



# CARNIVÀLE and the American Grotesque

*Critical  
Essays on  
the HBO  
Series*

*Edited by Peg Aloi and Hannah E. Johnston*

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24. Ibid.
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26. Perry Nodelman, *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 76.
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30. Ibid.
31. Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990).
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33. Ibid., 8.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 108.
36. Donis Dondis, *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), 141.
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38. Ibid.
39. Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 26.
40. "Creating the Scene," HBO: *Carnivàle*. Web. 12 Aug. 2009.
41. "a52 Earns Emmy for HBO *Carnivàle* Main Titles," Darnell Works. Web. 12 Sept. 2009. For a further discussion of the credit sequence, see Peg Aloi's essay in this collection.
42. See also in this collection the essays by both Sérgio Dias Branco and Hannah E. Johnston.
43. See Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
44. Discussion with Cast and Creators Courtesy of The Museum of Television & Radio.

## Magic and Loss

### *Style, Progression and the "Ending" of Carnivàle*

SÉRGIO DIAS BRANCO

"Mulfay," the first episode of *Carnivàle*, opens with a sequence that condenses the style of the series, by way of introduction: the sound of the windstorm sets the slow pace of the scene, and the images have a brown tonality with contrasted light and shadow. It is dark and stormy. We can barely see a man running away from something in a cornfield. He seems to be being pursued by a tattooed sturdy man, bare to the waist. A soldier in a war trench is terrified. A half-open and shaky hand displays a signet ring with a cross. The images flow rapidly across the screen, alternating with the chase in the cornfield: a gentleman in tuxedo, an officer in uniform, tarot cards, a funeral procession, a snake and an enchantress, a magic hat, a dead sheep, a framed photo of a group of coal miners, a woman in agony, a revolver and four bullets, a two-finger claw-like hand, a boy uncovering his body whose legs have been lacerated, a wall clock with a pendulum, the soldier, and a small community under a big tree. Then a young man wakes up. His name is Ben Hawkins (Nick Stahl) and we come to understand that this was one of many dreams that he will have. It is 1934 in Oklahoma and he is watching his mother slowly dying during the Dust Bowl.

"New Canaan, CA," the last episode of the series, closes with a shot inside a shady trailer, gradually tracking forward to a puppet the-

atre where Ben lies unconscious. In the previous scene, Sophie walks through the cornfield to find the dead body of Ben's opponent, Brother Justin. She kneels down and puts her hands on his chest. Iris, Justin's older sister, looks down from the yard of the Casa de Creepy as the carnival troupe leaves. A wide shot shows a dark wave growing in the cornfield and withering the corn as the last trucks leave the town of Shantytown. The dark green of the trees and the green of the cornfield, turned even darker than the former, occupies the top half of the screen, while the arid brown that had become a visual staple of the series fills the bottom half.

What connects the intimacy of the show's first moment with the spectacular quality of this last moment? How does the series progress from a succession of intriguing, fleeting images to this apocalyptic imagery? Umberto Eco writes that "a series, qua constellation, is a field of possibilities that generates multiple choices."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the answers to these questions have to take into account the alternatives that a series prompts, but most importantly the decisions embodied in the *form* of these works. In other words, a show advances stylistically each time a piece is added to it and its serial form changes, creating new internal relationships. Such an advance usually involves development—but not always, because the added element may, for instance, strictly repeat a pre-existing element. This sequential structure, which encompasses the narrative and aesthetic style, is a defining aspect of the form of television series<sup>2</sup> and may be encapsulated in the concept of *progression*.

Progress is to be taken here in its simplest and broadest sense; as an advance, as a movement forward, which may be more or less directed. The serial form of television programs is the result of organizing principles and operations that shape them throughout the episodes of the seasons of a series. A series progresses based on the repetition and variation of elements, as well as the introduction of new ingredients. *Carnivàle* provides a rich illustration of the way these structuring guidelines and actions function. It is a stylistically intricate, but relatively short drama, with only two seasons and 24 episodes. My aim is to single out some representative moments and aspects that may enable a general look at the complete stylistic structure of the series and its progression.

Progression is not to be understood as a teleological movement (though it may be), but as a synonym for advance. One factor is the

possibility of non-renewal, or mid-season cancellation. This means that such a factor is part of the *conditions* of the making of a series. Because of this, television series may be likened to what Eco calls *open works*, based on "a poetics of serial thought" and aiming "at the production of a structure that is at once open and polyvalent."<sup>3</sup> For him, this concept is hermeneutic and refers to works that are not limited to a single or range of readings. Television shows may also be considered polyvalent because they create a range of possibilities of progression. This redefines the concept of open work as having as much to do with composition as with hermeneutics. The compositional features of these works are also important for Eco; they derive from a poetics of serial thought, where the *poetic* is the artistic purpose of the work.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, style hinges on poetics. That is, stylistic analysis of progression of a serial work involves the consideration of the purpose of its connected elements within the architecture of the whole series. Yet series are whole *temporarily*, until the moment that they are whole *definitely* when they end. Glen Creeber writes that "part of the appeal of serialization lies in its ability to construct 'open' rather than 'closed' narrative forms."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, he recognizes that some series, like the action-drama *24* (2001–10), propose a well-defined arc and therefore point towards some kind of narrative closure.<sup>6</sup> It is in the balance between these two aspects that fiction series unfold their possibilities. Definitive resolution is delayed or evaded, until it is demanded or it is chosen, that is, until the time of the series is up or the right time comes. Throughout their run, series invariably build a thick structure with resonating internal connections that progress over the time of their production.

A further feature that makes *Carnivàle* such an interesting case study is its sudden ending. Creator Daniel Knauf had planned this drama set during the "Dust Bowl of the 1930s, between the two great wars"<sup>7</sup> to have six seasons. The ratings dropped during the first season; but even as the number of viewers increased toward the end of the second season, it was too late. The series had become increasingly expensive to produce and HBO decided not to renew it for a third season. At the time, Carolyn Strauss, then president of the entertainment department, declared in a definite manner: "We feel the two seasons we had on the air told the story very well and we are proud of what everyone associated with the show has accomplished."<sup>8</sup> This decision

has relevance to the examination of progression, because it cannot but highlight the show's progression in light of its interruption. As understandable as the creator's disappointment and the fans' protests are, this also brings to the fore that progression proceeds according to serial building blocks, not only episode by episode, but season by season as well. The fact is that this is the final shape that *Carnivàle* took. Consequently, looking at the series as a whole involves considering how its elements have been arranged.

### *Before the Beginning*

Before the beginning, after the great war between Heaven and Hell, God created the Earth and gave dominion over it to the crafty ape he called man.

—Samson, "Milfay"

Samson, who co-manages the carnival, utters this opening statement before the fascinating, brief images of Ben's first dream. He speaks directly to the camera over a black background so that the viewer listens to his words without distractions. "Milfay" starts with this monologue that serves as a prologue, not just for the opening episode, but for the whole season. The same happens in the second season premiere, "Los Moscos." In the first introduction, Samson talks about a battle between darkness and light that took place before creation and explains that this clash continues, until the Atomic Bomb inaugurates the Age of Reason and announces Doomsday. In the second, he is more precise and less prophetic and refers to an event, the First World War, that precedes a new confrontation between good and evil in a specific place, the United States. This fight will take place in the time when the action is set: between 1934 and 1935, during the Great Depression, after the financial and industrial slump of 1929.

The seasons are arranged to highlight their contrasting natures. Like Ben's dream, the first season's plot is intriguing and inconclusive, whereas the second answers questions and leads to the clash between the two opponents. All through the first season it is unclear who is who in this battle. In contrast, the beginning of the second season reveals that the eerie and elusive Management of the carnival, hidden behind a curtain in the previous season, is Lucius Belyakov, who Ben

had seen in his dream as a young Russian soldier and who is Justin's father. The gentleman in a tuxedo that we briefly see in front of Lucius in the same dream is Henry Scudder, Ben's father. They were the preceding adversaries: Lucius stood for good and Henry for evil. The dream is the first of many that Ben, a chain gang fugitive, has. Brother Justin, a Methodist minister, also shares them. These dreams weave enigmatic images that allow the series to connect the two main characters, who remain separate throughout the first season and most of the second. Justin and Ben share a dream as soon as in the second episode, "After the Ball Is Over." They are both seated at a diner counter and the frontal, perfectly balanced framing stresses their symmetry and their succession after Henry and Lucius, respectively, are placed behind them. Yet their story lines overlap only in the two final episodes, "Outside New Canaan" and "New Canaan, CA." Until that point each episode parallels Ben's travels with Justin's ministry. Ben moves with the carnival from town to town, from state to state, getting closer and closer to Justin, who stays in California during that time. The use of the names of the places where the traveling amusement show stops as episode titles signals the movement of Ben towards Justin—intermittently in the first season, in which "Insomnia" follows "Lonnigan, TX" and continuously in the next. The series gradually establishes the two figures and their worlds in an attentive way, conveying their changes and revelations. In the first season, the mysteries are slowly presented and not immediately resolved. The second season is more about the journey to the finish line, to the showdown.

The two parallel strands of narrative that intersect only in the penultimate and final episodes, one centered on Ben, the other one on Justin, create a strong and bisected structure. The style, its spatial qualities and its temporal organization, is informed by this narrative structure, presenting Justin's and Ben's story lines in distinct ways. Justin's is linear, eventful, and mostly confined to repeated places, presenting his persuasive ministry and his epiphanies regarding his destiny. Ben's mirrors the repetitiveness and looseness of carnival life: traveling for days, stopping in a new town, erecting the fair, supplying amusement, and then preparing for the next trip. This is a sequence of activities visually renewed every time by new locations and different audiences that is the regular background where Ben slowly discovers his fate and is helped in this discovery.

The series devotes considerably less time to Justin's narrative strand than to Ben's. Ben's and Justin's segments are well-defined components of the series throughout the two seasons. The run-times of these segments (shown here in Table 1) are fundamental because they portray each story line through a specific sense of duration. "Babylon," for example, dedicates less than one minute to Justin, who is shown solely in the beginning in an intense moment—confirming the pattern of his segments. He is seated on his haunches in the dark, illuminated by a tenuous ray of light, praying for the children who lost their lives in the fire that destroyed the building where he is, his Christian orphanage. In other episodes, the contrast is not so glaring, but the first episode initiates a noticeable pattern: it reserves only 11 minutes to Justin's narrative and around 43 minutes to Ben's. For my purposes, the exactness of the numbers is less important than the simple recognition of this discrepancy between on-screen times. There are fewer time discrepancies in the second season. Yet it is striking how Justin's scenes remain briefer, even though their total time within an episode is usually higher than the total times in the first season. "Lincoln Highway" and "Cheyenne, WY" maintain the same crosscutting structure, but are the most balanced episodes in terms of time, preparing for the merging of the two narrative strands in the next and last two episodes of the series. These details merely confirm what is evident for any viewer. As Robin Nelson contends, although the show "intercuts Crowe's interim experience 'in the wilderness,' specifically evoking Christ's journey of trial and introspection, with that of Ben with the carnival, it focuses more on the latter with its strong visual qualities."<sup>9</sup>

Beyond pace, the duration of each segment is related to the number of characters that they cover. There is an enormous difference here. In Justin's thread, his older sister Iris is the sole other main character that is constant throughout the series—Reverend Norman Balthus was a later addition and only became one of the protagonists during the second and last season. In Ben's thread, however, there is a group of ten characters who all play leading roles: Samson, the ride operator and leader of the roustabouts Jonesy, the fortunetellers Sophie and Apollonia, the bearded lady Lila, the manager of the striptease show Stumpy, the striptease dancers Rita Sue and Libby, and the snake charmer Ruthie and her son strongman Gabriel—the mentalist Lodz

**Table 1.**  
**Run-times of Ben's and Justin's segments in the first season of *Carnivàle*.**

Episode								Total
"MILFAY" (1.01). RUNNING TIME: 54:42								
Ben	8:33	26:47	8:54					44:14
Justin	6:02	4:26					10:28	
"AFTER THE BALL IS OVER" (1.02). RUNNING TIME: 50:04								
Ben	:06	:03	9:34	3:54	3:13	14:28	1:13	32:31
Justin	:04	:07	3:31	3:17	5:11	5:23		17:33
"TIPTON" (1.03). RUNNING TIME: 47:01								
Ben	6:11	16:53	17:04					40:08
Justin	2:52	4:01					6:53	
"BLACK BLIZZARD" (1.04). RUNNING TIME: 43:58								
Ben	7:33	15:12	16:08					38:53
Justin	2:12	2:53					5:05	
"BABYLON" (1.05). RUNNING TIME: 45:54								
Ben	45:31							45:31
Justin	:23							:23
"PICK A NUMBER" (1.06). RUNNING TIME: 53:17								
Ben	6:01	12:28	2:50	19:20	4:57			45:36
Justin	1:55	1:13	1:50	2:43				7:41
"THE RIVER" (1.07). RUNNING TIME: 50:09								
Ben	3:05	8:43	10:16	9:25				31:29
Justin	1:37	6:37	3:25	5:56	1:05			18:40
"LONNIGAN, TEXAS" (1.08). RUNNING TIME: 55:16								
Ben	8:11	10:15	6:07	4:15	18:00			46:48
Justin	1:17	4:56	:42	1:33				8:28
"INSOMNIA" (1.09). RUNNING TIME: 42:29								
Ben	8:18	13:26	6:11	9:25				37:20
Justin	2:38	:59	1:32					5:09
"HOT AND BOTHERED" (1.10). RUNNING TIME: 49:57								
Ben	2:14	4:26	1:55	30:07	:29			39:11
Justin	1:24	:55	1:16	1:45	5:26			10:46
"DAY OF THE DEAD" (1.11). RUNNING TIME: 51:15								
Ben	12:20	10:43	4:58	13:42	2:54			44:37
Justin	1:40	1:59	:42	2:17				6:38
"THE DAY THAT WAS THE DAY" (1.12). RUNNING TIME: 51:59								
Ben	15:27	10:57	2:20	5:45	:30	4:12		39:11
Justin	1:11	2:53	6:45	1:06	:26	:27		12:48

is only a main character during the first season. These characters and their shifting relationships with Ben, help reveal Ben's function and destiny within the show's narrative.

There are differences of tone and aesthetic in scenes that feature Justin and Ben prominently. The scenes set in the carnival follow the rhythm of a life of nomadism and camaraderie and result in images with multiple planes and various points of attention. This dense visual texture prevails even when the focus is on the conversation between two particular characters within the group. These visual patterns set Justin's and Ben's segments apart.

Similarly, there are performance patterns that identify the two main characters. Justin is played as a resolute man who overcomes the doubts about his fate. These doubts creep in when he talks and his voice breaks down or becomes hesitant. Later, he vocalizes his resoluteness and mastery over his followers and his destiny comes across through his straight, vertical posture, and the compact and imposing clerical black cassock that he wears. In contrast, Nick Stahl's performance as Ben is subdued. His watchful eyes and loose bearing present him as someone who is never certain about what to do, but ends up doing what he is supposed to do anyway. He acts as if he accepts this lack of certainty, always alert, waiting for something to happen that comes from him, but that he does not know how to master.

The first episode serves as a template, not just for the segmentation, but also for the mood and framing of each segment. Earthy, dry color tones already predominate in Ben's first scene, when he ends up joining the passing carnival. The encounter between Ben, who is burying his mother's body, and Jonesy is framed in low-angle, wide, full body shots that will become a staple of the visual style of Ben's segments, and, because of the weight of these segments, of most of the series. Paramount here is also the presence of the landscape in the composition. Nelson observes that "the landscapes of the Midwest dustbowl are vast, with big skies and ravaging storms. The wide-angle shots of landscape or of the carnival at night are beautifully depicted to convey an elemental vastness, and the special-effects dust-storms are powerfully realized in sound and vision"<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the first scene of Justin's segments introduces the deep blacks that will be dominant in his scenes. Moreover, the grounding of the characters that the wide fram-

ing facilitates is substituted by closer shots in Justin's segments. While mystery and magic are part of the everyday atmosphere of the traveling carnival, in Justin's environment the strange occurrences are more directly and concisely conveyed. This is what happens when an Okie church attendee spews out coins, a moment captured by a high-angle, assertive shot. The images of the carnival in the landscape may be impressive, but are not spectacular or eye-catching in this way.

The composition of the two story threads in *Carnivàle* demonstrates how the series arranges specific pieces, that is, pieces with particular properties. Progression is a gradual and irregular process, even when a series is thought out in advance. Usually, series can only be devised ahead of time within certain limits, which are at least seasonal and subjected to unforeseen events that may influence it. Yet every time an episode is completed or a season ends, choices about the arrangement of the parts of the series balance and weight their role. Typically, progression becomes more visible in the closing and opening of each season—such as the merging of threads in the last two episodes.

### *A Creature of Light and a Creature of Darkness*

Into each generation is born a creature of light and a creature of darkness.

—Tag line, first season of *Carnivàle*

Their journey. Their battle. Our future.

—Tag line, second season of *Carnivàle*

Fulfilling their function, the tag lines above summarize the fundamental narrative centers of the two seasons of the show: the first simply states that there are two rival creatures that appear in every generation, the second declares that they are journeying towards a battle in which the fate of humankind is at stake, that is to say, towards a fight with collective consequences. The tag line for the first season is the modified first sentence of the rest of Samson's opening lines. Samson concludes the statement thus: "And great armies clashed by night in the ancient war between good and evil. There was magic then, nobility, and unimaginable cruelty. And so it was until the day that a false sun exploded over Trinity, and man forever traded away wonder for reason."

The creature of light is Ben Hawkins whose name evokes hawks. The creature of darkness is Justin Crowe whose name evokes crows, portent of war.<sup>11</sup> Their battle echoes the “great war between heaven and hell” or between good and evil that Samson mentions in his first sentence. The “false sun” that explodes “over Trinity” refers to the first nuclear test in history that took place in July 1945, in Jornada del Muerto, a desert valley in New Mexico. John Donne’s devotional poetry inspired Oppenheimer to call the test Trinity, which refers to the three persons in the Christian Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The series would have ended on the sixth season with this nuclear explosion that marks the beginning of the Atomic Age.

All these references lay bare the core importance of Samson’s isolated monologues, defining their qualities as season prologues. The mythology of the show is mainly drawn on two religions, Christianity and Hinduism, which like other spiritual traditions rely on stories, poems, and accounts that were first transmitted orally and then preserved in written form as scriptures. Samson’s words have a scriptural character, evoking strong images about events with a transcendental nature. This evocation is more powerful because the words are *proclaimed*, instead of simply presented as a text on screen. The series also appropriates specific Christian and Hindu elements that become visual motifs. From Christianity comes a wealth of imagery, from the biblical Tree of Knowledge found in *Genesis* to the symbol of the Knights Templar in a ring, both appearing in Ben’s first dream. From Hinduism comes the two opposing incarnate divine beings or avatars, conveyed through the contrasting characterization of the two narrative threads and through symmetrical framing when the two characters share a scene.

Robin Nelson points out that in this Manichean battle between light and darkness, good and evil, “the established minister of the church, Brother Crowe, might seem better placed than the refugee roustie, but it is soon evident that [...] things might not be what they seem.”<sup>12</sup> This surprising reversal of expectations is built incrementally. Like Samson’s words, every moment and religious reference detail the literal and figurative levels of this work of fiction. The series presents two parallel, and at times intersecting, responses to the Great Depression that are connected with these levels: the role of entertainment as

an antidote to hopelessness and the emergence of solitary religious communities.

The relation between literalness and figurativeness is explored in the grandiose title sequence—which provides the first images and sounds to the series, before Samson’s prologue. The sequence conveys the formal relation and mutual evocation between words and images: words evoke images and images evoke words. It begins with a deck of tarot cards ruffled by the wind. The camera zooms in and enters one of the cards, “The World,” that represents a battle between Heaven and Hell, higher and lower beings.<sup>13</sup> The movement continues and the layers of painted drawings give way to footage of the Depression era. The opposite movement of the camera then follows: the camera zooms out from a different card, “Ace of Swords,” a card associated with force of insight and clarity of vision usually represented through a sword piercing a crown and here represented through a warrior with a sword battling an giant dragon.<sup>14</sup> This procedure of entering a card, referencing its artwork, revealing historical footage, and metamorphosing into another card is repeated three times, from “Death” to “King of Swords” (related to dictatorship, racism, and poverty), from “Temperance” to “The Magician” (connected with recreational dance and sporting events), from “The Tower” to “Judgment” (linked with the United States Capitol, American politics, and social protest).

The archival footage includes images of the Fascist Italian leader Benito Mussolini, the Communist Soviet commander Joseph Stalin (with Vyacheslav Molotov who negotiated the non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in 1939), the African American track and field athlete Jesse Owens whose gold medals at the Olympic Games in Berlin outraged Hitler, and the baseball legend Babe Ruth. These images are related to the political and social history of America well beyond the poverty and desperation of the Great Depression—the racist Ku Klux Klan, the thousands of Bonus Marchers approaching the Capitol, and Franklin D. Roosevelt whose New Deal programs fought the Depression.

This engagement with history is widened to the world, with a great emphasis on figures of World War II. Some of the images are also specific to American culture and are inserted under “Temperance,” a card related with balance and that is here connected with recreation (an antidote to unhappiness)—like the image of Ruth, who is considered

one of the greatest heroes of American sports. The sequence ends with the camera tilting up from the "Judgment" card to the "Moon" and the "Sun" that are placed side by side, once again as two mirror images. The "Moon" has a representation of the Devil and the "Sun" has an image of God (and a widely known one, from the Sistine Chapel ceiling painted by Michelangelo). Historical figures, cultural icons, and religious imagery are joined to give a dense portrait of the world. Nelson notices that the series "sets out its distinctive and innovative mix of history, myth and the supernatural"<sup>15</sup> through this sequence. Yet more than mixing, the sequence and the series put these aspects in contact, as if they are complementary visions of the same reality. The series does not invite the viewer to look for such numerous references to history, culture, and religion, as if there is something to be deciphered. It instead makes these references manifest, introducing them as part of its visible structure of relations. Mussolini, Ruth, and the other people seen in the archival footage, even the anonymous faces, are contemporaries of the era when the action of the show is set and become part of its narrative continuum. The religious imagery offers us access to another side of the same story, giving us images that serve as keys to unlock the connection between the two sides.

This particular kind of variation is maintained until the end of the sequence, reinforcing the idea of specific connectedness (the dissolves are different) and circularity (the zoom in-and-out movement is the same). The title sequence schematizes, in a visually arresting form, the relations that the series explores. Similarly to other HBO series, what makes this sequence such a forceful statement is its long duration, one minute and a half, and the fact that it is a sequence that is strictly repeated in every episode.<sup>16</sup> The sequence therefore insistently reacquaints the viewer with the series and its dual but connected style, between the card figures and the archive footage, between Ben's and Justin's segments, every time a new episode begins. Within the series, it is an emphatic reminder of the "density of construction of its imagery."<sup>17</sup>

Arranging the elements of a series is only one facet of progression. The arranged elements are also associated and dissociated, not only by their placement, but also by their forms and meanings. The analysis of the references that the series summons through Samson's words and the title sequence demonstrates how relations are built on the formal

and representational properties of the parts of the series. These relations are dynamic and not fixed—the two narrative strands, which as we have seen are stylistically differentiated, come together by the end of the second season.

### *On the Heels of the Skirmish*

On the heels of the skirmish, men foolishly called the "war to end all wars," the dark one sought to elude his destiny and live as a mortal. So he fled across the ocean to an empire called America. But by his mere presence a cancer corrupted the spirit of the land. People were rendered mute by fools who spoke many words but said nothing, for whom oppression and cowardice were virtues, and freedom an obscenity. And into this dark heartland the prophet stalked his enemy. Till, diminished by his wounds, he turned to the next in the ancient line of light. So it was that the fate of mankind came to rest on the trembling shoulders on the most reluctant of saviors.

—Samson, "Los Moscos"

The style of progression of *Carnivàle* arranges and relates its elements so as to slowly disclose the conflict between evil and good, the forces that Brother Justin Crowe and Ben Hawkins personify. This progression leads to a final, spectacular clash between them.

Series are created based on seasonal planning which means that the temporary nature of their wholeness is planned seasonally—even when they are axed in the middle of a season. On an immediate level, this temporariness is perceived at another scale: not that of the season, but that of the episode. Every episode seems to close the series temporarily. Nevertheless, all episodes are also understood as belonging to a larger unit, the season—in other words, every episode is seen as not simply another piece of the series, but as a part of a specific season. Series turn the temporary character of their wholeness into openness throughout their run, because if it is true that they may be cancelled it is also true that they may continue. Therefore, the endings of seasons tend to close some narrative threads while opening others, so that they feel like an ending, albeit a temporary one. Sarah Kozloff states that serials can be divided into those that end like miniseries and those that



may be cancelled, but that hypothetically may never achieve a conclusion such as soap-operas.<sup>18</sup> This description of the extremities of serial fictions is less useful for hybrid series, which usually present a tentative conclusion and also prepare their possible continuation. This is the reason why the creators of television series tend to speak about future seasons using vague language. The creator of *Carnivàle* confirms this tendency when he says in anticipatory but uncertain terms:

I really don't know how long it'll take, but it's definitely a finite story. It's not a serial like *Days of Our Lives* [1965-]. There's definitely an end to the series. And there are definitely going to be signposts that take them to that endpoint.<sup>19</sup>

The ending of *Carnivàle*, like the series itself, raises questions regarding the relation between the historical and the fictive, the history of the world (and of the series) and the imagination in our engagement with the world (and in the creation of the series). Regarding this relation, Frank Kermode appropriately asks: "How, in such a situation can our paradigms of concord, our beginnings and ends, our humanly ordered picture of the world satisfy us, make sense?"<sup>20</sup> Given the idea that the battle presented in the series is never-ending, that evil and good are embodied in *perpetua*, the open ending seems fitting, rejecting the presentation of the final triumph of the good.

Sophie is confirmed as the Omega, the Destroyer, the Antichrist, when she darkens and dries the corn around her in the last episode; a suggestion made earlier in "Lincoln Highway." This spectacular event is filmed in an extreme long shot, in which the people become minuscule and give an even larger dimension to the dark wave that begins as a localized patch and then withers the entire cornfield. With the exception that the last two episodes represent (they abandon the dual segmentation of the previous twenty-two installments), this is the visual culmination that the series has been building towards. It connects narrative and aesthetic progression: the moment when the supernatural forces invade the natural world and show the true, gigantic dimension of the fight. As a coda, there is a concluding tracking shot inside the Management trailer of the carnival that finds the exhausted Ben resting. The trailer is dim and the camera moves slowly, which lends an eerie character to the scene. This is an intimate, familiar environment in comparison to the spectacle of the previous image. There is neither

transitional nor establishing shot: the shots collide because of their difference of scale, setting up two new parallel narrative threads that are stylistically demarcated.

This is the ending of the series. Kermode identifies two attitudes and two ends that *Carnivàle* links. The first is an acceptance of apocalyptic data, the belief in prophecy, in a predicted end. The second is a skeptical derision of such information, the opinion that the conclusion is open and cannot be forecast. Between these two attitudes, we "make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle."<sup>21</sup> In the same vein, the ending of the series is consonant with its *beginning* and with the *direction of its progression*, that is, consonant with the premise of an incessant and inevitable confrontation between two human beings who are goodness and evilness incarnate. The closing two episodes, in which there are no longer images from dreams and visions that are an intrusion of the past in the present, define that the series is *directed towards* an intersection where the two protagonists, Ben and Justin, and the two times, past and present, meet. The series ends after this meeting, following the point when the story lines cross. The sense that the story goes on beyond the point where the plot halts may be potentially found in any story, but *Carnivàle* explores it, emphasizes it, foregrounding the impermanent, sometimes ephemeral, nature of television serial fiction.

## Notes

1. Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* [1976], trans. Anna Cancogni, Intr. David Robey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 220.
2. Glen Creeber, *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen* (London: BFI, 2004), 10.
3. Eco, 218.
4. *Ibid.*, xiii.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. *Ibid.*, 10.
7. Daniel Knauft, "The Making of a Magnificent Delusion," *HBO Online*, 2004.
8. Josef Adalian, "Carnivàle Packing Up," *Variety*, 10 May 2005.
9. Robin Nelson, *State of Play: Contemporary "High-End" TV Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 99.
10. *Ibid.*, 99.
11. Interestingly, both of these birds are chosen for their mythical significance within Western mystery traditions. The hawk is the bird associated with the God of Sun, Horus, a bird of royal lineage. Further, the crow as a black carrion bird, is

associated with numerous Gods and Goddesses of death and war, often acting as a portent of doom.

12. Nelson, 99.

13. This is an optical zoom, generated in post-production. Therefore my use of "camera" here is generic and a way to facilitate the visual description of this type of movement. It does not refer to an actual filming device.

14. My descriptions of the card meanings and symbols are based upon my own knowledge and study of the tarot.

15. Nelson, 100.

16. Except for the changes in the principal cast and, more regularly, in the writers and directors, whose names appear at the end on the covers of three successively piled books, after a stronger wind blows all the cards away to reveal the Carnivàle sign under the dust.

17. Nelson, 104.

18. Sarah Kozloff, "Narrative Theory and Television," *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed. Ed. by Robert C. Allen (London: Routledge, 1992), 10.

19. Knauf.

20. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (with a New Epilogue)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 38.

21. Kermode, 17.

## Magic and Supernatural Themes in *Carnivàle*

JENNY BUTLER

Magical and supernatural themes are central components of *Carnivàle's* storyline and are at the core of the show's mythology. In this essay, "magic" is examined as a power that individual characters possess, whether to heal or harm. The mysterious powers that particular characters have allow them to influence the course of events in the show's plot. Some examples of how magical power manifests itself are incidents where a character cures a person of a physical ailment, alleviates mental or emotional stress by calming somebody, or by uses their extrasensory power to change the weather. The contexts for practicing magic are either religious, as with Brother Justin in his ministry, faux-religious as with the "Benjamin St. John" show, or happen in more enigmatic character-specific situations.

The carnival itself is a milieu in which there are traditionally unusual and magical characters and the association of magic with otherness and marginality is also explored here. The relationship between magical power as a paranormal force and magic tricks performed for entertainment provides an interesting symbolic mesh of meaning in which the carnival characters are suspended. Some characters are aware of the supernatural happenings and their significance while others are not. Some observations are also made on supernatural forces, which in the context of the show are the forces of good and evil and the battle