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**"'Boo!' to taboo": Gothic Performance at British Festivals**

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“‘Boo!’ to taboo”<sup>1</sup>:

### **Gothic Performance at British Festivals**

**Emma McEvoy**

Since the late 1980s, when the French company Archaos brought their New Circus over to the British Isles, circus genres and, more recently, fairground genres have become a significant part of the contemporary live performance scene. The last few years have seen a proliferation of cabaret and circus-related genres (new circus, new burlesque, cruel cabaret) a revivification of old fair-ground performance (freak shows, museums of curiosities, side shows) and the invention of new quasi-fairground genres (walkabouts and installations). The popularity of these genres is indicated by the fact that the Circus Development Agency was set up in 1999, and in 2010 the Roundhouse in Camden instituted its annual CircusFest. In the world of live performance, the glory days of early twentieth-century circus and fairground are frequently revisited. In terms of the performers themselves the age is a significant one in which live performance thrived in fairground and circus and was economically viable - even in the face of the increasing popularity of cinema. Revisiting burlesque, carnival and fairground is thus a way of validating the concept of live performance in a contemporary age not only of cinema but also of electronic media.

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<sup>1</sup> I've taken the phrase from Robert Eke's description of the walkabout act "The Lost Funeral" on Stuff and Things' website. [www.stuffandthings.co.uk/funeral.htm](http://www.stuffandthings.co.uk/funeral.htm)

Increasingly, such performances feature Gothic content or else sit easily beside other performances which have a Gothic element. This is not only because Gothic has been such a significant part of twentieth-century popular entertainment (in the forms of, for example, the freak show, the museum of curiosity and many fairground acts as well as in cinema) but also because Gothic has become a dominant way of looking at the past and at the history of twentieth-century popular culture itself. In addition to this, the circus and the fairground have often featured as Gothic sites both within fiction and on the big and small screens. In films from Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) to Herk Harvey's *Carnival of Souls*, from Ray Bradbury's novel *Something Wicked this Way Comes* (1962) to its film adaptation (directed by Jack Clayton, 1983) and to American TV series *Carnivale* (2003-5) the fairground or travelling carnival is a potent Gothic locale. Indeed the interest shown by film in circus and fairground performance could be said to indicate that medium's fascination with its own origins. The fairground is part of the entertainment history which lies behind the begetting of film and which is able to cast a disconcerting perspective on cinema's mastery of illusion and its focus on star performance.

In this chapter I examine Gothic content in some of these fairground and circus-related acts as performed on the British Festival Circuit. In particular, I will be focussing through three Arts Festivals: Norfolk and Norwich, Showzam! ("Blackpool's Annual Festival of Circus, Magic and New Variety"<sup>2</sup>) and Glastonbury Festival ("of Contemporary Performing Arts"<sup>3</sup>). The British festival season runs from Easter to September and it sustains or is integral to a lively economy: from street performers and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.showzam.co.uk/> accessed 14.36 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.glastonburyfestivals.co.uk/> accessed 14.37 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

small theatre companies to stall holders, food outlets and health and safety inspectors, from security companies and toilet providers to festival managers and curators. Some British festivals are solely commercial affairs, some largely funded by public money (though often with business sponsorship). Although historically many of these festivals have been “music festivals”, more and more of them, both commercial and non-commercial, now bill themselves as Arts festivals or festivals of performance. As Festival Republic’s banner for Latitude 2011 (when the English National Ballet played) puts it: “It’s more than just a music festival...”<sup>4</sup> My interest for the sake of this essay lies primarily with the not-for-profit festivals, amongst which Glastonbury, though a commercial event, may be counted. These are potentially most interesting because (in the case of festivals funded by public bodies particularly) they act as a good indicator for the place of Gothic in a wider public psyche, in the cultural politics of contemporary Britain. In particular, looking at these festivals can tell us much about the status of certain kinds of Gothic and its use by the great and the good: educators, arts funders, councils and other spenders of public money. In the three following sections, I consider the phenomena of family-friendly Gothic at the Norfolk and Norwich, of municipal Gothic at Blackpool’s Showzam! and of Gothic as a mode of consumption at Glastonbury.

### **Norfolk and Norwich Festival: Family-friendly Gothic**

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.latitudefestival.co.uk/2011/> accessed 14.38 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

The Norfolk and Norwich Festival is a two-week long affair in May which hosts a “world-class programme”<sup>5</sup> of theatre, dance, music, theatre, literature and the visual arts. Its principal funders are Arts Council England, Norfolk County Council and Norwich City Council. Acts at the NNF 2010 and 2011 included (in no particular order) the Kronos Quartet, rock and classical musician John Cale, folk musician Liza Carthy, the Spanish National Ballet and poet Wendy Cope. Publicity for the festival focuses on the language of positivity, growth and personal development: “Norfolk and Norwich Festival aims to use the transformational nature of the arts, culture and creativity to bring about positive change for individuals, communities and the spaces in which they live.”<sup>6</sup> It is not particularly surprising to find that amongst its many and varied acts there is little that could be described as Gothic. There is, however, some Gothic content and, significantly, what Gothic content there is can almost entirely be found under the “Family” listings.

At the NNF in 2010 and 2011 Gothic content was to be found at “Museums at Night” events (2011); in some of the night-time out-door theatre spectacles (Basque company Deabru Beltzak’s *The Wolves* 2011); and, in some of the walk-about acts based at Chapelfield Gardens (2010). Gothic is an obvious choice for site-responsive outdoor theatre - especially in those shows designed to be played at night. The spiel for the NNF performance in the official programme is couched in terms of Gothic affect: “*The Wolves* promises to set your pulses racing and send a shiver down your spine as it weaves its way through the city centre’s streets and lanes. Night-time in Norwich may never be the same

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nnfestival.org.uk/UserData/root/Files/2010AnnualReportlowres.pdf> page 3 accessed 14.42 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.nnfestival.org.uk/UserData/root/Files/2010AnnualReportlowres.pdf> Annual Report for 2010 festival page 3 accessed 14.57 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

again.”<sup>7</sup> Outdoor promenade shows like *The Wolves* or *Arquiem* or *Crowley* (from UK-based Periplum) make the town itself perform; they gravitate towards Cathedrals and filter through narrow lanes, playing with both the sense of the town’s temporality and its topography as well as the spectator’s own vulnerabilities and sensibility to various kinds of shock or orchestrated obscurity, whether (as Periplum have it) “detailing the delirium of a fevered mind or the vast workings of a social revolution”.<sup>8</sup>

Gothic in outdoor promenade performance is one thing, the deployment of Gothic in entertainment in museums a rather different kettle of fish. “Museums at Night” events were not confined to Norwich but were part of a nation-wide drive to increase attendance at and interest in museums and other “heritage venues.”<sup>9</sup> At NNF 2011 the main venue was Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery, which became “the spectacular setting for a night of entertainment and discovery.”<sup>10</sup> As the sales pitch for this (free) event ran: “From chilling tales in the dungeons to tours of the battlements by twilight, this is a chance to explore the nooks and crannies of this fascinating building.”<sup>11</sup> The experience promised to present Gothic thrills grounded in Norwich’s real history: its selling point was “ambience”.<sup>12</sup> The personnel involved included performers (actors and musicians) but this was also to be an educational experience – an opportunity to try out “creative crafts,” talk to curators and handle some of the museum’s artefacts.<sup>13</sup>

**[insert figure 10.1 here]**

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<sup>7</sup> [http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/the\\_wolves](http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/the_wolves) accessed 15.00 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.periplum.co.uk/company/index.php> accessed 14.46 22<sup>nd</sup> July

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.heritagecity.org/projects/museums-at-night.htm> accessed 15.02 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>10</sup> [http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/museums\\_at\\_night](http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/museums_at_night) accessed 15.05 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>11</sup> [http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/museums\\_at\\_night](http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/museums_at_night) accessed 15.05 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>12</sup> [http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/museums\\_at\\_night](http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/museums_at_night) accessed 15.05 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>13</sup> [http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/museums\\_at\\_night](http://nnf11.nnfestival.org.uk/programme/detail/museums_at_night) accessed 15.05 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

Increasingly those involved in the marketing of museums have enlisted the Gothic as a mode of mediating history. Like the presence of Gothic in outdoor promenade, this is in some respects an obvious move – after all, many museums themselves are the antiquated location-bound spaces where Gothic narratives have thrived (Norwich Museum is the old Norman Castle). Yet it is a move that annoys and alienates many historians and educators, not only because of the fictitiousness of Gothic and the particular kind of template it applies to the stuff of history but because of the assumptions about history which underlie Gothic narratives.<sup>14</sup>

Gothicization (particularly Gothic inflected as time travel) has become a dominant approach in the “edutainment” project of selling history to a young audience. A trailer for a film created by Sky Arts for 2011’s “Museums at Night” project makes this particularly apparent.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the trailer a Gothic approach is privileged - even at the expense of other content. There is a Gothic sci-fi soundtrack in the style favoured by Murray Gold for BBC’s *Doctor Who*. The first shots are of the outside of the Old Operating Theatre (Southwark, London) and they are followed by a shot of a skull and the super-imposed words “Museums are the closest we will ever get to time travel...”<sup>16</sup> At this point, passing mention is made to Renaissance painting – still to the Gothic sci-fi soundtrack. Having nodded to the Renaissance, the trailer returns to its Gothic trajectory and subtitles pose the question “But what happens.... when the museums shut their doors...? And the galleries turn off their lights?” (These words are rather incongruously

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<sup>14</sup> Chris Baldick notes the Gothic’s preoccupation with “despotisms buried by the modern age” (Baldick: xxi). Robert Mighall notes that Gothic in literary texts always entails ‘an attitude to the past and the present’ (xxv). Characteristics pertaining to the past are those of being “unreasonable, uncivilized... unprogressive” (xviii).

<sup>15</sup> The trailer may be seen at <http://www.culture24.org.uk/places+to+go/museums+at+night/art354814> (accessed 8<sup>th</sup> July 2011). All subsequent references to the trailer refer to this site.

<sup>16</sup> All the ellipses in the quotations from this trailer derive from the trailer itself.

placed over shots of the inside of the National Gallery). This approach to purveying history to the young is similar to that shown by the CBBC programme *Relic: Guardians of the Museum*, which employs a game-show format together with strong elements both of fantasy and Gothic.

The last on the list of the Gothic fare at the NNF is the Gothic walkabout. The company Stuff and Things presented two of their Walkabout Acts at NNF 2010: “Futter’s Child” (a “Walkabout Mime Act With Soundtrack”<sup>17</sup>) and “The Lost Funeral”.

Walkabouts are a particularly curious phenomenon in terms of Gothic performance precisely because, unlike site-specific theatre or a Museum event, they are usually performed in daylight and are divorced from a particular place. Indeed, they transfer between locations with impressive ease. At NNF2010 these acts appeared in Chapelfield Gardens; they have also played on Queen Street, Cardiff (at the Cardiff Street Festival); in the theatre field at Glastonbury Festival; in Chelmsford’s Shopping Centre and a multitude of other places. (There is even a picture on Stuff and Things’ website of Futter with child in perambulator walking the Great Wall of China.)

**[insert figure 10.2 here]**

“The Lost Funeral” is Stuff and Things’ “head-turning comedy walkabout show” which features “Ernest Potts & Reginald Fowler - two incompetent, irreverent and yet

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<sup>17</sup> This quote and all further quotes relating to Futter’s Child from <http://www.stuffandthings.co.uk/futter.htm> accessed 15.08 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011



excessively charming undertakers”.<sup>18</sup> In “Futter’s Child”, the Igor-like Futter is “doing his best to look after a rather challenging baby” (“Horrace, the anatomically-accurate noisy infant...animated with jiggling arms and beautiful eyes that can be remotely triggered to glow red”) with “a small arsenal of unorthodox paraphernalia... soft toys impaled on a kebab skewer, a 'medieval' rattle and disconcertingly similar bottles of gripe water and embalming fluid!”

In both acts, Gothic imagery and content are re-fashioned into family-friendly comedy. Even though the narrative of “The Lost Funeral is revealed ultimately to be one of attempted murder and live burial, the act, as the website has it, puts the “‘fun’ back into ‘funeral’ and says “Boo!” to taboo.” The blurb for “Futter’s Child” notes: “While there's a subtle dark undercurrent to the performance (would you employ him as your nanny?) the emphasis is firmly on comedy, and laughs are plentiful.” Despite the on-line review of “Futter’s Child” from a “Teenage Goth” “Now that's what I call REAL Goth!”<sup>19</sup> this is not “Goth” as many would have it but a “unique world of love and horror - the quirky world of a misunderstood lovable misfit... Connecting with both the parent and the child within us all.” An internet image search for “Futter’s Child” brings up a wealth of photographs of delighted punters. This is Gothic that is very largely devoid of traditional Gothic affect: the racing pulse and shivers down the spine as promised by Deabru Beltzak.

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<sup>18</sup> This quote and all further quotes relating to “The Lost Funeral” from <http://www.stuffandthings.co.uk/funeral.htm> accessed 15.10 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.stuffandthings.co.uk/futter.htm> accessed 15.08 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

The blurb for “Futter’s Child” on Stuff and Things’ website points up the popular cultural ancestry for ““Gothic slaphead Futter” who appears “to have evolved from the same gene pool as Uncle Fester from the Addams Family” and whose miming is in itself reminiscent of the age of silent movies. Contemporary Gothic performance interpolates an audience that has a strong sense not just of the history of the entertainment that they are watching but of its treatment on the big and small screens. For these walkabout acts, and for contemporary culture more generally, I suggest, the imagery of old-fashioned horror in early twentieth-century film has become a useful common language. Gothic imagery embeds us, children and adults alike, into a shared history of popular culture. Family-friendly Gothic (the walkabouts, the Museums at Night events and the BBC’s *Relic*) appropriate a Gothic which has become the mark of a particular kind of cultural literacy - for the history of twentieth-century popular culture has achieved a level of respectability. This respectability chimes in well with the kind of performance that publicly-funded Arts festivals want to host: performances which are not only entertaining but assume or impart a certain level of education. The cultural positioning of Gothic at these events is in some respects elitist and its very status as popular culture has, paradoxically, gained it more than a veneer of respectability.

As opposed to contemporary Gothic in cinema, whether terror or horror, which continues to stimulate the required Gothic affects at ever increasing levels,<sup>20</sup> early twentieth-century Gothic has, as it were, become downgraded in terms of the fear factor. The imagery associated with it has thus come to occupy an interesting cultural niche. It

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<sup>20</sup> For Fred Botting, however, Gothic in contemporary culture does not include a “charge intense enough to renew the pulse of expenditure that staves off the black hole within and without. An object large enough to fill horror’s black hole is wanted” (Botting 84).

can signify fear without the sting of it still being effective/affective. Thus much live performance that draws on this content and imagery has come to be seen as suitable for family viewing. This is even so in the case of content that might in other circumstances be considered unsuitable for children. The London Dungeons are a popular family attraction. *The Circus of Horrors*, despite the sexual content and freak show aspects, always has a number of children in its audience and was recently (May 2011) featured on ITV's *Britain's Got Talent* (making their way to the semi-finals). A contributory factor in such antiquated Gothic being considered to be family-friendly is the phenomenon of live performance. It is as if the content is redeemed by the fact of live performance; the genre (Gothic live performance) acts as a safety-case, something which in today's cultural logic, confers "classic" status.

### **Showzam! Regeneration and the Gothic**

As the blurb for the Norfolk and Norwich Festival points out, one of the given reasons for a town or a city holding a festival is "increasing its national and international profile."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the nature of the festival reflects back onto the identity of the place. Thus, the Norfolk and Norwich (less than keen to play up to Norwich's "white city" cliché) with its many international acts highlights the city's historic openness to the rest of the Continent. The case is somewhat different for Blackpool, a town with a history as a capital of popular entertainment and an even more recent history of decline. As the Kate Burt wrote of public perceptions of Blackpool in *The Independent* in 2008 "the

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.nnfestival.org.uk/UserData/root/Files/2010AnnualReportlowres.pdf> Annual Report for 2010 festival page 3 accessed 15.21 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

seaside town had an image problem: people were more likely to think of it as a tacky playground for hen and stag parties than a centre of culture.” She also noted that Blackpool “has a staggering 23,000 theatre seats to fill each day, and was failing to do so.”<sup>22</sup>

Showzam! is part of Blackpool’s solution to the problem of the town’s decline. It takes place outside of festival season, in cold and rainy February and its date seems to mirror the town’s sense of being outside of the mainstream when it comes to the viable modern entertainment industry. However, the Visit Blackpool website, (as might be expected of the town’s official tourism website) is optimistic about the positive effects of Showzam! announcing in March 2011: “Blackpool’s Showzam! Proves To Be Tourism Tonic For Resort.”<sup>23</sup> The words of Councillor Maxine Callow (Cabinet Member for Tourism and Regeneration at Blackpool Council) allude to the thinking behind Showzam! She comments that the success of the festival “demonstrates that it is possible for Blackpool to attract new audiences without losing touch with it’s [sic] much loved cultural traditions for which we are famous the world over.”<sup>24</sup> Showzam! is Blackpool’s attempt to raise its present-day profile in terms of its past. It is not only Blackpool’s attempt at regeneration but, to use a more Gothic metaphor, revivification.

Showzam! features a variety of acts in genres associated with Blackpool’s glory days – it is a “Festival of Circus, Magic and New Variety.”<sup>25</sup> As might be expected, it has

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/higher/ride-of-a-lifetime-from-the-fairground-to-a-university-career-850595.html> accessed 15.23 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.visitblackpool.com/site/home/latest-news/2011/3/14/blackpool-s-showzam-proves-to-be-tourism-tonic-for-resort-a385> accessed 15.25 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.visitblackpool.com/site/home/latest-news/2011/3/14/blackpool-s-showzam-proves-to-be-tourism-tonic-for-resort-a385> accessed 15.25 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.showzam.co.uk/> accessed 15.30 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

a Gothic component. Not only did *Circus of Horrors* play Blackpool's Grand Theatre at Showzam! 2011 but there was also at "Showzam Central" a range of fairground attractions, some of which were very Gothic in themselves, but all of which, I argue, by their very context had become, to an extent, Gothicized. "Showzam Central" was situated in Blackpool's Winter Gardens (officially opened in 1878, bought by Blackpool Council in 2010). In February 2011, it hosted Pinball Geoff's collection of slot and pinball machines ("some dating back from the true inception of pinball, through to its golden age in the 50s, 60s and 70s"<sup>26</sup>), Mike Diamond's museum of curiosities (the gruesome contents included a shrunken human head), Al Stencell's collection of sideshow banners from American Carnival, the Insect Circus Museum, a contemporary version of Tom Norman's Travelling Palladium Show<sup>27</sup>, and a collection of sideshow acts: "The Living Half Lady", "The Mummy" "Electra - One Thousand Volts" and "The Butterfly Girl".

The sideshow acts were originally created in the 1950s by Jon Gresham, and have been recreated by Jon Marshall of Sideshow Illusions from photographs and in consultation with Pat Gresham (Jon Gresham's widow). "The Mummy" is a rip-roaring show which has its audience placed in a mock-up of an Egyptian archaeological dig, subjected to over-powering sound and watching a beautiful dancing Egyptian girl - soon to change into a Karloff/Chaney-type frenzied Mummy. "The Butterfly Girl" chases the lighter side of exotica with another lovely lady situated in a strange land and stranger situation. "The Living Half-Lady" marries illusion and soap opera comedy. "Electra" stages the meeting of yet another lovely girl with the "greatest energy on Earth".

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.showzam.co.uk/latest/newfoshowzamcentral> accessed 15.33 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>27</sup> For information on the original Tom Norman and the performances with which he was associated see "'It was not the show it was the tale that you told": The Life and Legend of Tom Norman, the Silver King" on the University of Sheffield's National Fairground Archive website. <http://www.nfa.dept.shef.ac.uk/history/shows/norman.html>

The side show performances occupy a multiply-framed cultural niche. “The Mummy” sits, generically-speaking, in a frame established by the Universal Studio’s Mummy films. “Electra” sits rather within the science-fiction/Gothic crux of 50s cinema. (The spiel for “Yvette – The Headless Lady” (seen at Showzam! 09) emphasizes this context “Twilight Time Thrills and Chills! ... Yvette is kept alive by the miracles of modern medicine. Well, modern as in all those glorious 50s Sci Fi B movies”<sup>28</sup>). **[insert figure 10.3 here]** They are all part of the science/fiction of illusion and the technology of lights, mirrors and van der Graaff generators. Inevitably for modern audiences, the side-shows were also situated within a cinematic understanding of the Gothic nature of the fairground itself and in particular the 50s fairground. The context of Blackpool’s Winter Gardens provided a third frame. Originally designed for the fairground, to be played to paying audiences, outside, these side-shows were now playing inside, for free. This was not just any “inside” either but Olympia in the once-fabulous Winter Gardens which had through this process been transformed into a museum of entertainment. Curiously this had the effect of Gothicizing the Winter Gardens themselves, giving them a *Carnival of Souls* atmosphere of the fairground trapped in time. The carpet, where no carpet should have been, managed to feel slightly damp and musty; where winds should have blown there was a ceiling. As well as being spectators of the illusions before them the audience was partaking in another illusion. Watching what was a resurrection of an act that had once taken place in a commercial environment, many audience members, watching this free family-entertainment, also found themselves acting. They were acting being the kind of 1950s audience who paid money to see the show.

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<sup>28</sup> <http://www.philandgarth.com/jon/shows.html> accessed 19.52 28<sup>th</sup> July 2011

Showzam! knowingly plays on the interchange with Gothic when it comes to presenting not only the Winter Gardens but the town as a kind of showcase for a history of twentieth-century popular live entertainment. There is of course a sense in which Gothic texts over a variety of media/genres have often acted as a kind of showcase of old genres and this is something that makes Gothicization particularly appropriate. What is happening at Blackpool, however, is not a wholesale Gothicization (which is something which seems to be happening to much of Southwark). Rather at Showzam Central and throughout the festival more generally it is possible to see the way in Gothic has become an entertainment choice, a mode, which has become part of our sense of history rather than a discrete mode of viewing history. Freak shows sit comfortably with pin-ball machines, comedy and science fiction. Gothic has inextricably become linked to our sense of the history of twentieth-century entertainment not only in terms of content but also in the way that the whole decline of the fairground and the circus is seen as a narrative with a Gothic trajectory. The far side of this Gothic trajectory is, however, the current resurrection of and fascination with circus and fairground genres. And it is this fact which enables “entertainment Gothic” to lend to our sense of the past a glittering dark patina of Gothic stylishness. The Gothic history of live entertainment has become subject to a degree of nostalgia.

Showzam! is the brainchild of Professor Vanessa, aka Dr Vanessa Toulmin, the Director of the National Fairground Archive at the University of Sheffield. In contrast to the NNF, much of the funding coming into the festival is not specially-designated Arts

Money but regeneration funding.<sup>29</sup> Showzam! is or has been hosted and funded by Blackpool Council, the Northwest Redevelopment Agency, by Blackpool Theatres, various other commercial sponsors and the University of Sheffield. In fact, Showzam! itself is the product of an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project - Toulmin's Admission All Classes - set up to "revitalise the entertainment and cultural industry quarter"<sup>30</sup> of Blackpool. Since Admission All Classes was first set up it has also been commissioned by Sheffield and Rotherham.

Blackpool has co-opted the Gothic in its attempts at constructing its new civic identity. Not only have its formerly vibrant entertainment centres been turned into (still vibrant) museums of entertainment but Professor Vanessa devised a Halloween Ball in the Spanish Hall in the Winter Gardens in 2008 (with cabaret, burlesque and Jon Marshall's Illusions).<sup>31</sup> And now, after being brought back for the third year by popular demand, Marisa Carnesky's Ghost Train "part ride, part visual theatre and part scare attraction which cleverly combines contemporary attraction technology with age old theatrical illusions" has been acquired by Blackpool Council. Carnesky's Ghost Train is now, according to the website, "permanently located in it's [sic] true spiritual home in the heartland of the British seaside - Blackpool, situated opposite Sandcastle Waterpark on South Promenade."<sup>32</sup> Thus is Blackpool, in partnership with Professor Vanessa, innovatively inventing an Academy-funded Municipal Gothic.

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<sup>29</sup> It should be noted though that NNF's Museums at Night events also had regeneration funding.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.admissionallclasses.com/about.php> accessed 15.23 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011.

<sup>31</sup> For more see the AHRC document on-line at <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Documents/admissionallclasses.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.carneskysghosttrain.com/> accessed 15.38 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011



## **Glastonbury: Gothic Consumption**

Glastonbury and Gothic seem almost mutually contradictory terms. Glastonbury Festival, the world's biggest music festival, is associated in the popular imagination with its hippie past, with the summer solstice, with mud baths, with vast crowds gathered in front of the Pyramid Stage, and seems to have little to do with the Gothic. Indeed the idea of Gothic at Glastonbury has been for many years inherently problematic: at a festival where mind-altering drugs are prevalent, Gothic can mean a very bad trip.

There has, however, been a fair sprinkling of Gothic at Glastonbury in the theatre and cabaret fields. There has been Gothic-themed Circus, Gothic walkabout acts (Futter's Child played in 2008), museums of curiosities (the ubiquitous Insect Circus Museum) and Gothic-inspired dance (most notably the Cholmondeleys and Featherstonehaughs with their *Dancing on your Grave* performed in the Astrolabe in 2008). This year (2011) however, Gothic was thin on the ground in these areas. None of the walkabouts was remotely Gothic (though arguably there were Gothic overtones to the Masked Venetian Beauties) and the sole survivor of these earlier acts was the Insect Circus Museum.

Arguably this is because certain kinds of Gothic have increasingly been colonized/adopted by the middle ground and the middlebrow. As Catherine Spooner points out: "In the twenty-first century, the prevalence of Gothic-themed products make it easy to select Gothic as a lifestyle choice, with or without the commitment entailed by participating in Goth subculture" (Spooner 127). Those performers who up to a few years ago still felt they could still legitimately associate Gothic with sub-cultural Goth (despite the incursions of the advertising industry, theme pubs etc.) have more of a problem exploiting sub-cultural cachet in a world full to repletion of teen-romance-

Gothic and where Andrew Lloyd Webber has included a Goth number in his latest West End spectacular (*Love Never Dies*). Gothic has not, however, been evicted from Glastonbury; rather, it has been moved and the festival has acquired its own Gothic geography. Somewhat disturbingly, Glastonbury Gothic is responsible for the festival's first one-way system.

Glastonbury Gothic in 2011 was played out in the after-hours areas which come into their own after the main music stages close for the night: The Common, Arcadia, Block9, Shangri-La and The Unfairground. These are themed and curated areas designed for partying between 11pm and 4am. As the Glastonbury 2011 Official programme states: "Shangri-La is the after-hours pleasure city of the festival. A futuristic and dystopian wonderland, a *Blade Runner*-inspired urban film-set, it has its own unique rolling narrative evolved over three years, creating a brilliant and bizarre alternative world for you to get lost in."<sup>33</sup> Block9 harks back to the urban nightmares of the more recent past, and, in a field in Somerset, creates amongst other installations "A sinister, decaying 50ft tower block with a life-size, blazing Tube train,"<sup>34</sup> and a dilapidated diner, as well as a "life-size ruin of an NYC tenement building." The massive Arcadia field (chronically underpopulated apart from at the times of its spectacles) is the stage for Arcadia "an experimental company who take military scrap and transform it to create positive environments for the purpose of celebrating life by incorporating circus acts,

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.carneskysghosttrain.com/> accessed 15.38 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011

<sup>34</sup> See the Glastonbury 2011 Official programme (page 60). Much of the material from the official programme can also be found on Glastonbury's official website <http://www.glastonburyfestivals.co.uk>

special effect and cutting-edge technologies to create a huge, unforgettable 360o show.”<sup>35</sup>

The Unfairground is “the latest disaster zone from the mad minds of Joe Rush and some of the UK’s best-loved art hooligans. Now in its second year at Glastonbury, The Unfairground invites you over to the dark side of the world: where plane wrecks, mutants and freaks all groove to Bez’s Acid House.” Shangri-La, Block9, Arcadia and The Unfairground all share a cyber-punk/Mad Max aesthetic of the glamour of the non-glamour of urban ruin.

**[insert figure 10.4 here]**

The Common is rather different. It is billed as “Un Fabuloso Espectaculo”. “Somewhere between Mexico City and Salvador, the mystical world of The Common has been awakened... A sumptuous Latino playground filled with the delights of a vibrant planet of decadence. It’s home to twisted voodoo parlours, debauched bordellos and criminal party houses.”<sup>36</sup> The Common hosted “Los Artistas Behemios” (a mock nineteenth-century life-drawing class), the circus/club Zona Bassline, the bull-fight-arena dance area “Campo Pequeno,”<sup>37</sup> “The Lost Picture Show” (a cinema, serving cocktails and popcorn, swathed in red velvet), Ken Fox’s uninsurable motor-bike spectacular - the Wall of Death, “La Arcada de Adavinos” (a museum of mechanical fortune-telling with some very funny live performance), Burchinger’s Boot Marionettes performing, in the daytime and for a family audience, “Yaga’s Fire”, another themed venue “The Photo Booth” and ‘The Back of Beyond’ where the company Copperdollar presented “a visual feast of art, music and interactive performance by a bizarre bonanza of ghostly carnie

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<sup>35</sup> Glastonbury 2011 Official programme (page 66).

<sup>36</sup> Glastonbury 2011 Official programme (66).

<sup>37</sup> Glastonbury 2011 Official programme (68).

folk who'll transport you to places that are in the dark side of your mind with irresistible sounds that will make your bones want to dance.”<sup>38</sup> The performance crew at this last venue were dressed and made up as glamorous ghosts whether serving at the bar or dancing with customers. Like the side-shows at Showzam Central, The Common mixed and mingled different kinds of past and perspectives on the twentieth-century past. Gothic (most properly seen in the Arcada de Adavinos) was one mode available, sitting beside tattered glamour (Lost Cinema), circus-fun (Zona Bassline) and nostalgia for the pre-health and safety days of the 50s (Wall of Death).

Apart from at The Common, Glastonbury's performed Gothic was in some respects, despite its lavish dressing, pretty denuded. Although some of it purported to be Gothic with narrative - “[I]n 2011 the storyline becomes pre-apocalyptic. The population of Shangri-La is preparing to flee the end of the world in 2012”<sup>39</sup> - the narrative aspects of Shangri-La, Block9, Arcadia and The Unfairground were practically nil. Much of it was not even performed. The main performance aspect seemed to be the installation but many of the spaces were no more than surfaces and many of the venues that seemed to promise labyrinthine exploration, merely a large dark room. There was a dominant aesthetic of gigantism – associated with the technological feats involved in erecting massive concrete tower blocks or moving army tanks around the site – but little left to obscurity. Even in Shangri-La, an “interactive environment” with soundtrack, which was set up as a series of seedy side-streets in a sci-fi city, exhibits (including some of Pinball Geoff's collection) were rarely more than one room deep. Very little was to be explored

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<sup>38</sup> This came with the following health warning: “We also wish to state that Glastonbury Festival does NOT condone bullfighting; in fact we are totally OPPOSED to bullfighting in all its various guises” (68).

<sup>39</sup> Glastonbury 2011 Official programme (69)

and significantly, the one installation in Shangri-La which did require exploration and journeying round was the Wellcome Trust's mock de-contamination unit.

Like the Gothic walkabouts, without being quite as family friendly, this was Gothic without traditional Gothic affect. Glastonbury Gothic rather than a performance mode, is an entertainment mode, a Gothic of consumption. It has been designed for the enjoyable consumption of drink, dance and drugs and even, in the case of one of the installations in Block9, a meal (one serving a day). Despite appearances often what was being consumed was singularly innocuous – the “Hotel Slumbarave Metropolis” in Shangri-La offered foot massage. Although the spin for The Unfairground noted of the wrecked plane as a venue: “Theme pubs will never seem the same again,” they will.<sup>40</sup> After all, the wrecked plane is only a theme pub.

Glastonbury's after-hours Gothic is anything but thorough-going, shorn of narrative, affect and hybridized to the point of generic melt-down. It is Gothic as style and Gothic as the excess of consumption. The very choice of Gothic signifies the luxury of abandon and indicates the prevalence of new types of drugs – recreational rather than mind-bending. Glastonbury Gothic is based on the premise that its consumers are not going to commit themselves to anything imaginatively. I have quoted at length from the copy-writers' descriptions of these areas because they play a key part in the construction of these Glastonbury Gothic experiences. As regards these after-hours fields, there is a mutually-beneficial collaboration between the language of consumerism and the language of installation. The experience of this place has been copy-written beforehand. In fields where film set has replaced performance it is necessary for spin to supplement experience.

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<sup>40</sup> Glastonbury 2011 Official programme (60).

## **Conclusion**

When considering these examples of contemporary Gothic live performance, what I have found most surprising is the ability of Gothic to be discontiguated: for motifs, discourse, narrative, affect to be dismantled. Not only may Gothic motifs be shorn from Gothic narratives, but so may the traditional affects associated with Gothic. Gothic cachet as regards any of these aspects is drawn on without necessarily producing a whole-going Gothic text, in fact hybridization is often the norm, whether it be the Gothic/sci-fi gameshow, or, for me the most incongruous, the reggae sets in Block9. Perhaps the most surprising aspect is the prevalence of virtually affect-less Gothic (in terms of the affects traditionally associated with Gothic). In the case of Glastonbury Gothic, the whole “package” is not required and it is perfectly possible, even desirable, to have an affect-less, narrative-less Gothic. Gothic as accessory might be said to have replaced Gothic as discourse. Embracing Gothic imagery but ignoring Gothic affect becomes an expression of consumer decadence for the music-festival-going public.

A recurrent phenomenon has been the recourse to early twentieth-century Gothic in live performance. Rather than commenting merely on the significance of this material for those drawing upon it, it’s worth turning the enquiry round and asking “what happens to out-moded Gothic”? What is involved in this habitual recourse to the early twentieth-century Gothic of fairground, circus and film? Outmoded Gothic it seems is a useful cultural tool, providing a common language. Gothic imagery and tropes cemented by their prevalence in early twentieth-century film have become a kind of common currency. Outmoded Gothic can act as a useful signifier and perform a number of significant

paradoxes. It can signify scary without actually being scary. To use Chris Baldick's concept of the "homeopathic principle" (Baldick xiii) at work in Gothic writing, what the use of antiquated Gothic protects against is not the horrors of the past but the ability of Gothic itself to shock: the use of antiquated Gothic sees Gothic inoculating against itself, as it were. Antiquated Gothic can also signify popular whether it has retained its original popularity or not. This is one of the reasons for its attraction both for those involved in selling us something and for those wanting to educate. Because Gothic has its desirable "popular culture" cachet, it is seen as possessing the requisite qualities for those engaged in selling what is perceived as less popular: museums and art galleries. For those involved in providing edifying entertainment to the British public, outmoded Gothic has the added advantage of being understood as popular whilst remaining in some ways satisfyingly elitist.

Gothic itself might be said to have become part of a popular sense of our history, certainly it has influenced an understanding of the nature of the history of popular entertainment. The use of Gothic performance in the Museum at Night events and at Blackpool is a sign of an understanding of history that is not placed in opposition to the fictionality of Gothic but comprehends Gothic. Gothic, particularly outmoded Gothic, can come to "constitute a kind of heritage" in itself (McEvoy 149). Instead of Gothic being an attitude towards history, Gothic has become both a part of history and, for many, a style choice in relation to the presentation of history.

To return to the question of economics. Glastonbury in 1990 featured the cyberpunk spectacles of Archaos the French new circus company whose spectacles of horror and the decay of civilizations, went hand in hand with their chaotic, and ultimately

disastrous, financial arrangements.<sup>41</sup> Much of the Gothic performance that I have been considering in this essays is founded on a different kind of economy, benefitting from direct or indirect (such as through the public funding of festivals) Arts funding – and sometimes both – from regeneration funding and even, in the case of Showzam!, from University funding. Carnesky’s Ghost Train is a particularly interesting example that manages to tick all the boxes. As Marisa Carnesky’s website tells us, the ghost train was funded, commissioned and invested in by Blackpool Council, Arts Council of England Nesta, Hellhound, European Cultural Foundation, Warwick Arts Centre, Fierce, Mama Cash, Creative Lewisham Agency, Creative London, London Artists Projects.”<sup>42</sup> Carnesky herself is currently AHRC Creative and Performing Arts Fellow at the National Fairground Archive at The University of Sheffield. This is all well and good but is curiously at odds with what could be termed an economic aesthetic underlying much of this Gothic live performance. Part of the attraction of Gothicized quasi-early twentieth-century entertainment is our sense of the direct economic transactions (and hardships) of the period. In the Gothicized takes on earlier Gothic that I’ve been looking at, the transfer of hard cash from punter to performer has in many cases been replaced by the economy of funding mechanisms.

The fortunes of Gothic performance at some of these contemporary Arts festivals tell us much about the circulation of Gothic in contemporary British society. One of the most surprising aspects is its respectability – born out of the perception of it as formerly disreputable, even risqué. It is courted by educationalists in children’s television, by Culture24, by towns eager to present their past so as to secure their future. Gothic has

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the story of Archaos see <http://archaos.info/pages/?id=14>.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.carnesky.com/productions.html> accessed 15.46 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011.



been funded by regional councils, by the Arts Council, by the AHRC, by the University of Sheffield, by aid organizations (Medecins sans Frontieres involved in Zona Bassline in The Common at Glastonbury) and by the public face of medical research - the Wellcome Trust. All are happy to bed down with the Gothic.

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