

Bodies Without Words: Prosthetic performance in Silent Film

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*Abstract- In silent films, makeup was a primary tool for conveying emotions. Heavy, distinct makeup allowed actors to create clear, memorable characters; it was the key element of visual storytelling, helping to define a character's personality and role within the narrative for the audience. This paper talks about the use of makeup as prosthetics in the 1923 silent film, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, directed by Wallace Worsley and produced by Carl Laemmle and Irving Thalberg, and the 1925 film *The Phantom of the Opera*, directed by Rupert Julian, with supplemental direction from Edward Sedgwick. In both of these silent films, actor Lon Chaney developed a famously painful and grotesque self-applied makeup to transform into the character of disabled Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and Erik in *The Phantom of the Opera*.*

Keywords—*Makeup, Prosthetics, Disability, Silent Films, Visual Storytelling.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Thesis Statement

This paper uses the analytical approaches of mise-en-scène, performative analysis, and historical prosthetics to unravel Quasimodo's disability, played by Lon Chaney in the silent films *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Phantom of the Opera*. Having my own ethnographic experience by being in the makeup industry as a freelancer, I have always viewed makeup through the lens of art; I have always seen makeup as a creative way of expressing emotions. Through this paper, I will merge my theoretical research on disability and the visual art of creating deformity by use of prosthetics in silent films.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written about Quasimodo, a stereotypical depiction of individuals with mental and physical disabilities. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, starring Lon Chaney as Quasimodo, is regarded as the iconic movie that best exemplifies Victor Hugo's masterwork about oppressed groups banding together

to overthrow their oppressors. There have been discussions of the film's self-sacrifices and self-sacrificing presentation style, in which the disabled characters give their lives to save their non-disabled counterparts. There has also been writing about the asexuality and dependency of Quasimodo; despite the disabilities of the character, sexuality is noticeably lacking. Quasimodo falls in love with Esmeralda, but she ultimately falls for the poet Gringoire.

Furthermore, the film's violent retaliation sequence lasts an incredible nine minutes and fifty-two seconds. In it, he kills numerous innocent Gypsies by hurling boulders and dousing them in boiling lead, in addition to tossing the oppressor Frollo to his death from the top of the bell tower.

Moreover, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923), in its live adaptation, depicts the intertwined concerns, identity issues, and enduring stereotypes that shape the Quasimodo character. It also shows how he is objectified by other characters and even the filmmakers. The main stereotypes that supported Lon Chaney's portrayal of Quasimodo were those related to disabilities, especially "the obsessive avenger," who is usually a male Ahab-like character who relentlessly seeks retribution on those he holds accountable for his incapacitating circumstances or other violation of the moral code.

The given model of religious and charity disability relates to *Hunchback at Notre Dame*—when Frollo, with his disabled son, tells Jehan that "this is God's judgement on you; the wicked shall not go unpunished." He believed that the child's disability was punishment for Jehan's promiscuity with a Gypsy girl, Florika, before he threw the child off the side of Notre Dame so that he won't ever look at himself; he feels God's judgement on himself. He takes Quasimodo as his own test of faith to charitably care for and Brought up to think like Frollo, he says, "Oh lord! You have sent me a test; this child is my cross to bear." He gave the child name Quasimodo, means "half-formed." This idea of a disabled child being half-formed suits well with the societal belief that people with disabilities are an incomplete picture.

Frollo believed Quasimodo was the abnormal and does not belong with normal men.

Since so much of this film centers on the deformity of Quasimodo, rendering one of literature's most famous disabled characters, I propose to examine and depict the making of the prosthetics of Lon Chaney's look as Quasimodo and explain how makeup shapes the character. The 'art of makeup' is considered one of the most important branches of optical illusions.

"God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another." —William Shakespeare (1546-1616).

Moreover, the silent film phantom of the opera, The narrative, the plot, and the story question established boundaries between fact and fiction. Often referred to as "gothic fiction" or a "spectacular story, film, or musical," "the phantom of the Opera's very fantastical elements in its original form and its variations—that is, all of the structures and forms that help make its fictional—actually enable 'the phantom and its variations to reflect reality better than what we would describe as "realistic" representations.'" In other words, "the phantom" looks more realistic than it would without the magical parts because it is so amazing. How? Surprisingly, this implausible tale of a disfigured psychopathic stalker who is not only a talented musician but also independently affluent, a traveler, and occasionally an architect who falls in love with his protégé only to have his heart broken by her choice to go back to a traditional, domestic relationship with a former lover is not only a reflection of reality, but it is a reality that all people, regardless of culture or era, experience. It is a magnificent story about our identities and the identities of others.

The existing theory about Phantom of the Opera is that the tale and plot, as well as the characterisation and portrayal of the Phantom, are structured similarly to the novel in that readers gradually learn who the Phantom is and how he came to be. The story of the phantom, however, makes a significant impact. The majority of Erik's initial history has been erased. Rather than traveling the world, he has been imprisoned on Devil's Island. During the Second Revolution, he was a prisoner in the Paris Opera and was subjected to torture in a torture chamber that dates back to the Middle Ages. Consequently, it is unclear if the phantom's facial deformity was caused by torture or is a congenital condition.

However, the dark aspect of the character is also heavily emphasized in this movie. Erik torments the opera's new administrators by subtly communicating his expectations to them and punishing them for disobeying him. In the movie, he is seen killing Phillippe and Joseph Buquet by lowering the chandelier, making the ambiguity of his killings completely evident. The audience finds it extremely difficult to empathize with his character because of this blatantly malevolent aspect of him as well as Christine's response to him. The audience's perception of the phantom is somewhat influenced by Christine's perspectives on film since the story is primarily told through her eyes in the moments involving him.

Erik is mostly portrayed in this movie as a monster because she is not attracted to him, does not love him, and passes out when he comes close. This is further demonstrated by the fact that Chaney's contract prohibited any photos of his face from being released (souvenir program 14), and in fact, one of the photos in that same souvenir program (5) had his face blanked. This indicates that he used the element of surprise to frighten as many people as possible. The unmasking scene is also presented in an intriguing way: The Phantom is paying for his own organ while Christine and he are both facing the camera.

He looks up in pain as she takes off the mask. His face is initially seen by the audience. He doesn't turn around and look at Christine until after this little shot, at which point she finally sees him and screams. This demonstrates that the phantom's visage was primarily intended to startle the viewer and forward the plot by highlighting the conflict between Christine's relationships with an attractive and ugly man. If this is how the entire character in the movie is portrayed, then Erik must be the murderer; otherwise, there would be a flaw in the character that does not fit the horror genre.

Today's makeup art is thought of as being related to femininity and covering up flaws, but it is much more than that. In actuality, makeup is the art of altering an actor's real face to fit the role they are playing by applying powders, colours, and other cosmetics to create specific facial features needed to convey the role or be reincarnated. To draw attention to the cinematic makeup, also referred to as special effects makeup or cinematic effects (FX), it is the art of disguise and beautification that transforms imagination into reality. It can provide features that correspond to the character's nature that the actor

portrays in accordance with the role that the director and creator have specified for that character.

According to psychoanalysis, the traumatized male body is returned to its original location. Therefore, these movies are trauma narratives in that they address a common fear in post-war society (the wounded soldier), but they are unable to, in the words of Thomas Elsaesser, “represent the unrepresentable” (the horror and aftermath of war) in narrative terms (2001, 195).

Through my paper, I am trying to fill in the gap of ‘Role of makeup’ as prosthetic — While much of the current research on *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925) focuses on disability, monstrosity, and the moral allegories of the deformity. Makeup’s role as a prosthetic performance and how it mediates between artifice, embodiment, and spectatorship in silent cinema has received less attention. Additionally, the main focus of current analysis of disability and film is ideology or narrative representation. The material process of creating disability through physical transformation—how Lon Chaney’s self-designed prostheses influenced the visual and affective impact of disability on screen—remains unexplored.

Moreover, few works combine historical prosthetic design, mise-en-scène analysis, and disability theory. By fusing theoretical analysis with ethnographic insights gleaned from my own practical experience in makeup artistry, my work bridges these gaps by providing a hybrid methodology that links academic theory with embodied practice.

III. A FEW QUESTIONS THAT MY PAPER PROPOSES AND ANSWERS

In what ways did Lon Chaney’s prosthetic makeup techniques in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom of the Opera* serve as extensions of the body, turning artifice into embodied disability?

How does prosthetic makeup compensate for the lack of dialogue in silent films by acting as a visual language of identification and emotion?

In silent films, how does prosthetic performance affect the audience’s empathy towards a crippled body?

What can be learned about society’s discomfort with physical diversity from the cinematic focus on prosthetically created deformity?

In what ways does his art refute contemporary beliefs that makeup is simply cosmetic rather than expressive?

IV. A BRIEF ABOUT QUASIMODO’S DEFORMITY EXPLAINED BY VICTOR HUGO IN NOTRE-DAME DE PARIS

Victor Hugo gave this brief about his disability to readers by expressing his tetrahedral nose, that horseshoe mouth, that tiny left eye obstructed by a bushy red eyebrow, while the right eye had vanished entirely beneath an enormous wen, those irregular teeth notched here and there like castle battlements, that horny lip on which a tooth encroached like an elephant’s tusk, that cleft chin, and above all the facial expression itself, with its crowning mixture of malice, astonishment, and sadness.

Though it is to be said that it was unclear to the character’s creator, Victor Hugo, which disability Quasimodo was born with. After looking into the details of Quasimodo’s disability, Krishna Seshadri concludes that Hugo’s description of Quasimodo most closely resembles the signs of cleidocranial dysplasia, or CCD.

The primary clinical characteristics of CCD include wide public symphysis, short middle phalanx of the fifth fingers, dental abnormalities, frequent vertebral malformation, and persistently open skull sutures with bulging calvaria or hypoplasia or aplasia of the clavicle permitting abnormal facility in opposing the shoulders. Additional characteristics include sinus infections, upper respiratory issues, recurrent otitis media, hearing loss, and genu valgus scoliosis.

Quasimodo’s hunchback and facial abnormalities are caused by a malformed skull and pelvic vertebrae. Despite the fact that his CCD may be the cause of his hearing loss, he tells Esmeralda that he can still hear a little and read lips. In addition to his CCD and hearing loss, Quasimodo has a speech impediment and communicates with the statues and other items in the bell tower.

V. HOW LON CHANEY PRESENTED HIS DEFORMITY VIA PROSTHETICS IN FILM

Lon Chaney recreated the look by building up features with prosthetics. For creating a deformed posture, Chaney used a 15–20-pound plaster hump, held on by a leather harness, that gave him his hunch.

For his nose and face distortion, he used a putty to create the appearance of a grotesque, deformed nose and warts on his cheeks; Chaney built up one side of his face to create a lopsided, swollen effect. He used cotton and a substance called collodion, a skin-sealing agent, to create the illusion of twisted, puffed cheeks. He also used innovative techniques to create scars and other elements. Moreover, for his character of Wild Hair and Brows, he used a knotted, unkempt wig to cover his head, and his eyebrows were likely printed or styled to look uneven and messy. For Quasimodo's jagged teeth—Chaney wore a set of ill-fitting, crooked false teeth to accentuate Quasimodo's monstrous appearance. For his misaligned eyes, a custom-made false eye or lens was used to give Quasimodo's left eye a milky, deformed, and partially blind appearance. In some of the scenes a rubber suit was covered with hair to enhance his bestial appearance.

Actors had spent decades honoring their use of greasepaints and other liners and powders by the time the cinema industry entered the scene in the 1980s and the 1990s, but they had to start over from scratch when they began working in motion pictures. Men's and women's grease paints came in different tones, which helped them look more natural.



Lon Chaney as Quasimodo

Additionally, a variety of colours were available for acting out 'ethnic roles.' Common in those days, particular powders were created specifically for use with films. Max Factor generously removed a great deal of uncertainty from makeup in 1914, introducing his 'supreme greasepaint,' which was available in twelve shades.

VI. APPEARANCE OF LON CHANEY AS ERICK

His deformity no longer has an explanation. Erik was detained in the torture chambers beneath the opera during the second revolution, according to one of the title cards used in the final version of the movie. This could suggest the source of his malformation.

Chaney, a makeup artist, created the makeup (Mac Queen "Phantom 11" 35). The makeup was intended to give Chaney's head a skull-like appearance, similar to Erik's countenance in the book. Blake goes into great detail on how Chaney achieved the look, including the use of fish skin to pull the top of his nose, darkening around the eyes, artificial teeth, and a wig-covered skullcap. In order to flatten his head, he additionally glued back his ears using spirit gum (Lon Chaney 133). Although Chaney was significantly older than Christine at the time of filming—he was 41 years old—the age difference is not as great as it is in the book.



Lon Chaney as Erik

Chaney also designed the mask, which is a bizarre visage with bulbous cheeks and a piece of cloth at the bottom to hide the mouth and chin. The mask gives

the ghost a very smooth-skinned, finely shaped, almost gorgeous face, which heightens the shock for both viewers and Christine when he is finally revealed due to the stark contrast. The smoothness of the mask and the round cheeks also give the Phantom a very childlike appearance, echoing the references to his being a child in the novel and giving the viewers an opportunity to sympathize with the Phantom because the mask makes him look innocent like a child, which enhances the shock when seeing his face. For the first time, it also helps to feel for him and the pain that his ugliness must have caused him.



Lon Chaney as Erik

VII. LON CHANEY AS "THE MAN OF A THOUSAND FACES"

As an actor and makeup artist in *The Penalty* (Wallace Worsley, 1920), Chaney's "transformative masculinity," demonstrated throughout his film career in the 1920s, allows for a neurotic repetition of the disfigured or deformed male body to be visualized on screen. Lon Chaney's active portrayal of disability gives his characters control over their bodies, which able-bodied people frequently regard as impossible. However, because these characters are unable to obtain their woman, they must all eventually die in awful or tragic situations as a result of their perceived transgressive sexuality. These people are doubly incapacitated in terms of physiological function and emotional expression; in Chaney's films, the dark side of Romantic love, a

problematic idea in a post-war decade, is depicted through damaged bodies that hold shattered psyches.

In order to make the damaged male body consistently visible on screen during a period when these visible differences are evident in post-war society in the US and throughout Europe but virtually invisible in terms of veteran disability on the Hollywood screen, Chaney repeatedly reinvents deformity. In Chaney's picture, European locations like the ghost of the opera and Notre Dame's hunchback are used to convey Europe and its tradition of "horror."

VIII. CONCLUSION

Yes, it's a movie, but it reflects so much about the disabled person in society, the hard work behind the creation of the characters of Quasimodo and Erik by Lon Chaney, and the creation of prosthetics by the actor himself. The formations of grease paints and powders, the viewpoint behind the disability at that era, and the religion model of disability.

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