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1

The British Holiday Film and Its Audience

Introduction

In the introduction to this book I discussed the idea that holidays can be considered as ‘imagined events’ (Hill, 2002: 86) and how this might relate to the way that films, like the holiday, can generate feelings of ‘anticipation, transportation and elevation’ (Kuhn, 2002). In this chapter I will think more specifically about what the social function of the holiday film might be, and how audiences might respond to it. Landy argues that recent studies of genre pictures have ‘sought to analyse the ways in which mass cultural productions are part of a meaningful system of social exchange in which the audience, rather than being the passive consumer of these texts, is an integral element in their production and reception’ (Landy, 1991: 4). Therefore, when looking at film in terms of national cinema, it isn’t just the film texts that have to be considered, but also the industry that produces them, and the society that consumes them.

Higson emphasises that a ‘representational’ approach to national cinema must not fall into the trap of being ‘reflectionist’, and that it is also important to consider how cinema ‘might actively work to produce’ national identity ‘through its own textual processes and forms of engagement with the spectator’ (Higson, 1995: 5–6). Street shares this point of view by saying that although British film is usually categorised by ‘economic boundaries’, it can also be categorised by ‘cultural conceptions’, and ‘the extent to which they participate in establishing nationhood as a distinct, familiar sense of belonging which is shared by people from different social and religious backgrounds’ (Street, 2009: 1).

In this chapter I aim to offer a speculative analysis of the different ways cinema – and the holiday film in particular – can be said to

engage with society. I question whether such films reflect society, or whether they critically engage with it. Mass Observers in the late 1930s, for example, concluded that the cinema had 'a profound effect on the everyday life of all social classes [including on] their education, fashions, morality, leisure and their social attitudes', alongside other social influences such as 'religion, politics and sport' (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 21). Kuhn similarly suggests that 'spectatorship intersect[s] with the feelings and behaviours of social audiences... [informing] people's daily activities and interactions with family members and peers' (Kuhn, 2002: 238). Therefore, it is useful to think about how the holiday film might communicate feelings of community and national identity, by looking beyond the film texts themselves and considering audience reception.

In order to make my speculative analysis, I examine some of the ways in which responses to texts have been theorised, including work on 'active' and 'passive' audiences, before looking at box-office statistics and sociological research on cinema audiences in the twentieth century. In so doing, I offer some of my own thoughts on the popularity of holiday films, and also on how audiences might have responded to them.

Different approaches to studying audience reception

Although there is not a huge amount of research material on the social function of British film, Mass Observation and the sociological work carried out by J. P. Mayer in the 1940s provide some useful contemporary sources. Shafer (1997) uses a variety of sources such as contemporary reviews and letters from filmgoers to magazines such as *Film Weekly* and *Picturegoer Weekly* to gauge taste preferences and responses to films during the 1930s, whilst Kuhn uses an ethno-historic approach, and gathers information from what she refers to as 'elders' stories', through oral history recordings and questionnaires, to reveal British cinemagoing experiences of the 1930s (Kuhn, 2002: 239). Looking at research on audience taste preferences of the 1930s and 1940s carried out by Poole (1987) and Harper (2004, 2006) also gives some indication of what kinds of films were most popular in these decades, and therefore the types of films audiences favoured on their visits to the cinema.

Most of the available data on cinema audiences tend to relate to the 1930s and 1940s, which is why I concentrate mostly on these two decades in this chapter, but looking at these decades is also useful for

the following two reasons. Firstly, they cover a period in which cinema attendance in Britain was at its height, giving a clue as to what audiences looked for when filmgoing was the most popular form of leisure.¹ Secondly, the period in question covers the interwar years of the 1930s, which I look at more closely in Chapter 4, and the postwar boom in leisure, which is covered in Chapter 5. It is useful, therefore, to look at the audience preferences revealed here in comparison with the contextual material and film analysis that appear in subsequent chapters.

Kuhn argues that 'although historical, ethnographic and film-based investigations are normally conducted in separate disciplinary and methodological universes', a process of 'methodological triangulation' combining historical, ethnographic and film-based disciplines can bring 'together issues around film texts and spectatorial engagements with questions relating to the social audience and the contexts of reception' (Kuhn, 2002: 7). Because the holiday film offers a 'condensed' image of leisure combining the holiday and film, some understanding of how the films may have been received (alongside readings of the texts) is useful for considering what the function of the films might have been, and therefore Kuhn's 'methodological triangulation' is a useful model to follow (Kuhn, 2002: 7).

This method, however, would undeniably be a huge task to carry out if I applied it to all the decades analysed in this book. My research therefore mostly includes film-based analyses, because one of its main purposes is to examine films that have largely been neglected, or to look at a body of films in the context of their subject matter as 'holiday films' which has not been done before. A more in-depth research project on holiday films and their reception, similar to Kuhn's exploration of the 1930s, would be worth returning to as a study in its own right – perhaps focusing on a specific period, such as the immediate postwar years when cinema appeared to respond to the boom in holidays for the working classes. The role of cinema at seaside resorts might also be another area worthy of study. One of the interview questions in Kuhn's fieldwork, for instance, was 'Did you go to the cinema on holiday?', but responses to this question do not appear to have been analysed for the purposes of her book (Kuhn, 2002: 244). Eyles also suggests that seaside towns, as well as major cities, were used for first-runs of main features 'prior to . . . general release', which seems to highlight the importance of resorts as places of film exhibition, and which also invites further investigation (Eyles, 1996: 180). Having outlined some of the different approaches to studying audience reception, I now consider the ways in which cinema audiences have been theorised.

The 'passive' and 'active' cinema audience

In his essay 'Transparencies on Film' Adorno decries mainstream, commercial cinema for the way it ideologically incites 'collective behaviour' in audiences and makes them 'fall into step as if in a parade' (Adorno, 2006: 183). For him, the cinema audience is decidedly passive. He uses the Hollywood film *Anything Goes* (1931)² as an example to argue that the viewer's eye is 'carried along' and 'joins the current of all those who are responding to the same appeal' (Adorno, 2006: 183).

Adorno would prefer film as a medium if it didn't use 'standardised' techniques 'which work against... realism', such as 'superimpositions' and 'flashbacks' that 'inform the viewer as to what is being signified or what needs to be added in order to comprehend whatever escapes basic cinematic realism' (Adorno, 2006: 184). However, to say that all commercial films incite the same response from every cinemagoer shows a tendency to oversimplify the role of the audience, and the narrative function of such films. Not all members of an audience may gain the same type of experience from one single film. This is pointed out by Mayer:

In the cinema the film is presented to every member of the audience. But the sensation-perception mechanism is unique for every individual. What is perceived is unique in each case, but what is 'seen' is also unique. (Mayer, 1946: 59)

He illustrates his point by saying that in essays written by three different schoolgirls about their favourite film *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the 'differences between the three accounts of the film are striking', with one girl remarking on the acting and casting of the main characters, the second on the details of the story, and the third on the thoughts and 'personal relationships' of the characters (Mayer, 1946: 61). Each girl has read the film in a unique way, and therefore has experienced the film differently to the other two and has a different memory of it. A film like *No Limit* (which I return to in Chapter 4), therefore, might also offer a range of alternative viewing pleasures such as the sights of the seaside resort of Douglas, the thrill of the Tourist Trophy Races, the central heterosexual romance between George Formby's and Florence Desmond's characters, or simply the tongue-in-cheek and smutty innuendo of Formby's songs. As Iser suggests when discussing how readers may respond to novels differently:

One text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual

reader will fill in the gaps in his [or her] own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. (Iser, 1974: 280)

Another way to consider the manner in which an audience might respond to texts is through the work of Althusser who says that 'ideology interpellates individuals as subjects' by 'hailing' the reader (Althusser, 2006: 343). He elaborates:

Ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by the very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey you there!'. (Althusser, 2006: 344–345)

Whilst referring to Althusser's theory, Storey (2006) uses advertising to explain how a text 'flatters us into thinking we are the special "you" of its discourse' (Storey, 2006: 276–277), but this process of 'interpellation' might also work in patriotic films such as *Millions Like Us* (1944) – which addresses the audience in the title sequence by referring to the 'Millions like you' who appear in the film – and in popular comedy films which can be said to invite feelings of communality. One of the ways in which comedies invite responses from an audience is through a 'direct mode of address', such as comic songs and asides, whereby characters look into the film camera's lens and consequently out into the cinema audience (Sutton, 2000: 23–25). As Sutton argues, 'British comedy films operate a distinctive mode of address, one which has more in common with the "open" and interactive forms it derived from live entertainment than the "closed" and historic ones of the narrative film' (Sutton, 2000: 23). He continues:

The voice of [Anderson's (1991)] 'imagined community' lies at the heart of much British comedy – whether it takes the form of the bond between music-hall performer and audience, the working-class solidarity of early Gracie Fields films, the later, wartime evocations of 'Britishness' in films as different as *Tawny Pipit* and *Gert and Daisy's Weekend* or the more familiar Ealing evocation of the local community as the key unit of social relationships. (Sutton, 2000: 24)

A similar feeling is alluded to by Kuhn, who says that part of the sensation of being 'transported' by film is due 'to a remembered sensation of being singled out and addressed individually by characters on the screen' (Kuhn, 2002: 226). Even in films where direct address is not used, but where certain sections of society are depicted or represented, there may be an element of what Althusser calls 'misrecognition' from the audience (Storey, 2006: 277). As I explain in Chapter 4, for example, part of the appeal of film stars such as Gracie Fields and George Formby was that to working-class audiences of the 1930s and 1940s they appeared to be 'down-to-earth' types from humble backgrounds that Lancashire audiences considered as 'their own' (Cross, 1990: 132). In turn, their films included characters, 'types' and situations that audiences would have been familiar with, such as family singalongs around the piano (in *Sing As We Go*), or furtive and awkward attempts at courting (in *No Limit*). Richards, for instance, reveals how 'working-class audiences did ... like stars who were both visibly and audibly from their own background, stars who shared some at least of their attitudes and outlook' (Richards, 1998: 297).

Some of these representations, in turn, may also be regarded as stereotypes, but nevertheless they would have offered some sense of familiarity for the audience to make comparisons with their own experiences, albeit with an element of escapism. As Shafer says:

Some working-class filmgoers were troubled by the comic portrayals of ordinary people. But those who objected were apparently in the minority; the seeming willingness of at least segments of the film industry to respond to the criticism was offset by the fact that other patrons did not seek and in fact avoided realistic social drama. Escapist cinema remained profitable. (Shafer, 1997: 55)

In terms of the holiday, film audiences may have been familiar with comic depictions of the Blackpool landlady, for instance. Moorhouse admits that she 'has been burlesqued in stage and radio play, caricatured by music hall and concert comedian', but the working-class audience of *Sing As We Go* had probably come across similar characters, or at least heard about them from friends, after their annual visits to the seaside town (Moorhouse, 1955: 66).

Audience preferences and box office takings

One way of speculating about the appeal of holiday films and how audiences may have responded to them is by looking at the box office

takings of the relevant films, and also audience preferences for other types of film, and making comparisons. The popularity of some of these films may also be measured by the fact that they have been re-released, enabling the longevity of their appeal to cinema audiences. *Sing As We Go* (1934) was reissued in 1953, *No Limit* (1935) in 1946, *Sam Small Leaves Town* (1937) in 1942, *Bank Holiday* (1938) in 1951, and *Holiday Camp* (1947) in 1948 and 1954. Some of these reissues were possibly to make up for shortages of second features during the war, and America's embargo of films into Britain due to the introduction of the *ad valorem* tax of 1947–1948.³ However, the episodic nature of some of the holiday films, and the framing of their narratives through music-hall gags, songs and skits, plus the enduring appeal of some of the films' stars, arguably made the films ideal for rekindling memories of holidays past and inviting thoughts of holidays present. *No Limit* also fostered something of a cult following among Isle of Man Tourist Trophy enthusiasts, with the film being revived annually during the races (Dean, 1973: 213).

Poole suggests, however, that 'film companies and cinema chains rarely issue statistics of attendance' and therefore it is difficult to construct an accurate picture of how successful or unsuccessful certain films were on a week-by-week basis (Poole, 1987: 15). Swern and Childs similarly point out that:

Until 1969 reliable box office figures were not made freely available to the cinema press of the day.... Distributors and exhibitors kept their receipts a closely guarded secret, but the trade publication *Kinematograph Weekly* and its dedicated staff kept a very close eye on the business and were able to determine which films were the hits, and which were the misses. (Swern and Childs, 1995: 4)

The *Kinematograph Weekly* surveys (by R. H. 'Josh' Billings and Bill Atria) give a broad overview of each year's successes, and several of the more popular holiday films do make an appearance in these tables after the Second World War. For example, *Holiday Camp* was named as one of the box office attractions of 1947 and Jack Warner and Kathleen Harrison as the 'Most Promising New Team', which gives an indication of the impact of the film and why it spawned a series of 'Huggett' films (Billings, 1947: 13–14).⁴ In 1953, *Genevieve* was listed as the third most successful British film, with other moneymakers including *Innocents in Paris* (Billings, 1953: 10). Although war films were still very popular in the

postwar period, *Doctor at Sea* was the second most successful film of 1955, running closely behind *The Dam Busters* (Billings, 1955: 4).

In the 1960s, a distinction was made between films on 'general release' and those which were 'special presentations' like *Cleopatra* (1963). In 1962, the best feature series was named as the *Carry On* films, with *Carry On Cruising* listed as one of the year's top moneymakers on general release (Billings 1962: 6–7). Not surprisingly, *Carry On* films featured heavily in these end-of-year polls, such was the enduring nature of their appeal to British audiences, and in 1969 *Carry On Camping* came second in the Top 10 general releases, with *Carry On Up The Khyber* in fifth place (Atria, 1969: 8–10). In 1963 *Summer Holiday* was the second most successful general release after *From Russia with Love*, and Cliff Richard was named as one of the most popular stars (Atria, 1963: 4).

Poole, however, points out that although *Kinematograph Weekly* offers some clues about which films were the most successful annual releases on a national level, these tables mostly reflect the taste preferences of West End audiences, and therefore should be compared alongside statistics that also record regional taste preferences (Poole, 1987: 15). Although published records of attendances at individual cinemas are rare, some have emerged such as those for the Majestic at Macclesfield (between 1939 and 1946), analysed by Poole (1987); the Empire, Leicester Square, analysed by Eyles (1989); and the Regent, Portsmouth (for the 1930s and 1940s), analysed by Harper (2004, 2006). These results represent a cross-section of society from England's north, south and capital, and in turn can be broken down into a 'distinction between matinee and evening performances, thus helping... to make distinctions between male and female taste' (Harper, 2004: 565, 568). Distinctions can also be made between times of war and peace, when the mood of the nation might be different, or a noticeable influx of American troops might make a difference to ticket sales (Poole, 1987; Harper, 2006).

Eyles' research isn't of much use here because the Leicester Square Empire's programme was mostly filled with American MGM films, although some British films, including *Innocents in Paris* and *Girls at Sea*, gained healthy receipts – the former selling 52,849 seats over a two-week period in July 1953, and the latter selling 17,811 seats in November 1957 (Eyles, 1989: 43, 46). Poole's research reveals that the highest number of seats sold between 1939 and 1946 at the Majestic, Macclesfield, was for the patriotic American film *This Is the Army*, with 14,662 out of a possible 15,330 seats (in 1944), followed by *Mrs Miniver* with 14,241. The

highest-selling British film in this period at the Majestic was *The Wicked Lady*, with 15,520 seats sold in 1945 (Poole, 1987: 16).

Regarding tastes in British films, George Formby and Gracie Fields were the most popular stars at the Majestic in 1939, with *It's in the Air* (11,626 seats), *Trouble Brewing* (11,480) and *Shipyards Sally* (11,095) providing the biggest box office figures (Poole, 1987: 19). Formby remained the top British attraction at the Majestic for the next two years, to be replaced by Frank Randle in 1942 and 1943 (Poole, 1987: 20–24). This preference would appear to be region-specific, because, as Poole points out, 'the taste in Macclesfield would seem to be for comedy which has definite northern links' (Poole, 1987: 19). It is therefore not too difficult to speculate that Formby's *No Limit* and Fields' *Sing As We Go* would have found a receptive audience in Macclesfield, as perhaps would Randle's *Holidays With Pay* in 1948.

In contrast to this, Harper suggests that 'Fields had never been a particular... favourite' at the Regent, Portsmouth, in the 1930s (Harper, 2006: 367) and finds instead that film adaptations of London's Aldwych farces starring Ralph Lynn and Tom Walls, and the comedies of Will Hay, appealed to the region's middle-class tastes (Harper, 2004: 572–573).

Holiday-themed films encompassing scenes of the 'exotic' and 'minor naughtiness' may have offered some sort of appeal to the tastes outlined above, although there is little evidence of them in the Regent's ledgers. Most of these films must therefore have appeared at one of Portsmouth's other numerous cinemas, of which there were 22 in 1930, and 29 by the end of the decade (Harper, 2004: 566). However, the Riviera-set *First a Girl* shown in the week beginning 25 January 1936 sold a very respectable 20,945 tickets at the Regent.⁵ The film's exotic setting would undoubtedly have lifted the audience out of the post-Christmas January blues, but its star, Jessie Matthews, would also have been a big attraction for the sophisticated tastes of the Regent's audience (Harper, 2004: 583). The film *Bank Holiday* fared less well, with 12,178 tickets sold in the week beginning 11 June 1938. Harper points out that attendances fall during summer months, but that this is usually from 16 June to 11 August (Harper, 2004: 568). Nevertheless, the film may have fared poorly as a result of representing a holiday atmosphere that the Regent's middle-class and respectable working-class audience could have been experiencing in reality, in nearby seaside resorts such as Brighton and Bognor Regis.

Analysis of box office figures gives us some indication of what types of films were popular at given times, and in certain regions, but as Poole argues:

They do not tell us about personal reactions. They do not tell us why people went to see a particular film or whether they enjoyed it. (Poole, 1987: 29)

In order to understand the social function of holiday films in more detail, it may help to examine the results of Mass Observation surveys and the film audience 'autobiographies' collated by J. P. Mayer in the 1940s.

Mass observation and film

Mass Observation conducted a survey with the audiences of three cinemas in Bolton in March 1938. The cinemas were chosen 'to represent the three different levels of cinema operation', with the Odeon being the most luxurious, the Crompton having a middle-range 'mixed family audience' and the Palladium, which was a 'downmarket' cinema, with a working-class audience from the city-centre area (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 32). The ages of the respondents ranged from 7 to 78, with 62 per cent of them being 30 or under (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 33).

Questions were asked about the regularity of their visits, the types of films they preferred – whether American or British – and also the genres or subject matter of films they liked and disliked. The most popular type of film overall for both men and women was the musical romance, with drama and tragedy second, and history and crime joint third. Slapstick comedy and cartoons were the least popular (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 34).

The majority of respondents preferred American films to British because of their fast pace and 'natural' actors, although many stated that they didn't like the American actors' accents and use of slang (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 101, 108). When responding about what they would like to see more of, most people commented that they would like to see more humour, more beautiful things, more action and more people like themselves, one example being the 26-year-old woman who attended the Odeon and asked for:

More real life stuff treated with imagination and insight. Situations that are real, and yet lift one 'out of oneself' more. I like to see films containing my favourite actor or actress – always *real* people. (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 120)

Similarly, an 18-year-old woman who visited the Palladium commented that she didn't like to see overly made-up actresses and too-lavish settings, instead wanting 'more films of people like us who live and breathe, not beautiful statues or tailored dummies' (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 55–56). Representations of working-class characters were sometimes treated as suspect. A 32-year-old male customer of the Odeon commented that 'when scenes are depicted of working class life, they are generally portrayed as a lot of buffoons, without manners or understanding' (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 96). Gracie Fields and George Formby were singled out as popular British stars, with one man looking forward to seeing Gracie in a Hollywood film, and another requesting to see *No Limit* again (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 46, 83). Travel films and beautiful scenery were appreciated,⁶ although one 28-year-old woman complained that 'sometimes the commentator talks too much and hinders appreciation of the scene' (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 122).

What can be gleaned from this information is that audiences didn't want total escapism. They wanted to be able to forget the cares and stresses of their everyday lives, but at the same time enjoy a film that resembled something of their own experience. The films of Fields and Formby arguably offered portrayals of working-class life not far beyond the experiences of the cinema-going public. Formby may have been a 'buffoon' but he always came out on top in his films, representing something of an underdog-turned-hero. The holiday film might also have offered film audiences an experience they could identify with, whilst at the same time presenting the holiday narrative as a means to 'take them out of themselves', as requested by the aforementioned Odeon attendee (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 120). Although the holiday film involves some element of travel, the respondents to the Mass Observation survey who enjoyed travelogues tend to be referring to those with 'exotic' locations, and this isn't really something that was offered by British holiday films until the 1950s and 1960s, although the aforementioned *First a Girl* is a rare exception with scenes of the French Riviera.

The downside to a survey like this, however, is that the respondents largely comment on films they have seen recently, hence the large number who refer to *Victoria the Great* (1937), *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *A Star Is Born* (1937). This means that many filmgoers will only be referring to films within recent memory, rather than offering a more considered or objective opinion of the impact of many different types of films they have seen over the years. People might also write answers that they think cinema managers *want* to read, rather than being completely honest. Several of the answers are worded as if they are addressed to the

cinema managers rather than Mass Observation, and the fact that cash prizes and complementary tickets were given out for the most comprehensive answers may have influenced those taking part, especially as the answers were not given anonymously.

Filmgoer 'autobiographies' of the 1940s

This issue of honesty is also a problem that has to be considered when looking at the sociological work of J. P. Mayer in the 1940s. Mayer placed an advert in *Picturegoer* in February 1945 which asked people whether films ever influenced them with regard to personal decisions or behaviour (such as love, divorce, manners and fashion) and also whether films ever appeared in their dreams (Mayer, 1946: 181). He followed this piece of research by placing another advert in *Picturegoer*, in order to discover how films affected people's 'whole development rather than ... only one or two aspects of their lives' (Mayer, 1948: 13).

The answers were written in the form of short essays, but were led by questions regarding whether films had ever given the cinemagoer the desire to travel, or any ambitions to pursue certain careers, for instance. Mayer himself questions whether the respondents might exaggerate their answers, and also whether they can 'be taken as a representative sample of our population' (Mayer, 1948: 15). Both points have to be considered, firstly due to the leading nature of the questions and because prizes were offered for the best responses; and secondly because most of the essays appear to be written by middle-class readers of *Picturegoer*, who don't necessarily represent the general population of British cinemagoers. Although the essays may reveal something about middle-class audience responses to films in the 1940s, it may help to consider Mayer's results alongside the research carried out by Harper on the 'more low-brow' tastes of audiences at the Regent, Portsmouth, during the 1940s (Harper, 2006: 367), and also that by Poole (1987), to create a complete picture.

Nevertheless, some of the respondents to Mayer's competition give clues as to how the holiday film might have found appeal amongst middle-class audience members, and it may be useful to consider some of the following comments in this context. Several people wrote in, for instance, saying that films gave them a desire to travel:

It is mainly through the influence of travel films that I want to travel when I am older. Foreign lands always look so beautiful when seen through the lenses of a [Technicolor] camera (British male aged 15½, quoted in Mayer, 1948: 40).

Films about European countries always have a special interest for me, especially those about Switzerland and France, the former for skating, ski-ing and climbing, and France for a gay life, and I hope when final peace comes and everything gets back to normal, I shall have the opportunity of seeing these countries myself. (British female shorthand typist aged 17½, quoted in Mayer, 1948: 64)

Films have made me long to travel especially those about the sea. My biggest regret is that I wasn't a man, otherwise I'd have gone to sea. I think most films have wonderful scenery and I imagine climbing hills and mountains and sailing on lakes until someone besides me says: 'All that is made of cardboard and paper'. I wish folks would keep their thoughts to themselves, because it so often spoils the atmosphere caused by the films.... I would like to travel and when I see cliffs and sea combined with the country I wish I could visit every coast in the world. Maybe travelling would inspire me to write more.... (British female clerk aged 21, quoted in Mayer, 1948: 81-82)

If the above comments reveal middle-class desires to visit foreign lands, other comments referred to the appeal of the British landscape. One 18-year-old woman, for instance, found that films further intensified this appeal:

Since I returned from Cornwall and seen (*sic*) its impressive coastline and countryside, I naturally wanted to see films about that and other parts of the country as in *Frenchman's Creek* and *Canterbury Tale*, the latter having given me a peace of mind which I had not known for some time, and a longing to go to Canterbury. (Mayer, 1948: 73)

Another woman (aged 25) similarly remarked on *Love Story's* 'marvellous Cornish scenery' and commented that she preferred the portrayal of 'our scenery' in British films to that in American ones as being more truthful (Mayer, 1948: 227). The above comments regarding travel (at home or abroad) suggest perhaps that such films might invite a desire for holidaymaking for those members of the cinema audience who could afford it. However, in a further *Picturegoer* competition (in which Mayer asked cinemagoers what their likes and dislikes about films were), one woman comments that these films offer an 'imagined' feeling of release in spite of travel being beyond her financial means:

Although I should like to travel all over the world, I shall never be able to, and through seeing films about other lands, this makes up

a little for not being able to go, (but only a very little I'm afraid). (British female GPO employee aged 18, quoted in Mayer, 1948: 183)

The same woman commented that she liked films with 'plenty of outdoor scenes, and children', continuing:

Always, I look for a sense of freedom in a film, something refreshing, something that really might happen in real life. Children too, seem to be the embodiment of freedom and happiness... I enjoyed *National Velvet* and the refreshing beautiful scenes shot by the sea. (Mayer, 1948: 182–183)

The above comments hint at my argument in the introduction to the book that films offer an 'imagined' sense of a holiday, and have a restorative and refreshing function. Mayer similarly interprets this woman's comments as a reaction to her class status and a job in which, 'shut in the office, she appears to satisfy her longing for fresh air by the fantasy fulfilment which films provide' (Mayer, 1948: 242).

Mayer's findings also reveal that middle-class cinemagoers wanted to see more people 'like themselves', just as Mass Observers had found in their investigation (as highlighted in Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 120). Many respondents said, for example, that they liked British films such as *This Happy Breed* (1944), *The Way Ahead* (1944) and *Millions Like Us* for their authentic portrayal of British people. One British female aged 19, for example, said:

There is nothing I dislike more than an imitation of Hollywood in British films: imitation in dialogue, accent, and action... Now take *Millions Like Us*. Here was not perfection, I admit. But here was sincerity, pathos and charm. Here were real, every-day people. Here was a very appealing and moving, natural love theme. (Mayer, 1948: 192)

Similarly, another respondent (named as no. 23A) said that they could really relate to the 'witty dialogue' and characterisations in *This Happy Breed* which made the filmgoer feel as though they had 'met that family':

The aunt who had 'turns', the harassed mother, the 'boy next door', once more you shared with them their happiness and sorrow, just as you did in *In Which We Serve*. (Mayer, 1948: 195)

These findings would seem to suggest that audiences enjoyed films that they could relate to on an everyday level, although Harper also points out that from the Regent ledger of the 1940s, 'audiences preferred films [such as melodramas] that dealt with their anxieties on a symbolic level, rather than those that alluded directly to their lives' (Harper, 2006: 380). Holiday films, therefore, might offer characters whom audience members, to a certain extent, could identify with, but, conversely, the 'liminal' (Inglis, 2000 – see Chapter 2) setting of the seaside might also give them an opportunity to live out fantasies of the holiday romance – as seen in the various productions of *Hindle Wakes* – or to deal with symbolic anxieties such as those provided by the introduction of more sensational characters like the 'mannequin murderer' in *Holiday Camp*.

A speculative analysis of the 'holiday film'

Throughout this chapter I have examined how films might work ideologically to 'hail' members of an audience, and make them feel that they are being addressed (Althusser, 2006). However, by referring to Iser (1974), it could be argued that audience responses to films are not necessarily passive. Films can also illicit audience response on a more prosaic or social level, by influencing fashion and behaviour,⁷ and by providing 'a taken-for-granted component of girl talk', with 'gossip about the cinema ... interwoven with other, non-film related, topics' (Kuhn, 2002: 116). On a similar note, Mass Observers suggest that:

It is reasonable to suppose that the average man who goes to the pictures every week is influenced more than somewhat by the films that he sees on the screen. It is just as reasonable to suppose that of all films that he sees those that influence him most are the 'family films'. (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 297)

If all of the above findings in this chapter are applied to holiday-themed films, it may be possible to begin to make assumptions about the appeal of such films. It could be argued, for example, that they have the potential to take a filmgoer 'out of' him or herself (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 120) or transport the filmgoer 'away from the dull things' (Kuhn, 2002: 226). The filmic holiday journey offers a sense of escape, and a temporary release from the stresses of everyday life. Holiday films largely include families and narratives that contemporary audiences could relate to, enabling the audience 'not merely [to] find on the screen individual characters that resemble people that they know, but [also a]

whole set-up... drawn to make the screen family act *as a whole* like the family next door' (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 296).

Mass Observers and Mayer found that many films that made a lasting impression often had a life 'beyond' that of the cinema, for example in introducing popular songs,⁸ or by starring personalities who had forged careers in music hall such as Gert and Daisy and the aforementioned Fields and Formby (Richards and Sheridan, 1987: 293). Holiday films can also be said to have wider associations with holiday-type entertainment, starring performers who were popular in end-of-pier shows and other seaside venues, and by presenting humour familiar from seaside postcards. George Formby was hugely popular at Blackpool Opera House in the 1930s and his films may have introduced popular songs that were consequently heard in seaside shows (Cross, 1990: 128). Much later, in the 1960s and 1970s, cast members of the *Carry On* films also provided a sense of familiarity and reassurance to film audiences who enjoyed end-of-pier humour, and played out stereotypes familiar from 'saucy postcards'. As Medhurst argues:

It was not just the same performers being the same kind of types, but also the same kind of types signifying the same set of attitudes and beliefs. (Medhurst, 2007: 134)

Although biographical asides are usually avoided in academic investigations, it may be significant that holiday films frequently include performers such as Fields, Formby, Jack Douglas, Reg Varney and Diana Coupland who were either raised at seaside resorts or holiday camps within a show business environment, or else had early experiences of performing in such places.⁹ Many of these films therefore include a certain type of performer with music-hall experience, sometimes playing characters created on stage – such as Douglas's Alf Ippitimus¹⁰ and Stanley Holloway's Sam Small – but occasionally appearing as themselves, for example 'cheerful' Charlie Chester in *Holiday Camp*.

Holiday films might provide a trigger for memories of family holidays – just as peacetime memories of the seaside are recalled in *Millions Like Us* – or, conversely, they might influence a filmgoer's decision as to where they choose to go on holiday, or what type of holiday they would like to go on. The films might subconsciously 'educate' an audience about the intricacies of holidaymaking, helping them to avoid the bank holiday fiasco highlighted by Angeloglou (1975: 40–41).¹¹ A 19-year-old English female bookkeeper and wages clerk who wrote to Mayer explained, for instance, that films could 'show how to behave in hotels

and similar places, which is a help to people who seldom travel, when they do visit such places' (Mayer, 1946: 223). These films might also reinforce the traditions of cultural practices that are part of the holiday-making experience, such as the beauty contests seen in *Sing As We Go*, *Bank Holiday* and *Holiday Camp*.

In some respects, the films may offer a response to the national mood at certain moments in history – *Holiday Camp*, for example, could be said to capture the immediate postwar desire for a return to familial normality and stability – but the films could also be said to critically engage with society. There are scenes in *Bank Holiday*, for instance, that depict the hectic nature of the rush to the seaside, and which mock affectionately the lower-class tastes of some of the characters. *Sing As We Go* expresses a resistance towards the burgeoning Americanisation of seaside entertainments, whilst offering traditionally British (and northern) representations of working-class solidarity as the ideal alternative.

In recent times, resorts and tourist spots have often utilised film and television associations for promotional purposes. Scarborough's *Visitor Guide* of 2009 points out that 'the sights and sands' of the resort 'have been familiar to movie buffs and telly addicts for decades' through films such as *Little Voice* (1998) and television programmes such as *The Royal* (2003–present), (*Visitor Guide*, 2009: 28). It is therefore not too fanciful that places like Blackpool and companies such as Butlin's could have exploited the publicity that films of the 1930s and 1940s, and subsequent decades, provided for their resorts. Holiday films could also be said to satisfy the demands, highlighted by Mass Observers and Mayer, for more films that show the British landscape and the British way of life. Richards, for example, points out how in 1935 P. L. Mannoek, critic of the *Daily Herald*, commented that British landmarks and the British countryside ought to be acknowledged by British producers, and that as a result of this 'widespread feeling', film critics 'fell on "authentically English films"' with almost pathetic gratitude' (Richards, 1989: 247). He argues that *Bank Holiday* therefore 'elicited almost universal praise' from publications such as the *Evening News*, *The Sunday Times*, the *Daily Worker*, the *Observer* and the *New Statesman*, all of which commented on the film's 'authenticity' (Richards, 1989: 247–248). The question remains, however, as to what constitutes an 'authentic' portrayal of England.

Conclusion

By looking at box office statistics, sociological surveys, ethno-histories of cinemagoers and contemporary reviews, an impression of how

audiences may have responded to holiday films, and the social function of these films, may be speculated upon to a certain extent. As I have revealed above, the films might be said to satisfy audience demands to see characters they could relate to in familiar representations of the British way of life and the British landscape. However, I have also found that the representations discussed in the studies by Mass Observation and Mayer are largely white, English and middle class, and therefore arguably offer a selective representation of the nation.

Higson points out that the diversity of British society is often overlooked in preference for an 'imagined community' of what embodies Britishness, and that, in film, 'descriptions of British cinema as a national cinema ... tend to be far more selective in promoting one particular reading of British cinema over others' (Higson, 1995: 1). British national identity in the films I analyse in further chapters is often marked as white and English, and representations that fall outside of this are often marked by their 'otherness' – for example in the blackface minstrelsy seen in *No Limit*, and the representation of Yugoslav border controls in *Summer Holiday*, both of which I return to later. However, Higson argues that different members of an audience do not always read films in the same way, and that there are also films that deliberately 'challenge the nationalising myths found in the most resolutely patriotic films' (Higson, 1995: 7).

Street similarly argues that national cinema may be more diverse than has traditionally been assumed. It need not necessarily be taken to imply 'a jingoistic, nationalist imperative', but can challenge 'that view by giving a voice to those who have had very different experiences of living in Britain'. Street continues by saying that 'British film styles and themes have not been totally uniform and in their different ways have contributed to the cultural construction of Britishness' (Street, 2009: 2).

By looking at certain films chronologically over a long period of time, patterns of 'repetition and reiteration' may begin to emerge which either reinforce or challenge representations of national identity (Higson, 1995: 5). The term 'national cinema' would suggest that the films have to follow some sort of formula, or have something in common that enables them to define or represent the nation, whether this be through jingoistic and flag-waving representations, or more 'banal' forms (Billig, 1995). The films would also have to win the audience's consent in order for this ideological construction of identity to succeed. It may be useful, therefore, to consider these arguments when looking at films that have, over time, traditionally been neglected by theorists and historians, and which may not represent what is considered to be the 'typical' British character.

Before I analyse the British holiday film in detail, however, it will be necessary to investigate how the holiday itself has previously been theorised as a cultural 'text' or cultural 'practice'. In Chapter 2 I provide a survey of the theories and methods with which the holiday can be analysed, and indicate which of these methods are useful for understanding how the British holiday has been constructed and represented in film.

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