In the opening montage of Harry Rasky's exhilarating documentary feature, Being Different, all of the film's "different" characters pool ride a mini-monster among everyday surroundings. Then Christopher Plummer appears as an on-camera narrator and invites the audience to embark on a strange journey. His face is flattened in a funhouse mirror; he asks us to imagine being trapped in the darkness of the cinema. Plummer's wonderland, suggesting that this is the way to begin to understand the alienation of the physically deformed. "If we were there," he asks, "what would we look like?" How would people look at us? Here Rasky invokes the spirits of Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll, not so much for their powers of satire as for their grasp of the potential for self-knowledge to be found in a distorting and looking glass. His subjects are decidedly not inferior, but they were in a sense born in a world like Alice's rabbit-hole or the island of Lilliput. The film insists upon the efficacy of that dream to teach, and encourages us to abandon the notion that it must surely be a nightmare which paralyses.

The last time the subject of human deformation was dealt with in a North American feature film outside of the horror genre was 50 years ago. Tod Browning's Freaks engendered such public outrage that the film was banned by the church, and Browning, one of the most successful directors of the 1930s, became a pariah in Hollywood. His film depicted the lives of circus freaks from their point of view, and contained a savage indictment of the world around them.

Today, our culture has developed an ambiguous tolerance for the grotesque in all the visual and performing arts, including film. The remarkable acclaim for the stage play The Elephant Man and the subsequent success of David Lynch's film on the same subject, indicate the public's fascination with the story: a curiosity and a need for the emotional catharsis which both the play and the film provide. However, there were five failed attempts to adapt the tale of John Merrick's tragic life to the stage before the current success. The problem is how to present a human being "normally" observed in a sideshow without either losing the audience or allowing their response to degenerate.

In The Elephant Man, Victorian England serves as a mimetic mirror in which the artist's prejudice is reflected through the gaze of history: it is a period drama, after all. The fine line between compassion and pity is emphasized. The film insists that the audience not kill the man, but rather than accusing, Rasky's people invite the audience to look at. He remained so nervous the process of creating Being Different. 

The film's triumphs over physical deformities and society's pervasive cult of the skin-deep.

Harry Rasky's
Being Different

The film triumphs over physical deformities and society's pervasive cult of the skin-deep.

Small, a friend of Rasky's from his days in New York. Produced by Harold Greenberg on a budget of $1.5 million, the matter of theatrical distribution is still up in the air. Although it will certainly be seen on television, distributors are nervous about giving the film a wide release. Rasky believes that people will pay to see it, and his conviction increases with every screening. "This is not a museum film, truck drivers going to encourage to the screen. It is a very unusual movie. Besides the on-camera narrator, Rasky also introduce himself into the wide spectrum of his subjects. Ward Hall is the impresario/manager of several of the unusual people in the film. He occasioned to describe what we are about to see, saying things like, "Let's go see what the world contains beside yourself." The technical work, only because we see Hall for exactly what he is — an unconventional, low-brow agent who offers his clients an incomprehensible reality. "Why exhibit yourself?" Rasky asks the wizened midget. Dolly Reagan. She answers, "I don't want to be confined. I don't want to be put away.

The least successful element in Being Different is the music. Much of the score, mainly composed by Paul Zaza, worked well, ranging from C&W, but Rasky's lyrics are sometimes embarrassing, and seem unnecessary if not made more accessible. While not exactly condoning the sentiment seems wrong. One wonders how Rasky could so rigorously refrain from being patronizing in the commentary and interviews, and then insist in the "Little People Song" that the general public should think tall — pretty tepid stuff, considering the unassailability of the footage which it punctuates. Certainly, the songs are intended to warm the heart, uproot moody which Rasky achieves, but there is little in them that his people don't say better. This year, to which society's norm not only tolerates, but is permutated by a 'fashionable' sense of the bizarre and grotesque is everywhere."

In an elegy to the Spanish painter William Blake wrote, "Pity would be no more/If we did not make some­thing poor." Rasky's film addresses this problem repeatedly. Bill Cole, a black pencil-seller in Buffalo who lost his legs in a car accident, \"Man, I've got it together, we are not inferior, but they were in a sense bom in a world like Alice's rabbit-hole or the island of Lilliput. The film insists that we must killer in an rode to the stage before the current suc­cess.

The problem is how to present a human being "normally" observed in a sideshow without either losing the audience or allowing their response to degenerate.

In The Elephant Man, Victorian England serves as a mimetic mirror in which the artist's prejudice is reflected through the gaze of history: it is a period drama, after all. The fine line between compassion and pity is emphasized. The film insists that the audience not kill the man, but rather than accusing, Rasky's people invite the audience to look at. He remained so nervous the process of creating Being Different. 

The film's triumphs over physical deformities and society's pervasive cult of the skin-deep.

Christopher Lowry

Being Different