

## **Blackpool Aesthetics.**

(Detailed abstract)

Gerald Mars and Valerie Mars

*'No culture? Why Lad, Blackpool stinks of culture'. F.E. Cronshaw, Blackpool's Chief Librarian and Curator of The Grundy Art Gallery in response to a London Fleet Street journalist.*

### Introduction

This paper is concerned with the aesthetic, the principles governing taste that were evident in Blackpool - the iconic working class resort<sup>1</sup> on North England's Lancashire coast - from the late forties to its decline in the sixties. This was a golden age when popularity and prosperity justified its description as 'an entertainment factory'.<sup>2</sup> It was during this time that Gerald Mars worked in various of the town's holiday trades. Valerie Mars first came to Blackpool with a fresh eye towards the end of this period. Both have occasionally returned to the town since.

At that time Blackpool had an instant and striking impact on its visitors. On leaving their 'excursion' trains and charabancs they were immediately assailed with aggressive forms of architecture, assertive images and brightly painted attractions. These were different from anything experienced in the utilitarian and monochrome industrial towns from whence they came.

The Golden Mile, close to the central railway and charabanc stations, quickly set the tone. Extending along a quarter mile (!) strip of promenade, it epitomised the exuberant nature of the town with its maelstrom of brightly painted stalls, its cafes with twenty foot high menus, its mini theatres, tantalising fortune-tellers and its raucous spielers<sup>3</sup>, all competitively belabouring the passing crowds to patronise their sideshows and theatres, play their games, buy their rock,<sup>4</sup> eat at their cafes and see amazing novelties – like the biggest rat in the world (allegedly caught on a Liverpool bombsite - it was actually an Asiatic racoon). To the millions<sup>5</sup> of working class visitors who flocked to the town, Blackpool presented a new and wonderfully exotic world – one to which they faithfully returned every summer. The post war boom was to continue until the north's industrial labour force succumbed to the allure of the Costa Brava with its cheap package holidays and guaranteed sunshine.

Reactions to Blackpool's visual cacophony can be charted as falling into two oppositional extremes. The first, the most common, or 'vulgar' constituency, represented the aesthetics of the average holidaymaker. Like Gerald Mars, from the time he first arrived in the town in 1946, they were captivated by Blackpool's sheer energetic excess, by its surfeit of colour and dynamism.

The second, represented 'the legitimate aesthetic' the bearers of which were on the whole, repelled by what Blackpool offered. Their counter-aesthetic was well expressed by the young daughter of friends of ours, the child of artistically sensitive

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to variations within the town and justification for the definition

<sup>2</sup> Source, Walton.

<sup>3</sup> Speiler- derived from the Yiddish - Barker.

<sup>4</sup> A sweetmeat special to the town, in the form of a white baton covered in lurid pink with "Blackpool" in pink script running through the centre.

<sup>5</sup> Give figures, Walton.

parents. When asked how she'd enjoyed her visit to Blackpool, her assessment was direct and succinct: 'everything there', she pronounced, 'is ugly.' It is by comparison of these two very different aesthetic approaches and the values they represent that we can better understand the contrasting world views from which they derived and to which they contributed.

### The duality of aesthetics.

These opposed views represent more than individual assessments; they reflect the preferences of two irreconcilable social entities: on the one hand were the possessors and defenders of symbolic capital<sup>6</sup>, the artistically aware, mostly middle class individualists, the upholders of 'legitimate taste.' On the other, were the collectively oriented industrial working class as epitomised by the typical Blackpool holidaymaker. Both used taste as preferences to confirm and consolidate their identities and to mark out what it was they rejected and despised in the other. As Bourdieu has noted:

*In matters of taste more than anywhere else, all determination is negation, and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust proved by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others.... Aesthetic intolerance can be terribly violent. Aversion to different lifestyles is perhaps one of the strongest barriers between the classes...'<sup>7</sup>*

'Symbolic capitalism' embraced an aesthetic emphasising restraint, 'moderation', order and above all control, abhorring anything suggestive of untrammelled excess. Its view of nature, (and accordingly, its approach to the body), its ways of spending leisure, its partaking of food and drink, its preferences in architecture and its approach to time were all influenced and sustained by adherence to this aesthetic. In contrast, the holidaymakers collective aesthetic, a mirror image of the symbolic capitalists, demonstrates a correspondingly opposite but equally cohesive view of the world with its own ordered preferences in all of these areas. These will be explored and comparatively discussed with a particular focus on perceptions of 'the nature of nature' - shown as ranging from neutrality to its opposition and eradication.

In drawing these comparisons, the paper will then consider (with numerous illustrations) various topographical and architectural features of the town: the North Shore's artificial concrete cliffs; the town's treeless and vegetation-free hotel forecourts and its disciplined and highly 'unnatural' 256 acre Stanley Park— totally laid out with a golf course, cafes, cricket and sports centres, a model village, fountains, flowerbeds, a boating lake, bandstand, bowling greens and a central Italian rose garden. The same comparative principles will be applied to consider aspects of the characteristic social relationships of Blackpool holidaymakers which will assess their choices in food and drink, their methods of childrearing and their relatively uninhibited approach to overt burping, farting, vomiting and laughter.

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<sup>6</sup> BOURDIEU reference and definition

<sup>7</sup> Henry Cole on unschooled taste: 'It gave me an indigestion' reference.