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## Contemporary photographic practices on the British fairground

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## **Contemporary photographic practices on the British fairground**

*Summary - The fairground is a somewhat magical and uncharted realm of illusion, deception, thrill and adventure. It offers a glimpse of the improbable and impossible, and a taste or touch of the unattainable. This article looks at the crossover of photography and the British fairground following the gradual take-up of photography in the post-war period. It briefly covers early traditions concomitant with the specialised practice of photography, then I identify photographic practices on the fairground through distinct communities of engagement including professional and amateur photographers attracted to the spectacle of the fair, ethnographic explorers, dedicated enthusiasts, show-people and the general public of 'punters'. In each case I present photographs from these communities as well as presenting a selection of photographs depicting these communities of photographers in action. The article concludes with the current situation of camera phone technology, social media and digitally manipulated photographic art as a new aesthetic of the fairground.*

Keywords: fairgrounds, showpeople, vernacular, experience, representation

This article focusses on the British travelling fairground and examines how, in the post-war period, different communities have formed around and within the fairground with an aim of using photography to facilitate and further their interests and practices. The article covers a diverse mix of communities including amateur photographers drawn to the technical and aesthetic spectacle of the fairground, professional photographers interested in documenting the elusive and mysterious community of fairground families, the arrangements for showpeople to document and share their own lives through photography, the intense community of enthusiasts who have a multitude of niche fascinations and obsessions with the fairground, and finally the large community of fairgoers - or punters - who seek out thrills and excitement. I draw upon my own experience of engagement with the fairground and its various communities, with particular regard to my own practices in photographing the fairground and also working in a past role as Photographic Collections Manager at the National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield.

This work can be understood as a case study of photographic practices **within** and around a distinct and often overlooked stratum of society consisting of overlapping sociological formations, a world that is often difficult to enter and understand. A clear documenting of practices and motivations is gradually developed using both photographic examples from within these communities and photographs taken (by the author) from outside the frame of the community but depicting members of the community in the process of making photographs. The article concludes with a consideration of developing practices in the digital realm of rapid-fire documentation and social media, and asks what is being added and what might be missed in this new ecology of photography. The article draws on an overt reference to the carnival space within Foucault's slippery list of **heterotopias**, though it is possible to classify the fair at various levels of his loose ontology; as deviation, as juxtapositional, as time-heterochronies, as "worlds-within-worlds". These concepts of strangeness and being out of time and place, or under the spell of spatial disorientation in either a crowded maze of visual effects or under the grip of twisting fairground ride, act as an opaque guide to the article. Foucault's heterotopia is returned to in the conclusion via Martha Rosler's *Passionate Signals* project, with regard to capturing such a space either deliberately or serendipitously with the camera.

### **History and context of the fair**

The British travelling fair holds a distinctive allure in both its coming-to-be and in-itself. It is provided by a nomadic community who seemingly have their own separate domain of existence, bringing the fair through the dead of night with a remarkable effort of organisation to assemble an array of vehicles and wagons. By the morning light activity is always well under way; teams of staff are unfolding and unpacking structures, some kind of marking out seems in evidence to make it all fit together *just so*. A characteristic of the British fairground is the common occurrence of short duration fairs in quick succession, resulting in the magical sense of the fairground arriving out of thin air through the night, and dismantling and dispersing with equal speed and mystery. In this regard the fairground embodies the central trope of magic and illusion, the "now you see me, now you don't", which sets out a visual engagement with the magical of the fairground.<sup>1</sup> **Visitors** to the fair share a suspension of disbelief evolving around the tensions of the phenomenal and noumenal, shifting what might be thought acceptable and everyday into the realm of the transgressive, surreal and thrilling, and pulling out the impossible and unimaginable into the realm of the sensory (or near-enough-sensory). It offers a glimpse of the improbable and impossible, and a taste or touch of the unattainable. The fairground disorients in an excess of sounds, smells, tastes, lights, visuals,

rootedness, social conventions and performativity. As Toulmin (*Pleasurelands* 61) states, the fair is “mysterious, dangerous, a venue in which emotions are unguarded, experiences intense, and a break from the routine of everyday life.” The duration of the fair disrupts both the allocated functions of spaces (consumption, commuting, parking) and the rhythms of normality associated with those spaces (opening/closing, parking by micro-divisions of the hour). And finally, the magical coming-to-be of the fair is mirrored with its departure. Just as it comes from elsewhere, it departs to another elsewhere, leaving a trace of compressed rings in the grass and residual artefacts such as broken light caps, food remnants, dislodged and scattered coins and traces of packaging from cheap swag prizes that looked so tempting under the fairground lights.

The British fairground season traditionally runs from February (Valentine’s Day marking the start of King’s Lynn Mart Fair) through to November (the season ending with the charter fair at Loughborough). In recent years the limit points of this period have been extended both ways, with a number of newly founded Valentine’s fairs usurping the status of King’s Lynn as the official start, and a number of extended bonfire fairs pushing towards the end of November, alongside Long Eaton Chestnut Fair which falls in the last week of November. With the current fashion for Christmas lights switch-ons and Christmas and New Year fairs, the season is now no longer a season as such, more a continuous occurrence. There are approximately 150 fairs taking place every week throughout the main season with these fairs consisting of large events occupying streets and market places in towns and cities, fairs on urban grasslands, commons and large out of town expanses such as business parks and retail centres, and smaller fairs taking a weekend occupation of idyllic village greens. The fairground will vary in size depending upon its historical importance and established population of customers, though a set structure permeates all fairs such that each will consist of larger rides (adult rides), smaller rides (juvenile rides), side and round stalls offering a variety of games, supplemented by food stalls (sweet and savoury) and a smattering of hawkers selling balloons and associated cheap trinkets known as swag. The regulations determining when and where a fair can occur are determined by and set out in historical charters, whilst the rights to present these fairs are generally managed by the Showmen’s Guild of Great Britain, whose members - showpeople - provide attractions that move from place to place.

Fairgrounds cry out for an ocular-centric engagement - every aspect from advertising, official opening ceremonies, aesthetic orientation of the equipment, lighting and situation employs a multi-faceted bombardment of visual themes and compositions. Such an overwhelming and overbearing encounter requires a step back and slight shielding of the eyes if any sense can be made of this visual cacophony. The tentacles of this visual spectacle reach deep inside us to draw us in to the polysensory labyrinth. But how does this excess of bright objects and illusionistic spaces engage with the practice of photography in the post-war era?

### **Early instances of photography on the fairground**

This article is concerned with post-war era and the take-up of photography as an affordable past-time or necessary adjunct to a hobby, commencing within the period classed as the third moment of photography (Gómez Cruz and Meyer 210). However, the fairground engaged with photography from the point of its inception and it would be lacking rigour to omit this important and lengthy era even though my focus here is on the later period. My principal argument is that photography existed as a tool for the showman, to be utilised in the arsenal of tools and techniques to tempt the public

by both fooling the public and proffering the public with something special, and I will provide a brief overview of this below.

The development of photography in the latter decades of the nineteenth century coincided with a fairground dominated by travelling shows, an age before mechanical rides began to replace stalls, games and shows and change the nature of the thrills on offer. The principal body of research covers the take up of moving images on the fairground, either through shadow illusions and magic lantern shows, or the utilisation of film proper. This body of work can be read as a history from below, detailing peripherally recorded activities presented as part of working class entertainment, with many showpeople then active in the establishment of the first cinema at the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> Prior to moving images proper, the desire to present something different and shrouded in illusion and impossibility saw static images utilised as lantern slides or illuminated and magnified images, as well as sequenced photographs and pictures used to create a sensation of motion with early incarnations of racy “what the butler saw” type shows.<sup>3</sup>

For the general public photography itself remained expensive and a special occasion. Whilst studios existed in towns and cities, the travelling showpeople built magnificent studios within wagons using lavish backdrops and props.<sup>4</sup> This tradition was short-lived on the fairground, not extending beyond the nineteenth century, but instead it migrated to become a stock feature in seaside towns with studios such as the Victorian mock-up still operating in the North Yorkshire seaside town of Whitby. Itinerant photographers also worked the fairs along with a motley crew of hawkers and tricksters, with the tradition for having a portrait taken with small monkeys again surviving into the 1970s as a seaside practice. The photographic souvenir of the fair itself grew with the birth of the postcard image. These early images were often created specifically for showpeople to celebrate the opening of a new ride, and often coincided with the aforementioned King’s Lynn Mart Fair where the local manufacturers Frederick Savage would provide a prestigious new ride for the start of the season for a particular showperson.<sup>5</sup> These classic views slowly began to proliferate and formed the currency of the nascent fairground enthusiasts (see below) who collected, swapped and traded views prior to the general public being able to take up photography for themselves.

### **Photographers starting to engage the fair**

Around 1930, as the practice of photography became more widespread and available, both professional and amateur photographers navigated towards the fairground. In many regards this grouping can be considered as being on the outside of the fairground, such that they do not engage with the fair in its primary purpose (the participative enjoyment of spectacle and thrills preferably negotiated through economic transactions). Here I consider three broad classes of approach to the fairground as a purely photographic subject: the fairground as pure spectacular subject that stretches, justifies and celebrates the practice of using photographic equipment, the ethnographic turn towards the outsider,<sup>5</sup> and the more recent turn in the past decade towards documenting the ironic vernacular of certain spaces and contexts.

**Firstly I consider** the broad-brush community of professional and amateur photographers. These individuals, generally acting as a community through either membership of a camera club or as part of modern day tribe with what Maffesoli describes as a sense of unicity as opposed to unity (105) and sense of identification as opposed to identity (75), approach the fair with a specific visual mission to search out raw material for various forms of representation and artistic expression.

The amateur photographer does not approach the camera as a tool to capture phenomena visually; rather, the potential photographic subject is chosen to draw into use the maximum number of specialist features within the camera. Flusser (58) amusingly refers to camera clubs as “post-industrial opium dens” with members “consumed by greed” as the camera defines how their world is conceptualised with a need to justify and maximise the capabilities of the photographic apparatus. The fairground thus presents a plethora of photographic possibilities with its array of human subjects performing at various levels on a spectrum running through spontaneous gathering, uninhibited behaviour and outright lewdness. In addition, the fast action motion of the fairground machinery combined with the saturated lighting elements and out of the ordinary colour clashes and combinations makes composition using the full extent of available camera settings an attractive challenge and opportunity to out-smart their colleagues in the photographic community. This way of seeing the fairground responds to a kind of challenge, leading back to the camera that needs to be fed in its voracious and infinite appetite for embodying technically enabled creativity (“my camera can do this, I need to find something that exploits this capacity...”).

Some photographers from this community can and do develop a particular way of defining the visual object of the fair whilst still remaining partially outside of the fairground. That is, they approach the fair with a systemised approach relating to the content and operations of the fair whilst still producing images that sit within a discourse of aesthetic practice rather than as a record of their own engagement with the fair. The first specialist approach, or way of seeing, concerns the photographic tradition of documenting the outsider; In this case **the** community of showpeople.

This community of showpeople is intrinsically linked to the fairground - they make it happen and are there at all times. The life of a showperson encapsulates a certain distancing from society, both in terms of actively placing oneself at a distance in a certain defined space (the fairground, the lorry and the caravan) and also in taking on a set of habits and practices seen as markedly different to **routine life**. A key factor to note is the de-differentiation of modes of dwelling. Whereas it is common practice for most residents of the UK to switch between environments of home (with family), work (with colleagues) and what we now call the third place (time with friends in the pub or at the football for example), for a showperson these environments and practices are not distinct. Furthermore, that the environment of the fair is at a physical distance, often located on the margins of a city or in a park, means that the totality of social existence of showpeople can appear to reside at a kind of social distance. Consequently, showpeople are depicted as mysterious and different, juxtaposed with seemingly similar outsider and mobile communities such as gypsies and new-age travellers, this alignment not helped by the recent trend (in the UK) for an intense sequence of reality TV programmes featuring the gypsy community.<sup>6</sup>

The tradition of photographically documenting the abject other is well established and not without critique, stretching back to the origins of exploitative ethnographic shows and extending into the present under the current regime of forced hardship and movement. Key works such as Sontag and Rabinowitz query these practices as designating and delving in to the ontological status of otherness, breaking down moral boundaries and subsequently bringing to bear an ethics of seeing that was pushed to the extreme with the photographer Kevin Carter who, in 1993, photographed a starving African child seemingly being stalked by a vulture. Whilst this is clearly not the case here, there are numerous examples where members of the showpeople community are portrayed as existing not only at a distance of spatial proximity but also at a point of social proximity, bringing to bear

accepted norms and standards of facets such as cleanliness and parental responsibility, part of what Douglas calls “matter out of place” (36).

Don McCullin produced a typically stunning visual ethnographic survey of the fairground population for the Observer colour supplement (29 August, 1965), extending from his 1960s forays around the Whitechapel down-and-outs as part of recording what he considers as “the war at home”. Harrison documents this move towards depicting colourful outsiders in the new medium of colour supplements started in 1962 with the *Sunday Times* and quickly followed by others. Features were ran on new post-war subcultures such as the mods alongside those simply unfortunate enough to be poor, living in the North, doing a gruelling job and having a predisposition for ritually scrubbing (or donkey-stoning) your front step, and so a fairground montage as a kind of rogues gallery was not out of place. McCullin managed to combine and effectively disarticulate three distinct communities who can be found on the fairground before it opens for business: an array of latent teddy-boy gaff-lads, a pair of female punters hanging around the fair looking to catch the eye of the aforementioned gaff lads, and finally images of showpeople waiting for business. The three images are remarkably similar in composition, with a front facing position depicting an upright pairing of subjects who glumly stare back at the camera, whilst a sense of boredom and restlessness broods in the background conjuring up a vaguely pervasive aroma of hot-dogs and diesel that ebbs and flows between periods of opening. As technically astute and moving as the images are, the whole does lend itself towards the categorising of otherness, merging the communities of showpeople, gaff-lads and loitering punters into a homogenous group united by a sense of dirt and moral decrepitude. The sociological distancing of the types also resonates within the photographs; the showpeople are clearly from the other world, the gaff-lads have been excluded from our world and now reside as a kind of underclass within the showpeople world, and finally the female punters are in our world but are being tempted into the other world through the allure of sexual encounters with the gaff-lads. The caption under the image reads “Two girls that follow: ‘Have you photographed Tony, the best-looking boy in the fair?’”, and McCullin’s use of a red lorry in the background (a standard fairground colour at the time) along with a red glow on the matching jackets of the pair evokes the moral warnings of *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Counter-examples to this othering or objectifying are also evident. Social historian Duncan Dallas gives a more in depth account of the showpeople community with his work *The Travelling People*, and the photographer John Comino-James brings this difficult project into the modern era with the extensive photographic documentation of his time getting to know various local showpeople families. These works possibly escape the feel of a “reconnaissance operation generating intelligence on people who had previously escaped official attention” (Edwards 35).

The second and most recent incarnation of the practice of a focussed engagement can be considered as part of the current trend for documenting the working class vernacular, encouraged by a general turn in the academic cultural and sociological environments towards the everyday (Highmore; Moran). Whilst this work focuses on the infra-ordinary and minutiae of the routine practices engaged in the lives of the routine people, a parallel can be drawn in the world of photography with photographers such as Martin Parr, Craig Atkinson and his Café Royal imprint and the mobile Caravan Gallery partnership. These artists draw out humour from the chaotic world of competing and malfunctioning cultural commodities, such that the space of the fairground and seaside present a strange take on the vernacular with something approaching a steroid aesthetic. Artists such as

Jeremy Deller with his folk archive add to the movement, with Deller having shown a passion and fascination for the giant plastic hot-dogs advertising the food of the fair. Meanwhile, the new school of mass observationists, exemplified by the Caravan Gallery, take pleasure in documenting the clash of errant and amusingly arranged signage and surplus of popular culture (mis-observation?) that permeate both the fleeting and fluctuating fairground and the in-decline seaside town. Figure 1, my own attempt to briefly contribute to this niche genre, shows a typical example of overburdened vernacular marked by a witheringly imminent redundancy, exhibiting a kind of doubling in worthlessness: the prizes manifested as an unofficial England Euro 2012 “brave lion” mascot photographed in June 2012 (after England had been knocked out of the tournament at their customary early stage).

Figure 1 here

### **Showpeople**

Whilst the example looked at the showpeople community as a photographic object, they are also important as a subject in their own right. The connotations of the fair as mysterious and dangerous, is transposed in a synonymous move onto the group associated with presenting the fairground, contributing to a very deterministic reading of the showland community as specific object. The reality is somewhat different, as showpeople see the fair as “their business arena, a few hours’ opportunity to earn enough money to keep the business operating for the rest of the week. It pays the bills, supports the family, and is both their home and working environment” (Toulmin, *Pleasurelands* 62). Showpeople are a clearly defined community of the fairground, by virtue of their immovable presence in the fairground.

Working out how the showpeople engage a way of seeing of the visual fairground is a two-step process. Firstly, showpeople do not fetishize the visual fairground as something to be recorded and retained as a specific reflection of an experience or a record of a photographic spectacle. Even though they carefully construct, maintain and maximise the visual identity of the fairground as a standard practice, observing the trendsetting methods and models of other showpeople and broader cultural currents, this visual extravaganza is set out for the others (namely the punters). Secondly, as stated in the previous section, showpeople live and breathe the fairground air, and come together with distanced friends and family at the various events. The fairground is the background to their everyday life. Hence, their membership as a community (family ties to being showpeople), their relationship to the fair (temporary habitation, etc), and their practices on the fairground (working), amount to the same thing in the aforementioned concept of de-differentiated modes of dwelling. Visual documentation of life is set against the visual backdrop of the fair; the spectacle is simply the background.

In addition, the close-knit nature of this community clings on to various traditions, one of which is to feature an array of social pictures in their weekly newspaper *World’s Fair*, an important publication that played the part of being the key vessel of everyday communication before the advent of mobile communications technology and social media. This newspaper serves as a medium for a multitude of rites of passage (birth, key birthdays, engagement and marriage, achievements and ultimately death and remembrance). Figure 2 shows a contemporary crowd of showpeople hastily assembling for a photograph opportunity when the *World’s Fair* reporter is spotted on the ground. However, specific practices in staging the visual moment are carried out, conceivably attributed to this merging of

family, work and leisure. The mise-en-scène is particularly meticulous and easily missed by the untrained eye. In this case the showpeople moved to frame themselves as part of the stall, standing between the pillars and underneath the vernacular array of plush tigers that might (or more than likely might not) be won as prizes.<sup>7</sup> In addition they are pictured as ready to do business, on the stall, and with their weathered money bags and pouches to the front. Figure 3 shows a page from the *World's Fair* newspaper as part of the regular post-documentation feature of replaying these images into the wider fairground community (the readership of the newspaper is predominantly showpeople). This image clearly shows the blurring (and capturing) of the modes of home and family, the workplace, and the leisure space in one instance.

Figures 2 and 3 here.

### **The civic opening**

As described by Walker, opening ceremonies are saturated affairs invoking quirky historical traditions such as ringing a special bell, throwing newly minted pennies into the crowd, handing over large gold keys and reading out ancient charters consisting of archaic language and seemingly printed on pre-historic parchments at the opening of the principal fairs. The ceremony is an event that marks the opening of the fair, falling on the cusp between the fair getting ready and waiting, and the fair stirring into action as the generators strike up and the aromas of hot dogs and fuel and sounds of cacophonous dance music starts to cluster. If the practice of the public bringing cameras to the fairground is not something with historical provenance, then the opening ceremony is an exception; it is a quieter moment that sits immediately before the hustle and bustle of a fairground in operation. The opening ceremony itself is a visual collision such that cameras (and now camera phones) are wielded by all present, the event recorded by many parties including the showpeople themselves. Most importantly, it provides a record of the enduring importance of a specific fair, as illustrated with figure 4 where the civic dignitaries are in the process of being visually captured by showpeople and punters surrounding the Dodgem ride that forms the stage for the opening ceremony.

Outside of what is a sumptuous clash of bizarre traditions, dress codes and modes of comportment, a closer examination of the photograph shows three realms of visualisation nested like a set of Russian dolls in the visual collision (see figure 5). The researcher and recorder of the photographic practices (myself) tries to survey a whole scene and inadvertently photographs a member of the public (on the extreme left edge of the photograph outside the stage of performance) who is himself photographing a close-up of the spectacle of the opening ceremony. This person seems to be focussed on a dignitary who is herself photographing the spectacle. Here we glimpse the diagetic code being transgressed as the friends and consorts of the dignitaries start to take a series of photographs and abandon their roles as actors, effectively shifting the functioning definition of the civic community from the role of spectacle to the role of visual consumers and creators, as they partake in the consumption of their own spectacle. This diagetic transgression also shifts the nature of the spectacle itself. For some consumers of this spectacle the action of the dignitaries creating photographs and selfies may dilute the importance and seriousness of the civic spectacle, for others it may add a different flavour to the spectacle as the practice of taking selfies vacillates between acceptable and unacceptable.

Figures 4 and 5 here.

## Enthusiasts

A key **aspect** of the fairground is what is known as the enthusiast community. Operating either as individuals or in a pre-arranged meeting at the larger fairs, these are people from outside the **official organisational communities** who take an interest in the fairground beyond simply attending and partaking in the rides and entertainments on offer. Practices are in line with what society has declared as trainspotters - whereby a passion for intense detail, completism, and the documentation of completism defines the life of the subject. Coming in to a more organised presence in the 1930s, the enthusiasts are a self-identifying community defined by a common interest - that is an interest in the interior workings of the fair. The use of the word enthusiast is a name that the members bestow upon themselves, and this community is often a grouping that sits distinct from general society with a hint of alterity alongside practical necessity and shared passion.<sup>8</sup> **Members** of the enthusiast community can be classified with a greater degree of granularity in various considerations. Specialisms exist with the nature of the objects recorded (transport, rides, rides building up, artwork, the fairground itself as a whole), the level of activism or commitment (how far the enthusiast is willing to travel, to research, to wait at an event for the right opportunity) and the operational practices undertaken as part of the hobby (this can range from actively buying and restoring fairground objects, documenting the history of fairs with written research, creating visual records, promoting the fair and working as close as possible with the showpeople community).

Fairground enthusiasts extend both the way of seeing and the when of seeing that challenges the fairground's own visual output. In my 30 years participating in the fairground enthusiast community, with a particular remit to document through photographs, I have never seen anyone photographing "wheel-nuts and hub-caps", though the phrase exists almost as moniker of self-deprecation to remind oneself of the quirky nature of the hobby. The fairground enthusiast sees new objects - (whole) objects not designed to be seen in general view (such as the lorries and living wagons) as well as sub-objects that, even though clearly existing as visual phenomena, are not tasked with being seen as part of the fair presenting itself - the wheel-nuts and hub-caps being an example. A recent trend is the photographing of manufacturer identification plates tucked away on the rear-most structures of rides. Whilst these sub-objects are part of the visual economy of the showpeople community, and part of the visual economy of a small legislative community of equipment manufacturers and inspectors, they are clearly not destined to be part of any other visual economies. Other unauthorised sub-objects that receive regular attention include technical and mechanical parts of the rides, generators, interiors of pay-boxes and fairground art scrutinised at a microscopic level with an aim to track the evolution of minute themes such as 'worm' patterning scrolls or painted typographic styles.

Enthusiasts extend the temporal conventions of the fair - seeking out and recording the visual event of arrival (pull on), construction (build up), dismantling (pull down) and departure (pull off). Figure 6 shows enthusiasts specialising in fairground transport active during the pull on of Knutsford Fair, indicating both an extension of the fair's normally considered duration and an extension of what is considered as the visible output that the fairground promotes, such that these trucks are normally placed 'off-stage' during the fair being open.

Figure 6 here.

With the advent of affordable photography the fairground enthusiast community has been drawn towards photographic documentation as opposed to the earlier era when written notes would be taken and shared at enthusiasts' gatherings. In many ways the enthusiast community has the most straightforward and directly accountable relationship to the fairground, with members recording the objects of the fairground as they present themselves - a what you see is what you get relationship. The perplexing capabilities of cameras are not engaged in the kind of battle that professional and amateur photographers would invoke when seeking out the fairground, instead the emphasis is on clear and concise images that show exactly what they show and say to other enthusiasts "I have seen this" or more precisely "I have achieved the seeing of this". Thus, documentation practices are important within this community, with photographs treated as records to be dated, inscribed with information relating to the content, and arranged in systems for viewing to facilitate either research or reflective revisiting for pleasure.

The recent movement through to the digital environment has changed practices in many ways. Firstly, the volume of visual documentation has increased exponentially as part of a general social trend, and secondly, contemporary post-documentation practices have gravitated toward the on-line environment with dedicated websites now augmented with discussion forums, Facebook groups, YouTube and Flickr streams populated with the visual endeavours of enthusiasts. This proliferation of visual materials, in terms of the affordability of cameras and the move towards a heavy output facilitated by digital media, means that specialist archives are constantly in danger of both saturation and ubiquity.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it is not unreasonable to assume that both of the enthusiasts rushing to capture the perfect view of the lorry, enacting a kind of paparazzi of the mundane, will procure what is possibly the same image.

### **The public and the scopic regime of the fairground**

The proximate public descend upon the fair as either fairgoer or punter, the identifications being interchangeable dependent upon different factors (how much money to spend, how courageous one is feeling, the company one is with). In the first instance the proximate public forms a crowd within the fair, and the crowd creates a spectacle to be both seen and experienced, it is both in-itself and for-itself. The crowd of onlookers if not necessarily spending money add to the attraction of spending money - becoming a punter - and so in this regard perform an economic function. The crowd is about seeing (watching) and being seen, and in turn invites both performance and performativity.<sup>10</sup>

Performance, particularly amongst the teenager category of the proximate public, may involve singing and dancing to the music on the fair, queuing for rides, going on rides, hanging around rides that offer enclosed gathering spaces (the platforms inside the Waltzer, the perimeter of the Dodgem track), flirting and courting practices whilst adorned with your best clothes, reinforcing your subcultural musical alliances. Performativity, as understood by Butler as inseparable from gender identity, is evidenced on the thrill rides with roles of bravery (for males) and screaming (for females). Figure 7 illustrates this contemporary scopophilia, a joy from watching, with the crowd tilting their heads upwards to watch the punters (out of view) about to be dropped from a great height and to hopefully catch a glimpse of their terror, whilst figure 8 illustrates a kind of exhibitionism with passengers on the Tagada ride contorting themselves gleefully in full view.

Figures 7 and 8 here.

Further practices and performances within the fairground crowd can be drawn out under the process of remaking cultural objects and rituals, studied by Willis in his work detailing the small modes of consuming, doing, recombining and repurposing in a social context amongst a group of working-class teenagers. This field of operation, coming under the wider rubric of symbolic interactionism, has recently been taken as a marker for generalised resistance (Scott), and has been mapped across to the 1990s rave culture evidenced in the UK (Malbon 151) and the broader field of pop music consumption (Laughey 90). Similar practices are developed on the fairground with regard to comportment whilst riding on certain machines - from clapping your hands, raising your arms, standing up whilst riding, wearing the garish tat and consumables offered on the fairground (such as bright red candy dummies) as adornments, to taking off your footwear.

These practices developed over time by the punters can have a variety of destinations. They may be discarded as the peripheral meme in modern day society, they may result in legislation from the Health and Safety Executive when there is a feeling that safety is breached (such as with standing whilst riding), or they may be absorbed by the showpeople community and re-incorporated back into the set of practices facilitated by the showperson operating the ride. For example, the practice of the crowd raising hands as an act of bravery whilst the ride is in motion has been co-opted by the fair such that most rides now have a soundtrack interjection encouraging riders to "put their hands in the air".

It is necessary to outline these developments of performance and watching on the fairground with regard to the recent trends around camera phones and social media. There is little evidence of the fair-going public considering the fairground as a place for the creation of photographic documentation, even though the occasion of visiting the fairground can undoubtedly be considered as ecstatic and special, and rich in visual spectacle. For the punter, the fairground simply did not afford the easy opportunity of taking photographs, with packed crowds, variable (lack of) lighting and fast moving machinery. Recent years have witnessed a significant shift in where and when we chose to take photographs. Larsen and Sandbye attempt to register the pulse of the social movement of everyday photography - photography of the everyday by everyday people - under the rubric of a new media ecology. This sees a shift from mementoes to moments, capturing a statement of being there / doing that rather than simply a memento of the there or the that. In the same volume Villi builds on this work and reassesses the camera (or camera-enabled device) as mutating from a time machine (communication over time, a photographic image linking a there then to here now) to a tele-machine (communication over space, a photographic image in transmitted and distributed digital format linking a there now to a here now).

Social media feeds from Twitter and Facebook relay both the trend for taking photographs and the construction of how the visit to the fair is recorded. Whilst the inclusion of the selfie is apparent across the tableau format of images offered by the social media devices, other modes of representation and visualisation start to emerge such as capturing the visual offerings of the fair-lights, crowds, technology set against the skyline. This provides some initial evidence that the widespread uptake of powerful camera phones has meant that visual documentation of the fair has extended from the pure self-oriented image (selfie) towards a more general photographic practice. It is doubtful whether it is common practice for these photographs to be treated as more than moments, such that they are downloaded, indexed and saved for future use (and thus exist as photographic mementoes).

## Conclusion

I will conclude this article with two points of interest and scope for consideration. Firstly, I consider the rapidly evolving set of practices enacted by the fair-going public alongside the current fashion for self-documentation and ask, from an archival position, what might escape from being captured and documented. Secondly, I briefly examine a new movement in the provision of digital fairground artwork and consider this as a further crossover between the fairground and the photographic.

I have outlined in this article a set of communities that approach the fairground with a specific photographic purpose and a wider community that approaches the fairground to partake in the event itself. Whilst the fairgoers and the punters engage the fair in the fullest sense, forming part of the crowd of observers and observed, stepping up to sample the rides and stalls, the other communities may be less engaged beyond their initial involvement in seeing the fair. In these latter situations, typified by the communities of photographic explorers and fairground enthusiasts, the way of seeing the fair and the process of visually recording one's engagement with the fair is a simple one-to-one, or isomorphic, mapping. In these cases the seeing of what is seen (and recorded) is the thrill-in-itself, such that a secondary - or reconstituted - thrill can be experienced by browsing the visual fruits of one's labours. The fairgoers and punters do not have such a direct relationship between what is initially engaged visually and the possibility of visually representing the results of their further engagement through either tangible (going on rides) or less tangible (being disorientated, performing in a crowd) means. If one purpose of going to a fair is to experience a thrill then the object that provides the thrill may be considered as separate from the thrill-in-itself. This gives rise to a disparity, or heteromorphism, of the visual engagement and visual representation of the fairground.

Photography has merged with philosophical and sociological discourses to provide compelling literature around the ontological status of the photograph. There is the unravelling of an understanding of the photograph as being evidence above all else, encapsulating some sort of epistemological invariance as part of its actual coming-to-be and reason-to-be. A photograph can be understood as a frozen window onto a past moment, becoming an object-in-itself that can be carried through into the future allowing a glimpse back in time. Berger dedicates much consideration of this and provides clear examples of how time pulls in different directions once the photograph is created, from the point of view of the moment captured in the image, the living subjects captured in the image, the possible viewers past, present and future, and the photographic object itself (90). There is a feeling that you can step into the photograph and move around, that what is there is evidence to be grasped and celebrated. But things are not that simple. Gordon (103) calls on "the context between familiarity and strangeness" that the photograph has a habit of conjuring up, and this is emphasised further by Smith (94) in her important work documenting what she labels the edge of sight: "as photography shows us more, it also shows us how much we don't see, how much ordinary seeing is blind".

Martha Rosler's *Passionate Signals* project, in which she records the everyday spaces and places of airports and underground stations, provides an example of this separation between the encountered and recorded. Rosler's photographs can be considered as doubly heterotopic. In the first instance they destabilise the usually unrecorded physical space of the airport lounge (famously referred to by Augé as a non-place) beyond tired representations in action films or news footage. In

the second instance they destabilise the familiar visual modes of recording and re-presenting movement through everyday life by setting the camera out as if it is our actual eyes lugubriously moving along. Rosler's photographs show us what we see if we were there seeing the space through being there, whereas typically staged and composed photographs (even if we chose to compose a photograph of a mundane airport space) show us *something else*.

Returning to the visualisation practices of the fairgoers and punters, there is thus a consequence to this separation between the visually engaged and visually represented, in that certain ways of seeing and practices of engaging the fairground escape visual documentation.<sup>11</sup> Figure 9 provides a good case in point as it shows a strange ritual that arose around 2010 regarding the taking off of shoes and assembling them (with bags and purses) in a mound on the checker-plate platform of the ride. This ritual seemingly developed its own rules in that it is associated only with certain rides and has an approximate tendency to be gender specific (teenage girls being the activists).<sup>12</sup> I would class it as part of the common culture of remaking I identified with Willis. I thought that this ritual would be useful to include in this article, as part of documenting engagement, but I realised that visual documentation of the ritual itself was not forthcoming. Approaching the quest from the point of view of sourcing the unofficial social media archives created by the fairgoers and punters proved impossible, whilst putting a call out to the community of enthusiasts yielded no results apart from the one shown here which was kindly supplied by virtue of an enthusiast having a remarkably powerful digital camera allowing the image to be created by zooming in closely. It was recorded as something unnoticed and outside of the rationale for taking the photograph.<sup>13</sup>

Figure 9 here.

The decoration of the fairground, as indicated at the start of this article, is a hugely important facet, and is documented both lovingly and extensively by Weedon and Ward. This lavish tome curtails its documentation shortly before its point of publication in 1981 without a real sense of the future, as the art of the fairground seemingly entered a new stage. The 1980s saw new thrill rides arriving that use a machine aesthetic to express their attraction - power, speed and complexity of movement. These rides abandoned painted artwork and opted for high finish metal and fibre-glass accompanied by vast grids of modern light-caps. It would not be until the 1990s that a renaissance in the painted aesthetic would return, but it arrived in a new method of expression in the form of airbrushed art. This differed from traditional brush painted work in that it was entirely figurative and tended to work with large spaces rather than forming repeating patterns around a traditional enclosed and circular ride. Airbrush artists necessarily had to aspire to realistic qualities, depicting pop-stars and film-stars, or scantily-clad crowds of ravers. The fairground shifted in terms of its illusionistic themes. Rather than a labyrinthine system of fairground patterns and colours, the fairgoer was immersed in a rapid-fire sequence of photo-realist fantasy worlds of raves, beaches, *Terminator* dystopias and extreme sports. The move from photo-realist airbrush towards digitally produced artwork quickly followed, with initially a print to vinyl sticker and then a direct print onto bonded aluminium.<sup>14</sup> With this new trend the fairground becomes an immersive photographic environment, returning to something resembling its origins with the panoramic show, whereby the visual is controlled (see Boyer 43) entirely by the showperson. Conceptualised as a remediation, it starts a new cycle of engagement between the fairground and photographic.

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<sup>1</sup> For a general history of the British fair see Braithwaite, *Fairground Architecture*; Cameron; Dallas; Starsmore; Toulmin, *Pleasurelands*; Weedon and Ward.

<sup>2</sup> See Crary, Harding; Scrivens and Smith; Toulmin, *Electric Edwardians* for good introductions to early cinema and the fairground.

<sup>3</sup> See the journal *Early Popular Visual Culture* for the most detailed excavation of these varied and ephemeral modes of utilising and presenting photographic images plus other visual techniques.

<sup>4</sup> Pauline Gashinsky has attempted to document travelling photographer shows on the British fairground, see <http://members.shaw.ca/pauline777/Visual.html#Cinematographs>. For a history of a specific show in terms of itinerary and practices, see <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~brett/photos/eng/dby/ctyler.html>

<sup>5</sup> Braithwaite, *Savage of King's Lynn* documents this company and includes many commemorative photographs that were commercially circulated.

<sup>6</sup> The most obvious example is the Channel 4 series *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* which commenced in February 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Winning on a stall is not as simple as it seems, in that there are big wins, medium wins and small wins. A winner is usually met with the response of "anything from the bottom shelf", a bottom shelf that is not normally visible amidst the large prizes that proliferate all over the stall.

<sup>8</sup> Whittaker gives some useful guidance to the self-identifying community of trainspotters.

<sup>9</sup> The National Fairground Archive at the University of Sheffield Library houses the key collection of photographs (or collection of photographic collections to be precise) for the fairground, and similar specialist archives exist for other realms that overlap with enthusiast practices such as trams, trains, buses, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett (263) provides a useful tangent of consideration here with his proposal of 'civic seeing' regarding the comportment and competence of working class crowds in formal museum and gallery situations (as opposed to the educated higher echelons of society). The controlled process of display of the museum imposes a servile, awkward and unappreciative manner, which can be contrasted with the more engaged postures as seen with fairground crowds.

<sup>11</sup> The growing practice of using camera-phones to create on-ride or 'point-of-view' recordings of thrill rides is something that feasibly counteracts this. However, it is seen as dangerous by the safety observers and enforcers and could well be the next practice to be outlawed on the fairground. In a kind of dialectical opposition to this, it is seen as dangerous by the activists and so partaking in the practice is akin to notching up the bravery associated with going on the thrill ride.

<sup>12</sup> Piles of shoes have clear connotations to the 1970s discotheque, and have also created uncanny art exhibitions with works such as *Atrabiliarios* (1992-1997) by Doris Salcedo incorporating shoes sealed in to wall holes to create physical voids, and *Shoe Waste?* (1970) by Marc Camille Chaimowicz which involved silver shoes distributed on Albert Bridge in London.

<sup>13</sup> As the practice is still in use it would, of course, have been possible to go out and secure an image. However, the implications of such practices being peripheral or evolutionary should be very clear as regarding them totally escaping visual documentation.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.colourbanners.co.uk/printed-boards/aluminium-coated-boards> for an example.