# MODERNISM *on Sea*

## Art and Culture at the British Seaside

Edited by Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris

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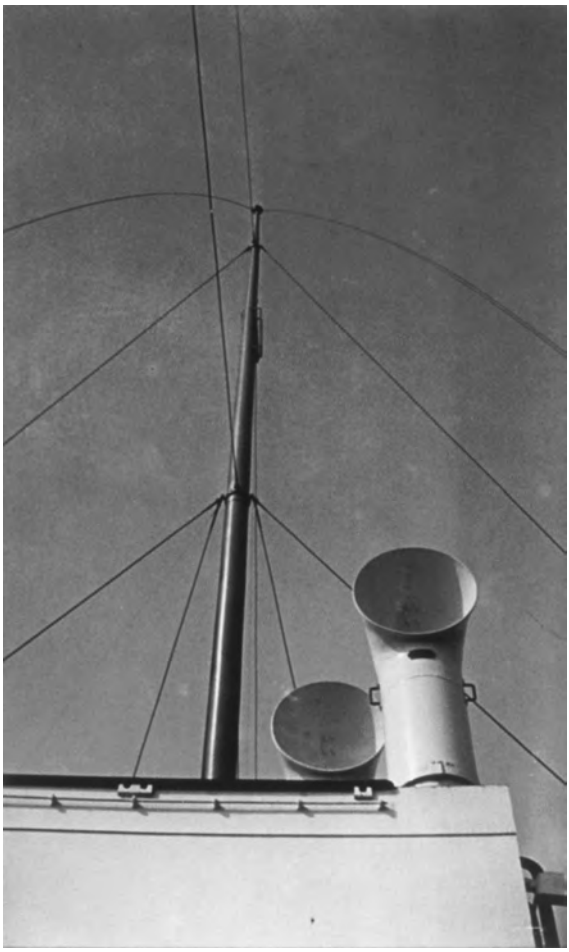

The nautical shapes of modernism:
*Atlantic Voyage* by Paul Nash, 1931

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Frontispiece: Paul Nash, *Atlantic Voyage*, 1931, photograph, Government Art Collection. © Crown copyright: UK Government Art Collection / estate of Paul Nash.

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# Introduction

Lara Feigel and Alexandra Harris

Modernism is usually seen as the most urban and frenetic of artistic movements. A typical journey through high modernism would start in the cafés and arcades of Paris, whirl along the banks of the Liffey and stop the traffic in Bloomsbury before blasting into a Berlin nightclub. But a discerning artistic pilgrim would do well to pause on the cliffs and promenades of the English coast. *Modernism on Sea* puts the case for a new geography of avant-gardism, acknowledging that the most intriguing cultural hubs of modern times include Swanage, Margate, Morecambe and Hythe. This book takes a series of expeditions in the footsteps of the twentieth century's great seaside artists and it argues that there exists in this country a rich, continuous tradition of seaside art that has never properly been pieced together.

Convalescing at Margate in 1921, T.S. Eliot spent long hours sitting in a blustery shelter looking out over the yellowed winter sea. His sense of desolation went into the poem he was writing and which would become 'The Fire Sermon' section of *The Waste Land*. His location mattered, and he acknowledged it explicitly:

> On Margate Sands.
> I can connect
> Nothing with nothing.[1]

Eliot's great lament for a broken postwar world belonged to Margate as much as it belonged to London Bridge. But if the seaside was, for Eliot, a site of modernist emptiness, it has seemed for subsequent writers more like a place of excess. Reaching Hastings, in his 2004 novel *Dining on Stones*, Iain Sinclair finds himself haunted by Eliot and needing to refute him. 'I couldn't help myself', says a narrator almost delirious with the joy of allusion, 'everything

connected with everything'.[2] And so these two writers, nearly a century apart, continue their argument on the shingle: just one instance of the dialogues which have shaped the modern beach.

It is possible to imagine an epic journey through the artistic and literary histories of the British coast, all 9040 miles of it. The tour might be made on foot, now that a continuous coastal path is to be opened, giving access to the cliffs right around the island. It would certainly be long and varied. It would find Elizabeth Bowen at Broadstairs, Folkestone and Hythe; Graham Greene, Patrick Hamilton and Walter Sickert at Brighton; Paul Nash enjoying the surrealist attraction of Swanage; John Betjeman admiring Victorian piers in Devon and Cornwall; Alfred Wallis, Barbara Hepworth, Roger Hilton and Virginia Woolf at St Ives; Anthony Gormley's iron figures at Crosby; Jeanette Winterson remembering Blackpool; W.G. Sebald spinning histories from the ruins of deserted Norfolk; Graham Swift on the reclaimed fenlands of Cambridgeshire; Benjamin Britten and many others at Aldeburgh; and (coming full circle back to Kent) John Piper and Derek Jarman scouring the shingle of Dungeness. In reality, of course, this book can only send out feelers, making day-trips rather than odysseys. It is personal and partial, reflecting the interests of its contributors, but we hope that it will be suggestive.

Our starting point was on the East Sussex coast, at Bexhill-on-Sea, home to one of Britain's first and finest modernist buildings, the De La Warr Pavilion. In 2005 we went on a small-scale pilgrimage to see this newly restored landmark of International Style design. Standing on the windy, deserted beach, we looked up at the chic white curves of the Pavilion, which had been commissioned in 1933 by the forward-thinking Earl De La Warr, and designed by the émigré architects Erich Mendelsohn and Serge Chermayeff. We couldn't help being struck by the incongruities. Bexhill is a genteel, conservative seaside town, offering peaceful retirement homes and excellent teashops. The Pavilion in its midst is commandingly beautiful, but seems awkwardly out of place, caught between its roles as modernist icon and local community centre. Visitors from across Britain come to admire its cantilevered glass staircase and elegant sun terraces, but they do not stay long. When the last train has taken the pilgrims back to London, the local pensioners gather to watch cabaret entertainers and nostalgically re-enact the seaside tea-dances of their youth.

*Figure 1*
One of Britain's first and finest modernist buildings: the De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill-on-Sea

What better place, we thought, to discuss the complex imaginative life of the coast. And so *Modernism on Sea* began as an interdisciplinary conference at the Pavilion. It brought together a community of beachcombing scholars, writers, readers and thinkers to explore twentieth-century artistic responses to the seaside. Why, we asked, is modernism so often linked with the life of the city and so rarely with the shore? The devoted observer of modern life would certainly find plenty to interest him on the esplanade: sunbathing, crowd-mingling, sexual licence, surreal juxtapositions, the modernist architecture of the lido; or, in more metaphorical terms, the experience of being on the edge, caught between the vast sea and the small human pleasures of the shore. Once we started looking, we realised that Bexhill and Romney Marsh were unsung artistic centres. And we felt that the continuity between interwar seaside artists and those working today was so strong that we should try to bring the story right up to the present without putting too many neat categorical barriers in the way.

John K. Walton, whose work on the development of resorts has set the standard for social histories of the seaside, has found sadly little to engage him in the literature of the sands. He laments that 'there has not, in fact, been a great novel set primarily, or even to a large extent, at the twentieth-century British seaside: nothing to match Mann's *Buddenbrooks* or the seaside dimension in Proust'.[3] This literary void seems astonishing, given our coast-consciousness

as an island nation. But one does not have to look very far to start filling in the hole. It is true that the greatness of the British seaside is not the greatness of Mann or Proust: its aesthetics are different. But if we pay closer attention to those unique aesthetics we will find a rich literary heritage, a continuous tradition of painting and sculpture, and some of the most innovative architecture in Europe.

## Seaside Style

One of the best guides to England's coastal heritage is John Piper, who wrote appreciatively, all through the 1930s, about the marriage of tradition and modernity in nautical style. Looking at the simple, functional shapes of lighthouses and fishermen's huts, he found a language of design which was rooted in the vernacular of particular English places, but which was consonant, too, with the pared-down world of contemporary abstraction. The modern painter, he thought, might have much to learn at the beach. In her essay in this volume, Frances Spalding, Piper's biographer, asks what Piper found there, and how he promoted to others his generous and distinctive nautical vision.

The seaside shapes the work of artists, and in turn artists shape the seaside with their own preoccupations. Piper was interested in the coast's elastic capacity to harmonise strong forms with messy detritus; he was always drawn to the pot-luck offerings of low tide, and loved to describe the 'water-logged sand shoes, banana skins, cuttle fish, dead seagulls, sides of boxes with THIS SIDE UP on them'.[4] He admired both the quiet simplicity of a whitewashed cottage and the chatty, show-off exuberance of Victorian villas.

The novelist Elizabeth Bowen, too, had a great feel for stucco flourishes. Having been brought from Ireland to the south coast of England at the age of seven, Bowen found seaside architecture an astonishing contrast to the imposing plainness of Dublin's eighteenth-century terraces. 'I was surfeited with the classical when we sailed for England' she remembered, 'where release, to the point of delirium, awaited me.'[5] Traces of that delirium survive in the relish with which, near the end of her life, she evoked those extravagantly whimsical seaside houses:

> I found myself in a paradise of white balconies, ornate porches, verandahs festooned with Dorothy Perkins roses, bow windows protuberant as balloons, dream-childish attic bedrooms with tentlike ceilings, sublimated ivory-fretwork inglenooks inset with jujubes of tinted glass, built-in overmantels with flight upon flight of brackets round oval mirrors, oxidised bronze door-handles with floral motifs [...] [6]

Bowen could be brutally snobbish about this profusion. She always took care to detach her more discerning adult self from the children in her writing who are allowed to admire fantastic verandahs and bows.

This scepticism about florid seaside style was felt much more deeply by the émigré European architects (Mendelsohn and Chermayeff foremost amongst them) who lived in England during the 1930s and who wondered how the seaside might be transformed into a modernist utopia. To them, the nineteenth-century bric-a-brac was not only claustrophobic but untrustworthy. Why was so much decoration needed? Perhaps something rotten was being covered up, in which case it was time to expose the underlying structure of things.

This is precisely what the Bexhill Pavilion aimed to do, with its glass walls and open vistas. Early photographs show the building rising serene behind the Edwardian onion-shaped domes that were still in place along the esplanade. These relics were soon cleared away, allowing uninterrupted views of the cruise-liner curves. And meanwhile Chermayeff was suggesting further ways to tidy up Britain's seaside towns. Writing in the *Architectural Review* in 1936, under the pseudonym of Peter Maitland, he complained about haphazard development and inefficient amenities. He was particularly scathing about 'the genteel teashop in the side-street, where you have neither the view of the sea you have come to enjoy, nor enough to eat, and where all the gaps are filled with mustard and cress'.[7] These are just the kind of teashops where Bowen's characters have their most intense conversations, but Chermayeff was more in favour of food served 'efficiently and quickly' from a snack bar near the beach. The resorts, he thought, should be divided into 'zones', so that holiday flats were separate from residents' housing, and family bathing separate from adult.

Chermayeff had a strong vision of the clean, efficient seaside, and there were many who supported him. But accident and ornament could not be kept at bay. It was not long before the Bexhill curves were obscured again. After the war, when modernist taste was in recession, attempts were made to give the Pavilion a feel of cosiness – just the sort of cluttered intimacy the building was designed to resist. Out came the carpets, deep-piled and patterned. Concrete pillars were clad in wood to give an olde-worlde feel, and trailing plants were draped over any offensively sharp edges. It was a travesty, but a tremendously human one, and admirable in its way. It takes some audacity to fly so determinedly in the face of so authoritative a building. Twenty-first-century restoration work restored the Pavilion to its mid-1930s glory. But even then the effect was precariously achieved. Moments before the Queen arrived for the royal opening, a pot of brown paint was spilt over the white façade, as if the robust forces of mess were staging a high-profile campaign against the rule of whiteness.[8]

## Seaside Society

These questions of aesthetics have a complex, fascinating relationship with the radical social changes of the interwar years. Swathes of the British coast became a pleasure beach as the number of seaside holidaymakers steadily multiplied. The working classes took advantage of the cheaper, faster train services and the improved pay and holiday conditions to escape for a day or week beside the sea. In 1937, seven million people were reported to visit Blackpool alone. Commercial art exploited the seaside exodus – here was a captive audience with time and some money to while away. In his essay, Svetlin Stratiev details the history of the humble seaside postcard, which developed complex survival techniques to evade censors and attract visitors, creating and perpetuating a unique brand of bawdy seaside humour.

In turn, the new crowds at the seaside provoked the enthusiasm and scorn of the literary establishment. Edwina Keown sets T.S. Eliot's fear of the emergent middle classes against Elizabeth Bowen's more appreciative account of their vigour, and it becomes clear that Bowen's mixed feelings about stucco connected with her acute readings of the seaside's social politics.

By the 1930s, the working classes had taken over the beaches from the middle classes and the essay on the 1930s seaside holiday explores the literary ambivalence towards the seaside crowds. Where Auden enthused about the freedom offered by the beach, Graham Greene set the lax morality of the seaside mob against the more stringent morality of his Catholic anti-hero, Pinkie. One of *Brighton Rock*'s most disturbing implications is that murder is in better taste than a careless one-night stand. The ambivalence towards the crowds intensified in the lead-up to war, when for writers like Patrick Hamilton the carefree frivolity of the popular seaside came to seem irresponsible and even dangerous.

In the 1930s, the seaside was defined as much by the 'side' as by the sea itself. In 1937, the 1930s people-watching group Mass-Observation went to Blackpool to observe the working classes at play and found that for most of the summer visitors the seaside ended with the promenade. Where nineteenth-century bathers had visited the coast chiefly to take the waters, 1930s holidaymakers were determined to return home with a suntan. Fred Gray's essay investigates the lure of the sun at the interwar seaside, exploring its influence on coastal architecture in this period. He argues that iconic seaside buildings like the De La Warr Pavilion catered for a growing number of seaside visitors who sought open spaces and sun terraces to bare their (occasionally naked) bodies to the sun (see Plate 1). Gone were the evenings spent staring at the crashing waves; this was a generation of seasiders who lounged by day and danced by night. A host of ever-new, ever-glittering amusements proliferated to fulfil their requirements – and their holiday fantasies. And the essays in the seaside holiday section show that artists throughout the twentieth century have taken advantage of the glamour, creating a literature and cinema of attractions as excessive as the seaside it depicts.

If the visitors kept close to the attractions and amenities of the coastline, many of the buildings they inhabited looked as if they might be about to set sail. As Bruce Peter points out, modern architecture was profoundly indebted to ship design, and the Pavilion which stayed put in Bexhill was nonetheless paying tribute to the vast liners which sailed between Europe and America. Peter offers a tour of the twentieth century's most advanced cabins and sundecks, demonstrating that modernism afloat set the standard for modernism on dry land.

## Seaside Memories

The feel for the coast can be a very personal thing. The attachment runs deep, and it is rare for two people to feel quite the same way about a particular stretch. Ted Hughes once wanted to show Sylvia Plath what an English beach could be:

> an altogether other England –
> An Avalon for which I had the wavelength.[9]

What he reported regretfully in his poem 'The Beach' was that the wavelength was not shared. Plath felt no connection with the car park on the Front at Woolacombe on a bleak November day:

> You refused to get out.
> You sat behind your mask, inaccessible –
> Staring towards the ocean that had failed you.
> I walked to the water's edge. A dull wave
> Managed to lift and flop.[10]

This is one of Hughes's places: rainy, English, unsensational. But the ocean has failed him too because it has so flatly refused to perform for his wife. What she had wanted from the coast was a great scouring and cleansing, which the splashy Devon pot-holes were not going to provide. The image of Plath and Hughes together in their damp car at Woolacombe, needing such different things from the sea, is powerfully indicative of the coast's capacity to separate out (and draw together) differing literary sensibilities.

Ben Morgan's essay on Plath in this volume responds to her sense of the sea as a sublime symbolic force, making and unmaking itself in rhythms which might provide form for her poetry. The words which recur in Morgan's essay (flux, rupture, dissolution) take us a long way from the cheery bandstands of Bexhill or the puddles of Woolacombe, and Plath was well aware of how these variant ideas of the seaside might play up against each other. This awareness came, partly, from reading and criticising Virginia Woolf. As Morgan shows, Plath responded keenly to a version of Woolf as a mystic seer, submerged in

clarifying waters (most notably the Woolf of *The Waves*) but was troubled when Woolf's prose turned heavier, 'needing the earth'.[11] Yet what Plath had identified was part of Woolf's great gift: to feel the pull of the universalising sea at one and the same time as the pull of the grubby, jolly, populous shore. This is why, so often, Woolf will describe a deserted beach, sublime in its inhumanity, before watching as the peace is shattered by a child running, splashing and shouting into the waves. David Bradshaw's essay pays attention to these opposing forces in Woolf's seaside writing, tracing her imagery of underwater amorphousness, and its complex relationship with the imagery of landlocked solidity.

It sounds like a particularly Woolfian preoccupation, but this potent relationship between sea and land emerges as one of the most recurrent dynamics of modern literature. It is there all through the writing of Stevie Smith, for example, as William May demonstrates in his essay on her characteristic responsiveness to both the shabbiness and the sublimity of the seaside holiday. Smith is a great poet of the bucket and spade, but her jolliness is always close to melancholy. Her faithful narrator Pompey is moved to tears when she looks out to sea, watching 'all that great wilderness of thought, coming rolling from the deep deep sea.'[12]

Seasides awaken Stevie Smith's intense sense of 'nostalgie', as they do for Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell among many others. Deborah Parsons develops an aesthetics of nostalgia, examining the intricate workings of memory in the Sitwells' long-neglected autobiographical works, which reach back, longingly, to sunlit childhoods on the sands at Scarborough. The Sitwells were acutely concerned with the juncture between Edwardian gentility and modern times, and accordingly their writing about Scarborough reminds us how often modernism (for all its futuristic bravado) was shaped by memories of an older world. So the pierrot troupes which performed in *fin-de-siècle* Scarborough were at the root of Sacheverell's life-long fascination with the commedia dell'arte, and those pierrots find their way into the modernist work not only of Sitwell but of Picasso and Diaghilev – and of Walter Sickert, whose melancholy identification with the pierrots at Brighton is explored here by Nicola Moorby. It begins to seem no wonder that the Camden Town Group swapped London for Brighton in 1915: the seaside offers ordinariness and sublimity, nostalgia and contemporaneity, in measures quite as compelling as Fitzroy Square.

In 1915 Sickert looked sadly at the empty deckchairs of Brighton; in 1942 Osbert Sitwell looked back on a Scarborough that had been fractured by the first war and was being shattered, irreparably, by the second. Although much of it became a military zone in wartime, the seaside still had a role to play. It was crucial to wartime propaganda and became a symbol of 'what we are fighting for'. The War Ministry's propaganda films produced by John Grierson's Crown Film Unit abound in images of the coast as a symbol of Britain's proud isolation and its triumphant naval past.

## Seaside Century

For a short time after the war, it seemed that the seaside might provide the model for a new, reconstructed Britain. Paul Rennie makes a fascinating case for the influence of seaside style on the Festival of Britain, with its promenades, bunting and democratic mixing of people. But the future was not so coastally oriented as it might have seemed in 1951. It would never regain the glamour and the wealth of the 1930s and in the late twentieth century, as seaside towns sought to reinvent themselves and fight off atrophy, it is not surprising that they turned again to the 1930s. Morecambe and Bexhill were not alone in restoring their great modernist buildings as they attempted to attract twenty-first-century visitors.

Thomas Heatherwick has described his 2008 East Beach Café in Littlehampton as responding to the 'raw beauty' of the seaside, and the building resembles a piece of driftwood, swept into the shore. Yet the clean lines of the pale blue exterior mark the building out as part of the nautical tradition, and the menu includes old-fashioned potted shrimps. Like his predecessors, Heatherwick sees the seaside as a place where the classes come together and has designed his café as an establishment where 'you can eat a Mr Whippy or drink Dom Pérignon'.

Postmodernism on Sea has paid pastiche-filled homage to its predecessors. Andrew Kötting's 1996 film *Gallivant* is a joyful montage of seaside past and present, punctuated with scenes from 1930s public information films and with reminiscences by Kötting's grandmother Gladys about her youth at the Bexhill seaside. Kötting, like us, takes the Pavilion as his starting point, and

he examines its role as a cultural landmark in his essay in this volume. He appends a critique of *Gallivant* by Iain Sinclair, who specifically lauds his friend's montage of 'found' past and filmed present, and whose own fiction lingers on the deserted balconies of 1930s seafront apartments, peering into the 'cracked swimming pool', recording 'glimpses of revenants, tourist class, on a ghost ship'.[13] Graham Swift's *Last Orders* (1996) looked back to prewar Margate as a place where dreams were made ('The Pier, the Jetty, the Sands. Dreamland'), and where dreams were broken.[14] When he made a film based on Swift's novel, director Fred Schepisi used nostalgic Technicolor for flashback shots of the younger Jack and his wife at the seaside, and each frame made its nod to iconic images of prewar holiday advertisements. The contemporary shots of the grey coast seem to have discoloured just as the film has, now that the seaside has passed its prime.

Michael Bracewell sees the English seaside as the site of an elegiac romanticism. For Bracewell, the contemporary seaside visitor goes to the coast partly in search of ghosts. In faded seaside resorts, the cultural tourist encounters a spectral pageant of 1930s sun-worshippers and of 1960s pop icons parading past the steamy cafes and the overgrown rides. Bracewell's essay suggests that Morecambe is as potent a subject for the romantic artist as the nearby Lake District and celebrates the English seaside town as 'a melancholy but intoxicating Venice of the national vernacular'.

Where Bracewell evokes the pop glamour of Morecambe, Alan Powers heads away from the resorts to the marshes and shingle of Aldeburgh. He asks what it was that drew Benjamin Britten to this small coastal town and shows how this mutable landscape, constantly dramatising its struggle against 'the destructive element', became home to art that was (politically, sexually and aesthetically) treading new and ever-shifting ground. Powers's essay pays tribute to a local festival which sprang from the love of a particular place, but which has become part of the national consciousness. And he affirms that the romantic English tradition which celebrates what Piper called the 'changeable climate of our sea-washed country' is still a strong, deep vein in our arts.[15]

This book is about the English coast, but it is a coast in dialogue with countries across the sea. It was appropriate that if International Style buildings were to be erected anywhere in England it should have been on the south coast, where they could look across to France and, beyond that, to the

Mediterranean. These were buildings in exile, designed by exiled architects who imaginatively linked England back to the continent.

A later exile, the German writer W.G. Sebald, looked out to Dogger Bank and reflected that this was once where 'the delta of the Rhine flowed out into the sea and where green forests grew from silting sands'.[16] England had once been attached to Europe and, in *The Rings of Saturn*, his novel of a journey around Norfolk, Sebald set about recording the continuity of lives criss-crossing between these lands which had only physically been severed. No illusions of Little England's detachment can survive a reading of Sebald, whose writing is about our responsibilities to the past, and to a world wider than the familiar radius of our daily lives. His English coastline is connected to remote places by supple, intricate chains of association which he moulds into bridges so elaborate that it might be possible to walk over them. So the trains which once brought holidaymakers to Blyth were in fact built for the emperor of China; the shape of the imperial dragon is still just about discernible beneath the paintwork. From the lost village of Dunwich grows a vast temple of Xanadu. And walking the deserted marshes around Walberswick, Sebald observes that this might be the shore of the Caspian Sea, or the Gulf of Lion-tung.

In German, Sebald's novel was subtitled *Eine Englische Wallfahrt*, 'An English Pilgrimage'. It is one of many journeys in modern literature which attest to the strong feelings of ritual and pilgrimage which the coast can arouse. We feel, like Masefield, the call of the sea; we go back again and again to the same seasides, enacting the same ceremonies of toe-dipping, pebble-collecting and fossil-hunting. The last essay in this book is about the sustaining nature of these repetitions, these small dialogues which we keep having with the elements and which go on, mile after mile, around England's edges.

*Part I*

# SEASIDE HOLIDAYS

## Lara Feigel

Lara Feigel is a Lecturer in Modern Literary Studies at King's College, London. She is currently working on a monograph emerging from her doctoral thesis at the University of Sussex on the influence of cinema on politically committed British literature, 1930–45. She is also researching a project on modernist autobiography and self-portraiture and another on the role of literature in the reconstruction of Europe after the Second World War, focusing on the work of International PEN and Unesco. She is a co-editor (with John Sutherland and Natasha Spender) of the journals of Stephen Spender (Faber, 2009) and the editor of *A Nosegay: A Literary Journey from the Fragrant to the Fetid* (Old Street Publishing, 2006).