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Blackpool Illuminations: Modernity, Nostalgia and Taste

Introduction

Each year around three million visitors make an annual trip to see Blackpool Illuminations, an extravaganza of light that extends the traditional holiday season by eight or nine weeks from the end of August. Costing the local authority approximately £2 million to run, and extending for nearly six miles along the sea front, the Illuminations feature a heterogeneous mix of lighting forms. For much of the route, serial themes are attached to parallel roadside lampposts and draped across the road, while illuminated trams glide alongside the promenade. At the Northern end, large animated tableaux flash and pulsate.

In this chapter, we identify some of the major developments in the 100-year long history of the Lights. We trace the emergence of key themes and motifs, the articulation of a distinctive *municipal modernism* through the deployment of illumination at the resort, and resistance to commercialism, by contrasting Blackpool Illuminations to the commercial landscape of Atlantic City. We also discuss ongoing tensions between those who conceive the Illuminations as an opportunity to exhibit good taste, high art and respectability, and others who foreground the celebration of a more ludic, fairground aesthetic and celebration of popular culture. We finally focus on how the production and reception of the illuminations have recently been marked by expressions of nostalgia.

Situating Blackpool and the Illuminations

Still Europe's most popular resort, Blackpool is the world's first working class holiday resort, superseding the 19th century middle class quest for health and respectable leisure at the seaside. With the advent of higher wages and cheap rail travel, the town attracted millions of workers, particularly those from the Lancashire cotton towns. From the late 19th century, the resort offered a beguiling mixture of sand and sea, and a host of entertainments and diversions, including what is now Britain's most popular attraction, the Pleasure Beach amusement park, the famous 19th century Tower with its ballroom menagerie, circus and elevated viewpoint, the Winter Gardens complex of ballrooms, theatres and bars, three piers and the string of attractions along the seafront known as the 'Golden Mile'.

These seductions, and the conduct of visitors who would drink, dance and seek romantic encounters, fuelled tensions between those who advocated 'respectable' and 'rational' recreation and the more bacchanalian, ribald, and less constrained practices of the working classes. The reign of feasting and bawdiness, and immersion in the excitable crowd, promoted a carnivalesque celebration of excess and the suspension of the usual propriety, as Blackpool became a site of 'industrial saturnalia' (Cross and Walton, 2005). According to Cross, resorts such as Blackpool combined 'popular modernity, mass consumption and a new collective experience' (2006: 631). This 'art of excess, situated at the seaside', as Feigel explains, was a 'garish overabundance' that represented 'ecstatic freedom' in contrast to the compulsions of industrial work, yet also stirred contrary interpretations of the crowd as 'vulgar, mechanical and base, or cheerful and democratic and unpretentious' (2009: 17).

These attributes were particularly evident at three sites in Blackpool. The 'Golden Mile', with its 'incredibly diverse forms of pleasure' (Bennett, 1995: 230), a medley of freak shows, stalls selling cheap souvenirs, fortune tellers, gambling arcades and drinking venues that has now largely been regulated away. Webb (2005) reckons the opulent Tower Ballroom exemplifies the carnivalesque experience of Blackpool, with its fantastic décor providing a setting in which dancing working class bodies could expressively escape the discipline of factory work. In discussing the Pleasure Beach, Bennett identifies the fantastical designs within which there were 'recurring motifs of the oriental, the ornate and the exotic' (1995: 234-5), but above all, the celebration and showcasing of modernity in the futuristic themes, sleek design and advanced technological applications that powered the thrill rides. These proliferating themes, the highlighting of modernity, and the reiteration of tensions between vulgarity and refinement resonate across and beyond the 20th century in Blackpool's Illuminations.

The advent of Illumination in Blackpool
With advent of gas and then electric light, illumination very quickly became utilised as a tool to create recreational space, festivity and spaces of entertainment. The deployment of a battery of techniques - 'electric signs, flashing signs, the searchlight, the spotlight and the floodlight' (McQuire, 2008: 117) - marked a broad shift from a lighting of order to a lighting of festivity according to Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1988). In fact, the first systematic explorations of electric light were perpetrated at the world fairs and subsequently, migration of illumination from 'idealized urban space' to amusement parks. Tellingly, at the end of the 19th century, 'the Chicago fairgrounds… contained more light than any contemporary city in the United States' (McQuire, 2008: 118).
This rapid development added to the notion that modern life was transformed by a 'technological sublime' (McQuire, 2008: 116), producing an 'electropolis' 'characterized by the interpenetration of material and immaterial spatial regimes', an 'oneiric city' that was simultaneously 'exhilarating and disorienting to its inhabitants' (122). Initially, these technologies of illumination promoted a sense of the 'technological uncanny' through the transformation of the city into spectacle, the production of a phantasmagoric and enthralling new realm, (Collins and Jervis, 2008), producing defamiliarisation and uncertainty, and fascination, constitutive aspects of modern experience. New lighting techniques were eagerly utilized by entrepreneurs within the field of entertainment to align with their desires to produce spaces of escape and fantasy for the growing mass leisure market. Cross describes how at New York's Coney Island, 'Luna Park and Dreamland created a dazzling architectural fantasy of towers domes and minarets, outlined by electric lights, giving these strange oriental shapes an even more mysterious and magical air at night' (2006: 365). At Blackpool, entrepreneurs similarly quickly grasped the potential of electric light to attract crowds of pleasure-seekers.
As early as 1879, Seimens were invited to display eight extraordinarily bright arc lamps at the resort, attracting huge crowds to witness an incomparable transformation of the night for spectators accustomed to dimmer gas lights. For the first decade of the 20th century, light was employed to adorn the piers, Pleasure Beach and Winter Gardens, supplementing the increased public electric lighting being used in the town. In 1912, the annual illuminations were initiated but then curtailed by the First World War and only restarted in 1926. The display subsequently extended for six miles, prolonging the

holiday season beyond August. During these interwar years, the tableaux were extended, along with animated sequences, the deployment of neon and an ever-greater range of colour.

Theming the Illuminations
To start with, and through to the early 1930s, the design for the illuminations were contracted out to light companies and artists from Paris, London and elsewhere. The artful installations of arches of light, illuminated pillars and fountains, and strings of bulbs and neon-lined buildings suggested that Blackpool was an artful, tasteful place, drawing on stylish designs from art deco that offered genteel pleasures for the eye (Figure 1). Although there were references to popular culture, primarily through themes derived from nursery rhymes, these designs tended to be sleek of line and of modest colour.

The Second World War intervened to suspend the Illuminations and following the end of the conflict and subsequent economic austerity, it was not until 1949 that the lights shone again. It was from this period that the lineaments of the current festival emerged. While there were references to the Queen's coronation in the 1953 display, designs based on film stars, pantomime and football signify the advent of a far greater range of themes from popular culture. The year before, the Council had signed a contract with the Walt Disney Corporation to feature some of the highly popular characters from animated movies (Toulmin, 2012). For the next 30 years, Disney provided designs for the Illuminations department where local designers would faithfully transform them into tableaux and serial themes.

Though the designs of the pre-war years did feature certain aspects derived from British popular culture, notably nursery rhymes and children's fiction, emphasis focused on the aesthetic, artful quality of design and produced a certain reserved tone that did not accord with the carnivalesque elements that were prevalent in other areas of the resort. This changed, and especially since the late 1950s, the Illuminations have provided a cavalcade of changing themes, designs and icons drawn from the lively terrain of popular culture and everyday life. Some of the topics have chimed with (post)colonial desires for otherness, featuring native Americans and oriental characters. Others have been more self-referential, with depictions of Blackpool scenes, fairground aesthetics and holiday activities. Other key themes resounding through the past 60 decades include a swathe of references to celebrity culture drawn from film, television and pop music, and to the comedians, female impersonators, burlesque artistes, singers, dancers and impressionists who have performed at one or more of its many theatres. Many designs pay homage to children's culture, with themes derived from fairy stories and myths, cartoons, popular toys and nursery rhymes. There are allusions to older design styles in the stained glass and Tiffany lamp displays, references to historical events and to national icons. Frequent motifs also play with aspects of the supernatural and horror, science fiction, the picturesque and the natural world. The Illuminations thus constitute an extraordinary historical record through which trends, crazes, cultural practices and styles have continuously emerged and disappeared; a storehouse of the protean, contested and vital qualities British of popular culture.

Municipal Modernism and Progress

The celebration of modernity is a second persistent them of the Illuminations, appropriately enough given the symbolic role lighting has played in heralding scientific progress, banishing ignorance and shining light onto matters of obscurity. Besides architecture, technological modernism belongs to a range of technologies, including widespread electricity, traffic management, sewage disposal and water provision that have modernized space, providing cleanliness, health and sensory clarity (Otter, 2008), and we can also consider artistic interventions through murals, sculpture and lighting. More specifically, in the case of Blackpool, we suggest that the Illuminations are aligned with a *Municipal Modernism* and form part of a broader programme by the local authority that testifies to the eager adoption of technological innovations and styles. This is exemplified by two distinct phases of development, a pre-war movement that attempted to situate Blackpool as an iconic art-deco city; and a post-war movement that repositioned the resort as a centre of high modernity and mass culture.

In the early decades of the 20th Century, as the resort sort to distance itself from Victorian freakery and carnival, Illuminations explicitly symbolised Blackpool's innovation as a *City of Lights* that could match Paris or Chicago in culture, glamour and style. Blackpool already possessed its own version of the Eiffel Tower, so why not? As early as 1897, the publically owned electric tramway was reinvented as a tourist attraction with the introduction of illuminated trams on the promenade. Municipal investment in Blackpool has been essential to the resort's growth and development (Toulmin, 2011), and in the interwar years, the local authorities invested heavily in new infrastructure, attractions, promenade extensions, indoor and outdoor swimming pools and a new public park, Stanley Park. Under the architectural leadership of JC Robinson, the borough re-invented itself through the art-deco restyling of public buildings, including cafes, tram stops, and swimming pools, reorienting the resort to a European modernist aesthetic that was evident elsewhere in attractions at the Pleasure Beach, public murals and cubist sculptures (Peter, 2007).

As Regan and Hazlehurst (2004) testify, historical accounts of the Illuminations foreground the technical feats achieved by lighting power, energy, engineering, the scale of the lights and the masses who came to view them. Echoing the arc lamps exhibited in 1879, new technologies have been successively unveiled and proudly displayed. 1937 represented the pinnacle of this celebration, with *Progress* forming the key theme, the word ignited by incandescent displays on Blackpool Corporation's town hall and tram cars. Public funding thus secured progressive extensions and improvements to the lights, which had developed from simple festoon lighting displays to sequence controlled illuminated tableaux. The town council's decision to build a dedicated Illuminations department in 1936, funded wholly by local taxation, heralded a key transformation as the design, production and installation of the Lights became the purely local operation that it largely remains.

The post-war era heralds the turn to a more Americanised version of modernity, as is revealed in the British Transport Films promotional short, *Holiday!* (1957). Replete with jazz soundtrack by Chris Barber's band and shot in colour, the film depicts a Blackpool in which the sophisticated pre-war art deco landscape is submerged by resolutely post-war design, concrete, colour and pop-cultural stylings. In 1950s Britain, the optimism generated by the new Welfare State and the 1951 Festival of Britain continued to resonate, foregrounding progress, technology and change. A few years earlier, in 1952,

Harry Carpenter had been appointed Head of Illuminations and together with a new design team, set about modernising the Illuminations to reflect the spirit of the age, consumerism, popular culture and the space age. New design materials, including crystalline and back-lit plastic panels, enabled the construction of more elaborate 3D models. Mercury vapour lights replaced tungsten bulbs and illuminated pylons, enhanced sequence-controlled and animated displays, and more elaborate themed sections. Carpenter's team also reinvigorated the tableaux, most famously through a 120ft long New York skyline.

During the 1960s, a more explicit sci-fi and space age theme emerged with robots, astronauts (Figure 2), lunar modules, a moon landing tableau, aliens, flying saucers and Dr Who. 1962 saw the installation of the *Roto-Sphere,* a rotating neon-lit 'sputnik' installation and the Astraland lighting display. In 1968, there was a large display of an imaginary future Blackpool, with science fiction architecture, skyways and people movers. These displays utilised yet more advanced lighting technologies, with the use of fiberglass moulds to produce three dimensional light models, linear animated transistorized sequence controllers to fashion more complex animated displays and thousands of blue mercury lights to create the eerie atmosphere of space. Yet this post-war reinvention did not necessarily lead to a complete break with traditions, which could be tweaked to represent both old and new. The Modern Witch tableau featured witches drawn in a traditional style but with broomsticks replaced by electric vacuum cleaners, and illuminated trams remained a key feature, but gondoliers and sailboats gave way to a modern warship, hovercraft and rocket.

To emphasise the distinctiveness of Blackpool's municipal modernism, a comparison with the illuminations of Atlantic City is instructive. Both resorts were established for a predominantly working class audience, and over the course of 20th century, both tapped into trends in national popular culture and even went through similar phases of art-deco architectural development. Both also experienced post-war transformation and declining fortunes as mass tourism dwindled. And both resorts understood the qualities of illumination and its potential to attract holiday-makers. Yet whereas public sector municipalism underpinned the development of Blackpool, in Atlantic City private actors played a pivotal role in introducing and extending the use of light, shaping a particular illuminated designscape, described by Levi and Eisenberg, (1979: 21) as 'wall to wall commerce'. The seafront became decoratively illuminated through a series of private architectural interventions as individual shops, hotels, nightclubs, tourist attractions, and later casinos tried to lure passing trade. Though some displays became iconic and were feats of technical innovation and creative design, neon-lit advertising hoardings came to dominate the city's piers and Boardwalk. Contemporary Atlantic City is dominated by enormous super-casino hotel developments, which have systemically diverted footfall from the Boardwalk and side-streets of the old commercial down-town into labyrinthine consumer spaces. By contrast Blackpool Illuminations were embedded within public control, a landscape of fun and fantasy emerged but one which was rarely disrupted by excessive commercialism or corporate branding.

The turn to nostalgia
During the 1970s, the allure of Mediterranean working class holidaying practices and the economic collapse of the industrial hinterland destabilised the town's economy and

identity. Blackpool experienced a reflexive turn and found itself looking backwards. Although a preoccupation with modernism has constituted a key element of the Illuminations, in recent decades this theme has faded, replaced by a nostalgic approach and a knowing self-referentiality by which historic designs and characteristics are playfully recycled. The theme of the 1976 Illuminations was *By-gone-Blackpool* and in 1979 the *Clowning* display directly referred back to the *1930s Juggling Clowns.*

Recent research reveals that these nostalgic sentiments, aligned with collective family memories during repeat trips to see the Illuminations, encourage a majority of visitors to continue to attend the annual display (Edensor, 2012). The crowds that surge through the resort on bank holidays and weekends are co-creators of the thick atmospheres and further consolidate the sense of nostalgia and conviviality. The experience perhaps resonates with the annual trips to the seaside that were 'part of an ongoing culture of memory fed upon renewal' (in a) gathering place for cross-generational and relatively stable working class culture' (Cross, 2006: 640).

Fred Inglis comments on how completely the Victorian 'architectural symbolisation of luxury and magic' (2000: 53) continues to shape the imagination of British holiday-makers, and now constitutes an 'idealised spectacle' within the 'kaleidoscopic repatterning' of the British seaside (54). Thus, the themes of the illuminations reverberate with those of earlier times. In this vein, Bracewell refers to English seaside towns as akin to 'a melancholy but intoxicating Venice of the vernacular' (2009: 36). In the design of such places, 'and in their every detail, you can glimpse an earlier phase' (36), for instance, of the exuberant emergence of 'rock and roll, television variety shows and burgeoning permissiveness' (40). At such sites, he continues, 'you can feel pop's ghosts all around you' (41), typifying how they generate an 'endlessly renewing contract with nostalgia' (43).

Innovative light designs and attractions are still occasionally produced. The world's largest mirror ball was installed in 2002, and technological innovation continues to be introduced with the recent adoption of fibre optics, LEDs, computerized design and programming. However, most cutting-edge installations are presently created and situated elsewhere as part of an upsurge in the depth and scale of festive lighting and in the deployment of illumination to regenerate the night-time economies of moribund urban centres and enhance place-image (Edensor and Millington, 2013). Selective coastal resorts have recently served as sites for culture-led regeneration, for example, with new art galleries of modish design created at Margate, Hastings and Eastbourne. Such desires to attract more lucrative, middle class visitors inform contemporary strategies to develop the Illuminations. Others, however, contend that Blackpool must not threaten the customers on which it has traditionally depended, those who seek cheap, hedonistic pleasures, references to the past and to popular culture, and to rituals of moving along the promenade en masse. Strategies to make Blackpool more tasteful and respectable accord with attempts to devalue working class art forms, mass entertainments, variety shows, comedy and karaoke which have been recently supplemented by an influx of stag and hens groups and strip clubs.

Taste, art and innovation
These contesting positions - celebrating local distinctiveness, or alternatively contending that this is an outmoded approach to illumination - continue to articulate discourses

about art, class, taste and excess, revealing that illumination is frequently a site of aesthetic contestation (Edensor and Millington, 2009). Recent developments have included those fashioned by celebrity designer Laurence Llewellyn-Bowen who has recycled older themes of risqué glamour, the styles of the 1920s and 30s and mechanical Victorian *son et lumière*s dioramas. His art deco models form a road sequence 'Deco-Dance' (figure 3) and are derived from designs in the resort's Winter Gardens, and his Venus Reborn installation combines music, fountains, theatrical models and illumination to conjure up a changing party scene that combines classical allusions and a nightclub. Llewellyn-Bowen underlines the spirit that guides his designs:

> Restraint, straight-laced good taste aesthetics and minimalism are your sworn design enemies. To work, Blackpool Illuminations have to be high kicking, showbiz, jazz hands and more than a little 'nudge nudge, wink wink'. Terms no-one ever teaches you at art school

His assertion that the recycling of older styles and themes is appropriate at the town also chimes with the dispositions of post-tourists who 'savour the ironies of its artificiality in knowing ways while enjoying the sense of nostalgia and kitsch' (Cross, 2006: 640).

In 2005, an annual 'Festival of Light' was initiated to supplement the Illuminations, showcasing the creations of designers and artists who did not belong to the local design team located in the town. It was intended that they would create attractions to cater for those who sought 'artistic', stimulating installations in contradistinction to the 'traditional' styles. Though the results met with a mixed response from visitors, as we write, there are new plans to integrate art and design into the display.

The restructuring of the economic and social conditions that has transformed Northern Englsuih cities such as Manchester into postmodern, globally orientated centres that appeal to sophisticated cultural consumers creates problem for Blackpool. What can it can offer this embourgeoisified post-proletariat? This tension currently resonates in the latest attempts to revitalise and reinvent the Illuminations.

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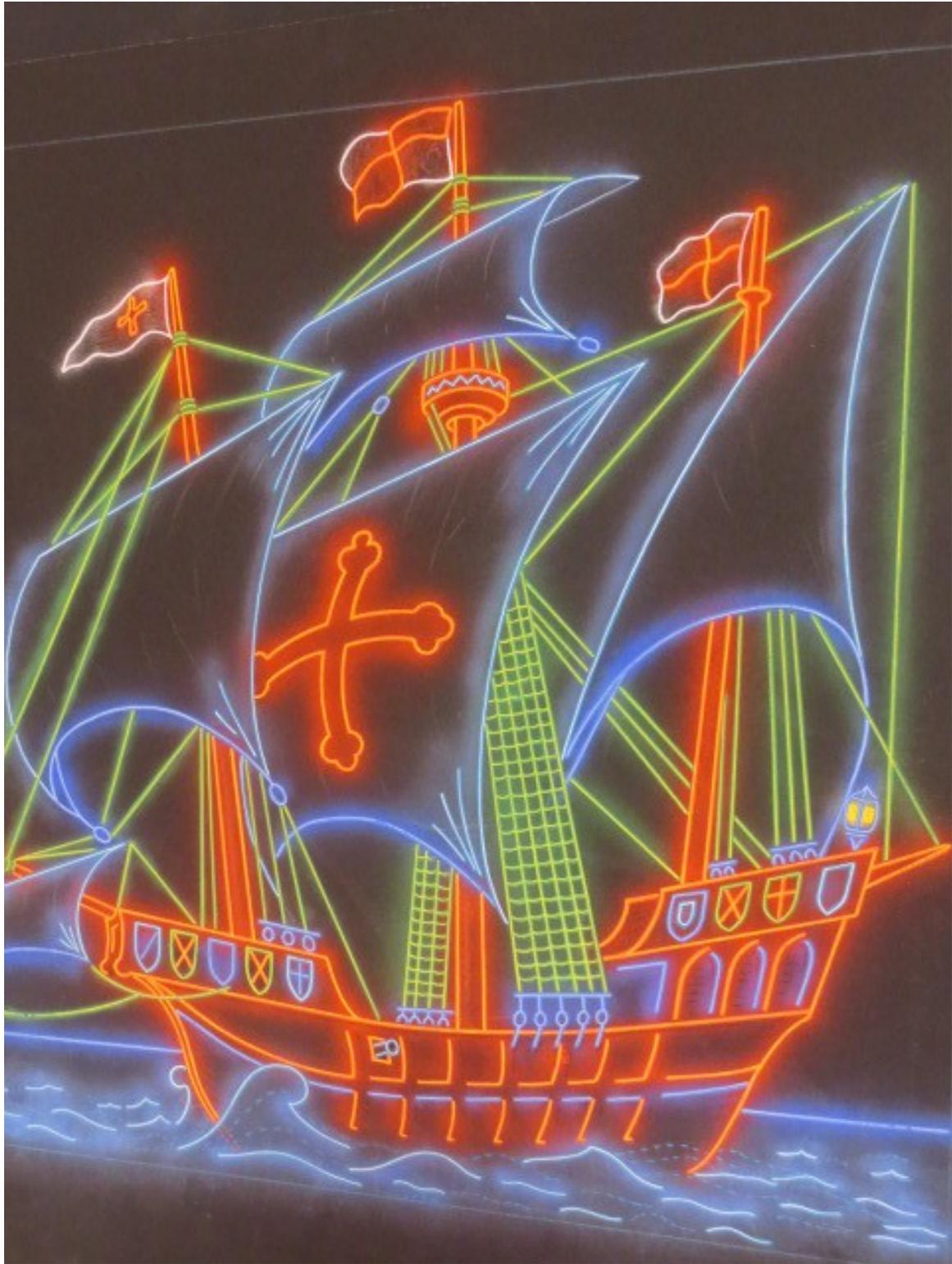
Figure 1: *All at Sea*, 1934

Figure 2: Design for *Space Age*, 1970s

Figure 3: *DecoDance*, 2007