

Mike Wayne

Utopianism and Film

Introduction

Utopianism is the capacity to imagine alternatives to the world as it is and to imagine 'an environment in which one is truly at ease'.¹ Clearly, then, a politics of social transformation such as Marxism ought to be interested in utopianism and, indeed, must be informed by it. Dialectical thinking, for example, insofar as it posits other possible worlds or potentialities embryonic or pregnant within this one, is implicitly utopian.² It is equally clear that utopianism, the imaginary projection into a world altered for the better, is central to popular culture generally and popular cinema specifically. I have argued elsewhere that an explicitly political cinema, such as Third Cinema, cannot do without the utopianism routinely mobilised by popular cinema.³ Indeed, utopianism is implicit in the identifications that the film spectator inevitably makes. This was understood by the Cuban Marxist filmmaker and theorist Tomás Gutiérrez Alea who argued that identification with the 'other' on

¹ Geoghegan 1987, p. 2.

² Harvey 1996, p. 56.

³ Wayne 2001.

screen is also a process of self-transformation 'in which spectators move away from themselves, stop being themselves so as to live within an *other* – in the character. That moment is invested with a special interest insofar as it constitutes the premise of a desirable change'.⁴

This premise is built into the armature of many popular film narratives where the characters with whom we are invited to invest our hopes and sympathies, seek to transform their own lives, breaking out from the limitations and constrictions of their environment. The desire for change inevitably involves popular film in a critique of the status quo and usually focuses on individual desire and transformation, although this is often also linked to a weaker sense of change for a wider community. Yet at the same time, the changes that popular film envisages, and the desires for change that it taps amongst its audience, are generally reconciled with the existing capitalist mode of production. Change and stasis, difference and continuity, utopianism and ideology are complexly interwoven.

Hollywood cinema has been the key site in which theories of utopianism in popular film have been both developed and contested. Along with the issue of how to hold onto the two poles of utopian critique and ideological legitimation within popular film, there are a number of other key theoretical and political issues that need to be negotiated in order for Marxists to productively engage with popular utopianism. These include popular utopianism's peculiar predisposition towards archaic and nostalgic modes; the extent to which utopianism articulates class consciousness; the relations between the emotional and cognitive dimensions of popular utopianism; popular film's intervention into conjunctural ideological struggles and the potential political uses to which popular utopianism might be put, if the Left is properly receptive to the desires and anxieties which it articulates. I will conclude by drawing these strands and issues together with an analysis of a British film, *Local Hero* (Bill Forsyth 1983). This national vector does give a distinct inflection to the film's utopianism (and its ideological complicities), at least when compared to Hollywood cinema. Exploring the resonance, relations and contradictions which the film has vis-à-vis its original context is of interest to us now because that context was the moment when the New Right and neoliberal project were just beginning to consolidate. Nearly twenty years later, with the benefit

⁴ Alea 1985, p. 51.

of distance and hindsight and with new forces of opposition to neoliberalism stirring, *Local Hero* speaks to our time and its time with equal force.

Utopianism and cultural theory

Debates concerning the relationship between film and utopianism are only a particular subset of a broader tradition of enquiry into the links between utopianism, media, technology and consumerism. Walter Benjamin's study of a city and a century in his unfinished *magnum opus*, the *Arcades Project*, was an early Marxist engagement with utopianism as it manifested itself in the emergent consumer culture of Paris in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. In a compressed synopsis of the *Arcades Project* from 1935, Benjamin detects in a 'thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions' the utopian yearnings that seek to 'transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organisation of production'. These utopian yearnings correspond to the potentialities which the 'new means of production' offer, but which are 'still ruled by the form of the old', subordinated that is, to the narrow priorities of capitalism. Yet these utopian yearnings or 'wish images' have a peculiar temporal character. While they are generated by *new* collective social relations and technological innovations, they seek to distance themselves 'from all that is antiquated' by regenerating archaic, primordial elements, often taking the form of myth or nature.⁵ The very word *arcade*, derived from the idealised rural Arcadia of Greek and Roman poetry, is an example.

One of the lessons to be learned from Benjamin is that nostalgia and the archaic – too often dismissed by the Left as reactionary predilections for unrecoverable social relations – are complexly linked to modernity and potentially the site of latent discontent with the social order. One of the strengths of Benjamin's study is that he was able to operate along the two axes of ideology critique *and* the reconstructing of the utopian dimensions of the phantasmagoria (the reified spectacle of the consumer landscape). Cultural analysis has persistently failed to hold onto these two axes simultaneously, as the tendency in recent theory to virtually equate popular culture with a realm of utopian transgression testifies. In the 1930s, Adorno by contrast,

⁵ Benjamin 1999, p. 4.

balked at Benjamin's suggestion that mass culture be a repository of utopian possibilities. Commenting on Benjamin's synopsis of the *Arcades Project*, Adorno asked him instead to concentrate on the nineteenth century as 'Hell'.⁶

Of course, nature and myth function ideologically within popular culture. Wish images, generated by what Benjamin called the collective unconscious, can be channelled into legitimising the existing class-divided order. In his 1979 essay 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', Fredric Jameson explores this dialectic between ideology and utopianism using Freud's concept of repression. Jameson's concern is to reformulate the simplistic notion of manipulation and instead stress the 'transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies' which mass culture performs.⁷ This involves the *management* of 'two inconsistent and even incompatible features'.⁸ On the one hand, cultural works have a 'wish-fulfilling function' but, on the other, that wish must be to some extent repressed, its full implications contained and safely channelled. In Freud, the symbolic fulfilment of a repressed wish allows the individual subject some psychic gratification without threatening their socially constituted identity. Rewriting this structure in relation to cultural texts and public consumption, the transformational work

strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealisable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can be momentarily stilled.

For Jameson, then, there is a dynamic relationship between legitimating the social order and acknowledging the utopian hopes, which potentially transcend it. Certainly, Jameson formulates a fairly restricted space for these utopian aspirations (his readings of popular films tend to weigh more towards their ideological operations) and the 'negative and critical' implications that they have for the social order appear to be fairly weak. The work of mass culture is to 'manage anxieties about the social order' but, nevertheless, Jameson agrees that this requires giving those anxieties 'some rudimentary expression', and, in offering certain resolutions to those anxieties, tapping into the 'most

⁶ Adorno 1988, p. 111.

⁷ Jameson 1992, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibid.*

fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity'.⁹ Indeed, for Jameson, it is the task of Marxist criticism to detect what he sees as the faint 'ineradicable drive towards collectivity'.¹⁰

To the complex dynamics between ideology and utopianism within mass culture, we can add a related one implied by the paradox that the drive towards collectivity is both ineradicable but also faint. It is ineradicable presumably because capital, despite itself, represents and advances a partial socialisation of production and consumption, yet it is faint due to the reification of production and consumption, which is also inextricably inscribed into cultural areas as into most other areas of production and consumption. At the point of production, the cultural artefact is presumed not to be an integral unity but is instead disaggregated into an arrangement of specific – market-tested – effects. The whole labour-process is geared not around qualitative aims but the quantitative means of a standardised production process abstract enough to be applied (from above) in principle and in practice to wildly different activities (from filmmaking to fast food).¹¹ Although Jameson does not pursue this in relation to film form, it is possible to see how this instrumentalisation presses itself into the very grammar of film: the *découpage* has the modularity and regularity of the Taylorised production process itself, resulting in narrative structures shorn of all superfluous material just as surely as labour-time is managed during the production process. At the point of consumption, mass culture is pitched to those fragmented and atomised agglomerations known as 'markets' (now globally distributed), which, again, militate against the emergence of collective identities.

Capitalism, Jameson argues, 'systematically dissolves the fabric of all cohesive social groups . . . including its own ruling class'.¹² The distinction to be drawn here is Marx's famous one between a class in itself and for itself. The class in itself (objectively constituted by the relations of production) does not dissolve as such, but its apprehension of itself, its means of cultural representation and self-representation, its ability to project and recognise its own self-image, become substantially blocked. In the cultural sphere, then, the class struggle is the 'slow and intermittent development of genuine class

⁹ Jameson 1992, p. 30.

¹⁰ Jameson 1992, p. 34.

¹¹ Jameson 1992, p. 10.

¹² Jameson 1992, p. 23.

consciousness . . . whereby the collective breaks through the reified atomization (Sartre calls it the seriality) of capitalist social life'.¹³

Yet where can this breakthrough occur when culture saturates 'every element of consumer society'¹⁴ if not culture itself? Mass culture is paradoxically both the problem and the medium through which to reconstruct social class. It is the 'insubstantial bottomless realm of cultural and collective fantasy'¹⁵ where class is concealed, yet the very same symbolic material vents deep down into the structural class contradictions of our time.

What, though, counts as 'genuine class consciousness' or, rather, if this is asking too much of mass culture generally speaking, what counts as *intimations* of it? One difficulty with Jameson's essay is the macro-level at which he is discussing reification and utopianism: it is primarily conceived, quite necessarily, in relation to the mode of production. But it is equally necessary, if one wants to engage with the 'intermittent' development, or better still, *vicissitudes* of class consciousness, to engage in a more conjunctural analysis, one attuned to historically specific ideological struggles. We shall see in a moment that this requires engaging with Gramsci's work in this area. However, the direction which Gramscian Marxism took in the 1980s was also problematic – and will have to be guarded against – precisely because the ideological struggle tended to float free (it was disarticulated) from the question of the mode of production (leading to a very bad utopianism). In addition to negotiating the necessary mediation between base and superstructure, there are a number of other related questions that arise from Jameson's essay. Are there any problems in recognising class (and what conception of class is operative) given that critics are no more immune to the pressures of reification than the cultural texts they study? If some sort of (intimated) class consciousness can be reconstructed from mass culture, can that epistemological operation be put to the service of political strategy? And what about the affective, emotional dimension to mass culture, which Jameson's rationalistic critique largely ignores?

Surprisingly, Jameson does not formulate in any detail what the 'fundamental hopes of the collectivity' might be. This is where Richard Dyer's article 'Entertainment and Utopia' is helpful. Focusing on film musicals, Dyer makes

¹³ Jameson 1992, p. 24.

¹⁴ Jameson 1992, p. 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

his case for arguing that utopianism is the central thrust of entertainment. The common-sense notion that film and popular culture generally represent a form of escapism (a judgement which can be made to either dismiss it or resist studying it seriously) contains within it the kernel of a radical premise: what is it that is so unfulfilling in our lives that we need to escape from it? Film does not offer utopianism in the form of blueprints as to how a better society might be organised – rather, on offer is what utopia would *feel* like.¹⁶ These feelings are articulated by formal strategies as much as by the actual ‘content’ of the representations. Dyer specifies five utopian qualities which popular film mobilises: energy (the capacity to act vigorously); abundance (for example in the sheer spectacle/scale of the musical); intensity (experiencing emotion directly, fully and authentically); transparency (of interpersonal and institutional relations) and community.¹⁷ Each of these is clearly a response to a lack or absence in everyday life, which Dyer identifies respectively as: exhaustion, scarcity, dreariness/monotony, manipulation and fragmentation.

Thus Dyer is able to specify the socially generated needs to which entertainment responds and which it mediates. But Dyer’s formulation of the dynamic between ideology and utopianism is somewhat curious. He suggests that there are ‘give-away absences’ in the *needs* which popular culture defines as important: there is ‘no mention of class, race or patriarchy’.¹⁸ Leaving aside the question of race and gender it is clear that there must be a very narrow and limited conception of ‘class’ operating (indeed it is a reified one) if these couplets (energy/exhaustion, intensity/monotony, abundance/scarcity, transparency/manipulation, community/fragmentation) appear unconnected to class relations and class struggle. Dyer, I would suggest, cannot *see* the class implications of the categories he formulates (apart from community ‘the most directly working class in source’)¹⁹ because he is operating within a sociological conception in which class is primarily defined by the visibility of existing social strata. Class becomes, in this view, a set of (usually statically conceived) attributes rather than something more generative and relational.

Within the Marxist tradition, class is defined more as a process, a dynamic inscribed into the historically determined level of productive life, which is

¹⁶ Dyer 1985, p. 222.

¹⁷ Dyer 1985, pp. 224–5.

¹⁸ Dyer 1985, p. 228.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

antagonistically organised around fundamental classes. It is therefore 'a logic', one which certainly operates through class actors and is, to some extent modified and inflected by class agents, but which is also something pervasive and totalising, working its way – not in the first instance or the last instance, but through complex mediations – into the fabric of all social, political, economic, interpersonal and private relations. Within this conception, it is hard to see how dreariness and monotony can be separated from the alienation of control and accountability of social life intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production. What I am arguing here is that if social class is to be recomposed from the 'bottomless realm' of mass culture as Jameson would have it, we need that rather more expansive and dynamic sense of 'class' denoted by the category 'mode of production'.

Dyer's article was originally published in the late 1970s, but Alan O'Shea has recently taken up its themes and approach again in the context of the 1980s and 90s. He argues that Dyer's categories help explore the way cinema 'recognises the frustrations and inhibitions embodied in contemporary institutions and offers glimpses of transformed social relationships'.²⁰ Compared to Jameson, O'Shea enlarges the space for 'negative' and critical currents within popular culture:

at the very *heart* of consumer culture, in the most popular narratives of our time, elements of a social critique are to be found, and imaginings of 'something better'.²¹

O'Shea argues that claims that popular cinema has been transformed into a postmodern cinema – one which would have a severely attenuated utopianism – misrepresent the broad output of popular cinema by focusing on a narrow – constantly repeated – selection of films. Defending the progressive impulses of modernity against the postmodern scepticism of meta-narratives, O'Shea argues that the ideals of 'emancipation, equality and community' are still evident or implicit in broad swathes of popular film. He is critical of Jameson's postmodern arguments of the 1980s, which in effect argue that popular culture has become seamlessly incorporated into the logic of capital. Here, even the faint hopes for mass culture which Jameson holds out in his 1979 essay, have

²⁰ O'Shea 1996, p. 243.

²¹ O'Shea 1996, p. 257.

been terminated. By contrast, O'Shea stresses, rightly I think, how popular cinema is 'itself contradictory and troubled, itself a site of struggle over the future direction of society'.²²

O'Shea sets out a very different stall to Jameson in terms of what intellectuals can reasonably expect from popular culture/cinema and how films and other forms of popular culture, might be useful politically. O'Shea suggests that Jameson is bound to be disappointed with popular cinema because his emphasis on cognitive mapping, or class consciousness, suggests that he is looking for 'a politics already articulated', that is to say, a more or less fully developed social analysis corresponding to the objective social conditions.²³ O'Shea instead draws on Gramsci who argued that socialists had to engage with the *inchoate* 'common-sense' of the subaltern classes, sifting it for those 'aspirations and discontents compatible with socialism',²⁴ rather than presenting the masses with a theory of class exploitation. Of course, the latter is the indispensable prerequisite for understanding the subjectivity of the former, but to turn the theory into transformational practices requires a dialogue and communication between the rarefied pages of *Capital* and everyday experience. There is, then, a class relationship to be negotiated between the progressive intellectual and the 'more fragmentary and affective utopian' elements within popular culture.²⁵ O'Shea develops Dyer's argument that utopianism in popular culture is very much a matter of feelings, sentiments and sensibilities and suggests that the Left's emphasis on rationalism and the 'battle of ideas' has blocked a more productive engagement with the affective dimensions of popular culture.

But is O'Shea overemphasising the extent to which popular culture and, by extension, the masses, are characterised by emotional, affective and fragmentary impulses? O'Shea is trying to reconcile a class split between progressive intellectuals and the masses, between rationalism and feelings, and I think one would have to agree (and Bourdieu's work bears this out)²⁶ that there is some truth to this fissure; but is it not also a binary opposition that itself needs deconstructing in the process of reconciling these torn halves? Are the masses to be uniformly characterised as governed by their hearts (and

²² O'Shea 1996, p. 241.

²³ O'Shea 1996, p. 246.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ O'Shea 1996, p. 260.

²⁶ Bourdieu 1996.

conversely intellectuals by their heads)? Can we fully separate the cognitive and the affective? Gramsci in fact offers a more dialectical conception when he argues that 'common-sense' is but the 'sedimentation' left behind or established by previous or dominant philosophies.²⁷ Nor is common-sense homogenous and unified. Instead it is composite, containing 'Stone Age elements', 'prejudices from all past history' and 'principles of a more advanced science'.²⁸ Thus it is not static, but rather it is continually transforming itself, 'enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life'.²⁹

This more dialectical conception of the relations between the cognitive and the affective has implications for film criticism. O'Shea argues that in *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987), a big 1980s box office success, the teenage middle-class heroine is transformed at an upmarket summer vacation camp when she is admitted to the 'forbidden quarters of the (working class) entertainment staff, where sensuous, uninhibited and expressive dancing is the characteristic activity'.³⁰ The transparency and energy of this forbidden quarter are constructed using lighting, sound, editing and body movement: a feeling of utopianism generated through formal strategies. Granted, there is a strong affective dimension here, but the affective realm is also opened up by certain 'cognitions' (implicit and 'intuitive') around working- and middle-class life and how the latter's commitment to hierarchy, formality and control governs interpersonal relations with fellow members, relations with the body and relations with others outside the class. How plausible and pleasurable would it be if we tried reversing the class trajectory and have a working-class heroine 'liberated' in the same way by her entry into a middle-class milieu?

The separation between the cognitive and the affective and the somewhat undialectical equation between feeling and the people may well feed into O'Shea's use of Dyer's categories. For there is a marked reluctance to articulate them in his readings of the films to the question of class relations, as if that would be to impose an overly rationalised, already complete (Marxian) politics on popular culture. O'Shea explains the utopianism of the films in terms of more liberal (less class-specific) categories: energy, integrity, expressiveness,

²⁷ Gramsci 1986, p. 203.

²⁸ Gramsci 1986, p. 201.

²⁹ Gramsci 1986, p. 203.

³⁰ O'Shea 1996, p. 250.

autonomy, community and so on. Partly this is because, as with Dyer, class is seen as relevant only when it is explicitly figured within the narrative. But, as I argued above, the explicit representation (or not) of class does not exhaust class analysis which, within the Marxian tradition, does have a more totalising set of thematics which can indeed be articulated with the indeterminate notions of expressiveness, autonomy and community. We shall see below that O'Shea's reluctance to articulate these terms to a class logic is symptomatic of the direction Gramscian Marxism took during the 1980s.

However, what I want to now draw out from O'Shea's essay is his suggestive remarks about how popular culture may be useful politically. O'Shea agrees with Jameson that popular cinema does not generally provide 'cognitive maps', but he disagrees with the conclusion that therefore 'popular utopianism is of *no* political relevance or use'.³¹ He argues instead that 'the presence of utopian aspirations' could be 'a very significant element of a conjuncture',³² one which signposts the kinds of 'affective investment' which any strong political project will require.³³ The idea that popular culture may be used as signposts is one which I want to develop then, but I will take it in a different direction, partly because O'Shea underestimates the extent to which cognitions about the world we live in are embedded into popular culture. Positioning myself between Jameson's desire (and therefore ineluctable disappointment) for fully developed cognitive maps and O'Shea's sense of the popular as primarily inchoate and affective, I argue that popular culture, both its utopian aspirations *and* its corresponding social anxieties, articulate *intimations* of class consciousness.

The 'hegemony' of neoliberalism

I want to return to the 1980s, the moment when the present political conjuncture, characterised by the domination of neoliberalism, first began to consolidate itself. The political expression of this domination was the successive elections of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US. Only recently has this neoliberal domination begun to be seriously challenged. Labour

³¹ O'Shea 1996, p. 258.

³² Ibid.

³³ O'Shea 1996, p. 264.

movements in Europe, particularly France, have started to contest the implications which neoliberalism has for welfare states and social entitlements,³⁴ while new social movements and NGOs have been instrumental in generating awareness of how rapacious global financial institutions are in their exploitation of the Third World. In the 1980s, however, much of the UK Left, both inside and outside the Labour Party, began to shift to the right (thus laying the ground for the Blair 'Project'). They argued that the intellectual and moral leadership established by Thatcherism was largely unassailable and could only be engaged with by working to some extent – and for some writers to a large extent – within the ideological parameters of the enemy. Thus Charlie Leadbeater, then part of the *Marxism Today*/'New Times' project, called for a 'progressive individualism' as a left or possibly social-democratic response to Thatcherism's reactionary inflection of post-Fordist individualism.³⁵

The theoretical rationalisation for this retreat lay in the interpretation of Gramscian Marxism that became popular during the 1980s. A representative and influential figure here was Chantal Mouffe. Her concern was to develop a conception of ideological struggle that escaped economic or class reductionism. According to her, economistic Marxism made ideological struggle largely impossible or redundant by insisting that classes already had their own 'paradigmatic ideologies'.³⁶ Thus there could be no ideological change, no dialogue about values, no process of mutual learning between (or within) different groups and classes and the process of forming alliances could only be one of imposing the values of one class or class fraction on others (O'Shea's concern vis-à-vis the intellectuals and the masses).

Mouffe argues instead, that 'ideological elements' have no fixed meaning or class belonging; rather, they are a site of struggle whose meanings and politics are up for grabs. But if ideas, values, 'ideological elements' are genuinely *autonomous* from class relations, then how are we meant to assess whether a given inflection of an ideological element is compatible with socialism or capitalism? Thus, in the late 1970s at least, Mouffe was willing to reintroduce (reluctantly one feels) *some* linkage between class and ideas and she does this by drawing on Gramsci's distinction between ideological elements and 'hegemonic principles'. The latter are the unifying 'system

³⁴ Bourdieu 1998.

³⁵ Leadbeater 1989, pp. 137–8.

³⁶ Mouffe 1986, p. 228.

of values' compatible with the interest of the class *at the level of the relations of production*.³⁷ Ideological struggle is then conceived as a process of 'disarticulation-rearticulation', whereby ideological elements are disembedded from one hegemonic principle (capitalist) and then rearticulated with another hegemonic principle (socialist).

This conception, it seems to me, is very useful, but we can immediately see how important it would be not to confuse an ideological element with a hegemonic principle. The notion of consumption for example, is an ideological element that can be pulled in radically different directions depending on its articulating principle. But the idea, implicit in Leadbeater's notion of progressive individualism, that access to social wealth should depend on private purchasing power, is not an ideological element but a hegemonic principle which is irreconcilable with socialism. Furthermore, it is easy enough to see how, in the context of the political defeats of the 1980s, theorists could concentrate more and more on the struggle over ideological elements, which become largely divorced from any consideration of (socialist) hegemonic principles. Increasingly, if largely tacitly, ideological struggle came to take place within the hegemonic principles compatible with capital.

What is striking though is the contrast between the *Marxism Today*/*New Times*' position and right-wing Labour Party shifts, which basically accepted that Thatcherism had 'hegemonised' the majority, and many of the decade's popular films, which display a much more anxious 'structure of feeling' in their visions of capitalism's organised power and its merciless pursuit of the profit motive over human need. Now, of course, one could alternatively simply look at the annual British Social Attitudes surveys, which throughout the 1980s found strong resistance to many of the central tenets of Thatcherism.³⁸ However, studying popular films does provide us precisely with a signpost to where the most affective hopes and anxieties are to be found, where latent concerns around current trends within capitalism as well as desires which capitalism can only one-sidedly (if at all) meet, could be most effectively re-articulated to socialist hegemonic principles. Ideological elements such as the family, nature, the environment, globalisation, gender and community were being anxiously meditated on in popular films of the 1980s. It is the Left's

³⁷ Mouffe 1986, p. 228.

³⁸ Mackie 1997, p. 10.

receptiveness to these ideological elements which is its greatest pedagogic challenge. The opportunities which engagement with these ideological elements offer is perhaps more evident now, in retrospect, but if the Left learns the lessons then there is no reason why now and in the future popular culture cannot be mined for its anticipations of political opportunities and possible cracks and contradictions in a seemingly ascendant ruling class.

Local Hero

I want to now draw together the many strands of the discussion around utopianism and apply it to Bill Forsyth's 1983 film *Local Hero*, which was released in the same year that Margaret Thatcher won her crushing second general election victory at the polls. Yet this low-budget British film which became very popular suggests a much more deeply ambivalent and contradictory conjuncture than the 165-seat majority that Thatcher had won in June. While it is undoubtedly true that in terms of representations of Scottishness (a particular particularity), *Local Hero* is a profoundly unsatisfactory film,³⁹ it is of interest because of its sensitivity to its historical context and a universal problem. The film keys into and anticipates some major themes and anxieties of the 1980s and beyond and articulates strong utopian and transcendent impulses.

The film opens with a promotional video for Knox Oil, a multinational American corporation:

Nature guards her treasures jealously. Just a decade ago these fields were beyond reach: we didn't have the technology. Today a Knox engineer will tell you that he might need a little time, but he'll get the oil. He knows that a little time is all we have left.

Within the video, the camera pans across arctic wastes and deserts before triumphantly revealing the pipes and refineries which testify to humanity's increasing control over the natural world. However, this valorisation of capital is immediately called into question by the ambiguity of the voice-over's final line concerning 'a little time is all we have left'. Its intimations of mortality set into play a chain of discourses concerning the insignificance of human

³⁹ McArthur 1994, p. 119.

activities and even the prospect of humanity itself being fundamentally transformed or erased by some near future apocalyptic event. The film's allegorical warning concerning the sustainability of capitalism in regard to both the human and natural world is embodied in the comet for which Knox boss, Happer (Burt Lancaster) is searching. Despite owning Knox Oil, Happer's distanciation from his own objective social position is signalled by his snoring figure as the promotional video comes to an end. The mogul who has lost interest in or is disenchanted with his own company is a common trope in Hollywood cinema (see for example *Big* (Penny Marshall, 1988)).

Nevertheless, Happer's search for the comet is ambiguous. Does it signify his discontent with the hubris of the corporate world and a search for something otherworldly, which would put humanity's achievements into perspective? Happer's therapy sessions with Moritz would appear to be a comic attempt to introduce humility into the life of this all-powerful figure. Moritz declares triumphantly at one point that he has got Happer's 'ego on the run' as he tries to introduce some self-doubt into his life. On the other hand, perhaps Happer's search for the comet (Moritz wonders if he would call it 'Happer's Comet') is just another vainglorious project, the personal equivalent to corporate sponsorship. Another way of phrasing this is that the film wants to introduce some position from which capitalism could be relativised and some value other than exchange allowed to operate. The difficulty is finding a perspective or position that is not already complicit with or helpless before capitalism's reach and power. Indeed, the film even has a Russian submarine captain arriving off the Scottish coast to discuss his stocks and shares with the village accountant, Gordon Urquhart.

The plot linking Knox Oil to the Scottish village of Ferness is this: the oil company wants to build a refinery in the village bay, which means buying the inhabitants out and destroying the village. Happer sends a Knox functionary, Macintyre, to negotiate with the villagers. Thus it is Ferness in which the film hopes to find some location to mobilise an alternative to American capitalism and criticise the aping of it by Thatcherism. It is Ferness which will be invested with the 'most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity' (Jameson), although with some ironic self-doubt attached, as we shall see. Ferness, frozen at an earlier moment of capitalist development, evokes an archaic blend of nature and, through its intertextual references to *Brigadoon* (Vincent Minnelli, 1954), myth. Ferness is our old friend the organic community, or, within

traditions of Scottish representation, it is firmly part of the Kailyard tradition which invokes a 'primitive' nostalgic and above all parochialist community.⁴⁰ But before we dismiss this as reactionary nostalgia, we must remember Benjamin's point that nostalgia and the archaic are complexly linked to modernity and potentially the site of discontent with the social order.

Thus Macintyre undergoes a slow transformation after his arrival in Ferness. Initially he is too alienated to realise that he is alienated. He is bemused by Happer's – non-business related – instruction that he keep an eye out for any unusual activity in the night sky when in Scotland. His isolation and loneliness in Texas is underlined by his failure to get a date before he leaves for Scotland. Once in Ferness, his repressions become more evident, manifesting themselves in his fussiness with his suits, his stiff manner of walking, the bleeper on his watch reminding him to phone Houston and his overdependence on the gimmickry comforts of modernity such as his electric suitcase (that has run out of power and so will not open).

This contrasts with Gordon Urquhart, who enjoys not only minimal divisions of labour (he is the village accountant, lawyer and pub landlord) but, in his sexual relations with his wife Stella, something approximating to that 'libidinal rationality' which Marcuse held out as a utopian reconciliation between affect and reason, desire and social convention.⁴¹ Oldsen, the Scottish-based Knox contact, asks Macintyre if he thinks Gordon and Stella 'do it every night'. Macintyre thinks not, precisely because it is unimaginable. Yet as with all organic communities imagined from the twentieth century onwards, this archaic little village is a tiny geographical and psychical space within a universe otherwise dominated by commodity relations, its critical reach is desperately truncated by impending accommodation to the global system. The film itself knows this, for while it plays on the political symbolism of Scotland as a bastion against Thatcherite values, as well as a decade-long debate concerning the exploitation by American and British multinationals of Scottish oil reserves, the ironic plot twist is that the villagers can hardly wait to sell up and move on. Around the village the talk is of nothing else but the luxury goods which people will buy (Rolls Royce or Maserati?) with their petrodollars.

⁴⁰ Craig 1982, pp. 11–12.

⁴¹ Marcuse 1987, p. 199.

The ambivalence of Happer's desires is now reproduced within the ideologue of the organic community itself. The untrammelled sexual desires of the villagers are defined against the sublimation of sexual energy into the crowded commodified world of advanced capitalism represented by Macintyre. Yet this is the very world the villagers are rushing to join. The paradox is that, in getting back to nature, the film finds desires which threaten to explode the organic social order which is offered as more natural than global capitalism. The antinomy around which the text oscillates is that, on the one hand, capitalism appears to be outside natural desires, corrupting them, but on the other hand, it appears to be already inscribed within desire, which seeks its commodified object world to find multiple expression. We are back again to the film's dilemma concerning the reach and power of capitalism: how totalising is it? Are there any values other than exchange-value? Can desire be articulated outside commodities and capital?

The film's solution lies with preserving the organic community and stifling the desires of its inhabitants to escape the limiting opportunities, which is, of course, the negative side of the valorised 'smaller' life. Part of the poignancy of the film is that it is not so misty-eyed about the smaller life that it does not recognise the progress of the modern world. In one scene, Macintyre and Oldsen are trudging across a beachy bay. They are discussing all the commodities which are dependent on oil. 'Can you imagine a world without oil?' asks Macintyre. The list includes: cars, paint, polish, ink, nylon, detergents, Perspex, polythene, dry-cleaning fluids and waterproof coats. The dialogue is a testament to the way capitalist modernity has expanded the forces of production, by the transformation of nature into useful commodities. There is however a tension between the sound and the image. For the scene is constructed in long shot, diminishing the human characters against the backdrop of the setting sun, seeking to relativise human endeavour through the grandeur of nature even as it acknowledges humanity's active transformation of the natural world.

The film's solution to the contradiction between expanding the forces of production and the destructive effects of capital's social relations, is not of course to transform the latter, but to provide an imaginary (ideological) reconciliation between Knox Oil and Ferness. With the Ferness inhabitants holding out for more money, Macintyre's trajectory is moving away from the business world altogether. This happens, significantly, just after Macintyre is

introduced to Ben Knox, who owns (and lives on) the all-important beach where the refinery is to be built. Looking up into the night sky, Macintyre is astonished by a meteor shower. The spectacle is overly familiar to Gordon Urquhart and he is unimpressed. But Macintyre begins to appreciate the strange and mysterious quality of nature, which the soundtrack is invoking through a mixture of horns and synthesisers. The impact of this spectacle on Macintyre is dramatic. In subsequent scenes, his dress codes change as he loses his tie and top button; he becomes much more enthusiastic about Happer's comet and he loses interest in the details of the business deal and begins collecting shells.

The deal however has been apparently spiked by Ben Knox's refusal to sell the beach. Knox thus becomes the 'local hero' for he is the true guardian spirit of the natural world. The name Knox also of course raises an interesting genealogical question. For Happer's vague sense of the illegitimacy of his business activities is related to the fact that his father bought Knox Oil from someone called Knox in the early part of the twentieth century. Encouraged by Macintyre's reports of night sky activity, Happer flies in to find Knox blocking negotiations. While Macintyre and the community anxiously wait, Happer disappears into Knox's ramshackle abode, only to emerge and announce that the bay is in the wrong location for the refinery and that he wants instead to build an observatory and an institute for the study of the sky and sea. Thus the villagers are rescued from their greed by Knox and Happer, whose agreement represents the film's fantasy reconciliation between the global and the local, multinational capital and small-scale ownership (Ben's beach), between corporate science and nature, between nature's transformation under commodity production and its conservation, and between past, present and future.

Yet this ideological solution does not quite contain all the questions left unanswered. When Macintyre tries to console Urquhart that at least the new plans will bring 'work and money', Urquhart repeats the refrain 'work and money' with evident weariness. Macintyre himself is dispatched immediately, like the wage-slave he is, back to Houston. There we see him staring out across the lonely city from his balcony. The film then cuts to the village in the early morning and the phone box, which has been Macintyre's communication link with Houston, starts ringing. Thus the film continues into its final image its aching sense of loss and absence which is the dominant

emotional tone of the film. For the conflicting desires of Macintyre, on the one hand, and the villagers, on the other, have been separated from the imaginary preservation of the social order. This is significantly different from Hollywood's characteristic utopianism, which manages to reconcile fulfilment of individual desire with the established social order. *Local Hero* is typically British insofar as *resignation* is the dominant emotional tenor of the film. It has a narrative inconclusiveness, which, recalling the discussion above regarding rationalised and instrumentalised production practices, it is tempting to relate to the *relatively* low-budget, small-scale 'cottage' industry that forms the film's production history.

Thus within a specific historical conjuncture, *Local Hero* makes a particular and contradictory intervention into the political hegemony of neoliberalism, resonating with the anxieties generated by capitalism and the utopian aspirations that it cannot meet. Those anxieties around globalisation, around the pervasive penetration of exchange-value into all social and natural relations, around the triumph of capitalism (the Russian sailor-capitalist is an extraordinary presentiment) and around environmental destruction are only now beginning to manifest themselves as a focus for political opposition – but were anticipated by this popular culture text in the early 1980s. The utopian aspirations for, on the one hand, a transcendence of alienated social relations and a new contract with nature, but, on the other hand, the expansion of horizons and material benefits which progress has bequeathed, point to those seams in popular culture towards which a Marxist politics could productively orient itself. Indeed, only Marxism has the philosophical base to offer a genuine reconciliation to these antinomies. In terms of the methodologies for reading the popular, I have tried to reconcile some tensions in Marxist approaches around the archaic and the modern, ideology and critique, cognition and affect, ideological struggle and its re-articulation to the mode of production.

References

- Adorno, Theodor 1988, 'Letter To Walter Benjamin', in *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: Verso.
- Alea, Tomás Gutiérrez 1985, 'The Viewer's Dialectic', *Jump Cut* 30: 48–53.
- Benjamin, Walter 1999, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

- Bourdieu, Pierre 1996, *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre 1998, *Acts of Resistance, Against The New Myths of Our Time*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Craig, Cairns 1982, 'Myths Against History: Tartanry and Kailyard in 19th Century Scottish Literature', in *Scotch Reels, Scotland in Cinema and Television*, edited by Colin McArthur, London: British Film Institute.
- Dyer, Richard 1985, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in *Movies and Methods*, Volume 2, edited by Bill Nichols, California: University of California Press.
- Geoghegan, Vincent 1987, *Marxism and Utopianism*, London: Methuen.
- Gramsci, Antonio 1986, 'Class, Culture and Hegemony', in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*, edited by Tony Bennett, Graham Martin, Colin Mercer, Janet Woollacott, London: Batsford Academic/Open University Press.
- Harvey, David 1996, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jameson, Fredric 1992, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', in *Signatures of The Visible*, London: Routledge.
- Leadbeater, Charlie 1989, 'Power To the Person', in *New Times, The Changing Face Of Politics*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Mackie, David 1997, 'British Social Attitudes Survey: Thatcher's Revolution a Failure', *The Guardian*, 19 November 1997.
- Marcuse, Herbert 1987, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, London: Ark Paperbacks.
- McArthur, Colin 1994, 'The Cultural Necessity of a Poor Celtic Cinema', in *Border Crossing, Film in Ireland, Britain and Europe*, edited by John Hill, Martin McLoone and Paul Hainsworth, Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies.
- Mouffe, Chantal 1986, 'Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci', in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*, edited by Tony Bennett, Graham Martin, Colin Mercer, Janet Woollacott, London: Batsford Academic/Open University Press.
- O'Shea, Alan 1996, 'What a Day for a Daydream; Modernity, Cinema and the Popular Imagination in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Modern Times, Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, edited by Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea, London: Routledge.
- Wayne, Mike 2001, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema*, London: Pluto Press.