"Man's Hatred Has Made Me So": Freakification and the Shifting Gaze in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925)

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Abstract

By using artistic conventions only available through cinema, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) manipulates the gaze to create a character so inhuman and unsympathetic, he transcends the position of the freak into the realm of the monster. The silent horror version of this film extends the social construct of the freak into cinema so that, while the freak shows may have been closing their doors, the legacy of the freak lived on.

As the conventional freak shows reached their peak in the 1920s and began their steady descent, another art form came to take their place, complete with the potential to freakify its subjects in more complex, subtle ways. Film had begun with the minute-long footage of *The Horse in Motion* in 1878 (which was intended to answer a scientific inquiry, not to entertain), but it had since advanced to full-length movies, albeit without dialog until 1927's groundbreaking *The Jazz Singer*. Although sitting in a 1920s theatre and watching a black-and-white silent film at first glance seems a far cry from the experience of going to a freak show, the similarities become apparent in the genre of horror. Like the freak show, the horror film delves into the liminal spaces between man and beast, often exploiting patrons' desire to look on the physical differences of others, a desire motivated by the hunger for novel entertainments, as well as the need to establish the boundaries of cultural otherness and affirm one's own position within the majority.

According to Stephen Prince, horror delves deeper than other genres into the "fundamental questions about the nature of human existence." It interrogates "nonhuman categories" via "the violation of the ontological categories on which being and culture reside." This creates an "us" versus "them" dichotomy. Horror films also generate a paradox in exploring "the

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way that terror opens onto pleasure" (Prince 2, 3, 10). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen adds that the horror film is a safe space in which to make these explorations: "We watch the monstrous spectacle of the horror film because we know that the cinema is a temporary place, that the jolting sensuousness of the celluloid images will be followed by reentry into the world of comfort and light" (Cohen 17).

In many ways, the freak show performs these same functions. According to Rosemarie Garland Thomson in her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, "Freak shows framed and choreographed bodily differences that we now call 'race,' 'ethnicity,' and 'disability' in a ritual that enacted the social process of making cultural otherness from the raw materials of human physical variation" (60). This made a silent horror film the perfect bridge between the old genre for freakification and the new. Indeed, Ian Conrich points out that freak shows and horror films alike explore "the boundary separating beast and mankind [that] is often challenged" by the monstrous portrayals characteristic of these movies (47).

Although many versions of the *Phantom of the Opera*'s story make use of the freak show trope (some even more explicitly than this one), the 1925 production in particular occupies an interesting place in American cinematic history as one of the age's "horror spectaculars" (Conrich 40); it also capitalizes on the shift of the freak show from the sideshow to the big screen during the age of silent film. In this production, the Paris Opera House is home of beautiful singers like Christine, the protagonist, and also to a much darker figure—the Phantom of the Opera, whose spectral presence has birthed a multitude of rumors and superstitions among the owners and patrons alike. Previously known as Erik, the Phantom is not truly a monster, but an escaped convict with severe facial disfigurements who lives beneath the opera house in what was once torture chambers. He has been giving Christine voice lessons for years and has become obsessed with the young singer, although they have never met face-to-face. His fixation on her reaches a crisis when another suitor, Raoul, plans to marry Christine; this leads the Phantom to finally reveal himself to her, albeit hiding his face behind a mask, and he proceeds to wreak havoc in her life and those of everyone else involved with the opera house. The film climaxes when the Phantom kidnaps Christine, Raoul rescues her, and an angry mob

chases the Phantom into the river.

The film serves as an extension of the dying freak show, performing an important move of shifting the process of freakification from live performance to the world of cinematic entertainment, "with a cinematic experience of images of the aberrant and the bizarre replacing the immediacy of the genuine (and often fabricated, or 'gaffed') disabilities of the live carnival" (Conrich 47). *The Phantom of the Opera* even features a character, Buquet, who is similar to a freak show's master of ceremonies, complete with "his visceral descriptions and melodramatic manner" (Randell 77). Thus, by examining this film in particular, one can see the important ways that traditional freak show practices are enhanced and complicated by their new home on screen. By using artistic conventions only available through the cinematic medium, *Phantom* manipulates the gaze of the characters and the audience members to create a character so inhuman and unsympathetic that he transcends the position of the freak into the realm of the monster.

GAZING AND POINTING AT FREAKS

As the freak show transitioned onto the horror film screen, the silent film enhanced elements of its predecessor that were essential in the process of freakification; in particular, the silent film emphasizes the visual conventions upon which human exhibits relied, such as staring. In "'*The Phantom of the Opera*': The Lost Voice of Opera in Silent Film," Michal Grover-Friedlander points out the way that silent movies and operatic performances both place emphasis on "an extravagance of gesture and movement" (180). This emphasis on gestures is particular to *Phantom*'s place in cinematic history. Norman King noted that there was a "marked" shift of "acting style away from the exaggeratedly gestural toward the naturalistic" in silent films that added sound beyond instrumental accompaniment (39). Because this film was made prior to this shift, it still carries all of the exaggerated gestures characteristic of both silent film and the opera. The Phantom uses such gestures to redistribute the gaze from himself as a physically disabled man onto the female object of his desire.

Throughout my analysis of the film, I noticed that most of the extravagant gestures originated from the object of freakification, the Phantom. The most prominent and frequent of such gesticulations is that

of pointing. While the objectifying gaze—the act of staring—has received much discussion within critical conversations about freakification and disability studies (see Thomson's book, *Staring*), this film demonstrates the importance of the physical gestures that accompany it. The act of pointing is a more extreme form of freakification than the gaze because it takes staring one step further by adding a direct physical action that is apparent to potential onlookers. This increases the attention drawn to the object of the gaze. Several times, the Phantom points dramatically at Christine in a way that emphasizes his reversal of the gaze onto her.

Although Erik is treated as a "freak" because of his physical disabilities, very rarely do other characters point at him, while he points at Christine no less than nine times. The two observed moments where Erik himself is the object of pointing occur early in the film, and, in one of them, he points to himself before the intertitle screen (the printed text screens that interrupt filmed action in silent movies to provide dialogue and narration) conveys his words: "Men once knew me as Erik, but for many years I have lived in these cellars, a nameless legend" (43:00). The other is when Christine accuses him of being the infamous Phantom (42:23). Other than these two early instances, the rest of the moments in the film that include pointing occur either when he points at Christine or, in the two instances, when he gestures toward an angry mob (1:40:30, 1:40:44). The sheer number of times this happens over the course of a film just under two hours and the fact that the pointing almost always serves to emphasize an implicit relationship between the Phantom and Christine demonstrate the importance of this extended form of the gaze to the film.

Often, the Phantom uses these gestures to create a sense of accusation or anger toward Christine. Other times, this motion serves to draw attention away from himself: after Christine sneaks up behind him and removes his mask, he points at her in a dramatic moment when her fear—both of his newly-revealed face and his ominous advances—is evident (50:27). Additionally, when his gesture refers to the angry mob of people who are hunting him down, Erik is striving to deflect their gaze from himself by redirecting it back onto them.

Besides the way that pointing functions *within* the film, it is also important to consider what this gesture serves for the story *as* a film, a visual art with viewers. When a character points to something or someone

else on screen, this motion draws the eye to the object of the gesture. Since this action is nearly always observed coming from the Phantom himself, this demonstrates a way that the character is drawing attention away from himself, whenever he is being freakified. He takes the gaze that is implicitly on him due to his position as a freak and twists it by deflecting the audience's gaze onto someone else, inviting the audience to look with him, instead of at him.

Within the context of a freak show, it would have been common to see patrons pointing at the human exhibits; this invites the others witnessing the myriad of human oddities to join that individual in gazing at one specimen in particular. This invitation to gaze with someone else is inverted in *Phantom* the same way that it would have been if one of the exhibits at a freak show had been pointing back at the patrons; this would have given the audience pause as they attempt to navigate the fact that their visual attention is being drawn away from the freak and toward a member of the normate population, someone who looks like them.

The act of pointing to one of the patrons at a freak show could have caused those present to acquire empathy for the one at whom they have been pointing, thus restoring a semblance of that freak's humanity. However, while this gaze reversal could have humanized the Phantom, making him someone with whom the audience could empathize, the way that the film consistently animalizes this character prevents such a reaction, creating a tension between the freakifying gaze, its reversal, and the portrayal of the freak himself.

THE MIRROR AND MASK AS MODERATORS FOR THE GAZE

Two ways that this film endeavors to construct the Phantom as a freak is through its use of the mirror and the mask. Scholars like Grover-Friedlander and Andrew P. Williams have discussed the presence of mirrors in the film, but the connection between these set devices and freakification has yet to be explored. Williams focuses on the mirror as "mark[ing] the boundary between the patriarchal code of Raoul and the exotic mysteries of the 'sexual other'" (92). By contrast, Grover-Friedlander looks a bit closer at the film's reflection in its many mirrors, agreeing that their main power is in their ability to transform the characters but also noting their implied

connection to power dynamics. According to this author, mirrors emphasize the ways that "the voice of the Phantom will overpower the prima donna's voice" and how they later "signify the Phantom's loss of power over the prima donna's voice when Christine crosses through the mirror and sees him: the mirror becomes merely one of the Phantom's [fetishized] objects underneath the opera house, and at that point it has lost all power" (189).

Missing from this discussion is an examination of the implications mirrors have for freakification. For any individual whose physical appearance has served as the catalyst for societal freakification, the image in a mirror can understandably range from causing depression to inciting rage. The implication that the gaze—particularly at one's self—is something to be feared is evident when Raoul and Leddoux of the Secret Police "'have fallen into the room of many mirrors—the old torture chamber!'" (1:22:42). The idea of having mirrors in a torture chamber is both logical and haunting: not only would the objects of torture be in agony, but they would be seeing the acts and the results of those actions on their physical bodies as they occur, creating implications of psychological torment in this scene that stem from the mirrors themselves. Likewise, the Phantom here demonstrates that, from his perspective, seeing oneself is the ultimate form of torture. As society has freakified Erik throughout his life, he has grown to associate his physical appearance as the source of this torment. Seeing himself is thus equated to torture in this moment, demonstrating the inherent connection between being freakified and being tortured.

However, the Phantom turns what could be objects of loathing into portals through which he gazes upon the object of his obsession: the beautiful Christine. As Williams observes, the two-way mirror in Christine's dressing room allows the Phantom to "gaze into the mirror and see the beauty" instead of "the painful realities of his own reflection" (92). Instead of coming to terms with his freakishness, he channels that energy into creating the perfect woman, training her through vocal instruction and conditioning her to call him "Master" (21:57). In this way, the Phantom continues to reverse the gaze away from himself—who cannot see himself in the two-way mirror—and onto Christine. By thus manipulating their use, he transforms the mirrors that would present him with his own "deformities" into access points to socially acceptable beauty.

A key point to emphasize here is the way that the conventional

gaze between the freak and the normate—which appears countless times throughout the film—is reversed through the mirror. Throughout the first half hour, Erik has been watching Christine, gazing upon her, with and without her consent, through the one-way mirror. Indeed, he "does not appear in person until the fourth reel of this production, but his shadow manifestations are said to be enough to enthrall the spectators" ("Lon Chaney Plays Role"). Since he does not appear right away, it is through his intertitle lines and descriptions from other characters that the audience builds their initial impression of him.

Erik controls his image by restricting access to it through hiding (both out of sight and behind a mask), but he frames the first real encounter with Christine as a privilege for the young singer. Prior to his appearance in her dressing room, he says, "Soon, Christine, this spirit will take form and command your love!" to which she responds, "Call for me when you will. I shall be waiting" (22:20). When he finally comes for her, she is "ready, Master—waiting!" to finally meet him, and he tells her to "[w]alk to your mirror, my dear—have no fear!" (32:20), giving her permission to see him, albeit still in a restricted sense as he keeps his mask on.

Prior to his unmasking, it appears that Erik might be the same as other men, even if he seems a bit socially awkward and sleeps in a coffin. However, at the moment of the unmasking, the audience faces an entirely new being. After Christine takes off his mask, "[n]o longer needing to hide his 'otherness,' Erik's tender appeals for love disappear," to be replaced with animalistic, violent forwardness (Williams 93-94).

Like the anatomical museums that were declining alongside the freak shows (finally closing their doors in the 1930s), this moment splits the character in two. These exhibits displayed "the Body with a capital B, separate from, deprived of, punished by, or in rebellion against, a moralizing, rationalizing, disciplining Spirit" (Sappol). Likewise, the spirit of Erik truly becomes separated in this moment from the physical body and social construction of the monstrous Phantom. This transformation is indicative of one of the main ways that this film creates a cinematic freak show: by presenting Erik as an animal, the movie plays into a larger trend of framing those with disabilities as something less than human, thus rendering them outside of the same moral purview that might hinder one's ability to fully freakify the individual.

The exact moment when Christine takes off the mask marks a turning point in the film where it shifts definitively into the genre of horror. According to a review from the time of the film's premier, "The scene wherein curiosity impels her to remove his mask is said to be manipulated so that the simple act of slipping off the disguise furnishes excitement" ("Lon Chaney Plays Role"). Indeed, the intertitle sets the scene as the Phantom proclaims, "Yet listen—there sounds an ominous undercurrent of warning!" (49:23).

As Christine reaches for the mask, her face bears an expression of anticipation that quickly turns to horror when the mask finally comes off (50:20). For the next two minutes, the camera switches between direct face shots of Lon Chaney (the actor playing the Phantom in this film), bearing a wide-eyed, gaped-mouth, inhuman expression, and full scene shots of him looming over Christine's fearful huddled form. He grabs her face, forcing her to look upon him, with the words, "Feast your eyes—glut your soul, on my accursed ugliness!" (51:20). In his action and word choice, we find a sense of violence in the gaze he invites; instead of a more permissive request or a gentler touch, the Phantom is demanding that she look at him, while physically not giving her any choice in the matter.

Here, the Phantom becomes, like freak show exhibits, a personification of anxiety about physical difference in such a way that impairs one's ability to empathize with him. The particular appearance of the Phantom's face in this moment establishes definitively what the film has been hinting at thus far: that Erik is something less than human. His face is presented as distorted, practically beyond recognition as a human face. As Grover-Friedlander describes,

> [T]he visual image is stretched out, formless, transgressive, shapeless, emphasizing the hollowness of the skull, the beastliness of the eye, nose and mouth cavities, and the lack of humanity in the Phantom's face. Described in terms of orifices and cavities—noseless visage, black holes instead of eyes—the Phantom's face is the negative of a human face, a trace of a human body, a literally phantom-like living corpse. (188)

Previous to this moment, there have only been rumors of his appearance to feed the audience's curiosity, and these descriptions vary and even contradict each other, like when the dancers "saw him for an instant—a

gray shadow—and he was gone!," and they cannot agree if he had a nose or not (10:34). Thus far, the Phantom is less than human in his ghostlike elusiveness; however, in this moment of unmasking, the audience members, with Christine, get to see for themselves. Here, inhumanity transitions from ethereal and elusive to material and monstrous. The film constructs an inhuman and unsympathetic character, and the way the unmasking is presented emphasizes these efforts.

From this moment forward, the film includes several scenes and intertitle word choices that emphasize the animalistic portrayal that plays into the freakification of this character. Twice, Christine directly calls him a "monster" when talking to Raoul (1:00:24, 1:08:20). Additionally, the phrase permeated the film's reviews, calling him "the inhuman monster of iniquity" ("Lon Chaney Plays Role"). This specific word has great implications on the freakification of an individual because, by using this term, Christine designates that his status as a human being is not only in question, but that it is beyond hope—he is not only monstrous, but a monster.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the implications of this term are clear. The original definition of the word was "a mythical creature which is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance," and the later and more general definition is "any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening." Another definition it provides is "a person of repulsively unnatural character, or exhibiting such extreme cruelty or wickedness as to appear inhuman" ("Monster"). Together, these definitions demonstrate the implications of the term the film uses to identify the Phantom: Erik is presented as ugly, frightening, and repulsive, somewhere in the liminal space between human and animal—the same space to which the freak show banished such real-life performers as Joseph Merrick (the Elephant Man), Stephan Bibrowsky (Lionel, the Lion-Faced Boy), and P.T. Barnum's "What is It?" exhibit. According to Thomson,

> the freak show defined and exhibited the 'abnormal.' By highlighting ostensible human anomaly of every sort and combination, Barnum's exhibits challenged audiences not only to classify and explain what they saw, but to relate the performance to themselves, to American individual and collective identity ("The Cultural Work of American Freak

Shows" 58).

Indeed, the use of the term "monster" plays into a history of exploring and exploiting liminality within the freak show: according to Thomson, "the word monster [is] perhaps the earliest and most enduring name for the singular body.... By challenging the boundaries of the human and the coherence of what seemed to be the natural world, monstrous bodies appeared as sublime, merging the terrible with the wonderful, equalizing repulsion with attraction" ("Introduction" 3).

This aspect of the character aligns with Thesis III of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," which is that "the monster is the harbinger of category crisis." Within this section of his work, he explains,

> [The] refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions. (6)

By the very nature of his existence and the way that he is perceived by the normate (coupled with how the film consistently places emphasis on a monstrous portrayal), the Phantom is a monster of hybridization. The fact that people cannot easily classify him as man or beast is cause for anxiety and fear, as is reflected on the faces of the other characters in the movie who see him without his mask—not to mention on those of the audience members who saw the film when it came out in 1925.

Beyond the moment of unmasking, the importance placed upon the necessity of the mask at the beginning likewise emphasizes the scenes in which the Phantom foregoes it. There is a significant difference between how the Phantom acts with his mask and without it. Most notably, his change of attitude toward its absence is worth examining. At first, when Christine takes it off, he is distraught and violent and even appears to cover his face and cry at one point (50:30). However, after this moment when the mystery has been lost and he knows that Christine cannot unsee what she has seen, this element of shame falls by the wayside in favor of exaggerated expressions and anger.

After the scenes at the Bal Masque de l'Opera, Christine and Raoul retreat to the opera's roof to talk, while the Phantom secretly leers down

at them from the gargoyles above (59:42). When Christine proclaims that "[h]e is a monster—a loathsome beast! You must save me from him, Raoul!" (1:00:24), Erik's gestures and facial expressions align him with the gothic statues; Chaney performs without the mask as the Phantom's cloak billows in the wind in a stark parody of the visible angel statues. The cinematography and acting in this scene show how, without his mask, Erik has fallen from the angels of love and music to become one of the opera house's most intimidating gargoyles.

The appearance of these particular forms of architectural adornment creates its own set of implications. According to Cohen, "Gargoyles and ornately sculpted grotesques, lurking at the crossbeams or upon the roof of the cathedral, likewise record the liberating fantasies of a bored or repressed hand suddenly freed to populate the margins" (17-18). This scene aligns the Phantom with these same sentiments; he embodies that feeling of liberation and freedom that come with being on the edges of society, of not belonging to the normate population. He embraces his monster status in this moment and joins the gargoyles in their inhuman and terrifying freedom, which threatens the safety of innocents like Christine and Raoul.

Another moment where his sans-mask human status comes into question is when he stalks Raoul's boat in the underground lagoon as the lover searches for Christine. Just after insisting that he is "a human like other men" (1:23:12), he contradicts this statement with his actions as he uses his cane to breathe underwater, implying that he is a creature from the deep. This is only intensified when he emerges from the depths later, framed in a manner that makes him look even less "human" than usual (1:27:05).

Likewise, the Phantom contradicts his claims to humanity with his language. At one point, he compares himself to a toad, saying "No longer like a toad in these foul cellars will I secrete the venom of hatred—for you shall bring me love!" (1:21:32). In addition to these animalistic portrayals, he also often refers to himself as a spirit, demonstrating a dichotomy between his aspirations to be more than human and his treatment as less than human. This spiritual element, though, is not always presented in a positive light. For example, at the beginning, he frames himself as Christine's spirit guide of music; later, he calls her an "ungrateful fool," saying, "You have spurned the spirit that inspired you—the spirit that made you great!... Now, you shall see the evil spirit that makes my evil face!" (1:21:01). This aligns

with the preconception with which many in the audience could have walked in, for frequently "the trope of disability is used to connote evil" (Randell 71).

Later, while driving the cart without his mask, he is depicted with an expression that reads as crazed and even non-sentient. He throws the cart's driver to the ground and boards the front bench quickly, with a dazed Christine in the backseat. He maintains this expression throughout this scene, laughing and staring directly at the camera, confronting the audience with his freakishness (1:42:20). In the film's final moments, as he runs from the angry mob, he suddenly seems to become aware of his face's nakedness, attempting to cover it with his cloak (1:43:47).

In this moment, the tension between his masked and mask-less selves comes forward as he faces the way the rest of humanity sees him. Although he has himself contributed to the construction of his freakification, that position was originally bestowed by society, which is now embodied in the angry mob. As the film's freak, it is necessary that some segment of the normate populace destroy him in the end; Cohen explains that monsters must meet this kind of sticky end because of the way that they are "transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker; and so the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed" (16). In these final moments, though, Erik clings to his humanity and hides the physical deformities that were the focus of his original ostracism in a last-ditch effort to deconstruct, or at least deflect, freakish identity; however, while there may be a happy ending for Christine and Raoul, Erik gets no such mercy in a tragic end to a miserable, fundamentally misunderstood, character who really only desired to be loved. This purpose became hopelessly distorted from the moment Christine removed that mask.

CINEMATIC CHOICES: THE ROLE OF SETTING AND CASTING IN ERIK'S FREAKIFICATION

Besides props like the mirror and the mask, the film's use of set also works to create the monstrous portrayal of the Phantom. As a 1925 review of the film states,

> Most of the more horrible and impressive scenes of the picture take place in the cellars and sub-cellars of the opera house where one's appetite for thrills is regaled with ghostlike shadows, trap doors working unexpectedly, an underground lake and torture

> chambers in which one may be smothered with heat or suffer almost any untold agony. ("'Phantom of Opera,' New Film at Astor")

The dramatic difference between the dark, dismal cellars and the light, beautiful opera house creates a distinction between those who inhabit these spaces. The film establishes this division early on, from the first intertitle: "Sanctuary of song lovers, The Paris Opera House, rising nobly over medieval torture chambers, hidden dungeons, long forgotten" (2:57). Following are establishing shots of the opera's beautiful architecture and interior. Then, viewers witness a perfectly choreographed performance of two hundred dancers ("Paris Opera Reproduced"), all of whom look identical, moving as one. This establishes the societal ideal that is reinforced by the audience's applause. The set and dancers present a society where conformity is key, and where aesthetic beauty is necessary for acceptance, directly contrasting with the Phantom, who is alone and monstrous.

When the Phantom enters this realm of beauty, the film shows the disastrous results of this mingling. In addition to the ways that he causes psychological and physical harm to the heroes, the set demonstrates this point through the chandelier. Clearly the pride of the opera house, the Phantom causes it to fall, leading to pandemonium in the crowd (28:52). The chandelier's wreckage is symbolic of the perceived destruction of social order and beauty that occur when a freak breeches the outside world and pursues beauty. This scene of set destruction reinforces the preconceptions that audience members would have had based on freak shows, a context that would have insinuated that the freak, being less than human, does not belong in the company of man.

In an examination of the sleeping quarters, viewers can see an additional way that the Phantom's less-than-human status in society has permeated his definition of self. In the cellars, the Phantom possesses two places for sleeping: an ornate boat-shaped bed that he bequeaths unto an unconscious Christine (43:38), and a coffin he identifies as his own, a bed which "keeps me reminded of other dreamless sleep that cures all ills—forever!" (42:11). The contrast between these two beds and their implications demonstrate how he sees himself as less than human, as a living corpse of a man incapable of rejoining the society of people even in such simple ways as his own choice of amenities. The socially constructed position of the

freak that he occupies has permeated his views of himself to the point where he doesn't need other people to tell him he's a freak—he affirms this title himself regularly.

In order to create the most freakish character possible, this film chose to have the Phantom played by actor Lon Chaney, who "was recognized for his portrayal of grotesques: physically malformed, or disfigured, afflicted, and stigmatized" (Conrich 46). Throughout his career as an actor, he had the roles of a variety of disabled characters, such as Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and a cripple in *The Miracle Man* (1919). In "Lon Chaney Plays Role of Paris Opera Phantom," a *New York Times* review of the film from 1925, the author discusses the importance of this casting choice. Chaney was known for playing the disabled: "Mr. Chaney... made a specialty of appearing as a distorted or crippled person" ("Lon Chaney Plays Role"). So, by choosing Chaney for the role, this film plays into the expectations that the audience members would have had for a Chaney monstrosity.

Indeed, another review stated that with this film the actor "adds another gruesome, and this time spooky, characterization to his [list] of interpretations." This particular review actually cites Chaney's portrayal of the Phantom as perhaps going too far: "there is something wanting in... sincere characterization. This is partly because in the leading role Lon Chaney is so much taken up with being hideous and with giving the audience the horrors that he has forgotten to be a bit human as well" ("New Film at Astor"). This critique of the film demonstrates how people viewing the film at the time of its release would have been aware of the way that Chaney's portrayal freakifies Erik to the point of losing his humanity. By playing his monstrous character almost too well, Chaney engages with the same practices freak shows used to distance their performers from their patrons. Instead of a human, empathetic response to the disabled person, the viewers are instead encouraged to see them as nothing more than freaks.

This can be partially attributed to the film's time period. According to Karen Randell, "It is possible to see this repeated motif of the deformed and disfigured man in Chaney's films as a deferred or latent representation of the disabled veteran" (70). However, while she believes that the film "both exhibits the body as fascinatingly grotesque and portrays the damaged male body as a site for sympathetic response" (76), I argue that the actor and

setting alike animalize Erik beyond the point of empathy. By manipulating the gaze, emphasizing pointing, and dehumanizing the character, the film engages with the same practices as freak shows, while complicating them with the nuances of the new medium.

CONCLUSION

When Erik responds to Christine's accusation by stating, "If I am the Phantom, it is because man's hatred has made me so" (42:33), he points to the nature of freakification: freaks occupy a socially-constructed position. Similarly, the film constructs this position via its participation in and reversal of the gaze, emphasis on dramatic gesticulations, tropes like the mirror and the mask, and cast/set decisions. These practices are eerily reminiscent of the ways that freak show directors would carefully construct the identities of their performers. Thus, the 1925 version of *The Phantom of the Opera* extends the social construct of the freak into a cinematic construction of the monstrous portrayal so that, while the freak shows may have been closing their doors, the legacy of the freak show lived on.

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