
THE SUBVERSION OF SYMPATHY IN BRITISH SOCIAL REALISM

Uses of Laughter in the Cinematic Representation of the British Working-Class.

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A Dissertation submitted in requirement for the degree of MPhil in Film from the
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UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW

December 2007

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Introduction

Laughter cannot fail to throw light on the way the human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular imagination.¹

The idea that a nation can have a sense of humour is in itself quite funny, but it is a persistent factor in most accounts of British culture.²

Within the ancient philosophies of Aristotle, lies the famous formula: “of all living creatures only man is endowed with laughter” and that laughter is “man’s highest spiritual privilege.”³ Learning to laugh is fundamental to the development of the human condition; an important means of embracing the fact that we are alive, whilst accepting the fact that we are mortal. Laughter can access an understanding of existence that few other emotional manifestations allow and its therapeutic relationship with everyday life is well established. Thus, within many cultures, laughter is an aspect of life that appears to become increasingly prominent depending on the level of suffering and oppression that a group of people endure. This, in simple terms, is what Bakhtin meant when, within his work on the history of laughter, he argued that laughter is “the people’s unofficial truth.”⁴ This perspective on laughter is certainly relevant to the character of British working-class life. It is surprising that British social realist cinema- a form of cinema that, since its inception, has possessed an intense interest in everyday working-class life- has only recently begun to place emphasis on the idea that the way people laugh provides clear insight into how people live, view and cope with their lives.

The rationale at the core of this research is that the lineage of British social realism has portrayed a gradual departure from an ostentatious and judgmental approach which circumscribed the British New Wave. Bazin successfully highlighted the patronising tendencies inherent in a benevolent approach to representation by suggesting that “even for the poorest or the most wretched... pity does violence to the dignity of the

¹ Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of The Comic*, (London: Macmillan, 1913) p.2

²“Carry on Regardless: The British Sense of Humour” in Leach, Jim, “British Film” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp.143-161/ p.143

³ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) p.68

⁴ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and his World*, p.90

man who is its object.”⁵ This bourgeois subjectivity has certainly become marginalised, especially in the last two decades of social realist cinema. Yet, the relationship between this development and the increasing observance of laughter, in British social realism, is presently a neglected subject.

The conceptual framework for this thesis intends to acknowledge social realism’s relationship with class through a discussion of the way in which the most recent examples of British social realism have begun to embrace the potentially liberating effect of laughter within the lives of working-class characters. The hypothesis for this work is that this site of study will elucidate how branches of British social realism have moved away from the bourgeois subjectivity of previous incarnations of the social realist form, towards a form of emotional realism that has a far more inclusive tendency. Influenced, in part, by Terry Lovell’s assertion that realism should more readily harness its ability to provide the pleasures of “common experiences”, “solidarity” and a sense of identity and “community”,⁶ I argue that emotional realism harnesses the potentiality to position the spectator within, rather than outside, the lives of the working-class subjects portrayed. Thus, this mode of spectatorship elucidates an attempt to collectively involve the audience in a way that removes them from the potentially patronising position of sympathetic outsider, which has been of such detriment to the appreciation of British social realism since its conception.

The films which I will consider, *Nil by Mouth* (Gary Oldman, 1997) and *Dead Man’s Shoes* (Shane Meadows, 2004), not only emerge at a relatively similar point in the social realist form’s recent development but they are films which elucidate directorial approaches that possess many comparative features. Oldman and Meadows are both interested in very similar subject matter, namely the experiences and environments of the British underclass. Likewise, the element of this subject matter that each director chooses to focus on is the dispossessed and disenchanted underclass male, heavily affected by the disintegration of the values and cultures of the traditional working-class. Most importantly, there is a congruity inherent in Oldman and Meadows’ understanding and appreciation of this social group. Unlike so many other social realist directors in the past,

⁵ Bazin, André “What is Cinema?” in Braudy & Marshall (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p.177

⁶ See, Lovell, Terry, *Pictures of Reality: Politics and Pleasure*, (London: BFI, 1980) p.95

both Oldman and Meadows' originated from the environments that they have committed to screen and they appear to use their films to deal, at least in part, with their own personal experiences.

A confessional tendency is not, in itself, fundamental to the creation of a social realist text; however, it is certainly relevant to the fact that both Oldman and Meadows have been motivated to create the type of non-judgmental and unsentimental films that, I shall argue, they have. The most significant element of similarity in their respective portrayals of the underclass is a creation of emotional realism. There is a remarkable ease with which each director seems to be able to realistically move from instances of despair to moments of laughter. This symbiosis has the potentiality to create a portrayal of the subject that is as celebratory as it is critical. As such, this synthesis provides little opportunity to appreciate these films as being either unremittingly bleak or overly sentimental and sanitised, neither of which would be completely relevant to *any* mode of life, even one that was, on the whole, grim.

Chapter One: The Origins of British Social Realism

There is probably no critical term with a more unruly and confusing lineage than that of realism.⁷

Due to its heterogeneous form, a definition of the practices inherent in the construction of the social realist model is not an undertaking that can be executed with brevity. Therefore an observation of the social and formal practices that governed the emergence of British social realism will dominate this chapter's concern. It is initially helpful to discuss social realism in terms of what it is not. Christian Metz discusses how the Cinema industry has adapted an audience "accustomed to the cinema", maximising the consumption of films through the creation of a "mental machinery."⁸ Metz is predominantly discussing the social and formal guarantees that have grown to characterise commercial generic production; that is, any form of cinema that has an inherent inclination towards generating profit. Heath discusses a study of the commercial cinema as a study of "the organisation of homogeneity."⁹ In terms of both social content and aesthetic form, social realism contradicts the polished practices that are so important to institutions such as the Hollywood studio system; focusing instead on characters, environments and stories that are at some remove from subject matter that belongs in most commercial generic production. Therefore, as Hallam and Marshment discuss,

Social realism is distinguished by the attention it pays to characters who usually figure as background presences in the generic mainstream, those marginalised by virtue of their social status.¹⁰

Likewise, in terms of the creation of a social realist aesthetic, social realism contradicts the guarantee of formal invisibility, which characterises the 'classic realism' of most commercial cinema.¹¹ Social realism, via a diversification of technique has increasingly

⁷ Hill, John, *Sex Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (London: BFI Publishing, 1986) p.57

⁸ Metz, Christian, "The Imaginary Signifier," in *Screen* (vol. 16, No.2, Summer 1975) pp.18-19

⁹ Heath, Stephen, "Film System and Analysis: Terms of Analysis, Part 1", in *Screen* (vol. 16, no.1, Spring 1975) p.10

¹⁰ Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press) p.190

¹¹ For a thorough description of 'classic realism', see MacCabe, Colin, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses", in *Screen* (1974, vol.15, no.2) pp.7-27

achieved its style exactly through being noticed. However, these notions were only in their formative stages during the period that saw the emergence of the British New Wave.

To date, the two most seminal texts on the signifying practices inherent in British Social Realism are John Hill's *Sex Class and Realism* and Andrew Higson's "Space, Place, Spectacle."¹² These two works are fundamental to this chapter's intentions. Together, these texts provide a cohesive definition of the social realist style and content that underwrote early social realism. Hill and Higson both focus on the signifying practices inherent in the British New Wave, the 1960s film movement which involved the first incontestable conception of social realism within the British feature film. This chapter will embrace a study of the New Wave, primarily in its own terms, as a means of facilitating chapter two's study of social realist practice in recent British cinema.

The rationale behind this decision is that this study of the New Wave will set up my discussion of more recent social realism, namely the work of Gary Oldman and Shane Meadows. This chapter will negotiate the question: what are the social and formal conventions which contributed to an initial academic appreciation of social realism and how, in chapter two, might we reassess these practices with regard to the current social realist climate? Discussion of this question will act as a justification for my intention to elucidate a new means of analysing recent social realist practice, through a study of laughter's ability to engender emotional realism within British social realism.

Signifying Practice

There is no knowable reality outside of 'signifying practices'... Ultimately 'reality' becomes nothing more, nor less than the signifying practice itself... The goal of realism is an illusion. Art cannot 'show things as they really are.'¹³

The subjectivity of the camera's reality and its subsequent limitations in depicting the 'real' is a well established notion. The bromidic nature of the discussion does not mean, however, that it isn't useful to briefly acknowledge this issue as a means of explaining why the study of realist convention and ideology exists. Bazin, one of film criticism's first and most noteworthy advocates of the unique realist potential that cinema harnessed,

¹² Higson, Andrew, "Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the 'Kitchen Sink' Film" in Higson, (Ed), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London; New York: Cassell, 1996) pp.134-156

¹³ Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, p.79

initially, justified his assertions via the belief that cinema was able to form an image of nature that was automatic and without any dependency on the creative intervention of man. Likewise, Kracauer expounded the notion that cinema had realised the potentiality to hold a mirror up to nature in a way that no other art form could rival. Kracauer argued that, “It must always be kept in mind that even the most creative filmmaker is much less independent of nature in the raw than the painter or poet.”¹⁴ However, cinema is as subjective as any other form of art; a recorded image immediately becomes a reproduction of its original state; once removed from the context of its original time and space, its new conception of time and space is dictated by whoever directs the camera. Alexander Hammid, a Czechoslovakian filmmaker, writes, “The camera records only in the manner in which the man (or woman) behind it chooses to direct it.”¹⁵

Signifiers of realism are the practices that have been created to articulate reality, because reality cannot exist in a recorded form. This explains Bazin’s commitment to the “multiplicity of ‘realist inventions’”,¹⁶ whereby, it is only through such techniques as deep focus, camera movement, lighting and editing that realism is ever achieved. Moreover, cinema is dependent not only on the artist’s tools, but also the artist’s perception. This is one constant in an otherwise shifting form. Steve Neale states that “the recorded image can be “realist but not real.”¹⁷ Yet, if Social realism possesses one clear aim, then that is to approximate reality; that is, to show things as they really are. However, the audience’s appreciation of what is ‘real’ is always dependent on what has emerged previously within the cannon of social realist cinema. A social realist film can never be judged solely on its relation to what one may consider ‘real’ life; thus, its influences are necessarily heterogeneous. The heterogeneous nature of realism’s creation is thus a catalyst for the multiplicity of its form. 1960s social realism is not important to social realist study because it established a fixed model for a form of cinema that

¹⁴ Kracauer, Siegfried, “Theory of Film”, in Braudy & Marshall (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

¹⁵ Alexander Hammid, in Fabe, Marilyn, *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) p.101

¹⁶ Bazin, Andre, *Jean Renoir* (London: W.H. Allen, 1974) p.63. Cited in, Lovell, Terry, *Pictures of Reality: Politics and Pleasure*

¹⁷ Neale, Steve, *Cinema And Technology: Image, Sound, Colour*, (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1985) p.96

attempted to depict 'real' life, in British cinema; in fact, such a notion is contrary to everything that the study of social realism is built upon.

Any critique of social realism is a site of study that necessarily demands constant reassessment. Hill states that "approximation to reality depends on the epistemology of the 'real'"¹⁸ and this assertion qualifies the idea that the discursive nature of realism prevents it from realising a position of unmediated reflection. Social realist discussion, therefore, is inherently intertextual; "comparing the terms of one discourse with those of another."¹⁹ Hill explains this condition by suggesting that social realist criticism creates a dialogue "with what has gone before... uncovering reality by exposing the artificiality and conventionality of what has passed for 'reality' previously."²⁰ Kirsten Thompson argues that, the audience's perception of what constitutes realism depends not only on our "knowledge of everyday life", but also on "our awareness of prevailing aesthetic canons of realism".²¹ Any form of 'reality' that we see on screen, therefore, be it documentary or feature film, is necessarily a human construct and instigated by human agency. An understanding of the British social realist form is an understanding of the signifying features which stylistically and socially construct it.

New Wave Subject Matter

Social realism has, from the outset, been marked by its choice of content; that is, the choice of people, places and experiences that are considered this form's principle subject matter. However the form's stylistic (or formal) elements, which dictate the aesthetic considerations that are implemented in the representation of these people, places and experiences, have grown to adopt a position of equal importance. A study of social realism is necessarily a discussion of these signifying practices and their constant state of transition. This section intends to decipher what these signifying features were originally and elucidate how the shifting nature of these representations circumscribe consideration of both the British New Wave and all social realism since that period.

¹⁸ Hill, *Sex Class and Realism*, p.57

¹⁹ Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, p.82

²⁰ Hill, John, *Sex Class and Realism*, p.127

²¹ Thompson, K. *Breaking the Glass Armour: Neo-Formalist Film Analysis* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1988) p.16

It is well-established that British social realism has always had a close relationship with the representation of the working-class. This is reflected by the films which define the British New Wave. Although the social realist intent of some of these films is more highly regarded than that of others, appreciation of the British New Wave is, debatably, organised around the following eight films: *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1959), *Look Back in Anger* (Tony Richardson, 1960), *The Entertainer* (Tony Richardson, 1960), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960), *A Taste of Honey* (Tony Richardson, 1961), *A Kind of Loving* (John Schlesinger, 1962), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962) and *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1963). The most convincing claim to realism that these films make is that, due to the context of other film production of the period, the subject matter they offered was, at times, shockingly fresh. This is not simply a reference to the depiction of working-class characters and environments, but also the New Wave's depiction of youth culture and the inclusion of controversial themes such as: casual rebellion against the establishment, infidelity, promiscuity, homosexuality, abortion, rape and domestic abuse. Overall, however, the fact that working-class characters and environments were given central importance in feature-film form should be considered the New Wave's defining feature.

Hill has argued that "traditionally social realism within Britain has been associated with the making visible of the working-class".²² The most significant problem with this situation is that there is nothing which makes the working-class more 'real' than any other social group. Hill's consideration of this predicament is effectual:

The idea that realism is linked to the representation of the Working-class derives in part from context, and specifically the perceived absence of (adequate) representations of this group within the dominant discursive regimes.²³

Hill's overall argument is an extension of Raymond Williams's assertion that new emergences within realism always involve "a movement towards social extension".²⁴ Williams's argument contends that social realism encourages the filmic exposition of formerly under-represented groups, environments and experiences. In many respects, for

²² Hill, John, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (London: Clarendon Press, 1999) p.135

²³ Hill, John, "From the New Wave to 'Brit-Grit'", *Continuity and Difference in Working-Class Realism*, in (Eds.) Ashby & Higson, *British Cinema: Past and Present* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000) p.251

²⁴ Williams, Raymond, "A Lecture on Realism" in *Screen* (vol.18, no.1, 1977) p.63

the New Wave, simply placing the working-class subject in a prominent position on screen was enough.

In terms of social representation, the context of film production at the beginning of the 1960s was far more restrictive than today. Nowell-Smith concedes that British films came across as, “restrictive and stifling, subservient to middle-class artistic models and to middle- and upper-class values.”²⁵ The Working-class subject was completely marginalized within British cinema. Generally, Working-class characters were either background characters or figures of bourgeois parody, or both. Likewise the environments on screen were far removed from faithful Working-class environments. The working-class was essentially the vulgar or threatening ‘other’. The initial reaction to the New Wave, and to the brand of social realism that it was responsible for giving to the film world, was an impressive one and reflected the fact that the New Wave was quite different from most British feature film production before that point. Lowenstein highlights some of the attitudes that emerged upon the release of the first film of the New Wave, *Room at the Top* (1959), as being suitably representative of reaction to the New Wave. Leonard Mosley, from *The Daily Express*, described Clayton’s film as, “savagely frank and brutally truthful.” Similarly, Derek Monsey in *The Sunday Express*: described the film as earning its rating through “sheer blatant honesty... the X certificate looks like a badge of honour.”²⁶ These qualifications of ‘honesty’, however, are entirely relative to the context of the period and the other films that were being produced within it.

The initial claims to realism were essentially due to this subversive and new subject matter, rather than the actual representation of this subject matter. As Hill has noted, the New Wave’s approach to the representation of the working-class was, in hindsight, socially and formally, restrained:

Despite the ostensive commitment to represent the Working-class, the British ‘new wave,’ through their adoption of conventional narrativity and ‘realism,’ tend to have the opposing effect, that is, the creation of an accentuated individualism.²⁷

²⁵ Nowell-Smith, George, “But Do We Need It?” in Roddick & Auty (eds.) *British Cinema Now* (London; BFI, 1985) p.152

²⁶ Lowenstein, Adam, “Under-The-Skin Horrors” Social Realism and Classlessness in *Peeping Tom* and The British New Wave, in Ashby & Higson (Eds.) *British Cinema: Past and Present* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000) p.225

²⁷ Hill, *Sex Class and Realism*, p.143

Essentially, the New Wave's handling of working-class concerns is marred by its expression of a middle-class standpoint. Peter Hutchings has further emphasised this flaw:

The middle-class perspective has become so obvious over the years that they have lost their power to win us over to their viewpoint and their power and main interest is now either historical or- in the case of the more 'poetic' or visually arresting films- aesthetic.²⁸

I shall proceed to discuss what both Hill and Hutchings mean by their respective assertions.

An attempt to remedy issues of social representation in British cinema was a significant motivation for the middle-class directors who were behind the advent of the New Wave. What we cannot ignore, however, is that the New Wave, unlike more recent social realism (which, like a lot of British cinema, is never likely to make a fortune or even receive a nationwide cinematic release²⁹) did achieve commercial success. As Hutchings argues,

In the past, discussions of New Wave realism have tended to place it in a position of resistance to the commercial... realism might well in some instances involve a 'moral' commitment to serious social issues but in the 1959-63 period it also sold films.³⁰

To criticise the New Wave simply because it achieved a fair amount of commercial success is a redundant pursuit. However, as Hill and Hutchings have both discussed, in terms of both the narrative and visual decisions that the New Wave committed to, there was nothing incredibly challenging or subversive about its formal elements; likewise, all too often, these representations of working-class life were characterized by their superficiality. Therefore, to what extent was commercial success achieved at the expense of- what we now understand to be- social realist integrity? I shall discuss how New Wave provided an outlet for audiences to *see* working-class life, without necessarily getting a *feel* for these lives.

²⁸ Hutchings, Peter, "Beyond the New Wave: Realism in British Cinema, 1959-63, in, Murphy, Robert (ed.), *The British Cinema Book: 2nd Edition* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001) p.146

²⁹ A good example of this is *Secrets and Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996). In interview with Leigh (*The South Bank Show* on the 13th October, 2002) Melvyn Bragg revealed the information that *Secrets and Lies* (1996) won Oscars and a Palme D'Or but in the county of Kent was shown in just one cinema and for just three days.

³⁰ Hutchings, Peter, "Beyond the New Wave: Realism in British Cinema, 1959-63", p.151

Higson argues that realism, within the New Wave, could be placed into three broad categories of realism: “moral”, “surface” and “poetic”. I shall begin by dealing with “surface” and “moral” realism. Essentially, “moral realism”, Higson writes, “is a commitment to a particular sense of social problems and solutions”³¹. This was executed, in part, via “Surface Realism”, which suggested that New Wave films should be shot on location in actual British (regional) landscapes, employing unknown or unglamorous British actors. It should be noted, such were the restrictive tendencies of film production at the time, that ‘unglamorous’ could simply denote an actor that spoke in his or her own regional accent. Thus ‘surface realism’ was never pursued to the same extremes as a movement such as Italian Neo-realism. Although this commitment to place ‘ordinary’ British people on screen was a relatively progressive development in terms of cinematic representation, as Higson states “surface realism still involves a fetishization of certain iconographic details”, through which we are given, nothing more than, “the spectacle of the real”.³² This is a reflection of the New Wave’s unthreatening treatment of supposedly ‘subversive’ subject matter.

The ideas, influences and context of the period that contained the New Wave are areas of research which are fundamental to a thorough appreciation of the origins of British New Wave cinema. Lindsay Anderson, director of *This Sporting Life* (1963), a seminal New Wave film, wrote an article on realist cinema, in 1957, called *Get Out and Push*. This article was contained within a group of essays, rather boldly entitled ‘Declaration.’³³ His piece described the “virtual rejection of three-quarters of the population of this country (on screen)” and how this represented a “ridiculous impoverishment of the cinema” and “flight from contemporary reality.”³⁴ In another article Anderson wrote “I want to make people- ordinary people, not just top people- feel their dignity and their importance.”³⁵ The most important assertion that Anderson makes, in his writing on the New Wave, however is a statement that is not truly reflected by the New Wave’s many cinematic achievements: “the cinema is an industry... but it is

³¹ Higson, Andrew, “Space, Place, Spectacle”, p.136

³² Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle” p.136

³³ Anderson, Lindsay, “Get Out and Push” in Maschler, Tom (ed.), *Declaration* (St. Albans: Macgibbon and Kee, 1957)

³⁴ Anderson, “Get out and Push”, pp.158-9

³⁵ Anderson, Lindsay, Free Cinema in *Universities and Left Review* (Vol. 1, No.2, 1957) P.52

something else as well; it is a means of making connections... (fulfilling) the need for a sense of belonging together.”³⁶ These comments certainly reflect the New Wave’s propensity for “moral” realism and thus “surface” realism. However, as Hutchings mentions, the New Wave was heavily driven by a middle-class subjugation of working-class culture.

Although I do not agree with comments such as those made by V.F. Perkins in the first issue of *Movie Reader*, in 1962, that British cinema was “as dead as it was before”,³⁷ it is certainly the case that moral realism, within the New Wave, was a form of realism that was as detrimental towards notions of ‘community’ and ‘belonging’ as it was progressive. Also, it is significant that comments about the commercial viability of ‘subversive’ subject matter were generally absent from the comments made by Anderson et al, about the New Wave’s motivations. This is perhaps because the New Wave directors were unaware of the success they would achieve. However there is a lot of evidence, within that period, to suggest that working-class subject matter was becoming a subject of great national awareness; the New Wave’s directors certainly did not pick this subject matter from thin air. The New Wave had various influences and it’s apparent they were all, on the whole, conducive to a broadening of representation on the British screen; but it is also clear from these influences that working-class culture was becoming a subject of potential mass-appeal.

The film movement that directly preceded the advent of the New Wave was Free Cinema, a documentary movement led by New Wave directors, Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson, which worked towards a type of ‘kitchen sink’ realism and included many working-class subjects within its oeuvre. The Free Cinema was in contrast to the documentaries which emerged from the 1930s’ ‘Grierson approach’, yet it is the former documentary movement which helps categorise the ‘Free Cinema.’ The documentary movement, lead by John Grierson, provided an emphasis on ‘ordinary people’ and social democratic values to a much greater extent than Free Cinema. Grierson’s main priority was to provide a social democratic contribution through the creative treatment of actuality. For filmmakers like Anderson, the emphasis had to be

³⁶ Anderson, “Get out and Push”, p.160-1, 177

³⁷ Perkins, V. F., “The British Cinema”, in Cameron, Ian (ed.), *Movie Reader*, (London: November Books, 1967) p.197

placed on the term ‘creative,’ for this is what separated documentary from mere journalism. Free Cinema and the New Wave were more intent on creating art, than social observation. In a sense, the dual motivations that the New Wave directors possessed- representing the working-class whilst achieving a personal vision- can become rather contradictory. Despite the comments voiced in publications such as ‘Declaration’, Anderson et al. had aesthetic concerns that far outweighed their attempts at ‘social connections.’ Anderson was consistently unapologetic about his upper-middle-class origins and Karel Reisz has often rejected any identification with Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.³⁸ This is not a negative in itself; there is little suggestion that any of the New Wave directors ever claimed to be anything other than members of the educated middle-class. These factors heavily impact, however, on the way in which the director and thus the audience are positioned in relation to the working-class subject, compounding the question; why did Free Cinema and the New Wave appropriate working-class culture as its focus?

Terry Lovell, amongst others, has cited the importance of two seminal texts on the Working-class, written by sons of the working-class, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, as being extremely relevant to these concerns and to the growing consideration of working-class culture in Britain, per se. Hoggart’s *Uses of Literacy*³⁹ and William’s *Culture and Society*⁴⁰ were published in 1957 and 1958 respectively and had a huge influence on perceptions of the British class and British cultural theory, in general.⁴¹ Hoggart’s feeling was that mass culture, precipitated by the increasing affluence of the Working-classes, had created a situation in which “the great majority of us are being merged into one class.”⁴² Likewise, Williams argued:

The masses are always the others, whom we don’t know and can’t know. Yet now, in our kind of society, we see these others regularly, in their myriad variations; stand, physically beside them. They are here and we are with them.⁴³

³⁸ See Gardner, Colin, *Karel Reisz* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2007)

³⁹ Hoggart, Richard, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-class Life* (Chatto and Windus, 1957)

⁴⁰ Williams, Raymond, *Culture & Society 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983)

⁴¹ For a broader conceptualisation of these texts, with a larger emphasis on cultural studies, see Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London; New York: Methuen, 1979)

⁴² Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, pp.279-280

⁴³ Williams, *Culture & Society 1780-1950*, pp.299-300

Williams gave these discussions the title, 'the structure of feeling'. 'The structure of feeling' was defined by Alan Lovell as "a sympathetic interest in working-class communities, (combined with) unease about the quality of leisure in urban society".⁴⁴ The most significant concern within each discussion was that the working-classes, living in a period in which post-war hardship was finally being displaced with a perceived increase in affluence- were disregarding long-held traditions for materialistic superficialities and this was creating a debasement of taste and values. This idea that the working-class was beginning to lose its most dependable qualities, created a concentrated interest in what elements of working-class were being lost and what these elements were being replaced by. The fact that the working-classes became a subject of great interest was not only being reflected in the academic work of Hoggart and Williams, but also within more popular spheres. A good example is the commencement of the naturalistic, working-class, soap opera, *Coronation Street*, in 1960.

There is one more influence on the New Wave's use of subject matter that should be considered. The New Wave was a literary film movement and it was influenced, not only by the working-class novels that it adapted into film, but, as Lowenstein has argued, by a group of defiant novelists whom J.D Scott labeled, 'The Movement'⁴⁵, in 1954. J.D. Scott, literary editor of *The Spectator*, described 'The Movement' as, "Anti-phoney, sceptical, robust and ironic"⁴⁶. Another literary figure of the time, John Osborne, (who made the famous comment: "the royal family are a gold tooth in a mouthful of decay") transformed contempt into an art form with his play *Don't Look Back in Anger* (1958). Contrary to popular history, therefore, the 1950s was a period of relative rebellion in British society. Hill writes, "A popular perception of the 1950s is one of domestic and sexual stalemate prior to the explosion of 'permissiveness' in the 1960s... However on closer inspection the picture becomes more complex."⁴⁷ Likewise, due to this increase in affluence and thus youth spending power, a rebellious youth culture had also exploded in Britain long before the 1960s had begun. It could be argued therefore that there was

⁴⁴ Lovell, Alan, "Free Cinema", in Lovell & Hillier, *Studies in Documentary* (London: Secker & Warburg, BFI, 1972) p.52

⁴⁵ See Morrison, Blake, *The Movement* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980)

⁴⁶ Scott, J. D. in "The Movement," (1st October, 1954)

⁴⁷ Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p.16

definite commercial viability inherent in films that suggested ‘subversive’ working-class content.

Free Cinema was forged around a dual notion of freedom: freedom from commercial constraint and freedom to issue a personal vision. The British New Wave continued these ambitions in the feature film form. Therefore this question persists: why did a group of directors, mainly of upper-middle-class origin, who were so intent on realising the freedom to issue a personal vision, choose to work with a subject-matter that was relatively far removed from their own ‘personal vision’? For, as Alan Lovell rightly asserts, ‘authorial self expression’ is potentially contradictory: “the demand for realism limited the freedom since the director was necessarily constrained by the nature of the world he was trying to represent.”⁴⁸ That both the working-class subject and anti-establishment behaviour had begun to possess potential commercial viability in 1950 British society may have been important factors in the New Wave’s decision to embrace working-class subject matter. This is a potential factor for the fact that the working-class experience was not as well realised as it would become in later social realist texts. The priority of later social realism has not been to simply put the working-class on screen, but to articulate their experiences meaningfully. The same cannot be said of New Wave and this is one reason why ‘moral realism’ and its ‘sympathetic interest in the working-class’ has increasingly been considered as a patronising tendency, dominated by middle-class subjectivity. As Higson argues, moral realism, despite its ostentations, fails to elucidate “a commitment to a particular sense of social problems and solutions.”⁴⁹ Most importantly, though, the New Wave does not even provide a realistic representation of the working-class experience. Notions of ‘commitment’ within the films of the New Wave, therefore, are relatively superficial. This is a stance that will be developed in this chapter’s focus on social realist style.

⁴⁸ Lovell, Alan, “The Chequered Career of Karel Reisz”, in *Movie* (Vol 57, 1981) p.1127

⁴⁹ Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle”, p.136

New Wave Style

The New Wave's allegiance to, what Higson described as, 'poetic' realism further contradicted the New Wave's intention of realising faithful representation. Poetic realism defined the visual and narrative tendencies of the New Wave, yet appropriation of working-class experience said more about the middle-class directors behind the camera than the subjects in front of it. The New Wave had an incontestable urge to photograph the real working-class locations, quite literally basing its narrative motivations around these locations. Hill argues that "Place rather than action assumes importance."⁵⁰ A good example of this emerges in the 'Saturday morning' sequence of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Three shots open the sequence; first we are greeted by a spectacular townscape from a high camera position, which then dissolves into a high angle long shot of the backyards of two rows of terraced houses. Finally the sequence cuts to an interior shot of Arthur lying in bed. The message is clear, and is reaffirmed throughout the whole film: this is where Arthur lives. Higson argues that this is, "a classic movement from the general to the particular within a scene... space is being used narratively."⁵¹ Beyond this factor, there is no real narrative necessity for this film to be set in the Midlands or on location. Therefore, how 'real' is this location or the experiences depicted within it? The endless emphasis on the details of the location has nothing to do with the characters who reside there and a lot to do with the director's fascination for such environments. The story of Arthur Seaton could quite easily be told from behind studio walls. There is no emotional connection inherent in this photography of space; in fact the opposite is true.

V.F.Perkins argues that these sort of artistic decisions are detrimental to faithful depictions of the subject matter:

Richardson, Reisz, Schlesinger and Clayton... are constantly obliged to 'establish' place with inserted shots which serve only to strengthen our conviction that the setting... has no organic connection with the characters.⁵²

Higson uses 'The Long Shot of the Town from the Hill', which opens the 'Saturday Morning' sequence (and also closes the film), to explain the inadequacy of the New Wave's depiction of working-class environments. The view is generally the view from

⁵⁰ Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p.131

⁵¹ Higson, "Space, Place, Spectacle", p.139

⁵² Perkins, "The British Cinema", p.9

the factory owner's house, where the factory owner can overlook his 'kingdom' and is symptomatic of the "view from above"⁵³ that the film as a whole offers. The New Wave often offers the character's p.o.v through voiceover (e.g. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*) or flashback (e.g. *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* or *This Sporting Life*) however this is consistently subordinated by this 'view from above.' One of the most important scenes in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is the closing conversation between Arthur and Brenda, on a Hill overlooking Nottingham, yet there is a very real sense that Reisz is distracted by the scene below. It is not the characters that concern this film, and most films within the New Wave, but the space in which the character's lives take place. Even then, this space is depicted in such a way that is rarely representational of these working-class character's own perspectives of this place.

The New Wave commonly seeks to photograph these working-class locales in a way that, as Higson states, "transcends ordinariness" and creates something both "beautiful and poetic."⁵⁴ Yet, Zola once said of naturalism: "you start from the point that nature is sufficient... without modification or pruning: it is grand enough, beautiful enough to supply its own beginning, its middle and its end... The work becomes a report, nothing more."⁵⁵ The New Wave did not seek to achieve this. Isabel Quigley, writing in the *Spectator* at the time of *A Taste of Honey's* release compliments the film's director: "Richardson has used the place and its objects as he uses people, moodily, lovingly, bringing beauty out of squalor."⁵⁶ However, there is something that is exceedingly patronising and untrustworthy about squalor being rendered beautiful, especially in such a detached manner. After all, if beauty does exist in such circumstances, would this be where the beauty resides? Would the beauty not exist via community and shared experience? It is fair to speculate that Richardson would not have found these scenes quite as beautiful if he was living within them and not photographing them from 'above'. Higson notes that "for London-based critics, films like *A Taste of Honey* are a magic journey to the exotic Working-class places of the Midlands and the 'distant' north".⁵⁷

⁵³ Higson, "Space, Place, Spectacle", p.151

⁵⁴ Higson, "Space, Place, Spectacle", p.136

⁵⁵ Zola, 'naturalism on the stage' in, *The Experimental Novel & Other Essays*, trans. Sheridan (New York: Haskell House, 1964)

⁵⁶ Quigley, Isabel, *The Spectator* (22nd September, 1961) in Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p.62

⁵⁷ Higson, "Space, Place, Spectacle", pp.142-143

Pauline Kael, in her discussion of *The Entertainer* (1960) qualifies this assertion with the following: “The locations seem rather arbitrary. They’re too obviously selected because they’re ‘revealing’ and ‘photogenic’.”⁵⁸ As Hill argues, by turning images of cities and factories into ‘art’ they are potentially going to be transformed into “objects of comfortable contemplation.”⁵⁹ Only from the outside (or ‘above’) can squalor assume this kind of perverse fascination.

The most common criticism of the New Wave’s poetic realism, therefore, is that although these films are about the Working-class they nonetheless represent an outsider’s view. Roy Armes argues that, like the pattern set by Grierson, “The university-educated bourgeois making ‘sympathetic’ films about proletarian life but not analysing the ambiguities of their own privileged position”.⁶⁰ Likewise, “The Free Cinema radicals are uninterested in the masses except as images for their own discontent.”⁶¹ Lowenstein’s consideration of Clayton’s *Room at the Top*, builds up a picture of how the New Wave, despite its intentions, presents its environments and characters as ‘the other’, thoroughly alien to the directors that depicted them:

The meticulous spatialisation of Joe’s Working-class identity produces a peculiar spectator position... The films inscription of the viewers’ relation to him resembles the ethnographic stance of an unusual species in exacting ‘authentic’ detail... (The) insistence on viewer’s distance from him by-passes any sort of meaningful social recognition of Working-class subjects.⁶²

Higson has described such audience positioning as “cultural tourism”.⁶³ The threatening and strange working-class subject matter is rendered beautiful, picturesque and, of course, “poetic”, but this only emphasises that the direction is removed from the subject and operating via bourgeois subjectivity.

Another issue that should be raised in terms of the New Wave’s subjective narrative decisions. Free Cinema saw the p.o.v. of the characters subordinated by the authorial p.o.v. of the directors. The progression to feature film-making obviously demanded, quite simply, that these directors do more with the characters depicted. New

⁵⁸ Kael, Pauline, *I Lost it at the Movies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966) p.71

⁵⁹ Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p.136

⁶⁰ Armes, Roy, *A Critical History of British Cinema* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978) p.264

⁶¹ Durnat, Raymond, ‘Brain Drains: Drifters, Avant- Gardes and Kitchen Sinks’ in *Cinema* (No.3 June, 1969) p.14

⁶² Lowenstein, “Under-The-Skin Horrors”, pp.226-227

⁶³ Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle”, p.149

Wave films therefore are conventionally organised around a central character, through whom the drama revolves. Translation from the original novels and plays generally involved a removal of ‘auxiliary’ characters and events. Should these features, however, not be considered the key to providing an insight into a social group or social condition? Hill describes how the simplification of narrative motivation creates an “ideology of individualism cemented into the narrative form: it is the individual’s desires and motivations which structure the films forward flow”,⁶⁴ not the desires and motivations of a particular social group. Therefore, even though the New Wave contradicted the classical narrative via the way it chose to turn space into narrative detail- as opposed to site of action- the narrative concerns still held a close affinity to that of classical realism.

Finally, Higson highlights how there is a dominant preoccupation, within the New Wave, of the tension between the city and the countryside and this is because the countryside offers an escape from the city. Thus, these films are never about social conditions or collective class consciousness but about the individual’s attempts to escape. Even when the countryside is not an explicit feature within the narrative, this need for escape still remains. Raymond Williams argues that in 19th Century literature, depictions of the working-class involved individuals “who must escape, or try to escape, from this repulsive and degrading mass.”⁶⁵ This also resonates with New Wave depictions of the working-class. In this sense, New Wave films looked down on its subject matter rather than seeking to elucidate the real value and beauty of the communities depicted. By individualising this mass, the subject matter is being rendered safe in the eyes of the bourgeois cameras that film it.

With the flaws of the New Wave in mind, Hallam and Marshment produce a useful argument for the importance of faithful cinematic representation within social realism: “the stories they tell have an explicit inter-textual reference to the everyday world, which is both real- their locations are commonly known as materially existent places- and imagined –they are familiar to many through their mediated representations, not from lived experience.”⁶⁶ The fact that many of us learn about such places via ‘mediated representation’ renders representation into a fundamental issue. Thus, social

⁶⁴ Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, p.138

⁶⁵ Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973)

⁶⁶ Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, p.193

realism should encourage identification with characters, situations and experiences in a way that does not deconstruct the potential “threat” of such subject matter into a form of tourist attraction or, as Hallam and Marshment articulate, “a spectacle for consumption”.⁶⁷ Terry Lovell suggests that

The pleasures of a common text may be grounded in pleasures of an essentially public and social kind... Pleasure in shared and socially defined aspirations and hopes; through a sense of identity and community.⁶⁸

These motivations were simply not apparent within the work of the New Wave. The following comment by Higson suitably concludes the shortcomings of the New Wave:

While the films seems to be offering a working-class perspective by foregrounding the working-class protagonist and his or her privatised gaze, there is still a lingering sense of the bourgeois-class looking at this working-class ‘other’ from a position of superiority.⁶⁹

In conclusion, there is little indication within the films of the New Wave to suggest any true attempt at forging a ‘real’ connection between the audience and the working-class experiences depicted.

⁶⁷ Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, p.195

⁶⁸ Lovell, *Pictures of Reality* p.95

⁶⁹ Higson, Andrew, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) p.271

Chapter Two: Advances in Signifying Practice in British Social Realism

Subject Matter

Williams has asserted that social realism's "move towards social extension"⁷⁰ remains pertinent in the context of recent film production. However, the context for the necessity of social realism in recent times has become far removed from the context of the New Wave's primary motivations. The perception of initial social realist cinema was that commercial cinema was dominated by a reluctance to represent working-class experience. Yet this qualification is not entirely appropriate to the context of the current British film-making climate. Mainstream cinema has begun to consistently appropriate the working-class subject- if not the working-class experience- as its own. As a result, social realism has engaged with a necessary diversification towards an observational stance that rarely exists within these mainstream depictions of working-class life. Because much mainstream cinema and social realist cinema presently seek to represent similar social groups, this discussion of recent social realist subject matter will begin with an attempt to provide insight into how these social representations necessarily differ between the two sections of British cinema and how this influences current social realist output.

Amy Sargeant's work on the making and selling of culture in the British feature film revolves around the consideration of what recent British cinema has come to consider "the heritage film":

Sometimes tacitly, sometimes explicitly, the term 'heritage drama' connects... with a particular cultural and entrepreneurial activity: the marketing and consumption of Britain's cultural heritage as a tourist attraction.⁷¹

Sargeant suggests that this production of 'tourist attraction' (or tourist gaze) underwrites a multiplicity of forms. To exemplify this stance, she highlights the appropriation of Working-class deprivation as one of the more unlikely ways in which British culture is adopted as a commercially viable enterprise; "even a film about unemployment such as

⁷⁰ Williams, "A Lecture on Realism", p.63

⁷¹ Sargeant, Amy, "Making and Selling Heritage Culture: Style and Authenticities in Historical Fiction on Film and Television," in, *British Cinema: Past and Present*, p.301

The Full Monty has these motivations attached.”⁷² Although, as Robert Murphy concedes, the British film industry in the 1990s was not the force it once was (“a cinema where only half the films made reach an audience can hardly be proud of itself”⁷³), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) was one of quite a few exceptions. *The Full Monty* remains one of the highest grossing British films of all time. With a budget of just \$3,500,000, it generated a worldwide gross of \$256,900,000.⁷⁴ It achieved this commercial success, in no small part, through subverting poverty via the creation of a feel-good effect. Using methods not entirely dissimilar to the New Wave, mainstream British cinema by the mid-1990s was attempting to find beauty and vitality amongst squalor.

The rationale behind such artistic/commercial decisions was, at least partly, due to the seismic changes that were elapsing within the system of British rule leading up to the 1997 general election. In the last half of the 1990s, the Labour party finally put an end to eighteen years of Conservative government. During this ascension there was a grand initiative by Tony Blair’s *New Labour* party to distance themselves from the previous government by engendering a more dynamic and diverse national economy, with a more fruitful position in the global economy. Their aim was to do this by reconstructing the country’s self-perception and the perception that the world had of Britain. As part of this initiative a report, by Mark Leonard, entitled *Britain*™, was commissioned. This report regarded, quite literally, the re-branding of British national identity: “The perception around the world is that Britain remains a backward-looking island immersed in its heritage... bogged down by tradition, riven by class and threatened by industrial dispute.”⁷⁵ Leonard believed that this image problem could be subverted by promoting “the reality of Britain as a highly creative and diverse society.”⁷⁶ Essentially the idea was to establish Britain as a forward thinking country that was unaffiliated with tradition, and unconcerned with class or class conflict.

Yet, as Moya Luckett has stated, “90s cinema suggests a set of problems around the representation of nation and national identity that cannot be easily reconciled...

⁷² Sargeant, “Making and Selling Heritage Culture”, p.309

⁷³ Murphy, Robert, “A Path Through a Moral Maze”, in, *British Cinema of the 1990s*, Murphy, Robert (ed) (London: BFI Publishing, 2002) P.14

⁷⁴ <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/1997/FULLM.php> 25/09/07

⁷⁵ Leonard, Mark, *Britain*™ *Renewing Our Identity* (London: Demos, 1997) pp.15-16. cited in Higson & Ashby (eds), *British Cinema, Past and Present*, pp.274-287

⁷⁶ Leonard, Mark, *Britain*™ *Renewing Our Identity*, p.10

national identity is always elsewhere.”⁷⁷ Hill reflects this observation with the argument that

Nation and national identities as such are not ontologically given but represent ‘imagined’ or socially and culturally constructed communities and forms of belonging... It follows that national identity and cultural forms in which it is given, must be conceived of as dynamic.”⁷⁸

Therefore films which were attempting to construct an attractive national identity were based heavily around the creation of myth. Social realism, however, remained heavily concerned with issues of tradition, class and conflict. Meanwhile, mainstream cinema was pursuing dissimilar objectives.

Claire Monk argues that New Labour’s political and economical motivations heavily influenced cultural production, namely the “commodification of the under-class”⁷⁹ in 1990s British cinema. Films such as *The Full Monty*, and their ‘feel good’ subtext, are a reflection of this situation:

They appear to signal a shift away from backward-looking complacency towards national self-criticism, suggesting the ‘new’ Britain is mature enough to acknowledge the presence of poverty, unemployment, industrial unrest, regional decline and drug addiction within the fabric of the nation. Such a reading, however, disregards the commercialised, market-driven film and political cultures within which the films were produced and circulate ... The poverty and initial hopelessness of the characters only serves to heighten the film’s message: if these guys can succeed as male strippers, it surely follows that Britons can make a success of any enterprise.⁸⁰

Working-class culture, especially deprived working-class culture, has become one of *the* most marketable subject matter that exists within British commercial cinema. Julia Hallam agrees with Monk’s assertions on this subject:

The working-class films of the 1990s occupy an ambiguous cultural terrain. They celebrate locality, yet at the same time they commodify the cultural identities of

⁷⁷ Luckett, Moya, “Image and Nation in 1990s British Cinema” in Murphy (ed.), *British Cinema of the 90s*, p.88

⁷⁸ Hill, John, “The Issue of National Cinema and British Film Production”, in, Petrie, Duncan (ed.) *New Questions of British Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992) p.15 (For more extensive work on the issue of nationality see Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) and Bhaba, Homi, K., (ed.) *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990))

⁷⁹ Monk, “Underbelly U.K.”, p.283

⁸⁰ Monk, “Underbelly U.K.”, p.284

economically marginalised communities, re-packaging their experiences for sale in the global marketplace.⁸¹

In Nina Caplan's review of *The Full Monty* she described its realisation of a "euphoric effect."⁸² However, was this commercial output appropriating this deprived working-class experience in a meaningful or faithful fashion? Accordingly, how may this have catalysed social realism's motivations?

Monk explains why these mainstream representations of the 'under-class' and their commercial viability contradict social realist integrity to the point where they must be considered as, what Murphy entitles, "glossy anti-realism"⁸³. Employing such films as, *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996), *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996), *The Full Monty*, *Twin Towns* (Kevin Allen, 1997) and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie, 1998); Monk argues, that although these films draw subject matter from the problems of unemployment and social exclusion (i.e. films about criminality and the 'under-class') and, to varying degrees, embrace discussions of 'community' and 'collectivity', the ulterior agenda of commodification, inherent in their creation, contradicts these discussions. The same could also be said about the work of a director like Nick Love in the early 21st century.⁸⁴ Hallam argues that *Brassed Off* and *Full Monty* encouraged "nostalgic sentimentality".⁸⁵ Any notion of community, male camaraderie and togetherness these films discuss is blunted by this nostalgia and sanitised ideas about serious social problems. Dave accurately concludes his own discussion of the *Full Monty* by describing the film as "a transcendent gesture which resolves all previous conflict and struggle."⁸⁶ Essentially it is a 'feel good' film about a subject that left most involved with nothing to feel good about. The reason why such a depressed social grouping could achieve widespread commercial viability therefore resides in the fact that so many of these commercial films are unfaithful to the working-class experience in 1990s Britain. As Monk argues, "these under-class films' exhilarating, uplifting effects and pleasures

⁸¹ Hallam, Julia, "Film, Class and National Identity: Re-Imagining Communities in the Age of Devolution", in, Ashby & Higson, *British Cinema, Past and Present*, p.270

⁸² Caplan, N., "The Full Monty" (Review) in, *Sight and Sound*, Sept. 1997, vol.7, no.9, p.43

⁸³ Murphy, *The British Cinema Book: 2nd Edition* (London: BFI Publishing, 2001) p.3

⁸⁴ See *The Football Factory* (Nick Love, 2004), *The Business* (Nick Love, 2005) *Outlaw* (Nick Love, 2007)

⁸⁵ Hallam, "Film, Class and National Identity", p.262

⁸⁶ Dave, Paul, *Visions of England* (Oxford; New York: Berg Publishing, 2006) P.75

will be limited to audiences who do not have to test the viability of this particular ‘miracle’ in their own lives.”⁸⁷

The working-class characters, which are most relevant to the social realist films that I intend to discuss in the last two chapters of my work, can generally be described as members of the under-class. David Cannadine has suggested that class in modern Britain is no longer an important concern,⁸⁸ but this over-simplifies the problems that currently surround class in Britain. The continued growth of the service industries and the decline of heavy industry are the most significant factors for this situation. Williams has described the Working-class as the, “useful or productive classes”.⁸⁹ However, in today’s terms, the original conception of this definition describes a relatively small social group. Many members of the working-class are now engaged in industries and endeavours that are far-removed from the working-class occupations of old. This is also the primary reason for this elision of certain categories of the working-class into what is, presently, described as an under-class.

In short, the under-class is an extremely deprived sector of society and this denotes not only a denigration of sufficient living conditions, but also broader welfare conditions, such as educational development and familial stability. In this sense, a deprived class could simply be considered a forgotten class *or* a class that has been left behind. Monk describes the ‘under-class’ as

A subordinate social class... a post working-class that owes its existence to the economic and social damage wrought by globalisation, local industrial decline, the re-structuring of the labour market and other legacies of the Thatcher era.⁹⁰

Dave suggests that this term under-class “also carries overtones of a specific political judgment of the Working-class, which was becoming commonplace by the late 1980s”.⁹¹ Hallam and Marshment add to this picture, suggesting that “they (the under-class) inhabit post-industrial, post-colonial spaces that international capitalism can no longer find a use

⁸⁷ Monk, “Underbelly U.K.” p.286

⁸⁸ See Cannadine, David, *Class in Britain*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) pp.15-16

⁸⁹ Williams, Raymond, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1990) pp.65-66

⁹⁰ Monk, Claire, “Underbelly U.K.” p.274

⁹¹ Dave, *Visions of England*, p.19

for... These are the places where others live... living in the gaps left by successive waves of industrialisation.”⁹²

Whether it is through the production of ‘cool’ in films such as *Trainspotting*, *Twin Towns* and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, or the creation of a ‘feel-good’ factor in films such as *Brassed Off* and *Full Monty*, most commercial output, which spends time with the under-class, completely fails to relate any sort of meaningful everyday class experience. This places even more of an imperative on social realism as a vehicle to articulate these experiences meaningfully. Hill argues that in order to subvert the asperities created by commercial cinema, the motivation that resides in a lot of recent social realism is “the emphasis... on the significance of the ‘ordinary,’ as opposed to ‘exceptional’ or unusual.”⁹³ In most recent social realist output the action is characterised, like everyday life, by the episodic and the uneventful and by the absence of subject matter that contains exceptional happenings or gratifying resolutions. Recent social realist output generally contradicts this idea that there is anything ‘cool’ or ‘feel-good’ about these deprived elements of society. However, in saying this, these films are not unrelentingly grim. The films that I wish to analyse are capable of realising moments which celebrate notions of community and shared experience, without abstaining from objective criticism through their depictions of both the rare pleasures and constant tension of living as part of an oppressed or underprivileged community.

The iconography of modern social realism is generally run-down housing estates with boarded up windows or former factory sites left to decay, reduced to wasteland. If images of work are included then they are linked to the service sector rather than manufacture. Moreover work has been replaced by criminal activity as unemployment is rife. Another important effect of unemployment is the presence of ‘enforced’ leisure activity. The streets, the pubs and the home are the environments that recent social realism depicts. The way in which recent social realism has chosen to explore themes such as unemployment and social exclusion is predominantly through the discussion of masculinity and the changes wrought upon masculinity by the changes rendered upon society at large. In an age when the working-classes lost the purpose of previous

⁹² Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, p.193

⁹³ Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p.193

generations, masculinity becomes one of the most obvious casualties inherent in this loss. For Hallam and Marshment, the major themes within recent social realism “personal alienation and rejection of established values”,⁹⁴ are predominantly relevant to the men that inhabited this social group. This is a point that is well executed by Michael Spicer:

Fears of social and sexual insecurity press much harder upon the under-class male disempowered by the Thatcher ‘revolution’ with its shift from a manufacturing to a service economy and concomitant high levels of unemployment... Their male confidence is eroded because they lack the traditional strengths of working-class masculinity: a secure place as the principle bread winner and head of the family, and comradeship with mates at work or in the union.”⁹⁵

Hill explains the existence of this predominant interest in the male, in 1990s cinema, when he argues that, during this period, there was a “weakening of the ideologies of masculinity which had traditionally underpinned work (pride in hard, physical labour) and also trade union power.”⁹⁶ Thus, social realism of the 1980s, 1990s and early 21st Century was, and is, attempting to observe what happened to the working-classes, specifically working-class men, when society ceased to offer the opportunity to fulfill their long-held role.

Monk, within a discussion of gender, work and criminality in 1990s British cinema, suggests that

In the 1990s women made increasingly confident inroads into the workforce, especially in the white-collar and service industries. Although the desirability of woman as employees was in many cases due to their ‘flexibility’ in tolerating work that was part-time, insecure and ill-paid, the impression grew of a society in which women were in the ascendancy in the workplace and beyond.⁹⁷

Jonathan Rutherford describes the way in which gender roles had begun to be blurred by the 1980s, due to “the changing nature of work... the introduction of new technologies and the subsequent deskilling of traditional male jobs... Undermining traditional working-class masculinities”.⁹⁸ Under-class men and their attempts to cope with their

⁹⁴ Hallam, “Film, Class and National Identity”, p.269

⁹⁵ Spicer, Andrew, *Typical Men: The Representations of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema* (London; New York: I.B.Taurus, 2001) p.188

⁹⁶ Hill, “Class, Gender and Working-Class Realism”, in, *British Cinema of the 1980s*, p.176

⁹⁷ Monk, Clairee, “From Underworld to Under-class: Crime and British Cinema in the 1990s” in Chibnall & Murphy, *British Crime Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) p.174

⁹⁸ Rutherford, Jonathan, “Who’s The Man?”, in, Chapman & Rutherford (eds.) *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988) p.23

decreasing position of power and importance is the predominant concern of my work on social realism, but not my only concern. Sargeant argues that the 1990s' investment in the discussion of masculinity "seems to reinvest the mythology of pathetic/heroic shit-putting-up-with and put-upon working-class woman."⁹⁹ Likewise, Monk discusses the extent to which 1990s cinema contrives to mourn "the passing of patriarchal certainties", involving a, "post-feminist male panic", whereby "the apparent ascendancy of women in the post-industrial workplace heralded a resurgence of masculinism and misogyny."¹⁰⁰ Monk asserts that even though these films portrayed masculinity in crisis they often did this by drawing attention to the way woman suffered at the hands of these impotent, disposed men.

Modern social realism has refrained from portrayals of the under-class that embrace the declamatory stance precipitated by figures such as Charles Murray.¹⁰¹ Hill has made the point that in many incarnations of social realism, output has rarely sought to simply 'represent' without committing to a social perspective, which attempts to induce economic or social change.¹⁰² The modern social realist directors whom I intend to study, seem, in part, to modify this situation. One way that this is done is simply through excluding other class sectors from the sphere of consideration. This allows for a thorough articulation of these social groups everyday existence, in a way that seeks to observe this existence, without necessarily attempting to thoroughly interpret, analyse or, most importantly, change it.

Higson's work on the subject of recent social realism discusses a progression away from the political address of class struggle: suggesting a, "changing conceptualisation of the relation between the public and the private... the political and the personal."¹⁰³ Likewise, Hallam's work on 're-imagining' communities in recent social realism suggests that

⁹⁹ Sargeant, Amy, *British Cinema: A Critical History* (London: BFI Publishing, 2005) p.339

¹⁰⁰ Monk, Claire, "Men in the 1990s" in, *British Cinema of the 1990s*, Murphy (ed) *British Cinema of the 1990s*, p.157

¹⁰¹ see Murray, C., *The Emerging British Under-class* (London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1990); & Murray, C., *Under-class: The Crisis Deepens*, (London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1994.)

¹⁰² see, Hill, "From the New Wave to Brit-Grit", pp. 249-260

¹⁰³ Higson, Andrew, "Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film: The Documentary-Realist Tradition" in Barr, C (ed.) *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986) p.83

Working-class identity is depicted not as the collective political unity of a group in society but as a site for exploring the personal stagnation, alienation and social marginalisation of these (primarily) male Working-class characters.¹⁰⁴

Likewise, Hill suggests that recent social realism “excludes wider patterns of social life.”¹⁰⁵ Raymond Williams has discussed this situation via a concept called, “small unity entity”, whereby, “you and your relatives, your lovers, your friends, your children are the only significant social entity.”¹⁰⁶ This situation is reflected through social realism’s movement away from the explicit, polemical discussions of class struggle inherent in the early work of a director like Ken Loach.¹⁰⁷ Nick James writes in a review of *Nil by Mouth* that whereas directors such as Loach and Leigh “often maintain, in their desire to show social structures at work, a political distance from their characters”, *Nil by Mouth* “adopts an intimate relationship to the film subject, born from psychotherapeutic models.”¹⁰⁸ The work of both Oldman and Meadows reflects this move away from polemical filmmaking.

Although Oldman’s and Meadows’ respective work is intent on discussing the personal, rather than the political aspects of the under-class experience this is not to say, that an implicit political message does not emerge from this focus. It is this concentration on the personal and the allowance this makes for a heightened appreciation of emotional realism, which presents this implicit message and has the potential to make the audience care about the people depicted. Leach, for example, describes *Nil by Mouth* as “a grueling experience for audiences: the intense emotional life of a working-class family is presented in close-up.”¹⁰⁹ Monk argues that

In many working-class communities where the closure of local industries had brought multi-generational unemployment, theft and drug-dealing became

¹⁰⁴ Hallam, “Film, Class and National Identities”, p.261

¹⁰⁵ Hill, “New Wave to Brit-Grit”, p.253

¹⁰⁶ Williams, Raymond, “Problems of the Coming Period” in *New Left Review* (1983, No.140, p.16)

¹⁰⁷ Social realism throughout the 70s and 80s possessed a strong social conscience, and was typified by the polemical approach of Ken Loach; this type of social realism and its attempts to initiate social change were, despite their progression away from the films of the New Wave, still symptomatic of a view from above. Although it should be noted that Loach has also made a movement away from this polemical approach in some of his more recent films such as *My Name is Joe* (1998). Hill writes: “Unlike previous Ken Loach films there is no character who might offer a more politicized perspective on events” and as a result “a sense of pessimism dominates almost completely” (see Hill, John, “Failure and Utopianism”, p.182) Likewise, as David Thompson asserts, “even in the insane prosperity of the 90s, Loach pursued his destiny and he grew gentler, subtler and funnier.” (Thompson, David, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film-4th Edition* (London: Little Brown, 2002) p.528)

¹⁰⁸ James, Nick, “Being There” in *Sight and Sound* (vol.7, no.10, October 1997) p.6. p.8

¹⁰⁹ Leach, Jim, “British Film” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p.64

normalised as strategies for survival... In 1990s Britain, the boundaries between underworld and under-class, petty and organised crime and criminality and mainstream society came to seem increasingly blurred.¹¹⁰

The very fact that films such as *Nil by Mouth* and *Dead Man's Shoes* are discussing such subjects and portraying the way characters personally deal with these predicaments creates an implicit political message.

It remains easy, however, to suggest the contention that films like *Nil by Mouth* or *Dead Man's Shoes* elucidate an apolitical stance and have no interest in the actual wellbeing of the characters. Certainly the fact that neither film looks for answers- nor allows any real hope to emerge from the stories told- encourages this opinion. However, though the outlook does remain bleak at the end of a film such as *Nil by Mouth* and although any sense of resolution is ambiguous, at best, Oldman has vehemently rejected the suggestion that *Nil by Mouth* is apolitical. Oldman has stated that “people *are* political. It's in the fibre of the thing. This (*Nil by Mouth*) is as much about my feeling regarding the English class system as it is about anything else.” Oldman feels that the reason his film is political is, “because ... I photographed what was there. I tried very hard not to be sentimental.”¹¹¹ In a sense, *Nil's* refusal to offer solutions *is* the films political address, a means of saying: look what has happened in these working-class communities, look at the erosion of hope that had elapsed. *Nil by Mouth's* lack of resolution, though, is certainly suggestive of an abstinence from both sentimentality and sympathy. In the end nothing has truly changed about the society that created this environment, thus film has not been a search for an insincere means of happy resolution (this is also true of *Dead Man's Shoes*)

Throughout *Nil by Mouth* and *Dead Man's Shoes* there is nothing that is paternal or condescending about each film's treatment of subject matter. They expose every character to the harsh realities of their environment and, in the end, refuse to let them escape from this situation. Any relief from the dispossession and disenchantment that these characters undergo- which generally come in the form of alcohol, drugs, violence, laughter and social life- is always a temporal relief, that is, in the end, a fierce

¹¹⁰ Monk, “From Underworld to Under-class”, p.175

¹¹¹ <http://hemsidor.torget.se/users/b/boatman/interviews/radio.html>

reinstatement of their, overall, depressing predicament. Yet, importantly, there is an almost complete abstinence from sympathy or sentimentality and, importantly, most characters often retain a glimmer of humanity. Each film offers tender insights in even in the most unlikely moments.

Chapter One attempted to highlight how the British New Wave invested too much time in discussing the working-classes in terms of their relation to other classes and this suggested a rather condescending stance on the part of these New Wave directors. There is a very strong sense within the characterisation of, for example, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning's* (1960) Arthur Seaton (Tom Finney), *This Sporting Life's* (1963) Frank Machin (Richard Harris) and *Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner's* (1962) Colin Smith (Tom Courtenay), that they have the opportunity to 'move up,' to escape their current existence. What is more, if these characters fail to achieve this 'move up' within society it is always a result of their own inability to accept and engage with the class system that they are a part of. Oldman and Meadows both chose to capture their under-class subjects in a space that is entirely detached from the dynamics of the class system as a whole and this allows their films to liberate the under-class subject from this perception; inducing a space in which reassessment can emerge as a relatively uncontrived or forced process. The directors are far more concerned with simply attempting to say something about the communities and individuals portrayed, rather than the society that these individuals and communities are *potentially* moulded within and it is extremely significant that what is said is neither wholly good nor irrevocably bad.

Style

The previous chapter began by explaining the principles behind social realism in terms of the contrast that its form has increasingly sought to maintain with classic realism and commercial film practice. This explanation is entirely relevant to the question that resides at the core of this section's concerns; what has 'the ordinary' come to look like? The simple answer is that, via social realism, at least since the 1970s and the release of films such as *Kes* (Ken Loach, 1973), the ordinary has become distinguished by being removed from what the audience commonly expects from a polished mainstream film.

Subsequent to the New Wave, the links between social realism and classic realism have become increasingly strained.

Mike Leigh has suggested that, “all art is the synthesis between improvisation and order.”¹¹² This is a description that is highly relevant to my definition of social realist style. Kristin Thompson has provided extensive work on the development of homogeneity in mainstream cinema. It has already been mentioned, within chapter one, that homogeneity is a device that the film industry has employed to ensure the creation and maintenance of audience guarantees. This essentially ensures that the audience has an ongoing faith in the product that they are investing in. Kristin Thomas uses Stephen Heath’s concept of cinematic ‘excess’ (or ‘play’) to discuss homogeneity in cinema.¹¹³ This work on ‘excess’ is helpful when attempting to forge an understanding of the separation between social realist style and the aesthetic initiatives employed by classic realism. Russian formalism understood cinema to be a struggle between two opposing forces:

Some of these forces strive to unify the work, to hold it together sufficiently so that we may perceive and ‘follow’ its structure. Outside of any such structures lie those aspects of the work that which are not contained by its unifying forces.¹¹⁴

‘Excess’ therefore is circumscribed by the forces which disunify structure and the material of the image. A lot of the governing principles behind social realism rely on disunifying the guarantees which reside in mainstream cinema; thus, a discussion of social realist style is, in part, a discussion of ‘excess’.

MacCabe describes classic realism as being defined by its formal invisibility¹¹⁵ and the polished nature of most classic realism is subverted by social realist cinematography and narrativity. Hill argues that the realist aesthetic “achieves much of its realistic quality from being noticed”.¹¹⁶ For such reasons, social realism is commonly associated with terms such as ‘gritty’ and ‘raw’. Vanessa Thorpe described the perception of social realism well when she referred to it as a “*hard-bitten* tradition.”¹¹⁷ These

¹¹² Mike Leigh on *The South Bank Show* (13th October, 2002)

¹¹³ Thompson, Kristin, “The Concept of Cinematic Excess”, in *Cine-Tracts* (vol.1, no.2, 1977) pp.54-63

¹¹⁴ Thompson, “The Concept of Cinematic Excess”, p.54

¹¹⁵ See, MacCabe, Colin, “Realism and the Cinema”, pp.7-27

¹¹⁶ Hill, “From the New Wave to ‘Brit-grit’”, p.256

¹¹⁷ Thorpe, V., “Reality Bites (Again)”, *Observer* (‘Screen’), 23rd May 1992, p.2, in Hill, John, “From the New Wave to ‘Brit-Grit’” p.249 (Italics my own)

connotations emerge not only because of social realist content, but from the formal treatment of this content. The style is almost always low-budget, and- unlike the New Wave- most often unpolished in appearance. John Orr comments that the immediacy of the hand-held camera has been instrumental in the progress of the social realist aesthetic. He states that social realism is defined by the “re-invention of the real in the age of the hand-held camera”, and this, above all, “entails a new kind of filming, including a greater proximity to the subject”.¹¹⁸ Social realism also fulfils less narrative obligation than an audience is accustomed to. Caughie’s description of social realist style, ‘the documentary look’, refers not just to the way the camera captures the action but the way in which the action is constructed narratively.

The Visual

Firstly, the visibility of social realism’s construction is fundamental to the presentation of the ordinary and the ‘everyday’ subject matter that it concerns itself with. In classic realism the spectator is directed to forget the camera’s existence; the opposite is true within social realism. The message, put simply, is that this is not an escape from reality. The term “documentary-look”¹¹⁹, coined by Caughie, is employed because social realism borrows from the techniques which formulate the practices of documentary filming. Caughie describes these as practices which are “unpremeditated” and “unplanned”.¹²⁰ The illusion of social realism is that there is no illusion; the audience are constantly being compelled to acknowledge that what they are seeing *is* captured and this emphasises the immediacy of social realism’s effect. Social realist style, like a conventional documentary, generally attempts to present the effect of reportage.

Alan Lovell believes, with justification, that there is only one established director in British cinema who has, over an extended period, maintained a thorough commitment to naturalistic realism. The study of Social Realism has placed an emphasis on the director and even the auteur, for, “even realist filmmakers, like Ken Loach, are treated as

¹¹⁸ Orr, John, “Traducing Realisms”, pp.105-106

¹¹⁹Caughie, John, “Progressive Television and Documentary Drama,” In, Bennett, Tony, et al., (eds.) *Popular Film and Television*. (London: British Film Institute, 1981.) p.27

¹²⁰ Caughie, “Progressive Television”, pp.27-.29

auteurs”,¹²¹ this provides an insight into the extent that Loach has submerged himself in creating his own articulation of something resembling real life. The work of Loach, which has maintained many aspects that are relevant to New Wave style, portrays a changing relationship with what realism is and what realism should aspire to accomplish. Loach, who for much of his early career worked alongside the cinematographer Chris Menges, is perhaps the most significant exponent of British social realism’s aesthetic output, especially in terms of cinematography. Lovell writes, “Loach’s struggle to maintain realism as a viable artistic form has been a heroic one. His project has been its modernisation.”¹²² Through directors such as Loach, therefore, social realist style began to deviate from the poetic realism that partially confined the New Wave’s ability to appropriate everyday life. Although Loach was one of the key instigators of social realism’s raw style and his influence is undeniable, I am not suggesting that all social realist films look like a Ken Loach film. Orr suggests that social realism has embraced a “trading or traductive, realism, where the shock of narrative fuses with a switching of styles.”¹²³ A key reason for this is the fact that the hand-held camera can produce such eclectic results. Due to this diversity of styles, this work on visual style therefore cannot seek to achieve a monolithic description of what social realist cinematography provides the audience with.

Social realist cinematography’s ongoing reverence for the hand-held camera is partly the result of the realities of British film funding and the fact that this mode of capturing footage is relatively cheap. However, as it has been stated, hand-held camera can provide the opportunity to achieve a great deal of diversity. For example, the hand-held camera (and the insistence this mode of filming regularly places upon the use of the highly visible, telephoto/zoom lens) can intentionally cram the action into a claustrophobic frame, rendering the captured action unsteady and, as a result, achieving this notion of the ‘unplanned.’ Loach has pertinently discussed the importance of the hand-held camera to social realism:

¹²¹ Higson, Andrew, “The British Cinema”, in Hill & Gidson (Eds.) *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.504

¹²² Lovell, Alan, “The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?”, in, Murphy, Robert, *The British Cinema Book*, p.202

¹²³ Orr, John, “Trading Realisms”, p.106

If you are making a documentary and there was a cameraman in the room and he was following the conversation, he would never be at somebody when they started to speak. He would follow the conversation. That's what we tried to do really, to let the conversation call for the cuts, rather than the camera knowing who was going to speak next and, therefore, always being in at the start of the sentence.¹²⁴

Loach continued, in another interview, that "It is important to us (himself and Mendes) that the camera could spontaneously react to everything which took place during filming."¹²⁵ This explanation was also pursued when Ken Loach was in conversation with Melvyn Bragg: "I was aware at the time (during the making of *Kes*) of not trying to let the camera do the work, but let the people in front of the camera tell the story, so that the camera was a sympathetic observer."¹²⁶ Orr, making a similar point, suggests that the hand-held camera provides the potentiality for, "A new closeness of attention... clinging to the figure or the face in movement at speed, tense, agitated, an echo of changing society."¹²⁷

A fixed camera, held in a deliberately conspicuous long-shot, however, is an alternative option to the hand-held technique and also lends to these notions of spontaneity; this device has also been increasingly embraced by Loach over the years. Via this method, the camera can be fixed in place, positioned away from the action and made conspicuous by its apparent inactivity. This inactivity provides the suggestion, often during long takes, that the camera is capturing the scene with no agenda other than to see what might happen, to observe rather than dictate. Either way, the result is often the same; the façade of the unpremeditated is created because the camera is being startled by the action, allowing the audience to believe that the action on camera- whether spectacular or mundane- is as unpredictable as the way that action often elapses in real life.

There are other key features within the social realist *mise-en-scène* that should be noted as key signifiers of the form. Artificial (or studio) lighting in social realism is often non-existent, the cinematographer regularly makes use of nothing more than the natural

¹²⁴ Interview with Ken Loach in the *Cinema Papers* (April 1976) in Caughie, "Progressive Television", p.29

¹²⁵ Ostria, V., "Entretien avec Ken Loach" in *Cahiers Du Cinéma* (no. 484, October, 1994) pp.38-39

¹²⁶ Ken Loach on *The South Bank Show*, (3rd October, 1993)

¹²⁷ Orr, John, "Traducing Realisms", p.106

light that the scene provides. This is often the result of the fact that social realism, which is still influenced by a preoccupation with surface realism, is often shot on location. For example, Meadows' *Dead Man's Shoes*, was shot on location and refrained from using any sort of industrial lighting whatsoever. Natural lighting contributes to a film's overall aesthetic motivations by disregarding the complex and polished processes that go into lighting a classical realist scene.

Finally, sound also contributes to the overall *mise-en-scène* by refraining from perfection. In real life we don't have the benefit of crystal clear sound quality or control of the diegetic sound that often interrupts normal conversation. Therefore, it is not uncommon in social realist output for sound to be practically inaudible in parts, either poorly recorded or affected by unexpected off-screen and on-screen noise. For example, a bus or car passing in front of the action being captured on film will, obviously, affect the visual footage; however it will likewise be allowed to harm the aural footage as well. This use of sound, like all of the features discussed, highlights the fact that the capturing of action and event, in social realism, aims to be visible. Mechanical processes, in social realism, are emphasised and not denied. Caughie argues that this "establishes the impression of a basis of unproblematic fact on which the dramatic 'experiment' can be conducted, and which will guarantee its validity."¹²⁸ The closer captured action gets to appearing unpremeditated or unplanned the more likely it is that this action will not appear contrived and fictionalised.

The Narrative

The way that a film looks is not enough, in itself, to capture social realism; visual techniques can never guarantee a thoroughly faithful articulation of the 'ordinary', at least on their own. Thus, the way that captured action is *presented* is of equal importance to this ideology of the unplanned in British social realism. Caughie argues that the "documentary look", is "spontaneous, therefore true",¹²⁹ and this is as much a narrative issue as a visual one. Social realism attempts to present fiction, through a documentary

¹²⁸ Caughie, "Progressive Television", p.27

¹²⁹ Caughie, "Progressive Television", p.29

style and it is highly possible that the distinctions between these two discourses can create an unsettling level of tension:

There is always the risk that the balance (between documentary and fiction) will fail, the dramatic narrative will impose its resolutions on the documentary disorder, and the drama will end up being about the privileged, central individuals.¹³⁰

Social realism certainly possesses some connection with classical realist principles. Uses of melodrama in social realism are a good example of this; Ken Loach, whose work is often marked by the spontaneous and episodic quality of his narrative, describes his own use of the melodramatic technique as “the balancing of “forward movement” and the “little asides or looks... that help to describe people.”¹³¹ Therefore, whilst I do not deny that certain classical narrative techniques still exist in social realism, the second part of this consideration of social realist style will elucidate the cyclical and episodic narrative agenda in social realism and why this form chooses to embrace this mode of presentation.

In a lot of recent social realism, “the plot contrivances associated with melodrama are absent”¹³² or at least far more rare, due to the use of narrative structure that is episodic and cyclical. Essentially, these terms refer to a narrative that is constructed around random and repetitive action that does not submit to the laws of cause and effect. Thus, there is a marked contrast to the commercial cinematic output that Kristin Thompson acknowledges is marked by its “unobtrusive craftsmanship”:

The most basic principle of the Hollywood cinema is that a narrative should consist of a chain of causes and events that is easy for the spectator to follow. This clarity of comprehension basic to all our other responses to films¹³³

Hill asserts that “the central expectation of spectators ‘accustomed to the cinema’ is that a film should, in some way or other, ‘tell a story’.”¹³⁴ Whilst, social realism attempts to promote a story, it does so in a far less artificial way than classic realism, providing far less affiliation to the creation of an unimpaired whole. The narrative agendas inherent in most classic realism are distinct from those that exist in social realism; this is

¹³⁰ Caughie, “Progressive Television”, p.30

¹³¹ Smith, Gavin, “Sympathetic Images: Interview with Ken Loach,” *Film Comment*, vol.30 no.2 (Mar-Apr. 1994) p.59

¹³² Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, p.192

¹³³ Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) p.3

¹³⁴ Hill, *Sex Class and Realism*, p.53

predominantly due to the idea that social realist narratives expound less loyalty towards providing a story in which every scene is intent on driving the action forward. In this sense, social realist narratives attempt to articulate the erratic variables and inane repetitions of everyday life, in a far less contrived way than the classical narrative. Richard Maltby argues that the expectation of a 'story' in classic realism is such that "they (the audience) are expected to operate a particular suspension of disbelief in which the mimesis of the photographic image reinforces the circumstantial and psychological 'realism' of the events those images contain".¹³⁵ This notion of 'the suspension of disbelief' dictates that, even though the progressions and digressions of 'ordinary' life do not elapse as most mainstream cinema suggests, for the period of time that one is watching a film, there is an acceptance that life is rather less random and repetitive than it really is. Suspension of disbelief is something that is prevented from becoming too much of a necessity within social realist narrative.

To generalise: the classic realist narrative (and even New Wave narratives) provide stories that are almost always centred on an individual. Hill argues that "this stress on the individual... helps confirm the ideology of containment characteristic of the narrative drive towards resolution."¹³⁶ Thus, these films are not a discussion of social life or social problems, but rather the problems of the individual. This objective relies heavily on a structured beginning, middle and an end, which is constantly working towards a satisfactory resolution. This leads to a necessity of economy, which dictates that superfluous scenes are kept to a minimum; thus the rules of cause and effect become emphatic. The series of cause and effect is allied to the idea that there is a solution to almost any problem. Hill argues, "The need for narrative resolution... tends to encourage the adoption of socially conservative endings", and this leads to a discrepancy whereby "problems can be overcome" even when there is "the absence of wholesale change."¹³⁷ Although there are many exceptions to this rule, these are fair approximations of the classic narrative. Likewise, whilst there are exceptions, social realism often attempts to

¹³⁵ Maltby, Richard, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1983) p.14

¹³⁶ Hill, *Sex Class and Realism*, p.56

¹³⁷ Hill, *Sex Class and Realism*, p.55

deal with more than one central character and is not necessarily intent on working towards a wholly satisfactory resolution.

Finally, action (narrative motivation) is often subverted by redundant detail in social realism and this is a fundamental way in which the form attempts to embrace an escape from the artificiality of the classic narrative's dependency on narrative cause, effect and gratifying resolution. Redundant detail involves the inclusion of scenes and events that do not necessarily drive the narrative forward, but rather highlight the often inane enunciations of everyday life and the 'unplanned' nature of the social realist text. Although this is a technique that is not entirely alien to the classic narrative, it is far more essential to social realist intentions. Kuhn argues that "unmotivated shots", "narrative pauses", "minor incident" and "inconsequentiality" refuse to subordinate the image and refuse to gratify narrative progression: "the episodic structure of the 'kitchen sink' films... allow a narrative curiosity to be displaced by a documentary mode of observation."¹³⁸ Similarly, Roland Barthes has argued the veracity of the fact that "useless details" produces "realistic effect".¹³⁹ According to Barthes, objects and events in a fiction, which are not 'used up' in the narrative process, reflect the way real life elapses: "It is the category of 'reality' and not its contingent contents that is signified... the loss of the signified becomes the very signifier of realism".¹⁴⁰ If an event does not explain anything or offer further information or insight into character or narrative, then this is a reflection of many events which are provided by our overall experience of our relatively unpredictable real life.

In conclusion, consideration of audience positioning is fundamental to the issue of social realist representation. The formal conventions of recent social realism, generally attempt to work towards a type of cinema that positions the audience inside the lives of the characters and not outside or above them. This cannot always be achieved, but it is generally attempted. The effect of the suggestion of the 'unplanned' or 'unpremeditated' therefore is that the audience may be able to relate to the action (or inaction) and environments depicted in a way that is hopefully not dissimilar to the characters involved. Notions of escape, which are central to mainstream cinema, are not as apparent in social

¹³⁸Kuhn, A. "The Camera-I: Observations on Documentary", in *Screen* (vol. 19, no.2, 1978) pp.71-83

¹³⁹ Barthes, Roland, "The Realistic Effect", in *Film Reader* (no.3, February, 1978) p.131

¹⁴⁰ Barthes, "The Realistic Effect", p.134

realism, due to this idea that social realism is attempting to subvert the inadequacies of the ‘tourist gaze.’ Social realism, through use of cinematography, mis-en-scène and narrative detail attempts to find a faithful way of articulating the working-class and under-class experience that provides its subject matter. However, the final section of this chapter hopes to elucidate how recent social realism not only helps the audience *see* as the characters involved see, but also share in the feelings that these characters communicate in a way that is not sympathetic, but rather empathetic.

Emotional Realism

The essence is always to find the humanity in whatever situation you’re exploring... I believe the challenge now is to push all that aside and just say, ‘look where is the common humanity between the audience and the people in the film?’¹⁴¹

Murray Martin, a documentary maker and founding member of Amber Films, in interview with Shelia Rowbotham, described his craft as being “dragged into an internal landscape.” He continues: in terms of “recording (working-class) culture it’s very difficult to find the celebratory elements of it... People are drinking hard, and they get into the drugs; there are teenage pregnancies. There’s no work, and no leisure potential other than the clubs, and sex and drugs... It can be quite depressing.”¹⁴² Yet, this is a limited perspective: situations that are undeniably depressing still have the potentiality to become spaces and sites of positive transgression. The final section of this chapter will discuss how uses of laughter in social realism’s depiction of emotional realism can become an important element of this transgression; assuming the ‘celebratory element’ that Murray Martin suggests is lacking in modern working-class culture.

Within the films involved in this thesis, emotional honesty is a preoccupation that is fundamental to the creation of social realism. I shall justify this stance by suggesting that truth and honesty are not the same concept. Many of the films that will be studied simply have an emotional effect that ‘feels’ real and creates a connection between audience and subject that feels honest and uncontrived. However, it should be conceded that the task of trying to articulate this feeling and how it is engendered is an impossible

¹⁴¹ Fuller, Graham (Ed.) *Loach on Loach* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998) p.115

¹⁴² Rowbotham, Sheila, *Looking At Class, Film, Television and the Working-class in Britain* (London, Rivers Oram Press, 2001) P.172

task. The remainder of this chapter, therefore, does not wish to concern itself with how emotional realism can be achieved, but rather how emotional realism can be acknowledged.

This chapter, thus far, has built towards an appreciation of recent social realism as being increasingly concurrent with the importance of attempting to position the audience inside the lives of the characters and not outside or above them. This is a result of an increasing effort on the part of social realism to eradicate sympathy and pity from the representation of deprived social groups. Emotional realism is a potential method for attempting to remove sympathy and promote empathy. Representation of subject matter becomes even more of a pressing concern when it is acknowledged that the lives depicted within social realist cinema are not necessarily familiar to the audience which generally witnesses them on screen. The task of allowing the audience to become a part of this experience is one which is always going to be afflicted by the *risk* of creating something resembling ‘cultural tourism’.¹⁴³ Adam Lowenstein’s work on the inadequacies of audience positioning within the films of the New Wave creates a compelling argument for a heightened focus on emotional realism. Lowenstein argues that social realism should partially disregard the importance of patronising concepts such as ‘moral’ realism. This is because, for Lowenstein, a ‘sympathetic interest’ in social realist subject matter will only subjugate these working-class subjects into the position of ‘the other’. Lowenstein suggests that “a model for emotional realism” could work towards “insinuating a realism that locates the viewer squarely *in* the field of the ‘other,’ not outside ‘outside and above it.’”¹⁴⁴ The consideration of the extent to which the social realist form allows the audience to *feel* in a way that forges a sense of recognition with the way those that are being watched *feel*, is a relatively neglected feature of the form.

The neglect of the emotional effect of social realism is, no doubt, partially due to the difficulties involved in speculating on how the audience is made to feel about what it is watching. Such a study would either be extremely reliant on generalisation or an exercise in audience reception theory; neither is an approach which I wish to embrace. Despite this, I shall attempt to refrain from speculating that there could possibly be any

¹⁴³ Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle”, p.149

¹⁴⁴ Lowenstein, “Under-The-Skin Horrors”, p.228

true form of universality inherent in audience response to the films that are to be considered. Instead, this thesis would like to highlight- without necessarily assuming that a thorough conclusion is either likely or necessary- that recent social realism has made an increasingly noticeable effort to encourage the idea that lives depicted on screen can appeal to what Terry Lovell describes as, notions of “common experience”, “solidarity” and “a sense of identity and community”.¹⁴⁵ I am most interested in highlighting how a more concerted preoccupation with emotional realism has helped to drive this amelioration. The hypothesis of this work therefore is that laughter is a manifestation of emotion that may be extremely astute in locating this, ‘common humanity’ between the audience and subject. Laughter is the predominant site of study for this acknowledgement of emotional realism within social realism.

Even if the oppressed subjects captured by recent social realism are far removed from the audiences that commonly watch such output, a sympathetic interest in the oppressed subjects portrayed is no longer enough to fulfil the form’s potentialities. For Andy Medhurst, empathy is the true goal of the creation of feeling in any form of cinema that has an obligation to the issue of representation. Medhurst provides a compelling argument for why this should be so by suggesting that sympathy is condescension. He argues that the best means to achieve a subversion of sympathy is through the depiction of passion:

Dignity, sobriety, caring, sympathy- reviews which use words like these are... connoting a tone of self-congratulatory benevolence to one’s unfortunate inferiors, but ‘passion’ is a term of a different order... ‘passion’ refutes sobriety and exposes sympathy as oppressive condescension.¹⁴⁶

Laughter is a form of true passion. For Bakhtin, laughter was the pursuit of “brimming over abundance”¹⁴⁷ and as fundamental to affirming one was alive as either eating or drinking. Social realism’s use of laughter is a form of passion that anyone, from any social group, can relate to as an articulation of life, without reliance on sympathy or pity.

¹⁴⁵ Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, p.95

¹⁴⁶ Medhurst, Andy, “Victim: Text as Context”, in Higson, (Ed), *Dissolving Views*, p.126

¹⁴⁷ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and his World*, p.64

It is immediately important to discuss why I should wish to investigate uses of laughter in the creation of emotional realism as opposed to comedy, per se. Neale and Krutnik's definition of comedy is a good source for justifying this decision.

Perhaps the most striking thing about comedy is the immense variety and range of its forms... Given that this is the case, any single definition of comedy, based on a single criterion, is bound to be limited in application, and therefore insufficient.¹⁴⁸

Neale and Krutnik continue with the point that so many films which contain laughter are only intermittently funny and can equally be driven by their capacity to induce tragedy and tears. "The generation of laughter is not always enough, in and of itself, to define a film as a comedy."¹⁴⁹ Likewise, a dictionary definition of comedy will rarely- if ever- explicitly highlight laughter as one of its governing features. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines comedy as a "stage-play of light, amusing and often satirical character chiefly representing everyday life, & with a happy ending." Therefore, whilst the term 'amusing' is often an obvious synonym for laughter; a film which contains laughter need not possess a 'light' character or a 'happy ending.' This is certainly the case with the films I intend to employ as case studies. Neale and Krutnik therefore suggest that the depiction and generation of laughter should be discussed as a convention in its own right:

Laughter depends upon certain principles and certain devices; it does not require any particular type of structural context (comedy). The forms designed to give rise to laughter are local, specific, and often, momentary.¹⁵⁰

These local forms can exist entirely on their own in complete isolation from comedy. It would, therefore, not be fruitful to base the criterion of this work around the concept of comedy. A discussion of the term comedy need not include a discussion of laughter; likewise, a discussion of laughter need not include use of the term comedy. Even laughter itself has the potential to become too broad a topic to consider in full. This work will therefore locate only moments of laughter which are used to encompass despair and distract us from reality. We shall call this site of study, 'incongruous laughter'. This thesis will approach its chosen films through a study of the synthesis between laughter and despair; observing laughter's temporal and momentary state within recent social

¹⁴⁸ Neale & Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990) p.10

¹⁴⁹ Neale & Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, p.10

¹⁵⁰ Neale & Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, p.10

realist narratives, which are principally involved in the depiction of depressing subject matter.

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There is a scene in *Sweet Sixteen* (Ken Loach, 2002)- a film that, if not for time, could quite easily fulfill a more significant role in this discussion- in which the film's sixteen year old protagonist, Liam, is dragged in front of Greenock's most powerful crime boss, Tony. "What is initiative?" Tony asks the fifteen year old, to the amusement of one of Tony's heavy-set henchmen. Liam's response is simple. Initiative, Liam replies, is "laughing at your boss's jokes." This response is daringly funny because it is delivered in order to disrupt the flow of congruity and subvert the established power distribution that exists within the situation. Liam's retort could be certainly be described as wit, moreover, a form of wit that has a satirical purpose. "Satire", Peter L. Berger argues, "is the deliberate use of the comic for purposes of attack."¹⁵¹ One of the most prominent, academic studies of laughter emerges from Mikhail Bakhtin's history of laughter and one of his foremost concerns is medieval folk laughter. In many ways, Bakhtin's description of medieval laughter's subversive qualities reflects the brief victory that Liam achieves over the oppressive dictator that he is being patronised by:

Festive folk laughter presents a momentary victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts.¹⁵²

Moreover, the mediaeval culture of folk humour belonged to everyone who wanted it: "The truth of laughter embraced and carried away everyone; nobody could resist it."¹⁵³

However, this subversive employment of laughter is not the only manifestation of laughter that I am concerned with. This subversive use of laughter is certainly a prominent coping device within life; however it is not nearly as ubiquitous in everyday life (or in the films that will be studied) as divertive laughter. Divertive laughter is, as Peter L. Berger asserts, a form of "benign laughter", which is employed in order to

¹⁵¹ Berger, Peter, L., *Redeeming Laughter: Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1997) p.157

¹⁵² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p.92

¹⁵³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p.82

“enhance rather than disrupt the flow of everyday life.”¹⁵⁴ It need not contain wit, it need not even be a conscious creation; it can just happen. Likewise, it need not commit to the achievement of a momentary victory; in short, divertive laughter’s only agenda is to provide

The mellow amusement that makes it easier to get through the day and manage the minor irritations... Benign humour in such instances manifests itself in momentary interruptions of the sober activities of living. It is the spontaneous reaction to the incongruities of an ordinary situation.¹⁵⁵

The ubiquity of the expression ‘you’ve got to laugh’ is, in the opinion of this thesis, not a coincidence. I shall spend the great majority of this section suggesting, firstly, that laughter brings us closer to one another and, secondly, that through the study of both divertive and subversive laughter in recent social realism harnesses the potential of this emotional manifestation.

Comments made by Ken Loach provided the initial inspiration for my own work on social realist uses of laughter. When Ken Loach was undergoing compulsory army service he made an important realisation, which, he said, influenced his own view on life:

We did all the stupid things, like painting coal black... Of course it’s stupid and some people got depressed but there’s a humorous side to it ... You just had to put yourself second and realise you weren’t the most important person in the world and just get on with it.¹⁵⁶

Given that so much of the subject matter within recent social realism is concerned with the representation of society’s forgotten men and woman and social groups that are disempowered and disposed, laughter seems like a fundamental means of locating an emotional understanding of their predicament. It is important therefore to further establish the significance of laughter as a manifestation of human emotion; for laughter, both consciously and unconsciously, has the potentiality to articulate many human beings’ true feelings about their lives. Moreover there is a certain degree of universality inherent in the use of laughter.

¹⁵⁴ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, p.99

¹⁵⁵ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, p.100

¹⁵⁶ Hayward, Anthony, *Which Side Are You On: Ken Loach and His Films*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2004) p.15

The statement that laughter possesses a universal quality is an assertion that will be, quite rightly, susceptible to conjecture. How can such a statement possess even a semblance of truth when, even within just one society, individuals and groups have the potentiality to possess such varied, diverse perspectives on life? Bergson justifies his own belief in the universality of laughter with the statement that, laughter's "universality lies in the effect produced, and not in the cause."¹⁵⁷ All the work and all the thinkers that I wish to consider on laughter seem to accept that the main 'effect' of laughter is the subversion of a broad range of forms of suffering. Therefore whilst the suffering that takes place in two contrasting individuals (or social groups) lives may be in complete isolation to one another, the effect of finding the ability to laugh during this time of suffering is remarkably similar. In this sense, I feel that even if the audiences who watch a social realist text do not relate to the suffering that these social realist characters undergo, they will, at least, have a chance of relating to this act of laughter as a subversion or diversion away from suffering.

Therefore, the most important reason why laughter has been adopted as a means of exemplifying and discussing emotional manifestations in social realism, is that laughter is a declaration of emotion that anyone, from any social group, can relate to. Even if the sources of humour which inspire laughter are disparate, the catalyst for this use of humour is often some kind of suffering or oppression. Be it a cold or cancer, the stress of a high-powered job or the indignity of long term unemployment; everyone will at some point in life have to encounter and endure a relative degree of suffering and oppression. Therefore, regardless of class, age and background; laughter, as a coping device, is embraced, to some extent, by almost everyone. Laughter is a great leveller; an announcement that we are all mortal. Be it a result of being in a position of fear, pain, nervousness, embarrassment, bravery, stupidity, boredom- or many other positions besides- to laugh is to *momentarily* take control, even when we have none.

Even if we should not, we often laugh as a means of coping with life; as a means of embracing the humour of the human condition and its many flaws and hazards. In this sense, laughter is greater than any individual. Accordingly, Bergson's essay on the meaning of the comic contains the assertion that, "the specific remedy for vanity is

¹⁵⁷ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.163

laughter.” (p.172) Laughter is certainly a means of temporarily cautioning the idea that anyone belongs at the centre of the world or that anyone is anything more than human. Therefore laughter is something that anyone with enough self-awareness can attempt to embrace and, most importantly, share. Bergson argues that laughter is always a shared experience: “laughter is always the laughter of a group” and therefore it is a form of “complicity” (p.5) and “social signification” (p.8). The act of laughter is something that everyone can potentially relate to.

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Ideas circumscribing the power of laughter have existed, in a recorded form, since the time of the ancient Greeks. Through further employment of the work of Bakhtin and Bergson, and inclusion of the work of Schopenhauer and Freud, I will briefly relate the discussions of laughter, which are most significant to this discussion. Bakhtin’s theory of the Carnavalesque and its inclusion of the idea that laughter possesses an ability to create a momentary ‘second world,’ is fundamental to the comments I have asserted so far. Likewise, Bergson’s argument that laughter subverts disguise, ceremony and mechanization- thus deconstructing the idea that we are anything other than ephemeral and wholly fallible- acts as a worthwhile parallel to Bakhtin. Beyond that, Schopenhauer’s work on laughter’s relationship with hopelessness, and Freud’s references to laughter as a deceleration of the disjuncture between reason and reality, will also inform my argument that laughter is often a fundamental aspect of even the most despair ridden situations.

Within ancient Greek civilization laughter was a manifestation of emotion that was widely celebrated for its therapeutic power. Bakhtin’s history of laughter builds a picture of the antique sources which have most significantly contributed to an ongoing appreciation of laughter’s power. This is an appreciation that has persisted in to the modern age. Bakhtin refers to three key Grecian thinkers, within his discussion; each of them welcomes laughter into the debate about what contributes to “the regulation of life.”¹⁵⁸ That is to say, laughter is an important means of assessing how we, as humans,

¹⁵⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p.70

live with our mortal predicament. Many of these ideas surrounding laughter are still pervasive within modern day thought. Bakhtin's collection of sources has strongly influenced the direction of this discourse's view on the inclusive nature of laughter in social realism.

Aristotle believed that it was only when a child laughs that they "become a human being." (p.69) The predominant reason for laughter's monolithic connection to humanity, according to Hippocrates- whose legacy resides in his contribution to the treatment of illness- is that laughter is intrinsic to the treatment of illness (thus mortality). Bakhtin states that it was Hippocrates "who argued that a gay and cheerful mood, on the part of both physician and patient, was fundamental to fighting disease" (p.68). Within the 'Hippocratic Novel', Hippocrates featured a case study of the ancient Greek figure Democritus whose Laughter, Hippocrates believed, had a philosophical character because it was directed at, "the life of man and at all the vain fears and hopes related to the Gods and to life after death." Hippocrates argued that Democritus exemplified, through laughter, how man was "awakened" (p.67), for he ceased to fear life. The final ancient source that Bakhtin, and this thesis, has an interest in is that of Lucien and his image of Mennipus who laughed in the kingdom of death. Mennipus discovered that laughter transcended all boundaries, even fear and death. Bakhtin cites the work of Lucien as providing the world with the idea that laughter was an expression of the "freedom of spirit" (p.70)

Bakhtin's main preoccupation with ancient Greek thought is the influence that this had on medieval and renaissance conceptions of laughter. In many ways all three periods still hold relevance to how the modern age embraces laughter, notably its close relationship with morality and mortality. The human condition, within Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, is discussed as a flawed predicament through its depictions of grotesque folk humour. For Bakhtin, the grotesque presents a "double faced fullness of life", primarily characterised by negation and destruction, yet these characteristics of negation and destruction discuss an "essential phase" of life, inseparable from "affirmation, and the birth of something new" (p.62). Within Medieval Carnival the grotesque possessed an inseparable relationship with food, drink, the sexual organs of the body and laughter. Essentially therefore laughter was placed within the same category as

the key signifiers of our mortality: nourishment and procreation. On a symbolic level laughter achieves both these significations.

Bakhtin believed that the grotesque image was not employed to express moral ideas: in fact, its meaning was a self-contained escape from morality. Bakhtin's description of Carnival laughter announces that an acceptance of mortality is necessarily a temporary escape from morality in which "the world is seen anew". In this sense, "certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (p.66). A significant reason for the influence of the grotesque and medieval folk laughter on renaissance thought was this idea that medieval laughter escaped the limitations that morality created. Within the Shakespearean character Falstaff, this influence is exemplified and we can see how laughter is given its own world: the world of the tavern, the world of 'misrule.' Folk humour in the middle ages "existed and developed outside the official sphere of high ideology and literature." This 'unofficial existence' "was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom and ruthlessness." Laughter was "bestowed exceptional privileges of license and lawlessness outside the official sphere" (p.72). Official culture throughout the middle ages was characterised by an

Intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness-Icy, petrified seriousness (...) the only tone fit to express the true, the good and all that was essential and meaningful. Fear, religious awe, humility, these were the overtones of this seriousness (p.73).

However, life is not as simple as that: no group or society can live in a social order that is unremittingly bleak and oppressive, without at least attempting to pursue some form of an escape from this bleakness. Bakhtin contends that medieval laughter, due to its disinterest in morality, was an escape from unremitting seriousness. Seriousness cannot thoroughly discuss the suffering which is a self-evident feature of being alive.

Bergson argues, "that which is laughable is most often an inversion, transposition or excessive repetition of that which is serious. Essentially, laughter is "a momentary anaesthesia of the heart."¹⁵⁹ When we laugh, we temporarily put our affection, pity, anger, and sadness to one side. We laugh, because otherwise we might cry. Bergson argues that in this way laughter is a form of common sense: "common sense consists mainly in being able to remember, it consists even more in being able to forget" (p.183).

¹⁵⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.5

He reasons that it is perfectly rationale to 'laugh things off.' Time and again, this is the function laughter performs: changing our perception of reality and "throwing a wet blanket upon sympathy... The situation, though a serious one, is not taken seriously" (p.140). Freud, similarly, states in his thesis on jokes that when we laugh it is as an announcement of the fact that reality and reason are rarely connected: "Jokes produce freedom. Joking is merely playing with ideas... what at one moment seemed to have a meaning, we now see as completely meaningless."¹⁶⁰ Likewise, Kant stated that when we laugh, we are forcing "Reality... to bow to imagination."¹⁶¹ We laugh at the realisation that the controlled environment of morality (and proscriptive thought in general) is really an attempt to avoid the inevitable chaos of mortality. This is exactly what Bergson is suggesting when he states "laughter is a sane type of madness."¹⁶² Therefore, although laughter can be used to cast judgment, it can also be used to move away from judgment and to embrace the reality of mortality and all the chaos that this contains.

Man, no matter how oppressed, still possesses the ability to laugh, even if it is laughter at his own misfortune. Laughter, without contrivance, can emphasise rather than reduce our perception of a desperate situation. In the films I shall proceed to study the characters laughter becomes a fundamental element of the desperate situations portrayed. Bakhtin argues that laughter embraces the realisation that "Everything is exposed to change",¹⁶³ and accordingly that which should induce despair can be turned upon its head. Similarly, Bergson argues that laughter is often preoccupied with "disguise."¹⁶⁴ Whether it is man in disguise, nature in disguise or society in disguise, Bergson believes that disguise is almost always laughable. Laughter, albeit momentarily, overcomes the lies and deception that man and society- and the man-made and natural authorities that govern society- create to keep certain forms of decorum and stability in place. Laughter is a temporary refusal to see life as we are ordered to see it; it is a means of observing life's 'ceremonies' and rendering them ridiculous. Overall, Bergson is suggesting that when "the automatic regulation of society" (p.46) is made explicit, those of us- which is, at

¹⁶⁰ Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious*, (1905), in, Strachey, Jones (ed.), *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud- Vol VIII* (London: Hogarth, 1960) p.42

¹⁶¹ Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious* p.184

¹⁶² Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and Their Relation to The Unconscious* p.186

¹⁶³ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and his World*, p.82

¹⁶⁴ Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of The Comic*, p.39

times, almost all of us- who mindlessly succumb to rules about what life should *be*, become comic.

Bakhtin asserts that laughter is freedom “from the gloomy oppression of such categories as ‘eternal,’ ‘immovable,’ ‘absolute,’ ‘unchangeable’”¹⁶⁵ If one observes society, whilst society is laughing, then one is privileged with the opportunity to witness a very pure form of life, a form of life that describes how we would choose to live and feel if we were not ordered to live as others feel we should. For Freud, laughter “evades restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible.”¹⁶⁶ Horton argues that laughter provides a ‘liminal’ space, in which,

The rules and regulations of a society are briefly suspended... where the everyday is turned upside down and where cause and effect can be triumphed over and manipulated... A playful realm of consecrated freedom.¹⁶⁷

Gill Plain argues that laughter “whether anarchic or corrective... depends upon an articulation of otherness and disorder, producing a transitional space within which the unthinkable can be thought.”¹⁶⁸ My overall point cannot be overstated: laughter is a fundamental means of understanding what it is to be human, for it expresses suffering in a way that even an audience member not familiar with this site of suffering should be able to relate to. As Bergson argues, “the Comic cannot exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*.”¹⁶⁹

Eagleton asserts that Schopenhauer has discussed morality as “values, ideas and the rest of the pointless paraphernalia” which exist merely to *hide* the fact that life is essentially governed by the pursuit of “nourishment and procreation.”¹⁷⁰ Essentially, for Schopenhauer, morality can often become a denial and avoidance of mortality and laughter is a key defence against this and against any contrived and proscriptive notions of what life should be. Hence Schopenhauer’s assertion that laughter is the “disjuncture

¹⁶⁵ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and his World*, p.83

¹⁶⁶ Freud, “Jokes”, p.103

¹⁶⁷ Horton, Andrew, S., *Comedy/ Cinema/ Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) p.5

¹⁶⁸ Plain, Gill *John Mills and British Cinema: Masculinity, Identity and Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) p.208

¹⁶⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.3

¹⁷⁰ Eagleton, Terry, “Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera,” in, Hirschkop & Shepherd, *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989) p.181

between experience and intellect”,¹⁷¹ the point when we realise that what we have been told about life and what we have learnt from actually living are often in total contradiction to one another.

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Laughter has become an increasingly prominent device within social realism, yet it is an element of consideration that is not at all prominent within academic work on the subject. Moreover, consideration of social realism’s use of laughter has not been given consideration within academic work on amusing British film. Recent social realism, however, has provided many moments of laughter that are thoroughly worthy of attention. The most recent work on film comedy in British cinema, Nigel Mather’s *Tears of Laughter: Comedy Drama in 1990s British Cinema*¹⁷², refrains from considering the significance of depictions of laughter within British social realism. Through films such as *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty*, *East is East*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill* and *Love Actually*, Nigel Mathers explores three specific strands of British laughter: comedies engaging with issues of class, culture and community in modern Britain; ‘ethnic’ comedy-dramas exploring complex issues of identity and allegiance in British society; and romantic comedies. I would argue that some of the most significant instances of laughter in British cinema, certainly laughter that has associations with class, culture and community, and undoubtedly laughter which has associations with tears, have emerged from the social realist form and it is an area that is worthy of debate.

This neglect of laughter in social realism is wholly understandable, in so far as there are difficulties inherent in the formulation of a criterion which is capable of discussing a subject such as laughter within a film movement that principally explores instances of despair. However this whole section has engaged with a conception of laughter that provides a formula for the discussion of suffering. Laughter throughout history has adopted a position as a very important device in the discussion of despair and,

¹⁷¹ Eagleon, Terry, “Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera”, p.180

¹⁷²See Mather, Nigel, *Tears of Laughter: Comedy-Drama in 1990s British Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006)

as a result, what it is to be a mortal human being. Uses of laughter in recent social realism films specifically reflect the way this form interrogates the problems inherent in the working-class males' attempts to reassert his previous position of power; emphasising the fact that they have lost their established position and are struggling to find a place in contemporary society. Perhaps conversely, this use of laughter does not side-step the suffering, but rather compounds the nature of this suffering in a fittingly grim and depressing context. Laughter and suffering therefore can be seen to possess a symbiotic relationship within British social realism and this is the perspective that the following two chapters will attempt to vindicate.

Chapter 3: Laughter and Loss in Gary Oldman's *Nil by Mouth*

Introduction

“Remember my fucking heart attack?” asks Mark, between snorts of laughter. The camera is as unflinching as the dialogue. Offering no respite, it holds a claustrophobic, tight focus as it darts between the faces of Mark, Ray and the other men, in the cramped domestic interior. All of these worn faces, weathered by excess, are laughing at this grotesque and adverse event- revelling in it. As all the men laugh at this oppressive, probably painful, moment in Mark's life there is no solemnity and no ceremony: sympathy is not the function that these stories are employed to fulfil. These men- both selflessly *and* selfishly- attempt to get on with life and laugh at its hardships as they engage with life from the periphery. Oldman's film is a balanced exploration of this determination, an observation of both its admirable and deplorable aspects. “Fucking hell- listen to this un”, Ray responds to Mark's question. Ray's prior knowledge of this story highlights the repetitive nature of the stories that these men tell one another. The idea emerges that repetition is an important element of this storytelling because it is a way of grinding down moments in life that would otherwise possess the capacity to grind these men down. Likewise there is a great deal of significance placed upon rehearsal and performance in these stories. The story's punchline (in which Ray mistakes Mark's heart attack for a prank) is relatively irrelevant to the story as a whole. Ten asides, with their own separate punch lines, are delivered by Mark before the final resolve. There is a sense that this oft-told story becomes more and more of a performance each time it is repeated. Each anecdote in *Nil by Mouth* becomes one means through which these men regain some semblance of power and importance; a means through which forgotten, disposed men are temporarily remembered and celebrated, if only through shared laughter. Incongruous laughter is one of the only partially positive devices these men possess that can effectively be used to overcome oppression and ignore the despair that otherwise fills their life.

Chapter Three will argue that the treatment of laughter and the storytelling and performance which produces it in *Nil by Mouth* offers one means of gaining insight into recent social realism's creation of emotional realism. Born in London in 1958, Oldman is

best known for his acting career and *Nil by Mouth* is his only directorial endeavour. This semi-autobiographical narrative of South London working-class life was dedicated to the memory of Oldman's father. In discussion with Henri Béhar, Oldman actually discussed the cathartic effect that this film's creation had upon him: "It was in a sense cathartic. It was a completion of the journey for me in dealing with baggage on which I continue to work with on a daily basis."¹⁷³ In conversation with Gerald Peary, Oldman describes his motivations within *Nil by Mouth*, as follows: "The film is a love letter to my family":

I'd seen films about London of which I said, 'I don't believe a fucking word!' I wanted to make a film about the neighbourhood in which I grew up, something honest, believable, and which didn't patronise the people depicted.¹⁷⁴

On another occasion, Oldman proposed that the film was his conception of a form of "personal cinema";

There's a lot of me in there (*Nil by Mouth*). I grew up in that neighbourhood. All the locations are the actual locations I remember. My mother used to sing in that pub. The bar where you see the father sitting alone... That pub is the pub my father used to go to, and where he destroyed his liver. I watched it all going on. A lot of people I knew are still there... I think there's a lot of me in all the characters.¹⁷⁵

Therefore, whilst Oldman's film portrays flawed, often undesirable, characters their portrayals attempt to stray away from stereotype and retain enough humanity to suggest, to at least some of the audience, that time should be taken to understand the motivations and emotions that influence the behaviour of these characters. This avoidance of stereotype is potentially conducive to a removal of sympathy.

This chapter on *Nil by Mouth* is predominantly concerned with the representation of subject matter, the way in which some semblance of identification and recognition of this isolated and alienated social grouping is realised through the depiction of the way these characters cope. Hallam and Marshment have argued, disparagingly, that *Nil by Mouth* is a "voyeuristic" work that the middle-classes might discuss over dinner; "an insider's film for outsiders."¹⁷⁶ However, I would more readily agree with Monk's argument that *Nil by Mouth*, "scrupulously resists the pitfalls of voyeurism... This care is

¹⁷³ <http://hemsidor.torget.se/users/b/boatman/interviews/scouts.html>

¹⁷⁴ <http://www.geraldpeary.com/interviews/mno/oldman.html>

¹⁷⁵ <http://hemsidor.torget.se/users/b/boatman/interviews/showbiz.htm>

¹⁷⁶ Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, p.218

undoubtedly connected with Oldman's deep personal investment."¹⁷⁷ Hallam and Marshment continue their own argument by stating, "It is difficult to imagine that anyone living in similar circumstances would choose to watch this film or wish to recognise themselves in it, it is too unrelenting, too grim."¹⁷⁸ The conclusion to *Nil by Mouth* certainly does not provide as much hope and exuberance as a film such as *The Full Monty* and this is reflective of an overall depressing depiction of south London life. Hallam and Marshment are also right that there is probably little chance that people from the environments depicted would enjoy or be entertained by what they are watching. However, their argument fails to harness the idea that there is a liberty inherent in a fair and balanced representation. This is a reason why people from the environment depicted may respond positively towards a critique like *Nil by Mouth*. After all, there is something interminably patronising about a film that sentimentalises or glamorises situations that are neither.

Many moments within *Nil by Mouth* do elucidate moments of humour and even warmth. Therefore, it is wrong to suggest that the entire film is unrelentingly grim. This is also why I am wary of Samantha Lay's argument that Oldman is simply "looking back but glad to have escaped."¹⁷⁹ *Nil by Mouth* finds moments of companionship and community amongst a discussion of wholly unsavoury topics such as addiction (self-abuse) and the abuse of others. In doing so the film somehow manages to portray all the characters as possessing some semblance of humanity; without ignoring the unsavoury aspects of their behaviour. The humanity of the characters induces at least a portion of the audience to attempt to understand this unsavoury behaviour and care about how these characters feel about their lives. However, so much of the behaviour by the male characters in *Nil by Mouth* renders this a difficult position to embrace. Chapter Two established that 1990s social realism was a critique of working-class man and masculinity in crisis. The working-class, specifically male members of the working-class, in 1990s Britain, were an alienated and rejected group that had lost their purpose and, as a result, their established values. Claire Monk argued that the late eighties and early nineties saw,

¹⁷⁷ Monk, "Men in the 90s", p.163

¹⁷⁸ Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, p.218

¹⁷⁹ "1990s and Beyond: Contemporary Social Realism" in Lay, Samantha, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit-Grit* (London; New York: Wallflower, 2002) p.112

“the passing of patriarchal certainties”, which resulted in a, “post-feminist male panic”, whereby, “the apparent ascendancy of women in the post-industrial workplace heralded a resurgence of masculinism and misogyny.”¹⁸⁰ Female suffering at the hands of impotent, disposed men is prominent in *Nil by Mouth*, not least through “the exercise of the working-class ‘hero’s’ verbal and physical power over woman”, which, as Hill states, can be read as “compensation for his actual social and political impotence.”¹⁸¹

The majority of the male characters attempt to reinstate their masculinity and inherent power through the use of alcohol and drug abuse. Moreover, they portray a constant need for the company of other males; it is only through male company that men appear comfortable or content. Ray has a severe alcohol problem, which is in a downward spiral from the first scene onwards. Likewise, he has a drug habit that, although, not as damaging as his brother-in-law, Billy’s drug addiction, still bears another hallmark of a damaged existence. Most worrying is Ray’s violent and abusive side which leads to the unforgivable beating of Val. Whilst we hate Ray for the brutal exertion of his misplaced ‘masculinity’, something is going on within the narrative that makes it possible for the audience to *try* and understand his grievous weaknesses. Those who are persuaded to understand how Ray feels may eventually realise that Ray’s strengths *are* his most pitiful weaknesses.

The fact that *Nil by Mouth* is a film which observes a group of male characters, who strive and, more often than not, struggle to deal with life, is an important reason for Oldman’s close concentration on the stories that men tell other men. Raymond Williams’s description of the working-classes as the “useful or productive classes”¹⁸² is relevant to Oldman’s depiction of an environment in which this sense of purpose has vanished and the working-class has almost wholly become a forgotten under-class. It is the men who seem to be the most ill-equipped to cope with this plight and *Nil by Mouth* is dominated by the celebration *and* censure of the multifarious survival tactics and coping devices that the characters in these environments of neglect chose to employ. Anecdotal storytelling and the laughter it has the capacity to produce is intrinsic to the celebratory aspect of this conception; most notably the way male characters employ laughter as a coping device

¹⁸⁰ Monk, “Men in the 1990s”, p.157

¹⁸¹ Hill, “Class, Gender and working-class realism” in *British Cinema of the 1980s*, p.173

¹⁸² Williams, *Keywords*, pp.65-66

amongst the many moments of despair. Yet, far less palatably, violence, alcoholism, drug-taking and shameful misogyny are other far more negative ways in which the men choose to cope with their purposeless existences. It is these, less positive, coping devices that eventually takeover the narrative. In conversation with Derek Malcolm, Oldman commented that these characters possess a definite resilience and moreover, “they don't feel sorry for themselves”.¹⁸³ Accordingly, Oldman refuses to make a film that simply pours pity upon those that live within this desperate environment; hence the film's preoccupation with censure and celebration of the activities that these characters pursue in order to cope.

Robert Murphy, discussing the position of females in the work of the New Wave, suggests that “women in the kitchen sink films suffer interminably.”¹⁸⁴ Yet, in terms of the female's position within social realism, this plight seems to have worsened by the 1990s; despite- or rather, because of- the fact that women had begun to make increasingly confident inroads into the workforce and the national economy. Females are never treated lovingly, affectionately or with respect and, in terms of their interaction with men, they are quite simply victims of various levels of misogyny. It has already been mentioned that men seem to repeatedly, almost exasperatingly, attempt to remain in the company of other men. Any attempt by woman to involve themselves in the male world is met with negativity. In interview with Derek Malcolm, Oldman details his own personal admiration for these females:

When my dad left, we didn't have two halfpennies to rub together. So mum went out and worked at two jobs. And she wasn't the only heroic woman in the family. They don't do so well on self-esteem, these amazing women. But they ought to, because there's an extraordinary stoicism and resilience about them.¹⁸⁵

Oldman, however, spends most of the film dealing with the male characters and he has a far more ambiguous attitude towards the resilience that the men in *Nil by Mouth* exert. It is in the film's observation of men and masculinity that the critique of working-class and under-class resilience has the capacity to be at its most critical.

¹⁸³ <http://www.garyoldman.info.preview7.oxito.com/goportal/htdocs/modules/articles/article.php?id=13>

¹⁸⁴ Murphy, Robert, *Sixties British Cinema* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992) p.35

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.garyoldman.info.preview7.oxito.com/goportal/htdocs/modules/articles/article.php?id=13>

In many ways, although the men in *Nil by Mouth* rarely seem to help the situation that they exist within- consistently making it worse- neither are they the cause of the problem as a whole. Likewise, there is also the suggestion that if a cure exists for this deprivation then it is external to the characters that inhabit these environments in *Nil by Mouth*. Hallam argues that most social realism of the recent age depicts, “situations and events, which are a direct consequence of the socio-economic realities of the place in which they are set.”¹⁸⁶ Similarly, Hill argues that recent social realism has unearthed characters who are not simply good or bad, but rather “moulded by the economic and social conditions in which they are located.”¹⁸⁷ Oldman’s ambiguous ending, certainly works towards the suggestion that characters do not have complete control over their situation. Yet, it is wrong to say that there is *no* light at the end of *Nil by Mouth*: the characters have highlighted that they are conscious of their situation and that they possess some positive means of coping with this situation. By the end of the film the characters may have found a slightly more positive way of coping with a situation that seems entirely unlikely to change and this determination is positive.

As Chapter Two has already attested, no discussion of subject matter can take place without also referring to the implementation of social realist style. Richard Williams has gone as far as to suggest that *Nil by Mouth* is, “the nearest thing to realism that cinema can achieve.”¹⁸⁸ This is partly due to the film’s use of style; *Nil by Mouth* discovers a pertinent aesthetic articulation of the working-class experience, which is fundamental to its approach to subject matter. *Nil by Mouth* employs the use of redundant narrative detail, creating a narrative structure that is punctuated by reflective episodes, which occur in isolation from the central thrust of the narrative action; it is these moments which offer us the most poignant moments of observation and, as I shall argue, facilitate the vindication that *Nil by Mouth* is as an outstanding social realist text. Likewise, the cinematography that Oldman’s cinema adopts, notably cinematographer Ron Fortunato’s insistent employment of hand-held camera and telephoto lens, also allows for distinctly social realist aesthetic. *Nil by Mouth*’s creation of social realism is

¹⁸⁶ Hallam, “Film, Class and National Identity”, p.262

¹⁸⁷ Hill, “Failure and Utopianism”, p.180

¹⁸⁸ Williams, Richard, “Cinema doesn’t get any more real than this,” *Guardian*, ‘Arts,’ (10th October, 1997) p.6

defined by both its interpretation of under-class subject matter and its aesthetic treatment of this subject matter. I would argue that in both social and formal terms *Nil by Mouth* looks *straight* at the characters and their environment, not *down* at them.

Overall *Nil by Mouth* has visual and narrative preoccupations which force the audience into a position where they, like the film's subjects, are offered no other option but to 'deal' with the lives depicted. Therefore, whilst anecdotal storytelling dominates *Nil by Mouth's* interpretation of subject matter, it also has a fundamental influence on the presentation of both narrative and cinematography. *Nil by Mouth*, particularly in its first hour, chooses to consistently implement detail that has no ostensible relevance to the narrative. Without *Nil by Mouth's* employment of redundant detail the synthesising of the movement from laughter to despair would probably not have been realised so successfully, if at all. *Nil by Mouth's* narrative structure is punctuated by reflective episodes, which elapse in isolation from the central thrust of the narrative action; it is these moments which offer us the most poignant moments of observation and allow an uncontrived movement from oppressive moments to laughter-filled moments, which would not be *as* possible within a conventional story. That is to say, moments of laughter would possess the effect of being *placed* within a narrative rather than elapsing organically within a representation of 'real life.' A conventional story contains a beginning, middle and end and is generally propelled into action by an inciting incident. The inciting incident essentially provides problems and dilemmas to be solved so that by the end the problems are solved and there is a satisfying conclusion. This is not the predominant narrative motivation within *Nil by Mouth*.

Much of *Nil by Mouth's* screen time is dominated by mundane moments of 'the everyday': Ray ordering drinks at the bar; Billy hanging around in a phone box, waiting for his drug dealer to arrive; Ray and Mark sitting around in Ray's front room, drinking tea and telling stories; Val standing alone in a kitchen, looking for something to do. All of these scenes, and many more besides, refrain from referring to the external narrative conditions of a beginning, middle and an end; fulfilling no real narrative guarantees. For over half the film therefore we are presented with incidents that contribute to our understanding of character and environment but we are never lent many features that provide anything like a true sense of narrative structure. The first inciting incident (or

‘problem to be solved’) within most film narratives takes place at a very early stage in the story. Within *Nil by Mouth* we are faced with a narrative structure that does not embrace its only discernible inciting incident- Ray beating Val so severely that she has a miscarriage and decides to leave him- until long over half way through the film. This is an inciting incident insofar as it gives the narrative pattern a consistent storyline- Ray attempting to ‘win’ Val back. The way this storyline is revealed however is still dominated by a very reflective mode of address.

Nil by Mouth places far more importance on observing subject matter than ‘telling a story’ and this allows the film to provide us with many moments that involve the characters simply sitting around doing nothing but attempting to alleviate the boredom of this banal occupation. Be it through the use of storytelling, performance and laughter or the use of addiction and abuse, much of the characters’ time is simply spent trying to cope with the environment that they reside within. The overall effect of this device is that these mundane moments provide the opportunity for audience recognition. Everyone, no matter which social group they come from, has moments in their life where nothing happens and the biggest challenge becomes rising above the boredom of the everyday.

Chapter Two discussed the ‘unplanned’ effect which social realist style was working towards. This is certainly an effect which the presentation of narrative has on the film and it is also perfectly encapsulated by *Nil by Mouth’s* expressive use of cinematography. *Nil by Mouth* was shot using only one camera; the footage is predominantly hand held and employs a grainy 16mm film stock that is far more abrasive than a cinema-going audience is generally familiar with. In addition, Fortunato’s use of the telephoto lens allows for almost constant claustrophobic close-ups. From the very first shot, the detail is presented via extreme close up and the effect this has is to present the characters as if they are in the face of the audience members. This unnerving cinematography would be diluted if we were slowly led into the film’s aesthetic landscape with a traditional master shot of the environment where the characters exist. While a master shot would allow us to slowly submerge ourselves into the ‘world’ of these characters, this is not the aesthetic objective that *Nil by Mouth* pursues.

Orr suggests that this form of close up “goes against the grain of that key convention of the close-up, the Hollywood celebration of stardom.”¹⁸⁹ For example during the first social club sequence in *Nil by Mouth*:

Their faces are tense and sweaty with ambient smoke, heat, noise and booze. Eliminating depth of field, the camera lens traps their talking heads against the background blur that fringes the image, but then invokes other more involuntary senses than that of sight. For, obscenely, it brings them close enough for us to touch, taste and smell. With the same discomfort with which they, unacknowledged, experience their tight surroundings, we, explicitly, are forced to experience them.¹⁹⁰

The close-up, therefore, is also used to highlight the aesthetic flaws inherent in the characters involved, rather than, more conventionally, by emphasising notions of perfection.

Nil by Mouth never conforms to the idea that the viewing experience should be kind or pleasing to the audience and it is this factor that immediately captures what Purcell, amongst many others, has labelled, a “view from within.”¹⁹¹ Fortunato and Oldman seem to deliberately attempt to make the viewing process difficult for the audience, just as the life depicted is difficult for the characters. Monk has talked about the way in which “the camera places us among the characters,

We are placed in the position of being squashed up against the characters, of having them invade our space, yet of constantly having to work towards making sense of what is going on.¹⁹²

The use of close-up camera work demands that the audience sit in the character’s front room and this contrivance is unrepentant. *Sight and Sound*’s original review of *Nil by Mouth* was, fittingly, entitled *Being There*.¹⁹³ Oldman’s comments regarding his visual intentions reflect this interpretation:

I wanted you to feel that you were sitting in the same room with these people and that you can't breathe, so I went for these very big close-ups... I guess what I was trying to get was a sense of claustrophobia ... it (the use of CU camera) is a little unbearable at times, and so is life.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Orr, “Traducing Realisms”, p.108

¹⁹⁰ Orr, “Traducing Realisms”, p.108

¹⁹¹ Purcell, “Re-imagining the Working-class,” in Rowbotham , *Looking At Class*, p.127

¹⁹² Monk, “Men in the 90s”, p.164

¹⁹³ See, James, Nick, ‘Being There,’ in *Sight and Sound* (October, 1997) p.6

¹⁹⁴ <http://www.garyoldman.info.preview7.oxito.com/goportal/htdocs/modules/articles/article.php?id=13>

All of these factors contribute to a visceral style that consistently reflects the raw subject matter that is being depicted.

Despite *Nil by Mouth*'s raw style, Fortunato's cinematography retains an intense regard for the characters; and not only because they quite literally fill the screen. Physical camera work highlights every element of each character's physicality. This physical use of the camera partly emerges from necessity; the fact that there was only ever one camera being used to shoot a scene placed a huge demand on this camera to move around the scene with an intense, seemingly unplanned, urgency and speed. Orr describes the cinematography of *Nil by Mouth* as being capable of suggesting

a new closeness of attention, at times limpet-like in clinging to the figure or the face in movement at speed, tense, agitated, an echo of changing society whose anxieties have speed and dislocation as their core focus.¹⁹⁵

These ideas support David Thompson's assertion that within recent social realism the fast-moving, close-up camera reflects the idea that the characters "have not given up on their own naked force" they are, "bursting with words, gestures, movement"¹⁹⁶ and this signifies their refusal to lie down and be beaten by life. The physicality of the characters therefore is reflected in the physicality of the camera. Moreover, this attention-grabbing cinematographic physicality is conducive to the idea that many of the male characters are intent on holding the attention of the other characters as regularly as possible. Without Oldman and Fortunato's aesthetic decisions the identification with subject matter that *Nil by Mouth* seems to encourage would not have been realised.

* * *

My textual analysis of *Nil by Mouth* largely focuses on the opening, fully analysing the first half hour of the film's content. This thirty minute section of *Nil by Mouth*, like the films as a whole, undoubtedly involves alcoholism, drug abuse, misogyny and violence; yet, unlike the majority of the film, it is dominated by men sitting around, telling stories and laughing at life. This period of the film comes to an end with the first instance of sustained and graphic violence, the moment when Ray savagely bites Billy's nose off.

¹⁹⁵ Orr, "Traducing Realisms", p.106

¹⁹⁶ Thompson, David, "Walkers in the World: Alan Clarke", in *Film Comment* (May-June, 1993) p.80

Beyond this moment in the film we witness a dramatic deterioration in the behaviour of these men. A large reason for this is that laughter is no longer Oldman's immediate concern and this is reflected in the fact that the film becomes increasingly dominated by other more destructive coping devices.

I find it extremely intriguing that Oldman has chosen to begin his story with an extended period in which the male characters share laughter with one another. Although never truly likeable, these depictions of laughter are portrayed with a certain degree of humanity. The potential for laughter as a complicitous device, described by Bergson in Chapter Two, fits into my appreciation of the first half hour of *Nil by Mouth* perfectly. I am also interested in the fact that as the film's narrative moves away from an observance of laughter, the film becomes harder to cope with. This idea is compounded by the fact that Oldman chooses to return to the observance of laughter at the film's close and as such retains at least a glimmer of hope that these characters may find a route through the hard lives they are made to endure.

The following textual analysis of *Nil by Mouth* looks at the first scene which involves a night out in which all of the film's principal characters are, to different extents, engaged. The predominant concern I have with these initial events is the way *Nil by Mouth* unceremoniously throws the audience into the lives of the family portrayed in terms of cinematography, narrative and dialogue. The next scene which is important to my analysis of the film's opening thirty minutes is the scene immediately after this, which places the males within the confines of a small domestic space. This is a scene that is fundamental to my overall assertion that within *Nil by Mouth* men use storytelling, performance and laughter as a means of coping with the domestic space which confines and restricts them. It is also a scene that elucidates the effect this behaviour has on the women who have to share this space. The scene which completes my analysis of the first half hour of the film is the night out that Ray, Mark and Billy share together. This scene provides a good opportunity to observe the debauched behaviour of these men when they briefly manage to escape the domestic space. The final part of the film that I wish to analyse is the film's ending. This scene is important to my work because of its ambiguous resolve. Although Oldman has certainly not created a positive resolution, there is a suggestion of hope insofar as it is the first scene in the film where the men and women

share laughter together. All these scenes combined will hopefully construct a justification for my assertion that laughter creates a form of emotional realism that offers at least some of the audience the opportunity to try and understand the brutal lives that these male characters lead.

Social life?

The action in *Nil* begins within a crowded, smoky, working-class social club. The darkness of the setting is particularly arresting: overcast, with a moody blue light. There is an inherent aggressiveness about the way the frame of reference presents us with information. The mise-en-scene is such that the audience is being induced to struggle with this discomfiting aesthetic. This effect continues throughout the opening sequence within the social club, during which time the camera refrains from moving beyond a medium shot of these events. The effect that the cinematography produces is in marked contrast to the music that accompanies the film. Eric Clapton's Blues-influenced soundtrack possesses a laid-back, ambient quality. Aurally we are not experiencing anything dramatic or striking. I am not suggesting that Clapton's work is not powerful or wholly capable of creating a mood, for it certainly is. The point is that the mellow blues guitar is inoffensive and the mood it creates is not what one may expect from the opening of a film that contains such offensive content. There is a strong sense of transience within the music and this transient feel seems to communicate a simple message: this is life, this is routine. This idea is re-emphasised by the fact that, as the music plays, we also hear the diegetic clatter of noises from the club itself, notably Ray ordering drinks at the bar: this is life, this is routine.

Ray, red-faced, sweating and seemingly drunk, is captured amongst a sea of bodies; his imposing, male physique is the only feature of the frame that is not distorted and blurred as he struggles to get served. The grim determination that is Ray's greatest attribute and, more significantly, his greatest flaw is portrayed vividly within the simple act of ordering drinks. We see it in his expression and mannerisms and we can hear it in his voice. We may be watching a relatively mundane moment, yet we are already receiving insight into the character of Ray. The intimacy of the camerawork is such that when, for example, Ray asks the barman "Got no ice? You got no ice?" and then shakes

his head in disgust when the barman replies in the affirmative, the audience may be left feeling uncomfortable in Ray's 'presence'. This is the first of many instances where this effect is employed, culminating in the close up on Ray as he savagely kicks his pregnant wife as she lies helpless on the floor.

After Ray has finished ordering drinks we are offered a series of expositional shots of the club that Ray is in, the crowded scene now captured in medium shot. Yet the creation of claustrophobia still reigns. Like the extreme close-ups that initiate this film, there is nothing reassuring or comforting about the mise-en-scene of this short sequence. The texture and colour of this scene is still harsh and dark: it is again drowned in dark blue light and smoke still fills the air. Dark figures pass in front of the camera, their silhouettes obscuring our vision. In fact, the camera obscures far more readily than it ever illuminates. At one point, for example, a bright light from the stage is flashed straight at the camera. The scene is busy and bustling with noise and action, so much so that the audience may not even know what we are meant to be observing or absorbing, as the camera shakily pans across the room, without any ostensible objective. The audience is not being allowed the chance to rest their eyes on any one point of reference. The editing is equally erratic and again seems to be without any discernible design. It seems that just as the film refrains from presenting the subject matter via an objective overview, the film's cinematography is equally subjective.

The design is such that the audience could be made to feel as if they themselves have walked into this busy social club. This approach to film-making can possess a truly realistic and visceral effect. There is also an almost symbolic meaning inherent in this creation of the initial mise-en-scene: the conflict between the camera and the scene in front of it informs and reflects the levels of conflict that are generally taking place within the lives of the characters portrayed. Like the narrative structure and dialogue, the cinematography and mise-en-scene deliberately attempt to deconstruct the way in which the majority of the audience is used to watching a film. *Nil by Mouth*, on many levels, creates what we could call a grammar of conflict. For Leach, Oldman's approach "stresses the intensity of affect rather than social or political understanding." i.e. calling upon "desensitised viewers" to be "shocked out of their apathy" Hence *Nil by Mouth's*

consistent creation of “a gruelling experience for audiences”, as they watch “the intense emotional life of a working-class family.”¹⁹⁷

Beyond Ray’s attempts to order a round of drinks, the first voice we hear is that of a stand-up comedian, performing in front of the laughter-filled social club audience. It is telling that a film which possesses so many moments of conflict and despair chooses to introduce laughter to the audience before the opening credits have even been brought to a close. It is also significant that most of the stand-up’s humour focuses on subjects of despair- “Best way to wind up an anorexic? ... say- you’re putting on some weight you fat cunt.” As I have said, it becomes progressively clear that an understanding of what makes characters laugh allows us insight into how they live. Therefore the very fact that this comedian is deriving laughter from depressing subjects such as anorexia and homelessness is important. Also, the fact that there is seemingly no subject that goes beyond the realms of laughter reflects the idea that within this environment suffering is commonplace. As Ray carries a tray of drinks over to the table where his wife and mother-in-law sit, the voice of the stand-up fades into the background and an argument between Ray and his mother-in-law, Jan begins:

Jan: “You pick them olives?”
Ray: “You wanna drink it or wear it?”

Jan and Val argue, yet in the form of wisecracks. Humour and conflict co-exist with each other and the distinction between the two is often non-existent. The synthesis works well because we are never sure how a situation is going to elapse, whether a scene is going to be funny or violent and this uncertainty leads to an unplanned effect, which as we have discussed is so synonymous with social realism’s appreciation of reality.

Conflict follows conflict in *Nil by Mouth*, Ray immediately moves on to an argument with Val, his wife. These arguments are seemingly inconsequential, like so many conflicts within the film; however the transition from the laughter that the comic induces to the mild conflict that takes place between the characters is again relevant to the perpetual uncertainties that mould the film. Rarely does a scene of laughter *or* conflict fulfil a ‘stand out’ moment within the film. Laughter blends into all the other levels of

¹⁹⁷ Leach, “British Film”, p.64

emotional interaction that preoccupy *Nil's* narrative. Ray's argument with Val concerns the fact that Ray is unwilling to sit with her and the other female characters. The fact that all the women are left to sit on their own while the men sit away from them, at another table, initiates a discussion that is significant. The men and the women generally inhabit separate worlds and, likewise, speak different languages.

Samantha Lay has stated that *Nil by Mouth* "is more focused on the male community and as such displays a certain sympathy for its members"¹⁹⁸. Yet such assertions fail to fully acknowledge that, whilst a lot of Oldman's focus is on the male characters, this focus is regularly critical. For example, at later points in the film Ray often drinks alone, detached from his male safety net. In one scene as he sits alone at a bar, ordering drink after drink, the camera steps away from the scene. Lay concedes that this distance suggests "that he cannot count on his male community... his machismo is wasted on an empty pub."¹⁹⁹ After off-loading drinks to the females, Ray sits down next to two friends. There is a complacently aggressive exchange between Ray and Mark regarding the fact that Ray has taken so long to get the drinks. This habitual nature of this aggressiveness is emphasised by the fact that Mark, without a pause, immediately digresses into an anecdote and the men immediately start to laugh. Again, the threat of conflict and the release of laughter seem to exist in parallel.

The character's casual and habitual relationship with both laughter and violence is again emphasised half way through Mark's anecdote. Someone bumps into the back of his chair: "wants to sit in me lap... Cunt!" As usual, it's uncertain whether the exchange Mark has with this man will result in an outbreak of violence, or not. With obvious relish, but also camaraderie, Ray also gets involved. He stares at the 'offender,' the look in Ray's face is savage, he looks like he wants to tear him in half. This is not the last time we will see this look in Ray's face as a result of such trivial provocation. These male characters have a dangerously childish need to prove themselves.

Whether in the stories they tell, the amount they drink or the violent acts they pursue, the male characters are desperate in their need to prove that they are men. Oldman manages to articulate both the brutality and the humanity of this situation; for in

¹⁹⁸ Lay, Samantha, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit-Grit*, p.113

¹⁹⁹ Lay, *British Social Realism*, p.114

their need to prove that they are strong and powerful, their flaws and weaknesses always seem to emerge. At one point in Mark's story he asks the table "what do you call them doors in westerns?" "Louvre doors" Ray responds. As the camera fixes on Ray's face we are able to witness the quiet satisfaction with which Ray savours this moment. He licks his lips and seems to relish the fact that he has proved himself. This fits into this idea that men are perpetually trying to prove themselves. The implicit message, of course, is that these men are desperate and desperate not to let it show.

The anecdote that Mark tells his friends works towards an incongruous punch line (a woman is having sex in public, yet takes offence to Mark's marijuana: "it ain't gonna be one of those parties is it?") and the way each character chooses to view their life is generally punctuated with many levels of incongruity. Sometimes these punctuations are rather savage and at other moments they are relatively harmless, but incongruity is at the heart of almost every moment of laughter within the film. That so many of the film's characters consciously laugh at things they shouldn't, embracing many levels of humorous incongruity, says something fundamental about the determined approach these characters take to the desperate lives they lead. This determination resides in the fact that they refuse to take suffering or despair seriously. The result of this perpetual use of incongruous laughter and humour, in terms of the emotional impact, is that when a character is observed in a way which more fittingly resonates with the desperation and reality of their situation it becomes genuinely powerful and shocking. The best exemplification of this assertion is the brutal beating that Val receives from Ray.

The second detail of importance concerning Mark's anecdote is Ray's reaction. Through gasps of laughter Ray says: "I've already heard that twenty fucking times." Mark responds: "and you'll hear it 20 fucking more times as well... it's early yet." The repetition of funny stories seems to be another fundamental element of existence within the lives of the characters portrayed. Stories, for the men become some sort of raw life force, a preservation of the small amount of spirit they still possess and a means through which these characters constantly re-affirm their existence. Most of all the act of storytelling provides these men with an audience and this attention provides them with a place in the world, even when society has deemed them surplus to requirements.

Unsocial life?

The events which take place within the social club elapse in parallel to the audience's introduction to the character of Billy, Val's brother. Whilst most of the main characters are in the social club, Billy is on the streets attempting to score heroin. The action keeps cutting from the club to Billy and his own brand of 'social life,' yet it is not very 'social.' Heroin addicts are oft described as 'ghosts' and Billy, whilst being given more screen time than any other character, floats around the edges of *Nil by Mouth's* narrative. Billy is almost always set at a distance from the camera's perception. On the first occasion we meet Billy harsh green and blue lights and hundreds of garish streetlights corrupt what is already a grainy film stock. It is hard to establish what it is we are meant to be focusing on. The effect is again to try and make the audience struggle with what they are watching in a way that involves them more, not less. As Billy stands in a phone box talking to his dealer, cars continuously pass in front of the screen, obscuring the main focus of the scene. Billy's friend Danny is also introduced in this scene and he is also captured in a distorted fashion, filmed through the dirty glass of the launderette window, lights and images reflect off the glass, corrupting the audience's perspective. This is a motif that is employed on several occasions throughout the film. Whether it is a passing car, a glass screen or the silhouette of a passer-by, the meaning seems to be the same. The camera is commenting on Billy's deeply entrenched alienation.

Billy is easily the most dislocated of all of *Nil by Mouth's* characters. He is loved dearly by his mother and sister and on certain occasions he portrays a capacity to love them back, yet his passion for drugs dominates. There are several occasions in the film where Billy appears to be only partially conscious of what is going on in front of him, let alone in his life. Billy, alongside Ray, dominates the film's running time and if anything he provides even more of an insight into the erosion of the male working-class community. Billy is from a younger generation than Ray and he is even more detached from working-class traditions and cultures that once held such communities together. Billy does not seem to possess any positive coping devices: drugs are his whole life. His detachment from society is encapsulated by the fact that Billy does not even seem to possess the ability to laugh. Billy is the character least capable of laughter. Amongst the

laughter of a group Billy always seems uncertain of what is going on. For example, after scoring his drugs Billy appears briefly at the social club, where all the other characters are drinking. He is blatantly unaware that Ray is winding him up and that he is a subject of mockery. It is Billy's inability to laugh that suggests he is *the* most desperate and alienated character within the film. The confusion in his eyes in this scene is desperate. Through these moments Oldman emphasises just how fundamental laughter is to survival. Laughter is a sign that these characters are conscious of the dynamics of their life and have found at least one non-destructive means of coping with it. That this ability escapes Billy seems to be a significant reason for his crippling addiction.

Confined by Domestic Space?

For Hill, men in 1990s cinema “seem to overwhelm domestic space, confining woman to the margins or excluding them altogether.” This is suggestive of an “increasing sense of political impotence and passivity”, leading to family portraits, marked by “breakdown and dysfunction” and male characters that are identified with “petty criminality, alcoholism and domestic violence.”²⁰⁰ *Nil by Mouth's* most prominent example of men ‘trapped’ within a domestic space immediately follows the scenes in the social club. The scene begins with an exterior shot before retreating back into Ray and Val's claustrophobic front room; this is particularly significant in emphasising the confines of this space. This scene is most important however because laughter seems to be the main reaction to the restriction that these characters feel.

The first master shot of the film emerges after a substantial amount of time has already passed. This is the first time we are offered a strong spatial sense of the area in which they live. Until now, the camera has been heavily concerned with capturing events in close-up. The camera has certainly never strayed beyond a medium shot since the film began. The first master shot therefore is an important event. Time has passed since the scene within the club, it is dusk. We meet Billy and Danny walking towards the block of flats, where Ray and Val live. The master shot pans across this scene; it is an undeniable dreary one and the dusk light contributes to the hopelessness that pervades the outlook. This master shot comes after a long period in which the camera work is claustrophobic

²⁰⁰ Hill, “From the New Wave to Brit-Grit”, pp.252-253

and drowned in darkness. The sudden release from this mode of footage is such that we look upon the space and dull light in front of us with relief and this contributes to our understanding of this environment.

Purcell has suggested that this scene is important because it is the first time we get a true sense of the idea that the predicament being portrayed is attempting to be a shared one. The fact that the camera shoots from a low angle compounds this. The most significant idea that this low angle shot suggests, however, is the way in which it is a complete contradiction of Higson's 'Long Shot Of Our Town From That Hill.' Purcell has argued that the film's aesthetic is distinguished by a style that captures not only the isolation and disconnection of the characters but also a sense that these characters are not alone; that the fragmentation of working-class life has actually created a "shared predicament" amongst disparate communities.²⁰¹ Purcell, also, cites the way in which Fortunato uses subtle colours that systematically avoids excessively vivid colours in his depiction of working-class life. Purcell suggests that this use of colour refrains from fetishising the outlook of the subjects which is an important element of the overall mise-en-scene of this shot of the tower blocks.

After this retreat outdoors the narrative throws us into Ray and Val's cramped flat. In previous periods of British social realism the domestic space has been the female's domain and men have commonly been represented externally from this space. *Nil by Mouth* articulates the disenfranchised, impotent position of working-class men in modern day Britain by cramming them into the same domestic space as women. Sadly it is the women who seem to suffer most from this situation. The scene that follows is probably the best example of how the male characters use laughter as a coping device, yet it is important to assert that despite the fact it seems to allow the men to cope, it is often just another thing for woman to have to cope with.

Communication is at the core of this section's discussion of why laughter exists alongside despair. One of the most immediately striking features of *Nil by Mouth* is its ferocious insistence on the use of obscene language. During the film, the word "fuck", and its variations, is employed 407 times, on average therefore this word is voiced 3.9

²⁰¹ Purcell, "Re-imagining the Working-class", p.127

²⁰¹ Purcell, "Re-imagining the Working-class," p.128

times every single minute of the film. Likewise the misogynistic word “cunt” is also used frequently (42 times in total). Firstly, this language elucidates ‘surface’ realism and authenticity. This is how people, especially men, speak; therefore this is how *Nil by Mouth* depicts their vocabulary. However, the casual aggressiveness and everyday misogyny inherent within this use of explicit language opens up more complex discussions. Hill mentions that “the exercise of the working-class hero’s verbal and physical power over women may be read as compensation for his actual social and political impotence”²⁰² Monk reflects this argument, by asserting that Ray and his group of friends are “marked as problematic by the style and rhythm of dialogue.” She continues,

Ray and his mates never stop talking, yet most of the dialogue communicates next to nothing, their bar-room chat is more patter than communication.²⁰³

In interview with David Furnish for *Interview Magazine*, Oldman stated that during his early life “the men would be in the pub talking nonsense, and the women would be at home talking common sense”.²⁰⁴

The meaning of the term ‘nil by mouth’ is literally a hospital term, which means the patient must not eat. Yet in the film the term possesses a figurative implication, which is that these male characters struggle to communicate meaningfully or at least with emotional significance. The only emotion the men ever seem to portray is anger or amusement and this seems to be symptomatic of the damaged life that they seem to live. Monk suggests that, “circular dialogue and cyclical narrative accrue to suggest a gendered cycle of damage.”²⁰⁵ Men rarely let woman into this world, perhaps because women readily see through this world.

In this sequence, Val, alone in the kitchen, is captured through glass, separated, isolated and unwelcome. There is an implicit message inherent in this lonely mise-en-scene: the male working-class community has been sent home from work, to sit around, without purpose; and the presence of woman, in the eyes of these men, only emphasise

²⁰² Hill, “Class Gender and Working-Class Realism”, p.173

²⁰³ Monk, “Men in the 90s”, p.164

²⁰⁴ <http://hemsidor.torget.se/users/b/boatman/interviews/newoldman.htm> Taken from, *Interview Magazine* (February, 1998)

²⁰⁵ Monk, “Men in the 90s”, p.165

this disempowerment. Male characters dominate Oldman's attention in *Nil by Mouth*. Yet these females, marginalised and maligned by the males in the film, are characters that seem to endure life in a far more formidable fashion than any of the male characters. Accordingly Oldman presents these women as being the most worthy of respect and admiration within the film. After Val has been heavily beaten by Ray she seeks refuge in her mum's maisonette. As Orr asserts, this creates "a female tableau spanning four generations, with males conspicuous by their absence."²⁰⁶ It is in these situations, detached from male rage and disenchantment, that the women seem to find peace and most importantly a medium to define themselves that is external to their relationship with men. Yet, despite this aspect of the men's behaviour Oldman still manages to capture something compelling about the way these men behave together.

In an interview with Richard Covington, Oldman made the following observation: "Stella Alder said that life corrodes and erodes the spirit... And she said art reminds us that we have one."²⁰⁷ Dave rightly describes the stories that Mark and Ray tell in the first half of the film as being marked by an "anecdotal eloquence and rhetorical sophistication."²⁰⁸ The behaviour of these characters is rarely savoury and neither are the sometimes grotesque stories they tell, yet there is an exuberance about them that forges a relationship with the audience, which allows us to witness a very human side to these characters. In the manner I discussed with reference to Bakhtin, grotesque humour seems to be an important way in which *Nil by Mouth* achieves moments of exuberance and celebration. So much of the humour is marked by a divertive quality that was discussed in chapter two; what Berger has described as "The mellow amusement that makes it easier to get through the day and manage the minor irritations."²⁰⁹

There are many negative features inherent in this mode of communication: the way females are excluded from taking part, the way speaking often loses contact with listening and even the way the stories seem to encourage further debauchorous living. Yet, at the same time, it is fair to say that storytelling and laughter in *Nil by Mouth* are as close as the male characters like Ray or Mark get to 'art,' and thus Alder's concept of

²⁰⁶ Orr, "Traducing Realisms", p.111

²⁰⁷ <http://hemsidor.torget.se/users/b/boatman/interviews/scouts.html>

²⁰⁸ Dave, *Visions of England*, p.86

²⁰⁹ Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, p.100

‘redemption of spirit.’ Likewise, the laughter that they share also elucidates a form of passion in the lives of these characters. In this sense, Oldman’s use of laughter has the potentiality to realise Medhurst’s assertion that “passion refutes sobriety and exposes sympathy as oppressive condescension.”²¹⁰ The use of laughter in the film is the closest that *Nil by Mouth* gets to forging a relationship between the audience and the male characters that has the potential to create empathy; rather than sympathy, pity or hatred. There is definitely something inherent in this shared laughter that creates a sense of spirit and passion that is sorely missed in most aspects of these male lives. This passion and spirit has the potentiality therefore to breed emotional recognition.

Ray and Mark sit in Ray’s front room and soon enough they are joined by Billy and Danny. The anecdotes that Ray and Mark tell are loaded with violence, sex and despair. These stories are told, not because the memories they replay are necessarily sweet but, simply to let laughter to endure. There is a great deal of importance placed on the ‘performance’ inherent in telling a story in *Nil by Mouth*. This idea of performance works well in terms of capturing the distortion of reality that these stories are creating. Like in the scene within the social club, we get the sense that these stories have been told, and retold, many times. Within each tale of strength, be it humorous or violent, each instance is marked by a man’s need to prove his importance. Despite this, and despite the glaring inadequacies inherent in their lives, when laughter is involved there are many moments in which men can still be valued for their resilience and determination to carry on. Amongst such stories are a plentitude of other more subtle examples of men who are simply using really quite benign humour in an effort to divert themselves. The wisecracks that Mark and Ray share in these regular moments is simple and playful and so much of it barely resembles wit at all, however it is always met with uproarious laughter between the two characters.

During this scene, explosions of laughter punctuate the dialogue, arriving constantly. On discussing the ‘fact’ that egg should always be eaten with bacon we hear them playfully discuss ‘justifications’: “It’s like, egg and bacon”...”horse and cart”... “north and south”. Soon after, talking about “ripping off” catalogue delivery fans, they are attempting to forge some semblance of wit out of the names of catalogue companies:

²¹⁰ Medhurst, “Victim: Text as Context”, p.126

“Littlewoods”... “Freemans”... “Well they were to us”. When Ray offers up a lighter to Mark and the flame nearly singes Marks eyebrows, we hear Mark say, “What’s that? A fucking oil rig?” Whilst Ray and Mark are discussing a man who didn’t like spending money, we hear Ray joke that “he got nicked for breaking into a pound note.” Some of the exchanges give the impression of having been performed, as if by ritual, many times before; however others seem like an organic result of the flow of the conversation and perpetual urgency to hold the room’s attention. Either way, these exchanges often become a true suggestion of male camaraderie and community. So often in *Nil by Mouth* men seem to provide a validation for the existence of other men, and woman, through simply being there, seem to disrupt it.

Oldman, though, is careful to portray a subtle celebratory dimension of this interaction between men, in parallel to a cautionary discussion of how these very situations alienate woman. It is only when Val enters the room and enquires about the conversation that they suddenly become scornful and disgruntled. Val is relegated back to the kitchen, made to feel unwanted and stupid and the men carry on with their conversation. So much of the time the conversation and laughter will move from what was, for at least some of the audience, playful and involving to moments that are really quite sickening. Moreover, these transitions dissolve with no real design or warning, rendering a more heightened sense of reality. *Nil by Mouth* provides both a cautionary and celebratory discussion of male under-class life; laughter is a theme, employed by Oldman, that fulfils both aspects of this discussion.

Spicer has discussed the main strength of working-class masculinity as being the man’s “secure place as the principle breadwinner and head of the family”;²¹¹ asserting that this position has been eroded by mass unemployment and poverty. None of the men in *Nil by Mouth* have a legitimate job and it is perhaps fitting, then, that the only character who seems to engage in any form of durable employment is Val’s mother Jan, a character who appears to go through life, and accepts life’s hardships, with a certain stoicism. The way in which the female characters and Billy gravitate towards Jan in times of need suggests that if there is any ‘head’ within this loose network of family and friends then it is not, despite his physical and verbal dominance, Ray. “Traditional working-class

²¹¹ Spicer, Andrew, *Typical Men*, p.188

culture”, according to Terry Lovell is “forged out of material hardship in communities where the individual’s most valuable resources were collective: family, community and a shared culture of resistance and mutual support.”²¹² It is only amongst the female characters that this idea is truly realised.

The only work that we witness the male characters engaged in during the course of the film is when Ray, Mark and Billy drop off cases of alcohol at the back door of a night-club. The alarmed response that emerges when they hear a police siren in the distance is, no doubt, a result of the illegality of this transaction. This scene takes place immediately after the extended scene in Ray and Val’s front room. There is a slight sadness in the way Ray gets all dressed up (“all suited and booted”) to carry out a low-level, petty crime. Instances such as this further erode any position of power that Ray’s behaviour alludes to. The job itself involves Mark and Ray standing at the back of a night-club, telling still more stories from the past, as Billy does all the work. Afterwards a short day’s work, the three men head to the West End to celebrate. This escape from domestic space entails gambling in amusement arcades, visiting a sex club, drinking, drug taking and the exchange of lurid stories. Orr provides a compelling critique of the decisions these men make in search of entertainment which comes in the form of gambling (camel racing), sex (strip club), drink and drugs:

Their blokeish adventure is more a craving for novelty than for the new or the different. Out of chaos, noise and bustle, out of a multitude of distractions, they narrow appetites down to a manageable size... the camera obliges with the close shots that mark out this adrenaline-fuelled tunnel vision.”²¹³

The music that plays at the start of this boy’s night out, shot in the west end of London contains the words “Hey Las Vegas” and initially the bright lights of the West End offer a respite from the dreariness of the majority of the film so far. However, very quickly, the night descends into cheap titillation and this is signaled via the way in which the music scratches to a halt at the same time as the bright Piccadilly circus lights are replaced with the lights and the cheap, brash sounds of a cheap amusement arcade.

²¹² Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, p.139

²¹³ Orr, “Traducing Realisms”, pp.109-110

It is fitting that the night out ends with Ray punching a man outside a Wimpy fast food restaurant. The punch is a cheap one and the night as a whole has been the same. They have spent their time in cheap amusement arcades and cheap strip joints and the humour they have exchanged is certainly cheap (“Want to come in here” says the hostess of a strip club. “I’ll cum in you” is Ray’s response). Mark’s response to the punch that Ray delivers outside Wimpy is one of complete delight:

Watch him go to work, go on my son, good sock, sweet as, nice, what goes around comes around, sweet as, nice one mate, nice one, nice one.

Mark and Ray provide each other with the validation that, Ray at least, does not feel in any other element of his life. The camaraderie through laughter that Ray shares is apparently his only positive outlet in life. The negative characteristics of Ray’s personality however are numerable and the morning after the boy’s night out, they begin to bubble over. For the majority of the rest of the film, these negative characteristics dominate.

A Happy Ending?

Hallam and Marchment’s main criticism of *Nil by Mouth* is that “it is too unrelenting, too grim.”²¹⁴ Oldman’s film is, at points, extremely difficult to sit through and even the film’s conclusion refuses to provide a wholly happy resolution. Yet, as Orr has argued, there is a glimmer of hope: “not for reconciliation, but for the future coexistence of bruised beings with some enduring loyalties.”²¹⁵ However, it cannot be denied that this hope is fittingly ambiguous and certainly not fully capable of uplifting the audience after a difficult viewing experience. By the end of the film, Val and Ray have been reacquainted, Val’s bruises have gone and Ray has redecorated the home that he previously destroyed in a drunken rage. However, as all the characters file out of Ray and Val’s front room, to go and see Billy in prison, there is only a fraction of discernible hope available. The final piece of dialogue is fittingly given to the films heroes: Val and Jan. Jan reveals her apprehension about visiting Billy in prison:

Jan: “I hope I don’t start to cry.
Val: “What”

²¹⁴ Hallam & Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, P.218

²¹⁵ Orr, “Traducing Realisms”, p.111

Jan: “When I see him.”

Tears are still to be shed and the women are still suffering at the hands of men, and in this sense, not that much has changed.

However, the final scene does highlight a few developments, which in the context of the film’s relationship to laughter are especially significant. Before the characters depart, they all sit together in relative harmony, sharing laughter with one another; dread and threat do not permeate this scene like in so many other scenes. This is the first instance in the whole film where Ray has sat in a room with woman without denigrating them in some way, be it comically or aggressively. Despite the unforgivable actions which Ray has committed in the past, it remains possible to acknowledge that Ray does not appear to be the threatening character that he once was. Ray is lovingly cradling his daughter in his arms, a notable progression given that this child was formally known as “it”. At one point, there is a touching moment between father and daughter when they playfully kiss each other and giggle: this is very far removed from the Ray we have witnessed previously. This is not only the first time the male and female characters sit in the same room as each other in a state of seeming harmony; it is the first time in which they appear to speak the same language as each other. There is a marked contrast, for example, with the scene, discussed earlier, when Val is relegated to the kitchen. In the final scene, however, Val and her mother dominate the conversation and hold everyone’s attention; it is they who induce laughter. It is potentially very significant that the first emotional connection between the men and woman emerges through shared laughter. A spirit of community is suggested via this shared laughter that involves men and woman. The camera observes Val intimately and fixes on her face for several moments. For a change, she is being given this attention not because she is suffering but because she is enjoying herself. She has everyone’s attention for the right reasons: she is given a voice, she has something to say. When Ray explodes with laughter at a one-liner that Val delivers, there is pride in his eyes and, likewise, she seems proud of herself. All the characters are sharing in something positive (the act of laughter) and we are warmed by the fact that we are sharing in this. Although this is an analysis that should have been rendered impossible by the atrocities that have gone before, it is even possible that there is almost something beautiful and very human about this scene. Although this may not

have been the reaction of every audience member and although many will see the rehabilitation of their relationship as being a negative resolution; it is fair to argue that a final scene which depicts Ray and Val laughing together is far more believable than the loving embrace that such an act may be cautiously attempting to symbolise.

It should not be overlooked however that the story the woman tell is about Billy's travails in prison. It is still men who dominate the female character's outlook and even though everyone is laughing, laughter is, and always will be, a temporal act. On top of this, the camera still observes the characters with the same grammar of conflict that it has throughout. The images are still very dark, the camera and editing is still disharmonious. Likewise, the harmony between some of the characters seem slightly forced, at least enough for us to assume that memories of the conflicts and violence still simmer below the surface. Val's best friend Paula is obviously uncomfortable in Ray's presence (turning her head away in disgust when he addresses her directly.) When Jan congratulates Ray on his decorating it seems as if it is a bit of a struggle to do so. Ray's reaction also seems a little contrived. After what we have witnessed previously, only a naive audience member would make the assumption that some new wall paper can truly change the fractured existence that these characters have led. The film ends with everyone departing to visit Billy in prison. We feel a certain degree of relief that the male and female characters have learnt to communicate with one another and, most importantly, learnt to laugh with one another. Orr contends that "Oldman looks to a revaluation of values as a way out of a destruction that is not apocalyptic at all but endlessly recurrent."²¹⁶ Overall though *Nil by Mouth* retains a bleak outlook, we know that tears are still to be shed; resolution is necessarily temporal and thus only temporary answers are truly offered. However, it is possible to argue that now that these characters have learned to laugh at life together, they have also found a positive means of coping with this life.

²¹⁶ Orr, "Traducing Realisms", p.112

Chapter Four: Laughing with Good and Evil in Shane Meadows' *Dead Man's Shoes*

"Let's look at someone who films never normally give a chance to."

-Shane Meadows²¹⁷

There is a scene in *Dead Man's Shoes* in which Sonny and his gang of minions sit around the table in his ramshackle club, coming to terms with the fact that Richard has returned to town and will not rest until he has avenged the death of his brother Anthony. In the previous scene, Richard has informed Sonny that: "I'm gonna fucking hit you all...I'm not threatening you mate, it's beyond fucking words." Someone has finally stood up to the local bully and there is now a subdued mood amongst these men; they sit in near silence, with little to say to one another. The camera employs a documentary style darting nervously from one figure to another in an unsettled, fretful manner. Meadows is attempting to create a sombre tone, yet it is impossible not to smile at the way that amusing incongruity remains present throughout this scene:

Tuff: "Did he (Richard) mention us"
Sonny: "Yeah he did, he invited us all over whenever we want to go
See him. He said 'please come and see me, invite the lads'"
Herbie: "Quite polite isn't he?"

Herbie's reaction is so vapid that it is amusing. Herbie is probably just filling the silence; maybe, he is not even attempting to be funny. However, whilst his choice of response verges on the ridiculous, there is a great deal of realism inherent in this silly comment. This is exactly the type of divertive humour that many people employ in such a nervous situation. It is possible for an audience member to recognise in this comment something they themselves might say in a situation where they don't know what to say. Moments later Sonny decides that they have no option but to kill Richard before Richard kills them. "Has anyone got any better ideas?" Sonny asks hypothetically. Soz responds by commenting on how hungry he is: "I think I've been awake too long... got any sandwiches or owt John? Pork scratchings, or something?" Meadows constantly blends the tone and the mood of the film's dialogue and narrative. This movement in conversation from murdering a man to savoury snacks is rather absurd; however, yet again, there is also something about this absurdity that is reassuringly true to life.

²¹⁷ McNab, Geoffrey, "The Natural" in, *Sight and Sound* (March, 1998) p.16

Moreover there is something about this incongruity that renders at least some of these characters occasionally likeable even though they fulfil the position of the film's 'bad guys'. Meadows, it seems, is unwilling to rely on uncomplicated characterisation or straightforward value judgments and his use of laughter is often an articulation of this stance. This chapter is principally concerned with analysing this rationale.

Born in 1972, Shane Meadows' underclass roots are central to his work. This work involves sometimes desperate, sometimes hilarious, council estate life. As Hildebrandt attests, "Meadows highly personal films render their social environment with both gravity and a sense of humour."²¹⁸ Despite Meadows' propensity for humour, however, Allen, Cullen & Anderson state that, "his films *are* concerned with the effects of social deprivation on Nottingham's housing estates" and although they rarely carry an explicit political message: "they do seek to engender a sense of social injustice."²¹⁹ This Chapter, like the work on Oldman in Chapter Three, will be particularly interested in the unflinching attention he pays to the characters that inhabit these environments and his willingness to embrace their complexity, regardless of what his own opinions are about some of these characters. Geoffrey McNab, suggests that a reason for this is that "unlike Richardson, Schlesinger et al. Meadows comes from the community whose stories he is telling".²²⁰

During a film workshop, which Shane Meadows conducted in September 2004, the director made an assertion about confessional film-making, which fits perfectly into the forthcoming discussion of emotional realism. Discussing his reaction to watching the films of Mike Leigh, Meadows stated:

A lot of the working-class characters were really over the top and not celebrated... I cared about the people. No matter how dark a film is- and my new film (*Dead Man's Shoes*) is very dark- I still care about even the darkest characters. When you're inside, it's different, someone that's viewed from the outside as just a foul bastard, has often got another side.²²¹

²¹⁸ Hildebrandt, Melinda, "Shane Meadows" in Macfarlane, Brian (ed.) *The Encyclopaedia of British Film-2nd Edition* (London: BFI; Meutheun, 2005) p.469

²¹⁹ Allen, Cullen & Anderson (eds.), *Contemporary British and Irish Film Directors: A Wallflower Critical Guide*, p.227

²²⁰ McNab, Geoffrey, "The Natural" in *Sight and Sound* (March, 1998) p.14

²²¹ <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?V=HHhJeZuqVU>

Sheldon Hall's comments that Meadows reflects a, "commendable inability to regard even the worst villains as anything other than human beings" and, as such, his work is suggestive of that of a "native insider rather than a sympathetic visitor."²²² Notably, interviews about Meadows' films are as often interviews about his life. In interview with Jason Solomons, Meadows stated that "I can't carry on making films about my own life forever but I need to care about the people that are in the film."²²³

I would like to spend a short amount of time formulating an impression of Meadows' overall film output, as a means of describing the underlying attitude towards the underclass subject matter that resonates through each of his six films.²²⁴ Monk has argued that the 1990s welcomed a renewed celebration of "regressive ideologies and obsolete models of criminal, gender and social organisation."²²⁵ As a result, many instances of 1990s cinema seemed to want to establish the idea that the reorganisation of society had rendered criminality as being normal. Meadows took this position one step further and in his first film, *Smalltime* (1996) created an example of 1990s cinema that suggested something almost comically everyday about 1990s underclass males' attempts to assert their masculinity through criminal activity. *Smalltime*'s treatment of underclass subject matter, whereby Meadows refrains from portrayals of the underclass that discuss them as either social victims or social problems, set a course for Meadows' film output which has remained intact ever since. Kemp, writing about *Smalltime*, suggests that the film "may deal with the most deadbeat stratum of our society but... it provides a remarkably exuberant experience."²²⁶ Through his ability to create something endearing within the modes of life portrayed, Meadows never lapses into a discussion of this group as 'the other'. *Smalltime* instigates a belief in notions of community and belonging that persist in each of his films. Regardless of how marginalised and desolate the 'community' being depicted is, Meadows always seems to find a way of freely celebrating its good points and stringently cautioning its less desirable characteristics.

²²² Hall, Sheldon, "Shane Meadows" in Murphy, Robert (ed) *Directors in British and Irish Cinema: A Reference Companion* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006) p.421

²²³ <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,2065377,00.html>

²²⁴ *Smalltime* (1996), *TwentyFourSeven* (1997), *Room for Romeo Brass* (1999), *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2003), *Dead Man's Shoes* (2004), *This is England* (2006)

²²⁵ Monk, Claire, "From Underworld to Underclass: Crime and British Cinema in the 1990s" in Chibnall & Murphy, *British Crime Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) p.173

²²⁶ Kemp, Philip, "Small Time" in, *Sight and Sound* (November, 1997) p.52

Smalltime begins with a voice-over from the film's main character, Jumbo, and it emphasises the marginality of the film's subject matter, yet it does so in a characteristically humorous way that completely disowns the idea that the film is going to be simply a sympathetic critique of this marginality:

There's one thing that you got to understand, right, this ain't fucking London. This isn't even Nottingham man; this is Sneiton.

Monk believed that *Smalltime* "seemed to herald a new, anti-nihilistic fighting spirit in British cinema." She argued that the reason for this new-found resilience was that

Smalltime had genuine origins in the (non-) working-class community it depicted rather than observing it with the gaze of the socially concerned outsider. One consequence is that it never idealises, sanitises or aggrandises its protagonists: Their swearing, sexual behaviour and limited criminal and intellectual horizons are all presented in hilariously unbowdlerised fashion.²²⁷

Smalltime's disinterest in the idea that underclass characters want or need sympathy has continued into his later cinematic output.

Meadow's second feature film *TwentyFourSeven* (1997) provides a critique of a community in despair. This representation- as the film's narrator, Darcy, attests- is laden with a great deal of negativity and pessimism:

I'm a casualty... most of us feel that way... demoralised inhabitants who have lost touch with their origins, living in the same day for their whole lives.

This negative overview, which opens the narration, like much of the film's content, partially disguises the fact that a lot of positivity *does* emerge. Geoffrey McNab has commended this Meadows piece for its "freewheeling exuberance." I agree with McNab that this is partly because "Meadows comes from the community whose stories he is telling."²²⁸ The 'lads' who Darcy attempts to nurture, through the formation of a local boxing club, are afflicted by gang conflict, violence, drug abuse, abusive home lives and destructive relationships with the law. Yet, when the interaction between these boys is not aggressive it is light-hearted and amusing. Moreover, Meadows seems to encourage the idea that a lot of these boys already possess the values and motivations that Darcy is trying to nurture; they have simply never been given the chance to prove themselves. The

²²⁷ Monk, Claire, "From Underworld to Underclass, p.185

²²⁸ McNab, Geoffrey, "The Natural", p.14

role of boxing in *TwentyFourSeven* is devised in order to encourage self-respect, not self-aggrandizement. Meadows encouraged this interpretation, in an interview with McNab, discussing his intention to promote a sense of “dignity” within these communities.²²⁹

One of the lads, Tim, who seems to suffer more abuse than anyone else within the film, consistently portrays an undemonstrative maturity and compassion for his elders and contemporaries, alike. At the end of the narrative Tim finds Darcy, destitute and mortally ill, and takes him in. Tim looks after him during his final days. Tim subsequently arranges Darcy’s funeral, using it as an opportunity to bring everyone together. It is fundamental to the film as a whole that this final sequence is not presented as revelation or aberration, but as an unsurprising confirmation of a quality that Tim has always possessed. Paul Dave argues that *TwentyFourSeven* is far more than just a reconfirmation of “*that*” emblem of male working-class self-help; it is also an unpatronising, amusing, celebration of the “protective, reciprocal and collective aspects of working-class life”, realising “an ethic of abiding working-class tenderness and mutuality.”²³⁰

Meadows’ films collectively highlight a social conscience which manages to disregard political agenda; they are more concerned with studying how characters live their lives and the sense of belonging that is often nurtured within the communities depicted. Accordingly, Meadows’ work often captures his working-class and under-class subjects in a space that is entirely detached from the dynamics of the class system as a whole. Likewise establishment figures (the absence of police presence in *Dead Man’s Shoes* for example) are remote from Meadows line of vision. The fact that Meadows subjects are so often isolated from such concerns reflects the idea that his films rarely attempt to induce social change. Meadows is far more concerned with simply attempting to say something- whether good or bad- about the communities and individuals portrayed, rather than the society that they are *potentially* moulded within. In *This is England* Meadows portrays a political perspective in its treatment of skin head culture in Thatcher’s Britain yet, even then, despite this obvious political dynamic, the official BFI review of the film describes it as being “made with tenderness and humour”:

²²⁹ McNab, Geoffrey, “The Natural”, p.14

²³⁰ “The Underclass, Fantasy and Realism” in Dave, Paul, *Visions of England: Class Culture in Contemporary Cinema* (Oxford: Berg, 2006) p.85

Offering neither brutal shock nor apocalyptic rant. Though located in the skinhead milieu sensationalised by *Made in Britain*, it treats its characters from an insider viewpoint, with full knowledge of their motivations and complexities.²³¹

Channel Four's press for the film rightly described the way *This is England* chooses to "render the political personal."²³²

Combo, by far the most unsavoury character in *This is England*, is a violent, racist thug who has few redeeming qualities, yet Meadows still takes the time to provide a prolonged sequence in which we observe him having his heart-broken by the girl he loves: Meadows cares about the feelings of even the most horrendous characters and he has the uncanny ability of making the audience care as well. Moreover, he has the ability to make the audience emotionally investigate what makes these characters function as they do. As Combo sits alone in his car, his lip trembling as he tries not to cry, the camera quietly observes the character's sadness, slowly withdrawing from the scene it is capturing. This reverence to his feelings is astounding given the acts of brutality that we witness him committing. Yet this sudden emotional insight is neither contrived nor unrealistic. It may be a rather bromidic suggestion, but it is important to acknowledge that everyone has feelings and Meadows' films remain conscious of this emotional dynamic.

Morrell, the main character in *Room for Romeo Brass* (1999), is perhaps the most significant encapsulation of this idea that Meadows has a great deal of time for all his film's subjects. Morrell is a truly disturbing character; yet at the same time he possesses many endearing qualities. Mark Kermode discusses this film's "wide emotional range" as an exemplification of Meadows' "unsentimental eye" which

does not need rose-tinted spectacles to find delightful sights... (*Room for Romeo Brass*) negotiates the change from significance to insignificance, drama to comedy, and humour to horror with ease.²³³

Morrell is gifted some of the funniest dialogue of any character in Meadows' oeuvre and, significantly, he is generally conscious that what he is saying is humorous. Because of this it is difficult not feel a certain amount of affection towards him; for even though

²³¹ <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49369>

²³² <http://www.channel4.com/film/reviews/film.jsp?id=161023&page=5>

²³³ Kermode, Mark, "A Room For Romeo Brass" (Review), in *Sight and Sound* (February, 2000) p.67

Morrell is a strange character it is possible to recognise his yearning to make people laugh. As the film goes on and Morrell forges a closer and closer relationship with the two young boys who befriend him a definite undercurrent of dread is constructed. It is difficult not to hold the uneasy feeling that something terrible is going to happen and that *Room for Romeo Brass* will never be the story of a half-witted man's sweet-natured friendship with these young boys. Eventually Morrell is revealed to be a real threat to the safety and security of these young boys. However, members of the audience may feel regretful that this is the case. So much about Morrell's character does have the capabilities to make members of the audience want to like him. Even after Morrell has been revealed as a threatening character the film still retains moments which will make members of the audience feel compelled to smile and laugh.

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Dead Man's Shoes is, in principal, a 'revenge thriller', however it is important to refrain from such unequivocal generic consideration. The film concerns the story of a soldier, Richard, who returns to the small town where he grew up; he discovers that it is still 'run'; by Sonny, an intimidating bully, and his gang of small-time drug dealers. Eight years before, these men mentally and physically abused Richard's brother, Anthony, who suffered from severe mental health issues. The details of this torture are revealed to the audience, throughout the film, via grainy, black and white, flash-back footage. It is this footage which provides some form of justification for Richard's deadly vendetta against this cowardly gang. Yet, it is only moments before the film's close, long after most of the gang members are dead, when we realise that Anthony was actually tortured to death. Previous to this point the gang's behaviour is abhorrent, yet they are not, as far as the audience are aware, murderers; evil would be a difficult adjective to level at the great majority of these men. Overall, it is Richard's brutal behaviour that stands out as being the most savage. Sonny is one of the only characters that Meadows has created who is without any redeemable qualities, however the rest of the gang members are so 'smalltime' (to coin Meadows' own phrase) that it is possible to be momentarily captivated by the humorously divertive approach that they take to most elements of their

life. A large consideration within this textual analysis is why has Meadows chosen to deny the audience the most categorical justification for Richard's violent revenge?

The demands that I am placing upon the textual analysis of *Dead Man's Shoes* are not as expansive as the analysis of *Nil by Mouth* that took place in the previous chapter, however this is not to say that the contribution that Meadows makes to this overall discussion is not extremely pertinent. The focus that I wish to embrace with regard to *Dead Man's Shoes* is essentially that this film possesses a playfully incongruous character, despite the fact that so much of the subject matter is nothing short of brutal. The assertion that this focus wishes to elucidate is that this playful character, which is also relevant to both the style and subject matter, creates an inescapable form of honesty, exactly because of its refrain from the idea that life needs to be discussed in an icy tone of unremitting seriousness. *Dead Man's Shoes* is undoubtedly Meadow's most violent film, yet it could also be argued that it is his funniest. Despite the fact that the film is distinguished by the threat and realisation of brutal violence, the film is actually dominated by characters who sit around passing the time of day.

Meadows has asserted his hatred for the characters portrayed. In interview with Joseph Fields he stated,

From me and Paddy's point of view it's almost like the people we knew from our lives - it's us whacking them...it's quite cathartic really... me and Paddy were talking about it and we still feel rage for things that went on 10 years ago... It's nice to find a way, an avenue, where you can express it, get it out... Like I say, it's these unpaid crimes that I can't cope with.²³⁴

Yet, there is a great deal of warmth inherent in the time that is dedicated to the-sometimes pitiful- lives that these characters lead. We are repeatedly being invited to share a joke with these characters and, as Bergson discussed, laughter is "a form of complicity".²³⁵ By engaging us in this laughter, is Meadows engaging us in momentary complicity with these characters? Denying us such fundamental knowledge about the extent of these character's crimes, further, justifies this argument? In the commentary for *Dead Man's Shoes*, Meadows makes a fairly revealing comment, about one of the early scenes between three of the gang members,

²³⁴ <http://www.lazaruscorporation.co.uk/v4/articles/shanemeadows.php>

²³⁵ Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay On the Meaning of The Comic* (London: Macmillan, 1913) pp.2-5

I think what made the film so dark in the latter stages was the initial likeability of the gang. We tried to make the audience like the gang. I feel this was one of the film's biggest strengths.

Anthony, a very 'real' presence within the film's narrative, has been nothing more than a fantasy, a product of Richard's memories and regret. The film's narrative concerns the way in which Richard exercises these regrets via violent retribution.

In many ways Meadows is simply describing this gang of lads as products of a small town that society has left behind, a place where nothing ever happens to the directionless characters that reside there. The 'club', as all the lads call it, where Sonny conducts his 'business' is little more than a store room, where they meet to drink cheap beer. The 'gangster' rap that they listen to is deeply incongruous to the setting; these men are not gangsters, they are just petty criminals. Sonny's business, the supply of drugs, is so small scale that it is conducted from within his underpants where he hides his supplies. Meadows wants us to appreciate that there is something almost endearingly silly about their gangster posturing. The best exemplification of this is the scene where Soz, Tuff and Herbie drive round to Sonny's house in Tuff's little Citroen. There is nothing 'gangster' about this car. It has a green frog painted on the front and, because of its lack of roof, Soz's head sticks out of the top. As they drive, gangster rap blares out and they all bob up and down attempting to look tough. Throughout this sequence Soz waves his lanky arm in the air. "I wor enjoying that" says Tuff when Herbie turns the song off. This ridiculous façade is simply a means of passing the time of day. The ridiculousness of this transportation is compounded further when all six of the lads cram inside the tiny little vehicle to go and search for Richard. Meadows is obviously making fun of these characters on such occasions however it is possible to get a very real sense that Meadows has an affection for such instances in life. Moreover, laughter is also shared between these characters and the audience. Meadows relates to the silly events and actions which mould a small town, small time existence. A lot of his work is attempting to engineer that same recognition from his audience.

Dead Man's Shoes is a very dark and violent film, which concerns a subject that captures the complex extremities of human behaviour. This impression is reflected by the

make-up of WarpFilms promotional website.²³⁶ There is no suggestion within this promotional material that the film will possess any light-hearted resonance or everyday banality: *Dead Man's Shoes* is inexorably presented as a violent, brutal and unforgiving 'revenge thriller.' Yet despite this marketing, *Dead Man's Shoes* is a film that can also be appreciated for its humorous, even light hearted, take on human interaction and everyday, small town, life.

We laugh with *and* at Shane Meadows' subject and subject matter. Sheldon Hall suggests that Meadows entire output is defined by an "invigorating playfulness that is rarely permitted to coarsen into parody or caricature... Meadows appears to like his characters, even the grotesques."²³⁷ No matter how intent Meadows seems to be on creating a dark mood or depicting a villainous character, he never ignores the idea that the diversity of tone inherent in life is rarely as easily consolidated as a lot of cinema often depicts it. Accordingly even the most unsavoury characters have likeable qualities and even the most brutal or depressing scenes have the potential to retain moments that make us laugh. It is this suggestion that life is not straightforward, that nothing is black or white, that I believe drives the emotional honesty of Meadows' films. Laughter and despair exist alongside one another in the work of Meadows. It is much more undemanding to identify *Dead Man's Shoes* as a funny film than *Nil by Mouth*; yet, in many ways, its content is far darker than anything *Nil by Mouth* offers. In a television profile of Shane Meadows,²³⁸ Mark Kermode attempted to define Meadows' work as a whole. The word that was given the most emphasis and resonated furthest was "compassion." Yet, I cannot concur with this idea because there is not a moment of pity in any of Meadows' films. They can be unflinchingly critical and unapologetically celebratory, yet they never pour sympathy upon the characters depicted.

Dead Man's Shoe's profuse employment of incongruous, indeterminate humour, which frequently detracts from the fact that a terrifying and violent event is taking place, also allows for a sustained discussion of the question: what is the everyday? *Dead Man's Shoe's* creation of everyday realism is in constant juxtaposition with the film's more

²³⁶ <http://www.godwillforgivethem.com/>

²³⁷ Hall, Sheldon, "Shane Meadows" in, Murphy, Robert (ed) *Directors in British and Irish Cinema: A Reference Companion* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006) p.421

²³⁸ Televised on BBC 2's "Culture Show", on the 23 April 2007

extraordinary elements. However this juxtaposition conspires to allow both the film's realist and fantastical qualities to be realised as emphatically as possible. The juxtaposition between laughter and horror is one way in which Meadows seeks to elucidate the conflict between capturing the uneventful occurrences of everyday life and a need to tell a story that depicts an almost fantastical interruption of this everyday existence. This becomes an almost constant discussion about the inadequacy of realism in attempting to tell a filmic 'story'. I would argue however that Meadows manages to achieve both.

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Meadows' social realist style is not governed by a strict aesthetic agenda, certainly not to the same extent as *Nil by Mouth*, and as such I shall not attempt to define *Dead Man's Shoes* formal characteristics to the same degree. What should be mentioned however is that the film articulates a discussion between the everyday and the extraordinary, in terms of subject matter *and* style. Meadows' use of social realist style is far more playful, contrary and contradictory than many other examples of social realist cinema. The fact that many of Shane Meadows' films have been made with minute budgets (*Smalltime*, for example, had a budget of £5000 and *Dead Man's Shoes* started filming with a budget of £75,000²³⁹) is indicative of a type of film production that makes a virtue out of its financial restriction. Meadows, in interview with Joe Field stated: "I think it's helped the film (*Dead Man's Shoes*) by having those restrictions, the film worked out better for it... We wanted this footage to look low budget".²⁴⁰ Meadows' affinity with low-budget, digital filmmaking, most relevant to the short film mode, have been transferred into his production of feature films. Meadows is an aggressive advocate of the idea that film production need not be dominated by financial considerations or polished production standards:

There are people out there who won't make a film unless they can shoot on 16mm: well I think, 'fuck off then', Camcorders cost nothing... by starting off

²³⁹ This was a provisional budget, the final costs for the production stood at just over £1,000,000 (see <http://shanemeadows.proboards39.com/index.cgi?board=general&action=display&thread=1178559661&page=1>)

²⁴⁰ <http://www.lazaruscorporation.co.uk/v4/articles/shanemeadows.php>

making films yourself, with no help, you're setting up your stall. You're saying, 'I can do this'.²⁴¹

It is impossible not to acknowledge the gritty and raw social realist integrity of his output. Although it is a problematic assertion to justify, it is reasonable to suggest that Meadows' films, via both narrativity and cinematography, are enjoying themselves simply because they are being made at all. The nature of this playful aesthetic position has strong bearing on the overall treatment of subject matter which, in itself, is often playfully rendered. The footage is generally captured through a playful approach to cinematography. *Dead Man's Shoes* is generally captured via a type of hand-held camera that creates an unplanned documentary feel. However, there are also scenes within the film that possess a calm and measured approach to the overall mis-en-scene, which contradicts this otherwise frenetic style. Likewise certain sequences are heavily rendered, employing digital colour filters that lend the film an occasionally fantastical quality; thus openly contradicting common social realist practise. Unlike *Nil by Mouth*, *Dead Man's Shoes* does follow a narrative which is governed by the revelation of an extraordinary event; however, this revelation generally transpires via the disclosure of a series of extremely everyday events. It is these moments- moments of inaction if you like- that put the characters in a position which allows them to behave in a very down to earth and amusing manner, providing the opportunity to create a real sense of recognition. It is wholly possible that the way Meadows delays the revelation of Anthony's death is an exemplification of his urge to allow us to become endeared to certain aspects of everyday 'reality' in this small-time, small town life (that is to say, the light-hearted side of the gang's interaction: the banter, the wise-cracks, the repetitive exchanges and incongruous nonsense). *Dead Man's Shoes* dramatic, perhaps even fantastical, qualities- notably the narrative drive of the revenge thriller- are in continual conflict with the film's realist intentions, that is, the uneventful and banal representation of incongruous laughter. Interestingly, each position seems to adopt the role of emphasising the other. The narrative drive of Meadows' 'revenge thriller' and its position as an unprecedented occurrence in this small town are always in conflict with the reality of everyday repetition. Each scene is resolutely dedicated to the continuation and progression of a violent, brutal and exceptional narrative, yet each scene

²⁴¹ McNab, Geoffrey, "The Natural", p.16

also embraces the banal, un-dramatic and hilarious logic (or non-logic) of human dialogue and interaction. All too often the gang members engage in incongruous dialogue to detract from serious and life changing events; this perpetually possesses humorous effect.

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Leaving Life

Mark Kermode has written of the “other worldly nature” of *Dead Man’s Shoes* and how this exists despite the films obvious realist qualities: “the tone of (the film) remains resolutely down to earth in its blend of grim social realism and edgy rural satire.” He argues this ‘other worldly quality’ that Meadows creates, “undermines any sense of cosy familiarity and keeps us in a state of anxious unease.”²⁴² This idea that the extraordinary quality of the ‘revenge thriller’ is in conflict with the reality of small town life is expressed through the arrival of Richard. Richard is *Dead Man’s Shoes* embodiment of a fantasy figure. Towards the end of the film the character of Soz, heavily drugged, peers at Richard and says: “are you the devil?” Richard’s response- “I wish I was mate”- encapsulates one of Richard’s principal motivations within the narrative: an escape from reality. At one point, near the beginning of the film, Richard utters the lines: “I’m gonna send them into space, but they ain’t coming back.” It is almost as if Richard has seen his own possession of normality shattered, so he will employ any means necessary to do the same to the gang who created this torturous situation. The film’s climatic drug scene symbolises these intentions. At this point even the film’s cinematography departs from the frank realism that it has pursued throughout. Richard’s motivations play an important role in the synthesis between *Dead Man’s Shoes* pursuit of fantasy- via horror and violence- and reality- via incongruous laughter.

There is a definite ghost-like quality to the character of Richard and this is rendered even more emphatic when we realise that, throughout the film, he has been communicating with his long-dead brother. Kermode has discussed Richard as an “admirably unpredictable creation” and how this lends to Richard’s potential as a fantasy

²⁴² Kermode, Mark, “Dead Man’s Shoes”, in *Sight and Sound*, 2004, Vol.10, p.51

figure: “his aura is enhanced by the titular suggestion that he has already left the land of the living.”²⁴³ The opening sequence of this film depicts Richard and his brother, Anthony, walking through the countryside; they are alone and, within this sequence, we rarely witness them without their back to the camera. They are constantly moving away from the camera. The cinematography and especially the music capture the peacefulness of this walk in the country. Is Meadows allowing us to witness the calm before the storm? Or, even more ominously, is this a metaphor for Richard’s journey towards death? The fact that he is taking this journey with Anthony justifies this assumption. On top of this, the footage is interspersed with use of home videos (generally home videos, which capture happier times). Could this sense of recollection also point towards the idea that Richard’s life is over? Notably, Richard is positioned, for the majority of this film, within a rural setting, sleeping in a run-down farmhouse on a wooden slats; this isolated space could be considered as another signifier of his departure from reality. When Richard does visit the town, it is generally empty. Richard’s first visit to the town is notably absent of any other human life, wonderfully elucidated through the way an image captures a garden swing, swaying without any human influence. This whole sequence is a good example of the calm and measured approach to *mise-en-scene* that the film sporadically adopts. Within this sequence there are eight expositional shots in total, each of them captured with a quiet regard for the setting. Interestingly, not one of them contains a human presence. Humanity, it seems, is not present within Richard’s perception of the world, literally and figuratively.

Richard is rarely seen by the gang- he is always in the shadows- and the only time they do get to interact with him is when *he* allows it. We do not see him murder anyone until the drug scene and this also contributes to this otherworldly suggestion. This narrative decision makes Richard even more (not less) deadly, intensifying Richard’s mystique. Likewise Richard’s fantastical, ‘otherworldly nature’ is highlighted by the fact that he is almost untouchable until the narrative’s close, and even then he dictates the terms of his own death. In one of the film’s most significant moments, Sonny confronts Richard face to face. Notably, Richard has dictated the terms of this meeting. The meeting takes place through Richard’s almost eerie ability to be in the right place at the

²⁴³ Kermode, Mark, “Dead Man’s Shoes”, p.51

right time. Throughout this scene, Sonny, twice Richard's size and full of menace, appears to be preparing to hit him. This impression is mirrored, hilariously, by the gang, who wait in the sidelines, "Why doesn't he just chin him?" Something, inexplicably, holds Sonny back. Sonny is constantly a moment away from knocking him out, yet, in the end it is Richard who, unpredictably, becomes the most intimidating presence in the scene. We realise that Richard is not bothered whether he wins or loses or lives or dies,

If I were you I'd get in that fucking car and get out of here man, and I'd gather all them goonies, get what ever you've got and come get me 'cos I'm gonna fucking hit you all... Your fucking there mate (gestures to the palm of his hand) so get in that car and fuck off, you get to me first.

Richard feels he has already lost.

Later in the narrative, when Al confronts Richard, Sonny, who is aiming for Richard, shoots Al through the head. These scenes further intensify Richard's untouchable, fantastical mystique. The flash backs are another significant element of Richard's fantastical presence and they perpetually provoke questions. Whose memories are these? Are these memories real? It is these sorts of questions, which create further unease, whenever Richard is on screen. These flash-backs are rendered even more disturbing by the notion that they are potentially offering us insight into just how disturbed Richard has become. The scene at the film's conclusion, between Richard and his last victim, Mark, is perhaps Richard's final conversation with reality. Only now we know that Richard is all alone- Anthony is dead. In terms of my own understanding of this film, the reason why the behaviour of Richard is so interesting is the way it is such a contrast to the everyday behaviour of the gang of lads who he pursues.

Holding onto Life

Within the film's DVD commentary²⁴⁴, Meadows mentions that because the story was being written as it was being filmed there was an opportunity to retain or withdraw characters depending on the strength of their performances; he stated that it was their ability to improvise in an amusing way that was an important element of this selection process. I believe that this improvisational technique is a contextual consideration that is

²⁴⁴ Contained within the DVD extra features for *Dead Man's Shoes*, released in 2005

fundamental to the playful and light-hearted presentation of much of the film, particularly the film's dialogue. This technique, specifically its apparent ability to consistently embrace and mobilise incongruous laughter, is conducive to *Dead Man's Shoes* realist sensibilities.

A definitive example of Meadows' use of improvised dialogue, which works towards an amusing effect, takes place at Soz and Tuff's apartment moments before Richard's menace is first, collectively, felt. This is perhaps the best example of how laughter engenders recognition and complicity within *Dead Man's Shoes*. This scene is also important because not only is it an insistently silly scene and a scene which truly introduces us to the idea of humorous banter, but it is also the scene in which it becomes clear that Richard means harm. The scene begins by dedicating its attention to the completely meaningless banter that Soz, Tuff and Herbie share. As the scene dissolves into horror, the juxtaposition between the two effects becomes emphatic and sets a tone for the remainder of the film, yet it also articulates the idea that it is horrific because of the complete contradiction it represents to the everyday.

This scene begins with Soz and Tuff sitting in their flat exchanging comments about the content of the porn magazines that they are flicking through. The 'conversation' is extremely casual and the camerawork that captures it reflects this. It is heavily indicative of Caughie's assertion that social realist cinematography is intentionally 'unplanned'. None of this humour could be considered particularly witty, however it often encourages a wry smile and it is constant and repetitive enough to make us occasionally laugh at its banality. "I love English cock" says Soz, reading from one of the magazines. "Do you?" Tuff replies, laughing. "Fancy a tit fuck?" asks Soz. "No thanks" Tuff responds, as they both laugh. As this goes on Herbie enters the flat, "Herbie, Herbie, Herbie, Heerb, Herbie..." Soz shouts, playing with Herbie's name as he repeats it over and over again, amusing himself with the sound of the word. The nature of these fast-flowing exchanges is utterly mundane and of absolutely no consequence in terms of the overall narrative, yet they are sustained for a notable period of the film. Such content, as it is employed repeatedly, becomes of implicit importance to Meadows' realist concerns. This dialogue is symptomatic of the idea that they are talking simply to pass the time of day and divert their attention from the boredom of everyday, small town life. Beyond

this, though, such humour, despite its base nature, has the potential to involve the audience and allow them to appreciate a playful and childlike quality about these lowlifes that is in contrast to their more dislikeable characteristics. There is definitely something compelling about the camaraderie of the group. Moreover, it is not wholly inaccurate to suggest that such scenes invite us to become part of this group.

Herbie tells Soz and Tuff that Anthony's brother is back in town and their thoughts immediately move away from laughter, the mood becomes exceedingly morose and the audience are offered an insight- via flashback footage- into the way these men bullied Anthony, using his mental disability as a source for their own amusement. It is unnerving that these characters who have amused at least some of the audience so recently, are now perpetuating a sense of revulsion. Yet, life is often like this and therefore rather than having a jarring effect this synthesis between laughter and revulsion captures the subtle modulations which often characterise real life. What we know about life, is never monolithic. Soon after Herbie has told his friends the bad news they again resort to laughter when Herbie and Tuff persuade Soz to have a line of cocaine, which transpires to be parmesan cheese. We now get the sense these characters are using laughter not simply to divert them away from boredom, but from the fear that Richard is seeking revenge. Laughter is almost always an escape from life and this articulates the fundamental nature of the life that is being laughed at. Moreover, despite what we now know about these men, the scene is still funny and we are still inclined to laugh with them. As such, those audience members that laugh are, perhaps unconsciously, fulfilling a form of complicity with these men. As previously mentioned comments by Meadows attest, this appears to be a deliberate device and it continues throughout the film. Human beings possess flaws, Meadows' characterisation seems to emphasise this whilst maintaining that they are human beings all the same.

After a night of divertive nonsense, Herbie leaves Soz and Tuff's apartment. Richard greets Herbie at the bottom of the dark stairwell. Richard is standing at the other side of the glass door, wearing a gas mask. The horror of this event is immediately recognisable, facilitated by the use of lurid green light filters, another signifier of Meadows' contrary approach to social realist style. Likewise, the accompanying sound mix qualifies this impression further. The music, a high-pitched synthesised sound, is

unnatural enough to be unsettling on its own, but the exaggerated volume of Richard's heavy breathing through the gas mask, makes the overall feel of the scene even more threatening. The sight of Richard in such an alien costume immediately frightens Herbie. When Richard begins to violently slam the glass, Herbie charges back up to the security of Soz and Tuff's apartment. This is the first explicit exemplification of the idea that the everyday realities of the men's lives are about to be forcefully interrupted by the almost fantastical and ghost-like 'presence' of this vengeful character.

Herbie, arriving back in the room he has just departed finds Soz and Tuff are now wearing African Tribal masks and dancing around, whilst waving pots and pans in the air. Horror is therefore subverted by a moment that encourages laughter. Herbie, still petrified, describes Richard as the "elephant man," thus even his recapitulation of the horrible event he has just endured is marked by another moment of, unconscious, humour. It is quite astounding that so much of this film's brutal narrative is off-set with these moments which encourage laughter. The juxtaposition between the two states is unremitting; as the three men run outside to confront this 'elephant man' the tension is immediately diluted by Soz, frying pan in hand, making the following war cry: "er y'are then mate... er y'are." The incongruity of Soz calling this would-be attacker "mate" is ridiculous, yet at the same time a perfect encapsulation of the way that people speak. Likewise, the frying pan further contributes to the funniness of the scene. The potential for horror that the situation offers is tempered by the reality of everyday life. When the men return to the apartment after their unsuccessful pursuit they discover that Richard has broken in and stolen Sonny's drugs. On the wall he has left a cryptic message in spray paint, which reads, "Cheyne Stoking." It is written in a heavily stylised and comical way yet "Cheyne Stoking," a medical term, describes the moment where a person's lungs take their final breath. It is therefore comic *and* deeply ominous.

Regardless of Meadows' own opinions on the type of characters that Richard tracks down and kills, this film (like every film that Meadows produces) highlights the idea that life is simply too complex to make judgments. It is very difficult to discern any likability from the character of Sonny and the way in which Richard places a plastic bag over his head and shoots him through the skull, murdering him without a second's thought is suggestive of the idea that this is one character who Meadows does not have

the inclination to view with an objective mind. However the younger gang members, namely Soz, Tuff and Herbie are, in the end represented as being neither good nor bad. Their lives have been a procession of mistakes and misdemeanours, yet this does not mean that they cannot partake in moments that actually make them quite likable or, at the very least, very human. When Richard confronts his final victim and tells him that “you were meant to be a monster, now I’m the monster”, this seems to elucidate the idea that Meadows is not attempting to make a film about good versus evil, but rather a film about how difficult such assertions are to quantify.

Conclusion

The title of this thesis: “The Subversion of Sympathy in British Social Realism”, is essentially a reference to the idea that recent social realist output- in this case the work of Gary Oldman and Shane Meadows- has found a means of representing the working-class experience in a way that seems to encourage audience recognition and understanding, rather than simply resorting to a sympathetic regard for the underprivileged communities depicted. My discussion of this progression in representation has built up into an elucidation of how the increased observance of laughter in recent social realism has become a significant factor in the construction of the current form, highlighting a more sustained focus on what I have called emotional realism. Emotional realism is essentially the way in which the manifestation of emotion demonstrates how the characters depicted chose to cope with their lives. My argument has tried to establish that this observance of laughter provides a template for representation that has the ability to forge insights into the concept of shared experience, whilst refraining from the idea that life or, most importantly, representations of life can be straightforward. I have deduced that social realist depictions of laughter, especially in relation to suffering and despair, appear to highlight an overall concerted effort to provide the audience with a view from within; portraying a heightened interest in the potential for common experience and a common humanity to be established between audience and subject.

Higson described early modes of British social realism as being blemished by their construction of “cultural tourism”.²⁴⁵ The main objective of Chapter One was to approximate the motivations behind social realist production at its advent; thus allowing subsequent chapters to discern the social and formal disparities between the New Wave and more recent instances of social realism. The New Wave, despite its undoubted achievements, was circumscribed by an often patronisingly sympathetic, subjugation of the working-class experience. Overall, these New Wave films generally provided a view

²⁴⁵ Higson, “Space, Place, Spectacle” p.149

of the subject that was “a view from above”.²⁴⁶ Most importantly, Chapter One also argued that true insight into how these working-class characters actually feel about their lives is minimal, if not non-existent.

Chapter Two was directly concerned with assimilating an appreciation of how social realist subject matter and social realist style defines social realist cinema. During this discussion it was firmly established that social realism must always be studied in terms of both its social and formal practices. This chapter concluded with a discussion of how emotional realism, via the synthesis between laughter and despair, has become an increasingly important element of this form’s ability to forge connections between audience and subject. In terms of its treatment of subject matter, style and emotional content, social realism from the late 1990s and the early Twenty First Century highlights a great remove between itself and working-class representations that emerged during the 1960s. Social realism beyond the New Wave began to appreciate that simply placing working-class characters in front of a camera, whilst maintaining a regard for notions of ‘surface realism’, was no longer enough to fulfil its potentialities as a representational form. Recent social realism has continued to capture the “movement towards social extension”²⁴⁷ that began during the New Wave; however, the form has developed a far more observational, far less judgmental, approach to this subject matter.

A key difference between the contexts of the two periods is that working-class subject matter is now a fully initiated element of mainstream British cinema. However, mainstream cinema’s use of working-class subject matter is generally marked by an often up-lifting, exhilarating quality that is unfaithful to those actually living in the conditions being discussed. Likewise, the fact that many of these films work towards a pleasing resolve of all the struggle and conflict that has gone before, is also incongruous to the way in which life itself generally elapses. The observational, non-judgmental stance that recent social realism has adopted, however, rarely exists within most mainstream depictions of working-class life. This is at least partly because recent social realism’s major concern appears to be the articulation of the irresolvable nature of everyday life

²⁴⁶ Higson, Andrew, “Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the ‘Kitchen Sink’ Film” in Higson, (ed), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London; New York: Cassell, 1996) P.150

²⁴⁷ Williams, Raymond, “A Lecture on Realism” in *Screen*, 1977, vol.18, no.1, p.63

and an emphasis on “the significance of the ‘ordinary,’ as opposed to ‘exceptional’”.²⁴⁸ A key element of this transition is that recent social realism also transcends notions of sympathetic social consciousness that dominated social realism between the New Wave and the 1990s. Social realism over the last two decades has been markedly unconcerned with the notion that it is a form which should attempt to change aspects of society. As a result recent social realism has, both socially and formally, portrayed a resolute effort to depict everyday working-class life as it *is*, without attempting to achieve either an explicit political agenda or a sanitised fantasy. This has almost certainly allowed for a more assiduous concern with how these characters actually deal with their situations in life. It is this idea of coping with life, and the way laughter helps almost everyone to do this, which is central to the idea that recent social realism has the capabilities to achieve a realistic connection with the audience which may breed a type of recognition.

During the course of Chapters Three and Four, I attempted to refrain from the speculation that there could possibly be any true form of universality inherent in the way an audience responds to the films that were considered. Instead, I have simply attempted to acknowledge that recent social realist texts have made an increasingly noticeable effort to encourage such ideas as “common experience” and “community”²⁴⁹ within their representations of the working-class subject. I briefly explored the idea that both *Oldman* and *Meadows* were articulating subject-matter that was personal to them as being a potential factor in this achievement. I have been predominantly interested, though, in highlighting how a more concerted preoccupation with emotional realism is what has driven this amelioration.

Having reached the end of this work, I believe that shared laughter is a manifestation of emotion that is extremely astute in locating a form of common experience and common humanity between film audience and film subject. Moreover laughter, as a coping device, has the capabilities to forge a connection and sense of recognition that is, for at least some of the audience members, notable for its lack of contrivance or insincerity. The overall explanation that I offer for this circumstance is that laughter in the films studied is both celebratory and cautionary, explaining both the

²⁴⁸ Hill, John, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p.193

²⁴⁹ Lovell, Terry, *Pictures of Reality: Politics and Pleasure*, p.95

shortcomings and strengths, and high points and low points, of the characters and lives that are being explored. Essentially, laughter encompasses the idea that life is complex and, furthermore, judgmental filmmaking has no real place within the assimilation of the representation of human life. In conclusion, the extent and variety of uses of laughter in recent social realism should be considered an important site of study within the analysis and acknowledgement of social realism's employment of emotional realism, not least, its potential ability to subvert the sympathetic mode of address that has afflicted previous incarnations of social realist cinema.

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