January 2024

**Freaky Tales**

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**Recommended Citation**  
Deacy, Christopher R. (2024) "Freaky Tales," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 5.  
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.28.01.05](https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.28.01.05)  
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Freaky Tales

Abstract
This is a film review of Freaky Tales (2023), directed by Ryan Fleck.

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Author Notes
Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred (Oxford University Press, 2016); Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film (Routledge, 2012); and Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy - https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567

This sundance film festival review is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol28/iss1/5
Freaky Tales (2023), dir. Ryan Fleck

There is a huge amount of self-inflicted hype surrounding *Freaky Tales*, a hodgepodge of four interconnected stories told over the course of one night in California in May 1987 which collide with each other and flesh one another out, with random occurrences or characters in one story providing the backbone in another. It has more than a whiff of *Pulp Fiction* to it. Whereas Tarantino’s classic gave us hypodermic needles, foot fetishes, Samurai swords, and passages from Leviticus that don’t exactly exist, *Freaky Tales* enjoys giving us the literal explosion of heads and the green glow emanating from bodies and buildings that represents something quite indefinable. It seems to make some people turn violent, or to act against character for a liminal moment, as they stand up against the forces of Nazism or police corruption that pervade the community.

It references many 80s movies, and after having two characters discussing the relative merits of the Tom Hanks comedy *The Money Pit* along comes Hanks himself, playing a video store clerk called Hank, who espouses film trivia to one of the characters, inviting him to guess the top
five underdog movies of all time—though quite deliberately keeping us hanging as to which 1979 underrated classic is ostensibly at number one. Each segment has a different aspect ratio and vibe, and the Sundance audience I saw it with gave it a rousing cheer at the end. This is an underdog story which romanticizes and eulogizes subcultures, all the bad guys get their comeupance, and the kinetic energy is palpable and intoxicating.

It also gives us a glimpse of life on the underside in the 80s without the same protections or rights for minorities that developed over subsequent decades, as when in the second chapter, “Don’t Fight The Feeling,” we are afforded a closer look at the lives of Barbie (Dominique Thorne) and Entice (Normani), two black women who work in an ice cream parlor where they have to endure racism from the local cop, and who are not taken seriously by their peers as rap artists called “Danger Zone” despite their palpable talent. The fact that the cop is the father of the lead skinhead whose stories emerge in chapter one and who reach a nasty denouement in the last chapter, mitigates against any notion that the 80s are worthy of the sort of nostalgia in which the film is otherwise immersing us.

The past catches up with these characters, including a hit man in chapter three intent on going straight, who then loses his wife and nearly witnesses the death of his unborn baby daughter; he still manages to make peace with his assailant, who has a loss and a score of his own to settle. For anyone who may have grown up in the Oakland area in the 80s this will no doubt supply a steady dose of pining for the various dance venues and restaurants that are name checked, but this is also a homage for anyone to an era of so-bad-it’s-good filmmaking with animated intertitles and the use of graphics to offer a commentary on what some of the characters are thinking. This is destined to be a cult classic that could easily fit in the same bill as *Grindhouse*. 