

Roll up for the Mystery Tour : Reading The  
Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* as a  
countercultural anti-masculinist text

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## **Abstract**

Sixties activist Abbie Hoffman has argued that The Beatles were part of a cultural revolution where the best and popular were, at a particular historical moment, the same, citing the *Sgt. Pepper* album in particular as a cultural artefact with wide reaching implications (Giuliano and Giuliano, 1995). This is, of course, a contested position, with The Beatles' relationship with the 1960s' counterculture the subject of much debate since, not least in the discussion around Lennon's song *Revolution*, resulting in written correspondence between Lennon and the London-based underground magazine *Black Dwarf*, or the debate between Richard Goldstein of *The New York Times* and Robert Christgau in *Esquire* on the merits of *Sgt. Pepper*.

In a recent book the author has explored The Beatles' role in changing representations of men and masculinities in the 1960s. The 1960s is, perhaps, the most re-presented decade of recent times, and this article will explore The Beatles' role in reflecting and popularising the values of the counterculture, both at the time and in retrospect. Coser (1965) drew parallels between the new intellectual elite of the 1960s and the court jester of medieval times, a role which allowed for the subversion and ridiculing of the established order of the times, positioned beyond the social hierarchy. Inglis (2000a; 2000b) has developed this concept, presenting The Beatles as men of ideas, constantly associated with changing visual and musical styles and reflecting on intellectualism at work in the new world of popular music.

Their role can be characterised as providing a focus, a prism through which to read the social changes of the 1960s, bringing a number of ideas into popular consciousness, magnified through the lens of their position in popular culture at the

time. MacDonald (2003:87) saw them as picking up ideas before their competitors: 'above and beyond the ordinary world: ahead of the fame and orchestrating things'.

This paper explores this idea in relation to 1960s' counterculture with a particular reference to the impact on men and representations of masculinity in the period. This exploration will take place through a discussion of their 1967 film *Magical Mystery Tour*, which is, it will be argued, a key countercultural text, much debated but, in retrospect, containing radical and subversive ideas in terms of content and form. Neaverson (1997) sees *Magical Mystery Tour* as filled with satire and mockery of establishment values, and draws comparisons with surrealist cinema, in particular Dali and Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*. The film also attempts to represent a state of heightened awareness, achieved through the use of psychedelic drugs, and this must also be considered as part of the subversive and counter-hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) agenda of the film.

While *Sgt. Pepper* is seen by many as the pinnacle of The Beatles' musical achievement, *Magical Mystery Tour*, generally panned by the critics at the time, represents a key point in The Beatles' transformation from loveable mop-tops to spokesmen for the counterculture (in the public perception), providing a challenge to ideas about men and masculinity within a countercultural context.

Key Words: Counterculture; The Beatles; masculinity; men; *Magical Mystery Tour*

## **Introduction**

Overt fifty years since their first single, *Love Me Do*, rose to number 17 in the UK charts in 1962, The Beatles remain as famous as ever and the words of press officer Derek Taylor, announcing their break-up in 1970, still seem to ring true: 'The Beatles are not a pop group, they are an abstraction, a repository for many things.'

(Sandbrook, 2006 : 724). With record sales topping half a billion (including 17 UK and 20 US number ones) their iconic images continue to fill TV screens whenever the 1960s are mentioned; the website Beatlelinks.com leads you onto Beatles web sites too numerous to list – facts, music, pictures, collectables etc. Still a global, cultural phenomenon, a repository for many things. Two are dead and two are living but their fame as The Beatles seems undimmed.

## **The Beatles and 1960s Counterculture**

'Counterculture: a way of life deliberately different from that which is normal or expected' (Chambers Dictionary, 1998: 373).

'During the last five years of the sixties, it seemed to many fans of The Beatles that the group was somehow above and beyond the ordinary world: ahead of the game and orchestrating things.'

(MacDonald, 2003: 87)

Accepting MacDonald's statement in conjunction with Inglis' (2002b) concept of The Beatles as men of ideas, the period 1965-67 is important in establishing The Beatles at the centre of the concept of 1960s counterculture, social change and the introduction of a number of new ideas about spirituality, peace, love, drugs and mind expansion and the ways men might think, feel and generally approach life.

'The counterculture's sudden efflorescence from elite status in 1965 to a subject of discussion in the mainstream of western society in 1967 was without doubt partially caused by The Beatles mirroring interest in it at that time. Psychedelic tracks like *Tomorrow Never Knows* and *A Day in the Life* spread the idea of mind expansion from a fringe concern to the centre of popular interest.'

(MacDonald, 2003: 88)

MacDonald goes on to discuss their importance in transmitting the psychedelic visual style through their clothes, hairstyles, record sleeves and songs. What placed The Beatles centrally in the public consciousness in what has, in retrospect, been termed the Summer of Love, the counterculture and the hippy movement is their shift from being seen (or represented) as within the establishment (albeit with some subversive tendencies) to being outside it. The way in which the media represented what they themselves, appeared to represent (in terms of visual appearance, cultural values, ideas etc) changed around this time. There are a number of key controversies, which mark this shift.

1966 is the turning point. Having ruffled establishment feathers the previous year with their MBE awards, 1966 was the year of Lennon's 'bigger than Jesus' controversy. In an interview with Maureen Cleave of *The Evening Standard* he discussed Beatlemania, his private life, his growing interest in philosophy and religion (Fricke, 2002). This in itself is significant, indicating how The Beatles had moved out of the to-be-looked and screamed at mop-tops of *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) to Inglis'

(2000b) concept of men of ideas, whose opinions on broad intellectual topics were to be elicited. However, Lennon's drawing of parallels between The Beatles' fame and the decline of Christianity caused controversy, particularly in the US.

Coser (1965) drew parallels between the new intellectual elite of the 1960s and the court jester of medieval times, a role which allowed for the subversion and ridiculing of the established order of the times. Inglis (2000b) develops this idea in relation to The Beatles' social status in the 1960s. As well as the 'bigger than Jesus' furore, 1966 saw The Beatles forming links with the British satire movement, with Lennon's appearance on Peter Cook and Dudley Moore's *Not Only but Also*.

The Beatles' interest in and connection with avant-garde movement also emerged in 1966, with McCartney developing links with a number of key figures on the London underground scene. MacDonald (2003: 32) states:

'He was steeped in surrealism and absurdism, in kinetic sculptures, experimental films, beat poetry and 'happenings' and in the associated anti-establishment state of mind.'

Lennon's first meeting with Yoko Ono, an active member of Fluxus, a radical multi-media art movement, took place in 1966 (although it was another 18 months before they finally became a couple). Linked to these developments in 1966 is their open use of psychedelic drugs, a countercultural badge of sorts, and the development of a psychedelic musical style evident in tracks like *Rain* and the *Revolver* album.

## **Men and Masculinities**

As Hearn (2004:49) has stated 'studying men is, in itself, neither new nor necessarily radical'. Hearn (2004) and Kimmel et al., (2004) provide a comprehensive guide to the development of gendered work on men, what Collinson and Hearn (1994:2) refer to a 'naming men as men'. This idea, originally advanced by Hamner (1990), refers to the way in which excavation of how masculinity operates within wider society takes place.

Some of this work has focused on the ways in which men in the arts and popular music, particularly through their representation in the mass media, have either colluded with or provided a challenge to dominant versions of masculinity at work in Western society in particular. Connell (1983) and Carrigan et al., (1985) were the first to introduce the concept of hegemonic masculinity, drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci (1971), arguing that dominant conceptualisations of masculinity were reproduced through key institutions such as the state, education, workplace, the family and the mass media. Carrigan et al., (1985) explain how hegemonic masculinity is not just about men in relation to women but is a particular type of masculinity. They characterise hegemonic masculinity: 'not as 'the male role' but a variety of masculinity to which others – among them young and effeminate as well as homosexual men – are subordinated' (Carrigan et al., 1985: 586).

A key feature of hegemonic masculinity is that it is explicitly heterosexual (Butler 1990). Carrigan et al., (1985) see hegemonic masculinity as the way in which men reproduce their dominance, through particular groupings of powerful men. The

importance of this theoretical development cannot be underestimated. It is their introduction of Gramsci's (1971) cultural-Marxist perspective which examines notions of class and power along with gender that is particularly important. Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony is summarised by Bocoock (1986:63) as:

'... when the intellectual, moral and philosophical leadership provided by the class or alliance of class factions which is ruling successfully achieves its objective of providing the fundamental outlook of the whole society.'

Carrigan et al., (1985:179) discuss how '**particular** groups of men' (emphasis in original) come to hold power and this is important in starting to unpack the grand narrative of patriarchy, for example, and begins to unravel the complexities at work where gender and class intersect. It is a concept which encompasses the notion of power being contested between groups (Gramsci, 1971; Foucault, 1980) and Connell (1995) builds on this idea and advances the notion of resistance and change, and this is important in relation to the notion of masculinity and the counterculture.

Brittan's (1989) concept of masculinism provides a complementary approach, one which explicitly accepts that 'both masculinity and femininity are continuously subject to a process of reinterpretation' (Brittan, 2001:51). Brittan (2001:53) warns against 'confusing masculinity with masculinism, the masculine ideology', an ideology which justifies male domination, sees heterosexuality as 'normal', accepts the sexual division of labour and the fundamental differences between men and women and, therefore, underpins men's dominant role in the world of politics and business.



Brittan's (1989) ideas allow for the emergence of plural masculinities or different versions of masculinity which challenge the masculinist ideology. Writing in 1989, he identified David Bowie's early 1970's flirtations with androgyny and presentations of self, which revelled in gender fluidity (Whiteley, 1997) as an example of this, thus seeing popular music and its representation in the mass media as a space in which dominant versions of masculinity may be resisted and undermined.

A number of authors have written on the subject of the masculine and masculinist (Brittan, 1989) nature of the music scene, (Frith and McRobbie, 1990; Cohen 1997; Whiteley, 1997).

Marwick (1998), Sandbrook (2005; 2006) and others have documented the social changes of 'the Sixties' and the rise in the importance of popular culture in this period as an influence in social change. There is a particular emphasis in this work on the role of popular music in general, and The Beatles in particular, as being key to this in terms of high-profile and an increased visual representation due to the rise in popularity of TV in the home and the resurgence of the British film industry in this period (Sandbrook, 2006). There is also a well documented debate about the importance of the arts in general as a key influence of the social changes of 'the Sixties' (Shulman, 1973; Martin, 1981; Moore-Gilbert and Seed, 1992). MacDonald (1994) presents a convincing explanation around The Beatles' symbiotic relationship with 'the Sixties'. Elsewhere the author has documented the ways in which they became synonymous with resistance and challenge to a particular set of values (often conceptualised as 'the establishment' [Sandbrook, 2005, 2006]) with the result that, in the public perception, they became seen as spokesmen for 'the

counterculture' in the mid 1960s, central to this role was a challenge to what had previously seen to be intransigent rules about male identity and masculinity. This includes an ever changing and increasingly feminized (Cohan, 1993; Bruzzi, 1997) appearance, their juxtaposition to masculinist (Brittan, 1989) male characters (particularly in their films), queer codes (Shillinglaw, 1999) and a child-like playfulness at work in their film work, their status as 'men of ideas' (Inglis, 2000b:1), which went beyond expectations of the 'normal' pop-star role, and their relationship to their female fans.

### **Magical Mystery Tour: Circumstances of Production**

Melly (1970) in his book *Revolt Into Style*, a look at the pop arts in 1960s' Britain, provides an insightful analysis of Sgt Pepper's importance in placing The Beatles at the centre of the 'happening' world in 1967.

'... the justification for the whole, largely absurd, bead-hung period lies in one artefact, the LP *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the Beatles' near flawless chef-d'oeuvre. For me this is conclusive proof that pop can be both art and pop, immediate and timeless. I don't know if such a balance can ever be struck again. It was perhaps pop music's classic moment... *Sgt Pepper* is on one level ideal thesis and examination material. It's full of esoteric references, irony, red herrings, deliberate mystification, musical influences, the lot.'

(Melly, 1970: 112)

The sleeve, featuring the Beatles surrounded by cut-outs of their heroes, and containing printed lyrics for the first time, was designed by pop artist Peter Blake and represented the 'cross-pollination' (Melly, 1970: 135) of the multitude of influences the Beatles had been experimenting with, 'a microcosm of the underground world' according to Melly (1970: 135) and a coming together of pop music and pop art.

*Pepper's* importance as a cultural/countercultural artefact has been well documented elsewhere (Whiteley, 1992; MacDonald, 2003; McKerney, 2005). It is the intention here, therefore, to examine the Beatles' third film, *Magical Mystery Tour*, as a countercultural artefact, with a particular emphasis on its challenge to traditional ideas about the masculinity and male role, a key theme of countercultural politics (Marwick, 1998).

If The Beatles' second film *Help!* (1965) represented a departure from the loveable mop-top world of *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) then *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) was something else entirely. Self-financed (through Apple Films) on a budget of £30k and shot over a period of two weeks in September 1967, *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) is the Beatles' foray into independent film making. Self-produced, financed, directed and based on an idea Paul McCartney had on a plane journey from New York to London (Black, 2004), the film represents a step into post-Brian Epstein<sup>7</sup> independence in a number of senses. Some, including the Queen of England, felt that it was a step too far for the nation's favourite male stars (Norman, 1981).

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<sup>7</sup> Beatles' publicist Tony Barrow stated: 'Epstein's death made the next thing the Beatles did absolutely crucial' (Barrow, 1987 : 5). Beatles' manager and Mentor, Brian Epstein had died on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1967. His influence as a father figure and mentor is well documented (Norman, 1981; Stark, 2005). *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) sees the Beatles free of 'parental influence'.

McCartney, having decided film making was 'not difficult' (Neaverson, 1997 : 49) came up with the idea of drawing a circle representing an hour, dividing it into segments and asking the other Beatles to throw in ideas as to what might happen. The basic plot consisted of a 'psychedelic day trip'<sup>2</sup> (Neaverson, 1997 : 47) undertaken by the Beatles and a set of actors and performers, a sort of traditional working class coach outing with a twist<sup>3</sup>. Various stops along the way filled up the segments: an airfield, an army recruitment centre, an Italian restaurant, and a Busby Berkeley musical set. This semi-comic, semi-narrative (Neaverson, 1997) also provided a structure in which to perform a series of new songs.<sup>4</sup> Later described by Dick Lester, producer of their previous films, as 'totally unprepared and half cooked' (Black, 2004 : 287), the film rolled into production on September 11<sup>th</sup> when the psychedelically decorated coach, filled with cast and production crew headed out of London for Newquay, followed by a 20 car press entourage.

## Escape

A discourse of 'escape', particularly escape from the responsibilities of masculinity, permeates *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) in a number of ways. The film represents an attempt to take artistic control of their own product following what Lennon described as the 'bullshit' (Miles, 1997 : 107) of *Help!* (1965) in which they had reportedly felt like extras in their own film (The Beatles, 2000). In its desire to put as much distance

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<sup>2</sup> The Beatles had already experimented with the double meaning of the word 'trip' on their 1966 single *Day Tripper*.

<sup>3</sup> It is suggested that McCartney was influenced by the adventures of author Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters who had taken a countercultural coach tour across the USA in 1965, stopping to see the Beatles at the Hollywood Bowl and playing *Help!* (1965) loudly through the external coach speakers. The trip is documented in Wolfe (1969).

<sup>4</sup> Music critic Charles Shaar Murray sees the US album version of *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), which added additional singles to the UK released EP, as a continuation of, or the second half of, *Sgt Pepper* (1967), containing, as it did, *Strawberry Fields Forever* (1967) and *Penny Lane* (1967) both of which were originally intended as tracks for *Pepper* (Murray, 2004).

as possible between the post-*Sgt Pepper* Beatles and the likeable mop-tops of 1964, the non-packaged nature of the film and its engagement, both musically and visually, with emergent countercultural ideas (MacDonald, 2003) and hippy ideals (Marwick, 1998) represents an attempt to 'break out of the straight jacket' (Neaverson, 1997 : 48) of previous vehicles. It is both a road movie, that most traditional of male genres,<sup>5</sup> yet it continues to create discourses around escape seen in the previous films and places representations of alternative masculinities on the global stage. The confined spaces of *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and the upwardly mobile consumerism of *Help!* (1965) are replaced by a journey from the city to the countryside. The Beatles abandon both the work ethic and the gendered narrative central to the traditional pop musical in favour of what would later be seen as an art house production<sup>6</sup>. Neaverson, (1997 : 55) states:

'Despite the lack of narrative coherence, the film enjoys an astonishing eclecticism and, like *A Hard Day's Night*, draws on a number of cinematic styles, happily jumping between, and at times combining, formal conventions from several different contemporary and historical genres.'

This escape from the formal conventions of the pop musical is important in that its radical form seems to be a deliberate act, with a rejection of logic, so that the film becomes a set of loosely associated scenes, some musical and some not, with the non-diegetic performances established by Lester in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) taken one stage further. The songs are often used solely as accompaniment to a surreal visual sequence. McCartney describes the process thus: 'we just got a lot of things

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<sup>5</sup> The film predates *Easy Rider* (1969) seen, by many, as **the** countercultural road movie (Biskind, 1999) by two years.

<sup>6</sup> McCartney has claimed that Steven Spielberg has cited the film as influential (Neaverson, 1997; The Beatles, 2000).

ready and fitted them together' (Gambaccini, 1976 : 28) but Neaverson (1997) draws comparisons with surrealist cinema, in particular Dali and Bunûel's *Un Chien andalou* (1928), citing 'the surreal iconography of the mis-en-scene' (Neaverson, 1997 : 55), including the wearing of animal suits, policemen swaying on a wall, a military officer interacting with a stuffed cow, and the displacement of cinematic conventions. This dream imagery can also be linked to the psychedelic experiences brought on by taking LSD. All of the Beatles had experimented with LSD by this point and Lennon's writing in particular had shown influences of this since the *Revolver* (1966) album<sup>7</sup>. Thus the film can also be read as an escape from reality of the everyday, a rejection of the male bread winner role outlined by Ehrenreich (1983) but also a rejection of Hefner's consumerist playboy lifestyle (a discourse at work in *Help!* [1965]) that was touted as a replacement within a capitalist framework (Ehrenreich, 1983). Instead, *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) can be seen as representing a rejection of masculinism (Brittan, 1989) and a dalliance with the counterculture, men on a creative mission fuelled by illegal substances, bringing countercultural ideas to the masses. 'Being in a band meant you had the chance of avoiding a boring job', McCartney retrospectively noted in an interview in 2004 (Wilde, 2004 : 47). Of the four films they made, *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) is the one in which the Beatles are not shown working in any shape or form. It is all about play, ideas and the possibility of something else. That 'something else' can be loosely read as an engagement with what has been termed 1960s' counterculture. According to Marwick (1988) the term was introduced by Roszak (1970 : XI) who states:

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<sup>7</sup> 'I must have had a thousand trips ... I used to eat it all the time' Lennon is quoted as saying in 1970 (Wenner, 1971 : 76). See also Chapter 1.

'The counter culture is the embryonic cultural base of New Left politics, the effort to discover new types of community, new family patterns, new sexual mores, new kinds of livelihood, new aesthetic forms, new personal identities on the far side of power politics, the bourgeois home and the protestant work ethic.'

There is much debate, beyond the scope of this article about the existence of a single counterculture (MacDonald, 1994; Marwick, 1998; Sandbrook, 2006) but Roszak's (1970) definition gives a flavour of what has come to be seen in retrospect as a number of 'movements' both political and cultural 'which contrasted with, or were critical of, the conventional values and modes of established society' (Marwick, 1998 : 12), movements which, according to Marwick (1998 : 13) 'permeated and transformed' society in the longer term, an idea interpreted by many (Martin, 1981; Marwick, 1998; Sandbrook, 2006) as success rather than failure in the context of a grand narrative. The assimilation of many elements of 1960s' countercultural activity into the mainstream, such as the emergence of political interest groups around gender, sexuality or single issues, operating outside of the constraints of the main political parties (Marwick, 2003), or the context and style of cultural products from the worlds of art, television and cinema which were to be influential in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Martin, 1981; Biskind, 1999) are examples of the way in which the idea of counterculture brought together the arena of politics and culture, a kind of logical progression from the satire movement and the golden age of TV discourse of the early 1960s, in a questioning of established values. In this sense *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), a product with the decade's key cultural icons (Evans 1984; Marwick, 1998) at the centre, can be read as a countercultural text.

## Men of Ideas

It is useful here to revisit Inglis' notion of the Beatles as 'men of ideas' (Inglis, 2000b : 1). Neaverson (1997) advances the view that by the time of *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) the Beatles had, indeed, recognised their role as 'men of ideas' (Inglis, 2000b : 1) and had begun to view themselves as 'cultural all rounders' (Neaverson, 1997 : 49). Their experimentation with the musical avant garde and an increasing interest in exploring what could be created in the studio had culminated in the release of *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) earlier that year. The cross fertilization of ideas at work in *Pepper* and Lennon and McCartney's evolving interest in the musical and artistic developments of 1966 and 1967 were probably what led to the idea of a self produced and directed film. Booker (1969) describes the emergence of an overall pop culture in the mid 1960s which transcended class, cultural and age differences. The 'men of ideas' (Inglis, 2000b : 1) had once again managed to place themselves at the centre of this emerging phenomenon and, thus there is an inevitability about *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), a step beyond what is still seen by many as the pinnacle of their work (Melly, 1970; Porterfield, 2006) and the gang, off the leash, on what some saw at the time, and many have seen since, as a foolhardy venture (Drummond, 1968; The Beatles, 2000). The fact that all four Beatles had or were on the way to branching out into other aspects of the arts at this point is significant as part of the 'ideas' discourse. Lennon's books and his appearance in Dick Lester's *How I Won the War* (1966) and McCartney's collaboration with George Martin on the sound track of the Boutling Brothers' *The Family Way* (1966) were solo projects which took the group's main songwriters into new areas. Starr's acclaimed performances in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965), particularly the former, were to lead to film roles in *Candy* (1968) and *The Magic Christian* (1969) [with Peter Sellers]. George Harrison's interest in the sitar



and his immersion in eastern spiritualism was, claims MacDonald (2003), highly influential in popularising and mainstreaming what we now know of world music and all things eastern by the early 1970s.

The six new songs written for the film, not fitting into any existing format, were released as a double EP accompanied by a 24-page colour booklet with lyrics, cartoons and pictures from the film, a multi-media object d'art, never done before. Neaverson (1997 : 54) sees this as being 'partly born of the Beatles' pioneering desire to experiment with unconventional formats', an observation that could also apply to the film itself. Inglis' (2000b :1) 'men of ideas' concept is rooted in the idea of art, creativity and left-field-ness and in this sense represents a counter-hegemonic version of masculinity (Gramsci, 1971; Connell, 1995; Hearn, 2004) which subverts the values of masculinism (Brittan, 1989).

## **Arcadia in Albion**

*Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) is both musically and visually part of the psychedelic scene that had established itself in the UK in this period (Marwick, 1998; MacDonald, 2003). Mäkelä (2004) sees psychedelia as the coming together of pastoral mythology, the notion of 'Arcadia in Albion'<sup>8</sup> and an interest in the images of childhood. MacDonald (1994 : 173) argues that the 'true subject of English psychedelia was neither love nor drugs, but nostalgia for the innocent vision of the child' and Mäkelä (2004) lists a number of UK pop songs from the period with childhood and innocence at their heart<sup>9</sup>. Campbell (1987 : 224) sees the ethos of

<sup>8</sup> A phrase more recently popularised by Pete Docherty of the Libertines (and Babyshambles) referring to a mythical ship, the Albion, (Albion is also a term used to describe England or Britain) sailing towards the legendary place of Greek mythology – Arcadia – a Utopian vision of pastoral life. The first part of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1960) is entitled *et in Arcadia ego* with reference to the idyllic lifestyle of the hero.

<sup>9</sup> These include *Simon Smith and His Amazing Dancing Bear* by Alan Price Set, *Ha Ha Said the Clown* by Manfred Mann and *My White Bicycle* by Tomorrow plus Syd Barrett's work with the Pink Floyd circa 1967.

childhood as being opposed to the 'ethos of bureaucracy', and, as such, in opposition to the principles of the adult world. In this sense it can be seen to be in an opposition to the values of masculinism (Brittan, 1989) and hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell 1995; Hearn, 2004) and part of the value base of the counterculture. The *Can't Buy Me Love* (1964) scene in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) provides an early example of The Beatles as men acting as children. In this scene they escape to the outdoors, run about in a field like four small boys, eventually being told off by a groundsman ('Sorry we hurt your field, Mister.'). Mäkelä (2004 : 115) argues that British Psychedelia is a movement 'in which the childlike world view becomes prominent.' *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) set, as it is, within the context of the counterculture, therefore can be viewed as a key text within this movement. The film itself can, therefore, be read as being in opposition to the values of masculinism (Brittan, 1989) and as a counter hegemonic text of itself. Drugs, according to Huxley (1968: 23) restore 'some of the peripheral innocence of childhood.'<sup>10</sup> The LSD influenced visuals of *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), combined with Lennon's Lewis Carroll inspired imagery within the lyrics of *I am the Walrus*, (1967) the film's visual and musical centrepiece (Neaverson, 1997), reflects Campbell's (1987: 224) 'ethos of childhood.'<sup>11</sup> In this sense *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), as well as incorporating much of this childhood vista into 'the 'texture' of the text' (Fairclough, 1995 : 184) , can be seen as a text akin to some of those which it incorporates as influences. Classic children's texts such as *Wind in the Willows* (1908), with its rural idyllic ideal as an escape from the industrialisation at work in the UK when it was written, or A.A.

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<sup>10</sup> Beatles' publicist Derek Taylor stated: 'My boyhood innocence seemed to have been returned to me by LSD. Some found only God. I also found Piglet and Pooh and Mr Toad' (Taylor, 1987 : 74). It is also worth noting that the use of ecstasy in the UK rave culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s involved much tactile activity and the wearing of children's dummies.

<sup>11</sup> Lennon's *Strawberry Fields Forever* (1967) and McCartney's *Penny Lane* (1967) were both songs about childhood recollections of Liverpool and were originally intended for inclusion on *Pepper* (1967), the original concept of which was to be a nostalgic journey into the past.

Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (1928), written following his traumatic World War One experiences, are other texts which offer an escape into rural tranquillity. These can be read as children's stories permeated with discourses of escape and ideals later returned to by the countercultural movement in the late 1960s and, similarly, T S Eliot's (1946 : 15) 'hidden laughter of children in the foliage' is an image conjured up by the 'texture' of *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967).

## **Different from that which is normal or expected : The Subversive**

### **Agenda**

MacDonald (1994 : 204) sees the film as having a subversive agenda in that it seems to be 'sending up consumerism, showbiz and the clichés of the media' through The Beatles' 'version of the counter-culture's view of mainstream society', while Neaverson (1997 : 62) describes the film as being 'charged with a deeply satirical mockery of both the establishment and 'straight' society'. As in *Help!* (1965) representations of the pillars of the establishment are in evidence; the law, the military, Christianity, sexual censorship and even the notion of working class entertainment – the coach trip itself, carnival, the pub and the club – come under fire. Neaverson (1997) sees the anti-establishment ideology of the film as complementary to its lack of traditional narrative construction and the mockery of the various institutions is achieved through a range of techniques at work in the film. The visual surrealism borrowed from the goons via Dick Lester, the realist documentary style commonly employed by 1960s' film makers such as Ken Loach, and a pastiche of traditional Hollywood styles all come together, to create a satirical take on mid-1960s' Britain. The scenes featuring Victor Spinetti as an army recruitment officer are particularly interesting. Black (2004 : 291) refers to this as 'pythonesque'. The scenes predates the *Monty Python* series by two years but use a surreal

indoor/outdoor juxtaposition of objects (for example, a desk in a field and a stuffed cow attached to a plank), in a style which would become commonplace on *Python*. Spinetti, as a recruiting sergeant barks meaningless orders, again reminiscent of *Python*, in a surreal send up of the military and the values of masculinism (Brittan, 1989) inherent in this institution. Establishment approaches to censorship and 'good' taste are also questioned. The BBC had already banned *A Day in the Life* (1967) due to perceived drug references and *I am the Walrus* (1967) on the grounds that it contained obscenities (MacDonald, 1994). Neaverson (1997 : 64) observes:

'As such it is possible that the animated 'censored' sign, which covers stripper Jan Carson's breasts in the nightclub sequence, is a slyly satirical dig at both the BBC and self righteous moral crusaders such as Mary Whitehouse.'

The film attempts, at a number of points, to represent a state of heightened awareness achieved through the use of mind expanding drugs, and this must also be considered as part of the subversive and counter-hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) agenda of the film. The film switches between psychedelic fantasy/reality (read drugged/clean of drugs) states (Neaverson, 1997), implying dull/mundane versus excitement/escape, discourses also at work in the previous two films. In the sequence which accompanies the song *Flying* (1967) images of coloured clouds are used to suggest a psychedelic 'trip', providing a contrast to the mundane banter on the actual bus trip.

'Here, the tour guide Miss Winters announces that 'if you look to your left the view is not very inspiring' (cut to short of real, and genuinely uninspiring

landscape). 'Ah but if you look to your right ...' (cut to colour-filtered clouds which herald the start of the 'flying' sequence.)

(Neaverson, 1997 : 65)

The fact that the first screening of *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) was not in an art house theatre, nor a projection on a huge canvas screen at an LSD fuelled happening in London, but in a prime time slot on the BBC on Boxing Day 1967, nestling among the usual 'square' Christmas fayre, raises a number of interesting questions about the Beatles as famous men and the Beatles as 'men of ideas' (Inglis, 2000b : 1) at this point in history. The Beatles were able to secure a prime time slot because they **were** the Beatles. However, there is some contradiction at work in their thinking that the subversive agenda of the film would be acceptable prime-time BBC viewing. A psychedelic drug tinged film shot in colour but shown in black and white generally mystified critics and viewers. Neaverson (1997 : 70) reads the event as an example of the Beatles' feeling that they, as famous men and cultural icons would somehow get away with it:

'Although their advocacy of certain ideas had brought them into considerable disrepute with sections of the public and the media, it had never harmed the critical or commercial reception of their work. As Britain's cultural royalty they had no reason to believe that *Magical Mystery Tour* would be treated any differently. If anything, wouldn't its 'anti-commercialism' paradoxically make it more popular?'

However, at this point in the 1960s, their journey from loveable mop-tops to men of ideas, with a seemingly increasingly counter-hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) and subversive agenda, meant that they were on a trajectory at odds with other male

performers of the era. Rebel to family entertainer was the usual trajectory for the male star (Savage, 1991). Elvis in the US and Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard in the UK had all followed this route. The Beatles, on the other were taking the opposite route. Lennon's 'Bigger than Jesus' controversy can be seen as a key point along this trajectory and the critical slating given to *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) coming soon after the Beatles' admission that they had tried LSD<sup>12</sup> (The Beatles, 2000) can be seen as another. Writing for *The New Musical Express* in January 1968, Norrie Drummond stated:

'It had to happen of course! The British National Press, which for the past four years had supported them, had now turned against the Beatles by viciously attacking their film 'Magical Mystery Tour'. Almost to a man, the TV critics of the daily papers declared it a mighty flop.'

(Drummond, 1968 : 3)

The papers found the film baffling, bemusing or like the Daily Express, just 'Blatant rubbish' (Drummond, 1968 : 3). A debate ensued during which the newspapers generally chose to interpret experimental as amateur while McCartney attempted to explain the concept (The Beatles, 2000). The satirical and subversive nature of the film and its representation of its male heroes in a context of anti-masculinism (Brittan, 1989) were not topics that made the debate in early 1968. A retrospective viewing of the film actually reveals it to be a fairly radical piece of cinema. Neaverson (1997 : 76) detects a 'moral revenge' in the critical reaction of the establishment press. The fact that the Beatles looked stoned and the way that they looked generally, in terms of visual appearance in *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), as if the coach had ramraided

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Brian Epstein's admission that he had also taken the drug took the controversy to new heights, including a discussion in the House of Commons (Neaverson, 1997).

*Granny Takes a Trip*<sup>13</sup>, is also part of the anti-hegemonic agenda (Gramsci, 1971) and, again, provides an alternative representation of masculinity to that of the hegemonic variety (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1995; Hearn, 2004).

‘... just as elements of the narrative mirror the group’s newly acquired taste for the counter-culture, so too does the nature of the Beatles’ filmic image, as expounded by their costume, behaviour, performance and songs’

(Neaverson, 1997 : 66)

In June 1967 the Beatles had been seen, along with famous friends and acquaintances, bedecked in bells, flowers, kaftans and beards, performing *All You Need is Love* (1967) for a global TV audience. *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) sees the Beatles continue in this visual vein in floral shirts, hats, kaftans, tank-tops, flares and even animal costumes. ‘The Beatles are turning awfully funny, aren’t they’, the Queen is reported as saying (Norman, 1981 : 306). It is a long way from the dressed-by-Brian<sup>14</sup> homoerotic boyish look of *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964). The fact that they do not appear as themselves (the famous men, ‘The Beatles’), but rather in a number of ‘roles’ throughout the film, allows for various presentations of self (Goffman, 1967). Neaverson (1997 : 69) argues that they manage to ‘amalgamate elements of hippy drug culture, eastern philosophy and underground satire into a single self image’ drawing on ‘the fashions of different youth sub-cultures’. For example, the costumes in the *I am the Walrus* (1967) sequence combine day-glo, psychedelic and Indian styles while in the *Fool on the Hill* (1967) sequence McCartney is seen wearing a navy style greatcoat which would become staple wear

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<sup>13</sup> *Granny Takes a Trip* was one of several shops which appeared in London in the mid 1960s selling a mixture of clothing and Victorian artefacts (Melly, 1970).

<sup>14</sup> Epstein also abandoned his trademark Saville Row suits for floral patterned shirts at this point.

for teenage boys in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At various points in the film they appear dressed as wizards, camping it up above the clouds 'orchestrating things' just as MacDonald (2003 : 87) suggests. Hats and moustaches, sideboards and glasses (what has been termed here 'facial ornamentation') are also much in evidence. The bright colours and mixing of styles, plus the camp behaviour in the 'wizard' sections of the film, can be seen as taking the arguments about the 'feminized' look in the chapter on *Help!* (1965) to another level. Many of the items worn in the film were already available on the High Street. MacDonald's (2003 : 87) point about the Beatles being 'above and beyond the ordinary world' at the centre of things, famous men being looked at by other men, is relevant here. Their attire in *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), taken together with the silk military outfits worn on the cover of *Pepper* (1967), and in the promo film for *Hello Goodbye* (1967), represent the high water mark (Thompson, 1972)<sup>15</sup> of men's 'feminized' clothing in the 1960s and also act as signs (Hebdidge, 1978) of the subversive anti masculinist (Brittan, 1989) agenda at work in the film.

## **Painting the Car and the Granny Glasses**

Mäkelä (2004 : 172) sees these 'lurid costumes' as linked to another 1967 Beatles artefact; Lennon's Rolls-Royce Phantom V which Mäkelä (2004 : 120) reads as 'an extraordinary work of art'. In early 1967 Lennon had the car repainted in bright yellow with accompanying designs, including flowers and zodiac signs, in reds, blues, greens, turquoises and gold. Described by publicist Derek Taylor as a 'cross between a psychedelic nightmare and an autumn garden on wheels' (Taylor, 1987 : 149), the car caused much comment in the press partly because it provided a perfect

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<sup>15</sup> In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) Hunter S Thompson argues that there is a point in the 1960s – a high water mark – after which things – politically, culturally and artistically – begin to roll back, and to return to less radical forms of expression.



complement to the Beatles' changing visual appearance at this point and to the exciting changes in visual media as TV moved from black and white to colour (Parsons, 2001; Sandbrook, 2006). The bus on which the mystery tour takes place in the film is also painted in psychedelic designs. More significantly, the Rolls-Royce, vehicle of choice of Sir Alan Sugar and other successful masculinists (Brittan, 1989), as already noted, is, according to Mäkelä (2004 : 126) a 'heavily coded artefact'. Its connotations of business, success and affluence, it can be argued, were subverted by painting it in the signs and symbols of the counterculture and as such, subverted its role as a symbol of hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1995; Hearn, 2004). Mäkelä (2004 : 128) sees the film itself as another 'painting the car project' in that similar subversive discourses and the mocking of 'normal' 'straight' society and conventions, particularly with reference to symbols of masculinity, are at work in both projects.

## **Conclusion**

Discourses of independence and escape permeate *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), both in the sense of it being a post-Epstein-as-father-figure, self-financed product and its construction around the idea of a coach trip, a traditional working class activity, which provides a playful contrast to the world of work. In addition to its countercultural credentials the film still draws on discourses at work in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and the Northern kitchen-sink dramas which were its contemporaries. The 'escape' discourse in *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) has as much in common with Albert Finney's escape from the drudge of work in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) by dressing up and going to the pub or Tom Courtenay in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) with its inside (bad)/outside (good)

binary (Petersen, 1998), as it does with *Easy Rider* (1969) and other countercultural texts. Having said that, the film has significant countercultural credentials, a text which MacDonald (1994 : 33) claims reflects 'the countercultural revolt against acquisitive selfishness and ... the hippies' unfashionable perception that we can change the world only by changing ourselves.' It is a text through which the public at large, through the Beatles popularity, were exposed to some of these ideas and the fact that this was disturbing or unacceptable to the 'mainstream' accounts for some of its critical failure.

The subversive agenda at work in the film, reflected through its style, production, visual appearance and the use of certain artefacts, and its status as a 'painting the car project' (Mäkelä, 2004 : 128) make it a text which is resistant to mainstream values and ideas. The Beatles once again appear as 'men of ideas' (Inglis, 2000b : 1) and one of the ideas in the film is to challenge masculinism (Brittan, 1989) containing, as it does, The Beatles, in terms of hair and dress, challenging the traditional masculine appearance, taking gender tourism (Reynolds and Ross, 1996) one step further in a semi-narrative steeped in countercultural and counter hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971; Carrigan et al, 1986; Connell, 1995; Hearn, 2004) discourses. *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), perhaps, provides an example of the way in which Fairclough's (1995 : 184) notion of reading 'the 'texture' of the text' and van Dijk's (1993) ideas about the way in which discourses are produced within texts, through a combination of setting, genre, topics, speech acts, participant positions, power relations and social meaning, come together to provide a holistic framework for analysis. The resultant conclusion is that the whole text can be read through 'the play of its internal relationships' (Foucault, 1984 : 103), as a representation of a particular set of values through the interaction of a number of different components

within the text and, thus, the texture of the *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) text produces a counter hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) 'anti constitutional' (Neaversen, 1997 : 111) and anti masculinist (Brittan, 1989) statement.

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