

The Performing Northern Working Class in British Cinema: Cultural Representation and its Political Economy.

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Abstract: *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman 1996), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo 1997), *Little Voice* (Mark Herman 1998) and *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry 2000) are a cluster of recent British films which represent an embattled Northern working class transgressing personal, gender and/or class boundaries that take them into uncharted spaces via public performance. A retro music based culture industry comes to be seen as some sort of amelioration of circumstances and/or (a sometimes temporary, sometimes permanent) transformation of the self. These films are fairly typical of the story which mass culture likes to tell about class: namely that it is always on the decline rather than changing. This narrative of decline in turn implies that class is *not* an on-going element in the production of such signifying practices and that therefore the epistemological powers of class analysis have waned. In response this essay situates the films within their context of an international political economy and the strategies of the Cultural Transnational Corporations that produce them. *Brassed Off* functions within this discussion as an example of how nationally grounded conditions of production with a public service remit can offer more scope for engaging with class relations.

Brassed Off (Mark Herman 1996), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo 1997), *Little Voice* (Mark Herman 1998) and *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry 2000) are a cluster of recent British films which represent an embattled Northern working class transgressing personal, gender and/or class boundaries that take them into uncharted spaces via public performance. A retro music based culture industry comes to be seen as some sort of amelioration of circumstances and/or (a sometimes temporary, sometimes permanent) transformation of the self. These films are fairly typical of the story which mass culture likes to tell about class: namely that it is always on the decline rather than changing. This narrative of decline in turn implies that class is *not* an on-going element in the production of such signifying practices and that therefore the epistemological powers of class analysis have waned. To counter this requires locating British cinema within the specific economic conditions of production structuring these films. For these conditions *are* class conditions, they are social relations and not just a question of economics and institutions. While the working class is characterised by their relative lack of movement and mobility, their rootedness in place, capital is characterised by its restless mobility, its continual crossing of borders and transgressing of boundaries, its movement through space and a relative indifference to concrete place, or an engagement with concrete place *only* on terms that satisfy its accumulation imperative.

We shall see that, with the exception of *Brassed Off*, these ‘British’ films are in fact the product of American based Cultural Transnational Corporations (CTNCs). The CTNCs work through British subsidiaries or

subcontractors to plug into national and regional cultures and articulate the resulting products across international markets via the American market. These films represent the recently acquired viability within the North American market of a certain kind of British film (low budget) offering a specific regional focus within Britishness (they are all set ‘up north’). I want to explore the implications of such an international political economy (and the pressures of commodification it brings to bear) for films addressing national and regional cultures with any complexity or specificity or (given the themes in the films of socio-economic crisis) political combativity. *Brassed Off* has often been assimilated to these other films and there are obviously generic and thematic similarities. However, while the film does share with these films some of their ideological problems, I will argue that its more indigenous conditions of production illustrate the extent to which it has a greater space for addressing nationally specific political conditions.

Class in Crisis

There is a widespread sense today that the concept of class is in crisis. Nowhere has this narrative of decline been more true than in cultural studies which constituted itself in the 1960s and early 1970s around the category of class in general and the working class in particular. Cultural studies set itself the task of studying the practices and history of the working class and exploring the theoretical and political implications of that endeavour. However, subsequently and with some acceleration in the 1980s, cultural studies abandoned this orientation in favour of exploring gender, race and sexuality within theoretical frameworks that stressed (in

contrast to the stubborn obduracy of class) social and cultural plurality, difference and transitoriness, coupled with a focus on identity rather than consciousness (with the cognitive implications of that category) and textual analysis favoured to the exclusion of a more materialist contextualisation of signifying practices (see Milner 1999).

Yet the decline in the use of class within political, sociological and cultural theory discourses has not been matched by a decline in representations of class in British film and television, although as I have indicated, within those representations class is often portrayed as archaic and residual. It is perhaps for this reason that class has begun to re-emerge as a category within film and television studies. Two anthologies in particular come to mind here: Rowbotham and Beynon's *Looking at Class, Film, Television and the Working Class in Britain* (2001), and Munt's *Cultural Studies and the Working Class, Subject To Change* (2000). It is striking how much both books draw on biographical experience and reflection to revalorise class as something worth studying. This is valuable especially, as Andy Medhurst recalls, after the reign of Althusserian theoreticism in the 1970s which treated lived experience as equivalent to ideology. (Medhurst 2000:23-28). Nevertheless, if class is to re-emerge as something more than a belatedly recognised legitimate (and often residual) identity, taking its place alongside gender, ethnicity and sexuality, then theoretical and methodological questions beyond the biographical (particularly of the kind posed by historical materialism) will need to be resurrected.

The titles of both books indicate the importance of the working class to the fortunes of the category of class. It is clear that many discourses about class conflate changes in the *composition* of the working class as workers

(the influx of female and Black and Asian labour, the rise of white collar work), changes in the occupational *locations* of the working class (the relative decline in manufacturing and extractive industries and the rise of the service sector) and challenges to the task of organising workers in trade unions (with work becoming casualised, temporary and part-time), with the disappearance of the working class itself. Thus, these transformations of the working class and the representation of the working class are today seriously out of sync. Class as an objective fact and representations of class peel away from each other as the former becomes more extensive and generalised at every level of society while the latter becomes associated with a narrow, standardised and deeply archaic sense of who and what constitutes the working class.

Mass culture works largely, at its most commodified core, to erase the sense of class as process and as a social relation, in two key ways. Myth number one is that technological and social changes are *in themselves* an index of social progress (disguising how class relations live on beneath these new forms). Myth number two (and this is crucial given the centrality of ‘consumption’ and culture within the films I will be analysing) is that mass culture cultivates the needs and subjectivity of the individual. Put together, these two myths imply that class as a collective relation is always something declining in the rear view mirror of history, while at the same time, through our fascination with that rear view image of class, mass culture surreptitiously registers its continued existence, necessarily speaking to us of realities it must simultaneously deny. A contradictory discourse indeed, and one that requires a nuanced response.

Up North: the political economy of a geographical category

It is necessary to return to political economy at the level of the British film industry itself if we are to avoid a number of methodological difficulties. Firstly, the thesis of the ‘myths of mass culture’ is immediately in danger of succumbing to a functionalist, overly homogenised vision of cultural production. This is very far from being my aim, and indeed *Brassed Off* and its political economic conditions of existence work within this essay as a reminder of institutional and textual difference that is hardly exceptional or at the outer edge of what can be accommodated within what one would still call mass culture. Secondly, political economic analysis is necessary in order to imagine and argue for alternative economic arrangements to the dominant ones which currently exist. Thirdly, while the performing Northern working class films can be accurately situated in broader cultural contexts which identify, for example, masculine anxieties and sexism (Monk 2000; Tinknell and Chambers, 2002) or the difficulties of representing class relations in the context of global international capitalism (Bromley 2000), without analysis of the *precise* economic and institutional relations *mediating* that broader context, there is a perennial danger of over-ontologising that cultural context and taking it as the absolute horizon for cultural representations *per-se* rather than the horizon for cultural representations made within specific conditions of production. None of this of course implies that immediate conditions of production in themselves absolutely determine the finished textual product where aesthetic choices can still be made, but they do powerfully shape and constrain it nonetheless.

British cinema has long occupied the position of the subordinate in its relationship with Hollywood. To understand the contemporary conditions of that subordination we have to recognise the new structures of the Cultural Transnational Corporations (CTNCs) which have been

developed to resolve the contradiction between the continuing concentration and centralisation of capital and the need to operate flexibly and swiftly in response to changing trends in a variety of markets across national borders. The CTNCs involved in film production are not always American, but it is the American CTNCs that have proved themselves most successful in the long term, where others, such as PolyGram (owned by the Dutch based company Philips) and Vivendi (the French CTNC) who have tried to secure powerful positions within Hollywood, have fallen by the wayside. The national base of a CTNC is important because it determines the size of its home market (the first market to be dominated) and the power of its own state in promoting its interests abroad. Whatever its national base though, a CTNC is structured around a network of subsidiaries and subcontractors that allow the parent company to operate globally and locally simultaneously with a huge variety of brands (Wayne 2003: 61-78). In doing so, the CTNCs plug into local and national cultural talent as well as forms of public subsidy (for example tax-write-off schemes) honing and articulating the resulting symbolic products across the international market. This is how the New International Division of Cultural Labour (Miller et al 2001) is constructed. With distribution to British cinemas dominated by the Hollywood majors, British filmmakers find that their access to a home market let alone an international one, must take a cultural detour through the American market as constructed by the Hollywood majors. It should not need saying that the main aim of the CTNCs is profit maximisation and thus cultural models are developed accordingly. The Hollywood majors exploit the limited choices for British film cultural workers through their subsidiaries and subcontractors.

Film is a commodity, as we know, but this in itself tells us very little about what specific forces are shaping particular films. It is crucial to understand that films emerge out of the *market strategies* which companies develop and which they develop in turn as a response to their position within the market at any one time as well as broader cultural and political trends. Companies may deploy different strategies at different times or simultaneously and a film might be the product of some new strategy innovation, some emulation of another corporate strategy or the continuation of its own well established one, or some combination of these. The notion of corporate stratagems allows us to understand how the process of commodification works as an *evolving and differentiated process*. It is possible to infer a corporate market strategy by studying the pattern of films that are made, when they are made, their conditions of production and how their textual characteristics are crafted with the aim of making the film congruent with a particular market.

In the mid-1990s, British Northerners increased their stock as a visible and viable category within the American market, with Northern accents now very commonly used by television advertisers. The success of the character Daphne Moon (supposedly from Manchester), in the television series *Frasier* (running since the early 1990s) eventually made the actress who played her (Jane Leeves) the highest paid British actress in history (Chrisafis 2002: 3). *The Full Monty* then can be seen as tapping into and reinforcing these market shifts. It was funded by Fox Searchlight, which was launched by Rupert Murdoch's Fox Pictures in 1995 with the aim of making smaller films and plugging into national and regional cultures around the world. Fox picked up the rights for *The Full Monty* after the script had been developed by Channel Four and Redwave Films, an independent production company set up by Uberto Pasolini. Channel

Four were also developing *Brassed Off* at the same time and the similarities between the story lines led them to decide that they could only part-fund *The Full Monty* in return for UK broadcast rights. However, when Pasolini got Lindsay Law, then running Fox Searchlight, to fully fund the film, Fox snapped up worldwide rights. *The Daily Telegraph* gleefully reported that Channel Four had missed the boat with *The Full Monty* in the wake of its phenomenal success (Boshoff 1998: 41). The film cost £2.2 million and took £134 million while *Brassed Off* cost a little under £3 million and just about broke even. The assumption appears to be, and it seems as if Channel Four shared this to some extent, that *The Full Monty* would have been a runaway hit if it had been a Channel Four production. This assumption ignores both the fact that Hollywood productions are minutely honed from pre-production to post-production by marketing executives (Miller 2001: 152-157), and that the marketing budgets and distribution muscle of Fox Searchlight and Channel Four hardly compare.

While *Brassed Off* made most of its money in the British market, *The Full Monty* had around £25 million pounds lavished on its UK, American and worldwide distribution and marketing, ten times its production budget. In the UK for example, Fox built crucial word of mouth momentum for the film by giving around 97,000 free screenings, targeting female audiences in particular. They built up the film's pre-release profile by buying up billboards with 'teaser' campaigns showing the characters naked with only a garden gnome, bag of chips or flat cap protecting their modesty (Gritten 1998:22). *The Full Monty's* screenwriter Simon Beaufoy noted how the upbeat marketing of the film obscured the sadness he felt lies at its heart. He complained that 'political messages have to be so hidden in films these days that they are almost

invisible' and he noted how the film had been co-opted by the political establishment. By contrast Beaufoy argues that Ken Loach's *Riff Raff* (1990) also starring Robert Carlyle, is playing a 'braver game' (Beaufoy 1998: 61). *Riff Raff* however, made just under \$300, 000 in the US and therefore clearly represents a cultural model with limited exchange value for a CTNC such as Fox.

After making *Brassed Off*, the director Mark Herman went on to make *Little Voice*. The authorial connection however ought not to obscure the fact that this film had very different conditions of production. It seems legitimate to infer a corporate strategy of emulation in the wake of Fox's success with *The Full Monty*. Herman's adaptation of Jim Cartwright's play, which also starred Jane Horricks, represents an attempt by another CTNC, Miramax/Disney, to tap into the new viability of the performing Northern working class in the American marketplace. Miramax fully funded *Little Voice* to the tune of \$6 million and the film was subcontracted out to Scala Productions. Nik Powell and Stephen Woolley's outfit is a regular vehicle by which the Disney/Miramax CTNC 'plug in' to British culture and talent. Originally Miramax, who had bought the rights, planned to make the film in the US but post-*Monty* were persuaded by the British producers to relocate the story back to the UK (Tutt 1998: 18). Miramax saw the film as an Oscar contender, but while it did reasonably well at the UK box office, taking over \$13 million, it generated only \$2.1 million at the US box office after nine weeks. By contrast, Miramax's *Shakespeare In Love*, which traded on an altogether more familiar version of English culture, took nearly \$32 million in the same time.

Billy Elliot was produced by Working Title, or rather (in the Chinese boxes that is subsidiary capitalism) by Working Title 2, a division within the parent company, especially designed to make low-budget movies that tap into the more differentiated images of Britishness that can now, post-*Monty*, circulate as successful commodities in the American market. It is worth noting that the form of subsidiary capitalism that the CTNCs have developed works not just at an economic level, but at an ideological level as well. For it helps give monopoly capitalism the appearance-form of diversity, plurality and autonomy in the market. Journalism works routinely to reproduce this ideological appearance. *Premier* for example describe Working Title as ‘a unique hybrid, a British independent backed by a Hollywood studio, with global distribution clout’ (Thompson 2001: 37).

In fact in 1992 Working Title became a wholly owned subsidiary of PolyGram Film Entertainment, itself a division of the electronics giant Philips. It has been ploughing a neo-traditional brand of Britishness very successfully since the 1994 success of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. *Bean* (1997) and *Elizabeth* (1998) followed. However in 1998 PolyGram were swallowed up by Universal-Seagram and Working Title acquired a new parent company. Again one can infer a corporate strategy from the films produced. Working Title were to continue producing the same white middle class brand of filmmaking that had proved successful in the US market for PolyGram. And they duly did with *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), *About A Boy* (2002), *Johnny English* (2003), *Love, Actually* (2003) and *Wimbledon* (2004). However, with *Billy Elliot*, Working Title simulated a more differentiated, gritty version of Britishness. At least half of the overall budget for the film came from public sources, with the BBC investing seeding money for the script and £800,000 overall for national

television rights, while Working Title successfully applied for £850,000 from the Arts Council National Lottery Film Fund. *Billy Elliot*, released to much critical acclaim, made \$19 million in the US market and more than \$25 million in the UK. The success of the film in the US, a condition for maximising its chances of success everywhere else, including the UK, was not of course a happy accident, but the result of the sort of careful top-down planning, calculation and administration for economic gain which Adorno saw as inimical to any authentic culture.

The CTNCs operate both locally and globally but are interested in local and national specificity only so far as it can be disembedded from those contexts and profitably sold in the international (and crucially, American) marketplace. All these films thus exploit particular places and times. *The Full Monty* was filmed on location in Sheffield (and marketed in America with a booklet on Sheffield slang), *Little Voice* was filmed on location in Scarborough and *Billy Elliot* was filmed in Easington, County Durham, a former pit village with a disused colliery. The deracination of place and time implicit in this production process is nowhere more evident than in *Billy Elliot*. For all the spectacle it makes of gender transgression, the entire film is predicated upon the absence of the miners' wives. Their involvement in the strike and the challenge to gender relations which that produced (Stead 1987) is ignored. Billy's dead mother is the necessary repression, the absence around which the film constructs its simplistic binary opposition between the archaic macho masculinity of Billy's father and brother and the 'feminised' new model masculinity of Billy himself. The presence of the mother would have seriously complicated this binary opposition, providing a mediating point between father/brother and Billy in which the politics of gender and the strike might have crept into the frame. But given the film's determination to

exclude such complexities it had to also exclude the mother since her presence might have pointed to the active support and involvement of the miners' wives in the strike. One indication of the film's deracination comes from the fact that the director Stephen Daldry was unable to draw on his personal experiences of these very realities. Daldry worked at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre during the 1984-5 strike, directing plays by striking miner's wives and touring pit villages with them. Such realities however speak of class and national specificities which would undeniably diminish the exchange value of the film in the American market. Use value is hardly the issue for the CTNCs.

Sounds of Nostalgia

Brassed Off, *The Full Monty*, *Little Voice* and *Billy Elliot* were all marketed along with compilation soundtrack CDs and tapes. In each of the films, characters engage in performances which generate or require diegetic and/or non-diegetic soundtracks. Corporate synergy between the film industry and record companies encouraged the increasing integration of film texts and the compilation score (which in turn spawns the well marketed soundtrack) in the 1960s. As Jeff Smith notes, in this period it became common to structure films around 'a series of self-contained musical numbers, usually pre recorded songs...[which] were substituted for the repeated and varied occurrences of a score's theme.' (Smith 1998: 155). This process accelerated with the appearance of MTV in the 1980s and the success of *Flashdance* (watched by the budding strippers in *The Full Monty*) in cross-promoting two commodities (film and soundtrack) from the same intellectual property (Smith 188).

By using pre-recorded music, the compilation score draws in its wake

‘the music’s close connections with its historical and social context’ (Smith 1998: 164). The compilation soundtrack also activates two closely overlapping modalities : nostalgia and utopianism. The term nostalgia brings into play the paradoxical sense of return and loss, of something homely and comforting and a mournful or painful sense of rupture from that condition (Flinn 1992: 93). Kalinak notes that structurally, western music has an inbuilt tendency towards the nostalgic in so far as it is organised around a single focal point (the tonic) which provides a powerful sense of completion and unity in a pop song (1992: 6). More broadly, this sense of return within western culture becomes a powerful yearning precisely because capitalist modernity unfolds at breakneck speed, with little mass control and accountability and thus challenges the individual’s own ontological security. In such circumstances music specifically and cultural production generally serve as sites of nostalgia for a more homely place that is also a better place; a utopia.

John Hill notes that compared to earlier 1960s British New Wave films, recent films about the British working class, seem to be concerned not so much with the threat which an emergent mass culture poses to working class culture but with the ‘damage wrought by de-industrialisation, mass unemployment and poverty typical of the Thatcher years’ (2000: 178). I want to suggest that it is the very *absence* of contemporary or emergent mass culture (in the diegetic world of the film) that casts these representations of the working class within a narrative of decline rather than change. The mise-en-scene of the films is profoundly archaic, with a strong narrative sense of dystopic decline and marginality, irrespective of the contemporary or near-contemporary setting of the films. The retro soundtracks of the films (all dated earlier than the mid-1980s-to-1990s

settings of the four films) then provide a further powerful nostalgic pull into the past while at the same time releasing utopian feelings and emotions because the soundtracks are all associated with the resources with which the characters combat the dystopian conditions they find themselves in. Indeed this retro mass culture provides the resources to transform the body either through the vocalisation of music and/or the physical response of the body to the soundtrack. This transformation of the body has distinct gender implications in *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot*, implying that a new self-consciousness around the body and the acquisition of non-traditional bodily skills are necessary in a context in which the body is less involved in producing goods than in serving a paying public. However the more general point is that mass culture is offered as the most significant means for reconstructing individual subjectivity in an empowering way to counter dystopian conditions.

Nostalgia is central to this utopianism. *Billy Elliot* may be set in the mid-1980s miner's strike but the soundtrack is made up not of then contemporaneous music, such as Wham, Ultravox, Spandau Ballet or the Pet Shop Boys, but four 1970s T-Rex classics as well as tracks from The Jam ('A Town Called Malice') and The Clash ('London's Calling'). Thus an already archaic looking image track, restricted to the pit village with its back-to-back housing and outdoor lavatories and iconic domestic objects like the spacehopper and the rolleromatic Hoover (both resonant of the 1970s rather than the mid-1980s), is further consolidated by the soundtrack. It is through the use of sound that the film performs an ideological strategy widespread through-out mass culture. This involves situating its heroes and heroines in some close proximity to a working class culture, which is then ascribed a vague sense of rebelliousness, before channelling and absorbing those associations into the hero/heroine

as an individual, separate from the collectivity whose cultural energies they siphon off. The songs function as signifiers of Billy's working class vibrancy and his ability to integrate everyday surroundings into his dance moves. It is clear that Billy's success as a ballet dancer and his integration of popular dance moves with tap dancing derives precisely from a raw, spontaneous, vibrant working class talent that will rejuvenate high culture while being moulded by it and its institutions (the National Ballet School). From the start though, the music is strongly associated with individual dreams and aspirations. The film begins with Billy jumping on his bed to the sound of T-Rex's 'Cosmic Dancer' ('I was dancing when I was 12'), then moves on to appropriate the music's sense of class resentment, re-directing it back at the miners themselves (Billy kicking miners' posters to the sound of T-Rex's 'Children of the Revolution' or kicking down the outside toilet door to The Jam's 'A Town Called Malice'). The only time the film links the soundtrack to anyone else is when Billy's brother Tony is running from hundreds of policemen who are literally storming the village. If at one level The Clash's 'London's Calling' makes a rare gesture within the film to the political forces the miners are up against, the soundtrack also tends to smooth over the rather absurd way that the entire sequence is built around Tony flight; it is almost as if this large scale assault on the village has been organised to arrest him alone.

Little Voice is the only film under discussion to feature a central heroine but it also constructs a similarly nostalgic dynamic between sound and image track. The setting of Scarborough (although never named in the film) lends the film's mise-en-scene that authentic sense of a declining, marginal and impoverished seaside town. The film's male hero, Billy, although a British Telecom worker, looks like a working

class man from two or three generations ago, given his obsession with training his homing pigeons. The discrepancy between musical soundtrack and temporal setting requires in the classical narrative, some motivation. It is Billy's older brother's record collection which provides the narrative motivation for the 1970s soundtrack in *Billy Elliot* while in *Little Voice* it is another record collection, this time LV's dead father, which provides narrative motivation. Tying biological death with economic decline, the story has LV and her mother living above the closed-down independent record shop which her father used to own. The film opens with a pan across LV's bedroom floor (accompanied by Frank Sinatra singing 'Come Fly With Me') where we see albums by Edith Piaf, Billie Holiday, Patsy Cline, Lena Horne, Marlene Dietrich, Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland. The film's narrative turns on LV's extraordinary ability to mimic these stars. She literally ventriloquises the voices and masks in the museum of mass culture in exactly the manner of pastiche that Jameson finds so distinctive about postmodern culture (Jameson 1991: 18). Stripped of the gender, race and class struggles that underpinned their historical marginality and performances, these stars are associated with LV in terms of the general depoliticised figure of the tragic heroine.

The films under discussion have a huge investment in the transformative power of live performance and the *frisson* of offering a spectacle to an audience within the film whose responses can be communicated directly, without mediation. This is in marked contrast to the economic, social and cultural mediations, stretching across the Atlantic, which actually shape these films (with, as we have seen, the exception of *Brassed Off*). They thus use the basic configuration of the

musical which, as Feuer argues, also works via a disavowal of the ‘big business, modern technology, and mass distribution’ behind the film the cinematic spectator is watching and mass culture generally (Feuer 1981:160). As Feuer notes, ‘[t]he musical film becomes a mass art which aspires to the condition of a folk art – produced and consumed by the same integrated community’ (168). It is hard to imagine a film about a film or television programme that produces the same sense of utopian integration for the *onscreen* audience without a sense of the corporate manipulation which has become attached to the mass media in the course of its history (see for example, *The Truman Show* (1998) or *SimOne* (2002)).

In *The Full Monty* and its successors, live performance also offers a suitably low-budget form of spectacle while making the most of cultural resources that draw on a long history of theatricals, amateurism, music halls, working class clubs, tribute bands and Karaoke. Tapping into an existing American ambivalence about capitalist modernity and the inauthenticity of mass culture is a key strategy for British films aimed at the American market (Street 2002: 213). However, the way these films represent that ambivalence can be deeply ideological. The dystopic conditions represented on the image track of *The Full Monty* (unemployment, marriage breakdowns, suicide, low self esteem) are transformed into an affirmative upbeat story of masculine reinvention by the soundtrack and the movement towards the climactic performance. Putting on a successful performance becomes an alternative source of identity, pride and self-worth. Thus standing in the dole queue, the would-be strippers begin to practice their moves as Donna Summer’s disco classic ‘Hot Stuff’ comes over the radio. In a musical proper, the scene would have been developed and extended into a utopian

transformation of the drudgery of the capitalist labour market. In *The Full Monty* however the scene is necessarily kept short in order to remain within the boundaries of 'realism' – thus the scene positions Gary as an observer of this mini-performance rather than a participant and this allows the scene to conclude with him laughingly acknowledging the new found dedication of his team.

Indeed one can detect a real formal problem within the film in terms of the way it integrates the musical score into its generic, narrative and ideological boundaries. Thus when Gary first demonstrates his idea to follow the Chippendales, he begins stripping to a diegetic soundtrack of Hot Chocolate's 'You Sexy Thing', but comes to a premature stop when he burns himself with his cigarette. At the same time the record needle (inexplicably) makes the sound of it scratching off the vinyl. The performance has come to a stop on the image track because the plot 'point' has been made, thus preserving the 'full monty' for the film's climax and more importantly staving off embarrassing homoerotic questions for his watching friends. The insistence on ending the soundtrack at the same time (without logical diegetic motivation, thus flouting the narrative's own strict cause-effect principles) betrays the nervousness of having any filmic elements becoming uncoupled or unhinged from one another. This commitment to formal unity is also reproduced at the level of 'content' in terms of a spurious social harmony and integration constructed in the finale.

The incredible nature of the community/audience constructed for the final striptease is overlooked as the film stitches the spectator into a unified space between spectacle and on-screen audience with classic shot-reverse shots between the two. The old steelyard works band are there

providing the musical accompaniment, the police who had arrested some of the strippers earlier also turn up and, in an even more stretched ideological manoeuvre, Gary's wife Mandy, who has been portrayed as hostile, vindictive and unsympathetic, also turns up to provide moral support and hint at a family reconciliation. The film ends with that famous teasing freeze frame from behind as the men do the 'full monty', tossing their hats into the crowd. The freeze frame literally fixes the moment of triumph, preserving it in order to disavow the fact that this performance has been clearly marked within the narrative as a one-off event and not a permanent solution to the men's economic problems. Thus the film gestures towards a refashioning of masculine identity while also confirming that this is not the sort of thing that real men do.

Redeeming *Brassed Off*

The plot and thematic similarities evident between *Brassed Off* and the other films discussed here have led to the film being conflated with them in many popular reviews and a number of academic discussions. It also shares, unfortunately, some of the problematic gender politics of these films. Unlike *Billy Elliot*, it does show something of the role of the miner's wives in the struggle to keep the pits open in the early 1990s. However they are portrayed as well-meaning but pathetically ineffectual as a group, always on the margins of the film's narration (seen through the car windows as the male miners drive past them) or, as in the case of Rita, inexplicably hostile to her husband. Nevertheless, the film is significantly different in two ways. Firstly, because of its conditions of production, it has a primary mode of address to a UK national audience and this opens up a space for a great deal more attention to the specificities of political conflict and social inequality than the other films

discussed. Secondly, the nostalgic and utopian feelings it mobilises, while not unproblematic, are informed by a genuine *materialist anger*, rather than the sentimental transcendentalism of the other films. It is true that one of the weaknesses of the film is that, as Roger Bromley argues, it suggests ‘no continuities’ with an emergent working class and is in this sense like a ‘period piece, almost a costume drama’ (Bromley 2002: 63). Nevertheless, the film has merits which have been generally overlooked.

As with the other films, *Brassed Off* had a spin-off soundtrack, sold like the soundtrack from *The Full Monty*, by RCA. As an economic prospect though there is hardly any comparison between *Brassed Off*'s classical orchestral tunes (performed by the Grimethorpe Colliery band) and the 1970s classic songs that are integrated into *The Full Monty*. This is indicative of a product rather less subjected to the forces of commodification than these other films. As a result, the film grounds the music in the struggle of the miners rather than using it to transcend their material conditions or trying to individualise the problem.

For example, in *Brassed Off*, as the band practices Rodrigo's ‘Concierto de Aranjuez’, the music is crosscut with union negotiators arguing with management. On the day that the band win through to go to the finals in London, their triumph is undercut by the cross-cutting between the band's successes and the announcement that the miners have been bullied into voting for redundancy payments rather than for keeping the mine open. Similarly, when they win the contest at the Royal Albert Hall, the implied unity between the middle class audience within the hall and the miners is problematised by Danny's critique of them (and in a quasi-Brechtian move, the middle class audience watching the film) and the musical contest as a whole. Music, he notes, does not matter more than people and

he savages the sentimentalism of the middle class, suggesting that they would be shedding tears if the miners were endangered dolphins. Thus, the music is both concretely yoked to a working class culture in a way that it rarely does in the other films while, at the same time, the film acknowledges that the culture only means something if there is a community to live and breath it. Yet while most film critics were happy to be emotionally *moved* by *Billy Elliot*'s sentimentalism (Alexander Walker celebrated the film's 'dedication to success – to transcendent success' (Walker 2000: 29)) they were rather unmoved by a film which offered a more authentic mobilisation of feelings which wre alive to a real collective tragedy and not attached to a trite story of individual success.

The materialist anger that powers *Brassed Off* registers the national political forces that are responsible for the predicament of the men and the community in a way that none of the other films do. Astonishingly, Margaret Thatcher is mentioned only once in *Billy Elliot*, when we briefly overhear the radio reporting Thatcher's infamous designation of the miners as the 'enemy within'. By contrast, *Brassed Off* features Phil's splenetic attack on God, Thatcher and the shocked middle classes when, dressed as Mr Chuckles the clown, he goes off the rails whilst trying to make a living as a children's entertainer. The film also has an early scene showing differences between not only the miners, but also rank and file miners and their union negotiators. The scene may not rank on a par with the discussion of collectivisation in Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995) but it is an indication of an address to an assumed national audience which would understand some of the details of the miner's situation and recognise tensions between more radical elements amongst the rank and file and trade union negotiators. This scene was cut from the film's brief American distribution (Bromley 2002: 63).

The film reviewer for the American magazine *Variety* thought that *Brassed Off*'s mixture of 'comedy and political sermonizing' would need 'some discreet trimming for it to find a niche in North America'. He goes on to outline something of the attractions that this type of film, drawing on the 'up north' category, might hold for the American market but also the ideological limitations that a successful reception of a film in that market necessitates.

After a lively first half, with plenty of rich characterization, gruff northern humour and good backgrounding of all the many roles, the tone darkens as the threat of pit closure starts to cause social and economic strains within the community. Where it doesn't quite take flight is in its early promise of music being the defining and elevating force of the character's lives (Elley 1996).

This identifies some of the elements that make the 'up north' sub-genre attractive to the North American market: the characters are interesting, the humour earthy and there is an appeal in the ensemble quality implicit in a focus on a community. However, *Brassed Off* does not 'take flight' because it is not the product of the CTNCs. It is rather more *grounded* in a national and class culture, not disembedded and deracinated for the international market. Its materialist use of music contrasts strongly with the sentimental use of music in the other films and with the transcendental narrative trajectory towards integration and/or social mobility. While more indigenous modes of production are a necessary condition for a film culture to speak with any complexity to its own context and national audience, it is not (given that the national context is

itself a site of unequal power relations), a sufficient condition. The international mode of production British cinema is locked into magnifies internal relations of power and the well-entrenched myths of mass culture as to the supposed disappearance of class. Conversely, the presence of a CTNC does not guarantee a successful deracinated modelling of the cultural material in question. It is hard to make progressive claims for *Little Voice*, but it is worth noting that the film climaxes (in contrast with *Billy Elliot* and *The Full Monty*) with a sour and sardonic performance - here Roy Orbison's 'It's Over' by Ray Say (Michael Caine) and not with LV's public triumph (which happens earlier in the film). This plot trajectory may have contributed to the film's diminished exchange value in the American market. Such a failure for a CTNC (Disney/Miramax) demonstrates that the control systems and standardised cultural templates do not always lock smoothly into place. However, while it is widely recognised that English heritage films are shaped according to the pressures of the international and especially American market, it is now the case that the CTNCs are today shaping the kinds of 'realist' films that were once thought to be the authentic representations of a national film culture.

Notes

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