Holiday Poetics: An Introduction

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WHEN considering modern and contemporary summer holidays as a social phenomenon, there might be a temptation to read them solely as a buoyant ramification of late capitalist habits, a garish bourgeois mass entertainment institution as futile and platitudinous as can be, leading to acritical tourism, hypertrophied infrastructural developments, dishonestly overpriced meals, and cheesy events aiming at a shallow carefree amusement. The history and cultural role of this fundamental recurring experience is, however, much more complex and significative than this clichéd portrait might reveal, and its legal birth in the modern age is the result of paramount rights arduously claimed by the European working classes in the interwar period. The idea of holidays currently adopted in capitalist societies is, in fact, surprisingly recent, dating from June 1936, when the Front Populaire in France established by law the right to an annual paid leave, which allowed 600,000 workers and their families to go on holidays that same year (a number which tripled as soon as 1937), and which lent its model to similar laws in many European and Western countries. Its importance in the social history of the twentieth century cannot be dismissed, and it must be politically respected as a major conquest in the rights of workers and families.

At the time when the first speeches demanding paid leave were made, holidays were presented as an antidote for the fatigue of a year of work, and, more broadly, for the "depressing life of our societies" (Hordern, 1990: 22), according to a 1912 statement by Charles Viennet, secretary-general of the French Christian employee unions. They thus played a major role in civic reflections on how work controls society and on how, if excessive, it can numb intellects, as well as destroy foundational freedoms and liberties. In the last twenty-five years, a number of important academic publications have questioned modern holidays from this historical and sociological perspective, looking back on a century of summer exoduses and their cultural implications. At the turn of the century, several impressive

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publications smoothed the path for this research: Jean Viard's *Penser les vacances* (1984) and *Court traité sur les vacances, les voyages et l'hospitalité des lieux* (2000), André Rauch*'s Vacances en France de 1830 à nos jours* (1996), Orvar Löfgren's *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing* (1999), Fred Inglis's *The Delicious History of the Holiday* (2000), Pierre Périer's *Vacances populaires : Images, pratiques et mémoire* (2000), Steven Braggs's and Diane Harris's *Sun, Fun and Crowds: British Seaside Holidays Between the Wars* (2000), and Jean-Didier Urbain's *Les Vacances* (2002). And, in the meantime, other authors followed the lead, such as Bertrand Réau, author of *Les Français et les vacances* (2011), and Alessandro Martini and Maurizio Francesconi, who recently published *La moda della vacanza. Luoghi e storie 1860-1939* (2021). Besides, the matter has also been treated from an aesthetic perspective, such as in Christophe Granger's 2009 *Les Corps d'été. Naissance d'une variation saisonnière*, republished in a slightly updated version in 2017 as *La Saison des apparences: Naissance des corps d'été*, where the French historian explores the development of notions of physical beauty within the context of summer leisure practices.

Clearly understudied in contemporary scholarship are, however, the multiple forms of relationship between the phenomenon of summer holidays, both in its pre-1936 forms (from aristocratic nineteenth-century health cures to early-twentieth-century cultural stays and seaside leisure) and in its post-1936 variants (from the massive postwar seasonal working-class exoduses to bourgeois resort vacationing and contemporary eco-conscious summer sojourning in nature), and the narrative arts. This issue of *Imaginaires* proposes to address just that, and does so through a wide lens.

On the one hand, the issue casts its look on the thematisation of summer holidays by the narrative arts. Indeed, holiday contexts are a staple setting for hundreds of novels, films, and comics, developing stories where, quite often, the anticipation of the benefits of summer rest is utterly dashed, both to tragic and to comic effects. Disrupted day-tripping or summer vacationing plans are, for instance, the narrative motor of a whole genre in Italy in the 1950s, the "cinema turistico-balneare", where feature films as distinct as Aldo Fabrizi's *La famiglia Passaguai*, Alberto Lattuada's *La spiaggia* and Antonio Racioppi's *Tempo di villeggiatura* clearly illustrate the exceptionally ample narrative and expressive possibilities of the theme.

On the other hand, this number proposes an examination of what is at times blurrily designated "holiday style" in the description of certain novels, films, and comics, and which necessarily implies a study of the possible interaction between topic and form. Here, aspects of density, rhythm, tone, and composition are the basis of analysis, and help explain

the points of intersection of holiday prose as different as Cesare Pavese's *Feria d'agosto* and André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*, films as disparate as Jacques Rozier's *Du côté d'Orouët* and Julie Delpy's *Le Skylab*, or narrative photograph albums as unrelated as Marie-Françoise Plissart's *Aujourd'hui* and Martin Parr's *Life's a Beach*.

Although several articles would not seem misplaced if included under the two categories, the texts are grouped according to their predominant focus: either centring their analyses of holidays on a temporal perspective or on a spatial one. Both have, notwithstanding, a common characteristic — the recognition of the parenthetical nature of summer holidays —, which explains the parallel structure of the section titles: "Times in Brackets" and "Spaces in Brackets".

The first batch presents a comprehensive reflection on the times of summer holidays, scrutinised through the prism of ephemerality and nostalgia, both thematically and formally. And all respond, directly or indirectly, to Orvar Löfgren when he writes, as quoted by Felicity Chaplin in her article (p. 154), that "one of the main characteristics of summer vacations or summers on the whole is their hopeless brevity. Here is a utopia that we start to lose already at the beginning of our vacations. Summers are always drawing to a close".

Proposing a close reading of a major title of the European postmodernist photonovel, Jan Baetens's article "Vacances et vacance. *Aujourd'hui* de Marie-Françoise Plissart" launches the discussion on holidays from the significative proximity, in the French language, between the words "holidays" and "vacancy", or "abeyance". It stresses the links of the medium's narratological characteristics and Plissart's formal choices with the ontological definition of holidays as a temporal bubble, existing solely within an idiosyncratic notion of "today" which gives this work its title. As the Belgian scholar and poet states in his article, "[h]olidays are a pastoral *intermezzo*, a way of taking time off from the world without quite taking time off from it, and this temporary but partial cessation of daily life is brought to light at every moment in the book." (p. 24; my translation).

This idea of bracketed time is pivotal throughout this first section of the issue, and is pertinently linked to notions of nostalgia in the two following articles. Valentina Monateri's text "'Lavorare è vestire la terra'. Summer memories in Cesare Pavese's *Feria d'agosto*" thoroughly explores the Italian author's short stories from the 1940s dedicated to the topic of summer holidays, and succeeds in "shedding a light on how mystery, myth, childhood and summer memories are enucleated in Pavese's view of fictional narrative in post-war Italy, including his social and political thought." (p. 31). Besides, it prolongs Baetens's take on the idea of

"suspended time" by defining holidays as inseparable from nostalgia for what has been lost: "The feria, the holiday, the time suspended from the working days symbolize Pavese's creative attempt to combat the existential nostalgia for the modern loss of the esoteric, the mysterious and the sacred." (p. 41).

Ann Catherine Hoag's article "Summertime: Time, Narrative and Queer Futures in Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*" treats André Aciman's praised début novel with the same attention to the temporal implications of holidays, and analyses the "narrative play with time in the text [which] functions to […] 'hold in abeyance' the finite abortive ecstasies of the heady summer months" (p. 50). Hoag tests in this novel which she describes as a "veritable mosaic of overlapping tenses" (p. 61) — as well as in its sequel *Find Me* — the narrative and human implications of the circumscribed and suspended time of holidays (often lived and expressed in the past, present, and future tenses), and does so resourcefully through the prisms of desire, love, and nostalgia.

Finitude and transience are intimately linked in the following article, Christakis Christofi's "*Les Estivants*, des gens de passage", which goes back to early-twentieth-century Russia for a reflection on Maxim Gorky's 1905 play *Summerfolk*. It is the first of two articles in this issue surrounding the space of the *dacha*, the traditional seasonal second home of families in the country, and in it Christofi questions the transient nature of the holidays of the rich classes in dialogue with the transitoriness of the political regime, since Gorky's text was published in the same year of the First Russian Revolution. And the concept of holidays as "vacance", used by Baetens in the sense of "emptiness" to discuss Plissart's *roman-photo*, returns: "Bassov states at the beginning of the play: 'How empty it us at our place' […], but this emptiness should be seen as the essential characteristic of this transitional period which not only describes the decor of Bassov's datcha and the emptiness of the existence of these people passing by, but also the problems of the whole country, on the way to revolution." (p. 83; my translation).

Alix Cazalet-Boudigues closes this section with her article "Holidays on Ice: William Morris and Lavinia Greenlaw in Iceland". The text departs once again from the productive and contradictory double meaning of "vacances" in French, that of "absence" and "holidays" (which presuppose, according to philosopher André Comte-Sponville "a fullness of a life"), to discuss Lavinia Greenlaw's *Questions of Travel: William Morris in Iceland*, a book which revisits the British textile designer and poet's written accounts of his summer stays in the island in the early 1870s. Once again, void and time are the central issues, especially those which can be observed through cognition altered by displacement: "This sense of writing

in a void, on an offbeat, ultimately matches his impression of existing in a place where time seems to have run differently than in England, a place where 'it looked as if you might live a hundred years before you ever see ship sailing into the bay there; as if the old life of the Saga time had gone, and the modern life had never reached the place'" (p. 94).

The second section is dedicated to the bracketed spaces of holidays, that is, what Orvar Löfgren calls "vacationlands", and which are as identifiable during the effervescent summers as they are, by contrast, during the deserted low seasons. The encounters of real spaces with figmental ones, those that are cultivated by individual imagination, collective mythologies, and organised fiction, give origin to what he terms "vacationscapes", where "[p]ersonal memories mix with collective images" (Löfgren, 1999: 2).

The text most directly dedicated to the places of holidaymaking opens the second part of the issue: Silvia Pireddu's "*Ad Limine*: Martin Parr's Humans on the Beach. Re-empowering the English Seaside Resorts as Pop Culture". It searches for micronarratives within the British photographer's extensive work on the beach landscape, which "witnessed the empowerment and profound transformation of the English working class with its cultural and racial (white) identity" (p. 112). And these micronarratives are read as very telling illustrations of the sociological implications of the changing landscapes and habits associated to leisurely fruition of the seaside in the second half of the twentieth century in Britain.

Hugo Frey believes Jacques Rozier's films do the same for the French context in the identical period. In "Summertime France as Ethno-Sociological Experiment: Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary in Jacques Rozier's *Du côté d'Orouët*", Frey dissects this particular feature film by the French New Wave auteur in order to explain how it promotes a view of co-dependence between the collective phenomenon of holidays and the paradoxical space where it is staged: on the one hand, "the mundane and the everyday world of the holiday home" (p. 144); on the other, "the profound environmental (what we might call today ecological) rhythm of nature" (p. 144). Besides, as most articles in this number do, Frey stresses the importance of nostalgia in the popular mythologies associated to holidays, notably the "bittersweet nostalgia associated with finding long lost holiday photographs" (p. 132).

Both nostalgia and the French landscape are also central to Felicity Chaplin's article "The iconography of the summer vacation in Julie Delpy's *Le Skylab* (2011)". Chaplin sees in Delpy's film a bridge between the holiday temporality and the spaces which host these brief physical and affective passages — in this case, as in that of Rozier's feature, centred in the family house and the beach: "Like other films which deal with representations

of summer vacations, *Le Skylab* depicts sites of brevity and impermanence such as the summer house and the beach with its attendant and fleeting romance." (p. 161). And she convincingly demonstrates how Delpy greatly invests in the development of a powerful, accurate, and arresting iconography of the French summer beachside, which serves the purpose of commenting on "a broader socio-political and cultural context which includes the legacy of May 1968, second wave feminism, and the Algerian War" (p. 151).

After Great Britain and France, the remaining three articles of this section further expand the temporal and geographical scope of this issue by turning their attention to late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century Switzerland, the mid-twentieth-century Soviet Union, and early-twentieth-century Italy. From the perspective of a literary and cultural historian, Hélder Mendes Baião delivers in "L'apparition du tourisme dans l'espace alpin helvétique : récits de voyage francophones (1760-1850)" a broad-ranging account of when and how certain mythologies associated to Switzerland as a holiday destination entered travel writing, and how literature contributed to "the invention of a desirable space" (p. 165; my translation). Mendes Baião reminds his reader that these texts which crystalise an ideal of a covetable place were produced before the generalisation of the concepts of tourism and holidays, and that they must, therefore, be studied according to an earlier outlook on travel. However, this perspective, which the author classifies as "scholarly, anthropological, romantic" (p. 183; my translation), is equally important for the comprehension of the contemporary popular image of the Swiss Alps in particular, as well as of the widespread iconography of mountainous retreats in general, populated by inns and baths set in dramatic landscapes.

The Russian rural holiday home is the topic of Polina Pavlikova's "The phenomenon of the Russian/Soviet *dacha* and the image of the *izba* in Andrei Tarkovsky's movie *Mirror*", which explores the feature according to the socio-cultural and narrative implications of this space, both in times of peace and of war. The article questions this by observing how Tarkovsky used his father's poetry in the film, especially the poem "Eurydice", and its relationship with the shifting function of the *izba*, from "holiday space" to "shelter" (p. 198).

Finally, Cláudia Coimbra's "'Possibilities of a Pleasant Outing': Doing the Don'ts in and about Florence in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View*" closes the section and the issue. In this article, the Tuscan city and adjoining countryside, as well as "the room" and "the view" of the novel's title, are read as "symbols of a higher nature" (p. 201), which serve a sophisticated narrative of female travelling, imbalanced holidays, and Englishness abroad. In it, "hopes are dashed, expectations thwarted [and]

new sensations embraced" (p. 199), and, in this sense, it certainly lives up to the intensity of the holiday phenomenon.

As I have attempted to point out in this introduction to the issue, the eleven articles of *Holiday Poetics* propose a scintillating examination of the holidays of the past through the narrative arts, as well as a wide-ranging scrutiny of the impacts of this paramount human phenomenon in European cultural creation and consumption of the last a hundred and fifty years. Of no less relevance, however, is the fact that they also inventively pave the way for the questioning of the holidays of tomorrow, those that will take place in a politically and environmentally threatened world, and whose stories will doubtlessly be shared by present and future media.

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