

## ***They're Just People, That's All*** **American Carnival, the Freakish Body and the Ecological Self in Daniel Knauf's *Carnivàle***

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### **Abstract**

In *American Carnival*, Phillip McGowan proposes a version of carnivalesque that developed in symbiosis with American culture specifically: instead of Bakhtin's European carnival of laughter, a temporary inversion of normal hierarchical structures, McGowan suggests that States-based carnival, manifested tangibly in American World Fairs, midway shows and freak shows, was a means of consolidating identity, race and social position specifically through the act of 'seeing.' Commercial, public events like these reassured the dominant, white population of its normality and status through the act of looking at the freakish, abnormal, and exotic or racially 'Othered' attractions such events had to offer.

In this paper I intend to apply McGowan's theory, along with those of other intersecting critics and concepts that reflect upon American culture, the visual and the organisation of social hierarchies, to a particular programme that lends itself naturally to this reading: Daniel Knauf's *Carnivàle* (2003 – 2005). Set between 1934 and 1935, *Carnivàle* provides an interior view of the carnival experience, following Ben Hawkins, a Dust Bowl farmer with inexplicable healing powers, after he is picked up by a travelling carnival. The show's depiction of this itinerant group, how they interact with and stray from dominant American social structures and cultures within the show, reveal just how *Carnivàle* offers an insight into the lives of the 'Other' in Depression-era small town America and how the 'Othering' it presents is not as clear-cut as it may first appear.

### **Keywords**

Freak, America, Visual, Carnival

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“We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice” (Berger 1972, 8). The principal hypothesis of John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* still bears weight in multiple contexts. To observe, examine or to even glance at another is rarely a neutral or objective act; ‘looking’ is both the culmination and catalyst of a number of social and cultural subcurrents that, created through individual, small-scale interactions, echo repeatedly into wider consciousness. This effect is only intensified in image rich, visual cultures like that of the United States. In *American Carnival*, Phillip McGowan proposes a version of carnivalesque that developed in symbiosis with American culture specifically: instead of Bakhtin’s European carnival of laughter, a temporary inversion of normal hierarchical structures, McGowan suggests that States-based carnival, manifested tangibly in American World Fairs, midway shows and freak shows, was a means of consolidating identity, race and social position specifically through the act of ‘seeing.’ Commercial, public events like these reassured the dominant, white population of its normality and status through

the act of looking at the freakish, abnormal, and exotic or racially 'Othered' attractions such events had to offer.

McGowan scaffolds his reading with the framework of European carnival, using this paradigm to delineate what he suggests is America's innately contrastive practice; he states that these American shows were not yearly festivals, events or rituals, or isolated incidents of 'Othering', but that this method of seeing and controlling those that deviated from the norm permeated American life, becoming ever-present and pernicious. Through these visual relations a binary racial code was created. The 'Other' was set apart both for and from the white viewer, becoming an object of visual consumption, and through that consumption, the viewer's whiteness and value were both confirmed and affirmed:

The spaces and moments of American Carnival serve a dual function: to displace and simultaneously display Otherness, to place non-American, un-American identities beyond regular social interactions and social viewing and exhibit them within extra social arenas that operate in the establishment of a politics or an economy of seeing, a visual economy of observing Otherness, blackness, 'subversiveness' (McGowan 2001, ix).

Within the structures of this American carnivalesque, boundaries are formed and fused instead of liberated. 'Normal' and 'Other' identities are constructed in symbiotic opposition, normal co-dependent on 'Other'. American carnival is one of repression, rather than expression, and its mode a political and economic exploitation of minority groups, a monetary exchange that ensured that the white viewer purchased reassurance of their normalcy at the expense of the economically exploited individuals on show. As Berger states, "[a]s a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessarily within arm's reach," (1972, 8). Through the act of purchase and the gaze itself, power and subsequently value were instilled in being able to 'look' at this 'Other' from a safe distance, laying the foundations for a sense of confidence and entitlement that went beyond the show environment. Though certain critics like Carl Lindahl argue that Bakhtin's depiction of carnival is inherently conservative, a controlled and self-limited

‘venting’ that allows only for a return to normality once the carnival experience is complete (Lindahl 1996, 57), in America, McGowan would have it, there is no inversion, however temporary, only enforced submission from those that appear to be different within such a “visual economy” (McGowan 2001, ix).

The theoretical concept McGowan proposes in *American Carnival* in particular seems little utilised in the broad and divergent sphere of reading American socio-cultural history, given that visual and commercial culture appear to be so inextricably engrained in the United States’ past and present; indeed, these cultural phenomena have become the primary driving forces of the ‘carnival impulse’ that is responsible for the inherent prejudice against and marginalization of what is not white, normal, expected. I intend to rectify this previous critical neglect, testing McGowan’s ideas alongside other intersecting critics and concepts that reflect upon American culture, the visual and the organisation of social hierarchies. As a suitable conduit for this examination, I will focus on a particular programme that lends itself readily to this reading: Daniel Knauf’s *Carnivàle* (2003 – 2005).

Set between 1934 and 1935, *Carnivàle* provides an interior view of the carnival experience, following Ben Hawkins, a Dust Bowl farmer with inexplicable healing powers, after he is picked up by a travelling carnival while attempting to bury his mother in the dust that killed her. *Carnivàle* occupies a strange position in televisual terms. Sincere and cerebral, neither outright horror nor fantasy nor history show but somehow presenting elements of each, and nowhere near as forthright – some would say exploitative though recent criticism has been more favourable – in its depiction of mental or bodily abnormality as Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), *Carnivàle* still makes for disquieting viewing. Knauf himself has said of his show, “[like] a beautiful child born with its heart on the outside, it had no business surviving delivery, much less two seasons on television,” (Aloi, Johnston 2015, 1). *Carnivàle*, as Knauf’s baby metaphor suggests, works in ectopia cordis, from the

inside out, a feature that is key to interpreting its representation of the very American cultural phenomenon it depicts.

The emerging critical focus on *Carnivàle* has homed in on the show's dense, inaccessible mythology, its tightly packed references, its HBO-standard montage title sequence and its spatio-temporal idiosyncrasies. While these new readings are necessary forays into an as yet underexplored show, the particulars of American visual culture embedded in its narrative and production have not yet been sufficiently investigated given their patent importance in a series that follows a freak show as it crosses some of the central and western states of America. Frida Beckman states that “[s]et in the 1930s Dustbowl and in California, *Carnivàle* offers a distinctly American historical context with powerful links to a specifically American identity” (2011, 6). The key projection of this identity in Knauf's show are the ‘carnies’ and ‘freaks’ of the *Carnivàle*, the travelling fair and freak show led by Samson the Dwarf. The show's depictions of this itinerant group, how they interact with and stray from dominant American social structures and cultures within the show, reveal just how *Carnivàle* offers an insight into the lives of the ‘Other’ in Depression-era small town America and how the ‘Othering’ it presents is not as clear-cut as it may first appear. The image of Knauf's ‘baby’ is perhaps more appropriate than even he may have realised.

### **Constructing the Freak**

In discussing ‘cult’ exploitation cinema, David Church argues that “non-normative bodies are framed in medium shots or close ups that abruptly break classical continuity, with a film's typically slipshod construction resulting in awkward cuts to the inserted spectacle” (2011, 3). Although, Knauf's creation is not as explicit as Browning or as heavy handed, in its first episodes *Carnivàle* does appear to borrow from this cult tradition. As Ben reluctantly becomes part of the carnival troupe, we are given lingering shots of abnormalities or behaviours that emphasize difference:

a shot of Gecko's lizard-like tail as it pokes through a hole cut in his underpants; Caledonia and Alexandria, the Siamese twins, playing cat's cradle, a game that requires two people, only here the two people are joined at the hip; Lila, the bearded lady tending her goatee; the catatonic gypsy psychic Apollonia, motionless in bed. We glimpse these moments of difference for perhaps longer than we should, the camera furtively resting on these characters only a second or two, but long enough to place the viewer firmly on the outside looking in, to separate the cast of the freak show from a 'normal' physicality and location.

This aligns with Church's notion that perceptions of disability or bodily difference as abnormal or 'Other' reinforce the deviancy of cult films and other cultural products that depict such difference. In the pilot episode, 'Milfay', the creeping of the camera literally suggests something odd or illicit is occurring, that Ben is in a suspicious environment, something he voices when he yells, "I don't appreciate being shanghaied by a pack of freaks" (Knauf 2005), piling piratical, unscrupulous and animalistic connotations onto the already unusual crowd he now reluctantly belongs to. Upon first viewing we appear to have a modern example of American carnival impulse at work effected through the show's presentation of its characters. In watching a show centred around freaks, one that lingers on their oddity, we've bought a ticket to look upon them from a distance, the camera's gaze fulfilling our commercially legitimated curiosity. McGowan states that, regarding this need to reject yet gaze upon the different, "it's most tangible manifestations are those of the freak show, or of American side-show culture" (2001, 1). A television show that in turn depicts a freak show is simply the latest incarnation in a long line of freak-based entertainment.

A generally unanimous critical understanding of the development of the freak show and its multiple incarnations (if not about whether freak shows themselves are commercially or morally acceptable forms of entertainment or ways of life) allows us to see that, in most instances, *Carnivàle* appears to be a faithful

recreation of the actuality of travelling carnivals and freak shows in the 1930s. Robert Bogdan's seminal text, *Freak Show*, tracks the development of such arenas of entertainment from their growth in museums in the nineteenth century through to their place in expositions and world fairs – designated sites of 'edutainment' – and their connection to the growth of fad sciences such as teratology, the study of people with bodies that deviate from a broad norm, all catalysed by P. T. Barnum's takeover of the American Museum in 1840, the establishment that pushed the freak show to the fore of American amusement.

Those with congenital abnormalities had, of course, been exhibited before this period, often touring individually with personal managers. It was the designation of a particular arena for the public to learn and be entertained, combined with the notion that to go to see a freak show was a legitimate activity, that became key to its popularity, its longevity, and its resonance in the American cultural imagination. Bogdan states that "[s]ignificantly, once human exhibits became attached to organizations, distinct patterns of constructing and presenting freaks could be institutionalized, conventions that endure to this day" (1988, 11). A growing preoccupation with the classification of different races, a taxonomic hierarchy and a growing divide between creationists and those who subscribed to evolutionary theories all created a climate in the nineteenth century in which the organized display of human oddities was a profitable proposition and a much sought out attraction. An unusual star was born.

This development gave rise to dime museums that sprang up, most frequently, in urban areas. They offered a similar, if often more tawdry experience at a cheaper price than their parent institution, the American Museum. Freak shows then found their way into circuses as side shows, providing entertainment for waiting crowds and an extra source of income for the circus outfit before the big top shows got started. They also became a part of World Fairs such the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, and the later Columbian Exposition of 1893 in

Chicago, significantly where Buffalo Bill was blurring the lines of history and showmanship with his Wild-West Extravaganza:

It was at this exposition of 1893, in the area around Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, that the idea of a collective amusement company was first discussed and the carnival as we know it was born. Alongside the daily appearances by Sitting Bull and the display of people from other countries as exotic primitives, a blueprint was formed for the organized touring of the abnormal body for the benefit of paying customers throughout America, not solely those in metropolitan areas (Bogdan 1988, 59).

Less concerned with the educational pretensions of its forebears, the travelling carnival took the show previously found at these larger urban meccas of edutainment on the road, giving small-town America a chance to see what it had been missing.

The early twentieth century saw the mood shift regarding freak shows and their various guises. A growing interest in eugenics, and in keeping those with 'bad genes' from passing them on, alongside a moral discomfort attached to the exhibition of those with differences for profit saw a 'medicalization' of so-called freaks develop, many ending up in hospitals and other institutions, shut away to be studied by doctors, not laymen. A resurgent interest in pseudo-medicines like phrenology and physiognomy followed Cesare Lombroso's theory that criminality and degeneracy were hereditary and could be identified through congenital defects and distinct physical characteristics; this developing concern with eugenics and genetic determinism as a means of classifying the 'quality' of certain races or social groups meant that, as Ardis Cameron suggests, a "domestic 'Dark Continent' emerged" to trouble the social and genealogical integrity of the normative classes (2005, 33). The popular appeal of freak shows suffered, as Bogdan notes: "The eugenics movement promulgated the idea that physically and mentally inferior people were far from being benign and interesting; rather, they were a danger" (1988, 63).

*Carnivàle*, set in the dilapidated mid-thirties, captures this industry on the down turn; Samson's outfit offers a seedy, shabby show that moves around the small towns of the West and South-West in order to make enough money to survive. The outfit, with its freaks, its cooch dancers, and its rickety rides, encapsulates the last death throes of the side show, far removed from the grand, municipal structures and strictures of nineteenth century exploration and scientific endeavour; the *Carnivàle* offers up acts typical of the 30s and 40s, when, as Thomas Fahy states, "no intellectual pretext could be given for staring" (2006, 10). A ticket purchases a right to ogle and partake in other fairground distractions; the small-town visitors to the show never imply that there is any inherent educational value to their experience, barring an implicit reassurance of their own normality and even fortune, compared with the precarious and 'Otherly' lives of *Carnivàle*'s freaks and roustabouts. Visitors are there to be shocked, titillated and to ride the Ferris wheel, and look over the small, isolated society they have purchased a chance to stare at from up high – a literal though temporary elevation in their social status within the confines of the fair.

Fahy, aligning with McGowan's interpretation of these carnival spaces, continues:

The freak represented what the audience was not – the Other, someone excluded from mainstream society for being different. In this way, the freakish body revealed surprisingly insecure power structures and suggested underlying anxieties about the ways individuals defined and related to each other in modern America (2006, 2).

Knauf's creations are pressed to sell visual access to their freakish body or ability, or failing that, an exotic or titillating experience like the cooch show, so that they may eat and drink and buy enough fuel to get them to the next small town waiting for much needed affirmation of the freaks' multifaceted subordination. The roustabouts, though physically normal except for their leader, Jonesy – a crippled former star baseball player – help to create this spectacle for the same ends.

The freak was rarely allowed to simply be themselves, to present their reality, and instead had to create an act, or have one created for them, that presented their deformity or ability in a stylized manner (the exception being the 10 in 1 show – literally ten exhibits on show in one tent – where quantity and explicit clarity were placed above idiosyncratic presentation). Bogdan states:

Showman fabricated ‘freak’s backgrounds, the nature of their conditions, the circumstances of their current lives, and other personal characteristics. The actual life and circumstances of those being exhibited were replaced by purposeful distortions designed to market the exhibit, to produce a more appealing freak (1988, 95).

Though the Carnivale’s acts are more low-rent than any Barnum production, they all have their own ‘shtick’, a persona or set of quips and props that they utilise at show time.

Identity is flexible where profit is concerned, the self is set aside and the body hyper-individuated, though ironically this exaggeration subsumes the act into a generalised ‘carny’ identity. Critical discourse regarding freak shows again concurs regarding the types of freaks on show and the ways in which freaks were presented. Bogdan suggests that there were two modes of presentation, the ‘exotic’ and the ‘aggrandized’ styles, and that performers generally sat along a spectrum of authenticity, either ‘born freaks’ (those with congenital deformities or other irregularities – dwarfs, tall men, bearded ladies, those with no arms, or legs, or any limbs at all), ‘self-made freaks’ (circassion beauties, the heavily tattooed or pierced, sword swallows) or ‘gaffs’ (fakes). The exotic ‘cast the exhibit as a strange creature from a little-known part of the world’, and normally applied to non-white races; sometimes these performers did come from Africa, or from little known tribes unfamiliar with western culture, but equally prevalent was the dressing up of black men and women to falsely cast them as ‘savages’ despite them having no physical abnormality and often being born and raised in the United States (Bogdan 1988, 97). The aggrandized mode was used for people with distinct bodies; these acts

were often presented in uniforms or fine clothing and were given status titles, like that of General Tom Thumb, a hypopituitary dwarf and Barnum's star act in the American Museum.

*Carnivàle* again faithfully reproduces these different varieties of showmanship. Walter, a member of the Daley Brothers troupe that the *Carnivàle* finds on the road, is clearly a physically normal, healthy black American. His colour is used to render him exotic and turn him into a 'wild man' dressed in skins, with bones in his purposefully unkempt hair. His act is a complete gaff, and exaggerates his racial 'Otherness', his colour is not 'freakish' in and of itself but is a marker of difference strong enough to build a freak identity upon. Characters such as Lila, and Lodz, her blind mentalist lover (he displays unusual psychic abilities including mind control and fortune telling), are aggrandized, dressed sumptuously, with fine clothes and jewellery. Lila curls her beard as another woman might her hair, and fans herself constantly, partly due to the heat of the region and partly a ladylike mannerism cultured to imply genteel respectability, a slippage between her act and herself. Samson and Gecko are almost always wearing a suit. Sabine, the scorpion girl, is also well-turned out in draped fabrics and furs with a heavily made up face. The Siamese twins are presented as pretty, young show girls who sing and do gymnastics, reflecting the fashionable look of the thirties, and a mimic of the real-life Hilton twins, stars of *Freaks* (1932) who were "packaged in the twentieth-century wrappings of stage and screen idols" (Bogdan 1988, 166). Even Ben, physically normal but supernaturally freakish, is turned out in a tailcoat and starched collar when he plays Benjamin St. John, a faith healer. In reality, these props, manners and distractions merely provided a build up to the 'big reveal', the culminating show moment and plenary lesson that viewers absorbed and carried with them out of the gate. If, as William Miller suggests, "[d]isgust shocks, entertains by shocking, and sears itself into memory" (1997, 42), that memory is

not dispassionate or without consequence; it produces both immediate and cumulative, reverberating sensations.

### **Constructing the Spectator**

The show's accurate recreation of historical freak show practice and presentation speaks to the conventions Bogdan outlines and the well-rehearsed homogeneity of freak show operations; whether they moved in the nineteenth century, the 1930s or on modern television, they follow a template of presentation that inherently fulfils McGowan's conceptualisation of the American carnival impulse. This is not the Bakhtinian carnival of inclusion and inversion; Knauf's *Carnivàle* is instead the antithesis to Bakhtin's notion that "[c]arnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin 1984, 7). The *Carnivàle* is a spectacle, a sight to see and a set of bodies to collect that encode for the audience a way to see them; that is its primary function, though it subsequently becomes a place to live for those that must carnivalize themselves to fulfil that function. The American gaze that gave rise to *Carnivàle*'s real-life counterparts did not form immersive moments of inversion, but sites of instruction that might have utilised all types of people but certainly did not embrace them or their variety.

Such lessons, learned among the gaudy banners and 'step right up' atmosphere of the side show, were applied long after the show had moved on. The 'Other' was both displayed and displaced simultaneously in these specific arenas of entertainment and the pattern of social exclusion that informed their creation emerged from them also, carried out of these spaces into wider American culture. At carnival sites, this construction is literal; the displacement is birthed from the rejection of those with bodily differences from normal society, the display revealing an implicit need to still see this Other on stage, to know that you are not freakish, that you belong on one side of the ticket booth and they on the other. Again,

speaking to the literal fashion in which carnivals and their acts exaggerated their own difference, and the routine and repeated ways in which this exaggeration was achieved, McGowan suggests that “[t]heir performance of otherness is scripted and costumed by the requirements of the white proprietor and viewer and by the stereotyped perceptions of difference abroad in the wider society” (2001, 2). Freaks must manipulate their own bodies or present them in a heavily stylized manner that obfuscates their real identity, to create a crowd-pleasing act.

Glenn C. Davis calls the freak show “a world where everything is the biggest or greatest” (Stone 2004, 64). This language, used so routinely that its claims became ridiculous and particularly ironic given that these shabby twentieth century shows were far removed from their Barnum heritage, was specifically an advertising ploy to get visitors through the gate, when conversely it was the bodies and lives of those on the inside that were amplified to produce a feeling of superiority – culturally, bodily, and racially – in the viewer. Cynthia Burkhead states that “[a]s a business, the carnival operators, sideshow freaks included, do not participate in the revelry they sell” (2015, 142). The freaks themselves are, in a sense, hidden, trapped inside the confines of the carnival. To reveal their abnormalities by simply going shopping or to get gas, those with bodily abnormalities would lose their source of income by giving up the goods too easily, as Samson says to Lila in the episode ‘Los Moscos’ when she stands outside without a veil on as visitors wander by, “you’re giving it away for free” (Knauf 2005). Deformity becomes something that must be withheld until point of sale, a commodity in McGowan’s ‘economy of seeing’, or it becomes immediately devalued, or worse, a tool in the hands of those who might cause harm.

The only examples we see of the troupe attempting to enjoy themselves and replicate normal social behaviours – and it certainly isn’t when they’re performing – is in ‘The Road to Damascus’ when the Carnivàle and The Daley Brothers outfit merge temporarily and hold a carny-only party in the big top tent (Knauf 2005), and

in 'Babylon' when the group venture into Babylon, Texas; finding the town empty save one bartender, they have to create their own amusement (Knauf 2005). Babylon turns out to be full of the ghosts of miners who have died there, and the carnies' visit does not go unnoticed; as the troupe dance in an otherwise empty bar, the camera pans away from the bar window into the darkness outside as if the group are being watched. The implication is that they might be trespassing, breaking an unspoken rule by drinking and dancing. The carnival may travel but their mobility does not permit them to transgress delineated social spaces or identities. This notion of being in the wrong place, of crossing impermeable boundaries seems particularly pertinent to travelling spectacles of Otherness, as McGowan states: "The static inertia of such a carnival image is at times, ironically, part of a travelling economy" (2001, 18)

*Carnivàle* never lets the audience forget that this is a show on the move. Episodes are named for the geographical locations of the carnival at that stage in the narrative – Milfay, Babylon, Damascus – and we see repeated shots of the caravan of cars and wagons carrying tents and rides to the next location, dust circling around them. The carnies must, as Samson says, 'shake some dust', a loaded phrase that implies they must move on to make a living but also shake off their previous show, the looks of their previous visitors, the 'dust' of their performed or perceived identities – the status that the ticket buying public assigns them and the association with the Dust Bowl and its destructive effects. They must also outrun any retribution that might be sought after visitors work out some of their insalubrious business practices.

When the troupe does stop, we are shown eye-level and birds-eye shots of the carnival sat in the middle of nowhere. This, combined with these geographical episode titles, heighten this peripheral existence. The troupe is not really in 'Los Moscos' or 'Tipton', they are in a field or patch of dirt outside these towns, waiting for an audience to come to them, the giant star of the Ferris wheel lit up on the

skyline like a beacon that announces their strangeness. Each location looks like the last; dirt and hills surround the camp, highlighting its insignificance and its vulnerability – tents do not provide adequate protection from violent townspeople, revealed by the murder of cooch dancer Dora Mae Dreifuss and the later kidnapping and mutilation of Jonesy in 'Lincoln Highway' (Knauf 2005).

Like the wheel, the freak show banners hint at what lies behind them, a precursor to the act of looking, as Davies states: "These images are designed to present information in a non-verbal manner, to communicate with visual dialogue" (2015, 66) The entrance functions in this way also – a white picket fence a few feet long on either side of a gate with a lit banner above it that reads 'CARNIVALE'; it is a strange construction that references the conventional ideal American home but fuses it with a sense of transgression, a distortion of normality. The fence abruptly ends on either side of the gate, giving only an illusion of something concrete. The entrance way lends a sense of incompleteness to the carnies' home, a half-structure that can be packed away at a moment's notice. We're shown one particular view repeatedly – so similar it could even be the same footage – a long shot of the carnival preparing to open, rousties setting up rides in the distance, the gate in the middle and the shows and stalls sitting quietly behind it. The carny home and identity are literally constructed and deconstructed before our eyes.

If, as David Sibley states, "the determination of a border between the inside and the outside [...] translates into several different corporeal or social images which signal imperfection or a low ranking in a hierarchy of being" (1995, 14) then transience, already a demarcation of difference or a cause for expulsion, again amplifies the strangeness of the Carnivale's freaks and carnies, and places them firmly if not at the bottom of the social hierarchy then outside it, as the group is not in one place long enough to be incorporated into any one social system. The carnies are negatively 'unbounded' in the sense that their homes – tents, caravans, the space underneath a truck even – do not sufficiently delineate them from the outside world,

as a standard dwelling would. This is a continuation of what Sibley calls the “ecological account of the self”, of non-human items or animals, in this case empty space, Dust Bowl destruction and the trappings of itinerancy being used to frame the carnary experience. Their rejection is two-fold; firstly, because they have some form of deformity, have been ‘Othered’ or have ‘Othered’ themselves in some way or that they work with or for those that do; secondly because that Otherness requires them to move around so that they may be seen and rejected, over and over again, by each new visitor in each new town.

The fake barrier of the ticket gate, incomplete mimic of the normal American house and its borders and the point at which entrance into the carnival proper is purchased, hints that the carnival is an in-between place, a source of attraction and repulsion for townspeople. If, as Kristeva states, the problem with the abject is that “[i]t lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated” (1982, 1), then the spatial positioning of freak shows just outside these towns, and their drawing on the curiosity of the residents who want to look at but not engage with what they’re being shown, becomes a source of tension between normal and abject groups and between the urges and fears of the normal individual. The show aesthetic is also uncanny in this respect: the barrier is a simulacrum of a home, or at least part of one, but it is also a space of entertainment; it is both private and public, disgusting and alluring, familiar and hidden – both *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*. Freud suggests that “an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary” (2003, 150). The fantastical presentations that form the freak show’s oeuvre are, therefore, a fantasy that emphasises the very reality of their abnormal bodies, and indeed their success and life despite these bodies, for this is the human form but not as we know it.

The travelling nature of the freak show solves one of the problems it creates. In *Carnivàle*, as in its real-life counterparts, any residual anxiety towners might feel

about the troupe is eliminated by the show removing itself from their proximity – the freaks simply move on, their presence immortalised only in memory, souvenirs and ticket stubs. The temporary entrance of an able-bodied, predominantly white viewer into the carnival world might bring with it the excitement of contravening certain boundaries, of lowering oneself by crossing the ticket gate and giving those with bodies displayed as entirely different to yours your money so that you might recognise your own as normal, but this excitement is not counter-balanced with the fear that they may enter the normal world in return, because the carnies simply disappear in the night. The tension within the individual that the abject and the uncanny create, however, in both recognition and the need to look yet also look away, to display and displace, is less easily abated.

Miller suggests that “[s]omething pre-social seems to link in to a strong sense of disgust and horror at the prospect of a body that doesn’t quite look like one, either grotesquely deformed by accident or disorganized by mayhem” (1997, 82) This mayhem implies an energy or illicit life, an excessive quality that jars with the non-generative, dried out world of *Carnivàle*. Miller further suggests that “[o]ur bodies and our souls are the prime generators of the disgusting. What the animals remind us of, the ones that disgust us – insects, slugs, worms, rats, bats, newts, centipedes – is life, oozy, slimy, viscous, teeming, messy, uncanny life” (1997, 50). The very life of a freak is then, as mentioned, part of the shock a visitor experiences – that they have one, that they exist, and seek to thrive, albeit in limited parameters. If “the generator of disgust is generation itself, surfeit, excess of ripeness,” (Miller 1997, 50) then an excessive, or misshapen, or compacted body suggests a biological process or being that was once out of control and one that could be again, if not for the confines of the stage, the tent and the fence. We have the uncanny manifest on a cellular level, the natural process of growth repeated with abnormal results, in manifold abnormal forms that threaten to overwhelm the normal.

The precariousness of this confinement, however, is not the primary driver of disgust; Miller states that, “[i]t is not that we fear intimacy with them or their intimacies with others; it is that we know how we see them and could not bear to be thus seen. The horror then is not being intimate with them (although that too), but in being them” (1997, 42). The recognition that not much separates the viewer and the viewed, beyond a set, some props and circumstance, produces a rupture in the American carnival impulse that *Carnivàle* depicts, and takes the show beyond an uncomplicated framing of these visual cues. It creates moments of recognition that blur attempts to render the carnies homogenous in their individuality.

Dawn Prestwich, a writer and executive producer on the show, states that “our belief, you know, thematically, in this whole series, is that the freaks are the normal people and it’s the normal people, you know, who are kind of bizarre” (Prestwich 2003). *Carnivàle*, then, is specular; it holds a mirror up to the audiences that come to gaze upon alterity. Regarding these social binaries Sibley states that “[o]ccasionally, these social cleavages are marked by inversions – those who are usually on the outside occupy the centre and the dominant majority are cast in the role of spectators” (1995, 43). In *Carnivàle*, the dominant majority are spectators – this position is not altered, it is this spectatorship that elevates them to dominance – but an inversion takes place in that the show is primarily filmed from inside the carnival, and particularly when the acts are ‘off-duty’, eating, talking, at leisure. While we are never given one clear shot out of the gate, an explicit outward gaze – we still get a sense of being firmly within the camp. Indeed, the suggestion is that many of those inside the carnival do not need or wish to look outward, as what they see when they do holds no appeal. The viewer sees the social and bodily norm through different eyes and finds that outward gaze is unforgiving. Rachel Adams points out an uncomfortable truth about the nature of paying to look at another person: “spectators may be disconcerted to find their gazes returned, often laden with resentment or hostility” (2001, 7).

If what Homi Bhabha calls the scopic drive, “the drive that represents the pleasure in ‘seeing’, [...] and locates the surveyed object within the ‘imaginary’ relation” sees audiences combining vision and liberty by paying to see acts of the ‘imaginary’ (2004, 109) – freaks or acts constructed specifically to confirm their worst nightmares or prejudices or to titillate their worst impulses, all a by-product of implicit identity consolidation, then a returned gaze operates in a similar manner to the uncanny, and contests or dismantles that imaginary or at least confirms its unreality. Bhabha states that “the recognition and disavowal of ‘difference’ is always disturbed by the question of its re-presentation or construction” (2004, 109); the displeased gaze of the act intercepts the scope of their audience in a way that illuminates the act as presentation, one tailor-made to extort the most profit possible from those that want to see it. Freaks can look back at their audience and reassert their agency and disquieting humanity through their own outward stare. A ticket only purchases a certain amount of passivity.

Indeed, *Carnivàle* engages in its own way with the creation of a ‘generalized other’ in its depiction of Babylon (Knauf 2005). The ghostly miners visit to the carnival explicitly creates a carnivalized and reductive version of the normal ticket buying public. The miners appear as if out of nowhere, all wearing dirty blue jeans, their faces indistinct; they shuffle through the gate in silence, lifelessly alike. Their pharisaic murder of Dora Mae (they brand her a harlot yet keep her ghost as a sex-slave) acts as distillation of all that is ugly about the American carnival impulse and the way it is operationally always in conflict - reject and look, displace and display, condemn and possess. Except here the miners are the worst features of normal society (in *Carnivàle*’s context at least) presented as a homogenous, blurred mass. Their brutality, predation, and deathliness appear in contrast to the life, dignity and compassion of the *Carnivàle*’s troupe, something only further emphasised by the loving funeral service and orderly retributive ritual the troupe hold after her death. The miners are trapped, vicious and dull shades who kill seemingly because they

cannot cope with the tension that exists between their disgust and lust, a sentiment Miller succinctly encapsulates: “Men desire access to the vagina, but also fear it” (1997, 102). The miners want the body of Dora Mae, even in spectral form, but loathe what that body represents. The show bestows upon them a non-identity and bounds them in a limited location – the town they all died in – an other-worldly punishment that consolidates their lack of individuation. Though dangerous within this confine, they’re rendered pathetic and aberrant ghosts of the past, literal nobodies, who cannot escape the limits and limitations of their own death, and in their portrayal, *Carnivàle* casts one half of the visual binary, the spectator this time, as ignominiously pathological.

### **Disrupting Boundaries**

These binaries – normal/abnormal, townspeople/carnies – depicted in the show first episodes, begin to disintegrate as the narrative moves onward. When Ben goes freak hunting in the episode ‘Lonnigan, Texas’, he encounters an auto-attendant with an intellectual disability as well as a skin condition and a speech impediment. We might be tempted to frame him within the same realm of identity as those in the carnival. He, however, reacts to those around him in a manner that surprises Ben and disrupts our expectations; he shouts abuse at a family of Okies who need to get their car tyre fixed, refusing to serve them, and when he sees Lobster Girl, he says to Ben that she’s “[a] real freak, that one,” (Knauf 2005). By verbally and violently asserting his own superiority, keeping the family at a physical and associational distance from himself, he denies or simply does not recognise any connection to those we assume he might identify with. He resists classification while happily denigrating and stereotyping others, rendering the family stuck in both automotive and social terms. His physical characteristics and the context in which he is presented might render him freakish to an external viewer – they certainly generate distaste in Ben – but freak is not a term or an identity he associates with himself.

Bogdan suggests that “‘Freak’ is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something that we created: a perspective, a set of practices – a social construction” (1997, ix). In the show it is a term employed by various characters, including the ‘freaks’ themselves. Though the auto-attendant might have a set of characteristics that could easily facilitate him becoming a ‘freak’ in certain circumstances, those characteristics alone are not enough to make him one. He works a normal job and adopts the standard prejudices of those around him. He is neither ‘normal’ townspeople, nor a carny with the trappings that create a second, externalized identity. In *Carnivàle*’s world, he occupies a middle ground that sits in between the two possible states shown, itinerant/freakish and stationary/normal.

He is not alone. Jonesy also occupies a liminal position within the show’s world. Klaus Rieser states that “images are overwhelmingly present in American life,” (Rieser 2013, 3) and that “[a]mong this flood of visual representations, a limited number of images gain greater prominence and remain in the public consciousness for an extended period of time, thereby becoming icons” (ibid). Jonesy, with a leg so damaged he must wear a brace which alters his gait significantly, is an example of what happens when a person situated in one arena of national iconography – in his case a promising career in national American baseball – ends up in another, a Dust Bowl freak show.

Michael Fuchs and Michael Phillips state that in America, sports are read as “a metaphor for life,” and that “[a]mong sports fans, the common view is that the essential struggle for success is ritually enacted on the playing fields/courts of America” (Fuchs and Phillips 2013, 86). Flashbacks reveal Jonesy’s knee was broken because he refused to throw a game. The price he pays for honesty is an injury that puts paid to his sporting career and finds him assembling a Ferris wheel for a living. He goes from Clayton Jones to Jonesy, Samson’s right-hand man. However, despite his job and his injury, Jonesy is not a freak. Physically unusual, with his over-extended stride and imposing stature, Jonesy again occupies an

unusual place within *Carnivàle* which both challenges and underpins the notion, broadly accepted and argued in critical understanding of freakery, that freaks are made and not born. What is Jonesy if not ‘freakish’ or normal? He is not a performer – his injury is not a congenital defect but is a physical reminder of a former identity now lost to him. It represents what he was, not what he is now, and also, like the migrants symbolising the failure of American agricultural commerce, signifies the corruption at work on the supposedly meritocratic American sports field.

Babe Ruth, arguably the most famous baseball player ever, iconic in the early decades of the twentieth-century and still celebrated today, acts as the original figure to Jonesy’s distorted mirror image, what Clayton Jones might have become had he remained undamaged. Shots of Ruth feature in the show’s expository title sequence, alongside other clips of 1930s footage (aid queues, The KKK, blimps, dust storms, Nazis, Jesse Owens, FDR) intercut with images of Tarot cards and biblical scenes that reference the more mythological narrative elements of the show. Ruth’s play altered the way baseball was played, ‘home runs’ becoming the aim of the game thanks to his powerful hit. His physicality altered the American consciousness and became a part of American iconography, taking sports with it. Jonesy is Ruth knocked off this trajectory, strength diminished, his imperfect body necessitating a marginal existence.

In an industry hungry for new attractions there lies an implicit possibility that Jonesy could have been packaged as a freak, an act that passed off his injury as congenital or else displayed him overcoming this damage in some way, his failed baseball career ample material for a freak narrative that would blend one national preoccupation with another. Spectators who once watched him on the ball field might be drawn to see his antithetical new existence in a freak show. As it is, in *Carnivàle*, Jonesy stays off the stage; there is no mention of him becoming an act. Nor does the *Carnivàle* make advances towards Maddy, the little girl Jonesy takes kindly on in the first episode; she cannot walk and must be pulled everywhere in a

trolley. Jonesy lets her ride the Ferris wheel for free, an activity she can take part in without difficulty. She too could be trained as a performer – she is adept at moving herself when not in her trolley – but no approach is made to this end.

Instead, Ben heals them both, fixing the girl's legs and saving Jonesy's life when he is tarred and feathered after a woman falls from the Ferris wheel on his watch (a strange echo of the creation of the Chicken Woman in *Freaks* and another means of physically 'Othering' someone as a punishment, like taking a bat to someone's knee). In saving him, Ben also heals Jonesy's injury – when he wakes he finds he is fully mobile once again and, crucially, can pitch a ball. Maddy and Clayton Jones/Jonesy represent the precariousness of the body, the different bodies a person might have in their life – physiology and identity can move from normal to abnormal and back again; the space between these variations can shorten or disappear entirely. Jonesy morphs from famous sports star to cripple to near-dead to healthy. Migrants move from respectable old-stock Americans to unwanted Okies before reclaiming a sense of belonging in Justin's camp. Transience is not only geographical, but corporeal. Itinerancy is not, here, a moral failing, but a state that materialises in life, body and vocation.

American visual culture and carnival impulses respond and adapt to this precariousness, creating structures and locations through which to gaze upon and make judgement upon marginalised people according to a shared understanding of social hierarchy. However, this codification isn't always easy to do, and generates anxiety because economic circumstances severely reduce the distance between normal and abnormal and render events such as freak shows uncomfortable and uncanny spaces of identification rather than straightforward opportunities to gawk at something reassuringly unfamiliar. Fahy states that in the Depression, "the physical cost of employment, illness and hunger could often be seen on the body, the sideshow performer was often an unwanted reminder of everyday hardships and physical vulnerability" (2005, 80). While after each show *Carnivale's* freaks and

rousties move on, removing any physical or spatial issue related to their difference, the realisation that the viewer is only one bad harvest, or one bad accident away from the same existence and the same social status as those in the camp or the show, and the contrast between the strange yet successful (in biological and often economic terms) life in the Carnivàle – the excess, or excessive life – and the degenerated geology and economy of the Depression, starkly undermines the benefits of paying to look at abnormality.

However, while Ben's ability to heal those around him facilitates the show's depiction of the instability of both body and identity, it also raises further questions surrounding just who is a 'freak' and who isn't that are left unanswered. Just as there is an implicit possibility that Jonesy could have become an act instead of a roustabout, Ben's presence amongst a group of people who have physical or mental abnormalities infers that these abnormalities might be 'fixable.' Ben saves the lives of Jonesy and of Ruthie when she is snake-bit. He can cure physical ailments from the minor to the terminal through taking the life from one thing or person and channelling it to another. He can even cure or soothe grief; in the first episode he calms a migrant woman who can't seem to let go of her dead baby (Knauf 2005), and he fixes Maddy's legs though she had been born without the use of them. He can also heal scarred and burned flesh, as he does with his father, who has mutilated himself to avoid detection by Ben. He can do all this, yet not one of the 'freaks' in *Carnivàle* enquires about the application of his power to congenital deformity or other conditions, such as Apollonia's paralysis, after they either intuit what he is or find out when Jonesy tells them.

The silence in the narrative regarding these possibilities is difficult to interpret. Considering the history of freak shows and the committal of the disabled into hospitals after the appeal of such entertainments waned, Ben is perhaps Knauf resisting the 'medicalisation' of his characters; they don't ask to be healed because their bodies aren't 'problems' or ailments to fix. They function, not as the 'Other'

to a normal, white body, but as dynamic, flawed individuals, each with their own idiosyncrasies. This is what Ben says to Maddy in 'Milfay', when she tells him that her "Grammie says y'all are marked"; his reply, "Nah. They ain't marked. They're just people, that's all," (Knauf 2005) suggests that, like the spectrum of authenticity within the carnival structure, bodies in *Carnivàle* exist on a shared plane underpinned by a flawed humanity common to all, including Ben and Justin.

Alternatively, the freaks' lack of interest in Ben's ability within the narrative could imply the converse to this argument; only those with 'whole', normal looking configurations are healed by Ben, implying, particularly within a narrative heavily reliant on themes of fate and the individual's destiny within a grand narrative, that there are those that are freaks and those that aren't. Jonesy shouldn't have had his leg broken; Maddy, apart from her legs, is an otherwise 'complete' and normal looking child. Other characters within the narrative wouldn't have become sick if it weren't for the poor conditions the 1930s inflicted upon them. These things are fixed in the narrative, a sense of order restored. These restorations seem to delineate the abnormal from the temporarily or wrongfully broken, giving their condition if not a physiognomic character than certainly a fatalistic one. Their role has been assigned, their difference pre-destined and unchangeable. They simply cannot ever be normal, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson suggests: "Never simply itself, the exceptional body betokens something else, becomes revelatory, sustains narrative, exists socially in a realm of hyper representation" (1993, 3). Freakishness, unlike injury, grief, culture and creed, cannot be hidden, or healed, only exposed.

While *Carnivàle*, with its freak show setting, its Depression-era story arc and direction and editing that makes explicit an individual's abnormalities, might appear to depict the display and the displacement of its freaks and Okies, and to reflect the binary this treatment constructs – 'Otherness' as opposed to normality, freakish as opposed to appropriate or expected, spectacle as opposed to respectable – it also works to display this binary as constructed on shaky foundations. The show

raises more questions than it answers, from its indeterminate position between cult show and mainstream fare, to the ambiguous potentials that lie in its open-ended depiction of both migrants and freaks within its world. It faithfully recreates historical freak show practice, then subverts this convention by involving its characters in a biblical parable of good and evil, the forces of which are so alike and intertwined they are often indistinguishable.

Ultimately, it elicits neither sympathy for the freaks nor disdain or disgust. Sometimes the viewer is placed on the outside of the freak show looking in, but more often than not we are inside it, looking out. It is left to us to form our own understanding about who or what is freakish or 'Other' from the show's unusual population, whether the 'freak' is a social construction or something more concrete. What it does illustrate clearly, however, is that there is another side to the American carnival impulse: that the act of looking at a freak, a carny, an Okie, is not a one-sided transaction. The normal gaze does not render the Other blind – your eyes might be met; your body, your culture, your way of life might be judged, and none too kindly; the cost of your ticket might be your dignity, self-perception and social identity, or all three. The tie between normal and 'Other' is inseparable, unlike a person and the money in their pocket, but an individual's position between them is always up for negotiation.

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