

# The Beatles Movies

Bob Neaverson



CASSELL

London and Washington

## Notes

1. See, for example, Hertsgaard, 1995, p. 106. Here the author describes the LP as the 'nadir of the group's recording efforts'.
2. Walker, 1986, p. 267.
3. Alun Owen interviewed in *Film Dope*, June 1993, p. 5.
4. Barrow, 1993a, p. 11.
5. Miles, 1978, p. 107.
6. Dick Lester, interviewed by author, 26 March 1996.
7. Joe McGrath, interviewed by author, 13 February 1996.
8. Dick Lester, interviewed by author.
9. Joe McGrath, interviewed by author.
10. Dick Lester, interviewed by author.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. The Beatles' introduction to marijuana by Dylan is well documented in a number of sources. A detailed account can be found in Brown and Gaines, 1984, pp. 134–6.
16. Dick Lester, interviewed by author.
17. *Hollywood UK* (BBC, 1993).
18. Wenner, 1973, p. 20.
19. *Hollywood UK* (BBC, 1993).
20. *The Paul McCartney World Tour*, tour brochure, 1989, p. 47.
21. For example, see Brown and Gaines, 1984, pp. 147–8.
22. *The Paul McCartney World Tour*, 1989, p. 47.
23. *You Can't Do That: the Making of A Hard Day's Night* (VCI, 1994).
24. Dick Lester, interviewed by author.
25. Ibid.
26. Sheff, 1982, p. 150.
27. See, for example, Kozinn, 1995, p. 110.
28. Hertsgaard, 1995, p. 124.
29. Sheff, 1982, p. 149.
30. MacDonald, 1994, p. 114.
31. Ann Pacey, 'Beatles You Put Me in a Flat Spin', *Sun*, 28 July 1965.
32. See, for example, Nina Hibbin, 'Come What May, You Cannot Crush a Beatle', *Daily Worker*, 7 July 1964. Here, Hibbin describes Ringo as the 'real comic of the quartet'.
33. Dick Lester, interviewed by author.
34. Starr, interviewed on *Aspel* (LWT, 1988).
35. Dilys Powell, 'Beatlage and Goonery', *Sunday Times*, 1 August 1965, and Clive Barnes, 'Marvellous – the Beatles' New Film', *Daily Express*, 28 July 1965. Powell maintains that the film is 'more successful in finding a visual equivalent to the verbal jungle of the Goons than such early TV attempts as *The Fred Show*'.
36. Nina Hibbin, *Daily Worker*, 31 July 1965.
37. Cecil Wilson, *Daily Mail*, 28 July 1965.
38. Walker, 1986, p. 270.
39. Victor Spinetti, interviewed by author, 29 April 1996.
40. Hertsgaard, 1995, pp. 130–1.
41. Figure supplied by Beatles discographer, Neville Stannard.
42. Dick Lester, interviewed by author.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Somach, Somach and Muni, 1990, p. 133.
46. Ibid.
47. Lahr, 1980, p. 296.
48. Ibid., p. 311.

## On the Road Again: Magical Mystery Tour

The Beatles' next major movie project, the television film *Magical Mystery Tour*, began some two years after *Help!* and, unlike their previous productions, was self-produced, financed and directed. The concept of the film was initially proposed by Paul McCartney, who envisaged a semi-improvised fantasy musical in which the group's most recent batch of soundtrack recordings would be sandwiched in a loose semi-comic and surreal narrative 'plot'. This 'plot', such as it was, consisted of a psychedelic day trip in which the Beatles, accompanied by a group of professional actors and performers, friends and fan club members travelled through unspecified parts of England in a multi-coloured bus, visiting such locations as an army recruitment centre, an Italian restaurant, and a Busby Berkeley-style musical set.

Although the idea was conceived by McCartney, the entire group was responsible for the 'story' of the film and, while much of the dialogue was improvised, the project was actually directed by all four Beatles, with Ringo Starr additionally credited as director of photography. Overseen by Apple Films' head Denis O'Dell, the film was produced for around £30,000<sup>1</sup> (over a two-week period) and released through Apple Films, a division of the group's emerging Apple business empire.

I have already discussed the economic and cultural reasons why film was (and still is) important to pop groups from a wider and more all-embracing economic perspective, but why should a group, with no previous experience of film-making (and with unlimited resources for hiring professional producers and directors), decide to write, direct and produce their own film? None of the Beatles has actually discussed reasons for such involvement in any depth, so one can only speculate as to how they became so deeply embroiled in the project. However, it is arguable that the group's interest in film-making at this point in their career was the result of both personal and wider, cultural factors.

From a personal perspective, they were rather unhappy with their previous film, *Help!*, and felt that their early 'loveable mop-top' image had been over-exploited in both their previous vehicles. Referring to *Help!* and *A Hard Day's Night*, Lennon commented, 'We were a bit infuriated with the glibness and shiftiness of the dialogue [of *A Hard Day's Night*] and we were always trying to get it more realistic, but they wouldn't have it. It ended up OK, but the next one [*Help!*] was just bullshit because it really had nothing to do with the Beatles. They just put us here and there.'<sup>2</sup> He also said that the group 'felt like extras'<sup>3</sup> in their own film. By making their own film, the group may have felt that they would be retaining total artistic control over their product.

Lennon's dismissal of their early films suggests that he and the other members of the group felt that they did not have enough personal control over their image and artistic output. Moreover, their 1967 embrace of hippy counter-culture (using and, in McCartney's case publicly endorsing LSD,<sup>4</sup> supporting the underground press,<sup>5</sup> and taking classes in transcendental meditation<sup>6</sup>) seems to have been a reaction against five long years of being 'packaged' into a highly manufactured act which, while musically liberated, was heavily contrived (the identically besuited 'boy next door' image), politically censored (Epstein did not allow the group to discuss Vietnam publicly<sup>7</sup>), and domestically lionized (Harold Wilson's 1965 award to the group of the MBE). For the Beatles, the exploration of alternative lifestyles may have offered the attraction of an individualism and personal freedom paradoxically necessary to regain some semblance of sanity. The 'hippy' ideal distrusted the 'manufacturing' of mainstream pop culture and placed individualism, however ironically, high on its agenda, and the group's involvement with the movement could well have exaggerated their distrust of such promotional methods and accentuated their interest in self-production. Indeed, for all its potential hazards, self-production and direction provided the group with a golden opportunity to break out of the straitjacket of externally imposed media presentation, a presentation which, by 1965 and the release of *Help!*, had become basically repugnant to them.

Moreover, their supreme self-confidence in their ability to adapt to and master other media was, in 1967, at least theoretically justifiable within both their own biographical track record and, on a broader level, within the cultural and artistic climate of the period. Besides being the

world's most successful contemporary songwriters and musicians, the Beatles justifiably saw themselves as cultural all-rounders, capable of mastering any medium which they felt inclined to dabble in. Quite apart from their music, each member had received considerable commercial and/or critical success for ventures undertaken outside the confines of the group itself. Lennon, for example, had published two best-selling books, while McCartney had provided the score for the Boulttings' feature film *The Family Way* (1966). Meanwhile, Starr, keen to develop his acting career, had in August 1967 been offered a part in United Artists' new production, *Candy* (1968), a role which he accepted later in the year. He would later co-star with Peter Sellers in the dramatization of Terry Southern's novel, *The Magic Christian* (1969), in a role which, according to director Joe McGrath, was originally envisaged for Lennon.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile Harrison had developed a profound interest in Indian music, and was busy mastering the sitar (an instrument which he brought into much of the Beatles' material from 1965) under the guidance of his musical guru, Ravi Shankar.

On a more conventionally musical level, the group were also achieving levels of commercial and critical success that, even in the early days of 'Beatlemania', they could not possibly have envisaged. Their most recent album release, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (released in Britain on 1 June 1967), as well as being instantly heralded in all sectors of the media as a major artistic breakthrough in pop music's brief history, was also one of their biggest commercial successes to date.<sup>9</sup> With such multimedia success, it is hardly surprising that the group felt that a move into film-making would pose no serious problem. As McCartney somewhat naively stated before the completion of the show, 'Film-making isn't as difficult as many people imagine. It's a matter of common sense more than anything.'<sup>10</sup>

On a broader level, the Beatles' film-making venture could also have been influenced by the current climate of cross-fertilization and synergy which was taking place in pop art culture on a vast scale during the mid to late sixties, particularly in the avant-garde or 'intellectual' circles in which the Beatles, and particularly McCartney, mixed whilst living in St. John's Wood during this period. More than any previous period in British culture, the arts, and specifically the musical and visual arts, had become a fluid melting pot of inter-relationships, with each discipline influencing and affecting the others. While groups such as The Who

absorbed the auto-destructive manifestos of Dadaism,<sup>11</sup> artists like Peter Blake borrowed from the imagery of youth culture, imbuing his work with iconography derived from fashion magazines and rock and roll memorabilia. Moreover, although the pop movement had no strict manifesto, its underlying ideology of instantaneous gratification, hedonism, industrial banality, youth culture and populism meant that artists such as Blake, Alan Aldridge and Richard Hamilton could comfortably cross over into other areas of design. Aldridge became art editor for Penguin Books in 1966, while Blake and Hamilton were involved in designing album covers for the Beatles in 1967 and 1968.<sup>12</sup> Other fine artists became even more experimental in the expansion of their media, and 'painters' such as Warhol (who visited McCartney circa 1966<sup>13</sup>) also worked in lithography, photography and film direction. While it is difficult to speculate upon the degree to which the contemporary cultural climate influenced the Beatles' move into filmmaking, it is clearly possible that the cross-fertilization in visual pop influenced their artistic sensibility.

Indeed, in many ways it is tempting to see their previous album release, *Sergeant Pepper*, as the epitome of such inter-disciplinary cross-fertilization, the 'product' itself comprising elements of music ('concept' songs by the Beatles), Blake's cover (which in its grandiose affluence, stylish montage and revolutionary 'gatefold' format self-consciously presented itself as 'art'), and literature (the printed lyrics of the songs, a first for a pop album, radically insisting that song lyrics should be considered as poetry). *Sergeant Pepper*'s release and enormous popularity crystallized the gradual shift in mainstream perceptions of pop music as a 'low' art, and ultimately elevated its cultural status to an intellectual level previously occupied by 'high' art such as theatre, literature and the fine arts. And if pop was now 'art', paradoxically art was now 'pop'. For the first time in pop music's brief history, it was embraced by intellectual and middle-class culture, and the avant-garde, a term paradoxically described by Lennon as being 'French for bullshit',<sup>14</sup> had become inextricably and harmoniously linked with popular teenage culture.

This cross-fertilization and popularization of the avant-garde or 'intellectual' arts (also mirrored by the heightened critical status of other media such as cinema and photography) was embraced by audiences and media alike, bridging cultural and generational differences and creating an overall pop culture which was both populist and avant-

garde, elitist and classless, intellectual and anti-intellectual. Within a few short years, approaches and attitudes to culture had changed beyond all recognition. In his analysis of sixties culture, Christopher Booker discusses this aesthetic shift:

[In 1956] there would have seemed an unbridgeable gulf between the concerns of, say, the teenagers jiving to Tommy Steele in the basement of the Two I's coffee bar and those of the audiences for Ionesco at the Royal Court Theatre. Now, in 1964, the coalescence of one form of fantasy with another to make up a sort of overall 'pop culture', was taking place so fast that, within a year or two, no-one would be surprised to see the pages of the 'quality' press regularly taken up with the rapturous reviews of the latest pop records, or prominent pop singers being starred in plays or films by directors of impeccable 'intellectual' credentials, such as Peter Hall or Jean Luc Godard – any more than they would be surprised to see Paul McCartney advertised as spending his leisure hours with the latest electronic fragment from the pen of Stockhausen.<sup>15</sup>

When in 1966 *Time* magazine boasted that London was fast becoming the most exciting city of the decade,<sup>16</sup> the exaggeration, for all its sensationalism and pretension, did not, at least on a cultural level, seem too jarring. The fusion of media, the synergy of styles and the spirit of youthful collaboration between artists from a vast array of disciplines and cultures meant that, at least for a brief period, the once risible idea of a 'swinging' London actually became a reality, and British pop culture, via the synergized commercial success of its musicians, designers, artists and photographers, became a highly exportable international phenomenon.

It is also possible that the group's decision to move into self-production and direction was based on a desire to counter the media's presumption that, with Epstein's death (on 27 August 1967), the Beatles, a product of his management, were also finished. Indeed, as Tony Barrow concedes, 'Epstein's death made the next thing the Beatles did absolutely crucial. The showbusiness world was watching to see how the group would handle itself without the personal management of their long-term mate and mentor, Brian Epstein.'<sup>17</sup> The Beatles' decision to become so heavily involved in a project which was (for them) experimental may

have been influenced by a need to prove their doubters wrong in grand style, showing them that not only could they still produce successful music, they could also still turn their hand to any medium they chose. Although McCartney's initial ideas for the film's concept (which dated back to April 1967) had been discussed with and approved by Epstein before his death, it is not known whether the manager had approved of the idea of the Beatles as film directors. However, the fact that they decided to progress with the project so swiftly after his death gives rise to speculation that the group wished to allay popular doubts about their abilities as soon as possible.

The Beatles' mystery tour embarked on the first leg of the two-week shoot on 11 September 1967, heading for various locations in Hampshire, Devon, Cornwall and Somerset. Along with the cast members, the coach contained a skeleton crew of film technicians and of course the Beatles themselves, who remained on board throughout the first week of the 'tour'. After the first week of 'tour' shooting, filming continued at Paul Raymond's Revuebar in Soho and then switched to a disused hangar at West Malling Air Station which, in the absence of available studio space, served as a makeshift replacement for the sequences which required conventional sets. Here a number of notable sequences were shot, including the famous 'Walrus' sequence and the memorable sergeant-major scene featuring the Beatles' closest actor friend, Victor Spinetti, who was unable to take a bigger role in the film due to other acting commitments. As he remembers, 'I'd have loved to have gone on the whole trip, but I couldn't, and that was that. So John said, "Well, look, why don't you do that thing you do in *Oh! What a Lovely War*", the drill sergeant sketch which I did in that show, so I just reinvented it for the film.'<sup>18</sup>

Despite the alluring premise of keeping the project relatively small-scale, the smooth running of the shooting was hampered from the start by a number of technical and logistical problems. Convoys of news-hungry journalists pursued the coach relentlessly, and at one point it became stuck under a narrow bridge on a B road towards Dartmoor, resulting in huge tailbacks and flaring tempers. 'Fifth Beatle' Neil Aspinall encountered difficulties organizing the en-route accommodation, and there were also problems with the technicians union. Later, at West Malling, hearts dropped when, at around four o'clock on the last day of principal photography (24 September), the

generators failed just as the cameras were to start rolling on the film's most complex and elaborate set piece, McCartney's 'Your Mother Should Know', causing delays while help was summoned by Denis O'Dell's assistant, Gavrik Losey. In the interim, Losey was mobbed when attempting to distribute signed photos to the 200 extras outside. Wherever they went, the Beatles were followed by hysterical fans. As Losey remembers, 'We were staying in a little hotel outside West Malling and the crowd that came pushed in the front window of the hotel... That level of adoration is just amazing to be around.'<sup>19</sup>

With principal shooting completed, the Beatles returned to London to begin working (under the supervision of Roy Benson) on the film's editing and to complete work on the soundtrack songs which they had begun before the start of shooting. Again there were problems. The editing took eleven weeks to complete (apparently because the group could never agree on the cutting<sup>20</sup>), and there were problems over how to present the songs which comprised the film's soundtrack. Although the previous Beatles film soundtracks had been issued on LPs with a second side of non-film songs, their stock of unreleased recordings had effectively run dry. Without the time to work on new material to make up a release of LP duration, they were left with the awkward problem of finding a solution for marketing the six recordings, which failed to fit into any recognized format.

After some discussion it was decided that the format of the record was to be a 'first' for the record industry, a double EP package encased in a twenty-four-page glossy booklet which contained the lyrics of the songs, stills from the film and a psychedelic cartoon strip (complete with captions) of the film's 'story'. The booklet was produced in association with the Beatles' official fan club, and carried an advertisement for both the club and its official monthly magazine, the *Beatles Monthly Book*, which had been running since 1963. While the accompanying booklet was in itself advertising for other Beatles-related merchandise for the unconverted who were not fan-club members, it also served another, more subtle 'reassuring' function for the 58,000 subscribers. With a booklet containing illustrations executed in a recognizably similar style to the black-and-white illustrations used to adorn the pages of the official fan club magazine, those who subscribed could feel reassured that their chosen publication was officially endorsed by the Beatles. The degree to which the format of the EP package was shaped solely by

necessity is unknown. While it certainly solved the song quota problem, one suspects that it was also partly born of the Beatles' pioneering desire to experiment with conventional formats and packaging. Interestingly, although *Magical Mystery Tour* was never broadcast in America, the songs from the film did appear in LP format (also titled *Magical Mystery Tour*), augmented by five other recordings from the year which had already been issued as singles. This policy was not followed in Britain because it was considered exploitative to issue an album that was comprised of too many singles, and of the twenty-two singles released in Britain between 1962 and 1970 only about half contained music (from A or B side) pilfered from albums.

The EP was also artistically unprecedented for the group in that it was their first and only record to contain an instrumental number, 'Flying', which also became the only song to be co-written by all four members of the group. The other songs to be issued on the discs were 'Magical Mystery Tour', 'Blue Jay Way', 'I Am the Walrus', 'Your Mother Should Know' and 'The Fool on the Hill'. The record was eventually released on 8 December 1967 at a price of 19s 6d.<sup>21</sup>

With the benefit of almost thirty years' hindsight, the most striking formal aspect of *Magical Mystery Tour* is its radical lack of any remotely classical narrative structure. Indeed, if Lester's first film managed to provide a far looser and wayward narrative construction than previous pop musicals, *Magical Mystery Tour* takes this development one stage further, and marks a departure from constructed, classical narrative coherence, opting instead for a discourse which, for the most part, rejects conventional principles of logic and motivation. Indeed, the 'narrative' consists merely of a series of musical sequences intertwined with 'psychedelic' sequences which take place either on the coach or at various unspecified ports of call during the journey. There are no goal-oriented protagonists, there is no logically motivated cause-effect chain and, once the initial premise has been established (that we are going on a magical mystery tour), there is no attempt at any form of narrative resolution. Indeed, the 'resolution' merely consists of an 'unmotivated' cut from the interior of a strip club to a Busby Berkeley-style set where we see the group (dressed in white tuxedos and surrounded by dancers) performing a loosely choreographed dance to 'Your Mother Should Know'. Before 1967, such a sustained break with narrative logic and causality had not been

attempted by the pop musical, and even now the formal style of *Magical Mystery Tour* seems quite radical. However, although much has been made of the group's lack of technical film-making expertise,<sup>22</sup> the film's radical form was clearly deliberate. The idea was that each member of the group should write unscripted sequences loosely related to the thematic premise of a fantasy coach trip (which could then be spontaneously improvised by whoever was acting in or directing the scene), and assembled, rather like a Dadaist collage, at the editing stage.<sup>23</sup> As McCartney maintained, 'We just got a lot of things ready and fitted them together.'<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as he explained some years later, 'I did a few little sketches myself and everyone else thought up a couple of little things. John thought of a little thing and George thought of a scene and we just kind of built it up.'<sup>25</sup>

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. Despite their lack of practical film-making experience, the group were clearly not cinematically illiterate, as the sheer eclecticism of the film's style testifies. Perhaps the most obvious influence is that of surrealist cinema; and while surrealism had played an important part in the group's previous films, with *Magical Mystery Tour* it became far more pronounced and all-embracing. Besides the lack of narrative coherence, the film boasts many sequences which demonstrate a distinctly surreal influence. Indeed, in its affection for surreal imagery, one could easily argue that *Magical Mystery Tour* is visually closer in spirit to Dali and Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* (1928) than to any previous pop musical. Besides the surreal iconography of the mise-en-scene (the swaying policemen on the wall, the Beatles' unmotivated changes into animals, the sergeant shouting gibberish orders to a stuffed cow), there are sequences which seem heavily influenced by Dali and Buñuel's films, and just as their collaborations displace conventional ideas of cinematic space and perspective, so too does *Magical Mystery Tour*. Such is the case when Lennon and Harrison, accompanied by a number of their entourage, walk into a two-man tent only to find themselves in a cinema. Despite the difference of location, the scene bears a significant resemblance to a sequence in *Un chien andalou* in which the 'heroine', retreating from her lover, exits a suburban house to

find herself on a beach. The film also makes constant use of the non-diegetic insert, and at various irregular intervals in the action we are greeted by a conventionally unmotivated shot of a cheering and waving crowd. While this formal trait can hardly be said to be 'surrealist' in its formal origins, it is employed with all the gratuitous anti-logic of a surrealist production, its effect further disengaging the viewer from any sense of conventional causality.

However, the film's affinity with surrealist dream imagery and narrative motivation is perhaps unsurprising when one considers two important factors. First, and perhaps most importantly, the Beatles had, as I noted earlier, become involved in mind-expanding drug culture. The aesthetics of psychedelia (to recreate visually or musically the effects of mind-expanding drugs) are closely related to those of surrealism, which recreates experiences unbound from the enslavement of reason. In 1967, no discernible genre of 'psychedelic' cinema existed, and it is natural that a group seeking to make a psychedelic film should turn to surrealist iconography for their inspiration. Moreover, while this is not to suggest that the film is not genuinely inspired or motivated by the 'psychedelic' aesthetic (as Lennon maintained in 1970, 'I must have had a thousand trips ... I used to just eat it [LSD] all the time'<sup>26</sup>), the relationship between psychedelia and surrealism became, at least for the Beatles, inseparable. As Lennon once commented, 'Surrealism had a great effect on me ... psychedelic vision is reality to me.'<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Lennon was particularly impressed by the surrealist films of Buñuel, and Victor Spinetti accompanied him to screenings of *Belle de Jour* (1967).<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is clearly possible that the group's writing technique of randomly joining sections of unrelated narrative events is partly derived from André Breton and Paul Eluard's writing game, 'The Exquisite Corpse', which randomly linked non-related or loosely related group writing to produce surrealist narrative. A similar random technique was partly employed to enlist the professional actors used in the production. The group selected cast members by flicking through the pages of the actors' directory 'Spotlight', and employed them on the strength of looks rather than any reasoned investigation of ability or track record. On a non-textual level, it is also interesting to note that the insignia for Apple, the Beatles' production company, was also inspired by surrealist art, namely a Magritte painting brought to McCartney's house by gallery owner Robert Fraser around 1966.

The writing and recording techniques employed for the more psychedelic songs on the film's soundtrack also owe a debt to surrealist and Dadaist form, and this is particularly apparent in the film's most lavish production, Lennon's 'I Am the Walrus'. Indeed, while the form of Lennon's lyric is clearly indebted to the unconscious nonsense poetry and 'automatic' writing style of the surrealists, the recording techniques are clearly derived from the Dadaist chance aesthetic. Just as artists such as Jean Arp produced paintings such as *Squares Arranged by Chance* (1917) by throwing pieces of paper in the air and glueing them to their landing spot, so George Martin's pioneering production work applied similar techniques: whilst recording the earlier *Sergeant Pepper* LP, the producer had created an atmospheric soundwash for the backing track of 'Being For the Benefit of Mr Kite' by cutting up tapes from the sound stock library of EMI and sticking them randomly back together. Although not constructed in exactly the same manner, the recording of parts of 'I Am the Walrus' was created with a similar 'chance' aesthetic, and amongst its many backing effects the song features radio interference and excerpts from a BBC radio production of *King Lear*, found on the radio tuning dial by Lennon during the song's re-mix and randomly fed into the backing track.

Finally, it is possible that the surrealist/psychedelic aesthetic also had a considerable impact upon the presentation of the group's songs in the musical sequences. Prior to the film's conception, the majority of British and American pop musicals had, as we have noted, relied upon the long-established tradition of presenting musical numbers as authentic performances. While the first pop musical to break the conventions of the performance-based tradition was arguably the Beatles' own *A Hard Day's Night*, *Magical Mystery Tour* can lay claim to being one of the first pop musicals to feature a soundtrack which almost completely negated the idea of 'realistic' performance.

Indeed, apart from the humorous 'Walrus' sequence, which I will discuss later, few of the other musical sequences make the remotest attempt to simulate a conventionally 'realistic' diegetic group or vocal performance, with the remaining songs often acting as a non-diegetic soundtrack to accompany the surreal action. 'Flying', for example, does not feature any of the Beatles at all, and the sequence for 'Fool on the Hill' is accompanied by footage of McCartney walking around the French countryside, intercut with occasional close-ups of his eyes

peering deeply into the camera. Even when there is some conformity to the performance aesthetic (as in the 'I Am the Walrus' and 'Blue Jay Way' sequences), there is only the slightest attempt to realistically lip-sync the songs, as if the vocalists are actually parodying the artificiality of classical miming.

While this is clearly in line with the surrealist aesthetic, it may also be related to the group's volatile relationship with the BBC, the channel on which the film was screened. Apart from banning 'A Day in the Life' earlier in 1967, the organization had vetoed the McCartney-directed promo film for their single 'Hello, Goodbye' from its weekly chart show, *Top of the Pops*, on the grounds that it showed the group lip-synching to a backing track, and therefore contravened the Musicians' Union miming rule (implemented in 1966) and which ruled that non-conceptual television appearances should be 'live'. Although the clip clearly showed the Beatles lip-synching, the group subsequently made every effort to comply with the BBC and, on 21 November 1967, allowed them to shoot some footage of the group editing *Magical Mystery Tour* on the understanding that this, along with some stills provided by NEMS, could then be edited into the clip to cover the most obviously lip-synched segments. However, claiming that there had been too little time to edit the 'new' clip together, the BBC annoyed the Beatles by using footage from *A Hard Day's Night* to accompany the clip on its first transmission (23 November), and subsequently employing a combination of the stills/editing footage without any of the performance material.<sup>29</sup> As a television film, *Magical Mystery Tour* was not subject to the same regulations, and it is possible that the exaggerated lack of sound/vision synchronization was a satirical parody of such bureaucratic pettiness.

However, we should not ignore the possible influence of more contemporary forms of surrealism on *Magical Mystery Tour*. Although, as I have suggested, it is most likely that the group's interest in surrealism was born largely from a direct interest in integrating elements of its 'pure', 'first generation' form, the Beatles, like any other artists, did not work in a cultural or historical void. While it would perhaps be an overstatement to suggest that the sixties heralded a surrealist revival, the aesthetic of anti-logic had become increasingly pervasive in radio and television comedy since the fifties, and the emergence of the *Goon Shows*. As I noted earlier, the Beatles were great fans of the surreal and anarchic humour of the Goons, and particularly

Lester's own collaboration with them on the silent movie parody, *The Running, Jumping and Standing Still Film*. Like *Magical Mystery Tour*, *The Running, Jumping and Standing Still Film* has its roots in surrealism, and frequently integrates its aesthetic into visual humour. As Alexander Walker maintains, it is littered with 'surrealist gags like the scrubbing brush used on the grass, the inverted logic of racing round a stationary phonograph disc with a needle, the ramshackle nationalism of the box-kite decorated with Union Jacks as Britain's entry to the space race, and the famous subversive booby-trap that beckons a distant figure nearer and nearer till he is within reach of the boxing glove on the hand outside the frame'.<sup>30</sup> *Magical Mystery Tour* shares a similar interest in visual surrealist humour, and it is certainly possible that such throwaway jokes as the photographer's mutation into a lion were influenced by the Goons' idiosyncratic employment of its form.

Despite the clear influence of surrealism and Dada, the film also includes a number of scenes which are formally derived from more conventional genres, and there are sequences which demonstrate a tendency toward the direct cinema/realist tradition. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in the sequence which directly follows the 'I Am the Walrus' number, in which Lennon and Harrison, shot by hand-held camera, are seen blowing up a balloon for a little girl to play with. This tendency towards capturing seemingly unscripted and improvised action, together with the group's deliberate employment of a partly non-professional cast, could have been influenced by a number of loosely realist approaches which came to prominence in a variety of contemporary British and American productions. Indeed, while their own film debut had employed certain pseudo-realistic techniques, contemporary directors such as Ken Loach were also incorporating realist methods (use of non-actors and improvised script) into film and television dramas such as *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and *Poor Cow* (1967). Another possible influence could have come from D. A. Pennebaker's presentation of Bob Dylan's 1965 British tour, *Don't Look Back* (1966). Apart from the Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan was, throughout most of the sixties, the Beatles' only serious commercial rival, and as personal friends they would have watched his presentation with great interest. So it is clearly possible that the grainy, instantaneous qualities of Pennebaker's direct cinema also influenced the more objective 'fly-on-the-wall' sequences of *Magical Mystery Tour*.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Beatles, like many, took advantage of contemporary technological innovation, and were avid home-movie makers. They took home-movie making very seriously, considering it to be an 'art' comparable with any other, McCartney even arranging a screening of his films for Antonioni whilst he was in London to shoot *Blow-up* (1966). As Joe McGrath remembers, Lennon was also a great home-movie enthusiast, carrying a small 8mm camera with him wherever he went with the progressive and (as it has since transpired) somewhat prophetic philosophy that 'there will come a time when you will be able to use a film camera like a biro. You take it out, you use it and then you put it away again'.<sup>31</sup> It is perfectly possible that the group wanted to include home-movie-style footage in the film to elevate (what they considered to be) its artistic credibility by placing it into a professional context. On a more practical level, it was also a manner of shooting with which they had some direct experience, and therefore presumably the mode of film-making with which they felt most comfortable.

The film also pastiches a number of other genres, most notably the family fantasy film and the thirties Hollywood musical. Indeed, if the sequences of the Beatles as four magicians who cast 'wonderful magical spells' on the bus is reminiscent of fairytale folklore, then the final sequence is clearly a pastiche of the thirties *Gold Diggers* series, choreographed and shot in the same style as the Busby Berkeley musicals. It is interesting here to compare writing and performing with the Beatles' fondness for musical pastiche, as it seems that their fascination with writing and performing songs in the style of other artists is echoed by the cinematic pastiche of *Magical Mystery Tour*. This is particularly true of McCartney's songwriting style, and it is clearly no coincidence that the writer of such music-hall pastiche as 'When I'm Sixty Four' should have conceived and scored the 'Hollywood' sequence at the film's closure. Indeed, just as it is possible to see *Sergeant Pepper* as a record born of a pastiche sensibility, one might say the same for parts of *Magical Mystery Tour*. The originality of both record and film lay in their constant fascination with and haphazard absorption of the formal language of other genres. Just as *Sergeant Pepper* was the first rock and roll record to be paradoxically preoccupied and inspired by any other musical genre than rock and roll, so *Magical Mystery Tour* is the first pop musical to be so utterly absorbed by formal styles other than those

of the genre (or generic precedents) to which it should, at least in theory, belong. Indeed, although their first film was partly instrumental in initiating the possibilities for the pop musical to achieve this, *Magical Mystery Tour* marks the Beatles' own realization and employment of this aesthetic, and its pastiche sensibilities were probably as influenced by their recording approach as by their previous film-making experience. As McCartney commented in 1973, 'It was just like making a record album, that's how we did it anyway... A record is sound and a film is visual, that's the only difference'.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps this comment provides the biggest clue as to why the group should make a film which is so fond of pastiche and so anti-institutional in its narrative form. The Beatles approached film-making in predominantly the same way as they approached sound recording, and although their interest in counter-culture was, along with their previous film-making experiences, clearly partly responsible for the anti-institutional nature of the narrative, my suspicion, which would seem to be enforced by McCartney's comments, is that the highly experimental nature of the film's form is also a logical extension of the anti-classical, progressive nature of their songwriting and recording techniques. As well as presenting popular music as 'art', *Sergeant Pepper* is frequently canonized as the record which, on its most simplistic level, transformed rock and roll (music to dance to) into rock ('serious' music to listen to). *Magical Mystery Tour* attempted something similar in its own genre and, despite its intended comedy element, the film's form marks a radical departure from the conventionality and frivolous boyishness of pop musicals prior to its conception. It demanded that pop musicals need not conform to formulaic precedents and, in so doing, attempted to do the same for the pop musical as *Sergeant Pepper* had already done for pop music. It suggested that the genre could also be approached as a self-conscious and serious 'art' which demanded an active, rather than passive, audience.

Ian MacDonald, in his discussion of *Magical Mystery Tour*, describes the 'subversive agenda' of the film, claiming that the Beatles were 'sending up consumerism, showbiz, and the clichés of the media' in 'their version of the counter-culture's view of mainstream society'.<sup>33</sup>

No strand of sixties culture was homogeneous, and the much discussed counter-culture or 'underground' youth culture was comprised of a number of different strands which embraced political,

religious, spiritual and moralist/humanist, and drug-oriented subcultures.<sup>34</sup> However, despite their different premises, each strand shared a common distrust of the establishment. The ‘version’ of counter-culture which inspired the Beatles in 1967 was essentially a loose amalgamation of consciousness-expanding ideas culled from an array of alternative sub-cultures. Indeed, as Hanif Kureishi has noted, the group acted as ‘popularizers’ of a range of ‘esoteric ideas’ concerning politics, mysticism and drug use.<sup>35</sup>

Despite its deliberate lack of narrative causality, the film seems charged with a deeply satirical mockery of both the establishment and ‘straight’ society. While this is obviously reflective of the general nature of counter-culture, the Beatles’ ideological motivation was probably further accentuated by contemporary attempts to calm the ‘movement’ they had embraced. Discussing 1967’s ‘summer of love’, Ian MacDonald maintains:

It was then that the British establishment, disconcerted by the explosion of counter-culture in the UK and aware of the unrest and civil disobedience associated with its parent movement in America, moved to stifle it at home by making examples of its leading representatives (notably the underground paper *International Times*, raided for ‘subversive material’ by the police in March). Though the MBE-inoculated Beatles were immune, their outrageous colleagues the Rolling Stones were fair game and within months Mick Jagger and Keith Richards were arrested on drugs charges... Soon after this, despite an outcry from the country’s younger generation, Britain’s hugely popular and perfectly harmless ‘pirate’ radio stations were officially banned. The times they were a-changing.<sup>36</sup>

How, then, is the satirical mockery of conventional society and the establishment achieved? More often than not, it is accomplished through surrealist pastiche, and just as the films of Dali and Buñuel used surreal imagery and scenarios to mock the morality of Catholicism, so *Magical Mystery Tour* employs similar devices, creating surreal sequences which mock (albeit more gently) the morality of all pillars of conventional British society, including state authorities such as the law and the military, organized Christianity, sexual censorship, and ‘straight’ working-class notions of entertainment and leisure. Indeed, if

the film’s narrative construction can be said to be violently anti-institutional, then so too can its ideology.

Perhaps the most poignant example of the mockery of state authorities is the sequence in which the party stop off in an army recruitment office, only to be confronted by a Sergeant (Victor Spinetti) who aggressively shouts abstract, meaningless orders at the entourage until Ringo gently asks ‘why?’ The scene then cuts to a similar sequence in which the same character is seen attempting to impose his gibberish orders upon a stuffed cow which is mounted on the back of a plank. The police are similarly ridiculed and, just as the surrealist films mocked religious figures by placing them into incongruous and childish imagic contexts, so *Magical Mystery Tour* does the same: the dancing policemen in the ‘Walrus’ sequence are employed in the same manner as the piano-chained priests of *Un chien andalou*. The Church of England is lampooned in a similar manner in the marathon sequence, in which a group of argumentative vicars are seen to be making unpleasant gestures at the winners of the race. However, while it is tempting to regard *Magical Mystery Tour* as uniquely subversive in such surreal satire, it is important to remember that the mockery of establishment figures and state authorities had already been partly culturally legitimised by the media, and especially television. Indeed, just as the sixties heralded something of a rebirth for a formally surrealist comic aesthetic via the Goons, so it also ushered in the start of the satire boom. Although informed by a totally different formal and ideological aesthetic (most shows had no pre-planned ideological agenda and indiscriminately satirized anything), the inclusion of skits and sketches which mocked leading political figures and other institutional icons had already pervaded factions of the nation’s consciousness via such programmes as BBC TV’s *That Was the Week That Was* (1962–3) and Rediffusion’s *At Last the 1948 Show* (1967). The latter, essentially a comedy show comprised of satirical skits devised by ex-Cambridge performers such as John Cleese, Graham Chapman and Tim Brooke-Taylor, shared the Beatles’ love of surrealist satire, and although much of its comedy was verbal, its sketches demonstrated a similar formal interest in the iconography of the absurd.

However, apart from mocking the symbolic representatives of state power, *Magical Mystery Tour* also satirizes slightly less predictable institutional concepts, such as traditional working-class notions of

showbusiness and leisure, and it is likely that the group were again informed by a loose hippy ideal which distrusted conventional capitalist notions of ordinary ‘entertainment’ and placed emphasis upon ‘free’ spontaneous ‘happenings’ such as ‘love-ins’ and ‘be-ins’.<sup>37</sup> The reason the group should choose to satirize working, rather than middle-class notions of these concepts, is probably twofold. First, if, as I suspect, the ideological intention of the narrative was to apolitically satirize all factions of ‘straight’ or ‘square’ society, then in the interest of balance (or just plain satirical anarchy) there was no reason why mainstream working-class culture should be excluded. Secondly, and from a purely biographical perspective, such forms of entertainment were particularly familiar to the upper-working-class roots of the Beatles, who, before their rise to fame in 1962, had spent their formative years playing on the British and German club and cabaret circuit.

Accordingly, the film is littered with instances which seem gently, and often affectionately, to satirize the professional insincerity and contrived prowess of traditionally working-class entertainments, including nightclub and cabaret acts as well as the actual notion of the mystery tour, itself a popular form of working-class entertainment. Indeed, this is apparent from the very beginning, and Lennon’s introductory voice-over (‘When a man buys a ticket for a magical mystery tour he knows exactly what he’s going to get, the trip of a lifetime’), which is delivered in a sarcastic tone. Moreover, the speeches of the courier, Jolly Jimmy Johnson (‘All my friends call me Jolly Jimmy, and you are all my friends’), can be read as a gentle satire on the insincerity of the leisure industry, while the drunken, unsynced performance of Bonzo’s vocalist Vivian Stanshall as the crass crooner in the nightclub appears to ridicule the tired routines of traditional cabaret entertainment, portraying it as grotesquely amateurish and completely insincere.

The film also attempts to lambast traditional conventions of British censorship and moral ‘taste’. As has already been noted, the group’s direct and indirect output came under considerable scrutiny from such organizations as the BBC, who had recently banned ‘I Am the Walrus’ from their playlists on the grounds that certain lines were judged to be sexually obscene. 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, whose 1964 Clean Up TV Campaign had

produced, in Arthur Marwick’s terms, a ‘running battle between the advocates of permissiveness and tolerance and those of purity and censorship’.<sup>38</sup> The sequence had allowed the Beatles, as advocates of the former, to have their cake and eat it. It showed ‘offensive’ permissiveness, and was therefore loosely in keeping with their advocacy of ‘free’ love, yet because of its humorous animation it could not be banned for sexual obscenity.

In tandem with the satirical treatment of ‘straight’ society is the promotion of ‘alternative’ lifestyles; and, bearing in mind the Beatles’ frequent experimentation with mind-expanding substances, it is tempting to interpret the film’s fundamental literal concept of the ‘magical trip’ as a thinly disguised metaphor for drug culture, the ‘magic’ being a metaphor for LSD and the ‘trip’ (already a loaded ideological term) being its effects. Moreover, it is clearly salient that it is only when experiencing the effects of the ‘magical spells’ from ‘away in the clouds’ that the entourage can truly enjoy themselves and achieve heightened levels of satisfaction. Indeed, the film occasionally switches between discernibly psychedelic fantasy/reality (or ‘drugged/clean’) modes, with objective reality exposed as dull and mundane. A fine example of this is the sequence on the bus which builds up to the ‘Flying’ extravaganza which, with its colour-filtered cloud images, closely resembles a simulated ‘trip’. Here, the tour guide Miss Winters announces that ‘if you look to your left the view is not very inspiring’ (cut to shot 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). Interestingly, the footage for this sequence included unused material shot some years earlier by Stanley Kubrick for *Dr Strangelove* (1964). The material, which was culled from hours of unused cloud formation footage, was now library footage and was subsequently purchased by production chief Denis O’Dell and tinted to achieve its psychedelic effect.<sup>39</sup> Shortly after the film was released, O’Dell received a call from Stanley Kubrick asking what right he had to use the footage. ‘I was amazed,’ remembers O’Dell with justified amusement. ‘I thought, this man is a bloody genius, he’d remembered everything he’d shot!’<sup>40</sup>

By switching between modes, the film suggests that only when experiencing altered states of reality can life be bearable, and it is clearly significant that all the numerous arguments between Ringo and his

Aunty Jessie take place only when the film is in ‘real’ *cinéma-vérité* mode. In this way, it is possible to see *Magical Mystery Tour* as a fantasy fundamentally based on pure Leary-inspired wish-fulfilment, the idea being that ‘ordinary’ individuals can only receive a state of heightened awareness and spiritual salvation through the ‘magic’ of mind-expanding drugs.

Interestingly, several writers have noted a connection between the fictitious concept of *Magical Mystery Tour* and a factual hippy ‘happening’ of the mid-sixties, namely the antics inspired by notorious novelist and acid-head, Ken Kesey, who was later to spend some time writing at Apple. As Mike Evans explains, ‘The concept of the mystery tour, touring the country in a multi-coloured bus, had much in common with a seminal “happening” in the annals of the American drug culture – the 1966 LSD-fed trip [across America] of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters [a group of stoned hippies] in a day-glo bus, documented in Tom Wolfe’s *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968).’<sup>41</sup> Whether the Beatles were inspired by this incident is a question which will probably always remain unanswered. However, the concept for the film was conceived by McCartney when on a flight returning from America, shortly after Wolfe’s reports had been first published in the *World’s Tribune Journal* (in January and February 1967). As a fellow advocate of underground culture, it is likely that he would have taken an interest in such stories, and the similarities between the two concepts do seem more than coincidental.

Coinciding with the film’s anti-institutional message is the group’s chosen representation of themselves and, just as elements of the narrative mirror the group’s newly acquired taste for elements of the counter-culture, so too does the nature of the Beatles’ filmic image, as expounded by their costume, behaviour, performance and songs. As I noted earlier, between the release of *Help!* and *Magical Mystery Tour* they had, like many other contemporary groups, become influenced by the doctrines of meditation and LSD, and this totally changed their musical style, media presentation and public image. Although it is possible to trace the group’s interest in these subjects back to their 1966 album release, *Revolver*,<sup>42</sup> it was not until 1967, and the release of *Sergeant Pepper*, that the Beatles became universally regarded as the leaders of psychedelic music and fashion. Moreover, this was accentuated by the broadcast and success of their mid-1967 single ‘All

You Need is Love’, the anthemic Western mantra which, in its idealistic appeal for global harmony, became the ultimate universal slogan of the ‘flower power’ era. It appealed to all factions of mainstream culture and also managed to transcend the divisions of the contemporary underground movements which, already deeply impressed by the group’s popularization of ethnic fashions and radical endorsement of ‘alternative’ lifestyles, regarded the Beatles as their ‘supreme spokesmen’.<sup>43</sup> However, despite such popularity, by December 1967 and the release of *Magical Mystery Tour* the Beatles had gone a long way towards destroying their previous mid-sixties image as clean-cut and ‘wholesome’ family entertainers. They no longer appeared on ‘kiddiepop’ television shows answering questions about their favourite colours, and they no longer pandered to the banal questioning of the tabloid press. And when the Beatles did give their attention to the media, it often had more to do with the promotion of alternative lifestyles such as meditation or drug culture than their latest record or film releases. In October and September they discussed Transcendental Meditation on the *David Frost Show*, and they helped finance, and signed, a ‘legalize pot’ advertisement in a July 1967 edition of *The Times*. They gave exclusive and increasingly philosophical interviews to the underground press, and in late 1967 they announced the opening of the Apple boutique, a hippy shop designed to be a ‘beautiful place where you can buy beautiful things’.<sup>44</sup>

In two short years, the Beatles’ visual, musical and philosophical image had changed beyond recognition. They had shed their Pierre Cardin suits of the early ‘Beatlemania’ days, and their dress became a visual explosion of psychedelic Technicolor which encompassed Afghan coats, Pickwick jackets, granny specs and floral shirts. Their increasingly complex and innovative music was still popular with a cross-generational audience, but their attempts to popularize less mainstream ideas reflected the fact that they had now outgrown and rejected any desire to be seen as the establishment’s role model for youth; by late 1967, it was unthinkable that only two years earlier they had been awarded the MBE, and even the Queen commented that ‘the Beatles are turning awfully funny, aren’t they?’<sup>45</sup>

Now an international phenomenon of unparalleled importance and, since Epstein’s death, without a manager to impart suggestions or impose decisions upon them, the Beatles were free to break from their

previously imposed cinematic image of cheeky conformity and to present themselves however they wished. Gone was the boyish ‘family favourite’ image of *Help!* and *A Hard Day’s Night*, only to be replaced by a self-presentation which, informed by their new philosophical outlook, was consciously or subconsciously committed to demolishing public perceptions of the ‘cute’ boy-next-door image once and for all. How, then, was the group’s presentation in the film informed by counter-culture, and how exactly did this presentation differ from their previous incarnations in the cinema?

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Beatles’ image in *Magical Mystery Tour* is that it broke with their previous tradition of appearing in films as ‘themselves’, and attempted to scramble any sense of identificatory perception by mixing footage of dramatic action in which they appear as actors who play characters within a dramatic context, sequences where they appear as ‘themselves’ in a dramatic or performance-based context, and sequences where the distinction is unclear. For example, Ringo Starr appears as an actor who plays one of the five magicians, as ‘himself’ (as drummer of the Beatles in the ‘Walrus’ sequence), and as ‘Richard B. Starkey’, a part which associates Ringo’s real name and alter ego with that of a fictional character, the hen-pecked nephew of Aunty Jessie. In this way, the viewer’s perception of the group is constantly blurred by a series of dramatic and non-dramatic paradoxes which partially obscure any single and coherent image of the Beatles as a ‘pop group’. This ‘multiple-image’ strategy performs a dual role. While it is clearly in keeping with the underground principle of satirizing conventional showbusiness ‘manufacturing’ and modes of representation, it also allows them the personal freedom to escape from the singly contrived group persona presented in *Help!* and *A Hard Day’s Night*. Again, it is interesting to make comparisons with the group’s musical career, and just as *Magical Mystery Tour* partially allowed the group to work as actors in a dramatic context, so the playful masquerade of *Sergeant Pepper* allowed them to ‘act’ within a musical context (i.e. to perform songs under a guise which partially subverted their recognizable identity as ‘the Beatles’).

Moreover, when the group do appear as ‘themselves’ (either within the dramatic context or when ‘performing’ songs), their image marks a total departure from the imposed boyishness and cheeky conformity of their previous cinematic excursions. Indeed, just as the film can, at

least partially, be read as a surreal/psychedelic indictment of ‘straight’ society, so the Beatles’ self-image can be seen as an advertisement for mysticism, drug culture, individualism and general non-conformity. While these concepts were all gleaned from separate strands of Anglo-American counter-culture, the Beatles managed to combine them harmoniously into a highly potent ideological cocktail which seemed to amalgamate elements of hippy drug culture, Eastern philosophy and underground satire into a single self-image. Perhaps the best example of this amalgamation of styles and ideologies can be seen in Harrison’s sequence for ‘Blue Jay Way’, which contains elements from an array of alternative sub-cultures, however fundamentally ideologically opposed. While he appears to be visibly ‘tripping’ (and therefore presenting himself as a Leary-inspired advocate of mind-expanding drugs), his ‘lotus’ posture also implies a contradictory advocacy of spiritual purity via transcendental mysticism and meditation. Moreover, he also appears to be ‘playing’ a keyboard drawn on the pavement where he sits, again a possible piece of underground satire on the banality of artifice which would probably have appealed to readers of *IT* and *Oz*. The fact that he appears unaccompanied by any other group member stresses the wider, and more populist, hippy cliché of ‘doing your own thing’, and the playful phonetic metamorphosis of the song’s final lengthy refrain seemingly imparts a similar message of individualism and rejection of social conformity. Apart from the dramatic action itself, the iconography of the group’s costumes also manages to compromise the fashions of different youth sub-cultures. This is particularly apparent in the ‘Walrus’ sequence, where the costumes (almost certainly designed by the Dutch collective ‘The Fool’<sup>46</sup>) combine the bright, ‘high fashion’ day-glo colours of psychedelic styles with the ethnic Eastern iconography of genuine Indian wear.

The degree to which the group could justifiably be called ‘opportunistic’ in their reconciliation of seemingly opposing strands of fashionable youth sub-culture is a question as unresolvable as it is unimportant. What is certain is that their presentation in *Magical Mystery Tour* confirmed and crystallized the Beatles’ recently acquired media image as the central figureheads of their own all-embracing, and therefore paradoxically populist, vision of counter-culture.

One final and important question remains unanswered. Given that the Beatles had an audience which transcended age and culture, why would

they make an ‘underground’ film which, in its form and ideology, seemed to deliberately marginalize their following? Granted, they had become, in Melly’s terms, genuine ‘underground converts’,<sup>47</sup> and yes, they had been dissatisfied with the imposed and contrived image of their previous screen incarnations. But surely, as a highly astute and intelligent group of musicians who were now beginning to branch into the business world, were they not committing financial and commercial suicide?

Prior to shooting the film, the Beatles announced that *Magical Mystery Tour* would be a film for an ‘all-inclusive, non-exclusive’<sup>48</sup> audience, presumably meaning that it would attempt to cater for all ages and factions of its potentially massive audience. That the Beatles clearly felt that they did not need to attempt to make a traditional musical which was remotely conventionally commercial or obviously ‘all-inclusive’ is a testament to their godhead status as popularizers, rather than followers, of commercial trends. After all, prior to its release, everything the Beatles had produced had achieved massive success, regardless of whether projects were conventionally ‘commercial’ or not. Indeed, at this point in their career it must have seemed to the group that the more experimental and anti-institutional the form and ideology of their work, the greater its potential critical and commercial popularity. For example, ‘Yesterday’, with its baroque string arrangement, was in its day a totally unconventional musical form for a pop group, yet it had popularized the classical ballad in mainstream pop and was fast becoming the most covered song of all time. By the same token, *Sergeant Pepper* was, in its day, extraordinarily radical musically, yet it had been extremely popular with both press and public. Moreover, as we have seen, the group’s previous screen excursions had also, albeit more modestly, broken formal and ideological ground. The reality of the matter is that throughout their entire career up to this point the key ingredient for the Beatles’ success had been their willingness to experiment with new forms and ideologies and to constantly change their image and style. 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 serious reason to believe that *Magical Mystery Tour* would be treated any differently. If anything, wouldn’t its ‘anti-commercialism’ paradoxically make it more popular?

The critical reception of *Magical Mystery Tour* was (and still is) unprecedented in the Beatles’ career. The film was almost unanimously savaged by critics and audiences alike and, for the first and only time in their career, the Beatles had to defend their work before a bewildered and angry British media. Indeed, as Philip Norman maintains, ‘For the first time in their existence, the Beatles were unpopular.’<sup>49</sup> If anything, ‘unpopular’ is an understatement. Almost all the ‘serious’ and tabloid press ran cover stories such as ‘Beatles’ Mystery Tour Baffles Viewers’,<sup>50</sup> and according to the *Daily Mirror* both the newspapers’ and the BBC’s switchboards were jammed by complaints from fans and impartial viewers alike.<sup>51</sup> Even *Melody Maker* (a magazine whose youthful readership extended beyond the usual conservatism of the press) received letters of complaint from bemused viewers, one of whom described it as the ‘biggest disappointment of 1967’.<sup>52</sup>

The scale of the film’s critical failure in Britain had serious commercial consequences for its overseas release, not least with the wealthy American television networks, who, besides being potentially high-paying buyers, also held the key to the film’s largest affluent audience. On 28 December 1967, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a headline which read ‘Beatles Produce First Flop with Yule Film’, and although the television rights were sold to Japan, Australia and some European countries, the American networks, discouraged by the film’s unfavourable British reception, backed out of lucrative sales negotiations at the eleventh hour, which meant that the film was not even seen by its most important target audience.<sup>53</sup> However, one wonders if this was actually a blessing in disguise. After all, although the group reputedly lost around \$1million in exhibition fees,<sup>54</sup> the American soundtrack became one of the fastest sellers in Capitol’s history, grossing an enormous \$8 million within just ten days,<sup>55</sup> in a country where the accompanying film went unseen. By comparison, the ‘advertised’ double EP set was less successful (by Beatles standards<sup>56</sup>) in Britain, becoming one of their few recordings which failed to top the *Record Retailer* charts. Considering the film as part of a package intended to generate ‘direct’ and related revenue, one would therefore have to concede that by the standards of their previous excursions into film, its critical and commercial failure was nothing short of monumental. Indeed, while ‘relative’ is clearly the operative word when discussing the film’s economic failure (obviously American soundtrack

royalties alone would easily have covered the modest production budget), one might argue that its singularly paradoxical commercial ‘success’ was that it was *not* shown in a country which I suspect would have reacted in much the same manner as the British audiences and critics.

Why, then, did critics and audiences despise the film so much? On a superficial level, the most obvious answer is that the form was simply too radical for its audiences’ expectations, and it is certainly true that a considerable number of the criticisms and complaints arose from its unconventional narrative and anti-institutional plot. As a *Daily Mirror* story explained, ‘By the thousand, viewers protested to the BBC who screened the fifty-minute film. What was it all about? they asked.’<sup>57</sup> TV pundits such as James Thomas of the *Daily Express* were also perplexed and angered by its form, complaining that ‘the confusion was horrific’.<sup>58</sup> It is clearly evident, then, that both public and critics fatally attempted to judge the film in relation to the more conventional narrative entertainment they would normally expect from the group, and were either unable or unwilling to sympathize with the experimental nature of the film on its own terms. Indeed, the press, armed with the knowledge that the film had been assembled hastily and largely without a professional production crew, seemed to misconstrue experimentalism as amateurism, with critics from papers such as the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Express* implying that the avant-garde nature of the film’s form was born out of the group’s lack of film-making expertise and contempt for the public rather than any deliberate attempt to create something ‘different’.<sup>59</sup> Jumping to the film’s defence, McCartney attempted to explain its experimental nature in an intense series of press interviews and television appearances. Speaking to the *Daily Express* on 28 December, he maintained that ‘the mistake was that too many people tried to understand it. There was no plot, so it was pointless trying to find one. It is like an abstract painting.’<sup>60</sup> To the *Daily Mirror* he added, ‘Everybody was looking for a plot but purposely it wasn’t there. The more people kept seeking a plot the worse it must have become for them. We did it as a series of disconnected, unconnected events.’<sup>61</sup>

Unsurprisingly, because they failed to comprehend the nature of the film’s form, critics and public largely failed to grasp (perhaps mercifully) the acerbic mockery of its surreal satire, gut-reacting to its imagery as if

it were intended as naively literal entertainment as opposed to a part satire of the concept. As a result, the stripshow sequence predictably engendered particular aversion, the *Daily Mirror* conceding that ‘there were protests too, about a striptease scene, though no-one had grasped its meaning’.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps more surprisingly, critics also attacked the Beatles’ soundtrack to the film, the *Daily Express* describing the songs as ‘quite unmemorable’.<sup>63</sup>

Even when one considers the film’s radical nature, it is truly amazing that it received such derogatory reactions from a press and public who had previously lauded the Beatles as the darlings of British pop culture. After all, although Ray Connolly suggests that critics were ‘not yet ready to see their family favourites step over into the avant-garde’,<sup>64</sup> both press and public had, as I have noted, been prepared to let the group experiment with new and frequently experimental fashions and musical forms prior to the film’s conception. Faced with this evidence, one has to look beyond the form of the film and question whether there were any other direct or indirect factors which also contributed to its vituperative reception and commercial failure.

The answer to this is a resounding ‘yes’, and there are several factors which one could posit as contributing to the unfavourable reaction to the film. First, it must be said that, as a multi-media sales campaign which comprised a record and a film, *Magical Mystery Tour* was beset by organizational problems. Prior to its release, previous Beatles soundtrack albums had been released concurrently with their films, creating a dual hysteria and an anticipated build-up for their release. However, possibly sensing that the highly experimental nature of both the songs and the double EP package needed more time to ‘catch’ than their predecessors, NEMS sensibly planned to rush-release the EP on 1 December, four weeks before the film was due to be screened, allowing both audience and critics to build up a familiarity with the musical material.<sup>65</sup> However, two major problems affected this strategy from the outset. A hold-up in the printing of the colour booklet meant a delay of over a week<sup>66</sup> and, when the record was delivered to stores, dealers were confused by its unprecedented format. As a contemporary *Melody Maker* item reports, dealers had problems with marketing the release as they were ‘not sure how to treat the record, because it isn’t a conventional single or album’.<sup>67</sup> It was another week before the confusion was cleared, and the record was properly marketed as a single.

Yet while these factors can be attributed to bad luck, it must be said that the marketing of the release was unconventional to say the least. With their eye on the profitable Christmas number one slot, EMI had released a new Beatles single, 'Hello, Goodbye' just two weeks earlier, thus over-saturating the market with Beatles product, and restricting the potential air play of the *Magical Mystery Tour* material. There is considerable irony in the notion that the EP was at least partially denied the Christmas number one spot by another Beatles single. On top of this, the film and EP's centrepiece, 'I Am the Walrus' had, as I have noted, been banned from Radio 1 by the station's bosses. With the 'pirate' radio stations recently banned, the song had no alternative outlet of promotion. As a result of these developments, public and critics had been given less exposure to the soundtrack songs than they may have needed to appreciate the unconventional nature of the material. George Melly, writing about the film in *Revolt into Style*, believes that this was certainly central to the hostile reaction, maintaining that the songs were 'admirable' but that if they 'had had time to become familiar, the film might well have aroused less irritation'.<sup>68</sup>

Another possible reason for the public and critics' hostility could be the broadcasting slot allotted to the film. The film was screened at 8.35 p.m. on BBC1 at a time usually reserved for more conventional films or light entertainment. As we have established, *Magical Mystery Tour* did not fit into such a category, and its radical style would have seemed especially frustrating to a public who would naturally have expected something more conventional (even from the Beatles) at this time in the evening. As Peter Black of *The Listener* commented, 'Slotted into one of the arts programmes' times, the Beatles film would hardly have raised a whisper'.<sup>69</sup> However, there were significant reasons why this did not happen. First, the Beatles' music was, until *Magical Mystery Tour*, a phenomenon which, at least for the last two or three years, had appealed across ages, cultures and classes. Everything they produced created massive popular interest and although the film was a critical failure, it was watched by a huge audience of around twenty million viewers.<sup>70</sup> With such enormous public interest, the BBC would have been ill advised to give it anything other than a prime-time slot. Moreover, apart from being given an aesthetically unsuitable slot, the film was also first broadcast in black and white, and as Gavrik Losey

rightly maintains, 'It had to be seen in colour to make any sense at all'.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, although the reason for this decision has never been fully revealed, there is no doubt that it was completely insensitive to the brightly coloured psychedelic aesthetic of such sequences as the 'Flying' extravaganza. Devoid of its startling colour-filtered effects, the entire *raison d'être* of its aesthetic and meaning is completely undermined.

Finally, there is another important yet totally external factor which could possibly have contributed to the film's negative reception, this being the timing of the hostile reaction which greeted McCartney's public admission that he had taken LSD and endorsed the experience. In June 1967, articles in *Queen* magazine in Britain and *Life* in America featured interviews with McCartney in which he admitted having used the drug and included comments regarding the possibilities of LSD as a universal cure for social evils. Here, McCartney explained that LSD had opened his eyes to a greater understanding of the human condition, claiming that 'we only use one tenth of our brain. Just think of all that we could accomplish if we could only tap that hidden part. It would mean a whole new world. If the politicians would take LSD, there wouldn't be any more war, or poverty or famine'.<sup>72</sup> Whether or not his comments were intended to promote sensationalist controversy, or whether he just wanted to use his cultural influence to popularize a substance which he personally endorsed at the time, is a debatable issue. However, according to Peter Brown, director of NEMS, the statement was made in a 'moment of unsurpassed folly',<sup>73</sup> causing a storm of outrage when discovered by the British press and making the previously 'wholesome' Beatles for a time personally unpopular, not only with most of the disapproving press, but also with mainstream youth magazines such as *Melody Maker*.

When Epstein (previously regarded as Britain's most admirable and exemplary impresario) had leapt to McCartney's defence and maintained that he also endorsed the drug, the controversy ballooned to new proportions, with both group and manager caught in a crossfire of public scorn. Epstein was 'widely criticized in newspaper editorials, TV commentaries, and by parent and church groups for his confession. It was discussed at length on the floor of the House of Commons, and the Home Office released an official statement saying that it was "horrified" at Epstein's attitude towards this dangerous drug'.<sup>74</sup> The LSD incident, which mirrored Lennon's 1966 faux-pas about being

'bigger than Jesus',<sup>75</sup> changed consensus attitudes towards the Beatles. Their music (which had, at least on a populist level, long been considered as 'beyond reproach') was still universally loved and adored (and bought!), but while the admission helped to clarify their godhead status within factions of the underground (who also presumably loved the film), it did little for their larger, and more 'mainstream', following. Indeed, while most of the press and public were prepared to enjoy a superficial appreciation of the fashions and music of 'flower power', it is clear that their fundamental conservatism meant that they were largely unprepared to accept the more serious ramifications of a flourishing drug culture. Singles releases notwithstanding, the group's next major project after the LSD furore was *Magical Mystery Tour*.<sup>76</sup> Although it is impossible to garner any concrete evidence that the press reaction to the film was coloured by any sense of moral 'revenge', it is clearly an interesting possibility. What is certain is that *Magical Mystery Tour*, with its combination of blatantly drug-induced imagery, simulated 'trips' and vérité footage of a frequently 'stoned' looking group, could not, in the light of these developments, have been timed more badly.

#### Notes

1. Figure supplied by Denis O'Dell, interviewed by author, 30 April 1996.
2. Miles, 1978, p. 107.
3. Connolly, 1981, p. 85.
4. Their use of LSD has been widely discussed. See, for example, Hertsgaard, 1995, pp. 191–200.
5. The Beatles' backing of the underground press was consistent throughout the late sixties. They frequently gave exclusive interviews to magazines such as *Oz* and *IT*, and occasionally donated much needed finances. See, for example, *The Paul McCartney World Tour*, tour brochure, 1989, and Hutchinson, 1992, p. 97.
6. The Beatles' first serious flirtation with transcendental meditation occurred in August 1967, when they visited their guru, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, in Bangor, Wales. It was here that they learned of Epstein's death.
7. Lennon reveals this in a seventies television interview (title unknown) featured in the film documentary, *Imagine* (Warner Bros, 1988).
8. Joe McGrath, interviewed by author, 13 February 1996.
9. The album was the first Beatles release to sustain a chart run of over one hundred weeks.
10. 'Beatles News November 1967', *Beatles Monthly Book*, no. 140, December 1987, p. 12.
11. Hutchinson, 1992, p. 41.
12. Blake was involved in the *Sergeant Pepper* album cover; Hamilton designed the cover for *The Beatles* (1968) album.

13. McCartney discusses his associations with the mid to late sixties avant-garde in *The Paul McCartney World Tour*, tour brochure, 1989, pp. 50–1. See also Bennahum, 1991, p. 92.
14. Evans, 1984, p. 94.
15. Booker, 1970, p. 240.
16. 'London: the Swinging City', *Time*, vol. 87, no. 15, 1966, p. 32.
17. Barrow, 1987a, p. 5.
18. Victor Spinetti, interviewed by author, 29 April 1996.
19. Gavrik Losey, interviewed by author, 27 March 1996.
20. Documented in a number of sources. See, for example, Norman, 1981, p. 311.
21. Price taken from Lewisohn, 1989, p. 131.
22. See, for example, Norman, 1981, p. 310.
23. Denis O'Dell, interviewed by author.
24. Miles, 1978, p. 111.
25. Gambaccini, 1976, p. 48.
26. Wenner, 1973, p. 76.
27. *Imagine* (Warner Bros, 1988).
28. Victor Spinetti, interviewed by author.
29. According to Lewisohn, 1992, p. 273, the final *Top of the Pops* airing of the song (Christmas Day, 1968) completely negated all these combinations, opting instead for BBC footage of a London/Brighton train journey.
30. Walker, 1986, p. 226.
31. Joe McGrath, interviewed by author.
32. Miles, 1978, p. 111.
33. MacDonald, 1995, p. 204.
34. Mid to late sixties youth culture comprised a vast range of underground sub-cultures informed by a number of different utopian ideals. These ideals encompassed drug culture (and particularly LSD), humanitarian causes such as CND, predominantly Eastern religious orders such as Zen Buddhism and Sufism, together with strands of political activity (such as the British 'New Left'). Much British counter-culture was based upon imported ideas from American and Indian gurus, leaders and activists such as Timothy Leary, Alan Watts and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The so-called 'underground' became the buzzword for alternative lifestyles, which were popularized and discussed in Britain in publications such as *IT* (est. 1966) and *Oz* (est. 1967). For an expansive study of sixties counter-culture, see Leech, 1973. Although different factions were frequently ideologically opposed (for example, the doctrines of Zen Buddhism are fundamentally opposed to drug culture), they were united by a deep distrust of dominant lifestyles and the moral values of capitalism, state authority and the nuclear family upon which Western society is built. Moreover, the various 'alternative' modes of belief and perception, whether political, humanist, spiritual or drug-oriented, shared a fundamental interest in ideas understood to be either consciousness-raising or expanding.
35. Kureishi, 1991, p. 88.
36. MacDonald, 1994, pp. 213–14.
37. Making alternative forms of entertainment was an integral part of underground culture, although the adjectives 'free' and 'spontaneous' are often misleading since 'happenings' had to be planned and financed like any conventional entertainment. According to Neville, 1970, pp. 24–7, the 'seeds of London's first psychedelic circus' were planted in June 1965 with Allen Ginsberg's famous 'Cosmic Poetry Visitation

- Accidentally Happening Carnally' event at the Albert Hall. By 1967, 'happenings' such as psychedelic concerts (often accompanied by 'hallucinatory' light shows) took off in such fashionable nightspots as London's UFO Club and The Electric Garden, a haven for the newly emerging music of artists such as Pink Floyd and Arthur Brown.
38. Marwick, 1990, p. 125.
39. Denis O'Dell, interviewed by author.
40. Ibid.
41. Evans, 1984, p. 78.
42. Although *Sergeant Pepper* crystallized the Beatles' psychedelic influences, *Revolver* contains the seedlings of drug-induced inspiration, particularly in the acid-inspired songs 'Tomorrow Never Knows' and 'She Said She Said', widely known by fans to have been derived from an encounter between Lennon and a tripping Peter Fonda.
43. Evans, 1984, p. 76.
44. Spence, 1981, p. 84.
45. Norman, 1981, p. 306.
46. 'The Fool' were a primarily Dutch design team who became heavily involved with the Beatles around the time of *Magical Mystery Tour*. They were commissioned (for £100,000) to design hippy attire for the Apple boutique, and also created the psychedelic costumes for the Beatles' appearance on the *Our World* television special.
47. Melly, 1970, p. 106.
48. Evans and Aspinall, 1967, p. 8.
49. Norman, 1981, p. 313.
50. Kenelm Jenour, 'Beatles' Mystery Tour Baffles Viewers', *Daily Mirror*, 27 December 1967.
51. Ibid.
52. *Melody Maker*, 6 January 1968, p. 16.
53. It did, however, later receive limited theatrical screenings in Los Angeles and San Francisco. According to

- Harry, 1984, p. 66, these took place in May 1968.
54. Ibid.
55. Figure from Brown and Gaines, 1984, p. 244.
56. Although also a speedy seller (according to Lewisohn, 1989, p. 131, the record sold half a million copies before the film was released at Christmas), the EP failed to repeat the previous success of such million-selling singles as 'She Loves You', 'I Want to Hold Your Hand', 'Can't Buy Me Love', 'I Feel Fine', 'We Can Work It Out/ Day Tripper'.
57. Don Short, 'So We Boobed Says Beatle Paul', *Daily Mirror*, 28 December 1967.
58. James Thomas, 'Magic Leaves Beatles with Mighty Flop', *Daily Express*, 27 December 1967.
59. Ibid. Thomas concluded that the Beatles were 'four rather pleasant young men who have made so much money that they can apparently afford to be contemptuous of the public'.
60. Robin Turner, 'Even Beethoven Wasn't Great All the Time', *Daily Express*, 28 December 1967.
61. Don Short, 'So We Boobed Says Beatle Paul', *Daily Mirror*, 28 December 1967.
62. Kenelm Jenour, 'Beatles' Mystery Tour Baffles Viewers', *Daily Mirror*, 27 December 1967.
63. James Thomas, 'Magic Leaves Beatles with Mighty Flop', *Daily Express*, 27 December 1967.
64. Connolly, 1981, p. 89.
65. 'Beatle News', *Beatles Monthly Book*, no. 54, January 1968, p. 29.
66. Ibid.
67. *Melody Maker*, 9 December 1967.
68. Melly, 1970, p. 178.
69. Peter Black, 'Nay, Nay, Nay', *The Listener*, vol. 79, no. 2023, 4 January 1968, p. 27.

70. Figure given by Paul Fox, head of BBC1, in Robin Turner, 'Even Beethoven Wasn't Great All the Time', *Daily Express*, 28 December 1967.
71. Gavrik Losey, interviewed by author.
72. Thompson, 1967, p. 105.
73. Brown and Gaines, 1984, p. 218.
74. Ibid., p. 219.
75. Lennon's remarks regarding Christianity, made to Maureen Cleave of the *London Evening Standard*, caused enormous controversy in the US when published in a teenage magazine titled *Datebook*. Reactions were particularly vehement in the southern states of America where Beatles records were ritually burnt. When arriving in America for the US leg of their 1966 tour, Lennon publicly apologized for his remark.
76. Shortly after his comments were published, McCartney stressed that he had not wished to advocate the use of LSD, and blamed the media for being irresponsible. However, despite this, and subsequent announcements that the group had given up drugs, the stigma, like the influence of mind-expanding substances, did not disappear so easily.

## Sergeant Pepper Goes to the Movies: *Yellow Submarine*

Of all the official Beatles movies of the sixties, the animated feature, *Yellow Submarine*, is perhaps the one with the strangest production genesis. Unlike their previous television feature, the Beatles personally had very little involvement in its production history. However, the labyrinthine twists and turns that led to the film's eventual production pre-date the *Magical Mystery Tour* episode by a considerable period, and to trace the film's origins we must briefly backtrack to 1964.

During that year, Epstein had been approached by an ambitious Hungarian-American cartoon producer, Al Brodax, whose company, King Features, had been responsible for the evergreen *Popeye* series. With the outbreak of Beatlemania, Brodax wanted to produce an American cartoon series starring the group and their songs. Epstein, although slightly reluctant to have his increasingly stoical assets trivialized into cartoon characters, saw no far-reaching or harmful consequences in the venture and struck a deal with Brodax. Thus began, in September 1965, a series of cartoon shorts starring the group in around sixty short animated adventures in which the 'moptop' Beatles were chased around (*Help!*-style) by an assortment of weird and wonderful characters and fans. The series, which based its episode titles on their songs, was networked on US television by ABC, but not shown on British television until much later, and then only in one TV region.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, it proved extremely popular internationally, eventually running for two years and earning the Beatles and Epstein 50 per cent of the project's profits.<sup>2</sup>

In their initial dealings Epstein had promised Brodax the group's cooperation for a feature film if the series turned out to be successful. In 1966, Brodax reminded Epstein of his promise and succeeded in getting him to agree to endorse the project with the Beatles' names and four new original songs for the soundtrack. Neither Epstein nor the Beatles

had been particularly keen on the idea but, according to McCabe and Schonfeld, they saw the film as ‘a means of fulfilling their obligation to provide United Artists with a third film’.<sup>3</sup> This, as we shall see in the next chapter, turned out to be a misplaced judgement.

Production began in 1967 and was initially envisaged by Brodax to be a kind of *Fantasia*-style production which, like the cartoon series, would be heavily based on the imagery and allusions of the group’s contemporary recordings. As Brodax later commented, ‘We derived a lot from the *Sergeant Pepper* album. We took the word “pepper”, which is positive, spicy, and created a place called Pepperland which is full of colour and music. But in the hills around live Blue Meanies, who hate colour, hate everything positive.’<sup>4</sup> The production itself was financed by Brodax’s American company and produced (for \$1million<sup>5</sup>) through TVC (TV Cartoons) in London. The director was the Canadian animator, George Dunning, and the writing credits were shared by Brodax, Lee Minoff, Jack Mendelsohn and Erich Segal, a professor of Greek and Latin at Yale, who later wrote the hugely successful *Love Story* (1970). In some ways, the employment of Dunning as director mirrored that of Lester some years earlier for *A Hard Day’s Night* and *Help!* Like Lester, Dunning had worked in commercials during the fifties and, again like the American director, his approach to film-making married commercial instinct with avant-garde sensibilities. As well as having worked on avant-garde shorts like *Cadet Rouselle* (1945), Dunning had also gained invaluable experience with more commercial ventures (in the early fifties he had worked in America at UPA on *The Gerald McBoing Boing Show*), and by the time he moved to London and set up TVC in 1956 his experience and aptitude for stylistic breadth took in a breathtaking range of influences derived from experience gleaned from living and working in Canada, Paris and America. Five years before *Yellow Submarine*, his short film *The Flying Man* (1962) had won the Grand Prix at the Annecy International Animation Festival.

The fantasy story of the feature was based on an idea by Lee Minoff, in turn derived from the Lennon and McCartney title track which, as well as appearing as one half of the highly successful ‘Eleanor Rigby’ double A-side single, was also a hugely popular album track from the 1966 album release, *Revolver*. Although the Beatles were not closely involved with the making of the film, which included work by two

hundred animators worldwide, McCartney gave his blessing to Minoff’s first screenplay outline which, according to Lewisohn, is dated November 1966 and states the following objective: ‘The goal should be nothing less than to take animation beyond anything seen before in style, class and tone, but avoiding the precious and pretentious’.<sup>6</sup> However, achieving this objective proved no small task and, according to actor Paul Angelis, the script underwent fourteen re-writes before it was finally completed.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it has been suggested that other uncredited writers were involved in the project, most notably Roger McGough, the Mersey poet and member of the pop group the Scaffold, who, according to Angelis, ‘wrote a lot of the Beatles’ dialogue’.<sup>8</sup>

What is certain is that neither Apple nor the Beatles had much involvement in the film’s production. Indeed, although the film credits state the film to be an Apple Presentation (which Denis O’Dell negotiated to ‘make it more official’,<sup>9</sup>) the Beatles’ contribution was limited to the four contractually enforced original songs, a few minor script ideas, and a brief appearance at the film’s closure, again negotiated by O’Dell, who also tried (albeit unsuccessfully) to get the Beatles to lend their own voices to the project.<sup>10</sup> In the end, the Beatles’ voices were dubbed by actors and even the idea of producing four original songs was treated with marginal disdain by the group. As George Martin explains, ‘Their reaction was, “OK, we’ve got to supply them with these bloody songs, but we’re not going to fall over backwards providing them. We’ll let them have them whenever we feel like it, and we’ll give them whatever we think is all right.”’<sup>11</sup> In the event, the Beatles grudgingly honoured Epstein’s commitment and provided the film soundtrack with four new numbers, ‘It’s All Too Much’, ‘Only a Northern Song’, ‘Hey Bulldog’ and ‘All Together Now’. While I shall discuss later what I consider to be the frequently overlooked merits of this material, it must be conceded that the songs were, at least in part, culled from sources external to the film itself. The second number (a Harrison composition) had been a left-over from the *Sergeant Pepper* LP, and ‘It’s All Too Much’, another Harrison number, dated from May 1967. However, although the group were initially sceptical about the film, thinking that it would put their newly acquired ‘intellectual’ image back several years, they had a massive change of heart when they saw the film in its almost finished state and were, in

Barrow's words, 'So pleased with the way the whole production had been put together that they were only too happy to associate themselves with it more closely from then on.'<sup>12</sup>

Formally, the film is rooted in a range of sixties pop styles, and the eclecticism of its colour imagery (designed largely by German poster artist Heinz Edelmann) is derived from a vast range of popular contemporary styles, including imagery culled from the pop art paintings, prints and designs of artists such as Peter Blake and Andy Warhol, the 'op' art of Bridget Riley, surrealist and expressionist art, the psychedelic graphics of British and American underground poster designers such as Martin Sharp and Rick Griffin, and the work of popular illustrators such as Alan Aldridge, who was apparently initially involved with creating some of the draft drawings for the animation.<sup>13</sup> Looking at *Yellow Submarine* with the benefit of almost thirty years hindsight, the cutting-edge, contemporaneous, 'now' aesthetic of its imagery inevitably makes it appear as something of a museum piece to the modern eye, yet in its day the animation was accurately described by Joel W. Finler as a 'remarkable summation and integration of the best in British and American pop design of the sixties'.<sup>14</sup>

Considering the imagery and allusions of the Beatles' music of this period, it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the most pronounced styles to be absorbed into the film's animation is that of British and American psychedelic poster art. In the mid-sixties, the cheap disposability of affordable, mass-produced psychedelic posters became heavily absorbed into pop culture through the work of such artists as Nigel Waymouth (of 'Haphash') and Martin Sharp, one of the key designers of Oz. Although such a-commercial posters and magazine pullouts sometimes had quasi-political or overtly propagandist purposes (such as 'Legalize Pot' or 'Plant a Flower Child'), their central purpose seemed to be more concerned with celebrating, through a combination of photo-montage, reworked fine art and original cartoon-style graphics, the spiritual benefits of different kinds of mind expansion, their hallucinatory aesthetic obviating the need for their copious colourful typography to be totally legible or conventionally 'understandable'. The psychedelic poster art of the aforementioned designers (and indeed the literary illustrations of Alan Aldridge and the psychedelic photography of Richard Avedon<sup>15</sup>) popularized the use of bright primary colours and surreal imagery derived from the urge to

produce art which simulated the LSD experience. The animation style of *Yellow Submarine* is also heavily influenced by the psychedelic aesthetic and, beyond the story itself, the film boasts iconography which, in its use of colour and patently psychedelic imagery, mimics that of the underground press and American West Coast poster design. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen in the simulated 'trip' sequence which accompanies Harrison's 'Only a Northern Song'. Here, bright strobes of alternating primary colour and close-ups of the Beatles' ears attached to frequency monitors emphasize a higher reality than that of the objective world and, in the employment of irrational imagery and a visceral onslaught of 'mind-blowing' colour, attempt to simulate a hypnotic 'psych-out' of epic proportions.

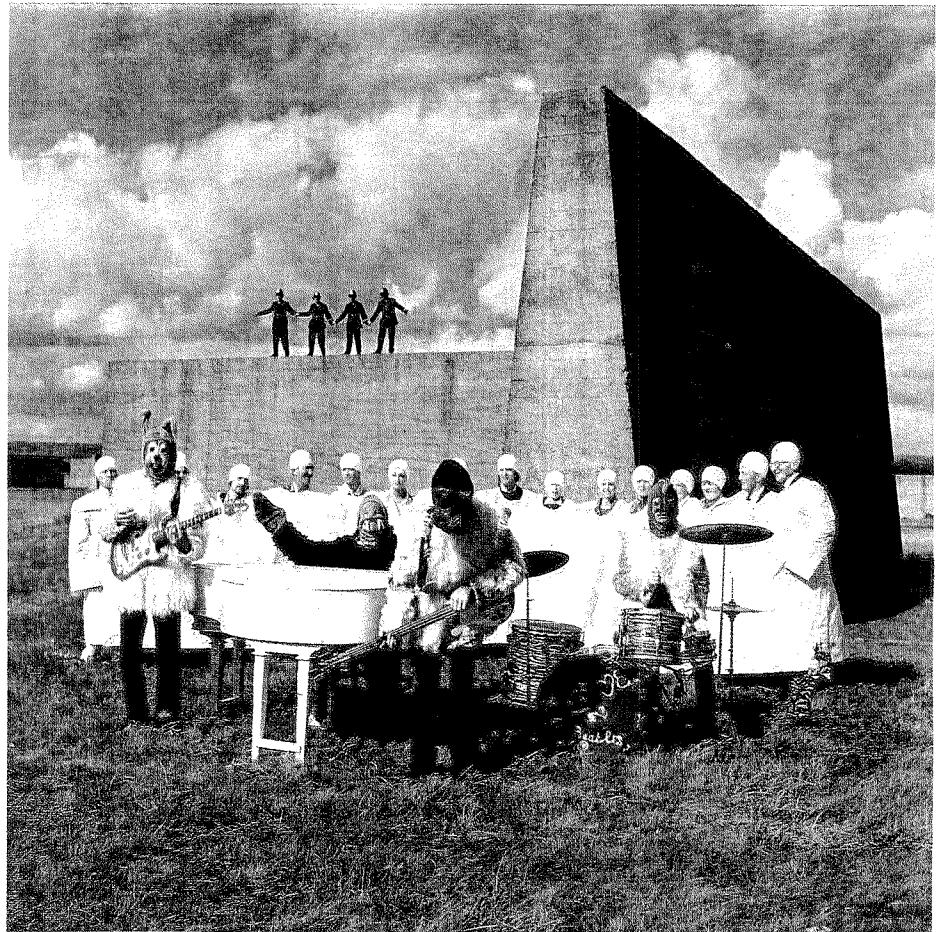
Like psychedelic poster art, the animation also invests in elaborate and fluorescent 'Disney-style' typography, although unlike so many West Coast designs, the lettering is never so elaborately transformed that it becomes illegible. Although often hypnotically multiplied à la Warhol, the lettering never ceases to have an implicitly rational meaning within the narrative's fantasy discourse. Indeed, so important is the meaning of lettering within the narrative that it actually becomes integrated causally into the dramatic action. Such is the case in the 'All You Need Is Love' sequence towards the end, when the terrifying and deadly 'Glove' is kept at bay by John, who physically bombards it with the word 'Love' whilst simultaneously delivering the song.

The film's iconography also shares psychedelic art's nostalgic celebration of all things Edwardian. Indeed, just as the sinewy art nouveau imagery of Aubrey Beardsley became integrated into many designers' work (see, for example, Martin Sharp's Bob Dylan poster of 1967, 'Blowing in the Mind'), so it finds its place in *Yellow Submarine*, and it is interesting to note that the inhabitants of Pepperland (grandfathers on penny-farthings, servants, maids and colourfully uniformed soldiers) are almost uniformly pseudo-Edwardian in appearance. Indeed, what could be more fundamentally Edwardian than *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* itself? Interestingly, much of the Beatles' music from this period was also deeply rooted in a desire for historical pastiche. While songs such as 'When I'm Sixty Four' were, as we noted in the last chapter, essentially attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the music hall, 'Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite', for all its psychedelic allusions, is fundamentally

Victorian in essence, inspired as it was by a real Victorian circus poster picked up at an antiques shop in Kent by Lennon. As George Melly maintains in *Revolt into Style*, ‘Alone in pop, with the possible exception of the Kinks, the Beatles are at their happiest when celebrating the past. They display little enthusiasm for the way we live now.’<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere, the film integrates the styles of other forms of popular posters and contemporary pop art, most specifically through the fascination with famous images of icons from contemporary and historical stage, screen and comic-book art. Indeed, while the images of non-psychadelic contemporary poster art employed huge blow-ups of such vintage icons as Charlie Chaplin, Humphrey Bogart and Laurel and Hardy, the pop art paintings and graphic designs of Peter Blake and the screen prints of Andy Warhol became preoccupied with images of contemporary stars such as Elvis Presley and the Beatles themselves. These contemporary obsessions are constantly present in *Yellow Submarine*, although perhaps the best example is the sequence in which Ringo and Old Fred are searching for the other Beatles and move into a vast anti-chamber populated solely by historical figures (General Custer), screen stars (Monroe, Astaire), and comic-book heroes. Tellingly, their collage-style presentation closely resembles Blake’s layout for that most enduring image of sixties pop graphics, the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper* cover.

Finally, the film also manages to employ imagery from a number of more exclusively ‘fine’ art disciplines, and the influence of Warhol’s pop art is never far away. However, perhaps the most obvious homage to his style is present in the extraordinary ‘Eleanor Rigby’ sequence and, although the sad characters which populate the desolate Liverpool cityscape are the thematic antithesis of his own glamorous subjects, their execution bears startling iconographical and textural resemblance to his mid to late sixties polymer paint and silk screen prints. Equally obvious is the influence of Bridget Riley’s op art; the bedazzling black-and-white imagery in the ‘Sea of Holes’ sequence shares the same disorienting geometric distortion of space and perspective as much of her playful mid-sixties work. Elsewhere, the film also manages to integrate images from less contemporary art. Indeed, while the semi-abstract colours and shapes of the ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ sequence might be tentatively described as a kind of animated



8) 'I Am the Walrus'. The Beatles shooting *Magical Mystery Tour*.  
©Apple Corps Ltd.

Kandinsky on acid, the pulsing, melting clocks which appear in the 'Sea of Time' scenes are directly lifted from Dali's *Persistence of Memory* (1931).

In his astonishing survey of pop art culture, George Melly analyses the eclectic form of sixties iconography. In his discussion of psychedelic poster art (and specifically the notorious 'Haphash' design group) he draws the following conclusion:

... when it comes to imagery there is no attempt to conceal a magpie approach to any artist past or present who seems to strike the right psychedelic note. As a result the 'Haphash' posters are almost a collage of other men's hard-won visions: Mucha, Ernst, Magritte, Bosch, William Blake, comic books, engravings of Red Indians, Disney, Dulac, ancient illustrations of treatises on alchemy; everything is boiled down to make a visionary and hallucinatory bouillabaisse.<sup>17</sup>

He could have been discussing the visual approach of *Yellow Submarine*. Although, as we have seen, the film occasionally absorbs its imagery from different sources, the iconoclastic approach to imagery is fundamentally identical. Not only does the film absorb the inherent and exclusive properties of psychedelic art, it also applies the same selectively eclectic approach, and it is clearly no coincidence that the styles which it tends to absorb (particularly surrealism and op) are fundamentally implicitly 'hallucinatory' by nature. They do indeed strike the 'right note'.

Beyond its imagery, it is perhaps also productive to apply this theory to the highly eclectic methods of animation technique, which comprise conventional cel animation, rotoscoping (the technique of simulating animated drawings over live-action sequences), and conventional live-action sequences (the final sequence where the real Beatles make a fleeting guest appearance). Although alternating between the first two techniques was not especially new to animated features (it had been used in Disney films since the thirties), *Yellow Submarine* integrates these styles simultaneously rather than interchangeably, using them together to create the disorienting 'trippiness' for which the film has become justly renowned.<sup>18</sup>

If the film's form is heavily influenced by psychedelic principles, then so too is the narrative, albeit in a more subtle manner than in *Magical*



12) Passing the audition: The final concert for *Let It Be*. ©Apple Corps Ltd.

*Mystery Tour*. Indeed, the cleverness of the story, which pits the Beatles (and/or their alter egos of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band) against the despicable Blue Meanies, is that it is seemingly constructed to be interpretable (to different factions of the audience) on many levels. On one hand, it can be read as a simple, nostalgic children's/family fantasy tale of the forces of good versus the forces of darkness, and, on the other, as an underground parable of how the psychedelic Beatles (symbols of the peaceful and apolitical forces of hippy counter-culture) overcome the forces of state power to establish a new regime of karmic awareness and universal goodwill. In short, the narrative rewards the audience with the limit of its own experience. It is worth considering this second interpretation in greater detail to assess what, beyond the use of the visual style, the narrative had to offer to the underground.

Firstly, the very title of the film held hidden significance for the flourishing drug culture, since a 'Yellow Submarine' (or 'Yellow Sub') was also the elaborate title ascribed to a brand of popular narcotic pill for 'heads'. Although the Beatles have always denied any 'hidden meanings' and claimed it to be nothing more than a 'children's song',<sup>19</sup> it is not unreasonable to question such a simplistic explanation. While their claims would to some degree seem to be consolidated by the use of Starr (the 'children's favourite') as lead vocalist, the identical titles would suggest there is more to the song than meets the ear and, whatever the Beatles' intentions, there is no denying that the song title had loaded implications for some of the audience. Secondly, the film's travelogue narrative, which to children and 'unenlightened' adults is merely an 'innocent' surreal fantasy voyage, is, to underground converts, a simulated hallucinatory 'trip' which, developing the themes of *Magical Mystery Tour*, seems intent on conveying the viewer from one acid-soaked vision of the mind's eye to the next. As the cartoon Beatles repeatedly and knowingly maintain, the world they inhabit is 'all in the mind'.

Within this world live the wicked Blue Meanies, who can be read as simplistic symbols of the ultimate grassroots manifestation of state power, the police. Like the police, they carry weapons, wear blue uniforms, and use ferocious dogs. Revealingly, they remind Paul of another authority figure, his old English teacher. The heroic Beatles, who with their kindly goodwill and affable humour are presented as the antithesis of these characters, speak a self-referential language which is riddled with sly

acknowledgements to their most heavily psychedelic songs, including the then recently banned 'A Day in the Life', 'Fixing a Hole', and 'With a Little Help from My Friends'. Indeed, while their dialogue contains drug-oriented references and 'in' jokes ('What day is it?' 'Sitarday.') which could not possibly have had any meaning for a juvenile audience, the chosen soundtrack songs (largely culled from *Sergeant Pepper*) are also almost always those which possess the largest quota of drug-oriented imagery. Whatever Lennon may have subsequently said about the lyrical content of 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' (and I see no reason to disbelieve the oft-repeated story of his young son's drawing acting as lyrical inspiration<sup>20</sup>), there is no doubt that it offers itself to be read as a psychedelic 'trip' song, bursting with paranoic tension and sinister metamorphic iconography. Indeed, even the more overtly 'innocent' and 'unenlightened' non-'Pepper' soundtrack songs contain lyrics which can be deciphered to suggest double meanings and references to alternative lifestyles. Such is the case in McCartney's 'All Together Now', which, with its lyrical marriage of childlike, nursery rhyme naivety and risqué references to promiscuity, creates an ambiguity which could only have been intentional.

The final narrative equilibrium, in which the Beatles' defeat of the Blue Meanies restores the harmonious karmic order of Pepperland, is also open to an 'underground' reading, although not perhaps one which would have been so universally welcomed by its more radical and politicized factions, who, by 1968 and the film's release, were beginning to feel that the group's 'flower power' philosophies of meditation, drugs, love and peace ('inner' revolution) were no longer a viable substitute for 'outward' protest and occasionally 'justified' violent activism.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in many ways the presentation of the Beatles' spiritual vision of counter-culture is, for all its Leary-like undertones, essentially closer to the more populist 'alternative' doctrines of Christianity or Hinduism (central to different strands of counter-culture during 1967) than to certain transatlantic and European strands of the movement which, since the Tet offensive of February 1968 in Vietnam and the French student uprising (May 1968) were becoming increasingly absorbed into strands of Trotskyism, Maoism and anarchism. While such militant factions would possibly have welcomed the fact that the Beatles, in *Yellow Submarine*, instigate a symbolic social revolution by establishing a new world order in Pepperland, it is

clearly symptomatic of both the film's 1967 genesis and the Beatles' unwillingness to relinquish their advocacy of 1967's peace-oriented philosophies, that the 'revolution' is achieved more through the redemptive consciousness-raising powers of music and nature than by violent retribution. Significantly, the group's 'army' can only ultimately 'defeat' the Meanies by changing their ideals, and this is achieved by magically making flowers spring up on to their bodies, literally equating the forces of revolution and change with 'flower power'.

Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that *Yellow Submarine* is the cinematic cousin of one of the most famous and enduring images of hippy counter-culture, the photograph of the flower being inserted into the barrel of a gun. At no point in the film do the Beatles take punitive action against the Meanies; they merely want to re-establish the utopian peace of Pepperland. While a brutal resolution would obviously have been unsuitable for a family audience (and therefore in direct opposition to the film's populist commercial aspirations), it is clearly salient that the revolution is, to quote MacDonald's well-chosen book title, 'in the head'. In essence, then, the underlying message of the film's climax (that love conquers everything) is not dissimilar to Lennon's controversial message to disaffected sixties youth, 'Revolution 1', recorded for *The Beatles* (aka *The White Album*) in the month of the film's release: do not exchange the principles of love and spirituality for violent retribution – real change can only be instigated by the shifting of consciousness.<sup>22</sup> In this sense the film perfectly mirrors the holistic ideas which pervaded many of the other, more overtly spiritual and psychedelic songs of the 1967/68 period. Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence that Lennon's stirring and sentimental 'All You Need Is Love' was later deployed to pad out the soundtrack LP: besides its spiritual themes of anti-materialism, temperance and tolerance, the title itself forms as neat a poetic summation of the film's ideology as one is likely to find.

Although their involvement in the film was small, *Yellow Submarine* crystallized the real Beatles vision of counter-culture with a dexterity and accessibility that far surpassed that of *Magical Mystery Tour*. With the possible exception of the 'militant' youth, it really was 'all-inclusive' in its attempt to attain cross-cultural appeal, and its projected vision of a utopian hippydom subtle enough to appeal only to those who searched for or expected it. With its undertones of pacifism and

spirituality, it was fundamentally populistic enough to be acceptable to those adults who found the more radical and militant ideals of the underground's more materialist strands to be objectionable or threatening. Indeed, as *Variety* wisely noted upon the film's release, 'The pic should be a sure click with Beatles' fans and youthful "pop" audiences and also intrigue those who sometimes tut tut the remarkable combo's more wayout activities.'<sup>23</sup>

The film was premiered at the London Pavilion on 17 July 1968. Again the Beatles attended personally and the traffic around Piccadilly Circus once more came to a standstill as thousands of fans swarmed across central London. Outside the theatre, costumed characters from the film entertained the crowds, and fans also caught glimpses of contemporary celebrities, including members of the Rolling Stones and Cream, James Taylor and Twiggy. All had been requested by the group to wear something yellow, and after the screening around 200 VIP guests made their way to the Royal Lancaster Hotel on Bayswater Road, where the hotel's newly built disco, 'The Yellow Submarine', had just opened.

The film was of course accompanied by a soundtrack album, although there were two important differences from the Beatles' other film-oriented material. First, it was the first British-issued film soundtrack album to include material which was not performed or written by the group. Although side one of the LP comprised the four 'new' songs mentioned earlier (plus the previously released title track and 'All You Need Is Love'), the second side contained nothing but extracts from George Martin's powerful instrumental score. Secondly, the album was not concurrently released with the film; it was released on 13 January 1969, seven months after the premiere, possibly because the group felt that the film soundtrack should not coincide with their most ambitious *White Album* project, which was released in Britain on 22 November 1968. On a more practical level, Mark Lewisohn, in his authoritative *Complete Beatles Recording Sessions*, notes that George Martin wanted to re-record his instrumental side of the album, which he did (with the aid of a forty-one piece orchestra) in two three-hour sessions at Abbey Road on 22 and 23 October 1968.<sup>24</sup>

The critics were by and large kind to the film, their reception in marked contrast to the venomous response which greeted *Magical Mystery Tour* just seven months earlier. However, before they had

actually seen the film, many reviewers were no more enamoured of the idea of a full-length cartoon film than the group themselves. Indeed, just three days after the first broadcast of *Magical Mystery Tour*, the *Daily Mail* ran an article titled 'After That Flop the Cartoon Beatles', which complained that 'the Beatles stubbornly continue to experiment'.<sup>25</sup> Despite these fears, the film received generally positive reviews. The tabloids were generally ecstatic, with the *Daily Mail's* Cecil Wilson running a headline which simply stated 'Dazzled by That Yellow Submarine', his review enthusiastically comparing the character of Jeremy Hilary Boob (the 'Nowhere Man') with Disney characters.<sup>26</sup> The quality press were also impressed, with reviews from Patrick Gibb and John Russell Taylor respectively describing the film as 'brilliantly inventive' and proudly announcing the arrival of 'a British cartoon film that's sure to please everyone'.<sup>27</sup> Nigel Gosling of the *Observer* was also enthusiastic, maintaining that the film 'packs in more stimulation, sly art-references and pure joy into ninety minutes than a mile of exhibitions of op and pop and all the mod cons'.<sup>28</sup> Specialist film magazines were no less enthralled, with Gavin Millar of *Sight and Sound* picking up on the scope of the film's formal eclecticism and describing it as both a 'pleasure and surprise'.<sup>29</sup> More importantly for the Beatles' underground following, Joel W. Finler of *IT* also gave the film a very favourable notice.<sup>30</sup> However, there were some minor complaints about the film's drug-induced imagery in certain British and American publications. While *Esquire* referred to the iconography as an 'LSD zoo',<sup>31</sup> Felix Barker of the *Evening News* wrote an extremely scathing piece which maintained that 'you won't be able to get near the box office for hippies, flower people, Beatle-crushers, love-inners and sit-downers. And in every ten thousand teenagers, one elderly person of over twenty-five will join in vaguely hoping to keep with it. Others I predict will hate every five thousand two hundred and twenty seconds of this cartoon'.<sup>32</sup> Fortunately for the Beatles, Felix Barker was wrong, although this did not stop the film from undergoing some very unfortunate complications in Britain.

Although the film was a critical triumph, its potential commercial success in Britain was hampered by problems of exhibition. Rank, the film's British exhibitors, refused to screen the movie at all their 200 cinemas; contemporary reports show that the film was dropped from about half their outlets shortly after its release. On 6 August 1968 the

*Daily Express* ran an article titled 'Beatles Yellow Submarine Dropped by Cinemas', in which a spokesman for Rank maintained that the film's takings in the first three weeks of exhibition had been lower than expected and it would therefore receive only a limited release.<sup>33</sup> According to Bill Harry, the box-office receipts showed that this had been a miscalculation by Rank, but by then 'the damage had been done and Rank's decision to withdraw the film from more than half of their cinemas drastically affected its potential box office income in Britain'.<sup>34</sup> Despite this setback, the film is still regarded by Peter Brown and Steven Gaines as a commercial success<sup>35</sup> and, as Bill Harry notes, no such problems occurred with the American release, where the cartoon did exceptionally good business.<sup>36</sup>

However, the soundtrack album shifted fewer units than previous Beatle albums, no doubt because of its delayed release and lack of original material. Indeed, as Mark Lewisohn maintains, the Beatles were 'mildly criticized'<sup>37</sup> at the time for providing fans with less than their usual good value, and for the first time in Britain an 'original' Beatles album failed to make the number one spot, peaking at number three in the *Record Retailer* charts and faring little better in America. Interestingly, Lewisohn notes that the group probably also felt that fans had been somewhat 'cheated' by the lack of original material on the album release, noting that the EMI library contains a master tape for a seven-inch mono EP of the group's four original compositions for the film (plus an early mix of Lennon's haunting 'Across the Universe') which dates back to 13 March 1969.<sup>38</sup> This 33⅓ rpm EP, which was no doubt intended to restore goodwill amongst fans was of course never released, and Lewisohn suggests that the group, who weren't particularly pleased with their musical contribution to the film, simply decided upon 'washing their hands of the whole affair'.<sup>39</sup>

Yet despite the Beatles' relative unhappiness and ambivalent attitude to their musical numbers for the film's score, there can be no doubting its quality. Although the *Yellow Submarine* album was much criticized by fans for its poor value, George Martin's soundtrack still retains an extraordinary freshness and, whatever their production history, the Beatles' contributions to the record are never less than first-class. Indeed, although fans had every right to complain about the inclusion of two pre-released numbers, the two Harrison numbers alone are worth the admission price. Although continually disregarded by the

majority of critics, ‘It’s All Too Much’ must surely be the most underrated song in the Beatles’ psychedelic canon. With its extraordinary tape loops and dense barrage of background effects, the song’s production took the psychedelic aesthetic to its logical conclusion, and the integration of classical music (trumpets lifted from Jeramiah Clarke’s ‘Prince of Denmark’s March’) and contemporary pop (the use of a verse from the Merseys’ 1966 hit ‘Sorrow’) anticipated the age of sampling with a far greater vengeance than anything they had previously committed to disc. Add to this Harrison’s wonderfully mysterious ‘Only a Northern Song’ (one can only speculate as to why it was discarded from *Sergeant Pepper*) and one of Lennon’s most powerful acid-rock songs to date (‘Hey Bulldog’), and one begins to wonder why the album performed less well than its predecessors.

There is, however, another possible reason for the album’s comparatively poor performance in the marketplace. Prior to its release, in November and December 1968, the first two solo Beatles projects, Harrison’s brilliant *Wonderwall Music* film soundtrack and Lennon and Yoko Ono’s avant-garde sound collages, *Unfinished Music No.1 – Two Virgins*, had been released to hostile reviews from the British and American music press and extremely poor sales, the latter record causing furore in some corners because of its provocative cover, which showed Lennon and his new lover/collaborator glaring at the camera in full-frontal nudity.<sup>40</sup> Although agreeing to manufacture the record, EMI refused to distribute it, the job finally being given to the Who’s label, Track, who ensured against legal liabilities by packaging the original cover in plain brown wrappers before distributing it. Whilst doubtless appealing to underground factions, neither the cover (which was perceived by many to be pornographic), nor the material it contained impressed the Beatles’ mainstream followers, and it is quite possible that the *Yellow Submarine* soundtrack suffered as a result of the hostility generated by these releases. As if this weren’t enough, the period between the film and album release was also marked by Lennon’s arrest on 18 October 1968 for possession of marijuana. He was released on bail, and in November he was fined £150 at Marylebone Magistrates Court. Although he claimed the incident to have been a set-up, it again fuelled the establishment’s disenchantment with the Beatles, who seemed, in the heady months following the film’s release, to have destroyed forever their relationship with mainstream followers. As

Lennon himself maintained, ‘The trouble is, I suppose, I’ve spoiled my image. People want me to stay in their own bag. They want me to be loveable. But I was never that. Even at school I was just “Lennon”. Nobody ever thought of me as cuddly.’<sup>41</sup>

Despite the LP fiasco, the film spawned a wave of other film-related merchandise in Britain and America with a range of goods which far surpassed the records and novelizations released to coincide with their previous screen incarnations. These products were largely targeted at younger children and, according to Richard Buskin, were launched by over twenty-five licensed merchandisers.<sup>42</sup> As Buskin’s book *Beatle Crazy!* illustrates, there was a vast range of children’s products, including jigsaws, snowdomes, Halloween costumes, alarm clocks, mobiles, watches and badges.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, on the day of the film’s British premiere, the *Evening News* carried an advertisement feature (presumably financed through King Features) titled ‘How the Beatles Brought Love Back into Our Funny World’, which, as well as advertising the film itself, also contained publicity for Marshall Dee’s official *Yellow Submarine* T-shirts (for adults and children) and the New English Library’s paperback novelization-cum-picture book, which was proudly proclaimed to be the world’s first ever full-colour paperback.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, the accompanying article claimed that ‘John Lennon and Paul McCartney made sizeable contributions to the script of *Yellow Submarine*,’<sup>45</sup> which, while a gross exaggeration, supports Barrow’s earlier comments that, upon seeing the finished product, the Beatles were happy not only to publicize the film by attending its premiere, but also to put their creative reputations on the line by lending their names to the project.

Beyond its commercial implications, the critical success of *Yellow Submarine* was of great importance to the group since, for all its drug-induced imagery, it presented the public with the cosy, safe and affable Beatles they knew and loved, deflecting, albeit briefly, the hostility garnered by *Magical Mystery Tour*, the LSD controversy of 1967, and the derision which, in the month of the film’s release, had met Lennon and Ono’s ‘You Are Here’ exhibition at the Robert Fraser gallery.<sup>46</sup> As the *Daily Telegraph* nostalgically proclaimed, ‘The Beatles spirit is here if not the flesh – their good-natured gusto, their kindly curiosity, their sympathy with their fellow men and their lack of pretentiousness are all summed up here with gaiety.’<sup>47</sup> Although, as I mentioned earlier, this

goodwill was somewhat shortlived, *Yellow Submarine* was important to the group's increasingly controversial late sixties image in that it pacified the mainstream press and public by providing a tonic for the group's increasingly bewildering and erratic output and behaviour. 1968 had been the strangest year to date in the Beatles' increasingly diverse career, full of huge peaks and sharp inclines. Though the year began badly with the negative response to *Magical Mystery Tour* still ringing in their ears, they had clawed their way back to mass popularity with the massive-selling 'Hey Jude' and 'Lady Madonna' singles and had reconciled this success with the *Yellow Submarine* movie, only to find the year ending on similar bittersweet notes as the winter of 1967.

Despite the commercial and critical success which heralded the release of their eclectic if rather patchy double album, *The Beatles*, Lennon's arrest and solo activities meant that the year also ended with more artistic, drug-related and (a first for the Beatles) sexual controversy. Worse still, the group's own personal and musical relationships (perhaps compounded by Yoko's constant presence in the recording studio) were beginning to deteriorate beyond repair. During the recording of *The Beatles* LP, Ringo quit the group for two weeks following arguments with the other members. While he was away the group simply went on with the recording sessions, with McCartney effortlessly providing the rhythm tracks for 'Back in the USSR' and 'Dear Prudence'.<sup>48</sup> Following Lennon's inauguration into the experimental styles of Cage and Stockhausen, McCartney desperately tried to keep Lennon and Ono's avant-garde sound collage, 'Revolution 9', off the album, only to meet with Lennon's equally dogged determination for it to remain there. Producer George Martin had recommended that the LP be scaled down to a single but was overruled by the group, and despite the sheer enormity of its eclectic pastiche (hardly a single musical style, contemporary or modern, went unnoticed), the album was essentially the work of four separate musicians working on their own solo numbers. Despite the tally of thirty songs, the recording sessions were frequently conducted in the absence of a complete line-up and, although largely unnoticed at the time, Lennon and McCartney's waning collaborative urge had all but disappeared.

In this sense, *The Beatles* can be seen as something of a watershed album for the group, the first album which contained no collaborative

equivalent to 'A Day in the Life' or 'With a Little Help from My Friends', and which highlighted the increasing differences of style of two songwriters who had effectively outgrown the healthy competition which had previously driven them. Whilst Lennon's songs had become increasingly lyrical, personal, and, in the case of 'Revolution 9', avant-garde, McCartney retained and developed his extraordinary melodic skills and uncanny aptitude for musical pastiche. Indeed, while the album's eclecticism and emphasis on the personal and the avant-garde justly won the approval of critics and consumers, there can be little doubt that many of the songs on *The Beatles* lacked the melodic polish they had come to love. Indeed, although the album was a fascinating scrapbook of material (in some ways the group's most 'interesting' piece), many of the numbers lacked the stirring middle-eights and meticulously crafted arrangements so apparent in their more collaborative work, giving credence to George Martin's belief that the record would have been more memorable if scaled down to single-album length.

Worse still, many of the divisions of their recently founded Apple Corps. business were in a mess. Apart from its record division (which, besides the Beatles, had under its supervision such profitable artists as Mary Hopkin), the company's multiplicity of other sections had produced virtually nothing of serious financial worth, and the openhanded ideals to which it aspired were being increasingly exploited from inside and out. On 31 July 1968, just seven months after its opening, the Apple boutique on Baker Street closed down, and its remaining stock was given away to the public. *Magical Mystery Tour* had met with vehement criticism, and Apple Electronics, headed by Lennon's Greek inventor friend 'magic' Alexis Mardas, had failed to produce any viable prototypes, despite the fact that the Beatles had channelled thousands of pounds into providing a working laboratory for the eccentric inventor. Indeed, by the end of the year, Mardas had designed nothing more than an electronic apple which pulsated to light and sound, and a 'nothing box', a construction which, equipped with twelve lights programmed to flash randomly for five years, did – as its name suggested – absolutely nothing of any practical purpose.

The Beatles had initially intended the Apple venture to be a form of 'western communism' in which the 'bosses aren't in it for profit',<sup>49</sup> and on 11 May 1968 Lennon and McCartney had gone to New York to

appear on the *Johnny Carson Show*, where they announced their plans to patronize artists from all cultural disciplines. As McCartney had maintained at an American press conference, ‘If you come to me and say, “I’ve had such and such a dream,” I will say, “Here’s so much money. Go away and do it.”’ We’ve already bought all our dreams, so now we want to share that possibility with others.<sup>50</sup> Two weeks earlier, full-page advertisements had appeared in the British music press, urging would-be recording artists to send in tapes to the Apple Music offices, and within days the London offices were flooded by a tidal wave of tapes, poems, film scripts and novels. At one point Denis O’Dell had five full-time readers wading through piles of unsolicited film scripts,<sup>51</sup> and, despite the best efforts of managing director Neil Aspinall and press officer Derek Taylor it was impossible to deal with the endless onslaught of applications for funding. As Taylor remembers, ‘We tried to do what we promised, to help people realize their dreams, but it was impossible. There weren’t sufficient hours in the day or sufficient resources.<sup>52</sup> The Beatles, for all their extraordinary mastery of musical genres, were not businessmen, and it showed. The Apple was beginning to rot.

## Notes

1. Harry, 1984, p. 164. According to Harry, the cartoons were shown only on Granada television.
2. Percentage from Barrow, 1993b, p. 10.
3. McCabe and Schonfeld, 1972, p. 92.
4. Harry, 1984, p. 37.
5. Canemaker, 1986/7, p. 27. According to the author, \$200,000 of this figure went to the Beatles ‘for the use of their songs’.
6. Lewisohn, 1992, p. 276.
7. Paul Angelis, ‘The Real McCartney – Eddie Yates’, *Observer*, 4 September 1988.
8. Ibid.
9. Denis O’Dell, interviewed by author, 30 April 1996.
10. Ibid.
11. Martin, 1979, p. 226.
12. Barrow, 1993b, p. 13.
13. Evans, 1984, p. 84.
14. Joel W. Finler, *IT*, 26 July 1968.
15. Avedon produced a set of psychedelic Beatles posters in 1968. According to Evans, 1984, p. 76, they were marketed in Britain through a special offer in the *Daily Express*.
16. Melly, 1970, p. 115.
17. Ibid., p. 137.
18. This eclectic mixture of styles is discussed by Sharman, 1994, pp. 14–15.
19. Miles, 1978, pp. 83–4.
20. Ibid., p. 89.
21. For a fascinating discussion of the Beatles’ (and especially Lennon’s) relationship to these developments, see MacDonald, 1994, pp. 225–8.
22. Ibid. According to the author, the

- song’s lyric brought the group considerable controversy with radical bodies such as the controversy with New Left groups, many of whom regarded the pacifistic lyrics as a ‘betrayal’.
23. *Variety* review, 23 July 1968.
  24. Lewisohn, 1989, p. 164.
  25. Trudi Pacter, *Daily Mail*, 29 December 1967.
  26. Cecil Wilson, *Daily Mail*, 17 July 1968. Referring to the character of Jeremy, Wilson states: ‘He exerts so much charm with his blue face, green eyelids, purple ears and prissy voice that you wonder why Disney never invented him.’
  27. Patrick Gibb, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 July 1968; John Russell Taylor, *The Times*, 18 July 1968.
  28. ‘Lessons at the Movies’, Nigel Gosling, *Observer*, 28 July 1968.
  29. Gavin Millar, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 37, no. 4, p. 204.
  30. Joel W. Finler, *IT*, 26 July 1968.
  31. *Esquire*, December 1968.
  32. Felix Barker, ‘Beatles, Meanies and Stark Raving Bonkers’, *Evening News*, 18 July 1968.
  33. Judith Simons, *Daily Express*, 6 August 1968.
  34. Harry, 1984, p. 46.
  35. Brown and Gaines, 1984, p. 191.
  36. Harry, 1984, p. 46.
  37. Lewisohn, 1989, p. 164.
  38. Ibid.
  39. Ibid.
  40. The Harrison LP, the soundtrack for a psychedelic art movie directed by Joe Massot, was the first record to be released on the Apple label. The vehement critical response to the cover of the Lennon/Ono collaboration was not helped by the hostile and frequently racist press reaction to Lennon and Ono’s relationship. Although Lennon and the Japanese concept artist had been lovers since early 1968, Lennon was still married to his first wife, Cynthia, and Ono was labelled as the monster responsible for destroying Lennon’s happy marriage.
  41. Connolly, 1981, p. 109.
  42. Buskin, 1994, p. 84.
  43. Ibid.
  44. *Evening News*, 17 July 1968.
  45. Ibid.
  46. This exhibition was essentially a collection of conceptual art produced by Lennon, in collaboration with Yoko Ono. For more information, see Evans, 1984, pp. 92–4.
  47. ‘Beatles Find Their Film Feet in Weird and Witty Fantasy’, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 July 1968.
  48. This is not to say that the other Beatles did not miss Starr. When he returned to the studios, he found his drums garlanded with flowers.
  49. Giuliano and Giuliano, 1995, p. 87.
  50. Ibid.
  51. Denis O’Dell, interviewed by author. According to O’Dell, most of these scripts were unreadable.
  52. Lawrence Donegan, ‘Another Bite at the Apple’, *Guardian*, 21 November 1995.