Introduction: The Changing Fortunes of Blackpool

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Blackpool, a town on the Lancashire coast in North West England is the largest seaside resort in the United Kingdom. In 2016, the last year for which full data are available, the overall number of tourist visits to the resort reached 18 million—an increase of around one million compared to the previous year. That survey valued Blackpool’s visitor economy at a £1.5bn, supporting more than 25,000 jobs (‘Marketing Lancashire STEAM figures 2017’). Blackpool’s Pleasure Beach (an amusement park complex) remains the most popular of all English holiday attractions.

Despite these successes there is a widespread perception that Blackpool is in decline and what it has on offer is not particularly appealing—entertainment rather than art and lowbrow for that. The purpose of this book is to interrogate these perceptions and the realities which are behind them, by looking at two facets of Blackpool: film and music, with an emphasis on more recent representations. I chose these aspects of Blackpool because the bulk of research concerns Blackpool’s history, neglecting its present day and focusing more on the infrastructure for entertainment than art created in and about Blackpool. Moreover, by considering Blackpool film
and music we can find out how Blackpool presents itself to different types of observers.

In order to better understand what Blackpool stands for, it is worth positioning it at the crossing of two discourses. One of them is the discourse on the North of England, because Blackpool is, of course, located in this part of the country. The second discourse is of seaside resorts. Onto them is woven a discourse of England as a country in decline, looking backward to its lost imperial glory. However, these discourses do not explain everything that has been said about Blackpool and this is not only because there is always a certain surplus of meaning which theories cannot capture, but also because Blackpool is in many ways exceptional: it is thus not like any other northern town or seaside resort. Even the post-imperial decline is played there uniquely. In the next parts of the introduction I will sketch these discourses, but first present a very short history of Blackpool.

1 Blackpool’s History: Facts and Figures

Nobody wrote as much and as vividly about Blackpool as my former colleague from the University of Central Lancashire, John Walton. His publications about Blackpool, especially the books *The Blackpool Landlady*, published in 1978 and *Blackpool*, published in 1998 and a number of articles and book chapters, provide the most comprehensive accounts of Blackpool’s history to this point, so it is worth revisiting its main findings, before presenting the last twenty years or so of Blackpool’s history, which Walton did not cover. As a seaside resort, in Walton’s words, Blackpool was ‘a late developer’, but it caught up very rapidly in the last decades of the nineteenth century, capitalising on the growing spending power of the working class which was released through falling prices in the extended period of deflation after 1873 (Walton 1998: 2). From the 1870s Blackpool opened its doors to the working-class holidaymakers en masse, first from the Lancashire cotton towns, then from further afield. Annual totals roughly trebled to about 85,000 between 1865 and 1873, then more than doubled again to nearly 2 million over the next twenty years, and continued this process to reach nearly 4 million on the eve of the First World War (ibid.: 3). It was during this period that Blackpool added an important attraction to its portfolio of pleasures: the Illuminations, an annual festival of light, founded in 1879 and inaugurated on the 18 September that year, and held each autumn for about two months,
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from late August until early November. It consists of traditional festoons and tableaux, and illuminated tram tours, covering 5.2 miles, stretching along the Promenade from Starr Gate at the south end of the town to Bispham in the north.

Going against the dictum that political upheavals thwart the tourist industry, Blackpool did very well during the First World War. The town benefitted from billeting troops and refugees and the redistribution of resources which produced enhanced spending power while rationing access to consumer goods. Meanwhile, transport restrictions gave Blackpool a captive market from the nearby industrial centres (ibid.: 4). The resort continued to grow during the interwar years, relying to a large extent on the working-class market but sustaining a broad appeal to more affluent groups (ibid.: 4). During this period it not only attracted visitors from the North of England, but also from London, the south coast, industrial South Wales and Glasgow (ibid.: 4–5). The period of the Second World War was, again, prosperous for Blackpool. This was in part because many of its competitors on the east and south coasts were incapacitated by the threats of invasion and aerial bombardment. Although the holiday season was shortened due to the lack of the Illuminations, the landladies were able to recoup their income through accommodating Royal Air Force personnel in training; over three-quarters of a million RAF recruits passed through the town during the war. The town’s population increased from 128,200 in 1939 to 143,650 in 1945, despite the departure of local men for the war effort (ibid.: 137). A property boom developed as boarding houses came to be regarded as goldmines and some trebled in value during the war years (ibid.: 138). During the war Blackpool also changed its employment structure thanks to the state-run aircraft factory at Squire’s Gate, which opened in 1940 to produce Wellington bombers and employed more than 10,000 workers at its peak (ibid.: 138).

The first two decades after the end of the Second World War were also prosperous for Blackpool. The town was ready for the explosion of post-war holidaymaking, facilitated by the Holidays with Pay Act from 1938 which gave most workers the right to one week’s paid holiday per year, in ways its competitors on the south and east coast, damaged by war deprivations, could not match. It also benefitted from convenient railway connections, as well as an increased number of visitors arriving in coaches and private cars. At the peak of the season Blackpool railway stations brought in over 100,000 passengers per day and 12,000 coaches
per week. In 1949 the Illuminations returned to Blackpool, bringing 3 million excursionists and symbolically ending the period of war and post-war austerity (ibid.: 139). Good seasons continued into the 1960s, as the change in emphasis from the summer to the Illuminations season continued. This reduced the impact of emergent competition from continental holidays, as many people took their second holiday in Blackpool in the autumn (ibid.: 141). The number of visitors were also boosted by the conferences of political parties, which brought Blackpool extra publicity. However, there was a shift towards shorter holidays, which inevitably brought less revenue to the town. Moreover, during this decade one can observe a change in the demographics of the visitors, with older holiday-makers dominating over the young, a trend suggesting an (approaching) decline.

In 1972 Blackpool Corporation and the English Tourist Board commissioned a survey of the town’s visitors, which was carried out by the British Market Research Bureau. It concluded that Blackpool attracted 3.24 million staying visitors and 12.8 million day trippers during the season, although many of these were repeat visits drawn from a pool of nearly 6 million regular customers. The survey also showed that Blackpool’s visitors were overwhelmingly working class and relatively elderly. However, contrary to the expectation of a downward spiral, a second survey in 1987 found that the number of staying visitors increased from 3.24 to 3.46 million, with the average length of stay being three to four nights. Up until the mid-1980s Blackpool attracted 17 million visitors a year. This and further increases in visits were prompted by the continuing development of the Illuminations. This was a remarkable achievement, given that Blackpool’s competitors, such as Morecambe, were declining rapidly (Hassan 2003: 254–55; Jarratt 2015: 355). The worst decade for Blackpool was the 1990s, when the number of visitors fell to 10 million, to recover to about 17–18 million in the second half of the 2010s.

The changes in the number of visitors are reflected in the population trends. Between the 1881 and 1911 censuses, Blackpool more than trebled its census population (Walton 1997: 21–22). In the early 1960s, Blackpool’s population reached its peak at about 153,000 people. In 1981, the total fell below 150,000 inhabitants and the 1991 counted about 145,000 people. Moreover, the proportion of the older population was increasing, with nearly one in four Blackpool inhabitants having reached pensionable age by 1991 (Walton 1998: 148). These trends have continued to the present day. In 2018, the population of Blackpool was
139,300 and of those 20.4% were of the age 65 or more against 18.2% in England as a whole (‘JSNA Blackpool’).

In the last twenty years or so the attempts to sustain Blackpool’s position as Britain’s biggest resort and entertainment centre were marked by setbacks. One of them included getting a super-casino, one of 16 such casinos around England mooted in 2007, under the Labour government of Tony Blair. However, the first licence to open a super-casino was granted to Manchester, rather than Blackpool, which hoped to use it to create an extra 3000 jobs, leaving its authorities and inhabitants very disappointed (‘Why Blackpool Lost Casino Bid’ 2007; ‘Blackpool’s Dismay at Casino Snub’ 2007). The reasons were complex, but in a nutshell, the rejection showed that London did not see Blackpool as a major player in the tourism industry, able to sustain such a large project. The super-casino project was reheated in 2019, but attracted little enthusiasm, in part due to the conviction that supporting gambling is not the best vehicle of regeneration and in part because in the meantime the gambling industry moved from the physical spaces of casinos to the internet (‘Minister Aims…’ 2019). Blackpool’s efforts to diversify its economy and strengthen the cultural capital of its inhabitants were also frustrated. A poignant example is its failure to secure the establishment of a university in Blackpool. Such ambitions were met with sympathy during (New) Labour rule (Lipsett 2008), but were thwarted by the successive Conservative governments, in part aware that higher education in England might have reached a saturation point, given that even the existing universities struggle to fill their places.

Even if Blackpool still holds on to its reputation as Britain’s Las Vegas, various socio-economic indicators cast the town in an unenviable light. In recent years a number of league tables which, among other indicators, identified Blackpool as having the lowest male life expectancy in England, being over 5 years below that of England (‘JSNA Blackpool’), the largest per capita number of prescriptions issued for antidepressants, the lowest full-time average wage in the UK (O’Connor 2017) and having eight of the 10 most deprived neighbourhoods in England (‘England’s Most Deprived Areas…’ 2019), positioned it as a ‘left behind’ town. The large vote in favour of leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum, amounting to 67.5%, the highest in the Lancashire region (‘EU Referendum: All 14 Lancashire Districts Back Brexit’ 2016) and one of the highest in the country, strengthened such an opinion.
In the light of the perception that Blackpool is going down, it is not surprising that many of those who can, leave the resort, to seek a better life elsewhere, leading to a BBC journalist stating that ‘young people might disappear from England’s seaside towns’ (Rhodes 2019). Yet, at the same time, its cheap housing, in part resulting from the receding tide of tourism leaving behind a surfeit of old B&Bs that have been turned into bedsits, leads to many people moving to Blackpool in search of affordable living, according to the rule that ‘the more the economy rots, the more some people come’ (O’Connor 2017). Sarah O’Connor describes this dynamic of Blackpool’s demography in such terms: ‘Blackpool exports healthy skilled people and imports the unskilled, the unemployed and unwell. All people overlooked by the modern economy wash up in a place that has also been left behind, the result of a quietly unfolding health crisis’ (ibid.). Although such opinions underscore Blackpool’s decline, they also point to a more positive character of Blackpool, as somewhere where everybody is welcome. Such places are needed to ensure that the marginalised are not wiped out from the face of the Earth, and the existence of such places should be celebrated rather than derided.

2 Blackpool as a Northern Town

Being situated in the North West of England Blackpool inevitably shares many characteristics attributed to the English North, most importantly its working-class character. This was because the global industrial revolution began in the North of England. In Engels’ The Condition of the Working Class in England, based on the author’s observations of the circumstances of workers in Manchester, he notes that the North gave birth to various technological inventions, such as the spinning jenny, which increased the productivity of workers and the wealth of the region where these inventions took place. Although in the longer run, they led to more people being vulnerable to exploitation by capital (Engels 2009: 52–3), it also meant that the northern proletariat enjoyed certain advantages and privileges, which were introduced later in other parts of the United Kingdom and Europe Engels (2009: 52). In particular, the real national income per head quadrupled over the nineteenth century. Moreover, British workers acquired the right to a holiday and with this a chance to enjoy culture created especially for them. These privileges brought immense advantage for Blackpool which developed to cater for working-class needs and tastes. By the same token, Blackpool’s history can be regarded as emblematic of
the development of the culture and identity of the English working class, understood as a counterpoint to southern English culture. This theme is developed by authors such as Tony Bennett and John Walton. Bennet claims:

Blackpool has, at various times, imaginary placed itself at the centre of the nation and, even more grandiosely, of the Empire, thus disputing London’s claims to pre-eminence.... It forged an image of ‘the people of the North’ as sharing a no-nonsense, down-to-earth, practical regional spirit, best exemplified in the triumphal achievements of northern industrial capitalists, constructed in opposition to the all-talk, no-action pretensions of the South. A true case of ‘second city first’, Blackpool has thus furnished the site for the enunciation of the distinctively regional claim to cultural leadership, albeit one heard only within the confines of northern, and particularly Lancashire, culture. (Bennett 1986: 136)

In a similar vein, Walton states that Blackpool expressed the principle of working and playing hard, laying claim to vitality, enterprise, and the earthy enjoyment of the fruits of manufacturing enterprise, as opposed to (in the view from the Tower) the limp-wristed snobbery of the exploitative financial manipulators of the corrupt metropolis and effete Home Counties. Blackpool took pride in bluntness, common sense and deflations of pretensions, sharing a sense of humour which could be bawdy as well as effervescent, but which bounded the acceptable with both self-respect and an awareness of the limits of shared tolerance. (Walton 2004: 58)

The period of industrial revolution was, however, the only time in the history of the English North, when it enjoyed not only economic advantage over the South, but also something like a ‘discursive autonomy’, being judged according to its own standards. For the rest of its history, the North has been seen as the obverse and inferior of the South. This means that the South dictates the terms on which the North is assessed and treats its own particularities as the norm, while the rest is an aberration (Russell 2004). This also means that for the majority of authors writing about the North of England, its most important aspect is the relationship with London and the South-East, which is seen as unequal, as demonstrated by the fact in the 2010s a large chunk of the North, such as Lancashire, constituted some of the poorest parts of the northern Europe,
while London and its surrounding areas are its richest part (Rickman 2015).

Common narratives of the North articulate not only its sense of marginality and second-classness in relation to the South, but also attempt to compensate for this position by suggesting that the North has some positive characteristics which the South (or indeed any other region in England) lacks. Typically, it is suggested that people living there are friendlier and closer to their roots than those living elsewhere. ‘A nostalgic discourse of tradition valorises the North as the homeland of a traditional British Working Class and the culture associated with it - ferrets, pigeon racing, mines and mills, fish and chips, regional accents and football - as well as organic communities…. Its rougher pleasures of the outdoors contrast with the more refined pleasures of the high-culture of London and its commuter belt’, writes Rob Shields (1991: 229). Helen Jewell observes that a MORI poll of 201 executives in London, Leeds and Manchester, published in the late 1980s suggested that the typical Southerner is seen as ambitious, entrepreneurial, under stress and wealthy, while the typical Northerner is friendly, careful with money, down-to-earth, a loyal employee and with a good sense of humour (Jewell 1994: 2).

In some ways Blackpool has been like the North, because it had to cater for the tastes of the workers labouring in the factories of Lancashire and Yorkshire. On the other hand, however, it was meant to be as dissimilar from the northern ‘Darkshire’ as possible, to offer the visitors a different experience which would allow them to recuperate for another year of hard labour. I will describe the means through which Blackpool tried to add to its attractiveness in the next part of my introduction. Here, however, I want to return to the issue of the power of the South to shape representations of the North. Blackpool probably suffers from what Dave Russell describes as ‘northern grit’ (Russell 2004: 1-2) more than any other town in the English North. Opinions about it are formed predominantly by outsiders, who assess it using their own yardstick. Moreover, as time goes by, the town is losing its power to shape its representations and make the outsiders present Blackpool to its advantage. We can see this by comparing earlier and more recent representations of the resort. Let’s look first at the early talkie, No Lady (1930). In this slapstick comedy, directed by well-known comedian, Lupino Lane, a family with five children goes on holiday to Blackpool and has various adventures there, including the main protagonist (also played by Lupino) being taken for an international spy. The film was welcomed by the inhabitants
of the town because it was an opportunity to showcase Blackpool’s attractions and boost tourism. At the time the local newspaper, *The Blackpool Times*, reported that *No Lady* would ‘include the Tower, Central Pier and Metropole Hotel, and would portray a plane crash, a leap from a hotel window and motor boat spills’ (quoted in Arthur 2009: 34). ‘*No Lady* would pave the way for popular Blackpool films like *Sing As We Go* (1934), which generated priceless publicity for the town. This Gracie Fields vehicle was still four years away, but the town’s entrepreneurs were not naive about the possibilities afforded by the presentation of Blackpool’s amusements on the big screen’ (ibid.: 34). *No Lady* does not even associate Blackpool with the working class and their favourite pastimes. In fact, the family at the centre of the story comes across as middle class; it has a maid, goes to the railway station in a taxi and dresses the children in the bourgeois attire of sailor suits. Other people shown in the film, including some foreigners, also look middle class or even posh. The attraction at the centre of the narrative, namely the international gliding competition, would appeal to people irrespective of their class allegiance, and the town’s hallmarks are presented in a way which renders them grandiose. They stand for the town’s modernity and the way they are portrayed, often from a low angle, might be compared to the representation of aristocratic properties in British heritage cinema.

In due course films about Blackpool would gradually lose its middle- and upper-class visitors, conforming to the stereotype of Blackpool as a working-class resort and there would be fewer shots focused on the town’s attractions. The culmination of this trend is *999: What’s Your Emergency?* (2012-present), a factual programme produced by Channel 4, whose first series was set and shot in Blackpool. The fact that Blackpool was chosen as the setting for a programme whose focus is the pathologies of British social life, such as drug and alcohol abuse, suggests that the town perfectly lends itself to such treatment, unlike, for example, Chester or Manchester. It also reveals the producers’ ignorance or lack of concern for the effect of a negative portrayal on the circumstances of the town whose livelihood largely depends on its representation in the media. Not surprisingly, since the airing of the show, residents and councillors from Blackpool have expressed their dissatisfaction about how the show has made their home town look to new visitors and especially families. The positive outcome of such protests was shelving the plans to commission more programmes using Blackpool as a metonymy of British social and moral decline. However, they failed to attract television and
film producers willing to reverse these representations. Hence, it seems that, as far as its representation in national media is concerned, Blackpool is condemned to one of two scenarios: negative representations, in the vein of ‘dark tourism’ or silence.

Not only Northerners complain about ‘northern grit’, but Southerners recognise it in relation to Blackpool. Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen, an interior designer from London who was involved in redesigning the Illuminations, admitted that ‘a lot of the negative perceptions of Blackpool come from people in the south of England. Blackpool is maybe seen as a bit wild and dangerous for southerners - you won’t see it featured in the Guardian – it’s about eating fish and chips as you walk down the street’ (quoted in Waites 2011). Llewellyn-Bowen was right in so far as the Southerners are prejudiced against Blackpool. However, it is not true that Blackpool is not featured in the Guardian. It is, but typically in a negative context, as demonstrated by such titles of articles: ‘Coastal towns hit hardest by soaring level of insolvencies’ (Elliott 2019), ‘Blackpool’s Livewire Festival Cancelled Due to “Investor Issues”’ (2019), ‘Engineers Accused of Botching £27m Blackpool Sea Wall’ (Parveen 2018), ‘Blackpool ailing piers to receive World Monuments Fund help’ (Kennedy 2018). There are also numerous articles about fracking for shale gas in Lancashire, which negatively affects Blackpool, causing minor earthquakes. The connotations of such and many other articles are similar. They point to financial incompetence and corruption marring Blackpool’s economy, as well as to the decades of neglect, which Blackpool itself cannot tackle; it needs taxpayer’s money (which mainly comes from the South of England), to make it prosperous again. While largely written in good faith, such journalistic interventions cause more damage than benefit, lowering the morale of Blackpool’s inhabitants and putting off prospective visitors.

3 BLACKPOOL AS THE ULTIMATE SEASIDE RESORT

There are different accounts when people in Europe began to travel to the coast and ‘holy wells’ for health and relaxation. According to James Walvin, it was the second half of the sixteenth century, when the sick started visiting Bath and Buxton (Walvin 1978: 14). The first spa in England appears to be Scarborough and dates from 1626. Over the next two centuries and at the beginning of the nineteenth-century spa towns remained the preserve of the upper classes, due to the high charges for
travel, accommodation and entertainment (Walton 1983: 6). The situa-
tion changed in the later part of the nineteenth century, when one
could observe the widespread development of seaside resorts where social
restriction was not possible, including Blackpool. This was due to Britain
possessing an extensive coastline which had few other uses apart from
fishing, and which could not be privately controlled since ownership of
the shoreline and beach between high and low tide was invested in the
Crown (Urry and Larsen 2011: 33). This also reflected a campaign for
higher wages and greater holiday entitlement among the working class
and, with that, a demand for holidays in locations away from the indus-
trial centres. The building of the railways in the first half of the nineteenth
century and especially provision of excursion trains which connected
coastal towns with the industrial cities greatly reduced the time and cost of
travel. For Blackpool, of special importance was a line connecting Preston
with Fleetwood, opened in 1840 (Walvin 1978: 37).

By the end of the nineteenth century, there were well over 100 coastal
resorts. By 1911, 55% of people in England and Wales took at least one
trip to the seaside and 20% stayed for a longer period each year. The
advantage of the seaside resort was the greater as during the nineteenth-
century Britain experienced rapid urbanisation, as demonstrated by the
fact that in 1801, 20% of the population lived in towns, in 1851, 50%
were city dwellers and by 1901, this figure reached 80% (Walvin 1978:
91; Urry and Larsen 2011: 34). This led to a high level of pollution and
overcrowding, exacerbated by the scarcity of public spaces such as parks in
the industrial towns and a need to escape, however temporarily, to places
closer to nature. The need and ability to enjoy holiday resulted in special-
isation and segregation of seaside resorts according to social stratification
of their clientele.

A seaside resort offered its visitors accommodation and food, as well
as space for reflection, even transcendence. It was a place where one
could think about one’s place in the universe, as the vastness of the sea
encouraged such thoughts (Jarratt 2015). Resorts also competed with
each other to engage visitors in spectacle and the production of novel
experiences and activities (Hughes and Benn 1998). During the course
of the nineteenth century, seaside resorts came to be socially constructed
as extraordinary. They offered landscapes physically removed from the
normal routines and obligations of work and home (in both geographic
and perceptual terms), and they were dedicated to pleasure and enter-
tainment. They became liminal places, characterised by release, escape,
excess and the temporary suspension of social norms (Walvin 1978; Shields 1991; Walton 2000: 3–4; 2004). Blackpool fits this description better than any other British seaside resort because of its size and its gearing towards the working class, whose taste is perceived as lowbrow and vulgar—by itself a sign of class character of the British society.

In the process of development, a highly distinctive ‘architecture of pleasure’ appeared at the seaside, which included piers, promenades, towers, pavilions, theatres, ballrooms, fairgrounds and winter gardens, filled with entertainment: theatre, music, circus, variety shows, opportunities for gambling and, at a certain point, cinema. Such architecture can also be found in Blackpool. Although it comes across as more chaotic than in some other British seaside towns, such as Southport, largely because of the fact that it lacked large investors to shape its urban design, and ‘the small freehold estates were developed in a piecemeal and uninspiring manner’ (Walton 1978: 16), this makes it particularly interesting. As Tim Edensor and Steve Millington notice, ‘the resort is characterised by a palimpsestic aesthetic in which Victorian ornamentations coincide with popular carnivalesque, Art Deco elements, Modernist brutalism, postmodernist designs, nostalgic flourishes and post-millennial architecture’ (Edensor and Millington 2018: 1022). Walking through Blackpool can thus serve as a short introduction to the history of British architecture. Among Blackpool’s hallmarks are some which reflect what can be described as working-class taste and the spending power of this stratum, as well as objects which could appeal to the higher class or universal taste. One of them is the Winter Gardens, a complex of ballrooms, theatres and bars, built mostly in the 1870s, which includes one of the largest ballrooms in the world, the Empress Ballroom. Another such unique object is the Promenade, constructed between 1856 and 1870 after the first railways reached the resort, and offered opportunities for leisurely walking and breathing purer sea air. Blackpool’s promenade remains Britain’s longest; running from Starr Gate to Bispham, it connects the Pleasure Beach, Golden Mile, Tower and the resort’s three piers, while running parallel to numerous hotels and boarding houses, souvenir shops, pubs, cheap restaurants, confectioners, amusement arcades and fairground stalls (ibid.: 1020).

Entrepreneurs operating in the seaside resorts tried to maximise their income by combining different types of entertainment in one place. One building can host a variety show, a play and a cinema projection in
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close temporal proximity. Moreover, in search for audiences and to maintain their competitive edge, seaside resorts closely observed technological inventions in the field of entertainment and here Blackpool led the way, by belonging to the first towns in Britain whose cinema theatres made the transition to the talkies (Arthur 2009). Blackpool also recognised the need to prolong the holiday season. One way to do it was to offer discounts to visitors arriving before and after the holiday season; another was to provide attractions which could be enjoyed out of season. The most famous of them became the previously mentioned Blackpool Illuminations. Currently it is an extremely popular drive-through attraction, and it is not uncommon for day visitors from many parts of the country to drive to Blackpool with the sole purpose of viewing the Illuminations from the car. In recent years it also includes the Lightpool Festival, which offers a mix of live performance and light-based art installations, taking place during the autumn half-term and geared towards school children.

After its heyday in the 1950s and the 1960s, British seaside resorts entered the period of a decline (Urry 1997; Walton 2000; Gale 2005; Walton and Wood 2009). There were different reasons for this downfall. Paradoxically, one of them was the rise of the spending power of the British working class, which allowed them to travel further than to the nearest coastal resort, both by car, thanks to the rise of car ownership and the opportunity to visit alternative destinations in Britain, and thanks to the introduction of the cheap overseas package holiday, especially to Spain, which had the advantage over British resorts in that it offered good weather all summer and at a lower cost, even when taking into account the cost of travel. The wider availability of a larger number of locations extended ‘tourist gaze’, making British seaside resorts compete with a larger range of objects (Gale 2005: 89–90). Another factor was a move from Fordism to post-Fordism, namely new patterns of working, chiefly moving from manufacture to service economy and new ways of leisure, which are less communal and more individualistic (Urry 1997: 110–11; Gale 2005: 93), leading to the birth of the sophisticated, self-confident and self-conscious ‘post-tourist’ (Feifer 1985: 259–68). Perhaps the most important factor, however, albeit connected to all the above-mentioned factors, as John Urry argues, is the association of the English seaside resort with bad taste (Urry 1997).

Tourists moving away from British seaside resorts resulted in their decline, because the resorts lacked the funds to invest in new attractions or even sustain the old ones. The facilities in many resorts (which
had often been developed in the late nineteenth century) were showing signs of deterioration. Many hotels closed down, civic building and piers started to look shabby. The northern-working-class seaside resorts were particularly badly hit in the 1980s and 1990s, due to Thatcherite policies which exacerbated the economic divide between the South and the North of England. This decline not only resulted in fewer numbers of visitors, but also negative perceptions of the resorts, as sites of poverty, deprivation and hotbeds of social pathology, such as alcoholism and drug abuse (Agarwal and Brunt 2006). In the case of Blackpool such perceptions are not unfounded, as I argued in the previous section. However, Blackpool has not allowed doom and gloom to overwhelm it. In the light of the decline of tourism beginning in the 1970s, it tried to reposition itself by playing down the old connotations. One way to do it was to tap into a niche market, such as gay tourism, gaining the title of the ‘gay capital of the north UK’. The website Gaytravel.com informs readers that ‘Blackpool has an exciting gay scene, centred around Dickson Road and Queen Street. Blackpool’s gay scene is especially known for its nightlife, and its bars are legendary in the UK’ (Gay Blackpool; see also Walton 1998: 6, 146–48). 2006 marked the year of the first gay pride festival in Blackpool. Unlike other resort cities, Blackpool has a reputation for being a safe area for the LGBT community. By positioning itself as a gay-friendly resort, the town also drew attention to the common ground between working class and gay aesthetics, with both having a penchant to excess and humour and, in some measure, dignified the former.

Another way to regain its former status is by reinventing itself through selectively regenerating its greatest treasures and repackaging its past as heritage, presenting itself as a gigantic skansen, commemorating the old ways of holidaying. The recently regenerated Promenade, the rise of penny arcades (Chapman and Light 2011), and the construction of the Blackpool Museum, points in this direction. The idea behind the regeneration of the Promenade and penny arcades is to show visitors how things were done in the past, hence penny arcades include small exhibitions (ibid.: 217–18) and encourage their users to do things the same way as they were once done: rediscover the pleasure of a leisurely walk and gentler gambling. Heritagisation also brings a specific class inflection, as it is not just about entertainment, but also about education. This means that even those people who regard themselves as too posh to enjoy the simple pleasures of the seaside resort, might be inclined to go to the resort to study its history. Such an idea stands behind the proposed bid
for World Heritage Status, the Blackpool Council’s first heritage strategy, published in 2006 (Walton and Wood 2009: 124–25) and the Blackpool Museum, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, to be opened in 2021, as announced on its website: ‘It will be a hybrid between museum and visitor attraction, capturing the spirit of this amazing town’ (‘Blackpool Museum Project’ website). However, regeneration through heritagisation, as Walton and Wood note, is not without problems, resulting from the need to decide which object deserves the status of heritage and tensions between framing certain objects as heritage and their everyday use. For example, ‘the survival of the promenade tramway, unique in England, generates tensions between its role as heritage transport attraction and the need to provide a modernized passenger service for visitors and residents alike’ (Walton and Wood 2009: 127).

Blackpool’s future might be better than its recent past thanks to three additional factors. One of them is Brexit. This event, generally seen in negative terms, as a sign of English isolationism, xenophobia and even irrationality, given that one of its effects is a diminished value of British currency and with that the purchasing power of British people when they travel abroad, might result in more people, especially on modest budgets, taking their holiday in Britain. If this happens on a large scale and I suggest that this has already happened on a modest scale, then we can draw a parallel between the current situation and that of First and Second World War, from which Blackpool benefited by attracting visitors from other parts of the country. At the same time, it won’t lose out from a diminishing number of foreign tourists, because it was never popular among them anyway, with foreigners constituting less than 1% of the total recorded numbers in the recent period (Waites 2011). Another reason why Blackpool’s prospects might improve is man-made climate change. Increased temperature makes the favourite destinations of British people in Europe, such as Spanish island, too hot while rendering British seaside resorts warm enough to risk staying there for a week or two (Collinson 2019). Moreover, global overheating might result in people flying less on moral grounds and seek leisure closer to home, returning to Blackpool the type of tourists which is largely lost in the 1970s and the 1980s: families staying there for part of the children’s holidays, and add a more affluent stratum of tourists due to the fact that flying abroad stopped being seen as ‘cool’. Finally, the Coronavirus pandemic (of midst of which we are at the time I am revising this introduction) most likely will further reduce the need to holiday abroad.
Of course, these factors might be not sufficient to change Blackpool’s fortunes in a major way because irrespective of how successful a specific tourist destination is, tourism provides mostly low-paid, seasonal and precarious employment. For this reason even an outwardly successful tourist resort may hide a plethora of economic and social problems. To flourish, touristic regions need to diversify their economies, making it less dependent on tourism and equally making employment in tourism more financially and socially attractive. Currently, this is not the case in Blackpool—tourism supports more than 25,000 full-time jobs there. This arises the question whether Blackpool is able to undertake such transformation itself, or whether it will need assistance from central government.

4 Music and Cinema in and About Blackpool

As previously mentioned, seaside resorts are known for their entertainment, namely lighter forms of art, which ensure an immediate gratification. Over the course of their existence, they included music hall, bands, minstrels, Pierrots, symphony orchestras, freak shows and Punch and Judy shows (Walvin 1978; Walton 2000: 3; Cross and Walton 2005: 31–56; Hughes and Benn 1998: 1). As Hughes and Benn argue, in the immediate post-war period, seaside holiday camps were a significant breeding ground for new performing talent. This is certainly true of musical talent coming from or being discovered in Blackpool. Numerous outlets such as the Tower, Winter Gardens, piers and various theatres made Blackpool the finest centre for live entertainment outside London. Probably nowhere outside the West End of London has seen such a concentration of popular theatres as in Blackpool. In the late 1950s and 1960s there would have been three or four variety theatres putting on shows each night during the season. These would feature popular music, including such acts as Cliff and the Shadows, Helen Shapiro, Tom Jones, Matt Monro, Engelbert Humperdinck, as well as American stars. Frank Sinatra played Blackpool twice in the early 1950s, and Gladys Cooper in 1953. Since then all the top British beat groups played there. This tradition, at the Winter Gardens, is enduring—there is a strong continuity in the staging of rock, alternative and indie music, as exemplified by concerts of the Stone Roses, Blur and New Order.

Moreover, several original music scenes have developed in Blackpool, of which northern soul, punk and grime are the most important. Blackpool became home to one of the four legendary northern soul nights
in the Highland Room, Blackpool Mecca which ran for twelve years between 1967 and 1979. Young grime artists, such as Afghan Dan and Little T became the national sensation (Rymajdo 2016). Blackpool also remains a frequent destination for soul weekenders, which were popular during the jazz-funk era of the mid-1980s. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a large market of tribute and cover bands and artists, who support themselves entirely or partially through performing popular songs, mostly for tourists. There is also a large number of popular artists connected to Blackpool due to being born there or living there. They include Robert Smith from the Cure, Graham Nash from the Hollies and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, John Evan from Jethro Tull, Chris Lowe from Pet Shop Boys and Little Boots. The list of these artists is long and one gets a sense that as for its size, the pool of Blackpool’s artists of international and national standing exceeds that of towns of comparable size. However, perhaps with the exception of grime artists, their hometown hardly features in the work of these artists and we never heard about ‘Blackpool sound’, as opposed to the Mersey Sound or Madchester. Their connection with Blackpool is played down in their careers, although one can argue that Blackpool’s culture influenced their music and star persona, for example, Smith’s goth’s appearance can be seen as a reflection of coming from a town which permanently wears a mask.

Blackpool is also evoked in many iconic songs. Among them are Blur’s ‘This Is a Low’, ‘Say Hello, Wave Goodbye’ by Soft Cell, ‘Elvis Impersonator, Blackpool Pier’ by Manic Street Preachers and ‘Autumn Almanac’ by the Kinks (Rogers 2019). Some of these songs will be mentioned in subsequent chapters, but now suffice to say that certain motifs reoccur in them. One is a sense that in Blackpool everybody can be him/herself or, indeed, somebody completely different, because in Blackpool being a freak is the norm. The second idea is that Blackpool is an important part of English identity, as stated in the song by the Kinks, which according to a comment on YouTube is ‘the most British song of all time’:

I like my football on a Saturday  
Roast beef on Sundays, all right  
I go to Blackpool for my holidays  
Sit in the open sunlight
This song suggests that for a British person or at least a Northerner, going to Blackpool constitutes a rite of passage; one is not ‘fully British’ without taking a ride on one of the Pleasure Beach attractions, visiting the Blackpool Tower or taking a walk on the Promenade. I must admit that my first trips to Blackpool played such a part in my entrance into British culture and in due course I often took my friends from different countries there or advised them to go to see a different facet of Britain than that offered by the Tate Gallery or the Beatles Museum. Many of songs about Blackpool convey nostalgia for an innocent and ‘timeless seaside’, which probably never existed in reality, only in children’s books (Walton 2000: 3).

Blackpool is also an important site of (mostly) British films and television productions. It will be impossible to list here all the films which were made in Blackpool, but it is worth mentioning their focus. The vast majority of them concerns holidaying in Blackpool, from four versions of *Hindle Wakes*, through *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), directed by Gurinder Chadha to *Bob’s Weekend* (1996), directed by Jevon O’Neill. The length of these holidays change, reflecting the changing patterns of British holidaymaking. Hence, the films begin with showing ‘wakes’, short holidays enjoyed by British workers before they received the right to longer, more regular and paid holidays, through presenting longer periods of rest, as in *Sing As We Go* (1934), directed by Basil Dean, to, again, short trips, typically lasting a weekend. We can also observe the altering social mix of holidaymakers. Before the Second World War the people who visited Blackpool were ethnically homogenous, all being Caucasian, but varied in terms of class. The majority were working class, but the visitors also included the petit bourgeoisie and industrialists. Such a social mix we get in *Sing As We Go*. At some point, however, the higher classes get spirited away, while we see some non-white people, as in *Bhaji on the Beach* and *Eaten by Lions* (2018), directed by Jason Wingard, although they are still rather rare.

The representation of Blackpool itself also has changed, with earlier films showing it thriving, as reflected in the camera focusing on crowds filling the beach, the Pleasure Beach and other attractions, to the films in which there are fewer visitors and the images of attractions intermingle with those of ‘anti-attractions’: places and objects which might put off the visitors, such as rubbish. There is also a shift in the tone of the films. The earlier ones, although often showing Blackpool’s excess, treat it with sympathy, pointing to the liberating potential of spending a ‘wake’ or a
week consuming Blackpool rocks and candy floss and having their future read by a fortune teller. In the later films, however, Blackpool is treated with less sympathy. Its putting on a mask, which previously was regarded as a result of the tacit understanding between the visitors and the locals that in Blackpool playing identity games is a norm, because people go there to be somebody else, starts to be presented as a dangerous deception. Blackpool as a ‘capital of sham’ first appears in *Funny Bones* (1995), directed by Peter Chelsom, and culminates in the television series *Blackpool* (2004), whose background was the previously mentioned attempt to get a super-casino for Blackpool (Mundy 2006: 62). Its main character, Ripley Holden, is presented as a dishonest entrepreneur, who cheats his customers, partners and his family. Blackpool, as epitomised by Ripley, has no redeeming features and its garishness is repulsive. When he declares that Blackpool is ‘where you can live a thousand lives and still have room for a full English breakfast’ (quoted in Mundy 2006: 64), this does not sound as a celebration of the seaside resort, but its condemnation. Hence, even the moral reawakening of the central character comes across as unconvincing (Cloarec 2017). Moreover, while in the films made before the 1980s, Blackpool is thriving, which is reflected not only by its mise-en-scene, but also by its characters, who are mainly young, in the later films it is in a state of decline, as demonstrated by its crumbling infrastructure and the choice of its protagonists, who are middle-aged or elderly. Such elderly characters we find, among others, in *Funny Bones* and *Bob’s Weekend*. Moreover, the newer films, even if their action is set in the present, tend to evoke the Blackpool of the past, which underscores the current neglect.

Irrespectively, however, when the Blackpool films are made, they typically focus on female protagonists who are depicted as strong and emancipated. It is also suggested that Blackpool helps them to discover or assert their identity. We can list here Jenny in *Hindle Wakes*, a girl from a textile mill who refuses the offer to marry a man much wealthier than her on the grounds that she can support herself through her work and Grace from *Sing As We Go*, who during her stay in Blackpool not only manages to do several different jobs, but also helps to have her factory reopened, or the Asian women in *Bhaji on the Beach* who in this seaside resort stand up to the abusiveness and misogyny of their partners.
Chapters Description

The first part of the book explores cinematic representation of Blackpool. It begins with a chapter by Cecilia Mello, who discusses three films from different periods, *Hindle Wakes* (1927), *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) as stories about female desire, frustration and intergenerational conflicts, which are triggered by their protagonists’ trips to Blackpool. She suggests that Blackpool’s atmosphere of leisure and excess exacerbates and reflects the changing conditions of female working-class characters. Drawing on theories of realism and Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, Mello argues that Blackpool in these films is constructed as a gendered heterotopia, which allows for encounters and romances, impossible in other times and spaces.

Next Chad Bentley examines two relatively recent films, *Away* (2016), directed by David Blair and *Bob’s Weekend* (1996), directed by Jevon O’Neill, in which a middle-aged male character goes to Blackpool to commit suicide, but changes his mind there. While Mello examines cinematic Blackpool as a heterotopia, Bentley argues that in *Away* and *Bob’s Weekend* the seaside resort comes across as a purgatory. In these films the characters are denied opportunities to shape the resort in a personalised imagined space, instead of allowing the resort to mould around them into a state, where the liminality of the holiday space falls between life and death, and heaven and hell.

The third and last chapter in this part is written by myself. I consider three films, the previously mentioned *Bob’s Weekend*, *The Harry Hill Movie* (2013), directed by Steve Bendelack and *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* (2016), directed by Tim Burton. In Blackpool, presented in them, different types of non-reality (fantasy, virtual reality, sur-reality) have conquered the material reality. This impression is achieved in a large part by (over)using light, which dematerialises the town. The focus on fantasy conveys a view that contemporary Blackpool lags behind the rest of the country not because it is ‘inauthentic’, but because it is not inauthentic enough and, to make it more attractive to tourists, it needs to become less material and more fantastical and virtual.

The second part of the book begins with a chapter by Les Gillon, who analyses songs devoted to Blackpool, from the 1930s to the present day, including such classics as ‘Up the Pool’ by Jethro Tull and the previously mentioned ‘Autumn Almanac’. Gillon divides them according to themes they convey, such as England’s decline and nostalgia for a certain type of
Englishness, carnivalesque, and the notion of the ‘fake’ and ‘simulacra’. In his investigation the author suggests that for many musicians Blackpool stood for what is best and worst about England; hence many of the songs, particularly those produced in post-war period, have a bitter–sweet taste.

Colin Appleby presents the history of Blackpool venues against a larger background of research about British music venues. Appleby notes that, thanks to being the most famous British resort, Blackpool had a wealth of venues of different shapes and sizes. Consequently, many famous performers and bands began their tours in Blackpool and many of their concerts became legendary, albeit on occasion because they were not short of causing scandal, such as the 1964 Rolling Stones concert, which finished with a riot. However, despite their rich history, many Blackpool venues closed down and currently the opportunities to perform original music there are very limited. This reflects the larger circumstances of the city, namely its privileging the guests over the local audience.

The last two chapters examine two music genres which flourish in Blackpool: punk and grime. First Philip Smith examines the career of Blackpool punk-influenced band the Ceramic Hobs, and their frontman Simon Morris, who died in 2019. He argues that the band, Morris’s own musical and literary work and his tragic fate, marked by substance abuse, mental health problems, financial difficulties and pessimistic outlook, closely reflect the economic, social and cultural history of the town.

Finally, Kamila Rymajdo discusses the interface between Blackpool and its grime scene, which emerged in Blackpool in the mid-2010s, focusing on its portrayal in three documentaries, which aired in 2016, 2017 and 2019, respectively. She shows how Blackpool grime differs from grime as a genre rooted in the black British urban experience and its post-internet character, and analyses the ways in which Blackpool grime attempted to grow its audience by distancing itself from Blackpool as a place.

These chapters do not exhaust the connections between Blackpool, popular music and cinema. However, they demonstrate the richness of Blackpool’s history and culture and its importance in constructing and projecting British identity. They also point to the resilience of the city faced with the adverse circumstances.

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