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Tales from the Crippled: Representations of Disability in North American Horror Cinema.

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of MRes in Film Studies

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Abstract

Disability has an uncomfortable ubiquity in the horror genre, with villains and victims making up the majority of these representations. While much scholarship continues to focus on gender and the final girl, and more recently has engaged with sexuality and race in horror, this thesis interrogates how ableist stereotypes have become ingrained in modern horror cinema with a particular focus on familial structures. Analysing the child/Adult Child, Mad Mother, then the wider, “deviant” family as a microcosm of perceptions of social “ills”, this thesis highlights the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and gender within these ableist trends in the genre through textual analysis. This research is intended to pick up where previous studies of disability in horror, such as Angela M. Smith’s 2012 monograph, have left off. As such, the films analysed here begin in the 1960s, but particular attention is paid to the most influential films in the genre, particularly those with extensive franchises and recent reboots. These are then compared throughout the thesis to recent horror from the 2020s to illustrate the continued prevalence of the disabled villain, and how it manifests differently across North American horror cinema. Centuries of fiction utilising disability as metaphor for social issues (Mitchel and Snyder, 2004; Susan Sontag, 1978) perpetuate false ideas about disability, particularly as it intersects with class, race, and gender, prevalent in eugenicist discourse, which continues in the genre and is internalised by disabled and non-disabled people alike, which this thesis aims to contest and unpack.

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Author Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Katherine Lucia Prentice

Signature: _____

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Introduction

As a Disabled horror fan, it is hard to remember the last time I saw a horror film with a Disabled character, which I didn't feel, at best, conflicted about afterwards. Disability justice is central to my beliefs and even my identity. Yet, I can't help but enjoy watching the very films and villains I dissect as negative, even harmful, representations throughout this thesis, or admire the fantastic films coming out recently, such as *When Evil Lurks* (2023, dir. Demián Rugna), despite grappling with the implications of demons getting confused when they try to possess autistic people. Nica Pierce, played by Fiona Dourif in *Curse of Chucky* (2013, dir. Don Mancini) and then *Cult of Chucky* (2017, dir. Don Mancini), was chosen over all of these villains or victims for the cover of this thesis as one of the most rule-breaking final girls I have seen. There has been debate over how male audiences identify with the final girl since at least 1992 with Carol Clover's seminal text 'Men, Women, and Chainsaws', but little or nothing into how able-bodied audiences can identify with a Disabled final girl, partly because there aren't many. Of course, there have been some, such as *Wait Until Dark* (1967, dir. Terence Young) starring Audrey Hepburn as a blind housewife who survives a violent home invasion by turning out the lights, inspiring numerous films such as *Hush* (2016, dir. Mike Flanagan), *A Quiet Place* (2018, dir. John Krasinski), and *Bird Box* (2018, dir. Susanne Bier) where disability is central to survival. However, Nica could have survived *Curse of Chucky* had she been able-bodied, and it would have made a compelling film; there wasn't some supernatural or SuperCrip reason she survived.¹ There are, however, numerous problems with this film and its representation, notably the failure to cast a Disabled actress in the role, and the elements of the Disabled avenger trope (see Travis Sutton, 2014). Still, Nica cooks, she has sex, she gets angry, and she shows affection and care: in short, she is a fully developed

¹ SuperCrip is a term used in disability justice spaces to describe the ways in which Disabled People are expected to be exceptional, both as "compensation" for their disability and to inspire able-bodied audiences (see Sami Schalk, 2016).

character, and not the villain. In fact, the other characters are cast in a worse light for not believing that Chucky (Brad Dourif) is the villain, not Nica. All of this to say, Nica is a rare example of a character in horror who feels like actual representation that doesn't hinge on her tragedy or anger, a far cry from Franklin (Paul Alan Partain) in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, dir. Tobe Hooper) or Jason Vorhees (Ari Legman) in *Friday the 13th* (1980, dir. Sean S. Cunningham). She is far from perfect, just like the rest of us, but we are intended to root for her throughout the film, whether we are male, female, non-binary, abled, or Disabled.

This thesis doesn't focus on characters like Nica but instead turns to the Disabled villains that other characters in *Curse of Chucky* assume Nica to be. Like audiences, these characters are biased due to a century of horror films and centuries more of literature perpetuating the pseudoscientific, eugenicist concept that repressed anger, lust, and evil manifest physically in the form of impairments (known as physiognomy), passing from parent to child. It is not just the impression able-bodied people get from cinema which is troubling, but also the conception internalised by Disabled People, or people who eventually become Disabled. As disability activists such as Alison Kafer (2013) remind us, disability is inevitable if you live long enough and can occur at any time. However, stereotypes of disability in film, whether 'benevolent' supercrips or 'malevolent' villains, contribute to the discrimination Disabled People face due to being constructed as the 'Other' (Shapiro, 1993: pg30). While disability activism has traditionally been more concerned with governmental policies, this should be accompanied by an interrogation of the images and narratives which shape the stereotypes that policies and laws uphold and perpetuate. Rather than interrogate this process as a whole, this thesis will analyse the emergence of disability as central to tropes of popular horror in North American horror cinema, particularly the villains of the last 50 years. These stereotypes are by no means limited to the USA and Canada or the horror genre. Still, these films are so prevalent and influential that they warrant further, intersectional analysis. Given that horror often depicts the most explicitly "evil" characters in fiction,

the genre can teach audiences false signifiers of evil, such as facial or limb differences and learning disability, as seen in the prevalence of disability metaphors in children's fairy tales, designed to teach children whom to trust and how to navigate the world (Amanda Leduc, 2020). There have been numerous studies on disability in horror cinema, outlined in the literature review below, but few that are longer than a journal article or book chapter, or that approach the topic with an intersectional analysis, cognisant of the historical context that gave rise to the genre's stereotypes. This thesis interrogates the ways these ableist stereotypes have become ingrained in modern horror cinema with a particular focus on familial structures, highlighting the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and gender within these eugenicist trends in the genre. As the influential Black, Queer activist Audre Lorde noted in 1982, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Lorde in *Sister Outsider*, 2007).

Lineage

Eugenics, which flourished in the USA and UK throughout the 20th Century, has entrenched white supremacist and ableist attitudes in culture and policy, which are both upheld and challenged in numerous ways in the horror genre, which has a history of being subversive. This thesis is indebted to the work of Angela M. Smith in her book ‘*Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Film*’ (2012), one of the few monographs about disability in horror, where she argues that

“The genre emerged out of a culture used to assigning pathological meaning to certain body and behavioural traits, and thus justifying the institutionalisation, sterilisation, and even elimination of certain individuals [...] eugenic assumptions about bodily form and biological inheritance were vital to the formation of classic horrors' visual and narrative conventions” (Smith, 2012: pg2).

Smith goes on to compellingly justify this argument by analysing a breadth of films from the classic era of horror cinema alongside the eugenic laws and cultural productions of the 1920s-1950s USA, which undoubtedly influences horror films today, a genre which loves to give its dedicated audiences easter eggs and homages to the classics. She does, however, offer a nuanced view of these films, illustrating that classic horror movies often question what are assumed to be natural responses to the

Disabled body on screen, thus garnering sympathy for the “monster” that was institutionally demonised through legislation, medical practice, and culture (Smith, 2012: pg3-4). This questioning of such apparently innate, fearful responses is at odds with psychoanalytic arguments, which justifies Smith's avoiding such a methodology. However, given the continued trends which uphold the idea of natural responses to disability in horror and the continued relevance of psychoanalysis to horror (see Creed, 2024), psychoanalysis is helpful alongside socio-historical textual analysis to understand and dispel stereotypes properly.

Monstrosity and horror are not innately defined but are culturally specific (see J.A. Weinstock, 2020 and J.J. Cohen, 1996), and disability has been conflated with the monstrous for millennia. Perhaps it is no coincidence that James Whale, the pioneering director of classic films such as *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Old Dark House* (1932), and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), which garnered sympathy for their Disabled characters, including the monsters, was an openly Queer man like the director of *Curse of Chucky* and *Cult of Chucky*, Don Mancini. The Queer and Disabled communities have a long history of support for each other's movements, though, as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder point out in ‘Narrative Prosthesis,’ another work without which this research would not have been possible, not always an easy one.

“As feminist, race, and sexuality studies sought to unmoor their identities from debilitating physical and cognitive associations, they inevitably positioned disability as the ‘real’ limitation from which they must escape” (Mitchell and Snyder, 2014: pg2).

Both communities also share a long history in the horror genre and community (see H.M. Benshoff, 1997), identifying with the monsters and their plight and rejection. However, these films still use disability as a trope in the genre, as a plot point for the villain's origin story, as explored in Chapter One. While used as social critique, utilising disability as a narrative crutch without fully exploring the complexities of living as a Disabled Person in such a society is a trend, identified by Mitchell and Snyder (2014), which needs to be dismantled, particularly where the trope is rooted in eugenics and

physiognomy, reinforcing the fear and discrimination of Disabled People. While Smith focuses on eugenics and classic horror, ending her analysis in the early 1960s, Mitchell and Snyder illustrate narrative prosthesis as a tool employed in literature throughout the 20th Century. This thesis will instead explore how these representations have created the modern horror villains enjoyed by millions each year, modernising these previous arguments and filling a gap in scholarship around modern horror and disability.

This trend has by no means lessened, as evidenced by the 2024 film *In a Violent Nature* (dir. Chris Nash), analysed in Chapter Three, which shows that this research remains timely. While studies of the emergence of the tropes by Smith (2012) and Mitchell and Snyder (2014) are illuminating, this research endeavours to unpick the current state of disability in the horror genre. Not all the films in this thesis are from the 21st Century, with references to earlier films underpinning the textual analysis to trace their influences. The films selected for textual analysis have been chosen because of their current impact on filmmakers, as and audiences it would be an oversight to analyse the slasher villain Johnny (Ry Barrett) in *In a Violent Nature* without recognising the autistic villain being directly inspired by Jason in *Friday the 13th* or Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, or to unpack disability and demonic pregnancy in *Apartment 7A* (2024, dir. Natalie Erika James) without first considering *Rosemary's Baby* (1968, dir. Roman Polanski) or *The Exorcist* (1973, dir. William Friedkin). These older films continue to have wide viewership, and therefore substantial impact on audiences and filmmakers, including by perpetuating stereotypes of disability and establishing it as a recognisable character type or even trope of the modern horror movie. As such, this thesis references a wide array of films, picking up where Smith left off in the 1960s and looking at contemporary reboots, remakes, and references to the Disabled villains of the last 60 years. Each film which was chosen for close textual analysis was selected due to its relevance to horror filmmaking today, either by inspiring recent depictions, having recent reboots and remakes, or being recent themselves, and its

alignment with eugenicist ideas detailed in the main body of this thesis, and thus often feature family units (Chapter 3), pregnancy (Chapter 2), alignment with childness and animality through disability (Chapter 1), or threat of corruption, contagion, and reproduction by the monstrous disabled character, found in each of these films and widely across the genre. This is not a historical analysis, despite examining laws from the 1920s or films from the 1960s, but a critique and analysis of disability representation in horror today and of the very real role these films continue to have in shaping cultural attitudes towards Disabled People.

Methodology and Language

Smith (2012) opts for textual and historical analysis to support her argument over utilising psychoanalysis, traditionally dominant in film studies. However, this thesis originally developed out of a consideration of how the Disabled body was represented as what Julia Kristeva (1980) terms abject horror, that which transgresses boundaries and systems to a horrifying effect, and horror studies to date have been indebted to psychoanalysis and Kristeva, as have the tropes of horror cinema. It is therefore difficult to distance the analysis of horror films from psychoanalysis, which shaped the representations and ideas of what is horrifying in films. Thus, psychoanalysis makes up a significant portion of the analysis and argument in this thesis, particularly with reference to Barbara Creed's seminal work 'The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis' (1993), and the parallels to be drawn between representations of the feminine body, as outlined by Creed, and the Disabled body. However, psychoanalysis also frequently falls prey to essentialist arguments about the inherent or innate nature of the human mind and body, which this thesis disputes, and must be employed carefully to avoid these pitfalls. However, psychoanalysis is also helpful in understanding how, like eugenics, psychological understandings of people and culture helped constitute the stereotypes explored through this research, and crucially, the development of Western psychology and psychoanalysis is very closely linked to the development of eugenics (Smith, 2012: pg19, Rogers, 2024). More recent developments in feminist psychoanalytic film studies, many of which are indebted to Creed and Kristeva, have usefully

employed the sophisticated concepts and methods found in early film analyses while maintaining a firm rejection of essentialism and instead focusing on how, in particular, colonial and patriarchal attitudes have shaped these depictions and their interpretations, not universal consciousness affected by one's sex as Freud or Jung may have indicated.

In addition to psychoanalysis, the methods of textual analysis employed in this research include a qualitative approach, focusing on narrative, stereotype, and character types (as outlined by Richard Dyer, 1993) rather than formal film analysis. As mentioned above, a wide range of films are considered here. The argument that disability is central to villainy in horror cinema could benefit from a quantitative analysis; a qualitative method allowed for a better understanding of how and why these representations are constructed and reconstructed on screen, and in particular, qualitative textual analysis offers the chance to unpick the meaning and history behind specific character tropes, from drinking milk to limping. However, this research does endeavour to cover a broader scope of films and to trace a general lineage of Disabled horror victims and villains from the 1960s to today, which means most of the films or tropes analysed in this thesis warrant fuller analysis to unpick these particular representations, such as in the excellent article 'Built to Destroy: The Eugenic Gaze in David Cronenberg's *The Brood*' by Sarah Manley (2024). Further, the focus on pregnancy, learning disability, and rurality leaves many enlightening films, tropes, and subgenres worth considering through a disability studies lens. While race, sexuality, coloniality, and gender necessarily play into the representations discussed here, any one of these identities could be analysed alongside disability to provide a thorough, qualitative analysis of their intersections. This feeds into the sociological element, which aligns with the disability studies framework employed throughout this analysis and draws on the work of theorists such as Irving Zola (1972), Susan Sontag (1978), and Michel Foucault (1973).

The language used throughout this thesis to discuss disability is rooted in UK disability activism and in US and UK Crip Theory, as outlined by Alison Kafer and Robert McRuer. This entails using identity-first language (e.g., Disabled Person) over person-first language (e.g., person with disabilities) and employing the reclaimed term Crip, born of artistic, academic, and activist disability movements (see R. McRuer, 2006). However, there is also language throughout this thesis which is recognised by scholars as discriminatory to Disabled People in many contexts. The choice was made not to censor and avoid these words completely and to include words such as deformed, disfigured, slow, and r*tard to accurately portray the language used by scholars, reviewers, and filmmakers, as well as audiences and lawmakers, as relevant. In particular, the concepts of disfigurement and deformity are to be recognised as socially constructed; however, to articulate the arguments in this thesis, they are included. This thesis uses disability in a broad sense to encompass physical disabilities, facial, bodily, and limb differences, learning disabilities, and neurodivergence, as well as bodies and bodyminds-recognising the nature of the human mind and body as integrated and rejected Western dualism- (Eli Clare, 2017) which experience pathologisation, medicalisation, and discrimination due to lack of access, inclusion, and understanding of the diversity of bodyminds in our world. This is chosen in line with the social and cultural models of disability, as well as with commonly accepted ideas of disability in activist spaces. As such, when this thesis discusses or references, for example, autism, neurodivergence, facial scarring, wheelchair users, or prosthetic limbs, it is with the understanding that these are all disabilities despite encompassing a wide range of experiences and ways of moving through the world, but all are ways which are discriminated against and which are, therefore, used as visual cues for villainy or as indicative of sickness of the body-politic. Further, when words such as “mutant”, “hybrid”, or “monster” are used, it is with the understanding that these are supernatural and fictional categorisations, not based in biology or meant to apply to real groups of people. In contrast, the term Freak is capitalised as a form of identity, in line with arguments put forward by disability scholars and historians such as Nadia Durbach (2010) and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1996). The language is

chosen to align more closely with the expressed preferences of UK disability activists. Still, much of this language is continually reevaluated and debated, and is recognised as dependent on individuals' preferences in most contexts.

Chapter Breakdown

This thesis begins with one of the most pervasive character types in the horror genre, specifically within the slasher subgenre, yet one that has gone overlooked by scholars. Termed the Adult Child Killer by John Edgar Browning (2015), the disabled slasher villain is epitomised by Jason Voorhees and Leatherface, who have themselves seen numerous iterations and have been replicated and referenced in subsequent films, such as the 2024 slasher film *In a Violent Nature*. This Adult Child Killer villain, a non-verbal, easily influenced, “childish” male who stalks and kills teenagers who are often the eugenic ideal, is often canonically autistic or learning disabled, such as in *In a Violent Nature* and *Halloween*, and usually also visibly Disabled through facial or limb difference (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *In a Violent Nature*, *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*) and a slow, clumsy gait (seen in all the above). This is one of the most popular types of horror villain, and as such influences numerous characters within and outwith slashers, and perpetuates the fear of Disabled People, particularly Disabled males, and fear of their sexuality (and, thus, their reproduction). For this reason, these were among the most important examples to turn to for this thesis, given how well-known these villains are to horror fans and filmmakers alike and the recurrence of their disability as a trope in recent adaptations, reboots, and original slasher films. The alignment of disability with childness, and of both with evil, is unpacked in Chapter One, with numerous traits and tropes which tie the three together being identified and interrogated. Crucially, this representation is also tied to childhood trauma as disabling, which influences the other characters examined in this thesis, such as in *The Brood*.

This research then focuses on a more explicit reading of ‘The Monstrous-Feminine’ through a disability/Crip lens. 2024 saw a variety of pregnancy horror films, as to be expected in times when women's reproductive rights are threatened, with *Immaculate* (2024, dir. Michael Mohan), *The First Omen* (2024, dir. Arkasha Stevenson), and *Apartment 7a* being a few recent examples in a long lineage of monstrous children and ostracised mothers on our screens. The female body and the physically Disabled children we see in these films come under medicalised scrutiny by Western medicine and psychology (see Nisha, 2020; Zola, 1972; and Foucault, 1973). The explicit disability of many infants in these films (including scenes of children with facial and limb differences in jars, church files) and the disabling effects of institutional control and medicalisation on the physically vulnerable and weakened woman make these films an apt site on analysis for disability in horror, especially given these films' recent release dates and the current uptick in pregnancy horror. This chapter illustrates this process in pregnancy horror, analysing the parallels between the treatment of motherhood and pregnancy and that of disability on screen, proposing a new understanding of Barbara Creed's concept of the Monstrous-Feminine (1993 & 2024), with disability central to the construction and popularity of this figure in horror film, aligned with more recent understandings of the Monstrous-Feminine figure as not mere villain but a character brimming with subversive possibilities (Howell and Baker, 2022), particularly when read with care (Manley, 2024). Fundamentally, the Monstrous-Feminine and the Disabled monster both take aspects of identity and twist them to be horrific, from Hollywood movie monsters to drama serial killers. Building on Creed's chapter ‘Woman as Monstrous Womb: *The Brood*’, this paper brings in a Crip perspective, analysing the alignment of Nola/the Mad mother and her Disabled children with literal and metaphorical disability, illustrating how this model - rooted, like most monsters, in teratology and physiognomy- continues in recent horror releases.

Considering the focus on perpetual motherhood and perpetual childhood as either themselves disabling or indicative of disability in these narratives, this thesis concludes with a case study of such figures in

the fascinating subgenre of backwoods horror. Often termed hillbilly horror, this genre illustrates the way eugenics has embedded notions of “deviant”- that is, disabled, racialised, or experiencing poverty- lineages in the popular imagination. Intersecting factors of race, gender, geography, class, and crucially disability pervade this subgenre, best known in *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977, dir. Wes Craven) and *Deliverance* (1972, dir. John Boorman) and informing films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but perhaps epitomised in the more recent film series *Wrong Turn* (2003-2021). The Adult Child Killer often inspires the villains in these narratives. Still, they are part of a larger family or small community, which is usually both incestuous and cannibalistic, two pervasive taboos. These taboos are expressed physically in the form of facial and limb differences and learning disability. They are also often related to environmental factors, which are woven throughout the horror genre and, in turn, this thesis. The ultimate horror of this subgenre, like much horror dating back to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, is in the reproductive threat of the monster rather than the threat of death: a process of corruption and contamination articulating a generational threat beyond the individual, directly recalling eugenicist messaging and building on it to create truly monstrous characters such as *Wrong Turn*’s Saw Tooth (Garry Robbins), Two Finger (Julian Richings), and One Eye (Ted Clark).

Moving through this thesis takes us through the children, the mothers, and finally the wider families who pervade the horror genre; this familial focus itself hints at the eugenic undertones the genre has maintained over the last century. Robin Wood, in his seminal text on the genre which helped birth the field of horror studies, posited that in the apocalyptic horror film, of which he cites *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as an example, the horror is not located in the individual monster, but in the wider societal structures, including the family (Robin Wood in Smith, 2012: pg 24), echoing such fears not of the Disabled individual but of their effect on the country which such deviant families act as a microcosm of. The recent films analysed in this thesis illustrate the continued fear of disability as a warning- a portent- as the medieval study of teratology aimed to prove (Weinstock, 2020: pg 4), and

that even when not employed explicitly as a means to discriminate, utilising disability in this way continues to encourage and enable discrimination of Disabled People globally. This thesis, in analysing more recent horror films and examining these tropes in their context as reflective of wider communities and families, picks up where other scholars have left off in their analysis of particular characters, films, or the classic horror genre, reaffirming the importance and timeliness of such research and calls to improve disability representation on screen.

Literature Review

Despite the Disabled villain being somewhat of a trope in the genre, little scholarly attention has been paid to horror cinema and disability specifically. The key full-length work on disability and horror cinema is Angela Smith's 2012 book 'Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics and Classic Horror', as mentioned in the introduction. In this book, Angela Smith covers the classic period of horror cinema (from the 1930s into the early 1960s) through the lens of disability, providing the most extensive analysis of the rich and troubled relationship between horror and disabilities to date. Smith argues that early horror cinema was born out of the prevalent eugenic thought in Britain and the USA, leading up to the 1930s, and that these tropes have shaped the horror tropes we are familiar with to the present day. She concludes that while in many senses these films depict the monstrous body as Disabled, and the Disabled body as a monstrous threat, often they are more sympathetic than eugenicists might read them, generating sympathy in many viewers for the monster. 'Hideous Progeny' is, therefore, a suitable place to begin when researching this topic, and naturally invites further scholarship of later horror movies and disability/eugenics. While Smith is quick to dismiss psychoanalysis and thus misses some literature which would strongly support her argument (Creed or Kristeva, in particular), this text has been crucial for this research.

Many of the texts this research hinges on are critical of our current neoliberal systems and classifications, including those of the medical institution, which may seem counterintuitive from a Disabled and chronically ill author due to the reliance on medicine and medical interventions of many Disabled People. While in many individual cases it is true that without modern medicine our impairments may be more life- or energy-limiting, this is also true for many able-bodied people. However, the social model of disability argues for a move away from considering disability an individual issue and instead considering it as a social one; a social experience which can be improved

by creating societies built with disability in mind, and so which does not disable its citizens (see Shakespeare, 2018: pp.12-13). Further, as Irving Zola (1972) articulates, medical institutions are crucial institutions of control and oppression for Disabled and marginalised people. Tom Shakespeare, in providing a brief but illuminating history of disability, argues that Western pre-industrial and pre-capitalist society was in many ways more inclusive, with the home being the site of production and artisan work being possible for many Disabled People, enabling them to contribute to the household and be cared for without needing to travel or adhere to a 9-5 schedule (*ibid*: 28). Conversely, modern cities developing through the 1800s were not shaped with Disabled People in mind who were being excluded from work in industrial cities and from public life in general and with the “Ugly Laws” in the USA prohibiting visibly diseased or Disabled People from public spaces (*ibid*: 35), shaping the context for our current situation in late capitalism.

The above-mentioned social model is dominant in the UK and USA in particular, and fundamentally argues that society disables people, not impairments themselves, departing from the earlier medical model and for the individual approach to disability it upholds. However, it is not too long ago that the dominant narratives around disability were eugenic in nature. Eugenics, coined in 1883, was defined by Francis Galton as “the science of the improvement of the human germ plasm through better breeding” (Galton in Shakespeare, 2018: pg36). This “science” is often divided by historians into ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ eugenics: positive eugenics encourages reproduction among “desirable” people, as culture defines them (White, able-bodied, intelligent, wealthy), while negative eugenics discourages procreation by “undesirable” people. A further distinction is made between coercive eugenics, which involves sterilisation or “euthanasia”, and eugenics based on voluntary action impacted by eugenicist education and culture (see Shakespeare, 2013). This, as Angela M. Smith (2012) has argued, is reflected in American cinema commissioned by eugenicists, such as *The Black Stork* (1917, dir. Leopold Wharton and Theodore Wharton), also known as *Are You Fit to Marry?* But

numerous propaganda films have been created pushing an eugenicist agenda. Eugenics was “an intellectual trend on the left and right”, being “adopted as official policy in most developed countries” until its association with the Nazi party caused it to fall out of favour, at least by name, after World War II (Shakespeare, 2018: 37-38). However, in discussions surrounding euthanasia or assisted dying, abortion, education, and social policy, eugenics continues to cast a dark shadow, arguably only strengthened by the COVID-19 pandemic, with narratives of a “new normal” excluding elderly, Disabled, and immunocompromised people from public spaces, and accepting their deaths as necessary for a return to “normal”. Similarly, there continues to be negative associations with Disabled People choosing to have children, particularly their biological children, and with abortion being encouraged by medical practitioners in cases where disability is likely. These debates are outside the scope of this research. Still, it is imperative to consider that in this context the narratives analysed in this thesis of intellectual disability (Chapter One), pregnancy and disability (Chapter Two), and rurality and disability (Chapter Three) cannot be separated from the spectre of eugenics which was contemporary with the development of cinema, and rife in the birth of the modern horror film in the 1930s-1950s.²

Eugenics and its continuing influence over Western medicine is particularly troubling when we consider the arguments put forward by scholars of the use of medicine as social control in the modern West, beginning in 1973 with Michel Foucault’s ‘The Birth of the Clinic’, which was translated to English in 1973, which introduced the concept of the medical gaze which this thesis argues is present in cinema in Chapter Two. Foucault defines the medical gaze as the gaze of a Doctor “endowed with a power of decision and intervention”, and he discusses how this is used for social control and regulation, changing human experience and concerns to be experienced as fundamentally medical, to

² The spectre of eugenics here referenced Derrida’s ‘Specters of Marx’ (2006 ed.) and Mark Fishers consequent works (2012 and 2022 ed.) on the concept of hauntology, which is not explicitly employed throughout this thesis but is important to the notion of the haunting effects of social and cultural ideas and historical events, particularly movements such as eugenics, or Marxism.

be fixed and corrected (Foucault, 1973: pg 89). Sociologist and disability justice activist Irving Zola introduced the idea of medicalisation in 1972, describing how our bodies and lives have become intertwined with the medical institutions, which now function as an institution of control which we cannot separate ourselves and our experiences from. These concepts have been applied to the 21st Century (see Nisha, 2020) showing that far from being past the days of social control via medicine, such as during the height of eugenics, these processes are deeply ingrained in our lives today, and as Nisha notes “medical sciences and biology are indirectly and unconsciously influenced by pre-existing structures of society and cultural norms that require serious exploration” (2020: pg 26), showing how culture underpins the norms which enable and thus the value of considering the kinds of characters and narratives which are reinforced in popular cinema. This thesis, in particular when analysing the Hag figure in Chapter Three and the Mad mother in Chapter Two, is cognisant of the ways medicine has been utilised through the processes of subjugation and oppression enacted through capitalist expansion and colonialism, especially for minority genders and BIPOC (see Federici, 2004). Horror, in particular, benefits from such an analysis as the medical institution is an omnipresent threat in the genre, particularly in female-fronted horror films, a reality for many people throughout history and today. In particular, incorrectly being institutionalised for medical reasons is a recurring feature of the genre, and the mostly male, White doctors exert control over the bodies and freedom of those deemed incapable (see Martin and Benoit, 2023). There has been a surprising lack of analysis of this trope despite a scary hospital or asylum being a typical “horror” stock image or setting across media. Applying the concept of medicalisation to horror cinema in particular is an illuminating approach. While this thesis begins to do so, many examples would benefit from further study across the genre, and marrying this sociological concept with cultural analysis strengthens the conclusions of both.

Criticisms of the social model have included its overlooking of personal and individual experiences, and its lack of consideration of culture and arts in calls for disability justice (Shakespeare, 1994;

Waldschmidt, 2017: pg 21). To counter this, a cultural model of disability has arisen that specifically focuses on representations of Disabled People in culture, including (but certainly not limited to) film. Anne Waldschmidt (2017, pp. 19-28) provides a brief overview of the cultural model of disability in her chapter ‘Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Model of Disability as an Analytical Tool’, which offers an informative summary and details on applying the model to analysis. This approach, in conjunction with Crip Theory (as outlined in the introduction) and disability activist theories underpins much of the analysis in this thesis, and indeed the approach to analysing cultural texts through disability and disability history which “assumes that impairments and disabilities are structuring culture(s) and at the same time are structured and lived through culture” (*ibid*: 20). A significant limitation of the most dominant texts on the cultural model, such as Mitchell and Snyder’s 2006 book ‘Cultural Locations of Disability’, is the focus on North American and European cultures and texts (*ibid*: 22). While this thesis focuses on North American cinema, it is worthwhile to note the value that similar analysis would have in looking at other regions globally, particularly considering the varying sociopolitical contexts that may shape the relationships between disability and villainy in various cultures. Further, horror globally has been impacted by the tropes identified in this thesis and the eugenic tradition these films follow, given that the USA’s horror has the widest distribution. It would be fruitful to trace these influences more specifically outside the USA.

Disability and film studies have certainly lagged, for example, race or gender in terms of film analysis, and more specifically, disability within horror, despite it being such an integral stereotype of common villains (and victims) in the genre. In analysing disability in genre literature, Ria Cheyne (2019) reaffirms how genre studies scholars overlook disability, perhaps finding it uncomfortable to engage with, and, in turn, the lack of genre studies within disability studies (Cheyne, 2019). This echoes Catherine J. Kudlick’s (2003) argument that disability as an important social category and identity is often overlooked in cultural and historical analyses. Instead, scholars touch on the use of disability as metaphor (see Sontag, 1978), a mystery to be pieced together (Mitchell and Snyder, 2004: pg6), or,

more often, avoid calling it what it is. Kudlick further explains that bodily difference is often dismissed as a signifier of Otherness rooted in race, gender, class, or sexuality (*ibid*). Additionally, Mitchell and Snyder helpfully articulate how disability has been constructed as a “baseline of undesirability”, which, as mentioned above, marginalised communities sought to distance themselves from under hierarchical, capitalist structures (2004: pg 6). Intellectual disability and physical disability were (and are) often divided in hierarchies within and outwith the community (*ibid*), and this is also reflected in the literature, which does exist about disability in film and literature, where a focus on the body and physical disability is privileged over analysis of intellectual disability and neurodivergence. To this end, intellectual disability is central to this thesis and cannot be overlooked in the analysis of disability in horror, not least because of the ways it is communicated visually in the medium through the body, as well as in dialogue. This thesis further aims to reaffirm how analysing disability is crucial to intersectional cultural analysis and intertwined with experiences of race, gender, class, sexuality, and rurality, particularly under eugenicist regimes and rhetoric. Since 2003, there have been rich and varied works in the field of cultural disability studies, particularly the works of Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell (2000), Angela M. Smith (2012), Robert McGruer (2006), and Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic (2010).

When considering the literature, a few trends become apparent across film and literature, for example of the disfigured villain, the lovable (and pitiable) sidekick, or inspiration porn and supercrip characters (where Disabled characters are written into the work to inspire assumed able-bodied audiences) as topics of study, with scholars such as Martin F. Norden (1994) and Jack Nelson (1994), and Travis Sutton more recently (2014), attempting to categorise these characters. This thesis develops these categorisations but identifies more specific character types within horror and specific horror subgenres, providing a more in-depth textual analysis than overarching character studies. Each of these character types identified by scholars is united by commonly falling into what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) term

‘narrative prosthesis’ in their book of the same name, where they developed a theory of disability characterisation, analysing depictions of Disabled People and arguing that these characters are employed as a one-dimensional narrative device in narrative media. The authors, in tracing the Disabled character type in film and literature historically, explain how authors or filmmakers use Disabled characters as a narrative/plot device and discuss these representations as commentaries on disability in broader culture. Mitchell and Snyder have drawn together a wide range of sources and examples into a coherent and erudite piece of work, which is key to any discussions of Disabled characters in media. It will be interesting to similarly trace how disability has been a crutch to identifying the figure of the monster, and often the villain, in horror films.

Not long after Mitchell and Snyder’s seminal work, Christopher R. Smit and Anthony Enns published ‘Screening Disability: Essays on Cinema and Disability’ (2001), which spans a broad range of films and offers potential ways of reading them, given that it is a collection of essays. The alternative critical frameworks are usefully rooted in key works by Paul K. Longmore, Martin F. Norden, and Thom B. Hoeksema and Christopher R. Smit, who respectively proposed a political critique of images of Disabled People in film, a more historical approach rooted in the same framework, and an aesthetic methodology to studying disability representations in cinema. Smit and Enns present an excellent introduction to the field, with strong examples throughout the body of the work. While they rarely question horror’s unique relationship with disability, five of the essays interestingly focus on Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932, dir. Tod Browning), a rich text to discuss on the topic, but one which has continued to receive disproportionate academic analysis and is taken as representative of disability and horror despite varied examples across the genre. Martin F. Norden, mentioned above, published one of the earlier full length works exclusively on disability and film studies, ‘The Cinema of Isolation’, in 1994 which offers an overview of physical disability in film, arguing that disability representations often create or depict an experience of intense isolation both in the physical space on the screen as well

as within the plots or storylines (Norden, 1994: 1). Norden provides a more historical overview than earlier theorists such as Longmore, though his argument and methodology is still fundamentally political, an essential aspect of disability studies to keep in mind when analysing texts and cultural histories. This approach benefits Norden's historical overview, which begins (briefly) with the bible, underscoring how ingrained tropes of disability and difference reflecting inner aberrance are, but acknowledging this cannot be used as an excuse for continuing these depictions in modern media. Norden then goes on to discuss disability representation through an extensive range of films, which is useful as a springboard for further study. However, it has the obvious drawback of providing a less rigorous analysis due to its broader scope.

One of the most recent full-length works on disability studies and film has been Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic's 2010 work 'The Problem Body: Projecting Disability on Screen'. The two key words for Sally Chivers and Nicole Markotic's analysis are presented in their book's title: projection and problematic. Chivers and Markotic aim to unpick the issues in representations of disability on screen, and to this end, discuss projection in terms of both what is physically projected on screen and the meaning audiences project onto these figures. Their analysis is also helpful to consider in relation to narrative prosthesis and the cultural model of disability studies, which argues that disability is constructed both physically and culturally. This is in line with what Mitchell and Snyder argue in most of their work (see Mitchell and Snyder 2000; 2006), and a cultural model seems to be gaining prevalence in academic and arts spaces over the social or medical models of disability. Mitchell and Snyder also have an excellent chapter in 'Narrative Prosthesis' where they analyse the modes of spectatorship encouraged by different filmic depictions of disability, which, while not the focus of this research, does pose interesting questions concerning horror cinema and other 'body genres' (see Badley, 1995). Fundamentally, Markotic, Chivers, and most of their contributors are sceptical of the binaries imposed on Disabled and gendered bodies, which is a fruitful thread to follow throughout the

literature on horror, disability, and film studies. ‘The Problem Body’ provides a thorough introduction to the necessity of an intersectional analysis. Chivers and Markotic’s focus on the body in their criticisms is helpful to consider alongside horror, given that it is known as a body genre, as usefully outlined by Mitchell and Snyder, as mentioned above, and by Linda Badley in ‘Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic’ (1995). However, developing this with a more robust consideration of intellectual disability opens new avenues (and implications) to unpick in these representations. Badley’s work is useful for horror studies and for contextualising how the construction and fear of the Other, particularly Othered bodies, is central to the genre; however, Badley fails to address disability specifically, despite hinting at recurring medical themes where disability analysis would strengthen the argument. This is a trend in the field, especially as intersectional analyses have developed, which take into account identities such as gender, sexuality, race, and class as being othered, but often skip around disability, even where extremely relevant, and this is a gap which this research hopes to address by working disability into existing theories of difference and horror cinema. Some of the most influential works in horror criticism and analysis, many of which focus on race and gender, similarly dance around the compelling links to disability, for example, Carol Clover (1992), Barbara Creed (1993), Harry M. Benshoff (1997), and more. Of course, it is not expected or necessary to discuss disability when analysing other aspects of representation in the genre. Still, its omission begins to form a clear pattern in the literature, including in traditional analyses of body horror, slasher cinema, or monster movies, where it is most prevalent.

Central to the field of horror studies is the idea that horror, and whatever monster, villain, or threat antagonises the characters, should be considered in its sociocultural context as a mirror for audiences’ fears. Psychoanalysis dominates the field with works such as Julia Kristeva’s 1982 work ‘The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection’ and Barbara Creed’s ‘The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis’, underpinning much subsequent literature, all rooted in Freudian ideas,

particularly around gender and social boundaries. In her 1982 work, Kristeva defines what she terms abject horror, the psychoanalytic term for the corporeal reactions to that which threatens established or normative boundaries, in particular, the boundary between the subject and the object. Blurring this boundary is key to horror cinema in many ways, which links to how the monster, villain, or Disabled figure in horror films serves as both an object to be stared at (a concept developed by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in 2002) and a subject often identified with. It is useful to consider throughout this work in what ways this positioning as subject and object aligns with, or at times breaks from, Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) conception of narrative prosthesis. These ideas recur throughout the literature on representation and horror cinema, and Kristeva herself being Disabled adds poignancy when considering this work in relation to disability and horror specifically. 'Powers of Horror' has been central to discussions of gender and horror. Still, the concept of abjection lends itself particularly well to disability and horror and is expanded upon in Kristeva's own writing on disability and later discussions of abjection/art/disability (see Rina Arya, 2014). Describing abjection often invokes language associated with sickness. It is rooted in the casting out of the Other, or that that which is cast out then becomes the other, which applies interestingly to the body in horror, both the abled body often rejecting 'infection' from a monster, birthing and casting out a monstrous child, or shunning the Other from a group. Two other works that will be referenced throughout include 'The Monstrous-Feminine' by Barbara Creed (1993) and Carol Clover's 1992 book 'Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film'. While these works do not specifically focus on disability and horror cinema, it is useful to look at influential writings on difference in horror to draw parallels with how characterisation and representation work to make the Other horrifying, particularly Barbara Creed's application of abjection to monstrous women.

In Carol Clover's hugely influential 1992 work 'Men, Women, and Chainsaws', Clover compellingly asserts that viewers are aligned with, or identify with, the 'final girl'- a term coined by Clover in this

work and now ubiquitous in horror studies and fandom- and not with the male killer who stalks and injures the final girl, who endures and defeats the killer. This presents numerous interesting questions for the research within this thesis, many of which go unanswered here but are worth acknowledging. In tackling some of the same influential texts that Clover addresses - *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Halloween*, for example- the work should be examined, and of particular interest was Chapter One, 'Her Body, Himself'. Here, Clover makes arguments which are echoed in this thesis, but this thesis analyses these villains primarily to consider their representation, not spectatorship and identification in horror cinema. However, this thesis often asserts that these villains are not to be identified with (object rather than subject, see the paragraph above), and, in that sense, this research is indebted to Clover's work in expanding this understanding of spectator identification in horror cinema. In Chapter One, Clover discusses the idea that these male slasher villains are "permanently locked in childhood, - arguing this is "broken" by developing an interest in sex, rooted in trauma related to the mother per psychoanalytic readings (Clover, 1992: pg28). This is a concept which is developed in Chapter One of this thesis in relation to disability and the common misunderstanding or explanations of learning disability as someone being "trapped" or "stuck" at a particular age, particularly prevalent in the 1980s USA (Elman, 2014), around the time of the slasher films Clover analyses. These characters, summarised by John Edgar Browning as the 'Adult Child Killer, "the Disabled, child-minded (I.e. mentally underdeveloped) killer" who "starts off his narrative as a child, only to maintain afterwards, as an adult, a child-like emotional and behavioural demeanour, inciting terror" (Browning, 2015: pg78), align closely with Clover's analysis in her chapter 'Her Body, Himself'. Clover's gender-specific analysis mentions these family dynamics as explanations for the killers 'stuckness'. It parallels this with the gender confusion of many of these slashers (1992, pp. 28-55), where these boundaries collapse (adult/child, male/female), and family dynamics pose a significant threat throughout this thesis. What is of most interest for this thesis is that almost all of these characters are disabled; Michael Myers experiences disabling mental health difficulties and potentially an intellectual disability, and

spends the narrative being pursued by his psychiatrist; Freddy Kreuger has extensive facial scarring and, less concretely disability, prosthetics; and Leatherface is mocked for being non-verbal, “childlike”, feminised, and easily manipulated throughout the *Texas Chainsaw* franchise, most closely aligning with Clover’s discussions around gender and the notion of being “permanently locked in childhood” (1992, pg28). This thesis also aims to avoid some of the common criticisms of Clover’s analysis, including a lack of diversity in her examples, for example Clover only giving a very brief acknowledgement to the character Epiphany Proudfoot (Lilakoi Moon) in *Angel Heart*, calling her a “Cajun Voodoo practitioner” (Clover, quoted by Means Coleman, 2024; pg 649) and overlooking the wide-ranging implications of this characterisation or affording Epiphany closer analysis. In its focus on disability, this thesis aims to open previously underexplored avenues for horror studies, while remaining intersectional and expanding the intersectionality of the secondary sources used, particularly given the focus on eugenics, which affected all marginalised communities. As such, this thesis offers an analysis of the racialised aspects of the characters in these films, despite most characters being white, reflecting the casting in these popular North American films.

Barbara Creed’s 1992 book ‘The Monstrous-Feminine’ is referenced closely throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapter Two - ‘Crippling the Monstrous-Feminine’. As mentioned, Creed’s work is built upon the groundbreaking psychoanalytic analysis of Julia Kristeva and the theory of abjection (1982), which holds that abjection destroys systems, binaries, and classifications (such as the distinction between Adult/Child and Male/Female mentioned above). As with most modern analyses of horror, this thesis uses abjection, recognising that such binaries are socially and culturally constructed and thus variable, demonstrating how disability collapses these false classifications (adult/child, human/animal, etc.) within the horror film. The Monstrous-Feminine introduces us to different tropes or archetypes of the Monstrous-Feminine, which are grouped into two parts: abjection and the maternal, and the *femme castratrice* (Creed, 1992). This thesis primarily engages with abjection and the

maternal and Chapter Four of *The Monstrous-Feminine*, ‘*Woman as Monstrous Womb: The Brood*’. Through engaging with contemporary disability and Crip theory, as well as more recent engagement with Creed’s work (see Howell and Baker, 2022; Creed, 2022; Chare et. Al, 2020), this thesis aims to offer a fresh understanding of the Monstrous-Feminine through a disability lens, including acknowledging the ways disabled people are feminised and animalised in the way the Monstrous-Feminine is animalised, and expanding her possibilities as a figure which recognises its origins as a stereotype but which, how Howell and Baker put it, engages “with the subversive, transformative and often frankly pleasurable possibilities of her abject otherness [...] an anti-heroic figure of possibility” (2022, pg2). To this end, the Mad-Mother analysed in Chapter Two, often embracing her Madness and rejecting her expected submissive role – giving into maternal instinct, in a sense- can be reappraised not as ‘Woman as Womb’ as Creed says but Woman and Womb, rereading these characters with care as complex characters needing support (Manley, 2024) or as women working toward “their own visions of transformed sociality, providing dark wish-fulfilment fantasies for audiences along the way” (Howell and Baker, 2022; pg8). Their appeal to disabled audiences is apparent if we read them with these helpful reappraisals of Creed’s seminal work, which look into the spectatorship and the appeal of these characters to current female audiences and filmmakers (Chare et al., 2020; Howell and Baker, 2022), developing Creed’s assertion that the woman is not always victim. Where Creed argues that she can also be a villain, modern readings reveal complex antiheroines or even vigilante figures, as Creed (2022) explores in her more recent works.

Returning to her 1992 work, Barbara Creed explores the changes to horror over the last two decades in ‘The Return of the Monstrous-Feminine’ (2022). Foregrounding, in particular, what she terms “Feminist New Wave Cinema”, Creed discusses the way the Monstrous-Feminine functions differently today, particularly in films directed by women or which foreground their female characters in new ways. For example, at times Creed leans into ecofeminism and analyses ecohorror, and has produced

a thoroughly intersectional feminist work, missing one thing: disability. This is an excellent expansion and update to her pantheon of Monstrous-Feminine archetypes, and in particular, her analysis of the Monstrous-Feminine alongside race and queerness is a timely and needed update. In analysing how these films demonstrate a marked departure from past depictions and challenge dominant narratives, this work utilises psychoanalysis alongside discussion of historical and current events to construct an eloquent argument which responds to many past criticisms of Creed's work and Psychoanalytic Film Theory as a whole, being more socially aware and grounded, and aware of the cultural subjectivity of the ideas of psychoanalysis such as what the "abject" constitutes" (Creed, 2022: pg9). Still rooted in Kristeva's 1982 'Powers of Horror', this text uses that very power of horror to illustrate a revolt, a revolution in horror creating the Feminist New Wave, cognisant of Kristeva's more recent works (2002) which describe not just social revolt, but "intimate revolt" (Creed, 2022: pg 5) as a development of the self and a process of questioning oneself and one's experiences. In similarly relying on the concept on abjection and Creed's concept of the Monstrous-Feminine (1992), and taking a semi-historical and socially aware approach, this thesis aims to foreground disability in a similar way to Creed (2022) as seen in Chapter Two in particular, but less firmly rooted in psychoanalysis and not rooted in modern feminist cinema, or Feminist New Wave Cinema. Disability in Feminist New Wave Cinema offers interesting points of departure for further research, but is outwith the scope of this thesis. Similarly, it is crucial to consider feminist disability studies, for example, the works of Barbara Fawcett (2000) or Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002), which cover a wide range of issues relating to disability representation and gender. The arguments and methodologies raised in these feminist and psychoanalytic works influence how we understand the representation of disability in horror films and will strongly influence the conclusions of this research. The feminist works consulted also include the work of ecofeminists, which overlaps with studies of that which is abjected and oppressed, such as Karen J. Warren (1997) and Nicole A. Jacobs (2022), as well as intersectional feminists such as Audre Lorde (1980, 1984), both of whom underpin the analysis in Chapter Two, 'Crippling the Monstrous-

Feminine’. This thesis will also develop this research to foreground rurality and class, particularly in Chapter Three, as well as race, highlighting the intersections of identity that were targeted most by eugenicist programmes throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries, and the ways this continues to inform concepts of aberrance and villainy through these characters.

Analysis of the Other, particularly in horror cinema but also in broader contexts, leads to consideration of the idea of monstrosity and its relation to the Disabled body, especially when represented as villainous. Something which becomes apparent when studying monstrosity and horror cinema is that many of the monsters display childish traits which can sometimes be perceived as innocence and elicit sympathy, particularly for female characters within the film as well as audiences (see Smith, 2012), or otherwise combine to make the childish monster a greater threat. These childish aspects lead us to consider why ‘childness’ is such a key part of constructing monstrosity, as well as the extent to which these traits can also be seen as traits of disability, for example, being non-verbal, speaking differently, walking differently, or having a different sense of right and wrong from the other characters. These can also be seen as traits of learning disabilities, a consideration that begins with *Frankenstein* and can be traced throughout the slasher genre into the 1990s, although little work has been done in this field. However, ‘Monstrous Children and Childish Monsters’ (Markus P.J. Bohlmann and Sean Moreland, 2015) is an illuminating starting point which outlines a compelling history of monstrous children in cinema from the 1950s onward. A key chapter for this research is ‘Disability and Slasher Cinemas Unsung Children’ by John Edgar Browning, who illustrates that in early films from *Frankenstein* to *Psycho* or *Peeping Tom*, the monster is a castrated/dominated male figure. We often see these Disabled villains first as children (such as Michael Myers and Jason Vorhees). They are then “stuck” or “stunted” in this state (and often non-verbal with a distinct gait) due to trauma, a psychoanalytic understanding of childhood trauma being translated fairly literally to screen and resulting in the disablement, and then vengeance, of the characters. In some ways, these villains are being viewed as

‘innocent’ children, controlled by others (usually an overbearing woman like Norma Bates or Mrs Voorhees, or an abandoning male like Dr Frankenstein) because they are perceived as not knowing any better. Another interesting perspective on children in horror cinema comes from Karen Lury’s 2010 book ‘The Child in Film’, where the first chapter focuses specifically on the ghost child in Japanese horror films, and where many interesting parallels begin to emerge with Browning’s conception of the slasher villain. For example, both are constructed as asexual; often, the ghost child cannot speak (Sadako in *Ringu*), and often the character has been wronged by the adults responsible for their care, resulting in them being frozen in this child-like state and causing them to take revenge.

What links many of these works mentioned is an interest in understanding how what is deemed ‘monstrous’ is defined, and of course, why. It is useful, then, to turn to cultural studies of disability from before cinema’s beginning, with studies of Freak shows and the construction of the Othered monster based on visible difference. A key theorist in this field, and in cultural disability studies as a whole, is Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and her work ‘Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body’ (1996) which traces a comprehensive history of Freak shows from their inception to modern day equivalents, for example talk shows and medical documentaries, which function somewhat how these horror movies do, fundamentally as a spectacle of difference in the human body. Also referenced throughout this thesis is ‘Spectacles of Deformity’ by Nadja Durbach (2010), which usefully traces the construction of the Freak and the monster as intertwined from the start, and like Garland-Thomson’s work, considers and implements disability studies in her cultural criticism of the impact of freak shows on modern British culture. These two books provide context for the formation of the modern monster as being rooted pre-cinema in the Freak show, as well as in literature (comparisons to *Frankenstein*, again, pop up), and thus inform how we consider the monster, knowing its basis in real Disabled People’s lives, and the harmful impact these representations continue to have on Disabled People today. This understanding of who and what constitutes the “monster” is crucial to

this thesis, and draws on the works of Jeffery Andrew Weinstock (2020) and Jeffery Jerome Cohen (1996), who, inspired by the earlier works of Kristeva and Foucault, wrote seminal texts in the field of monster studies, outlining the belief held by most modern scholars that;

“Monstrosity is a socially constructed category reflecting culturally specific anxieties and desires, and often deployed—wittingly or not—to achieve particular sociopolitical objectives” (Weinstock, 2020: 25).

The writings of both theorists and the contributors to their collections understand that bodily and behavioural differences underpin what most cultures consider monstrous, but also that these differences carry different meanings across cultures. A disability studies lens is useful to approach monster studies from, and while it isn't a focus of Cohen or Weinstock, disability is present throughout their analyses from medieval to modern monsters, and so to advance this research, an intersectional approach foregrounding disability is a needed update to monster and horror studies, which confidently confronts the elephant in the room. Drawing on these theorists and centring the Disabled voice rather than just the Disabled monster allows for a more nuanced understanding of the monsters on our screens today as more than descendants of past monsters, but as representations that adapt to our cultural assumptions about what constitutes difference and disability.

1: The Adult Child Killer: A Stab at Crip Time

Originary Moments

The image that first comes to mind when considering a Disabled horror villain is undoubtedly that of a slasher villain. Indeed, when you think of any horror villain, the mind (and merchandise) first goes to Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers, and Freddy Krueger, whether or not there is recognition of their disabilities beyond registering that they “look scary.” The subgenre’s prominence amongst scholars and audiences alike, and its complicated relationship with disability, offer a logical place to begin an analysis of the Disabled villain trope, especially given the lack of analysis of slashers through a disability framework. However, it is not an easy place to start, as many scholars have noted, because it is extremely difficult to define exactly what a slasher film is. Most 1980s films with a masked killer and a summer camp, slumber party, or babysitter in the suburbs setting will be reliably slasher-esque, and contributing to the discourse of the exact definition of this beloved genre is outwith the parameters of this analysis, where the primary concern is the individual characters and how they play into wider ableist conceptions of disability. The fullest slasher-specific analysis of Disabled villains to date comes from John Edgar Browning’s (2015) analysis of what he terms the Adult Child figure, or “the Disabled, child-minded (I.e. mentally underdeveloped) killer” who “starts off his narrative as a child, only to maintain afterwards, as an adult, a child-like emotional and behavioural demeanour, inciting terror” (2015: pg78). Specifically, Browning analyses *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Halloween* (1978), illustrating disability as central to the characterisations of Jason Vorhees and Michael Myers; while these are key examples which shaped the trend of Adult Children in slashers (though it has a traceable lineage before the 1970s), it is vital to recognise the wide-ranging impacts of this character type on more modern examples. For this reason, the following chapter will discuss these canonical texts, as well as the widely influential film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, with a focus on their more recent

revisions, as well as the 2024 film *In a Violent Nature*, all of which have evident inspiration from the Adult Child killers of the 1970s and 1980s as identified by Browning, and this chapter aims to update and expand the existing scholarship on disability and slashers through these key examples. As these films are rebooted for the 2020s, it is interesting that the same ableist tropes continue without question, tropes that reinforce stereotypes which infantilise and demonise real Disabled People (see Schwartz et. al., 2020; Nelson, 1999).



Michael Myers is unmasked in Halloween.

Browning attempts to first define a slasher film to argue that his conception of the Adult Child, or at least a physically anomalous villain, is defining of the genre;

“The slasher films' *socially transgressive* protagonists, with whom adolescent viewers ideally are meant to identify, are killed off one by one for their ‘sins’ by the films' *physically anomalous* slasher” (Browning, 2015: pg178).

While monster movies, whether overtly horror or more rooted in Sci-Fi, focus on antagonists who are both socially deviant and physically anomalous, Browning argues that slashers encourage identification with the socially transgressive victims, seen drinking, doing drugs, trespassing, and most

notably engaging in sexual relations, who are picked off by a villain who is deviant due to his physical difference (*ibid*). This argument aligns with Travis Sutton's analysis of the Disabled Obsessive Avenger, as discussed in the literature review, perpetuating the notion that Disabled People are bitter and angry and thus turn to violence and revenge. This narrative extends far beyond the genre (2010). Further reinforcing this harmful stereotype is what Browning terms the 'originary moment' for the Adult Child killer as a key feature of the slasher film- the traumatic moment they continuously return to; for example, *Halloween's* Michael Myers reenacting murdering his sister after witnessing her sleeping with her boyfriend, which resulted in his institutionalisation, or Jason Vorhees' drowning. Browning explains that these villains are across the genre.

“share between them an early, originary traumatic moment, conflict, or history that has previously left them physically and/or psychologically disabled: fundamentally, it is this key moment or incident which narratological echoes into the villain's adulthood with his repeated policing of socially transgressive behaviours that visually or conceptually footnote his own traumatic past” (Browning, 2015: pg178).

A significant omission from Browning's study, likely because of the lack of an explained originary traumatic moment, is Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. We can, however, infer that the absence of a mother figure correlates with this gap to a degree. However, this is not necessary for the significance of the trope, and, similarly decomposed to Norman's mother in *Psycho*, the mother's body is revealed in *Texas Chainsaw*. Sequels and reboots enjoy returning to Leatherface's mother and possible originary moments, such as trauma acquired by his mother's death and his disability in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006, dir. Johnathan Liebesman). By comparing the original *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with the 2022 reboot of the same name (dir. David Blue Garcia), it becomes clear how central infantilisation of Leatherface is to his characterisation. Indeed, he is taken in and cared for by an older female figure in the 2022 remake, filling in a sense the conspicuous gap of a mother figure, and leading Leatherface's homicidal tendencies to lie dormant for a time, much like when Jason Vorhees listens to the character Jenny thinking she is his mother in *Friday the 13th: Part 2* (1981, dir. Steve Miner). The early 2000s were a key moment for the disabled

Adult Child Killer, with numerous remakes of classic slashers and new entries, such as the WWE-produced *See No Evil* (2006, dir. Gregory Dark). These more recent films that reproduce the disabled slasher villain demonstrate the need to update the study of disability in the genre beyond the classic slasher period of the 1970s and 1980s and reaffirm the impact of this trope long after films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Friday the 13th* were released by using these canonical texts and more recent examples, including *In a Violent Nature* and the 2022 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

Understanding the Genre

Browning's chapter is erudite and thought-provoking; however, it is worth expanding upon, particularly at a time when so many of these texts are being revisited, and it has its detractions. Firstly, there are issues with this definition of the slasher genre. While I will not attempt to propose my own definition for this thesis, it is crucial to fully understand the trope by examining these issues. Browning's definition of the genre is presented only as applicable to films from the 1980s. It therefore has limits when applied to films outside this decade, which in turn limits the impact of analysing such characters and the influence they have on the genre and popular misconceptions about disability. However, films from the 1980s also reveal problems for Browning's definition of slashers as featuring villains who are physically anomalous and police social transgression. Still, they are never both things themselves, like the usual movie monster (Browning, 2015: pg178). For example, the 1984 film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (dir. Wes Craven) and its infamous antagonist Freddy Kreuger (Robert Englund) are thought of as emblematic of the slasher film, but Kreuger, much like the antagonists of slasher's predecessors (*Psycho* and *Peeping Tom*, most notably) and those of modern slashers (*Wrong Turn*, 2009-2022 or *In a Violent Nature*) is sexually deviant, thus socially transgressive, as well as physically anomalous, featuring significant facial disfigurement due to being burned to death. Of course, Freddy is also not an Adult Child; instead, as a paedophile killed for his crimes, he is positioned

alongside children and adolescents throughout the narrative, maintaining the close ties between such figures and childhood. Julia Passanante Elman writes in ‘Chronic Youth’ that in the 1980s

“disability became attached to other forms of embodied experience that have been deemed undesirable, such as adolescence, Queerness, or immaturity, while able-bodiedness became synonymous with ‘healthy’ attributes like maturity, productivity, or heteronormativity” (Elman, 2014: pg9).

This explains the Adult Child character, seen to be a more viscerally disturbing villain if they are Disabled and ‘stuck’ in adolescence, a combination of supposedly unfavourable conditions for the body and mind. This also offers insight into the choice to make Freddy a paedophile, due to the understanding victims of childhood sexual violence are more likely to be paedophiles and so, in line with Browning’s argument, are stuck at their own originary moment and thus reenact this action, much like Michael Myers reenacting the night he murdered his sister due to the trauma of witnessing her performing sexual acts. Indeed, in *Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991, dir. Rachel Talalay) and the 2010 remake of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010, dir. Samuel Bayer), Freddy’s backstory as a child abused by his family is explored, characteristic of horror prequels where there is a fascination with the villain's origin story and childhood.

Bernice M. Murphy notes that in the backwoods genre, which often overlaps with slasher, sexual deviance is often linked with male disability, citing *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010, dir. Stephen R. Munroe) and *Straw Dogs* (1971, dir. Sam Peckinpah) as key examples (2013: pg159). This upholds the infantilising perceptions of disability, where all Disabled sexuality is regarded as deviant due to their reduced ‘mental age’ or their physical difference, and encourages fear of Disabled men in particular. This is also seen in more modern films which fit the slasher genre, as discussed at length in Chapter Three, such as the *Wrong Turn* franchise, where incest and cannibalism are physically manifested by deformity on screen to represent the moral transgressions, even when there is an avenging aspect (against the city people who lead to the downfall of rural communities, historically through eugenics and often contemporarily through disrespect or pollution). Similarly, *Scream* (1996,

dir. Wes Craven) features two adolescent villains, presented as homoerotic to the point of parody (*Scary Movie*, 2000, dir. Keenen Ivory Wayans). This draws on a long history of horror in which Queerness serves as another indication of deviance (see Benshoff, 1997), as a social transgression rather than a physical anomaly, alongside the supernatural abilities anyone who inhabits the Ghostface persona is imbued with. These understandings of the monster directly draw upon Julia Kristeva's explanation of abjection (1982) as the corporeal reactions to that which threatens established or normative boundaries, in particular, the boundary between the subject and the object.

Masked Killers and Milk Drinkers

Returning to the Adult Child, in characterising adults with childish traits as monstrous, we are demonising traits inherent to numerous disabilities and neurodivergences, for example, autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This is particularly clear in the non-verbal, male villains who haunt our screen and are analysed by Browning (2015: pg78), although not exclusively. Steven Bruhm highlights that, as horror viewers,

“Every year we pay millions at the box office, the DVD store, iTunes, and pay-per-view to smack our lips at the destruction of the family we elsewhere invest enormous capital in propping up” (Bruhm, in Bohlmann and Moreland, 2015: pg2).

It is no secret that there is a unique *schadenfreude* in such narratives, which have been popular for centuries, and often it is in seeing supposedly perfect families' destruction, which sets standards we cannot meet, as evidenced by the prevalence of horror movies in predominantly white, suburban neighbourhoods. Bruhm's comment is enlightening, as while this is widely applicable to drama movies with cheating spouses, bereaved families, and narratives of illness, Bruhm is specifically referencing horror narratives of murderous children, a trope audiences continue to enjoy. For example, the 2024 film *The First Omen* (dir. Arkasha Stevenson) grossed \$53,845,880, and in 2022, *Halloween Ends* (dir. David Gordon Green) grossed \$105,400,796 (figures taken from Box Office Mojo). Both *Halloween Ends* and *The First Omen* are additions to longstanding horror franchises, with the first being a prequel to the popular film *The Omen*, which follows the Antichrist in the body of a young boy. The latter is a

sequel in the *Halloween* franchise, which features one of the most famous villains of all time: Michael Myers.

Myers is portrayed throughout the franchise as both semi-supernatural and a psychological threat to what is considered safe, proper, and normal development, and Michael is shown to be reliving his first murder of his sister at age 6, and to be stuck in this stage despite now being a man. Non-verbal, with a lack of facial expressions (even under the mask), and with the unusual gait sometimes associated with neurodivergence/ASD, we see Michael silently stalk his victims in the same way he does in the famous opening scene to *Halloween* as a child. In *Halloween 2*, psychiatrist Dr Sam Loomis says of Michael, “he waited with extraordinary patience. There was a force inside him biding its time. The staff grew accustomed to his immobility and silence. In many ways, he was the ideal patient. He didn't talk, he didn't cry, he didn't even move. He just waited.” In his waiting, Michael misses any developmental milestones from the age of 6, being stunted as a 6-year-old despite growing physically, which resonates with the ways many describe disability and ‘mental age’, with intellectual disability sometimes being explained as one being ‘a child in an adult's body’. Much like the visual shorthand of facial/limb differences or a limp, connoting evil and deviance, in these films, the concept of the child in the adult's body, or mental age theory, has its roots in eugenics in the USA. Terms such as ‘feeble-minded’, ‘moron’, and ‘imbecile’ come from the development of mental age theory as a means of eugenic classification (Wendy Kline, eugenicsarchive.ca). While the concept of mental age is used less today, it remains a persistent notion (one that underpins the 2024 film *Poor Things*, for example) that relies on the concept of ‘normalcy’. While eugenicists of the early twentieth century denounced Freudian ideas, their practices similarly rest on the concept of proper development and, often, arbitrary developmental milestones, which they in turn base the ‘mental age’ of those they deem unfit (usually Disabled People or BIPOC). Many such infantilised horror villains remain ‘stuck’ or stunted because of their upbringing or disabilities, and through showing them conduct violent acts in these depictions,

we can see that it is the presumed able-bodied audience these monsters are created to scare. In their childness and inhumanity, Jason and Michael are also positioned as asexual, another symbol of their aberrance but also their childness, since children are often constructed as asexual and child sexuality (particularly children's Queerness) is demonised in the same vein as Disabled sexuality (see Kathryn Bond Stockton, 2009 and McRuer and Mollow, 2012).

The shocking ending of *Friday the 13th* reveals Jason Voorhees, unmasked, as he emerges from the water to grab the final girl, who wakes thinking the nightmare is over, in a kayak on Camp Crystal Lake³. Jason then slashes his way through teens for decades of sequels and remakes. In each, we are given one or two quick flashes of his disfigured face underneath the mask, explained in the story by disability rather than decay or the supernatural. Similar to Michael's mask slipping in the climactic scene of *Halloween*, revealing his facial difference (which is exaggerated as the sequels go on) of a vacant eye socket, Jason's appearance is always presented as a grotesque reveal.⁴ In *Friday the 13th: Part 3*, the lead character who previously survived an encounter with Jason describes him as "this hideous man, he was so grotesque he was almost inhuman", and his appearance is meant to shock us, much like the unmasking of the disfigured Erik (Lon Chaney) in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925, dir. Rupert Julian). Unlike Erik, part of the shock is that it isn't Jason in his undead form which has been committing these murders, but his controlling mother, reminiscent of Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, whose overbearing mother means the mentally ill and distinctly child-like Norman (he is called 'boy' by his 'mother' throughout the movie, and milk is his drink of choice) murders women. While Norman does murder the woman who hurt him, his mother, he is still under her control as he acts according to her stifling wishes and murders women he finds attractive, a key thread in

³ Masking here has a double meaning, both referring to the literal wearing of masks which hide the Adult Child's face and disability, and the term masking being used to refer to hiding traits of disabilities and neurodivergence such as ASD around others.

⁴ Blindness and eye-loss are a common theme in these films, such as in *Wait Until Dark* and *See No Evil*, or more recently, the *Don't Breathe* films, and the imagery of a missing eye is frequently used to shock and framed as spectacle.

neurodiverse characters (especially survivors of abuse and trauma) being portrayed as monstrous in cinema due to their following rules laid out by a deviant parent figure exactly. Jason is similarly controlled by his mother's wishes to enact revenge on camp counsellors whom she attributes blame for his death. This is made explicit through the character of Jenny in *Friday the 13th: Part 2*, a student in child psychology who escapes Jason by wearing his mother's jumper and speaking to Jason as his 'Mother', the same title Mrs Bates is, somewhat unaffectionately, referred to as by Norman. This is Mrs Vorhees' vengeance, not Jason's. We see Jason (like Frankenstein) in a man's body but still with the mind of a child, frozen developmentally at the point of his death, despite coming back as an adult. His physical disability was utilised for shock value and to justify his lack of agency throughout the narrative.



The Phantom of the Opera: Erik's shocking face reveal

This resonates with the familiar ghostly children in Japanese Horror (J-horror), as discussed extensively by Karen Lury. Lury argues that in J-horror

“The child functions as the kind of spectre identified by Jacques Derrida and is therefore an inhuman entity, acting as an irruption of repressed mythic, or pre-modern temporality into the present day” (Lury, 2012: pg2).

These children, who arguably have more in common with the ‘repressed childness’ or stunted nature of the villains in this chapter than with the more commonly understood ghostly children in Western tradition, represent a terrifying rupture of normative temporality through their haunting. Similarly, disability is often understood as a threat to what has been termed ‘chrononormative’ structures (Freeman, 2021: pg245), one of many intersecting structures through which hegemonic patriarchal ableism is enforced. This is likely part of why we see disability used to align characters with the supernatural in gothic and horror narratives, which has the effect of also constructing disability as unnatural and inhuman. These films disrupt chrononormativity as a threat, more specifically in the form of experienced time and linear developmental processes, which are also different for Disabled People. Alison Kafer’s seminal work ‘Feminist, Queer, Crip’ (2013) explores the concepts of Crip time and the perceived threat of Crip futurity, which has also been widely adapted within Queer theory. Drawing on Carolyn Steedman, Lury says that in the 19th Century.

“Set apart in terms of time and experience, the child and childhood became paradoxically other to adult human life – childhood was a special, if restricted, time period in which children were different from adults” (Lury, 2012: pg24)

Here, Lury illustrates that this concept of children as separate from adults is an ongoing construction. It is, as with disability, a cultural understanding, not a necessary or natural one. This understanding disrupts the horror these events attempt to evoke, in which, in the absence of abjection or casting out one's childness in favour of more proper adult traits, these characters threaten normative boundaries and thus unsettle. For example, long before Norman is revealed to be a murderer, he is signalled to the audience as aberrant through childish traits, as mentioned above: repeatedly referring to his mother, calling himself a boy, and giggling nervously and at seemingly inappropriate moments. These characteristics are frequently used to signal ‘deviant’ psychopathology due to their understanding as inappropriate for adults, for example, the drinking of milk is a common trope of villains such as Rose in *Get Out* (2017, dir. Jordan Peele) or Anton in *No Country for Old Men* (2007, dir. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen). These may suggest a disregard for normative behaviour and structures, particularly for

one's age, hinting at the violence to follow. This, in combination with their inexpressive faces and monotonous or overexcited voices, could suggest neurodivergence, as flat affect is a diagnostic criterion for ASD, and these characters are perhaps holding onto childhood routines longer than most, another trait of ASD.



Jason Voorhees, now a child again, emerges from the water as a final jump scare in Friday the 13th (1980)

Chimaeras, Changelings, and Children

By disrupting time and normative developmental milestones through, as Bohlman and Moreland (2015) put it, monstrous children and childish monsters, the boundaries of what it means to be human or monster, adult or child, are threatened, as well as the constraints of time itself. This is the process by which monsters and the feeling of horror are understood to be formed in film and monster studies, both of which have a psychoanalytic history. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (2020) proposes a genealogy of monster studies and reasserts the importance of these normative categories and the concepts of development and childhood, quoting Asa Mittman's assertion that "the monster is that which unsettles or challenges established cognitive categories and interpretive strategies [...] that which shouldn't be,

but is” (Mittman in Weinstock, 2020: pg2). The Adult Child, and the ghostly, atemporal child, shouldn't *be* according to established categories, yet is, and is therefore explained away, like so much else which transcends categorisation, by folklore. However, rather than being an Adult Child or simply a ghostly child, these characters are explicitly Disabled adults or implicitly Disabled children. Many of the characters who fall into the Adult Child trope are introduced to the other characters, and to the audience, as creatures of folklore and ghost stories, nothing more.

For example, in 2024's *In a Violent Nature* the Adult Child slasher villain Johnny is introduced to the characters over a campfire, telling his story the same way as all boogeymen stories are told, like that of Michael Myers as a scary story in *Halloween*, or in the *Friday the 13th* remake (2009, dir. Marcus Nispel), where Jason is also introduced as “r*****ded”. Relegating these characters to myth, whether campfire tale or horror film, enables us to categorise that which resists categorisation, and in the process to dismiss it. But as we learn in *In a Violent Nature*, the “r*****ded [...] slow kid, Johnny” is all too real, his tragic tale too possible. His disabilities are not corrected by the end of the story, like in traditional fairy tales (for example, the Prince's blindness being cured in the Grimm's telling of *Sleeping Beauty*, discussed by Amanda Leduc, 2020). As Karen Lury explains,

“By mapping out a narrative of progress and a series of developmental milestones for the normal child, it also became possible for the child to act as the personification of development itself, whether this was applied to the individual or the human race” (Lury, 2012: pg25).

Considering the rural locations of many of these films, the eugenic fears which pervaded early horror and which disproportionately affected rural populations likely play a part in the Adult Child trope, with *In a Violent Nature*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Friday the 13th*, and other films with similar characters, such as *The Hills Have Eyes*, taking place in the rural USA. This is explored in Chapter Three, but it is worth considering how eugenics forms part of the background of this trope, particularly with the links to the demonisation of Disabled sexuality explicit in such films, fears exacerbated in films such as *Straw Dogs* and *Deliverance*.

From the suburban, asexual slashers of the 1970s, we can trace the development of the Adult Child trope into the 1990's and 2000s, where the Adult Child is now sexual, and often rural, epitomised by *Wrong Turn 2*, where the central conflict between the rural family and the young gameshow contestants they cut down is jealousy over sexuality. An explicit scene of incest between disfigured, immature siblings drives the conflict and overtly demonises the sexuality of the Disabled characters by creating a perverse situation where they are wearing the scalps of their victims. As Bernice M. Murphy notes (2013: pg159), often sexual assault and deviance are attributed to disability in backwoods horror narratives. The end of the film, like Jason's reappearance from the lake, shows a surviving, disfigured child of the family being nursed on a human finger by another mutant survivor. Similarly, the enduring threat that Johnny could arise again is the same as that of the horror of allowing Frankenstein's monster to survive with his bride, in that it suggests the possibility of new generations of monsters, and further disruptions to progress (which is thought to be achieved through generations of eugenic/healthy reproduction). The eugenic fervour of the 1930s and 1940s would not allow the monsters to survive, but for millennial horror films, following in the footsteps of the classic slashers of the 1970s and 1980s, allowing the "monster" or the "slow kid" of Johnny, Jason, or the infant in *Wrong Turn 2* to survive only intensifies the threat to national progress, encouraging their own lineage of spin offs and sequels.



The exaggerated disfigurement of the mutant siblings in Wrong Turn 2 is on full display for a shocking sex scene.

Also notable is that Jason Voorhees is not, as Browning (2015: pg173-176) explains, an adult but a supernatural being. Beyond creating fear of an adults body that acts childishly, and unsettles by transgressing normative developmental and behavioural categories, Jason's supernatural state also disrupts time by continuing to develop physically after death, a fear which has been pervasive for centuries (for example in 'vampire burials' where the body was staked due to hair and nails continuing to grow after death, particularly in Puritan settlements in the USA). Returning to Lury, the 'uncanny' nature of such children who threaten these adult/child boundaries reinforces a recurring concept throughout this research, that of the chimaera. While based on mythology and then Freud, a specific application of the chimaera as an unsettling blend of multiples can be seen in the 'Wolf Men', 'Living Skeletons, and 'Lobster Boys' of 20th-century freak shows, which explicitly impacted American and British culture, especially horror cinema.⁵ Lury explains that;

⁵ See, for example, Todd Browning's *Freaks* or the more recent film *The Greatest Showman* (2017, dir. Michael Gracey), and the TV series *American Horror Story: Freak Show*. For the impact of modern Freak shows on culture see Nadja Durbach's 'Spectacles of Deformity' and 'Freakery' by Rosemarie Garland Thomson.

“If the child is acting (seeming), then we may be confronted with an individual that might be regarded as a ‘freak’, a prodigious child who must possess adult-like qualities, which allows it to act in a childlike rather than childish manner. And it is the case that many successful child actors are frequently identified as odd, miraculous or unique [...] the question becomes whether these marvellous individuals are really children or children as we would normally understand them to be” (Lury, 2012: pg10).

Such chimeric children, possessing a blend of child and adult qualities (and often what are regarded as inhuman or superhuman qualities), reinforce Cohen’s thesis that monsters are “hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” (Cohen in Weinstock, 2020: pg9). It is this hybridity and need for bodies to adhere to strict binaries which Chivers and Markotic (2010) problematise and critique. Disabled bodies and children, either physically or developmentally, ‘out-of-time’ operate in similar ways to unsettle, if subscribing to the psychoanalytic understandings underpinning horror studies, by asking us “to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorisation.” (Mittman in Weinstock, 2020: pg2). As we can see through monstrous children such as Damien in *The Omen*, or through the supernaturally stunted villains of slashers, the temporal categorisations that shape our understandings and the functioning of the world around us are threatened by such characterisations, whether Adult Child, ghostly, Disabled, or chimeric child. In perpetuating the fear of the “adult in a child’s body” or the “old soul” in a child as scary, such films uphold ableist structures which hold back neurodiverse people’s development and support, and instead demonise neurodivergence expressed in, for example, non-verbal communication in adults or hyper-verbal/hyper-lexic communication in children.

Sleeping Animal

Putting these ideas into practice, *In a Violent Nature* draws on decades of existing horror and slasher tropes in the ultimate Adult Child killer, Johnny. The film is “largely filmed as though viewers are following in the footsteps of its hulking big-bad, an animalistic monster of a reanimated corpse” (Megan McClusky, 2024, Time Magazine). Throughout the film, like with other Disabled characters in horror films discussed (particularly ecocritical horror) such as *Wrong Turn*, *Deliverance*, and *The*

Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Johnny, who is canonically autistic, is likened to animals and his first kill is a hunter, culminating in an interesting monologue by Lauren-Marie Taylor, known from *Friday the 13th: Part Two*, describing a particularly vicious bear-attack which may have been Johnny, saying that “animals don't get too hung up on reason”. Further, Johnny is wearing primarily leather, emerges from the forest in dirty, tattered clothing, is nonverbal, and seems motivated by an unconscious vengeance against those who disrespect the forest and its animals. In line with the eugenic underpinnings of the genre, Johnny and other Disabled characters are positioned, like the Freak show performers of the past, as closer to animal than human, and similarly closer to a child than a rational adult, being presented as terrifying due to their lack of “reason” as their motivations and actions are often unclear to neurotypical adults. Indeed, director Chris Nash admits that the seemingly tender moment when we see Johnny’s face, which breaks from the tradition of being a last-minute jump-scare reveal, was a mistake that betrayed his true intentions.

“I wanted him to remain unapproachable, and I didn’t want to give any entry points for an audience into feeling any kind of sympathy or empathy for him [...] how it plays out is a little too emotional, a little too internal, a little too projecting, like me telling the audience he’s a person under all that, which is almost the opposite of what I intended” (Chris Nash, Interviewed by Maria Lattila, 2024, Film Stories).

In attempting to create a character which is as far from a person as possible, it is telling that Nash has chosen to make his character autistic and have facial differences, and while a child-like, Disabled character may seem a poor choice for a villain for most film audiences (who are perhaps more familiar with *Forrest Gump*), a look at past horror villains begins to unpick this troubling choice. Johnny has, of course, been regularly compared to Jason Voorhees and Leatherface, and, like the other two characters, his dead mother is his main “reason” for his actions, seeking her necklace stolen by college students at a campsite (another reference to the 2009 *Friday the 13th*). This choice aligns him with children in his seemingly instinctive hunt for his parents, and his father's death is what drives his resurrection, having been killed in the aftermath of Johnny’s death while being bullied for being different. This backstory and scene generate sympathy for the killer, as the audience is shown that this

is a result of his own injustice and mistreatment due to his disability. He has no “rational” figures left to guide him, only the memories tied to the necklace, particularly given the scene in which we see Johnny’s face and see him emotional, because he has found a toy car, bringing memories of the childhood he was robbed of and thus is trapped in. However, this is undermined by the treatment of Johnny as one-dimensional for the rest of the narrative, in line with Nash’s intentions, despite the opportunity to present a sympathetic Disabled character by shooting the film from his perspective and giving his backstory early, unlike Jason or Leatherface. This action epitomises what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) term narrative prosthesis in employing disability as a metaphor (in this case for the supernatural or tragic) and for the plot (for horror or scares) rather than tackling disability as a complex identity and depicting what this might mean for characters, by stripping away Johnny’s humanity as a disabled villain rather than allowing his character complexity.



Johnny emerges from the wilderness, hunting a local hunter.

In *In a Violent Nature*, tellingly originally titled *Sleeping Animal*, Johnny and his actions are presented as ‘out of time’ through more than his childness; smartphones, cancel-culture, and openly Queer characters are met with a vintage 4:3 aspect ratio and every 1980s horror homage you can imagine, as well as a tactile, film effect which adds to the retro feel of the movie, taking the audience into Johnny’s

atypical temporal experience as an autistic ghost/zombie, an unintentional stab at Crip time in the form of slow cinema, a genre rarely meshed with horror. Actor Ry Barrett, in preparing to play Johnny, “devoured monster movies as well as real animal attack videos [...] *In a Violent Nature* reflects its antagonist’s unspoken motivations and emotions primarily through cadence and movement” (Alison Foreman, 2024: IndieWire). This cadence and movement are central to the character and the film, which takes a real-time approach to the stalking of the slasher rather than opting for jump scares and time jumps. Johnny moves through the film with a flat affect and a steady pace. At times, his pace suddenly changes, and his movements become more erratic, which is not foreshadowed by the dialogue or score to frighten and unsettle viewers who have become accustomed to the film's slow pace. This slowed approach, from Johnny's perspective, and its interruption as a tool to frighten align the audience with Johnny’s experience of time, a fundamentally different one from that of the allistic characters in the film. Barrett’s preparation is also telling of the ableism of this trope, as to play an explicitly autistic character, rather than working with experts, they choose to turn to monsters and animals rather than learning from people. Of course, learning from people for a role like this is not unproblematic itself, with actor Gunnar Hansen visiting a school for intellectually disabled young people to prepare for his role as Leatherface, as revealed by the actor in the 2000 documentary about the making of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2000, dir. David Gregory). Autistic characters deserve to be treated with nuance and respect but are frequently portrayed by allistic actors in derogatory ways, and the only place for an autistic character should not be as the villain. Disabled children are also a staple of the horror genre, and similarly likened to animals, and are viewed as a driver (or explicit result) of the Madness and terror experienced by their mother. The slasher film seems to favour unpacking the lives of these characters as adults, and presenting them as disturbing for the same reasons ghost children, monsters, and animals are horrifying in film; their ambiguous thoughts and actions to adult, allistic audiences.

2. Crippling the Monstrous-Feminine

Introduction

Most of the arguments and theories underpinning this thesis, and the thesis itself, oppose the medical model of disability which would suggest that disability is inherently biological and *is* the impairment, there to be cured to fit into the wider world, not something the wider world should accommodate (Shakespeare, 2018: pp.12-13), in favour of the social or cultural models (see Dan Goodley, 2016: pp.14-16). As is apparent with any conversation centring on eugenics, the Disabled body is not the only body subjected to this “medical gaze” or model, and any body other than that of a cisgender, White, heterosexual, able-bodied male comes under medicalised, or often pathologised, scrutiny by Western medicine and psychology. This chapter will focus on how the female body comes under such scrutiny in the horror genre, analysing the parallels between the treatment of motherhood and pregnancy and that of disability on screen, arguing for a refreshed and revised understanding of Barbara Creed's pioneering concept of the Monstrous-Feminine (1993) with disability (and childness) central to the construction and popularity of the Monstrous-Feminine in horror film, focusing on the Mad mother. This will be done by identifying and unravelling several strands and cultural anxieties which feed into the development of the pregnancy horror subgenre and its tropes today, considering the medical gaze, medical paternalism, ableism, reproductive rights, eugenics, and the visual and narratological parallels of pregnancy and illness, especially cancer, in media. Fundamentally, the Monstrous-Feminine and the Disabled monster both embody difference as terrifying and are, as such, cast out through the narrative of these films. Both medicalised femininity and disability underpin the development of Hollywood movie monsters. As Julia Kristeva proposes, “The fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially a fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing” (1982: pg77), one which the eugenicist, phallogocentric

field of Western medicine is interesting in “medicalising”; that is, to bring the female body under medical/institutional control and authority (Nisha, 2020: pg28). This is a process which Kristeva recognises as more prevalent where the “patrilineal filiation” is perceived as weaker. However, she doesn't identify it as medicalisation, as it encompasses many forms and processes across cultures (Kristeva, 1982: pg77). This chapter draws on ideas of the medicalised gaze as understood by Michel Foucault (1973) and developed with reference to motherhood and pregnancy by Zairu Nisha (2020), alongside the female-focused, psychoanalytic narratives of horror put forward by Barbara Creed (1993) and Julia Kristeva (1982) to demonstrate that pregnancy is represented as disabling for the mother in horror. The birth of Disabled children (in a trend dating back as far as records on the topic) is blamed on the mother's behaviour, thoughts, and environment. These metaphors of disability and pregnancy are inherently feminised and animalised, like the Adult Child or the mutant families explored in the next chapter, as an oppressive trope underpinned by the same eugenic history which has shaped the wider genre. Pregnancy and motherhood are paralleled with metaphors of cancer, parasitism, possession, and a loss of agency, where the images of disability common to the horror genre are a seemingly natural fit. This will be explored primarily through recent pregnancy horror films, including *The Last Omen* and *Apartment 7a*, which are both developments of earlier popular horror films, with close reference to *The Brood*. These films and this subgenre are pertinent to the discussion of disability and horror as they engage in a very direct way with the eugenicist rhetoric and the dangers of institutional medical control, which underpins these representations more widely. Their explicit use of images of disabled infants and demonisation of their mothers, even in very recent examples (*Immaculate*, *The Last Omen*) is troubling. *The Brood*'s influence can be felt in these films, and between Cronenberg's fame and reverence amongst horror filmmakers and fans and the recency of many of these examples, this is a timely addition to the scholarship on pregnancy horror.

Pregnancy and the pregnant body have pervaded horror for decades, characterising their own subgenre of body horror entirely. Linda Badley argues that from the 1980s, “The awe formerly granted to the

supernatural mass culture had invested in clinical images of the physiology of disease, mutation, mutilation, and decomposition” (Badley, 1995: pg6). This uptick in the clinical horrors and worries over mutation and mutilation occurred alongside a noticeable increase in horror films centring on pregnancy following the success of *Rosemary's Baby* in 1968. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that this coincides with the abortion debate gaining traction in the United States in the run-up to the presentation of the *Roe v. Wade* case, passed in 1973, and we have seen a similar boom in body horror centring pregnancy from 2024, with this law being overturned. It is also no coincidence that the Church, usually the Roman Catholic Church, is central to these narratives which explore the horror of medicalisation, of having your body fall under another's authority and control, either that of the child or of a medical, governmental, or religious institution, such as in the forced pregnancy and birth of the demonic child in most of these examples. Susan Sontag, writing on metaphors of illness in 1978 following her own cancer diagnosis, wrote of cancer/tumours;

“But this lump is alive, a fetus with its own will. Novalis [...] defines cancers [...] as ‘full-fledged parasites - they grow, are engendered, engender, have their structure, secrete, eat.’ Cancer is a demonic pregnancy. St. Jerome must have been thinking of cancer when he wrote: ‘The one there with his swollen belly is pregnant with his own death’. (Sontag, 1978: pg14)

Pregnancy is often given as a metaphor for disease, or vice-versa, and the horrors explored in these narratives parallel the horrors Disabled or sick characters are subjected to, primarily of losing control over one's body. In the quote from Novalis, as well as in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986) and *Adult Child* narratives, the sick/Disabled male body is feminised in its alignment with the natural cycle and denial of the agency afforded to the ‘rational’ male, either metaphorically pregnant or aligned with the non-human animal, as women often are

“The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminising them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalising them” (Karen J. Warren, 1997: pg12)

Within horror, and within early texts on disability, the mother receives the blame for the disability or monstrosity, synonymous within the visual logic of the horror film. Weinstock explains that in medieval texts within Christendom, disability was attributed to “moral lapses, often specifically sexual

ones, including sodomy, bestiality, adultery, incest, and ‘impure thoughts’ and ‘unnatural desire’ of the mother” (Weinstock, 2020: pg6). These ideas continue into the modern day, having been widely perpetuated in eugenic rhetoric through the 20th Century and making their way onto screen. This idea is also present in pregnancy horror narratives, and looking at Creed’s case study on *The Brood*, the idea of the monstrous womb is literalised as Nora’s untamed emotions cause the disability of her children, but also her own physical disfigurement. This chapter is in line with much of Creed’s seminal and respected analysis, but also complicates her reading of these characters - including Nola - by focusing not only on the Monstrous-Feminine but on the idea of the monstrous disabled body, linking this idea of the monstrous womb and the monstrous child with eugenics and disability. Further, this chapter identifies and interrogates the similarities between these pregnancy metaphors and metaphors of cancer, as outlined by Susan Sontag, and, calling back to the first chapter, the idea of animality and the alignment of nature as monstrous (Warren, 1997). Disability, femininity, and animality are each seen as monstrous and combined as an ultimate form of abjection, through Nola and other unruly, Mad women.

Pregnancy and The Medicalised Gaze

Zairu Nisha argues that

“Medical sciences seem to provide new reproductive opportunities for women to enhance their procreative choices, but often disable them and contribute to perpetuating patriarchy in new ways by treating women’s bodies as procreative machines and making profits for the pharmaceutical companies and medical practitioners.” (Nisha, 2020: pp.26-27)⁶

This biological essentialism echoes the medical paternalism that sees Disabled People being told by medical practitioners what they can or can't do (including reproduce), what they should be feeling, and why the sick have historically been lied to about their conditions.⁷ Medical paternalism and biological

⁶ Nisha’s choice to use the word disable will be returned to, but is notable in that it aligns with the Social Model in arguing that it is these companies and practitioners which disable, not illness, impairment, or pregnancy in itself and while disability is not a focus of Nisha’s it is difficult to overlook in analyses of the medical sciences in reality as well as in fiction.

⁷ See Sontag, ‘Illness as Metaphor’, 1978 which discusses medical paternalism and secrecy with patients in relation to cancer.

essentialism grant power and authority to the medical professionals at the expense of the patient, whether this is a mother, a cancer patient, someone with a chronic illness, or simply someone seen as abnormal, and underpin eugenic arguments for reproductive control. Biological essentialism perceives a woman's ultimate purpose as reproduction, a process which is then medicalised by these practitioners (*ibid*). According to Silvia Federici (2004), reducing woman to womb or to the site of reproduction of the labour force, is a crucial step towards capitalist society and is as such deeply ingrained in our popular conscious today, and the link to horror is evidenced in the title of Creed's chapter on *The Brood*, 'Woman as Monstrous Womb' (1993: pg43).



Nola reveals her tumour-like sacs where her disfigured brood gestate to her horrified husband.

In 'Woman as Monstrous Womb' Creed outlines several films depicting women giving birth to monsters before analysing David Cronenberg's *The Brood* in depth. Nola (Samantha Eggar), the monstrous mother of the narrative, is institutionalised in the Somafree Institute of Psychoplasms (a fictional science) due to an unspecified mental illness, some form of hysterics or neurosis. Her

husband, Frank (Art Hindle), cares for their daughter, Candy (Cindy Hinds), while Nola is undergoing treatment, but he is unable to see Nola when Candy visits Somafree. He notices mysterious deaths, which turn out to be the result of creatures Nola is birthing as physical manifestations of her rage. Like Robert Louis Stevenson's Mr. Hyde is described as a "deformed" manifestation of the repressed emotions and desires of Dr. Jekyll, the children born from Nola while institutionalised are the same size and colouring of Candy but have facial differences, are non-verbal, colourblind, and have no mind of their own, instead acting only in response to Nola's no-longer repressed emotions. While the focus is put on the mother as monstrous womb and on the significance of women's reproductive organs symbolically, much of the film is concerned with the physical manifestation of the repressed and how it spreads and metastasises in the body, such as a growth on the neck of another of the Institute's patients. Indeed, Nola's children are born from tumour-like sacs which grow on the outside of her abdomen, and are themselves mindless yet organised about their murder, threatening the social body as well as the individual body, uniting malignancy and militarism as Sontag expresses, which is common with cancer metaphors (Sontag, 1978: pg67). The children are the parasitic or cancerous manifestation of the mother's "sickness," disfiguring her and explicitly threatening the eugenic child, the happy and healthy Candy, whom the brood, and then Nola, attack. As Creed notes, "the film makes no attempt to explore the origins of woman's desire to harm her daughter physically; rather it suggests that this rage is passed down through the female generations as if it were some kind of inherited disease" (Creed, 2022: pg46) and at the end of the narrative we see Candy herself developing such a growth on her arm, positing a generational threat due to the mismanaged emotions, or hysteria, of the women.

Likely, Nola's attack on Candy is out of self-preservation and the preservation of her other "children." Notably, the children born from Nola's rage have no reproductive organs, so cannot themselves pose a eugenic threat, except for in murdering others, which is interesting given that eugenic logic would posit that this lessens their horror as Disabled People, but Candy - the "normal" looking child- takes

up the position as eugenic threat instead. The cancer parallels are made overt with the reveal of the tumour-like growths on another patient's neck, but this idea of children and pregnancy as cancer also pervades the film, moving out from Nola's body as the aberrant children begin to invade the spaces of the social body, for example, a preschool classroom. Where, as ecofeminists such as Warren argue, women (and children) are aligned with the animal to reinforce their inferiority, when read with the Monstrous-Feminine and Sontag these children in *The Brood* and other monstrous pregnancy narratives, including *The Fly*, can be argued to be instead aligned with cancer and illness/disability to align them within the threatening life/death/decay cycle.



A male patient - and victim- of psychoplasms reveals his disfigurement.

Creed's fundamental argument in writing 'The Monstrous-Feminine' is disputing claims that in horror, the woman is always the victim, and that the femininity of the monster, including her reproductive capacity, is abject and thus horrific. This follows Kristeva's argument that the abject is that which is othered for civilised society to be constructed in opposition to it, what we define ourselves as not (1980). In this instance, the female body's capacity for reproduction is unsettling and unpredictable, and Creed is arguing that it is horrific for the male viewer. However, beyond eliciting castration anxiety, the maternal body exemplifies fears common to us all, but most prevalent amongst women;

the fear of our bodies, abilities, and identities changing, and of pain. Of course, this applies also to our fears of becoming Disabled, sick, and ageing, and the women in these narratives are often institutionalised in some form and lose their agency and identity. These institutions, whether medical or religious, “disable” them, as Nisha (2020: pp.26-27) argues. The uncertainty of our bodies and what can be produced internally, or contracted and inflicted externally, and how it can multiply and change us when we think of ourselves as separate, distinct entities, is the foundation of body horror and links to what Creed illustrates as horrific in scenes of childbirth as a moment which penetrates the boundary between internal and external (Creed, 2022: pg 58). It is illuminating, then, to step back from Creed’s focus on the womb in these stories and consider the body as a whole, crucially including the mind, depicted as the most fluid organ of all. In stepping away from focusing on the woman as womb, it also allows analysis which moves from the medicalised gaze towards a social/cultural one, looking at the conception of the women’s bodies as a whole and the threat inherent in these depictions beyond the womb, but for all of us who have what Margarit Shildrick (1997) terms “leaky bodies”. The body’s impermanence and permeability are the horror in these narratives more than yonic imagery. Still, the two have become intertwined in meaning, underpinned by the horror of illness and disability perpetuated by such narratives and the figure of the Monstrous-Feminine or monstrous mother.



The face of one of the brood, displaying traits of real-life facial differences, uncannily like Candy

Cancer, as Sontag (1978: pg18) highlights, is known to disproportionately attack “embarrassing” body parts, such as the reproductive organs, potentially why it was thought of as a sign of repression, attacking areas associated with passion. Similarly, female hysteria was thought of by the Ancient Greeks to be caused by sexual frustration, with the uterus wandering to other areas of the body seeking moisture due to going unused, and causing an array of symptoms (Creed, 2023: pp.55- 56). In Creed’s view, *The Brood* argues that female desire to express emotions is illegitimate, abject, and disruptive to the social order, and that it is the repression of these emotions that causes the birth of Nola’s monstrous brood, and presumably, the mental illness which led to her institutionalisation to begin with. Sontag explains

“As once TB [tuberculosis] was thought to come from too much passion afflicting the reckless and sensual, today many people believe that cancer is a disease of insufficient passion, afflicting those who are sexually repressed, inhibited, unspontaneous, incapable of expressing anger.” (Sontag, 1978: pg22)

Cancer, then, was thought to be caused by repressed emotion; the opposite of tuberculosis, which was the killer of the poets, cancer was repression manifest and eating away at the victim or overgrowing the unused areas, demanding attention: rhetoric still prevalent in contemporary ‘wellness’ movements online or in evangelical sects. Nola’s children are “cancerous”, evidenced by the tumour-like sacs they are born from and leave behind, eating away at society around her as the embodiment of her hysteria and previously repressed anger. Images of sickness are as fundamental to this film as images of the womb, representing the body’s mutable, or mutatable, nature. The children, the embodiment of this fear, are themselves Disabled, non-verbal and with facial differences, further eliciting fear of what our bodies could produce, seemingly spontaneously, in ourselves or our children, echoing early teratological and modern eugenic fearmongering. The horrific imagery in this film is presented as much in the children’s lack of speech and atypical facial features, and the risk of being left with growths to the neck or abdomen, as in the murders and the birth scenes.

Christ and Crips

Outside of the medical institution- a favourite setting for horror, due to medicine’s innate acknowledgement of the body as mutable and as a place associated with loss of agency- many pregnancy horror films take place in religious settings. This is often depicted in the West as an offshoot or sect of Roman Catholic institutions. A recent example is *The First Omen*, a prequel to the well-known film *The Omen*, which follows the childhood of the Antichrist, a young boy named Damien. In *The First Omen*, which makes several allusions and homages to earlier films such as *Rosemary’s Baby* and *Possession*, we follow Margaret (Nell Tiger Free) as she joins a convent in Rome that plans to bring about the Antichrist. Margaret, herself a (literal) child of Satan, is to be the mother of the Antichrist because a chosen girl she meets in the orphanage, Carlita (Nicole Sorace), is still too young. The devil forcibly impregnates Margaret, who gives birth to twins, and she escapes with Carlita and her daughter, the other twin, taken by the sect, being Damien. From early in the film, before Margaret is pregnant, she spends time training in the hospital attached to the convent where there is a scene of

an unnamed woman giving birth which makes Margaret pass out; the sterile, brightly lit medical room being directly paralleled with, and as horrifying as, the dark chamber in which Margaret is impregnated and later gives birth, both of which are ritualistic. Like *The Brood*, we see multiple images of disfigured babies, past attempts to create children of Satan, of which Margaret and Carlita were the only successes, and have no physical difference aside from the hidden mark of the devil, a birthmark-shaped 666. Similarly, the 2024 film *Immaculate* makes use of images of disfigured babies and fetuses in jars as evidence of the previous attempts of the convent to clone Jesus. In this instance, the main character does kill the child she has been forced to carry in an animalistic scene where she first bites through the umbilical cord in the wilderness. These repeated images of Disabled babies and fetuses - not unlike the birth scene in *The Brood*- may be constructed out of popular fears of inbreeding as well as of the supernatural, as inbreeding producing Disabled, monstrous children is a common trope of the genre. However, these children, being a result of coerced impregnation, are also acting as a metaphorical condemnation of this act, though using Disabled bodies to this end is concerning and a prime example of narrative prosthesis. Similarly, as a result of parthenogenesis, Nola's children lack genetic diversity and present a similar fear of uncontrollable female reproduction, without the need for men, as well as of the results of inbreeding. Despite their lack of physical difference, Margaret and Carlita are isolated and mistreated due to their behaviour, attributed initially to mental illness, including hearing voices and meltdowns or outbursts, but later explained as supernatural. The alignment with disability as indicative of supernatural origins or abilities is a recurring and harmful trope across genres. Carlita and Margaret grow up away from peers and spend much of the narrative alone, often framed by a dark room. In contrast, shots of their peers often include many others, showing how they are Disabled by their behavioural differences, reflected in Martin F. Norden's argument that disability representations often create or depict an experience of intense isolation both in the physical space on the screen as well as within the plots or storylines (Norden, 1994: pg.1). Both characters are also institutionalised, like Nola, and subjected to "corrective" treatment within the church, including enforced isolation. At the

end of their time in the church, their isolation continues, and we see the three female characters living alone, again with a darkened background, but this time in the shot together, a happy scene interrupted by news that the Church is looking for them.. Unlike many monstrous mothers in film, Margaret experiences isolation and disabling symptoms her whole life, manifesting mentally rather than physically, like with her half-siblings. The threat is that her child survives, while the best outcome for her and those around her is to remain isolated, according to the events of the film.



*A screaming woman from an early scene in *The First Omen*, setting up the horror of the clinic*

Also in 2024 was a prequel to the pioneering horror film *Rosemary's Baby*, titled *Apartment 7A*, which has similarly ritualistic scenes paralleled with medical ones, following a young dancer called Terry (Julia Garner) who is taken in by an elderly couple when struggling following a disabling ankle injury, but who is then forcibly impregnated with the antichrist by a coven of Satanists living in the apartment building. The first third of the film features numerous scenes following Terry as she walks around the city or stumbles through auditions, ensuring that her full body is captured to show her significant limp. As she turns to self-medicating, her limp does not improve, and the shots, much like in *The First Omen*, increasingly show her separate from others, either in the foreground limping or shot by herself. As

well as having the elderly neighbours around her acting as the monsters, *Apartment 7A* (like *Rosemary's Baby*) implicate medical professionals who reassure her everything is normal, questioning her sanity and her symptoms, as well as sharing her medical information with her neighbours, creating a sense of distrust around the doctors, along with everyone else Terry confides in. The distrust links the Church and the medical system both visually and thematically as corrupt institutions. Thomas et al directly read *Rosemary's Baby* with disability, and the problems inherent to concepts of the child as parasitic, asking "Who are we to begrudge a woman for loving her child, despite how 'monstrous' some may perceive the child to be?" while acknowledging the stigma and guilt associated with parenting a "monstrous" child (2022: pg100). This guilt is often depicted in horror as extending to the guilt of parenting, or relying on help to parent, Disabled and/or autistic children, such as in *The Babadook* (2014, dir. Jennifer Kent), *Pet Sematary* (1989, dir. Mary Lambert), or *Madre* (2016, dir. Aaron Burns). Manley (2024) also links motherhood in horror and in *The Brood* to disability through identifying the disabling effects of the abuse and trauma the women in these narratives experience, whether by family, medical practitioners, or the church. While Rosemary is told she is suffering prenatal psychosis, postnatal, her judgment and opinions seem to melt away when faced with her child, even though he is the Antichrist. In contrast, Terry chooses suicide when learning her unborn child is the child of the devil. These two fates reflect two fears associated with motherhood and the mind, that reason may be lost due to improper responses to pregnancy and the child (psychosis, depression) or from "proper" yet illogical responses to the child, or "maternal instinct".

This notion of maternal instinct, as in *Rosemary's Baby* and in *The First Omen* to an extent, as Margaret finds herself unable to kill her son when given the chance, aligns with what Creed (1993: pg53) terms the "bestial birth", separate from that of machines as reproductive in other films. While the abject is often what is considered non-human or non-civilised, Creed argues that female reproduction reminds us we are not so separate from animals and are a part of the life/death/decay cycle, a further reminder

of our bodies' mutability. Therefore, scenes in *The Brood* where Nola licks the amniotic sac off her child like an animal, or more subtly when Margaret and Rosemary act upon “maternal instinct” rather than logic, it evokes horror through this association with the natural world and life cycle, but also through the fear of a lack of logic or reason, much like the fear played on in many horror films such as *Prevenge* (2016, dir. Alice Lowe) or *Baby Ruby* (2022, dir. Bess Wohl) of pre/postnatal depression or psychosis. We also see perversions of this reminder of the life/death/decay cycle and maternal instinct in two recent pregnancy horrors, notably also directed by women, *Titane* (2021, dir. Julia Ducournau) and *The Substance* (2024, dir. Coralie Fargeat). As Garland-Thompson writes, “both women and the Disabled have been imagined as medically abnormal—as the quintessential sick ones. Sickness is gendered feminine” (2002: 10).



Nola animalistically licks the amniotic sac of her child

The Parasitic Child

This idea of feminine sickness and its associated weakness aligns the woman and mother with the monster in classic horror. These pregnancy horror films also make the mother a host for her parasitic child as it feeds off her or, in the case of Margaret and Nola, benefits from her instinctual kindness while she experiences disabling physical effects and trauma. The child and mother are as corruptible as each other, a misogynistic concept underpinning many male-directed horror films and tied to the

above-mentioned fears around the perceived animality of motherhood, where the father can remain detached and his body unchanged but is terrified by the reality of the mutable, animal, leaky body: be it a woman's, child's, or Disabled persons. Smith notes that the threat to eugenic reproduction posed by the "women's attraction or vulnerability to the monster" is a central theme in the classic horror genre, and that the biggest threat to eugenicists of the twentieth century was reproduction between the eugenic female and the "physiologically dysgenic" male, which was heavily racialised, who the movie monster embodies (2012: pp.37-39). Through dysgenic reproduction with a monster, with Satan, or - as for Nola's parthenogenesis - with the self, these women experience disabling effects. While this mirrors fears in the current political climate with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the Trump administration, the use of disability to express fears around a lack of reproductive rights reinforces abledness as the right way to be. In these alignments with sickness and disability, the disabling effects of medical institutions on women are also demonised; however, reliance on metaphor has harmful repercussions. For example, baldness or very short hair aligns these women with sickness but also shows them to be, in a sense, rejecting normative femininity. Characters such as Rosemary in *Rosemary's Baby* and then Terry in *Apartment 7a* lose or cut off their hair when pregnant, visually reinforcing the cancer metaphor and parallel, and conceptually reinforcing this as men. such as Rosemary's shocked husband, find them less attractive, and they become ostracised. A similar trend can be seen in films such as *Titane* (2021, Julia Ducournau), where shaving her head also reveals a large scar from an earlier accident, inferred to be the cause or originary moment of the main character's deviant sexuality, psychopathology, and subsequent monstrous pregnancy. Hair loss directly aligns these pregnancies with the disabling effects of chronic illnesses or diseases such as cancer, which, as Sontag (1978) notes, is used to denote a whole host of metaphors, including a sense of militant invasion. In being invaded, the effects on these women are also reminiscent of parasitism, and pregnancy is presented as disabling, which only justifies the medicalisation and control of reproduction.

Disabled People being “parasites” on their carers (often mothers) or communities and countries more widely is enough of a recurrent metaphor, particularly in the UK, that a chair of a United Nations committee in 2017 spoke out against this language (John Pring, 2017). Still, it has continued to today, with a right-wing broadcaster being criticised in 2024 for calling young Disabled People “parasites” (Pring, 2024), rhetoric fuelling the UK’s 2025 cuts on disability benefits (DWP on gov.uk, 2025). In the horror movie, the Disabled Person - adult or child - parasitises the woman, whether a mother or not, due to their inherent alignment as more animal (and thus ostracisation), the woman's supposed instinctual pity for the childlike monster, and therefore her weakness, also expressed through metaphors of disability. This is seen in women’s susceptibility to Dracula or in *Nosferatu* (1922, 2025), the girls fondness of the monster in *Frankenstein*, the final girl Kris (Andrea Pavlovic) returning Johnny’s mothers locket in *In a Violent Nature*, or Heather’s (Alexandra Daddario) “adoption” of her Disabled cousin, Leatherface (Dan Yaeger), in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 3D*, as well as in the above-mentioned examples of the woman protecting her brood (Nola) or failing to kill her monstrous child (Rosemary and Margaret). In allowing these women to reproduce, even normatively, the threat of disability and monstrosity is continued through the children (Candy, Damien, Rosemary’s baby) or the mother herself (Margaret, Heather).

These depictions of women protecting the monstrous child, either satanic or Disabled like Leatherface or Johnny, as well as the metaphors of such monstrous pregnancies disabling the mother and resulting in Disabled children, demonise Disabled Peoples need for care and upholds eugenicist views that, as less/non “productive” members of society, this care is parasitism on the family or wider community. In her erudite analysis of *The Brood*, Sarah Manley (2024: pg18) calls for a rejection of the sexist, eugenicist notion that women are “inherently violent, Mad, and Disabled” and “womanhood as Disabled and motherhood as disabling” and to instead understand Nola as the embodiment of a

complicated request for care to heal intergenerational trauma which, through the disgust and manipulation of the male characters, is denied. This neglect of care and community is disabling for Nola and for mothers more widely, as noted by Nisha (2020: pp. 26-27) in relation to modern medicine. Through a more critical reading than Manley's, we can see how these pregnancy horror movies recreate the medicalised gaze, which contributes to the demonisation of women and Disabled People, and deepen fears of illness and disability through metaphors aligning it with sickness and cancer, and thus the benefits of an intersectional/feminist perspective on horror. To this end, Creed's concept of the Monstrous-Feminine offers an excellent framework for approaching women in horror, but an understanding of disability studies enhances its use to critique the social implications of these representations and to understand the twofold demonisation at play here more fully.

3. Hillbillies, Cannibals, and Cripples: Backwoods Horror and Backwards Representation

Hillbilly Horror

Backwoods horror is a little-cited but widely recognisable subgenre of horror compared to other subgenres such as found footage, rape-revenge, and certainly the slasher film. Although in her seminal work on gender in horror, 'Men, Women, and Chainsaws' (1992), Carol Clover mentions country/city tensions, she does not link it to disability and its critical study largely stagnated aside from in analyses of the Southern Gothic genre, which rarely consider disability (see Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow, 2016). The fullest analysis of the subgenre comes from Bernice M. Murphy in her 2013 work 'The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture', where the undeniable link to eugenics and disability is given a few pages in her useful list of genre tropes, many of which were parodied in *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011, dir. Drew Goddard) and *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* (2010, Eli Craig), frequently discussed in analysis of the genre, but the way disability is entrenched in this subgenre begs further research, and has many parallels with the 'Adult Child' killer in Chapter One. The backwoods horror film, also frequently called hillbilly horror or hicksploitation, focuses on, in the words of Christian Knöppler, "modern, urban Americans who find themselves trapped in remote, rural parts of the country and are subsequently abused, murdered and possibly eaten by the savage locals" (2017: pg185). The savage locals, often referred to as hillbillies or mountain men, are, of course, the key identifying feature of the subgenre, and often their key identifying feature is disability through facial or limb difference and being non-verbal. As the 'monsters' of the narrative, these rural locals are characterised by their taboo behaviour, often incest and/or cannibalism, and, crucially, their appearance and behaviour being indicative of disability. It is in these characterisations that we most clearly see the eugenic holdover in our modern conceptions of what constitutes 'monstrosity': disfigurement, disablement, limps, and a lack of speech are as monstrous in these narratives as cannibalism and murder. This chapter will develop the analysis of the Adult Child and Monstrous Mother as underpinned by disability from the

previous two chapters and apply it to the backwoods horror subgenre to illustrate these figures' ubiquity in horror from the 1970s to the present day, updating where previous analyses such as Smith's (2012) and Browning's (2015) have left off to illustrate the continued relevance of this trope. As with the recent remakes and reboots of the films explored in Chapters One and Two, the older films this chapter will focus on retain their relevance and continue to heavily influence films within the subgenre and across horror as a whole, rehashing ableist tropes rooted in eugenics that plagued rural North America through the 20th century, with the newer examples from the 2000's to today evidencing this impact.

Origins

The film often credited with kickstarting the genre, *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964, dir. Herschell Gordon Lewis) created many of the key tropes of backwoods horror: a group of young, white, healthy kids from the Northern States driving through the South, in this instance, Georgia, and being picked off gruesomely by the locals. *Two Thousand Maniacs!* Americanises the folk-horror tale common in Britain at the time, and parallels can easily be drawn to *The Wicker Man* (1974, dir. Robin Hardy) and numerous later films, such as *Midsommar* (2019, dir. Ari Aster), with the key distinction from much backwoods horror being the ritual nature of the murders.⁸ Action-thriller *Deliverance* (1972) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) are the earliest examples of pure, American backwoods horror, and popularised the genre and its tropes. While the former is not strictly a horror film, it is certainly horrific and has shaped the genre so much that it warrants acknowledgement in any discussion of backwoods horror; "might I remind you of a little film called *Deliverance*?" an ill-fated teen shouts in *Wrong Turn* (2003). The Appalachian setting of *Deliverance* alone has carried with it associations and tropes separate from, say, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, with *Deliverance*'s horrific 'mountain men' paving

⁸ This format is notably popular across the globe, and in particular further study on backwoods and folk horror in colonial countries such as the USA, Australia, Canada, and Central and South America would be rich due to increasing numbers of films tackling colonial narratives by using native knowledge and religious practices as both threat and cure to the plight of the colonisers and those who align with them. See, for example, Guatemalan horror *La Llorna* (2019, dir. Enrique Monteverde), Mexican-Peruvian folk horror *Huesera: The Bone Woman* (2022, Michelle Garza Cervera), or Lao horror *Dearest Sister* (2016, Mattie Do).

the way for many of horror's favourite villains, from One Eye (Ted Clark), Saw-Tooth (Garry Robbins), and Three-finger (Julian Richings) from the franchise *Wrong Turn* (2003-2021) to Jason Vorhees stalking teens through a forested landscape in *Friday the 13th*, and disability has been central to each of these characters into the era of the post-millennial backwoods horror (see Christian Knöppler, 2017). Besides the genre, the key distinction between *Deliverance* and the other films discussed in this chapter is also its all-adult-male cast in contrast to the usual younger, mixed gender cast- usually two couples and one single woman, the final girl (see Carol Clover, 1992)- and the film follows as the city men hunt and are hunted by locals as they go for a canoeing trip on a soon to be dammed river.

Only a couple of years later, the release of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 1974 marked the beginning of the genre proper and was hailed as the start of modern horror and slasher films. This film begins and ends with disability as spectacle: a group of teens, headed by Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns) and her brother Franklin (Paul A. Partain), a wheelchair user, venture into rural Texas amid reports of grave-robbing to check on their old family home. As they trespass on another property, members of the (exceptionally American-named) Sawyer family, most notably chainsaw-wielding, fan favourite Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen), pick them off gruesomely, of course, starting with Franklin.⁹ Director Wes Craven's ode to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, inspired by the Scottish legend of Sawney Bean (Zachary Paul, 2017 for Bloody Disgusting), *The Hills Have Eyes* followed in 1977, this time bringing the familiar story to the deep deserts of California, where the clash between a suburban family and a family of rural, inbred cannibals turns deadly. This chapter will then jump forward to 2003 with *Wrong Turn*, where a group of college students and rugged medical student Chris Flynn (Desmond Harrington) are hunted down and butchered by the disfigured mountain men One Eye, Saw-

⁹ We only learn the family name of Sawyer in the sequels of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, although the name is well known amongst horror fans.

Tooth, and Three-finger in the wilderness of West Virginia. The second instalment, which will be referenced in this analysis, reveals the wider family including a mutant baby, extending the threat of the deviant, Disabled, families seen in each of these films; as Finn Ballard notes, “Both *Wrong Turn* and *The Hills Have Eyes* make it apparent that antagonists are seeking female victims with whom to breed, in a bid to further their increasingly -degenerate line” (2008: pg25) making clear the eugenic and generational threat of the Disabled characters in the films. These films, which make up the bulk of this chapter's focus, are all notable due to their influence on the horror genre as a whole, as well as each birthing its own deviant offspring in the forms of reboots, remakes, and sequels, as well as satires, as mentioned at the start of this chapter. In referencing the continuation of the tropes and character types identified in these franchises into the 2020s, the importance of deconstructing the eugenic, ableist legacy of these characters is as crucial as understanding the gender and race dynamics at play.

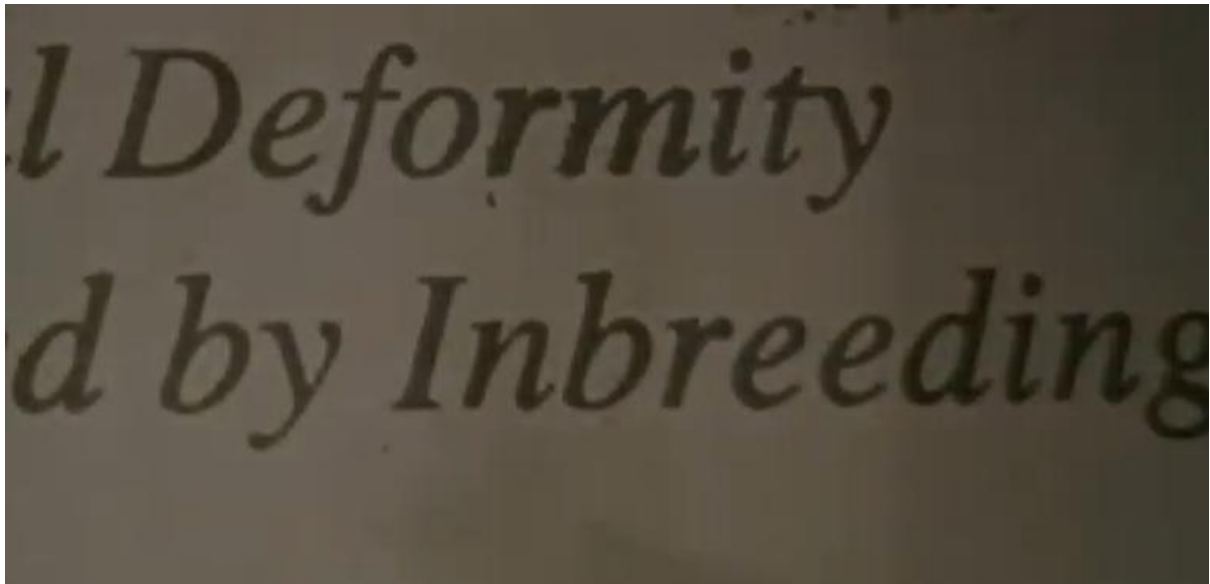
Politicising the Natural

William Cronon argued in 1995 that.

“In the wilderness, the boundaries between human and nonhuman, between natural and supernatural, have always seemed less certain than elsewhere” (Cronon quoted by Murphy, 2013: pg2)

As becomes clear in analysing the intersections of disability, monstrosity, rurality, and animality, binaries such as this are central to understanding the problematic representations of Disabled characters in the genre and, as articulated by Chivers and Markotic (2010), film more widely. Disability as a threatening blend of the human and nonhuman- be that animal, supernatural, or dead- has a traceable history in ancient texts through to the modern era, as outlined by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (2020, pp.1-29). A clear example may be in the early-modern to modern, Western ‘freak shows’, which showcased “wolf-men”, the Elephant Man (Joseph Merrick), Leopard Boys, Bear Women, Tripod Boys and “Savages” (Nadja Durbach, 2010: pp.28-32), all of whom were either Disabled/disfigured

or BIPOC showcased as a hybrid of animal and human, or sometimes object and human.¹⁰ This, of course, links with Julia Kristeva's definition of abjection as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect border, positions, rules" (1980: pg4) associated with "what is jettisoned from the 'symbolic system' [...] what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based" (*ibid*: 65).



"Deformity by inbreeding" fills the screen during Wrong Turn's opening montage, linking the two with the crimes the rest of the montage depicts

In *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Deliverance*, and *Wrong Turn*, the villains' names are known only from the film credits and later films. It is interesting to note that these Disabled villains are rarely named in the films and rarely speak, instead lurking as an unnamed threat, a trend broken in *The Hills Have Eyes* (although these characters' names are 'inhuman' objects and planets, and their speech is erratic and slurred). This is just one symbol of these characters lurking somewhere outside the usual "social rationality" or aggregate referenced by Kristeva (*ibid*) in a more literal way. Their bodies and behaviour break every rule of humanity, and the characters are referred to by their appearance as much

¹⁰ This link was depicted interestingly in Tod Browning's infamous pre-code horror *Freaks* (1932), showing early horrors origins alongside the freak show, which could be traced back further to cinemas place alongside circus acts and with vaudeville.

as by their actions; “mountain men”, “cannibals”, “Leatherface”, “Three-finger”, “the Hitchhiker”, “mutants”, or simply as an “animal” which is repeated in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* (2006, dir. Jonathan Liebesman). This is another area in which these characters' actions and appearance are correlated, as they are known only by their appearance or actions rather than by their names, putting both on equal footing as Othering and therefore as notable characteristics. It is also a sign of them living outside the law, outside society, as how can someone with no name be held appropriately accountable or be seen to be obeying the social contract? It is closer to how we might refer to animals: the wolves are hunting, the pack descend, the sheep are scared, and the mutants attack Brenda (Susan Lanier, *The Hills Have Eyes*). Indeed, we often see from the camera these characters more aligned with animals than humans, for example in shaky, handheld shots from within the trees seen in both *Wrong Turn* and *Deliverance* where the viewer stalks the victims from the animalistic viewpoint of the antagonist, often from what seems to be a low, crouching position, what we might imagine the viewpoint of a wolf or tiger stalking prey to be, hidden in the landscape. These references to animals reinforce the earlier arguments in this thesis that aligning Disabled People with nature is done to similar ends as aligning women with nature, thereby reinforcing their mutual oppression (see Warren, 1997; Jacobs, 2022). These scenes are also reminiscent of the famous opening scene from *Halloween*, but while Michael Myers (Will Sandin) stalks from the lower position of a child, obscured through a mask and moving through a home, in these films, the point of view is aligned more with the landscape itself than with a human. As Torsha R. Taylor explains,

“This landscape aids evil locals and creatures, making clear the thematic significance of (un)familiarity with the land. Many rural horror films feature shots revealing that the travellers are being observed, imbuing even the wilderness with a panoptic quality” (Taylor in C. Bloom, 2020: pg166).

The mountain men or mutant characters are so closely aligned with the wilderness that they transgress the imagined boundary between civilisation and the wild, between the environment of humans and animals, as do the characters' behaviour and appearance, constructing their disabilities as a product of such transgressions, much like the “Wolf Men” of 20th-century freak shows.

Judith Butler writes that the word abjection.

“in Latin literally means to cast off, away, or out, and, hence, presupposes and produces a domain of agency from which it is differentiated [...] the notion of abjection designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality” (Butler, 1993: pg243, quoted in Calvin Thomas, 2008: xiii).

Perhaps, then, in ‘containing’ rather than ‘eliminating’ the threat within these movies suggests the casting off, or dismissing and ignoring, of a portent, given the Latin root of the word ‘monster’ as a divine warning/portent. For example, the complicity of the local communities in the actions of the murderous families in the wilderness only allows the threat to continue, out of sight, as in *Wrong Turn* and *The Hills Have Eyes*, and it will come to a head. This narrative encourages the eugenic thread within these films to stamp out the threat, for example, at the end of *Wrong Turn 2*, where the survival of Three Finger and his mutant nephew is ensured. The famously open-ended conclusions of these films, and others in adjacent genres, suggest the threat continues until the aberrant family is either dead or sterilised, as in the case of “feeble-minded” families being castrated or sectioned under the 1924 Commonwealth of Virginia law (Murphy, 2013: pg144). Andrew Tudor frames these open-ended films as examples of postmodern horror, which he also terms paranoid horror, where the monstrous does - or has the potential to - define normalcy (Tudor in Smith, 2013: pg24). With the Disabled body being used in these films to construct abledness as normal in comparison, this is a loaded trope. The framing of the survivors of each family at the end of these films supports this narrative and continued eugenic threat, for example, Leatherface wielding his phallic chainsaw, frustrated but still alive (and potentially not technically in violation of the law given Texas trespassing laws), and as Torsha R. Taylor writes “he is visually constructed as a dominant figure of the landscape; Sally’s continued shrieking as she observes him reminds the audience that he remains part of this place” (Taylor in Bloom, 2020: pg167). Indeed, in reference to *Texas Chainsaw*’s final scene, Christian Knöppler writes that the “lack of closure and general denial of narrative conventions play a significant part in its disturbing effect” (2017: pg184). In a different finale, the finale shot of the *Wrong Turn* remake shows

the ‘final girl’, now pregnant with a member of the mountain men's child, walking triumphantly towards the camera, having just murdered the rest of the rural family, holding hands with a young girl (notably non-verbal) she met while captive. This suggests the corruption of the city woman, now that she is pregnant and continuing the deviant family line and thus contaminated in a sense. To further demonise this, she is shown as being violent towards her captors, and she maintains a calm demeanour as she walks away from committing a brutal- if justified- murder, showing she has become more like her captors in her ability to kill, as has the young child she walks with. As Bernice M. Murphy summarises,

“the implications are clear: when you leave ‘civilisation’ you will inevitably become less civilised, often as a result of a process of adaptation and transformation that turns you into something partially or wholly monstrous” (2013: 11).

So, whether by biology or contamination, the survivor walks away changed and now a threat in herself.



Leatherface twirls and revs his chainsaw in frustration

According to Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, contemporary theorists tend to agree that.

“Monstrosity is a socially constructed category reflecting culturally specific anxieties and desires, and often deployed—wittingly or not—to achieve particular sociopolitical objectives” (2020: page 25).

Weinstock traces the modern theorisation of monstrosity to Michel Foucault, who emphasised that, rather than being universal and immutable, understandings of normalcy and deviancy are context-dependent and mutable; the result is that “what one culture construes as monstrous aberration could be considered normal by another” (*ibid*). This is now much more widely recognised in the context of, for example, race, gender, sexuality, or even hair colour such as redheads or children with albinism, the meanings of which and their relations to the concept of monstrosity all vary according to time and culture (again evidenced by the Freak show) than perhaps disability, which outside of disability spaces is often constructed as inherently negative, rather than a neutral or even positive aspect of being human. Disability is neutral, it is natural, and it does not, as both modern pop cultural depictions and Renaissance fears of monstrous births might lead one to think, signify behavioural aberrance, or make one less human and closer to inhuman, looking at the binaries imposed by such depictions for the sake of evoking horror or abjection. Given eugenics’ impact on cinema, taking at face value the

“Eugenic interpretations of individual bodily difference as proof of internal, genetic aberrations [...] assumed that presumably normal members of the public naturally react negatively - with shuddering and repugnance- to visible deformities and disabilities. Such reactions ostensibly confirm such traits as self-evidently ‘bad’ and register the likely physiological harm such deviance may cause the nation” (Angela M. Smith, 2012: pg2).

This quote illustrates the harmful cycle of depictions of Disabled villains: as they are presented to us as negative, we react negatively, and this then confirms the conception that they are, somehow, inherently negative. For example, the montage in the opening credits to *Wrong Turn* pans across clipouts from newspapers and medical journals discussing deformities, incest, and mountain men, along with slow, suggestive pans of dead young women in tight, white tank tops. This montage clearly links the three in the mind of the viewer: incest = disability = evil, in any order of the three, and thus tells the viewer that the disfigurement and disability are inherently monstrous. Indeed, even images of children with facial disfigurements are juxtaposed with shots of bloody knives and missing children’s

posters, implying that the disfigured child murdered the able-bodied, ‘eugenic’ child, providing no reason other than their implied monstrosity due to their appearance. The fact that the introduction focuses again on inbreeding, deformity, and children (both missing able-bodied children and Disabled/disfigured children) immediately positions the viewer with the eugenic stance that these traits are dangerous and should be stamped out for fear of harming the “normal” child who represents an ideal, eugenic future. In the context of eugenics, McDaniel argues that

“deviance refers to beliefs, behaviours, or perceived bodily conditions that violate a cultural norm and bring about a social reaction to control or confine such beliefs, behaviours, or conditions” (2016: 427).

and disfigurement and disability are being linked to such deviance from the first moments of this film.



A child with a cleft lip and other facial differences from Wrong Turn's opening montage

Mountain Mama

In 1924, the Commonwealth of Virginia passed a law which was upheld by the Supreme Court ensuring that those perceived to be “genetically defective” and “feebleminded” could be forcibly sterilised, and as a result, over 50,000 Americans “whose sole crime was to have, or be claimed to

have, an intellectual impairment- or who were deemed to have significant ‘moral’ or ‘hereditary’ failings” were abducted into asylums and sterilised throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Murphy, 2013: 144). As Edwin Black explains,

“No one was quite sure how feeble-minded was defined. No matter. The country authorities were certain that the hill folk swept up in their raids were indeed mentally- and genetically-defective. As such, they would not be permitted to breed more of their kind.” (Edwin Black, 2003, quoted in Murphy, 2013: 144).

This resulted in a modern witch hunt, where instead of preventing women from lying with the devil and producing monstrous children, the moral conviction was to prevent monstrous births by Disabled People (sometimes explained with reference to the devil), or simply those deemed deviant and defective. As discussed in the introduction, this eugenic fervour was an important thread in the tapestry of influences in early horror cinema, from the prevention of contaminating eugenic women in *Dracula* to the threat of Frankenstein’s monster’s own hideous progeny in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935, dir. James Whale). But here we see how it specifically was implemented to stamp out “white trash”, mixed-race communities, and the rural poor generally in the South and Appalachian regions in the USA, through forced sterilisation in Virginia. This law was based on studies on “mountain people” and “bush men” in the state of Virginia, and the rural poor, White and Black, were targeted based on claims of intellectual disability or deviance, inevitably linking the two. Notably, Disabled men are often associated with sexual violence in the genre, for example in *Straw Dogs*, *I Spit on Your Grave*, or *Deliverance*, cementing their threat if left un-castrated’ (for example, Leatherface symbolically isn’t as he wields his chainsaw at the end of the film), likening the rural poor and Disabled to poor breeding stock in animals (Murphy, 2013: pg159) as seen in the pregnancy horror in the previous chapter. This also links to the persistent trope of incest in these films, as Torsha R. Taylor argues

“physical deformities gain further emphasis in more recent hillbilly characters, further hearkening myths of widespread incest in rural areas. The *Wrong Turn* franchise (2003–present) features extremely deformed West Virginians as its principal villains. [...] these characters are even given names that suggest deformity [...] The 2006 remake of *The Hills Have Eyes* visually reinvents Pluto to emphasise the effects of inbreeding” (Tosha R Taylor, 2020: pg170).

While generations of inbreeding do cause disfigurement and disability, they are not necessarily linked, and disability and facial or limb differences can arise due to numerous factors with no link to such a taboo as incest. For example, Carol Clover argued the sickly appearance of many characters in backwoods horror films to be due to “the material expression of family wrongness (inbreeding being one obvious form of wrongness)” (Clover in Murphy, 2013: pg158), while Murphy points out the historic reality that the economic deprivation in the South and inaccessibility of doctors for the rural poor would have impacted their health and appearance, indeed often resulting in facial scarring (*ibid*), an argument echoed by Tosha R Taylor (2020: pg171). Regardless of the cause, the main point of interest for this analysis is the linking of such characteristics with deviance and monstrosity, and as Clover also argues

“What is threatening about these little incivilities is the larger incivility of which they are surface symptoms. In horror, the man who does not take care of his teeth is obviously a man who can, and by the end of the movie will, kill within his kin, commit incest, and/or eat human flesh...” (Clover in Murphy, 2013: pg163).

Analysing the families featured in these films reveals much about such characterisations, for example of the Sawyer family in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* Knöppler writes; “Their deviance from normality is fairly visible”, describing that the members of the family have “grotesque bodies to varying degrees [...] and their physical and mental disabilities are basically cast as monstrous.” (2017, pg191). Knöppler moves quickly on from this point, but each family member being Disabled warrants further analysis. The first member we meet, ‘the hitchhiker’ (Edwin Neal), has a large birthmark on his face, serving as his immediate visual signifier of aberrance, and he behaves excitedly and erratically, indicative of a neurodevelopmental disorder and neurodivergence. Similarly, the famous Leatherface is seemingly non-verbal, only grunting (again linking him to the animals he butchers for work, signalling the transgression of the boundary between human and animal) and exhibiting a clumsy gait. Leatherface was based on Tobe Hooper’s previous work in an institution for autistic children,

whom Gunnar Hansen was told to emulate, according to the actor in an interview given for a documentary on making the film (2000, dir. David Gregory). The grandfather (John Dugan) is shown to be impossibly old, and as such is a wheelchair user and similarly non-verbal, and lacking motor control and strength. Only the father (Jim Siedow) passes as abled and thus, following hierarchical eugenicist logic, commands the rest of the family as the patriarch, yelling at the feminised Leatherface in particular to care for his grandfather and prepare the meal, aligning the most overtly “monstrous”, animalised, and Disabled character with the feminine (as seen in Leatherfaces make up and apron). Often in the genre, we also see a terrifying (usually overweight or extremely broad and tall) matriarch, who is often depicted as the most evil, perhaps as she goes against all that is feminine in being violent and commanding, and which interestingly links to Barbara Creed's conception of the Monstrous-Feminine, for example, Ma (Ashlea Earl) in *Wrong Turn 2: Dead End* or Big Mama (Cordy Clark) in *The Hills Have Eyes*.



The cannibalistic 'Big Mama' from The Hills Have Eyes

Hags and Hillbillies

For a more metaphorical example, the movie *Pumpkinhead* (1989, dir. Stan Winston) features a familiar plotline: six college-aged men and women enter remote Appalachia, and at the transitional location of a small grocery store (rather than the usual gas station), they witness the stereotypical locals

(superstitious, covered in dirt, and missing teeth). Here, they commit their wrong, which drives the plot, accidentally mortally wounding a young boy named Billy (Matthew Hurley). Billy's father, Harley (Lance Henriksen), seeks out an elderly witch (not very subtly) named Haggis (Florence Schauffler) in the nearby mountainous area, another familiar trope that uses disability as an indicator of evil. Here, they raise from the dead the humanoid monster Pumpkinhead (Tom Woodruff Jr.), who will not return to his slumber until his mission is complete. In an analysis of zombies as material metaphor- calling attention to the material of film itself - for disability, McDaniel (2016) offers a valuable methodology for examining the supernatural as disability allegory and the issues this presents as "These common metaphors of disability reinforce that the only 'real' or viable human experience - or at least the most suitable one - is based on an identifiably 'normal' body" (*ibid*: 425). Similarly, Martha Stoddard Holmes (2018, pp.372-387) examines Frankenstein explicitly through the lens of the disability metaphor and relates the monster's experiences to those of Disabled People navigating society. With these, as well as the aforementioned history of monsterising disability in teratology as examined by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (2020), in mind, we can see that a monster is never just a monster but a production and embodiment of cultural anxieties. In the context of a subgenre with such a history with disability, the monster of Pumpkinhead cannot be read in isolation from disability. As later revealed, much like the Frankenstein monster itself, Pumpkinhead is reanimated from the body of the last person to call upon it to enact revenge. Pumpkinhead is monstrous, and comparisons could be drawn to the supernatural powers of Jason Vorhees, or to traits of connective tissue disorders such as Marfan Syndrome, which are frequently depicted in horror through long limbs and thin physique (Doug Jones and Javier Botet both having the condition and notably making careers playing monsters in the genre). The disability metaphor is undoubtedly present in the central theme of lineage, as Harley's face distorts and merges with Pumpkinhead's. However, it is equally interesting to mention the significance of the older woman, Haggis, who resides outside of the already remote Appalachian community.



Haggis carries the now emaciated body- or zombie- of Harley to Pumpkinhead's resting place.

Haggis, unlike Harley, knows the consequences of awakening the monster, but does so anyway, knowing how many lives will be lost through a ritual involving blood from Hurley and his son. Disability and age are central to the characterisation of such witch/hag figures. While Haggis is a white or white-passing woman in the film, the racial implications which underscore backwoods horror are essential to consider alongside the issue of disability and the witch. The witch is constructed as a threat to the community, eugenically and literally being blamed for crop failures, mysterious deaths, and any number of unfortunate events. She is represented as disrupting or being outside the symbolic order (Creed, 1993: pg76), as reflected in Haggis' remote cabin. However, the witch is also constructed, particularly in this region, colonially, used to demonise indigenous religious practices in North America and hybrid practices which are born out of diasporic communities. Appalachian regions were noted and stigmatised for their mixed-race communities, which resulted in groups known as "Melungeons" who were targeted by eugenicists for sterilisation, and referred to mixed-race (often

white-passing) people who usually had white settler, African, Jewish, and Native American heritage (see Wayne Winkler, 2004). In areas affected by colonialism, and tied to the African Slave Trade, hybrid religions often appear, such as *Brujeria* or *Santeria* in Mexico and other Latin American countries, and in rural Appalachia. The witch, or any practitioner of stigmatised indigenous or hybrid practice, is, like the Disabled Person or Monstrous-Feminine, more widely portrayed as closer to nature, almost animalistic.

While in many indigenous religions and practices across the world, this is a positive and central to belief systems, in the USA, as we have seen (see Warren, 1997), alignment with nature and the animal is a negative. It echoes eugenicist Social Darwinism, reinforced by Haggis' age, making her more unsettling and abject. It aligns her with the life/death/decay cycle (Creed, 1993) in a way different from that of the mothers in the previous chapter. Older adults, women especially, are a staple of horror, and their impaired bodies are used for shock as another example of the Disabled and mutable body being used for horror. In the case of the witch, the racial connotations can be especially harmful. As Torsha R. Taylor notes, "critics have pointed out that rurality has not received the same attention as race, gender, or sexuality in wider studies of the genre" (2020: pg163). Through this chapter, the centrality of disability to the genre and to rurality has been evidenced by drawing further on the understandings of the Monstrous-Feminine and Adult Child. Through backwoods horror, these factors come together to demonise families outside the symbolic order. It is also clear that it is impossible to separate the analysis of disability or gender in the genre without acknowledging the ways race underpins eugenics, and its application in Appalachia through sterilisation. Such racist and ableist actions as enacted by the Supreme Court in 1924 have left ongoing trauma in these regions and cultural representations of disability, and the backwoods horror subgenre provides a particularly rich body of films for a case study of the tropes given, as Bernice M. Murphy explains, "The presence of some kind of physical

deformity amongst the locals is a given in the backwoods horror movie” and that this genre reveals the centrality of eugenics to this trope (2013: pg158).

Conclusion

When this thesis was at the proposal stage, eugenicist language pervaded social media and the news, as there were calls to return to normal after the pandemic, which has still not ended. As law Professor Laura I Appleman highlighted, the pandemic revealed that

“though nominally discredited, eugenic thinking continues to guide our twenty-first century incarceration policies and our discriminatory treatment of detained, Disabled, and neglected populations [...] including children in foster care and the cognitively and developmentally Disabled” (2021: pg329).

This includes the elderly and Disabled who were denied ventilators when they were in short supply in the US (*ibid*), but also the physically Disabled and chronically ill populations who are disregarded in calls for returns to normalcy and the abandonment of masking. For Disabled People, their families, and carers, COVID continues to pose a disproportionate risk. Calls to return to normal at best, isolate Disabled People and, at worst, accept their deaths as a necessary sacrifice. As mentioned in Chapter Two, recent cuts of £5 billion to disability benefits in the UK are threatening the lives and health of many Disabled People (John Campbell and Finn Purdy, BBC, 2025), especially while the NHS continues to be under strain due to austerity, which disproportionately affects Disabled People (see Frances Ryan, 2019). Meanwhile, the language used in the media and by politicians paints Disabled People as parasitic and a burden on the state and NHS for claiming benefits and using healthcare, particularly young Disabled People (Rachel Reeves, Spring Statement, quoted by Ruby Flanagan, 2025). In the USA, Project 2025 is making care and healthcare harder for Disabled People by suggesting limits to Medicaid, a lifeline for American Disabled People, and dismantling federal protections afforded by the Americans with Disabilities Act (Ian C. Langtree, 2024) in the name of “Making America Great Again” and protecting the family - that is, the white, eugenic, nuclear family.

In moving from analysis of the child to the mother and finishing with a case study on the deviant family in backwoods horror, this thesis has interrogated the centrality of disability as a metaphor for the downfall of the family - and a society or nation at large - in horror. By selecting some of the most influential horror films since the 1960s, and selecting contemporary releases which continue the problematic use of disability in the genre, this work endeavours to illustrate just how entrenched and prevalent disability as a trope of horror is to this day, and to reveal the eugenicist thinking underpinning these depictions which may not seem as harmful to horror filmmakers, scholars, and fans as they are. By applying and developing analyses of disability in film for the twenty-first century, this thesis aims to update and expand existing literature on the topic to reflect the contemporary moment and to consider the ongoing impact of these representations. A key concern of disability studies should be to interrogate the ways abledness is normalised (see McDaniel, 2016: pg423), and to understand this. The ways horror can perpetuate ableist stereotypes require an intersectional analysis. This thesis interrogated the medical gaze's role in constructing horror tropes and disability in opposition to normalcy, and foregrounded women in the genre where possible. Given that most studies focus on the abundant Disabled male villain, analysing disabled women and children in the genre is a fruitful intervention in the field (which the second chapter in this thesis begins). Building on this intersectional approach to disability in horror, future research should endeavour to interrogate the use of disability metaphor alongside the implications of the representations of race, sexuality, and indigeneity in the genre.

The stereotypes surrounding learning disability, neurodivergence, and facial difference are key to the horror villains we know today, and the reaffirmed notion of deviant families and lineages. Beginning this thesis by expanding on John Edgar Browning's theory of the "Adult Child" killer trope (2015) allows us to consider these most overt depictions of disability in the genre, which provide context and a framework to expand on throughout the rest of the analysis. This also moves from a tendency

traceable in past literature to foreground physical and mobility disability in cultural analyses, reflecting physical disabilities' privileged position over learning disabilities within hierarchical structures which are formed in various spaces (largely through culture). The Adult Child killer, most known in slashers, is often characterised by their awkward gait, lack of facial expressions or speech, facial differences, and crucially, their childlike behaviour. Through this trope, we can see the misunderstandings of Disabled People as “stunted” at a point in their development, demonstrated through what Browning terms the originary moment- a traumatic event which has left the physically adult killer mentally “trapped” at the age he was at the time of the event. This trope reveals the centrality of disability to characterise villains, as well as the significant role that notions of proper temporalities and notions of progress play in the demonisation of Disabled People. This is a recurring theme throughout this thesis, which would provide fertile ground for further research on the Disabled child and learning disability in culture. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen insightfully puts it, “monsters are our children” since they

“ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, and our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them.” (Jeffery Jerome Cohen quoted by Bohlman and Moreland, 2018: pg 18)

Why, indeed, have we created these monsters, the Adult Child killer, and recreated them repeatedly, for example, in 2024's Johnny from *In a Violent Nature*? And, more importantly, why have they been made to be Disabled? Fundamentally, in line with Kristeva's (1982) articulation of abjection, the Disabled body is depicted as monstrous so that we can define what is not monstrous, and assumed abled viewers can abject the body or psychology which is different from their own and its reminders of the mutability and temporary nature of abledness. After all, disability has “been attributed to all ‘deviant’ biologies as a discrediting feature, while also serving as the material marker of inferiority itself” (Mitchell and Snyder, 2014: pg3), and the role of the monster is to be inferior to the human. This is why, drawing on ecofeminist arguments outlined by Karen J. Warren, this thesis has reiterated

at several points the alignment between Disabled People and other marginalised groups - including women, children, and BIPOC - with nature and the animal.

Where the Adult Child often longs for his mother, who is usually also “monstrous” (most famously Jason and Mrs Vorhees in the *Friday the 13th* franchise), Chapter Two develops Barbara Creed’s ‘The Monstrous-Feminine’ (1992) and, in particular, the figure of the abject mother to read disability into the subgenre of pregnancy horror, a subgenre which encapsulates horror’s preoccupation with medicine. This genre’s recent proliferation with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2024 and the mistrust of medical institutions explicit in the films analysed shows the relevance of considering politics of care alongside the horror genre and its depictions of Disabled People, including mothers and infants (see Manley, 2021). However, alongside distrust of medical institutions, this chapter posits that such films demonstrate the “medicalised gaze” in their depictions of monstrous births and mothers, as developed by Zairu Nisha (2022) from Michel Foucault’s ideas in ‘The Birth of the Clinic’ (1973). In upholding this medicalised gaze and repeatedly depicting explicitly Disabled and disfigured children, and either explicitly or implicitly depicting disabling effects on the mother, this genre contributes to the stigmatisation of, in particular, Disabled and Mad women and children, resting on the use of sickness and disability as a metaphor (drawing from Sontag, 1978, and Mitchell and Snyder, 2000) and the use of disability for shock/abject horror. As explored throughout Chapter Two, the women in these narratives are aligned with the psychoanalytic concept of the archaic mother outlined in Barbara Creed’s *Monstrous-Feminine* (1993). The women’s reproductive function is a reminder - much like leaky and changing bodies - of the life/death/decay cycle, which Kristeva (1982) argues as a key harbinger of abject horror. While ecofeminists such as Karen J. Warren (1997) less often root their arguments explicitly in psychoanalysis, this notion of the archaic mother blends well with the idea of the demonisation of nature and animality which was mentioned in Chapter One, and expanded upon in Chapter Two, illustrating how aligning women and Disabled People with nature or animals

(such as Nola licking the amniotic sac off her disfigured newborn) makes explicit the intended demonisation of such characters, and reinforces such demonisation. While this thesis begins to unpick these representations, the alignment of the disabled body with nature, drawing upon ecofeminism (see Jacobs, 2022) and the Monstrous-Feminine, offers interesting avenues for further study as research into disability in film, especially horror, develops.

Nature and family as sources of fear when aligned with disability further figure into the third chapter, which uses backwoods horror as a key example of disability's prevalence in the horror genre more widely. Backwoods horror was chosen for this analysis because of how explicit these depictions are, as well as the fact that it illuminates the Disabled family as indicative of wider social paranoia; the genre has continued relevance, seen in recent films such as *Wrong Turn* and *In a Violent Nature*, and innumerable horror parodies such as *Tucker and Dale vs Evil*. As well as illustrating the demonisation of Disabled People in the genre, this chapter further demonstrates the necessity of intersectional analysis when considering disability representation due to the significant implications of this trope in relation to people of colour in rural regions, especially Appalachia. While there were numerous laws across the USA and globally that enacted eugenicist regimes, the laws in 1920s Virginia and other Appalachian regions, which led to the forced institutionalisation and sterilisation of thousands of Disabled, poor, and people of colour in the country, form the most relevant and sustained example utilised in this chapter. Women were also disproportionately affected, and the chapter focuses on the rural 'mountain men' villains prevalent in the genre before moving on to a brief analysis of the hag in hillbilly horror through Haggis in *Pumpkinhead*. The recurring ecological messages of these films, such as the contaminated water in *Wrong Turn* or the condemned river in *Deliverance*, further link to ecofeminist arguments and notions of animality, and the frequency of POV shots of the killers stalking their victims through the wilderness illuminates this. These ecological motifs offer an interesting point for further research, particularly drawing on the links to the oppression of indigenous people and

practices, and to disability in media and culture (see Eli Clare in Ray, Sibara, J, 2017, pp.242-265) through the witch/hag and rural/deviant families. This chapter also links back to mentions of hybridity as horrific, a key idea in the field of gothic and horror studies, and uses the key example of 20th-century freak shows to illustrate this, drawing further on the alignment of the Disabled body with the animal, and which links to the stigma of mixed-race communities and hybrid cultures in these rural areas. As explored in the second chapter, the reproduction between a person, particularly a woman, who is a eugenic ideal and a dysgenic male figure is particularly demonised through eugenic logic and is frequently seen throughout the horror film (see Smith, 2012); this relationship is a key theme of backwoods horror narratives which frequently see abled women kidnapped by deviant male characters, and as Murphy (2013: pg159) notes disability is often correlated with sexual deviance (and greater eugenic threat) in such narratives.

As this overview illustrates, several key threads run through this thesis and the broader literature on disability representation in film; however, horror film representations are particularly malevolent. The unique intersections between disability and the issues raised throughout this thesis and in the field more widely offer numerous avenues for further research that can interrogate these tropes and enable calls for better representation, with a very tangible effect on the lives of Disabled People. However, disability often goes overlooked, not just in horror studies but in cultural studies more generally. This research contributes to the work to assert the need for disability studies in cultural studies (and further research should endeavour also to do the reverse), and to demonstrate that where disability is overlooked in analyses which consider gender, sexuality, race, indigeneity, and other key aspects of identity, there is a unacknowledged gap to fully understanding the representations and experiences of all these groups. Just as any feminist work should consider, for example, Transgender women and Black women, Disabled People's experiences also need to be centred to encourage change within the screen industries and beyond. Monstrosity and disability are not inherently intertwined and are both

the result of social stigmatisation and abjection rather than true categorisations. Cultural depictions have the power to begin to undo some of the harm caused by these tropes, which are entrenched in horror, and their prevalence needs to be examined to steer the genre away from such harmful representation. Within our current context and political climate, using disability as a metaphor, shorthand for villainy, or shock-value in media is not just distasteful; it is dangerous.

Filmography

A Nightmare on Elm Street, 1984, dir. Wes Craven, USA
Apartment 7a, 2024, dir. Natalie Erika James, USA
Cult of Chucky, 2017, dir. Don Mancini, USA
Curse of Chucky, 2013, dir. Don Mancini, USA
Deliverance, 1972, dir. John Boorman, USA
Frankenstein, 1931, dir. James Whale, USA
Friday the 13th, 1980, dir. Sean S. Cunningham, USA
Friday the 13th, 2009, dir. Marcus Nispel, USA
Friday the 13th: Part 2, 1981, dir. Steve Miner, USA
Friday the 13th: Part 3, 1982, dir. Steve Miner, USA
Halloween, 1978, dir. John Carpenter, USA
Halloween Ends, 2022, dir. David Gordon Green, USA
Halloween 2, 1981, dir. Rick Rosenthal, USA
Immaculate, 2024, dir. Michael Mohan, USA
In a Violent Nature, 2024, dir. Chris Nash, Canada
Psycho, 1960, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, USA
Pumpkinhead, 1988, dir. Stan Winston, USA
Rosemary's Baby, 1968, dir. Roman Polanski, USA
Texas Chainsaw 3d, 2013, dir. John Luessenhop, USA
Texas Chain Saw Massacre: The Shocking Truth, 2000, dir. David Gregory, UK
The Brood, 1979, dir. David Cronenberg, Canada
The First Omen, 2024, dir. Arkasha Stevenson, USA
The Hills Have Eyes, 1977, dir. Wes Craven, USA
The Hills Have Eyes, 2006, dir. Alexandre Aja, USA
The Omen, 1976, dir. Richard Donner, UK and USA
The Phantom of the Opera, 1925, dir. Rupert Julian, USA
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 1974, dir. Tobe Hooper, USA
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 2022, dir. David Blue Garcia, USA
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning, 2006, dir. Johnathan Liebesman, USA
Wrong Turn, 2003, dir. Rob Schmid, Canada, Germany, and the USA
Wrong Turn, 2021, dir. Mike P. Nelson, Canada, Germany, and the USA
Wrong Turn 2: Dead End, 2007, dir. Joe Lynch, USA and Canada

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