

Drawing on the temporal nature of the Estuary and Southend's positioning upon it, how does this influence the town's character? With progress a construct, can we think of Southend as between cultural classifications, moving from its supposed "heyday" towards something new? Or does the ever-dying high street point us back towards its ever-trilling arcades, its "golden mile" forever a liminal boundary against the threat of the sea, already Pompeii before it is swallowed whole?

## **POMPEII? Rose Cleary**

"This moment in history is a liminal moment. Liminality does not give us answers; rather, it gives us a choice where none seemed to exist before — a choice as to how we should continue living in the future... Our culture itself is being thrown into question.<sup>1</sup>

Pompeii sticks in my primary school memory for its fatalism: the unwittingness of some of its inhabitants, the realisation of imminent doom and the total submission to fate by others. It resonates as a warning: the inescapable dominion of nature.

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It is difficult to pinpoint when I "returned" to Southend. After moving to the Netherlands in 2019 I found myself back in my hometown multiple times: mid-pandemic, mid-masters degree, and mid the suspended grief of my father's death. My 30th birthday occurred at some point. The tide was out. Mudflats stretched black and green before us. In between lockdowns, life was deferred.

In a rambling voice note conversation, a friend told me how the pandemic has made them perceive space differently — having returned to their home in Barcelona and finding that nothing had apparently changed about life there since they'd left. People had the same lives, the same attitudes, the politics were the same.

I have moved away from Southend before, and I have felt that illusion of time having stopped when I returned, my perception tainted by the apparent fast-paced flashiness of London art school. This is of course an illusion: as though your sense of self (another illusion) can "change" or "progress" so far as to be severed from its origins. Although maybe that's the thing about hometowns — they are the familiar, always a return.

"...space and time... are not realities but relations derived from processes and events" (Harvey, 1996)

And yet. Southend has become a strange space stuck between histories, a liminal domain. A threshold between past and modernity; greasy spoon cafes and arcades trilling endlessly alongside bass-boosted grime from fast-passing cars. The McDonalds (two of 'em) from my childhood sustaining while other windows fill up and empty around them endlessly.

At the time of writing, we are still under lockdown, "non-essential" shops due to reopen in April. Until then, Southend high street is entombed. No doubt the other side of the pandemic will reveal the full extent to which the high street has been affected. But

1 Groundwork, Liminality [<https://www.layinggroundwork.org/liminal-space>]



for now it remains frozen, obviously dying but doing so silently behind metal shutters. The arcades and Adventure Island are quiet now too. This seaside economy, an echo from a distinctive period of British history, has provided the framework for the town's conception in popular culture. When, in *Eastenders*, Shirley Carter spits at a minor character to “go back to Southend”, the town's reputation in relation to the fictionalised Albert Square is positioned staunchly: Southend is rougher than rough.

“The social ‘Other’ of the marginal and of low cultures is despised and reviled in the official discourse of dominant culture and central power.”  
(Shields, 2013)

Time is a flow; it does not move upwards from a point but simply passes. Fluctuating like waves, repetitive indeed but often subjective. The high street seems to possess its own “time” — travelling from one end to the other has a distinctive repetition to it, punctuated by pedestrian crossings. For disabled people, limited access to the high street presents a parallel timestream, a layer of stopped-ness.

The Estuary is significant, not only for what its presence lends regarding ideas about seaside towns. The places in which its waters are visible or its breeze palpable co-exist with a temporality: positioned on a point of linear movement without going anywhere. When I step out of my house, huge cargo ships float in my periphery, above houses and trees. When Canvey and Kent light up at night, it's like seeing Southend reflected across the water. On foggy days, standing in front of the old-BHS-now-Primark building, it looks as though Southend high street is dropping off into the sea. At the end of the world.

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To consider it as a town in which time has “stopped” is dangerous — for with this “stoppage” comes poverty, desperation, a lack of infrastructure — and overall feeds the town's negative-coding. For all the personal affections for fish and chips, seagulls and stoney beaches, this characterisation exists like a too-small shell. Kiss-me-quick no longer fits. As the economic landscape changes, Southend waits not to evolve but for its epicentre to shift, to shed the shell of the high street.

Considering that the high street bears such significance over the town's future, Southend BID are in a position of authority over defining the town as a whole, pulling out its characteristics from liminality to be marketed. Many BID models do so by redeveloping spaces under new names, drawing on old histories to create charming but false community narratives.

Southend BID is approaching this reconditioning via commissions of street art. On their website this is listed as part of their vision: “High-quality street art not only engages and delights residents and visitors, it also helps inspire community pride and spirit. Talented local artists will be commissioned to provide eye-catching installations throughout the town centre.”<sup>2</sup> The Essex Birds commission, quite damaged but nonetheless still in existence beside Cafe Nero, and the dialogue surrounding it was an ominous signal of Southend BID's future intentions. In 2019, they commissioned a mural to four artists — three of which were male — of “the most successful and instantly recognisable stars”<sup>3</sup> from the county. This included, bizarrely, the artist Grayson Perry, who doesn't identify as a woman.

2 [www.southendbid.com/vision](http://www.southendbid.com/vision)

3 Southend's tribute to our most successful Essex girls, Southend Echo [<https://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/17591476.southends-tribute-successful-essex-girls>]

Not only did this commission do nothing to advance the notion of Essex Birds — because this misogynist term is not for men to reclaim, even if intended as “a playful and satirical riposte”<sup>4</sup> — Southend BID engaged with the social media dialogue about the piece damagingly, becoming argumentative and ring-leading derision against those who pointed out these failings, namely members of the town’s LGBTQI+ and creative community.

What was the point of this commission, if not to solidify a very clear stance on whether the town could evolve from this reductive narrative and who could take ownership of it? Importantly, who were BID aiming to accommodate?

When I wrote about this in 2019<sup>5</sup>, I found myself at the stalemate of equalising my politics against the environment I grew up in; as a queer, female, and working-class but nonetheless cis, white and privileged person trying to practise something other than humiliation about a place I held in my heart and truly wanted the best for. I wrote my article the week I left the UK, in a sudden flurry fuelled by a lot of coffee and speculoos spread.

Upon returning not even a year later, it seems that Southend BID is still indeed attempting to exploit the town’s cultural character while extracting it from its socioeconomic realities. This is “street art” without the “street”.

In the middle of the high street stands the railway bridge, the walls on either side filled by a cycle of mural commissions — currently an anti-bullying cartoon and a Julian Opie mimicry (without any acknowledgement to Julian Opie). The railway bridge is also a dedicated busking space, one of five allocated by the council. This posits the railway bridge as a “spot”, a place where buskers can be presented with the backdrop of a mural, creating the visual idea of culture “happening”. Southend can therefore be presented as a town with “buzz”, a “vibe”, a “community”, while aiming to keep the strings of privately-owned space and business-led initiative invisible.

Often, however, people living on the streets will sit against the not-Opie and ask for change. Here is where BID’s operational push, against the pull of Southend’s socioeconomic truths, becomes clear. On their website, Southend BID state their primary objective is to manage, over and above motivate and market, the high street. The businesses making up Southend BID’s membership have access to DISC, an information-sharing system used by over 450 towns and cities to “self-manage” low level crime and anti-social behaviour, with police input.

This is enforced by street rangers, the role of whom Southend BID base upon knowledgeability of the area — yet online their duties are listed in such an order: “graffiti removal, first aid occurrences, shoplifting incidents and visitor queries.” The irony of graffiti removal as a key operation within a model which places street art at the centre of its image is obviously of note. Furthermore, the street rangers’ black and blue uniforms, which include a security vest, are surely no accident — they resemble police, if not security guards.

“Liminality represents a transient and in-between space in which the subject, midritual, is rendered absent and abject. This space is generated and inhabited by both the victims and perpetrators of social transgressions; a space in which each party is caught in a state of abjection until the fulfilment of punishment.” (Hoey, 2017)

One page of BID’s website is dedicated to “successes”, including “392 nuisance or unauthorised buskers relocated,” and “6559 rough sleeper engagements.” I sent an email to

4 <https://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/17591476.southends-tribute-successful-essex-girls>

5 Strange Love for Southend or: How to Stop the Bomb [<http://roseclarey.com/strange-love-for-southend>]

their general enquiries inbox, asking what was meant by this last point, and what their policy for managing rough sleepers was. They responded that they do not “manage” rough sleepers (they are better at semantics than I am), instead the Street Ranger team engages with rough sleepers to make them aware of outreach programmes and support them to make contact... If this is what is meant by moving homeless people away from the high street, which street rangers have been seen to do, then these “engagements” are not genuine engagements by any stretch — merely an evasion.

The issue of homelessness is simple when approached from the base fact of social inequality, but complex when approached from the authoritarian angle. And so BID can only approach their role with a sheath — saving the sword not to pierce through to the heart of the problem but to point people elsewhere, to move them along. To clear the view of the murals.

Make no mistake — Southend BID’s onus, as an extension of its authority, is cultural revanchism. A reclamation of the town, away from what it could be into a reductive, dated and shit version of its former self.

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For so long now it has felt as though the world is moving through Southend without effect on its landscape. That is except, of course, for the sea. How apt that the body of water which granted Southend’s popular character should be the thing to drown the town.

When I picture the sea surpassing the cliff wall and rising to the top of Pier Hill, I see the arcades filling with seaweed, the slot machines not exploding with electricity but muting without a fight. The high street unchanged while surf licks at its doorways. I see Southend stranded, its histories underwater, existing forever as it exists today. The North Sea as our Vesuvius, its threat dormant until now. Sea: the great leveller.

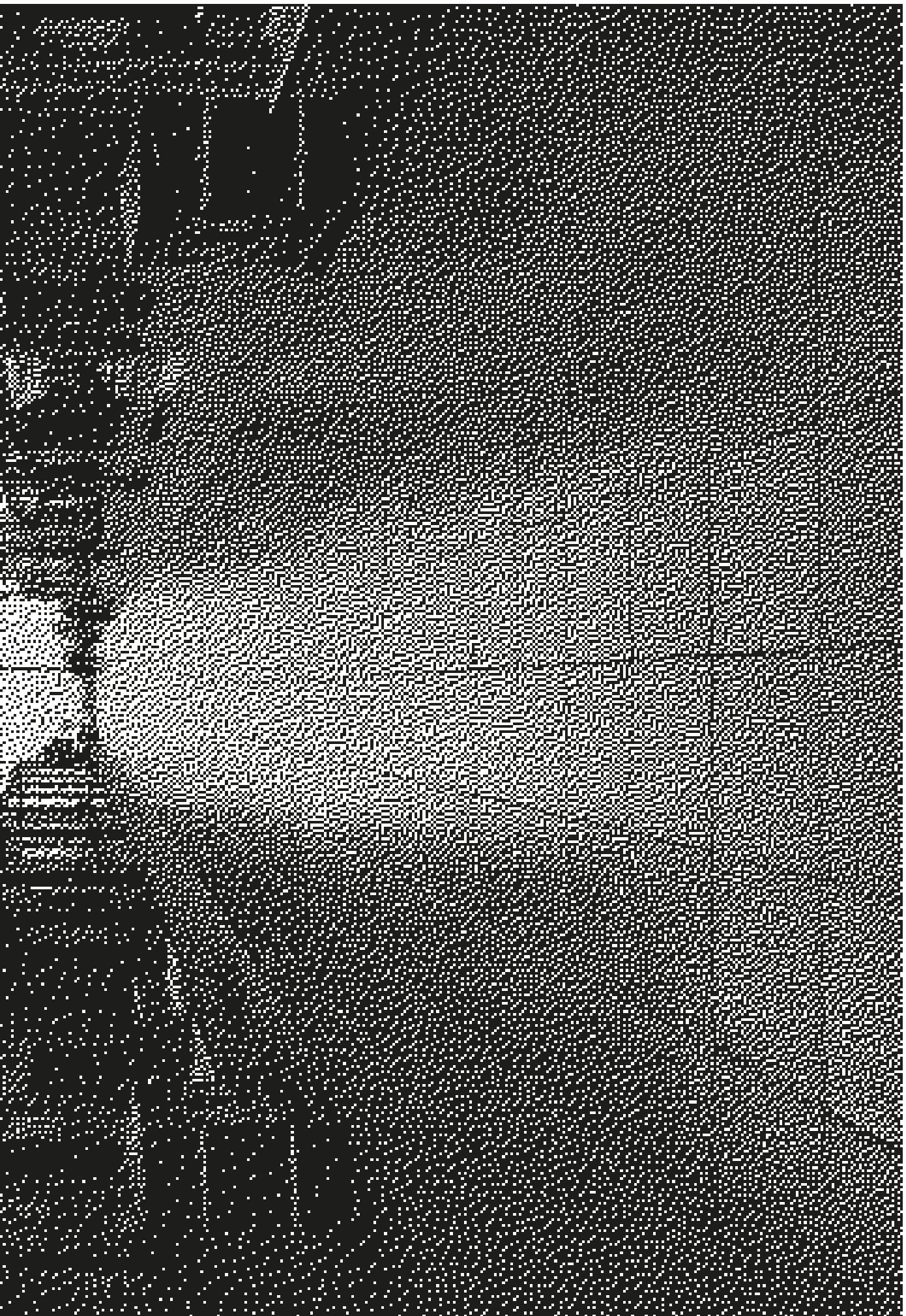
The volcanic burial of Pompeii echoes as a lesson, the moral of the story dependent upon who is making sense of it — Google brings up offerings from travel bloggers to Christian magazines. It exists as a monolith, rooted in a nationalist school curriculum of Henry VIII and the Second World War: a story of progress, a comparison from which to decide we now have fully developed understandings of the world allowing us to escape threat. However, the common understanding of Pompeii is often based upon inaccuracies: it was not 20,000 people that were killed, but 2,000; the population had warning but it was the ones who chose to stay that died. The aforementioned “inescapable dominion of nature” was, in fact, escapable. What sticks in our memory from this story does not include that Vesuvius, since the infamous eruption of 79AD, has erupted multiple times through the centuries since, most recently in 1944. Today, 600,000 inhabitants live in its “danger zone.” Vesuvius remains a threat.

We know what is happening in Southend. We know what is happening to the sea. We are lucky to be in such mild climes, where the idea of the water rising to meet the doorstep of The Royal’s shopping centre still feels “distant”, despite Climate Central’s projection being 2050. I am fortunate to be speculating cinematically about the event, the sea not yet erasing our backyards and roads as it has in other countries, the destruction of our livelihoods not yet palpable.

Southend, collapsing through the shell of its reputation into nothingness, is threatened by a perpetual liminality, the structures from which to form identity, to nurture culture and community, floating from grasp. And while Southend BID green lights deliberately harmful and misogynistic commissions for the social media buzz, the town continues to sink.

This sensation of Southend having “stopped” presents itself as another lesson — of things that have not been done, things that are not being done, and things we will not do.

These narratives become a prop. While the town's decline is by design of corporate bodies and bureaucracies, as is the climate crisis, perhaps there is something to be borrowed from the aforementioned Christian magazine and to match my biblical imagining of Southend-under-Sea: flee complacency, before it is too late.



## References

- D. Harvey, Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference (1996)  
 Molly Hoey, Liminal Criminal: 'Abject, Absence and Environment' in Junky and The Outsider, eTropic Vol. 16 No. 1 (2017)

## Glossary

- Temporality: the state of existing in relation to time  
 Liminality: an anthropological phrase, describes environments in which social identities are suspended or paused as individuals adhere to the surrounding conditions, e.g. airports, shopping centres.  
 Revanchism: describes the political will to reclaim territory by force, usually following war or social movement/unrest. Historically, it is justified by the notion of sacrament.

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