

THE DEATH OF THE WORKING-CLASS HERO

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As the British firefighters' dispute dragged on into the winter of 2003, its public support eroded and its urgency displaced in popular consciousness by the inflammatory rhetoric of war, the initially robust, articulate figure of their union leader, Andy Gilchrist, became a less and less frequent presence at the top of the TV news. If you hung on for the final roundups, you could just catch him visiting a fire station, ritually shoring up the morale of the men and women standing around a blazing oil drum, or, from the relative safety of a Glasgow podium, upbraiding the government at Westminster for its contempt for firefighters. Watching these classic vignettes with their reminders of militancy past, I was struck with the way this conflict between the government and a public service that has long been associated with the heroism and skills of a largely working-class masculinity had taken on the narrative form of 'historic' confrontations between labour and capital. Both sides played on and played with this well known, well worn drama: Gilchrist, in his person, his language and his stance - a class act if there ever was one - and the government by deploying the 'working-class' counter-image of the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, to give a kind of class imprimatur to its tactics of humiliation. The government's aim was to shrink the image of the firefighter - symbolically, perhaps, the nation's last working-class hero - down to size, reducing him rhetorically to a greedy, semi-skilled conman, a moonlighter resisting rational 'modernisation' to the detriment of community and country, his head in the sand, and his persona long past its sell-by date.

The firefighters' dispute is just one recent public staging of the issues of class and of gender in Blair's Britain. In what follows, I will be examining the articulation of these issues in New Labour's early agenda, and exploring their wider resonance through a trio of films from the late 1990s: Mark Herman's *Brassed Off* (1996), Peter Cattaneo's *The Full Monty* (1997) and Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot* (2000).¹ All three films chronicle the effects on men and their communities of the simultaneous dismantling of heavy industry and the destruction of the power of the unions by the Tory governments of the 1980s and 1990s. Combining social realism - including stylistic nods to its distinctive tradition in post-war British cinema - with a showbiz storyline, the films make 'entertainment' their expressive vehicle as well as their narrative occasion. Indeed 'entertainment' as content and form carries, for better or worse, much of the serious weight of the films. Marketed as comedies and aimed, very successfully in the case of *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot*, at an international mass audience, the jokes, music and performance through which all three films are borne along sharpen as

1. All citations to *Brassed Off*, Mark Herman (dir), Miramax and Channel Four Films, 1996; *The Full Monty*, Peter Cattaneo (dir), Fox Searchlight, 1997; *Billy Elliot*, Stephen Daldry (dir), Working Title Films and BBC Films, 2000 from video versions.

often as they sugar-coat the bitter taste of their social and political themes.

In associating this group of films with a real life industrial action I am suggesting only that they, like the firefighters' strike, raise both representative issues and issues of representation that can throw light on the nature of those paradoxical structures of feeling that have grown up around recent social and political transformations in Britain. For while the films - two produced on the brink of New Labour's electoral triumph and the third well into its first term - are 'set' in the world made by Thatcherism, a Tory Britain that each film names and attacks, they resonate also, if not always consciously, with some of the revisionist politics of New Labour and its ideological allies. Each film in different ways describes the decline and 'death' of an old social, economic and political order as lived in the provincial cities and towns of England - almost exclusively white, Anglo England - a world each of them selectively evokes, but with fluctuating registers of regret or nostalgia. These changes are largely imagined through the mutation of working-class masculinity and its aspirations across and within generations.²

That is not to say that women don't figure at all in these films - but the function of real women in them is less interesting and inventive than their discussion of the shifting terms in which gender, especially masculinity, may be constructed and lived in the new economic order. Both *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, for example, contain an anxious, jokey exchange among the men about the significance of women's ability to pee standing up - a form of supposed agency that will ironically, according to a miner in *Brassed Off*, allow women, like men, to 'piss in the wind'. For if, as a horrified male says in *The Full Monty*, women are 'turning into us', they are doing so, *Brassed Off* implies, too late for the transformation to confer any advantages or privileges. *The Full Monty* turns this unpromising gag into a wonderfully creative visual scenario. The film's protagonist, Gaz (Robert Carlyle), peeps through a hole in a cubicle door, watching, as one of a group of women who have invaded the men's room of the workingmen's club, entertains the others by expertly using the urinal. Discussing this remarkable feat later, at the job centre, the men agree that women peeing standing up represents a last stage of evolution, nature's little twist of the knife that will make men as biologically redundant as they are economically. 'A few years, and men won't exist except in zoos or summat', says Gaz. 'I mean, we're not needed no more are we? Obsolete, dinosaurs, yesterday's news'. This, in a nutshell, is the film's larger question, raised from a cosmic biological joke to the level of the economic, the social, the psychic and the political. Admirably, none of the films, least of all *The Full Monty*, are out to blame women for the emasculation or despair of working-class men in late capitalism - rather the peeing-standing-up gag is meant to bring that anxiety into the open, so that the film can work to defuse it. Penis size and erectile response are standing jokes in *The Full Monty*, becoming more urgent and literal as the wannabe strippers think about the promised full frontal finale of their performance. But the root cause of Gaz's friend Dave's impotence is laid,

2. See Claire Monk's astute analysis of *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* in 'Underbelly UK: The 1990s underclass film, masculinity and the ideologies of 'new' Britain', in J. Ashby and A. Higson (eds), *British Cinema, Past and Present*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp274-287. I am in debt to her arguments about the fate of post-industrial working-class masculinity, the leitmotif of 'entertainment' and the role of women in these films but our conclusions diverge.

3. See Judith Halberstam, 'Oh Behave! Austin Powers and the Drag Kings', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7, 3 (2001) 425-452. Halberstam asks 'what cultural changes allowed mainstream parodies of dominant masculinity to flourish in the 1990s?'. Her interesting analysis of *The Full Monty* suggests the ways in which the film's 'new conceptions of masculinity can and indeed must be routed through feminism and the female body'.

by his wife Jean as well as by the film itself, firmly at the closing factory door. As Judith Halberstam argues, in a brilliant analysis of the radical implications of *The Full Monty*, the men's room scene and the discussion that follows it prefigure 'the politics of the gaze that will be elaborated in the film', a politics which, as she suggests, wants above all to resist Gaz's bleak social Darwinism.³

Nevertheless, male obsolescence, the fear of becoming 'yesterday's news', hovers as a threat over all three films' representation of women. While the films do avoid the more vulgar backlash against post-war feminism, or a softer scapegoat - modern women - for the invented *fin-de-siècle* 'crisis of masculinity', their focus is on a social crisis gendered as masculine, and their common narrative solution to this problem is to make sexual politics central - but women characters marginal - to the main action. The absence of a gendered economy of blame is complemented by something more worrying, which is the way in which women's subjectivity is seen, by default, as less affected than men's by the economic and political turn of late capitalism. In spite of odd references to feminism in *The Full Monty*, none of the films explore, even at a superficial level, what form of relegation or transformation might be waiting in the wings for working-class women. It is as if the traditional division of labour that kept women out of the mines and mills has made these women (perhaps all women) *avant garde* victims of postmodernity, subjects already abjected or masculinised, often both, depending on your point of view. *Brassed Off* even suggests through the plot line which opens the film, that it is the miners' daughters - who can access education class mobility and, ironically, join middle management - who will manipulate them at the expense of the mining community. Yet, while women in the films are variously represented in supporting and/or interfering roles, and femininity can appear momentarily dangerous - either taking over all the prerogatives of the masculine or, conversely, a deeply disempowered identity into which the men themselves might fall - women are finally not the subjects whose lives are most at stake in these films.

The old or traditional working-class that had agency when coal and steel weren't 'history' and men and miners weren't 'dinosaurs' is virtually gendered male, and it is the tragi-comedy of masculine identity in a crisis for once *not* laid at the door of feminism but of economic and political change that is the key term at the affective centre of the three films. And affect-feeling-men (and boys) angry, weeping, in suicidal despair, ill and dying, in comic camaraderie, in paternal and filial struggle and intimacy and sometimes, mostly in performance mode, exalted - is what all three films present *par excellence*. Close ups of male bodies in motion and of men's faces contorted by feeling represent both the old and the new class masculinities that the films are constructing. This, you might say, is a truism - the convention of the medium - what films do best - and there are plenty of precedents for the camera's gaze, usually gendered as male, to dwell on men's faces and bodies *in extremis* in ways that cannot be understood as a

process of feminisation. Instead such a gaze often focuses, frames and constructs the illusion of a heightened and ennobled masculinity.

This essay aims to set these *fin-de-siècle* representations of working-class men as Men of Feeling alongside the simultaneous disappearance of the language of class, and of the affective register itself, in the promotional and analytic language of New Labour, most especially at the points where its rhetoric has zeroed in on disadvantaged persons or groups, including the 'old' labour constituency. But first we need to backtrack a little, and look again at the firefighters' strike at the moment when the frustrated Gilchrist departed from his carefully framed script, one which consistently highlighted pay and profession, and broadened his comments to include an oblique attack on the credentials and intentions of 'New' Labour. What the country needed, he said, was 'real' Labour (in other words 'old' pre-Blair Labour with its supposed roots and its traditional constituency in an industrial, and unionised working class). The media got very excited by this slip - if it was one - and the right-wing tabloid press predictably seized on it to draw a parallel between Gilchrist and the former miners' leader, the left-wing Arthur Scargill, linking this supposed 'politicising' of the strike by the British Firefighters Union with the failed struggles of British mining and its militant leader. There is a link here, but not perhaps so much between far left union leaders as between successive governments, between the Conservative party's successful assault on unionisation - the 'no alternative' case for the law of markets and modernisation - and New Labour's extension of that relentless narrative, one which, as Gilchrist and other union officials kept pointing out, inevitably has massive job losses as its bottom line.

The government's logic in its campaign to discredit the firefighters by depicting them as examples of pre-modern man (a strategy which deliberately occluded the existence of female firefighters) and the tabloid media's willingness to predict the strike's failure in terms of Scargill's downfall, has, I want to argue, everything to do with how New Labour has played gender politics. Its relationship to the 'old' and the 'new', however, whether of times or of men, is not simple or straightforward. It follows a particular pattern of what Stuart Hall, in a prescient essay of 1995 in the first issue of the journal *Soundings* predicted would be a 'regressive' modernising on behalf of New Labour's vision of 'conservative modernity' - one in which the progressive advancement of societies depends on freeing up the market while keeping traditional social arrangements in place. In Hall's view, one of the symptoms of this conservatism was Blair's own contradictory identity. 'He actually knew the Sixties, had participated in the social movements, was married and bringing up young kids in Thatcher's Britain, may even know an unmarried mother or even have a friend who was HIV positive. He was, in generation at least, a post-feminist man.' Yet as leader of the opposition, particularly as Labour spokesman in home affairs, Blair was already proving 'a sort of "new" or modern man, but a deeply conservative version of the species. On crime, on family values, on one-

4. Stuart Hall, 'Parties on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown', *Soundings: A journal of politics and culture*, 1 (Autumn 1995), 30-31.

5. *Ibid.*, p31.

parent families, on questions of sexuality, on the particular variant of communitarianism which he espouses' he had been oddly retro - his 'ideological commitment to the monogamous nuclear family as the only credible and stable family form' gives 'modernity' such a deeply conservative inflection that it hardly deserves the name'.⁴

Hall's focus in this essay is on Blair's confusing attempt both to acknowledge that there has been a 'revolution in the position of women and in sexual attitudes' and to deny their effects: resulting in a stance that is both 'tough on the causes of women's oppression, tough on women'.⁵ Indeed the first months of New Labour's first term saw the development of punitive legislation aimed at cutting benefits for unemployed groups and categories - 'lone' parents and the disabled - which seemed to them to lack traditional, affiliative ties. The word 'lone' itself and the category of 'social exclusion' when put together can be read as rhetorically confirming that isolation.

Much since 1995 has been written about New Labour's strange and strained relations to new social identities of all kinds - its notorious ambivalence about racism and British multi-cultural identity, and its stigmatisation of 'asylum-seekers' and immigrants are particularly disquieting for anyone hoping that more enlightened attitudes on race and immigration might be a rational, even a pragmatic response to new global and national realities. But its resoundingly un-progressive stands on these issues can be seen as of a piece with its contradictory assumption that women can simultaneously be in the low-paid workplace with its unsocial hours and non-existent benefits, and shoring up the crumbling traditional family. One notable exception stands out, and it suggests that Blairism in office has not proved to be quite so conservative about sexuality as Hall predicted. Under the pressure of the European Court, and very, very quietly, New Labour has, through a series of significant acts over the last six years, gone a long way to improve the civil and legal status of homosexuals. It has done so through the new partnership legislation, equalising the age of consent and public indecency restrictions, new directives on workplace bullying and, finally, the rescinding of the provocative Clause 28, which tied the hands of schoolteachers seeking to explore the question of sexual orientation with young persons by making it illegal for local authorities to 'promote the teaching in any maintained school the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. Even so, all New Labour's moves to roll back or reform discriminatory legislation against gays, even or especially the removal of Clause 28 which made same sex partnerships a 'pretence' rather than a fact of modern life, could be seen as cannily supporting rather than undermining its larger familial agenda. Economics rather than morality may be at the heart of this agenda: a desire to shrink the welfare state and its economic liability through the increased 'recognition' of private bonds and responsibilities. Thus, while equality legislation extends workplace rights, the encouragement of 'partnerships' of all kinds, even heterodox,

homosexual ones shores up the government's key concept of an extended private, affiliative world.⁶

If there is a conservative logic to these moves, it is still one that depends on contradiction. Where the state is willing to spend money, and where it viciously targets particular categories of male subjects, is in the arena of public order: its effects can be seen in illiberal policies on crime and imprisonment, on asylum seekers, on drug use and, of course, strikers. Many types of working-class masculinities have been pathologised in the last six years as negative examples of male identity, but there is another sense in which traditional masculinity, with almost all of its attendant baggage in tow, remains neither deconstructed or reconstructed. The government has tackled issues of domestic violence and child pornography, crimes overwhelmingly labelled as male, but, interestingly, has studiously avoided the clichéd media rhetoric of a 'crisis in masculinity', keen neither to be seen to do much to undermine male privilege in general - in politics or the workplace for example - or to risk the rage of middle Britain by putting the power of the state behind an effective campaign against racism and sexism in police and prison services.

I would argue that there is an agenda about masculinity or rather one for which masculinity has become the symbol - that is deeply yoked to New Labour's decisive rejection of the image and politics of Old Labour, while aiming to keep its constituency. In the first place, and in line with Hall's argument, New Labour silently aligns the word and concept of class with the category of men, as if feminism hadn't thoroughly interrogated that assumption. This backward intuition has been, I believe, part of a political strategy to make 'class' itself, especially but not exclusively 'working-class', obsolete or 'history' as a term of social analysis. Consequently, class becomes part of a version of the past where, if it were personified as a male, he would be one of the disappeared. For in Blair's own publications in the early years of New Labour, such as his 1998 Fabian pamphlet *The Third Way*, class is a censored term, like the war in *Fawlty Towers*, not to be mentioned lest it call up or incite old antagonisms. (When Blair himself slips up at the 1999 party conference in Brighton and pronounces the 'class war' over, it produced a moment of media hilarity and a chance for irony. Callers into BBC radio asked, tongue in cheek, who had won? Television delighted in showed striking electricians and angry pro-and anti hunting lobbies demonstrating outside the conference.)

In *The Third Way*, class conflict is spoken of in the carefully chosen abstractions of 'social polarisation', and 'antagonisms of capital and labour' associated with a nineteenth-century through mid twentieth-century world where raw materials and heavy industry dominated the economy.⁷ Class hierarchies are referred to as unfortunate legacies of history: 'gross inequalities' that 'continue to be handed down from generation to generation'.⁸ People without work or prospects are figured as abject in language that harks back to the nineteenth and early twentieth century as

6. I am indebted to a conversation with Mandy Merck for the above analysis of New Labour's record on homosexuality, and the logic behind it.

7. Tony Blair, *The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century*, [Fabian Pamphlet 588], The Fabian Society, 1998, p8.

8. *Ibid.*, p3.

9. *Ibid.*, p4.

10. Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998, pp102-103.

11. Giddens, *op. cit.*, p103.

12. Anthony Giddens and David Held (eds), *Classes, Power and Conflict: Classical and Contemporary Debates*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1982; Anthony Giddens and Gavin Mackenzie (eds), *Social Class and the Division of Labour*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1982.

13. David Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1998, p184.

the 'poor' and the 'weak', terms married to a much more modern nomenclature drawn from UN and EU rhetoric and appearing everywhere in New Labour's first term: 'social exclusion', a phrase which itself becomes a euphemism for the more brutal category of the 'underclass'. Who or what performs the exclusion is left dangling, without a referent; neither government policy nor market forces are blamed, but as with the targeting of 'lone' parents, the responsibility tends to fold back on the subject so described. The socially excluded - the poor, the lone and the weak - are all atomised in this discourse, not so much groups as discarded and powerless isolates. Social exclusion is not, in Blair's own words, the ejection from community, or the decline of a whole community, so much as an 'enemy of talent and ambition, of aspiration and achievement'⁹ the enemy, that is, of the individual whose liberty to aspire is, for Blair, always explicitly linked to the economic.

In this pamphlet and associated essays Blair echoes the views of sociologist Tony Giddens, the theoretical face of New Labour. In Giddens *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998), equality means inclusion - having the 'civil and political rights and obligations that all members of society should have, not formally but as a reality in their lives', and inequality simply means 'exclusion'.¹⁰ Giddens's equality is always one of 'opportunity', a meritocratic platform whose basis is participation in paid work, and whose rationale is couched in a reflex androcentrism. 'In a society where work remains central to self-esteem and a standard of living', Giddens writes, 'access to work is one of the main contexts of opportunity'.¹¹ To read Giddens's *The Third Way* or its sequel, *The Third Way and its Critics*, where class rarely appears either as a term or a category of analysis, one would never think of that other Giddens from the early 1980s, who wrote a monograph and an edited volume exploring, with considerable if critical sympathy, Marxist theories of class.¹² Like New Labour, Giddens has a socialist past to expunge.

Blair's Fabian manifesto and Giddens' *The Third Way* hit the bookshops in 1998, the same year that David Cannadine's *Class in Britain* argued in its concluding pages that both the Tories 'Middle England' and New Labour's 'Middle Britain' were neologisms crafted to evade the very use of the 'word' class. 'Class', Cannadine suggested had become a provocative term for New Labour especially, because it invoked a type of disruptive unified agency. Even when 'class' referred to the middle class alone it evoked, he thought, a collective, therefore potentially resistant, social category.¹³ While explicitly repudiating a Marxist analysis, Cannadine's conviction that 'class' must be occluded under a New Labour regime for its agenda to prosper, suggests the shift in understanding forecast by Hall. It is a move that perhaps anticipates the possibility of alliances between different disruptive collectivities, an outcome that the government seeks at all costs to avoid. The prospect of pathologised, criminalised, socially excluded persons joining with other more prosperous elements of the population in the development

of a positive progressive and resistant politics -such an alliance, which we might say has been partly realised in the unprecedented anti-war demonstrations of 2003 - is exactly what New Labour fears. This kind of alliance, as Hall has memorably put it, comes 'without guarantees', that is without the theoretical or political status of the group chosen to revolutionise society, and without the mission and the promise as ascribed to the working class by Marxism - but it is these alliances, these new social formations that we might now be looking towards.¹⁴ And the more the idea of such alliance is edited out of the debates of civil society, barely appearing on the left or in feminism either - the more it returns as a spectre of violent confrontation with Government and Society from outside - as a non-white mob or as individual 'terrorist' masculinity, or perhaps, at times, an ambiguously gendered femininity out of control.

New Labour's virtual ban on thinking or speaking of class relations, or class agency, or class as a still meaningful category of analysis, or as anything indeed but a kind of retro-social performance as cynical as television chef Jamie Oliver's mockney act, has, as its corollary, the deliberate emptying out of the affect that attached to the history of old solidarities and conflicts. It is in this context that I want to explore aspects of these three films that have been criticised for their sentimentality as well as praised for their boldness. There is no doubt that each film resorts to sentimentality, and sentimentality, as extravagant, debased feeling, is usually seen as the wrong sort of affect, standing in the place of argument. But I want to argue that on the contrary, some of the sentiment, in *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* at least, comprises a kind of argument. There are classic, sentimental moments that are part of the films' defiance of the coldness of contemporary politics, so that sentiment's despairing register is meant, vulgarly and extravagantly, to confront the chilling dehumanising of current realpolitic, while its optimistic register, which engages fantasies of a radical communitarianism, can be seen to gesture towards the possible reinvention of agency and community. At the same time, this sentiment is undercut but also powerfully underlined by irony. Irony becomes, as Peter Hitchcock has argued in relation to *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off*, the bearer of feeling's excess and politics' absence in this brave new world - 'realism's answer to the abstract realities of commodity fetishism ...'¹⁵ It is not the presence of sentiment, but rather what kind of work it tries to do in these films in relation to masculinity and the politics of class that is the issue. Indeed, if we think of the films as a kind of trilogy after the fact, and address them in the order in which they were made, the way in which this effect functions becomes clearer.

Brassed Off is set in fictional Grimley - an amalgam of Grimethorpe whose real brass band plays the tunes, and Barnsley - and it is here, ten years after the 1984 miner's strike that we witness the endgame of pit closure. Still viable collieries are being shut one by one by bribing the miners with 'generous' redundancy packets to vote for closure so that they will not risk the lesser benefits accruing if they lose their case in the independent review

14. See Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1996, pp25-46.

15. See Peter Hitchcock, 'Problems in Theories of Working Class Representation', *PMLA*, 115, 1 (January 2000), 20-32. I am indebted throughout this piece to Hitchcock's discussion of *Brassed Off* on pp24-25.

to which they are legally entitled. Danny (Peter Postlethwaite), the aging bandleader of the Grimley colliery brass band is dying of black lung. He has used his 'music' to defend himself - and his 'lads' - against the decline and fall of the community and his own illness. The band, whose history goes back to the nineteenth century, represents for Danny the leisure, pleasure and strategies of survival of British mining communities. Up to a point, the band represents those things for the film's audience too - but the film works to make both those identifications, Danny's and ours, problematic as well as indispensable. The denouement comes through a brilliant and very long montage which juxtaposes the band's successful performance at the semi-final championships in Halifax, with the miners' vote which signs the pit's death warrant - 'four to one for redundancy'. The film sets the band's exuberant performance in a square strikingly flanked by eighteenth century neo-classical architecture, evoking an altogether more prosperous and promising moment in Britain's industrial and civic history. They play from a raised stage that repeats in miniature this Palladian theme, but denaturalises it as theatrical and artificial. This spectacle is juxtaposed with bleak clips of all too modern Grimley - the looming elevator of the silent pit, depressed domestic scenes with women and kids, the agonistic voting procedure. The juxtaposition increasingly presents the band's musical labours and the crowd's pleasure as exigent, in terrifying ignorance of the disaster that lies in waiting for them at home. It is they, not the voting miners, the harassed wives and children and the weary 'women against pit closures' who suddenly seem redundant. Increasingly, the cheerful music becomes macabre as it seems, inappropriately, to be celebrating the death of community. The film audience is drawn into the montage as a third party, knowing but uncomfortable and unwilling bystanders, caught between two scenarios.

In the aftermath of the vote the miners and the women opposing pit closures are depicted walking home in slow motion, accompanied by a quiet, slow movement of the music, exaggerating the contrast between the upbeat, active figures of the musicians and the sagging bodies of the defeated workers. The triumphant band returns to a town silent and shaken, its depressed reality deflating Danny's fantasy of empowerment along with our viewing and listening pleasure. The bad news precipitates his sudden physical collapse - a struggle for breath that is the very literalisation of a deadly silence, the opposite of both music and political protest - against the background of the pit elevator. The first profoundly 'sentimental' moment in the film occurs as Phil, Danny's son, runs to his side with a wail of 'Dad!' - a moment drawn out through the tracking shot which follows him, and the rest of the onlookers, there. What begins as a sequence that highlights the incommensurability between two emblematic public events, the contest and the vote, ends as a tragedy in which the contrasting fortunes of leisure and work, produce a crisis that permits the familial and the political to be merged.

Each film uses the familial as a way of humanising its political and public themes, and each has fathers and sons at its centre. Their generational struggles, their conflicting versions of the masculine, carry important elements of the films' structures of feeling. Danny's son Phil has been a militant in the 1984 strike - jailed and then out of work for a long time before the union managed his reinstatement. Married with kids, he still carries a long train of debt, and while out of work has developed a second 'career' as Chuckles the Clown, entertaining at middle-class children's parties and similar events. This work, which he loathes, is presented as wholly degrading labour, infantilising and emasculating, the debased other of the band's proud communal performance. Nevertheless, Phil is forced to rely on it when his furniture is repossessed and his wife Sandra leaves with their kids, a move which the film - and Phil - fatalistically understand as an effect of the strike and the politics of pit closure. Sandra's flight is not portrayed as right or inevitable; Phil and Sandra's oldest son points out to his mother, that he'd 'rather see Dad sad, than not see him at all', a filial sentiment that moves Sandra tentatively back towards the marriage by the end of the film. Family, community and class loyalties are too deeply entwined to be separated in *Brassed Off*. The upwardly mobile miner's daughter Gloria (Tara Fitzgerald), whose return to her hometown as a surveyor for management, advising on the pit's viability, opens the film, realises too late that management has used her as a screen for its own agenda. A new member of the band herself, its only woman player, she sells her car to pay for the band to go to the London finals, and rejoins the mining community she has left by going back to her teenage romance with Andy (Ewan MacGregor) a militant young miner. In this register, if not in others, the film makes working-class solidarity, traditional families and heterosexuality co-existent - drawing on the least socially radical element of Old Labour's mantra.

Yet in other respects *Brassed Off*'s critique is sharper and bolder, aspiring to be more radical in its politics than the post-war social realism to which it owes much in style and content. Rather than simply celebrating amateur entertainment as heavy industry's recreational solace, the payoff for dirty, health-destroying labour, or mourning the closure of the pits merely for its destruction of this leisure activity, *Brassed Off* emphasises the pathos of Danny and his men's investment in music and the band as a collective, cooperative identity. 'Oh, they can knock out a bloody good tune', says Danny at the end of the film, 'but what the fuck does that matter?' When challenged by his activist wife about the futility of keeping the band going, Harry, Danny's successor as bandleader, mutters bitterly that at least when they play 'someone listens to us'. At bottom the band provides the practice and performance of a male agency that the government is trying to extinguish. The band's confirmation of masculine skill and pride, its voluntary collective discipline, its manifest ability to produce pleasure if not profit, is set in sharp contrast to the humiliation of Chuckles the Clown - the isolated and dependent performer - forced to play the 'fool' to an uncaring middle-class

culture.

With Danny in hospital and the band on the verge of dissolution, Phil/ Chuckles breaks down during a performance at a Harvest Festival in a local church and attacks the reactionary conspiracy of state and church. The shocked female organiser, exclaims piously, 'May God forgive you'. Phil replies, 'God, alright, now there's a fella. I mean what's he doing, eh? He can take John Lennon ... he's even thinking of taking my old man, and Margaret bloody Thatcher lives? I mean what's he sodding playing at, eh?' Turning on his heel, facing the suffering Christ on the cross, Phil speaks back to his uncomprehending infant audience: 'You've been great. My name's Coco the Scab'. This savage diatribe comes as a welcome relief to the viewer - a shrugging off of an unnatural male passivity and a liberating expression of a rational anger. Yet it is also as close as the film gets, and a bit too close for comfort at that, to misogyny, introducing a rhetoric and *mise en scène* in which middle and upper class women - the church organiser and Maggie Thatcher - mediate and enforce the will of an unjust God. The church setting, redolent of a comfortable middle England, offers a traditional frame for a very modern very male martyrdom. Yet while his outburst relieves us, it fuels Phil's destructive self-hatred - a self-wounding martyrdom where the enemy becomes oneself. The ironic identification of Phil with Christ is emphasised, when, shortly afterwards, he makes an abortive attempt to hang himself from the cruciform pit elevator in his clown suit, tears streaming through his makeup. As he desperately tries to keep the rope from choking him, his gesture bizarrely replays Danny's struggle for breath on the ground a few scenes earlier, highlighting the joined fates, and archetypal roles, of father and son. These episodes, broadly, even heavy handedly drawn, but still moving, thanks in part to Stephen Tomkinson's inspired performance as Phil, depend for their effect on the viewer's empathy with Phil's rage and abjection as Chuckles, a violent oscillation of feeling evoked by the loss of a certain kind of masculine identity - one traditionally aligned with the dignity of labour and love of family - a double loss too irreparable to be endured.

This 'Old Labour' conflation of family, community and the dignity of skilled labour embodied as male agency, the *sine qua non* of a true civic identity in the film's political lexicon, is rammed home in its final scenes, which take the band to its inevitable win in the Grand Finals at the Albert Hall. As Harry, standing in for Danny, conducts the William Tell Overture, the camera cuts between band and rapt metropolitan audience, this latter including Grimley's home fans in centre of the stalls. For a few minutes audience, band and viewers are permitted to enjoy the untainted pleasures of success - but the music, with its references to travel and pursuit through its familiar accompaniment to the popular heroics of the Lone Ranger, alerts us to the arrival of the miraculously revived Danny, out of breath but on his feet, to deflate this last illusion. The bottom line for Danny is Phil's emblematic loss of 'the will to live'. He addresses the Albert Hall audience for all the world as if he were the holy ghost of Scargill and the militant

miners of 1984, telling the punters, the press and us that, 'I thought that music mattered. But does it bollocks; not compared to what people matter'. Charging the government with destroying an industry, a community and its people, he refuses the prize, calculating, as the flash bulbs pop, that 'then it becomes news. And I won't be talking just to myself, will I?' In this scene the shot-reverse-shots of father and son, Danny and media, band and Grimley fans, and band and approving urban audience (its cosmopolitanism symbolised by two black faces) works as much as Danny's polemic to argue that the old-fashioned working-class values, the local, British loyalties of community, family and labour -contrasted satirically by Danny to the fashionable liberal campaigns to save 'seals or whales' - can cut through Tory brutality and reconstruct progressive priorities - to be the bearer of new national hopes. The final scene sets this to music - as the band - 'out on the town' plays 'Land of Hope and Glory' in front of the Houses of Parliament, determined to 'make them listen for a change'. This unnecessary coda - one performance and one slogan too many - which implies that music does matter, if not as itself then as protest, returns the film briefly, and somewhat disappointingly, to the very register of fantasmatic agency that Danny, in his speech, has rejected.

Brassed Off is the most 'traditional' of the three films, its sexual politics resolutely hetero, its women, in the end, all supportive of the men's lost cause, its sense of outrage matched by the absence of alternative forms of work or, when it comes down to it, alternative forms of political community. And its nostalgia is sharply selective -there is nothing about mining itself that is valued - we see the men companionably scrubbing each other's backs in the colliery shower, but coal dust which can be scrubbed off, black lung which can't be, and the mine elevator doubling as a convenient gallows - these are the only, and almost always negative, representations of mining itself. In spite of Danny's autocritique at the Albert Hall, music and/or feeling-carefully calibrated as filial homosocial affection, heterosexual love - are the modes through which new masculinity must be forged. For all its rhetorical militancy *Brassed Off* has little to say about the future. The hollow centre of the film can only be filled by the music, and the narrative satisfaction of winning the trophy at the Albert Hall. However ironised, the metropole, and its competitive way of valuing talent, somehow stays intact. Almost in spite of its own rhetoric, but in thrall to what Hitchcock identifies as its unashamed commodity function, entertainment - both inside and outside the film - becomes the alter ego as well as the vehicle of protest.

Whether as deliberate citation or happy accident, the steel mill's brass band figures as an in-joke at the beginning of *The Full Monty*. When Gaz, his son Nathan and his mate Dave (Mark Addy) are looting old girders from the gutted interior of the closed steel works, they are interrupted by its cacophony - 'What the fuck was that?' asks Gaz, 'It's the works band', the son replies, 'It's still going'. 'It's the only thing that is' quips Gaz, and we are treated to a quick shot of the band itself, a shabby, rag-tail operation. In

The Full Monty the band, like 'men', is on its way to history, a forlorn, grotesque relic, part of the vertiginous melancholia of loss that threatens all the ex-steel workers, the divorced dad scared of losing his son's respect and affection, tubby impotent Dave, Lomper, the suicidal son looking after his sick mum, the middle-aged middle manager Gerald, afraid to tell his wife he's lost his job. Sheffield in the 1990s is Engels' world 'turned upside down', with women at work and men idle, but also Engels updated. The emphasis here is not on the abjection of men sitting at home, tending children or cooking - so much as men in a modern geography of displacement and anomie: at the job centre, in low paid menial work, in the parks, pinching scrap metal. Meanwhile the women, in work and with a tenner still in hand, pay to see professional male strippers, the Chippendales, for a laugh. The joke is a post-feminist one perhaps, but not anti-woman, rather a reversal of fortune and gender in good bawdy northern tradition.

The Full Monty acknowledges new sexualities - Lomper and the awesomely hung Guy are seen to get it together in a delicate moment when they've escaped from the police while rehearsing in their leather jockstraps. Gaz and Dave notice their new relationship at Lomper's mother's funeral (where the works band, spruced up and in uniform, officiate). They accept it without much censure for all their earlier homophobic joshing - taking embarrassed, giggling refuge in vernacular cliché - 'nowt so queer as folk'. Indeed the men's collective enterprise - to make some cash by stripping at the local workingmen's venue - makes them increasingly tolerant of sexual and ethnic difference. There is even one token black man in their group, significantly safely older (over 50) and, in a weary ethnic cliché, the best dancer. While all the men need cash, the driving moral force behind the hair-brained scheme to turn ex-steelworkers into dancers is Gaz's need to pay his back child support, lest his wife and her well off new partner win full custody of Nate. Thus the film turns on another simple if temporary reversal of value. To be good dads, husbands, lovers, earners, 'men' again in short - as well as to re-ignite the approbation and innocent solidarity of their community, the film's larger agenda - they have to be, if only for an evening, at once ultramasculine and feminine, taking the place of women as objects of the gaze, exposing their imperfect bodies and - Guy excepted - ordinary equipment. But rather than this exposure remaining exploitative, the film turns it into an unashamedly fantasmatic celebration, so that it becomes a unifying moment for the whole community. In contrast, when women go to see the Chippendales' perform early in the film, the event is 'women only' and the all-female audience is portrayed as a rabid, over-stimulated mob, women out of control, egging the men on with their cash.

For the heroes' amateur performance however, the greedy club owner sells tickets to men too - and this mixed audience is key to the film's sexual and social politics. For as they strip off their policemen's 'uniforms', and the camera cuts lovingly between audience and performers, desire and identification become joined, the audience's approbation and the men's

performance becomes wholehearted, not ironic. Yet the choice of music to strip by - Randy Newman's 'You Can Leave Your Hat On' as performed by Tom Jones, with its resonant phrase 'gives me a reason to live', which echoes Danny's punch line in his Albert Hall tirade, underlines the uncertain future of post-industrial man. The event becomes a kind of demonstration manqué, generating as demonstrations often do, a powerful but innocent polymorphous sensuality - in this case, unalienated pleasure in which the money that changes hands remains as use value, a benefit for and within the community. The final shot in which the club audience sees the performers' penises but the film audience only sees the men's bare asses is a rude but precise gesture to the political and economic forces that have put them there, and a comment perhaps, about the political limits to which the film as global commodity will go. It might be said that each audience, the 'local' one in the club and the international one in the cinema, get the Full Monty they deserve.

Yet for all its emblematic power, the men's performance is not a solution but rather a symptom of their plight - strictly, the plot tells us, one night only. The steel mills are still gutted, Sheffield is not about to have a millennial renaissance to match the one that the opening montage from the 1960s newsreel euphorically shows us. All but Gerald, the manager, off to a new job, are still unemployed. Work, in *The Full Monty* as in *Brassed Off*, remains a kind of elusive mystery. The discipline and skill of dancing-like musicianship - stands in for its possibility. And the tentative new masculinities forged here, although perhaps not so radical after all - the newly outed men are quickly turned into a couple who hold hands at a parent's funeral - are somewhat elusive too. Like *Brassed Off* however, the elements of forced sentimental and conservative closure at the end of the film - the rapprochement between Gaz and his son Nate, even the presence in the audience of Gaz's hostile ex-wife, is a fantasy of the enduring values of family (which remain more 'traditional' than not). Unlike the more open ended comic sentimentalism of its beginning and middle, this closure works against the film's more radical gestures, offering us instead a world of radical uncertainty where entertainment - a paid performance of gender and of sexuality - now seems to be, in more than one sense, the real thing. The 'real' here is the deeper reality of a fantasy whose perverse power is that characters and audience both know that it cannot be translated into paid work.¹⁶ There is an overarching comic pragmatism in the film that neither mourns the past or praises the present - or thinks too hard about the future - a structure of feeling in regard to loss that we have come to know only too well in the early years of the new millennium.¹⁷ In this sense, I would argue, the film performs a critique that at the same time opens the way for the conservative modernity of New Labour.¹⁸

Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot* is the last of these films, and the one most writ through with the terms of New Labour's dispensation. The film is set back in the bitter year of the 1984 miner's strike which is visually represented

16. To argue, as Monk does, that careers in entertainment are narratively presented as practical options in *Brassed Off* or *The Full Monty* is, I think, to misunderstand the key role of fantasy as an activity in these films.

17. See for example Slavoj Žižek's illuminating reading of performance in both *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* as the 'acts of losers' ... 'two modes of coming to terms with the catastrophic loss: insisting on the empty form as fidelity to the lost content'. But his analysis depends on seeing these acts as a sign of political abjection in the wake of the failure of Marxism ('Whither Oedipus', in *The Ticklish Subject*, Verso, London, 1999, pp351-2).

18. See my essay, 'Millennial Class' in *PMLA*, January 2000, Vol. 115, No. 1, pp9-19.

in a series of shots that cut between an undifferentiated vision of anarchic male violence - scabs, cops, strikers in close packed and violent confrontation, in stunning contrast to the ordered and disciplined femininity of little girls in tutus, and Billy, at their ballet lesson. Old working-class masculinity, with its confrontational tactics, its atavistic angers, has, the film implies, nothing much going for it. Yet even more than the other films, *Billy Elliot* makes women marginal to the main action - one senescent grandmother, Billy's middle-class ballet teacher and her sexually precocious daughter, and the ghost of Billy's mother in one unfortunate scene, stand in for women. Billy's dad, wonderfully played by Gary Lewis is widowed, like Danny in *Brassed Off*. (As the nineteenth-century novel orphaned its heroines to give them the possibility of autonomy, late twentieth-century cinema does the same to its men and boys.) There is particular logic to the exclusion of women in *Billy Elliot*, which has a strongly marked gay subtext: to support its homosocial and gently homoerotic narrative, femininity as a negative or abject trope must be cordoned off from the film's redefinition of masculinities, both heroic and ordinary. These include Billy's butch activist brother Tony (Jamie Draven), his grieving, angry Dad and his cross-dressing friend Michael. *Billy Elliot* has even less positive things to say about mining as a job, a skill, a profession or a way of constructing a viable masculinity than *Brassed Off* - one grim shot of the cage going down after the strike is lost does it for mining. The mining town - like its domestic architecture, the privies, roofs, yards and walls of the back-to-backs where Billy (Jamie Bell) dances his anger and frustration to popular music - is a kind of provincial prison, a closet for gay men (Billy's best friend Michael and his friend's dad, who are secret cross dressers, and perhaps Billy himself, whose sexuality remains unspoken), a grave for talent and opportunity.

Unlike Grimley's music, Billy's dancing, pop or posh, doesn't really have a home in the town, though the view of the sea at the end of the road he dances down is a visual clue to open sky and a possible exit route. More purely, more openly than in either of the other films, dancing, the ballet, its aesthetic, is a way out of the prison of class, gender and industrial labour; it escapes the temporality of late capitalism and its discontents, into a sublime timeless space. Billy verbalises this effect in the last moments of his interview with the Royal Ballet in London - a place his father has never visited or wanted to visit: 'There are no mines in London' Jackie Elliot tells his son, without any irony at all, when Billy asks him, innocently, what London is like. Tongue-tied and abashed in the company of his father in front of the toffee nosed Royal Ballet School panel - an exemplary scene of class confrontation which takes place in yet another architectural monument to Empire - Billy's finally finds a voice when asked what it 'feels like' when he's dancing. In one of the best, and most revealing, moments of the film he struggles to describe it. 'Dunno. It sort of feels good. Like I forget everything. I sort of disappear. I sort of disappear. I can feel a change in me whole body, like there's fire in me body'. Reaching for a non-human, depersonalised

simile he says he feels as if he's 'flyin' like a bird ...like electricity ... yeah like electricity'. Billy's ability to deliver a poetic description of the aesthetics of dance, as much as his raw talent, is the decisive factor in his winning the scholarship - the sign, to the panel, and I would argue to the film audience also, that he will be amenable to training, a boy who can be interpellated not only as a artist but as an articulate bourgeois subject, a boy who can, miraculously, transcend his origins. The panel chair's farewell, 'Safe journey. And good luck with the strike, Mr Elliot', should be heard as both genial liberal support and the death knell to the miners' hopes.

The aftermath of this moment is fully realised in the final scene of the film which fast forwards to opening night at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, at least ten or more years later, with Jackie and Tony Elliot older but virtually unchanged, arriving just before the curtain to watch Billy perform, not as a plebeian member of the corps de ballet of course, but as the lead in the much praised production of 'Swan Lake' that cast male dancers as the swans. They are seated, accidentally or by design, next to Billy's old friend Michael, now a fully-fledged transvestite, and a black man, perhaps Michael's boyfriend. Jackie tells the usher to tell 'Billy Elliot that his family is here', and Michael extends that definition of 'family' by reintroducing himself to Tony, and saying ambiguously that he 'wouldn't miss' Billy's debut 'for the world'. Curiously excluded from the 'family of men' are Billy's Gran, presumed dead, and his dancing teacher. We see Billy in the wings, waiting to enter, in an adult male body so impossibly muscled, tall and erect - at once hypermasculine and androgynous - that it might seem that ballet training took place on some planet where morphology was easy to mutate. This sublime, sci-fi translation of weedy, northern Billy into gender-bending celebrity, is confirmed by the desiring identification which the working, worshipfully upturned and expectant faces of his family, friends and the cosmopolitan audience all share as spectators. As Billy leaps and starts to descend, the film reaches its apotheosis.

This moment is irony-free - an uncritical moment of suture in which old and new masculinities are somehow reconciled in the suspended moment of high art, and the aristocracy of talent effortlessly substituted for the aristocracy of labour. It is a great cinematic moment which we are not allowed to savour lest it turn suddenly sour; or we dwell too long on Billy's social and sexual future. The film cuts quickly to a montage of the pre-pubescent, pre-sexual Billy dancing to popular music, its selective, self-referential nostalgia effacing the other history it has narrated. Billy's godlike ascension begs almost all the more serious questions that the film has led us to ask, and stops us from inquiring why or how the emergence of one man of genius from a declining community can somehow reconcile its remaining members to being 'yesterday's men' from a world well lost or left behind. *Billy Elliot's* message seems spookily to echo Blair's narrow and radically individualistic definition of social exclusion quoted earlier as the 'enemy of talent and ambition, of aspiration and achievement'. It is true of all these films that

19. Yet to argue, for example as Julia Hallam does in 'Film, Class, National Identity' in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, p267 that the characters in *The Full Monty* 'seem to yearn for the stability of ... [an] imagined postwar world' as portrayed in post-war Ealing cinema is to miss the film's resolutely postmodern presentism.

20. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, revised edn, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, p3.

the emphasis on the reconciliation of fathers and sons from the dying working-class communities, denies the fissures within those communities and the unbridgeable rifts, becoming wider, between the 'two nations' in Britain, rifts that no longer seems to have a legitimate language or an adequate analysis to unpick their causes or devise a cure.¹⁹ *Billy Elliot* takes the radical revision of masculinity further than either *Brassed Off* or *The Full Monty*, ending on a utopian note of sexual politics, but its very lack of ambivalence makes it the most skilful, but the least progressive and the least subtle of the three films -although by far the easiest to watch. All three films hope to substitute men who can say and show what they feel, for the caricatured stoical northerners who can't or won't display emotion. Fathers and sons embracing is the safe, traditional trope through which this transformation is depicted in all three, creating a composite intergenerational hero, for whom class is an indeterminate signifier. We might still ask whether the supposed reinvention of Men of Feeling - a home-grown eighteenth-century subjectivity after all, an effect of the culture of sensibility that thrived from the 1750s through the 1790s when it fell out of vogue, and as British and imperial as neo-classical architecture - is a sufficient act of resistance to the chilly version of social democracy New Labour has offered? Whether emoting for family values or art or against the ruthless rationalisations of the state, the new man of these films is hardly the New Times' vision of reinvented social or political identities that hopeful feminists and socialists less than a generation ago aimed to bring into being.

Nevertheless all three films have positive virtues and undeniable cinematic power that resists the negative critical closure that I am in danger of imposing. The historian E.P. Thompson, in the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* (1961) argued that class itself was an historic relationship, fluid and impure, 'like love', a relationship that was always inherently agonistic - 'class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to theirs)'.²⁰ At some level all of these films take up this definition bringing out its problematic homosocial subtext - 'between men and against other men' - yet making class present to us, its audience, through feeling articulated in words, music and movement. And although flawed in the ways I have suggested, at times mawkishly laced with the traditional social ingredients that New Labour has kept on the shelf to sweeten the bitter pill of conservative modernity, each film does try to project the possibility of new forms of feeling - and new men to feel them - in ways that we still struggle, and must struggle, to imagine.