

Hayley Mills and the Disneyfication of Childhood

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In the early 1960s, Hayley Mills was the most popular child film star in the Western world. While she is best known for her performances in six Disney movies, she also played leading roles in several British-made film dramas of the time. Now in her seventies, she has had a long career in film, television and stage acting, although it is for her work with Disney between 1960 and 1965 that she is best remembered. In this essay, I will focus on a selection of Hayley Mills's Disney films, and on some of her British films from the same period. As I will show, these films raise several broader questions about the phenomenon of child stardom, and about the representation of childhood – and specifically of *girlhood* – during this period of rapid social and cultural change.

Biography, Part One: The Making of a Child Star

Hayley Mills was born in London on April 18th, 1946. Her father was the prominent film actor Sir John Mills and her mother was the writer Mary Hayley Bell: Hayley later appeared in several films alongside her father, and in two written by her mother (*Whistle Down the Wind* and *Sky West and Crooked*). She made her screen debut as a baby in her father's 1947 film *So Well Remembered* – although some accounts suggest that her parents were not necessarily keen for her to pursue an acting career.

Mills was brought up on her parents' 400-acre dairy farm in Sussex, although she attended a private boarding school for most of her childhood. One day, the director J. Lee Thompson had come to visit her father in order to discuss his role as a police superintendent in his forthcoming thriller *Tiger Bay*. Thompson noticed twelve-year-old Hayley playing in the garden, apparently spoofing television commercials. He was so impressed by her that he immediately decided to change the lead role in the film – that of a child who witnesses a murder – from a boy to girl: he apparently cast Hayley without a screen test. Released in 1959, the film was a great critical success. Hayley Mills won the British Academy Award (BAFTA) for Most Promising Newcomer to Film, as well as an award at the Berlin Film Festival.

After *Tiger Bay*, Hayley went back to school. However, the film eventually brought her to the attention of Walt Disney. On a trip to London, Disney's wife Lillian saw the film more or less accidentally, while seeking shelter from the rain. Disney asked the film's distributor, Rank, to send him a print, but they refused. His wife was so insistent that Disney finally came over to London, where he met Hayley and her parents in the swanky Dorchester Hotel. At the time, Disney had been casting for his forthcoming film *Pollyanna*, and had tested 350 girls for the title role, without

success: apparently he was at the point of dropping the project. Shortly after meeting her, he signed Mills to a five-year contract, again without a screen test.

Pollyanna, released in 1960, was something of a sensation, not least because of Disney Studios' energetic pre-publicity. Amid a high-profile cast, Mills won very positive reviews, and was awarded a special miniature-sized Juvenile Academy Award. It seems that her parents didn't tell her about this, and she wasn't there to collect it, having once again gone back to her strict boarding school: the award was presented by the leading child star of a previous generation, Shirley Temple, and collected on Hayley's behalf by a fellow Disney child actor, Annette Funicello.

Despite the critical acclaim, *Pollyanna* was not a major box-office success: apparently Disney put the blame for this on the title, which he believed would be a turn-off for male cinemagoers. However, Mills's second Disney film, the comedy *The Parent Trap* (1961), in which she played identical twin sisters, was far more popular: it has made more than \$25 million at the box office to date, as well as spawning several sequels. Mills's performance of the song 'Let's Get Together', written by Robert and Richard Sherman, was a top-ten chart hit, and led on to an album.

Hayley Mills's Britishness was not entirely disguised in her Disney performances. She has a distinct British accent in *Pollyanna* – although the script tries to explain this by mentioning that her father had been a missionary in the 'British West Indies'. In *The Parent Trap*, one of the twin characters has been brought up in an upper-class Boston neighbourhood; and in one scene, she teaches her California twin to speak in a 'correct' Boston accent – which (in Hayley's version) is actually strongly English. Disney was apparently quite relaxed about having a mixture of accents in his films, although it is possible that part of Hayley Mills's appeal was due to the associations of Englishness for (some) American audiences.

Walt Disney himself took a close personal interest in Mills's career, and became friendly with her family: she later described how she was 'looked after... like a cherished daughter' at Disney. Yet Hayley Mills was also a leading earner for the studio. During this period, she regularly appeared on lists of the most popular female screen actors on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1961, she was the most popular star overall at the US box office. Mills was on the receiving end of a tidal wave of fan adoration: she reportedly received 6-7000 letters and gifts every week. Evidence from her recent public appearances, and from extensive video tributes and comments on YouTube, suggests that this fandom continues today – albeit, of course, with a strong element of nostalgia.

After *The Parent Trap*, Mills continued to appear in Disney films – albeit more routine ones like the adventure *In Search of the Castaways* (1962, with Maurice Chevalier and George Sanders) and *Summer Magic* (1963). She had a somewhat more adult part in the Disney mystery film *The Moon-Spinners* (1964), although her most successful later role was in the comedy *That Darn Cat!* (1965), which was her last Disney film, as well as the last Walt Disney produced before his death in 1966. I'll be discussing several of these films in due course.

During this time, Mills was considered for the lead role in Stanley Kubrick's film of *Lolita*, although this was apparently vetoed by Disney, and by her parents (who chose

all her roles at this time). Significantly, Mills later said that she regretted missing out on *Lolita*, and that her career might have 'turned out differently' if she had taken it. She was also in line for a part in a Disney adaptation of Dodie Smith's novel *I Capture the Castle*, although the film was never made. However, Mills also had a kind of parallel career in British films, often made with her parents. A year after *Pollyanna*, she played the lead role in a version of her mother's novel *Whistle Down the Wind* (1961), directed by Bryan Forbes. In 1964, she co-starred with her father in the melodrama *The Chalk Garden*, and did so again in the comic adventure *The Truth About Spring* (1965), made for Universal Studios.

Towards the end of this period, Mills was beginning to transition out of her role as a child star – and that role was effectively put to an end when she appeared in a modest but much-discussed nude scene in the British comedy *The Family Way* (1966), at the age of twenty. I'll consider this process of transition in more detail in a later section of this essay.

Understanding Child Stardom

Of course, there is a long history of child stardom, that can be traced back well beyond the advent of cinema. In Hollywood, the lineage extends from Mary Pickford in the 1910s and 1920s, through Shirley Temple and Mickey Rooney, on to more contemporary examples such as Macaulay Culkin, Drew Barrymore and Miley Cyrus. Inevitably, there are significant variations here – not least in terms of how successfully these stars make the transition from child to adult roles. Yet broadly speaking, child stars function in two principal ways: as *commodities* and as *representations*.

Thus, like other stars, child stars have an economic function for the film industry. They operate as 'unique selling points' for films, enabling producers to draw attention to their products in a crowded and competitive marketplace, and thereby create a degree of predictability in an uncertain business. Stars are bankable, in a way that relatively few directors or screenwriters are; although the economic and legal position of child stars as paid employees is often complex. Meanwhile, stardom can also prove difficult for the industry to handle, not least because stars live off-screen lives that can sometimes conflict with the roles they play on screen. Considerable work goes into managing public perceptions of these off-screen lives, on the part of publicists, agents and studio executives.

At the same time, child stars also function as representations of childhood itself. They perform particular versions of childhood, and thereby embody assumptions about what children (and, by extension, adults) are, or ought to be. These actors are children, but they are also *playing the role* of children: childhood is, at least partly, a kind of masquerade. Again, there is a good deal of diversity here: but it is hard to ignore the dominant tendency to idealize and sentimentalize childhood. While this is certainly apparent within a good deal of Hollywood cinema, it has a longer history in the Romantic view of childhood, expressed for example in nineteenth century literature and painting (Wordsworth, Dickens, the pre-Raphaelites...). The child is often seen here as 'cute' or a 'loveable moppet' – as a beautiful, pure, free spirit, an object of unquestioning wonder and joy.

In her book *Precocious Charms*, the critic Gaylyn Studlar has explored these representations of childhood in the films of six leading Hollywood child stars, including Pickford and Temple, as well as actors such as Deanna Durbin and Jennifer Jones, who are less well remembered today. In performing childhood, she argues, these child stars also mark out the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and the relationships between them. Indeed, the child is often seen to have something to teach adults: it is a repository of fundamental human values such as honesty, loyalty and affection, with which adults are sometimes seen to have lost touch. In these films, the child is innocent, and yet somehow intuitively knows and speaks the truth – even if that truth is something that adults seek to deny. The child is a peacemaker or a healer, with the power to make adults better people. Like some kind of sticky emotional glue, it has a unique ability to reunite or reassemble the family, and in some cases the wider community as well. One aspect that is especially striking here is the preponderance of sick and orphaned children in these films. These vulnerable children typically evoke or re-awaken feelings of pity and affection, and a hidden wish to care and protect; and this is especially notable among potential father-figures, who thereby become more human and domesticated, and can be integrated back into the family.

The majority of child stars are female; and as such, the girl star also embodies particular ways of being feminine, and therefore assumptions about what females are, or ought to be. This can obviously take the stereotypical form of prettiness and passivity, but girl stars are also often represented as independent and physically assertive. From Pickford and Temple on through, they often play the role of the ‘tomboy’ or the ‘hoyden’, who is feisty and rebellious. This is a child who is determined to be free of adult constraints, and to resist adult authority, and often takes on conventionally masculine characteristics in doing so. Even so, this is frequently a temporary starting position: such girls generally learn a more traditional form of femininity, although they may still use it to further their own interests.

In such narratives, the spectre of sexuality is often lurking, albeit often off-screen. Despite Freud, childhood is traditionally considered to be pre-sexual, or a-sexual: the child is not assumed to know about adult sexuality, let alone experience sexual feelings in its own right. However, numerous commentators have argued that the child star itself can also become an object of sexual desire. The most infamous instance of this is the novelist Graham Greene’s 1936-37 reviews of Shirley Temple, which commented on the star’s ‘voluptuous’ appeal, her ‘dubious coquetry’ and her ‘dimpled depravity’ – reviews for which he was successfully sued by Temple’s studio, Twentieth Century Fox. This argument may say more about Greene than it does about Temple – or indeed about the studio, which Greene accused of exploiting her appeal to ‘middle-age men and clergymen’. However, it has subsequently been taken up by feminist critics, who suggest that these films invoke a ‘paedophilic gaze’ that is equivalent to the ‘male gaze’ of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

There is no doubt that some adult men may find such images of girlish innocence erotic; and images of cute girls may be more palatable and comforting in this respect than images of sexual adult women. However, as Studlar points out, the fans of girl stars like Temple were by no means only adult men; and even for them, the appeal may have been more about the search for a lost childhood than anything overtly

sexual. The role of the adult male (re-)discovering a fatherly desire to protect the child may hold a genuine appeal both to male and female viewers.

Nevertheless – and especially in the case of female stars – the issue of sexuality is frequently a key point of tension. As we'll see, the transition from child star to adult actor is often fraught with difficulty, and this can be exacerbated by public perceptions of stars' off-screen behaviour. The industry's publicity machine may have to work overtime to reassert conservative notions of childhood and of femininity that the stars themselves urgently wish to jettison, and often resort to extreme tactics in seeking to do so (Miley Cyrus would be a recent case in point).

As we'll see, these characteristics are apparent in several ways in the case of Hayley Mills. However, Mills was not just a Hollywood star. She was also an actor in British films – films whose style and approach reflect a very different context of production, and which also represent childhood (and girlhood) in rather different ways from her American movies. I want to begin by looking at two of these films, before contrasting them with Disney's vision of childhood.

Tiger Bay

Released in 1959, Hayley Mills's first film still seems remarkably fresh and contemporary. Directed by J. Lee Thompson, who went on to direct several notable (and less notable) Hollywood action movies, *Tiger Bay* co-starred the German actor Horst Buchholz in his first English-language film, along with Hayley's father John Mills. As I have noted, it was Thompson's meeting with Hayley that prompted him to change the central character from a boy (in the original short story, 'Rodolphe et le Revolver' by Noel Calef) to a girl: apparently, he was impressed by what he saw as her natural talent and her 'wonderful big eyes' – eyes which play a crucial role in the film.

Briefly, the story concerns a young girl named Gillie Evans, who witnesses a murder. Looking through the letterbox of a flat in her apartment block, she sees a Polish sailor (Bronislaw Kochinsky) shoot his lover in a fit of jealousy. Kochinsky hides the gun, but Gillie retrieves it. Kochinsky then tracks her down to the church where she has been singing in the choir. At first, she threatens him with the gun, but they go on to form a friendship. The police are on Kochinsky's trail, but the two manage to escape capture. Gillie is apprehended, but she denies all knowledge of Kochinsky, and helps to implicate another man. However, in the final scenes, the police catch up with Kochinsky, who has already absconded on a ship bound for Caracas. Gilly falls off the ship, and Kochinsky rescues her, but the police pull him from the water and arrest him.

Tiger Bay is essentially a fast-paced suspense thriller: several scenes are very tightly choreographed and edited, and the chase sequences build to an effective climax. However, there are also elements of social realism, especially in the matter-of-fact portrayal of the shabby, multi-cultural Cardiff neighbourhood in which the film is set. Despite the casting of John Mills in the role of the police superintendent, it is striking how the point of identification throughout remains with the child, and her association with the wrong-doer, rather than with the authorities. The murder is a

crime of passion: as Steve Chibnall argues, ‘criminality stems from weakness and the inability to deal with the emotions created by interpersonal relationships’ – a repeated theme in Thompson’s other early films. Kochinsky fails to heed the warning given to him by an Indian doctor early in the film: ‘don’t let your emotions rule your life’. For much of the film, he is panicking, out of his depth, and this is why he has to rely on the child to help him.

Mills’s performance is a very long way from the cute ‘moppets’ played by the likes of Shirley Temple. Her acting is quite naturalistic, with occasional fleeting facial tics and ungainly expressions that became a kind of trademark of her style. Her character is feisty, sometimes insolent, and very defiant towards authority. As in many films featuring child stars, she is without parents: she has moved to Cardiff from London, and is living with her aunt, who struggles to control her. From the very start, she is depicted as a liar: she deceives her aunt of the change from her shopping in order to buy a toy, and she immediately lies to the police about what she has witnessed. Later, she falsely identifies the murderer in an identity parade, and continues to insist until the very end – despite great pressure from the police – that she knows nothing of Kochinsky. However, this is not inveterate lying: it is motivated in the first place by her desire to keep the gun, and then by her loyalty to Kochinsky. Both Gillie and Kochinsky are outsiders: Kochinsky dreams of marriage, but he is constantly drawn by his love of the sea; while Gillie is parentless, a Londoner in an alien city and country, who struggles to find a way in to the street games of her peers. Both are looking for belonging, and yet also for escape.

One recurring issue in the films I’ll be discussing is to do with children’s agency – that is, their ability to drive and influence events. A key aspect of this is to do with *knowledge*. This is partly a matter of how the film manipulates the viewer’s access to information, and that of the various characters, through narrative; but in this case it is also to do with the different kinds and levels of knowledge possessed by the children and the adults. In the early part of the film, Gillie has most of the knowledge, and the viewer shares it with her: she knows where the gun is, and conceals it; she knows that the gun is not loaded, although Kochinsky does not know this when she aims it at him; and of course she constantly conceals key facts about the murder from the police. At the same time, the viewer knows that Kochinsky is unlikely to take her with him, despite her wishes; and we see several threats to her safety that she does not see herself (notably in a scene where a gate swings open on a ferry, and Kochinsky eventually rescues her).

Tiger Bay also comments more directly on assumptions about childhood, most notably in the scene where Gillie takes the gun with her to church and conceals it under her surplice. She then proceeds to sing in a very pure and ‘angelic’ way; yet she also swaps a bullet from the gun for some chocolate with one of the choir boys, and they clinch the deal while singing in time to the psalm. As in her interrogations at the hands of the police, it seems that Gillie is very skilful in turning on the persona of the innocent, wide-eyed child when the context suits her.

Another key issue here is that of gender. Thompson’s use of a girl rather than a boy in the leading role may have been somewhat fortuitous, but it opens up some interesting questions. Gillie is a tomboy, with a short pudding-basin haircut, dressed in trousers and a dark t-shirt throughout. When we first see her, she is framed

behind railings, looking on at a group of (mainly) boys playing a cowboys-and-indians or gangster game in the street. The boys refuse to allow her to take part on the grounds that she doesn't have a toy gun, and tell her to go back to London. When Gillie fights back, the boys tell her that this is not a game for 'ladies', and she retorts 'I'm not a lady'. Gillie's desire for a gun, and her eventual acquisition of a *real* gun, is her initial motivation. Some critics have read this in tiresomely Freudian terms: Gillie is apparently suffering from penis envy, and the gun is (needless to say) a phallic symbol. The film's title, meanwhile, is apparently a reference to *vagina dentata*, at least according to the critic Melanie Williams...

Freudian symbol-hunting aside, Williams is correct to suggest that *Tiger Bay* offers a vision of girlhood, not only on the cusp of adolescence, but also on the cusp of the social revolutions of the 1960s. In one scene, Kochinsky invites Gillie to look forward to the romantic relationships that will lie ahead for her as a woman – although from his rather embittered perspective, this is a matter of her having 'all the power in the world, for good or bad, just with your little finger, a few words, to make [men] happy or unhappy'. If Kochinsky's lover Anya clearly represents this *femme fatale* version of female power, the other women in the film (such as Gillie's aunt) are less than powerful; yet, as Williams argues, Gillie's own role anticipates the more liberated young women of 1960s cinema.

Of course, it's possible to see the relationship between Gillie and Kochinsky as a kind of romance. (Mills later reported that she fell 'instantly in love' with the handsome Buchholz.) In one scene, they are onlookers at a West Indian wedding celebration, and the two of them are scattered with confetti; and the closing shots, in which they embrace after he has rescued her from the sea, are accompanied by a rather insistent swell of romantic strings. However, it is Kochinsky's desire to *protect* Gillie that pulls us to his side – for example, in the scene on the ferry, and of course when he rescues her from the sea, rather than choosing to stay on the ship and save himself (even the police superintendent is bound to admit that he has shown himself to be 'a brave man'). When the two of them briefly escape to the countryside before Kochinsky can catch his ship, we see him acting out playful stories for her, more like a young father than a lover. In this scene, as in the wedding scene and elsewhere, there are constant reminders of Kochinsky's passionate love for the woman he has killed. By contrast, the bond between him and Gilly is one of loyalty and friendship between outsiders: it is affectionate, but there is no implication of sexual attraction (although Graham Greene might have disagreed...).

Whistle Down the Wind

This bond that is formed between the child and the criminal is one that recurs, in a rather different way, in the second film I'll discuss, *Whistle Down the Wind*. Released in 1961, it was produced by Allied Film Makers, a small independent company that made a total of six films (including, most famously, the gay drama *Victim*) between 1959 and 1964. Two members of the company were mainly involved: Richard Attenborough as producer, and Bryan Forbes in his debut as a director. The script, based on a novel by Hayley Mills's mother Mary Hayley Bell, was written by Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall, who went on to become leading television writers.

The film focuses on three children living on a Lancashire farm who discover a fugitive hiding in their barn. When they stumble upon him, he exclaims 'Jesus Christ!' in shock. Heavily influenced by stories they have heard told at Sunday School, and by the Salvation Army, the children believe that he is Jesus come again. We learn fairly soon that the fugitive is wanted for murder, although the children remain unaware of this. Initially confused by their willingness to protect him from discovery, he makes no attempt to correct their mistake. Most of the children in the nearby village eventually learn that 'Jesus' is living in the barn, but it is only when the news finally reaches an adult, the children's father, that police are called in to apprehend him. The criminal surrenders and is taken away, watched by a large audience of local children.

Here again, the issue of children's agency and knowledge is a key theme. Mills's character, Kathy, is the oldest of the children, and for much of the film she has knowledge that she deliberately conceals from the adults (and some of the other children). And yet, on another level, she suffers from a kind of blind faith, or ignorance: the adult viewer obviously knows that the fugitive, Blakey (played by Alan Bates), is not Jesus, whereas Kathy herself does not realize this until the very end. Initially, Blakey does not understand why the children are protecting him, and only gradually realizes. Meanwhile, the viewer sees information (for example on newspaper billboards) about the hunt for Blakey that the children do not see. These differences in knowledge – between the child characters, their parents, Blakey, and the viewer – are manipulated throughout, for various reasons: in order to create tension, to encourage or undermine the viewer's identification, and at times for comic or ironic effect. It isn't without significance that the game the children play at a birthday party towards the end of the film is one of *Blind Man's Buff*.

It is only in the final scenes that these disparities in knowledge are resolved. The adults (and the police) find Blakey, and Kathy appears to learn what the adults know. Nevertheless, the ending is somewhat ambiguous. Rather than explicit dialogue, a series of extended close-ups on Kathy seem to imply that she is finally registering the truth about the criminal's identity. However, when a couple of much younger children approach her and ask to see Jesus, she replies that they have missed him this time; but she reassures them that he will be coming again another day. The significance of this is open to debate: it is possible to infer that Kathy continues in a state of blind faith, although it seems more likely that she has made the transition to adult knowledge, and simply wishes to protect the younger children from disillusionment – rather as though she might not want to tell them the truth about Santa Claus.

Indeed, it could be argued that the film as a whole takes a rather ambiguous stance on these questions of knowledge and faith. As Sandy Brewer has noted, the story of Jesus was central to British children's primary-school education in the 1950s. At the start of the film, we see the Salvation Army proselytizing in the streets of the village, and we also see the children at their religious Sunday School – although in both cases, their questions about whether Jesus will come again receive answers that are unclear and unsatisfactory. The posters outside the church, and the comments of the local vicar, suggest that organized religion is in decline. Later, the children approach the vicar for some definitive judgment about the rebirth and return of Jesus, although he appears largely preoccupied with thefts of metal guttering and dustbin lids from

his church. As they leave, the youngest child, Charles, says 'he doesn't know, does he?' Indeed, it is Charles who acts as a kind of disbelieving truth-teller throughout the film: he seems to lose his faith when he finds that 'Jesus' hasn't protected his pet kitten, and he later asserts, 'it isn't Jesus, it's just a feller'.

Yet at the same time, the film is overflowing with religious symbolism – to an extent that some contemporary critics found contrived. 'Jesus' appears in a stable, and the children of the village come to bring him offerings (including a plastic 'Arabian charm bracelet' from a children's magazine); while at the very end of the film he holds out his arms in a crucifixion pose as he surrenders to the police. The children (his disciples, as they are called in the credits at the end of the film) have to 'sin' (to steal and lie) in order to help him; and in one scene, an older bully forces a younger child to deny three times that he knows Jesus, while a train whistle blows (or a cock crows). A version of 'We Three Kings' plays on several occasions as we see the three children approaching or disappearing into the distance. All of this could be read as ironic, or at least playful; but in combination with the other elements I have discussed, it contributes to a wider sense that the boundaries between knowledge and ignorance (or blind faith) are perhaps not entirely clear-cut.

From the outset, the film portrays the children's world as largely separate from that of adults. In the opening scene, the three children, unseen, follow a farm worker as he goes to drown some unwanted kittens. They promptly rescue them and hide them in the barn. Here, as in their later attempts to conceal Blakey, they effectively evade adult control and surveillance, often through outright lying and deceit – and despite adults' repeated attempts to boss them about. As Kathy says, the return of 'Jesus' has to be kept hidden: 'it's got to be a secret society from the grown-ups'. To some extent, the children are free to come and go as they please, although Kathy (aged about twelve) is delegated to take charge of the younger ones. The film offers a vision of rural childhood, but it is by no means a pastoral idyll of the kind that appears in Mills's Disney films: the landscape is rugged, the weather is unforgiving, and farming is clearly very hard work.

On the one hand, this view of the child's world might be seen to reflect the 'lost freedom' of 1950s childhoods, although it also generates some concerns about the children's safety – as when their father, having heard that Blakey is on the run, warns them about the danger of talking to strangers or the 'funny people [who are] about these days'. Significantly, the children's mother is missing, and (as in *Tiger Bay*) a rather reluctant aunt has taken her place; while their father is generally somewhat distant – 'I don't know what they're up to half the time', he admits. These absences might be seen to reflect concerns about the need for emotional attachment within the family that were strongly emphasised in theories of child development at the time (for example in the work of psychologists such as Bowlby and Winnicott). Kathy is, on one level, an active agent with a certain degree of power and authority; but she is also rather lost and confused.

Debating 'Disneyfication'

It was on the strength of her performance in *Tiger Bay* that Hayley Mills was awarded her contract with Disney – although it is hard to think of many films featuring

children at this time that are *less* like the output mostly associated with Disney Studios. Before moving on to look at Mills's Disney features, it is important to consider Disney's significance in relation to ideas about childhood, and to unpack the idea of 'Disneyfication' in my title.

In the three decades before the 1960s, the rise of Disney was largely due to its intensive targeting of the children's market – although Disney himself always insisted that his films were intended as 'family entertainment', which would draw in parents as well (and hence prove even more lucrative). From *Steamboat Willie* and the early Mickey Mouse cartoons, right through to its contemporary productions such as the *Toy Story* films, *Cars* and the various 'Disney Princesses', Disney has become almost synonymous with a particular, dominant definition of American childhood. Even today, Disney films tell both parents and children powerful stories both about childhood and about the transition to adulthood.

In his book *Babes in Tomorrowland*, Nicholas Sammond describes how claims about the harmful effects of media on children gained traction in the early 1930s, especially after the coming of sound. While this led to greater censorship (in the form of the Hays Code), it also implicitly raised the question of how movies might be *beneficial* for children – how they might help to raise children as good citizens, rather than misleading them into bad ways. This effectively created a market opportunity: it enabled Disney to present itself as a company whose accumulation of commercial profit could be compatible with 'doing good' for children. By carefully cultivating its wholesome brand identity – and constructing Walt himself as an avuncular but efficient self-made man – the company was able to embed its enormous range of media products and merchandise into most Americans' everyday family lives.

Sammond shows how ideas about child-rearing changed from the highly regulated behaviourist approach of the 1920s and 1930s, based on ideas of 'scientific management' that were being applied in industry, to the moderately permissive approach that arose in the 1950s, most often identified with Dr. Spock. As he argues, these changing ideas were tied up with anxieties about the United States' national identity and its position in the world, initially around the Depression and the New Deal, and subsequently during the Cold War. Media consumption was a particular focus of concern here – especially given the way in which cinema brought different racial groups and social classes together. According to Sammond, Disney's approach involved the imposition of white, middle-class norms of behaviour; and even as it cautiously embraced the more permissive ideas of the 1950s, it also urged the child to conform to narrowly stereotypical but apparently innate gender roles, not only in its cartoons but also in its nature documentaries.

Sammond's account goes beyond familiar arguments about ideological manipulation that are often laid at Disney's door. He argues that these arguments about child-rearing, which were widely circulated in women's magazines and other popular advice literature for parents, effectively created a climate in which Disney could thrive. Disney, he argues, was not an all-powerful agent of thought control, imposing a kind of false consciousness on its audiences: rather, it was meeting (and of course also helping to shape and define) an already perceived need.

However, the view of Disney films as a means of brainwashing is the one that prevails in much of the critical commentary. Despite his status as a kind of American icon, there is a long history of condemnation of Disney, which gathered particular force in the 1960s. In 1965, the critic Frances Clarke Sayers published a classic essay in a children's literature journal, in which she claimed that Disney productions – its animated cartoons in particular – were vulgar, sentimental and clichéd. Disney's versions of classic fairytales, she argued, were crude and simplistic, ironing out moral complexities in favour of a one-dimensional image of 'sweetness and light'. Three years later, Richard Schickel was going further: 'Disney's machine,' he argued, 'was designed to shatter the two most valuable things about childhood – its secrets and its silences – thus forcing everyone to share the same formative daydreams'. Disney was a force for ideological conformity, which was driven by rampant commercialism.

For more recent critics, of whom there have been many, Disney is also a purveyor of sexism, racism, classism, imperialism, and a whole legion of other obnoxious prejudices. The charge of 'Disneyfication', in this account, is partly about a kind of simplification or sanitization: moral tension and complexity are ironed out in favour of simplistic, dumbed-down tales of good and evil. It is also about sentimentality: genuine and profound emotions are substituted by superficial mawkishness and mush. The criticism implies a rejection of Disney's commercialism – and in particular the transformation of 'classic' or sacred children's texts into profitable commodities. Yet it is also, finally, a political charge: Walt Disney himself is presented (admittedly with some good evidence) as a reactionary, even a kind of crypto-fascist, as well as a peddler of xenophobic prejudice.

Few critics seem prepared to defend Disney from such charges, although one notable exception is Douglas Brode, who claims that Disney laid the ground for the counter-culture of the 1960s, and indeed was its 'primary creator'. Brode identifies numerous instances of anti-establishment thinking in Disney films, as well as examples of youth-led rebellion and environmentalism. He is not wrong to identify some more liberal elements in recent Disney output – although much of this (for instance the animated blockbusters of the Eisner era) post-dates both the counter-culture and Disney himself. Yet while his challenge to the narrative of 'Disneyfication' is provocative, Brode's work is undermined by his inaccurate interpretations of the films, and the overstatement of his argument.

Debates about Disney remain highly polarized, not just among critics but also among ordinary parents. Several years ago, I conducted a study of British parents' views, which identified a profound ambivalence. On the one hand, many parents recalled their own childhood experiences of Disney output with nostalgia and affection, and also regarded it as relatively 'safe' for their own children. Yet on the other, many were critical of what they saw as its gender stereotyping, commercialism and sentimentality – and, in the UK context, its 'Americanism'.

While these critical views of Disney were not widely shared in the early 1960s, some of the films of that time – including the ones I consider next – would certainly have provided them with valuable ammunition. On the other hand, we might also expect to see (as we do in *Tiger Bay*) at least some intimations of the changes in the position of children and young people, and of women, that began to gather momentum as the decade progressed.

Nicholas Sammond's account takes us to the dawn of the 1960s, when Hayley Mills's first films for the studio were released; and, like most critics of Disney, he barely looks at the Studio's live action films. Along with its nature documentaries, such films began to appear in the early 1950s, as the animated output began to fade (at least until the late 1980s); and they became the dominant form of Disney production in the 1960s. They included early successes such as *Treasure Island* (1950), *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954) and *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* (1955). Such films were largely targeted at boys; and in this context, Disney's hiring of Mills represented something of a departure – *Pollyanna* was his first live-action feature with a central girl character.

Pollyanna

Sandwiched rather incongruously between the two British films I have discussed was Mills's first Disney feature, *Pollyanna*, released in 1960. Unlike both *Tiger Bay* and *Whistle Down the Wind*, which are arguably films for adults, *Pollyanna* is clearly a children's film, or at least one intended as 'family entertainment': there is hardly anything in this film that would not be understood by most children of cinema-going age. The director, David Swift, had previously worked on Disney's animation and TV productions, and this was his first feature film; it enjoyed a relatively high budget of over \$1 million. Walt Disney took a close personal interest in the project, and reportedly wept on frequent occasions while viewing the daily rushes; he refused Swift's requests to cut the running time, which is just over two hours.

The film is set in the small town of Harrington in the early 1900s: the set closely resembles 'Main Street USA' at Disneyland. Pollyanna, a 12-year-old orphan, arrives to live with her wealthy and domineering Aunt Polly, who effectively controls the town. Pollyanna is a very cheerful, talkative and optimistic child. She tells the inhabitants of the town about the 'glad game' her father had taught her: you should always find something to be glad about, she says, no matter how bad things may seem. As she settles in, Pollyanna gradually transforms the entire community, including the hypochondriac Mrs. Snow, the grumpy recluse Mr. Pendergast, and the hellfire-and-brimstone preacher Reverend Ford – and ultimately even her Aunt Polly. When most of the townspeople want a run-down orphanage rebuilt, Aunt Polly opposes the idea, but they defy her by planning a bazaar to raise funds. Pollyanna subtly persuades Reverend Ford to support the idea, and this proves decisive: the bazaar is a great success. Although Aunt Polly refuses to allow Pollyanna to attend, her playmate Jimmy Bean helps her to escape from the house by climbing down a tree outside her bedroom window. However, when she returns, she slips and falls from the tree and is badly injured. With her legs paralysed, Pollyanna becomes severely depressed, jeopardizing her chance of recovery: it seems that the 'glad game' can no longer do the trick. However, when the townspeople learn of the accident, they arrive *en masse* at Aunt Polly's house with gifts and good wishes. The film ends with Pollyanna leaving Harrington for an operation in Baltimore, which is hoped to secure her recovery.

If ever a film was open to the charge of 'Disneyfication', it would be *Pollyanna* – although I reserve a special place in my heart for *Summer Magic*, to be considered

next. However, it should be noted that both films have their origins in a long tradition of 'sentimental fiction', particularly aimed at girls and women. While this tradition arguably extends back to the early days of the novel (for example, Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*), it continued in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with enormously popular books like *Little Women*, *What Katy Did*, *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Secret Garden* (and their numerous adaptations for film and television).

The original source for *Pollyanna* was a novel by Eleanor Porter, published in 1913. The book sold more than a million copies, and was first adapted for film in 1919, significantly featuring an earlier child star, Mary Pickford. The success of Porter's novel generated a sequel, *Pollyanna Grows Up*, and a series of at least fourteen subsequent *Pollyanna* books (collectively known as the 'Glad Books') by other writers. The book was adapted again for television by the BBC in the 1970s, and by the UK commercial network Carlton in 2003. More implausibly, it also generated a 51-episode *anime* series on Japanese TV, and two Disney musicals with largely African-American casts in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The central theme of these 'sentimental novels' is all about children's agency. The child is seen to have the power to transform everybody around her – not only her extended family (as in *Summer Magic*), but also the wider community (as in *Pollyanna*). One of the closing shots of the film shows the citizens attaching a new sign to the train station as Pollyanna leaves for Baltimore: no longer called just 'Harrington', in reference to the control exercised by Aunt Polly's family, it has also become 'The Glad Town'. As Judy Rosenbaum puts it, Pollyanna is a kind of 'junior fairy godmother': she changes negatives into positives, encouraging all she meets to look on the brighter side of life, and thereby to transform themselves. She unfreezes those who are emotionally frozen or blocked, and humanizes those who are repressed and miserable, enabling them to fulfill the desires they cannot admit even to themselves. By the end of the film, a whole set of new partnerships is formed, both romantic (Aunt Polly and the doctor) and familial (Jimmy Bean is adopted by Mr. Prendergast, and Aunt Polly finally accepts Pollyanna as her daughter).

At the same time, *Pollyanna* helps to precipitate a kind of democratic revolution, which empowers the citizens of the town and challenges the quasi-aristocratic position of her aunt. In the early scenes, we see the townspeople's resentment against Aunt Polly's charity, and their failure to fully stand up to her wealth and power. The bazaar represents self-help, as opposed to charity; yet here too, the people require Pollyanna to set them free. In particular, she enables the priest to liberate himself from Aunt Polly's control, which has extended to defining the tone and content of his sermons: it is Pollyanna's claim that 'nobody can buy a church' and then her mention of the 'glad texts' in the Bible that most incites him to change. While Aunt Polly takes on an almost villainous air, especially when she refuses to allow Pollyanna to attend the bazaar, she too is eventually transformed by the power of Pollyanna's love: in the closing scenes, she becomes both a wife and a mother. This all happens at some personal cost to Pollyanna – in that she becomes an invalid – but the ending suggests that this will only be temporary. While far from radical, the politics of the film reflect a kind of democratic populism that is very prevalent in Disney (and indeed in mainstream Hollywood more broadly).

Pollyanna arrives in a world where adult authority is not to be questioned: in the opening scenes, she is persistently bossed about and told off for showing curiosity about her new environment. Yet as we have seen in other child-centred films, Pollyanna uses her growing knowledge, gained through eavesdropping and observing adults, in order to manipulate them. While she may lie or deceive, she does so for good reasons, and she has an ability to speak the truth (for example, by drawing attention to her aunt's considerable wealth) that adults may wish to efface or conceal.

Pollyanna is significantly more 'girlish' than the characters in Mills's British films, although she retains elements of the tomboy persona. She seems uncomfortable with her Aunt's attempts to make her more 'ladylike', and prefers to run around with Jimmy Bean, getting her new dresses dirty in the process. As in her British films, Mills's performance conveys a degree of unpolished spontaneity – she screws up her face and makes ungainly expressions – although in this context the act seems somewhat more contrived and cute.

Of course, there is a good deal of sentimentality in *Pollyanna* – although (as Rosenbaum suggests) it is debatable whether this is any more apparent than in the original novel, or the broader tradition from which it comes. The ending brings together all the characters, playing on all heart-strings at once; and it is certainly difficult (perhaps particularly for a British viewer) to stomach the sight of Hayley Mills at the bazaar, wrapped in the American flag singing 'America the Beautiful'. Between the release of Porter's original novel and Disney's version almost fifty years later, the word 'Pollyanna' had come to represent a kind of saccharine sentimentality – which, once Pollyanna is paralysed, extends to mawkishness. Although the film makes some changes from the original novel – playing up Aunt Polly's power in the town, and playing down Pollyanna's talkativeness – it doesn't by any means escape this charge.

Summer Magic

Released in 1963, *Summer Magic* was Disney's second adaptation from 'sentimental fiction' to feature Hayley Mills in a leading role. The film is based on a novel by Kate Douglas Wiggin called *Mother Carey's Chickens*, published in 1911. Directed by James Nielson, it also stars Dorothy Maguire and Burl Ives. It has a great many similarities with the earlier film, and I will deal with it more briefly here.

The film takes place in a similarly pastoral setting. Following the death of her husband and the resulting loss of income, Margaret Carey relocates her family from Boston to the small town of Beulah, Maine. Her oldest child, Nancy, has found a likely house for them to live in; and the local community, especially the caretaker and postmaster Osh Popham, are generally welcoming. Osh enables them to rent a house that he is managing on behalf of its owner, Mr. Hamilton, who is travelling overseas. Nancy's orphaned cousin Julia comes to live with them, because of the financial difficulties of her adoptive parents, the Fergusons, to whom she constantly refers. Nancy dislikes Julia's vain and snooty behaviour, and competes with her for the attentions of the handsome new teacher in the town, but she eventually comes to accept her, despite her flaws. Towards the end of the film, as the community

enjoys a Halloween party, the mysterious Mr. Hamilton eventually appears. Unexpectedly, he turns out to be another handsome young man; and he becomes Nancy's partner at the dance.

As in *Pollyanna*, the child operates here as a kind of magical agent. Nancy solves the problem of the family's poverty by finding the house in Maine; she manages to integrate Julia within the family; and she constantly finds solutions to problems caused by the family's lack of money. Where *Pollyanna* focuses on the wider community, the emphasis here is on the family: the absence of the father is made good by the discovery of the grandfatherly Osh, and the family is also able to accommodate a difficult relative. The other residents of the town are only distantly present; yet it is the recovery and health of the happy family that provide the means for it to integrate in the new community.

Summer Magic is significantly more sentimental than *Pollyanna*, if such were possible. Its vision of small-town America is quaint and artificial, although the back-projection doesn't help. Nancy's relentless positivity, and her persistent search for silver linings, quickly become wearing. Stock characters, such as the saintly, warm-hearted and avuncular Osh Popham, and the succession of handsome and bland young men – not to mention the loveable dog – are equally tiresome. This is a world with very little tension or conflict: problems and misunderstandings are quickly resolved, and difficulties are easily overcome. The only obstacles – most notably in the form of Nancy's cousin and rival Julia – are quite quickly incorporated into the harmonious paradise of the family. Even the distant threat of Mr. Hamilton's return – we discover that Osh has been concealing the Carey family's occupation of his house – easily turns out well. As a result – and unlike *Pollyanna* – the film has little narrative drive. The sense of inertia (as well as the nausea quotient) is significantly reinforced by the songs: Burl Ives's version of 'The Ugly Bug Ball' stands out, not least for Disney's gratuitous recycling of footage from his 1950s nature documentaries. All in all, *Summer Magic* makes *Pollyanna* look like *Reservoir Dogs*.

The film's messages about gender also border on the prehistoric. In the world of Beulah, boys will be boys, and girls must learn to be girls. One song in particular will undoubtedly be required viewing for feminists who land up in Hell: in 'Femininity', Nancy and Julia instruct Osh's daughter Lolly Joy in her efforts to 'catch a beau', in the form of Nancy's brother. Femininity, they tell us, is all about passivity, subordination and restraint: 'let him do the talking – men adore good listeners', and 'laugh, but not loudly, should he choose to tell a joke'. Nancy is younger and less obviously feminine than Julia – she is talkative and not always glamorous. Yet although she is initially critical of Julia's vain and flirtatious behaviour, she learns from her cousin's success with the local teacher to 'use her femininity' to her advantage.

Heterosexual romance is certainly on the agenda for the young people here, in a way that it is not in *Pollyanna*, but sex certainly is not. Under Julia's tutelage, Nancy appears to be making some kind of transition to womanhood by the end of the film – 'I just have a different feeling,' she says, 'I didn't feel like this a year ago'. Yet as she dances with Mr. Hamilton in the closing scene, she notably consents to keep her mouth shut.

As William McReynolds points out, Pollyanna's 'glad game' is not only a feature of these two films, but a consistent strategy in Disney's work more broadly. The films proclaim the benefits of looking on the bright side; they reassure us that goodness and virtue will always triumph. This kind of 'positive thinking' is not just an invention of modern pop psychology: it's also apparent, for instance, in the work of the popular mid-century African-American poet Zora Neale Hurston, which Disney would certainly have read. This optimism is frequently embodied in the figure of the child, who has somehow escaped the corruption of adulthood. Like Pollyanna and Nancy Carey, Disney's heroines are often underdogs, but they are determinedly optimistic: it's no coincidence that he also adapted both *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. This positive thinking is only threatened by outsiders who have lost touch with their true feelings, and with true human values (such as Pollyanna's aunt, or the Fergusons in *Summer Magic*): they may have more money than heart, yet they can eventually be saved by the power of the magical child. Only wholehearted villains cannot be redeemed – the queen in *Snow White*, Maleficent in *Cinderella*, Cruella de Vil in *101 Dalmatians* – and their evil exists primarily in order to make the happy ending that much sweeter.

The Parent Trap

Released in 1961, *The Parent Trap* was Mills's second Disney film. Like *Pollyanna*, it was written for the screen and directed by David Swift, and was based on a novel called *Das Doppelte Lottchen (Lotte and Lisa)* by the popular German children's author Erich Kästner. The film was a great success at the box office, generating almost ten times the revenue of *Pollyanna*.

The story begins when two very similar-looking girls, Susan and Sharon, meet at summer camp: both are played by Hayley Mills, using stand-ins and a variety of split-screen and matte effects. Unaware that they are in fact identical twins, the girls initially become rivals, pulling pranks on each other. Eventually they figure out that they are sisters, who were separated shortly after birth when their parents (Mitch and Maggie) divorced. They decide to switch places, eager to meet the parents they have never known, and return to each other's homes in Boston and California respectively. They also hatch a plan to bring their parents back together, suspecting that they still love each other despite the hostility between them. However, they discover that Mitch is shortly due to re-marry, to a gold-digging younger girlfriend named Vicky. In order to stop this, Susan and Sharon decide to reveal their true identities, and the whole family reassembles in California. Through a variety of means, and with the help of their mother, the girls conspire to sabotage Mitch's marriage plans. Just in time, they succeed: Mitch and Maggie rekindle their romance, and the film ends with their wedding, with the girls as maids of honour.

The Parent Trap might be described as a romantic comedy, although it is one in which children occupy the central roles. As in a conventional rom com, the inevitable romantic conclusion is deferred through a variety of obstacles, and the couple realize their true feelings for each other only at the very last minute. While the girls do eventually get in league with their mother, it is they who engineer the eventual reunion, and hence the reassembling of the family. As in the other films I have discussed, children possess a considerable degree of agency here: they often know

more than the adults, extracting information from them that they can later use, and they deceive and manipulate them for their own purposes. In doing so, they often choose to play the role of the angelic, innocent child, even if the viewer knows better. Once again, the child (or children plural, in this case) plays the role of the healer, who magically rights the wrongs that have been caused by the mistakes or delusions of adults. While some adults can be trusted – the wise, benevolent grandfather, the honest family servant – others (such as those who run the summer camp) are seen as merely inept figures of fun.

Nevertheless, there are limits to this fantasy of child empowerment. The children do play mischievous pranks on Mitch's villainous girlfriend Vicky, but they hardly ever challenge their parents' authority: only at one point, where they resist their attempts to make Sharon return home, do they do so directly. Their means of rebellion may be effective, but they are essentially harmless and child-like; and they serve as a primary source of the film's rather basic slapstick comedy.

Furthermore, the children's agency is entirely directed towards the reconstitution of the traditional nuclear family. Steven Watts describes *The Parent Trap* as 'Disney's ultimate expression of domestic ideology'; yet this is an ideology that appears to be implicitly under threat. At several points, the girls refer to the breakdown of the modern family, and its consequences for their friends. Thus, Susan remarks, 'it's scary how nobody stays together any more: pretty soon there's going to be more divorces than marriages'. Both girls resist one potential solution to their problem, that of sharing the children: the 'six month split', they argue, would leave them feeling like a 'yo-yo' or a 'bathroom towel'.

While this might be seen to reflect the social changes of the time, rates of divorce in the United States actually fell during the 1950s, and did not start to rise significantly until the 1970s. Yet for Disney in 1961, it appears that the family is in need of support. The embroidery sampler bearing the legend 'Bless Our Broken Home', which appears in the animated credits at the start of the film, is replaced at the end by one that says 'Bless Our Happy Home': 'broken' families, it seems, cannot be happy ones. And in case we missed it, the message is also reinforced by the song 'Let's get together' that the girls perform for their parents, and whose melody recurs in later scenes.

The unspoken problem here, of course, is sex. It seems that Mitch has been sexually manipulated by his much younger girlfriend, whose motives are primarily financial (and who is supported in this by a scheming future mother-in-law). Although Mitch is conventionally masculine (and is described as such), this is not to say that Maggie herself is passively feminine: she repeatedly stands her ground against Mitch, and at one point even hits him in the eye. However, her determination is primarily focused on her desire to win back her man. With the assistance of the girls, she takes the lead in trying to rekindle their relationship. Following the not-so-subtle hints of her father, she adopts a new hairstyle and more sexually alluring clothes ('using her femininity' again); and when the children are off the scene, she engineers an embrace with Mitch while she cooks a meal for them. What the couple are missing, it appears, is not so much sex as romance; and the girls work hard to evoke the memories of their early relationship, for example by re-staging the scene of their first date.

Significantly, however, Mitch seems just as interested in Maggie's abilities in the kitchen. He looks back wistfully to the domestic realities of femininity 'behind the scenes' – the wet stockings drying in the bathroom, the blunt razor she has used to shave her legs. He even fondly recalls looking after the girls as babies, feeding them and changing their diapers. Even 'masculine' men need romance, it would seem, but they also crave a degree of domesticity. Women are by no means entirely passive here, and men are not merely hunters and warriors. Even so, the gender roles remain highly conventional: if women perform their domestic and romantic roles adequately, it seems that men can be drawn back into the traditional family.

The girls themselves implicitly understand some of this, but as children they remain outside it. In one scene, Sharon tells her father that 'when a girl gets to a certain age, she misses her mother'. Mitch takes this as a cue for the 'father-daughter talk' about sex, and clumsily makes a start. However, it isn't clear to either of them what they are actually talking about; and in any case, Sharon claims 'I've known about all that for simply years'. Later, Sharon torments her father's girlfriend by referring to the large numbers of other women he is seeing; and Vicky warns her not to 'play with the big girls'. Yet for the moment, even at the age of thirteen, the girls remain children, whose knowledge of the adult world needs to be strictly limited.

Biography Part 2: Coming of Age

As I have noted, one of the key difficulties faced by child stars (and especially by girls) is how they revise their image as they grow up, and how successfully they make the transition to adult roles. Some effectively continue as children: Mary Pickford, for example, was still playing 'little Mary' when she was well into her twenties. Others – perhaps those who were more implicitly or explicitly sexual in the first place – seem to make the transition more smoothly: Elizabeth Taylor or Jodie Foster, for example. Many appear to crash and burn in their private lives, and never fully recover, attracting a great deal of voyeuristic publicity in the process: examples here might include Drew Barrymore or Macaulay Culkin (or indeed Michael Jackson). Yet others simply withdraw from the public gaze, or find alternative adult roles, such as Deanna Durbin or Shirley Temple.

Hayley Mills's contract with Disney ended after five years, and was not renewed. I haven't been able to find out whether this was her choice, or Disney's. The Disney Studios might not have had much use for a young adult star, given its emphasis on 'family entertainment'; and yet Mills herself (or indeed her parents) might understandably have wanted out as well. According to Richard Schickel, Mills was quoted in a *New York Times* interview a couple of years later saying that she had enjoyed her time at Disney, but...

...those films were very restricting. Conveyor belt jobs. So goody-good, you know? And there was this image I created which was hideous. I wasn't supposed to be seen drinking or buying cigarettes or smoking in public. The reasoning was that the audiences for the Disney films were very young and if they saw me smoking eight cigars a day, why shouldn't they?

It's also important to bear in mind that this was the mid-1960s. After *Pollyanna*, Disney's publicity machine worked hard to dispel the rather old-fashioned image of Mills that the film had created. According to Steve Watts, 'a torrent of popular newspaper and magazine stories portrayed Mills as an earnest, pretty, unspoiled and personable young woman who was full of didactic moralism but also an active "modern" girl'. Modernity, however, was fraught with risks, not least in the off-screen behaviour of child stars. If Mills's innocent star persona had been viable for a thirteen-year-old in 1960, it wasn't quite so possible or attractive for a nineteen-year-old in 1965.

Mills herself had found it difficult adjusting to her success, and life after Disney was bound to be challenging. She had some success with her first post-Disney film, Columbia's *The Trouble with Angels* (1966), but she then returned to Britain, apparently in search of more adult roles. She worked with her father on two other films that year: *Sky West and Crooked* (from her mother's script, also known as *Gypsy Girl*) and an adult-themed comedy about young newlyweds, *The Family Way*. The latter included a film score by Beatle Paul McCartney, and was critically well received, yet it also put an emphatic end to Mills's career as a child star. While gossip columnists had been somewhat tantalized by her first screen kiss in *The Moon Spinners* (1964), they were exceptionally over-excited about the film's brief nude scene. This was compounded by the fact that she had begun an affair with the film's director, Roy Boulting, who was 33 years her senior. Mills went on to live with Boulting for five years after he divorced his wife.

Many years later, in an interview with *People* magazine, Hayley Mills confessed that she had developed an eating disorder in the latter years of her time at Disney, which she did not overcome until her first pregnancy. Her sense of confusion and lack of confidence at this time is apparent in a television interview for the British programme *Inside Film*, conducted in 1967, when she was 21. Caught at an awkward moment of transition, Mills seems quite uncomfortable, frequently looking down, almost hiding from the camera, and playing with her hair. She describes herself as 'terribly lucky' to have won her Disney contract, but she clearly has some regrets. 'I have been in the hands of other people for a long time,' she says, 'and it's not what I want to do now'. Yet in terms of the future, she appears quite uncertain. 'I believe myself to be an actress', she says, and expresses a wish to 'start again', and see how far she will be accepted within the theatre world: she mentions wanting to perform in Ibsen and Chekhov. However, she remains very uncertain about the future:

This whole business is so ephemeral, and... you really just have no idea what tomorrow is going to bring. So I don't make plans for the future, because I fear they'll be thwarted. Because I don't have much confidence in... ahead, really.

The interviewer Barbara Kelly presses her about newspaper stories to do with her 'growing up', and particularly the gossip about her and Roy Boulting. Mills worries that she will be seen as 'frivolous', or as having a 'father fixation', but she insists that they are in love. Asked which films she is most proud of, she fails to name any, although she does suggest that they are 'not necessarily the most successful ones'. Success, she implies, has not bred confidence but insecurity, both financial and emotional.

Hayley Mills continued to act in mostly British movies until taking a break in 1975. Her popularity was waning, and several films with Boulting as director did not do well, either critically or commercially. While her career as a child star was clearly over, it seemed as though she was unable to make the transition to becoming an adult actor, at least in the medium of film. By 1976, as the Internet Movie Database charitably puts it, her film career had pretty much tanked. Mills appeared in three Disney TV-movie sequels to *The Parent Trap* in the late 1980's, and in British TV series including *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1981), *Good Morning, Miss Bliss* (1987) and *Wild at Heart* (2007-2012). A series of unhappy break-ups led her to religion, although she later denied rumours that she had joined the Hare Krishna movement. Since the end of her marriage with Roy Boulting, several of her partners have been significantly younger than her. Mills has done very few films in recent years, and much of her work is now in the theatre.

In the final section of this essay, I want to return to two films from the final stages of Mills's career as a child star: the British-made melodrama *The Chalk Garden* and her last Disney film, the comedy *That Darn Cat!* In different ways, both illustrate some of the difficulties of a child star 'coming of age' – particularly in the mid-1960s.

Awkward transitions

The Chalk Garden (1964) is a film adaptation of a stage play by the British author Enid Bagnold, probably best known for her book *National Velvet*. The play was first performed on Broadway in 1955, and three years later in London's West End. Directed by Ronald Neame, the film stars John Mills, Deborah Kerr and Edith Evans (who was nominated for an Oscar as Best Supporting Actress), alongside Hayley Mills. It was produced by Ross Hunter, who (among many other films) is especially well known for his work on a series of 1950s melodramas directed by Douglas Sirk: *Magnificent Obsession*, *All that Heaven Allows* and *Imitation of Life*.

The plot of *The Chalk Garden* is somewhat convoluted, to say the least. Mills's character Laurel is a troubled and deceitful sixteen-year-old who appears to have been abandoned by her mother when she remarried, and sent to live with her domineering grandmother in a large country house. Her grandmother engages a new governess, Miss Madrigal, who has few qualifications for the job, and appears to have dark secrets of her own. Laurel spies on Miss Madrigal, in the hope of finding out information that will force her to quit her job: she eventually discovers that she had been tried and imprisoned for murdering her step-sister many years previously. Meanwhile, the grandmother is resisting the mother's attempts to take Laurel back, accusing her of being an 'unfit mother'. Miss Madrigal, who recognizes something of herself in Laurel's troubled feelings, realizes that reuniting with her mother would be the best outcome for her emotional health; and this is what she eventually achieves.

The Chalk Garden might be described as a psychological mystery, although it has strong elements of melodrama. Ross Hunter's influence is especially apparent in the insistent use of music, the somewhat lurid Technicolor, and the occasionally expressionistic camerawork. At the same time, the film betrays its origins as a stage play. There is a kind of literary pomposity about the dialogue, much of it delivered with cut-glass English elocution. The film is also infused with some tiresome

symbolism, whose significance is repeatedly explained lest we miss the point. For example, the barren chalk garden of the title represents the grandmother's emotional sterility, and she engages Miss Madrigal largely because she promises to cultivate it. Like Laurel, the garden is lacking in the food (that is, the emotional nourishment and love) that will help it to grow. There is also an element of overt psychobabble that provides an additional level of explanation, as when Laurel announces early in the film that her problems are 'Freudian'. The captions in the film's trailer neatly summarise the motivations of the two main female characters: 'a girl who defied life yet longed for love... a woman who longed for love yet fled from life... both running from affection – yet starved for love'. It is Miss Madrigal who finally teaches Laurel to love – and at the very end, it seems as though she might be able to teach her grandmother as well. The film's psychological lessons could hardly be clearer. In all these respects, *The Chalk Garden* appears quite old-fashioned: stylistically and in terms of its content and themes, it seems to belong to the mid-1950s rather than the decade in which it was made.

Mills's character, Laurel, is described in the trailer as 'sixteen and outrageous', and by other characters in the film itself as 'troubling' and 'frightening'. Apparently alienated by her mother's remarriage, she has developed a destructive streak, and enjoys setting fires while screaming rather unconvincingly. She tells elaborate lies, affects a kind of nihilistic despair, and is insolent and sarcastic – although her acid tongue is more than matched by the highly polished repartee of the adults around her. Laurel is troubled by sex, and frequently makes flaunting references to it: she describes her mother as 'a Jezebel, overloaded with sex', and says that Miss Madrigal has led 'a sex life of fire and brimstone' – although she later suggests to Miss Madrigal that her duties should include sex education, arguing that she will have to learn about it eventually. Even so, the full causes of her condition are never made clear – for example, it is not certain whether she was raped or sexually assaulted at some point – and she seems to be caught up in a semi-fictional world of accusations and fantasies.

Nevertheless, Laurel looks somewhat younger than the sixteen-year-old she is supposed to be: Mills's bland, fresh face, wide eyes and neat blonde hair make her look somewhat too angelic for the part. At the same time, the adults consistently refer to her as a 'child', which in many respects she clearly is not. As a character, Laurel displays some of the characteristics of Jim Stark, James Dean's character from *Rebel Without a Cause*, made ten years earlier, although Mills's performance has little of the emotional anguish of Dean. For much of the time, Laurel/Mills appears to be *playing the role* of the 'troubled adolescent', almost as though it were a self-conscious affectation, or a form of attention-seeking; and while it may be that this is how she is supposed to appear, for much of the time she seems lacking in conviction, and distinctly less than 'frightening'.

That Darn Cat! (1965), Mills's final Disney production, is a very different kind of film, yet some of the same problems and limitations are apparent here too. Directed by Robert Stevenson, and based on the novel *Undercover Cat*, it is essentially a light comedy thriller. In terms of box office, the film narrowly overtook *The Parent Trap* to become Mills's most successful Disney movie: it was remade in 1997.

Mills plays a suburban teenager, Patti Randall, who lives with her older sister Ingrid and their cat 'DC' (their parents are conveniently absent, travelling abroad). Through a series of coincidences, Patti comes to believe that DC knows the whereabouts of two hoodlums who have kidnapped a bank-teller in a robbery. She approaches an FBI agent, Zeke Kelso, who sets up base in the house, and they proceed to track the cat's movements at night through a series of comical chase sequences. Needless to say, the criminals are eventually apprehended; and in the final scenes, various romantic sub-plots (between Ingrid and Zeke, between Patti and her surfing-obsessed boyfriend Canoe, and even one involving DC himself) are safely resolved.

Like *The Parent Trap*, the film contains a good deal of farcical comedy and slapstick, especially as the FBI agents attempt to follow the cat. It would seem that Disney's own right-wing politics, and his granting of script approval to J. Edgar Hoover, did not preclude a degree of harmless, light-hearted satire here. Meanwhile, Mills's role as a child investigator comes straight out of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories, a children's book series that was enjoying a revival at the time.

As in *The Chalk Garden*, there is a good deal in the film that seems to come from the mid-1950s rather than the mid-1960s. The swinging title song by Bobby Darin; the kidnapping hoodlums, who talk in the lingo of 1930s gangster movies; the clean-cut FBI agent; the drive-in movie theatre, and the surfing movies Canoe takes Patti to see – all show very few signs of the cultural changes of the 1960s that were well under way at the time. The setting is also very safely suburban, white and middle-class. DC takes off to the city on his nightly perambulations, but it is hardly a dangerous ghetto: indeed, it is hard to see it as anything other than the cardboard back-lot at Burbank Studios where it was filmed.

There are several intimations of romance in the film, although sex barely rears its head. The girls are spied upon by their prurient neighbour Mrs. MacDougall, although she has little to fear. Canoe comes and goes from the Randalls' house – he enjoys 'kitchen privileges' – but his relationship with Patti seems entirely chaste and domestic: despite his boyish interest in surfing, he actually smokes a pipe, like a middle-aged suburban father. Meanwhile, Patti adjusts her clothing a little in order to gain the attention of Agent Kelso when she first meets him, but his romantic interests eventually focus on her older sister. The only notable sign of actual sex is in the closing shots, where we see that DC has fathered a set of kittens with a long-haired cat he had been courting earlier in the film.

According to Ron DePeter, there is a level of mild sexual innuendo and flirtation in the original novel, which is largely missing from the film. Nevertheless, DePeter tries hard to find such elements in the Disney version. He writes about Mills's 'simmering, paradoxical sensuality' and her 'burgeoning womanhood', describing her as 'dazzlingly sexy'. He argues that the film contains 'echoes of sexual liberation' and 'hints of feminism', and that Patti is 'freer and more sexually progressive' than the role of Lolita, for which (as I have noted) Mills was once considered. It may be that I like my coffee a little stronger, but frankly I find this quite unconvincing - and perhaps a little reminiscent of Graham Greene. Far from being a 'quasi-feminist depiction of autonomous, independent, and sexually liberated women', the Randall sisters seem entirely tame and conventional. Both are effectively partnered up by the end of the film, in a wholly chaste and unthreatening way. At the age of nineteen, Hayley Mills

resembles nobody so much as Doris Day, the middle-aged, pastel-clad icon of 1950s domestic femininity.

At least in these two films, it seems that – like many child stars – Mills was struggling to make the transition to more adult roles. As she later acknowledged, in discussing *The Chalk Garden*: ‘that was a difficult time for me... I was moving out of childhood and developing into another kind of actress, because I was developing into a woman. It was new territory and I wasn’t sure of myself.’ If she appears uncomfortable and implausible as a troubled adolescent, her role in *That Darn Cat!* seems bland and lacking in individuality. Sexuality might serve as one obvious marker of a transition to adulthood; yet while sex is certainly referred to in *The Chalk Garden* – albeit primarily as a means for Laurel to outrage the adults – in *That Darn Cat!* it seems to be largely repressed.

At the same time, both films also seem to reflect difficulties in making the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s. While *The Chalk Garden* might be seen to make implicit reference to the ‘youth revolution’ of the 1960s, Laurel is mostly confined to the claustrophobic atmosphere of the house and family. There are no other young people in the film, and no evidence of anything remotely approaching ‘youth culture’. Likewise, the young people of *That Darn Cat!* – like much else in the film – seem to have walked straight out of the 1950s: they are bland, suburban, and entirely wholesome. In different ways, the style of these films also seems to look backwards – to 1950s melodrama, and to comedy capers of an earlier age. Ultimately, both seem distinctly old-fashioned for the time in which they were made.

Conclusion

Hayley Mills became a child star on the cusp of a period of great social and cultural change. By definition, a child star is a temporary phenomenon; and making the transition to adult roles is rarely straightforward. Like many others before and since, Mills clearly found the inevitable end of her career as a child star to be uncomfortable and difficult, both personally and professionally. This was compounded by the historical period in which it took place. Her films towards the end of this period seemed to be unable to take account of emerging changes in the social position of young people more broadly, and of young women in particular.

The contrast between Mills’s experiences in low-budget British films and in the Disney Studios must have made this transition more difficult than it might otherwise have been. *Tiger Bay* and *Whistle Down the Wind* offer very different representations of childhood from the Disney version – and very different opportunities for Mills as an actor. Of course, the production context of Disney Studios was (and still is) very different from that of independently produced British cinema, in all sorts of obvious ways. Yet in these two British films, there is an element of genuine spontaneity in her performances.

It was this spontaneity that Disney clearly noticed, and yet in taking it and using it, he transformed it into something merely cute. Mills later credited her time at Disney for giving her the opportunity to ‘learn her craft’; but in fact it was a particular kind of craft she was learning – and one that did not easily transfer to more mature, adult

roles. In her Disney films, it is as though Mills is self-consciously *acting the part* of a child, and doing so in quite narrowly defined terms. When she could no longer do this, there was really nowhere for her to go. In this sense, Hayley Mills was 'Disneyfied', in a way that did not ultimately serve her very well.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

Surprisingly, there is no **biography** (official or unofficial) of Mills, and very little in the way of memoir or autobiography. I have gleaned information from various popular magazine stories available online, as well as a variety of more-and-less reputable sources, including:

Internet Movie Database:

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001539/bio>

Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hayley_Mills

Reel Classics:

<http://www.reelclassics.com/Actresses/Hayley/hayley.htm>

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Senior City: 'Celebrating seniors: Hayley Mills turns 70', 2016:

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I have also quoted from a short interview with Mills in Brian McFarlane's *An Autobiography of British Cinema* (London, Methuen, 1997); and consulted various TV and radio interviews to be found on YouTube, although these are mostly less than illuminating. The exception to this is the British TV interview with Mills, conducted in 1967, available online from the British Film Institute:

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-hayley-mills-1967-online>.

On **child stardom**, my main source here has been Gaylyn Studlar's book *Precocious Charms: Stars Performing Girlhood in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

There is a vast literature on **Disney**, although very little of it focuses on the studio's live action films. I reviewed some of this many years ago in an article for *Media, Culture and Society*, 'Dissin' Disney: critical perspectives on children's media culture': <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016344397019002010>. My study of British parents' views of Disney is contained in the book *Dazzled by Disney? The Global Disney Audiences Project* edited by Janet Wasko, Mark Phillips and Eileen Meehan (London: Leicester University Press, 2001).

I have made some use here of Richard Schickel's *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art, and Commerce of Walt Disney* (3rd edition, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997: first published 1968) and Steven Watts's *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press, 1997). Specifically relating to the issue of childhood, I have particularly drawn on Nicholas Sammond's *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). Frances Clarke Sayers' essay 'Disney Accused: Interview with Charles M. Weisenberg' (1965) was published in the *Horn Book Magazine* 41: 602-11. Douglas Brode's rather idiosyncratic view of Disney can be found in *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2004).

Several of the Disney DVDs of Mills's films contain 'making of' documentaries, all predictably glowing with praise and lacking in information.

Critical analyses of specific films

The book *Walt Disney, from Reader to Storyteller*, edited by Kathy Merlock Jackson and Mark I. West (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015) is also rather dominated by adoration for Disney, but it contains some useful essays on these films:

Judy Rosenbaum, 'Adapting *Pollyanna* for the space age';
Susan Larkin, 'The sentimental novel: community, power and femininity' [on *Pollyanna* and *Summer Magic*]; and
Ron dePeter, 'Hayley Mills and the constraints of artifice in *That Darn Cat!*'

In order of appearance, I also refer to:

Chibnall, Steve (2000) *J. Lee Thompson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) [section on *Tiger Bay*]

Williams, Melanie (2005) "'I'm not a lady!'" *Tiger Bay* (1959) and transitional girlhood in British cinema on the cusp of the 1960s', *Screen* 46(3): 361-372

Brewer, Sandy (2000) "'Who do you say I am?' Jesus, gender and the (working-class) family romance', in Sally Munt (ed.) *Cultural Studies and the Working Class* (London: Bloomsbury) [background on *Whistle Down the Wind*]

Dux, Sally (2012) 'Allied Film Makers: crime, comedy and social concern', *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 9(2): 198-213 [context for *Whistle Down the Wind*]

McReynolds, William (1974) 'Disney plays "the glad game"', *Journal of Popular Culture* 7(4): 787-796 [on *Pollyanna*]