

Tom Jennings **The Poverty of Imagination**

The UK's soporific slide deeper into fiscally-imposed structurally-readjusted barbarity, without much in the way of disturbance to putative social peace, has now been thoroughly punctured. First the exuberant Lethal Bizzle of EMA kids prompted their university 'betters' to trash Conservative HQ. Latterly, so-called Black Blocs bypassed passive masses of notional protest and pissed on complicit bureaucracy to attack the City. And then, most vividly, came unexpected eruptions of spontaneous sustained rage among festering slumdweller that blazed all over the national shop.

What is remarkable, nevertheless, is how unprepared those supposedly in-the-know were in the face of these socio-political squalls, storms and tornadoes. Sure enough, the *flog-'em-and-bang-'em-up* brigade broadcast their bile in a prompt chorus of class-hatred, as if the perpetrators of anti-social crime were restricted to archetypal, opportunistic, small-time hoodies and arsonists. As if it had nothing to do with a wider, more deliberate orchestration on an apocalyptic scale, thanks to elite financial obscenities mugging the 99% and foreclosing on the mortgaged futures of global and local populations.

But why do the revolting poor come as such a surprise? After all, despite unhealthy upstart idealisms regularly messing up business-as-usual elsewhere, a mythic enlightened middlebrow rationalism is normally alleged to have bewitched this geographic idyll. Early last century it even gave birth to that dispassionately charitable media empiricism called 'documentary' or 'social realism'. This has remained at the centre of the country's fantasy factories ever since – despite infernal colonisations by vulgar American kitsch and purist continental aesthetics. And this cultural paraphernalia of institutional and representational patterns, disciplines, practices, and rhetorics has always taken as its very special scientific project the minute observation and adumbration of the travails of the poor. In other words, where was the careful data gathering, processing and interpretation, on large and small public screens, when the think-tanks, policymakers, police, and movers-and-shakers seemingly needed it?

Accepting that current predicaments set-in during Thatcher's yesteryears, not yesterday's recession, this essay subjectively surveys two decades of austere growth in British poverty porn. Dissecting grim-up-north platitudes, perilous-down-south perambulations and sundry slumming-it social-realist serenades, an attempt is made to see if the national film oeuvre ought to have opened any eyes.



The Coming of Age of Austerity

UK cinema responded in a relatively sluggish manner to the tragedies of the 1980s, hot on the heels of the Tories' first decade of cuts and the accompanying degradation of working and living conditions for vast swathes of the populace. In the 1990s, however, veteran social-realist director Ken Loach was soon able to make up for lost ground, forensically detailing the latter in terms of restructured employment (*Riff Raff*, 1992; *The Navigators*, 2001) and unemployment (*Raining Stones*, 1993; *Ladybird Ladybird*, 1994; *My Name Is Joe*, 1998) – with Jimmy McGovern's rare account of grassroots industrial struggle in *Dockers* (Channel 4, 1999) integrating both within a wider urban context.¹ Elsewhere, less shackled by documentary motivations, more expressive aesthetic and narrative means were mobilised to bemoan crumbling lower-class ties – whether these were traditional (*Nil By Mouth*, Gary Oldman 1995), biological (*Orphans*, Peter Mullen 1997) or alternative (*Among Giants*, Sam Miller 1998). Yet, despite not shrinking from the heft and scope of misery suffered, these films still reserved space for germs of unprepossessing hope – some genuine residue, albeit tenuous, conflictual or deeply buried, of affiliation, commitment, conviviality and solidarity.

But beyond being corruptible for cynical enterprise, such organic human values have no obvious place in the New British Order. If Thatcher's "no such thing as society ... only individuals" was not so much empirical description as statement of intent in a parochial version of global neoliberalism, its enduring corollary that "there is no alternative" was pointedly rendered in baleful portraits of attenuated nihilism and hopelessness among younger generations in *Naked* (Mike Leigh 1993), *Butterfly Kiss* (Michael Winterbottom 1994) and *Stella Does Tricks* (Coky Giedroyc 1997). Conversely, a cinematic coming to terms with 'capitalist realism'² sketched resignation to the rule-of-the-market over economic and social relations among impoverished post-industrial subjects, yielding three highly successful British films which profited from blending social-realist tropes with populist melodrama, comedy and romance. Worse, *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman 1996), *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo 1997) and *Billy Elliott* (Stephen Daldry 2000), as well as sad retreats like *Up 'N' Under* (John Godber 1998), displaced structural relations of class into its contrived performance³ – projectively mystifying the contemporary crisis into anachronistic patterns of masculinity⁴ presented as wilful personal obstacles to survival, health and happiness via vicissitudes of cultural capital.

With class-denialism promulgated promiscuously – left, right and centre – elegies to what was lost from a mythical social-democratic golden age of the political clout, social stability and economic security of labour now readily figured as mere consolation. Period drama recuperations of recent proletarian experience strategically accentuate style over substance in a distanced nostalgia of 'decadent mannerism'⁵ cut loose from specific historical moorings. This ironic mendacity retrospectively legitimises its referent's inevitable demise, having eviscerated the messy contextual blood and guts which animated it. The

outcome is queasy revisionist hokum in outwardly well-meaning, commemorative approximations of, say, traditions of northern music-hall (*Little Voice*, Mark Herman 1998), Northern Soul (*Soulboy*, Shimmy Marcus 2008) and even the militancy of factory women (*Made In Dagenham*, Nigel Cole 2010). Having said that, other film revivals of working-class life – in the 1950s (*Vera Drake*, Mike Leigh 2005), '60s (*Small Faces*, Gillies MacKinnon 1995), '70s (*Neds*, Peter Mullan 2011) or '80s (*This Is England*, Shane Meadows 2006, plus 2010/2011 television series sequels)⁶ – may flirt with sentimental closure but, courtesy of subject matter and handling, instead serve genealogies of the present far better than safe paeans to, or laments for, heroic or hellish pasts.



Service economy realignments in value-generation also nudged middle-class identification from institutional professionalism towards crass corporate or petit-entrepreneurialism – which, among only recently mobile fractions, often led steadily back to precarity. Class recomposition had myriad reflections in new social movements – from anti-Poll Tax action, hunt sabotage, New Age travel and Reclaim the Streets, to anti-globalisation – but direct political manifestation scarcely troubled mainstream media fiction. Instead, as in working-class realism, markers of commodified (counter) culture dominated representations of hipsters and bohemians flaunting superior fashion; foregrounding consumption over production and assuming assimilation to blind materialism in biopics of youth music scene appropriation like *Velvet Goldmine* (Todd Haynes 1998) and *24 Hour Party People* (Michael Winterbottom 2002)⁷. The postmodern manoeuvring was more deviously deployed by Cool Britannia's celebrated middle-class vanguards who, adapting slick cinematic innovations from Hollywood and MTV spectacle, purportedly blurred class boundaries in superficial travesties of underclass abjection – such as *Shopping* (Paul Anderson 1994), *Twin Town* (Kevin Allen 1997), *South West 9* (Richard Parry 2001) and, most iconically, Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996)⁸.

If the illusory bubble of New Labour's "Things can only get better" mirrored Boyle's thematic trajectory – from yuppie psychosis (*Shallow Grave*, 1994), through *Trainspotting*, to *X-Factor* transcendence (*Slumdog Millionaire*, 2008) – concurrent trends in UK cinema thoroughly tainted any seamless passage to consumerist nirvana⁹. Darker urban pastorals spoiled ersatz streetwise cosmopolitanism with the return of the repressed, signalled again through dysfunctional macho convolutions – such as the 'disease' of football hooliganism forever worried over in *The*

Firm (Allan Clarke 1989) all the way to a protracted 2000s cycle spearheaded by Nick Love. A parallel nostalgic restoration dredged up more archaic ghosts of mockney spivs and hardnuts dressed up in Tarantinoesque neo-noir, posturing at hyperstylised gangster gloss in the *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Ritchie 1998) franchise. These twin fetishisms then promptly smart-casually cross-fertilised in a lucrative homegrown exploitation genre greeted with universal critical derision. A common denominator throughout is supine acceptance of the petty bourgeois order, with its pitilessly diminishing real returns wished away in infantile dreams of lottery wealth and celebrity lifestyle. The accompanying solipsistic vacuum is then hysterically concealed in atavistic charisma, in the latter cases of 'New Lad' vintage, coding stranded, fragmentary memories of collective vigour, pride, and even resistance to the present desperate state of things. Even when upwardly-mobile, it seems the rough and dangerous classes could not be persuaded to exit the big historical stages and screens.

Coming of Age in Austerity

Meanwhile the working and workless inhabitants of sink estates and industrial wastelands suffered the New Public Management of state provision, which increasingly appeared premised on shortchanging both its demoralised education, health and welfare staff and 'customers' punished for privatised, personalised deficiencies. But in the ruins of the post-war Keynesian settlement – the practical and psychological ramifications of which their parents wrestled with in struggling to survive – fresh cohorts of kids were growing up relatively unencumbered by broken twentieth-century promises. For them, material and social decay and deprivation were always already facts of life; the glittering sheen of consumerism a world away even when on sale round the corner. And again, the millennium's social-realist filmmakers were well-placed to explore how these young generations could conceive, build and live lives in such straitened circumstances. After all, the original colonial impetus of early British realism also thrust anthropological apparatuses into slums to observe and record their strange exotica. This time round, many of its exponents had themselves emerged from working-class backgrounds and, with more intimate knowledge, were motivated by their own unfinished business.

So a heterodox flow of realist films by low-budget auteurs blended poetic naturalism with European arthouse enchantment and popular melodramatics. Each sought potential in contemporary poverty, in contradistinction to the deafening discourses flooding media, culture and politics which blame, dismiss and demonise neoliberalism's victims. Established old hands like Amber Films¹⁰ paid painstaking attention to authentic sources, while bold faces like Lynne Ramsay, Pawel Pawlikowski and Andrea Arnold tempered miserabilism with impressionist perspective or mixed-genre expressionism. Shane Meadows had also privileged local and autobiographical narratives for *Smalltime* (1996), *Twenty Four Seven* (1997) and *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999) before risking provincial Hollywood pastiche in *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2002) and *Dead Man's Shoes* (2004) and subsequently returning to more expansive social-realism in *This Is England*. Conversely, Penny Woolcock's faithful ethnography in *Tina*



Goes Shopping and *Tina Takes a Break* (Channel 4, 1999; 2001) gave way to audacious crossovers, with wildly uneven results, in *The Principles of Lust* (2002), *Mischief Night* (2006), *Exodus* (Channel 4, 2007) and *1 Day* (2009).

UK cinema's 2000s infancy intelligibly embarked from middle-childhood fantasies of escape, after the surreal end-of-century *Ratcatcher* (Lynne Ramsay 1999) cut adrift abandoned offspring to blissful suicidal merger in the poisoned urban womb. A rash of kitchen-sink stories then set about the salvation of dying families via wounded youthful innocence, with fairytale resolutions varying in outlandish naffness in *Purely Belter* (Mark Herman 2000), *Billy Elliott*, and *Gabriel and Me* (Udayan Prasad 2001)¹¹. More complex portrayals of the negotiation of naïve Oedipal archetypes among networks of kith and kin – for example in *Like Father* (Amber 2001), *All or Nothing* (Mike Leigh 2001), *Sweet Sixteen* (Ken Loach 2002), or *A Boy Called Dad* (Brian Percival 2009) – again endeavoured to resurrect the nuclear alms across intransigent generations, and amid corrosive infrastructure. Perhaps more presciently, further contributions fast-forwarded past adolescence to recalibrate bad family romance in elective relational antagonisms no longer so bogged down in blood provenance – including *A Way Of Life* (Amma Asante 2004), *Love + Hate* (Dominic Savage 2005), *Summer* (Kenny Glenaan 2008) and *Somers Town* (Shane Meadows 2008).

However, uprooting from unsafe havens in migrant dislocation to make economic and emotional ends meet risks alienation at every turn. This was charted in melancholic accounts of young adults depressed beyond their years in transient oddball communities of uncertain motive, in *Human Traffic* (Justin Kerrigan 1999), *The Last Resort* (Pawel Pawlikowski 2000), *Late Night Shopping* (Saul Metzstein 2001) and *Morvern Callar* (Lynne Ramsay 2002). Corresponding paranoid detachment may then follow overweening malevolence, as in *London To Brighton* (Paul Andrew Williams 2006), but also prehistories of impersonal or absent nurturance poignantly conveyed in *Helen* (Christine Molloy & Joe Lawlor 2008) and *The Unloved* (Samantha Morton, Channel 4, 2009). Finally, black-magic temptations of addiction to stave off social and psychic collapse easily prove fatal, overwhelming ambivalent forbearance and despairing care offered against all the odds in *Pure* (Gillies MacKinnon 2002), *Shooting Magpies* (Amber 2005), *Better Things* (Duane Hopkins 2008) and *The Arbor* (Clio Barnard 2010)¹² – thus circuitously recalling *Ratcatcher's* comparably psychotic oblivion in other polluted hinterlands that no last-ditch love could cleanse.

But the love remained alive, albeit in abeyance, and the newbies weren't giving up without a fight. Filmmakers who had matured within Thatcher's blight, witnessed at first-hand the squandered and dashed hopes among peer groups which they had,

nevertheless, survived. So Nick Love's biographically inflected picaresque, *Goodbye Charlie Bright* (2001), chased its eponymous likely lad, streaking round a run-down but still marginally benevolent south London manor, flanked by equally schematic petty criminals and sociopaths. Despite ducking and diving soon going decisively pear-shaped, Charlie's readiness to put away childish things gets spun unconscionably sunny – even if his creator's own output graduated from wideboy thuggery to middle-aged bover and raving vigilantism. However, in many rotting metropolitan boroughs, things already were more murderous, and

dilemmas starker, for schoolkid armies brokering narcotic economies with knives and guns. And this wasn't just according to moral-panic merchants and tabloid crisis-mongers – the teenagers believed the hype too. But before their versions of events reached the screen, there was still time for sober documentary observation as well as cynically intemperate exploitation.

In depth and texture, *Bullet Boy* (Saul Dibb 2005) merited promotion as the 'Brit Boyz N the Hood' even if hardly matching the gang-infested intensity of American New Black Cinema. The film's restrained picturing of Hackey towerblocks, terraces and playing fields counterpointed troubled biographies and questionable futures, as a paroled aggravated assaulter fails to go straight thanks to irreconcilable demands of family, friends and foes. His pre-teen brother strives to avoid the same fate with an integrity built from scratch, himself facing multiple threats in an environment of jaundiced institutional hypocrisy and thoroughly compromised masculine power. With their own preoccupations, the damaged and besieged elders exhibit contradictory nobility and inflexibility, with the generations' lifestyles barely intersecting. Even when they do, mutual incomprehensibility ensures a zero-sum game of passionate relations. In impressive yet impeccably modest social-realist style – thanks to a complex, subtle script and naturalistic dialogue delivered by a committed cast – both the spiralling determinism of violence and, counterintuitively, genuine chances of youngsters thriving without abandoning homemade ethics or home turf are convincingly rendered.



Only the former was managed by the resolutely unrealistic *Rollin' With the Nines* (Julian Gilbey 2005), a cheap blaxploitation ripoff revelling in kinetic drug-fuelled brutality and depths of sexual depravity. It did, however, showcase the indigenous gangster-rap incarnation of Grime –

London's ascendant mixed-race music subculture which, like the tawdry trappings of pornographic consumerism, was neglected in *Bullet Boy's* atmosphere before being thoroughly integrated into later youth-centric fare. Accordingly, *Life and Lyrics* (Richard Laxton 2006) was next up in the neighbourhood-watched stakes – a relatively mild Brixton hip-hop romance kitsching Eminem's *8 Mile* – which was promptly blown away by the manic virtuosity of *Kidulthood* (Menhaj Huda 2006). Written by Noel Clarke (who directed *Adulthood*, the 2008 sequel), this pursuit of classmates dragging a panoply of delinquent predicaments round streets and high-rises drew on his intimacy with its disreputable setting – more like four funerals and a teenage pregnancy than in the yuppie *Notting Hill* – and the vernacular of impatient yearning, impassioned loyalty and harsh wit rang as true as the quickfire intimidation and unforgiving shaming and disrespect among incipient predators and prey.

Sadly, rushing to deliver revelations of moral squalor in juvenile rites and wrongs of passage rammed far too much implausibility into a twenty-four hour exegesis. Inflated physical, mental and sexual cynical prowess in characters left little of the humdrum anomie and vulnerable uncertainty of real adolescent shades of grey. The breathless narrative panned out thick, fast and predictable, leaving no space for reflection let alone quotidian teenage kicks such as enjoying the spot-on beats blaring on the soundtrack. Maybe kids do mature that quickly and wickedly. But such suspiciously partial verisimilitude seems rather to reflect teenage's own delusions of grandeur, keeping fear of the future at bay while inadvertently nourishing agendas pushing the repressive containment of subhuman underclasses. And authorities in any sense are conspicuously absent here, as in later *Menace II Society* wannabes like the rather charming *1 Day* (Penny Woolcock 2009) and relentlessly charmless *Cherry Tree Lane* (Paul Andrew Williams 2010), as well as, at another figurative extreme, the comedic contempt of *Anuvahood* (Adam Deacon & Daniel Toland 2011) where clueless cretins with Ali G pretensions are antisociality's primary perpetrators.

Recent entries in UK youth cinema's urban killing fields continued to earnestly craft dialogue scripted from authentic patterns of banter and patter, but disguise blindingly obvious narrative arcs with increasingly tired crowd-pleasing novelty gimmicks. *Sket* (Nirpal Bhogal 2011) at least tempered testosterone overdoses with feminine ferocity and tenderness in girl gangs betraying their men and each other – whereas *Shank* (Mo Ali 2010) and *Attack the Block* (Joe Cornish 2011) traded respectively in *Mad Max* and Spielbergian sci-fi buffoonery. The former parachuted an utterly unconvincing nonviolent direct action credo into the directionless moral starvation of infantile teens, while the latter's unwelcome intruders were rampaging pitch-dark aliens disrupting mugging, drugging and blagging in a motley starstruck crew. Our petty posse transform themselves into unlikely superboys in ridding the 'hood of its unspeakable nemeses – forging alliance with a slew of more or less respectable middle-class fractions in the process. Sadly, and ruinously, however, the ultimate deeply offensive corollary implies that the otherworldly invasion actually emanated from their own psychic recesses, whose 'blackness' they must expunge to prevail.

Alongside high-energy grimefests running out of steam for want of hints of the transcendence of endless, restless immaturity, more contemplative slices of community hard-knock life have embedded individual outsiders within – as opposed to insiders without prospects – in translating elements of the filmmakers' own conflicted upbringings. Among the best was Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009), updating her Oscar-winning desperate single-mother short *Wasp* (2003) and showing a disaffected daughter suffocating under constricting Thames Estuary horizons. Her obsessive-compulsive acting-out veers from solitary hip-hop dancing to cathexis with her mam's new boyfriend – the exotic downhome appeal of local travellers and strangeness of semi-natural landscapes beyond the estate contrasting with its familiar ambient clamour of a back-catalogue of plaintive calls and responses from British soul musics. Coloured and lit with bewitching point-

of-view cinematography, this potent expressive interplay of single-minded interior and implacable exterior alienation perfectly conveys the reckless damage risked for self and others; when lashing-out at each successive vain option threatens a self-fulfilling prophecy of disappointment.



The grievous hostility here evident in dysfunctional lower-class daily life, however, matches fractiously vibrant intimacy, spirit and intelligence, and such vital human impulses can warp destructively when inchoate fury narrows the limits of the foreseeable. Refusal to relinquish desirous intensity, no matter how inadequately articulated and negotiated, or subsume it in conventional role prescriptions, is highly likely to result in schism. Yet emotional bonds run as deep as the profanity even in a family this fragile; one which nurtures as well as neglects. Conversely, Channel 4's recent four-part *Top Boy* (Ronan Bennett 2011) revisits *Bullet Boy's* Hackney(ed) crossroads, whose socio-economic climate over intervening years has exacerbated the unravelling of further impoverished kinship networks: blood connectivity now stretches beyond breaking point. Fashioning substitute clans from social detritus at hand is thus imperative and, as in its precursor, realism and crime melodrama are skilfully blended, daring to expose prevailing commonplaces of urban deviance as simplistically prejudicial with Ashley Walters nailing yet another bad boy with a heart of tarnished gold, and a young cousin warding off his ambivalent mentorship.

Psychiatric and relationship breakdown and overworked drudgery leave kids fending for themselves among drug cartels who succumb to the vicious logic of their enterprise more from lack of alternatives than psychopathy – paralleling the affective sufferation among children, parents and intermediate cohorts alike. Highlighting one lad's navigation through everyone's stormy weather, a sophisticated meshing of trauma, painful love and hope, in overlapping biographies, convincingly sketches manifold constituents of crumbling commons, in spite of an unfeasibly minimal cast and plentiful questionable plot holes. In the light of dishonest commonplaces elsewhere overstating degraded sociality, the anachronistically threadbare gangs and police presence here rather suggest institutional neglect, paradoxically letting autonomous interaction breathe. Dehumanisations of feral scum crescendoed after the series' completion, but no deterministic truck is had with clichéd inadequate parenthood, positive role models and the 'Victorian' values toxic in any strata, but pathetic in these. So, Reality TV's tough-love presaging of soft-cop invasion to transform fortunes is trashed along with traditional professional imperialism; with social workers only being useful when disavowing officialdom and following class-conscious noses, instead of turning them up in disgust at respectability's failure to thrive.

The older characters seem paralysed in sad individualistic tactics just as useless these days as the moral homilies which blatantly failed them. Acutely so aware, the youngsters combine wily intelligence and obstinate interpersonal commitment to carve out coherent paths from

limited material resources, relations and ethics discernible in the city's wreckage. Their tentatively awkward strategies may have only modest chances of pragmatic success, but ultimately they reject the false promises of embracing addictive barbarity to feed fatal fancies of fulfilment. Maybe *Top Boy's* author retains radical sensibilities from his own outspoken revolutionary republican, libertarian-Left youth, even if in dotage accepting political and artistic limits of temporary respite for isolated souls. But what works best, as in much of the work described above – whether focusing on personal or interpersonal change or stasis – is imaginatively brewing trials and tribulations into ensemble patchworks of juxtaposition to creatively mull over. This was already explicit in the rhythms and rhymes of the local soundsystems and griots, and now brings to life on screen the extraordinarily multifarious striving for individual and collective redemption and empowerment still characteristic of environments mired in the most unpromising circumstances. Misery? Yes: in spades – but far more besides, and by no means only representable miserably.

Community De- / Re-generation

For the most comprehensive excommunication of kitchen-sink drudgery in the service of exuberant flatulent hilarity – but never abandoning a scandalous sacreligious slant on magical realism – the unique, groundbreaking *Shameless* (Channel 4 2004-2012), now in its ninth series, is unlikely to be beaten. With nary a trace of patronisation or mockery, but profound and abiding respect for those making the most of the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune, Paul Abbott's barnstorming soap-operatic brainchild – based on memories of his troubled childhood – began serial offending with a humble family-in-meltdown on a satellite Manchester sink thoughtfully dubbed the 'Chatsworth'. The non-landed gentry of this lumpen country estate are the Gallaghers, presided over by drunken, feckless Frank: a fleetingly present, irredeemably self-centred dad gone rotten who was doubtless never good for much other than siring nine. Successive series inexorably haemorrhaged siblings pining for greener grass, so narrative blinkers slowly widen to a panoramic kaleidoscope of ne'er-do-wells and inadequates who actually do tolerably and adequately well, from day to day at least – shoring up mutual, unapologetically glaring weaknesses and bad-luck excuses with irrepressible optimism, surprising nous, and adventurous brio. And, as well as their effortless practical genius in syncretic cultural expropriation, this best of humanity certainly know how to throw a party – both in the dry political and festive wet-bar senses¹³.



The writing team's eschewal of any harsh judgement that the characters wouldn't already level at one another – affectionately or otherwise, though never with superior snobbish boosterism in mind – instantly and consistently irked all conceivable sneering moral majorities. The high-minded chatterati can't handle every facet of their bourgeois omniscience being bawdily punctured with unforgiving regularity, pinpoint alacrity and alarming accuracy. And they writhe and whinge in apoplexy about this 'fetishisation' of poverty as if we haven't had to put up long enough with schedules full of the pompous circumstances nourishing their vanity. Yet among sublime

crackpot pratfalls and subversive overcomings of official and informal malignancy, mistakes have certainly proliferated – like embracing local Plods to the bosom or, worse, installing criminal tribe the Maguires at the heart of the darkness – but the surefooted guiding vision sweeps such embarrassing accidents under the carpet-bombing profanations of sincere single-issue and PC complacencies. *Shameless* automatically and unerringly takes the side of the subalterns, without sacrificing clear-sighted vulgar class pride and righteous reverse prejudice. And if the proof of TV puddings is ratings, it has vastly overperformed, whilst remaining fondly appreciated by all demographics closest to its beady-eyed gaze.

Among few cultural products with the bare-faced cheek to compare, *Under the Mud's* (Sol Papadopoulos 2006) repair of a lame marriage seems wastefully unambitious given the scouring Scouse humour and invention in its community workshop source material. *Mischief Night* (Penny Woolcock 2006) also skims romcoms and amateur northern (this time Leeds) raconteurship, but with inspired whittling and surreal realisation is a different kettle of fish altogether from the previous *Tina* films. They located their Channel 4 *Cutting Edge* credentials in recounting everyday resourcefulness among the urban deprived struggling to stay afloat, rather than merely reactions to trauma as in normal social-realist agonies. But the cinematic denouement was shot amid heightened police paramilitarism after the London bombings, reinforcing aims to comedically undermine increasing segregation of British Asians from neighbours. Here, legacies of closer prior interaction converge on a single mum seeking stability for the kids, and various diverse connectives develop with the embattled Khan family leading to November 4th's festivities of benign delinquency set against the mundane disrespect and darker anti-sociability of crime, racism, drugs and violence.

Design and photography magnify warmth and vitality despite divisions, and the overlain New Beats and bhangra avoid cliché as the mayhem resolves into generational contrasts of multiracial hope. Romance rekindled breaks backward-looking traditions, while teenagers pursue quests and forge friendships based on generosity and – glimpsing the limitations of parental blind alleys – working-through toxic power relations to serve future needs. But deterministic narrative arcs rather miss the point – an urge obliquely lampooned in the Big Men's ballooning fetish; a deft condensation of joyriding, lifestylism and the Northern kitchen-sink ritual of climbing a hill to look down on the town. The lieutenants flail out of control of their territory, ending impaled on the mosque tower – contrasting the failed Western secular hot air of mastery with the impotence of the Muslim hierarchy in challenging the fundamentalists eventually repelled by enlisting dope-dealers' muscle. Such plot absurdities likewise signal the humility of the film-maker in relinquishing authorial omnipotence – bravely weaving the weft and warp of meticulously collected grass-roots anecdotes and repartee to demolish pretension, free up energy and facilitate agency.

Fittingly, the children's exploration of a mysterious adult world provides most bite, blithely juggling real danger and heartache with naïve sass and insight. They grapple with the inanities of respectability (“My mam's a smackhead.” “Mine's a dinner-lady.”) and are drawn to the relatively well-off ‘Death Row’ whose denizens – paedophiles, headteachers, gangsters, bosses – correlate posh with perverse. While one joyrider views Osama bin Laden screensavers and jihad videos as comic relief from being pressganged into iniquity, another's apprenticeship to a hardman grandad entails blundering around junkie mums and courier pensioners. And whereas one lass finally guns down her unlikely father, a younger Muslim stepsister strategises her transcendence of patriarchy in the local urban music nightclub – a temporary autonomous zone where lower-class

youth of all races enjoy their hybrid culture in relative peace away from vexing intransigence elsewhere.

Cross-stitching the corrosive fissures of white and Asian communities, the film's hysteria consistently erodes stereotypes, remaining rooted in working-class neighbourhoods. Here, despite intense material pressures, upward mobility's false promises are just as destructive as the baleful allure of the law of the criminal jungle in crystallising vicious circles of isolation. The desperate rearguard defence of ancestral families provides no useful prognosis, merely locking members into perpetual hypertension and the submission to oppression which carnivals have always had the function of momentarily overturning. In fact, though now celebrated only in Yorkshire, the druidic origins of *Mischief Night* – a time when fairies walk the earth – predate Hallowe'en and *Guy Fawkes* by many centuries. While hardly supernatural, the outcomes of this highly unusual urban fairytale “with its head in the clouds and its feet on the ground” might also appear somewhat improbable. Nevertheless, its hidden script alchemy of pragmatic irreverence for authority, laughing-off of adversity, and imaginative empathy and engagement updates age-old formulae for survival, solidarity and resistance still applicable most anywhere.



Of course, a crucial salient caveat with suspiciously benevolent heterotopias like the aforementioned is a risk of soft-peddling tragedies and turning points, indelible scars and intransigent devilishnesses probably present in many midsummer night dreamers' real lives. *Shameless* sometimes surely errs on the rosy side since, for example, sticky ends are so few and far between. But significant negativity can nonetheless be acknowledged and encompassed if the storytelling is sufficiently freewheeling while being carefully, caring choreographed. Exemplary in this category are Greg Hall's super-ultra-low budget guerrilla productions¹⁴ – *The Plague* (2005) and *Same Sh*t, Different Day* (2010) – chronicling teetering trajectories among lovable London hip-hop chancers, which allow frustrating prevarication and protracted interludes to modulate impending agony or ecstasy and judiciously sprinkle sudden serious twists among inadvertent clowning and slobbering. But for deep dramatic chutzpah, oscillating humour and winning gross caricature, as well as in facing nightmare scenarios head-on, the 1980s saga *This Is England* (2006-12) might, if mentally calibrated to regional, sonic and sartorial specifics, share common class co-ordinates across the present day UK.

The four-part *This Is England '86* (2010) reconstituted threads of the initial film, depicting its ensemble's continuing misadventures three years later. The skinhead subculture whose ambivalences the earlier work unpicked – echoing only in fading NF graffiti – has diluted further into post-punk, goth, mod and casual crossovers. Style-sense promiscuity mirrors diverse fortunes among misfit gang members who nevertheless retain the rabid loyalty emblematic of the depressed post-industrial contexts excavated so convincingly. Again structured by the re-engagement of old mates, Meadows' loosening of the semi-autobiographical focus allows fully-realised grappling with the challenges of young working-class adulthood, with prospects dire and dubious past certainties disappearing in rampant political Machiavellianism. In such inauspicious circumstances the ‘imagined community’ of nation coheres no better than England's footballers at tournaments then or since – rendering concrete damage to social fabrics most explicit in gamuts of savage stress and ill-ease which friendship networks struggle to heal or ameliorate –

metaphorised in failed marital attempts by the couple at the centre of comic gravity. Cheap, cheerful ceremonials fall foul of material, social and historical stumbling blocks threatening to cripple the future. The groom sorrowfully panics about turning into his father's facsimile, and the bride's abused backstory comes intolerably into conscious relief in a transfixing strand escalating to unlikely resolution.

Switching format seemed natural in light of the cinematic inspiration of social-realism by Alan Clarke, Ken Loach and Mike Leigh which failed to attract film funding. Trademark collaborative practices with a superb cast shine through, improvising everything from dialogue to design and costume, placing a premium on the awkward naturalism of time, place and interaction rather than slavish devotion to seamless superficial simulation. This approach favours narratives weaving together multiple characters without relegating subsidiary roles as mere props for conflicted heroes – which previous work, including the cinema film, was regularly guilty of. That it augured well for emphasising the open-endedness of real communities – haunted by ghosts of crisis past but with potential for resilience, autonomy and creativity as well as regression, submission and malice – was amply demonstrated in the 2011 series set at Christmas 1988 and with the most

gut-wrenching but almost inconceivably optimistic collective passion on display. Skilfully melding the mildly amusing, sympathetically grotesque and downright horrific without detracting from very serious concern, Meadows' best script yet sketches comparably tangled personal tensions and pressures across the board in a compelling portrait of a desolate generation boding their own coming of age¹⁵.

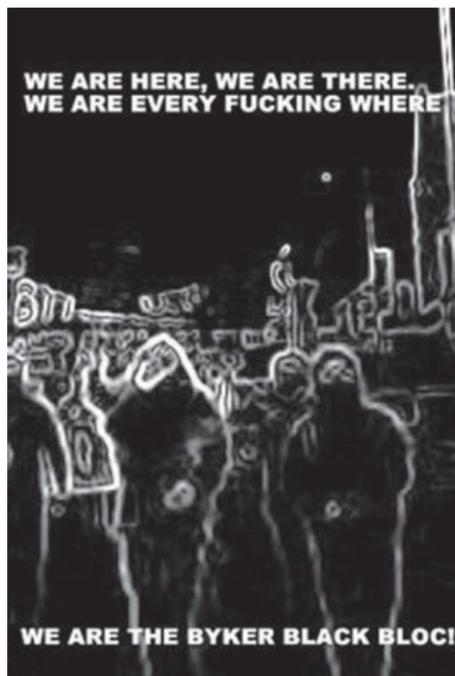
“We Come From the Slums of ...”

Not only run of t' mill rations of awfulness, but also fascinating cornucopias of fictional fancy and food for thought about the social and cultural reproductive conditions of the wretched of our earth have smuggled through the closed-circuit Big Brother filters of conformism in the towering manufacture of consent. On closer inspection, grounds for provisional encouragement that another world is possible seem least opaque in exactly those scenarios where groups of characters have some paltry time and space to arrange their affairs without constantly being individually and collectively fingered and pestered by formal market and governmental forces. In which case, it's telling that the remnants of Old Left patrician vanguardism these days, in concert with the usual bourgeois suspects, line up to a man, woman and transgendered being in the parties of the dark angels of capitalism and the State. No doubt we should also give a passing nod to conspiratorial paranoia over the recuperative inoculation of animalistic carnival among human couch-potatoes vegetating in the future-in-the-present matrix of Baudrillardian simulation. But that too comfortably coincides with the absorption of comfortable classes into twittering Webs inconsequentially cluttering up so many Occupy Everything liberal world views. Effete consensual dissociation from the obscene Real cannot stomach any of the hideous visceral immediacy and euphoria, let alone convulsive mortal agonies, of the libidinous and death-drive imaginaries of illiberal billions – who can't in any case afford the latest must-have digital gadgetry or other high-blown or low-rent distractions of fashion, let alone decent IT facilities. Descending back to ground zero, two tendential gaps may be noted in TV and cinematic transitional programmes out of the post-war social-democratic settlement ushering in the post-class-war neoliberal consensus and beyond.

First is the odd erasure alluded to above of signs and symptoms of the direct intervention of either corporate or state services and utilities, be it hard forces of law, disorder and criminal injustice or, for that matter, soft bizzies of all education, social work, or welfare disciplinary stripes. But then the contemporary repressive SNAFU (‘situation

normal, all fucked-up') of the militarily-industrious complex is moderately disinclined to bother mobilising its bungling apparatus unless the lower-classes collectively impinge outside abject zones on solid middle-England ground. Except, of course, in cultural representations – those discussed herein, but more especially in the mesmerising panopticon of Reality TV¹⁶. Of course, once sticking our necks above the parapets and daring to intrude in the sterile civic spaces of genteel residence and dirty commerce, they'll come down like a ton of bricks – but neither is there much hint of that on telly or at the pictures. Whereas, as the riotous August proved¹⁷, if there's more than a few of us at a time they're not really fit for that purpose anyway, unless tooled up like robocops bludgeoning and blasting innocuous passers-by and those deluding themselves trying to cash in on 'rights'.

At stake, then, is what will happen when the unruly multitudes emerge en masse from symbolic and actual repositories of despair and sleepwalking estates of mind, to posture, frolic and act directly in the faces of authority, its reluctant or enthusiastic servants, and those who just don't care and are content – if not intent on it – for us to remain corralled there? Apart from sideways glances and glimpses in *Shameless* and the like, and occasional frescoes of fury against the indiscriminate, discriminatory intrusion of public policing and, even rarer, the intimate internal biopolitics of the nano-commodification of desire, UK filmmakers are largely silent on such questions – and would doubtless be booted offscreen pronto if presuming otherwise¹⁸. However, in matter of fact – to cite one tiny recent example – when East London's Muslim and other youth come out and about scouting against fascist manifestation, blatantly flouting the commands of community 'leaders', and make a point of seeking out 'Mischief Night' camaraderie with 'the anarchists' while the woefully backward self-styled 'advanced fractions' of self-important politicians studiously self-kettle down the other end of the road; well, maybe there's hope for us all.



Notes

- 1 And, even now, we can confidently predict that no right-on leftie accountancy will reach our plasma screens – matching the mainstream media news blackout of the most significant victory of British industrial labour for many years – of the recent magnificently horizontal national networking militancy of sparks, siteworkers and allies, defeating with inspired direct determined action (against the grain of their appalled and appalling trade union hierarchy) the massed ranks of the Big Seven construction companies; thus, for now, retaining some of the precious terms and conditions remaining from what their ancestors battled so hard for (see, for example, reports at <http://neanarchists.com/>).
- 2 Cf. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero, 2009); see also Slavoj Žižek, 'Risk Society and its Discontents', *Historical Materialism*, 2, 1998, pp143-64.
- 3 See Mike Wayne, 'The Performing Northern Working Class in British Cinema: Cultural Representation and its Political Economy', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 23 (4), 2006, pp287-297.
- 4 For relevant discussions and varying interpretations, see: Slavoj Žižek, 'Whither Oedipus', in: *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (Verso, 1999); John Hill, 'Failure and Utopianism: Representations of the Working Class', in: R. Murphy (ed.) *British Cinema of the 1990s* (BFI, 2000) and 'From New Wave to Brit-Grit: Continuity and Difference in Working Class Realism', in: J. Ashby & A. Higson (eds.) *British Cinema Past and Present* (Routledge, 2000); Claire Monk, 'Underbelly UK: the 1990s Underclass Film, Masculinity and the Ideologies of "New" Britain', also in Ashby & Higson; and Cora Kaplan, 'The Death of the Working Class Hero', *New Formations*, 52, 2004, pp94-110. For a corrective, see James Heartfield, 'There is No Masculinity Crisis', *Genders*, 35, 2002, www.genders.org/g35/g35_heartfield.html.
- 5 As Paul Marris aptly puts it, in 'Northern Realism: An Exhausted Tradition?' *Cineaste*, 26 (4), 2001, pp30-66.
- 6 Not to mention the excoriating postmodernist grandeur of the Dante-meets-James Ellroy apparitions of 1970s-80s West Yorkshire in the *Red Riding* trilogy (by Tony Grisoni, from four David Peace novels, Channel 4, 2009); let alone those dipping into the rural and urban class-saturated vicissitudes of previous centuries, such as Andrea Arnold's exhilaratingly trenchant take on *Wuthering Heights* (2011) and the sickly-sour sex-work exposé *The Crimson Petal and The White* (by Lucinda Coxon, based on the Michel Faber novel, BBC2 2011).
- 7 A rare exception being the reggae dancehall-themed *Babymother* (Julian Henriques 1998); discussed in Rachel Moseley-Wood, 'Colonizin' Englan' in Reverse', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 5, 2004, pp91-104.
- 8 In *Visions of England: Class and Culture in Contemporary Cinema* (Berg, 2006), Paul Dave convincingly parallels the venture capital speculation on low-cultural signifiers emptied of context in *Trainspotting* with similarly blatant cultural commodity trading among the era's Young British artists – as critiqued by Julian Stallabrass in *High Art Lite* (Verso, 2000) – calculatingly pandering to sundry aspirational, reactionary and aristocratic deceptions that class really no longer mattered.
- 9 See Carl Neville's valuable analysis in *Classless: Recent Essays on British Film* (Zero, 2011).
- 10 Amber's work is discussed in more detail in my 'Hunting, Fishing and Shooting the Working Classes', *Variant*, 34, 2009, pp25-27.
- 11 See James Leggott, 'Like Father? Failing Parents and Angelic Children in Contemporary British Social Realist Cinema', in: P. Powrie, A. Davies & B. Babbington (eds), *The Trouble With Men: Masculinities in European & Hollywood Cinema* (Wallflower, 2004).
- 12 The latter not being fiction at all, but a quasi-documentary with professional actors ventriloquising the family and friends of troubled Bradford playwright Andrea Dunbar. For a discussion of the 'truth' irretrievably lost in this variety of realism, see Omar El-Khairy, 'Clio Barnard's Talking Heads', *Mute*, 3 (1), 2011, 'Double Negative Feedback'; www.metamute.org.
- 13 Despite all these uncommon attributes, it is revealing that scant recorded intelligent attention has accrued to *Shameless* so far. What does exist includes: James Walters, 'Saving Face: Inflections of Character Role Play in *Shameless*', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 3 (1), 2006, pp95-106; Sally Munt, 'Shameless in Queer Street', in *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (Ashgate, 2007); and Stephen Baker, 'Shameless and the Question of England: Genre, Class and Nation', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 6 (3), 2009, pp452-67. For discussion of the first series in terms of previous television comedy and drama, see my 'A Low Down Dirty Lack of Shame', *Variant*, 12, 2004, pp11-12. Note also a considerably tamer *Shameless U.S.* (produced by John Wells and Paul Abbott in 2010), with the otherwise superlative loser-actor William H. Macy completely unconvincing as a Yank Frank. Whereas north of their border, the comparably mordant mockumentary saga *Trailer Park Boys* (Mike Clattenburg, Canada 1999-2009), as with Manchester's favourite fictional pikeys, broke viewing figure records year on year – see Dean DeFino, 'From Trailer Trash to Trailer Park Boys', *Post Script magazine*, 2009 (posted at <http://libcom.org/library/trailer-trash-trailer-park-boys>).
- 14 The outfit responsible is called Broke But Making Films, whose website at www.broke-but-making-films.com can now be visited to snap up *The Plague* and extras on DVD for only a fiver ...
- 15 For an account of Meadows' own coming of age in bodging bang up-to-date slickly digital production, see his interview in *The Guardian*, 16th December 2011, online at www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/dec/16/making-of-this-is-england-88.
- 16 At the turn of the century, sociologist Beverley Skeggs embarked on a thoroughgoing decade-long investigation of Reality TV's primary function of informally legislating popular orientations to lived class – see: the excellent collection *Reality Television and Class* (edited with Helen Wood, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); *Reacting to Reality Television* (by Skeggs & Wood, Routledge, 2012); and, for tentative political lessons, 'Imagining Personhood Differently: Person Value and Auonomist Working-Class Value Practices', *Sociological Review*, 59 (3), 2011, pp496-513 (also at: www.hum.aau.dk/~proj-forsk/beverley_skeggs/articleskeggs.pdf).
- 17 For a range of interesting perspectives on the significance of the UK riots, see: 'Paul Gilroy Speaks on the Riots, August 2011, Tottenham, North London', <http://dreamofsafety.blogspot.com>; Slavoj Žižek, 'Shoplifters of the World Unite', *London Review of Books*, 19th August 2011; Aufheben, 'Communities, Commodities and Class in the August 2011 Riots', *Aufheben*, 20, 2012, pp1-17 (available at <http://libcom.org>); *The Guardian*, 'Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder', 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots; plus the Khalid Qureshi Foundation & Chelsea Ives Youth Centre, 'Riot Polit-Econ', and Howard Slater, 'FTH: The Savage and Beyond', both in *Mute*, 3 (2), 2012, 'Politics My Arse', www.metamute.org. Finally, for a preliminary – if sometimes strangely misconceived and over-reaching – exploration of what insurgent educational praxis might entail, see the admirable Mastaneh Shah-Shuja, 'Zones of Proletarian Development' (*Open Mute*, 2008).
- 18 Perhaps that's why the risibly underwhelming Wachowski brothers-produced American version of Alan Moore's graphic novel *V For Vendetta* (James McTeigue 2005) wasn't a whole lot more illuminating on the subject, either.