



*“CARNIVAL AND THE GROTESQUE ARE ANTI-HEGEMONIC STRATEGIES TO ESCAPE THE HIERARCHY, THE CHURCH, OR OTHER POWER LIKE CAPITALISM. THEY ARE A TEMPORALLY AND SPATIALLY DETERMINED TRANSGRESSIONS FOLLOWED BY THE RESTORATION OF THE SOCIAL ORDER.”*

**- Bakhtin**

Grit in the Oyster is a body of work by Matt Rowe that represents the often-overlooked rituals and aesthetics of carnivalesque culture in the traditional British seaside resort, with a particular focus on the coastal town of Folkestone. For Rowe, this work reflects the town as a cultural space where the conventions and boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour or reckless hedonism could become blurred. In this work, Rowe uses Folkestone and its complex history as a screen onto which to project and explore the process of regeneration through ideas such as: savagery vs civilisation, the frontier, place-making, the carnival and the grotesque.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the ‘carnavalesque’ is defined as ‘a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style of atmosphere through humour and chaos’. Rowe highlights that Mikhail Bakhtin has famously described both the ideas of the ‘carnival and the grotesque’ as ‘anti-hegemonic strategies’ that are built ‘to escape the hierarchy, the church, or other powers of capitalism’. For Bakhtin, these ideas are ‘temporarily and spatially determined transgressions’ which are then followed by ‘the restoration of the social order’.



*“ Peter Burke – suggests that Carnavalesque is - a shared ‘POPULAR CULTURE’ in the medieval period, in which all classes joined together in excessive eating and drinking on festive occasions. Eventually this gave way to a cultural split between civil elites on one hand and the carnivalesque common people on the other ”*

**- Peter Burke**

For Peter Burke, the carnivalesque is a shared ‘popular culture’ in the medieval era, ‘in which all classes joined together in excessive eating and drinking on festive occasions’. The opportunity to experience popular culture provided by the carnival was originally intended to be a unifying process, but eventually gave way to a ‘cultural split between the civil elites on the one hand, and the carnivalesque common people on the other’.

Likewise, Rowe’s work displays Folkestone’s regeneration as intrinsically linked with the medieval aim to drive the ‘betterment’ of society. *Grit in the Oyster* suggests that this idea of ‘betterment’ and ‘place-making’ is still evident within the cultural-led regeneration of today’s society, and particularly in British coastal-towns. The transgressional yet planned urbanisation and civic re-appropriation of a town or city is, Rowe argues, exceptionally relevant to Folkestone’s recent history and regeneration. This hegemonic system strives towards a utopia or master plan, and also intends to instigate economic growth in the area. However, *Grit in the Oyster* highlights that this aim to create a cultural and economic sense of utopia has not yet been fully realised in Britain’s coastal-towns. Or at least, has not been as clear-cut as it was ever intended to be. Rowe uses Bakhtin’s ideas of the carnival as a conduit for ‘subversion’ and ‘liberation’ to create pictorial accounts of Folkestone’s architecture that capture a seaside resort in permanent off-season as it breaks away from its mass cultural identity.

The faded grandeur of Folkestone’s architecture is evident through Rowe’s photographic documentation of the gradual decline (and in some cases, active demolition) of its tourist attractions: funfairs, casinos, cafes and nightclubs. Rowe’s imagery depicts Folkestone as a desolate landscape in constant transition, a topography where the industry of pleasure seeking was interlaced with the gritty reality of the town’s social and economic divides – not dissimilar from Burke’s idea of the carnival as a catalyst for a ‘cultural split’ between the elite and the polarised carnivalesque.

Further to this, Rowe’s mixed-media pieces often make use of found objects or materials that have been thoughtfully reclaimed and re-appropriated to shed a new light on the context and history of Folkestone. Regionally specific and recognisable materials such as net curtains, red velvet interiors, cassette tape ribbon, faux flower arrangements and green screen fabric are torn and recreated into military ghillie suits, providing a satirical outlook on the concept of ‘social camouflage’ as an inherent part of the carnivalesque. Here the threadbare remnants of Folkestone are no longer evidence of its ‘faded grandeur’ but a valuable and protective resource that, seen through new eyes, renews and renews.

Rowe sees Folkestone as a ‘frontier’, in itself an ‘edge-land’ reminiscent of the American West and the disillusionment of Westward expansion driven by man-





ifest destiny. The 'frontier' is defined as both 'the extreme limit of settled land beyond which lies wilderness' as well as 'the extreme limit of understanding or achievement in a particular area'. Rowe's sculptural and performative work echoes this concurrent expanding and fading sense of place, and celebrates the recent social history of the run-down resort – the remnants of the seaside town which, in his opinion, they 'forgot to close down'. Rowe sheds light upon the various ways in which the decline of the tourist industry in Folkestone has allowed vast areas of the seafront to decay into a 'dystopian landscape' or 'frontier-like wilderness' - a far cry from the economic utopia that was originally envisaged in the medieval period. Further to this, the very decay and wilderness specific to Folkestone in recent history is ironically what has subsequently led to an increase in social funding for the area to regenerate. Folkestone's decay has therefore become not only its downfall, but also an avenue for future prosperity and social change. In parallel with the idea of the carnival using both 'humour' and 'chaos' as a conduit to 'subvert' and 'liberate' away from the dominant ways of thinking, Grit in the Oyster is both satirical and apocalyptic in its approach to documenting Folkestone's ever-changing socio-economic landscape.





