



AS GRACEFUL AS THEY WERE DISGRACEFUL :

EROTICISM AND THE FAIRGROUND

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The main importance of the fair is not so much for merchandize and the supplying what people really want; but as a sort of Bacchanalia, to gratify the multitudes in their wandering and irregular thoughts...

Henry Morley, *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair*, 1859

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The travelling funfair in British culture has long occupied a strange sense of otherworldliness and discourse from the surroundings into which it appears. Acting as transitory spaces where cultures collide but also places of traditional continuity, the fair becomes a place of customary but also transitory history. Today's travelling fairground owes its existence both to the network of chartered and prescriptive fairs, which were brought into place from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, and the onset of the industrial revolution in the mid nineteenth century which transformed the landscape to one of modernity and motion, morality and conformity. The fairground in its pre-industrial days was seen as a venue for the pursuit of pleasure - a carnival in which all aspects of society could mingle and participate in a multitude of vices and experiences. This concept of the carnivalesque as described by Mikhail Bakhtin's in his study of the Venetian Carnival, Rabelais and his World, was an arena where familiar and free interaction between people occurred, where unacceptable behaviour was accepted against the norms of society and where the format of the carnival allows familiar and free behaviour, a world which was turned upside down to create a sensualistic ritualistic performance.

Perhaps, the most documented and infamous fair in England to which this interpretation could be applied was St Bartholomew, founded in 1133 when Henry I granted a charter to his jester Rahere, the fair later being immortalised by Ben Jonson in 1614. Throughout its long history, the association between Bartholomew Fair and to a lesser extent Greenwich, Southwark and Mayfair, with immorality was prevalent. William Addison comments on Bartholomew Fair in his *History of English Fairs and Markets* that:

Every component of the fair was there from the beginning, every manifestation and expression of its piety, its fasting, its greed, its folly, and it seems in melodramatic proportions.

The bawdiness and immorality attached to this fair led to a chronicler from 1641 describing the fairgoers as 'knaves and fooles, cuckolds and cuckoldmakers, Bauds, Whores, Pimpes and Panders, Rogues and Rascalls, the little Loud-one and the witty wanton'. The review of the fair continues with the writer appraising the wares and amusements on offer:

And now being arrived through the long walke to Saint Bartholomew Hospital; that place (me thinkes) appears to me a fucking Exchange and may be so termed not unfitly; for many a handsome wench exchanges her maidenhead for a small favour .. for she comes not hither with her sweetheart to serve her owne turne only but also to satisfie his desire; according to the old saying, one good turn deserves another.

This association between loose sexuality and the fairground was not unique to Bartholomew Fair and a certain percentage of licenses and charters were revoked in 19th century Britain due to this licentious reputation. Those that survived the cull were reformed by the showpeople and businessmen alike into more respectable arenas of recreation where the wonders of the industrial revolution and scientific discoveries of the late 19th century were premiered. However, despite the attempts by moral puritans to tame the baying crowds, the elements of untamed sexuality, the Bakhtinian world of the carnivalesque remained beneath the veneer of the modernistic fairground roundabouts and carousels. A visitor to Buxton a small town in Derbyshire in 1905 complained about the behaviour of the local women who 'pay a penny for the 'delight' of being carried up with a rush, hanging by the hands, at a dizzy height, to a wire cable, to be caught at the bottom by a greasy showman in corduroys - a dangerous and degrading form of amusement'. Here is the true spirit of the fair captured by the moralistic tones of the journalist who cannot quite believe that the visitors to the fair are inhabitants of his town! The fair has created an atmosphere of carnivalesque enjoyment where the world is temporarily turned upside down, classless and sexless, where even women behave badly and lacking in decorum. 'There moves a gulf stream of people of all classes, a tumultuous sea of human souls - and are evidently bent on enjoying themselves, even at the expense of decorum.



The relationship between immorality and sexuality was never more apparent in the amusement grounds across the Atlantic. From the construction of the Midway at the 1893 Chicago Exposition, which created a separate area for amusements, sideshows and entertainments, the role of the midway in American popular culture has translated into a contemporary arena for the carnivalesque. This is most obvious within the area known as the side-ground on British fairgrounds and the space where the sideshows operated on American midways.¹ The modernity of the fairground allowed a moment of intimacy when the audience was thrown into the void of the original Dark Ride, the Tunnel of Love, and then later the Ghost Train. The rides with their white knuckle offerings enabled audiences to cling, touch, group or embrace in the confines of an enclosed car or compartment whilst the world spun them around in a vortex of speed and modernity. However, it was entry into the sideshows that revealed to the visitor the full frontal erotic reality of the female nude. Offering a titillating mixture of sex, horror and burlesque they were in the words of one chronicler, observing a tableaux vivant show at Coventry Fair in the 1890s, 'the place where the graceful as well as the disgraceful are on view'. The sideshows of the twentieth century were a continuous link to the bacchanalia of the medieval and preindustrial European fairs, offering sex, nudity and the wonders of gay Paree for a penny or a dime. From the Girlie shows of the American midways and Coney Island to the striptease shows of 1950s Britain, the sauciness of the fairground experience was one of titillation, eroticism and risqué naughtiness.

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