

Carnivàle: Social Surrealism and Subjectivity

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Glen Creeber argues that far from being unrealistic, fantasy drama on TV enables the presentation of a universe “in which social reality itself is continually set against subjective, individual and multiple perspectives,” (14) describing this as social surrealism (15). Set in the United States during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, HBO’s short-lived drama *Carnivàle* (2003-5) might look like social realism, but it presents a surreal vision of America’s past by collapsing history and mythology together¹, incorporating documentary-style realism and attention to period detail alongside uncanny visions and a mythic battle of good and evil. In his book on history and modern horror films, Adam Lowenstein argues that what he calls the “allegorical moment” in such films “disrupts the realism/ modernism dichotomy by partaking of the real without adopting ‘naturalized’ realism, and by partaking of the abstract without mandating a modernist aesthetic of absence and self-reflexivity” (2005, 15). *Carnivàle*, however, incorporates naturalized realism as well as modernist and surrealist art aesthetics and juxtaposing these leads creator Daniel Knauf to admit that the show can be described as “*The Grapes of Wrath* meets David Lynch” (website). Cynthia Freeland identifies the uncanny as “something from ordinary life that has a mysterious and familiar feel yet becomes alien and frightening” (235). In *Carnivàle*, history and realism function as the ordinary, made alien and frightening, uncanny, by interplay with fantastic and surreal elements.

The surreal and uncanny both work to refigure, to disturb what we see and how we see it. Thus Rudolf Kuenzli comments that surrealist film is an “exploration of the camera’s potential to transform the familiar world, and thus to create surreality” (3). A surreal uncanny perspective also disrupts conventional forms and, as David Marc notes, in *Carnivàle* “the story is told in visual language bearing little resemblance to the naturalistic techniques that dominate the narrative genres of American television and film” (103), a deliberate choice producing a hypnotic unfolding of imagery. The resistance to narrative and slow pace (markers of realism in some genres e.g. *The Wire*) here function as art, foregrounding visual style. *Carnivàle*’s historical consultant, Mary Corey, comments on the links between realism and more fantastic elements:

the eerie surreal-ness of the carnival is really mirrored in the culture, in realityyou have a world that’s in a kind of emotional chaos, where people are de-centered and ripped off of their moorings. And I think that the show -

¹ Though David Marc suggests that the knowledge expected of viewers is vast: “To follow even the basic mechanics of [the story]... a viewer would have to bring to the screen a working knowledge of history that includes World War I, the Great Depression, the rise of radio broadcasting, and the failure of the Crusades to reclaim Jerusalem for Christendom. And that’s not all – a passing familiarity with Western literature and art from, oh, the Bible to Todd [sic] Browning’s 1932 film *Freaks*, wouldn’t hurt, either” (104).

visually and intellectually and narratively - really mirrors that. Reality is ripped from its moorings (website interview).

The show consistently explores that which is apparently normal, ordinary, historical, alongside that which appears freakish, extraordinary, mythological. Because it is, despite HBO's slogan, still TV and serial drama at that, it does this through the development of two main characters, Ben Hawkins and Justin Crowe.

Actor Nick Stahl, who plays Ben, suggests that season 1 can be read as a story of "self-realization" for the main characters (s1 DVD feature). Similarly, some-time director Rodrigo Garcia comments on how larger thematic concerns are balanced by focus on character: "good and evil. . . that's a very vast concept. . . . But what interested me was the conflict of these two people who don't know who they themselves are." In this way, *Carnivàle* deals with familiar territory for either fantasy or "quality" television, and, as Corey notes, "It's not a history show." The sense of national crisis apparent in the 30s setting is layered with the personal struggles of Ben, a young man who joins the carnival after his mother dies, and "Brother" Justin, a Methodist preacher, and with upheavals in their respective communities. Bruce Lenthall argues that developing technology and communication meant that "During the Great Depression, many Americans first found their lives tie into an unfamiliar, vast and abstract world. And during the Great Depression, many Americans began figuring out how they would inhabit that world" (5).² This paper will analyse how the show's two protagonists find that their lives "tie into an unfamiliar, vast and abstract world" in both a historical and a fantastic sense.

Carnivàle has large ensemble cast but Ben and Justin are the focus of what linear narrative it has, and take centre-stage in its mythology. The opening sequence of the first episode outlines this mythology and amply demonstrates the juxtaposition of surrealism and realism.

CLIP opening sequence "Milfay" 1.1 c. 2 mins

Viewers are quickly cued that Ben may be the "creature of light" making the pious Justin the "creature of darkness": the two form a symbiotic pair (see PIC), an interesting study in terms of the extra/ordinary. Justin, the preacher, is supported by his sister and seems to be at the heart of his community, championing the people and adapting to the changing world as he ministers to his flock. In contrast, Ben's mother dies as we first meet him and the chain around his ankle suggests he has escaped from a prison work detail. Joining the carnival positions him as an itinerant social outcast and he resists and denies the changes that happen around him.



Justin/ Alexi "a marriage of new science and superstition"

Actor Clancy Brown, who plays Justin, observes that his character knows "he is different than other men, because of certain abilities that he has" and "because of

² Actor Clancy Brown, who plays Justin, supports this view. "Well, it's the time of my father's youth. And my father put it very well once: he said that, for the first time in human history, a father could not with confidence say to his child, 'I know what the world is going to be like.' So the undermining of that authority, the authority of the elderly, started then, because the world just began to change at such a pace" Website interview)

his training, the default position is that it is God – God’s will, and God speaking to him” (website interview). However, though Justin may be “different” and already attuned to the supernatural, he is nevertheless firmly located within his place and time. In early episodes he ministers to migrant “Okies,” despite resistance from prominent citizens of Mintern, California. After the church he establishes in gambling joint (and brothel) Mr. Chin’s is deliberately burnt down, killing six children who were sleeping inside, he has a crisis of faith but soon vows to continue and expand his work. He does this via the relatively new medium of radio. When Justin disappears following the fire, his story, broadcast by roving reporter Tommy Dolan, attracts enough attention to eventually give him his own radio spot. Justin gains huge numbers of donations and enthusiastic volunteers from his “Church of the Air” broadcasts. The possible conservatism of religion in Justin’s representation [NB he is not a Catholic, too many negative overtones] is thus offset by the technology of radio and an apparently progressive social politics. Yet in “Ingram, TX” (2.3) Justin states that in one of his radio broadcasts he should be able to “speak to more souls” than Jesus Christ “in his entire lifetime”, later he describes an upcoming event as “a Sermon on the Mount for a new America” (“Outskirts, Damascus, NE” 2.8). Both comments could be either delighted optimism about the potential of radio to highlight religious ideas and social justice, or a form of hubris. Is Justin adapting to the expanding/ contracting world or using it to his own advantage? There are obvious similarities with historical figure Father Charles Coughlin (whose political broadcasts on social justice in the 1930s reached millions), as well as a broader parallel with President Franklin Roosevelt’s “fireside chats.” Contemporary concerns about the influence of radio on the general public are also evident. “For some,” Lenthall notes, “the emotional intimacy of Roosevelt’s radio addresses had a dangerous seductive quality” (95). Are such figures champions of the people, or simply manipulative speakers?



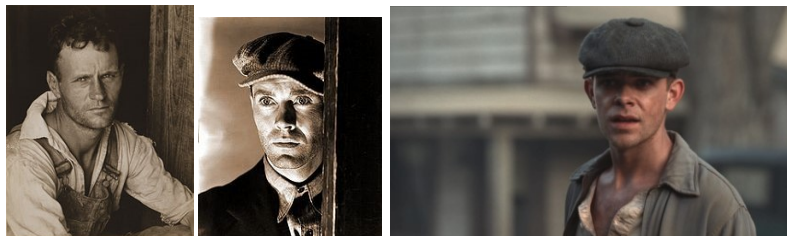
When Garcia notes that “the mixture of the old and the new, the modern and the pre-modern” in the show is “very fertile ground for prophets, both good and evil. The radio exists and people can begin to communicate and ideas travel. But [t]here’s still a marriage of new science and superstition” he sums up both Justin’s character and radio’s function. Since radio itself can be seen as an ethereal, an uncanny voice (cf. early cinema images as ghostly) it is more than simply period detail in *Carnivàle*. The uncanny nature of radio is made literal in season 2 when Justin’s broadcasts send a message to prison inmate Varlyn Stroud. Stroud hears Justin speak directly to him, telling him he is Justin’s “archangel” and consequently Stroud escapes prison to do Justin’s dirty work. Lenthall argues that advances in communication at this time meant that “the boundaries of space softened” (8), while the intimacy of radio’s address “eroded lines between the public and private spheres” (7). In this sense, radio is part of *Carnivàle*’s uncanny surrealism. Along with visions, tarot cards and prophecy, radio is a means of supernatural communication, offering not simply information or inspiration but a connection to something that transcends everyday life in Depression-era America. As Justin’s Church of the Air sells it, this might be the sublime; as aligned with the show’s more uncanny or horror elements it is closer to what Freeland theorises as the antisublime. If the sublime is awesome and uplifting,

Freeland argues that "By contrast, the forces of the uncanny dwarf us in a way that simply threatens a dissolution of the self, meaning, and morality" it is "morally deflationary, raising real questions about the limits of our human powers" (237).

As *Carnivàle* unfolds Justin's encounter with the uncanny increasingly dissolves "the self, meaning, and morality." Justin's identity as exemplary Christian slips at times and his performance of it is exposed. His relationship with sister Iris is often disturbingly close: they frequently kiss and, both unmarried and seemingly unattached, they live together and are often in each other's company. Soon we discover that Iris and Justin were raised by Rev Norman Balthus, who found them abandoned as children. A mixture of Justin's dream/ flashbacks and Iris' story recounted to Tommy Dolan reveal that that their closeness arises in part from their childhood experience as orphan survivors of a rail accident ("The River" 1.7) when they were Russian immigrants, Irina and Alexi. Both siblings resort to violence here to protect each other, and Iris continues to protect Justin/ Alexi, covering up his sexual appetite (a series of new maids), but it is not until season 2 that we discover she is responsible for burning Chin's, killing the children and setting Justin on the path to fame. Justin accepts his role as the Usher: arguably there never was a Justin, a self, only performance and a desire for power and status. Yet even this can be seen in terms of historical and national specificity, as Amy Madigan, who plays Iris, observes. "Iris wants to see her brother succeed ... and he has an enormous amount of power and charisma. We're in America, so boy, you can go as far as you want, can't you? Not just to be the good guy on the side, but to take command, take control, take charge, lead hundreds of thousands of people in the way of God" (website interview). Justin's hollow self is now (apparently) filled by the avatar and he establishes the site for a new "Temple of Jericho" on the field he has seen in a vision, the next step of his empire-building.

Ben "You can't run away from who you are"

If Justin might seem adapt to the changing world, Ben is the epitome of the helpless Depression and Dust Bowl victim.



The carnival troupe first encounter him as he digs a grave for his mother in scenes echoing famous FSA photographs of the Dust Bowl, as well as John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and John Ford's film adaptation of it (1940).³ The opening episode, showing a huge tractor destroying Ben's family home ("Milfay"), derives directly from *The Grapes of Wrath*, and was powerfully visualized in Ford's film (I don't have time to show both clips here, see PICS).

³ This is partly achieved through casting, as John Papsidera, casting director explains: "If you look at the photographs of Dorothea Lange. We tried to replicate that image of the Depression - you have to worry about body types, you have to worry about the feel of people and how people sound."



While scenes of harsh social realism appear throughout the show's two seasons, a period drama aesthetic softens their effect. The painstaking attention to detail found in any well-executed period drama is apparent here and despite a rather different atmosphere to a Jane Austen adaptation, the audience can still admire and take pleasure in such detail. "You know, in a show where glass shatters and eyeballs bleed, leeway is available," says Corey, "But in terms of what the carnival was like, and what their lives were like, and what they wore, and what they ate, and how they slept, and their cars and all the material culture, it's impeccable."⁴ This is a "costume drama" even if it is not a feel-good, nostalgic view of the past. Heritage drama may now include serving classes, rural life, industrial history, as Linda V. Troost points out (87) but it doesn't usually include conjoined twins, "cooch" dancers or midgets, and American TV rarely uses actors who don't look like "underwear models" (see Knauf). That *Carnivàle* does include these can be chalked up to the HBO effect: this is TV for adults, a more gritty take on history/ reality than might be acceptable on mainstream TV. Here the past offers neither escape nor safety (see Cardwell, 151), even if it is familiar. In fact, the very familiarity of some images causes its own uncanny effect – we are watching a version of history that has already been mediated for us. How many viewers can remember these events? What we remember are the powerful FSA photographs, art as much as documentary, or the images evoked by *The Grapes of Wrath*, novel or film.

Discussing Vietnam protests and 1970s film, Lowenstein draws on Lauren Berlant's concept of the media tendency to "facialize", put a "'face' on an otherwise abstract issue," (125), an idea that aptly describes Ben's function here. Just as Ford's film folds the universalizing interchapters of Steinbeck's novel into its story of the Joad family, here Ben is an "ordinary" person caught up in events beyond his control, an ideal focus for the show's recreation of the Dust Bowl and for audience empathy. Justin, older and already established in his community, directly contrasts Ben's vulnerable uncertainty. The chain round Ben's ankle forges another link with *The Grapes of Wrath*, which opens with Tom Joad, escaped convict, returning to his family home. While Tom manages to find his family before they set out for California, Ben is adrift from the start, his mother dead of dust pneumonia, their house gone. Much of Ben's metaphorical and geographical journey is an attempt to locate his father, the enigmatic Henry Scudder. Ben only gradually comes to find out that Scudder *is* his father, though he sees him in dreams and visions from the first episode (see CLIP). (Scudder is often seen - in visions, in old photographs - dressed

⁴ Ironically, it was the cost of reproducing period with such accuracy that led to the show's cancellation (Folk 2007).

in white tie and tails, an outfit that makes his presence in ordinary surroundings even more surreal). Thus the surrealism of Ben's visions, violent, disturbing and disorienting, is balanced by the emotional realism of serial drama – a character finding out who he is, where he comes from. The story of a son seeking his absent father lends itself to both melodrama and archetype, at home in fictions from soap opera to *Star Wars*.

On the one hand, Ben's association with the carnival positions him as a social outcast; on the other, his ordinariness is highlighted against a background of carnies, "halfwits, whores, and two-bit freaks" as Stroud comments to Samson ("Creed, OK" 2.5).



I do not have time here to do justice to the topic of representation (see Folk), but this is particularly evident in season 1, where Ben often stares at the carnival's performers with the same awe and disbelief as the punters, the "rubes." The audience understand long before he does that he is more at home here than he believes. Lodz, the blind seer, Apollonia the catatonic, telepathic tarot reader, and the mysterious unseen Management all know more about Ben and his role than he does, and they sense his power. In *Carnivàle* the unusual (tarot readings, freaks) becomes normalised through the everyday lives of the carnies, but the uncanny surreal, eerie visions are also experienced by Ben and Justin as surreal and eerie. Their discovery of their powers and possible roles in the battle of good and evil is a prime example of the uncanny as anti-sublime. Eric Bronson notes that the show's representation here supports "the belief that most religious experiences must take place outside of organized religion and are usually met not with peace but with crushing isolation and abandonment" (139). Justin may embrace the belief that he is the avatar of evil, while Ben resists, but both experience such alienation because of their visions.

Like many other reluctant TV heroes, Ben wants to be normal. He sees his miraculous power to heal people as a burden rather than a blessing, and refuses to accept who he might be. When he finally meets his father, Scudder tells Ben of his own reluctance to use his gifts. "I never wanted to be a part of this madness. I just wanted peace and a family. But you can't just up and quit. You can't run away from who you are" (2.7 "Damascus, NE"). His words apply equally to the mythology and the history invoked by *Carnivàle*. While Justin accepts that he is the avatar of evil, exposing his previous "self" as hollow, Ben resists, trying to cling to humanity. Yet his uncanny power means he cannot be normal and flashbacks to his childhood show that at an early age it estranged him from his strictly religious mother ("Milfay"). It also blurs moral distinctions, since to give life or heal, there must be a death or a taking of life-force (as visualized in key scenes from the first episode onward). The mythological battle between good and evil might provide a structure of meaning for the show, but ironically, it also undermines meaning. Justin, a poor immigrant made good, embodies the American Dream but becomes the American nightmare. Ben wants to be the average Joe and we sympathize with his humanity and his doubts, not his power and heroism.

Conclusion: There was magic then

"It is possible," suggests Marc, "that HBO launched *Carnivàle* as a probe to see just how far a premium cable series could push the aesthetic envelope" (101). There are limits, perhaps, but the show does not tell us a story, rather it presents images that make us feel. It does this in the same way that FSA photographs of the Dust Bowl and Depression transformed documentary realism into art, not so much recording the real and fixing the historical moment as putting a face to the national crisis, simultaneously aestheticising it and inspiring empathy. Yet *Carnivàle* also adopts the mode of surrealism or the uncanny, using bizarre imagery to evoke the disturbing, visceral affect of horror. *Carnivàle* develops distinctive "art" strategies for representing the uncanny, but locates such representations within a framework that heightens their fantastic nature by contrasting realism with surrealism.⁵ Lowenstein describes the films of David Cronenberg, which similarly mix art and genre elements, as consistently narrating "the fraught translation of a private, embodied self into a public, abstracted social body" and argues that they "[unmask] the alienation, exclusion, and violence that were always part of the everyday exchanges between private and public that the self and the nation depend upon" (146). Whether we watch *Carnivàle* as realism, or as fantasy surrealism, it accomplishes the same goal, visualising the response of individuals to changes in history, in national community, and in moral concepts.



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⁵ NB unlike TP and Riget does NOT use TV form/ convention, in fact, Marc chooses it to demonstrate the lack of genre in some successful HBO programming.