

Working Title Mark II: A Critique of the Atlanticist Paradigm for British Cinema

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Abstract: This essay explores the economic and cultural subordination of British cinema to Hollywood. In particular it analyses how the subsidiary mode of corporate organisation allows Hollywood to ‘drill down’ into national and regional cultures and talent. It offers a case study of Working Title, a nominally ‘British’ company and *Billy Elliott* to show how the subsidiary mode works and with what culturally detrimental effects.

Since 1994, when *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell) grossed more than \$250 million worldwide, the production company, Working Title, has been associated with some of the most financially successful films at both the UK and US box office, of the last decade or so. These films include *Bean* (Mel Smith 1997) which made \$45 million at the US box office, *Elizabeth* (1998) which made \$30 million at the US box office, *Notting Hill* (Roger Michael, 1999) which made a staggering \$116 million, the low-budget *Billy Elliott* (Stephen Daldry, 2000), which

took \$19 million dollars in the American market in its first four months, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001) which took \$71.5 million in four months at the US box-office, *About a Boy* (2002) which took \$40.7 million at the US box office and a worldwide gross of \$129.8 million, *Johnny English* (Peter Howitt, 2003) which took over \$18 million in two weeks and *Love, Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003), which made nearly \$50 million in five weeks. However, the bubble may have burst somewhat with *Wimbledon* (Richard Loncrane, 2004) taking less than \$17 million at the US box office.

From the time of *Four Weddings and A Funeral*, the Working Title film developed a definite brand identity: neo-heritage locations, white middle class characters and films with a geographical awareness that points firmly across the Atlantic, a celluloid example of the so called 'special relationship' between the UK and the US.

Only *Billy Elliot*, on the surface, appears to contradict this. We will return in more detail to the significance of *Billy Elliot* later as it is especially indicative of the new structures of the Cultural Transnational Corporations (CTNCs) and an interesting trend in the 'differentiation' of Britishness that can circulate in the international (and especially the North American) image market. However, for the moment we might just note that the narrative trajectory of the film is one which seeks to relocate

Billy in the middle class. This social mobility, this movement disembedding the character, is figured in the image of Billy *leaping* with which the film begins and ends and which was used in the marketing of the film's narrative image (Ellis, 1991: 31-37). Although Billy is the object of both gay and heterosexual desire from other characters, he cannot reciprocate such desires because to do so would complicate and provide inertia on what the film conceives as Billy's simple upwards trajectory. While Billy's story can usefully be situated within the national endogenous context of New Labour's rise to power, we can also posit an entire international mode of production behind this narrative movement and one in which British cinema occupies a neo-colonial position vis-à-vis Hollywood. As with all neo-colonial relations, the relations of subordination with the dominant external other reinforces internal relations of domination.

However, not so long ago, in the late 1980s, Tim Bevan, who co-founded Working Title in 1982 with Sarah Radclyffe, could be quoted as describing the typical Working Title film as: 'socio-economic and political movies with a strong narrative' (*Producer*, 1988: 23) The films of the 1980s bear this out: *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985), *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Stephen Frears, 1987), *Personal Services* (Terry Jones, 1987), *A World Apart* (Chris Menges 1988), *For*

Queen and Country (Martin Stellman, 1989) and *Hidden Agenda* (Ken Loach, 1990). In all the celebrations of Working Title's economic success, the loss of cultural ambition of that selfsame company has been largely unremarked. It is true that some mainstream commentators wondered what had happened to all the black people who live in Notting Hill when they watched the film of the same name, but such reservations are very much the minor key of most discussions about the company or the films. Box-office speaks louder than cultural politics for sure. For those who would wish British cinema to have more cultural ambition, Working Title is emblematic of its current homogeneity; but the company's history which once traced a rather different trajectory, has been largely forgotten. To understand the transformation of Working Title requires going far beyond the question of the personal ambitions of Bevan or his current co-chairman, the American, Eric Fellner. The story of how Working Title reinvented itself in the 1990s requires an understanding of how British cinema at the level of production, distribution and exhibition, is completely integrated and subordinated to Hollywood and the American market. The story of Working Title is I will argue a *typical* one in the sense meant by Lukács; it reveals the fundamental socio-economic dynamics of a situation and a period. Thus we will have to discover how Working Title has functioned from the 1990s within the New International Division of Cultural Labour (Miller,

Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, 2001) as a wholly owned subsidiary of PolyGram Film Entertainment (PFE) in the first instance and latterly of Universal-Seagram. As I will show, the subsidiary form of intercorporate relations has important economic, ideological and cultural ramifications.

Cultural Values

What follows then is a critique of British cinema's integration and subordination to Hollywood and the American market and a critique of the role a company like Working Title has played in reproducing that subservient position. The American orientated British film has a long pedigree of course and was first developed in the sound era by the Hungarian filmmaker, who had worked in Hollywood, Alexander Korda. His 1933 film *The Private Life of Henry VIII* set the model for the rest of the decade as British producers chased dollars with historical epics. Sarah Street has recently provided us with a methodologically innovative and fascinating study of the 'internationalist' (read American) orientation of British cinema through the decades. She tracks the material circumstances which shape the fate of British films in the American market, including advertising policy, distribution strategy, access to cinemas, and the complex cross-cultural dynamics involved in the reception of British films by American audiences in different historical contexts. Street argues

that such films do not have to ‘stifle national themes in order to be successful in America’ (Street, 2002: 70). This is true. Indeed, as we shall, within the New International Division of Cultural Labour (NIDCL) Cultural Transnational Corporations are looking precisely to tap into local and national ‘content’ and sell it to the international market *via* the American market as currently constructed. The question then is to what extent such ‘national themes’ are shaped and work within the parameters set by the ratcheting up of the pressures of commodification. As Marx noted:

capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary is and has to be a barrier for it...If ever it perceived a certain boundary not as a barrier, but became comfortable within it as a boundary, it would itself have declined from exchange value to use value (Marx, 1993: 334).

The corporate industrial structures and institutions which shape British films and their access to the American market function precisely to go beyond the barriers of geography and box-office potential in order to maximise exchange value and therefore shape the use-values of those films within that agenda. Thus Working Title Mark I came to represent a

boundary and a barrier which had to be overcome for PolyGram Film Entertainment, the first CTNC which absorbed Working Title in the early 1990s. What is at stake, economically, for the CTNCs, is nicely illustrated by the example of one of the last films of Working Title Mark I, Ken Loach's *Hidden Agenda*. This film made \$1 million in the US market and was his most financially successful film in the US during the 1990s. All Loach's other films made no more than a third of *Hidden Agenda*'s box office. Presumably the subject matter, Britain's neo-colonial role in Northern Ireland, had a special resonance for US audiences. Clearly though, this sort of film and the cultural model it represents was an unacceptable *barrier* to capital when other cultural models could be developed which, as we have already seen, could make 20, 40, 70 or more times as much in the US market as *Hidden Agenda*.

This is not to say that British films orientated to the American market are unworthy of study, that they are uninteresting, unpleasurable or even occasionally aesthetically progressive. The question is the dominance of the Atlanticist model and whether in the long run and at a systemic level, it is economically and culturally the best policy option to follow.

Economically it is high risk and British companies trying to break into the American market in a big way, have often, like Goldcrest, capsized (Iberts and Illot, 1990). Film Four is only the latest to do so when in the

late 1990s it signed a three year deal with Warner Brothers to make seven films with budgets of £13 million or more. But the cultural question is the more significant one for us here. Where she *can*, Street makes the cultural case for the internationalist film, such as in her discussion of *Tom Jones* (1963) (2002: 177-180). But for the most part, Street steers clear of the question of cultural evaluation. The suspicion has to be that in part this is because she would find it difficult to make the cultural case for these films. Such a case would certainly function as an affirmation of existing industry institutions.

The absence of explicit discussion of cultural and aesthetic values builds in a strong conservative bias to political economy and implied limits to thinking about alternative film policies. Watson for example can look at British cinema from the early-to-mid 1990s and offer a boosterist narrative of ‘new-found energy, confidence and optimism’ because the cultural question is never really addressed (Watson, 2000: 80). For many commentators such as Watson and industry insiders the main problem for the British film *industry*, is its over-dependence on inward investment from Hollywood (that investment could dry up if the conditions are no longer favourable to investors, such as a good exchange rate). Such a position advocates consolidation within the industry and vertical integration in order to *compete* with Hollywood. The situation the British

film industry finds itself in is rather more serious than merely over-dependence: it is economic and cultural domination. The ambition to ape and imitate Hollywood is symptomatic of this condition and in no way contests it.

We are talking here about an *invasion* in the sense that the radical educationalist Paulo Friere meant: ‘the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, and ignoring the potential of the latter, they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression’ (Friere 1972: 121). The export of British cinema to the American market is an example of what Friere calls antialogical action, where communication is structured not as co-equals in order to enhance understanding, but as unequals in order to reproduce domination. As Friere notes, invasion can take the form of one country by another, but also, one social group of another. Thus it would be naïve to think that indigenous production in and of itself would lead to films which are more adequate to the complexity and diversity of life as lived in the UK. There is to be sure not only the invasion of a constantly restless, boundary transgressing international capital via the CTNCs, there is also the invasion that results from indigenous relations of class, gender and ethnic domination. Within the UK we can add the question of national domination between an

overmighty England and the other nations long (sub) merged within the (dis)United Kingdom. Together such exogenous and endogenous relations of domination produce a generalised complicity and internalisation of self perceptions that produce precisely, among other things, that 'static perception of the world' that Friere suggests flows from invasion (1972: 129).

It is my contention that the integration and subordination of British cinema into Hollywood and the American market provides massively diminished conditions within which British filmmakers could explore the diversity and complexity of life within the UK, while also functioning to magnify internal relations of domination. Thus the last film which Working Title made which recognised the multi-cultural realities of Britain was *Wild West* (David Attwood, 1992) about a working class Asian country and western band. Thereafter the American cultural reference point of *Wild West* would be consolidated around the all-white middle class paradigm.

In the Shadow of Hollywood

Hollywood dominates British cinema at every level of the industry: production, distribution and exhibition. However it is the dominance of

Hollywood in distribution and exhibition that is crucial. It means effectively that for British filmmakers to get decent access to their own home market, the films have to take a *detour* through the American market and indeed are made with that market primarily in mind. The UK Film Council, which in its upper echelons is populated by industry people with a strong Atlanticist orientation, such as former chairman Alan Parker, provides compelling and shocking data in its Statistical Yearbook as to the extent of the UK film industry's subordination to Hollywood.

In 2002, 43% of all films released in the UK were US solo or US co-productions (excluding UK partners) and accounted for 73.4% of total box office earnings. UK solo and co-productions (excluding US partners) accounted for 15% of all releases but only 6.2% of box office revenues. However, UK co-productions with US partners, while accounting for only 6% of all releases, took 18% of all box-office takings (*Film in the UK*, 2003: 15). No wonder then that the top six distributors, all US companies, had a 90% market share in 2002 (2003: 27). The lesson is therefore clear. If UK producers want to get a decent slice of box-office takings, neither solo productions nor co-productions with anyone else other than US companies, is likely to do the trick. The sort of films which make up that 6% of UK/US releases for 2002 include, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, the James Bond film *Die Another Day*, and of

course Working Title's release that year, *About a Boy*, which took £16.94 million and was spread across 446 cinemas by the American distributor UIP. This list also includes a rather more adventurous than usual UK/US co-production in the form of Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* (part funded by the Film Council) which at least offers a critique of its upper class milieu.

The dominance of Hollywood over UK cinema screens means that the share of foreign language films is also commensurately small. Seventeen of the top twenty foreign language films released in 2002 took less than £1 million and together, the top twenty took just over £11 million. These films included *Y Tu Mama Tambien* (Mexico), *Devdas* (India), *Nine Queens* (Argentina) and *Sex and Lucia* (France/Spain) (2003: 23). Only 5% of cinema screens are dedicated to specialised, non-mainstream programming (2003: 31). and only 0.5% dedicated to Asian programming (2003:31).

If the access of UK films to the UK market is detrimentally affected without US partnership, unsurprisingly, access to the US market is also determined by US involvement. UK and UK co-produced films (excluding US partners) accounted for twenty-nine releases in the US market in 2002. This is worth 6% of all releases but their slice of box

office takings was only a meagre 0.6% of box office revenues. Thus without US funding, non-US producers find their access to the American market substantially limited. Compare this with what happens when UK producers co-produce with US companies. This amounts in fact to only 3.3% of all releases but these films together took a very sizable 6.6% of all US box-office grosses in 2002 (2003: 45).

The US was the largest market for UK film exports, taking 48% of total exports in 2001. However, indicating perhaps one alternative pole of attraction for British producers, the EU was the second largest export market, taking 30% of all exports. It is worth pondering how British films might alter their character were the EU to become the main export market for British films. However, this is unlikely to happen when between 1995 and 2001, 50-70% of UK film exports derived from UK subsidiaries of major US film companies (2003: 48).

The CTNCs and Subsidiary Capitalism

The centralisation and concentration of capital in the cultural industries has developed a particular corporate structure and set of market strategies which reflect that structure. I call this multi-divisional structure subsidiary and subcontractor capitalism (Wayne: 2003: 61-86). It is

through these structures that monopoly capitalism is partially reconciled with the need to plug into segmented markets and cultures and cultural producers worldwide, disembedding them from their local and regional contexts and articulating the resulting cultural commodities across international markets. This New International Division of Cultural Labour is organised by corporations composed of a network of wholly owned or partially owned subsidiaries (and divisions within subsidiaries) who often have considerable day-to-day operational autonomy, but only because they have internalised the logic of accumulation as it pertains to their position in the market and the parent company's long term strategies. If a subsidiary fails to appreciate its role within this decentralised accumulation logic, the parent company's ultimate control over allocation of resources will swiftly remind the subsidiary where the real centralisation and concentration of power lies. The subsidiary structure of advanced capitalism is an attempt to combine large size with speed. It allows the one company to develop multiple brand identities and thus hopefully build in the sort of flexibility and sensitivity to opportunities and market shifts which perhaps eluded the older more unified corporate entity as it got larger and more cumbersome.

This subsidiary structure also has the additionally useful ideological role of giving advanced capitalism the *appearance-form* of plurality and

diversity in the marketplace, screening off monopolistic tendencies from the public eye as and when journalists fail to critically engage with the true nature of the subsidiary unit and the products it makes. Thus for example, Working Title is routinely described as an independent British company. *The Times* failed to penetrate beyond the appearance-forms of subsidiary capitalism when it favourably compared two recent successful ‘British’ films: ‘Unlike *The Full Monty* which was funded by an off shoot of Twentieth Century Fox, *Billy Elliot* qualifies as a fully British picture’ (*Times* 2000: 11). *The Full Monty* was indeed produced by Fox Searchlight, launched in 1995 with the aim of making smaller films and plugging into national and regional cultures around the world. With *The Full Monty* British social realist traditions were gutted of their progressive class content, while simultaneously massively amplifying the gender biases and sometime latent sexism of that tradition into a veritable spectacle of misogyny (Ticknell and Chambers 2002; Monk, 2000: 157). The only difference between the financial providence of the two films is that Working Title does not in its name give a clue as to its ultimate corporate parentage.

The CTNCs bestride national and regional film cultures, mining for cultural ore to be modelled into commodities for the international image markets. The cross-border, indeed global activities and strategies of a

CTNC such as Fox Searchlight requires the study of national cinema to move beyond what Philip Schlesinger calls its 'internalist' assumptions (Schlesinger 2000: 22-3), the idea that the most significant determinants on it, whether political, economic or cultural, arise from within rather than outside its borders. The CTNCs compel the study of national cinemas to develop more comparative optics. Thus Fox Searchlight did to the British social realist tradition with *The Full Monty* what it would later do to the European art film and representations of Latin America with *The Dancer Upstairs* (John Malcovich, 2001). The CTNCs 'drill down' into national and regional cultures. Disney's subsidiary Miramax, which has successfully plugged into both 'independent' American cinema and European cinema, has set up a UK based production outfit called Comedy Label. Its first film took the recent sub-genre of the Performing Northern Working Class and gave it a middle class spin with *Calendar Girls* (2003).

One of the things that is attractive to Hollywood CTNCs working through British subsidiaries and/or subcontractors is that the cultural material they are dealing with works well with low budgets (especially comedies) and yet has the potential to deliver very high returns. *The Full Monty* remains the paradigmatic example with a budget of \$3.5 million and worldwide grosses in excess of \$200 million, the film made 58 times

as much as it cost to make. Thus while Fox's *Titanic* grossed \$1 billion at the global box office, it provided, once all the costs of production, distribution, marketing and commissions were tallied, 'only' around \$100 million in profits to the studio, about the same as *The Full Monty*. Thus while the grosses are modest by Hollywood standards, the ratio of profit to investment is substantial.

We need to be clear that when we speak of making films for the 'American market' we are not in the first instance talking about American audiences. We are talking about an economic and cultural space constructed by the Hollywood majors. Access to American audiences is mediated through a set of institutional relations designed to ratchet up exchange value. One sign of this relatively more intensive process of commodification is the role of marketing in the Hollywood system. Within British cinema, marketing has been historically separated from production, but the Hollywood studios have for just as long integrated the two, with the effect that the marketers have a key role in greenlighting (or not) film projects as well as having influence over any project from script all the way through to post production. This amounts to what Miller et al describe as 'marketing's textual gatekeeping' (152-60). It is hard to over estimate the built in cultural conservatism this

leads to. Here is the British female Asian director Gurinder Chadha describing her experiences in this market:

The problem with getting films made in the US is the pernicious view that white people don't want to see films in which people of colour tell their own stories. Studios make black films specifically for black audiences, on budgets that they know they can recoup. Every green-lighted film is determined by niche marketing for a particular community.

When I made *What's Cooking?* in the US two years ago, I had first hand knowledge of how divided these lines are. I wanted to make a film about contemporary American families who happened to be black, Latino, Jewish and Vietnamese. I thought I'd made a truly American film that had the potential to reach mainstream audiences. After it opened the Sundance film festival, several US distributors said they loved the film, but that I had given them the problem of having to market it separately to the four different communities in the film, and therefore they'd have to spend four times as much on the release. They couldn't fathom the idea that they could release

the film in the same way that they would a family film featuring a white family (Chadha 2002: 11).

The subordination and integration of British cinema to this deeply ethnically segregated market makes it unsurprising that Chadha struggled to find UK money for her hit film *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) despite its mainstream content and form. It was eventually part funded by the Film Council and money from one of the numerous German tax-break funds operating at the time, taking £11.55 million at the UK box office. It went on to make over \$20 million at the US box office, no doubt alerting the CTNCs that British multiculturalism can now join the category 'Up North' as fertile territory for colonisation.

Working Title: from independent to subsidiary

The beginning of the end of Working Title's existence as an independent film company making culturally ambitious films that address some of the antagonisms, complexities and diversity of life in the UK comes in 1988.

It was then that Michael Kuhn, as Chairman of PolyGram Film Entertainment (PFE), took a 49% interest in Working Title in order to test out a working relationship that began with a television drama for Channel Four. Under Kuhn, PFE, itself a subsidiary of the Dutch electronics firm, Philips, was looking to break into the American market, producing and distributing both American independent films and European films. A British company would have to be at the core of the European end of the business, exploiting the cultural links and shared language that exists between the US and UK. Kuhn identified two key questions for himself and PFE:

...how to control a creative company, imposing financial disciplines but not stifling creativity; and secondly, how to squeeze every penny of value out of the product produced, in order to make the numbers work (Kuhn 2002: 33).

Part of Kuhn's answer to this question was to draw on PolyGram's music division which operated the sort of niche subsidiary system I have described above. In the music business this is called the 'label' system. In its classical division PolyGram had three 'creative units', while on the pop side they had numerous labels such as Polydor, A&M, Island and Mercury records. These labels were 'left to get on with the business of

attracting talent and making successful records. In return for this autonomy, they had to observe strict financial disciplines' (2002: 33). Working Title then were to be one of PolyGram's film labels, as was Propaganda Films, an American independent company that PFE also bought a stake of in 1988. During the 1990s PFE began building up an independent distribution company in the US (called Gramercy) as well as buying stakes in distribution companies around the world (2002: 54). This would allow them to claw back more revenues from successful films but also of course, ratcheted up the requirements on those films to be successful (Kuhn's 'every penny of value') in order to recoup the massive expenditure on distribution networks. PFE bought out Working Title completely in 1992 and in the same year, Sarah Radclyffe left the company in order to remain an independent producer, while Eric Fellner joined Tim Bevan as the new co-chair of the company. Where as Radclyffe was on record as being wary of larger budgets because of the external interference they brought from investors, Fellner's arrival clearly signalled a seachange in the direction of the company. 'In considering the British film industry' he said in 1994, 'its role within the context of filmmaking as a global business is essentially the core of its definition' (*Screen International* 1994: 26). Working Title likes to think of itself as retaining the spirit of an independent while having the resources of a studio. Acceptance of this requires turning a blind eye to the shift in the

kind of films Working Title produced almost immediately after they were bought out and a misunderstanding of how the subsidiary structure works: autonomy of operational control is allowed to the extent that the operation internalises the logic of its position within the parent company's market strategy.

The early 1990s saw something of a slow-down in Working Title's investment in British productions, as if the company were trying to work out the model they could develop to exploit British cultural materials in the American market. At this time, Working Title begin to develop their connections with American independent films, investing in *Bob Roberts* (Tim Robbins, 1992), *Posse* (Mario Van Peebles 1993) and *The Hudsucker Proxy* (Joel Coen, 1994) which marks the beginning of a long association with the Coen brothers. It is one of the ironies of Working Title that it has made a greater contribution to American film culture during the 1990s than it was to make to British film culture in the same period. Working Title did experiment with a more commercial British model with *The Young Americans* (Danny Cannon, 1994), a British set gangster film starring Harvey Keitel as an American cop called in to advise on American 'style' gangsters. However, the model for exploiting British 'difference' in the American market mapped out by *The Young Americans* was to be comprehensively eclipsed by the vision of British

middle class comic eccentricity proffered by *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in 1994.

Four Weddings and a Funeral was the first of numerous teamings between writer Richard Curtis and actor Hugh Grant. The American in Britain plotline from *The Young Americans*, was incorporated in the shape of Andie McDowell and has subsequently been successfully repeated with Julia Roberts, again providing the love interest for Hugh Grant in *Notting Hill* and Kirsten Dunst, providing the love interest for Paul Bettany in *Wimbledon*. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* cost a mere \$4.3 million. Channel Four had contributed \$1.2 million and PFE's profit projections for the film were between \$1million and \$2.4 million (Kuhn 2002: 58). This demonstrates that the model for successfully exploiting Britishness in the American market was discovered by accident and has, subsequently, been ruthlessly milked.

On *Four Weddings and a Funeral* Kuhn and his team developed what has since become the favoured distribution pattern for small British films in the US market. The size of the American market and the advertising channels that need to be tapped to ensure a competitive profile required in the mid-1990s, a spend of around \$20 million. However, with a little film and no stars (other than Andie McDowell), such an investment

represented an unacceptable risk for PolyGram. Instead they decided to build an audience for the film slowly, releasing it in just two theatres in New York and three in Los Angeles. In this way Kuhn reasoned that they could spend a ‘disproportionately high amount of TV advertising money in order to be competitive’ (2002: 61) in those two cities, producing higher than average takings per screen and thus, with the support of word-of-mouth endorsements, persuade movie theatres outside those cities to support the film. The success of the film’s early reception allowed PFE to roll it out across the US eventually reaching 1000 screens which was virtually unheard of for a British film.

Goodbye PFE, Hello Universal-Seagram

Towards the end of the 1990s, the board of Philips, PFE’s parent company, lost interest in the film and music division. Deciding to concentrate their interests on the hardware side of the electronics business, they sold PolyGram to Universal-Seagram for \$10.6 billion in 1998. Universal Seagram were mainly interested in the music divisions of PolyGram and merged them with its own Universal Music interests, at the cost of around 3000 jobs. Having failed to find a buyer for PFE, Universal then disappointed many by refusing to retain PFE as an independent entity, instead electing to fold its distribution operation into

Universal Pictures. Seagram, a drinks company in the control of the Bronfman family (who made their fortune in the late 1920s supplying bootleggers during the prohibition), bought Universal for £5.5 billion in 1995. Thus the new home for Working Title was a major Hollywood studio, itself a subsidiary of an even larger corporation whose major profit streams derive from an entirely unrelated industry. Working Title's two chairmen, Bevan and Fellner, eventually struck a deal with Universal which gave them a reported \$150 million a year over five years and the power to greenlight films under \$25 million (*Premier* 2001: 37). With this new financial backing Working Title did two things. Firstly, and quite sensibly from the point of view of maximising profits, they continued to repeat the successful model branded by *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. However, no doubt noting the success of *The Full Monty*, Working Title also sought to tap into the new receptiveness of the American market to a slightly more differentiated sense (within profoundly limited parameters) of Britishness. Thus they set up Working Title 2, a division within Working Title, designed to develop lower budget films mining this new internationally assimilable cultural territory.

The first product of this new diversified market strategy was of course *Billy Elliot* (2000). This was to be Universal's first low budget UK top

grossing film. It was distributed by Universal Focus, a division within Universal International Pictures, designed to market more ‘specialist’ films. The US trailer for the film framed it within the familiar ‘universal’ terms of Hollywood narratives. Opening with a shot of Billy getting knocked off his feet in the boxing ring, the voice-over tells us that every individual has a talent, but the ‘trick’ is to find out what it is: cue, Billy striking ballet poses. The necessary narrative obstacles to be overcome are rapidly sketched out: Billy’s struggle to master his talent, his father’s gender determined response and one brief visual reference to the conflict between the miners and the police. The voice-over assures us that this is the story of one boy’s ‘triumph’ that ‘changed everyone’, thus fitting the film into a dominant American ideological reconciliation between individualistic success and a vague attenuated sense of ‘community spirit’. The trailer thus amplified and honed cultural codes already present in the film that were suited to a profit-led American exhibition, while marginalising what was already within the film, a representation of the miners’ strike shorn of any national specificity or complexity. While the film did not match the staggering success of *The Full Monty* (which took \$44 million in the US and \$87 million in the UK) it still took \$19 million in the US market and \$25 million in the UK.

I have suggested that one of the roles of a subsidiary such as Working Title is to give the parent CTNC an *effective* presence within local and national contexts. This means cultivating links with talent and a network of other organisations that can be drawn together around specific projects. The genesis of *Billy Elliot* is a textbook example of how a long standing subsidiary such as Working Title extends the power and reach of the CTNC deep into the institutional and cultural territory of the nation whose cultural producers are sucked into the NIDCL. The script of *Billy Elliot* was developed by the BBC working in conjunction with the scriptwriter Lee Hall and Tiger Aspect Pictures. Tiger Aspect have worked in television, producing the *Bean* series starring Rowan Atkinson and *The Vicar of Dibley*. They have a track record of turning television material into hit international film commodities, with *Bean: The Ultimate Disaster Movie* (Mel Smith, 1997) and *Kevin and Perry Go Large* (2000). Tiger Aspect have close links with Working Title (who co-produced *Bean* while they belonged to PFE) including an agreement to give Working Title first refusal on their projects. Thus the *Billy Elliot* project was picked up by Working Title/Universal who minimised what was already a fairly low-risk project by getting the BBC to contribute £800,000, half for national television rights and half for a share in profits. The BBC subsequently screened the film on New Year's day 2003 and were rewarded with a 12.2 million rating for the film, comfortably

beating their 2002 Christmas Eve Hollywood film, *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers 1999) which got 10 million. However, Working Title sought to further spread their risk with *Billy Elliot* and successfully applied for £850,000 from the Arts Council National Lottery Film Fund, just prior to the establishment of the UK Film Council. Working Title then brought the theatre director Stephen Daldry onto the project, having been grooming him for sometime as someone who could follow in the footsteps of Sam Mendes, another theatre director who had made *American Beauty* (1999) for Stephen Spielberg's studio Dreamworks. With an overall budget of £2.8 million, more than half of which had been funded from other sources, Working Title/Universal were hardly over exposed on the production side. Once the film was finished they carefully calculated the film's potential with test screenings in the US market (Pulver 2000: 14). When the film was released, a number of British film critics were apparently moved to tears, their emotions yanked by a product instrumentally calculated by economic and institutional determinants that have their origins many thousands of miles away.

Conclusion

This analysis of the conditions of production for British cinema demonstrates that ‘production’ must refer to rather more than a discrete unit of production (the immediate company and people involved). Production has to be seen as a network of economic and institutional relationships across the industry as a whole, while territorially it must extend as wide as the economic and institutional relations of the CTNCs themselves. Production should also include audiences as well. I have suggested that the CTNCs plugging into the British film industry at the level of production are making films whose primary audience is in the first instance, located in the American market. British producers and cultural workers must access British and other world audiences by taking a *cultural detour* through this primary market as it is controlled and organised by the CTNCs. The colonising and accumulating logic of big cultural capital has demonstrated a recent interest in a more differentiated vision of Britishness than was once viable to it in international image markets. The trajectory of Working Title brings out the ironies of this new cultural turn. Having discarded the kind of cultural terrain in the 1980s which once marked a certain political and cultural ambition, Working Title Mark II follows (via its division, Working Title 2) other CTNCs such as Fox Searchlight and Disney/Miramax/Comedy Label and (re)turns in *Billy Elliot* to a simulation of the earlier model. In doing so of course, the CTNCs provide textual evidence to undermine the arguments

for more diversified and less commodified cultural production. One should not underestimate the extent to which mainstream film commentators (who play a crucial role in defining and constructing what constitutes a *legitimate* national cinema) may find this evidence compelling. One television critic deluded herself by turning a neo-colonial relation on its head, celebrating *Billy Elliot*'s success in 'conquer[ing] Hollywood' just before the film's second showing on the BBC at the end of 2003:

As *The Full Monty* showed, foul mouthed films about deprived areas up North are fine as long as they end on a high note. Someone like Ken Loach refuses to learn this lesson. In his last film, *Sweet Sixteen*, a gifted young boy who loves his mother gets taken under the wing of a savvy adult, but unlike Billy, this boy sees his dreams dissolve. Loach's film, by the by, made £180,000 in the States (O'Sullivan 2003: 27).

What this critic presents as a choice (the wish to be successful in the American market) is in fact not a choice at all: it is already an inscribed condition of the film's production. The end result, far from conquering Hollywood is evidence of Hollywood conquering the UK, for the cultural

compromises involved are rather more profound than simply a question of plumping for an optimistic ending. Fortunately there are signs of an increasing pressure on the UK Film Council for a more explicit commitment to an independent cultural agenda for British film. Alex Cox excoriated the Atlanticist vision of the then Film Council chair, Alan Parker, in the pages of *Sight and Sound* (Cox 2003) while the Film Parliament which gathered in Cambridge in 2003, assembled numerous concerned filmmakers and academics to discuss how British cinema could develop beyond a mere adjunct to Hollywood (The Film Parliament has been extensively reviewed in the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* volume 1, number 1). Even those cultural workers who have been associated with the most financially successful films, are dissatisfied with the options open to them within the NIDCL. Simon Beaufoy, screenwriter for *The Full Monty* complained of the compromises and depoliticisation that enabled it to be co-opted by the political establishment (Beaufoy, 1998: 61). Roger Michell who directed Working Title's *Notting Hill* and later went on to make the Hanif Kureshi scripted *The Mother* (2003), has also called for institutional changes that would allow cultural workers to make films 'about our society, culture and times' (Michell, 2003: 7). A reexamination of the British film industry's 'special relationship' with Hollywood, is long overdue.

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