Order, taste and propriety at the eighteenth-century London fairs

Benjamin Heller
Abstract

Fairs have rarely been studied in detail by historians of the eighteenth century, but a more nuanced analysis of fairs and, in particular, fairgoers provides insight into what was distinctive about the cultural world of eighteenth-century Londoners. Careful examination of eighteenth-century writings on fairs shows how these annual festivities gained symbolic importance that shaped the records of fairs as well as the analyses of modern historians. Bartholomew Fair, Southwark Fair, and other, lesser, fairs were not separate, antiquated or anomalous aspect of eighteenth-century London life, rather they were closely related to other leisure spaces. Fairs offered a diverse array of entertainment opportunities including shows, dancing, drinking, and shopping and have more in common with the interests of polite society than has been previously recognized. Visual representations, newspaper reports and advertisements, court records, and other documents reveal the diversity of the fairground crowd and suggest ways that the fairground space, considered impolite by some, could be use by members of polite society for recreation. Fairs furthermore are a space that complicates the “commercialization of leisure” that historians have recognized as taking place during the eighteenth century. While innovations were taking place during the eighteenth century in fairground entertainments, the continuities with the seventeenth century and before are also striking. An examination of how fairs were regulated also reveals a combination of continuity (in the form of informal, crowd-based regulation) and change (such as new policing measures).