

Reading the promenades: an exploration of seaside liminality through Walter Benjamin's 'Arcades Project'

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Paper proposal

The seaside promenade took its current form in the context of the developments of urbanization, regulated leisure and cultural change driven by the mass-transit capitalism of the 19th century. This period created new regimes of work, leisure and consumption and led to the ideological transformation of public spaces. The promenade is an example of how these public spaces were constructed, used and exploited.

The promenade is a liminal space, but a *managed* one in which the carnivalesque freedoms and unpredictabilities of the beach were reined in and packaged; made safe for consumers and predictable for tourism entrepreneurs, producers and municipal capitalists. The promenade sits between public and private space, between human and wild space, and acts as both boundary marker and connector for these different spaces

In this paper we draw on the *parataxic* methodology developed by Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project*³. The *Project* assembled a diverse range of historical and contemporary sources relating to the Parisian arcades of the 19th century and their social, cultural and economic contexts. Benjamin placed these alongside ethnographic observations and cultural texts, with the aim of providing a methodological scaffolding upon which a *critique* would take shape. The Parisian arcades were a liminal space within the broader field of early capitalist development, marking and making distinctions between commerce and culture as well as the private and public spheres.

The parataxic method set out in the *Arcades Project* provides a new methodology for engaging with liminality as it connects seemingly disparate sources, draws on a range of texts and scholarship and resists classical binary / categorical thinking about spaces and concepts. In this paper we present an application of this method to the promenade in the English seaside city of Brighton, Sussex. This application brings together visual sources, historical documents and ethnographic methods to place the liminal space of the promenade as a social construction at the centre of our analysis.

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3 Benjamin, Walter (2002) *The Arcades Project trans. Eliand, H. & McLaughlin, K*, Cambridge MA: Belknap