'The Itinerant British Showman':
an exploration of the history and contemporary realisation of three popular
entertainment forms.


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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.


Signature: …………………………………………………………

**Abstract**

This thesis is a reflection upon three aspects of my practice as a performer: it explores the ways in which the seaside pierrot troupe, the fairground sideshow and the peepshow contribute to a deeper understanding of the showman's role. This practice is combined with published materials in the form of broadcasts and publicly accessible media, which contextualize my research. I shall demonstrate how a showman may use historical performance forms to present subversive, social and political comment, in contemporary public space.

***Notes to Ebook format:***
*A constraint of this format is that the chapter headings are already set by the programme and there are no page numbers possible (because the font size and imagery can be expanded or contracted by the viewer). A short introduction and instruction manual has been provided with this thesis by the technicians in the Drama Department at Exeter University to make the operation as simple as possible.*

# Introduction

**'See, reflect and spare no trouble**
**For knowledge makes our pleasures double'**
*Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show*, (London: Thomas Tegg, 1839), p. 38.

**Chapter 2: Introduction:**

The purpose of this thesis is to understand and legitimise the form and function underpinning a tradition of itinerant British showman performance – a style of delivery that has prevailed as part of popular culture for centuries. In this context, I have used the term 'showman' (as distinct from an 'actor' or 'salesman',) to mean the presentation by a performer of unscripted, fictional material in public space, using any dramaturgical means at his or her disposal.  It is a style that my performance practice has sought to embody over recent years. It could be considered as part of an intangible cultural heritage, as identified by UNESCO in 1983:

> The 'intangible cultural heritage' means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.[1]

Such practice as that of the itinerant British showman is commonly disregarded as 'low brow' or illegitimate, but using my unique recent experiments and experiences in their practical implementation, I hope to reclaim a performance form that has both historical precedent and contemporary relevance and which operates in a liminal space between heritage performance and contemporary practice. Over the last three decades, my performance practice and historical researches have focussed increasingly on the re-imagining and embodiment of *al fresco*, popular cultural heritage in which 'the medium of transmission is secondary to the act of transmission.'[2]

These historical popular entertainment forms, which I have re-imagined for contemporary audiences, contain a subversive potential which lies buried beneath the accretion of assumptions surrounding the stereotypes of high and low art. The subversive potential of such popular entertainment, what Stallybrass and White dub 'low domains', comes from the dichotomy between bourgeois disgust and desire – a hinterland where the potential for alternative realities can be played-out:

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[1] Cited in Diana Taylor, 'Performance and Intangible Cultural Heritage', *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. by Tracy C. Davis (Cambridge University Press, 2008). pp. 91-104 (p. 95).

[2] Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance – between Brecht and Baudrillard*, (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 172-3.

> These low domains, apparently dispelled as 'Other', return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination. The forest, the fair, the theatre, the slum, the circus, the seaside resort, the 'savage': all these, placed at the outer limit of civil life, become symbolic contents of bourgeois desire.[3]

Each of the reimagined creations featured in this thesis fit into this category of 'otherness', with the opportunity to explore, distort and potentially subvert the expectations and limitations of bourgeois controls of public behaviour and public space.

Significantly, these forms use the audience as collaborators, rather than mere consumers, just as Oliver Double notes about variety theatre: 'the particular circumstances of the show - the audience, the orchestra, the theatre itself – could be openly acknowledged and worked into the act.'[4] Double regards this as being unique to the variety form, but it is in fact, a prerequisite of many popular entertainments.

There is a marked lack of serious consideration or rigorous theoretical analysis of the marginalised performance forms of street theatre, fairground sideshows, pierrot concert parties, or peepshows, which has resulted in them being largely dismissed as commercialised and not worthy of serious analysis. In addition to the lack of analytical publications about these topics, there is a particular paucity of material available regarding the style and content of their performance. However, alongside my theoretical research and practice for this thesis, I have also made numerous short films and series of radio broadcasts that I have adapted, written and presented. These demonstrate and annotate the biographies and stories of illegitimate, popular entertainers and which contextualise my work and thinking for a wider radio and online audience. These media broadcasts have run concurrently with my live practice of performing with pierrots, flea circuses and peepshows, providing a context and reach for my performance work that is way beyond that which is possible with small, immediate, live shows. The broadcast material attempts to present the stories of past itinerant performers for as wide an audience as possible.  As part of their re-imagining for a contemporary context, I added my own 'take' to the original material to draw parallels with the present and provide a platform for alternative perspectives on culture and society. These audio and video materials have already been seen or heard by a large, mainstream audience and as such, have framed both my ongoing, live practical work and my theoretical analysis. These media files are embedded within this Ebook as the published component of my thesis, not merely as an annotation. My role in the creation of each of these public pieces has been as curator, annotator, editor and presenter: the raw, primary research has, in some instances, been sourced elsewhere, but their realisation in an accessible, public format, has been my own work – paralleled by own performance practice as research, which has then, in turn, informed the published material. Each of the publications has my own, original material embedded within it – usually as a way to

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[3] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 191.
[4] Oliver Double, *Britain had Talent* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 140.

draw direct contemporary parallels and link the narrative themes into more twenty-first century concerns.

The following example is a BBC Radio 4 series entitled *Clowning Around*, which explores the history of British clowning from Shakespearean times to the present day. It incorporates excerpts from a variety of my previous radio series on itinerant performers (notably Joseph Grimaldi, Dan Leno and Max Wall), as well as material from the BBC archives – these are presented by me as an accessible journey through four hundred years of history of clowning and comedy. Radio 4Extra source their material from their own archives and commission new programmes from existing stock. My role in the following series was to collate and present a coherent narrative for comedy and clowning in Britain, using collaborators from my previous research projects (eg Professor Jacky Bratton, Dr Caroline Radcliffe and Professor David Wiles), together with a significant number of my own broadcast projects (eg excerpts from 'An Audience with Joey Grimaldi', 'An Audience with Dan Leno', 'An Audience with Max Wall', 'The Byng Ballads', 'The Memoirs of Clifford Essex', 'Clowning in the Downturn'). These were then merged with older archive material and a narrative written by me. I used the mass media in this way to inculcate awareness of the parallels between historical and contemporary practice in an accessible form of presentation and through reanimating the archives, to offer an alternative way of viewing the current cultural context.

**Audio 3.1-3.3:** *'Clowning Around', episodes 1-3. BBC Radio 4Extra (2015)*

As well as these published outputs, I have contributed directly to a number of related academic explorations and seminal projects: I was employed as part of Jacky Bratton's contemporary re-imagining of 'The Victorian Clown' for Royal Holloway, University of London with Gilli Bush-Bailey; I contributed to Martin Reeve's thesis on Punch & Judy; I was the collaborative expert on Jane Milling's AHRC research project about seaside pierrots ('Revitalising the Prom'); I helped formulate Dave Calvert's recent papers on pierrot troupes; I worked with Phil Smith as collaborator on 'The Geo-Quest' as part of his recent books and papers; I worked with Welfare State International throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Over the years, my primary perspective has been as a practitioner, or 'insider' to performance, which has enabled me to have an unique understanding of the form and content, as well as the contemporary possibilities.

The various performance practices explored in this thesis, demonstrate a methodological process of practice as research[5] that moves from an embodied, incremental, proximal knowledge of performance forms, through critical reflection and explicit practice-led pedagogy and research, into a final stage in which the praxis (theory imbricated within practice) manifests new knowledge and insights into the role and function of the itinerant British showman – both in their historical and contemporary contexts. I have recreated these popular entertainment forms in order to explore their function through practice. For twenty-seven years I created, managed and performed 'The Pierrotters' – a re-imagined seaside pierrot troupe

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[5] Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts; Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistancies,* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

which regularly performed throughout Britain and was the only recent reincarnation of the form to have performed professional summer seasons. Alongside my practical involvement, I researched the history and content of the industry, which has given me an unique insight into the form. This re-imagining of the pierrot form was not initially developed with any research inquiry at its core, but rather it was driven by curiosity and financial necessity – as such, it represents a process of learning through doing, or 'liquid knowing'.[6] It was only later, as I pursued a more pedagogical role in transferring the embodied knowledge of the form to a new generation, that my practice informed more original academic research enquiry to yield new knowledge. My work on pierrots provided the "clew (thread)"[7] that resulted in focussing my subsequent practice as research into the role of itinerant showman in sideshows and peepshows and the perceived potential for that role to contain a range of challenging material.

Five years ago, I created a sideshow booth ('The Imaginarium') and my flea circus, explicitly to explore the potential of creating a ludic space in 'ordinary' urban environments. This now tours during the summer season and alternates with The Peepshow at festivals and events all around the country. These attractions were devised as a means of testing my emerging theories about performance practices of showfolk in public space and how to construct a temporary, ludic, carnivalesque environment.

As a result of this preceding work and alongside the fruits of my parallel research with the broadcast publications, I most recently created 'The Peepshow', which employs a multiplicity of different medias and technologies simultaneously to 'challenge the normative way of looking at the world from a linear perspective.'[8] This project is a convergence of my previous research outputs and attempts to synthesise them by putting into practice my discovery that there is a mode of itinerant showman performance, in which historical tropes of popular entertainment can be utilised in ordinary urban spaces, to deliver political content. This final articulation of the showman's performance form is the culmination of my research: it began with my 'know-how' process of cumulative learning through 'The Pierrotters', then developed through the critical reflection and theoretical analysis of 'know-what', in which the tacit, experiential learning is made explicit, before finally progressing to the synthesis of 'know-that', in which I assert fresh insights and understanding of the role of the itinerant British showman.[9]

The very accessibility and familiarity of these popular artforms has enabled me to make 'the present interrogate the past not as mimesis or exact imitation, but as a negotiation about its meaning in the present.'[10] The interpenetration of performative signs which have absorbed meanings by being steeped in former usage, enables them to refract meaning in other contexts and times, what Bakhtin termed

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[6] Nelson, p. 52.

[7] Nelson, p. 27.

[8] Caroline Radcliffe, 'Remediation and Immediacy in the Theatre of Sensation', *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 36/2, 2009. 38-52 (p. 40).

[9] Nelson, *passim*.

[10] Kershaw p. 182.

'heteroglossia', as a polyphonic address to the audience in which 'its mediality is the interplay of cinematography and theatricality, its temporality is the navigation between the epochs, its audience strategy is the mobilisation of the viewing experience between exploration, attraction and archaeology.'[11] In my work, I combine together old and new forms, old and new content, old and new technologies and in so doing, explore both old and new attitudes to audiences. My investigation of past forms of popular entertainment is not to create some 'authentic' revival, but to use the accretion of multiple possible meanings from the past in order to engage with contemporary audiences.

This use of familiar, yet arcane tropes of popular performance forms, parallels the Situationists' most widely recognised technique of 'detournement', 'the reversal of "pre-existing" aesthetic elements to create a new and subversive effect, (a) mixture of pastiche, parody, and plagiarism'.[12] Indeed, popular entertainment has always been linked with popular politics – almanacs, chap-books, broadside ballads, radical journals were all peddled in the loose anarchy of the fairground and street. My recent exploration and development of historical forms has been a deliberate, political act rather than any attempt at historical verisimilitude or heritage practice.

In the following paper, I shall demonstrate the potential of embodied performance practice, using three, specific, British popular entertainment forms. I shall demonstrate how the heteroglossial, polyphonic aesthetics of these forms may facilitate counter-cultural, sagacious, contemporary comment by the showma n who is able to connect the past with the present.

Part 1 uses the pierrot troupe as the start of an enquiry into historical popular entertainment tropes: how form, costume and peripatetic performance within the defined, ludic environment of the seaside, enabled us to penetrate mainstream environments with mildly subversive content and intent.

Part 2 explores the potential of a fairground or sideshow environment to transform ordinary space and provide an artificial, temporary, portable milieu for the audience's encounter with the showman, where carnivalesque misrule can reign.

Part 3 uses the recreation of an eighteenth century, raree peepshow to demonstrate how an historical form, transformed space and more overt, political content can be combined as an example of more than just nostalgia, but as contemporary, politicised commentary.

The conclusion draws my research and practice together and provides a definition of this type of itinerant practice that can be applied to a variety of possible performative contexts in the past, the present and the future.

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[11] Claude Bertemes and Nicole Dahlen, 'Back to the Future: Early Cinema and Late Economy of Attention. An interim report about *Crazy Cinematographe'. Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance, KINtop studies in early cinema – volume 1*, ed. Martin Loiperdinger (Hertfordshire: John Libbey Publishing Limited, 2011), p. 102.

[12] Graham White 'Direct Action, Dramatic Action: Theatre and Situationist Theory', *NTQ* IX. 36, (1993), 329-340. (p. 330).

# 'Troupes & tropes – The English Pierrot'

**'I would wipe all sorrow from your eyes
And make you happy, good, and wise.'**
*Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show, Ibid.* p. 443.

**Chapter 3: Troupes & tropes – The English Pierrot**

<u>Section 1: 'Historiography, history and context'</u>

Pierrot troupes were seasonal seaside companies of performers, dressed in white satin, pom-poms and conical hats, who used song, dance, comedy and banter; they performed generally in the open air (or *al fresco*) and mainly at seasides, between 1890 and 1938.[13]

The pierrot concert party show was a significant British performance form, which lasted as a coherent industry from its inception in 1890, for approximately fifty years. Alongside variety theatre and pantomime, the pierrots and concert parties were a key component of the live popular performance entertainment industry in the first half of the twentieth century. Remarkably, this sector of popular entertainment has largely escaped coherent scholarly documentation, both in terms of the troupes and of the form (although there have been some explorations of preceding forms and fleeting reference in work such as Michael Pickering's excellent study of *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*,[14] Baz Kershaw's writing in *The Radical in Performance*[15] and Sophie Nield's chapter in *Cambridge History of British Theatre*).[16] I own one of the world's largest archive of materials relating to seaside pierrot troupes and concert parties, comprising more than ten thousand photographic images, hundreds of programmes, folios and songsheets, a wide range of original testimonies on tape and hand-written archives and material from early twentieth century troupes, as well as a comprehensive collection of secondary sources such as autobiographies, resort histories and journals about individuals by groups such the British Music Hall Society.

- ***3 X Images of archive here***

Evidence from my archive indicates that there were in excess of 1000 troupes and many thousands of performers employed during the period 1891-1938. Indeed, most of the documentary material on the topic, resides in individual private collections, as programmes, postcards, photographs and songsheets; these are sometimes bequeathed to university libraries, collated through local history internet groups or occasionally oral history and reminiscence activities produced by resort

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[13] There is no precise 'end' to the pierrot troupe era, but the outbreak of the Second World War signifies a suitable break-point of change in the format of seaside entertainment and the change in market demand.

[14] Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

[15] Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance – between Brecht and Baudrillard,* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 140-156 .

[16] Sophie Nield, 'Popular Theatre 1896-1940', B Kershaw (ed.), *Cambridge History of British Theatre vol. 3*. Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 86-109.

communities. Thus the existing historiography and archiving of the pierrot troupe tradition is largely comprised of what Bratton calls 'the tribal scribes'[17] or what I have often termed 'the anoraks' – non-professionals, fans, enthusiasts, and participants, who describe their participation or consumption from personal memoirs, rather than attempting any more theoretical or rigorous analysis.

As a practitioner, archivist and researcher of the form, I am responsible for holding much of that lost history – both in the primary material of my archives and the practice of reimagining the pierrot concert party over the last thirty-five years. This places me in an ideal situation from which to articulate the meaning and function of the pierrot concert party. There are numerous analyses of the development of the seaside resorts in Britain, which tangentially address some of the entertainment forms to evolve there – an example being James Walvin's *Beside the Seaside*[18] but there is very little specific analysis of the pierrot troupes and concert parties as a form. Other collectors and now-deceased tribal scribes, such as Geoff Mellor, Bill Pertwee and Ben & Mave Chapman, are all people who have advised me on my work and who were aware of, or even came to watch 'The Pierrotters' perform. I have provided guidance and advice to more recent projects such as Dave Calvert's short papers[19] and Channel 4's The Edwardian Farm *(footnote link to clip* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ejkMsNMf1h8 *47-49.15).* I received an award from the Society for Theatre Research in 1991 to fund my early archival researches and subsequently, further support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) in 2005 for a project entitled 'We Do Like to be Beside the Seaside'. The fact is, that there is very little material available to the researcher apart from my own archive and practice, which makes my position for reflection unique.

In outline, the history of the pierrot concert party in Britain is as follows: Pierrot is a familiar character originating from Pedrolino in the *commedia d'ell arte.* For four centuries, itinerant commedia troupes travelled the continent of Europe, playing-out the familiar *schenas* and *lazzis* to popular audiences on the streets and piazzas, using archetypal characters within a loosely-arranged narrative structure. Characteristics of the popular entertainment form called the Italian Comedy brushed-off into more mainstream entertainments, as can be observed in Shakespeare (Andrew Aguecheek & Sir Toby Belch), Moliere (Mosca) and pantomime, but in the late nineteenth century, the character of pierrot was given a distinctly British make-over by the English banjo entrepreneur Clifford Essex: having seen a highly-acclaimed production of 'L'Enfant Prodigue' at the Princess of Wales' Theatre, featuring a family of silent pierrots. He was inspired by this show to create his own version of a pierrot troupe in 1891.

*2 X Clifford Essex images to be added here*

The following is a 3-part series of 15-minute broadcasts, which I made for BBC Radio 4 and broadcast in 2012 (then re-broadcast again in 2013) about the evolution

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[17] Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 5.

[18] James Walvin, *Beside the Seaside* (London: Allen Lane, 1978).

[19] 'From Pedrolino to a Pierrot: The Origin, Ancestry and Ambivalence of the British Pierrot Troupe', *Popular Entertainment Studies* 4.1, (2013), pp. 6-23.

of the first season of Clifford Essex's pierrots. The original material is drawn from archive sources which I researched over the previous 10 years at the British Library: I found the majority of this material in 'Banjo, Mandolin and Guitar Monthly', which I then photocopied in their entirety, before scanning them into Word format, editing them into the necessary lengths of segment for the commissioned slot on BBC Radio 4 and finally introducing my own narrative structure and performing them for broadcast.

***Here add image of the BMG photocopy + appendix of script of 'Pierrot Hero'***,

***Audio 4.1-4.3:*** *'Pierrot Hero: The Story of Clifford Essex'. Episodes 1-3, BBC Radio 4 (2013)*

In the decade following the foundation of Clifford Essex's original troupe, the performance model of a troupe of pierrots clad uniformly in floppy white costumes, black pom-poms and conical hats, presenting a variety-based show format *al fresco*, using music, comedy and terpsichore, became so widespread that almost every resort in Britain boasted of one or more troupes as visitor attractions. By the turn of the century, the pierrots had ousted the so-called 'nigger minstrels', who had dominated the busking performance scene since the mid- Nineteenth Century.[20]

The pierrots' appeal to a family audience, with their inclusion of female performers, self-consciously decorous material and their uniform, anodyne dress, meant that they were ideally suited to the seaside resorts with which they were most closely associated. By the outbreak of the First World War, pierrot troupes had become a mass entertainment form, which, according to my archival records, show more than a thousand troupes performing in hundreds of resorts and towns, employing tens of thousands of artists. At this time, pantomime, music hall, travelling fairs, circuses and pierrot troupes provided the greatest amount of employment for performance artists and between them, they provided the primary cultural experiences for the majority of the working class audience in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As David Calvert observes in 'From Pedrolino to Pierrot',[21] the individual *zanni* archetype of 'Pierrot' which stems from a combination of *commedia* and *opéra bouffe* (a late nineteenth-century French genre of light, satirical operetta which included the adaptation and modification of existing forms and tropes for comic purposes), morphed into the  distinctive British definition of a pierrot 'troupe' – a performance form that utilised a perceived popular, historical aesthetic, combined with the opportunity to present contemporary material. Due to the familiar, accessible style of delivery and the British Edwardian association of the seaside holiday with a sense of place, home and stability, it was an ideal platform through which to present a capsule of nationalistic comfort during the First World War and many troupes found their way

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[20] For a detailed history of British blackface minstrelsy, see Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain*, (Hampshire: Ashgate), 2008 and for further analysis Baz Kershaw *The Radical in Performance: between Brecht and Baudrillard***,** (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 140-153.

[21]Dave Calvert, (2013).

across the Channel to perform in distribution centres, field hospitals and even towards the front-line.

Between the wars, pierrot troupes remained a feature of the typical British seaside holiday, although the role of the commedia-based costume declined and increasingly the troupes wore less stylised attire and referred to themselves as concert parties. Nevertheless, the format and style of delivery remained primarily outdoors, acoustic and family friendly.

As part of community projects, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, I created an interactive, public exhibition presenting the history of the pierrots and concert parties as they evolved from Victorian times to the present day. In addition to live performance and a visual display of exhibition panels, I created a CD-ROM articulating the history of the form and tied-into key stage targets within the national curriculum. I researched each of these short films that are featured in the CD-ROM, using my own archive and then storyboarded them; I wrote the scripts and recorded them. There follows a selection of these short films from the CD-ROM, which was sold at The Pierrotters' performances and given-away to participants as part of subsequent community projects, such as 'The Pier Echoes' and 'The Chin Uppers'. These films demonstrate how my research materials have been used to make the information and research materials accessible to a wider public, as well as giving more detailed information about the style and context of pierrot performance.

***Movie 4.1-4.3****: 'History of the Pierrots' / 'Costume and Make-up' / 'Music & Material'.*

It was only after the Second World War, with package holidays, summer camps, motoring holidays and the emergence of a financially independent teenage market, that the concert parties fell into decline. In 1963, Theatre Workshop's production of *Oh! What A Lovely War* at Theatre Royal, Stratford East and the subsequent film directed by Richard Attenborough in 1969, used pierrots to present a satirical attack upon the conduct of the Great War. However, although these lodged or reaffirmed the vernacular memory of the pierrot troupe trope in the popular British consciousness, the performance form embedded in these productions was clearly framed as historicised and anachronistic, it bore little or no resemblance to the more contemporary practices of 1960s popular entertainment in Britain. The format of an *al fresco* pierrot or concert party show appeared only sporadically through the 1950-70s, although it did exist in a sublimated, remediated fashion through sketch-based radio formats and television anachronisms such as 'The Black and White Minstrel Show' or 'It Ain't Half Hot Mum'. Such shows combined nostalgia for a sense of British identity and 'traditional values', with an exciting new mass medium.

By 1980, there were no professional, regularly-performing pierrot troupes or concert parties left in existence – merely a vernacular memory. As noted earlier, there was no lasting record of their impact on generations of British working class audiences. Ninety years of an indigenous, British performance artform is virtually absent from any social or cultural historiography. There is no film footage of any seaside troupes, apart from ninety seconds on Blackpool Central Pier in the Mitchell & Kenyon

series[22] and there are no sound recordings of any of the vast number of troupes who had plied their trade at the seaside resorts for almost a century. It was in view of this, that I had created the CD-ROM to provide an accessible way of understanding the evolution and context of the seaside pierrot troupe tradition.

In 1983, having established that there was little more than a vestigial, somewhat nostalgic memory of the pierrots and barely any written material, I resolved to explore the form through reviving its practice and create my own troupe in Brighton – 'The Pierrotters'. It seemed to me that the direct experience of presenting the form in contemporary public space would give me some immediate way of understanding the form and function of the genre. I already had some experience of street performance from my undergraduate days of agit-prop shows, which, like comedy, had shown me that

> It's not a technique that can be learned in front of the bathroom mirror; it's an intuitive state of grace that has to be discovered, an abstract lubricant that exists in the eternal now and can only be found by taking risks and playing around with a live audience…it's all in the doing of it.[23]

Here follows another short film from the CD-ROM, which gives a brief introduction and contextualisation to 'The Pierrotters' and their work, within which can be seen a range of *al fresco* seaside performance contexts and material retrieved from a century of musical and comedy sources:

**Movie 4.4:** *'The Pierrotters'*


Section 2: 'Re-making history and exploring its subversive potential in performance'

Performance of historical and heritage forms can easily drift into uncritical populism and thereby endorse or reinforce what might be called the 'authorised heritage discourse', a hegemonic perspective, which 'emphasises the materiality and innate value of heritage and stresses the monumental and grand, national narratives and values, as well as the comfortable and the "'good"',[24]

The effect of this is to de-legitimise other competing discourses or performances of heritage. Smith goes on to define heritage further:

> Heritage is not a thing, but a process of meaning-making and negotiation and that the authenticity of heritage lies not in its physical fabric, but in the

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[22] *DVD - The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon: Complete BBC Series [2004] Catalogue number: BFIVD692*

[23] Tony Allen, *Attitude: wanna make something of it? The secret of stand-up comedy,* (Glastonbury, Somerset: Gothic Image Publications, 2002) p. 19.

[24] Laurajane Smith, 'The doing of heritage: heritage as performance', *Performing heritage: research, practice and innovation in museum theatre and live interpretation*, edited by Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 71.

> legitimacy given to the social and cultural values we imbue in places of heritage through the performances we construct at them.[25]

As a consequence, such cultural populism rarely addresses 'the political economy of culture or satisfactorily locat[es] cultural circulation within historical contexts and institutionalised systems of power.' [26] However, Baz Kershaw suggests that there are historic processes and forms that can be re-imagined through a contemporary lens that does not necessarily conform to the authorised heritage discourse, but could indeed subvert it:

> the creative innovation called 'practice as research' can dislocate the knowledge that underpins the present as a way of resuscitating the past.[27]

He suggests that through this embodiment of intangible cultural heritage, 'history can be rescued from the reign of nostalgia by the performance of the past as a reclamation of its radical instability in the present.'[28] Through re-imagining a pierrot troupe in the late twentieth century, I was attempting to find the performative nature of a form that for over 60 years, had created an enormously powerful aesthetic, yet had apparently accrued little cultural impact or value. I had no intention of creating a museum-piece or verisimilitude of historical performance practice, but rather to make it 'a negotiation about its meanings in the present'[29]. Such contemporary meaning is inevitably affected by the socio-economic context of the performance.

In 1981, London's Covent Garden Piazza had opened opportunities to busk as part of a burgeoning café society. Inner city developers recognised the potential of colourful, extrovert, accessible street performance to animate public space and generate focal points of attraction for tourists and shoppers. The acceptance of animating the public realm in such an influential central location within the West End of London, encouraged cosmopolitan urban centres like Brighton – the town where I was based, to follow suit. Inspired by the seminal spirit of DIY culture implicit in the 1970s punk movement, street acts and alternative comedians felt little fear in addressing the general public in public space – reclaiming the streets and promenades with a radical agenda that by-passed the formal structures of the cultural industries and allowed the possibility of earning a living from the street collections of a burgeoning yuppie middle class and an ever-growing overseas tourism trade. Just as had occurred a century earlier, major conurbations and the more urbane seaside resorts such as Brighton and Blackpool, became centres of *al fresco* performance innovation and my troupe – 'The Pierrotters' were forged in this milieu.

The following documentary was broadcast and repeated on mainstream television, following a weekend of performances by 'The Pierrotters' at Bexhill on Sea. Although

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[25] Ibid. p. 80.

[26] Jim McGuigan, *Culture and the Public Sphere*, (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 126-127.

[27] 'Nostalgia for the future of the past: technological environments and the ecologies of heritage performance', *Performing Heritage*, *Ibid*. p. 124

[28] *The Radical in Performance – between Brecht and Baudrillard*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 24.

[29] Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance.* p. 182.

I was not directly involved in the structuring or edit of this documentary, 'The Pierrotters' are very clearly at the forefront of the narrative; the programme contextualises our work as both part of popular entertainment heritage and the contemporary popular entertainment industry. It connects the past with the present, as well as demonstrating the flexible nature of the form – capable of addressing audiences peripatetically on the promenade, or on the stage, with a mixture of song, dance, comedy and banter. It demonstrates how our re-imagined troupe was able to present a connection with past performance practice both in form and content.

***Movie 4.5:*** *'Five Guys Named Acko', 'Picture This', BBC2 (2000).*

In addition, outdoor arts had become an outlet for alternative, political statements and imagery: amongst others, Welfare State International, IOU, Red Ladder and John Bull Puncture Repair Kit had blazed a trail in the 1970s that attacked political targets and totems in overt, agit-prop style. The streets and other public spaces such as fields and parks became a territory in which large, iconic political statements could be made to large-scale audiences: the antiquated legislation of vagrancy and hawking, which controlled actions in public space, were ill-suited and outdated for a permissive age. In addition, the new health and safety rulings and insurance requirements that were later to curb some of the more anarchic and polemical actions, were not yet in place. In the early 1980s, flying pickets were still legal and public discontent was overtly demonstrated on the street through political activism – whether that were protest marches, IRA street bombs, or mass demonstrations against mining, steelworks and shipyard closures.

'The Pierrotters' were not created with an overtly political agenda, but as a reaction against what I perceived as the controlling hegemony of conventional theatre structures such as venue, box office and a predetermined audience. The opportunity of working on the street offered the opportunity to perform to a non-stratified viewing public, as well as the freedom to create and declaim with little constraint other than the need to hold an audience long enough to merit a collection or 'bottle'.

The historical connection with the British form of the pierrot troupe gave us an entry-point into a vernacular culture of intangible cultural heritage that was shared (if not consciously understood) by the audience: the costumes and material that we wore evoked a timeless seaside past. I adopted the soubriquet of 'Uncle Tacko!'[30] – an avuncular leader of the troupe, whose forename 'Uncle', echoed links to the minstrel heritage of the pierrot concert parties and also the homely seaside entertainers of the inter-war years. These aesthetic echoes of the past, enabled us to fit into our socio-geographic context – allowing us to play with tropes of seaside entertainment as contemporary heritage performance. I well-remember, during our second season in 1984, as we meandered along Brighton's Palace Pier in our full pierrot 'kit', an old lady said to me, 'It's nice to see you boys again.' 'Did you see us last year then?' I replied. 'No,' she said, 'it was 1925…' Her reaction was typical of many of our audiences down the years – we represented the current incumbents of a form, rather than being individual performers in a contemporary act: like the characters of Punch

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[30] The exclamation mark is part and parcel of the name, linking to the hyperbolic, exclamatory nature of the clown/showman.

& Judy, or the Dame in pantomime, we were the timeless epitome of the location and occasion…more seaside spirits than a mere busking band.

It was this sense of timelessness and our subsequent role in a lexicon of vernacular mythology that was one of 'The Pierrotters'' greatest assets, eventually enabling us to play in remarkably charged circumstances with a subversive agenda and intention, akin to the pranks of the Situationists: we played for HRH Queen Elizabeth II, we opened the National Theatre of Variety at Blackpool Grand, we played the South Bank's Festival Hall and we played The Globe in London – all mainstream, high profile occasions, at which we were able to perform acoustically, our brand of subversive, reinterpreted historical material.

Perhaps this is not so surprising, for throughout the history of the British pierrot industry,

> the pierrot troupe did not simply reflect or adopt the performance modes and structures of the variety tradition, but revitalised the elements of song, dance, clowning and spectacle in the disruptive manner of the theatres at the fairs and earlier carnivals.[31]

This "disruption" is carnivalesque in its intent – providing an opportunity for licenced misrule and interruption, where normative rules of attitude and behaviour can be temporarily suspended within the constraints of decency and order. Through performing over a protracted period of many years, I became conscious of the adaptability and flexibility of the pierrot performance format, which was framed by an aesthetic structure and presented within the carnivalesque atmosphere of the seaside. In short, our contemporary recomposition of a pierrot show, demonstrated more than just a performance of heritage: it made manifest a continuing popular theatre tradition, with the capacity to explore less constrained forms of material than either the more legitimate theatrical forms (usually those located within conventional theatre spaces), or the discourse of authorised heritage. Our recreation of the pierrot format for a twenty-first century culture, was part of an intangible cultural heritage – an illegitimate form, without cultural recognition, that was dependent on embodied practice of what John Fox of Welfare State International calls 'the vernacular river'.[32]

The experience of 'The Pierrotters' in performance, had proved to me that the pierrots were part of an illegitimate, popular entertainment tradition, beyond easy class distinction, which offered the possibility for anyone to view or even participate in the action. So, in the absence of any cultural impact, 'without having to conform to externally-imposed standards or depend on institutional approval, artists can say what they please and may please the public in ways more controlled, formulaic art cannot'. [33]

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[31] Dave Calvert, 'From Pedrolino to a Pierrot: The Origin, Ancestry and Ambivalence of the British Pierrot Troupe', University of Huddersfield, *Popular Entertainment Studies* Volume 4, Issue 1. (2013) p. 15.

[32] National Arts and Media Strategy, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1990.

[33] Schechter, *(Ibid.)* p. 6.

It was this nexus of acceptability through an unrecognised yet accessible historical form and aesthetic, combined with the potential to present subversive ideas in an unstratified public arena, which coincided with my punk anarchistic instincts back in 1983 and by chance, resulted in a long-lasting professional performance career.

Part 3: Teaching and new possibilities
Whilst I always enjoyed the opportunity to explore the practice of performance with my pierrot troupe, it has only been in more recent years, since refashioning pierrot troupes with a new generation of young performers, that I have been able to consider the cultural significance and impact of its form and content in contemporary contexts, through a more structured and theoretical analysis.

In 2010, I undertook an AHRC project in collaboration with Dr Jane Milling of Exeter University's Drama Department entitled 'Revitalising the Seaside' – our stated intention was to examine

> the implications of 'reactivating' the pierrot show on the beaches and promenades of The English Riviera and South West seaside resorts [in order to] …gain deeper insight into a popular performance mode from the past, and what modes of transmission exist for recovering such performance practices? What kind of theatre history are we making if we re-present a mode of performance from the past within an enduring, but transformed location for a contemporary audience? What role might popular promenade performance play today in the cultural regeneration of seaside resorts? [34]

As part of the output from 'Revitalising the Prom', we recorded my reflections on the ways in which my performances with 'The Pierrotters' had informed my teaching of the form - imparting the procedural knowledge embodied in my practice over the previous decades. This represented a shift from the tacit know-how of my pierrot performance-work to a passing-on of my knowledge through critical reflection. The specific research aim of the AHRC project was to examine how the form and material might impact upon contemporary audiences . This short film articulates the link between these two modes of practice.

***Movie 4.6***: AHRC interview linking 'The Pierrotters' with 'The Pier Echoes'.

The project involved creating a new pierrot troupe of four emerging artists (called 'The Pier Echoes') drawn from a range of young professional artists who were already engaged in aspects of performance that centred on popular entertainment and traditions. These young performers were trained and experienced in contemporary street arts, circus and folk arts, and were as well-matched as possible to the hybrid origins of the pierrot troupes, which had drawn their recruits from the

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[34] Tony Lidington and Dr Jane Milling, 'Case for support', *Revitalizing the Prom,* AHRC, 2010.

popular, direct address of clowning, fairground and solo minstrel performances, as well as the more elevated domestic concert party and large-scale minstrel groups.

I taught them a set of songs, routines and sketches comprising three, distinct strands of material: some had been proven successful with 'The Pierrotters' over our twenty-seven years of performing, some was new material created by 'The Pier Echoes' and some was authentic, early twentieth century material. In particular, we were interested to find-out if the costuming and flexibility of the act was still accessible for a contemporary audience and whether the original material would be able to be presented equally alongside new material with a very different sort of sensibility. I wanted to examine how this material translated (or not) to a modern context and in order to do so, 'The Pier Echoes' performed in a variety of outdoor locations such as promenades and piers at seaside resorts along the English Riviera and in a variety of costumes.



Audiences were then invited to give feedback on the performances – particularly reflecting on the style, content and meaning. The uniformity of costume and make up provided a stylistic convention which both separated the performers as a group or troupe of archetypal clowns – this was equally true for when the troupe performed in the quasi-military outfits of a concert party, or as worker bees.

> Like many folk performers who played in the streets, their costumes and properties served as a kind of basic scenery, announcing them immediately as entertainers.[35]

There was no comment made at all about any differences between the old material and the newly-devised stuff. These findings confirmed my own performance experiences over the previous decades, that the style provided a safe context from which to present family entertainment in public space and the material remained accessible across all ages. There appeared to be relatively little restriction to the possibilities of what might be articulated within the pierrot frame of reference; in fact, there was licence to present a wide range of content. Few, if any, of the audience members could have had direct experience of a pierrot troupe or concert party performing, yet they all recognised the accessible nature of the troupe and showed how it could be effective in the present and more than just an act of heritage re-

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[35] Brooks McNamara, 'Scenography of popular entertainment' *The Drama Review TDR 18(1):16* · (March 1974), p. 13.

creation. The following edited sequence of films show the evolution of a particular routine by the 'Pier Echoes', from first rehearsal to broadcast presentation. It demonstrates the flexibility of the form and the eventual warm response from the public.
*Movie 4.7: 'The Pier Echoes' devising material from workshop/rehearsal to performance.*

This following article was a quarter-page editorial about the project in The Guardian newspaper, demonstrating the national impact of the AHRC-funded practice as research project on which I was the lead practitioner.
*Image 4.1: Article in The Guardian about 'The Pier Echoes'.*

The AHRC project 'Revitalising the Seaside' afforded me the opportunity to reflect critically upon both the form and content of what I had practised for decades and to examine how that was informed and transformed in the process of re-imagining the pierrot troupe for contemporary society. In essence, 'The Pierrotters' were embodied cultural practice created instinctively, whereas 'The Pier Echoes' were created specifically as action research - a cultural experiment to interpret intangible cultural heritage from the inside. The project examined the ability of this historical popular performance form to explore anachronism and juxtaposition, to use the vernacular river of familiarity to play within contemporary environments and with both original and historical content. It created a means by which to relocate the form in both time and place and in so doing, offered the potential for an alternative, improvised commentary that could be the subject of future investigation.

Almost thirty years after my first, tentative steps into public performance in white satin and pom-poms, the AHRC project with 'The Pier Echoes' led me into further research about intangible cultural heritage and its meaning in the absence of any substantive historiography. In her essay 'Re:enactment', Gilli Bush-Bailey describes this practice as 'kinaesthetic imagination' (after theatre historian Joseph Roach in *Cities of the Dead*):

> The connections and dissonances between reconstruction and revival, the archive and the body, are being employed to explore and contest the assumptions of distance and difference between the past and the present.[36]

This porous relationship between past and present, in which theatrical form and vernacular memory percolate through historical re-presentation rather than being any kind of linear, orthodox progression, means that it is possible to employ the opportunities provided by an apparently safe, historical context or revival, to engage in subversive process and content. It was this potential for the pierrot concert party format that I next examined with a two-year project in Torbay called 'Chin Up!', funded by the Armed Forces Community Covenant, whose purpose was to examine

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[36] Gilli Bush-Bailey, 'Re:enactment', *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History*, Eds. David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 281-298 (p. 282.)

the role of entertainments during wartime. In this project, I worked with a small group of self-selecting young people, aged 13-23, to devise a short pierrot show that could perform in the open air at Armed Forces Day in Babbacombe. This provided a further opportunity to hand-on knowledge and experience of the form, as well as exploring the potential for flexible, peripatetic performance to infiltrate mainstream environments.

Pierrot troupes had a significant role to play in promoting morale and raising funds during the First World War. There were a range of military concert parties – in fact, most divisions in the army presented a divisional concert troupe as well as offering battalion canteen shows; from 1915, civilian concert parties were regularly sent-out from Britain to tour distribution centres and hospitals for 4-6 weeks, whilst all-female troupes known as 'permanent parties' played in a specific area further behind the line for three months at a time.

***Insert 2 x pictures of First World War material***

These pierrot troupes provided 'not just the relief from the arduous task of fighting, or the chance to enjoy the therapeutic effect of laughter. The theatre reminded those serving on the Western and Eastern Fronts of home, another life.'[37]

For 'Chin Up!', my aim was to train a group of local young people to perform as a pierrot troupe at Armed Forces Day in Babbacombe June 2015. I wanted to discover if it was possible to use the flexible potential of this performance form (that I had identifies in my previous practical research into models of pierrot troupes with 'The Pierrotters' and 'Pier Echoes',) to produce something rather more challenging and potentially subversive of the authorised form of entertainment on offer at the event. My aim was to produce something that might be more than a sanitised rendition of the historical pierrot troupe format. Through summoning references to historical military contexts, I wanted to see if it was possible to access an audience at a mainstream, martial event and then present a show that could comment self-reflexively on its context and the expectations of the audience by satirising and parodying the military environment in which we were playing. We wanted to perform without endorsing the assumed hegemonic militarism, or causing offence. Even during the Great War, concert party pierrot troupes had retained a satirical edge:

> Officers were sent up, and the pleasure was all the greater for the victims' presence. Beyond pleasure, the value of the occasion was also increased. Officer attendance, and often participation, gave their implicit sanction to the proceedings. They accepted the comic strictures offered from the stage; they did not stand on their dignity; they were 'alright' at bottom, simply men doing their job.[38]

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[37] LJ Collins, *Theatre at War 1914-18*, (Lancashire: Jade Publishing Limited, 2004), p. 105.

[38] JG Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 102.

However, in 1914-1918, such satire was hardly subversive or anarchistic in its intent, rather it was a form of repressive tolerance, allowing 'a legitimate opportunity to voice corporate feelings of dissent: […] a valued psychological safety valve.'[39] Most First World War concert party material was generally affirmative of the moral imperative for war, providing a distraction from tedium and horror, with nostalgia for a romanticised, peaceful homeland and family.

Another aspect I was keen to explore with 'Chin Up', was how these early twentieth century troupes had played with gender stereotypes: the all-male environment of the war zone meant that:

> Drag could be transferred to the front lines because its subversive potential (enabling gay subcultural forms to flourish within and exploit homosocial arrangements) went hand in hand with its conservative and misogynistic ability to shore up normative arrangements of sex, gender, and sexuality in an acutely homophobic context. Because so much material originally performed by women was recontextualized from contemporary music halls, revues, and operettas on the home front, and staged in all-male theatrical locations on the front lines, the process of resiting and reciting this material affirmed the slippage and connotation upon which drag capitalized.[40]

This tension between the subversive potential of presentation and the complicity of the context was an aspect that I was keen to explore in 'Chin Up!', particularly the possibility of devising a satirical critique of militarism and gender stereotypes. I wanted to see if we could re-present the latent satire and gender commentary implicit in the First World War pierrot tradition, to a contemporary, militaristic context – a practical expression of kinaesthetic imagination. In the following film, the 'Chin-Upper' pierrots (including cross-dressed pierrots) parody the military practices of soldiers at Babbacombe Armed Forces' Day 2014:

*Movie 4.8: 'The Chin Uppers' in performance at Babbacombe Armed Force Day, 2014*

The process of creating the material for the performance allowed me to use the medium of heritage-based, pierrot material to inculcate the young practitioners in the subversive, non-militaristic potential of the form. In reality, however, the performances of 'Chin up!' that were given on Babbacombe Down on Armed Forces' Day in June 2014, offered only gentle jibing and wry comment, rather than any genuinely subversive or shocking satire. Nevertheless, we were able to present a range of material that was non-jingoistic and poked fun at the militaristic context in which we were performing: indeed, our role at the event was as costumed clowns or bouffons, we had a genuine and justifiable connection to the militaristic occasion

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[39] LJ Collins, *(Ibid.)* p. 220.

[40] David A Boxwell, *'*Follies of War: The Cross-Dressing and Popular theatre on the British Front Lines, 1914-18' – *Modernism/modernity, 9:1*, January 2002. p. 11.

through the history of the concert party, but with the opportunity to parody and subvert. Our legitimacy as part of such an event was further enhanced by the accompanying exhibition I created, entitled 'From Agincourt to Afghanistan', which was situated either side of the simple concert party staging. Here you can see the panels of the exhibition (either side of the pierrots' performance platform,) for the general public to glean information based on my research into the activities of pierrot troupes and seaside concert parties in the first and second world wars.

**Gallery 4.1:** *'From Agincourt to Afghanistan' (2014)*

So, although the performance itself was relatively tame in its expressed content, as the general public meandered around the exhibition and amongst the various attractions, we were able to ridicule and mock individual members of the audience. These short excerpts of film document some of the ways in which I was able to taunt members of the military forces as part of my showman's role:

**Movie 4.9:** Examples of playing with the audience at Babbacombe Armed Forces Day.

The process of re-imagining, re-making and re-siting the pierrot concert party form over many years, led me on a journey of enquiry about the nature of historical popular entertainment performance: how such forms could provide access to mainstream, open-access environments and to start to explore the potential for interplay between form, content and context. My work over three decades with 'The Pierrotters' had been proximal, procedural knowledge, which led to the discovery of what Robin Nelson[41] calls "the clew" or thread, whereby I was able to engage in practice-based pedagogy that made research enquiries into the potential of historical popular entertainment forms to convey a range of material in public space. It seemed to me that the use of intangible cultural heritage and tropes of historical popular entertainments, was a kind of cultural Trojan Horse through which might be delivered carnivalesque, politicised material, in an accessible, ludic way.

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[41] Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts; Principles, Protocols, Pegagogies, Resistancies,* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p.27.

# 'Fairgrounds, Fleas & Fancy' or 'Bakhtin the Future'

**'Sergeant Bell loves a joke; but he loves, too, when he can, to impress a valuable principle, or a useful moral, on youthful hearts: he had rather add to your lasting happiness, than make you laugh for a fleeting moment.'**
*Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show*, (*Ibid.)* p. 190.

## Chapter 4: 'Fairgrounds, Fleas & Fancy' or 'Bakhtin the Future'

In this section, I shall examine the liminal public space occupied by ludic performance: how it is created and defined, as well as its potential to affect an audience. My starting-point will be the discoveries I have made through working with the pierrot concert party form at the seaside, then I shall explore the application of these findings to temporarily transformed public spaces, with particular reference to the fairground sideshow and the showman barker, whose traditional role at the fair is to confront the passing public and attract them into his or her sideshow attraction with improvised banter, hyperbole and comedic commentary.

Such illegitimate popular artforms and especially the role of the showman, again lack any significant body of critical analysis. The National Fairground Archive (based at Sheffield University and curated by Professor Vanessa Toulmin,) is an invaluable repository of original historical materials, but apart from some quotations of direct public address, information and analysis regarding the practice and style of showman delivery is sparse. There are some books, articles and documents relating to the emergence of the showman in pre-cinema and magic lanternism that I shall draw-on in this section, as their mixture of direct address to the general public and storytelling/lecturing to the paying public, is analogous to the mix of persiflage and explicit guidance employed by the sideshow showmen in their *spiel*.

### Section 1: Location, location, location

My explorations of popular cultural practice with pierrot troupes led me to consider the following three issues: the unconventional locations in which such performances occur, the role of the spectator in public space and the showman's function in addressing and controlling that public.

> Street arts interventions place the spectator in a familiar place but in an unexpected and often bewildering situation, and that unfamiliarity requires critical reflection and possible adjustments.[42]

The very ordinariness of the architectural and social context (or lack of it) in which the pierrots operated both historically and in my experiences as a performer, seemed to be an essential constituent of the success of the form. I came to recognise that the accessibility of performing to ordinary people in ordinary places, was integral to the meaning and subversive potential of my work. As is the case in many popular

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[42] Susan C Heidicke, *Contemporary Street Arts in Europe; Aesthetics and Politics. Studies in International Performance*. (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 53.

entertainment environments, showman performance in open public space is generally less constrained than in a more conventional theatre space. In a less stratified relationship with the audience, the performed material does not need to 'conform to externally-imposed standards or depend on institutional approval, artists can say what they please and may please the public in ways more controlled, formulaic art cannot.'[43] Schechter's vision is of a rather over-idealised state of freedom from constraint, for no matter how playful and relatively unrestrained an environment the street or seaside might be, it was (and is) still necessary to conform to some social and political conventions in order to perform family-friendly, accessible material in the public domain. I concluded that the *al fresco* physical environment was a key component of both the showman's performance and that the more relaxed institutional oversight of public spaces might allow the delivery of more subversive content in public space.

The British seaside is a permanent, ludic, public environment associated with holidaying and leisure; the seaside resorts' *raison d'etre* has always been to provide opportunities for irreverence, romance and exotica – a transmutation of the carnivalesque to a commodified and constructed public playground. Stallybrass and White observe that Victorian seasides marginalised the carnivalesque under the guise of health, so that

> the emergent bourgeoisie, with its sentimentalism and its disgust, made carnival into the festival of the Other. It encoded all that which the proper bourgeois must strive not to be in order to preserve a stable and 'correct' sense of self.[44]

However, the non-stratified nature of a street audience means that the performed acts are generally attractive and unintimidating to all socio–political classifications: the work must be family-friendly, inoffensive, yet intriguing. Successful carnivalesque has always existed in the heart of 'normality', offering a glimpse of the fantastic and the alternative. That normality is generally found in locations that are heightened or transformed into a ludic environment in some way, so that they are, to a limited extent, removed from the commercial hustle-bustle of the streets:

> Things are better on the fair-grounds and beside the sea. The atmosphere of the streets is hostile to entertainment. People are curious enough, but they retain their prudence, their caution, their ruling passion of making sure they are not being done. But take the same people and fill them full of ozone and mussels, whirl them round in the chairoplanes or jolt them silly on the Rocky Road to Dublin, and they will start shelling out their sixpences as fast as any showman could desire.[45]

Mikhail Bakhtin locates this heightened world in the market-place: 'The marketplace was the centre of all that was unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a

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[43] Joel Schechter, *Popular Theatre A Sourcebook* – editor Joel Schechter, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 6.

[44] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 178.

[45] Maurice Graham, *Showman & Suckers*, (London: Percival Marshall, 1951), pp. 261-262.

world of official order and official ideology, it always remained "with the people.""[46] Bakhtin's market place is 'carnivalesque' - a popular, subversive performance platform, where the audience becomes 'more than just a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organised in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organisation, which is suspended for the time of the festivity'.[47]

However, Mikhail Bakhtin is presenting a 1930s discourse upon the writings and culture of Rabelais in the Middle Ages and his proposition for the generic festive, anarchic potential of popular forms, is a rather utopian vision of urban emancipation. Most contemporary market places remain fundamentally places of commerce with predetermined purposive activities and little opportunity for drifting encounters, or *derive*, as defined by Guy Debord.[48] [49] The fairground is a rather less commodified carnivalesque environment:

> Fair time is regarded [...as] a kind of 'open house' period when scattered members of family are united. There is an exuberance of hospitality, a jolly good fellowship permeating all classes of society'.[50]

Although described here in a rather rose-tinted, wholesome fashion, the temporary de-purposing of functional locations such as a car park, playing field, or even a town centre, as is achieved by light-footed structures like a fairground or circus, can (and do) subvert the prescribed purposive activity of the city. 'Within these 'controlled' circumstances the inciting of dynamogenic bodily sensations, for example on a merry-go-round, was a fragmentary and mechanical recuperation of carnival energies.'[51]

In this way, the fairground has the capacity to provide a Rabelaisian carnivalesque environment which can disrupt and reinterpret urban space in a manner that could be interpreted as *derive* with the potential for licensed, disruptive behaviour by the showman: it is a liminal territory in the heart of the hegemonic landscape, ripe for subversive activity, in which some conventional structures and strictures can be by-passed. I wished to see if it were possible to recreate a setting in which 'counter-cultural forms of engagement with the urban realm are distinguished by a principle of

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[46] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 153-154.

[47] Bakhtin *Ibid.* p. 255.

[48] 'Theory of the Dérive' (1956) Les Lèvres Nues #9, reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste* #2 (December 1958), tr. Ken Knabb.

[49] Debord's theory of derive proposes that people may temporarily drop their usual motives for movement and action, allowing themselves to be drawn by attractions found within the urban environment, so that they can engage in playful and constructive encounters. Such encounters interrupt the predictable paths of public behaviour and can thereby jolt them into a new awareness and attitude towards their environment.

[50] From the *Hull & Lincoln Times* 1874, quoted by Vanessa Toulmin in *Randall Williams King of Showmen. From Ghost Show to Bioscope*, (East Sussex: The Projection Box, 1998), p. 12.

[51] Jonathan Crary quoted by Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 33

disobedience towards accepted dominant spatial and social practices.'[52] It was with this aim in mind that I sought to manufacture my own, ludic space that could be erected speedily and temporarily in ordinary urban environments.

*Section 2: The evolution of The Imaginarium*
My interest in exploring fairgrounds as a temporary ludic landscape for presenting historical popular performance forms, combined with some very practical and commercial considerations that had emerged from my pierrot performance experiences: I had discovered that creating and performing acoustic performance in outdoor, public locations, demanded focussed attention from its audience (as opposed to the conventional busker, who performs for a passing crowd). Such performances made considerable physical demands on both the voice and body: 'The Pierrotters' would regularly perform outdoors – singing, dancing, interacting and playing musical instruments at high-energy, whilst competing against the sound of wind, traffic, waves and the hubbub of daily promenade life, for upwards of four hours a day. Although we developed increasingly resilient vocal techniques and robust physicality, we were constantly exhausted at the end of a day and as we aged, so our bodies found that the impact of performing at this level took its toll.

I looked at ways in which I could use the experience and success gained from the pierrot troupe format and combine it with something that allowed greater conservation of the performers' energy, which did not rely on proximity to the geographical liminality of the sea, but retained the energy, irony and conviction of 'The Pierrotters'. My ideas coalesced around the development of a sideshow booth. For some years previously, I had been performing as one of 'Poppets Puppets' - a double act, presenting modular, anarchic, family variety shows inspired partly by 'The Pierrotters' (both of us were members of the troupe) and also by the knockabout, rebellious nature of Punch & Judy. Our work centred around a puppet booth from which we told stories; however, the audience remained *al fresco* and unless we were fortunate enough to be playing in a quiet environment, we suffered from the same physical exigencies as the pierrots. There was a lack of intimacy, as is common in many outdoor street shows and although we were able to be playful in our use of researched, historical material such as recitations, music hall songs and well-known variety sketches, it was difficult to deliver any more nuanced storytelling with the aural and visual distractions of the seaside or the street.

**Movie 5.1:** *'Poppets Puppets' – AHRC interview*

In addition, the summer seasons of 2010-2012 had been particularly rainy and many festivals and gigs were cancelled or severely curtailed as a result. 'Poppets Puppets' and my peripatetic pierrot acts had been unable to perform in the rain, so especially during the contemporaneous economic recession, it became a financial necessity to be able to continue working during inclement weather and thereby add commercial value to our offer for promoters.

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[52] Lukas Feireiss, 'Livin' in the city. The urban space as creative challenge', *Urban Interventions – personal projects in public spaces,* edited by Robert Klanten and Matthias Hubner, (Berlin: Gestalten, 2010), p. 3.

It struck me that one way of doing this, which simultaneously retained street presence, an unstratified audience and preserved our voices from the ravages of competition with the ambient sounds of the street world, was to create our own, larger fit-up or booth to contain a small audience under cover. Such a construction could house the audience in a weatherproof, temporary structure, which would minimise external distractions and focus their attention. I had undertaken research into travelling fairs, showmen and fit-ups as part of my broadcasts for BBC Radio and this informed me of the ways in which the nineteenth century fairground sideshows and popular entertainers would draw crowds by creating a distinct visual attraction externally (decorative, distinctive frontage), accompanied by a sonic environment (eg the calliope or trumpet & drum) and the performance activity of showmen. In this way, 'The fairground was the attraction, not the show itself'.[53] I resolved to see whether I could recreate these techniques and generate such an atmosphere in the twenty-first century.

*The Victorian Clown* and *The Showman's Parson* were two key radio series that I adapted, wrote and presented which informed my thinking on these matters: each explored the day-to-day lives of nineteenth century showfolk and as part of their remediation from book to audio form, I was able to make oblique references to contemporary experiences and themes. *The Victorian Clown* series was drawn from Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone's book of the same name,[54] I edited the material which I had been involved in developing with them and then added my own linking material to make the finished piece. *The Showman's Parson* came from research I had been doing at The National Fairground Archive, Sheffield University with Professor Vanessa Toulmin; I made a digital copy of the only surviving paperback book of the stories held in the archive, then edited, collated, linked and produced the three-part series (the first direct public use of this material).[55]

*Add here 2 X images of Showman's Parson*

**Audio 5.1-5.3:** *'The Victorian Clown', Episodes 1-3 BBC Radio 4 (2010)*

**Audio 5.4-5.6:** *'The Showman's Parson'; Episodes 1-3 BBC Radio 4 (2014)*

In my attempt to recreate the context and ambience of the nineteenth century fit-up for the twenty-first century, it was apparent that it should be simple and temporary and to do this, the structure had to be able to be built-up and taken-down within a day; it needed to fit easily into most public realm locations (on either hard or soft standing) and require only a few people to do both the manual construction and performance work. The booth, which I called 'The Imaginarium', needed to be able to appear and disappear easily, make maximum impact on both the public and the public space and provide a glimpse of alternative realities through what we might present inside.

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[53] Vanessa Toulmin, 'Cuckoo in the Nest: Edwardian Itinerant Exhibition Practices and the Transition to Cinema in the United Kingdom from 1901-1906', *The Moving Image, 1.1 (2010)*, pp. 52-79 (p. 63).

[54] Bratton & Featherstone, 2006.

[55] Rev. Thomas Horne, *Humorous and Tragic Stories of Showman Life,* (London: The Era Publishing, No known date of publication.)

My 'Imaginarium' booth is a modern construction, based on a tubular garden gazebo, but customised to make it look vintage and beautiful, with ornate frontage and bright circus-style colouring - a modern attempt to re-interpret the frontages and colour of its predecessors a century earlier, which were designed for exactly the same purpose.

> Historically, fairground sideshow booths were designed both for optimum audience capacity and fairground flash – that is, the front of the show was as important as the interior, as it needed to compete with the lavish frontages of other types of entertainment on offer.[56]

Having created peripatetic, Situationist-pranking troupes of potentially subversive pierrots, I now intended to explore how such popular carnivalesque/festive performance forms could be presented in more fixed, neutral public locations. The low-impact portability of 'The Imaginarium' meant that we could erect it in any public space and still engage with unstratified audiences to transform their familiar surroundings.

*Section 3: The Ballyhoo (a showman's term meaning the platform for barkers to shout about their attraction)*

> The booth stage entertainer was elevated and distanced from his audience. Unlike the street performer who worked against the background of town and its activities, his territory was clearly distinguished from that of his spectators.[57]

As past performers on the 'bally' (showman's cant for the outside stage of a sideshow booth) might bark-up potential audience members outside the fairground booth, the acts performing inside 'The Imaginarium' would parade outside beforehand, during and even between each show inside – accosting passing members of the public and engaging them in cheeky, risqué banter throughout the day. In the past, such paraders on the showfront 'prided themselves on their voices, some describing themselves as atmospheric printers'.[58] The language and style of speaking by the characters who present 'The Imaginarium' are not naturalistic, but in keeping with the historical equivalents above, they 'bark' in an exaggerated and hyperbolic style. This barking, is 'sometimes soberly explanatory, sometimes contrapuntally jocular, sometimes dramatically inflammatory'[59].

Barking is a term I had never questioned as being anything other than showman's

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[56] *Toulmin, Ibid.* p. 62.

[57] Brooks McNamara, 'Scenography of popular entertainment'. *The Drama Review* 18.1 (1974). p. 16.

[58] Kevin Scrivens & Stephen Smith, *The Travelling Cinematograph Show*, (Teesdale: New Era Publications, 1999), p. 21.

[59] Claud Bertemes and Nicoe Dahlen, 'Back to the Future: Early Cinema and Late Economy of Attention. An Interim Report about Crazy Cinematographe'. *Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance. KINtop studies in early cinema – volume 1,* Ed. Martin Loiperdinger, (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing Limited, 2011), p. 86.

cant (also known as 'Parlyare' [60] and 'Polari' from the travellers' and Romany language) for shouting in public. However, performing on the bally for 5-6 hours at a stretch, taught me that in practice, the term reflects a style of delivery that is short, abrupt and produced in a single staccato rasp – a bit like a dog's bark which could protect the larynx whilst maximising projection. The content of barking is both hyperbolic (extolling the virtues and superlatives of the amazing acts available inside) and teasing – using irony and chutzpah to elicit a response from the audience in a spirit of freedom, frankness and familiarity.

Each character performing with 'The Imaginarium' is also dressed in a heightened fashion – setting them apart from the audience and announcing them immediately as entertainers or 'showmen' in a non-specific, historical context through costume and presentational style. The costumes and props we use are neither contemporary in style nor construction and do not claim to represent any historical verisimilitude. However, they are self-consciously antiquated and stylised. This gives the showmen a distance from the audience – a 'specialness' that removes them from the everyday and gives them an archetypal licence to play and to guide, like a clown or a ringmaster:

> The clown comes from very far away, like the Wandering Jew or the Gipsy. He talks with a special accent that has never been heard before. He comes from nowhere in particular. He brings the freedom of someone who is rootless and so laughs better. He helps us dream because he isn't from round here.[61]

This conscious exploration of intangible cultural heritage is not an attempt to conjure any re-enactment of an historical world, but rather an a-historical world: like the tropes of pierrot, it provided a mechanism whereby I could explore how the fairground booth might provide an uncertain, heteroglossial space where fact could merge with fiction and history merge with the present. So rather than seeking to create an authorised heritage discourse'[62] (as discussed by Laurajane Smith), in which veracity and accuracy are essential ends in themselves, I used the embodied practice of intangible cultural heritage to produce a fantastical, heightened world.

This exploration of the mechanisms employed by historical fairground sideshow booths to lure audiences also extended to the mechanics of the sonic environment I tried to create around 'The Imaginarium'. Past eras generally featured loud instruments such as drums and trumpets, or in more sophisticated joints, a calliope or fairground organ. In order to evoke the past and to connect it to the digital present, we play a barrel piano. It provides a mechanical, acoustic sound that suggests a former, less digitised age and also allows impromptu workshops for passers-by to see the mechanics of sound reproduction (pins on a barrel, which when cranked, enable hammers to hit the piano strings, the woodblock and triangle). The clanking mechanical music adds to the evocation of a festive, antiquated atmosphere, whilst

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[60] Randall Williams *Ibid.* p. 11.

[61] Bim Mason, *Provocation in Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge, 2016). p. 93. Quoted from Philippe Gaulier, 'The Tormentor', (Paris: Editions Filmiko: 312 2007.)

[62] *vide* Laurajane Smith, 'The doing of heritage', *ibid.*

actively encouraging the audience to connect the past with their present through an understanding of the aural context, alongside the visual aesthetics.

Finally, in order to attract viewers and potential visitors towards 'The Imaginarium' from even further afield, I commissioned a Victorian-style, hand-painted, try-your-strength machine: over twenty feet tall, it rises high above the heads of the crowds making a focal point for people's attention from more than a hundred yards away. In addition, the participatory nature of the game as the showmen on the bally challenge all-comers to 'whack the knobble and ring my bell', encourages passing trade to stop - either to have a go themselves, or to watch others try. The sound as an audience member bashes the knobble with the hammer, together with the cheers or jeers elicited by their success or failure, draws others towards the arena, where sight, sound, participation and direct engagement provide a transformative, festive, entertainment environment.

> The effect of an entertainment environment on the spectator is a kind of disorientation, and the showmen attempt to use that disorientation to draw the spectators through the environment from attraction to attraction.[63]

The crowd that have been attracted and engaged by an alternative, temporary environment are now enticed towards the centrepiece of the installation – 'The Imaginarium', then they are ushered inside. In the following promotional film, examples of barking and banter are demonstrated as the showmen attempt to attract passing audience members. The film also shows the construction of 'The Imaginarium' and the way in which the whole assemblage of booth, try-your-strength and barrel organ or barrel piano are configured. The film presents to promoters and the wider general public how historical research has been used in the creation of the work and how it constitutes part of the appeal of the whole fit-up.

**Movie 5.2:** *'The Imaginarium' - Youtube film*

Once inside the booth, the audience's dislocation from their present spatial and temporal context is further enhanced by the bright colourings and ornate fabrics with which it is bedecked: like the exoticism of the fortune teller's inner sanctum, 'The Imaginarium' is laid-out as an immersive, festive space.  As they gather to sit on the gaily-painted benches, or stand crowded at the back of the twelve-foot diameter, octagonal booth, they are welcomed by the showman. The audience have voluntarily (albeit unwittingly) become part of a dialogic discourse between past and present, fact and fiction, as each blurs with another in 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin), here they achieve 'relative historic immortality':[64] they are a-historic and participatory in their engagement.

## *Section 4: The Flea Circus*

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[63] Brooks McNamara, p. 19.
[64] Bakhtin *Ibid.* p. 255.

The act I chose to create inside 'The Imaginarium' was a flea circus: a popular entertainment, which, like the pierrot show, enjoys a curious and enduring vernacularmythology. Regularly, members of the audience will say to me how they have often heard about a flea circus, but never actually seen one, or that they last saw one at a remote and indeterminate festive occasion in their youth. The first mention of a British performing flea circus is Signor L Bertolotto's 'Extraordinary Exhibition of Industrious Fleas' at The Cosmorama Rooms, 209 Regent Street, London in England in the 1830s.[65] Prior to that time (and indeed since), fleas have held rather insalubrious associations with dirt and disease (most obviously with The Black Death), corruption and pornography.[66]

The essence of this sideshow routine that I was particularly keen to utilise, were its intrinsically salacious and grotesque popular memory, combined with the possibility of a hyperbolic, hyperreal presentation of the form. Baudrillard describes a 'precession of simulacra'[67] as being that in which the truth or reality of a situation is indistinguishable from the fictional or fantastic: this was precisely my aim in presenting the flea circus act for an audience who had already shown compliance and complicity with our polyphonic, heteroglossial world by being drawn into the sideshow.

The look of the flea circus (traditional primary fairground colours cherry red, royal blue, kerry green and gold, with a sense of dilapidated grandeur), together with my costume (a heightened ringmaster's outfit with red tunic, white riding breeches and tasselled boots, inspired by Mickey Mouse's mini-ringmaster in Walt Disney's 'Dumbo'), are crucial elements of my show. I retained my pierrot sobriquet of Uncle Tacko! – authoritative and absurd. Although the individual acts of the fleas are important and must impress the audience with their daring and skill, their routines are devised and delivered as lazzis, around which, I, the showman and flea wrangler, can improvise. My purpose was not to explore the subtlety of text, or the structure of a narrative story arc, but like a commedia or pierrot troupe, to be able to present the tricks and gaffs of the performing fleas with *ex tempore schtick* and panache.

> Subtlety and conventional good taste are usually secondary to action, fantasy and physicality. The script of a popular theatre piece is often little more than a scenario or framework for improvisation and spectacular effects.[68]

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[65] L. Bertolotto, *The History of the Flea with Notes and Observations*, (London: Crozier. [1835?])

[66] Extract of Lope de Vega's poem *The Flea* (1634):

'A daring, living atom suckèd
Fair Leonór's white breasts,
A garnet amidst pearls, a mite in a rose,
A brief mole with an invisible tooth.
She, two points of shining ivory,
with sudden disquiet, whining, bathed,
and with her twisting its boisterous life,
in a single torment, it feels a double revenge.'

[67] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulcra', *Media and Cultural Studies. Keywords. Revised Edition.* Ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 2006.) pp. 453-481.

[68] Joel Schechter, *Back to the Popular Source. Ibid.* p. 4.

My flea circus is not billed as a great work of art, or a commentary upon society, but as a ludicrous and engaging world.

***Movie 5.3:*** *'Uncle Tacko's Flea Circus' - promotional film…*

The flea circus show lasts little more than twenty-five minutes, but during that time, preposterous claims are made and absurd actions demonstrated by Uncle Tacko! the flea wrangler, as the flea artistes are put through their paces. Crucially, the audience are increasingly drawn-into the nonsense, absurdity and playfulness of the showman as his persiflage and hyperbolic performance permeate the show.

The audience's willing suspension of disbelief and their acceptance of theatricalised space in the shared public realm, dissolves the distinction between the simulated and the real. In this disorientated world of hyper-reality, anything is possible and the constraints of ordinary, 'acceptable' behaviour are loosened.

Just as the seaside provides a natural, liminal festive space for the pierrot troupe, 'The Imaginarium' provides an artificial, temporary, festive space for a wide range of popular attractions to perform: both are opportunities for a carnivalesque attitude amongst its audience – the former being geographically specific, the latter having the flexibility to work in a wide range of public spaces through its immersive nature. In this way, 'The Imaginarium' provides the opportunity for the showman (in this instance, the flea ringmaster) to enter into a complicit, playful relationship with the audience:

> the showman had popularly come to represent a distinction between knowing and knowingness…Working under the aegis of the conspiratorial wink, the popular image of the showmen emphasised their dependence upon their audiences' well-humoured complicity in the tricks and cons apparently played out upon them.[69]

My ringmaster's character constantly plays with this audience complicity, creating a shared world of multi-layered nonsense, aphorism and irony. The following film was made of a performance at Exeter University Drama Department – although *al fresco* and therefore containing many aspects of the usual show, here it is shown without the defining environment of 'The Imaginarium', so it is rather less intimate than would otherwise have been the case. Nevertheless, it shows how the audience is drawn increasingly into the ludicrous world of the fleas through hyperbole, nonsense and improvisation. The showman moves easily in and out of the structure of narrative, constantly engaging with the audience and developing a sense of inclusivity and playfulness.

***Movie 5.4:*** *'Uncle Tacko's Flea Circus' in performance.*

'The Imaginarium' had demonstrated the potential for the heteroglossial use of popular entertainment forms to create wonder and/or complicity, but it seemed to me that there was an even greater opportunity to be explored in the role of the showman being more than just a knowing trickster or shyster. Having glimpsed an alternative

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[69] Joe Kember, *Marketing Modernity* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), p. 45.

world by engaging and participating in the temporary performative environment of 'The Imaginarium', I was intrigued to see if the spectator could move beyond 'astonished embodiment in which the spectator becomes less immersed in the narrative than in the spectacular image-situation.'[70] In such a ludic environment and with the audience in an appropriately receptive state of being, I hoped next to manufacture a heteroglossial fit-up in public, open space and use it to make subversive, contemporary commentary both in the content of the performance, as well as in its context. This was to be the subject of my next enquiry…

# 'Peep Practice'

**'…riches are capital things when put to a good use, but do not let your heart trust in them. They will do much, but some things they cannot do – they cannot cure the toothache, the headache, nor the heartache; they cannot lengthen your life a single hour, except, sometimes, by supplying helps against casualties and disease, nor comfort you in death. Get riches, my boys, but get something better with them –**
**Something sterling, that will stay**
**When gold and silver fly away.'**
*Sergeant Bell and his Raree Sho*w, (*Ibid.)* p. 51.

### Chapter 5: 'Peep Practice'

In this section, I shall explore how the development and presentation of the peepshow and raree man offered a way of presenting accessible, subversive, contemporary comment in licensed public space. My experiments in the use of historical popular entertainment tropes - the pierrot troupe form and fairground sideshow 'Imaginarium' environment and the flea circus, demonstrated to me that it was possible to lure an unstratified audience into a more ludic, liminal state which, I hypothesised, might then facilitate the accessible delivery of more contemporary, politicised content than is generally possible on the street or in public space and more specific, subversive intent  than had been possible in my previous *al fresco* experiments. I wished to see if these strategies could be employed as part of a more intensely immersive experience: could the content of such narrative embrace one of the most widely recognised subversive techniques of the Situationists and Letterists[71] - 'detournement' (as interpreted by Graham White),[72] where pastiche, parody and plagiarism of known popular entertainment tropes might subvert the assumptions of public space and hegemonic discourse?

The political urgency of agitprop theatre and the punk movement of the twentieth century, both had a tendency either to preach to the converted, or to cause offence

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[70] Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), p. 24.

[71] Guy Debord, Gil Wolman, 'A User's Guide to Détournement', *Les Lèvres Nues* no. 8. (1956)

[72] Graham White, 'Direct Action, Dramatic Action: Theatre and Situationist Theory', *NTQ* IX. 36, (1993), pp. 329-340.

(or at least an affront) to people going about their business in public spaces. Indeed, my experience of the economics of outdoor arts over the past thirty-five years and the resistance to controversy in the public realm implicit in the by-laws and contractual restrictions of most (if not all) commercial promoters, meant that explicitly political messages in the public arena have been generally regarded as unsuitable for paid bookings. There have been many recent political performance protests – from Clowns Without Borders, to Greenpeace, to demonstrations such as 'Shake the Tate' and a myriad of urban interventions, but to date, such proselytising has been unfunded and tolerated, rather than actively encouraged by either funding bodies or the civic/corporate curators of public space. Clearly, public space is differently defined and politically coded by many different approaches and perspectives of critical theory, philosophy, cultural and social studies, but for the purposes of this thesis, I am simply taking the term to mean an outdoor social space that is open and accessible to people on a daily basis. My aim was to see if it were possible to insinuate my peepshow into situations in public space that would normally be denied to acts with political content.

Taking Bakhtin's belief that 'Folly is a form of gay festive wisdom, free from all laws and restrictions, as well as from preoccupations and seriousness',[73] my supposition was that the showman might be able to embody and embed accessible, more explicitly political content in a show for a carnivalesque audience during their ludic engagement with an a-historic performance form. In order to test this hypothesis, I drew on other research that I had been making into earlier forms of itinerant British showmanship: the pierrot troupe was primarily a late Victorian and Edwardian performance form, 'The Imaginarium' and its world employed a popular memory or nostalgia for the mid-Victorian travelling fair or fete, whilst the earliest flea circus reference in England is to Signor Bertolotto's 'Extraordinary Exhibition of Industrious Fleas' in the 1830's. I now wanted to research further back into the history of British illegitimate, itinerant performance forms, to discover the antecedents of the flea fantoccini and the animation of stories through the showman's role.

My recent BBC Radio 4 re-interpretations of mid-Victorian showmen had led me to explore not just the origins of the flea fantocinni, but also how itinerant entertainers might use puppets, waxworks, automata and magic lanterns as means of animating their storytelling. In particular, I was intrigued to find how these gaffes and illusions were used as a means of accessibly annotating stories that were historical, moralistic, gory and fun. I edited *'Joe Smith & His Waxworks'* from a book of the same name[74] and added material that would resonate with contemporary issues about travelling folk and other marginalised groups. The original material contained a range of banter and descriptions of fit-ups that connected directly to the way in which my peepshow was constructed.

**Audio 6.1-6.3:** *'Joe Smith & His Waxworks', episodes 1-3, BBC Radio 4 (2014)*

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[73] Mikhail Bakhtin, p. 260.

[74] Dr. Bill Smith, *Joe Smith and his Waxworks* (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source UK Ltd. 2011). Reprinted from 1896.

I discovered a rich source of material pertaining to the history of peepshows and raree men, at The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum (http://www.bdcmuseum.org.uk/) a pre-cinematic, itinerant style of presentation which 'was one of the commonest forms of optical entertainment during the nineteenth century. It was a staple of fairs, wakes, market days, races, regattas, and shop shows.'[75]

They combined storytelling with mechanical devices, optical illusions and puppetry to animate their fables, histories and moralising tales. These were part of a culture of attractions that emerged during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and eventually fed into the development of early cinematic forms:

> displays of magic, magic lantern, and variety shows, etc. The central 'mechanism' of the culture of attractions was the interplay between hiding and revealing. Banners, signboards, and auditory signals, such as barkers' cries and musical sounds, promised pleasures and curiosities kept just out of sight. For peep show exhibitors, puppets on a string or caged animals on top of the box, as well as curious illustrations, written slogans, and marketing cries, served similar goals.[76]

I made the following short documentary film as part of the original commission of 'The Raree Man & his Peepshow' by Arts Council England – in part because of the lack of accessible information about the form in the public domain.

*Movie 6.1: A short documentary about 'The Raree Man and his Peepshow':*

This film has been viewed widely and even plagiarised by international television companies such as Iranian Television, who copied footage of my show from Youtube to demonstrate the worldwide reach of the 'Shahre Farang' peepshows of Persia and Iran.[77]

It was clear to me that there was a direct line from the work I was creating, right back to the peep practice of the itinerant showfolk of the early nineteenth and late eighteenth centuries, who had employed a multitude of technological and representational devices, alongside the persiflage and *chutzpah* of the presenter, to entertain and engage a transient public gathered in a carnivalesque spirit in public space.

As the showman or raree man, my embodiment of the role and the form needed to permeate the show: just as in the past, the outward show of the booths and fit-ups were essential to attract crowds, so the costuming of the performers (raree man and 'Boy') and the peepshow's outward appearance were key areas of investment. These characters exist in the moment of performance as anachronisms in contemporary public space. People moving through a common environment such as

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[75] John Plunkett, 'Peepshows for All: Performing Words and the Travelling Showman', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture,* 63.1 (2015) pp.7-30. p. 7.

[76] Erkki Huhtamo, 'Toward A History of Peep Practice' from *A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. Andre Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac and Santiago (Chichester: Hidalgo, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.) p. 35.

[77] Youtube link to Iranian Television programme featuring my peepshow - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wuyvZ-Gke24

a field, a car park or promenade, are attracted by the bizarre, heightened, historical costumes (many of the audience ask me if I'm a pirate) and the intriguing physicality of the peepbox. In the historical incarnations of the role, the raree man would generally adopt the guise of a trusted, authoritative figure, demonstrating a degree of control and mastery in the chaotic, fantastical world of his creation. 'The voluble and voluminous chat of the peepshow man bestrode a fuzzy line between lecturing and showmanship.'[78] Yet he still had to combine information with instruction and entertainment, as he says: 'My maxim is, delight the eye, inform the head, and correct the heart.'[79]

Thus, my raree character needed to have a showman's eye for the sensational, the absurd and the wise, as well as being a trusted and experienced character. He had to have authority and a knowing wink of irony, he had to be perceptive, experienced, accessible and fun. Henry Mayhew notes that the nineteenth century showmen possessed a similar function, 'that quickness of perception which is commonly called 'cunning', a readiness of expression, and a familiarity (more or less) with the topics of the day.'[80]

Basing my costume on the many illustrations and engravings from the era, I chose my character to be a veteran of Waterloo, aided by a walking cane and a mute 'Boy' apprentice. This Napoleonic veteran's status offered the character both the required sagacity and authority, as well as conforming to a stereotypical showman's garb as depicted in many of the contemporary images:

***Gallery 6.1:*** *Images of raree men and their contraptions.*

The role of 'Boy' was practical in so far as I needed more than just myself to effectively manoeuvre and operate the device (my poor eyesight made it tricky to decipher the cues on the Ipod, in particular) and also to help in managing the audience as they shifted from passive observers to peepers and from peepers to those wearing earphones and fully immersed. I did not want to build a relationship with dialogue or double-act banter with the 'Boy', but rather for him to represent a naïve, clown-like foil to the garrulous master showman. 'Boy' is an apprentice to the raree man, he is at the start of his journey, whereas his master is at the end of his and reflecting upon it - proffering mottos, aphorisms and words of advice both to his young apprentice and his audience, in much the same way as Sergeant Bell's homilies and epithets start each of the chapters of this thesis.

> At the first glance any one might have felt disposed to entertain pity for him; but, when he began to speak, he introduced so many proverbs, and short pithy rhymes, and mingled so much information, cheerfulness, good sense, and good advice, in his observations, that pity was supplanted by respect.[81]

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[78] Plunkett, *Ibid.* p. 17.

[79] *Sergeant Bell, Ibid.* p. 77.

[80] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor.* Volume IV, (New York: Dover Publications, 1968). p. 209.

[81] *Sergeant Bell, Ibid*. p. 3.

Just as Uncle Tacko! the flea ringmaster, draws people into the absurd, anthropomorphic world of his flea circus, so the raree man draws his 'peepers' (the limited audience who are able to view through the nine available lenses) and those outside (the potential peepers) into a vicarious relationship with the story and the fantastical contraption that is the peepbox, by an inclusive style of 'fresh-talking communicability'.[82]

The historical integrity of the making and dressing of 'The Imaginarium' world was as important as the authenticity and intricacy of the flea circus's construction and the pierrots' iconic uniformity of costume: the peepshow was similarly designed to connect implicitly with its socio-political source, through the vernacular river of residual popular memory. The peepbox itself was meticulously researched and a considerable proportion of the project's initial Arts Council of England's budget was used to commission the authenticated conventions of Georgian performance for the modern age – a sumptuous Georgian auditorium with dimming house and stage lighting, stage machinery with working flaps and traps, flying scenery, painted cloths and puppets.

I was consciously juxtaposing old and new elements – stage machinery (such as a sprung trapdoor and peristrephic panorama) with lithium-powered lighting, Pollocks-style flat puppets with digital 3-D mapping projections. I wanted to manufacture an a-historic world with theatrical devices drawn from every age – a sort of post-modern remediation of Georgian performance. Through this 'assemblage',[83] the technology, context and content are engaged in 'Hypermediacy [which] presents everything simultaneously, employing a multiplicity of different medias and technologies, challenging the normative way of looking at the world from a linear perspective'.[84]

The impact I desired, was one of increasing immersion in the heteroglossia of remediation and hypermediation: a typical viewer would progress (a bit like in 'The Imaginarium' experience,) from external passer-by, to non-peeping viewer, then s/he would approach the peepbox to become a peeper through one of the nine lenses with a live, aural story from the raree man, until eventually, they enter the more fully immersive experience of an intermedial, world with headphones, sound effects and the sensory effects of touch and sprayed water. This was my attempt to create an intermedial, virtual reality world:

> the immediacy of environment, the feeling of physically entering a space created by hypermediated effects which include the use of speed, time, sound, smell, and three dimensions. All contribute to the creation of a completely immersive experience.[85]

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[82] Kember *Ibid.* p.81.

[83] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer – On vision and modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: October Books, MIT Press, 1992), pp.30-31.

[84] Caroline Radcliffe, 'Remediation and Immediacy in the Theatre of Sensation', *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film 36/*2, after Bolter & Grusin, p. 40.

[85] Radcliffe, *Ibid.* p. 41.

Each of these senses were employed in the creation of the piece and in the performance of 'The Peepshow', with the result that the audiences experience increasing levels of immersion as they progress from outside viewer to peeper.

I designed the raree man's stories to be reflections or parables of life: they are clearly, by turns, fanciful, factual, timeless, barbed, joyful and cautionary. Indeed, even the peepshow cart is a sort of mobile wayside pulpit, with key aphorisms written as slogans on its outer surfaces – these are mottos for the raree man's vision of the world, such as 'Money is the root of all evil', or 'Fancy sets you free'. In fact, the entire creation is a solipsistic universe of the raree man's invention – every character portrayed on the film or as a puppet, whether that be a miniature raree man, a devil, an old lady, or a grotesque king, are played-out or represented by versions of the raree man.

The theatrical conceit implicit within 'The Banker's Progress', is that the raree man's story is the creation of the peepbox and the peepbox itself creates the story. All this serves the function of presenting a world interpreted and infused by the raree man – he is the beginning and the end, the alpha and omega, as he says at the start of Part 2:

> This is my 'peepbox' - a portal to another world, just like Platform 9¾ or a crack in time. I shine a ray into realms both natural and divine. I bring light into darkness – the light-bringer, your very own Lucifer!

He conveys knowledge and wisdom as both moral guide, but always with the self-deprecating irony of a knowing wink. He is both fallen angel and a man of our world, 'natural and divine'.

In addition to the visual aesthetic and characterisation of the piece, we provide a live sonic environment with a barrel organ: like the barrel piano (or tinglary) in 'The Imaginarium' set-up, the barrel organ is there to attract an audience with an authentic, historical sound. However, we toy with the audiences' expectations by accompanying the raree man's singing with the contemporary Jesse J song – 'Price Tag', punched into the paper roll of the barrel organ. The kinetic manufacture of live sound by an historical mechanical instrument (which is itself a binary form of mechanical representation and therefore directly linked technologically to the twenty-first century digital technology delivered inside the box), combined with an anachronistic contemporary tune, provided a further level of inter-textuality. These different technical and sensory layers provided another route by which the audience could enter into a playful engagement with the raree environment, whose central focus remained the extraordinary, almost steampunk-looking peepcart.

***Gallery 6.2:*** *Images of the peepcart.*

My flea circus had placed the exhibit or 'gaffe' at the centre of the performance context, but the circus itself and the tricks contained therein remained fairly immutable, any deviation from the script or prepared *lazzis*, required improvisation in the moment. This meant that although there might be occasional reference to contemporary issues and concerns, these were largely incidental to the uncontroversial and crowd-pleasing spectacle of the fleas' world. Therefore, my aim

in creating the raree show, was to see if overtly political content could be thoroughly embedded accessibly within the text, as well as the form, of the performance.

In the midst of a non-theatrical, conventional social gathering space, the showman or Raree Man's rhetorical barking and banter, (eg 'Come and see the wonder of all the wonders that ever the world has wondered at!' - Part 1 of 'The Banker's Progress' and direct from David Paton-Williams' *Katterfelto – Prince of Puff*, (Leicester: Matador, 2008), drew passive spectators into an alternative encounter with spectacle, a disruptive discourse which Baz Kershaw refers to as 'the decontextualized carnivalesque*'.[86] Stylised and improbable, this genre of popular entertainment collapses the cultural hierarchies present in conventional theatrical contexts and allows the possibility of detachment from reality which the raree man is then potentially able to exploit for subversive (or reactionary) purposes. The personality of the raree man or showman is one of the most important aspects of the peepshow, both historically and in its re-presentation: he contextualises and animates the variously-created imagery inside the box through oral and aural components in what Martin Hewitt describes as a 'spectacle of words'.[87]

> None of the shows were ever simply 'visual', invariably being composed of all manner of attractions – as much aural, musical, haptic, habitual and convivial… The showman's narrative accompanying his scenes was the crucial difference between the optical box as a scientific recreation and the peepshow's status as a popular entertainment. The attraction of the peepshow was as much verbal as visual.'[88]

It was the showman's address – his style and content of delivery that I was most keen to explore: the showman's patter in peepshows and early films is often described as 'ironic' and 'fresh-talking',[89] combining popular common sense, the authoritative tone of a lecturer and strongly satirical self-consciousness – full of exaggeration, duplicity and bunkum. The patter I developed as the raree man was drawn in large part from the few authentic texts that are available from the early nineteenth century: volumes such as *Sergeant Bell and his Raree-Show*, contained some *verbatim* versions of the raree text and from these original sources, I created almost a quarter of my performance text. The tone of delivery is akin to that of early bioscope presenters – by turns authoritative, avuncular, absurd and wise. I used this style of presentation to introduce the story and then sprinkled it throughout the more formal storytelling (as was noted in the extant versions of raree and peepshow performances of the time).

***Notes:*** *'The Banker's Progress' text Parts 1, 2 & 3*

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[86] Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance Radical - Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992) p. 71.

[87] Martin Hewitt, 'Beyond Scientific Spectacle: Image and Word in Nineteenth-Century Popular Lecturing.' Ed. Joe Kember, John Plunkett and Jill Sullivan. *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840–1910.* (London: Pickering and Chatto, *2012.*) *passim* pp. 79–96.

[88] John Plunkett, MLA paper. *Ibid.* 1-5. p.1.

[89] Joe Kember, *Ibid, passim*.

NB The words that are spoken from the text are at times accompanied by live action, stills images or film. Some is spoken live, some is recorded. The peepshow experience is a multi-media event.

The main narrative of 'The Banker's Progress' story was invented by me to demonstrate both the possibilities of the peepbox and the different types of raree/peepshow performance that would have been presented in the past - in particular the historic lecture, the mythical journey, the morality tale and absurd, subjective narration. In wanting to make contemporary political comment, I drew inspiration from the period's satirical cartoonists, including Gilray and Cruikshank, who depicted showmen and raree men in their lampooning of the dignitaries and foibles of their age. However, it was William Hogarth's series of bitingly satirical Georgian paintings that seemed to me to have the strongest parallels with the modern age: above all, I used 'The Rake's Progress' as the basis for my first peepshow. This series of eight paintings was produced in 1732–33 and it depicts the decline and fall of Tom Rakewell, the spendthrift son and heir of a rich merchant, who comes to London, squanders all his money on luxurious living, prostitution and gambling, before first being gaoled in Fleet Prison and finally being incarcerated in Bedlam  (*Image 6.1: The Rake's Progress)* This work was produced just ten years after the South Sea Bubble – the first great stock market crash to occur in Britain, as the country attempted to raise funds for a war against France. There appeared to me (and several other twenty-first century cultural and financial commentators) to be profound connections between this eighteenthcentury crisis and the recent banking crash of 2008 that started our current world-wide recession. I felt that this was an appropriate historic portal through which I could explore intertextuality by making contemporary political commentary with didacticism, moralism, irony and parody. As an homage to Hogarth, I called the piece 'The Banker's Progress' and it operated in three, distinct parts, each of which explored different aspects of the peepbox's physical and technological potential, as well as the development of different themes within the narrative: all of this was contained within the authenticated performative conventions of the peepshow and annotated by the raree man's ironic, hyperbolic, knowing discourse.

*Movie 6.2: Film for Part 3 of 'The Banker's Progress' – 'This Too Shall Pass'.*

A new aspect of performance I needed to consider, was how to address simultaneously both the audience of peepers (those engaged directly in the story within the box) and those gathered around the peepshow. This second audience is intrigued by the performance activity, but either unable to participate fully because of the limited number of lenses, or unwilling to do so for some other reason. Nevertheless, it was clear from my research into raree show practice, that the original showmen were keen to attract a wider interest amongst the public than just those who had paid for their view through the peephole and thereby arouse sufficient intrigue to retain a potential second or third audience.

> At the peepshow, there were always two audiences, at least two sets of experiences, for the showman's performance. There was the audience viewing the show inside the peep-box, and the 'onlookers' who were watching

the 'inlookers' while still listening to the showman and adding their own observations, banter, and commentary.[90]

Hence 'The Banker's Progress' was conceived as a three-part show, with the ability to swap viewers around at the end of each section and there are parts of each show that simultaneously deliver a slightly different narrative externally and internally to the peepbox. Naturally enough, those who had not had the experience of directly engaging with viewing through the peephole, were by-and-large curious as to what was going-on hidden from their view. However, what they do get is an opportunity to observe the backstage workings of the peepbox's mechanisms and the acoustic aspects of storytelling and characters played by the raree man, as well as the occasional image or complicit sardonic comment delivered specifically for their separate consumption.

**Gallery 6.3:** *Dual audiences of peepers and non-peepers.*



This dual audience of peepers and non-peepers was a particular aspect of the raree man's performance that I was keen to explore – how to deliver storytelling that would engage both a more immersed audience (those experiencing the show through the peep hole) and those who were less connected. This sense of simultaneous immersion and non-immersion is one noted in my historical predecessors by Erkki Huhtamo:

> Public peepshows often had several peepholes side by side, sometimes in two rows (for grown-ups and children). This made physical contact unavoidable. The fair had a dense soundscape the visitors could not escape – exhortations, shouts, bursts of laughter, showmen's stories. The peepers surely commented on the sights as well, chatting with the invisible beings waiting behind their backs. In spite of visual immersion, peepers were firmly anchored to their surroundings.[91]

In this respect, the peepshow presages a range of more contemporary immersive assemblages. Josephine Machon identifies immersive theatre as being an

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[90] Plunkett, *Peepshows for All, Ibid,* p. 10.

[91] Erkki Huhtamo, *Toward A History of Peep Practice. Ibid.,* pp.35-36.

architecture of the senses, where immersion is 'quintessentially (syn)aesthetic in that it manipulates the explicit recreation of sensation through visual, physical, verbal, aural, tactile, haptic and olfactory means.'[92]

She argues that such haptic sensation or 'praesence' is disorientating and thereby can 'ignite the imagination; to offer clues and set experiences in place; to give a carnivalesque logic to the illogical.'[93]

The hypermediacy of the peepshow, which acknowledges and makes visible a variety of multiple acts of representation, means that 'audience members become active participants, collaborators and co-creators, moving into the realm of audience-adventurers.'[94] Hence the physical engagement of the audience of peepers, as well as their imaginative and cognitive perspectives, is a core component of the peepshow's meaning.

Here follows a few short excerpts of the kind of contact and intimacy that is possible in the performance of the peepshow (this performance is at RAMM in October 2016):

**Movie 6.3:** *The Raree Man's direct physical contact at RAMM, September 2016*

There has been considerable research by early cinema historians into the ways in which moving pictures evolved from magic lanternism and prior to that, from the raree men and their peepshows. The proximity of these early cinematographic incarnations to the peepshow, betray their roots in the more ancient bastions of the sideshow midway such as mumming booths, waxwork exhibitions, ghost shows, marionette displays and other means of annotating narration by showmen. New media technologies almost always involve a remediation of earlier presentational formats and my intention was to re-imagine the raree man and his peepshow box for the twenty-first century and thereby engage in what the Situationists defined as *'detournement'*: 'the reversal of 'pre-existing' aesthetic elements to create a new and subversive effect, (a) mixture of pastiche, parody, and plagiarism'.[95]

I was delighted to find how the peepshow form maintained a connection with the subversive movement that had been such a significant (if unwitting) part of my experience of the flexibility and transient nature of the pierrot troupe. In effect, the peepshow was another form of 'situationist prank', insinuated into mainstream contexts. Despite my efforts to present subversive material through the peepshow, there was never any impetus from the audiences to storm the banks at the end of each show, but rather it provided food for thought and the desire of many to discuss the issues raised. After each performance, I have as many people wanting to talk about the meaning and implications of the show's content, as are intrigued by the extraordinary nature of the physical and technical contraption.

The early cinematic lecturers and *spielers*, possessed remarkable freedom of expression: they could poke fun at authority figures and dupe audiences in the

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[92] Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres – Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 107.
[93] Machon *Ibid.* p. 97.
[94] Machon, *Ibid*. p. 99.
[95] Graham White. *Ibid.* p.330.

process of weaving fantastical tales and engaging their potential audiences in banter that might be regarded as cheeky, or risqué. They were not, historically-speaking, satirical in content or even intent, but rather, utilised mischievousness to forge a personal connection with their punters.

It was at this nexus, between a pliant, carnivalesque audience, brought into complicity with a subversive purveyor of mediated storytelling, in the persona of the knowing and knowledgeable raree man, that I sought to push further my experiments with the presentational form of popular entertainment. Claude Bertemes and Nicole Dahlen describe this same interconnectivity with reference to the 'Crazy Cinematographe' (a similar contemporary project exploring early cinematic techniques of presentation):

> a meandering form of attention. …Its language is heteroglossia (Mikhail Bakhtin) – the polyphony in addressing the audience, its mediality is the interplay of cinematography and theatricality, its temporality is the navigation between the epochs, its audience strategy is the mobilisation of the viewing experience between exploration, attraction and archaeology.[96]

The raree man's hyperbole, blatant exaggeration and absurd representations of adventures permeate the show, which draws audiences both into the story and into a relationship with the adventurer himself. The public's simultaneous enjoyment of the showman's skilful presentation and hyperbolic persiflage is a key component of their appreciation of the shows. The raree man acts as advisor, confidante and spokesperson - a 'seer' of world events, both as one who observes and one with insight from a moral, political and avuncular standpoint. He occupies a professional comedic role with knowing, self-deprecating irony and an ability to communicate accessibly in 'a boisterous, inclusive, interactive environment wherein authoritative discourses could be safely caricatured and parodied without bringing the commercial foundations of the show itself into question'.[97]

Such a performance style is not, in itself, an innovative practice – in fact, rather like 'immersive theatre', it is simply a fresh, discursive tool by which to understand a particular process and function of performance. Alongside the fortune teller and psychic, the peepshow and raree presentation occupies a liminal space between performance and social commentary, but rather than claiming spiritual connections or access to runic cyphers, the raree man uses wit and prescience more like a trickster, or a people's fool.  One of the key themes in eighteenth and nineteenth century popular culture was the continuity of its anarchic and carnivalesque dimension, with its tendency to mock authority and a 'refusal to be rational or serious',[98] which provided an opportunity for the showman to play the 'clever fool':

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[96] 'Back to the Future: Early Cinema a Late Economy of Attention an interim report about Crazy Cinematographe' *Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance, KINtop studies in early cinema – volume 1,* Edited by Martin Loiperdinger (Hertfordshire: John Libbey Publishing Limited, 2011.) p. 102

[97] Kember, *Ibid.* p. 87.

[98] JM Golby & AW Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd. Popular Culture in England 1750-1900'*, (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1984), p. 14.

> In a world of fools, it is the person who realises (or who can be brought to realise) his own innate folly who is truly wise. This is the universal message of the clever fool.[99]

Popular culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are similarly inhabited by 'clever fools', through whose self-deprecating, parodic irony they share their 'knowing', subversive wisdom: from Dan Leno or Charlie Chaplin, to Lennie Bruce, Eddie Izzard, Ricky Gervais and Homer Simpson.

The embodied practice of the raree man's persona and delivery, combined with the authenticated conventions and immersive potential of the peepbox (through which the audience enters a heteroglossial relationship with the presented material), engages the audience as active participants rather than mere consumptive observers and in so doing, allows more subversive content – ameliorated by its historicised aesthetic, yet barbed in its contemporary resonance. Plunkett identifies the same implicit alternative perspectives in earlier peepshow forms, in which 'sensory optical effects that disrupted the transparent rationality of vision were outside the patriarchal, political, order.'[100] However, just as in earlier times, the raree men's principal aim would be more to engage and entertain(with perhaps the opportunity to moralise or proselytise) rather than to prompt dissent, so my peepshow is ultimately constrained by the need to conform to the socio-economic requirements of the environments in which I am able to perform (festivals, public events, museums)  and although I may offer subversive content both implicitly and explicitly, it is not able to radically alter public discourse.

However, the intertextuality of my re-imagined peepshow form, combined with the heteroglossial interpretation of its content, provides a platform for the ludic transcendence of the commonplace – an alternative vision presented accessibly in contemporary, open, public space. In this way, the re-imagined peepshow does not prescribe a utopian model, but 'rather utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies... [it] presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility'.[101] The context, form and content of The Peepshow immerse the audience into an accessible, temporary sense of liberation from normative structures.

My aim in producing the peepshow, had been to find a means of presenting overtly political material in public space through the use of historical tropes of itinerant performance. My peepshow attempts to create an almost Brechtian sense of distance between the heritage form and the contemporary socio-political meaning. This process of practice-based research resulted in defining a style and potential of performance by itinerant showman who adopt the role of a publicly accessible, clever fool with subversive potential: no such word exists for this function and so I have

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[99] John Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*, (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2003), p. 10.

[100] Plunkett, *Peepshows for All, Ibid.* p. 12.

[101] Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 18.

invented the term 'seer performance' in an attempt to describe it and offer a tool by which to identify such practices in the future.


# Conclusion


**'Knowledge is gained from near and far
And wisdom is better than weapons of war.'**
*Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show, (Ibid.)* p. 297


**Chapter 6: Conclusion**

> Culture is ordinary: …Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land.[102]

The performance forms described and analysed in this paper were all popular in their time, yet there is relatively little that has been written about them during the centuries of their existence. My efforts to explore their practice and meaning in contemporary, twenty-first century England have led to my definition of a style of itinerant showman performance ('Seer') that I believe can usefully help interpret the intention and praxis of such work both in the past and for the future.

The seer performance of the showman or barker is commercial in its approach and certainly fulfils Williams' criteria of being 'ordinary' (as cited above), but it is not part of the cultural mainstream. As an itinerant artform, it has more in common with fairgrounds, circuses, the market square and early music hall, than with theatrical spaces, or classical forms. It is an accessible, adaptable form which has managed to evade rigorous, theoretical analysis. Such performance does not command any significant cultural recognition, nor does it offer the kind of direct, socio-political content of agitprop street theatre or small-scale touring work. The showman's primary purpose is to engage and entertain (and thereby appeal as widely as possible), but the semi-improvised, semi-secluded intimacy of such a personalised, transformative experience, facilitates opportunities for social and political commentary through its form.

> Heritage is not a thing, but a process of meaning-making and negotiation and […] the authenticity of heritage lies not in its physical fabric, but in the

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[102] Raymond Williams, *On Culture and Society*, 1958, Essential writings, edited by Jim McGuigan, (University of Loughborough: Sage Publications, 2013), p. 2.

legitimacy given to the social and cultural values we imbue in places of heritage through the performances we construct at them.[103]

The enduring practices of the itinerant showman's performance provides the means to reflect on the past, transform the present and offer alternatives for the future - a facet of festivity identified by Bakhtin: 'Popular festive forms look into the future. They present the victory of this future, of the golden age, over the past'.[104] Such seer performance uses the tropes of the past – in fabric, form and text, to offer comment on the present.

> The more we become urbanised, the more we surround ourselves with mechanical devices and the more we let Society plan our lives, the greater our need for the showman to bring us all that we have agreed to do without.[105]

Like the Situationists, the Seer showman tries to ensure that the experience resonates 'outside a purely aesthetic context and provides a blue-print for the transcendence of the constrained and limited experience of 'everyday life'.'[106] In the peepshow, I endeavoured to achieve this effect through allegory and parallel historical resonances.

Through a kind of media archaeology that excavates and analyses the neglected processes and practices of itinerant showman performance, it has been possible to see how popular entertainment forms can provide a portal through which we can interpret and understand the cultural orthodoxies that underpin the use of public space and the commodification and control of activities that take place within them. As Lukas Feireiss remarks, 'counter-cultural forms of engagement with the urban realm are distinguished by a principle of disobedience towards accepted dominant spatial and social practices.'[107] By recognising and using some of those same commercial aesthetics, social conventions and allegorical meanings, which enable popular entertainers to engage accessibly with the general public, I found that a seer performer could deliver politicised commentary and homilies with subversive intent.

*Tony Lidington, 29th November 2016 (revised with corrections 22nd April 2017)*

**"…if I were to write my own epitaph, it should be this; 'A faithful soldier, a kind-hearted man, and a humble Christian.' This, if deserved, would be a better monument for Sergeant Bell, and a better for many of his neighbours, than a**

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[103] Laurajane Smith, 'The doing of heritage: heritage as performance', *Performing heritage: research, practice and innovation*, edited by Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd, **(**Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 80.

[104] Bakhtin, p. 256.
[105] Maurice Graham, *Showman & Suckers*, (London: Percival Marshall, 1951), p. 6.
[106] Graham White, p. 330.
[107] Lukas Feireiss 'Livin' in the city. The urban space as creative challenge'; *Urban Interventions – personal projects in public spaces'*, edited by Robert Klanten and Matthias Hubner, (Berlin: Gestalten, 2010), p. 3.

**gilded escutcheon, an inscription of gold, or a marble statue in the Abbey-church of Westminster.”**
*Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show*, *Ibid.* p. 447.

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