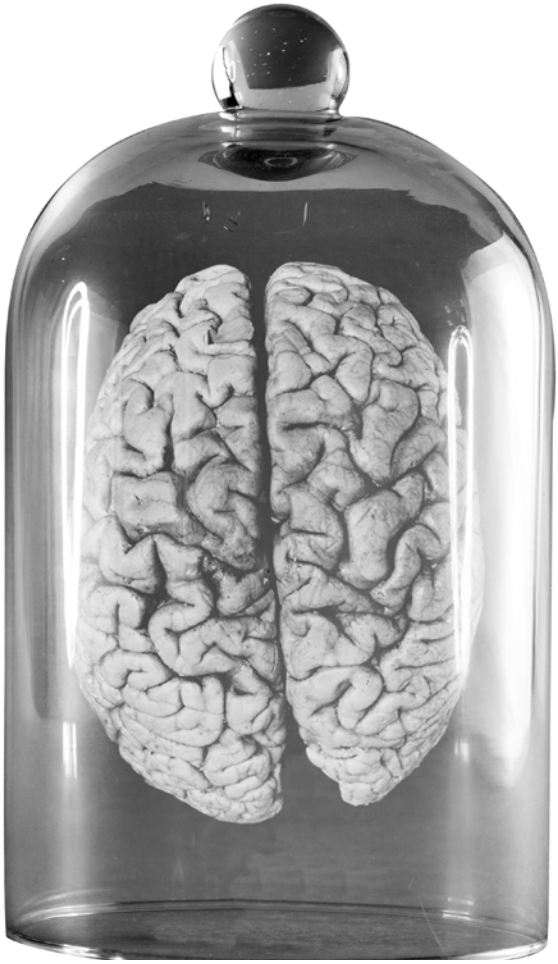
HORROR & DISABILITY 2

Disability Action Research Kollective



Featuring work by **Aaliyah Bates, Brooke Eaglesong Wilson, Crystal Orellano, Paul Bones, Richard Amm, Sam Logan, Zephyr Ash Grand, Natasha Trotman, Shelby Walton-Clark, K. Q. Watson, Cameron Mumford, Melissa Haas, Li Brady, Gary Needham, Rebekah Stone, Julia Radtke, Juanita de Villiers, Nisha Oza, Popstar Presents, Charley Swire, Mile Lex Franke and Yankel G. Heim**

The Penalty (1920) is one of several silent films in which Lon Chaney portrays a disabled character whose bodily difference is tightly bound to deviance. Directed by Wallace Worsley, who would later direct Chaney again in The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1923), The Penalty exemplifies an early cinematic trend that positioned disability as a visual and moral shorthand for social threat. Chaney plays Blizzard, a crime boss whose life is defined by a childhood accident ("a victim of city traffic") and its aftermath. A surgeon unnecessarily amputates both of the boy's legs and conceals the error from his parents, encouraging the audience to read the amputation as the origin of Blizzard's bitterness. Blizzard later explains that his father "detested little boys with their legs clipped off. So at fifteen I hobbled out of his life," a moment that frames his rejection and criminal path as inseparable from his disability. From the outset, then, the film treats the amputation as the rupture that determines Blizzard's entry into crime, positioning disability as the catalyst for obsession and violence. This framing draws on a familiar trope in which a disabled character's physical difference is used to explain social deviance.

Blizzard's criminal empire is presented as the pathological outcome of his impairment. He is described as "that cripple from hell," a phrase that fuses bodily difference with inherent evil. Disability is moralized, marking Blizzard as a threat because of his being "mangled." The film ultimately resolves this threat through cure and containment. Under threat to his daughter and her fiancé, the surgeon is coerced into operating after Blizzard demands his legs be restored. Instead of reattaching the legs, the surgeon treats a brain injury caused by the childhood accident. Immediately after the operation, the doctors explain the moral transformation in medical terms: "That caused pressure on the brain—he has never been wholly responsible for his acts." Blizzard awakens transformed, no longer violent or scheming but gentle and capable of love (and being loved). Another doctor notes, "This man, let alone, may become as great a power for good as he was for evil." The Penalty's final scene underscores this change visually, showing Blizzard playing the piano while carefully framing his body above the waist, obscuring his missing legs. Having been cured of both

(neurological) impairment and criminality, Blizzard marries and appears redeemed before being shot and killed. This death, the film's titular penalty, functions as punishment for Blizzard's former self. [Yankel G. Heim]

Frankenstein (1931) has less discussion of disability than the 1818 novel. Frankenstein's "monster" doesn't represent one particular disability, but rather a metaphor for individuals who are outcast from a normative society. People frequently make assumptions about his character based on physical and mental attributes he did not choose. This constant fear and repulsion is seen in the lynch mob who misidentify an accident as murder, as well as Dr. Frankenstein, who immediately institutionalised his "mistake" and threw himself into a traditional lifestyle as distraction. Dr. Frankenstein's decision to end the life he didn't understand is the primary cause of conflict; his creation isn't inherently evil, simply misunderstood and rightly defensive. Having an open-minded child, who has not yet had their preconceptions tainted by prejudice, be the one to treat the creation as an equal, makes the message clear, that judgements based on surface level characteristics, are harmful and a serious problem. This was as true in 1818 as it was in 1931, and still is today, especially for those of us who face discrimination due to perceptions of disability.

Eugenics underlies several scenes in Frankenstein, an ideology inherently genocidal towards disabled people, with the creature supposedly possessing a "criminal brain". However, the narrative refutes the idea by presenting a being who isn't dangerous or violent until he is attacked and imprisoned, primarily because of his appearance. This isn't bad, although I do feel it should have handled such a serious subject more explicitly. A specific trope that Frankenstein does conform with, was to depict Fritz as having Kyphosis. The character's disability is meant to be disturbing for the audience and his appearance, coupled with an unceremonious death, presents disabled people as another part of the spectacle of horror. Additionally, he is played by a non-disabled actor, further preventing disabled people from accessing limited job opportunities. 1931's Frankenstein has some

very compelling themes, but when it comes to disability it fails to treat real people with the same nuance it gives the creature. [Isaac Leal]

The Brood (1979) is often remembered for its hellish children and its infamous birthing scene. At its core, The Brood is about the way institutions pathologize people when their pain does not fit neatly into both medical and social expectations. Nola, the film's main character, is treated as a problem to be fixed rather than a person in distress. Her body becomes a battleground where ignored trauma literally manifests itself into a breeding site that develops embryo sacs that birth devilish offspring. Because of her body, the psychiatric clinic isolates her, her husband doubts her, and the doctor overseeing her treatment exploits her body for his own theories. The Brood mirrors real disabled experiences related to the medical gaze that reduces a person to their symptoms.

The Brood resonates with me personally as someone with a misunderstood disability. Diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes, especially coming from the United States, I live in a body that is constantly judged and constantly misread. Strangers assume it is "your fault," institutions treat you like a problem, and even well-meaning people project pity and fear onto your body before they ever ask what your life is actually like. This is why The Brood can be cathartic when you live in a misunderstood body. The film seems to capture the way systems talk about you instead of to you. When Nola finally exposes her body and exclaims to her husband, "I disgust you!", it lands with the weight of every disabled person who has ever been told their body is frightening. When she says this, it's not a whimper but instead a declaration. She says it with a kind of magnetic control, like she's naming the thing everyone else has been too polite or too afraid to admit. For anyone with a misunderstood disability, that line hits hard. You can live in a body that demands care yet still be made to feel like you are the one causing discomfort. The Brood is a reminder that the horror is not the body itself, but the systems that fail to understand it.
[Brooke Eaglesong Wilson]

The Changeling's (1980) title and movie poster tells you everything about how the film represents disability. A changeling is often defined as someone who is left in place of a disabled child who is kidnapped by a supernatural entity such as a fairy or demon. Richard Carmichael murdered his disabled six-year-old son, Joseph, in their home. Joseph was set to inherit a large sum of money from a relative once he turned twenty-one years old, but the money went to charity if he didn't live that long. Richard killed his son and replaced him with an adopted boy from an orphanage to make sure the inheritance stayed within the family. We never learn much else about Richard—no flashes of regret, remorse, or humanity. These events occurred in the early 1900s when eugenics were taking hold and disabled children were often sent to institutions and segregated schools. Although Richard went to the extreme of murdering his son for greed, this act is reflective of society's repeated acceptance of discarding disabled people when convenient, which remains true today. This story is told through John Russell, who moved into the Carmichael house, and Clair Norman, a member of the historical society.

The movie poster features an empty wooden wheelchair covered in cobwebs. In its shadow, the silhouette includes a young boy sitting in the wheelchair. Despite John and Claire unraveling the true events of Joseph's death, the wheelchair threatens and attacks them—a maniacal manifestation of Joseph's vengefulness. The wheelchair serves no other plot device such as revealing Joseph's character. If intentional and thoughtfully constructed, the wheelchair could have served to give Joseph agency from beyond the grave. The wheelchair's charred remains is a final shot of the film. The film weaponizes and exploits disability through the physical artifact of the wheelchair. We are meant to feel relieved at the wheelchair's destruction, like some evil threat had been neutralized. The Changeling is a well executed haunted house film—yet, the same goal could have been achieved without the harmful disability representation, or it could have explored disability with a deeper and more critical lens.
[Sam Logan]

The Friday the 13th (1980) series is best known for its villain, Jason Voorhees. The hockey-masked slasher only makes a brief appearance in this film, as his mother, Pamela Voorhees is the main focus of this first installment. Jason is referenced several times, as his drowning death serves as Pamela's murderous motive for revenge against all camp counselors. Jason is referenced as being intellectually disabled and, during his jump scare appearance at the end of the film, he is visibly disabled. The condition that most resembles what Jason is depicted as having is hydrocephalus, or an irregularly shaped head and face, due to excess cerebrospinal fluid. The decision to make Jason visibly disabled was an intentional choice on the part of the filmmakers and special effects artists, who reportedly wanted to make Jason appear scarier. This decision, to fit the 13-year-old actor who played Jason with a prosthetic mask to make him appear with an atypical face set the tone for the rest of the franchise, as well as countless slashers that copied the Friday the 13th formula.

Making Jason disabled as a scare tactic is an example of exploiting disability for non-disabled consumption, as it preys upon existing ideas about disability, morality, and inherent evil. The character of Jason could have been a sympathetic figure, as many disabled kids face extreme bullying—at camp, at school, at home, and in the neighborhood. But instead, by using facial deformities as a jump scare, we have a character whose legacy would become synonymous with horror and the slasher genre. The bulk of the movie does not directly deal with disability. It follows a cast of young, attractive, white camp counselors as an unseen figure takes them out one-by-one. The reveal of Ms. Voorhees as the killer is a subversion of our gendered expectations. The motive is more fully fleshed out than one typically finds in this era of horror film, as a grieving mother makes for a unique choice of slasher. [Paul Bones]

Scanners (1981) has an underlying thread of seeking community within neurodiverse circles. Our protagonist, Cameron Vale, has no idea that there are other scanners like him until he's captured and sent on a mission to find the leader. As Cameron meets more scanners, each one

bears a resemblance to various philosophies on disability. You have the artist, bitter about his lot in life after spending time in an institution and wants nothing to do with seeking community. There's the support group led by other scanners, asserting that their disability is nothing to be ashamed of. And then there's the antagonist, Darryl Revok, who wants to convert other scanners to his cause of a global takeover. If you're looking for a contemporary parallel, there's the concept of "aspie supremacy" wherein the disability (namely the obsolete diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome) is seen as the next step of human evolution and the people with it are superior beings. It's a bullshit belief and it ends up being a plot point in something as recent as 2018's The Predator in all but name. On top of all this, there's the drug "ephemerol" causing the existence of scanners. This drug for pregnant women has parallels to not only the thalidomide scandal of the 50's and 60's that caused multiple birth defects but also the present-day Tylenol scare as put forward by the second Trump administration in an attempt to find the cause of autism. Scanners is by no means the only Cronenberg film with elements of the disabled experience but it's his biggest one that touches upon neurodivergency. [Zephyr Ash Grand]

The Fly (1986) is a great example of why David Cronenberg films can be a safe space for disabled viewers to use for emotional release. In the film, scientist Seth Brundle, in an act of haste, tests out his teleportation device where a mishap involving a rogue fly causes Brundle to slowly and brutally transition into a different species. As the film progresses, so does the disablement of Brundle's body as he begins to lose mobility, fine motor skills, skin and hair, and mental control. Unlike other horror films that focus on real disabilities, The Fly does not feature a character with a disability that exists in our reality. No one in real life is transitioning into a fly. Because of this, the film does not suffer the usual scrutiny that other disability-centric films so often do. There is no real way to judge the accuracy of the representation of Brundle's disability when we do not know the rules of his disease or the emotional turmoil that accompanies it. Therefore, for me The Fly is free of cultural constraints and can become a safe imaginative space for many disabled viewers to experience their own disabled identity

through a single character without feeling misrepresented or targeted. In a way, this very unreal disability becomes a very real representation of feelings about disability and losing control of the body because it is free of the expectation of accuracy. There is no pressure to check off any boxes. There is only the option to use this film in whatever way you need to. To any viewer The Fly can be about AIDS, cancer, cerebral palsy, diabetes, muscular dystrophy, anxiety, aging, or even schizophrenia. It's not a "one-size-fits-all" disability as not everyone will experience the same symptoms as Brundle, but it is an outline that many people can fit their own narrative into.
[Brooke Eaglesong Wilson]

A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors (1987) attempts to empower its disabled characters by relying on ableist tropes. The 'supercrip' presents disabled people as extraordinary or superhuman as they inspirationally overcome their impairment instead of structural barriers and social prejudice. The problem is positioned as something inside the individual who becomes heroic for overcompensating for their shortcomings instead of society changing to include them. There is a wheelchair user who is able to mobilise within the dream world. He is attacked by an empty, spiked nightmare wheelchair which he explodes with his magical powers. Another character is nonverbal but is able to use his voice as a weapon in the dream realm. Both characters are "cured" within the dream. The depiction of characters' disabilities as "strengths" is problematic as it sets unrealistic expectations, trivialising the real-world struggles of these communities. Both these characters are dead by the end of the film but so are many non-disabled characters.

There are also some eugenic ideas about genetic inheritance. One staff member blames the high suicide rate on the kids having 'damaged chromosomes', another blames guilt. The antagonist, Freddy Krueger is said to be evil because his mother was assaulted by the 'criminally insane' resulting in his conception and birth. The kids are being targeted because of the sins of the parents having killed Freddy. Freddy is covered in scars, reinforcing the common trope of associating

facial difference with evil. Freddy represents the enduring stigma attached to disability in society and how it endures in the legacy of psychiatric horrors. The film correctly positions psychiatric institutions as corrupt, racist, uncaring places that perpetuate abuse. People are often sedated against their will and the one male African American character is frequently sent into solitary confinement for minor verbal infractions, while characters belonging to dominant groups can carry out threatening behaviour with little to no consequences. Other than Nancy who has lived experience, most staff do not believe the kids about Freddy and blame them for their psychiatric issues. The kids find peer support with each other and work together to fight Freddy. [Natasha Trotman and Richard Amm]

Monkey Shines (1988) is a George A. Romero horror movie about a quadriplegic man whose trained carer monkey becomes the incarnation of his disabled rage. Sold? I was. I was expecting a schlocky B-movie with dated ableist tropes, something campy I could laugh at for a couple of hours. Instead, I got a 2-hour character study of a disabled man that fails to deliver on every promise on the poster while delivering on the ableist tropes. An abled actor plays a disabled man who attempts suicide, is abandoned by a lover, wins the day by performing a miraculous feat of physical ability, and is conveniently cured. And I still loved it. After being paralysed from the neck down in a brick-related incident, our hero Alan returns home from surgery in a powered wheelchair to find his house fully accessible, his university education still waiting for him, his best friend unfazed, and his wife premeditating cuckoldry. “To the start of his new life,” as one character toasts. Ella is a monkey trained to provide him care, a psychic link driving her chemically altered brain to wreak vengeance on ableists for a whole range of relatable reasons: medical malpractice, unprofessional care, and parental abuse. Alan is thoroughly characterised, empathetic, and well motivated. The most pleasantly shocking inclusion is a romance he has with an abled woman, an attraction that grows naturally between peers, is reciprocated, and results in a sex scene that proudly features a hoist being used to aid and even eroticise the sexual act. As Alan battles this metaphorical rage monkey in the final act,

we get to see a character with limited mobility circumvent obstacles without ever making his chair a limitation, his physical limits used to raise tension rather than dehumanise. The film flops in the last few minutes with miraculous physical ability saving an endangered damsel, followed by an abrupt cure. Disability has long been treated as a loose thread in need of tying, but a crip sex scene goes a long way to redeem this overlooked gem. [Richard Amm]

Pet Sematary (1989) has the iconic tagline "Sometimes Dead is Better." While this mostly refers to the idea that what's dead should stay dead, it's easy to see that both the author and filmmaker also hold the ableist belief that it can be better to let someone die in slow and agonizing ways than to let them live as a disabled person. One of the main spirits (and the source of a good amount of scares) is Rachel's physically disabled sister, Zelda. Described as having suffered from spinal meningitis, Zelda is portrayed in a way that is meant to invoke fear and disgust - using makeup to create an 'uncanny valley' effect that leads the audience to view her as something other than human, even monstrous. After being left in the care of an 8-year-old Rachel, Zelda suffers a slow and agonizing death. We would assume that this would be framed as a tragic event and yet, the film posits that her death was far better than the quality of her life. In this flashback sequence, we learn that Zelda was considered a burden on the family and was locked away in a back room where her family simply waited for her to die. Rachel goes on to explain that "We wished for her to be dead. It wasn't just so she wouldn't feel pain. It was so we wouldn't feel any more pain." She also describes Zelda as a monster, and expresses hatred toward her, resentment for caring for her, and joy around her death. This firmly paints Zelda as the villain in her story. Throughout the rest of the film, we see Zelda reappearing as a grim and monstrous spirit, haunting Rachel and threatening a punishment worse than death - a life with a crippling physical disability. "I'm going to twist your back like mine so that you'll never get out of bed again." [Shelby Walton-Clark]

Jacob's Ladder (1990) Gallons of ink has been spilled over thousands of pages about the subject of authorial intent and whether it should be

taken into account when enjoying a work. Ostensibly, Jacob's Ladder is about the horrors of war, shell-shock, PTSD, all of which were very pertinent for the late 80s and early 90s. Thirty-five years later, we have new lenses through which to analyse. I posit a new interpretation of the film: Any of us can lose our health at any time and become disabled. The character of Jacob Singer exists in two states: Before Deployment and After Deployment. Before, he had a happy family; after, he lost everything and constantly sees "demons". His mental state is what is in torment along with a bad case of back-pain. As he is continuously accosted by these demons, Jacob studies fables, demonology and witchcraft, looking for answers. During the worst delusion, Jacob is taken to a hellish hospital and the "demons" there are played by people with thalidomide deformities as director Adrian Lyne wanted the demons to look humanesque but not quite human. That's how a lot of disabled people are seen: uncanny, not quite right. And heaven forbid a hard-working, everyday person become one of them. Good health is not guaranteed, as we saw in 2020 when the world ground to a halt because of a pandemic. Many, many people permanently lost their health. They lost lung capacity, were seized by brain fog, developed heart issues, lost their sense of smell, and a whole host of other ailments. The thing is, a person can do everything right, but all it takes is one cough, one wrong turn, a missed step, and we're othered. [K. Q. Watson]

Army of Darkness (1992) begins where Evil Dead 2 (1987) ends: with our protagonist Ashley Williams having been sent back to Medieval times to fight the deadites. In the previous entry, Ash fought his possessed hand to a draw, before removing the evil appendage with a chainsaw. In Army of Darkness, Ash replaces his amputated hand with a chainsaw, as well as a metal gauntlet that he can fully control. Although this is not the most realistic or typical view of life after amputation, Ash is never held back by his impairment, and actually makes use of his prosthetics to make him an even more formidable hero. This, in my mind, makes it a rare case of positively showing disability, although the film is decidedly more comedy than horror, which also extends to the use of prosthetics in the film. However, it would be fair to critique the

film on the basis of Ash as a kind of "super crip," as Ash most certainly overcomes his disability and makes use of it to fight the forces of evil. One thing that stands out to me about Ash and his journey into disability is there actually is no journey. There is no coming to grips with losing a hand (because it turned evil and tried to kill him), or even a hint of a process of "becoming disabled." It is simply an action that happens, and he immediately adjusts by turning what could be an impairment into a new way to kill demons. The movie is a fun, highly unserious time travel horror/comedy epic, and so perhaps it would be too much to expect our protagonist to think through and feel the loss of his hand. Given the general tone of the film, such a pointed reflection would feel more out of place than a middle aged retail store worker in the 15th Century. It is ultimately up to the viewer to decide if this is good disability representation, stigmatizing, or something all together different. [Paul Bones]

Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed (2004) Horror and disability is an interesting topic, initially one would look towards the deformities present in many classic horror monsters as the co-option of disabilities for cheap scares having the real-world effect of demonising disabled people. However, I cannot help but feel it is not that simple. Seminal horror theorist Robin Wood puts forward the theory of the Return of the Repressed, where he argues that the "other", those that society fears and subjugates, return in the form of the monster to enact their revenge on the society that persecutes them. From this angle Ginger Snaps 2: Unleashed is a fascinating case. Brigitte, survivor of the first film, now taking regular shots of monkshood to stave off the effects of lycanthropy, awakens after a werewolf attack to find herself imprisoned inside a rehab clinic, with the medicine essential to her survival withheld from her. From a Woodian perspective Bridgitte's treatment by the clinic's staff can be seen to be reflective of the trends in behaviour towards those that are disabled. For example: the ignoring or downplaying of symptoms or conditions; societies desire to lock up and ignore those who are disabled; and the general infantilization of disabled people. All of these elements are engaged with, in one way or another, metaphorically through the lens of the werewolf within the film. However, there is

one specific dynamic that I want to address, and that is the character of Tyler. Tyler is one the orderlies at the clinic who, in exchange for sexual favours, offers Brigitte some doses of monkshood. This viewing of disabled people as exploitable, and people with disabilities being forced into uncomfortable and violating situations to get the help that they need to live, is sadly all too common. However, as Wood highlights, Brigitte specifically due to her disability, her lycanthropy, is able to enact her violent revenge on those that abused and exploited her, providing a cathartic relief for the marginalised viewer. [Cameron Mumford]

Excision (2012) is the only horror/dark comedy to feature a character with cystic fibrosis (CF). However, it is the healthy sister's sociopathy that takes center stage in this movie. Pauline is Grace's older sister, who wants nothing more than to become a surgeon. While noble, it's very much comparable to Norman Bates' interest in taxidermy - gruesome, creepy and offbeat, all adjectives that describe Pauline herself. Conceptually, the question at the center of this film is "Which would you rather have: mental illness or physical illness?" By the end of the film, I promise you, CF is the better option. Grace, the child with CF, is seen as the beloved child and licks up every opportunity afforded to her, where the disparity between sisters is notable. For example, Grace gets sent to CF camp, while Pauline is sent to a Christian counselor, their mother citing money as the reason for not being able to afford a mental health professional. The visual horror in this movie mainly comes from Pauline's blood and guts sexual fantasies. The psychological horror inherent within the family dynamics and how situations play themselves out will remain with you much longer than the visuals. CF is treated in a CF lite capacity - the standard aerosols and chest vest to loosen mucus in the lungs are shown, a reminder to give Grace her enzymes during dinner, and the large stepping stones of CF - losing a teenage best friend to the same disease and suddenly being listed for a lung transplant despite "looking so healthy" - are some of the specifics that show people the tip of the CF iceberg. For this reviewer, there wasn't nearly enough coughing or hospital admissions to come across as a believable portrayal of CF. One should also note that

Grace is infantilized as a consequence of her illness. Finally, it must be mentioned that Excision features some of the best razor-sharp, obsidian-dark humor one can find in this genre (e.g., the deaf Marlee Matlin stating, “Being in the same room with you and your daughter makes me glad I can’t hear”). Definitely worth the watch.
[Melissa Haas]

Swallow (2019), directed by Carlo Mirabella-Davis, provides a glimpse into eating disorders, particularly as they relate to mental health conditions. Our protagonist, Hunter, experiences life trapped behind the confines of her relationship and family, under the guise of only wanting what is best for her. The attitude of the family throughout the film echoes that of infantilising disabled people, as well as a purposeful misunderstanding of health conditions or in some cases, a direct refusal to acknowledge. As the film progresses, Hunter develops pica: an eating disorder in which an individual craves or consumes things that are not meant to be consumed. Though this is due to her mistreatment, it also represents those with a need for control and a darker desire of no longer wanting to exist in a world where they are not listened to, not given agency, and not made to feel wanted. As Hunter’s pica worsens in both capacity and danger, posing threats to her unborn child, it shows just how intense these feelings can be, and the risk that disabled people are exposed to as a result of gaslighting and neglect from family members. In Hunter’s eventual escape from the trap she’s caught in, we are shown a world in which she is free of her shackles and able to grant her own agency, even being able to make her own medical decisions (which we see in her use of abortion medication). However, despite these earnest representations, the film falls victim to a regular trope of Disabled or Sick folk being the result of an irregular pregnancy.

In Swallow, it is revealed that Hunter is the result of her mother being raped, and even goes as far as her facing her biological father about it. Though the plot isn’t ruined for this part, it does seem, in retrospect, an unnecessary callback to common tropes. It gives us another piece of media telling us that a disabled person cannot exist without a traumatic background of some sort, as though disabled people have to be the

result of the negative, or exist in some form as unwanted.
[Li Brady]

The Fanatic (2019): There are few things scarier than a Fred Durst movie that thinks it's saying something important. The Fanatic, directed by the Limp Bizkit frontman himself, stars John Travolta as Moose - a man heavily implied to be on the autism spectrum - whose parasocial obsession with his favorite actor spirals into violence. On paper, it's a psychological thriller about fandom gone too far. In execution, it's a cinematic hate crime against folks on the spectrum. Durst and Travolta's portrayal of Moose leans on every tired, ableist trope imaginable: the "unhinged" figure who can't regulate emotions or actions and the "dangerous" outcast whose neurodivergence supposedly explains their descent into violence. The film signals Moose's autistic identity through a checklist of stereotypes - rocking back and forth, avoiding eye contact, speaking in an unnatural cadence - as if imitation alone could stand in for representation. What follows isn't empathy or critique, but spectacle built on stigma.

What's particularly insidious is that the film never explicitly says Moose is autistic, but every official synopsis and review online does. Somewhere between script and marketing that label was stamped on him as if to assure audiences that his "otherness" had a diagnosis. The implication? Autism itself becomes shorthand for obsession, instability, and threat. When cinema frames neurodivergence as horror, it tells the world that people on the spectrum are the horror. Watching The Fanatic feels like watching decades of disability representation unravel in slow motion. It's sensationalism masquerading as psychological depth - a performance so offensively misguided it borders on exploitation. And yet, in its failure, it reveals something about Hollywood's anxieties: that it's still far more comfortable depicting autistic folks as violent caricatures than as complex humans with agency. Autism remains one of the most misunderstood conditions despite growing awareness in recent years, and inaccurate film representations only deepen that misunderstanding to an uncritical audience. Not all representation is progress. Sometimes, it's a step back

into the shadows we thought we'd already escaped. In The Fanatic, the real monster isn't Moose - it's the gaze that created him. [Crystal Orellano]

When Evil Lurks (2023) is a gory Argentinian film about demonic possession that comes with superstition, rules, and rituals for understanding and expunging a nameless evil. When the body of a local man is found, bloated and housing an evil waiting to be reborn, it becomes the job of two local brothers Pedro and Jaime to sort things out. Things go terribly wrong when they try to get rid of the corpse, they break supernatural rules, and discover the nature of this demon is highly contagious and hell-bent on possession, leading Pedro to flee the region with his sons Santino and Jair. Jair is autistic and presented as non-speaking, vocal-stimming, with stereotyped high support needs. Jair is central to the second half of the film which hinges on his autism as a crucial plot mechanism. As the evil spreads, destroys everyone it touches including Santino, it then attempts to possess Jair. However, for a demon used to a lifetime of possessing neurotypicals this gets complicated. "A demon got into his head and is trapped. I saw this in autistic people. They invade their bodies but can't figure out their minds" says a local exorcist.

So, it turns out that accommodation is the problem. Like most of us, Jair exists in a world not built to accommodate him which makes this reversal, Jair's autism as an un-accommodation to demonic possession, intriguing and notable. Notable, in that it was only last year that a viral clip of a US pastor's splenetic autism-as-demonic-possession evoked many historical antecedents in which traits of neurodivergence were treated as evidence of demonic possession. What I liked about When Evil Lurks, is that it conjures this nefarious history through Jair but not as a victim but resistance. Is he demonic or not becomes a line that the film seeks to blur as his autism bristles against possession tropes so that we don't really know if he is actually possessed or simply masking? After his family have all been gorily dispatched, I appreciated that his future support plan might in fact be better handled by a demon. [Gary Needham]

Poor Things (2023) tells the story of a young woman, Bella Baxter, pieced together in the lab of Dr. Godwin Baxter in late-Victorian London. Having found the pregnant, waterlogged body of Victoria Blessington in a river post-suicide, 'God' decides rather than save Victoria, he'd like to perform an experimental surgery to transplant the mind of her fetus into her body, creating Bella. As a retelling of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, the film is laden with themes of non-normative bodyminds. The character of 'God' is visibly disabled and his facial differences are a recurring topic of conversation; medical students refer to him as 'monster'. Further, 'God' is portrayed as a 'mad scientist', pushing past the ethical boundaries of science; his experiments horrify and his sanity is therefore questioned. In both regards, disability is used as shorthand to convey villainy, leaning into the 'evil cripple' trope, relying on eugenic ideas about disability predisposing one to madness, violence, and criminality. Victoria is characterized as mad for her attempt – the desecration of her body and consequent discardment of her brain is even justified by this fact, for, as 'God' reminds, "suicide is treated as lunacy or crime," and her revival would have doomed her to a life institutionalized. These violations sadly reflect a reality in which mad bodyminds are devalued by medical professionals in life and Othered in death (see: mass unmarked graves in asylum cemeteries).

Bella is highly medicalized, subject to frequent observation; her movements are stiff, she is low verbality, and she is shown to miss social cues. These characteristics are used for comedic and horrific effects at the start and slowly dissipate as she 'ages.' She is described as a "very pretty retard" whose "mental age and body are [un] synchronized." In reality, 'mental age' is an oppressive concept utilized in intelligence testing; it insists that there is an 'average' age at which certain cognitive abilities are ascertained, and agency is frequently denied to those who fall outside of it. In creating a character with a literal difference in physical and 'mental age', the film potentially exposes the absurdity of such concepts. [Rebekah Stone]

The Substance (2024) fails to reconcile its critique of gendered ageism with its understanding of disability. Elisabeth Sparkle is fired from her

job because of her age. When she is introduced to a black-market drug known as The Substance, she learns that she can create a younger, quasi-cloned version of herself to audition for her job. Failure to stick to the medicine's strict rules of 'the balance' between her two selves results in body horror pandemonium. Despite the film's patent recognition of ageism against women, there is an underlying sense of disdain for the aging body. The Substance seeks to estrange ageism from ableism (and the balance between these concepts must be respected!). Ageing is presented as a sinister and undesirable process through the language of body horror. Elizabeth's hyperbolic shame manifests an exaggeratedly aging body - one which aligns with visual codes for disability. This is emphasised by director Coralie Fargeat's allusions to The Elephant Man in her film's final act, such as the POV shots and the starry sky.

Disability is abstracted and used as a metaphor for monstrosity, reinforcing dominant beliefs that there is something inherently wrong with being old and/or disabled. Ultimately, the film uses an aging and visibly different body as a site of spectacle, for spectators in the film, and the real, external audience. It shows Elisabeth being punished for her fear of aging and for actually growing old. This can be viewed as commentary on the existential futility of ageism, and how social stigma and self-hatred compounds this. But the satirical tone often feels cruel; there is a strong desire to degrade and humiliate Elisabeth's discordant body. I would have loved to see Elisabeth and Sue (her double) developing their relationship in a symbiotic act of survival. The marked absence of solidarity in their dynamic was disappointing, but not surprising. So was the lack of robust and integrated disability representation in the overall narrative. Because if the aging body is a haunted house, then here lies the ghost that disturbs our socio-cultural psyche: the spectre of disability. [Aaliyah Bates]

Bring Her Back (2025) uses horror to publicly rupture a typically subdued and private experience: grief. This is a recurrent theme in modern horror, such as The Babadook (2014) and Hereditary (2018). Bring Her Back offers a complex portrait of grief by focusing on the

vulnerability of disabled children in the foster care system. The film follows stepsiblings Andy and Piper, who enter foster care after the death of their father. Both children are disabled: Piper is blind, and Andy develops PTSD after discovering their father's corpse. They join foster mother and former counselor, Laura, and her foster son, Oliver, who is mute. The film develops a keen sense of dread by slowly exposing Laura's exploitation of her position of power. This is augmented by the precarious positioning of her fostered children and their ongoing grief. The dire consequences of her abuse are played out in full while remaining plausibly unnoticed; she is a respected and 'safe' adult. And exploitation, like grief, remains woefully ignored by society at large.

Notably, the film resists outright demonising Laura by expanding on her personal grief. The directors, Danny and Michael Philippou, were interested in creating a psycho-biddy horror. However, their nuanced characterisation of Laura exorcises the ageist/ableist/misogynistic tropes that trouble the psycho-biddy subgenre. Similarly, the lack of representation of blind actors and characters in cinema is an historic issue. First-time actor Sora Wong identifies as partially blind and has spoken about being drawn to playing Piper. She felt the character was relatable and had a strong desire to bring lived experience to the role. In addition to reworking tropes, I find the Philippou brothers are at their strongest when crafting dark internet mythos and unloading gnarly body sequences on audiences. They did this with Talk To Me (2022), carving out a clear style and building a sizzlingly macabre world that I was eager to return to. Their follow-up film, Bring Her Back, had some of the most visceral and uncomfortable gore I've seen in a while. They're offering something unique and necessary to the genre, and I look forward to seeing what they make next. [Aaliyah Bates]

Stigmatising neurodivergence - Horror films have notoriously featured elements of disability and, whether directly or indirectly, appropriated various conditions. This is particularly because they have always sought to display the atypical—that is, atypical to the cisheteronormative, neurotypical, abled, white, male population. This means that even

invisible disabilities have been integrated into horror, particularly various forms of neurodivergence (inclusive of schizophrenia, antisocial personality disorder, or else). From the abnormal gait and non-verbal nature of characters such as Nosferatu (1922) to the sound sensitivity and social awkwardness of Cadi from the Welsh-language horror film Gwledd (2021), neurodiverse coding can be found in popular to more obscure works. Characters such as these base their horror in the socially unconventional, which the lack thereof would severely deplete trepidation. Of course, this also means that neurodiverse attributes are sometimes amplified and misinterpreted. In Split (2016), dissociative identity disorder (DID) is taken to its extremes with a total of 24 alters, one of which happens to be murderous. Growling, climbing walls, unpredictable and angry, the main character is shown to be animalistic and ready for a rampage—a trope which dehumanises those with DID.

What is worse, mental health professionals or those with DID were not consulted in the making of the film, adding to the harm caused. In the Joker franchise, the mental (possible antisocial/narcissistic personality disorder) and neurological (pseudobulbar affect) converge to create a violent criminal and uncaring villain; this diverges from reality, as people with these conditions live relatively normal lives with appropriate treatment. In these characters, rather than being coded as neurodiverse, their impairments are the specific factors played upon to cause unease. In a world where many still use the colloquial “psycho”, this contributes to stigma and misunderstanding as the films reproduce rhetoric which sees those with certain conditions as dangerous. This is not to say that these conditions cannot be integrated into horror, but that seeking the advice of disabled communities should be integral to their creation; those with various forms of neurodiversity should be able to have a say in how their communities are represented.
[Julia Radtke]

Neurodivergence coded as violent - Horror often metaphorizes neurodivergence and mental illness as violent, dangerous, and uncontrollable - conditions to be contained or destroyed. These portrayals frame difference as a threat and justify control or eradication

as a form of safety. Yet the true horror doesn't reside in madness itself, but in the fatal consequences produced when society believes those narratives. What horror invents as metaphor, reality enforces as policy. Individuals with serious mental illness or experiencing mental health crises make up a disproportionate number of those killed at the very first step of the criminal justice process: during police encounters. A study by the Treatment Advocacy Center reported that people with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed during a police encounter than those without. Similarly, Khan (2024) found that nearly one-third of fatal police encounters in 27 U.S. states involved a victim experiencing a mental health crisis. Using data from the National Violent Death Reporting System, Khan (2024) discovered that the most common scenario involved a suicidal adult with a known mental health history who expressed distress to a family member - someone who, seeking help, called 911. Instead of receiving care, many encounter state-sanctioned force.

Studies using open-source data such as The Washington Post's Fatal Encounters database estimate that one in five people shot and killed by police may have been experiencing a mental health crisis at the time of their death. As of this writing, 20% of victims in the database match that classification. If nearly one in five adults in the U.S. lives with a mental illness, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, then this pattern is not a coincidence - it's a systemic failure. Policing is not mental health care, yet it's positioned as the default response to distress. There must be a national reckoning: a push for legislation, officer training, and community-based alternatives to 911 that prioritize de-escalation and non-lethal intervention. Until then, the cycle continues - where those seeking help are met not with compassion but with a weapon drawn in fear of the "madness" our culture taught us to see as violent. [Crystal Orellano]

The Kids aren't alright: Neurodivergence and the coding of the "creepy child" We all know the creepy child: rocking in the corner, staring silently at the camera, humming the same tune, or erupting in sudden screaming fits. They don't play with other children and

are either clingy or emotionally distant. Through a familiar cinematic shorthand, they're framed as unsettling and often autistic coded. These are characters not explicitly autistic but whose traits align with how autism is popularly perceived. There's overlap with other forms of neurodivergence (mutism, sensory issues, dissociation, PTSD). Common behaviours include: Repetitive movements (rocking), mutism or limited speech , flat affect and lack of emotional expression , apparent lack of affection toward parents , meltdowns , elopement, social isolation and refusal or inability to play, adult-like speech (The Sixth Sense, 1999; The Omen, 1976; Us, 2019; Hereditary, 2018). These traits often serve as cinematic shorthand for trauma. Autism, PTSD, and dissociative conditions are conflated because film language isn't precise.

No one is writing these children as autistic; they're assembling familiar cues for "otherness." Outdated theories once blamed autism on cold or neglectful mothers. This lingers in horror: The Babadook's grieving single mother grows estranged from her child, while in The Omen a nanny replaces the maternal role. Echoes of this persist in Hereditary (2018), where maternal relationships remain fraught and uncanny. In Us (2019) a character appears "normal" until confronted by her mirror self, after which she becomes selectively mute and exhibits behaviours linked to both PTSD and autism. She lines up toys during therapy; later, her son shows similar signs: fascination with patterns and magic, poor eye contact, and a literal mask. Across these films, autistic traits mark characters as other, sometimes saviours and sometimes threats. They flatten real experiences into archetype. I'm not making a moral claim; some depictions resonated, others repelled. "Positive" and "negative" representation doesn't quite fit. Really, my pet theory is that this thread runs from folklore through Gothic literature into modern horror, but we don't have space for that. [Juanita de Villiers]

Seizures in Horror Films - The Body Is Not the Horror - Horror has a familiar image for a seizure: the body rigid and shaking, eyes rolled back, a flash of terror for the audience. It is used to mark the moment someone crosses from ordinary to other. The body becomes evidence of contamination, not change. A seizure is not a haunting - it is the body

moving into another existing state. Sometimes it announces itself with a metallic edge to the air, a pull in the stomach, sound turning flat and far away. It can also arrive without ceremony. When it ends, there's the slow task of finding words, faces and time again. None of this needs a demon.That distinction matters because horror's language was built on old scripts: epilepsy was once called 'the sacred disease' - its meaning twisted through religion and medicine - treated as possession and linked to eugenic ideas of weakness or decline. Horror repeats those traces in The Exorcist (1973), The Conjuring (2013) and Hereditary (2018) - bodies convulsing as proof of something evil inside. What is really on display is the fear of losing control. A seizure unsettles people because it shows that control was never absolute. It blurs the boundary between body and will, between action and being acted upon. Horror can't accept that truth, so it invents something to blame. The seizure is not the monster. The monster is a world that cannot look at a body moving through its own storm and still see a person. [Nisha Oza]

The Body as Portal: Disability and Horror Through a Black Lens -
Disability in horror films has long carried the weight of misunderstanding. It's been used as shorthand for tragedy, evil, or helplessness — the limp that signals danger, the scar that marks corruption, the silence mistaken for ignorance. Too often, disabled characters exist as metaphors rather than people, their bodies turned into symbols of fear or punishment. Hollywood loves the image of deformity but refuses the reality of humanity. What these portrayals ignore is the truth of embodiment. Living with a disability isn't a curse or a horror story — it's a different rhythm of survival. It's awareness sharpened through pain, movement learned through adaptation, and strength built in the face of constant misreading. Where horror films seek to sensationalize difference, real life finds meaning in it. Disability becomes its own form of knowledge — one that doesn't fit into cinematic pity or spectacle. When viewed through a Black spiritual lens, the body — all bodies — becomes sacred ground. In many African traditions, power doesn't depend on perfection. Scars are signatures of endurance. Limping doesn't mean weakness; it means you've walked through something that tried to break you and failed. The disabled

body carries stories of transformation, of ancestors who learned to live between worlds — one physical, one unseen. This reframing exposes what horror never understood: what it labels monstrous is often divine. The horror genre fears loss of control, but African spirituality teaches balance — that spirit moves even in stillness, that healing doesn't always mean returning to what was. The body that Hollywood deems "broken" might, in truth, be closer to the ancestors — already fluent in crossing thresholds. Because in the end, what frightens the world most is not the body that changes, but the one that reveals the unseen. [Popstar Presents]

Marfan syndrome is common in actors playing tall skinny monsters. It is associated with unusually long limbs, fingers and being skinny and flexible. It can also cause scoliosis and heart, eye and connective tissue problems. People with Marfan syndrome, much like dwarfism, are more likely to play a non-human creature than be cast in any human role. People with Marfan syndrome have been monsters in Pan's Labyrinth (2006) Rec (2007), Mama (2015), The Conjuring 2 (2016), Slender Man (2016), Gerald's Game (2017), It (2017), Smile (2022). Alien Romulus and Nosferatu (2025). Christopher Ikonomou, had this to say: "Even if it's unintentional, writing monsters who resemble a real group of people harms that group. People see these representations in horror films and it implicitly affects how they treat people who look like those monsters in real life. This then creates a positive feedback loop where our bodies are reinforced as innately unsettling and more writers decide to use us as inspiration to evoke that feeling in audiences. I have experienced a lot of bullying growing up and in my adulthood because of my visible illness, and much of it manifests as people seeing me as an inhuman creature. I shouldn't be stared at wherever I go because people are shocked to see the way my body naturally exists. Dozens of people with Marfan have contacted me to share the fact that they've gone through the exact same treatment. Despite the negative comments and incessant staring I've experienced from nondisabled people, I have come to love my body and am proud to be who I am. It shouldn't be the case that the first thing people think of when they see me is a monster. People with Marfan, or anyone resembling the

body type, should be able to play more than horrific villains, and those characters shouldn't reinforce negative biases toward us. I hate that this has to be said, but we are not monsters." [Richard Amm]

Transcoding in horror movies - Trans identity has been, and is, pathologized in Western society. Gender dysphoria as a psychiatric diagnosis first appeared in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) and persists in the DSM-5. There is a significant overlap between the transgender and disability communities: In the 2020 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 52% of transgender respondents reported having a disability. While these connections are truthful, an issue arises when disability and transness are treated negatively and their connection as an invalidation of each other (i.e., the notion that disabled trans people only identify as trans because disability compromises their capacity for self-understanding and self-determination). Additionally, disability and transness are both equated with danger. There are several examples of horror movies where the villain is coded as trans and disabled by way of psychiatric diagnoses. They're typically coded as transfeminine people who are the primary targets of trans panic in real life.
Psycho (1960) combines harmful mental illness tropes with trans coding in Norman Bates, who dresses up as his deceased mother when he kills. In this situation, it's clear that "man in woman's clothing" is the danger. This trend continues with Sleepaway Camp (1983) and The Silence of the Lambs (1991). A theme to note in these two films is the trans-coded characters are proclaimed to be not "actually" transgender. Buffalo Bill "believes" he is transgender but was denied gender-affirming surgery due to mental illness, and this contributes to his motive to kill women. In Sleepaway Camp, Angela is revealed to be the killer when her penis is exposed, and she was forced to assume a female identity as a traumatized child. These examples add layers to the trans-horror connection: transness is mental illness, which is disability, which is dangerous. Trans and disability liberation are in deep connection to each other; So long as we are othered, our struggles will be intertwined. Until we are free to exist in our bodies as they are and as we want them to be, we will continue to be the monsters of media. [Félix Moreno]

Transphobia in horror movies. - ‘Billy’s not a real transexual, but he thinks he is. He tries to be.’ In Johnathan Demme’s 1991 film The Silence of the Lambs (based on the book of the same name) the infamous Dr Hannibal Lecter describes the film’s true villain using the preceding quote. It begs the question, what is a ‘real’ transexual? How does one define the validity of an individual’s gender identity? Despite this, Buffalo Bill is frequently listed amongst horror’s most controversial transgender horror villains, appearing along side such characters as wouldn’t harm a fly ‘Norman Bates’ (Psycho, 1960), everyone’s favourite southern boy ‘Leatherface’ (The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 1974) and the infamous naked and bloodied ‘Angela’ (Sleepaway Camp, 1984) . Of the above characters, only Buffalo Bill is ever really described as ‘transexual’ and even then it is only to say he isn’t ‘really’ trans – not that many people seem to remember this fact. Since its inception the horror genre has derived much of its terror from the presence of the other, a character set apart due to race, disability, ‘deviant’ sexuality, or refusal to conform to gender expectations. The demonisation of the trans community, and more specifically of transfeminine individuals is just the next step in a long standing tradition of othering that which strays from the norm. In each of the above mentioned films, the fluidity of gender identity exists to demonstrate the character has broken with reality and poses a threat. More often than not within horror, trans people often fill the role of villain or inflictor of violence when in reality the opposite is true. In 2024, in the US alone there were twenty-seven trans people who lost their lives to violence and an additional twenty-one lost to suicide. While the trans people of horror are skinning women alive to make outfits or surprising them in the shower with a knife and a jarring soundtrack, in real life most of us are simply trying to get by. [Charley Swire]

Consumption of Madness and the fictionalization of psychiatric violence - Psychiatry, mental asylums and mad*/mentally disabled people are a common trope in horror movies. In order to provoke discomfort and fear, psychiatric institutions are often used as a setting. Former treatment methods, such as isolation cells, electroshock therapy and straitjackets, are frequently shown, evoking an atmosphere

of cruelty and control. Mad/mentally disabled people can be depicted as part of the scenery – as just a whining pile lingering in the corner, inactive, more like a decorative object used to create a gruesome atmosphere, while the whining becomes the soundscape. In other cases they are “enemies”, shown not so much as humans but more like savage animals, beasts, not reachable for “sane” arguments. Additionally murderers or serial killers are often portrayed as being “insane”. Those tropes follow the myth of the dangerousness of mad/mentally disabled people and strengthen this perception. Mad/mentally disabled people are viewed by others,as persons who need to be changed, controlled or even eliminated, fiction or otherwise. Even though the conditions and treatment methods of psychiatry and its predecessor institutions in horror films resemble reality, this seems distant and unrealistic for most people.

Using psychiatric themes as fictional elements makes real psychiatric violence invisible. Despite the primary purpose of entertainment, it makes fun of real suffering and the circumstances in which mad/mentally disabled people were/are incarcerated and mistreated. Another effect of this fictionalisation is that pro-psychiatric voices try to paint a counter picture: sentiments like “in reality psychiatry isn’t like that – It offers help and everything is wonderful.” This narrative erases the fact that involuntary confinement and coercive treatment are still legal in many places, even though they contradict the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The horror of psychiatry is real. Sadly people still get traumatized and die by psychiatry. But in horror movies it is not shown to expose how horrific it was (and is) for people to be subjected to mental asylums and psychiatry. By turning psychiatric violence and madness into fiction, horror cinema distances it from reality and reinforces a dehumanizing perception of mad/mentally disabled people. *mad is a reclaimed term and stands for self determination, the rejection of psychiatric categories and the fight against psychiatric violence. [Mile Lex Franke]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