The Representation of Disability in Contemporary American Television Series

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1 Introduction

For the longest time and well into our present day, to live with a disability has meant to live on the margins of society. Stared at in the elevator or gawked at in freak shows, the passive object of ostensible charity in telethons or in involuntary institutionalization, denied access to buildings through architectural barriers or barred from public life by way of the infamous ugly laws. Pitied, patronized, fetishized—throughout history, people with disabilities[1] have found themselves physically and discursively pushed well outside the borders of that which constitutes acceptable ways of being human. As David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder put it, disability has been and continues to be "the master trope of human disqualification." (*Narrative* 3)

But as master tropes go, they are rarely noted for their absence, which is to say: for all its marginalization, disability is a matter of striking ubiquity. This is not only because, in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's words, disability "is one of the most universal, fundamental of human experiences [because] we will all become disabled if we live long enough." ("Seeing the Disabled" 337) It is also because disability is a cultural presence even in its perceived and frequently hoped for absence. It is the Other that lends shape to the normal, healthy, beautiful body;[2] it is made to define (by what it is not) the fit and productive, self-sufficient and self-

[1] The politically correct or most acceptable term to describe people who live with a disability has been a point of contention in disability activism and scholarship. Proponents of the person-first argument prefer "person with disability" to highlight that a person is not defined by their disability but by their personhood. This phrase is used especially in American scholarship. Conversely, many British disability activists find the term "disabled person" preferable because it foregrounds that disability is, as they argue, an effect of a person's architectural, social, cultural and political environment rather than something inherent to the person (this argument reflects the social model of disability which I will discuss below). Although I find the person-first argument ultimately more convincing, I do see the merits of the "disabled person" formulation, and throughout this study, I use both terms interchangeably. In any case, the critical drift of this study will make it clear that I think of all disabled people first as people, and that I am aware that the lives of all people with disabilities are complicated by an unrelenting environment.

[2] My critical focus throughout this study is on physical disabilities and intellectual disabilities that are physically marked on the body, such as Down Syndrome. This latter limitation is not meant to suggest that there necessarily exists a fundamental difference between physical and intellectual disability that would warrant or require a fundamentally different theorization of the two. The diverseness of both subsets of disability is so great that a differentiation between the two often feels arbitrary. The lived experiences of people with different physical disabilities may differ as widely as the experience of one person with a physical and one person with an intellectual disability. In fact, as popularly accepted as the distinction may be, the clarity of each subset's boundaries easily blurs under closer scrutiny and / or is highly contingent on discursive surroundings. An in-depth analysis and discussion of the potential merits or problems of a differentiation between physical and intellectual disability in scholarship would far exceed the scope of this study. My focus on physical and physically marked intellectual disabilities, then, is primarily due to the fact that disability studies has generally focused on disability that is marked upon the body—or, more specifically, physical disability. What is more, in the field, the word "disability" is frequently used as synonymous with "physical disability." It

reliant member of society. Perhaps more than any other trope of human disqualification, disability occupies the negative space that demarcates all manner of cultural concepts that we deem good and right and proper. And from that negative space it incessantly haunts us, lurking beyond and, every once in a while, reaching across the border of acceptability, threatening us with what we hope to never be.

Disability's ubiquitous cultural presence is not only an abstraction, however. It is a tangible thing. Disability suffuses our language and the stories we tell. Take a moment and think about the last book you read or movie you watched—more likely than not there is some manner of disability representation in it. These representations, the causes, purposes and effects of their ubiquity, have been subject to a great deal of cultural scholarship in recent years from the still comparably young field of disability studies (the polemic tone of these opening lines betrays, of course, my own inscription into the field and, by extension, the normative politics at play in my study; but more on that below). Critical inquiry into them has unearthed numerous well-worn tropes of disability narration. As deeply as a sense of disability as the master trope of human disqualification is engrained in our cultural subconscious, as pervasive are these narrative tropes in the stories we tell, inextricably tangled up in poetics, structures and themes. So pervasive are they that—even if we acknowledge that disability critique has occasionally risked lapsing into a pattern of kneejerk wholesale condemnation—it may seem at times that any attempt at narrating disability is indeed inevitably headed for its normative representational pitfalls.

But the stories in which we find these tropes of disability representation are largely found in books, in the cinema, and on the stage. They are Victorian and postmodern novels, plays written in antiquity and modernity, Golden Age Hollywood and 90s melodrama. It is understandable that disability scholarship has largely focused on these types of media as they are the dominant forms that are both mainstream and respected, discussed by popular and academic critics alike. They are, in a word, canon. But to find the same tropes repeated in stories with age-old poetics, narrative structures, and themes is hardly surprising.

In recent years, however, a form of storytelling has begun emerging that has not only received little attention from disability scholarship, but that arguably comes with a new poetics, new narrative structures, and often even new themes. Beginning in the 90s, more and

is arguably true that intellectual disability has remained somewhat under-theorized and certainly too unremarked-upon (some prominent exceptions include the work of Michael Bérubé, studies surrounding autism such as *Autistic Disturbances: Theorizing Autism Poetics from the DSM to Robinson Crusoe* by Julia Miele Rodas [2018] or *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence* by Anne McGuire [2016], Allen Thiher's *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature* [1999], or Margaret Price's *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* [2011]).

more American television series abandoned adhering to one of the two distinct forms of fictional television narratives: the episodic form that we typically associate with cop shows in which in each episode's plot comes to a conclusion; and the serial form that we associate with soap operas in which parallel narrative strands carry across several installments in which no overall closure is ever achieved. Instead, these new shows employ what Jason Mittell calls "narrative complexity [which] *redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration*." [italics in the original] (*Complex TV* 18) Such a broad definition suggests that, as in any other narrative form, there is great variation in complex television. But there are certain hallmarks that help further circumscribe the narrative form: complex television series are typically of high production value and target relatively niche audiences; they employ complex story and character arcs, often narrated in a non-linear and sometimes deliberately confusing fashion; they boast self-conscious storytelling, foregrounding not only the story but the way that the story is told; and they demand an extraordinary willingness on the part of the viewer to deeply engage with narrative and characters, challenging their audiences to abandon passive viewing practices and rewarding a heightened sensibility for even seemingly minute details. The skyrocketing growth of this narrative form, especially from the mid-2000s onward, has provoked a great deal of ongoing scholarly attention, chiefly from media, literary and film scholars. There exists now an understanding of the poetics of complex television that provides a foundation upon which representation critical research can solidly build.

In several areas, television has been a highly if not the most influential medium for a long time. For world news and political punditry, it was rivaled only by newspapers and is rivaled now only by online publications; for sports it has no match, not even in-person spectatorship can draw as large an audience; for advertising, its significance has only recently been equaled, perhaps surpassed, by the internet; and it arguably remains the undisputed standard for entertainment culture, from soap operas to reality TV, from pop music videos to game shows. Television, on the whole, is the medium that shapes discourse more pervasively and more broadly than any other medium. But respected mainstream narrative fiction had so far not been the domain of television.[3] With the boom of complex television series, this is quickly changing. Complex television has already secured its spot among literature, theater, and cinema on feature pages and in academic journals alike.

Consequently, a representation critical examination of disability in complex television is worthwhile for disability studies because this new type of narrative may bring about new

[3] I do not mean to suggest that non-complex TV is inherently unrespectable, only that such is clearly the dominant perception of these cultural forms. The subject of television respectability will be central to my discussion in chapter 6.2.

types of disability representation. With the availability of appropriate critical tools for, and insight into complex TV, such an examination is now a tangible project. And finally, it is arguably overdue because of the immense discursive significance of the medium of television.

The purpose of this study, its overall critical move, is to employ the recent insights into complex television to interrogate it from a disability studies perspective. But before I can specify what I mean by that, I should briefly make explicit what several buzzwords up until this point have surely already signaled: the theoretical foundation of this research is decidedly one of cultural and social constructivism. The notion of representational critical analyses of disability on complex TV builds on the assumption that images of disability—in whatever form they are mediated—do not merely reflect the empirical reality in which they were created. Rather, they are part of and feed into a wider discourse which in turn shapes reality by pushing to the cultural fore one worldview rather than another, and by legitimizing and naturalizing a specific set of ways of being in the world. Of course, the empirical reality that discourse shapes is more likely to produce certain types of representations of itself, particularly those that *purport* to reflect it in some degree of mimetic manner. But it is precisely because representation is not simply reproduction that it has the potential to disrupt the cycle of legitimization and naturalization. This disruption may occur through representations that openly offer subversive or transgressive reading potentials but also through subversive or transgressive readings of representations that arguably do not. The central point here is that representation shapes discourse and reality as much as discourse and reality shape representation.[4]

This is not only a sober acknowledgment of the way of the world. It is also an acknowledgment of the normative politics that inevitably guide representation critical work (or any work for that matter). Any critical reading of any representation invests it with the predispositions of the critic, framing it in a way that, simply put, renders it a contribution to one discourse rather than another. More specifically, I acknowledge here that I fundamentally subscribe to the normative politics of representation critical disability studies (which I will discuss in the following chapter), and I prefer to make a point of reflecting on this rather than futilely attempting to mask it. There is, to my mind, nothing wrong with expressing political leanings in the sciences—be they soft or hard—especially because constructivist theory teaches us that they are inevitable in any case.

[4] My understanding of representation reflects of course Stuart Hall's as discussed in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (2013).

To specify the goal of my research, then, this study seeks engagement with and answers to the following questions: What are the potentials and pitfalls that the narrative form of complex television may have for the representation of disability? If, as a lot of research in disability studies has shown, the same tropes of narrating disability appear to be inextricably bound up with the more seasoned narrative forms, what are ways in which complex television series break with these tropes through their poetics? At the same time, what are ways in which they continue and perpetuate them? Discussing these questions may prove beneficial to our understanding of two related matters: first, an analysis of a fresh subject matter—the representation and representation potentials of disability in complex serial narration—may productively destabilize some of the thought patterns and assumptions that critical disability studies has come to accept as canonic. Such an implicit reevaluation of some of these (perhaps all too) naturalized perspectives could offer new inroads for future scholarly endeavors either into yet another fresh subject matter, or areas of critical inquiry that the field has already covered more extensively. Second, representation critical analyses of complex TV are bound to help further the insights of the theoretical research into the narrative form. Taking the findings of recent television scholarship on formal qualities and putting them to work with regard to representational potentials can be considered something of a stress test. While neither of these matters will take center stage in my study, both will echo throughout its subtext.

It is clear, then, that when I ask about the representation of disability in American complex TV, the answers I hope to find are not so much encyclopedic but structural and formal. Consequently, I approach the matter by way of a detailed analysis of some representational fragments under the rubric of a poetics of complex television. More precisely, I will provide a series of close readings of two television series, *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *American Horror Story* (2011-present). Each close reading will employ a variation of what we may broadly call constructivist theory to engage the text's disability representation from a specific angle relevant to critical disability theory. Importantly, the reading potentials I seek to unearth will always also involve considerations of the significance of complex TV's poetics, the theoretical underpinnings of which the well-connected recent scholarship on the matter offers in abundance.

All of this clearly calls for some more detailed explication, which I will provide in the overview of this study. Before I can do so, however, and before I can delineate where exactly my own work picks up and what precise critical gap I hope to fill, I must give an overview of the field of disability studies, or rather my understanding of it. I will show that the field is quite diverse in terms of critical assumptions, concepts, methods and approaches. My own work, as most scholarship in disability studies, is not focused on a single strand of disability critique

but evolves out of and liberally deploys this pluralism in order to achieve critical insight. The following pages, then, serve to position my own work within the field and what is arguably the dominant understanding of current disability scholarship in the humanities. Consequently, necessity dictates quite a sweeping (albeit not exhaustive) glance at the field. I do, however, narrow my focus to scholarship that is primarily concerned with or readily relates to textual and, more broadly, cultural representations of disability. These types of scholarship may be subsumed under the rubric of a cultural model of disability.[5]

2 A Cultural Model of Disability[6]

The term cultural model of disability has been proposed by Anne Waldschmidt (cf. "Disability Studies" 24-28; see also "Disability Goes Cultural" 22-26) as well as by Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell (cf. *Cultural* 5-11) in a similar although not quite identical way. It serves to demarcate the critical framings of and approaches to disability and its representations that are dominant in and utilized by American disability studies in the humanities. Following Waldschmidt, and Snyder and Mitchell, I will use the term cultural model on the subsequent pages. It should be noted, however, that unlike the term social model, which I will discuss presently, it is only very rarely used by scholarly critics as a means to inscribe their contributions into a tradition of critical disability scholarship. This has likely something to do with the fact that American disability studies in the humanities are often perceived as a relatively incoherent field of inquiry (cf. Waldschmidt, "Disability Goes Cultural" 22), a point which I will elaborate more fully below.

As Snyder and Mitchell note, the critical scope of a cultural model of disability is best understood in the context of its genesis from other models of understanding disability (cf. 6).

[5] Within cultural model disability scholarship, there are some variations of critical work that I will omit not because their insights are wholly irrelevant to my work (they are not, and I will in fact occasionally refer to some of them throughout my research), but because the scope of their critical interest does not help outline the part of disability studies within which I intend to position myself. These include disability-focused histories such as *A History of Disability* by Henri-Jacques Stiker (1999); *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* edited by Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (2001); or *A Disability History of the United States* by Kim E. Nielsen (2012). Another genre of scholarship I omit here is autobiographical criticism like Michael Bérubé's *Life as We Know it: A Father, a Family, and an Exceptional Child* (1996); Georgina Kleege's *Sight Unseen* (1999); and Simi Linton's *My Body Politic: A Memoir* (2006). Finally, I will not discuss politically focused analyses such as Mitchell and Snyder's *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (2015) or Jasbir K. Puar's *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (2017).

[6] I am aware that the position of this chapter before my discussion of the state of research, and my method and material is somewhat unorthodox. I am convinced, however, that to understand the field of disability studies in quite some depth greatly facilitates the understanding of all chapters that come after it, and also helps cutting down on redundancies.

Its most immediate predecessor is the social model of disability.[7] The social model was developed and popularized by the early British disability rights movement, especially surrounding the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), which began expressing its core beliefs in the mid-1970s (cf. *Fundamental Principles of Disability* 4). Its central notion is the constructivist distinction between impairment and disability. The term "impairment" designates a physiological or mental difference in relation to non-impaired physiology or mental constitution—in other words, the fact of physical or mental limitation.[8] "Disability" is considered an oppressive effect of historically contingent social practices that occur on the basis of impairments. For example, a person with paraplegia who uses a wheelchair may be *impaired* due to nerve damage, but that same person is only rendered *disabled* by such barriers as buildings that are only accessible by stairs. The difference between impairment and disability is, thus, akin to a distinction between biologically determined sex and social gender (cf. Shakespeare, "The Social Model" 198).

The social model emerges in explicit distinction to what is variably termed the "medical model" or the "individual model of disability." This model, disability critics agree, "defines disability as an individual defect lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured or eliminated if the person is to achieve full capacity as a human being." (Siebers, *Disability Theory* 3) On the one hand, this focus on a physiological or mental deviation from a norm defined in purely medical terms is considered by proponents of the social model to be severely reductive of the complexities of how disability as "social exclusion" (Shakespeare, "The Social Model" 198) comes into being. It ignores the myriad barriers to "participation in the mainstream of social activities" (*Fundamental Principles of Disability* 14) put in place by society, for instance through negligent architectural design, infrastructural planning or educational policies. On the other hand, it "is destined to lead to a partial or inhibiting view of the disabled individual" (Brisenden 173) and is experienced as conducive to a profound sense of dehumanization. The disabled person, so the argument goes, experiences the medical, therapeutic or pedagogic gaze as objectification. The impaired body or mind becomes an object of professional curiosity and something that demands "prevention, cure or rehabilitation." (Shakespeare, "The Social Model" 199) The effect, according to proponents of the social model, of an essentialist understanding of disability as personal and individual misfortune rather than as a social construction, and its relegation to the supposed wisdom and

[7] My brief delineation of the social model draws heavily on Tom Shakespeare's "The Social Model of Disability" to which interested readers may turn for greater detail in particular with regard to the history of the notion in British disability activism.

[8] It is worth noting that the original and earliest formulations of the social model referred only to physical but not to intellectual disabilities (cf. Waldschmidt "Disability Studies" 18).

knowledgeability of professional experts rather than the free choices of those who live with impairments, amounts to nothing less than oppression. To escape practices of social marginalization, forced segregation into group homes, institutions and hospitals, and eugenic practices such as sterilization or prenatal testing is rendered particularly difficult because these structures present themselves as necessary for the well-being of society and as benevolent toward the disabled person. Thus, when disabled proponents of the social model level critique and exert resistance against such ostensibly benevolent practices, they are often accused of being narcissists "more interested in pursuing self-gratification than in contributing to a common cause." (Siebers, *Disability Theory* 35) As a reaction to such opposition by the hegemony, the social model, as Tom Shakespeare and Nicholas Watson point out, "originally underplayed the importance of impairment in disabled people's lives, in order to develop a strong argument about social structures and social processes." (298) And elsewhere Shakespeare explains that the model's radical constructivism with its strong emphasis on the aspect of disability over impairment initially proved to be its particular strength: "the British social model is arguably the most powerful form which social approaches to disability have taken. The social model is simple, memorable, and effective, each of which is a key requirement of a political slogan." ("The Social Model" 199) Shakespeare goes on to name three connected ways in which the social model has proven its effectiveness: first, it

> has been effective *politically* in building the social movement of disabled people. It is easily explained and understood, and it generates a clear agenda for social change. The social model offers a straightforward way of distinguishing allies from enemies […]. Second, by identifying social barriers to be removed, the social model has been effective *instrumentally* in the liberation of disabled people. [… It] demonstrates that the problems disabled people face are the result of social oppression and exclusions, not their individual deficits. This places the moral responsibility on society to remove the burdens which have been imposed, and to enable disabled people to participate […]. Third, the social model has been effective *psychologically* in improving the self-esteem of disabled people and building a positive sense of collective identity […] The problem of disability is relocated from the individual, to the barriers and attitudes which disable her. It is not the disabled person who is to blame, but society. She does not have to change, society does. Rather than feeling self-pity, she can feel anger and pride. [italics in the original] (199)

On the whole, the social model has effectively made it possible to think of disability not in terms of compensatory interventions predominantly in the form of medical therapy, but in terms of socially enacted accommodation of bodily and mental deviation from a perceived norm. It encourages a shift in "our conception of disability from pathology to identity." (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary* 137)

But, as Mike Oliver has argued, it is important to understand that the social model is at its most useful when it is "a *practical* tool, not a theory, an idea or a concept" [emphasis mine] (11). That is to say that although there is evidence that it has proven highly useful to effect social change, its *critical* potentials have proven to be rather limited beyond providing the "decisive impulse" [translation mine] (Waldschmidt, "Warum und wozu" 18)[9] for contemporary disability studies (a point which I will elaborate below). As many have noted, its simplicity, the aspect that makes it so effective, is also what manifests as its limitation. The greatest points of criticism that the social model faces concern the status and the role of the body and mind. At its most fundamental, critics of the social model argue that through its focus on the social constructedness of disability, "it risks implying that impairment is not a problem" (Shakespeare, "The Social Model" 200) and disregarding the individual experience of impairment. Proponents of the social model remind these critics that the social model evolved precisely "out of the experiences of a number of disabled activist" (Oliver 8) and to bear in mind that a focus on impairments does not help a political cause. Nevertheless, many disabled people feel inadequately represented by the social model (cf. Shakespeare, "The Social Model" 200), insisting that it produces analyses that ignore diverse lived realities of the impaired body or mind, and their implications. Simi Linton, for instance, notes that "it is incumbent upon disability studies theorists to articulate these elements of experience [that arise from impairment] because they are relevant to many areas of inquiry, from literary criticism to anthropology, from clinical psychology to cultural studies." (138)

Moreover, the supposed clarity of the distinction between impairment and disability is doubly problematic: first, in practice it is frequently blurry, and it is hard if not impossible to ascertain whether a particular effect is more appropriately ascribed to the individual dimension of the impairment or the social dimension of disability. Shakespeare's example is instructive here:

> If a person with multiple sclerosis is depressed, how easy is it to make a causal separation between the effect of the impairment itself; her reaction to having an impairment; her reaction to being oppressed and excluded on the basis of having an impairment; other, unrelated reasons for her to be depressed? ("The Social Model" 201)

Second, the distinction is an expression of a "simplified dichotomy of nature and culture" [translation mine] (Waldschmidt, "Warum und wozu" 18)[10] that uncritically ignores

[9] In the original: "entscheidender Impuls".

[10] In the original, cited part in italics: "Offensichtlich […] basiert das soziale Modell auf einer *vereinfachten Dichotomie von Natur und Kultur*."

that impairment and the idea of what constitutes a "normal" body or mind is already a culturally and historically contingent construct. There remains thus an essentialist core lodged under the constructivist surface of the social model.

Other arguments that have been articulated against the social model are that, like the medical or individual model, it frames disability primarily as a problem for which a solution is required (cf. Waldschmidt, "Disability Studies" 23-24). This ties in to the argument that the social model encourages "the opinion that disability as a social problem can be 'solved' through accessibility and participation, mainstreaming and human rights policies" (Waldschmidt, "Disability Goes Cultural" 21), potentially downplaying other dimensions. For instance, such practical solutions to a socially framed problem of disability fail to account for and approach the interpersonal "unease that disability so often generates" (Shildrick, *Dangerous* 4). Finally, proponents of the social model appear to aspire toward an unfeasible "barrier-free utopia" disregarding that "numerous parts of the natural world will remain [physically or cognitively] inaccessible to many disabled people" and issues of compatibility that result from the fact that "people with different impairments may require different solutions" (Shakespeare, "The Social Model" 201).

These are all separate and not wholly congruent points of criticism. However, they all share a recognition that to understand disability purely in terms of the social model is to neglect a great number of perspectives on and aspects of it, which renders the social model an insufficient tool if a more comprehensive understanding of disability is to be achieved. Of course, the notion that such an understanding is desirable and necessary even if it is not immediately productive of political and social change, itself bespeaks a critical self-image that is quite distinct from the social science-centered approaches that govern the work of most social model practitioners. As many have noted, this self-image is arguably best located within the scholarly tradition of American cultural studies. Cultural studies understand culture, in Waldschmidt's words, as a broad term that

> denotes the totality of 'things' created and employed by a particular people or a society, be they material or immaterial: objects and instruments, institutions and organisations, ideas and knowledge, symbols and values, meanings and interpretations, narratives and histories, traditions, rituals and customs, social behaviour, attitudes and identities ("Disability Goes Cultural" 24).

It is within such a framework that what may be called a cultural model of disability emerges particularly in American scholarship in the humanities. As I noted above, unlike "social model," "cultural model" is not a self-designation, and while the critical approaches that can be subsumed under the term are arguably much more diverse than the social sciences

approaches that dominate the social model, they are also much less coherent (cf. Waldschmidt, "Disability Goes Cultural" 22). But they share an understanding that as "a culturally fabricated narrative of the body" (Garland-Thomson, "Integrating" 259), the study of disability must frame it "as a social construction *and* a set of cultural products" [emphasis mine] (Garland-Thomson, "Disability Studies" 916). This points toward an important aspect of the cultural model: it is not a rejection of the social model, but what might be called an open-ended extension of it. As Snyder and Mitchell put it: "We believe the cultural model provides a fuller concept than the social model, in which 'disability' signifies only discriminatory encounters." (*Cultural* 10)

Cultural model disability studies draws on a wide array of theory—often but not always poststructuralist—that has informed other areas of cultural studies, as well as on those other areas of cultural studies themselves, and especially on writing that has "investigated aspects of the body" (Davis, Introduction xvii). Most importantly this includes Erving Goffman's *Stigma* (1963); Michel Foucault's "archeological" analyses of insanity in *Madness & Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965) and of the "medical gaze" (29) in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception* (1973), or his work on docile bodies and governmentality;[11] a host of feminist scholarship and gender theory put forward by Judith Butler, Susan Bordo and others; but also work by Mikhail Bakhtin, Georges Canguilhem, Mary Douglas, Leslie Fiedler, Sander Gilman, Donna Haraway, Julia Kristeva, Adrienne Rich, Oliver Sacks and Susan Sontag to name a few. Understanding and theorizing disability as a socio-cultural ascription, disability studies seeks to deploy it as category of analysis "that reveals cultural practices and societal structures that would otherwise have remained unrecognized" [translation mine] (Waldschmidt, "Warum und wozu" 19).[12] As such, the cultural model hopes to be politically and socially potent not despite, but rather precisely because of its more comprehensive perspective. To continue Snyder and Mitchell's above quote:

[11] It could be said that Foucault references in disability studies tend to occur more in spirit than in practice (and my own research will be another instance of this tendency). Anna Mollow argues that Garland-Thomson does not actually follow through with her enlistment of Foucauldian theory (cf. "Identity"). More generally, Waldschmidt observes that while the importance of his ideas is frequently emphasized in disability studies introductions and overviews, his work itself is rarely used as a "genuine theoretical point of reference" [translation mine; in the original: "genuiner theoretischer Bezugspunkt"] ("Disability Studies"). A notable exception is *Foucault and the Government of Disability* (2005) edited by Shelley Tremain, and Tremain's monograph *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability* (2017).

[12] In the original, cited part in italics: "Entsprechend setzen die am kulturellen Modell orientierten Arbeiten an den Erfahrungen aller Gesellschaftsmitglieder an und benutzen ‚Behinderung' […] als Erkenntnis leitende und generierende Kategorie, deren Untersuchung *kulturelle Praktiken und gesellschaftliche Strukturen zum Vorschein bringt, die sonst unerkannt geblieben wären*."

> The formulation of a cultural model allows us to theorize a political act of renaming that designates disability as a site of resistance and a source of cultural agency previously suppressed—at least to the extent that groups can successfully rewrite their own definition in view of a damaging material and linguistic heritage. (10)

Thus, while the cultural model recognizes people with disabilities as a socially and politically "disenfranchised community" (17), it engages this disenfranchisement not only through social and political activism but seeks to interrogate and disturb the historical and cultural narratives that lend credence to such practices of marginalization. In the following chapter, I will delineate in greater detail how specifically such rather broad mission statements reflect in the scholarly work of disability studies in the humanities, particularly with regard to representation critical approaches. In doing so, I will also set forth some of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of my own analyses in the study at hand.

2.1 Imagery Evaluation and "Social Realism"

A large portion of the earliest work of disability studies in the humanities—from the 1980s to the late 1990s—employed critical approaches that can be called imagery evaluation and, in Mitchell and Snyder's words, "social realism" (*Narrative* 21-24). These two approaches to representations of disability are only rarely used in contemporary scholarly work because they tend to curtail and preclude in-depth engagement with disability representations as I will demonstrate presently. However, they are not wholly without merit and can often operate as a starting point for a more complex analysis of a given text or give a general idea of a text's overall representational drift. In any case, they are important to discuss not only because they represent the first attempts at cultural model disability critique, but also because they illustrate more tangibly the insufficiency of the social model on which both rely quite heavily.

Imagery evaluation is primarily concerned with identifying and categorizing disability stereotypes and tropes, most of which were considered negative by early critics.[13] Published in Alan Gartner and Tom Joe's *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images* (1987), Leonard Kriegel's "The Cripple in Literature" is one of the earliest critiques of fictional representations

[13] I should point out that my category "imagery evaluation" is indeed somewhat akin to Mitchell and Snyder's category of scholarship of "negative imagery" (*Narrative* 17-21), but it differs in that I wish to acknowledge that this kind of research was not only preoccupied with negative imagery. It is worth pointing out, for instance, that Ann Pointon and Chris Davies do not claim that the representation of disability has been "relentlessly negative" as Mitchell and Snyder quote them (19), but that it has been "relentlessly repetitive" (Pointon and Davis, Introduction 1).

of disability. Kriegel categorizes a sweeping array of disabled characters—from Richard III to Captain Ahab, from Tiny Tim to Clifford Chatterley—as the threatening "Demonic Cripple", the pitiful "Charity Cripple", the unremarkable "Realistic Cripple", and the noble "Survivor Cripple" (33). But while Kriegel does acknowledge that not all stereotypes shed a negative light on people with disabilities—particularly the Survivor Cripple, to whom he appears to ascribe empowering potential—the majority of disabled characters, particularly the well-known ones, fall into either of the two first categories.

The tendency to unearth predominantly negative imagery from the wealth of previously largely overlooked disability representation is even more evident in Paul K. Longmore's "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures." This essay, published for the second time in the same volume by Gartner and Joe, would become one of the most prolific works of the imagery evaluation school and disability studies as a whole. Even more than Kriegel, Longmore condemns nearly all disability representations on television as detrimental to the social image of people with disabilities. He is wary in particular of disabled "villainous characters" (67), with "villainous" being an exceedingly large category encompassing not only criminal characters but virtually any character to whom some sort of moral deficiency might be ascribed by the narrative, such as a failure to adjust to disability in a proper manner (70-71). These representations perpetuate, Longmore argues, common negative stereotypes of disability, namely that "disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their 'fate'; disabled people resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them." (67) Elsewhere, Longmore, like Kriegel, identifies what he deems positive representations of disability in the movies *Mask* (1985) and *My Left Foot: The Story of Christy Brown* (1989). But he is clear that these constitute "a welcome departure" from a far greater wealth of movies and television shows in which "disabled people are inevitably shown to be angry and obnoxious, wallowing in self-pity and unwilling to take responsibility for themselves." (*Why I Burned My Book* 123)

Perhaps the most ambitious piece of imagery evaluation scholarship is Martin F. Norden's *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies* (1994). Norden traces representations of disability in cinema (mostly Hollywood) over nearly a century, from the medium's early feature films at the beginning of the 20th century to the 1980s. His judgment, as the title of his book implies, is devastating. He concedes that historically "the general movement from exploitative treatments [of disability] to exploratory to incidental does suggest a slowly developing enlightenment on issues of physical disability." On the whole, however, he argues that "the history of physical disability images in the movies has mostly been a history of distortion in the name of maintaining an ableist society" and the

"slowly developing enlightenment" is "marked by frequent slippage back to the older forms of expression" (314).

Similar projects to Kriegel's, Longmore's and Norden's have been undertaken for other narrative forms or media such as Shakespeare's much briefer discussion of "evidence of slight improvement in the [qualitative and quantitative] coverage of disability" ("Soaps" 74) on British soap operas. But while the wealth of materials these works have unearthed in their early interrogation of disability representation formed and continues to form a valuable repository for historical analyses, the critical insights they offered proved to be rather limited. By way of variously differentiated typologies—Colin Barnes' comprises eleven types, all of which negatively connoted (cf. *Disabling Imagery*)—disability representation and disabled characters were predominantly found to reproduce and reinforce much if not all of which the social model had ascertained to be society's dominant understanding of disability: that disability is an individual misfortune, best cured or else eliminated, and the marginalization of disabled people is generally the natural or essential order of things. Scholars of imagery evaluation conclude that by repeatedly and incessantly pushing predominantly negative, limiting and damaging imagery, disability representations across media are at least in part to blame for the sluggish advancement of disability rights (cf. Darke, "Everywhere" 11).

Such a conclusion is certainly not misguided, and, as I suggested above, some aspects of imagery evaluation continue to be valuable critical tools for disability scholarship. Consider, for instance, disability archetypes such as the obsessed avenger or the supercrip both of which may offer a representation critical analysis a sort of organizational ground structure. But for the most part, imagery evaluation winds up in a critical dead-end and can do little else besides political calls for more positive images such as Barnes' itemized prescriptions for media portrayals of disability in his 1992 report "Disabling Imagery and the Media: An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People".

Another critical approach to representations of disability closely linked to imagery evaluation is what Mitchell and Snyder call "social realism." While the former is concerned with the distinction between negative and positive images, the latter is focused on demonstrating "the measurable gap that existed [sic] between the reality of contemporary lives lived with disability and the images of those lives in film and literature" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 180n3). Indeed, it should be noted that the two approaches that I discuss as separate here frequently overlap and often inform the same research. Kriegel's work on literature and Norden's on cinema, Shakespeare's discussion of British soap operas, and Barnes' report, for example, are all also interested in images that are "far removed from the actual experiences and lifestyles of people with disabilities" (Norden 3). It makes sense, in fact, to think of social

realist scholarship as a logical continuation or a gradual recalibration of imagery evaluation because it can be understood as a realization of the shortcomings of a simplistic, questionable and critically unsustainable division of representations into negative and positive types. Much of what is considered negative is deemed such because it is inaccurate (cf. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 21) or unduly indebted to an individual or medical model understanding of disability (cf. 23), and much of what is considered positive might from a different perspective seem a more backhanded iteration of negative stereotypes and the status quo of disability marginalization (cf. 23; Pointon and Davies, Introduction 1; Darke, "Understanding" 183). *My Left Foot*, for example, the movie that Longmore finds to be "'inspiring'" (*Why I Burned My Book* 130) in the best sense, in Paul Darke's view reflects "an audience's social culturation into the medical model of impairment perspective that views disability as abject and abhorrent, and which equally valorizes normality." ("Understanding" 187) Rather than calling "for 'positive images' that would celebrate the lives of people with disabilities in a romanticized light" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 23), social realist critics "insist upon politicizing disability by portraying it as the result of the interaction between impairment and physical and attitudinal environments." (24) Thus, a social realist approach to the study of disability agrees with Cheryl Marie Wade's demand to not shy away from openly articulating the subjective experiences of impairment as a means of achieving political ends and changing social attitudes (cf. 94). Such a particular emphasis on "disabled subjectivity" is evident in work such as David Hevey's *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (1992), G. Thomas Couser's *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing* (1997) or Simi Linton's *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998).

The emphasis on a politicized disability experience and subjectivity remains a critical aspect of most work in disability studies in the humanities. However, the "relatively static structuralist methodology" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 25) of social realist approaches tend to obscure or preclude historical and cultural considerations in favor of a strict political and social normativity. Even more, or at least more clearly, than in scholarship of imagery evaluation, a social model understanding of disability demarcates the critical scope of social realism, limiting its potentials for insight to aspects of disability that relatively immediately concern social and political change.

2.2 Disability as Culturally Constitutive Other

Beginning in the mid-1990s, disability scholarship in the humanities began refocusing critical attention from qualitative appraisals of disability representations and calls for change

toward a critique of disability as a historically contingent and arbitrary socio-cultural category (cf. Waldschmidt, "Warum und wozu" 19). My use of the term "socio-cultural" rather than "cultural" signals that critical inquiry into social and political aspects of disability and disability representation were not abandoned. Rather, in disability scholarship's struggle "with how to most effectively evaluate the *cultural work* of disability" [emphasis in the original] (Garland-Thomson, "Disability Studies" 916), social and political questions began to be framed predominantly by inquiries into the role disability plays in a culture's perception of itself. This critical shift from asking about the *what* and *to what end* to asking about the *how* and *why* involved an immense diversification and complication of American disability scholarship in the humanities. Waldschmidt, accordingly, describes the field as "a patchwork quilt" ("Disability Goes Cultural" 22). Nevertheless, there exists an overall critical thrust that I will delineate by briefly discussing three pivotal works and their impact on the field. These are Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), and David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000). Each of these works, albeit to different degrees, recognizes disability as a socio-cultural category that has throughout history been occasion for marginalization; each work identifies disability as a cultural Other laden with different meanings at different historical moments that has been deployed in some manner in the service of validating and consolidating that which it is not or perceived to not be; and each work contributes to an understanding and cultivation of disability as an analytical tool for the humanities, a mode of scholarship that would consequently come into its own in the early 2000s.

The central and governing insight of *Enforcing Normalcy* is that the very idea of the norm and normalcy, far from being an ahistorical given, only emerged in conjunction with the development of statistical methods and the social class of the bourgeoisie. The concept of the norm as a desirable average, Davis suggests, gradually replaced the premodern notion of the ideal, which was associated with divinity and as such by definition unattainable. Using several concrete historical examples, Davis goes beyond narratives of oppression to demonstrate a variety of ways in which western cultures from early modernity to postmodernity have in complex ways relied on visual and functional notions of disability as difference as a means of self-consolidation. For instance, Davis links the 18th century's widespread attention to deafness to the time's growing literacy and to reading becoming an "activity" (61) in its own right. He argues that the deaf, "seen as readers and writers *par excellence*, as fellow creatures who existed first and foremost in semiology, were the first totemic citizens in the new age of

textuality" (63). However, at the same time they remained socially marginalized by the enlightenment's scientific gaze and also by the fact that deafness almost always disqualified from anything but menial work. Davis also delineates ways in which disability was used during the 19th century to construct a *national* Other: attempts to suppress sign language betray a recognition of deaf people as a linguistically marked, quasi-ethnic community that was perceived to threaten the coherence and stability of the body politic. While producing through its working conditions unprecedented amounts of disabled people, industrialization and the rise of capitalist market economy demanded an able-bodied worker and "redefined the body […] as an extension of the factory machinery" (87), reinforcing the eugenicist call for "the breeding of a better, more robust national stock" (88). Freak shows, likewise, constructed their spectacles of otherness not only around disability as bodily difference, but also the purportedly and frequently made up "exotic" origin of the freaks, suggesting that "[t]he disabled person is not of this nation, is not a citizen, in the same sense as the able-bodied" (91). Finally, Davis reads the well-documented tendency to withhold information and imagery regarding American presidents' disabilities as further evidence for the reliance of modern national identity on constructions of able-bodiedness and disability. In another chapter, Davis traces this opposition of able-bodiedness and disability in visual representations throughout a variety of media—from classical nudes, to the figure of Frankenstein's monster, to Hollywood cinema—arguing that these representations and our perception of them constructs the whole and coherent body in distinction to disability. Disability, he concludes, "is in some sense the basis on which the 'normal' body is constructed: disability defines the negative space the body must not occupy, it is the Manichean binary in contention with normality." (157)

Davis' account is sweeping in terms of time frame and research object, but he articulates several succinct ideas that remain central to disability studies in the humanities. Although he focuses on Europe and modernity, his work demonstrates, first, the historical and cultural contingency not only of disability, but of the very idea of the norm and normalcy. This is a fundamental insight in a cultural model of disability because—much more fully than the social model—it allows for disability to be wrested from an essentialist understanding as deviation from a "normal" corporeality, and places it, rather, on a continuum of human variation. Second, *Enforcing Normalcy* frames disability as a socio-cultural category that is crucial to the construction, representation and maintenance of cultural, biological, national, ideological and the subject's own normality. Not only does Davis contribute in this manner to the demarginalization of disability by ascribing cultural value and significance to it. His work also plays an important role in laying the groundwork for future work in disability studies

which deploys disability as a representational vantage point of alterity from which to interrogate hegemonic cultural and political discourses and practices.

Whereas Davis's book covers great historical, cultural and geographical distance and a diverse range of topics, Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* has a more limited scope and explores some of the areas Davis touched upon in greater detail. In other words, whereas Davis traces broad historical movements, Garland-Thomson exemplarily details particular sites of the representation of the disabled body. Drawing on a rich literature on the subject, she traces the history of the American freak show and its performers, as well as its cultural significance during the 19th and early 20th century. The freak show, she argues, served a number of purposes: "to delimit the 'average man,'" (63), racial and national self-consolidation, offering a site for the spectator to have "his own seeming ordinariness verified" (66). Importantly, Garland-Thomson goes on to suggest that

> although the anarchic body of the domesticated freak reassured audiences of their commonality, at the same time the extraordinary body symbolized a potential for individual freedom denied by cultural pressures toward standardization [and arguably operated as] a safe, ritualized opportunity for banal democrats to voyeuristically identify with nonconformity. (68)

Thus, the freak show performer simultaneously served the delineation of an identity from which they were necessarily excluded, but also carried with them the potential to figure as a disruption of this very identity.

Garland-Thomson identifies a similar tension at work in another American site of disability representation she explores. In "sentimental social protest novels by mid-nineteenth-century middle class white women," (17) the disabled woman figure becomes the object of the benevolent maternalism through which the novels' writers and readers sought to create the empowered identity of womanhood at the heart of the women's rights movement of the nineteenth century. These novels ultimately frame disability as "a free-floating signifier for evil and woe that envelopes and diminishes the [disabled] figures so that they tend to become gestures of human wretchedness rather than characters with whom readers might identify." (84) Thus, although they operate with benevolent intentions, Garland-Thomson demonstrates that they project what their historical moment's hegemony perceives as "the liabilities of femaleness onto the disabled woman," (101) so that they do injustice to the very women whose plight they enlist in the service of their own benevolence.

The disabled figure in Garland-Thomson's analyses thus tends toward occupying a liminal space between affirmation and disruption of the status quo. It is precisely this liminality that she argues Ann Petry, Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde have deployed in their

constructions of empowering identities for black women. These writers "appropriate" the visibly marked disabled body as a site where "a politics of affirmative identity" (107) for a black woman can emerge because it "neither repudiates her history nor embraces the conventional scripts of womanhood that have excluded her." (104) But Garland-Thomson reads this appropriation for identity politics (130) at the same time as a recuperation of the disabled body from a social and cultural marginalization, reimbuing it with a sense of "the wondrous pre-Enlightenment monsters whose bodies were not seen as flawed but as distinguished and awe-inspiring." (131)

Throughout these analyses, *Extraordinary Bodies* alternates between two modes of approaching disability. On the one hand, the study highlights the centrality of the disabled figure in historical and cultural moments in which it had previously been overlooked. This approach is similar to Davis's project in *Enforcing Normalcy* in that it involves delineating how the construction of a socio-cultural category disability has often occurred in the service of constructing what Garland-Thomson calls the "normate" identity. On the other hand, *Extraordinary Bodies* evidences an investment in pointing toward potentially empowering subject positions or identities for those who experience social and cultural marginalization on the basis of their extraordinary bodies. Garland-Thomson time and time again attempts to reclaim the hegemonic narrative of the disabled body: she reverses the freak show's dominant line of sight to scrutinize not the performer on the stage but the spectator in front of it; she rejects the would-be benevolence of 19th-century sentimental fiction, refusing to let the disabled body be rendered the backdrop against which middle-class femininity makes an argument for its own virtue and necessity; and in 20th-century black women's writing, she foregrounds a literary tradition in which disability figures prominently as an identity outside of the oppressive cultural scripts otherwise available to black women. Here, Garland-Thomson and Davis diverge somewhat. Although Davis's critique evolves in part out of his own identity as a "CODA (Child of Deaf Adults)" (*Enforcing* xvii), his work is generally less inclined toward and sometimes deeply skeptical of identity politics, which is particularly evident in his later essay collection *Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* (2002). Garland-Thomson is more open to the essentialist implications of identity politics:

> Both constructionism and essentialism […] are theoretical strategies—framings of the body—invoked for specific ends, such as psychologically liberating people whose bodies have been defined as defective or facilitating imagined communities from which positive identities can emerge. Strategic constructionism destigmatizes the disabled body, makes difference relative, denaturalizes so-called normalcy, and challenges appearance hierarchies. Strategic essentialism, by contrast, validates

> individual experience and consciousness, imagines community, authorizes history, and facilitates self-naming. (*Extraordinary* 23)

The decidedly normative oscillation between constructionism and essentialism that Garland-Thomson employs remains the dominant variation of disability studies in the humanities. Such an approach is significant because it is vital to disability studies' close allegiance with other identity-based fields of study in the humanities. Women's studies and feminist theory have been major influences on disability studies from the outset, and *Extraordinary Bodies* emphasizes the insights such critical allegiances may yield, rendering the study a significant contribution to the continued centrality of intersectional approaches in disability studies.

Building on nearly two decades of scholarship, Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* may be said to represent a deliberate culmination of humanities scholarship that understands disability as a culturally constitutive Other. In fact, Mitchell and Snyder appear to position their work as something of a next step in disability studies. Summing up previous work in the field under the rubric of "*representational discontent*" [italics in the original] (10), they fully acknowledge the legitimacy of such an overall critical sentiment in disability scholarship but also point out that it is ultimately inevitable, because meanings ascribed to a given representation are always historically, culturally and individually contingent and thus necessarily "fraught with politics" (40). Beyond this multiple contingency of disability's meanings, however, Mitchell and Snyder identify a cross-cultural and ahistorical pattern of disability representation in narrative art that they term "narrative prosthesis," a "perpetual discursive dependency [of literary narratives] upon disability" (47). This dependency manifests first in the tendency of narratives to rely on disability as the deviance from a perceived norm that "originates the act of storytelling" (54). Mitchell and Snyder argue that a story justifies its own existence, the fact that it is worth telling, by calling attention to "something that has gone amiss with the known world" (53). Against the narrative backdrop of an uneventful normality or familiarity, disability frequently operates as an easily recognizable difference that warrants the act of storytelling. Their famous opening example is the children's story *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* in which a single soldier among many becomes the center of narrative attention simply by virtue of his missing leg. Mitchell and Snyder do not claim that disability is the only socio-cultural construct that might operate in this manner—they list "femininity, race, class [and] sexuality" (55) as further examples—but they suggest that disability is particularly noteworthy mainly for two reasons. One, because despite its pervasiveness as a narrative device, it has for a very long time remained almost completely

unremarked upon in critical and scholarly circles. Two, because although so many narratives rely on disability to set off their story, they rarely identify "people with disabilities as a disenfranchised cultural constituency" (55) or recognize "disability as an experience of social or political dimensions." (48)

This latter aspect points to the second manifestation of disability's prosthetic relationship to narrative, namely its ubiquity "as a metaphorical signifier of social and individual collapse." (47) Mitchell and Snyder point toward a deep-seated and persistent assumption by which bodily deviance signals some manner of moral or psychological deviance. Such an assumption of "strict correspondence" (58) between body and subjectivity precludes a recognition of the social or political aspects of disability. For example, it focuses attention on the individual whose subjectivity is deformed by an equally deformed body, or whose deformed body is the result of a deformed subjectivity; or it may think of a deviant physicality as evidence of a magical, perhaps divine soul. Consequently, diverse cultures across history exhibit a strong physiognomic impulse to interpret bodily deviance. This "knee-jerk impulse to interpretation that disability has historically instigated hyperbolically determines its symbolic utility" (61) for the storyteller: the outwardly recognizable difference of disability is frequently called upon as a means to alert the reader, viewer or listener to some manner of immaterial and abstract deviance that might otherwise escape the grasp of potent textual representation. The notion of narrative prosthesis thus highlights that "[p]hysical and cognitive anomalies promise to lend a 'tangible' body to textual abstractions" (47-48) such as ideology, philosophy, or character psychology and motivation, providing them with a visceral sense of substance and representational weight.

Like Davis and Garland-Thomson, Mitchell and Snyder thus demonstrate how disability has been and continues to be integral to the consolidation of that which it is not. Furthermore, they explicitly foreground the disruptive potentiality of disability to which Garland-Thomson's ascription of liminality to disability points. The reliance of narratives upon disability, Mitchell and Snyder contend, causes representational inconsistencies within these narratives that make their overall representational project vulnerable to destabilization by disability scholarship's critical inquiry. For instance, they argue that Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* unquestioningly assumes a relationship between Ahab's "corrupted exterior and contaminated interior" (139), between his injury and peg leg and his monomaniacal pursuit of the whale. This assumption, however, proves an uneasy fit with what they identify as the novel's central representational thrust: "*Moby-Dick* confidently parades the fallibility and incompleteness of a multitude of discursive systems before its reader" rendering it a "novelistic exposé of interpretive limitations [that] demonstrates that interpretation itself is historically

contingent and contextual." (129) A "narrative equivalent to scientific physiognomy" (131), the prosthetic reliance of the narrative upon Ahab's disability as a means of characterization proves inconsistent with such a critique of an absolute determinacy of signification.

Another example Mitchell and Snyder offer are various productions of Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The play was written at a time, they argue, during which "medieval interpretations of disability as a sign for misfortune" (103) co-existed with a "pre-Enlightenment challenge to the long-established equation between deformity and metaphysical meaning" (105). The title character thus alternates between self-assured deployment of his cultural moment's uncertainty about what his disability might signify, and a sense that his is in fact the natural shape of malignancy. Mitchell and Snyder go on to discuss various moments of the play's production and reception history and demonstrate how different cultural environments differently valuate and interpret the original text's reliance on its lead character's deformity. However, while the specificities of these interpretations of the text and Richard's disability may vary, they ultimately all assume a "connection between physiology and psychology, between deformity and derangement" that is naturalized through centuries of reiteration as "it yields the pleasure of universal recognition" (116) even despite lack of validity.

As narrative prosthesis, disability operates thus not only as a text's constitutive Other, but also as its representational undoing. It provides a site for critical exploration and interrogation of a text's overt and underlying cultural, social and political assumptions about the body and the meanings associated with and ascribed to disability across cultures and history. This is significant for disability studies, Mitchell and Snyder contend, because it allows it to be political without recourse to classification systems "into 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' representation." (42) Borne of representational discontent, the act of scholarly critique itself is explicitly understood in *Narrative Prothesis* as a potentially transformative act of political subversion because it "provides a fulcrum for identifying culture that *might be* rather than that which *is*." (45) The importance of this critical approach—certainly implied in Davis's work, more clearly exercised in Garland-Thomson's, but most urgently formulated in Mitchell and Snyder's—for disability scholarship in the humanities is evident in the exploding number of contributions to the field in the following years, most of which recognize the foundational influence of the works discussed here, particularly of the concept of narrative prosthesis. In the next chapter I will give an overview of the influx of disability scholarship that forwards various ways of conceiving of and deploying disability as an analytical category that can serve to irritate conventional ways of thinking about, seeing and being in the world, especially with regards to the body.

2.3 Disability as Analytical and Critical Category

Along with a host of articles, these book-length studies form the theoretical and critical foundation for a great variety of approaches (not all of which would seem to be compatible with one another) that think about and / or deploy disability as an analytical category that can serve to irritate conventional ways of thinking about and seeing the world. One example for such a deployment of disability can be found in Davis, *Bending over Backwards* (2012). Disability, Davis points out, is an inherently unstable and always potentially universal socio-cultural category. It is subject to constant discursive definitions and redefinitions by its contexts, and anyone might slip in or out of its parameters by way of accident, illness or cure. By virtue of its instability, disability has the potential not only to foreground, but to provide a solution to what Davis thinks of as the inevitable necessity of identity politics to (strategically) fall back on the essentialism they purport to critique. More precisely, Davis argues that there exists a tension between the "postmodern critique […] that renders problematic desires to unify, to create wholes, to establish foundations" (12) and the essentializing tendencies of identity politics. In other words, while identity politics inevitably imply a degree of stability of identities, postmodern thinking generally champions the view that identity categories are created discursively and thus necessarily unstable. The inherently unstable identity category disability thus becomes what Davis calls a "neoidentity" (26), one that is not bound up by the contradictory necessity to be at once stable and constructed. As such, it embodies his notion of *dismodernism* (cf. 27). Dismodernism relieves the tension between the modernist essentialism of identity politics and postmodern constructivism by centering its critical and theoretical focus on difference. Where difference operates as the social and cultural norm, where the "partial, incomplete subject[']s …] realization is not autonomy and independence but dependency and interdependence" (30), there is no need to strategically hang on to the very identity categories created by the hegemony—as identity politics do, according to Davis—in order to reap the rewards of a normality prescribed by it.

Disability, then, is the corporeal point of departure for the notion of dismodernism, the analytical and critical category which gives rise to its conception. By way of its instability, disability foregrounds that "[w]hat is universal in life, if there are universals, is the experience of the limitations of the body" (32) rather than normality and bodily norms. Disability studies as exercised by Davis, then, "can provide a critique of and a politics to discuss how all groups, based on physical traits or markings, are selected for disablement by a larger system of regulation and signification." (29)

The discussion about the role of identity and identity politics in thinking about and conceptualizing disability is central not only to Davis's work. Rather, it frequently surfaces as the central site of distinction between various scholarly approaches within disability scholarship. If, in terms of identity politics, Davis's ideas are located at the one extreme, the writing of Tobin Siebers tends toward the other extreme. Whereas Davis locates a tendency toward oppressive body ideals within identity politics' (inadvertent) striving for normalcy, Siebers' work is critical of poststructuralist social constructionism because it tends to, in his view, prefer able-bodied standards. When social constructionists see an actual, physical body rather than a theorized abstraction, Siebers maintains, "[i]t is usually a body that feels good and looks good—a body on the brink of discovering new kinds of pleasure, new uses for itself, and more and more power." (*Disability Theory* 59)[14] Consequently, the analytical and critical potency that disability holds for Siebers centers on the often physically and socially painful experience of disability and the identities it creates. Siebers articulates this vantage point of disability criticism perhaps most explicitly in the chapter "Disability-Experience on Trial" in *Disability Theory* (2008). He builds his argument around the U.S. Supreme Court case *Tennessee v. Lane* which saw the plaintiffs convince the court "that states not making courtrooms and legal services physically accessible to people with disabilities could be sued for damages under Title II of the ADA." (120) The importance of the court's ruling, in Siebers' view, lies in the fact that it takes the plaintiffs' personal experiences of disability-based discrimination in the American legal system as its the evidentiary foundation. As such, the ruling is at odds with "the dominant theoretical position on experience in historical and cultural studies" (121). This poststructuralist view deems individual experience an inadequate articulation of "emancipatory goals" (122) because it inevitably naturalizes the oppressive system from which it is borne. The Supreme Court ruling thus demonstrates the emancipatory potential of disability experience:

> Disability provides a vivid illustration that experience is socially constructed, but it exposes just as vividly that the identities created by experience also contribute to a representational system whose examination may result in verifiable knowledge claims about our society. When a disabled body enters any construction, social or physical, a deconstruction occurs, a deconstruction that reveals the lines of force, the blueprint, of the social rendering of the building as surely as its physical rendering. (124)

[14] Strikingly, Siebers argues this point by citing Davis (cf. *Disability Theory* 59). This hints towards the overall reconcilability of these seemingly disparate critical positions, to which I will return below.

The critical and analytical potency Siebers ascribes to disability goes beyond only matters of disability but, rather, may more generally aid in unearthing and accessing socially transformative knowledges about other oppressed minority identities (cf. 127). The significance of the personal experience of disability undergirds Siebers' work even when a defense of identity politics is not at the center of his analysis. This is evident for instance in his chapter "Disability and Art Vandalism" in his book *Disability Aesthetics* (2010). Here Siebers argues that there exist two dimensions which closely link disability to art vandalism. He suggests, in the first instance, that the spectator's experience of a vandalized work of art often closely resembles our reaction to encountering disabled bodies: "suffering, revulsion, and pity" (91). The reason for this, according to Siebers, is that art reception tends to frame pieces of art as representative of the subjectivity of the spectator (cf. 92). In other words, if a work of art represents a subjectivity (93), damage to that work of art—be it in the most urgently noticeable form of vandalism, or in the creeping process of aging—is akin to "the effects of change on that subjectivity" (94). Siebers goes on to point out that "restorers often insist that artworks, once damaged, cannot be returned to their original condition." (93) Consequently, if the deterioration of an artwork—the disability it symbolizes—becomes its marker of authenticity, a vandalized work of art may be "capable of inspiring new visions of subjectivity, visions more attuned than those imagined by traditional art forms to the fragility and diversity of human beings." (94)

In the second instance, Siebers demonstrates that the art vandal themself is often regarded as intellectually disabled in media reports. Siebers takes this observation as a starting point to consider possible implications of the vandal's abandonment of the emotional restraint with which art is meant to be appreciated according to the dominant "doctrine of disinterestedness" (97). It may give rise, he ultimately suggests, to an aesthetics that disregards moderation in art reception, "one in which people react powerfully to works of art that in turn affect the emotions, sensibilities, and perceptions of others" (99).

Siebers' essayistic form remains largely open-ended in terms of critical insight and his ideas tend to take the shape of thought experiments. Nevertheless, either instance demonstrates how framing art vandalism with an understanding of experiences of disability and disability identities may offer fresh perspectives on the issue. Disability in Siebers' work, then, often operates as an analytical tool and critical irritant.

If, as I claimed above, Siebers and Davis are located at opposite critical extremes in terms of identity politics, this does not mean that their approaches to disability studies are irreconcilable. In fact, despite the centrality of questions surrounding identity, most disability theorists find it quite easy to reconcile such theoretical contradictions and tensions without

much ado, liberally helping themselves to the rich smorgasbord of insights achieved across the entire span of the critical spectrum.[15] Waldschmidt's notion of disability studies as a theoretical and disciplinary patchwork quilt comes to mind—an apt description of the field indeed. The work of Robert McRuer may be considered especially exemplary of this notion.

McRuer's work centers on the idea of an emerging "crip culture", a set of "perspectives and practices" he calls "crip theory" (*Crip Theory* 3). This term is explicitly meant to echo and recall the destabilizing and subversive potentials of queer theory. In his accordingly titled book *Crip Theory – Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006), he argues that alongside and intertwined with compulsory heterosexuality there exists compulsory able-bodiedness. Over the course of a series of case studies, he explores ways in which "crip theory […] can continuously invoke […] the inadequate resolutions that compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness offer us." (31) While "cripping" (32) hegemonic culture in this manner serves to avoid the absolute truths about able bodies and proper sexualities propagated by the hegemony, McRuer is careful to emphasize that this does not involve a denial of the "materiality of queer/disabled bodies" (32). By stressing both the inadequacy of the set of identities deemed acceptable by the hegemony and the significance of the "material bodies that have populated [disability-related] movements" (32), McRuer sets up crip theory in a manner that arguably navigates the middle ground between Davis's and Siebers's scholarship.

A central case study in *Crip Theory* is concerned with university level composition programs. McRuer argues that at most US universities—what in the subtitle to the respective chapter he calls the corporate university—composition is taught in a manner that focuses on "a corporate model of efficiency [and] professional-managerial interests." (148) In these programs, the act of writing serves the finished product, composed according to measurable rules of what constitutes a well-written text. McRuer notes, however, that the act of composition "as the production of order [is] paradoxically experienced as the opposite" (149): as troubling, agitating, and disorderly. McRuer points toward Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and the critical and disruptive possibilities inherent in the compulsory act of repeating endlessly yet never perfectly successfully the performance of one's gender. He suggests that similar possibilities exist for composition as something that endlessly yet never perfectly successfully reiterates the hegemonic neoliberal demands for student writing skills (cf. 168-169). In focusing on the agitating and chaotic writing process over the finished well-ordered

[15] We need only note, as Anna Mollow does, that regardless of his critique of identity politics, Davis continues to exhibit a "reliance upon identity as an organizing concept" ("Identity").

product, composition programs may refuse not only the push toward ostensible completion but also neoliberalism's normalizing tendencies with regards to bodies because "the demand for certain kinds of finished projects in the writing classroom is congruent with the demand for certain kinds of bodies." (159) McRuer argues "for the desirability of a loss of composure, since it is only in such a state that heteronormativity might be questioned or resisted and that new (queer / disabled) identities and communities might be imagined." (149) Cripping the writing classroom in this manner may result in what McRuer calls "[c]ritical de-composition" (159) which can help "imagine or envision a future beyond *straight* composition, in all its forms." [emphasis in the original] (170)

Crip theory has proven an influential idea in disability studies. Alison Kafer's *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) is one of the many works that explicitly refers to and builds on McRuer's work. Like him, she makes explicit the need to navigate the middle ground between taking seriously the identities on which disability studies and the disability movement has centered while remaining persistently critical of those very identities (cf. 12). The inconsistencies and contradictions that such an approach often yields are inevitable if a critical discussion of disability is to reflect the convoluted meanings attached to disability in US American culture (cf. 19). Moreover, Kafer claims that they are a necessary means to imagine "accessible futures" (19) and discuss "crip temporalities" (20), which is her central critical project.

One such discussion of crip futures involves, on the one hand, a case study of Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), which has gained some considerable popularity in feminist scholarship for the egalitarian utopia it is deemed to represent. On the other hand, it revolves around the controversial case of a Deaf lesbian couple who chose a deaf sperm donor so that their child might be deaf too.[16] Kafer traces the complex entanglements of queer, feminist and disabled identities in these cases, noting that the assumption of a supposedly universal desire for the eradication of disability governs the discursive logic in both instances: in Piercy's novel, which is centrally concerned with a "democratic science" of genetic engineering, disability is a thing of past, appearing "only as an unwanted characteristic" (74). "In both the novel and interpretation of the novel, it is assumed that disability has no place in feminist visions of the future, and that such an assumption is so natural, so given, that it does not merit public debate." (73) Public discourse about the case of the Deaf lesbians built on a similar assumption. Conservative commentators, Kafer

[16] Here and below, I capitalize the word Deaf where I mean to designate by it a linguistic community.

demonstrates, troubled by the idea of a "queer disabled future" (77), tended to conflate the couple's queerness and Deafness, criticizing them for selfishly burdening their child not only with the disadvantages of growing up with homosexual parents, but also with a disability (cf. 77). But Kafer points out that even queer commentators took issue with the couple's decision, suggesting that "bearing deaf children becomes 'unnatural' and thereby dangerous when it is done outside the bounds of a 'normal, natural' relationship" (78). Like McRuer's work, Kafer's critique is ultimately aimed at highlighting counter-narratives that, unlike Piercy's story of "eradication and cure" 84), imagine queer, feminist *and* crip futures. Cripping, in this manner, hegemonic framings of bodily difference, serves as an ingress into understanding difference differently and to "discovering alternative ways of being in the world" (83).

Perhaps what makes these differing positions with regard to identity politics so relatively easily reconcilable is the fact that these approaches all deploy disability as an analytical and critical category that can disrupt and destabilize not only hegemonic understandings of difference but, in a sense, the hegemony itself. On one level, these works share a concern for gaining a deeper understanding of (perceived) difference. More fundamentally, however, they are all part of a wider move in disability scholarship that focuses disability's potential toward achieving insights into what it is to be "normal." Margrit Shildrick, for instance, devotes her critical attention to tracing how that which is not perceived as normal affects subjectivities that assign one of the many categories denoting abnormality such as monstrosity or disability. In *Dangerous Discourses*, she argues that

> disabled people continue to endure broad cultural discrimination and alienation, not so much for their difference (which may of course be hidden) but because their form of living in the body lays bare the psycho-social imaginary that sustains modernist understandings of what it is to be a subject. Where physical and mental autonomy, the ability to think rationally and impartially, and interpersonal separation and distinction are the valued attributes of western subjectivity, then any compromise of control over one's own body, any indication of interdependency and connectivity, or of corporeal instability, are the occasion – for the normative majority – of a deep-seated anxiety that devalues difference. (1-2)

Building on this destabilizing potential, some disability scholars have recognized that if previous approaches in disability studies have inadvertently continued to frame disability as Other, then, in Fiona Kumari Campbell's words,

> [t]he challenge [may be] to reverse this traditional approach, to shift our gaze and concentrate on what the study of disability tells us about the production, operation and maintenance of ableism [i. e. the dominant set of cultural beliefs that assumes an able and whole body to be the norm]. (4)

Of course, such a notion of what disability studies can achieve has always been an implicit critical undercurrent. For instance, Mitchell and Snyder's concept of narrative prosthesis is certainly useful as a means to lay bare the device of dominant readings of specific literary works or, more generally, interpretation patterns of narrative art. Its critical focus, however, is clearly on the socio-cultural effects of the meanings ascribed to disability throughout literary history. Likewise, Davis's earlier work in *Enforcing Normalcy* provides us with striking insights into the historical formation of normalcy, but it does so in the service of discussing that which falls outside of normalcy's parameters. As disability's destabilizing potential moves to the forefront of scholarly attention, however, the critical thrust of much work in the field shifts, allowing for disability critique to become an increasingly widely applicable theoretical tool. Apart from consolidating a field as diverse as disability studies—sewing the patches into a quilt, to return to Waldschmidt's image—this shift has opened the field more thoroughly than before to research (and increasingly often researchers) that had previously not considered disability as an analytical and critical category.

For instance, Ato Quayson's own first major entry into the field of disability studies, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007), proposes that disability in literature inevitably causes a crisis of "the dominant protocols of representation" (15). Quayson argues that more than Mitchell and Snyder's narrative prosthesis which is "nonaesthetic" and "extrinsic to the literary field itself" (Quayson 25), his notion of aesthetic nervousness refers to the "collapse that occurs *within* the literary frameworks themselves." [italics in the original] (25). This difference is suggestive of the move in the field toward a deployment of disability as analytical and critical category: whereas narrative prosthesis denotes the meanings ascribed to disability in literary texts, aesthetic nervousness is about the effects of disability on and in the literary text. In other words, the former tends to frame disability as passive object to the agency of the hegemony, the latter asks about disability's agency within the object of hegemonic literary narratives. Michael Davidson's *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (2008) also exercises this move. Davidson suggests an approach to the study of disability that explicitly thinks about culture from a position of alterity (cf. 33). The "estrangement posed by disability" (5), he argues, may defamiliarize us with what may otherwise appear so familiar as to go unnoticed and unremarked upon. In this same vein, Michael Bérubé also employs a critical understanding of disability as a means to gain a fresh understanding of things putatively familiar. In *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way We Read* (2016), he explores how intellectual disability may suffuse storytelling even in stories in which it may not be represented in any immediate way through

bodies or minds marked as disabled (cf. 2). Understanding intellectual disability, then, becomes a means to understand a textuality that regardless of its contents is informed by disability as "a social relation" (25). Like Bérubé, Garland-Thomson is a critic who is hardly a newcomer to the field but whose work is also marked by a shift toward a use of disability as disruptive force. Her book *Staring: How We Look* (2009) is an in-depth study of the act of staring. Although she is concerned with a great range of what she calls stareable sights—racial difference, skin color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class—most of her insights come from an intimate knowledge of disability as a socio-cultural category that she deploys productively in her analysis and critique of something that is not necessarily linked to it.

Of course, this more recent critical trajectory of disability studies that I have described here has significantly reshaped the field in that it has made a much broader spectrum of scholarly work possible. To reiterate, however, it has not made other (previous) approaches obsolete or even replaced them. A host of work exists and continues to be created which analyzes the representation of disability in the work of a given artist, or the meanings ascribed to disability in a given genre, and so on. Such works remains valid and important. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a study that deploys disability as an analytical and critical category without also discussing the socio-cultural implications of disability representation in the respective study's object of analysis. Although many scholarly overviews of the field identify *waves* of disability studies (recalling, of course, the popular historical division of schools of feminism), the development of critical work in disability studies may thus be more aptly described as an evolution. The image of the wave implies the end of the previous wave whereas evolution implies the synchrony of distinguishable elements, at least for an extended period of time. Consequently, my own analyses to follow do not adhere to one ostensible school of thought. Rather, as noted above, I will avail myself of the richness of critical and theoretical means to analyzing disability as culturally constitutive Other in a given context and to deploying disability as a means to gain a better understanding of said context. Moreover, while my own work is thus largely situated within what we might call an advanced cultural model understanding of disability, there will be moments in which I refer back to practices of imagery evaluation and evaluations of realism, as well as the occasional usage of approaches informed by a social model understanding. At the same time, not each idea presented on the previous pages will resurface explicitly in my own analyses. But their overall critical thrust informs and represents my way of doing disability studies in the pages to come. At any rate, I hope to have illustrated that, rather than betraying inconsistency, this makes my approach consistent with the majority of disability studies in the humanities, because the emergence of

the field is best understood as a history of complements and extensions, rather than contradictions.

3 State of Research

Having discussed the overall critical, theoretical and methodological thrust of disability studies, I can now turn my attention to how the field has approached my specific subject matter, representations of disability on complex television series. To what degree has research on the subject seen critical interest expand beyond imagery evaluation and social realism? What previous scholarship on the subject can I draw on for my own research into *Breaking Bad*'s and *American Horror Story*'s representation of disability in particular and the potentials of contemporary American television series for disability representation in more general terms?

Television as a medium has been the object of discussion in disability studies for a long time. In fact, one of the most prolific early works in the field (published originally in 1985), Paul K. Longmore's aforementioned "Screening Stereotypes", identifies disability stereotypes on both the silver and the television screen.[17]

As suggested above, Colin Barnes in *Disabling Imagery and the Media* (1992) embarks on a similar project as Longmore but expands on it. He not only identifies more (televised) disability stereotypes than Longmore but provides several practical principles for creators of media representations to adhere by, as well as mail addresses and phone numbers where people can complain should they come across a disability representation they deem detrimental to the advancement of disability rights. According to Katie Ellis, Barnes's study may be understood as an attempt to politicize the then dominant mode of research into disability and other minority representation, which were mostly content analyses such as *Images of Disability on Television* (1992) by Guy Cumberbatch and Ralph Negrine (cf. Ellis 82). What these works have in common is that they identify "underrepresentation, negative stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals" (82) as obstacles to overcome if social change is to be achieved for people with disabilities.

While neither content analysis nor prescriptive imagery evaluation have ceased to exist in a broader, "non-academic" context of disability critique, the direction scholarly

[17] Longmore's scholarly interest remained with televised representations of disability: his 1997 analysis of the cultural and societal significance of telethons, "Conspicuous Contribution and American Cultural Dilemmas: Telethon Rituals of Cleanings and Renewal", ultimately grew into the posthumous publication of the exceptionally detailed book-length study *Telethons: Spectacle, Disability, and the Business of Charity* (2016).

research into disability representation by and large follows the field's overall movement toward a cultural model of disability studies. Building on the pivotal works by Mitchell and Snyder, Davis, and Garland-Thomson, later explorations of disability on television largely abandon the significance of social sciences approaches in earlier studies in favor of cultural studies-style representation critique. This involves both a move away from empirical research and a higher specificity of studies as scholars began to focus on single shows or genres as their object of study rather than on the medium of television as a whole. For instance, Katherine Foss's "Gil Grissom and His Hidden Condition: Constructions of Hearing Loss and Deafness in *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*" (2009)—while opening with and somewhat indebted to content analysis-style research—traces how the popular crime procedural *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-2015) frames hearing loss not only as weakness, defect and functional limitation. Rather, Foss argues that through representations of American Sign Language and Deafness as culture, it is also framed as a potentially enriching way of experiencing life and community. Another instance is Therí A. Pickens's exploration of the complex relationship between blackness and disability in *Monk* (2002-2009). She suggests that the title character Adrian Monk's (Tony Shalhoub) social interactions, which are always represented as awkward because of his phobias and compulsions, "complicate the tensions between the social constructions of blackness and disability even as they challenge the discourse of white liberalism." (Pickens) A third instance, one that focuses on one of the shows I will analyze, is Carl Schottmiller's discussion of *AHS*'s fourth season. He argues that the show's disability and freak discourse ultimately amount to not much more than historically inaccurate narrative vehicles for a story about the oppression of gay white men (cf. 121).

Whether one agrees or disagrees with these works' conclusions, they are all valuable entries into a representation critical discourse that arguably remains somewhat underdeveloped. It should be acknowledged that disability critique has somewhat tended to shy away from mainstream popular media and focused on cultural fragments more readily recognized as "high culture" (cf. Allan 7). The relatively small extent of critical attention to forms of representation other than literature, cinema, performance and the museum may be one of the reasons that works on disability in television series very rarely, if ever, consider the idiosyncrasies of the narrative form in which their subject matter occurs. If anything, Ellis notes, a "significant proportion of disability-informed research into disability and television proceeds from insights obtained through *film* analysis." [emphasis mine] (80)

This is surprising insofar as there is a great deal of scholarship on television and serial narration in general, as well as serial television in particular. Earlier works include David Thorburn's case for a serious scholarly exploration of what he calls television melodrama

(serial prime-time television); feminist studies by Tania Modleski, Jane Feuer and many others who analyze how narrative structures on television may be gendered; Horace Newcombe and Paul M. Hirsch's famous notion of "Television as a Cultural Forum" (1983); or John Fiske's near-encyclopedic *Television Culture* (1987), an overview of both scholarly approaches to television and the medium itself. More recently, the field of television studies has experienced some considerable reinvigoration, which is certainly due in part to the massive influx and popularity of both serial dramas and non-linear modes of television consumption. For example, there is John Thornton Caldwell's *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (2008). An ethnography of the television and film industry, it provides researchers with a plentiful resource that may help better understand and assess creative decisions—something arguably especially valuable for readings of a narrative form that so extensively relies on co-authorship. Amanda S. Lotz's *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (which in 2014 saw the publication of a second, heavily revised and expanded edition a mere 7 years after the first edition) is equally useful in that respect as it traces the various industrial changes that affect the way television is made as well as the way we consume it. Jason Mittell's work is more immediately concerned with the formal aspects of television series: his notion of complex TV is one of the most important concepts in recent television scholarship, offering a rich poetics of the form's specific storytelling means and mechanics. Another particularly worthwhile resources can be located in the publications surrounding the German research project "Ästhetik und Praxis populärer Serialität" (Aesthetics and Practices of Popular Seriality). While the project was not limited to televisual seriality, it yielded a great deal of insight in that area. Frank Kelleter's work in particular has helped, among other things, in exploring the potential effects of the close ties and simultaneousness of reception and production of serial narratives. Of course, this brief overview of some trajectories of earlier and more recent television studies represents a minuscule part of the ever-expanding scholarship in the field. My goal here is not comprehensiveness but rather to highlight that a great deal of potential for critical insight for disability scholarship has so far remained untapped.

And there is potential in the engagement with the narrative form is demonstrated by the fact that there are some scholars, after all, who productively devote portions of their analyses to representational effects that might be attributed to complex serial narration. In most cases, however, these effects are in fact attributed to other, albeit certainly equally valid, factors. Shannon Walters, for example, argues that the sitcoms *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) and *Community* (2009-2015) use humor to destabilize binary categories such as "normal" and "abnormal," "autistic" and "neurotypical," and "disabled" and "non-disabled,"

offering "non-normative and neurodiverse ways of thinking" (286). More precisely, in *Community* in particular, Walters identifies a striking narrative self-reflexivity as well as encouragement for audiences to partake in this reflexivity (cf. 285), and a high degree of polysemy which act as catalysts for this breaking down of categorical barriers. She rightly ascribes these narrative idiosyncrasies to the comedy genre. But they might just as well be ascribed to complex serial narration, as my second case study on *AHS*—chapter 8.3.3 in particular—will demonstrate. Quite similarly, Michael M. Chemers and Hioni Karamanos praise *South Park*'s (1997-present) parodic treatment of disability, arguing that time and time again and through a wide array of disabled characters, the show "castigates the 'disabling stare' even as it invokes it" (37). While this is clearly suggestive of polysemy, Chemers and Karamanos attribute the effect once again to comedy rather than the complexity of much of contemporary serial narration. John Reid-Hresko and D. Kim Reid, likewise, see culturally transformative potential in the polysemy of South Park's humor and note that "both the content of television programs and the methods [narrative means]" are significant to understand to fully appreciate the respective representation of disability. Ultimately, however, they remain focused on specifically *South Park*'s "methods" rather than recognizing a set of narrative means that *South Park* shares with complex television series as a whole. Another instance is Donna Binns's discussion of disability in *The Bionic Woman* (1976-1978). Binns bases part of her critical insight on the fact that lead actor Lindsay Wagner made a point of having her opinion on her character heard and reflected in the scripts, substantially changing the direction of the narrative and the significance of the main character's prosthetics (cf. 96). In Binn's analysis this is merely an interesting side note, and perhaps rightly so, as there appears to be no critical value in further pursuing this point in this particular case. It is worth noting, however, that such a degree of influence on the part of the performer is relatively unique to and quite common in serial television, and, as I will discuss in chapter 8.5.4.2, bears some considerable transgressive potential with regard to disability representation.

While most studies stop just short of recognizing and discussing the significance of the narrative form for the representations they analyze, Ellis's work proves the exception to this rule. She recognizes the extraordinary length of serial television narratives and its importance for character development and audience identification (cf. 81), both of which figure centrally in her discussion of disability in *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011). In another instance, her analysis of *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) applies notions of polysemy. *Game of Thrones*, Ellis, argues belongs to a "new golden age" (90) of television series that exceeds the confinement of its own core narratives, inherently opening up, instead, to the production of meaning in new "knowledge spaces" (87) such as online fan forums. Ellis's analysis of the

disabled characters Tyrion, Bran and Hodor not only makes explicit use of such resources but reads the show's own narrative alongside its fan involvement to achieve a deeper understanding of "the social and cultural construction of disability" (100) in *Game of Thrones* and outside of it. Disability studies must begin to make such a mode of reading complex television series its own, Ellis proposes, one in which we "consider the specificity of television [… ,] what makes television television" (80).

In my own analyses in this study, I seek to address precisely this critical blank space. Drawing on the rich repertoire of cultural model disability studies, I will attempt representation critical readings of disability on American complex TV that take into account the narrative form in which they exist. In doing so, I hope to achieve a deeper understanding of my specific subject material, namely the implications that complex television may have for disability representation (be they pitfalls or transgressive, destabilizing, or transformative potentials) as well as scholarly disability critique. By extension, I intend to shed some light on ways in which formal considerations may generally yield deeper, more complex, and perhaps more complicated understandings of disability representation on TV.

4 Method and Material

First, how will I go about this project? My focus is not only on one or more specific texts' representations of disability but more importantly on the significance of storytelling mechanics and formal idiosyncrasies for these representations. It makes sense, then, to dive deep into the intricacies of a relatively small selection of research objects rather than attempting to achieve an overview of what might be called the state of disability representation on American serial television (such a project, to my mind, would be doomed to failure in this context since it would either have to assume an unlikely uniformity of meaning ascribed to disability across hundreds of television series, or blow up to encyclopedic lengths in order to achieve even a modicum of nuance). Consequently, I will approach my subject in the form of five close readings, each of which will trace one theoretical trajectory of disability representation critique and each will be concerned with a specific aspect of complex serial television. The first will focus on how disability politics in *Breaking Bad* are inflected by the show's realism, the narrative time it devotes to its disabled characters, and the strategies it employs to achieve a cultural legitimation television series had lacked at the time of its original run. The second case study, this one on the first season of *American Horror Story*, is concerned with the effect that some means of serial viewer orientation may have on the representation of disability and disabled subjectivities. The representation of the relationship of intersectional

feminism and disability in *AHS* season 3 will be the subject of the third case study, in which I will also explore how serial self-reflexivity may complicate a given reading potential. The fourth case study investigates the representational effects of the myriad altered bodies in *AHS* from a psychoanalytic perspective and relates them to the deferral of closure and overall protractedness of serial narration. Finally, in my fifth case study I will turn to *AHS* season 5 to analyze its narrative through a Bakhtinian lens, tracing the carnivalesque and grotesque in its freak representation, and relating my findings to industrial production realities of complex television (I will delineate both theoretical trajectories and aspects of serial TV in more detail below). While I intend for each reading to provide useful insights on its own, there will be occasionally strong argumentative links between them. Recalling and anticipating, in this manner, findings and arguments of other chapters, will certainly enrich and deepen our understanding of the subject matter.

Second, what guides my selection of research material for this project? Disability is as ubiquitous in serial television as it is anywhere and choosing which of the myriad representations to critically engage in more detail is a complex task. The first step toward narrowing down the potential material, then, is to consider only those shows in which disability is in some manner central to the narrative, at least upon first inspection. In most cases this will involve one or more central characters with a disability, but a persistent presence of disability might also occur in the absence of such characters, for example if the show is set in a medical environment, such as hospital dramas, or in war-time dramas in which disability might be a feasible prospect for each non-disabled character. Of course, it may certainly be a worthwhile undertaking to analyze disability on television where it occurs outside of the narrative center, where it is a fleeting presence lasting only an episode or two, or predominantly in the narrative background. But it seems reasonable to assume that an analysis of disability in the context of the narrative form of television series benefits more from representations in which disability figures more centrally to the series *as a whole*.

Even after narrowing down the material in this way, there is still a considerable bulk of series to consider. Apart from *Breaking Bad* and *AHS*, the shows I discuss in this study, my own initial (and non-exhaustive) pool of potential series included *South Park*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Daredevil*, *House*, *Game of Thrones*, *Glee* and *Orange Is the New Black*. An analysis of each of these shows would certainly yield worthwhile insights, and my decision for *Breaking Bad* and *AHS* is primarily precisely that: a decision *for* them, not against the others. An analysis of *Breaking Bad*'s representation of disability seems a particularly promising endeavor in the context of this study for two reasons. One, the series was and continues to be extraordinarily popular, having spawned both a spin-off series and a movie, its quotes and

images having achieved a near-unrivaled degree of instant recognizability. Its undeniable cultural impact alone begs a closer analysis of its disability representation. But more importantly, while *Game of Thrones* and *House* (the latter at least during its original runs) may have achieved similar degree of cultural permeation, what sets *Breaking Bad* apart is that the critical attention it receives is as much popular as it is scholarly. Thus, the series lends itself to closer analysis because it comes with a foundation of scholarly work on which my research can build.

As a first examination suggested, *Breaking Bad* is a useful object of study also because it is somewhat of a hybrid between serial and cinematic or non-serial narration. Although it clearly employs narrative means and mechanics of complex TV, there is a distinctly cinematic style to the show, as well as an underlying narrative logic that evidences a referentiality and indebtedness to storytelling structures that dominate Hollywood cinema. An analysis of *Breaking Bad*'s representation of disability that builds on this recognition, one that contrasts representational effects of serial and non-serial narration, is likely a fitting point of departure and contrast for a research project that seeks to read television series as its own narrative form rather than as a form of cinema.

AHS lends itself to my study first because of its sheer abundance of disability representations. This abundance is arguably immediately evident upon even the most cursory inspection of the series as it features a cast regular with Down Syndrome, inscribes itself into the horror genre with its propensity for mutilated or otherwise extraordinary bodies, and has an entire season set in a freak show. Moreover, the show's anthology format, with each season telling a different story from a shared universe, proves convenient for my research. On the one hand, it allows for distinct analyses both of relatively distinct fragments of disability representation and the effects that specific aspects of complex serial narration bear on them. On the other hand, these distinct portions of critical analysis nevertheless relate closely to each other, not only because of the shared universe but also because of a largely consistent style of storytelling. This certainly works in favor of identifying and comprehending the argumentative connections I intend to make between the discrete chapters. In other words, the compactness and density of *AHS* as a research object makes it, to my mind, an unavoidable choice as a show case analysis.

The following overview of my study will serve to flesh out some of the points about method and material that I have made so far: I will specify the theoretical underpinnings of each close reading and detail my angle of disability representation critique and discuss how the narrative form of complex TV may shape and inflect the representation at hand.

5 Overview of the Study

I begin my analysis of *Breaking Bad* with the observation that from an activist and social change advocate's normative point of view, the show's disability representation arguably appears laudable for its realism. On the one hand, the various characters' emotional responses to disability evolve out of their respective characterizations in a believable manner. It is the serial longform, I suggest, that facilitates such attentive characterizations that resists the more common trope of disability narration in which, conversely, the characterization evolves out of the disability. On the other hand, the show not only narrates the financial pitfalls of the American health care system in some considerable detail, but often depicts the mastering of mundane tasks and logistical matters—such as driving a car or using the toilet—with a disability in an equally meticulous manner. Disability activists and critics alike have identified the politically and socially transformative potential that such realism may entail where it familiarizes the audience with ways of life that might otherwise remain obscure and alien.

I will then move on to discuss how some of the strategies *Breaking Bad* employs to achieve cultural legitimacy risk undermining the transformative potential of the careful realism of its disability representation. The series, one, seeks proximity to narrative forms that, at the time when it first aired, were (and often still are) perceived as more respectable and serious in popular critical and scholarly circles. Two, it distances itself from narrative forms that are deemed even less respectable than prime time television drama such as soap operas. Specifically, I will focus on legitimation strategies that are located within the text, namely the show's cinematic style, a closed narrative form, and deeply embedded tropes that recall works of literature. If we read the cinematic style and closed narrative form as masculinely coded, it becomes clear that *Breaking Bad* favors these over femininely coded narrative forms. A brief discussion of the show's gender politics reveals that disability falls squarely within the realm of the feminine. Thus, I argue that *Breaking Bad*'s narrative valuation of masculinity involves a devaluation of disability.

The show's investment in literary tropes as a means of legitimation also threatens to undo the work of its realism. I will present two cases in which there is a distinct sense that these metaphorical deployments of disability serve the purpose of legitimation as the narrative could easily do without the overdetermined literary modes of characterization by way of disability. By juxtaposing Hank's (Dean Norris) hunt for Heisenberg with Ahab's hunt for the white whale, his leg injury lends itself to be read as a signifier of obsession. The narrative similarly frames Walter's (Bryan Cranston) cancer as manifestation of a repressed Other, of the Heisenberg in him, another well-known literary trope. In both cases, the evocation of

literariness undermines the otherwise careful characterization, inadvertently bringing to the fore the notion that disability is the governing aspect of a disabled character.

While the majority of my chapter on *Breaking Bad* is concerned with the troublesome aspects that non-serial narration may bring into serial narration, the chapter ends on the caveat that serial narration is, of course, not without its pitfalls. Specifically, I will show that Walter Jr.'s (RJ Mitte) cerebral palsy operates as a narrative device necessitated by the length of serial narratives: it helps us recall our initial sympathy for Walter Sr. despite his increasing villainy so as to not entirely alienate us from the show's main character.

In the second case study, and the first on *AHS* in my study, I argue that one of the first season's disabled characters is instrumental in providing viewer orientation, and then focus on how this affects the representation of disability. I will argue that the character of Addy (Jamie Brewer and Katelyn Reed [as a child]) serves to fulfil a central requirement of the beginning of a television series, namely, to orient the viewer within the new narrative and its storyworld, as well as the show's style and wider cultural context. Specifically, *AHS* makes Addy a site of intertextuality that, by invoking other fragments and tropes of popular culture, inscribes the series into liberal left-leaning (in the American sense) discourses on the one hand, and the horror genre on the other. In keeping with its liberal politics, *AHS* is clearly invested in a progressive representation of disability. However, I will show that the use of Addy as a reference to the horror genre poses a problem for this pretense to progressiveness as it inadvertently frames the character herself as horror. This is something of which *AHS* seems acutely and uneasily aware. I suggest, then, that the uncertainty as to how the character might be handled leads to her being killed off after having fulfilled her purpose of viewer orientation. While this is a storytelling move that can be read as itself problematic (from a normative disability studies point of view), there is another aspect of viewer orientation that, I will argue, may redeem the season's disability representation (again, normatively speaking).

For other than being a site of intertextuality, Addy is also a surrogate for the viewer. More than any other character in the season, we share her perspective on and relationship with the storyworld. This, I suggest, provides what I call a model viewing stance, a blueprint for how to read different aspects of the show. While Addy approaches the horror elements of the storyworld with a gleeful enjoyment, framing this aspect of the show as distinctly camp, her experience of oppressive beauty standards and her disability is represented as deeply serious, highlighting that the show's liberal politics are equally serious. Consequently, I conclude, *AHS* is a rare and notable case in which a narrative not only focuses on a disabled character's experience of disability, but does so with an exceptional degree of viewer identification with said character, rather than with the non-disabled populace of the storyworld.

My third case study is concerned with season 3 of *AHS*. I argue first that it is a critique of intersectional feminism's relative ignorance of disability as a socio-cultural category. I then turn to discuss how the season also lends itself to be read as a self-aware critique of its own disability representation through what I call *AHS*'s stylistic overdrive—a relative valuation of style over narrative substance that is particularly pronounced in season 3. The series highlights, one, how its very own examination of the marginalized position of disability in an intersectional feminist discourse may in fact reproduce that which it critiques; and, two, extends that same self-critical realization to the first season's representation.

I conclude the chapter by discussing in greater depth the significance of the poetics of complex TV for my readings specifically, and for disability (and minority) representation of serial television in general. This involves a recognition of what is often referred to as the feedback loop: the fact that serial narratives read themselves, feed on their own previous installments, in order to produce new installments. While the feedback loop is borne of necessity, I suggest that shows may employ it, as *AHS* does, as a means to reflect on, amend, deepen and critique their own representational politics. Furthermore, such self-reflexivity on complex television series often takes the form of what Jason Mittell calls "operational aesthetic" (*Complex* 46), a foregrounding of *the way* a series is narrated and an invitation to the viewer to partake in an analytic way of consumption. *AHS*'s stylistic overdrive, I suggest, is precisely such an invitation and, thus, a way in which the poetic of serial narration encourage critical readings of disability representation.

Case study number four is focused not on a specific season of *AHS* but on its myriad altered bodies—my umbrella term for bodies that undergo some form of violent alteration so that they differ from what may be referred to as normative corporeality. I begin my analysis of the representational potential of the altered body by discussing several ways in which *AHS* foregrounds how socio-cultural ascriptions of bodily abnormality are contingent on a variety of factors such as framing and discursive context, but also visibility and access to medical remedies.

I then take a psychoanalytic stance toward the altered body, exploring what the effect of encounters with non-normative bodies may be. I argue specifically that AHS's incessant focus on the process of bodily alteration may not only destabilize myths of discrete, coherent and autonomous corporeality. Building on theories by Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan, I suggest that this destabilization is rendered particularly powerful because it strikes at the heart of the individual's subject formation. The altered body thus represents not only the instability of the body, but it recalls a perception of the *self* prior to achieving a state of perceived discreteness, coherence, and autonomy. And because ideologies of normative corporeality (as

identified by Garland-Thomson and Davis) build on precisely such a perception, the altered body's destabilizing potential, by extension, may prove troublesome to these ideologies which have been the occasion for the socio-cultural marginalization of disability.

I finally turn to the significance of serial narration for these representational potentials. Specifically, the focus is on narrative structure. The horror genre has frequently been described as inherently conservative because, more often than not, it instantiates a narrative structure by which a normality lost at the beginning of the story is reinstated at its end. Disability scholarship, for instance by Mitchell and Snyder, has on occasion championed a similar view with regards to narratives in general. I argue, however, that *AHS*' stories tend to refuse such a return to normality, valuing a state of abnormality over a state of normality, and frequently offering a narrative equilibrium that involves a coming to terms with abnormality. In fact, I suggest, such a refusal of normality is not specific to *AHS*, but a necessary ingredient in complex serial television storytelling. I conclude my chapter, thus, by arguing that on the level of the episode and the season, serial TV cannot provide a return to a perceived normality but must, in order to keep the narrative going, remain open-ended. For different reasons, the same is true of the largest discrete unit of serial narration, the series as a whole: because it ends so rarely with a planned and scripted ending, most shows retain at least a sense of abnormality at the end of their narratives. The narrative structure of serial television itself, then, appears to lend itself to endeavors in storytelling that seek to explore and value states of non-normative corporeality.

My final case study discusses season 4, which is set in a freak show, in some great detail. I build my analysis on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnival as a leveling of socio-cultural hierarchies. This leveling is expressed through, among other things, the grotesque body, which will be the governing concept of my analysis. I begin by identifying a number of ways in which the freaks of *AHS* visually fit the bill of Bakhtin's grotesque body. Once this has been established, my reading will grow more complex, sticking with Bakhtin but incorporating also Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's reading of his work with regard to the bourgeois social strata. I intend to demonstrate that more than visually, the freaks of *AHS* can be figured as socio-cultural grotesques. While on the one hand the freak is a product of bourgeois efforts of socio-cultural self-consolidation, I will argue over the course of four smaller case studies that in *AHS*, the freak also represents a site of longing for the local bourgeois town folk. Such a reading of the freak, I contend, may offer inroads for an appropriation and reappraisal of the historical freak and freak show, unearthing empowering reading potentials of a phenomenon that otherwise nearly always signifies the inferiority of bodily deviance.

I then relate my findings to serial narration, this time moving outside of the poetics of complex TV. Specifically, I am concerned with how the process of production may impact the polysemy of television texts and thus its representational potentials. The chapter departs from the realization that irrespective of the transformative potentials of its narrative, *AHS*'s fourth season inescapably also partakes in the oppressive aspects of the freak show. I suggest first that such representational inconsistencies, while inherent to any narrative medium, may be amplified by a commercially motivated demand for a broad audience appeal. Second, I discuss how various aspects of logistical aspects of television production—from rushed filming to collaborative authorship—may in fact cause a greater propensity for polysemy. Most significantly for my study, I argue that the television performer may be more involved in the writing process, which in the case of *AHS* has led to some notable aspects of disability portrayal being changed to meet the disabled performers' wishes.

6 Some Notes on Terminology

In a final chapter before I begin the case studies, I will briefly delineate some of the vocabulary surrounding seriality and serial narration. There is terminology that calls for definition, as parlance from different discourses—casual, scholarly, and industry—is occasionally contradictory and far removed from one another. For the most part, the vocabulary I use throughout this study follows that used by Jason Mittell in his various works. Many terms have arguably already entered common knowledge and likely require no further explication, others I will explain where they are relevant. There are, however, some matters of terminology and use of words that call for clarification prior to my analyses.

The first pertains to my use of the word "series," which I use somewhat liberally. The need for clarification here arises out of the fact that for television there is technically a distinction to be made between series and serials. A series, or episodic series, in this technical sense designates a show with

> a consistent storyworld, but each episode is relatively independent: characters, settings, and relationships carry over across episodes, but the plots stand on their own, requiring little need for consistent sequential viewing or knowledge of story history to comprehend the narrative. (Mittell, *Television* 228)

Procedural cop shows and older sitcoms tend to belong in this category. Serials, or serial narratives, conversely, require sequential viewing as stories span several episodes and seasons (where the concept applies). When these stories are resolved, "the resolving third act

morphs into a disruptive first act of a new plotline." (230) Telenovelas and soap operas fall squarely within this category.

The type of television show with which I am chiefly concerned here occupies the middle ground between the extremes of episodic series and serial narratives. They are what Mittell called episodic serials in *Television and American Culture* (2010) and has since come to define as complex TV or

> narrative complexity [which] redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration […]. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres. Complex television employs a range of serial techniques, with the underlying assumption that a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode. […] This new mode is not as uniform and convention driven as episodic or serial norms traditionally have been […]. [italics in the original] (*Complex* 18)

In the majority of cases, then, when I speak of series or television series, I mean to designate shows that fall into the category of complex TV (although, in some clearly marked cases, I use the word "series" as an umbrella term for any form of narration distributed over a number of installments). Importantly, however, I do not mean to subsume under the term "television series" episodic series or serial narratives unless explicitly specified. Consequently, it should also be noted that the word "serial" in my use is strictly an adjective meaning *pertaining to series or seriality*.

The second term that needs to be clarified is "pilot episode." Here too, different usages may be cause for confusion. In industry terminology, a pilot is an independently produced episode of a series whose production has not yet been green-lit. The pilot episode's success with network executives and test audiences determines whether the full series it represents will be picked up. That is why there are sometimes striking tonal differences between a show's first episode and the rest of it. There are also cases in which the pilot is never aired, or not aired as the first episode of the series but at a later point in the season. Thus, a series does not necessarily have a pilot. In Netflix's production model, for instance, a full season is ordered, produced, and published as a whole.

My use of the term "pilot," then, is much closer to Mittell's and largely congruent with popular usage: a pilot is understood here as the first episode of a series. Although the distinction between pilot and non-pilot first episodes is important from an industry viewpoint, from a storytelling perspective and for audience reception it is arguably negligible. A pilot as first episode must accomplish a number of tasks—the introduction of characters, storyworld

and narrative style to name a few (I will discuss these tasks in more detail in the first case study on *American Horror Story*)—irrespective of whether the episode was also what sold the series. My technically incorrect usage, then, reflects this study's overall focus on narrative and representation.

Finally, I should clarify my use of the terms "story," "plot," "story arc," and "character arc." My distinction of story and plot agrees with the common distinction in which the story consists of all events that happen in a narrative while the plot consists only of selected story elements, arranged and framed with a specific dramatic and representational effect in mind. While story and plot are terms that may be applicable to any form of narrative, the term story arc is used primarily for forms of storytelling that divide their narratives up into episodes. A story arc is a relatively discrete portion of the story, a shorter dramatic entity with its own beginning and ending embedded within the overarching narrative. Understanding it and appreciating its significance requires differing degrees of knowledge of the storyworld and story, and its events will in almost all cases remain meaningful after it concludes. In complex TV, a story arc may span anything from an episode to a full season or more. On *Breaking Bad*, for example, we may identify a relatively clear-cut story arc in the power struggle between Walter and Gus (Giancarlo Esposito) which ends with Walter's successful assassination-by-proxy of Gus. The latter's death represents the end point of the story arc, and its repercussions echo throughout the rest of the series. While this story arc spans almost two seasons, the series also contains much shorter arcs such as the two-episode arc of Skyler (Anna Gunn) scheming to force Bogdan (Marius Stan) to sell his car wash so that she and Walter can use it for money laundering purposes. Importantly, as the brevity of the car wash arc suggests, shorter story arcs may be nested in longer story arcs, and key events in one arc may also be significant in other arcs. Character arcs might be thought of as story arcs that center on a specific character. For instance, we might think of the entirety of *Breaking Bad*'s run as Walter's character arc in which we follow his transformation from high school teacher to drug kingpin. Seeing as the assassination of Gus both constitutes a story arc in itself and contributes to Walter's development, it is clear that a character arc can consist of more than one story arc in the same way that longer story arcs can contain several shorter arcs.

My use and distinction of the terms "story arc" and "character arc" is ultimately owing to argumentative clarity. On the one hand, the complexity of the narratives I will discuss in the analyses to come necessitates a means of isolating specific narrative strands, as well as isolating a specific character's journey through these strands. On the other hand, understanding the place of a story arc or character arc in the overall narrative structure helps grasping its role in the story, and the significance of the representations it involves.

7 Case Study 1: Disability Representation in *Breaking Bad*

When *Breaking Bad* first aired in early 2008, it entered an American television landscape that had only begun to grow into what it looks like now. In terms of complex TV, we might say that it looked emptier. Of course, many of the shows that helped bring the narrative form of serial television to the center of public, critical, and scholarly attention had aired already, and many had already been concluded or cancelled. *Breaking Bad* is preceded, for instance, by all of the shows that we today recognize as HBO's groundbreaking dramatic programming: *Oz* (1997-2003), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Deadwood* (2004-2006); by *Weeds* (2005-2012) and *Dexter* (2006-2013) on HBO's premium cable competitor Showtime; and by a number of sometimes hugely successful programs on network television such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) on The WB and UPN, *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991, 2017) and *Lost* (2004-2010) on ABC, *The West Wing* (1999-2006) on NBC, *24* (2001-2010) and *House* (2004-2012) on Fox, and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) on UPN and The CW. But it would be another five years before Netflix and Amazon would venture into original programming, and, more significantly in this context, original programming on basic cable stations was still somewhat of a rarity: FX had led the way with *The Shield* (2002-2008) and *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010), Syfy (then known as Sci Fi) had *Battlestar Galactica* (2003, 2004-2009), and *Breaking Bad*'s own channel AMC had just landed a hit half a year earlier with its first original drama series *Mad Men* (2007-2015). While it does suggest that *Breaking Bad* premiered at a time when complex television dramas were still a relative novelty, this list is by no means exhaustive, especially not with regard to network programming. But *Breaking Bad* was cast in the mold of the then rarer basic and premium cable drama,[18] with shorter seasons than network programming—ten to 15 episodes per season, rather than 20 to 24—which is the format that today we are most likely to associate with the ubiquitous proclamations of television's new quality, and second (or third? Or simply new?) golden age.[19] And as one of complex television's pioneers,

[18] Alan Sepinwall provides some concrete data: "FX's research department […] says that in 2002, the year *The Shield* debuted, there were 36 original scripted dramas and comedies on cable; by 2014, that number had skyrocketed to 167, along with another two dozen from streaming outlets like Netflix and Hulu. By the end of this year [2015], FX estimates, there will be over 400 original scripted series in primetime across broadcast [i.e. network], cable, and streaming networks." (434) Although these figures do not specifically mention the year of *Breaking Bad*'s premiere, their trajectory illustrates what I suggest when I speak of complex television's relative novelty and rarity.

[19] There are several incentives for producers to cut down the length of seasons, from clearing time slots for a greater diversity of shows to making it more attractive for well-known performers to

Breaking Bad arguably struggled with a then more widely unchallenged reputation of its televisual medium, particularly the non-subscriber-financed channels, as home of second-rate or "low" culture. This is not to say that later shows do not also face that same struggle. As Newman and Levine noted in 2012, the medium's cultural "legitimation is an ongoing cultural process that is still incomplete even in its heightened, present state." (4) But like its predecessors on HBO, *Breaking Bad* appears to be especially invested in positioning itself not alongside the "profane flow of everyday television" (Anderson, Overview 25) but in the proximity of already legitimated cultural forms such as cinema and literature. My discussion of *Breaking Bad* evolves out of this observation, which I will flesh out in chapter 7.2.

In my analysis of the representation of disability in *Breaking Bad*, I am, thus, centrally concerned with the narrative's efforts to approximate narrative forms that enjoy a greater degree of cultural legitimation than its own narrative form of the television series. I will argue that these efforts, or legitimation strategies, inflect the series' disability representations in a manner that produces an uneasy tension with, or undermines its equally evident interest in narrating disability in a manner that recognizes and grants narrative time and space to the disabled characters' subjectivities, and their experience not only of the story's events, but more importantly of their disabilities. Thus, the opening chapter of this analysis lays the argumentative groundwork by exploring the emotional verisimilitude and material realism of *Breaking Bad*'s disability representations and briefly discusses this realism's usefulness for disability studies' and activism's central political agenda. A second step will identify several manifestations of the show's legitimation strategies. This entails a series of discussions—first relating to the show's aspirations to cinema, then to the aspirations to literature—not only of the complex ways in which they relate to and impact the arcs of its disabled characters, but also of the effect they have on the series' disability politics. I will conclude by counterbalancing my findings: a brief case study will demonstrate how requirements of serial narration may be just as productive of tensions with the show's more overt investment in "careful" disability representation as its aspirations to more legitimated narrative forms are.

7.1 Emotional Verisimilitude and Material Realism of Disability

This chapter serves to demonstrate that *Breaking Bad* evidences some considerable investment in providing realistic representations of disability and illness with regard to two

sign on to a production. For a more detailed discussion of these and other reasons, see Josef Adalian, "10 Episodes Is the New 13 (Was the New 22)" (2015).

aspects:[20] one, its characters' emotional responses to disability; and, two, more material realities relating to options, availability, course and prospect of treatment as well as matters of disability accommodation in non-medical settings. The first aspect, which I term emotional verisimilitude, acknowledges Mittell's justified claim that *Breaking Bad* is not concerned with a "naturalistic" realism of *The Wire*'s order, as its "flashy visual style signals", and that it "is ultimately less invested in creating a realistic representation of its storyworld than in portraying people who feel true" (*Complex* 221).[21] However, there are some thematic concerns of *Breaking Bad* that tend to be represented with a distinct commitment to a naturalistic realism, among which are the science of chemistry as well as disability. In this chapter, neither aspect demands a great deal of critical analysis as the greater significance of the observations presented here—that is, the point I intend to make—arises only in conjunction with my discussion of *Breaking Bad*'s legitimation strategies which I discuss in the following chapters. However, I will conclude this chapter by briefly delineating in how far the show's disability realism may be considered politically significant and progressive as a successful implementation of representational demands posed by some influential currents of disability studies and activism.

What specifically, then, do I mean by emotional verisimilitude? My point is neither to pathologize the various emotional responses to their illness or disability so that we may judge their medical realism or relative likelihood, as one critic has done for Walter (cf. Warraich). Nor do I intend to pass normative judgment on whether or not they are represented in a positive

[20] In the interest of avoiding an excess of unwieldy formulations such as "representations of disability and illness": throughout these chapters, when I refer to *Breaking Bad*'s representations of disability, I mean this to include Walter's cancer, which is, of course, more commonly understood as an illness. Lengthy semantic debates on the subject would certainly run contrary to the purpose of a study such as this, which is concerned with the cultural meanings attached to disability as opposed to essentializing definitions. In any case, on whichever discursive grounds the socio-cultural categories of disability and illness are constructed, they are likely never mutually exclusive. Most importantly, it will become clear over the course of the chapters to come that *Breaking Bad* does not engage disability and illness as distinct categories, but rather subsumes them under an implied master category of what might be called bodily deficiency.

[21] I am aware of the wealth of scholarship on the subject of realism and will very briefly refer to the aspect of its ideological implications at the end of this chapter. By and large, however, my use of terms such as "realistic" and "realism" will not entail a critical discussion of them because it is grounded in the most basic (perhaps even non-scholarly) understanding of them: a realistic fictional representation or image of a thing is one that is reasonably congruent with the empirical thing itself. Thus, when I speak of disability realism throughout this chapter, I refer to representations of disability that correspond to likely experiences of "contemporary lives lived with disabilities" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 180n3). For comprehensive discussions of realism in television see John Fiske's chapters on the subject in *Television Culture* (pp. 21-45). Other contributions include Bambi L. Haggins' "*Homicide*: Realism" (2013); "'How Is It Possible That This Was Kept a Secret?': Representation, Realism, and 'Epistemic Panic' in *The West Wing*" by Sebastian M. Herrmann; Kathi Gormász's concise chapters on modes of character realism in television series (pp. 101-117); or Jason Mittell's chapter "Making Meaning" in *Television and American Culture* (pp. 161-212).

or negative manner. That is to say, if they constitute "negative imagery" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 17) of disability by reinforcing "common prejudices" regarding emotional responses to disability such as that "disabled people are embittered by their 'fate' [and that they] resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them" (Longmore, "Screening" 67). Rather, by emotional verisimilitude I mean to designate the observation that the emotional responses "feel true", to return to Mittell's phrase, that they are consistent both with our likely experience of reality despite occurring within *Breaking Bad*'s sometimes "implausible and even antirealist" (Mittell, *Complex* 221) storyworld. Let us consider, thus, Walter's response to his cancer diagnosis: upon receiving it, he appears to not quite process the information—he experiences "depersonalization" in Haider Javed Warraich's medical terms—acknowledging it in a matter-of-factly fashion, and then only tells his family about it after a couple of days have passed. While almost any response to a terminal diagnosis can arguably be represented as relatable, Walter's is consistent not only with specifically his emotionally reserved manner but also, more generally, with the culturally dominant notion that "boys don't cry." His initial decision against treatment is equally governed by a set of culturally pervasive beliefs about masculinity (I will discuss these in greater detail in the following chapters), which renders it credible and comprehensible (or intelligible, in Judith Butler's sense of the term) although, like Skyler and Walter Jr., we might disagree with it. Finally, those same credible beliefs about masculinity along with the manifold ways that he feels his masculinity has been violated, form the foundation of Walter's most pronounced emotional response to his cancer diagnosis: his eponymous breaking bad. The material fact of his transformation from high school chemistry teacher to drug kingpin and one of America's most wanted within two years may ultimately ask of us some considerable suspension of disbelief. Like the psychological development that goes along with this transformation, however, the emotional response to cancer that lies at the heart of it is represented as very believable. *Breaking Bad*'s deep investment in emotional verisimilitude is thus rooted, as Mittell notes, in the fact that the show "aims for a nearly unprecedented effect in television: chronicling how a character's core identity and beliefs can drastically change over time" (*Complex* 221). In order for such a complex transformation to be credible and comprehensible, its complex psychological and emotional triggers must be equally credible and comprehensible. But while, consequently, this emotional verisimilitude is particularly important for the character of Walter, the show's three disabled characters—Hector Salamanca (Mark Margolis), Hank Schrader, and Walter Jr.— arguably respond to their respective disabilities in a similarly believable manner. Chapter 7.2.1 will see a comprehensive exploration of each character's response to their respective disabilities and disability in general, so a very brief survey will suffice at this point.

Hector, who is a former high-level member of the cartel, responds to his paralysis in a way that reflects both that he remains honor-bound to the cartel and the hypermasculinity that dominates the realm of his socialization. He accepts that his disability renders him incapable to effectively compete in the day-to-day business operations of the world of drug manufacture and trafficking, and largely withdraws from his position of power. His invariably bad temper may certainly have been amplified by his becoming paralyzed, which would be a likely development for someone who had previously lived a life that values masculine assertiveness. But it is not a product of his disability, as we learn from several flashbacks that evidence a propensity for irate behavior prior to his disability.

Hank's response to his disability is also noticeably informed by the fact that he belongs to the hypermasculine world of drug manufacture and trafficking (although, of course, he operates on the side of the law). Because like Hector he values the exercise of masculine assertiveness, a pronounced change of personality occurs in the time directly following his injury: he goes from a cheerful, jocular disposition to being curmudgeonly or downright abusive toward his wife Marie (Betsy Brandt). This personality change is consistent with Hank's characterization not only because it is triggered by his loss of control over his body. It is also credible because a number of events prior to his injury had already suggested that his cheerfulness might be somewhat disingenuous, and because, irrespective of the bodily aspect, his disability keeps Hank from engaging in his increasingly obsessed pursuit of Heisenberg. The significance of this latter aspect is then emphasized when, rather than the healing process, it is first the (false) presumption that Heisenberg is dead, and then the prospect of catching him after all that lift Hank's spirits once more, returning him ultimately to his old self irrespective of the limp he retains.

Unlike Hank, Walter Jr. has lived his whole life with his disability, and is thus represented as wholly accustomed to the practical concessions it requires of him. To him, cerebral palsy is an extraordinary but everyday fact of his life as an otherwise ordinary teenager. His emotional response to his disability evolves out of this characterization: he remains level-headed even in situations that he experiences as embarrassing such as when he requires his parents' help to try on a pair of jeans in a store and is mocked for it by a group of teenagers. His reactions to his father's cancer diagnosis and Hank's injury is equally believable and consistent with his experience of living with a disability. He confidently lays into Walter for his refusal of treatment and into Hank for his refusal to leave the hospital by reminding both that he enjoys his life irrespective of his less than immaculate health.

What is important to note is that in each of these cases the disability does not define the respective character's emotional response to it. Rather, it is the characterization that defines

the emotional response to the disability. In other words, disability does not serve as the singular or even primary means of characterization but is one among many aspects of the character's life that shape who they are in different ways and to different degrees. *Breaking Bad*, thus, resists a ubiquitous and reductive method of disability-related characterization in western literary and cinematic tradition (cf. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 57-61), namely the essentialist assumption that there necessarily exists a correspondence between the exterior and the interior, the body and the soul or psyche. Rather, the verisimilitude with which the narrative invests its disabled characters' complex and multi-layered emotions operates in a way that frames disability as an equally complex and multi-layered experience and allows for the emergence of what might be called "disabled subjectivities".

Apart from emotional verisimilitude, *Breaking Bad* exhibits a considerable investment in a realistic portrayal of disability through its representations of matters pertaining to material aspects of disability. These include, first, options, availability, course and prospect of medical treatment. It has often been remarked that *Breaking Bad*'s premise hinges on the fact that the Whites "don't have the greatest insurance" (1.1 17:20). Thus, matters of (in)accessibility to medical treatment initiate the narrative as that which "has gone amiss with the known world" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 53). Importantly, however, *Breaking Bad* does not abandon its attention to the material reality of disability and illness once it has served the purpose of a plot device that "originates the act of storytelling" (54). Rather, it is brought to the narrative fore time and time again. The story's "first antagonist", Walter's cancer, is "a threat floating above the character" (Lang 166) for the duration of the entire series and the series commits to the tediously drawn-out process of cancer treatment. We return with Walter to chemotherapy and doctor's appointments, we listen to explanations of treatment options and perspectives, and we see him and Skyler discussing bills and payment plans.

The material aspect of medical treatment is also granted some considerable attention in Hank's character arc. Far from being represented as being simply a matter of will power and determination, the degree of his recovery is determined in no small part by the limited treatment options covered by his health care plan. The recovery itself is also invested with attention to realism and detail. Hank's progress during physical therapy is represented as very slow and demanding of a great deal of bodily and psychological exertion. The same applies to basic bodily functions: the camera does not cut away when Hank needs a toilet but lingers for a drawn-out shot as Marie and Hank labor to position him over the bedpan. Of course, the scene serves not only the purpose of a realistic portrayal of the experience of disability but also to visualize what Hank experiences as emasculation. In a similar manner, the previously noted detailed representations of medical treatments' financial implications also operate as

plot devices that advance a narrative centrally concerned with "contemporary discourses about neoliberalism and their effects on society" (Pierson 15). Likewise, the narrative's frequent returns to images of Walter's medical treatment also serve other means, such as to propel forward the plot, or, as Lang suggests, "to relativize the morally questionable behavior of the main character" (166). In the following chapters, I will return to a more comprehensive discussion of some of these functions of *Breaking Bad*'s detailed representations of disability. For now, we should note that in any case they offer realistic depictions of some of disability's material aspects—something that is a relatively rare occurrence in mainstream audiovisual media. Mitchell and Snyder point toward an interview with disabled writer Andre Dubus to illustrate how Hollywood cinema tends toward "inaccurate portraiture" (*Narrative* 22). Dubus recalls watching the movie *Passion Fish* (1992) and being perplexed about the paraplegic protagonist's range of mobility in her wheelchair:

> I remember one scene in Louisiana, they're on a wharf and there's this little skiff, and she tells the nurse, "Get me in the boat." Now these are things I live with all the time. Next scene, she's in the boat, and I said, "How the fuck did she lower this woman from the chair into the boat in the water?" Show me that and you've got some story. (Dubus, qtd. in Mitchell and Snyder *Narrative* 22)

This scene, although involving a nurse, occurs outside of a medical setting, which brings us to the second aspect of *Breaking Bad*'s material disability realism, which centers on matters of negotiating or accommodating disability in non-medical contexts. To begin with, however, we should note that the narrative's attention to realistic detail surrounding the medical context of disability may have the effect—or, phrased more normatively, may be accused—of perpetuating the hegemonic western notion of disability as a purely medical matter, consequently reducing the experience of disability "to issues of medical prevention, cure or rehabilitation" (Shakespeare, "The Social Model" 199). But if this is the case, then the frequent portrayals of material aspects of disability outside of the medical context—of which I will only delineate some of the most salient examples—arguably have the opposite effect: they wrest disability from this reductive medical understanding and frame it as a much broader, ordinary, and often even banal experience. One such ordinary and banal moment occurs in the pilot episode during the abovementioned scene in which Walter Jr. requires assistance when trying on a pair of jeans. In the episode "Down" (2.4), we also learn in what way his cerebral palsy impacts his ability to perform the mundane task of driving a car: he has a hard time operating the gas and brake pedals of an automatic car with just one foot. This is referred to again much later in "Half Measures" (3.12) when he first asks Walter if he can use his car for his driving test because his Skyler's car's breaks are too sensitive for him to operate, and then

tells him that it is permissible in New Mexico to use both feet if you have a doctor's note. Another striking instance involves Hector: his attendance of a meeting with Gus Fring at his out-of-town factory farm depends first on stealing a car that can accommodate him along with his wheelchair, and then on the Salamanca cousins painstakingly carrying him up the narrow set of stairs into the room where the meeting takes place. Clearly, the doubly inconvenient location of the venue constitutes a deliberate act of humiliation on the part of Gus and, consequently, serves his characterization as well as the progression of the narrative. Similarly, Walter Jr.'s struggles with putting on pants in an unaccommodating changing room and with driving serve to trigger his father's actions or to illustrate his frame of mind. Nevertheless, the narrative also recognizes these instances as opportunities to represent disability in a manner that foregrounds with a high degree of realism some material aspects of disability that are more typically glossed over for the sake of anything from a perceived need for propriety to narrative economy.

In what regard, then, is *Breaking Bad*'s attention to a realism of disability politically significant from the perspective of disability studies and activism as I suggested above? Although employing an altogether more graphic register than *Breaking Bad* does, Cheryl Marie Wade's passionate reasoning for a need for realistic representations of disability is instructive:

> To put it bluntly—because this need is as blunt as it gets—we must have our asses cleaned after we shit and pee. Or we have others' fingers inserted into our rectums to assist shitting. Or we have tubes of plastic inserted inside us to assist peeing or we have re-routed anuses and pissers so we do it all into bags attached to our bodies. These blunt, crude realities. Our daily lives. […] If we are ever to be at home in the world and in ourselves, then we must say these things out loud. And we must say them with real language. So they are understood as the everyday necessity and struggle they are. (92-93)

This "new realism of the body", as Siebers calls it (*Disability Theory* 65), even in the not quite as "blunt, crude" manifestation we can observe in *Breaking Bad*, may be politically highly useful. It certainly is to Wade because "to tell the truth about the pain and struggle of this life as well as the joy and freedom" (93) may be the first step for people with disabilities to finding a language with which to demand choices even in the most private areas of life that are usually deemed too undignified to discuss publicly (cf. 94).[22] I would add that realistic

[22] The mobilization of the private and personal for the political has been received with some skepticism by disability scholars. Petra Kuppers, for instance, cautions that "[t]he personal isn't political for disabled activists: it too easily becomes a narrative of overcoming, of living *in the face of* disability, rather than living *with and through* a disability and its historic and institutional placing." (109)

representations of disability can be politically useful because they can familiarize the non-disabled population with fundamental aspects of the disabled experience from which it usually remains far removed. Not only can such an increased familiarity with disability potentially salvage it from a dominant cultural compartmentalization "as thoroughly alien" (Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 22). Moreover, a familiarity with realities of disability may be a potent vehicle for socially and culturally subversive or transformative forces because, as Siebers suggests, it tends to accentuate moral and political perspectives that may destabilize and complicate conventional wisdom of any political persuasion (cf. *Disability Theory* 66-67). This latter aspect is also why Siebers claims that such disability realism is mostly beneficial to the normative project of disability studies and activism while having "few of the risks associated with realism" (66), chief among which is, of course, the charge that realism is an inherently "reactionary mode of representation that promotes and naturalizes the dominant ideology" (Fiske 36).[23] Such a charge is hardly applicable to the politics of disability realism, according to Siebers, precisely because the political positions that tend to accompany the activist call for disability realism cannot be "easily described as conservative or politically reactionary" (*Disability Theory* 67). In this view, even when *Breaking Bad*'s realistic representations of disability risk perpetuating the dominant view of disability as purely medical phenomenon by foregrounding the medical aspect, they nevertheless offer a familiarizing and thus politically potent perspective on experiences of disability. This is not to say that disability realism is without representational pitfalls, which Siebers acknowledges. I will point to one such instance in chapter 7.2.2 when I discuss *Breaking Bad*'s deployment of Walter's cancer as metaphor.

On the whole, however, we can conclude for the time being that *Breaking Bad*'s representations of disability and illness are noteworthy because the narrative invests some considerable time and attention to their emotional verisimilitude and material realism. More precisely, they stand out from among more salient modes of representation mostly for two reasons: one, they resist the impulse to employ a character's disability as a simplistic, circular and consequently reductive method of explaining their emotional response to their disability.

Similarly, Mitchell and Snyder note that "that which parades itself as 'fixing' the historical record often ends up in the pathos of an individual life or in the falsely superhuman portrait of the overcompensating crip." (*Narrative* 23).

[23] Fiske continues: "It [realism] works by making everything appear 'realistic,' and 'realisticness' is the process by which ideology is made to appear the product of reality or nature, and not of a specific society and its culture." (36) It should be noted, however, that Fiske does not consider realism quite as ideologically powerful as the quotations here might suggest: in keeping with his culture-optimistic approach (cf. Gormász 106) he ultimately demonstrates that an "oppositional reader" may still identify non-reactionary reading potentials because "the text cannot enforce its preferred meaning." (86)

Instead, they root the response in a complex and multi-layered characterization and subjectivity that builds on a diverse wealth of factors and influences. Two, they foreground time and time again material aspects of disability, both inside and outside of a medical context, providing an arguably realistic portrayal of a variety of everyday and often mundane issues—from the cost of treatment to its drawn-out process and limited prospects, from unaccommodating changing rooms to missing wheelchair ramps and too narrow staircases. These representations offer an opportunity for the non-disabled population to become acquainted with aspects of the experience of disability that usually remain obscure, countering in this manner the sense of alienation that governs the dominant view of disability.

The observations presented in this chapter are what I have in mind when, in the chapters to come, I suggest that *Breaking Bad* is invested in representing disability in a manner that is attentive and sensitive to each disabled character's subjectivity, and the complexities that surround the experience of disability.

7.2 Textual Legitimation Strategies

As one of the earlier attempts at "quality TV" programming on a basic cable station, *Breaking Bad*, like virtually all its predecessors on HBO, seems to be particularly invested in aspirations to respectability, and artistic and cultural valuation. Throughout the show and its paratexts, evidence abounds of several strategies that serve such legitimation. For television as a whole, Newman and Levine identify two central legitimation strategies. The first is comparison with already legitimated forms, such as literature and cinema" (4),[24] the second "works by elevation of one concept of television at the expense of another" (5). In their study, Newman and Levine focus on how the discourse of legitimation operates *paratextually* through promotional material, interviews, reviews, and so on. Although such paratextual strategies exist for *Breaking Bad*—the show's reliance on an author figure will serve as a brief example—my focus will be on what might be termed *textual* legitimation strategies. By this I mean ways in which the text itself foregrounds resemblance to and instantiates approximation with "already legitimated forms", and distinction from what is perceived as inferior types of television.

[24] Although it manifested somewhat differently, a similar process could be observed in a format of the television medium's infancy, the 1950s anthology drama series, in which single play dramas were performed live. Jane Feuer notes "their prestige came from an association with a 'higher' form of art: theatre, a form that at this time was widely acknowledged by intellectuals as superior to the film medium […]." ("HBO and the Concept of Quality TV" 146)

Before I begin, I should briefly point out that I do not mean to suggest that all the practices I discuss below serve exclusively the show's aspiration to legitimacy. Rather, they serve different and diverse ends among which we should certainly count varied functions such as viewer orientation, the creation of a unique selling point, or even the fulfillment of creative vision. However, I contend that to no small part, intentionally or inadvertently, they all have in common that they always also serve to position *Breaking Bad* within a perceived pantheon of "quality TV" (cf. Barrette and Picard 136). That *Breaking Bad* is particularly enveloped by a pervasive discourse of legitimation is certainly evidenced by a paratextual discursive legitimation strategy I wish to briefly discuss here: the focus on Vince Gilligan as the text's author or auteur.

As far as legitimation goes, the (desirable) effect of ascribing authorship to Gilligan is neatly summed up by Sven Grampp: "Mass media products come by aesthetic refinement through the establishment of such an *auteur* precisely by seeking affiliation with the artistic concept of authorship" [italics in the original; translation mine] (312).[25] However, while showrunners such as *The Soprano*'s David Chase or *Mad Men*'s Matthew Wiener quite unabashedly claim sole authorship, "the traditional marker of quality" (Caldwell, *Production Culture* 211), *Breaking Bad*'s case is not quite so simple. Mittell notes that "the vision of authorship constructed by *Breaking Bad*'s paratexts is far more decentered, more collective, and less authoritative" (*Complex* 102). However, Mittell further explains that authorship is also produced through the act of reception, that, in fact, this is where it is "most vital" (105; cf. also Grampp 313, 332). The effect in the case of *Breaking Bad* is such that, irrespective of its paratexts' suggestion of collective authorship more typical for television, the show is very strongly linked to the sole, more "cinematic," author figure Vince Gilligan in the public perception. And what is more, this effect is certainly encouraged by "the prevalence of the showrunner's voice in paratexts" (Mittell, *Complex* 113), or quite simply by the fact the show's extremely short opening titles feature only its own name and that of Vince Gilligan with the *created by* credit. Claiming both sole and collective authorship may seem somewhat contradictory but, as my subsequent analysis of textual legitimation strategies and their impact on the show's disability representation will demonstrate, this sense of contradiction permeates the show not only on a paratextual level.

Perhaps the most obvious of *Breaking Bad*'s textual legitimation strategies is its visual style. Shot mostly on 35mm—an increasingly dated technology that, according to the show's

[25] In the original: "Massenmediale Produkte erfahren mit der Etablierung eines solchen *auteurs* eine Art ästhetische Veredelung, eben indem Anschluss an das künstlerische Konzept der Autorenschaft gesucht wird" [italics in the original].

director of photography Michael Slovis, is conducive to a cinema aesthetic not only because of its look, but also because of the accuracy it requires during shooting (cf. Lang and Dreher 25-26)—*Breaking Bad* makes use of "specific film effects that were not envisaged as such in the aesthetics of television" (Koch 35). Mittell notes the show's exceptional "visual palette, ranging from stylized landscape shots evoking Sergio Leone Westerns to exaggerated camera trick and gimmicks situating our vantage point within a chemical vat or on the end of a shovel, as well as editing devices such as time-lapse and sped-up montages" (*Complex* 218-219). Such "maximum-degree style" (219) works to distinguish *Breaking Bad*'s visuals from the "zero-degree style" that dominates most television and suggests "that we are watching an expensively produced *film* and not *merely* a trivial TV production" [emphases in the original] (Koch 74).[26] We should note, however, that for all its aspirations to cinematic style, *Breaking Bad* does not wholly deny that it is a television program. As Koch points out, "the stylistic allusions are not only to older film genres, but also to TV formats, […] for instance in musical numbers, which often turn up in the aesthetics of video clips, a format that was perfected in the eighties by channels such as MTV and that has its antecedents in fashion and advertising film" (36-37). While it may not quite qualify as contradictory, this reliance on both cinematic and televisual aesthetics at least parallels the show's paratexts' simultaneous evocation of sole and collective authorship which, we recall, is associated with cinema and television respectively.

Another textual legitimation strategy concerns the formal dimensions of *Breaking Bad*'s narrative. From today's point of view, *Breaking Bad* constitutes somewhat of an exceptional case in formal terms of serial narration because unlike the majority of American complex television, it is narrated in the predominantly closed form. "In the closed form, narrative structures are always focused on the subject, they constitute meaning through linear-causally and logically successive events, which are not entirely predictable, but in retrospect are meant to appear inevitable" (Lang 164). *Breaking Bad*'s closed form is significant as a legitimation strategy in several ways. The first is that it calls for an ending, which is, of course, part and parcel of the closed form. Newman and Levine demonstrate that "across the history of prime time seriality we see a repeated valuation of the serialized narrative that successfully concludes" (90). Although the precise nature of *Breaking Bad*'s ending was not decided upon

[26] Mittell bases his understanding of what the phrase "zero-degree style" signifies in analyses of television on Jeremy G. Butler's use of it in *Television Style* (2010) who, in turn, draws on Caldwell's use in *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (1995) (cf. *Complex* 370n18). Neither text offers a concise definition, but all emphasize the audiovisual aesthetic of unadorned recording of what happened in front of the camera that does not "call attention to itself" (Butler, *Television Style* 197).

until midway through its final season, the narrative's very premise anticipates an eventual endpoint. As reflected in Gilligan's oft repeated summary of *Breaking Bad*—Walter develops from "Mr. Chips to Scarface"—there is a clear narrative thrust for the protagonist, the conclusion of which cannot be endlessly deferred. From a narrative standpoint, Walter can only break bad so much until he has fully broken bad, after which an equilibrium of badness would be achieved, and there would be no more story left to tell. This is not simply a matter of a series living past its prime because it exhausts its premise, as was arguably the case with *Dexter*. In *Dexter*, the premise is that a morally upright serial killer (as far as moral uprightness goes for serial killers) kills only criminals that escape lawful conviction. There is arguably only a limited number of variations in which this premise can play out before it becomes uninteresting (cf. Lang and Dreher 53). In *Breaking Bad*, the premise itself subsumes the entirety of the story, and thus also that it concludes.

Newman and Levine argue that the valuation of a series' definitive ending constitutes a legitimation practice insofar as it elevates the narrative above the soap opera (cf. 90), which is generally perceived as a particularly low-brow (cf. Modleski, *Loving* 86) and defined by an infinite deferral of narrative closure (cf. 88).[27] *Breaking Bad*'s closed form may be seen to operate as a strategy of legitimation not only by promising a conclusion, thereby demarcating itself from the low-brow soap opera. The instantiation of the closed form specific to the series, that is, the particularities of its story, can furthermore be said to have a legitimizing function because, according to Christine Lang and Christoph Dreher, it evokes a narrative structure that is usually associated with American cinema (cf. Lang and Dreher 48; cf. Lang 164-172). Specifically, this is the character-driven three-act structure that is most commonly referred to as classical Hollywood narration (cf. e. g. Bordwell, *Narration* 157; cf. Belton 23-25): "an active hero with a clear, personally motivated goal […] is confronted with antagonistic forces" (Lang 164) that he (or, more rarely, she) ultimately overcomes—a structure that is certainly suitable to outline the story of *Breaking Bad*.[28]

Together, the narrative formalities discussed so far play into *Breaking Bad*'s aspirations to legitimacy by way of its inscription into the Western genre. Lang argues that on the basis of its narrative structure, "*Breaking Bad* can be described as a modern Western (with elements taken from the mafia genre) – including all the motifs that belong to it: saloon door,

[27] Interestingly, one of the examples Newman and Levine provide for respected series that are considered to have suffered a blow to their overall quality by not ending "properly" is *The X-Files*, on which Vince Gilligan worked as a writer and producer.

[28] Bordwell and others also employ the term "canonic narration" (cf. *Narration* 157). Following Kerstin Stutterheim and Silke Kaiser's delineation of the concept (cf. 109-129), Lang and Dreher call this structure "American dramaturgy."

train robbery, showdown, and the recurring musical Western motifs" (164). How does genre inscription operate as a legitimizing strategy? As late as 2004, Jason Mittell could rightly note:

> Unlike literature or film, television rarely has pretensions toward high aesthetic value, making it problematic to consider television using the same aesthetic tools designed for high literature or visual arts, because this simply dooms television to evaluative failure and misrepresents the way the majority of television viewers and producers engage with the medium. (*Genre* xiii)

When, by way of narrative form and cinematic style, *Breaking Bad* inscribes itself into the "respectable" cinematic genre Western, this is precisely such a pretension toward high aesthetic value that is demonstrable for a now considerable and growing portion of television.[29] It represents an aspiration toward evaluative equality, and an engagement with the medium of cinema that seeks to elevate its own status.

The final textual legitimation strategy I wish to discuss here concerns intertextual references to literature.[30] These come in a variety of forms, for instance as episode titles that relate to thematic concern or plot points of the respective episode. Episode 9 of season 3 is titled "Kafkaesque", a word that serves to aptly describe the indeterminately menacing circumstances of Walter and Jesse's (Aaron Paul) meth production. The term is used in the diegesis by a therapist after Jesse describes his work in a roundabout fashion, and a clueless Jesse agrees—"Yeah. Totally Kafkaesque" (3.9 11:00)—even uses the word himself later, apparently still clueless, in a scene arguably played for laughs. *Breaking Bad*'s employment of the word communicates a perception of its audience as educated and high-brow enough to understand its uses (implicitly equating, in fact, those who do not understand it with high-school drop-outs, drug dealers and habitual meth users). By extension, the show frames itself as capable of appealing to such "elevated" tastes.

The episode titles "Gliding Over All" (5.8) and "Ozymandias" (5.14) operate in the same manner: the first is a poem by Walt Whitman the final lines of which arguably relate to Walter's view on life and more specifically to a series of murders that occur during the episode; that same episode also references Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, a work that is frequently

[29] Of course, there are not only Western *movies*—Richard West's non-exhaustive book *Television Westerns: Major and Minor Series, 1946-1978* (1987) lists 138 shows. My point here is that *Breaking Bad* inscribes itself specifically into the cinematic, rather than the television Western.

[30] I am aware that the previously delineated strategies also qualify as "intertextual references": they might be classified as Fairclough's "interdiscursivity" (124) or Pfister and Broich's "generic system reference" [translation mine; in the original: "Generische Systemreferenz"] (Pfister 52), both of which designate intertextual references not to specific texts but to groups of texts. What I call intertextual reference, Fairclough calls "manifest intertextuality" (117) and Broich and Pfister, more simply, a "single-text reference" [translation mine; in the original: "Einzeltextreferenz"] (Broich 48).

called upon and cited throughout the show and plays a pivotal part in Walter's downfall. The second refers to the sonnet of the same title by Percy Bysshe Shelley and foreshadows the demise of Walter's drug empire (a promotional video for the second half of season 5 has Bryan Cranston recite the whole poem in Walter-as-Heisenberg's voice over time lapse shots of past and future settings from the series). Like the word "Kafkaesque", these episode titles arguably signal distinguished and accomplished tastes on the part of both producers and viewers.

The same holds true for implicit references—perhaps even more so, as they are not given away, so to speak, by explicit episode titles. One such implicit reference occurs in the penultimate episode "Granite State": when Walter aborts an attempt to leave his New Hampshire exile, he mutters, "Tomorrow, tomorrow" (5.15 26:50). As Tom Mendelsohn notes, this recalls a line from a soliloquy toward the end of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*—"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow"—delivered directly after Macbeth reflects on how over time he has seen so much horror that he has grown callous and indifferent—much like Walter has. Mendelson further notes similarities in season 5 to *King Lear*:

> Much like the mad king, Walt is forced into the wilderness, his kingdom in tatters and his family deposed. We even have a fool-like character in the form of the extractor, who, in admitting he'll appropriate Walt's money after he dies, is telling him not what he wants to hear, but what the truth is. (Mendelsohn)

More broadly but in a similar vein, Greg Metcalf echoes the sentiments of many reviewers when he calls *Breaking Bad* "The Television Tragedy", arguing that it "is the most Shakespearean of contemporary television series in story, if not in characters" (109). Opening up to and encouraging reading potentials that draw parallels between the series and Shakespeare represents another way in which *Breaking Bad* aspires to legitimacy by evoking an already legitimated form.[31]

For the purposes of this study, the most significant implicit piece of literature to which *Breaking Bad* refers is Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: following Hank's near-fatal injuries in "One Minute" (3.7), his character begins to figure as an evocation of Captain Ahab. After acquiring their disabilities, both characters slowly begin to exhibit a "narrow-flowing monomania" (*Moby-Dick* 201), an obsession with the pursuit of that which they deem responsible for their disability, which is, respectively, the White Whale and Heisenberg—or,

[31] In the context of this exploration of legitimation strategies for television series, not only the title of Metcalf's book—*The DVD Novel: How the Way We Watch Television Changed the Television We Watch*—is noteworthy: he begins his book under the heading "Introduction: Because 'Excuses' Sounds Too Defensive a Way to Start", acknowledging in a tongue-in-cheek manner the perceived need to rhetorically legitimize scholarly and critical appreciations of the medium.

to emphasize the similar name and shared initials, Walter White. This short outline will suffice for the time being. I will discuss this intertextual reference's implications in greater detail in chapter 7.2.2. The following chapters focus first on how the show's aspirations toward cinematic style and narrative structure significantly impact its representations of disability.

7.2.1 Gendered Narrative Structures and the (De)valuation of Disability

I will begin this chapter by discussing how *Breaking Bad*'s gender politics are inflected by its reliance on those textual legitimation strategies that suggest proximity to cinematic forms. These gender politics, I argue in a second step, impact and relate directly to the show's modes of disability representation. More specifically, I will discuss the series' gender politics first because they present a fairly well documented aspect of *Breaking Bad*'s representational politics. Thus, they provide an exemplary site for us to trace how the show's approximation of cinematic style and narrative as a means of legitimation entails a reliance upon masculinely coded representational tropes which often seem at odds with the attention the narrative pays to female subjectivities. The link to *Breaking Bad*'s disability representation lies in its emphasis on narrative closure by way of rejecting the soap opera, which can be figured as privileging "masculine" over "feminine" narratives. This gender-based privileging surfaces in the narrative as a perplexing tension between more "masculine" and more "feminine" approaches to narrating disability. This echoes a tension between the reliance on conventional gender tropes and attention paid to feminine subjectivities. I will argue that ultimately the masculine approach to narrating disability, which entails the necessity of its eradication, inevitably not only reigns supreme, but is presented as superior and more desirable.

At its most fundamental, *Breaking Bad*'s representation of women is in tune with that found in classical Hollywood narration. In this narrative structure, Kerstin Stutterheim and Silke Kaiser note, the hero's personal motivation is often emphasized and amplified because the antagonism he faces threatens in some manner his wife, wife and son, or wife and children in general (cf. 109). This certainly holds true for *Breaking Bad*: Walter initially begins manufacturing meth to make sure that his family, consisting of wife, son and unborn daughter, will be financially secure after the cancer with which he is diagnosed in the pilot episode kills him. Structurally, this places Skyler in a position of passivity. At the beginning of the narrative, this is reflected by the fact that, while Walter works two jobs to support the family, Skyler is a stay-at-home mom, wholly confined to the domestic realm. But the matter is more complex as *Breaking Bad* does not limit itself to such stereotypical gender representation: Skyler puts

in tremendous effort to escape her very traditional gender role, returning to work as an accountant despite motherhood and pregnancy, reluctantly becoming complicit in Walter's crimes, eventually taking charge of the financial aspect of the operation. I will briefly note here that the narrative can only diverge from the classic structure of Hollywood narration and devote enough time to Skyler's story because of its serial longform.[32] I suggest this in order to point out that Akass and McCabe would perhaps argue, as they have for HBO's female characters, that there is a "structural tension" (254) between televisual and cinematic representation at work here. This tension allows Skyler to "emerge as strong and complex precisely because [she is] produced in and through representational structures struggling over questions of power – who has the right to speak, to tell their story, and shape how that story is told" (256). While this might certainly be a viable reading of Skyler's character arc, the fact remains that the narrative is initiated by *Walter's* choice to become active, not hers. Irrespective, then, of what Skyler's growing complexity in later installments might suggest in terms of gender representation, *Breaking Bad* rests firmly on the most traditional of cinematic role ascriptions: an active man saves a passive woman.

But, as I mentioned, this is only the most fundamental aspect of the show's gender representation. This is the case because saving his family is only initially Walter's motivation, which we slowly learn over the course of 62 episodes until Walter finally spells it out 20 minutes before the final credits roll: "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really… I was alive" (5.16 33:25). Walter utters this line to Skyler, and it suggests his true motivation: to "Live Free or Die", the title of season 5's first episode, and New Hampshire's state motto inscribed on the number plate of the car with which Walter heads back out west toward his final showdown. This aspect of his motivation reflects *Breaking Bad*'s inscription into the cinematic Western genre, which also significantly impacts the show's gender representation, although in a different manner than classical Hollywood narration. As Lang notes, in *Breaking Bad* the "roles and gender attributions typical of the Western are […] made use of to a large degree […]. In the 'patriarchal folklore' of American Western narratives, the woman embodies civilization as such, from whose 'clutches' the man attempts to escape" (164). If Walter's criminal career is initially motivated by a desire to save Skyler and his family, it is sustained by a more powerful desire to be free, and this freedom is frequently figured in the narrative *ex negativo* through Skyler's dominance and assertiveness at home (cf. Lang and Dreher 49). But Lang also highlights that we witness a "modernized form" of these

[32] In this vein, Lang notes that Walter has not just one antagonist, but several simply because the narrative complexity of a series exceeds that of a 90-minute movie (cf. 164-166).

gender attributions, and that their "updating in *Breaking Bad* refers in the first place to the fact that the concerns and desires of the wife Skyler are nonetheless taken seriously as dramaturgical conflict" (164). This attention the text earnestly devotes to Skyler, I would argue once more, is facilitated substantially by the narrative space the serial longform offers. Thus, in *Breaking Bad* as Western, the same tension arises between cinematic modes of representation and a valuation of the conventionally disregarded vantage points on the story.

In fact, where it arises between representations of Skyler as inhibitor of Walter's freedom and representations of Skyler as justifiably concerned and distressed woman, the tension becomes very palpable in what Emily Nussbaum calls *Breaking Bad*'s "Bad Fan" ("That Mind-Bending Phone Call"), referring to the large portion of viewers for whom Skyler is one of the show's villains. The "violent, misogynistic hatred" (Mittell, *Complex* 347) with which many of these fans view Skyler has prompted actor Anna Gunn to call her character "a Rorschach test for society, a measure of our attitudes toward gender" ("I Have a Character Issue"). Gunn certainly has a very valid point. There is an argument to be made, however, that this view lets *Breaking Bad* off the hook too easily. As Mittell notes: "Hating Skyler is a significant part of *Breaking Bad*'s cultural circulation and thus an aspect of its gender politics as articulated, if not textually intended or justified" (*Complex* 348). Elsewhere, he suggests that part of the reason for the sustained and vocal hatred of Skyler may be due to the fact that

> the first season of *Breaking Bad* did a pretty mediocre job developing any character beyond Walt and Jesse, and of those undeveloped characters, Skyler was the most central in the story. […] B]ut we'd seen enough of Skyler to cement a sense that she was unappealing. Plus in those early days, we were rooting for Walt to break out of his boring life into the more exciting world of crime, and Skyler's primary function was to ground him in mundanity. ("Skyler's Story")

What Mittell articulates here is in essence precisely the representational tension that arises from the show's inscription into the cinematic Western genre—which calls for the masculine hero to break free from the clutches of feminine civilization—and its apparent efforts to develop (if only after season 1) a complex and emotionally rich female character and her perspective on the storyworld. The deep discordances surrounding the character of Skyler serve as a striking example of how such textual legitimation strategies as *Breaking Bad* utilizes them may have a startling, inadvertent ripple effect on a text's representational politics. The bearing this ripple effect seems to have on the series' disability representation is in part directly related to another way in which aspects of gender are significant to the series.

I argued in the previous chapter how the notion that the narrative will achieve closure is inscribed into *Breaking Bad*'s closed form and its very premise. This prospect of closure

can be considered a means of legitimation insofar as it distinguishes the show from, and supposedly elevates it above the soap opera, which is conventionally viewed as a particularly low-brow form of television. As Newman and Levine observe, such a distinction of "high" from "low" television is "thoroughly and fundamentally gendered" (99). This is the case because the opposition between narrative closure and its deferral has been figured as an opposition between masculine and feminine narratives (cf. e. g. Modleski 85-109). Masculine narratives, Fiske argues, "usually have a single hero or a tightly knit hero pair or hero team" (219) that solves a specific problem (cf. 217)—the base structure of classical Hollywood narration and *Breaking Bad*. A feminine narrative focuses on the portrayal of conflict between diverse characters and subject positions, what Fiske calls a "decentered reading subject" (219). This describes *Breaking Bad*'s attention to subject positions other than Walter's, particularly Skyler's.[33] In other words, feminine narratives "emphasize the process over the end product, whereas the masculine gives the product priority over the process" (217). Borrowing Fiske's approach to such matters of categorical opposition, a simplified representation of this distinction's specific aspects might go as follows:

Legitimated / High-brow	:	Delegitimated / Low-brow
"Quality TV"	:	Soap opera
Closure	:	Deferral of closure
Masculine	:	Feminine
Walter	:	Skyler

[33] It should be noted that when Fiske speaks of masculine television narratives, he refers to fully episodic shows such as *The A-Team* (which often serves as his prime example), not of programs such as *Breaking Bad* that employ "*episodic forms under the influence of serial narration*" [italics in the original] (Mittell, *Complex* 18). This means that in Fiske's masculine / feminine opposition, *Breaking Bad* would occupy a middle ground with a tendency toward the masculine, which might be construed as conflicting with my operationalization of his work. However, this seeming conflict is easily resolved because my argument refers not to unit of the episode, as Fiske's does, but to *Breaking Bad*'s narrative as a whole: as I have argued, *Breaking Bad* is a somewhat peculiar phenomenon among contemporary complex television because it utilizes the closed form as a means to approximate *cinematic* narratives. While the show is serialized on the level of the episode, it steadily approaches closure on the level of the series as a whole. In fact, this is ultimately just a reversal of the fully episodic narrative structure because, as Fiske notes himself, the closure an episode of *The A-Team* achieves "is not as final as that of a book or a film, for we know that the same characters will return next week in a similar adventure" (217), so the series as a whole necessarily remains open-ended. Strictly speaking, then, the opposition between feminine and masculine narrative is best reflected in the opposition between the soap opera and the movie (rather than episodic or complex television)—which is precisely the opposition that Modleski has in mind.

If Walter and Skyler represent *Breaking Bad*'s masculine and feminine narrative aspects respectively, their son Walter Jr. as their literal synthesis figures as the tension that arises between both aspects. Indeed, as his parents' marriage begins crumbling, Walter Jr. is represented as continually torn between taking the side of either one or the other parent. The earliest rift in the relationship with his father occurs when Walter decides to refuse cancer treatment. During an intervention staged by Skyler to change his mind, Walter Jr. tells him: "I'm pissed off. Because you're being… You're… You're a pussy. You're, like, ready to give up. […] What if you gave up on me, huh? This here [he lifts up one of his crutches] … all the stuff I've been through… and you're scared of a little chemotherapy?" (1.5 32:20) He likens, we note, chemotherapy to his own cerebral palsy. Shortly after, Walter explains the rationale behind his decision to refuse treatment: he says that he feels as if none of his life choices were ever truly his, which is why he at least wants to be free to choose to approach his illness in his own way:

> Skyler, you've read the statistics, you … [sighs]. These doctors talking about "surviving" one year, two years, like it's the only thing that matters. But what good is it to survive if I am too sick to work? To enjoy a meal? To make love? For what time I have left I wanna live in my own house. I wanna sleep in my own bed. I don't wanna choke down 30 or 40 pills every single day and lose my hair and lie around, too tired to get up and so nauseated that I can't even move my head. And you. Cleaning up after me. And me? What? Some, uh, some dead man, some artificially alive… Just marking time. No. No. (36:40)

Not only is Walter's reasoning strongly coded in conventionally masculine terms that evoke the masculine aspects of *Breaking Bad*'s narrative: he wants the freedom to choose for himself how to handle his cancer, he values activity and virility, and rejects the idea of being passive and incapacitated.[34] What is more, his preference for the swift finality of death over what he perceives as an emasculatingly drawn-out process of "'surviving' one year, two years" of treatment reflects the drive toward a conclusion prevalent in masculine narratives. Skyler, of course, represents a feminine deferral of closure , demanding that Walter begin therapy to avoid finality. Which returns us to Walter Jr., who aptly equates, we recall, the process of cancer treatment with his own disability for which there is no cure either, no conclusion, only the drawn-out process of treatment. Consequently, if Walter Jr.'s name represents the masculine side of his father (which, in a sense, it literally does)—the side he rejects by wishing

[34] Not to mention the fear of losing his hair. It is notable how reliably hyper-masculine characters in *Breaking Bad* tend to be bald or balding or to have very short hair. If we read hair as a traditional marker of masculinity, its loss provides an amusing counterpoint to the bald characters' overdetermined masculinity, suggesting a sort of overcompensation for a masculinity they appear to perceive as compromised.

to be called Flynn as the rift between the two grows—then his disability appears to represent the feminine side of his mother, the side that resists closure and finality.[35] The implication is perhaps best explained if we simply amend accordingly our above representation of how the distinction of legitimated and delegitimated television reflects in *Breaking Bad*'s narrative structure:

Legitimated / High-brow	:	Delegitimated / Low-brow
"Quality TV"	:	Soap opera
Closure	:	Deferral of closure
Masculine	:	Feminine
Walter	:	Skyler
Capability	:	Disability

Consequently, in the opposition instantiated by *Breaking Bad*'s efforts of legitimation, disability and illness falls squarely on the side that is more often than not represented as structurally and inherently inferior. This continuum that links disability to femininity to deferral of closure to inferiority is not only a significant aspect of the narrative relationship of Walter Jr. and his parents. It is also rendered meaningful in conjunction with the show's two other characters with disability-related story arcs: Hector and Hank, to which I will turn shortly. First, we should note that, as Lang and Dreher note, Walter Jr. stands out as remarkably static among *Breaking Bad*'s character ensemble (cf. 57). While Walter, Skyler, Jesse, and Hank (even Marie to a lesser degree) go through profound changes over the course of the series, Walter Jr. remains firmly lodged within a quite narrow character margin, alternating merely between siding with his mother or his father, ultimately winding up with his mother. His relative stagnancy suggests that he is fundamentally a characterization device for his father because it provides a stable point of reference against which Walter's character development can be measured. If his son is that from which Walter veers away over the course of the series as he becomes more conventionally masculine and approaches his inevitable end or ending, Walter Jr.'s stagnancy arguably figures as a reflection of the narrative's feminine aspect that favors the continuous over the conclusive. By extension, if Walter Jr.'s disability, as I have

[35] Strikingly, there are two other instances in which disability is linked to the mother: One, the example Walter chooses to illustrate to his class the chemical concept of chirality (which serves as a powerful metaphor for the duality of his own personality) is thalidomide, the morning sickness medicine that causes phocomelia. Two, as a result of stress, Skyler picks up a smoking despite being pregnant. Both these scenes have prompted a somewhat uninformed online debate suggesting that Skyler might in some way be responsible for Walter Jr.'s cerebral palsy (or even for Walter's lung cancer), feeding into the hatred of her character discussed above.

argued, is coded as feminine because it resists cure and avoids resolution, it is also linked to his character arc's equally femininely-coded stagnancy. The underlying logic of *Breaking Bad*'s narrative structure is thus inflected by an understanding of disability as feminine stagnancy. It is by virtue of precisely this logic that disability emerges as an antagonistic force that must be dealt with once and for all in both Hector's and Hank's highly goal oriented, masculine character arcs.

Although, admittedly, for the longest time Hector does not appear quite so goal-oriented, his entire characterization rests on the premise that he would be if it were not for his emasculating disability. He is a high-ranking member of the cartel, and as such invested with a basic motivation to act in its interest. However, he is represented as utterly powerless to effectively carry out actions himself, as he is paraplegic and can communicate only by ringing a bell that is attached to the armrest of his wheelchair. As a result, his influence within the organization is considerably diminished, and his orders do not carry the same weight as they used to. However, loyal to the workings of the cartel and obeying the perceived rules of masculinity, Hector appears to have had accepted his fate, handed his responsibilities over to his nephew Tuco (Raymond Cruz) and resigned to live out his remaining time in a remote hideout in the desert, and later in a nursing home. Incapable to take the actions a drug trafficker's life would require of him but having had appointed what he believed to be a capable successor, Hector had effectively arrived at the end of his life. It is only when Tuco is killed that his basic motivation is turned into an attempt to take veritable action: he orders Walter's assassination, both to avenge Tuco and to defend the cartel's business with which Walter's meth production had begun to interfere. The hit is called off, however, by Gus, with whom the cartel has an uneasy business partnership, a decision that is supported by Juan Bolsa (Javier Grajeda) who used to be Hector's equal in the cartel's hierarchy. Governed by an unwavering sense of loyalty, Hector begrudgingly accepts this decision. Within the hypermasculine world of drug manufacture and trafficking, it is unsurprisingly agreed upon by all, including Hector, that his disability emasculates him, renders him almost completely passive and inferior. What is more striking, perhaps, is that *Breaking Bad*'s narrative structure appears to enact this very view of him and his disability. Over the course of nearly two whole seasons following Walt's aborted assassination, Gus skillfully arranges the deaths of those in the cartel that were close to Hector, and all living members of the Salamanca family. These deaths, we learn eventually, are motivated to a great degree by revenge because it was Hector who, long before becoming disabled, had killed Gus's associate and close friend (lover, it is often speculated) Max (Maximino Arciniega). Again and again, Gus visits a completely powerless Hector in the nursing home—a place doubly connoted with femininity: a *home* with

nurses—to taunt and humiliate him. In fact, the narrative itself appears to revel in Hector's powerlessness, employing it as counterpoint to and emphasis of season 4 main antagonist Gus's unshakable will and determination to achieve his goals. And we can see in his silent and paralyzed rage that Hector, who used to be a man of action and determination himself, wants nothing more than the death of Gus, but the antagonistic force that stands between him and his goal, his disability, figures as his defeat, as it had before when he honorably accepted it and chose to hand the reins down to Tuco. Until, of course, he does find a way around his disability, or rather, until it is found for him by Walter. They lure Gus to the nursing home where Hector awaits him and kills both of them with a bomb attached to his wheelchair that he detonates by performing the only action his disability would allow: ringing his bell.

Hector's is a compelling character arc, expertly constructed in terms of writing, nuanced, complex and highly engaging. This is rare for a character that is, for the most part, silent and immobile, and I would argue that like the attention the narrative pays to Skyler's subjectivity, the emotional depth and attention to detail with which Hector is represented is possible because of the serial longform. However, it is also a character arc that is a potent articulation of *Breaking Bad*'s underlying narrative logic by which a deferral of closure equates inferiority. It is not only he and his peers who consider his disability emasculation—the narrative itself does too: it first strips him of agency and action, all of which it values by way of its closed form and adherence to classical Hollywood narration. Then it leaves him with a near-endlessly protracted period of femininely-coded stagnancy that represents his delegitimated position both within the hypermasculine cartel, and within the narrative where his character serves primarily as a point of contrast that helps us appreciate the limitless potential and capability of another, Gus. Until finally, within the space of less than one episode, Hector is allowed to defeat the antagonist that is his paraplegia and is allowed to break free from his emasculating stagnancy and what is represented as the humiliating femininity of the nursing home (recall how his nurse scolds him after he begins spelling out "F – U – C" to the DEA shortly before he blows himself and Gus up). But even this short moment of what is represented as triumph over adversity is not quite his own and certainly clouded to no small degree because it is initiated and orchestrated not by him but by Walter, whom Hector hates as well, just not as much as he hates Gus. But because it tends to reward a consistent drive toward resolution, it is all the victory the masculine underlying logic of *Breaking Bad*'s narrative structure can concede a static character such as Hector. Thus, his is the littlest victory imaginable, represented by the littlest motion, a twitching finger (for the explosion itself is Walter's victory). For as long as his disability renders him static, Hector is an accessory

character. It is by way of the only part of him that is capable of action, the finger on the bell, that he moves to the center of the narrative, if only for a few seconds.

As DEA agent, Hank, like Hector, belongs to the hypermasculine world of drug manufacture and trafficking. Having barely survived the cousins' attempt at assassinating him, it is hardly surprising, then, that to him too, disability looms large as the end of his life as what he would consider a "real man." His resistance to being released from hospital testifies to this view: to him, the hospital connotes cure, a conclusive end to his injuries. Home, however, the realm of the feminine, connotes stagnancy, that which refuses conclusion. Notably, the only character besides Marie who we see unsuccessfully trying to convince Hank to leave the hospital, is Walter Jr., whose disability, as we have seen, is intricately linked to the feminine and that which avoids closure. And let us note in passing that in that scene, he wears Marie's color purple, which will become quite significant during Hank's recovery arc.

It is also worth noting that this is not the first time that Hank has expressed a view of disability as something that must be overcome for the sake of maintaining masculinity. When in the third episode of season one, he takes Walter Jr. to see Wendy (Julia Minesci), a meth junkie prostitute, to show him what drugs do to people, Wendy asks Walter Jr. if he is "handicapped". Hank, in his mind sparing Walter Jr. the embarrassment, quickly replies, "He broke his leg playing football. He's a QB. Got an arm like a howitzer." (1.3 18:50)

Ultimately, Marie gets Hank to agree to check out of the hospital. She manages to give Hank an erection against his will, in the case of which he had agreed to coming home with her. This scene—the couple's last in season 3—in which Marie is literally in charge of Hank's masculinity, may be played partly for laughs at his expense; but it also signifies something *Breaking Bad*'s narrative structure takes very seriously: his thorough emasculation. Season 4 begins with the Schrader's at home, Marie taking care of Hank, who is unable to leave the bed except for strenuous physical therapy. His three-day stubble suggests his resignation, that he believes he has hit rock bottom, that his disability effectively has ended his life. The slow, drawn-out progress he makes during PT, which to Marie is reason to celebrate, to him is unbearable stagnancy:

Marie: I heard you broke new ground today?

Hank: I broke new ground?

Marie: That's what he [the physical therapist] said. Tell me.

> Hank: I walked 16 feet in 20 minutes which is up from like 15 and a half yesterday. And I had maybe this much less shit in my pants. So, yeah, Marie, if you and him and everybody else in America secretly took a vote, changed the meaning of the entire English language, yeah, I guess I "broke new ground."
>
> Marie: Well, call it a figure of speech, but I am seeing progress. Definite progress. (4.1 24:10)

But although his resentful and mean-spirited demeanor toward his wife makes him thoroughly unlikeable during these early scenes in season 4, we are encouraged to sympathize: the camera lingers relentlessly on the excruciatingly labored process of Marie helping her heavyset and visibly humiliated husband position himself above the bedpan. Importantly, it is not only Hank who seems to equate his disability with a humiliating emasculation and inferior femininity, but also *Breaking Bad* itself. Arguably a given in conventional gender ascriptions in any case, the connotation of the home to the feminine is particularly evident in the Schrader residence: here the color purple, which is Marie's color right down to her grocery bags, dominates everything and overdetermines the whole house as the realm of the feminine. While tapestries and decorations scattered throughout the home all tend to incorporate the color purple, it is most prominent in the kitchen—especially on the side of the counter where food is prepared, here every single appliance is purple—and, most importantly, in the bedroom to which Hank finds himself confined. While color in *Breaking Bad* frequently carries significance, in the Schrader residence it borders on the oppressive, highlighting just how removed Hank is from his old, masculine, active, goal-oriented self. And *this* is the favored, legitimated, superior self—the self, to which the masculine logic of *Breaking Bad*'s narrative structure demands to return by virtue of its closed form. Within the rules of classical Hollywood narration applied to Hank's character arc, disability is an antagonist that Hank must overcome to achieve his goal, the capture of Heisenberg; more specifically, within the genre conventions of the Western, Hank is the lawman to Walter's outlaw, and as such his active involvement in the story is indispensable to the show's central and most important antagonism (cf. Lang 166-168).

But first Hank learns of Gale Boetticher's (David Costabile) death and believes him to be Heisenberg. This knowledge, false as it may be, changes something for him: for the first time in season 4, we see him outside of the purple bed linen, using his wheelchair throughout the house, shaved and in his old chipper mood. He seems somewhat content, and indeed, he says, "[… Y]ou know, finding this guy Heisenberg dead like this, I have to say, it, uh, kind of feels like closure to me" (4.5 14:40). He would have loved to be the one to catch him, but Hank—who, in any case, has been shown to struggle with the demands of the hypermasculine

world of drug enforcement ever since the shootout with Tuco—evidently made his peace with the way everything turned out, with being disabled and perhaps "less of a man" than he thought he was. Thus, *Breaking Bad* represents disability as a valid way of being, as something that may demand laborious re-negotiation of many mundane realities of life (see chapter 7.1), but does not render life inherently meaningless and unenjoyable. At the same time, however, its narrative structure, inevitably favoring action and the resolution of conflict, suggests something else altogether. For we know that Hank's closure is based on a false assumption, we know that him being fine with the way things are is unacceptable—that, although he may not know it yet, his disability is still an antagonistic force that demands to be overcome. And indeed, animated by a drunk Walter's hubris to go through the Boetticher case files once more—sitting not in bed but at the kitchen table on the non-purple side of the counter—Hank finds a reason to continue to investigate. The print on the t-shirt he wears earlier in the episode—"TEAM DEA, FUN RUN 2006" it reads, with the "D", "E" and "A" all pictured with running legs—had anticipated that the next we see him, he would be back do doing what the show presents as so much more "FUN": struggling to fight his disability by using a walking frame, he is out and about investigating, once more in masculine pursuit of his goal, the capture of the real Heisenberg. One episode later the walker is replaced by a cane, likely to give an impression of masculine prowess during an interrogation of Gus, and over the course of the rest of the season we see him using his walker, a wheelchair or simply being seated until, at the beginning of season 5, he uses a cane or no walking aide at all. Hank, in other words, snaps out of the stagnancy of his emasculation, overcomes his disability and is rewarded accordingly: if not with the capture of the real Heisenberg, then at least with the knowledge of who he is, and with an honorable death that spells out a definitive conclusion to his character arc.

None of this is to say that *Breaking Bad* is all about the glorification of the "toxic masculinity" (cf. Hudson) that over the course of its narrative threatens and destroys the lives and happiness of so many people in its world. Quite to the contrary, the show frequently makes a point of poking fun at the inept clumsiness with which Hank approaches emotional matters and is deeply invested in criticizing Walter's obliviousness to the pain his egomania inflicts on his family. As René Dietrich notes, *Breaking Bad* "shows clearly how […] an idealization of unchecked dominant 'hegemonic masculinity' […] produces a pathology of hubris, avarice, self-grandeur, and pride." (199)[36] And just like its men are never straightforward heroes but

[36] Scholarly engagements of masculinity in *Breaking Bad* abound. See, for instance, the collection *Masculinity in* Breaking Bad*: Critical Perspectives* (2015) edited by Bridget Roussell Cowlishaw, or Brian Faucette's "Taking Control: Male Angst and the Re-Emergence of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Breaking Bad*" (2014).

invariably represented as profoundly ambiguous anti-heroes (although Nussbaum's Bad Fan might disagree here), so are *Breaking Bad*'s representations of women and disability highly nuanced, written with a great deal of attention to feminine and disabled subjectivities (although the Bad Fan might think it too much): consider how the camera is focused almost exclusively on Skyler who is barely able to contain her disbelief as Walter, incapable of tolerating that his work might be considered someone else's, drunkenly convinces Hank that Heisenberg is still at large; or recall Walter Jr. calling Hank out for absurdly implying that only people who do not require (medical) assistance are fit for life outside of a hospital.

These reading potentials of masculinity, femininity and disability are all evident in *Breaking Bad*. However, I have attempted to demonstrate in these past chapters how the series' narrative structure operates in a manner that conflicts with or contradicts such readings. *Breaking Bad* seeks cultural legitimation through approximating the already legitimated, more conventional closed form of cinematic storytelling. But this narrative form, in turn, comes replete with representational conventions and assumptions that inevitably reflect in *Breaking Bad*'s overall narrative thrust and its character arcs. Not only do these conventions and assumptions wind up corroborating precisely those views of masculinity, femininity and disability which the narrative otherwise may be said to expose and undermine. What is more, because this dynamic is rooted in part in an effort to gain cultural legitimacy, they are ultimately presented as superior and more desirable. This results in a perplexing tension between views the narrative seems intent on championing and those it inadvertently champions. As reviewer Laura Hudson notes about the show's conclusion:

> While Gilligan has voiced his criticism and even contempt for the man Walt becomes on numerous occasions, the final installment is nothing if not a victory lap. Yes, Walt pays for his decisions in many ways, but it's telling that all of those costs get extracted in the episodes preceding the finale. Taken on its own, the last episode of the show reads more like wish fulfillment than condemnation, as Walt dies surrounded not by his failures but by his triumphs, by the chemistry he loves rather than the family he sacrificed, and with a smile on his face. You can (and probably should) step back and view Walt's final form as a critique, as something that ends in emptiness, but somehow that's not the feeling the finale imparts. The show ends not by inviting introspection, but rather, as Gilligan said, offering satisfaction:
>
> "As bad a guy as he has been, and as dark a series of misdeeds as he has committed, it felt right and satisfying and proper for us that he went out on his own terms. He went out like a man."
>
> Indeed he did. ("Die Like a Man")

What she describes is arguably an effect of precisely the tension between criticizing "toxic masculinity" and a valuation of conventionally masculine cinematic closed form in which a protagonist overcomes antagonism to achieve his goal—a valuation that is inscribed into the series' narrative structure from its outset, which is why ending on Walter's terms "felt right and satisfying and proper".

We can observe a similar effect with regard to *Breaking Bad*'s representation of disability. Walter Jr. is represented as a moral compass in terms of disability and illness. We are often encouraged to share his "feminine" view of disability as something that does not render life meaning-, worth- and pointless because it is likely to demand a continual engagement, offering no prospect of being resolved once and for all. But as the narrative progresses, he becomes increasingly irrelevant to the plot, more and more of a marginal character whose arc not so much concludes as it peters out. Unsurprisingly so, as *Breaking Bad*, by virtue of its cinematic closed form, has a strong tendency to focus on views and approaches connoted with masculinity. As a result, Hector and Hank, whose respective disabilities figure as emasculation for as long as they are not resolved in some manner, become more and more central to the narrative. They represent a view of disability as something that must be overcome. This view is granted absolute primacy in *Breaking Bad* as that which is worth the viewer's attention. Walter Jr. may get to survive the narrative, but his last scene is largely forgettable, an afterthought—he gets off a school bus and walks to the front door as Walter watches him from a distance. Hector and Hank may both die, but they go out in two of the show's most exhilarating narrative pay-offs, suggesting that the masculine story of overcoming disability is much more rewarding.

7.2.2 Legitimation and Literary Legacies of Disability

Like *Breaking Bad*'s cinematic narrative structure, the textual legitimation strategies by which the show seems to strive toward an approximation of literature also entail a surfacing of conventional disability tropes the narrative otherwise seems to resist. More precisely, a very noticeable representational tension arises from the show's devotion of attention and narrative detail to the subjectivities of those characters that experience disability or illness on the one hand, and its simultaneous reliance on reductive literary deployments of disability on the other hand. Although this reliance takes a different shape in both of the brief case studies to follow, I will argue that in each case they surface as overdetermination or as an excess of characterization that is at odds with *Breaking Bad*'s otherwise careful and attentive modes of characterization. In the first instance, the evocation of *Moby-Dick*, this reliance on literary

deployments of disability may be suggestive of a downright contradictory reading potential of Hank's motivation and character arc. The second instance is Walter's cancer, which operates to some extent as a material metaphor (cf. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 61-64) in the service of his characterization.

I suggested in chapter 7.2 that the obsession with which Hank pursues the mythical Heisenberg begins emerging as an intertextual reference to *Moby-Dick* shortly after he acquires his disability. While, as the script for the episode "Sunset" (3.6) reveals (cf. Shiban 40), the show's writers equate Hank's hunt for Heisenberg with Captain Ahab's for the whale even before his injury, the reference becomes more explicit only in conjunction with Hank's walking disability, which, of course, mirrors Ahab's peg leg. The scene that perhaps most urgently inaugurates the reference occurs in "Bullet Points" (4.4): Hank shows Walter Gale's notebook and points out a dedication that reads, "To W.W. My star, my perfect silence." (22:50) He begins guessing what "W.W." might mean, listing Woodrow Wilson, Willy Wonka, and Walter White. Walter then pages trough the notes until he finds the poem "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" by Walt Whitman, rightly noting that this is the name that "W.W." must stand for. But the viewer is arguably invited to continue the list of famous W.W.s and come across Melville's white whale eventually—if not at that precise moment, then likely later because the "W.W." remains significant for the rest of the series. But likening Hank's hunt for Heisenberg/Walter White to Ahab's for Moby-Dick/the white whale brings to the fore an interpretive dimension that the text otherwise avoids: it suggests that Hank's obsession, like Ahab's, is an instance of what Mitchell and Snyder call "the mutilated-avenger motif" (*Narrative* 97).

Mitchell and Snyder trace this motif back to Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and convincingly argue that its immense proliferation from there to cinema is due to the fact that it allows the visual cue of disability to operate "as direct, embodied motivation" (97) for a character's action: "Whereas written narratives name and label experience, film [employs] tactics to visually evoke, as opposed to voiceover or label, dramatic content." (96) But while Mitchell and Snyder are centrally concerned with movies, they do cede that the motif also pervades literature, noting as a famous example, of course, *Moby-Dick*. By grounding Ahab's motivation to hunt the whale in an injury for which he blames it, his characterization, they argue, "is secured by a largely unchallenged story that yokes disability to insanity, obsessive revenge, and the alterity of bodily variation." (121) In the context of my exploration of the effect of *Breaking Bad*'s textual legitimation strategies on its disability representations, one claim by Mitchell and Snyder stands out as particularly noteworthy: "Many mutilated avengers

gain a steady high-art complexity by invoking Shakespeare or Melville in the portrayal of a hunchback or an amputee." (99)

However, the matter is more complicated in the case of *Breaking Bad* because, for all its aspirations to a more cinematic form, *Breaking Bad* is not a movie, but a television series. If "film's representational repertoire" frequently relies on a character's "physical surface to provide a window onto the soul of motivation, desire, and psychic 'health'" (97), the television series has access to a wider range of inroads to even a supporting character's subjectivity simply by virtue of its much longer duration. *Breaking Bad*, as I have argued, makes use of the serial longform, investing narrative effort and time in Hank, so that he is thoroughly characterized, and his motivation clearly articulated long before he becomes disabled. Thus, unlike mutilated avengers from cinematic history but also unlike his Captain Ahab, Hank's disability is not "the medium that reveals his personality" (131). More precisely, Hank's injury has little to nothing to do with his obsessed pursuit of Heisenberg / Walter White. He is a mutilated avenger only in the sense that he is an avenger of crime who is also mutilated, but hardly in the sense that he seeks to avenge his mutilation. But by evoking in its aspiration to literary legitimacy a similarity to one of history's most famous mutilated avengers, *Breaking Bad* risks voiding the effort and time it had put into narrating the complex character of Hank. Mitchell and Snyder help illustrate this argument with reference to *Richard III*. They point to actor Ian McKellen according to whom, rather than linking the physical fact of the play's protagonist's disability directly to his vengeful character, "the play dramatizes the social outcome of cruel assumptions about disability held by the protagonist's family and associates." (116) They caution, however, that "historical repetition has so naturalized this connection between physiology and psychology, between deformity and derangement, that even if it does not bear the markings of factuality and truth, it yields the pleasure of universal recognition." (116) By precisely this dynamic, viewers may come to recognize in post-injury Hank the disabled-avenger motif that is so at odds with pre-injury Hank's characterization.

Whereas Hank's walking disability appears to be somewhat inadvertently invested with metaphorical potency only as a side-effect of the specific intertextual reference to *Moby-Dick*, Walter's cancer is offered as a meaningful account of his character by *Breaking Bad* itself. This is not to suggest that cancer's metaphorical efficacy originates historically in the series—of course it builds on a rich cultural history of metaphors surrounding the illness. My point is that the ascription of metaphorical meaning to physiologies occurs in *Breaking Bad* not only as a by-product of specific intertextual references. Rather it is actively exercised in precisely the manner that Mitchell and Snyder demonstrate to be common in literary texts.

Susan Sontag, who has traced the metaphorical meanings ascribed to cancer by western culture throughout history, notes that there are "fictions of responsibility and of a characterological predisposition to the illness: cancer is regarded as a disease to which the psychically defeated, the inexpressive, the repressed—especially those who have repressed anger or sexual feelings—are particularly prone" ("AIDS" 151). It is quite striking how much this quote reads like a characterization of Walter (cf. Rojek 282). He is represented as so thoroughly "psychically defeated" that Lang and Dreher aptly call the pilot episode's first act an "exposition of indignities." (63)[37] He is "inexpressive" and "repressed", virtually incapable of articulating the disappointment over his life, his dismay at being served vegetarian bacon on his fiftieth birthday, or at having to work late at the carwash, or at Hank handing his son a gun to name just a few of the examples *from the first ten minutes* after the pilot's opening credits. And while it is mostly anger that he represses, it is also sexual feelings or a disturbing combination of both as his increasingly aggressive sexual advances not only toward Skyler evidence. If Walter's cancer signifies "a steady repression of feeling" (Sontag, *Illness* 22), it is only fitting that his breaking bad, which the narrative represents as an expression and actualization of his "true" self, would be accompanied by the cancer going into remission. Ultimately, however, the cancer starts growing again. As Sontag notes, it "is a disease of growth (sometimes visible; more characteristically, inside), of abnormal, ultimately lethal growth that is measured, incessant, steady." (12) This, too, resonates in a metaphorical way with Walter, although not so much with his characterization but with his character arc and the way it is narrated. From this angle, the metaphor connotes the slow and "measured, incessant, steady" increments by which he advances his secret criminal career, which, as I argued previously, is destined for a conclusion—"ultimately lethal"—from the outset. What may appear to be two distinct metaphorical angles—cancer as result of repression, and cancer as incremental growth into villainy—can actually be subsumed under the master trope of cancer's metaphorical potency: that it "is the disease of the Other." (68) This trope lies at the heart, for instance, of the ubiquity of military metaphors surrounding cancer and its treatment (cf. 64-69; see also Lupton 67-68). In Walter's case, cancer is his repressed self, the self as Other. When Walter ceases to repress it, it surfaces as Heisenberg who threatens "social order" like cancer's "deviant cells that refuse to obey societal laws" (Lupton 67) of the body.

That the text offers such a wealth of metaphorical reading potentials for Walters cancer can certainly be considered a legitimation strategy. Among the myriad ways in which *Breaking Bad* strives for cultural legitimation, these metaphors read as attempts to approximate the

[37] In the original: "Exposition der Demütigungen."

multi-layered inroads for interpretation that one might think are more typically found in metaphorically potent characterizations of already legitimated literary texts. Does the narrative unnecessarily reiterate points about Walter that it also makes using the televisual representational repertoire at its disposal without recourse to literary-seeming illness metaphors? Whether or not the word overdetermination is an apt description for this plethora of access to his character is perhaps a question of personal taste. Irrespective of personal taste, however, the cancer metaphors can arguably be called overdetermined in the sense that they produce an uneasy tension with the narrative's otherwise dominant investment in realistic representations of disability and illness. Fiske's succinct summary of realism's ideological dimension is instructive here: "Realism's desire to 'get the details right' is an ideological practice, for the believability of its fidelity to 'the real' is transferred to the ideology it embodies" (36). In the case of *Breaking Bad* this means that the emotional verisimilitude and material realism that governs the narrative's approach to disability may have the effect of naturalizing the metaphorical meanings that it ascribes to Walter's cancer. In other words, when every other aspect of the show's cancer representation is realistic, the "fictions of responsibility and of a characterological predisposition to the illness" that Sontag discusses may not appear quite so fictional after all.

7.3 Conclusive Remarks (and a Caveat)

Over the course of the above chapters, I demonstrated first that *Breaking Bad* appears to strive for cultural legitimacy by seeking, one, association with the already legitimated narrative forms of cinema and literature, and two, distance from the culturally denigrated televisual form of the soap opera. These legitimation strategies, I argued second, entail or favor certain conventional approaches to representation that often narrate experiences of disability in reductive manners. In a variety of ways, *Breaking Bad*'s otherwise notably sensitive and attentive handling of disability is often inflected by the more reductive approaches that dominate the legitimated forms to which the series seeks proximity. Such is the central argument of my analysis of *Breaking Bad*'s representations of disability and illness. The longer narratives, stretched out in the case of *Breaking Bad* over 62 episodes and over 50 hours, allow for a mode of narrating disability and illness that is simply unattainable for the average 90-minute movie; compared to the novel, serial television's relative cultural youth has the benefit of allowing more easily for fresh and unconventional modes of representation, rather than a comfortable reliance on reductive tropes. While I do contend that there is considerable truth

to these broad statements, I am also mindful that serial television is itself not without representational pitfalls.

For instance, it can be argued that the character of Walter Jr. appears to be borne in part of a recognition of serial television narration's necessities. I suggested in chapter 7.2.1 that by virtue of his character arc's relative stagnancy—which, we recall, is accorded tangibility through the material metaphor of Walter Jr.'s cerebral palsy—he serves as a stable point of reference for the character development of Walter. Let us put the duration of this character development into perspective: in retrospect, Breaking Bad may appear to be a relatively compact show, its plot unfolding over a story time of only two years, and its steadily progressing narrative inviting binge-watching its five-season run within much shorter time frames. However, it is important to remember that the duration of its original release exceeded five and a half years, resulting in a narration time spanning from mid-January 2008 to late September 2013 with several months-long gaps in between of installments. As Mittell reminds us, when telling a story over such long periods of time, "managing the mechanics of [serial] memory becomes a challenge" (*Complex* 180). Comprehension of Walter's character development—which is undoubtedly *Breaking Bad*'s most central concern—is thus partly an exercise in remembering who he used to be when we met him years ago.

Walter Jr.'s stagnancy, thus, may be read as a means of mastering this challenge of serial memory: as the only aspect of pre-Heisenberg Walter's life that remains reliably unchanged, his character recalls time and time again that, even as Walter has turned into a child-poisoning, mass-murder-orchestrating super-villain, we started out sympathizing with him.[38] Walter Jr.'s disability may be incidental to this aspect of serial television narration in the sense that the primary operative aspect of the mechanics of serial memory is his stagnancy, not his disability, irrespective of the fact that the text consistently suggests that one signifies the other. But as Vince Gilligan himself thinks, it may not be quite as incidental to our sustained sympathy for Walter in a different sense:

> To me the very fact that the character of Walter Jr. has CP was probably in some regard, either consciously or subconsciously, a decision made in an effort to insure [sic] that the audience was on Walt's side, that they empathized with him, that they thought well, this guy, he's had some problems thrown his way and he has dealt with them admirably. (Interview)

In other words, if Walter Jr. operates in the narrative as a reminder of early Walter, Walter Jr.'s disability is a reminder of the desolation that was early Walter's life. The one

[38] For a detailed analysis of how this character development is executed, see Mittell, *Complex TV* 150-163.

reminds us *that* we liked Walter, the other reminds us *why* we did. Thus, the need for the series to ground its increasingly villainous protagonist in a history of likability (one that is ideally evocable through visual clues) produces a reading potential that narrates disability as tragically detrimental to life, and in particular to the lives of the non-disabled population who is now burdened with having to deal with it "admirably." In short, there is evidence that some features specific to serial television narratives—very long; not "allowing for an on-demand return to previous pages as needed" (Mittell, *Complex* 180)—has favored a multiply marginalizing representation of disability. Of course, the series does not originate such a narrative of disability. For it to work as visual clue that does not require a great deal of exposition, it must reproduce a previously existing cultural archetype of disability. These archetypes are firmly lodged in our cultural imagination, and it is inevitable that serial television, like any other form of storytelling, would exploit this wealth of easily recognizable representation.

I will discuss a great deal more of such instances in the remainder of this study. Unlike the previous chapters' critical focus on a television series' referentiality to cinema and literature, the subsequent chapters on *American Horror Story* will examine effects on disability representation as they relate more immediately to television drama series.

8 Disability Representation in *American Horror Story*

My goal in the following chapters is to unravel meanings and effects of the disability representations that abound throughout the first four seasons of *American Horror Story*. I use the word *unravel* advisedly here, as it implies Frank Kelleter's suggestion that "serial stories will often appear more untidy [sic] than work-bound structures when they are consumed *as if they were* predesigned works." [emphasis in the original] ("From Recursive" 101) Within the format of a case study I can hardly escape making precisely such a concession. That is, if I hope to arrive at any fruitful conclusions at all, I must, at least to a degree, consume my object of study as work-bound and make a cut after season 4 (with some remarks on season 5)—even though, as I am writing this paragraph, *AHS*'s sixth season has long aired and another three have been confirmed; and as I am editing it, season 9 has aired and the show has been renewed for a tenth season.[39] But then again, such is precisely the nature of ongoing serial television: what has been established in the first 40 hours of aired narrative may for any number of reasons

[39] The cut after season 4 is not purely borne of necessity. It is also sensible because there is a marked drop in disability representations beginning with season 5, something which I will discuss toward the end of my analysis of the series.

very well be amended, questioned, undermined, taken back or reversed in hour 41.[40] The uncertainty, then, that lingers in this opening paragraph's meanderings is owed to my object's own uncertain properties, rather than to my inability to make a definitive choice with regards to how I treat my object—either as a finished work and discounting the fact that it concludes in 2021 at the earliest; or as an ongoing narrative and running the risk of *a priori* invalidating any finding that resembles a conclusion. I would, in fact, even go so far as to claim that this uncertainty is an appropriate and necessary acknowledgment of on-going serial television's properties. After all, no viewer would wait years for the conclusion of a series before forming an opinion of it—counting your chickens before they are hatched is all but standard practice in television. In the four case studies to follow, I thus presume of a certain amount of narrative closure but am aware that future narrative developments might cast a different light altogether on my insights.[41]

The first of these case studies is concerned with the centrality of season 1's Adelaide Langdon—or Addy, as she is mostly called—to the mechanics of television series pilots specifically and viewer orientation more generally. My argument is that the narrative uses Addy's Down Syndrome as a representational shorthand for its own inscription into politics and generic conventions, at times to a somewhat disconcerting effect in normative terms of disability representation. At the same time, it is by virtue of this use of Addy's difference that a high degree of viewer identification with a disabled character is achieved, yielding the narrative focus to a disabled subjectivity in a manner that is rarely seen in mainstream media.

I then turn to season 3, which I read as a critique of intersectional feminism's overall failure to incorporate disability as a minority identity that may inflect a woman's experience of the world. Building on this reading, I then suggest that the season may in fact also be read as a self-critical reflection on *AHS*'s part about its own disability representations. I conclude this case study by discussing the representational potentials of such self-reflexive properties, which are a staple of complex serial narration.

The third case study is focused on the over-abundance of (in some way or another) altered bodies that populate *AHS*'s generic horror storyworld. I argue that there are several ways in which these bodies may prove to be loaded with transgressive potential with regard to

[40] Consider, for instance, season 9 of *Dallas* (1978-1991), which was retroactively declared a dream in season 10; or the series finale of *Rosanne* (1988-1997), in which all of the show's previous events were revealed to be fictionalized diary entries by the title character.

[41] Of course, a close reading from a cultural studies perspective is ideally always mindful of the impossibility of definitive readings, identifying rather reading potentials. The uncertainty to which I refer here goes beyond that because it includes the possibility even for a comprehensible and convincing reading potential to become virtually indefensible as the narrative progresses.

disability representation. On the one hand, they foreground that the socio-cultural ascription of disability is always contingent on a number of factors and never an ahistorical given. On the other, they may be useful as a means to destabilize normative assumptions about corporeality. Employing Julia Kristeva's and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic perspectives, I suggest that this destabilizing potential may be particularly impactful because the altered body strikes directly at the heart of subject formation. All these effects, my argument concludes, are in turn all the more emphasized because complex serial narration inherently refuses a swift return to a status quo lost at the beginning of the story, massively extending the duration of deviance from perceived normality.

In my fourth and final case study I explore how employing Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of the carnival and the grotesque together with Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's readings of them may enrich analyses of *AHS*'s freak show-centered fourth season. I argue that the narrative frames the freak and the freak show as sites of bourgeois longing, unearthing transformative and perhaps empowering reading potentials for the historical freak show. Proceeding, finally, from the realization that irrespective of transformative potentials, the season remains structurally indebted to the oppressive dynamics of the historical freak show, I link my findings to a discussion of the various ways in which industry and production realities create texts which are particularly open to polysemy.

Before I turn to my analysis proper of disability in *AHS*, a short chapter is required to illustrate some of the show's structural idiosyncrasies.

8.1 Prefatory Matters: Idiosyncrasies of *American Horror Story*

American Horror Story is an anthology series with season-long stories. Each season (usually about 12 episodes long, with later seasons tending to be a little shorter) builds upon a well-known tradition of (American) horror fiction or mythology, while simultaneously examining socially volatile issues which often pertain to identity politics and civil rights. The series' title, thus, carries a double meaning, referring both to the horror tradition and the implications and consequences of the social issues which are frequently depicted to be equally if not more terrifying (cf. Taylor 135-136, 138). This two-layered concept is perhaps best illustrated by briefly listing each season's horror trope along with the social issues it examines. In season 1 *Murder House* the eponymous murder (or haunted) house serves as the setting for a narrative that explores violent domestic misogyny and the oppressiveness of the concept of

nuclear family (cf. Kim 62, 65-66, 75).[42] Season 2 *Asylum* is set in a 1960s mental institution, and deals with the medicalization of female sexuality and, more generally, the potential oppressiveness of the concept "mental health". Season 3's *Coven* is the backdrop against which issues surrounding femininity, race and racism play out. The title of season 4 *Freak Show* suggests a slight departure from the usual two-layer structure. Rather than being based on a tradition of horror fiction, the season sets out to employ the once real phenomenon of the freak show to examine the meanings and realities of disability and disabled lives in the USA, as well as criticizing the ills of show business and entertainment. Season 5 *Hotel* returns to the structure of seasons 1, 2 and 3 as it focuses on the fashion industry, drug use, and child neglect in the setting of a Los Angeles hotel, recalling Bates Motel from *Psycho* (1960) or the Overlook Hotel from *The Shining* (1980). This list only gives a general idea about each season's settings and themes, and is not exhaustive, neither in terms of horror traditions, nor in terms of the scope of social critique. For instance, while *Coven* focuses on the theme of oppressed femininity, the same theme pervades all other seasons as well—most prominently, of course, in the many pathologized female characters that find themselves imprisoned in season 3's Briarcliff Manor. Similarly, *Freak Show* centers specifically on disability, a topic that is also relevant to the narratives of *Murder House*, *Asylum* and *Coven*, if to a lesser extent. Furthermore, I do not mean to suggest that the two layers are mutually exclusive as there are areas where the more straightforward horror elements and the social critique overlap and condition each other. There is, for example, no doubt that the horror trope of the Haunted House in *Murder House* can (and, I would argue, should) be read as symbolic of the social critique element of violent and oppressive domesticity. However, *AHS* does not rely heavily on such symbols to express its critique. Rather, it tends to be articulated in a more immediate manner. In *Murder House*, this is done through frequent representations of men cheating on their partners or couples collapsing under the weight of the unfulfilled normative expectations they have of romantic relationships. The horror elements, thus, parallel the social critique but do not exclusively constitute it. In other words, while many horror movies tend to achieve their critical, disruptive or subversive potential in the subtext and through textual abstractions, *AHS* generally favors a more unequivocal approach.

AHS's seasons do not only share structural and thematic features. In fact, although each season arrives at a narrative conclusion at its end, they all share the same storyworld. This is evidenced by recurring characters and occasional remarks that reference events from

[42] Season 1 was only retroactively subtitled *Murder House*, which is why the title card and promotional material only refer to *American Horror Story*.

other seasons' stories. Pepper (Naomi Grossman), for instance, who is a relatively minor character in *Asylum*, returns to *AHS* in *Freak Show*, in which she has a more central role. Conversely, *Coven*'s central character Queenie (Gabourey Sidibe), similarly, has a brief appearance in *Hotel* (and then returns much later with the rest of *Coven*'s characters in *Apocalypse*). The fact that all of *AHS*'s seasons share a storyworld is significant for my analyses to follow. More than a gimmicky instance of what Mittell would refer to as operational aesthetic (cf. *Complex* 43-4), the storyworldly interconnectedness introduces into *AHS*'s anthology format the open-endedness and deferral of narrative closure that is typical for episodic serials and serial narratives but is usually not found in anthology series. Thus, although each season arrives at a narrative conclusion, to read each season as a concluded work would be as ill-advised as reading any other form of ongoing serial television as a work-bound structure—recall the previous chapter's brief pondering of the implications of the uncertain nature of serial narratives for critical work.

Other than structurally, thematically and by their shared storyworld, *AHS*'s seasons are, finally, connected through the series' ensemble cast. Most main and supporting characters are played by performers who also play other characters in other seasons. For instance, Frances Conroy portrays Moira O'Hara in *Murder House*, Shachath the Angel of Death in *Asylum*, Myrtle Snow in *Coven*, and Gloria Mott in *Freak Show*. The particularity of an ensemble cast playing different roles is relatively unimportant to my analysis of *AHS*'s disability representation. The exception here is Jamie Brewer, the only central cast regular with a (known) congenital disability, namely Down Syndrome.[43] Throughout my analyses to come, her characters, as well as the fact that they are portrayed by the same actor, will time and time again be pivotal to my arguments. The first is *Murder House*'s Addy, whose significance for the narrative function of viewer orientation I will explore in the following chapter.

8.2 Case Study 2: Disability in the Context of Viewer Orientation

Addy is in her 30's and lives with her mother Constance Langdon (Jessica Lange) next-door to the haunted house in which most of the season's action takes place. Addy appears in six of the season's twelve episodes. During these relatively few appearances, her character, I will argue, serves at least two important narrative purposes: one, to evoke intertexts that serve to create a cultural and political framing for *American Horror Story*; and, two, to provide a

[43] The only other congenitally disabled actor with more than one role is Ben Woolf, who portrays the Infantata in season 1 and Meep the Geek in season 4. Especially his role as Infantata is very minor, however, and he appears in a total of only 5 episodes, which is why I do not count him as a central cast regular.

model viewing stance, that is, to demonstrate *how to* watch the show. Both of these purposes act as a means of orienting viewers in the serial text. I will examine them and their effects in some detail, and then situate my findings within the broader context of a representation critical analysis of Addy.

AHS's first episode is doubtlessly the appropriate starting point for such an examination as it condenses many, if not all of the aspects which I intend to discuss into a very condensed time frame. As Mittell notes, the television pilot "must accomplish numerous tasks." (*Complex* 56) It is the beginning of a plot, and as such it must provide narrative exposition, introduce characters and their relationships, and "establish the program's genre as a means of mapping viewers' horizon of expectations, while making the case for why the series will not be 'just another' conventional example of what they have seen before." (56) Most importantly, Mittell concludes, a pilot must

> teach us how to watch the series and, in doing so, to make us want to keep watching—thus successful pilots are simultaneously *educational* and *inspirational*. Pilots must orient viewers to the intrinsic norms that the series will employ, presenting its narrative strategies so we can attune to its storytelling style. Frequently such storytelling strategies are presented in a pilot's opening minutes, providing an immediate invitation to watch a particular way […]. [emphasis in the original] (56)

The television pilot is thus an exceptionally dense piece of narrative.[44] Unsurprisingly, then, both the evocation of intertexts and the shared viewer perspective, with which I will be concerned in this chapter, are laid out during the opening sequence of *AHS*'s pilot. My analysis will, thus, focus first on the opening sequence, then regard how the effects play out over the rest of the pilot, and until Addy's death in episode 4.

8.2.1 Addy as Intertextual Reference

Before I examine the intertexts evoked by the character of Addy, it is important to point out that even before *AHS* first aired on October 5, 2011, the series was linked to at least two important intertexts through its creators Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk: *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010), which was created by Murphy, and *Glee* (2009-2015), which was co-created by Murphy and Falchuk. Not only especially well-informed viewers knew about the connection between the three shows as it was in fact advertised in the trailers that FX ran prior to the pilot's airing. At first glance, both *Nip/Tuck*, a medical drama about plastic surgeons, and *Glee*, a high-school

[44] We may also note that this density is ultimately due to very practical, commercial reasons: while the viewer has usually already paid to see the movie or the novel before the narrative begins, serial television must continually and especially at the beginning convince the viewer to, in a sense, keep paying (for instance by sitting through commercial breaks).

musical comedy, appear to be unlikely choices of shows to use as advertisements for a horror series. However, more than merely attracting the attention of fans of *Nip/Tuck* and *Glee*, the prominent mention of both shows on *AHS*'s trailers also suggests what kind of characteristics prospective viewers might reasonably expect from *AHS*. Among these characteristics are *Nip/Tuck*'s camp and *Glee*'s liberal politics and left-leaning (in what we might call an American sense) social consciousness and conscience.

Glee is the first of the intertextual references that I investigate in the analysis to come. It is evoked in *AHS*, I will argue, through the character of Addy to highlight *AHS*'s ambition to social critique, but in doing so risks reducing Addy to a promotional gimmick. There are no further evocations of *Nip/Tuck* in the narrative proper. Instead, *AHS*'s camp aesthetic is evoked through a high density of evocations of the horror genre, one of which occurs through Addy. The narrative exhibits some deep discomfort with its own use of Addy as a site of intertextual evocation of the horror movies. I will demonstrate in some detail that it evidences an awareness of and desire to resolve the conflict that arises from its use of Addy as element of straightforward horror *and* as site of negotiation of social issues (which, of course, mirrors the overall two-layer structure of *AHS* delineated above).

8.2.1.1 Down Syndrome as Promotional Gimmick and Marker of Critical Ambition

AHS opens with a black screen telling us that the year is 1978. We hear wind chimes and a clacking sound. Menacing string music (the season's leitmotif) starts as the first proper shot sets a calm yet gloomy mood: we look upward through the grey branches of a tree. The camera appears to roll, pan and tilt simultaneously as it moves downward the tree trunk, creating a discomforting sense of dizziness. We then cut to an establishing low-angle long shot of a large, partly overgrown brick house with boarded up windows. In the weedy front yard, a girl in a bright yellow dress catches out eye. She looks up at the house like we do. The girl is, of course, Addy, although we do not know this yet. She has her back turned toward the camera, which steadily dollies in toward her and the house through the tall and overgrown cast-iron front gate. The next shot is a close-up of a mobile made of animal bones, evidently the source of the clacking sound. We then return to another, more sweeping long shot of the whole scenery from outside of the gate. The camera moves from left to right so that at the beginning of the track shot Addy is hidden behind the left gate post and disappears behind the right post at the end of it. The menacing calm of these four initial shots is then broken when we see a hand picking up a small rock and throw it through a first story window. Addy is as startled as we are and turns around—at which point we see that she has Down Syndrome—to see twin boys (Kai and Bodhi Schulz) with baseball bats entering through the gate. As they walk past,

one of the boys says to her, "Hey, freak", while the other throws her kisses in a mocking way. Addy calls after them, "Excuse me. You are going to die in there." The boys ignore her warning, threaten to beat her and enter the house, while she says, "You're gonna regret it. You're gonna regret it. You're gonna regret it" (1.1 0:36).

Already at this point—not even a minute into the narrative—the potential for the viewers' recognition of both major intertexts which I will discuss here, has emerged. I speak of *potential for recognition* because we can assume neither sufficient knowledge of the respective intertexts among all viewers, nor that such knowledge would be instantly called upon in the precise moment the link is screened.

Although in terms of narrative order horror movies are evoked first, I will begin by considering the meanings implied in the intertextual reference to *Glee*. The link emerges (that is, it becomes potentially recognizable) through *AHS*'s and *Glee*'s shared series creators Murphy and Falchuk at the moment we see Addy because *Glee* features the recurring character Becky Jackson (Lauren Potter) who has Down Syndrome.[45] As suggested, calling upon memories of *Glee* has the effect of establishing early in the episode *AHS*'s own claim to a similar brand of social consciousness. However, whereas in the abovementioned trailer *Glee* is explicitly named, here Addy's Down Syndrome is a visual clue that evokes the intertext and thereby signifies *AHS*'s claim to social awareness. Down Syndrome, then, effectively functions as a stand-in for all social issues that the series may address. Of course, this dynamic approximates David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder's concept of *the materiality of metaphor*, describing a common device in literary texts that employs representations of physical disability to signify social issues other than disability itself (cf. *Narrative* 47-48 and 61-64). In fact, as the episode and the series progress, the reality of Addy's Down Syndrome turns out to be one of the social issues that is negotiated to some extent. This development is of course already suggested by the boys' expletive "freak" exemplifying the verbal abuse with which people with disabilities are frequently faced. But although her disability is not only a metaphor for other social issues, during the opening moments the representation of Down Syndrome serves not so much to examine the realities of disability, but as a flashy, easily recognizable advertisement for what may be called one of *AHS*'s selling points: its liberal politics and left-leaning social awareness.

[45] Of course, this intertextual reference additionally hinges on the fact that main or supporting characters with Down Syndrome are very rare in American serial television. Apart from Becky Jackson, Tom Bowman (Luke Zimmerman) from *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* (2008-20013) was the only other somewhat prominent character at the time of *AHS*'s series premier. Before that, Charles Thatcher (Chris Burke) from the relatively short-lived *Life Goes On* (1989-1993) was the only main character with Down Syndrome on American serial television.

The same dynamic is also apparent in the long teaser (often referred to as "Family Portrait") that FX broadcast before the series premiere.[46] In it we see each of the major characters performing brief actions that relate in some manner to their role in the season's story. Addy is shown walking through a hallway and disappearing through a door—signifying her intimate knowledge of and bond with the house. The shot is particularly noteworthy because it includes both actors who portray her walking hand in hand: Jamie Brewer, who portrays her in her thirties, and Katelyn Reed, who portrays her as a child and occurs *only* during the above 1978 flashback. No story element justifies showing both younger and older Addy at the same time, as she is played by two actors purely to signify the age difference. To illustrate: during the teaser we also see the older and younger version of ghost housekeeper Moira O'Hara (Frances Conroy and Alexandra Breckenridge respectively) in the same shot. This parallels the story element in which men see only the young and women the old Moira. Consequently, both Moiras are included in the teaser's concluding group shot of all characters, from which, sensibly and importantly, Katelyn Reed's Addy is absent. Showing both Addys interacting in the first shot, then, can easily be construed as an attempt to maximize the promotional effect of the visual clue *Down Syndrome*.

Like the word *promotional*, the above words *advertisement* and *selling points* should not be understood purely metaphorically here. Jonathan Gray, for instance, points out "television entertainment's conflicted nature as simultaneously one of modern day's most prominent and loved sources of narrative, art, and creative display, while also being produced as a business intended to attract viewers to advertisements" (13). His analysis demonstrates the many ways in which television makers must ceaselessly engage in navigating the interplay of commercial and artistic interests (cf. 16-44). The opening seconds of *AHS* can thus be figured as an example of such navigation, which may at times produce somewhat contradictory potential readings. Down Syndrome being exploited for commercial ends while simultaneously heralding *AHS*'s "genuine" ambition to social critique is such a contradiction.

Naturally, the mere presence of or attempt at social critique does not imply that it is executed in a manner that satisfies those social groups with which it declares alliance. *Glee*'s representation of disability, for instance, is frequently criticized in reviews by popular

[46] By using the terms *trailer* and *teaser* I mean to designate distinct forms. A trailer uses actual footage from the movie or show it promotes, outlines the movie or show's narrative, and frequently employs voice-over to convey further information such as naming the director or producer(s). A teaser is usually made up of stand-alone footage. It rarely provides immediately intelligible information about the narrative, focusing instead on mimicking or creating atmosphere, and includes little or no information regarding the production other than an often vague release date. Furthermore, the term *teaser* may also refer to the "pre-credit sequence segment" of an episode (Mittell, *Television and American Culture* 232).

disability critics.[47] Similarly, *AHS*'s own social critique sometimes fails to avoid pitfalls of minority representation in general, and disability representation in particular. An example of such a failure will be presented in the next chapter, in which I will closely examine how the character of Addy evokes horror movies.

8.2.1.2 *American Horror Story*'s Use of and Discomfort with the 'Creepy Child' Trope

The sequentially first intertextual reference that is made through Addy, horror movies, may more precisely be classified as "interdiscursivity" (Fairclough 124) or a "generic system reference" [translation mine] (Pfister 52) as it does not reference a specific single text, but rather a (movie) genre.[48] The first two shots of Addy in her yellow dress standing among the weeds in the decrepit front yard (see my above description of the opening shots) unmistakably reference a host of horror movies which feature one or more characters that the website *TVTropes* calls simply "Creepy Child":

> They look sweet, innocent, even angelic, but there's something not quite right about them. They're too calm, too knowing. They aren't really children any longer, not at heart.
>
> Children should be innocent and in need of adult protection. By inverting this, the trope arouses deep-rooted fears. The Creepy Child might not be physically dangerous, but their profound unnaturalness is just as chilling. ("Creepy Child")

Some famous examples are Regan MacNeil in *The Exorcist* (1973), the Grady daughters in *The Shining* (1980), Carol Anne Freeling in *Poltergeist* (1982), the children in *Children of the Corn (*1985), Cole Sear in *The Sixth Sense* (1999) (although, as TVTropes notes, this example holds true only during the movie's beginning), the Red Queen in *Resident*

[47] See, for example, SE Smith, "No Glee for disabled people"; USA Today, "'Glee' wheelchair episode hits bump with disabled"; and Erin Tatum, "Disabilities Week: 'Glee's Not So Gleeful Representation of Disabled Women". This criticism is, in fact, mostly directed at the decision to cast non-disabled actor Kevin McHale to play wheelchair user Artie rather than at the representation of Down Syndrome in the character Becky.

[48] In the original: "Generische Systemreferenz".

Evil (2002), and Samara Morgan in *The Ring* (2002) (cf. "Creepy Child").[49] The trope is so common, the list could be continued almost indefinitely.[50]

I this chapter, I will demonstrate the text's own apparent discomfort with the implications of its use of Addy as intertextual reference to horror movies. These implications begin to surface as soon as the twins arrive on the scene. Note first, though, that because we only see Addy's back during these first two shots, she is a Creepy Child *only* by way of standing motionlessly in the front yard of the Haunted House, *not* by way of her disability. As soon, as she gets startled by the rock the twins throw, her Creepy-Child-status is suspended because her fright eliminates, if temporarily, her air of mystery and makes her relatable, humanizes her (it is, to illustrate, virtually unimaginable that any of the above-mentioned other examples of Creepy Children are ever startled). Thus, at the very moment that we learn of her Down Syndrome, we also cease to find her "creepy". But this is only a matter of correlation, not of causation, and her creepiness returns mere seconds later when she utters her "too calm, too knowing" warning about the twins' impending deaths. Like *AHS* in general, Addy's characterization is premised on a two-layer structure: her Down Syndrome signifies *AHS*'s ambition of social critique; her creepiness signifies that *AHS* is a horror series. While her Down Syndrome is strictly speaking wholly unconnected to her creepiness because it neither causes nor obliterates it, the mere proximity of both character elements establishes a connection despite such subtleness, suggesting, by extension, that Down Syndrome is creepy.

Fast forward, so to speak, a couple of minutes: inside the house, the boys are killed by a basement-dwelling creature (hereafter referred to by the name it is given in the end credits: Infantata [Ben Woolf]), which comes as no surprise to us not so much because of Addy's warning, but rather because of the previous evocations of generic horror movie conventions. During the second half of the pre-credit segment—set in the present day, that is, about 30 years after the twins' deaths—we get to know Vivien Harmon (Connie Britton) who, after a post-miscarriage check-up in a doctor's practice, walks in on her husband Ben (Dylan McDermott) cheating on her. The scene ends with Vivien cutting Ben's arm as he tries to stop her from walking away, and, just before the opening credits begin, we hear Addy's voice repeating her

[49] Dawn Keetley provides a list of specific intertexts from what may broadly be described as the horror genre to which *AHS* refers (94; 101). While most of her examples are recent horror movies, she makes a connection all the way back to gothic literature of the late 18th century. Furthermore, she points out the double meaning of Constance's remark about the unavailability of "virgin plots" in episode 7 "Open House". On the diegetic level, she refers to plots of land, but the remark may also be understood as a winking acknowledgement of *AHS*'s excessive intertextuality—thus qualifying as another instance of operational aesthetic.

[50] *TVTropes* notes somewhat sardonically: "Practically every recent horror film has at least one of these […]."

earlier warning—*You're going to regret it*—thus reiterating and emphasizing the creepy sense of knowing menace already associated with her.[51] In an attempt to start fresh, the Harmon family with teenage daughter Violet (Taissa Farmiga), move from Boston to Los Angeles, specifically, of course, into the Haunted House, which has seen some thorough renovations since the twins died in it.

It is now that Addy returns to the narrative in a way that is highly revealing of the conflicted nature of her two-layered characterization. Vivien is at work pulling wallpaper from the wall when we hear Addy saying, "You're gonna die in here." Vivien gets a fright, spins around and sees Addy staring at her (1.1 14:28). The cut to Addy is underlaid with a dramatic musical cue that would typically highlight a jump scare in a horror movie. Note, however, that while the moment is reminiscent of a jump scare, it fails to make the viewer jump like Vivien does. We may not expect Addy to just stand there, but as soon as she speaks, we have plenty of time to process the information that someone else is the room besides Vivien, and who that someone is. Only then is Vivien shown spinning around and only *then* do we arrive at the shot of Addy underlaid with the musical cue—the shot that would have had to come first for the jump scare to give us fright. I contend that the jump scare is purposely ill-constructed to soften the blow, in a manner of speaking, of Addy being creepy by way of her sudden appearance in the house, her evidently justified warning of impending death, and her menacing glare. Such hesitance on behalf of the text to fully commit to Addy's Creepy-Child-status may very well stem from its simultaneous awareness of the problematic reading potentials it offers in this manner.[52] One of these reading potentials, as pointed out above, is the confluence of *Down Syndrome* and *creepiness* that Addy's two-layered characterization almost inevitable provokes. From a disability critic's perspective, another problem occurs in terms of stereotypical disability representation now that Addy is grown up—recall the 30-odd-year jump forward: although Addy is simply not a child any longer, she still evokes the Creepy Child trope. Similarly, then, to the way in which *AHS* inadvertently suggests that Down

[51] It is interesting to note that, in small, the opening sequence, thus, reflects *AHS*'s overall two-layered structure: the first scene climaxes with the rather straightforward horror of the Infantata killing two boys; the second scene depicts, or at least hints at the more abstract horror of domestic misogyny and the failing nuclear family.

[52] My ascription of authorial agency to the text rather than to the credited writers, the director, editors or the showrunners reflects the recognition of the highly collaborative production process of television series (cf. Gray 28; see also Mittell, *Complex TV* 87). Shorthand ascriptions of authorship to the director, writer, or showrunner seldom if ever reflect the reality of the production process. Similarly, Frank Kelleter points to Bruno Latour in claiming that a theorization of popular serial storytelling benefits from a framing within an *actor-network* model (cf. Kelleter "From Recursive", 101; see also Kelleter "Populäre Serialität", 20).

Syndrome is creepy, it appears to suggest that people with Down Syndrome essentially remain children even in their thirties.

However, the narrative is quick and thorough in its attempt to dispel such an essentialist reading. Directly after Addy scares Vivien, Constance walks in and, before she sends her daughter home, berates her: "Adelaide, I put on *Dora the Explorer* for you so you would sit and watch it." (1.1 37:00) *Dora the Explorer* (2000-2014) is, of course, a cartoon aimed at a preschool audience. In this way, the narrative strongly implies that Addy's childlikeness is not so much due to her disability but rather imposed on her by her mother. During the ensuing conversation with Vivien, with whom we are very likely to side because of her hitherto sympathetic portrayal, Constance is portrayed as obnoxiously intrusive, egocentric and condescending. We are made, effectively, to find her very unlikeable, lest we read the narrative thrust here as meaning to suggest that her treatment of Addy is in any way appropriate.

Narrative measures such as the ill-constructed jump scare and basing Addy's childlikeness in her upbringing rather than her nature thus serve to remedy what could otherwise be read as "problematic" disability representation. But to read them solely as quick fixes would do injustice to the text because they also reflect and sometimes constitute *AHS*'s subversive social critique, which, at times, translates to a sensitive handling of disability-related issues. Some of these issues might derogatively be called political correctness, by which I mean, for instance, rules of politeness by which one should not call people with Down Syndrome creepy or equate their intellect with that of a child. Such politeness may be far from commonplace in everyday interactions with people with Down Syndrome, but in theory its legitimacy is arguably non-controversial among the general populace. *AHS*, however, also negotiates issues that go beyond politeness and are likely much more controversial: during Constance's near-monologue she implies, for example, that if prenatal testing had been available during her pregnancy with Addy, she would have gotten an abortion. Shortly afterwards, she says that in dogs she prefers "purebreds [because she] adore[s] the beauty of a long line […]". Because it is the unsympathetic Constance who voices these rather common ideas—which can, additionally, easily be interpreted to liken people with Down Syndrome to canine mongrels—there is implicit in this scene a critique of eugenic practices such as prenatal testing.

I will examine *AHS*'s critique of cultural practices surrounding disability in greater detail in the chapters to come. My point here is that *Murder House*'s mode of critique oftentimes conflicts with its use of Addy as a site of intertextual evocation, and that, moreover, the narrative appears to express awareness of and discomfort with this conflict. While it

devotes some considerable time and effort to representing Addy's childlikeness as an effect rather than a cause of her mother's overbearing parenting (see also chapter 8.2.2), it nevertheless frequently relies on the Creepy-Child-trope, and by extension Addy's childlikeness, to create moments of horror or tension. Consider the following sequences: Later in the pilot, Addy enters the house without permission again, and instead of answering Vivien's repeated and agitated demands to know why, she just laughs at the ghosts of the twins creeping up behind Vivien. In episode 2 "Home Invasion", the house alarm goes off, and we follow Ben searching for the intruder. He ultimately finds Addy sitting at the bottom of the basement stairs and giggling while she rolls a ball into the shadows. After having thrown out Addy, Ben walks back up the stairs and we see the ball rolling back from out of the shadows. In episode 4 "Halloween Part 1", Addy hides under Violet's bed and grabs her ankle—a successful jump scare, since the viewer is aligned with Violet's perception in this scene.[53] Note that in the first two scenes the actual horror itself is not located in the character of Addy, but rather in the ghosts of the twins and Infantata in the basement shadows, and that in the third scene Addy is only scary because she herself chooses to be to give Violet a fright in a Halloween-context. While the narrative thus relies on Addy to initiate the horror in each of these scenes, it seems to be intent on negating potential readings of Addy as inherently creepy (cf. Kim 67-68). But of course, such negations after the fact can never be fully effective simply because they cannot erase the fact that Addy is a Creepy Child.

The representational tension that arises from the narrative's apparent desire to side with Addy that is inevitably paired with an inadvertent exploitation of her—this impossibility, in other words, to have it both ways—may thus point to one of the reasons for Addy's surprising death in the middle of episode 4. In a textbook instance of *deus-ex-machina* she dies in a hit-and-run outside the house—for if she were killed on its grounds, the storyworld logic dictates, she would become part of the haunting, and thus continue to also "haunt" the narrative. Not only is she the only one among the main and supporting characters that dies in a manner that removes her from the narrative altogether. What is more, the hit-and-run is never investigated and quickly forgotten. Addy's death, thus, can be read as the final coup to rid the text of her discomforting presence. But like her character's evocations of intertexts, killing her off is a narrative move that itself ultimately troubles *AHS*'s own otherwise subversive disability politics. This is the case because it inevitably figures as a retrogression to what Garland-Thomson calls "eugenic logic" ("The Case" 339-340): the historically and

[53] My use of the concept of *alignment* rather than, for instance, *focalization*, is due to my use of Murray Smith's theory of character engagement in the following chapter.

ideologically deep-seated tendency within western culture and literary tradition to eliminate disability where it is perceived as uncomfortable, failing to serve a purpose, or in some other way disturbing an order.[54] Recalling the subtle critique of eugenic practices mentioned above, it is noteworthy that Addy's death figures as a narrative enactment of precisely the cultural logic that *Murder House* otherwise seems to critique. The troublesome nature of disability representation, it appears, is not easily subjected to *AHS*'s storyworld logic. Addy's death outside of the grounds of the Harmon House does nothing to keep it from haunting the narrative as a recalcitrant and irritating presence. It will do so again, as we will see at the end of the following chapters, in which I will explore another means in which Addy serves the purpose of viewer orientation—a means, I will show, that holds considerable subversive potential.

8.2.2 Viewer Engagement and Serial Disability Critique: Addy as Surrogate Character

In a sense, Addy's evocations of intertext may be considered a relatively abstract instance of viewer orientation. They arguably serve to inscribe *AHS* in generic horror traditions and to accentuate its claim to subversive social critique, thereby helping to instantiate and foreground the text's two-layer structure. They do not, however, tell the viewer in what way this structure might be significant for their attempts to make sense of the series. In other words: Addy's evocations of intertext tell us about the *what* but leave us unclear about the *how*. This chapter, then, will be concerned with a more immediate means of viewer orientation, provided by Addy as "surrogate character." I borrow this term from Casey J. McCormick who identifies a number of surrogate characters in *House of Cards* that instruct the show's viewer, he argues, how to properly binge watch it (cf. 107). He notes that while "[s]urrogates, or characters that stand in for the viewer, are a common narrative device, […] they have been understudied in

[54] Scholarship on this eugenic tendency abounds in disability studies. The following are just some examples: chapter 2 in Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy* provides an historical account of how the modern idea of normalcy is inextricably bound up with eugenics. For a perspective on the workings of eugenic ideas in literature see Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* (cf. e.g. 56-7 and 163-71), in literary and artistic traditions see Snyder ("Infinities of Forms" 180-1), and, more broadly, "as an influential hegemonic formation" (x) in culture see Snyder and Mitchell's *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006). Although not explicitly using the term "eugenics," both Longmore ("Screening Stereotypes") and Darke ("Understanding Cinematic Representations of Disability") identify similar ideas for film and television. Bérubé ("Disability, Democracy, and the New Genetics") discusses the ethical implications of a new eugenics that is born out of scientific advancements in the field of biotechnology.

the televisual context." (107) [55] In this chapter, then, I seek to contribute to closing this critical gap by exploring how the surrogate character Addy guides the viewer's stance toward *AHS*'s generic horror elements and its subversive social critique, thereby meeting complex television's pronounced requirement of particularly comprehensive viewer orientation. Specifically, I will show that the character of Addy encourages the viewer to take affective pleasure in *AHS*'s horror movie elements, whereas its social critique and commentary is to be taken seriously.[56] My discussion will begin with a delineation of the narrative and stylistic means by which viewer engagement with Addy is forged. I will then turn to a brief analysis of how Addy's experience of the diegetic manifestations of the horror genre (the ghosts) on the one hand and the diegetic manifestation of the subversive social critique (her disability) on the other hand guides the viewer's stance toward, or relative valuation of these elements of the series. Finally, I will consider in detail how the deployment of Addy as surrogate character shapes the representation of her Down Syndrome in *Murder House*.

8.2.2.1 Viewer Engagement and Addy as Surrogate Character

My above use of the term *viewer engagement*, as opposed to *identification*, refers to Murray Smith's conceptualization of viewer sympathy, which consists of "three levels of engagement […] (recognition, alignment, and allegiance), and the interrelations among them." (81)[57] To understand the degree of viewer engagement with Addy that the text encourages, it is sufficient to focus on the levels of *alignment* and *allegiance*.[58]

Smith explains that alignment consists of "two interlocking functions":

[55] Noël Carroll, for instance, makes the following observation about the horror genre in general: "The emotional reactions of characters […] provide a set of instructions or, rather, examples about the way in which the audience is to respond to the monsters in the fiction—that is, about the way we are meant to react to its monstrous properties" (17-18).

[56] This is neither to claim that seriousness cannot be pleasurable, nor the opposite, that pleasure cannot be serious. However, in his study on the pleasures of horror genre, Matt Hills points out the cultural truism of the "discursive opposition of 'theory' and 'pleasure' [which] marks down 'pleasures' as easy and counter-positions 'theories' as difficult, demanding and requiring labour" (8). Thus, my point here and throughout this chapter is that, irrespective of its "truth value," *AHS* appears to be very much steeped in this notion of opposition.

[57] Smith's concept is, of course, much more intricate and complex than my employment of it reflects. For him, character engagement is comprised not only of the structure of sympathy but also of empathy, which can be either voluntary or involuntary. Furthermore, Smith describes specific dimensions of alignment and allegiance (cf. e. g. 105). For my analysis, a more limited use of his work will suffice.

[58] Smith refers to the "the spectator's construction of character" as *recognition*, which "has received less attention than any other form of engagement in studies concerned with character and/or identification, probably because it is regarded as 'obvious'." (82)

> [Spatiotemporal] attachment concerns the way in which the narration restricts itself to the actions of a single character, or moves more freely among the spatio-temporal paths of two or more characters. Subjective access pertains to the degree of access we have to the subjectivity of characters, a function which may vary from character to character within a narrative. (83)

Admittedly, it may initially seem like a stretch to claim a particularly noteworthy degree of alignment with Addy: in most cases, we come across her because we follow the spatiotemporal paths of a different character—see for example the above instances of Addy's encounters with each member of the Harmon family. And while, as suggested above, we do have access to Addy's subjectivity to a degree that I consider significant among more traditional modes of disability representation, we are granted similar if not greater access to just about any other main or supporting character on the show. However, viewer alignment with Addy is exceptionally high in more general terms of perspective on the storyworld. Like Addy, we have access to both the Langdon's and the Harmon's home, and, like Addy, we know that the latter is haunted. We may not follow Addy's spatiotemporal path, and initially we are certainly not as well informed about the specificities of the haunting. Nevertheless, despite these differences in range, the overall quality of the viewer's and Addy's perspective is strikingly similar.

Our alignment with Addy is established during the opening seconds of the pilot. In the first shot of her, she looks up at the house like we do, and like us, she is startled when the rock smashes through the window (see chapter 8.2.1.1.). Both Addy and we know of the twins' impending death (albeit for different reasons: she knows the inhabitants of the house, we know the horror genre conventions). Once the twins are dead, the camera cuts back to Addy, whose perspective on the house we share once again, thus emphasizing the shared knowledge of the dangers that lurk inside of it. The notion of Addy's and the viewer's perspective on the storyworld as largely congruent also helps account for her passiveness throughout the narrative. Recall, for instance, that she appears to wait motionlessly outside of the house while the twins get killed; or the frequency with which she is asked to leave once her character has set in motion another plot development.[59] Thus, like the viewer, Addy is an inactive observer of the narrative's events, rather than an active agent. Figured this way, alignment between her and the viewer manifests in the utter ineffectuality of the attempts she does make to interfere

[59] In this manner, Addy initiates but is otherwise inconsequential to (1) Constance and Vivien's first conversation which serves to introduce Constance; (2) Constance and Ben's first encounter during which tensions between the Harmons and Constance become articulated; (3) a conversation between Ben and Vivien which reveals the couples differing expectations of Vivien's pregnancy. A notable exception is Addy's sudden appearance in Violet's room in episode 4 "Halloween Part 1" which sets in motion the story arc that ultimately results in Addy's death in the same episode.

with the events. Neither the twins nor Vivien pay heed to her warning that they will die in the house. The most striking instance of this dynamic occurs in episode 2 "Home Invasion". Addy is witness to a group of intruders who intend to reenact a crime that occurred in the Harmon house. She heads home to get help, but Constance is preoccupied with her boyfriend Travis (Michael Graziadei), and instead of listening to Addy trying to explain the situation next door, she locks her in a closet, rendering her wholly inconsequential to remainder of the home invasion-arc (I will return to this plot development in greater detail below). While alongside Constance, Addy is not the only character to have near-universal access to all the storyworld's realms as well as knowledge of the haunting,[60] only Addy shares with the viewer such a high degree of non-interference with its events.

Addy's unique position in relation to the viewer is reinforced by the allegiances that the text forges between the characters and the viewer. "To become allied with a character," Smith states, "the spectator must evaluate the character as representing a morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits, *in relation to other characters within the fiction*" [emphasis mine] (188). It is clear that whenever we come across Addy in narrative, she is very likely a character whose morals we evaluate as more "desirable" than those of other present characters. Whatever we may think of Addy's "creepy" way of standing motionlessly in the front yard of the house, the rampaging twins with their baseball bats are surely less likable. We may disagree with Addy entering the house uninvitedly and with her strangely sinister delivery of the warning that Vivien will die in there, but Constance's casual racism and condescension likely overshadow any immediate sense of Addy's moral ambiguity. Even when Addy is more clearly at fault, the narrative tends to be quick to squeeze a character below her in terms of what, for the sake of argument, may be called moral hierarchy: for instance, when she sets of the alarm by breaking into the house at night, Ben's anger with her is represented as relatable until he spitefully refers to her as "little freak," for which he is immediately admonished by Vivien (11:50).[61] Note that in this and the previous example, Vivien remains at the top of the

[60] Technically, one could argue, the character of Larry Harvey (Denis O'Hare) also shares this perspective. However, for as long as Addy is alive his involvement in the matters surrounding the haunted house remains opaque to a degree that precludes any viewer alignment with him.

[61] This is, of course, not an exhaustive list of examples. A final one is worth mentioning, however, if only in a footnote. Smith identifies a character's behavior toward pets as a means by which allegiance to this character may be forged or undermined. He specifically claims that the viewer's subconscious registering of a character petting a dog may increase our likelihood to feel allied with that character (190-1). In a scene that ultimately serves to escalate tensions between the Harmons and Constance, Vivien repeatedly and urgently asks Addy to not enter the house again. Addy's unresponsiveness creates a distinct sense of discomfort. The reason why she does not respond is that she is distracted by the Harmon family's dog. She asks if she may pet it, but Vivien declines with a harshness that further increases the discomfort. Because Addy and Constance are together on one side

moral hierarchy—in fact, I would argue that she and her daughter are the characters with whom the viewer feels highest degree of allegiance throughout *Murder House*. However, my claim is not that we feel the strongest allegiance of all characters with Addy, but merely that there is a relatively high and consistent degree of allegiance. The unique mode and degree of viewer engagement with Addy, then, is marked by alignment in the shape of omniscience regarding the storyworld's constitution and non-interference with its events, as well as an overall feeling of allegiance with her. To reiterate, we do not find this combination in any other character, as they are either unaware of the haunting or represented as unlikable.

It is on the basis of this exceptional degree of viewer engagement that the text encourages us to model our stance toward the generic horror elements and the subversive social critique on the way that Addy perceives of and experiences their diegetic manifestations. What does this mean specifically? First, Addy exemplifies that *AHS*'s horror elements are best appreciated with affective enjoyment. In each of the previously cited scenes in which Addy serves to initiate horror, her experience of it is represented as one of playful enjoyment: she laughs about the ghosts of the twins creeping up behind Vivien, and she giggles while she plays ball with the Infantata; she plays a Halloween prank on Violet, shortly after which she tells Violet that she likes the house because it is where her friends, that is, the ghosts, are.

Only the home invasion in episode 2 appears to contradict this otherwise dominant pattern of Addy taking pleasure in the horrific events in the house rather than fearing them. Upon witnessing the danger in which Vivien and Violet find themselves, she runs to get help—an act that, as mentioned above, remains inconsequential to the home invasion-arc (the Harmon family is instead saved by the intervention of some of the ghosts in their home). Precisely because Addy's brief presence in the Harmon house is inconsequential, her part in the home invasion-scene appears to be significant not so much as another illustration of her experience of generic horror elements but rather figures as a plot element within what I will call the *pretty girl*-arc. Revolving around Addy's desire to be considered "a pretty girl"—a desire that earns her nothing but scorn and degradation from her mother—the arc's representation of how she experiences oppressive beauty standards arguably figures as the primary textual site at which Addy operates as a surrogate character, providing a model stance for the viewer with regard to *AHS*'s culturally and socially subversive elements. Specifically, the *pretty girl*-arc appears to fault hegemonic culture and society for its valuation of beauty standards that are as unattainable for many as they are purportedly constitutive of a person's

of the confrontation—the Harmons having apparently invited them over to discuss the matter of Addy's intrusions into the house—her desire to pet the dog may be read as a means to distance her from Constance in terms of likability.

worth. In short, the diegesis articulates this critique as follows: Addy subscribes to the hegemony's beauty standards represented by the fashion magazines she reads, and those standards are mandated by an oppressive society, which is represented by Constance. I will discuss some specifics of the pretty-girl arc in greater detail below. Suffice it to demonstrate briefly here that Addy's experience of these beauty standards is represented as a far cry from the gleeful enjoyment with which she encounters the majority of the generic horror elements in the Harmon house. It is, quite to the contrary, consistently represented as seriously and profoundly harmful to her emotional well-being: to Addy, the "bad girl closet"—a closet full of mirrors, the same closet in which Constance locks her during the Harmon home invasion—is not terrifying simply because she is locked in it, but rather because she is forced to look at her own reflection, which she is aware does not meet dominant beauty standards. She has been led to believe that being thought of as a conventionally pretty girl is an inescapable requirement for romantic love. When Constance forbids her to wear make-up as a Pretty-Girl Halloween costume, Addy cries violently and storms off because being "a pretty girl" is of near-existential importance to her. And her troubling experience of oppressive beauty standards culminates in and concludes with her death as she runs into the street to join a group of conventionally pretty trick-or-treaters, unable to see the approaching car because of the enormous Pretty Girl-rubber mask that Constance had ultimately bought her. The unattainable beauty standards virtually end up killing her (cf. Keetley 100).[62]

What I have demonstrated so far is how *AHS* creates and employs a unique degree of viewer engagement with Addy, rendering her a surrogate character in the service of orienting the viewer to the affective entertainment value of its two-layer structure's generic horror aspect and its more serious vesting in subversive cultural critique. I will now turn my attention to how this deployment of Addy as surrogate character shapes the representation of her Down Syndrome in *Murder House*.

[62] This reading may appear to contradict my reading in chapter 8.2.1.2 of Addy's death as a device to rid the narrative of her discomforting presence. It does not. First, a representation of beauty standards as having a profoundly harmful effect on Addy's emotional well-being would have been perfectly imaginable without her being symbolically killed by them—in fact, the narrative drives this point home convincingly long before Addy's death. Second, her death also conveniently ends the story arc and by extension the thematic digression into the social issue of oppressive beauty standards—a digression, one might argue, that, had it been sustained after episode 4, would have compromised the narrative's thematic consistency.

8.2.2.2 Potentials of the Disabled Surrogate Character

Critical disability scholarship demonstrates that modern representations of disability have tended to be either located at the margins of narratives, or, in Davis's terms, have served the construction of normalcy if they are at the center (cf. *Enforcing* 41-42)—which is ultimately tantamount to marginalizing disability.[63] Addy functioning as a surrogate character runs quite contrary to this dominant mode of disability representation as marginalization: by way of both the reliance on an exceptionally high degree of viewer engagement with her, and the narrative time devoted to specifically *her* subjective experience of what is represented as oppressive beauty ideals, Addy is accorded a centrality that arguably remains very rare for disabled characters in mainstream culture. Furthermore, the representation of her subjectivity is rendered even more urgent, visceral and relatable precisely because we are so closely aligned and allied with her. Not only does the *pretty girl*-arc draw attention to the issue that dominant beauty standards tend to exclude and marginalize many people with disabilities—it does so *from the perspective of a woman with Down Syndrome*. Embedded within the arc's function as tool of viewer orientation, the narrative voices a range of concerns that are highly relevant to a critical scrutiny of the socio-cultural category of disability. My focus in the remainder of this chapter is on reading potentials of disability critique that emerge most visibly in Addy's troubled relationship with her mother Constance.

[63] Some prominent examples: Paul K. Longmore has famously observed that although "television and film […] frequently screen disabled characters for us to see, […] we usually screen them out of our consciousness even as we absorb those images" (65). He later notes that one of the most pervasive modes of fictional and non-fictional disability representation frames it as "an individual, rather than a social problem" (74), thus relieving society of any responsibility. In a similar vein, Martin F. Norden argues that cinema has traditionally tended to "reflect an able-bodied point of view [which ultimately reduces disabled characters] to objectifications of pity, fear, scorn, etc.—in short, objects of spectacle—as a means of pandering to the needs of the able-bodied majority" (1). Likewise, but more to the point, Paul Darke identifies the existence of the "normality genre": "films that have, superficially, impairment or disability as their central theme [but in which what is at stake] is not the impairment or the abnormality but the degree to which it can either define or validate its opposite: normality." (187) For both literature and film Mitchell and Snyder argue that "the reliance upon disability in narrative rarely develops into a means of identifying people with disabilities as a disenfranchised cultural constituency." (*Narrative* 55) I do not mean to suggest that all these studies make the same arguments. However, in some manner, they all build upon the shared realization of marginal role of disability in fiction.

Notably, Murray Smith appears to inadvertently suggest the same basic dynamic of marginalization—albeit from a very different angle and not explicitly mentioning disability—when he notes that a viewer's moral evaluation of major characters is often based on that characters "behaviour […] towards physically and socially weaker characters (children, the old, the sick, the oppressed)" (190).

Episode 1 establishes the basic dynamic of Addy and Constance's relationship: Constance's general behavior toward her daughter can be described as a sort of condescension which is not wholly unloving, which is why it mostly takes the shape of her treating Addy like a child. Addy appears largely powerless in relation to her mother, but she is by no means resigned. The conflict proper between the two is set up largely in episode 2 "Home Invasion". It begins with Addy leafing through a scrapbook filled with pictures of conventionally pretty girls cut from magazines. Expressing her concern with her own looks in relation to dominant constructions of beauty, she asks Constance why it is that she does not look like those girls. Constance's dismissal of her question—"Because you don't. That's just the way you were born. Accept it." (16:00)—implies the rigidity of her views on the validity of conventional beauty ideals. This implication is then substantiated and fleshed out over the course of her next two scenes, revealing itself to arguably border on the obsessive. In each of these two scenes, Addy is directly relevant to Constance's remarks. In the first scene, referring to Addy's physical appearance by calling her "that little bug-eye", she freely admits to Vivien that she thought about leaving her out to die in the cold. She then theorizes that she tends to give birth to children with disabilities because her and her husband's beauty was "an affront to the gods" (20:19). In the second scene, admiring Travis's naked body, she looks up at him and says, "I think there isn't a closed door in the world that beauty can't open." This metaphor manifests doubly just moments later when Addy arrives at Constance's bedroom to get help because the Vivien and Violet are under threat from the home invaders: Constance first opens the bedroom's closed door, then locks her in the "bad girl closet"—literally closing another door that Addy cannot open. She finally suggests the perceived deviance of Addy's physical appearance once more by telling her to look at herself "long and hard", while Addy's bloodcurdlingly fearful screams express the terror that Constance's views on beauty cause her (32:58).

Certainly, much of the episode serves as a vehicle of characterization for Constance. Within the context of the *pretty girl*-arc, however, it can also be read as familiarizing us with the nature of Addy's upbringing, of giving us an idea of what it might be like to be the child of Constance Langdon, of the severe limits of appreciation and love one might receive from her failing to meet her beauty standards. Because Constance is Addy's primary attachment figure—and a domineering one at that—Addy's perspective on the world is inevitably framed by her mother's perspective. Thus, by way of her near-absolute authority over what her daughter recognizes as beautiful, we may read Constance as a personification of the powerful and pervasive discourses that create and perpetuate our own dominant cultural configurations

of beauty which necessarily exclude such visually marked deviations from their norm as Down Syndrome.

In episode 4 “Halloween Part 1”, the conflict between Addy and Constance fully erupts over the course of two scenes. In both, Addy is together with characters whose beauty ideals appear to allow for the inclusion of what we recognize as “deviant” bodily formations. However, both scenes also stress the power of the dominant discourse by ending with Constance angrily enforcing her views. In the first scene, Constance witnesses Travis sitting closely next to Addy and reading to her from a children’s book. After sending Travis away, she points out that Addy knows how to read. The implied accusation that she misled Travis to get attention, might well to be justified: Addy was visibly flattered by his physical closeness, his good-natured, but purely playful flirtations (he too sees a child in Addy), and his encouragement of her plan to dress up as a “pretty girl” for Halloween. In short, she enjoyed feeling pretty. Towards Constance, Addy reacts defensively, apparently aware that the situation might get out of hand; but with a slip of the tongue her defensiveness turns into defiance. Like her, the camera and we look up at Constance, a threatening dark figure looming angrily above us. The season’s menacing leitmotif starts playing and Addy’s expression turns to one of fear as her mother tells her that she “will not share the affections of the men [she brings] into this house with any woman” (1.4 6:45).

In the second scene, Addy asks Violet to put make-up on her so that she can be a “pretty girl.” When Violet is finished, Addy looks at herself in the mirror and exclaims, “Wow! Violet! I look beautiful!” (1.4 17:10). Through its subtle reversal of the bad-girl-closet, this moment complicates the pretty-girl story arc: it emphasizes that beauty lies not in the eyes of the beholder—it is Addy looking at herself both times—but, rather, that beauty is a construction of discursive circumstances. At home, apparently still elated from her experience with Violet, Addy runs from Constance who orders her to “wash that smut off” her face. Her smile quickly turns into anguish and teary-eyed desperation as she protests that she wants to be a pretty girl, but Constance yells at her, “You’re not a pretty girl, and you know it!” Again, we look up at her from Addy’s eye-level. Constance bends down further and further as she loudly tells Addy how people advised her to put her in a home. She finally reaches Addy’s and our eye-level when she, herself vulnerable and teary-eyed by now, utters the line, “Do you know what they think when we walk down the street? ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’ You make them feel lucky.” (1.4 18:10). Perhaps the line may be understood as an admission by Constance as to why she is so intent on keeping Addy “ugly” by her standards (for which no other explanation is offered): so that despite her life’s many misfortunes she has it easier to

feel lucky herself.[64] In any case, Constance ascribes to her daughter's physicality a similar function that Garland-Thomson and others have identified for the 19th century American freak show: "sooth[ing] the onlookers' self-doubt by appearing as their antithesis" (*Extraordinary* 65). Thus, *AHS* seems to imply that the trouble with dominant beauty standards is not only that they are currently unattainable to some, but that they in fact *rely on* that unattainability to achieve stability and permanence.

To reiterate, this reading of the *pretty girl*-arc as disability-centered critique of oppressive beauty ideals is rendered especially potent by the exceptionally high degree of viewer engagement with Addy. The narrative places the viewer in consistently close proximity to Addy's subjectivity, thus foregrounding her perspective even in its representations of more abstract concepts such as the power of hegemonic discourse.

Constance ultimately changes her mind (why precisely remains conjecture) and gives Addy the Pretty Girl-rubber mask which factors into her death shortly afterwards: while trick-or-treating Addy follows a group of conventionally pretty girls, runs into the street, and gets killed by a car she likely could not see because of the enormous mask. The dramatic ending of the story arc may appear somewhat over-determined, precisely because it adds little to its previous subtleties and terms of disability-centered critique and representation of Addy's subjectivity. The death seems to somewhat bluntly reinforce a point that has arguably already been made sufficiently: that the oppressiveness of dominant beauty ideals can have terrible implications for those who fall outside of it.

But as I argued in chapter 8.2.1.2, Addy's unexpected death might more appropriately be understood as a narrative device to rid the text of the inevitable implication, arising from her deployment as an instantiation of the Creepy Child-trope, that Down Syndrome is creepy. I noted at the end of that chapter that the troublesome nature of disability representation would return to haunt and irritate *AHS*'s subversive cultural potentials once more: read as a sort of retrogression to a "eugenic logic" that otherwise appears to be at odds with *AHS*'s apparent disability politics, Addy's death threatens to undermine the subversive potency of the *pretty girl*-arc's disability critique. As does, one might argue, its aftermath: having lost all her children, her daughter's death is one of the reasons Constance begins plotting for one of Vivien's unborn children; Addy is seen briefly in episode 5 "Halloween Part 2" as a dead body in the morgue for her bereft mother to put make-up on; and in episode 6 "Piggy Piggy" when, with the help of a medium, Constance gets to explain herself and apologize to Addy's spirit

[64] Some of these misfortunes are that her husband cheated on her, and that at least two of her four children are dead, that one of them was a school shooter. Of course, to Constance the fact that only one of her children met conventional beauty standards is itself a misfortune.

who immediately dishes out redemption.[65] In short, what remains of Addy is almost entirely about Constance.[66]

But these developments do not wholly invalidate the subversive achievement of affording Addy's subjective experience such a centrality during the first four episodes. There certainly is a sense that they have the effect of relegating disability to the narrative margins after all, leaving it behind to be forgotten once it has served its purpose. However, I demonstrated that as a means of serial viewer orientation, Addy's character arc is accorded a particular significance as it is instrumental in familiarizing us with the intrinsic narrative norms and political leanings of *AHS* as a whole. Thus, potentially shaping and inflecting the viewership's appreciation and comprehension of the series, the potent subversive critique articulated through her arc—however short it may be, and irrespective of the fact that it swiftly fades into diegetic insignificance—lingers throughout not only the rest of *Murder House*, but *AHS* as a whole.

Moreover, even if we discount this particular significance of Addy's arc as a means of viewer orientation, her death and the subsequent relegation to the narrative margins arguably do not automatically invalidate her character's subversive potential. While a reading of Addy's arc relative to a perceived overall narrative thrust of *Murder House* may certainly yield some critical insight, we should also keep in mind that such an approach risks implying a steepness of hierarchies between narrative strands that may misrepresent the storytelling structure of serial narration. This is to say that unlike work-bound narratives that tend to center on a clearly defined main story, series have a greater tendency to fray out in terms of storytelling (cf. Kelleter, "From Recursive" 101). Particularly those with large ensemble casts are more likely to narrate several story and character arcs in parallel or in succession, alternating in so-called beats between them and variably adding and detracting from the perceived centrality of any single one. Babette B. Tischleder emphasizes that even shows with "explicit protagonists" (121) are not exclusively focused on these protagonists. In fact, she suggests that in most complex television series, "a particular setting or institution forms a show's center of gravity" (121) rather than a specific story or character arc: New Jersey on *The Sopranos*, Baltimore on *The Wire*, the 1960's advertising industry on Madison Avenue on *Mad Men*, Litchfield Penitentiary on *Orange is the New Black*, Albuquerque on *Breaking Bad*,

[65] Apart from these scenes, Addy also occurs briefly in two short flashback scenes in episode 10 "Smoldering Children" and episode 12 "Afterbirth".

[66] Constance admits as much herself when she says, "One of the many comforts of having children is knowing, one's youth has not fled, but merely been passed down to a new generation. They say when a parent dies, a child feels his own mortality. But when a child dies, it's immortality that a parent loses." (1.5 29:43)

Hell's Kitchen on *Daredevil*. I do not mean to claim here that *Murder House* is devoid of a central narrative thrust. It might be defined, for example, as follows: the Harmon family moves into a haunted house and struggles to escape. My point is, rather, that this thrust is dispersed across and narrated through a multitude of relatively distinct if constantly intersecting arcs, all of which are related primarily through their shared "center of gravity," the haunted house, making it difficult if not impossible to identify a single central plot. Consequently, any argument that valuates a representation in complex television purely by virtue of its relative narrative centrality should be taken with a pinch of salt as it unduly disregards that such hierarchies, while not wholly foreign to the narrative form, may be perceived as less meaningful in serial narratives than in work-bound narratives.

Finally, *Murder House*'s subversive disability-centered critique does not conclude with Addy's death or the season, but is referenced, I will argue, time and time again throughout the seasons that follow. There is evidence, we might say, that even after *Murder House* ends, the ghost of Addy continues to haunt the series. I will argue that in both season 3 *Coven* and season 4 *Freak Show*—which I discuss in chapters 8.3 and 8.5 respectively—*AHS* remains thematically preoccupied not only with the socio-cultural category of disability but, more strikingly, with the troublesome aspects of its own disability representation. This persistent preoccupation is encouraged by the ongoing serial text's invariable disposition, often referred to as the feedback loop, to look back and reflect upon itself. The representational potentials for disability representation that that evolve out of the feedback loop will be my critical focus in the next chapter in my analysis of *AHS*.

8.3 Case Study 3: Disability in the Context of (Serial) Self-reflexivity

The following chapters provide two parallel readings of the representation of disability in *American Horror Story*'s third season subtitled *Coven*. These readings are parallel insofar as they evolve from the same basic observations about one of the eponymous coven's witches, Nan, who, like Addy, is played by Jamie Brewer. The observation is that almost no one in the coven takes her seriously.[67] The first reading frames this observation as a critique of intersectional feminism: I will argue that while the coven's struggle to come to terms with the femininity-race nexus is ultimately resolved (or at least clearly headed for resolution), its

[67] Although she is not the only character with a disability in this season, this chapter's analysis of the narrative's disability representation will be concerned only with her. Thus, for the sake of brevity, whenever I refer to the narrative's representation of disability in this chapter, I mean specifically Nan's disability, unless otherwise specified. The other cases will be discussed briefly in my analysis of altered bodies.

discomfort with the femininity-disability nexus lingers to create a blank space that can be read as a critique of intersectional feminist theory's overall failure to account for the socio-cultural category of disability. The second reading juxtaposes the coven's treatment of Nan with the narrative's own hesitance to afford the character what I term narrative substance. I read this apparent lack of narrative substance as part and parcel of what I will demonstrate to be a self-aware stylistic overdrive that marks the overall tone of *Coven*. More specifically, I will identify an implicit self-critical meta-commentary about complications that attend any attempt at representing disability outside of its dominant socio-cultural framings. In a final analytical step, I intend to demonstrate how such complex reading potentials are facilitated and foregrounded by the high degree of self-reflexivity that is inherent to serial storytelling.

Before I begin these analyses, the remainder of this chapter will serve to delineate what precisely I mean when I claim that Nan is not taken seriously. At first glance, it would appear that Nan's Down Syndrome is wholly irrelevant within the social environment of the coven, neither determining nor limiting her role. During roughly the first half of the season, Nan is not only consistently represented as an equal among her peers, she is also, at least ostensibly, perceived as such by the other characters. Up until episode 8 "The Sacred Taking", Nan's disability is not remarked upon by any character. The remarks in the second half are few and far between, and implicit but bordering on the explicit.[68] However, the social hierarchies among the coven's wards cease to appear quite so flat within the context of the season's central plot, the search for the new leader of the coven, the Supreme. Here, Nan marks a curious absence. She is the only one of the young witches who is never considered as a potential candidate by the others. It is, in fact, always within this context that the narrative comes nearest to an acknowledgment of Nan's Down Syndrome: when in episode 8 Nan remarks that anyone of the coven, including herself, could be the next Supreme, Madison (Emma Roberts) looks at her contemptuously and replies, "Not really. It's pretty obvious." (14:30). Later in the same episode, Nan's question if anyone thinks that she could be the next Supreme is met with uncomfortable silence, suggesting that the others consider it just as

[68] Of course, in the absence of any explicit verbal acknowledgment of Nan's Down Syndrome, the causal link between it and her not being taken seriously is one that the text never explicitly articulates. In chapter 8.3.2, I will return to the significance of the fact that it is instead up to the viewer to make the connection on the basis of the fact that both Nan's presumed inability to perform certain tasks and her presumed innocence reflect well-known stereotypes about Down Syndrome (a plethora of educational, activist texts and other websites testify to the commonness of these and other stereotypes: some examples include Caroline Boudet and Rémy Bellet's "'Down Syndrome Is Not What I Am. Just What I Have.' Our Campaign Against Stereotypes Of Down Syndrome"; the National Down Syndrome Society's list "Myths & Truths"; a video by BBC Three titled "Things People With Down's Syndrome are Tired of Hearing"; or "When You Say 'Angel' With 'Down Syndrome'…." by Meriah Nichols).

"obvious" that they do not. In episode 10 "The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks", Nan, once more, claims that she could be Supreme because her powers are growing. In what appears to be a reference to Nan's sometimes slurred speech, Madison replies, "Yeah, the mind-reading's a real party trick, Mumbles the Clown" (14:10). While on the surface, then, the other witches appear to unquestioningly accept Nan's presence in the coven as an equal, their ultimate reluctance to consider her as potentially the next Supreme contradicts such a notion. They seem, instead, indebted to the dominant socio-cultural ascriptions attending the set of phenomena we know as Down Syndrome that assume those who have it to be in some manner "obviously"—read: *inherently*—less capable of performing certain tasks. In other words, they do not take her quite seriously.

The coven's overall unwillingness to take Nan seriously is especially noteworthy because the narrative is punctuated by details that, at the very least, acknowledge Nan's potential to become Supreme. For instance, like the other witches, Nan gains magical powers that are part of the Seven Wonders, the set of skills the emerging Supreme is required to perform. Strikingly, her achievement of these abilities is in both cases introduced in the context of other characters doubting that she might become Supreme: in episode 8, after her question if anyone thinks it might be her is met with uncomfortable silence, Nan leaves for the neighbors' house and offhandedly opens the door using telekinesis. In episode 10, after Madison tells her to prove her claim that her powers are growing, Nan uses mind-control to force Madison to put out her cigarette and insert it into her vagina (which ultimately does not happen only because Zoe intervenes). Apart from Nan's magical abilities, Fiona (Jessica Lange), who as current Supreme arguably has some authority on the subject, is shown to be the only witch to recognize Nan's potential. In episode 1 "Bitchcraft", she points out to the young witches that Nan is smarter than all the others combined. Nan's death at the hands of Fiona and Marie (Angela Bassett) in episode 10, finally, is a result of their joint realization that she is too much of a danger to their respective causes to be alive. Fiona's cause being her desire to stay Supreme, and her documented willingness to kill who she considers a likely successor (she had previously murdered Madison for that very reason) suggests, once more, Nan's potential to become Supreme—which her peers fail to recognize.

Having established the peculiar position of Nan within the coven's social structure, I can now begin to explore the two parallel reading potentials that emerge from these observations.

8.3.1 *Coven* as Disability Critique of Intersectional Feminism

This first reading requires that we first consider what I identify as the season's primary thematic concern: the intersections of femininity with other socio-cultural identity categories. While the text's focus is clearly on the femininity-race nexus,[69] I will argue that its treatment of disability in relation to femininity may be read as a critique of intersectional feminism's critical limitations.

Populated almost only by women, the coven in and around Miss Robichaux's Academy, which was founded by "an early suffragette" (3.1 13:00), offers itself to be read as representative of, broadly speaking, feminism.[70] More specifically, the text deploys the coven as a sort of representational microcosm of historical and contemporary women's issues and struggles complete with a violently oppressive patriarchy represented by the all-male witch hunting organization Delphi Trust. *Coven*'s primary concern, however, is not so much the oppression by men and resistance by women, or feminism's fight against the patriarchy. Rather, the central conflict of the narrative is between white women and black women: with the exception of Queenie every member of the coven is white, rendering it, by extension, representative of "white" feminism; and Supreme Fiona Goode's arch enemy is not the white male CEO of Delphi Trust, but Marie Laveau, Voodoo Queen and owner of the black hair salon Cornrow City.

While reviewer Hannah Pingleton claims that in *Coven* feminism is "treated entirely separately from [...] issues of race and oppression" ("Saying 'Balenciaga!'"), I argue, to the contrary, that the narrative highlights its feminism's complex intersections with race even in relatively marginal story elements. Most striking in this context, perhaps, is the season's geography: the coven is located in New Orleans, which we learn is the case because the witches fled there from Massachusetts during the Salem witch trials. Through this "obvious reversal of the direction slaves pursued in order to escape"—north to south vs. south to north—feminism and race are "simultaneously entwined and juxtaposed." (Lippert 193)[71] Similarly, although less obviously, *Coven* appears to suggest the opaque complexity of the femininity-

[69] To a lesser extent than race, the text is also concerned with the intersection of femininity with class, and, in fact, with race and class (cf. Lippert 193-4; see also Bolonik) I omit this aspect in the service of this chapter's poignancy with regard to its focus on the intersection of femininity and disability.

[70] The only man that appears to be part of the coven is Quentin Fleming (Leslie Jordan), who is a member of the Witches' Council, but it is unclear if he is himself a witch.

[71] In quoting Lippert in this chapter, it should be noted that, unlike me, she does not explicitly read the coven as an allegory for feminism, noting instead that "*Coven* focuses on women, and while their portrayal might warrant a study of its own, it should suffice to say that questions of gender are one strand of many in the discussion of oppression and inequality therein" (188).

race nexus in its inclusion of imagery of both the burning of witches at the stake, and a lynch mob's hanging of a black child: as Lippert points out, while today we tend to associate capital punishment by immolation with witchcraft, "[a]t the time of the Salem witch trials it was chiefly slaves who were burned alive" (190) and convicted witches were hanged, a form of execution we typically associate with racist lynch mobs. It is, however, the major story arc revolving around the coven's conflict with the Voodoo tribe that illustrates best the narrative's preoccupation with the subject matter of intersectionality. An in-depth analysis would exceed the scope of this study, but a rough outline of my reading will provide a sufficient frame for my subsequent reading of *Coven*'s representation of the femininity-disability nexus.[72]

If the coven operates as representative of "white" feminism, the Voodoo tribe, it can be argued, is a representation of black feminism.[73] The sentiments that each group harbors for the other resonate well with such a reading because the relationship between them is not simply one of similarly motivated and equal hatred: rather, Fiona (representing the coven as its Supreme) views Marie (representing the tribe as its Queen) with condescension while Marie views Fiona with an almost unshakable distrust. These feelings, although of course simplified, arguably translate well into the relationships between "white" feminism and black feminism as "white" feminism has historically tended to overlook and ignore the specificities of black

[72] My outline continues to be indebted to Lippert's "Nightmares Made in America: *Coven* and the Real *American Horror Story*" (2017) to which interested readers may turn for a more thorough exploration of the subject of race in *Coven*. It also worth noting that *Coven*'s representation of race has drawn some pointed criticism. In "'There's nothing I hate more than a Racist:' (Re)centering Whiteness in *American Horror Story: Coven*" (2018), Amanda Kay LeBlanc provides a further perspective on the representation of race and racism in *Coven*, arguing that its condemnation of racism fails to a certain degree because it frames it as a phenomenon of the past. Kayla Upadhyaya calls the racial politics of *Coven* "confusing" and notes that some aspects of the representation of black characters come across as caricatures. While she has a very valid point, there is the argument to be made that these caricature-like representations are not careless as she suggests, but a deliberately ironic and self-aware instantiation of what I will later in my analysis call *AHS*'s stylistic overdrive.

[73] I opt to employ quotation marks in the term "'white' feminism" but not in the term "black feminism" to reflect that historically the former did not view itself as specifically concerned with *white* women, while the latter consciously seeks to fill the critical gap left by a supposedly universal feminism, focusing, thus, specifically on black experiences of femininity. In other words, the latter is self-designation, the former is not.

Furthermore, using the term "black" in the context of a critique of "white" feminism may appear reductive of the issue at hand. After all, feminist thought did not only omit *black* women but arguably all non-white women. In activist circles, contemporary intersectional feminism frequently employs the acronym WOC (= women of color) to designate the sum of these women. I nevertheless speak of "black feminism" because in *Coven* all non-white women are clearly identified as black.

Finally, I am aware that my argumentative structure—beginning at the coven as representative of "white" feminism and moving from there to the Voodoo tribe as representative of black feminism—centers on the coven and may thus be construed as a perpetuation of the dominant position of "white" feminist scholarship. I justify this choice by the fact that I read Coven as primarily a critique of "white" feminism, and, more importantly, by the trajectory of my analysis being aimed at the femininity-disability nexus which is represented by Nan, a white member of the coven.

women's experiences. The particularities of the renewed eruption of the conflict at the beginning of *Coven* (both parties had entered into a truce several decades earlier) are secondary. What matters is that eventually both Marie and Fiona come to realize that they need to work together to protect themselves against the witch hunters, and with one simple ploy they manage to eliminate Delphi Trust entirely—read: the patriarchy is no match for the joined forces of black *and* white women. It is against the backdrop of this conflict between coven and tribe and its gradual resolution that the narrative foregrounds "white" feminism's prolonged failure to acknowledge and account for the existence and relevance of gender's intersection with other socio-cultural identity categories. This preoccupation is arguably most manifest in Queenie's role in the story arc: she arrives at the conclusion that her feeling of discomfort in the coven stems from the other witches not fully accepting her because of her race, and switches sides to the Voodoo tribe. Having been left for dead by Marie after a shooting perpetrated by the witch hunter Hank (Josh Hamilton) at Cornrow City, she disappointedly returns to the coven shortly after it joined forces with the Voodoo tribe. If we read her renunciation of the coven as an effect of feminism's failure to acknowledge intersections of identity, the reluctance with which she returns to it after having been left for dead may be understood as a representation of a feminist dilemma: while, as *Coven* illustrates by means of its warring factions, "monologism, unilateralism and sanctioning of one 'true' line of political correctness [do not belong] to feminist thought" (Lykke 3), the series also emphasizes that "minorities are often not only suppressed by the majority, but, by fighting amongst themselves, do their oppressors' work for them" (Lippert 190). In other words, while unity may be a strategic necessity for feminism, it is neither a conceivable nor a desired reality.

Ultimately, both Fiona and Marie die, and with them, the narrative seems to propose, outdated racial division lines, clearing the way for Queenie to be part of the new Witches' Council. In fact, in light of the overall system of representations of feminism that is at play throughout *Coven*, the transition from the Fiona-led coven to the more "intersectional" coven led by Cordelia (Sarah Paulson) can be understood as analogous to the transition from a late second-wave to third-wave feminism.[74] The term "third wave," after all, was formulated first by Rebecca Walker in an article that highlights specifically the experience of *black* women. Thus, the story arc's critique of "white" feminism ends placably, forwarding the idea that ultimately intersectional feminism is possible. Moreover, however, it can be read as an acknowledgement of a historical reality, namely that a great deal of feminist thought has in

[74] Recall also the narrative's evocation of first-wave feminism when Cordelia explains that Miss Robichaux's Academy was founded by an early suffragette.

fact incorporated and evolved many of the notions of intersectionality since Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in 1989.[75]

But while *Coven*'s feminists ultimately succeed in including a black woman, the disabled woman in their midst suffers a different fate: Nan is ignored and not taken seriously by those witches who represent third-wave intersectional feminism; she is eventually killed by the second-wave feminists; and soon forgotten by all of them. Let us take a closer look at the possible meaning of Nan's death at the hands of Marie and Fiona, who, as I suggest above, are the only characters who appear to take Nan seriously. It is precisely because they do so that they perceive her as threatening—threatening to reveal that Marie steals babies and is not as righteous as she would like to appear; and threatening because she has the potential to replace Fiona as Supreme—which is why they choose to kill her. We can read this choice in light of a claim that is often formulated in disability scholarship, namely that disability is perceived as possessing considerable destabilizing potential with regards to other identity formations: Joseph P. Shapiro remarks that "disability catches up with all of us in old age, [that] it is a minority that we all, if we live long enough, join" (8). G. Thomas Couser builds on this realization when he observes that "[p]art of what makes disability so threatening to the nondisabled, then, may be precisely the indistinctness and permeability of its boundaries" (178). Similarly, Garland-Thomson notes:

> That anyone can become disabled at any time makes disability more fluid, and perhaps more threatening, to those who identify themselves as normates than such seemingly more stable marginal identities as femaleness, blackness, or nondominant ethnic identities. (*Extraordinary* 14)

She adds that "lurking behind the able-bodied figure is the denied, and perhaps intolerable, knowledge that life will eventually transform us into 'disabled' selves" (46); or in Henri-Jacques Stiker's words: "Each of us has a disabled other who cannot be acknowledged." (8) Herein lies disability's potential "for destabilizing all categories of identity" (Bérubé, Foreword *x*), to highlight the general "instability of identity in a postmodern era." (Davis, *Bending over Backwards* 25; cf. also 86-87)[76] Visually linked to disability, Nan's potential, then, to destabilize Marie and Fiona's ostensibly fixed identities easily translates into

[75] See "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." I do not claim, of course, that Crenshaw was the first to articulate these ideas, only that she was the first to do so using the terminology that dominates the discourse today.

[76] I am partly indebted to Shildrick and her succinct summary of these positions (cf. *Dangerous* 4, 17).

disability's potential to disrupt some of feminism's more essentialist tendencies.[77] More recent feminist theory, Shildrick points out, "has fully embraced corporeality in all its contingency, fluidity and messiness" (*Dangerous* 37).[78] But she curtails her own enthusiasm when she expresses her discomfort with intersectional feminism's often remarked upon sustained omission of the femininity-disability nexus (cf. 179n11; see also Lykke 82).[79] If the text's

[77] Of course, it could be argued that Nan's particular disability is congenital, that is, one that does not suggest corporeal instability as readily as an acquired disability would. I would point, however, to the narrative's overall preoccupation with the notion which is evidenced by the fact that *Coven* is replete with instances of bodily instability: Cordelia moves in and out of blindness (notably with both her eyes intact at the end); Fiona ages, becomes younger, ages again, and so on; Myrtle's scar tissue heals as easily as Spalding's tongue is re-attached and Madison is cured of her heart murmur; Kyle, Bastien the Minotaur, and Delphine's bodies are dismembered, transformed, reassembled, sometimes seamlessly, sometimes in new combinations.

[78] I will explore the significance of corporeal instability in *AHS* more fully in the next case study.

[79] While Lykke devotes two chapters of *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* (2010) to intersectional theory, her allusion to the omission of disability remains a desideratum. Similarly, Helma Lutz, Maria Teresa Herrera Vivar and Linda Supik's collection *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies* (2011) mentions the omission in its introduction (cf. 9-10) but does not include any articles on the subject. Other works explicitly concerned with intersectionality—for instance Iris Marion Young's *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (1997), Anna Carastathis's *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (2016), or Ange-Marie Hancock's *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (2016)—neglect disability altogether. This is surprising insofar as the femininity-disability nexus (or gender-disability, or "gender/sex-dis/ability" [Lykke 82], etc.) is hardly uncharted territory within *disability* scholarship: Marsha Saxton and Florence Howe's *With Wings: An Anthology of Literature by Women with Disabilities* was first published in 1987 (and includes, notably in the context of this chapter, work by Alice Walker), and Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch published their collection *Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture, and Politics* in 1988. Since then a range of other collections have appeared, including Rannveig Traustadóttir and Kelley Johnson (2000), Asha Hans and Annie Patri (2003), Bonnie G. Smith and Beth Hutchison (2004), and the German volume by Jutta Jacob, Swantje Köbsell and Eske Wollrad (2010). Potentials of a "gendered theory of disabled bodies" (173) have been prominently charted by Helen Meekosha in her contribution to *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives* (1998). Robert McRuer's 2002 article, "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence" translates Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) to disability theory, a project that later brought forth his study *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006). Margrit Shildrick devotes much of her work to the femininity-disability nexus, for instance in her 2009 study *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity and Sexuality*. Fiona Kumari Campbell explores how "gendered ontological differences are negotiated and spoken of and how these differences intersect with ontologies of disability that inform social policy and law" (144) in *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (2009). Perhaps most prominently, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work as a disability scholar has been informed from the outset by feminist thought, as she relates in her essay "The Story of My Work: How I Became Disabled" (2014), and as is evidenced by work such as her frequently republished article "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory" (2002) and her groundbreaking study *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997) (which, once again notably in the context of this chapter, devotes a full chapter to the representation of disabled women in the writing of Ann Petry, Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde). Extensive as this list is, it is not exhaustive, and its length seems to testify to the tendency on the part of intersectional feminist theory to consider disability a niche concern and to overlook the femininity-disability nexus despite the wealth of thought on the subject.

examination of the femininity-race nexus constitutes a critique of "white" feminism; and if Nan's death at the hands of Fiona and Marie is a reaction to the perceived threat disability poses to the integrity of non-disabled identities; then the younger witches' failure to take Nan seriously echoes precisely this omission, this willingness on the part of intersectional feminist theory to forget about disability.[80]

But sympathetic as *AHS* may be to the process of overcoming feminism's neglect of disability, a major drawback of articulating its critique in this manner, normatively speaking, is that it centers on the perspective of the able-bodied, white woman. This holds true more for disability than for blackness: while Nan's perspective is primarily concerned with her love interest, and to a more limited extent with the search for the new Supreme, large portions of the narrative do in fact represent Queenie's perspective with regards to intersectionality. Nevertheless, the narrative's focal point remains the coven. It could be argued that it consequently, if inadvertently, perpetuates precisely that essentialist notion on which "white" feminism builds: that the able-bodied, white woman is the norm of femininity from which all others are deviations. It would be an overstatement to claim that the second reading potential, to which I will turn now, acknowledges specifically this drawback. However, as I juxtapose in the next chapter the coven's unwillingness to take *the person Nan* seriously with the narrative's hesitance to flesh out *the character Nan*, it will become evident that the text exhibits awareness not only of such dilemmas of disability representation in general, but also, more specifically, of its own representational shortcomings—again, normatively spoken—both in *Coven* and in *Murder House*.

It should also be acknowledged here that disability scholarship's own track record in terms of inclusiveness of disparate identities has been less than immaculate. As Chris Bell has noted in his groundbreaking polemic "Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal" (2006) the perspectives and subjectivities of disabled people of color have largely been ignored. Although the omission has since been somewhat remedied by his posthumously published collection *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (2012), the blackness-disability nexus arguably remains undertheorized.

[80] Lykke also calls attention to the "gender/sex-old age nexus" (82) as another intersection that feminist theory tends to overlook. While it would far exceed the scope of this chapter, an analysis of *Coven* or, more generally, *AHS* in this regard would surely be a worthwhile undertaking—if only because *AHS*'s cast arguably exhibits an above-average frequency of being populated by women such as Jessica Lange, Kathy Bates, Frances Conroy, Angela Bassett, and Mare Winningham. Interested readers may turn to Lorna Jowett's "American Horror Stories, Repertory Horror and Intertextuality of Casting" (2017) for some insights into the significance of age in *AHS*.

8.3.2 *Coven* as Self-aware Critique of Disability Representation

In this chapter, I will argue that *Coven* exhibits a high degree of self-awareness about its style of narration and storytelling choices surrounding Nan. These may be read as a meta-commentary on the narrative's own commitment to dominant and limiting socio-cultural ascriptions attending Down Syndrome—the same ascriptions which I demonstrated in chapter 8.3 to latently operate among the members of the coven. I ultimately contend that this meta-commentary can be read as an acknowledgment of the difficulty of avoiding dominant (and often oppressive) modes of disability representation; and, by means of several parallels between Nan and Addy, as a critical commentary on *AHS*'s own handling of the subject matter in *Murder House*.

I will begin, however, by delineating what precisely it is of which *Coven* appears self-aware. My argument rests on the recognition that at least at first glance, the season appears to favor, in broad terms, style over substance. It is important to note that by employing the phrase "style over substance" I do not mean to refer to *thematic* substance—*Coven* is as thematically dense as any season of *AHS*. Rather, I mean to signify the season's willingness to abandon what may be described as classical cachets of "accomplished" writing. It instead allows for shots, scenes and sequences that risk feeling ill-conceived within the overall narrative thrust, but may be entertaining and satisfying to watch in the short term—encouraging a way of viewing that J. Bryan Lowder calls "vibe-watching" ("Why I'm Vibe-Watching").[81] I will refer to this somewhat subordinate role that consistent characterizations and coherent story arcs play in *Coven* as "lack of narrative substance." By employing this term, I do not intend to make a value judgment, only to designate the idiosyncrasy of *Coven*'s mode of storytelling, which a few examples should sufficiently illustrate.[82]

[81] Popular criticism of *Coven* often acknowledges or even centers around this favoring of style of substance. Some examples: Chris Jancelewicz considers the season "meandering" and "bloated" with "too many extraneous characters and tangents" (Huffington Post); Louis Peitzman deemed the season finale "messy and head-scratching" (BuzzFeed); Phil Dyess-Nugent bluntly titles his season review "*American Horror Story* has never been more of a mess"; similarly, Ross Bonaime called *Coven* a "jumbled mess" (PASTE). It is noteworthy, however, that while the vocabulary used in these quotes may suggest otherwise, these popular critics more often than not find the show enjoyable nonetheless. This suggests that Lowder's "vibe-watching" may be an apt description of *AHS*'s appeal to many viewers.

[82] I generally agree with Conny Lippert's claim that, "[r]ather than focusing on narrative continuity and realistic character development, *AHS* [in general, not only *Coven*,] concentrates on compressing as many audio-visual and conceptual elements of the Gothic horror genre into each minute of its running time as possible" (183). I would add, however, that *AHS* compresses not only a very large number of *horror* elements into each episode, but rather anything that adds to the show's "vibe." Furthermore, this tendency appears to me to be especially pronounced in *Coven*.

Toward the end of episode 1 “Bitchcraft”, a brief montage shows each of the young witches in a private situation that appears to be of importance to their characterization and character arc: we see the Madison crying naked in the bathtub with the shower running, because she had been gang-raped at a frat party earlier in the episode. The vulnerability this cinematographically compelling shot suggests is never referenced again, and the narrative focuses entirely on Madison’s boundless egotism and narcissism. Zoe (Taissa Farmiga) is shown raping a now comatose gang-rapist, intentionally killing him in the process through her particular supernatural power: those who she has sex with die of internal bleeding. For the rest of the season, this power is never relevant again. This is especially noteworthy because of, one, its centrality as the point of departure of her character arc (the episode begins with her accidentally killing her boyfriend during sex, thus discovering that she is a witch in the first place), which, two, also involves a very strong love-interest. Similarly, Queenie’s habit of over-eating as compensation for not experiencing love is presented as the most substantial part of her characterization during the first few episodes—the montage sequence, for instance, shows her taking food from the fridge at night. Although it does factor into a suspenseful scene in episode 3 “The Replacements” in which she attempts to seduce a minotaur by claiming they should love each other because no one else will, it is soon after forgotten when the character’s main source of motivation shifts from her body to her race. In each of these cases, emotionally engaging and ostensibly meaningful characterization is surprisingly abandoned in favor of altogether unrelated character arcs. (I will discuss the significance of Nan’s part in this montage sequence below.)

The narrative’s above-mentioned self-awareness of this favoring of style over substance is expressed, for instance, by characters remarking on situations in a way that can also be read as extra-diegetic meta-commentary: when shortly after having been burned at the stake, a revived Myrtle returns to the coven with a full head of long hair, Nan effectively flaunts this suspension of logic by asking, “How did your hair grow back so quick?” (3.8 11:50). Likewise, Queenie’s distraught exclamation, “Things around here change fast, but damn” (3.11 22:55) is a surprised reaction to the fact that Marie has suddenly become the coven’s close ally after about two centuries of being its sworn enemy. But it can also be understood as a self-aware highlighting of the narrative’s willingness to discard plausibility and credibility in favor of dramatic and exciting plot developments. Myrtle’s second time being burned at the stake provides an example that is almost literally *style over substance*: asked if she has any last words, she says, “Only one,” then passionately screams, “Balenciaga!”, the name of a fashion brand (3.13 33:30).

This structural idiosyncrasy—self-awareness of its own stylistic overdrive that often seems to forsake narrative substance—frames this chapter's reading of the significance of Nan's disability. It seems, in fact, that this idiosyncrasy is particularly pronounced in the case of Nan. To elaborate this point, I will first establish the extent of Nan's narrative insubstantiality: As delineated at the beginning of this case study, Nan's peers in the coven fail to take her seriously. Notably, them not considering Nan a candidate for Supreme resonates very well with the narrative's overall hesitance to flesh out her characterization or arc. The narrative developments surrounding Nan suggest a similar dynamic to the way the other witches stop short of fully acknowledging her as their equal: the text accepts Nan's presence, but ultimately shies away from affording her much narrative substance. For instance, we know something about each main or supporting character's life before or outside of the events of the season's present time: Fiona's rivalry with Myrtle, Queenie's job at a fast-food restaurant, Madison's acting career, Kyle Spencer's (Evan Peters) sexual abuse at the hands of his mother, and so on. Nan is the only character who has no backstory whatsoever. Furthermore, she is largely irrelevant to the central plot—the discovery of the coven's new Supreme—and nearly all story arcs—the feud between the coven and Marie; the love-triangle between Zoe, Madison and Kyle; the ill-fated redemption arc of Delphine LaLaurie (Kathy Bates).[83] The only exceptions are, one, the story arc involving the witch hunting organization Delphi Trust at the moment that it intersects briefly with, two, Nan's own love story with Luke (Alexander Dreymon). The latter, finally, is especially suggestive of a lack of narrative substance or direction surrounding Nan, as everyone centrally involved in her romantic story arc is dead by episode 10 of 13—including herself. Nan's unrealized potential to become Supreme is thus paralleled by the narrative's failure to realize her character's potential for narrative substance.

How, then, does the text's apparent awareness of its own overall lack of narrative substance manifest with regards to Nan's particular insubstantiality? I argued above that the montage sequence at the end of episode 1 represents a core emotional conflict of each of the coven's wards (although each of these narrative strands is soon abandoned): we see Zoe attempting to come to terms with her deadly ability, Madison suffering an emotional break-down after having been raped, and Queenie binge-eating. Nan's shot in the sequence, however, does not appear to represent an emotional conflict that might be raging within her: we simply see her sitting on her bed with a pair of scissors, crafting a paper people chain. Considering that it does not feasibly serve her characterization, we might, then, rather read the shot as a

[83] While it is, in fact, Nan who first discovers Delphine, the significance of her contribution to this story arc hardly exceeds that of a plot device. It is, after all, wholly unimportant after the fact.

self-aware foreshadowing of her subsequent narrative insubstantiality.[84] In other words, the shot suggests early in the narrative both the other characters' and the text's tendency to not take Nan seriously.

Coven most urgently exhibits awareness of this tendency in episode 10 where it manifests as an absurd insistence on the assumption of Nan's innocence despite any and all evidence to the contrary. First, during a brief conversation between her and Zoe, Nan says, "If I was the Supreme, I would only do good." Zoe, having that very day and in the same episode witnessed and stopped Nan's spiteful attempt to make Madison insert a cigarette into her vagina, replies, "I believe that. You don't have a mean bone in your body." (3.10 19:30). Later, this same pattern—Nan is assumed to be innocent despite her previous actions—returns, and this time it culminates in Nan's death. Marie and Fiona come to the conclusion that Nan might become dangerous to each of them, albeit for different reasons: Fiona sees in her a potential threat to her plan of staying Supreme; Marie is worried that she might expose to the public that she has been sacrificing innocent souls—that is, stolen babies—to the Voodoo spirit Papa Legba (Lance Reddick) for well over a century in exchange for eternal life.[85] They thus drown Nan in a bathtub because they reckon that, apart from thereby containing the threat that Nan poses, they might pass her off as the innocent soul that Papa Legba is due to collect. The absurdity of the plan lies in the fact that on that very day, and only about ten minutes earlier in the episode, Nan had killed her boyfriend Luke's mother Joan (Patti LuPone) by forcing her to drink bleach using mind control. Certainly, Nan knew that Joan had murdered her husband some time ago and suffocated her son, so her act of vengeance seems at least somewhat morally justified. Nevertheless, trying to pass off her soul as *innocent* to a spirit who had previously only accepted babies requires some considerable suspension of disbelief, especially if we take into account the excessively violent and cruel nature of Nan's revenge. Add to that the above-mentioned cigarette-incident and her declaration in episode 3 that she is not a virgin, and the idea of her innocence is doubtful at best. Unsurprisingly, then, Papa Legba is dissatisfied with Marie and Fiona's offering, whereupon Fiona, apparently aware of the absurdity of their suggestion, pleads, "She's innocent. Mostly. She killed the neighbor, but the

[84] It could be argued that the shot represents her desire for a unified coven. However, even if we accept such a reading, I would insist on a significant qualitative difference between her shot and those of the others: it would have to disregard, one, that unlike Zoe's, Madison's and Queenie's conflicts, emotional investment in a unified coven is by no means a unique feature of Nan's characterization; and, two, that Nan is not at all the lovingly peaceful individual it would make her out to be—which is precisely what I will demonstrate below.

[85] *AHS* takes some great creative liberty with the accuracy of the representation of Haitian and Louisiana Voodoo: the spirit (or, more precisely, *loa*) who decides over a soul's entrance into the underworld is traditionally Baron Samedi, who is usually represented in terms of behavior and attire the way that *AHS* represents its Papa Legba.

bitch had it coming." (3.10 42:30). Jessica Lange's deadpan delivery of these lines does nothing to make Papa Legba's subsequent consent to the changed parameters of the deal appear more credible, but rather acknowledges, in the texts' overall self-aware manner, the implausibility of the plot development. More importantly, it acknowledges that other characters stubbornly fail to view Nan's actions as more meaningful indicators of her personality than their preconceptions about her. In other words, it acknowledges that no one except Fiona and Marie takes her seriously.

The self-aware acknowledgment of Nan's insubstantiality is continued in episode 11 "Protect the Coven" which, after the opening credits, begins with Fiona delivering a eulogy at Nan's funeral:

> Our coven mourns. After facing so many trials, defending ourselves against onslaught. Forging enemies into friends. The witches of Miss Robichaux's Academy have fought for their lives, and won. And so, it is with great sadness we must say goodbye to Nan, [*she pauses*] who fell in the tub. (3.11 41:40)

Without missing a beat, Marie, with a shrug of her shoulders, adds, "Amen." The disconnect between the grief-stricken pathos of the beginning and the matter-of-fact bluntness of the final line "who fell in the tub" and Marie's "Amen" may, once again, be read as self-reflexive commentary, highlighting that Nan was never quite developed into a character with notable narrative substance. In other words, it flaunts the text's own failure to take Nan seriously as a worthwhile addition to the storyworld. Finally, the inconsequentiality of her erasure from the narrative is emphasized, when, later in episode 11, Zoe finds out that she was murdered and by whom before she is interrupted by Madison who dismisses her realization by rolling her eyes, after which Zoe and everyone else appears to complete forget that Nan ever even existed.

Such plot developments may certainly be filed under *entertaining camp overdrive*; or, less sympathetically, under *sloppy writing*. My point is, however, that a more productive reading emerges in conjunction with the text's apparent self-awareness. I demonstrated that the inclusion of *the person Nan in the coven* can be understood as analogous to the inclusion of *the character Nan in the narrative*: although both the person and the character are packed with potential—to become Supreme, or to become a fleshed-out character with a disability—neither coven nor narrative allow for Nan to develop this potential. By extension, we may read Nan's ostensible equality within the coven as an allegory for a given narrative's attempt at breaking with traditional and dominant modes of disability representation. The coven's ultimate failure to take Nan seriously, then, translates into the text's acknowledgment that, no

matter how sympathetic to normative causes of counter-hegemonic disability critique, representations of disability must inevitably operate (from) within the representational structures prescribed by the hegemony. Thus, they always run the risk of reproducing, perpetuating, and falling back on, rather than destabilizing them.

Strikingly, read this way, *Coven* would not only comment on such "sympathetic" representations in general, but specifically on its own representation of disability as that which intersectional feminism neglects and its shortcomings; namely that it risks reproducing the "second wave feminist" essentialism it contests (see chapter 8.3.1). Moreover, it comments on *AHS*'s own representation of Down Syndrome in *Murder House*. Consider the many similarities and parallels surrounding Nan and Addy from *Murder House*: both Nan and Addy are drawn to the neighbors' house where both are often considered intruders; both struggle with overbearing mothers who punish their children by locking them in closets, Addy with her own, and Nan with Luke's; both make a point of declaring that they are not virgins; both die unexpected and violent deaths that remove them permanently from narratives in which deaths are otherwise notably less final (because the dead return as ghosts in *Murder House*, or are resurrected in *Coven*); both are ultimately quite happy to have died, and furthermore relieved to find that the afterlife has a favorable effect on their outward appearance (although in Nan's case this refers only to the style of dress, not her body, which appears to have not been a concern of hers). From an extradiegetic perspective, we might add to this list that both Nan's and Addy's character arcs are inconsequential to their respective season's central plot; and, of course, that both Nan and Addy are played by Jamie Brewer. By recalling in this manner Addy, *Coven* appears to acknowledge *Murder House*'s indebtedness to the same socio-cultural ascription Down Syndrome. Thus, *Coven* appears to suggest what I argue in the previous chapters on *Murder House*: even in its critique of this ascription's effects, *Murder House* cannot escape reproducing it.[86] Moreover, the text's refusal to explicitly name the ascription,

[86] To further illustrate, we may draw a parallel here to Judith Butler's deliberations regarding the possibility of "strategies of displacement" of dominant notions of sexuality (meaning: gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality): "If sexuality is culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before,' 'outside,' or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself. This critical task presumes, of course, that to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement." (*Gender Trouble* 42) This passage is a response to those currents of feminism that seek "a sexuality freed from heterosexual constructs" (40). It is therefore phrased in a manner that foregrounds the *possibility of displacement* within dominant notions of sexuality. But precisely because there is no "outside" of "the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification" (202), it also includes the notion that even subversive operations within the matrix of power risk replicating and consolidating them.

to say that Nan has Down Syndrome, effectively makes *the audience* conclude that the other members of the coven do not take Nan seriously (by not considering her the potential next Supreme and tenaciously assuming her innocence) *because of her Down Syndrome*. As if through mind-control, *Coven* pushes us to think along the very lines we might otherwise hope to resist. By highlighting the oppressive assumptions at work in the storyworld and replicating them in the audience, the text arguably foregrounds just how the near-inescapably pervasive this ascription is, and how easily we become complicit in perpetuating it, if only inadvertently.

In the next chapter I will delineate how some aspects of serial narration not only produce, but also encourage and emphasize such complex reading potentials.

8.3.3 The Representational Potentials of Serial Self-reflexivity

In terms of serial narration and television, finally, we find at work here what Kelleter has described as the "*recursive* character of serial progression" [emphasis in the original] ("From Recursive" 101), and what is more commonly referred to as the feedback loop. As Kelleter notes: "A series, unlike a self-contained oeuvre, can observe its own effects on audiences as long as the narrative is running. Moreover, it can react to these observations, making adjustments in form and content" (*Serial Agencies* 5). To understand *AHS* as such a "self-observing system" (Kelleter, "All About [Part One]"), we do not need to identify voices from *Murder House*'s audience that are specifically concerned with the risk of inadvertently perpetuating dominant socio-cultural ascriptions of disability even when attempting to destabilize them (as I argue *AHS* frequently does). As Kelleter clarifies, the feedback loop is "not necessarily a matter of audiences immediately influencing a narrative—there are also more indirect forms of interaction between storytelling and story consumption" ("All About [Part One]"). Thus, when *Coven* extends its critique of the risks inherent in counter-hegemonic representations to specifically *Murder House*—that is, when *AHS* reads *AHS* to produce more *AHS*—we might say that, in a sense, we witness the text becoming its own audience.[87] It is only by means of the feedback loop, then, that *AHS* can examine its very own already complex system of disability representation and complicate it even further, thereby opening up paths of self-aware disability critique that might prove inaccessible to non-serial forms of narrative. More specifically—and to recall the first reading potential I identified—the feedback loop allows for the text to go beyond its critique of intersectional feminism's neglect of disability,

[87] Likewise, Kelleter claims that "commercial series offer one of the most compelling opportunities to observe how modern popular culture observes itself" ("From Recursive" 102).

and to employ the narrative structures by which it articulates this critique to problematize its own representational practices.

But which viewer, a skeptical reader may ask, will even notice any of this, at home on the couch? Is this not something that becomes apparent only to the scholarly eye that has watched and re-watched each episode until these intricacies surfaced from the diegesis? Could it not even be true that these intricacies were produced in the first place by the researcher's own interest in identifying them in his research object?

Sure enough, I must concede, it might well be the case that no (casual) viewer has ever watched *AHS* in this way. But of course, my initial response would be that the text offers these reading potentials irrespective of the number of viewers who take it up on the offer or even recognize it to begin with. Furthermore, I contend that *AHS*, specifically, uses its serial form to point the viewer to these representational paths. For, importantly, the feedback loop is not optional, it is not simply a luxury granted by serial narratives' "repeated temporal overlap between publication and consumption" (Kelleter, "From Recursive" 100). Rather, it *must* occur because a series "must achieve a dialectic between order and novelty, in other words, between scheme and innovation" (Eco 91). While for Umberto Eco this is an aesthetic requirement, Kelleter's similar assertion that a series' "fundamental structural problem lies in simultaneously creating dependability and attraction, repetition and renewal" [translation mine] ("Populäre Serialität" 20)[88] is a recognition of commercial interests.[89] Simply put, viewers expect a certain degree of reliability from the shows that they watch, but not to the extent that they get bored with them.[90] On the one hand, this tension between repetition and innovation can pose a serious problem for television series: to avoid attrition, many long-running shows eventually "come to rely on larger-than-life events and […] stunts" (Gray 29), such as "Hollywood: Part 3", the famous episode of *Happy Days* (1974-1984) in which Fonzie (Henry Winkler) water-skis over a shark. The now common phrase "jumping the shark" originates from this scene, describing the moment at which something has passed its zenith

[88] In the original (translated part in italics): "Insofern *ihr grundlegendes Strukturproblem darin besteht, gleichzeitig Verlässlichkeit und Attraktion, Wiederholung und Erneuerung zu schaffen*, sind sie darauf angewiesen, Selbsthistorisierung als ein Mittel ästhetischer Differenzierung zu betreiben."

[89] The same requirement of "repetition and renewal" also persists from show to show, as Newcombe and Hirsch note: "The goal of every [television] producer is to create the difference that makes a difference, to maintain an audience with sufficient reference to the known and recognized, but to move ahead into something that distinguishes his show for the program buyer, the scheduler, and most importantly, for the mass audience." (510)

[90] This double bind of having to provide repetition and renewal simultaneously may serve to explain *AHS*'s returning cast, at least from an industrial perspective: while seeing the same faces makes sure that a considerable degree of consistency persists, the new roles in which we see them guarantees renewal with each new season.

(cf. Gray 24-25).[91] But Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter note that while such "quantitative operations" may be the most common manifestation of the need for commercial competitiveness—which for American television series usually translates into longevity (cf. Mittell, *Complex* 33-34; see also Kelleter "From Recursive" 105n4)—it "culminates ultimately in meta-serial intelligence. It is precisely because of the paradoxical requirement to *replicate innovatively* that commercial series are bound to think about their own genesis" [translations and emphasis mine] (Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter 208).[92] They go on to demonstrate that such meta-serial intelligence frequently materializes as operational aesthetic in Mittell's sense (cf. Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter 213). "Through the operational aesthetic," Mittell writes,

> […] complex narratives invite viewers to engage at the level of formal analyst, dissecting the techniques used to convey spectacular displays of storytelling craft; this mode of formally aware viewing is highly encouraged by these programs, as their pleasures are embedded in a level of awareness that transcends the traditional focus on diegetic action that is typical of most mainstream popular narratives. (*Complex* 46-47)

We may consequently identify many if not all of the previously discussed aspects of *Coven*—the nonchalance with which Nan is universally not taken seriously; or the text's stylistic overdrive and its acknowledgment thereof; or the similarities between Nan and Addy—as operational aesthetic at work. Thus, not only does the feedback loop open up new representational paths in the manner I described above. What is more, borne of the feedback loop *AHS*'s "meta-serial intelligence" operates in a manner that highlights that these representations may offer complex reading potentials. For instance, Nan's frequently and absurdly emphasized lack of narrative substance may prompt the "formally aware" viewer to mull over this aspect's potential implications. We might think of it, incidentally, as something akin to McRuer's notion of a desirable "loss of composure" (149), as something that prepares the ground for non-normative ideas to emerge. The viewer, perhaps already familiar with *AHS*'s often distinctly counter-hegemonic politics, may arrive at a reading that situates Nan in meaningful contradistinction to the text's preoccupation with femininity and race. They might understand this, as I do in chapter 8.3.1, as a critique of intersectional feminism's disability

[91] In his chapter "Creativity, Innovation, and Industry" in *Television Entertainment* (pp.22-33), Gray offers a more detailed overview of how the industry navigates this thin line.

[92] In the original (translated parts in italics): "Was zunächst und wesentlich über *quantitative Operationen* funktioniert, *kulminiert zuletzt in metaserieller Intelligenz. Gerade aufgrund der paradoxen Anforderung, innovativ zu reproduzieren, können kommerzielle Serien gar nicht umhin, über ihre eigene Genese nachzudenken* […]."

politics. Or the "formally aware" viewer who recognizes the parallels between the characters Nan and Addy is encouraged to ponder if they might suggest something significant on the representational level. They may consequently be more likely to critically reflect not only on *Coven*'s and *Murder House*'s representation of disability, but more generally on difficulties of counter-hegemonic representation, perhaps in the manner I do in chapter 8.3.2. This is not to say that the viewer might not arrive at altogether different or contradictory readings. My point here is not so much that *AHS* employs its "meta-serial intelligence" in the service of specifically the readings that I have discussed here (although, of course, part of me believes it does—which is why I argue the point). Rather, I hope to have shown that serial storytelling in general encourages a critical reflection of the wider cultural implications of its texts; and that in *Coven* (and *AHS* as a whole) this encouragement is aimed in a striking manner at matters pertaining to the politics of disability representation.

8.4 Case Study 4: Altered Bodies, the Instability of Corporeality, and Perpetually Open-ended Narratives

In chapter 8.3.1, I briefly pointed out that there exists a wealth of disability scholarship on the destabilizing and threatening potential that representations of the disabled body seem to possess with regard to identity. In the following chapters, I will explore this notion from a somewhat different angle by analyzing the significance of *AHS's* many (images of) bodies that have been altered in some visible and violent manner from a previous state of corporeality. These bodies, I will argue, can operate in manners that may upset hegemonic notions of normative corporeality.

Such notions of normative corporeality are reflected, for instance, in Ralph Waldo Emerson's self-reliant liberal individual which Garland-Thomson identifies as one representation of the ideal self of egalitarian democracy (cf. *Extraordinary* 41-44). A "well-regulated self […] contributes to a well-regulated nation [with] a body that is a stable, neutral instrument of the individual will." (42) Doubtlessly, the fact that "the disabled figure flies in the face of this ideal," (46) has played a significant role in the emergence of cultural practices that marginalize people with disabilities, such as the freak show, medicalization, or the so-called "ugly laws" of the 1960s and 70s.[93] We can also identify these hegemonic notions of

[93] For a historical examination and critical discussion of the "ugly laws" and their cultural significant, see Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (2010).

normative corporeality in the ostensible objectivity of statistical mappings of the human body, the history of which Davis traces (cf. *Enforcing* 23-35). The concept of the norm, or "statistical ideal", as Davis argues, has replaced the

> classical ideal which contains no imperative to be the ideal. The new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then is supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating, hegemonic vision of what the human body should be. (35)

Thus, when we discuss hegemonic notions of normative corporeality, what is at stake may be nothing less than the ideological foundation of practices that marginalize people with disabilities, and even eugenic practices, both of the past and those that persist to the present day.

Before I begin my analysis, I must also specify what I mean when I speak of the altered body. I focus in this chapter on those fictional and fictionalized bodies that inspire horror either because we witness the process of violent alteration, a process of which we are subsequently reminded every time we encounter the respective character; or because we can infer from their visible alteration both a previous state of corporeality, and likely scenarios of how the alterations were brought about. In either variation, the altered body stresses the process of crossing over from one state of corporeality to another. This is a pivotal point in this chapter, and the reason why I consider an operationalization of the altered body a worthwhile endeavor: embedded within each manifestation of the altered body on screen are visceral images of the process of alteration, and thus a subversive potential with regard to culturally preconceived notions of the putative stability of corporeality. A list of specific instances should serve to illustrate. Its (non-exhaustive) length is important to understand the diversity of bodily alteration that we encounter in *AHS*.

Altered bodies in *AHS* may manifest as dismembered bodies such as that of Elizabeth Short (Mena Suvari), who is sawn in half at the waist and given a so-called Glasgow smile; those of Leo Morrison (Adam Levine), whose arm gets torn off, and Teresa Morrison (Jenna Dewan Tatum), who is skinned; Shelley (Chloë Sevigny), whose legs are amputated and whose skin blisters massively after she has been administered a cocktail of deadly diseases; Spalding (Denis O'Hare), whose tongue is cut out and later returned to him by means of

It is also worth mentioning that, as Shildrick emphasizes, it is of course not only the disabled body that betrays ideologies of normative corporeality: "[F]or infants and children whose bodily well-being is largely dependent on others, for older people facing the finitude of death and bodily decay, and for women whose intrinsic leakiness marks a body that is always already breached, the ideal of a closed, powerful and self-defined schema is never less than compromised" (*Embodying* 72).

witchcraft; Delphine LaLaurie, who is decapitated and eventually returned to wholeness; Salty (Christopher Neiman), who is decapitated after his death so that his head can be displayed in the American Morbidity Museum; Legless Suzi (Rose Siggins) whose legs were amputated for medical reasons when she was a child; Maggie Esmeralda (Emma Roberts), who is sawn in half on stage; Ethel Darling (Kathy Bates), who is first shot through the eye and then decapitated; Stanley (Denis O'Hare), whose extremities are amputated; and Elias (Denis O'Hare), whose legs are sawn off. There are, furthermore, several bodies that are further altered beyond an initial dismemberment—for instance by means of prosthetics: Elsa Mars (Jessica Lange) uses prosthetic legs after her biological legs were sawn off for a snuff film production; Jimmy Darling (Evan Peters) receives prosthetic hands mimicking his ectrodactyly after his own hands are amputated to display them in the American Morbidity Museum; and Twisty the Clown (John Carroll Lynch), who as a ghost is returned to wholeness, wears another human's scalp on his head, and a grinning mask over the lower half of his face which hides that his mandible is missing after a non-fatal shotgun blast. Other dismembered bodies experience further alteration not through prosthetics but by means of reconfiguration and recombination. These include, of course, Charles Montgomery's (Matt Ross) Frankenstein-like experiments with human and animal parts which culminates in the creation of the Infantata, who is made up of the body parts of the dismembered Thaddeus Montgomery and the heart of one of the fetuses aborted by Charles; Piggy Man, who is a human with a pig's head, wearing it either as a mask or instead of his human head; Bloody Face's (Zachary Quinto and Dylan McDermott) mask, which consists of fragments of his victims' faces; Kyle Spencer, who after his death is revived as a combination of the body parts of various other deceased members of his fraternity; Bastien (Ameer Baraka), one of Delphine's slaves who she forced to wear a hollowed out bull's head and who becomes a minotaur after his death; and Gloria Mott, on whose shoulder Dandy Mott (Finn Wittrock) sews the Avon Lady's (Lara Grice) head to recreate Bette and Dot (Sarah Paulson). We might add to this category some of the stop-motion puppets from *Freak Show*'s title sequence because they are visibly pieced together from different original puppets. Several altered bodies in *AHS* are not dismembered, but nonetheless carry signs of violent alteration. These are the damaged and mutilated but whole bodies of Larry Harvey, who was set on fire and has facial burning scars and a crippled arm; Moira O'Hara who oscillates between intact and damaged, depending on whether we see the young Moira or the old one with the foggy eye she carried away from a gunshot wound; Cordelia, who is blinded and scarred with acid, receives other people's non-matching eyes, blinds herself again with gardening shears, and is finally returned to her own eyes; Myrtle Snow, who, after being burned at the stake, is scarred for a while before the scar tissue heals

and disappears; and Penny (Grace Gummer), who receives facial tattoos and whose tongue is bifurcated. Finally, the altered body manifests in images of severed body parts and organs such as those in the basement of *Murder House*'s opening sequence and title sequence, the lamp shade and bowl in Bloody Face's home, the bus crash victims', Dandy's victim Andy (Matt Bomer), a number of exhibits in the American Morbidity Museum and its director Lillian Hemmings's (Celia Weston) severed head in a glass jar, and the trophy display of the Ten Commandments Killer(s).

Not included in this category, then, are those bodies that do not conform to hegemonic norms but have not been violently altered—this includes congenitally disabled bodies. Whereas the violently altered body likely always evokes some measure of horror regardless of its genre context, the congenitally disabled body is more likely to inspire different emotions in different genres—for instance superiority in a comedic context, or pity in a melodrama (cf. Snyder and Mitchell 165). Additionally, I should point out that there is an area of overlap of uncertain extent between the altered body and acquired disability: while we would commonly call some of these altered bodies "disabled," others do not quite fit the category comfortably, while yet others do not at all.

The uncertainty of this area of overlap, in part, presupposes my argument in chapter 8.4.1: the altered body may unsettle hegemonic notions of bodily norms because it sometimes operates in a manner that emphasizes the various contingencies of socio-cultural ascriptions to non-normative corporeality such as "monster," "freak," or "disabled." In chapter 8.4.2 my focus shifts. Here I suggest that the altered body's subversive potential also lies in the fact that it highlights the instability of corporeality itself. Moreover, employing in my argument Julia Kristeva's and Jacques Lacan's conceptualizations of subject formation, I will argue that this potential is rendered especially powerful because it strikes at the visceral level of the subject's sense of stable embodiment.[94] I will also, very briefly, consider how the various orgy scenes in *AHS* may figure as (relatively) non-violent forms of bodily alteration. In chapter 8.4.3 I will conclude my exploration of the altered body by discussing how its representational potency may be emphasized by, relate to, and depend on seriality's open-endedness.

[94] Although the terms *corporeality* and *embodiment* are sometimes used interchangeably, my use here adheres by what is arguably one of the more common, if not the most common distinction. In short, corporeality refers to the materiality of the body, to its fleshly, physical quality. The term embodiment denotes our subjective experience of corporeality, the fact that we invariably experience life with or through a sense of a discrete and coherent body (notwithstanding that some critics would obviously dispute that we do).

8.4.1 The Altered Body and the Contingency of Ascription

One way in which *AHS*'s altered body potentially subverts hegemonic notions of normative corporeality is by upsetting socio-cultural ascriptions upon which such notions predicate and which they perpetuate. By foregrounding the process of alteration, the altered body offers a site for *AHS* to emphasize and explore the various contingencies of such ascriptions and the categories with which they operate. Consider, for instance, the following example by Davis, which demonstrates the contingency of the putatively objective category of disability:

> [I]t is hard if not impossible to make the case that the actual category of disability really has internal coherence. It includes, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, conditions like obesity, attention deficit disorder, diabetes, back pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, severe facial scarring, chronic fatigue syndrome, skin conditions, and hundreds of other conditions. (*Bending* 23-24)

What is implied here, of course, is that many people would dispute that some of these "conditions" qualify as disabilities for any number of informed or uninformed reasons. And indeed, Davis goes on to note that in response to the ADA's broad definition, "the federal courts have issued very narrow interpretations of disability" (24).[95] Thus, although we remain within a legal discursive context, what is understood as disability may depend upon whether the phenomenon is perceived from the perspective of the legislature responding (in part) to a civil rights movement, or from the perspective of the judiciary responding to issues arising from the implementation of the ADA.

My goal in this chapter is consequently to trace briefly how two instances of *AHS*'s altered body call attention to the fact that socio-cultural ascriptions to non-normative bodily figurations may lack "internal coherence" in a way similar to what Davis describes. While neither of these instances is explicitly concerned with the category disability, both relate to the socio-cultural ascription of an "umbrella category that certainly encompasses disability" (Shildrick, *Dangerous* 21): in the first instance the category is, in the second instance it is freakishness. Both *monster* and *freak* have historically been used to designate bodily figurations we might today subsume under *disabled*, a fact to which I will return at the end of

[95] Davis is concerned here with a legal context. To the same argumentative ends, we might consider the definitions of disability collected in the medical section of The Free Dictionary: each of these definitions comes from a different medical dictionary, and each definition differs in scope and angle.

this chapter (in fact, both terms are still used in such a manner, as evidenced by Constance's, the twins', and Ben's derogatory exclamations with regard to Addy in *Murder House*).

The first of these instances is the case of *Asylum*'s Shelley, a relatively minor character, whose process of bodily alteration is divided up into short sequences over the course of four episodes. In episode 3 "Nor'easter" she is captured by Dr. Arden (James Cromwell) while attempting to escape Briarcliff and laughs at his penis when he tries to rape her, after which he knocks her unconscious. When she wakes up on his surgical table, she begs him to let her "walk out of here" (2.3 40:00) only to find that he has amputated both her legs above the knee. At the beginning of episode 4 "I Am Anne Frank Part 1" we see small blisters on her face and Arden about to inject her into the eye with an unknown substance; at the episode's end, the blisters have grown considerably in size, disfiguring her facial features, and she begs Charlotte Brown (Franka Potente) to kill her. We see Shelley again in this state in episode 5 "I Am Anne Frank Part 2" when Sister Mary Eunice (Lily Rabe) drags her out of her cell. Shortly after, she groaningly struggles up a flight of basement stairs on a school yard (where Mary Eunice dumped her) and is found by a girl who runs away screaming, "There's a monster!" (2.5 22:00). In episode 6 "Origins of Monstrosity" Monsignor Timothy Howard (Joseph Fiennes), not yet aware of her identity, is asked to perform last rites on her, but is warned by a member of the hospital staff that the sight of her is so "shocking" that several other priests declined after they saw "those grim pictures of her" (2.6 13:20) in the newspapers. Indeed, Timothy is visibly disturbed at first, then recognizes her, and strangles her to death with his rosary, out of what he likely deems a sense of compassion.

As the narrative progresses, Shelley's appearance becomes increasingly framed as a horror movie monster: our encounters with her consist of short and unsteady, flickering shots that leave to the imagination a considerable portion of what they purport to depict, reminiscent of the fleeting and distorted images of *Asylum*'s title sequence, or Arden's other victims that populate the woods around Briarcliff and have turned to cannibalism. But each of these images of Shelley as monster recalls also her previous bodily states, and we experience, in a sense, Timothy's moment of recognition several times over during the four episodes that depict Shelley's process of bodily alteration: we see a monster and realize that the monster is, in fact, a mutilated human. The schoolgirl's panicked screams; her classmates' and teacher's reaction; the newspaper pictures; the priests' refusal to perform last rites; Timothy's initial reaction; the way Shelley is filmed; and, importantly, our likely reactions to the images—each of these explicit or implicit ascriptions of monstrosity likely provokes also our renunciation of them because we recall who it is that we are seeing and are acutely aware of the ascription's contingency on framing and discursive context. Shelley may be a monster in the perception of

a startled child, in photographs accompanying sensationalist newspaper reports, and in the camera eye of a television horror show. But the ascription seems wholly unlikely in some of the other contexts of her process of bodily alteration: on Arden's table, free of blisters, asking to "walk out of here" before realizing that both legs are amputated, and within the setting of the hospital she is a victim to tortuous and punitive pseudo-medical procedures that produce not a monster, but a severely mutilated human. Thus, these contexts suggest circumstances under which her bodily state is far less likely to provoke the ascription of monstrosity. Because the altered body foregrounds the process of alteration and recalls the non-monstrous Shelley, the ascription of monstrosity falters time and time again, falling short of any sense of definitiveness. In this way, the narrative highlights any socio-cultural ascription's contingency on framing and discursive context.

AHS also deploys the altered body in its exploration of the ambiguities and contingencies that attend the ascription of freakishness to *Freak Show*'s character Elsa. The case of Elsa demonstrates first that the ascription hinges not only on bodily figuration but on its visibility: the outstanding quality of her prosthetic legs allows her to remain as non-freakish to most of the people around her as she is freakish to those few who are in on her secret. Furthermore, *Freak Show* is careful to highlight that such technologically advanced prosthetics are by no means a given: the fact that Elsa came by her prosthetics only because of a chance encounter with the exceptionally talented carpenter Massimo Dolcefino (Danny Huston) suggests that the availability of and access to technological fixes or remedies may have an impact on such ascription practices. This notion is in fact reinforced in the narrative through the case of Legless Suzi, who grew up in an orphanage (her parents abandoned her after her legs were amputated) and could not find employment during the Great Depression. Unlike Elsa, circumstance placed Suzi in a position with neither social safety net nor access to remedies that might allow her to escape the ascription of freakishness. True, Elsa's prosthetics allow her to move with such self-assured grace that it might be easy to briefly forget about her bodily figuration. But with each condescending remark about her "monsters" (which is what she calls her employees at the freak show), and with each opium- or alcohol-induced break in her façade, we are reminded that her self-assurance is a fragile construct which depends on her avoiding at all cost the ascription of freakishness. For the most part, she successfully does so, and we are thus reminded time and time again of the ascription's contingency on visibility and access to remedies.

My brief argument here is that *AHS*'s altered body highlights how ascriptions of *monstrosity* and *freakishness* may be contingent on a variety of factors. I contend, however, that they lend themselves to be read as commentary on the contingency of socio-cultural

ascriptions to non-normative forms of corporeality in general. This is, on the surface, a fairly obvious observation in that it merely suggests that *monstrosity* and *freakishness* can be understood non-specifically as symbolic for a wider set of non-normative forms of corporeality. Such a non-specific reading of monstrosity and freakishness, however, also implies a potential reading of *AHS* that highlights the historical contingency of the socio-cultural category *disability*. This is the case because, as I noted at the outset of this chapter, both the term *monster* and *freak* have historically served as labels for people with disabilities. Thus, because we encounter in Shelley not only the monstrous and non-monstrous and in Elsa not only the freak and non-freak, but rather recognize in both also the disabled and non-disabled, we are effectively faced with the notion that the ascription *disabled* may at a different moment in history appear as outdated as *monstrous* and *freakish* do now.

8.4.2 The Altered Body and the Destabilization of the Embodied Self

In this chapter I will demonstrate how *AHS*'s altered body unfolds subversive potential with regard to hegemonic notions of normative corporeality by suggesting the instability of embodiment. More precisely, I will show that the altered body threatens to destabilize precisely those normative notions of discrete, coherent, and autonomous embodiment upon which practices of marginalization of people with disabilities, as well as eugenic ideas and practices predicate. While this can be achieved by simply tracing how *AHS*'s myriad instances of bodily alteration suggest equally myriad ways in which normative embodiment is inherently prone to instability, my approach here goes beyond such an argument: I preface my analysis with a brief detour through Julia Kristeva's and Jacques Lacan's models of subject formation, both of which offer explanations for the disruptive effect anomalous bodies can have. These conceptualizations from the field of psychoanalysis serve to emphasize that the altered body's destabilizing potential in this regard is rendered especially potent because it strikes at the visceral level of embodied subject formation. That is to say, the altered body is not only suggestive of corporeality's instability by offering visual examples of the loss of *bodily* coherence but threatens to fissure a perception of a coherently embodied *self*, upon which hegemonic notions of normative corporeality rest.

Both Kristeva's concept of the "abject" and Lacan's "fragmented body" have specific merits for my purpose in this chapter: Kristeva's theory, on the one hand, has more thoroughly suffused horror scholarship perhaps because the abject comprises more varied instances and images of revulsion, including not only those relating to body parts but also to bodily excretions, waste, food, decay, crime, incest, and so on. Lacan's "fragmented body," on the

other hand, posits a more ubiquitous human experience specifically of fragmented embodiment (I will explain this point more fully below). Taken together, then, the "abject" and the "fragmented body" provide a thorough explanatory model for the universally destabilizing potential of the altered body in horror.[96]

"Neither subject nor object" (Kristeva 1), the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). The abject occupies the liminal space between subject and object—or, rather, *before* subject and object. The subject that experiences abjection recalls in its encounter with the abject a state of being that preceded its "primal repression" (11)—the separation from the mother so that it may enter a state in which it perceives itself as a discrete being. This is why, as Shildrick notes, the abject is "associated primarily with the female, and more particularly with the maternal, body" (*Embodying* 81). While the association with the female and the maternal is a significant aspect of Kristeva's study, it is relatively inconsequential for my purposes here. It suffices to establish that the abject includes those things that "for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome" (Creed 9) because they recall in it a state of being that preceded its "primal repression". Thus, while the abject is constitutive of the embodied self—Kristeva asks: "How can I be without border?" (4)—it is invariably and simultaneously perceived as threatening to it. "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (10). The abject breaches, in Creed's words, the "imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self" (9). Finally, Shildrick demonstrates how bodies may operate as Kristevan abject:

> In Kristevan terms, any form of anomalous [corporeality …] is highly productive of anxiety, insofar as it threatens to overflow the boundaries of 'the self's clean and proper body' (Kristeva 1982: 71). The specific and semi-conscious fear that haunts the subject […] is that the extra-ordinary body's putative lack of self-containment, and its failure to occupy a delimited space, signal the disturbing possibility of engulfment […]. The normative subject, in other words, implicitly fears that it will be overwhelmed. As Kristeva's concept of the abject makes clear, the issue is not so much that the body of the other is horrifying in and of itself, but rather that it might

[96] The concepts can complement one another easily, as Shildrick's work demonstrates (cf. *Embodying* 79-81), and sometimes they blend near seamlessly as Barbara Creed's employment of both evidences (cf. 29).

> infiltrate the space of my own body and effect the very transformations that would unsettle my claim to autonomous selfhood. (*Dangerous* 22)[97] [98]

While anomalous bodies, then, doubtlessly join the ranks of those things that *may* be experienced as abject, there appears to be no universal rule of what precisely causes abjection in the individual subject beyond the "primal repression" of the maternal. Kristeva's own inaugural example serves as a case in point: while to her "that skin on the surface of milk" (2) is profoundly abject, it is immediately clear that this is a distinctly individual experience that may or may not be shared by others. It is this aspect that leads me to suggest that Lacan's conceptualization of the lasting effects of subject formation may be more universally applicable to what I term the altered body, because it is specifically concerned with fragmentation of embodiment.

In his account of subject formation, the infant perceives of the body not as a unified whole, but "as separate parts or pieces, […] an assemblage of arms, legs, surfaces" (Davis, *Enforcing* 138). Rather than "simply physical disunity," Shildrick emphasizes that these fragments comprise "a startling series of negative images" (*Dangerous* 90) "of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting of the body, in short […] *imagos of the fragmented body*" [italics in the original] (Lacan 13). With the onset of the mirror stage, "[w]hen the child points to an image in the mirror [and] recognizes (actually misrecognizes) that unified image as his or her self" (Davis, *Enforcing* 139), the fragmented body begins to be repressed in favor of "a form of its totality" (Lacan 5). This, in turn, leads to "the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development" (5). Davis articulates one effect of this repression of the fragmented body with regard to disability:

> [T]he disabled body is a direct *imago* of the repressed fragmented body. The disabled body causes a kind of hallucination of the mirror phase gone wrong. The subject looks at the disabled body and has a moment of cognitive dissonance, or should we say a moment of cognitive resonance with the earlier state of fragmentation. [italics in the original] (*Enforcing* 139)

[97] This quote is part of Shildrick's own summary of her earlier study *Embodying the Monster* which explores more fully "the link between abjection and the monstrous as an umbrella category that certainly encompasses disability" (*Dangerous* 21).

[98] I have replaced Shildrick's use of the word "embodiment" with "corporeality" to align the terminology with my own use and avoid confusion. Her use is occasionally somewhat unclear. She appears to make the same distinction as I do at times while at other times the two terms seem to be synonymous. In this passage, it is clear from the context that she refers to what I call corporeality.

"The disabled body," he adds, "far from being the body of some small group of 'victims,' is an entity from the earliest of childhood instincts, a body that is common to all humans, as Lacan would have it. The 'normal' body is actually the body we develop later." (140-141).

As Shildrick notes, we can, or should, quite simply expand the scope of this observation:

> While it is not difficult to recognise the mechanisms at work in the response to disabled bodies, I want to stress that similar moves operate in relation to all forms of monstrosity. It is above all, the corporeal ambiguity and fluidity […] that marks the monstrous as a site of disruption. (*Embodying* 80)

Like Davis, Shildrick identifies as the root of this disruptive effect a "cognitive resonance with the earlier state of fragmentation": "In the encounter with the disabled or damaged body, the shock is not that of the unknown or unfamiliar, but rather a psychic evocation of a primal lack of unity as the condition of all" (80). In both Kristevan and Lacanian terms, then, the subject's response to altered body is borne of a primal anxiety that this Other body might unsettle a perception of the embodied self as a discrete, coherent, and autonomous entity. As evidenced by the "ideal self of egalitarian democracy" and the "normal human" which I discussed at the outset of this exploration of the altered body, this perception is closely associated with hegemonic notions of normative corporeality. It thus remains to be seen how precisely the altered body's potential destabilization of the embodied self manifests with regard to normative corporeality, and, by extension, disability.

8.4.2.1 The Destabilized Self and Ideologies of Normative Corporeality

Let us, for this purpose, keep the visceral nature of the altered body's potential effect on the embodied self in mind but briefly step back and consider two notions it suggests about the stability of corporeality—that is, of the body itself rather than the subject's sense of embodiment. The first is concerned with the *likelihood* of acquiring a non-normative bodily state, the second with the *irregularity and unpredictability* of this possibility.

In the first instance, and at its most fundamental, *AHS*'s altered body suggests by evoking the illusive nature of able-bodiedness that anyone might at any time experience a traumatic event that propels them outside the realm of normative corporeality and possibly into the realm of disability. More specifically, *AHS*—reliably fond of excess and overdrive—is populated by such an abundance of characters in various stages of wholeness and

fragmentation that it seems to posit not only the possibility of non-normative corporeality, but rather a high likelihood of it. In other words, *AHS*'s myriad and diversely dismembered bodies and body parts suggest that corporeal wholeness may be the exception, not the rule, as several observers have noted (cf. e. g. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative* 7; Waldschmidt, "Disability Goes Cultural" 16). The likelihood of non-normative corporeality recalls Garland-Thomson's observations regarding the ideological significance of the normatively bodied ideal self of egalitarian democracy. She demonstrates that this ideological construct is destabilized by the disabled body because it

> poses the troubling question of whether any person is independent of physical limitations, immune to external forces, and without need of assistance and care from others. [It] exposes the illusion of autonomy, self-government, and self-determination that underpins the fantasy of absolute able-bodiedness. (*Extraordinary* 45-46)

Having explored the destabilizing potential of anomalous corporeality with regard to the subject, it becomes immediately clear that we might expand the scope of Garland-Thomson's observation quite considerably: first, of course, because it is once more not only the disabled body that operates in a manner that questions "the fantasy of absolute able-bodiedness", but also the altered body. Second, and more importantly, we may justifiably claim that this operation also goes far beyond the posing of a troubling question. We might rather say that both the disabled body and the altered body potentially unsettle such ideologies of the whole body, not only by disrupting the *ideological dimension* of the idea of the coherent and autonomous body, but more fundamentally also by striking at the *dimension of the subject*, triggering deep-seated anxieties regarding the autonomous, embodied self.

In the second instance, *AHS*'s altered body foregrounds not only the possibility and likelihood of non-normative corporeality, but also the irregularity and concomitant unpredictability of its occurrence and quality. On the one hand, I mean to suggest that it does so simply because of the sheer variety of alteration we witness—amputations and dismemberment, decapitation and recombination, disembowelment, prosthetics, burning and other scars, crippling, blinding, muting, skinning, and so on. On the other hand, however, some altered bodies are especially conducive of highlighting the irregularity of corporeality because they relate in some manner to other altered bodies. Consider, for instance, the Infantata from *Murder House* and *Coven*'s Kyle: both are assembled from the body parts of different individuals, but while one becomes a murderous creature dwelling in the basement of a haunted house, the other becomes the butler of a coven. Another example is the amount and persistence of scarring that mark the bodies of various characters in *Coven*: Madison retains a

scar where Fiona slit her throat and so does Kyle where his body parts join, but Myrtle's burn scars disappear over time, and Delphine's temporary decapitation leaves no scar tissue whatsoever. These are juxtapositions of what could be called irregular processes of alteration—similar to a degree but then widely divergent in their outcome and effect. Along with the immense variety of alteration, they arguably create a sense that while the fact of potential loss of normative corporeality becomes increasingly likely as time progresses, the quality of it—its cause, specific manifestation, result and effects—remain wholly unpredictable.

With regards to the altered body's subversive potential, the irregularity of corporeality may be particularly productive for the destabilization of eugenic ideas of "the perfectibility of the human body" (Davis, *Enforcing* 35) because they operate on a false assumption of universal predictability of the human body. Bérubé, for instance, notes that eugenic science has always, "from Francis Galton right through to William Shockley and Arthur Jensen, [been] promising certainty where there is none to be had" ("Disability" 205). "[M]any disabilities are not detectable genetically," he argues later in his essay on the democratic ethics of biotechnology, "and […] no amount and no degree of prenatal screening or in vitro engineering will produce a world free of people with cerebral palsy or pneumonia, not to mention people who are hit by cars" (210). With reference to Michael J. Sandel's argument against genetic enhancement, Garland-Thomson elaborates the point more fully. She argues that this assumption of predictability, which she subsumes under the term "eugenic logic" (e. g. "The Case" 340), is borne of a distinctly modernist "mandate […] to control the shape of the future by intentional human action in the present" (348). But "modernity's investment in controlling the future" (352) is frustrated by those "aspects of the human condition that are unpredictable, unstable, and unexpected: in short, contingency itself." (340) What Garland-Thomson has in mind here, of course, is disability and illness. However, as I have shown, *AHS*'s altered body operates in quite the same manner.

Here too, we can identify a meaningful connection to the altered body's evocation of Kristevan or Lacanian articulations of the states of embodiment that precede the autonomous subject. To explicate, let us explore some ethical reservations with regard to eugenic practices more fully. Sandel argues that genetical enhancement is unethical because it ignores the "gifted character of human powers and achievements, and misses the part of freedom that consists in a persistent negotiation with the given." (83) He bases his argument in part on Jürgen Habermas's notion that "[w]e experience our own freedom with reference to something which, by its very nature, is not at our disposal." (Habermas 58) This notion is linked explicitly to the body:

> It is the body that our sense of direction refers to, denoting center and periphery, the own and the alien. It is the person's incarnation in the body that not only enables us to distinguish between active and passive, causing to happen and happening, making and finding; it also compels us to differentiate between actions we ascribe to ourselves and actions we ascribe to others. But bodily existence enables the person to distinguish between these perspectives only on condition that she identifies with her body. And for the person to feel one with her body, it seems that this body has to be experienced as something natural – as a continuation of the organic, self-regenerative life from which the person was born. (57-58)

What Habermas suggests here is that the experience of individual freedom may be closely tied to what Sandel calls "the given": "something natural", in Habermas's words, "a beginning we cannot control" (58). He goes on to note that birth may constitute such "a beginning which eludes human disposal" because it represents an "indeterminate hope of something new, [on which] the power of the past over the future is shattered" (58). Consequently, genetic engineering as a form of eugenics is problematic because it might rob the individual of such "a beginning which eludes human disposal" (58). In this light, we might say that the altered body not only frustrates "modernity's investment in controlling the future" (Garland-Thomson, "The Case" 352) but may be productive of a visceral aversion to all eugenic practices that is situated at the level of subject formation: the altered body recalls in the subject a state of fragmented embodiment that precedes the crucial moment at which a self-perception as autonomous is achieved (be it illusory or otherwise). To borrow Habermas's terms, the altered body recalls a state in which "the person [not yet] identifies with her body" (58)—a state before a Kristevan "primal repression", or a Lacanian mirror stage. It might, thus, provoke in the subject a sense that, by "barring him from the spontaneous self-perception of being the undivided author of his own life" (Habermas 63), eugenics might threaten the freedom and autonomy that lies in a corporeality beyond "human disposal".

There is one counter-argument that I should engage here: if the altered body operates in the manner suggested here, it is in keeping with the overall argumentative logic of this chapter that the disabled body does too. To claim, such an argument might run, that the disabled body is productive of a visceral aversion against eugenic practices would discount all evidence to the contrary. As Garland-Thomson notes: "Disability and people with disabilities are eugenic targets because we embody the unpredictable and intractable nature of temporality" ("The Case" 352). The disabled body, in other words, is productive of quite the opposite of an aversion to eugenics: its transgressive and destabilizing potential has historically resulted in punitive practices—social marginalization and ostracism, and ultimately, eugenics—against those it is perceived to represent: people with disabilities. This is true enough, but I would reply to such an objection by pointing out two things: first, while

the existence of eugenic practices and thought is a demonstrable fact throughout modernity—more widespread, in fact, than is often believed—it has just as demonstrably never been unquestioned. That is to say that, for as long as eugenics has existed, there has arguably also been a public sentiment—however unarticulated and indistinct—that there is something "wrong with it" (Sandel 68). This shows that the disabled body may not be unequivocally productive of eugenic logic, but may for some, in fact, be productive of a renunciation of that very logic.

Second, and more fundamentally, I would reject the premise that this chapter's overall argumentative logic suggests that the altered body and the disabled body's destabilizing effect manifest in necessarily the same manner. The altered body and the disabled body are two distinct, if overlapping, categories that may share such destabilizing effects, but that does not mean that they necessarily operate in the same way in every aspect. That is to say that, while the disabled body has undeniably played a part in inspiring eugenic practices and fantasies (with the reservations articulated in the previous paragraph), this does not mean that the altered body has too. In fact, and this is perhaps a banal point to make, the altered body's transgressions against hegemonic notions of normative corporeality evade punitive measures in the shape of eugenics quite simply because there tends to be no empirical body against which they might be enacted—the most instances of (at least *AHS*'s) altered bodies are fantastical to a degree that they do not and could not represent real-world identities. It appears, thus, that in this respect the altered body proves a quite valuable (because unassailable) tool for a normative project of destabilizing dominant ideologies of corporeality.

8.4.2.2 A Few Observations on Orgies as Bodily Alteration

Before I conclude my analysis of the destabilizing potential of *AHS*'s altered body, I wish to point briefly to Jay McRoy's study "'Parts is Parts': Pornography, Splatter Films and the Politics of Corporeal Disintegration" (2010) because it suggests that we might expand our perspective to another mode of filmic bodily fragmentation that operates in a related way. Although McRoy does not explicitly reference Kristeva or Lacan, his argument is similar to the one I put forward in this chapter:

> Horror cinema is informed by a disruptive aesthetic that reveals the body – of the 'monster'/killer, of the 'victim' – as fragmentary, rendered cohesive only through a process of imagining wholeness. Consequently, horrific images *horrify* because they disrupt audience assumptions of what is and is not 'fixed' or 'normal'. (197)

As the title of his study gives away, he is not only concerned with horror movies (more specifically the sub-genre splatter) but also with hardcore pornography. He claims that "in their depiction of the body in fragments, both hard-core pornography and splatter films […] reveal the artificiality of socio-cultural paradigms informed by modernist myths of organic wholeness" (192).[99] But while in horror the "depiction of the body in fragments" comes in the shape of representations of dismemberment, in pornography it is achieved through more technical means:

> Alternating between extreme close-ups and medium shots of the actors performing, the pornographic mise-en-scène exposes the rhizomic complexity of the various anatomical (re) assemblages. Consequently, the images the viewer encounters depict a multiplicity of disassembled and amalgamated desiring machines. The viewer witnesses a graphic display of variable physiognomies at once coherent and fragmented, individuated and merged. (194-195)

(Let us note make one brief observation: the simultaneity of coherence and fragmentation that McRoy sees enacted in the bodies of hardcore pornography parallels the altered body's foregrounding of the process of alteration which allows, as I established, *multiple* states of corporeality to manifest in *one* body.) The reason I call upon McRoy's reading of the pornographic body is that *AHS* includes several mise-en-scènes of the variety he describes: for instance, in the flickering black-and-white footage of the orgy in *Freak Show*'s opening episode. While at first the bodies of those involved are clearly discernable, the closer the camera moves toward the screen upon which the film is projected, the less they appear as coherent entities. When the projector images fill up the entirety of our television screen, we can only distinguish isolated body parts protruding out of the assemblage of out-of-focus bodily matter. Season 5 *Hotel* includes several of such sequences, two of which I consider especially noteworthy. Countess Elizabeth (Lady Gaga) and Donovan's (Matt Bomer) seduction of a couple in episode 1 "Checking In" is one of them: as the orgiastic intercourse between the four approaches its climax, and the camera moves closer and closer, it becomes increasingly difficult to discern which body part belongs to which participant. Of course, because Elizabeth and Donovan are vampires, the sex act ends with them slitting their victims' throats. The ensuing blood bath emphasizes the visual effect of bodily fragmentation.

[99] McRoy bases his argument largely on Kaite, *Pornography and Difference* (1995), specifically chapter 2 "Sexual Techniques" (pp. 37-66), to which the interested reader may turn for an in-depth exploration of processes of bodily fragmentation in pornography. Slavoj Žižek makes a similar observation in *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences* (2012): "The effect of close-up shots and of the strangely twisted and contorted bodies of the actors is to deprive these bodies of their unity […]" (153).

Although not graphic to the degree of hardcore pornography, these scenes from *Freak Show* and *Hotel* nevertheless suggest "variable physiognomies at once coherent and fragmented, individuated and merged."

The second scene from *Hotel* to which I wish to point here is an orgy scene in episode 11 "Battle Royale", which blurs the boundaries between discrete bodies in quite a different manner but with an arguably similar effect: Sally McKenna (Sarah Paulson) recalls a heroin-laced three-way with two friends. The warped images, close-ups, and the pale color scheme of the flashback that represents her recollection makes it hard to differentiate not only between the bodies, but at times even their surroundings. As everything in the hotel room blurs into one, Sally proposes that she sew all three of them together with needle and thread. Her friends, however, overdose and die, and it is only after several days that Sally musters the courage to violently tear herself free from the corpses of her dead friends. Not only do corporeal borders become indistinct to the point of disappearance here. What is more, the scene may be read as a visualization of Kristevan abjection: in order to live, regain the borders of her corporeality, and become a discretely embodied subject once again, Sally has to literally avail herself of the "immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva 10).

8.4.3 Narrative Structure, Seriality, and the Refusal of Normality

Having discussed some ways in which the many instances of the altered body in *AHS* may destabilize hegemonic notions of normative corporeality, it remains to be discussed how these potentials relate to and are shaped by the horror genre, narrative structure and the serial form. I will begin by exploring briefly the well-known charge against horror movies that they are inherently conservative because of their narrative structure—a charge which disability scholarship has similarly articulated for non-horror narratives. In a second step I will examine to what degree *AHS*'s altered body and overall narrative structure may be read as an instantiation or refusal of such putative conservatism. Finally, I will consider how American serial television's mode of narration and production may inherently tend toward favoring representations of non-normative ways of being.

I should, thus, first clarify first that my findings of the previous two chapters are not meant to suggest that images of altered bodies within a text are necessarily productive of a subversive, transgressive total. In fact, it has been argued (and counter-argued) time and time again that horror—arguably the genre in which such images are most frequently to be found—is always conservative. Stephen King, for instance, claims that Horror is "innately

conservative, even reactionary" ("Why We Crave" 461) in mainly two ways: one, by reassuring us of our own normalcy through depictions of monstrosity (cf. Underwood and Miller, qtd. in Carroll 199); and two, by employing what Noël Carroll calls a "normal/abnormal/normal" (200-201) narrative structure in which the ending of a story reinstates a normality that was in some way lost or disrupted at the beginning (cf. *Danse* 39, qtd. in Carroll 199). Carroll convincingly argues to the contrary: such totalizing ascriptions of ideology to an entire genre cannot withstand closer scrutiny, if only because some horror fiction simply does not adhere by this narrative structure (cf. 201-201).[100] However, as McRoy notes, a "conceptualisation of contemporary horror cinema as largely reactionary is understandable, as most works of filmic terror still conclude with the (if only temporary) defeat of the fantastical or virulent threat to the equally imaginary social order" (196). Likewise, Carroll does ultimately grant that the idea of innate conservatism may be feasible for a lot of horror fiction (cf. 202), namely that which does in fact instantiate the normal/abnormal/normal narrative structure. I will presently return to the prevalence of this narrative structure in horror and discuss the degree to which it relates to *AHS* and seriality. But first, let us note that we find the normal/abnormal/normal narrative structure not only in horror.

In at least two instances, a similar conceptualization has been applied to disability representations. Darke identifies a body of films he calls "normality drama:" these are movies such as *My Left Foot: The Story of Christy Brown* (1989), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Children of a Lesser God* (1986), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *The Elephant Man* (1980), and *Rain Man* (1988) (cf. 185) in which disability is narrated in such a manner that "normality is reinforced as superior and abnormality is made abject […]".[101] Although such movies do not necessarily end with a return to a previously lost normality, Darke argues that "[t]he point of the [normality] drama is about the relative worth of being, or striving to be, normal rather than abnormal; the logical corollary is that the audience leave satisfied as their own attitudes and conformist lives are validated" (188). More generally, Mitchell and Snyder claim that a

> simple schematic of narrative structure might run thus: first, a deviance or marked difference is exposed to a reader; second, a narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation's origins and formative consequences; third the deviance is brought from the periphery of concerns to the center of the story to come; and fourth, the remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes

[100] By employing King's radical claim of horror's conservatism, I follow Carroll's argument: It should be noted, however, that they are likely best understood as hyperbole, since he also claims that "the best horror films, like the best fairy tales, manage to be reactionary, anarchistic, and revolutionary all at the same time" ("Why We Crave" 462).

[101] Darke does not use the term abject in a Kristevan sense here, at least not explicitly.

> the deviance in some manner. This fourth step of the repair of deviance may involve an obliteration of the difference through a "cure," the rescue of the despised object from social censure, the extermination of the deviant as a purification of the social body or the revaluation of an alternative mode of being. Since what we now call disability has been historically narrated as that which characterizes a body as deviant from shared norms of bodily appearance and ability, disability has functioned throughout history as one of the most marked and remarked upon differences that originates the act of storytelling. (*Narrative* 53-54)

As in the majority of horror movies, then, the narrative thrust in both these conceptualizations tends toward the normative (with the exception of the "revaluation of an alternative mode of being", to which I will return below), which is frequently figured in terms of corporeality.

How does this tendency toward the conservative resolution play out with regard to *AHS*'s altered body? I emphasized in the previous chapters that one distinctive feature of the altered body is that it foregrounds the process of alteration even in a singular image of the respective body. If we think of this process in Mitchell and Snyder's terms of narrative structure delineated above, it becomes immediately apparent that in the majority of cases this process is not directed toward normative corporeality. Most characters with altered bodies ultimately settle into a bodily state that is not whole and not coherent—a state at least once removed from Garland-Thomson's "ideal self of egalitarian democracy" and Davis's "normal human". This is the first aspect specific to *AHS*'s deployment of the altered body that must be highlighted.

The second aspect concerns *AHS*'s overarching narrative structure. Although the altered body may unfold its destabilizing potential irrespective of its text's (formal) ideological leanings, it stands to reason that it less effectively does so within the context of a narrative structure otherwise preoccupied with a return to stability. Beyond the fact that its own narrative thrust—that is, the process of alteration—is not aimed at normative corporeality, it is then a significant feature of *AHS*'s altered body that we encounter it within a context that, unlike most horror narratives (following King's, McRoy's, and Carroll's assessments), does not gravitate toward a conclusion that reinstates a previously lost normality (the context to which I refer here is the season, which, for lack of a series finale, constitutes the dominant narrative structure in *AHS* against which we can measure the show's formal ideological thrust). In other words, by refusing a clean return to normality, *AHS*'s overall narrative structure emphasizes the possibility of non-normative corporeality that the altered body suggests. Consider, for instance, the ending of *Murder House*: the Harmon family is dead and haunts the house with the other ghosts to scare off further potential victims from moving in while Constance raises

Vivien's surviving child who appears to be the Antichrist. Sure enough, with the nuclear family united in harmonious domesticity there is some measure of a return to normality that was lost at the season's outset. This supposed normality, however, is accompanied not only by the not-so-normal fact that the Antichrist grows up next door, but by all of the other ghosts and the house itself—some of precisely those things, that is, that previously constituted the story's intruding abnormality. Rather than driving away the abnormality, the Harmon family members come to terms with it, or rather, themselves become the abnormal that has intruded into their lives. Thus, *Murder House*'s conclusion figures as what Mitchell and Snyder call the "revaluation of an alternative mode of being" (*Narrative* 54). A very similar argument can also be made about other seasons as they end with such a revaluation rather than with a return to normality: in *Coven*, the war between the Voodoo tribe and the coven ends, and under Cordelia's supremacy the coven ends its policy of secrecy and publicly invites young witches to join. The same holds true for *Hotel*, at the end of which the inhabitants of the Hotel Cortez quit their reckless murdering and begin running the hotel as a viable business. But even those season arcs that seem to conclude with the normality that had been the anxious goal of its protagonists, *Asylum* and *Freak Show*, refuse an unequivocal instantiation of it: Briarcliff is closed down and the true Bloody Face is identified, but the thusly exonerated Kit Walker's (Evan Peters) polyamorous family life prematurely ends with Grace Bertrand's (Lizzie Brocheré) death at the hands of Alma (Britne Oldford) before Kit he gets pancreatic cancer and is abducted by extraterrestrials a final time. Elsa becomes famous, and Jimmy, Bette and Dot, as well as Desiree Dupree (Angela Bassett) appear to be happy in the domestic bliss and perceived normality for which they may have hoped. But the rest of the troupe is shot dead by Dandy, and Elsa is ultimately unhappy in her marriage and suicides when she learns that the snuff film of her amputation is about to be made public. I do not claim that these synopses are definitive readings, and they may be contestable to a certain degree in their subtleties. I do contend, however, that they evidence *AHS*'s principal refusal of a reactionary narrative thrust toward the reinstatement of normality. In this way, these season arcs consistently, if to different degrees, value not the possibility normality, but rather the possibility of, and sometimes a coming to terms with what is perceived as abnormal. The altered body's destabilizing potential with regard to hegemonic notions of normative corporeality arguably resonates with and is emphasized by such overarching narrative structures.

But let us leave behind *AHS* and the altered body and consider the significance of serial storytelling to the previous arguments. For, to be sure, the narrative structures outlined above are not specific to *AHS*. They are, rather, a ubiquitous feature of serial television as a whole. In most cases, a return to normality is an inherently problematic concept for television

drama series because at the level of each discrete narrative unit—episode and season—the show must usually retain a certain degree of unfulfillment or open-endedness—that is: abnormality. The deferral or refusal of narrative closure is not only necessary to keep the story going—to warrant a story, there must be something wrong in the world that needs to be engaged—but also to ensure that the viewer tunes in again for the next installment. Of course, there is a great deal of nuance to be encountered in the way and degree to which television series refuse a return to normality. For the unit of the episode, Mittell's comparison of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* is instructive. At the conclusion of an episode of *The Wire* there is no return to normality: the program is highly serialized, with episodes that "are virtually impervious to brief plot summaries, as each event scattered over the large cast of characters may or may not be important to the larger [season] story arcs" (*Complex* 30). *The Sopranos*, however, "exemplified the model of serially infused episodic television that typifies most complex television, with fairly episodic plots building into a serialized storyworld and character arcs" (29).[102] Thus, shows with relatively "discrete episodic stories" (30) such as *The Sopranos*, nevertheless retain a measure of serialization that figures as a refused return to normality.[103] In fact, Fiske argues that even a highly episodic series of the cop-show format remains inconclusive because, "while reaching a resounding conclusion to each episode, [it] never resolves the ongoing situation. The police force is engaged in a constant war against crime, *The A-Team* has a constant supply of 'little people' who need its help […]" (145).

Variance is equally great for the season unit. One extreme are the season finales of *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), for instance, which tend to be intense cliffhangers: the narrative stops mid-action with Piper (Taylor Schilling) beating up Pennsatucky (Taryn Manning), or Dayanara (Dascha Polanco) pointing a gun at a guard's head. Nearer to the other extreme, we would find *Stranger Things* (2016-present): the season arc is wrapped up, Will (Noah Schnapp) is returned to safety and the Demagorgon is dead, but a measure of uncertainty persists in Eleven's (Millie Bobby Brown) disappearance, or the knowledge that the Mind Flayer is still alive. Located on the continuum in between of these two shows are those that I discussed previously: *Game of Thrones* seasons are relatively open-ended and tend to reserve

[102] For further reading on the episodic format in *The Sopranos*, see Sean O'Sullivan, "*The Sopranos*: Episodic Storytelling" (2013).

[103] David Chase, creator of *The Sopranos*, describes the show's dual investment in returning and progression as follows: "[P]eople don't care about the trunk of a Christmas tree; they only care about the lights and the balls and the tinsel. But the trunk has to be there. So, we always referred back to that; we had this continuing story, which people seemed to get involved in" (qtd. in O'Sullivan "*The Sopranos*: Episodic Storytelling" 66).

one major climax for the penultimate episode,[104] with the final episode operating as an epilogue and setting up the following season's story. *Breaking Bad*'s seasons are relatively more self-contained, arriving at a neater conclusion of the arc's central narrative thrust such as the relationship between Walter and Gus in season 4.[105] *Daredevil*'s seasons are simultaneously more self-contained and more open-ended: each arc ends with the defeat of the season's central villain, but because the series is part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), there remains a considerable degree of open-endedness as the storyworld is constantly evolving in other series and movies. *AHS* is located near *Daredevil* even despite its anthology format: although each story is concluded at the end of the season, their shared storyworld introduces a lingering possibility of open-endedness that, every once in a while, manifests in such narrative turns as the death of *Coven*'s Queenie in *Hotel*, or the backstory of *Asylum*'s Pepper in *Freak Show*.

At both the level of the episode and the level of the season, then, television drama series exhibit a strong tendency to at least a degree of open-endedness or storyworldly abnormality. Furthermore, this refusal of normality may be emphasized by what Mittell deems the "essential structure of serial form" (27): its temporality. He notes that "television series in their original broadcast form alternate between episodic installments and mandatory temporal gaps between episodes—it is these gaps that define the serial experience." (27) Although some skepticism is surely appropriate with regard to such an absolute statement,[106] the point that Mittell makes is enlightening for our purposes. Not only is the possibility of abnormality foregrounded by the narrative's persistent refusal to reinstate normality over the course of its (already extraordinarily long) story and narrative—that is, in its diegesis. It is also foregrounded by serial television's narration time, which, in its "original broadcast form", is stretched out over weeks, months and years. Thus, abnormality can regularly reign supreme

[104] Consider Ned's beheading in season 1, the Battle of the Blackwater in season 2, the Red Wedding in season 3, the wildling attack on Castle Black in season 4, the Battle of the Bastards in season 6, the battle beyond the wall in season 7. Some exceptions are the stabbing of Jon in the season 5 finale, Cersei's walk of atonement in the same episode, and the destruction of the Sept of Bealor in the season 6 finale.

[105] Season 1 is an exception here. It concludes somewhat awkwardly because it was originally scheduled to run for nine episodes but was cut short to seven as a result of the writer's strike of 2007 and 2008.

[106] My skepticism regards the essentializing implication that "television series in their original broadcast form" define the "structure of serial form" or "the serial experience." As Amanda Lotz notes, "there is nothing natural about or inherent to the paradigm of linear viewing" (79). Viewing patterns that diverge from this paradigm—made possible and encouraged by diverse technologies and distribution models from the DVR to the DVD, from online streaming services to Netflix's practice of releasing full seasons at once—are arguably becoming far too common to maintain such a nostalgic ascription of serial essence to the "original broadcast form".

for as long as half a year or longer even in programs that gravitate toward a reinstatement of normality at its seasons' conclusions.

Finally, even if we consider the largest discrete unit of serial television, the series as a whole, we seldom find reinstated at the end a normality that we recall from the first episode. This is the case because, as Mittell explains, most American television series' last episode is not a planned conclusion of the series as a whole (cf. *Complex* 319-322). More commonly, programs end either in a stoppage, which means that they are cancelled midseason; or with a wrap-up, which is "a series ending that is neither fully arbitrary nor completely planned" such as the "natural stopping point" (320) that may be provided by a season's conclusion. A true series conclusion—an ending, that is, written and produced with the knowledge that it is an ending—however, is "comparatively rare for American television" (321).[107] And even when a program winds up with a conclusion, it remains doubtful if we could identify a return to normality. When Kelleter notes that the serial "storyworld […] progresses more in the sense that it spreads than it unfolds" ("From Recursive" 101), his imagery captures quite succinctly the reason for this: serial narration tends to embark on the project of story-telling not so much, or not only, in pursuit of an ending, but rather with an "explorative movement" (Kelleter, "All About [Part Two]").

It appears, thus, that television series are reliably, if to different degrees, predisposed to evade the instantiation of a conservative normal/abnormal/normal narrative structure. At the very least, they extend the duration of abnormality in relation to normality beyond the dimension it would reach in shorter, work-bound forms of storytelling. Like Mittell, Sean O'Sullivan ascribes an utmost significance to the gap in between of installments. He describes the gap as "a territory of uncertainty, mystery, and doubt; to commit to a serial is to commit to long stretches in this landscape, and to a perhaps masochistic immersion in ignorance, in the unsettled: that which could be more than one thing, at the same time" ("Serials and Satisfaction"). By demanding from the viewer a prolonged immersion within such a world of uncertainty and double meanings, and by favoring in this way that which is perceived as abnormal, the television series in general, and *AHS* in particular, appears prove a particularly useful vessel for the altered body destabilizing potential with regard to dominant ideologies of corporeality.

[107] Even for a show with such a conclusion, there is a distinct (and perhaps growing) possibility of a spin-off. *Better Call Saul*, for instance, tells the backstory of James McGill whom we know as Saul Goodman in *Breaking Bad*.

8.5 Case Study 5: Carnivalesque Grotesque and Televisual Polysemy by Industry in *Freak Show*

On the surface, *American Horror Story*'s fourth season *Freak Show* instantiates a fairly simple us-versus-them narrative. Our sentiments regarding the individual members of Elsa's troupe are certainly subjective, our sympathies likely unequally distributed among them and subject to change over the course of the season. Still, there is arguably a homogeneity to the troupe as we are, in Smith's terms of character engagement, encouraged to feel allegiance to the troupe as whole. Consequently, the antagonisms that dominate the narrative are between those characters that are marked as freaks because of their bodily differences and those that are not. Specifically, these oppositions are of the freaks of Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities versus the townsfolk of Jupiter, Florida; versus Stanley the conman; and versus Dandy.[108] A reading of the narrative that is based on such a relatively simple schematic might posit the that *Freak Show*'s freaks represent people with physical disabilities, and that the season is fundamentally an exploration of the troubled relationship of hegemonic culture and society with disability. It would trace how the narrative, using a fictionalized variation of the historical freak show as an atmospheric and aesthetically compelling setting, engages a host of discourses that pertain to western culture's dominant understandings of disability. Such a reading is certainly viable as it would present a continuation of what I have previously called *AHS*'s critical ambition with regard to minority (identity) politics.

However, while I am not wholly opposed to such a reading, I contend that relying too comfortably on the simple us-versus-them narrative structure risks disregarding some important aspects and intricacies of *Freak Show*. Specifically, I claim that a more productive reading might be achieved by employing Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnival and the grotesque body along with some critical readings and continuations of his work, such as those by Mary Russo (1994) and particularly Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986). Such an approach allows us to go beyond a simplistic understanding of the relationship of *Freak Show*'s non-normative body and the hegemony as oppositional, or the non-normative body as oppressed and the hegemony as oppressive. Rather, it may produce a more detailed understanding of the relationship as marked by complex mutual dependencies—an understanding of the relationship as *interrelation* in which the non-normative body of the freak

[108] Throughout the chapters concerned with *Freak Show*, I will use the word "freak" (and its variations) without quotation marks as a shorthand for "freak show performer", designating by the word not the individual's bodily figuration, but their employment or profession as a member of a freak show troupe.

is framed not exclusively as Other and as victim of oppression and marginalization, but also as a site of bourgeois longing.[109]

Thus, I will begin part one of this chapter with a delineation of, first, Bakhtin's notions of the carnival and the grotesque body, and, second, some scholarly criticism of these notions. Building on Stallybrass and White's reading of the carnivalesque in relation to bourgeois efforts of self-consolidation, I will then establish how the categories of the grotesque and the freak relate. I will then operationalize this relationship for a number of smaller case studies that constitute my subsequent analysis of the complex ways in which the carnival and the grotesque manifest in *Freak Show*. Based on the findings of my analysis and the troublingly contradictory observation that *Freak Show* itself inevitably operates partly as a freak show, part two will see a shift in focus from textual analysis to an analysis of industry practices. Arguing that the medium of television itself can be read as an instantiation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, I will discuss how various modes of television production are conducive to a heightened degree of polysemy in the medium, and how this may reflect in *AHS*'s disability and freak representation. Finally, I will return to the text once more, create a dialogue between the arguments of part one and two, and suggest that at the end of *Freak Show*, *AHS* can once again be read to exhibit self-reflected awareness of these complexities.

8.5.1 The Bakhtinian Carnival and Grotesque Body

Stallybrass and White note that Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1968) is "ostensibly a scholarly study of [François] Rabelais's popular sources in carnivalesque folk-culture which shows how indebted Rabelais is to the popular, non-literary, 'low' folk humour of the French Renaissance." (7) They also highlight, however, that "the main importance of his study is its broad development of the 'carnivalesque' into a potent, populist, critical inversion of *all* official words and hierarchies in a way that has implications far beyond the

[109] Throughout these chapters, I employ the term "bourgeoisie" (and the accompanying adjective "bourgeois") *not* in a relatively narrow Marxist sense, denoting the class of citizens in possession of material and monetary means of capitalist production. Rather, my use of the term designates those citizens of a capitalist society who (knowingly or unknowingly) consider desirable a consumerist lifestyle in accordance with culturally and socially dominant capitalist ideology, norms and values—those people who might, in short, be referred to as the mainstream. This broader category thus includes people who, in the Marxist sense, would be considered working class or proletariat, such as an electrician, as long as they aspire to the lifestyle described above. Furthermore, I intend to stick with the word "bourgeoisie," where some quotes speak of the middle class (or use the adjective "middle-class"). I should thus point out that in all the below instances I understand both terms to be used interchangeably.

specific realm of Rabelais studies" [emphasis in the original] (7). Medieval carnivalesque festivities, for Bakhtin, "were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclastiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 5-6). It is important to be clear on what specifically Bakhtin means by "sharply distinct" and "completely different." Carnival, according to Bakhtin,

> celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order […]. The suspension of all hierarchical precedence was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. (10)

This last sentence is instructive here. Significantly, the carnival's sharp distinction to "high" culture is marked not so much by exclusionary opposition to it (cf. Russo 62), but, rather, by a leveling of hierarchies. Carnival "built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which *all* medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year" [emphasis mine] (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 6).[110] And, for all its hostility toward things "immortalized and completed" (10), this "all-people's character" (19) situates the medieval carnival "far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times" because it operates rather as lighthearted folk humor with a "sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" (11).

This lightheartedness that pervades Bakhtin's notion of the carnival is crucial. As Stallybrass and White note: "If there is a principle to [Bakhtin's carnival] it resides in the spirit of carnivalesque laughter itself" (8). Bakhtin himself sums up his idea of carnival laughter best in his introductory remarks on the subject:[111]

> It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it

[110] Rather than of leveling, Stallybrass and White (and many scholars referencing them), speak of an *inversion* of hierarchies (cf. e. g. 17). I consider this a misleading word choice because it implies that that which is considered high culture outside of carnival becomes low culture during carnival and vice versa. Bakhtin (who himself does not employ the word "inversion") is clear, however, that this is not what occurs, but that social hierarchies are suspended *as a whole*. I do not at all mean to suggest that Stallybrass and White misread Bakhtin—and indeed, my arguments throughout these chapter rely considerably on their reading of his work—but simply that their word choice is somewhat unfortunate.

[111] I curtail here, for the sake of clarity, Bakhtin's description of medieval forms of folk culture. Apart from carnivalesque festivities, Bakhtin notes as manifestations of folk humor "comic verbal compositions, in Latin or in the vernacular" (12), and "various genres of 'Billingsgate', by which [he] designated curses, oaths, slang, humour, popular tricks and jokes, scatalogical [sic] forms, in fact all the 'low' and 'dirty' sorts of folk humour" (Stallybrass and White 8; cf. Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 15-17).

> is universal in scope: it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival (11-12).

At the heart of the "comic imagery" of the carnival and its laughter lies the "peculiar aesthetic concept" that Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism", which, in turn, is governed by a "material bodily principle (18), an "all-popular festive and utopian" corporeality:

> In grotesque realism, [...] the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body. We repeat: the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable […]. The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity. (19-20)

The dominant manifestation of carnival's grotesque realism—and the principle from which these chapters' exploration of non-normative embodiment in *Freak Show* departs—then, is the grotesque body.

Universal as carnival laughter and decidedly material, the grotesque body is "ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed" (25); "it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits"; it is a body of "apertures," and "convexities," of "various ramifications and offshoots"; it tends to combine "two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born" (26); it

> is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic, it represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements. It is an incarnation of this world at the absolute lower stratum, as the swallowing up and generating principle, as the bodily grave and bosom, as a field which has been sown and in which new shoots are preparing to sprout. (27)

The grotesque body is, in short, as optimistically and sweepingly exuberant as Bakhtin's description of it.[112]

We should explicitly note, finally, the principal utopian aspect of the grotesque body in particular and carnival in general that surfaces time and time again in the above quotes and that is essential to Bakhtin's writing. Just as the carnival, through its suspension of dominant hierarchies, provides "a site of insurgency" (Russo 62), so the ever changing grotesque body, "conceived of first and foremost as a social body" (8), promises social change and counter-hegemonic renewal.

This near boundless optimistic nostalgia that pervades Bakhtin's work on the carnival is the most common basis for scholarly critique of his work. I will focus here on two main objections. Stallybrass and White formulate the first: their often-cited notion of *displaced abjection* describes "the process whereby 'low' social groups turn their figurative and actual power, *not* against those in authority, but against those who are even 'lower'" [emphasis in the original] (53). This process is evident, they argue, in many "carnivalesque rituals and symbolism" such as the "conjunction of Jew and pig" that can be found in German anti-Semitic prints of the renaissance era (54). Russo, similarly, points out that the image of Kerch terracotta figurines of "senile pregnant hags" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 25) cited by Bakhtin as epitomes of the grotesque body, is problematic from a feminist point of view: "It is loaded with all the connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of aging" (Russo 63). The existence of displaced abjection thus figures as a serious setback to Bakhtin's enthusiasm because it seems to belie, or at least relativize, the carnival's purported "lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract".

Terry Eagleton introduces the second objection to Bakhtin's optimism, questioning the effectiveness of carnival's transgressive potential: "Carnival, after all, is a *licensed* affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art" [emphasis in the original] (148). While this is a familiar point of criticism that not only Eagleton has articulated, as Stallybrass and White demonstrate (cf. 13-14), it is more often than not expressed not as a response to Bakhtin specifically, but in more general terms. Russo, for instance, notes that the work of Mary Douglas, Victor W. Turner and Clifford Geertz suggests that "[i]n liminal states [such as carnival] temporary loss of boundaries tends to redefine social frames, and such topsy-turvy

[112] It has been noted that Bakhtin's style of writing tends to mirror his subject matter. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, for instance, point out that he "exploited the device of ambiguity that he himself admired in others, especially in Rabelais" (312-313) so that he could get away with implicit criticism of "the puritanism of Stalinist society" (311).

or time out is inevitably set back on course" (58). But she emphasizes that this point of criticism is ultimately as relative as carnival's transgressive potential: "The extreme difficulty of producing lasting social change does not diminish the usefulness of these symbolic models of transgression" (58). Likewise, Stallybrass and White remark "that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*" [emphasis in the original] (14). Thus, while Bakhtin appears to overestimate the transformative potential of the carnival and its grotesque imagery, it would be equally unfitting to deny such potential entirely.

A concise summary of the main points made so far will aid the subsequent analysis of *Freak Show* through a Bakhtinian lens:

1. Carnival is marked by a temporary, cyclical and universal suspension of the hegemony, …
2. … which manifests as a utopian leveling of social hierarchies rather than a blunt opposition of the ruling classes.
3. Its dominant expression is carnival laughter, which is
    a. *festive*, as opposed to an "individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event",
    b. *universal* in that it is "directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants",
    c. *ambivalent* because it is "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding".
4. At the heart of carnival laughter is grotesque realism, predominantly figured as the grotesque body, which is …
    a. … unfinished, open, protuberant and outgrowing itself,
    b. "blended with the world, with animals, with objects",
    c. often "two bodies in one", combining death and birth, destruction and creation,
    d. and, as such, a social body that promises social change.
5. Bakhtin's notions of the carnival and the grotesque body is criticized mostly because they fail to recognize that …
    a. … carnivalesque rituals and symbolism tend to turn against the weaker, not the powerful social groups (displaced abjection);
    b. … carnival's transgressive potential is limited because it is a deviation from the rules that is expressly permitted by the ruling class.

While the interpretive backdrop provided by Bakhtin's notions of the carnival and grotesque informs my analysis of *Freak Show* at nearly every turn, the itemized format in which I summarize them here is not intended as a checklist to tick off one by one but serves merely the purpose of clarity. Admittedly, however, the beginning my discussion of the grotesque body in *Freak Show* does resemble such a ticking off before growing more complex.

8.5.2 The Freak as Visual Grotesque

If we defer for the time being considerations regarding the degree of overlap between the freak and the grotesque as socio-cultural categories and conceive of the members of Elsa's troupe *as carnivalesque imagery*, it becomes immediately evident that they resemble or approximate in some notable ways Bakhtin's grotesque bodies. For instance, and at a comparatively abstract level, the field's tall grass, the swampy and humid surroundings, and the unpaved ground that the troupe inhabits suggest that they all are *blended with the world*. Additionally, and more concretely, we can identify the attribute *unfinished* in a variety of manifestations, namely in those bodies that are missing limbs such as Legless Suzi, or Elsa and Jimmy (once his hands are stolen)—perhaps even more so because their prostheses provide a kind of makeshift completion that highlights their bodies' incompletion. But *unfinished* can also describe those bodies that suggest a sense of stunted development, of a growth process left in some manner incomplete: Ma Petite (Jyoti Amge), Meep the Geek (Ben Woolf), and Toulouse (Drew Rin Varick), all of whom have different kinds of dwarfism, and Paul (Mat Fraser) due to his phocomelia. Due to their extraordinary size, the bodies of Amazon Eve (Erika Ervin) and Ima Wiggles (Chrissy Metz) might be called *protuberant, outgrowing themselves*. We might also attribute *protuberance* to those bodies with excessive body parts: Desiree with her three breasts and clitoris so enlarged it gets mistaken for a penis; Ethel with her beard; or Bette and Dot, whose body looks like that of one woman with two heads. Of course, these four women can also be considered to be *two bodies in one*: Bette and Dot not only literally occupy the same body, but also combine *death and birth* because they kill their mother at the beginning of *Freak Show* and are pregnant at the end of it. Both Desiree and Ethel combine female and male traits; and Ethel, furthermore, combines, in a sense, *birth and death* in one person when she learns of her terminal liver cirrhosis in the same episode in which we see her giving birth to Jimmy. Chester Creb (Neil Patrick Harris) the magician and ventriloquist also occupies *two bodies*, his own and that of his dummy Marjorie (Jamie Brewer), who he not only *creates*, but also *destroys*. Since Marjorie appears human only to

Chester, however, we might also say that he is *blended with an object*. The same can be said about Elsa and Jimmy when they wear their prostheses. Indeed, before Jimmy is blended with an object, he is, in a sense, *blended with an animal* because his ectrodactyly earns him the stage name "Lobster Boy." Equally, because of his tattoos and phocomelia, Paul is staged as "The Illustrated Seal;" and with her facial tattoos and forked tongue, Penny becomes the "Astounding Lizard Girl." In a broader sense, his feathery attire makes it appear as though Meep the Geek is dressed as a stylized chicken. This notion is reinforced considerably by the revenge the troupe exacts on Stanley: with both arms and legs amputated and dressed in Meep's costume he resembles the aerial artist Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova) from Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) who begins as "peacock of the air" (00:03:50) but at the movie's conclusion has been transformed into a "feathered creature who is half chicken, half woman" (Adams 62).

Aside perhaps from Pepper's and Salty's gaping mouths on stage, *openness* is one aspect that is not as explicitly realized among the freakish bodies of Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities. This is particularly noteworthy in the context of this study because this omission could quite simply be linked to industrial considerations, which I will discuss toward the end of my analysis of *Freak Show*. Bodily openness in Bakhtin's sense is related closely to grotesque realism's emphasis of the "lower bodily stratum" (e. g. Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 23)—the body's orifices, that is, that are linked to "acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (21). Representations of the openness of the "lower bodily stratum" may very well teeter on the brink of violating the FCC's (Federal Communications Commission) "statutes and rules regarding the broadcast of obscene, indecent, and profane programming" (*Obscene*).[113] Consequently, both instances that relate to orifices below the waistline—the footage of the orgy in episode 1 "Monsters among Us", and Ethel's public birth of Jimmy in episode 3 "Edward Mordrake: Part 1"—are merely suggestive, not explicit in their representation of lower bodily openness.

All of the attributes—unfinished, open, protuberant, blended with the world, animals, objects and other bodies—then, that make up the Bakhtinian grotesque body are evident to some degree in *Freak Show*'s freaks. Of course, I have so far treated these attributes as visual descriptors. More importantly, however, they signify the grotesque body's promise of social change, which, in Bakhtin's sense, primarily takes the shape of a utopian leveling of hierarchies. In order to discuss how, if at all, the bodies of *Freak Show*'s freaks promise social

[113] For a case of study of how the FCC's statutes and rules may affect a program, see Jennifer Holt, "*NYPD Blue*: Content Regulation" (2013).

change, we need to begin to consider them not only as carnivalesque imagery but within their social context.[114] In other words, we must explore the realm where the freak might effect social change: the relationship between the freaks and the social and cultural hegemony, that is, the bourgeoisie. The analysis that follows will also require us to ascertain the extent to which we might equate the grotesque body, the historical freak and *Freak Show*'s freak. But first, to demonstrate that the relationship between freaks and bourgeoisie is not marked by harsh opposition, let us back up and examine the opening minutes of *Freak Show*.

8.5.3 The Freak as Socio-cultural Grotesque

Set in small town Jupiter, Florida in 1952, we might expect *AHS*'s fourth installment *Freak Show* to build its narrative on an opposition between the social outcasts of Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities, and the stereotypical candy colored bourgeoisie of 1950s small town America, self-assured of its rightful place at the top of the world. The season's opening scene, then, appears initially to bear out this assumption: we first see a woman (in fact, we only see her head at the edge of the frame at an awkward angle) walking beneath circus lights and pennants, her off-screen voice reading out a gloomy diary entry which at this early point escapes comprehension:

> It was a Saturday, the third of September, that the world as I had known was forever doomed. The shadows that had sheltered me were banished by the blinding light of scrutiny. I knew I was about to enter the gates of hell. But like the inescapable pull of gravity, there was nothing I could do about it. (4.1 0:00)

The camera then cuts to what might be considered a quintessential image of 50s small town America: the milkman (Wilson Bradford) pulling up in his delivery truck and stepping onto a front porch. The sequence soon turns grisly as, instead of empty bottles, he finds the milk from his last delivery spoiled, still outside the door. Concerned, he enters the house only to find his customer Mrs. Tattler (Ann McKenzie) dead in a pool of her own blood on the kitchen floor. In a closet upstairs, he then discovers—to quote the newspaper article we hear

[114] Mikita Brottman briefly employs Bakhtin's carnival and grotesque to explore how Browning's *Freaks* may allow us "to access some of the sociocultural dimensions of the freak show" (50). However, her analysis is based only on the grotesque body's visual aspects and its psychic effects, and she stops short of exploring the socio-culturally transformative potential of the (freak as) grotesque. The reason likely is that this is one dimension to which *Freaks* does not give us access simply because there is little interaction between the freak show performers and the outside world in the movie. It may be a benefit of the serial longform that it allows *Freak Show*—which frequently references *Freaks*—to devote narrative time to the freak show's relation to the outside world.

read out soon after—an "unfortunate creature" so "monstrously deformed" (4.1 4:10) it causes him to drop his milk in shock, a nurse at the hospital to which the creature is rushed to vomit into a trash can, a doctor to be barely able to contain his disgust when dictating his medical report, and another nurse to forget writing down what the doctor dictates.

The two portions of the scene so far are similar in that both suggest a troubling quality to something typically thought of as positive: a woman speaks of entering *hell* as she walks onto *circus grounds*, and a *quiet small-town* is revealed to harbor *monstrosity*.

Of course, knowing that the season's title is *Freak Show*, the audience is invited to (correctly) conclude that the circus decorations from the first shot are in fact those of the eponymous freak show. Thus, an initial assumption, as I suggest above and in the introductory part of this chapter, might be that the freak show figures as some sort of hellish and monstrous intrusion into an otherwise peaceful normality. Viewers well-versed with *AHS*'s politics would then furthermore assume that a reversal of traditional or mainstream value judgments is about to occur: that which is typically perceived of as monstrous—in this case, the freaks—turns out to be morally superior to the peaceful normality, which, in turn, is revealed to be "truly" monstrous—in this case, middle-class society. Irrespective of whether or not the individual viewer anticipates such a reversal, at this early point in the season premiere, there would appear to be a fundamental opposition at work between the freak show troupe and the Jupiter's bourgeois populace.

Such a relatively simple reading, however, is soon complicated considerably. The viewer learns that, one, the "unfortunate creature" is in fact two women, the conjoined twins Bette and Dot Tattler; and, two, that the woman from the awkwardly angled opening shot is Dot. The possible readings of her hitherto obscure diary entry that emerge at this point illustrate nicely why *Freak Show* offers intricate reading potentials of the freak show in relation to bourgeois sentiments beyond the merely oppositional. Let us recall the central line: "The shadows that had sheltered me were banished by the blinding light of scrutiny." On the one hand, the "shadows" represent the dark closet in which she and her sister kept hidden after their mother's violent death, while the "blinding light of scrutiny" stands for the light-flooded halls of the hospital and its staffs' astonished and inquisitive gazes. On the other hand, the "light" represents the freak show performer's life on stage and as exhibit, as opposed to the "sheltered" secluded domesticity of their previous life. It remains unclear which of these readings Dot may have intended, so both appear equally valid. The fact that they thus establish convergence rather than divergence of Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities and Jupiter is suggestive of a highly complex relationship between freaks and non-freaks, which this chapter sets out to explore.

My overall argument keeps the convergence of freak and bourgeoisie suggested by Dot's diary entry in mind. I contend that, rather than a clichéd portrayal of 50s society as starkly and unequivocally opposed to the freaks, *Freak Show* offers a much more nuanced representation of the freak show and the freak body as a site of bourgeois longing. The Bakhtinian carnival and grotesque body will serve as conceptualizations that frame our understanding of the intricate social and cultural interplay that governs the encounters between the people of Jupiter and Elsa's troupe. To achieve this understanding, however, we must first explore the degree to which the freak show can be described as carnivalesque, and the freak body as grotesque.

Garland-Thomson's observations regarding the freak show serve as a suitable starting point for this exploration. She argues that there are two ways in which the freak operated as "the necessary cultural complement to the acquisitive and capable American who claims the normate position of masculine, white, nondisabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class" (*Extraordinary* 64): one, as a site of distinction that "reassured audiences of their commonality"; and two as a site of identification or longing that "symbolized a potential for individual freedom denied by the cultural pressure toward standardization" (68).[115] What is important to note is that her observations are marked by a distinct sense of opposition between the freak and the onlooker. Even in her descriptions of the spectator's desire to identify with the freak, her choice of words—a "ritualized opportunity for *banal* democrats to *voyeuristically* identify with *nonconformity*" [emphases mine] (68)—is more suggestive of a divergence of the two than it is of convergence. This is an opposition that in its absoluteness seems altogether alien to the "all-people's character" of Bakhtin's carnival and grotesque.

Of course, the reason for this disconnect is quite simply that the historical freak show that Garland-Thomson describes is *not* a carnival in the Bakhtinian sense, and the freak body is not the same as the grotesque body.[116] In fact, one might justifiably speculate that the freak show is an example of the negativity of modern parody that Bakhtin decries (*Rabelais* 11). Consider, for instance, this reading of the freak show by Garland-Thomson:

> The freak's indelible physical markings mocked the insignia and conventions [of pre-Enlightenment Europe]—the sacred stigmata, so to speak—that distinguished the

[115] Similarly, Shildrick notes about the monstrous that it "cannot be confined to the place of the other; it is not simply alien, but always arouses the contradictory responses of denial *and* recognition, disgust *and* empathy, exclusion *and* identification" (*Embodying* 17).

[116] It is also worth noting in this context that when Garland-Thomson employs Bakhtin in her study, she does not refer to the grotesque body, but to what she calls "the carnivalesque figure [as] perhaps his version of the disabled figure" (*Extraordinary* 38), by which she designates the rogue, clown and fool (cf. *Dialogic Imagination* 158-159).

> extraordinary man from the ordinary one in the fixed social hierarchy that America imagined resisting. Pseudonymous titles such as "King," "Queen," "Prince," and "Princess," as well as aristocratic-sounding stage names and the pretense of elite pursuits like writing poetry and speaking many languages were intended to suggest that freaks were luminaries or perverse aristocrats […]. Freak shows thus conflated kings and fools in a tawdry, satiric extravaganza that inverted the old ceremonial spectacle of royal pomp and power by ritually displaying a person stigmatized by bodily particularity, silenced by the pitchman's imposed narrative, and managed by the showman. (*Extraordinary* 67)

We can identify some isolated aspects of Bakhtinian carnival in this quotation—the mockery of insignia and conventions, or the conflation of kings and fools. This, however, is where the similarities end. For, as Russo remarks about the distinction of bodily freaks and the grotesque: "The grotesque body of carnival festivity was not distanced or objectified in relation to an audience. Audiences and performers were the interchangeable parts of an incomplete but imaginable wholeness" (78). Ultimately, it is clear that the freak show described by Garland-Thomson is not marked by joyous, heterogeneous universality, but by a ritualistic process of othering for the purpose of delimiting the ideal American. Thus, the social construct "freak" falls outside the definition of Bakhtin's grotesque because it lacks the mark of social universality and heterogeneity and operates, rather, as a means of demarcating the ideal American through opposition.

But in their extensive study *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White offer a compelling analysis of the grotesque in relation to the bourgeoisie that can help bridge the disconnect between the categories of the grotesque and the freak. Stallybrass and White argue that, beginning with the French Renaissance, the carnivalesque was repressed by the emerging bourgeoisie as a means of self-consolidation: "The bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked as 'low' – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating" (191; cf. also 178). This process, they claim, not only rejected the carnival's grotesque as Other, but in fact produced a distinct second kind of grotesque, inhabiting the liminal space between bourgeois self and Other.

> [T]he *exclusion* necessary to the formation of social identity […] is simultaneously a *production* at the level of the Imaginary, and a production, what is more, of a complex hybrid fantasy emerging out of the very attempt to demarcate boundaries, to unite and purify the social collectivity. [emphases in the original] (193)

It is no coincidence that the language employed here recalls the psychoanalytical approach I took in the previous chapters. For Stallybrass and White see their notion evidenced

in particular in the patient's narratives of Sigmund Freud's early *Studies on Hysteria*. Here, they note,

> many of the images and symbols which were once the focus of various pleasures in European carnival have become transformed into the morbid symptoms of private terror. Again and again these patients suffer acute attacks of disgust, literally vomiting out horrors and obsessions which look surprisingly like the rotted residue of traditional carnival practices. At the same time the patients seem to be reaching out, in their highly stylized gestures and discourses, towards a repertoire of carnival material as both expression and support. They attempt to mediate their terrors by enacting private, made-up carnivals. (174)

The carnivalesque imagery, then, that permeates the discourse of bourgeois hysteria—as the second, liminal kind of grotesque produced by the repression of the carnivalesque first—is not only perceived as disgusting, but "bears the imprint of desire [as an] object of nostalgia, longing and fascination" (191).

Because, as we have established, the freak is produced by bourgeois efforts of self-consolidation, we might consequently frame it in Stallybrass and White's terms as a manifestation or projection of what I will refer to as the liminal grotesque. Indeed, Garland-Thomson notes herself that "[t]he constructed freak occupies the alarming and chaotic space at the borders that delimit the 'average man'" (*Extraordinary* 63). Furthermore, Rachel Adams's reading of the defamiliarizing effect of the camera work on Tod Browning's *Freaks* resonates well with such an understanding: "the 'normal' is an elusive fiction, as is its abject byproduct, the 'freak.'" (68). Her remark links the production of the freak to the bourgeoisie's construction of its own normality, and her use of the term *abject* suggests a liminal quality to the freak.[117] The liminal grotesque, then, offers a certain redeeming quality with regard to the freak: with it we can identify after all a sort of Bakhtinian optimism within the otherwise overwhelming sense of oppression and exploitation that likely governs our perception (as evidenced for instance by Garland-Thomson) of the practices surrounding the freak show. It may provide us with a vantage point that can help us understand more fully the cultural logic of the freak show as a remnant of the Bakhtinian carnival and the freak as grotesque.

With this in mind, let us reconsider Russo's contrasting of the freak and the grotesque. They "overlap as bodily categories", she notes, but are distinct in that the freak show "spectacle, by definition, requires sight lines and distance. Audiences do not [as in carnival] meet up face to face or mask to mask with the spectacle of freaks. Freaks are, by definition,

[117] When she later notes that "[l]ooking is the primal activity that produces freaks in the first place" (83), we would continue to ask what it is, then, that provokes the act of looking. The answer would be that it is the sense of bourgeois longing that permeates the liminal grotesque.

apart, as beings to be viewed" (79).[118] The liminal grotesque bridges, in a sense, this distance because it enables us to think of the empirical freak not only as singled out at the far end of the audience's sight line, but also as a projection of an imagined freak which is representative of a unifying desire.

Of course, we might apply the liminal grotesque not only to the category of the freak, but also to the arguably broader category of disability. As Davis observes, the term "grotesque," when used in relation to disabled bodies in most instances "lacks the redeeming sense of class rebellion in Bakhtin's formulation" (*Enforcing* 151). Here too, the liminal grotesque may allow for potential readings of the disabled body that retrieve precisely this sense of liberation from the overwhelmingly oppressive.

Over the course of the following pages and a series of four case studies, I will demonstrate that *Freak Show* can be read to highlight precisely this redeeming potential of the empirical freak as (projection of) liminal grotesque or, to return to the phrase I employed at the outset of this chapter, as a site of bourgeois longing. However, I wish to note first that my intention is in no way to excuse the atrocities committed in the context of freak show practices. I am aware that an abstract conceptualization of the freak as liminal grotesque risks losing sight of the freak show performer's humanity. As Mitchell and Snyder note:

> Disability Studies scholarship on freak shows often rest comfortably in their containment of freak difference by forwarding freaks as safe objects of academic inquiry. Nearly every scholarly work on freaks substantiates their analyses by inserting freak visuals, making parallels between medical and performance classifications openly, and championing freak resourcefulness as entrepreneurs of the stage. Freaks become scholarly specimens we can gaze at from the safe perspective of academic analysis without being sullied by their status as historical spectacles.
>
> […]
>
> [But s]ociological distance merely gives way to a new formation of the gaze. In fact, it provides a model that allows the freak show gaze to continue while seemingly disguised behind a façade of interpretive skepticism [so that] even a systemic critique of the freak show offers little salvage from its dehumanizing effects […]. ("Exploitations")

Moreover, these effects not only persist in the face of critical inquiry. It must also be acknowledged that there is a distinct risk that they may be reproduced and perpetuated. As Shildrick admits in her introduction to *Embodying the Monster*: "Inevitably the repulsion and

[118] Bakhtin, too, employs the word "spectacle." However, he specifies that "[c]arnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (7).

fascination that I analyse is as much my own as that of the abstract modernist subject, or the projected reader, and I want to be clear that none of us is innocent" (8).

I will more fully explore this very ambiguity that makes itself known here in chapter 8.5.4 when I discuss the degree to which *Freak Show* itself replicates functions and effects of the historical freak show. For the time being and throughout the analysis to come, I acknowledge my inevitable complicity as freak show spectator, and turn now to the case studies.

8.5.3.1 Bourgeoisie / Freak Encounters: Vignettes and Myrna

While my contention is that the relationship of Elsa's troupe and the townsfolk of Jupiter is marked by much more complex goings-on than blunt opposition, there are doubtlessly those instances that evidence such oppositional sentiments. In the opening episode two such instances stand out: the first occurs when Jimmy, Paul and Eve hang advertisement banners by the roadside. A group of young men drive by, contemptuously yelling "Freaks!" and throwing beer bottles at them. The second involves police detective Bunch (Dane Rhodes), lead to the freak show by the very roadside banners, arresting Bette and Dot for the murder of their mother. He claims that on top of evidence pointing toward them, they are likely also responsible for other murders and that it is obvious that they are guilty: "Look at 'em. They're monsters. Jury's gonna have no problem seeing that." He continues to announce that the police are going to start driving the troupe out of town—he says, "There is no place in Jupiter for freaks."—whereupon Jimmy kills him by slitting his throat with a razor (4.1 46:45). This conflict between the troupe and the Jupiter police continues to play out throughout the rest of the season, with the police arresting Meep for the murder of Bunch because of false evidence planted by Dell (Michael Chiklis) in episode 2 "Massacres and Matinees", which is the incident that triggers Jimmy's drinking problem. Nonetheless, it is only in these isolated instances in the season premiere that we witness irreconcilable hatred on the part of the non-freaks, and they appear to serve more to initiate Jimmy's specific character arc than to set the scene in general. And while Jupiter's men tend to display such an attitude of hatred, the women lean toward quite different reactions in their encounters with members of the troupe.[119]

[119] Although certainly a worthwhile line of inquiry, I do not intend to discuss at length possible meanings of such differences in gender representations. That being said, I would argue that they are perhaps best understood as lending consistency to the storyworld: testosterone-driven aggressive men, and women with a disposition for hysteria reflect the traditional gender roles that are typically ascribed to what we perceive as the hyper-conservatism of 1950's American society. It should be noted, however,

The reactions of the patrons and staff during the troupe's visit to a diner in episode 2, for instance, betray not only aversion, but also quite clearly fascination and thus recall Stallybrass and White's reading of Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* as evidence of the liminal grotesque: although one man angrily leaves, all other patrons stay, such as the mother who half-heartedly demands the freaks eat somewhere else because they are "upsetting" her daughter who, in turn, looks not so much upset as puzzled and amazed (4.2 32:00). The hybridity of the liminal grotesque arguably also governs the wide-eyed fear and fascination in the reaction of the girl in episode 3 "Edward Mordrake: Part 1" who sees Twisty the Clown while trick-or-treating. Her mother's reply to her telling her about the clown is noteworthy too: "Remember what we talked about?" she says, "How sometimes we can get confused because of our imagination?" (05:50). Her remark conjures up the notion of hysteria quite clearly as it suggests that what troubles her daughter is borne from the realm of the imaginary.

Admittedly, reading these vignettes under the rubric of Freudian hysteria in Stallybrass and White's sense may appear all too prescriptive. But *Freak Show* is full of encounters between the freaks and Jupiter's bourgeoisie that lend plausibility to these readings because they bespeak much more explicitly precisely the duality of bourgeois aversion and longing that marks the liminal grotesque. The first of these encounters that requires mention here occurs in the season premiere. We are just over 20 minutes into the episode and have been acquainted with the fundamentals of the setting—1950's Florida small town of Jupiter and the struggling freak show on its outskirts—and the character constellation—Elsa as the troupe's domineering and manipulative matriarch; Ma Petite as stand-in for obedient, unquestioning troupe members; Jimmy, Bette and Dot as conflicted characters with renegade potential; Twisty as menacing outside threat. After returning (in the original airing) from a commercial break, we see a succession of close-ups of snack food trays and aperitifs.[120] The camera then cuts away from the close-ups to reveal a middle-class living room with a group of women, apparently during a Tupperware party, two of which converse about how they are sexually dissatisfied in their marriages. Another woman enters from a hallway with a wide smile, and

that *AHS* is careful to not suggest these gender stereotypes might be absolute truths and includes characters that break with their respective sex's gender expectations. Mr. Haddonfield (Thomas Francis Murphy), for instance, asks the troupe to vacate the field that he is renting out to them in a very calm and sympathetic manner, claiming that if it were up to him they could stay, but that he needs lessees that actually pay and that his wife is ridden by nightmares knowing that the freaks stay there. Similarly, Dr. Bonham's (Jerry Leggio) estranged daughter, "the one without a husband and children", blames Desiree and Ethel for her father's suicide, and yells at them, "Get out, you freaks!" (4.7 9:15).

[120] The effect of the commercial break as a narrative structuring device is most commonly not wholly lost when a series is viewed not on linear television but on, for example, a streaming service. The commercial break is usually replaced by a long black screen, which mimics the interruptions effect to a certain degree.

one of the dissatisfied women, Myrna (Ashlynn Ross), looks up at her in astonishment. Yet another woman, credited as Sylvia (Lin Gathright), walks up to her, and the following dialogue unfolds:

> Sylvia: It's your turn, Myrna.
>
> Myrna: Where did you [she pauses] find it?
>
> Sylvia: I took in that new roadside attraction. Wandered into an empty tent, and the real show began [she chuckles]. Oh, don't be afraid. Oh, you'll be so relaxed after. (4.1 22:40)

Sylvia ushers Myrna in the direction of the hallway, and while she nervously approaches it, we hear Sylvia beginning her Tupperware advertisement spiel. As her voice grows inaudible, we follow a reluctant Myrna through the dark hallway while the music that has been playing throughout the scene begins to fade and distort. She enters a bedroom where Jimmy lies. He tells her not to worry, the music suddenly fades back in, she slowly lies down on the bed, pulls up her dress, and Jimmy presents his right hand to her—and to us, in fact, because this is the first view we get of his ectrodactyly. He then slides it between her legs, appears to penetrate her, and massages her to orgasm.

No great analytical contortions are required here, the scene is very straightforward. Myrna is obviously afraid and uncertain of the encounter she is about to make. But her imagination also renders her curious, so she leaves behind the Tupperware and devilled eggs, those epitomes of bourgeois domesticity that form the backdrop of her frustration, and walks through the dark hallway. The distorting music and fading voices seem to suggest that at the other end of the hallway she will find some realm wholly alien to one in the living room. But as the music returns to its previous clarity, she (and the viewer) understands that the experience offered to her is the satisfaction of a longing that, as subdued as it may be, is very much her own. After all, she stays within her middle-class surroundings, does not leave them. She only allows herself respite from the seemly conservatism of the living room—that area of the home that constitutes, represents, and perpetuates the bourgeois self-image—and to move to the dimness of the master bedroom—signifier of those desires that must always remain implicit, only hinted at, even when the Tupperware party-goers seem to talk about little else.

This scene, emphasized through its placement after a commercial break, constitutes *Freak Show*'s first proper encounter between freak and bourgeoisie in that it involves an actual interaction during which each party is fully aware of the other party's status. Thus, it arguably operates as a primer that alerts the viewer to the complexity of the narrative's freak/non-freak

relationship, which is marked not by blunt opposition, but by a bourgeois sentiment toward the freak that oscillates between aversion and longing. And it is important to note that while Myrna's aversion is figured primarily in cerebral terms—her range of facial expressions and her factual inquiry as to where Sylvia found "it" betray concern rather than repulsion—her longing is doubly linked to the prevalence of the bodily aspect: not only does the satisfaction of Myrna's longing manifest as an orgasm; more importantly, the extraordinariness of Jimmy's ectrodactyly provides the corporeal site of Myrna's longing.

8.5.3.2 Bourgeoisie / Freak Encounters: Penny and Her Father

The next encounter between Jupiter's bourgeoisie and the freaks that I will discuss here is from the outset also strongly coded in bodily terms. It begins when we hear a nurse reading out the newspaper article about the discovery of Bette and Dot to Penny the candy striper who in reply expresses sympathy for Mrs. Tattler hiding the "creature" and adds, "If I gave birth to something like that, I'd drown it in the bathtub first thing" (4.1 4:40). Although this comment may appear to indicate a hyper-conservative stance and that Penny is utterly repulsed by "something like that," Grace Gummer's delivery of the line with a smile and wink that seem curiously at odds with its content implies that something more or other than repulsion is at work here. This notion is subtly substantiated by the fact that she wears red lipstick, which we learn is against hospital regulations, suggesting that she has a penchant for transgressing the rules of the hegemony. Indeed, the clues continue to add up: Elsa, who appears to have overheard the conversation, approaches her, and Penny seems instantly taken in by the extravagance of her clothes and her lit cigarette. Then, despite telling her that smoking is prohibited, it requires no effort at all on the part of Elsa to sway her to take a drag herself (in fact, Penny keeps the cigarette altogether). When Elsa goes on to inquire about what "extraordinary" thing it is that was brought to this hospital, Penny snarkily tells her that it would only be considered extraordinary by "the bumpkins in this town" (6:00). And finally, we learn that the only reason she is a candy striper is because she would otherwise have been sent to reform school. The overall picture we get of Penny during this introductory sequence, is thus dominated by contradictions: she expresses sympathy for Mrs. Tattler and contempt for the "bumpkins" of Jupiter; she claims both disgust with the "monstrously deformed" creature and that it is not at all as extraordinary as people make it out to be; she points out that smoking is prohibited and instantly smokes herself; she does charitable volunteer work, but not actually voluntarily.

The next time we see Penny, later in the episode, confirms this initial image. She storms into the main tent, upset about something we do not yet know about, yelling, "I got to get the hell out of here. This place is a snake pit! I got to get back to my life, my family, my church, my people!" (39:50) In terms of content, her exclamation once more points toward conservatism. But her make-up is heavily smudged, her hair messy, and her nightgown covers only the right shoulder, revealing the flimsy nightshirt underneath and leaving bare the other shoulder from which both shirt and bra strap hang—an appearance that, in short, betrays a disregard for the very propriety that her words seem to plead. She goes on to threaten Elsa that she will tell everyone that she was "drugged, ravaged." But Elsa tells her that she liked what happened and shows her footage of the previous night's opium induced orgy. The camera switches back and forth between Penny's distressed face in the flickering light of the projector, and the blurry, shaky images of her sitting among the nude and semi-nude troupe members, blissfully smoking an opium pipe. Slowly, she comes to the realization that, yes, she did in fact like it: "I can still feel them. All over me. Inside me."

Of course, Penny cannot literally "still feel them." Her utterance, thus, must necessarily refer to a sensation rooted within herself, *inside* her. What she feels *all over* her—like the dreamlike images on the projector screen reflecting off her skin—is an intense longing for an experience which, for all the agony she is in now, is undeniably also a source of great satisfaction for her. The sequence, by depicting so viscerally Penny's inner conflict, evokes precisely the oscillation between aversion and longing felt by Myrna in the scene discussed above. And let us note not only that Penny's longing, like Myrna's, is strongly coded in bodily terms of orgiastic bliss, but that the longing is projected (lending some intriguing significance to the projector as the piece of technology that facilitates Penny's realization) on the non-normative bodies of the freak show troupe. But Penny is yet unable to come to terms with what she is learning about herself, and the cerebral force of her aversion kicks in one last time: "I'm gonna tell. They're depraved monsters!" she bellows pointing at the screen, prompting Elsa to dish out a speech that sums up in harsh terms her perception of the bourgeoisie and how the freak show relates to it:

> I'll tell you who the monsters are! The people outside this tent! In your town, in all these little towns. Housewives pinched with bitterness, stupefied with boredom as they doze off in front of their laundry detergent commercials, and dream of strange, erotic pleasures. They have no souls. My monsters, the ones you call depraved, they are the beautiful heroic ones. They offer their oddity to the world. They provide a laugh, or a fright, to people in need of entertainment. Everyone is living the life they chose. But you, you undoubtedly will be one of those soulless monsters. Perhaps you already are. (42:55)

For now, we should note how Elsa's views reflect the notion of the freak as projection of the liminal grotesque, and, more broadly, conjure up the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. The bourgeois lifestyle, represented by small-town housewives and TV commercials, represses desires and dreams "of strange, erotic pleasures." So, it falls to the freak show to provide such release; "a laugh, or a fright," as Elsa describes the freak show's mode of entertainment—words that recall the ambivalent nature that Bakhtin identifies in carnivalesque laughter. But this is not some charitable act on the part of the freaks, as Elsa herself inadvertently suggest: she, who considers herself not an equal among her troupe, but something more elevated, something more bourgeois as expressed by her invariably lavish attire, claims possession of the freaks by calling them "my monsters." The troupe is of her making, after all; it is Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities. She thus frames the freak show as a decidedly *bourgeois* product, which, in turn, serves the satisfaction of a repressed *bourgeois* longing. We can easily identify here the idea that the freak and the freak show are material projections of Stallybrass and White's liminal grotesque, a by-product of bourgeois efforts of self-consolidation that inspires contradictory feelings of both aversion and longing. Furthermore, Elsa ascribes monstrosity to both bourgeoisie and freaks (although, by way of clever rhetoric she implicitly excepts herself). Such universality, such absence of hierarchy, too, recalls the Bakhtinian carnival. What distinguishes the bourgeois monster from the freakish monster is that the former lacks "soul," perhaps Elsa's word for the "ever changing, playful, undefined forms" of the carnival spirit and its "pathos of change and renewal" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 11).

Of course, several aspects of Elsa's speech ring false, problematic or flat out untrue: how level can hierarchies be in social surroundings in which one person claims possession of all others? And if the freak is a bourgeois construct, how voluntary can the choice to join the troupe really be? But we will postpone the examination of these questions for the time being and turn our attention back to Penny.

Although Elsa's tirade appears to have an effect on Penny right there in the big top, we learn only after a long absence of four episodes that she must have convinced Penny to acknowledge her attraction to the freak show. The site of this attraction, or longing, is once more a non-normative freak body, for as it turns out, Penny and Paul the Illustrated Seal started a romantic and sexual relationship sometime after the opium orgy. Penny's and Paul's relationship itself is relatively inconsequential to this analysis, but its implications, which play out in small increments over three episodes, are worth considering here because they intriguingly complicate and deepen our understanding of the liminal grotesque as the governing force in the relationship between bourgeoisie and freak. These implications revolve around Penny and her father, Vince (Lee Tergesen), with whom she has a very strained

relationship because he is extremely strict and controlling while she, as we already know, tends to break rules all over the place. Episode 6 "Bullseye" sees Vince beginning to suspect his daughter's secret relationship, and one night he catches her sneaking out. Penny says to him, "Here's the scoop, Dad. I'm in love, and I'm gonna go see him right now. I'm gonna have a life that means something, a life with some excitement, a life that's real. Not this goddamn middle-class hell." (33:05). Her words to him clearly reflect Elsa's words to her, and her own longing for the carnival spirit. In episode 7 "Test of Strength", Vince sits in the dark living room, drink in hand, and waits for Penny to return home from another visit to the freak show. When she does and tells him that she came back only to pack her things, he says to her,

> I'm an electrician. Strangers welcome me into their homes and leave me there alone to ply my trade. A man like me is dead if he doesn't come with a sterling reputation. You are my blood, but if you do something to shame me, to shame this family, I will do whatever it takes to make sure no one ever knows you belonged to me. (32:35)

We find out how specifically he intends to achieve this, when he drugs her, and has a friend tattoo scales all over her face and fork her tongue so that she resembles a lizard.

A detailed dissection of his reasoning and actions are very worthwhile here: he first emphasizes how important it is for his livelihood that he be recognized as a member of the bourgeoisie. As viewers, we are aware of this, mainly because we can infer from the family's living standards their pursuit of the consumerist lifestyle that is the hallmark of the bourgeoisie as I delineated it at the outset of this chapter (and, of course, there is Penny's remark about "this middle-class hell"). But Vince's clients' recognition of his bourgeois affiliation, he notes, hinges on his reputation, that is, his conformity with bourgeois ideology, values, and norms. Thus, he considers it fundamentally important to constantly establish and re-establish his bourgeois identity. His daughter's relationship to a non-bourgeois member of the freak show troupe compromises, in his view, the clear-cut line that delimits this identity. By mutilating Penny, by turning her into a freak and expelling her from the realm of the bourgeois, he intends to redraw this line and, thus, to re-establish his compromised identity and threatened livelihood.[121] However, in doing so he inadvertently produces a hybrid creature reminiscent of

[121] Following one dominant categorization practice of freak show workers, there is a difference between Penny and the other freaks of Elsa's troupe: the latter are "*born freaks* […] with real physical anomalies who came by their condition naturally. While this category includes people who developed their uniqueness later in life, central are people who had abnormality at birth" (Bogdan 8). Penny would likely fall into the category of the "*made freaks*," people who do something to themselves that make them unusual enough for exhibit, such as getting adorned with tattoos or growing their beards or hair exceptionally long" (8) (although Penny, in fact, did not do anything to herself). *Freak Show* ignores such historical distinctions, an approach that is consistent with the season's general disregard for

Stallybrass and White's liminal grotesque in that it incorporates both the Other—the freak as grotesque—and the self—his daughter, his "blood" as bourgeois.

Freak Show, thus, not only frames the freak as site of both bourgeois longing (in the case of Penny) and aversion (in the case of her father), but also appears to forward precisely the notion that the freak as liminal grotesque is an inevitable component of bourgeois efforts of self-consolidation. Such a representation goes beyond simplistic conceptions of the freak as powerless victim and spectacle for the oppressive bourgeois gaze, and offers, rather, a relationship between bourgeoisie and freak as a complex web of mutual dependency and bidirectionally effective power. For, as Stallybrass and White remind us, the liminal grotesque is "dangerously unstable" (193), and if the bourgeoisie relies on the freak as a consolidating construct, there is always the possibility that the freak might turn back on its creator.

The climax of Penny's character arc, then, spells out this very possibility: having been let go by her father, she later returns to the house and, together with Desiree, Eve and Suzi abducts her father. The four women tar and feather him, intending originally to castrate and then kill him, but Penny changes her mind at the last minute, and exclaims with a grandiose sense of accomplishment: "I am the Astounding Lizard Girl. You get to live only because I say so" (4.8 38:00).[122] While this might certainly be considered whitewashing in terms of how the freak show operated in reality, historical accuracy rarely seems to be the point in *AHS*.

historical accuracy. Two points of divergence from the historical freak show are worth briefly noting here. One, Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities is a stand-alone circus in which the freaks perform a sequence of artistic acts on a stage in front of a seated audience. The historical freak show (or side show) would accompany a much larger, three-ring circus, and consist of ten performers on a platform or in pits at the same time, with the audience being led to each by a lecturer (for a more comprehensive description of this and other modes freak presentation, see Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* [1988]). Two, as Schottmiller points out, "*AHS* depicts only ableism as an organizing logic of freak shows. The show's writers erase all constructions of nonwhite bodies as 'Natives' and 'Exotics from the Wild.'" (114). While this is not entirely correct—Ethel's introductory speech in the season premiere does employ vocabulary that references and acknowledges the historical freak show's reliance on what Bogdan calls the "exotic mode" (105) of freak presentations—Schottmiller does have a point in that the historical freak show performers' corporeality was very frequently presented in racial terms (apart from Bogdan, Garland-Thomson [1997] and Adams [2001] provide insights into this aspect of the freak show). While technically true, Schottmiller's charge that *AHS*'s writers "present an inaccurate version of freak show history" is ultimately somewhat perplexing because, as a series incorporating a host of supernatural elements it makes no pretense to historical accuracy. In fact, to Mat Fraser who plays Paul, this is "one of its saving graces" ("Fraser").

[122] While the opening of episode 12 "Show Stoppers", during which the freaks chase Stanley after having found out his plan to sell their bodies, borders on a reenactment of the climactic scene in Browning's *Freaks* (especially because the scene is preceded by the freaks telling Stanley about the movie and its plot), the scene described here can be read as a more subtle reference to *Freaks*: apart from the revenge enacted by the freaks against the normatively embodied villain, the fact that Penny ultimately backs away and decides against castration parallels the studio's decision to remove Hercules's implied castration intended in the original script from the final cut of the movie (cf. Adams 74).

What such a representation can achieve (and this would appear to be much more in concert with *AHS*'s overtly political agenda than mere historical accuracy), is to imbue a sense of empowerment to those that might fall within the socio-cultural category of the freak. After all, this category—we recall the twins' calling Addy a freak at the very beginning of the pilot episode—is still very much existent today, even though the freak show is not. Moreover, the label *freak* does not need to be used explicitly for such representations to unfold empowering potential, because our (more) contemporary socio-cultural category *disabled* is closely tied in our cultural memory to the freak, as Mitchell and Snyder point out:

> The contemporary disabled body exists by virtue of a visual residue from the freak show past through a contrast that continues to conjure up the freak as potent image in our interpretive reservoir. [Disabled people's] 'humanization' is trapped in the necessity of referencing dehumanizing representations of prior histories. ("Exploitations")

8.5.3.3 Bourgeoisie / Freak Encounters: Dandy and His Mother

Dandy Mott and his mother Gloria provide a very different angle on the freak-bourgeoisie relationship. If Vince represents the bourgeoisie's formative "phobic avoidance" (Stallybrass and White 191) of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body, and Penny and Myrna represent the tantalizing experience of its resurfacing as liminal grotesque; the Motts's is the disturbing story of a bourgeoisie whose relationship to carnival and the grotesque body has been denied and irretrievably lost.

Although marked by affluence and upward mobility, the bourgeois lifestyles of Myrna, Penny and Vince are nowhere near that of Dandy and Gloria in terms of wealth and distinction. Their boundless consumerism and overzealous demarcation of social standing produce a lifestyle so excessive it becomes a pastiche of aristocracy.[123] Gloria in particular appears to relish this life, having as we learn eventually, married her second cousin so that she could maintain her social status after her father lost his fortune in the stock market crash of 1929. Dandy is the progeny of this mildly incestuous marriage. His very existence is, then, the by-product of a desire to maintain class. Furthermore, his absurdly spoiled upbringing, although filled to the brim with commodities, has always also been marked by restrictions, or "phobic avoidance", imposed by his mother's efforts to demarcate social status. Specifically, she would not let Dandy become a "thespian": "It's not our world, Dandy," she reminds him,

[123] In fact, the Mott family may technically be of aristocratic descent, although this is never stated with satisfactory certainty, and, in any case, is a status that would have lost its significance within capitalist American society.

"You come from a long line of such fine people, generation after generation of refinement. I am simply protecting you from a life of degradation and opprobrium!" (4.2 12:00)—degradation being, we recall, the "essential principle of grotesque realism" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 19). Thus, we might think of Dandy as the physical manifestation of Gloria's liminal grotesque: a hybrid creature borne of a desire of self-consolidation, incorporating both the (hyper-)bourgeois in his mannerisms, parlance, and over all elitism; and a baser, carnivalesque longing in the shape of his desire to become an actor.

This observation forms the basis of my analysis of Dandy, which must, of course, begin with the acknowledgment that there is nothing grotesque about his body. Still, the hyper-bourgeois lifestyle of Dandy, whose very name signifies bourgeois excess (cf. Halberstam 62), recalls, albeit hesitantly and uncomfortably, the "brimming-over abundance" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 19) associated with carnival and the grotesque body.[124] But if both are marked by excess, what precisely is it that is so jarring about the juxtaposition of Dandy and the grotesque (beside the fact that his body does not fit the bill)? Why does there appear to be a sense of reluctance when we think of his longing as carnivalesque? The answer seems to be that his excess and his attempts at satisfying his longing manifest only as perversions of the carnivalesque practices: he buys out the whole tent when he goes to see the freak show, precluding any sense of the carnivals "all-people's character"; his idea of Halloween is to "terrorize the neighborhood" (4.3. 16:00), the trick in trick-or-treating to him is stabbing people; and a magic show of his involves actually cutting a woman in half. Carnivalesque imagery invariably seems to turn perverse around Dandy, such as when he recreates Bette and Dot's grotesque body by stitching the head of the Avon Lady on his dead mother's shoulder and plays with the lifeless body as if it was a string puppet. Or consider his descriptions of Rorschach test images: "I see a man with his arms torn off. His insides are outside for all the world to see. [*He is presented with another image*] Oh, that one's easy. A man is stabbing a woman to death. Her blood is smeared all over the wall. It's going to be a very messy cleanup." (4.8 24:55) His grisly descriptions are remarkably close to the "grotesque image [which] displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, hearts and other organs" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 318). They lack, however, the aspect of renewal so essential to the grotesque image. And even when there is a sense of renewal—as when he anticipates "the carpet of color" (4.5 20:45) that will grow from the flower bed under which he and Gloria buried Dora (Patti LaBelle) the maid and cook after he killed her—his joy over the new life is

[124] Richard Dellamora notes that there is a common misconception that the dandy is an aristocratic figure: "Although some aristocrats were dandies, the 'dandy' as a popular phenomenon is middle-class […]. Dandyism was associated with middle-class uppityism […]" (198).

obviously only an attempt to make his distraught mother feel better. Thus, while each of these instances bears some resemblance to the carnivalesque, the lighthearted aspect is invariably missing. It is like Gloria says herself: "The boy never learned to play" (4.8 1:20).

And it is also Gloria who makes explicit the link we suspect between Dandy's perversion and his wealth: "These mental perversions are an affliction of the extreme affluent. Cousins marry cousins to protect the money, to keep the estates whole. Inbreeding. It becomes a rite of passage to have a psychotic or two in the line." (4.5 20:40). Although her particular reasoning suggests a distinctly biologistic understanding of the link between Dandy's perversion and his wealth, it might also be framed in different terms: "generation after generation of refinement", that is, incessant demarcation from that which is considered "dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating" (Stallybrass and White 191) has left the hyper-bourgeoisie wholly alienated from the carnivalesque spirit. *Freak Show* appears, then, to suggest that this alienation and the concomitant impossibility to alleviate the hyper-bourgeoisie's hyper-boredom may erupt as murderous, "psychotic" violence.

This eruption of violence is associated not only to wealth. It is also coded as specifically American (although the Dandy's dandyism and the Motts' overall lifestyle may conjure up association to the Old World through its resemblance of aristocracy) and linked to hyper-able-bodiedness. To illustrate, let us consider in some detail the scene in episode 5 "Pink Cupcakes" that marks his conscious decision to become a murderer. We see him working out in his room, wearing only briefs and sneakers. From off-screen he narrates:

> I was destined to be the greatest actor of all time. Monty Clift? If I had been in *A Place in the Sun*, George Stevens would have had me do the walk to the electric chair shirtless. I mailed away for one of those Charles Atlas exercise routines they advertise in the back of the Superman comics. [...] And this body is America, strong, violent and full of limitless potential. My arms will hold them down when they struggle. My legs will run them down when they flee. I will be the U.S. Steel of murder. My body holds a heart that cannot love. […] I am perfection. I am greatness. I am the future, and the future starts tonight. (27:00)

Dandy first refers to the movie *A Place in the Sun* (1951), which is based on the novel *An American Tragedy* (1925). In it, a poor man begins manual labor in his rich uncle's factory, slowly works his way upward, and is ultimately willing to commit murder to secure his prospect at wealth. Thus, he links to murderous violence the idea of social advancement through labor, "the definitive creed of Puritan through contemporary America" (Extraordinary 46-47) which, as Garland-Thomson shows, is closely tied to able-bodiedness. In Dandy's fantasy—a shirtless walk to the electric chair—even the punishment for this violence becomes an homage to the able body. The ideas implicit in his reference of *A Place in the Sun* then

begin to take on a more pronounced, even exaggerated form, when he mentions Charles Atlas, widely credited as one of the men who popularized bodybuilding, and Superman. Not only are both Superman and Atlas icons of American hyper-able-bodiedness. Both, moreover, rely on physical violence to assert what might be called bourgeois identity: Superman fights both domestic and foreign enemies of the American way of life; and the Charles Atlas exercise routine adverts were comic strips that regularly featured a boy knocking out a bully and thereby gaining the admiration of nearby girls. The conclusion of Dandy's monologue represents the culmination of his self-absorbed musings, linking together the hyper-able American body; physical violence and murder; American industrial dominance; and his psychopathy.

Although dissipated and erratic, like Dandy himself, his monologue nevertheless suggests a clear trajectory for the self-image of the American bourgeoisie: from labor to wealth, from able-bodied to hyper-able-bodied, from determined to assertive to violent—a trajectory, more precisely, from that which represents the bourgeois ideal to an excessive distortion of it that, in its quasi-fascist demeanor, betrays its own ideology. This very trajectory toward the excessive is echoed also by two implicit intertextual references that Dandy embodies. Prior to this scene, his good looks, man-boyishness and over-involved mother recall Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). At the end of *Psycho*, Bates, the proprietor of a small Motel, is responsible for six murders triggered more or less directly by a traumatic relationship with his mother. This intertextual reference is arguably supplanted by Dandy's workout routine and off-screen narration which brings to the fore the disproportionately more excessive Patrick Bateman from Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* (1991) and Mary Harron's movie adaptation of the same title (2000). A wealthy high-level Wall Street employee obsessed with immaculate looks, Bateman's body-count amounts to somewhere around 40, and his motivation, for the most part, appears to be sheer boredom.[125] *Freak Show*, thus, appears to suggest that the ideology of the bourgeoisie carries in it the seed of its own destruction, because in the absence of a carnivalesque release its idealization of labor and able-bodiedness easily translates into a fetishization of material excess as extreme wealth and hyper-able-bodiedness.

Importantly, the only thing that could have prevented Dandy's violence by satisfying his carnivalesque longing are Bette and Dot (even if Gloria had let him, a career in acting would have been doomed to failure in any case as his laughable "acting faces" make clear), with whom he is falls in love the minute he sees them on stage. As in Myrna and Penny's

[125] In fact, whether Bateman actually committed the murders or merely fantasized them is cast into doubt at the conclusion of both novel and movie.

cases, the freak's body once more provides the corporeal site upon which bourgeois longing is projected. And although its satisfaction is not as explicitly coded in sexual term as in the other instances, to Dandy it is a decidedly bodily matter: "I wish you could be in my body for one minute to know what it feels like to be me," he screams at Gloria when he attempts to explain what Bette and Dot mean to him, "It's like when I had tuberculosis, and you took me out to the Utah desert, and there was nothing but dry open space for hundreds of miles around us. That is what is inside of me. Those girls were a cool stream of glacier water. My heart bloomed as they nourished it." (4.6 42:40)

Thus, if in Penny's arc the freak as grotesque is a bourgeois means of demarcation from what is perceived as too low and too little, in Dandy's arc the freak as grotesque is what demarcates the bourgeoisie from that which is too high and too much. And just as *Freak Show* derives a sense of empowerment from the former purpose by reframing it as the freak's capacity to become a force of disruption to the bourgeoisie's hegemony; so it does from the latter, by suggesting that the freak is all that keeps the bourgeoisie from dismantling itself. Once more, *Freak Show* spells out this capacity in quite literal terms when, after all the bourgeois people who tried, it is Bette and Dot, Jimmy and Desiree who manage to stop Dandy from killing any more people.

But in the latter case, *AHS* curtails its own optimism quite considerably. Dandy points out to the troupe that the freak as cultural safeguard against the self-destruction of the bourgeoisie is vanishing: "The town has had their fill of your mediocre oddities. The thrill is gone. You're yesterday's news." (4.13 2:10) His assessment is correct, of course. The fact the we saw only two performances in front of a full audience throughout the entire season reflects the historical fact that by the 1950s the freak show had all but died out, with the freakish body relegated fully to the realm of natural science and medicine. This development is not only represented by the absence of audiences from the show. Stanley, the seasons other main antagonist besides Dandy, who attempts to steal freaks to turn them into exhibits for the American Morbidity Museum where they would become exhibits framed by scientific and medical discourses. "Audiences want a new type of freak," Dandy continues, "Something different," and although, true to character, he comes up with the absurd idea of putting a pair of horns on Penny, there is a moment of hesitation during which there is a strong sense that he speaks of himself: the psychopath as "new type of freak". Because we do delight in Dandy's highly entertaining psychopathy, because we watched first Norman Bates and moved on from him to Patrick Bateman, the implication is that he talks about us: that we are precisely the audience that yearns for a new freak, that has lost its sense for the all-people's character of the

carnival and revels rather in the violent excess of the hyper-bourgeoisie—that the seed of bourgeois self-destruction is budding.

More importantly, however, there is a distinct pessimism with regard to the empowering reading potentials of the cultural construct of the freak that governs the ending of the season (which is not to withdraw the optimism I identified earlier—I will explore the complex reading potentials of *Freak Show*'s ending more fully below). For if being a freak is such an empowering experience, why do, at the end of the season, all surviving freaks enthusiastically strip themselves of their freak personae, and don, instead, bourgeois identities? The short answer to this question is certainly that such empowering re-framings of the freak construct are little else than precisely that: re-framings; and that the lived experience of the freak show is evidently not quite as compellingly empowering as they might suggest. This is not to say that they do not have value. Unlike dominant representations of the freak as powerless victim of oppression, they present us with a freak who is a powerful and significant social force in relation to the hegemony. As such, they may contribute to a cultural revaluation of those of whom we may think or have thought of in the past as freaks—they may help loosen the tight association in our cultural perception between the freak and notions of inferiority.

8.5.3.4 Bourgeoisie / Freak Encounters: The Freak Show

The question of why the survivors of *Freak Show*'s troupe so eagerly flock from campsite to suburban home can also prompt us to focus our attention away from the freak's significance within a bourgeois context, to the bourgeoisie's significance in the context of the freak show. In other words, it urges us to ask: if *AHS*'s bourgeoisie projects its longing for a carnivalesque "sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities" on the freak show, to what degree does *AHS*'s freak show as carnival actually make good on the perceived promise that it may harbor such relativity?

Although the carnival "marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 10), they were not absent from it, as Russo reminds us:

> The categories of carnivalesque speech and spectacle are heterogeneous, in that they contain the protocols and styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement. The masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society. It is as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation. […] Carnival and the

> carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure. In its multivalent oppositional play, carnival refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class […]. (62)

In the historical freak show we might identify this redeployment, to some measure, in the presentation of freaks that Bogdan calls "aggrandized mode" in which freaks "were given high-status titles such as 'Captain,' 'Major,' 'General,' 'Prince,' 'King,' 'Princess,' or 'Queen.'" (108). But as Garland-Thomson highlights, such titles, especially the aristocratic ones, did not in fact designate American "prevailing truths and authorities" or "high culture" to the American freak show visitor, but "the old order", "vestiges of pre-Enlightenment European culture" (*Extraordinary* 67). Rather than as a leveling of factually dominant hierarchies, this practice is more adequately understood as a reiteration of the American bourgeois identity in distinction to the old hierarchies it "imagined resisting" (67).

And although *Freak Show* does not reference the "aggrandized mode" of freak presentation, even a cursory glance at Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities reveals that here, too, a reiteration of dominant hierarchies takes invariable precedence over any leveling of them. In fact, as Bette's star-struck diary entry records quite accurately in the season premiere: "There is only one law here—the bigger the star, the bigger the tent" (4.1 35:00). The overall order of the bourgeois lifestyle, we learn early on, has largely been transposed to the freak show context. Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities arguably reproduces the two most important social environments of the bourgeoisie, the workplace and the family.

In the workplace, Elsa is boss, and there is what might be called a white-collar caste of troupe members, such as Ethel, Jimmy and Amazon Eve, whom she trusts enough to let them operate somewhat independently and exercise their own, more limited, authority. The much more extensive blue-collar caste to which Ma Petite, Meep, Pepper and a large number of unnamed stagehands belong, however, operates exclusively on orders from the higher ranks.

As a family, the troupe is also structured strictly hierarchical: Elsa is the matriarch and all others relate to her in ways that can be described in terms of familiar bourgeois family constellations: there are grown children, such as Jimmy, with a relatively high degree of liberty, and younger children and toddlers, such as Ma Petite and Pepper, who appear to be wholly dependent on Elsa. Ethel's role resembles that of a grandmother, and Dell might be a more boisterous, somewhat alienated sibling with his extravagant wife Desiree. It is clear that the social environment of *AHS*'s freak show predicates not on level hierarchies, but on a resemblance of bourgeois hierarchies.

One might of course argue that if we understand the freak show as carnivalesque, we should not focus on the time in between of shows, but on the performances themselves, the

carnival proper so to speak. But here too steep hierarchies reign supreme, as the organization of the show—at least the little we get to see of it—makes abundantly clear. The running order of each show appears to be so that Elsa is the headlining act, with all other performers either warming up for her, or playing a supporting role during her performance. Thus, the shows are not only organized by and around the social structure outlined above but are planned so that they visibly reproduce them in front of an audience, publicly reiterating the dominion of the normatively embodied over the freak. In fact, Elsa feels profoundly threatened when Dell introduces matinee shows in which Bette and Dot take center stage on account of Dot's talent as a singer. She asserts her dominance by reorganizing the show so that they are no longer main act, but warm up for the "pinheads" Pepper and Salty. This move not only reiterates the distinct power gradient between (supposed) non-freak Elsa and the freak twins, but also demonstrates the very low rank of Pepper and Salty within the hierarchy, as to open for them appears to be a particularly degrading experience in the logic of Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities.

Another way in which the shows reproduce rather than flatten hierarchies becomes evident when we approach the performances with the concept of carnival laughter in mind. Elsa's is the only serious, or non-comical central act. The other *non-comical* acts, such as the sword swallower or the musicians, serve as mere accouterments of Elsa's performance and are placed below or on the margins of the stage; whereas the other *central* acts, at least those that we see, tend to consist of freaks like Pepper, Salty and Paul doing slapstick comedy bits that attempt humor exclusively by highlighting the respective freak's abnormality. Laughter, to Elsa, should be neither universal nor festive nor ambivalent. In her design, it is directed only at the freaks, and it is provoked by a comical event that foregrounds precisely the distinguishing bodily marks because of which they experience derision and mockery anyway.

But we cannot simply chalk all this up to Elsa and her domineering nature and call her a villain for having created around her a social environment in which she is invariably at the top. In episode 5 "Pink Cupcakes", *AHS* makes sure to show us that Jupiter's own bourgeoise is equally uninterested in a freak show that offers the experience of a carnivalesque leveling of hierarchies. In fact, they care for the show only for as long as the freak performances last, that is, as long as they feel that the show reiterates their own bourgeois distinction. But Elsa's act does not operate in this way. From the audience's point of view, Elsa' act, unlike the freak performances, does in fact destabilize dominant hierarchies as it presents a circus performer in bourgeois terms of stardom. Their reaction to what they appear to perceive as an unduly transgressive act is unequivocally hostile: they lose interest, start throwing popcorn and boo Elsa until they bring her performance to a complete halt. A similar dynamic is evident in

Ethel's biography prior to her joining Elsa's troupe: as long as her show was an upbeat vaudeville dance number, people flocked to see her perform. But when she changed her show and began reciting classics of English literature—in other words, when she trespassed into the realm of the bourgeoisie, audiences began booing her.

These reactions suggest a pervasive absence of a carnivalesque leveling of hierarchies in that the audience remains in the position of relative power they occupy outside the show. While this implies a presumable general skepticism of Bakhtin's notions on the part of *AHS*, Elsa's attitude toward the freaks recalls more specifically the first of the two points of criticism that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter: *displaced abjection*, we recall, is Stallybrass and White's term for the phenomenon that the "low" culture of the carnival tends to turn against those who are perceived to be even lower, rather than against those who are in power. In *Freak Show*, evidence for this phenomenon abounds, as not only Elsa's case demonstrates. In each of the following examples, the relatively powerless turn on those who are perceived to be in an even lower position of power. Consider, for instance Twisty's story: before he became a kidnapper and serial killer, he used to work as a children's clown at Rusty Westchester's Traveling Carnival. But when a group of freaks decided that the job should be theirs because of their "seniority" (4.4 26:20), they began mocking him for his minor intellectual disability, calling him "simpleton", and making him believe that the police was after him for child molestation. A similarly clear case is provided by Dell and Desiree's backstory: they came down to Florida from their Chicago circus after, in a fit of jealousy, Dell had killed a gay man who attempted to "change his stripes" by sleeping with Desiree. But neither are worried that they might be prosecuted because, as Desiree points out, "ain't no Chicago police gonna drag his ass all the way down to this swamp on account of some dead poof. They're lower than us freaks" (4.2 15:30).

At this point, we can safely conclude that *AHS*'s representation of and position toward the freak and the freak show is informed by a profound sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, the narrative seems to forward time and time again the notion that there are redeeming or empowering potentials inherent in the socio-cultural construct of the freak—potentials that present themselves as a result of a critical appreciation of the freak's significance within the social and cultural context of a capitalist bourgeoisie. Such redeeming potentials may have an empowering and ultimately socially transformative (carnivalesque!) effect for those who fall within present-day figurations of the freak construct or the broader category disabled. But on the other hand, *AHS* appears to be highly conscious of the objection articulated by Mitchell and Snyder, that "even a systemic critique of the freak show offers little salvage from its dehumanizing effects" ("Exploitations"). In other words, for all the transformative potential

we might identify in the freak show as carnival, there remains the simple fact that it marginalizes and exploits people whose bodies deviate from the norm. Moreover, if the freak show is, as *AHS* indicates, a bourgeois institution serving primarily the bourgeois interests of self-consolidation, there are likely considerable limitations to the transformative potential it is permitted. Here, we recall the second main objection to Bakhtin's notion of the carnival, namely that a practice legitimized by the hegemony is unlikely to effectuate actual social change. However, we also recall Stallybrass and White reminding us—and Russo making a similar remark—"that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*" [emphases in the original] (14).

AHS, in fact, evidences alertness to these complexities and remains ambivalent about the freak show's *actual* transformative potentials. This ambivalence is perhaps most succinctly articulated by *Freak Show*'s ending. When Jimmy, Bette and Dot, and Desiree all begin bourgeois lives, do we read this as evidence for fulfilled transformative potential, or as evidence for social standstill? Because *AHS* provides no context, both make sense. Their usurpation into the bourgeoise might signify a loss and final repression of their carnivalesque identity, and the triumph of the bourgeois lifestyle over those that deviate from it. Just as easily, it might signify a loss of rigidity and opening up of the social and cultural structures mandated by the bourgeoisie to allow for a more diverse spectrum of bodily figurations. And, of course, it might signify a little bit of both, or something else altogether. The point is that we do not and cannot know: *Freak Show*'s inconclusive ending offers not certainty, only room for guesswork about the transformative potential of the freak show as carnival.

8.5.4 Television Production, Polysemy, and Ambiguous Freak Representation

Toward the beginning of my analysis of the bourgeois/freak relationship in *Freak Show* I expressed qualms regarding my approach toward the material. Echoing Shildrick's reservations about her own research in *Embodying the Monster*, as well as Mitchell and Snyder's now twice quoted similar caveat, I noted that whatever transgressive or empowering reading potentials I might unearth in the chapters to come, two facts remain: one, the historical freak show and its contemporary counterparts instantiate a system of objectification of people with non-normative bodies; and, two, that my scholarly inquisition into the meanings of the freak body inevitably runs the risk of reproducing and perpetuating this system because it "allows the freak show gaze to continue while seemingly disguised behind a façade of

interpretive skepticism" ("Exploitations"). While this relates to scholarly approaches to the freak show, Mitchell and Snyder formulate similar reservations with regard to other forms and media: while "historical re-enactments" of freak shows such as the one in Coney Island might allow for explorations of "disabled subjectivities" within a "predominantly objectifying historical record, […] these resuscitations of the past revivify the original objectification" ("Exploitations"). More generally, they conclude that

> [t]here is something alarmingly recalcitrant about efforts to destabilize, re-appropriate, or politically expose the freak show as a bygone representational mode. Its objectifying formula threatens to transcend its historical moment; even sepia-toned obituaries of the form wind up invested with a strange nostalgia […]. ("Exploitations").[126]

In "Freakery, Cult Films, and the Problem of Ambivalence" (2011), David Church points out an especially distinctive variation of this very dynamic. He argues that part of cult cinema's appeal is that it tends to feature non-normative bodies, or "freakery" (3), which can be read by the audience to signify rebellion against normativity. But as these bodies become "visual shorthand for 'strangeness' or 'weirdness,' making the films [in which they occur] seem less accessible to 'normal' tastes" (10), cult cinema begins "inadvertently encouraging the disabled body's stigmatization by linking 'transgressive' physical difference to social deviance and marginalization" (12).

In each of these instances a highly ambivalent dynamic persists in the form of a representational quandary: it appears that any critique of the freak show and what is perceived as its attendant ideologies is always accompanied by the (inadvertent) reproduction of the freak show's effects and the ideologies at which the critique is aimed. According to my readings presented in the previous case studies, *Freak Show* itself appears to acknowledge this problem to a degree, remaining hesitant in the face of its own powerful evocations of freak empowerment, permeating them with frequent representations of the institution's "dehumanizing effects". But each of the above instances, we should note, relates to a different form and medium of freak representation, and there is a sense that this has some considerable bearing on how precisely this ambivalent dynamic plays out. This formal and media specificity will be the central concern of this chapter: if critical freak and freak show representation is inevitably freighted with the danger of reproducing its own object of criticism, what impact

[126] By mimicking cheaply colorized versions of highly popular *carte de visite* photography (cf. Garland-Thomson *Extraordinary* 62), this is arguably precisely the effect of some of the promotional photos that were released prior to *Freak Show*'s premiere and continue to pop up in any Google search for the season's main characters.

does the serial form and medium of television have on the degree to which *Freak Show* is, simply put, itself a freak show?

Although my exploration of this question will focus on industrial aspects of serial television production—rather than, as previous chapters have, on narrative and structural aspects of serial storytelling—we begin by returning briefly to *AHS*'s storyworldly Jupiter, Florida, where television, although still at the beginning of its proliferation throughout the American household, is already ubiquitous. I will first demonstrate that *Freak Show*'s representation of television is suggestive of precisely those characteristics that render it a medium especially prone to representational ambivalence and likely to slip from authorial and creative control. I will then show how these characteristics may be borne of industrial practices of producing television series, and, finally, how these practices may impact *AHS*'s representations of the freak in particular and disability in general.

In *Freak Show*, the subject of television is invariably associated in some manner with the carnivalesque. For instance, just minutes before Myrna achieves sexual satisfaction at the hands of Jimmy, she links her frustration to television: "Every Thursday night at 9:00 p.m., he [her husband] turns on *Dragnet* and climbs on top of me" (4.1 22:00). While Myrna appears to suggest that television does nothing to satisfy her carnivalesque longing, for her husband the opposite appears to be true. In another instance, Lillian Hemmings, director of the American Morbidity Museum, laments that "without new exhibits, even our most loyal patrons would rather stay at home and watch *Ed Sullivan*" (4.3 2:20). Here, television is more explicitly juxtaposed with and likened in function to the carnivalesque because her remark follows a presentation of the exhibits—photographs of freaks, conjoined human skulls, a two-headed chick—which she delivers using terms and tone reminiscent of a side-show barker. Later in the same episode, two mothers discuss that although they "can't wait for Halloween to be over" because of "all the kids jacked up on sugar" they still prefer it over them watching television: "I swear, *Dragnet* is going to be the downfall of American culture" (4.3 38:40). Not only is television discussed in these instances as a particularly "low" form of culture; the implication is furthermore that Halloween's arguably carnivalesque function for children is assumed by television in its absence.[127] Of course, the medium figures most prominently in

[127] The choice of shows to which *Freak Show* refers is interesting: *Dragnet* (1951-1959) is the show that popularized the use of telefilm for drama series, the production model that still dominates dramatic serial programming today (cf. Mittell, *Television* 169-170). *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948-1971) was a variety program resembling in many ways the vaudeville tradition of American stage entertainment. As a primetime drama telefilm that is interspersed with musical performances, *Freak Show*—or *AHS* as a whole, since musical performances also occur in *Asylum* and *Coven*—seems to align itself with these early hits of the medium.

Freak Show when Stanley attempts to gain Elsa's (and briefly Bette's and Dot's) trust by promising her a television show of her own. Elsa is still dead set on making it on the big screen, which she considers the most superior form of entertainment, and vehemently refuses Stanley's offer: "My name alongside some type of, uh, instant coffee or shampoo? No! I know for a fact, motion pictures will never be replaced by your TV, no. […] I would never participate in what I consider to be the death of art and civilization." (4.5 7:00) Like the mothers in the previous example, Elsa's view draws a parallel between television and the carnivalesque as both represent "low" culture from which "high" culture must remain distinct.

In each of these instances, then, television is represented as carnivalesque. Strikingly, Fiske draws up the same analogy when he notes:

> The carnival, according to Bakhtin, was characterized by laughter, by excessiveness (particularly of the body and the bodily functions), by bad taste and offensiveness, and by degradation. Television is frequently accused of, or more rarely praised for, these same vices and virtues. (243)

But the shared privileging of what is perceived as "low" culture does not exhaust the analogy of television and the carnival because, like carnival and its "all-people's character," television is marked by what Fiske subsumes under "multivocality" (89) or "polysemy" (85)—a multiplicity of ambivalent voices, ironic, metaphorical, jocular, excessive, and downright contradictory (cf. 85-94). In fact, Elsa's rejection of Stanley's offer is grounded in one manifestation of precisely this polysemy: she objects to the idea of having her glamorous star persona muddled by juxtaposition to something so pedestrian as instant coffee. Admittedly, the notion of the television text's polysemy borders on the truism and has been expressed in various forms many times over,[128] perhaps most famously by Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch in their essay "Television as a Cultural Forum."[129]

But polysemy is not the singular domain of the television text. Fiske, for instance, notes that Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism, both of which are formulated in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), denote similar ideas without referencing television (cf. 89-

[128] See, for instance, Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television" (1986); Reeves, "Rewriting Culture: A Dialogic View of Television Authorship" (1990); and Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (1994) (cf. 5-6, 59-61), see also all subsequent editions (2002, 2007, 2012). Mittell expresses similar ideas throughout *Complex TV*, especially in parts of the chapter "Ends" in which he discusses different reading potentials of *Homeland* (2011-2020) and *Breaking Bad* (cf. 339-349).

[129] Although Newcomb and Hirsch do see "individual episodes, series, or even genres" as invested with "incredibly mixed ideas," their emphasis is on "television as a whole system that presents a mass audience with the range and variety of ideas and ideologies inherent in American culture" (508).

90). Moreover, one of Fiske's central theoretical points of reference is Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (1974), in which he argues "that even the most apparently closed narrative, a realist one with its closing reliance upon 'truth to reality' as its final pleasure, is available to open, 'writerly' readings" (145). Nevertheless, he ultimately argues that while textual openness may be a universal feature of narratives, the television series is particularly "open to negotiation" (148). His argument is based on the idea that television provokes a higher degree of viewer engagement with the text at hand than novels or cinema: the inevitable absence of narrative closure even in the most episodic series results in a "tension between equilibrium and disruption" (146) which, in turn, contributes to a sense on the part of the viewer that they are directly involved with the text's diegesis. This sense of involvement, Fiske adds, is reinforced by commercial breaks that directly address the viewer, making "explicit the sense of intimacy between the televisual world and that of the viewer in a way that breaks the self-containedness of television's diegesis by presenting it not as a separate world (like that of a film or a book) but as a part of the 'real' world of the viewer." (147)[130]

Of course, it is precisely its polysemy that renders television so especially prone, as I put it above, to representational ambivalence and likely to slip from authorial control. This means that television's especially distinct polysemy contributes to the representational quandary that marks *Freak Show*. However, we should note that Fiske is concerned primarily with highly serialized television such as soap operas and highly episodic narratives such as cop shows. He does not take into account our subject matter of complex TV, which, we recall, "*redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration*" [italics in the original] (Mittell, *Complex* 18). This does not diminish the validity of his argument in any way—after, all soap operas and cop shows continue to exist. Furthermore, his omission is quite simply due to the fact that his argument's conception preceded the advent of what we refer to as complex TV.

But I will argue presently that beyond the sense of viewer involvement encouraged by the essential narrative openness of the television text, there are industrial conditions and production methods that render the phenomenon of polysemy especially pronounced in complex TV—perhaps even more so than in the forms that Fiske describes. By being conducive of televisual polysemy, these industrial realities have a direct bearing, I contend, on *Freak Show*'s representational quandary, and, thus, must not be ignored. For, as Mittell observes with regard to television authorship (to which I will return in more detail below):

[130] When I stream television at home, I can see myself reflecting in the black screen that replaces the commercial breaks.

> There is a romantic notion that a writer's creative vision starts as 'pure' and then gets compromised through the process of realizing that vision, especially in the commercially inflected world of mass media. However, the creative process in television is always inflected by the realities of both practical production and commercial concerns for what can and cannot sell, and these concerns shape television storytelling in all stages of creativity. (92)[131]

There is, however, a limitation to my argument that I should acknowledge head-on: much of this chapter reasoning must remain somewhat speculative, perhaps to a degree that some readers may find inconsistent with its project of shedding light on the effect of industrial *realities* on the narrative's freak representation. The reason for this is simply that my research does not involve, could not, in fact, have involved factual insider knowledge of the actual production process of *Freak Show* that constitutes these industrial realities. When Gray and Lotz point out that "of the most elaborate assessments of the intersection of the television industry and culture available to date [, n]early all took historical objects of study" (103), this suggests that access to contemporary productions is difficult or even impossible to obtain. In an effort of "protecting power from prying eyes" (Gitlin 18), the television industry, like any industry, is invested in keeping its modes of production secret, shrouded in mystery, or represented to the public in a distorted fashion. Obviously, although desirable in an ideal world, it would have been beyond the scope of my research to approach the industrial realities surrounding *Freak Show*'s production as extensively as Caldwell, for instance, approaches Hollywood's television and film industry as a whole in his comprehensive ethnographic analysis *Production Culture* . But it is studies such as his that provide important insights which allow us, even in the absence of actual fieldwork, to draw some valuable conclusions regarding the significance of industry practices for the representations they produce.

8.5.4.1 Polysemy and Audience Appeal

The first industrial reality that I wish to address relates to polysemy as a necessary means to secure audience appeal. It has frequently been suggested that broadcasting is one of the industry practices that palpably changed during American television's transition from the network era to the multi-channel era to the post-network era. The imperative to provide the "least objectionable programming" (Klein qtd. in Lotz 24) in order to appeal to the largest

[131] Gray and Lotz note: "When those in humanities traditions, such as English, examine television, the work risks being shockingly ignorant of industrial considerations" (90). They go on to trace the history of the conflict between proponents of the political economy approach to studying television and the cultural studies approach, arguing that for a long time "the acrimonious divide" (104) between the two prevented much productive work in the field of television studies.

possible audience (cf. Fiske 37) may be responsible for a host of mediocre and forgettable productions, but it is arguably also one of the foundations of many television shows' exceptional degree of polysemy. This imperative, so the argument goes, has grown less and less significant as more channels became available to the viewer, allowing for an increase in niche programming and what is today often referred to as narrowcasting.[132]

However, while there is no contesting the unprecedented relevance of narrowcasting, within the framework provided by any program's target audience there remains considerable representational leeway. Neil Marshall, two-time director on *Game of Thrones*, offers an exemplary anecdote, in which he relates how during filming he was approached by an unnamed executive producer who urged him to shoot a scene with full frontal nudity. *Vulture.com* quotes Marshall saying,

> This particular exec took me to one side and said, 'Look, I represent the pervert side of the audience, okay? Everybody else is the serious drama side, [but] I represent the perv side of the audience, and I'm saying I want full frontal nudity in this scene.' So you go ahead and do it. (Buchanan)

The anecdote is instructive because it explains why *Game of Thrones* so frequently features gratuitous nudity, a practice that often seems at odds with its otherwise progressive and respectful portrayal of powerful women: evidently, the comprehensive satisfaction of the show's viewership calls for contradictory representational strategies.

In an interview with *Not Television*, Mat Fraser, who plays Paul on *Freak Show*, suggests how commercial necessity may have been productive of polysemy on *Freak Show*:

> *Not Television*: What's been the most challenging thing about working on AHS: Freak Show?
>
> Fraser: […] To basically be a subsidiary character in the portrayal of my own cultural heritage as a disabled performer – moreover, one whose presence lends an authenticity to the production that it would not otherwise enjoy… To be the one person on set who has for a lifetime lived and breathed the experience of being a physical outsider, and has actually both acted and been a performing freak professionally… That has made it hard to be asked to stand, sit and be in the background to so many scenes where a non-disabled actor delivers passionate speeches about being different, being a freak in this cruel world et cetera et cetera et fucking cetera. It's had me very upset privately many times.

[132] For a concise history of these developments see Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (2014).

> I really like all these guys and where do you find a two-headed actor? I get it. And the repertory company vibe, where the star regulars get to play the main people, is all fine. But because it's my history they're taking about, it's been hard […].
>
> *NT*: And what's been most pleasing?
>
> Fraser: The opposite to all the stuff above. Ryan Murphy decided to cast me as the lover! Never been done on US TV, but I play a lover type, with lines that no disabled actor would ever usually have in any mainstream TV thing. I was pleased to finally be allowed to flex my acting muscles […]. (Fraser)

A number of tensions that mark *AHS*'s freak representation become apparent in Fraser's remarks. On the one hand, *Freak Show* gave him as a disabled actor the rare opportunity to play a character type not usually associated with disability, which is highly suggestive of *AHS*'s subversive efforts with regard to freak or disability representation. However, his personal experience, and the subversive potential of the representation, is marred by the fact that the majority of the central lines and speeches that explicitly address discriminatory practices against people with disability were given to non-disabled performers, while the disabled performers stood silently in the background. The choice of arranging and shooting such scenes in this manner risks reinforcing precisely the hierarchies that the speeches delivered in them lament. After all, they silence and marginalize the disabled performer while granting the prerogative of interpreting reality to the non-disabled performer. But, as Fraser suggests, the choice may ultimately be informed by two (interrelated) considerations regarding audience appeal: on the one hand, *AHS*'s popularity relies at least in part on the immense popularity of its repertory cast members such as Jessica Lange, Sarah Paulson, Evan Peters and Kathy Bates, so it seems logical that central parts of the narrative would go to these performers. On the other hand, the presence of people with actual disabilities "lends an authenticity to the production it would not otherwise enjoy." Formulated more harshly, what this implies is that the presence of people with disabilities who might have been "real" freaks provides bodies at which the audience bodies can gawk, all the while being ostensibly absolved of this act of objectification because it is accompanied by "passionate speeches about being different, being a freak in this cruel world." The accouterment of the mise-en-scene with "actual" freaks may be read as stylistic choice but as the casting of Jyoti Kisange Amge as Ma Petite demonstrates it also pertains to audience appeal. Amge had achieved some considerable fame prior to her attachment to *AHS* because at the time of her casting she held (and still does at the time of writing) the Guinness World Record as the world's smallest living woman. Unsurprisingly, many news reports about her joining the cast focused precisely on this fact. It

seems likely that the choice to cast her was based on a prediction of the publicity effect it would have rather than on her acting skills, which one struggles to describe as anything but wooden, a far cry from that of the other members of the cast.

8.5.4.2 Polysemy and Production Modes

The quandary of freak representation particular to *AHS* and complex TV's polysemy in general are not only grounded in decisions regarding audience appeal. They are also linked to industrial realities that arise from practices common to the mode of production of complex television. I will consider two closely related aspects here: the time pressure under which shows must be shot (cf. Caldwell, *Production Culture* 174); and the fact, determined in part by time pressure, that "[n]arrative television is a highly collaborative medium" (Mittell *Complex* 87). Both aspects, I will argue, result in a diminished authorial control over the television text that opens it up to polysemy and, thus, contradictory reading potentials.[133] At the same time, both aspects also grant a higher degree of agency to actors than they usually have in other media. This potentially greater agency may figure as an important—normatively speaking: redeeming—factor of AHS's freak representation because, as Mitchell and Snyder point out, a central question "informing contemporary studies of freaks concerns the agency of individual performers in their creation of artificial stage personas" ("Exploitations").

Caldwell explains that

> unlike feature films, which may be shot over six weeks or even six months, most long-form television must be shot and finished in seven to eight days. Despite similarities in mode of production, television's budget-induced scheduling pressure creates working conditions in hour-long prime-time dramas that are far more manic and intense than feature film shoots. (*Production Culture* 174)

For a concrete example, consider producer Scott Brazil's explanation of the "stylistic benchmark" for the influential series *The Shield*:

> It goes to Clark Johnson who directed our pilot. A lot of stylistic choices … were born out of the fact that we had: (1) no time, (2) no money, and (3) Clark's experience with *Homicide*. There he learned to direct that way. And they directed handheld [with]

[133] Since my subsequent discussion of creative and authorial control in television series naturally implies authorial *intent*, I should note briefly that what follows is not meant to contest the validity of what is known as the intentional fallacy—quite to the contrary. My point is not to extrapolate definitive meanings by subtracting industrial influences on the text until I arrive at some measure of original intent at the core of the narrative. Rather, the implication of my analysis with regard to the intentional fallacy would be that it should be observed in discussions of television programs *in particular* precisely because of the abundance of influences on authorship.

> 16mm cameras. This sort of approach for us—from a storytelling point of view—was to try and make it feel like … a police ride-along. That's where it began. No time, no money. Handheld. [omissions and alteration in the original quote] (qtd. in Caldwell, *Production Culture* 227).[134]

This quote suggests that coincidences and relatively ad hoc decisions forced by necessities arising from prime-time television's mode of production can have a profound impact on the show (lasting, in the case of *The Shield*, for 88 episodes and seven seasons). Thus, the text's internal coherence is inherently less stable and more likely to give way to contradictions than in other media.

What Caldwell calls "speed shooting and hyperproduction", particularly the relatively novel time and money-saving practice of shooting whole takes with more than one camera, has a distinct effect on the actors' performances:[135] "actors revert to spontaneous interaction having little to do with shot-by-shot directorial choices or scripted camera instructions" (*Production Culture* 229). For instance, Catherine Dent from *The Shield* points out that this mode of shooting is "freeing" (qtd. in Caldwell, *Production Culture* 402n41; see also 174), a claim that is echoed by William H. Macy from the American version of *Shameless* (2011-present) (cf. Macy). Furthermore, such freer performances are more likely to reflect in and impact the finished textual product, as diminished authorial or directorial control does not end after photography concludes. Caldwell also quotes Scott Powell, editor on *24* (2001-2010) commenting on the effects contemporary shooting methods have on postproduction: "I've never received this much footage in a show. Or paid less attention to the script. We go through and *read the film*. And we do a lot of rewriting after it is shot" [emphasis in the original quote] (*Production Culture* 20). Consequently, complex TV's hurried production mode may entail a degree of polysemy that, in the case of *AHS*, makes it more difficult to exert the creative control that would be required to escape or keep to a minimum the contradictory implications of the quandary of freak representation. At the same time, this more limited creative control appears to grant performers greater agency over their role, an effect that may extenuate some of the exploitative aspects of *Freak Show*'s deployment of non-normative bodies as background accouterment.

These aspects of contemporary modes of *on-set* production techniques all belong to the industrial practices that render television an exceptionally collaborative medium. But

[134] Lotz points out that although a series such as *The Shield* employs a handheld camera's "unstable image to reinforce a sense of spontaneous action" (105), stability controls allow for the use of handheld cameras on shows that do not employ such a stylistic device.

[135] For a more detailed explanation of the introduction of multiple cameras into telefilm production modes see Lotz (104-105).

television is also collaborative because of practices that relate more directly to authorship. Mittell characterizes television authorship in distinction to literary and cinematic authorship. In literature, he argues,

> we imagine *authorship by origination*, in which a singular creator devises every word and thus is responsible for creating everything found in the text. Such a notion is obviously an oversimplification, minimizing the important role of feedback, editing, publishing, and intertextual influence, but it is the widespread conception of what a literary author does. [italics in the original] (*Complex* 87-88)

For cinema, our notion of the director as "singular creator" is not as pronounced because it is commonly known that "legions of performers, technical crew members, designers and executives" (88) as well as the script writer are involved in the process of making a movie. Still, there is the assumption that the director usually has the final say, which is why Mittell proposes the term "*authorship by responsibility*" [italics in the original] (88). For television series, we might think of "*authorship by management*" [italics in the original] (88) as a model that best describes not only the job of showrunner, the producer to whom authorship in television is commonly ascribed, but also the jobs of the various other producers that oversee an episode's writing, filming, editing and so on. The point of describing television authorship in this way is not to deny

> their roles in originating ideas or taking responsibility for choices, but it emphasizes the additional role that television authors must take in helming an ongoing series rather than a stand-alone work, as well as highlighting the importance of the sustained team of creative and technical crew that often stay with a single series for years. (89)

Or, as Caldwell puts it less enthusiastically: "Viewing television as an industrial—rather than merely artistic—practice shows television authorship to be inherently protracted, collective, and contested" (*Production Culture* 201). Whichever way we think of and value television's authorial processes,[136] even the most romanticized celebrations of complex television as "auteur series" tend to acknowledge, if sometimes implicitly, the collaborative authorial efforts that support the "auteur."[137]

[136] Gray's (2008) chapter "Creativity, innovation, and industry" (pp. 16-44) offers an intriguing discussion of these processes' advantages and disadvantages.

[137] See, for instance, David Lavery's "The Imagination Will Be Televised: Showrunning and the Re-animation of Authorship in 21st Century American Television" (2010). The collection in which it appears, "Auteur Series: The Re-invention of Television" edited by Christoph Dreher, exhibits the same overall tendency. It should be noted, however, that it is rarely the showrunners themselves who claim to be auteurs, but rather critics both scholarly and popular, who make that ascription.

Perhaps the best-known manifestation of television's collaborative authorial process is what Caldwell calls "writing by committee" (211), or the writer's room. Although each episode of a given series usually credits only the individual who provided the first draft of the script (cf. Mittell, *Complex* 91), the reality is that in the vast majority of cases the scripts are a collaborative creative effort by a group of people, 6 to 12 strong (cf. 90). While ultimately the authority over the narrative remains with the showrunner and, to a lesser extent, the high-level producers, "all writers' contributions are incorporated into a creative stew" (91).[138]

As creator and producer Mitchell Hurwitz puts it for his show *Arrested Development* (2003–2006, 2013, 2018), "[t]here are really a lot of voices in the scripts" (qtd. in Caldwell, *Production Culture* 212). This suggests that the collaborative authorial process of a series, despite the "showrunner's defining vision" (211), is productive of another way in which it is particularly open to polysemy, contradictions, and internal inconsistencies. Once again, in the case of *AHS*, this decreased authorial control might have increased the difficulty of resolving or avoiding the quandary of freak representation.

But like the hurried production mode, collaborative authorship also enables performers to take greater agency over their role. Gray notes that television is "sometimes more of a writer's medium, sometime more of a producer's medium, and sometimes the stars hold significant power" (28). With regards to the writer's room this is the case simply because writing takes place not only before but again after, and also during shooting. Thus, the acting can have a direct bearing on the text that goes beyond the particular performance in a specific scene in that it informs writing choices. As Hurwitz notes, "the writers can't help but follow them [the performers]. Sometimes it's based on the words that are spoken, but often times it is because of the personas that the actors bring with them to the role" (qtd. in Caldwell, *Production Culture* 228). *Breaking Bad*'s showrunner Vince Gilligan provides another example of how performers can come to shape the authorial process. He says that the creative conception of a character that is not yet cast must always be mindful of the performer's unknown qualities, which may have an impact on the character's significance within the narrative. For the writing process this means that "you kind of have to wing it. It's like

[138] The industrial practice of *giving notes* is the one instance that can override a showrunner's creative decisions. A "note is in fact a corporate communiqué based on some artistic and economic ideal about how film/television *should* work. Notes are seldom lengthy or abstract since they function as orders about who to cast, how to modify scripts, how to deal with quality of performance, how to recut a scene, or how to revise endings" (Caldwell, *Production Culture* 217). The process of giving notes and their amount and frequency differs from show to show and from corporate culture to corporate culture (cf. Mittell, *Complex* 91).

improvisational jazz" ("'Interview'"). But performers can also influence the narrative outside of the writer's room. Mittell explains:

> Television characters derive from collaboration between actors who portray them and the writers and producers who devise their actions and dialogue. Performance is always a collaborative act, as actors embody the roles sketched out on the page; within television's writer-driven production model […], this collaboration is most typically developed through pre-production work between actors and showrunners […]. Thus actors have varying degrees of creative authority and collaborative ownership of their ongoing characters […]. (119)

Indeed, both Mat Fraser and Erika Ervin, who plays Amazon Eve, report that they had some considerable influence on their characters. Ervin says that her role was originally written for a man, but that she managed to change it because she simply "auditioned for the part as a guy […] and nailed it" (*American Horror Story: Freak Show - Extra-Ordinary Artists - Erika Ervin* 0:50). Fraser's influence appears to have been even greater:

> I negotiated the character from a lizard man to a sealboy. And they also write for the actor, so once they'd seen me and got to know me, my character became somewhat darker and edgier – ha ha! – than the all-round nice guy they had planned. […] I also just refused to have my face tattooed. I didn't want to be stuck on my biggest break ever in a six-month shoot and not have my face recognisable! ("Fraser")[139]

Even more so than industrial practices that lead to the dispersal of creative control, practices of collaborative authorship may mitigate exploitative aspects of *AHS*'s freak representation. There is evidence that suggests that the voices and subjectivities of *Freak Show*'s non-normatively embodied performers inform and inflect the narrative in a manner that far exceeds the agency granted to most performers on the historical freak show.

In fact, *AHS* provides a paratextual platform where these performers' voices can be heard: shortly before the season premiere, short promotional videos were released featuring the non-normatively embodied supporting cast members Ben Woolf, Erika Ervin, Jyoti Amge, Mat Fraser and Rose Siggins. In these videos the performers speak briefly about how they experience their disability or gender dysphoria, their relation to the ascription "freak," their performance on *Freak Show*, and how all these experiences relate. These videos arguably suggest that among the producers there is an awareness of the exploitative aspect of the season,

[139] It is implied by a promotional video that, similar to Paul, the character Legless Suzi is somewhat inspired the performer who plays her, Rose Siggins. In a promotional video (*American Horror Story: Freak Show - Extra-Ordinary Artists - Rose Siggins HD*) we see a clip from episode 4 in which Suzi explains that her legs were amputated at a very young age because of a spinal condition. The video then cuts to Siggins as herself explaining that she was diagnosed with sacral agenesis, a spinal condition, because of which her legs were amputated when she was a child.

and a concern for minimizing this aspect as well as the potentially negative publicity it might entail. Their very titles—*American Horror Story: Freak Show - Extra-Ordinary Artists* followed by the respective performer's name— may be read as a somewhat desperate attempt at substituting the collateral but inevitable ascription of the category "freak" to the season's non-normatively embodied performers (which is carried out by the season's very title) with the ascription "extra-ordinary." But nevertheless, these videos ultimately also provide another opportunity for viewers to unidirectionally gaze at the performers' non-normative embodiment—an opportunity, moreover, that risks extending the ascription "freak" beyond the text's diegesis by depicting them, like many performers were on the historical freak show (cf. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary* 51), ostensibly "being themselves," engaging in everyday actions in between of takes and off set. Consequently, the quandary of freak representation appears to invariably permeate the whole of the text and its paratexts in different variations.

8.5.5 *American Horror Story*'s Final (?) Remark on Disability

I argued earlier that by foregrounding in its representation of television its carnivalesque aspects, *Freak Show* acknowledges the medium's exceptional propensity for polysemy, its inherent tendency to invite inconsistent and contradictory readings. Of course, this acknowledgment must, by extension, also be read as a self-aware and self-critical acknowledgment of *AHS*'s own inevitable polysemy, its own inability to escape exploitative representations and reading potentials.

The notion of self-critical awareness—the various manifestations of which have also been discussed in previous chapters—returns us to the text a final time because it reflects prominently in a short story arc toward the end of *Freak Show*. Spanning just two installments, episode 11 "Magical Thinking" and 12 "Show Stoppers", it features Jamie Brewer's third role on *AHS* after her roles of Addy in *Murder House* and Nan in *Coven*. In *Freak Show*, she plays magician Chester Creb's ventriloquist's dummy Marjorie as he, Chester, imagines her (all other characters see simply an inanimate ventriloquist's dummy). Brewer's Marjorie might, thus, best be understood as the manifestation of Chester's psychosis. The psychosis is implied to have been brought on by a severe World War II trauma paired with the realization upon his return that his wife had begun a lesbian affair. We may read the war as an effort to secure the lifestyle of the American bourgeoisie and the lesbian affair as a dangerous intrusion upon this lifestyle—Chester suggests as much when he hallucinates his wife, who he had killed after Marjorie urged him to, and reproachfully says to her, "I went to a war for you" (4.12 29:30).

Thus, Marjorie might also be described as Chester's liminal grotesque: a product, ultimately, of an anxiety over the potential loss or destabilization of bourgeois identity. She is, furthermore, a hybrid in a number of ways: real and imaginary, human and object, self and other, friend and enemy. In this chapter's context, the most important ways in which she is a hybrid—and the reason I only turn to this instance of the liminal grotesque here and not previously with the other examples—is that to us she is also a hybrid of Marjorie and Jamie Brewer, and thus of Marjorie and Addy, and Marjorie and Nan. In other words, Marjorie operates as an intertextual reference to *AHS*'s earlier central disability representations. Remarkably, however, the character Marjorie is not disabled. That is to say, within *Freak Show*'s diegesis the ascription "disabled" does not apply to her in any feasible way—neither explicitly as it does to Addy, nor implicitly as it does Nan—because she is a puppet imagined to be alive. She is the only one of her kind and thus lacks an ontological Other, or a norm by which any deviance might be measured. This means, by extension, that to the viewer Marjorie instantiates a hybrid of disabled and non-disabled.

Importantly, the same cannot be said about the normatively embodied actors who play freaks, at least not to the same extent. Two differences between the cases must be noted here. The first is that the practice of non-disabled performers playing disabled characters is not only common, but has, in fact, been the dominant mode of performing disability for the longest time. It thus arguably rendered wholly unremarkable and likely to go unnoticed (at least by the able-bodied part of the audience).[140] By contrast, the practice of disabled performers playing non-disabled characters is virtually non-existent, and thus much more likely to be consciously noted.[141]

The second difference is due to the fact that although we can divide the troupe into two different categories of freaks—those played by normatively embodied performers and those played by non-normatively embodied performers—these categories have no bearing in the diegesis. We are highly likely to empathize with *all* freaks, they *all* are the narrative's heroines and heroes, and we root for them *all* to succeed. This homogeneity of the freaks is important because it has the effect of obscuring any sense of disabled / non-disabled hybridity of the freaks played by "non-freaks." This obscuration is particularly effective in episode 12,

[140] The practice is so common, in fact, that it has been dubbed by disability critics as "cripface," a term meant to recall the much more universally discredited practice of blackface.

[141] The only circumstances under which this does occur is when only little effort is required to enable a performer with a relatively minor disability to pass as non-disabled. *AHS*'s repertory cast member Frances Conroy provides a case in point. For her role as Ruth Fisher on *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) she wore a contact lens that hid her discolored eye. On *Murder House*, the discoloration was built into the story as a result of her character Moira having been shot by Constance.

with which I am chiefly concerned here. Having found out that Stanley (whose sleazy con-artistry has rendered him an arguably unambiguous villain in every regard throughout the entire season) schemes to kill them and sell their bodies, all freaks, with their homogeneity emphasized by the presence of their mutual antagonist, first take equal turns torturing him psychologically, and then chase him across the camp and mutilate him together.[142] From a storytelling point of view, this story arc instantiates a straightforward good-versus-bad structure, in which the viewer is satisfied that good ultimately defeats evil.

True to her hybridity, the character of Marjorie presents a more ambiguous case than the relatively clear-cut cases of the freaks and Stanley. While she is certainly represented as unsettlingly malicious and scary, she arguably also holds an appeal that appears to be linked to Brewer in two ways: one, the glee with which Brewer performs Marjorie's villainy is highly enjoyable to watch;[143] two, we might be more inclined to be drawn to her despite her villainy because we recall her highly sympathetic roles from previous seasons.[144]

Thus, if in the face of Marjorie's hybridity, we experience both aversion and sympathy, we might say that she represents *our, the viewer's* liminal grotesque. Straddling the line between the viewer's world and *Freak Show*'s storyworld, Marjorie's liminality and hybridity evoke and reflect not only *Freak Show*'s ambiguity regarding the quandary of freak representation, which, we recall, is concerned precisely with the "alarmingly recalcitrant" ("Exploitations") power of the historical freak show to inflect any fictional representation of it. What is more, Marjorie's liminality and hybridity address *AHS*'s disability representation

[142] Having argued in this chapter so vehemently for television's extraordinary polysemy, I would be amiss to suggest that there might not be some redeeming factor to Stanley's character that I fail to recognize as such. I am confident, nevertheless, that irrespective of redeeming factors no viewer of *Freak Show* would in seriousness consider Stanley the narrative's hero. Similarly, the viewers' sympathies might, as I have noted at the very beginning of this chapter on *Freak Show*, be somewhat unequally distributed among the members of the troupe. Ultimately, however, they make up the narrative's "collective" protagonist.

[143] I understand that this is a subjective claim, and while a search on internet discussion boards on *AHS* will yield many users who agree with my evaluation of Brewer's performance, there are also those who do not. However, I concur with Mittell who argues that aesthetic judgments can and should play a role in scholarship of complex television. Although "evaluative critique does not aspire to the status of fact or proof" it can be used "to strengthen our understanding of a how a television program works" (*Complex* 207). This is precisely what I hope to achieve with my evaluation of Brewer's performance. Furthermore, I would add that, in any case, I am concerned in my study only with *reading potentials*, and not with definitive readings that claim to be indisputably factual. In other words, arguing on the basis of the claim that Brewer's performance is enjoyable to watch is thus no more of a risky undertaking than, for example, readings that are based on intertextual references, which might equally not be recognized or appreciated by all viewers.

[144] Mittell provides a thorough examination of the significance of memory in complex television (cf. *Complex* 180-194), arguing that it "requires viewers' effort and attention for ongoing comprehension, strategically triggering, confounding, and playing with viewers' memories via medium-specific techniques" (180).

as a whole, which, as I demonstrated in previous chapters, has arguably always struggled with and acknowledged its own (normatively) troublesome implications.

But this is not just a matter of addressing this representational tension. *Freak Show*, as *AHS*'s season chiefly concerned with non-normative embodiment, appears to go all out in attempting to resolve these tensions once and for all. Marjorie's arc climaxes in episode 12 when she causes Chester to botch his magic act rehearsal and saw in half and kill Maggie, who had been working with Stanley but stopped after developing genuine friendships with the freaks. Notably, there is an analogy between the character Maggie and the series *AHS*: both struggle with the tension between siding with and exploiting people who are non-normatively embodied, with the impossibility, as I put it, to have it both ways. Marjorie's murder-by-proxy of Maggie, thus, takes on a twofold (hybrid!) significance. On the one hand, it can be read as an act of vengeance on behalf of Addy and especially Nan exacted upon those who try to have it both ways. This reading is emphasized because Desiree's reaction to Maggie's death recalls Nan's death: after glancing briefly at Maggie's dead body, she says, "She had it coming," and adds that they should now, "Steal her jewelry and bury the bitch" (4.12 31:30). These lines and Angela Bassett's delivery recall Fiona's remark right after having murdered Nan—"She [Nan] killed the neighbor but the bitch had it coming."—and Marie's deadpan "Amen" at the end of Nan's eulogy.

On the other hand, the murder-by-proxy can be read as symbolically concluding, by way of analogy, *AHS*'s disability representations because they invariably wind up perpetuating, at least to a degree, that which they critique. Maggie's death may be read to signal the beginning of a remarkable change in the series as a whole, not a resignation, but a final acknowledgment that disability representation is inevitably indebted to hegemonic notions of non-normative embodiment. For as the curtain falls on *Freak Show*, so it does, in a way, on *AHS*'s disability representation. After four seasons featuring a total of about twelve main or supporting characters with disabilities (depending on who we count as disabled, and as supporting character), the frequency with which *AHS* includes visibly disabled characters drops considerably (there is not a single such character to be found in season 5 *Hotel* or season 6 *Roanoke*; only one in season 7 *Cult*; Jamie Brewer reprises her role as Nan for two episodes of season 8 *Apocalypse*; and season 9 *1984* features only one character who has a light limp).

At the *Conference on Disability Studies and the University* at Emory University in 2004, Mitchell and Snyder delivered a talk (that would two years later become the conclusive chapter of *Cultural Locations of Disability*) in which they cautioned that people-based disability research involving human subjects always risks reproducing oppressive structures such research might claim to oppose. The basic argument, of course, is quite similar to the one

regarding freak representation cited several times throughout this chapter. In their talk, however, they arrive at a provocative conclusion:

> We want to end by making a heretical claim that textually based analysis is the only absolute guard against the exhaustion of people-based research practices—primarily because a study of texts, no matter its limitations, exhausts no one but the researcher (and, perhaps, the original author). ("Compulsory" 633)

At the end of *Freak Show*, *AHS,* always down with some heresy, appears to arrive at a conclusion of the same basic tenet. The series' negotiations and critique of the non-normative body and specifically its destabilization of the hegemony of normative embodiment continue throughout *Hotel*, *Roanoke* and *Cult* in the shape of the altered body discussed in chapters 8.4. But there is a distinct sense that, following *Freak Show*, such negotiations and critique are not carried out using more immediate representations of disability (by which I mean representations of bodies to which we are culturally and socially predisposed to ascribe disability). Their subversive and transformative potentials remain ultimately uncertain and might not be worth risking the perpetuation of precisely those hegemonic practices they otherwise seek to subvert and transform.

9 Conclusion

At the end of this series of case studies, there remains a sense of hesitance with regard to the potential effects of disability representation on American complex TV. The final caveat is that representation always risks reproducing and perpetuating the socio-cultural practices of marginalization and oppression it may seek to question and destabilize. A new narrative form such as complex television series within which a given representation occurs is clearly not a magical cure-all that eradicates all traces of such practices.

But acknowledging this does not diminish the fact that, although a reproduction of hegemonic practices appears to be inevitable to some degree, there is a great deal of subversive and transformative potential that the narrative form of complex TV lends to disability representation. I will begin these conclusive remarks with a recap of my relatively independent case studies. The goal here is to recall how these pitfalls and potentials manifest in *Breaking Bad* and *AHS*, and what their significance may be of our understanding of disability representation on complex television. Following this recap, I will broaden the perspective to reflect on how my research and, more generally, the discussion of disability on TV series may contribute to the field of disability scholarship and the study of complex TV. Finally, I will

consider the limitations of my research and identify some possible avenues for future investigation of the subject matter.

The one aspect of serial narration that has come up during my analyses most frequently is certainly its length and duration. It may seem a banal point to make, but the fact that television series tend to exceed both the narrated and the narration time of other forms of storytelling clearly impacts the way that disability is represented. Of course, other narrative forms do not tend to relegate their disabled characters and their experiences to the narrative sideline simply because of constraints in narrative time and space. Rather, this is an effect of the role allocated to disability in our culture. But the sprawling narratives of complex TV evidently facilitate or even invite explorations of disability that grant significant amounts of time and attention to disabled subjectivities. I use the word "exploration" to recall Kelleter's notion that serial forms tend toward explorative movements, that they spread rather than unfold. I have shown that a narrative that spreads rather than unfolds in such a manner quite frequently engulfs disability in a way that places it in a narrative center. This is the case even when the story is not immediately *about* disability—much more so, it seems, than in a movie or novel not centrally concerned with disability. Addy's experience of Down Syndrome and dominant beauty standards, the way that *Freak Show*'s freaks experience the normatively embodied Jupiter town's folk, Hank's excruciating healing process, Walter Jr.'s handling of cerebral palsy—it is easy to imagine that each of these narrative strands might have been abandoned in a different form of storytelling less luxuriously outfitted with the time to dive as deeply into these aspects of the story.

Of course, length and duration do not alone make up the formal qualities of complex TV. While the serial longform may provide a foundation for explorations of disabled lives and subjectivities, it is certainly not a guarantee for the success of such an endeavor, as I have shown in my discussion of *Breaking Bad*. In many ways, *Breaking Bad* is a prime example for the poetics of complex television series. But I read its conclusion-bound narrative structure and frequent intertextual references to literature and cinema as legitimation strategies for the then relatively new form of complex serial television. The legitimation strategies give rise to modes of disability representation that contradict its otherwise careful attention to the subject matter. More specifically, I argued that the series' efforts to approximate the cultural validity of literature and cinema threaten to undermine the political potency of its own disability realism. *Breaking Bad*'s masculinely coded narrative structure—that is, a narrative structure that, atypically for serial television, is headed for conclusion and closure—favors and attaches heightened viewing pleasure to those character arcs in which disability is overcome or eradicated. Conversely, the series tends to make its femininely coded narrative arcs less

appealing. These are arcs about living *with* rather than *in spite of* disability, arcs associated with deferral of closure and avoidance of finality, the hallmarks of serial narration. Thus, where *Breaking Bad* is most removed from the formal markers of complex TV, is precisely where it is most replete with the echoes of marginalizing disability representation as we know it from the history of literature and cinema. This impression is amplified by the show's (overdetermined) reliance on metaphorical meanings attached to disability and illness. *Breaking Bad*, I suggested, attempts to achieve cultural legitimacy by deploying Hank's disability as a reference to the literary classic *Moby-Dick*, or by recalling the wealth of inroads for interpretation that cancer as metaphor has offered throughout our cultural history. In these instances, too, the marginalizing modes of disability representation surface from the show's otherwise careful handling of the matter where its serial form is infused with remnants of more legitimated forms of storytelling.

American Horror Story also struggles with the weight of a history of oppressive disability representation. However, as I showed over the course of four close readings, *AHS* appears to employ the representational potentials of the narrative form of complex television series to more potent effect. My first case study provides a case in point. It focused on season 1 *Murder House*'s use of the character of Addy as a means of viewer orientation. This use, I argued, manifested in broadly two distinct ways: one, as an intertextual reference, and two, as a character that encourages the viewer to experience different aspects of the storyworld in specific ways.

The first instance of intertextual referentiality builds on Addy's Down Syndrome. *Murder House* uses the immediately recognizable Down Syndrome of both actors who portray Addy to announce to the viewer that *AHS* will engage in a similar style of social and cultural critique as previous shows by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuck. The second instance of intertextual referentiality builds on the way that Addy as a young girl is represented as a Creepy Child, a familiar horror trope that serves to provide generic context to the viewer. The juxtaposition of the Creepy Child trope and Down Syndrome creates an uncomfortable sense that, one, Down Syndrome is creepy and, two, even adult Addy is essentially a child. I showed that despite all intricate narrative moves to prevent the viewer from arriving at such a reading, *AHS* cannot quite escape the reverberations of historical modes of disability representation that would frequently proffer precisely such readings of disability. Even its solution for this representational dilemma, the untimely and swiftly forgotten death of Addy, is itself a reverberation of the oppressive modes of disability representation it seeks to circumvent. But still, *AHS* manages to render Addy's screen time as a means of viewer orientation a strikingly

visceral and meaningful example of what empowering and subversive disability representation may look like.

Specifically, I demonstrated that Addy operates as what I termed a surrogate character—a character, that is, whose perception of the storyworld constitutes a sort of ideal or intended perspective for the viewer to adopt. As such, the viewer is encouraged to feel a deep sense of identification not simply with the character, but with her subjective experience of the world. And since Addy's character arc revolves around the oppressiveness of hegemonic beauty standards for people with disabilities, the viewer is put into a position of experiencing, with her as their proxy, a similar sense of oppression. What is more, *AHS*'s use of Addy as such a significant means of serial viewer orientation, places a disabled subjectivity at the very center of the narrative. Whatever marginalizing effect the juxtaposition of disability and creepiness, the incidental suggestion that adult Addy is a child, and her removal-by-killing-off may have, the importance of her character arc, necessitated and catalyzed by the serial form, remains a (normatively) laudable instance of disability representation.

My next case study on *AHS* was about season 3 *Coven* and likewise demonstrated ways in which the series employs complex television's formal idiosyncrasies in a manner that favors counter-hegemonic representations of disability. Specifically, I was concerned with the representational potentials of the feedback loop, a system of serial self-reflexivity that creates and encourages what Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter call meta-serial intelligence. My analysis of these aspects' significance for disability representation builds on two intertwined readings that focus on the role of Nan in the eponymous coven and the narrative, respectively. I first read *Coven* as a disability-centered critique of intersectional feminism. I argued that the white witches and the black voodoo practitioners learn to move beyond what can be read as second-wave feminism's essentialist tendencies toward a third-wave feminism that realizes the importance of femininity's intersections with other identities such as blackness. However, *AHS* seems to suggest that disability, as represented by Nan who is never taken seriously by her peers, is the one identity category that is consistently sidelined by intersectional feminist thought. My second reading transposes these findings to a meta level. I argued that *AHS* appears to acknowledge its own subscription to the same socio-cultural ascriptions about Down Syndrome that lead to the coven's members and voodoo practicioners not taking Nan seriously. Significantly, this reading potential extends beyond *Coven*'s to the earlier season *Murder House*'s disability representation. My reading suggests, ultimately, that *AHS* employs the stuff of its own disability critique of intersectional feminism to critically reflect upon its own treatment of the subject matter.

It is, so I contended at the end of the case study, only by virtue of the serial form that *AHS* can achieve such a degree of self-reflexivity as to evolve it into a critique of its own history of disability representation. One particularity of serial narratives is that there is a simultaneousness to their production and reception, something frequently referred to as the feedback loop. The feedback loop causes a serial narrative to reflect upon itself, as *AHS* does with regard to its own disability representation. On complex TV, this meta-serial intelligence is often productive of a pronounced tendency to encourage the viewer's awareness and enjoyment of a narrative's formal features, something Mittell calls operational aesthetic. My final argument in the case study centers on this aspect. I argued that the "formally aware" (Mittell, *Complex* 47) viewer of complex TV in general and *AHS* in particular may be more likely to identify complex, politically charged reading potentials such as the ones I discussed in this case study. If complex TV indeed encourages attention to the cultural implications of representation, *Coven* is note- and praiseworthy from a disability critic's perspective as it directs this attention to matters of disability representation.

In my next case study, I changed my perspective and, rather than discussing a specific season's narrative, turned my focus to what I termed *AHS*'s altered bodies. These are bodies that are in some visible and violent manner altered and contain or recall always both their current state of corporeality as well previous states of corporeality. My argument was that the abundance of altered bodies in the series very effectively destabilizes notions of normative corporeality, and that this destabilization is emphasized and amplified by complex TV's often endless protraction of narrative closure.

The altered body's destabilization of hegemonic ideologies of corporeality in *AHS* operates in two ways. One, it foregrounds that the categorical ascriptions we make to a body—such as monstrosity, freakishness, disability—are neither internally coherent nor operate independently of their cultural, political, and social context, their moment in time, framing, the observer's predispositions, and so on. Rather, their perceived validity is contingent on these and a multitude of other factors all of which are inherently unstable. Two, and more importantly, I demonstrated that the altered body very effectively destabilizes the illusion of the discrete, coherent, and autonomous embodied self. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's and Jacques Lacan's concepts of subject formation, I argued that the altered body recalls in the subject a state of embodiment prior to a perception of the self as discrete and coherent. Thus, its unsettling potential is especially powerful precisely because it strikes at the very heart of subject formation—an effect that several critics have similarly identified for the disabled body. Not only does this arguably amplify the destabilizing effects the altered body may have on oppressive ideologies of normative corporeality. I argued, furthermore, that because it recalls

a state prior to the self-perception as a coherent subject, it may also give rise to ethical qualms with eugenic ideologies that hope to exert control on the uncontrollable process of subject formation.

Finally, I related these findings to *AHS*'s narrative structure. I demonstrated that *AHS* resists a gravitation toward an ending or resolution that reinstates a normality that has been lost at the beginning of the narrative. Rather, *AHS*'s story and character arcs frequently end on a coming to terms with or normalization of the intruding abnormality. For altered bodies this means that they are more rarely fixed or eradicated than they are accepted, settled into, lived with. Importantly, this highlighting of the possibility of abnormality is not only another of *AHS*'s idiosyncrasies, but necessarily occurs in complex seriality, if to differing degrees. Serial narration must always retain some lack of resolution, some measure of abnormality to warrant continuation. It does so over weeks, months, and years of narration time, demanding of the audience an exceptional immersion in and a narrative foregrounding of states of abnormality. In this manner, I concluded, it is not only *AHS* but complex seriality in general that may be a highly potent means of narrating bodies that subvert hegemonic notions of corporeality.

The last case study focused on *AHS*'s fourth season *Freak Show*. In it, I explore how both freak representation and television storytelling often involve contradictory reading potentials. I began with a reading of the complex relationship of freaks and bourgeoisie in *Freak Show*'s storyworld. In the second half of the case study, I departed from textual aspects of representation to discuss the effects that complex TV's mode of production may have on representation.

My central argument was that reading *Freak Show* through a Bakhtinian lens, that is, using his concepts of the grotesque and the carnivalesque, opens up potentially empowering interpretive inroads for the historical freak and freak show. Building on Stallybrass and White's reading of Bakhtin, I read the freak as *liminal grotesque*—a projection, that is, of a bourgeois psyche that represses a carnivalesque and grotesque longing in an effort of socio-cultural self-consolidation. By extension we may consider this the freak constitutive of the bourgeois hegemony. Through a series of shorter case studies, I demonstrated how the multitude of freak / bourgeoisie encounters in *Freak Show* bear out such an understanding of the freak as liminal grotesque. While not denying the oppressiveness and marginalizing effects of the historical freak show, *AHS* elevates the role of the freaks in their encounters with the bourgeoisie so as to offer a potentially empowering reframing of the freak and freak show, finding agency and significance where there would otherwise only be dependency and heteronomy. *Freak Show*, I argued, tells stories in which the freak becomes a potent disruptive force to the bourgeois hegemony, and stories in which the freak is all that keeps the bourgeoisie

from flying off the rails into perverse aristocracy. But I also showed that for all the empowering potential that *AHS* identifies in its freak show and freaks, it is acutely aware of the oppressiveness of both the historical and its own freak show. Ultimately then, as in other seasons, *AHS* also acknowledges the ambivalence inherent in its own disability representation and that it cannot escape being something of a freak show itself, profiting from the spectacle of difference its disabled performers bring to the show. Moreover, *AHS* links its awareness of this representational quandary to its own medium of storytelling, the television. Television is a constant presence in *Freak Show*'s storyworld and, like the freak show, it is invariably represented as something that recalls a sense of carnival: as something that grants temporary release from the hegemony of the high culture; as something from which the bourgeoisie must remain distinct; and, most importantly, as something that is inherently ambivalent or contradictory.

Following *AHS*'s cue, in the second half of this final case study I discussed some of the reasons why television storytelling may be particularly prone to such polysemy. Of course, all narrative forms involve a multitude of voices, and there is never a fixed singular meaning of a given text. Consequently, my focus here were not textual reasons for ambiguous reading potentials, but informed speculations about industrial and production realities that produce polysemy. The first central aspect I discussed was television's need for a relatively broad audience appeal. Even in an era of narrowcasting, there remains a pronounced tendency in television series to try and attract the attention of comparatively diverse audiences and keep them invested in the series. A case in point is that in *Freak Show* it is the highly popular non-disabled repertoire cast members that speak the central dialogue lamenting the societal marginalization of disability—not the disabled performers, who stand idly at the margins of the scene. A choice likely mandated by commercial considerations, this creates an uneasy disconnect between the content of *AHS*'s disability critique and its mode of delivery.

The second central aspect revolves around how complex TV's mode of production may give rise to contradictory reading potentials. First, there is very little time to shoot an episode, which leads to many would-be creative choices—performances, camera angles, cutting—to be determined by coincidence and necessity. These are circumstances that may muddle attempts at unambiguous representational politics. Second, and related to this, television, is marked by a high degree of authorial collaboration more than other forms of storytelling. From the showrunner to the writers, from the director to the producers, from the cutter to the performers—authorship on television is "inherently protracted, collective, and contested" (Caldwell, *Production Culture* 201). Such a diminished centralized authorial control may also be productive of contradictory reading potentials.

While this part of my study had to remain somewhat speculative—reliable information on a specific show's production processes is notoriously hard to come by—it nevertheless demonstrated how the particular realities of making complex television may pose a challenge to representational vestings. However, I also showed that both the hurried mode of production and the authorial collaboration may provide performers on a given show the opportunity to exert no small part of authorial influence on their characters and the narrative. Notably, this is precisely what happened during the production of *Freak Show*, mitigating somewhat the exploitative aspects of the quandary of freak representation on complex TV.

It has become clear that American television series offer a rich resource of ways in which we may narrate disability that, for all their indebtedness to a history of oppressive disability representation, bring the promise of overcoming this history. However, at the end of my study, I hope to have demonstrated not only the subversive and transgressive potentials that the narrative form of complex TV may hold for disability representation. Rather, I have shown that we can begin to understand the striking complexities of the matter only when we take into account the poetics of serial complex TV. To grasp how television series operate is to occupy otherwise unavailable perspectives on disability representation: Recognizing that *Breaking Bad* often favors proximity to cinematic narration helps us discern the uneasy disconnect between its various mode of disability (and gender!) representation. Knowing what a pilot episode has to achieve allows us to appreciate that Nan's role in Murder House is not quite as marginal as it may initially seem. Meaningful and complex critique surfaces from the reckless abandon of *Coven*'s narrative once we understand the mechanics of serial self-reflexivity and the feedback loop. The extent of the altered body's transgressive potential becomes clear only when we account for the multiple dimensions of open-endedness in serial storytelling. To know of the production realities of complex TV, their purposes and effects, helps us comprehend the television text's polysemy in general, and the apparent inevitability of *Freak Show*'s representational ambiguity.

Representation critical insight is considerably deepened by an intimate knowledge of a narrative's formal features. This is perhaps a platitude. Still, it is worthwhile spelling out once again considering a hope I had expressed at the outset of this study, namely, that disability scholarship may benefit from a fresh subject matter; that exploring an area of scholarly inquiry previously largely overlooked may productively destabilize what has come to be considered canonic in the field. If representation critical work in disability studies has tended somewhat to neglect the formal features and poetics of many mainstream cultural texts, the case studies I have conducted throughout this study may pose such a productive destabilization. At the end of this study, it is evident that the field's reservoir of critical approaches, extensive and rich as

it may be, risks looking rather depleted where it fails to provide perspectives that allow us to read a given text for what it is—in this case, to read complex TV as complex TV rather than as a novel or as cinema. Several instances throughout this study have shown that such an approach toward a text may unearth unexpectedly empowering reading potentials from a history of oppression and marginalization. In challenging critical reading and thought patterns geared primarily toward the unearthing of such a history—as much of disability scholarship arguably is—we may find representational resources that, while not denying or whitewashing it, may help overcome it. As disability representation seems to benefit from a new vessel in the shape of complex TV, so disability scholarship may benefit from a scholarly engagement of the form's representational potentials. It is ultimately my hope that, beyond an exploration of complex TV's potentials for disability representation, my work serves as an example of how new perspectives in disability studies may be brought about with the help of new materials and suitable approaches to them.

But this study reflects back not only on disability studies, but also on the other half of its theoretical foundation, the study of complex television series. While, as has become clear, the work in the field has proven tremendously useful for representation critical analyses, there remains one aspect of the inquiry into the serial form that leaves something to be desired: how might the scholarly critic relate more productively to the "ongoing-ness" of serial narration. There is work on the gap between narrative installments, on open-endedness and deferral of closure, on the explorative movement of the narrative, and all these things do yield critical insight. What I mean here, however, is something different, namely a theorization of the point of inquiry itself, the moment at which the critic interjects and says, whatever may come after this point in time, what I look at is what comes before it. Can more be made of approaching a subject matter so fundamentally in flux as serial narration than saying merely, well it if it has to happen at some point, now is as good a time as any? My course of action here has been to approach my texts as if they were a concluded work while acknowledging that the reading potentials I unearthed, I unearthed from unstable ground that may give way and crumble with each new installment of the series I discuss. And I am confident that my approach amounts to more than an identification of some viable reading potentials at a specific point in time. Still, I will admit that this has occasionally felt somewhat unsatisfactory. It has felt like a *concession* to the structural fact of complex TV's ongoing-ness rather than *operationalization* of it. To gain a better understanding of the moment of critical interjection along with its implications and its consequences would be to alleviate this dissatisfaction for the benefit of an even deeper grasp of the mechanics of serial narration.

This work has been concerned with the representation of disability in American complex TV. My approach has been to focus on a small number of textual examples and to discuss these in relatively great depth. If we were to expand the scope of this study, or continue its critical project, we might consider looking at other shows. Although I contend that my selection of texts constitutes a relatively representative sample that covers a lot of ground in terms of how complex TV narrates disability, there are aspects that have not been included. A text rich with diverse disabled characters, *Game of Thrones*, for instance, would allow us to trace how adaptation from one serial form to another may affect representation. *Daredevil*, as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, might help us understand how representation operates on highly complex cross-media franchises. An analysis of *The Big Bang Theory*, of Sheldon Cooper's implied autism specifically, may yield useful insights into the role that the audience plays in reading disability *in* or *into* a text. But we might also expand the scope beyond American television. After all, even before internationally established streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, complex TV as a form was not exclusive to the USA. How do other "national poetics" affect disability representation? What is the effect, if there is one, of the much shorter seasons of British television? What about complex series on German television, which is usually much more geared toward a domestic market? And how might the generic specificities of what has come to be known as Nordic noir affect representation?

Disability, I suggested at the outset of this study, is as ubiquitous on television as it is anywhere, and television, as it moves beyond its linear form and the box in the living room, is more ubiquitous than ever. This study, consequently, can only be a small part of a wider inquiry into the manifold potentials of the narrative form of complex TV for disability representation. But it is also precisely because of the ubiquity of both disability representation on complex TV and complex TV itself that this wider inquiry is worthwhile and necessary. They are both ever present parts of our lives, directly or indirectly shaping how we experience and speak about others and the world. And they arguably share something else, something that may be conjecture but educated conjecture all the same: despite or because of their significance, there has been a tendency in academia and elsewhere to view both disability and television with disdain, as undesirable, as something the existence of which is regrettable at best and deserving of eradication at worst. Rarely had disability's and television's cultural significance been recognized at all—and where and when it had, it was usually with a considerable if not outright impulse to discursively exclude and negate. But like the advent of complex TV has accorded the medium television an arguably unprecedented degree of respectability, so the humanities have come to champion the importance the previously neglected socio-cultural category of disability. Complex TV, we have come to realize, offers

very engaging stories, stories told over weeks, months, years and sometimes decades, stories that not only pull the audience in but demand and reward involvement of the audience. And disability is increasingly understood as not only demanding and deserving of critical attention, but as an intellectually rewarding matter to grasp and engage; as something that may uncomfortably disturb many of the views we traditionally hold but, in doing so, often opens up new avenues of understanding society, our culture, and our experience of the world. Perhaps, at some level, it is these parallels between disability and complex TV that makes them go together so well. And perhaps, no, hopefully, complex television series prove a helpful vessel for the dissemination of disability activism's and disability studies' critical insights across popular culture for a long time and well into our future. At the end of this study, I am optimistic.

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