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Problem bodies and sideshow space:
A study of the twentieth century sideshow in Blackpool
1930-1940

by

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Declaration

I, the author, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

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Abstract

This thesis presents an interdisciplinary reflection of the seaside sideshow in Britain during the 1930s. With a particular focus on Blackpool as a growing resort in the interwar years, it explores the showmanship, scandal and scrutiny of impresario Luke Gannon, who exhibited on Blackpool's Golden Mile throughout the early 1930s. The unique exhibitions organised by Gannon, including fasting females and his notorious 'Starving Bride' exhibits, are explored in detail to demonstrate how the female body on display became a site of conflict. Tensions were played out through the regulation of the body on display, and a struggle ensued between efforts to create a modern progressive resort verses more traditional forms of entertainment. These struggles are articulated in conflicts about space on the Golden Mile and the visibility of particular forms of entertainment that became the subject of legal regulation.

This thesis presents a series of vignettes and cross-chronological comparisons to demonstrate how the sideshow functions as a site of negotiation between entertainment entrepreneurs, local authorities and audiences. Local and national newspapers provide insight into the multiple interests and conflicting voices that sought to redefine acceptable entertainment. These conflicts are seen to be fought as part of a wider dialogue around ever emerging new ambitions for Blackpool and its reputation. Through this study, the significance of the micro and macro space of the sideshow is brought into focus as a site of profound negotiation, reaching beyond its enclosed boundaries to influence and infiltrate wider social and cultural realities.

With strong theoretical grounding from the disciplines of History, Anthropology and Art History, this thesis seeks to recast the histories of the seaside. It does so through the examination of case studies, with the aim of revealing discrete negotiations that took place and shaped the townscape over the identification of wider trends. Evidently, the unique

nature of the sideshow as a site that sought to excite and shock its audience is recast in new light, regarded as a space that shaped its wider context through productive exchanges between entrepreneur, the law and the complex commercial interests of Blackpool authorities.

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My time spent at the Blackpool History Centre was greatly helped by librarian Anne Cameron, whose introduction to the world of sideshow proprietor Luke Gannon proved a pivotal moment in this thesis' direction. Aside from this introduction, the History Centre allowed me access to microfilm, rare books and images, of which I am grateful.

I am hugely thankful for my supervisors Mary Vincent and Julia Dobson. They have been incredible supports, both academically and personally. Through a busy four years, Mary and Julia have been both anchors and guides through smooth and choppy seas of academia and life more widely. I am so grateful for their confidence in me, for their valuable advice and for the time they have given.

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Introduction

Creating an interdisciplinary approach to the twentieth century sideshow

The British sideshow was a form of varied entertainment which peaked in popularity in the nineteenth century. These small show-worlds offered titillating experiences, from tattooed men to Siamese twins and real-life Sleeping Beauties, to a broad audience. They occupied various venues, but their traditional site was the travelling fairgrounds and circuses. Each sideshow offered a closed off space and created a threshold between the sideshow interior and the outside world. With the interior preserved for paying customers, props, people and posters were placed outside to entice passers-by inside. Sideshows offered a unique encounter, with the distinctive content making each sideshow an experience of intense entertainment but also, often, contention.

Organisers of sideshows were commonly from a fairground family line, and their names distinguished within the travelling tradition. Exceptional entrepreneurs such as P. T. Barnum in the United States and English exhibitor of the well-known Elephant Man, Tom Norman, made household names for themselves predominantly through their production of freak show content.¹ These figures were able to create national networks and global reputations, traversing and collapsing the worlds of medicine, entertainment and education.

The sideshow's trajectory within the British entertainment sector is generally seen as declining from the beginning of the twentieth century, viewed with increased disdain as new ideas about exploiting 'others' cast unfavourable light on much of the sideshows' content, as well as competition from newer forms of entertainment, such as talkies, taking precedent. Of

¹ Rachel Adams, *Sideshow USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Charlie Holland, *Strange Feats and Clever Turns: Remarkable Speciality Acts in Variety, Vaudeville and Sideshows at the Turn of the 20th Century as Seen by Their Contemporaries* (London: Holland & Palmer, c1998); Anna Kerchy and Zittlau, Andrea (eds), *Exploring the Cultural History of Continental European Freak Shows and 'Enfreakment'* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012); Tom Norman, *The Penny Showman: Memoirs of Tom Norman "Silver King"* (Privately published, 1985); A. H. Saxon, *P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1989).

course, the idea of audiences watching the ‘freakish’ still holds today, with reality and medical television shows arguably a mediated and nuanced form of gawping at uncomfortable exhibitionism. The traditional sideshow, however, had lost much traction as a form of favoured entertainment by the mid 1900s.

This thesis seeks a new vantage point on the sideshow. It does so, firstly, by focusing on a sideshow proprietor who remained outside of the typical sideshow trajectory. It looks at the early-mid twentieth century - a less considered period within fairground and sideshow literature. In addition to this, it identifies sideshows that were not within fairgrounds, nor developed by traveling showman families. Rather, the case study upon which this thesis revolves is that of an outsider, opportunist and often outspoken Yorkshire man turned self-made sideshow entrepreneur, Luke Gannon. As well as exploring a less considered characteristic of sideshows, Luke Gannon’s chosen sideshow location also poses a point of interest for this thesis. Luke Gannon came to Blackpool in the 1920s, with his crowd-drawing shows peaking in popularity throughout the 1930s. Existing outside of the fairground, and within an increasingly popular town which was setting the trend for British holidays, this thesis opens new questions of the sideshow and its role in British culture.

As well as discourses around the sideshow itself, this thesis reveals the underlying tensions that were often antagonised and framed around women’s bodies on display, the significance of which is surveyed. In particular, it regards the spectacle of female bodies as sites of political and cultural struggle, hinging around negotiations of visibility. These negotiations are brought into being and made graspable at the sideshow, where women’s bodies were displayed in different ways for a paying audience.

Furthermore, the interdisciplinary approach of this thesis asserts a new vantage point as it includes theory and consideration from the disciplines of History, Art History and

Anthropology. Whilst Blackpool and the historical context, culture and legal climate of the town are of profound interest, this thesis does not attempt a history of Blackpool. Rather, Blackpool acts as an empirical case study for exploring the relationships between people, places and performance at the sideshow. It seeks to demonstrate the tensions that occur between sideshow entrepreneurs, the holiday market and the law. In doing so, this thesis benefits from a multi-disciplinary approach as it brings a breadth to the research, posing questions that open it well beyond Blackpool. The thesis enables an original way of dealing with multiple moving parts - people, places and performance- and, moreover, highlights how they push against each other in constructive tensions within Blackpool during the 1930s. Moving away from the nineteenth century and incorporating a sideshow proprietor who occupied a static site in one of Britain's top entertainment resorts and most turbulent towns, Blackpool, the thesis asks new questions of the sideshow and its significance as a site of study.

In this way, cross-chronological comparisons to sideshow and freak show culture, as well as starving exhibitionism, are considered in detail. Whilst the context of Gannon as an entrepreneur in Blackpool during the 1930s is well considered throughout this thesis, with particular attention paid to the townscape and the social makeup of the town, the history of the sideshow is also given attention. Such cross-chronological comparisons are revealing of the nature of the sideshow space, of the distinctness of Gannon as a show organiser and of the deeper context of the affiliations that sideshow showmanship held. This thesis therefore emphasises Gannon's shows as the product of a particular historical conjuncture. The social, cultural and political structure of Blackpool, as well as wider trends in entertainment and social mobility, were integral to the nature and trajectory of Gannon's career. At the same time, this thesis regards the history of sideshow and freak show culture as important and incredibly informative.

The theoretical keystones of this thesis will be explored in more detail below. As a general point however, primary and secondary literature brought to use within this thesis creates an interdisciplinary grounding including: consideration of how history deals with performativity, the law and women; an art history method of considering visual culture as in the work of Blackpool's railway poster artwork; and anthropological philosophies of the body and corporeal encounters. Encompassing approaches from anthropological perspectives, historical archive work and processes of place-making through bodies on display as informed by an attention to the visual image, this thesis is driven by a desire to reach into the twentieth century and address the messy areas of negotiation, framed by the sideshow.

Case study: introducing Luke Gannon

This research will explore in detail the productions, public reception, and legal repercussions surrounding sideshow entrepreneur Luke Gannon. His turbulent career makes for a fascinating biography, from his early run-ins with the law and his contentious yet successful years on Blackpool's Golden Mile, to his attempts to relocate after his stint on the Mile came to a dramatic close. Gannon was and remains a significant character in the history of Blackpool and, as argued in this thesis, sideshow studies. His shows, as well as his provocative personality, had a resounding effect on the townscape of Blackpool during his time there. He played an important role in the shaping of Blackpool, as Blackpool too shaped his shows and career. Blackpool, Gannon and the sideshow are held together in a nexus of dialogues that attests to wider cultural forces at play, such as taste, morality and commercialism.

Whilst great attention will be paid to Gannon's sideshow career throughout this thesis, it is helpful here to provide an introductory overview of his career. This is so as to provide a familiarisation with the content of Gannon's shows, but also to introduce the character and plucky spirit that ensued throughout his career. An appreciation of Gannon's showmanship

and opportunism goes some way in understanding how and why Gannon proves an interesting subject for sideshow and seaside culture.

Gannon's early years in Burnley, Lancashire, were dictated by numerous run-ins with the police, beginning on July 21 1894 when the *Burnley Express* identified Gannon as a participant in a house theft.² This was, however, just the beginning and in 1899, under the old Irish name of Gilgannon, he was sentenced to four years and charged with 'feloniously receiving stolen goods.'³ This episode received much scrutiny from the local press, describing how Gannon and his brother, Martin Gannon, encountered trespassers in the Burnley hills, assumed the role of police officers and thereafter claimed the stolen goods from the original criminals. Although the 1899 Calendar of Prisoners states the occupation of Gannon as a 'barman', this episode demonstrates a degree of opportunism and, most tellingly, showmanship.⁴

Opportunistic deception seems to have been a recurrent theme throughout Gannon's record. In the 1911 Burnley Census, a man named 'Luke Sinclair', an apparent cotton weaver, recorded his address and age at 33 years old.⁵ Suspiciously however, he is documented as living with 'Hannah Sinclair' - Hannah being the registered name of Luke Gannon's wife- and also a 'Martin Gannon', Luke Gannon's brother.⁶ Supporting this, the signature at the bottom is tampered with, with the signed named 'Sinclair' suspiciously written over what appears to be a name with double 'nn' and a capital 'G.'⁷ This alteration of

² *Burnley Express*, 21 July 1894.

³ The National Archives, Calendar of Prisoners (1899), Home Office, Ministry of Home Security (Ref: HO 140). Hard copy held in Blackpool History Centre.

⁴ The National Archives, Calendar of Prisoners (1899), Home Office, Ministry of Home Security (Ref: HO 140). Hard copy held in Blackpool History Centre.

⁵ 'Hannah Sinclair' (1911) *Census return for England and Wales, Burnley, Lancashire*. Number of Schedule 84.

⁶ Anne Cameron, librarian at the Blackpool Local and Family History Centre, believes this to be an attempt at Gannon to escape his past troubles, at least for a short time.

⁷ 'Hannah Sinclair' (1911) *Census return for England and Wales, Burnley, Lancashire*. Number of Schedule 84

identity becomes intelligible when, nine years later, Gannon ‘causes a disturbance at an auction room’, which resulted in the Chief Constable of Blackpool commenting on Gannon in the *Blackpool Gazette*.⁸ According to one police constable, Gannon shouted inappropriately at the manager of an auction room, causing a crowd to form and refusing to ‘go away quietly.’⁹ As a result of this altercation, Gannon was charged with a breach of the peace and obstruction. Perhaps more significant, however, were the terms in which Gannon was publicly introduced to the Blackpool area. Referenced throughout the *Blackpool Gazette*’s article as ‘the prisoner’, the Chief Constable is quoted saying Gannon was, ‘one of the worst possible men who came into Blackpool’, that Gannon’s record was ‘terribly bad’, and ‘he would tell him that they wanted space in Blackpool and not his presence.’¹⁰ Ironically, the theme of occupying ‘space’ unwantedly, as well as Gannon’s ability to draw an obstructive crowd, would continue throughout Gannon’s move to Blackpool and was used against him in his later years a sideshow proprietor.

The reputation the Chief Constable ascribed to Gannon during his move to Blackpool was troubling to Gannon. So much so, that on 24 August 1920, Gannon made his reply to the Chief Constable in the *Blackpool Gazette*, stating ‘facts’ in a list-like structure of life events. For example, ‘I have been in business for eighteen years’, ‘I have had a restaurant’, ‘I deny that I am one of the worst.’¹¹ Gannon dismisses his ‘terribly bad’ record, stating that his conviction ‘22 years ago, when I was a lad of 18’ should have ‘expiated long ago.’¹² Furthermore, that ‘the memory of it certainly did not prevent me from fighting for my country, nor for the Army accepting my services’.¹³ This attempt to restore his reputation is

⁸ *Blackpool Gazette*, 12 August 1920.

⁹ *Blackpool Gazette*, 12 August 1920.

¹⁰ *Blackpool Gazette*, 12 August 1920.

¹¹ *Blackpool Gazette*, 24 August 1920.

¹² *Blackpool Gazette*, 24 August 1920.

¹³ *Blackpool Gazette*, 24 August 1920.

somewhat futile however, as he only served a short time in the army before being quickly dismissed for dubious health reasons.

Gannon stated that ‘since the Chief’s remarks I have found it difficult to get employment, and I write this letter in order to prevent any further mischief being caused by these unfounded and unjust references to my character and record.’¹⁴ Arguably, it was this damning critique of his character and his subsequent difficulty in gaining employment that pushed Gannon to create his own role as a self-made showman. Gannon’s early encounters show a character of defiance and quirky assertiveness that was reflected in his later career as a sideshow proprietor which would, nine years later, find him making headlines and fulfilling his clear aptitude for showmanship.

Helpfully, Clarke’s recollections of Blackpool include specific references to Gannon’s ‘involvement’ with the scene.¹⁵ Gannon’s initial appearance was, as Clarke recalls, ‘doing a mind reading act with a lovely young lady billed as Madame Kusharney.’¹⁶ Clarke notes that at this point the space occupied by Madame Kusharney and Gannon was known as ‘No Man’s Land’, a site whereby there was no discernible owner. As a result, people could ‘set up their wares without paying rent.’¹⁷ The unchartered and autonomous territory of ‘No Man’s Land’ would stand in contrast to the restrictive and policed space Gannon would later occupy. The discernment of available space and how it was to be used played an important role in Gannon’s relationship with Blackpool police authorities and, as will be discussed, with the performers and bodily displays he was able to exhibit.

¹⁴ *Blackpool Gazette*, 24 August 1920.

¹⁵ Ellis Clarke, ‘The Golden Age of the Golden Mile’, in *Fresh Air and Fun*, ed. by D. Brotherton and B. Dobson (Landy Publishing, 1988), pp. 65-67.

¹⁶ Clarke, ‘The Golden Age’, pp. 65-67. Notably, Madame Kusharney and Gannon did not directly exhibit together throughout Gannon’s career, yet the relationship remained important throughout Gannon’s showman career particularly in terms of space and the legality of spatial occupation.

¹⁷ Clarke, ‘The Golden Age’, p. 65-67.

Gannon's role as a show manager and showman is first mentioned by the press in the *Evening Gazette*, 13 July 1929, in an article reporting on 'Blackpool's claim to world record' for the 'Long Fast' of Mr Gus Clarke.¹⁸ He had recruited professional fasting artists to the Golden Mile in his first year there, including Gus Clarke and the Great Sacco, who were both male, professional individuals. It was, however, female fasters that would become one of Gannon's trademark shows. In 1931 Gannon introduced his first female faster Joyce Heather, who abstained in a barrel. This was proceeded by other female fasters in said barrel, some of which drew media attention for the interest and, at times, hostility shows provoked from Blackpool holiday goers.

One of Gannon's major crowd pullers was the public fasting of Harold Davidson, who went on display in Blackpool in 1932 in a barrel and again in 1935 in a glass cabinet. It was, in fact, the story of this disgraced former man of the church that initially directed my research to the Golden Mile, Blackpool. A visit to the Blackpool History Centre, located within the town's central library, introduced me to the vibrant past of sideshows on the Golden Mile. The archives held material which revealed the turbulent times of the 1930s for sideshow proprietor Luke Gannon, who exhibited Davidson. Archivist Anne Cameron from the centre expressed an interest in this figure on the Golden Mile who, although widely known, had been little researched in any formal sense. Delving into Gannon's background, through census records and newspaper reports, Gannon revealed himself as a showman who experienced conflict throughout his life. As a non-travelling showman, an entrepreneur who clearly fought for his place on the Golden Mile and adapted his shows with provocative intent, he offered an intriguing case study.

¹⁸ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 July 1929.

His shows often played with sex, gender and controversial intimacy set on display. Colonel Barker, a cross-dresser who posed as a Royal Air Force officer after World War One, was one such individual displayed by Gannon.¹⁹ As described, ‘Ticket, 2d., yellow. Up two steps, then anticlockwise between wooden walls decorated with cardboard cupids and Richard Coeur de Lion in red war-suit who is blessing the bride and bridegroom. Through glass, you look down on the couple in pit below.’ The somewhat disconcerting arrangement of fasting figures in glass persisted throughout Gannon’s chosen exhibits.

In 1934 a new kind of fasting show had emerged on the Golden Mile- Starving Bride shows. According to the *Mail* and the *Evening Gazette*, in 1934 there were three ‘rival’ Starving Bride shows at Blackpool.²⁰ None proved so popular, or so policed, as Gannon’s. By 1934, undercover police visits commissioned by the Watch Committee and under their authority were at work in Gannon’s shows. Significantly, in 1935 local Blackpool authorities sought the passing of a new bill within The Blackpool Improvement Act that paid attention to the authorities ability to close down unacceptable entertainment.²¹ In the *Evening Gazette*, 22 October 1934, a cynical prediction in the paper attested to the thin ice Gannon was on, from a legal standing at least. Despite his shows proving popular in terms of admission numbers, his popularity as a figure fit for the progressive Blackpool was dwindling; ‘Blackpool saw the last of the starving brides- for this season at any rate- when the doors closed at the Central

¹⁹ Gary Cross (ed)., *Worktowners at Blackpool, Mass-Observation and popular leisure in the 1930s*, 1990, pp. 193-194.

²⁰ ‘Starving Bridal Couples in British Sideshows’, *The Mail*, 13 October 1934, p. 3.

²¹ For review of changing governmental powers and local Corporations, see Barry M. Doyle, ‘The Changing Functions of Urban Government: Councillors, Officials and Pressure Groups’, in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain Volume 3 1840-1950*, ed. by M. Daunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 287-314. For details of the Blackpool Improvement Act and the changing Corporation within Blackpool, see John K. Walton, *The Blackpool Landlady: A Social History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 44; Sam Davies and Morley, B (eds), *County Borough Elections in England and Wales, 1919-1938: A Comparative Analysis: Volume 1: Barnsley - Bournemouth* (London: Routledge, 2016).

Beach shows last night...today the shutters were up at Mr Luke Gannon's exhibition and the couple who had been on a milk diet had been removed from their cases.'²²

The details of Gannon's success and exodus from Blackpool will be explored throughout this thesis. His contradictory status as a crowd-puller, nuisance and outspoken entertainment manager reveals much about the nature of the sideshow itself, as well as the ways in which bodies put on display may become embodiments of cultural curation. The ways in which bodies may be regulated, removed or reimagined can be revealed as involved in wider processes that create a culture within a town such as Blackpool. In 1938 Gannon is reported elsewhere, attempting to exhibit new shows in Cleveleys, not far from Blackpool. His reputation appears to follow him, as he was met with hostility and deemed an unwanted presence.

Research material: initial archival interest

Material held at the National Fairground and Circus Archive (NFCA) was the inspiration and the starting point of this thesis. Housed within one of the University of Sheffield's main libraries, the archive contains objects, posters, photographs and a comprehensive collection of resources which showcase the rich history of the travelling fair and circus from the seventeenth century onwards. Amongst the valuable material relating to the showpeople's way of life, from business to travel, is a breadth of material relating to one of the travelling culture's contested yet iconic forms of entertainment- the nineteenth century freak show.

The NFCA's significant collection of primary material on the freak show formed the basis of this thesis' understanding of the ways in which bodies were presented in the sideshow, through visual and textual content, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. The secondary material made available by the NFCA was also imperative for a

²² *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 22 October 1934.

grounding in sideshow studies. The ‘big names’ of freak showmanship are heavily represented within the archive, and have been extensively considered through this thesis.²³

Through reading freak show literature, both primary and secondary sources, I established that the sideshow was considered as an important site where the display of abnormal bodies reflected or deflected something about society itself. I noticed, however, that much of the analysis of such bodies embedded each case of freakery within an inevitable dialogue of decline, as the Victorian era passed. Whilst texts narrated a decline in this form of showmanship, there was little analytical consideration of the tensions and productive outcomes of how showmen won and lost the case for showing their entertainments and how it was that such bodies on display, once so useful a reflective tool for society, became problematic in the light of changing moral and legal standards. Furthermore, whilst the nineteenth century freak show benefits from a wealth of study, the detailed accounts of the sideshows and showmen of the twentieth century were fewer and less accessible.

This wide grounding in freak show exhibits became more focused when I began to consider copies of *The World's Fair* newspaper, a publication targeted at showpeople around England which circulated information on innovation and business for show folk around the country.²⁴ The full run of the newspaper, from 1904 to the present day, is available at the NFCA with copies between 1904-1950 available on microfilm. It was in viewing this newspaper that I began to consider troubles and the problems facing showmen that became apparent in the twentieth century fairground society. These problems were usually linked to a grey area of law enforcement and concerns around the impact of travelling shows on the

²³ Interestingly, during my time of study there has been an explosion in public interest thanks to the 2017 hit film *The Greatest Showman* which tells an adaption of the life of P.T. Barnum who is considered a major figure in the commercialisation of ‘freak shows’ and the great American amusement parks and museums.

²⁴ Interestingly, the paper’s origin was Lancashire, a place of interest throughout this thesis.

country's landscape, both physical and cultural. It was the idea of these conflicts that drew the attention of my research.

In light of this, and in order to address an assumed narrative of freak show decline, I was keen to investigate cases of conflict between showmen and wider society in the twentieth century, particularly in regards to conflicts that dealt with contentious bodies on display. To do so, a framework for identifying and undertaking the complex roles played by multiple people throughout these conflicts was needed. This should be led not by the documenting of legislative changes, but by looking at the negotiations between people. I was encouraged by the response of the NFCA librarians and archivists, who deemed 'conflict' in sideshow studies a subject matter that had not, in their knowledge, yet been addressed.

I was intrigued by the varying ways in which the sideshow space was talked about and comprehended throughout the archive's collection. There existed clear studies of the sideshow as a count by count exhibit, highly structured and performed with direct intentions. In other accounts the sideshow was presented as a site of uncontrollable, subjective experience. It was in developing this problematisation of the sideshow space that led me to a framework which encompassed the materiality of the sideshow as a structured space and performance, whilst also acknowledging the ways in which this related, influenced and challenged wider cultural realities through negotiation.

Moreover, the problem of the sideshow space presented me with an understanding that the sideshow and the bodies that occupied it could be defined in different terms through different discourses. This related to my initial interest, which sought to answer how bodies, once insightful, became unsightly. The sideshow space and the bodies that occupied it should, through my research, be considered as mutually informative. Ideas and constructions of the body and space, and how they were negotiated by *people* is clearly influenced by my research

background in anthropology. A background in the study of humankind, with a particular focus on material culture, undoubtedly informed a desire to consider how space and bodies not only occurred, but what ‘work’ they performed within culture.

The striking story of Harold Davidson, a disgraced former man of the church who became a sideshow occupant, directed my research to the Golden Mile, Blackpool. A visit to the Blackpool History Centre, located within the town’s central library, introduced me to the vibrant past of sideshows on the Golden Mile. The archives held material which revealed the turbulent times of the 1930s for sideshow proprietor Luke Gannon, who exhibited Davidson. As a non-travelling showman, an entrepreneur who clearly fought for his place on the Golden Mile and adapted his shows with provocative intent, he offered an intriguing case study.

My work conducted in history of art has often dealt with ideas of landscape and place-making. This is particularly true of my interest in working-class cultures. The way places make people and people make places, as represented through visual culture, has been the object of much of my former research. I was therefore drawn to Blackpool as a site of profound place-making in the 1930s, intrigued to see how this once again related to my initial concerns of conflict and problematic bodies at the sideshow. As such, a form of visual consumption, considered through this thesis, are the advertisements of Blackpool in the form of railway posters. In an attempt to see clearly the visual place-making activity undertaken by Blackpool, the National Railway Museum offered a rich resource. Through its online catalogue I was able to filter rail posters which were used to advertise the town to the nation. These were valuable in discerning the image of Blackpool sold to the world and, importantly, how bodies occupied this visionary landscape. They provide an imaginary, curated vision and image of Blackpool which is useful for contextualising the foggier negotiations of Blackpool’s identity at work during the period. These curated images of Blackpool provide

insight into the projected model image of Blackpool, and in doing so act as counter points in this thesis' discussion on the discourses mediated by newspaper articles.

Newspaper sources and the role of the press

In seeking to understand the shifting role of the sideshow and those that occupy it, my research focused upon the ongoing exchanges that occurred between impresario Gannon, Blackpool's planned commercialisation and the law. There existed dynamic and productive tensions between the three, as they resisted and reconciled at various points in time. Integral to both the unravelling of these tensions through this thesis, as well as their very production in interwar Blackpool, was the role of the local and national press.

This project sought to utilise national and local press archives. The National Archive presented national and local sources online, important for establishing further cases of sideshow conflict. Significantly for researching Gannon and Blackpool, the Blackpool History Centre's microfilm copies of local newspapers, in particular *The Blackpool Gazette*, *Lancashire Daily Post*, *The West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, all established at the end of the nineteenth century, provided an abundance of primary material for this thesis. The centre also offered lesser available works on the town, such as Gerald Mars' early anthropological studies of Blackpool in the 1950s, which preceded his main body of work, and a collection of files on the Mass Observation of the 1930s within Blackpool, which would prove helpful in considering the end of Gannon's career and Blackpool's place-making activity.²⁵

The press presented an evolving platform for Blackpool's colourful and contested cultural identity, continuously in the making, to playout. It performed an integral role in recounting incidents that occurred, for example Gannon's run-ins with law officials, but also Gannon as an active agent who was pivotal in mediating representations of the sideshow and

²⁵ Gerald Mars, *Becoming an Anthropologist: A Memoir and a Guide to Anthropology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2015).

Blackpool alike. For example, the press was undoubtedly important to Gannon firstly in reporting on the success of his show, notorious for bringing in big crowds, but also during periods of legal scrutiny where he often was seen to increase dramatics in attempts to draw more attention. This is encapsulated by Gannon during a particularly tense episode involving a barrel, occupied by a fasting lady, being rolled down the promenade by an angry crowd. In response to the incident making headlines in the daily newspaper, Gannon contends, “I don’t care what they say as long as they spell my name right.”²⁶

The nature of the press at the time when Gannon took to the Golden Mile was evolving its own self-promoting style. The press took on a new boldness to create an invigorated form of mass media during the interwar years.²⁷ Arguably, this significant period in press culture mimics many of Blackpool’s transitions during the same period. For example, in correlation with Blackpool’s growing popularity, due to new leisure time and the democratisation of leisurely pursuits for the working class, the press was also being reimagined. New audiences were now available to the press, thus shifting the style and nature of journalistic activities. As noted by Newman and Houlbrook:

While the interwar period marked a crucial moment in the commodification of news and concentration of the mass media, it was thus also characterised by the development of ‘human-interest’ features like the women’s pages and a growing emphasis on the newspaper as a spectacular visual product, characterised by photographic spreads, illustrations and bold, eye-catching headlines and fonts.²⁸

As with the sideshow proprietors of the Golden Mile, newspaper stories were competing to be spectacular, eye-catching and to entice the interest of emerging audiences. The controversial, dramatic and sometimes comical nature of Gannon’s career therefore provided

²⁶ Clarke, ‘The Golden Age’, pp. 65-67.

²⁷ Sarah Newman and M. Houlbrook, ‘The Press and Popular Culture in Interwar Europe’, *Journalism Studies* 14:5 (2013), p. 641.

²⁸ Newman and Houlbrook, ‘The Press and Popular Culture in Interwar Europe’, p. 643.

great stories for local journalists in particular. In return, the press provided a platform for the authorities and Gannon to play out conflicts and, in Gannon's case, to deliberately dramatize proceedings so as to invite more publicity. Gannon, with eye-catching props, showmanship style and a defiance of authority, was very much in tune with the nature of the press at the time.

Moreover, just as the occupants of Blackpool's Golden Mile continuously reimagined themselves to appeal to visitors of different class and to appease both authorities and a demanding new public, newspapers were also bound to both 'the state' and the public.²⁹ They were governed by but also complicit in creating a national discourse, constituted through the negotiation between multiple voices and agendas. Individual newspapers of course had their own political and promotional incentives and styles, but general trends in journalism can be acknowledged.³⁰ Newman, writing on interwar Britain's press culture at the time, notes that 'sensational drama and gossip' provided a form of escapism whilst simultaneously facilitating 'bracing reflections on tensions of interwar society, culture and politics.'³¹

Furthermore, as will be discussed in the analysis of sideshow space, the sideshow too was in constant conversation with its wider cultural and political contexts. Sideshows and the press therefore both reformulated the creation of their own content and narrative in an attempt to offer a form of escapism, whilst manifestly being drawn into political and societal structures. Both the sideshow and newspapers played an important role in shaping narratives that extended beyond their own 'spectacular visual product.'³²

²⁹ Newman and Houlbrook, 'The Press and Popular Culture in Interwar Europe', p. 641.

³⁰ Adrian Bingham & Martin Conboy, 'THE *DAILY MIRROR* AND THE CREATION OF A COMMERCIAL POPULAR LANGUAGE', *Journalism Studies* 10:5 (2009), pp. 639-654.

³¹ Newman and Houlbrook, 'The Press and Popular Culture in Interwar Europe', p. 644.

³² Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Inter-war Britain* (Oxford, 2004); Newman and Houlbrook, 'The Press and Popular Culture in Interwar Europe', p. 643.

As well as these journalistic spectacles of drama and gossip, an interest in crime and criminality is also identifiable in the inter-war years, in terms of journalistic content. As described by Houlbrook:

As historians have shown, for example, crime was a key battleground in the newspaper circulation wars of the period; its popularity with readers reflected in the prominence given to dramatic accounts of sensational trials, detailed reports on criminal investigations, and the first-person testimonies of participants and observers.³³

Drama, divulging information and acts of deviance were therefore prime material for journalists. Arguably, this had an important influence on the handling of contentious issues, such as those presented by Blackpool and Golden Mile residents.

This thesis therefore acknowledges the relationship between Blackpool, sideshows and the press, who were all in one way or another, trying to assert themselves with new audiences. Notably, this was often achieved not through isolationist activities, but by these entities being in contact or even in conflict with one another. The practical implications of such a relationship are also acknowledged here, with case studies revealing how proprietors such as Luke Gannon and the authorities capitalised on the commercialisation of the press.

However, this thesis does not attempt an in-depth analysis of alliances between individuals- an area which would prove interesting for further research. Rather, the use of primary material, gathered from local newspapers, is considered in terms of how Blackpool, the sideshow and Luke Gannon's exhibits in particular, were made and made themselves visible. The extensive use of newspaper sources shows the way in which reporting played an active role in shaping public knowledge of the sideshow and its place on the Golden Mile.

³³ Matt Houlbrook, 'Fashioning an Ex-crook Self: Citizenship and Criminality in the Work of Netley Lucas', *Twentieth Century British History* 24:1 (2013), pp. 1- 30.

For Luke Gannon, the press was arguably his greatest critic, with national and international newspapers condemning various exhibits portrayed as harmful to participants and to Blackpool's reputation. The press was also, however, one of his greatest tools for promotion and for establishing himself as a distinctive entrepreneur who, even when criticised, was shaping the narrative of Blackpool. Much of this shaping was achieved thanks to the shared desire for sensationalism in both his sideshows and in the press. Newspaper reports are, therefore, used to great effect in this thesis. They reveal not only detailed accounts, dates and quotes from individuals and groups, but also the ways in which public perceptions of the sideshow were mediated and negotiated. They expose the tensions that arose between making Blackpool modern, and how this vision involved interactions between impresario Luke Gannon and the corporation.

One way in which newspapers proved somewhat frustrating in my research was in disseminating details of the individuals who were fasting, particularly the starving brides themselves. Whilst a vast amount of interest was taken with Gannon and a handful of his controversial exhibits, the individual women who became 'starving brides' remained enigmatic. Interviews are not conducted, quotes are not taken, and the background and story of the individual starving brides were not easily traced through newspaper reports. However, their lack of existence outside of the sideshow itself, rather than a point of hindrance, became a point of interest and important for understanding how the sideshow space negotiated Blackpool's image of itself through the bodies it allowed on display.

This lack of journalistic interest in the women as individuals, to a great degree, shaped the development of this thesis. In tackling the negated existence of the brides, research was directed to the ways in which the law deems and deals with 'problematic' bodies on display, particularly those of women. Whilst wider literature on the changing state of decency and public entertainment provided important guidance in this field, this thesis is influenced by

texts that deal not with changes in legislation alone, but the ways in which such changes involve complex processes that defined and re-categorised women and how women defined themselves in the face of this. Report and newspaper coverage are considered an important platform for such processes of categorisation, again attesting to the ways in which the press reflected and constructed public knowledge and its cultural contexts. Newspaper sources provoked interest not only in how the brides were mediated- or negated- but also, how they were consumed through the press.

Wider literature and theoretical debates: space and the body

This thesis engages with intellectual debates on space and the body. It offers not only a critical engagement with such theoretical frameworks, but attempts to bring debates together into a prism of adjacent disciplines including Anthropology, History and Art History. Key sideshow case studies are used as focal points for engaging with such debates, offering empirical evidence to deal with theoretical meditations. These case studies, whilst making reference to wider sideshow practices, focus mainly on sideshow performances organised by a prominent figure on Blackpool's Golden Mile in the interwar years. Theoretical debates will be revealed through such case studies, in an approach that allows the complex notions of space and the body to reveal themselves within the sideshow analysis. Sideshows featured in Blackpool during the 1930s contextualise this thesis' emphasis on the sideshow as a site of intricate negotiation. However, before such case studies are brought into practice, it is first necessary to acknowledge the literature which prompts this thesis' approach and, moreover, those it seeks to develop.

The sideshow can be defined by its unique structural qualities, distinctive in offering a unique world of intimate proportions. From a distance, the rows of tents and show booths offered a distinct visual landscape and set-up, as strips of individual booths amassed in particular areas of fairground and travelling show grounds. Each sideshow would entice

wandering visitors with captivating signage and eye-catching titillations, all designed to tempt possible punters inside to witness novelty acts, freak shows and waxworks to name a few.³⁴ Whilst publicity outside the small spaces initiated intrigue for passers-by, the closed off sideshow space meant that consumers had to enter in order to be entertained. Showmen were able to utilise the intimate interior to manipulate an audience's experience. But audiences too were able to curate their own experiences, entering in and out of multiple tents and booths depending on what caught their eye.

Whilst the succession of rows of sideshow booths was most commonly associated with travelling fairs, sideshows did also appear in alternative spaces. Sideshow attractions infiltrated places such as drawing rooms and royal palaces, shops and vacant buildings. Indeed, this thesis takes particular regard of those sideshows that occupied Blackpool's Golden Mile not as travelling shows, but as ongoing attractions housed within a permanent building. So, what makes a sideshow a sideshow? How can a space that may occupy a temporary tent or a permanent tenancy, and play host to such a range of exhibition types, be defined? A degree of flexibility is required when considering what makes a sideshow, a sideshow. Its structural qualities as part of the traveling fair were distinctive, but there was evidently also a deeper notion of what the sideshow offered. The sideshow was a space that facilitated a specific mode of production and reception, regardless of its material housing. This is an important consideration for deepening understanding of conflicts that occurred around sideshow organisers. Deconstructing what is meant by the sideshow space, which will follow, reveals the productive qualities of the sideshow that made it at one time unique, distinct and recognisable, but also changeable and variable depending on who organised it, and where it was situated.

³⁴ 'History of Sideshow Exhibitions and Acts', *National Fairground Archive*, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca/researchandarticles/sideshowexhibitionsacts> [accessed 19 August 2018].

It is helpful at this point to offer a general understanding of what the sideshow space initiated, as observed by this thesis. What was unique to the sideshow space was a sense of opportunistic satisfaction and unexpected interaction. Experiences were decided in moments when passing by, and the encounters on offer only fully knowable when inside the intimate space. In this sense, the space was profoundly liminal, even when housed in a permanent structure. This is because boundaries between the inside and outside continuously created tension, and experiences within the sideshow space were brief but punchy.

It is necessary to consider the sideshow space because there are multiple ways in which 'space' can be defined and considered. This includes, firstly, the ways in which space may be physically constructed and culturally perceived in particular historical contexts and, secondly, how space (or spaces) may be considered in the subsequent theoretical and analytical frameworks that seek to understand such historical contexts. To demonstrate these two-branched approaches to space, I will begin with an orientation of the term through the examination of literature on the history of the sideshow. This acts as an intellectual starting point for revealing the complexity within understandings of performance space firstly within the field of sideshow studies but also, and explored thereafter, as a wider field for discussion across disciplinary boundaries.

Notably, this discussion does not seek to define the sideshow space unambiguously or space in general. Rather, in opening up debates about what the sideshow offered and, more markedly, what it does, and questioning how to analyse its place as a significant cultural site, it is evident that a multi-disciplinary and multi-dimensional approach to the sideshow space may provide nuanced insight. This thesis therefore should be considered as an exercise in navigating the sideshow space, identifying rather than defining multiple encounters between institutional, commercial and social processes and, in doing so, remaining open to the

paradoxical productivity of the sideshow that is at one time a controlled performance space and, on the other, a unpredictable site of social experience.

Historical studies into the nineteenth and twentieth century fairground have often presented it as a space outside of and in exception to the realm of the everyday. It is also seen, suggestively, as a temporary space within which bodies of an ‘abnormal’ and ‘unpredictable’ regard, naturally or decoratively, might be exhibited and made profitable.³⁵ Literature surrounding the freak show is a useful starting point for understanding how to deal with and define the ‘space’ of the sideshow and its relationship to the bodies which occupy it. Critically, such histories expose ambiguity as to what is in fact meant by the ‘space’ of the sideshow, whether this is an abstract, discursive realm, or a physical, established, if temporary, structure. This dichotomy of spatial understanding, between the conceptual and the concrete, may require collapsing in order to reveal interaction and interdependence.

I begin with a discussion of the freak show literature, not because the freak show will be the focus of this thesis but because it exposes concerns over the siting of problematic bodies in space; space which requires redefinition. In Dubach’s significant work, the sideshow is regarded as a site where those involved ‘cope with cultural anxiety.’³⁶ What emerges from such a position is a concept of space which holds a discursive function. The sideshow is a physical space which also operates as an ideological gateway, a space operative and recognisable in the realm of discourse. In addition to this, the changing regulations over freak show exhibitors demonstrate wider concerns related to bodily display, propelled by anxieties over decency and public taste.

³⁵ Ian Trowell, ‘Spin and Spew’ (2015), http://www.route57.group.shef.ac.uk/issue12/01_nonfiction/12nf_trowell.php [accessed September 2019].

³⁶ Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture* (California: University of California, 2009), p. 4.

Ian Trowell deems the fairground space to be fluid and ungraspable in its entirety. ‘Comfortable comprehension of the environment is never attained.... Everything evolves, changes, vanishes, re-emerges in a different way or is hybridised in the most unpredictable fashion.’³⁷ Furthermore, he exposes an ambiguity between the abstract and the concrete in fluctuating order when he states, ‘Fairgrounds work 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 what can only be said to be impossible and unimaginable into the realm of the sensory.’³⁸ Notably, in discussing how one may be brought into the other, the everyday into the surreal, he manifestly makes a distinction between the two. The fairground is deemed a distinctly separate space from the everyday, apparently because of its ungraspable nature.

Returning to the history of the freak show, Ferguson inadvertently makes a similar supposition. She argues against the assumption that the ‘public rejection of the exotic freak’ was ‘the end of Victorians’ courtship of the freak in general’.³⁹ Instead, she argues for a shift towards a ‘new and deeper mythos of freakishness.’⁴⁰ Significantly, this occurred as the freak was brought out of the exotic and into the domestic. The turn of the twentieth century did not thus mark the dissolving of an institution of freakishness, rather that the freak underwent a process of domestication. This blurred the once defined lines between freak and normality rendering them less knowable and predictable and thus, more unsettling. Put simply, ‘while the Victorians gaped at wild boys and Elephant men, we fetishise and make spectacles of (both mentally and physically) pathological individuals with the semblance of outward

³⁷ Trowell, ‘Spin and Spew’.

³⁸ Trowell, ‘Spin and Spew’.

³⁹ Christine Ferguson, ‘“Gooble-gabble, one of us”: Grotesque Rhetoric and the Victorian Freak Show’, *Victorian Review* 23 (1997), p. 246.

⁴⁰ Ferguson, ‘Grotesque Rhetoric and the Victorian Freak Show’, p. 248.

health.’⁴¹ Ferguson thus suggests that bodies not only occupy physical space, but that bodies may also shift and re-occupy culturally defined discursive spaces previously denied to them. In doing so, bodies take on new sensibilities, capacities and meanings to the audience. Therefore, underlying all of the above considerations is an ambiguity as to the interactions of ‘space’ as a concrete site, and that which opens and functions for discursive and negotiating practices.

In a different tone from Trowell’s conceptualisation of the fairground space as ungraspable, Siegel presents the space of the sideshow as highly structured. In his examination of the aesthetic of the sideshow, space is considered as a structuring tool. Physical space and its ability to manoeuvre bodies is therefore vital for the effectiveness and success of the sideshow. For example, consideration was given to the spatial relations of bodies where the same space was used by performer and audience to create dramatic effects.⁴² There is an interaction between the showman, billboards, banners, and pictures. Physical space and its ability to mediate bodies are vital for the effectiveness and therefore success of the sideshow. Space is therefore, a physical reference point, a prop, and a material construction which helps to structure the narrative and imaginative aspect of the show. Durbach does include this concept of space in his description of the nineteenth century freak shows, observing the segregation of audiences for example between working class and ‘ladies only shows’, and private showings. Like Siegel, he concludes that this was for economic and profitable outcomes and Durbach notes the ‘techniques of exhibition...fabricated from the raw materials of bodily variation’.⁴³ Therefore, the sideshow space can be considered as part

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴² Fred Siegel, ‘Theater of Guts: An Exploration of the Sideshow Aesthetic’, *The Drama Review* 35 (1988), p. 109.

⁴³ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 9.

of a structured event, with physical, defined/confined space itself a technique which influences the aesthetic and economic success of the show.

Yet, this idea of structuring space can be taken further. Space contributes to the structure of the show by attempting to mediate interactions between audience and performer. This implies the regulation of the direct gaze and how bodies are viewed in the moment of performance. Yet, as seen in Ferguson's shifting contexts of bodily occupation, bodies can find themselves in new discursive spaces, for example freak performers positioned in already identifiable spaces such as the domestic. Notably, this was not achieved through live shows alone but through the literature, photographs and discourse surrounding such acts. Evidently therefore, bodies are repositioned in new spaces through alternative performative contexts. Moreover, bodies are subject and opened to new regimes of seeing as gaze is no longer controlled by physical spatial relations alone, but through those discursive, representational spaces which are constantly evolving and subject to interpretation.

Studies and histories of the freak show are useful in displaying this evolving process. For example, research has revealed the relationship between sideshow performers and the medical profession as freaks began to appear in medical journals.⁴⁴ As Kochanek observes, British medical colleges built collections as 'the spectacle of the freakish was becoming an institutional tool of the medical profession... not to be looked at, but to be examined.'⁴⁵ The freak shows and the bodies which occupy them became subject to the 'medical gaze.'⁴⁶ This suggests that bodies not only shifted into new spaces, namely the medical space of journals and medical exhibitions, but that these instigated *new ways of looking*; 'medical men had to evolve a way of seeing and representing monstrosity, because no systematic, scientific

⁴⁴ Lisa Kochanek, 'Reframing the Freak: From Sideshow to Science', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 30 (1997), p. 230.

⁴⁵ Kochanek, 'Reframing the Freak', p. 230.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

methods of seeing existed.’⁴⁷ Insightfully therefore, bodies may be staged in alternative contexts on top of their original performative context. Furthermore, those bodies influence and are influenced by such new regimes of seeing. In terms of space, bodies are capable of occupying, influencing and being reimagined in new spaces, be they abstract, concrete or discursive. Therefore, this thesis is open to multiple notions of spaces that help us to understand the sideshow and the bodies that occupy it, particularly when considering where and *how* these multiple notions of space are exercised upon specific bodies.

To develop this line of enquiry, wider key theoretical debates must be acknowledged. Where freak show literature promoted this thesis’ drive for clarity in terms of how one can conceive of sideshow space, key thinkers of space and place are useful to consider. These theoretical debates branch between Anthropology, History and History of Art. An interdisciplinary approach allows for a more multidimensional view of the sideshow, emboldening rather than negating the complexity of the sideshow’s position in the early twentieth century- a period less prominent in sideshow histories but a period during which flamboyant spectacles were introduced in new social spaces such as the Golden Mile, Blackpool.

Prominent twentieth century philosopher and academic Michel Foucault theorised on space throughout his career.⁴⁸ Applicable to the development of this thesis in particular is Foucault’s notion of heterotopias. This theory draws on ideas of the graspable and the ungraspable space, the mirror and the reality, which are prominent themes in freak show and sideshow literature. Foucault proposed that space can be categorised in to two types; utopias and heterotopias. Utopias are unreal spaces that do not hold any grounding in reality. These

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 230. The difference between “looking” and “examining” is questionable and in need of clarification.

⁴⁸ Linguistic differences between French and English are notable when considering the term ‘space’. Foucault used the word ‘emplacement’, rather than the term ‘espace’.

sites may relate to others and even reflect other sites, but they are fundamentally not real. Heterotopias on the other hand are situated and actual. They are enacted and experienced, unlike utopias which remain incorporeal, and offer a distinct space in relation to the world.

However, Foucault deems that heterotopias do not exist in a simple material sense entirely. Heterotopias are ‘real’ spaces but also exist in the mythic. They offer constant dualistic tensions as they both reflect and contest, are unreal and real. They are, in some way, ‘other’ spaces and distinct from the world around them in a disruptive, sometimes disturbing, fashion. Foucault uses the mirror as a way of defining utopias and, more specifically, heterotopias.

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface.... But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy...The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.⁴⁹

Like the image in the mirror too, heterotopias exist not merely in reflection, but in direct relation to other spaces that exist outside of them. They are at one time distinct and defined as a space unlike any other, yet they are also reflective and related to wider social patterns and orders. Foucault asserts the heterotopias’ contradictory nature in the words he uses to describe them, considering them able to ‘designate’, ‘represent’, whilst also ‘contest’, ‘invert’ and ‘suspend.’⁵⁰ The mirror as heterotopia therefore allows understanding of spaces and their juxtaposition as both real and unreal, reflective yet divergent.

⁴⁹ Foucault, M. (1968) [1967] ‘Des espaces autres’, [Of other spaces], *L’Architettura* 13: 822-23. This text, entitled “Des Espace Autres,” and published by the French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* in October, 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Foucault thus touches upon multiple interpretations of sideshow and freak show literature. In this sense, Foucault's notion of heterotopia is relevant to sideshow analyses such as that of Trowell, which deem it in some ways 'ungraspable.'⁵¹ At the same time however, they are situated and in direct relation to reality itself. Heterotopias are spaces which are real, though seemingly abstracted. Furthermore, the concept of the mirror deepens theoretical links and poses an interesting connection to the study of sideshows. As will be discussed further throughout this thesis, sideshow literature has grappled with the idea of the sideshow as a 'mirror to society.'⁵² Through dramatization, controversy and exploitative content, the sideshow has been regarded as reflective of societal issues and anxieties.⁵³ This concept is challenged in this thesis through the careful consideration of the way in which the sideshow space functions and the ways in which actual conflicts between individuals and groups play out. Foucault's notion of the mirror is important as not only does it deem heterotopias to be reflective, but also 'connected with all the space that surrounds it.'⁵⁴ This line between abstracted reflection and connected spatial reality is a major concern throughout this thesis, important for recasting the sideshow's cultural productivity in new light.

Foucault therefore offers interesting theoretical springboards for consideration of the sideshow, specifically in the context of Blackpool during the 1930s. As well as musings on the mirror as a common interest for Foucault and fairground studies, Foucault goes as far in his exploration of heterotopias as to identify two spaces highly relevant for this thesis' study of showman Luke Gannon in particular; the honeymoon and the fairground. Foucault offers a range of examples of heterotopias, which include cemeteries, libraries, Oriental gardens and

⁵¹ Trowell, 'Spin and Spew'.

⁵² Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery*, p. 7.

⁵³ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, pp. 3- 4.

⁵⁴ Foucault, M. (1968) [1967] 'Des espaces autres', [Of other spaces], *L'Architettura* 13: 822-23. This text, entitled "Des Espace Autres," and published by the French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* in October, 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967.

prisons. These different examples are categorised by Foucault as functioning in different heterotopic ways, split into six principles. These principles exhibit the ways in which an identified space may disrupt spatial and/or temporal experience. For example, the ‘honeymoon’ trip is categorised within ‘principle’ one which considers the space as arising in all cultures but in diverse forms. The honeymoon in particular is categorised as a ‘crisis’ heterotopia, in that it is ‘reserved’ for individuals who are out of society. The honeymoon offers a disruptive space in that it exhibits a rite of passage and takes place out of sight.

For girls, there was, until the middle of the twentieth century, a tradition called the “honeymoon trip” which was an ancestral theme. The young woman’s deflowering could take place “nowhere” and, at the moment of its occurrence the train or honeymoon hotel was indeed the place of this nowhere, this heterotopia without geographical markers.⁵⁵

Therefore, Foucault allows for a systematic approach to space, whilst maintaining and deconstructing the complex social, spatial and temporal elements a space may encompass.

Whilst Foucault’s approach to space is, in general, conducive to this thesis’ approach to the sideshow space, Foucault’s discussion of heterotopias offers much more than a general framework. Examples of heterotopias presented by Foucault are extremely relevant. The honeymoon trip, discussed above, provides a very specific point of interest for discussing sideshow proprietor Luke Gannon, who exhibited starving brides who claimed to be spending their honeymoon in glass cases to raise funds.

Foucault’s deliberations that the ‘deflowering’ of brides occurred out of view poses a point of interest for Gannon’s brides who were, in contrast, on display. This is because, even when considering honeymoon events occurring out of sight, spatial relations between spaces and people persist – a point inherent in the relational characteristics of heterotopias as defined

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

by Foucault. As described by Ben Davis in *Sex, Time, and Space in Contemporary Fiction*, 'the honeymoon...is a heterotopic 'elsewhere' and 'nowhere', a societally created exceptional place, neither fully in nor out of societal time and space.'⁵⁶ This is because spaces are inextricably tied to social purpose and social exceptions.

The heterotopic nature of the honeymoon space derives from its exception... the honeymoon bedrooms are all connected by their sexual functions. Moreover, their position within societal space is designed to except people, to separate, however momentarily, their inhabitants from the rest of society. Correspondingly, society is aware of their sexual purpose and politely ignores them. Therefore, these spaces are excluded from society by their inclusion, and included by their exclusion; they are excepted.⁵⁷

It is interesting therefore to ask how these excepted and exceptional spaces function when put on display? Foucault's assertion that such a 'nowhere' space incited a rite of passage alludes to the possible tensions created by Gannon who took this space and put it distinctly somewhere- on the Golden Mile or, more specifically, in a glass case. In what ways are people within disruptive, exceptional spaces separated? What response does the sideshow, functioning as a place of high visibility, elicit from society when it inverts once private spaces?

Furthermore, as well as prompting a consideration of spatial elements, Foucault makes an explicit connection between space and time. The heterotopia honeymoon disrupts time and space in the act of 'deflowering' which is the enactment of a rite of passage. What then occurred when 'deflowering' was put on hold by the brides' suspension in glass cases and what new tensions and contradictions are created when spatial/temporal occurrences are reconfigured? In other words, what occurs when the rite of passage- fundamental to Foucault's principle for the heterotopia in this instance- was disrupted? One can question the

⁵⁶ Ben Davis, *Sex, Time, and Space in Contemporary Fiction: Exceptional Intercourse* (Springer: 2016), pp. 45-46.

⁵⁷ Davis, *Sex, Time, and Space in Contemporary Fiction*, pp. 45-46.

ways in which tensions were created, spatially and temporally, within Gannon's unique bridal encasements, and how the sideshow space and the exhibit within it created disruptive spaces and experiences.

More than this, it is important to consider how this was received within the wider context within which it appeared. If the out of sight honeymoon was able to be 'politely ignored', what societal wheels are set into motion when peculiar spaces are made into a spectacle? This is particularly striking in terms of the female body on display, and the possible sexual connotations such a display intimated. The link between new bride, honeymoon and sex is, arguably, explicit. As Ben Davies observes in relation to Foucault's regard of the honeymoon suite:

But, unlike the motel room that houses illicit and illegitimate sex, the honeymoon bedroom is a heterotopia specifically designed and designated for first-time socially sanctioned sex. In the honeymoon bedroom, newly-weds (are supposed to) consummate their relationship, which inaugurates their joint societal function and will lead them into the utilitarian parental bedroom.⁵⁸

Arguably then, the honeymoon and the bodies that occupy it are tied in complex ways to spatial, temporal and social relations.

In regards to the sideshow, this thesis utilises oppositions, such as the private and the public, to better understand the spaces in between. As Foucault asserts in reflection of the history of space, 'life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable, that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down.'⁵⁹ These include the public and private space, family and social space, cultural space and useful space,

⁵⁸ Davis, *Sex, Time, and Space in Contemporary Fiction*, pp. 45-46.

⁵⁹ *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, October, 1984; ("Des Espace Autres," March 1967)
Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec

and those spaces for leisure as opposed to those of work.⁶⁰ As noted above, the Starving Bride exhibition can be considered as a disturbance of oppositional spaces, for example as the private is put into a public display, or the sideshow more generally blurring the lines of entertainment- cultural space- and education- useful space. The dualistic notion for understanding how spaces function should be regarded as a starting point for understanding those spaces which disturb, disrupt and distort, such as the sideshow.

Fairgrounds are regarded by Foucault as ‘marvellous empty emplacements on the outskirts of cities that fill up once or twice a year with booths, stalls, unusual objects, wrestlers, snake ladies, fortune tellers.’⁶¹ Like the honeymoon trip, the fairground is linked to notions of spatial and temporal disruption. In this instance, the disruption occurs because the fair appears suddenly and only for a set amount of time. It is, essentially, a temporary space. The fairground is latest for most of the year and then liminal when present. Again, Foucault offers a point of interesting comparison for this thesis, which considers sideshow booths and stalls outside the strict context of the fairground. In reflection of Foucault’s observations, this thesis seeks new understanding of sideshow proprietors who carved novel spatial/temporal occupancies. It asks in what ways new contexts received these once temporary, typically fairground features as they sought more permanent emplacement.

The details of the negations that took place around sideshow proprietors who sought such residencies during the twentieth century are regarded as significant, offering nuanced understanding of the sideshow space as a site of temporal/ spatial relations. This is because, unlike the defined fairground which had clear demarcations which set them apart from a

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Michel Foucault, [1967] ‘Different Spaces’, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 2* ed by J. D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 182.

place (within which micro-worlds such as the sideshow were encompassed), the sideshows considered here form part of the landscape of a town. In this sense, it is interesting to question how the sideshow functions outside of the umbrella of the fairground as a whole. How does the sideshow still function as an 'other' space?

One obvious feature that remains in the sideshow outside of the fairground, and which was identified by Foucault as a feature of heterotopia, is accessibility. The entrance to the sideshow was just as important as the inside. Time, money and showmanship were spent on making the entrance as enticing as possible. This was also where money was collected, with profit dependent on monitoring and manipulating access. As well as eye-catching, the entrance demarcated the separation from the outside world, creating a sense of containment. The accessibility of the sideshow can be explored as a way of establishing how otherworldly-ness was instilled outside of the fairground context. For a showman such as Gannon, the accessibility of the sideshow would also play an important role in determining the nature of the interactions with legal and local figures of authority.

Furthermore, where the sideshow was no longer confined to the fairground, arguably regarded as an exceptional area, alternative dialogues opened up around the sideshow. These dialogues, often contentious in nature, pose a new way of examining the relationship between the sideshow and the townscape within which it is situated. They reveal people's ideas about a place, such as Blackpool, and the ways in which the sideshow may or may not have fit into such a vision. As such, conflicts that occur around the sideshow relay something about a particular space, place and time.

Dr Peter Johnston, a current expert in heterotopia theory, offers another point of connection as he attributes the heyday of heterotopias as the nineteenth century. He argues that, with the exception of prisons which have intensified, these spaces and their distinctness

from the rest of space has ‘deteriorated.’⁶² This proves an interesting parallel for the sideshow, also seen to peak in the nineteenth century and suffer decline thereafter. Not only does this provide an interesting theoretical link, but prompts one to question how such deterioration of space took place and what changes drove it. This is particularly relevant in reference to spaces of the fairground variety, identified by Foucault as heterotopias for their temporal disruptive qualities. Exceptionality is therefore a theme throughout not only freak show literature, but in wider discussions about space, power and performance.

Exceptionality, however, can be reductive in terms of the sideshow’s situatedness in wider cultural activities. Where Foucault offers important and relevant points of consideration, particularly in heterotopia theory, the idea of the sideshow as ‘ungraspable’ or totally exceptional is challenged throughout this thesis. The sideshow may be at once a highly structured space in controlling performing bodies through physical structures but one that also, at the same time, opens such bodies to new discursive spaces and thus new regimes of performativity and seeing. Evidently, it is important to consider the corporeal, cultural and porous nature of the sideshow space in relation to performing bodies. This thesis therefore seeks to confront the idea of the sideshow space as one which is romantically abstracted from the world outside, and suggests the extreme embeddedness, yet distinctiveness, of the sideshow. Although a space which offers ideological and corporeal negotiation through the exhibition of bodies, for example in Durbach’s discussion of cultural anxieties surrounding what it is to be ‘normal’ or sexed, the sideshow is not self-ruling.⁶³

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o offers important evaluation of performance space that develops the embeddedness of seemingly distinct spaces within culture and society.⁶⁴ He asserts that

⁶² Peter Johnson, *Heterotopian studies*, <https://www.heterotopiastudies.com> [accessed October 2019].

⁶³ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, ‘Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space’, *The Drama Review* 41 (1997), p. 13.

performance space is ‘never empty’, but is always filled by contesting ‘physical, social and physic forces in society.’⁶⁵ In this way, I assert that performance space is created, an amalgamation of material and immaterial elements within an ever-evolving space.⁶⁶ Showmen are responsible for the very creation of performance spaces, thus maintaining agency over their exhibits.⁶⁷ For example, Gannon was responsible for bringing material and immaterial forces together and setting them ‘still’, in one space, whilst ensuring they are continuously in ‘motion.’⁶⁸ Gannon put in place the props outside the show, facilitated the revolving crowd in ‘a long queue...lined up to pay 2d... to look at this remarkable spectacle.’⁶⁹ Physical and social elements of display are brought together through a specific performance that initiates multiple confrontations. Kember reinforces this view in his description of showmen’s ‘ability to convert even unpromising materials into highly consumable public spectacles... appealing to the rapidly changing psychology or social needs of spectators.’⁷⁰ It is not only physical materials such as stage, signage and bodies that must be called upon, but also immaterial social and psychological realities.

Here again, I acknowledge and do not attempt to segregate the apparent ambiguity between interactions of ‘space’ as concrete site and that which opens and functions for discursive and negotiating practices. Instead, this ambiguity is embraced and the grey areas in-between as sites of investigation. Thiong’o’s approach to performance space exposes the uniqueness but also the connectedness of the performance space.⁷¹ The sideshow always references and is governed by regulatory practices. As such, it negotiates its right to negotiate

⁶⁵ Thiong’o, ‘Enactments of Power’, p. 13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁶⁹ *Biggleswade Chronicle*, 25 August 1933, p. 3.

⁷⁰ Joe Kember, ‘The Functions of Showmanship in Freak Show and Early Film’, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 5:1 (2007), p. 3.

⁷¹ Thiong’o, ‘Enactments of Power’, p. 13.

for example with the changing limits of display in moralistic and legislative terms. Identifying where law, sideshow and exhibitors come into conflict, a more complex relationship is revealed between performative bodies, the space of the sideshow and the real negotiative practices which occur there.

There are examples of this in some freak show discussion. Senelick exposes the undercurrents which impelled changes in sideshow displays of half-and-half performers. According to Senelick, the seventeenth century hermaphrodite was exhibited as a peep show. Audience satisfaction was guaranteed by the validation of ‘ocular proof.’⁷² The nineteenth century saw increased regulation of popular and sexual entertainments and public manifestation of sexuality.⁷³ The display of genitalia was made illegal and, as a consequence, the validity of the performers’ freakish claim made disreputable. It was the role of the showman to ‘emblazon hermaphroditism’, so making the platform space outside the sideshow tent of increasing importance, as literature surrounding the acts also increased.⁷⁴ Bodies were increasingly not sufficient sites in themselves for profitable validity; other spaces of performativity had to be created, utilised and exploited.

Furthermore, half-and-half performers and the showman who exhibited them increasingly became subject to the harassment of police and local authorities. Displays become linked to perversion and prostitution. The sideshow was not therefore a space which dictated its own nature of display, but increasingly became subject to the control and gaze of the law, as the law itself intensified its concerns over indecency, gender and sex. In this way, the sideshow increasingly comes into view not as a separate sphere of democratic performative space, but one that is constantly policed in relation to wider regulatory regimes

⁷² Laurence Senelick, ‘Enlightened by Morphodites: Narratives of the Fairground Half-and-Half’, *American Studies* (1999), p. 359.

⁷³ Senelick, ‘Enlightened by Morphodites’, p. 359.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

over the body and over space. This is significant for understanding how the sideshow was influenced by, as well as, in turn, influencing understandings of gender and sexualised bodies. As such, looking more deeply at the sideshow and cases of legal dispute, connections between law, bodies and space- understood as both concrete and discursive - are revealed.

The work of Sears examines relations between the sideshow, space and sex by looking at the use of the San Francisco 1863 law, which prohibited the public appearance of cross-dressers, deemed ‘problem bodies’, as implemented in the 1950s and 60s.⁷⁵ ‘Problem bodies’ were controlled by the management of space itself. Cross-dressing was deemed a sin that offended ‘public morality’ with a ‘toleration for vice... as long as it remained in an underground state.’⁷⁶ New spaces had to be created, with the law affecting the ‘sociospatial order of the city.’⁷⁷ According to Sears, it was these ‘problem bodies’ that occupied the freak show stage, presenting a paradox as the law seeks to subdue deviance, the show to exaggerate and increase it.

Examining the ‘indecent law’, Sears makes three main arguments. Firstly, that the law used clothing to police the type of people who ‘belonged in public spaces.’⁷⁸ Secondly, that this law not only created a new ‘object’ of regulation in the ‘problem body’, but a new mechanism of regulation; the exclusion from public spaces. Thirdly, that both the law and the freak show imposed disciplinary affects which produce and police boundaries often in ‘incomplete ways.’⁷⁹ At this point, Sears warns of the danger of regarding the freak show as an undisciplined space- just because ‘problem bodies’ were visible there, does not exclude them from regulatory regimes. In this way, Sears exposes how the sideshow may be a space

⁷⁵ Clare Sears, ‘Electric Brilliancy: Cross-Dressing Law and Freak Show Displays in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco’, *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36:3/4 (2008), p. 174.

⁷⁶ Sears, ‘Electric Brilliancy’, p. 176.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

of some exception as ‘problem bodies’ are allowed to be seen. Significantly however, although it may be a space that facilitates the exceptional, the sideshow is not a space of absolute exemption; it is in constant regulation and relation to other spaces, understood as both concrete and discursive.

In summary, the varying ways in which the sideshow space is comprehended within freak show literature prompts a major concern within this thesis. There exist studies of the sideshow as highly structured, where a count by count analysis of the exhibit reveals the performance as having direct intentions and presumed outcomes. People and the places they occupy within the sideshow are controlled and considered. Analysis can be conducted by a methodical deconstruction of the sideshow performance, demonstrating how people and props filled the sideshow space. In other accounts, the sideshow is presented as a site of uncontrollable, subjective experience. Deconstructing the sideshow in this sense involves considering how and where the sideshow is considered outside of the performance itself, and conceptualises the sideshow space as existing metaphysically through changing discursive regimes, as well as in the material.

The problem of the sideshow space presented me with an understanding that the sideshow and the bodies that occupied it could be defined in different terms through different discourses. This related to a major research question which sought to investigate how bodies, once insightful, became unsightly. This question itself requires some unpacking. Insightful refers to the way in which sideshow booths and the bodies that occupied them were regarded at one time as instruments of education. This education was sometimes explicitly promoted, for example in the form of ethnographic sideshows or medical marvels such as hermaphrodites. Of course, true educational incentive was always questionable and showmanship undoubtedly elaborated many spectacles. However, even shows of questionable scientific substance, as well as those that did not label themselves explicitly for

education, offered visitors a chance to challenge their reality and could thus be deemed 'insightful' for individuals and society more widely.

Becoming 'unsightly' operates on two levels; firstly, in the very physical sense of no longer being visible and available for visitors. This refers to the ways in which sideshows were excluded from entertainment sectors or pushed underground. Secondly, unsightly carries with it the moral tone of that which was no longer appropriate and considered unpleasant. Both of these understandings of the word 'unsightly', applied within my research question, will be considered through sideshow case studies. As such, investigating how a sideshow may move from 'insightful to unsightly', as framed above, allows not only for consideration of the physical repositioning of particular sideshows, for example by exclusion from particular areas on Blackpool's promenade, but also the cultural repositioning of such forms of entertainment, for example through changes within the law which considered particular shows offensive.

The notion of bodies and spaces shifting from being 'insightful to unsightly' also demands careful consideration of the body. This includes the body of performers, as well as the collective movement and behaviours of audiences and officials. Moreover, this is intimately connected to an understanding how space and bodies work in relationship to present cultural and, in this case, moral understandings within society. For example, the term 'problem bodies' refers to those bodies that have been ascribed a label as problematic to society, typically by some form of official legislation. The work of Sears, discussed above, introduces the term 'problem bodies' in reference to the prohibition of cross-dressing in the USA. The law, established in the nineteenth century, was used by officials over a century later to exercise legal regulation on bodies that elicited fascination, but committed

‘transgressions.’⁸⁰ This thesis applies the term ‘problem bodies’ to those in the twentieth century as a tool for identifying those bodies ‘that local government officials defined as social problems.’⁸¹

However, where Sears identifies the link between problem bodies and their regulation through the city space, this thesis develops a further connection where bodies are not only excluded from spaces, but are used as sites – through their re-categorisation as problem bodies – to project, produce and promote the town or city space itself. Thus, the body and space are revealed as holding a closer connection. Moreover, this thesis not only identifies which bodies were deemed ‘problem’ and the subsequent control exercised over them in the form of spatial regulations, but the means by which the ‘problem bodies’ negotiated with such regulations. In doing so, this thesis not only considers which bodies were deemed problematic, but takes a more detailed approach to the processes through which bodies came to be excluded from public spaces.

The sideshow space and the bodies that occupied it should be considered as mutually informative. Ideas of the body and space, and how they were negotiated by *people*, is clearly influenced by my research background in Anthropology. I emphasise the importance of people at the heart of the case studies presented here, as people are notoriously complex, unpredictable and constantly oscillating between the individual and collective identities. The field of anthropology as an underpinning of my academic research has pushed me to take into account that, whilst attempts to unearth the experiences of people can be done somewhat systematically, there is always that which is subjective and surprising. Whilst this may seem a general point, it is an important one. It reflects the impetus of this thesis to seek complex negotiations and of the productive tensions that arise between people, performances and those

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

that police them. Furthermore, anthropological interest in the field of material culture undoubtedly informed this thesis' approach. This is evident as I consider not only how the body was presented within particular sideshow case studies, but what work the body was doing within a particular space, and how this *affected* those who encountered it.

The connectivity of notions of space, body and affect is made clearer when underpinning approaches to the body and space are explored further. For example, anthropological approaches to material culture- the study of how people make, exchange and consume objects and how this relates to processes of socialisation- provides an ever-developing notion of the body. How we perceive, use, identify our 'bodies' is a complex series of analyses linked to the somewhat ambiguous notions of 'personhood' and 'self'. Previous Western discourse and anthropological practice viewed mind and body as separate points of personhood; the mind being the believed point of learning and constitution of self. As such, little emphasis was put on our 'body' as a point of learning.

However, it is increasingly suggested that our bodies are not mere casing for the ego. The body, in all its physicality, is constantly subject to pedagogy through contact with the material world and, ultimately, a material existence. Furthermore, this pedagogy does not remain on the external bodily periphery but is incorporated into deep notions of self and psyche. In bringing together an increasing wealth of bodily knowledge, the body is evidently a contact point between material world and psyche. This contact point is extensive, flexible and is responsible for the material world's incorporation into subjects, and for subjects' projections onto the physical world.

Anthropology therefore demands that the body should not be explored merely as a physical object, but crucially, in conjunction with the metaphysical. Theoretical constructions of self, symbols and ideology, cannot be separated from the physicality of the body, just as

the body cannot be separated from self, symbols and politics. As such, developments into understanding the intimacies of this contact are important for revealing processes of social and individual orientation and, in turn, how this is reflected in our cultivation of the material world. Put simply therefore, our bodies are the contact point between self and world.

The intricacies of this understanding are important for this thesis' approach to the sideshow. Firstly, this approach to the body adds new significance to the encounter between sideshow content and wider socio-political productions. As previously stated, the sideshow was considered at one time as an educational tool. The underpinning of this education was not only questionable at times, but also considered morally precarious. Anthropological understandings that emphasise encounters between the body and the material world as bound to notions of self, symbols and politics, suggests a nuanced way of considering not only *why* the sideshow was deemed unsightly by Blackpool's local authorities, but *how* it came to be defined as such.

Pierre Bourdieu's recasting of the significance of the body in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* presented socialisation and the making of social beings as occurring through the body as it encounters the material world. This is regarded as a form of 'knowledge through the body.'⁸² According to Bourdieu, pedagogy instilled through the body has the power to 'instil a whole cosmology.'⁸³ This has influence over our perceptions both of self-orientation i.e., our place in the world, and our perceptions of the world around us. Our schemes of perception are directly related to materiality, summarised by the phrase 'materiality of subjectivity.'

⁸² Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁸³ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

Whilst Bourdieu is mainly concerned with the role of everyday materiality in processes of pedagogy, I consider his ideas as profoundly relevant for studying the sideshow. This is because the sideshow is preoccupied with material encounters that hold social and political implications. Moreover, exhibits were often, if not always, preoccupied with the human body. This is true firstly in terms of the bodies on display but also through its very structure and appeal, as the sideshow intensified bodily awareness, and thus intensified an encounter with one's own and the performers' material existence.

Bourdieu's notion that pedagogy occurs through the body is also relevant for this thesis' interest in sideshow conflict. This thesis considers the sideshow as a site of negotiation, where ideas about people, places and society are defined and navigated. Importantly, these negotiations are considered not as occurring within the exhibits exclusively, for example in a structuralist approach that seeks to break down elements of the sideshow (though these are significant), but in the ways in which sideshow organisers, audiences and local authorities contested their place on the Golden Mile.

But what was at stake for those involved? Why was it important for the Blackpool authorities to exercise control over the sideshows and the bodies on display? Appreciating the sideshow as preoccupied with inciting knowledge through the body is suggestive of the how and why bodies, once insightful, were deemed unsightly. The *why* is informed by an understanding that the body and its material existence is inescapably bound to the socio-political. The sideshow and its attempts to bring entertaining bodies to audiences should be considered as holding great pedagogical potential. However, more than the mere presented tropes of education that showmen sold to audiences, the pedagogical potential of the sideshow should be considered as a complex interaction of bodies and the spaces they occupy. Bourdieu indicates the potential influence of material confrontations as he perceives learning the 'legitimate way to proceed in the world' to be most successful when pedagogy

takes place through the body. Not only is this more effective, he asserts, but in becoming somaticized, cultural constructions and evaluations become naturalised and hidden.

Therefore, this approach accommodates the physical and the metaphysical elements at work as the sideshow as it presented fleshy displays to close-up audiences. Bourdieu's notion of 'knowledge through the body' opens new understanding to the pedagogical potential of the sideshow in a way that emphasises the material and bodily elements at work. This thesis develops this deeper appreciation of the affective, material encounters that occurred around and within the sideshow- understood as interconnected to the political and the social- to explore why Blackpool's local authorities sought to control and contain those who encountered it.

Processes which sought to make bodily and material encounters unsightly- through moral condemnation and physical inaccessibility- can be reconsidered with new significance. This is because the sideshow performers and those who encountered them were considered to affect one another. They were, as understood in terms of material culture, in a form of bodily and material confrontation and thus significant in revealing what the sideshow space cultivated and what confrontation was curated. This is important for not only establishing what performing bodies and occupying audiences did within the sideshow space, but also what such confrontations imply for wider groups of actors such as the police and politicians.

Emphasising the affective potential of bodily encounters, such as those cultivated on the Golden Mile by sideshow proprietor Gannon, goes some way to revealing why such shows were deemed in need of measures of control. To use Bourdieu's insight, learning the 'legitimate' way to proceed in the world is most successful when pedagogy takes place through the body.⁸⁴ Not only is this more effective, but in becoming somaticized, cultural

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

constructions and evaluations become naturalised and hidden. Arguably therefore, a lot was at stake when it came to the state of entertainment. As crowds of pleasure-seeking holiday makers flocked to the Golden Mile, encounters were not merely entertaining, but edifying.

This thesis therefore considers the intricate details of sideshow displays to suggest why such encounters caught the attention of local authorities. In doing so, details of sideshow performativity are considered within the context of contemporary social and political concerns. Notably however, this thesis goes further than a contextualisation of sideshow performances. Rather, it seeks to emphasise the role of the sideshow as always actively negotiating with social-cultural contexts, often in the form of legal conflict, both within performances but also outside of the space of the show itself. This highlights the benefit of using case studies as particular sideshows did not merely occur at a particular historical conjuncture- they were established by the agency of dynamic individuals, who actively sought out spaces for their shows and actively dealt with the conflicts that surrounded them.

A term considered throughout this thesis, and related to the status of 'the body', is the term 'problem body'. The introduction of freak show literature has been used as an initial point of departure for the discussion of sideshow, space and the body and its ambiguous status. Such discussions focus primarily on the nineteenth century, tracking cultural and regulatory approaches to sideshows. Senelick's work on the early twentieth century is particularly drawn upon in relation to the concept of problem bodies. Senelick's study not only steps forward in time, but also allows for a nuanced approach to the relationship between the law and sideshow space and how bodies are discursively and spatially defined; with unquestionable consequences for performers and proprietors of such shows.

Notably, this opens points of analysis for British 'problem bodies', and for identifying the relations between law, space and the body on display. It pushes examination of the

twentieth century to identify how societal mechanisms, which have been proved to be so influential in freak show regulation, may be at work in alternative later contexts and differences in regulatory regimes. It is useful to identify general trends and how these may be differently articulated, defined and delegated. For example, some general questions that emerge are; What were the changing means by which authorities and police authorities sought to control sideshow proprietries and their exhibitions? How did sideshow proprietors and performers deal with conflicts: what were the strategies employed? Such a study thus requires an examination of the changing contexts framing conflicts between sideshow proprietors the law and display.

In order to identify the intricacies of the social regard of ‘problem bodies’ in the sideshow context through the identified fields of space and the law, rather than general shifts, this research chooses to approach these wider questions through a case study. In this way, negotiations and contradictions, which may be overlooked by generalised social studies, may be brought to light. This reveals the complexities within controversies over the sideshow and how discourses on space and the law are not merely theoretical considerations, but exist in the material realities and experiences of sideshow participants.

Significantly for this thesis, within this exploration of ‘problem bodies’ the female form on display is considered in detail. Gannon’s exhibits on the Golden Mile, whilst featuring some male performers, predominantly featured self-elected female fasters. The implications of this - for the fasters, the authorities and for Gannon - are considered, drawing on Elizabeth Grosz’s approach to ‘volatile’ bodies and corporeal feminism, including an awareness of how the body may be constituted by means of ‘cultural inscriptions.’⁸⁵ Judith Butler’s consideration of the ways in which the body may be ascribed meaning and ‘stylised’,

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

particularly in relation to the embodiment of social constructions of gender, is also used. This is explored through the materiality of exhibits such as the Starving Brides who were explicitly presented with props and a bridal characterisation and, furthermore, considers how the sideshow is constructive within and without its boundaries.⁸⁶

In discussing these issues, it is also important within this introductory section to consider the issue of exploitation. Is it the exhibitors, gaining money from their bodily exploits, that are asserting agency? Or, on the other hand, can Gannon be seen as exploitative of couples in need of money at all costs? These moral questions around exploitation are not new, given the nature of sideshow displays that often involved the exhibition of ‘abnormal’ bodies.⁸⁷ However, recent considerations of Neo-Victorian literature highlight the need for self-reflexivity when it comes to ideas about exploitation. More specifically, there has been criticism of well-intended approaches that fail to consider the ‘material, lived experience of the other’.⁸⁸

This thesis acknowledges the processes by which the female body may be objectified and the evidence that the brides were, undeniably, devoid of voice. However, its main approach is to look at the discourses that create these silences themselves. As Patrick Anderson asserts, these questions are best approached from a position that does not seek to claim ultimate definition of intentions, but to see self-starvation as ‘a unique point of intersection in relationships between people.’⁸⁹ This sets up an interesting parallel with Walton’s critique of approaches to Blackpool’s history, which has ‘concentrated on bricks and mortar at the expense of people.’⁹⁰ Gannon’s brides offer a point of study at the cross-

⁸⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge Classics, 2011), p. 9.

⁸⁷ For a full review of ethical ideas around exploitation in the sideshow, see Helen Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery: The Cultural Afterlife of the Victorian Freak Show* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2015), pp. 1-13.

⁸⁸ Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery*, p. 7.

⁸⁹ Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 83-84.

⁹⁰ Walton, *The Blackpool Landlady*, p. viii.

section of these two critiques, where sideshow, starving exhibits and Blackpool meet. As such, it demands a sensitivity not only to contexts but to conflicts, and the complex processes of negotiation.

Where Neo-Victorian analysis can be critiqued on its inherent position in ‘looking back’ from a particular ‘cultural moment’, this thesis considers these processes as happening continuously.⁹¹ Bodies are considered as continuously in the making for example within the sideshow, the law and in the analysis that tries to identify them. To combat a ‘looking back’ approach that merely views the brides as exploited, I consider the conflicts that ensued around the brides in detail. As Davies considers with approaches to the freak show, an entertainment genre that elicits much anxiety as an exploitative act when viewed from a contemporary vantage point, one must be open to the ‘potential for thinking of freak shows as arenas for mutual engagement and communication in a variety of ways, of negotiation, of prospective dialogue.’⁹² For the brides, this process of negotiation heavily involved Gannon, the public and the officials.

Thesis synopsis

Chapter 1 introduces Blackpool as a significant point of study in the 1930s. It brings together primary and secondary literature from multiple fields to contextualise the changing place of the British sideshow within the growing attraction of the seaside resort. It considers the introduction of sideshow proprietor Luke Gannon who, although recognised as a major influencer on the Blackpool entertainment scene during the inter-war years, remains somewhat of a fleeting reference amongst the accounts of the acts he ran. The chapter offers a narrative of Gannon’s significant sideshow exhibitions. As this narrative of Gannon’s years on the Golden Mile is developed, so too is a deeper insight into Blackpool and the sideshow

⁹¹ Neo-Victorian refers to scholarly work that seek to explore ways in which the Victorian period has been considered and related to.

⁹² Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery*, p. 13.

space. The materiality of Gannon's displays, particularly of female starving exhibits, is detailed to provide insight into the vivid, innovative nature of Gannon's displays. The Starving Bride exhibit is considered significant, given it was Gannon's final show on the Golden Mile. This show is revealed as encompassing complex ideas, and the adverse reaction it received is considered informative of wider narratives around Blackpool's identity as played out on the female bodies that were presented through this act.

Importantly, analysis of these displays does not stop with a visual analysis of the displays in situ. Rather, the ways in which Gannon responded to criticism, opposition and even legislation against his shows are explored through the changing materiality of his acts. Coverage in local newspapers provides a vivid account of the ways in which Gannon responded to actions taken against his displays, often in true showmanship fashion.

Within this, the act of starvation for public display is analysed, alongside a developing understanding of the sideshow space. Here, the sideshow space is understood as being profoundly affected by and affective to wider social and cultural realities. This approach, combining analysis of literature on starving exhibitionism and sideshow space, aims to provide a nuanced approach to unique displays such as Gannon's Starving Brides act. The showman is highlighted as a pivotal actor in responding, resisting and redirecting bodies on display and as the node through which performers and authorities negotiate.

Where Chapter 1 explores the changing nature of Gannon's shows and hints at the conflict he encountered, Chapter 2 goes deeper into the fundamentals of these conflicts, including an assessment of which voices opposed Gannon's shows, and how they implemented action. In order to understand the ways in which authorities dealt with Gannon's sideshow exhibits, it is first necessary to address the wider fears of the time, including the rapidly changing and growing crowd that flocked to Blackpool. The nature of this crowd is

explored in detail. More importantly however, the chapter introduces how this new crowd, whilst undoubtedly real, was also constructed by officials through discourses of the working-class and how these narratives held implication of the sideshow itself. In doing so, the chapter provides a well-rounded vantage point for contextualising Blackpool, Gannon and the exhibits, as officials, crowd and sideshow organisers and participants are carefully considered.

Chapter 2 also highlights the structural aspects of Blackpool, physical and political, that firstly allowed Gannon success on the Golden Mile, and how these changed to ultimately facilitate his demise. In doing so, it introduces the power of ‘reputation’ in Blackpool as a driving force behind many of the Corporation’s decisions. Gannon’s sideshow therefore acts as a microcosm for understanding wider ideologies about Blackpool and the nation. More than ideologies, the chapter explores how these visions and ideas of place-making were articulated in action. This is achieved not through merely looking at chronological changes in legislation, often a starting point for tracking changes in place-making activity, but rather it considers the complex negotiations that took place, in one place, to highlight the extreme complexity of place-making activity.

Chapter 3 calls upon the nineteenth century freak show to develop ideas about negotiating the sideshows titillating nature- the need to provoke to the point of disturb, and how such provocations lead to their suppression from sight. Through contemporary examples as well as Gannon’s exhibits, it considers the question of who has the right to provoke and where this ‘right’ is curbed. The chapter recognises the struggle of show organisers and performers in navigating between trying to push the boundaries and create sensational acts, whilst negotiating with moral and civil boundaries. In doing so, the chapter considers what it is that the sideshow *does* to its audience, both physically and affectively. I consider this to be the *affective potential* of the sideshow. The historic nature of the freak show, as a site where

abnormal bodies were put on show to shock, is reconsidered in terms of starring exhibitions occurring in sideshows. This once again utilises insights from both fields, starring and sideshow literature, from historical and anthropological perspectives, to reach new understandings of the significance of such shows. This affective potential is considered as evident in the very fears such shows incite from officials. It therefore seeks new understandings of the sideshow by detailing and dissecting the conflicts that occur in relation to them.

Furthermore, the concept of problem bodies is developed. The freak show's vast history is used as a broad basis for seeking regimes that sought to control sideshows that challenged cultural and moral boundaries. Developing from major narratives of the decline of the freak show however, the chapter reveals a deeper understanding of the sideshow space as a site where bodies are presented, re-imagined and redefined. Specifically, how the display of abnormal bodies in the sideshow space moved from an act of problem solving, to deeming the bodies that occupied them as problematic to society. This is related to Gannon's experiences to develop a detailed understanding of the ways in which bodies may be re-considered, relocated and eradicated from sight. These bodies are constantly performing towards and against Blackpool's working image of itself.

Chapter 4 offers wider examples of females on display who are subject to similar discourses as Gannon's brides. Again, like the freak shows, these are used to gain understanding of the processes by which bodies may be re-categorised as problematic and relocated to less visible spaces within culture and entertainment. Through this chapter, new related characters are introduced. In doing so, the analysis develops deeper understanding of why Gannon's exhibits did not fit into Blackpool's place-making rhetoric- what resonances his shows did or did not have that failed to fit towards a progressive Blackpool. The chapter uncovers how various female displays that played on ideas of concealment and containment

created differing challenges for the powers policing place-making activity. Throughout this, and throughout the thesis as a whole, the ways in which agency is asserted by particular forms of display, and how this agency may be negated, is considered.

Chapter 1: Gannon and the Golden Mile

Introduction

The chapter begins with an introduction to Blackpool as the social and material context for Luke Gannon's sideshow activity. The interwar years would prove to be a significant period in the entertainment industry in particular, with various authorities and voices contributing to a vision of what the townscape would, and should, look like. Seemingly, Blackpool was constantly delineating divides, for example between areas in the town and the classes and clientele who occupied them. It was also, however, bringing separate spheres together, blurring the lines between spaces and status. This dualistic existence will be shown to have created a somewhat contradictory narrative around Blackpool, one that Gannon found himself very much a part of. Exploring this contradiction and tension proves to be highly productive in terms of sideshow studies, as the sideshow itself is imbued within wider cultural and political negotiations.

Gannon's experience on the Golden Mile is brought to light in this chapter through the description of his early exhibits, in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Gannon's primary conflicts reveal his character as an opportunist who was not afraid to challenge authority, an attribute that would come to define his later career as a showman. These early encounters with Blackpool audiences and authorities precede a more detailed look at his most controversial sideshow exhibit- the Starving Brides. As the chapter describes these shows it also introduces more complex understandings of staving as a spectacle and thus a nuanced look at the relationship between the body and space, as located within the sideshow. In consideration of literature, including starving, performance and sideshow studies, this research contests that controversial shows, particularly of starving exhibitionism, have often granted more analytical vigour to shows during their peak in popular culture. This is shown to

neglect the real significance of these shows as sites of conflict that are redefined and reimagined over time and through continuous negotiation.

To counter this, this chapter seeks to unveil such negotiations by exploring the very materiality of Gannon's displays. A detailed examination of Gannon's Starving Bride exhibit reveals the ways in which Gannon adapted and reacted to scrutiny from both the Blackpool audience and authorities. Giving particular attention to the materiality of Gannon's shows also reveals the significance of female bodies being on display, informative of wider narratives around Blackpool's identity. Introduced in this chapter therefore are the many negotiations at play, particularly in regards to the agency of the body and space.

Blackpool

Blackpool historian John K Walton states that 'Blackpool is often considered a "Victorian" resort; but in many ways its most expansive and dynamic period of growth came in the inter-war years.'⁹³ This was true in terms of visitors, as the number of visitors rose from an estimated 73,000 people in 1921, to 140,000 in 1941, with new houses, promenades and hotels springing up to host them.⁹⁴ Whilst other areas which once drew vast visitors suffered a decline after the First World War, Blackpool continued to draw a substantial crowd throughout the 20s and 30s. It is reported that even in times of hardship, surrounding workers would make their holiday trip and return to collect their dole money half-way through the holiday, so strong was the pull of Blackpool.⁹⁵

Also, reflective of the every-increasing occupants and visitors to Blackpool, the inter-war years was a time of intense innovation and scrutiny within Blackpool's entertainment

⁹³ John K. Walton, *Riding on Rainbows: Blackpool Pleasure Beach and its Place in British Popular Culture* (Skelter Publishing LLP, 2007), p. 41.

⁹⁴ Walton, *Riding on Rainbows*, p. 41. Walton notes that the 1921 figures are taken from June census, whilst the 1941 figures are an estimate as no census was taken in 1941.

⁹⁵ Bertha Wood, *Fresh Air and Fun: The Story of a Blackpool Holiday Camp* (Lancaster: Carnegie Publishing Ltd, 2005), p. xiv.

industry. This was true of the types of entertainment available, and the very space entertainment entrepreneurs occupied. As will be explored in more detail throughout this thesis, the 1930s involved multifaceted processes of intense place-making and re-imagining for Blackpool. At the heart of this was the consideration of what Blackpool had to offer, to whom, and what such leisurely pursuits meant for Blackpool's identity.

As is evident before the Second World War and during this period of increased tourism, the status of Blackpool as a holiday destination and its reputation for providing entertainment fitted into a wider narrative about Britain's social and economic trajectory. An article in the *West Lancashire Evening Gazette* articulates the trans-national interests into the new-found tourist industry.⁹⁶ According to the article, Britain received 25,000 tourists a year with the focus of the article being, 'Can Blackpool attract some?'⁹⁷ A report from the US Department of Commerce is quoted, offering a breakdown of what tourists spent their money on. It was found that 14% of tourist spending went on 'theatre and entertainment'.⁹⁸

It is notable that Blackpool had various physical divisions within the town which existed as named streets and landmarks. These operated socially, offering different forms of interaction for example through dancing or drinking and even morally, as differing divisions were known as places where moral etiquettes were either upheld or temptingly permissible. Significantly, the differing character of these divisions underwent a constant process of reinforcing and resisting their own images. For example, in 1932, a starving show exhibited by sideshow proprietor Luke Gannon was banished from the Golden Mile and it was suggested that the exhibit would likely be reinstated on the Pleasure Beach, a separate district that prided itself on its 'modern amusement park'.⁹⁹ This angered Pleasure Beach tenures

⁹⁶ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 26 July 1935.

⁹⁷ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 26 July 1935.

⁹⁸ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 26 July 1935.

⁹⁹ Walton, *Riding on Rainbows*, p. 63.

who argued that the Pleasure Beach was both technologically and morally higher in standing than the Golden Mile, a place that played house to ‘cheap, scruffy, disreputable stalls.’¹⁰⁰

Therefore, districts demarcated themselves by emphasising their differences based, in part, on entertainment. This demonstrates how the types of entertainment and the visitors an area attracted constituted a reputation, whilst simultaneously it was the reputation of the area itself which attracted entertainers and thrill seekers who sought particular freedoms and pleasures. Evidently, the divisions between entertainment hubs in Blackpool identified as physical, social and moral were constantly in a process of reinforcement and resistance with their own reputation.

On a wider scale, whilst it is true that the influx of the working class from the surrounding industrial towns dominated the Blackpool’s place-making activity at the turn of the century, it attracted a wide variety of people and, while there were general class-based divisions, Blackpool’s rise in popularity was characterised by its appeal to all.¹⁰¹ This is particularly true of one of Blackpool’s most recognised entertainment strips, The Golden Mile. Gerald Mars, best known as the writer of the academic self-study *Becoming an Anthropologist*, conducted early anthropological research on the Golden Mile in 1959.¹⁰² *Golden Mile (A Survey of this Semi Permanent Fairground)* is a lesser known work and features a unique engagement with the Golden Mile.¹⁰³ In his introductory material, Mars gives a brief but informative description at the turn of the twentieth century, observing that ‘Blackpool developed by giving its customers what they wanted: one of the things they wanted was The Golden Mile.’¹⁰⁴ The Golden Mile offered a strip of entertainment in close

¹⁰⁰ Walton, *Riding on Rainbows*, p. 63.

¹⁰¹ Walton, *The Blackpool Landlady*, pp. 48-49. Walton notes the power over change the working-class held, and that this change demanded a solid place for the working-class holiday in British culture.

¹⁰² Gerald Mars, *Becoming an Anthropologist: A Memoir and a Guide to Anthropology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2015).

¹⁰³ Gerald Mars, *Blackpool’s Golden Mile (A Survey of this Semi Permanent Fairground)*, 1959.

¹⁰⁴ Mars, *Blackpool’s Golden Mile*.

proximity. As Mars describes, ‘The Golden Mile is situated on the promenade between two roads inland and it faces the busiest section of the beach – the busiest because it is the last to be covered by the tide.’¹⁰⁵ It was a hub of activity, and was flocked to by keen money-makers and crowds alike.

As mentioned, certain areas did hold their own moral and class-centric allure. The South Promenade in the 1930s was, for example, more open to a variety of small stall holders and was also occupied by the former travelling fairground entertainments that had increasingly found their place at the seaside destination. However, the Golden Mile was not devoid of these more ‘traditional’ entertainments, not yet. It was still permeable to savvy stall holders who recognised the appeal of a strip that, by its very structure, encouraged masses of people to walk past each occupant of the Mile.

With the fairground folk, came the sideshow; a long-founded travelling tradition in Britain which found a place in Blackpool as the town went through its expansion. Notably, just as the historical rise of Blackpool can be all too easily categorised as a ‘Victorian’ sensation, as contested by Walton, so too is the sideshow all too strongly labelled as such.¹⁰⁶ The Victorian era was clearly a time when sideshows were prevalent and widespread as these micro-worlds of entertainment populated theatre halls and exhibition spaces, but were most distinctly recognised as belonging to the travelling fairgrounds.¹⁰⁷ The explosion of dime museums and major exhibitors across the Atlantic such as P.T. Barnum in the nineteenth century inspired a trend for showing unusual objects and bodies.¹⁰⁸ Whilst this caught on in Britain, particularly the display of wax works, which was dominated by Reynolds's Waxwork

¹⁰⁵ Mars, *Blackpool's Golden Mile*.

¹⁰⁶ Walton, *Riding on Rainbows*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁷ ‘History of Sideshow Exhibitions and Acts’, *National Fairground Archive*, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca/researchandarticles/sideshowexhibitionsacts> [accessed 19 August 2018].

¹⁰⁸ ‘History of Sideshow Exhibitions and Acts’, *National Fairground Archive*.

Exhibition in Liverpool in the mid-nineteenth century, sideshows brought the weird and wonderful to the public who frequented travelling shows in rows of stalls, each offering a new fascination in a small space.¹⁰⁹

As Blackpool expanded, sideshow proprietors sought the opportunity to profit from the constant stream of visitors and take advantage of an alternative means of showmanship where shows no longer travelled to audiences, but audiences travelled to them. Sideshows and showmen once reserved for the travelling life became more situated around Britain's booming seaside resorts at the turn of the century.¹¹⁰ In this context and importantly their situatedness was subject to the physical, social and moral divisions of Blackpool. In the 1930s, it was those fairground thrills of the 'technologically sophisticated' variety, such as new gravity-defying rides, that were granted 'dedicated sites', again part of a perpetuating form of place-making within Blackpool.¹¹¹ The other side of fairground entertainment such as the smaller sideshows, where 'other' fittingly refers to those bodies exhibited that stood against normalcy and as the epitome of 'other', were increasingly less welcomed through the interwar years. This was particularly true of those shows that occupied a site on the Golden Mile.

The sideshows' significance to the Golden Mile and how regulatory attitudes towards them changed will be explored through this thesis; however it is important to note that sideshows, like the rise of Blackpool itself, should not be bound to a Victorian model of entertainment. Rather, they went through a period of change, both positive and negative, during what was Blackpool's most informative years. Blackpool's inter-war years, therefore,

¹⁰⁹ 'History of Sideshow Exhibitions and Acts', *National Fairground Archive*.

¹¹⁰ John K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 109.

¹¹¹ Walton, *The British Seaside*, p. 109.

pose a so far lesser considered period of change for two major British holiday institutions- the sideshow and the seaside.

A variety of sideshow excitements came to the seaside, one particular trend that became synonymous with Blackpool being starving exhibits. The deep history of acts involving fasts and food refraining will be described in more detail, however Emma Purce offers a general insight into the Golden Mile's culture of starving exhibitionism alongside exhibits of extreme fatness.

Holidaymakers were able to place themselves on a scale of normality and therein better understand their own bodies, health and physical fitness. Although some became increasingly disconcerted with the display of unusual bodies, freak shows continued to provide entertainment, education, and spectacle in seaside resorts until the late 1940s when the rise of holidaying abroad affected the attractions available to holidaymakers in Britain, which consequently impacted on the display of unusual bodies.¹¹²

Evidently, Blackpool's position as a major tourist destination, which attracted crowds of upper, middle and lower classes, meant it also acted as a pseudo-educational hub for the nation. Moreover, the Golden Mile and its freaky exhibits were significant to Blackpool's profitability, particularly when Luke Gannon established himself as a sideshow organiser and manager of starving exhibitions at the end of the 1920s and throughout the 1930s. According to Ellis Clarke, in a nostalgic piece, 'the Golden era of the Mile began when Gannon appeared on the scene in the late 1920's.'¹¹³ This is a bold, but not unfounded statement. Luke Gannon was one of the most influential and memorable sideshow proprietors of the Golden Mile.¹¹⁴ This is evident not only through his influence over trending shows, but also

¹¹² Emma Purce, 'Scales of Normality: Displays of Extreme Weight and Weight Loss in Blackpool 1920-1940', *Cultural and Social History* 14:5 (2017), p. 686.

¹¹³ Clarke, 'The Golden Age of the Golden Mile', pp. 65-67.

¹¹⁴ Walton references Gannon, calling him 'the most high-profile impresario on this front.' Walton, *The British Seaside*, p. 110.

his continual conflict with police authorities. However, despite the significance of Gannon to the Golden Mile, he remains surprisingly under-researched.¹¹⁵

Importantly, these sites of negotiation and conflict were manifest through the materiality of Gannon's displays. Gannon's career, particularly his Starving Brides exhibits, reveals the complexity of display within sideshow performances. Exploring the component parts that Gannon brought together highlights the value Gannon attributed to space, time and bodies, all of which were manifested in the materiality of the display. It is important to identify and analyse these component parts as each was a site of negotiation in itself. Gannon changed his displays as he negotiated his space on the Golden Mile. Therefore, the materiality and arrangement of his displays reflect Gannon's challenges to social and legal boundaries, thus revealing the link between conflict and content.

A showman of starvation: Gannon's move to the Golden Mile

As revealed through the Introduction, Gannon presented a notorious character on the Golden Mile thanks to his encounters with police throughout his early years in Burnley. It is notable that Gannon's first publicly acknowledged position as a 'showman' is in reference to a starving exhibit, as this would become his notoriety. Gannon's role as a show manager and showman is first mentioned by the press in the *Evening Gazette*, 13 July 1929, in an article reporting on 'Blackpool's claim to world record' for the 'Long Fast' of Mr Gus Clarke.¹¹⁶ The article provides some detail of the exhibition, stating that 'lemonade, soda-water and cigarettes have formed his (the fasting man's) diet.'¹¹⁷ Gannon is referred to as the 'manager' of the exhibit and he offered a humorous quote to the papers, stating that 'it was the

¹¹⁵ Foundational research conducted at The Blackpool History Centre. Discussion with Anne Cameron, former librarian, expressed the significance of Gannon and the lack of research produced on such a key figure.

¹¹⁶ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 July 1929.

¹¹⁷ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 July 1929. Further detail includes, 'The only drink he was able to take this morning was brandy and milk. His weight today is 5 ½ stone in comparison with his original weight of 7stone 13lbs.'

Blackpool air that kept him alive.’¹¹⁸ In this short passage, Gannon demonstrates his aptitude for presenting his shows, and himself, to the press and public in an informal, often witty, manner. Furthermore, his reference to Blackpool and the body emphasises the close relationship between the two, a theme important throughout Gannon’s career.

Ellis Clarke offers further insights into the running of the exhibition;

His money had to be brought to him each day by the doctor, who entered the case to examine him, then left and the sealing tapes were re-sealed and signed by the public. This was to stop any secret feeding. This venture didn’t look as if it proved successful at first, but as time went by people, who had been for a day at Whit returned for their annual holiday, saw that he was still fasting, and flocked in to see him at 2d a time. During the last few days of his fast, there was a continual queue. The following year, Luke had another man fasting. He was known as “The Great Sacco”. These two were the forerunners of a spate of fasting men at other resorts throughout the country.¹¹⁹

Gannon’s initial shows involved male figures who would undergo ‘starvation’ for agreed periods of time, for a set sum of up to £250.¹²⁰ This episode reveals the economic basis and profitability of the show, as people were impelled to return to the show multiple times to check in on the fasting body.

These initial shows therefore established Gannon was a showman, however he was not yet a major headliner on the Golden Mile. He had recruited professional fasting artists to the Golden Mile in his first year there, including Gus Clarke and the Great Sacco, who were both male, professional individuals. In 1931, however, Gannon introduced his first female faster who was not a professional but rather an opportunist, Joyce Heather. Notably, Joyce is

¹¹⁸ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 July 1929.

¹¹⁹ Clarke, ‘The Golden Age of the Golden Mile’, pp. 65-67.

¹²⁰ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 12 December 1929.

identified as the earliest starving 'bride' displayed in and through a 'huge barrel with a glass window'.¹²¹ As Clarke describes:

Luke exhibited a starving bride called Joyce Heather, who, immediately after marrying, entered a huge barrel with a glass window inserted so that the public could view her fasting. She had to go without food or water for ten days and if she was able to complete the task, she would receive £200, a princely sum then.¹²²

Joyce occupied a liminal space in a few senses. Firstly, unlike previous starving acts which were isolated by a wooden barrel, here wood and glass create a paradoxical mechanism of display which is at once closed and open. She was sealed from vocal and physical contact by the sheet of glass, yet made inescapably visible. Secondly, Joyce occupies a liminal state as she was frozen at a transitional moment. As claimed by Clarke, Joyce entered the barrel 'immediately after marrying.'¹²³ She therefore was encapsulated on the cusp of change from social status of bride to wife.¹²⁴ Thirdly, she represents a liminal stage in Gannon's choices as a showman and the way he displayed his brides.

Notably, Joyce formed the catalyst for Gannon's rising reputation in Blackpool as he developed from an obscure showman to a major character on the entertainment industry. Clarke's memoir states, in reference to Joyce, that 'next season, the barrel was used to exhibit another publicized figure, "The Rector of Stiffkey"', an episode heavily reported by the national press in 1932.¹²⁵ Notably for Gannon's celebrity status, Clarke observed that it was the dramatic episode between Joyce, showman and public 'that made Luke (Gannon) famous.'¹²⁶

¹²¹ Clarke, 'The Golden Age of the Golden Mile', pp. 65-67.

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 65-67.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-67.

¹²⁴ Both these liminalities will be explored further in the following discussion of later Starving Brides.

¹²⁵ For full references to Ex-Rector of Stiffkey see John Walsh, *Sunday at the Cross Bones* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007). For full description of Davidson's dismissal see Matthew Parris, *The Great Unfrocks: Two Thousand Years of Church Scandal* (London: Robson Books, 1998).

¹²⁶ Clarke, 'The Golden Age of the Golden Mile', pp. 65-67.

Joyce gave up on the ninth day, and the public didn't care for this, saying that she had been made to give up so that Luke would not have to pay out. Knowing Luke Gannon though, I doubt if she suffered financially. The public protest led to a confrontation on the forecourt of the show. The crowd rolled the barrel across the prom and into the sea. Traffic was stopped for ages. The daily newspapers made the story headlines the next day, and this made Luke famous. His attitude was that of the well-known business adage- "I don't care what they say as long as they spell my name right".¹²⁷

The public, driven by a sense of justice, caused an inversion of boundaries, as crowds rolled Gannon's barrel and became actors in the Joyce Heather episode. Gannon's acknowledgement of the crowd's involvement as beneficial to his show's status demonstrated that the crowd were active participants, be it in their psychological response or their very physical response seen here. This episode also draws attention to the physical aspects of the display, as the confrontation between Gannon and public took place on the sideshow *front*, with the crowd interacting with the moveable barrel. The barrel was solid, yet mobile and vulnerable being outside of the building.

A year later, a Miss Nellie Heyes entered one of Gannon's barrels as she took over the failed attempt by a known fasting artist, Billy Brown, who was set to fast for ten days for the sum of £250; this too would end in confrontation.¹²⁸ On 25 July 1932, the *Lancashire Daily Post* headed an article 'Fasting Barrel Cases', 'Beach Structure Question', 'Adjournment', giving detail of the apparent hostility that had arisen from an 'attempted fast.'¹²⁹ In this episode, Gannon was to answer to two cases of setting up a structure on the Promenade without permission of the 'Corporation'. Two structures were brought into question, the first an apparent 'refreshment stall...20 feet long, 10 feet wide, and nine feet in height.'¹³⁰ A thorough inspection was carried out by a Mr Stead, the Blackpool stalls inspector, who

¹²⁷ Clarke, 'The Golden Age', pp. 65-67.

¹²⁸ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 4 July 1932.

¹²⁹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 25 July 1932.

¹³⁰ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 26 July 1932.

reported that there were ‘supports attached to the stall which had the appearance of an old billiards table that had been reconstructed for stall purposes.’¹³¹ This observation is later confirmed by Gannon, claiming that it was not ‘fixed to the ground, neither closed’, and the lights not ‘fastened to the table’, thus defending his structure by the very inventiveness of his recycled stall.¹³² Gannon contended that the structures conformed to the by-laws put in place by the authorities, citing its impermanence and unfixed property.

The barrel itself became a point of structural objection, with a rather convoluted argument unfolding as to whether a barrel can be considered a building. What is made apparent by these reports of conflict however, is that the starving exhibit was not inside Gannon’s Brunswick building, but clearly out front. The reports thus demonstrate Gannon’s early structural attempts at crowd drawing. Furthermore, these reports reveal the cost of occupying a key place on the Golden Mile. Whilst subject to scrutiny by authorities, Gannon pointed out the sum paid in rent and rates, making explicit his contribution to the Blackpool Borough. This includes over £700 a year in rent, £150 in rates plus water rates. As previously noted, this stands in contrast to the free running of ‘No Man’s Land’, as authorities held more power in this new location and Gannon was required to defend his ‘space’ as a paying stall holder. Mr Blackhurst, Gannon’s defence lawyer, explicitly stated that ‘Mr Gannon was paying a tremendous rent and he was only trying to make a living.’¹³³ Gannon positions himself as a contributing citizen and businessman, both respectable roles that stood in contrast to the character depicted by the authorities.

Importantly, Miss Heyes demonstrates the role of female opportunist into Gannon’s starving exhibits as she usurped the position of a professional male faster for her own

¹³¹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 26 July 1932.

¹³² *Lancashire Daily Post*, 26 July 1932.

¹³³ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 26 July 1932.

personal gain. Furthermore, the Miss Heyes episode introduces the first legal set of negotiations to take place involving Gannon, the officials and a female faster. The narrative here, although seemingly a case of structural licensing, was still convoluted with more ambiguous discussions around the content itself. For example, Gannon's defence, Mr Blackhurst, asks the stalls inspector why he had not drawn attention to another stall 'in the next forecourt', questioning why Gannon had been targeted.¹³⁴ Tellingly, as the inspector dismisses this point, Mr Blackhurst replies with a loaded question: 'This complaint is all through the women in the barrel?', to which the inspector objects and states that 'I will not say we have had an onslaught, but we have taken numerous cases of this kind to the Court.'¹³⁵

Later Mr Blackhurst makes a more explicit accusation amongst the structural debate, stating directly 'Is not the whole trouble that they have had something in the barrel?', referring to the 'fasting women'.¹³⁶ Later, the prosecution address to the underlying ambiguity around the female faster, stating 'The Act says there must be no perishable articles offered...but I could argue, although I am not going to, that a starving woman is a perishable article.'¹³⁷ These hints at an underlying concern towards the female faster, skirted around by more straight negotiations around structural licensing are important to take note of as they were the beginning of what would become a long negotiation between Gannon and the authorities.

¹³⁴ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 26 July 1932.

¹³⁵ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 26 July 1932.

¹³⁶ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 26 July 1932.

¹³⁷ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 26 July 1932. Referring to The Blackpool Improvement Act.

Joyce was the initial steppingstone from early ‘professional’ male acts to the act of starvation performed by women, presented as ‘ordinary’ to the audience. Notably, although Joyce was undoubtedly made visible, she was not completely displayed in glass. Nor was she

set back into the building of New Brunswick.

Rather, she was out *on* the street and not within the confines of the building. The barrel was vulnerable to conflict from visiting crowds and the authorities’ legislative agenda. The barrel was a site of conflict, and required Gannon to renegotiate the spatial arrangement and the very materiality of the display, bringing his starving brides *inside* and displaying them in glass cabinets.

Notably, these shows evolved into a new type of starving show unique to Blackpool and led by Gannon. By the 1930s, Gannon had progressed to starving brides [Figure 1].¹³⁸ As a brief introduction, the Starving Bride show involved a

young woman, unnamed, occupying a glass cabinet. Clad in white dress, she was set to fast for an agreed upon period of time in order to receive a monetary prize. The white dress was a customary outfit for marriage, a tradition that began in the mid-eighteenth century.¹³⁹

Ironically, with this white dress tradition, the ‘weddings of ordinary people’ were also accompanied by ‘feastings.’¹⁴⁰ Sometimes these women would appear with a groom and they

Figure 1: Photograph of the ‘Starving Brides’, Blackpool, The Blackpool History Centre, Cyril Critchlow Collection.



¹³⁸ Figure 1: Photograph of the ‘Starving Brides’, Blackpool, The Blackpool History Centre, Cyril Critchlow Collection.

¹³⁹ Philip Cunnington and Catherine Lucas, *Costume for Births, Marriages and Deaths* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1972), p. 60.

¹⁴⁰ Cunnington and Lucas, *Costume for Births, Marriages and Deaths*, p. 77.

would lie side by side, fasting. Often however, and causing the most controversy, lone brides would occupy the transparent unit. Visitors would pay entry to overlook the glass cabinets, which were horizontal, and observe the depleted bodies from above. This greatly contrasted with the display of Joyce, as the new bride fasting was well within the building. To incite the interest of passers-by, wax works imitating the starving bride took the street position.

Whilst female fasting for profit seems a morbid and even shocking as a form of entertainment, it has deep historical references and has appeared throughout history in a variety of contexts including religion, medicine and sideshows. Walton even notes that other fasting females in coffin structures had been on show in areas surrounding Blackpool through the 1930s.¹⁴¹ Notably however, ‘the sheer concentration of these exhibits in popular seaside settings, and the publicity they attracted, assimilated them to the collective place-myth of the seaside.’¹⁴² Blackpool can once again be seen as offering something new to the relationship between sideshows and the seaside holiday, whereby Blackpool continuously fashioned its reputation on the exhibitors and audiences that occupied it.

Moreover, whilst starving females were not new in general, the status of ‘starving bride’ was something specific to Blackpool. It is, therefore, important to consider these historical resonances, whilst acknowledging that the Starving Brides were unique, and locatable specifically to Blackpool. In looking at historical female fasting cases, historical approaches to understanding them can also be scrutinised to develop a nuanced analysis of Gannon’s exhibits and their significance to wider understanding.

Self-starvation as ‘spectacle’

The display of fasting bodies was not new to the twentieth century. The history of ‘fasting girls’ reveals a rich history in which the starving female body acted as a site where cultural

¹⁴¹ Walton, *The British Seaside*, p. 110.

¹⁴² Walton, *The British Seaside*, p. 110.

anxieties and timely cultural issues were simultaneously reflected and negotiated. A further approach is needed, one that traces a showman's evolving relationship with fasting performers, their audience and the spaces the showmen occupy. Rather than considering one type of spectacle at its peak, such an approach examines the interchangeable ways in which the 'body' and the 'self' are offered 'to public consumption' by one showman.¹⁴³ This is because 'showmen did valuable cultural work for audiences', significant, sensitive and suggestive to wider societal cognisance.¹⁴⁴

Debates around the act of self-starvation often draw lines between the medieval practices of female fasting as a concern of 'spirituality' and the contemporary, medically labelled presentation of anorexia.¹⁴⁵ As shown in the work of Sigal Gooldin, such plain distinctions and de-contextualised comparisons are problematic, with a tendency to view starving practices as all assimilating to a history of anorexia.¹⁴⁶ Walter Vandereycken introduces a linear development of acts of 'self-starvation' from fasting saints, to contemporary medicalisation of eating disorders.¹⁴⁷ In doing so, Vandereycken offers chronological case histories of particular practices and acts. What is lacking however, is an analysis of each form of self-starvation that serves to deconstruct the *performance*. His work

¹⁴³ Sigal Gooldin, 'Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists: Spectacles of Body and Miracles at the Turn of the Twentieth Century', *Body and Society* 9.2 (2003), pp. 27-53.

¹⁴⁴ Kember, 'The Functions of Showmanship', p. 3.

¹⁴⁵ Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (New York, 1994).

¹⁴⁶ Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, pp. 31-56. Anderson offers a review of the development of anorexia nervosa, asserting that the condition entered the 'public venacular' of Europe and North America in the second half of the twentieth century. Diagnoses became widespread in the 1970s.

¹⁴⁷ Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 47. Notably, Vandereycken begins his historical overview of starvation with a re-definition of anorexia nervosa. According to Vandereycken, the literal Latin terminology of anorexia nervosa is 'misleading' in denoting 'lack or abstinence of appetite of nervous origin.' Instead, 'they- anorexics- do not suffer from a lack of appetite; partly the term refers to a desired or deliberate suppression of appetite and hunger, partly to a disturbed eating behaviour from a deeply rooted pursuit of thinness. Therefore, self-starvation would be a better term'. Vandereycken goes on to list the characteristics of sufferers, including denial, pride in self-discipline, ritualistic eating and 'narrow-mindedness.'

is useful in providing an overview of general shifts and introduction of new markers of self-starvation. For example, his chapter on ‘miraculous maidens’ highlights the shift as:

Fasting and religion became more and more loose, physicians succeeded in transforming food abstinence into a medical problem... Not until the end of the nineteenth century was it widely accepted that self-starvation was a pathological state requiring medical treatment. Against this backdrop emerged the phenomenon of fasting girls and miraculous maidens and later on, of hunger artists and living skeletons.¹⁴⁸

Here, ‘miraculous maidens’ is a generalised term, used by Vandereycken to cover cases of female fasters from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, usually occupying their own domestic space, such as a bedroom or living room, who become subject to public and medical interest by way of their abstinence from food.

His major defining feature of these maidens’ is through contrast to their predecessors, the fasting saint. The major contrast lay in their ‘contexts’, specifically the ‘opposition’ experienced as medical scrutiny of the maidens had ‘intensified’ since the sixteenth century.¹⁴⁹ A result of such opposition leads Vandereycken to identify one performative aspect of these maidens; their “isolation” and their being subject to scientific ‘investigation.’¹⁵⁰ This intensification of isolation and investigation was a result of the expanding medical profession’s need to assert its authority and credibility over such, one regarded, ‘metaphysical’ and mystifying phenomena and, in doing so, to promote their own newly emerging profession in a shift to empirical thinking.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 47. See for fuller definitions and descriptions.

¹⁴⁹ Examples of named miraculous maidens and case studies can be found; Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁵⁰ Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁵¹ Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, pp. 51-52. He exemplifies the fasting woman, Ann Moore, between 1808-1813. Undertaking a long fast, Ann was put under intense ‘watch’, during the second half of which ‘Ann fell ill.’ In the subsequent weeks it emerged that Ann’s daughter had in fact been feeding Ann with food passed between mouths when she kissed her mother. Ann gave a written confession and ‘left Tutbury to a taunting crowd.’

As shown by Vandereycken however, the emerging medical profession's involvement with such popular entertainments was not a smooth resistance whereby empiricism won over old-fashioned mysticism. For example, in the 1860's, The Welsh Fasting Girl, Sarah Jacobs, came under scrutiny with two major medical 'watches' taking place.¹⁵² The first, due to last a fortnight, produced unclear results as the child was not watched 24 hours a day. A later watch involved six nurses who mounted a 24-hour watch.¹⁵³ After her death, *The Lancet* addressed the medical profession declaring they should have 'nothing to do, directly or indirectly, with the investigation of any of the absurd stories arising from time to time out of ignorance, deceit and superstition.'¹⁵⁴

Controversy over medical intervention in starving shows was still apparent over 70 years later, when Gannon brought his Starving Bride show to Blackpool's Golden Mile. However, in an apparent shift of incentive, the medical profession was not only focused on proving fraudulence but also on ensuring the well-being of the twentieth century performers. In Blackpool, the performer Ricardo Sacco, who was famous as a fasting record breaker, died following a 56 day fast in 1929. Notably, Sacco is reported as having 'Fasted in a large glass case at Blackpool Arcade...The case was dirty, smelt offensively...he was surrounded by monkeys and funny cats.'¹⁵⁵ Through the description, a clear link is made between the grim end the entertainer met and the mood of the exhibit which appeared mismanaged and sinister.

Unlike the Fasting Women phenomenon, Gannon's starving shows were not performed in the 'natural' environment of a faster's home. Furthermore, the starvation on show in Blackpool was not a 'natural' bodily state, unlike the Fasting Women who claimed

¹⁵² Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 70.

¹⁵³ For the comprehensive life story of Sarah Jacobs, see Sarah Busby, *A Wonderful Little Girl: The True Story of Sarah Jacob, the Welsh Fasting Girl* (London, 2003). For another example of Victorian fasting girl, see Michelle Stacey, *The Fasting Girl: A True Victorian Medical Mystery* (New York, 2002).

¹⁵⁴ Vandereycken and van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, p. 70.

¹⁵⁵ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 12 December 1929.

not to desire food. For Fasting Women, this state of self-starvation was ‘detached from the domain of suffering’ as it came *naturally*, in an unlaboured state of self-starvation.¹⁵⁶ This distinction between natural setting (home) and natural state of starvation, in comparison to the staged and suffering circumstances surrounding Gannon’s exhibits, arguably reveals a distinct relationship between space and site of starvation and the understanding of body and starvation.

Living Skeletons are also a relevant consideration here. They were predominantly male performers who exhibited their freakishly thin bodies and emerged at the same time as Fasting Women, in the early nineteenth century. Gooldin acknowledges that the two acts attracted the same ‘lay’ and medical gaze. Living Skeletons, however, pushed more towards a wonder of the secular than the spiritual.¹⁵⁷ Medical authorities emphasised an apparent normal and healthy appetite, in turn exaggerating an abnormality further. The Living Skeletons were ‘normative social beings’ in self-juxtaposition with their dead, abnormal physical bodies.¹⁵⁸ Both Fasting Women and Living Skeletons occupied a liminal space between life and death, the spectacle presented being one that articulated ‘corporeal reactions’ to the cultural collapsing of ‘mysterious...open body’ and the ‘modern, closed’ body.¹⁵⁹ The ultimate similarity was their apparent ability to occupy wasting bodies as a normative state of being.

Distinct differences between Gannon’s own exhibits are apparent, for example between the early barrel exhibits and the later Starving Brides, however there are traits in Gannon’s shows that appear somewhat consistent such as both operated with a similar

¹⁵⁶ Gooldin, ‘Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists’, p. 26.

¹⁵⁷ As discussed, the Fasting Women occupied a complex, hybrid state, collapsing the two.

¹⁵⁸ Gooldin, ‘Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists’, p. 42.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

structure and predominantly featured lay people who would undergo starvation for an agreed period of time, for a set sum. It was, explicitly, an act of some discomfort driven by monetary gain. This is a distinct difference from the Fasting Women and particularly the Living Skeletons' 'natural' state of self-starvation. The very advertising and general structure of Gannon's shows points to a contrasting state. Returning to the initial billboard example, 'HONEYMOON COUPLE STARVES FOR LOVE' denotes a sense of struggle and sacrifice. Furthermore, they were displayed in distinctly sufferable spaces; confined to barrels and to glass cabinets. Such spaces, like the act of starvation, were artificial, unnatural and highly performative, again emphasising the relation between body and space.

Arguably therefore, Gannon's spectacles may be better equated to Hunger Artists who emerged some decades after Fasting Women and Living Skeletons, peaking in the 1880s. Hunger Artists were predominantly male and, unlike the Fasting Women and Living Skeletons, Hunger Artists were not a spectacle of being but of 'doing.'¹⁶⁰ Their performance was not detached from suffering through a miraculous lack of appetite, but revolved around the overcoming of hunger and suffering itself. This may be more relatable to Gannon's later shows in that Hunger Artists were a 'public fast in which time was measured and documented as determination of the "quality" of the artist.'¹⁶¹ There are, therefore, structural similarities in the temporal structure of Hunger Artists and Gannon's barrel and bride shows. Both, unlike the Fasting Women and Living Skeletons, make explicit a specific temporal element to their spectacle which, simultaneously, exaggerates the overcoming of the challenge of hunger in a distinctly public space.

There is, however, a difference in motivation. As noted in reference to the Hunger Artist, the endurance performed in the fast was motivated by being an 'artist', encapsulated in

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

their very name as *Hunger Artists*. Gannon's early starving shows included 'the world record holder' and a recognised fasting man, *The Great Sacco*.¹⁶² However, Gannon's entrepreneurial spirit seems to have rolled with the opportunities and changing taste for spectacle of the fasting kind, arguably finding more profitable ground in the controversial fasting of ordinary people, made into spectacle, explicitly for monetary gain.

Gannon pulled on both individually acclaimed titles, distinctly ordinary members of the public, by ordinary I mean those with no previous act, or sideshow reputation, to draw in holiday makers to his ever-evolving starving exhibitions. For example, *Bride and Bridegroom* were titles available to anyone, holding no individualistic, characterised persona in contrast to Gannon's earliest act, *The Great Sacco*. There was a sense of anonymity and an irrelevance of the individual outside of the performance space and emphasis was placed on their identifiable roles as *Bride and Bridegroom*.

Fasting Women declined in a relatable fashion to the Freak Shows, popular during the nineteenth century and declining at the beginning of the twentieth century. Gooldin notes the writing of Franz Kafka, 1922, who remarks that 'during the last decades the interest in professional fasting has markedly diminished. It used to pay very well to stage such performers under one's own management, but today that is quite impossible.'¹⁶³ Interestingly, despite this acknowledged decline, Gannon was able to draw in crowds so large at numerous instances that the whole Blackpool Golden Mile was obstructed. Unlike a visit to a fasting woman's home, which was likened to a planned pilgrimage, Gannon's spectacle relied on transitory holiday makers. Clarke's memoir of Gannon's first fasting shows notes the precarious nature of this environment; 'This venture didn't look as if it proved successful at first, but as time went by people, who had been for a day at Whit returned for their annual

¹⁶² *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 26 July 1935.

¹⁶³ Gooldin, 'Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists', p. 45.

holiday, saw that he was still fasting, and flocked in to see him at 2d a time. During the last few days of his fast, there was a continual queue.’¹⁶⁴

Gannon therefore created new spaces of performance and new practices of making starvation public and profitable. In doing so, he also produced new conversations and debates about the body, the sideshow space and its place on the Golden Mile. It was not just the medical profession’s need to assert relevance and authority at the turn of the century, opposition also coalesced around new tropes of decency, national reputation and control over bodies which are made visible.¹⁶⁵ In this way, Gannon stood as a pivot and an analytical centre of a intersection of shifting ‘sources of authority’, ‘formal and informal voices.’¹⁶⁶

This is made apparent, not by focusing on one over-arching historical genre of starving practice alone, but by approaching the complexity of sideshow space through the role of the showman (in this case Gannon) as negotiator and organiser, where variable practices were possible in one space. Studies such as Vandereycken provide an over-arching chronological account of such self-starvation categorisations. There is, however, no deep consideration of the performative context of the cases. Vandereycken rather directs his narrative to the progressive and final point of modern day anorexia. In doing so, deep cultural resonances are lost.

Other scholarships have uncovered the tensions that exist between the social contexts in which particular starving practices are embedded, and assumptions that all practices across time share ‘heterogeneous meanings.’¹⁶⁷ Particular discursive themes emerge which view

¹⁶⁴ Clarke, ‘The Golden Age of the Golden Mile’, pp. 65-67.

¹⁶⁵ Explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

¹⁶⁶ Gooldin, ‘Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists’, p. 36.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30. Attitudes which branch away from the medicalisation of anorexia highlight the ‘spiritual dimension’ and asceticism modern women experience, thus relating the modern anorexic to the medieval fasting female. Another assumption may also be that both the medieval women and the contemporary anorexic are on the ‘quest for liberation from a patriarchal society’, with the limitation of food a ‘channel’ to exercise ‘control.’

self-starvation in relation to the spiritual, the aesthetic, the feminist and the medical.

Approaches from each dominant discursive position often present starved female bodies as comparable across time. Gooldin however, emphasises the specificity of fasting and starving practices within their cultural context. Quoting Joan Brumberg (1989), Gooldin reaffirms that it is the ‘cultural context within which fasting is practiced that constitutes meaning.’¹⁶⁸

Fasting cannot and should not be ‘de-contextualised.’¹⁶⁹

Gooldin takes this approach further, beyond the hunt for conceptual ‘meaning’ of fasting practices, looking rather at the very corporeal presence of such practices. In doing so, she aligns the intangible yet influential ‘socio-symbolic’ existence of fasting and self-starvation practices with how this is constituted by physical, tangible arrangements of such practices. Drawing upon the example of the 1808 Fasting Woman of Tutbury, Anne Moore, Gooldin identifies the contradictory narratives that surround such women, thus taking the case of Ann Moore beyond a purely chronological approach. The key to “decoding the social significance” of an act of self-starvation relies not only on the cultural context, seen in the work of Brumberg, but a shift from considering the ‘act of fasting’, to the ‘spectacle.’¹⁷⁰ This is an analytical distinction, requiring Gooldin to define ‘spectacle’ as ‘the spatial and temporal presence of the act of fasting.’¹⁷¹

In this way, the act of fasting is likened to a text, devoid of meaning until it is encountered by a reader. It is therefore the spectacle, the ‘appeared, performed, visible phenomenon of fasting’ that elicits an *interaction* between the fasting individual and the audience, which in turn produces meaning.¹⁷² Anderson affirms this, recognising that bodies

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32.

‘in performance’ take on a new form of ‘intersubjective’ self with their audience: ‘But in performance, indeed *as* performance, which “saves nothing, it only spends”, he is given himself up to a dramatically open if deeply contested we.’¹⁷³

This approach opens historical performers to complex interpretation. Shifting analytical focus from the ‘ontological’ act of fasting to its ‘sociological’ presence opens Gooldin’s first case, Anne Moore, to more complex ways of analysing the ways in which she offers her ‘body and self to public consumption.’¹⁷⁴ Anne Moore, as spectacle, was present in her own home and bed, monitored closely by ‘examiners’ and ‘watchers’.¹⁷⁵ These medical examiners form what Gooldin considers as the ‘authoritative voice’, or ‘formal discourse’, through which much contemporary understanding of fasting women is framed. Notably, in shifting to the ‘spectacle’ Gooldin makes apparent the different textual frames and alternating ‘sources of authority’ including the highly valid but often analytically undervalued, ‘informal voices.’¹⁷⁶ Limiting analysis to that of the ‘authoritative’ medical voice is to misjudge the complexity of the social significance of such fasting women. Taking formal voices alone may lead to an understanding of the fasting women as secular beings, considered merely as physical freaks or, as often proposed, fraudulent bodies.

Through a consideration of the wider ‘spectacle’ of Anne Moore’s performative and social presence, Gooldin identifies the ‘simultaneous secular and religious wonder’ stimulated through the encounter between performer and audience.¹⁷⁷ Anne Moore is a ‘hybrid’ performance, at the ‘crossroads of pre-modern miracle and rationality’, attracting not one unified gaze- as presented by formalist, authoritative voices- but allowing more ‘secular

¹⁷³ Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, p. 84.

¹⁷⁴ Gooldin, ‘Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists’, p. 34.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

forms of admiration for (the) miraculous.’¹⁷⁸ This is, according to Gooldin, only realisable when the entire spectacle as an ‘appeared, performed, visible phenomenon of fasting’ is considered and not merely the ‘act’ of fasting.

Despite developing a more dynamic and contextually sensitive approach to starving practices, Goodlin does not analyse how specific shows shift in their own lifetime, going no deeper than a distinction between ‘formal’ voices, which are mainly identified as medical, and ‘informal’ ones. She thus overlooks how voices shift, as well as the potential for new voices to be introduced in the lifetime of a spectacle and often at times of conflict. As will be shown in Gannon’s starving sideshows, the spectacle was not only articulated by *multiple* voices, but also by consciously *conflicting* voices competing for authority.

Goodlin briefly notes the decline in fasting women and living skeleton shows at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, less consideration is given to the time between their peaks and their apparent disappearance.¹⁷⁹ Instead she focuses on the performances at their most popular, identifying these peaks as a particular point of ‘corporeal reaction’ specific to an ‘eclectic cultural moment.’¹⁸⁰ Therefore, although Gooldin approaches these performances from a dynamic and complex standpoint, such shows did not exist in one moment. Furthermore, although Gooldin acknowledges the dichotomous ideologies between the mysterious, carnivalesque and open body, and the disciplined, modern and closed body ‘collapsed in to each other’, these dichotomies should not be seen as two separate philosophies which collapse in *one body* at *one* moment in time.¹⁸¹ These very notions, the very formal and informal voices which Gooldin separates, were in constant flux over decades of cultural change.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Contested shows were still *spectacles* as, to use Gooldin's analogy, the number of 'readers' does not reduce the potential of the 'text' to hold significance for those who continue to encounter it. It does however, show evidence of shifts in the cultural relevancies of a text. Therefore, whilst acknowledging that meaning is produced in the interaction of performer and audience, this interaction is analysed by Gooldin only at the point of a particular spectacle's peak at one point in time. Gannon, despite having his shows labelled regressive and out of time by Blackpool authorities, remained incredibly popular. This is evident as the major conflicts that occurred between himself and the authorities often included concerns around the mass, obstructive crowd. Analysis of his shows, therefore, should not be confined to one 'cultural moment'; rather it should consider the evolution of his starving exhibitions as continuous sites of negotiation over time. This is also apparent in Purce's analysis of starving shows on The Golden Mile. Whilst she acknowledges that 'some became increasingly disconcerted' with displays of extreme thinness, the disconcerted periods of these extreme displays are somewhat neglected.¹⁸²

In light of the above investigative positioning, intricate and overarching enquiry is made more achievable by not limiting investigation to particular 'types' of starving spectacles. Rather, one can trace the evolving of self-starving shows in the context of one sideshow space and, uniquely, under the management of one show organiser. Gooldin, as with much analysis of freak shows and shifts in cultural resonance of such performers to their audience, emphasises the relationship between performer and the audience. Granted the ways in which these interactions are facilitated is acknowledged, for example, Gooldin acknowledges the pamphlets circulated about Anne Moore, yet who opened the doors to

¹⁸² Purce, 'Scales of Normality', pp. 669-689.

Anne's home and organised the pilgrims to this attraction? To use Gooldin's analogy, who is the hand behind the text?

As shown in the case of Gannon, showman played pivotal roles as writers, editors, illustrators and publicists. They were also however spatial occupants and explicitly involved in the struggle over performance space. Developing from Gooldin, Thiong'o takes a spatially holistic approach to defining performance and performance space. He emphasises the concrete and structural 'presence' of exhibitions, whilst also emphasising the discursive presence of the 'struggle' of voices. In this way, Thiong'o opens the exploration of the conflicts between the law, sideshow organisers and their performers, to spatial relations.¹⁸³ For example, performance is regarded as composite of place, content, audience, time and goal. Furthermore, Thiong'o asserts that all performance 'rivals in articulating law', a concept discussed in the sideshow as a 'contestable' space where 'abnormal' bodies are allowed to dwell.¹⁸⁴

Evidently, this rivalry does not go without points of dissonance and, moreover, points of dissonance which are ever shifting. Where this typically may be called censorship, Thiong'o unpicks this general term to a 'struggle' over performance space, specifically in its definition, delimitation and regulation.¹⁸⁵ As such, he opens analysis to the unpredictable, evolving grey areas which are no less substantial or influential as written law. Showmen were heavily involved in negotiating the multitude of voices and agents who encountered the very 'spectacle' they constructed. Tracing a showman's evolving relationship with fasting performers, their audience and the spaces they occupy, approaching not one type of spectacle

¹⁸³ Thiong'o, 'Enactments of Power', pp. 11-30.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12. Chapter 3 of this thesis explores further the idea of censorship.

at its peak but observing the potential changing ways ‘body and self’ are offered ‘to public consumption’, proves more insightful.¹⁸⁶

Acknowledging this opens not only the voices offering contradicting narratives surrounding such starving shows, but also the multitude, varying and inclusive bodies that Gannon made visible. This contrasts with the narrowing approach of segregating particular starving or fasting practices, allowing the adaptive potentiality of the sideshow space to really be appreciated. Moreover, although in doing so the versatility of fasting practices is acknowledged, concentrating on Gannon informs the fact that such shows are not produced incidentally as a subconscious ‘cultural reaction.’¹⁸⁷ They required work and a great deal of negotiation and struggle.

Starving Brides and glass cabinets

As noted, the use of glass cabinets was not new to starving exhibitions and there are a number of cases that reveal the use of glass cabinets in starving exhibits. Reports of female fasters in glass cases in Europe appeared as early as 1907 in *The World’s Fair*.¹⁸⁸ In a romantic tale where ‘the fasting woman, Miss Anges Macdonald’, was ‘wooded’ by an observer, Miss Macdonald is reported as ‘trying to fast for thirty-three days.’¹⁸⁹ Interestingly, the description of their encounter and her subsequent marriage proposal reveals the set-up of this performance in Edinburgh. For example, her admirer ‘saw and admired’ her ‘through her glass box’.¹⁹⁰ Conversation was allowed in ‘frigid circumstance’, through ‘the grille of the glass box’, demonstrating a play on separation, intimacy and restraint.¹⁹¹ The Macdonald

¹⁸⁶ Gooldin, ‘Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists’, p. 34.

¹⁸⁷ Gooldin, ‘Fasting Women, Living Skeletons and Hunger Artists’, p. 45.

¹⁸⁸ ‘Romance of Hunger: Fasting Lady Wooed in a Glass Box’, *The World’s Fair*, 12 October 1907, p. 7.

¹⁸⁹ *The World’s Fair*, 12 October 1907, p. 7.

¹⁹⁰ *The World’s Fair*, 12 October 1907, p. 7.

¹⁹¹ *The World’s Fair*, 12 October 1907, p. 7.

episode highlights more clearly a key consideration, namely the interconnectedness of starving female bodies, love and sex evoked through the romantic tone of episode.

Later articles from *The World's Fair* in 1934 report on a 'Girl's attempt on fasting record... Mr Walter J. Womersley, M.P., at Grimsby on Saturday, sealed up in a glass cabinet a young woman Doris Deane, of Balham, who is attempting to undertake a fast of fifty days.'¹⁹² Doris Deane is also mentioned a few weeks earlier, on the 6th of June, 'Doris Deane, aged 23, on Tuesday, ended a fast of 47 days and nights at a fun fair in High Street, Clapham, London.'¹⁹³ It is the use of glass that makes these episodes, at the beginning of twentieth century, particularly notable. The use of glass in Gannon's later shows also proves extremely significant. It acted as a practical barrier, and a physical presence, whilst also operating on a discursive level, vital for calling upon an intimate and most likely intuitive knowledge of the value of 'otherness to particular audiences... to appeal to the rapidly changing psychology or social needs or spectators.'¹⁹⁴ Doris is not, however, a bride, but a performer and a touring act.

According to the *Mail* and the *Evening Gazette*, in 1934 there were three 'rival' Starving Bride shows at Blackpool.¹⁹⁵ One at 'the White House, another ran by a Mr Chapman', and most notoriously, the Starving Bride shows of Luke Gannon.¹⁹⁶ Gannon was however, unique in his profound defiance of the authorities and in his presence in the media as a proprietor of these shows. He was the most dogged by the authorities and made an example of, whilst making a profitable name for himself. The boundaries between starving body and audience were continuously manipulated and modified by Gannon, eliciting an

¹⁹² *The World's Fair*, 27 January 1934.

¹⁹³ *The World's Fair*, 6 January 1934. The short time lapse between fasts not only denotes an impressive threshold of endurance, but shows the movement of fasting females around fairs and opportunities for display.

¹⁹⁴ Kember, 'The Functions of Showmanship', p. 3

¹⁹⁵ 'Starving Bridal Couples in British Sideshowes', *The Mail*, 13 October 1934, p. 3.

¹⁹⁶ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 22 October 1934; *The Straits Times*, 28 October 1934, p. 7.

appreciation for the deep morbid, ideological resonances such a display would create with its audience. By 1935, Starving Bride shows were displayed by Gannon in all-glass cabinets. Evidence of the interior display is offered by a photograph of one of Gannon's brides asleep in her glass cabinet, isolated by glass panels [Figure 1]. Ogling crowd members peer down at the sleeping bride, their faces reflecting back at them on the thick glass which encapsulates the starving female. As described in 1934 by the *Mail*,

The couples lie in single beds separated by a wall within glass cases. The morbid' curiosity of the public is stimulated by revolting advertisements eulogising the courage of the fasting couples on going straight from the wedding breakfast to a 'coffin.' Another declares that the honeymooners are starving for love... A shop front shows waxwork brides, one radiant and the other in a bed ragged wedding dress, with corpse-like lineaments...Pallid couples are sleeping the sleep of exhaustion.¹⁹⁷

Further descriptions of the cabinets portray them as approximately 8ft. long, by 3 ft. wide, and 3ft. 6 ins. in depth. At the head end is a shelf, upon which lemonade and cigarettes could be kept.¹⁹⁸

It is this consciously constructed choice of female display that proves unique during Gannon's time at Blackpool. He not only brings a regular travelling show to a permanent tourist location, but chooses a particular character for starvation; the Starving Bride. Gannon's move to glass is arguably one of practicality but also poignancy. The fragility of the glass cabinet, which stands in stark materialistic contrast to the barrels, could not be rolled. Glass elicited a type of fragility contrasting the brutish barrels, with glass asking of its audience a different kind of interaction - one of intimate observation. Furthermore, Gannon's glass cabinets were inside his New Brunswick building, with signage and props required to compensate for no longer presenting acts out front. These considerations, made by Gannon,

¹⁹⁷ Starving Bridal Couples in British Sideshows', *The Mail*, 13 October 1934, p. 3.

¹⁹⁸ The National Archives, Entertainment: Exhibitions of persons fasting (Ref: HO 45/16275). Kew, London.

demonstrate the way in which he actively negotiated the authority's oppositions, such as structural licensing, through material display whilst always considering the audience's desire for entertainment.

Notably, unlike the professional starving artists such as the Great Sacco and the females who occupied Gannon's early barrels as identified individuals, the brides are seldom reported, if ever, with their name. According to writers for *The Mail*, 'proprietors of the sideshow canvass the country seeking couples who are unable to marry and offer them engagements.'¹⁹⁹ It would appear, therefore, that brides were neither local nor recognised performers, but ordinary members of the public who engaged in an economic exchange. The exchange taking place between Gannon and his brides took the form of the women offering their bodies for money. This in itself has a sexual connotation. Yet, the presentation of 'Starving *Brides*' heightens the sexual charge of the subsequent exchange between watched and watcher; bride and audience. It creates a disruptive and disturbing conflict of connotations where romance and intimacy are elicited themes, but also a disturbed scenario of offering one's body to public suffering and subjectification for money.²⁰⁰

What Gannon created was a display which both touched upon things readable and socially familiar, whilst also maintaining a degree of unsettlement, disruption, and thus, entertainment. This may be understood further when considering that it is not merely the body that is on display, but, as Rudkin usefully phrases, 'starvation places humanity's bodily economy on display.'²⁰¹ Approaching self-starvation as 'performance' requires acknowledgment of the 'universality of starvation's biological process.'²⁰² Following this,

¹⁹⁹ Starving Bridal Couples in British Sideshows', *The Mail*, 13 October 1934, p. 3.

²⁰⁰ As noted by Purce, 'Scales of Normality', p. 686, 'The Starving Brides...exposed the lengths to which some people went to provide for their families.'

²⁰¹ Hayley Rudkin [review], Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Duke University Press, 2010), *Cultural Studies Review* 18.1 (2012), p. 309.

²⁰² Rudkin, [review], 'Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted*', p. 309.

Rudkin acknowledges the conflicts that may occur within an audience, specifically as witnesses to acts of self-starvation.

Anderson argues that the observation of a starving body's wasted flesh is fundamentally altered by the knowledge that the subject has deliberately starved themselves. Not only does this knowledge change the observer's comprehension of the starving subject's relationship with the world, but also transforms the observer's understanding of their own position as a witness to this act.²⁰³

Witnessing the process of starvation, due to its universality as a human condition, elicits empathy. However, 'the meaning of this empathetic connection is unsettled by the starving subject's perverse wish to destroy the body at the heart of it.'²⁰⁴ There is therefore, *intentionality* as a point of unsettlement.

Multiple readings of 'intention' can be observed through Gannon's exhibits. There are, in Gannon's display, clear descriptions of intentions for fasting. For example, a huge billboard over the sideshow in Brunswick Street declares, 'HONEYMOON COUPLE STARVES FOR LOVE.'²⁰⁵ Single brides are described in endearing terms, such as 'The Lovely Bride lies here starving.'²⁰⁶ Props therefore emphasise the overcoming of hunger, intensifying a morbid curiosity to see actors suffer with the intentionality of love [Figure 2].²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Rudkin, [review], 'Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted*', p. 309.

²⁰⁴ Rudkin, [review], 'Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted*', p. 309.

²⁰⁵ *Biggleswade Chronicle*, 25 August 1933, p. 3.

²⁰⁶ *Biggleswade Chronicle*, 25 August 1933, p. 3.

²⁰⁷ Figure 2: Visitors to Colonel Barker's 'strange honeymoon', Blackpool, from the Mass Observation 'Worktown' study (1937-40). Image copyright Bolton Library and Museum. Next door can be seen the famous palmist's stall.

Figure 2: Visitors to Colonel Barker's 'strange honeymoon', Blackpool, from the Mass Observation 'Worktown' study (1937-40). Image copyright Bolton Library and Museum.



However, there is also the explicit intention of making money. This is linked to ‘love’, as this money is purportedly either to enable a couple to marry, or, to support a newly-wed couple. For example, in an apparent case of failed starving exhibitionism, one sign declares, ‘THE STARVING BRIDE CANNOT NOW WIN £250’, however audience members are given the chance to reimburse the bride’s efforts as ‘all profits of this day will be given to the starving bride.’²⁰⁸ It is exactly this intention within the performance that is conducive to the audience’s discomfort. It runs as an almost parallel tension to Rudkin’s observations, between empathy and consciousness of self-infliction; a conflict and disturbance between declarations for love and romance, and money and exhibitionism. An

²⁰⁸ *Biggleswade Chronicle*, 25 August 1933, p. 3.

insinuation of wedding night intimacy put on hold and put on display for profit reveals the complex dynamic between commercial potential and social convention.

Arguably, it is the intentionality that disturbs an audience's sense of empathy, as this empathy is rooted in the shared feeling of inescapable *suffering*. As described by Patrick Anderson in his work on self-starvation as performance, it 'obliges us to participate in the ethical imperative of the aesthetic encounter.'²⁰⁹ This link can be taken further when the performance and advertising is considered further. The 'natural' state of starving yet non-suffering, domestic bodies, a theme of early nineteenth-century fasting exhibits, was displaced by visibly suffering, uncomfortable bodies, placed in a highly contrived and uncomfortable environment. Furthermore, the contradictory idea of *intimacy on display* within the bride exhibition also stands as a complex feature in that the public and private sphere for women was changing. As will be explored in more detail in Chapter 2, the women who visited Blackpool in the 1930s were an emerging crowd of factory workers who, given the nature of their work, were experiencing a new sense of monetary independence.

The theme of suffering, tied to intentionality, is an important consideration for the more specific means of display employed by Gannon. Props emphasised the visibility of suffering tied to notions of starving for love. For example life-size cut-out pictures of a blushing bride, labelled 'as she was', were placed in a sequence of deprivation, with the final emaciated cut-out labelled 'as she is now'.²¹⁰ The clear reference to degradation elicits empathy and disturbance, creating a narrative for the audience to be part of should they enter the exhibition and see her 'as she is now'.²¹¹ The props acted as frontage for the paid corporeal display, acting in place of the starving bodies that Gannon once placed out on to the

²⁰⁹ Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, p. 83.

²¹⁰ *Biggleswade Chronicle*, 25 August 1933, p. 3.

²¹¹ *Biggleswade Chronicle*, 25 August 1933, p. 3.

street itself after 1933. They were not only ‘a verbal or figurative indication of the show that was inside...but a fairground performative designed to bring in the audience.’²¹² Moreover, the act demanded actions and thus transformed passers-by from ‘vaguely curious into more serious gazers.’²¹³

The materiality of the glass cabinet also plays a vital role in Gannon’s display. Firstly, an all-glass cabinet emphasises a desire to observe and examine. Ultimately, Gannon utilized props to emphasis suffering and suppression, satisfying an identified ‘rapidly changing psychology or social needs of spectators.’²¹⁴ It pushes the visibility to the fore, stifling sound and smell, and inviting ocular scrutiny. In this way, Gannon’s display reflects the practices of the fasting maidens, where ‘watches’ ensuring no food had been secretly consumed were fundamental to the spectacular seeing of the fasting body. Furthermore, an all-glass cabinet ensured that suffering of the body, be it through emancipation or discomfort, was heightened for the spectator. This is further articulated by the fact that spectators would channel inside through Gannon’s sideshow space, able to peer over in close proximity to the horizontal figure.

Horizontality is also a key consideration of Gannon’s display. Joyce, in her glass infused barrel, was saved from the complete visibility of the glass cases of Starving Brides. She was not, as with later brides, laid down and was not, presumably, in a state of ‘exhaustive sleep.’²¹⁵ It may be that this early barrel/glass structure allowed crowds to remain in complete intrigue to the point of peering. This desire for horizontal display, and the sleep state as seen

²¹² Kathryn Hoffman, ‘Sleeping Beauties in the Fairground: The Spitzner, Pedley, and Chemisé’, *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4:2 (2006), pp. 140-141.

²¹³ Hoffman, ‘Sleeping Beauties in the Fairground’, pp. 140-141.

²¹⁴ Kember, ‘The Functions of Showmanship’, p. 3.

²¹⁵ Hoffman, ‘Sleeping Beauties in the Fairground’, p. 141.

in photographs, may be equated with the ‘sleeping beauties’ of the late nineteenth and mid twentieth century, also displayed in glass cabinets.²¹⁶ As Hoffman describes,

From the late nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, strollers through European fairgrounds were liable to chance upon pretty young women, dressed in white satin, reclining on silk-draped beds. Some lay in state in glass coffins, resembling, at first glance, improbably displaced relics. Passers-by surely walked into the entrances and onto the verandas of fairground buildings and hovered over the crystal cases, under the falsely watchful gaze of carved or trompe-l’oeil caryatids. They peered at the pretty sleepers, likely trying to determine whether the case housed real flesh or wax, a live girl or an anatomical model.²¹⁷

Hoffman reveals ways in which ‘the sites of spectacle...shared techniques of display...merged public knowledge, popular entertainment, death memorial and fairground.’²¹⁸ These sleeping females were not merely the enactment of fairy-tale fantasy, but were also demonstrative of memorial photography emerging at the time. Photographs produced for private memorial and mourning, as well as sometimes public consumption, either depicted staged actors or real deceased figures. Notably, in this photographic genre, female figures wore white satin, silk and tulle and Hoffman suggests that sleeping beauties and memorial photography intermingled in an audience’s experiential understanding. Bodies continuously slipped between ‘realms’, likened to Grosz’s assertion in the ‘body’s ability to seep beyond domains of control...to extend frameworks which attempt to control them.’²¹⁹ This included the realm of death and decay, with the glass cabinets analogous to a coffin, extracted from the ground and brought into view. In a similar way, there is an emphasised sense of potential morbidity in the horizontal position of the Starving Brides, particularly when contrasted to the upright barrels.

²¹⁶ *Biggleswade Chronicle*, 25 August 1933, p. 3.

²¹⁷ Hoffman, ‘Sleeping Beauties in the Fairground’, p. 141.

²¹⁸ Hoffman, ‘Sleeping Beauties in the Fairground’, p. 141.

²¹⁹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. xi.

Hoffman's observation of a displayed body's ability to slip between 'realms' opens up the starving brides' temporal and worldly uncertainty. It builds upon an already identified liminality, and the tensions which pull around the displayed body- those between love and sex, intimacy and exposure, life and death- with new found tensions of linear time, and a created temporal structure of Gannon's fashioning. Crucially this is best understood when examining the glass cabinet.

Jessica Tiffin, in her analysis of glass in fairy tale literature, notes the paradoxical nature of glass. Glass is at once enclosed and revealing, transparent and containing, invisible and entrapping, solid yet constantly shifting.²²⁰ In reference to 'The Glass Coffin' from Grimm's Household Tales, in which a young woman is rendered immobile by enchanting music and confined in a glass coffin awaiting disenchantment, Elizabeth Hopkinson notes important tale features, introduced through her confinement in glass.²²¹ For example, and in line with Tiffin's observation, speechlessness is enforced upon the confined female. Secondly, Hopkinson notes the 'purity of their enchanted state', observing that 'rather than being degraded they seem to have been glorified.'²²² Hopkinson identifies this glorification in the process by which the 'enchanted ones have almost become works of art in themselves.'²²³

This notion of transference from a living body to a 'work of art', elicited by a state of sleep and confinement to a glass case, presents temporal tensions in relation to starving brides as paradoxes between agency and subjection, temporal and the atemporal bodily state are made apparent. For example, unlike the enchanted females of Grimm's glass coffin, time

²²⁰ Jessica Tiffin, 'Ice, Glass, Snow: Fairy Tale as Art and Metafiction in the Writing of A.S.Byatt', *Marvels and Tales* 20:1 (2009), p. 54.

²²¹ See Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Illustrated Works of the Brothers Grimm* (London: 1989), p. 680.

²²² Elizabeth Hopkinson, 'The Glass Coffin and The Ensorcelled Prince: An Asexual Reading', *Fairies and Fairy Tales* (April 2013), <https://druidlife.wordpress.com/2013/04/21/asexual-fairytales/> [accessed 25 August 2019].

²²³ Hopkinson, 'The Glass Coffin and The Ensorcelled Prince: An Asexual Reading'.

inside Gannon's glass case is not stood still. Although reports of Gannon's starving brides show that they observe periods of sleep and exhaustion, an acute awareness of the passing of time, as experienced by the encased body, is vital for the spectacle. Time produces an awareness of suffering, sensationalised in, for example, 'Sensational bulletins, such as "Bride-groom Sinking Fast"...chalked, on the pavement.'²²⁴ Linear time and its effects on the human body are explicit within the exhibition. The starving brides must be presented as within the world, subject to risk of suffering from starvation, like the audience, subject to the passing of linear time.

There is, however, also a distinct element of atemporality. This is evident as the brides' immobilisation prevents them from developing into wives. They are confined in a liminal state as connotations of purity and sacrifice of self, emphasised by the white dress and bound to the traditional rite of passage, are suspended. The use of white gowns suggests virginity and the point displayed may be that of suspension of entrance into marriage and therefore sexual relationships. Dress and glass are in materialistic dialogue as time is simultaneously and effectively passing, yet progression is frozen. This frozen state, a state of atemporality, also exposes the brides to a realm of assertive agency. Tiffin observes that:

Women in glass coffins...enclose not only women and place, but narratives...only released when glass is broken and the women tell them...preserving solitude and distance, staying cold and frozen, may, for some women, as well as artists, be a way of preserving life.²²⁵

This preservation of life comes from a resistance to the passage of time and thus the passage of ownership to another through marriage. Furthermore, one can consider that starving has a depleting effect on the female figure and fertility, as fasting is linked to the stopping of menstruation and smaller breasts. It can be viewed as a way of defying female biological

²²⁴ Starving Bridal Couples in British Sideshows', *The Mail*, 13 October 1934, p. 3.

²²⁵ Tiffin, 'Ice, Glass, Snow', p. 54.

expectations. The act of depleting feminine attributes, inflicted and controlled through starvation, were arguably a perceptible step back from the figure of fertile, womanly fulfilment. Glass coffins therefore retaliate against offering the female body to the purposes of fertility and to the transition from wife to mother.

In this way, starving is therefore at one and the same time an act of *devotion* and of *deviance*. Although Gannon's brides cannot be seen as suffering for God like their predecessors, they were promoted as devotional in that they were 'starving for love'.²²⁶ Their suffering was thus a disturbing act of devotion, played out in the realm of encapsulated and ever exhibited time, produced by Gannon through furnishings of dress and confinement. The element of deviance in delaying womanly fulfilment and, perhaps more fittingly for Gannon's brides, in removing themselves from social and gendered norms through the act of starving, demonstrates that starving could be used to assert agency over one's body and one's situation. For the brides, this is accentuated by the fact that they profited from their suffering and sought an opportunity to utilise the Blackpool sideshows.

On the other hand, the brides occupied a condensed space of highly gendered ascription. In recent feminist work, which addresses the contemporary approaches to anorexia, Grosz argues that 'the body can be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles.'²²⁷ Judith Butler points to the ways in which gender is marked upon a neutral body. The universal body exists as a 'politically neutral surface on which culture acts.'²²⁸ The ascribing of such marks of gender is a process of body-making, in that the body itself is a 'situation' constantly coming into being. Grosz reiterates this, stating that the body is the very 'stuff'

²²⁶ 'Starving Bridal Couples in British Sideshows', *The Mail*, 13 October 1934, p. 3.

²²⁷ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 40

²²⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 9.

of subjectivity and acts as a site where unintentional projections about the body and its role, particularly around ideas of gender, take place. It is these ‘cultural inscriptions that literally constitute bodies.’²²⁹ Moreover, she states that bodies ‘cannot be said to have signifiable existence prior to mark of gender.’²³⁰ This is interesting, as the brides were devoid of status in any real sense, being non-professional and merely labelled ‘brides’. It was their demarcation as bride that encapsulated their very existence on the Golden Mile and to the audiences who knew them as only such brides. Moreover, their horizontality, and the intimacy of the show being inside, denoted the domesticity and dominance of the brides who, desperate for money, were trapped inside an objectified space.

Furthermore, Butler’s analysis is highly relevant as, where the everyday ascribing of gender through discursive and cultural acts may be ever-present in daily life, in the sideshow it is not only present but pointedly presented. Arguably, the sideshow is the epitome of a space where ‘cultural act’ making takes place. This understanding becomes particularly poignant when one considers how the female body is, in fact, asserted through the very ‘stylization of body’ through ‘constitutive acts.’²³¹ The brides were highly stylised from the white dresses they wore to the settings they occupied.

Conclusion

In reflection, the above chapter has sought to establish the display and visible intricacies of the Gannon’s starving exhibits. In doing so, the space they occupied and the complex and often contradictory narratives this display created included the objectified and glorified, the power to profit at the cost of degradation and a corporeal weakened state, devotion and deviance. The intimacy elicited within the very public display infers ideas about the domestic space of the feminine against the once male dominated public leisure space. Butler’s claim

²²⁹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. x.

²³⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 10.

²³¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 45.

that it is through ‘compulsory frames set by various forces that police the social appearance of gender’ holds particular poignancy for the brides, who occupy real glass frames and are, as will be explored in the next chapters, continuously policed.²³² This policing is not merely a matter of enforcing the act of starvation, as seen in miraculous maidens, but one that relates to the moral, agentive potential of the Starving Brides exhibit.

The introduction of Butler, whilst highly relevant to a focused analysis of material matter of the brides’ exhibition, introduces the development of this thesis into the realm of the law. Shown through this chapter is the body’s identity and social significance as malleable within the sideshow display. However, the very cultural, intelligible ‘notions of identity’ that Gannon set up through the bridal bodies- for example through the white dress, the billboards, the horizontal positioning- were to become subject to another level of ascribing identity within the hands of the Blackpool authorities.²³³ Evidently, the brides not only occupied the sideshow space, but became part of the Golden Mile’s quest for identity and an increasingly policed agenda to maintain its national sense of place. Building on this understanding of the brides the next chapter carries these discourses, identified in the very materiality of the Starving Bride show, to consider how they play out when law and sideshow clash.

Gannon as a sideshow proprietor is pivotal in this meeting of sideshow and law. The contradictory state of the brides, revealed as one of asserted yet encased agency, becomes even more complex when one considers their wider social significance and their longevity as a form of entertainment- or lack of it. Importantly, as will be explored in the remainder of this thesis, through the consideration of their plight and Gannon’s process of resistance to the authorities, an understanding of the complex and often contradictory ways in which bodies

²³² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 45.

²³³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 10.

may become 'passive recipients of the inexorable law' is discovered.²³⁴ The sideshow as a site of intense bodily productivity, where bodies are continuously presented and re-presented, allows the consideration of these bodies as unstable and highly malleable.

Furthermore, having acknowledged the significant relations between Gannon as creator, starving bride as actor and glass cabinet as structure, it is important to consider the audience. This is significant in not only dealing with sideshows as spaces of public consumption and entertainment, but also the glass cabinet displaying an act of starvation. For example, Jane Nicholas acknowledges Grosz's drive to view anorexia as a form of patriarchal protest. However, she takes this further in noting that 'some anorexics perform their bodies and, subsequently, draw in discussion the participation of the audience- those who watch and who participate the surveillance of the thin body.'²³⁵ It is the audience who hold agency in 'recognising our implication.'²³⁶ This links to Rudkin who observes that, 'in seeking to determine the meaning of a starved body, our own position as witnesses inevitably becomes intertwined with questions of power.'²³⁷ Anderson too affirms this in the context of starvation as performance, stating 'artist and audience collaborate in reflecting and determining the significance of a given representational form.'²³⁸ Notably, the relationship between watcher and watched was significantly structured and affected by the location of the brides' body in a glass case. The performance of the starving brides is particularly important to consider as a reciprocal *encounter*, permitted by the glass case. For example, it was not merely Mr Otley

²³⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 10.

²³⁵ Jane Nicholas, 'Hunger Politics: Towards Seeing Voluntary Self Starvation as an Act of Resistance', *Third Space: A Journal of Feminist Theory and Culture*, (Summer 2008), <http://journals.sfu.ca/thirdspace/index.php/journal/article/viewArticle/nicholas/215> [accessed March 2018].

²³⁶ Nicholas, 'Hunger Politics: Towards Seeing Voluntary Self Starvation as an Act of Resistance'.

²³⁷ Rudkin, [review] 'Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted*', pp. 308-31.

²³⁸ Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, pp. 82-83. A deeper analysis of the sideshow space as an encounter will be explored in Chapter 3.

who was captivated by Miss MacDonald's 1907 appearance, but 'she in turn was captivated by his appearance.'²³⁹

The appreciation of glass cases used by Gannon in 1930 allows for a greater insight into these complex encounters and exchanges that took place at this unsettling exhibition. This reiterates the sideshow space as generative, made up of constantly working components that are in 'motion.'²⁴⁰ Furthermore, it reveals how the distinct changes in Gannon's materiality of display, brought about by conflict with authorities, created new sites of negotiation. For example, the glass cabinet contrasts with the early barrels which granted fasting individuals contact with their spectators, as well as being viewable from passers-by out front of Gannon's sideshow space. The barrels, which were vulnerable to authoritative control by being placed out on the street, were brought inside. As will be seen in Chapter 2, just as Gannon adjusted these early barrel displays which were increasingly prone to conflict and contestation of the 'obstructive' variety, the authorities were forced to scrutinise his glass cabinets, now deep within his New Brunswick building, by entering into the space. Gannon therefore, through the materiality of his display, shifted the negotiations and created new sites of negotiation that forced the authorities to consider their own power over social and legal boundaries.

²³⁹ *The World's Fair*, 12 October 1907, p. 7.

²⁴⁰ Thiong'o, 'Enactments of Power', p. 13.

Chapter 2: Negotiating for power and a place on the Golden Mile

Introduction

Through this chapter, the audience here refers to those who visited Gannon's sideshow whilst crowd refers to growing number of people who visited Blackpool. Watcher and watched are part of a reciprocal encounter which challenges how agency is experienced within the act of starvation. Before considering the deep theoretical implications of this encounter however, it is first necessary to understand who this audience was and where this crowd made from. The expansion of Blackpool was not a smooth transition, but a highly contested, competitive process and the nature of the increasing crowd was significant for these contentions and negotiations.

It is therefore important to explore the context of the crowd in this broad manner, with a general understanding of the physical and social landscape of Blackpool a useful point of reference. However, it is done so here in an attempt to better understand the detailed discourses that took place at Gannon's sideshow. Whilst the overall shifts in Blackpool's crowd numbers and character are observable from a general viewpoint, Gannon's encounters and the role of the brides in bringing to the fore particular discourses, allows for a more nuanced understanding of what these wider socio-cultural shifts meant. The sideshow, as a site that provokes conflict, offers a means of exploring what may be seen as general shifts in Blackpool, as a process of intense negotiation between multiple groups of people with competing visions and incentives behind Blackpool's place-making.

A new crowd in Blackpool

With changes to working patterns and the availability of rail transport, the twentieth century introduced a time of profound transformation, creating a new type of crowd. During the early nineteenth century, visitor numbers to Blackpool at the height of the season escalated from

around 1,000 in 1830 to 3,000 in 1840.²⁴¹ But in the twentieth century, it is estimated that, in 1910, Blackpool had four million visitors a year, by the 1930s seven million visitors flocked to the resort each season.²⁴² During the nineteenth century these came primarily from the Lancashire towns and villages but now, although this did remain Blackpool's primary crowd, visitors from farther afield increased in number.²⁴³ It was the regional working class, however, that shaped the progression of Blackpool as, by its sheer volume, it offered financial opportunities for many and commanded an entertainment industry as strong as the crowd itself.²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Peter Borsay, 'Health and Leisure Resorts 1700-1840', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain Volume 2 1520-1840*, ed. by Peter Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 778.

²⁴² Arthur, 'Blackpool Goes All-Talkie: Cinema and Society at the Seaside in Thirties Britain', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 29:1 (2009), p. 29; Gary S. Cross and John K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 6.

²⁴³ Chapter 1 references an article in the *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 26 July 1935 that articulates the trans-national interests into the new-found tourist industry. According to the article, Britain received 25,000 tourists a year with the focus of the article being, "Can Blackpool attract some?". A report from the US Department of Commerce is quoted, offering a breakdown of what it is tourists spend their money on. It was found that 14% of tourist spending went on "theatre and entertainment".

²⁴⁴ John K. Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays in Victorian England', *The Economic History Review* 34:2 (1981), p. 251. Walton observes that Blackpool was the most rapidly expanding resort of the late nineteenth century, because this was 'where the working-class presence was most strongly felt.' Blackpool's adaptability to this allowed its expansion.

Figure 3: Reuben Saidman, 'A train load of visitors arriving at Blackpool railway station, Lancashire, 1937', Daily Herald Archive / National Science & Media Museum / Science & Society Picture Library, Image Ref 10324945.



The Lancashire mills presented Blackpool with a crowd unlike any other [Figure 3].²⁴⁵ The textile industry provided income for most ages and both genders, as mill-work offered good wages from an early age as well as some of the highest wages for working women in the country.²⁴⁶ This benefitted the Blackpool tourist industry as those who were married with children accumulated more income with each child who was able to start work early, and those who were single, even women, were financially stable enough to still participate in leisure activities.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Figure 3: Reuben Saidman, 'A train load of visitors arriving at Blackpool railway station, Lancashire, 1937', Daily Herald Archive / National Science & Media Museum / Science & Society Picture Library, Image Ref 10324945.

²⁴⁶ Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays', p. 251; Arthur, 'Blackpool Goes All Talkie', p. 29; Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, p. 6; Curnow, 'The Growth of Blackpool as a Health and Holiday Resort', in *A Scientific Survey of Blackpool and District*, ed. by A. Grime (Manchester, 1978).

²⁴⁷ Walton, *The Blackpool Landlady*, pp. 32-33; Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays', p. 253; Gurney, "'Intersex" and "Dirty Girls": Mass-Observation and Working-Class Sexuality in England in the 1930s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8:2 (1997), p. 272.

Secondly, holidays agreed in advance between employers and workers were increasingly favoured over workers taking short spells of disjointed leave. This allowed employees to save up and spend accumulated money over a long weekend or a week, in a more concentrated timeframe.²⁴⁸ The weeks taken by workers were staggered through July and August, thus allowing the development of a season designed around the working class.²⁴⁹ Blackpool as the twentieth century centre of entertainment was, therefore, created out of a combination of geographical, social and economic factors, exploited by Blackpool's developing advertising industry.

This substantial crowd was a cause for great excitement and apprehension in Blackpool, expressed by both permanent residents and local governing authorities. A wary yet eager approach to the crowd was shaped by an anticipation of the moral and cultural character of this new mass.²⁵⁰ Notably, the crowd not only shaped Blackpool, but also infiltrated it, pushing against its physical and moral boundaries.

In their inherent structure as artificial, but relatively open environments, they created a flowing, even potentially promiscuous, crowd that required special efforts to regulate and control and frequently raised the question of whether these throngs threatened rational self-restraint and other prized values of modern civilization.²⁵¹

Here, the physical landscape of Blackpool is linked to the creation of the crowd, as the 'flow' of people through its townscape contrasts the effort or resistance pushed against it by struggles of regulation. The structure of the landscape and the structure of the crowd itself were both simultaneously open- as the rail links opened the gates to self-governed travel and the anonymity of the flowing crowd allowed visitors to move through Blackpool freely-and

²⁴⁸ See Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays', p. 256 for full detail of development of holidays through nineteenth century. Also Kathryn Ferry, *The British Seaside Holiday*, (Oxford, 2009).

²⁴⁹ Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays', p. 256.

²⁵⁰ Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, pp. 7-8.

²⁵¹ Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, p. 5.

regulated, as the crowds were distinctly identified as outsiders and the townscape facilitated an ushering of this crowd. The crowd is positioned as not only a danger to Blackpool's moral compass, but also as possessing the ability to stand against and in contrast to modern civilisation.²⁵²

Notably, Cross and Walton go on to highlight the crowd as a product of human societies. The crowd was as created alongside the sites of pleasure they occupied, with the seaside resort a major shift in these.²⁵³ In doing so, they highlight the Blackpool visitors as a playful crowd, whose threat was not perceived to be political by the authorities, but 'threatening culturally and morally...(as) The rise in seaside resorts minimised threat of disorder or mass violence in celebrations, but worried critics concerned with shallowness, vapidty and immorality of mass entertainments.'²⁵⁴ The crowd was therefore, not merely a collective of people, but a discursively created mass defined by those outside it. Moreover, at Blackpool, the cultural and moral concern was directly linked to the crowd's engagement with entertainment.

Concern over the moral health of the British public in the form of 'indecenty' had deep religious roots but began to emerge as a more secular concern from the eighteenth century.²⁵⁵ This secularisation was reflected in the power structures surrounding indecenty, increasingly managed by non-religious institutions, including the police, in the nineteenth and

²⁵² Cox's analysis of 'indecenty' describes this on a more general scale during this period, stating that indecenty, 'threatened the health and stability of communities and the nation as a whole.' David J. Cox, Kim Stevenson, Candida Harris, Judith Rowbotham (eds), *Public Indecency in England 1857-1960: A Serious and Growing Evil*, (New York, 2015), p. 4.

²⁵³ Scott Martin [review], 'Gary S. Cross and John K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005)', *Journal of Social History* 40.3 (2007), p. 755.

²⁵⁴ Martin [review], 'Gary S. Cross and John K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure in the Twentieth Century*', p. 755.

²⁵⁵ Cox et al, *Public Indecency in England 1857-1960*, p. xvii.

twentieth centuries. The issue of controlling indecent behaviour was taken into the hands of politicians and legislators, who were forced to respond to public pressure.²⁵⁶

David Cox illuminates the link between the moral compass of the crowd and entertainment between 1857 and 1959.²⁵⁷ He asserts that the performance of acts, particularly of an obscene or sexual nature, aroused fear as they held the potential to ‘incite others to imitation.’ Performances held the potential to escalate low-level crime and thus destabilise and sabotage first local areas, and thus the nation.²⁵⁸ What was consumed by the public in terms of visible performances was linked to behaviour, and performances were seen to hold a strong potentiality for moral corruption.

The link between performance and crowd control was not only feared as a possible incitement of ‘imitation’, but the very consumption of such indecent performances declared a lack of taste which reflected an unsound moral character within. The outward observable behaviour of the public was perceived as a sign of their internal moral health.²⁵⁹ Consumption of disreputable entertainment was ‘a genuine threat to the national character- to “Britishness”’.²⁶⁰ Performances consumed by the public were thus considered dangerous on an intimate level of *imitation*, a dangerous transference that relied upon the relationship between performer and observer. But they were also dangerous on a much wider scale in the form of *reflection*, firstly as a reflection of the observer’s moral character and more widely as an indication of the state of British decency. It was deemed necessary to manage these threats through changes in legislation and new power structures. For Blackpool, whose wealth

²⁵⁶ Cox et al, *Public Indecency in England 1857-1960*, p. 4.

²⁵⁷ These dates reflect the implementation of the Obscene Publications Act.

²⁵⁸ Cox et al, *Public Indecency in England 1857-1960*, p. xviii.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

depended on its entertainment industry, this careful management of reputation was particularly important.

Evidently therefore, as well as scrutiny of legislative powers there was a need to scrutinise the crowd itself. The potential of the working class crowd to be defined by those outside it was clearly evident in 1937, when social scientists tried to document the behaviour and social life of the Blackpool working class holiday-goers through the emerging anthropological technique of Mass Observation.²⁶¹ The exercise was driven by an increased interest in the subject of anthropology, specifically an anthropology of working-class British habits and behaviours. Born from two anthropological advocates, Tom Harrison and Charles Madge, Mass Observation represented a shift from the study of far off cultures to the ‘science of ourselves.’²⁶² In parallel with the preoccupation of upholding the ‘civilised’ crowd, described earlier, new anthropological endeavours sought to expose the savage and civilised rhetoric and re-establish the individual within an understanding of self-hood that was uncompromised by its own cultural blueprint. In doing so, the commonality shared by humans across cultures would be revealed.²⁶³

Despite the intention to observe ‘facts’, Mass Observation was driven by an unintended but undeniable agenda to map out certain assumed ideologies.²⁶⁴ For example, there was an underlying assumption that the working-class visit to Blackpool was a kind of release and driven by an ever-present sense of ‘repression.’²⁶⁵ With this in mind, the observers went out of their way to seek promiscuous, out-of-control behaviours. Notably

²⁶¹ Gurney, ‘Intersex and “Dirty Girls”’, p. 261.

²⁶² Penny Summerfield, ‘Mass-Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 20:3 (1985), pp. 440- 441.

²⁶³ Gurney, ““Intersex” and “Dirty Girls””, p. 257.

²⁶⁴ Gurney, ““Intersex” and “Dirty Girls””, p. 270. For further analysis on Mass Observation see Annabella Pollen, ‘Shared Ownership and Mutual Imaginaries: Researching Research in Mass Observation’, *Sociological Research Online* (August 2014), <https://journals-sagepub-com.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.5153/sro.3317> [accessed 29 March 2019]. Penny Summerfield, ‘Mass-Observation’, pp. 439- 452.

²⁶⁵ Gurney, ““Intersex” and “Dirty Girls””, p. 261.

however, these behaviours were not as evident as predicted and were therefore more a reflection of middle-class fears about the working class, rather than knowledge of the working class reality. Such assumptions could be seen to reflect a misinterpretation of humour and irony that was more explicit towards sexual behaviours in working class traditional entertainment.²⁶⁶

Fears around promiscuous behaviours were especially expressed towards women, even when directly contested by the evidence:

Mass Observation had to conclude reluctantly that young working-class women were unlikely to have intercourse unless they were having a steady relationship and concluded that this was due to female restraint- "To most mill-girls sex is still definitely linked to the idea of marriage and courtin".²⁶⁷

Historians have credited this social norm to a number of factors that mainly revolve around the work offered by the Lancashire textile industry.²⁶⁸ The nature of work meant women were able to maintain independence till an older age, and so exhibited a higher marriage age and lower fertility than anywhere else in the country.²⁶⁹ Therefore, not only was the Mass Observation troublesome for reasons of ethics and privacy, with observers recorded as acting drunk and falling on top of courting couples under the pier to 'have a feel' of what was

²⁶⁶ Gurney, "'Intersex'" and "'Dirty Girls'", p. 269. This misinterpretation Gurney ascribes to a failure to uphold Clifford Gertz anthropological ideas of selfhood, quoting Gertz: 'Rather than attempt to place the experience of others within the framework of such a conception, which is what the extolled "empathy" usually comes down to, we must, if we are to achieve understanding, set that conception aside and view their experiences within the framework of their own idea of what selfhood is.' Clifford Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cock Fight', in *Interpretive Social Science*, ed. by P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (Berkeley, 1979), p. 229.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 275. As will be shown, this cultural consciousness of marriage is arguably an important part of the Starving Brides as holding particular cultural resonances in Blackpool.

²⁶⁸ Gary Cross, 'Crowds and Leisure: Thinking Comparatively Across the 20th century', *Journal of Social History*, 39:3 (2006), pp. 631-650; Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays', p. 258; Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure in the Twentieth Century* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

²⁶⁹ Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure in the Twentieth Century*; Gurney, "'Intersex'" and "'Dirty Girls'", p. 272; Cross, 'Crowds and Leisure', pp. 631-650; Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays', p. 258

actually going on in the dark, but makes evident an underlying fear towards holiday-goers from the middle-classes.²⁷⁰

Ironically, as Penny Summerfield points out, the Mass Observation founders were in fact motivated by a sense of wanting to liberate ‘social consciousness’, which they believed to be stifled in the 1930s by those in power.²⁷¹ It was hoped that, in collecting and disseminating observed realities about people’s lives, a powerful sense of social consciousness could be rallied.²⁷² Critically however, Mass Observation tended to reduce its subjects to passive, misunderstood objects of study. As Gurney notes, ‘the preference for a static rather than a dynamic analysis, which raised issues of change and conflict, tended to isolate the working class and represent them as a passive object, albeit a somewhat quaint one.’²⁷³ Arguably, this projected passivity of the working class crowd is evident on a much wider scale beyond the Mass Observation. For example, the previously discussed fears around imitation of indecent performances, incited by merely observing them, denote a passive characterisation of the crowd with an inability to reason with morality without assistance.

The critique of a ‘static’ analysis of Blackpool’s visitors supports this thesis’ position in pursuing conflicts as a means of insight, with the twentieth century sideshow acting as a microcosm for wider negotiations taking place. Moreover, promoting a dynamic approach supports the notion of the ‘problem body’, understood as the process by which a body, or bodies, come to be categorised as problematic, and how this re-categorisation is defined, constructed, maintained and made real through regulatory changes. For example, implicit

²⁷⁰ Mass Observation Collection, The Blackpool History Centre, Worktown Collection, "Sex," box 56, pp. 26-27.

²⁷¹ Summerfield, ‘Mass-Observation’, p. 440.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 440.

²⁷³ Gurney, ““Intersex” and “Dirty Girls””, p. 262.

within the Mass Observation's positioning of the working class crowd was a form of 'othering', a process by which a group is distinguished as different in relation to another, often in a way that lacks self-reflexivity. As Gurney describes, for the Mass Observation, conducted by a team of Oxford researchers, the Blackpool crowd were measured through an understanding of self, dictated by a white, privileged male vantage point.²⁷⁴ Importantly, this lack of self-reflexivity inherently led to the negation of the agency of that group which was 'othered'. For the Blackpool working crowd, this manifested itself as a decapacitation of taste and decision making, primarily articulated in entertainment consumption, but that reflected wider decapacitation of moral character.²⁷⁵

Importantly, this type of 'othering' was implicit in the approach and measures taken by the Blackpool authorities towards controlling the new crowd. Moreover, 'othering' reiterated the crowd as a distinguished, defined collective group- a collective problem body. This collective body was defined and redefined by the authorities, isolating the visiting public and inherently leading to a 'blurring of mob and mass.'²⁷⁶ Evidently therefore, the crowd was subject to definition from the outside and was seen as a 'problem' for the local authorities in as much as they had the potential to behave in disruptive, unruly ways, which were detrimental to Blackpool's reputation.

Crucially, the way in which people were created into a collective problem body and thus defined as an abstract interpretation had implications for how such a grouping of people were not only perceived, but also subsequently dealt with by observers. In other words, how one defined the 'other' had direct consequences in terms of how the 'other' was perceived potentially to behave and thus, how the 'other' was treated. The working class crowd was

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

²⁷⁵ The idea of the 'other' is a prevalent theme within the freak show and will be explored in Chapter 3 in more detail.

²⁷⁶ Gurney, "Intersex" and "Dirty Girls", p. 263.

defined as a potential threat and problem to the local authorities, and consequently demanded the attention of new regulatory action. At the same time, the crowd presented opportunities for money-making and so demanded the attention of new advertising ventures and an increased interest in how to influence the interests of this profitable 'other'. Furthermore, the creation of both 'other' and of 'problem body' was intrinsically linked to constructions of self. In this case, this self was the creation of a Blackpool authority that possessed perpetual fears around sexual and moral downfall as the perceived passivity of the working class led to an eroticised view of the crowd. This eroticised view is expressed firstly by Mass Observers, who continuously sought out sexual misconduct and promiscuity. Secondly, it is expressed in the authorities who constantly sought to contain outlets of sexual activity, down to the very viewing of potentially charged entertainment.²⁷⁷

This cycle of crowd creation and a desire to regulate it is reflected in Blackpool's ever-changing approach to entertainment through the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.²⁷⁸ Blackpool needed to declare its modernity, pleasing its crowds each season with new, exciting experiences that enticed people to spend money on the spot in their typically week-long window of holiday.²⁷⁹ This meant staying up-to-date with developments in entertainment ahead of rival resorts and constantly plan how to transport, attract and maintain crowd numbers. In the 1930s this involved embracing developments in the 'talkies',

²⁷⁷ As a point of reflexivity, whilst I address the connotations of the Starving Brides show as a site of potential sexuality and excitement, and a highly gendered space, I do so by considering the materiality of the display as well as the ways in which these sexual and gendered discourses within the show are re-presented in wider conflicts around the show. As such, I remain self-aware of the historian's potential for what Helen Davies describes as seeing what contemporary culture 'wants to see' in the sideshow. Davies advocates for thinking 'beyond' merely asserting contemporary understandings of gender, sex and disability. I instead look at conflict in an attempt to evaluate the discursive and legislative ways these not only existed within a 'cultural moment', but as a process of making bodies. Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery*, p. 3.

²⁷⁸ Cross, 'Crowds and Leisure', pp. 631-650; Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, pp. 7-8; Gurney, "'Intersex'" and "'Dirty Girls'", pp. 265-290; Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays', p. 258.

²⁷⁹ Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays', p. 258; Cross, 'Crowds and Leisure', pp. 631-650.

the cinematic experience where dialogue accompanied visuals on screen.²⁸⁰ It also however, had to maintain its conventional roots as people had come to associate Blackpool with traditional forms of entertainment. One example of this in the 1930s was the Pavilion Variety Theatre, which continued to stage live variety in the evenings, but showed ‘talkies’ in the day time.²⁸¹ This demonstrated Blackpool’s 1930 juggling act, existing in the past and pushing forward to be progressive as it combined in its self-representation elements of past tradition and future novelty.

Arguably it was Blackpool’s paradoxical nature that established it as the fastest growing seaside resort in the 1930s. Cross describes people ‘drawn towards the assorted gambling places, pubs, musical performances, comedians, freak shows, fortune tellers, dancehalls, variety shows, Blackpool like Coney Island and other holiday destinations combined popular modernity, mass consumption and new collective experiences.’²⁸² It was a real mixture of entertainment made accessible in one place.

However, this coincidence of tradition and novelty did not evolve effortlessly. Blackpool was in a constant negotiation with itself, a process fraught with contradiction.²⁸³ It is evident that some forms of entertainment aroused more concern than others, as particular entertainments were associated with certain stereotypes. For example, the once locally orientated fairgrounds migrated and so relocated a community based festivity, through ‘mass exodus’ to the seaside.²⁸⁴ Sideshows and freak shows, once predominantly travelling acts going from town to town, became permanently situated by the sea and so an iconic part of the

²⁸⁰ Arthur, ‘Blackpool Goes All Talkie’, p. 29. Arthur argues that the conversion of cinemas to sound in 1929 and early 1930s is an example of Blackpool’s ability to respond to public demand and invest in the technology required.

²⁸¹ Arthur, ‘Blackpool Goes All Talkie’, p. 29.

²⁸² Cross, ‘Crowds and Leisure’, pp. 631-650.

²⁸³ Arthur, ‘Blackpool Goes All Talkie’, p. 27. As Arthur describes, ‘Blackpool juggled to reconcile the seemingly contradictory demands of providing the latest and the familiar.’

²⁸⁴ Walton, ‘The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays’, p. 258.

Blackpool landscape. Walton argues that such a move ‘made the seaside even more attractive to the less respectable elements among the working class.’²⁸⁵ At the same time, however, the embellishing of the Blackpool seaside with sideshows marked Blackpool out as being somewhat accommodating in the early 1930s, attracting crowds by harnessing ‘techniques from the World’s Fair to appeal to the plebeian crowd.’²⁸⁶ The apparent positives and drawbacks of the fairground’s new seaside location allowed Blackpool to thrive as a productive contradiction.

What occurred in Blackpool therefore was an influx, not only of workers from the surrounding areas to create a crowd, but also of entertainers to create a new culture. Blackpool’s mixing pot of traditional yet controversial content, alongside modern developments, stirred a heightened sense of moral activism. This reflected wider concerns in the early twentieth century, as the rise in wages, literacy and rights of the working class blurred the lines in what Cox describes as ‘the highbrow values of modernism and radicalism, and the considerably lower-brow but equally problematic influences of commercialism.’²⁸⁷ Significantly, Cox describes a fight to protect and preserve ‘their (moral upholders’) diminishing moral space in the face of a new popular culture.’²⁸⁸ In Blackpool, this moral, figurative space was being negotiated through real, tangible spaces particularly along the Golden Mile. As will be shown in more detail, Gannon had to continuously negotiate his visibility and his space on the Golden Mile with both the Blackpool authorities and moral protest groups. The wider concerns over crowd morality and its link to consumption of entertainment is an important context for understanding these negotiations.

²⁸⁵ Walton, ‘The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays’, p. 258.

²⁸⁶ Martin [review], ‘Gary S. Cross and John K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 754-756.

²⁸⁷ Cox et al, *Public Indecency in England 1857-1960*, p. 103.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Cox also makes a distinction between ‘organised’ public entertainment, such as theatre and cinema, and ‘less-organised’ leisure activities such as drinking.²⁸⁹ Both required legal regulation under the umbrella of indecency, however there was a continuous underlying confusion about how to deal with differing acts of indecency. Arguably, Gannon and his *Starving Bride* exhibits encapsulate this confusion, existing on the cusp of organised and less-organised entertainment. As a rent payer, Gannon’s shows were under the control of certain regulations, seen clearly in his early run-ins with the law, where cases of obstruction were brought against him.²⁹⁰ In terms of content, however, Gannon’s show was somewhat unpredictable. This unpredictability was exaggerated as the *Starving Bride* shows involved ‘regular’ people starving for money, not professional acts with well-known celebrity status. Furthermore, unlike cinema or theatre, the crowd were not separated from the performance by stage conventions, nor was the act to follow a definite script. Rather, visitors were observers were very much integrated into the sideshow space. All of this was ‘organised’ by a showman who valued the intrigue of his audience over his reputation amongst Blackpool’s authorities and moral activists, which he only considered when necessary. Gannon was therefore the epitome of Blackpool’s identity struggles and contradictions.

A call for new measures under the Blackpool Improvement Bill in 1940 specifically named sideshows as disreputable on the basis that they were out-of-time with Blackpool’s visions of itself. It pushed for new developments that would ‘clear away many buildings which are not a credit to a progressive resort and to do away with the sideshows on central beach. This they have been endeavouring to do for years.’²⁹¹ In 1936 C.A. MacKay, the Blackpool Corporation’s Attractions Manager, insisted that ‘We should adopt the methods of

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁹⁰ See Chapter 1.

²⁹¹ Quote from G.F. Burton, Vice Chancellor of Publicity Committee, in an advertisement printed in the *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 1 January 1938, held in Mass Observation files at Blackpool History Centre, Reel 41 Box 53C, Blackpool Improvement Bill.

the Pleasure Beach. Get rid of Victorian styles. This is the reign of Edward the Eighth.²⁹² It is therefore interesting to consider how Blackpool sought to appease its ‘plebeian’ audience which, for economic reasons, it still desired, but also to ‘do away’ with particular acts inherently linked to working class traditional entertainment.²⁹³

Show content and crowd control

The above section sought to better establish an understanding of the Blackpool crowd and the issues such a new mass created for local authorities. In doing so, it touched upon the importance of the entertainment industry as a site of concern and commercial interest. The significance of the entertainment industry can, however, be developed further by an increased appreciation of the ways in which individual entertainment entrepreneurs, such as Gannon, were regulated. The regulation of such entertainments, and the complex negotiations that ensued in debating their presence on the Golden Mile, positions a nexus between the crowd in Blackpool, the authorities who sought to control it and the organisers of unique entertainments.

Blackpool was constantly reimagining itself, a self-reflexive exercise that was expressed as authorities negotiated what entertainment was, and should be, available. Fundamental to understanding how such reimagining’s became concrete- both in legislation and in the very landscape of Blackpool’s Golden Mile- is an appreciation of the constant negotiations that took place. The profound role the crowd played in shaping Blackpool, with its particular power existing in the anticipation and anxiety it aroused in the middle class, was significant. However, approaching the apparent moral anxieties, made tangible in changes to

²⁹² Walton, *Riding on Rainbows*, p. 44.

²⁹³ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 1 January 1938, held in Mass Observation files at Blackpool History Centre, Reel 41 Box 53C, Blackpool Improvement Bill; Martin [review], ‘Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, p. 755.

Blackpool regulation, as a two-sided relationship between the authorities and the crowd means that a significant vantage point is missing- that of the sideshow organisers.

It is important to consider how the authorities sought to control the crowd through policing and regulation of show content itself. This means appreciating the role of entertainment organisers in negotiations between crowd control and authorities. The organisers of different sites and types of entertainment were constantly in compromise with one another as they competed amongst themselves for the crowd's attention, as well as in discussion with Blackpool authorities for access to space and content. These negotiations were fuelled by concerns over whom such entertainment should attract, how such entertainment might influence the spectator's behaviour and how this behaviour represented Blackpool.

Furthermore, a little used approach is to consider how individual occupiers of the Golden Mile were restricted, appreciating that each posed a unique problem and produced differing anxieties that required regulation of varying degrees. It can be misleading to start with evidence of regulatory changes and impose an overview of how this impacted the shows during the period. Rather, it is important to consider the hard negotiations that took place between entertainment entrepreneurs over time, as each negotiation occurred in unique ways, shaping each show and regulation in return. Freak shows for example, did continue to some degree along the Golden Mile throughout the twentieth century. Alfred Gregory notes the 'Palace of Strange Girls' show in the 1960's, which showed girls contoured and disproportioned by mirrors and effects.²⁹⁴ However, the Starving Brides in the early 1930s were a point of clear contention and increasingly intolerable for the authorities. The Brides were thus a unique phenomenon and produced negotiations that played out distinctively

²⁹⁴ Alfred Gregory, *Blackpool: A Celebration of the Sixties* (London, 1993).

between Gannon and the authorities. Considering this one show thus narrows the starting point and illuminates how the Starving Brides are distinctive in what they reveal about their point in context. There were of course broad legislations that sought to encompass control over entertainment, such as alcohol licensing. However, how entertainers responded to early legislative intervention and negotiated through this was always particular to the individual case.

It is important to note that although the implementing of regulations and interventions are focussed on here, Blackpool's local government was not an enemy to entertainment. On the contrary, Blackpool in this period had a governance approach that supported the flood of entertainment. This included its position towards land ownership, as well as its strong involvement in advertising. Blackpool's Municipal Corporation, created in 1876, took exceptional interest in comparison to other resorts to the promotion of its entertainment industry, setting up an Advertising Committee who lead the way in resort advertising right throughout the early twentieth century.²⁹⁵ Furthermore, despite the perpetual fears towards the working class crowd and its moral compass, Blackpool as a site of sin and illicit sex was 'emphasised by town council and leisure entrepreneurs...in an effort to create a naughty vulgar allure.'²⁹⁶ Therefore, the authority's prominent role in advertising not only supported Blackpool's broader reputation as a place of popular entertainment, but went as far as to sexualise Blackpool and its appeal. This sexualisation was achieved both in the entertainments made available but also in the very process of crowd creation discussed previously. Entertainment, crowd creation and Blackpool reputation were in constant contact as it gained status as a place where more liberal behaviours could be exhibited and indulged in.

²⁹⁵ Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, p. 27.

²⁹⁶ Gurney, "'Intersex' and 'Dirty Girls'", p. 269.

However, it is evident that the officials who sought to dictate the Blackpool reputation did hope to exercise some control over this sexualisation of place. For example, titillating shots of girls in bikinis were frequently publicised [Figure 4].²⁹⁷ More than mere sex however, such images arguably contributed to Blackpool's appeal as a holiday destination with clean open air, promising a seaside filled with healthy (and unmistakably suggestive) bodies. Sexual excitement, health and healthy pursuits were suitable and amenable to Blackpool's image. On the other hand, Cross and Walton point to the fact that 'vice and girlie shows were kept successfully hidden.'²⁹⁸ These kinds of entertainments were famously available, though intentionally somewhat invisible. There was, therefore, a clear concern when it came to the visibility of bodies, particularly female bodies in the field of entertainment and public consumption.²⁹⁹ And this was often articulated through implementing control over space, as is shown in Gannon's occupancy of the Golden Mile and the profound distaste his starving females provoked.

²⁹⁷ Figure 4: 'The Bishop at the Circus', *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 7 August 1935.

²⁹⁸ Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, p. 30.

²⁹⁹ In London theatre, The Paradise Club, for example, police officers were known to attend "private parties" in the mid-1930s, to act as witnesses to indecent acts performed by fan dancers. Cox et al, *Public Indecency in England*, p. 113.

Figure 4: 'The Bishop at the Circus', *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 7 August 1935.



To elaborate on this therefore, where a general anxiety towards the working classes' new found sense of freedom caused authorities to review entertainment, this was particularly true when it came to female bodies, including the crowd and entertainers. This is because there can be distinctive freedoms or constraints when it comes to the female body as either occupying the private or the public sphere.³⁰⁰ According to Grosz, the specificities of the female body as the site of reproduction sees the 'private' as a polarised sphere where the 'role of mother' restricts, whilst the public sphere is regarded as the only possible sphere of sexual equalisation.³⁰¹ Grosz's analysis can be related to the brides who, as identified in Chapter 1, created a paradoxical presentation of the female body as they asserted themselves into the

³⁰⁰ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 15.

³⁰¹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 15.

public realm in an intimate display. Moreover, they asserted a highly recognisable feminine production of themselves in a white dress and evocative of sleeping beauties, heightened by the way in which they invaded the once male space of leisurely pursuits that were increasingly being occupied by women.³⁰²

Interestingly, Smart's work on the perceptions and controls over prostitution, whilst seemingly unconnected here, asserts that narratives that condemn the prostitute as nuisance to society are produced within a context which 'idealised marriage.'³⁰³ This analysis is poignant, firstly in Smart's approach which is to look at the discussions surrounding prostitutes, rather than apply contemporary standards of morality to them.³⁰⁴ Secondly, Smart's work recognises the complex relationships between sex and marriage, as ideas around them are projected to produce definitions of feminine bodies within the eyes and control of the law. Furthermore, defiance of legitimised moral boundaries to do with marriage and sex is often tied to the spaces women occupy, with the law asserting itself as a defender of legitimised space through policing legitimised bodies, and subverting those that do not conform.³⁰⁵

Gannon's brides posed a conflicting image of the pure bride, heightened by the sideshow's reputation for titillating its audience, and demanded a review of how such spaces could be occupied. In doing so, they provoked discourses around the female body, clouded in wider negotiations of Blackpool's entertainment industry and the nature of the mass crowd. As Smart asserts, 'the nature of intervention varied according to the perception of the problem' which was founded in 'ideological positions' and discourses on sexuality. These constructed discourses are used to 'explain' a problem, for example prostitution, and as a

³⁰² Smart, *Law, Crime and Sexuality* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1995), pp. 55-56.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55-56.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55-56.

means of justifying new legislative policy.³⁰⁶ The ways in which the female agency is talked about- the discourses and narratives that surround them- are ‘constitutive of certain social practices’ which ‘incite social consequences.’³⁰⁷ For the brides, their agency and identity was firstly ‘constructed’ through the modes of their display, implemented by Gannon’s props and billboards that challenged and simultaneously reaffirmed particular social practices; it was a distorted image of the bride in her wedding bed. Secondly, however, the brides were surrounded by discourses of moral degradation that constructed them outside the sideshow, in complex ways by various voices.

In focussing on one particular show and its means of negotiating the crowd and its place on the Golden Mile, it is evident that negotiations took place on multiple levels, with multiple parties. For Gannon, the years between 1930 and 1942 gave rise to a sustained period of both heightened moral anxiety and wider legislative change, which were negotiated not just between himself and Blackpool’s local authorities, but also the public (visiting and residential), the press and independent local groups. These groups, at different times, had direct contact with Gannon and not only voiced concerns over the ‘objectionable’ content of his shows, but also influenced legislative and moral discourses about the place of sideshows in Blackpool more widely. Tracing his relationship with police authorities, performers and the public reveals new ways of thinking through the sideshow as a physical and discursive space where bodies may be simultaneously produced, policed and yet remain unpredictable.

Gannon and the Blackpool entertainment industry

The Blackpool local authorities were the main drivers in defining Gannon and his Starving Bride shows as problem bodies. To understand the nature of their concerns and how such concerns converted into regulatory action, the role and structure of local authorities must be

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

established. This requires looking at the general changing structure of Blackpool authorities in the lead up to Gannon's occupation there, as well Gannon's early encounters with authorities before the Starving Brides.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Blackpool had secured itself as 'leisure central', a status which brought a strong working class presence.³⁰⁸ Well before Gannon's occupancy, throughout the 1870's and 1880's, concerns over who had the power to dictate the tone of entertainment in Blackpool and how such powers were articulated were discernible. For example, early refusal by county police to enforce by-laws 'left control of noise, obstruction and touting to a nuisance inspector and a couple of carriage inspectors.'³⁰⁹ In time, this problem was addressed in the form of a new Watch Committee which was granted 'limited summary jurisdiction over by-law offences.'³¹⁰ By 1887, a borough police force was established, accountable to the Watch Committee, with an increase in the number of by-law offences tried by magistrates in Blackpool.

The form of governance had a direct impact on the tone and structure of local entertainment. Firstly, Blackpool lacked dominant land ownership. This influenced who and what was able to set up shop at Blackpool, as it meant there was no formidable forces for dictating exclusion.

Almost inevitably once a site begins to draw a crowd, it pulls in commerce and entertainers that challenge the genteel values of early visitors. Only when land aristocrats, entrepreneurs, or public officials held large contiguous acreage of resort property could they exclude the gypsy fortune tellers, push-cart merchants, target game stalls and prostitutes who sought a piece of the market created by the beach, built-up attraction and the crowd itself. Neither Coney Island nor Blackpool

³⁰⁸ J. K. Walton, 'Municipal Government and the Holiday Industry in Blackpool, 1876-1914', in *Leisure in Britain 1780-1939*, ed. by J. K. Walton and J. Walvin, (Manchester, 1983), p. 178. Walton argues that the significant role of local government is often under-researched and underestimated in its relationship with the entertainment sector.

³⁰⁹ Walton, 'Municipal Government', p. 165.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

exhibited this exclusive power of elites nor were able to keep down market diversity.³¹¹

Gannon was a perfect example of the lack of land ownership granting opportunity to any opportunists as Gannon occupied a space initially on Blackpool's No Man's Land, where the lack of landowner's authority permitted him unregulated set-up.³¹² His first occupancy on the Golden Mile in the late 1920s was shared stall holdings with a fortune-teller, encapsulating the above observation. The availability of land was also a factor in how, at the beginning of the twentieth century in Blackpool, delights and sights of the fairground, despite their traditional routes and arguably old-fashioned shows, flocked to the coast.³¹³

Furthermore, Walton observes that despite the Watch Committee's favouring of tight control over entertainment and crowd conduct, and a desire to 'minimise annoyance' for visitors in relation to obstruction and noise, showmen were treated with a degree of leniency.³¹⁴ Furthermore, many showmen were prepared to 'tolerate the occasional small fine.'³¹⁵ Therefore, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a combination of Blackpool's continuous entertainment juggling act, of supplying the old and new, and the very legislative power structures of Blackpool were already very much up for debate. Blackpool became a major example of 'socially mixed clientele', bringing disputes over the 'preferred social tone' of the town and, specifically, forms of entertainment. This social mixture awkwardly positioned the local government 'on a tightrope, balancing the claims and needs of conflicting interest groups.'³¹⁶ In correlation with this, Blackpool local authorities were increasing

³¹¹ Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, pp. 18-19; Walton, 'Municipal Government', p. 165.

Walton echoes this, stating that at the end of the nineteenth century there was an inviting 'lack of pretensions... (due to) lack of dominant landowner with aspirations of high-class entertainment' and with this came a 'ready tolerance of open-air entertainment.'

³¹² Clarke, 'The Golden Age', p. 65-67; Walton, *The Blackpool Landlady*, p. 44.

³¹³ Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays', p. 258.

³¹⁴ Walton, 'Municipal Government', pp. 178-179.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

enforcing themselves as civilisers and educators, particularly when it came to policing culture.³¹⁷ The health of a town was seen to not only depend on its water systems and building projects, but also its reputation.

These compromises and negotiations would be fought out well into the mid-twentieth century and are clearly evident in Gannon's dealings with the authorities as Blackpool continued to reimagine itself. Gannon acts as a focus point for grasping the subtle modes of legislative change that were both influenced by and influential on the tone and structure of Blackpool's entertainment sector. More specifically, Gannon's sideshow makes apparent the exercising of power as bodies enter the category of 'problem'. This category is not inherent or fixed but articulated and defined by shifting frameworks of authority. It is at once a profoundly conceptual, abstract creation, the potential problem body, but one that is conceptualised in that it is constructed, manipulated and deemed as such by visible changes in power structures. What Walton opens to discussion in general terms, the study of Gannon offers as an in-depth example into the twentieth century and an experiential case study of governance, entertainment and wider theoretical issues of societal power structures over bodies on display.

In September of 1932, Gannon came into conflict with local authorities over his barrel show which exhibited the Ex Rector of Stiffkey, Harold Davidson.³¹⁸ In this episode, the structure of local authority and its control over Gannon is negotiated, including the power of by-laws, the future desired changes for the local authorities, and the very definitions of what could and could not be regulated. Mr D. L. Harbottle, Town Clerk at the time, hints at the

³¹⁷ Walton, 'Municipal Government', p. 160. Walton describes, a 'growing conviction into the dispensing of polite culture and 'rational recreations' to the masses.'

³¹⁸ For full novel based on the life and letters of Davidson, see John Walsh, *Sunday at the Cross Bones* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007). For full description of Davidson's dismissal see Matthew Parris, *The Great Unfrocked: Two Thousand Years of Church Scandal* (London: Robson Books, 1998).

struggle authorities experienced in terms of exercising power and the complicated nature of categorising sideshow content. Harbottle states,

There are certain exhibitions which are illegal, such as indecent shows or shows where there is cruelty to animals or exhibition of young children for profit. The barrel exhibition, of course, cannot be proceeded against under any of those headings. It would not be possible to have a special by-law to deal with the exhibition without the authority of an Act of Parliament.³¹⁹

It is useful here to unpack the word ‘indecent’, referenced by Harbottle. Cox helpfully describes public indecency at this time as acts that, although not always ‘illegal’, become so when they are made visible in a public place.³²⁰ Grappling with acts of indecency as a form of intense negotiation is inadvertently described by Cox when he states, ‘in law, “indecency” remains neither a single moral principle nor a defined legal concept, but rather something framed by perceptions of behaviour or feelings that certain actions and beliefs represent an impropriety that give rise to some measure of psychological discomfort or offence in those bringing or adjudging a prosecution.’³²¹ Gannon’s negotiations with the authorities epitomise this uncertainty in regulation and highlights the ways in which authority, entertainment and crowd control wrestled to find the right balance.

As Cox notes, indecency cannot be traced as a linear development to modernity but exists as a fluid concept upheld by ever changing explanations.³²² I argue that these are always created within a nexus of wider negotiations. In Blackpool, these included negotiating with a new crowd but also, and most overlooked, with the entertainers and entrepreneurs. Returning to the 1932 case above for example, Harbottle makes clear that attempts to close the exhibition must proceed in one of three ways, all related to the power lent to the local municipal authority. In doing so, the case demonstrates the ongoing struggle over power

³¹⁹ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 25 July 1932.

³²⁰ Cox et al, *Public Indecency in England 1857-1960*, p. 1.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³²² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

within Blackpool, negotiated through encounters with show proprietors such as Gannon as a clear weighing up of what is currently ‘illegal’, and what would need to happen in order for Gannon’s show to be condemned.

Significantly, the above case occurred in the same year as the case of Nellie Hayes where, as previously described in Chapter 1, Gannon was to answer to two cases of erecting a structure on the Promenade without the permission of the Corporation.³²³

Mr Lee (Assistant solicitor to the Corporation and prosecuting Gannon) submitted that the barrel was a structure within the meaning of the Act because it was no ordinary barrel...“The Act (Blackpool Improvement Act) says there must be no perishable articles offered”, said Mr Lee, “but I could argue although I am not going to, that a starving women is a perishable article”.³²⁴

Mr Blackhurst, in a cross-examination of the stall inspector, questioned, ‘You don’t seriously suggest a barrel is a structure?’³²⁵ Mr Stead confirms his idea of structure, counted as answerable to the by-laws, because ‘it has a roof and is enclosed.’³²⁶ The essential question was, ‘Do you call an umbrella a roof?’, to which Mr Stead confirmed, ‘Yes.’³²⁷ Again, the debate is very much a discussion of power, and an articulation of boundaries. In this particular case, this includes an underlying debate about how to perceive and categorise the ‘starving women’, and the legal consequences such categorisation, in this case as a ‘perishable good’ or not, would have.³²⁸ Therefore, in 1932 Gannon is the target and his stall the site for continuously developing ideas about entertainment control as voices of authority

³²³ Quoting the *Lancashire Daily Post*, 25 July 1932. ‘The fasting barrel on Central Beach, Blackpool, in which people have attempted to fast for certain periods, and which was attacked by a hostile crowd on Saturday, was brought to mention at Blackpool Police Court today... “There is a perfectly good defence”, said Mr Lawson, “Because we contend that the barrel does not come within the by-laws...” The Chief Constable, Mr H. E. Derham, stated “I am afraid this case will lend to a lot of bother on the part of the Promenade. There has already been one ugly scene, and I don’t want another”.’ Note: Different to the Constable who wrote the “One of the worst” articles.

³²⁴ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 25 July 1932.

³²⁵ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 25 July 1932.

³²⁶ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 26 July 1932.

³²⁷ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 26 July 1932.

³²⁸ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 26 July 1932.

were brought into discussion, including stalls inspectors, and the limitation of by-laws voiced as a concern.³²⁹

It is notable that as part of Gannon's defence he emphasises his position as a legitimate rent payer, stating 'he paid £700 a year rent, over £150 in rates and also water rates for the premises.'³³⁰ This evidences Gannon's progression on the Golden Mile from an occupier of No Man's Land, to a paying occupant. It is telling of changes to Blackpool as, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Golden Mile and the beach had become a free for all for stall holders. It was a key space because it was the last to be covered by the tide and was sandwiched by two roads either side. This allowed longer opening times, as well as a funnel effect of the crowd.³³¹ Increasingly through the century, this open beach was policed and authorities sought to control the space in terms of who was able to set up there and what rent needed to be paid.³³² Therefore, in 1932, Gannon's defence demonstrates an understanding of the concerns at the time, and what would deem him to be a legitimate contributor to the entertainment industry.

He was, however, eventually fined. Possibly being subject to constant harassment drove him to an alternative set up, one inside the building. Gannon's glass cabinets were inside his New Brunswick building. Signage and the props were required to compensate for no longer presenting acts out front. These considerations, made by Gannon, demonstrate the

³²⁹ Walton, 'Municipal Government', pp. 179-180. Town Clerk, Derham, a strong proponent of stronger by-law powers to be passed by Parliament. Harbottle's comments on Acts of Parliament were also observed by Walton in the end of the nineteenth century, 'The corporation was particularly keen to minimise annoyance to visitors and residents from noise, obstruction... although the urge to prohibit and suppress was inhibited by legal difficulties, by the numbers involved, and increasingly by the need to take account of excursionist tastes and preferences... The Corporation were frustrated by legal loopholes and Parliaments unwillingness to grant extended by-law powers against stalls.'

³³⁰ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 26 July 1932.

³³¹ Mars, *Blackpool's Golden Mile*.

³³² Walton, *Riding on Rainbow*, p. 41.

way in which he actively negotiated the authority's oppositions, such as structural licensing, through material display whilst always considering the audience's desire for entertainment.

By 1934, undercover police visits commissioned by the Watch Committee and under their authority were at work in Gannon's shows. In 1934 police men are reported as going 'from booth to booth' as a closing down order was issued against Gannon's *Starving Bride* show.³³³ In response, Gannon expresses frustration at the multiple interests of middle-class influence,

I want to tell you...that a certain Lord Mottistone has come to Blackpool. He has come to a National Savings Conference, but he seems to have had a greater interest in these people, pointing to the closed cabinet...He has not had a good influence on Blackpool by saying what he has said, but today he has secured the intervention of the Town Clerk and this is the result.³³⁴

Notably, there were two other *Starving Bride* shows showing at Blackpool in 1934. These other shows at The White House and Tocandero refused admission to the public immediately after being instructed by police. Gannon however, sought an opportunity to upstage the police, and left in a taxi whilst the booth remained open as 'a constant procession of people filing past a cabinet on which a young man and girl lay in separate compartments.'³³⁵ Gannon returned with two men, and ordered that the 'wood and gauze lid of the cabinet should be lifted.'³³⁶

"This is a doctor", he said indicating one of his companions, who immediately produced a stethoscope. Men had to hammer one of the walls of the cabinet to awaken the young man, who eventually was lifted to a sitting position and submitted to a short inquisition of his condition.

There was a whispered consultation between Mr Gannon and his companion before the crowd, which packed the booth, made a path for the doctor to the other side of the cabinet, where the girl was submitted to examination.

³³³ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

³³⁴ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

³³⁵ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

³³⁶ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

The cabinet was closed again, and immediately, as a long queue began to form outside the show, and the people in it stood silently in a mass, Mr Gannon made a statement, “These two people in the cabinet have been fasting 21 days/ I undertook to pay them £250 if the fasted in it for 30 days. Now we are told they cannot starve any longer.”

“Well”, said Mr Gannon, with a flourish of his arm, “they shan’t starve. The doctor has just seen them, and he’s ordered a milk diet. That shall be given to them at once.

“They’ll remain here for another nine days, completing the 30 days, and at the end of that time they’ll be given the £250. I’ll give it them even if it skins me”.³³⁷

Gannon went on to order milk for the occupants, before reiterating his ‘legitimacy’, claiming he could produce evidence of payment to his previous occupants of £250. The crowd take on a passive form, with their silence in a ‘mass’ as Gannon goes to speak in a manner comparable a preacher before a silent congregation. Gannon strongly professes his reliability and reputability, with the call for the doctor an attempt at legitimising his act by introducing a reputable character.

Later that day, the show at Tracadero followed Gannon’s lead, with a female ‘in the dress of a nurse’ visiting the show.³³⁸ Notably, the description suggested showmanship, describing the women as if in costume. Mr Clarke, the show manager, went on to express his respect for the authorities, declaring ‘because as a showman I think if any show seems to give offence to the public and the authorities, the showman ought to take it off immediately.’³³⁹ He promised to pay the couple, who had fasted for 26 days. However, in one last showman stance, later that day he placed a sign to invite the public to one last glance by stating, ‘The dreaded cabinet recently occupied by the bride and bridegroom for the last 24 days now on view.’³⁴⁰

³³⁷ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

³³⁸ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

³³⁹ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

³⁴⁰ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

These encounters between showmen, the police and the authorities demonstrate a great degree of negotiation and a playfulness by the showmen in particular, who were looking to validate their legitimacy as well as continue to make money. It is extremely fitting that the newspaper reports this instance as a ‘sensational sequel’ to protests directed at the starving exhibits, as the drama, characters and monologues unfold in front of the crowd.³⁴¹

Three days later, Gannon and The White House reopened their starving shows ‘despite requests from the police.’³⁴² Again, both presented their negotiations with the authorities in a dramatised manner, never failing to declare their activities on their boards outside of the exhibits. For example, at the White House, the bride is reportedly too ill to be removed from the ‘coffin’. The manager attests that she must remain until a doctor deems her fit to be moved. This morbid situation, if indeed it was even true, is ‘now on exhibition’, professed by two big blackboards which state ‘The bride too ill to be moved. Still on view after 23 days of starvation.’³⁴³ The absolute mortality of the female occupant is used to entice more visitors who are invited to see her recuperate on brandy and eggs.³⁴⁴

Gannon also remained resilient stating, ‘A daily newspaper, today, has made an attack on me, and taken all the credit for the exhibitions closing last night. In view of that, I am going from now on to continue in my own way and without any interference from the outside.’³⁴⁵ Evidently, Gannon’s final female was no longer starving, rather she was ‘just there’ to finish the time of eight days and nights of fasting. Notably, the billboard refers to ‘The girl inside the ex-Rector of Stiffkey’s barrel on view.’³⁴⁶

³⁴¹ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

³⁴² *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 16 October 1934.

³⁴³ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 16 October 1934.

³⁴⁴ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 16 October 1934.

³⁴⁵ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 16 October 1934.

³⁴⁶ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 16 October 1934.

This billboard is significant in declaring the defiance of Gannon as this bold response prompted the discussion of the Starving Bride act at the Blackpool Publicity Committee a few days later. The Corporation decide to defer any action on Gannon, whilst they ‘seek powers to deal with such exhibitions, and that the question had now resolved itself into a legal matter.’³⁴⁷ Clearly, Gannon’s shows and his stance prompted the need for considering positions of power, a direct result of Gannon’s unique shows that raised questions of progression and morality.

The reference to the ex-Rector is also significant. The demoted Rector had gained Gannon notoriety as an exhibitor of the controversial. In 1932, Mr Harold Davidson was brought to the Consistory Court under the Clergy Discipline Act accused of immoral conduct.³⁴⁸ Found guilty on numerous counts, he was subsequently defrocked. Following this defrocking, Davidson wrote to sideshow organiser, Mr Gannon, ‘asking permission to starve in one of his exhibitions at Blackpool.’³⁴⁹ Granting him the occupation of this sideshow space, this sideshow occupation would become known as the ‘Fasting Ex-Rector’, reportedly performed in an attempt to ‘induce the authorities to abolish consistory court trials’ and ultimately to reinstate him into his church position.³⁵⁰

Davidson would go on display in Blackpool in 1932 in a barrel and again in 1935 in a glass cabinet. The barrel show proved hugely popular, reported as ‘11,000 people had paid to see Mr. Davidson by midnight’ on its opening. Capturing the atmosphere, the local newspaper describes that, ‘If the entrance to the passage where people passed to view the Rev. Harold Davidson, Rector of Stiffkey, sitting in a barrel on Central Beach had been

³⁴⁷ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 17 October 1934.

³⁴⁸ For full novel based on the life and letters of Davidson, see John Walsh, *Sunday at the Cross Bones* (London: Fourth Estate, 2007). For full description of Davidson’s dismissal see Matthew Parris, *The Great Unfrocked: Two Thousand Years of Church Scandal* (London: Robson Books, 1998).

³⁴⁹ *Daily Mail*, 22 August 1935.

³⁵⁰ *Daily Mail*, 27 July 1935.

equipped with a turnstile, last night, it would have made a noise like a machine gun continuously in action.’ People are described as an excited mass that ‘swarmed’ around the barrel and Gannon, who charged ‘two pence a time’, made a healthy profit of £93.³⁵¹

Significantly, in 1935 local Blackpool authorities sought the passing of a new bill within The Blackpool Improvement Act.³⁵² The Blackpool Improvement Bill would prove significant for how the authorities dealt with Gannon, who was increasingly causing them concern as a defiant entertainer who attracted an undesirable crowd. It is referenced in relation to Gannon in 1932, as his defence claims that ‘the stall did not come within the Blackpool Improvement Act, said it was only used for the sale of temperance drinks.’³⁵³

Improvement Bills were introduced centrally in the nineteenth century as result of the need to address unhealthy environments. Those councils who sought to ‘improve’ their districts were set loose limitations via Improvement Acts, with decisions as to how ‘problems’ were solved a major feature of local self-governance.³⁵⁴ The concerns expressed in 1932 about what powers the Act should grant the authorities in the coming years, particularly in regards to undesirable shows, were answered in 1935 through the Blackpool Improvement Bill, as new powers in relation to public interest were made law. These enabled ‘the corporation to deal with certain shows which have brought undesirable publicity’ to Blackpool.³⁵⁵ As described by the mayor in 1935 Blackpool, Alderman W. Newman, ‘The Blackpool Improvement Act

³⁵¹ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 5 September 1932.

³⁵² For review of changing governmental powers and local Corporations, see Barry M. Doyle, ‘The Changing Functions of Urban Government: Councillors, Officials and Pressure Groups’, in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain Volume 3 1840-1950*, ed. by M. Daunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 287-314. For details of the Blackpool Improvement Act and the changing Corporation within Blackpool, see Walton, *The Blackpool Landlady*, p. 44; Sam Davies and Bob Morley (eds), *County Borough Elections in England and Wales, 1919-1938: A Comparative Analysis: Volume 1: Barnsley - Bournemouth* (London: Routledge, 2016).

³⁵³ *Lancashire Daily Post*, 26 July 1932.

³⁵⁴ A. J. Ley, *A History of Building Control in England and Wales 1840-1990* (Coventry: RICS, 2000), p. 27. Note that Ley uses the phrase, ‘how problems were solved’ by councils. This reiterates the theme of problem bodies.

³⁵⁵ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 2 August 1935.

of 1935 was drawn up to put reasonable limits to “freak” holiday attractions and states that offensive or objectionable exhibitions will be prohibited.’³⁵⁶

The act came in objection to Davidson’s Blackpool sideshow exhibition, which was deemed an ‘objectionable display’ by the authorities. As reported by the *Daily Mail*, ‘Ex-Rector ‘fasting’ in a glass covered cabinet in a Blackpool Central Beach sideshow is considered ...another objectionable public exhibition.’³⁵⁷ Therefore the Davidson case, along with the brides, pushed the authorities to consider their position vis-à-vis public entertainment. Arguably however, the Ex-Rector case differs from the Starving Brides in that Davidson’s glass cabinet was indeed a sideshow space; it is not an act of purely aesthetic nature but an attempt to induce the authorities to abolish consistory court trials. This act had a particular motive and may be considered a demonstration rather than a performance, the difference being one which has motive beyond the show itself.

Critically, research into the significance of sideshows and performances reveals the wider cultural significance held. Assuming a difference between demonstration and performance is not to undervalue the role sideshows played; as previously discussed sideshows were significant in demonstrating and disturbing political, sexual and social ideas. However, Davidson states a clear agenda in his use of the sideshow space. Speaking some weeks after his initial arrest, Davidson explicitly claims ‘it is nauseating to me -all this showman business. I am merely using it as a means to an end.’³⁵⁸ Evidently however, to Gannon, the occupation of the glass cabinet, whether by the Ex-Rector or by the brides, exploited the interest of the public sparked by exhibiting equally controversial displays.

³⁵⁶ ‘Ex-Rector of Stiffkey Roasts’, *Daily Mail*, 11 April 1936, p. 7.

³⁵⁷ *Daily Mail*, 27 July 1935.

³⁵⁸ *Daily Mail*, 22 August 1935.

This reinforces the view of the sideshow a revealing space, in that it made things visible in order to reap rewards and also navigates bodies through cultural and legal boundaries. The exhibitions were exploited by Gannon for monetary gain and by his occupants for both money and, in Davidson's case, visibility. Arguably, it is Davidson who exploits the provocative space of the sideshow for personal motive, having written to Mr Gannon 'asking permission to starve in one of his exhibitions at Blackpool.'³⁵⁹ It is precisely this capacity of the sideshow as a space of cultural significance, performativity and visibility that appealed to Davidson. In this way, the sideshow operates as a double means of demonstration: not only demonstrating bodies in making them highly visible and on show, but also demonstrating grievances.

Again, the sideshow space is reopened as a highly political space, not one devoid of agenda and agency. This is relevant as the notion of public 'interest' is rooted in public consumption of a visible act in the framework of the sideshow. Davidson places his body firstly in the realm of performativity, in a sideshow, where bodies, be they freaks or fan dancers, are involved in an undeniable act of making their bodies visible. Davidson places himself in a glass cabinet, choosing an act that involves no performance but the destruction of body and flesh. There can be no question that Davidson uses the sideshow as a site of fleshly visual consumption to make his voice- the unfleshly- heard. The physicality of his occupation is relevant to his message, as well as to how authorities deal with this objectionable display. Importantly, the 'active measures' carried out upon Davidson and his objectionable bodily display depends upon authorities possessing power over performance space. There is, at the heart of this case, a 'battle over performance space' and what may be termed struggle over 'enactments of power.'³⁶⁰

³⁵⁹ *Daily Mail*, 22 August 1935.

³⁶⁰ Thiong'o, 'Enactments of Power', p. 11.

In relation to the Starving Brides, for the press there was a sense of finality to Gannon's shows as the *Evening Gazette*, 22 October 1934, stated, 'Blackpool saw the last of the starving brides- for this season at any rate- when the doors closed at the Central Beach shows last night...today the shutters were up at Mr Luke Gannon's exhibition and the couple who had been on a milk diet had been removed from their cases.'³⁶¹ The paper's premonition was correct, as increasing pressure from the authorities who sought more legal leverage and from local groups mounted.

This is further articulated in the public letters published by the *West Lancashire Evening Gazette* two days later which represent, the paper claims, 'extracts from a large letter-bag.'³⁶² One writer declares that although it (Blackpool) is prepared to stage every new and up-to-date thrill and attraction, it will not tolerate this nauseating exhibition. Disgusted.'³⁶³ Several letters make more explicit the underlying anxiety towards such an exhibition, beyond that of structure and obstruction, to 'indecent' and 'offensive', and the loss of Blackpool's 'prestige.'³⁶⁴

Various local groups, independent of the Watch Committee, had articulated their views of Gannon and his 'problem bodies'. In October 1934, the Free Church Protest 'welcomed' the action of the police authorities in Blackpool.³⁶⁵ In a letter to the Home Office, a Church of England vicar deemed the starving exhibitionism an abuse of the sacred body, and demanded 'details of any law by which we can proceed to stop this nauseating spectacle.'³⁶⁶ It attests to Walton's observation specifically to Blackpool:

Advocates of the strict regulation of open-air entertainment in the streets and on the beach, and of the imposition of a narrow Evangelical

³⁶¹ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 22 October 1934.

³⁶² *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 8 September 1932.

³⁶³ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 8 September 1932.

³⁶⁴ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 8 September 1932.

³⁶⁵ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 20 October 1934.

³⁶⁶ The National Archives, Entertainment: Exhibitions of persons fasting (Ref: HO 45/16275).

code of conduct on the public behaviour of visitors, also remained noisily in evidence, in Blackpool as in more socially aspiring resorts.³⁶⁷

Notably, Walton acknowledges that such regulation was greatly limited at the start of the century. By 1935, given the increasing powers of authority through the Watch Committee and Blackpool Improvement Bill, the ‘Evangelical code’ for moral behaviour was upheld not by only a small church protest, but the entertainment industry more widely itself. In 1935 the Amusement Caterers Association protested such ‘undesirable shows’, claiming that they were ‘no credit to our business.’³⁶⁸ These groups, from seemingly very different sectors and social interests, demonstrate the interconnectedness of multiple Blackpool groups and ‘rivals in articulating laws.’ The interest of the government in the entertainment industry and wider concerns over the moral and reputational health of Blackpool’s entertainment industry are not surprising, particularly given the dependence of Blackpool on its entertainment industry for economic stability.

Gannon advocates for his rights and representation as a professional, asserting that in the current power structures of Blackpool showmen are not offered a strong enough voice. The Showmen’s Guild was founded in 1889, which represented and offered protection for travelling showmen.³⁶⁹ Gannon was however, somewhat of an outsider not coming from a travelling family or being associated with any one fair in particular. After coming under significant pressure from the authorities to close his Starving Bride show in 1934, he argued for the ‘need of representation...to protect interests with authorities.’³⁷⁰ This was a call for representation at Blackpool specifically and demonstrates a recognition by Gannon of the increasing power that local authorities

³⁶⁷ Walton, ‘Municipal Government’, p. 165.

³⁶⁸ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 3 April 1935.

³⁶⁹ *The Showmen’s Guild*, <http://showmensguild.co.uk/> [accessed 19 May 2018]

³⁷⁰ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 22 October 1934.

had over sideshows. His previous attitude of accepting small fines or opening his shows in spite of authorial and public protest would no longer suffice. It also demonstrates a lack of representation and Gannon's loss of voice as an individual showman, which parallels that in the historical literature, about the hard negotiations entertainment entrepreneurs had with authorities, and how this shaped Blackpool in a contradictory, inconsistent and yet harmonious manner.

Gannon's Starving Bride show did not reopen after 1935. Davidson reappeared in 1935, 'exhibited as "roasting"- this process taking place in the same cabinet in which he was formerly shown starving and freezing...he lay with a cigar and a little automatic demon prodded at him with a fork.'³⁷¹ Clearly, the display alluded to Davidson residing in hell, perhaps of the hell on earth in feeling unjustly expelled or alternatively as a 'poke' at the accusations of the apparent sins he had committed.

In August 1935, Davidson was arrested and removed from the glass cabinet. Notably, Davidson was not charged with indecency or 'objectionable display' and, as reported by the Mail, 'the arrest was *not* made under the Blackpool Improvement Act which gives the corporation wide powers in controlling sideshows.'³⁷² Rather, Davidson was committed for trial on a 'charge alleging that he unlawfully starved himself with the intention of committing suicide.'³⁷³ Suicide was illegal at this time, not being decriminalised until 1961.³⁷⁴

Davidson's arrest on a charge of attempting to commit suicide is not entirely clear, and is arguably made hazier by the performative context of the sideshow space. For example, the defence countered the charge by calling upon the lines between intention and attempt. Mr

³⁷¹ *Daily Mail*, 11 April 1936.

³⁷² *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1935.

³⁷³ *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1935.

³⁷⁴ Downey, B. W. M., 'Indecency with Children Act, 1960. Suicide Act, 1961', *The Modern Law Review* 25:1 (1961), pp. 60-63.

Burke, defending, asserts that ‘it has been laid down that discrimination must be drawn between an intention and an attempt.’³⁷⁵ In short, the argument was that Davidson could not be charged with suicide in that the prosecution could not prove his suicidal intent. The *Mail* quotes the defence’s argument, asking Davidson ‘was it your intention to starve to death?’ Quoting Davidson’s reply, ‘certainly not... I consider it far more important that I should go on living until I have secured the repeal of the Clergy Discipline Act of 1892.’³⁷⁶ He was driven by a desire to clear his name and be reinstated. This emphasises the performativity of Davidson’s protest, where the ‘display’ and the process was more important than any end point of performance. The climax of Davidson’s display was envisioned as lying beyond the glass cabinet itself and in the realm of regulatory reform. Furthermore, it demonstrates the profound negotiations that occurred between entertainment regulators, and the ungraspable nature of sideshows, that often blurred the lines of intention and interaction.

Gannon’s later years as a sideshow proprietor

Gannon reappears in 1938 in *The West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, after leasing a site in Cleveleys, north of Blackpool. The article introduces Gannon as gaining ‘prominence by exhibiting the late ex-Rector of Stiffkey in a barrel at Blackpool and displaying starving brides.’³⁷⁷ The focus of the article was not Gannon’s move, however, but a petition circulated in Cleveleys and promoted by the Cleveleys’ Hotel and Apartment Association, Thornton Cleveleys’ Chamber of Trade, and Cleveleys’ Ratepayers Association. Notably, the petition is worded as follows: ‘to prevent the establishment in this district of those side-shows, booths, stalls and so-called amusements of the Blackpool Central Beach type.’³⁷⁸ The petition thus reiterates a concern over taste in entertainment, and the dangers of unhealthy consumption as a

³⁷⁵ *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1935.

³⁷⁶ *Daily Mail*, 22 August 1935.

³⁷⁷ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 19 May 1938.

³⁷⁸ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 19 May 1938.

reflection not only of the moral health of the crowd, but also of the healthy reputation of a place. Local authorities and groups demonstrated their new-found powers in determining the ‘taste’ and ‘type’ of entertainment permitted in their district and so protected its reputation.

Gannon replied to this, declaring his surprise at the ‘resentful’ attitude, keeping what would be ‘on view’ at his Amusement Park a ‘trade secret.’³⁷⁹ It is noted that Gannon had ‘already brought a preserved whale and a baby whale’ to Cleveleys and that these would continue should he be granted permission. Evidently, Gannon’s reputation and that of his shows preceded his move from Blackpool and Gannon was unable to open in Cleveleys after conversations with Cleveleys’ council.

In 1940, the Blackpool Improvement Bill pushed to move and extend the town’s rail station. Within the Mass Observation documents of 1940, promotions in favour of the bill reveal the final blow to Gannon. G.F. Burton, Vice Chancellor of Publicity Committee, states, ‘it will clear away many buildings which are not a credit to a progressive resort and to do away with the sideshows on central beach. This they have been endeavouring to do for years.’³⁸⁰ Here a direct link between Gannon’s sideshows and the rhetoric of progression is expressed. There was a clear understanding that such shows hindered the reputation and health of Blackpool’s entertainment industry and did not fit into the vision Blackpool had for itself. Furthermore, the description of a continued ‘endeavouring’ denotes a sense of struggle, encapsulating the push against Gannon in a calculated, progressive manner.³⁸¹ Furthermore, the plans reveal a direct

³⁷⁹ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 19 May 1938.

³⁸⁰ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 1 January 1938, held in Mass Observation files at Blackpool History Centre, Reel 41 Box 53C Blackpool Improvement Bill.

³⁸¹ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 1 January 1938, held in Mass Observation files at Blackpool History Centre, Reel 41 Box 53C Blackpool Improvement Bill.

overhaul of Brunswick Street where Gannon was an occupant. Ironically, as in his first contact with authorities, the structural aspects of Blackpool, the safety and obstruction of its streets, are used to eliminate Gannon from his occupancy permanently.

Conclusion

During the 1930s Blackpool saw an influx of entertainment and a new type of crowd with a taste for both the traditional and the new. In order to accommodate this new mass and to ensure Blackpool as a leisure centre, Blackpool endeavoured to control its identity. A new level of self-consciousness led to complex and often contradictory conflicts of interest from entertainers, authorities and visitors.

Regulatory changes were driven by very specific moral concerns in relation to sideshow content, but also by the determination to uphold Blackpool's reputation and economy. What emerged at this time, therefore, were regulatory changes which articulated and allowed action in response to the moral concerns about Blackpool.³⁸² Therefore, fear over the crowd and the ensuing regulations sought to alleviate such concerns were born out of an underlying understanding of the nature of the crowd itself. The crowd was a point of concern and as such was subject to processes which continuously sought to define, in order to control it. This aligns with the notion of the crowd as a collective 'problem body', evident as the authorities exercised a need to curb visitors' behaviour by pushing ideas of progression and respectability whilst also satisfying a thirst for the illicit, different and obscene. This duality contributed to establishing Blackpool as a unique experience where boundaries were stretched.

Gannon and his starving exhibits existed during this intense period of reputation building in Blackpool, with major changes regarding the level of control authorities held over

³⁸² Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*.

sideshows occurring throughout Gannon's occupancy. It is not that Gannon and his sideshows were the sole cause of such changes. Rather, these shows acted as catalysts for legislative change, as authorities responded to exhibits such as the Starving Brides. These changes were not confined to Blackpool but spoke to broader legislative changes to the entertainment industry and wider social anxieties, thus emphasising Gannon's significance as a point of study. In exploring one particular showman, Gannon, a clearer picture of these wider anxieties towards the twentieth century crowd, new in scale in its pursuit of leisure and pleasure, is achieved. The extent to which moral activists or regulatory changes affected the behaviour of the visiting holiday-goers is debatable.³⁸³ The crowds were still flocking to the Starving Bride shows till their closure. Their significance was, however, in ensuring the shows were no longer accessible, visible or, in some cases, legal.

This point of attack, making such problem bodies no longer visible, was directed towards the showmen who organised such exhibits. Showmen should not therefore be sidelined in the relationship between regulatory authorities and the crowd. They were key negotiators at a time when Blackpool was trying to determine its reputation through confusing and often contradictory re-imaginings of itself. The inventiveness, resilience and playfulness of Gannon in particular played a vital role in the local government's relationship with the crowd. Whilst changes did occur and Gannon was ousted, the intimate study of his relationship with the crowd and the authorities demonstrates the 'impossibility of reaching the necessary unanimity around ill-defined moral concepts.'³⁸⁴ Gannon's sideshow space acts as a stage to such an impossible task, revealing part of a narrative that sought to establish a contradictory ideal of Blackpool.

³⁸³ As noted by Cox, 'Public behaviour was not modified to any great extent despite the occasional success of the moral minority in closing particular venues or banning particular "indecent" acts.' Cox et al, *Public Indecency in England 1857-1960*, p. 179.

³⁸⁴ Cox et al, *Public Indecency in England 1857-1960*, p. 179.

Chapter 3: People doing deplorable things: defending the art and defining the objectionable in the twentieth century sideshow

Introduction

I argue that the image of Blackpool and the indulgences of its visitors were managed through control over spaces- specifically, spaces that made bodies visible. Using Gannon as a case study goes some way towards removing a reductive narrative in which social and cultural changes in the entertainment industry seem inevitable and predestined. Gannon makes visible the complex, contradicting and extremely self-conscious shifts in authority and how the values, image and identity of Blackpool - its visitors and residents - were portrayed and constructed through the entertainment industry.

Figure 5: 'Blackpool - Health & Pleasure, Glorious Sea', 1868-1893, published by Midland Railway, Science Museum Group Collection. Image ref 1975-8377.



Gerald Mars' early observations of Blackpool include the 'interest' of social scientists, including himself, in Blackpool and a call for a Mass Observation in 1940.³⁸⁵ This, Mars observes, was 'because of the intense competition within itself, it is quick to adapt to changes in its public's taste.'³⁸⁶ Blackpool was a suitable research site for Mars and other social scientists as it offered insight into the human condition, culture and change, as a magnified and intense site of transforming consumption and taste. There was an enduring tension between the then current consumption of undesirable popular culture, as considered by certain groups and authorities, and that which may be deemed as tasteful, progressive and portraying a positive image of Blackpool.

For example, Blackpool has a history of negotiating between classes, progress and popularity. Blackpool's Winter Gardens, opened in 1878, 'tried...to pander to the Victorian delight in indoor and outdoor foliage, light music and polite company.'³⁸⁷ However, due to commercial pressures, 'more entrepreneurial managers...responded to the demands of less sophisticated clientele for dancing, variety acts and other novelties.'³⁸⁸ The *Blackpool Times*, 1916, records the demolition of 'a building that has seen some of the most sensational shows...(such as) the world's biggest rat.'³⁸⁹ The site is to make room for 'proposals for a large entertainments and amusements complex.'³⁹⁰ Following the opening of the Blackpool Tower in 1894, 'there followed a series of developments which added further leisure to the resort's reputation: South Pier (1893), the Grand Theatre (1894), the Empire (1895), the Empress Ballroom and the Great

³⁸⁵ Mars, *Blackpool's Golden Mile*.

³⁸⁶ Mars, *Blackpool's Golden Mile*.

³⁸⁷ Denis Shaw, *Selling the Urban Image: Blackpool at the Turn of the Century* (Birmingham, 1990), pp. 7-8.

³⁸⁸ Shaw, *Selling the Urban Image*, p. 8.

³⁸⁹ *The Blackpool Times*, 1916.

³⁹⁰ *The Blackpool Times*, 1916.

Wheel at the Winter Gardens...and, by the eve of the First World War, the first experiments with Autumn illuminations.³⁹¹

However, Mars' statement requires some unpicking. Blackpool's authorities did not merely 'adapt' to the public, but reimagined and redirected its public in the control over Blackpool's spaces for entertainment. Resonating with responses to the nineteenth century freak show, there was a fear over the 'taste' of the crowd consuming these sideshow spectacles, discussed in Chapter 2. For Walton, this was less of an adaptation and more an act of 'domination' of the working class, who controlled the 'forces of change' by their numbers.³⁹² For Blackpool in the 1930s, the undesirable taste perceived in the crowd consuming Gannon's Starving Bride shows expressed something undesirable *about Blackpool* to a much wider audience; the world.

Shaw notes that Blackpool authorities were able to manage 'some of the worst excesses of the ...commercial character of the working-class holiday' by directing its upper-class patrons to specific events.³⁹³ Rail posters were produced to sell the sights of Blackpool and declared the visual aesthetic that Blackpool wished to market. For example, the word 'health' appeared on many of the posters for Blackpool as early as the nineteenth century. In the 1868-1893 poster *Health & Pleasure, Glorious Sea*, there are in fact no people of any description [Figure 5].³⁹⁴ Rather, Blackpool as a busy, segmented landscape is offered from a bird's eye view, starting with the rolling hills in the background, to the neat town and the busy sea.

³⁹¹ Shaw, *Selling the Urban Image*, p. 6.

³⁹² Walton, *The Blackpool Landlady*, pp. 48-49.

³⁹³ Shaw, *Selling the Urban Image*, p. 6. Specifically, Shaw looks at pamphlets and advertisement of Blackpool through sketches and photographs.

³⁹⁴ Figure 5: 'Blackpool - Health & Pleasure, Glorious Sea', 1868-1893, published by Midland Railway, Science Museum Group Collection. Image ref 1975-8377.

By the 1920s, the selling point of Blackpool as a place where ‘health’ resided was still in use, however its image as a location that offered spaces of pleasure was increasingly emphasised. As seen in the 1923-1948 poster *Blackpool’s New Promenade*, the Pier and the Tower act as the structural points around which the scene is set [Figure 6].³⁹⁵ People, though figurative, are much more prominent in the landscape than they are in earlier depictions. Moreover, the poster segregates people into multiple levels of looking, from the top of the clean impressive building, all the way laterally across the image to the sea. Block colours

Figure 6: Chelsey Bonestell, ‘Blackpool’s New Promenade, 1923-1948, published by London & Scottish Railway Company, Science Museum Group Collection, Image ref 1993-8119. MS "The Best Way" Series No.71.



³⁹⁵ Figure 6: Chelsey Bonestell, ‘Blackpool’s New Promenade, 1923-1948, published by London & Scottish Railway Company, Science Museum Group Collection, Image ref 1993-8119. MS "The Best Way" Series No.71.

sanitise the image, leaving a precise clarity of colour which alludes to an unblemished and vibrant vision of Blackpool itself.

Blackpool's image to the world was also managed by the visibility - or lack of visibility - and availability of sideshow spaces. In 1935 for example, the Blackpool Improvement Bill introduced new powers in relation to 'public interest' which were 'made law', emphasising the 'undesirable publicity' that targeted shows had brought to Blackpool.³⁹⁶ This sentiment was cemented through the control over spaces in Blackpool when, in 1940, G.F. Burton, Vice Chancellor of Publicity Committee states, 'it will clear away many buildings which are not a credit to a progressive resort and to do away with the sideshows on central beach.'³⁹⁷ Blackpool therefore, utilised powers over exhibitors and their acts as a means of monitoring and manipulating Blackpool's image.

Blackpool was not, however, a static poster image. It was a town brought to life by places and people. As a holiday destination in the 1930s, it was a highly social space made up of districts and entertainment venues. Jeffery Mason states that,

The nature of social space, even its material and physical reality, is a function of its use, which in turn is a consequence of the interaction of those involved. If social space itself is a field of contention, of expressing difference, asserting ownership and displaying relationship, any action from concerted effort to choosing to attend an event can constitute a performative strategy.³⁹⁸

The social spaces within Blackpool's entertainment districts, by Mason's definition, invited people 'to attend' and, in doing so, invited people to take part in the very performance of that social space. This illuminates why it was so important for the authorities to keep control over the sideshow, as the activity of these social spaces was a 'performance' involving the crowds

³⁹⁶ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 2 August 1935.

³⁹⁷ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 2 August 1940.

³⁹⁸ Jeffery Mason, 'Street Fairs: Social Space, Social Performance', *Theatre Journal* 48:3 (1996), p. 307.

as well as performers themselves. For Blackpool, these social spaces and the way in which they were attended were intrinsic to Blackpool's 'expressing' itself to the nation.³⁹⁹

Moreover, the conflict (or contention) arising can be seen as a negotiation not only over ownership, but the very right to display the relationships that constitute that social space itself. It includes multiple actors- audience, exhibitors and authorities- who are all involved in an 'interaction' within the social space.⁴⁰⁰ This is important as it implies various degrees of visibility at work in one space. For example, Gannon negotiated the visibility of his brides within the show. As discussed in Chapter 1, this included adapting the form and fashioning of the starving females. He also had to make his performers hyper-visible on the Golden Mile, as he was competing for the attention of passing visitors. Paradoxically, visibility also works in reverse on a wider level, where sideshows and their content may be removed from sight (and site) as they were deemed redundant and even rebellious to a place's self-image. The sideshow, therefore, was at once a highly contained and intimate space for negotiating the visibility of individual bodies such as the brides. It also operated as a site of the social and was therefore constantly negotiating its visibility as a 'social space.'⁴⁰¹ This 'social space' being, itself, a 'performative strategy' and, thus, a space to be viewed by those outside of itself, is perceptible in the actions of the Blackpool authorities where the 'viewer' was the nation.

Attempting to control this social space was, therefore, like a performance in that it involved a constant strategy of presenting bodies. These bodies included, on one level, those within the sideshow exhibits which Blackpool authorities increasingly attempted to make invisible, but also the 'new crowd', understood itself as a 'problem body' as described in

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

Chapter 2. An idealised presentation of the ‘crowd’ could be achieved by officials through material means, such as posters and place-making props. These were, however, two dimensional images. More dynamically therefore, it involved the management of ‘social space’ where the crowd, as attendees of that space, were involved in a wider ‘performance.’⁴⁰²

Who has the right to provoke?

Underlying this consideration that social spaces, such as sideshows, the Golden Mile and Blackpool more widely, were involved in competing processes of presentation is a questioning of who had the power and the right to make things visible. This is a particularly important question when considering the nature of Gannon’s shows which were, undeniably, garish. Indeed, the history of the nature of the sideshow itself is tied to a capacity to shock, to present the ‘abnormal’ and, therefore, to provoke from its audience exaggerated experiences beyond the everyday. This question therefore becomes one of ‘who has the right to provoke?’⁴⁰³ This question can be explored in the context of Gannon and, specifically, through the consideration of contention that arose. The question raises ideas about where agency may be located or subverted, and how the authorities viewed the potential of sideshows as sites of provocation. To reiterate, I consider how the authorities employed a regime of regulation on sideshows which, as social performative spaces, had a constant potential to ‘explode.’⁴⁰⁴

It is useful to consider further examples of fasting as spectacle that raise questions about the public consumption of such exhibitions. Contemporary examples, occurring after Gannon’s brides and their demise, offer the opportunity for wider reflection on the fascination and contention surrounding fasting bodies on display. By introducing such

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

⁴⁰³ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4, (March 15, 2018).

⁴⁰⁴ Thiong'o, ‘Enactments of Power’, p. 13.

examples, this thesis considers who and in what capacity starving exhibits raise moral and legal questions. These examples are mainly of artists exhibiting their own bodies and, as such, they pose an interesting alternative view on the agency of the body within starving exhibits such as Gannon's. This informs an understanding of Gannon's experiences on the Golden Mile in that it raises the moral and legal implications the role of 'showman' possesses. Whilst the role of the showman as 'artist' and the status of showmen in the context of cultural artistic capital is an important consideration, it is too wide a debate to fully explore within this thesis. However, shared by self-starving artist and showman is their responsibilities in curating, producing and presenting bodies to a public. Similarities and distinct differences in the organisation, reception and degrees of negotiation related to their bodies on display allow important understandings of Gannon. A general analysis of fasting performances in contexts outside of the sideshow reveals relevant points and comparable discussions to Gannon, across time.

In opening these avenues of dialogue between showmen and other forms of popular consumption, a highly pertinent discussion develops where starving exhibitors, both contemporary and historical, negotiate the relationship 'between the obligation to be civil but the right to provoke.'⁴⁰⁵ What emerges is a complex relationship between civility, legality and a desire to disturb for profit, promotion and publicity. Evidently, these three areas are in constant negotiation, and negotiated by multiple people. As shown in Gannon's case, within these negotiations a great deal of tension exists. Firstly, a tension between the boundaries of moral, civil based control over objectionable displays, and the line of legality. Secondly, and the driving force behind the preliminary tension, is the strain between multiple parties, who seek to define and control these boundaries. Arguably, a great deal of this tension is compounded by the sense that to be provocative is to potentially offend. For exhibitors,

⁴⁰⁵ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4, (March 15, 2018).

provocation can be an integral part of their work and, in Gannon's case, a major contributor to his financial and reputational success.

This is to consider an aspect of intimate visibility, additional to the starving brides on the Golden Mile and the wider visibility of Blackpool to the nation. Here, the intimate interaction between the body on display and the immediate audience is considered. Anderson identifies the links made between the structures of space, i.e. where and how the body is made visible, and the intimacy of the act of looking at such spectacles.

Performances also disclosed the profoundly social, intersubjective character of both the body's economy of consumption and the institutional economy of the spectacle. Looking at these performances both effaced the expectation of passive spectatorship and enacted a vibrant, indeed *vital* form of *presence*: an experience more faithfully as being-*with* than being-*near*... a new figure emerges, one who is bound by the conventions of the institutional domains he has inhabited but who is simultaneously infused with the vulnerability of intersubjective presence.⁴⁰⁶

This is an important consideration, underlined in Chapter 1's analysis of the use of the glass cabinet. Linking it to the wider notions of visibility, contextualised at the beginning of this chapter, this section develops an understanding of how shows may be seen to hold affective potential, driving tensions and rendering indeterminate the line between civility, understood as a collective responsibility of upholding moral standards, and legality.

A consideration of contemporary fasting spectacles must include the well-reported image of David Blaine suspended in a glass box in central London. His 2003 venture into performance art titled *Above the Below*, involved 44 days of fasting supplemented only by water. His performance was subject to a great deal of hostility in the UK, provoking one saboteur to by-pass security and climb the frame holding the glass box in the air in an attempt

⁴⁰⁶ Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, pp. 83-84.

to cut off Blaine's water supply.⁴⁰⁷ Blaine's performance was also met with scepticism, involving the diagnosis of doctors from below, much like the scrutiny of fasting females in the eighteenth century. Arguably, much of the hostility was aimed at the perceived self-indulgence of the act, to which Blaine attributed no political agenda. This lack of political weight deemed the performance offensive to many. Blaine also made himself profoundly vulnerable by positioning himself outside of an artistic institution. Whilst he was physically separated from the world below in his glass box, he was vulnerably situated, in a public space, and suffered the consequences with crowds throwing eggs and cooking barbecues beneath. Undeniably however, the feat gripped the nation.

In contrast, a year earlier in 2002 artist Marina Abramović was conducting a 12 day fast in Sean Kelly gallery in Chelsea. In a piece titled *The House with the Ocean View*, audiences witnessed her fast in a staged domestic setting, including a simple bathroom, bedroom and living room built against the back wall of the gallery and open to the public. The aesthetic of suffering here was domesticated, intimate yet staged. Her audience and herself were most prominently separated by the ladders made from butcher's knives, which led to her domain six feet off the ground. The controlled space inside the gallery contrasts with Blaine's positioning outside. Visitors to Abramović's show were there by intent and the hush of gallery etiquette, framing the experience as high art, created an intense, quiet experience unlike the noise reverberating around Blaine's glass box. Arguably, Abramović's audience came with very different expectations and codes of cultural behaviour to those passing by Blaine's exhibit, which was obtrusively situated in a very public space.

⁴⁰⁷ Blaine declared the fast "a piece of performance art, and I also consider it something that for me is like the ultimate truth". Christopher Hooton, 'Remembering David Blaine's 44 days in a glass box', *The Independent* (September 2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/david-blaine-london-glass-box-stunt-reaction-starvation-above-the-below-a8523606.html> [accessed 25 June 2019].

The intensity of Abramović's performance is expressed by one visitor to her exhibition who claimed, 'Crazy, but I could feel her weakened state. To me the whole thing was about testing the limits, and this is a time of testing we're all going through.'⁴⁰⁸ The act of starving as an elicitor of empathy is further articulated by Abramović herself when she stated, 'So many stayed. So many came back day after day. I was like a mirror.'⁴⁰⁹ Her version of the 'mirror' was one of intense scrutiny. The intensity created by the hushed silence of Abramović's state and her slow movements around the 'house' was made even more cutting as she asked those who visited the scene to participate in an 'energy exchange'.⁴¹⁰ This exchange occurred in the moment she returned and held the gaze of those watching. Furthermore, Abramović positioned her piece as 'a gift to the city (New York) about living in the moment in difficult times and in peace', following the September 2001 terror attacks.⁴¹¹ It was an attempt to reflect an entire nation back at itself.⁴¹² Unlike Blaine, she attributed a politicised meaning to the fast, rendering it purposeful and thus, more acceptable.

In another contemporary example, intimacy and vulnerability created between audience and body on display is made clear. Sam Taylor-Wood's video installation of footballer David Beckham sleeping was considered to be somewhat 'erotic.'⁴¹³ Depicted in his bed, recorded sleeping peacefully, the camera takes the position of sleeping next to him. It is a profoundly intimate, if not erotic, experience. This alludes to Gannon's brides, often seen

⁴⁰⁸ 'Reflecting on an Ordeal that was also Art', *The New York Times* (November 2002), <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/28/arts/reflecting-on-an-ordeal-that-was-also-art.html> [accessed 20 June 2019].

⁴⁰⁹ 'Reflecting on an Ordeal that was also Art', *The New York Times*. Note, the relevance of her mirror reference as linked to freak show analysis.

⁴¹⁰ Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, pp. 106-107.

⁴¹¹ 'Reflecting on an Ordeal that was also Art', *The New York Times*.

⁴¹² Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, pp. 106-107.

⁴¹³ Sam Taylor-Wood, *David Beckham*, Digital video displayed on plasma screen, 2004, held at the National Portrait Gallery, NPG 6661. *Telegraph*, 'Beckham the sleeping beauty' (April 2004), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3616013/Beckham-the-sleeping-beauty.html> [accessed 13 June 2019].

sleeping and laid down in their cabinet, thus placing the watcher in the uncomfortable position of a missing bed companion. As with Taylor-Wood, Gannon exploited the feeling of intimacy, confined not by a television glass screen but a glass cabinet. The audience was charged with a sense of close watchfulness, proximity and sensuality.

These examples of twenty-first century fasting pose some interesting points of reflection when considering Gannon's starving brides. Firstly, they highlight the continued fascination of human fasting as spectacle into the next century. Gannon's brides may have accepted defeat in the 1930s, exiled from the Golden Mile and condemned morally and legally, yet fasting prevails in new contexts as a point of human fascination. Secondly, what can be drawn from the contemporary examples is the way in which space plays a vital role in the reception and the experience of the observers. Blaine's invasion of public space rendered his act vulnerable to a challenging public whilst also maintaining a degree of distance. Whilst he could look down upon the crowd below, his ability to interact remained disconnected. He was very much the object of display. For Abramović, the gallery space offered a degree of safety, but also the opportunity to play with gaze and the exchange between witness and willing participant.

Gannon arguably occupied a space somewhat reflective of both. Blaine, like Gannon's brides, made use of a glass box to simplify his fasting space, and render him separate from the public. Blaine's description of the glass box is reflective of previously discussed ideas of glorification through passivity of the starving brides when Blaine states, 'When you live with nothing there's no distractions, you're just there as you are, struggling; I think that's the purest state you can be in.'⁴¹⁴ Unlike Blaine and more in line with Abramović however, Gannon's brides remained inside a controlled building, with audiences paying to

⁴¹⁴ Hooton, 'Remembering David Blaine's 44 days in a glass box'.

enter a designated space and observe the fasting bodies. Moreover, where Blaine and Abramović create indelicate structures of separation - Blaine his high suspension from a steel frame, and Abramović her ladder of butcher's knives - the brides are separated by a single sheet of glass, looked down upon, rather than existing 'above the below.'⁴¹⁵ Like Abramović, the brides were able to indulge in an exchange of 'energy', contained to some degree by their fragile containment.⁴¹⁶

Important, still, is the idea of the politicisation of acts of fasting. Despite some performance artists attributing political references within their fasting acts, the acts of fasting considered here are profitable beyond a mere political standpoint. This is because they are acts to be witnessed as a form of leisure for their audience. They are intended to be consumed by a visiting audience as a pursuit of interest, not necessity. Exemplified by Gannon and continued in the analysis of contemporary examples, the ways in which fasting acts are related to agendas and agency influence their reception. It is apparent that audiences desire a meaning behind acts of fasting, for example Gannon fashions meaning out of romance as fasting for love. David Blaine's apparent void where there should be a cause was a point of popular contention. Arguably, Gannon differs profoundly in that he is not the one on show; however, he is the orchestrator of the body on display, and can therefore by association be deemed the 'artist' in this sense.

In light of the above discussion, the dynamism of debates that revolve around fasting for public consumption, by various means and with various perceived motives, is clear. Considering fasting this way, as an act for public interest not necessity, opens Gannon to dialogue that crosses boundaries of time and context. Considering multiple examples of starving in this way highlights questions asked of those who put fasting bodies up for popular

⁴¹⁵ Hooton, 'Remembering David Blaine's 44 days in a glass box'.

⁴¹⁶ Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, pp. 106-107.

consumption. It is clear that they are not always welcome, but cannot fail to stir something within the watching public. Significantly, the above discussion demonstrates how the differing structures that surround each act of self-starvation influence how the act is perceived and received by the public.⁴¹⁷ The immediate ways in which the body is made visible to the present audience, hold wider implications of how the body may be perceived and thus represented outside of the show itself. The ways in which bodies are displayed holds consequences for the questions asked of performers and organisers, and the powers granted or taken away from them. From Gannon's thousands of visitors, to the millions who viewed footage of David Blaine online, a debate ensues about whether it is 'right' to exploit the body and project suffering in such a way, what is the 'right' way or motivation for doing so, and who indeed has the 'right' to do it?

These tangential yet pivotal questions point to a seemingly grey area between the arts - in the context of this thesis the viewing public - and the law. The first appointment of a Chair in Law and the Arts at University College London, January 2017, presents a novel and apparent 'necessary' collaboration for the under-examined topics of censorship of literature and the visual arts.⁴¹⁸ In an interview for Radio 4, the appointed Chair, Professor Anthony Julius, stated that 'the connection (between law and art) is more exposed in the conflicts than in the relationship.'⁴¹⁹ This observation, that there is exposure in conflict, is a major consideration throughout this thesis and an alternative way of exploring sideshows. More specifically, Professor Julius' statement refers to a theoretical connection between law and art that can be made visible and tangible in moments and situations of conflict. In other words,

⁴¹⁷ Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, pp. 110- 137. Anderson reviews how the contexts of starvation performance and political agenda shape their meanings.

⁴¹⁸ "Necessary" was the term used by Anthony Julius in reference to the new position.

⁴¹⁹ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4 (March 15, 2018).

probing conflicts allows the examination of theoretical or thematic areas of study, law and art, by giving them real relevancy and perceptible effects.

Arguably, these conflicts are particularly heightened when people are exhibited ‘doing deplorable things.’⁴²⁰ This contemporary concern resonates with sideshow discussion in major ways. For example, Professor Julius sees the role as extremely multifaceted and contends that the term ‘censorship’ is a loose one including, for example, trigger warnings on novels, used to warn audiences of ‘unhappy experiences’ that may occur if ‘exposed to works.’⁴²¹ I argue that, according to this understanding, the ‘deplorable’ entertainment up for consumption is given an *affective potential*- an ability to incite personal unhappiness or discomfort for its audience. The ‘unhappy experience’ that is initially that of a specific individual, transfers beyond the person described in text or displayed on stage, to a personal, corporeal experience for the audience member.

A similar line of thought was evident in the early twentieth century, as disturbing performances were feared in relation to their effect on the crowd as a possible incitement of ‘imitation’, but also as a reflection of an unsound moral character.⁴²² Therefore, a relationship between those placed on display, be it through a novel or a sideshow, and the effect this may incite upon the audience is expressed in contemporary concerns over the law and art, as well as controls that were pushed during the twentieth century.⁴²³ Ideas of censorship, in its broadest sense, denotes a concern over the relationship between audience exposure and what the audience member may go on to experience within his or her self.

As expounded in the previous chapter, there are major problems with ascribing types of entertainment with agency over an audience. For example, in Blackpool, the conception of

⁴²⁰ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4 (March 15, 2018).

⁴²¹ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4 (March 15, 2018).

⁴²² Cox et al, *Public Indecency in England 1857-1960*, p. 4.

⁴²³ See Chapter 2 for detail of Blackpool’s changing regulations.

‘nauseating exhibitions’ as possessing an ability to provoke the working-class crowd revealed a perception of the crowd as wholly passive, stereotyped and in need of moral containment.⁴²⁴ However, a degree of agency within types of entertainment, particularly the kind that sees participants ‘doing deplorable things’, has to be acknowledged. Whilst avoiding a presumption that witnessing such acts may be the cause of imitation and mass degradation, it is important to consider how audience members may have been affected in some way. There is, and in fact must be, an affective potential within types of disturbing experiences, paid for as forms of entertainment. This is evident, as the success of sideshows relied on their potential to excite, disturb and enthrall visitors. Arguably, where ‘trigger warnings’ may be seen as a protective measure in contemporary censorship, or indeed entertainment regulators of the twentieth century, such ‘warnings’ may also be provocative.⁴²⁵ The promise of an unsettling and potentially disturbing experience was one of the major appeals of the sideshow and relied on the audience’s paid and participatory exposure to a particular act. To understand this, one has to consider the more intimate experience between performance and audience, which will be discussed in more detail later.

Evidently however, even the most intimate exchanges that are capable of arousing personal feelings of disgust, distain and desire are regulated. This is where the role and agency of those who place fasting bodies on display are brought back into view. Underlying these acts and the controversy surrounding them is a long running, necessary discussion: how to negotiate the relationship ‘between the obligation to be civil but the right to provoke.’⁴²⁶ This discussion is arguably at the heart of Gannon’s run-ins with the authorities as he makes provocative acts visible and exposes audiences to potentially disturbing experiences. The

⁴²⁴ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 8 September 1932.

⁴²⁵ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4 (March 15, 2018).

⁴²⁶ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4, (March 15, 2018).

starving brides are, as clearly considered by authorities and members of the public, ‘doing deplorable things.’⁴²⁷

A troubling question that can arise from such a discussion is whether artists should have to consider questions regarding the balance between being ‘civil’ and being provocative; ‘should they (the artist) even be conscious of these questions, even if they are not breaking the law?’⁴²⁸ The question raises some interesting difficulties. First, the relationship between offence and the law is a complex one. An offence made in a moral sense may incite forms of intervention before it is deemed illegal, and what was once not offensive may become offensive, and subsequently (but not always) made illegal, thus exposing how fluid the ideas of offence and law are. This is particularly tricky when it comes to performance acts that are intentionally provocative.

It is easy to over-simplify the considerations as to whether entertainers should be conscious of such risks *or* enjoy total artistic freedom. As is evident in Gannon’s history on the Blackpool Golden Mile, performance was a constant form of negotiation and engagement between public consciousness and pedantic changes in law wrought by local authorities. Gannon was able to push boundaries, to ride on the cusp of that which was offensive, in order to excite and entice his audience and to gain notoriety in the press. A heightened awareness of what was ‘civil’ did not hinder his early years at the Golden Mile, rather it allowed him to navigate the blurred lines that existed between offensive and illegal. Ultimately, these lines would shift out of Gannon’s favour as offence became law and the sideshow became sidelined in favour of ‘progressive’ developments. However, his deep engagement with what was ‘civil’ could be considered the secret to his early success during his time on the Golden Mile.

⁴²⁷ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4, (March 15, 2018).

Letters written to the *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 8 September 1932 from the public also testify to the perceived deplorable character of Gannon’s exhibit.

⁴²⁸ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4, (March 15, 2018).

The provocative freak show

Showmen had a history of promoting their own ideas of what was ‘offensive’ and a means of monitoring it. One example comes from the 1908 *World’s Fair*, in an article titled ‘Offensive Postcards: A Timely Warning of an Evil Practice: That Must be Stopped.’⁴²⁹ Apparently, hawkers attending the fair were giving away postcards of ‘a very obnoxious nature’ and ‘indecent literature’ and in doing so, causing a ‘respectable enterprising body of tradespeople a serious harm.’⁴³⁰ Specifically, the complainant argues for the significance of the fairground as the Englishman’s recreation and declares that such a space should be to ‘amuse, not abuse’ with any distasteful material or ‘smut.’⁴³¹ Notably, he calls not upon the police to control this issue, but upon the stallholders and proprietors in an act of unified protection of the respectability of the Englishman’s recreation ground. Arguably, such an act by the showman could be pre-emptive, and a means of avoiding clashes with the law by taking an anticipatory premature stance. However, what this does demonstrate, is the coinciding of collective responsibility when it comes to controlling and monitoring potentially offensive material, and a call to the law for an alternative form of control.

Where contemporary examples introduced questions around provocation and politicisation, a deeper reflection of the ‘right to provoke’ is considered through analysis of sideshow exhibits closely related to Gannon and preceding his rise to fame; those of the freak show. In doing so, the question of the ‘right to provoke’ is once again considered in an alternative frame work. Gannon occupied an interesting time in the sideshow’s history, and particularly in the display of problematic bodies. By the end of the nineteenth century, the nature of sideshows had changed dramatically. Increasingly throughout the twentieth century

⁴²⁹ *The World’s Fair*, 22 February 1908.

⁴³⁰ *The World’s Fair*, 22 February 1908.

⁴³¹ *The World’s Fair*, 22 February 1908.

freak shows were considered old fashioned, lower class and had been subject to legal action and observation.

The rich history of the freak show and the intense scrutiny it provoked towards bodies on display takes the question of ‘the right to provoke’ to another level of analysis. In examining where the question of the ‘right to provoke’ was negotiated and defined, a deeper level of understanding about the potential capacities of the sideshow space is reached. What becomes clear is an understanding of the sideshow and its inhabitants as possessing the ability to deliver *affective potential*- to move the audience beyond mere observation, to an experience.

In many ways Gannon’s acts replicate aspects of freak show display as they too showed a body that was suspended from the everyday. Bodies were heightened by characterisation and costume, which added multiple layers of interpretation and bodily exaggeration. In the case of Gannon’s starving brides however, unlike nineteenth century freak show performers, the individuals on display had not been born with an unchangeable, lifelong abnormality.⁴³² Their exclusion from the norm of bodily function was located in the *act* of starvation which was voluntary and temporary. The depleted bodies were the object of observation: no mystical or science defying trickery was displayed or exaggerated. As noted by the National Fairground Archive, Sheffield, ‘what was saleable as far as the freak was concerned was, of course, physical difference.’⁴³³

Gannon’s exhibited bodies relied upon their regular and thus relatable state to exaggerate the suffering experienced by the fasting bodies and entice viewers. This means the approaches by multiple groups and those in positions of power who opposed freak shows and

⁴³² There were of course performers who were accused of falsely changing their bodies, however, they were presented and perceived as having inherent bodily differences.

⁴³³ ‘The History of Freak shows’, *National Fairground and Circus Archive*, [https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca/researchandarticles/freak shows](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca/researchandarticles/freak%20shows) [accessed 2 March 2019].

Gannon's later sideshows are open to similar lines of investigation around opposition and cultural attitudes to displayed bodies. Indeed, Purce considers the Starving Bride shows a 'controversial display of freakery.'⁴³⁴ However, Gannon stands as an unusual later case against the apparent widespread and generalised shift to declining freak shows.

It is helpful therefore to consider Gannon within the trope of freak shows, which reference the sideshow space in particular. Although Gannon's brides were not strictly 'freaks' they shared commonality in their occupation of the sideshow space and in their exploitation of bodies. Considering this alongside cases such as Blaine, which reach forward into the turn of the twenty-first century, allows greater comprehension of Gannon's position as a fasting act entrepreneur and the conflicts which took place during the 1930s. His case, together with the decline of sideshows on Blackpool's Golden Mile, develops insight into wider questions of sideshow decline by looking at groups, discourses and positions of power in a focused nexus. This magnifies the complex web of 'rivals in articulating laws', which ultimately pushed Gannon and his acts out of the Blackpool Golden Mile.⁴³⁵

The rich body of literature that considers the decline of the freak show, a recognised trend that began at the end of the nineteenth century and culminated in the mid-twentieth century, offers a wealth of analysis for considering how the affective potential of shows, the agency of exhibitors and the exhibited, and fears over audience offence are articulated.⁴³⁶ In parallel with the freak show acts, Gannon's acts were denied space and denied visibility. This appeals to the earlier discussion around space and the sideshow, which brought attention to the body's ability to be at once contained and located within a performance space, whilst

⁴³⁴ Purce, 'Scales of Normality', p. 686.

⁴³⁵ Thiong'o, 'Enactments of Power', p. 14.

⁴³⁶ Bogdan, *Freak show*; Drimmer, *Very Special People*; Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*; Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, (New York, 1981); Charlie Holland, *Strange Feats and Clever Turns: Remarkable Speciality Acts in Variety, Vaudeville and Sideshows at the Turn of the 20th Century as Seen by Their Contemporaries* (London, 1998); Rosemary Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York, 1996).

making wider, discursive references. These references are not neutral but push against the very frameworks and constraints that are given to performance space, be they in the form of regulations for curfews, licences and crowd control. The sideshow's struggle for space is essentially a struggle to make the body visible; thus appealing to theories of performativity and containment in Grosz's assertion about the 'body's ability to seep beyond domains of control...to extend frameworks which attempt to control them.'⁴³⁷ More specifically, it involves looking at how bodies 'seep' from visible, entertaining bodies, to 'problem bodies', to less visible bodies.⁴³⁸

The peak of the freak show was the Victorian era, as the turn of the twentieth century not only brought new forms of entertainment, such as film, into the accessible realm of the average worker, but saw new considerations around the appropriateness of displaying human oddities.⁴³⁹ Changing standards in the entertainment industry, both in taste and in innovation, displaced the explicit exploitation of abnormal bodies in travelling fairs and sideshows.⁴⁴⁰ Furthermore, for a time, the freak show moved with the Western world in its pursuit of science's progressive discourse, as mythical anomalies became medical marvels and subjects of study.⁴⁴¹ However, by the 1900s the freak show was no longer a fitting frame of reference for exploring what it was to be abnormal or normal. In 1907, the London County Council stopped issuing permits for freak shows.⁴⁴²

Arguably, this shift in freak show suitability was because freak shows always existed on the cusp of showmanship and could never fully remove themselves from the world of entertainment. As Fiedler explains, the freak show exists as a 'myth we may be lucky enough

⁴³⁷ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. xi

⁴³⁸ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p.xi; Sears, 'Electric Brilliancy', p. 174.

⁴³⁹ 'The History of Freak Shows', *National Fairground and Circus Archive*, https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca/researchandarticles/freak_shows [accessed 2 March 2019].

⁴⁴⁰ 'The History of Freak Shows', *National Fairground and Circus Archive*.

⁴⁴¹ Lori Loeb [review], 'Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak shows and Modern British Culture*, (California: 2009)', *The Journal of Modern History* 83 (2011), pp. 647-648.

⁴⁴² Loeb, [review], 'Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*', p. 648.

to see...if however, the spell doesn't work...we awake to the mouldy stench of an old canvas...see hostility and boredom in the eyes of those we thought were there to be looked at, not to look back.'⁴⁴³ Freak shows were built upon and required arousal, props, playing with trickery and reality; they must be, as I argue, *affective*.⁴⁴⁴ They demanded profit and the consideration of an audience's satisfaction and entertainment. This meant that there was a limit to its claim to medicine and science. As perceived by medical practitioners and local authorities, they were an undesirable marker of naivety, ignorance and misinformation when it came to knowledge of corporeal reality itself. Their consumption by the masses was seen as a reflection of backward British tastes.

Whilst freak shows continued into the twentieth century, particularly in the USA, they were met with increasing opposition and difficulties. For example, Mr J. R. Styles, a travelling showman who specialised in displaying 'freaks', exemplifies considerations that showman negotiated with, and the terms under which bodies increasingly became 'problem bodies' under new regulatory regimes.⁴⁴⁵

In happier days Mr Styles would exhibit one freak for 2d; under the pressure of competition today he shows five for the same price admission. He pleaded yesterday for the remission of the trailer tax on showman's caravans. In 1929, he said, 298 sideshows- booths which exhibited the Fat Lady, the Midget, or the Tattooed Man- were getting a living on the fairgrounds of the country. Today there were only 43 sideshows left. The decrease he attributed to taxation. "I serve a useful purpose by keeping these people," Mr Styles said of his freaks, "Surely this country has not fallen so low that it must take from them the right to live...must I turn to the girl without arms and say that because the country is in difficulty she must accept half wages?...if this show business is taxed out of existence it is not only they who will suffer but many trades".⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴³ Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*, p. 283.

⁴⁴⁴ Siegel, 'Theater of Guts', pp. 107- 124.

⁴⁴⁵ Further references to Styles' show as found in *The Merry Go Round*, 1913.

⁴⁴⁶ 'Travelling Showmen and Taxation', *The Times*, 19 January 1935, p. 10.

The above extract is one example of changing concerns widespread throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. Concerns are mainly expressed in a series of articles in *The World Fair* and reported in national newspapers, as the decline of sideshows and ‘troubles’ of showman were raised.⁴⁴⁷ This includes mainly arguments around monetary and spatial issues: taxation and public protest at the noise and ‘bad crowds’ of certain fairs. These issues were, however, as with Gannon, embedded in wider cultural and social negotiations about the kind of bodies that should be visible as forms of entertainment and how this reflected on the moral health of Britain.

Even in the United States, the twentieth century freak shows were under more scrutiny. In 1908, Barnum and Bailey Circus put out a press release stating that the freak show department would no longer be showing.⁴⁴⁸ The reason for closure was given as the many letters received, condemning the exploitation of showing freaks. Days later, another press release announced to sideshow fans that freaks would, after all, be on display. Again, the reason given was the vast quantity of letters received from fans, declaring unhappiness at the closures. Unsurprisingly, the whole back and forth was a calculated publicity stunt, conducted to attract attention and, tellingly, to exhibit an appreciation of the changing public’s views.⁴⁴⁹ Whilst the shows went ahead, the stunt exposes a change in consciousness, and a need for the show organisers to address freak show concerns, in a pre-emptive manner.

The concocted closure would however be met with real opposition, with members of the scientific community publishing an article in the *Scientific America Supplement* the same year, de-mystifying the freak show and calling for a more ‘humane’, pathology based understanding of the ‘unfortunate individuals.’⁴⁵⁰ The relationship with the scientific

⁴⁴⁷ ‘Travelling Showmen and Taxation’, *The Times*, 19 January 1935, p. 10.

⁴⁴⁸ Bogdan, *Freak Show*, p. 63.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

community continued to wain during the twentieth century, as is explored in more detail later.

In general, the twentieth century exhibition of human anomalies increasingly became

‘inappropriate, indecent, and indefensible’, a pleasure of Victorian monstrosity voyeurism.⁴⁵¹

As Bogdan articulately describes,

Once the freak show, packaged as rational entertainment, had legitimized and provided cover for theatrical undertakings; by the forties it had become morally bankrupt.⁴⁵²

Affect and the construction of problem bodies

The freak show has been shown to be subjected to similar oppositional arguments with

Gannon’s brides. Whilst acknowledging their differences, namely that starving brides were

‘normal’ and subject to physical hardship in a dissimilar way to the typical ‘freak’, opposition

framed in terms of ‘bad crowds’, indecent voyeurism and exploitative showmanship

transcended sideshow spaces.⁴⁵³ To better understand these fruitful crossovers, it is first

necessary to decipher the idea of ‘problem bodies’, not only to make clearer a definition of its

use in this context, but in breaking down its meaning, this in itself acts as an academic

process which produces a new conceptual framework into performing bodies. This also

develops and encompasses ideas about agency and affective potential.

This begins with reiterating complex ideas of the space of the nineteenth century freak

show. As previously discussed, the space and site of freak show display can be understood

from a variety of angles. It is an understanding of this ‘space’ that reveals freak show bodies

as ‘problem’. Arguably, Durbach’s major text on freak shows and British culture introduced

the bodies of the freak show as problem bodies. Durbach argues that the displaying of freaks

acted as an index to cultural anxieties at the time. For example, Lalloo, the double-bodied

⁴⁵¹ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 171.

⁴⁵² Bogdan, *Freak Show*, p. 67.

⁴⁵³ Exploitative here refers not to the financial exploitation of exhibits, but the way in which their bodies were put up for visual consumption.

Hindoo Boy, displayed in London in 1887, ‘had a conjoined, ostensibly female twin, much smaller than him, growing out of his chest. Marketed as double sexed, Lalloo exploited late Victorian anxieties about incest, paedophilia, and child marriage.’⁴⁵⁴ This approach, situating the sideshow as cultural mirror, reflecting cultural anxieties, is suggested in the majority of freak show literature.⁴⁵⁵ Freak shows exaggerated and made explicitly visible anxieties, representing them through the bodies of the ‘other.’⁴⁵⁶

In this sense, freak show bodies were ‘problem bodies’ themselves, as they reflected societal problems to be solved or negotiated back at society itself. Arguably, this was achieved through a process of division. Firstly, the audience and the ‘freak’ were separated as audience and performer i.e. object on display and onlooker, achieved through a variety of innovative, spectacle making methods such as peepholes, stages, curtains. Secondly, a process of conceptual and reflective division was achieved; a reductive and reassuring opposition between ‘freak’ and ‘norm’. This not only operated between the freak and the individual onlooker, but exercised the general cultural muscle for division between bodies. For example, as Ferguson describes of the nineteenth century freak show, ‘by exoticising bodily difference, sideshow performers were able to capitalise on the public’s need to see bars of culture, race and geography between the physical deviant and their own idyllic homestead.’⁴⁵⁷

Notably however, these seemingly obvious points of duality within the freak show are not so simple. This next section will reconsider the over-simplified dualistic approaches to the sideshow as a site where freak meets norm, where audience is separated from performer.

⁴⁵⁴ Loeb, [review], ‘Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*’, p. 648.

⁴⁵⁵ Bogdan, *Freak show*; Drimmer, *Very Special People*; Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*; Kochanek, *Reframing the Freak*.

⁴⁵⁶ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, pp. 3- 4.

⁴⁵⁷ Ferguson, ‘Grotesque Rhetoric and the Victorian Freak show’, p. 245.

This complex reality of the freak show can be seen in its very breaking down of the freak show space and bringing one back to the term, ‘problem body’. For example, freak shows within nineteenth century society were highly social and visible events. They were important in social calendars with ‘their ubiquity in almost every British city in music halls, theatres, circuses, zoos, museums, and travelling shows suggests cultural significance...their audience cut across class and gender lines.’⁴⁵⁸ Yet, they provided a designated and unique space which offered access to the ‘other’. In this sense they were *outside* of society, creating a space designed to confront, exaggerate and make a problem visible; the term ‘problem’ in this context meaning something to be solved, debated or reflected upon. Yet they were, at the same time, profoundly accessible which leads to the conclusion that, through the freak shows’ explicit display of problem bodies, the freak shows were *problem solving spaces*. ‘Corporeal and cultural volatilities’ of society and those that existed outside the freak show were dealt with within the sideshow space, deeming it a problem-solving space within itself.⁴⁵⁹

Regarding the sideshow as a unique space that was also deeply embedded within its social context allows the construction of a ‘problem solving space’ to be developed further to take the sideshow beyond the conceptualisation of it as a ‘mirror to society’.⁴⁶⁰ For example, Haibestam’s discourse on monstrosity takes the ‘mirror’ theory to a corporeal level, in that monsters ‘function’ by condensing ‘fears into a body.’⁴⁶¹ In this view the sideshow, specifically the *freak body*, operates as a societal tool for reflection. Yet, to whom exactly does the ‘reflection’ belong, and to what degree is this image fixed?⁴⁶²

⁴⁵⁸ Loeb, [review], ‘Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*’, p. 648.

⁴⁵⁹ Ferguson, ‘Grotesque Rhetoric and the Victorian Freak show’, p. 245.

⁴⁶⁰ Davies, *Neo-Victorian Freakery*, p. 7.

⁴⁶¹ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 3.

⁴⁶² This notion of spaces acting as mirrors is discussed in this thesis’ Introduction, explored through a grounding in the work of Foucault. Spaces can be seen to act as reflective yet divergent images of wider society, and can be seen a distinct from society in general. Foucault, M. (1968) [1967] ‘Des espaces autres’, [Of other

Arguably therefore, the ‘freak show as mirror’ approach can thus be seen as reductive in its lessening of the experience of the freak show to a general metaphor which functions upon discursive and abstract problems. Evident in the case of Gannon is the unfixed quality of the sideshow as a site not of stable reflection, but rather of continued negotiation. It is important to consider that, far from acting as a showcase for completely defined or controlled examples of norm and other, freak shows were also designed to disturb and unsettle.

The threat posed by Gannon’s starving brides shows were debated by the authorities through discourses that focused on the physical structure of a place, such as Blackpool town planning, as well as the moral and consumerist structure and reputation of British society itself. These once highly visible bodies did not suffer a casual extinction but were subject to regulatory and strategic condemnation. This is noted as occurring at a range of sideshows, as Toulmin notes that issues with sideshows and their content are attacked with reference of ‘noise, nuisance... obstructing.’⁴⁶³ The opening and closing of sideshows was therefore a process through which bodies may not only be displayed or removed, but recategorised; redefined from ‘problem bodies’ to be consumed by popular entertainment, such as the early freak show, to ‘problem bodies’ which were a concern for society and must be removed.

It must be noted that this is not an argument for the resurrection of such shows to their once pervasive platform. It is however important to consider who was involved in specific processes and cases of sideshow decline, how they succeeded and how bodies were successfully problematised, in other words, deemed problematic to society. This recategorisation is defined, maintained and made real through regulatory changes. It is necessary to identify the specific networks and societal mechanisms which allowed this

spaces], *l’Architettura* 13: 822-23. This text, entitled “Des Espace Autres,” and published by the French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* in October, 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967.

⁴⁶³ Toulmin, ‘Curios Things in Curios Places’, p. 117.

recategorisation, and to avoid a narrative that portrays the decline of any sideshow as an inevitable cultural shift in taste or ideology. Simply, the decline of freak shows involved the transference of potentially problem-solving spaces, into a new category, that of problems to society, a process paralleled in Gannon's case.

However, there is another level of volatility to be considered which addresses the audience.⁴⁶⁴ More specifically, it requires the collective consideration of the audience's body, the artist's body and the body of the public sphere.⁴⁶⁵ Sideshows were *affective* and not uninterested in the physical and emotive response of their audience. It was their profound capacity for 'seepage' - to mingle in the consciousness of their onlookers and to dilute the boundaries that sought to contain them - that made them such appealing sites of entertainment.⁴⁶⁶ Durbach hints at this when he states, 'the freak was therefore both an occupation and a role that was produced in collaboration with the audience whose spectatorship itself shaped the construct of the performer's body as aberrant.'⁴⁶⁷

I take this further however, where declaring the nineteenth century freak show as a *problem solving space* is to recognise that such a space not only allowed the display of bodies which elaborated and made visible societal anxieties, but invited other bodies into that space, to *corporeally* and *affectively* experience and, therefore, work through such problems.⁴⁶⁸ This develops an understanding built on notions of the body, discussed in more detail in the Introduction, that assert the body as a key site for processes of experience and understanding. Bourdieu's assertion that pedagogy instilled through the body is capable of influencing

⁴⁶⁴ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁶⁵ These three bodies are considered as necessary individual and collective points of research, needed in humanity studies. See Žarko Cvejić, Andrija Filipović and Ana Petrov (eds), *The Crisis in the Humanities: Transdisciplinary Solutions*, (Cambridge, 2016).

⁴⁶⁶ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. xi

⁴⁶⁷ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 9.

⁴⁶⁸ The term 'problem' meaning something to be solved, debated or reflected upon.

perceptions both inner self and outer world, is developed here.⁴⁶⁹ The ‘materiality of subjectivity’ is arguably developed in an intense form within the freak show. This is evident as the sideshow put a great emphasis on the body, its display and, more specifically, on the encounters occurring between body on display and audiences.⁴⁷⁰ The freak show relied upon these bodily and thus affective interactions to create a sense of excitement and entertainment.

Arguably, it is the uncontrollable nature of these affective potentials that may cause such concern for authorities. ‘Desires’ towards sideshow bodies may be unintended by show organisers themselves, and this is often unacknowledged within contemporary sources.⁴⁷¹ Sears makes an acute observation in regards to the affective and uncontrollable relationship between sideshow and audience;

Consequently, we can imagine the different ways that different audiences may have interacted (with performers); with fascination and titillation, perhaps; with discomfort and disdain; but also, perhaps with identification, attraction, and desire... neglecting this possibility because of insufficient evidence may be more problematic than raising it unsupported by positive proof, as it replicates the structure of the archive, amplifying some voices and silencing others.⁴⁷²

It is therefore important not to attempt to define the exact affective intentions of Gannon. His starving bride shows were without question provocative; however, the aim is to look at how authorities sought to reign in these ungraspable affective potentials; how and why?

To give an example from freak shows, Senelick’s research into nineteenth century hermaphrodites reveals a preoccupation with models of sexuality explored in the medical and entertainment context; ‘The carnival half-and-half gave them an object lesson, confirming

⁴⁶⁹ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

⁴⁷⁰ Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

⁴⁷¹ Sears, ‘Electric Brilliancy’, pp. 183-184.

⁴⁷² Sears, ‘Electric Brilliancy’, pp. 183-184.

their belief in the compartmentalisation of male and female.’⁴⁷³ These shows were accompanied by medical ‘narratives’, which presented the performers as subjects of study. This granted voyeurism as audiences were ‘licensed to ogle’ under the guise of medical interest.⁴⁷⁴ An undercurrent, under-emphasised in Senelick’s analysis, is the relationship between legislative regulations of bodily display and the sideshow. Senelick notes that ‘the half-and-half was a creature whose self was exclusively or primarily defined by gender: the common assumption that gender and sexuality were the same thing led to the belief that a being who partook of both genders must be literally oversexed.’⁴⁷⁵ As a result, half-and-half performers and the showman who exhibited them increasingly became subject to the harassment of police and local authorities. These legal allegations generally came under two aspects of concern. Firstly, cases of diverse types of genital fakery or exaggeration were not uncommon. The second concern for police and authorities was indecency. Senelick mentions the inferences made in such cases, where displays become linked to perversion and prostitution. The specifics of such clashes are not, however, explored in detail.⁴⁷⁶

Senelick goes as far as to observe that half-and-halves continued to be popular with their audience, with legal clashes rooted in the limits of bodily display and of the danger of ‘oversexed’ anxiety. On the other hand and in compliance with the law, ‘the half and half confirmed the divinely ordained division of human beings into two sexes...even freaks of gender were tokens of the overarching scheme of things and their display could serve the cause of progress.’⁴⁷⁷ This was because a ‘third sex’ was rejected and the half-and-half emphasised a distinct difference in female and male by showing them, physically, side by side in one body. Furthermore, in an attempt to ‘neutralise the exhibition’s steamier aspect’,

⁴⁷³ Senelick, ‘Enlightened by Morphodites’, p. 364.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

the sex lives of half-and-halves were not discussed.⁴⁷⁸ Notably therefore, the half-and-half was able to ride the wave of scientific progression, but only when sanitised and only when conforming to a socially-sanctioned strict regime of distinct sexes. They were still, despite these sanitised efforts, subject to harassment by authorities and were in steep decline by the 1930s.⁴⁷⁹

Ultimately, the half-and-half exemplifies two major themes which lead to their ‘problematism’ by authorities. Firstly, they were perceived as arousing something within the public – ‘over-sexed’, provocative and therefore dangerous. In essence, the danger of an ‘over-sexed act’ is an affective danger, in that it carried with it the potential for undesirable arousal and attention. Secondly, they undermined and made unstable a potential discourse of progress. In this case, it was the medical profession that was potentially undermined. As Bogdan pronounces, ‘shifting meaning of abnormality formed by scientific discovery and ascent of medical authority is basic to understanding the decline of the freak show.’⁴⁸⁰ This is echoed as Brottman describes,

Over time, developments in medicine and anthropological knowledge undermined some of the wild stories proclaiming the origin and capture of people with mental retardation. Gradually, the exhibition... moved from straight presentations emphasizing the attraction's scientific merit to mockery and farcical displays.⁴⁸¹

The context of their display, within the space of the sideshow, would never be clear of its ‘spectacle’ status. The sideshow was therefore often a contentious and complicated site in how bodies were problematised by authorities and the nation more generally. The freak show, despite its overlapping with medical discourses, could not accommodate the emerging and

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁴⁸⁰ Bogdan, *Freak show*, p. 62.

⁴⁸¹ Mikita Brottman and David Brottman, ‘Return of the Freak show: Carnival (De)Formations in Contemporary Culture’, *Studies in Popular Culture* 18:2 (1996), p. 91.

desirable sanitised, progressive discourse. The idea of ‘freak’ became a relic of the past and bodies treated in different terms.

Arguably, as with the nineteenth century half-and-half, Gannon’s starving bride shows appealed to something dangerously passionate, sexualised and unsettlingly instinctual; they were profoundly affective experiences, with their affectiveness a significant prerequisite for success and appeal. The unusual nature of starving brides deems them affective by the following definition; ‘superstitious or confused accounts of the world and ones that expose that certain aspects of social and political conditions have an affective character.’⁴⁸² Acknowledging this goes some way to adding complexity to the projected binary between self and other by avoiding over simplistic ideas of performance and performance space. Although it may be helpful to set out apparent dualities that may act as initial points of interest for sideshow study and to acknowledge those that have typically been tools of investigation, it is looking at the ways in which these are contradicted, made complex and the spaces in between such binaries that the sideshow is revealed - notably, in looking at times and cases of conflict.

This realisation opens investigation of sideshow decline to much deeper understandings. Notably, that opposition to the sideshows demonstrates an unease with the affective potential of particular acts. This simultaneously reveals the sideshow’s power, as a profoundly corporeal confrontation of societal norms, as well as its very downfall as a unique space, popular with the mass audience and unpopular with changing ideas of entertainment, morals and bodies on display. It also allows the researcher to consider what those affective potentials within a specific sideshow display structure were and why might they become

⁴⁸² Cvejić et al, *The Crisis in the Humanities*, p. 13.

undesirable to authorities, public groups and eventually, the audience? Furthermore, how are these affective potentials processed by authorities and subsequently denied?

Particularly, this revolves around debates about the opening and closing of sideshow spaces. This was evident throughout the nineteenth century, for example, as Toulmin notes, 'Popular urban pursuits underwent major transformation...with the judicial system and range of legislations performing a critical function in moulding the major institutions and practices of urban leisure.'⁴⁸³ This observation occurs as a side note in a paper about 'places' and spaces. Toulmin acknowledges the role of the law in shaping how these spaces were accessed and experienced, however subtler lines of enquiry into the relationship between sideshow spaces and the law, and the experiences of those showmen and performing bodies, can be opened. This is made possible using close analysis of a case study, such as Gannon, which also reaches into the twentieth century; a less-considered period of sideshow research and developing the idea of problem bodies.

The affective potential of sideshow acts is relevant for contemporary historical practice. In a recent publication seeking to address the 'crisis in the humanities', the role of affect as both a subject of study and as a researchers' tool is considered. Relevantly for this sideshow study it addresses the divisive role of censorship over affective forms of public expression. Although talking specifically about affective acts in public speaking, the affective character of sideshows allows an insightful link, where authorities and legislative acts prevent an audience member attending an exhibit which may hold affective potential.

The discourses that guide this are significant, as Aumiller points out, because 'only an affect can defeat an affect.'⁴⁸⁴ In the case of Blackpool, the public declaration of Gannon's

⁴⁸³ Toulmin, 'Curios Things in Curios Places', *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4 (2006), p. 117.

⁴⁸⁴ Cvejić et al, *The Crisis in the Humanities*, p. 13.

sideshow as ‘objectionable’, ‘disgusting’ and ‘backward’ generate a new type of self-consciousness upon entering such spaces. It positions such sideshows against the progressive image of Blackpool and thus changes the affective tone of the shows. This is not to say that people stopped going, but it demonstrates a realignment of a space from problem solving, to problem to society and thus, generates a new self-consciousness that is not merely stimulated by the affective potentials of the sideshow performance alone. It relates to a wider consciousness of the image of Blackpool and the subjecthood of its residents. This approach, with a heightened awareness not only of discourses, but also of regimes that seek to deny specific affective experiences, opens the study of Gannon to the real complexity woven in his decline.

Interestingly, this can be once again linked to affective public displays and their censorship. For example, the ‘crisis in the humanities’ debate emphasises the separation of science and passion in the seventeenth century, which developed into both academic and scientific writing that were ‘devoid of affect.’⁴⁸⁵ As noted by Aumiller, in 1842 an amendment to public speech censorship appealed to the ‘objective, respectful public discourse’, actively targeting the certain affective tones in public speeches.⁴⁸⁶ This was both a result of the perceived correct separation of sense and passion, and, more significantly, resulted in a silencing of voices who did not conform to this dialect. Specific affects were relabelled as redundant, non-political and not appropriate. This poses an insightful line of thought for Gannon and sideshow study as, just as voices may become inaudible for not conforming to public affective regimes, bodies can become invisible once deemed redundant and inappropriate.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Although it is well recognised that developments in science influenced freak shows, firstly as sites for scientific display and justified voyeurism later in the freak shows' decline, the separation of science from passion is important for identifying more specific examples of how bodies were made invisible; 'problem body' shifting. It shows a clear link to the problem of the affective potential in sideshow displays, identified by positions and discourses of power who sought to control or refocus this. Notably, it goes some way in answering *how* this may be achieved, in acknowledging that 'affect' is fought with 'affect': the public sphere bodies must be relocated to new spaces which allow society to work through its 'problems' in new, 'correct ways' (delineated through legislation such as the Blackpool Improvement Act); the sideshow space must be closed; the problem bodies must be identified, removed and relocated.

Brottman argues that freak shows still exist, be they in new forms and in new spaces; 'the contemporary mass media exhibit so many different forms and manifestations of the malformed human body that it is not overstating the case to claim that the freak show has gone prime-time, both reflecting and impelling current obsessions with exotic body markings.'⁴⁸⁷ This is due to a 'voyeuristic drive', 'the nervous disease of the human condition...a neurotic fear of the body.'⁴⁸⁸ This he typifies with mainstream media programmes such as *Embarassing Bodies*, *Big Brother*.

However, despite agreeing with Brottman's observation to some degree, the freak show as displayed in the sideshow space did decline. The freak show became an unacceptable form of display as, through medicalisation, the immoral nature of gazing at those who may be sick or suffering was increasingly brought to light- 'least in

⁴⁸⁷ Brottman and Brottman, 'Return of the Freak show', p. 91.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

person.⁴⁸⁹ One can therefore agree that the fascination with ‘the other’ may be an innate human condition. It is however, as identified, an affective act which is active and involves continuous work. Therefore, the form in which we explore, display and choose *not* to display these problem bodies is significant. These changes are tied to shifting discourses of power, agency and dehumanisation, evident in Gannon’s twentieth century sideshow exhibition and made apparent when comparing his decline to these earlier freak shows. It is this exact emphasis on how things are or are not displayed, which reveals the sideshow as a tool for authorities to control the evocative, passionate and disturbing innate feelings which draw a crowd; more specifically to avoid them and redirect them through new forms of leisure.

For example, in Gannon’s bride’s sleep-like state in glass cabinets, dress and glass are in materialistic dialogue as time is simultaneously and effectively passing, yet progression is frozen. Starving female bodies, particularly those in glass cases, are not devoid of agency.⁴⁹⁰ In recent feminist work, which addresses the contemporary approaches to anorexia, Grosz argues that ‘the body can be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles.’⁴⁹¹ Their glass cases elevate the pure and untouchable body to a glorified state. Moreover, one can consider that starving has a depleting effect on the figure of fertile, womanly fulfilment by stopping menstruation and making breasts smaller. It can be a way of defying feminine biological expectations.

Therefore, the female body, in this context, is full of agentive paradoxes which are exploited in the space of the sideshow. These include the observation of time and body through the glass case which deems the body objectified yet glorified, subjective and passive

⁴⁸⁹ Loeb, [review], ‘Nadja Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*’, p. 649.

⁴⁹⁰ For more on agency and glass cases, see Tiffin, ‘Ice, Glass, Snow’; Hopkinson, ‘The Glass Coffin and The Ensorcelled Prince: An Asexual Reading’.

⁴⁹¹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 40.

yet also visible and agentive. In this sense, the question of agency in the sideshow draws the observer to the individual body, be it the freak or the bride. They are, after all, the pivotal presence around which costume, props, signage were arranged.

Arguably, it was the body's living, breathing presence that gave these inanimate objects meaning within this context; it asserts them with a particular agentive charge. Without the body, they were merely display pieces, but with a living body they were performative. For example, one newspaper reports a wax work bride outside Gannon's sideshow, used to draw in passing Blackpool visitors.⁴⁹² This prop was used to catch the eye and stood as a signpost for the show within. However, this wax work could not present the audience with the essential appeal of a starving exhibition; the depleting body. Visitors would return to Gannon's starving brides to see if the body was still there, how it may have changed, how the living body may be suffering.⁴⁹³ Essentially, the presence of a living body, as opposed to a wax work, instilled time itself into the sideshow. With this, the living body emphasised suffering, empathy of hunger, some distorted form of humanity. It was around the corporeal, fleshly presence of a living body that adorning, showy ideas of 'fasting for love' were built and the bridal *dress* became an actual starving *bride*.

It is therefore easy to identify the agentive weight of individual, performing bodies within peculiar sideshow performances. One can look at the paradoxes such bodies may create, whilst always ending such analysis within the performance itself and not considering the body beyond the dialogue of that created within the show itself. It is important to consider the strong nexus of meanings, paradoxes and experiences brought in intense proximity within the sideshow space, for example as one entered the starving bride exhibit and peered down at

⁴⁹² 'Starving Bridal Couples in British Sideshows', *The Mail*, 13 October 1934, p. 3.

⁴⁹³ *Biggleswade Chronicle*, 25 August 1933, p. 3.

the glass case. Mapping out the materiality of such displays and the exhibitor's intentions is essential for understanding the wider meanings and resonances of such shows with audiences.

Furthermore, it is essential for understanding the agency of individual bodies; how a female body works in a performative space as displayed in a glass cabinet for example. However, sideshow bodies, such as an individual starving bride, were part of wider dialogues outside of the intensified sideshow space. It is important to consider how agency may shift or be reimagined when the performance of the sideshow is not a nexus of stable and carefully considered connections within one confined space; how is the performance itself reimagined? How is the agentive potential, created in the show itself, addressed? Who is given agency and given visibility? This also poses a self-reflexive consideration for the researcher who, in relaying the sideshow through text, is in danger of reconstructing such a confined, one-dimensional image of the sideshow and the agency of the bodies within it.

Gary Watt poses the theatrical stage as 'a genuine zone of exception in which the usual laws of dress may be wholly suspended or repealed. Naked and sexual performance is permitted on the stage, and within the confines of the theatre, and would certainly be deemed criminal outside.'⁴⁹⁴ The sideshow space is, however, always shifting in its performative capacity. In opposition to the view of the sideshow as a space of absolute exception, how bodies on display may translate into affective experiences beyond its walls and into its audience is an important consideration.⁴⁹⁵ Again, this is not to confirm the fears of the twentieth century such as shows inciting imitation in the audience, but rather to consider the affective potential of putting disturbing acts on display, and how the very potential for them to disturb was itself provocative of the attention and action of legislation.

⁴⁹⁴ Watt, *Dress, Law and Naked Truth*, p. 47.

⁴⁹⁵ Susan Edwards, *Female Sexuality and the Law: A Study of Constructs of Female Sexuality as they Inform Statute and Legal Procedure* (Oxford: Robertson, 1981); Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, 2000); Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*.

The work of Sangster is useful in identifying the complex relations between bodies, the law and regulation.⁴⁹⁶ Sangster emphasises an approach which deals with the law as ‘not one monolithic text’ but a ‘complex of codes, practices, personal’ elements.⁴⁹⁷ She seeks to neither look at resistance to the law, nor at a history of ‘sexual regulation.’⁴⁹⁸ Rather, Sangster proposes the dissecting of specific issues that drew women to court, how women themselves use the law to define sexuality, and how women may be classified in the process. In doing do, Sangster presents an interesting framework for examining how the law propels not only new regulations over bodies, but new definitions and orderings of bodies.

Here, the law is considered as highly dominant in its capacity for forming ideological issues. This reiterates and develops Watt’s assertion that ‘public indecency is not merely a matter of law, but is something made by law and culture.’⁴⁹⁹ Critically however, his use of ‘culture’ hangs as a highly ambiguous and over general term. Culture is made separate from the determinable and apparently concrete arrangement of the law. In this way, Watt sees the law as resistible in the form of direct defiance.⁵⁰⁰ One is either inside or outside; he overlooks the subjective ability not to only walk along the lines of the law but to move in the channels in-between them. Sangster on the other hand, acknowledges the malleability of the law, presenting it as a structure which may be inverted by the very subjects it seeks to subjugate. In emphasising how women themselves ‘use the law’, Sangster maintains a strong sense of subjectivity.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁶ Joan Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family and the Law in Ontario, 1920-1960* (Oxford, 2001).

⁴⁹⁷ Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women*, p. 3.

⁴⁹⁸ Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women*, p. 3.

⁴⁹⁹ Watt, *Dress, Law and Naked Truth*, p. 5.

⁵⁰⁰ To reiterate, he describes the law where for ‘every mask too rigidly imposed, there is always someone whom it will not fit’. Watt, *Dress, Law and Naked Truth*, p. 121.

⁵⁰¹ Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women*, pp. 3-4.

This is highly relevant for the notion of ‘offence’ within sideshows and specifically Gannon’s 1930s shows. Gannon relied on controversy for success. His shows had to relay something unique and situated tantalisingly on the edge of offence. At times Gannon’s shows even dealt with the law, including contesting the law directly. His meeting with Harold Davidson is a perfect example of using controversy for profit by exhibiting him in a half-cut barrel as he protested against the Church of England. In another unusual episode, Gannon is reportedly approached by Gandhi’s cousin, Narigaidey Gandhi, ‘dressed in loin cloth’, who offered to pay the showman if he is able to occupy his Blackpool sideshow and ‘fast until death.’⁵⁰² Gannon refused this request, claiming he must ‘consult my lawyers as to what my position would be if I allowed him to fast to death.’⁵⁰³ Gannon was therefore aware of his show’s legal limitations, whilst considering the ability to display not only provocative shows, but also political ones. To take this further, it is possible that the two cannot be separated; to be provocative was to be political in that incited moral, legal and national concerns around local issues, such as Blackpool’s Golden Mile, and the wider state of national moral health.

The presence of a *living* body, vital for empathy to be provoked and suffering to be portrayed, was unsettling for its audience through carefully considered side-showmanship. It was, in being unsettling, popular and desirable- full of affective potential. This demanded the absolute visibility of the brides and a belief in their affective agency. It was because of these very attributes however, capable of stirring its audience, that the show was considered inappropriate. As such, although the agency of the starving brides and their capacity to create agentive paradoxes within the show are visible, as Gannon’s starving bride shows were continuously subject to the scrutiny of Blackpool authorities, the agency of the brides out of the case is much less visible. They are not referred to by name and during the incessant

⁵⁰² *The Aberdeen Journal*, 27 March 1933.

⁵⁰³ *The Aberdeen Journal*, 27 March 1933.

scrutinising of Gannon's acts by local police authorities and the numerous times Gannon is brought to court, not once is a quote taken from one of the brides. Nor are the brides themselves summoned. It is therefore interesting to consider how and where problem bodies are identified, how they are transferred from entertainment to legal spaces, and where agency is located or negated. It would appear that their agency is valued and considered disruptive whilst in the glass case, but not outside of it. Once outside of the case, the affective potential was nullified, extracted from the abstract space that at once confined them and made them so visible.

Therefore, the brides occupy an interesting state of agency which negotiates visibility and objectivity. However, just as Gannon and other showman of purposefully provocative shows aimed to unsettle and even disturb their audience - arguably a form of offence in putting their audience through an unsettling ordeal - regulators made use of the malleability of offence to their own ends by deeming them non-progressive and legally improper. During this process, the agency of the brides shifted from visible bodies to invisible topics of debate as their offence was given configuration. This reiterates the sideshow as a performance space which, in examining conflict, articulates 'rivals in articulating laws.'⁵⁰⁴

As the affective potential of entering a sideshow reveals something to the individual, making such experiences inaccessible and making problem bodies less visible, is a provocation of self-consciousness. One no longer enters merely into a problem-solving space, but a space that is also marked as a problem to progressive society. Entering such a space brought to the attention of the public through press and legislative acts, becomes more problematic for the public. In this sense, it is important to seek how the identification of problem bodies became a tool for authorities to define good values and subject hood, in this

⁵⁰⁴ Thiong'o, 'Enactments of Power', p. 11.

case explicitly relating to reputation and character, through their realignment as newly defined and designated problem bodies. The sideshow was not merely a nuisance for authorities, but in fact a useful tool for controlling culture and citizens' values and behaviours. Values are encouraged as problem bodies are defined and dealt with by authorities, identified as the process of locating and defining bodies as problematic, and how this was then acted upon.

Conclusion

The beginning of this chapter sought to contextualise Blackpool as a site where concerns over image, reputation and visibility were apparent. Blackpool is understood as a social space and, as such, is seen to be part a performative strategy. There was a constant negotiation over which bodies, within the sideshow and within wider society, were visible and which were deemed undesirable. The attitudes and the legislative actions towards Gannon and his sideshow are considered as revealing of Blackpool's self-image, but also of the perceptions of sideshows themselves.

Where Chapter 2 sought to make explicit the types of opposition faced by Gannon, this chapter considered *why* the sideshow posed such problems for local authorities and place-makers. In doing so, it considered the very nature of the sideshow itself, as a form of entertainment that relied on provocation and interest. Contemporary examples of starving exhibitionism highlight the influence of context, politicisation and artistic merit that may shift such acts from unsightly to insightful, or vice versa. These examples therefore facilitate a better understanding of the reception of Gannon's showmanship and the idea of provocation.

Evidently, provocation is negotiated in three domains; the sideshow structure, the subjective experience of the audience, and the law. It exists in a stable, structured way within the sideshow itself, but also outside of the sideshow conveyed by regulators such as police

and policy makers. Notably, in highlighting the constructed nature of sideshows, including the agency asserted by performers and their affective potentials, it is important to note that provocation or affective experience, be it thrilling or disturbing, also exists in the realm of the uncontainable and the subjective. For example, Sears highlights that freak shows simultaneously produce a sense of ‘otherness’ through their ‘spatial and existential distance’ to audience members, along with self-identification and recognition within their audiences as they interact.⁵⁰⁵ This dualistic exchange was able to occur ‘because the meaning of the freak show performance was never completely fixed, but was open to multiple interpretations by different audiences.’⁵⁰⁶ Notably, here Sears refers to particular ‘interactive’ freak shows, with exchanges taking place verbally between freaks and audience members, to highlight how the ‘interactive format... amplified the possibility of unintended interpretations’.⁵⁰⁷ This emphasises the role of agency in affective performances by asserting that interaction beyond mere voyeurism, such as speaking, heightens the potential for multiple interpretations.

There is no doubt, however, that sideshow organisers sought to provoke particular ‘experiences’ within their audiences.⁵⁰⁸ A strong relationship exists between offence and provocation as the potential to disturb or thrill by ‘doing deplorable things’ which flirt with offence were advertised and produced within the show itself.⁵⁰⁹ Asking whether artists or sideshow organisers should consider giving offence and simply misunderstanding this in terms of breaking the law ignores the real complexity of such a dialogue. It proposes the law as definite and a clear line to be considered by provocateurs. As shown in Gannon’s case however, the law is composed of multiple interests, parties and motives. Moreover, these

⁵⁰⁵ Sears, ‘Electric Brilliancy’, p. 183.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁵⁰⁸ *Today Programme*[Radio], BBC Radio 4 (March 15, 2018).

⁵⁰⁹ *Today Programme*[Radio], BBC Radio 4 (March 15, 2018).

multiple factors and parties have interests beyond personal ‘offence’, such as reputation, economic expansion and crowd control.

The relationship between provocation and offence is unstable, grappled with historically and continued today. For example, in answer to the question, ‘is giving offence essential to art?’, Anthony Julius declares that ‘art, limited to the giving of offence, produces a mental paralysis in its audience; a recoil or retreat’.⁵¹⁰ The starving brides of course aimed to disturb and to incite fascination, but also, by way of the glass cabinet, to be examined and to be accessible. Offence is not universal or innate whether within an artwork, an act or a sideshow. There was something specific to the location of the starving brides, Blackpool, and the 1930s that deemed them offensive to the point of legislative change. Starving exhibitionism was not new, nor had it been illegal for centuries before. The instinctive drive to provoke or disturb, the foundations of sideshow structure, did not mean an inevitable decline for them on grounds of ‘giving offence’ in legal terms.⁵¹¹ Gannon’s decline was embedded in the context of Blackpool’s ideals of progress as well as wider cultural shifts.

This chapter explored the freak show to better illustrate the complexity of provocation, the affective nature of sideshows and the role of showman who test the boundaries of civility. They were able to excite and disturb audiences through the corporeal presence of bodies on display. This threat is illustrated through a history of freak show decline. As such, in controlling the availability of Blackpool’s sideshow spaces, local authorities were essentially attempting to control or subdue the affective quality of the sideshow. This emphasises a position towards the sideshow which recognises its unique

⁵¹⁰ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4, (March 15, 2018).

⁵¹¹ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4 (March 15, 2018).

nature as an exceptional, disturbing space, but places it within the context of society and as a space subject to control from within itself, and from without.

Chapter 4: Policing and narrating the female body at the sideshow: containment, concealment and conflict

Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated how Gannon was able to create affective experiences for his audience, despite his show being deemed objectionable by Blackpool authorities and moral groups in Blackpool. He, like artists and other showmen, offered his audience a unique, framed experience designed to challenge, move and entertain. This chapter continues to explore Gannon's unique position in Blackpool by considering examples of performing bodies, particularly those of females, who were subject to moral and official regulation. Female bodies - whether the performers of the sideshow or the consumers of sideshow content - were continuously problematised by narratives that sought to negate their degree of agency within and outside of their acts.

The sideshow is understood as a site that is continuously at work and in touch with the law as, 'regardless of ideology, aesthetics and political agenda, the state and the theatre are always bonded.'⁵¹² As will be shown throughout the chapter, there was not one overarching agenda for officials when it came to the agency of female bodies that occupied the sideshow space. Negotiations were always inconsistent and often contradictory. However, unpacking the multiple voices that sought to control the narrative of the sideshow and the bodies that occupied it, reveals it as a site of power play and a site for the construction of problem bodies through alternative, competing narratives.

Wider examples of the female body on display at the turn of the twentieth century and into the 1930s, including tableaux vivants, fan dancers, and sleeping beauties, reveals another layer of context and comprehension of the female fasting exhibitions presented by Gannon.

⁵¹² Catherina Schuler, 'Editorial comment: Theatre and State/ Theatre and Law', *Theatre Journal* 61:3 (October 2009), p. 5.

Each of these genres provoked both fascination and repulsion, with each subject to some degree of moral opposition. For each, anxieties around the ways in which the body was made visible were linked to wider concerns around national reputation and the moral health of the population, as officials pushed for their community to be seen as a progressive, civilised majority.⁵¹³ Thus, the female form during performances became the site of negotiations that were, at one and the same time, about their intrinsic content and their wider societal significance. Significantly, these negotiations were facilitated through showmen who frequently acted as the node between the show, the bodies that occupied them, and the law. Often, as performances were put up for public consumption, they were also put on trial.⁵¹⁴ The performances discussed here are linked, first, as they were managed by male showmen. Secondly, showmen exercised the role of negotiators for the continuation and the legitimisation of shows, as female bodies themselves became sites of wider negotiations.

As will be explored further, fan dancers, tableaux vivants and starving brides were all policed, and under continuous inspection as they all fell under the category of objectionable display. Whilst there are overarching themes that make for fruitful comparison, it is the differences *within* the crossing themes that reveal the complexity of the female form on display as a site of negotiation. The different ways in which ‘problematic’ bodies were dealt with reveals the inconsistent narratives that constantly sought to contain and conceal the sideshow participants. This is important, as female performers themselves constantly played with ideas of containment and concealment.

⁵¹³ Purce, ‘Scales of Normality’, p. 686. Purce asserts that the the malnutrition of the brides ‘intensified fears surrounding the physical deterioration of the human race.’

⁵¹⁴ As previously noted, it was often the manager who was held accountable in court for displays, but it was of course the subject that was debated, the subject being the female body.

These shows were all connected to the perceived cultural changes regarding women who occupied new spaces and, in doing so, whose bodies took on new significance.⁵¹⁵ Significantly however, each case was unique in how bodies were framed and presented during performances. The starving bride in her white gown differed greatly from the female form, covered apparently only by large feathers during the 1930s fan dance. Each genre articulated comparative themes, in alternative ways and, consequently, posed *distinctive difficulties* for moralists and authorities. Unpacking these difficulties allows insight into the complex negotiations that were constantly at work within the sideshow. And, whilst it is often noted that during the nineteenth century regulation of popular entertainment increased thus producing a more regulated twentieth century, it is important to consider emerging themes of acceptance, resistance and resilience.⁵¹⁶ Evidently, the trajectory of shows that are designed to push the boundaries of entertainment are unique and competitive. Official interventions in twentieth century entertainments were not black and white as to whether a show was accepted or banned. Rather, there was a constant toing and froing between the law and the entertainers - predominantly the showmen - who both used narratives of legitimisation, profitability and moralistic tones to determine the place of any such entertainment in their space.

Before a British audience: relocating the female body on display

The first case considered here is that of a 1930's fan dancer performing within a sideshow in Liverpool. Whilst this exuberant, skimpily clad display may seem distant from Gannon's clothed, morbid brides, major parallels can be traced between them, and any major differences aid the unravelling of the complex web of negotiations that took place around the

⁵¹⁵ Brenda Assael, 'Art or Indecency? Tableaux Vivants on the London stage and the Failure of Late Victorian Moral Reform', *Journal of British Studies* 45 (2006), p. 746.

⁵¹⁶ For review of increased regulation of popular entertainments see Senelick, 'Enlightened by Morphodites', p. 359.

sideshow, particularly around the female body on display. An overview of the case will be followed by a drawing out of these thematic parallels and dramatic differences.

In May 1937, Edith Balles, under the show name Margot, was charged with ‘aiding and abetting an indecent exhibition. Police stated that the alleged offences went against ‘common law’ and were ‘served to persons connected with a sideshow known as “in Town Tonight”.’⁵¹⁷ In Sefton Park fairground, Liverpool, it was stated that Margot appeared on stage ‘with no dividing screen, completely nude, waving two ostrich feathers which partly covered her body.’⁵¹⁸ The crux of this perceived crime is perhaps best expressed in a statement from the prosecution, led by Mr J. R. Bishop, at Liverpool Police Court; ‘if a young woman appears before a British audience nude - with only two feathers between her and her reputation, that would seem, to put it mildly, an indecent performance.’⁵¹⁹ The statement infers carelessness from the ‘young woman.’⁵²⁰ Suggesting ‘only two feathers between her and her reputation’ implies a fragility of reputation that actively must be maintained, notably, by the ‘between’ of dress.⁵²¹ There is, therefore, something to be said about the relations posed between the ‘young women’, her dress and her apparent disregard for a seemingly morally charged illegality.

The article by the *Daily Mail* was accompanied by a long portrait photograph of Margot, posing behind her exuberant fan, presenting both condemnation and titillation. The accused are introduced, starting with Mr John White ‘aged 30, of Lowther Street, Doncaster’ and the owner of the booth where the dance took place. He is accused of ‘having exposed to view an indecent exhibition.’⁵²² Edith Balles, stage name Margot, aged 21, was charged with

⁵¹⁷ ‘Strip Tease At A Fair’, *Daily Mail*, 17 May 1937.

⁵¹⁸ ‘Fans As Screen For Dancer’, *Daily Mail*, 28 May 1937.

⁵¹⁹ ‘Fans As Screen For Dancer’, *Daily Mail*, 28 May 1937.

⁵²⁰ ‘Fans As Screen For Dancer’, *Daily Mail*, 28 May 1937.

⁵²¹ ‘Fans As Screen For Dancer’, *Daily Mail*, 28 May 1937.

⁵²² ‘P.C.’s Fan Dance In Court’, *Daily Mail*, 29 May 1937.

aiding and abetting. Notably, Margot is placed as an accessory in the accusation, despite her body being the site of concern. It was the man, the showman, who was ultimately held accountable for this indecent act. Arguably therefore, Margot is presented as a kind of prop, with the agency of representation and performance attributed to the showman. It is the showman who is given agency over what was exposed, Margot was not seen to expose herself.

This may be understood further when one considers the idea of ‘indecent’ and its definition. Watt states that ‘the notion of ‘decency’, which informs such criminal offences as ‘indecent exposure’ and ‘public indecency’, is not merely a matter of law; it is something made by law and culture.’⁵²³ The case’s approach to Margot, charging her with ‘aiding’, epitomises not only a matter of law, but law built out of cultural notions of gender and control of performativity of gender itself. As Smart asserts, ‘the law constructs a specific category of women...which it then subjects to a unique form of regulation.’⁵²⁴ Essentially, Margot’s case reveals a constant negotiation of locating agency within and outside of the performative space of the sideshow.

In a fuller description of the events, the pivotal moment identified as ‘indecent’ is acknowledged:

A girl gave a strip-tease performance with a powerful lamp behind her throwing her silhouette on to a thin gauze curtain from the audience, and that:

Another girl, alleged to be “Margot”, walked on the stage with no dividing screen, completely nude, waving two ostrich feathers which partly covered her body.⁵²⁵

⁵²³ Watt, *Dress, Law and Naked Truth*, pp. 4-5.

⁵²⁴ Smart, *Law, Crime and Sexuality*, p. 54.

⁵²⁵ ‘Fans As Screen For Dancer’, *Daily Mail*, 28 May 1937.

It appears therefore that it is the ‘lack of dividing screen’ and the ‘completeness’ of her nudity which is located as the point of overstepping a moral and juridical boundary. The material immediacy of her embodied presence occupies the same space as that of the audience and any comfort of the illusion allowed by a mere two-dimensional figure is shaken. Notably, the nature of dress is one of the main topics of debate within the hearing.

Margot’s case can be located in wider timely considerations during the 1930s. In 1932, the Windmill Theatre had established itself in London. As described in a retrospective by *The Guardian* in 2011, ‘Soon the Windmill was producing revue shows five times a day, with a new programme every six weeks, and introduced the famous nude girls in stationary artistic poses representing some famous painting or piece of sculpture.’⁵²⁶ The Lord Chamberlain's Office, responsible for stage censorship, took a while to catch on to the nature of the shows, and Henderson and Van Damm were able to ‘carve out a zone of tolerance denied to other theatres. In an uneasy compromise, the nude girls were permitted to remain but were not allowed to ‘move a muscle.’⁵²⁷ What became apparent in the case of the Windmill Theatre was an anxiety towards the moving flesh. Arguably, this is because static bodies were displayed, much like the women poised in Blackpool’s *Gorgeous Sights* poster, meanwhile moving bodies projected and asserted their agency in much more vivid ways.

In the USA, famous fan dancer Sally Rand was also a hot topic in the 1930s.⁵²⁸ Her appearance at the World’s Fair, Chicago, in 1933 brought her a profitable salary of \$5,000 a week. She was, notably, also convicted of indecency several times.⁵²⁹ The Virtual Museum of

⁵²⁶ ‘Mrs Henderson’s House of Delights’, *The Guardian*, (November 2005), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/nov/18/2> [accessed 30 June 2017]; R. Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

⁵²⁷ ‘Mrs Henderson’s House of Delights’, *The Guardian*.

⁵²⁸ ‘Sally Rand Trial: 1946’, *Great American Trials*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/law/law-magazines/sally-rand-trial-1946> [accessed 25 May 2018]; ‘Sally Rand, Whose Fan Dancing Shocked Country, Is Dead at 75’, *The New York Times* (1 September 1979), p.12; ‘Sally Rand’, *The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco*, <http://www.sfmuseum.org/bio/rand.html> [accessed 15 May 2018].

⁵²⁹ ‘Sally Rand Trial: 1946’, *Great American Trials*.

San Francisco attributes these early arrests as catapulting her to fame; on one occasion she was arrested four times in one day.⁵³⁰ In 1946 in San Francisco, Rand was arrested by six police officers who had witnessed her act and deemed it ‘indecent exposure, corrupting the morals of an audience, and conducting an obscene show.’⁵³¹ This rested on the observation that Rand had been nude, though nude here refers to stripping down from full costume to a single tiny flesh coloured triangular patch, described later by the observing police officers as adorned with beads.⁵³² The most apt reference to the illusion of nudity and the use of this as a defence against any offence, as defined by the law, comes from Rand herself as she stated ‘The Rand is quicker than the eye.’⁵³³ She was acquitted on all counts.

What was worn in Margot’s case was, therefore, of significance, in a period of anxiety in the entertainment industry and wider cultural discourse. Watt reveals the theoretical significance of this when he asserts that ‘the practical purposes of dress are always directed towards one or more of decency, decoration and defence, and each of these purposes falls within one or other of the paradigm purposes of projection or protection.’⁵³⁴ A performer may dress to deliver and make visible a particular body part, theme, experience to the audience: projection. But this always must operate and consider the parameters of culturally constructed decency, and one must dress so as not to overstep the line: protection.

Notably, Margot’s act inherently plays on these two aspects of dress predominantly through *movement*. The foregrounding of discourses of illusion reveal the defendant’s’ possible intent to de-sexualise the dance and project it into the sphere of justifiable arts. Importantly, this involved taking ownership of the act. Mr White’s wife deems Margot as a

⁵³⁰ ‘Burlesque Arrests: Mae West & Sally Rand’, *Pin Curl*, December 31, 2010, <http://pincurlmag.com/burlesque-arrests-mae-west-sally-rand> [accessed 17 May 2018].

⁵³¹ Section 311 of the Penal Code, found in ‘Sally Rand Trial: 1946’, *Great American Trials*.

⁵³² ‘Sally Rand Trial: 1946’, *Great American Trials*.

⁵³³ ‘Sally Rand, Whose Fan Dancing Shocked Country, Is Dead at 75’.

⁵³⁴ Watt, *Dress, Law and Naked Truth*, p. 7.

‘clever dancer’ with the illusion of nudity ‘the art of the dance.’⁵³⁵ In this way, defendants disrupt the foundations of the case by suggesting the case itself is evidence of a successful illusion, an artful dance and an intelligent successful performance and performer.

The ambiguity around this case and the indefiniteness of illusion rests in a deeper inability to place the performance in the context of the law. As Watt observes, ‘confronted with that face (the face of the law), the individual has three choices in cases of conflict: to conform, to contest or to compromise.’⁵³⁶ In Margot’s case, all three of these possible actions are at play. Evidence of conformity is communicated by dress, props and descriptions of suitable attire. For example, White describes how Margot wore a ‘bathing costume...and gave a graceful performance, concealing herself behind the fan all the time.’⁵³⁷ Contestation and compromise are sought in the art of ‘illusion’ which is placed as the grounds for justified innocence from indecency. Decency is contested by stating that illusion compromised with any real act of nudity.

For Margot, Mr. J. A. Behn defending presents a brassiere and ‘a pair of pink trunks’ to counter the prosecution’s claim that all Margot wore was ‘a headdress, thin piece of tape, and a pair of dancing shoes.’⁵³⁸ In this case, the question is not simply whether she was naked or not; rather dress, body and actions are played out together to determine the extent of the indecency. As such, it can be deduced that there is an ambiguous boundary between decency and indecency that must be *performed* to be ascertained and thus stabilised. The emphasis placed on dress in this case expresses the importance of the function of dress as something beyond the concealing of the body; for where dress covers, it too exposes. This infers a double meaning upon Grosz’s assertion of the body’s ‘ability to seep beyond domains of

⁵³⁵ ‘I Shall Appeal’, *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1937, p. 6.

⁵³⁶ Watt, *Dress, Law and Naked Truth*, p. 79.

⁵³⁷ ‘P.C.’s Fan Dance in Court’, *Daily Mail*, 29 May 1937, p. 9.

⁵³⁸ ‘Fan As Screen For Dancer’, *Daily Mail*, 28 May 1937, p. 11.

control...to extend frameworks which attempt to control them.⁵³⁹ The body seeps through the physicality of dress which, in covering, cannot help but draw attention to exposure. Secondly, the body ‘seeps’ in relation to the governance of dress and beyond prescribed moral limits and beyond illusion.

It is the manner in which exposure occurs, the limits between decency and acceptability, and the spaces which facilitate and seek to control such seepages which are interesting to investigate. Investigating the limits of indecency in this case exposes a great degree of ambiguity, for example in the idea of illusion. One magistrate seeks to clarify whether there was ‘hankey pankey with the lighting to cause an illusion’, and that Margot was not in fact naked.⁵⁴⁰ The illusion of nudity was on the acceptable side of decency. As stated, it was the completeness of bare flesh which appears as the point of concern.

Offence is not therefore a clear term, but one that exists with a high degree of ambiguity even in its application. In regards to the structure of the sideshow itself, Margot as a skilled fan dancer exhibits a control over the audience’s feelings of titillation. She also holds agency as negotiator of the precarious limits of indecency. Perhaps one of the major issues was that her act relied on illusion and a teasing play on what was seen or not seen, what the audience *think* they saw and what was a trick of the fan. Arguably therefore, the audience was witness to an illusory act and it was the subjective experience of the audience that either deemed the act offensive or skilful.

Interestingly, officials tried extremely hard to demystify the illusion of the fan dance by breaking it down into individual props and, significantly, removing the skilful creation of illusion from its context in the sideshow. Firstly, the feathers are not only discussed in detail,

⁵³⁹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 74.

⁵⁴⁰ ‘P.C.’s Fan Dance in Court’, *Daily Mail*, 29 May 1937, p. 9.

but actively exhibited in the hearing. One fully-clothed witness is asked to ‘show how Margot held the feathers...holding one over the front of his shoulder, he pivoted around the witness box.’⁵⁴¹ In this sense, the hearing opens as a new space of performativity. Taken out of the sideshow space, the performance is relocated and re-performed into a new domain. Watt asserts that ‘law demonstrates anxiety when individuals attempt to perform their own public face, through personal modes of dress and undress, in the liminal space of dress that the law takes to be a locus of its own dominion.’⁵⁴² The performative yet displaced re-enactment of the hearing may express an attempt to relocate and discipline an apparent case of self-governance or, more accurately, self-(un)dress. It removes the agency from the performer, Margot, and abstracts the skilful dance into a series of material objects – the items of individual clothing. In doing so, it attempts to construct a possible offence. For example, in addition to the feathers, physical pieces of clothing are brought into the hearing and the attire worn beneath the feathers became a major point of concern.

Returning to the Rand case as a point of comparison, Rand’s attorney insisted on the re-performance of the fan dance in the most vivid sense; ‘May I suggest, Your Honor, that we adjourn until tomorrow morning, at which time my client will perform her specialty for you? Thus, instead of second-hand accounts and narrow-minded criticisms, we’ll be dealing with the naked truth.’⁵⁴³ Not only did Sally Rand get to perform her dance in front of court officials, but it was performed at the Savoy, San Francisco. Unlike the brides who occupied a site of lesser cultural prestige during the 1930s, the sideshow, Rand occupied a site of great prestige. Furthermore, Rand contrasts greatly with Margot’s deconstructed dance and its altered state of re-performance in the courtroom. Rand was able to defend herself against the

⁵⁴¹ ‘P.C.’s Fan Dance in Court’, *Daily Mail*, 29 May 1937, p. 9.

⁵⁴² Watt, *Dress, Law and Naked Truth*, pp. xiv–xxii.

⁵⁴³ ‘Sally Rand Trial: 1946’, *Great American Trials*; ‘Sally Rand, Whose Fan Dancing Shocked Country, Is Dead at 75’.

offence of indecency as defined by the law, by demonstrating that such accusations of nudity were merely due to the success of her skilful illusion.

Interestingly, when faced with the uncertainty of ‘illusion’ and construction of an offence, newspaper photographer Frederick Fyfe was summoned to give evidence in Margot’s case. Fyfe was quoted directly stating, ‘Unknown to the performers I took photographs. I did not see anything indecent.’⁵⁴⁴ Curiously, this statement was reported by the *Daily Mail* after the announcement that Margot had been officially charged and fined. The evidence was, at this point, irrelevant. It is interesting to consider the contrast of photographic evidence in this case, which would present a static body, devoid of movement. In doing so, one is reminded of the significance of movement for Margot’s case. In a photograph Margot would be reduced to a still, two-dimensional image like that of the body behind the screen and, notably, an object. For Margot, the skilful dance and play on illusion is where the agency is asserted. It demands the movement of her body, present and alive, with multiple layers of lighting, screens and feathers to deliver the desired performance and to playfully dance on the lines of decency.

The importance of projection and protection is evident in Margot’s emotional statement following her final charge and fine of £2. Margot expresses the need to defend herself through her dress when she states, ‘I shall appeal - I could not bear the idea of people thinking my dance indecent... This conviction has destroyed all our plans and I cannot carry on with it hanging over me.’⁵⁴⁵ The weight of indecency, unable to ‘protect’ herself from the accusation by way of evidence of dress, is taken upon the subject herself.

⁵⁴⁴ ‘I Shall Appeal’, *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1937, p. 6

⁵⁴⁵ ‘I Shall Appeal’, *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1937, p. 6.

Containment and concealment of the female form: creating tensions in the sideshow

The charging of Margot and the case's discussion by prosecutors and press provides an interesting case for considering the sideshow, offence and how the female body asserts agency within the show and in the conflict that follows. In following such an enquiry, the sideshow appears not as a space outside and above normative regulatory regimes or above the concern of the 'acceptable'. It is not a space of open and liberal negotiation where norms are indiscriminately subverted. Moreover, it is important to note that issues over agency are located within the sideshow performance itself, but also could be taken outside of the sideshow as conflict arose. This introduces a more intimate understanding of narratives around containment and concealment for the female body on display during the 1930s.

It is interesting to consider, therefore, what narratives the encounters discussed above shared with Gannon's sideshows, how they differed and to what end. Understanding this is a process of untangling negotiations, unpacking how shared anxieties were played out on stage and within social realms such as local governances. The reasons why, despite shared anxieties, some shows were able to continue whilst others were not is of great importance for a nuanced understanding of the construction of problem bodies. To better understand these narratives it is first necessary to locate Margot in the context of 'acceptable' exposure of flesh, a point of contextual analysis that will in turn inform narratives that revolved around Gannon's starving brides. As noted, Gannon's shows were not, by any means, as promiscuous in terms of their fleshly displays. However, shared concerns around the containment of the female body thread throughout the sideshow drama. Furthermore, differences emerge as to whether particular bodies, even when morally contestable, have commercial and cultural value and, thus, are granted space to continue.

Degrees of nakedness and the contexts within which it appeared had been the topic of debate in relation to emerging forms of popular entertainment in British capitals at the turn of

the century. For example, the performance of tableaux vivants peaked at the end of the nineteenth century, predominantly in London. Tableaux vivants were ‘living pictures’ and consisted of female models in flesh coloured stockings, posing in historical and mythological scenes on a rotating stage. Even before performances at the Windmill Theatre, these shows had already forced authorities to consider their moral stance on nudity on stage. Heated debates between moralist groups such as the National Vigilance Association, British Women’s Temperance Association, the government and performers ensued.⁵⁴⁶ However, the loud cries of moral activists did not result in the banning of such shows, to which the later opening of the Windmill Theatre attests.⁵⁴⁷ Nudity and nakedness were constantly being defined, with nudity approaching acceptability and nakedness seen as officially offensive.

Even for tableaux vivants however, shows which played with naked ambiguity had to be monitored and tableaux vivant shows were regularly attended by inspectors, with show managers often writing to licensing committees for a better understanding of the law.⁵⁴⁸ The 1912 Lord Chamberlin’s prohibition on licensed theatres allowing ‘indecent dress, dance and gesture’ did little to settle any confusion.⁵⁴⁹ Overall, rather than being subject to official action, tableaux vivants were ascribed to a process of self-regulation and observation.⁵⁵⁰

This type of observational regulation continued within sideshows, as evidenced by both Margot and Gannon who experienced inspectors ‘visiting’ their shows. Testament to the uneasy reception Gannon shared with his show’s predecessors is the fact that all were subject to intrusive observation from local officials, whose form of policing was often their presence in the site of regulation. Notably, while the tableaux vivants were met with opposition, their

⁵⁴⁶ Assael, ‘Art or Indecency?’, p. 744.

⁵⁴⁷ Assael, ‘Art or Indecency?’, p. 744.

⁵⁴⁸ Assael, ‘Art or Indecency?’, p. 756.

⁵⁴⁹ Assael, ‘Art or Indecency?’, p. 757.

⁵⁵⁰ Assael, ‘Art or Indecency?’, p. 757.

exclusion as a form of popular entertainment in the mid-twentieth century was less a result of the moral anxieties and more the result of the popularity of alternative entertainments.

Gannon was considered to be firmly outside the narrative of Blackpool's progressive image, despite his shows being attended by huge crowds. The significance of this association with earlier sideshows becomes evident when considering why the starving brides failed to

Figure 7: Matania, Fortunino, 'Blackpool', original oil painting for an LMS poster, c 1930s, NRM / Pictorial Collection / Science & Society Picture Library. Image Ref. 10282854



withstand condemnation whilst the titillating fan dances and tableaux vivants prevailed.

Interestingly, a railway poster produced and reproduced throughout the 1930s materialises this relation between painting, acceptable levels of flesh on display and the

image of Blackpool [Figure 7].⁵⁵¹ Made for the London, Midland and Scottish Railway, the original oil painting was executed by an Italian artist, Fortunino Matania. It enshrines the Blackpool beach goers with an air of classical beauty. Attractive figures are placed in a busy but clean and attractively composed landscape. The group in the foreground who occupy a large rock are healthy, muscular even, with the dominant figure an amalgamation of contemporary fashion and classical magnificence. The poster, used to promote Blackpool as a holiday destination, exemplifies Blackpool's vision when it came to place-making. Moreover, it incorporates an ideal of the kind of bodies that occupied its landscape. These were the picture of health, athleticism and beauty.

All of this was thoughtfully projected through a medium that, like tableaux vivants, combined classic with contemporary and linked *ideas* around bodies across time to project an acceptable image. The body as constructed entity is exemplified here, understood through an attention to not only the 'material out of which such a construct is forged', but to the ways in which these material and physical compositions of the body relate to other constructs of bodies across time that may deem them acceptable or unacceptable.⁵⁵² This is true within the painting and can be considered as occurring within the sideshow itself, as bodies are re-imagined and reproduced to form new discursive links across time. In the case of Gannon's sideshows, these constructions failed to meet the vision of itself that Blackpool authorities wanted to project. The starving brides appeared in stark contrast to the visions of health and athletic beauty projected here.

An additional form of female display that informs both the Margot case and Gannon's brides was that of Sleeping Beauties who, like tableaux vivants, were also appearing at the

⁵⁵¹ Figure 7: Matania, Fortunino, 'Blackpool', original oil painting for an LMS poster, c 1930s, NRM / Pictorial Collection / Science & Society Picture Library. Image Ref. 10282854

⁵⁵² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 18.

end of the nineteenth century and frequently occupied the fairgrounds of Europe. They too encountered conflict and their fleshly exposure of the female form sought to disturb and excite. Visitors could peer into glass coffin and be enticed to decipher whether the female, clothed in white satin, was ‘wax, a live girl or an anatomical model.’⁵⁵³ Where a live model was used the show could be deemed a tableaux vivant as it involved the static female form creating a recognisable scene. Anatomical beauties whose chest heaved to give the illusion of life aroused a lack of clarity whether bodies were indeed real or automated. This confusion was part of the early shows’ draw, ‘a tableaux vivant show is always about plays of counterfeit, of body and art, static image and breathing flesh.’⁵⁵⁴

The structural similarity of Sleeping Beauties to Gannon’s shows here is obvious, with the parallel use of glass cases and bridal white dresses. Notably though, Gannon’s were not ‘sleeping beauties’ but ‘starving brides’, thus adding a new degree of showmanship with his models unambiguous in their status as living women, defined by their very liveliness. Unlike the play of identifying live or wax bodies, Gannon’s brides were performing an act of starving, and therefore their fleshly vulnerability and agency was paramount to the show.

Another difference was that, during their peak, these Sleeping Beauties were presented as evidence of progressive links between science and art. Pierre Spitzner’s Grand Musée Anatomique et Ethnologique, which travelled around the European fairgrounds including England, involved a particularly famous sleeping beauty.⁵⁵⁵ His special piece was an anatomical Venus who had long dark hair and lay in a glass casket. The wax figure’s chest rose and fell by the magic of mechanics. It is interesting that, above this ‘masterpiece’, Spitzner chose the bold heading ‘ART, SCIENCE, PROGRESS’:

⁵⁵³ Hoffman, ‘Sleeping Beauties in the Fairground’, p. 139.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Drawing people into the museum, in a moment between breaths, when the limits of life and death, simulacrum and body were unclear, she marked the point where fairground and museum spaces interwove and instruction pleasure, dreams and art all became caught in the heaving breast of a wax automaton.⁵⁵⁶

As revealed in previous discussions, this link between the sideshow and science wore thin by the turn of the century as scientists, not showmen, took the role of educators and, in the process, exposed showmanship. Whilst Hoffman notes that the ‘tradition for displaying live girls in glass cases continued well into the twentieth century’, the links between art and science that would allow any Spitzer-like showman to label himself with the badge of ‘PROGRESS’ were dented.⁵⁵⁷

Notably, Gannon did not attempt to align himself with scientific incentives. He was very persuasive in romanticising the motivations of his fasting females. Although some of his encounters involved the support of medical practitioners these were utilised to ensure the health of the performers, to counteract slander to his character and, unapologetically, to add to the dramatic conflict between himself and law enforcers.⁵⁵⁸ However, Gannon did not try to link his starving brides with scientific narratives possibly because the legitimacy of these links, between show and science, were somewhat lost in the twentieth century. His attempts to romanticise such exhibitionism and create more aesthetically delicate displays may testify to an attempt to realign himself away from such anatomically explicit shows. Taking the structural properties of the Sleeping Beauties shows, he imbued them with features that sought to reimagine the sleeping beauties of old and to nullify any degree of uncertainty that had lost showmen their status as windows to the world within. Adding the fasting element

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁵⁵⁸ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 13 October 1934.

was a major move in such a reimagining as the female fasters must be alive, not automata, in order to fast. Importantly, they must be real flesh and prone to hunger, appetites and desires in order to suffer.

However, what did continue from such shows was the creation of tension; specifically, the sexual tension created by a contained female body. As previously discussed, Gannon may have subtly played on sexual intensity due to the containment of the bride. The use of white gowns suggests virginity and the point displayed may be that of suspension of entering into marriage and therefore of sexual relationships. Yet, in clarifying the roots of this show and parallel earlier shows, such as the Sleeping Beauties, a much more explicit sexualisation of Gannon's brides by association becomes clear. For example, early sleeping beauty shows such as the Spitzer Venus were shown as part of wider exhibitions that exposed the female form. 'Reserve' rooms, predominantly accessed by men, displayed wax works of the female genitalia.⁵⁵⁹ Untouched, covered over sleeping beauties were displayed on the outer circle of the display, inviting viewers in to see versions of the beauties who were displayed in more explicit fashions. In an extreme example, one showed the 'virgin female genitalia' and the other 'after defloration.'⁵⁶⁰ Crass and intentionally disturbing differences between the two included the latter being red and swollen. As Hoffman observes, anatomy displays were not new but their situatedness, both as part of travelling fair show and their placement alongside the seemingly living automaton, 'configured the female body as malleable in its sexual excitability.'⁵⁶¹ The white gown of these anatomical figurines combined with the beauty of the dark haired princess-like figure in the glass case to make

⁵⁵⁹ Hoffman, 'Sleeping Beauties in the Fairground', p. 152.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

audiences enticingly aware of what may lie beneath. Those female forms that did not yet have their ‘night gown’ hitched up wore similar silky white gowns teasingly easy to gape beneath.

Given that part of the sexual tension of Gannon’s brides was the tension of wedding night nuptials not yet performed, suspended in time by the glass cases, the play of before and after ‘defloration’ continued as an obvious theme from these early displays to the Golden Mile. Whilst the starving brides may not have entered into the trope of ‘pedagogy and pornography’, they certainly entered into a ‘world of slippages’ where bodies slipped between realms of meaning and intention.⁵⁶² The clear influence on Gannon’s show of *Sleeping Beauties*, who were so closely associated with the explicit yet acceptable display by their association with anatomy, continued to allude in a subtle fashion to that which lies beneath the gown and is untouchable. As described in 1908, fasting, ‘like any other thing in our experience, may be taken as a picture of something else. Thus, figuratively, it is sometimes used to denote the lack of any bodily gratification.’⁵⁶³ This idea of contained gratification links Gannon to the preceding shows by which he was so obviously influenced.

What links the discussed examples, although differing in their degree of exposure, is the fleshly realities that each presented and their inescapable fleshly presence. The contextual relevance of Margot here is revealed when considering further the theme of illusion. In Margot’s case, the case hinged on whether or not Margot was indeed naked or was merely creating the illusion of nakedness. This reveals a contradicting and confusing narrative, with an ironic realisation that it is acceptable for the audience to believe they saw a nude female dancer, to question what they saw, but highly unacceptable for actual nakedness to be presented. The illusion, which lies within the audiences’ subjective experience, could be

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 152. Hoffman notes that ‘rarely do shows such as the sleeping beauties fit into extreme views as pornography or pedagogy, rather the exist in a middle ground.’

⁵⁶³ Farquhar, ‘Fasting’, *International Theological Review* (1908), p. 532.

legitimised but the material reality of nakedness could not. What Margot's case articulates here is an important consideration for other sideshow performances that involve this fleshly conflict.

This distance created between real flesh on display and the displays relativity to the audience, played with through containment and concealment during the sideshow exhibits, runs throughout the genres discussed and provides a clear link. For example, for tableaux vivants the premise of their nudity was that it reflected that of a picture in narrative context and projection of a static, two-dimensional form. In doing so, the fleshly presence of the girls is at once revealed but remains, like those female figures configured in the painting, untouchable. This plays on the tension between the illusion of a two-dimensional painting displaying untouchable figures and the corporeal reality of the flesh on stage. For *Sleeping Beauties*, this play between pictorial illusion and material reality is located in the ambiguity as to whether a body was an automaton or a real girl. The body's containment within the glass case creates a distance yet the material presence of the flesh (or non-flesh) is heightened by drawing observers in to examine every detail, such as the movement of breathing in order to distinguish between a real or illusory body.

For Gannon, the starving bride's presence in the sideshow space was not exaggerated by them holding a renowned title, but by their fleshly presence contained within the glass cabinet. The glass cabinet contained and objectified the female body. As such, Gannon too played on ideas of the tangible reality of flesh and its containment and distance from his audience. There continued to be a continuous tension as material bodies were at once displayed and remained contained, presented as tantalisingly untouchable objects.

Therefore, tableaux vivants, fan dancers and sleeping beauties and the starving brides all played on ideas around containment and concealment. Significantly different in the

discussed genres however, was the ways in which these displays were able to legitimise their fleshly presence. Notably, this is intrinsically linked to the artistic ways in which these displays played on illusion and reality, between fleshly presence and containment, as each dynamic display sought narratives of legitimisation. For example, tableaux vivants and fan dancing projected a degree of artistic merit that was lost to Sleeping Beauties and to the starving brides. They were at the disadvantage of being associated with more old-fashioned side show culture, more so than the vibrant, healthy figures of the fan dancers and Windmill girls. Dancing, much like the historical and aesthetic projected origins of the tableaux vivants, was open to association with artistry and much more appealing in its acceptability as a form of consumer capital. The nude figures, whilst very much immersed in heated debates, represented a legitimised form of bodily consumption that appealed to the self-image of British consumer tastes. For Margot, although she was convicted, she was in many ways a modern body and profoundly marketable. Her ability to speak for herself on the merit of her showmanship forms a stark contrast to the starving brides who remained silent. Margot was able to legitimise her illusory nudity by calling upon the artistic merit of her disciplined body. Therefore, whilst these sideshows shared thematic concerns around the female body on display they existed in differing contexts and, whilst I have previously argued that the showmen can and should be regarded as artistic orchestrators, Gannon was not considered as such in Blackpool at this time. His association, far from high art, was perceived in the context of the freak shows of old and tied not only to ideas of trickery, but to outdated appetites ascribed to Victorian monstrosity voyeurism.⁵⁶⁴

Furthermore, this analysis is useful in firstly suggesting that Gannon's exhibitions were more akin to the degenerate body associated with the freak show and thus, low-class cultural consumption. As previously discussed, the starving brides were contested as a non-

⁵⁶⁴ Durbach, *Spectacle of Deformity*, p. 171.

progressive representation of taste and culture seen as specifically unsuitable for representing national taste. This is also true of Margot when, returning to the statement from the prosecution, she is not only nude but nude ‘before a *British* audience.’⁵⁶⁵ The prosecution thus ensures the show is located, inferring that her performance is not just objectionable intrinsically but that its location in front of a *British* audience deems such a performance unacceptable. The female body is alienated from civility and becomes the other.

The female bodies on display were, therefore, actively associated with a class-based model of cultural consumption, for example as legitimised artistic practices or non-progressive working class amusement. These associations helped to determine public and official narratives of acceptance or resistance, with the *categorisation* of the performing body and the perceived cultural class of a body on display having major implications for whether the cries of moral objectors found response with official regulators. This links with the notion of problem bodies, as they were all problematised by different means of negotiation; becoming problem bodies within differing discourses which, in turn, held different consequences for their sustained success. For example, in the case of tableaux vivants official measures fell short of fulfilling moralist objections and closing down such shows, thus allowing a longer process of decline triggered by new forms of entertainment.⁵⁶⁶ These contrast to the intense official legislative attack suffered by Gannon, whose shows were eradicated comparatively quickly.

This was important as the female body for popular consumption was thereby brought into understandings of, and negotiations for, definitions of national reputation and civility, predominantly an understanding articulated by authoritative voices pertaining to morality and legality. It is true that the brides do not present ideas of titillation quite so explicitly as the

⁵⁶⁵ ‘I Shall Appeal’, *Daily Mail*, 1 June 1937, p. 6.

⁵⁶⁶ Assael, ‘Art or Indecency?’, p. 758.

tableaux vivants and the fan dancers, as they are of course covered up and contained. However, as shown here, the case studies are discursively connected as these female bodies are continuously positioned at the centre of the negotiations about the parameters of an acceptable British culture. Gannon's starving brides, although neither nude nor indeed naked, were problematic in much the same way. They too projected a woman's body into a special space where the degree of display and concealment, proximity and containment, were main drivers in the audience's sense of gratification.

The railway posters, designed to project an ideal vision of Blackpool at this time, once more offer pertinent illustration of how female bodies were expected to occupy particular spaces. The poster *For Gorgeous Sights*, first appears in 1910 but is used throughout the 20s, 30s and even 40s to advertise rail services for the Great Central Railway and Midland Railway [Figure 8].⁵⁶⁷ The women here are sketched in a light, delicate way and their features remain indistinct, with none of the three figures holding any real distinguishable character. Crucially, they are framed at the centre of the poster as 'sights'. The Tower behind, which could be considered one of the tourist sights to be seen, is alongside the women creating a visual equivalence between the women and the tower as legitimate landmarks. They are, like the iconic landmarks of Blackpool's entertainment industry, eminently visible. More widely, the poster and the women within it was a fashioned means of Blackpool itself being seen by the nation. The delicate, open-air setting of the 'gorgeous sights' is fitting of Blackpool's vision of health and respectability - these were the kind of women Blackpool wanted the nation to see as 'on display' in its spaces.

⁵⁶⁷ Figure 8: Wilton Williams, 'Blackpool; For Gorgeous Sights', 1920, Great Central Railway, National Railway Museum and Science Museum Group. Image ref 1986-8786.

Figure 8: Wilton Williams, 'Blackpool; For Gorgeous Sights', 1920, Great Central Railway, National Railway Museum and Science Museum Group. Image ref 1986-8786.



Evidently therefore, just as sideshows themselves drew upon alternative narratives, stealing from other genres and creating meaning out of illusion and allusive references, so narratives that drove social anxieties and official legislation were full of complex concerns. These concerns crossed entertainment genres whilst grappling with the ways in which the female body on display fitted into wider self-reflexive ideas of the modern nation.

A speaking part: negotiating agency within and outside of the sideshow

The above section describes alternative reasons for resistance to shows which positioned the female body within the realm of public consumption. The female body was subjected to and

located within wider narratives around British culture and taste, with a show's ability to be 'classed' constituting a major factor in its ability to resist censorship or removal. Building on this, the various genres also offer an important insight into the ways in which agency was allowed or disallowed. In doing so, it reveals how female bodies, displayed for public consumption in these contexts, were able or not able to use the law to define their agency and their skilful artistry and how women were subject to classification or attempted to classify themselves.

The Margot case is helpful in bringing to the fore the multiple considerations of agency within this sideshow conflict. Firstly, the agency asserted within the show itself; the performing body. It is Margot's body that is visible, potentially nude, and the fleshly appearance of which is deemed potentially offensive. What follows is a locating of agency outside of Margot's bodily exposure to the showman. Margot's artful agency is negated when her act is demystified and taken out of artistic context in the courtroom and concludes with Margot's attempt to reassert her agency via an appeal. This case therefore requires us to recognise agency as located by multiple people, in multiple contexts.

The idea that the agency of female bodies on display can be relocated and negated is profoundly visible on the Golden Mile. The case of Harold Davidson, the Ex-Rector in one of Gannon's fasting sideshows, introduces a complex nexus of ideas around agency and offence. This apparently male dominated act disguises narratives that revolve around constructions of gender, and specifically around femininity. This is true, firstly, in terms of women as a collective group who were occupying spaces of leisure alongside men.⁵⁶⁸ The narratives surrounding groups of women and linking them to the consumption of popular entertainments makes for interesting analysis. Whilst the 'new crowd' was discussed in Chapter 2 in terms of

⁵⁶⁸ See Chapter 3 for more detail, including social and economic forces.

the anxieties this may have caused local authorities in relation to the affective potential of the sideshow, here I will look in more detail at the multiple types of agency granted to women as they were represented by dominant voices, including the press and officials, as they positioned themselves as sideshow consumers. Secondly, I will re-examine individual female cases who put themselves up for public consumption, and how agency was continuously in contention at the Golden Mile and beyond. Davidson allows for an insightful comparison to the starving brides, highlighting the difference of a male starving exhibition who was a character known outside of the show itself, and who constantly interacted with the audience and the press. The ways in which female fasters who surrounded Davidson, or who were linked to him, were discussed reveals how the female body was continuously asserted as a site of problematisation.

In Blackpool, Davidson was condemned firstly for causing obstruction and an unmanageable crowd. This was in terms of Acts and by-laws already in place in Blackpool in 1932. His arrest did also however reveal a more ambiguous form of offence, demanding a debate about the very definition of what such an offence consisted of.

(Letter to the editor of West Lancashire Evening Gazette) Sir- The Town Clerk is reported to have said that the prosecution would not lie against the barrel exhibition for an indecent exhibition. Pray, why not? The description “indecent” as framed in the Act, means what it says, and “indecent” is defined in the dictionary as “offensive to delicacy.” “Delicacy” is defined as “refinement of sensibility or taste.” Anything more offensive to delicacy or offensive to refinement of taste than the barrel exhibition is hard to imagine- Yours, etc.⁵⁶⁹

As Margot was held to account through investigation of her individual pieces of clothing and the abstraction of movement, Davidson’s offence is constructed around the definition of offence itself which, even in the seeking of its definition, demonstrated its ambiguity. His return to the Golden Mile a few months after his initial display in 1932 included not display

⁵⁶⁹ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 8 November 1932. Letter is attributed to “Lex”, *Queen’s Hydro*, Blackpool, 6 September.

in a barrel, but rather in a glass cabinet.⁵⁷⁰ This resulted in a charge of attempting to commit suicide, deemed offensive to the audience and to the reputation of Blackpool. His charge was wrapped in moralistic discourses which condemned his ‘most objectionable’ show.⁵⁷¹

The appearance again of the ex-rector of Stiffkey...“fasting” in a glass-covered cabinet in Blackpool Central Beach sideshow is considered by the Blackpool public as another objectionable public exhibition.⁵⁷²

In Davidson’s case, throughout the press reports, women dominate the audience, the defence and, most importantly, the drama. A mass female following is reported throughout the coverage of Gannon’s sideshow. Girls in ‘holiday dress’ are reported as frantically rushing forward to shake hands with Davidson as he left Blackpool Police Court.⁵⁷³ The women continuously encircle both the legal case and the glass case of his exhibition.

The presence of a female fan club that appeared to follow fasting men was not new. In an article in the 1908 *World’s Fair*, fasting legend Ricardo Sacco was reported as liberated from a thirty-seven day fast. Notably, Sacco mentioned the offers of marriage he had received whilst fasting and the number of his female admirers.⁵⁷⁴ Furthermore, in April 1928, a small article in *The Daily Mail* presents the case of Oswald Ernest Hayden. He was the rector of Avening, Gloucestershire, removed from this position on counts of impropriety.⁵⁷⁵ This makes an interesting point of comparison with Harold Davidson who would plead not-guilty relation to similar judgements years later on the Blackpool Golden Mile.

Firstly, throughout the coverage, prominence is given to the women who surround the Hayden. The case is described ‘as a display of feminine temperaments and as a clash of

⁵⁷⁰ ‘Ex-Rector’s Show In Barrel’, *Daily Mail*, 31 July 1937, p. 6.

⁵⁷¹ ‘Ex-Rector’s Show In Barrel’, *Daily Mail*, 31 July 1937, p. 6

⁵⁷² ‘New Objectionable Beach Display’, *Daily Mail*, 27 July 1935, p. 7.

⁵⁷³ ‘Rush To Shake His Hand’, *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1935.

⁵⁷⁴ *The World’s Fair*, November 1908.

⁵⁷⁵ ‘A Rector’s Honour’, *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1928, p. 11.

feminine wit, no more dramatic spectacle perhaps has ever been seen in a law court or staged in the theatre.⁵⁷⁶ Women are noted as dominating the hundred ‘spectators...who lined up in the queue for admission.’⁵⁷⁷ Five women are presented as principal witnesses; two against and three for the rector.

The first woman presented in detail as speaking against the rector are described as ‘thin, pale, blonde, of medium height...dressed in a quiet fawn costume, looked attractive but unhappy.’⁵⁷⁸ The article draws attention to the emotional way in which her evidence is given; noting the ‘outburst of tears’, and that she ‘wept often.’⁵⁷⁹ The defence asserted a history of her mother, who allegedly died in an asylum. Drawing on this and the emotional nature of the women’s demeanour, the court deemed that ‘she herself was imaginative and hysterical.’⁵⁸⁰ This is compared to the evidence given by the rector in ‘clear tones’ and the rector’s wife, ‘with a calm smile gave her husband the highest of matrimonial certificates.’⁵⁸¹ Undoubtedly, these are the contrasting displays of ‘feminine temperaments’ identified and put on show for the spectators.

Numerous details that focus on appearance are given of women, including his wife and the women central to defending the rector’s innocence.

He was followed by his wife, a pleasant and still good-looking matron, tall and buxom, well dressed in grey, with a serene and unwrinkled face.

Miss Nina Chipp, the central figure of this drama, then appeared. She proved to be an extremely good-looking young woman of medium height, fair, much prettier and younger in appearance than her portraits in the newspaper would suggest. She was dressed with quiet taste in a

⁵⁷⁶ ‘A Rector’s Honour’, *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1928, p. 11.

⁵⁷⁷ ‘A Rector’s Honour’, *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1928, p. 11.

⁵⁷⁸ ‘A Rector’s Honour’, *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1928, p. 11.

⁵⁷⁹ ‘A Rector’s Honour’, *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1928, p. 11.

⁵⁸⁰ ‘A Rector’s Honour’, *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1928, p. 11.

⁵⁸¹ ‘A Rector’s Honour’, *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1928, p. 11.

cinnamon coloured tailored costume with a shrimp pink felt hat and sable milk fur tie.⁵⁸²

There are many issues of female representation that could be drawn out here including, most alarmingly, dismissing claims of inappropriate behaviour towards a woman because her family's history of poor mental health. Relevant for this study however, are the deep resonances between courtroom and sideshow. This begins with issues of costume, appearance, performativity and extends into the deeper discussion of agency within sideshows. Most notably, following what was described as a composed performance in court, Miss Chipp pulled out her secure pass for sincerity; a doctor's note. She provided evidence of examination by a doctor to prove the innocence of the rector, passing it around the courtroom and, in doing so, 'secured a notable triumph.'⁵⁸³ Arguably therefore, throughout this case the female body is subject to multiple sources of scrutiny including the voice, the dress and most effectively evidence of intimate scrutiny by the most trusted gaze - that of medical authority. As previously noted, the use of the medical gaze upon a female body was used in starring exhibitions on multiple occasions, including Gannon's sideshows.

For Davidson, his 'mob' of women is described as desperate to 'shake his hand' and to be photographed with the vicar.⁵⁸⁴ Even in Gannon's first appearance in 1932, women dominate the narrative about the crowd. In a particularly dramatic episode, 'One woman who brought her baby in a carriage left it on the fringe of the crowd and then apparently forgot all about it in her excitement.'⁵⁸⁵ Davidson is described as interacting with women in a very direct fashion, as 'girls in dance frocks passed the front of the barrel, and afterwards

⁵⁸² 'A Rector's Honour', *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1928, p. 11.

⁵⁸³ 'A Rector's Honour', *Daily Mail*, 12 April 1928, p. 11.

⁵⁸⁴ 'Rush to Shake his Hand', *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1935, p. 7.

⁵⁸⁵ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 5 September 1932.

exchanged giggling versions of what they had said to the Rector and what the Rector had said to them.⁵⁸⁶

In the 1935 trial, Davidson's audience are transported from the Golden Mile, to the court house. The female body - its 'feminine temperaments' and feminine display - and female agency is in a constant performative state. This is revealed in more detail when the two spheres, sideshow and law, come into direct conflict, i.e. when the 'giving offence' is committed within the sideshow.⁵⁸⁷ Conflicts between the law and the female body are drawn upon when discussing Davidson's position on the Golden Mile through two significant comparisons. Firstly, *The Daily Mail* recalls a Starving Brides exhibition in the previous year, so 'disgusting' that the paper vigorously called to the public to stop them and the exhibitions were stopped.⁵⁸⁸ This is an interesting association, comparing the ex-rector to a highly aesthetic exhibition. Furthermore, it reveals that a year previous to the Blackpool Improvement Act, it was the press who took the role of guardians of public 'interest' and prosecutors of offence.

The comparison to the starving brides works in the initial article with little emphasis given to Davidson's 'end' – his demands for reinstatement in the church - and more to his 'means.'⁵⁸⁹ As discussed, the 'interest' of the public here may be identified in a projected potential disgust. The second interesting line of comparison acknowledges more dramatically the motivation behind the act. As the *Mail* describes, 'Mr E Rowson, prosecuting, recalled that there had been many cases in the early days of the Suffragette movement of people starving themselves with the object of bringing some grievance before the public.'⁵⁹⁰ In

⁵⁸⁶ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 5 September 1932.

⁵⁸⁷ *Today Programme* [Radio], BBC Radio 4, (March 15, 2018).

⁵⁸⁸ 'New Objectionable Beach Display', *Daily Mail*, 27 July 1935, p. 7.

⁵⁸⁹ 'New Objectionable Beach Display', *Daily Mail*, 27 July 1935, p. 7.

⁵⁹⁰ 'Rush To Shake His Hand', *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1935.

relation to the question of 'interest', again, it is the vantage point of the public which is considered, emphasising the act of 'bringing before': specifically bringing a 'grievance' to the public through the deliberate neglect or destruction of the body. Here the prosecution calls upon a highly political, violent and gendered example.

At this point, it is important to consider the physicality of the space itself. This is relevant as the notion of public 'interest' and potential 'offence' caused is rooted in public consumption of a visible act in the framework of the sideshow. Davidson places his body firstly in the realm of performativity- the sideshow- where bodies, be they freaks or fan dancers, are involved in an explicit act of making their bodies visible. Davidson places himself in a glass cabinet, choosing an act that involves less of a performance and more a demonstration and the destruction of body and flesh. There can be no question that Davidson uses the sideshow as a site of fleshly visual consumption to make his voice - the unfleshly-heard.

Starving as an act of defiance was carried out by suffragettes who were confined; other forms of protest and occupation of public spaces were denied to them. As such, their bodies acted as sites of protest through a fundamental assertion of agency. Davidson mimics this agency over the body in a confined space, the difference being he is not in a confined cell but a glass cabinet. Davidson therefore projects paradoxes in presenting a sense of confinement and stripped power, relatable to the political protest of the suffragette, whilst making himself highly visible and as a consequence his body highly agentive. Arguably therefore, previous acts by women are appropriated both by Davidson, in form of protest like the suffragettes, and by the authorities in their comparative disgust at the starving brides. Davidson is himself revealing of constructions of female agency within and outside of the sideshow.

Importantly for this analysis of the Davidson case, another female character emerges in the background; ‘In a second glass cabinet beside him is his youngest daughter Pamela.’⁵⁹¹ In comparison to the profile of Pamela, the mob of women surrounding the Davidson case are given prominence with numerous female characters introduced into the narrative. It is notable that compared to the ‘mob’ of women who surround Davidson, Pamela’s occupation of a glass cabinet beside her father goes very much overlooked.⁵⁹² The dramatic arrests of Davidson are described,

‘within ten minutes of the departure of the Ex-Rector of Stiffkey and the officers, shutters were again taken down, and the exhibition thrown open to the public. The girl, Pamela, was still in her cabinet, but as Mr Luke Gannon, the proprietor of the show, told an *Evening Gazette* reporter, “she is not fasting.”’⁵⁹³

Little information is given about Pamela and at one point in the press coverage it is even debated whether Pamela is ‘Davidson’s daughter or not.’⁵⁹⁴ When the case is brought to court in 1937, observers of the show the town clerk confirm seeing a girl on display with Davidson but cannot confirm whether it was Davidson’s daughter. Pamela is, however, reported as continuing the fast after her father is taken to court.⁵⁹⁵

Research into her later life reveals she continued in show business and shows she regularly visited her father at Blackpool during his years of protest whilst the rest of their family moved to the South Coast.⁵⁹⁶ Notably, no statement was taken from Pamela during her time in the glass cabinet. Rather, a board was created and displayed for the reopening of the sideshow stating, ‘The rector has been arrested for attempting to commit suicide, but his

⁵⁹¹ ‘New Objectionable Beach Display’, *Daily Mail*, 27 July 1935, p. 7.

⁵⁹² *Daily Mail*, 27 July 1935; *The Times*, 6 August 1935.

⁵⁹³ *West Lancashire Evening Gazette*, 3 August 1935.

⁵⁹⁴ Rush To Shake His Hand’, *Daily Mail*, 10 August 1935.

⁵⁹⁵ ‘Stiffkey Ex-Rector’s Arrest’, *Daily Mail*, 5 August 1935, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁶ *The Telegraph*, March 12, 2001, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1326009/Pamela-Nelson-Edwards.html> [accessed March 3, 2018]; ‘New Objectionable Beach Display’, *Daily Mail*, 27 July 1935, p. 7.

daughter will remain in the cabinet.⁵⁹⁷ It appears Pamela would not speak onstage until Davidson's death in 1937, a fact revealed by Mrs Davidson during an interview about the lack of compensation given to her. Mrs Davidson mentions Pamela's career as a dancer at the Windmill Theatre noting 'she just got a speaking part.'⁵⁹⁸ Pamela, seventeen at the time of her mother's interview, is described as dancing in the show at the infamous theatre and as 'absorbed in her stage career.'⁵⁹⁹

It is ironic to note the reference within the article to the subject of illusions, as Mrs Davidson speaks of being 'without illusions, but not angry' at the lack of compensation from Mr Davidson's death, brought about by injuries inflicted by a lion whose cage he occupied during a sideshow in Skegness.⁶⁰⁰ Given Pamela's new occupation and its link to tantalising dancing- very much contended as the art of illusion at the time, it appears that the gap between the realities of the stage and real life are collapsed, as the show itself becomes a metaphor for life.

Notably, there is no mention of Pamela being brought to court for her involvement with Davidson's fast, just as the starving brides were to remain silent within glass cabinets some years later. Pamela therefore possesses an indirect sense of agency as an aid or prop to her father's cause. She seems not to have been considered as causing an offence and is not charged. Little attention is given to her, as opposed to her father who is the main spectacle. No direct quotes are taken from her during her time in the glass cabinet unlike Davidson who, although in a glass cabinet, offered numerous statements.

⁵⁹⁷ 'Stiffkey Ex-Rector's Arrest', *Daily Mail*, 5 August 1935, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁸ 'My Illusions Are Lost', *Daily Mail*, 7 October 1937, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁹ 'My Illusions Are Lost', *Daily Mail*, 7 October 1937, p. 5.

⁶⁰⁰ 'My Illusions Are Lost', *Daily Mail*, 7 October 1937, p. 5.

Conclusion

The above discussion investigates the ways in which narratives around concealment and containment of the female body were constructed and utilised by multiple groups that surrounded the sideshow. This included concealment and containment within the show itself, as performers played on illusion and insinuation to create attractive content. Tensions are created within shows, evident from the case of the exuberant fan dance to the provocative starving bride. The bride's body, although hidden by a white gown, existed as one that pushed through the fabric and the glass case itself by presenting the depleting body and with its strong association of the Sleeping Beauties. Ideas around concealment and containment were also showcased in discourses outside the sideshow, as the female body on display became a site for the negotiation of ideas of nationally acceptable British modes of entertainment.

Whilst all of the shows discussed in this chapter were met with forms of opposition, some were more amicably incorporated within the continuously redefined tolerances that drove a vision of Blackpool. The female body could be deemed more tolerable, displayed and consumed as a healthy, progressive body, or it could be problematised as a degenerate body, clearly associated with a regressive past. Therefore, whilst all the shows considered were policed and observed, some were held more officially accountable than others. They shared a subjectification to debates around tightness of controls over entertainment and the public's 'good sense', but some lent to Blackpool's narrative of place-making more than others.⁶⁰¹ This was achieved as the bodies were narrated in different ways and thus created alternative 'perceptions of problem', understood here as problem bodies, triggering varying degrees of intervention.⁶⁰²

⁶⁰¹ 'Ex-rector of Stiffkey Roasts', *Daily Mail*, 11 April 1936, p. 7.

⁶⁰² Smart, *Law, Crime and Sexuality*, p. 55.

This exploration of Gannon's sideshow in the context of wider negotiations around the female body on display reveals not only historical links, such as the Sleeping Beauties, but allows for a greater understanding of how agency may be denied or defined within and outside of the sideshow. For example, throughout Davidson's trial, although Gannon spoke on the matter and was subject to his own charges in connection with the ex-rector, Davidson spoke for himself in court. This contrasts greatly with the treatment of Gannon's anonymous starving brides who, once removed from the glass case, are deemed devoid of implication. They appear, as with Margot, to be viewed in the legal terms as aids to the showman's performance. Unlike Margot however, they were not trained or skilled performers. Rather, the emphasis of the show was on their passivity and their status as ordinary, if arguably desperate, individuals. Unlike Margot, the brides made no appeal on account of their damaged respectability; arguably this was because they were not continuous performers, and so their reputation would have little impact on their livelihoods. They were also completely abstracted from any accountability or agency as individuals other than *brides*. In both cases however, the female body is positioned as the site of offence and as disruptive of the moral security of the audience.

Considering these multiple examples reveals how women were, or were not, able to utilise their run-ins with the law to define ideas around women, performance and society. It reveals the negotiations that ensue as women were classified by officials and showmen or attempted to classify themselves.⁶⁰³ Ultimately, it reveals the complexity of the female body as a site of negotiation. Specifically, for Blackpool and Gannon, it develops an appreciation of 'the resilience of understandings of popular culture that do not fit easily into established narratives of improvement, regulation, and modernization.'⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰³ Extending work of Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women*.

⁶⁰⁴ Assael, 'Art or Indecency?', p. 745.

Conclusion

‘The law, having made a face for itself, makes its subjects in its own image. Individual human beings cease to be fully human in the eyes of the law and become, instead, abstract constructions.’⁶⁰⁵

This thesis established the significance of the sideshow as a space of entertainment that was both a unique, distinctive space, but one that held an inevitable connection with cultural and moral issues. Beyond the concept of a ‘mirror’ to society this thesis argues that the bodies displayed in the sideshow are not mere reflections of society, but were implicit in complex negotiations around visibility. These negotiations are articulated through the immediate visibility of the sideshow display, through props, costume and the presentation of bodies. They are also, however, imbued in negotiations outside of the sideshow space, with such negotiations involving a process whereby bodies on display may be re-categorised and defined by wider societal voices. Importantly for this thesis, this re-categorisation was achieved through discursive and legislative activity by local authorities that attempted to negate visibility. This leads to the finding that the bodies displayed in the sideshow became a site for controlling and projecting ideals around place-making of Blackpool – how Blackpool was visible to the nation.

The findings of this thesis are important, firstly, in developing sideshow studies as it considered the lesser researched era of the twentieth century. It did so through a case study which sought to avoid over-generalisation or over-arching considerations of sideshow genres and their decline. In doing so, it presented insight into the rich negotiations that occur at the sideshow, where decline was not inevitable, but the result of complex interventions between showmen, exhibitors and authorities. Links between the themes of the conventionally considered decline of the freak show to later, less considered examples of sideshow

⁶⁰⁵ Watt, *Dress, Law and Naked Truth*, p. 79.

performers and showmen, such as Gannon, reveal the ways in which bodies become problematised to society. Considering these wider examples embedded Gannon's shows in a wider context, whilst maintaining the necessity to consider his unique presence and forms of negotiation in Blackpool during the 1930s. The decline of the freak show acts to demonstrate the ways in which changing cultural attitudes towards bodies that were, at one time, highly visible and a legitimate form of entertainment, shift and were recategorized or removed from a highly visible and accessible space. Furthermore, a cross-chronological approach revealed the power of the sideshow as a site of affective potential, developing from freak show literature, thus revealing its capacity to move and disturb its audience. This discussion of affective potential opened deeper understanding not only of what the sideshow provoked in its audience, but the fears and need for action it incited in authorities.

Secondly, the findings are important in developing studies of the female body on display and the relationship with the law. It reveals the ways in which bodies may be constructed and the consequences such constructions have for the agency and activities of women. A detailed consideration of the Starving Bride show revealed how ideas of class, objectification and agency are in constant compromise. Wider examples of exhibitions that share ground with the brides highlighted the ways through which the law defines the boundaries of acceptability and objection in terms of bodies on display. These boundaries were revealed as tied to the aesthetics of display, such as moving of static naked flesh, and also the artistry of the act, such as plays on illusion. Most significantly, however, the brides demonstrate how the narratives and discourses that constitute their problematisation incite social consequences.

These consequences are not just for the brides directly, but for the wider social and cultural landscape of Blackpool and its image. This thesis therefore develops a need to look at conflicts which deal with the aesthetic and class based categorisation of women on display. In

doing so, it reveals how the contested body on display, in the face of law, shapes and defines our public spaces and identity. Today, this offers insight for ongoing discussions around the policy of strip-based entertainment and other forms of titillating display, which often includes discussions around the location and legitimacy of displays, the behaviours such displays may incite in their audiences, as well as the agency of the women on display.⁶⁰⁶

Blackpool is considered as a site of profound interest in this thesis. Notably, the themes of this thesis hold strong resonance with Blackpool today. This thesis argued that Blackpool was involved in complex processes of place-making. This was tied greatly to the entertainment industry- who and what was exhibited there- as well as its architectural amenities and its aesthetic image to the wider population. For the Blackpool of the twenty-first century, the place-making work continues; it struggles to fight its reputation as a stag do destination.⁶⁰⁷ Perhaps more than ever, Blackpool struggles to define its identity and its crowd, whilst benefitting from the money that even the most debaucherous image can bring.⁶⁰⁸

In a 2011 paper, attempts by policy-makers to redesign the Blackpool Illuminations are called into question. It deems the Blackpool Illuminations as ‘negatively stereotyped’, abstracted by policy-makers as negative due to a lack of accountability taken as to the cultural practices and local production of the Illuminations.

This climate of opinion fostered through judgements that identify ‘good’ taste and condemning of that which is identified as abject,

⁶⁰⁶ Teela Sanders, Kate Hardy and Rosie Campbell, ‘Regulating Strip-Based Entertainment: Sexual Entertainment Venue Policy and the Ex/Inclusion of Dancers Perspectives and Needs’, *Social Policy and Society* 14 (2015), pp. 83-92; Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988).

⁶⁰⁷ ‘Blackpool Bids to End “Stag Do” Image’, *BBC News* (February 2011), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lancashire-12416956> [accessed 18 June 2019].

⁶⁰⁸ Numbers to Blackpool have declined steadily since the 1960s. Tim Edensor and Steve Millington, ‘Blackpool Illuminations: Revaluing Local Cultural Production, Situated Creativity and Working-Class Values’, *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 19:2 (2013), pp. 145-161.

excessive and ‘tacky’ is mirrored across wider cultural policy and strategies for regeneration.⁶⁰⁹

The paper finds the creativity and the desires of the working-class crowd to be dismissed in a misinformed drive by policy-makers to rebrand Blackpool. It rejects the idea of ‘tackiness’ as something in need of change, and instead considers the notions of togetherness, nostalgia and consolidation the Illuminations exhibit and incite. In doing so, it highlights the disparity between policy, the desires of the crowd, and the fight for a legitimate place on the Golden Mile. This thesis is important therefore in contributing to the study of Blackpool’s historical processes of place-making, which continues to be at work. Within this struggle, and articulated in this thesis, are the complex ways in which certain entertainments may be classed, and how this relates to the perceptions and control measures of the crowd.

This thesis is also significant in bringing a comprehensive and considered exploration of the career of Luke Gannon. His place in Golden Mile history, whilst acknowledged by historians of Blackpool, was yet to be fully discovered. As revealed in this thesis, he was a big character on the Mile as he prompted questions, incited action and provided entertainment. Evidently, he existed on the margins in many ways, for example through his muddling census records, occupying No Man’s Land in Blackpool and playing within the very margins of the law. This thesis has brought to light the incredible stories and incidents that Luke Gannon curated, and the profound role showman played as negotiators of space and spectacle.

⁶⁰⁹ Edensor and Millington, ‘Blackpool Illuminations’, p. 150.

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