



Fairs and Frontiers

The Transnational Circulation of Knowledge, Technology, and Visual Culture at 19th-Century European Funfairs

We are pleased to invite contributions for an upcoming two-day salon on 24-25 April 2025, which will lead to the publication of a book titled *Fairs and Frontiers: The Transnational Circulation of Knowledge, Technology and Visual Culture at 19th-Century European Funfairs*. This salon and resulting book volume will explore the rich and multifaceted world of European funfair culture, with a particular focus on its role in the popularization and transnational circulation of science, technology, and visual culture across Europe during the long 19th century.

Call for contributions

While funfairs have traditionally been seen as spaces of sensory pleasure—filled with the sounds of lively music, the sights of dazzling attractions, and the smells of tempting foods—they also served as key venues for challenging societal norms. Scholars have often emphasized the fairground as a space where normal life is temporarily upended, a place of inversion where visitors encounter the unexpected, the abnormal, and the extravagant. Fairs have always been sites of boundary-testing, where the thrill of illusion, risk, and danger offered an escape from the everyday. They provided opportunities for indulgence in food, drink, and behaviour that would be unacceptable in other contexts. In this way, fairs blurred the lines between entertainment and transgression, inviting visitors to explore the frontiers between the acceptable and the illicit.

However, beyond this carnival atmosphere, funfairs were also pivotal spaces for public engagement with science and technology. For over 150 years, travelling showpeople exhibited innovations in optics and mechanics, captivating audiences with spectacles that combined scientific demonstration and entertainment. Audiences marvelled at a variety of automata, witnessed experiments in microscopy, photography, and telegraphy, and explored the mysteries of anatomical cabinets that unveiled the secrets of the human body, displayed diseases like syphilis, or proved the perils of alcoholism. Showpeople—often self-styled professors and physicists—dazzled crowds with spectacular displays of electricity, magnetism, and X-rays. These performers introduced ordinary people to new discoveries, offering a blend of the educational and the spectacular.

This two-day salon and the resulting book volume will focus on how funfairs served as sites of knowledge exchange and cultural interaction, reflecting the diverse and dynamic societies of 19th-century Europe. Emphasizing the transnational scope and the networks that linked these itinerant showpeople, we seek to lay bare how they facilitated the exchange of knowledge and visual culture across borders. This transnational approach is crucial in understanding funfair culture as not merely a local tradition but as a European phenomenon that contributed significantly to the cultural landscape of the continent, representing the scientific, technological, and social dynamics of the era.

We invite scholars from a wide range of disciplines—including theatre and performance studies, history of science, media studies, cultural history, and sociology—to contribute chapters that offer new theoretical perspectives, in-depth case studies, or comparative analyses. This interdisciplinary and cross-cultural exploration will provide a nuanced and comprehensive view of how fairs functioned as venues for knowledge exchange and cultural interaction, and how they continue to resonate in contemporary cultural memory.

Themes and Topics

We invite contributions on the following themes, but submissions on related topics are also welcome:

- **Historical Context and Evolution of European Fairs**
 - **Development of Fairground Culture:** The transformation of fairs from local folk traditions to vibrant hubs of entertainment and education across different European regions.
 - **Social, Economic, and Cultural Significance:** The role of fairs in reflecting and shaping social, economic, and cultural life during Europe's industrial era.
 - **Fairs as Spaces of Transgression and Freedom:** How fairs became places where social norms were tested and temporarily suspended, offering visitors the thrill of risk, excess, and indulgence.
- **Showpeople, Transnational Networks and the Fairground Ecosystem**
 - **Profiles of Key Showpeople:** Studies of notable showpeople and their contributions to the dissemination of knowledge, culture, and entertainment.
 - **Transnational Networks:** The cross-border exchanges, and familial and professional networks that connected travelling entertainers across Europe.
 - **Business Models and Organizational Dynamics:** The economic strategies and logistics behind travelling entertainment and its success across regions.
 - **Role of non-European actors:** The involvement of African, Asian and American performers in European entertainment, and their influence on both local and transnational entertainment ecosystems.
- **Science as Spectacle and the Performance of Media and Technology**
 - **Scientific Demonstrations as Entertainment:** Analysis of how science and technology were transformed into spectacle, blending scientific demonstrations with entertainment.
 - **Public Engagement with Technology:** The role of media and technology in shaping fairground performances and influencing public reception of scientific ideas.
 - **Superstition and Occult Performances:** The relationship between science, superstition, and the occult in fairground shows, including fortune-telling, automata, and performances blending science with magic and the supernatural.
- **Exhibiting the Body: Anatomy, Anthropology, and Ethnography**
 - **Displays of Human Anatomy and Ethnographic Collections:** The exhibition of 'freaks,' anatomical curiosities, and exoticized representations of different cultures, and their impact on public perceptions of health, race, and normalcy.
 - **Social and Ethical Implications:** The cultural significance and ethical considerations surrounding these exhibits, including the way they challenged or reinforced contemporary views on the body, disease, and physical difference.

- **Representations of the World: Historical and Geographical Narratives**
 - **Panoramas, Dioramas, and Cosmoramas:** The role of visual spectacles in educating the public about history, geography, and the wider world, offering a blend of entertainment and instruction.
 - **Circulation of Knowledge through Visual Media:** How these attractions contributed to visual literacy and public understanding of distant lands and historical events.
- **Cultural Exchange and Knowledge Circulation**
 - **Fairs as Cultural Crossroads:** How fairs facilitated the exchange of ideas, practices, and knowledge across urban and rural settings, and between different national fair cultures.
 - **Media and Promotion:** The role of newspapers, posters, and other media in promoting fairground events and shaping public perceptions of science and spectacle.
 - **Public Education:** The fairground as a site for public education and engagement, and the dissemination of scientific, practical, or tacit knowledge to diverse audiences.

Submission Guidelines

Interested contributors are invited to send an expression of interest of 300-500 words outlining their proposed theme for a chapter by **31 October 2024**.

Accepted authors are invited to a 2-day salon on **24-25 April 2025** in Ghent, Belgium, which will take place in a historic **magic mirror tent** at the House of Mysteries—a unique setting that evokes the vibrant atmosphere of the traditional European fairground. This gathering will provide an opportunity for contributors to present and discuss first drafts of their chapters in a collaborative and immersive environment. In addition to author presentations, the programme will feature interim results from the **EU-funded project Science at the Fair**, and participants will have exclusive access to the project's developing database, offering a valuable resource for contextualizing their research.

To ensure meaningful discussion and synergy, the number of participants is limited to **25**. All participants will be required to submit a **three-page pitch (approximately 2000 words, including references)** by **1 April 2025**, allowing ample time for everyone to review and engage with each other's work ahead of the event. Full chapter drafts are expected by **5 July 2025**.

Submission Details:

- Expression of Interest: 31 October 2024
- Notification of Acceptance: 8 November 2024
- First Draft (2000 words): 1 April 2025
- Full Chapter Submission: 5 July 2025
- Chapter Length: 6,000-8,000 words

Contact Information

Please send your 'expression of interest' and any inquiries to both

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The workshop and resulting book publication are organized in the framework of Science at the Fair: Performing Knowledge and Technology in Western Europe, 1850-1914 (www.scifair.eu), a five-year research project coordinated by Nele Wynants, funded by the European Research Council (ERC).

