

Before London started swinging: representing the British beatniks

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In his autobiography, *Personal Copy*, the journalist and broadcaster Ray Gosling describes a feeling of imminent change that was shared by many young people at the very end of the 1950s:

There was just this feeling... that we were important, that something was going to happen. How, and in what direction, we didn't know. And we didn't much care. It was a very, very, very odd feeling, but we felt it.

Gosling himself came from a frugal working-class background in the provincial English city of Northampton. In 1959, he dropped out of university and set up a youth centre in Leicester that was run autonomously by a committee of young people. The academic Richard Hoggart – the author of *The Uses of Literacy*, who was soon to become the founding director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University – was on his management committee. Although Gosling's youth centre collapsed, he developed the argument for youth-led welfare provision in a pamphlet for the Fabian Society; and he went on to build a career as a writer and public speaker, offering an insider's perspective on the emerging youth culture of the time. He became associated with the New Left, and began to mix in the more cosmopolitan culture of London's coffee bars, making friends with Stuart Hall (then the editor of the *New Left Review*) and the novelist Colin Maclnnes, whom he described as his 'mentor'.

In this essay, I aim to capture some of the feeling of impending change that Gosling describes. I want to look at a key moment of transition in the history of modern youth culture in Britain, shortly before the more spectacular explosions of the 1960s. I will be focusing on a range of films, books and other publications that almost all appeared in the year 1959. These include the films *Beat Girl*, *Expresso Bongo* and *The Lambeth Boys*; Colin Maclnnes's novel *Absolute Beginners* (and its much later adaptation into film); and other writing by the cast I have already introduced, including Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall. Self-evidently, these are all *representations* of youth culture, or responses to it, rather than accurate documentary sources. Yet in very different ways, they also capture something of the changes – the sense that *something was going to happen* – that Gosling was seeking to identify.

Among other events, 1959 was the year of the second annual march organized by the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the first to go from the nuclear base at Aldermaston to a closing rally in London's Trafalgar Square. It was also the year of London's first 'Caribbean Carnival', which subsequently became the Notting Hill Carnival, still Europe's largest street festival. Meanwhile, the following year saw young people 'rioting' and fighting with police in the implausibly bucolic surroundings of the Beaulieu Jazz festival.

If these things might be taken as early indications of the counter-cultural developments of the 1960s, it's important to see them in their wider context. As the historian Robert Hewison suggests, the cultural changes that had begun to appear around 1956 were rapidly gathering pace by the end of the decade: by 1960, he argues, various opposing forces were at a 'point of balance'. The latter half of the 1950s had seen a release of the constraints and privations of wartime: food rationing didn't end until 1954, and compulsory army service was not phased out until 1960. This was a period of full employment and growing affluence, not least among young people. The debacle of Suez marked a key break in Britain's position as a world power, and was followed by the gradual withdrawal of the Empire; and yet, with increasing migration from the former colonies, the country was also becoming more multicultural and globally oriented. Within the arts and literature, Hewison suggests, there was a gradual break-up of the cultural consensus, and a growing challenge to the authority of what was becoming known as 'the Establishment'.

Thus, 1959 also saw the release of the film version of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, the play that gave the 'Angry Young Men' their label; and the publication of the novels *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and *Room at the Top*, which challenged conventional values from a more distinctively working-class, Northern perspective. Meanwhile, the Obscene Publications Act, passed in 1959, was followed by the trial of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960, which marked a dramatic shift in the public representation of sex and sexuality. Lest we become carried away, it's important to note that 1959 also saw the Conservatives achieve a third successive election victory, increasing their majority to 100 seats: the Labour Party was in disarray, and more fundamental political change did not emerge for some years to come. Yet this year also saw the founding of the influential *New Left Review*, formed from two earlier publications, which gave voice to more radical challenges to traditional Labour politics, not least among academics associated with what came to be called 'Cultural Studies'.

Of course, by no means all these changes were directly related to young people. Nevertheless, it's possible as this point to detect the early emergence of a distinctive form of cosmopolitan youth culture, at least in London. It was by no means the first youth culture, of course – and indeed in many respects it defined itself in opposition to a previous, much more working-class youth cultural 'tribe', the Teddy Boys. It was also by no means homogeneous or coherent. Rather, what we see here is the overlap between a number of contemporaneous developments. In addition to the wider changes Hewison identifies, there was London's existing bohemian culture, which began to spread beyond the drinking dens of Soho and Chelsea; the commercial music business, which sought to capitalize on the growing affluence of young people, with a succession of youthful rock-and-roll performers; the influence of mass immigration, particularly from the West Indies, in response to British government recruitment campaigns; and the concerns of a group of leftist intellectuals and commentators (such as Hoggart and Hall), who felt a growing need to understand the 'youth question', and thereby to engage young people more actively in politics. All these elements will recur in the stories and debates that follow.

Looking yonder: the beat generation

The label that was most frequently attached to these new cultural movements was that of 'beat' or 'beatnik'. The term itself was imported from the United States, along with some of the work of the 'Beat Generation' authors. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* was published in Britain in 1958, while William Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* appeared the following year; and, perhaps more significantly, the same year saw a collection entitled *Protest: The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men* (edited by Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg), which included Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and other US writers alongside British 'angries' like John Wain, Kingsley Amis, John Osborne and Colin Wilson – with whom, by any measure, they had little in common. Furthermore, as we'll see, one of the fundamental issues at stake in the emerging debates about youth culture was to do with 'Americanisation'; and so before moving on to the specific context of London, England, it's important to address this transatlantic connection.

The notion of a 'Beat Generation' dates back to 1948, and apparently arose in a conversation between Kerouac and the novelist John Clellon Holmes (although the term itself is sometimes attributed to the street hustler – and later writer – Herbert Hunke). 'Beat' seems to imply a kind of exhaustion or weariness with the demands of the conventional world; but it also implicitly refers to the rhythmic beat of jazz (rather than rock-and-roll); and to a religious or mystical sense of the 'beatific' (as many of the beats flirted, and in some cases fully engaged, with Buddhism). While Kerouac himself seems to have tired of the label, it was energetically taken up by the poet Allen Ginsberg, who effectively became the beats' leading publicist and entrepreneur.

Accounts of the beats tend to focus heavily on the trinity of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs. Others – not least the very few women and African-American writers associated with the movement – tend to be relegated to the sidelines. These three writers are remarkably different in many respects, and hardly amount to a literary movement, let alone a 'generation'. Nevertheless, they shared a sense of alienation from what they saw as the shallowness, conformity and materialism of US consumer culture. Although Ginsberg later came to align himself with the counter-culture, the beats were far from explicitly political: they believed that revolutionary change would follow from personal liberation, and by dropping out of mainstream society. This escape took various forms, from the vagabond travelling of Kerouac through to the oblivion of alcoholism and heroin addiction, as well as the introspection of religious meditation. There is a strange mixture here of bohemian hedonism and ascetic spirituality: the beats sought a kind of authenticity in the skid rows and flophouses of the urban underclass, but also in the spontaneity of Buddhism, with its belief in the impermanence of human existence. In many respects, there was a considerable continuity between the individualism of the beats and that of the society they appeared to be rejecting. Nevertheless, there's no doubt that the beats both prefigured and influenced the counter-culture of the later 1960s – although only Ginsberg made the transition into a fully-fledged hippie (Kerouac was significantly more scathing about what followed, and became steadily more conservative, not to mention more inebriated, as the decade progressed).

The beats were ridiculed by most leading representatives of mainstream literary culture at the time. Critics sought to puncture their image of themselves as revolutionaries, accusing them of empty posturing: the beat style, they argued, was merely conformist in its own way. However, more recent accounts of the beat writers seem to share the breathless mythologizing that was apparent in many of their pronouncements at the time. A great deal has been written about their lives, but much less about their work: a few celebrated stories are told and re-told (Kerouac typing *On the Road* on a long roll of paper, Burroughs accidentally shooting his wife), yet there are very few detailed critical analyses of beat writing itself. David Sterritt usefully challenges the claim that their writing was all about spontaneous improvisation, and that this was something they shared with jazz; and he also points to their dubious attitudes towards Jews and African-Americans. Nevertheless, much contemporary writing about the beats is merely celebratory: a more measured, critical account is sorely needed.

By contrast, the term 'beatnik' was a label imposed from outside, having been coined by the journalist Herb Caen in 1958. It was intended to be a satirical conflation of 'beat' with 'Sputnik', the Soviet space satellite that seemed to embody the hopes and fears of the nuclear age. Subsequent media representations – including the parodic advertisements featured in the illustrated version of this essay – combined to create a familiar stereotype. Thus, beat men sported goatee beards, striped sailor shirts or black turtlenecks, sandals and berets, and wore dark sunglasses, even indoors and at night. Beat women wore tight black sweaters or smocks, black tights or cropped jeans, and went barefoot; and their ghostly white complexion was accentuated by heavy black mascara. Beatniks had their own lingo, largely derived from the 'jive talk' of jazz musicians. They recited poetry and played the bongo drums, while drinking espresso coffee, smoking marijuana and discussing existentialism late into the night. In many respects, the beatniks were the precursors of our modern-day 'hipsters' – and indeed that term was often used to describe them. They were certainly just as vulnerable to parody.

Of course, this was a stereotype – albeit one that was arguably just as inaccurate as the beats' own generalizations about the consumerism and conformity they claimed to be opposing. These images were recycled in numerous beat-themed movies, and while some – such as *The Beat Generation* (1959) and *The Beatniks* (1960) – can be considered 'exploitation films', others involved the beat writers themselves – notably Robert Frank's *Pull My Daisy* (1959), and an adaptation of Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* (1960). Perhaps the most famous beatnik of all was the character of Maynard G. Krebs in the popular TV sitcom *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959-63) – although it would be remiss not to mention Shaggy in the cartoon *Scooby Doo* (even if he didn't appear until 1969). Popular comedians, especially Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl, also played heavily on the beatnik persona, albeit in a semi-parodic manner. And there were countless beat jokes and cartoons, which largely reinforced the stereotype of beats as lazy, incoherent, self-consciously cool and phony.

While such popular media images might have seemed a long way from the revolutionary literary aspirations of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, these authors also undoubtedly courted media attention on their own behalf. The 'beat generation' was to a large extent a media creation, and the difference between the beat and the beatnik (or between reality and representation) was not always easy to discern.

While such images might have been intended to be satirical – or even, as in some of the films, to serve as a kind of moral warning to the young – that is not to say that they were always read in the same light by young people themselves.

The beats and the angries

It's doubtful whether many British writers would have identified as 'beats'. Among the possible exceptions are Alexander Trocchi, who hailed from Glasgow but lived in Paris and then New York in the early 1960s, and whose semi-autobiographical account of his heroin addiction *Cain's Book* (1960) was quite at odds with other literary trends in the UK at the time. Another might be Michael Horowitz, who founded the poetry journal *New Departures* in 1959 while a student at Oxford, and later invited Ginsberg to London for the first International Poetry Incarnation at the Albert Hall in 1965 – although he is of a slightly younger generation. However, none of the other writers I'll be referring to here even mentions the American beats; and there are many aspects of the beat 'ideology' (if that's the right term) that do not easily transfer to the UK – such as their religiosity, or their infatuation with the open road.

As I've noted, parallels were sometimes made between the beats and the 'Angry Young Men', a label that began to be used in the UK in the mid-1950s. Like the beats, the 'angries' were primarily a literary phenomenon, and most of their key members were well into their twenties when they emerged (the playwright John Osborne was 26 when his play *Look Back in Anger* was first staged in London). The label 'Angry Young Men' was applied to a wide range of writers, who arguably never saw themselves as a 'movement': there are considerable differences, for example, between Kingsley Amis's comic novel *Lucky Jim* (1954) and the working-class social realism of Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), let alone Colin Wilson's erratic exploration of literary existentialism, *The Outsider* (1956). The angries appeared to give voice to a resentment against the repression and hypocrisy of conventional middle-class morality that (they claimed) was widely shared among young people. Yet despite their claims to speak on behalf of young people, it's hard to see either the beats or the Angry Young Men as instances of 'youth culture'. For this, we will need to look elsewhere.

Youth culture and the rise of the young consumer

The first sighting of the term 'youth culture' is generally traced to an article by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons, published in 1942. This is not, of course, to suggest that there was no such thing as youth culture before that time, as a range of historical studies has shown. However, the widespread identification or *labelling* of youth culture as a distinct social phenomenon – not only in academic and journalistic commentary, but also in popular culture – is largely a post-War development. Parsons' claim that there were rituals, tastes and practices that were specific to young people – and that there was a gap between them and older generations – became widely accepted in the US in the 1950s, although (for various reasons) the UK may have lagged somewhat behind in this respect.

The Teddy Boys are generally identified as the first post-War British youth culture. While one can detect signs of the Ted style in the early 1950s (see my discussion of the film *Cosh Boy* (1953) in an earlier essay), it did not fully coalesce until the middle of the decade. The Teds were identified by their distinctive dress (an assemblage of long 'Edwardian' drape jackets, crepe-soled 'brothel creeper' shoes, cowboy-style bootlace ties, and elaborate quiff hairstyles), as well as their enthusiasm for early rock-and-roll. They achieved notoriety largely as a result of the rioting that accompanied the release of the film *Rock Around the Clock* in 1956; and as we shall see, they were also implicated in the attacks on West Indian immigrants that precipitated the Notting Hill Riots of 1958. The Teddy Boys were very clearly working-class, and their style has been interpreted as an attempt to defend their social status at a time when it was under threat from wider social changes of the time. In this sense, they might almost be seen as a throwback – an attempt to cling on to an identity that was gradually being swept away by the onward rush of modernity.

By the end of the decade, the Teds were already beginning to fade, and a new breed of young, largely working-class consumers was taking their place. Mark Abrams's short report *The Teenage Consumer*, published in 1959, is often cited as an early indication of the 'discovery' of the youth market in Britain – a discovery (or indeed an invention) that seems to have taken place some years later than in the United States. Published by the London Press Exchange, a major advertising agency, and based on market research conducted by his own company, Research Services Ltd., Abrams's report maps the emergence of what he describes as a 'newly enfranchised' consumer group. Abrams uses an extended definition of the teenager, as those aged between 15 (the point of leaving school) and 25, although he excludes those who are married; and on this basis, he estimates that they represent around 5 million people, approximately 13% of the British population. According to Abrams's research, the spending power of this group had doubled in real terms between 1938 and 1958, as young people had moved into what he terms 'modern jobs' – engineering and building for young men, and retail, nursing and secretarial work for young women.

Abrams notes that the expenditure patterns of this group were dominated by media and leisure (cinema admissions, records, popular magazines, clothing, soft drinks). As he puts it:

... the quite large amount of money at the disposal of Britain's average teenager is spent mainly on dressing up in order to impress other teenagers and on goods which form the nexus of teenage gregariousness outside the home. In other words, this is distinctive teenage spending for distinctive teenage ends in a distinctive teenage world.

Despite this insistence on age-defined identities, Abrams's account is principally concerned with *working-class* youth – a characteristic that differentiates it from the more class-blind approach of early research on the youth market undertaken in the US by Eugene Gilbert and others. Middle-class youth and the small minority then in full-time education are explicitly ignored: Abrams suggests that 'not far short of 90 per cent of all teenage spending is conditioned by working class taste and values'.

Abrams argues that the distinctiveness of this market in terms of both age and class poses a significant new challenge for marketers and manufacturers (for whom his report is principally written). The teenage years, he argues, are 'a period of intense preoccupation with discovering one's identity', and teenagers are looking for products that are 'highly charged emotionally' – something that will be difficult for the 'middle-aged industrialist' to understand. In terms of class, Abrams argues, 'post-War British society has little experience in providing for prosperous working-class teenagers':

The aesthetic of the teenage market is essentially a working-class aesthetic and probably only entrepreneurs of working class origin will have a 'natural' understanding of the needs of this market.

The influence of American culture on working class youth is seen as a further problem in this respect: 'it is difficult', Abrams argues, 'for the middle-aged British manufacturer to adopt the styles and language and appeals of American manufacturers concerned with the teenage market'.

In general, Abrams's account of this market is fairly non-judgmental. In a follow-up report, published in 1961, he speculates about the impact of new weekly magazines (such as *Reveille* and *Valentine*) that were popular with working class young readers, but largely ignored by their middle class counterparts:

This bias is so marked that almost any research on adolescence might well start by asking why working class young people on leaving school and starting adult life stand in such acute psychological need of what is provided by these publications.

Yet aside from this slightly awkward moralistic note, Abrams's stance is generally neutral, and even seeks to defend young people against the negative perceptions of adults. The economic enfranchisement of the teenager, he argues, has provided

... the chance to be himself and show himself, and has misled a number of people, especially some elderly ones, into the belief that the young of mid-twentieth-century Britain are something new and perhaps ominous. We ourselves see no cause for alarm, and not much for diagnosing novelty except in the new levels of spending power and their commercial effects. There remains the ancient need for the older to understand the younger, and we now confront a business necessity for this understanding, as well as the older moral and psychological imperatives.

Subsequent writers have questioned Abrams's rather generalized account. Adrian Horn and David Fowler, among others, have argued that the affluence he identifies did not extend far beyond London, and that it was generally much less apparent than in the United States. Nevertheless, as we'll see, this view of the affluent young consumer was a recurring theme, both in academic and journalistic commentary, and in fictional representations. Along with the associated rise of the popular music industry, it represented a particular concern for those on the political left, who feared that it might neutralize the potential appeal of socialist ideas, and undermine the gains of the post-War welfare state.

Beatniks: a middle-class youth culture?

As I've noted, Abrams' focus is primarily on working-class youth: he dismisses middle-class youth largely because of their lack of independent spending power. However, one can also identify the first signs of a more middle-class youth culture that began to appear – especially in London – at around this time, and which eventually led on to the more celebrated youth movements of the 1960s. These developments were quite diverse, and are probably best thought of in terms of overlapping trends rather than distinct tribes like the Teds.

The 'beatnik' style was perhaps more widely taken up in the UK than the work of the beat writers themselves. The 1959 film *Beat Girl*, which I'll be discussing below, is a case in point – although in fact the film was originally entitled *Striptease Girl*, and was paradoxically renamed *Wild for Kicks* in the US. The girl of the title is an art student, but she is also distinctly affluent. The following year, the much-parodied TV reporter Alan Whicker ran an item for the ITV news magazine programme *Tonight* (available on YouTube), in which councillors and older residents in the Cornish town of Newquay were interviewed about their attempts to be rid of a plague of long-haired, apparently 'dirty' beatniks. Again, the beatniks interviewed appeared to be middle-class students seeking to live inexpensively through the summer break; and one of them notably responds by singing a Woody Guthrie-style folk-song.

These British beatniks (if such they can be called) shared some characteristics with their American counterparts. There were some overlaps in styles of dress and appearance (berets, sandals, sunglasses, beards), although the stereotypical British beatniks were also more likely to wear duffel coats and even tweed jackets. Both were inclined to hang out in cafes, rather than in bars or pubs; and they shared a generalized resistance to 'the Establishment' and what they saw as its materialistic values. Nevertheless, there were some other youth cultural trends at the time that were more distinctively British, even if some of them had partly American origins.

Music played a vital role here. The British beatniks were mostly dismissive of American rock-and-roll, and especially of its more commercial varieties. Like their American cousins, their main preference was for jazz. Yet while modern jazz of the period (what would now be called post-bop) was certainly popular, there was also a significant revival of 'traditional' New Orleans jazz, which didn't seem to occur in the US at the same time (although there had been a partial revival some ten years earlier). The beatniks also led, or at least shared, the short-lived enthusiasm for 'skiffle', a form of do-it-yourself music played on inexpensive and sometimes home-made instruments (washboards and tea-chest basses) which combined early rock with the apparent authenticity of American folk and blues music.

These different musical genres overlapped, but distinctions between them were vitally important. Passionate battles were fought between the fans of traditional jazz and the modernists (referred to by their enemies as 'mouldy figs' and 'dirty beboppers' respectively); while there were also narrower debates between different varieties of New Orleans enthusiasts ('revivalists' versus 'traditionalists'). These conflicts also led to physical battles, as in the 'riots' that erupted at the Beaulieu Jazz

festival in 1959 and 1960 – a ‘beatnik beat-up’, as it was described in the popular press at the time. As Alan Sinfield has described, jazz was a key arena for wider battles over cultural capital, despite its lack of status with official cultural authorities. While concerns about the ‘Americanization’ of youth culture were probably overplayed (as we’ll see below), it is striking how the origins of much of this music were nevertheless American – even if it took British musicians (like the New Orleans purist Ken Colyer or more commercial artists like the skiffle player Lonnie Donegan, or the trad bands of Chris Barber and Acker Bilk) to go in search of what they imagined was some kind of authentic American folk culture.

There was undoubtedly a political dimension to this, and for some contemporary commentators, such as the Marxist Eric Hobsbawm, traditional jazz was definitively ‘people’s music’. However, this can also be overstated. The CND protesters who marched from Aldermaston to London were accompanied along the way by New Orleans-style marching bands – although this was partly because their instruments were portable and didn’t require amplification. Writing of this period, George MacKay claims that traditional jazz was ‘leftist marching music of the streets’, although there’s a certain amount of wishful thinking here. (The anti-nuclear protests of more recent times are more likely to culminate in deep house raves, but few people make similar claims about the inherent political significance of the music itself.)

Despite their occasional appearances at Newquay and Beaulieu, it’s fair to say that if British beatniks existed at all, they were primarily a metropolitan phenomenon – and indeed that they gravitated towards a few, relatively select, areas of the capital city. Soho’s coffee bar scene, portrayed in a *Look at Life* newsreel in 1959, actually dates back to the early 1950s, and provided inexpensive gathering places for artists, media types and political radicals, as well as assorted eccentrics and beatniks. As *Look at Life* explains (somewhat satirically), they were definitely not for ‘squares’. Cafes like The Two I’s sought to attract young people by providing rock-and-roll music (live and via juke boxes), and were famous recruiting grounds for music business entrepreneurs (there are thinly disguised versions of The Two I’s in several of the films and books I’ll be discussing, including *Expresso Bongo*, *Beat Girl* and *Absolute Beginners*).

In this respect, there is a continuity with the bohemian London that emerged in the years immediately following the war. In his book *London Calling*, Barry Miles offers a rather breathless portrait of this demi-monde, in which artists, writers, musicians and TV performers rubbed shoulders (and other body parts) in clubs like the infamous Colony Room. While Soho was the key focus – offering a seedy but exotic netherworld of drug dealers, sex workers and street hustlers – bohemian London also extended to parts of Chelsea and Fitzrovia, although not far beyond. As the historian Frank Mort has suggested, the artistic denizens of Soho contributed to a kind of sentimental mythology about the place, in which manifold forms of sex and drugs, combined with crime and an increasingly multicultural population, provided a kind of edgy, cosmopolitan glamour. As we’ll see, writers like Colin MacInnes combined this with a certain mythology of youth, seeing it as a challenge to the suffocating conventional morality of the mainstream adult society of the time. How far any of this extended beyond a couple of square miles or a few hundred people, is (as ever) open to debate. But as the fifties turned into the sixties, this mythology of London’s cosmopolitan youth culture slowly began to extend its influence – arguably

reaching some kind of zenith in the discovery of 'swinging London' only a few years further down the line.

Of course, almost everything I've said in this section has been in the form of generalizations. The identikit image of the beatnik (whether British or American) is self-evidently a media stereotype, although that's not to say that stereotypes are inevitably inaccurate, or that they are not influential. Nevertheless, I hope I have identified at least some of the diversity of youth culture at this precarious moment of historical transition. This was a period of short-lived trends and seemingly contradictory influences. Distinctions in terms of taste and style were vital, and often seemed to be very finely drawn, at least to the outsider; and they were constantly subject to change. These distinctions were partly about class, but (as we'll see in more detail below) gender and ethnicity also played a role.

There is a danger in blurring these distinctions together into some all-inclusive grand narrative of youth culture. From the vantage point of the later 1960s, hippy ideologues like Jeff Nuttall (in his book *Bomb Culture*) were keen to celebrate a continuing tradition of Dionysian revolt against the established society of the squares and the straights. For Nuttall and others like him, the trad jazz boom, the New Left and CND, jazz and skiffle, Teddy Boys, beatniks and mods can all be swept along in the same narrative of revolution and liberation. Yet as I have implied, youth culture at this time was much more fragmented, tentative and provisional than it might have seemed in retrospect: change seemed to be emerging on the horizon (as it was for Ray Gosling), but what kind of change it would be was less than immediately obvious.

The New Left and youth culture

Where Mark Abrams saw the emerging forms of youth culture as a new opportunity for companies and marketers, some academics perceived a more troubling challenge. For many on the political left, the 'youth question' was becoming more urgent, not only in response to rising affluence and the post-War baby boom, but also as a result of wider political developments: the Labour Party was in retreat, and many of the older certainties of left politics were being questioned, not least in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. One consequence of this was a general 'turn to culture' among left-wing academics: the cultural, symbolic and emotional dimensions of the 'consumer society' could no longer be ignored or merely condemned.

The most notorious response to these developments can be found in Richard Hoggart's influential book *The Uses of Literacy* (first published in 1957), and especially in his description of the working class 'juke box boys' he saw loitering in a 'milk bar' in a Northern town. According to Joe Moran, Hoggart was writing about an experience from the early 1950s (the book was actually written between 1950 and 1955), and yet his description suggests something of the early Teddy Boys: these are young men with 'with drape-suits, picture ties, and an American slouch'. Hoggart is scathing about the décor of the milk bar – 'the nastiness of their modernistic knick-knacks, their glaring showiness' represents a kind of 'aesthetic breakdown' – and about the (largely American) music the boys are playing on a 'mechanical record player'. Hoggart is in no doubt about the lack of authenticity and cultural value of such entertainment:

Compared even with the pub around the corner, this is all a peculiarly thin and pallid form of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk. Many of the customers – their clothes, their hair-styles, their facial expressions all indicate – are living to a large extent in a myth-world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life.

As this latter comment implies, Hoggart seems to have reached his conclusions merely from superficial observation of the boys' appearance: he does not seem to have spoken to them, let alone conducted any research. Yet he seems entirely confident in dismissing them outright: they are, he claims, a 'depressing group', 'rather less intelligent than the average' and 'therefore even more exposed than others to the debilitating mass-trends of the day'. He continues:

They have no aim, no ambition, no protection, no belief... For some of them even the rough sex-life of many of their contemporaries is not yet possible; it requires more management of their own personalities and more meeting with other personalities than they can compass... Most of them have jobs which require no personal outgoing, which are not intrinsically interesting, which encourage no sense of personal value, of being a maker... [They are] the directionless and tamed helots of a machine-minding class.

Hoggart's account of these young people and their leisure experiences is part of his broader lament about the decline of the traditional working-class culture of his own childhood. *The Uses of Literacy* contrasts the 'rich full life' of sing-songs in pubs and local clubs with 'the newer mass art', the 'candy-floss world' of 'sex in shiny packets'. Authentic working-class culture, rooted in the home and the community, has been eroded and destroyed by commercialism, and especially by American popular culture. This is not only a cultural problem – a matter of 'cultural debasement', as he puts it later in the book – but also a political one: 'mass produced entertainment' is bringing about a moral and social 'crisis' that bodes ill for a free and open society. Yet despite his seemingly democratic values, Hoggart's description of these young people is shot through with a patrician condescension and arrogance that makes it difficult to stomach today.

Hoggart's approach was frequently dismissed by subsequent generations as both sentimentally nostalgic and elitist. More recent writers have been somewhat more forgiving, however. Joe Moran, among others, suggests that Hoggart's concern about 'cultural literacy', class and education is still relevant today; while Sue Owen and her colleagues argue that the questions of cultural value that he raises should not be wished away in a kind of easy populism. To be fair, Hoggart does emphasise the continuing resilience of working-class culture; yet it is hard to detect much respect for the users of 'mass culture', at least in the descriptions I have quoted. Young people, in his account, seem to be little more than unfortunate, deluded victims of mass consumerism.

As I've noted, the empirical basis of Hoggart's account is hard to pin down. However, Joe Moran provides a brief history of the 'milk bars' that helps to set it in a historical context – as indeed does Adrian Horn in his book *Juke Box Britain*. As Moran suggests, the milk bars should not be confused with the espresso coffee bars

frequented by beatniks and metropolitan bohemians (the former were originally Australian, while the latter were Italian in origin). As these writers point out – and as Hoggart himself acknowledges – they were one of the few places young people could congregate to hear the popular rock-and-roll music that was beginning to emerge at the time. As Moran suggests (and as contemporary writers such as Ray Gosling and Stuart Hall also argued), there was a distinct lack of public leisure provision for young people: existing youth clubs had limited basic facilities, and were often run in disciplinarian (or at least worthy and patronising) ways. Moran's telling comparison here is between the milk bars and our contemporary generation of Starbucks and Costa Coffee shops, which cater primarily to the 'bourgeois bohemian' (as compared, for example, with MacDonaldis, which remains a popular location for working-class young people to hang out).

As Horn argues, Hoggart's fears about the 'Americanisation' of working-class culture – and particularly of youth culture – were somewhat misplaced. While some of the music itself was undoubtedly American, British artists increasingly came to the fore, and American influences were quickly absorbed and adapted. Furthermore, as Alan Sinfield suggests, the take-up of American popular culture can be interpreted not only as a symptom of 'cultural imperialism', but also as a means for young people to resist and create alternatives to the traditions of their parents' generation. As we'll see, Colin MacInnes shared this more ambivalent and nuanced view of 'Americanisation', both in his journalistic essays and in his fiction at the time.

There's an interesting contrast here between Hoggart's views and those of Stuart Hall, who was eventually to succeed him as the director of CCCS at Birmingham. Hall was of a different generation (he was fourteen years younger than Hoggart), and came from the very different context of a middle-class childhood in Jamaica. Hall was a young academic, but also briefly a secondary school teacher at the time). As I've noted, he became the founding editor of the journal *New Left Review* in 1959. The *NLR* was formed out of the merger of *The New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review*; and significantly, its offices were located on the floors above its own espresso coffee house, the Partisan in Soho's Carlisle Street.

In 1959, immediately before the merger, Hall published two articles in the *ULR* that offered a different take on the 'youth problem', as he called it. In 'The Politics of Adolescence', he draws attention to a new generation of young people that had not grown up in 'the heroic days of the Labour movement'. These young people are, he argues, instinctively radical: they resist conformity, but they do so primarily at the level of feeling rather than rational argument. They remain disenchanted with mainstream politics, which they regard as 'stiff and dry and colourless and conciliatory'. They are, he suggests, 'rebels without a cause'. Working-class youth culture is a vehicle for some of these feelings, although it is also open to commercial manipulation. The task for political radicals – and here Hall's address is explicitly to the Labour Party of the time – is to learn from these developments, rather than merely dismissing them. He notes that some of the most significant political movements of the time (and especially youth-oriented movements like CND and the anti-apartheid protests) were not tied to any political party. And he urges fellow activists to engage much more directly with youth culture as a force in its own right: 'skiffle and jazz,' he suggests, 'are not substitutes for politics: they are legitimate forms of expression in themselves' (although he notably omits rock-and-roll).

In the following issue, Hall published a longer article that combined a review of Mark Abrams's *Teenage Consumer* report with comments on three novels, including Maclnnes's *Absolute Beginners*. Hall professes to be 'shocked' and even 'staggered' by Abrams's account; but unlike Hoggart, he also appears to perceive a latent radicalism in this emergent youth culture - albeit one that operates at the level of 'style' rather than anything close to overt politics. In some respects, Hall shares Hoggart's contempt for what he calls the 'aimless frenzy' of working-class young people's leisure activities. He is prone to similarly grandiose laments about cultural decline:

The truth is that we live in an age in which the very flow between human beings — a truly human and personal thing — has become distorted, part of a total crisis which eats through into the family life, and personal relationships as well. If we are willing to accept this state of affairs for the sake of a high rate of technical and industrial growth, then we are laying in store for our society deep social disturbances, of which racial riots, floating [sic] juvenile delinquency and petty crimes are merely unpleasant forbears.

However, in the course of the article, Hall appears to turn his attention away from what he calls the 'secondary modern generation' (that is, the predominantly working-class young people who attended less academic schools) and towards a newer group that he sees emerging, at least in London. He notes that 'the Teddy Boy Era is playing itself out' and 'the L.P. Hi-Fi generation is on the way in':

Here are the very smart, sophisticated young men and women of the metropolitan jazz clubs, the Flamingo devotees – the other Marquee generation. Suits are dark, sober and casual-formal, severely cut and narrow on the Italian pattern. Hair-cuts are "modern" – a brisk, flat-topped French version of the now-juvenile American crew cut, modestly called "College style"... A fast-talking, smooth-running, hustling generation with an ad-lib gift of the gab, quick sensitivities and responses and an acquired taste for the Modern Jazz Quartet... They have the spending habit, and the sophisticated tastes to go along with it. They are city birds. They know their way around...

Unlike the 'depressing group' portrayed by Hoggart, these hip young people do not appear to be wholly duped by the commercial market. 'They know that the teenage market is a racket, but they are subtly adjusted to it nonetheless,' Hall suggests. 'They seem culturally exploited rather than socially deprived.'

Hall's description of this emerging youth style (of which this is just an extract) owes a certain amount to Colin Maclnnes's journalism, and to *Absolute Beginners*. Indeed, Hall gives Maclnnes's novel something close to a rave review: it is, he writes, 'an excellent and distinguished piece of social documentary', that is commended for its authenticity in capturing this emerging youth culture. It is, Hall suggests, 'the closest we have come to a "British" *Catcher in the Rye*'.

Hall's cool, cosmopolitan sophisticates are clearly a very different group from the denizens of Hoggart's Northern milk bar – and to some extent, the more generalized working class consumers of Abrams's report. Yet in his conclusion, Hall suggests that it may be here – rather than among the traditional working class – that

the seeds of a new political radicalism may be found: 'I do not believe that humane attitudes to people and to social justice are bred only in conditions of want and deprivation'. It is in this 'sophisticated advance guard of the teenage revolution' that protest about social issues can be found, he suggests: 'if the cool young men of today were to become the social conscience of tomorrow, it would be because they had seen sights in the Twentieth Century closed to many eyes before'. Hall's arguments here seem remarkably prescient, and they still have much to say to us today – although for some they would probably be regarded as an early indication of where socialist politics began to lose its way. The shift in focus from working-class to more middle-class youth – or perhaps away from class altogether – is especially striking in this respect.

Hall was not the only writer to address the 'youth question' in the pages of *New Left Review* or its predecessors. For example, in 1958, the sociologist Derek Allcorn had published an account of his research on what he called the 'unnoticed generation' of young men in an industrial suburb earlier in the decade. Interestingly, he uses the term 'youth culture' to describe what he finds, although his focus is more on the dynamics of the peer group than on leisure *per se*. It is here too that we can find the early work of Ray Gosling, with whom this essay began.

Significantly, Gosling was presented as an 'insider': his first piece for *NLR* described him as 'a young signalman' (which he briefly was) as well as a youth organizer. Entitled 'Dream Boy', this piece offers a rather poetic account of the newly affluent emerging generation (and again, as in Hall's articles, youth remains implicitly male). Here, and in a later *NLR* article 'Ordinary Kids' (1961), Gosling explicitly addresses the British commercial pop idols of the time, including Adam Faith and Cliff Richard, whom we will meet later in this essay. While he does take them seriously, he also acknowledges concerns that young people are being seduced into a 'dream world' that is largely of American origin. While he admits that these performers are 'sizzling' and 'sexy', he also condemns them as 'commercial, unreal, glamourised, nice, respectable, conventional'. Gosling's view is broadly sympathetic, although (like Hall and Hoggart) he remains highly ambivalent about the moral and political dimensions of this emerging youth culture, and the potential for change:

There is no answer in planning another social revolution, in giving another dream to a people still disillusioned, and dazzled with the last. The social revolution is taking place. A new world has been born. The country is a better place. The working class are better off than ever before. But the exploitation continues, the cheapening of human life is being accelerated. The mental and moral degradation is as intense, as terrifying as the physical of the past.

Despite this rather grandiose pessimism, Gosling was also a youth work practitioner, and was involved in contemporary debates about youth provision. As I've noted, he produced a pamphlet for the Fabian Society in 1961 that offered a critical response to the government's Albemarle Report on youth work that had been published the previous year. The report eventually led to a professionalization of youth work, and to a large increase in funding, but Gosling claims that it largely failed to address the real lives and concerns of 'teenager 1960'. He is critical of the disciplinarian and elitist approach of much youth work, and also of the patronizing, 'vicar-type' youth

clubs; and he argues that young people should be trusted to organize their own provision.

A cinematic counterpart to these pieces can be found in the 1959 documentary *We Are The Lambeth Boys*, directed by Karel Reisz. Set in a youth club in South London, the film is one of the last examples of 'Free Cinema', the 1950s documentary film movement Reisz co-founded with Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson and Lorenza Mazzetti. Like other Free Cinema films, it has a naturalistic, almost improvisational style, although it also uses a voice-over narrator. The boys of the title (and in this case girls too) are not Teds, although they have some elements of the style. In most respects, they seem closer to the affluent teenage consumers of Mark Abrams's report. The film follows them going to the club, dancing and listening to records, playing games and sports, and going downtown for fish and chips afterwards; and it also shows some of them at work, largely in manual trades, although a couple are shown at school. There are also extensive discussions among them about a range of issues, from clothes, entertainment and smoking, through to parents and romance, and even capital punishment. At one point, the group visits an elite public school for a cricket game, although there is little of the class conflict that might have been expected in this situation (one wonders what a contemporary 'life swap' programme would have made of this).

In some respects, the film seeks to reassure its audience about the potential threat of young people. We are told at the outset that this is 'the rowdy generation that's always in the headlines'. However, by the ending, it asserts that 'people who complain about the young' are largely mistaken. The group gets a little noisy at one point, throwing chips around, but we are reassured about the sheer normality of what is shown. 'A good evening for young people is much as it has always been,' the narrator tells us; 'it's for being together with friends, and dancing and shouting when you feel like it – things we'd all like to do'.

The 'we' of this commentary – and the implied audience of the film as a whole – is of course not young people themselves, but adults. While the voice-over generally refrains from being unduly didactic, it is nevertheless attempting to teach us a lesson. Its predominant tone is more anthropological, as though (in the mode of David Attenborough) it were cautiously approaching an exotic tribe in the jungle, and seeking to explain its curious rituals and behaviours. The song 'Putting on the Style', which is used repeatedly in the later part of the film, seems to encapsulate part of its message: 'that's what the young folks are doing all the while'. (The song originates in the 1920s, but became a hit for the skiffle singer Lonnie Donegan in 1957.) However, the film's incidental music is by John Dankworth – a somewhat bland British modern jazz artist who would have been much more likely to appeal to an older, more educated audience than the young people featured in the film itself. (Although it's strange to note that it was reactions to Dankworth's music that seem to have kicked off the riots at Beaulieu the following year.)

Ultimately, these 'New Left' critical responses to youth culture need to be understood in their historical context. These writers and film-makers were not all responding to quite the same things, and their views often seem quite ambivalent and confused. Both directly and indirectly, they address a wide range of concerns about youth, and about social change much more broadly. And, like the films and novels

we'll consider next, they are all choosing to *represent* contemporary youth culture in partial and selective ways. With the possible exception of Ray Gosling, they all implicitly regard young people (and especially working-class young people) from the outside, as somehow 'other'. And yet, as Nick Bentley argues, the new left's responses reflected what he calls the 'seemingly paradoxical duality of the teenager' – on the one hand as a cultural manifestation of emerging post-industrial consumerism, and on the other as a potential point of resistance to it.

Youth culture on screen

As I've noted, US film-makers made various attempts to represent – and indeed to 'exploit' – what they saw as the beatnik phenomenon. Several of these films displayed characteristics of a slightly earlier Hollywood cycle of juvenile delinquent (or 'JD') movies, which I've written about in another essay. Films like *The Cool and the Crazy* (1958), *The Beat Generation* and *The Rebel Set* (both 1959) offered salacious images of sex, drugs and crime, alongside implicit or explicit moral warnings about the dangers of such behaviour: they were intended to appeal to voyeuristic impulses on the part of adults, as well as to the growing cinema audience of young people themselves.

British films on the same theme are harder to find. *All Night Long* (1962), directed by Basil Dearden, is an updated version of Shakespeare's *Othello* featuring a young Patrick McGoochan as an aspiring jazz drummer; while *That Kind of Girl* (also known as *Teenage Tramp*, 1963), directed by Gerry O'Hara, focuses on the risks of promiscuity and sexually transmitted diseases. Both are set in London, and contain references to the youth culture of the time, but neither can really be called 'youth' films. However, in this section I want to look at two rather different films – both conveniently released in 1959 – that do have youth, and youth culture, as their central theme.

Expresso Bongo is a satire on the contemporary music business. Written by Wolf Mankowitz and produced and directed by Val Guest, it was based on a successful West End musical that had been staged the previous year. The film tells the story of a talent agent named Johnny Jackson (Laurence Harvey) who attempts to revive his fortunes by taking on a new young rock-and-roll musician, Bert Rudge (Cliff Richard). He visits Bert's family, who live in a run-down East End tenement, and persuades his parents to sign a contract on his behalf. Although Bert protests that he doesn't want to become a star (he prefers playing the bongo drums to singing), Johnny transforms him into a teen idol, renaming him Bongo Herbert. Johnny's wheeler-dealing secures him a TV appearance on a discussion programme about 'teenage rebellion', and then a recording contract: before long, Bongo Herbert is hitting the charts. However, Johnny's efforts to control Bongo are eventually out-manipulated by his record label manager and by Dixie Collins (Yolande Donlan), an older American star who takes him under her wing. His ambitions thwarted, at the end of the film Johnny returns to his earlier passion of jazz drumming. The film is set in London's Soho, amid strip clubs, brothels and salt beef bars; and Bongo Herbert is 'discovered' in a thinly veiled version of the famous Two I's café.

On one level, *Expresso Bongo* is a vehicle for Cliff Richard (although his screen debut had already taken place earlier that year, in a British 'JD' film called *Serious Charge*). In

some respects, the narrative re-enacts Cliff's 'discovery', much in the manner of *The Tommy Steele Story*, a successful 1957 film that tracked the eponymous star's rise to fame. Although the narrative centres on the Laurence Harvey character, Cliff gets to sing three songs and appears at one point in a shapely pair of swimming trunks. As K.J. Donnelly notes, the sequence of music in the film effectively prefigures his later career. His first song, 'Love', is delivered to a young audience in the coffee bar, and its wild beat is matched by some fast editing: notably, it is sung in an American accent. The second, 'Voice in the Wilderness' (which was the major hit) is a slow ballad that is sung primarily to please older listeners, particularly the record label manager and the host of the TV show (Gilbert Harding, performing 'as himself'). Finally, under Dixie's tutelage, he is seen performing a cheesy dedication to his mother, 'The Shrine on the Second Floor' on a traditional stage variety show, accompanied by a choir. In both these latter cases, the songs are much more mainstream 'Tin Pan Alley' material, and the editing and visual composition are significantly more sedate and conventional. Through this sequence of songs, Bongo Herbert effectively makes the transition from youth culture to mainstream 'show business' – a transition that was replicated through the films that Cliff Richard himself made in the following few years. Although he was initially hailed as Britain's answer to Elvis, any vague aura of youth cultural rebellion that might have been apparent at the outset was quickly dispelled as Cliff's career progressed; and for the ensuing decades, he has been synonymous with wholesome family entertainment.

Expresso Bongo is a critique of the music industry, albeit a fairly mild one. Johnny is a likeable Cockney shyster character, who cynically builds the buzz of media interest: Bongo's appearance as the representative 'modern teenager' on the TV show, alongside a psychiatrist and an archbishop, echoes a similar scene in *Absolute Beginners*, to be discussed below. Nevertheless, Johnny is eventually outsmarted by Gus Mayer, the more established record label manager (who largely conforms to a familiar Jewish stereotype). All Bongo really wants from his success is a red scooter (another echo of *Absolute Beginners*), but he gradually becomes uncomfortable with the way he is being manipulated: Dixie alerts him to the fact that he is getting a poor deal from his manager, and he complains that he is just something Johnny sells, 'like rat poison or fish and chips'. Dixie rescues Bongo, by visiting his mother and pointing out that his contract is worthless (Bongo was 'under age' when it was signed); but she only does so in order to secure him for Gus and for her own show, with which she is seeking to revive her flagging fortunes. As this implies, the film largely takes an adult point of view: Johnny and the other adults make the running, while Bongo is merely the innocent victim. In this sense, it can be seen to reflect some of the wider adult responses to the emerging youth culture of the time that I have already described.

Released the same year, *Beat Girl* was marketed in the US as another 'JD' film, under the title *Wild for Kicks*. The theatrical trailer features scenes of wild dancing and sexy display, while the commentator intones as follows:

Wild for Kicks. The vivid and shocking portrayal of modern youth who grew up too soon and live it up too fast... The daring motion picture that takes you behind the scenes in a world where anything goes. A world of beat girls and defiant boys... It's wild, wild, wild for kicks, a motion picture that will leave you breathless.

The trailer gives a very prominent place to a sequence from the film in which the young people have a car chase, and then lay their heads on the railway tracks in the path of an oncoming train, in a game of 'chicken', accompanied by some wild jazz on the soundtrack. And in case the reference wasn't clear, a caption helpfully informs us that this is 'the most exciting film of its kind since *Rebel Without A Cause*'.

However, *Beat Girl* is a rather less sensational film than its trailer implies. Unlike *Expresso Bongo*, or indeed *Rebel Without a Cause*, this is clearly a 'B movie' – that is, a low-budget independent production. Directed by Edmond Greville, with a 'mod jazz' soundtrack by John Barry, the film was delayed on release because the film censors objected to some scenes set in a strip-club, and to the 'chicken' sequence: an edited version was eventually granted an 'X' certificate.

The film focuses on a young art student named Jennifer Linden (Gillian Hills), the rebellious daughter of a celebrated and wealthy London architect, Paul (David Farrar). The film begins as Paul returns home with his new wife, a younger French woman called Nichole (Noelle Adam). Paul is keen that Jennifer should become good friends with Nichole, but she is cool and hostile towards her stepmother's overtures. Jennifer is then seen sneaking out of the house to join her friends in the Off-Beat café, a Soho coffee bar: these include a singer (Adam Faith), who is clearly potential boyfriend material. Through various coincidences, Jennifer discovers that her new stepmother used to be an 'exotic' dancer, and (it is implied) a prostitute, in Paris; and she confirms this by meeting with Greta (Delphi Lawrence), a performer at a nearly strip club, who once knew her. When she has an argument with Nichole about staying out late, Jennifer threatens to reveal this information in order that her stepmother will 'keep out of her life'. After a night out at Chiselmhurst Caves (a fashionable but rather tame music venue on the outskirts of London), Jennifer and her friends engage in the various forms of 'delinquent' behaviour featured in the film trailer. This culminates in an impromptu party at Jennifer's house, in which she starts to perform a strip tease dance before her father reappears and ejects what he calls the 'jiving, driveling scum'. Despite her parents' attempts to discipline her, Jennifer is drawn to revisit the strip club, where she is preyed upon by the sleazy owner, Kenny (Christopher Lee). As Kenny makes a pass at Jennifer, he is stabbed – and while Jennifer is briefly detained, it quickly emerges that the real culprit is Greta, who has killed him out of jealousy.

Beat Girl has gained a reputation as a 'cult' film, partly because it features early appearances by performers who later became much more famous (including the singer Adam Faith, Christopher Lee in a rare non-horror role, and Oliver Reed, who has a small part as one of Jennifer's friends). However, its notoriety also derives from its self-conscious and rather heavy-handed portrayal of the generation gap, and of youth culture. There is some absurdly 'cool' lingo in the exchanges between Jennifer's well-bred friends, much of it delivered in crisp upper-class English accents. After Dave performs one of his Eddie Cochrane-style songs, they chime in with lines like 'he sends me, daddy-O, I'm over and out!' and 'straight from the fridge!' Much of the dialogue is self-consciously smart and epigrammatic, laden with quotable lines: love, Jennifer suggests, is just 'the gimmick that makes sex respectable', while smoking is 'the juvenile delinquent's first vice'.

The rather wooden confrontations between Jennifer and her father are particularly notable in this respect:

Paul: I'm trying so hard to understand you.

Jennifer: You don't really ever look at me, not really. None of you squares ever do. You see what you want to see – a group of teenagers lumped together under one label. But we are us, nothing to do with our parents. I am me, Jennifer Linden, a complete, whole, independent living person.

A little later, her father questions her use of fashionable language, and she responds:

Jennifer: It means us, something that's ours. We didn't get it from our parents. We can express ourselves, and they don't know what we're talking about. It makes us different.

Paul: Why do you need to feel so different?

Jennifer: It's all we've got. Next week, voom, up goes the world in smoke. And what's the score? Zero. Now, while it's now, we live it up. Do everything, feel everything, strictly for kicks.

Jennifer's comments are partly a generalized statement on behalf of all teenagers ('us'), but they are also particular to her affluent, upper-middle-class upbringing. The family home is designed in an avant-garde modernist style, with sleek polished surfaces and floors, more like an art gallery than a family home. Jennifer's father is obsessed with a modernist architectural fantasy called 'City 2000' that he is planning to build in South America – a city in which any noise will be eliminated by large concrete baffles, and people will be able to escape from each other. 'Human neurosis comes from too much contact with other humans,' he claims. To underline the point, Jennifer accuses him of being 'dried up', and argues that he doesn't know the first thing about the people ('us') who will have to live in his new city.

As this implies, the film's portrayal of the relations between the generations is highly self-conscious. In the scene in Chiselhurst Caves, Dave and another friend, Tony, offer a historical account of their seemingly confused position. Dave describes how he was born in the underground shelters during the Blitz, and later played on the bomb sites. Tony talks about how his mother was killed by a bomb, and how his father, an army General, told him to keep a 'stiff upper lip' and not to cry – 'it's not manly'. In stereotypical fashion, both bemoan the fact that adults will never understand them, and that they are constantly being told they are too young. Meanwhile, in a later scene, Tony's upper-class girlfriend Dodo (Shirley Anne Field) performs the sultry song 'It's legal' – 'think of the things that we can do without even breaking the law'. Although he seems to have working-class origins, and wears a leather jacket and a cool snarl, Dave is also far from threatening: he eschews alcohol, and (at the very end of the film) refuses to get into a fight with a group of Teddy Boys who have trashed his car. Such things, he suggests, are merely 'kids' stuff', or 'for squares'.

While Jennifer is the obvious point of identification throughout, she is also shown as rather spoilt, and not a little confused. On the one hand, she is an innocent child – and indeed, when her father accuses her of being ‘childish’, she responds ‘Why not? I am a child’. Yet she is also precariously teetering on the edge of adulthood. When her friends play ‘chicken’, she is the one who keeps her head on the railway line the longest; and later, at the party, she chooses to strip off to her underwear, with the clear intention of arousing the Adam Faith character but also of defying her stepmother (she frequently looks over her shoulder to her parents’ bedroom). She also chooses to return to the strip club, where the sleazy owner invites her to come with him to Paris in order to learn the art of stripping. While the strip-tease sequences provide some obvious fodder for what film theorists call ‘the male gaze’, it’s striking that some of them are intercut with large close-ups of Jennifer’s watching eyes: her fascination with the world of the strippers is clearly motivated by more than a desire to get revenge on her stepmother.

As in other films of the period, female delinquency in this context is principally about sex. As Janet Fink and Penny Tinkler point out, Jennifer’s ambiguous position here reflects a wider awareness of the threats and risks posed particularly to young women as a result of wider social changes – including the growth of commercial youth culture. Jennifer is from a ‘broken’ family (we do not know why her parents have divorced): her father laments that fact that he has been absent, and that they have not been a ‘complete unit’. She is also independently mobile in a range of potentially dangerous urban spaces, and well able to evade adult control. As a result, she finds herself in an awkward in-between space, trying to make sense of conflicting signals and imperatives: whether she appears as an innocent young girl or as a mature woman depends on how she is treated by adults, and by how she chooses to appear herself.

Predictably, order is restored at the end of the film. Bursting out of the club, Jennifer calls for her father, and is last seen going off arm-in-arm with him and her stepmother. Meanwhile, having walked away from his confrontation with the Teds, Dave drops his broken guitar in a waste bin and proclaims: ‘funny, only squares know where to go’. However, the re-imposition of adult authority is by no means as absolute or as disciplinarian as it is in other ‘JD’ films of the period: adults may offer a kind of wisdom, but most of them are flawed and damaged, and some are positively dangerous. Young people, it seems, will still have to find their own way.

Colin MacInnes

The most interesting commentary on the emerging youth culture of the late 1950s can be found in the essays and novels of Colin MacInnes. MacInnes was no teenager himself at the time: born in 1914, he would have been 45 years old in 1959. Although he was born in London, MacInnes spent most of his childhood in Australia, where his mother Angela Thirkell gradually established a reputation as a prolific writer of popular fiction. MacInnes himself returned to Europe in 1930, and eventually settled in London to study painting; he later served in the British Intelligence Corps during the Second World War. During the late 1940s, he began to establish a career as a writer, producing journalistic essays and novels, and working in radio broadcasting.

MacInnes was fascinated by the Soho netherworld of crime, prostitution and drugs described in Barry Miles's *London Calling*. He led a fairly chaotic, restless existence, moving from one address to another, and was often short of money. He was a prodigious drinker, and probably an alcoholic. He was bisexual, with a well-documented preference for African men, and was quite open about his use of male prostitutes. Those who knew him frequently described him as unpredictable, quarrelsome and difficult. Ray Gosling, whose mentor he became, depicts him in his autobiography as moody, irascible and opinionated, but also as a fiercely independent thinker and a 'fighter for liberation'. Gosling even makes a comparison – at first sight quite improbable – between MacInnes and the upright military figure of Lord Baden-Powell, the founder of the scout movement:

If any one was, though, he was the Baden-Powell to the 1960s – he fought for, led and chronicled, cajoled and disciplined the formation of our compassionate, permissive society (abortive though it may now be in part). (p. 72)

The most obvious manifestation of MacInnes's political radicalism was not so much related to young people, however, as to the cause of anti-racism. As we'll see, this was a recurring theme in his writing, especially in his response to the 'Notting Hill Riots' of 1958, which are documented in *Absolute Beginners* (they actually took place in Notting Dale, some distance north of Notting Hill itself). In the aftermath of the riots, he played a key role in a short-lived group called the Stars' Campaign for Inter-Racial Friendship, and was involved with several black liberation campaigns: as late as 1971 he appeared as a character witness in the trial of the self-professed Black Power activist, Michael X. Nevertheless, MacInnes was also somewhat of an outsider – or at least an 'insider-outsider', as he described himself: he felt at home in the multicultural, cosmopolitan buzz of London, and he was praised by some of the key New Left writers (such as Stuart Hall), but he was never a team player. During the 1960s, he never regained the comparative success of his three 'London novels', to be discussed below: he died in 1976.

Some of MacInnes's best journalistic writing on these issues is contained in a collection called *England, Half English*, published in 1961. The book contains both shorter and more substantial pieces about a wide range of issues, from London's drinking clubs and sex workers, through Ella Fitzgerald to the Elgin Marbles and Pevsner's *Buildings of England*. There are critical essays on contemporary drama and the artist Sidney Nolan, as well as relatively obscure figures such as the novelist Ada Leverson. There are also interesting pieces on what we would now call 'post-colonialism', including an extended essay based on a trip to Nigeria, and a piece about immigration entitled 'A Short Guide for Jumbles (to the Life of their Coloured Brethren in England)', originally published in 1956: here MacInnes warns his white readers ('Jumbles' are 'John Bulls') against a whole range of patronizing assumptions – although (like his novel *City of Spades*, which tackles the same issues) the piece is not without problematic generalizations of its own.

While there is a shared set of concerns cutting across these essays, I want to focus here on three that are specifically concerned with youth culture. 'Young England, Half English', first published in 1957, was written for the decidedly upmarket literary journal *Encounter*. Here, MacInnes sets out to explain for his educated older readers the appeal of a new generation of teen pop stars – and specifically that of 'the Pied

Piper from Bermondsey', the working class Tommy Steele. Steele's rise to 'the status of national idol', he suggests, is partly about his talent: he is both 'animally sensual' and yet 'innocent', possessing a 'joie de vivre' that Maclnnes claims to find 'irresistibly engaging'. However, he also seeks to explain this phenomenon sociologically, as a consequence of the increasing affluence of young people, which the market researcher Mark Abrams would go on to document a couple of years later. In response to fears about 'Americanisation' (as evidenced for instance in Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, published in the same year), Maclnnes paints a more complex picture: Steele, he argues, is not just a copy of America, a kind of English Elvis. He may sing in a 'shrill international American-style drone', but he speaks in an English Cockney accent. Maclnnes looks forward to the possibility of a more English singing style, and to songs that would deal with English topics, but he thinks this is an unlikely development (although in fact, he would not have long to wait).

'Pop Songs and Teenagers' was published the following year in *The Twentieth Century*, another literary magazine. Here, Maclnnes goes rather more on the offensive against what he describes as the 'abysmal ignorance of educated persons about the popular music of millions'. He challenges such people's 'morbid dislike of these symbols of popular culture which they feel are undermining not so much culture itself, as their hitherto exclusive possession of it', and he condemns them for having 'a lamentable lack of curiosity about the culture of our country in 1959'. Here again, Maclnnes notes the rise of young British performers such as Steele and Lonnie Donegan, who have come to equal the popularity of Elvis and Paul Anka – although he laments the fact that they are still singing 'in American'. He also provides a more detailed sociological account of the rise of the teenager, noting how their increased spending power is fuelling not just the music industry but also a distinctive new market in technology, transportation (scooters) and food and drink. These young people, he claims, are 'a new classless class'. They are 'blithely indifferent' towards politics and 'the Establishment'. They are internationally-minded, a 'post-Hiroshima generation', but they are not merely 'Americanised': rather, they have transformed American influences into something of their own. They are independent of adults – 'in their private lives, they don't like to be *told*' – and they are joyful and 'gay' in what he describes as 'the dullest society in Western Europe'.

However, Maclnnes's account here is not entirely sanguine: he also suggests that it is 'possible to see, in the teenage neutralism and indifference to politics, and self-sufficiency, and instinct for enjoyment – in short, in their kind of happy mindlessness – the raw material for crypto-fascisms of the worst kind'. These fears were also dramatized in the character of Wizard in *Absolute Beginners*, who joins the racist attackers in the Notting Hill riots – although as Maclnnes remarks in a footnote to this essay, he felt that the 'worst offenders' in these events were not the young people but the 'countless respectable adults who just stood and *watched*'.

The final essay I want to consider in this collection was also published in *The Twentieth Century* in 1959, and is entitled 'Sharp Schmutter'. It details the 'dos and don'ts' of contemporary English menswear. Maclnnes contrasts his preferred style both with mainstream adult fashions, but also with the clothing of the Teddy Boys and that of the followers of Trad Jazz, who (he suggests) 'simply haven't got the money for sharp clothing'. His favoured style is described in considerable detail: it is smart and tailored, an early version of the 'mod' style that was to become much

more widespread a few years later. It belongs largely to the newly affluent working class, although it has a certain 'classless' appeal; and its influences are primarily drawn from Continental Europe (especially Italy) rather than the USA (and here again, MacInnes detects a 'growing indifference to America'). Once again, we can see this style in evidence in the descriptions of the characters in *Absolute Beginners*; and MacInnes's detailed attention to such issues is especially evident in his comparison between two of his minor characters, the Misery Kid with his 'trad drag' and Dean Swift, a hip 'modernist'.

Once again, MacInnes feels compelled to persuade his readers that attention to such matters is not merely 'frivolity', or a matter of young men becoming 'effete'. He argues that, like pop music, this isn't the only preoccupation of the young. On the contrary, he asks:

Isn't it rather a minor (and pleasant) part of an international upheaval which is changing, behind the lock-jawed deadlocks of the politically mighty, all forms of social intercourse, the world's boundaries, thought, art – everything, almost? (p. 157)

On reading these essays, it's hard to resist the conclusion that MacInnes was well ahead of his time, in a great many respects. He is not blindly celebrating youth culture, but he is making the case for taking it seriously, and treating it with respect. He is alert to the political dimensions of what some might dismiss as mere trivia – to subtle changes in class identities and especially to the rise of what we now call multiculturalism and globalization. And, like Stuart Hall and Ray Gosling, he is also looking ahead to social and cultural changes that are only just emerging over the horizon.

The London novels

The essays in *England, Half English* are to some extent journalistic rehearsals of themes that MacInnes was also developing in his fiction. His three London novels in particular have often been praised for their journalistic accuracy. Nevertheless, in one of the brief introductions to these essays, MacInnes refutes the idea that these novels are some kind of 'documentary', or the work of a 'researcher'. They may come from his own 'direct experience', he says, but they are also 'poetic evocations of a human situation': the language of the characters – including the youthful lingo of the narrator of *Absolute Beginners* – is 'invented' rather than 'naturalistic'.

My main focus here will be on *Absolute Beginners*, but this novel should be briefly set in the context of MacInnes's other London novels, *City of Spades* (1957) and *Mr. Love and Justice* (1960). Although it's doubtful whether MacInnes ever intended these books to be a trilogy, they share a concern with contemporary social issues: the first is primarily about race, the second about youth, and the third is about crime and the sex trade, although these themes feature to a greater or lesser extent in all of them. The first two in particular also have a powerful graphic feel for London locations, which extends well beyond the affluent West End, and indeed the Soho and Fitzrovia districts where MacInnes spent much of his time, to areas like Shepherd's Bush, North Kensington ('Napoli' in *Absolute Beginners*), Stepney and Kilburn. This is not at

all the 'official' version of London, or indeed the glamorous image that was later to appear in accounts of 'Swinging London': in many respects it shows the seamy underside of the 'straight' world, which MacInnes himself liked to frequent. The characters move quickly from one location and social milieu to another, perhaps (as Paula Derdinger suggests) reflecting the more general modernist concern with mobility. As in his journalistic essays, MacInnes shows himself to be a keen observer of contemporary fashions and social rituals across a wide range of London's diverse communities; but his overarching concern is with the tensions between the past and the present, the blurring of social boundaries, and the sense of impending social change.

Nevertheless, there are some striking differences between these three books, not just in their substantive focus but also in their approach. MacInnes's interest in questions of race – and his fascination with the worlds of black (and especially African) immigrants – is most fully explored in *City of Spades*. Like *Mr. Love and Justice*, this book has a dual perspective, alternating between the accounts of a Nigerian student, the charismatic Johnny Fortune, and a liberal white government employee, Montgomery Pew. The book contains a great many debates between the characters about racial issues, ranging from drugs and criminality, to the appeal of black men for white women, the 'colour bar' and racism, and the prospects for post-imperial Africa. Like his stand-in Pew, MacInnes is an outsider to the 'Spade' community, and he knows it. He indulges in generalizations (for instance about black people's musicality and their physical and sexual prowess), while simultaneously warning against them; he romanticizes the exotic 'other', while also being aware of the superficiality of doing so.

City of Spades makes an interesting comparison with the film *Sapphire*, a more conventional 'social problem' film produced by Michael Relph and directed by Basil Dearden, which was released (needless to say) in 1959. The film has similarly didactic intentions – it portrays racism as a kind of pathological 'sickness' – but it also fails to avoid some of the assumptions that it is supposedly questioning. In one notable scene, we are introduced to the 'lily skins' – the young black women who (like Sapphire herself) are able to pass for white, yet are betrayed by their inability to resist the 'beat of the bongo' and are compelled to engage in frenzied dancing. (The music, once again by Johnny Dankworth, offers a rather sanitized version of contemporary 'hard bop'.) In *Sapphire*, the point of view is that of the white British police officers who are investigating Sapphire's murder, although they also meet Sapphire's impeccably well-spoken (and much darker-skinned) brother, who is a doctor. The film's primary focus is not on the black experience, but on white racism. By contrast, *City of Spades* offers much more direct access to the perspectives and experiences of the black characters, who are by no means all worthy and well-behaved.

Mr. Love and Justice takes a similarly didactic, sociological approach, in this instance to the sex industry: it depicts the relationships between ponces, prostitutes and the police, attempting to explain how the business works and how the different participants benefit from it. As in both the other novels, there are ongoing debates among the characters that are intended to address the reader's questions, to challenge familiar assumptions, and to expose some of the hypocrisies and contradictions that are at stake. MacInnes's third London novel is more tightly

focused and structured than its predecessors, and there is less journalistic description for its own sake: arguably, it works somewhat more effectively as a novel, although the parallels and contrasts between the two sets of characters are almost schematic.

Absolute Beginners

Absolute Beginners is made up of four sections of uneven length. Each section focuses on a particular day in the four months that span the summer of 1958. *In June* takes up the whole first half of the book. It follows the unnamed narrator meeting up with numerous friends and acquaintances in various parts of London. He also learns that his ex-girlfriend, Crepe Suzette, is about to enter a marriage of convenience with her boss, a middle-aged gay fashion designer called Henley. *In July* finds the narrator taking photographs by the River Thames, before attending a performance of the musical operetta *H.M.S. Pinafore* with his father. Along the way, he has a violent encounter with a former school-friend and watches another friend's appearance as a representative 'teenager' on a TV show. Part three, *In August*, is the shortest section. It follows the narrator and his father taking a cruise along the Thames towards Windsor Castle. His father becomes unwell on the trip and has to be taken off to a doctor; and in the course of this, the narrator comes across Suzette at her new husband's house in a nearby village. Finally, *In September* is set on the narrator's nineteenth birthday, the start of his last year as a teenager. He witnesses the beginnings and then the full eruption of the Notting Hill riots. In the course of these events, he has a passionate encounter with Suzette, who has returned to London; and his father also dies, leaving him four envelopes stuffed with money. The narrator decides to leave the country and find a place that is free of racism. He doesn't succeed, but at the airport, he encounters a group of Africans arriving and gives them a warm welcome.

Absolute Beginners shares several characteristics with MacInnes's other London novels. Like *City of Spades*, it moves in an episodic, seemingly arbitrary way from one London location to the next: particularly in the first half of the book, the narrative has an almost aimless, improvised feel. The three parts of the latter half of the book focus more narrowly on three key incidents, and stronger narrative 'hooks' start to emerge, although the structure is by no means as tight and schematic as that of *Mr. Love and Justice*. Nevertheless, as in both the other books, and in his journalism, MacInnes has an almost didactic purpose: there is a good deal of self-conscious commentary and debate between the characters on the 'teenager' phenomenon – or what is announced in the novel's first sentence as 'the whole teenage epic'. This is also placed within a broader set of concerns, especially about multiculturalism and the changing nature of English national identity.

Especially in the early sections of the book, the narrator's adventures seem almost random, and some of them are quite extraneous to the main plotlines. Although the narrator's background is working-class, and he doesn't have much money, he is able to move easily across class and social boundaries, from Teddy Boys and ponces to debutantes and diplomats. Along the way, he has passing encounters with an enormous series of characters with obviously implausible names, who function largely as ciphers for MacInnes's commentary on contemporary social trends. These

include various representatives of current youth cultural 'tribes': Ed the Ted (a Teddy Boy), the Wizard (a baby-faced 'proto-fascist'), the Misery Kid (a follower of trad jazz), Dean Swift (a sharp-suited hipster and heroin addict), Zesty-Boy Sift (a teen songwriter), the Fabulous Hoplite (a gay occasional rent boy) and Mr. Cool (a mixed-race dude). There are also several adult characters who serve similar functions, at least some of whom may be thinly-disguised versions of real people: they include Call-Me-Cobber (an Australian TV celebrity), Vendice Partners (an advertising executive), Mannie Katz (a Jewish poet), Big Jill (a lesbian ponce) and Ron Todd (a Marxist enthusiast for American blues). As Alan Sinfield puts it, Maclnnes 'falls over himself' in his efforts to include such a wide range of journalistic observations. Yet while the novel is clearly purporting to represent England (or at least London) at a particular moment in history, there is little pretence of social realism here.

Maclnnes's narrator is also, to a large extent, a kind of stand-in for the author – a vehicle for him to engage in a running commentary about the teenage phenomenon. In this respect, he often seems oddly perceptive, and somewhat more self-aware and knowledgeable than one might expect for an eighteen-year-old. Despite having left school at the earliest opportunity, he is also a reader of books, and a lover of serious jazz rather than pop: he pays tribute to Billie Holiday, and to the transcendent music of performers whom I take to represent Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald. At one point he even describes (albeit with some astonishment) how he had been taught 'morals' by a scout-master in his early years.

The narrator is both a participant and an observer, an 'insider-outsider', as Maclnnes liked to describe himself. He works as a photographer – initially creating what he himself describes as 'pornography', and later enlisting two of his friends to help him produce a sequence of images that he attempts to sell to Vendice Partners, the advertiser. Yet significantly, when the riots start to gather pace, he abandons his role as a mere observer: 'I took up my Rolleiflex, but put it down again, because it didn't seem useful any longer'. This ambivalent position is also apparent in the writing style. There is extensive use of youthful jargon (or at least a version of it) and clauses and sub-clauses pile up, much as in improvised conversation, although it is hardly naturalistic. Yet for much of the time, the narrator seems to be addressing a reader who needs to have this whole phenomenon explained, and even justified, rather than one who already knows about it, or takes it for granted.

In this sense, the narrator is rather more than merely a representative teenager. Indeed, there are some more personal storylines that give him added dimensions. His romantic pursuit of Crepe Suzette – and his attempt to define what 'love' really means – is one aspect of this. So is his relationship with his father, which becomes a key focus in the later sections of the book. It is hard to avoid the feeling that Maclnnes was working through his relationships with his own parents at this point - his resentment of his mother and his sense of loss for his father. Here, and in the vivid portrayal of the Notting Hill riots that takes up the final section of the book, Maclnnes moves beyond smart, satirical social commentary to something more moving and profound.

The book's commentary on the teenage phenomenon largely reflects that of Maclnnes's journalistic essays, discussed above – and at several points, it almost

directly echoes them. The narrator repeatedly distinguishes between the world of teenagers and that of the majority of adults, who are variously labeled 'squares', 'conscripts', 'taxpayers' and 'old sordids'. These include his father – who constantly reminds him about how much worse things were for young people in the 1930s – but also his 25-year-old brother, who is 'one of the last of the generations that grew up before teenagers existed'. By contrast, the narrator is a 'Blitz baby', born during the War. As his mother points out, it was the post-War Labour government that gave the teenagers their 'economic privileges', as an unintended consequence of 'emancipating' working people. What they failed to do, she argues, was to give them the rights and duties that should have accompanied this. The narrator seems to accept this analysis: 'you gave us the money, and you took away our responsibility', he says, and 'we like it fine... let it stay that way!'

Equally, the narrator doesn't want to be patronized and treated as a child – as he is by a bank clerk in one early scene. Although he is constantly in search of money, he is clearly one of Abrams's affluent teenagers. In line with MacInnes's essays in *England Half English*, he professes a complete lack of interest in politics and in class (especially in the Marxist arguments of Ron Todd); although he does have an abiding sense of social justice that is largely to do with racial and sexual diversity. He is not anti-American: he doesn't want English kids to be 'bogus imitation Americans', but he also sees anti-Americanism as 'a sure sign of defeat and weakness'. He is critical of the commercialization of the teenage phenomenon – the record stores, the fashion industry, the coffee bars and clubs, the television shows – but he puts this down to the operation of 'the adult mafia'. Perhaps with a touch of irony, he also proclaims the 'divine power' of youth.

Yet despite his apparent rejection of the adult world, the narrator clearly has expectations of it, which are sorely tested by the Notting Hill riots. He seems to believe that conventional adults would not countenance violent attacks on ethnic minorities: 'They'd never allow it!' he exclaims – 'The adults! The men! The women! All the authorities! Law and order is the one great English thing!' As the riots break out, he is outraged by the fact that most of the residents of 'Napoli' simply stand aside and watch what is happening – although he also notes that the few white people who resist the violent attacks on the black community are actually 'old-timers' rather than teenagers. He passionately condemns the establishment's response to the riots for its complacency and hypocrisy, in terms that MacInnes himself clearly shared.

As well as his reflections on 'the whole teenage epic', *Absolute Beginners* thus provides MacInnes with a further opportunity to work through his views on multiculturalism and national identity. In a sense, the novel aligns this opposition to racism with the figure of the teenager – although MacInnes's narrator is clearly distinguished in this respect from characters such as Ed the Ted and the Wizard, who eventually joins up with the 'keep England white' movement. According to the narrator, England is now moving into a post-Imperial age: it's time for politicians to stop playing 'Winston Churchill and the Great Armada', he says. 'There are no tin soldiers left any more': Britain has lost her position in the world, but it has yet to find a new one. The narrator describes himself as a patriot, but he is also explicitly critical of the racist response to immigration. The sequence of the riots is prefaced

by the narrator's critical account of a newspaper article that reads like a contemporary equivalent of today's right-wing press.

Here, as in *City of Spades*, MacInnes takes pains to confront stereotypical assumptions about new immigrant communities, but his version of multiculturalism verges on exoticism. Crepe Suzette is described as a compulsive lover of 'Spades'; and the narrator himself tends to idolize his house-mate 'Mr. Cool' and his jazz favourites. A 'coloured character' he observes gardening in a London square is described as 'so bloody *civilized*'; and Mannie Katz, the Jewish poet character, seems to have been included purely in order for the narrator to express his positive valuation of the entire Jewish race. Yet in the end, this benign view is impossible to sustain in the face of the riots: the narrator 'falls out of love' with London, and decides to escape.

Ultimately, MacInnes's narrator is a member of a subcultural minority, rather than a representative of teenagers in general. Indeed, he might be described as a kind of aristocrat of style. He dresses sharply, drives around on a motor scooter, and enjoys a free and gracious lifestyle. There are two kinds of people in the world, he tells us: mugs and non-mugs. Being a freelance photographer means that he has to hustle for a living, but it also means that he doesn't belong to the 'great community' of the mugs, the 'Other World' of conventional wage-earners. As Alan Sinfield points out:

The boy's time is his own, money problems miraculously disappear, and he has no difficulty meeting interesting and influential people. The impression is that subculture can cut you free from other allegiances: that if you listen to jazz, dress snappily and stay cool, then the rest of it needn't bother you.

In a sense, the arc of the narrative gives the lie to this optimistic projection, and to the more celebratory view of teenagers that it reflects. The riots reveal the continuing influence of racism (not least on young people) and the apathy of the majority, who seem unwilling to resist. As Sinfield points out, the very ending of the book offers an uneasy combination of hope and despair. The narrator is unable to escape to Norway, or to Brazil, as he attempts to do: he welcomes a group of Africans arriving at the airport, but he is 'heartbroken at all the disappointments that were there in store for them'. Here again, MacInnes views the impending changes of the coming decade with a mixture of optimism and deep foreboding.

Absolute Beginners on screen

In 1986, the leading British company Goldcrest released a musical film adaptation of *Absolute Beginners*. Directed by Julien Temple, the film cost £8.4 million to make (a very high budget at the time, especially for a British film). It features a range of well-known stars from the worlds of film (James Fox, Steven Berkoff) and pop music (David Bowie, Ray Davies), as well as cameo appearances from a motley collection of well-known names of the time including Sade Adu, Tenpole Tudor, Alan Freeman, Lionel Blair and Mandy Rice-Davies (among many others). The film was panned by critics, and was a commercial disaster: it recouped only £1.8 million, and is often accused of bankrupting the Goldcrest studio. The director Julien Temple apparently

lost control of the film (three different editors were appointed), and subsequently had a breakdown and left the country.

Even less than the book, the film is clearly not intended as a realist documentary or a work of sociological reportage. It is a musical, with deliberately artificial settings, costumes and dance sequences, and post-dubbed dialogue. Soho is presented very much as a stage set, and the Notting Hill Riots come across like a scene from *West Side Story*. At least some of the novel survives, although a great deal is changed: Crepe Suzette (Patsy Kensit) is no longer shown as a promiscuous 'Spade lover'; the role of the advertising executive Vendice Partners is expanded to accommodate David Bowie; and much of the narrator's peer group are shown only in passing, if at all. There is a good deal of period detail crammed in, some of it additional to the book (the Wolfenden Report, *Hancock's Half Hour*, naturist magazines), and some of it (like Kensit's mini-skirt) unfortunately anachronistic.

The film self-evidently filters the late 1950s through the lens of the mid-1980s; or, as Temple later put it, 'we were trying to hold up a mirror to 1958 and another to 1985, and bounce ideas between the two'. This is reflected in the soundtrack, which contains a rap version of Miles Davis's 'So What' and orchestrations of Charles Mingus tunes by the film's illustrious music director, Gil Evans, alongside songs by Ray Davies, the Style Council and David Bowie that clearly belong to a very different period. The dance sequences owe much to the short-lived jazz dance scene that emerged in a few London clubs in the early 1980s. Albeit not directly, the film reflects the aesthetic approach of 'post-punk' genres like 'new pop' and 'new romanticism' that had emerged in the early 1980s: the emphasis here is on glamour and deliberate artificiality rather than any perceived authenticity. Despite this, the basic cultural sympathies and even the political messages of the book remain more or less intact; although one can only wonder what Colin Maclnnes might have made of it.

Conclusion

In different ways, all the texts I have discussed in this essay are attempts to identify and come to terms with that feeling of impending social change with which we began – a feeling that is at least partly identified with young people, or with the idea of youthfulness. These academics, journalists, film-makers and novelists provided contrasting representations and explanations of the youth cultural trends of their time; yet they seemed to share a sense that they were witnessing a beginning of something that would prove to be much more fundamental and far-reaching. Their accounts are shot through with ambivalence, uncertainty and confusion, and with an uneasy mixture of hope and foreboding. Yet it's at such moments, when change is just taking shape, rather than in the periods where it appears to be in full swing, that we might be able to identify some of the tensions and contradictions that were later obscured. In this respect, we might have more to learn from 1959, even than from 1968...

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