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► **To cite this version:**

Nicole Cloarec. Kitsch and Avant-garde Television in Blackpool (Peter Bowker, BBC, 2004). *Revue LISA / LISA e-journal*, 2017, Les spécificités du kitsch dans le cinéma anglophone, XV (1), 10.4000/lisa.9070 . hal-02183843

HAL Id: hal-02183843

<https://univ-rennes2.hal.science/hal-02183843>

Submitted on 15 Jul 2019

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Revue LISA/LISA e-journal

Littératures, Histoire des Idées, Images, Sociétés du Monde Anglophone – Literature, History of Ideas, Images and Societies of the English-speaking World

vol. XV-n°1 | 2017

Les spécificités du kitsch dans le cinéma anglophone

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/9070>

DOI: 10.4000/lisa.9070

ISSN: 1762-6153

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Brought to you by Université Rennes 2



Electronic reference

Nicole Cloarec, « Kitsch and Avant-garde Television in *Blackpool* (Peter Bowker, BBC, 2004) », *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* [Online], vol. XV-n°1 | 2017, Online since 06 September 2017, connection on 15 July 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/9070> ; DOI : 10.4000/lisa.9070

This text was automatically generated on 15 July 2019.



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Kitsch and Avant-garde Television in *Blackpool* (Peter Bowker, BBC, 2004)

Kitsch et avant-garde sur le petit écran : Blackpool (Peter Bowker, BBC, 2004)

Nicole Cloarec

- 1 A white limousine is driving through the night. After the title *Blackpool* crosses the screen from right to left, written in bright yellow bulbs and superimposed on a blue-lit roller coaster, the first tune of Elvis Presley's famous 'Viva Las Vegas' starts playing. Once the limousine has pulled up in front of a large hacienda mansion at the end of a sweeping crane shot, the main protagonist Ripley Holden (David Morrissey) appears in front of a mirror, slicking back his hair and grooming himself to go out while singing aloud the first line over the song. In all likelihood, Ripley is singing – or rather karaokeing – to some diegetic music. But he is soon joined by his wife (Sarah Parish) who is wearing a black low-neck evening dress and black patent high-heels, his daughter (Georgia Taylor), also dressed in a black evening dress, and lastly by his son (Thomas Morrison) who is smoking on the balcony. Their voices overlap in the original soundtrack as the swirling camera introduces them separately before the whole family walk down the stairs together. They go on singing in the limousine, drinking champagne as they are driving through the flashy neon-lit streets at night. Welcome to *Blackpool*, which “brings the glitz of Vegas to the English seaside town.”¹
- 2 As its American title *Viva Blackpool* clearly indicates,² the opening sequence of Peter Bowker's six-part serial drama sets the tone of the entire serial, tapping into some of the most famous icons which epitomize the glitz and kitsch of British and American popular culture. Most academics concur³ that if kitsch is notoriously difficult to define and, what is certain is that it has most often been used negatively by the elite to refer to any type of mass-produced, low-brow and crowd-pleasing art that exploits stock emotions and ready-made conventions. Clement Greenberg, whose 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” has provided much of the theoretical basis for subsequent discussions on the notion of kitsch, writes: “Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and

faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious.”⁴ As literary critic Matei Calinescu points out, “No matter how we classify its context of use, kitsch always implies the notion of aesthetic inadequacy.”⁵ In other words, kitsch is always the Other’s bad taste or lack thereof.⁶ The term thus denotes a value judgment which implicitly determines what is “good”, “authentic” or “legitimate” art to which kitsch has consistently been opposed since at least Clement Greenberg’s seminal essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939).⁷ More recently, Monica Kjellman-Chapin notes in the introduction to *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice*:

Thus from its earliest usage, kitsch was linked with a cheap(ened) form of art, something either mass-produced or produced hastily, and without much aesthetic merit or taste. For the most part, the term continues to connote that which is aesthetically wan or suspect. At the heart of discussions about kitsch lies a concern about authenticity and value, as kitsch is often understood to stand opposed to “real art”, opposed to “true” aesthetic experience, offering instead only enervated and inauthentic approximations, merely syrupy, sugary surrogates for the more robust fare of “real” art.⁸

- 3 More than a descriptive term, kitsch is used to confer or withhold value and in this respect it questions the viewers’ responses and modalities of reception. Monica Kjellman-Chapin can thus conclude: “In fact kitsch, though it may be carried through the hackneyed and clichéd, does not necessarily reside in the object, but in the response to the object.”⁹ In the case of television drama, this calls into question the audience’s viewing position shaped by their own cultural background and experience of media literacy.¹⁰
- 4 Surely enough, as Tomas Kulka recalls, using kitsch is not the same as being kitsch.¹¹ Likewise, English philosopher Roger Scruton writes: “The intention to produce real kitsch is an impossible intention, like the intention to act unintentionally. Preemptive kitsch sets quotation marks around actual kitsch and hopes thereby to save its artistic credentials. The dilemma is not: kitsch or avant-garde, but: kitsch or ‘kitsch’.”¹² If nothing else, *Blackpool* is the epitome of “kitsch” with inverted commas, just as Holden wears “his mutton-chop sideburns as if they were a pair of inverted commas”.¹³ However, by showcasing icons of kitsch and popular culture from the onset, *Blackpool* raises the question of its own quality as TV drama in the context of the mid-2000s, when British television drama production was undergoing major changes. On the one hand, the shift toward an ever more competitive, market-led broadcasting environment resulted in “broadcasters – and audiences – increasingly favouring ‘reality’ format”,¹⁴ but also in growing concern within the industry about the drift towards safer and formulaic productions to the detriment of quality and originality.¹⁵ On the other hand, true creativity and “quality TV” were then being perceived as the preserves of series produced by the American subscription channel HBO.¹⁶
- 5 Lastly, *Blackpool*’s exuberant aesthetic choices could be construed as a call to reconsider value judgments on television drama production in other terms than the classical Reithian ethos¹⁷ and its social realist aesthetics which have long governed what is deemed “good television” in Great Britain.¹⁸ Reading *Blackpool* through the critical perspective of kitsch thus allows one to pinpoint the ambivalence of its narrative and aesthetic choices. Because of its extravagant hybridity, it defies the modernist insistence on ‘pure’ forms, its opposing pleasure and emotion to reflexivity and creativity. As the serial brazenly exploits generic conventions and iconic artefacts of popular culture while exposing their immediacy as artifice, it questions the very possibility of providing the “heart’s ease” or

emotional gratification that Walter Benjamin criticized kitsch for, along with critical distance.¹⁹

A glittering world of pretence and make-belief

- 6 As the opening sequence makes clear, *Blackpool* ostentatiously indulges in recycling icons of kitsch popular culture. The main storyline follows the business venture and family troubles of Ripley Holden, whose dream is to upgrade his amusement arcade into a casino hotel before turning the whole English seaside resort into the “Las Vegas of the North”.
- 7 The serial makes full use of “the world’s biggest and brashest working-class seaside resort”²⁰ as its setting, exploiting the connotations it provides. The city itself has been built as a collage of eclectic borrowings, from pseudo oriental cultures to its own version of the Eiffel tower, whose distinctive superstructure has become its enduring symbol, and its own version of Coney Island with its open-air amusement park christened “Pleasure Beach”. If the famous Tower is not seen before the second episode, its conspicuous silhouette on the skyline punctuates all the other episodes, which also use its underground aquarium as a meeting point. Other notable features include the Promenade, the silhouettes of its rollercoasters, its amusement arcades with their flashy neon signs and the camp cabaret venue “Funny Girls” which stages drag performers²¹ and attests that Blackpool is now also noted for harbouring a vivid centre of gay culture,²² adding masquerades and inversions to the carnivalesque tradition of the city.
- 8 All these elements contribute to providing a colourful palette for the *mise en scène* which also uses bright-coloured buses and tramway cars driving along the Promenade as wipes and shots reminiscent of Martin Parr’s series of photographs on English food and British seaside resort. One of the main characters, DI Carlisle (David Tennant), is repeatedly shown indulging in all types of junk food and sweets – candyfloss, ice-cream, pink-iced doughnuts, fancy cakes – as he is sitting or strolling along the Promenade. And of course, to complete Parr’s pictures, he ends up dropping used plastic cups and greasy fish and chips paper down the street.
- 9 At the centre, though, stands Holden’s “Lucky Star” amusement arcade, which encapsulates all the glitz and brash tawdriness of the city. Its façade is painted in brick red and bright yellow, surmounted by rows of white and golden stars that twinkle on an electric blue panel; in front of the entrance, the pavement itself is painted in gold and blue and the arcade’s windows display dollar signs. Inside, the walls and columns are covered in glittering silver and gold; lines of lamps flash incessantly; rows of garish slot machines keep beeping and whooping; and golden dollar signs adorn the staircase banister which leads to Ripley’s spacious office that overlooks the place.
- 10 Like the place he owns, Ripley Holden cuts a brash figure, sporting sideburns like his hero Elvis Presley, whose plate portrait hangs on the wall of his kitchen.²³ Holden is wearing a silk white suit for festivities, bootlace ties and flowery shirts for his daywear, a golden chain, a bracelet and a signet ring. His home is a hacienda manor house named “Shangri-La”,²⁴ with golden taps in the bathroom, a pool in the garden and the “S” of the house sign turned into a dollar sign. Ripley Holden is the epitome of the “nouveau-riche” entrepreneur, overbearing and vulgar, mesmerized by the glittering world of Las Vegas, its over-the-top, anything-goes mind-set as well as its individualistic and materialistic hedonism. He believes in the virtues of free-trade capitalism, thinks his business is a true

surrogate for “living the dream”,²⁵ equating his amusement arcade to “the people’s stock exchange”.²⁶ He describes his dream-project for the arcade to his business partners in the kitschest terms possible: “You know, one day you’ll stand outside here and there’ll be pink colonnades, statues, barmen dressed as gladiators and shit and the sound of money falling 24 hours a day.” (episode 3). As such Ripley Holden is a caricature of the “Kitschmensch” or “kitsch-man”, first described by Hermann Broch,²⁷ for whom value is reduced to price and who believes he can build up a “Shangri-La”, a kitsch utopia where arrogance, ruthless self-assertion and money are the recipes of permanent happiness, where one can fashion oneself after one’s own idealised image, no matter how sham it may be. If his first name evokes Patricia Highsmith’s famous con artist,²⁸ Ripley is very much a masquerade, a fantasy “re-play”. As Andrew Anthony sums up, “Ripley [is] a triumph of mockery. He live[s] in a mock hacienda, with a mock Elvis wardrobe and an essentially mock marriage.”²⁹

- 11 Screenwriter Peter Bowker explained that the idea for *Blackpool* originated in a newspaper report of the city council’s new plans to transform Blackpool into a casino resort as new gambling laws were being discussed in the early 2000s.³⁰ He added that Ripley Holden owed much to Anthony Trollope’s larger-than-life Augustus Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now*³¹ as he wanted to create “a modern capitalist monster”, as cynical and dishonest as his Victorian counterpart, but as brash, self-delusionary and sham as Blackpool itself. In this respect, the references to kitsch and its aesthetics in *Blackpool* can be construed as a harsh satire of the most despicable features of consumer society and its leisure economy.³² Ripley Holden may wax lyrical about his first “Space Invader” and other slot machines, comparing his arcade to a Cathedral (episode 3) and his business enterprise to a Calling,³³ he is depicted as cynical and immoral,³⁴ cooking the books and cheating the Inland Revenue. His speeches are redolent of prejudices, peppered with xenophobic, racist and homophobic remarks, when he is not riling against political correctness and rattling off offensive “jokes” against women. He is uncaring towards his wife, rude to his children and to his friends whom he even goes as far as hitting in rage. Moreover, his success story soon turns out to be only a façade. Not only does he rent out sordid tenement flats to prostitutes and drug dealers just behind his glittery arcade which he persistently dubs a “family entertainment centre”, his “family business” is beset by debts contracted on risky ventures. Worst of all, all his dreams of expanding into a true Las Vegas-type casino hotel eventually fall apart after a dead body is found in the arcade, which triggers a police investigation and makes Ripley lose the trust of his business partners as well as the Enterprise Committee’s planning permission.
- 12 As the main storyline follows Ripley’s downfall, *Blackpool* is very much a moral parable, equating ruthless capitalism with hubris. The persistent presence of Hallworth (David Bradley), the religious anti-gambling campaigner who is picketing outside the arcade eighteen hours a day, may thus appear as the moral centre of the serial, the only character who does not lie and cannot be bought off. Indeed, if Ripley stands at the epicentre of this phoney world, almost all the characters are deceitful, cheating and dissembling. As soon as the first episode, punters are shown cheating, Ripley’s son Danny is dealing drugs, Ripley is cheating on his wife, his friend in the local police appears easily corruptible; later on, Ripley’s accountant turns out to be a fraud, his “perfect trophy wife”³⁵ starts cheating on him, DI Carlisle conceals his true identity to approach Ripley’s wife Natalie before having an affair with her, Ripley’s daughter Shyanne wrongly suspects

her father of beating up her new boyfriend, Danny, who stealthily visits Hailey, one of his father's prostitutes, turns out to be gay...

- 13 *Blackpool's* world is a mirage of pretence and make-believe. Significantly enough, Ripley Holden is introduced in front of his mirror and most characters are caught in mirror images, in the glass reflections of the shop windows, slot machines, car rear windows or other glossy surfaces. When Natalie eventually discovers Carlisle's true identity, both are filmed behind glass panels before the street buildings are shot upside down on the shiny bonnet of her car. Especially at night, the whole city is turned into a place of shimmering reflections, and when filmed in slow motion, it looks like a large impressionistic tableau of brightly coloured blurry dots, superimposed on each other.
- 14 Within this "aesthetics of deception and self-deception",³⁶ what John Mundy interprets as "the moral and ethical journey"³⁷ which Ripley Holden undertakes at the centre of the drama appears rather unlikely. The happy ending in particular is highly improbable as Ripley eventually shows some humility and selfless magnanimity, accepts to bless his daughter's marriage with the man he disapproved of and even threatened out of courting her; encourages his wife to leave him for her lover, acknowledges his son is gay and even admits of his own failure as a self-made man, only to celebrate the humble joys of loving his family. Holden's speech at his daughter's wedding recaps it all:

It's not every day that your daughter gets married to a man your age, your wife leaves you for the copper that's been investigating you for murder and your son tells you he's a Perry Como. But then, we are in Blackpool. And let's face it, you can live a 1000 lives in this town and still have room for a full English breakfast! You can't beat a big sausage! But the life I wanted to live here hasn't worked out. I've been unluckier than a ginger stepchild this last couple of weeks. Maybe my dreams got too big or the town got too small. Maybe I just messed up. I could sing "Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me" but seeing as our Danny's just come out it might not be wise. One thing I have found out, though, I love my girl. And I love my lad. And I love my wife. And I always will. They say a man who's lost a fortune but found his heart is a wealthy man indeed. But then people will say anything when they're pissed, won't they? No, but the truth is, I mean, I know. I'm as shocked as you are.

- 15 The very enumeration makes it all the more contrived, which is highlighted by the very last sequence in which Blackpool's promenade, on which Ripley is walking alone, dissolves into Las Vegas Strip at night, on which a grinning, cocksure Ripley is parading triumphantly. Holden's overt statement of contrition sounds as artificial a pose as this last image set in "The Capital of Second Chances" which still clearly partakes of Ripley's fantasy world.

Recycling a "heady mix" of generic formulae

- 16 What this specious happy ending makes clear is that *Blackpool's* narrative does not intend to provide any realistic character depiction that would follow their moral wanderings and psychological development. The serial's narrative itself adopts some features that are associated with kitsch, often accused of indiscriminately putting together heterogeneous elements that have been mindlessly copied and recycled.³⁸ Like the city itself, *Blackpool* is built on eclectic borrowings which at first sight would seem incompatible; it mixes unlikely genres and gleefully plays with their different codes and conventions. *Blackpool* has been described as a "heady mix of generic reference points",³⁹ an "energetic hybrid"⁴⁰ which is part musical, part crime and detective story, relies much on soap opera clichés

as regards Holden's family, involves elements of romance and melodrama (Natalie's affair and her daughter's sentimental setbacks) but also of gritty northern social realism (the seedier side of the city depicted in the old decrepit tenement that Holden rents to prostitutes and drug dealers but also through some of the arcade's working-class employees, deaf old Barry and dyspeptic Ruth) and even of western, through the leitmotif of the showdown between Ripley and Carlisle and the recurring guitar twang that inevitably recalls spaghetti westerns. In his review in the *Sunday Times*, A. A. Gill took issue with its "confused style": "*Blackpool* doesn't know whether it wants to be drama with humour, or comedy with dark bits."⁴¹

- 17 Although the main characters and story arcs are introduced as early as the first episode, the plot meanders from one genre to another, making the most of the episodic structure of the serial which manages to achieve as many twists and turns, multiplying red herrings, cliff hangers and new developments (see annex), using abrupt non sequitur editing from one setting to another.⁴² The serial's generic hybridity thus foregrounds the arbitrary conventions of each narrative strand whose convergences appear to be governed by pure chance and coincidences. Already right at the beginning, the lyrics of the first two songs set up the metaphor of living one's life like a gamble, suggesting one is not so much responsible for one's lot as pure chance.⁴³ Chance is one of the themes discussed explicitly by the characters. Ripley in particular strongly believes his life is ruled by luck, and the narrative clearly follows this view rather than endowing its characters with some destiny. In this regard, the philosophical, existential or even theological questions that are tackled in the serial are treated with a pinch of salt, for the sake of facetious wisecracks or a punch line verging on blasphemy,⁴⁴ unless one contends with Abraham Moles that "there is a Kitsch theology".⁴⁵
- 18 Most significantly, the chance leitmotiv is humorously foregrounded in the self-reflexive device of the fruit machine which is filmed repeatedly in close shot but instead of the fruit, some of the characters' faces appear in the windows of the win line. Actually, except for once, when the accountant, grinning, frames a scowling Ripley after telling him he is bankrupt,⁴⁶ the line shows either Carlisle or Ripley adopting different disguises and attitudes that convey their mood, winking, smirking jubilantly or frowning threateningly. All instances occur when the two men confront each other about the murder case, highlighting the couple's conflictual relationships.⁴⁷ The investigation thus becomes a contest between two gamers, with the fruit machine keeping the score as it were. And when they also both appear wearing cow-boy hats or carrying smoking guns, and, in the case of Carlisle, wearing a bobby hat, the device mockingly turns them into the conventional roles of arch enemies in westerns or cops-and-robbers movies.
- 19 The characters are indeed part of a huge game of recycling postures, mimicking generic formulae that are exposed as such. In particular DI Carlisle treads in the footsteps of TV detective Columbo from whom he adopts the same casual disregard for appearance and formal police procedure, adding his own brogue-type Scottish accent. Carlisle hangs about wearing a long dangling black overcoat, unshaven and dishevelled; he explains to his assistant DC Blythe that he should proceed with "the gruelling but necessary slog that makes our police force enviable" while he will meet Ripley's wife because "[he is] good with wives" (episode 1). Most characteristically, when leaving a place, he repeatedly turns around for a last incidental question: at the end of episode 1, Carlisle is questioning Danny while seemingly playing some slot machines when Holden comes and tells him he is not entitled to interrogate his minor son:

Carlisle: "Mr Holden, just one question and I'll be gone."

Holden: "What do you want to know?"

Carlisle: "What's an AWP?"

Holden: "Amusement with Prizes. Like that machine you've just been playing."

Carlisle: "I see. Amusement with Prizes. Sounds a bit like life itself, doesn't it?"

[taking out the picture of the dead boy] And you are absolutely sure you didn't see him here at your opening night party?"

- 20 Most significantly, characters make self-reflexive comments about their functions in terms of roles and their idiosyncratic conventions. To Deputy Chief Inspector Jim Allbright who has come to provide an alibi for Holden, Carlisle perfunctorily asks: "So what were you doing on the night in question, as the cliché goes?" (episode 1). Later on, Carlisle forcefully tells his assistant: "We're going to assess motive, means and opportunity. And to use the American vernacular, we are going to nail Ripley Holden's sorry ass" (episode 4). Likewise, Holden keeps discrediting Carlisle as a mere pretence of a detective:

Holden: "I told you I've got nothing to do with the Hooley case."

Carlisle: "Who?"

Holden: "Mike Hooley. The lad who died."

Carlisle: "You never told me you knew his name."

Holden: "Didn't I? Come on. There's a bloke doing a Howard Jones impression at Legends. Is it as good as your impression of a copper?" (episode 2)

- 21 Both Carlisle and Ripley in particular relish in "breathless repartees"⁴⁸ with ornate rhetoric and vocabulary, vying for the most high-flown expressions, from utterly vulgar to mockingly politically correct as when Carlisle introduces himself as "a crime-citizen interface consultant" when Ripley explains he runs "a family entertainment centre" (episode 1). Along with such repartees,⁴⁹ self-consciousness is also achieved through the multiplicity of references that can be found in the dialogue. If many of them draw from British popular culture,⁵⁰ testifying to Ripley's background and character, they also illustrate the extreme heterogeneity of a "mosaic culture"⁵¹ which ignores generic classification and hierarchy. This eclectic catalogue includes the famous football player David Beckham (cited twice in episodes 1 and 6), British and American pop singers (Shakin' Stevens, Howard Jones, Aretha Franklin, Chuck Berry, David Essex, Boy George), popular British television presenters (Richard Madeley, Hugh Scully, Carol Vorderman) and TV shows (*The Weakest Link*, *Millionaire*, the *Graham Norton Show*), well-known actors (Jimmy Stewart, Julie Andrews, Hugh Grant, Halle Berry), fictional characters of children's literature (PC Plod) and historical figures (Mary Queen of Scots, Braveheart or even Tony Blair), notorious serial killers (Fred West) and well-known Northern places ("dead as Southport", Goodison Park). In a manner characteristic of the miscellaneousness that kitsch has been accused of, allusions also include references to high culture which are mixed up with the rest, as when Carlisle facetiously cites Freud, Wittgenstein and Proust⁵² and even more unexpectedly when Ripley compares a punter to Pythagoras (episode 1) or transforms Puccini's aria "Nessun dorma" into "Nesse Dorma" (episode 2).

The dual mode of popular songs

- 22 Nevertheless, *Blackpool's* most notable feature lies in its extensive use of popular songs. As in traditional musicals films, all of a sudden characters start singing and dancing in the

middle of a scene. However, unlike musicals, the songs are not specific to the serial which uses pre-existing pop anthems. Because of this device, *Blackpool* has unmistakably drawn comparison with Dennis Potter's work,⁵³ in which musical numbers enact characters' own self-dramatisations, giving voice to the thoughts and feelings they would otherwise be unable to express.⁵⁴ As in Potter's dramas, songs can convey the characters' inner moods and emotional states. As discussed before, Presley's "Viva Las Vegas" (episode 1) objectifies Holden's overbearing confidence in his good luck while offering the viewer the perfect image of a happy family that shares his upbeat optimism. Similarly, the love songs (Johnny Cash "Cupid", Gabrielle's "Should I Stay", Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' "I Second That Emotion", Slade's "Skweeze me, Pleeze Me", The Faces' "Ooh La La") all reflect on the characters' falling in and out of love, their hopes and doubts. After Natalie has discovered Carlisle's deception, they meet in a café and Mud's "The Secrets That You Keep" aptly gives dramatic expression to her anger and grief.

- 23 However, whereas the songs in Potter's work are supposed to endow the characters with greater psychological and existential depth, in *Blackpool* the musical numbers are not so much related to the characters' consciousness as they are used to provide performative spaces for enacted fantasy that comment upon the narrative itself. Nor are they meant to recreate the atmosphere of an era, since the songs range from the 1960s to 2000.⁵⁵ Rather, they capitalise on their pre-existing resonance within popular culture and their appropriation for dramatic purpose.
- 24 Because most of the songs' lyrics deal with stock feelings and emotions,⁵⁶ they can easily relate to the main themes of the serial, namely chance and fate, expectations and disillusionments, love relationships, deception and self-deception, and thus provide some comment upon the dramatic action while contributing to further it. Holden's financial difficulties are thus underlined by Elvis Costello's "Brilliant Mistake", whose protagonist "thought he was the king of America / Where they pour Coca Cola just like vintage wine". The songs often prove ironical or subject to dramatic irony, stressing Ripley's delusory self-confidence. The visit of the enterprise committee is thus filmed as a deceptive fantasy with everybody dancing in yellow overalls and hard hats to the tune of Diana Ross and The Supremes' "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me" (episode 4). After they have declined Ripley's planning application and left, Ripley is filmed alone with his accountant on top of the balcony, still singing after the music has stopped. Likewise, the lyrics ending Queen's "Don't Stop Me Now" "Have a good time, good time" shed an ironic light on Ripley's gambling away his arcade (episode 5). Moreover, the songs are also often used to relate the main characters to each other, illustrating how the different storylines are intertwined. As such they function as classical choruses that comment the action, while inviting comparative confrontation of different perspectives. This is the case particularly in the first song of each episode that immediately follows and somehow prolongs the recapitulation of all that happened previously. To give but one example, episode 3 opens with Holden who is singing Elvis Costello's "Brilliant Mistake" while walking in the streets. The song then interconnects a collage of short scenes that show all the main characters in different places (Danny on the balcony at his parents' home, Natalie at work answering the phone, Shyanne in front of her then-former boyfriend's flat looking up at his window, Carlisle questioning Hailey during forensic work at her flat) before ending with Holden again who finally arrives at his arcade. As the characters are singing the same song while remaining apart in different environments, the lyrics take on different meaning for each, each reflecting on the "brilliant mistake" they have made.

- 25 Moreover, while in Potter's work actors actually lip-synch the songs, in Bowker's serial, the actors' voices are superimposed on the original, thus highlighting the duality of the device. By foregrounding the hybrid source of the songs, the musical numbers blur the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic origins even further and showcase their status of performances beyond any realistic aesthetics. As early as the first song, self-reflexive performance is highlighted when Ripley winks at the camera as he walks down the stairs singing. Quite similarly, songs also foreground the stereotyped roles and generic codes that make up the story lines, for instance when Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made For Walkin'" conveys the instantaneous antagonism between Ripley and Carlisle engaged in a half tango half bull-fight dance in the arcade, Carlisle accusing Ripley that "You keep lyin' when you oughta be truthin'" and Ripley answering Carlisle that "You keep playin' where you shouldn't be playin'". The scene ends up in a showdown that highlights the mock-western leitmotiv, with a slow tracking in on the two characters filmed in shot counter shot, Carlisle now outside in front of the arcade, Ripley still inside looking out, until their faces are framed in close ups, showing Carlisle smirking and Ripley looking down, thus introducing the self-reflexive device of the fruit machine with a smirking Carlisle wearing a cowboy hat.
- 26 Along with deliberate "amateurish" choreography, the musical numbers flauntingly transgress the boundaries of realism. If they often start in realistic settings, with smooth transitions from the spoken drama, the *mise en scène* generally multiplies breaches in the illusionistic fabric of the diegesis, as the camera work adopts highly mobile crane shots and the montage favours parallel editing from one place or character to another. Action glides magically from one place to another, for instance from the arcade indoors to the back alleys of an imaginary building site as the members of the enterprise committee dance in line, their white-collar back suits turning into yellow boiler suits and hard hats ("I'm Gonna Make You Love Me" in episode 4). Likewise, the drama shifts from diegetic "reality" to pure fantasy, with characters intruding into scenes which they cannot possibly attend. After Natalie has found out Carlisle's real identity, she meets him in a café where Ripley appears as a waiter at the end of Mud's "The Secrets That You Keep" (episode 3). During The Faces' "Ooh La La" (episode 4) the scene alternates between a realistic situation (Holden and Natalie sitting in their bed at night) and the imaginary scene of a cabaret stage on which a naked Natalie behind bright yellow feathers is being watched by both her husband and Carlisle.
- 27 In one unusual instance, when Natalie and Carlisle are dating each other for the first time at the "Funny Girls" club (episode 2), the song is first introduced diegetically: Gabrielle's "Should I Stay" is actually performed on stage by a drag singer, but it soon evolves into non-realistic mode, involving the characters as performers. After focusing on the singer, the camera tilts up from the star-lit stage to the ceiling which displays the shadow of a couple who is dancing; the ceiling actually turns out to be a similar star-lit dancing floor where Carlisle and Natalie are dancing but now in full evening dress. Then, just behind the couple turning, Ripley is shown emerging from the ground of the stage, playing the piano in a Liberace-like⁵⁷ manner when the words "maybe I'm getting in your way" are being played. While romance is still conveyed through the couple's performance, the use of slow motion which captures the glittering reflections of the club and creates blurring halo effects as well as the metaleptic breaches into the "reality" of the fictional world highlight its artificiality.

- 28 Because of such unrealistic option, humour prevails, deflating potentially cloyingly romantic, over-dramatic or even scabrous scenes such as love scenes. When Terry is beaten up by Ripley for example, the character is singing over Alison Moyet's "Invisible" and looking at himself or his double lying under the blows (episode 5); when Ripley is perfunctorily making love to Natalie, Elvis Presley's ballad "She's Not You" starts playing, introducing a scene blending the actual married couple who start singing with a fantasy flashback of the night before which Ripley had spent with call girls and the fanciful presence of the same prostitutes playing double bass in the couple's bedroom.
- 29 Because these sequences stand out for their deliberate artificiality and exuberance, the main dramatic device of actors bursting into song and dance routines with their voices superimposed on the original versions brings about a range of complex and ambivalent effects: while viewers are drawn into feeling the potency of popular music,⁵⁸ fostering that process of shared "emotional reclamation" which Dennis Potter deemed so important in popular songs,⁵⁹ it also gives prominence to its own artificiality, undermining all mimetic illusion and thus forcing viewers to adopt a critical stance. By challenging the viewers' suspension of disbelief, the musical numbers appear as first and foremost full-scale performances, revealing both the diegetic world and drama as narrative construct and spectacle.

Conclusion

- 30 Just as the main character Ripley Holden elicits mixed feelings, both alienating the viewers by his outrageous xenophobic and misogynistic jibes while seducing them by the sheer exuberance of the part and the actor's performance, *Blackpool* remains highly ambivalent. As it plays with codes and clichés, making extensive use of kitsch and popular culture, it subverts them as much as sustains them. On the one hand, as its original use of musical numbers testifies, it demonstrates a genuine desire to pay tribute to icons of kitsch and popular culture and their "sheer visceral qualities",⁶⁰ their ability to open up all types of personal resonances, to convey feelings and emotional states that can be shared. On the other hand, by foregrounding the hybridity and ambiguity of its narrative, *Blackpool* also invites its viewers to adopt a critical distance to a medium which usually invites them to immerse themselves into the immediacy of a fictional world.
- 31 In his essay *State of Play. Contemporary "High-End" TV Drama*, Robin Nelson suggests that such contemporary fictions which, like many postmodernist works, overtly display features such as hybridity, ironic playfulness with genres and conventions and an indiscriminate mixture of high and low culture, foster a "both-and" mode of engagement,⁶¹ a mode that combines the pleasure of following a good narrative with the awareness of its artificiality. According to the same principle, *Blackpool* has its pink-iced cake and eats it. Its deliberate artificiality and exuberance only adds to the enjoyment of its spectacle owing to its playfulness with generic codes and its display of performance. As Robin Nelson also points out, such contemporary fictions overcome the traditional opposition between artless immersion and suspension of disbelief which have characterised popular fiction and the self-reflexive devices that have long remained the hallmark of the avant-garde. In this respect, *Blackpool's* stylistic originality demonstrates the ability of television drama to provoke and challenge through the means of truly "popular" narrative devices and cultural artefacts. Ultimately *Blackpool* perfectly illustrates Walter Benjamin's claim that all "living forms" of art must engage in "taking kitsch dialectically up into

themselves”⁶² – allowing them to provide some “heart’s ease”⁶³ along with critical distance.

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APPENDIXES

Blackpool's synopsis

Broadly speaking, **episode 1** introduces all major characters and story arcs. It starts with Ripley's opening new amusement arcade and his dream of a future casino hotel. His daughter Shyanne is dating a new boyfriend literally old enough to be her father as he turns out he went to school with Ripley. His son Danny is shown dealing drugs and meeting Hailey, one of the prostitutes living in Holden's flats. His wife Natalie works at the Samaritans for charity work. His business partners include edgy accountant Adrian Marr, local police inspector Jim Albright and Terry. His arcade employees are old deaf Barry and Ruth, who is always moaning because of stomach aches. After Ripley threatens his daughter's boyfriend Steve and the latter breaks off, Ripley discovers the dead body of Mike Hooley, a peroxide-haired young lout, in his arcade. DI Peter Carlisle and DC Blythe start to investigate.

In **episode 2**, as the murder investigation goes on, Carlisle starts dating Natalie while concealing his true identity. Shyanne and Steve resume their relationship. The arcade opens up again after being closed for forensics. Yet Ripley's partners start growing nervous as money trouble is piling up for Holden. Danny grows increasingly edgy as he believes the police suspect him. Carlisle tells Ripley he will formally interview Danny in the police station.

In **episode 3**, the detectives learn that forensics have found traces of Mike Hooley's hair and blood in the flats owned by the Holden family. Ripley's planning application is turned down. Carlisle sets Danny up for supplying drugs but lets him go on condition he cooperates. Steve is assaulted at night by someone who remains unknown. Natalie eventually discovers Carlisle's true identity and breaks off. Danny turns up in the police station to confess to the murder.

In **episode 4**, Shyanne accuses her father of beating up Steve. Carlisle manages to talk Natalie into seeing each other again and is determined to get Ripley arrested no matter how. Ripley meets the Enterprise Committee but loses his appeal for his planning permission. Shyanne announces she and Steve are getting married. Ripley tries to buy Steve off. The murder investigation reveals Mike Hooley used to beat his girl-friend. DC Blythe suspects Hailey of the murder. Holden organises a bogus break-in to make an insurance claim. Danny loses nerve and attempts suicide in a way similar to his father's at his age. He tells his father he moved the dead body from the flats to the arcade. To

protect his son, Ripley meets Carlisle in his hotel room and confesses to moving the dead body to the arcade.

In **episode 5**, Natalie forges an alibi for her husband; Hailey owns up Mike Hooley died in her flat. DI Carlisle announces he is withdrawing from the case to win Natalie back. Ripley finds out that the flats he wanted to sell as a last resort have been placed in a trust for their children by Natalie. His last move is to gamble the arcade but he loses. Natalie thinks her husband has found out about her affair when he accuses her of betrayal while he is actually referring to the flats. Ripley closes off the arcade, then evicts all his tenants from the tenement flats and burns the building down.

Episode 6 opens up with the wedding preparation. Ripley is finally arrested during the wedding party but he challenges Carlisle's legitimacy and deontology considering he has seduced his wife. He and Carlisle then strike a deal, whereby he will let Natalie go off with her lover if the murder charge against him is dropped. Subsequently DI Carlisle blackmails his assistant DC Blythe into accepting the deal and the only arrest turns out to be that of the accountant for fiddling with the accounts. After Ripley's emollient wedding speech, in which Ripley shows uncharacteristic self-denial to the benefit of his family, Hailey tells him all the circumstances of Mike Hooley's death.

NOTES

1. This is part of the blurb describing *Blackpool* on its BBC official website; see <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/blackpool/>>, accessed on August 6, 2016. The six-part serial was first broadcast on BBC 1 every Thursday night at 9 pm for six weeks from November 11 to December 16, 2004.
2. When first broadcast in the United States, the British serial drama *Blackpool* was retitled *Viva Blackpool*. *The American title should not be confused with the similarly titled TV film made in 2006, conceived as a sequel featuring the main protagonist Ripley Holden who returns from Las Vegas to his hometown to open a chain of gaudy wedding chapels. There was also an American remake of the series which was co-created by Peter Bowker and Bob Lowry and broadcast on CBS in 2007, but it was entitled Viva Laughlin.*
3. "There is no consensus among scholars as to the etymology of 'kitsch'. Some believe that it derives from the English 'sketch', mispronounced by the Germans, while others link it to the German verb *verkitschen* (to make cheap). Ludwig Giesz maintains that the origins of 'kitsch' can be traced to the German verb *kitschen*, meaning *den Strassenschlam zusammenscharren*, literally 'to collect rubbish off the street'. There have even been speculations that 'kitsch' comes from the inversion of the French *chic*. The experts do, nevertheless, agree that ever since the word was coined, in the second half of the nineteenth century, it has borne negative connotations." Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, 18.
4. First published in *Partisan Review* 6:5, 34-49, available at <<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>>, accessed on July 7, 2016.
5. Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977, 236.
6. Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts (eds.), *Kitsch! Cultural Politics and Taste*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts argue that analyses of

kitsch should tackle the question of aesthetic judgment as its starting point in order to identify the ideological framework implied by the term as regards value judgments of taste, markers of social differences and class distinctions.

7. “Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard. True enough – simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.”, Clement Greenberg, *op. cit.* In his wake, Theodor Adorno’s modernist stance within the Frankfurt School drew similar distinction between “authentic” art and the commodified products of mainstream culture industries.

8. Monica Kjellman-Chapin (ed.), *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, xi.

9. *Ibidem*, xiii.

10. Media literacy is defined as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media.” <<https://medialiteracyproject.org/learn/media-literacy/>>, accessed on August 6, 2016.

11. “But when “kitsch enters the museum it doesn’t enter as kitsch. Kitsch images are usually used as self-conscious subversions, as part of irony, parody, anti-art, or some other artistic ideology. [...] making use of kitsch is not the same as making kitsch.” Tomas Kulka, *op. cit.*, 9.

12. Roger Scruton, “Kitsch and the Modern Predicament”, *The Social Order*, Winter 1999, <<http://www.city-journal.org/html/kitsch-and-modern-predicament-11726.html>>, accessed on August 5, 2016.

13. Andrew Anthony’s review “What a Tower of Strength”, *The Observer*, 19 December 2004.

14. Mark Duguid, “TV Drama in the 2000s”, <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/1394013/index.html>>, accessed on Dec. 30, 2016.

15. Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama. A History*, London: BFI-Palgrave, 2015 [second edition], 210.

16. “In many ways, production quality and professionalism are higher than they’ve ever been. The problem is that so much of it just feels dull, mechanical and samey. There’s a pervasive sense of predictability. When you’re looking for ambitious, complex and above all modern TV, you find yourself watching not British but American pieces: *Six Feet Under*, say, or *24*. [...] British television used to be famous for its risk-taking. Now we’re trailing behind American TV...” Mark Thompson, “What’s Wrong with Our TV?”, *The Guardian*, 24 August 2002, 18.

17. John Reith was the first general manager of the BBC (1922-27) and its first director-general (1927-38). His ambition was to provide the population with television programmes that would not only entertain, but also inform and educate.

18. John Caughie, *Television Drama, Realism, Modernism and British Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

19. “Although Benjamin does not offer an exhaustive definition of kitsch in any of his works, his use of language does provide clear semantic clues. Kitsch, according to Benjamin, undermines the distinction between art and utilitarian object. Art in the

exalted sense ‘begins at a distance of two meters from the body. But now, in kitsch, the world of things advances on the human being; it yields to his uncertain grasp’ (SW 2:4). Kitsch does not have the austere remoteness of classical works of art, and this absence of reverential distance also means that kitsch provokes another kind of intimacy. It has – as Benjamin says with no trace of irony – ‘something that is warming’, is even conducive to ‘heart’s ease’ [...] ‘Kitsch [...] is [...] art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption’ (AP K3a, 1). Kitsch offers instantaneous emotion gratification without intellectual effort, without the requirement of distance, without sublimation.” Winfried Menninghaus, “On the ‘Vital Significance’ of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin’s Politics of ‘Bad Taste’”, in Andrew Benjamin & Charles Rice (eds.), *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, Melbourne: re.press, 2009, 41. [SW refers to: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Works*, edited by Marcus Bullock, Michael W Jennings, Howard S. Eiland & Gary Smith, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003; AP refers to: Walter Benjamin, *The Arcade Project*, trans. Howard S. Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999].

20. John K. Walton, *Blackpool*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998, 90.

21. “Funny Girls” is set on the North Shore and owned by Basil Newby who has been expanding Blackpool’s gay scene since the 1980s; see “Life looks better in the pink”, 5 August 2003, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/lancashire/lifestyle/2003/08/05/in_the_pink.shtml>, accessed on August 9, 2016.

22. Blackpool has been nicknamed “The Gay Capital of the North”. See *The Bolton News*, 16 July 2002.

23. In addition to the opening song “Viva Las Vegas”, which conveys Ripley’s ambitious dream and upbeat optimism, other references include the other song “She’s Not You” (episode 1), a triple picture of Elvis Presley’s live concert in Las Vegas which stands prominent on one of the arcade machines, Holden recalling how “[his] mum hadn’t got out of bed for six weeks because Elvis Presley had died.” (episode 3) and Holden again who answers “It’s Elvis calling” to the chorus of Mary Hopkin’s “Knock, Knock, Who’s There?” when he starts evicting all his tenants before burning down the block of flat at the end of episode 5.

24. The name Shangri-La refers to the earthly paradise described in James Hilton’s 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*.

25. At the end of his opening speech, Holden concludes: “I declare this arcade open. Let’s live the dream.” (episode 1) The phrase “living the dream” will be one of the leitmotif throughout the serial.

26. Holden’s opening speech starts with such an assertion: “The gaming industry creates gambling addicts, misery and family break-up. That’s what they say, eh? The do-gooders, the lentic jockeys outside. Oh, yes. They look like they really know how to have a good time, don’t they? They look like an advert for Cancer Research! What do they want you to do with your money? Put it in a bank? A pension plan? Now, that’s just gambling without the fun. An amusement arcade is the people’s stock exchange. Except we give you the chance to win your money back.”

27. See Hermann Broch’s 1950 essay, *Quelques remarques à propos du kitsch*, Paris, Allia, 2001: “En outre, je ne parle pas véritablement de l’art, mais d’une attitude de vie déterminée. Car l’art kitsch ne saurait naître ni subsister s’il n’existait pas l’homme du kitsch, qui aime celui-ci, qui comme producteur veut en fabriquer et comme consommateur est prêt à en acheter et même à le payer un bon prix.” Abraham Moles also follows Hermann Broch’s approach by tackling

kitsch as a lifestyle: “*Ce n’est pas un phénomène dénotatif sémantiquement explicite, c’est un phénomène connotatif intuitif et subtil ; il est un des types de rapport que l’être entretient avec les choses, une manière d’être plutôt qu’un objet ou même un style.*” Abraham Moles, *Le Kitsch: l’art du bonheur*, Paris: Mame, 1971, 7. [“It is not a semantically explicit denotative phenomenon, it is an intuitive and subtle connotative phenomenon; it is one of the types of relationships that human beings have with things, a way of being rather than an object, or even a style.”]

28. His surname Holden may also be an ironical reference to J.D. Salinger’s teenage hero and narrator Holden Caulfield who keeps calling everything “phony”, a catch-all term for the perceived overall hypocrisy that he so much loathes.

29. Andrew Anthony, “What a Tower of Strength”, the *Observer*, 19 December 2004.

30. Stephen Pile, “Dark Drama in Blackpool’s Arcadia”, *The Telegraph*, 6 November 2004. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3626656/Dark-drama-in-Blackpools-arcadia.html>>, accessed on July 21, 2016. The proposal started around 2000 and triggered much controversy; eventually Manchester was selected for the initial trial by the Government’s Casinos Advisory Panel.

31. “At the time, I was watching David Suchet in *The Way We Live Now* and wondered if I could create a modern capitalist monster like that, who is both corrupt and essential to the community because he makes them rich.” Quoted in Stephen Pile, *op. cit.*

32. The analysis of the notion of kitsch as the starting point of a critique of the consumer society and its subsequent “dumbing down” has a long tradition, from Greenberg and the school of Frankfurt; more recent critiques include: Abraham Moles, “Le phénomène Kitsch est fondé sur une civilisation consommatrice qui produit pour consommer.” Abraham Moles, “Qu’est-ce que le Kitsch ?”, *Communications et Langages*, 1971, 9:1, 78.

33. Holden recalls his childhood to his son: “I was 16 years old. I’d run away from home. No roof over my head. Hungry. I’d heard that perverts hung out at one of the arcades. Pay for rent boys and that. I’m not proud to tell you, Danny. But I went down there. I was playing on one of the machines and sure enough, this old bender came over. I was about to go with him. You know what happened? - No. I got three bars on a win line. Ten quid jackpot payout. The old Bar X machine. That’s when I knew, I’d found *my calling*. I saw what I could do.” (our emphasis, episode 4).

34. In episode 2, Ripley wants to teach his son Danny the difference between right and wrong. To do so, he gives him the pay packet of his employee Barry and asks him to choose whether he should give it to Chantelle, a single teenage mother who is also a compulsive punter. What apparently starts like a moral lesson from father to son ends up in a celebration of ruthless individualism: “Either her kid doesn’t eat or Deaf Barry doesn’t get paid. All you need to know is right from wrong. Chantelle’s a loser. Bad. But that means that I can be a winner. Good. And my family and friends and Deaf Barry can share in my good fortune. It’s called the Trickle Down Effect. There always has to be a loser. And I spend my life making sure that I’m not it. The right decision is the one that makes you a winner.”

35. These are the words of DC Blythe’s report: “And Natalie Holden is the perfect trophy wife. Combines public appearances with dedicated housewife and charity work. And she scrubs up nicely by all accounts.”

36. Matei Calinescu, *op. cit.*, 15.

37. John Mundy, "Singing Detected: *Blackpool* and the Strange Case of the Missing Television Musical Dramas", *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 3, May 2006, 64.
38. Denis Dutton uses the strongly derogative term of parasitism to define "the essential attribute" of kitsch: "Kitsch can thus be defined as a kind of pseudo-art which has an essential attribute of borrowing or parasitism, and whose essential function is to flatter, soothe, and reassure its viewer and consumer." "Kitsch", *The Dictionary of Art*, London: MacMillan, 1998. <http://www.denisdutton.com/kitsch_macmillan.htm>, accessed on July 18, 2016, our emphasis. Clement Greenberg already defined kitsch as parasitic: "The precondition for kitsch, a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends. It borrows from it devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system, and discards the rest. It draws its life blood, so to speak, from this reservoir of accumulated experience." Clement Greenberg, *op. cit.* Abraham Moles also distinguishes heterogeneity among one of the principles defining kitsch, producing a "mosaic culture". Abraham Moles, *Le Kitsch: l'art du bonheur, op. cit.*, 7.
39. John Mundy, *op. cit.*, 59.
40. Robin Nelson, *State of Play. Contemporary "high-end" TV drama*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, 190.
41. Adrian A. Gill, "Blackpool Rock or Singing Defective?", *Sunday Times*, 14 November, 2004, culture section.
42. For example when the camera follows Danny to the tenement flats and shows him knocking on the door to the tune of tense suspense chords, the abrupt cut is followed by a scene set in Ripley's manor house.
43. Presley's "Viva Las Vegas" ends with these words: "I'm gonna keep on the run / I'm gonna have me some fun / If it costs me my very last dime / If I wind up broke well / I'll always remember that I had a swingin' time / I'm gonna give it everything I've got / Lady Luck please let the dice stay hot / Let me shoot a seven with every shot." and the opening ceremony of Ripley's new arcade ends on the notes of Jimmy Cliff's "You Can Get It If You Really Want" with the couplet "win or lose you've got to get your share".
44. Typically, Ripley reduces all moral issues to questions of chance. In episode 5, after Holden has gambled his arcade away, he has a chat with Hallworth, the religious anti-gambling campaigner with whom he regularly exchanges moral considerations and biblical quotations: Ripley: "When I was a kid, I believed in God. Then something happened. I did something. I didn't believe in God any more, just luck. This last couple of weeks I realised God and luck are the same thing, aren't they?" Hallworth: "Well, I wouldn't agree with that. God knows why things happen." Ripley: "He's not letting on though, is he? At least not to me. You know where you are with luck. It doesn't pretend to be something it isn't. To have any feelings about you." Hallworth: "You're still arguing with God even though you don't believe in him anymore." Ripley: "I believe in him. I just don't like his sense of humour."
45. "La distanciation de l'humour ne doit donc pas nous faire illusion : il y a du Kitsch au fond de chacun de nous. Le Kitsch est permanent comme le péché : il y a une théologie du Kitsch." Abraham Moles, "Qu'est-ce que le Kitsch ?", *op. cit.*, 87.
46. This is actually the ninth and last occurrence of the device in episode 5.

47. The first occurrence, just at the end of Ripley and Carlisle's first meeting (episode 1), shows Carlisle winking; the second, after Nancy Sinatra's song at the end of episode 1, reveals Carlisle again smirking and wearing a cowboy hat; the third instance occurs at the beginning of episode 2 with Ripley pointing his fingers while singing the lyrics "You never count your money" from Kenny Rogers's song "The Gambler"; in the fourth, Carlisle appears wearing a bobby's helmet, after he has told Ripley he is going to summon Danny; the fifth shows Carlisle again, this time smirking; the next three occurrences all show Ripley: looking furious after quarreling with his partner Allbright in episode 3, grinning before entering the arcade in episode 4, then, again in episode 4, wearing a cowboy hat, shooting a gun and blowing its smoke after telling Carlisle he is confident his friend Allbright will settle the case.

48. Explaining to DC Blythe he is going back to the arcade: "Ripley and I already have a breathless repartee. I wouldn't want you coming between us." (episode 1).

49. As Ripley tells his son after abusing some driver: "A quip for every occasion" (episode 2).

50. The serial is also noteworthy for the use of Northern slang (for example "skally" in episode 5 to refer to a roguish self-assured young person) as well as Cockney rhyming slang (Ripley referring to his son as a "Perry Como" in episode 6).

51. The term comes from Abraham Moles, *op. cit.*, 7. See note 38.

52. To Ripley who has made a poor joke about the dead boy found in his arcade, he answers: "Freud would say that your jokes revealed a truth buried in your subconscious." (episode 1); to DC Blythe while discussing the investigation: "It's a paradox that Wittgenstein would have a lot to say about." (episode 3); to Natalie, he explains: "Two times in my life I've been happy, really happy. Once in Glasgow. A summer's evening. This singer came on sounded exactly like Aretha Franklin with a Scottish accent. If Proust had drunk McEwans, he'd have written about moments like that." (episode 4)

53. Peter Bowker acknowledged that Dennis Potter's work had great influence on him; to the question "Which TV drama changed your life?", he answered: 'In the end *Pennies from Heaven*, Dennis Potter's *Pennies from Heaven*, because when Bob Hoskins opens his mouth and starts to mime, I remember thinking 'are you allowed to do that?' I remember actually thinking that I'd watched enough television dramas to know there were rules and these were being broken and also broken in such an audacious and entertaining way so I think that made anything possible on television – for me.' "Writersroom: Interviews Playwright & screenwriter, Peter Bowker", 6 February 2013, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p014r8j1>>, accessed on July 18, 2016.

54. Most specifically, *Pennies from Heaven* (1978), *The Singing Detective* (1986) and *Lipstick on Your Collar* (1993).

55. The serial features 23 songs in all, ranging from the 1960s (Elvis Presley, "Viva Las Vegas" and "She's Got You"; Nancy Sinatra, "These Boots Are Made For Walkin"; Johnny Nash, "Cupid"; Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, "I Second That Emotion"; Val Doonican, "Walk Tall"; Diana Ross and The Supremes, "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me"; Engelbert Humperdinck, "There Goes My Everything"; Sandie Shaw, "There's always Something There to Remind Me") to 2000 with Gabrielle's "Should I Stay", with songs from the 1970s (Jimmy Cliff, "You Can get It If You Really Want"; Kenny Rogers, "The Gambler"; Slade, "Skweeze Me, Pleeze Me"; Mud, "The Secrets That You Keep"; The Faces, "Ooh La La"; Queen, "Don't Stop Me Now"; Mary Hopkin, "Knock, Knock, Who's There?")

and from the 1980s (Elvis Costello, “Brilliant Mistake”; The Smiths, “The Boy With The Thorn In His Side”; The Clash, “Should I Stay or Should I Go”; Alison Moyet, “Invisible”; Billy Idol, “White Wedding”; The Communards, “Don’t Leave Me This Way”). Each episode contains four songs, except episode 4 with only three. There are mainly British and American pop singers (12 British, 10 American and 1 Jamaican) but some songs were already subject to cover versions. According to John Mundy, “despite inevitable budget restrictions, the production team were able to use most of the songs they wanted, making good use of the BBC’s blanket music copyright agreements, though objections from artists or agents meant not using some songs or re-versioning others.” John Mundy, *op. cit.*, 65.

56. In his essay *Kitsch and Art*, Tomas Kulka identifies the ability to elicit stock emotions as one determining characteristics of kitsch objects and themes: “[...] they are all highly emotionally charged. They are charged with stock emotions that *spontaneously* trigger an unreflective emotional response. [...] this emotional charge does not just typically concur with kitsch; it is a *sine qua non*. [...] Kitsch comes to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them. [...] The success of kitsch also depends on the universality of the emotions it elicits.” Tomas Kulka, *op. cit.*, 26-27.

57. Wladziu Valentino Liberace (1919-1987), known as Liberace, was an American pianist who became famous for his theatrical performances, the exuberance of his scenic costumes and custom-decorated pianos, some encrusted with rhinestones and mirrors and his flamboyant lifestyle both on and off stage. He regularly performed in Las Vegas.

58. In his play *Private Lives* (1930) Noël Coward has one of his characters comment on some melody which sparks off some memories for him: “strange how potent cheap music is.” Noël Coward, *Plays: Two*, London: Methuen, 1979, 32.

59. In the preface to *Pennies from Heaven*, Kenith Trodd notes that Dennis Potter fully acknowledged the songs’ capacity “to communicate genuine emotion and capture the atmosphere of their period to a degree which seems to contradict the shoddiness of their raw materials.” Kenith Trodd, *Pennies from Heaven*, London: Faber & Faber, 1996, ix.

60. John Mundy, *op. cit.*, 69.

61. Robin Nelson, *op. cit.*, 124.

62. “Among the consecrated forms of expression, kitsch and art stand irreconcilably opposed. But for developing, living forms, what matters is that they have within them something stirring, useful, ultimately heartening – that they take ‘kitsch’ dialectically up into themselves... while yet surmounting [it]. Today, perhaps, film alone is equal to this task – or, at any rate, more ready for it than any other form.” Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), trans. Howard S. Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999, K3a, 1, 391. As *Winfried Menninghaus points out (see note 19)*, although Walter Benjamin did not write a comprehensive study of kitsch, he uses the term in his reflection about Romanticism. Starting from Friedrich Schlegel’s definition of “sentimentality” understood in its derogatory meaning of “shallowly emotional”, Benjamin notes that to be deemed “respectable”, art forms have come to exclude the sentimental, which has then been left to the domain of lowbrow, popular, and kitsch culture. Even worse, sentimentalism and kitsch can thus be misused from a political perspective (and this has obvious ominous significance considering inter-war Germany). In this respect, Benjamin argues that the question of emotions and kitsch is too serious to be ignored by art forms. This does not mean that Benjamin purported to

reverse all negative connotations about kitsch, but rather that it should be acknowledged and dealt with through dialectical strategies rather than merely condemned or ignored.

63. See note 19.

ABSTRACTS

As its American title, *Viva Blackpool*, indicates, BBC's *Blackpool* originates in at least three glittering icons which epitomize the glitz and kitsch of Anglo-Saxon popular culture. Set in "Britain's largest, busiest and best-publicised popular resort", the six-episode television drama refers to the city's attempts to create the "Las Vegas of the North" as well as to Elvis Presley's famous song which opens the first episode. While mixing generic reference points such as the detective thriller, melodrama and the musical, *Blackpool's* most notable achievement is its extensive and highly original use of popular songs. In a device reminiscent of Dennis Potter's work, actors burst into song sequences and dance routines with their voice superimposed on the original, blurring the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic origins and undermining all mimetic illusion. Reading *Blackpool* through the critical perspective of kitsch aesthetics allows one to pinpoint the ambivalence of its narrative and aesthetic choices. Thanks to the extensive use of generic conventions and iconic artefacts of popular culture, the serial drama builds up on their pre-existing emotional resonance while highlighting their artificiality through self-reflexive devices. Ultimately, *Blackpool's* stylistic originality demonstrates the ability of television drama to provoke a dual mode of engagement, which combines the pleasure of immediacy while exposing it as artifice. In so doing, it proves that, contrary to what Walter Benjamin asserted, the use of kitsch can provide "emotional gratification" along with critical distance.

Comme l'indique son titre américain, *Viva Blackpool*, la mini-série britannique *Blackpool* est issue de la combinaison d'au moins trois icônes insignes qui représentent tout le kitsch et le clinquant de la culture populaire anglo-saxonne. Située dans la station balnéaire la plus importante et la plus populaire du Royaume-Uni, la mini-série fait référence aux ambitions de la ville de se transformer en « Las Vegas de la côte nord » ainsi qu'à la célèbre chanson d'Elvis Presley « Viva Las Vegas », qui ouvre le premier épisode. La série se caractérise par l'extrême hétérogénéité des références génériques et esthétiques qu'elle recycle, empruntant aux films policiers comme aux genres du mélodrame, du soap opera et de la comédie musicale. Cependant, le trait le plus original tient dans l'utilisation de chansons populaires, qui, tout en rappelant l'œuvre de Dennis Potter, vient saper toute illusion mimétique. La lecture de *Blackpool* à travers une critique du kitsch comme mode esthétique et existentiel permet de souligner l'ambivalence de ses procédés narratifs et formels. Par l'entremise de conventions génériques et d'icônes de la culture populaire, la série met en exergue leur pouvoir d'évocation générateur d'émotions tout en soulignant leur caractère délibérément artificiel. C'est précisément cette dualité qui fait toute l'originalité de *Blackpool* et permet un double mode de réception spectatorielle, procurant le plaisir de l'immersion fictionnelle sans en être dupe. Contrairement à ce qu'affirmait Walter Benjamin, la série est une démonstration jubilatoire que l'utilisation du kitsch peut générer, en même temps qu'une « gratification émotionnelle », une distance critique.

INDEX

Mots-clés: kitsch, fiction télévisuelle britannique, série télévisée, culture populaire, réflexivité

Keywords: kitsch, British television drama, TV series, popular culture, self-reflexivity

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