

**Gut-wrenching: A phenomenological investigation of somatic responses to disgust in *American Horror Story: Freak Show***

by

KELLYN LEIGH DAVIES

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Magister  
Artium (Visual Studies)

in the

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

February 2024

Supervisor: Prof. J Lauwrens and Dr R du Plessis

## SUMMARY

Title of dissertation: Gut-wrenching: A phenomenological investigation of somatic responses to disgust in *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (Murphy 2014–2015)

Name of student: Kellyn Davies

Supervisors: Prof. Jennifer Lauwrens and Dr Rory du Plessis

Department of Visual Arts

Degree: Magister Artium (Visual Studies)

### **Abstract:**

The horror genre is very good at evoking an excess of heavy emotions and eliciting intense visceral responses in the viewer. The fourth season of the show titled *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (Murphy 2014–2015) follows the fall of one of the remaining freak show acts in 1942 in South Florida, focusing on the troupe of performers' lives and the trials they face to survive.

This dissertation presents a phenomenological analysis of *Freak Show* (Murphy 2014–2015) to understand how this television show elicits somatic and affective responses from its viewers. It therefore focuses on the affective response of disgust as understood through the theoretical lenses of embodied perception and the abject. This study investigates how disgust plays a role in a viewer's experience of *Freak Show* specifically concerning selected social issues explored in the series such as the social hierarchy, sex, homophobia, and the family unit. This study concludes by describing the transformative potential of the somatic encounter with *Freak Show* (Murphy 2014–2015).

**Key Terms:** Horror, *American Horror Story*, *Freak Show*, embodied perception, phenomenology, somatic response, disgust, abject

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHS	American Horror Story(Murphy & Falchuk 2011–)?
FS	Freak Show (Murphy 2014–2015)
CGI	Computer Generated Imagery

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background and aims

#### 1.1.1. *Background and context*

Our bodies react emotionally to experiences before our mind can fully comprehend what we have experienced, as originally theorised by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002). When applied in the context of film, film phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack (2004) stresses that our unconscious<sup>1</sup> is embodied as we watch a movie. Embodied perception focuses (among others) on the effects of the images in visual culture on our bodies and how we process these emotive experiences. The embodiment of perception is a topic that has recently been applied to many aspects of visual culture, including fashion (Shinkle 2013), art (Lauwrens 2018), and film, by scholars such as Jennifer Barker (2009), Laura Marks (1999), and Julian Hanich (2010).

In the area of affect and visual culture, there has been a turn in attention to how images are perceived with our whole body.<sup>2</sup> Emphasis is increasingly being placed on how our whole bodies and psyche are affected by what we see on the screen (Elsaesser & Hagener 2015:127). Recent research in film and media studies is particularly interested in the emotional and affective responses that are elicited in audiences by the films we watch, focusing on how films appeal to viewers' unconscious somatic responses.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely these responses that take shape in the film experience, and that are the focus of this study.

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<sup>1</sup> The scholars I have referred to in this study, who theorise the embodied encounters with visual culture (Hanich 2010, Plantinga 2009), do not distinguish between subconscious and unconscious. Instead, they use the terms interchangeably. However, I acknowledge that "subconscious" is a very dated term and should only be used in the context of Freudian psychology. For this reason, unless I quote directly from these sources, I use "unconscious" or "nonconscious" to refer to reactions that are pre-reflective, spontaneous, and involuntary.

<sup>2</sup> The use of pronouns such as "we", "our", and "us" begs the question, who are the subjects being referred to? Whilst acknowledging that emotional and somatic responses to films are idiosyncratic, I follow the style and approach to theorising films that surfaces in Vivian Sobchack's (2004) and Julian Hanich's (2010) research. For instance, Hanich liberally uses all the above pronouns in his robust phenomenological analysis of horror films, without referring to specific research participants.

<sup>3</sup> Some scholars distinguish between affect and emotion. For Brian Massumi (2002), affect is pre-personal, unmediated, and non-intentional, whereas emotions are personal, mediated, and intentional. Instead, I will follow Sara Ahmed's (2014:207) position that affects and emotions are entangled.

Our somatic or bodily responses to these experiences differ from individual to individual, which in turn, results in unique emotional responses. These reactions can also differ from genre to genre, as described by Ndalians (2012:6) somatic responses are caused by:

the extremity and textural surface of violence in New Horror which plunges us into such a state of discomfort until ... we ingest the disgusting material presence that's onscreen into ourselves so that our bodies are forced to respond physically.

Many film scholars, such as Julian Hanich (2010), Carl Plantinga (2009), and Linda Williams (1991), centre their arguments around how films elicit emotions. Horror is a particularly interesting genre to explore in terms of bodily and emotional responses. However, apart from a few exceptions (such as Merleau-Ponty 1964, Hanich 2010 and Ndalians 2012), I have found very few investigations of horror films from the perspective of the viewer's body. While not a film, the horror anthology television series *American Horror Story* (referred to in online discussions, and throughout this text, as *AHS*) (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) presents an interesting case study for further investigation from the perspective of bodily responses and embodied perception. The series first aired in 2011 with the most recent twelfth season airing on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2023 (*American Horror Story* 2023.) To reiterate, while *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) is not a film, I will demonstrate how film theory that explores spectators' embodied engagement with movies can be applied to a television show.

The series is designed so that each season is a self-contained miniseries, having characters, a timeframe, a narrative, and a setting which changes from season to season (*American Horror Story* 2020). The critically acclaimed series saw around six million people watching the premiere episode of season three and received an average of 3.5 million viewers per episode thereafter (LeBlanc 2018:1). Compared to the overall shorter run-time of a film, television shows can endure, expand, and experiment with characters, trials, and their actions. This allows for television shows like *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) to experiment with narrative, time periods, and the central group of actors in varying roles (Sevenich 2015:42). Moreover, each season focuses on various contemporary social issues such as the super naturalisation of the AIDS crisis (seen in season 11 titled *NYC*), a magic pill that reveals what people will do for fame and fortune (seen in season 10A titled *Red Tide*), or the exploration of the perception of mental health in season 3s '*Asylum*'. Inspired by the history of the horror genre, the show has gained inspiration for troupes and themes typically found in horror media. For example, season

one titled '*Murder House*' centres around the concept of the haunted house, and season nine titled 1984 which was inspired by the series *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (Cunningham 1980). Another example, which will be discussed throughout this study, is season 4, titled '*Freak Show*' (Murphy 2014–2015.) Inspired by the 1932 film '*Freaks*' (Browning 1932),<sup>4</sup> '*Freak Show*' is centred around Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities, a travelling carnival, and the differently-bodied performers within the troupe. By utilising various tropes typically found in horror films, such as the murderous cult and the shady lives of those in the freak show, and relying on current social problems, viewers engage with the chaos and emotional relief that this series offers.

### **1.1.2. Aims and research questions**

The main aim of the study is to conduct a phenomenological analysis of *AHS: Freak Show* (Murphy & Falchuck 2014–2015) (hereafter referred to as *FS*) to understand how horror media can elicit somatic and affective responses concerning a heightened emotional state<sup>5</sup> such as disgust. The aim is to analyse how the viewer responds while experiencing disgust elicited by the television show *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). Furthermore, the aim is to investigate the potential transformative effect of the viewer's somatic responses to *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). Other sub-questions I explore include:

- What is the history and context of the horror genre which forms the foundation for *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015)?
- How have bodily and affective responses to films and/or television series been theorised? What are the benefits and limitations of these theories and how can these theories be applied to *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015)?
- How do somatic (bodily) responses, affect (emotional) responses, and disgust differ? How are they similar?

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<sup>4</sup> In 1847, the term "freak" developed its contemporary association with human anomaly and difference (Tromp & Valerius 2008:1). Some authors, such as Andrea Poppiti (2011:26) explain that "Despite its negative connotation and offensive implication, the present use of the word 'freak' will ensure historical accuracy and realistic accounts of circus-life." The use of the term is generally frowned upon within twenty-first-century society and, therefore, it is necessary to contextualise the term 'freak'. I shall be using terms such as 'performers in freak shows', 'troupe of performers' or 'performers' throughout the study instead of the term 'freak'.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Rubin (1999:5) defines this heightened emotional response as "an excess of certain qualities and feelings beyond the necessity of the narrative: too much atmosphere, action, suspense - too much."

- Does the focus on the physical body of the characters bring about new insights for the viewer regarding social issues addressed in *FS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2014–2015)?
- What transformative experiences are generated by viewers' somatic responses to *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015)?

## 1.2. Significance of the study

Plantinga (2009:24) identifies a gap in the literature on film, arguing that the theory of affect and emotion is applied mainly in mainstream Hollywood films. Similarly, Plantinga (2009:24) states

We must ask how art films, experimental films, video games, television serials, television advertising, websites, and diverse other media elicit affect and emotion.

Although Plantinga made this argument more than a decade ago, I have found that it still holds water in 2023 and is especially relevant to the analysis of a television series like *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-). A secondary gap in academic studies is the attention that is given to the negative emotions elicited within the media-viewing experience. Hanich (2010:48) states that “Emotions have hardly played a role in film phenomenology so far. However, emotions merit a closer, non-cognitivist look”. The focus of this investigation will be on affective reactions of disgust in response to horror media; other somatic responses such as repulsion, disdain, or relief could warrant a study of their own and are not explored in detail here.

## 1.3. Theoretical framework and literature review

The research in this dissertation is situated within the field of phenomenology focusing on the horror genre and uses *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) as a case study. In this section, I briefly introduce the literature that is explored in more detail in Chapter two. The first part of this literature review briefly explores embodied perception through the concept of phenomenology, which assists in understanding the structure of somatic and unconscious experiences. It is from this foundation that I will examine Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2002), Vivian Sobchack's (2004) and Julian Hanich's (2010) theories of embodied perception.

The second part of this literature review explores the emotional affect in response to experiencing and engaging with horror, which is defined by Ruth Leys (2011:443) as “a matter of autonomic responses that are held to occur below the threshold of consciousness and cognition and to be rooted in the body”. The foundation of this understanding is rooted in Carl Plantinga’s (2009) theories surrounding the affect in film in his text *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator Experience*, specifically his discussions of disgust in Chapter Seven – *The Rhetoric of Emotion: Disgust and Beyond*. Plantinga (2009) introduces Noël Carroll’s (1990) theory of the ‘paradox of horror’, which questions why we are willing to put ourselves in front of a screen to experience negative responses like disgust.

In response to this paradox, the third portion of this literature review will discuss Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory of the ‘abject’. Julia Kristeva is a well-known philosopher and theorist of the abject in film. Kristeva’s book considered the seminal introductory text into the abject, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) is the most influential theorisation of the concept related to artistic practices, such as film relating to the abject (Arya 2014:2–3). Ria Arya (2014:3), in her study *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, film and literature*, explains that the term *abjection* originates from the Latin word *abicere*, meaning “to throw away” or “to cast off, away, or out”. Following the bodily affect that films can elicit in the viewer, the fourth part of this literature review will discuss the concept of “disgust” based on Plantinga’s (2009), Arya’s (2014), Katrena Bantinaki’s (2012), and Matthew Stohl’s (2012) perspectives on the matter.

This moves into a brief contextualisation of ‘horror’ by looking at its history as a genre. I also introduce how technological advancements influenced the psychological responses elicited by horror films. Thereafter, I briefly explore the literature on the psychological effects produced by horror films. I will then focus on briefly introducing *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) and its focus as a series. This leads to the final brief contextualisation of the ‘freak’, and a further discussion of the history of the freak show and the Victorian era in Chapter three.

### **1.3.1. Embodied Perception and Phenomenology**

My understanding of embodied perception in this study is based on *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses* by Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010). The



text is based on a series of lectures given by Elsaesser in 2005–2006, and comments written from the lecture notes by Hagener in 2006–2007. Elsaesser and Hagener (2010:117) explore embodied perception in film and television, explaining that:

We take in films somatically, with our whole body, and are affected by images even before cognitive information processing or unconscious identification addresses and envelopes us on another level.

Films are experienced with our whole bodies before our nonconscious minds can interpret what has happened (Elsaesser & Hagener 2010:127). Rooted in theories of embodied perception, a phenomenological analysis gives a glimpse into a somatic structure between the film and the viewer. The most notable theorist in the field of embodied perception is Maurice Merleau-Ponty,<sup>6</sup> who writes about the connection between the mind and body in the perception of the world in his book *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002 [1945]). Merleau-Ponty (2002:203) maintains that all perception is embodied perception, which means that vision does not and cannot occur apart from the body that enables it. Therefore, the body must be taken seriously in analyses of visual culture. Merleau-Ponty's theories of perception, have provided the basis of much academic analysis in which theories of perception are at the forefront of the discussion (Barker 2009, Hanich 2010, Sobchack 2004).

#### 1.3.1.1. *Phenomenology and film studies*

In her influential study, *The Address of the Eye* (2004) Sobchack builds on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories of perception applying his theories to the cinema and the relationship between the film and the viewer. Likewise, Jennifer Barker (2009:4) examines the "tactile structures of embodied cinematic perception and expression that are taken up by on-screen bodies... filmgoers, and film themselves" in her book *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*. Both Sobchack and Barker mobilise Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception to demonstrate that a film has its own embodied existence in the world, sharing with us some modes of visual perception (Barker 2009:8).

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<sup>6</sup> Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), considered the founder of twentieth-century phenomenological philosophy, influenced Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (2002[1945].) However, Merleau-Ponty took Husserl's essentialist approach to phenomenology in a different direction, namely existentialism.

Julian Hanich, in *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (2010:43) argues that existential phenomenology (which is the strand of phenomenology developed by Merleau-Ponty, among others) assists the researcher in avoiding slipping into a reductive and essentialist account of experience and embodiment. As opposed to 'pure' phenomenology (of the kind supported by Edmund Husserl), which has been criticised for prioritising a universal or transcendental subject, Hanich (2010:40) argues that uniformity in an audience's response to a specific genre, film, or scene is problematic and this is not phenomenology's goal. The aim of a phenomenological study is not to explore various and varying experiences, but rather to find out if someone is affected by what they see and thus try to capture a *type* of experience that may account for most people's reactions (Hanich 2010:40). While following Vivian Sobchack's (2004) cinesthetic subject,<sup>7</sup> my interest is in exploring how, in addition to immersing ourselves in the narratives and character's actions in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), we also extract meaning through our bodies. According to existential phenomenology (as theorised by Merleau-Ponty), the subject is always embedded in a specific historical and cultural context which informs experience (Hanich 2010:40). As I have noted above, although this study is not about a film, Sobchack's theories on the embodied perception of moving images provides insight into how audiences might respond to and interact with a television series. Barker (2009:4) contemplates that:

[paying attention to] ... sound and image will reveal certain patterns of texture, space and rhythm enacted by film and viewers. Attention to these embodied structures and patterns allows for a sensually formed (and informed) understanding of the ways that meaning and significance emerge in and are articulated through fleshy, muscular, and visceral engagement that occurs between films and viewers' bodies.

When watching a film or a television series, images are taken in with our whole body and thus our whole bodies and psyche are affected by the experiences we see on the screen (Elsaesser & Haganer 2010:127). Throughout this study, I follow Hanich (2010), Sobchack (2004) and Barker (2009), who based their theories on Merleau-Ponty's (2002) theory of perception and phenomenology. I follow Hanich's understanding of

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<sup>7</sup> The "Cinesthetic subject" is defined by Sobchack (2004:67) as "the complexity and richness of the more general bodily experience that grounds our particular experience of cinema, and ... also points to ways in which the cinema uses our dominant senses of vision and hearing to speak comprehensibly to our other senses."

phenomenology which will be further explored in Chapter two for my analysis of selected scenes in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) in Chapter four.

### **1.3.2. The affect of horror**

The concept of 'affect' has attracted academic interest since the 1960s. The term 'affect' derives from the Latin term '*affectus*' which translates to afflict, touch, or to feel (Doss 2009:9.) Affect is notoriously difficult to define, leading to various theorist's use of the term in slightly different ways. In Leys's (2011:443) essay, *The Turn to Affect: A Critique*, she explains that affect eludes all forms, cognition and meaning. Affect is thus difficult to define or articulate verbally. It is a deeply felt response to both pleasurable and painful experiences.

Carl Plantinga (2009:6) "offers a theory of affect elicitation in mainstream American narrative films ... [which offer] packaged experiences, commodities designed to engage audiences effectively and emotively, [by] providing a pleasurable and/or thrilling experience". Noël Carroll's (1990:10) concept of the 'paradox of horror' entails why people willingly and repeatedly subject themselves to a genre like horror that produces such an intensely negative affect and experience. In other words, he questions why people continue to watch these films again and again when they know they are going to experience negative emotions, such as disgust, horror, or dread. Plantinga (2009:175) compares Carroll's paradox to David Hume's account of the 'paradox of tragedy' in his essay *Of Tragedy* (1965.) Hume's (1965:29–37) paradox similarly asks that if tragedy elicits fear and pity (which are fundamentally painful), why would people seek them out and enjoy them? Plantinga introduces Carroll's paradox of horror, which questions why an audience will willingly watch a film that elicits a negative effect. Hume's (1965:32) solution to his paradox is that negative emotional responses are directed through the manner of depiction, which means that our responses are directed at something in the film. Thus, "... the pleasures derived from *how* the tragedy is represented predominate over feelings of distress caused by *what* is depicted" (Plantinga 2009:175, own emphasis). In Chapter two, the definitions of affect and explanations surrounding emotional and affective responses to horror are further explored based on the arguments put forward by Leys (2011), Plantinga (2009) and Hanich (2010).

### **1.3.3. Abject**

The abject was first theorised by cultural theorist Georges Bataille in the 1930s, who wrote several unpublished papers on the concept (Arya 2014:2). In the early 1990s, the concept of abjection became popular and has remained central to artistic endeavours, especially given the persisting interest by theorists in the body and trauma (Arya 2014: ix). Kristeva theorised the abject as a contrasting term to Jacques Lacan's '*objet petit a*' meaning 'object of desire' (Felluga 2011). Her theories draw from psychoanalysis, linguistics, literary theory, and philosophy (Rizq 2013:1279). Whilst Kristeva's notion of the process of abjection has been criticised as limited and reductive at times (Grosz 1994; Arya 2014), it nevertheless offers insights into the process and effect of embodied engagement with a film, especially in horror films.

Since the late twentieth century, explorations into the abject "provoked new ways of thinking about art and aesthetics" (Arya 2014:82). Fear is central to the experience of abjection and instils horror in the subject (Arya 2014:6–7). The abject is described by Julia Kristeva (1982:4), as, "not lack of cleanliness or health ... but what disturbs identity, system, order". Arya (2014:45) elaborates that something lying outside of this symbolic order in society is seen as corrupting:

'dirty', impure, and capable of polluting because it is out of place and so causes confusion and disruption to the social (and even cosmic) order. Dirt has to be gotten rid of to preserve social order.

Confrontations with abjected sources are identified by Barbra Creed (1986), Kristeva (1982) and Arya (2014) as food loathing; experiences with sinister individuals that reject the symbolic order; bodily excretions outside of the body; and seeing a corpse without the presence of God or science, meaning outside the accepted settings of a church or a morgue. In my analysis of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) in Chapter four, confrontations with the abject are explored throughout the series to examine how confrontations with abjected characters and storylines elicit a somatic sense of disgust in the viewer.

### **1.3.4. Disgust**

During the film viewing process, films can have varying physical effects on the viewer, as Strohl (2012:210) discusses:

In some cases when one watches a horror movie, one experiences emotions of fear and disgust that have [a] pain structure. They would

be outright painful, and one would be fully averse to them if one were outside of an aesthetic context [such as a film or television series]. In an aesthetic context, however, these emotions may fit well with one's more general condition and make a vital contribution to the pleasant character of the complex experience of engaging with an ar2rk.

Disgust, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is a highly negative emotion that is defined as a feeling of repulsion or strong disapproval aroused by something unpleasant or offensive. Disgust is classified, according to Plantinga (2009:218), as an emotion, while Hanich (2010:8) defines it as an affective response. In Chapter two, I discuss the emotional/affective response that the 'disgusting' object elicits within the embodied film-viewing process in greater detail. When we are already in a heightened emotional state, such as when already having experienced dread or fear, interactions with disgusting stimuli fuel our reaction more strongly compared to someone who is not in an emotionally heightened state. On the other hand, repeatedly watching dreadful or horrifying content in films and television shows, may desensitise our responses to disgust. Bantinaki (2012:390) explains that "through voluntary encounters with 'gross' stimuli ... we can learn to manage our reactions to disgust, or (through desensitisation) increase our tolerance over such stimuli, or just ease the negative hold that they have on us in real life". Thus, for some, experiencing disgust can be as "... intense as...fear and so equally rewarding if one craves excitement" (Bantinaki 2012:390). As a result, Feagin (1992:81–82) explains that:

... the fact that a certain kind of thing provokes feelings of disgust in you can reinforce your desire for those sorts of things. If it ceased to produce the affective components of repulsion, it would cease to attract (at least to that extent). Thus, one might be transfixed by and attracted to – almost addicted to – gory sights or disgusting descriptions.

Strohl (2012:203) notes that people react to horror media as they would anything disgusting outside of the theatre. The difference is that outside of the movie theatre or the television show, the audience members speak of the experience with great enthusiasm and show an eagerness to return for more of the same experience (Strohl 2012:203). Compared to viewing something disgusting outside of the horror viewing experience, the experience elicited during the film viewing experience stays with the viewer longer. Indeed, fans of the horror genre often claim that their enjoyment of a horror film depends on its effectiveness in inducing fear and disgust, and if they are not

experienced by the audience they are upset (Strohl 2012:203). Therefore, it is also important to contextualise the history of horror.

### **1.3.5. The horror genre**

Dixon (2010:x–xi) in *A History of Horror*, traces the technological impact on “key films that formed the genre in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century... the most representative examples of the genre...defined the genre, and continue to influence the horror films present today”. Dixon (2010) explores the origins and history of the horror genre and discusses historical events, societal changes, and technological and psychological advancements that influenced what and how the audience responded to the films seen on screen. This historical exploration of horror assists in contextualising *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). The subject matter, in terms of the themes and narratives, included in early films transformed through events such as World War I and World War II (Dixon 2010:63). Following this, independent filmmakers allowed for a major expansion in the film industry. One of the greatest influences on the aesthetic style of the film industry today is technology, as Dixon (2010:3) states:

cinema was made for horror, [which bring] the various special effects, tricks, and prosthetic makeup devices used in theatrical presentations ... to a considerably larger audience.

Charles Derry (2009:1) in *Dark Dreams 2.0: A Psychological History of the Modern Horror Films from the 1950s to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* writes an updated edition to his 1977 book. As elaborated on by Derry (2009:1):

The ideas I put forward in the 1977 volume, which feels written by some distant version of myself, have held up well: my basic premise that the horror film underwent a radical transformation in the sixties, developing three subgenres (the horror of personality, of Armageddon, and the demonic), seems from today’s perspective to be fairly obvious.

The updated section “Millennial Nightmares” “... offers insights and close readings of the most notable horror films of the last thirty years” (Derry 2009:3). The resulting novel *Dark Dreams 2.0* analyses over fifty years of horror film history and the psychological impacts and influences on the genre, exploring impactful horror films from the 1960s to the twenty-first century. Drawing inspiration from historical events and current social concerns, the film-viewing experience allows the audience to process these social

worries and hidden traumas head-on in a safe space. Horror film viewing allows the audience to address these unconscious fears head-on.

### **1.3.6. *American Horror Story* (2011-)**

*AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) is one of the most successful horror-centred television shows to date, with the premiere episode recording 3.2 million viewers and season 4's premiere episode receiving 6.13 million views, which at the time are the best numbers FX had ever received for a series premiere (LeBlanc 2018:1). The well-received television series has won 140 of the show's 362 award nominations across the current twelve season run. Beyond the series' popularity in horror media, the reason *AHS: FS* (Murphy & Falchuck 2014–2015) was chosen for analysis in this dissertation, is because of the varying storylines, tropes, issues, and characters the show portrays in new ways each season. The show uses a familiar central cast of actors appearing as new characters each season, being set in a new location, occurring in a different time, and following a new central theme within the collective narrative. With the often gory and visual strategies used to film the television show, season after season people return to see what the new story has for the *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) universe and how it fits on the timeline<sup>8</sup> within the show. The show refers to many issues within society such as racism, idolisation of political figures, homophobia, social hierarchies, murder, and mental illness to name a few. In the case of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), Robert Sevenich (2015:47) states that the series:

argues that the true monsters in society are the people who disregard and separate people who are different. But perhaps more unforgivable than those who exclude and reject the dignity of those who are different are the sins of those who strive to commoditize and exploit the 'exoticism' of the outcast individuals.

*AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) is one of the most successful horror-centred television shows to date, with the often-gory visual strategies used to film the television show, season after season people return to see the new story on offer in the *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) universe and how it impacts the overall timeline across the show. Every season focuses on a different constellation of contemporary social issues. For example, season seven titled 'Cult' centres around the political divide in America after the winner

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<sup>8</sup> All seasons of *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuck 2011-) occur in a shared universe with overlapping fictional locations, characters and events that follow a timeline that fans of the show have placed together which is seen in Appendix A.

of the 2016 American election Donald Trump entered office. To comment on these issues, different horror tropes are often used as central themes for the show. For example, season 9, titled 1984, is based on the 'haunted summer camp' such as seen in the film franchise *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* and other similar 80s classic slasher movies. By using tropes found in horror films, the example here of a murderous cult or the lives of those in the freak show opens a platform for activism and discussions of the tropes and themes used in each season. *Freak Show* contends that the "...true monsters in society are the people who disregard and separate people who are different" (Sevenich 2015:47).

#### *1.3.6.1. Freak Show (Murphy 2014-2015)*

*Freak Show* follows the fall of one of the remaining sideshow acts in 1952 in South Florida. The show was begun by aspiring singer and TV personality Elsa Mars (Jessica Lange), named "Fräulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities". Mars opens her freak show as a home for rejected, abandoned, and abused individuals labelled as 'deformed' and those deemed unfit to join society (Sevenich 2015:47). The series follows the lives of the troupe members and their struggle for survival in the dying world of the circus and freakshows. The season follows the waning popularity of the freak show due to changing attitudes and society's tendency of "exclusion and commodification" (Sevenich 2015:49). Their arrival in Jupiter, Florida, invites con men and murderers who aim to disturb the lives of the performers through any means possible. Since the series revolves around people labelled as 'freaks' who perform in so-called 'freak shows' it is necessary to contextualise the use of the word freak and to understand the treatment received by freak show performers.

#### **1.3.7. Contextualising the 'freak'**

According to Andrea Poppiti (2011:36), there is no evidence to support the notion that nineteenth-century performers were offended by the descriptor 'freak' at all. *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) makes use of actors who have previously performed in freak shows. Confronting the societal idea of normal, people with extraordinary bodies engage in a social performance of their abilities. Due to societal and financial reasons, performing at the freak show was often chosen over options of various workhouses or being homeless, which will be further discussed in Chapter three with reference to Joe Nickell (2005), Helen Davies (2015), and Nadja Durbach (1971).



As summarised by Christine Ferguson (1997:245), "... the application of this or any other derogatory label to those individuals born with a physically unorthodox body is cruel, pointless, and stupid". Therefore, this study aims to avoid using 'freak' so as to not offend or further aid in stigmatising bodily differences. However, the stigma and sensationalism associated with the word 'freak' is still heavily imposed on people regarded as such in society. Within the history of freak show performers, is the recurring question of their autonomy and consent. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, information about the performers' lives was given mainly in promotional material with the varying narratives conjured up by their managers. Thus, information regarding the freak show performers' true feelings about their employment remains hidden from performer to performer, as now we have no way of truly knowing what each performer was or was not forced into doing by their showman. At the same time, Fraser's comments provide invaluable insight into how a person labelled as a freak has embraced the term.

#### 1.3.7.1. *Autonomy and photography*

Many performers from historical freak shows might not have wanted to exhibit themselves. Unfortunately, there is no way to know those who wanted to and those who did not. In her studies of the neo-Victorian freak shows, Davies (2015:18) chooses not to include available photographic material at all in her study. In contrast to Davies's approach, visual material from both *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) and *Freaks* (Browning 1932) will be used in this study; however, if a performer's autonomy is in question (such as mental disabilities or known statements) they will not be included. Even though I do not include visual material in which they appear, these performers are still studied to not forget their experiences and what can be learned from them and their lives. It is here that I share the opinion of Davies (2015:9) that:

We can never have an unmediated perspective on these performers, and the boundary between representation and 'reality' is necessarily always blurred. But the complex ideological work done by cultural representation is always worthy of scrutiny ...

In the context of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), no differently able-bodied freak show performer's autonomy was ever undermined. Behind-the-scenes interviews conducted for the show in 2015 indicate that all the actors were excited to do the show as they could show how they live their daily lives with their bodily differences. For this reason, I include screenshots from the series because, in the context of the series, the performers are depicted as human beings with their own agency, as well as spectacles for viewers'

entertainment. By providing both experiences of the freak show performers – as both agential and spectacle – *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) allows the audience to process how we treat those who are differently bodied by actively implicating the able-bodied characters of the show of violence.

#### 1.4. The research methodology

The methodological approach I use in this study is a phenomenological analysis of the affective and somatic responses that one may experience while watching *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). The methodological approach I apply is rooted in theories of embodied perception and phenomenology in response to disgusting scenes seen in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). In my analysis of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) I use the methodological approach of phenomenology, particularly as outlined by Hanich (2010) in his book *Cinematic Experience in Horror Film and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*, and by the Hermeneutic phenomenological research method as outlined by Narayan Prasad Kalfe (2011) and Susan Lavery (2003). When applied to film, phenomenology questions how a viewer experiences a scene as intended by the creators of the show by what all viewers experience such as the lighting, sound, focus, pacing and colour; as explained by Hanich (2010:40):

Phenomenology does not want to explain how specific viewers respond to specific scenes. The question is rather: if a viewer is affected by a horror, shock, dread, or terror scene, how does he or she experience it?

Instead of asking why we feel certain emotions in response to certain scenes in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), I aim to ask what the effect of those emotional and affective responses might be. Aided by the theories of the abject and affect, I will examine and focus on the somatic and emotional responses of disgust in chapter four, specifically seen in videos that can be seen by following hyperlinks, QR codes or may be viewed on the following link:

[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1O2chDg3oDyb-a8xgoxLyBs0vSM7Z37m7?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1O2chDg3oDyb-a8xgoxLyBs0vSM7Z37m7?usp=drive_link)

To summarise my discussion above, embodied perception refers to the way that experiences are felt and interpreted by the body. Embodied perception therefore comes down to somatic responses to what is depicted on the screen (Elsaesser & Hagener 2015). When analysing *The horror Sensorium*, Ndalianis (2012) focuses on the

perception of our senses when interacting with film media. Ndalians (2012:1) identifies 'the sensorium' as referring to:

both the sensory mechanics of the human body and to the intellectual and cognitive functions connected to it... and to processing the gamut of sensory stimuli individuals may experience in order to make sense of the world around them.

Therefore, an analysis based on embodied perception can increase our awareness of how our bodies react to stimuli in images and films. Phenomenology aims to focus on how the world is experienced by those who live in it, by focusing on the "seemingly trivial aspects within experience that may be taken for granted in our lives ... with a goal of creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding" (Kalfe 2011:191). Hanich (2010:45) states that "Phenomenology aims to uncover aspects of the everyday experience that are buried beneath habituation and institutionalisation and are thus known only implicitly". In this way, a phenomenological analysis is sensitive to that which one would not usually pay much attention to – our bodily responses to, and absorption in the scene. Hanich (2010:8) states that it would be "reductive to restrict the aesthetic experience of frightening films to the aspect of emotion and the body", he agrees that negating the types of experiences felt by the body "would be an odd endeavor".

A phenomenological analysis differs from a cognitivist approach. For instance, phenomenology analyses how we feel emotions (focusing on descriptions), while cognitivism aim to explain why we feel certain emotions (focusing on explanation) (Hanich 2010:13). Hermeneutic phenomenology suggests that to uncover this knowledge hidden in the habits of daily life, the researcher must be aware of the viewers past life-experiences, as further defined by Lavery (2003:24) as:

Historicity, a person's history or background, includes what a culture gives a person from birth and is handed down, presenting ways of understanding the world. Through this understanding, one determines what is 'real', yet Heidegger also believed that one's background cannot be made completely explicit.

Therefore, the researcher must not overly concern with viewers individual experiences, while not becoming overly descriptive of the scenes or the individual experiences of each audience member could possibly be experiencing. When watching *FS* (Murphy 2014–

2015) we interoperate what we see on the screen based on our unique understanding of the world, further elaborated by Laverty (2003:24):

Pre-understanding is not something a person can step outside of or put aside, as it is understood as already being with us in the world... Meaning is found as we are constructed by the world while at the same time we are constructing this world from our own background and experiences ... Claiming that to be human was to interpret, Heidegger (1927/1962) stressed that every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by an individual's background or historicity. Moreover, hermeneutics is the study of human cultural activity as texts with a view towards interpretation to find intended or expressed meanings.

While watching a television program such as *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) a viewer is typically in the safe space of their home, returning weekly like a ritual to experience the creator's horrific scenes which elicit negative bodily reactions from experiences and subject matter that we normally would not in everyday life. Emotional responses are felt and experienced by everyone; thus, phenomenology's rich description can assist to uncover these emotions and what this could mean about the weekly empathetic and dedicated viewers of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

Thus, a phenomenological analysis accounts for a *type* of experience that all audience members can relate to and will focus on the bodily reactions that could be related to by most viewers while experiencing the disgusting subject matter we see on screen. This means that some audience members will feel the disgusting affects intended by the creators of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), while others will not. As will be discussed in more depth in Chapter two, every viewer's threshold for what they find disgusting is different based on differing past lived experiences that are remembered by the body of each viewer. Phenomenologists such as Hanich (2010) and Barker (2009) supply rich descriptions of selected scenes in the films they analyse to capture the shared experiences of the engaged and empathetic viewer. Thus, my analysis of selected scenes in the TV series *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) in Chapter four will begin with an exploration into my phenomenological and somatic reactions to selected scenes, which will include a rich and detailed description of the audio-visual elements in the scene that function to elicit disgust in the viewers of the television show.

A phenomenological analysis provides insight into how audiences, through their lived bodies, are drawn into social issues dealt with in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) previously mentioned. I have specifically chosen to focus on this season because it showcases a colourful and diverse cast that depicts the lives of those who are forced beyond the accepted and safe societal norm. Thus, through the concept of the abject, the lives of those in the abjected freak show performers and the experiences they face against socially considered normal and able-bodied characters. It is important to note that my discussion on disgust attached to the able-bodied characters will centre around visual sites of disgust such as murder, assault, a dead body, or detached body parts, and not the character's deformities.

The show's central narrative follows the group trying to enter the local town's society as 'normal' people and not 'freaks'. Yet, I do think that the physical appearance of these characters elicits forms of disgust in able-bodied audiences. And, at the same time, might elicit a transitional experience for the viewer. I will argue that the implied meaning behind the filmmakers is to transport the viewer from their initial response of disgust for the different-bodied characters. The show does this by appealing to the viewer's bodily responses through subject matter that a viewer could typically find disgusting such as murder, decapitation, seeing and interacting with dead bodies, or deviant sexuality. With the use of phenomenology, I describe and analyse emotional responses to selected scenes and what that might mean for us as the audience while watching *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

### **1.5. Outline of chapters**

Chapter one provides an introduction to the study. The research question is contextualised within relevant literature, and an outline of the research methodology is given. The chapter also explains the significance of the study, alongside an outline of the chapters.

The second chapter contextualises the history of the horror genre, and how technological advancements affect the somatic and psychological reactions elicited by filmmakers. This chapter also provides a more in-depth investigation into the concepts of embodied perception, phenomenology, the abject, the affect, and disgust. Key researchers, theories, their agreements, and their disagreements are discussed and analysed concerning horror media.

Chapter three sets the foundation for the history of the freak show, popular in the entertainment industry during the Victorian era (1837–1901) the foundation for this time is also discussed. Freak shows representation in visual media, specifically *Freaks* (Browning 1932) and its influence on *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), is introduced and discussed. This chapter introduces *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) by setting a foundation for the influences taken by the filmmakers from the history and the culture of the freak show.

Chapter four is the analysis of the aspects of disgust related to *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). The chapter also explores the potential transformative effect that can follow an emotional and affective encounter with the social issue of marginalised individuals who have been alienated by society to maintain traditional cultural practices as is represented in this horror series.

Chapter five concludes the study by pointing out what has been established, what the limitations of the study were and possible avenues for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### HORROR, AFFECT, ABJECT, DISGUST, AND EMBODIED PERCEPTION

This chapter aims to set a theoretical foundation for how I analyse *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) in Chapter four. Due to the deep-rooted inspiration that the horror genre has on *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) I begin by contextualising ‘horror’ by describing its history as a genre and the influences of the genre on the film industry. This analysis is accompanied by an exploration of how technological advancements have influenced the genre, especially how special effects contribute to the narrative and themes investigated by filmmakers and directors contemplated by Dixon (2010). Thereafter, I briefly researched the psychological effects produced by horror films on the viewer as proposed by Derry (2009).

With the psychological effects of horror in mind, through the concept of phenomenology, I review the structure of somatic experience within embodied responses to horror. Aided by theorists such as Merleau-Ponty (2002), Barker (2009), Hanich (2010), and Sobchack (2004), this chapter aims to examine theories of embodied perception and the subjectivity of the film viewer. This leads to an analysis of the affective responses that are elicited while watching horror with reference to authors Leys (2011), Plantinga (2009), and Hanich (2010). Plantinga (2009) explores Noël Carroll’s (1990) theory of the ‘paradox of horror’, which questions why we are willing to purposefully put ourselves in front of a screen to experience negative experiences like disgust. Like Plantinga (2009), I will also explore various advancements, interpretations, and criticisms of Carroll’s position. This is aided by a brief introduction to ‘the abject’, which could provide an answer to Carroll’s theory. I introduce Julia Kristeva (1984), who interoperates her theories surrounding the abject in the horror genre. Kristeva introduces confrontations with and surrounding the abject, including food loathing, experiences with sinister individuals that reject the symbolic order, bodily excretions outside of the body, and seeing a corpse outside the accepted settings of a church or a morgue (Creed 1986:70). The chapter concludes with defining disgust, by discussing theories presented by Plantinga (2009) and Arya (2014).

#### 2.1. The horror genre

The horror genre has been around since the dawn of literature and theatre performances. The first-ever horror film was entitled *Le Manoir du Diable* (Méliès 1896), translated as

*House of the Devil* in English releases (Figure 1.) According to Derry (2009:22–23), the most important aspects of the classical horror film are:

... the physical form of the horror itself. Usually, the form (in other words, the monster) is something abstracted from man: a horror that keeps its distance from man both aesthetically and metaphysically ... The horror may be a metaphorical manifestation of man's animal instincts (*King Kong*), his evil desires (witches, Satanism), or his fear of being dead yet not at rest (*The Mummy*, zombies); but the horror is certainly not man itself. This separation usually enables man in horror films to confront directly his evil enemy as surely as one could confront one's reflection in a distorted mirror.



Figure 1: Georges Méliès, *Le Manoir du Diable*, 1896.  
Film poster, 100 x 150 cm.  
Copy by and found on TheMovieDatabase.

During the silent era (1894–1930s), directors and filmmakers took inspiration from and experimented with literary classics for their source materials (Dixon 2010:22). The genre quickly gained momentum with the film adaptation of books such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1823) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). During the mid-1910s to the



mid-1950s, the emergence of the ‘Monster films’ was popularly received by audiences, for instance *Frankenstein* (Edison 1910.) The monstrous horror figures in the films of the 1910s to 1940s would fall into one of two groups, those that were explained supernaturally (witches, vampires, and mummies) or those that were created scientifically (Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, Frankenstein, and King Kong) (Derry 2009:23). These monster films, which were usually dominated by varying adaptations of Frankenstein and Dracula (Figure 2), are colloquially known as the ‘Universal Monsters’. Dixon (2010:xi) states that these universal monsters or “... the Universal mythos [including] (Dracula, the Frankenstein monster, the Wolf Man, the Invisible Man, and the Mummy)” were called as such due to Universal Studios' influence, who produced a vast number of media portraying these monsters.



Figure 2: Boris Karloff (1931) and Max Schreck (1922) as Frankenstein and Count Orlok.  
Frankenstein (1931) and Nosferatu (1922.)  
Photographs by IMDB and TVTropes.

Film serials started becoming popular in the early 1910s, showcasing new chapters weekly and could be considered the forerunners of television viewing. Examples from the time include T. Hayes Hunter's *The Crimson Stain Mystery* (1916), and Louis Feuillade's *Les Vampires* (*The Vampires*, 1915) (Dixon 2010:10). The horror films of the 1930s and 1940s “set the standards for narrative pacing, production values, star power, and iconic and thematic structure” (Dixon 2010:60). Horror films of the 1940s followed

the habit of shooting as quickly and as cheaply as possible, resulting in unoriginal and uncreative films for audiences (Dixon 2010:54). However, studios of the 1950s and 1960s realised that rapidly releasing black and white films was “not be sufficient to sustain the company in the long run” (Dixon 2010:78). This was partially due to the plethora of poorly made sequels that lacked the care and the creativity of bigger budget studios like Universal Studios and Warner Brothers (Dixon 2010:63).

During the emergence of television during the 1930s, the overabundance of monster horror films was repeated for viewing from the 1930s to the 1950s. Therefore, becoming a predecessor of horror television shows before television series adaptations of the monsters found in films of the early 1950s. Major figures of horror at the time, particularly actors Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, acted as star-power drawing in crowds to the failing film industry (Dixon 2010:31). Their popularity was attributed to the repeated broadcasts of these black-and-white films in the early days of television in the 1950s (Derry 2009:55).

The *all-too-real* events of World War II caused the horror genre to look for new content to please a more sophisticated audience. The audiences of these films were people who had seen the violence and atrocities of war, with horror providing an outlet to process these emotional traumas. This followed a transition in horror during the 1950s to 1960s, which shifted towards “... the spreading concern with and fear of the possible innate insanity and violence in man...” (Derry 2009:53). Directors and filmmakers of the time drew inspiration from rising social anxieties over the rapid development of technology being invested by the government in preparation for war (Derry 2009:23). The universal monsters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries died out with World War I and II (Dixon 2010:64). Derry (2009:200) explains the horror genre’s change in the popularity and influence with its audience due to cultural shifts as follows:

[A] genre is a dynamic critical concept; genres evolve to reflect new cultural energies. Yet there are several signs that a genre is losing its vitality. The first is when sequels churn out endlessly, each revealing less creativity and variation than the one before.

Thus, going into the 1960s, independent films started to explore other subject matter instead of the usual monsters like Dracula and Frankenstein. Some of the new subject matter that was explored included sub-genres of the supernatural and science fiction themes. An example of such subject matter is to be seen in *Night of the Living Dead* (Romeo 1968) which is famed for the creation of ‘zombies’ in pop culture (Dixon

2010:107). Other topics used by independent filmmakers in the 1950s to 1970s included sex, sexuality, gender, death, and religion, which had previously not been seen in mainstream studio films. These topics helped these films break away from the then-overused monsters of the earlier studio films (Dixon 2010:67). Many movie-goers of the 1950s and 1960s horror films had grown up in the time of WW1 and WW2. The previous decades of war were a time of violence and anxiety, which filmmakers recognised and exposed through horror media, Derry (2009:53) reveals that:

Horror films have always reflected our deepest anxieties about ourselves. In a time where life, or at least our awareness of it, seems to be increasingly horrible, it is most understandable that elements from horror-of-personality films (violence, insanity) are now being fed into the mainstream. No longer are horror films (if ever they were) escapist fare for children.

This led to the production of independent horror films from the 1950s to the 1970s (Dixon 2010:65). Notably in the USA, a small independent studio American International Pictures (AIP) which “first specialised in cheap black and white double bills with such films as Herbert L. Strock’s *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* and Gene Fowler Jr.’s *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (both 1957)” (Dixon 2010:77). Dixon (2010:77–78) suggests that teenagers during the 1950s were seeking escape at the movies from their parents who were at home watching television. Competing in the UK was a small British studio Hammer Films. Following the repeated viewing of monster films and television series adaptations throughout the 1950s, film studios “[abandoned] these pseudo-America knockoffs and, starting with Mary Shelley’s seminal creation, reinvent the horror film from the ground up” (Dixon 2010:64).

While the monsters of Dracula and Frankenstein were retired by the 1950s, the monster figures of horror remained and evolved into other forms of monstrous abjected sources of horror. Following the assassination of John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s, crime and violence in the USA started to increase. Understandably, another theme that emerged in the film was violence, introduced by Alfred Hitchcock in his highly regarded film *Psycho* (1960). Breaking away from the scientific and supernatural monsters of the early studio films, *Psycho* introduced a third monster of horror – the psychological (Derry 2009:31). Charles Derry (2009:5) states that at the time of the film’s release, the film was criticised for its use of violence, but he defends Hitchcock’s use of violence by insisting that:

[Hitchcock] constructs the first third of his film in such a way that virtually every image promotes compassion for his troubled heroine,

despite her moral failings. Hitchcock's strategy contrasts with many films today, where the victims are mere props, cardboard creations dispatched without a second thought.

A second example of violence being used in horror is *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1968) which is remembered for making "even the most innocent aspects of modern Manhattan life seem sinister" (Dixon 2010:107). Staring in the film alongside his wife, Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate's lives were unfortunately cut short by Charles Manson and his followers not long after the release of the film (Dixon 2010:107).<sup>9</sup> As stated by Dixon (2010:107):

That event marked a change in the public's attitude toward violence, which is arguably, and sadly, reflected in the plethora of slasher films released in the 1970s and through to the present day.

During the 1960s and 1970s, television series aligned themselves alongside the increasingly popular science-fiction genre. This can be seen from the debut of *The Twilight Zone* (Sterling 1959–1964), *The Outer Limits* (Stevens 1995–2000), and *The Addams family* (Addams 1973). Derry (2009:119) states that it was during the 1970s to the 1990s another fascination in pop culture surrounding serial killers gained popularity in visual media. The reception of horror media began to oscillate between being respected by the audience and acquiring contemporary recognition (such as either achieving accolades like an Academy Award or Golden Globe) or being disregarded by both the audience and these film academies completely (Derry 2009:6). This oscillation is often linked to the 'serial horror-franchise' which normally follows a serial killer who stalks and kills a person or group of people in many subsequent remakes, often following a pattern of sorts. Within the horror franchise, the same main antagonist returns again and again. This develops the antagonist into monstrous and increasingly violent in their murder sprees with each new film. Film critics and audiences see these slasher films<sup>10</sup> as pointless and problematic, as well as calling out the repetitiveness of the genre (Dixon 2010:164). This fascination with serial killers is seen today with television shows such as *Dexter* (Manos 2006–2013), *Dahmer* (Murphy 2023) and *Deathnote* (Araki 2006–2007).

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<sup>9</sup> The lives of Abigail Folger, Wojciech Frykowski, Jay Sebring, Steven Parent, Sharon Tate, and her unborn child were murdered on the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> August 1969 by the Manson family cult in their home in Los Angeles.

<sup>10</sup> The slasher, as defined by Dixon (2010:125), is a genre of film that does not focus on character development or motivations, but instead focuses on the killing of as many people as possible during the film.

The horror genre once again fell into the habit of over-producing similar films from the 1970s to the 1990s, which is most obviously seen in the number of sequels and rebooting of the franchises attached to slasher films such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984), which has released sequels in 1985, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1994, 2003, and 2010 is one example. *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978) is another such franchise with sequels being released in 1981, 1982, 1988, 1989, 1995, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2018, 2021, and 2022. Derry (2009:343) suggests that 9/11 forced, at least American, audiences “to develop a more personal, emotional understanding of the meaning of violence in the world.” Therefore, in many horror media since 2000, “the new focus has been on assaulting the spectator with extreme violence, gore and a merciless social critique that understands the social fabric as coming apart at the seams” (Ndalianis 2012:6).

Murder and violence in horror have become a spectacle that audiences cheer on (Derry 2009:221). Ndalianis (2012:5) introduces the concept of *New Horror Media* and its ability to address the spectator through “intense and unforgiving corporeality that demands the attention of the senses.” Films like *The Hills Have Eyes* (Alexandre Aja 2006), *Halloween* (Rob Zombie 2007), and *28 Weeks Later* (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo 2007), plunge the film viewer into spaces of extreme violence that are transformed across the body of the spectator through the senses (Ndalianis 2012:6). While film is an audio-visual medium, sight and sound often migrate their sensory effect onto other sense modalities, therefore making the horror experience even more potent (Ndalianis 2012:6). *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) debuted its episode in 2011, and as previously mentioned the creators behind *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) gained inspiration and aims to give appreciation to horror directors and actors of the past through using common troupes, characters, locations and styles found throughout horror and thriller media.

### **2.1.1. Thriller versus horror**

The dictionary definition of a thriller is “a novel, play or film with an exciting plot, typically involving crime or espionage” (Garmonsway & Simpson 1965:754). Rubin (cited by Killmeier 2013:168) traces the thriller to three literary backgrounds; the first is eighteenth-century Gothic novels that stressed suspense, sex, and violence, the second is the Victorian sensation novel; and lastly the detective or mystery story. Tapping into themes of “Otherness or the exotic [the thriller] ... colour[s] the monochromatic, modern world

with elements of the mysterious, bewitching and enthralling” (Killmeier 2013:169). The thriller allows the audience to be “captured and carried away to be thrilled – to receive a series of sharp sensations” (Hanich 2010:32). Examples of thrillers include *Shutter Island* (Scorsese 2010) or *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme 1991), to name only two.

Horror films, and horror television series, on the other hand, are defined as evoking “an intense feeling of fear, shock, or disgust” (Garmonsway & Simpson 1965:368). Moreover, Illes (2008:110) sees horror:

[as an] attempt- on the part of the characters, obviously, but equally on the part of the audience – to obtain reassurance, to obtain a sense of security in a world made threatening by forces beyond individual control.

Horror serves several functions mainly highlighting social unease or indeterminate fears (Illes 2008:109). It becomes particularly popular around periods of societal anxiety, economic shifts, and change perhaps because personal anxieties are brought with us as we are entertained by the genre (Illes 2008:109). Traditionally, and ironically, horror represents an attempt to find reassurance or a sense of security in a chaotic world (Illes 2008:110.) According to Noël Carroll (cited by Feagin 1992:75):

novels, short stories, films, and even paintings and cartoons belong to the horror genre if (1) they are intended to produce the emotion art-horror, (2) in such a way that the audience's emotions are to run parallel to those of (certain) characters in the work, and (3) these emotions are responses to monsters which are viewed by the characters as disturbances in the natural order.

We can thus summarise that the thriller works to evoke visceral, gut-level feelings and contains alarming, startling, and frightening moments that are brief, while horror evokes an excess of fear in the viewer, evoking more sensitive, cerebral, or emotionally heavy feelings Illes (2008:108). This includes tragedy, pathos, pity, love, or nostalgia which linger and stay with us longer (Illes 2008:108). Timothy Illes (2008:106) states that both the horror and thriller genre grew from a historical tradition for *gruesome* or *shocking* themes. In *Crisis of Identity in Japanese Film*, Illes (2008) traces the origins of the thriller and horror genre, clarifying the differences between the two through various film examples. Illes (2008:107) explains that:

[They] are ... substantively different, and yet they exist in overlapping areas of affect, all aiming in some way to excite the sensations of the

viewer in difficult, frightening, or 'thrilling' ways .... Often a single film will contain many elements from all of these categories.

How can a film be considered both a horror and a thriller? Martin Rubin (1999:5) notes that:

The concept of 'thriller' falls somewhere between a genre proper and a descriptive quality that is attached to other more clearly defined genres ... [but as a collective shorthand for films which contain] an excess of certain qualities and feelings beyond the necessity of the narrative: too much atmosphere, action, suspense- too much, that is, in terms of what is strictly necessary to tell the story...

Our understanding of the thriller and horror can be understood in the differing attitudes in which way this 'excess' of emotions functions. The thriller aims to evoke fright, mystery, exhilaration, and excitement by emphasising visceral feelings rather than emotionally heavy feelings (Killmeier 2013:168). Hanich (2010:32) asserts that "it is next to impossible to generalize about the effects horror films and thrillers have on viewers." Thus, "viewers have very different thresholds in terms of what they consider scary; what people experience as horrifying or terrifying varies a great deal" (Hanich 2010:32). Therefore, some audience members may be extremely frightened or disgusted by what they see on the screen, there will also be a variety of audience members that are not affected by what they experienced at all. Hanich (2010:31) suggests that the horror and the thriller genre both offer "an intense corporeal experience that, at the very least, points in the direction of fear."

Hanich (2010:32) also suggests that the thriller provides a "milder form of emotional involvement than the horror film". Offering a lighter version of horror, including less violence, shocking moments and more moments of relief and rest (Hanich 2010:32). Hanich (2010:31) provides the etymology of "horror" and "thriller," which are derived from:

The Latin 'horrere' meaning 'to stand on end, bristle, shake, shudder, shiver, tremble'. And the adjective 'horrific' comes from the Latin 'horrificus,' literally meaning 'making the hair stand on end'. It thus describes an intense fearful reaction of the body. 'Thriller,' on the other hand, comes from the Middle English word 'thrillen' meaning 'to pierce.'

By looking at my two previous examples of *The Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984) and *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978), one can say that both fit into the thriller and horror category. *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978) follows Michael Myers (who variously has been played by Nick Castle, Tony Moran, Dick Warlock, George P. Wilbur, Don Shanks, Chris Durand, Brad Loree, Tyler Mane, and James Jude Courtney) who was committed to a sanatorium as a child for killing his sister. He is later discharged from the facility and goes on multiple murder sprees. This is an example of a thriller film with horror elements, with the murder and stalking providing moments of horror. On the other hand, *The Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984) has scenes in which the character, and thus the viewers, do not know that they are dreaming before they are killed. The film can be viewed as a horror film with thriller elements and scenes.

*AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) uses both horror and thriller elements to elicit a wide variety of reactions and emotions from the viewers of the series across the entire showing of the series. In both the thriller and horror genres the effect of what we see on the screen is intensified by the technological apparatuses used by the producers. Therefore, I look more closely at the horror genre and what selected technological advancements have influenced the genre.

### **2.1.2. Technological Advancements**

Advances in technological capabilities have allowed for developments in what could – and can – be achieved in the film industry. Visually striking technological advancements and visual effects have allowed viewers to follow the narrative in a somatically involved manner. An early example is when sound technology advanced with the result that sound became a necessity in film from the late 1920s onwards. The first horror film that used sound *The Terror* (Del Ruth 1928) (Dixon 2010:21). Dixon (2010:22) substantiates the importance this shift in technological improvements had for the horror genre:

With this change, there came a complete shift in pictorial values; visuals, which had once driven the horror film, were now relegated to background effects, and sound became the linchpin of the medium.

During the early stages of sound in cinema, studios of the early 1930s adapted Broadway plays for the film screen (Dixon 2010:26). Dixon (2010:26) describes the filming process as follows:



... at the time, sound recording was usually done on large shellac phonograph discs, and directors would typically set up three or four cameras to cover a scene simultaneously in order to give some sense of cinematic style to their productions.

Other technological advances include the use of technicolour<sup>11</sup> between the years 1916 and 1932, make-up, and more recently, special effects produced via 3D technology,<sup>12</sup> and CGI. Alongside computer-generated technological advances in visual effects, practical effects (including illusions or tricks) are also used within film, television, theatre, or video games – such as the use of motion capture suits for the *Mortal combat* series in the 90s (Rokoko 2022). This was achieved through using physical props or machines, in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) this can be seen in the blood splatter made with coloured corn syrup and water. *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984) utilised a lot more fake physical blood during filming than *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978). The surrealistic film drifts between a dream world and reality, giving a lot of room for playing with special effects. Notable is a manually spinning room, a real knife glove, and a secret compartment under a bathtub (so someone could get said knife glove through the bubbled water to attack a victim) (The films that made us: *Nightmare on Elm Street*). Above all else, however, the prosthetic makeup used on Freddy Krueger (Figure 3) is now inseparable from the character.



Figure 3: John Saxon as Freddy Krueger,  
*The Nightmare on Elm Street*.  
Photo by CinemaBlend.

<sup>11</sup> A process of colour cinematography that uses synchronised monochrome films, each of a different colour, layered to produce a colour print (Garmonsway & Simpson 1965:744.)

<sup>12</sup> Technology developed alongside computers, which allows for the illusion of a three-dimensional imagery and special effects in films.

The rise of television in the 1950s affected the popularity of the film industry. Derry (2009:57) suggests that during the 1950s “the television replaced the fireplace as the centre of the American home, but in addition to bringing us warmth and comforting entertainment, it brought bad news and new fears”. While other film genres slowed down in popularity due to the rise in popularity of television, horror however was a genre that television had largely not experimented with. The film industry of the 1950s started experimenting with early 3D technology to draw the attention of audiences away from the television. Examples of this early 3D technology can be seen in films such as *Bwana Devil* (Oboler 1952) and *House of Wax* (de Toth, 1953) (Dixon 2010:65). During the early 2000s, 3D computer-generated imagery was perfected. Its inclusion has allowed for the exploration of subject matter with less physical production of props and set designs, this use of editing heightens the viewer’s bodily response.

3D-Generated imagery can be seen in the twins, Bette and Dotte Tadler in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). The process started by filming the actress Sarah Paulsen, who plays both characters and then editing both heads onto one body. Or it can be seen in the gore generated for the mouth of the character Twisty. The visual effects produced by these technological advancements allow for further explorations into the subject matter, such as more sophisticated supernatural elements with the advancements of digital effects, or (in the case of the slasher films) practical effects. In the horror genre, the visual effects produced by these technological advancements appeal to our nonconscious and add to these films’ psychological effects.

### **2.1.3. Psychological horror**

“Films are much like dreams, and horror films are like nightmares” (Derry 2009:21). Much like a nightmare, horror films allow its audience to process unconscious fears. Psychological horror focuses on the psychological thinking or emotional states of the audience and filmmakers at the time the film was made. During the 1960s, horror turned away from the monster towards the psychological. Inspired by the success of *Psycho* (Hitchcock 1960), psychological horror refers to horror films that remind their audience of the psychological and violent potential of everyone around us, not just the obvious abstracted forms of man like Frankenstein or Dracula. Throughout the development of film, filmmakers have become more aware of the impact that psychological impressions have on the audience.

The brief exploration into the technological advancements has shown how horror films and TV series use various strategies to elicit deeply felt responses – both somatic and psychological – in the audience. The experience of watching horror films and television shows enables us to experience the horror from an outside perspective, this distance allows the viewer to deal non-consciously with our fears or previous traumatic experiences we have had. This is also true when one watches *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). Ndalianis (2012:6) maintains that “the disgusting subject matter [used in horror films] imbricates itself into our bodies and across our skin by inciting our senses directly, and synaesthetically<sup>13</sup>, in very real ways”. We take in the disgusting subject matter onscreen, “so that our bodies are forced to respond physically” (Ndalianis 2012:6).

How can one account for the audience’s physical responses to the disgusting subject matter they see in horror films and horror TV shows? To answer this question it is necessary to delve into approaches to film that have analysed the embodied encounter between spectators and films to apply this approach to the TV series *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). In the next section, therefore, I explain what embodied perception and phenomenology refer to and how the abject, affect, and disgust are forms of bodily perception. These body-centred approaches to the analysis of film fall within the larger theoretical framework of phenomenology and film phenomenology which underpins the theoretical approach I take in analysing *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

## 2.2. Phenomenology and Embodied Perception

Phenomenology is the study of the structures of experience and the unconscious, in which researchers study individuals’ lived experiences in the world (Baker 2009:11). As Jennifer Barker (2009:11) explains:

Phenomenological description seeks to identify the underlying structures of the phenomenon at hand by studying its intimate entailment with the intentional act of perception to which the phenomenon is present.

Barker (2009:11) recommends that researchers approach art and film experiences in this way because this way of being in the world resonates meaningfully with the viewer’s

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<sup>13</sup> “Synaesthesia refers to the ability sense modalities have to translate themselves in other senses” (Ndalianis 2012:6.)

ways of being. Phenomenology forms the foundation of theories about the embodied perception of film by directly addressing the embodied spectator (Fisher 2014:56). It is important to note that researchers' findings show that not every single spectator reacts to something in the same way, pointing out the problem with unifying our encounters from one experience.

Jaimey Fisher (2014:53) however, identifies the central approach of the 'lived body' as a "sense of how the body affects perception, affect/emotion, experience, and reason". The body is inserted into the world, which we relate to and make sense of with our bodies which become the mediators between our unconscious and the exterior world of objects (Barker 2009:17). The cinema offers structured narratives and collectively staged events that help identify encounters experienced by the body (Fisher 2014:51). Sobchack (2004) mobilises Merleau-Ponty's notions of perception to demonstrate that a film has its own embodied existence in the world, sharing modes of visual perception.

### **2.2.1. Phenomenology and film studies**

As previously stated, a phenomenological analysis gives a glimpse into an embodied structure between the film and the viewer that begins with the body. Barker (2009:11) explains that we approach art and film experiences intentionally, and this way of viewing a film resonates meaningfully with a person's way of being in the world. The film experience is made meaningful because of our bodies, which is different from the film's body because, as Sobchack argues, the film has its own body (Barker 2009:8). Elsaesser and Hagener (2015:116) explain this as a process that is: circular or self-reinforcing:

the film is the expression of an experience, and this expression is itself experienced in the act of watching a film, becoming as a consequence the experience of an expression: 'an expression of experience by experience'.

In other words, spectators experience the film's (and in this case the TV series') representation of experiences that they are all in some ways familiar with owing to their lived experience in the world. This double structure persists in a convertible form. From the intersubjective communication between the spectator, film, and filmmaker this double structure is "enabled by a shared structure of embodied experience that permits the perception of experience and the experience of perception in the first place" (Elsaesser & Hagener 2015:117).

While authors Hanich (2010), Bantinaki (2012), Plantinga (2009), Reyes (2016), and Strohl (2012) have explored disgust in terms of 1980s horror films, like *The Exorcist*, there has been no study on disgust in AHS (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-). Therefore, we can summarise that through the experience of watching a film, we are perceptually immersed in the film. The filmmaker's intentions elicit a response from the body. In the case of horror films and TV series, this response might take the form of powerful affects such as disgust. Our mind recognises the nonconscious response by the body and then undergoes the processes of the experience. Therefore, it is through the experience of phenomenological analysis that we can interoperate affective responses such as disgust that are felt in our bodies, directed through media such as *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

### 2.3. The Affect of Horror

Affect has been defined differently by different theorists. This makes the term rather slippery and difficult to pin down. For instance, Plantinga (2009:29) defines affect very broadly as “any state of feeling or sensation”. This includes all manner of emotions, feelings, and sensations like desires, pleasures, and moods. In addition, affect also includes reflex responses like getting startled or scared. On the other hand, Massumi (cited by Leys 2011:441) defines *affect* as “... a nonsignifying, nonconscious ‘intensity’ disconnected from the subjective, signifying, functional-meaning axis to which the more familiar categories of emotion belong”. In other words, Plantinga and Massumi disagree about the relationship between affect, feeling and emotion. However, Eric Shouse (cited by Leys 2011:442) warns that it is important not to get confused between emotions and affect, noting that:

Affect is not a personal feeling. Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social ... and affects are pre-personal .... An affect is a nonconscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential .... Affect cannot be fully realised in language ... because affect is always before and/or outside consciousness .... Affect is the body's way of preparing itself for action in a given circumstance by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience. The body has a grammar of its own that cannot be fully captured in language.

Unlike Massumi and Shouse, many theorists who are interested in the embodied perception of film conflate feeling and emotion (such as Hanich 2010 and Plantinga 2009). In pursuing a bodily-centred perspective to *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), I will do the same. Emotions, as described by Hanich (2010:18–19), are complex phenomena that

are directed at something, being thought through and experienced. Similarly, Plantinga (2009:9) characterises emotions as a “concern-based construal” which is a judgement or perception which represents how a situation affects a viewer’s concerns. In this sense, emotions result from someone’s concern with their perception of an event or situation (Plantinga 2009:9). This means that the affect can be defined as a nonconscious feeling that we are familiar with but are somewhat disconnected from. Although they may be elusive, autonomic, and nonconscious; affective responses induce reflection and critical thought that may be interpreted as feelings (Kesting 2017:13). While we watch films, we experience affective experiences which vary from positive to negative. Silvan Tomkins (cited by Angerer 2011:211) further clarifies:

Positive affects are interest and curiosity, joy and excitement, neutral affects are surprise and dismay, negative affects are stress and fear, terror and shock, anger and fury, disgust, and above all, shame.

In his application of affect to horror films, Hanich (2010:22) describes the ‘affective experience’ as a transformative experience that is not reflected upon during the experience. Rather, it is only after the encounter that a phenomenological reflection can lead to our recovery from the affective-mannered situation. By extension, affective responses are reflective responses that occur between our intellect and our bodies. Film and visual media account for how our whole bodies and psyche are affected by the things that we see on the screen (Elsaesser & Hagener 2015:127). Thus, once phenomenologically reflected on, emotional and affective responses to horror media such as *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), may potentially at least, offer a transformative experience in response to the subject matter the viewer has seen. As stated by Hanich (2010:22), “these transformative experiences are rarely reflected upon *during* our fearful encounter with the film”. Before we realise, we are in an affective state, we are already “experiencing the situation in an affective manner. It is only *after the fact* that phenomenological reflection can recover the experience” (Hanich 2010:22, emphasis in original).

### **2.3.1. Emotional and affective responses to horror**

According to Plantinga (2009:29), ‘affect’ is cognitively impenetrable, so that the “...causal chain may be inaccessible to consciousness. But affective experience, although it may be itself ‘cognitively impenetrable,’ can certainly contribute to the cognitive complexity of a film”. For Plantinga (2009:21–22), the cognitive complexity of a

film refers to the spectators being motivated by narrative emotions, such as curiosity, suspense, and anticipation. In this sense, emotional and affective engagement with a film can lead audiences to a heightened involvement with the storylines. Horror films tend to focus on the purposeful eliciting of negative emotional affects like disgust. In a genre that usually explicitly shows violence, profanity, illicit substances (such as drugs), the eating of raw animal organs, nudity, and scenes of a sexual nature, horror has the potential to elicit various responses in the viewer, both positive and negative.

Hanich (2010:87) identifies an ontological distance (a sense of safety) between the spectator and the screen, which allows the audience to feel the experiences that a character is feeling. It is when this ontological distance is brought down that the viewer feels the full effect of the emotion. However, as previously discussed, an emotional, and thus an affective response such as disgust, is a type of embodied experience that is not universal to every person. In the context of emotional affects elicited specifically by the horror genre, film theorist Noël Carroll is often brought into the conversation owing to his arguments on the 'paradox of horror'. This paradox focuses on the positive emotional experiences that are left after watching a horrifying film.

### **2.3.2. Noël Carroll's 'Paradox of Horror'**

Carroll's (1990:179) own answer to the paradox is that the source of our fear or repulsion is not the source of the pleasure we have from horror; it is the narrative that holds people's interests and satisfies our curiosity of the unknown being or object of our horror. Thus, negative emotions like fear are the price to pay for satisfying our curiosity about the abject monstrous things we see in horror films and TV series (Plantinga 2009:180). Plantinga (2009), Katerina Bantinaki (2012), and Susan Feagin (1992) set the foundation for the responses and further exploration into Carroll's paradox through the concept of the abject. Hanich (2010:5) disagrees with Hume and Carroll, rather suggesting that researchers "... overemphasize the cognitive pleasure and thus overintellectualizes a rather somatic experience". Hanich proposes that what we see right now is what is scaring us and not the previous narrative or characters. On the other hand, Strohl (2012:205) specifically notes that "Carroll's story may correctly describe some cases, but it is unacceptable as a universal account of our enjoyment of horror". Similarly, Susan Feagin (1992:80) also identifies a problem, with Carroll's assessment of the paradox of horror. She argues that Carroll "... protests too much against the possibility that a major source of the enjoyment of horror films is having the feelings of fear and disgust". Instead,

Feagin (1992:81) maintains that it is possible to enjoy the components of fear and disgust rather than only finding them entirely unpleasant. Katerina Bantinaki (2012:384) notes that Carroll believes that when we identify typical objects of horror, such as monsters or confrontations with the abject, that "... lie outside our standing conceptual schemes," we see these as disgusting or disturbing. These objects attract our attention and elicit our curiosity, in that we want to know more about these beings, their behaviour, and if they can be destroyed (Bantinaki 2012:384). The uncanny encounter with these strange, mysterious, monstrous, and/or disgusting objects elicits curiosity, and this is the basis of our paradoxically pleasurable experience of horror.

While this 'paradox' remains contested and unsettled among researchers, it is important to raise it as it leads to the question of whether the act of experiencing an emotion like disgust could be pleasurable after the experience. From a psychological perspective, the horror genre taps into our nonconscious need to cope with things that frighten us (Derry 2009:22). As Derry (2009:22) argues, "usually the form (in other words, the monster) is something abstracted from man: a horror that keeps its distance from man both aesthetically and metaphysically". These abstracted forms include monsters, ghosts, demons, witches, Armageddon, satanism and serial killers, as well as actions that are foreign to us such as murder, corpses, and detached body parts. From past experiences and traumas, the audience responds to abjected forms of man that we see on the screen. Filmmakers recognise this and deliberately confront us with our nonconscious fears in the form of the abject.

#### **2.4. The Abject**

Robbie Duschinsky (2013:712) defines the abject as that which is "... impure, ineffable, disgusting, horrifying, illicitly desirable, outside of logic, rejected by classification, maternal, continuous (as opposed to discrete)". Similarly, Foster (1996:114) describes anxiety caused by the abject as "a phantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it – too much so in fact, and this over-proximity produces panic in the subject". The abject points at our source of intensity, drawing our energy while keeping us at a distance (Krečič & Žižek 2016:70). Krečič and Žižek (2016:70) describe encounters with the abject in the following way:

The encounter of the abject arouses fear, not so much fear of a particular actual object (snakes, spiders, height), but a much more basic fear of the breakdown of what separates us from external



reality; what we fear in an open wound, or a dead body is not its ugliness but the blurring of the line between inside and outside.

As humans we do not seek out abjection, and wherever possible, avoid it at all costs (Arya 2014:7). We expel the abject, yet it remains to hover and challenges the boundaries of the self (Arya 2014:6). However, the abject compels and terrifies us, fascinating us while keeping distance, protecting us from the dangers we experience when confronting the abject (Arya 2014:5). Although the abject is rejected by the subject, it endures because "... that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life" (Creed 1986:69). As a result, abjection is essential to our "... ontological reality and epistemological awareness of what it means to be human" (Arya 2014:19). Thus, it is integral to how the subject identifies "what is 'I' and what is 'not I'" (Riqz 2013:1281).

In her introductory text to the abject, Kristeva identifies four main sources of abjection in her opening chapter *Approaching Abjection* (1982), emerging through confrontations with food loathing, experiences with sinister individuals (that reject the safe symbolic order of society), bodily excretions and waste products, and seeing a corpse outside of a church or morgue (Creed 1986:70).

#### **2.4.1. Julia Kristeva on the abject**

Kristeva's (1982:2–3) explanation of the abject can be best seen when describing a situation when we drink an old glass of milk:

When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk-harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful- I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire.

The process that the milk undergoes from being a homogenous liquid to being a semi-solid liquid causes sensory discomfort, "making the milk an object of disgust" (Arya 2014:11). When confronted with the spoilt milk, we are unable to rid ourselves of the body's response of revulsion or disgust. The milk is abjected, threatening our well-being and making us temporarily lose a sense of ourselves (Arya 2014:11). When confronted with the abject, we expel the abject to restore safety and stability, if only temporarily (Arya 2014:4). This threatens our boundaries of the self, as elaborated by Kristeva (1982:9–10):

One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims- if not its submissive and willing ones. We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it- on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.

Food loathing according to Kristeva (1982:2) is the most well-known state of the abject. Food only transitions into the abject when it borders "... between two distinct entities or territories" (Kristeva 1982:75), as when the milk transitions from a liquid to a semi-solid liquid. When we are challenged with nausea concerning the abject, the boundary between inside and outside is transgressed, becoming foreign and abject (Arya 2014:193). The reaction of disgust and nausea to food items stems from the body's natural reaction to protect itself from harm. As Kristeva (1982:2) explains, "... the retching that thrusts me to the side ... turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck". By blurring the line between inside and outside, the abject gives us insight into our fear of foreign objects, the relationship between body and language and how we construct our identities (Arya 2014:190). This encounter with an abjected source linked to food can elicit a reaction of disgust from the viewer.

For Kristeva (1982:4), the ultimate source of abjection is the cadaver or corpse, as being seen without the presence of a soul and being seen outside of accepted settings such as a morgue or a church, which represents death infecting life. According to Arya (2014:193), humans ignore the skeleton within our skin for our daily comfort, meaning that to cope and live a productive life we ignore our skeletons, our blood, and our organs. This transgression of the boundary between life and death thrusts the viewer into a state of abjection, which can elicit a sense of disgust in the viewer.

The second-last source of abjection identified by Kristeva is acknowledged by Barbra Creed (1986:70) as the most dangerous form of abjection to an observer, a sinister individual who rejects the law and denies morality (Creed 1986:70). Identified by Kristeva (1982:4) as including:

... that which does not respect limits, places, or rules. It is the in-between, the ambiguous, the mixed. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the rapist without scruple, the killer who claims to save... All crime, because it indicates the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, sly murder, hypocritical vengeance

are still more so because they emphasise this exhibition of legal fragility.

Arya (2014:2) states that abjection is an explanation and rationalisation for laws and codes that underpin social, legal, and cultural orders. Transgressing these laws and codes renders the object abject. Being at the heart of social and cultural regulations, the abject determines what is socially and individually permissible or not through the symbolic social order. Seen to take place outside the symbolic order determined by society, the abject therefore evokes feelings of anxiety, disgust, repulsion, and fear (Rizq 2013:1277). Therefore, when being confronted with an individual who overlooks the boundary between chaos and order, threatens the viewer and leaves the sinister individual abject.

These abjected and sinister individuals who do not respect boundaries threaten the social order and thus threaten our bodies' safety in society. Through murderous characters such as the universal monsters of early sound cinema, Freddy Krueger or Michael Myers, horror films are saturated with blood and gore which deliberately challenge the fragility of the symbolic order (Creed 1986:74). The function of the monster figure in horror films, "... present alternatives to the tenuous human equilibrium; that is, a vampire is too close to man for comfort; even on a simplistic level it is obvious that King Kong represents an aspect of man that man has managed to suppress" (Derry 2009:22). Thus, in horror media these sinister individuals embody aspects of man that we ignore socially to remain a part of accepted society, and any individual that goes beyond that boundary is seen as abject in society.

Therefore, the last source of abjection identified by Kristeva is bodily fluids or excretions, which involve all manners of secretions such as blood, urine, and sexual fluids. Bodily waste is central to culturally and socially constructed notions of stability in society (Creed 1986:73). These bodily fluids are contextually accepted while existing inside of the body. However, when crossing the boundary of inside and outside, the body's 'wholeness' is threatened, filling the subject with disgust and revulsion (Creed 1986:73–74). The body expels waste products that are unsafe to keep in the body (such as faeces, blood, urine, and pus) to protect itself from waste, which is deemed society determines inappropriate (Creed 1986:70).

Therefore, we can summarise that when we watch abjected sources in horror media, a somatic response of disgust is initiated by our bodies in response to the disgusting and abjected imagery we see onscreen. According to Hanich (2010:82;89), objects of our fear intrigue us, and much like the abject and the paradox of horror, results in our emotions oscillating between wanting to push and pull away from the object. We are unable to rid ourselves of the source of abjection and our disgust as it is “abject and not an object, and hence threatens our being” (Arya 2014:11). To fully understand and explore the experience of disgust elicited by these sources of abjection expressed in relation to the social issues explored in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), disgust must be unpacked and explored.

## 2.5. Disgust

The elicitation of emotions like disgust in film leads to an action response as Fisher (2014:66) explains:

The disgust reaction, at least initially, does not require any thinking, any conscious cognition or sympathy with a protagonist. If viewers see a close-up of fly-ridden putrescent flesh, most are likely to feel disgust without requiring a shot of the protagonist’s reaction – in this way, disgust serves as a powerful example of cinema’s potential for direct affect.

Plantinga (2009:51) on the other hand, argues that emotions are not an after-effect of the film experience but are brought on by unconscious mental processes that elicit certain emotional and affective responses. Carroll’s (1990:25) view of emotions is that emotions are brought on or caused when an individual has certain types of ideas or thoughts. Feagin (1992:81) states that feeling emotions like disgust, “can be attended by an extraordinary number of feelings which are partially constitutive of one’s disgust on a given occasion”.

Personal experiences throughout our lives fuel emotions behind disgust, for example, someone who has drunk spoilt milk will react more somatically to the sight of such milk than someone who has not. Through desensitisation to disgusting imagery, some individuals are attracted to the elicited experience of disgust. Plantinga (2009:207) classifies two main types of experiences with disgust, physical disgust and sociomoral disgust.

### 2.5.1. Types of disgust

Disgust functions to control society, and to keep the boundary between chaos and order. Disgust then has a deeper role in society, playing a higher social purpose (Ndalianis 2012:34). Sociomoral disgust thus refers to behaviour those in society find disgusting, and as a result, those that cross that border are deemed disgusting (Plantinga 2009:216). Social disgust discourages criminal acts, but also “[contributes] to the justification of murder or execution in the name of a larger social good” (Plantinga 2009:213).

Physical disgust refers to the activation of the “biological process of rejection” (Arya 2014:35). When interacting with stimuli that we consider disgusting, this may cause moments of physical reactions. Such reactions include not being able to move, looking away, covering the eyes, nausea, retching, and in some even laughter (Arya 2014:151). When being confronted with nausea, our bodies have the desire to move away and reduce sensory contact with the source of the disgust (Arya 2014:33). As a result, we turn and look away to reduce contact with it, Arya (2014:38–39) explains: We turn away from something that causes disgust because we do not want to be in contact with it; we fear it and it is perceived to be dangerous because of its powers to contaminate or pollute by contact or ingestion. As a result, we recoil in fear or disgust.

Studies conducted by Rozin et al (in Arya 2014:35) found that physical disgust involves more than an instinctual response of nausea to spoiled or unsavoury food. The physical form of horror takes place in an image of an abjected object of horror. This reminds the audience of themselves and their experiences, enhancing this disgust that our bodies instinctively feel when watching horror media, such as *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). Other sources of physical disgust include seeing acts of cannibalism, seeing murder, violence, or corpses. This disgust is elicited to protect the body from contamination from the abjected source of disgust, as suggested by Derry (2009:23):

... [this keeps] a distance from man aesthetically and metaphysically.  
This separation allows us to confront this enemy, following a sort of a struggle between man’s rational and animal instincts.

Finally, to sum up, sociomoral disgust is classified as a social construction, while physical disgust is culturally determined, “... influenced by cultural assumptions and by what cultures find to be socio-morally disgusting” (Plantinga 2006:83–84). For instance, it is culturally determined that vomiting or urinating would be frowned on in public, thus confronting vomit or urine in public might cause a physical response of disgust. It is

established by Arya (2014:44) that experiences inflicted on the physical body are reflected by the social body. Cultures around the world differ in the "... means of mapping physical onto sociomoral disgust" (Plantinga 2009:206). However, both sociomoral and physical disgust encourage people to turn away or leave the source of disgust, which starts a "... push and pull between curiosity and fascination on the one hand and aversion and repulsion on the other" (Plantinga 2009:212).

## 2.6. Conclusion

Throughout the history of horror films, filmmakers have concentrated on the psychological effects on audiences' unconscious responses or fears. Advancements in technology have propelled and influenced the technical potentialities of horror films by enabling filmmakers to experiment with what is possible to achieve with their subject matter and narratives. Using psychological influence in horror, the audience watching is directly confronted with our nonconscious fears. Therefore, our bodies react to these created images before our minds and unconscious can fully translate what we have experienced, as originally theorised by Merleau-Ponty. Sobchack (1992:10) argues, our nonconsciousness is embodied. Thus, our bodies react to the images that we see in the film which elicits a somatic reaction unknowingly.

When applied in the context of the film, the paradox of horror questions why we willingly watch violent, disgusting, and unpleasant media. When applied to the context of a television show such as *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-), why would an audience continue to watch horror media week after week? The 'paradox of horror', while not entirely conclusive, is explained, to some extent, through the abject. More specifically when confronted with the abjected monsters, groups and objects often seen in horror, the viewer is conflicted by the unfamiliar horror source but draws our interest and fascination to learn more about the unfamiliar source. This leads to the viewer feeling conflicted between a fascinating pull towards these sources of horror and our natural reaction to pushing these sources away.

This state of being in between the familiar and unfamiliar could elicit a reaction of disgust from the viewer. Emotions that are elicited from these experiences affect us particularly strongly in situations when our emotional states are already heightened. A highly negative affect like disgust stays with us; although we instinctively push these sights away, the source of the disgust still draws our interest. However, every person who

watches disgusting scenes or moments in horror will process and physically react differently. Therefore, through desensitisation of these disgusting moments in horror media some audience viewers can start to enjoy and look at these experiences. This offers some justification for why we obtain pleasure from experiencing these negative affective emotions and responses.

## CHAPTER 3

### FREAK SHOWS IN VISUAL CULTURE

Since the main subject of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) centres around a freak show, aiming to provide a finer historical context of the rise of the freak show in visual culture. The creators of the show revealed in a behind-the-scenes interview in 2014 that a lot of research was done into the lives of freak show performers to portray the subject matter to its fullest. This chapter aims to provide context of what the lives of living freak show performers were so that the socio-hierarchical issues represented in the series can be analysed in Chapter four. From a phenomenological perspective, as described by Lavery (2003:27) rich descriptions focus:

on the structure of experience, the organizing principles that give form and meaning to the life world ... seeks to elucidate the essences of these structures as they appear in consciousness - to make the invisible visible (Kvale 1996; Osborne 1994; Polkinghorne 1983.) Hermeneutic research is interpretive and concentrated on historical meanings of experience and their developmental and cumulative effects on individual and social levels.

Therefore, I shall be introducing the history of the freak show and influences of the Victorian era (1837 to 1901), which aims to provide insight into the modern notion of the freak show (Chrisp 2005:5). It is important to thereafter define what a 'freak' performer was during the height of freak shows popularity. This chapter further aims to introduce the representation of freak show performers in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), with a particular focus on the main inspiration behind the series, namely the 1932 film, *Freaks* (Browning 1932.) The chapter concludes with a brief introduction into the representation of trends followed amongst the freak show performers typically cast in the troupe of performers, which includes a comparison between characters in *Freaks* (Browning 1932) and *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

#### 3.1. History of the Freak Show

During the Middle Ages,<sup>14</sup> between the fifth and fifteenth centuries, people lived in small, relatively remote communities (Nickell 2005:4). Most Europeans during this time had

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<sup>14</sup> The earliest recorded stories about a group of performers entertaining a crowd are the Westcar Papyrus (1550 B.C.), describing an Egyptian conjurer (magician) named Tchatacha-em-ankh (Nickell 2005:1.) The handed down stories are widely thought to be from the court of Khufu (in 2680 B.C.), recounting "... leading a lion about as if with a rope and restoring a head that had been severed" (Nickell 2005:1) As far back as 2400 B.C. Egyptian art depicted "jugglers, acrobats,



access to carefully created visual and textual representations of ‘monstrosity’ which were tailored to serve a particular political, moral, or religious purpose (Durbach 1971:2). When travelling entertainers brought dancing bears, trained dogs, and troupes of jugglers this generated great excitement in these communities (Nickell 2005:4). Nadja Durbach (1971:2) explains that:

In medieval Europe monstrous births were often interpreted as divine signs, omens that warned of impending danger. But as many scholars have noted, by the sixteenth century they were beginning to lose their portentous status, becoming objects of curiosity and wonder as well as tropes rich in metaphorical and political resonance.

While the roots of modern freak shows lie in medieval Europe, the peak in popularity of the freak show occurred between 1847 and 1914 (Durbach 1971:1–2). From the mid-nineteenth century, there were two forms of travelling entertainment – the carnival and the circus. Distinguishing between the similar forms of travelling entertainment of this time, Nickell (2005:19–20) explains that:

... a carnival is a travelling outdoor amusement enterprise – usually including rides, concessions, games, and sideshows – arrayed around a broad walkway. When the carnival is an adjunct to a circus, fair, or exposition, it is termed a midway because, as its name implies, it is located between the entrance and the big top (or pavilion), where the main entertainers perform. Essentially, then, a carnival is only a midway, which can be taken on the road or rail by itself.

During the 1830s, carnivals, or ‘outside shows’ began to align with travelling menageries and circuses, eventually thriving as a separate attraction (Nickell 2005:9). In 1850, however, relationships were established between these sideshows and main shows (Nickell 2005:9). Therefore, circuses can have sideshows,<sup>15</sup> including a freak show, while

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and clowns, along with parades, entertaining the nobility and citizenry.” (Nickell 2005:2). This practice continued into the Roman era, as documented by writer Juvenal (60-127 A.D.), who stated that the public desired “... *panem et circenses*- ‘bread and circuses’” (Nickell 2005:2). At these circuses spectators gathered in large roofless arenas which had oval tracks used for various events such as chariot races, and public shows (Nickell 2005:2). One might suggest that these are all examples of what would later come to be associate freak shows.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Sideshow’, refers to a show that is subsidiary to the main one, literally meaning “... a show to the side” (Nickell 2005:24). The first recorded uses the term in the *Oxford English Dictionary* dating to 1971 (Nickell 2005:24) was by Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891), better known as P.T. Barnum (Nickell 2005:10).

a carnival cannot (Nickell 2005:24). Durbach (1971:2) explains that by the eighteenth and nineteenth-century performers included people acting as:

... horned men, hairy women, giants, dwarfs, and double-bodied wonders had become staples of both popular and elite culture, appearing not only in entertainment venues but also in scientific spaces.

Most early attempts at permanent structures for circuses were not successful, which eventually forced showmen to take their acts to the road, using wagons and tents (Nickell 2005:9). However, new forms of transportation options available in the 1830s and 1840s allowed the travelling circus to flourish, and by the 1830s there were more than 30 circuses on the road in the United States of America (USA) (Nickell 2005:9). This meant that from the easier travel methods such as the railway, freak shows also became more accessible to a wider audience. Furthermore, as they were no longer dependent only upon *local* anomalous births, showmen and circus managers could travel to find a wider range and variety of people to perform in the show (Durbach 1971:3). Durbach (1971:5) maintains that, while popular in the USA at this time, freak shows were also "... highly mobile spectacles that visited not only cities but also towns and sometimes villages across the United Kingdom". As Durbach (1971:3) states:

... they could draw upon a larger pool of performers who came not only from other European countries but also from the Americas, Asia, and Africa – locations that sometimes yielded genetic mutations that resulted in anomalous bodies that were unfamiliar, and therefore intriguing, to those of European descent. By the mid-nineteenth century, the freak show had become a truly international institution.

Showmen oversaw the performers of the travelling freak shows, usually men given guardianship or ownership of freak show performers controlling the performer's career. The most prolific showman is undoubtedly the American, Phineas Taylor Barnum, better known as P.T. Barnum (1810–1891) (Nickell 2005:10). Barnum's curiosities can be regarded as the first official freak show, known for being one of the biggest of their kind. Barnum's travelling tour is described by Nickell (2005:15) as follows:

He sent the massive 100-wagon caravan on the road in 1871, and by the next year, the multiple-tent show was being billed as 'Barnum's Magic City' ... By this time, Barnum was already heading his advertisements with the phrase destined for history, 'The Greatest Show on Earth!' According to one authority, 'The golden age of circus had begun!'

Barnum was not only a showman, but he also became a museum owner in late 1841. Along with a financial backer, Barnum bought a five-story building naming it “Barnum’s American Museum” (Nickell 2005:11). The museum<sup>16</sup> featured a permanent collection of stuffed animals, fossils, and scientific demonstrations as well as live entertainers including contortionists, a banjoist, a female magician, a tattooed man, a lecturer on animal magnetism, albinos, giants, dwarfs, the Highland Fat Boys, ballet dancers, theatrical performances, and magic shows, to name only a few (Nickell 2005:11–12). In 1870 Barnum took his museum on the road, after striking a deal with Dan Castello and William Cameron Coup. He named this museum “P. T. Barnum’s Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan, Hippodrome & Circus” (Nickell 2005:15). At the time, this was the biggest circus ever in the USA, although Barnum merely regarded it as his museum being resurrected on tour<sup>17</sup> (Nickell 2005:15). Throughout the long and complex history of freak shows, the height of their popularity was during the Victorian era (1837–1901). This era marked the extreme high and the initial fall in the popularity of freak shows in entertainment.

### **3.1.1. The Victorian era**

Victorian era ‘freakery’ blurred the boundary between the self and the other, focusing on the ‘normalcy’ of the audience and the ‘abnormal’ performer (Davies 2015:15). During the eighteenth century, freak show performers (being those that had been born with or had attained significant bodily anomalies later in life), were medically classified and called “monsters” (Dixon 2010:22). Robert Bogdan (in Davies 2015:14) argues that people classified as ‘freaks’ in the nineteenth century would appear in a wide variety of locations including circuses, exhibition buildings, and carnivals but also in museums, lecture halls, and medical theatres (Davies 2015:14).

Victorian anthropologist, Sir Frances Galton, is famous for coining the ideas surrounding the rise of eugenics and the pursuit of “racial fitness” (Rich 2010:4.) Galton (cited by Rich 2010:4) defines eugenics as “... the study of agencies under social control that may

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<sup>16</sup> This museum unfortunately burned down on 13 July 1865 (Nickell 2005:14). Soon afterwards the “New American Museum” was built on another site, but unfortunately also burnt down in March 1868 (Nickell 2005:14). Barnum always had a complicated relationship with his failures, retiring as a museum owner in 1868, and starting his showman career in 1870 (Nickell 2005:10,17).

<sup>17</sup> Barnum, who was now in his 60s, never travelled with the show but contributed his name and genius for publicity (Nickell 2005:15). Barnum passed away on 7 April 1891 (Nickell 2005:10,17).

improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally” (Rich 2010:4). The reason for the variety of spaces in which ‘freaks’ were shown to audiences was largely due to the ‘*New Poor Law*’ of 1834 in the UK, which distinguished between the ‘able-bodied’ poor (those who could work) and ‘the infirm’ (those who were unable to work) (Durbach 1971:5). Since freak show performers were working, they were classed as able-bodied. This demonstrated their “... respectable status as self-sufficient labourers and resist[ed] the idea that they were dependents suffering from what the poor law termed ‘infirmity of the body’” (Durbach 1971:19).

The position of being classified as ‘able-bodied’ was heavily invested in by all freak show performers. Not being classified in this way had social and cultural ramifications, with many people being forced to a life in sweatshops, workhouses, or asylums (Durbach 1971:19).<sup>18</sup> Experts on the poor law policy, Sidney, and Beatrice Webb (cited by Durbach 1971:19), define the infirm as “... permanently incapacitated, whether from old age, physical defect, or chronic debility, from obtaining any paid employment”. If you were deemed unable to work, you were permitted to receive ‘outdoor’ poor relief, (including food, money, or medicine), and if you were deemed able to work you could seek aid from the government (Durbach 1971:18). If someone chose to receive outdoor relief from the government, they needed to be prepared to give up their independent existence and enter a workhouse for the rest of their life. The 1840s introduced an intense fascination with understanding the human body evidenced by the “... increased concern about the health and fitness of the white British body” (Durbach 2010:20–21). Thus, medical practitioners sought out freak shows to advance their knowledge about pathology and eugenics (Durbach 2010:39). Researchers of the time included social purists, social Darwinists, and Eugenicists, which Angelique Richardson (1999:228) explains:

... were concerned less with examining the unstable, socially constructed nature of selfhood and the body, than with grounding both the body and sex roles in the flesh and blood of evolutionary narrative.

Teratology and Teratogeny (sciences of birth defects), specifically by the father-son team of Etienne and Isidore Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, “... argued that congenital anomalies were not random but rather fell into clear categories that could be scientifically classified”

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<sup>18</sup> This was the unfortunate ending place for many freak show performers and was demonstrated in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) in the character Pepper in season Three and episode Four after she was falsely accused of murder and sent to an asylum for the rest of her life.

(Durbach 2010:22). Many performers with extraordinary bodies and their managers, on the other hand, resisted getting any sort of diagnoses from medical professionals, trying instead to establish that they were not exhibiting a diseased or unhealthy body (Durbach 1971:26). However, the freak show communities' deformities were often examined, speculated on, catalogued, and these people were seen as nothing but props in lessons of abnormal physiology (Kochanek 1997:230). It is important to note that there had been no previous scientific system of classifying people with physical deformities or illnesses before (Kochanek 1997:230).

By the nineteenth century, freak shows had become a much larger part of the scientific community, with the medicalisation of the freak show (Durbach 2010:22). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, medical textbooks and encyclopaedias regularly displayed images of freak show performers, illustrating various congenital conditions (Durbach 1971:24). The many exhibitions at the time provided what scientists and medical professionals perceived as medical specimens, from which they could study and gain recognition (Durbach 1971:24). By the middle of the nineteenth century, freak shows had become firmly embedded within, and inseparable from, the growing industry of cheap Victorian entertainment (Durbach 1971:5). The Victorian era was a massive time for social change (Chrisp 2005:5), as Marlene Tromp and Karyn Valerius (2008:1) state:

we can trace records back to the public exhibition of freaks for centuries – but the nineteenth century was a time of significant social change, highly popular freak shows, and taxonomic frenzy; this nexus makes the period particularly rich for the study of the freak phenomena. Nearly every critic writing on freaks has echoed this sentiment, pointing to the Victorian era as central in the establishment of freak shows and in the evolving understanding of “freaks” as a social construct.

Cultural representations of the freak show, and those that performed in it, express thoughts held by the audience about the performers. Our awareness of common generalisations and stereotypes of the public has been researched from surviving texts, advertisements, novels, and journals from the time. However, Davies (2015:5–6) explains that the nineteenth century is reconstructed through “... the dis(re)membred pieces of the past ... by the text[s], and in the reader’s imagination. The reader thus literally embodies (re-members) the reimagined past”. At the same time, it is common to see that these fictional re-imaginings can become sensationalist, cynical, trivialising, and coarse (Davies 2015:8).

The Victorian era (1837–1901) marks a particular interest in extraordinary bodies, which began to develop more thoroughly than it had before (Davies 2015:10). Personal letters and journals, literary texts, and imagery from the late nineteenth century offer insight into the modern understanding of ‘freakery’, and how people that were categorised in this way were seen, represented, and treated. The medicalisation of human difference in the nineteenth century, and the interest in eugenics, gave the term ‘freak’ a new meaning (Poppiti 2011:36–37). Changing from being a descriptor of who worked in the freak shows to a description of a ‘freak of nature’. The freak show functioned as a space for researchers to explore human differences through the carefully put-together performances compiled by the performers.

### **3.2. The “Freak Show”**

As I have already shown, the freak show itself is classified as a sideshow, which is a show that is subsidiary to the main circus (Nickell 2005:24). The performers in the freak show utilised the “ten-in-one” style of the show, which is a show that has around ten attractions either performing on a stage or multiple stages that audiences can walk through (Nickell 2005:50). In front of the show there is what is known as “the string show” (Figure 4) including the banner line, which was where painted banners hung in a line leading up to the show as an advertisement for what lies inside (Nickell 2005:53). These colourfully painted canvases were heavily exaggerated and marketed whatever the current marketing ploy for that performer was (Nickell 2005:5). The types of acts that performed ranged from human oddities (giants or conjoined twins) to anatomical wonders (contortionists or rubber skin people), and working acts (magicians, fire eaters, or knife throwers) (Nickell 2005:vii–viii). Nickell (2005:48) lists the various types of acts that were performed:

girl shows (entertainments featuring dancing women), illusion shows (those consisting of magical illusions, such as the headless girl), life shows (educational exhibits of preserved foetuses illustrating the stages of gestation), menageries (animal shows in which the animals do not perform but are merely on exhibit), and others, including wax shows (exhibits of wax figures of notables, such as famous outlaws.)



Figure 4: The string show outside of the main tent,  
American Horror Story, 2014-2015.  
(Screenshot by author)

Along with the banner line, other forms of merchandise such as handbills, posters, and pamphlets were offered by the showman in charge of the show (Kember 2007:7). The role of the showman was to repackage “otherness in an ideologically ‘safe’ and highly popular form” (Kember 2007:1). Depending upon their abilities to both objectify and internalise otherness, showmen contributed to “cultural work” for audiences (Kember 2007:1) by indicating what the audiences would learn with the inclusion of various races, cultural backgrounds, and ethnicities. There was indeed cultural appropriation<sup>19</sup> within this “repackaging” of otherness, but as Ferguson (1997:245–246) suggests:

by exoticizing their bodily differences, side-show performers were able to capitalize on the public's need to see bars of culture, race, and geography between the physical deviant and their idyllic homestead.

It is still important to note that many of the backgrounds, including their history, upbringing, birthplace, nationality, and race, of the performers were sometimes faked or exaggerated for marketing purposes. Freak shows functioned as an arena for mutual communication between the performer and the audience, for the performer to achieve

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<sup>19</sup> This includes claiming to be part of cultures that one was not, further perpetuating stereotypes of various cultures and racial groups.

understanding with the audience (Davies 2015:13). But it must also not be forgotten that the freak show was one of the only platforms that these performers could choose to display themselves. Those who performed at freak shows usually worked for a showman or under a manager figure, who often legally stepped in as guardians or slave owners. It is important to note that these performers (some of whom are now popular historical figures) above all marketing ploys conjured up by their managers, were normal people who wanted a safe and stable life.

Once again returning to the most prolific showman in the history of the freak shows, is P.T. Barnum. The origin of Barnum's career started when he learned of a remarkable 'slave', 161-year-old Joyce Heath who claimed to have been George Washington's nursemaid (Nickell 2005:10). On 6 August 1835, Barnum bought the blind, toothless, and partially paralysed woman for \$1000 (Nickell 2005:10) Unsurprisingly, upon Heath's death it was discovered she was no more than 80 years old (Nickell 2005:10.) Despite this scandalous revelation, Heath had officially launched Barnum's career as a showman, by grossing \$1500 the week of her first exhibition (Nickell 2005:10.) Many performers in freak shows were exploited by their managers even after many of their deaths, an example including Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman.

Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815), known under the moniker "the Hottentot Venus", was a Khoikhoi-born woman who had the condition Steatopygia (the accumulation of fat tissue around the buttocks.) Baartman was extremely eroticised and exoticised during and unfortunately after her death. Upon her death, Baartman's brain, genitalia and skeleton were preserved, as well as her skeleton and a cast of her body. Her remains were exhibited in France until being returned to South Africa in 2002. Saartjie Baartman was classified as a 'Hottentot Venus', which symbolised "... an 'intermediate race' between men and animals" (Boetsch & Blanchard 2008:62). Treated as 'the missing link', Baartman was situated in the realm of beasts and bestiality (Boetsch & Blanchard 2008:65). She was exhibited as "... an object of entertainment, an object of media attention, a 'sexualised' object, a monstrous object, and a scientific object" (Boetsch & Blanchard 2008:62). Baartman was considered "misshapen" which linked her to the realm of the freak show (Boetsch & Blanchard 2008:68). As Boetsch and Blanchard (2008:68) argue:

It was also for this reason that the scientists classified her as beyond the anatomical norms associated with the Western canon. Such



bodies would later be used by P.T. Barnum in his 'freak shows' (bodies which combined the 'exotic' and the 'monstrous'), but also by many European impressions, situating side by side, and then face-to-face, 'ethnic' and 'freak' shows in a world which existed in parallel with the 'normalised' world.

Through the studies of Saartjie Baartman, the Khoisan were classified as a special human type. As Gilles Boetsch and Pascal Blanchard (2008:65) argue:

To describe a 'race' based on one individual demonstrates the fallacious contribution which zoos<sup>20</sup> made to the science, in particular in understanding the other.

Exhibitions of people based on racial difference was seen with the 1851 London World Fair, which continued until 1965 (Willis & Williams 2000:1). These exhibitions displayed different colonised racial and cultural groups of humans as living exhibits alongside advancements in technology and industry (Willis & Williams 2000:4). These world fairs "... describe celebrations of industrial, colonial, and imperial achievements, opportunities for countries, territories, regions, and cities to represent themselves to the world" (Willis & Williams 2000:1). The spectacle of human difference was available for members of all classes to learn and explore human difference (Willis & Williams 2000:1). Promoting politically and racially charged theories due to the influence of colonialism, the world fairs "[represented] a practical living or documented lesson in evolution through the exhibition of the 'other', establishing racial hegemonic structures in the displaying of Africans" (Willis & Williams 2000:6). Exhibiting the different racial groups from "... the darkest to the lightest, or "lowest" to the "highest" on the evolutionary scale" (Willis & Williams 2000:6). These world fairs during the 1970s provided the scientific and anthropological academies provided opportunity to study these communities (Willis & Williams 2000:2).

The position of being classified as 'able-bodied' was heavily invested in by all freak show performers. Not being classified in this way had social and cultural ramifications, with many people being forced to life museums, human zoos or those that performed in freak shows as Saartjie Baartman had been. Thus, were also included in the term and the negative connotations attached to the word 'freak'. Throughout this history, the use of the term 'freak' and the treatment of those who were classified as such, and as previously

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<sup>20</sup>Popular in the nineteenth century in Europe, human zoo's were large public displays of people in a simulated living space from the peoples country of origin. These people were displayed, literally, like animals in a zoo.

mentioned were unfairly discriminated against and landed up in sweatshops, workhouses, or asylums if they did not perform in the freak show (Durbach 1971:19). While many people throughout history have not chosen to perform in the freak shows, provides a much-needed context for how those that chose to become freak show performers portrayed themselves on stage. And through performing acts such as juggling, singing, rolling cigarettes, or dancing aims to teach the audience about our boundaries and what we consider to be a 'freak'. Therefore, it is necessary to define what the term 'freak' means, and the cultural and social implications for its use in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

### **3.2.1. Definition of the 'freak'**

As from the previous discussion, the term 'freak' is often associated with negative connotations that label physical difference, "... such as aberration, monstrosity, [and] otherness" (Davies 2015:9). Much of the language used since the popularity of freak shows such as 'freak', 'midget', and 'dwarf' are now considered to be demeaning, derogatory, and stigmatising (Davies 2015:12). This tells us more about those who construct the category than those it is supposed to define. According to Robert Bogdan (in Kochanek 1997:231), the 'freak' is defined as:

not by the possession of any particular quality, but by a set of practices, a way of thinking about and representing people with major, minor, and fabricated physical, mental, and behavioural differences.

It is in popular thinking in freak show research that the true construction of the 'freak' is that "... the freak of nature was, in fact, a freak of culture" (Kember 2007:7). By defining the 'freak' as a performance, some sort of agency is restored to the actors in the freak show (Davies 2015:12). Rachel Adams (cited by Davies 2015:12) defines the 'freak' as an identity recognised through gestures, costumes, and staging, elaborating further as:

an essence, the basis for a comforting fiction that there is a permanent, qualitative difference between deviance and normality, projected spatially in the distance between the spectator and the body onstage.

The various acts performed by the freak show performers on stage provided direct contact with audiences. However, the emergence of cinema in the late 1800s opened new doors for these performers in a different kind of audience interaction. Dixon (2010:52) described Todd Browning's *Freaks* (1932) as "one of the most sympathetic

and original of the early 1930s horror films” describing the film as raising empathy for the freak show performers, even if the studio that produced it distanced itself from the film upon release. I therefore introduce *Freaks* (Browning 1932) in the next section, for it is the main inspiration behind *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015.)

### 3.3. *Freaks* (Browning 1932)

*Freaks* (Browning 1932) is centred on a freak show’s performers getting revenge on two able-bodied performers. The film’s narrative follows Hans (played by Kurt Schneider), a “little person”<sup>21</sup> performer in the freak show who is in love with able-bodied Cleopatra (played by Olga Baclanova). After finding out that Hans is secretly very wealthy, Cleopatra and her fellow able-bodied performer on two able-bodied and lover Hercules (played by Henry Victor) hatch an evil plan. Their plan is for her to marry Hans, Hercules would help her kill Hans, and the monstrous pair would run away with his money. After the rest of the performers in the show find out, they plan to take revenge on the couple, by killing Hercules and deforming Cleopatra into a woman-bird hybrid (Figure 5) (Vila 2008:58). The able-bodied characters Cleopatra and Hercules are portrayed as sexually enthusiastic, treating the abjected and differently bodied performers with hatred and antagonistic language. The plot-twist towards the end of the film is that the monster spoken by the narrator at the beginning of the film is a disfigured Cleopatra.



Figure 5: Cleopatra as a bird-woman hybrid,  
*Freaks*, 1932.  
Screenshot by author

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<sup>21</sup> The term “midget” is considered offensive to people in the Dwarfism community, “person of short stature”, or “little person” are now more commonly used (LPA issues statement to abolish the “M” word:2015)

Having a history of performing in the circus, Browning took inspiration from the stock cast of performers in a freak show, employing famous performers of the time. The film was thus appropriately titled “Freaks”. Promotional imagery like film posters (Figure 6) gave the public a strong indication, for the time, of the seemingly shocking choice of using real professional freak show performers and centring the story around these performers as the main characters. By centring the abjected freak show performers as the main cast of the film, the audience is forced to be confronted with individuals that have been abjected from society. The negative connotations associated with being part of the abject, is contrasted by the sinister motives displayed by the seemingly socially-accepted able-bodied couple.

*Freaks* (Browning 1932) was an attempt to “... decouple disability from freakiness”, an attempt on Browning’s part to portray the freak show performers as everyday people and not be linked to the negative connotations attached to the term ‘freaks’ (Krugman 2018:103). By portraying their everyday lives as unexceptional Browning blurs the difference between the disabled and non-disabled performers (Krugman 2018:103). The vindictive acts displayed by the able-bodied performers Cleopatra and Hercules alongside the shocking reveal that it is Cleopatra on exhibition at the end of the film, implicates the able-bodied performers as the true “freaks” of the film. The able-bodied performers function as the source of disgust throughout the film, this contrasts the audiences’ assumption that the “freaks” are the physically disabled performers.

Despite Browning’s attempt to evoke sympathy in the audience for the disabled performers, it received an overwhelmingly negative reception. This was largely due to the use of a varied cast of popular and widely known freak show performers of the time (Brodesco 2014:295). The freak show performers are eventually drawn into a violent rage by the conclusion of the film, taking the place of the source of violence and horror in the narrative. This perhaps confirmed negative audience prejudices against these ‘freak’ performers. Unfortunately, the film ended up making Browning a recluse from Hollywood while the actors in the film received a lot of disapproval during and after filming (Krugman 2018:103).

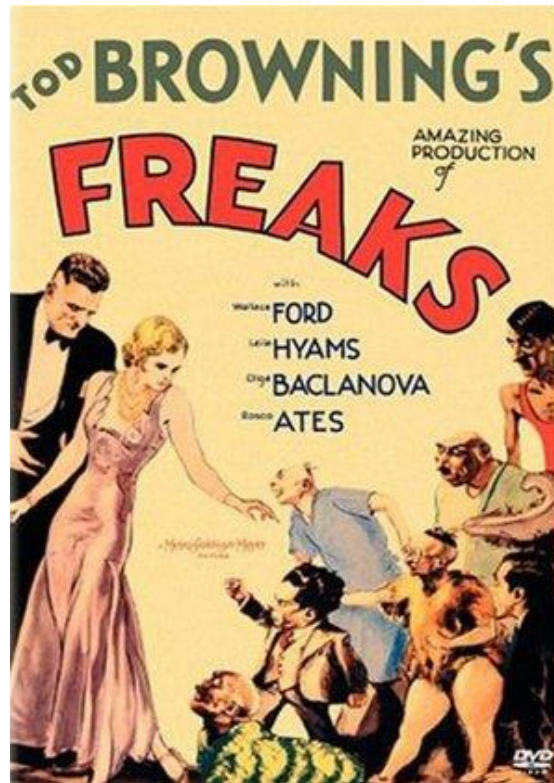


Figure 6: Promotional film poster, *Freaks*, 1932. (Cinematerial [O])

The negative response to the film was primarily due to the shocking reaction from the public's perception of the portrayal of the disabled bodies onscreen as gaining their power back by punishing their tormentors. Although the film was not well received, it is largely still remembered as one of the first attempts to depart from the usual standard disability narrative by giving power back to the performers (Krugman 2018:102).

*Freaks* (Browning 1932) instead, leaves you understanding their humanness, putting our humanity in perspective. The freak show performers get their power back by making them the source of horror, shock, and violence at the end of the film. According to Krugman (2018:104), the film's ending provides a potent societal critique as opposed to a simple reading of an ableist horror narrative.

### **3.3.1. The influences on *Freak Show* (Murphy 2014–2015)**

*FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) is influenced by *Freak's* (Browning 1932) portrayal of the troupe of performers doing everyday tasks such as playing musical instruments, cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. This was based on Browning emphasising the human performer behind the character they portray in the freak show, showing the performers

completing basic tasks despite living in a world that does not cater for their abnormalities or disabilities. Both the film and the series shock the audience by portraying the performers being coerced into aggressive violence “... resulting in a cycle of violence based on difference” (Krugman 2018:105).

*FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) takes this one step further than the film by actively implicating the upper-class non-disabled citizens in crimes against disabled performers throughout the series (Krugman 2018:106). Tim Minear, an exclusive producer of *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-), also chose to use real freak show performers rather than able-bodied performers. In a behind-the-scenes interview in 2014, Minear supports this choice by explaining, “You want to find people who are differently abled and bring them into the show. For a whole host of reasons, but certainly adds a sense of reality to what we are doing”. This sense of reality extended to which characters were cast in the series. The main cast of performers in freak shows was inspired by casting choices made by Browning. Which was a troupe of performers which represented the more popular or more common acts that would be seen during the height of the freak show’s popularity. The following section aims to draw attention to the stock characters that often pervade freak shows both on and off-screen. The secondary aim is to introduce how some of these characters are represented in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

### **3.3.2. Trends in freak shows**

The most recognisable cast member in a freak show troupe is the bearded lady. Played in *Freaks* (Browning 1932) by Madam Olga (Vila 2008:62), the counterpart in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) was played by Ethel Darling (Kathy Bates), who wore a prosthetic piece of hair for her beard. Another act that recurred in the freak show circuit was those who were born with the condition called dwarfism and have a long history in the freak show circuit. During the Victorian era, those considered to be little people fell into one of two categories, as originally described by Nickell (2005:106) “... *midgets*... who have normal proportions, and *dwarfs*, whose features are disproportionate”. It is important to note here that during the time of the film’s production the term “little people” was not in common use yet.

In *Freaks* (Browning 1932) the two main protagonists of the film are little people named Hans and Frieda, played by Kurt Schneider (1902–1985) and Hilda Schneider (1907–

1980) (Figure 7).<sup>22</sup> The other little person featured in the film is Angelo Salvatore Rossitto (1908–1991), who performed under the moniker “Little Angelo”. Rossitto had Achondroplastic Dwarfism (only reaching 89cm at the time of filming), which is a hereditary bone growth disorder that specifically affects the growth of the extremities (Vila 2008:60–61). Thus, during the time he was billed as a ‘Dwarf’. In *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), the role of the performer who has Dwarfism is played by Jyoti Kisange Amge (1993-) in the role of Ma Petite. Amge holds the title of smallest woman in the world, having the condition Achondroplasia. These actors can be seen below in Figure 7.



Figure 7: Harry and Daisy Earles, Angelo Salvatore Rossitto, and Jyoti Kisange Amge (Ma Petite), *Freaks* 1932 and *American Horror Story: Freakshow* 2014–2015, Screenshot by author.

The biggest crowd-drawing numbers in the history of freak shows are undoubtedly conjoined twins (Vila 2008:64), who were played by Violet and Daisy Hilton (1908–1969) in *Freaks* (Browning 1932). The Hilton twins are notable for their long history in the freak show, even after gaining legal emancipation from their managers. The twins are best known for Violet’s relationship with a man named Maurice Lambert, who applied for a marriage licence but was denied in 21 states. The Hilton twins (Figure 8) are one of the influences behind the main protagonists of the *Freak Show* series, Bette and Dot Tattler (Sarah Paulsen) (Figure 8). They mirror the conjoined twins in *Freaks* (Browning 1932),

<sup>22</sup> The pair were popular around from the 1910s to the late 1950s in their sibling entertainment troupe “The Doll family” (Vila 2008:60). Kurt and Hilda changed their names to the more English-sounding Harry and Daisy Earles to act in Hollywood films, namely *The Wizard of Oz* (Flemming 1939) and *Freaks* (Browning 1932) (Vila 2008:60). The pair were often marketed as a married couple, but they were siblings (Vila 2008:60). Both Harry and Daisy had Hypophysary Dwarfism, characterised by having small but proportioned extremities and being short in stature, thus in their freak show careers they were classified as ‘midgets’.

one being optimistic and the other pessimistic, as well as one twin dying their hair blonde while the other stayed brunette.



Figure 8: Violet and Daisy Hilton; Bette and Dot Tattler, Medium.com & American Horror Story: Freakshow, 2014–2015. Screenshot by author.

The second inspiration behind this is the lives of well-documented lives of conjoined twins, Chang, and Eng Barker, which will be introduced throughout Chapter four. *Freaks* (Browning 1932) influenced the representation and emotional arcs of the freak show performers as a family in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). *Freak Show* (Murphy 2014–2015)



uses the format of a television show to build depth on the character's experiences and feelings, which translates to us as the viewer through the storytelling of *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuck 2011-).

### **3.4. Conclusion**

The history of the sideshow can be traced to ancient Egypt and started to meet its end in the 1950s. The Victorian era brought the influence of the medical field in the freak show through Eugenics and early disability studies. The nineteenth century showed largely lost or misrepresented histories, from the often-one-sided recording of history that usually was from the point of view of audiences and the showmen and not the performers entertaining them. Robert Bogdan's (cited by Davies 2015:14) classification of 'freaks' reminds us that these performers would appear in a wide variety of locations including museums, lecture halls, medical theatres, circuses, exhibition buildings, and carnivals. Therefore, the stigma attached to the performers in these freak shows followed them outside of the freak show space to these other places. When considering Eugenics, these performers were anthropomorphised and sexualised due to their bodily differences in a multitude of spaces including the scientific, the educational and the entertaining. The boundaries of an educational medical exhibition and an entertaining freak show are blurred (Davies 2015:18). However, at these freak shows a relationship between the performer and the audience is formed, whereby representing issues such as race, culture, gender, background, and ethnicity could be questioned discussed and thought over. It is important to note that many of these ways of representation were presented in a manner that a modern viewer could possibly now find discriminatory and appropriative.

Many performers from freak shows might not have wanted to exhibit themselves and unfortunately, we will never know who wanted to and who did not. The ethics in which the subjects were treated are questionable and should be questioned. However, the information gained from freak show performers who chose to display themselves, rather than the alternative workhouse or asylum, holds great knowledge and insight from medical, cultural, and societal standpoints. People with unusual anatomies are remembered on the side of victims, being taken advantage of by having no choice in the matter of performing. Although, as already stated, we can never know the full extent of whether this is fully true. We can study the treatment of these people through the information that we do have and treat their memory and their life experiences with the most respect possible.

Horror films connect with our subconscious need to cope with things that frighten us (Derry 2009:21). Playing on this, filmmakers connect with our subconscious fears from the distance of a film or TV screen. *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) draws inspiration from the film in its character choices, set designs, and past freak show performers so that the treatment and reaction of the characters are rooted. *Freaks* (Browning 1932) portrayed performers of a freak show's everyday lives as unexceptional, Browning aims "... to blur the lines of difference between the disabled performers and non-disabled viewer ..." (Krugman 2018:103). This is seen within *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) in the sympathy built towards the performers in the freak show compared to the antagonists of the series.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE SOMATIC AFFECTS OF DISGUST IN *FREAK SHOW* (MURPHY 2014–2015)

This chapter discusses the affects of disgust in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) that might be evoked in some viewers by closely analysing selected scenes. While watching *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) disgust plays a role in the viewer's experience of several social issues dealt with in the series. In my reading, *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) deals with the disturbance of 1) social hierarchies, 2) sexual norms, and 3) the family unit and utilises disgust to absorb the viewer in these themes. I show that, across the season, viewers are disgusted by the able-bodied characters in the series due to the abjected members of the freak show. I also argue that the purpose of elevating viewers' disgust towards able-bodied characters elevates the audience's empathy for the so-called 'freaks'. According to Korsmeyer (2012:754), disgust is a protective response that shields a person from contact with contaminated objects, or objects of abjection. Disgust finds expression on and in the body, for instance, the viewer's face might display "lips drawn back and down, a wrinkled nose, and narrowed eyes" (Korsmeyer 2012:754). The increasing violence and murderous actions displayed across the season elicit various bodily responses of disgust from the viewer who, in turn, empathises with the members of the freak show.

Part one of this chapter contextualises the class system and socially condoned norms of behaviour as portrayed in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). The social order, as established throughout the season of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), dictates that the upper and middle classes hold greater respect in society than freak show performers, who are seen as outside of the social norm due to their abjected position in society. This will be substantiated through the comparison of the portrayals of the freak show performers, middle-class townspeople, and the wealthy upper classes. To demonstrate how and why freaks were marginalised from society, this chapter briefly explores the museums where the freak show performers' bodily differences were displayed to confirm their abjected status. *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) displays the museum as a morbid space filled with selected human remains, skulls, and skeletons of now dead freak show performers. I analyse and discuss the reaction and embodied experience of the viewer to these scenes, with the aim of this section being to establish the treatment of the freak show performers in relation to the socially accepted and 'normal' members of society, by highlighting how the audience responds empathetically to the freak show performers.

The second part of the chapter deals with the representation of sexuality of freak show performers and those socially linked to the freak show. The use of gratuitous sex, violence, and horror, as identified by Linda Williams (1992), often overlap to cause intense sensory affects in the audience. Therefore, this section explores the purpose and the bodily reactions felt when watching sexual scenes that defy the accepted symbolic system and that are therefore considered disgusting. This is due to *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) paying tribute to the history of the sexual lives and the subsequent fascination with freak show performers, such as Chang and Eng Bunker. This history reveals a stereotypical association between freak show performers and deviant sexuality, which further serves to justify the freak show performers' treatment by the normal members of society in the town. The history of the sexualisation of freak show performers exposes thoughts and prejudices held by the disgusted members of the town, which leads the viewer to feel an increasing disgust at the able-bodied townspeople and characters throughout the season. Therefore, the viewer watching *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) might start to feel empathy for the freak show performers and start to feel disgusted with the increasingly deadly misfortunes that occur to the troupe of performers. There is a longstanding history of freak show performers being considered 'abnormal' because their bodily deformities did not allow for them to live normal sexual lives, which is discussed briefly through the lives of Chang and Eng Bunker.

The third part of this chapter reveals the intended meaning implied and identified by the creators of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) in online discussions and behind-the-scenes interviews, which was to represent the found family unit that the abjected freaks on the outside of accepted social normalcy find and protect each-other inside. This chapter explores the various family units and family relationships found across *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). This chapter examines how these varied family relationships impact and elicit the disgusted responses in varied ways as well. Chapter three introduced *Freaks* (Browning, 1932), which inspired the creators of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) to go against the usual empathetic portrayal of disability and give agency back by showing the troupe getting revenge on the monsters that prey on the troupe throughout the season.

Illes (2008:110) argues that the horror genre often deals with controversial subject matter about which people might feel anxious. This genre deals with the dark side of society, testing "the rules, morals and ideological structures that operate in our culture" (Ndalianis

2012:15). In this way, horror challenges the underlying values of social structures and exposes “the instability of the system that inform[s] the social order” (Ndalianis 2012:15).

#### **4.1. The class system and socially condoned norms of behaviour**

Goodnow (2010:47) explains that “distinctions, dichotomies, and borders are socially constructed”. These borders distinguishing people in society favour those that fall within accepted societal norms “constitut[ing] a classification, system, or a structure” (Kristeva 1982:65). Duschinsky (2013:716) claims that heterogeneity distinguishes every member of society, meaning that people within society classify themselves by how they are different. This habit of humans pointing out other human differences allows those who fall inside the accepted realm of the ‘social norm,’ to push those who do not fit into these norms to the margins of society. This means that members of society determine what is and who may be accepted within the social normality, which Angela Ndalianis (2012:25–26) defines as:

an order that conforms to dominant social norms - heterosexuality, monogamous couples, the family and social institutions, such as the police, the Church and the military which defends ... them.

Plantinga (2009:216) states that any trait that stigmatises a person (including race, sexuality, gender, and disability), may be considered to spoil social identity (Plantinga 2009:216). Any person, action, being, or object that crosses these boundaries against accepted white heteronormative society is deemed as ‘other’ and thus, are abjected from accepted society. Therefore, contrasting the accepted normal individuals in society are the extraordinarily bodied members of the freak show. In the case of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), the performers in the freak show troupe are identified as abjected figures by challenging society’s notion of “normalcy”. As Poppiti (2011:29–30) describes that the:

19th century social hierarchy dictated that the freak be regarded as the opposite of the ‘normal’ American, human curiosity and insecurity led to the freak show’s popularity ... reassuring those whose bodies and costuming did not match the fully enfranchised and indubitably American ideal ... of their normalcy.

Therefore, the audience is reminded of their socially normal body and takes relief in feeling part of the ‘social norm’. The freak show performances allowed for a space of interaction between the abjected troupe of performers and the audience who fall part of the social norm. The performers become tools for understanding and learning about our own identity, sexuality, and bodily understanding. Outside of the freak show space, the performers are outed from society, receiving aggressive and negative reactions from

those in the norm, the audience, and nearby townspeople. As previously stated, *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) is set in South Florida during 1952, showing the performers living outside of town in an open field in a settlement of tents and caravans.<sup>23</sup> The nearby middle class inhabitants of the town are weary of the performers in the freak show, for example, a nurse who vomited at the site of the conjoined twins – Bette and Dot Tadler – in the opening episode. Other reactions across the season include throwing glass bottles at the performers from a moving car, staring, gasping, refusing to allow them to shop at local stores and kicking them out of restaurants in the town nearby.

Disgust functions to maintain social norms, which are described by Plantinga (2006:83) as preserving social hierarchies whilst discarding certain groups in society.<sup>24</sup> As explored in Chapter three, bodily differences offered a starting block for a career performing in the freak show and were not the only requirement to become a performer in a freak show. Throughout the career of a performer in the freak show, the backstory and stage name used by the performer would change. This was an effort on behalf of the showman to change the way that the audience interacted and understood the performers by changing ethnicities and genders and implying an animalistic nature of the performers (through names such as lobster boy, lizard girl or the illustrated seal). As society's idea of normal is constructed by society, the idea of abnormality is also subject to change. The freak show capitalised on changing aspects of their performers to stay on the outside of the social norm. The nature of the freak show performer is to challenge society's idea of the normal, which brings with it conversation and understanding. The space of the freak show allowed for open conversations about “where the boundaries between sexes, races, classes, species, nations, and civilizations could be drawn and how and why these distinctions should be upheld” (Durbach 1971:184). The changing nature of the freak show performers allowed them to transition according to and alongside the changing social norm, which further cements the social order that abjected them in the first place.

Therefore, the performers function as a source of abjection in society by challenging society's notion of normal. For some members of society, this conjures up imagery of the order of society versus the chaos that can be invoked if their safe society were to

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<sup>23</sup> This is reminiscent of the ways in which freak show performers travelled and lived, as I discussed in Chapter three, and which can also be seen in the film *Freaks* (Browning 1932) that inspired this season of *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-).

<sup>24</sup> Plantinga (2006:83) explores the social hierarchy systems in Japan and India (the Caste System), as well as the varied homophobic history in the US, as examples.

crumble. This is supported by Durbach (1971:4) who argues that the freak shows performers' ability to transition and change, allows the performers to entertain and teach society from their abjected social position they are put in. The negative and disgusted reactions of the suburban, middle-class town towards the abjected performers of the freak show further reflect their thoughts around their prejudiced thinking of the 'normal' versus the 'abnormal'. For a safe society, this border must be maintained, and "in order for control to be maintained, the excluded need to remain on the outside of the signifying boundary" (Arya 2014:8). Therefore, by calling the freak show performers "monsters" and "freaks", cements the intolerant and negative treatment that the performers endured in everyday life. The choice on behalf of the filmmakers to consistently torment the group with these now outdated slurs further builds the viewers' empathy for the abjected freak show performers. During the Victorian era, freak shows preserved the working-class culture of commercialised leisure (Durbach 2010:4). Appealing to elite customers, such as Queen Victoria herself, the freak show served as an educational tool for the general population about bodily difference and what that means for societally viewed normally bodied people. All members of society frequented the freak show, regardless of class or social order.

While the freak show performance space allowed the performers a sense of power in displaying their bodies and talents, which allowed for learning about our own bodily boundaries of our sense of self. As previously discussed in chapter three, besides the freak show space, many formal education institutions that displayed bodily differences appeared in the form of museums and human exhibitions as well (Davies 2015:11). The creators of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) represent the history of the freak show through the introduction of a museum alongside the downfall in popularity of the freak show. Contrasting the living freak show performers, the museum displays bodily remains, skeletons, photographs, and preserved organs of popular historic freak show performers. From the perspective of the audience that has now built empathy for the freak show performers, the museum is seen as less of a scientific institution and more of a morbid building of the dead not being able to lay in peace. The museum highlights the classification systems used to identify socially accepted and unacceptable bodies. The museum in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) functions as a place for the series' main antagonist, con artist Stanley and his orphaned assistant Maggie to further exploit the abjected freak show performers. By doing whatever they can as a pair to make money, we are initially introduced to the pair attempting to sell a fake specimen to the freak show museum.

#### 4.1.1. The Museum

The first appearance of the museum in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), is the opening scene of episode three titled *Edward Mordrake – part 1*, which can be viewed in the first 3:40 minutes of [video 1](#). The viewer is thrust immediately into the sights of a skeletal exhibit of foetal conjoined twins accompanied by an overwhelming chorus of violins. The dark shelves of the small museum room are littered with perfectly lit taxidermised animals, withered and discoloured bones, and photographs of notable freak show performers such as Grady Stiles Junior, Ella Harper, and parasitic twins Pираmai and Sami, which can be seen below in Figure 9.



Video 1: The opening scenes of the museum,  
*American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014–2015.





Figure 9: Exhibits in the interior of the freak show museum,  
*American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014–2015.  
Screenshot by author.

Slowly panning around the museum, the camera shows that the museum is shrouded with a repetition of the blue-toned lighting, which signifies a depressive nature around the location of the museum. This makes the viewer experience the sad reality of the lives of those on exhibit, forcing them to reflect on the fate of the troupe of performers we follow at the freak show. The close-up sweeping shots through the shelves of the

museum parallel the experience of the audience looking at the chilling exhibits in the museum for themselves. The details of the exhibitions that can be seen on the shelves conjure up the conflict and “the collapse of the border between the inside vs. the outside” (Kristeva 1982:53). Upon seeing the skeletal exhibits I immediately focused on the photographs of healthy-looking freak show performers littered among the bones on exhibit. The clash of the healthy skin of the performers contrasted against the discoloured bones bothered my stomach, while watching I experienced my face frowning and my heart rate increasing with the swell of the violins. According to Elsaesser and Hagener (2015:111):

... skin touches on a central hypothesis of the present study, namely that, in the cinema the confusion, transformation, and transgression between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, between Self and Other, is of a foundational nature, inherent and ingrained.

The sight of the skeletons, skulls, preserved organs, and other exhibits scattering the shelves transgresses the boundaries between life and death, and is a reminder of the normal versus the abnormal. I found myself recoiling at the site of the skeletons and skulls; as I was reminded of walking through the aisles of a museum, debating the morality of life, and how I would like my body to be treated after I die. Korsmeyer (2012:35) suggests that when a viewer’s body recoils and feels disgusted, this acts as:

... a protective barrier between subject and object, but the ultimate recoil is from our mortality and the recognition that, by being proximate to contamination, we lose our bodily integrity - die, decompose, and become the disgusting object itself.

This leaves the audience in an in-between state (Arya 2014:27), rendering the museum a morbid and abject space. We as viewers are fascinated by the sites seen in the museum, looking intensely at the changing images of the human remains on display as exhibits. This visceral introduction to the afterlife the audience face is jarring to the twenty-first-century viewer, which for some can conjure feelings of disgust, curiosity, and discomfort in their bodies by thinking of their own skeletons. The safety of our bodily integrity is damaged, leading some viewers to feel disgusted at the site of the human remains; that which was thought to be on the inside now is on the outside. However, not all audience members will react to the same disgusting affect the same way. For instance, while I was disturbed by the site of the skeleton, another viewer may see the sights of the skeletons as fascinating and enjoy the feeling of disgust elicited in this in-between state of abjection. Our different responses point to the curious oscillation

between disgust and curiosity often experienced when watching horror films or TV series (Hanich 2010:99).

The music repeatedly chosen by the creators in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) is used to indicate to the viewers of danger or ill-intent towards the freak show troupe. The viewer starts to feel shivers up their spines as we hear of the recognisable chorus of violins that is followed by an ominous sound that mimics the beating rhythm of a heartbeat. This has the potential to launch the viewers body in a heightened emotional state, as the body reacts to the music and starts to prepare for an upcoming threat. As mentioned in Chapter two, the integration of sound into horror changed the trajectory and reception of horror which Elsaesser and Hagener (2015:140) elaborate that:

a film performance is no longer limited to the screen alone, by virtue of the spatial extension brought about by the envelope of sound ... it becomes indeed difficult to decide whether the cinematic experience takes place 'inside' or 'outside' the body.

The familiar ominous chorus of violins that play as background music throughout the series heightens and envelopes the viewer with the feelings of upcoming danger and that this location is surrounded by vulnerability and danger. The memorable violins fade away to a rhythmic-like beating sound that influenced my heart to beat in time to the rhythm, further eliciting a heightened response from a viewer. The gloomy beating is interrupted by a tour given by the museum's tour guide Lillian.

Beginning her introduction to the museum, Lillian gives the audience her views on what the museum, and thus the medical field's goal is, by displaying the performers as they do. As if she is reading a script, her discomfort at seeing the exhibits in the museum is evident in her voice; a concern and discomfort that can be mirrored by the viewer. Lillian's shift back to happy and excitable when offering the museum patrons candy exposes prejudices such as the stereotypical consideration that people with atypical bodies are sites of entertainment. Her humour is only understandable when considering that the people on display were deemed 'abnormal' and 'unnatural.' The uncaring nature of exploiting the dead in this way implies that Lillian is comfortable with displaying these people, who were historically othered based on their disfigured bodies. Lillian and the middle class that she embodies, reveals again the abject state of the freak show performers. The morbid introduction to the museum, while stating "They highlight the strange wonders of the human body and illuminate the horrors of disease and disorder,

death” reminds the viewers of their own bodies' fragility. A casual reminder on behalf of the creators of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) that anyone could become extraordinarily bodied (through accident, disease, or disorder) and thus could be labelled a ‘freak’.

After introducing the freak show museum to the tour of patrons, the violins heighten in the background, heightening to a flourish when Stanley and Maggie enter the room. I initially interperated this, weather on purpose or by accident, as the pair ultimately bringing about some sort of chaos in the narrative of the series. When seeing the exhibits on display, Maggie initially shows worry and empathy for the dead bodies acting as exhibits, lying on display shelves, and not peacefully resting in death. This is a reaction that I related to and felt when seeing the sights of the displays. The sympathetic viewer empathises with Maggie’s sympathy for the exhibits, which is confirmed after describing the museum exhibits as: “These poor people. Doomed to lie here and be gawked at all day”. Although no other visible concern is seen on her face afterwards, the glimmer of sadness is not enough to sway her original murderous and evil plans. Contrasting Lillian and Maggie’s reactions, Stanley absent-mindedly stares at one of the displays, replying to Maggie “Well, they were losers in life. At least now they have some value”. He says this with a slight grimace on his face, indicating that the freak show exhibits and their community of performers disgust him. After the museum refuses their fake specimen, the violins we know all too well start to swell once again. As the pair are about to leave the museum, Lillian stops and says to them:

You're obviously inventive people. If you brought me something authentic, something truly priceless, I, well, I wouldn't ask many questions. In fact, my business is in trouble. Without new exhibits, even our most loyal patrons would rather stay at home and watch Ed Sullivan ... I used to get calls from freak shows when one of theirs would pass, but they're mostly gone now.

After learning that the museum is desperate for new exhibits, Stanley and Maggie learn from Lillian that the liver of conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker sold for \$5000 (which in the series is valued in 1952), Stanley quickly decides to travel to the freak show in South Florida and enact his murderous plot before leaving the museum. Stanley then enacts his plan to infiltrate the freak show, kill them and sell their bodies to the museum for his profit. It is important to note that we cannot be sure that Lillian would knowingly condone killing the freak show performers to be displayed in the museum. However, she does state that “I wouldn’t ask many questions” about where the bodies for the exhibit

came from, perhaps exposing her true nature and thoughts about the community of freak show performers. This is accompanied by a knowing glance between Stanley and Maggie and a dramatic beating of the drum to indicate to the viewer of this statement's importance. It is hard to ignore how Lilian believes Stanley's reasoning for how he suddenly obtained new authentic exhibits after he tried to con her when they first met.

Through the combination of disturbing images and disquieting music, the viewer associates the museum with a space of danger and horror for the freak show performers that we have built sympathy for throughout the series. Durbach (1971:3) states that freak show performers purposefully challenged society's idea of normal by identifying as in-between, "both male and female, white and black, adult and child, and/or human and animal at the same time". Arya (201:56) states that during the freak show or the carnival:

... the 'open' body became the point of exchange between people, and they would express themselves in acts of transgression and excess, through activities such as swearing, laughing, feasting, copulating, excreting, and in general taking pleasure in violating limits that reigned in normalcy.

Therefore, when the audiences interact with the abjected freak show performers on stage this satisfies the audience's need for normality compared to the freak show performers. But for others such as Dandy Mott (episode six) this is not true. Dandy relates to the abnormality that the performers embody, stating "They're freaks and so am I. When I'm with them I feel normal". Dandy's character arc throughout the season centres around the transformation from a spoiled child-like man-baby to a blood-thirsty man intent on becoming a successful serial killer. Sevenich (2015:48) describes Dandy as a "first-class citizen and among the majority: he is a white, handsome, wealthy, heterosexual man". In differentiating the social order or hierarchy, Chrisp (2005:10) states that the "middle classes – the group who ranked higher in society than the working classes, who worked with their hands, yet were lower than the upper classes, who inherited their wealth and did not have to work at all". This wealth and attitude gap is further expanded on by the filmmakers of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) depiction of the upper class through Dandy and his mother Gloria Mott.

#### **4.1.2. Social Status**

The families considered to be part of the upper class in the late nineteenth century, were "families that had been rich for generations looked down on those with 'new money'"

(Chrisp 2005:56). In *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) this role in society is represented by the Mott family, comprised of Dandy and Gloria Mott who earned their vast fortune from their families owning lettuce farms. The Mott family repeatedly reminds the audience of their higher station and bigger fortune compared to the freak show performers and those that are considered middle class that live in the town.

The first time we meet the Mott family is in episode one at an evening performance inside the main tent of the freak show in episode one, seen in the Figure 10 below. Establishing the freak show and their camp at night, the darkened sky of the camp is illuminated by singular-strung light bulbs against the dark interior of the tent. The silence of the camp is accompanied by a symphony of crickets alongside the creaking carousel and Ferris wheel moving on their own, entertaining thoughts of mystery and hidden secrets connected to the camp. This all culminated in my heart race increasing, my hearing becoming focused on the small changes in sounds around me. This heightens my awareness while continuing inside the main tent, the flickering light bulbs – a sign that their equipment needs maintenance – indicate to the viewer that although big in scale and grandeur the freak show itself is suffering due to the freak show performers' community and the popularity of freak show culture dwindling.



Figure 10: Dandy and Moira Mott alone in the audience,  
*American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014-2015.  
Screenshot by author.

We are introduced to the Mott family at the freak show waiting for the performance to begin. Having bought every ticket to the show presumably so they would not have to sit with middle-class townspeople. The sound of crickets is all the viewer hears as the pair sit in silence, perfectly postured, and formally dressed. Attempting to break the silence, Gloria softly asks if Dandy is comfortable where he is sitting. Framing the pair from close-up camera shots to wide-angled views of the pair alone in the audience, in a displeased and stern manner Dandy turns to his mother and says, "They're all my seats. I could sit anywhere I like. I like the one you are in." Dandy makes his mother move one chair down so he can sit in the seat that she is in; this introduces the viewers to the dark nature that surrounds his character. Gloria's only response is to immediately and almost absent-mindedly manner, move for him, say "Oh. (laughs) How's that? Better? Mother made it toasty for you". The harsh and brash nature that Dandy exudes contrasts with his mother's soft and gentle nature, which shocks the viewer and feelings of hatred arise for his character immediately. The language, formality, and etiquette in interactions between the two characters place their position in society with the elite, contrasting that of the freak show performers they are watching, as well as the middle-class clientele that frequented the freak show and the museum spaces at that time. The mother-son duo have a vast fortune from farming thus representing the affluent, upper-class society which is further evidenced by their big expensive home, perfectly manicured garden, and live-in housekeeper and team of gardeners which we are introduced to in episode five.

Gloria reveals to Dandy that to conserve the money and stay in the elite class in society that she had been used to her whole life, she married her cousin. Gloria gently explains to Dandy that his murderous tendencies came from his father who had murderous tendencies as well, explaining to Dandy (episode five):

You have the sickness like your father had before you. He stifled it the only way he could. These mental perversions are an affliction of the extremely affluent. Cousins marry cousins to protect the money, to keep the estates whole. Inbreeding. Becomes a rite of passage to have a psychotic ortwain the line. Jack the Ripper was a Windsor, for God's sake.

Accompanied by a knowingly guilty glance at Dandy, Gloria's choice of saying "perversions of the extremely affluent," again reminds the audience of their higher status in society because of the wealth of their family. In this moment I felt as though Gloria was condoning the murdering of innocent people as she believes it further solidifies their wealth and higher position in society. The filmmakers highlight the Mott's, the upper class

they represent, and their willingness to accept incest for money; fills the wealthy with disgust. The directors actively aim to challenge the social order by making Dandy the product of incest, thus the audience reviles Dandy and Gloria for their choices. The plethora of health issues that could be passed to her child because of their close relation, is suggested by *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) to have caused Dandy to eventually go insane and murderous. The audience is aware that Gloria acknowledges the murderous tendencies her cousin acted on, explaining that he had killed hitchhikers that he would come across and dispose their bodies somewhere. Choosing self-preservation over crossing over the taboo of incest, Gloria transitions the boundary between acceptable versus nonacceptable sexual partners all to stay in the wealthy in the high-class part of society.

Gloria's concern about remaining part of their family's reputation as wealthy, highly respected members of higher-class society is Gloria's focus as a character. Repeatedly relating that Dandy's antics will eventually lead their family to lose respect in society. This is seen in episode two, when we learn that Dandy wanted to be a thespian but due to their higher status within society, his mother would not allow it. As a result, Dandy desires creativity and expression, craving difference in his life and daily routine. This starts to make Dandy bored and cynical, forming a deep-rooted hatred of his mother over what he perceives as the control she holds over his happiness. Even though the child-like nature of Dandy's tantrums when he does not get his way or is unhappy, results in him being spoiled by his mother, such as buying every ticket to a show he wants to see. The child-like nature of the grown man having immature, aggressive and violent outbursts reminds the viewer of the insane and psychotic tendencies of Dandy. This indicates to some part of the viewers that there is a perceived fear of falling or losing one's class in society. This further represents that the social hierarchy reveals stereotypes, generalisations, and the mistreatment of those in lower society. Gloria's fear exposes the disgust that she feels toward those whom she deems lower in class. The viewer watching and experiencing this dynamic throughout the season may relate to the overbearing nature of Gloria's parenting or the frustration felt when dealing with a childish man like Dandy. Overall, this dynamic raises the disgust felt towards the able-bodied characters, the reasoning being that he is mentally disabled because of his mother's choice of incest only raises the viewer's disgust towards Dandy's monstrous and murderous actions.



In summary, through the middle-class residents of the town and upper-class members of society (the townspeople and the Mott family) recognise, exclude, and abject the freak show performers due to bodily differences, compared to that of 'normal' accepted society members. The freak show performers are treated as though they are threatening homogenous society that those within the social normal see as safe and secure. *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) builds empathy for the freak show performers through the treatment received after being excluded and abjected from society. When confronted by an abject source there is a violation of somatic integrity, “evoking an image of the contamination of a prior homogeneity by the intrusion of heterogeneity” (Duschinsky 2013:716). During the introduction of the Mott’s at the freak show, the viewers are introduced to the pair’s tendency to throw money at their problems to make them disappear or get what they want, this further indicates to the viewer the family’s social and financial status over the freak show performers.

This is first evident when Dandy falls in love with the conjoined twins. Supposedly falling in love at first sight with the twins when he sees them on stage, Dandy goes to the lengths of sneaking backstage after the show to see and speak to them. He offers their pair of twins a cigarette which Bette accepts and without any further conversation or much hesitation, Dandy sees an opportunity to flaunt his wealth by simply saying “So, how much?” (Dandy, episode one). The second nature to ask how much he needs to pay to simply own the twins indicates to the viewer that for the Mott family in the upper class of society, money is the answer to any problem that comes their way. Dandy’s plan does fall apart however when offering to buy the twins from the showman Elsa who initially rejects his offer of \$5,000 and then \$10,000 (which translates to roughly \$63,400 and \$126,800 today respectively). Although Dandy appears to be genuinely excited and happy to be able to interact with them, the audience is left unsure if Dandy has genuine feelings for the girls. Or, if he was attracted to their bodily differences because he desires the exotic, in his perceived, boring life. Although the twins initially reject the offer to be purchased by the Mott family and choose to stay in the show with the other performers, the twins are sold to the Mott’s later by a jealous Elsa. The sympathetic twenty-first-century viewer may find disgust in the callous nature of people being sold as if they were objects. However, the commodification of freak show performers raises empathy for the freak show performers and heightens our disgust for the able-bodied antagonists such as Dandy and Stanley. After buying the twins, Dandy believes that he has fallen in love with the girls and becomes determined to marry the twins. When confronted with this

news, Gloria is not shy to expose her true views of those seen as lower in society, raising her voice in embarrassment and anger exclaiming to Dandy (episode five):

It's not our world, Dandy. You come from a long line of such fine people - generation after generation of refinement. I am simply protecting you from a life of degradation and opprobrium!

Gloria's immediate reaction is to present Dandy with a platter of condoms so that he does not have children with the twins, she explains "We don't need to muddy the waters any further with whatever curse led to those girls' affliction" (Gloria, episode six). This returning to Gloria's concern of remaining among the elite members of society, the outburst she expresses disgusted me because of the degree to which she was protecting her social standing while being belligerent and ableist by modern standards. The disgust at her son's realisation is evident with erratic hand gestures and her forced and erratic speaking. The hysteria that raises in her voice heightened the viewer's reactions to the scene, who relate to Dandy's outrage and relate to his mother's apprehension when Dandy comes close to her. His mother's response shows us again how concerned she is at their status by stating "What do you think? Are you going to escort them to a cotillion? I will not allow you to isolate us from the world because of some new *fetish*" (Gloria, episode six). With the disgust evident in her tone, Dandy remains determined in his wish and insists to his mother that he will be marrying the twins.

Dandy is equally outraged at his mother's classist actions, but in a calm and sinister manner stands up with the platter of condoms and gives them back to his mother. The way he slowly walks to his mother with the platter of condoms is ominous and very eery to the viewer who now does not trust his actions. Throughout history, marriage among conjoined twins has been a topic of controversy, namely questions surrounding the functioning of the family and sexual dynamics in the family and household. Alongside this fascination the wider public did question whether conjoined twins' "unusual domestic situation was avoidable" (Davies 2015:72). Such controversy includes Daisy and Violet Hilton, who famously were denied a marriage licence in twenty-one states across America during the 1930s due to moral grounds. As well as conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker, whose marriages to women caused a lot of discussion and debate during and after their lifetimes (Durbach 2010:81–82). Marriage between those accepted into the social norm and the rejected and abjected freak show performers further elevates our disgust towards the classist actions exhibited by Gloria towards the freak show performers. This deliberately disturbs the social order, reiterating the fact that the freaks

should remain separate as to not be accepted members of the safe social order, "... the world 'outside' pose[s] a threat to the one 'inside'" (Elsaesser & Hagener 2015:13). This also introduces the rejection of the freak show performers from society, resulting in the commodification and exoticism of freaks based on bodily differences.

The status of the freak show performers is seen as being commodities for entertainment, even in their personal relationships with their showmen. The freak show performers thus embody the abjected members of society while the members of the social norm encompass the source of disgust to the audience. The representation of disgust shown by the characters in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) represents the maintenance of the safe social hierarchy by demonising those in the lower class and is further represented by the abjected freak show performers and their community. This is not relatable for the twenty-first-century viewer who increasingly empathises with the freak show performers. Therefore, when heinous and disgusting acts by able-bodied characters throughout the season threaten the safety found by the freak show performers the empathetic viewer feels an increasing disgust towards the normal and safe members of society.

#### **4.2. Sexuality**

Although the Victorian era is known for having a conservative approach to sexuality, historical documentation of freak show performers places a recurring fascination with the performer's genders, genitalia, and sexuality (Davies 2015:8). Therefore, although the Victorian era was modest and prudish with their attitudes towards sex (specifically sex that was not for the purpose of reproduction), historically particular interest has been placed on the irregularity and abnormality of freak show performers' sexual lives and genitalia. This fascination with the freak show performers sexual lives is elaborated on by Elizabeth Grosz (in Davies 2015:9–10) who states:

the initial reaction to the freakish and the monstrous is a perverse kind of sexual curiosity. People think to themselves: 'How do they do it?' What kind of sex lives are available to Siamese twins, hermaphrodites, bearded ladies, and midgets? There is a certain morbid speculation about what it would be like to be with such persons, or worse, to be them.

The nineteenth century was a site of fantasies and fears based around sexual Otherness, which forms "projections of our desires and preoccupations" (Davies 2015:9). Stigmatising traits such as deviant sexuality or homosexuality are frequently attached to those involved in freak shows, especially those of conjoined twins. Raising questions of

the self versus the other, conjoined twins were frequently questioned over their sexuality, as it is unclear “whether the twins were one or two individuals ... imply[ing] that sex with ‘Siamese twins’ necessarily involved more than two people” (Durbach 2010:80). This is supported by Pancoast (in Davies 2015:72), who discusses “alternate mastery”<sup>25</sup> on the count of conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker. The topic surrounding their sexual lives was so speculated on, that when they died in 1874 a newspaper emphasised that the twins had married separate wives, and each brother had a surprisingly large fully grown family of their own (Durbach 2010:82). This did end in questioning who exactly fathered the children, which had been raised while they were alive and after their death (Durbach 2010:82). Above all other controversy was questions into their sexual relationships with each other’s wives, “[was] something that was clearly ‘immoral and shocking’ to the wider world” (Durbach 2010:82).

The central issue following all conjoined twin performers was not being able to live a heterosexual and monogamous lifestyle while being joined to another person (Durbach 2010:83-84). This fascination with the sexual lives of conjoined twins is seen across the season of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) as the twins Bette and Dot have the most romantic and sexual partners, with a particular emphasis on the twin's acceptance of their conjoinment being linked with losing their virginity in episode 11. This highlights the misconceptions and prejudices preconceived notions of sexuality and sex that are tied to freak show performers. Which is used by the wider public to exert social hierarchical control over the group of performers. This forcibly isolates the group from accepted society to the outside of accepted society, this thrusting the performers into an unfair and unsafe environment while not being allowed to exit it.

While the aim of sexual scenes in media is to excite and titillate the audience, some viewers may be disgusted by what they see because they are included in such a personal act in such an intimate way. This imposes the viewer in an abjected state, which is explained by Korsmeyer (in Ndalianis 2012:104) that while sex can be perceived as affectionate and desirable, sex can also be seen as disgusting due the “unclean” bodily fluids (such as semen or menstrual blood.) Plantinga (2009:212) recognises that in the realm of art, and in this case a TV series, there is a push and pull on the part of the

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<sup>25</sup> This describes a living situation where each twin was in complete control for one week at a time, living at his home with his wife and submitting to the will of his brother, his wife, his home, and his rules.

viewer between curiosity and fascination on the one hand, and aversion and repulsion on the other. As Linda Williams (1991:6) states that while watching sex in visual media, although they are not participating, viewers can be aroused by what they see while others, however, could be disgusted at being included in a private and intimate moment. In summary, this means that the representation of sex and sexuality in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) is determined by what society – or individuals - deems normal or acceptable. The freak show performers and those associated with the freak show are assumed to participate in deviant sexual activities, due to the misconceptions of bodily difference. *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) reflects the sexual deviance attached to the freak show performers through the backstory of the owner and showman of the freak show, Elsa.

#### **4.2.1. Elsa's deviant sexuality**

The showman, Elsa Mars, is a German-born woman who once worked as a dominatrix<sup>26</sup> that founded, owns, and headlines the show “Fraulein Elsa's Cabinet of Curiosities”. In episode four, Elsa explains that after Germany lost World War I, the country was plunged into complete sexual chaos. This is due to “All of the pain and humiliation of Germany's surrender. Before there was Hitler to channel it into another war, the citizens of Germany expressed their misery with their cocks” (Elsa, episode four). According to Elsa, this loss of structure and order in their society led to sexual deviations from the accepted hetero-normative coupling. This sexual chaos in Germany that is described by Elsa is directly contrasted by a conversation held by an unnamed 1950s middle-class housewife who complains that she is lucky if her husband has sex with her once a year. This direct contrast on behalf of the creators further solidifies all the members of the troupe as part of the object that is being rejected outside of society.

When recounting Elsa's life story, we enter a brothel in 1932 in a black and white film reel-style flashback, introducing us to this deviant sexual chaos she described, which can be seen in Figure 11. The creator's choice to portray the scene in a black-and-white-style film is familiar but disconnected from the modern audience, which is used to seeing film and television in colour. Elaborating on the chaos of the imagery seen Elsa (Episode four) narrates accompanied by moans of pleasure from those in the brothel:

Any deviance you could imagine, you could have. Animals, scat, amputees, hunchbacks... And in the darkest corner of it all, I found

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<sup>26</sup> A dominatrix is a woman that is paid for sexual services by individuals who find sexual pleasure in pain and is classified as a subculture of BDSM (which originated in Germany).

myself...Unable to find work on the stage, starving. But even in that world, I was a star. I was a minette, a French cat. I worked only at the top hotels. But I wasn't like the rest of those whores. I never let my clients touch me, let alone put their filth inside of me. I gained a reputation for being the one you went to when you were looking for something... creative. No one puts on a show better than I do... You trade away your humanity trick by trick. In the end, I wasn't Elsa. I was nothing. A ghost.



Figure 11: Flashbacks showing the sexual chaos in Germany, *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014–2015. Screenshot by author.

The types of sexual deviance that Elsa describes include "... the categories of fetishism, voyeurism, sadism, and masochism [which are] frequently invoked to describe the pleasures of film spectatorship are by definition perversions" (Williams 1991:6). The quickly changing images of people engaged in sexual activities, and the sounds of moans of pleasure accompanying Elsa's explanation allow for immediate sensory contact to be made with the viewer. The fast pacing of the perversions and sexual deviance described allows the viewer to become immediately introduced to the chaos. This means that "the corporeal, sensuous, erotic events onscreen affect us and write themselves across and inside our bodies in very real and intimate ways" (Ndalianis 2012:102). The deviant acts that are highlighted by *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) directly contrasts the modest attitudes of sex that are expressed by the housewives in episode one. Portraying the opposite attitudes towards sex, is an attempt on behalf of the creators to purposefully titillate or disgust the audience.

A shocking moment of disgust hits the viewer when Elsa shows one of her clients a bed of nails that is attached to a toilet, Figure 12. Her client who is crawling on the floor like a dog on a leash, sits on the toilet slowly in pain. His screams of pain are evident and heard by the viewer who takes in the scene viscerally in their own bodies as the anticipation of the scene becomes too intense for the viewer who knows that the man will sit on the nail infested toilet. I found myself looking away and turned away before I could see the scene occurring, while other viewers may not have looked away. It is possible that this viewer is fascinated by how the creators will show the unfolding scene before us. As I was sitting waiting for the ultimate end to the scene, I start to feel the pain were to inevitably sit on the toilet covered with nails, feeling my sitting position on the couch suddenly become uncomfortable. The scene is made particularly more disturbing due to the vulnerability felt when sitting on the toilet.



Figure 12: Elsa's client sits on a nail adorned toilet,  
*American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014-2015.  
Screenshot by author.

This feeling of pain and shock expressed by Elsa's client in his screams, elicits what Hanich (2010:182) identifies as motor mimicry which may result in the tensing of muscles – in this case would be the legs or our buttocks – our bodies imitating the acts that we see on screen. However, the viewer is shocked when his expression changes from pain to that of sexual pleasure and relief. Plantinga (2009:23) notes that while some films entice the viewer with sexual pleasure, he warns however that it would be too simplistic to describe all sexual scenes as voyeuristic. As voyeurism requires “... [deriving] sexual gratification from observing others, and (2) the voyeur observes others while being unobserved, from a secret vantage point” (Plantinga 2009:23). Therefore, the affective experience of disgust while watching sexual scenes is not always an enjoyable or sexual experience, “but is as varied as the visual and aural world itself” (Plantinga 2009:23). Ndalianis (2012:104) explains that the audience understands “... what it feels like to touch, taste and smell”, by watching films and television shows our “brain recodes what I experience on screen into a sensorial encounter that’s felt in very real ways across my body”. Therefore, experiencing disgust while watching horror is found tolerable or enjoyable because these senses (touch, taste, and smell) are not actually present (Ndalianis 2012:104). All viewers that watch the sexual nature of these scenes will interpret the scenes in a unique way, therefore some viewers’ bodies may react disgusted or while other viewers’ bodies may become titillated towards the brief flashes of sexual scenes shown.

Elsa's backstory continues when *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) reveals that Elsa is an amputee from the rest of the freak show, wanting to still hold social status and thus power above the remaining performers in the freak show who are unable to hide from their bodily differences. Elsa recounts the horrifying ordeal when she had lost her legs describing being drunk and drugged, unable to control herself and her calls for help ultimately went unnoticed. The moment of dread comes from the heart of the viewer when the sound of the chainsaw starts and it is implied that Elsa's legs are cut off, this revelation causes the skin to tingle on my legs while I watch the violent nature of the scene unfold.

Elsa was completely ignored by the inhumane men surrounding her, and the trauma of the sexual violence that Elsa received remains in the mind of the audience who listens to her fading screams in pain. In Elsa's intoxicated, confused, and scared state, the film documentary-style transitions from calm to chaos as a chainsaw used to saw her legs



off. In series of unfocused and quickly flashing imagery, the viewer experiences the sounds of a film camera rolling, a chainsaw and the scared screams of Elsa, while seeing her screaming face and the obscured faces of the men tormenting her. The unclear editing of the images obscures the gore we hear Elsa experience, the sawing into her legs with Elsa's screams of pain fading into the noise of the chainsaw and then into an echoed nothing. While some viewer might feel less disgusted as we do not see any blood or open wounds on her legs due to the editing choices, I felt the opposite. My imagination then was forced to imagine the gore-filled imagery and wounds due to my hearing that is completely enveloped in the sounds of the chainsaw and screaming.

During this scene, the audience's bodily integrity is compromised by the thought of undergoing the same trauma that we see in the fast-paced and sporadic imagery of Elsa tied to the bed with the chainsaw. In the case of the sexual crime that Elsa experienced, the audiences' firsthand experiences will determine the level of disgust felt towards the watchers and what they chose to do to Elsa. For example, those who have been sexually assaulted will relate to the violation she felt by being taken advantage of, or those who have lost a limb will understand the struggle she faced as a result. Therefore, being reminded of their emotional traumas through watching Elsa's experiences, a viewer's own body may react somatically to these images.

The deviant nature of the sexual scenes depicted in the scene could impact the viewer as Nussbaum (2004:96) notes that experiences with disgust towards gender, and sexuality, "... societies potently convey attitudes toward animality, mortality, and related aspects of gender and sexuality". Although Elsa was not officially known as a freak show performer, she does actively perform in the freak show performances with the rest of the troupe and her character arc centres around her accepting her feelings as a 'freak'. Historically during the Victorian era and when the show was set in the 1950s, the social implications, judgements, prejudices, and assumptions would still be placed upon Elsa by those in the accepted social norm. Elsa's hidden history as a dominatrix further reflects the historical record of the sexual lives of those seen as performers being a popular topic of speculation from those that were not considered a part of the abjected freaks. The topic of sex among performers in the freak show has been one of the main sources of concern among the public since the inception of the freak show, showing a profound "sexual curiosity" in the observation of extraordinary bodies (Davies 2015:10).

The assumptions of normality on behalf of the abjected freak show performers' sexual lives, indicates the assumptions of deviant sexuality of the freak show performers lead to prejudices against the troupe. *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) further depicts the sexual deviancy attached to the troupe through the violence and homophobia attached to freak show performers. Williams (1991:9) implies that the arrangement of sex and violence “...address[es] persistent problems in our culture, in our sexualities, in our very identities”.

### 4.3. The family Unit

The freak show performers are abjected members of society, based on their bodily differences. *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) takes the perspective of the freak show performers finding their own family unit on the outskirts of society – banding together, supporting each other, and referring to the troupe as their family. The family unit of the performers is highly preserved and fought to keep and protect throughout the series. The family unit created by the performers provides an emotional structure for the freak show performers that are abjected by society. The members of the freak show relate to each other's experience of being othered in society and their need for family support.

From episode one the group is shown willing to kill whoever needed to keep the family together. This can be seen when the troupe of performers, after finding out the truth about Stanley from Maggie, plots a gruesome revenge. Following in the footsteps of *Freaks* (Browning 1932), *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) recreates shots of the chase scene involving Cleopatra and Hercules. Including recreating the performers chasing down Stanley in the rain with knives while he hides under caravans and attempts to run away. Being turned into a male counterpart of Cleopatra's disfigured form (Figure 5 in Chapter two) (Krugman 2018:106). In a behind the scenes interview, the creators identify the central theme of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) as the outsiders who create their own families. Thus, the abjected troupe of performers, even though they are rejected from society, have found their own community on the outside of the social order. What would happen if a member of the freak show lost this important family support structure? This is explored through the series' antagonist Twisty (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Twisty the Clown,  
American Horror Story: Freakshow 2014-2015,  
Screenshot by author.

#### **4.3.1. *Twisty the clown***

Twisty the Clown is first introduced to us as a horrific-looking clown who appears threatening and menacing in appearance but is a docile man who has developmental problems. Throughout the series, he wears dirty and tattered clothing with an accompanying sling-bag, and half of his face is covered in a dirty mask shaped like an oversized deranged clown smile, itself becoming a symbol for madness and murder as the season progresses. When recounting his life story Twisty introduces himself to the rest of the freaks in an unknown freak show as “slow”, claiming this is due to his mother dropping him on his head after too many cocktails as a baby.

Twisty was once a children’s clown at a travelling carnival and was falsely accused of paedophilia by the performers of the carnival he was working with. However, this was a lie made up by the other performers at the carnival so they could have more contact with the children to satisfy their paedophilic tendencies. As a result, Twisty was chased out of town and was banished from the ‘carny circuit’ for this false reputation, which extends to the treatment received by society, as Plantinga (2009:212) explains:

people tend to want to distance themselves by moving away from, removing from their presence ... or avoiding and censoring that which elicits disgust. A characteristic movement is to reject the disgusting object, person, or event.

Twisty experiences both physical and sociomoral disgust from the other townspeople, however his history and mental state fascinates the viewer and thus gains some sympathy from the viewer. This introduces Twisty's obsession of being perceived as a good person, thus no matter how twisted and harmful his actions were, he meant no ill harm and thus views himself as a good person. Needing to make money, Twisty tried to make toys out of rubbish and sell them to the local toy store owner. The toy store owner initially calmly rejects Twisty's offers, trying nicely to get him out his of store which is overlooked by an overexcited Twisty. Twisty tries desperately to get the toy store owner to buy his toys, frantically and intensely showing a young boy in the store one of his toys. His over-intensity ends up scaring the child, making him run to his mother for comfort. The toy store owner now feels angry at Twisty; this makes the store owner insinuate that Twisty is a paedophile. Twisty's demeanour changes to that of pure anger, which threatens the toy shop owner and leaves the store with his toys.

Opening on the local toy store that is littered with dolls, drums, animal toys and puppets. The store clerk arrives at work, calling out for his boss who does not reply. Walking around the empty toy shop the clerk starts to clean some toys on the floor and out of place. Suddenly he sees a robot on the floor walk towards him with a startling heighten in the violin background music, which made my heart jump. He walks closer towards the robot seeing that there the small toy is leaving a trail of blood behind it. As the clerk follows where the robot came from the camera shifts from the clerk on the floor to Twisty hiding amongst the Halloween clown costumes. The violin music swells to an overwhelming crescendo as the clerk follows the blood that is dripping from the decapitated head of the toy store owner's head, as seen in Figure 14. The clerk steps backwards in shock, walking into Twisty's knife that stabs him in the neck, the close-up camera filming his shocked reaction to the head of his boss and then the reality that he is dying.



Figure 14: The decapitated head of the toy-store owner being found by a store clerk, *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014–2015. Screenshot by author.

The brutal nature of the revenge taken by Twisty against the toy store owner was a moment that I found myself being fascinated by the imagery I found disgusting. The site of the robot walking around the toy-store with blood trailing behind it, the camera angle when the clerk looks up to see the decapitated head and the close-up shot of the clerk's face while the knife emerges from the front of his neck, all intrigued my interest because of the artistic filming of the disgusting scene. After losing the protection that the freak show and the performers in the freak show offer, Twisty is lost and alone, eventually attempting suicide. However, he unfortunately fails to aim properly and ends up shooting his bottom jaw off instead, leaving him without a bottom jaw, which can be seen below in the Figure 15.

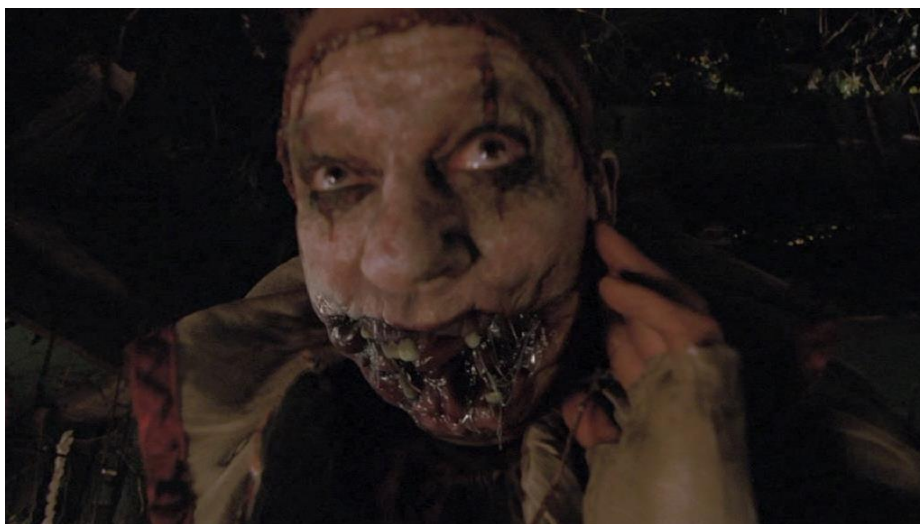


Figure 15: Twisty the clown with his mask off, *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014-2015. Screenshot by author.

Upon first seeing what Twisty his mask has underneath in episode two, the viewer immediately reacts with physical disgust. The shocking scene of Twisty's exposed jaw reveals the inside to the outside, exposing the viewer's own fears of mutilation and bodily harm. For those that are particularly sensitive to gore, these viewers may be affected by a heightened emotional response of disgust. This can be indicated by the body's reactions of looking away, nausea or gasping for air. Now severely injured with no one to help him, Twisty cannot do what he loves anymore, making children laugh and be happy. The intensity that the freak show performers exert around protecting the family of the performers is shown in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) to involve killing and disfiguring able-bodied people that threaten those in the freak show. This reiterates to the viewers the level of desperation and need for the family unit they have created for themselves and cherish dearly, as it offers them a safe space outside of the social normal. Twisty first introduces the audience to the slasher style horror increasingly seen throughout *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), which is categorised by a senseless killing of multiple victims by a human-like-monster horror figure in the early history of the horror genre such as Dracula or Frankenstein. The twisted and murderous acts that Dandy and Twisty participate in throughout the season embody "the monstrous [which] is produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast" (Creed 2003:49). However, the damage inflicted by Twisty is nothing compared to that of Dandy, as supported by Williams (1991:5) who identifies that the monster figure in horror "... seems to take second billing to the increasingly numerous victims slashed by the sexually disturbed but entirely human monsters".

Gloria introduced the pair after a fight with Dandy Gloria saw Twisty walking down the street in episode two. She stops him to ask if he has private parties for children, as she believes her son to be bored, and not that she has again diminished Dandy's dream of being a thespian. Gloria hopes that the clown will keep him occupied for an afternoon and make Dandy happy with her again. Bringing the clown into their home for Dandy "to play with", which is another indicator of the child-like nature that Gloria has stuck Dandy in. Upon meeting the clown Twisty stands out in Dandy's white, neat, and pristine playroom, seen in Figure 16. In complete awe of the clown, finding his silence provocative, Dandy initiates that the pair play with his puppets. Dandy soon finds himself bored of the activity, demanding the clown entertain him. Dandy looks through Twisty's bag and sees the head of the toy store clerk, when Twisty notices this he knocks Dandy unconscious before running out of their house making very distressed whines as he does

so. Dandy soon wakes up and follows the clown to Twisty's abandoned bus-home. Dandy's resentment towards his mother from her overbearing parenting has kept Dandy in a child-like mental state that was channelled into monstrous violence when Gloria introduced him to Twisty. Dandy feels himself freakish from his family ties and being the product of incest, as well as his feelings of loneliness due to his spoiled, immature nature and angry outbursts. Every outburst that he displays is tainted with instability, violence, or manipulation, rather than represented as sympathetic and emotional. While watching the season I could not overlook the increasingly violent and monstrous actions that Dandy displays towards those outside of the social norm like the abjected freak show performers. This ultimately increasing my disgust towards his character and his actions.



Figure 16: Twisty the clown and Dandy Mott first meet,  
*American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014-2015.  
Screenshot by author.

#### **4.3.2. Dandy Mott the 'all-American' monster**

Throughout the season we see that Dandy is deeply unhappy with his life, leading him towards the freak show as an escape and desires for nothing more than to be a performer in the freak show. However, he cannot produce any sort of talent that the freak show performers could make or market into an act for the show, so the troupe rejected his request to join them. The troupe reminds him about how lucky he is to not have to deal with the negative social implications of being a freak show performer. This makes Dandy violently and murderously angry towards the freak show performers, becoming vindictive and vengeful against the troupe of performers. As previously mentioned, Dandy connects

with the freak show performers and their abjected space in society. Wishing to be part of the family unit that the freak show performers have found while being rejected on the outside of the social normal. While watching *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) I understood and at moments related to Dandy's feelings of loneliness and his desire to join the family of the freak show troupe, but I did not build empathy for him as a character due to the monstrous temperament of his character. After being introduced to the "sweet language of murder" (Dandy, episode five) by Twisty and his first murder the Mott family's maid Dora in episode five – which was completely unintentional – leads to a detrimental shift in his character, making Dandy obsessed with being a perfect "all-American murderer" (Dandy, episode five). This starts a downward spiral for his character falling deeper and deeper into madness, while his lust for murder only grows stronger and stronger. This increased my discomfort when seeing him on screen, as I never knew if he was going to manipulate a situation and leave, have an angry outburst or kill them and get away with it due to his stature and status in society.

In planning for his first planned out murder Dandy's new destiny is to become the "U.S. steel of murder" (Dandy, episode five), the use of language indicated to me that he was admiring prolific serial killers in America and learning from them. The interactions with Twisty were Dandy's final push to give in to his unmanageable and violent tendencies, starting to murder, dismember, and bathe in his victim's blood (Figure 17). These acts directly disturb the social order, and as Creed (2003:49) argues, the impure monster threatens the stability of the symbolic order. Having violated the social order and what is considered appropriate behaviour for a member of the upper class, Dandy has turned into a human-monster. Nussbaum (2004:168) proposes that the human-monster reminds the audience:

that all human beings are capable of evil, and that many, if not most, of the hideous evildoers are warped by circumstances, both social and personal, which play a large and sometimes decisive role in explaining the evil that they do. If jurors are led to think that evil is done by monsters who just were born different, are freaky and inhuman, they will be prevented from having thoughts about themselves and their own society that are highly pertinent, not only to the equal and principled application of the law, but also to the construction of a society in which less evil will exist.





Figure 17: Dandy bathing in a bath of blood,  
*American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014–2015.  
Screenshot by author.

Dandy saw his first murder as messy and imperfect, immensely bothering his spoiled and inflated sense of superiority. After being advised by his mother that “... it's 1952. You can't just go around picking up vagrants and killing them. People are missed” (Gloria, episode five), Dandy decides that his first planned target will then be known as being in the weakest and lowest class who will not be missed or questioned where they went if they went missing. Therefore, Dandy decides to choose a member of the queer community, which is reinforced by Desiree – who is labelled as a hermaphrodite – who remarks that the queer community holds a status “lower than us freaks”. Arriving at the local gay bar, Dandy plans to choose a target for his first planned and thought-out murder Andy, which can be seen in [Video 2](#).



Video 2: Dandy murders Andy,  
*American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014-2015.

The scene opens with Dandy leading Andy to Twisty's home, an abandoned bus in the middle of the woods. As Andy works as an escort, therefore he has become desensitised to the scandalous nature of sneaking back with a random stranger to an isolated location for a sexual encounter, getting paid, and then going home. The sound of crickets and crunching grass from the men briskly walking through the forest are joined with loud beating drums. The viewer's body is pulled forward nervously following Dandy and Andy, being reminded of the promise Dandy made to commit the perfect murder in the same episode heightens the viewers captivation into the unfolding scene. This draws the viewer's attention as we are knowingly going to witness a murder. While being fascinated and excited to see how and if Dandy will commit his first purposeful and senseless killing, our bodies start to prepare itself for the feeling of disgust. While watching Dandy convince Andy to get into the bus, I found myself looking away and silently thinking "please don't go in there".

At first, Dandy pretends to be nervous about the first sexual encounter with Andy, however, Dandy harshly denies all of Andy's advances. Through gritted teeth, the displeasure and disgust are visually seen on Dandy's face and heard in his voice, saying "I'm not a fruit". The viewer feels disgusted with Dandy due to the social behaviour that accepted society in the twenty-first century would not consider proper or polite. Therefore, sociomoral disgust is elicited in the viewer is directed towards Dandy's physically disgusted and homophobic reaction. Tricking Andy into a false sense of security by pretending to be nervous and closeted, Dandy's demeanour changes when Andy becomes slightly defensive and confused. Quickly changing his harsh scowl for a light smile, Dandy suggests that the pair turn away from each other, undress, and then turn around "and see what happens". Dandy's manipulation of Andy works, and the pair agree to do so, all while any friendly small talk is quickly shut down by a domineering and controlling Dandy. While undressing, Dandy hurriedly strips to his underwear, almost looking as though he is dissociating thinking about what twisted acts he has planned. Upon rewatching the season, I realised that Dandy's dissociated and emotionless nature always seems to be there heightening the viewers discomfort and disgust towards him and his unstable mental state. The excited yet psychotic expression on Dandy's face prepares the audience for the violent scene to come.

Counting to three, Andy turns around to reveal Dandy wearing his underwear, Twisty's clown mask and holding a knife. Confused and shocked at what Andy sees and Dandy not quite knowing what to do, the first the pair momentarily look at each other. This moment is broken when suddenly Dandy lunges forward and attacks Andy. In a distorted compilation of Dandy stabbing Andy, in a final exertion of rage and control that Dandy had been repressing against his mother. The sound of Dandy uncontrollably grunting all his power into every stab of the knife is reflected in our body's feeling of violation. With every violent stab that enters Andy's naked torso blood spurts and covers the two men in red blood. Standing up to admire his work, Dandy stands over the body admiring the feeling of Andy's blood on his chest.

The threat of violence experienced by Dandy murdering Andy is felt within the viewer's body. Relating to and experiencing each time Dandy forcefully stabs Andy. Unexpectedly Andy wakes up, first struggling for breath before screaming as loud as he could for help. Andy crawls in a desperate attempt to get away, however, Dandy stabs him in the back repeatedly before Andy loses consciousness once more. The never-ending amount of

blood covers Dandy and Andy, colouring both bodies red. The vast amount of blood causes a deep sense of revulsion and disgust in the viewer (Arya 2014:51). Nussbaum (2004:88) suggests that disgust elicited from the sight of blood:

has to be seen as alien: one's own bodily products are not viewed as disgusting so long as they are inside one's own body, although they become disgusting after they leave it.

Horror films popularity is based on the use of blood and gore, thus, to enjoy horror "you need to enjoy the revulsion and want to experience the fear and disgust" (Feagin 1992:80). When horror media passes the boundary of accepted and unaccepted behaviour, by displaying actions not normally accepted in society such as murder, some viewers may enjoy seeing an excessive amount of blood. This is an attempt on behalf of the creators to get a deeper look at "something we regard as visually forbidden or disgusting, when it violates or looks upon the violation of another body-subject with prurience and pleasure" (Sobchack 1992:288). When a viewer watches gore-intensive horror media, Ndalianis (2012:6) suggests that:

the disgusting subject matter imbricates itself into our bodies and across our skin by inciting our senses directly, and synaesthetically ... the extremity and textural surface of violence ... plunges us into such a state of discomfort.

Disgust functions as a protective response from the negative affective experience of being disgusted. Then why do some viewers willingly enjoy these experiences while others are not pleased and are disgusted (Korsmeyer 2012:754)? The success of a horror film is based on whether the viewer's expectations of the intense affective experiences are felt or not. As Feagin (1992:81) suggests "one doesn't always get pleasure in being frightened and disgusted in response to horror fiction". Those who do not like horror fiction will not. When Sobchack (1992:288) experiences violent horror she explains that she:

will either share its inhumane interest (taking advantage of the curiosity of a technological body) or [she] will break [her] engagement with its gaze and stare at [her] lap, unable to share in a look that behaves with no subjective awareness of what it is to bleed or be in physical pain.

Similarly, Hanich (2010:102) suggests that interactions with cinematic constructions of monstrosity or violence may elicit "... reaction[s] such as nausea caused by cinematic

disgust (which is focused on the stomach and/or the gorge)". Therefore, for some viewers who are particularly sensitive to the sight of blood, violence, or gore; a reflex response by our bodies may be to gag or become nauseous. I experienced nausea starting to form in my stomach, immediately clenching my stomach and feeling shivers up my arms and spine. Other viewers who might be bothered by the scene may simply look away. This again depends on one's individual experiences brought with them in the viewing experience, as they affect how we process what we are experiencing.

The determination seen by Andy to get away and get help from his murderer while still coughing up blood is chilling, and some viewers may relate to personal traumas they have experienced. This raises unease, as the blood that by accepted standards belongs inside the body is now outside the body. I could only imagine the pain and Andy is experiencing while I am sitting comfortably at home. This amount of blood reminds the viewer of life and death, which in turn prepares the body to see a corpse. It is important to note however, as Korsmeyer (2012:755) stresses, that:

disgust is not uniquely aimed at mortality ... But with its palpable visceral and sensory arousal, disgust notices the ignoble aspect of mortality in a particularly intimate way, reminding us of the supremely discomfiting fact that in the end our physical selves share the same fate as the lowly worm.

Dandy cheerfully narrates his decision that the perfect way to get rid of the corpse is to dismember him and dissolve his body into acid. This marks the only time throughout the whole season that Dandy is seen cleaning up a mess or problem that he made all by himself. Having already taken Andy's left arm off with a handsaw and dissolved it in the acid bath, Dandy starts to saw off his other arm when suddenly Andy wakes up yet again. Waking up with a blank stare and a flat, but still desperate tone, he pleads for Dandy to end his suffering by killing him. As if it is a thought stuck on a loop inside his slowly dying mind he repeats "Please kill me, please kill me." Andy's dramatic moment of pain and suffering is interrupted by Dandy's tantrum over him not being dead yet. He gets increasingly irritated that Andy is disobeying him by staying alive and is also mad that Andy is making him feel guilty that he is not dead yet shouting "stop it! You're making me feel bad!". This unexpected expression of guilt from Dandy is completely neglected when he rolls his eyes and continues to dismember Andy limb by limb and dissolve him in acid. The scene closes with the sound of the saw being used by Dandy and Andy's screams begging for death.

The sounds of Dandy dipping the dismembered limbs of Andy into the acid bath, while sounding calm made me think of how that would smell which made me turn up my nose. By dismembering Andy's corpse and dissolving him in acid, Dandy transgresses the boundary of life and death. This goes far beyond what accepted normal members of society will ever even think of doing, let alone planning to commit the perfect murder. The sheer violence at which Dandy continuously stabs Andy, which Ndalianis (2012:6) suggests has the ability to force the viewer into an extreme:

state of discomfort until, ironically, like the zombies that often navigate its fictional universes, we ingest the disgusting material presence that's onscreen into ourselves so that our bodies are forced to respond physically.

Dandy embodies the monstrous sinister individual discussed in the abject, as his murderous tendencies become completely unpredictable and random which directly threatens social order and safety. This leaves the viewer in the in between state between the potential for a threat and being safe in watching a television show at home. The experience of seeing and experiencing how his mind as an insane killer operates first-hand from the disturbing inner monologue narrated by Dandy. Throughout the season, Dandy reminded me of Norman Bates for this reason. The aspiring thespian, overly groomed and murderous man acting his role as an attractive, respected, and rich member of society who is good and can do no wrong. However, the audience is aware of every twisted thought that enters his mind, this confronts the viewer with thoughts and imagery they will not normally see in normal life.

The viewer is made increasingly disgusted that Dandy gets away with the murders he commits against the marginalised and abjected members of society including a homosexual and the freak show performers. The viewers now fully see that the frame of mind that Gloria has kept her son in to keep him docile and behaved for their upper class society, has spoiled his mind completely to the point that Dandy has become a murderous monster. The relationship between Dandy and Gloria Mott is at the centre of the downfall of Dandy's mind, from the incest connotations and the overbearing nature that spoiled him into a child-like state of mind.

Dandy initially starts the series as a caricature of a rich mommy's boy, dressing in dress suits with perfectly tamed hair and presenting as a perfectly respectful gentleman. The child-like nature Dandy includes throwing tantrums when he does not get his way, yelling

and screaming at his mother, using a baby-bottle-style whiskey glass, and having a playroom filled with stuffed toys and a stage for puppet shows (which stocks a massive number of toys and gifts that Gloria spoils her grown adult son with). Throughout the series, we see that the relationship between Dandy and Gloria's strained, toxic, full of manipulation, and constantly lie and control each other. This is no more evident than when Gloria continues to hold an overly motherly role over her grown adult son, treating him like a child by telling him to go to his room as punishment after he had murdered their long-time housekeeper Dora in episode five. This moment that Dandy's character shifts from power-hungry child to blood-thirsty man was introduced by Gloria's overbearing parenting of the grown adult Dandy, which boils to an unfortunate and disturbing ending.

#### ***4.3.3. Dandy and Gloria Mott's unhealthy relationship***

The childish tantrums and aggressive outbursts that Dandy thrusts himself into are usually controlled by his mother, who calms him down or finds a way to distract him. The creators of the series portray the family unhealthy dynamic between the two characters being blamed on a family having too much money, by implicating the wealth being the reason for his family's incest as well as Dandy's spoiled mind. The intense need to stay in the higher status of society which spoiled their chances at a supportive and loving family environment that they both craved from each other as they were otherwise focused on wealth and status. However, the deep-rooted hatred that Dandy feels towards his mother for not allowing him to become a thespian – because of their higher status in society – pushes Dandy's mind into a dangerously overcontrolled state for the insane and violent man-child that is Dandy. Dandy's poor mental state and the turbulent relationship with his mother reaches insane levels once he eventually kills his mother by shooting her in the head, his facial reactions of the scene can be seen in Figure 18.



Figure 18: Dandy Mott kills his mother,  
*American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014-2015.  
Screenshot by author.

Dandy's unregulated emotions have, until now, been controlled by his mother who usually has cleaned up the results of his actions. Now that she is dead, Dandy's childish nature is now unregulated and unleashed onto the world with murderous intent. One of the most disturbing moments of the season is seen at the start of episode nine and can be viewed in [Video 3](#).





Video 3: Dandy turns his mother into a conjoined-twin puppet,  
*American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014-2015.

The scene starts in Maggie's tent, who is pretending to be a fortune teller in the freak show for Stanley. Dandy is seeing her for guidance after killing his mother, and of course paying her an exorbitant amount of money to do so. Maggie looks into her crystal ball, which opens onto the Mott family home where a travelling make-up sales associate is seen at the front door. After knocking on the door Dandy welcomes her inside. She gleefully walks into the home while Dandy picks up a candle stick and hits her over the head, this was not a shock to me as it was obvious Dandy would murder her. The scene transforms into the floor of Dandy's playroom as he hums a song happily. Slowly panning up to the stage in his playroom, the viewer sees toys, a bathtub, then the decapitated body of the sales associate. The camera finally we see Dandy standing on the stage. It

is then revealed that Dandy is sewing the saleswoman's head onto his mother's body in a twisted form of his own conjoined twin puppet, Figure 19.



Figure 19: Dandy's creates a conjoined puppet of his mother and a victim, *American Horror Story: Freak Show*, 2014–2015. Screenshot by author.

According to the abject, the viewer's interest is pulled towards and away from the monstrous Dandy, which is experienced as either fascinating or threatening for the viewer. This is true in the case of the monsters and violence displayed in films – we do not usually see them in everyday life and thus, even though they are fictional, when we see these images in films, they fascinate us. When the viewer is faced with a violent and threatening monster and looks away from the screen, our bodies are attempting to avoid the very real threat on screen, which is further elaborated on by Hanich (2010:95):

The film may be fictional; the threat to the well-being of our lived bodies and psyches is not. The danger to the characters might occur at a safe ontological distance; what we see, hear and feel can easily bridge the phenomenological distance.

Therefore, when I understood that the saleswoman will die my response became heightened for a bigger and upcoming threat. The deeply disturbing sight of Dandy playing with the puppet, reveals the twisted level at which he has become infatuated with the conjoined twins that he seems all right with fetishising and sexualising his own

mother. This is deeply disturbing to the viewer, who becomes fearful at what other disgusting acts Dandy is willing to do to marry and build a life with the twins. This also indicates in some part that Dandy wanted a loving environment to express himself and feels comfortable with the abjected members of society, revealing how he views himself as 'a freak'. It is important to raise the question if Dandy was truly in love with the twins, or if he was attracted to them because of their stereotypically exotic and sexualised status as freak. This can be seen through interactions between the trio while the twins were living with the Mott family. Due to their abjection from society the freak show performers turn into an exotic spectacle that has been seen throughout history as being sexualised based on bodily difference.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4.4. Conclusion

This chapter set out to analyse and investigate how *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) can solicit somatic and affective responses in its audience specifically concerning disgust. Through an analysis of themes of social hierarchy, sexuality, and the family unit, I have attempted to understand how disgust plays a part in how viewers come to process these social issues as they are depicted in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). Appealing to our twenty-first-century context, a more positive tendency, is to accept what was once considered deviant sexuality, and irregular family units. Disgust is a protective response that helps our bodies reduce sensory contact with the source of disgust, prompting mirrored feelings of violation in the viewer (Arya 2014:44). Arya (2014:2) explains that:

... the experience of abjection both endangers and protects the individual in that it threatens the boundaries of the self and also reminds us of our animal origins and protects us because we can expel the abject through various means.

Following the inspiration of *Freaks* (Browning 1932) it is not the freak show performers who are seen throughout the series defending their family unit from danger, it is the able-bodied performers and 'normal' members of society are likened to the true freaks of nature. For me, the abject that was experienced when viewing *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) is seen in the mysterious and ominous nature surrounding the societally normal-bodied but disgusting and monstrous characters Twisty and Dandy. The state of being between feeling empathy for their unique circumstances and hating how they are acting because of their circumstances. Social status within *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) forms the basis for

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<sup>27</sup> This can be seen in the history of sexualization of freak show performers such as Saartjie Baartman briefly discussed in chapter three.

the treatment of the freak show performers throughout the series. Regarded as being on the outside of the social order, the freak show performers are abused, misrepresented, mistreated, and marginalised by those who consider themselves normal. Disgust is elicited towards the middle and upper classes of the social hierarchy which is represented by the exploitation of the freaks' bodies by the museum, Stanley's killing of the freak show performers, and the Mott family. *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) proposes that power is held by those of a higher class over those in lower classes, and those that are not accepted by the symbolic social normal are outed and rejected. This thinking has stuck with those such as the Mott family, with their self-imposed importance over those deemed below them. The flaunting of their wealth exerts a level of control that the Mott family exerts over those around them was something that Gloria risked the health of her future children over.

From the twisted and murderous actions of Stanley, Twisty and Dandy, disgust can arise which reminds the viewer of the animalistic and primitive nature that every person is capable of. When a horror becomes too intensely affected for a viewer by the intensity of the abjected monster, Creed (2003:65) suggests that:

By not looking, the spectator is able momentarily to withdraw identification from the image on the screen in order to reconstruct the boundary between self and screen and reconstitute the self which is threatened with disintegration.

As stated in Chapter two, sociomoral disgust is a social construction. In other words, society determines what is deemed disgusting (Plantinga 2006:84). In the case of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) Stanley, Dandy, Twisty and the inhabitants of the town nearby all express physical disgust towards the abjected freak show performers by grimacing, refusing to serve them at the restaurant and the pharmacy, cursing, throwing glass bottles, and ultimately ends in nearly all of the members of the freak show being killed or mutilated. This reminds us of the social prejudices against the performers that was linked to the descriptor of a “freak”. The empathetic viewer may feel disgusted at his prejudice and willingness to murder the performers without a second thought, which leads to the viewer feeling sympathy for those considered ‘freaks’ by society. As previously mentioned, the main source of disgust throughout the season is located in the treatment of the freak show performers, acting as the underdog of society.

*AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) represents varying family relationships through the toxic Mott family, the freak show finding family in their fellow performers, and the loss of this family unit through Twisty the Clown. The freak show performers offer each other solace and protection against those that try harm them within the troupe and find their own family unit on the outside of accepted society. Therefore, when characters such as Dandy, Twisty or Stanley infiltrate the family unit to inflict harm on the members of the freak show, the viewer's disgust towards the murderous actions represented is heightened in the body of the viewers.

Therefore, disgust is elicited as a protective response to shield contact with gore-intensive horror media that incites our senses with deep effects both inside our bodies and across our skin (Ndalianis 2012:6). A viewer's tolerance for disgusting objects reaches a limit, especially when an audience becomes accustomed to viewing certain disgusting activities (Korsmeyer 2012:755). This could lead the horror-loving audience into becoming bored following episodes of a horror television series that does not include much gore, scares or disgusting moments. Not everyone will enjoy this taste for gore and disgust, as according to Feagin (1992:80), to enjoy horror you need to expect to see blood and gore and enjoy this revulsion. Not every viewer will enjoy disgust and gore that the horror genre offers us, while others get pleasure out of the experience drawing them back to the horror genre repeatedly (Feagin 1992:81).

This is supported by Plantinga (2009:212) who states, "the disgusting may also attract the viewer, creating a push and pull between curiosity and fascination on the one hand and aversion and repulsion on the other". The narrative across the season is slow but takes time to build the narrative and connections between characters within the season. This slow pacing at times has led to the season being received as being lower in favouritism amongst fans, but what is not disputed is that Dandy's character is very well written and performed throughout the series. Dandy's slow decent into madness and ultimate karmic ending was satisfying to watch be completed across the season. The disgust felt towards Dandy as a character keeps bringing television viewers back once a week every week for 13 weeks.

The season takes inspiration from *Freaks* (1932) implicating the able-bodied members of society being truly freakish. *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) implies that the same through

the murderous and incestuous acts engaged by the able-bodied and ‘deviant’ members of accepted society. Unlike its inspiration *Freaks* (Browning 1932),

*FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) was generally well received upon viewing and was nominated for 76 awards and won 21 of them. Some of the awards include being nominated for the Emmy for best outstanding limited series, and winning Emmys for outstanding hairstyling, special visual effects, costumes, prosthetic make-up, and make-up. This all leads to an immersive experience through the artistic direction taken from all contributors towards the series. Ultimately upon completed viewing is an immersive.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

### 5.1. Summary of chapters

This study set out to analyse and investigate somatic responses to *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) in relation to the affective response of disgust. Some film studies theorists focus on how images are taken in with our whole body, placing emphasis on how our bodies and psyche are affected by the experiences we see on the screen (Elsaesser & Hagener 2015:127). Thus, a phenomenological based study, based on the theories of Julian Hanich (2010) and Angela Ndalians (2012) in the embodied perception of horror focused on the senses gives us a deeper perspective into people's experiential engagement with film and television.

Chapter one introduced the background and the aims of the study and situated the study within the field of visual culture and the somatic effects of phenomenology. The research question was contextualised within relevant literature, outlining major theorists and literature used within this study. Chapter two introduces the history of the horror film which revealed that the horror genre advanced from the outside of mainstream films since the flourishing of gothic horror literature and the theatre in the 1800s. A major shift in horror films was the focus on psychology, which focuses on the audience's unconscious emotions or fears. Advancements in technology have propelled and influenced technical aspects in horror films enabling filmmakers to experiment with what is possible to achieve in subject matter and narratives.

Chapter two explores the concept of phenomenology through theorists Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2002), Vivian Sobchack's (2004) and Julian Hanich's (2010). My investigation into film phenomenology revealed that our bodies react to these experiences before our minds and consciousness can fully translate what we have experienced, as originally theorised by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002). When applied in the context of film, Vivian Sobchack (2004) argues that our consciousness is embodied. Thus, a viewer's body react to the images that we see on screen which makes us react unknowingly before we realise, we have been affected. The affect can offer an explanation to the somatic effects felt when watching horror media. Carroll's paradox of horror offers an explanation to why we obtain pleasure from experiencing these negative affective emotions and responses. Emotions are elicited within these experiences, affecting us in situations when our

emotional states are heightened, with these experiences in turn affecting our unconscious. A highly negative affect like disgust stays with us, the abject (as theorised by Arya 2014) proposes an answer to Carroll's paradox which states that some viewers enjoy being simultaneously fascinated and disgusted by an abject source while others do not. Therefore, Chapter two argues that disgust is elicited as a protective response to shield the body from the disgusting source of abjection, which causes negative somatic affects in the viewer's body. Every viewer will experience, process, and interoperate this experience the same, therefore resulting in some viewers becoming desensitised to the gore filled media genre.

Chapter three contextualised the history of the freak show and explored of the use of the word 'freak'. This chapter explored the main inspiration behind *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015), *Freaks* (Browning 1932). The films narrative and characters were explored, as the series took inspiration from typical cast members of freak show troupes depicted in the film. The corresponding characters from *Freaks* (Browning 1932) and *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) are briefly compared to provide context for the well-rounded representation of freak show performers seen throughout *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

In Chapter four, provided the analysis of the aspects of disgust related to *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015). The chapter explored the potential transformative effect that can follow an emotional and affective encounter with the social issue of marginalised individuals who have been alienated by society to maintain traditional cultural practices as is represented in this horror series. It is argued throughout this chapter that the freak show is composed of those who have experienced rejection from accepted society, who create their family unit outside of the accepted social heteronormative thinking. Creating their own safe space for them to live in, the performers fight murderous intentions to keep their community safe. Therefore, with every attempted death and murder of freak show performers and those marginalised as lowest on the cultural hierarchy like homosexuals, we are increasingly disgusted at the able-bodied and 'normal' members of society.

By drawing on our sociomoral disgust that is elicited by the disregard for human life seen throughout the season, *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) conjures imagery of the middle class protecting their safe position in society from the rejected, chaotic, and marginalised abjected group of performers. The empathetic viewer watching this exchange further builds disgust towards those inside of the social norm for the vile acts committed against



the empathetic group of performers. The viewer realises the sheer desperation that the performers in the freak show feel as the abjected members of society, which the empathetic viewer realises and relates too. By being abjected by society, the members of the freak show are seen as abnormal and no longer human. Sevenich (2015:49) suggests that this “... exposes and criticizes the discriminatory demands put upon marginalised citizens as well as society’s destructive nature of exclusion and commodification”. The reminder of our animalistic nature is represented in freak shows through socially abnormal or deviant activities such as taboo-sex and murder. As Arya (2014:12–13) suggests, through abjection society marks out areas of society to remove, who often remind the viewer of the “threatening world of animals or animalism”. And yet, it is the animal nature of those who are supposedly normal that is brought to the fore in *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

## 5.2. Contribution of this study

The creators of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015) uses disgust to illustrate how the socially constructed class system that governs our lives in society is weaponised against those seen as lower in society. While the able-bodied people elicit the source of disgust throughout the season, disgust is embodied by the performers of the freak show. This is due to their function in reminding the audience of the constructed categories of the ‘normal’ versus the ‘abnormal’ and what these categories mean for us as a twenty-first century viewer. The able-bodied characters throughout the season could make the viewer reflect on how we are treating differently abled people. This forces the viewer to explore what and how these categories and class distinctions have changed and what they mean now.

*AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) has slowly declined in popularity since COVID in 2020, I experienced the seasons starting to have overly complicated plots and the characters and narratives were no longer captivating. This led me, and many like-minded fans online, to stop watching the later seasons of the show. However, *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) is currently airing its twelfth season featuring Kim Kardashian and Emma Roberts directly on Disney+. *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) continues to critique on social issues and societal changes that has been found throughout horror history. While featuring freak show performers as the central cast of characters, the setting of the freak show is rarely seen in television and film. Except for documentaries about specific freak show performers, or being the setting of *Carnivalé* (2003) and *The Greatest Showman* (2019).

### 5.3. Limitations of study

Having now researched emotional affect in cinema, a noticeable gap was found in the literature of the negative emotions elicited within the film viewing experience. This is due to more focus being placed on the perceived positive emotions that is left after watching horror films and not many on the negative emotions that are elicited. Another glaring gap in the literature, as identified by Plantinga (2009:24), is that the theory of affected emotions is applied largely to mainstream Hollywood films. Thus, I decided to study a television series that is known but not largely accepted by mainstream audiences. Affect, as I have presented throughout my study, is unconscious, instinctual, and pre-reflective. I present these non-cognitivist responses as the focus on my analysis of *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

The abject, as theorised by Kristeva (1982), is described phenomenologically as arising from a breach in the symbolic order. This means that, as much as it may elicit bodily responses in the viewer (such as nausea or vomiting), Kristeva's notion of abjection is shaped by the socio-cultural environment. Arya (2014:2) states that "although the phenomenological response is the most immediate one when we are confronted by something that causes abjection, it is inadequate to think of abjection only in terms of the reactions it elicits". In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva's (1982) analysis of abjection is phenomenological, using first-person point-of-views to capture the lived experience of the body. Although the concept of abjection originated in psychic development (Arya 2014:12), it resonates and is used in many ways throughout academic theory. While I acknowledge my limited use of the abject and the psychoanalytical roots of Kristeva's theory of abjection, I am interested in examining abjection in relation to bodily responses to *FS* (Murphy 2014–2015).

The world-wide experience of COVID in 2020 changed the way we interact with film and media. As it was deemed unsafe to go watch a film in a cinema interacting with media on largely streaming sites or other broadcasting services from the comfort of your own home has become more of the norm within society. As the study was grounded in the television series *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-) a lot of arguments made by authors rooted in the cinematic experience and the surrounding settings of where the season was watched had to be largely ignored.

#### **5.4. Suggestions for further research**

The study included the analysis of one season of the television series *AHS* (Murphy & Falchuk 2011-). This could lead to other aspects of Visual Media, as Plantinga (2009:24) suggests, “We must ask how art films, experimental films, video games, television serials, television advertising, web sites, and diverse other media elicit affect and emotion”. Further studies of somatic responses in relation to the horror genre can be extended to these other media like video games, advertising, or other television series. The focus of this investigation was the affective reaction of disgust; other somatic responses such as repulsion, disdain, empathy, or relief could warrant a study of their own.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

A table showing the narratives of each *American Horror Story* season.

Season (Year)	Title	Air Dates	Premise
1 (2011)	<i>Murder House</i>	5 October 2011 - 21 December 2011	This season follows the Harmon family going through conflicts including adultery, death, intruding neighbours, and mysterious visitors to their famously haunted new home. We also follow the story lines of the many ghosts residing within the walls.
2 (2012)	<i>Asylum</i>	17 October 2012 - 23 January 2013	Set in a 1964 Christian mental hospital, the season follows patients and staff members through the eyes of aspiring investigative journalist Lana Winters (Sarah Paulson). Specifically focusing in on Kit Walker (Evan Peters) who is accused as a serial killer 'bloody face'. Facing the death penalty, we continuously question if he is guilty or not. The hospital's inhabitants are subject to a demonic possession, extra-terrestrial abduction, and a scheming undercover- Nazi doctor.

<p><b>3</b> <b>(2013)</b></p>	<p><i>Coven</i></p>	<p>9 October 2013 - 29 January 2014</p>	<p>The dwindling descendants of female witches who survived the Salem witch trials. The series, set in 2013, follows the covens fight for power within and outside of the coven, while trying to understand and gain control of their own powers.</p>
<p><b>4</b> <b>(2014)</b></p>	<p><i>Freak Show</i></p>	<p>8 October 2014 - 21 January 2015</p>	<p>Following a 1952 sideshow lead by Elsa Mars (Jessica Lange). The time of 'freakshows' entertaining the public is over, but Mars and those involved in the show see it as a safe haven for her 'monsters'. The group of freaks in the show must also navigate a twisted killer clown, called 'Twisty' on the loose, a conman who is trying to sell the dead members of the freakshow to a museum of deformities, as well as a spoiled rich Dandy Mott (Finn Wittrock) who becomes obsessed with the show and the freaks inside of it. These people's personal lives and medical issues will be tested while trying effortlessly to fit into the nearby small Florida town.</p>
<p><b>5</b> <b>(2015)</b></p>	<p><i>Hotel</i></p>	<p>7 October 2015 -</p>	<p>The season is set in the Hotel Cortez, an imaginary hotel in</p>

		13 January 2016	downtown Los Angeles. Built by a serial killer James Patrick March (Evan Peters) to trap, murder, and torture as many people as possible. Initially investigating 'a ten-commandment killer' detective John Lowe (Wes Bentley) personal, moral, and professional life gets caught up in the colourful variety of ghostly, vampiric, and living inhabitants of the hotel that are unable to leave if they are killed inside of it. The series also investigates those living inside of the hotel as well.
6 (2016)	<i>Roanoke</i>	14 September 2016 - 16 November 2016	Set from 2015- 2017 in the style of a documentary series called My Roanoke Nightmare, this season follows retelling their experience of moving into a haunted home. Borrowing from the real-life disappearance, the couple find out that the house was previously built on the site of the Roanoke colony's disappearance and the land is now haunted with their ghosts. After the initial run of the series the actors and real-life counterparts return to the house in a final battle between the hostile

			neighbours, ghosts of the colonists and the ghosts of previous inhabitants of the house.
<b>7 (2017)</b>	<i>Cult</i>	5 September 2017 - 14 November 2017	In Brooklyn Heights, Michigan residents are divided after Donald Trump is elected as president. Misogynistic alt-righter cult leader Kai Anderson (Evan Peters) rejoices the election results, prompting him to join the political career and runs for city-council. However, Ally Mayfair-Richards (Sarah Paulson) does not agree and goes increasingly unstable affecting her, previous existing phobia's returning to haunt her. Kai's cult goes on a murder spree causing trouble around town, using clown masks haunting Ally. Using fear as a weapon, Kai's rise in power signifies sinister motives.
<b>8 (2018)</b>	<i>Apocalypse</i>	12 September 2018 - 14 November 2018	In the near future, the anti-Christ Michael Langdon (Cody Fern) brings the apocalypse. Chosen survivors of the aftermath take refuge in a fallout shelter. Flashbacks spanning the last three years informs

			us that Michael is the son of Tate Langdon (Evan Peters), a ghost we see throughout in season one. The coven from season three makes a comeback to stop Michael, in a show stopping cross-over between seasons, and good and evil.
<b>9 (2019)</b>	<i>1984</i>	18 September 2019 - 13 November 2019	Set in the namesake of 1984, the season follows Brooke Thompson (Emma Roberts) along with a group of friends, travel to a summer-camp to prepare as camp counsellors. All seems to go wrong however, when serial killer Richard Ramirez (Zach Villa) and Benjamin Richter (John Carroll Lynch) escapes captivity and is on a killing spree. Revealing secrets of all the camp counsellors and follows their struggle to get away from the killer.
<b>10 (2021)</b>	<i>Double Feature</i>	25 August 2021 - 20 October 2021	Divided into two parts, the first part of this season titled <i>Red Tide</i> , follows Harry Gardner (Finn Wittrock), his pregnant wife Doris (Lily Rabe) and their daughter who move to a costal town. The family moves to the town so that Harry, a writer, may work in peace. He is unfortunately

		<p>still suffering from writer's block, leading him to the towns nearby bar. There he meets a singer Austin Sommers (Evan Peters) and erotic writer Sarah Cunningham (Frances Conroy), who convince him to take a mysterious black pill that supposedly boosts creativity and improves your talents. This pill of course comes with the horrible consequence that if you stop taking the pills your previously existing talents will be limited. After taking the pills you also start to crave blood like a vampire. If you were not talented before you become a zombie-like shell of a person. After his wife and daughter find and take the pills his wife becomes a zombie, while his daughter becomes a vampire and kills her father and many residents of the town.</p> <p>The second part of the series is titled, <i>Death Valley</i> follows four college students on a camping trip. The group is entangled in a decade long extraterrestrial conspiracy. Setting out conspiracy theories involving the</p>
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			American government and area 51.
<b>11 (2022)</b>	<i>NYC</i>	19 October 2022 - 16 November 2022	Set in New York City in 1981, a series of murders are being investigated by secretly gay detective Patrick Read (Russel Tovey) and his partner Gino Barelli (Joe Mantello). The murders all target gay men, pleas which are ignored by the investigating police department. The duo investigates the murders, finding the homicidal duo of Dr Whitely (Jeff Hiller) and the leather wearing “Big daddy”. Commenting on the AIDS epidemic in the LGBTQ+ community, as well as the growing discourse and treatment surrounding the gay community in USA.
<b>12 (2023)</b>	<i>Delicate</i>	1 August 2023 - TBD	Season 12 marks the first time that American Horror Story is taking inspiration from the upcoming novel, <i>Delicate conditions</i> (Danielle Rollins 2023)  The season has yet to conclude so the story remains to be Determined (TBD)