

Shifts in Attitude Towards Disability Observed Through Seven German Films

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ABSTRACT

Disability is a label accompanied by a multitude of misconceptions and stereotypes. During various periods in Germany, attitudes towards disability have ranged from disgust and fear, to acceptance and inclusion. Being disabled in Germany once meant certain isolation; at the hands of the Nazi regime, it was met with almost certain premature death. Since those darker days of Germany's history, the country has become one that now affords its disabled citizens with the same rights as the non-disabled population and seeks to create a barrier-free environment.

This study examines these perceptions of disability in Germany from the 1920s through the first decade of the 21st century. In order to accomplish this goal, cinema is used to provide insights into contemporaneous ideas about disability. By drawing upon analyses of seven films that span the course of nearly 80 years, careful examination of disability portrayals reveal philosophical shifts in how the German people interpret disability. When analyzing these films, aspects of physical and mental disability are brought to the surface and discussed in terms of their sociopolitical and philosophical implications. To provide a social and cultural framework that gives significance to the changes in these cinematic roles, a historical survey of the German disability rights movement is folded into the discussion.

The films explored in this study serve as culturally important visual aids that illustrate positive changes for the disabled living in Germany. Although not directly influencing cinematic portrayals of disability, the German disability rights

movement that arose in the postwar period shaped ideas about disability and allowed disabled Germans to be accepted and included in society. With these rights now available disabled Germans are able to lead a self-determined life and portray themselves as equals.

This is dedicated to my family, who throughout my life has given tremendous dedication and support to me in everything I have done. I would not have been able to accomplish this without their encouragement and guidance.

I love you all.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Future generations of disabled people will certainly be faced with barriers – both social and environmental – but many will never understand what life was like before laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act were put into place. It was a world where curb cuts were not on the majority of sidewalks, where public transportation didn't have to accommodate wheelchair users and people with walking aids through the use of ramps and kneeling buses, and where employers could decide not to hire you because of your disability. When cast against the backdrop of history, it is easy to see that much progress has been made in terms of how disabled people are perceived and treated. Until the end of the 20th century, those who were born “different” were often treated as second-class citizens, sometimes not even as fellow human beings. Although this remains true for many parts of the world, there has been an increasing willingness to embrace disability. This acceptance is the result of great efforts from individuals and groups that decided to take matters into their own hands and fight for equal treatment of the disabled. Every disability rights movement has a fascinating story to tell. Germany has one that is of particular interest. In looking at it from a distance, it is amazing to see the great dichotomy contained within the history of a single nation. On the one hand, Germany is a country that carried out government-sanctioned murder of its own citizens. Those that were not deemed fit enough to be self-sufficient and contribute to the greater cause were systematically eliminated. On the other hand, Germany has shown itself to be a

country that pushes for the deconstruction of barriers to make the environment accessible for everyone. The prevailing thought here is that no one should be denied the opportunity to lead a fulfilling life. These two very different viewpoints towards disability obviously have not occurred simultaneously, but the fact that both can claim a part of one country's history is astounding. It is also a testament to the many people that labored in various collaborations and individually to change a nation's philosophy. The aim of this study is to take a closer look at the trajectory of this philosophical change, and use German cinema to serve as markers along the way in order to give us a clearer gauge of this progress.

A useful tool to peer into the social atmosphere of any given period is to examine a culture's art, especially its visual media. Paintings, photographs, and film all provide a glimpse into the past and can provide valuable information that gives researchers a much clearer sense of popular attitudes within a particular era. In this respect, film is especially useful because so much detail can be extrapolated through the deconstruction and analysis of storylines, the mise-en-scène, and even the roles and impact of directors and actors. The impetus for this paper stems from the need to further investigate and understand ideas about deformity and disability in cinema, following their permutations throughout the years. One of the richest archives to study is the highly revered collection of films originating from the German film industry. Prior to World War II, it was arguably the most respected film industry behind Hollywood. During the war, however, the Nazi regime skillfully used this influential industry to their

advantage by commissioning films that spread their propaganda in a captivating and effective manner. Given the country's tumultuous past with the disabled population, it will be informative to undertake a historical survey to witness the progression of roles of disability in German cinema. To serve as a backbone for this cinematic analysis, we will also be following the evolution of the German disability rights movement. Simultaneously tracing the chronology of disability roles in German film and the German disability rights movement will allow us to reveal how the latter has affected the former over the course of nearly a century. The intertwined relationship between the two will be revealed through readings of films that highlight several key decades in the 20th century. This will be followed by a historical survey of the German disability rights movement. Following this path should allow us to observe how increasing liberties for the disabled eventually helped lead to more empowering and positive film roles for the disabled.

The inspiration for this research can be attributed to Carol Poore's 2007 landmark text, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*. In this book, Dr. Poore touches upon a great number of topics and gives the reader an in-depth glimpse into life of the disabled in Germany from the turn of the 20th century until present day. Discussed in this work are disabled soldiers returning after World War I, mass killings of the disabled during World War II, the beginnings and ongoing struggle within the civil rights movement, and current disability trends in Germany. As an integral piece of this comprehensive survey – using the artistically rich Weimar era as a launching point – Poore takes a look at various

representations of disability in literature, painting, and film. Although the film analysis provided is fairly in-depth, the scope of films could be expanded to include films prior to WWII as well as more contemporary depictions of disability. This research project seeks to take a small, yet integral part of Poore's work and expand it in order to apply a more critical eye to German cinema and its representational treatment of disability.

The films selected for discussion were chosen based on several factors. First, they had to be readily available. There are a multitude of films that deal with disability, many of which are independently made. They are therefore not available outside of a public screening due to limited financial support and distribution. Since this research lacked the funding necessary to attend events that showcased German films on disability, it was necessary that the films be available on DVD and VHS, or on the internet. Secondly, the films had to be representative of their respective eras. Filmmakers often create pieces that are set in the past or future, and while it is still possible to extrapolate what a director was thinking in such a film, it is much more difficult to grasp the prevailing attitudes of the time as you would spend much of the viewing looking for subtle hints and cues.

Widely considered cinematic masterpieces and pioneers of the style associated with Weimar-era films, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), *Nosferatu* (1922), and *M: Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1931) are excellent subjects for looking at, not necessarily disability, but rather the idea of disfigurement and strangeness in a post-war period where ethnic and social homogeneity was highly valued. We will explore the idea of the "other" and how it was used to invoke

feelings of fear in a fragile, post-war populace. Next, *Ich klage an* (1941) is a piece that exemplifies the dominant Nazi attitude towards disability during that period. We will expand on Dr. Poore's analysis of the film and look at how it played an effective role in propagating Nazi ideology about disability. Moving out from the shadows of WWII, the popular film *Heidi* (1952) will act as a bridge between post-war Germany and the country in modern times. As we will see, the way in which disability is displayed in that film will speak volumes about disability in Germany, as well as the general attitude of the country throughout the 50's and 60's. *Freakstars 3000* (2004) and *Wo ist Fred?* (2006) are two contemporary films not well-known outside of German cinematic circles, but were chosen because they featured disability in a more light-hearted and comedic manner. Such portrayals of disability certainly would have been met with much more resistance had the films been released twenty or thirty years earlier. Within the scope of this project, this union of comedy and disability serves as a fitting capstone for our survey. The films for this project were selected because they provide a vivid picture of society within their respective eras. These clear windows into key periods of modern German history work collectively to exemplify the complete shift in attitudes towards disability that had developed over an 80-year period. While there were other films produced in 20th century Germany that touched on disability in some manner, the films chosen for this analysis serve as an excellent framework by providing strong social, political, and cultural commentary of the time.

Through this discussion, we will attempt to uncover a few of these social matters prevalent at the time these films were released. It will be interesting to use these movies as an outline to frame German culture and society. Beginning in Chapter 1 with the Weimar Republic, we take a look at three films that all touch on the ramifications of being an outsider. By playing on the idea of the “stranger” we can take note at how the concepts within these films effortlessly transition into Nazi ideologies.

Reinforcing the idea that the “stranger” was an inherent threat to society, the Nazis further expanded the notion to include those deemed physically and mentally unhealthy. The thought was that unhealthy (read: disabled) people were unable to contribute to society and would therefore weaken it. For Hitler, the only solution was to expunge the weakness from the population. This was carried out through a multitude of horrific inhumane acts that included forced sterilization and euthanasia, which we will explore in greater detail with Chapter 2. Throughout Chapter 3, we will delve into the notions of disability and weakness depicted in film and the ramifications for disabled Germans. In order to strengthen this belief in a strong German society, the Nazis produced highly effective propaganda films that advocated the benefits of assisted suicide. Through our investigation, we will see that such films had the frightening capability to not only captivate as a work of art, but also serve as an effective tool in disseminating the government’s message.

After World War II, we begin to notice the first signs of positive change for the German disability community. In Chapter 4, we will observe that in the

postwar period, there is a complete reversal in how disability is portrayed. Here we explore the relationships between disabled and non-disabled characters and notice that the disabled are no longer demonized; in fact, they are portrayed as people with emotions and needs. In addition, we also trace the inception of the German disability rights movement during this fragile moment in time.

Continuing through Chapter 5, we take a historical survey of the German disability rights movement. At this juncture we momentarily step aside from the films to focus on the decades-long journey for disability equality. Here we discuss the various factors that led to the emergence of this movement, and expose various obstacles faced by German disability rights activists over the course of several decades. The chapter concludes with a brief glimpse into how the hard work of determined advocates culminated in laws that offer legal protections to the disabled.

By implementing two theories of laughter in Chapter 6, we conclude our film analysis with two contemporary comedies that offer decidedly different portrayals of disability. The first film employs a cast of people with real mental and physical disabilities. In this film we investigate how the Superiority Theory invokes laughter. We also discuss how the disabled people are affected by their participation in this film and the effects on the audience. The second film explores the dynamics of disability portrayed by a non-disabled character and we use the Relief Theory to explain the comedic effects in this film. We also discuss the implications of using non-disabled actors to portray disability for comedic purposes. Within the contexts of Chapters 2 and 3, finishing our investigation

with these two contemporary films allows us to observe the progress that has been made in terms of attitudes about the disabled in Germany. It also illustrates how the disability rights movement has had a great influence in maintaining that progress.

As we will validate throughout this study, art has the ability to provide a window into its respective time period. It allows us to understand prevailing thoughts of the time and with that, we are able to track gradual social transformations as the art evolves. Here, we will use the art of cinema to trace how social philosophies regarding the disabled in Germany shifted from one of disgust and hate, to one of acceptance and inclusion. In order to give the analysis social context, we will integrate a survey of the German disability rights movement into our discussion.

CHAPTER 2

DEFORMITY AND THE OTHER IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

Deformity of the human shape has long been a source of repulsion, derision, and abjection. When confronted by an entity that does not conform to the prescribed notion of normalcy, the typical reaction ranges from ridicule and rejection to prejudice and fear. These things that we reject and fear, “we often stigmatize and shun and sometimes seek to destroy” (Longmore, 32). On many occasions, those inside this sphere of normalcy become overwhelmed with feelings of abjection and the deformed are thus transformed into a sort of commodity. Julia Kristeva’s interpretation of abjection essentially states that objects that cause feelings of repulsion and disgust – in this case disability – are rejected. This is how people, in certain contexts, create their identity (Kristeva, 3). This ultimately leads to the dehumanization of the deformed. Throughout history, this has been done in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. This is most exemplified by the circus “freak” show, where deformed people exploit their outwardly appearance of “otherness” in the name of shock entertainment for the uniform masses. This exploitation of deformity has also become a powerful tool found in the realm of visual media. Painters and other visual artists were especially drawn to the malformed body during and after World War I as subjects for their work, since battlefield disfigurement became a norm, and the number of maimed veterans returning as citizens to Germany’s streets increased exponentially in the years following the war.

During Germany's Weimar Republic period (1919-1933), the country was in economic turmoil as people were struggling to rebuild their country. It was also at this time that the Expressionist movement came to prominence. In terms of the visual media, this movement was characterized by distorted representations of familiar objects, and often the use of radiant color in paintings. One of the preeminent artists of the time was Otto Dix. His work, *Die Skatspieler* (1920), is one of the best examples of Expressionist art that employs the disfigured human form. The painting depicts three soldiers maimed by war, sitting around a table playing the popular German card game, Skat. Each of the soldiers is horribly disfigured, their bodies integrated with non-human parts to compensate for that which has been lost in battle. Here, deformity and the notion of otherness are used as tools to protest the war by evoking feelings of repulsion and abjection in the audience. While artists like Otto Dix were using deformity through Expressionist art to convey a message, it was at this time that Weimar film was also making its mark on the socio-cultural landscape.

Producing some of the most technically influential films in cinematic history, the Weimar era pioneered many stylistic innovations that can still be seen today. Its use of light and shadow inspired the film noir genre, and expressionist elements used at the beginning of the movement went on to inspire future generations of horror film directors. Recovering from the toll of the first World War, the country also found itself in a time of rebuilding. In such moments of vulnerability, countries go through not only a physical reconstruction, but also one of a sociological nature. Mirroring the ideas of identity from psychologists

and social theorists of the time such as Sigmund Freud and Georg Simmel, some filmmakers sought to create a sense of solitude through exclusion. Several of these films accomplished this by touching on the concepts of “otherness” and “strangeness” through representations of deformity. Three cinematic masterpieces that demonstrate these ideas are *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* by Robert Wiene, *Nosferatu* by F.W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang’s *M: Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder*. Through the use of Expressionist mise-en-scène in the early years and deep character development as the period progressed, the portrayal of deformity becomes a device that instills fear and uncertainty in the audience. Later we will see these ideas carry over into the Nazi regime as a way of selling the idea of “*ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer (one people, one empire, one leader)*,” by suggesting that the disabled are the weak link in an otherwise strong society. The Nazis were able to play on these emotions of fear and use them as powerful tools in their effort to manipulate and homogenize national beliefs and sentiments, as well as dispose of those considered “undesirable.” However, our goal in this chapter is to uncover how “otherness” and “strangeness” is personified through deformity in these films and why is it so effective.

Expressionist German films, through their use of intelligent set design and creative use of light and shadow influenced countless films during the ensuing decades. Of all the films produced during this period, arguably the most referenced film is Robert Wiene’s *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. This revolutionary movie seemingly used every possible interpretation of deformity to evoke a sense of the “other” in the audience. One of the most interesting, and

unique, aspects of the film is the set. The most prominent example in this film that characterizes the “strange” is the town of Holstenwall. It is composed of buildings that twist and turn in seemingly random directions. Doors and windows are oddly shaped. Streets and walkways are contorted like unruly vines. The use of shadow and light makes for an even stranger setting because shadows appear as strategically placed, yet awkward shapes that do not mirror the buildings from which they are supposed to originate. Wiene’s mastery of scene composition in order to portray “otherness” in the *mise-en-scène* did not end with the set architecture. In addition, he used tight close-up shots to create an uncomfortable proximity to Dr. Caligari and Cesare in order to further exacerbate the strangeness of these two already suspicious characters. His most simple method of creating otherness in the *mise-en-scène* was the use of irregular camera wipes to transition between scenes. The odd direction of the wipes and non-traditional shapes he used were a departure from the conventional wipes used in films before it. All of these techniques were effective due to the uncharted visual territories the film had explored. However, they also served as “literal interpretations of the subjective visual aspects of being insane” (Skal, 43). At the end of the film, it is revealed that Dr. Caligari is actually the head of an insane asylum, and the person narrating the story, Francis, is a patient in the asylum. The entire story was a fantasy, fabricated inside the mind of a mad man. The movie set, with all of its idiosyncrasies, can therefore be seen as an obvious projection of Francis’ mental state. This really sets the mood for the film and presents a chilling look inside the mind of a person suffering from a mental illness. As we can see, even from the

early days of German cinema, it was being portrayed that disability, more specifically mental illness, was something to be feared and avoided. This is a theme we will encounter repeatedly over the next 30 years.

Dr. Caligari and Cesare are two characters that we have identified as strange. This is due to the fact that their appearance and behavior have caused the townspeople of Holstenwall to become leery and suspicious of them. They are someone who German sociologist Georg Simmel may describe as a “potential wanderer” in that both Caligari and Cesare are not one “who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow” (Simmel, 1). The fact that Dr. Caligari operates a traveling show and has taken up residence in Holstenwall lends credence to this definition of a “potential wanderer.” Dr. Caligari is a foreigner to the area, and therefore the “other,” but this is not the sole factor that casts him as an outsider. His outward “deformities” play a large role in the scrutiny placed upon him. Caligari is a mysterious figure with ragged hair, slouched posture, and shifty eyes. His walk is somewhat laborious and conveys bodily weakness, standing in direct contrast to a person one would deem healthy. His deformed gait “is a visual image [that] has its effect because it evokes a simple negative stereotype of disability. Seeing the character limping, one is supposed to understand immediately that this is...one of life’s outsiders” (Sutherland, 17). Caligari’s form is further exaggerated by his wardrobe. Most other men in the town are dressed in a jacket and pants, while he elects to wear multiple layers of oversized clothing; this is especially evident in the long, open jacket sleeves. He even goes so far as to wear white gloves, in

contrast to his black clothing, to draw attention away from the rest of him. This simple technique of using the hands to distract the audience is also used by illusionists to hide the fact that there are other things happening around them. His manner of dress conceals the true shape of his body and represents a device used to cloak his true intentions of causing fear and panic through acts of murder. Although Caligari has been branded a stranger because of his outward appearance, it is Cesare who requires a more in-depth examination. He obviously has a look that people will automatically identify as foreign, but his “otherness” penetrates much more deeply. As we will see momentarily, this “otherness” disrupts the belief system of an entire village as Cesare performs feats previously thought to be humanly impossible.

One look at Cesare and it is easy to see what makes him appear foreign. He has pale white skin, wears a black, skin-tight outfit, and his eyes are dark and highlighted by black rings. While this “otherness” is certainly cause for alarm for the townspeople, Cesare’s pale, white face calls attention to that of which will become of greater concern. He is in a perpetual state of sleep until awakened by Caligari. He says nothing and shows no emotion; something must be wrong mentally as no “normal” human being could function in this manner. This perceived mental “deformity” is at the root of what portrays Cesare as the “other.” Although Cesare cannot function on his own, when commanded to do so by Dr.

Caligari, he has the uncanny ability to predict the future.¹ Sigmund Freud defines the uncanny in two ways; the definition we are concerned with identifies the uncanny as:

[something] once regarded...as real possibilities; we were convinced that they really happened. Today we no longer believe in them, having surmounted such modes of thought. Yet we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; the old ones live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation. Now, as soon as something happens in our lives that seems to confirm these old, discarded beliefs, we experience a sense of the uncanny... (Freud, 154).

In this day and age, most people do not believe that someone can truly predict the future. In the movie, this “old, discarded belief” quickly becomes a reality when a spectator asks Cesare how long he has to live. The man is told he has until dawn. Once the prophecy is fulfilled, the town of Holstenwall fears this mentally deformed man with uncanny abilities and reinforces his labeling as the “other.” Throughout the town, more murders take place and the citizens are on high alert. Even in the absence of supporting evidence, several residents immediately suspect Dr. Caligari and Cesare are responsible for the crimes. This fear stems from the “age-old belief that people with disabilities are possessed by supernatural forces. Ancient societies feared disabled people because they believed the latter harbored

¹ Cesare’s mental state and his dependence on Dr. Caligari are what essentially make him “disabled” in the sense that he cannot care for himself. This becomes evident in the scene where Dr. Caligari is seen propping up and feeding Cesare.

evil spirits who...were capable of harming others” (Norden, “The ‘Uncanny’ Relationship of Disability” 132). As we will see later in this study, a variation of this belief will be used for much more sinister purposes.

At the time, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* was considered a groundbreaking film in terms of its twisting story line and expressionist mise-en-scène. It is also considered by many to be one of the first true horror films. During the Weimar era, technological and cinematic advancements were developing at a rapid pace and directors were eager to push the limits of moviemaking. When *Dr. Caligari* premiered in 1920, German cinema was still a fairly new enterprise. While making the film, Robert Wiene observed a unique opportunity to take full advantage of the Expressionist movement that was so popular at the time. Wiene maximized his use of the contemporary artistic trends to create a world that was identifiable, but represented something atypical. The film begins in a very traditional fashion with a scene that appears to take place at a city park bench. Setting up the film within the opening scene, audiences are forewarned of the unimaginable tale they are about to experience. We are immediately whisked away to a place that looks familiar, but is decidedly out of the ordinary.

The landscape is exaggerated and represents something that is uncontrollable. The buildings and structures in the town of Holstenwall have an avant-garde, organic architecture and appear as though they are growing from the ground like wild garden weeds. It is visually reminiscent of Otto Dix’s *Die Skatspieler* to some extent. It is nearly impossible to distinguish between the

furniture and the soldiers, like it is difficult to differentiate from nature and the city. To contribute to this visual chaos was the artificial use of light and shadow. As previously stated “lights” and “shadows” were actually painted onto the stage, one of the most unusual and compelling aspects of the set design. Everything about the set, although meticulously planned, appeared seemingly out of control. One observation about the set in relation to its function within the film was how it perfectly contradicted the only component that actually seemed to be in control, the roles of Dr. Caligari and especially Cesare. Dr. Caligari knew exactly what he was doing and was fully aware of the benefits and consequences of his actions. Cesare was the ultimate example of control and order as he committed no act without the express commands of Dr. Caligari.

In *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene utilized various interpretations of deformity to convey “otherness.” From a sociological perspective, he introduced viewers to Dr. Caligari and Cesare, characters with obvious traits that immediately categorized them as strange, or the “other.” From an artistic point of view, Wiene brought forth the concept of deformity through the use of wide-ranging expressionist devices. Through vivid imagination and creativity, he created a visual wonderland that continues to make its mark today with acclaimed filmmakers such as Tim Burton. Two short years after the release of *Dr. Caligari*, a film would be released that would not only surpass the achievements of Robert Wiene’s work, it would also make an impact on cinema that still resonates decades later.

In the early to mid-1920s, the Expressionism movement was at its zenith. By the time *Nosferatu* hit the silver screen in 1922, Weimar film had a well-established reputation for being on the cutting edge of cinematography with films like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and *Der Golem* garnering critical acclaim. After audiences had the opportunity to see *Nosferatu*, the standard for German cinema had been raised to even greater heights. However, instead of completely embracing expressionist stylings, F.W. Murnau decided to add elements of realism to his movie. It was more akin to a modern-day horror film than it was to a (at the time) contemporary artistic work. He filmed scenes within a real town and the ocean scenes were filmed with ships in an actual harbor. He also integrated breathtaking special effects, such as stop-motion animation. Murnau took aspects of realism and manipulated them with expressionist sensibilities to create fascinating new possibilities for filmmakers and moviegoers alike. In conjunction with that, the notions of deformity and “otherness” were being explored in more intrusive ways. In the movie, Murnau elected to focus his energy on using the characters within the framework of the *mise-en-scène* to convey mood and stir emotions. His most valuable device for accomplishing this was the character Graf Orlok.

From the outset, audiences of *Nosferatu* identified that Graf Orlok represented the “other.” First, his exaggerated deformities instantly dehumanize him and make him a menacing figure. His head is irregularly shaped, his eyes are sharp and piercing, he has a rather pronounced nose, and his elongated fingers do not fit the mold of a normal human being. His body is representative of figures

that “rest precariously on the borderline of humanity, their fleshy, molluscan bodies suggesting a descent into the lower realms of the animal kingdom” (Stich, 30). He is made to look this way because “convention specifies that whenever one sees a character who is basically humanoid in form, yet visibly distinct from the norm, that character is not merely physically, but also mentally ‘not one of us’” (Sutherland, 17). As audiences watch the film, they will realize that this statement holds absolutely true, further conveying the notion that disability and disfigurement “express disfigurement of personality and deformity of the soul” (Longmore, 33). In similar fashion to *Dr. Caligari*, Graf Orlok and his appearance are directly affected by the postwar mood, a reflection of the maimed and less-than-human looking soldiers who returned from the battlefields a few years prior. We will explore the mental “otherness” of Graf Orlok momentarily.

As previously mentioned, Graf Orlok is a rather grotesque figure. He looked more like an animal than a human; one of the few remotely identifiable human characteristics he possesses is that he has two arms and legs, and walks upright. His facial features resemble a sort of human/bat hybrid, as though he were the result of a failed lab experiment. His eyes were large, his stare predatory. His arms were extremely long and his fingers were pointed at the end; they more closely resembled animal claws than they did human hands. His appearance was sure to evoke emotions of shock and disgust in viewers. During their first encounter, the realtor Thomas Hutter reacted in much the same way the audience did when meeting Orlok, with a bit of apprehension. He quickly discovered that something was not quite right about Orlok, but cautiously

followed him into the castle. Despite the fact that Orlok was an abomination from a physical standpoint, the audience would soon discover that it was his mannerisms that made him truly objectionable.

One interesting aspect about this film was how the concepts of deformity and abjection interlock. Folding in our description of Graf Orlok, we will revisit Julia Kristeva for a moment and discuss the topic of the body. Kristeva discusses body fluids and applies her ideas of abjection by stating that, although they originate from within you, the body expels these fluids because they are waste (Kristeva, 3). In the movie, we witness a scene of abjection during the first scene in Orlok's dining area. At this point, it is very early morning and Hutter is eating while Graf Orlok is seated at the table intently reading a piece of paper with mysterious symbols scrawled on it. Suddenly, a clock with a skeleton figure on top chimes and Orlok raises his head from the paper, exposing his soulless eyes that stare blankly. Hutter, who was slicing a loaf of bread, is startled by Orlok's stare and the fact that the clock is chiming at 6 AM. Orlok explains that it is time for him to sleep. Forgetting that he is slicing bread and losing himself in this bizarre moment, Hutter cuts himself with the knife. Graf Orlok notices the blood, stands up and walks over to Hutter, his eyes fixed on Hutter's bleeding thumb. His stare is almost hypnotic, as though a primal instinct has overcome Orlok and feasting on blood is his only goal. Orlok grabs Hutter's hand and attempts to suck the blood off his thumb. A now shocked and abjectively frightened Hutter immediately jumps up, yanks his hand away, and backs away from Orlok. The expression on Hutter's face is one of fear, like a small animal trying to escape a

predator. Compounded by the fact that he was previously unnerved by the count's appearance, Hutter is now questioning Graf Orlok's mental state. Obviously, a man who desires to suck another's blood cannot be of sound mentality. However, as we will see, the "otherness" of Orlok penetrates much deeper than the desire to ingest another person's blood.

A long-standing notion associated with deformity and disability is that those affected by such conditions are inherently diseased and/or evil. This unsubstantiated belief can be traced back to, and before Biblical times because "many ancient works contain sections that equate physical perfection with spiritual goodness and disability and illness for evil or punishment for evil" (Norden, "Cinema of Isolation" 7). In Western culture, a widely accepted symbol for filth and disease is the rat. This notion gained strength during medieval times when the bubonic plague was wreaking havoc across Europe. Bringing the discussion back to the time of the film, "in 1918 and 1919, the Spanish flu pandemic raged throughout the world, claiming millions of victims" (O'Brien, 37). This undoubtedly played a factor in Murnau's decision to associate Graf Orlok with rats and disease. These two ideas converge in the sequence where Graf Orlok sneaks on a boat in pursuit of Hutter and his wife. The ship's crew notices unmarked wooden crates in the hull and they want to know what is inside. Opening the crates reveals a pack of rats; having seen Nosferatu seal himself in a crate earlier in the film, the audience would automatically associate him with the rats, and hence, death and disease.

One of the more attention-grabbing storylines in the movie was the metaphysical connection between Hutter's wife Ellen and Graf Orlok. These two had not previously come in contact with each other, yet they form a psychic bond the instant Graf Orlok sees a picture of her in a locket that Hutter carries with him. The creation of this bond is necessary for the plot, as Ellen serves as a counterbalance to Orlok and becomes the savior of her husband and the town. Thomas Elsaesser explains the relationship like this:

Nosferatu stands for raw carnal desire, which must be kept in check, if not altogether suppressed, in the interest of higher, spiritual values, and so [Ellen], expressing that mixture of desire, curiosity and horror typical of patriarchal culture when depicting female sexuality, must die along with Nosferatu (86).

She is gentle, pure, and essentially a goddess-like figure as she is the embodiment of good. The scene at the start of the film that shows her playing with a kitten and her starry-eyed displays of affection for her husband both reinforce this idea. On the other side of this peculiar affiliation is Graf Orlok. His slow, deliberate movements and reserved speech add to his already ominous presence and essentially demonize him.

His outward appearance, strange behavior, and association with disease has already established Graf Orlok as an "other," but his ostracizing has now been extended due to the psychic connection with Ellen. On the same token, this metaphysical association has also labeled Ellen, not with the townspeople but

with the audience, as an “other.” Each represents an edge of a moral spectrum and these “opposite extremes merge, becoming indistinguishable in their respective *strangeness* and *uncanniness*,” through the connection between them (Kearney, 42). Ellen, through the internalization of “otherness,” is a character that, rather than being rejected by viewers, receives their pity and sympathy because she is associated with the monster, Graf Orlok. She represents one end of the aforementioned spectrum by projecting warmth and purity. Whenever she appears on screen, she seems to have an angelic glow about her. On the other end is Graf Orlok, who has a cold and lifeless appearance; his “otherness” is the personification of evil. At the end of the film, it is this purity that triumphs over evil. In a sort of symbolic ascension to heaven, Ellen dies as the sun rises; it is the power and purity of the sun’s rays that ultimately become the downfall of Graf Orlok. Once Orlok has been vanquished, the evil and death and disease associated with it are gone. Interestingly enough, it is these virtues of purity and strength that would later resurface during the Nazi regime, as they would use them to once again eliminate “evil.”

Both *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu* are cinematic masterpieces that have left their own unique mark on filmmaking. Though they were released only two years apart, the difference in production and the number of innovative technical ideas in *Nosferatu*, when compared to *Dr. Caligari*, is staggering. Both films achieved similar results, but followed different paths to get there. On the one hand, the former made use of a unique storyline with an unexpected twist, while incorporating imagination and fear, to create an uncanny

world that amazed audiences everywhere. On the other hand, the latter employed advanced cinematic techniques to create a visual *mélange* that frightened viewers, thus having a more superficial shock value. It was presented in a recognizable reality, but introduced elements that stood in direct opposition to what was understood to be within the realm of possibility.

Designing a set and choosing real locations to shoot further accentuated the expressionist (deformed) elements within *Nosferatu*. The most glaring example of deformity is Graf Orlok. His physical features resembled that of a human being, but they were different enough to cast him as a gruesome monster. Orlok had sharp, animal-like teeth and predatory eyes that had a dehumanizing effect. In addition, he possessed hands with extremely elongated fingers that further emphasized his slim, gangly body. As one of the most enduring icons of horror films, Graf Orlok's outward appearance evoked immediate reactions of fright from the audience because "fiction [is] abound with bad men whose sinister threat is signified by a physical difference" (Morris, 22).

Another much discussed aspect of the film's *mise-en-scène* is the way in which Murnau manipulated light and shadow to create an intensely terrifying effect. In several scenes from his home, Graf Orlok can be seen lurking in the shadows, adding to his mystery. Murnau also used shadows in place of the character, such as moments where shadows of Orlok's alien-like hands can be seen reaching for Hutter as he sleeps. Perhaps the most famous, and most imitated implementations of lighting and shadow, is the scene where Graf Orlok ascends the staircase. Here, the light is shown at an angle slightly behind him to

over-exaggerate his already monstrous features. As a symbol of reverence to the Expressionist movement and this film, the demonized character, and the exaggeration of shadows, have been repeated in horror films for decades. In fact, 60 years after its release, one of Nosferatu's most famous incarnations hit the silver screen in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The main character of this horror series, Freddy Krueger, bears a striking resemblance to Nosferatu, his famous glove fitted with knife blades, serving as an obvious homage to Nosferatu's hands. As a fascinating side note, Krueger also possesses the uncanny ability to metaphysically connect with his victims through their dream states. The modern twist on Krueger is that he can cause physical harm once he invades the dream of his victim.

As the years passed, German cinema would increasingly become technically sophisticated and special effects would become more realistic. As audiences became desensitized to visual portrayals of deformity and "otherness," an increasing trend towards internalizing these character traits would take place. It is at this time when we witness a movement reverting back to more psychological constructs of deformity and "otherness." After the release of *Nosferatu*, came one of the greatest films ever made. Fritz Lang's critically acclaimed *Metropolis* (1927) was a monumental work that far exceeded what any German film had previously accomplished. Nonetheless, it was apparent that the German Expressionist movement had run its course as film and other art forms moved to themes involving an increasing amount of realism. This transformation was already in progress before *Metropolis*, but really took hold at the end of the

decade. The Weimar Republic was folding under the rising influence of the National Socialists and art was leaving behind the expressionist trends of the previous 15 years. Well aware of this shift, Lang was among those leading the way in this new period. Among the movies he would release after *Metropolis* was the psychological thriller *M: Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder*, a movie that explores deformity and “otherness” from a mental perspective.

With technical wizardry and special effects no longer in vogue, this movie harkens back to films like *Dr. Caligari* to incite emotions of fear. In *M*, the main character is a serial child killer named Hans Beckert. Unlike Cesare, Beckert cannot be readily identified as the killer because he does not fit the description of the “other.” In fact, he goes to great lengths to blend into his surrounding so that he may kill without causing suspicion (Ng, 66). He does this by “disconnecting himself from any originality and identity, he becomes instead, a duplicable and exchangeable (therefore undetectable) body which is also potently destructive” (Ng, 19). Although Lang elects not to reveal the killer’s identity right away, there are a few methods he used to quickly shroud Beckert in mystery and cast him as the “other.” The first was reminiscent of *Nosferatu* in that Beckert’s shadow was cast on a wanted poster, creating a looming, ominous presence and foreshadowing impending doom. The second was the casting of Peter Lorre as the killer. When his shadow is shown for the first time, it is also the first time the audience hears him speak. Lorre was deliberately cast into this role because “his soft Viennese drawl marked him as an intruder...underscoring a sense of otherness and non-belonging...” (Gemünden, 87). His slow, deliberate speech also gave people the

sense that Beckert was possibly deformed mentally. Although no one could visually identify him as a stranger, other markers like his speech labeled him as such.

When Beckert is finally revealed, the most surprising, and scary thing about him is his appearance; this is because, as previously mentioned, he looks very much like every other citizen. He was round and possessed child-like facial features, something that was quite troubling as his innocent looks, coupled with his speech, served as the root of a dilemma for the city's residents and moviegoers. Preconceived notions of the "other" were sent spiraling out of control, as the search for the killer "creates a mass paranoia...where everybody begins suspecting everybody..." (Gemünden, 89). This chaos transferred itself to the audience, as the idea that everyone is a potential killer arose. At this juncture, the idea of "otherness" has been turned upside down. However, Fritz Lang is not yet finished challenging the audience.

The blind beggar in the film was a particularly interesting choice to make a major supporting character. He was dirty and obviously homeless. Under normal circumstances, most everyone would, within a single glance, immediately assume the panhandler was a potential suspect. On the contrary, his blindness becomes an advantage as he ends up being the one responsible for Beckert's capture. Up until that point in the film, the beggar had indeed been treated as an outcast. The beggar most closely resembles a stereotypical disabled character portrayal who Martin Norden describes as the "Saintly Sage." This character is "almost exclusively a supporting character...[who] is sensible, charitable, and

above all wise” (“Cinema of Isolation” 131). As with Ellen in *Nosferatu*, he serves as a counterbalance to Beckert, except in this film, the roles of the visual have been reversed.

Throughout the film, Fritz Lang is not very forthright with Beckert’s mental “deformities.” It is not until the end of the movie where we see the true magnitude of Beckert’s affliction. In the meantime, we are given small glimpses into the madness that torments him. There are several scenes involving mirrors that allow us, and him, to peer into the soul of this killer. The first is our initial introduction to Beckert. He is looking at himself in the mirror as the detective is describing what the child killer may look like. While he intently stares at himself, he is feeling his face, as though he does not recognize the man staring back at him. This seemingly creates a sort of separation between his body and mind. The second scene places Beckert at a shop window staring at knives. The pattern displayed creates a frame around his face, with the knife blades pointing towards him, calling attention to his head, or more likely, the killer inside his mind. The third example takes us to yet another shop window. Here, Beckert notices that he has been marked with the letter “M,” which the blind beggar had designated as a sign that Beckert was the murderer. In each of these scenes, Beckert is looking into the mirror to find himself due to the fact that, with each killing, he loses his sense of identity more and more. Trying to find himself in the mirror simply exposes him to the monstrosity within because “the gazer becomes the gazed...constantly projecting himself onto a desired other on the other side of the

mirror which is actually *himself-as-other*" (Ng, 92). Wherever he turns, he looks into the eyes of a killer that he is so desperately trying to escape.

After a lengthy manhunt, Beckert is finally captured and is subsequently subjected to a "trial" held by bosses of the criminal underworld. It is here that Beckert finally exposes the evil that lurks within. In a most gripping of sequences, he anguishes over the voices that scream inside him and the need to silence them. He claims the only way to quell the voices is to kill. Perhaps he is, by taking the lives of these children, trying to steal back his innocence that was taken from him. The pain on his face is deep. As Beckert pleads his case, he looks like a child begging to his parents. It is at this moment that we no longer see Beckert as a cold, calculating murderer, but rather as a poor man that is a victim and product of his environment. After this desperate plea, we are overcome with feelings of abjection because Beckert resembles the rest of us, he is something familiar. In addition, we find ourselves empathizing with this child killer, the most repulsive of criminals, as he explains to the jury and audience that his actions are "something uncontrollable – a drive, a perversion, something subconscious – which made him not only the perpetrator but also the victim" (Gemünden, 89-90). The idea that he is not only a child killer, but a serial killer, makes matters worse because "serial killing is a ceaseless act of brutality...and the only way to satisfy his lust for killing is by killing more" (Ng, 71). Knowing that a man of such heinous evil can exist is rather unsettling. What is even more frightening is that we can actually relate to his pain, as we have all experienced the role of the victim at some point in our lives. *M* shows us that things are not

always as they seem. In comparison to the other two films we have analyzed, *M* goes above and beyond in deconstructing our notion of deformity and “otherness” by internalizing it. The film forces us to consider what is truly deformed, strange, or foreign and reapply this definition within a newly found identity.

Deformity (disability) and “otherness” has forever been a part of humanity. Through the centuries, the deformed have received a less-than-welcome treatment from the ableist majority. For example, since the inception of art, deformity has been a recurring theme, usually depicting something gruesome or evil. Within the sphere of cinematography, while this tenet remains true, the role of disability has been somewhat expanded. It is said that “filmmakers use disability to suggest some element of a person’s character, a tradition that carries back to the earliest days of the medium,” regardless of whether the character is good or evil (Norden, “Cinema of Isolation” 5).

With the emergence of the Weimar Republic between the first and second World Wars, German filmmakers quickly became a source cutting-edge movie production. It was also a time where Germans, while picking up the pieces after being ravaged by war, were in search of an identity. Several cinematic masterpieces were released during this era that set out to achieve this goal of identity formation. They set about accomplishing this by representing unity through the depiction of the “other.” Giving viewers the capacity to recognize something as foreign, thus allowing them to gravitate towards those who are more familiar, created a sense of solidarity. Early films like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu* took advantage of the flourishing Expressionist movement

and created unforgettable characters and worlds that not only brought people together, but also made a lasting impression on moviemaking. Moving forward several years and coming off the success of the critically acclaimed *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang's *M: Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* took storytelling to new heights. Through fresh interpretations of what entails deformity and the "other," Lang created a psychological thriller that has been seldom matched.

One thing these three very different movies taught everyone is that disability has many permutations and incarnations, yet all of them are capable in striking fear within the masses. Disability could come in the form of an emotionless sleep walker that kills on command, or it could be a blind panhandler that takes advantage of his lack of vision to help capture a serial killer. Through the years, disabled people have been "manipulated by imagery and stereotyping in order to fulfill the 'needs' of the non-disabled filmmaker...and audience" (Pointon and Davies, 1). There are numerous stereotypes linked to disability and all these films use a variety of them to maximum effect. However, all of the films touch on one key point that binds them together. This point is the belief that disabled people are less than human. Coupled with that is the idea that "disability results in a loss of self-control. The disabled character thus endangers the rest of society" (Longmore, 33). Cesare in *Dr. Caligari* was a sleepwalker that killed on the doctor's command, unable to control his true desires.² In *Nosferatu*, Graf

² As an aside, Cesare's sudden refusal to kill Jane is quite an interesting foreshadowing of the disabled population's fight to break away from the control of the non-disabled. He saw the injustice in the killing and temporarily broke

Orlok had an insatiable appetite for blood and, in an effort to feed, frightened Thomas Hutter when he tried to suck the blood off of Hutter's cut finger. Finally in *M*, Beckert was mentally disabled and unable to stop killing because it was the only way to satisfy the voices in his head. From a social standpoint, the characters' lack of self-control can be seen to have wider implications. Looking at this set of films from a distance and working with the topic of control, it is interesting to note that this was also a time that the disabled had very little in terms of rights and self determination. Many were placed in asylums and perished due to poor living conditions, while others simply did not have the means to lead fulfilling lives. This may very well have been indirectly linked to the overarching idea in these films that the disabled lack the ability to control themselves; they must therefore be controlled systematically.

Bogdon et al. best sum up why disability in these films worked so well in stirring up emotions of fear by saying:

By linking ugliness and physical and mental differences with murder, terror, and violence, the media creates, as it at the same time perpetuates, society's prejudices – prejudices that result in fear of the handicapped, and ultimately, in their systematic, intentional exclusion from society (32).

Although this may not have been the intent of the directors, the fear that was born out of these movies became a vital asset for the Nazis. As Germany moves out of

from his mental slavery so that she could live. This is not unlike the disabled breaking away and taking control of their own lives nearly 60 years later.

the Weimar era, we can witness the rising Nazi Party taking advantage of these depictions of disability by manipulating them and justifying a means to strengthen and cleanse the population. The country was preparing for war, setting forth on a journey towards global domination and genetic purity. For the ruling government, disability was a weak link in this chain and could therefore not be tolerated.

CHAPTER 3

"USELESS EATERS" IN NAZI GERMANY

Before the Nazis rose to power, there was a movement within Germany that aimed to reconstruct a sense of national identity. During the Weimar Republic, the country was recovering from defeat in World War I and society had been disrupted. Although Germany flourished from a cultural perspective, there was a prevalent fear of outsiders taking advantage of a vulnerable nation, threatening their way of life. There was a perceived need to band together and it was this need that served as an inspiration for such characters as Dr. Caligari, Nosferatu, and Beckert. When the Nazis swiftly assumed power of the country in 1933, they quickly latched on to this momentum and used their peoples' fear of "otherness" and "strangeness" against them, allowing them to easily assert their agendas of "solidarity," "purity," and "strength." It was through this calculated manipulation that allowed the ruling party to carry out genocide on its' own people. It also gave the Nazis an avenue in which they could use art and entertainment to further put their philosophical stamp on society. As we will discover in the next chapter, the Nazis took full advantage of this as they exploited the German film industry and transformed it into a powerful tool for spreading the Nazi message.

If goal of strengthening the population were to come to fruition, the Nazis decided they needed a way to get rid of anything seen as a potential weakness. Disabled people were targeted as this weak link and the Nazis sought ways of minimizing their impact on society. At first, the disabled were simply isolated

from the world and kept in facilities. However, as the Nazis entered into war, the disabled were taking up space that was seen as more useful if used by injured soldiers. We will explore momentarily how this led to the mass murder of thousands of disabled people. Eventually, this plan used to destroy the disabled population would serve as the foundation for the Jewish Holocaust. Over the next few pages, we will examine how the Nazis executed this horrific plan to strengthen a country now at war.

Atrocities against humanity have been committed for centuries. Whenever one group of people feels compelled to impose their will over another, untold numbers of people are brutally disposed of and those who survive undoubtedly witness horrific acts of violence. The Jewish Holocaust during World War II is perhaps the best-documented and widely studied of these crimes against mankind. Throughout the course of World War II, over six million Jews lost their lives in the numerous concentration camps throughout Germany. Before meeting their untimely deaths, many Jews were subjected to slave labor that powered the German war machine. Others were subjected to horrifying medical experiments that would never take place in this day and age of ethical practice. What is particularly distressing about the systematic killing of so many people was the seeming tolerance of it by the German population. Surely there were many who opposed such atrocities, but fear of retaliation from the government kept the dissenters silent.

Despite opposition, how could so many others stand idly by and even support the concept of so many people being put to death? In the years leading up

to the beginning of the Nazi regime, they started developing programs that were designed to rid the population of those who were deemed “unhealthy” and detrimental to the overall strength of the German people. Gearing up for war, the ruling regime wanted the strongest possible soldiers available. This edict led to the systematic killing of more than 275,000 physically and mentally disabled people through the Nazi *Aktion T4* program; the majority of those murdered were native Germans (Evans, 16). The notion of killing people simply because they were deemed unfit is not one that developed suddenly. This basic concept is seen repeated daily in nature with survival of the fittest. In a herd of animals, it is typically the old and the weak that are left behind, falling victim to various predators. Thomas Mueller states that ideas about racial hygiene in Germany date as far back as the nineteenth century when there was an increasing emphasis on biological medicine (95). As we begin to transition out of the Weimar Republic, the country was replacing “a liberal concern for individualism with a species-centered philosophy that fed into the eugenics movement [...] between the wars” (qtd. in Halliwell, 123).

Authored in 1920 by psychiatrist Alfred Hoche and jurist Karl Binding, the book, *The Permission to Destroy Life Unworthy of Life (Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens)* served as the philosophical foundation behind the Nazi euthanasia program. As previously stated, the philosophical basis for this did not spawn overnight. In fact, it was also something Hoche was espousing as early as 1912, years before his work was published, when he noted that the mentally ill “were a burden to the state” (Mueller, 95). While some

medical professionals took the idea of “unworthy life” from the onset, it didn’t gain a much wider support until the end of World War I. With the conclusion of the war, many German psychiatrists saw what was perceived as a grave injustice. Many from the “‘most productive of a generation’ lost their lives while many ‘worthless’ or ‘psychopathic elements’ survived” (Mueller, 96). It was this sentiment rippling throughout the psychiatric community that built momentum and fostered an environment that was sympathetic to the idea of human euthanasia. When this group of like-minded doctors allied themselves with the National Socialist policies, all opposition was quickly overcome (Mueller, 100). With the economic state of Germany, all of these factors combined to create a tragically unavoidable situation for the disabled population. The medical community was willing to accept the notion that eliminating the weak and disabled was the best solution for a cash-strapped country looking to revitalize itself in preparation for a new war.

However, the Nazis simply could not eliminate all of these people without just cause, so they devised several reasons that made the euthanasia of disabled people “necessary.” In order to execute their plans, the Nazis began the elimination process as they were starting WWII. The thinking was that the plan would be “easier and smoother to carry out in wartime.” In addition “public resistance which one would expect from the churches would not play such a prominent role amidst the events of wartime...” (qtd. in Evans, 24). In those days, many disabled people were kept in hospitals; Germany would undoubtedly suffer casualties and would need room in these hospitals to tend to their injured

soldiers. The Nazis decided that the best way to avoid overcrowding the hospitals would be to simply kill the disabled people “in order to make space for anticipated wartime casualties” (Evans, 43). As horrible as these acts were, they merely served as a precursor to the Disabled and Jewish Holocausts.

In order to be successful, the Nazis had to recruit people willing to do the work; they also had to garner the support of the people. These seemed to be fairly easy obstacles to overcome as young doctors looking to advance their new careers and Nazi loyalists were enlisted to carry out the deeds (Evans, 36). Military personnel and civilians were given tours of the asylums where these people were being housed. This was done to get people up close to these “lumps of meat” and “useless gobblers,” hoping to invoke feelings of disgust and making the decision for euthanasia easier (Weindling, 252). To round up support from the rest of the population, the Nazi propaganda machine churned out endless literature, posters, and movies to champion their cause. Disabled people were portrayed as mentally inept, physically deformed, and a general burden to society. One such piece of propaganda that we will investigate is the film *Ich klage an (I Accuse, 1941)*. The Nazis used these channels as a springboard to appeal to the financial costs involved in caring for a disabled family member. To further emphasize the point, images of a “strong and healthy” German were used to reiterate the notion that the disabled were a weakness and useless to society; especially in times of war where “the healthy were making enormous sacrifices, one could justify the ‘sacrifice’ of ‘not merely absolutely valueless, but negatively valued existences’” (Burleigh, 115).

While the organization of a countrywide euthanasia program did not occur overnight, the process was fully in place within a disturbingly short period of time. It is generally recognized to have begun in a city near Leipzig in 1938 with the birth of a child to the Knauer family. The baby was born blind and missing limbs. The father of the baby reportedly asked the physicians to euthanize the baby. After being rejected, the father is said to have appealed directly to Adolf Hitler. Dr. Karl Brandt, Hitler's chief physician, was ordered to go to Leipzig and determine if this father's plea was factual. If true, Dr. Brandt was ordered to direct the physicians to euthanize the baby. Upon inspection, the doctor deemed the child an "idiot" and had it killed (Evans, 22). It was this act that began a dark journey into the euthanizing of thousands of mentally and physically disabled people.

After the Knauer baby incident, Hitler ordered Dr. Brandt and the head of his Chancellory, Phillip Bouhler, to devise a euthanasia program. On August 18, 1939 Hitler ordered all medical professionals to report all disabled births and in return, they would receive a small fee (Evans, 26). As the program progressed, all disabled children were being reported. These children were gathered and placed in institutions where a majority of them would die. Many of these children were starved or given a lethal injection (Evans, 32). Due to the "success" of this child euthanasia program, Hitler ordered the program expanded to include euthanizing adults.

The program was named Operation T4 (*Aktion T4*), and was officially put into place by an order given by Hitler in October 1939, but it was backdated to

coincide with the September 1st invasion of Poland (Weindling, 251). Now that Germany was at war, it was easier to justify eliminating those who served no purpose in order to make room for the soldiers who sacrificed their health for the country. Not everyone housed in the facilities would be killed. Some of the “less” disabled people were allowed to live because they could perform necessary menial tasks. The decision process to determine who lived and died was as brutal and inhumane as the rest of the program. There was a form to be completed by the medical staff for every patient. These forms asked basic questions that asked for height, weight, disability, etc. However, they also asked for information such as how often these people had visitors and what kind of work they were doing at the facility (Lifton, 68-69). Once the forms were completed, they were sent to the T4 Headquarters in Berlin. There a three-person panel of medical experts reviewed the forms and decided who would be killed based on the information they had; none of these evaluations were made in-person (Evans, 46). Many whose lives were spared may have preferred death, as they were forced into labor and subjected to extremely poor living conditions. One former inmate testified that “her experience at [the asylum] was as bad as her incarceration in the [concentration] camps” (Evans, 84). In many asylums, it was not uncommon to see “untended and skeletal patients lying naked in their own excrement and urine on straw sacks, and people locked alone in dark vermin-infested bunkers” (Burleigh, 129).

To further hide the atrocities taking place, officials in Berlin were “busy creating a wide range of covert bureaucratic agencies that would serve as front

organizations for the killing program” (Evans, 44). One such agency was the Community Patients’ Transport Service, which was responsible for taking victims from the asylums to the killing centers (Evans, 44-45). The buses used by the service were driven by SS personnel dressed “in white uniforms or white coats to appear to be doctors, nurses, or medical attendants.” In further efforts to hide the victims from public view “the bus windows were covered with dark paint or fixed curtains or blinds” (Lifton, 70). Those who met their untimely demise were, many times, forcefully extricated from the facility as they were painfully aware of the final destination for the buses that arrived. Those who were targeted “tried to hide or run away. Some patients pleaded for their lives and struggled against being forcibly loaded onto the buses” (Poore, 121).

To accommodate the massive number of people that were being eliminated, the government experimented with several methods to quickly kill a large amount of people. The Nazis began with pumping vehicle exhaust into a room full of people, but it took too long. It was decided that killing in poisonous gas chambers was the quickest, most efficient way as everyone was dead within just a few minutes. At the Hartheim center, “young Nazi doctors experimented with various mixtures of gasses in order to find the most deadly combinations” (Evans, 55). There were six main killing centers – many which were abandoned castles – established throughout Germany in the towns of Hartheim, Brandenburg, Grafeneck, Sonnenstein, Bernburg, and Hadamar (Evans, 50). In order to convince large numbers of people to gather, they were corralled into large rooms and told they were getting showered. In an article entitled *Gassing Operations*

from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the victims in some of the killing centers were ordered to “enter the ‘showers’ with raised arms to allow as many people as possible to fit into the gas chambers”. The shower heads did not lead to water pipes, but rather gas lines. After the victims were dead from carbon dioxide poisoning, they were cremated.

Although the T4 program was intended to be a covert operation, efforts to keep it out of the public arena were pretty unsuccessful. Suspensions were raised almost immediately and family members were stunned as they discovered the true fate of their relatives. Seeing busloads of people herded to these killing centers, followed by billowing black smoke, locals were quick to make the connection. In fact, children would routinely tease each other by screaming: “You’re crazy! You’ll be sent to bake in the Hadamar ovens!” (Evans, 37). Before the victims were even dead, false letters of death and condolence were created to be sent to families.

The process that went into writing these letters was extremely meticulous, as they had to be completely believable. In composing the notifications:

physicians were instructed to take great care in assigning causes of death that were consistent with the patients’ prior physical and mental state. The doctors matched the age, sex, and physical condition of each patient to one of at least sixty-one false causes of death (Evans, 58).

Mistakes were made, however, when families would receive letters that list the cause of death “as appendicitis when the victim’s appendix had previously been removed” (Evans, 17). Such errors really set the wheels of suspicion in motion.

After the mass of bodies was cremated, workers took a random pile of ashes and put them in an urn and according to Suzanne Evans, “several months later, [relatives] were told they could obtain an urn of their beloved’s ashes” (58).

Unfortunately, families were confirming their fears that they were being deceived when “women’s hairpins turned up in urns sent to relatives of murdered male victims” (Evans, 17).

Now that the public had been fully made aware of the depth and breadth of the Nazi euthanasia program, people started making their dissension to the program known. Many sought legal action but were being ignored or threatened. One woman wanted to press charges, but withdrew after her lawyer told her that “the courts would never hear such a case and that her mouth would be shut in a concentration camp” (qtd. in Poore, 124). Directly in the face of these very real threats of violence, Bishop Clemens August Graf von Galen bravely encouraged people to voice their anger over the mass killings. Public opposition had finally reached a fever pitch and on August 24, 1941, Hitler put an official end to the T4 euthanasia program (Evans, 67). However, it is estimated that over 70,000 had lost their lives in a little over a year (Weindling, 250). Unfortunately, the closure of the T4 killing centers did not end the systematic killing of disabled people, as the Nazis found other methods of elimination. One method was killing with dynamite by “locking up to ten psychiatric patients in a large box and blowing it up” (Evans, 68). Starvation was the preferred method to take; some patients were fed “no more than fifty grams of boiled vegetables a day” (Evans, 70).

It is extremely difficult to get an accurate number of how many disabled people were exterminated by the Nazi regime, but it is conservatively estimated that as many as 275,000 people met their untimely demise in these acts of euthanasia (Weindling, 251).

CHAPTER 4

THE MERCY IN DEATH

Although it was over, the T4 program had served its dubious purpose and successfully served as a testing ground. The Nazis would take the knowledge they gained and refocus their energy towards the infamous concentration camps responsible for the premature death of over six million Jews. Interestingly, favor for euthanasia waned greatly amongst the German people after the T4 program as they realized family members and friends were the ones serving as fuel for the killing machine. Unfortunately, this did not deter the powers that be from moving forward with their “final” plan. In order to maintain some level of support, the Nazis had to employ effective, yet more subtle methods of distributing their message. Once again, their strategy hinged on the assumption that the population would feel differently if those being eliminated were not native Germans. One way to preach this message was through film; leading up to the war, the country boasted one of the strongest cinematic industries in the world. People were still going to the theaters to escape the harsh realities of the time and movies provided an optimal pulpit for spreading the ideologies of Hitler’s agenda. One such film was *Ich klage an*.

Released five days after the T4 program was officially ended, *Ich klage an* was a well-crafted film that maintained a disturbing balance between tasteful filmmaking and repeated attempts to indoctrinate. In fairness to the film’s writers and directors, the likelihood of detecting the propaganda when moviegoers first saw the film was probably not great. Seventy years later, the once subliminal

messages condoning euthanasia have come to the forefront and are crystal clear. The movie employed negative stereotypes of disability to skillfully and slyly reassure viewers that euthanasia was acceptable if it was advantageous to the community – in this case, a country bent on global domination – as a whole. Disability was used here as a deterrent much in the same manner that it was used by Otto Dix in his piece, *Die Skatspieler*. Instead of trying to deter people from war through depictions of the grotesque and monstrous body, here disability was portrayed as an undesirable trait from which people should want to disassociate themselves, even if it meant suicide. *Ich klage an* was particularly effective because several well-known members of German cinema's upper echelon lent their talents to the film. As a director, Wolfgang Liebeneiner was already established with eight films in his filmography by the time he directed *Ich klage an*. Casting performers that were rising stars and widely familiar added to the movie's credibility and it became something people in Nazi Germany wanted to see. This was undoubtedly a positive sign for the government who commissioned this film.

The story is about Dr. Thomas Heyt and his young, beautiful wife Hannah. Hannah is extremely bright with a promising future ahead of her, as she had recently been accepted to a university in Munich, a bit of a rarity for women at the time. During a party celebrating the news of getting into a university, she begins to feel pain in her hands while playing piano. Over the following days and weeks, the pain worsens and Hannah begins to lose function of her limbs. Medical tests reveal that she has multiple sclerosis, a disease that attacks the body's nervous

system and eventually affects motor function. Distraught over the news, Hannah loses her lust for life and comes to the conclusion that things would be easier for everyone if she were put to death. After she is given a “merciful death,” her husband is put on trial. Occupying over one-third of the film, the trail becomes a heated debate between the quality of life and whether or not it is worth living when afflicted with a disability.

The director wastes little time alluding to the negative and false perceptions of disability. Less than 15 minutes into the film, we see a group of doctors at the celebration gathering discussing various illnesses when one states, “schmerzen kommen zweifellos von Gott” (*pain undoubtedly comes from God*). This declaration not only sets the tone for the film from the outset, but it also gives credence to one of the oldest and most damaging misconceptions about disability. In times when medical knowledge was still highly rooted in religious foundations, it was generally agreed upon that seemingly inexplicable physical and mental afflictions were divine punishments. The effects of the above statement resonate throughout the film, and are harmful on two levels, as this also puts forth the notion that disability and pain are intrinsically related. We see crystalline examples of this in several moments throughout the movie.

In a lab where they are conducting experiments on mice, one mouse becomes disabled after being intentionally infected with a disease. After observing the success of the experiment, an unmoved Dr. Burckhardt can only respond by referring to the mouse as a “poor animal.” Later, in one of the most chilling scenes of the film, Dr. Burckhardt goes into a room where the mouse is

kept. She pulls out a beaker and a bottle of a poisonous substance. She pours some of this chemical into the beaker and retrieves the disabled mouse. As she brings it to the table with the beaker, she says, “I didn’t forget about you...” She then places the mouse inside and covers the beaker. With a cold and lifeless stare, she callously whispers to the mouse “you’ve now been released from your pain.” This act blatantly recalls visions of gassing unsuspecting victims during the T4 program. It also stoutly reinforces one of the pivotal arguments used by Nazi doctors who supported euthanasia of the disabled: they were leading miserable, insufferable lives and death was the only way to “set them free.” According to this proclamation, not only is the affected person freed from pain and despair, but those who look after the disabled are now free from the burden of caring for them and the suffering that comes with that caring. Although science has solved many medical mysteries over the last few centuries, the consistent repetition of these two fallacies in visual media and literature makes them difficult to eradicate.

The movie continues with numerous references of disability leading to a “life unworthy of life.” In various dialogues with her husband, Hannah woefully states that she cannot continue her life lame and disabled. The shame of her disability sends her emotionally in a downward spiral. She wishes for death so that her husband can be happy, inferring that disabled people are a burden and bring sorrow to those around them. Hannah is adamant about not wanting to live with her affliction and at one point begs Dr. Bernhard Lang, the family doctor who is also a close friend, to “forget the bottle of medicine” and leave it behind so she can take it. He had warned her that an overdose could be fatal. He refuses to

leave the bottle and reminds her that his job as a doctor is essentially to save lives, not end them. In an emotional exchange with her husband, after the disease has become more prominent, she convinces him to put her out of her misery. The audience never sees her ingest the liquid medicine, but can deduce that death is fast approaching as she recalls the bitter taste. Shortly thereafter, she was gone. The multitude of references in this film to disability being a burden and causing grief is extremely dangerous. These malevolent insinuations were so perfectly woven into the script that they seemed like a natural part of the storyline. When trying to convey a message, many artists often make the mistake of being too direct and inundating the audience to the point of fatigue. Wolfgang Liebeneiner and the other writers managed to avoid this blunder and masterfully executed the task at hand to near perfection.

After Hannah's death and throughout the ensuing trial, the viewer is presented with the back-and-forth debate of whether or not Dr. Heyt was virtuous or criminal in terms of his role with the assisted suicide. Dr. Lang is naturally angered by the fact that his close friend Thomas was complicit in killing his wife. He labels Thomas a murderer and insists on dissolving the friendship. Keeping in line with the prevailing ideology of the time, Thomas consistently maintains that his wife, whom he adored, was killed out of mercy and love. At the trial, Dr. Heyt has the support of various experts. A colleague of Dr. Heyt is put on the witness stand and is asked by the judge whether or not it was possible that Frau Heyt's illness contributed to her death. The professor answers with an unequivocal "yes." He then goes on to clarify that Frau Heyt suffered the agony

of an unbearable disease and that she, under her own volition, asked for death. He then proclaims to the judicial panel that he believed Dr. Heyt “acted out of love.” He also opines that “a judicial system that allows the prolonging the life of someone who has an incurable illness is ‘unnatural’ and ‘inhumane’”. Dr. Heyt even receives indirect support from jury members.

A note is brought to the court to announce that Dr. Lang is on his way to testify and the judge orders a recess. During the break, jurors debate the issue at hand. One juror then begins to talk about how he had to put his beloved dog down two weeks prior. He then goes on to say that putting the dog down was the right thing to do; it was a noble act to end its suffering. A fellow juror quickly responds by reminding the man that it is just an animal. The man retorts by asking his fellow juror, “Yes, but should animals be treated better than humans?” The scene immediately cuts back to the courtroom with a brief pause and allows the viewer to come to their own conclusion. This debate between the two jurors once again touches on “caring” and “love” for one another. The argument is asserting that, if we care enough to end the suffering of an animal that we love, then why is it wrong to do the same for a person we should love even more? This is another example of how the writers of this film carefully guided the opinions of moviegoers without explicitly stating that euthanasia of people is a worthy cause.

The coup de grâce in the prosecution’s case against Thomas Heyt was the change of heart experienced by his friend Dr. Lang. Throughout the film, Dr. Lang had been vehemently opposed to Hannah Heyt ending her life prematurely. For him, the notion went against everything he believed as someone who was

supposed to save lives. This all changed towards the end of the film. The question arose of how far one should go to save a life. Should it be prolonged if there is no hope for recovery or improvement? While meeting with another doctor, he encounters a child that had been treated for meningitis. In an effort to save the child using every medical technique possible, it has become blind, disabled, and mentally unstable. The sight of this child causes Dr. Lang to have a change of heart as he starts thinking about his friend Hannah. He decides to go to Dr. Heyt's trial to absolve his friend of murder, realizing that killing her really may have been the most merciful thing to do.

Ich klage an was a propaganda film that was nearly unmatched in terms of how it blended quality cinematography with Nazi ideology. It is a troubling example of the dubious extent to which the German government went to pushing its platform at the general population. Reflecting back upon the increasingly unfavorable sentiments noted in the films during the Weimar Republic, we can clearly observe a progression of hostility in portrayals of disability. *Ich klage an* strikes a truly cinematic low point for disability and the "otherness" typically associated with it. In the Weimar films, society as a whole took an active role in the fight against the "other," with the force of resistance increasing with each film. In *Dr. Caligari*, the "other" ultimately ends up being a figment of the doctor's twisted imagination. In *Nosferatu*, the evil associated with the "other" is vanquished by the warmth and purity of the sunlight. The resistance seen in *M* manifests itself in the form of a relentless manhunt that results in the people nearly turning on each other before unifying to capture the killer. Presenting the

strongest display against the “other” in *Ich klage an*, the concept was turned against itself and subtly put forward the underlying idea that suicide was the only way to return to a sense of “normalcy.” Longmore explains why this is so effective by pointing out that the audience “compliment[s] itself in supporting death as the only sensible solution to the problems of people with severe disabilities.” This allows them to “avoid confronting its own fears and prejudices” (33). Given the trend of increasing apprehension towards the “other,” this film was the tragic, yet obvious culmination of an ideology that began to infiltrate German society nearly thirty years prior in the Weimar era. *Ich klage an* is tangible evidence of the Nazi government’s ability to effectively assert its political beliefs, as it undeniably touts the “benefits” of human euthanasia.

It is here where we also need to revisit the idea of control discussed in the Weimar film chapter. As previously mentioned, disability is linked to a loss of self-control, which ultimately endangers the rest of society. Although her disability was not endangering anyone per se, the main pretense for Hannah Heyt wanting to die was that she was gradually losing control of her body. In her eyes, she was becoming an increasing burden on her husband and the eventuality of her condition meant “total physical dependency that deprives the individual of autonomy and self-determination” (Longmore, 33). If the *Aktion T4* program represented the sociopolitical culmination of anti-disability sentiments, the cultural abyss was undoubtedly represented with *Ich klage an*. Also, as the other Weimar films represented a lack of political control for the disabled, *Ich klage an*

was a powerful statement denoting the disabled had absolutely no right to legal protections.

Although the *Ich klage an* film was released after the abrupt end of the T4 program and opposition towards euthanasia had been mounting, there was still plenty of support and films such as this helped carry momentum into the next stage of the Nazi's grand scheme. Despite the malicious intent of this film, it is fortunate that it is still available for future generations to see in order to understand the powerful influence of Nazi propaganda. For the disabled, many questions arose in the aftermath of the war. How would they be treated by the rest of society after the war? Would the able-bodied population embrace the disabled in a show of remorse for the atrocities committed against them? If so, would disabled Germans be afforded the same liberties and freedoms as everyone else? As we will see, the struggle for disability equality in Germany has made great strides towards achieving the ultimate goal. However, no victory has come easy as both sides work together and determine how to fully integrate those who were once considered "useless."

CHAPTER 5

THE HEALING PROCESS

When the dust settled in the aftermath of the war, Germany began the arduous road to reconstruction. Not only did the country's infrastructure need to be reconstituted, but the national psyche and Germany's reputation around the world were in a state of disrepair as well. With an abundance of video footage from concentration camps and films such as *Ich klage an* in circulation, Germany was now faced with the daunting task of changing the view of those around the world and of her own people. From a disability perspective, how were people going to regain trust in a government that advocated for their death? Would the new government do anything to express regret and attempt to right the wrongs committed against the disabled? Throughout this chapter, we will look at the role of film in creating a new image for the disabled. We will also investigate the beginnings of political action for the disabled in a self-sufficient movement, and how films in the post-war period are symbolically tied to that.

After the war people sought guidance with the desire to forge a sense of direction as they attempted to come to terms with the rebuilding process. One place people turned to during this tumultuous period was the church. During the Weimar era and WWII, the church had lost a considerable amount of social and cultural influence. However, religious leaders saw the immediate post-war period as a perfect opportunity to regain the confidence and support of the masses. This was accomplished by "bolstering their initially strong position as the sole remaining institutions in defeated Germany, forging close ties with the reigning

Christian Democratic Party, encouraging lay involvement in party politics, and crafting their rhetoric to underscore the need to protect the national community during a time of exceptional material and moral crisis” (Fehrenbach, 55). This strategy was particularly effective as the church desired to have an influence on a film industry looking to rebrand itself with a more positive post-war image.

It was during the post-war period that the German film industry started producing what are known as *Heimatfilme* (homeland films). Popular throughout the 1950s, these were created to serve as a way to help Germans temporarily forget about the war and whisk them back to a more pleasant time. Heide Fehrenbach further elaborates, describing *Heimatfilme* as, “featuring close-knit townsfolk in traditional dress... [that] provided Germans the opportunity to participate, for a couple of hours, in a never-never land of lost German traditions” (56). To further amplify their effect, they were typically set in the hills or open fields as a way to escape from the cities still trying to pick up the pieces.

Heimatfilme became extremely popular as they were a stark visual contrast to the chaos and destruction that enveloped the country a few years prior. One of the more popular films in this genre was the 1952 version of *Heidi* by Italian director Luigi Comencini.

Although filmed entirely in Switzerland, *Heidi* brought comfort with the familiar sight of serene countryside and a bustling city. Part of the story takes place in Frankfurt, but they had to use a Swiss city as well due to Frankfurt still being under repair due to damage from the war. The film was naturally embraced by moviegoers and reminded Germans of how picturesque their country was in

the not-too-distant past. In addition, spiritually uplifting songs were abundant throughout the film to further elevate the nostalgic mood. In fact, the final scene takes place in a village church and the movie ends with the entire congregation singing a hymn. This ending is undoubtedly the direct result of the aforementioned church influence. The depictions on screen were the opposite of what many had been exposed to on a daily basis and were a far cry from what had been seen during the war. Interestingly, this also holds true with respect to disability.

One of the main characters in the film, Klara Sesemann, is the daughter of a wealthy businessman and physically disabled due to damage caused by diphtheria. She is bright, cultured, and very “lady-like.” When she makes her initial appearance in the film, the viewer cannot discern that Klara is disabled. However, Comencini does little to hide the fact that Klara is in a wheelchair as she is shown sitting in it throughout much of the film. In light of artistic depictions and attitudes towards disability only slightly over a decade before, this alone is an extreme shift. Unlike the Hanna Heyt character in *Ich klage an*, Klara is perceived as a human being of value, despite the fact that she became disabled because of illness. Although she spends the majority of her time at home, she is receiving an education and appears generally happy and well cared for. She and Heidi form a strong bond and her disability seems to have no negative effect on Heidi. The bond between the two is so strong that, in the later portion of the film, Klara claims that Heidi gave her the courage to overcome her disability. It happens when the two girls are in a barn interacting with the horses. Klara cannot

see the horses very well because she is sitting and the stall wall stands at roughly eye level. With Heidi's encouragement, Klara pulls herself on her feet. She is amazed at the fact that she is standing and says that it is the first time she's tried to stand since becoming disabled. Later that night in her bedroom, she takes her first steps with Heidi's assistance. She then falls and upon hearing the commotion, everyone rushes upstairs to make sure Klara is ok. When they walk in, they see Klara standing and everyone rejoices, claiming that a miracle has taken place. Despite the positive trajectory we are seeing with cinematic disability portrayals, there are still stereotypes and attitudes in *Heidi* that perpetuate negativity towards the disabled.

One somewhat common occurrence throughout the film was the ease with which family members and house servants could keep Klara under control through her disability. Whenever Klara is being too intrusive or the adults of the house need privacy, they simply wheel her away. When Dr. Classen comes to the house to discuss with her father matters concerning Klara, the girl is whisked into the adjoining study room for her lessons and the large door is closed. This was most likely done, not to hide her from a visitor, but more to protect her from the serious discussions about her prognosis. Later, a homesick Heidi reminisces about her village and describes it in beautiful detail. The mental images make Klara long for the day when she can see the countryside and she sadly states, "if only I could go." Heidi encourages her by saying that perhaps she can one day. Klara's governess, Frau Rottenmeyer, unfortunately puts a quick end to such a crazy idea. In one other scene, Heidi goes missing and everyone is scrambling to

find her. Amidst the ensuing chaos, a concerned Klara wheels out to ask what is happening and Frau Rottenmeyer tells her to go back in her study. She then wheels Klara back into the study room and shuts the door, as if to shield her from the disparaging news that her new companion has gone missing.

Although she is a beloved member of the family, everyone still feels compelled to protect Klara in some fashion. She often stays home and any social interaction comes primarily from her relatives and those that work in the home. When she is finally afforded the opportunity to leave the house, she is still accompanied by a trusted guardian. Unfortunately, very little has changed in regards to this prevailing notion that those with disabilities need to be sheltered, as it is still common for parents of disabled children to be over-protective. Their physical “fragility” is mistakenly correlated with mental fragility³. As a result, those children are at a disadvantage when they try to become self-sufficient, thus perpetuating the idea that disabled people are “helpless.”

Another common theme that permeates throughout the film, one that has only recently begun to change, is the view of disability from a medical perspective in favor of a social perspective. There are multiple instances in the movie where Klara’s relatives – even Klara herself – continue to refer to her as being “sick” or “unhealthy,” although she no longer seems to exhibit symptoms of diphtheria outside of her paralysis.

³ Mental fragility should not be confused with a lack of intelligence. Here, fragility refers to the mental “toughness” of the individual.

In one scene after Klara is “cured,” the Sesemann family realizes that Heidi wants to leave Frankfurt and return to her village. The father states that “Klara is no longer sick, but Heidi is. She’s homesick.” Towards the end of the movie, as Heidi prepares to return to her village and the two friends bid each other goodbye, Klara hopes that she could one day visit Heidi when she “gets healthy.” All of these assertions relating disability and sickness create the fallacy that disabled people are also inherently unhealthy. This is of course untrue as the lifespan of many disabled people is unaffected by the disability. In a somewhat ironic juxtaposition, many seemingly “healthy” people – especially high-performance athletes in recent times – are met with an untimely death due to undiagnosed ailments.

In *Heidi* we have seen disabled people portrayed as “helpless” and “unhealthy.” The other popular notion we can observe in the film is that disabled people are preoccupied with their condition and continuously seek a cure. It is certainly understandable that someone who suffered an injury and became disabled as a result would want to be rehabilitated. However, many others have congenital disabilities and have no life experience in any other state. In one scene it comes out that Heidi wants to go home, but Klara begs to her family that her only real friend stays at the house. Klara shouts, “it’s horrible always sitting in this chair,” and begins sobbing. This indicates that Klara believes she has no friends *because* of her physical limitations, instead of some other factor such as an over-protective family.

In a scene that takes place after the “cure,” the people in the house believe it is haunted. They hear strange noises, doors mysteriously open, and things are found in different places from where they had been left. As Frau Rottenmeyer and a maid investigate, they believe they have found the ghost as they encounter a covered human-like figure sitting in Klara’s now unused wheelchair. Once the blanket is removed and the women run away screaming, it is revealed that there is not anyone actually sitting in the chair. The “ghost” turns out to be nothing more than a coincidentally-shaped blanket and it is later discovered that the “ghost” was Heidi, who was suffering from bouts of sleepwalking due to her homesickness. This scene plays into the notion that Klara is no longer the person she was and that her temporary disability defined her. Once she was “cured,” she was freed from her crippling shell and allowed to leave her confinement permanently. While this may be true about Klara, this again continues to falsely generalize that a disabled person’s physical constitution is directly related to their mentality. It is surely naïve to believe that a disabled person is in no way affected by their disability, but how one arrives at a definition of self is determined by the way in which these uncontrollable factors affect them psychologically. Some people are completely unaffected by their disability, whereas others allow their condition to govern every aspect of their life.

In following the treatment of disability in *Heidi*, we observe multiple scenes where Klara is being "protected" or hidden away. It is very telling in that - in a complete reversal of treatment - the disabled are now being seen as a group that needs the assistance and guidance of the able-bodied population.

This however did not sit very well with the disabled population. They felt as though their needs were not being fully met. Those that were being met were not satisfactory as an able-bodied person could never have a completely clear understanding of what the disabled need. The disabled no longer wanted their lives determined by a misunderstanding able-bodied population. It was at this moment that the disabled began advocating for themselves. While the country had a multitude of things to take into consideration, the sensitive subject of disability was very much at the forefront of the nation's conscience.

Unfortunately, this was not due to any remorse felt by the population for the crimes committed against the disabled by the Nazis. Once the fighting ended, thousands and thousands of returning soldiers found themselves suddenly thrust into the realm of disability. They came home bearing the scars of war, a permanent reminder of the once proud country's demoralizing defeat. Many were amputees and required crutches or wheelchairs to get around. Others were blind, deaf, or suffered from mental disorders. Hence, much of the focus on disability immediately following the war was justifiably aimed at the soldiers. They needed rehabilitation services to help them adjust to their new realities. Although many veterans were receiving some form of assistance, they felt as though it was grossly inadequate, especially in monetary terms. Due to this perceived negligence, veterans were the first group of disabled Germans to mobilize after the war in the name of activism. This movement was born out of the desire for greater pensions, something veterans deemed were too small and that the government was slow to disperse (Poore, 174).

The war veterans were not satisfied with letting the government dictate their lives and took matters into their own hands. One of the earliest concerted efforts by the disabled in West Germany to push for equality and a means for self-sufficiency took place in 1950. Members of the Association of War-Disabled, War Survivors, and Social Pensioners (VdK) gathered in Munich on March 26th to protest a delay in the passing of the Disabled War Veterans' Benefits Law and its proposed pension limits (Poore, 175). Protests such as this sprouted up all over Germany as veterans sought fair treatment. Although this disability movement was initially founded in the struggle for acceptable pensions, we can take note as a shift in focus began to unfold during the early-mid 50s. It was at this time that the protesters incorporated the visual aspects of their disability to discourage war and the debates about rearmament (Poore, 175). Fully aware about the ravages of war, disabled protestors took to the streets en massé to prevent future generations from experiencing such devastation. Missing limbs and twisted bodies were to serve as a visual reminder that, win or lose, going to war had lifelong consequences for all parties involved.

Those who were disabled because of combat or work-related causes never received quite the same harsh treatment as those born with disability or with a debilitating disease. Congenital disabilities are accompanied by a different set of deeply-ingrained perceptions that certainly made the struggle for disabled citizens more difficult. These disabilities are often seen as hereditary flaws. The highly coordinated nature of the veteran-led disability rights movement overshadowed the citizens' fight for equal treatment, but they were also making headway in a

separate, but equally important movement towards equality. Throughout the 50s, a change in attitude develops from legislators and rehabilitation professionals (Poore, 179). Many acknowledged that disabled people are indeed human beings that deserve respect and dignity. However, there was an overwhelming desire for “separate, but equal” accommodations, a notion that eerily mirrored the cultural environment for blacks in the US during the same time period. While the intent for equal treatment was certainly refreshing and a far cry from WWII, the push for separate amenities greatly hindered the progress of disability rights. In the States it was (and still is) blatantly obvious that “separate, but equal” was anything but what it claimed. From a professional perspective, this is especially apparent in the field of education. Writing in a book commissioned by the Labor Ministry, Dr. Wolfgang Albert supported education for the disabled, but suggested they be put “in special schools, or in at least special classes in regular schools, maintaining both that they would be highly stigmatized in regular classes and that it would be impossible for any teacher to cope with such mixed classes” (qtd. in Poore, 179).

Disability rights activists were starting to make progress in legislative and administrative areas, but the struggle to change the mindset of the German people proved to be a much more daunting task. Changing perceptions of disability is unfortunately a campaign that continues in present-day, not exclusively in Germany, but all over the world. Despite the increasing support from legislators and health professionals, disabled citizens were still being treated in a less dignified manner by people in everyday interactions. Carol Poore describes the

experiences of countless people, saying they were “being stared at frequently, and being addressed with the familiar *du* instead of the polite *Sie*, being asked tactless questions or offered money by strangers” (181). Although some of these things were happening to all disabled people, citizens, as opposed to war veterans, seemed to experience these things with greater frequency. This is likely due to the fact that veterans had an easily understood cause for their disability, lending to the ease with which the able-bodied population was able to sympathize. Many disabled citizens, on the other hand, had disabilities caused by less obvious origins. This was problematic as it did not provide non-disabled citizens with a satisfactory mechanism to cope with the glaring physical differences. Due to the negative treatment and feelings that veteran-led organizations did not have the interest of citizens in mind, they decided to split and take matters into their own hands (Poore, 181-2). These organizations were founded primarily by the parents of disabled children during the mid to late-50s. While these groups were a definite step in the right direction, they were not meeting the ultimate goal of equality. As the children of these activist parents matured, they began to carve their own path towards integration and it is at this point that we begin to see the German disability rights movement become one of self-determination.

Before moving forward, it would be beneficial to briefly discuss what is known about the lives of disabled people in East Germany (German Democratic Republic) during the postwar period in order to compare and contrast various ways these two countries served their respective disabled populations. In the early years of the country, prospects for the disabled appeared to be moving

forward. The socialist government structure guaranteed all citizens the right to basic services such as education and employment, regardless of disability. In similar fashion to the West German model, there was unfortunately a large consensus for a “separate, but equal” education system. Disabled students were regularly segregated from their able-bodied counterparts and received sub-standard education. To further exacerbate the issue, disabled students were further marginalized by the type of disability they had. Children with physical and sensory disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental disabilities were all relegated to different types of schools based on their perceived capacities, while those deemed “uneducable” and “untrainable” were sent elsewhere (Poore, 257). Children with the highest levels of cognition were able to attend universities, but even that was a difficult task to undertake. For non-disabled students, schools offering the chance to take a university entrance exam (*Abitur*) were numerous. In contrast, there were only a handful of schools available to disabled students. This often meant that students had to live away from home to attend school. For the severely physically disabled who wished for a university education, there was only one such school in a city just north of Berlin (Poore, 258).

In regards to the East German labor force, everyone who was capable of doing so was expected to contribute. Not only did many disabled people find employment under the GDR labor model, but it also meant that some could also “pursue the same career paths as the non-disabled” (Poore, 260). Even those that had more severe disabilities found work and although it may not have been anything substantial from an economic standpoint, it gave purpose and meaning to

those who may have otherwise wasted their days doing nothing. Integration of the disabled through employment can be seen as a very progressive step in a postwar world. Surprisingly, this was also much different from employment practices in West Germany. In the capitalist West, many of the instruments in place to facilitate the hiring of disabled employees were simply skirted by companies by paying a fine if they did not meet hiring quotas (Poore, 260). Unfortunately for many disabled Germans, this is still common with many businesses today.

Despite the various shortcomings of the GDR, disabled citizens were afforded some level of support from the socialist government. However, growing costs throughout the country put financial strains on many programs for the disabled. Though generally viewed as a great achievement, the enormous costs incurred when the East reunified with the West in 1990 was the death of numerous social programs disabled East Germans relied upon over the years. Many of these programs were either folded into their West German equivalent, or completely eliminated. Among other things, this meant that many disabled East Germans suddenly found themselves unemployed because it was not economically practical to keep those jobs (qtd. in Poore, 271). With the influx of people moving westward in search of employment, the disabled were left out because most businesses preferred to employ able-bodied workers. Sadly, this trend continues today as unemployment rates are higher for disabled people. The overall unemployment rate of the non-disabled came to 11.1% in 2005, whereas

14.5% of disabled people were unemployed (qtd. in Waldschmidt, Lingnau, and Meinert, 7).

Although many East Germans – both disabled and non-disabled – are of the belief that things were more stable before reunification, disabled people have now been afforded more rights than before the two countries reunited. This is due largely to the fact that, unlike their counterparts from the West, disabled people were only allowed to organize within certain contexts. Only three organizations for disabled persons were allowed to exist in the GDR: one was a sports organization and the other two were in existence prior the Third Reich (Poore, 261). Thus, West Germany had laid considerable groundwork for the disability rights movement before East Germany entered the picture. Now we can look at how disabled people in the West took greater control of their lives and forged a self-determined path that continues to shape the future of all disabled people living Germany.

CHAPTER 6

TAKING STEPS TOWARDS ACCEPTANCE

The German disability rights movement began as a grassroots effort born out of a desire to be granted a sense of equality. Disabled people wanted to be integrated into mainstream society and parents of disabled children wanted equal opportunity. Once these children reached adulthood, they were no longer satisfied with what had been given to them. They wanted control of their lives, rather than have their outcomes determined by a battery of non-disabled “experts.” However, this strong desire alone was not enough to alter the deeply-rooted political and social paradigm of the German welfare state. A catalyst was needed to provide this new wave of activists with the tools to achieve their goals of independence and self-determination. The impetus was found in the United States during the 1960s. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the first major piece of legislation to grant equality for minorities. Although the legal protections opened many new pathways for people around the country, the millions of disabled people were initially excluded. Thankfully, this gross negligence was finally recognized and rectified when the US Government passed the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the first substantial legislation to protect the rights of the disabled. In the Section 504 of the original document, it states:

No otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States [...], shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to

discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance (93rd US Congress).

The passage of this historic document sent a worldwide message that disabled people were an integral part of society and deserving of equal treatment. The act offered equality protections in government agencies, and also helped level the playing fields of employment and education. Disabled Germans took notice and used the rights movement in America to jumpstart their own efforts for equality.

In the 1970s, disabled children in postwar-Germany had reached adulthood. Many of them had grown weary of the government-sanctioned lives they were leading and started forming groups of their own. A number of these groups consisted of members from other existing disability organizations who felt that their former groups did not serve their needs. Eventually a coalition of these groups created a national organization called *Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Clubs Behinderter und ihrer Freunde*, or CeBeeF. The purpose of these clubs was to serve as a way for disabled and non-disabled people to get together in social settings (Poore, 274). As great as this idea was, many of these clubs encountered issues when trying to socialize, which stemmed from physical barriers and an uneducated public. However, these obstacles strengthened the cause of disability rights because “these disabled people and their allies were facing them together, [so] they could strategize amongst themselves about how to resist exclusion in daily life and claim their civil rights” (Poore, 274).

Throughout the 70s, frustrations were mounting and people were becoming more outspoken. In the early 1980s, all of these things culminated with disability rights

activists finally putting down their proverbial foot, essentially stating that “enough is enough.”

The year 1981 was designated as the UN Year for People with Disabilities, born out of a declaration made a little over five years prior that denounced discrimination against them (Poore, 273). The intent behind this was that conferences, discussions, and other events would be held in order to increase awareness about the needs of the disabled. On the surface, it appeared to be a great gesture in mending the gap of inequality. However, many disability rights activists were outraged and perceived it as a complete farce. This is because the planning that went into these events was largely done without the input of the disabled community. A vast number of these activists saw “its adoption by the government as a form of political posturing belied by the lack of commitment to real reforms” (Heyer, 733). Although there were protests and demonstrations throughout the year that were in opposition to this UN-sanctioned event, there are a few incidents in Germany that are particularly worthy of mention. They were all carried out by a group of various disability organizations called the Action Group against the UN Year (Poore, 279).

The first took place at the opening ceremonies in January, where the group “entered the hall [in a parade], occupying the stage, and forcing Federal President Karl Carstens to withdraw to a locked room to deliver his keynote address” (Poore, 279). It was at this point that the protesters read a declaration criticizing the current way disabled people were being treated. The group asserted that “disability was socially constructed and caused by exclusionary policies directed

against them...” (Poore, 280). The second incident occurred in the summer of 1981 and was a reversal of the numerous nonviolent protests that were held, as this one got slightly physical. Once again, Federal President Carstens was a key figure. In this confrontation, activist Christoph Franz went on stage and hit Carstens with his crutch, “shouting that the president was again supporting an event in which [...], ‘people were talking about us but not with us’” (Poore, 280). This episode was met with mixed reactions in the media and the public as Franz “challenged not only the image of the grateful cripple, but also that of the noble helper” (Poore, 281). Finally, in December of that year, a “Cripple Tribunal” was held by a group of disability activist organizations that exposed on a wide scale, the daily struggles of disabled people. This tribunal essentially “accused the Federal Republic of violating the human rights of disabled people” (Poore, 282). According to Carol Poore, these incidents heightened public awareness of the plight of the disabled in Germany, but did very little in practical terms (283). One contributing factor can be traced to the election of an economically conservative government in 1980. Financial support was reduced in a wide variety of programs. According to Katharina Heyer, “political concerns for persons with disabilities lost importance in this period and gave way to growing concerns over Germany’s increasing unemployment rates” (734). The disability rights movement carried on despite this setback and at this point, many activists decided to head to the United States in order to gain a fresh perspective. The passage of the Rehabilitation Act several years prior gave activists in the U.S. plenty of time

to formulate effective methods to lobby for equality. In the coming years, this move would prove to be a crucial step for disability rights in Germany.

For the American disability rights movement, the 1980s were a particularly active time and there were a few select places that were hotspots in the movement. Many activists from Germany descended upon Berkeley, California as it was here that the American independent living movement got its start (Poore, 286). Wanting to separate from the medical model of care that had dominated the landscape for so long, the independent living movement was brought about as a way for the disabled to be self-sufficient. German activists recognized this movement and the timing of it as a prime opportunity to discover exactly what was possible in terms of equality for the disabled. A lot was learned from these various trips and German activists were amazed by how much freedom disabled Americans enjoyed. Upon their return, many were “full of enthusiasm and optimism about what might be possible with a paradigm shift from charity and dependence to equal rights and self-determination” (Heyer, 734). Taking cue from the American independent living movement, German disability rights activist Ottmar Miles-Paul created the first Center for Independent Living in Bremen in 1986 (Poore, 286). This spawned the creation of many similar organizations throughout the country over the next few years.

Although the American independent living movement had a great impact on the German movement, the widest reaching impression was made in 1990 with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Once implemented, the ADA gave the disabled greater channels to become contributing members of

society. Not only has this legislation deeply impacted the lives of the disabled living in the US, but disabled people all over the world have been affected by it, either directly or indirectly. Regarding its influence, Theresia Degener lauds that it has had “such an enormous impact on foreign law development that one might feel inclined to say that its international impact has been greater than its domestic effect” (in Lawson and Gooding, 89).

In Germany, this impact can be seen in an extremely short time after its passage. Seeing that their American counterparts succeeded in getting the ADA passed with the help of strong coalitions, the Germans formed one of their own. Consisting of well-established organizations, the Initiative for Equality of the Disabled (*Initiativkreis Gleichstellung Behinderter*, or Equality Initiative) was formed “with the goal of introducing a similar law [to the ADA] in Germany and planning more media work and public consciousness raising” (Heyer, 736). Their first great challenge was having language inserted into the German Constitution that ensured protections for the disabled and the country’s reunification in 1990 served as a perfect window of opportunity. Two years after reunification, the German government was in the process of updating the constitution. The Equality Initiative requested a hearing before the Constitution Commission to have a provision for disability rights placed in the constitution, based on an ADA proposal model (Heyer, 737). Their efforts were unsuccessful, but the group was not deterred. They had one final chance at altering the future of disabled Germans. In 1994, they targeted the annual rehabilitation exhibition in Düsseldorf as the platform they would use to campaign their cause, by asking

candidates about their position on legislation for disability equality (Heyer, 737). According to Katharina Heyer, “then-Chancellor [Helmut] Kohl suddenly recognized people with disabilities as potential voters...[and] surprised everyone by declaring that he, too, favored an antidiscrimination clause in the Basic Law” (737). The Equality Initiative had finally achieved their goal after this public declaration of support. After years of negotiation and cooperation, German disability rights activists attained legal protection for millions of previously-neglected citizens. It was a momentous occasion and a grand victory, one that many could not have foreseen just a decade prior. The reward for their efforts was a single sentence placed in Article 3 of the German Constitution. It read: “No one shall be discriminated against because of their disability / *niemand darf wegen seiner Behinderung benachteiligt werden*” (Heyer, 738). While the Equality Initiative understood the gravity of such a political victory, they realized that their work was far from finished. The wording in the constitution protected the disabled from discrimination, but who was considered “disabled,” and furthermore, what exactly constituted “discrimination?” Recognizing this from the outset, activists began the push for “a separate antidiscrimination law outlining the kinds of rights that cannot be denied, [in order to] give the constitutional amendment the political and legal teeth necessary [...] to combat discrimination” (Heyer, 739). This push consisted of a two-pronged approach that would take a lot of cooperation between various organizations, and several years to achieve the desired end result. The first step was to implement a massive advertising campaign in an effort to educate the public. They would use

television, newspaper and magazines, and distribute literature informing the general population about not only the new provision in the constitution, but also about the hardships faced by disabled people on a daily basis. Once they gained public support, they could then approach the government and work in a joint effort to create concrete legislation.

In order for the campaign to be effective, the Equality Initiative needed to utilize an organization who had established credibility and recognition. For this, the group *Aktion Sorgenkind* (Operation Problem Child) was called. Despite its name alluding to dealing with troubled youth, *Aktion Sorgenkind* was actually a well-established and respected disability organization originally founded in 1964 as a support group for children affected by thalidomide (Heyer, 740). However, not everyone agreed with the choice although the organization was certainly best suited for the task. Some critics argued that *Aktion Sorgenkind* played on the hearts of the public by “creating images of disabled people as helpless, needy, and objects of charity” (Heyer, 740). After much deliberation and negotiation, the advertising campaign was launched over a two-month period at the end of 1997. Heyer states that this was done in order to bombard the public with a lot of material in a short amount of time (740). This tactic was highly effective, and slightly ironic. The Nazi campaign *against* the disabled carried out before and during World War II was very similar in method, although that one lasted considerably longer. Billboards, posters, street performances, conferences, stickers, drink coasters, and buttons all worked in unison to educate the public about daily obstacles of the disabled. Many of them carried sometimes very

direct slogans and quotes pointing out what the disabled are faced with.⁴ The campaign was heralded as a success and not only did it have an effect on the public, but all the organizations involved were moved as well. They saw that they could accomplish great things if they put aside their differences and work together. Heyer mentions that “the hierarchy between the physically and mentally disabled was [...] pushed to the background, as [...] every group had an equal say in the discussions surrounding the choice of slogans and events” (749). In addition, *Aktion Sorgenkind* announced in July 2000 that it was officially changing its name to *Aktion Mensch* (Operation Human Being), and “would no longer refer to people with disabilities as ‘problem children’” (Heyer, 749). This change was a welcomed gesture as it no longer stigmatized the disabled and more accurately reflects the mission of this organization and others like it: the demarginalization of disabled people and the adoption of the notion that everyone is a human being.

In the next few months and years, a series of events took place that set the stage for the disability movement to have legislation that would give them some kind of recourse for violations of the constitutional amendment. The first was the election of a much more liberal government in 1998. This was especially encouraging for activists as “the Social Democrats and the Greens promised to expand the constitutional mandate in a separate equalizing law” (Heyer, 752). As a reminder to the government of this promise, a follow-up to the media campaign

⁴ For details about this campaign, including visual samples of campaign materials, please read Katharina Heyer’s article: *The ADA on the Road: Disability Rights in Germany* (2002).

from the previous year was implemented. After another successful campaign, it was finally time for legislation to be drafted. A group of disabled jurists were called upon for the task, a move described as “unprecedented in German legislative history” (Heyer, 752). The draft was put up for public debate in October 2000, where various activists, legislators and others from the public and private sector met to discuss the details. This meeting signified a true collaborative effort, a rare occasion where the disabled were able to dictate how their future would unfold. A group of disabled jurists determined what was needed by the disability community and a mix of disabled and non-disabled groups worked together to create equal rights legislation that was deemed acceptable by the disabled. Although there had been many hurdles and obstacles overcome over the decades, this meeting truly signaled a turning point for the German disability rights movement. It was at this moment the disabled proclaimed they were capable of self-determination and the non-disabled were willing to acknowledge that. Passage of the law was a formality at this point; the process of arriving at this juncture, however, was a quantum leap forward in achieving true integration of the disabled.

After being passed by both houses of the German Parliament by a large majority, the Federal Equalizing Law for People with Disabilities (now referred to as, *das Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz*) went into effect on May 1, 2001 (Heyer, 755). This legislation was actually the final piece of a three-part legislative plan. Combined with the *Sozialgesetzbuch IX* of July 2001 and the reformed employment law passed in October 2000, disabled Germans were now

equipped with the legal tools to legally combat discrimination. An amendment in the German Constitution made discrimination against the disabled illegal, and these very important pieces of legislation outlined what was needed by the disabled to lead a self-determined life. Under this disability legislation:

The Federal Government is obliged to a barrier-free design and construction of public buildings, streets, etc. and to provide barrier-free access to communication, especially in the field of administrative Internet sites, official forms and notifications. In the area of public transportation, all facilities and means of transportation (bus, train, aircraft) are also required to be barrier-free. The same applies to restaurants (Kock, 1373).

On paper, this new self-determined future meant many things as the possibilities appeared endless. Passing antidiscrimination legislation was, comparatively speaking, the easy part. The last major obstacle, one that continues today in countries around the globe, is overcoming the negative social perceptions of disability. However, with this support in place, disabled people all over Germany have taken to the streets, airwaves, the stage, and the silver screen in an effort to educate the public and dispel misconceptions. The goal is to remove the impairment from the equation and be seen simply as another person. Visual media are powerful tools that can perpetuate negative stereotypes of disability on one end of the spectrum and on the other end, strip away these perceptions and cast disability in a more positive and accurate light. As we progressed through the first decade of the new millennium, the stigma attached to disability was

slowly being torn away. Something that had previously been taboo to even discuss was now allowed to be displayed in various manners without fear of backlash. Disabled characters were now appearing in television shows and film.

CHAPTER 7

DISABILITY IS A LAUGHING MATTER

Reflecting upon the 80 years prior to these historic moments, it is easy to see the amount of progress made. The vast unexplored territories of freedom now bestowed upon the disabled create a perfect canvas with which we can better understand the final two films of this survey. We are now afforded the ability to discuss the relatively progressive nature of the films and how the disability rights movement has allowed such cinema to be seen by viewers not only in Germany, but around the world. Before moving forward, it would be imprudent to not revisit our cinematic journey up to this point.

Generally speaking, art is often interpreted as a reflection on society. If this is the case, what sort of social commentary can we derive from the aforementioned films? During the Weimar era, where German film reached a critical high point, disability was portrayed in several different manners. However, they all shared the common theme of strangeness. It was a time when Germany was desperately seeking identity and unity among the people. Through the process of using deformity and disability as the foundation for creating a sense of “normality,” those that did not conform to the specifications of what was deemed normal were shunned. This philosophy found its way as a sort of rallying point as we move into World War II. It was here that we saw a real strong effort to “cleanse” German society of perceived weaknesses, such as disability. This lead to the mass murder of thousands of people labeled as “useless.” To further perpetuate such notions, the Nazi government commissioned propaganda films,

such as *Ich klage an*, that supported the idea that disability was a burden to society. In the aftermath of the war, we notice a complete paradigm shift in terms of how disability is portrayed. In an almost apologetic fashion, the disabled were being shown as human and in need of protection by the able-bodied. Films such as *Heidi* seemingly swept the previous 40 years under the rug, as though none of it ever happened. A burgeoning disability rights movement would not allow such travesties to be forgotten. Through years of hard work and sacrifice, they demonstrated that disability was not a free license to be abused and murdered, and shunned the idea that they needed to be sheltered by those who were more “able.” With this newly bestowed freedom, disabled Germans have been afforded the ability to dictate their own portrayals. This helps break down the taboos and stereotypes surrounding disability. The able-bodied have also taken advantage of this new attitude as disabled people and disability roles are being cast in films ranging from serious roles, to comedy. In the following discussion, we will examine two comedies and see how the recent victories for equal rights have allowed audiences to view disability in different ways. In addition, we will introduce two theories to help us understand why disability can now be something that elicits laughter, rather than fear and disgust.

As we have previously observed – regardless of the time period – disabled characters in television and film have reprised the same roles over and over again. Barnes and Mercer assert that “representations of disabled people are highly stereotypical, depicting them not as ordinary members of society, but using them to evoke emotions of pity, fear, or admiration” (94). While this statement has

generally held true, Austrian director Christoph Schlingensief attempts to push the boundaries of humor and disability in his 2004 movie *Freakstars 3000*. All of the main participants in this film have a disability, although Schlingensief is himself not disabled. Some of them are physically disabled, but the majority of them have a mental disability of some sort. The film was obviously a parody of the worst television has to offer. The film pokes fun at reality talent competitions (American Idol), in-home shopping (Home Shopping Network), roundtable news debate shows (anything on a major cable news network), and commercials advertising ridiculous multi-disc music compilations.

The main premise of this film is a talent competition and the winners of the competition form a band in which they will perform in front of a live audience. The contestants go through several rounds to determine who will win the competition. In the first round, the contestants are asked to show their personality in a question and answer session. In the later rounds, they are asked to tackle physical challenges, as well as sing. After several elimination rounds, the film culminates in a final performance at a hall where the winners of the competition gather on stage and perform in front of a crowd of several hundred people.

Barnes and Mercer say that “as a visual medium, cinema uses pictures to reveal character, so the physical and emotional ‘cripple’ was a regular amalgam” (Barnes, 96). Whether or not Schlingensief is degrading the actors for the sake of humor, or if he has other intentions, could be difficult to ascertain if the viewer simply takes the movie at face value. On one hand, the contestants are referred to

as “Freakstars” throughout the film. The fact that the contestants are referred to as “freaks” would immediately indicate that these actors may be somehow being exploited. Another small, yet important, part of the film is the transitions that are used to move from one skit to the next. These transitions employ a very “Monty Python-esque” motif that could mean different things. They can simply be a way to pay homage to the famous British comedy troupe, or perhaps they hold a much deeper meaning. Monty Python has always been a symbol of comedy that uses “stupidity” as a staple of humor. These scene transitions may be conveying the same message. If these transitions are a way to point out the stupidity within the film, one must ask whether Schlingensiefel is referring to the actors, or the type of television shows being fed to the masses. One could watch the weather reports given in between the main scenes and say that the director is obviously taking advantage of these actors in order to get a laugh. One of the actors, Mario, keeps repeating that it is sunny and tries to get a magnet depicting sunny weather to stick to the map of Germany in one of these reports, but he has problems as the magnet never stays in place. Another scene is one that documents the contestants going through physical challenges to advance in the competition. Everyone has problems with challenges and their follies serve as more fodder for laughter.

Despite all of the indicators that these contestants are making people laugh at their own expense, there are other cues within the movie that suggest otherwise. Some of the more humorous moments in the movie were the commercials in between scenes. The commercials are obvious parodies of those you would see selling “exclusive TV offers.” The manner in which they were written would

allow them to be just as funny had non-disabled actors been cast. One of them was for a CD compilation. Some of the advertisements were shot with very cliché themes: soft white light, fields of flowers, and uplifting music. The funniest part of the commercials was the fact that the number of songs in the compilation kept increasing with each subsequent showing of the commercial. The compilation eventually comprised of over 10,000 songs by the time the last commercial was shown, all for around 80 Euros. Another funny part of the movie was the “Freakmann” segment. The interviews mocked those, typically with regional politicians one would see on news channels such as Deutsche Welle. The interviewer, “Freakmann,” is overly tanned and wears an exorbitant amount of hair gel for a stereotypical fake, “Hollywood” look. These interviews were ridiculous and obvious parodies. A particularly amusing interview that comes to mind is one in which Freakmann interviews the leader of a group that he claims is racist and anti-Semitic. The person he interviews is supposed to look like Adolf Hitler with a bad comb-over, an obvious parody on the projected seriousness of such shows and their guests.

For audience members who are willing, the movie allows them to deconstruct their preconceived notion of disability and revisit it from a new perspective. When seeing a person with a mental disability, or even a severe physical disability, it is very common for the able-bodied to feel pity and sadness. They see these disabled people as not able to care for themselves and not able to lead rich, fulfilling lives. Many times, this translates into a perceived need to help the disabled person, even if it is unnecessary. This unfortunately occurs all too

often and results in the suffocation of these people. They are never truly allowed to push the boundaries of their comfort zones and grow as individuals. They end up leading sheltered lives and unable to care for themselves, thus creating a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Conversely, those who are disabled, yet are able to live independently, often had a support system that allowed them to discover the boundaries of their abilities and push them throughout their lives. Watching this film, Schlingensiefel seems to have been able to put aside any negative perceptions of the actors, not treating them as helpless and disabled. However, he seems to be conscious of any limitations that may exist. If the audience is able to discard any negative perceptions, as the director has, then they may take away a fresh perspective of the film and its actors. It is admittedly somewhat difficult to discern whether or not Schlingensiefel is exploiting the mentally disabled actors for his own message, or if he is genuinely giving them an outlet they may not otherwise have. The fact that the actors are repeatedly referred to as “Freakstars” may be a play on words regarding their condition, stating that their disability somehow deprives them of an aspect of their livelihood. On the other side, many scenes throughout the film depict the participants enjoying the experience to the fullest. In addition, Schlingensiefel is never patronizing, or degrading to any of the contestants. He treats them all like people, and even hugs one of the contestants when she is overcome with joy and cries after making the cut to the next round.

Many may see these mentally disabled people in skits that would seem degrading on the surface. However, none of the participants appear to be forced into doing anything against his or her will. It could be said, however, that some

of these people may not know any better. This movie would be funny to people because the mentally disabled contestants are not very “good” at doing anything asked of them. It would be something reminiscent of laughing at the “fool” in a royal court. For the contestants, however, the film gives them an avenue to participate in mainstream society in an alternative setting when they would likely be mocked and ridiculed, had they been put together with the non-disabled population. Though it was not a series of high-stakes television shows with advertising money and ratings on the line, *Freakstars 3000* appeared to be an earnest endeavor to give the contestants a means to be “like everyone else.”

We have now established that there is indeed humor in this movie. However, given Germany’s past attitudes regarding disability, how can a movie such as *Freakstars 3000* be funny? Undoubtedly, attitudes about disability progressed immensely between the releases of *Dr. Caligari* and *Freakstars 3000*, but perhaps there is a deeper, psychological reason. Here we will introduce the first of two theories that help clarify *why* something is funny. The Superiority theory essentially states that humor is derived from feeling a sense of superiority over someone or something. The theory is the oldest known humor theory and dates back to Plato and Aristotle (MacHovec, 30). From the perspective of these two great thinkers, humor and laughter were essentially “the enjoyment of the misfortune of others due to a momentary feeling of superiority or gratified vanity that we ourselves are not in the predicament observed,” (qtd. in MacHovec, 30). It was demeaning for whomever or whatever was the source of laughter; for Plato and Aristotle, it was the very essence of *Schadenfreude*, or deriving pleasure from

the pain of others. In this movie, the Superiority theory is applied on the idea that humor and laughter both stem from one group (the audience) feeling superior to another group (the cast members).

Given the style and nature of *Freakstars 3000*, it is understandable that most viewers will misinterpret the purpose behind the film and laugh at the disabled cast members, as opposed to laugh at the skits which clearly mock popular television programming. In the movie, a portion of the contest requires the contestants to sing along to a song in a recording studio. Some contestants manage fairly well with this task, but others are unable to sufficiently execute the challenge at hand, even if they understand on a basic level what is being asked of them. Schlingensief, playing the part of record producer in this scene, is trying to help those having difficulties but to no avail. According to the Superiority theory, this is funny because some of the contestants are clearly getting lost within the process and watching them trying to cope with their problem should elicit laughter. From an audience perspective, the cast members are playing the role of the “idiot” or “fool” and this is what gives the movie, this scene in particular, its humor. Using actors with disabilities works more effectively to convey the comedic angle in Schlingensief’s film because “comedy rarely explores the consequences of disability in realistic ways, it is ripe for exploiting idiotic modes of behavior without recourse to clinical categories” (Halliwell, 218).

Unfortunately, much of the intent on mocking popular television gets lost behind the visual representation of disability. As previously suggested, if the audience can allow themselves to see past the disabilities of the cast members, they will see

film for its stance against contemporary television, rather than an exploitation of the disabled.

Continuing with the “wave of cinematic representations of mental and neurological conditions” that Martin Halliwell says took place during the 1990s and still occurs today, we are looking at the 2006 comedy, *Wo ist Fred?* (215). The story is of a man out to prove to his new fiancée (Mara), his love and commitment to being a father by trying to get a basketball from her spoiled son’s favorite player. At the end of home games, the player tosses a basketball into the disabled seats in the arena. Fred thought that a great way to get that ball would be to pretend to be disabled. He ends up catching a ball and is chosen to be the centerpiece of a new video that highlights disabled fans of the basketball team. An attractive woman named Denise is directing the video. Everyone affiliated with the team believes he is disabled, although he is not. In order to avoid losing the ball for his fiancée’s son and being labeled a fraud, he must lead a double life for the next seven days.

From the beginning the issue of disability is one degrading stereotype after another. First, as Fred and his good friend Alex look for a place to park, they nearly hit a man in a wheelchair as they settle on parking in a disabled parking space. As they head into the arena Alex, who is pushing Fred in a wheelchair, messes up Fred’s hair in an effort to make him look “more disabled.” Another scene takes place near the end of the movie when Fred meets his fiancée’s (Mara) parents for the first time. At this point in the film, Fred’s fiancée knows that he is faking a disability to obtain the basketball (and she is seemingly ok with this).

The scene takes place at Mara's house because Denise is at the home filming Fred with his family. Unbeknownst to everyone, Denise invited Mara's parents, setting up an extremely awkward situation. Mara's parents arrive, excited to meet Fred for the first time. They meet everyone and finally make it to Fred. When they see him sitting in a wheelchair, every bit of excitement they had is immediately lost. It was as though he was not good enough for their daughter because of his disability. This perception is one that disabled people have been battling for ages and scenes such as this simply perpetuate and reinforce this notion.

The other troubling aspect of this movie is the dehumanization of the disabled characters. In many scenes throughout the movie, the "disabled" and disabled characters are treated and viewed as lesser human beings incapable of leading fulfilling lives and contributing to society. One instance is the aforementioned scene in which Fred meets his fiancée's parents for the first time. Another was at the beginning of the movie when Fred enters the basketball arena, faking a disability. It was agreed before going inside that Fred would be able to neither walk, nor talk. When his best friend Alex was agreeing to do something Fred disagreed with, Fred started flailing about and grunting in disapproval. In an effort to calm him down, an arena employee injects Fred with a sedative. Fred was treated as though he were an animal rampaging uncontrollably through a zoo, only to be corralled by a zookeeper with a tranquilizer.

When Fred decides to fully go through with his plan of faking a disability, he decides to take up residence in a home for the disabled. The home is run more like a prison with a regimented schedule. As everyone is gathered in a room

getting to learn about Fred (as they are suspicious of him), the headmaster comes in and tells them that it is quiet time. Later, she comes in and tells everyone that it is bath time. When they go to sleep at night, many of them are restrained in the bed with clamps that go across their chests “for their protection.” The beds were reminiscent of those one may see in a psychiatric ward of a hospital. In that home, those people were treated in an undignified manner. They were seen as robots, or animals that needed a lot of structure and could not function self-sufficiently. What is most troubling about the previously mentioned scenes is the still-lingering German attitude of approaching disability from a medical, instead of a human perspective.

Although many people are a bit uncomfortable when confronted with disability, it is more comfortable for many to laugh at the humor in this movie. In contrast to the disabled cast members of *Freakstars 3000*, the main character in *Wo ist Fred?* is not disabled, although he is pretending to be. This automatically makes the “Fred” character identifiable and more readily embraced by a non-disabled audience. When the audience feels comfortable with Fred, they are essentially given an invitation to laugh at his mishaps.

Here we will clarify why this movie is funny from a different approach. While the Superiority theory examined laughter from a psychological approach, the Relief theory looks at humor from a physiological perspective. It explains laughter as the byproduct of excessive energy that must be expelled. The Relief theory can be used to explain moments of awkward silence that are broken up by laughter, or someone using laughter as a way to disguise the fact that they are

hiding something. Sigmund Freud is probably the most well-known of the Relief theorists. Freud explains the theory by introducing several sources of laughter. He discusses “joking, the comic, and humor...which all involve the saving of some psychic energy that is then discharged through laughter” (Smuts, Humor). The three are described as follows:

In joking, the energy that would have been used to repress sexual and hostile feelings is saved and can be released in laughter. In the comic, cognitive energy to be used to solve an intellectual challenge is left over and can be released. The humorous involves a saving of emotional energy, since what might have been an emotion provoking situation turns out to be something we should treat non-seriously. The energy building up for the serious emotional reaction can then be released (Smuts, Humor).

Most of the energy, or tension, built up from this movie stems from watching as Fred feverishly tries to balance his roles between a disabled person, and an able-bodied person. The audience finds release because Fred is not truly disabled and he occasionally finds himself on the receiving end of some rather agonizing, yet comical, situations throughout the film. In one scene, Fred’s best friend Alex is transferring Fred from his wheelchair to the passenger seat of a truck. As he is carrying Fred, Alex turns to say something to the film director Denise, and accidentally smashes Fred’s head into the truck. In another scene, Alex is preparing to wheel Fred downstairs. Unfortunately, Alex rushes into it, the handle bars slip off the wheelchair, and Fred goes tumbling down the

staircase. With Denise and her camera operator witnessing this traumatic event, Alex tries to make light of it by yelling down to Fred, “Eight seconds?! That’s a new record!” The only response Fred can muster is a groan of excruciating pain.

Another scene finds Fred and Denise sitting alone, watching edits of the film she is creating about him. As they are talking, Denise notices that Fred’s toes moves slightly. Amazed by this, Denise calls her roommate to see if he is gaining sensation in his foot. To perform the test, he sticks Fred’s foot with a needle. Since Fred is supposedly paraplegic and unable to feel anything below his waist, he must act as though he feels nothing. As he continues to stick him with the needle, the camera focuses on Fred’s face as it turns red and tears start flowing because of the pain. At one moment, Fred flinches and moves his toe. Denise is amazed and says, “Fred, you moved your toe!” She is extremely happy about the step he has taken, but misinterprets his tears of agonizing pain as tears of overwhelming joy.

These moments constantly test Fred’s determination to hide his true self and act as a karmic counterforce to Fred’s immoral act of falsely portraying a disability. For the audience, a nervous energy builds from the anticipation of seeing if Fred will ever blow his cover. Each time he manages to keep up the act, the audience can laugh and release that energy, as painful as it may have been for Fred. The audience reaction surely would have been different had the actor playing Fred been someone with a real physical disability. The laughs would have most likely been replaced with shock and outrage that a disabled person would be portrayed in such an abusive manner. To laugh at Fred is ok, however,

because he is not really disabled, but going through rather great lengths to appease his spoiled future son-in-law.

Disability has deeply rooted social and cultural perceptions. All over the world, disabled people are met with daily struggles. In some countries, disabled people are shunned from mainstream society and forced to fend for themselves. In other countries, where they are afforded more liberties, disabled people are still met with the challenge of overcoming physical and mental barriers constructed by the non-disabled population. When one adds Germany to the discussion, given the country's history with the disabled and reputation for being somewhat humorless, the stage is set for an appealing study with somewhat unexpected results.

In the case of *Freakstars 3000*, the audience finds it funny because they feel to be above the mentally disabled cast of the movie. This is unfortunate because they are missing the point of the film. The visual representation of the mentally disabled people is essentially speaking out against the love affair with "trash" television. Some examples of this are reality TV and mindless political debates which end up devolving into shouting matches between talking heads. While they laugh at the disabled cast, they are actually laughing at that which they consume on a daily basis. In addition, as degrading as it may seem to some on the surface, this movie also allows the cast members to participate in facets of mainstream society that they may not otherwise be able to. If any of these people were given the opportunity to be a contestant in a real TV competition, they

would be laughed and booed off the stage immediately. Within the confines of this film, they are given a safe alternative.

Unlike Christian Schlingensief and his movie *Freakstars 3000*, director Anno Saul is not trying to make some kind of rebellious statement with *Wo ist Fred?*; it is simply a film that employs disability as the main comedic gag. While disability can be funny, the way it was portrayed in this film was quite the opposite. First and foremost, it fulfilled its primary obligation of making people laugh, earning over \$6.3 million in its first five weeks in theaters (Germany Box Office). Unfortunately, it also succeeded in setting back the efforts of disability advocates trying to reshape perceptions of disability by perpetuating deeply-entrenched and humiliating stereotypes. Movies such as *Wo ist Fred?* touch directly upon so many things that disabled people combat on a daily basis. Take this example, a synopsis taken from the film's information page on the Internet Movie Database:

In order to catch a basketball from the favorite team of his girlfriend's spoiled son, Fred (Schweiger) poses as a numb, wheelchair-bound fan. But when he catches the ball, he also catches the attention of young, attractive filmmaker Denise (Lara), who wants to feature an invalid fan in an image film for the team. Fred has to keep playing his role, while real invalid and really furious fan Ronny (Herbst) might call his bluff at any moment.

Worse, still, love sets in...

The author of this synopsis, in referring to the disabled characters as "invalids," strengthens the position that much work still lies ahead for the equality of

disabled people, especially in Germany. No matter what strides have been made, no matter how many barriers have been deconstructed, there remains a mental barrier that has proven difficult to tear down. While disabled people have made great inroads to mainstream society, the disparaging reality is that there are still those that view the disabled as less than human. Although the intent may have simply been to make people laugh and escape reality, movies such as this have done nothing but perpetuate a reality disabled people have endured for centuries. The film is particularly harmful because it devalues those who live with speech and motor deficiencies, yet manage to live fulfilling lives.

Comedy involving disability is perfectly acceptable and certainly not off-limits. However, because messages from the movie industry and media are so powerful and pervasive, they must make a concerted effort to change the way disability is portrayed. The current *modus operandi* has done enough damage as the movie industry and media have used “stereotypes so durable and pervasive that they have become mainstream society’s perception of disability and have obscured if not outright supplanted disabled people’s perception of themselves” (Norden, 3). Disability rights advocates must not wait for the visual media industries to make changes, they must strive to show media outlets the damage being done and encourage them to reassess their perspectives. Otherwise, the “non-disabled people’s greater access to the means of communication and representation effectively ensures a dominance of the world view and able-bodied ‘normality’” (Barnes, 88). It is a bit discouraging that this able-bodied dominance

has not wavered since the early days of cinema as today's cinematic landscape still displays negative portrayals and perpetuates stereotypes of disability.

Fortunately, disabled people throughout Germany and the world are taking a proactive stance and doing their part to shift perceptions into a more positive and realistic light. They are working to change visual perceptions of disability by creating the works on their own, taking yet another step towards the goal of self-determination. Located in Munich, *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Behinderung und Medien (ABM)* is an organization that provides opportunities for disabled film and television producers to get their work aired on German television stations. While they do not produce any original content as an organization, they are able to provide the disabled community with a means to voice their own perspectives. According to Gregor Kern of the ABM, they are “a kind of production company with some additional projects that supplies two monthly and one weekly slot on public and private TV” (Kern, Praktikum question). These works come from people with a wide range of disabilities and deal with an equally vast array of topics. In addition they host a film festival every two years called “*Wie wir leben!*” which showcases works about disability, from a disabled perspective. ABM and other organizations like it allow disabled people to tell their stories and share their vision in an unfiltered fashion. “Gimps”, “invalids”, and “idiots” can now portray themselves in a way they were meant to be seen, as human beings. While there is still much work to be done, these additional avenues leading towards true self-determination are encouraging steps in the right direction.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Human beings across the globe differ in a multitude of ways, but share common threads regardless of socioeconomic and cultural distinctions. One such universal trait is the desire for acceptance and belonging. Many people are compelled to align themselves with clusters of like-minded individuals, giving us this sense of belonging and self-worth. However, if history can be seen as a reliable indicator, acceptance can be difficult to give and receive. Fear of the unknown and ignorance has led to the persecution and isolation of those who were perceived as the “other.” These differences can be based on anything from religious preference to outward appearance. Through education and a willingness to break down mental blockades, former enemies have now become partners and allies. Unfortunately, beliefs that have been deeply held for so long do not disappear instantaneously. Although differences may be eliminated on the surface with relative ease, true change occurs only when belief systems are altered and people do away with antiquated social constructs. This struggle to eradicate misconceptions and gain acceptance has been a long one for people with disabilities.

For centuries disabled people were either killed at birth or abandoned at abbeys, where nuns took on the responsibility of providing care. Others were relegated to begging on the streets in order to survive. As time progressed, disabled people were given menial tasks or became the object of entertainment, as a court jester or an unwilling participant in a “freak show.” Later still, disability

was used to reinforce fears of the unknown and used as a tool to justify genocide. Like many others before them, disabled people had finally decided that they had endured enough and fought for equality. They wanted to be recognized as people and longed for the same basic human rights as their non-disabled brethren. In Germany, this road towards equality was particularly difficult. We can trace the beginnings of this movement that started at the end of World War I, implementing cinema as a tool to mark significant shifts in perceptions of disability.

The portrayals of disability within the films chosen for this study reveal varying degrees of cultural acceptance. At the end of World War II, the films also start to exhibit the effects of the growing disability rights movement. To gain a true sense of how much progress has been made in a relatively short amount of time, let us briefly revisit two films in this study. *Ich klage an* and *Freakstars 3000* reside at completely opposite end of the spectrum in regards to cultural acceptance. In the former, euthanasia was seen as a humane method of dealing with a disability. People were shown to be suffering from their disability and ending their life was deemed as the right way to put an end to the pain. At the time this movie was released, the Nazi Party was in power and was building up towards the Jewish Holocaust. In the years leading up to that, hundreds of thousands of disabled people were murdered, their deaths justified by the fact that they were being “released from their pain.” Although there were many opposed to the mass murder of the disabled – most of whom were friends, family, and the clergy – there was virtually no public backlash for the movie. That surely would

not have been the case had this movie been released in more modern times. This can be seen by the reaction to the movie *Freakstars 3000*.

Released a little over 60 years after *Ich klage an* – a Nazi propaganda film that subtly advocated euthanizing the disabled – *Freakstars 3000* took a much more light-hearted look at what it means to be “different.” This was a movie that intended to poke fun at the reality television trends that began at the end of the 20th century and have gained popularity ever since. The main premise of the film pokes fun at the popular singing competition, American Idol and the contestants all have some sort of disability. Many who saw the film considered it to be in bad taste and criticized the director for exploiting these disabled people. However, it can also be argued that this film accomplished the exact opposite by empowering the participants. This film allows them to participate in an aspect of mainstream society within a safe environment. The actors in this movie would have certainly faced ridicule and embarrassment had they been allowed to compete in the mainstream version of the competition. The mere fact that such a debate is taking place, one where non-disabled and disabled people weigh the positives and negatives of a film such as *Freakstars 3000*, is a testament to the tireless efforts of disability advocacy and the fruits of their labor. Neither such a film, nor such a debate would have been possible in the 1980s, much less the 1940s when *Ich klage an* was released. Thankfully, there were numerous strong-minded individuals who would make it known to the non-disabled population that people with disabilities wanted, not to be seen merely as a part of society, but to be fully integrated as a vital section of the general population.

This push for integration was a long and demanding struggle to change decades of assumptions. Germany has long been known for its social welfare programs and after World War II, the government set up programs to help injured soldiers integrate back into society. They were given pensions and programs were created to give them work. It was these post-war actions that served as the foundation for programs that served the disabled civilian population. However, these programs isolated disabled people. Many were treated without dignity and numerous specialists claimed that they were not capable of significant contributions to society. Initially, parents fought for their children to be treated more fairly. As these children matured, they decided that it should be them that decided how their lives should be lived and not the government. It was at that moment that the modern disability rights movement was born. Disabled Germans protested and fought to make their voices heard, taking cues from a similar movement taking place in the United States. After nearly 30 years of struggle, disabled people now have the means to tell their own stories and determine their own paths. They finally achieved their goal of gaining acceptance as a viable group and contributing members of society.

It is evident that the efforts of these determined individuals have changed the course of German society for the better. Disability is no longer an afterthought and disabled people are being seen as a charity case with diminishing frequency. There are constitutional laws that provide protections from discrimination and although they are not perfect, it is a monumental step towards true equality. As previously stated, legislative changes play a major role in

shaping a more accepting society, but true change only takes place when mental barriers are broken. This evolution of thought is taking place and can be seen through the transformation of disability roles in film. People consume cinema to escape reality and cinema provides us as researchers with a view of this reality from a particular time period. This consumption can be dangerous if negative stereotypes are perpetuated in these films, as they are reinforced in reality if a consumer has no experience to refute these myths. Throughout the decades however, we have witnessed a massive shift from fear and derision to inclusion and acceptance of disability. From the Weimar Republic through 1945, disability was seen as something that should be done away with, something that weakened society. At the turn of the 21st century, disability has now become a characteristic that is embraced and seen as something adding to the diversity of the human experience. One such actuality of this shift is the presence of disabled actors in film. This change demonstrates the need for filmmakers to portray disability in a more realistic manner. Disability rights activists battled centuries of misconceptions in order to achieve equality. Now that this has been obtained, it is the responsibility of everyone to shed notions of the past so that everyone can be treated on equal footing.

Both film and disability are pervasive across the globe and there have been other works written about how the former can affect the latter, and vice versa. However, this survey seeks to observe the convergence of the two and how a relatively young disability rights movement has had an impact on the end product. There are certainly newer, burgeoning disability rights movements throughout the

world but Germany and its terrifying past regarding disability, coupled with its pioneering film industry, serve as a perfect study of how these diverging topics can come together and illustrate how each effects one another. As an extension of this study, it would also be interesting to look at disability within cinema's ubiquitous counterpart, television. In contemporary culture, television has a profound influence on norms and depictions of disability in television most certainly make a deep impression. Popular television shows such as *Lindenstraße* and *Marienhof*, that have recurring disabled characters, expose viewers to disability on a regular basis. This repeated exhibition of disability places at least some responsibility on the producers, directors, and writers to lead by example in presenting disability in a positive, yet realistic manner on television. Given the quicker turnaround of television shows, it makes one wonder how much attention is being paid to these disabled characters and what kind of impact they have on the general storyline.

The art of filmmaking and the disability rights movement in Germany have both made great strides since their meager beginnings. Although lying on very separate planes, the two occasionally cross paths and form a unique perspective on each other. It is this collaboration that has allowed us to see a metamorphosis in German society since the turn of the 20th century. Disabled people were previously seen as a weakness to a society that has always emphasized the virtue of strength. The efforts of the disability rights movement have been embodied in the visual medium of film and these works provide evidence that this deeply cherished virtue is being redefined. Having a body or

mind that does not conform to preconceived notions of normalcy does not dictate a person's strength. In turn, these imperfections actually serve as the source of strength for many disabled people. The work of the artist and the advocate is endless. However, because both have worked tirelessly to eliminate barriers for the disabled, the future is now boundless.

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