

■ **Tony Lidington**
University of Exeter, UK

In the Belly of the Beast: The Itinerant British Showman and the Definition of ‘Seer Performance’

This article explores the potential for embodied performance practice to interrogate contemporary social relations in public space and time: this is particularly pertinent as the public realm becomes increasingly controlled and defined. It is my assertion that there is a mode of itinerant showman performance which uses historical tropes of popular entertainment in fabric, form and text, operating in unstratified public spaces, to deliver radical commentary upon contemporary socio-economic circumstances: this I have coined ‘Seer Performance’. The performativity of itinerant British showmen has evaded cultural analysis for centuries, but in this article I examine how this style of delivery can provide contemporary opportunities to challenge the hegemonic orthodoxy of the streets. Seer performance occupies a liminal space between heritage performance and contemporary practice and is demonstrated by my research into the historical practice of fairground sideshows, flea circuses and peepshows, combined with my autoethnographic performance. Seer performance is not a new form, but rather a new term through which to understand a performance function that has existed as long as there has been storytelling and showmanship. Tony Lidington is a scholar-practitioner associated with the Department of Drama, University of Exeter.

Keywords: seer, showman, fairground, flea circus, peepshow, raree man



Figure 1. Uncle Tacko! All images are from the author's collection

The Radical Showman: 30 years of experience, centuries of practice

As a practising street performer, I have employed historical popular entertainment forms to make a living and to challenge expectations and perceptions of public space, for the last 30 years. More recently, I have started to analyse the processes and meanings that underlie my work and in particular, how the radical, subversive intentions which informed my first street performances in the early 1980s are manifested in my research and practice in the twenty-first century.

For over 25 years, I performed as part of an *al fresco*, peripatetic pierrot troupe—'The Pierrotters'. My experience of performing in the open air at countless seashores around the country, led me to consider a number of factors: the unconventional locations in which our performances generally occurred, the role of the spectator in public space and the showman's function in addressing and controlling that public. The British seaside is a permanent, ludic, public environment associated with holidaying and leisure; the seaside resorts' *raison d'être* is to provide opportunities for irreverence, romance and exotica—a transmutation of the carnivalesque to a commodified and constructed public playground.



Figure 2. The Pierrotters

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. ¹

The performance practice of itinerant British showmen, is commonly disregarded as ‘low brow’ and illegitimate, but it is a performance form that has both historical precedence and contemporary relevance. There is a lack of serious consideration or rigorous theoretical analysis of marginalised performance forms such as street theatre, fairground sideshows or peepshows, which has resulted in them being dismissed as commercialised and irrelevant. Yet these historical, popular entertainment forms contain social relations and radical potential which lie buried beneath the accretion of assumptions surrounding the stereotypes of high and low art. It is part of an intangible cultural heritage:

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.²

The accessibility and familiarity of the popular artforms which I employ, 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.” ³ 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: this is what Bakhtin termed ‘heteroglossia’—a theoretical framework which I have employed throughout this article to explore the performance of the showman. Bakhtin’s original concept addresses the polyphony of interpretations and meanings that accrete over time about a work of fiction, but in this article, I use his theory as a form of critical reappropriation by linking the showman’s role into radical discourse.

The showman offers a polyphonic address to the audience which in “its mediality is the interplay of cinematography and theatricality, [in] its temporality is the navigation between the epochs [and in] its audience strategy is the mobilisation of the viewing experience between exploration, attraction and archaeology.” ⁴ 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 remediation of past forms of popular entertainment does not create some ‘authentic’ revival, but uses the accretion of multiple

possible meanings from the past to engage with contemporary audiences. In so doing, the usual constraints of what is perceived as ordinary and real are relaxed and in this more receptive atmosphere, a more radical form and content can be presented that has the capacity to subvert the hegemonic orthodoxy of the streets.

The use of familiar, yet arcane tropes of popular performance forms, parallels the Situationists' most widely recognised technique of *détournement*—"the reversal of 'pre-existing' aesthetic elements to create a new and subversive effect, [a] mixture of pastiche, parody, and plagiarism".⁵ *Détournement* is an overtly political act⁶, so my aim was to explore whether the ludic, carnivalesque marketplace identified by Bakhtin could be remediated into contemporary, mainstream, public locations and then, through the use of *détournement*, enable popular entertainment forms to present radical interventions.

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 world of official order and official ideology, it always remained 'with the people.'"⁷ Bakhtin's market place is 'carnavalesque'—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.⁸

However, Michel Bakhtin is presenting a 1930s discourse upon the writings and culture of Rabelais in the Middle Ages and perhaps 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 *dérive*, as defined by Guy Debord.⁹

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 so doing, I have coined the term 'Seer Performance' to describe the role of the showman operating in what Kershaw calls the "decontextualized carnivalesque"¹⁰, to provide a radical, transformative experience through semi-improvised performance. Seer performance temporarily reclaims ordinary public space from commodified, consumerist control and is part of a continuing heritage of radical discourse.

Fairground sideshows and flea circuses: creating contemporary decontextualized carnivalesque space in the public realm

Bakhtin's marketplace and the permanent, legitimised playground of the seaside are both codified and commodified environments—a more truly carnivalesque opportunity is offered by the fairground or circus, where functional locations such as a car park, playing field, or even a town centre are temporarily de-purposed with light-footed structures which can subvert the prescribed purposive activity of the city. So, although contemporary fairgrounds and circuses operate their own socio-economic practices and conventional structures, they have the potential to provide a Rabelaisian carnivalesque environment. Consequently, I decided to create interventions which had the capacity to disrupt and reinterpret these urban spaces in a manner that the Situationists could recognise as *dérive* and radical—a liminal territory in the heart of the hegemonic landscape, which is ripe for subversive activity.

I wished to find out 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 disobedience towards accepted dominant spatial and social practices.”¹¹ It was with this aim in mind that I sought to manufacture my own, ludic yet radical space that could be erected speedily and temporarily in ordinary urban environments. The resulting ‘Imaginarium’ 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.¹²



Figure 3. 'The Imaginarium'

The low-impact portability of ‘The Imaginarium’ meant that it could be erected in any public space and engage with a wide range of ordinary folk to transform their familiar surroundings. 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, timeless, festive space. As the audience gather to sit on the gaily-painted benches, or stand crowded at the back of the twelve-foot (3.65 meter) diameter, octagonal booth, they are welcomed by the showman; their voluntarily presence engages them in a dialogic discourse between past and present, fact and fiction: the ‘heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin) of signs and meanings presented inside ‘The Imaginarium’ removes the audience from the here and now, they achieve “relative historic immortality”¹³. As active participants in their engagement with the showman, they become a-historic, part of a stream vernacular folk culture, rather than mere passive consumers of spectacle.

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 folk mythology. 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 aspect of this sideshow routine that I was particularly keen to utilise, was its historically salacious reputation (as epitomised in erotic poetry and aesthetic imagery) and its grotesque folk memory (as demonstrated in jokes, anecdotes and seaside postcards), combined with the possibility of a hyperbolic, hyperreal presentation of the form. Baudrillard describes a “precession of simulacra”¹⁴ 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 whose attraction towards and subsequent entry inside ‘The Imaginarium’ demonstrated their engagement and complicity with the polyphonic, heteroglossial world we had created.

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.



Figure 4. Uncle Tacko's Flea Circus

Although the individual acts of the fleas are important and must impress the audience with their daring and skill, their routines are rehearsed 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.¹⁵

My flea circus is not billed as a great work of art, or a commentary upon society, but as a ludicrous and engaging world. The flea circus show lasts little more than twenty-five minutes, but during that time, preposterous claims are made and absurd actions demonstrated, as the flea artistes are put through their paces by the ringmaster. Crucially, the audience are increasingly drawn-into the nonsense, absurdity and playfulness of the showman as his persiflage and hyperbolic performance permeate the show. This playfulness, is accentuated by the necessity and inevitability of audience interaction, as the ringmaster showman engages directly with the audience, who asks for regular verbal and physical responses to the acts and situations he is demonstrating. No two shows are ever the same, as fresh material is improvised each time around the set series of flea 'acts', depending on what the audience offers during the performance.

The audience that gathers outside 'The Imaginarium' booth are effectively 'passing trade', part of the general urban public going about their business in their local high street. Even when 'The Imaginarium' is part of an advertised event, the punters do not buy tickets or plan to attend, they are attracted, in the moment, by the showman's patter and interaction and no financial transaction occurs, so the social demographic is as wide as possible within the cultural context of the street. This process of engagement, transforming passers-by to a more or less unstratified audience as they enter the booth, is part of the re-purposing of the familiar, controlled urban environment that is essential in the work.

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.¹⁶

My flea circus ringmaster constantly plays with this audience complicity, creating a shared world of multi-layered nonsense, aphorism and irony.

'The Imaginarium' demonstrated the potential for the heteroglossial interpretation 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 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."¹⁷ How might these strategies 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—'*détournement*', where pastiche, parody, and plagiarism of known popular entertainment tropes can subvert the assumptions of public space and hegemonic discourse? My next ambition was to manufacture a new fit-up, capable of operating in a ludic environment, with an appropriately receptive audience (comprised once again of a diverse range of social and economic groups) and to make radical, contemporary commentary in the content of the performance, as well as merely in its context.

Peep Practice: towards an embodiment of 'Seer Performance'

My experiments in the use of historical popular entertainment tropes with the fairground sideshow 'Imaginarium' and the flea circus, demonstrated to me that it was possible to lure a virtually unstratified audience into a more ludic, timeless state which, I hypothesised, might then facilitate the accessible delivery of contemporary content with more specific, subversive intent than is generally possible on the street or in public space.

My aim was to see if it were possible to insinuate my peepshow into situations that would normally be denied to acts with radical 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",¹⁸ my supposition was that more explicitly radical material could be made more accessible for an audience who had entered into a carnivalesque frame of mind through an encounter with tropes of historic popular entertainment in public space: to do this, I needed to create a dramaturgical environment and a style of address that would appear to suspend time, place and constraint. Such ludic engagement with an a-historic performance form (as explored in 'The Imaginarium' and flea circus environment), could then enable the showman to embody and embed accessible, explicitly radical content in a show and occupy a function as the dispenser of 'festive wisdom', or 'seer'.

In order to test this hypothesis, I drew on other research that I had been undertaking into earlier forms of itinerant British showmanship: ‘The Imaginarium’ and its world employed a folk 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 researched further back into the history of British illegitimate/itinerant performance forms and this led me to discover not just the origins of the flea fantocinni, but also how itinerant entertainers might use puppets, waxworks, automata and magic lanterns as ways of animating their storytelling.

The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum offered a rich source of material (<http://www.bdcmuseum.org.uk/>) and of particular relevance seemed to be the history of peepshows and raree men—a pre-cinematic, nomadic 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.”¹⁹ These travelling performers combined storytelling with mechanical devices, optical illusions and puppetry to animate their fables, histories and moralising tales. They 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. It was clear from this research 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 century, who had employed a multitude of technological and representational devices, alongside the persiflage and chutzpah of the presenter, to entertain and engage a transient audience gathered in a carnivalesque spirit in public space.



Figure 5. Sergeant Bell (circa 1834)

As the showman or raree man, my embodiment of the role needed to permeate the presentation: 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

and the peepshow's outward appearance were key areas of investment. The characters exist in the moment of performance as anachronisms in contemporary public space. People moving through a common environment such as 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."²⁰ 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 campaigner. He had to have authority and a knowing wink of irony, he had to be perceptive, experienced, accessible and fun.

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".²¹

'The appeal of the peepshow stemmed as much from the relationship between audience and showman as that between the viewer and the painted scenes. The showman provided an aural narrative that not only brought the scenes to life, but also encouraged those waiting to desire their own glimpse inside the box. In short, the attraction of the peepshow was as much verbal as visual.'²²

The showman's patter in peepshows was often described as 'ironic' and 'fresh-talking', full of exaggeration, duplicity and bunkum. It combined popular common sense, the authoritative tone of a lecturer and strongly satirical self-consciousness. 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,²³ contained some verbatim versions of the raree *schtick* 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. Here is the opening to my peepshow, as spoken by the raree man to the assembled crowd—this is almost *verbatim* from original raree man texts researched at the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum:

"Come and see the wonder of all wonders that ever the world wondered at!
 Every vision I do here present
 Will please your fancy and yield your mind content!
 Like the Raree Men of old used to say in their Italian 'Chi vuol varder il Mondo Nuovo' which means 'Who will see the new world?' Will you?
 Step forwards, step forwards—one foot in front of the other—just as we

did when I was in the Heavy Dragoons. Here you see my Regimental clothing of scarlet, faced with blue;
I campaigned in Devon under Wellington and again at Timbuctoo.”

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.



Figure 6. The Raree Man

The construction and aesthetic of the peepbox was meticulously researched and a considerable proportion of the project’s initial budget was used to commission the authenticated conventions of Georgian performance for the modern age—a sumptuous Georgian auditorium with dimmable house and stage lighting, stage machinery with working flaps and traps, flying scenery, painted cloths and puppets.



Figure 7. The Peepbox

I was consciously juxtaposing old and new elements: stage machinery (such as a sprung trapdoor and peristrepthic 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”²⁴, 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”.²⁵

The impact I desired, was one of increasing immersion in the heteroglossia of remediation and hypermediation: a typical viewer would progress 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.²⁶

Each of these senses was 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: by turn 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’. 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, a grotesque king, or a black chancellor of the exchequer, are played-out, or represented, by versions of the raree man. I was keen for the raree man to challenge the boundaries of political correctness and explore those territories of racial and gender politics blatantly, yet with wit and irony—to delve into the transgressive, carnivalesque ‘other’ identified by Stallybrass & White.²⁷ For example, in the film projected in Part 3 of ‘The Banker’s Progress’, based on the Jewish fable of ‘Solomon’s Ring’, the raree man (me) plays every character including an aged female market-trader and an arrogant chancellor, who is depicted with Arabian make-up. There is no attempt at verisimilitude in these characterisations—the old lady sports the raree man’s moustache and the make-up of the chancellor is clearly streaked with sweat: the aim is to provoke discussion of the use of these stereotypes in the story, as well as animating the action.



Figure 7a. The Merchant Lady



Figure 7b. The Chancellor with streaked makeup

Just as the flea ringmaster had drawn passive spectators from the midst of a non-theatrical, conventional social gathering space, 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 an alternative encounter with spectacle: a disruptive discourse which Baz Kershaw refers to as “the decontextualized carnivalesque”.²⁸ 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 able to exploit for radical (or alternatively, I suppose, reactionary,) purposes. This exploration of the boundaries of political correctness risks being regarded as somehow endorsing some of the reactionary forces implicit in Bakhtin’s idealized and allegorical definition of carnival, but in taking that risk, within the familiar framework of an archetypal story, it also provokes debate and response.

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 performative 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.²⁹

This dual audience of peepers and non-peepers meant that I needed 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. In this respect, the peepshow presages a range of more contemporary immersive assemblages. Josephine Machon identifies immersive theatre as being an 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.”³⁰ 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”.³¹

The piece I created for the peepbox was called ‘The Banker’s Progress’ and 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. 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.”³² 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.



Figure 8. Dual audiences of peepers and non-peepers at Festival Number 6, Portmeirion, 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 *détournement*: the peepshow plays with both the juxtaposition of historical presentation alongside its contemporary context and the authenticity of its aesthetic alongside modern referencing. In effect, the peepshow is another form of ‘situationist prank’, insinuated into mainstream contexts. This use of radical form “seemed to offer a way of avoiding dogmatic and factional association while reasserting the need for vigorous and fundamental change”³³ ; this meant that I could also insinuate my own radical agenda into the content of the piece.

Here is an example from Part 1 of ‘The Banker’s Progress’, as the raree man explains how he came to lose all his money:

“It was during the great Eastern War with Spain and France that all this happened and of course, I was there, don’t you know. Now wars have

always been a costly business in both lives and cash. People have always been cheap, but to find the money for this war wasn't easy.

(To the peepers) There's more to see—look further, my dears, look at the pretty sights inside... Curtain up! *(Slowly raise house tabs.)*

(To outside audience) Jealous now, eh? Never mind, you may get a chance in Parts 2 or 3. *(Start film of financial charts inside the peepbox.)*

(To both audiences) It was especially hard in the midst of a slippy, triple-dip recession when our national debt was so high. All the banks & companies invested in anything that would make a quick profit – however silly or bizarre that might be: Irish bogs, guns that fire square cannon balls, even palaces for ducks. People grabbed at dots and coms and all manner of boom-busting paraphernalia. Perhaps the cleverest, or silliest, was simply printing more and more banknotes to ease the vast quantity of debts. If only pocket money were as easy as that, my little ones, eh? *(Hand a coin to a kid in audience.)*"

There was certainly no impetus amongst the audience to storm the banks at the end of each show; there was, however, both food for thought and the opportunity to discuss the issues raised. In fact, after each performance, I have as many people wanting to talk about the meaning 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 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 the subversive purveyor of mediated storytelling and in the persona of the knowing and knowledgeable raree man, that I sought to define by coining the new term 'Seer Performance'. Such a performance style is by no means 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.

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/or avuncular standpoint. An example of this role comes from part 2 of 'The Banker's Progress', when the raree man addresses the peepers, following a puppet and film sequence in which they have been immersed in the peepbox, as they join the surrounding external audience:

“So here we are again.

(The barrel organ starts to be played underneath the following section.)

Now I sing for all of you who think money can do everything, yet end-up doing everything for money. Listen well, for money is like muck—no good unless it is spread and however much you have, what you do not have amounts to so much more.

Look at the views before you, full of interest, full of information! Listen to the songs—full of meaning, full of life! The world and everything in it is full of wonder. Quite wonderful. Hear it. See it. This is my duty.”

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”.³⁴

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”.³⁵ It therefore provided an opportunity for the showman to play the ‘clever fool’:

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.³⁶

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, engages the audience as active participants rather than mere consumptive observers and in so doing, allows transcendent, radical content—ameliorated by its historicised aesthetic, yet barbed in its contemporary resonance. Plunkett identifies the same implicit radicalism in earlier peepshow forms, in which “sensory optical effects that disrupted the transparent rationality of vision were outside the patriarchal, political, order.”³⁷ However, in those times, the content of the raree men’s *spiel* would not have attempted to radicalise, but rather to moralise or possibly proselytise, but more likely, simply engage and entertain.

The intertextuality of a re-imagined peepshow form, combined with the heteroglossial interpretation of its content, provides the platform for the radical transcendence of the commonplace—an alternative vision presented accessibly in contemporary, open, public space. Rather than merely entering Bakhtin’s carnivalesque world in which there is a permissible rupture of hegemony, the peepshow has enabled me to present Baz Kershaw’s definition of radical work that offers:

a way of avoiding dogmatic and factional association while reasserting the need for vigorous and fundamental change... (to reach) beyond existing systems of formalised power, freedom to create currently unimaginable forms of association and action—the transgressive or transcendent sense of the radical.³⁸

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”.³⁹ The context, form and content of *The Peepshow* immerses the audience into an accessible, temporary sense of liberation from normative structures.

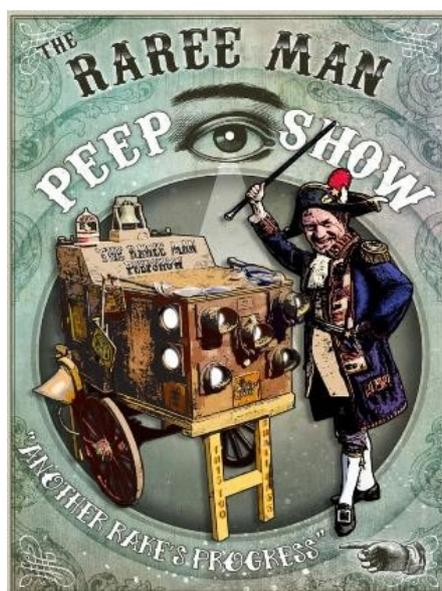


Figure 9. *The Peepshow*

Conclusion: the definition of 'Seer Performance'

My aim in producing the peepshow, had been to find a means of presenting radical material in public space through the use of historical tropes of itinerant performance. It creates an almost Brechtian sense of distance between the heritage form and the contemporary socio-political meaning. This process of research and practice resulted in coining the term 'seer performance' to describe the role of a publicly accessible, clever fool with radical intent. I believe this term can help interpret the intention and praxis of such work both in the past and for the future.

Seer performance is commercial in its approach, but it is not part of the cultural mainstream: it stems from illegitimate, itinerant artforms, having 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, working class (or classless) form which has managed to evade rigorous, theoretical analysis. Seer performance does not command any significant cultural recognition, nor does it offer the kind of direct socio-political content of

agit-prop street theatre or small-scale touring work. Its 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, provides opportunities for social and political commentary through its form. Thus seer performance is part of a heritage of radical discourse, a temporary reclamation of ordinary public space from commodified, consumerist control.

Seer performance provides a means of reflecting on the past, transforming in the present and offering 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”.⁴⁰ Seer performance uses the tropes of the past—in fabric, form and text, to offer comment on the present physical and socio-economic circumstances and offer alternative ways of approach for the future.

The itinerant British showmen have lurked in obscurity beneath the radar of cultural analysis for centuries, but now an examination of their style and means of performance offers an opportunity to engage in a permissible rupture of the hegemonic orthodoxy of the streets. The seer’s presence and *schtick*, the historical tropes of popular entertainment with which they surround themselves and the ludic environment in ordinary public space engendered by the combination of each of these aspects, results in a ‘transgressive or transcendent sense of radical’, as identified by Kershaw,⁴¹ where the “street artists create affective encounters rather than reproductions of reality. These encounters encourage each participant to become an aesthetic and political being”.⁴² Through excavating and analyzing the neglected processes and practicalities of itinerant showman performance, using a kind of media archaeology, 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.”⁴³ 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, the seer performer is able to deliver politicised commentary and radical homilies with subversive intent.

In the future, I shall be exploring the practical potential to create other incarnations of seer performance, as well as researching further examples of its practice historically and currently. My hope is for the term to become a tool by which to articulate a style of popular, accessible performance with radical intent, that has hitherto remained unrecognised. As the public realm of contemporary society becomes increasingly controlled and defined, such work is particularly relevant, because seer performance offers an opportunity to celebrate the

counter-culture publicly, accessibly, inclusively and right in the belly of the beast!



Figure 10. Seer Performance

¹ Maurice Graham, *Showman & Suckers*, (London: Percival Marshall, 1951), 261-262.

² Diana Taylor, 'Performance and Intangible Cultural Heritage,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. Tracy C. Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 91-104 95.

³ Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 172-3.

⁴ 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*, ed. Martin Loiperdinger (Hertfordshire: John Libbey Publishing Limited, 2011), 102.

⁵ Graham White 'Direct Action, Dramatic Action: Theatre and Situationist Theory', NTQ IX. 36, (1993): 329-340, 330.

⁶ Cathy Turner, *Dramaturgy and Architecture: Theatre, Utopia and the Built Environment*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 153-154.

⁸ Bakhtin, 255.

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

¹⁰ Kershaw, 1999

¹¹ Lukas Feireiss, 'Livin' in the city. The urban space as creative challenge' in *Urban Interventions – personal projects in public spaces*, ed. Robert Klanten and Matthias Hubner, (Berlin: Gestalten, 2010), 3.

¹² 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): 52-79, 62.

¹³ Bakhtin, 255.

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Precession of Simulcra', in *Media and Cultural Studies. Keywords*. Revised Edition. Ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.) 453-481.

¹⁵ Joel Schechter, *Popular Theatre A Sourcebook*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 4.

¹⁶ Joe Kember, *Marketing Modernity* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 45.

¹⁷ Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 24.

¹⁸ Bakhtin, 260.

¹⁹ John Plunkett, 'Peepshows for All: Performing Words and the Travelling Showman' *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 63.1, (2015): 7.

²⁰ Plunkett, 'Peepshows': 17.

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- ²¹ Martin Hewitt, 'Beyond Scientific Spectacle: Image and Word in Nineteenth-Century Popular Lecturing'. In *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840-1910*. Ed. Joe Kember, John Plunkett and Jill Sullivan, (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012), 79-96.
- ²² John Plunkett, 'Moving Books/Moving Images: Optical Recreations and Children's Publishing 1800-1900', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 5 (2007): 4.
- ²³ *Sergeant Bell and his Raree Show*, (London: Thomas Tegg, 1839), 38.
- ²⁴ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer – On vision and modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: October Books, MIT Press, 1992), 30-31.
- ²⁵ Caroline Radcliffe, 'Remediation and Immediacy in the Theatre of Sensation,' *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film*, 36/2 (2009): 38-53; 40.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* 41.
- ²⁷ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, (London: Methuen, 1986)
- ²⁸ Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance Radical - Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 71.
- ²⁹ Plunkett, 'Peepshows', 10.
- ³⁰ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres – Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 107.
- ³¹ Machon, *Immersive Theatre*, 97.
- ³² Machon, *Immersive Theatre*, 99.
- ³³ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, (London: Fontana, 1976), 210.
- ³⁴ Kember, *Marketing Modernity*, 87.
- ³⁵ John M. Golby & A. William Purdue, *The Civilisation of the Crowd. Popular Culture in England 1750-1900*, (London: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1984), 14.
- ³⁶ John Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*, (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2003), 10.
- ³⁷ Plunkett, 'Peepshows', 12.
- ³⁸ Kershaw, *Radical in Performance*, 18.
- ³⁹ Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 18.
- ⁴⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 256.
- ⁴¹ Kershaw, *Radical in Performance*, 7.
- ⁴² Kershaw, *Radical in Performance*, 183.
- ⁴³ Lukas Feireiss, 'Livin' in the City', 3.