

Peripheral visions: you would not want to be staring like that at me: the American other and the carnival spectacle in HBO's True Blood, Deadwood and Carnivàle, & a

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Carnivàle, & a novel, Tarnished

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Abstract

'You would not want to be staring like that at me.' The minacious words of Deadwood's Al Swearengen ring out beyond the show's Wild West confines and speak to the wider cultural anatomy of the United States. Swearengen is threatening his nemesis, Sheriff Bullock, who has decided to communicate his contempt for Swearengen with one, long look. Al returns this glare, his verbal riposte a mere addendum to their power struggle that is, in that moment, reaching its climactic end through a distinctly visual discourse.

The visual, what we look like, what we look at and how we look at each other, the superficial dermal sign and what it signifies, not only about itself but about the viewer also, permeates and produces American subcultural interactions. Philip McGowan calls this 'an economy of seeing', and conceives it as a distinctly American version of the Carnavalesque that renders the act of looking a method of both highlighting and monetising difference and negating the different, of constructing and deconstructing the identities of those who do not fit into the template of the norm (white, able-bodied), and of creating a binary between this norm and an American 'Other', the racial, physiological, cultural outsider. McGowan traces the development of restrictive visual exchange through the chronology of the American exposition, the midway and the freak show, arguing that these public events provided a model for the paying public on how to frame and interact with this 'Other' in both showground and more quotidian spaces. McGowan follows this historical precedent through to its literary permutations, exploring texts that best illustrate his conceptual reframing of the Carnavalesque in distinctly American terms.

I seek to take this updated framework and apply it to its other natural counterpart, serial television (HBO specifically), the filmic, opt-in, long-form narratives that have overtaken cinema as both our premier visual product and primary means of replicating, investigating and evaluating culture. The shows I have selected (True Blood, Deadwood and Carnivàle) each stand as and offer up instances of these visual behaviours through their narratives and aesthetics, depicting this normal/'Other' binary in illuminative, intersectional and often disruptive ways.

With these concerns in mind, I also present my own creative work, a novel that attempts to converge American Gothic and Western tropes (succeeding other less explicitly coalesced examples) in order to more fully materialise the inherent potential of this specific hybrid, and that was, in part, written in consideration of and as response to this critical discourse and its associated visual, cultural and historical cues.

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