

Chapter XX

Mechanical Pleasures: The Appeal of British Amusement Parks, 1900–1914

Josephine Kane

In April 1908, the *World's Fair* published an account of progress at the White City exhibition ground, which was nearing completion at London's Shepherd's Bush.¹ Under the creative control of famed impresario Imre Kiralfy, a series of grand pavilions and landscaped grounds were underway, complete with what would become London's first purpose-built amusement park.² The amusements at White City had been conceived as a light-hearted sideline for visitors to the inaugural Franco–British Exhibition, but proved just as popular as the main exhibits. The spectacular rides towered over the whole site and were reproduced in countless postcards and souvenirs. Descriptions of the 'mechanical marvels' at the amusement park dominated coverage in the national press. *The Times* reported on the long queues for a turn on the Flip Flap – a gigantic steel ride which carried passengers back and forth in a 200-foot arch – and of the endless line of cars crawling to the top of the Spiral Railway before 'roaring and rattling, round and round to the bottom' (Figure XX.1).³ The Franco–British Exhibition was visited by 8 million people, but it was the amusement park which captured the public imagination and made a lasting impression.⁴

¹ *The World's Fair* is a national amusement trade newspaper, published weekly from June 1904. Providing news and commentary about the industry, it was read by fairground and amusement park operators across England, who used its pages to buy or sell rides and equipment, to advertise jobs or services and to let or request concessions pitches. The *World's Fair* is the single most important published source about fairgrounds and amusement parks during the twentieth century.

² 'White City Wonders', *World's Fair* (25 April 1908), p. 5.

³ 'At the Franco–British Exhibition', *The Times* (9 June 1908), p. 8.

⁴ Javier Pes, 'Kiralfy, Imre (1845–1919)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53347> accessed 11 January 2013.

[Insert Fig. XX.1 here – landscape or portrait - **check**]

Figure XX.1 The Flip Flap and Spiral Railway at London’s White City, 1908

Source: © The author’s collection

The following year, in a survey of London exhibitions, *The Times* acknowledged the growing importance of amusement areas, observing that: ‘We do not go to exhibitions for instruction ... the great mass of people go to them for pure amusement’.⁵ The universal appeal of these amusements was deemed particularly noteworthy, and a remarkable royal endorsement in July 1909 provided definitive proof that the amusement park was not just for the masses. Queen Alexandra and Princess Victoria, visiting the Imperial International Exhibition at White City, were given a tour of the adjoining amusement park and – much to the delight of the crowds – decided to sample some of the rides. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that the Princess rode the Witching Waves (an early incarnation of the dodgems, recently imported from America), while the Queen herself took a trip on the Scenic Railway rollercoaster (Figure XX.2) and completed two winning runs on the Miniature Brooklands racetrack.⁶ It was a promotional masterstroke, signalling to the country that mechanised amusement had joined the ranks of respectable modern entertainments.

[Insert Fig. XX.2 here – landscape or portrait - **check**]

Figure XX.2 The Scenic Railway at London’s White City, 1908. Built by John Henry Iles, this ride featured scale bridges, waterfalls and mountains and was famously patronised by Queen Alexandra in 1909. Note the group of smartly

⁵ ‘Open-air Pleasures in London’, *The Times* (24 May 1909), p. 13. This tendency had been observed at the Crystal Palace American Exhibition in 1902 where a ride from Coney Island, Loop-the-loops, outshone the manufacturing exhibits. Although the amusements did not yet amount to a coherent amusement park, the reporter noted that: ‘it is not for exhibitions that visitors go to Crystal Palace. They go to enjoy themselves’: ‘American Exhibition at Crystal Palace’, *The Times* (2 June 1902), p. 13.

⁶ ‘Visit of the Queen to White City’, *London Daily Telegraph* (15 July 1909), sourced from the William Bean Scrapbook, Blackpool Pleasure Beach Archive (hereafter cited as BPBA).

dressed women waiting a turn *Source:* © The author's collection

But Imre Kiralfy – the brains behind White City – was far from a solitary visionary. The Edwardian era produced a number of wealthy entrepreneurs who recognised the huge potential for amusement parks as new forms of commercial entertainment. In 1908, the amusement park concept had been around for about a decade, but was still really a novelty. Britain's longest serving amusement park had started life on Blackpool's South Shore in 1896, inspired by the success of New York's iconic Coney Island.⁷ The Pleasure Beach, as it became known, cast the die for a growing number of competitors, and the opening of London's White City coincides with the beginning of a frenzied phase of investment in American-style amusement parks in cities and seaside resorts across Britain. Between 1906 and 1914, more than thirty major parks operated around the country and, by the outbreak of the First World War, millions of people visited these sites each year.⁸

Kiralfy and his peers proclaimed themselves pioneers of modern entertainment. But did the experiences on offer really mark a significant break with the past? The early parks followed a distinct formula. Unlike their fairground cousins, amusement parks were enclosed, fixed-site installations controlled by a single business interest. In 1903, for example, William Bean and John Outhwaite secured a £30,000 mortgage to develop

⁷ See John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); John K. Walton, 'Popular Playgrounds: Blackpool and Coney Island, c.1880–1970', *Manchester Region History Review* 17, 1 (2004), p. 52. By 1906, over 1500 parks operated across the US – see 'Park Notes', *Billboard* (3 February 1906), p. 20, quoted in Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. 139.

⁸ This figure is based on a survey of parks featured in *World's Fair* from 1906 to 1939, and on the comprehensive lists made by Robert Preedy, *Roller Coasters: Their Amazing History* (Leeds: Robert Preedy, 1992), and *Roller Coaster: Shake, Rattle and Roll!* (Leeds: Robert Preedy, 1996). Reliable visitor statistics are scarce, but a sense of numbers can be gleaned from newspaper reports and other contemporary sources.

30 acres of Blackpool's shorefront into the Pleasure Beach.⁹ The target audience was urban, adult and socially all-encompassing. It ranged 'from the young to the middle aged, and from those who could just afford an annual day trip, to the curious middle classes for whom the crowd itself was an essential part of the spectacle'.¹⁰ It is estimated, for example, that 200,000 people visited Blackpool Pleasure Beach on a typical bank holiday weekend in 1914.¹¹

In the interests of minimising disreputable behaviour, wardens policed the grounds and, at night, flood lighting banished opportunities for shady dealings.¹² They offered a wide range of popular entertainments, including battle re-enactments, cinema, dancing, theatres, concession stalls, landscaped gardens and often a zoo. But the amusement parks were dominated by machines for fun, and it was this aspect which marked them out as something unique. In particular, it was the rollercoaster – the defining symbol of the new parks – which enjoyed phenomenal success.¹³

Contemporary commentators were often bemused by the success of amusement parks. So what exactly was their appeal? Why were the huge crowds – predominantly drawn from the wage-earning urban masses – prepared to pay for pleasure rides on machines which looked and sounded much like their everyday environment? The answer lies partly in the momentous cultural impact of industrialisation. The parks catered for the industrialised masses, offering – like the cinema – an otherworldly escape

⁹ Peter Bennett, *Blackpool Pleasure Beach: A Century of Fun* (Blackpool: Blackpool Pleasure Beach, 1996), p. 18.

¹⁰ Walton, 'Popular Playgrounds', p. 54.

¹¹ Gary C. Cross and John K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 47.

¹² At Blackpool Pleasure Beach, for example, gambling and gypsies were banned and the grounds were 'policed in accordance with the requirements of the Chief Constable': *Blackpool Gazette News* (12 April 1907), BPBA.

¹³ See J. Meredith Neil, 'The Rollercoaster: Architectural Symbol and Sign', *Journal of Popular Culture* 15, 1 (1981), pp. 108–15.

from the drudgery of industrial labour whilst (paradoxically) mirroring the factory system in their regularised opening times, dependence on modern transport networks and in the industrial rhythm of the attractions they offered. Just as concepts of work, time and space were altered by the onset of modernity, ideas about what constituted pleasurable experiences were transformed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For people living in towns and cities across Britain, visiting an amusement park forged new understandings of modern pleasure and became a defining counterpart to life in the modern metropolis. This chapter considers the significance of the amusement park experience for Edwardian Britons, focusing on the idea of ‘machines for fun’ and the crowd itself to explore their enormous appeal.

Machines for Fun

The visual landscape of the Edwardian parks was quite unlike anything which had come before. Architectural eclecticism ruled. Amusement parks combined familiar styles – the exoticism and grandeur of international exhibitions and seaside piers, and the faux luxury and scenic realism of theatrical design – with the ‘tober’ layout of traditional fairgrounds.¹⁴ With a single sweep of the eye, the visitor might encounter the imposing industrial skeleton of a rollercoaster, a tin-roofed hoop-la stall, the towering concrete fortress of a battle re-enactment show, a mock-Tudor house and an Indian-style tea room (Figure XX.3). At the turn of the century, eclecticism was a source of delight, a visual pleasure learned at the exhibitions and transposed to the amusement world.¹⁵ But this seemingly ad hoc jumble was, in fact, underpinned by the visual language of machines. It was precisely this technological aesthetic – mechanical rides in motion and multicoloured electric lights – that set the amusement park experience apart.¹⁶ At sites

¹⁴ ‘Tober’ is a term used to describe the site occupied by the fair.

¹⁵ Alexander Chase-Levenson, ‘Annihilating Time and Space: Eclecticism and Virtual Tourism at the Sydenham Crystal Palace’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 34, 5 (December 2012), pp. 461–75.

¹⁶ On this theme see Brenda Brown, ‘Landscapes of Theme Park Rides: Media, Modes, Messages’, in Terence Young

such as London's White City, the 'gear and girder' aesthetic of the industrialised workplace was transposed to the world of pleasure for the first time, and with great success.¹⁷ Indeed, the bare lattice-structures and whirling mechanical apparatus of the rides played a key role in the success of the amusement park formula.

[Insert Fig. XX.3 here – landscape or portrait - **check**]

Figure XX.3 Main Street at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, c. 1923. The eclectic delights include, from left to right: Noah's Ark (1922), Scenic Railway (1907), Rainbow Pleasure Wheel (1912), Naval Spectatorium (1910), Big Dipper (1923) and Helter Skelter Lighthouse (1906) Source: © The author's collection

The visual delight found in machines for pleasure clearly emerges from photographic evidence of early amusement parks. One particularly arresting image, reproduced on a souvenir postcard from Kiralfy's Franco–British Exhibition of 1908, suggests the sense of pride and wonder associated with the latest thrill ride (Figure XX.1). In the foreground, smartly dressed men and women enjoy a sedate afternoon tea, their backs turned to the camera. From the formal poses and composition of the photograph, one might expect the group to be contemplating a quiet ornamental garden, or enjoying the gentle melodies of a bandstand. But instead the central focus of the scene is two massive and foreboding thrill machines: the aforementioned Flip Flap and Spiral Railway. A strikingly similar photograph of the Scenic Railway at Margate's Dreamland taken twelve years later suggests that by 1920 this had become a standard element of the amusement park experience. The rattle and roar of speeding carriages

and Robert Riley (eds), *Theme Park Landscapes: Antecedents and Variations* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002), p. 241.

¹⁷ The phrase 'gear and girder' was coined by the literary critic Cecelia Tichi to describe the pervasive impact of technology on American culture and aesthetics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Cecelia Tichi, *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1987), p. xiii.

and screaming thrill-seekers was not, it seems, considered at odds with sedate afternoon refreshments. The spirit of these images is celebratory rather than humorous or ironic, and suggests a more complex engagement of the amusement park landscape than might at first appear.

The appeal of monumental machinery had its roots in the international exhibitions and railway and bridge-opening ceremonies of the nineteenth century, where industrial technologies were staged as spectacle.¹⁸ The towering rollercoasters, swirling roundabouts and clunking revolving wheels at amusement parks visually replicated these icons of engineering progress (Figure XX.4). As the *World's Fair* observed, 'The Great Wheel [at Earl's Court] was almost as much of a landmark for London as the Eiffel Tower is to Paris'.¹⁹ Like the railway stations and factories which filled Victorian cities, mechanised amusements were consumed as rhetorical structures which demonstrated the advance of civilisation.²⁰ A working drawing of the new Water Chute at Blackpool Pleasure Beach was, for example, published in the local paper in 1907, complete with dimensions and other scientific credentials.²¹

[Insert Fig. XX.4 here – landscape or portrait - **check**]

Figure XX.4 The Gigantic Wheel at London's Earl's Court, 1908. This 300-foot revolving wheel arrived at Earl's Court in 1896, just three years after the Ferris Wheel was first demonstrated at the Chicago Exposition in 1893 *Source:* © The author's collection

The amusement park landscape – with the rollercoaster as its focal point – was designed to startle and surprise, to inspire awe and wonder, to ignite people's curiosity,

¹⁸ Lieven de Cauter, 'The Panoramic Ecstasy: On World Exhibitions and the Disintegration of Experience', *Theory, Culture and Society* 10, 4 (1993), p. 12.

¹⁹ *World's Fair* (15 February 1908), p. 1.

²⁰ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass/London: MIT Press, 1994), p. xviii.

²¹ 'New Water Chute', *Blackpool Times* (16 March 1907), BPBA.

and, above all, to part them from their money. To this end, the bare lattice structures and visible workings of cranks, pulleys and gears, had the additional benefit of enhancing anticipation. The loading bays, often with neo-classical or exotic facades, were designed not to beautify this machine landscape, but to entice customers, then prime and deliver them into the realm of thrilling experience. But the aesthetic appeal of giant thrill-machines also lay in a combination of what David Nye has called the mathematical and dynamic sublime.²² Like the arrival of high-rise buildings and transatlantic liners, these vertigo-inducing rides seemed to defy the forces of gravity and shared the power of the railway and telegraph to compress space and time. The landscaped or ‘scenic’ rollercoasters, covered by moulded ferro-concrete mountainscapes were, for example, designed to create immersive temporal and spatial effects for the riders, rather than enhance the aesthetic reality of the parks.²³ They created exaggerated and compressed versions of long-distance travel and exotic locations, such as the Canadian Rockies or the Swiss Alps. As work and travel speeded up, so an act of pleasure could be time–space compressed into a three-minute thrill ride (Figure XX.2).

These rides created an affordable, idealised window into the world of long-distance travel. At Manchester’s White City, for example, Hale’s Tours – a simulator ride which featured travelogue film projected through the windows of a mock-up railway carriage – was billed as:

²² Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, pp. 8–9. Presenting the sublime as cultural practice, rather than as an immutable law of perception (Edmund Burke), Nye describes the history of popular ‘enthusiasms’ for technological objects in the United States. Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* was first published in 1757. Though Nye charts the development of what he calls a ‘popular sublime’, he draws heavily on the definition proposed by Burke (astonishment mingled with terror), and later developed by Kant (arithmetical, and dynamic sublime).

²³ See, for example, John Henry Iles’s Scenic Railway at White City in 1908, modelled on the Canadian Rockies: Preedy, *Roller Coasters*, p. 31; Jeffrey T. Schnapp, ‘Crash (Speed as Engine of Individuation)’, *Modernism/Modernity* 6, 1 (1999), p. 29.

more than an illusory trip, for we see the most natural pictures of all the most interesting places of resort to which the wealthy of all nations go in their hundreds and pay huge sums for the pleasure. We get it here for an infinitesimal sum of two or three coppers and the loss of only a few minutes of time, and in perfect comfort.²⁴

Rollercoasters also offered, in visually accessible ways, the potential for unparalleled forms of motion: sharp turns, vertiginous inclines, even 360-degree revolution, as in the case of the Loop-the-Loop at the Crystal Palace in 1902. The verticality and sweeping curves of these rides echoed the freedom of bodily movement which defined the experience of riding them. They did not need to be beautiful in a traditional sense to be enjoyed, and the crowds were not expected to qualify them in these terms. The Franco-British Exhibition postcard illustrates perfectly how, in 1908, mechanised amusements seemed to demonstrate the advance of civilisation.

After dark, the rides and park structures were transformed by an abundance of electric lights, a celebration of the electrical sublime.²⁵ Illumination was rapidly embraced by amusement park owners as a way of extending hours of operation whilst, at the same time, allaying fears of criminality and sexual transgressions associated with darkness.²⁶ Blackpool Pleasure Beach acquired over a thousand lamps in February 1906 and, not to be outdone, Manchester's White City announced plans a month later for 'over 60,000 electric lights'.²⁷ An additional benefit was that the smaller rides and temporary stalls which, by day, betrayed their cheap building materials and rapid construction, were, by night, melded seamlessly into a spectacular and entrancing display of modernity (Figure XX.5). Rem Koolhaas observed this effect in his seminal reading of the Coney Island parks. The electrified night-time landscape embodied the

²⁴ Souvenir of the White City (1909), p. 23.

²⁵ Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, p. 151.

²⁶ 'Our Al Fresco Entertainments', *Blackpool Herald* (23 July 1906), BPBA.

²⁷ 'The White City', *World's Fair* (2 March 1907), p. 1.

‘Irresistible Synthetic’, an urban prototype which would later emerge in New York’s Manhattan.²⁸

[Insert Fig. XX.5 here – landscape or portrait - **check**]

Figure XX.5 Night time view over the Boating Lake at Manchester’s White City, 1910. White City’s owner, John Calvin Brown, claimed to have installed over 60,000 electric lights *Source:* © The author’s collection

Speed, Shocks and Kinaesthetic Pleasures

Visual pleasures at the amusement park were a prelude to physical engagement. In contrast to the spectacular displays at museums and exhibitions, where visitors were encouraged to look but not touch, the amusement parks were designed to be thrilling in kinetic, haptic, aural and visual ways. In 1912, Blackpool Pleasure Beach acquired the Rainbow Pleasure Wheel. A detailed description of the ride from a promotional souvenir shows how the multi-sensory nature of attractions was actively promoted. Colour, noise and speed were all incorporated in a ride which, according to its title and accompanying literature, defined the experience of modern pleasure:

It is a Great Wheel, with two “humped” railways within the periphery, which is prismatically painted to represent the Rainbow. The giant circle revolves. The passengers are carried part of the way round, until the cars, by gravitation, run over the humps and up the other side of the Wheel; and then they roll back. Racing each other, backwards and forwards, through tunnels, with weird noises and scenes – it is Dante’s Inferno!²⁹

Like the budding advertising industry in the early 1900s, the amusement park landscape was designed to encourage people to pay for a thrill ride or attraction ‘through processes of vision and initiation of desire’.³⁰ The commodification of these multi-sensory (or

²⁸ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), pp. 35, 41.

²⁹ Blackpool Pleasure Beach Souvenir Booklet (c. 1912), Blackpool Central Library.

³⁰ Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure*, p. 139.

kinaesthetic) pleasures played a key role in success of the amusement park formula.³¹

The appeal of kinaesthetic pleasures was rooted in the rise of new modes of perception in the nineteenth century. Wolfgang Schivelbusch charts the emergence of a specifically modern form of panoramic vision produced by mechanical motion, inaugurated by the railway and sustained by the department stores and industrial cityscapes.³² As speed of motion causes the foreground to disappear, the individual feels increasingly detached from their surroundings, separated by an ‘almost unreal barrier’. The landscape is thus stripped of its intensity and is experienced impressionistically, or ‘evanescently’.³³ Panoramic perception depends on both physical speed and the commodity character of objects viewed.³⁴ Schivelbusch compares the modern shopping experience with a train ride, suggesting that ‘the customer was kept in motion; he travelled through the department store as a train passenger travelled through the landscape. In their totality, the goods impressed him as an ensemble of objects and price tags fused into a single pointillistic overall view’.³⁵ Early film show how similar modes of viewing operated at the amusement park.

In 1909, William Bean, owner of Blackpool Pleasure Beach, commissioned what may be the first promotional film of an amusement park, shown in Manchester to prospective visitors, and at the Pleasure Beach itself. The local paper described the film:

First a panoramic view of the whole grounds, holidaymakers everywhere, is shown. This was taken from the top of the switchback. Next comes a panoramic view of the Spanish street [with] a gay old spark, with a bevy of girls on his hands ... Calling at the Oscillating Staircase, people

³¹ ‘Kinaesthetic’ is used here to describe the aesthetics of movement and multi-sensory modes of perception which were produced and experienced at the amusement park.

³² Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), p. 194.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

are seen tumbling upstairs and down, the gay old party comes slithering down the Helter Skelter, the girls after him ... The dash down the water chute comes out splendidly in the picture, ... making a tremendous splash. Finally the old party slips off with his favourite girl into the River Caves.³⁶

The film, produced by the New Bioscope Trading Co., included a sequence shot on board the Scenic Railway. The cameraman claimed (incorrectly) that it was the ‘first film ever taken under such conditions’. The novelty of combining panoramic shots of crowds, close-up frames of rides, and filming from a moving rollercoaster was clearly impressive, and the newspaper declared it to be ‘very clever’ and ‘a great success’.³⁷ The North West Film Archive holds a number of home movies from the 1920s and 1930s which attempted to capture the park landscape from within a moving rollercoaster, suggesting that new perceptual experiences formed an important and lasting component of the amusement park pleasure formula. The visitor experienced the park as an ensemble landscape of commodified pleasures, infused with speed: multi-directional crowd flows, the movement of ride machinery, and the body itself in motion.

While the *visual* experience provided by a speeding ride might be similar to a train journey, the bumps, jolts and twists of a rollercoaster offered a very different *physical* experience. How was it that being rushed up and down terrifying inclines, spun into a dizzying haze and turned topsy-turvy came to be seen as enjoyable? The answer lies partly in the cultural impact of urban modernity. By the turn of the twentieth century, the speed of travel and urban life had become normalised. The well-documented anxieties and bewilderment expressed by early train passengers and city dwellers in the mid-nineteenth century receded.³⁸ Travellers and urbanites became

³⁶ ‘A Gay Time on Blackpool Pleasure Beach’, *Blackpool Times* (7 September 1907), BPBA.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ For a detailed account of early ambivalence towards railway travel see Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, pp. 5–15.

desensitised to their environments, acquiring what has been called ‘the industrial consciousness’.³⁹

The idea that people develop a protective mental layer against the over-stimulation of modern life was first formulated by German sociologist Georg Simmel, who observed the ‘blasé’ attitude of urbanites in his seminal essay ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ (1903)⁴⁰ and, later, by Sigmund Freud’s ‘stimulus-shield’ theory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922).⁴¹ Simmel and Freud suggested that only extreme shocks could penetrate this protective psychological layer. Just as the amusement parks were becoming more popular, the potential of shock to be pleasurable was gaining recognition.

Writing about the Berlin Trade Exhibition in 1896 (the same year that William Bean registered a London syndicate to operate the rides on Blackpool’s South Shore), Simmel argues that the modern urban experience ‘produced a thirst for yet more amusement’.⁴² The blasé attitude, characterised by ‘an incapacity to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy’, paradoxically lead the urbanite to seek out ever-new attractions.⁴³ Simmel observes ‘the craving today for excitement, for extreme impressions, for the greatest speed of change ... the modern preference for ‘stimulation’ as such in impressions, relationships and information’.⁴⁴ The indifference

³⁹ Ibid., p. 159.

⁴⁰ Georg Simmel’s ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ was originally published as ‘Die Grosstadt und das Geistesleben’ (1903), trans. reprinted in Donald N. Levine (ed.), *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 329. See also David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge, Mass/London: MIT Press, 1986), p. 73–4.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 4, James Strachey (ed.) (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1974), pp. 20–22.

⁴² Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p. 75; Bennett, *Pleasure Beach*, p. 14.

⁴³ Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (1907), trans. by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London/Boston: Routledge, 1978), p. 257; cited by Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p. 74.

and isolation induced by living in modern cities caused an inner restlessness which people sought to satisfy through intensified experience: ‘the lack of something definite at the centre of the soul impels us to search for momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations and external activities’.⁴⁵

The amusement parks, with their mechanised thrill rides and spectacular displays, were understood as an antidote to desensitisation, and so their emergence was perceived by contemporaries (both advocates and critics) as inextricably linked to the condition of modernity.⁴⁶ In 1912, the *World’s Fair* reported that: ‘Blackpool hungers and thirsts for novelty ... When the Lancashire operative goes to Blackpool ... he puts behind him the monotony of routine and yearns for novelty, sensation and excitement. The immense popularity of Blackpool’s big pleasure beach provides striking proof of this’.⁴⁷

The *World’s Fair* reiterated the belief that amusement park success depended on satisfying the modern person’s insatiable appetite for novelty: ‘only the weirdest sensations are favoured by the public to-day’.⁴⁸ Rides were thus stripped of all sensory buffers in order to re-inject the sense of velocity and danger which had been dampened by upholstered, enclosed railway carriages.⁴⁹ Olympia’s Canadian Toboggan, for example, promised to ‘bump with as much violence as if you were in a motor car on a bad road’.⁵⁰ The opportunity for interaction with strangers and physical intimacy on rides such as The Tickler or in the quiet darkness of the River Caves compensated for the indifference of the city street. The amusement parks represented a unique space in

⁴⁵ Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, p. 484; cited by Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p. 72.

⁴⁶ ‘The Mad Rush for Pleasure’, *World’s Fair* (15 January 1927), p. 21.

⁴⁷ ‘Rainbow Pleasure Wheel’, *World’s Fair* (24 February 1912), p. 8.

⁴⁸ ‘All About the Mammoth Fun City’, *World’s Fair* (31 August 1907), p. 6.

⁴⁹ The comfort and enclosure of late-nineteenth century trains repressed fears of accidents and danger: Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, p. 162.

⁵⁰ ‘All About the Mammoth Fun City’, *World’s Fair* (31 August 1907), p. 6.

which the rules of social convention – reserve, indifference, class distinction – could be flouted and the stimulus-shield of modern life might be momentarily cast aside.

The search for intense experience – thrill-seeking – was understood as a defining characteristic of the modern psyche. In 1908, a journalist provides a glimpse of Edwardian attitudes to the thrilling pleasures offered by the amusement park. Thrill is described as an ‘ecstasy of excitement’ which ‘stirs his blood, excites his brain’, offering transcendent possibilities. On the Scenic Railway, we are told, even the ‘mildest of men’ becomes a ‘reckless hero’ and ‘staid old ladies ... frisky maidens’. The perception of danger and speed is essential for this momentary catharsis, enabling the individual to take ‘the brake off himself’ or to ‘relieve her feelings’. Thrill-seeking itself was, of course, not new in 1900. But mechanically produced amusement park thrills were understood as a scientific phenomena in an era of progress. The rollercoaster ride is ‘a psychological revelation’ in which ‘the modern man ... enjoys primitive emotions in a scientific fashion’.⁵¹

The perception of thrill as an enjoyable experience depended entirely on the trust placed in the safety of the rides themselves. Despite sharing the same technological vocabulary, amusement park machines were carefully distinguished from their industrial and transport counterparts.⁵² While serious and sometimes fatal mishaps frequently *did* occur at amusement parks, most were caused by passengers misusing rides – standing up in cars or leaning out. At the inquest into the death of 19-year-old Alfred Butts on the Figure Eight rollercoaster at Cleethorpes, for example, the coroner passed a verdict of accidental death following witness accounts of Butts’ behaviour: ‘When they neared the bottom, Butts rose a little and put his hands in his pockets, leaning back while he did so. He lost his balance then, and went over the side of the car,

⁵¹ ‘A Fortune in a Thrill’, *The Sunday Chronicle* (Manchester, 23 August 1908), BPBA.

⁵² Arwen Mohun, ‘Design for Thrills and Safety: Amusement Parks and the Commodification of Risk, 1880–1929’, *Journal of Design History* 14, 4 (2001), p. 292.

trailing along for a little way'.⁵³

The caution demanded in daily life on the construction site, the factory floor or a traffic-filled street was evidently not translated to the amusement park – partly because the otherworldly landscape discouraged such comparisons, and partly because the concept of ‘health and safety’ was still very much in its infancy.⁵⁴ Machines for pleasure were perceived as safe – providing shocks without trauma – and this became a mark of progress itself. Even accidents caused by machinery failure appear to have caused relatively little concern and, in some cases, actually added to the success of a ride. Take, for example, the first serious accident on Blackpool Pleasure Beach’s Scenic Railway at the height of the 1911 summer season. A car loaded with 25 people was ‘thrown violently off the tracks’, causing six passengers to be severely injured. The aftermath of the incident caused great interest amongst the crowd, becoming a ghoulish spectacle in its own right. A report stated that ‘assistance to the injured ... was greatly hampered, and the efforts of the ambulance workers and others hindered, by the crowd of people who immediately collected around’. Just two hours later, ‘the service of the cars was resumed and they were as freely patronised as ever’.⁵⁵

The amusement parks became crucial loci for the commodification of risk, both through the entertainment value of apparently safe thrill rides and the high-risk antics of daredevil stunt performers, and the hazards faced by park workers who operated the rides. Reports in the *World’s Fair* of horrific injuries and fatalities suffered by ride operatives is testament to a level of peril unseen by visitors.⁵⁶ As Arwen Mohun

⁵³ ‘Figure 8 Railway Accident at Cleethorpes’, *World’s Fair* (4 June 1910), p. 7.

⁵⁴ *Royal Society for Prevention of Accidents*: <http://www.rospa.com/about/history/> accessed 26 April 2015.

Formalised attitudes towards safety came surprisingly late in the twentieth century with the 1937 Factory Act.

⁵⁵ ‘Scenic Railway Accident’, *World’s Fair* (19 August 1911), p. 12.

⁵⁶ Two workers were seriously injured during the construction of the Pleasure Beach’s Scenic Railway in May 1907 – one from a fall, the other was electrocuted: ‘Fairground Accident’, *Blackpool Herald* (24 May 1907); ‘Fell Thirty Feet’, *Blackpool Herald* (10 May 1907), BPBA.

observes, visitors to the amusement parks paid to avoid risk, or to watch skilled entertainers taking it.⁵⁷

Wonders of the Modern Age

For critics of modern amusement, the appeal of amusement technologies which mirrored working life was unfathomable. A writer for the *London Standard* called Blackpool a ‘pleasure factory by the sea’. Observing the ‘exorbitantly crushing demands made upon [Lancashire workers’] endurance by the heavily capitalised organisation of pleasure’, the writer comments that ‘one may wish that the operatives of Lancashire would prefer ... rustic pleasuring, though in view of their lives the year round, the wish is hopeless’.⁵⁸ So what made visitors to amusement parks, predominantly drawn from the industrial and white-collar masses, prepared to pay for pleasure rides on machines which replicated their working lives? Many elite commentators failed to grasp the clear distinctions visitors made between what they might ‘endure on a day-to-day basis and what they could selectively pay for’.⁵⁹ More importantly, the amusement park with its machines for fun offered the working masses unprecedented opportunities to participate in a shared culture of modernity.

The rollercoaster, in particular, seemed to epitomise modern pleasure. This was not because the technology itself was new (early rollercoasters were essentially a variation of well-established railway traction systems and bridge construction) – but because it signalled the arrival of technology for fun. A 1906 article in the *Manchester City News*, reporting on amusement parks in Canada, described ‘a bewildering maze of switchbacks, aerial flights, water chutes, scenic and toy railways’ as ‘triumphs of modern civilization ... all brilliantly lighted by electricity’.⁶⁰ A souvenir brochure from

⁵⁷ Mohun, ‘Design for Thrills and Safety’, pp. 292, 300.

⁵⁸ ‘A Day in Breezy Blackpool. A Pleasure Mill by the Sea’, *London Standard* (24 August 1906), BPBA.

⁵⁹ Mohun, ‘Design for Thrills and Safety’, p. 294.

⁶⁰ ‘Canadian Sketches’, *Manchester City News* (8 September 1906), BPBA.

1912 declared Blackpool Pleasure Beach ‘a revelation of the Age of Science’.⁶¹ The industrialisation of amusement seemed to represent how far civilised (Western) societies had progressed – modernity had reached all aspects of life, including the notion of pleasure itself. Just as shopping in a new department store, using a bicycle, or visiting a cinema were identified as activities unique to the modern age, riding a rollercoaster became one way in which contemporaries might achieve the status of ‘being modern’.

Moreover, the ups and downs, sudden twists and the exhilaration of a rollercoaster ride soon became a familiar metaphor for the disjunctive and transient nature of life in the modern city. Sequences shot by mounting a camera on moving rollercoasters (like that used in the 1907 film of Blackpool Pleasure Beach) were later used in commercial films as an allegorical device to denote the modern condition. In 1927, Walter Ruttmann interwove first-person shots from a rollercoaster into the narrative of *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927) to suggest the ‘dizzying, frenetic vortex’ of modern metropolitan life.⁶² In the same year, the British film *Hindle Wakes* employed a lengthy sequence on the Big Dipper at Blackpool Pleasure Beach as a narrative turning point, sparking a scandalous ‘modern’ love affair between a factory girl, Fanny Hawthorne, and the factory-owner’s son.⁶³

From the beginning, the parks contained powerful representations of the newest era-defining technologies, including the aeroplane, the submarine and the motor car. Sir Hiram Maxim’s Captive Flying Machine, first exhibited at Earl’s Court in 1903 and then at Blackpool Pleasure Beach the following year, provided a simulated taste of what

⁶¹ Pleasure Beach Souvenir Brochure (c. 1912), Blackpool Library Collection.

⁶² Lucy Fischer, “‘The Shock of the New’”: Electrification, Illumination, Urbanization, and the Cinema’, in Murray Pomerance (ed.), *Cinema and Modernity* (New Brunswick/London: Rutgers University Press, 2006), p. 36.

⁶³ Maurice Elvey, *Hindle Wakes* (Gaumont British Picture Corporation, 1927).

it might feel like to pilot aeroplane (Figure XX.6).⁶⁴ Having made his name as an engineer of machine guns, Sir Hiram devised the Flying Machine as a fund-raising initiative to support his ongoing experiments in aviation.⁶⁵ As the ride revolves on a 30-metre steel pole, ten suspended carriages fan outwards, creating the illusion of flight. Its arrival at South Shore marked a turning point in the development of the Pleasure Beach: it was ‘one of the first indications of a new era in mechanical contrivances’ which helped transform the ad hoc entertainments into a fully fledged amusement park.⁶⁶

[Insert Fig. XX.6 here – landscape or portrait - check]

Figure XX.6 Sir Hiram Maxim’s Captive Flying Machine at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, c. 1904. One of the earliest thrill rides to be constructed at the Pleasure Beach, the Flying Machine still operates on the same site today *Source:* © The author’s collection

This novelty ride was a remarkable symbol of technological progress. The realisation of powered flight (achieved by the Wright Brothers just a few months after the Flying Machine opened at Earl’s Court) was viewed as the epitome of modernity, a herald of unimaginable change.⁶⁷ The immense popularity of Maxim’s Flying Machines around the country spawned various imitators. In 1909, Manchester’s White City promoted its Aeroflyte as a flight simulator open to all:

⁶⁴ Bennett, *Pleasure Beach*, p. 20.

⁶⁵ In 1884, Sir Hiram formed the Maxim Gun Company. His fully automatic gun was adopted by the British Army in 1889, and the Royal Navy in 1892. The company was later absorbed into Vickers Sons and Maxim. Variants of Maxim’s machine guns were used by British, German and Russian troops in both World Wars: Brysson Cunningham, *Maxim, Sir Hiram Stevens (1840–1916)*, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34954>; Arthur Hawkey, *The Amazing Hiram Maxim: An Intimate Biography* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2001), p. 104.

⁶⁶ ‘South Shore’s Newest Novelty’, *Blackpool Herald* (22 February 1907), BPBA.

⁶⁷ David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: An Essay on a Militant and Technological Nation* (London: Macmillan Press, 1991), p. 2; Robert Wohl, *A Passion For Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 14.

Every man would like to enjoy even for a moment the supposed sensational trip through the air ... It is not possible for many in these days to obtain this opportunity, but the next best thing that is offered them is a short flight on some contrivance or mechanism that will produce similar sensations ... The Aeroflyte ... gives to the occupant of the chair the exact same sensations that are experienced by the balloonist or aeroplanist.⁶⁸

The transcendent possibilities of flight was not the only culture-changing technology to be celebrated at the amusement park. In June 1907, Blackpool Pleasure Beach acquired an attraction which simulated a submarine descent, complete with ‘scientific lecture’.⁶⁹ Later that year, Charles Cochran’s Fun City at Olympia heavily promoted a similar ride – Voyage on a Submarine – which fused science-fiction fantasy with technological utopianism, playing on the transformative potential of this newest form of transportation. It was, in reality ‘a sort of ‘20,000 leagues under the sea’ illusion. You get in, the hatches are screwed down, and then the boat seems to be going down, down, down until you find yourself at the bottom of the sea among the coral and the mermaids’.⁷⁰

In 1870, Jules Verne’s novel *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* popularised the idea of submarine transportation, igniting the popular imagination and fuelling the activities of engineers worldwide. The turn of the twentieth century marks a pivotal time in the development of submarines, with the French and United States navies leading the way. The race to develop submersible technology was viewed with a sense of national urgency and it is no coincidence that simulation rides appeared in amusement parks in the following decade.⁷¹ Underwater travel was viewed as a significant break with the

⁶⁸ *Souvenir of the White City* (1909), p. 24, Manchester Room and County Record Office, acc. 791 M24.

⁶⁹ ‘On the Pleasure Beach, by a Visitor’, *Blackpool Times* (24 August, 1907), BPBA.

⁷⁰ ‘Novelties for the Mammoth Fun City at Olympia’, *World’s Fair* (14 December 1907), p. 6 (quotes extensively from a recent edition of the *Daily Express* national newspaper).

⁷¹ *Submarine*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition:

<http://academic.eb.com.ezproxy.westminster.ac.uk/EBchecked/topic/570813/submarine> ; Bernhard Rieger,

past, as a sign of the progress of the civilised world. The submarine was successfully appropriated by the amusement parks not just because it symbolised technological modernity and Britain's continued naval and imperial prowess, but also because – like the airplane – it offered an experience unimaginable to earlier generations.

In 1907, motoring was a new mode of transport favoured by the fashionable elite. But the opening of the world's first purpose-built racing track at Brooklands in Surrey in June of that year created a surge of popular interest in motor racing as a novel (albeit socially exclusive) sport. Brooklands signalled Britain's arrival as a racing nation, and established driving itself as an aspirational metaphor for the modern age.⁷² Within a year of its completion, Blackpool Pleasure Beach had opened its own version: 'a motor-racing track that provides the delights and the thrills of a miniature Brooklands, with none of its dangers'.⁷³ The ride consisted of three cars, each seating four passengers, which raced along half a mile of parallel tracks at speeds of up to 12 mph, controlled by the driver.⁷⁴ The accessibility and safety of the ride were touted as particularly appealing features. A local paper reported that 'ladies can drive these cars just as well as the sterner sex', whilst 'accidents of any sort are quite out of the question'.⁷⁵

Amusement parks around Britain quickly followed with their own versions of the Miniature Brooklands, including the ride famously endorsed by Queen Alexandra at London's White City in 1909. Patent after patent of mechanical riding devices inspired

Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890–1945 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 227.

⁷² Daryl Adair, 'Spectacles of Speed and Endurance: The Formative Years of Motor Racing in Europe', in David Thoms, Len Holden and Tim Claydon (eds), *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), p. 129.

⁷³ 'Motor Car Racing', *Blackpool Gazette News* (28 August 1908), BPBA.

⁷⁴ 'A Safe Brooklands', *Daily Express* (12 September 1908), BPBA.

⁷⁵ 'Motor Car Racing', *Blackpool Gazette News* (28 August 1908), BPBA.

by the motor car were announced in the *World's Fair*. One of the earliest was Mr Fred Harrison's rollercoaster, *Looping the Loop in a Motor Car*, unveiled in 1906.⁷⁶ The *Rolling Motor Track* of 1910, in which three cars steered themselves around an oscillating track, is another example of the numerous designs exploiting the allure and novelty of motoring.⁷⁷ Driving in 'real life' was deemed highly unsuitable for women and beyond the financial reach of most men.⁷⁸ Rides such as these capitalised on the novelty and socially aspirational appeal of the motor car whilst simultaneously removing the physical, moral and economic constraints.

So, the amusement park appropriated cutting-edge technologies which, in the eyes of contemporaries, marked a clear break with the past and underpinned 'the modernist storyline' of the onward march of progress.⁷⁹ In the first decade of the twentieth century, these technologies – the airplane, the submarine, the motor car – were highly potent emblems of modernity, which lay beyond the reach of all but a select few. By removing the practical, physical and ethical limits of new technologies, the amusement parks enfranchised the masses – and, astonishingly, women – into an elite culture of technological modernity.

The amusement parks employed the language of 'wonder' to describe new attractions with striking regularity.⁸⁰ Blackpool Pleasure Beach's *Sea Circus* (an aquatic roundabout) was portrayed, for example, as 'an elaborate piece of mechanism, having

⁷⁶ 'The World's Fairograph', *World's Fair* (29 December 1906), p. 4.

⁷⁷ 'The Rolling Motor Track', *World's Fair* (30 July 1910), p. 5.

⁷⁸ The RAC initially refused women members, and in defiance of popular disapproval a Ladies Automobile Club was formed in 1903: Sean O'Connell, *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender and Motoring 1896–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 48.

⁷⁹ Thomas Misa, 'The Compelling Tangle of Modernity and Technology', in Thomas Misa, Philip Brey and Andrew Feenberg (eds), *Modernity and Technology* (Cambridge, Mass/London: MIT Press, 2003), p. 12.

⁸⁰ 'White City Wonders', *World's Fair* (25 April 1908), p. 5.

many hidden wonders'.⁸¹ Likewise, the submarine ride was an opportunity to experience 'the countless wonders of the submarine world'.⁸² By describing new rides as modern wonders, the amusement parks tapped into a general fascination with (and fear about) technology itself and the dramatic changes it heralded.⁸³ But the assimilation of new inventions into the recreational experience of the general public also served to demystify them. Just as the national press eulogised Britain's engineering and technological leadership, providing a sense of 'collective purpose' for innovation, rides like the Flying Machine and Miniature Brooklands helped dampen ambivalence to new technologies and create a national culture conducive to technological advance.⁸⁴ At the same time, the amusement parks themselves became part of the landscape of modernity.

The Crowd

The throngs of people who patronised the amusement parks were as much a part of their appeal as the over-sized mechanical attractions. The tea gardens at Manchester's White City were carefully positioned so that its patrons were able to survey 'the constantly moving and changing human panorama as it passes along the promenade'.⁸⁵

Commentators remarked on the novelty and spectacle presented by such gatherings of people. For one journalist writing in 1907, Blackpool's amusement park attractions were overshadowed by the sheer volume of people at the Pleasure Beach. 'On the fairground', he reported, 'the spectacle was simply bewildering. One gazed in amazement, and wondered where all the people came from' (Figure XX.7).⁸⁶

[Insert Fig. XX.7 here – landscape or portrait - check]

⁸¹ 'Fairground Novelties', *Blackpool Times* (20 February 1907), BPBA.

⁸² 'The Latest Novelty', *Blackpool Herald*, (24 May 1907), BPBA.

⁸³ Rieger, *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany*, p. 16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁸⁵ *Souvenir of the White City* (1909), p. 30, Manchester Room and County Record Office, acc. 791 M24.

⁸⁶ 'Bank Holiday', *Blackpool Herald* (6 August 1907), BPBA.

Figure XX.7 Crowds gathered in front of the River Caves of the World at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, c. 1912. This attraction arrived on South Shore from Coney Island, via Earl's Court, in 1905, and remains popular today. Boats carried up to ten passengers through a series of 'underground' caverns, each styled in a different theme. The Caves were an opportunity to escape the noise and bustle of the crowds, and indulge fantasies of exotic travel *Source:* © The author's collection

The scale of the crowds was partly a consequence of the broad social appeal of the amusements. Rides and shows at the Pleasure Beach generally charged between one and three pence, making them within the reach of all but the poorest sections of society.⁸⁷ Even London's White City – where rides charged between six pence and a shilling – a large proportion of the Bank Holiday crowd in 1908 was made up of a spectrum of industrial workers. *The Times* reported that:

The Cooperative Societies of Newcastle, Manchester, Liverpool, Derby, Lincoln, Retford, and Hucknell each sent large parties, and, in addition, there were parties of engineers from Newcastle and Bristol, gasworkers from Cardiff, steelworkers from Sheffield, foundry-workers from Birmingham, and railway *employés* from several centres.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, the amusement park crowd was considerably more diverse than other commercial entertainments aimed at the masses. To a far greater extent than the music hall and public house, the parks attracted equal measures of women and children. A colourful description from 1907 describes the eclectic mix who patronised the Blackpool Pleasure Beach sideshows and who ranged from 'the bewildered miner' to 'smirking young ladies, awkward hobbledoys, self-conscious matrons, reluctant papas, and uneasy family groups'.⁸⁹ Indeed, the appeal of mechanised amusement transcended divisions of age and gender, as well as class – although debates concerning

⁸⁷ 'On the Pleasure Beach' *Blackpool Times* (24 August 1907), BPBA.

⁸⁸ 'Bank Holiday ... At The Franco-British Exhibition', *The Times* (9 June 1908), p. 8.

⁸⁹ 'Blackpool: On the Seafront at Holiday Time', *Lancashire Daily Post* (16 August 1907).

the role of mechanical amusement in the later twentieth century have certainly obscured this fact.⁹⁰ The Edwardian amusement parks – with the help of much-publicised royal and government endorsements – were consumed and enjoyed across the social spectrum.

Moreover, from the start, park entrepreneurs, keen to reproduce the success of exhibition amusements, aimed to attract a prosperous and educated audience, and clearly targeted the middle classes in their promotional material. Various strategies were employed to this end. First, comparisons with London exhibition sites were repeatedly made, with the implication that the amusement parks offered superior and respectable attractions suitable for a more refined audience. In 1907, Southport's proposed amusement park would 'combine the best features of Crystal Palace and Earl's Court'.⁹¹ A visitor to Blackpool Pleasure Beach reported that 'we all rubbed our eyes, and asked each other were we dreaming, or had we, by some mysterious means, been suddenly transported to Earl's Court'.⁹² In 1911, the newly renamed Luna Park advertised itself as the 'White City of Southend'.⁹³

Second, the educational and artistic merit of attractions was heavily promoted. Entertainments celebrated historic events – in the case of Blackpool Pleasure Beach's Monitor and Merrimac Naval Spectatorium, the first battle between two 'ironclad'

⁹⁰ New critical discourses emerge in the 1920s and 30s which depicted the mechanisation of commercial entertainments as the cause and symbol of working-class degeneration. For an examination of the reactions of the British educated elite to the development of commercial gramophone, radio and cinema culture see Dan LeMahieu, *Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). These ideas have continued to influence elitist attitudes toward all manner of entertainments – from amusement parks and cinema, to the juke box and computer games.

⁹¹ 'What Will Southport Do?', *Blackpool Herald* (19 February 1907), BPBA.

⁹² 'On the Pleasure Beach', *Blackpool Times* (24 August 1907), BPBA.

⁹³ Ken Crowe, *Kursaal Memories: A History of Southend's Amusement Park* (St. Albans: Skelter Publishing, 2003), p. 15.

warships off the coast of Virginia in 1861.⁹⁴ These spectacles claimed to be authentic in every detail, and often incorporated some form of educational commentary. The submarine ride, for instance, was accompanied by a ‘capital scientific lecture on the diver, his equipment, and work in the depths of the sea’.⁹⁵ Artistic merit was equally stressed. The publicity for an illusion show called ‘Sculpture Bewitched’ informed potential visitors to the Pleasure Beach that it was the creation of ‘Mr. Hudson, a portrait painter, whose work is of such merit as to have secured his admission to the Royal Academy’. The show was ‘a genuine novelty, of great refinement’.⁹⁶

Finally, the discourse of health was employed in order to distinguish the amusement parks from other working-class entertainments. Accordingly, in 1907, Blackpool Pleasure Beach emphasised its ‘clean and honest amusements’.⁹⁷ The following year, it was described to Manchester readers as ‘a vast outdoor entertainment resort which skirts the sea shore [and] is completely exposed to the healthful breezes that sweep from the west’.⁹⁸ Other parks were more explicit in laying claim to the morally improving aspect of the healthy entertainments on offer – a useful strategy for quashing local opposition to new ventures. The amusement park proposed at Shoreham in 1907 would consist of ‘a great variety of the very healthiest entertainments’, aimed at giving ‘our toilers the opportunity to enjoy a ‘real bank holiday’ away from the beer house and gin palace’.⁹⁹ Edinburgh’s Marine Gardens, which opened in 1910, was described as a place ‘of innocent amusement’, which provided ‘counter attractions to the public-house’.¹⁰⁰ By invoking the tenets of fresh air and respectable pleasures, the

⁹⁴ ‘Blackpool’s Newest Entertainment’, *World’s Fair* (20 August 1910), p. 14.

⁹⁵ ‘On the Pleasure Beach’, *Blackpool Times* (24 August 1907), BPBA.

⁹⁶ ‘Mrs. Ashley and Party: Round the Pleasure Beach’, *Blackpool Gazette News* (23 July 1909), BPBA.

⁹⁷ ‘South Shore Pleasure Beach’, *Blackpool Times* (30 March 1907), BPBA.

⁹⁸ ‘Blackpool’s Attractions’, *Oldham Chronicle* (15 August 1908), BPBA.

⁹⁹ ‘London to Have its Blackpool’, *World’s Fair* (4 May 1907), p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Opening of the Edinburgh Marine Gardens’, *World’s Fair* (7 May 1910), p. 9.

amusement parks appropriated the language of the rational recreation movement of the nineteenth century.¹⁰¹ In addition to calming fears of bawdy and morally degenerative behaviour, they hoped to draw in women, children and wealthier holidaymakers.

The effectiveness of these strategies in attracting a broad spectrum of visitors may be gleaned from accident reports (which stated age, gender and occupation of injured parties), the contemporary press and photographic evidence. While much of the amusement park crowds were made up of the wage-earning masses – which was in itself a highly stratified group ranging from factory employees to white-collar and skilled workers – it is clear that the amusement parks were not exclusively male, adult or working class.

Amusement parks heavily promoted their universal appeal, irrespective of age. Blackpool Pleasure Beach's advertisement in 1907 declaring 'A New World. Everything Good for Young and Old' was typical of the claims made by other parks.¹⁰² The success of such promotional rhetoric is borne out by archive evidence. In 1906, the manager of the Pleasure Beach's Aerial Flight testified in a personal injury claim heard at the Blackpool County Court that 'people of both sexes up to sixty years of age went on it without accident'.¹⁰³ In 1911, a party of elderly ladies were reported enjoying the delights of the amusement park with 'youthful enthusiasm'. 'Two giddy old dames of over 70 years of age' were whirled off the Joy Wheel, whilst another 85 year old 'derived the keenest enjoyment from the thrilling rush round the Velvet Coaster'.¹⁰⁴ The amusement parks were aimed primarily at the spending abilities of a mixed adult

¹⁰¹ From the 1830s, the predominantly middle-class rational recreation movement campaigned for organised and edifying non-work activities for the working classes: Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* (Basingstoke/London: Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 32–4.

¹⁰² *Blackpool Gazette News* (19 March 1907), BPBA.

¹⁰³ 'The Fall from a Slide at Blackpool', *World's Fair* (2 June 1906), p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ 'Old Folks Become Young Again', *Blackpool Gazette News* (16 September 1911), BPBA.

audience, but children and families were an important constituent in the amusement park audience.

In contrast to the male-dominated venues which had previously characterised popular entertainments, women formed a major and visible element of the crowd. Far from taking a backseat, preferring the quieter gardens or more sedate attractions (and contrary to the expectations of the time), female visitors of all ages were as likely to head for the large-scale thrill rides as men. In 1910, for example, *The Times* reported a Lord Mayor's Court action to recover damages for injuries sustained on White City's Spiral Railway. The Plaintiff, Mrs Blanche Dunn, was the wife of a veterinary surgeon from Poplar, London. There is no hint in the report that Mrs Dunne, as a respectable middle-class woman patronising a mechanical thrill ride, was considered exceptional.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, by 1912, the manager of White City could confidently state that 'women far exceed men in the numbers patronizing the newer sensations' such as the Screamer, Flip Flap and Mountain Railway. 'Their attitude to these novelties suggests that women are certainly more enterprising than men in collecting new sensations'.¹⁰⁶ Given the highly restricted nature of commercial recreations available to 'respectable' women in the Victorian and Edwardian period, it is hardly surprising to find that women made up a significant portion of the amusement park's clientele. Indeed, the amusement parks, like the cinema, may be seen as part of a wider process in which commercialised entertainments increasingly catered for the female consumer.

The amusement park crowd must be distinguished, however, from the everyday hordes of the modern urban street, identified by Simmel.¹⁰⁷ The daily encounter with the modern metropolis caused, according to Simmel, a unique psychological adaptation in

¹⁰⁵ 'A White City Accident', *The Times* (10 May 1910), p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ 'The Taste for "Thrills"', *World's Fair* (17 August 1912), front page.

¹⁰⁷ Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', pp. 324–40.

the city-dweller.¹⁰⁸ In order to cope with the ceaseless barrage of sensory stimuli, urbanites attempted mentally and emotionally to distance themselves from their environment. One of two responses resulted from this attempt: agoraphobia and hypersensitivity in extreme cases or, more commonly, indifference towards human relations – the blasé attitude.¹⁰⁹

By contrast, the amusement parks promised release from the demands of everyday life, and played host to a mass of individuals joined together in the pursuit of fun. To be part of such a collective could, as one writer described, be uplifting, liberating and exciting – a far cry from the indifference and distrust displayed by Simmel's urban crowd:

You wander in search of adventure, and you find it in canvas booths, in the shower of sand, in the rumble of wheels, in the glad cry of the triumphant tripper, in the shrieks of maidens, in the glorious crescendo of a summer crowd climbing to the knowledge of holiday happiness.¹¹⁰

For some historians, the concept of the carnivalesque helps explain the behaviour of the crowds drawn to the amusement park.¹¹¹ And yet there is strikingly little evidence of the wild and hedonistic behaviour associated with the Bakhtinian crowd.¹¹² In 1907, for example, only two cases of drunkenness were reported at Manchester's White City during a season in which over 750,000 people visited.¹¹³ In 1913, London's White City

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 325.

¹⁰⁹ Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity*, p. 73–4.

¹¹⁰ 'Blackpool's Carnival of Sensations', *The Sunday Chronicle* (Manchester, 31 July 1910), p. 2.

¹¹¹ Cross and Walton, *The Playful Crowd*, pp. 4–5, 61–2 identify the 'playful crowd' at the amusement park, a phenomenon which, they argue, represented a modernised expression of pre-industrial saturnalia. Elements of medieval carnival surviving at Blackpool Pleasure Beach are identified by Tony Bennett, 'Hegemony, Ideology, Pleasure: Blackpool', in Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Culture and Social Relations* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. 135–54.

¹¹² My understanding of the carnivalesque is based on a reading of Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

¹¹³ 'The White City Make Another Application for a Drink License', *World's Fair* (15 February 1908), p. 5.

claimed ‘there had never been a single case of disorder of any kind’ in the five years since its opening.¹¹⁴ Unruly behaviour undoubtedly manifested itself at popular resorts such as Margate, Southend and Blackpool, but it is much easier to locate in the liminal spaces of the beach, pubs and ad hoc seafront entertainments than in the carefully regulated amusement parks.¹¹⁵ A letter published in *John Bull* in 1909, for example, expressed outrage at the behaviour of ‘hobbledehoys and wenches ... in the lanes, in the shelters, on the sandhills’ of Blackpool, but made no mention of the Pleasure Beach.¹¹⁶

The amusement park landscape, with its myriad of attractions, created an atmosphere of collective freedom in which the formality of official, working life was relaxed. But, far from representing ‘a second life’¹¹⁷ the crowds’ experience was framed by familiar rhythms of sociability, celebration and consumption. Rather than turning the ‘world inside out’, as Bakhtin would have it, the amusement parks magnified the positive and festive features of everyday life.¹¹⁸ Thanks to new mechanical forms of pleasure, crowds enjoyed the ‘holiday mood’ rather than the carnival spirit. The freedom of bodily movement, social mixing and compulsory screaming that occurred at the amusement park – but would have been quite unacceptable in everyday life – might be seen as elements of carnival had they not been regulated by the rhythm and movement of the mechanical rides and, to a great extent, by the crowds themselves. Bakhtin states that carnival ‘is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and

¹¹⁴ “‘White City’ License Granted’, *The Times* (2 May 1913), p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Rob Shields locates the carnivalesque on the beaches of Brighton and Margate: Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991). Blackpool’s Golden Mile, with its wax works and freak shows, offered visitors graphic inversions of social norms: see Gary Cross, ‘Crowds and Leisure’, *Journal of Social History*, 39, 3 (Spring 2006), p. 635–6.

¹¹⁶ ‘The Morals of Blackpool’, *John Bull* (1 May 1909), BPBA.

¹¹⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 6, 9.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

everyone participates.’¹¹⁹ And yet, at the amusement park, spectatorship was a key element of the amusements on offer. Members of the crowd were encouraged to be both actors in, and spectators of, the entertainment.

Archive photographs show how crowds gathered to watch mechanical rides in operation. Blackpool Pleasure Beach’s Joy Wheel – a spinning circular platform on which people sat to be thrown outwards by centrifugal force – was designed with a large raised circular gallery on which people could stand to watch and laugh at the fate of those being spun around.¹²⁰ The idea was to engineer a total loss of bodily control amongst the riders – men and women of all ages – for the entertainment of spectators.

One journalist described the effect:

You may go feet first, head first, or sideways like a crab. You may go on your elbows, your ankles, the knuckles of your hands, the broad of your back, the pit of your stomach; you may go even on your eyebrows or on one ear ... The world is full of flying arms and legs and spinning bodies until the Joy Wheel is spinning empty and triumphant [and] the arena is rocking with laughter.¹²¹

Rides such as the Joy Wheel show how a visit to the amusement park involved its own set of coded behaviours, ritual practices that lay somewhere between the everyday and the liminality of the beach or fairground. The lack of carnival spirit should not be taken as evidence of the suppression of popular practices of resistance which – as John F. Kasson has argued in reference to Coney Island – created ‘passive acceptance of the cycle of production and consumption.’¹²² The meaning of the amusement park experience for visitors themselves was rather more complex.

Utopias at the Amusement Park

For people living in towns and cities across Britain, visiting an amusement park became

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹²⁰ ‘Blackpool’s Carnival of Sensations’, *The Sunday Chronicle* (Manchester, 31 July 1910), p. 2.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, p. 109.

a defining counterpart to life in the modern metropolis. Rather than an escape from the urban spectacle, the amusement park offered a heightened version of it: speeding rides, mechanical noise, electric lights and the anonymity of flowing crowds. Darren Webb's revealing analysis of Blackpool Tower suggests how framing the amusement park landscape as a utopian text might help explain their appeal to a metropolitan audience in the early twentieth century.¹²³ Enclosed and clearly separated from the outside world, the amusement park engineered an immediate sense of otherness, heightened by ornate entrances and clearly marked boundary lines, and by the fantastical designs of shows inside (Figure XX.8). Attractions such as the Scenic Railway, Hale's Tours, the River Caves, and various 'native' villages, emulated foreign landscapes and provided (like the Tower interiors) 'a succession of glimpses into the exoticism of other extant realities'.¹²⁴

[Insert Fig. XX.8 here – landscape or portrait - check]

Figure XX.8 Inside Manchester's White City, 1910 *Source:* © The author's collection

Defined by fantasy on the one hand, the amusement park simultaneously celebrated the very real emancipatory potential of the present. In particular, the replication of cutting-edge technologies in popular rides – the flying machines, motor-racing tracks and submarine rides – testified to the 'possibilities of the future' and the ongoing advances of science.¹²⁵ Alongside these realisations of the exotic present and idealised future were nostalgic representations of the past: Ye Olde Englishe Street at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, Old London at London's White City, a medieval ruin at the Hall-by-the-Sea in Margate. These temporal elements collided at the amusement parks

¹²³ Darren Webb, 'Bakhtin at the Seaside: Utopia, Modernity and the Carnavalesque', *Theory, Culture and Society* 22, 3 (2005), pp. 121–38.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

but in a way which encouraged visitors to ‘decode the interrelatedness of their immediate present’.¹²⁶

The sense of utopian otherness is graphically illustrated by a description of a day at Blackpool Pleasure Beach in 1910. The amusement park is presented as a place ‘where life moves so swiftly and noisily, where fatigue is an unknown word, and where joy is served in deep draughts that knows no satiety’. The intensity of experience offered at the amusement park warps the space and time of everyday life: to spend an afternoon there is ‘to have lived many years between noon and sunset’. It provides transformative encounters which are both revelatory and rejuvenating: ‘before I went on the Joy Wheel, I had not lived. I had not drawn back the veil which secretes true happiness. To go on the Joy Wheel is to be born again; born in gaiety and baptised in the waters of irresponsibility’. The past (and the geographically distant) is presented up close in the Monitor and Merrimac, a ‘theatre-like palace’ where you ‘learn how the Monitor and Merrimac fought their great battle off the coast of Virginia’ and ‘feel that you are looking across a mile of water watching naval history in the making’. Ultimately, the Pleasure Beach is a place where ‘nothing is impossible’ and ‘freedom and forgetfulness’ reign.¹²⁷

The amusement park landscape, with its combination of fast-flowing crowds and spectacular rides, represented the pulse of a romantic vision of modern life: visceral, intense and stripped of the banality of everyday industrial labour. In doing so, these sites strove to create a kind of commodified utopia with potentially universal appeal.

Conclusion

Amusement parks flourished not because they were vehicles of indoctrination or sites of resistance for the masses, but because they were the source of a new kind of pleasurable

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Blackpool’s Carnival of Sensations’, *The Sunday Chronicle* (Manchester, 31 July 1910), p. 2.

experience which captured a pervading sense of living through an era defined by permanent and man-made change. White Cities, Pleasure Beaches and Luna Parks offered a heightened version of the urban spectacle: speeding rides, repetitive mechanical noise, multi-coloured electric lights, transient crowds and uninhibited behaviour. Rather than offering a space of escape, the particular form of mechanical multi-sensory pleasure consumed at the early parks became a defining counterpart to city life and played a key role in making sense of the experiences of popular modernity. While critics berated the similarities between the industrial workplace and the mechanised amusement parks, for the patrons themselves the experience was far from routinised or passifying. A visit to such a place was a treat, somewhere to go once or twice a year. Moreover, as accident reports reveal, pleasure-seekers were continually experimenting with their own ways of bringing novelty and excitement to the rides.

The amusement park offered a redefined notion of pleasure in which *doing* was as important as *watching*. Rides and attractions transformed the visitor into racing drivers, pilots, explorers, comedians, even stars of the screen. This was a form of pleasure defined by participation and, in this way, the parks provided a momentary escape from the anonymity and indifference of urban life characterised by Georg Simmel. The amusement park catered for a shared desire for sensuous and immediate engagement with life, a desire seen as a key point of tension in the mechanised age.

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