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# I WAS A TEENAGE SURFER ZOMBIE FROM MARS

## A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CULT CINEMA

Andrew Graves

### Week 1: What is Cult Cinema?

#### Interpretations

- Underground
- Exploitation
- Trashy
- Sublime
- Surreal
- Strange
- Cool

#### Tod Browning (1896-1942)

Most famously directed *Dracula* (1931) but had an established silent film career before, where he often worked alongside actor Lon Chaney. Had a background in the American carnivals – certainly had a showman's approach when it came to early cinema.

*"Ninety percent of the people are morbid minded...more people would gather to look at a dead horse in the street than would assemble to watch the finest coach go by."*

**Tod Browning**

#### Tod Browning and Freud

In his essay *The Uncanny* Freud talked about the relationship between Castration Complex and Macabre Fantasy (or horror).

#### The Doppelganger

The basis for all 'monster' images.

- Jekyll and Hyde
- Frankenstein
- The Werewolf
- The Vampire

The Doppelganger is “a defense mechanism; the unconscious mind, sensing a mortal danger to the ego, eye, limb or genital, creates an imaginative stand-in for the threatened part”

- Frankenstein creates another ‘self’
- Alonzo has an extra thumb

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## Tod Browning and Castration Fear?

*“Tod Browning was turning castration symbolism into a cottage industry. The image of human beings paralyzed, mutilated, or otherwise ‘cut off’ below the waist occurs repeatedly in Browning films.”*

**David J Skal**

Browning’s films contain numerous visual references alluding to this. Limbless characters or characters being cut off at the waist etc.

### **Freaks (1932)**

- Directed by Tod Browning
- Screenplay by Willis Goldbeck and Leon Gordon
- Based on *Spurs*, the short story by Todd Robbin
- Produced by Tod Browning
- Cinematography by Merritt B Gerstad
- Edited by Basil Wrangell

In many ways, *Freaks* (1932) is the perfect example of the Pre-Code film.

### **The Production Code**

From March 31, 1930, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America formally pledged to abide by the production code. However, compliance with the Code was a verbal agreement and essentially it became difficult to maintain or enforce.

*“That four-year interval marks a fascinating and anomalous passage in American motion picture history: the so-called pre-Code era, when censorship was lax and Hollywood made the most of it. Unlike all studio system feature films released after July 1934, pre-Code Hollywood did not adhere to the strict regulations on matters of sex, vice, violence and moral meaning...the Code commandments were violated with impunity and inventiveness in a series of wildly eccentric films...”*

**Doherty, T (1999) Pre-Code Hollywood**

### **Contradictions in *Freaks***

*“A creeping duality is omnipresent in *Freaks*. Although Browning wins our sympathy towards his twisted protagonists early on in the film, both the wedding feast and the lightning illuminated shots of them at the climax, slithering through the mud with vengeful intent, are truly shocking and re-establish an ambiguity toward their role; are they heroes or, ultimately monsters?”*



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### **Freaks (1932) CONT...**

*“(in Freaks) Tod Browning’s amputation/castration fixation had finally achieved delirium pitch.”*

**Inside Teradome**

- Sexual inadequacy and frustration drive the entire story
- Phroso the clown – hints at his own impotence – “You should have seen me before the operation”
- In the original script, Hercules is castrated and forced to sing soprano in the freak pit. Still heavily hinted at in the final version
- Cleopatra is ‘cut down’ to size
- Hans cannot ‘consummate’ his marriage to his ‘normal’ sized wife
- The hermaphrodite dreams of ‘auto copulation’
- The conjoined twin’s marriage is treated as ‘a joke’

*“In Tod Browning’s microcosmic circus, there are physical barriers to ‘normal’ sex at every turn.”*

**David J Skal**

**The Monster Show**

### **After Release**

- The film was heavily criticized
- "There is no excuse for this picture. It took a weak mind to produce it and it takes a strong stomach to look at it."
- Lost money
- Was not received well by audiences
- Was pulled by MGM before completing its initial run
- The film was banned in the UK for 30 years.

### **Freaks and Dwain Esper**

- In 1948, exploitation purveyor, Dwain Esper leased the rights to Freaks from MGM for a paltry sum
- For the best part of a decade Esper toured Freaks

*“...playing seedy vaudeville and burlesque theatres, sleazy skid row dives and any rural small town flea-trap that would have him.”*

**The Movie and the Myth Reconsidered**

**Jack Stevenson**

- Esper retitled Freaks as *Natures Mistakes* or *Forbidden Love*
- He created a host of new sensationalistic posters in an attempt to attract the more prurient customer

*“Esper’s ads guaranteed a plethora of prurience. An all-day downpour didn’t deter any carnality-crazed Carolinians from filling the muddy movie pen...Esper calmly averted a near riot in the mud hole that night. After seeing Freaks/Forbidden Love, and not seeing any skin, the audience of lusting degenerates began to demonstrate noisily.”*

David F Friedman

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## Freaks and Rescue from the Gutter

- In 1956, a wealthy San Francisco film buff was preparing to put on a Horror retrospective for the Camera Obscura Film Society
- The show was to be called ‘History of the Macabre’
- She intended to show a compilation of clips and end with a yet-to-be-selected headlining movie
- In her search for an appropriate film she was directed to Anton LaVey
- Mrs. Werby bought the rights from Dwain Esper for around \$5000
- She later sold the rights to Raymond Rohauer
- By the early the sixties the film began to enjoy a brand-new revival
- Screenings at Universities and art centers would become more common
- It later chimed in well with the counter culture and particularly the hippy ‘freak-out’ movement
- The word freak was reclaimed by a new generation, as was the film

## Exploitation Cinema

- Can be used as a catch-all term to describe strange or outsider cinema
- Often deals with themes or topics that won’t be found in more mainstream movies
- Often offers cheap thrills, sex, nudity, violence

*“I believe exploitation films to be those that try to grab an audience by offering something unavailable elsewhere – films that pander to our baser instincts, pique our curiosity, salaciously sell us some seamier side of life, but do so knowingly and for just one reason: to make money.”*

Jonathan Ross

The Incredibly Strange Film Book

## Reefer Madness (1936), Some Context

- Hemp can be grown easily with little environmental impact
- Hemp as a plant has multifunctional uses – rope, cloth etc.
- However, in the 1920s, pharmaceutical and petrochemical manufacturers, did not want people using hemp – they wanted people to consume their products
- Unhappy with hemp’s widespread use, they, with the help of the US government, launched a campaign to discredit hemp by blurring the lines between an environmentally low impact plant and a potentially dangerous, mind-altering recreational drug
- Cannabis and by extension hemp, was overnight rebranded as Marijuana
- The term was created because it sounded Spanish or ‘foreign’ to tap into ignorant notions about exotic overseas drugs
- This rebrand was accompanied by an official ‘scientific’ government report delivered by Harry J Anslinger

*“There are one hundred thousand smokers in the United States most are negroes, Hispanics, Filipinos and entertainers...satanic music (jazz and swing) result in marijuana use...”*

Harry J Anslinger

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## Harry J Anslinger

- Was the founder of the FBN (Federal Bureau of Narcotics)

### The Anslinger Report Stated that...

- *“Marijuana is the most violence-causing drug in the history of mankind.”*
- *“Reefer makes ‘darkies’ think they’re as good as white men.”*
- *“You smoke a joint and you’re likely to kill your brother.”*
- *“Marijuana is an addictive drug which produces in its user’s insanity, criminality, and death.”*
- *“The primary reason to outlaw marijuana is its effect on the degenerate races.”*
- In light of this manufactured Moral Panic, Dwain Esper stepped in to exploit the situation

### Reefer Madness (1936)

- Originally made by director Louis J Gasnier and producer George Hirlman, the film was at first called *Tell Your Children*
- It was funded by a small church group, with the intention of warning parents about the dangers of narcotics
- However, after a short run it was purchased by Dwain Esper
- Esper, cynically inserted newly filmed salacious elements and retitled the movie *Reefer Madness*

### 1970s Revival

- Enter Keith Stroup, founder of NORML (Nation Organization for Reform of Marijuana Laws).
- In 1971, he bought a print of *Reefer Madness* for \$297.
- He cleaned it up and started showing it at pro-cannabis events.
- It was very successful
- Distributing *Reefer Madness* to college campuses of the 1970’s helped bankroll the burgeoning film company New Line Cinema, which today is a major player in the Hollywood film industry.