

There'll Always Be An England – Butlins, Brexit and the Heterotopic Body

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Abstract

This article addresses the role of entertainment and performance in the holiday camp today as a way of understanding its interface with contemporary concerns around the impact of mass immigration and consequent emerging nationalisms. Focussing on the British Butlins holiday camp, which still maintains its original base in the English north-east coastal town of Skegness, the article builds on the work of earlier studies of leisure camps (and camps in general), in locating the function of entertainment as a key engine in driving forward a sense of 'England' which is at the same time nostalgic and isolationist. Within the context of the UK referendum result on June 15 2016 to exit the European Union, alongside recent concerns of new manifestations of racism and the marginalisation of foreign nationals working in the UK, the paper addresses the paradox of the use of a mode that has the capacity to engender empathy as a way of objectifying the Other and consolidating a notion of a single sovereign state. Ultimately, while acknowledging the contribution made by contemporary philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben to the field, the paper revisits and finds Foucault's notion of heterotopias as a more dextrous way of conceiving of the ways in which entertainments are planned, produced and performed at British leisure camps today.

Keywords

Nationalism; entertainment; Brexit; popular performances; Foucault; heterotopia

Introduction

In August 2014, I took my family to the Butlins holiday camp in Skegness on the East Coast of England. While there, I became increasingly aware of a range of issues which later came to the fore during the referendum that culminated in the decision for the UK to exit the European Union on June 24 2016. These issues centred on both the programming of entertainments at the camp and the relations between the largely immigrant workers (who serviced its catering and housekeeping functions) and the resident camp guests who were predominantly white British working-class. In this article, I want to examine the role of entertainment and performance in the holiday camp today as a way of understanding its interface with contemporary concerns around the impact of mass immigration and consequent emerging nationalisms. In doing so, I will propose a way of understanding the function of camp entertainments that utilises a metaphor of the body in three distinct ways where I will position the function of entertainment as a key engine in driving forward a sense of ‘Englishness’ which at the same time seeks to promulgate cultural stereotypes that set Englishness apart from cultural Others. The article addresses the paradox of the use of theatrical performance - a mode that can engender empathy but can also be utilised to objectify the Other - and how it has the capacity to consolidate notions of a single sovereign state.

The beginnings of 20th century leisure camps, the body and national identity

Since their inception in the 1930s, the British holiday camp has continued to adapt to its times and changing conditions with varying degrees of commercial success. More importantly, it has played a pivotal role in promoting a uniform sense of cultural value. Starting out as a means of encouraging the development of physical health for young working-class men, Cunningham’s Young Men’s Camp, which opened on the Isle of

Man in 1894, is generally thought to be the trailblazer for what later grew from a dozen or so bell tents to a five-acre estate with a dining pavilion that could host 1600 men at one sitting (Ferry 2010: 6). However, it would be misleading to believe that grouping people away from their domestic habitus to commune with the natural world is a singularly UK phenomenon.

The early camps that were set up in Britain to deliver physical fitness training to young work-class men as a source of leisure and a driver for bodily improvement were paralleled on mainland Europe. The German Freikorperkultur (Free Body Culture) movement of the 1900s, for example, celebrated naturism as central to the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle with the first naturist beach opening on the island of Sylt in 1920 followed by a camp opening at Freilichtpark in Klingberg. In Berlin, Adolf Koch and photographer Hans Surén became chief exponents of Nachtkultur – involving a network of more than 200 naturist clubs which evolved throughout Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Surén, who eventually became a Nazi, famously captured the bracing outdoor activities of the German countryside with an assortment of naked models while fellow German (and anti-Semite) Richard Ungewitter (1868-1958) became a central exponent of promoting a link between communal nudity and racial purity (Toepfer 1997:37). Thus, what becomes apparent within these early manifestations of the leisure camp is a close link between leisure and nature, the human body and racial identity, and localised spaces and national places.

The work of gender theorist Judith Butler (Butler, 1988, Butler, 2002) as well as sociologists Garfinkel (Garfinkel 1967) and Goffman (Goffman 1956) has helped our understanding of the ways in which the human body can be seen as a performative, i.e. how the repertoire of behaviours humans exhibit correspond to a performed rather than

innate presentation of self that comprises a social construction of assumed fixed identities such as those defined by gender. It is interesting to note that both the British and the German camps served to establish and promote nationalist cultural tendencies directly connected to the body at a time when the European body politic was about to change irrevocably with the onset of the Second World War.¹ While initially Hitler banned naturism, it was so popular among the SS that he reinstated it through the auspices of the Kraft durch Freude (literally Strength through Joy) – the state-controlled leisure organisation which sought to promote tourism through the provision of daily leisure events. State control also provided a means of regulating the activities of the camps ensuring that its participants were Aryan nationals so that what is almost immediately apparent when looking back at both the German and the British camps is the connection between bringing people together in areas resplendent with natural beauty as part of an active, ongoing process of cultural confirmation and the establishment of nationhood. This idea of cultural singularity is central to our understanding of the link between the Nachtkultur movement in Germany, the Cunningham Camp, and its offshoots that appeared the other side of the North Sea. During this period, a vital link was made between the performed body, made visible without the costumes of everyday life, and an emerging national identity that evoked a sense of nationhood, nationalism and eugenics. While the early British camps of this time did not embrace the same level of nudity (despite or perhaps because of its similar climatic conditions), they did share an interest in enhancing and improving the body through the establishment of encampments where proximity to nature was linked to a regime of physical fitness and training – something that became a feature of the later Butlins camps through their organisation of sporting competitions as well as those based on physical appearance.

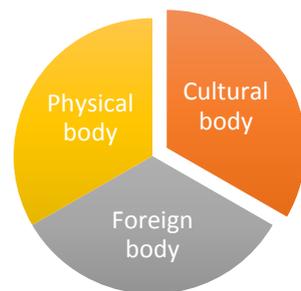
In similar terms, the idea of the body provides a useful frame in which we might begin to understand the ways within which the camp interacts, utilises and promotes a sense of nationalism within its attendees by using it as a mechanism or prism through which we might conceive of the entertainments that were and continue to be offered to its temporary residents. Here it becomes evident that popular performance had and continues to have a critical role to play in configuring cultural stereotypes and establishing national pride.

While the Italian philosopher and sociologist Giorgio Agamben has precisely addressed the degradation of the human body and its function as “bare life” (Agamben 1998) within configurations of camps that act as “states of exception” (such as the concentration camp), there has been little work on scoping out the potential for this kind of analysis within other camp configurations that do not register so marked a delimitation of personal freedom but rather seek to indicate precisely the opposite – a site of leisure and hedonistic pride. Through offering a model for analysing camp entertainments I hope to throw new light and offer new insights into how nationalism and xenophobia are promulgated through both the participation and spectating of popular performance.

The holiday camp as a body

Camp entertainments demonstrate three core characteristics or defining elements which have a direct relation to their corporeal antecedents. These elements correspond to a configuration of the body of the camp performance which is itself comprised of a cultural body, a foreign body and a physical body. Each of the elements interacts and intersects with each other in order to produce a cohesive functioning camp that seeks

the active participation of its members and their heightened motivation within its activities.



Firstly, it is through the establishment of the cultural body that a sense of national cultural coherence was established for the camp guests in ways that helped define how Englishness might be mutually conceived. Secondly, having established a sense of national culture, the camps also help to clarify what Britishness is *not* by setting up the Other as a source of comedy and frivolity – the foreign body. Lastly, an association is made between nationality, national identity, and the twinned elements of strength and beauty which seek to both promote familial roles and provide ideal models for guests to aspire to.

The Cultural Body

During the Second World War, popular performance and entertainments had been maintained through the provision of touring companies under the rubric of ENSA – the Entertainment National Service Association – where artists went out and performed variety acts at military camps and staging posts in order to foster optimism and hope for those fighting on the front line. Songs such as “We’ll Meet Again” made famous by ENSA entertainer Vera Lynn and “When The Lights Go On Again” became talismanic cultural memes of the era offering a bridge of shared experiences between the front line and home front. In a more traditional Arnoldian sense, the

nation's higher culture was domestically sustained during this period through the establishment of CEMA² – the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts – which served as guardians of the higher arts with a remit to support and “preserve 'the national framework of culture, with special reference to music, drama and the arts' during the emergency and to provide sufficient entertainment to sustain the morale of the civilian population,” (Leventhal 1990: 290). A postcard from the era makes this distinction quite clear when a driver mistakenly assumes that an actor is bound for entertaining the troops when he most certainly sees himself as a performer of higher ideals and aesthetics.



Part of the Walter Hudd Collection, given to the British Theatre Museum Association by Walter Hudd's sister, Mrs Hodson, in August 1963. V&A Theatre & Performance Collection

Within the holiday camp, these two elements – popular and high culture - were brought together in a post-war offering that provided a unified sense of nationhood through performance. Thus, combining offerings as diverse as opera and slapstick in ways that now seem radically broad and incongruous achieved a strong sense of national culture among the camp clientele. Today, the camps no longer attempt to bring together high

and low cultural outputs for the social benefit of its guests. The impact of television and more recently digital media has led to a prevalence of TV performances being re-presented once their televisual sell-by date has finally elapsed. Acts that were once on *X Factor* or *Britain's Got Talent* are recycled for public viewing in a rehashed vaudevillian way that goes back to popular entertainment's roots in variety and musical hall.

The Foreign Body

The entertainments offered by Butlins had their roots in music hall and variety encompassing a range of acts that referred back to a nostalgic past where music was, like the fruit and vegetables of the war years, home grown. Foreign, disfigured and ethnically different bodies had long formed part of these entertainments with Black Face performances forming part of the repertoire from the mid 19th century. As social historian George F. Rehin has noted, "Street entertainment and its extensions to fairs, sporting events, seaside promenades and the like was to nineteenth-century Britain what the mass broadcasting media have been to the twentieth," (Rehin 1981:19). It is not surprising, then, that the influence of these foreign bodies permeated through into the post-war holiday camp entertainments. A key event in the calendar during the 1950s and 60s, for example, was the annual parade where holidaymakers and redcoats³ would work together to produce a range of floats that would tour around the camp in a British seaside adaptation of the imagined exotic carnivals of Trinidad, Rio de Janeiro or New Orleans' Mardi Gras. Looking at the Butlin archives of these parades, the prevalence of blacked-up minstrels is clearly in evidence as part of a regular schedule of entertainments. Indeed, the redcoats performed their own local versions of the Black and White Minstrel Show which was a popular network television and stage show

throughout the 1960s and 1970s, where male dancers were ‘blacked up’ to perform a medley of classic American minstrel songs. It was not until 1978 that the BBC decided to stop broadcasting what at one time was one of its most popular weekly entertainment programmes.⁴ It is perhaps by no accident that the stage show, which continued for some years after its television demise, chose Butlins as the destination for its farewell tour when it closed forever in 1987. By this time, public sensibilities had elsewhere finally tired of this pervasive form of institutionalised racism and the show appeared old fashioned and out of touch within a new multicultural and perhaps more politically astute Britain.

With the growth of budget European flights making warmer climes a more attractive proposition and the regimented organisational dogma feeling out of step with an increasingly independent clientele, the British holiday camp entered what appeared to be a terminal decline in the mid 1980s with Butlins being forced to downsize its nine camps to three. However, despite this significant demise, the company brand remains and continues to operate in the British leisure market. Indeed, not only do its famous redcoats persist but the role of the foreign body in its entertainments remains as fundamental as ever.

In 2014, for example, when I arrived at the camp with my family, Butlins were in the process of rolling out *African Fusion* across its resorts which promised to be an amazing experience of “acrobatic performances in a fusion of dance, music and culture” (Anon, 2015). This show deliberately conflates (in its signalling through the word “fusion”) the African continent into a single homogenised whole which itself appears to evoke a pre-colonial Africa of spear-carrying warriors. If multiculturalism was a

project that sought to view others as people like us, then these entertainments serve paradoxically to do the opposite. Here the emphasis on the show centres onto a fetishistic display of supra-human acrobatic feats that forge awe and wonder to an estranged otherness. All of this is packaged up in a family show of music, singing and dancing that, like the Black and White Minstrel shows of forty years before, objectifies another cultural group in ways that at first sight may appear innocent and benign.⁵ While the lives of the African acrobats who form part of these touring troupes may have significantly improved in economic terms as a result of these international engagements (Susan, 2005), the reception of their performances fits into a broader picture of migration patterns and nationalism that serve to underscore cultural difference as a marker along bordered lines and territorialised limits.

Butlins in Skegness today, like much of the agricultural industry of the East of England, is largely staffed by East European migrants in its service sector. They cook and serve the food, they clean the rooms and pick up the rubbish, and in doing so serve to maintain an operation that is ultimately geared towards upholding and maintaining a sense of England at its nostalgic best. Foreign bodies are present as either objectified others engendering awe and wonder or as invisible automatons whose only function is the comfort and sustenance of the monocultural camp guest.

The Physical Body

In terms of the physical body, however, less has changed at Butlins than might be imagined. While the beauty competitions have disappeared, a strong emphasis on physical fitness is maintained with daily sessions available for a range of sports including football and archery. A central element of the sporting programme at Butlins

is wrestling which has a long history and association with popular performances (Portnoy 2006; Chow et al. 2016; Carotenuto 2013; Soulliere and Blair 2006). Butlins has maintained a regular programme of wrestling matches for the entertainment of its guests where, unlike some of its other legacy acts, popularity has not waned. Indeed, a recent wrestling controversy at Butlins provides a paradigm example of the ways in which the heterotopic body surfaces as a key means in establishing and ascribing territories. In 2016, for example, a wrestling match at Butlins became a focus of media interest when the holiday company was accused of fostering racism following a staged contest between British wrestler ‘Tony Spitfire’ and Islamic-flag-bearing immigrant ‘Hakeem’⁶. Tony Spitfire, whose name of course clearly conjures up the British glory of the Second World War through its iconic aeronautical fighter provided a metonymic counterpoint to his apparent radical Islamist foe where the crowds were encouraged to cheer on Spitfire in ways that brought events on the world stage to the fore and reframed them for the camp guests.

Here again the foreign (immigrant) body is invoked as a performative marker that is set up to establish both who we are not and who we in fact are, in an act that brings together the foreign, cultural and physical bodies in one single event.

The holiday camp as a heterotopic body

Foucault’s instigation of the term ‘heterotopia’ was both fleeting and insightful. In three separate spaces, he discussed how the concept might be applied to different spatial elements and how these operate within culture. In Foucault’s discussion of space, six principles of heterotopic space are described which correlate to different categories of

what might constitute a heterotopia (a space in which time is misaligned and reconstructed to form a microcosm of society). Cemeteries, for example, and the nineteenth century phenomenon of a storehouse for individual coffins, evolved to become a space that was “no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but [became] the other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place” (Foucault 1984, p. 25). Within his six principles, the fairground figures as a manifestation of a heterotopic entity as does what Foucault refers to as “vacation villages” that are perceived as:

[...]marvellous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclitic objects, wrestlers, snakewomen, fortune-tellers, and so forth.
(Foucault, 1984, p. 26)

Janina Gosseye and Hilde Heynen discussed Foucault’s neologism in their study of the postwar Belgium holiday camp where they located the camp as a staged heterotopia (Gosseye and Heynen 2013).

The British holiday camp can be conceived as a heterotopic space but just as Agamben has extended Foucaultian notions of biopolitics and biopower, it is useful to rethink the notion of heterotopic space in ways that view it not just as a site that can condense time (through its adherence to nostalgia) but also one that instigates a sense of nationhood through its manipulation of foreign, cultural and physical bodies.⁷ It is a counter site offering a critical distance where this distancing functions to uphold, justify and endorse the hegemonic status quo. Here, outsiders (foreigners, other nationals) are encouraged to engage in heterotopic acts (such as performances) which ultimately render them excluded. In this way, the camps become sites of heterotopic festivity and compensation acting in areas that are geographically remote but at the same time propelling and promoting a hegemonic sense of nationhood. In this respect, it might be more useful to think of the holiday camp itself as a heterotopic body – a space in which

a nostalgia for an olde worlde England of the past, an England of seaside fairground attractions, empire, and bodily strength and beauty, are re-presented as contemporary presences with polarised dynamics. It is within such a space that an exit from the European continent begins to make sense because here we find a site in which the apparent an England that is reconstituted is one that remains constant and true to its nostalgic colonial past.

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¹ **While initially Hitler banned naturism, it was so popular among the SS that he reinstated it through the auspices of the Kraft durch Freude (literally Strength through Joy) – the state-controlled leisure organisation which sought to promote tourism through the provision of daily leisure events.**

² **CEMA was founded in 1940 and lasted for the duration of the war whereupon it was reformulated and more broadly reconfigured as the Arts Council.**

³ When British entertainment impresario Billy Butlin opened his first holiday camp on the Lincolnshire coast at Skegness in 1936, he became almost immediately concerned that its new campers were not fully engaging with the holiday spirit. Compelled to take action, Butlin asked Norman Bradford, who had worked on the building of the camp, to assume the job of cajoling the guests into taking advantage of the activities which he accomplished with the acquisition of a red blazer to make him more easily identifiable (Mason and McGroarty 2010: 12). Thus, the first redcoat was born with a growing army soon becoming a permanent fixture of not just the Butlins camps but also a whole range of other British holiday camps, each with their own version of the colour-coded entertainment army whose mission was to maximise the enjoyment of everyone attending through their fun-making operational stewardship.

⁴ **Due to a long-standing protest by the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination. The show's viewing figures peaked at 18 million at one time. See**

<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2004/mar/26/features11.g2>

⁵ Cultural historian and human rights campaigner Michael Ignatieff has drawn attention to how Butlins sits at the epicentre of the development of a post-war suburban British self-image where “[t]his image was based on keeping certain realities out of the frame of the family album: father’s affairs, mother’s unhappiness, Uncle Jack’s homosexuality and little Annie’s homoerotic stirrings. Moral consensus depended on silence and exclusion.

Ignatieff, M. (1998) 'Identity Parades', *Prospect*, 20 April 1998. Available at:

<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/identityparades> (Accessed: 15 March 2015).

See, for example, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/05/butlins-apologises-for-racist-wrestling-match-that-urged-familie/> Accessed on 1 May, 2017

⁷ In far more darker territory, Agamben has also written about camps and encampment as a principle means of understanding his distinction between *bios* (our way of life) and bare life (the simple fact of living) where the concentration camps of the Second World War (and beyond) demonstrated a bare life which has no *bios*. The camp becomes a liminal space given over to sovereign decision which lacks the normal rule of law Agamben, G., Binetti, C. V. and Cesare, C. 2000. *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.