

Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: 29 - English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Working Class Entertainment: Economic and Cultural Impact on Blackpool
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Vanessa Toulmin's research into working class entertainment has had cultural and economic impact, creating and interpreting cultural capital to enrich and expand imaginations and sensibilities, and applying the knowledge gained from research to create wealth in the service, creative, and cultural sectors. Her research has galvanised the regeneration of Blackpool's Winter Gardens, helping raise £40 million to save the complex, and has rejuvenated Blackpool's cultural scene. These activities have increased visitor numbers and revenue, and have enhanced the public appreciation of these historic entertainment locations. Public understanding of the cultural and creative significance of working class entertainment has also been furthered by high-profile events such as CircusFest at London's Roundhouse, and numerous media appearances.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Toulmin's research specialises in the history of what she terms 'illegitimate' entertainment: working class recreation – of the circus, showground, and music hall – marginalised by academic study of entertainment history. Toulmin's research recovers and re-values these overlooked forms.</p> <p>As Director of the University of Sheffield's National Fairground Archive, Toulmin takes a lead role in the collection, preservation, management, interpretation, and dissemination of an archive which gives unique insights into the culture, history, and society of travelling shows and entertainments, and she has published extensively on the history of fairs and freak shows [R6]; neo-variety, burlesque, outdoor spectacular theatre [R5]; early film [R1, R2]; and the Blackpool entertainment industry since 1870. Her research demonstrates the significance of popular entertainments to urban culture from the nineteenth century onwards, showing that street shows were not on the edge of the entertainment industry, but at its centre, based in significant urban areas with large populations for whom they provided a daily form of cheap entertainment. She uncovers how these shows catered for a mainly urban, working-class audience, appealing to public curiosity and adapting to changing trends in the entertainment world (including the early use of cinema), with the showmen exhibitors providing a regular supply of novelties and exhibitions for a public who were eager to view them [R3, R4]. As such, she uncovers the cultural creativity and innovation of these 'cheap' and 'popular' forms of entertainment.</p> <p>From 2001-4, Toulmin was principal investigator on the AHRC-funded project 'Analysing the Mitchell and Kenyon Collection in relation to regional and non-fiction films 1900-1911' (£146,527). Toulmin's research on the Mitchell and Kenyon collection challenged the traditional view of early cinema by shifting the emphasis away from film production and technique to consider exhibition and audience response. The analysis of the collection conducted provided empirical evidence that the spread and exploitation of cinema in the first decade of the twentieth century beyond London and south-east England was primarily undertaken by itinerant showmen, who utilized the 'local' and topical as essential elements of the film programmes they presented. Toulmin's research on this archive also highlighted the role of cinema in representing the early twentieth-century urban working class at leisure, and the ways in which these recreational activities shaped and consolidated a sense of community and identity. Further to that, it revealed the importance of examining the local contexts of both production and reception. These findings were published in Toulmin's 2006 monograph, <i>Electric Edwardians</i> [R1], and 2004 edited collection, <i>The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon</i> [R2]. She also published the entire surviving output of this northern regional company on DVD in 2005 with accompanying interpretative material.</p> <p>At the heart of Toulmin's research is the fusion of ground-breaking work on archival records, an attention to material culture and to the local environment in which culture is consumed, and a determination to celebrate and unpack the cultural value and creativity of academically marginalised forms of entertainment.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>R1. Toulmin, V. (2006), <i>Electric Edwardians: The Story of the Mitchell & Kenyon Collection</i>. London: British Film Institute. 326pp. [Returned RAE 2008]</p> <p>R2. Toulmin, V., S. Popple and P. Russell, eds (2004), <i>The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film</i>. London: British Film Institute. 210pp. Includes essay by Toulmin</p>

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- on travelling exhibition showmen. [Returned RAE2008]
- R3. Toulmin, V. (2006), 'Curios Things in Curios Places: Temporary Exhibition Venues in the Victorian and Edwardian Entertainment Environment', *Exhibition and Performance*, Special issue of *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 4.2: 124-49. [Peer-reviewed journal]
- R4. Toulmin, V. (2010), 'Cuckoo in the Nest: Edwardian Itinerant Exhibition Practices and the Transition to Cinema in the United Kingdom from 1901-1906', *Moving Image*, 10.1: 52-79. [Peer-reviewed journal]
- R5. Toulmin, V. (2011), 'Wizards of the Wall: Wall of Death Riders as Northern Heroes in the 1930s', in D. Russell and S. Wragg, eds, *Sporting Heroes of the North*. Newcastle: Northumbria Press, ch. 12
- R6. Toulmin, V., ed (2005), *Hull Fair: Fun for All*, DVD and web resource, www.hullfair.dept.shef.ac.uk; funded by Heritage Lottery Fund (£50,000, PI Toulmin, 2003-5)

4. Details of the impact

Toulmin's research into early film and popular entertainment, and her position as Director of the National Film Archive, led to her role as initiator of public engagement projects aimed at disseminating the history of popular entertainment in cinema, street theatre, fairground, resort complexes, and variety halls (especially in the North of England), and at archiving, preserving, and recreating those entertainments. Her work in Blackpool – a partnership which began after she had given a public lecture in the city on Mitchell and Kenyon – exemplifies the ways in which her research has helped to preserve, conserve, and present cultural heritage, and to increase economic prosperity through tourism and creative endeavours (e.g. shows, exhibitions).

Cultural impact

In 2007-8, Toulmin was the lead investigator of the AHRC-funded 'Admission All Classes: Entertainment for the Masses, 1850-1950' (£173,731), which directly addressed aims set out in Blackpool Council's Heritage Strategy (2006-10), namely: to establish and celebrate the history of the UK's first mass leisure resort to accommodate working-class holiday-makers. During the eighteen months of the project, Toulmin curated a series of ten themed events, underpinned by her research into the history of fairground, music hall, circus, and seaside entertainments that drew nineteenth- and early twentieth-century visitors to the resort. These included the 'Cabinet of Curiosities' (recreating sideshows from Blackpool's entertainment heritage), exhibitions (*Top of the Bill*, *Showtown*), and a weekend of screenings of early films featuring Blackpool held in the archives of British Film Institute. The programme was also designed to revive historic entertainment venues (Grand Theatre, Winter Gardens, Tower Circus and Ballroom) and highlight their value both as architectural heritage and as contemporary performance spaces. To further this aspect of the project, Toulmin developed a heritage tour of venues designed by the renowned nineteenth-century theatre architect, Frank Matcham. The cultural impact of 'Admission All Classes' was also extended beyond Blackpool through Toulmin's collaboration with Nick Patrick (Radio 4, *Making History*) to produce a series of podcasts exploring the themes of the project (15,000 downloads). The success of the events in 'Admission All Classes', which attracted 14,000 visitors, led directly to the following cultural legacies:

1. **The foundation in 2008 of 'Showzam'**, Blackpool's annual festival of Circus Magic and New Variety, developed in partnership with 'Visit Blackpool' as part of the North West Development Agency (NWDA) programme for bringing high quality arts organisations to Blackpool. With Toulmin as creative director and drawing on her research into popular entertainment, the festival – subsidised by Arts Council grants (£148,000 since 2009) – showcases the best of contemporary magic, circus, and new variety but also brings to the forefront Blackpool's entertainment heritage buildings such as the Winter Gardens, the Grand, and the Ballroom. The festival has grown year by year and at the most recent festival in 2013 attracted 30,000 visitors. It brings more than 150 performers from over twenty different countries to Blackpool each year and – as one of the UK's largest and most innovative entertainment events – it provides a platform for artists from across the UK and Europe. The annual festival is also accompanied by exhibitions, curated by Toulmin, on the history of popular entertainment. These attract a heavy footfall and extensive media coverage (e.g. in 2009, *Circus of Wonders* attracted 17,000 visitors in 8 days and featured on 'Good Morning America' as well as *The Sunday Telegraph*, *Times*, *Independent*, and Radio 4).

The partnership with the NWDA was extended with the 'Cine Variety' project accompanying 'Showzam' in 2010: Toulmin was granted £30,000 from NWDA to curate a ten-day programme

presenting the history of Blackpool on film with ten events, featuring rare and unseen film footage of the North West's rich entertainment heritage in the first half of the twentieth century. These played daily, interspersed with public lectures given by Toulmin.

2. **'Admission All Classes' informed Blackpool Council's tourism and heritage strategy** by feeding into their consultation process for a new public space. The Council's aim was to bring entertainment out of the venues and onto the streets, and therefore to wider audiences. This provided a taster of what happened inside the buildings and increased people's awareness of the different types of events on offer. In support of the consultation and in order to demonstrate the cultural value and commercial possibilities of outdoor entertainment, 'Admission All Classes' put on a weekend of street theatre in collaboration with Blackpool's Townscape Heritage Initiative. This was followed by a day of talks on popular entertainment in the Grand Theatre Studio. As a result, a series of decisions were taken by the Council to ensure that the new public space incorporated the necessary facilities for flexible entertainment, both street-based and stage-based. For example, outdoor electrical points were installed which rise up from the ground to supply sufficient power to any activity taking place in that space, something which had not been considered originally. Blackpool City Council acknowledges Toulmin's impact here, with the then Chief Executive stating that 'Admission All Classes' brought *'high quality variety and street performance back to the resort, drawing on Blackpool's history and contemporising it. This project directly influenced the design of a key town centre space in front of the Winter Gardens, helping to justify a £3.5 million spend to create not just a quality piece of public realm but outside performance space'* [S1].

3. **Saving the Winter Gardens:** The relationship established during 'Admission All Classes' led to Blackpool Council commissioning Toulmin to research and write *Blackpool's Winter Gardens: The Most Magnificent Palace of Amusements in the World* (Boco Publishing, 2009), a commemorative volume celebrating the history of this magnificent Grade II* listed building with its opera house, ballroom, theatre, arena, Spanish hall, Olympia, Baronial and Renaissance halls. The publication was used by Blackpool Council to lobby Parliament and funding bodies on the desperate need to preserve the buildings, which were close to being condemned. £40 million was secured from Blackpool Council, European Regional Development Fund, Homes and Communities Agency, and NWDA, and in March 2010 Blackpool Council purchased the Winter Gardens, saving a crucial part of Blackpool's architectural and cultural heritage and securing a vital, and profitable, entertainment venue for the town. The Council acknowledges that Toulmin's research, and her own lobbying, played an essential role in driving the campaign. Toulmin's research also underpins the heritage pages of the Winter Gardens website [S1, S2].

4. **Productive partnerships with voluntary groups, leading to more innovative programming:** Alongside various Council departments, 'Admission All Classes' worked in conjunction with a range of non-academic partners, including Blackpool's Theatre Group (a consortium of the resort's private commercial venues) and the Blackpool Civic Trust, to enhance the visitor experience [S3]. This collaboration encouraged local groups to expand their programming range, having been shown during the project that it is possible to accommodate new and different audiences alongside those traditionally associated with popular entertainment in the town. The success of 'Admission All Classes' also raised Blackpool's profile and allowed the town to secure bigger names from the world of entertainment, including cutting-edge shows such as performances from the award-winning cabaret *La Clique* (2010).

5. **The acquisition for the city of a significant archive:** In 2009, Toulmin played a central role in securing funding and appropriate facilities for housing, in Blackpool's local studies library, the private collection of Cyril Critchlow, founder of Blackpool Magic Club and former proprietor of Blackpool's Museum of Entertainment, thus ensuring that this substantial, nationally important collection (25,000 items) was accessible to the people of the city that produced it. Since the launch of the collection (with an exhibition curated by Toulmin), the profile of the local studies library has increased markedly, and the Critchlow Collection is used extensively: for TV programmes, arts-for-health programmes, creative writing exercises, education for local schools, and in a regular programme of public heritage talks. As the head of the library acknowledges, Toulmin's championing of the collection has also had longer-term impact, since it *'led to a far greater local understanding of our rich heritage resources, and opened up the way for us to secure other local collections of significance. Quite simply the Cyril Critchlow Collection has eased the way for present and future projects, and opened up our own story to a new audience. Professor Vanessa's*

role in this important process cannot be overstated' [S4].

6. Greater understanding of Blackpool's entertainment heritage: Subsequent to the volume on the Winter Gardens, Toulmin has produced a further three volumes about Blackpool's entertainment industry: *Blackpool Tower: Wonderland of the World* (Boco Publishing, 2011), *Blackpool Pleasure Beach: More Than Just an Amusement Park* (Boco Publishing, 2011), and *Blackpool Illuminations: The Greatest Free Show on Earth* (Boco Publishing, 2012). In addition, the heritage tours developed for 'Admission All Classes' are now a fixed feature of 'Showzam', and Toulmin has trained local heritage champions to deliver these.

The **re-valuing of popular entertainment**, exemplified by Toulmin's work in Blackpool, is also evidenced by *Professor Vanessa's Wondershow* for the 2012 CircusFest at London's Roundhouse. This commission resulted directly from her work on 'Showzam' and featured many of the same artists, providing a contemporary twist on sideshows of the mid-twentieth century and bringing to a cosmopolitan audience an 'irresistible tribute to the fringes of the fair' (*Exeunt Magazine*). The production received nation-wide media coverage (in both the print press and broadcast media), and all five shows were sold out; Toulmin also delivered a public talk ('Step Right Up: The Social History of the Sideshow'), discussing the heritage of the programme she had curated.

Social and economic impact

Toulmin's work has been crucial in the regeneration of Blackpool, helping raise its national and international profile as a leading entertainment resort. As the then Chief Executive of Blackpool City Council acknowledges [S1], "*Admission All Classes*" proved that Blackpool could host successfully new variety and performance. This helped to leverage £3 million of NWDA funding as part of an events programme [...] giving visitors new reasons to come to the resort, particularly while the physical regeneration [of Winter Gardens] was underway and not completed.' Visitor satisfaction at 'Showzam' is extremely high, and demonstrates the positive impact on Blackpool: a study by the UK Centre for Events Management in 2011 reported that over 90% of those interviewed agreed that initiatives like 'Showzam' made Blackpool a better place to live or to visit; it also estimated that Management Gross spending associated with those attending 'Showzam' since 2009 is over £6m (with Gross Value Added estimated to be nearly £3m). Since 'Showzam' occurs in February, this provides a significant income stream during the low season.

The positive economic benefits of celebrating entertainment heritage are further exemplified by Toulmin's consultancy for Butlins (2012-13). Butlins Bognor Regis fairground was neglected; Toulmin's input on its historic significance gave the parent company Bourne Leisure the confidence to celebrate and reinvest in this aspect of the resort, creating new rides, stalls and sideshows, and featuring it in their promotional material (including a film scripted by and featuring Toulmin, S8). The success of this initial project has led to a further consultancy about Butlins Minehead.

In sum, Toulmin's public-facing research demonstrates how celebrating the UK's entertainment heritage leads to positive cultural, social, and economic impacts.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. The AHRC's impact case-study of 'Admission All Classes', corroborating the impact claimed here (including testimonial from the former Chief Executive of Blackpool City Council), will be available via www.ahrc.ac.uk from autumn 2013.
- S2. The Head of Heritage, Blackpool Council, can corroborate Toulmin's contribution to heritage and tourism strategy, and her impact on the campaign to save the Winter Gardens.
- S3. The Head of Marketing Blackpool can corroborate the benefits of Toulmin's projects to tourism and local economy and provide access to the 2011 report by UK Centre for Events Management.
- S4. An email held on file from the Head of Local Studies at Blackpool Library can corroborate Toulmin's contribution to local archives.
- S5. 'Council buys Blackpool Tower to stem slide', *Financial Times*, <http://tinyurl.com/nxleevt> (corroborates the value of the Winter Gardens to the local economy)
- S6. <http://tinyurl.com/lqtcpor> (corroborates the connection between 'Showzam' and 'Professor Vanessa's Wondershow')
- S7. Chief Executive, Bourne Leisure can corroborate the impact of Toulmin's Butlins consultancy.
- S8. <http://tinyurl.com/o8m6w26> (film about Butlins Bognor Regis, corroborating Toulmin's impact on investment in its fairground)