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DOI: 10.1068/d12211

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# Illuminated atmospheres: anticipating and reproducing the flow of affective experience in Blackpool

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Received 10 June 2011; in revised form 23 December 2011

**Abstract.** This paper considers the atmospheric qualities of illuminated space, grounding notions of affect in investigating the longstanding autumnal event of Blackpool Illuminations. I consider the affective qualities of lighting before discussing the ‘atmosphere’ of the Illuminations. I critically explore the division between affect and emotion, the insistence on affect’s precognitive qualities, and the notion that affective atmospheres produce a ‘mute attunement’ to place. In foregrounding the dense social production of atmosphere at Blackpool Illuminations, I highlight the flow of affect and emotion in place, show how lighting is ideally constituted to blur divisions between the representational and nonrepresentational, identify the anticipation of affect, and demonstrate that affective atmospheres are coproduced by visitors as part of a reiterative, festive, convivial, and playful social practice in familiar space.

**Keywords:** Blackpool, illuminations, atmosphere, affect and emotion, flow, anticipation, representation and nonrepresentation

## Introduction

This paper considers the atmospheres of illuminated space by drawing on ethnographic research carried out at Blackpool Illuminations. I use Böhme’s conceptualisations to explore the multiplicity of atmospheres and their melding of affect, emotion, and sensation. I subsequently show how lighting is a particularly powerful element in contributing to the production of thick atmospheres and is also ideally constituted to blur divisions between the representational and nonrepresentational. I then explore the metaphor of flow in accounting for the experience of atmosphere, insist upon the anticipation of atmosphere in place, and underline the ways in which atmospheres are coproduced by conventions of social practice. The longstanding autumnal event of the Illuminations is also a useful setting at which to interrogate some of the recent, often dense and obtuse, writing which has served to mystify affect. The paper is thus aligned with recent critical writing which has tried to ground notions of affect. Consequently, by exploring the mutability and multiplicity of atmosphere, I question rigid conceptual divisions between affect and emotion, an insistence on affect’s precognitive qualities, and, consequently, the notion that ‘affective’ atmospheres produce a ‘mute attunement’ to place.

After briefly describing the Illuminations, I consider the affective qualities of illumination, a hugely neglected subject in geography and across the social sciences. Following this, I discuss the notion of atmosphere in relation to Blackpool. I subsequently include short vignettes of three separate visits to the Illuminations<sup>(1)</sup> to offer a more grounded sense of this atmosphere and to provide a sense of the flow of affect and emotion and the mingled apprehension of the

<sup>(1)</sup>Research was undertaken during the Illuminations in 2008 and 2010 by two research assistants. In each period more than fifty semistructured interviews with visitors were carried out, along with extensive participation observation and many shorter, informal interviews. This was complemented by several visits made to the resort for participant observation by the primary researchers.



**Figure 1.** [In colour online.] Illuminations at the Pleasure Beach. (Source: author.)

representational and nonrepresentational qualities of light. Next, and drawing on participant observation and ethnographic interviews, I discuss how visitors' repetitive annual visits to Blackpool produce anticipation for the atmosphere of illuminated space. Finally, I show how the atmosphere of the Illuminations is coproduced by familial, festive, convivial, and playful forms of communication and practice. Accounts of atmospheres and affects are inevitably difficult to compose. Here, I combine descriptive passages that depict incidents and an immersed engagement with space to try and capture some of the atmospheric qualities, as well as quotes from visitors that convey their involvement with this atmosphere.

### **Blackpool Illuminations**

With a diverse array of attractions, including the beach, piers, the Tower, waxworks, huge amusement arcades, theatres, and Britain's most visited holiday attraction—the Pleasure Beach—Blackpool remains Britain's most popular holiday resort, despite a gradual decline in visitor numbers over the past four decades. This continuing popularity is indicated by the more than three million visitors to the autumnal event, Blackpool's Illuminations. Following earlier experiments, in the 1920s the display was established to extend the traditional holiday season and has remained an annual institution ever since, war and rationing permitting. Each year the Illuminations run for sixty-six days from the beginning of September. Extending for nearly six miles along the sea front, the eclectic mix of illuminations includes more than 500 scenic designs and features lasers, neon, fibre optics, LEDs, searchlights, and floodlighting. Illuminated designs attached to roadside lamposts form successive themes, lighting picks out landmarks such as the Tower, illuminated trams glide alongside the promenade, and large, animated tableaux flash and pulsate. A rolling programme of annual updating replaces selective sections, most recently with Warholesque Local Heads, the world's largest mirrorball, and installations by celebrity designer Laurence Llewellyn Bowen. The lights thus conjoin the disparate parts of Blackpool's seafront, the big hotels, the Tower and the Golden Mile, the piers, the sprawl of small hotels, and the Pleasure Beach, with each realm possessing its own illuminated character and atmosphere.

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The designs are both representational and abstract, diverse in their animation, colour, and form. The different icons, motifs, forms, and styles that have varied from year to year constitute an astonishing compendium of changing tastes and trends in popular culture. Though enormously diverse, common themes include celebrity, film and television, myth, the ‘exotic’, modernity, toys, folk tales and nursery rhymes, Blackpool scenes, nature, glamour, national identity, science fiction, historical scenes, and the supernatural. Collectively, they produce an excess of meaning that testifies to the protean, dynamic qualities of British popular culture. I now turn to consider more broadly the relationship between illumination and affect.

### Affect, emotion, and illumination

Affect has been defined as “a sense of push in the world … a notion of broad tendencies and lines of force” (Thrift, 2004, page 60) or a “set of flows moving through the bodies of human and other beings” (Thrift, 2009, page 88). The claim that affect is distributed amongst discrete elements and across space expands understandings about the constitution of the social. Decentring the individual human subject, conceptions of affect usefully prompt consideration about how different configurations of objects, technologies, and (human and nonhuman) bodies come together to form different capacities and experiences of relationality. This insistence on relationality offers opportunities to explore how such actors and energies emerge, relate, and are distributed differently across space and are enrolled into the social to form affective fields that produce “temporary configurations of energy and feeling” (Conradson and Latham, 2007, page 238), or affective atmospheres.

Certain accounts infer that affect is composed of ‘transpersonal’ or ‘prepersonal’ intensities (Massumi, 2002), in contradistinction to emotion as precisely the intersubjective expression of the feeling of these intensities “in a socio-culturally recognizable form” (McCormack, 2008, page 426), the social translation of an affective charge, or an expressive capturing of affect (Curti et al, 2011). Moreover, various individual states of emotion—anger, joy, and anxiety, for instance—are identified as communicable, intersubjective states. However, until recently there has been limited crossover between geographical accounts of affect and emotion (Anderson, 2009; Smith et al, 2009). In a critique of this conceptual division, Pile (2010) contends that a division into discrete emotional and affective geographies produces a binary wherein each category becomes reified. I will follow Bondi and Davidson’s suggestion that imperatives to maintain such conceptual boundaries are unproductive and that parameters should remain “amorphous and elusive” (2011, page 595). Atmospheres, I argue, exemplify this blurring.

Other assumptions inherent in prevalent notions of affect have been critiqued. Tolia-Kelly (2006) and Rose et al (2010) argue that theories of affect have tended to miss the social and cultural contexts of affective formations and thus neglect how affective experience is “a cumulative, and therefore historical, process of interaction between human beings and place” (Kobayashi et al, 2011, page 873). Similarly, Barnett (2008) contends that a dearth of social and historical contextualisation of particular affects, together with the disregard for anticipation and prior experience, suggests a mute attunement to place bereft of political, social, and cultural orientations, delimiting peoples’ agency, expectations, habits, and objectives. Further, Duff claims that “affective environment is largely an expression of the social ties that form its foundation” (2010, page 881). Below I exemplify how the cumulative processes through which affect in place is experienced partly lies in its anticipation, adding to these critiques of the notion that affect is invariably precognitive. These depictions of reflective, historical, and anticipatory engagements with place suggest that there is a thorough entangling of emotion and affect, an entangling that inheres in Böhme’s notion of atmosphere.

Atmospheres, according to Böhme, “imbue everything, they … bathe everything in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions” (2008, page 2) or are “something distributed

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yet palpable, a quality of environmental immersion that registers in and through sensing bodies whilst also remaining diffuse, in the air, ethereal" (McCormack, 2008, page 413). While Böhme alludes to a powerful atmosphere as "something which can come over us, into which we are drawn, which takes possession of us like an alien power" (2008, page 3), he crucially insists that these atmospheres are intermediate phenomena, belonging neither in the world out there or the person. Thus, an atmosphere is "a certain mental or emotive tone permeating a particular environment" but also "the atmosphere spreading spatially around me, in which I participate through my mood". A space thus "attunes my mood, but at the same time it is the extendedness of my mood itself" (Böhme, 2002, page 5), and in suggesting a thorough imbrication of the affective and emotional, he contends that one must experience atmospheres "in terms of one's own emotional state", for he argues, "without the sentient subject, they are nothing" (Böhme, 2008, page 2). The "indeterminate, spatially extended quality of feeling" (Böhme, 1993, page 118) of atmospheres can suffuse all spatial contexts, but in some spaces more profoundly than others. For instance, 'warm' atmospheres with distinct affective tonalities may be produced in transnational spaces (Kobayashi et al, 2011) by home decoration (Olesen, 2010) or in youthful and subcultural urban sites (Duff, 2010). The capacity of atmospheres to affect bodies and emotions varies in intensity. Consider the calm atmosphere produced through meditation, the animated atmosphere of a market or rock concert, or the sombre atmosphere of a gothic church.

Thibaud (2011) refers to how the "pervasive quality" of a "situation as a whole" that "gets inside us" or in which we are "caught up" orients us towards particular actions and expressions (page 209). Thus, rather than eliciting passivity, atmosphere "gives rhythm to our movements and modulates the manner in which we move" (page 209). As Duff insists, atmospheres provide the conditions for orienting potential action in place, furnishing "an array of resources useful for the realisation of specific experiences, ambitions and capacities" that can facilitate "personal enrichment" (2010, page 882). Duff cites Casey's (2001) distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' places, where the former are suffused with a sense of sensual, emotional, and affective belonging that is embedded over time through repetitive practical, embodied engagement. As we will see, Blackpool Illuminations provide such a thick atmospheric context. I now consider how illumination more broadly produces atmosphere.

Utterly transforming the practical, aesthetic, and commercial properties and potentialities of urban spaces in the 19th century (Schivelbusch, 1988), artificial lighting since then has been utilised to enhance safety and mobility, facilitate surveillance, foster domestic intimacy and style, broadcast commercial advertising, fashion signposting, selectively highlight buildings to reinforce state and corporate power, promote festivity, and generally expand the uses of the city at night.

The ways in which light transforms space is complex and multiple. We see both with and in light and move through illuminated space, making engagement with light a deeply embodied experience. Light alters the perception of the colour and shape of space and is both a discrete material object comprising an assemblage of elements and a property that extends across space, providing a 'viewing field' that inflects how all objects within it can be perceived (Thibaud, 2011). Different kinds of lighting and their impacts upon the particular elements within space produce particularistic illuminated landscapes. Moreover, light invariably produces complex relations through its interplay with its ostensible opposite, dark, whether through an absence of darkness, multiple shades and shadows, or a contrast between illuminated and unilluminated space. Morris recognises "the extent to which variations in relative 'lightness' or 'darkness' can impact upon an individual's understanding of, and movement through, the landscape" (2011, page 334) along with the effects of the moon and stars (Attlee, 2011). Anderson and Wylie discuss how Lingis identifies 'levels' of light and

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colour, an “incessant composition of qualitative, differential spatial, and temporal ‘tunings’” that “constitute an incessant, diffracting, patterning of matters and senses” (2009, page 327) in the experience of space.

A further quality of light is its peculiar confounding of materiality and immateriality. The concrete solidity of fixtures, buildings, and surfaces and a complex of integral urban material artefacts: wires, posts, pylons, substations, junction boxes, lamps, bulbs, and reflectors appear to contrast with the radiating energy that animates and suffuses space, resonating with Ingold’s (2007) contention that weather is conventionally conceived as reifying the ontological division between material and immaterial. Yet the apprehension of illuminated space often confounds this distinction, shifting perceptions about what appears solid. Street lamps are reflected across windows, in the movement of passing cars, in puddles and waterways, to produce a splintered, refracted city comprised of a constantly shifting pattern of ambient textures, ephemeral shimmering shapes, glittering colours, and incandescent glares. Structures and surfaces which appear fixed and solid by day are transformed into insubstantial, fluid entities by shadow, glow, and sparkle. The tension “between what is solid, present, corporeal and material and that which inheres in the material as something mysterious, elusive, and ethereal” (Cloke and Dewsbury, 2009, page 698) is thus particularly evident in illuminated landscapes. Distances are difficult to fathom, illuminated buildings appear to float, areas of darkness are impregnable to sense-making, and scale and proportion may be illusory, factors which combine to produce the oneiric dimensions of illuminated, nocturnal space, particularly in the city (McQuire, 2008). This oneiric quality has, of course, been a staple backdrop for 20th-century cinematic, televisual, photographic, and artistic representations and paintings (Sharpe, 2008), and the production of spectacular, fantastic urban nightscapes is evident in the recent growth of festivals of illumination (Alves, 2007).

Böhme points out how lighting development is coterminous with the broader modern expansion of aesthetic experience, with the advent of “new perceptual pleasures available to people in the modern period ... the technical mastery of light and sound, together with the technical shaping of ... materiality” (2010, page 29). And along with telephony, film, and photography, electric light has added what Collins and Jervis term a ‘technological uncanny’ through the production of a phantasmagoric urban realm, “the shadowy hauntings of the fleeting and insubstantial” (2008, page 1), producing defamiliarisation, uncertainty, and fascination, constitutive aspects of modern experience.

These phantasmagorical attributes were exemplified at theme parks like Coney Island where, as Cross describes, “Luna Park and Dreamland created a dazzling architectural fantasy of towers domes and minarets, outlined by electric lights, giving these strange oriental shapes an even more mysterious and magical air at night” (2006, page 345). Similarly at Blackpool, a profound theatricalisation of space through lighting invests space with the oneiric and phantasmagoric qualities that contribute to the production of illuminated atmospheres. Here, the affective potentialities and capacities of illumination become particularly evident as particular atmospheres emerge as part of a distributed relationality. Like atmosphere, the expanse of illumination cannot be delimited for it fades into darkness or blends with other lighting. As material entities, illuminations “radiate presence, projecting their qualities outwards and colouring the environs” (Thibaud, 2011, page 211). All atmospheres are “‘tinctured’ through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations” (Böhme, 1993, page 121). For instance, the colour of an object in the daylight certainly infuses its surroundings as “it goes forth from itself”. However, this is usually less vivid than the tinctures produced by the radiating properties of electric illumination (page 121).

Artificial lighting conditions environments, bestowing manifold moods or tones of feeling that influence notions about how to operate within particular spatial and social settings and

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provoke apprehensions and responses that further contribute to atmosphere. As Cochrane discusses, “lighting can reveal texture, accent, spatial transition, visual cues, security and perception of security, moods, cerebral temperature and drama in the city when abstracted from daylight” (2004, pages 12–13), radiating diverse qualities of sparkle, glow, glare, highlighting, and diffusion. Yet cultural responses to the styles and attributes of illumination vary. For instance, those possessing certain cultural dispositions and tastes may experience strong glare, colour, animation, or flashing as discomforting (Lam, 1977) or prefer a less illuminated world of shadows and subtlety (see Tanizaki, 2001), whereas others are drawn towards festive lights and luxuriate in brightly illuminated space (Edensor and Millington, 2009).

In our interviews one of the key pleasures continually identified by a majority of visitors to Blackpool Illuminations, without any solicitation, was precisely the particular atmosphere experienced:

“When it gets dark and they all light up. It’s lovely, it’s different altogether, it’s just a different feeling when it’s dark and they are all lit up. They isn’t anywhere else is Britain I don’t think . . . The atmosphere is great” (Beverley, seventies, Yorkshire).

“It’s just the whole atmosphere, everybody all outside at once, lights are going, there’s music going” (Mark, thirties, Sheffield).

“You can feel the happiness of people walking around you and passing you, and you can watch them talking and they are all very happy and they are all laughing and talking. . . it’s a good atmosphere, people enjoying themselves, there’s the children around and it’s just a happy time for people” (Tom, twenties, China).

These responses exemplify how most visitors to Blackpool open themselves up to the atmosphere (though others may close themselves off), to the pervasive emotional and affective elements that include lighting, music, and moving people. This highlights the participation of visitors in the coproduction of the atmosphere as they expressively and communicatively respond to illuminated space, producing tones of conviviality or excitement that add to the medley of atmospheric constituents. Crucially, this widespread awareness of this atmosphere indicates an affective engagement with place and event that is not merely precognitive.

Though apparently nebulous for those suddenly in their midst, Böhme shows how stage production techniques set “the conditions in which the atmosphere appears” (2008, page 4), creating ‘tuned’ spaces with tones, hues, and shapes. The “constructive orchestration of tonality” of lighting can shape the meaning and feeling of space, conforming to or altering “the very sensory and perceptual pathways on which they rely” (Thrift, 2009, page 92), producing divergent affective registers and intensities in domestic, commercial, and festive realms. Böhme exemplifies this orchestration of atmosphere by referring to practices in landscape gardening that manage darkness and the light that filters through woodland spaces, an expertise that, similar to the production of illuminated atmospheres by Blackpool’s technicians, is “tacit knowledge” (1993, page 123). As Laganier and Van der Pol (2011) testify, light designers are well aware of the imperative to create atmospheres for the users of illuminated spaces.

Though we need to avoid suggestions that the calculative manufacture of affect via illumination *determines* feeling and meaning, the illuminated seafront at Blackpool provides “a situational affective context that lays down root textures and motivations for movement and feelings” (Adey, 2007, page 439) and activates “predisposed routines, emotions and movements” (page 444). In envisaging affective, emotional, and practical engagement with lighting, designers of Blackpool Illuminations aim to encourage playful consumption, sensation, and movement, and to produce cheer and pleasure. Though their efficacy is crucial to the commercial viability of the extended seasonal period, the town’s Illuminations Department continues to reproduce a local craft tradition concerned with the production of

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jollity, fun, and festivity rather than instrumental political and commercial contexts or taste-conscious, artful design (Edensor and Millington, 2013).

However, visitors to Blackpool are not manipulated by affective engineering. Visitors may be reflexively critical of new designs or lament what they regard as declining standards, and the affective response of a minority takes the form of repulsion to what they conceive as the tasteless gaudiness or ‘tackiness’ of the lights. More crucially, the allure of the Illuminations depends upon a shared endeavour, as hinted at in the quotations featured above, for the atmospheres are not solely produced by the lights but by other elements within the affective field: the weather, sounds, the time of day, architectural forms, and, crucially, other people, as discussed in more detail below. First, I provide vignettes of three separate visits to Blackpool Illuminations that capture some of the atmospheres of place and event. By highlighting the different spaces and stages of a visit to the resort, the different modes of moving, the effects of particular illuminations, weather, aggregations, temporalities, incidents, representations, sensations, and interactions, I highlight the *flow of atmosphere*, revealed as “a dynamic process comprising different consecutive phases” (Thibaud, 2011, page 207). These vignettes also exemplify and introduce themes subsequently discussed, concerning the blurring of the representational and nonrepresentational in illumination, the melding of affect and emotion, and the coproduction of atmosphere by visitors.

### **9 September 2008**

Sharp autumn air, a damp chill, and a mild mist. Groups of excited people board the tram, illuminated as a boat, with laughter and camaraderie, much of it involving the joking conductor. The tram starts and attention shifts to the animated tableaux on the coastal side of the road: lights pulse at different tempos, a kaleidoscope of shifting colours flashes, and all is motion, a wall of illuminated vibrancy. Children squeal and adults point, many absorbed in the complex animated sequences and changing patterns of light against the dark backdrop. Familiar characters are heralded: “Evel Knievel, there he is! He was there last year; look there he goes!” Small children crane their necks to gaze upon tableaux featuring Alice and the Mad Hatter, Postman Pat, Noddy, and Basil Brush. As the Ali Baba tableau is passed, a large contingent of children on the pavement shout “Open Sesame!” Chatter subsides as the tableaux recede and lights along the road become thin and unprepossessing. The surrounds are quieter here, shops, amusements, and food outlets are absent, with hotels and boarding houses lining the opposite side of the road. Mobile peddlers of portable lights, cloaked in their wares, try to allure passing traffic. Waving is part of travel on the illuminated trams: children wave from their pushchairs, families wave from their cars, hotel guests move towards the windows of the bar and restaurants to wave at the tram and we wave back, part of the show.

### **5 September 2009**

This evening, as for one night every year, the road adjacent to the promenade is crowded with 500 or more large Honda Goldwing motorcycles, their riders, and passengers, engines revved intermittently (see website, Goldwing Light Parade at Blackpool Illuminations, <http://www.goldwings.org.uk>). The weather is still mild, but it has been raining and the clouds are low. Pedestrians line the pavements three or four deep as the Goldwings make their stately procession along the seafront, most emblazoned in a plethora of lights, the bikes shimmering and pulsing, some riders in fancy dress. Reflections from surrounding illuminations streak the chrome and silken paint of the machines and, together with the lights adorning the bikes, they splash across the wet asphalt. When the bikes speed up a flash of illuminated colour goes past, and when they slow, details become apparent. There is continuous cheering, waving, and clapping and banter back and forth between the bikers, and between the bikers and the spectators, a persistent



**Figure 2.** [In colour online.] Honda Goldwing parade. (Source: author.)

hubbub, blending with the purring of the engines, replete with jokes, and replaced by the pings, bleeps, and kerchings of a neighbouring slot machine arcade when noise subsides.

### 26 October 2010

An Indian summer still pervades the night air. Walking towards the north, I see the trams intermittently groove past, the horse-drawn buggies alongside move at a slower pace, and the jammed-up traffic edges forward, spewing fumes. Walking quickly, I see sections of illumination successively transform surrounding space. Silly, patterned cartoon animals split with a half on either side of the road conjoined by a trellis pattern, twirling and sparkling three-dimensional geometric designs akin to Christmas lights. Out to sea there is dense blackness, but jutting out into the dark is the Central Pier, its Ferris wheel spinning like a giant Catherine wheel. Groups of friends and families pass, some engaged in animated conversation, some larking about, others walking together in silence. Smells of fish and chips mix with sea aromas and petrol fumes, and the strains of recorded music and karaoke drift across. The school half term means that large crowds line both the promenade and the pavement on the other side of the road. Some wander along the prom, and some flit into pubs or arcades, or stop at shops to buy trinkets. Groups of bodies flow together, meet and detach, pass each other, smiling, looking ahead. Some groups dance between those coming in the opposite direction. I was here a few days ago, in midweek. Then the promenade was windswept and icy, largely bereft of humans. The lights insistently and impassively carried on but were visible to few, the cold weather and desertion created a lonely, melancholy scene.

### The flow of atmosphere: experiencing affect and emotion in illuminated space

These episodes exemplify how the ongoing experience of atmosphere in place might be captured by the notion of flow. Though Csíkszentmihályi (1990) conceives flow as characterising an active absorption enabled by proficiency in using well-honed and rehearsed skills, it may also apply to a temporal, rhythmic process in which a sequence of events and sensations successively provoke immersion, engagement, distraction, and attraction.

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The journey along the illuminated seafront involves a concentrated sequence of attractors as sensations, emotions, affects, and social encounters meld in a medley of immanent experience (Shields, 1997), attuned by and coproducing an atmosphere of myriad, emergent elements. The host of multicoloured lights, flashing, glowing, and pulsing, and patches of darkness are complemented by a changing array of sounds and smells that merge with and provoke animated conversation, laughter, and movements that together ripple across space.

This flow of experience is shaped by the ways in which people consume the lights through a variety of travels along the seafront by tram, motorbike, car, or foot, whether continuous or interspersed with stops for food, drink, shopping, and entertainment, and influenced by how different groups and individuals are drawn to familiar fixtures—favourite illuminations, cafés, pubs, and locations along the promenade. It is also conditioned by the spatial and material specificity of Blackpool Illuminations, highlighting Anderson and Harrison's advice to consider “our intimate and prosaic entanglements with the object world”, for to neglect the distinctive “spacing of emotion and affect, any theory runs the risk of idealistic reification” (2006, page 334, original emphasis). At Blackpool linear passage along the seafront coaxes people through shifting fields of materiality as they are drawn to particular illuminations, zones, and surrounding attractions, immersed in a succession of encounters through different emotional phases or pools of affect within a seething space of movement and activity. More specifically, illumination continuously changes in colour, glare, level of animation, density, and representation, qualities that waver, peter out, and blaze moment after moment, inculcating not only a focus on the lights themselves but also mutable relationships to surrounding tinctured materialities and spaces as well as to darkness, epitomized by the deep black of the Irish Sea. Yet the flow of atmosphere, besides being shaped by these ever-changing illuminated scenarios, is also affected by distraction, social engagement, eating or drinking or smoking, talking on mobile phones, or minding children (see Rose et al, 2010, for a similar example), testifying to how “affect is integral to a body’s perpetual becoming” (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, page 3) as it moves between states in response to multiple encounters. Yet despite these disruptions and preoccupations—the apparent instability of the constellation of elements in “the swash and swirl of affect” (Thrift, 2009, page 84)—they constitute a sequential experience conceived as a singular event in place, an outing given its guiding logic by the linearity of the lights along the seafront and the habitual interaction with illuminated space.

The atmospheres of Blackpool Illuminations are temporally apprehended through the body’s capacity to sense visual and other sensory rhythms (Edensor, 2010; Edensor and Holloway, 2008; Lefebvre, 2004): the rhythm of the illuminations that flash and pulse and the repetitive lighting sequences strung along and above the road, the rhythm and tempo of walking, periods of conversation and quiescence, the flux of wind and rain, the periodic swish of passing trams, the hum of cars, the surge of other bodies, and the capacity of these rhythmic bodies “to affect others through gestures, bodily movements and voice” (Duffy et al, 2011, page 19), elements that bestow on each section a different mood and tone, fostering different modalities of engagement with illuminated space. To this rhythmic ‘place temporality’ (Wunderlich, 2010) can be added the temporal shape of the event, the autumnal air, the cyclical rhythm of the soon-to-end holiday season, and the events of bank holiday and half term within this period.

These vignettes also provide a snapshot of the ways in which the atmospheric flow of experience in illuminated space is characterised by the mingling of affect, emotion, sensation, and social interaction. This flow suggests that inferences that emotion and sensation are subsidiary to affect are inapposite. This chimes with Rose et al’s (2010) concern with acknowledging the multiplicity of spatial experience in a shopping centre and Jayne et al’s (2010) insistence on “the fluidity of boundaries between emotions, embodiment and

interconnectedness of processes of individuation, relationality and affect" (page 544) that is exemplified by the different embodied, neurological, social, cultural, material, and spatial elements and relationalities that modulate and contextualise the experience of drinking alcohol. Similarly, visits to the Illuminations are characterised by conviviality, excitement, and a host of other affects and emotions, constitutive of and responsive to atmospheres (and disruptive to them as with family arguments, children crying, and periods of boredom) that are "always being taken up and reworked in lived experience—becoming part of feelings and emotions that may themselves become elements within other atmospheres" (Anderson, 2009, page 79).

### **Blurring the representational and nonrepresentational**

Pile (2010) suggests that certain theories mystify affect by asserting that it is purely nonrepresentational, immune from analysis, and thereby irresistible when applied through affect management. Böhme, however, distinguishes between embodied situatedness in space and the abstract schema of representation, but contends that "we overlay our perception of the environment with patterns of representation" (2002, page 6) in intuiting space. Anderson also underlines this combining of these two modalities of perception in reminding us that "it is through an atmosphere that a represented object will be apprehended" (2009, page 79) and, similarly, a representation may contribute to the atmosphere. Moreover, illumination uniquely blurs the boundaries between affects generated by representational and nonrepresentational qualities. As Benjamin pointed out, commercial lighting transcends its function: "What, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism? Not what the moving red neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt" (1997, page 476).

As already discussed, Blackpool Illuminations are saturated with abundant references to popular cultural motifs that carry semiotic weight and provoke emotional responses from visitors. As seen in the vignettes, children express glee at seeing the likeness of the familiar animated character Postman Pat, and adults respond with fondness, enthusiasm, or antipathy to well-known characters from fiction, television and film, pop singers, and comedians. However, as Benjamin suggests, illuminations are always more than representational, and their symbolic



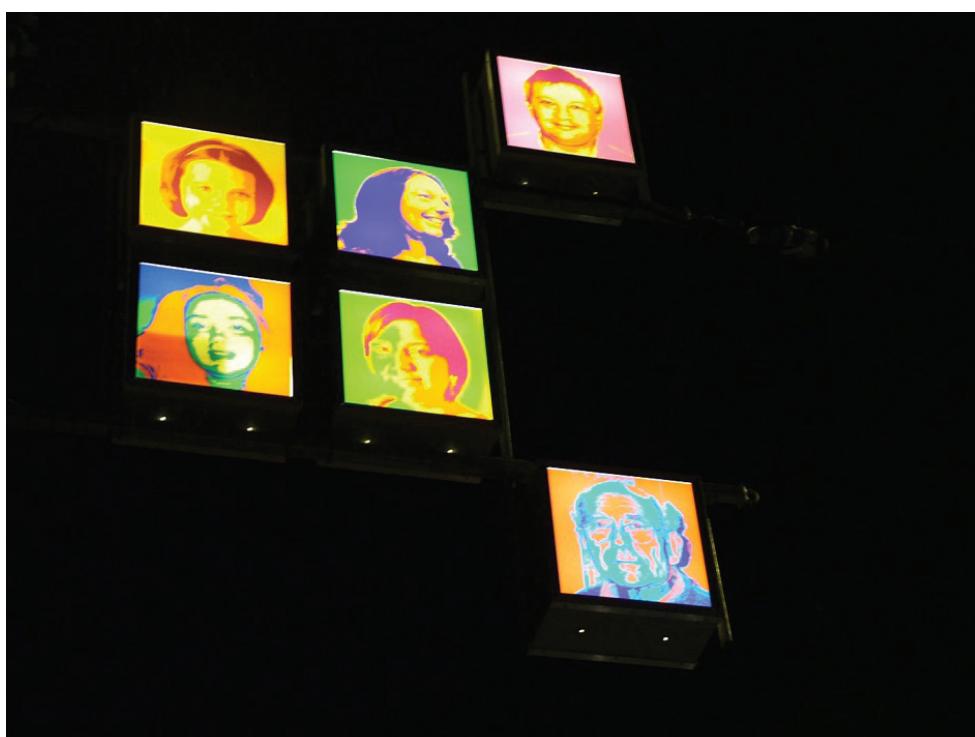
**Figure 3.** [In colour online.] Alice in Wonderland tableau section. (Source: author.)

and referential qualities are complemented by atmospheric and nonrepresentational properties of glare, brightness, colour, animation, sparkle, and glow. As Anderson insists, atmospheres “mix together narrative and signifying elements and non-narrative and asignifying elements” (2009, page 80), a melding that further exemplifies the flow of experience depicted in the vignettes. Here, the Illuminations are not experienced as solid entities but as continually changing, replete with multiple potentialities that incorporate nonrepresentational qualities and representations, which themselves can be consumed according to their “material compositions and conduct” (Dewsbury et al, 2002, page 438, original emphasis).

To underline the blending of these symbolic and nonrepresentational qualities, I feature a typical visitor response to the linear section of street illumination known as the Local Heads, 600 multicoloured, 1960s pop-art stylised representations of local Blackpool residents mounted in light boxes (see more at <http://www.blackpool-illuminations.net/LocalHeads.html>). Though artful, original, and striking for some, the Local Heads were consistently singled out by our respondents as an illuminated feature with which they felt little connection, as typified by the following response:

“They are a bit weird aren’t they? Are they like passport photos? … they don’t flash or anything … they are just lit up boxes. And I don’t know any of the people and I’m not from Blackpool, so it didn’t even occur to me it was Blackpool people. I didn’t see a sign or anything saying what it was .... It’s just random … it could be adverts or something. And why are they laid out like that. So they spell something or …? And then you don’t have any emotional connection, like if they had done the Andy Warhol paintings .... I mean it’s not like there is Marilyn Monroe or someone you would recognise. There is nothing to latch onto and they don’t flash. Or catch your eye at all” (William, thirties, Ormskirk).

In attempting to read these illuminations, this visitor is confounded by both the representational and nonrepresentational qualities of these particular lights. The images cannot be incorporated into any referential logic and possess no emotional significance, and they are static in form and lack any animating attributes that might generate a stronger affective connection.



**Figure 4.** [In colour online.] The Local Heads. (Source author.)

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### **Anticipating the lights**

In developing our analysis of the affective and emotional effects of Blackpool Illuminations, I now further critique suggestions that affect is purely transpersonal or prepersonal whereas emotion is discretely identifiable as the communication of such feelings and intensities. I refute the idea that affect is necessarily precognitive, and though lighting designers are well versed in producing atmospheres, this does not infer that they can wholly engineer affect to “excite bodily and emotional dispositions at an unconscious and precognitive register” (Adey, 2007, page 439).

I follow Rose et al’s critique of conceptions of space as “a pulsating, rhythmic force-field of encounters and practices” that “precedes any individual body or subjectivity, and in which cognition, interpretation and motivation are rather minor processes” (2010, pages 338–339). Such ideas construe a rather virginal subject who is forever entering new and unknown terrain for which all previous experience has left him/her unprepared. No doubt sudden immersion in unfamiliar environments may initially produce an overwhelming state of affective disorientation in which the surrounding incipiences and potentialities surging around and through the body prevail. However, affective experience of space is usually conditioned by previous experience, by habit, by familiar emotions and sensations that produce feelings of belongingness or otherwise. As Rose et al assert,

“the relentlessly presentist performative account of human subjectivity found in the work of geographers of affect … makes it hard … to grasp the obduracy of past experiences … (or acknowledge) that which has been, or will have been, and its relationship to the present” (2010, page 345).

Previous encounters with places, people, and things thus provide a relational context for how affect and emotion are expressed, anticipated, and conceptualised in repeated experiences, in this case, of Blackpool Illuminations. Holloway argues that those who are drawn to paranormal experiences embark on such endeavours with “a disposition towards and willingness to be enchanted” (2010, page 632), undermining contentions that affect is invariably prereflexive and prepersonal. Relatedly Jones (2005) recognises the ways in which affects and emotions of place become sedimented in memory over time. This is emphatically not to deny the affective power of place. Indeed, I acknowledge the distributed elements that combine to produce the shifting affects of illuminated space, and these come peculiarly to the fore when people are few in number. But I insist that atmospheric attunement (Stewart, 2010a) is frequently *anticipated* attunement, for emotions and affects “have a culture, history, seasonality, psychology, biology, economy and so on” (Smith et al, 2009, page 1), subject to consistencies and recurrences in movements through familiar space. Accordingly, there are no purely affective atmospheres, for all atmospheres entangle affect, emotion, and sensation.

To bring out this attunement and how the mingling of affect and emotion continually emerge, I draw upon interviews with visitors to show how anticipation, often saturated with emotional resonances, particularly of nostalgia and notions of continuity, is evident in the ways in which Blackpool Illuminations are visited, year on year:

“It was the wow factor weren’t it and the glitz. The kiss me quick hats and the candy floss and the donkeys and everything. Everything you remember as kids . . . Oh it’s that warm feeling in’t it? That excitement. Yes definitely that excitement . . . because we’ve got children of our own . . . we still do the illumination run, regular” (Jenny, forties, Manchester).

“Well really just magic of it for t’little’uns and us big’uns as well. We’re softies aren’t we?... It takes you back to your childhood when we used to bring our lad when he was only a little’un so now we’re bringing his little’un. So it carries on doesn’t it and they’ll

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always carry on with the lights won't they? I mean, people look forward to it don't they? It's like a yearly thing really" (Graham, sixties, York).

Affect here mingles with emotion in anticipation of a visit, a 'looking forward' based on a looking back. A shared emotional and affective relationship with the town and its Illuminations sedimented over many years of repeat visits, including the perpetuation of family traditions, is expressed. Besides consolidating an intersubjective expression of affectual belonging to a time and place, this underscores the temporal qualities of affect and emotion, the ways in which they are conditioned by and condition the experience of social time:

"I remember walking through Blackpool with my mam and dad when I was young, when we were just children ... so when I come back it feels like home" (Daisy, thirties, Southport).

"I come every year, just like tradition .... I've been coming since I was like old enough to remember, so it like reminds me of when I was young ... there's an arcade what sells cups of tea for 10p and we always get it, we do, and we park on the same car park near the joke shop. It's just like tradition" (Ellie, 18, Manchester).

The affectual connection fosters a deep connection to place as visitors declare that their repeated annual visits are stimulated by a sense of family tradition and that the Illuminations are an 'institution' that they remember attending as children, along with relatives. Continuity is important, emphasising the conviviality of the event and the way in which it is woven into family lives as meaningful. This is not only expressed evocatively but is also understood in a cognitive sense, a rationality that comprehends what Blackpool is *for*:

"There are not many places like this left .... I think it takes you back to the old world, into how things used to be. I find it all quite emotional, quite moving" (Jennifer, forties, Essex).

The reiterative practice of visiting the illuminations accords with Ahmed's notion that "happiness functions as a promise that directs us to certain objects" (2010, page 29), a collective orientation that sustains Blackpool as a place of happiness intensified by successive visits. A dispositional orientation towards place is enacted upon arrival but also anticipated beforehand, highlighting how atmosphere provides a "subjective orientation to place, signalling the various affects, moods, and capacities that might be enactable in that place" or that are "awaiting reactivation in practice and interaction" (Duff, 2010, page 892). This illuminated realm is deeply familiar for visitors, who anticipate and coproduce the atmosphere, as I now discuss.

### **The coproduction of affective atmosphere by visitors**

The atmospheric temporal flow identified above emerges in a context in which there is a sensual and practical familiarity with place and event. Impressions are rarely disruptive or disturbing but pleasantly anticipated and subsequently experienced in a mindful, immersive engagement that connects body and environment as different stimuli are consecutively encountered and new thoughts stirred. In further considering this social constitution of affect in place I look at how atmospheres are coproduced by reiterative practices. As Barnett (2008) argues, echoing the arguments of Tolia-Kelly (2006) cited above, the dearth of social and historical contextualisations of particular affects, together with a disregard for anticipation and prior experience, suggests a mute attunement to place bereft of political, social, and cultural orientations that erases people's expectations, habits, and objectives. In contrast, I argue that anticipation engenders the coproduction of an atmosphere by preparing visitors for an emotional and affective encounter with the resort in noncognitive *and* cognitive ways.

Those within familiar spaces are usually individually and collectively attuned to atmospheres and to the performance of affective practices. As Ahmed asserts, "emotions are also *about* attachments, about what connects us to this or that .... What moves us, what

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makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place (and) ... what connects us to this or that place" (2004, page 27, original emphasis), and aligns individuals with collectives. At Blackpool we can identify affective and emotional dispositions through which subjectivities are grounded in place and time and mobilized around customs of shared practice. Blackpool has historically released industrial working-class bodies from their everyday discipline, feeding them, whirling them round, getting them drunk, immersing them in sea and sand, and bedazzling them with lighting. Temporal breaks from the working week, and the alterity of resort space to everyday work and home, are part of the continued appeal of annually repetitive seaside visits, where expectations about what to do and say are facilitated by taking place in a seafront "comprised of relatively consistent assemblages" (Conradson, 2005, page 113). Practical conventions of visiting the Illuminations are thus grounded in arriving at particular times, adopting particular routes, lengths of stay, taking breaks for food and amusement, engaging with others, and articulating feelings.

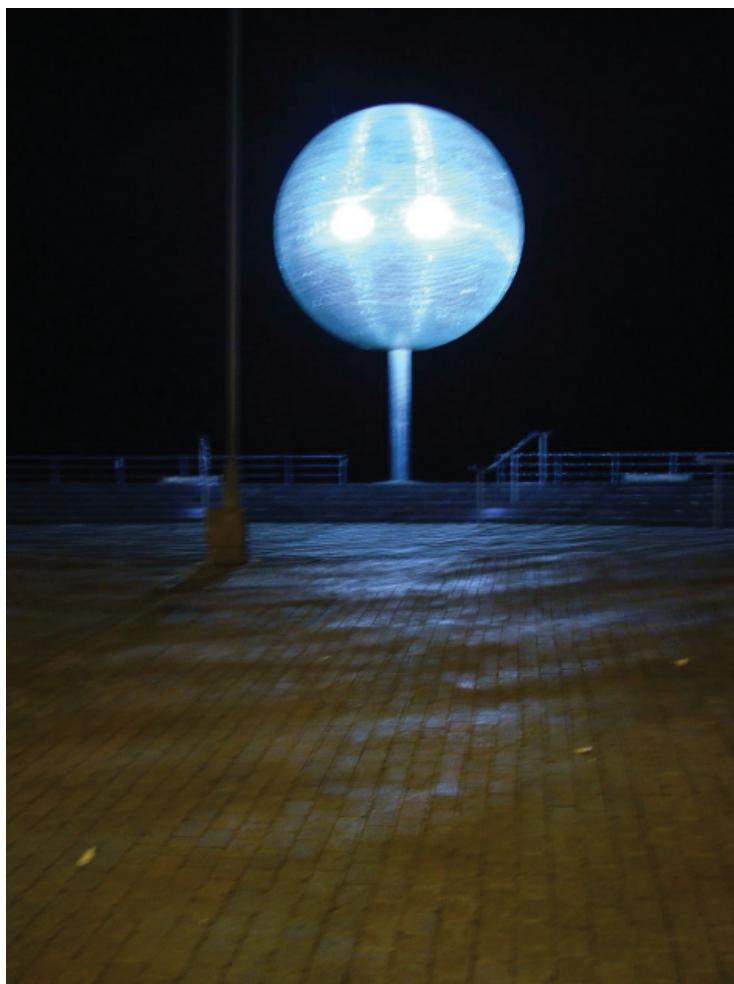
In this context, and bearing in mind the emotional and affective anticipation highlighted above, participant observation and interviews with visitors make apparent rich and convivial social interaction, where friendship and familial bonds are forged through sharing experiences. The ways in which people communicate and express themselves, reinscribing similar practices across illuminated space year on year, follow conventions that are entangled with the affects of illuminated space and emotions oriented around nostalgia, conviviality, continuity, and family. As with Jayne et al's drunken revellers, these collective practices reinforce "a sense of community, corporeal participation and sharing" (2010, page 546). Visiting the Illuminations is thus overwhelmingly a social or family event that is practised through the mobilisation of a 'collective' rather than 'romantic' gaze (Urry and Larsen, 2011), complemented by the proprioceptive pleasures of walking, smelling, and hearing. Families drive, take the tram or coach tour, or walk along the promenade, gazing at the lights, talking, playing, and being together:

"We walked along with our chips earlier, it was great. There is lots of atmosphere, everyone is about. It's buzzing. And we're all together, that's why we go to Blackpool, to be together, and with the lights it's really good" (Rose, twenties, Liverpool).

"I think it makes me young at heart. Me and Mum try and have a skip while we're going along as well. My Dad doesn't join in that bit, he thinks we're mad" (Mary, thirties, Preston).

The communality of this emotional and affective sense of place is evident and is shaped by modes of travel. As we have seen, people travelling on the illuminated tram wave to passers-by, children wave back from their pushchairs, and families wave from their cars. People purchase and adorn themselves with illuminations sold by roadside traders, revealing that the consumption of illumination is not merely passive but performative, and there are loud conversations and banter with strangers, laughter and larking about, and expressive physical performances, gestures and dancing—often in relation to the lights—that crucially are coproductive of the atmosphere of the Illuminations. Similar to an extended festival, this involves "active participation in creating, celebrating and engaging with ideas of community identity and belonging" in familiar illuminated space over time (Duffy et al, 2011, page 19), reproducing a particular atmosphere. This is captured in an episode that occurred underneath the world's largest mirrorball, with a diameter of twenty feet, mounted on a ten foot pole, featuring 46 500 mirrors, with an array of lights projected onto it:

Sitting under the great mirrorball feels bizarrely like being inside an artificially coloured snow blizzard and makes you feel quite dizzy. The woman next to me says, "It's a bit like a Blackpool ballroom, maybe that's why they designed it?" Other viewers associate the glitter blizzard with drunkenness, one exclaiming "Oh it's so strange! I feel like we've had a few!" One young woman looks mischievously at her boyfriend and jokes, "Does it make you miss



**Figure 5.** [In colour online.] The mirrorball. (Source: author.)

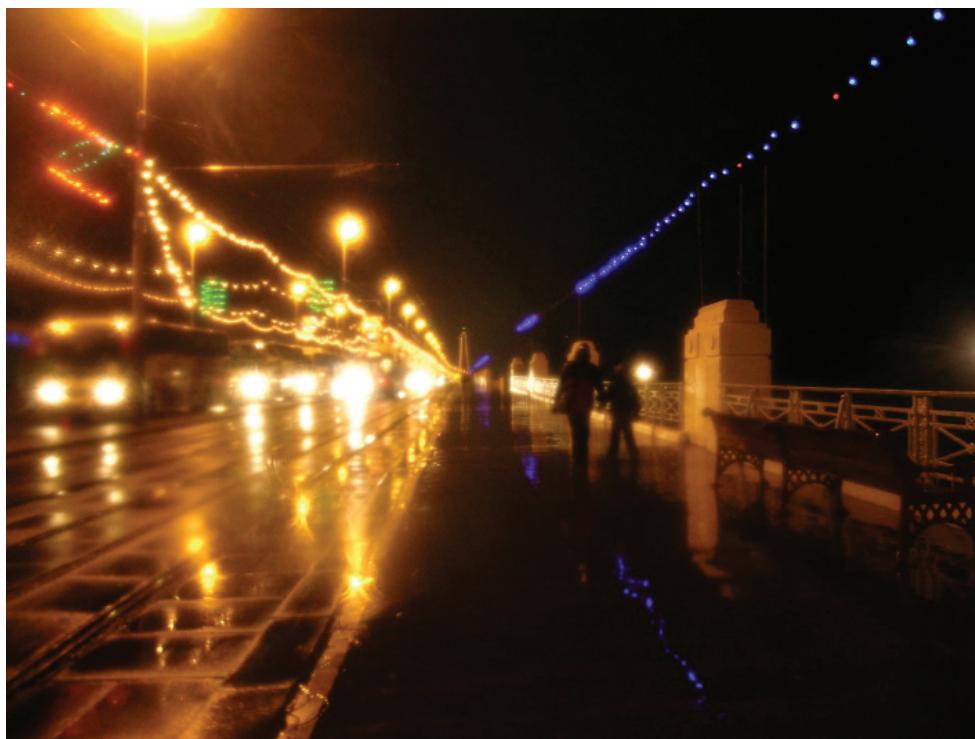
ecstasy?!” Children dance in the glittering lights, like a disco dance floor. One lies on the ground and screams “it’s pulling me down!” Another frantically tries to stamp on the moving fragments of light as they circle past. A little girl lies down and in the darkness her father can’t see her for a moment. Eventually scooping her up he shouts at her, “you are the only person who could get lost in glitter dots!” Another family approaches, again with small children. The glitter snow blizzard begins. “Ooh look at the floor. Shall we have a dance? Let’s dance over here!” The family dance with the children, one of whom tries to catch the swirling reflections with their hands, parents goading them: “Catch it! Catch it!”

This incident highlights how illumination impacts upon bodies, here drawing them into its orbit, encouraging expressive play and dance, social and familial interaction, sensations of other places and times, and conjuring symbolic allusions. The atmosphere produced by such actions is contagious, with expressions nonreflexively transmitted and received by faces, arms and legs, gestures and postures (Bissell, 2010). Ahmed draws attention to the communicative powers of emotion: “in feeling happy you direct the feeling to what is close by, smiling, for instance, at a person who passes you by” (2010, page 33). In this illuminated space, primed by anticipation and a sense of belonging, bodies respond to other bodies’ expressivity, further augmenting their capacity to be affected and affect others as part of a distributed affect that also involves lights, sounds, and weather.

The collective expressions performed in this historical and cultural setting act to sustain the relations between people and between people and place as “events, relations and impacts accumulate as... capacities to affect and be affected” (Stewart, 2010b, page 338) in an annual

refrain. In Ahmed's terms, most visitors arrive attuned to "doing the lights", adopting an optimistic "angle of approach", ready to be delighted in a setting in which familial and communal interaction "provides a shared horizon in which objects circulate, accumulating positive affective value" (2010, page 38). Thus, while some commentators and visitors to Blackpool regard the Illuminations as tasteless and lurid, a positive affective and emotional expression overwhelmingly characterises the experience of the event. The occasion is immersive, nostalgic, convivial, and festive, not influenced by what Böhme calls the 'old aesthetics' based on critical judgement and taste that establish criteria for appraisal (1993) in order to discern works of distinction. This is not a 'cool' approach to practising and experiencing space that requires dispassionate disposition (Liu, 2004; Potts, 2010), and there is no imbrication of affect with "discernment and disdain" (Highmore, 2010, page 124).

There is an absence of irony in the consumption of the lights. Some are found to be amusing—'a laugh'—but as the quotes I have featured exemplify, appreciation circulates around values associated with happiness, colourfulness and sparkle, festivity, conviviality, nostalgia, and a shared and coproduced atmosphere. Yet, despite this lack of irony or detachment, there is a reflexive understanding that focuses upon Blackpool's uniqueness, the atmosphere, the qualities of particular lights, nostalgic recollections, and bonding family experiences. Accordingly, I concur with Rose et al who insist that "affects must be considered not only in relation to emotions, but also in relation to reflective judgments made by humans" (2010, page 343), as exemplified by visitor responses to the Local Heads, a subjectivity that includes the articulation of affect and emotion, critique, memory, and conviviality. During Blackpool Illuminations, the flow of walking, gazing, chatting, and visiting favourite spots consolidates the enmeshing of bodies in "relational networks of meaning and belonging, of time and space" (Duff, 2010, page 890) in the residues of past visits, in emergent and immanent experience, in repetitive practice and reflection.



**Figure 6.** [In colour online.] Rainy, midweek day in Blackpool. (Source: author.)

## Conclusion

In this paper, in endeavouring to ground notions of atmosphere and affect through ethnographic description and interviews, I have considered the much-neglected contribution of illumination to the production of space, focusing upon how lighting is a crucial ingredient in the atmospheric qualities of nocturnal space. I have also demonstrated that at a particularly thick place and event, Blackpool Illuminations, light is one key element in constituting the flow of experience, blurring distinctions between the representational and nonrepresentational, between the material and immaterial, and between affect and emotion. The Illuminations exemplify how “affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness”, by “thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs” (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, page 4) rather than discrete forces. This highlights how there is “no single, unwavering line that that might unfurl toward or around affect and its singularities, let alone its theories”, but only “swerves and knottings” (page 5), that I have characterised as flow, a metaphor that appositely captures the experience of atmosphere.

Crucially, the multiplicities of atmosphere emerge in particular contexts, with their affective and emotional affordances, historical resonance, and social practices. In exploring the thick and enduring affective force of Blackpool Illuminations and the deeply sociohistorical formations within which it is entangled, I have demonstrated that the affectual change of place is never purely precognitive. I have recognised the distribution of nonhuman elements that coconstitute the thick atmospheres of illuminated space, yet also insisted on recognising the anticipatory preparedness that engenders an affective and emotional disposition and underpins a sense of place. In addition, I have drawn attention to the convivial, nostalgic, expressive, sensuous, playful, and sometimes reflexive engagement with illuminated space crucial to the coproduction of atmosphere. This active coproduction of an affective milieu is certainly not suspended in mute attunement, revealing that geographical considerations of affect should “develop a more complex sense of human subjectivity” (Lees and Baxter, 2011, page 108). Accordingly, geographers need to more convincingly explore situated contexts to investigate how affect “is the strange attractor lingering in place awaiting its realisation in practice, habit, and sensation” (Duff, 2010, page 892). I have focused on a particular landscape in which lighting plays a crucial role in producing atmospheres, and this resonates with other spaces of festivity such as rock concerts, fairgrounds, bazaars, and carnivals where illumination, along with numerous other cultural practices, materialities, and sensations. But the generative atmospheres of less festive sites, mundane and homely environments, commercial venues and heritage realms, are equally available for exploration.

At Blackpool I have exemplified the unique capacities of the Illuminations to produce thick atmospheres. In addition, the affective and emotional attributes of jollity, fun, festivity, conviviality, brightness, and prettiness are counterposed to the “classic aesthetic ‘affective qualities’” cited by Anderson, including the ‘sublime’ and the ‘beautiful’ (2009, page 79). This suggests that it would be fruitful, as Anderson and Harrison suggest, to investigate the “logics of affective intervention enacted through generosity, hospitality, trust, friendship, solidarity, respect or responsibility” (2006, page 335). Perhaps the Illuminations remains popular precisely because they sustain a historically grounded, collectively shared, and rather utopian atmosphere, offering a temporal and spatial experience removed from the affective manipulations of capital, design culture, and more intensive spatial regulation.

**Acknowledgements.** I would like to thank Richard Ryan, Director of Blackpool Illuminations, for his enthusiastic assistance. In addition, big thanks to Emily Falconer and Panni Poke Loh, Steve Millington, Tracey Potts, Bethan Evans, and Julian Holloway. I would also like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of the paper for their constructive suggestions.

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