

## Special Thematic Block

### British Seaside Resorts and Their Representation in Literature and Cinema

#### Introduction

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Great Britain being an island, the coast, and especially the coastal resorts play an important role in British culture, almost epitomizing the culture of the industrial working class. Earlier on, however, people of higher classes traveled to the coast and “holy wells” for health and relaxation. It was the second half of the sixteenth century when the sick started visiting Bath and Buxton (Walvin 14). Over the next two centuries and through the beginning of the nineteenth century, spa towns were frequented usually only by members of the upper classes due to the high charges for travel, accommodation and entertainment (“English Seaside” 6). Changes occurred in the later decades of the nineteenth century with campaigns for higher wages and greater holiday entitlement for the working class and, with that, a demand for holidays in locations away from the industrial centers. Increased mobility as a result of extending railway networks and, especially, the provision of excursion trains connecting coastal towns with the industrial cities, greatly reducing the time and cost of travel, encouraged the widespread development of seaside resorts, as well as the consequent easing of social restrictions.

By the end of the nineteenth century, there were well over 100 coastal resorts in Britain, and by 1911, 55 per cent of English and Welsh citizens could afford at least one trip to the seaside, and one in five stayed for a longer period each year. Increasing demand for seaside trips and holidays was propelled by rapid urbanization, as demonstrated by the fact

that while in 1801 only 20 per cent of the population lived in towns, a century later this figure reached 80 per cent (Walvin 91; Urry and Larsen 34). The consequent rise in pollution and overcrowding, exacerbated by the scarcity of public spaces such as parks in industrial towns, and the commercialization of social relations, made places closer to nature popular. The need and ability to enjoy a holiday resulted in the specialization and segregation of seaside resorts according to the social stratification of their clientele.

A seaside resort offered its visitors accommodation and food, as well as space for reflection, even transcendence. It was a place where one could think about one's place in the universe, as the vastness of the sea inspired such thoughts (Jarratt). Resorts also competed with each other to engage visitors in spectacles, providing them with novel experiences and activities (Hughes and Benn). They offered landscapes physically removed from the normal routines and obligations of work and home (in both geographic and perceptual terms), and they were dedicated to entertainment. The highly distinctive "architecture of pleasure" that appeared at the seaside, including piers, promenades, towers, pavilions, ballrooms, fairgrounds, and winter gardens hosting theatrical and music hall performances, circus shows, film screenings, and opportunities for gambling all added to these resorts' liminality and allowed for release, escape, excess, and the temporary suspension of social norms (Walvin; Shields).

After their heyday in the 1950s and the 1960s, British seaside resorts entered a period of decline (Urry "Cultural Change"; Walton "British Seaside"). Among the factors that contributed to their downfall were the rise of the spending power of the British working class, and the introduction of the cheap overseas package holiday, especially to Spain, which had the advantage over British resorts in that it offered good weather all summer at a lower cost, even when taking travel expenses into account. Another factor was a move from Fordism to post-Fordism, namely to new patterns of working, chiefly moving from manufacturing to a

service economy, and to new ways of leisure, which were less communal and more individualistic (Urry "Cultural Change" 110-11; Gale 93), which in turn lead to the birth of the sophisticated, self-confident and self-conscious 'post-tourist' (Feifer 259-68). Perhaps the most important factor, albeit connected to all these, as John Urry argues, was the association of the English seaside resort with bad taste.

As a result of the decline in the number of visitors, the resorts lacked the funds to invest in new attractions or even to sustain the old ones. The facilities in many resorts (which were mostly developed in the late nineteenth century) were showing signs of deterioration. Many hotels closed down; civic buildings and piers started to look shabby. In the 1980s and 1990s, the widening economic divide between the South and the North of England, largely blamed on Thatcherite policies, meant yet another blow to many resort towns. Some hoped to regain their former status by reinventing their image through selectively regenerating their greatest treasures and repackaging their past history as heritage, presenting themselves as gigantic *skansens*, commemorating the old ways of holidaying. Heritagization played down the entertainment aspect and highlighted the educational benefits of regenerated promenades and penny arcades. This meant that even those people who regarded themselves as too posh to enjoy the simple pleasures of the seaside resort, might be inclined to go to the resort to study its history.

Even such a brief overview explains how the seaside resort has become a significant topos of British social history, why it enjoys a secure place in the country's cultural memory, and why it is regarded as a unique British institution. If the coastal experience is constitutive of British national identity, it owes this position to its widespread cultural mediation. Paintings, posters, cartoons, bawdy jokes, collectors' items turned souvenirs, travel literature, stage plays, films, popular songs, and an endless list of consumer artefacts prove the entanglement of the coastal resorts with British culture. In works of fiction, such as the ones

discussed in this special section, the coastal resorts function as the backdrop of the stories, which allows or prevents their characters from behaving in a certain way, most often helping them to adopt manners that are regarded as unacceptable outside the 'carnavalesque' confines of the resorts. As such, the seaside is not only intimately linked with British identity, but also with the fascination of this identity to search out its own limits. Stating that the resort culture and the seaside experience is inalienably British is also a way of saying that Britishness is defined from its own margins, resembling the person on the beach looking into the non-human vastness and infinite openness of the sea. Liminal vantage points acknowledge both aspirations to expand with the openness, to escape and move toward the unknown, and the desire to contain and rule it. The topos of the seaside resort is a vantage point onto national identity and culture, or rather a bifurcation point of a line of flight and a line of capture that defines the dynamic of any culture. Taking the notion of Britishness to the sea is to affirm its many dimensions and directions, to discover its vagueness, and to appreciate it as a discursive formation.

As with all relevant scholarly research, the essays to follow make sense of the seaside as a site of intense cultural negotiation where the middle-class validates many of its stereotypes about commodifying the working class, about the hedonistic rituals of consumerism, about Americanization, and attacks the easily manipulated herd instinct founded on these. No matter how well-informed and pertinent these accounts are, as Virginia Richter demonstrates, there is certainly another side to them. Claiming that the seaside brings out the most debilitating aspects of working class behavior displays the hypocritical and judgemental attitudes of the middle-class, while debunking its individuality as an agency of normalizing power. In any case, notions of Britishness are negotiated in debates proving that resort culture is a stage for acting out often significantly different identity politics. This performative aspect is emphasized by Pieter Francois, whose contribution on Ostend shows

how the Belgian seaside resort hosted a thriving British colony pursuing identity strategies along the lines of the genteel poor. To regard Britishness as a thing performed is not just about acting in accordance with social rituals and culturally coded attitudes. In fact, no other place allows for acquiring a new and transitory identity than the seaside, a place of pretension and masks. Exploring this motif in golden age crime fiction, Brigitta Hudácskó uses the term “genre” to explore the synergies between space and identity. The notion of the seaside resort as a multigenre cultural space is most illuminating; it is not only confirmed by two cinema-focused articles, authored by the editors of the special section, but expanded on through an investigation of representative films that feature both locals and holidaymakers, seaside identity politics taking heterogeneous forms, with some rendering criminal and subcultural aspirations legible, and others subscribing to post-colonial and migrant experience. What all protagonists and the developments of their personalities share is their being subjected to the mixed impulses of disillusionment and empowerment, entrapment, and escape. Especially in films with an appeal for social realist aesthetics foregrounding teenage residents of economically failing seaside resorts, whose feelings of having been neglected is part of the wider crisis British identity suffers from in the present. The striking abundance of literary and cinematic reflections on seaside resorts explains why critical inquiries into this unique British institution adopt the seaside as a vantage point from which to consider questions of national identity.

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