The concepts of ‘carnival’ and ‘the carnivalesque’ are associated with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984a: 218) used the concepts to denote ‘the varied popular-festive life of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance’. A full appreciation of this festive life was seen as an essential precondition for understanding both Rabelais and the carnivalesque interpretation of literature more generally. For historians and sociologists, however, the utility of the concept of carnival lies in its capacity to illuminate potentially transgressive elements within popular social and cultural practices. In this regard, the present article suggests that the concept has been over-utilized. Confronted with a crowd temporarily freed from work and engaged in the pursuit of pleasure, it seems that many writers cannot resist the temptation to turn to Bakhtin. This has two important implications. On the one hand, utopian possibilities are read into situations where there are none, while on the other, alternative utopian possibilities are overlooked in the scramble to locate and eulogize the carnival spirit. To illustrate the point, the article takes as its subject the English seaside resort, a social and historical phenomenon that has received its own fair share of Bakhtinian interpretations.

The article begins by emphasizing Bakhtin’s own conviction that the utopian radicalism of the carnival experience was rooted in the ‘purely human’ social relations that defined it. Attention then turns to carnivalesque interpretations of the English seaside resort. These suggest that resorts developed in England as sites of cultural resistance to the pressures of modernity – marginal spaces in which the utopian dynamics of traditional recreational practices were kept alive. On this basis, the rise of the seaside ‘leisure industry’ is interpreted as a hegemonic force, tearing the social practices of the people away from their traditional associations and rendering them complicit with the discourse of modernity. Taking the popular resort
of Blackpool as a case study, the article offers a somewhat different argument. First, it suggests that the social relations of the 19th-century English seaside resort were anything but ‘purely human’. In Bakhtin’s terms, therefore, the recreational practices that were engaged in were devoid of philosophical content and utopian meaning. Second, it claims that the leisure industry is open to interpretations other than those which focus on bourgeois hegemony and social control. These latter interpretations preclude the possibility that modern leisure practices possessed a utopian dimension of their own. In the case of Blackpool, however, it is argued that they did. The article concludes by highlighting the need for a more careful and considered use of the concept of ‘the carnivalesque’, as the analytical frame it provides can serve to mask rather than illuminate the utopian dimensions of popular culture.

The Utopian Radicalism of the Carnival Experience

For Bakhtin, it was the unofficial festivities that took place alongside official Church feasts that constituted the site of carnival praxis in medieval and Renaissance Europe. These popular festivals were nothing less than ‘the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter’, during which ‘people were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 8, 10). The purely human relations that defined the carnival experience possessed various distinct features:

- ‘during carnival there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers’ so that ‘all were considered equal’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 15, 10);
- during carnival the ‘norms and prohibitions of usual life’ are suspended so that an ‘atmosphere of freedom, frankness and familiarity’ reigns (Bakhtin, 1984a: 15–16). On this basis ‘an ideal and at the same time real type of communication, impossible in ordinary life, is established’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 92);
- during carnival the official ordering of space and time is suspended and the people become ‘organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 255);
- during carnival all official truths become relative: ‘carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order’, and was ‘opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretence at immutability’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 10–11);
- during carnival the individual self is dissolved: ‘The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people’s mass body’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 255).

Although Bakhtin is perhaps best known for his analysis of the forms of laughter through which the established order was symbolically degraded
– comic crownings and uncrownings; grotesque representations of the body; grotesque behaviour, profanation, and so on – Gardiner (1992) is right to emphasize that these forms and acts possessed a ‘utopian radicalism’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 89) only to the extent that they were organically related to, that is, emerged from and were expressive of the truly human relations of the carnival experience. It was only in the context of free, equal, communal human relations, mediated through membership of a crowd experienced as a growing collectivity, renewing itself in proportion as it rejected all that was immutable, that the specific forms of carnival laughter acquired philosophical depth and utopian character.

It was precisely the transformation of the social relations underpinning the carnival spirit that precipitated ‘the disintegration of laughter’ in the 17th century (Bakhtin, 1984a: 115). The encroachment of the state upon festive life, together with the privatization of festive life within the family meant that ‘the carnival spirit with its freedom, its utopian character oriented toward the future, was gradually transformed into a mere holiday mood’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 33). Although Bakhtin (1984a: 33) concedes that ‘the popular-festive carnival spirit is indestructible’, he claims that, from the mid-17th century onwards this spirit found expression solely in the realm of literature (Bakhtin, 1984b: 131). In the social sphere, laughter came to express mere ‘erotic frivolity’ or ‘gay, fanciful, recreational drollery deprived of philosophical content’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 115, 12). In contrast, many argue that the popular-festive culture of the people has proven more resilient. Rather than disintegrating in the 17th century, it survived well into the 19th, with residues surviving still. In England at least, a common argument suggests that the carnival spirit was marginalized, displaced and transferred to the seaside, where it continued to possess a utopian dynamism.

‘Carnival’ and the English Seaside Resort

It is often claimed that pre-industrial popular recreations in England were typified by many of the transgressive features characteristic of the Bakhtinian carnival (Malcolmson, 1973: 75–88; Reid, 1982; Rojek, 1985: 26–8; Rule, 1986: 215–16). It is also claimed that these features were suppressed during the first few decades of industrialization by a combination of factors, including the labour discipline of the factory system, the rise of Methodism and evangelism, the provision of alternative ‘rational recreations’ and state regulation of traditional wakes and pleasure fairs (Billinge, 1996; Cunningham, 1980; Malcolmson, 1973; Storch, 1977; Thompson, 1967). In spite of this, however, Rojek (1995: 85–6) argues that ‘the carnivalesque was marginalized and repressed’, not so much uprooted ‘as pruned and replanted at the margins of society’. The prime example he cites is ‘the rise of new centres of “carnival” on the coastal periphery in the development of seaside resorts’ (1995: 86). Shields (1991: 91) also insists that ‘despite repression and systematic elimination of fairs and fetes, carnival did not entirely disappear but was merely banished to less “serious” arenas such
as the liminal beach’. According to Billinge (1996: 454), the seaside experience constituted an ‘absolute disjunction’ and offered ‘spectacular release’ from everyday life. Walton (2001a: 176) suggests that the seaside was ‘a potential site of carnival’, inaugurating ‘an ephemeral regime of festive excess’. At the Victorian seaside, he adds: ‘The spirit of carnival bubbled close to the surface, threatening and promising to turn the world “upside down”’ (Walton, 2001b: 5).

General arguments concerning the carnivalization of social relations at the English seaside have been supported by detailed studies of particular resorts, most notably Rob Shields’ analyses of Brighton (1990, 1991) and Tony Bennett’s studies of Blackpool (1983, 1986, 1995: 229–45). The present article focuses on the latter, not least because the popular seaside holiday tradition originated in the mill towns of industrial Lancashire and nowhere epitomized the supposed ‘carnival of working-class holidaymakers’ (Shields, 1990: 52) more than Blackpool. The second half of the 19th century saw the town become ‘undeniably the world’s first working-class seaside resort’ (Walton, 1992: 2). By 1900 it was attracting around 3 million visitors a year, primarily workers from the textile towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Coney Island was the only place on earth that could rival Blackpool in terms of visitor numbers, and in terms of the class composition of its visitors the town was unique (Walton, 1978: 29–30). During the same period, argues Tony Bennett:

... both the traditional [wakes] and newer [fairs] urban forms of popular recreation, under considerable attack in the inland towns at the time, had been displaced to Blackpool beach where they were able to thrive in an excess of unbridled vulgarity. (1986: 138)

The combination of huge working-class crowds and the spatial concentration of forms of popular recreation displaced from inland saw the beach and promenade become sites of carnival praxis (Bennett, 1986: 149). Bennett even suggests that, since the late 19th century the carnivalesque ‘has constituted the unofficial Blackpool, the underbelly beneath its constructed image of progress, respectability and modernity’ (1986: 147).

From the late 1880s onwards, however, Bennett (1986: 149) argues that ‘the carnivalesque was opposed and dismantled’ in Blackpool as a consequence (indeed as an aim) of the construction of its image as the embodiment of progress. The development of the mass entertainments industry is seen as pivotal and is interpreted as ‘a programme of ideological and cultural re-formation’ which sought to re-order the carnivalesque aspects of popular recreation, render them complicit with the dominant ideology of progress and modernity and thereby destroy their transgressive and utopian dimensions (Bennett, 1986: 140–1). All this in the service of a ‘regional-popular hegemonic discourse’ within which the achievements of northern capital were pitted against those of southern metropolitan elites (Bennett, 1986: 145). With their hegemony under threat from London, the
Lancashire industrialists used Blackpool as a means of uniting the working class against the capital city. Drawing on the tradition of northern chauvinism, the town brashly ‘displayed the prowess of “the workshop of the world” in the sphere of pleasure’ (Bennett, 1986: 142) and became a showcase demonstrating the technological and cultural superiority of northern grit (Bennett, 1983: 146, 1995: 236). In what follows it is suggested that this line of argument misrepresents the nature of the human relations that characterized Victorian Blackpool, misinterprets the development of the mass entertainments industry and subsequently locates the utopian dynamism of Blackpool in completely the wrong place.

Blackpool: The People’s First Life Transposed to the Sea

A great deal is known about the way in which Blackpool was experienced during the second half of the 19th century. ‘The Trip to Blackpool’, as recounted by contemporaries in prose, poetry and song, offers a particularly rich source of information, as do the popular guidebooks of the period. Four things in particular need noting. The first is that the Victorians were as divided in pleasure as they were at work. At the seaside, class distinctions and barriers were maintained via social zoning (Huggins, 2000; Perkin, 1976). In Blackpool two middle-class zones were created in the 1860s. North Pier (built in 1863) was designed and promoted as a secluded promenade area segregated from the working class by means of a two-penny toll. When the toll proved insufficient a deterrent, a second pier was opened in 1868 (the South Jetty or ‘People’s Pier’) specifically in order to siphon off the working-class trippers (Walton, 1998a: 37–9). Meanwhile, the Blackpool Land, Building and Hotel Company had been set up in 1863 with the aim of developing a strip of North Shore land (Claremont Park) into a quiet, planned, regulated middle-class enclave, offering high-class accommodation with the whole area again segregated from the working class by means of a toll (Walton, 1998a: 60–8).

Everyone in Blackpool was conscious of this geographical class segregation. Guidebooks assured the middle classes that Claremont Park was kept free of proletarian crowds while Blackpool Corporation introduced a string of bye-laws to ensure that this was so (Dobson and Brotherton, 1983: 74; Popular Guide to Blackpool, 1889: 10). Even more pronounced were the class divisions represented by the two piers. The guidebooks made it clear that North Pier was for middle-class promenading while South Jetty was for working-class dancing (People’s Guide to Blackpool, 1883: 17). For their part, the visitors were well aware of this and vivid depictions of the different classes one encountered on the two piers – in terms of attitude, manner, dress and accent – formed an integral part of the ‘Trip to Blackpool’ stories (Brierley, 1881: 14–15; Clegg, 1895: 440; Hartley, 1890: 59).

In Blackpool, then, there were two crowds segregated by class. This class segregation was deliberately engineered and was supported by local government. The two piers themselves, stretching a quarter of a mile out to sea, were visible from almost everywhere and served as a reminder of the
permanent presence, the immutability, of class distinctions. Hierarchical barriers – both symbolic and physical – were central facets of the way in which Blackpool was sold and experienced. Not only were social relations in Blackpool not egalitarian, nobody pretended that they were.

Second, trips to Blackpool during the Lancashire wakes were often organized by mill-owners, trade unions, temperance societies, schools, neighbourhood committees or savings clubs. Blackpool was thus experienced by communities *en masse*, and if one thing above all characterizes the ‘Trip to Blackpool’ genre, it is the universal exclamation that ‘it wor ommost like bein’ at hooam’ (Hartley, 1890: 46). Nor was this unwelcome, as being at home was precisely the point of Blackpool. Hudson captures a sense of the repetitive familiarity of each wakes holiday when he remarks:

> The room would be the same, the landlady would be the same and the other families down the corridor would be the same. That was the essence of wakes week for so many, a break with routine but with familiarity and reassurance all around. (1992: 27)

One consequence of this was that the social relations of the mill town – their hierarchies, norms, prohibitions, rules of address and etiquette – were transposed to Blackpool for the duration of the holiday. On organized mill trips, managers and overseers visibly maintained their authority status by wearing special coloured caps made for the occasion by the mill workers themselves (Coleman, 1992: 13). Less formally – but just as effectively – the sheer weight of the presence of family, neighbours, work colleagues, etc., provided a self-policing ‘censorious collective gaze’ which ensured that fun was kept within conventional social bounds (Walton, 1998a: 72). This in part explains the well-noted good behaviour of Blackpool’s working-class holiday-makers. While it would be misleading to suggest that working-class experiences were undifferentiated or that disreputable behaviour was entirely absent, so ruly, polite and well behaved were the visitors in general that organs of Victorian morality such as *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph* and even *The Methodist Recorder* could each recommend their readers to visit Blackpool for its ‘harmless fun’, ‘decency, sobriety and great good humour’ (BCLa, cutting 123; Clarke, 1923: 239; Hudson, 1992: 120; Walton, 1981: 257, 1983: 213, 1992: 5, 13, 15).1

On the one hand, therefore, one found visitors ‘returning year after year to the same accommodation and the same landlady in a comforting assertion of the routine and predictability of play as well as work’ (Walton, 1994a: 24). On the other hand, the comforting predictability was accompanied by a less comforting collective gaze which served to reproduce class and gender relations, reinforce home-town rules of etiquette, restrain behaviour and maintain the distorted nature of ‘polite’ communication.2 Indeed, a common theme within the ‘Trip to Blackpool’ literature is that the town’s comforting predictability proved such a burden that convoluted lies and deceptions were the only means of escaping social suffocation. William
Cooper (1882: 11) observed: ‘Somebody’s said there’s nowt so pure as deceit, an’ what’s moor, there’s no place where there’s moor on it nor Blackpool i’ t’ season.’ In other words, the distortions of everyday communication were exaggerated in Blackpool precisely because human relations there were characterized by a lack of freedom and frankness.

Third, one of the key attractions of Blackpool lay in its built environment, which effectively rendered it a mill town with a beach (Turner and Palmer, 1976: 31). The sense of homeliness this provided was compounded by the fact that the majority of landladies had migrated from the inland towns whose residents they were serving. Holiday-makers could thus be housed and fed by someone from their home town, providing comforting familiarity in terms of accent and points of social reference (Walton, 1978: 93). What the Blackpool landlady also did, and did very effectively, was organize her visitors’ time. This was partly born of necessity. For in order to generate an income that would sustain life throughout the year, visitors had to be crammed into lodging-houses during the season. One thus finds tales of guests sleeping in dining rooms, sitting rooms, reception areas, bureau drawers, upturned tables, sinks and hammocks swung over the cellar steps (Clegg, 1895: 437; Hartley, 1890: 41; Longworth, 1865: 12). In order for the lodging-house to function, therefore, the landlady had to specify exactly when guests were to wake up, when they could wash, when they must leave each morning, when they could return to eat, when they could retire to bed, and so on. As Walton (1998a: 79) rightly indicates, lodging-houses imposed an almost factory-like discipline on the experience of leisure.

This was only partly due to the financial and logistic necessities of the lodging-house business, however. It was also partly due to the way in which Blackpool as a whole was experienced. Memoirs highlight the popularity of organized trips with regimented itineraries (Coleman, 1992: 19), and it was commonly observed that working-class visitors maintained as strict a regimentation of time in leisure as they were forced to do at work. Factory workers, for example, tended to keep factory hours in Blackpool in terms of the timing of lunch, tea breaks, the reading of the newspaper, and so on (Walton, 1998a: 123). As one contemporary observed: ‘The day’s work of pleasure-seeking is as carefully planned out beforehand, as if the day’s bread is to be earned by it’ (Kneeshaw, 1894: 21). The masses did not throng to Blackpool to escape or subvert the official ordering of space and time. The festive life of the people was neither outside nor contrary to existing forms of socio-economic organization. In Blackpool, the official ordering of their own home space was reproduced for the visitors while they, in organizing the pursuit of pleasure, and with the help of their lodging-house keeper, reproduced the immutable order of official time.

Finally, with regard to the recreational practices of the resort’s visitors, the principal attraction of Blackpool was the ‘glorious, soot-shiftin, soul-liftin gush o’ pure sauty west wynt’ (Clegg, 1895: 438). Almost without exception, the protagonists of the ‘Trip to Blackpool’ stories suffered from some malady ‘ut nowt but Blackpool air could cure’ (Brierley, 1896: 200)
and went ‘to swallow as mich say hair as we could get into us, an’ to lay in
a good stock o’ health’ (Benjamins, 1882: 1). It may seem disappointingly
prosaic to think of the working class travelling en masse in search of a
bracing sea breeze, but that is what they did. Blackpool was known locally
as ‘the Lung of Lancashire’ and it was as the lung of Lancashire that it was
experienced.

It is true that a popular entertainments industry had begun to develop
in Blackpool as early as the 1860s. Beach entertainments, open-air dancing,
firework extravaganzas and freak shows all made for a crowded, noisy, boisterous cacophony. What needs to be emphasized, however, is that this
hubbub lacked any utopian character, depth or meaning because its forms
of laughter were grounded firmly in distorted, divided human relations.
Human relations within Blackpool were constituted by the inescapable
presence of class distinctions, established hierarchies and the norms of
distorted communication, all beating to the rhythm of official time.
Reminders of established truths, the established order, the immutable, were
everywhere, and, in many respects, Blackpool represented not the second
life of the people but their first life transposed to the sea. In Bakhtin’s terms,
the hubbub of Blackpool comprised ‘gay, fanciful, recreational drollery’
expressive of ‘a mere holiday mood’. This of course was something, but it
was not carnival (Walton, 1998a: 80).

Modernity, Progress and the Entertainments Industry

The 1890s saw a massive wave of investment in the entertainments industry
in Blackpool such that, by the turn of the century, it was unrivalled (globally)
in size and scope. Accompanying the transformation of the town’s pleasure
economy came a transformation in the key motifs of Blackpool’s constructed
place-image. Whereas previously the emphasis had been placed on health,
hubbub and dance, the motifs of modernity and progress now came to the
fore (the watershed here being the publication of The Popular Guide to
Blackpool in 1889). One word – ‘Progress’ – was adopted as the town’s motto,
and the discourse of progress was harnessed in the service of ‘selling’ Black-
pool. The following paragraph from Blackpool Corporation’s official
brochure of 1897 makes the point:

When the Eiffel Tower created its furore among the Parisians, Blackpool
showed its enterprise by being the first place in the United Kingdom to put
up a similar erection! When the Great Wheel at Earl’s Court, London, tickled
the Cockneys with its novelty, Blackpool was the only town in the United
Kingdom to erect one of its own! . . . The Pleasure Palaces are magnificent
structural edifices, possessing interiors out-rivalling in magnificence even the
resorts of London and the Continent . . . a perfect wonderland of pleasure not
to be obtained at any other watering-place on the face of the globe. (Black-
pool Corporation, 1897: 33)

Bennett (1986: 141) argues that the entertainments industry, together
with the discourse within which its development was framed, had a profound
effect on the recreational practices of the Lancashire working class, ‘wrenching them away from their traditional associations [the carnivalesque] and selectively reconstructing them in association with new sets of values [modernity and progress] and ideologies [the cultural and technological supremacy of northern grit]’. If this was so, however, then little evidence found its way into contemporary accounts. The ‘Trip to Blackpool’ literature of the early 1900s was still very much framed by the ‘traditional associations’ of health, hubbub and dance (Chappell, 1907; Dunlop and Parry, 1908; Judge, 1918; Kelly, 1913; Lambe and Edgar, 1917; Wigglesworth, 1902). Moreover, as Jonathan Rose (2002) has indicated with regard to literature, the Victorian working class often found hope and inspiration in sources that the educated critic would dismiss as reactionary. The same might be said of the working-class response to the mass entertainments industry. For while the educated critic might read into the growth of the popular ‘pleasure palaces’ an insidious re-constituting of traditional cultural practices, the visitors to these palaces might have seen in them something very different. With this in mind, the remainder of the article examines Blackpool’s greatest pleasure palace and its defining symbol of modernity and progress: Blackpool Tower.

**Blackpool Tower: Symbol of Hope**

By way of contextualization, three things need to be said. First, throughout its history Blackpool’s economic base has comprised one industry – tourism (Walton, 1978). Second, until the 1930s Blackpool’s development was inseparable, materially and culturally, from the textile industry of Lancashire and the West Riding. Blackpool was the resort of the northern textile industry, the playground of the workshop of the world (Walton, 1981). Third, a notable feature of Blackpool’s development during the 19th century was the lack of indigenous investment. The fragmented landownership structure and short-term profit-maximizing approach to building development meant that local investment was concentrated almost solely on expanding the town’s stock of cheap, poorly built housing (Perkin, 1976). Investment in the town’s social and economic infrastructure was non-existent (Turner and Palmer, 1976: 22–3). In fact, Blackpool was constructed not so much for its visitors as by them. Smith (1959) tells the incredible tale of Blackpool’s first school, the building of which was instigated by John Gisborne, a regular visitor to the resort. Concerned about the welfare of the town’s children, Gisborne appealed for individual subscriptions by writing letters to Blackpool’s visitors, the names of whom he had acquired from visitor books. By 1817 enough money had been secured to build two schools. The town’s first church was constructed in 1821 via exactly the same process. With regard to the town’s entertainments infrastructure, virtually every major project was promoted and financed, not locally, but by investors from the textile towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire (Walton, 1998a: 37–43, 92–3).

To be clear, then, Blackpool’s growth during the 19th century was founded on one industry (tourism) that was in turn dependent on another
Blackpool was dependent on the textile industry in two senses: first, in the sense that the majority of its visitors were textile workers; second, in the sense that the town’s social, economic and entertainments infrastructure would not have developed had it not been for investment from the textile industry. In the case of smaller projects such as the schools and church, the town’s visitors were directly responsible for infrastructural development. In the case of the larger entertainments projects, much of the capital came from major industrialists. Even here, however, the smaller investments of the workers themselves were important. Indeed, the origins of popular shareholding can be traced to the financing of Blackpool’s entertainments industry. This is the context in which the significance of Blackpool Tower needs to be placed.

The initial idea for the Tower came from the London-based Standard Contract and Debenture Corporation (SCDC), the first time that London capital had entered Blackpool. The Tower’s architects, solicitors and auditors were all based in Manchester, whilst only one of the five directors of the Blackpool Tower Company was a local (the mayor of Blackpool, John Bickerstaffe). Of the 204 founding shareholders, only 40 were Blackpudlians (Blackpool Tower Company, 1891). From the very outset, then, the Tower was an exogenous concern. In 1891, when shares totalling £150,000 were offered to the public, only 23 local businessmen responded, constituting ‘the worst local support for a new venture’ (Turner and Palmer, 1976: 47). Blackpool Tower Company could not pay the construction costs, SCDC reneged on its promise to underwrite any unsold shares and the whole project faced crisis. Two factors saved the Tower. First, the personal efforts of Bickerstaffe, who forcefully negotiated with SCDC while selling many of his own interests to pay for extra shares in the Tower. Second, the support of Blackpool’s working-class visitors, who were petitioned on the streets to subscribe to shares and thus save the project. The Tower eventually boasted 3000 shareholders – many of whom were Rochdale spinners, Blackburn weavers, Oldham machinists – with most of the investment capital coming from the textile towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire (Taylor, 1994: 63).

The whole affair may lend credence to Bennett’s claim that Blackpool was harnessed in support of a regional-popular hegemonic discourse centred around the cultural and technological supremacy of northern grit. The inland Lancashire press certainly went to great lengths to emphasize the fact that Blackpool Tower was a northern technological achievement (BCLb, cuttings 181, 182, 184, 186). Bickerstaffe himself was presented with a miniature silver Tower in honour of ‘his northern grit and prescience, routing London capitalists’ (Rothwell, 1986: 1). In addition, bankruptcy had forced the abandonment of a similar Tower project in London, leaving an embarrassing 150-foot stump. Ensuring that the same did not happen in Blackpool was therefore a matter of northern pride. Once construction had been completed, moreover, Bickerstaffe explicitly acknowledged the link between Blackpool Tower and the Lancashire textile industry. When asked by a young journalist what the Tower was built on, he replied, ‘bales o’ cotton,
lad, bales o' cotton' (Curtis, 1988: 23). This response carried such resonance that it quickly entered Lancashire folklore.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the impact of the discourse of chauvinism and modernity was the ideological incorporation of the working class and the cultural re-formation of their recreational practices. Rather, the regional-popular hegemonic discourse which framed the rise of the mass entertainments industry in Blackpool created a utopian surplus by virtue of pointing to an essential truth, this being the determining role of the northern textile workers in the creation of Blackpool. By emphasizing the link between the technological wonders of Blackpool and the power of northern grit, the regional-popular discourse of the Lancashire bourgeoisie rendered explicit what had been an implicit truth all along, namely, that Blackpool was materially and culturally inseparable from the Lancashire textile industry. The experience of the Tower similarly rendered apparent the essential truth that the creative power of Lancashire capital was founded on the contribution of the workers themselves. In short, the developments and discourse of the 1890s made it clear that Blackpool was a space of pleasure for the working class created in large part by the working class.

It is true, therefore, that something profound happened in Blackpool during the 1890s. This was not the suppression of the carnivalesque, however, nor was it the ideological incorporation of the masses. Rather, the 1890s witnessed Blackpool's transformation from a homely town with a bracing sea breeze into a space of hope; a space symbolizing hope in the collective creative potential of the working class. Blackpool Tower was the ultimate product and the ultimate symbol of this hope. When it opened in 1894, 500 special excursion trains arrived from the Lancashire textile towns and 70,000 people queued to enter (Curtis, 1988: 23). From that moment on, the Tower simply was Blackpool. In the early 1930s a group of children from a Lancashire textile town were asked to draw a picture of Blackpool. Each one independently drew the Tower and nothing else (Harrison, 1938: 400). The symbolic place occupied by the Tower in the consciousness of the Lancashire textile workers is hinted at by William Woodruff in his account of life in the cotton town of Blackburn in the early 20th century. Woodruff describes the typical Lancashire 'front room', a pristine place of family pride and identity used only for 'special occasions'. On the mantelpiece stood pictures of his relatives. Set above these – and the same would have been true of countless thousands of other identity-defining Lancashire front rooms – hung a framed picture of Blackpool Tower (Woodruff, 2000: 16). Memoirs repeatedly tell the tale of Tower-spotting on the train, of the first sight of the Tower stimulating not only excitement, but also anticipatory imaginative hope (Dobson and Brotherton, 1988: 40–3; Hudson, 1992: 12–13). Mass Observation described the change of mood on the train once the Tower came into sight. ‘It’s all Blackpool – all magic – now. The ordinary, the common, the usual is all left far behind, left in the mill town’ (Cross, 1990: 60). Precisely because of what it symbolized – the central role of the working
class in constructing a space of pleasure and progress – the Tower served as a utopian text, liberating the visitor’s imagination to contemplate the real possibility of better ways of being. If utopianism can be seen as a process driven by and embodying creative hope, then Blackpool Tower was infused with a utopian portent at least as great as any of the traditional recreational practices so beloved of Bakhtinian theory.

**Blackpool Tower: Utopia of Spatial Form**

The utopian promise of Blackpool Tower was inscribed on the one hand by what its very construction symbolized; the determining role of the Lancashire working class in creating a space of pleasure and hope for the Lancashire working class. It was inscribed on the other by its status as a utopian text in its own right. A utopian text at its best performs various functions. It depicts a non-existent society that is regarded as better than the one in which its readers live (Sargent, 1994). In so doing ‘[i]ts unabashed and flagrant otherness gives it a power which is lacking in other analytical devices’ (Geoghegan, 1987: 1). By virtue of its fantastic nature, which defies the rules of logic, common sense and realism, it is able ‘to illuminate and emphasize the neglected, shadowy, hidden parts – and to show the interrelatedness – of the existing system’ (Geoghegan, 1987: 1–2). By emphasizing the emancipatory dynamic of certain aspects of the present, it also celebrates activities and practices whose potential is currently being stifled. Through all of this the utopia induces the reader’s imagination to contemplate the possibility of other worlds (Suvin, 1990).

With regard to its capacity to render the present world transparent, Thompson (1983) draws a parallel between Blackpool Tower and Barthes’ analysis of the Eiffel Tower. For Barthes, the way in which the Eiffel Tower gazes at Paris induces a sublime kind of pleasure, in which the visitor is at first mesmerized by the panoramic view but then engages in a struggle to decode it, to identify familiar points of reference, to link these and thereby gain an insight into the interrelatedness of the social totality. In the case of Blackpool Tower, the utopian power of the gaze was enhanced by what its visitors had experienced prior to their ascent, in the Tower buildings below.

The Tower buildings were a major architectural innovation, combining several functions in a single structure – an immense, enclosed red-brick box that hid the outside world completely from view (Pearson, 1991). Once inside, everything became an event. The corridors and staircases were covered in opulent low-relief panels that infused the act of walking with such a sense of fantastic otherness that bottlenecks were frequently encountered as visitors stood motionless in awe (Pearson, 1991; Turner and Palmer, 1976: 49). Those who managed to walk were then presented with the aquarium, menagerie and botanical gardens, a succession of glimpses into the exoticism of other extant realities. Descending then into the base of the buildings, the visitor entered the Tower Circus, not only the largest and most extravagant in the world but also a space which offered
an insight into the possibilities of the future (Curtis, 1988: 23; Rothwell, 1986: 6). A unique flooding mechanism allowed the vast floor of the circus to be filled with water in a matter of minutes, then drained just as quickly. Once filled, the circus became an arena for swimming and aquatic displays. Here, then, the interface between land and sea was mastered and controlled before the very eyes of the visitor. In the world outside, a hundred yards across the promenade, the ordering of space and time was dictated by the tides. Here, inside, sea became beach and beach became sea in the space of minutes. Having witnessed humanity’s capacity to manipulate the nature of space at will, visitors then proceeded to Ye Olde English Village, complete with ‘authentic’ village houses and shops, which formed the entrance lobby of the Tower ascent. Only then, having experienced the exoticism of other presents, the possibilities of the future, and representations of a medieval past, all navigated via corridors in which the most banal of acts was transformed into a magnificent event; only then did the visitor ascend the Tower to gaze upon and decode the interrelatedness of their immediate present.

Finally, there was dancing. Poole (1983: 92) says that during the Lancashire wakes ‘the more positive and joyous features of working-class life were magnified’. The same might be said of Blackpool, especially with regard to the way in which the joyous feature of dancing was magnified in the Tower Ballroom. More than anything, the Tower Ballroom demonstrated how the positives within the present could be captured, enhanced and rendered a thing of beauty to celebrate. Aside from the bracing sea breeze, dancing had always been Blackpool’s principal attraction and some of the most poignant passages in the ‘Trip to Blackpool’ literature describe the sheer exuberant pleasure of the dance. In this context, as Walton (1994b: 196) rightly observes, ‘the Tower Ballroom became the greatest shrine to the Lancashire working-class love of dancing’. The greatest achievement of one of the country’s greatest architects, Frank Matcham, in sheer size and opulence the Ballroom to this day ‘remains the most richly decorated large space in England’ (Girouard, 1990: 290–1). At the time ‘it enabled the mill hands of Lancashire to dance together in a setting as superficially glittering as anything provided for the court of Versailles, and a great deal larger’ (Girouard, 1990: 291).

It is useful here to highlight Dyer’s (1981: 177) claim that: ‘Entertainment does not . . . present models of utopian worlds. . . . Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized.’ In these terms, the social significance of the Ballroom was twofold. On the one hand, it represented the most glorious place to dance on earth. In his novel, Warren of Manchester, Arthur Laycock (1904: 101–2) captures something of its glory:

The rhythmical flow of the vari-coloured figures across the smooth expanse, the glitter of gilt ornaments in the embellishments of the building, the
thousands of brilliant sparks streaming everywhere, the prismatic colours directed at intervals on the dancers, all combined to produce an incomparable spectacle – radiant, refulgent, entrancing.

On the other hand, social relations were genuinely transformed in the Ballroom. As Laycock (1904: 101) again describes:

The mill-girl, in sailor hat and tasteful blouse, glided cheek by jowl with the factory-master’s daughter, the spinner, with the smart city clerk and the stylish salesman who sold the cotton that he spun. All classes co-mingled freely, presenting an interesting study to the student of human nature by reason of their general geniality and camaraderie.

If the spectre of Bakhtin must be made to haunt Blackpool then it should be here, for it was the experience of dancing in the Tower Ballroom at the turn of the 20th century that came closest to his description of the truly human relations of the carnival. It was here that class distinctions came closest to being suspended, that communication came closest to being free and frank, that the crowd came closest to fusing into the immortal mass body of the people, united in free celebration of the most beloved of all social practices. In the utopian space of Blackpool Tower, that symbol of hope, people experienced a life that was better than the one in which they ordinarily lived. The Tower exuded an ‘unabashed and flagrant otherness’. Cocooned in a vast indoor space with no window to the world outside, the dictates of common sense and realism were subverted completely. The very unreal juxtaposition of exotic, technological and medieval otherness served as the basis on which the immediate present was viewed in its now-very-mutable glory from the top of the world’s second-tallest building. As a finale, the Tower Ballroom, with its truly human relations, became ‘the place where life was lived as it ought to be’ (Girouard, 1990: 300).

Conclusion

Talking of contemporary Blackpool, Bennett argues that:

... the never-ending excess of eating and drinking, the disruption of conventional temporal rhythms, the transgression of normal rules of dress and behaviour by the wearing of funny hats and the like ... point to a residue, a utopian excess ... a residue which could be made to point in fruitful directions. (1986: 152)

In striving to locate a utopian excess in the residues of a pre-modern carnivalesque heritage, however, Bennett is looking in the wrong place. If one really wishes to find utopian excess in contemporary Blackpool, then one should turn away from the behaviour of the stag and hen parties – there is nothing to be found there. One should turn instead to the pensioners quietly sitting on the benches lining the promenade and ask what Blackpool Tower meant to them in their youth.
The Tower was the greatest achievement of Victorian seaside architecture, ‘the architecture of pleasure, novelty, excitement and stimulation’ (Pearson, 1991). It was also a defining symbol of the late-Victorian leisure industry as a whole. As such, the pleasure, novelty and excitement it offered could be cited as evidence of the way in which ‘carnivalesque’ practices were transformed and subsumed within the disciplined, ameliorative form of social control now referred to as ‘mass culture’. The reality, however, is somewhat different. In Victorian and Edwardian Blackpool, the Tower was nothing less than the locus of utopian hope. To be sure, Blackpool can no longer boast such associations. This has very little to do with ideological incorporation, however, and everything to do with the decline of the cotton industry. Blackpool’s rise and development had been dependent upon the Lancashire and Yorkshire textile workers, and as their numbers declined so too did Blackpool’s symbolic value and utopian meaning. The subtleties of Blackpool’s utopian heritage are only masked by interpretations which trace the town’s history and development in terms of the carnivalesque and its suppression. What is true of Blackpool may also be true of other examples of the varied social phenomena that have received Bakhtinian analysis.

Notes
1. To illustrate the point, in 1886 (when around 2 million visitors crowded the resort’s beach, streets and pubs) the number of convictions for drunkenness in Blackpool totalled 190 (Dobson and Brotherton, 1988: 83). It may, of course, be that behaviour deemed disorderly inland was tolerated in Blackpool (which, to an extent, it was). It was also the case, however, that ‘there was a common awareness of persisting boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable conduct which should not be transgressed’ (Walton, 1998b: 175).

2. On the issue of gender relations, while there is little evidence to suggest that these were transformed or suspended among the holiday-makers, Walton (1978: 90) suggests that becoming a financially independent landlady in the resort ‘provided an early and remarkable opportunity for female emancipation’.

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