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'Tears of Laughter': 1990s British Cinema
in the Comic Mode

By

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A thesis submitted to the University of Kent in fulfilment of the
regulations required for the degree of PhD in Film Studies

March, 2004

Abstract of thesis

The thesis examines the interactions of comedy and drama in three significant strands of British film production during the decade of the 1990s, classified and considered under the headings of 'comedies of class, culture and community', 'ethnic' comedy dramas exploring issues of cultural identity, and romantic comedies, set and produced in Britain. The study will consider the extent to which these particular kinds of narrative are both indebted to earlier forms of comic drama in British film culture, and also represent a decisive break from established traditions in British film culture. The thesis seeks to demonstrate that the 'comic mode' proved to be a dynamic creative mechanism in recent British cinema, facilitating the construction of innovative and genuinely exploratory filmic stories about characters seeking work, cultural acceptance and romantic fulfilment.

Part one considers the role of humour in societies, the relationships between comedy and other dramatic modes of expression, such as tragedy and melodrama, and the significance of genres in British film culture. Part two discusses a series of 1990s films which dramatise issues of community from a comic and tragi-comic perspective, and includes case studies of *Brassed Off* (1996) and *The Full Monty* (1997). Part three examines a series of 1990s British films revolving around British-Asian and African-Caribbean characters attempting to feel 'at home' in Western and modern British culture, and features a detailed analysis of *East is East* (1999). Part four explores the emergence of romantic comedy as a popular and influential genre in 1990s British cinema, and concludes with case studies of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and *Notting Hill* (1999). The thesis will claim that the comic framework deployed in the films discussed was crucial to their success in creating compelling portraits of the multi-faceted nature of modern British society.

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Part One:

Introduction to thesis:

'Tears of laughter': **1990s British cinema in the comic mode**.

In the entry on comedy in *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies* (1996), Susan Hayward suggests that 'Britain has a strong tradition with its Ealing comedies and Carry-On movies. But these are past history (1940s-50s and 1958-78 respectively) – as indeed is the British film industry itself'.[1] My thesis will contest the latter claims of this statement, and argue that native comic traditions did play a significant role in the considerable achievements of British cinema during the 1990s. Although the British film industry lacked a studio based, centrally organised system of production and distribution during this period, film-makers were influenced by movements and cycles associated with earlier traditions of British film production, such as the Ealing Studios comedy dramas produced in the 1940s and 50s, the British 'new wave' films of the early 1960s, and television situation comedies of the 1970s, a number of which were transferred into feature length narratives released as cinema films.

I will seek to illustrate that, as well as drawing upon and re-imagining such traditions for a contemporary era, independent film-makers in Britain recognised the importance of formulating new and original strategies for competing with modern Hollywood. One consequence of this realisation was that the genre of romantic comedy, a form of narrative previously closely identified with American, rather than British cinema, subsequently became a 'high profile' feature of British film production in the 1990s.

The particular focus of my study will involve examining the interactions of comedy *and* drama in three key thematic strands of 90s British cinema, to be classified and analysed under the headings of 'comedies of class, culture and community', 'ethnic' comedy dramas, and romantic comedies. I shall investigate the ways in which humour is deployed for dramatic effect in the context of scenarios engaging with such seemingly non-comic subjects as mass unemployment, failed or uneasy relationships, bitter family disputes, or instances of racial tension and conflict in British society. The thesis will consider some of the reasons why film makers might have sought to develop their treatment of such themes within 'comic-based' narrative frameworks during the 1990s. The

aesthetic and cultural effects generated by incorporating comic, farcical, and satirical elements into dramatisations of serious themes will be a key area of my study.

Part two of the thesis, "Things can only get better..?" [2] – 'Comedies of class, culture and community', will discuss a series of films depicting groups of individuals working together to achieve a common goal, with much of the comedy and drama in these scenarios emerging from the improbable and not easily realisable nature of the ambition (*The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain*, Chris Monger, 1995; *The Full Monty*, Peter Cattaneo, 1997). In such narratives, humour tends to be generated out of the discrepancy between the collective aspiration, and the inherent lack of ability displayed by individual group members, making subsequent achievements all the more remarkable (*In the Bleak Midwinter*, Kenneth Branagh, 1995; *The Full Monty*; *Up 'n' Under*, John Godber, 1998).

The contemporary 'ethnic' comedies to be discussed in part three of the thesis deal with complex issues of identity and allegiance, often from the standpoint of characters searching for their cultural 'roots' or 'origins', and grappling with the problems of experiencing 'mixed' loyalties in the context of a fragmented and individualistic society. Such quests are presented as challengingly painful, and at times, almost comically absurd. In *Secrets and Lies* (1996), for instance, Mike Leigh's drama about a black woman discovering that her biological mother is white, a social worker warns Hortense (Marianne Jean-Bapitiste), and, by extension, spectators of the film that 'It's a traumatic journey we're embarking on'. This warning proves to be only too prophetic, but comic ironies are nonetheless evident in the melodramatic and farcical nature of the plot as hidden "skeletons fall out of cupboards", and repressed actions rise to the surface in the changed conditions of the present. On realising that Hortense is black, her biological mother, Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn), suggests that someone is 'having a joke' at their expense. The joke, in fact, turns out to be the truth, and the film explores at what emotional and social cost, this particular joke, can be incorporated into everyday family life.

In the British romantic comedies produced during the 1990s, less intense and serious concerns might appear to be at stake. These films do, however, explore the attempts by various characters to achieve romantic and sexual satisfaction,

and dramatise the difficulties of finding a suitable and desirable long-term partner in the context of modern courtship patterns. The majority of the 90s British romantic comedies do focus on heterosexual relationships, but efforts to extend the scope of the genre by dramatising other forms of emotional encounter and sexual engagement were notably evident in *Beautiful Thing* (Hettie Macdonald, 1996), a gay love story, unfolding in the seemingly unromantic setting of a south London council estate, and *Love and Death on Long Island* (Richard Kwietniowski, 1998), a tragic-comic account of a failed love affair between two incongruously matched male characters, an ageing British writer, and a young American film actor.

Four Weddings and a Funeral (Mike Newell, 1994) and *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999), also consider the opportunities for Anglo-American relationships to flourish in unexpected and unpredictable ways during the 1990s. The staging of such encounters could be read as symptomatic of attempts by British film producers to forge closer relationships between contemporary British and American film production companies, and to create an impression that British cinema was capable of producing films with mass international appeal. The comic tensions pervading *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill* are, however, closely linked to a sense that the English male (as represented by Hugh Grant) is not necessarily emotionally compatible with the modern American woman (as personified by Andie MacDowell and Julia Roberts), implying, perhaps, that a rapprochement between the creative tendencies and more typical features of Hollywood and British cinemas would not necessarily be easily achieved, or seamlessly maintained.

The thesis is organised into five sections. Part one introduces the conceptual concerns of the thesis, and meditates upon particular aspects of theories pertaining to the aesthetics and politics of comedy. Parts two to four explore, in detail, historical and conceptual areas of study around the themes of communal comedy, ethnic comic dramas, and indigenous romantic comedies. The concluding section considers the implications and achievements of the contemporary British films which have engaged with these particular generic and ideological concerns.

My study will explore the interactions of comic and dramatic modes and styles of narration, within the three key generic areas outlined above. Each of the three

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main parts of the thesis includes a discussion of the history and key features of communal, 'ethnic' and romantic comedies in British film culture.

Part two of the thesis considers key examples of community-based comedies and social dramas in British cinema, and proceeds to an examination of their relationship to current day exemplars of these traditions of British film-making. Part three explores three 1970s British film comedies which treat issues of ethnicity in British society as an *inherently funny* topic, and from ideological viewpoints which might currently be considered racist and objectionable. The influence of such 'disreputable' traditions of humour on 1990s British 'ethnic' comedy dramas will subsequently be scrutinised. Part four, focusing upon romantic comedy, investigates the question of how far such a type of narrative format might be deemed to have played an important role in British film culture, prior to the 1990s.

The parts of the thesis exploring these three areas of study will each conclude with detailed case studies of films, selected both for their individual resonance and complex layers of interest, and their emblematic status in terms of the generic and thematic concerns being examined in each section. These case studies will undertake close textual analysis of key 1990s British films, including research into the critical reception, production history, and distribution factors affecting the impact made by these particular narratives on contemporary British and world film culture.

Part two of the study concentrates on *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) and *The Full Monty* (1997), two films featuring contrasting approaches to the problems caused by redundancy, and also evoking idiosyncratic cultural traditions as possible post-employment activities for male groups in socially depressed communities. Part three is centred around a case study of *East is East* (Damien O'Donnell, 1999), a comedy-drama about the tensions caused by conflicts between absolutist and more liberally inclined, individualist-orientated beliefs within a British-Asian family, living under the same roof in Salford, circa 1971. Part four compares and contrasts *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill*, two examples of different kinds of British cinema and culture, each film being set in the south (rather than the north) of England, and exploring the private and emotional lives of a group of relatively privileged individuals.

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The following section of this introductory chapter (part one of the thesis) will examine a number of significant debates about the purposes and achievements of comedy, differing examples of comic practice and philosophy, and the nature of the cultural and aesthetic interactions which can take place between comedy and other dramatic modes of expression such as tragedy and melodrama. I will consider Bakhtin's notions of the subversive power of comedy, and its potential to challenge authority, the social and psychological functions of jokes, and the effects and consequences of their incorporation into extended narrative forms. I shall also seek to introduce some important questions about the relationship between British cinema and influential generic forms of storytelling. The intention is to formulate a broadly informative, philosophical and cultural context for the specific discussions of the areas of communal and socially concerned comedy-drama, comedies about ethnicity and cultural identity, and romantic comedy, which follow in parts two, three and four of the thesis.

(1.1) Defining and conceptualising comedy

> 'When it is suggested that Britain might sometimes fall a prey to dictatorship or bloody revolution, English people often reply: 'We have too much sense of humour…[based on] a kindly sense that all human institutions may be debunked and respected at the same time'.
> By our film critic', *The Times Educational* Supplement, 13 May, 1949, review of *Passport to Pimlico*.

> 'One of the reasons why world peace is today as fragile as a crate of eggs is that people have a diminishing capacity for laughing at themselves. The Americans are losing this talent fast. It is doubtful whether the Russians ever had it. The English, on the other hand, have it in abundance'.
> Anthony Carthew, *Daily Herald*, 14 August, 1959, review *of I'm All Right Jack*.

> 'In Britain, the human comedy we tend to see in even the most miserable straits comes again and again to our social rescue. No one makes revolutions here: not violent ones, anyhow. We laugh our way out of our troubles, even though our hearts are breaking'.
> Alexander Walker, *Evening Standard*, 20 August, 1997, review of *The Full Monty*.

The conclusions drawn by these reviewers, in response to three 'classic' British comedies produced within three different decades, suggest both a fascinating continuity in the types of comic films produced by film-makers in Britain over a

distinctive period of time, and a striking similarity about the ways in which such films may be valued and assimilated into British culture. Concepts of humour and laughter in these particular reviews are associated with emotions of frustration, scepticism, irony, common sense, and a particularly British form of irreverence and social restraint. British cinematic forms of comedy over a near fifty year period are thus credited with possessing the potential to challenge and question authority, without, however, inflicting lasting damage on the structure and organisation of society. The studies of British film comedy in parts two to four will explore the pertinence and accuracy of these claims in more detail.

Comedy as a universal form has traditionally drawn upon elements of pathos and sadness in order to achieve specific effects on audiences, and, in such instances, comedy as a cultural and aesthetic practice can appear to possess close links with dramatic and even tragic modes of narration. Walter Kerr in his study of *Tragedy &Comedy* (1967), for example, has suggested, in fact, that 'Laughter always erupts precisely as the situation becomes hopeless…Comedy occurs when there is no way out'.[3]

Critical and academic examinations of comedy have often been organised around attempts to identify and define its specific distinguishing generic features, in order to gain an enhanced understanding of the relationships between jokes, instances of the 'comic' and extended narrative forms. It is inevitably difficult to assess the importance and value of comedy as a social and aesthetic form, in the absence of consensual agreements about what the genre may generally entail, embrace or exclude.

The 'comic', in its range of varying manifestations, has constituted a vital component of many types of artistic format, including plays, novels, poems, newspaper articles, comic strips, and radio, film and television productions. The flexibility of comedy, and its ability to adapt itself to the particular conditions and needs of contrasting forms of entertainment, and cultural changes in society, has meant that comedy is a form which has generally tended to occupy a significant (if not always a highly regarded) position in most national cultures.

Franco Moretti in an essay 'Planet Hollywood' (*New Left Review*, May/June 2001), argued that national forms of comedy, with their indigenous comic points of reference, may be somewhat culturally exclusive in their overall appeal to audiences:

relatively speaking, comedies do *not* travel well…since jokes rely heavily on short circuits between signifier and signified, they are weakened by translation…laughter arises out of unspoken assumptions that are buried very deep in a culture's history…we usually associate the national spirit with the sublime…[e.g.] unknown soldiers, torn flags, battlefields, martyrs…yet, what makes a nation laugh turns out to be just as distinctive as what makes it cry. If not *more* distinctive…[4]

Comedies, when considered in these terms, can, however, provide potentially useful cultural insights into the sub-conscious and latent preoccupations of particular societies, through an examination of the kinds of subjects and themes being 'joked about' in individual texts produced within nation states.

As comedy is invariably associated with depictions of individual failure and social disarray (what, after all, could be funny about everything going according to plan?), one might conclude that when it comes to representations of individual nations, comedy might be culturally and politically displaced by narratives and generic forms which present more grandiose, dignified *and favourable* portraits of countries and societies than comedies, as a rule, perhaps, tend towards formulating.

Other writers and cultural commentators have suggested that the very term and category of 'comedy' itself may be of only limited value and helpfulness. Robert Stam, for instance, in his study *Film Theory* (2000) suggests that 'Some generic labels, such as comedy, are too broad to be useful'.[5] Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins in an essay 'Funny Stories', collected in a study of *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (1995), note a lack of shared features such as 'setting and iconography' which could be identified as endemic or integral to the vast majority of comic films. As a result, the authors suggest that 'There is no plot structure that encompasses all comedies. Nor is there shared subject matter'.[6] In the light of such claims and observations, it might be concluded that comedy is a particularly versatile, if peculiarly 'decentred' form or mode, which may ultimately (and somewhat defiantly) resist definitive categorisation, classification or positioning.

Umberto Eco, in an essay, 'Carnival' (1984), claimed that comedy was best understood as 'an umbrella term referring…to a network of family resemblances… a disturbing ensemble of diverse and not completely homogeneous phenomena, such as humour, comedy, grotesque, parody, satire, wit and so on', emphasising diversity, rather than inherent unity and internal

cohesion.[7] Clearly, there are many different types of comedy, and the narrative structures which frame (for example) parodic, farcical or satirical narratives will be significantly varied in form, style and tone. Walter Kerr in *Tragedy and Comedy* asserted that the multi-faceted nature of comic practices meant that comedy was 'a parasitical form, and no absolute'[8], implying that what might be deemed comic within a text is always somewhat subjective and subject to fluctuations.

Ian Green, in an essay entitled 'Ealing: In the Comedy Frame' (1983), raised the following questions which are relevant to any exploration of comedy as a particular form and style of narrative: 'one might ask of comedy, what are its functions, what themes can it explore, what are its parameters, and what problems and resistances does it negotiate?'[9] One of the key functions of comedy is to provide pleasure and entertainment for audiences, and, as a result, comic plays and films may initially be judged simply on the basis of their success at eliciting laughter and amused responses from viewers and spectators. Comedy, from this perspective, can be viewed as a medium for creating moments of happiness, serving the function of allowing audiences (however briefly) to experience enjoyable emotions and sensations (often ironically engendered through laughing at the misfortunes and comic observations of others).

The question of whether such laughter and humour tends towards the incitement of potentially radical or conservative responses in both historical and contemporary audiences is a debatable (if inevitably somewhat unverifiable) issue. Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) claimed, for instance, that 'for Bergson comedy' fulfilled the 'function of preserving social norms by castigating deviancy with ridicule', while for Emil Staiger, 'the comic' served the purpose of making 'the fundamental absurdity of human existence tolerable'.[10] Comedy, in the first instance, is associated with preserving the status quo, and, in the second example, with a desire to transcend earth-bound political considerations, through a wider consideration of man's place in the greater scheme of things.

As multiple and conflicting readings can be generated even by individual comic texts, and as comedy (by its very nature) is an essentially 'hybrid' form, one should, perhaps, be wary of making over-generalised assumptions about the typical role and function of comedy in society. Fundamentally, I would suggest,

it cannot be claimed that comedy is either intrinsically or inherently 'conservative' or 'socialist' in its implications, narrative impulses or practices. Consequently, it is important and vital to pay attention to the particular features of individual texts, and examine (with an open mind) the ways in which they may aspire to be amusing, ironic or parodic.

Howard Jacobson in his study *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (1997), does suggest, however, that 'In so far as man…invests in a moral or ideological system, comedy is always against it',[11] implying that whatever constitutes the dominant or defining social and economic structures of a society at any particular moment, time or place, will be met by comedy with an instinctively sceptical and potentially undermining response. Within such a framework, comedy could be perceived as an opponent of certain existing class and political arrangements, even if practitioners of comic arts might appear to equally gravitate towards somewhat nihilist or apolitical positions on numerous occasions.

Comedy is a genre, which, as suggested earlier, tends to resist inherently restrictive or confining definitions, and, as a result, there may not necessarily be any limits to the kinds of subjects which can be treated by comedy, or the ways in which particular themes and concerns may be mediated or inflected through varying types of comic format. Satires and parodies can (for example) serve contrasting functions in society, and yet be linked by a desire to illustrate that there are other ways of conceptualising art and conducting political debates than those enshrined in either traditional political institutions, or in more conventional, 'realist' oriented, drama based forms of narrative.

It is important, at the same time, to be aware that most practitioners of comedy will not necessarily be motivated by the 'purest' or most 'high-minded' of intentions, and that, equally, what may be deemed acceptable in a comic scenario may radically differ or change from one era to another. For instance, in an interview about his participation in the 1970s British situation comedy, *Love Thy Neighbour*, black actor Rudolph Walker declared that the series 'was never done to solve the racial problem. It was done for pure entertainment and to make money'.[12] While defending his role in a programme which allowed racist insults to flow freely in the name of light entertainment, he admitted that 'it's not something I would do now, simply because the atmosphere is different'.[13]

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One of the most controversial aspects of the comic form has been the refusal of certain performers and writers of comedy to necessarily accept that there may be limits as to what can be mocked, parodied or transmuted into comedy for the pleasure of audiences. Andy Medhurst in a 1989 essay on situation comedies and representations of race, argued that 'Comedy can never be inoffensive', as notions of 'attack and hostility are built into its very structure'.[14] Laraine Porter, writing on 'Women and representation in British comedy' (1998), observed similarly that 'Comedy is forever reinventing its victims, the butts of its jokes',[15] implying that the continuance of comedy as an art form may indeed depend on the existence (and creation) of an ever changing and extending set of individual and group victims capable of providing 'material' for comedy.

Certain examples of humour and observational comedy are, thus, formulated out of socially specific and topical paradigms and discourses. Examining comic patterns and subject material from previous decades can (as a result) provide revealing insights into the nature of ideological and social conflicts taking place within particular historical conjunctures. 'Mother-in-law' jokes, for instance, were once a staple feature of British comedy, but with the rise of the single parent family, and a reduction in the number of couples living with their parents, along with conceptual changes in the ways society perceives women, such examples of British comedy are no longer as current, meaningful (or funny) to contemporary audiences as they once were to previous generations.

Comedy, one might claim, is always preoccupied with (and fascinated by) images of what might be termed the 'other', groups of individuals (like the 'mother-in-law' figure from the past) who are deemed to not quite fit into the kind of world inhabited by the 'silent majority'. Such 'others' may be designated as different from dominant social norms and axioms because of their sexual orientation, skin colour, or religious and political beliefs. In his essay, 'Myth Today' (1957), Roland Barthes claimed that the 'petit-bourgeois universe' always aimed to reduce 'otherness' to the status of 'sameness', justifying such intentions in the name of social democracy: 'the bourgeois can at least imagine the place where the [other] fits in: this is what is known as liberalism', he observed, somewhat sarcastically.[16] Barthes also suggested that one other way to lessen the power of the 'other' was to fetishize or ridicule such figures: 'How can one assimilate the Negro, the Russian? There is here a figure for emergencies:

exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown'.[17] Comic forms and practices, in Barthes' view, can (on occasions) be converted into tools or weapons in the hands of those who may wish to subtly exercise a form of social control, based around concepts of inclusion and exclusion.

In such circumstances, comedy can draw upon the fears, anxieties and prejudices within audiences in relation to the existence of those somehow designated as 'other'. Within such contexts, 'Stand-up' performers or situation comedies may appear to endorse a kind of 'them' and 'us' mentality (what one might term a 'Stand-off' situation), in which humour is calculatingly *used* to ridicule, undermine or neutralise the lifestyle, culture and beliefs of particular social groupings in society. Cynical observers of such comic practices and processes could argue that comedy can be too easily used for reactionary or regressive purposes, with the perpetrators of sexist, racist or overly-cruel humour endlessly taking refuge behind the fictional-imaginary status of comedy, amidst a cry of 'I'm only joking, don't take me too seriously!'

Instances of such 'irresponsible' comic practices in British culture might be found in the self-seeking and ruthless behaviour of 'Mr. Punch', and his treatment of both 'Judy' and the local policeman. Howard Jacobson notes in his book on comedy, 'Come summer we sit on a beach and watch Punch beat his wife and cheat the hangman',[18] as if this is were perfectly normal, acceptable and *comic* behaviour. Equally, the sustained racist rants and behaviour of Alf Garnett (Warren Mitchell) and Eddie Booth (Jack Smethurst) in their respective television programmes and feature films produced during the 1960s and 70s were once considered to be 'family entertainment', suitable for the masses.

In his study, Jacobson, however, does seek to defend audiences who find such comic practices entertaining and invigorating, by asking 'Why must it always be *nice* laughter, silliness, clowning about, goofing, that restores us to ourselves? Why, when it comes to more tendentious comedy, the faintness of heart?'[19] In arguing for the importance of (and even the necessity for) outspoken and potentially offensive forms of comedy, Jacobson claims that such comic styles and modes can act as 'a periodic release from our compulsion to overdo the sympathy and suffering',[20] and, thus, serve a useful purpose in permitting the imaginary acting out of tensions and conflicts which are already simmering away within particular societies.

The comic tendency to be drawn to 'low' subjects which may then be treated in a dubious or provocative manner has been praised by other writers. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1975), suggested that the comic novel from the eighteenth century onwards had served to displace tragedy as the dominant artistic form, and (in so doing) had extended both the democratic possibilities for producing forms of art accessible to the masses, and highlighted the aesthetic potential of comedy to both subsume and transcend other cultural forms which had possibly peaked, or no longer appeared to urgently engage with the times in which they were produced:

> It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and… any hierarchal… distance…Alongside direct representation…there flourish parody and travesty of all high genres and of all lofty models embodied in national myth. The "absolute past" of gods, demigods and heroes is here…"contemporised": it is brought low…in an everyday environment, in the low language of contemporaneity.[21]

Bakhtin here conceives of the comic as a demystifying force which rejects notions of separateness or elitism, thereby constituting a positive movement within art, literature and society, particularly through comedy's commitment to celebrating and delineating the ordinary and unremarkable lives of the 'People', rather than concerning itself with the exalted lives of certain privileged or fortunate individuals.

Bakhtin's emphasis on the socially therapeutic potential of comedy was linked to his admiration for the medieval process of 'carnival', a festive occasion allowing the lower classes a licensed moment to briefly re-make society in their own image (often literally, by parading caricatured images of authority figures around the local community). Carnival permitted a temporary suspension of traditional class structures and notions of deference and social restraint, leading to situations in which Bakhtin claimed, 'where there has been respect and awe there is now travesty, where modesty, lewdness'.[22] In terms of their potential for parodying or challenging oppressive class and sexual structures within society, one can recognise the aesthetic and political possibilities of both comic and carnivalesque modes of art and communication. As regards the position of those, however, who might be designated as 'Other' within particular communities, one might conclude that the liberating aspects of 'carnival' for certain groupings within societies are less clear-cut or self-evident.

Howard Jacobson recognised this potentially negative feature of carnivalesque approaches to culture and society when he acknowledged that such licensed forms of comic revolt could have harmful or malign effects: 'Because you never know who or what the community is going to decide is the evil in its midst...when a community celebrates its shared pleasures in the ordinary, *something* perceived as extraordinary has to get it in the neck'.[23] The comedy of 'Carnival' may begin by celebrating freedom, and conclude by seeking to repress certain social and cultural differences. There is also the question of how far such comic revolts and carnival-type rebellions may be permitted in art and society, precisely, because of their actual inability or disinclination to bring about any kind of significant (or permanent) socially progressive forms of political change.

The following section will consider the significance of attempts to narrow the aesthetic distance between comedy and other forms of drama by the production of narratives which draw upon both comic and dramatic modes of representation, a development which could be read as prompted by a desire to imbue comedy with a greater sense of meaning and purpose than it, perhaps, held for certain audiences, critics and social commentators, when it was conceived of as a purely separate, self-governing and self-generating phenomenon.

(1.2) Comedy, tragedy and melodrama

Some of the earliest recorded attempts to compare and contrast the intrinsic features of comedy and tragedy tended towards a view that comedy, in comparison, could possibly be regarded as the lesser form of the two modes. Aristotle (384-322 BC), meditating on dramatic forms in his (undated) *Poetics*, suggested that comedy lacked the emphasis on rigorous character motivation, logically determined plot developments, and the overall spiritual intensity and creative ambition which was to be found in most tragic dramas. Aristotle, similarly, noted that the origins of comedy remained obscure as 'its early stages [had] passed unnoticed because it was not as yet taken up in a serious way'.[24]

Aristotle's thoughts on comedy tend to be presented in the form of fascinating asides, rather than expansive critiques, as his main concern was with considering the contours and parameters of tragic verse and drama. He did, however, acknowledge historical changes in the construction of comic forms by crediting Crates as 'the first Athenian poet to abandon the Comedy of invective and devise

stories of a general and non-personal nature, in other words Fables or Plots'[25]. The comic form as it existed in poetry and drama, whilst lacking the aloof determinism of tragedy and epic poetry, was perceived by Aristotle as increasingly capable of reflecting upon and indirectly representing some of the contradictory features and contemporary intrigues of ancient Greek society.

Aristotle noted that the 'Megarians in Sicily' claimed that comedy 'arose when 'Megara became a democracy',[26] and that that the Dorians of Peloponnesus wrote that 'comedians got their name not from *komazein* (to revel), but from their strolling from one *kome* to another before they were appreciated in the city'.[27] These observations suggest that developments in comedy corresponded with the gradual evolution and establishment of more democratically inclined structures of government in such civilisations. An equating of democracy and comedy in this fashion may serve to confirm Bakhtin's claim that a significant feature of comedy in its formative stages was that its practitioners sought to reject the social exclusiveness of classical tragedy, and its corresponding emphasis on the ambitions and flaws of 'great men' and tragic heroes.

The 'strolling' element of early comic practices referred to by Aristotle, draws our attention to the nomadic, restless nature of comedy in general, and its reluctance to be confined to one place, perspective or style. The willingness of early performers of comedy to undergo a series of journeys in order to find a dramatic space in which comedy could be enacted, may account for the importance of the journey motif in certain comedy dramas, where suspense and amusement is generated out of a series of chance encounters, joke-ridden digressions, and unexpected occurrences.

Aristotle concluded that tragedies were constructed out of six main elements, composed of 'Spectacle, Melody, Diction, Character, Thought, and Plot',[28] narrative components which, from our contemporary perspective, could be considered as equally significant to the construction of a comic play or film. Aristotle subsequently discriminated between what he saw as the several different types of tragic drama: 'complex tragedy, which is all peripeteria and discovery', tragedies of 'suffering', the 'tragedy of character', and 'that in which spectacle is predominant'.[29] No records have been discovered as to whether Aristotle believed comedy capable of generating similar narrative and generic distinctions, but from our own modern cultural perspective, one might identify

comedies of equally varying complexity, comedies in which (for instance) suffering is a prevalent theme, comedies based around character observation and study, and more visually emphatic comedies 'in which spectacle is dominant'.

Whatever might be speculated or inferred about comedy from the version of the *Poetics* which has survived, it is clear that Aristotle tended to privilege tragedy as the more significant form, partly out of admiration for its clear and logical structure, which he perceived as built around 'an imitation of some action that is important, entire, and of a proper magnitude...[and] which has a beginning, a middle and an end'.[30] If comedy is perceived as the opposite of tragedy, then comedy, by way of a contrast, might be somewhat negatively defined as centring around an imitation of 'some action' that may be lacking in real significance and import, encased within a narrative format lacking clear structural distinctions and divisions.

Comedy, if evaluated in such terms, can appear as the 'poor relation' of tragedy, perceived as a 'light-hearted' form capable of entertaining audiences, but rarely succeeding in making spectators reflect either deeply upon society, or the nature of their own lives. George Steiner, to take a modern example, appeared to endorse this view of comedy in his study, *The Death of Tragedy* (1961). Steiner implied, in particular, that the vulgarity and earthiness to which a certain form of comedy tended to gravitate, contrary to whatever a writer such as Bakhtin might claim, served largely to cater for the unimaginative expectations of certain spectators, leading to an emphasis in the material on the physical, rather than the spiritual, or the transcendental:

> Comedy is the art of the lesser orders of men. It tends to dramatise those material conditions and bodily functions which are banished from the tragic stage. The comic personage does not transcend the flesh; he is engrossed in it. There are no lavatories in tragic palaces, but from its very dawn, comedy has had use for chamber pots.[31]

David Sutton in *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929-39* (2000), however, expressed a contrary view that comedy's sense of spontaneity and relish for the pleasures of the world could act as 'a corrective to the pre-scripted and fateful world of tragedy', allowing comedy to be a more socially optimistic form, and one able to contemplate the possibility of 'social change and renewal'.[32]

Comedy significantly lacks what Wylie Sypher in a 1956 essay on comedy described as the 'single vision' of tragedy.[33] Subsequently, comic based narratives, unlike many tragedies, do not necessarily work towards a single defining moment which might seek to explain the meaning and significance of the work as a whole. Comedy may, in fact, be more concerned with the *processes* of narration, than with the final narrative product.

Whether comedy and drama can be mixed together in a theatrical or filmic production on an entirely equal basis, without one or other of the forms being ultimately privileged, is a debatable point. The ways in which narratives are concluded, from this point of view, can be crucial in attempts to determine whether comedy or drama is to be considered the more dominant aesthetic mode within texts which are composed out of both comic and dramatic features. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnick in *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (1990) suggest that one of the traditional ways in which a narrative could be defined as comic was if there was the presence of a 'happy ending' to the story being told.[34] Unhappy or disappointing endings are, of course, more typical of tragic and melodramatic forms of drama.

Comedy, with its penchant for narrative disruption, emotional excess, and heightened forms of characterisation, can be said to share many of these aspects in common with the genres of tragedy and melodrama. All three forms lay great stress on the nature of 'obstacles' blocking the happiness of key characters, and involve the introduction of improbable or outlandish plot developments into their respective narratives, when deemed dramatically necessary (albeit, for varying aesthetic and cultural purposes). Considered from this perspective, comedy and tragedy might have more in common than writers such as Aristotle and Steiner acknowledge.

Neale and Krutnick suggest in their study that one crucial means of differentiating specifically between comedy and melodrama is that in the latter form, spectators are encouraged 'to identify' with the 'plights and dilemmas' of key characters, whereas, in comedy, the tone of a particular narrative may require audiences to laugh at (rather than sympathise with) the misfortunes of key protagonists.[35] The authors go on to contest that 'Whereas (melo) drama relies upon the spectator's engagement with the fictional articulation of a set of

narrative problems…the process of comedy more acutely involves a *play* between identification and distantiation'.[36]

Comedy, as such, may tend towards drawing attention to its fictitious nature, particularly if formulated in the shape of satire, parody or farce. Melodrama, in comparison, is perhaps more likely to emphasise the relevance and seriousness of the themes being explored in its stories, and so consequently may seek to play down its 'imaginary' fictional status, inviting audiences to suspend their disbelief at what they are witnessing, and sympathise with the plight of key characters. Pure or overt forms of comedy may place characters in situations of extreme danger, knowing that they can be rescued before the close (if necessary) by acts of authorial benevolence, partly prompted by implicit desires on the part of audiences for events to end 'comically', rather than 'awfully' or 'painfully'. By way of a contrast, in forms of traditional melodrama, the death of one or other of the central characters may be deemed to be necessary or desirable in order to illustrate a point about the repressive or unjust nature of a particular social situation.

It is feasible to surmise that as tragedy has become a less pervasive mode in film productions and theatre performances, its influence has nonetheless increasingly permeated and influenced the kinds of comedy and drama being produced in the late twentieth century. Walter Kerr in *Tragedy & Comedy* (1967) has suggested that this mutating of comedy and tragedy may constitute a perfectly logical response to developments within contemporary societies: 'The landscape has darkened. What can comedy do but grow darker with it?'[37] In such darker 'visions' of comedy and society, audiences may be encouraged to find humour in the spectacle of characters committing degrading or destructive acts, or becoming internally (and irrevocably) exiled from the dominant values, codes and ethics of mainstream walks of life.

In a 1992 interview, the novelist Martin Amis argued that comedy had, in fact, been forced to take on many of the burdens involved in representing the problems and difficulties of modern societies, and therefore had to engage with themes which previously would have been explored and investigated within the confines of tragic drama:

> The reason comedy is so odd is that comedy is really having to do it *all* these
> days. The tragic voice has lost its slot on the register; the heroic, the epic, are

not really very plausible voices for modern fiction. And the comedy is full of things which really shouldn't there, like rape and murder and child abuse, real sin and evil.[38]

Such shifts in comic subject material, with their corresponding ambivalences in tone and perspective, might lead one to ask is there a point at which comedy becomes no longer comic, simply because the events it is dealing with are too distressing to be laughed at, or even contemplated?

The 1990s British films (and their predecessors) to be discussed in parts two to four of the thesis will grapple with many of the thematic and conceptual concerns outlined in this introductory chapter, such as the relationships between comedy and more tragic or melodramatic modes of narration, the effectiveness of comedy in dealing with serious and complex issues, and the ethics of joking about communities and individuals designated as separate from - or different to - the mass of the population. The appropriateness of deploying carnivalesque readings of film texts within a British culture in which there may be greater opportunity for 'play', rather than fulfilling or economically rewarding work for large sections of the population, will also be a subject for investigation.

As a coda to this particular consideration of the diversity of comic practices and forms, one should, however, perhaps note in passing that Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) mischievously suggests that the real "opposite" of comedy may not, in fact, lie in instances of drama, melodrama or tragedy, but might more accurately be found in 'the non-comic or the unfunny, the joke that falls flat or the farce that remains a dead letter',[39] reminding us that comedy can always be partly defined in tautological terms as *that which works and succeeds with audiences.*

(1.3) **Genres and British film culture**

Studies of genres in a filmic context have until recently tended to gravitate towards notions that Hollywood cinema is the most important begetter of generic forms, and, therefore, the most important source for examinations of the role of genres in film production. Such an emphasis on the significance of American genres can have the unfortunate side effect of appearing to marginalise the importance of genres in other national cinemas, and implying that non-American generated genres are essentially inferior imitations of their Hollywood rivals.

In the case of British cinema, notable critics and commentators were initially doubtful about whether the term 'genre' possessed positive qualities in relation to patterns of British film production. Critic, and later film director, Jacques Rivette, in a 1957 *Cahiers du Cinema* discussion about French cinema, responded to a leading question from Andre Bazin about what in his opinion defined the 'mediocrity of British cinema', with the statement that 'British cinema is a genre cinema, but one where the genres have no genuine roots'. 'It's a cinema that limps along…based on …false notions of supply and demand,'[40] concluded Rivette, appearing to imply that British audiences played a role in perpetuating this uninspiring state of affairs.

Charles Barr in an article in *The Listener* (1976) argued that 'We have no dynamic film genre, like the western or gangster movie... Our genres, such as they are, are tamer: the comedy thriller, the family drama…the 'northern'.[41] In Barr's view, this situation was partly due to geographical considerations, Britain being a self-contained island, small in comparison to America, and, therefore, lacking Hollywood cinema's potential to develop expansive genres such as the road movie and the western. For Barr, British cinema was consequently inherently disposed towards producing drama-oriented narratives, rather than constructing displays of spectacle, action and 'larger than life' performances by actors.

In his identification of a genre which he termed the 'northern', Barr was aware that the north and south of England could be regarded in many ways as social and economic opposites, a feature of the landscape which created its own possibility for dramatic film narratives exploring differences of culture and lived experience. It is surely significant that when British cinema has artistically and commercially renewed itself, as in the 'new wave' films of the 1960s, and the communal regional comedies of the 1990s, contrasts and conflicts of interest between the areas of the north and south have formed the basis for a series of compelling and probing films.

Marcia Landy in *British Genres: Cinema and Society 1930-1960* (1991), notably, challenged negative conceptions of British cinematic genres, and argued that British films had succeeded in developing their own distinctive generic patterns and formats over the period of time covered by her study. Landy identified the biographical film, war movies, the horror film, narratives of

Empire, social problem dramas, family melodramas and comedy films as important and authentic British cinematic genres.[42] Landy did not deny that these genres were also prominent in American cinema, but suggested that film-makers in Britain had imbued these narrative forms with their own particular perspectives on specifically British concerns, issues and aspirations. British generic based films, she concluded, were well positioned to dramatise 'cultural contradictions, particularly relating to questions of social identity'[43] (an important feature also of 1990s British genre based films, as I shall seek to illustrate in the course of my own work).

David Sutton in *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929-39* intriguingly suggested that 'Genres such as the war film, the Empire film, the historical film…could all be seen as articulating the 'official' discourses of British society' such as 'national and historic mythologies' and offering conservative views of the 'class system'.[44] The indigenous comedy genre could in striking contrast be read as offering 'unofficial' and more 'down to earth visions of what life was like in contemporary Britain with its means tests, dole queues…pubs and greyhound tracks'[45]. This is a fascinating observation, which I wish to pursue in my own analyses of the contributions of British film comedy dramas of the 1990s to our own understanding of contemporary social, economic and cultural developments in British society.

As regards this more recent period, Andrew Higson claimed in an essay on 'British Cinema' (1998) that 'As genre cinema has all but disappeared from the production schedules in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, British cinema has been increasingly promoted in terms of authorship'.[46] I would suggest, however, that such a formulation is actually more relevant and applicable to the 1980s, when directors such as Terence Davies, Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway occupied a prominent position in British film culture, whereas, I would contend that 1990s British cinema was much more associated with directors who were making their first feature film, many of whom subsequently struggled to complete another film within the decade.

Genre based films such as romantic comedy, and what Brian McFarlane in an essay on 'British Cinema in the 90s' (2001) defines as 'film clusters which may yet coalesce into genres,'[47] were one of the means by which British film production coped with the absence of high-profile or experienced directors, while

also seeking to establish a more populist and commercially lucrative cinema than that associated with 'art-house-style' British film productions of the 1980s.

Duncan Petrie in *Creativity and Constraints in the British Film Industry* (1991) emphasised the importance (in his view) of considering British film production in terms of influential modes of narrative, rather than concentrating on the fluctuations of particular genres. Petrie argued that 'the trans-generic modes of realism, melodrama and comedy…serve to constitute the dominant aesthetic tendency within which most British film-making has, and does take place'.[48]

The studies of communal and ethnic comedy dramas, and romantic comedies which follow in parts two to four of the thesis will explore the interactions of realist, melodramatic and comedic strands of narrative within a group of important and influential British films released during the 1990s, and consider how these combinations of generic forms might be seen to differ from previous examples of comedy drama within British cinema.

In terms of the political events acting as a backdrop or spur to the generic types of narratives produced by film-makers in Britain during the decade of the 1990s, the years 1990 and 1997 were of special significance. In November, 1990, Margaret Thatcher resigned as Prime Minister, and John Major, subsequently, led a Conservative Party in government until May, 1997.[49] In a review of *Raining Stones* (Ken Loach, 1993), entitled 'No end to the Thatcher's Britain genre', Philip French in *The Observer* (10 October, 1993) suggested that the 'Condition of England' genre associated with the Thatcher administration, continued to exercise a fascination for British film-makers, even after Mrs. Thatcher had retired from office:

> At the end of the 1990s there was a naïve belief that the coming decade was to be more tolerant and hopeful than the one just over, and that the Thatcher's Britain movie would be replaced by a new genre reflecting the aspirations of better times. Such has not proved to be the case and Ken Loach's post-Thatcher movie *Raining Stones* (15) is perhaps his most despairing.[50]

In 1997, the Conservative Party was finally voted out of office after eighteen years, following a landslide victory by the Labour Party in the May elections.[51]

A Labour Party Demos study of 'the long-term problems facing the UK', *Britain* ^{TM} *Renewing Our Identity*, published during that year of electoral victory, argued that 'Britain is a hybrid nation...Not a melting pot that moulds disparate ethnicities into a conformist whole, but a country that thrives on difference and uses it to constantly renew and re-energise itself'.[52] The study acknowledged, however, that Britain still suffered from certain negative perceptions around the world in which the United Kingdom was conceived of 'as a country whose time has come and gone – bogged down by tradition, riven by class and threatened by industrial disputes...and poverty-stricken inner cities'.[53] The author, Mark Leonard, also claimed that earlier connotations of Britishness embodied in notions and stories of 'the imperial nation' and 'industrial powerhouse' had 'lost their resonance. We need new stories that both reach back into our history and project forwards into the future', concluded Leonard.[54]

My own account of three key strands and cycles of British film production during the 1990s will consider the relationship between such issues of national, ethnic and political identity, and the role of popular generic forms within contemporary British cinema, during a period of transition from a Conservative to a Labour government. I shall consider the use of comedy as a means of engaging with serious and topical subjects such as the social, economic and moral state of the 'post-Thatcher' nation in part two of the thesis, and the possible tensions created by ideological conflicts between traditional notions of 'Britishness', and the forces working towards the construction of a fully multi-cultural society.

The extent to which directors and writers succeeded in creating new ways of producing cinematic 'stories' about British culture which looked both backwards and forwards will be considered. The implications of finding humour in situations of economic decline and social disruption will also be explored, and I shall consider how far British cinema of the 1990s might be associated with notions of tragi-comedy in the social sphere, contrasted with the implicit optimism in regard to the more private aspects of British culture, personified by the emergence of romantic comedy as a popular 'British' form, with international appeal during this period.

Notes

1) Susan Hayward, *Key Concepts in Cinema Studies* (Routledge, London, 1996), p.56.

2) The sub-heading to 'comedies of class, culture and community' – 'Things Can Only Get Better' - comes from a 1993 song by D:Ream, which was used as the theme tune to Labour's election campaign of 1997.

3) Walter Kerr, *Tragedy & Comedy* (Da Capo Press, New York, 1985: first published in 1967), p.145.

4) Franco Moretti, 'Planet Hollywood', *New Left Review*, Second Series, number 9, May/June 2001, pp.94-95.

5) Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2000), p.128.

6) Kristine Brunovska and Henry Jenkins, *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (American Film Institute Film Readers, Routledge, New York/London, 1995), p.69.

7) Umberto Eco, 'The frames of comic freedom' in *Carnival*, edited by Thomas Sebock and Marcia Erickson (Mouton Publishers, Berlin/New York, 1984), p.1.

8) Kerr, op. cit., p.315.

9) Ian Green, 'Ealing: In the Comedy Frame' in *British Cinema History*, edited by James Curran and Vincent Porter (Weidenfield and Nicolson, London, 1983), p.295.

10) Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Methuen, London, 1981), p.107.

11) Howard Jacobson, *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (Viking, London, 1997), p. 240.

12) Rudolph Walker quoted in *Black and White in Colour: Black People in British Television Since 1936*, edited by Jim Pines (British Film Institute, London, 1992), p.78.

13) ibid.

14) Andy Medhurst, 'Introduction to Laughing Matters: Situation Comedies' in *The Colour Black: Black Images in British Television*, edited by Therese Daniels and Jane Gerson (British Film Institute, London, 1989), p.21.

15) Laraine Porter, 'Tarts, Tampons and Tyrants: Women and representation in British comedy' in *Because I tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Sexual Difference*, edited by Stephen Wagg (Routledge, London, 1998), p.76.

16) Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', *Mythologies* (Paladin, London, 1970, first published in France, 1957) p.151.

17) ibid., p.152.

18) Jacobson, p.151.

19) ibid., p.37.

20) ibid., p.206.

21) Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981), pp.21-23.

22) Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rablais and His World* (published in the West in 1968), extract reprinted in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998), pp.47-49.

23) Jacobson, p.206.

24) Aristotle's *Poetics*, introduction by John Warrington (Everyman Library, London, 1963) , p.11.

25) ibid., p.6.

26) ibid., p.6.

27) ibid., pp.6-7.

28) ibid., p.13.

29) ibid., pp.18-23.

30) ibid., p.12.

31) George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (Faber and Faber, London, 1961), p.247.

32) David Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929-39* (Exeter University Press, Exeter, 2000), p.57.

33) Wylie Sypher, 'The Social Meanings of Comedy' (1956), in *Comedy: an Essay on Comedy* by George Meredith; Henri Bergson *on Laughter* (John Hopkins University Press, 1956), p.255.

34) Steve Neale and Frank Krutnick, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (Routledge, London, 1990) p.15.

35) ibid., pp.13-14.

36) ibid., p.149.

37) Kerr, p.317.

38) Martin Amis quoted in *New Writing: an Anthology*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and Judy Cooke (The British Council, London, 1992), p.172.

39) Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Methuen, London, 1981), p.108.

40) Rivette is quoted in 'Six Characters in Search of *auteurs*; a Discussion about the French Cinema' (1957) in *Cahiers du Cinema*, edited by Jim Hillier (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p.32.

41) Charles Barr, 'Opening the Drama Archives', *The Listener*, November 18, 1976, p.651.

42) Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society 1930-1960* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991).

43) ibid., p.14.

44) Sutton, p.36.

45) ibid., p.226.

46) Andrew Higson, 'British Cinema' in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998), p.504.

47) Brian McFarlane, 'The More Things Change…British Cinema in the 90s' in *The British Cinema Book* (second revised edition), edited by Robert Murphy (British Film Institute, London, 2001), p.277.

48) Duncan Petrie, *Creativity and Constraint in the British Film Industry* (Macmillan, London, 1991), p.166.

49) Arthur Marwick in *A History of the Modern British Isles 1914-1999, Circumstances, Events and Outcomes* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2000) records that Margaret Thatcher withdrew from the leadership contest in favour of John Major (p.312), who, on becoming Prime Minister declared his aspiration to create a 'classless' society, 'at ease with itself' (p.335).

50) Philip French, film review of *Raining Stones* in *The Observer*, 10 October, 1993.

51) According to Arthur Marwick's study cited above, the Labour Party polled 13,518,167 votes in the 1997 election, compared to the Conservative Party's 9,600,943 (p.361).

52) Mark Leonard, *Britain ^{TM} Renewing Our Identity* (Demos, London, 1997), p.56.

53) ibid., p.16.

54) ibid., p.48.

Part Two:

" Things can only get better..?" Comedies of class, culture and community.[1]

In the *Daily Telegraph* review of *Up 'n' Under* (John Godber, 1998), a belated cinematic adaptation of a play first performed in 1984, set in Yorkshire, and revolving around a rugby 'sevens' grudge match, Chris Peachment noted that 'We have had a minor renaissance of British regional comedies lately…in which a team of blokes from some chronically depressed area regain their pride through a healthy burst of team spirit'.[2] This formulation neatly encapsulates several of the features which distinguish the two most significant British movies of this particular cycle of films: *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) and *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997). Both of these films draw creative inspiration and sustenance from their northern settings, feature unlikely groups of screen heroes, and include scenes of attempted suicide, depicted in a tragic-comic style. Each of the films contains social realist and melodramatic strands of narrative, with the film-makers boldly encapsulating their respective stories about the social, psychological and economic effects of unemployment within the confines of an overall 'comic' perspective and framework.

Such an approach to the subject of unemployment carried obvious dangers of appearing glib, uncaring or facile. Film critic Tom Charity observed in *Time Out* (30 October, 1996) that when he initially heard about the narrative form, style and tone of *Brassed Off*, it sounded to him 'like a bad joke, the kind of thing Ian Carmichael and Terry Thomas churned out with the Boulting Brothers 30 years ago'.[3] The writer and director of *Brassed Off*, Mark Herman, admitted in an interview featured in the *Weekly Alibi* (6 November, 1997) that a treatment of mass redundancy, conceived and filtered through an ironic or comic outlook, could be regarded as socially tactless and ideologically dubious: 'As a writer you get worried that you've done too much caricature. That you've made a comedy about pit closures'.[4]

Academic commentator, Claire Monk, in an essay, 'Underbelly UK: The 1990s underclass film, masculinity and the ideologies of 'new' Britain' (2000) went so far as to suggest that the attempts in *The Full Monty* to transform 'feel-bad subject matter (redundancy, economic desperation, divorce, despair, impotence, loss of family, loss of self-esteem) into feel-good comedy' were

symptomatic of a general move away from the production of British films in the late 1990s which promoted a need for serious and meaningful 'social analysis, commitment or action' about the social and economic state of the nation.[5]

In Claire Monk's view, *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* were politically and aesthetically compromised by the extent of evasive fantasy and insidious wish fulfilment which was necessary for the films to reach their particular bitter-sweet narrative conclusions. An interview with Simon Beaufoy, the screenwriter of *The Full Monty* in *Story and Character: Interviews With British Screenwriters* (2003), suggested a certain level of sympathy on his part with the moral and ideological positions adopted by commentators such as Claire Monk on the issue of how effectively comedy combined with attempts to make serious political observations in contemporary British films. Beaufoy claimed that the determining factor influencing the inclusion of so much humour in *The Full Monty* was the subsequent possibility of broadening the scale of the film's potential appeal to audiences:

> …we did sit down and say, 'Let's see if we can make a film about working class people which working class people will actually want to watch'. Uberto Pasolini…saw that the way to do this was to make it funny. Ken Loach's work has got funnier and funnier over the years, because I think he's realised that comedy is a way of pulling in audiences…It's a way of sugaring the pill – and sadly you now have to use more and more sugar.[6]

Beaufoy's final comments, do, however, seem to imply a certain ambivalence and scepticism about the process of combining comedy and drama as a means of appealing to cinema audiences.

In the case studies of *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* which follow in the latter part of this chapter, I will explore some of these key issues raised out of the films' willingness and ability to create laughter out of socially distressing situations, and consider the aesthetic, commercial and cultural implications of combining comedy alongside aspects of melodrama and realism within a singular narrative. I will seek to demonstrate that the comic features of both films significantly contributed to - rather than detracted from - the effectiveness of their representations of male unemployment, growing social distress, and the changing nature of cultural trends in British society.

Both films convey a regard for group actions and communal values, and draw upon traditions in British cinema of narratives detailing and exploring

relationships between communities, individuals and society. In particular, *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* can be interpreted as films which acknowledge and seek to extend traits and traditions inherent in a number of key Ealing Studios comedies, northern based dramas from the period of the British 'new wave' cinema (circa 1958-63), and films directed by Ken Loach (1936-), which dramatise issues of social concern, through a mixture of politically committed scenarios, provocative dramas, and complexly drawn characters.

Prior to the case studies of *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, I will consider the significance of a number of these examples of earlier British films which have examined communal and industrial themes through a combination of comic and drama based approaches. Key instances of native films examining the nature of British society through its regions would include the overtly comic, 1930s depression film starring Gracie Fields, *Sing As We Go* (Basil Dean, 1934), and post-war Ealing comedies such as *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949), *Whisky Galore* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1949) and *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (Charles Crichton, 1953). Two seminal comedy-dramas, *The Man in the White Suit* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1951) and *I'm All Right Jack* (John Boulting, 1959) were also important for the ways in which they satirised and probed relationships between management and labour in British society at the beginning and end of the 1950s.

A Kind of Loving (John Schlesinger, 1962) and *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963) were two later additions to the cycle of 'northern realist' films, a movement which sought to produce more modulated and diverse portraits of northern community life than had, perhaps, previously been developed within British cinema before the 1960s. Ken Loach has continued since his debut feature film, *Poor Cow* (released in 1967) to direct a series of films which have challenged notions of Britain being a truly affluent and fully democratic society. His two early 1990s 'state of the nation' films, *Riff-Raff* (1991) and *Raining Stones* (1993) in which, by his own admission, he tried to work 'with a lighter touch' than previously, and avoid being 'po-faced and heavy-handed',[7] were both, I would suggest, films which exerted a significant influence on the structure, tone and mood of *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*.

As noted by Chris Peachment in the quotation which began this chapter, a number of regional comedy dramas were produced in the 1990s which seemed

particularly to have been conceived in the spirit of modern-day Ealing comedy dramas, rather than as examples of a more directly politicised British cinema. *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain* (Chris Monger, 1995), for instance, was described by Philip French in *The Observer* as a film containing 'a classic Ealing plot – a tight little community making common cause against threats from officious outsiders representing remote, powerful forces'.[8] Tom Hutchinson in the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* summed up *Waking Ned* (Kirk Jones, 1999) as 'A relish of human behaviour which reminded me of nothing so much as an Ealing comedy'.[9] These films (along with *Up 'n' Under*) will be discussed as a 'bridge' between some of the earlier traditions of communal comedy drama outlined above, and *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*.

The following section will, thus, discuss some of the varying ways in which issues of community and society have been conceptualised and represented within comic and dramatic forms in a range of British films. In the process, I shall consider the implications of film-makers in modern Britain, drawing upon and revitalising narrative paradigms and cultural viewpoints associated with previous eras of British film-making.

(2.1) Imagining the community

'No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind…it is imagined as a *community*, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship'.
Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, Verso, 1991.[10]

In his study *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams noted that in pre-industrial Britain, the notion of the country town or village had seemed to offer the prospect of what he termed a 'knowable community'.[11] This concept referred to the possibility of the inhabitants of particular settlements being acutely aware of the existence of their fellow neighbours, so that while the wider world may have been something of a mystery, the immediate 'community' was perceived as a comprehensible and meaningful entity. Social stability, regular interactions between members of a village, and a level of continuity between past

and present traditions of community life were, consequently, conceivable features of such societies.

Williams records that the 'Industrial Revolution' went on to change the landscape of Britain on both literal and metaphorical levels. Society became increasingly organised around distinctions between those workers who sold their labour for wages, and those who actually owned the means of production. A corresponding broad division between town and country, and north and south, was subsequently initiated in British culture. Raymond Williams suggests that the English novel of the nineteenth century represented a creative attempt by writers to document and respond to these social and economic changes, and to affirm the value of human relationships, within a system which could appear to be beyond immediate human control and intervention.

All novels in Williams' view involved the construction of micro-communities, based around the interactions and inter-connections between a group of characters - 'the novelist offers to show people and their relationships in essentially knowable and communicable ways'[12] - so that art and fiction now seemed to offer the possibility of 'knowing' and understanding individuals in ways which actual industrialised communities possibly denied. Nonetheless, Williams goes onto to record in *The Country and the City* that many English novelists of the nineteenth century found the experience of industrialism and capitalism to be fundamentally tragic in nature and effect. Citing George Eliot's novels, Williams notes the presence of what he terms a 'tragic separation between human intensity and any available social settlement', a state of affairs which resulted not in 'transcendence' but a sense of 'sad resignation' by the close of the narratives.[13]

James. F. English in *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humour, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth Century Britain* (1994) explored a similar series of themes, within a group of novels inflected by differing strands of British humour. English noted that the comic novel was particularly well equipped to illustrate and critique the relationship between differing classes within society, and to point out the tensions between opposing sections of the same community:

> Comic transactions constitute a field on which the categories and contradictions of community may be most freely…worked upon, a site where the fundamental political operations of inclusion and

exclusion, identification and otherization, are performed with special license and…particular vividness.[14]

English claimed that there is always something of a 'fundamental struggle over who or what constitutes'[15] the community, and that the term 'community' itself can be seen as both real and imaginary, utopian and dysfunctional, and often tantalizingly elusive: 'a yearning and a dream, not a concrete reality'[16].

Comedy is often drawn towards situations of conflict and disruption, and English seeks to demonstrate in his study that 'Comic practice is always on some level or in some measure an assertion of group against group'[17], implying that class antagonism or divisions within a community can result in comic conflict, and not just the kind of tragic deadlock envisaged by Williams above. Comedy can arise from the sheer range of viewpoints within a particular community, and a comic based representation of the consequences, can, according to English, have the result of making 'us laugh not merely with our allies but with our enemies'[18], thus, potentially extending the range of an audience's emotional and political sympathies.

English points out that communities, like nations, are composed out of 'categories of social difference' based around groupings of ethnicity, class, and gender[19], and, as discussed in part one of the thesis, particular communities may be formulated around the concept of keeping out that which is perceived as being too different or separate from the norm. 'Every community…has its scapegoat, the figure of absolute and unassimilable difference',[20] notes English, and, as we examine past and present communal comedies in British cinema, we can test the pertinence and accuracy of such a statement.

Simon Critchley in *On Humour* (2002), claims that 'A sense of humour is often what connects us most strongly to a specific place and leads us to predicate characteristics of that place, assigning certain dispositions and customs to its inhabitants'.[21] Such a linking of place, perception and pre-judgements, in turn, raises questions about the role of caricatures, stereotypes and mythical images of British regional communities, particularly when considered in relation to London and the South of England. Martin Green in *A Mirror for Anglo-Saxons* (1957), for instance, conjured up a picture of 'The Northerner' as 'tougher, blunter, dowdier, warmer than the Southerner…strongly rooted in himself and his own fireside.[22] Writing in 1957, Green could suggest that the 'Northerner' was

capable of being patronised by his Southern counterparts: 'The Northerner is only a comic, one dimensional figure; in a film a local accent signalises humorous relief – only characters speaking BBC English are to be taken seriously'.[23]

As I mentioned earlier, Charles Barr, in an article 'Opening the drama archives' (*The Listener*, 18 November, 1976), went so far as to claim that British literary and film culture possessed a genre which could be explicitly classified and recognised as the 'northern' : 'where America has the western, we have the 'northern', featuring a north as mythical…as the west: not necessarily a geographical north, but an area whose life and values conflict with metropolitan and middle class culture'.[24] In these terms, the landscape of northern territories, embracing both country and city, can act as a challenge to images of refinement and restraint which may be associated with British southern culture. The much vaunted 'Angry young man' literary and cinematic movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s was, in part, 'a gauntlet' thrown down to a cultural establishment capable of being perceived as elitist and complacent, and a mass populace seen as over-enthralled with the somewhat tawdry or unchallenging appeal of commercial television and the modern consumer society.

The films and novels which emerged from this movement did not, however, romanticise or sentimentalise their northern, regional settings, and many of the stories featured men and women who longed to escape from their surroundings, but were held back by social constraints and personal responsibilities. In the article, Barr describes the American west as 'expanding, fluid' and open', whereas, in comparison, the British north represents 'a society that is older…not to say stagnant': characters in British films, Barr notes, 'generally take a journey north or south, but it is seldom a releasing one'.[25] The two cultures of north and south, subsequently, came to be seen as somewhat separate and distinct, with representations of the south, and particularly London, tending to be more prominent overall in British cinema.

Prior to the British 'new wave' phenomenon of the late 1950s, the northern areas of Britain had often featured in our national cinema in comic terms. David Sutton in his study, *A Chorus of Raspberries*: *British Film Comedy 1929-1939* (2000), associates northern based cinema in the 1930s with what he terms 'working class' comedy, a type of narrative which he reads as 'dominated' by

comic performers, and composed of 'loose organisational structures' and tenuously connected scenes.[26] This kind of comic film tended to depict characters coping with potentially adverse scenarios and difficult situations unfolding within homely, if prosaic surroundings.

Films starring such northern performers as George Formby and Gracie Fields tended to be episodic in form, with developments in the plot frequently being interrupted by the insertion of scenes featuring the stars singing directly to the camera and cinema audience. This created a sense of an intimate, direct relationship between such stars and British cinema spectators, a process which encouraged perceptions of 1930s Britain (despite its class divides, and social and economic problems) as a kind of inherently good-natured family, capable of collectively withstanding and dealing with various forms of social disappointment and economic disarray. Such working class performers might have become very successful, but the inference in their films was that they had not forgotten or betrayed their cultural roots.

In *Sing As We Go* (Basil Dean, 1934), for example, Gracie Fields appears as a redundant textile weaver who maintains her good spirits through a 'carnivalesque'-type stay in Blackpool. When the textile works' revue team is disbanded because of the closing of the factory (cf. *Brassed Off*), Gracie declares that 'We'll be able to practise while we're all queuing up for the dole. It'll be very funny'. In *Sing As We Go*, the good-natured resilience of the workers is finally rewarded by the discovery of a more economical means of weaving, allowing the factory to reopen at the close, and making the intervening period of unemployment seem as if it were merely an extended holiday for the workers.

Marcia Landy in *British Genres: Cinema and Society 1930-1960* (1991), however, warns against too easily assuming that 1930s audiences would necessarily have assumed that this ending represented anything more significant, perhaps, than the propensity of film comedies to end happily, rather than sadly:

> The implication that the comic ending resolves the film's conflict lies in the face of the insoluble problems posed by the film, namely…the unlikelihood of magical "cures" for the depression, and the…unpredictable experience of being out of a steady job. Moreover, the assumption that audiences confused conventional comic closure with "reality" is… untenable….[27]

Films such as *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* in the 1990s are arguably engaging with the implications of such an interpretation of *Sing As We Go*, whilst

rewriting its narrative of factory closes and mass job losses for a more cynical, modern age in which film-makers are not constrained by (implicit or explicit) censorship to ultimately affirm political and economic structures in British society. *Sing As We Go* is overwhelmingly a comic, rather than a dramatic narrative - hence, perhaps, its 'fantastical', optimistic ending. British films from the 1990s, combining comedy and a more realistic degree of social drama will, perhaps, inevitably conclude with more problematised and open-ended resolutions, whilst still paying tribute to the resilience of the local community.

During the Second World War (1939-45), the qualities of adaptability and perseverance displayed by figures such as Formby and Fields were applied to the national war effort, and the British nation, as it struggled to survive a terrible ordeal, came to be increasingly perceived as a total community in itself, rather than as a collection of disparate (if linked) series of regions. Internal conflicts and divisions, and cultural and economic distinctions between the north and south of England, temporarily declined in importance, as a potentially over-whelming external threat was posed to the countryside and the city, town and village, alike.

After victory was finally achieved by the Allied Forces in 1945, the nature of British film comedy, and of drama based representations of British communal life, were both gradually re-imagined for a new era. The immediate post-war years were concerned with processes of reconstruction, and the aftermath of the war, with its ensuing 'period of austerity' did not appear initially to be a propitious era for film comedy. Gracie Fields and George Formby seemed less cinematically and socially relevant, and ceased making feature films after 1946. The most significant post-war development in British cinema was the production of a new series of comedy-dramas, set often in the south of England, but occasionally venturing out to more far-flung areas, released by Ealing studios between 1949 and 1955. These film comedies, with a strong narrative thread, were constructed around character actors, rather than star performers, which imbued them with many of the attributes associated with traditional notions of British community life and 'knowable' communities.

Marcia Landy, in an essay 'The other side of paradise: British cinema from an American perspective' (2000) noted that the most resonant of these comedies managed to compete 'successfully with neo-realism', whilst being compared by

some American reviewers 'to the heyday of Hollywood comedy'.[28] The most effective Ealing comedies were capable of appealing to audiences and critics on a number of levels, combining the propensity of Hollywood comedies to indulge in moments of heightened characterisation, accentuated narrative tension, and knockabout farce, alongside a 'neo-realist-type' desire to formulate stories about 'ordinary' people, which had some kind of sociological basis and emotional investment in the post-1945 concerns of post-war reconstruction and rebuilding.

Films such as *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949) and *Whisky Galore* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1949), contemplated the nature of post-war Britain, and considered how the relationship between a small segment of society and the larger governing body might be made more dynamic and inventive. In such films, individually comic scenes tended to contribute to the meanings of the narratives as a whole, rather than as in the Formby and Fields films, where comic sequences tended to constitute an end in themselves. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in *Film History: An Introduction* (1994) suggested that 'While many Hollywood-style comedies depended on slapstick or on sophisticated screwball situations, Ealing's humour was built on injecting a single premise into an ordinary situation'.[29] The 'what if' ideas on which many of the key Ealing comedies were constructed often carried surreal and unsettling overtones, and took a series of different forms such as the unexpected possibility of a local borough achieving political independence; a rural community working together to preserve a feature of economic life deemed by the outside world to be outmoded and no longer viable; a small, self-contained society, unexpectedly finding itself faced with the prospect of acquiring enough free whisky to sustain itself through both good and bad times.

The changes in daily routines prompted by such events lead, in the respective films, to the opening up of dramatic spaces in which individuals can momentarily break away from conventional patterns of behaviour, morality and social expectation. The comic elements of these scenarios are closely bound up with these unexpected opportunities, and the main dramatic interest in the narratives is created by the curiosity of spectators as to how the unusual and 'fantastic' situations will finally be resolved. The Ealing comedies explored the consequences of escalating situations, a process which created comic and dramatic possibilities for the subsequent narratives to explore. The major

comedies tended to centre around some notion of community (except notably *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, Robert Hamer, 1949, which dramatised the consequences of unbridled individualism and self-seeking).

In his *Screen* article, 'Projecting Britain and the British Character: Ealing Studios, Part Two' (Summer, 1974), Charles Barr constructed a table denoting the main settings and collective aspirations of the central characters in Alexander Mackendrick's Ealing comedies.[30] I have extended the table to include three Ealing comedies made by other directors, to be discussed, briefly, in the section which follows:

Table One -

Title	Location	Aims of community
Whisky Galore (1949)	Todday Hebridean island	Salvaging of shipwrecked whisky
Passport to Pimlico (1949)	Pimlico London borough	Achieving 'home rule' and becoming independent country
The Man in the White Suit (1951)	Textile factory Lancashire	Develop an everlasting cloth Maintain economic 'status quo'
The Lavender Hill Mob (1951)	London	Convert gold bullion into Eiffel Tower souvenirs
The Titfield Thunderbolt (1953)	Titfield village	Maintain a local railway service

In *Passport to Pimlico*, shopkeeper Arthur Pemberton's (Stanley Holloway) attempts to persuade the local council to convert a bombsite into a swimming and play area for children, during the period of an intense heat wave, are dismissed by a committee as impractical 'daydreams'. As this meeting proceeds, however, an unexploded bomb erupts on the site under discussion, and a scenario is created in which it appears that out of the disruption and fragmentation which follows, even greater 'daydreams' than Pemberton's might prove to be realisable. The

bomb blast unearths a charter stating that Pimlico really belongs to the French state of Burgundy, and therefore stands outside the rule of English law.

Following the revelation of Pimlico's 'alternative' status, a French descendant of the Duke of Burgundy emerges as a possible new head of State for the would-be independent borough of Pimlico. 'Show me my Dukedom', he declares to the local citizens, but as the narrative progresses, he is sidelined by developments which depict the comic 'dark side' of an anarchical, carnivalesque society in which everyone wants to have his or her own needs and desires gratified. In his study of the English novel, James English pointed out that sustaining a cohesive community is a difficult task: 'For under the least scrutiny the discourse of community begins to break apart, shattering into a thousand micro-discourses, each with its own declared aims and affiliations'.[31] This is what happens in *Passport to Pimlico*, where no smooth transition to a new form of self-government is managed by the community, and the dream of home rule quickly descends into a social nightmare, as Pimlico is disowned by Britain, and a siege situation develops in which the inhabitants are dependent on food supplies dropped in by sympathetic nations from around the world.

At the point of the morally 'darkest' and most frantic part of the narrative, the film suddenly draws back from depicting the repercussions of the Pimlico inhabitants' stand against the British State any further, and brings matters to a brisk conclusion. Suddenly, and almost imperceptibly, the crises of independence and isolation are revealed to be over, the community is re-admitted to Britain as a London suburb, and their Burgundian status becomes part of an imaginary history. The final scene in the film is of a ceremony to celebrate the opening of a newly built swimming pool which has been constructed out of the local bomb site (suggesting that some lasting improvements and adjustments to community life did prove to be possible). In a moment of comic and poetic 'realism', however, even this muted celebration party has to be abandoned because of the onset of torrential rain. The heat wave which has pervaded the rest of the film (along with the deluded 'dreams' of the citizens) has evaporated, and 'ordinary' British life can be resumed. By the close, even the British weather has returned to a more temperate and unexceptional state of being.

Passport to Pimlico appears to both critique and vindicate certain conceptualisations of Englishness at a particular historical conjuncture in British

society. In the form of a controlled experiment, the Pimlico community are allowed a brief period of liberated freedom as they experience the joys of local autonomy (no policeman can demand a cessation of after-hours drinking), and are presented with the opportunity to form a society conceived on utopian lines. Conflict amongst individuals, and the onset of anarchy, soon, though, destroy the notion of a coherent, self-governing 'mini-society'. A state of autonomy and separateness cannot be managed, and the 'local' administration has finally to be reintegrated back into the 'national' by relinquishing its powers and 'foreign' status.

Whisky Galore similarly revolved around a concerted revolt against English authority, on this occasion as personified by Captain Waggett (Basil Radford) of the British Home Guard, who seeks to stop Scottish islanders from taking crates of whisky from on board a sinking ship, and keeping them for their own pleasure. Unlike in *Passport to Pimlico*, the community here succeeds in achieving its (admittedly more limited) aims of outwitting the English State. Captain Waggett is ultimately framed into appearing to be pilfering whisky himself, so that the 'joke' of the narrative is ultimately on him, and the kind of puritan, officious figures which he represents. Some of the 'liberated' whisky is used to celebrate the marriage of an English army officer (Bruce Seton) to a Scottish woman (Joan Greenwood), suggesting that in the right circumstances, England and Scotland might not exist in a state of opposition.

The narrative proper, in fact, concludes with a curious coda undercutting the previous events, and claiming that the happiness gained by the successful seizure of the whisky turned out to be short lived. The film's voice-over narrator (Finley Currie) relates how eventually the supply of whisky ran out, the drink became too expensive for the local inhabitants to purchase, and depressed times returned to the island: 'No one in Todday could afford even a dram', he records. The final image in the narrative is of the English soldier and the Scottish woman, strolling contentedly along the beach, as a voice-over narrator informs the audience that 'They all lived unhappily ever after. Except for Peggy and her sergeant. They weren't whisky drinkers. And if that isn't a moral story, what is?' This conclusion (however ironically it is meant to be taken) is in stark contrast to the earlier scenes detailing the comic energy of the islanders in outwitting the English officials, and signals a new tone in British film comedy, indicating that

an unambiguously affirmative ending was no longer a prerequisite of films within this category of native cinema.

While the central situations of *Passport to Pimlico* and *Whisky Galore* contain the potential for a radical critique of the British State, both films, in their final moments, back away from completely endorsing the actions of their central figures. The Pimlico citizens are represented as grateful to be allowed back into society, and the Todday islanders (it is claimed) do not find lasting happiness from the illicit whisky. The narratives thus parody and satirise the pitfalls of trying to find a 'short cut' to success in British society, and offer a cautionary note about the dangers of over-reaching ambition. Equally, the film-makers do not shy away from illustrating some of the social constraints, ideological limitations, and fragility of post-war British society as it is constructed and represented in the films, which implicitly support communal and regional life in post-war Britain.

Duncan Petrie in *Creativity and Constraint in the British Film Industry* (1991), claims that 'Ealing comedy concerned itself with the idealisation of community', a trait which he sees as emanating from intense 'nostalgia for the war years in a period of post-war austerity'.[32] Jeffrey Richards in his study *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (1997), suggests that 'Interestingly, the early Ealing comedies were more or less remade in the Conservative era (1951-58) and show…instructive changes'.[33]

To test these claims and observations with regard to particular examples of late Ealing comedy, it can be noted that *The Lavender Hill Mob* (Charles Crichton, 1951) explores the possibility of moving up the social ladder through drastic and illicit means, while illustrating that ultimately crime does not pay; *The Man in the White Suit* (1951) examines conflicts of interest and social tensions within the British industry, and finds no real solution to the problems unearthed; and *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953) ventures into a kind of pre-industrial British society, where an established and threatened local railway line is both rescued and ultimately affirmed.

While *The Lavender Hill Mob* evinces a wry sense of regret that it is not really possible to produce a crime picture capable of imitating and matching its Hollywood counterparts, and one which doesn't (in the end) lapse into farce or improbability, *The Man in the White Suit* is a more sombre and troubled film,

directly concerned with the social and economic future of Britain, and finding little cause for optimism or enthusiasm. The title refers to Sidney Stratton (Alec Guinness), a scientist, who accidentally stumbles upon a formula for producing a suit which never wears out or needs replacing. Such an innovation is naturally seen as a threat to the future of workers and capitalists alike, and Stratton is faced with the dilemma of being a 'would be' innovator in a society suspicious and wary of change.

Stratton may innocently enquire about whether the invention of the mechanical loom turned out to be 'a disaster', implying that in the long run, technological improvements will always prove to be beneficial, but his new invention connotes him in the eyes of his detractors as a dangerous idealist, who ultimately has to be forced into hiding. Stratton's invention leads to scenes of comic farce in which he is chased by representatives of management and labour, anxious to destroy his formula and safeguard their employment. (Despite the intellectual and ingenious nature of the central conceits of the key Ealing comedies, the films still tended to build towards concluding scenes of frenzied physical action).

Stratton maintains a commitment to the noble sanctity of the scientific pursuit, and believes in pursuing experiments to their logical conclusion, but he only finally escapes being torn apart by an angry crowd, when his infamous 'white suit' disintegrates as he is prodded and pushed, proving that the experiment was not in fact an infallible success. This penultimate scene in the film balances farce, suspense and irony, as the textile industry is saved at the cost of Stratton's dignity, pride and 'white suit'. The intense fears expressed by workers and businessmen in the industry testify to a deep fear of the effects of world competition on the open market, and the introduction of labour saving devices, and the film ends with Sidney, in abeyance, amidst a sense that whilst he may be banished, the future which he connotes cannot necessarily be dismissed or held back so easily.

The Titfield Thunderbolt also plays upon fears of redundancy, and the film, in fact, begins with notice of a closure – a close up shot of a poster announcing that the local Titfield railway service will be permanently withdrawn after the 14th of June, 1952, to be replaced by an alternative bus service. The Vicar (George Relph), along with the Squire (John Gregson), determine to keep 'the oldest surviving branch line in the world' going, by running it themselves as a private,

non-nationalised enterprise. On being informed that 'The old Canterbury to Whitstable line' was closed down by rationalising forces, the Vicar replies, 'Perhaps there were not men of sufficient faith in Canterbury'! In a variation of the legal loophole which allowed the citizens of Pimlico their brief moment of self-government, the railway supporters learn that their venture will not come under the terms of the 1947 Railway Nationalisation Act. A rich local resident (Stanley Holloway), whose main interest in life is drinking, provides the group with the necessary £10,000, despite being told that the line has been losing money for years.

The Titfield Thunderbolt was the first Ealing comedy to be shot in colour, and the lovingly composed photography of the green southern English countryside lends a rich patina to the dream of an enclosed community, resisting the onset of modernity and regimentation, making the treatment of rationalisation and progressivism much less disturbing than in *The Man in the White Suit*. Much of the film's humour is of a visual nature, evoking the era of silent film comedy, and involving the locals rallying around to allow the ancient train to pass an examination by an official from the Ministry of Transport. Through the community's ingenuity and cunning (cf. *Whisky Galore*), the civil servant is fooled into thinking that there are not, in fact, major problems of carriage coupling, refuelling and safety as the journey progresses.

The actual ineptitude of their 'test run' performance is concealed from the transport official, and in the film's vision of a happy ending, the line is leased out to a private company. (Ken Loach, nearly fifty years later in his film, *The Navigators*, (2001), would dramatise what he saw as the ruinous and dangerous consequences of de-nationalising the railways in the 1990s, and, in particular, leaving rail safety in the hands of private companies).

These films celebrate notions of English community and co-operation, perhaps, especially, because they feel these values to be threatened as the decade of the 1950s progresses. Ealing cinema did not have to consider the prospect of nuclear war, or the continued existence of mass unemployment in British society, themes which would concern later film-makers, but the Ealing comedies were indelibly marked by the experience of World War Two, and, perhaps, as a result, stressed the importance of Britons ultimately displaying a loyalty to the nation state, whatever internal dissensions and tensions might exist within particular

localised communities. As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson note in their *Film History*, the Ealing comedies make great play with notions of 'English eccentricity',[34] both as a means of generating narrative complications, and of promoting the international appeal of the films abroad. This lesson would not be lost on several of the film-makers who produced what one might term 'neo-Ealing' comedy dramas in the 1990s.

As John Ellis points out in his essay, 'Made in Ealing' (*Screen*, Spring, 1975), the Ealing comedies tended to privilege the concerns, ambitions and frustrations of male characters, downplaying or reducing women characters to the level of spectators. Ellis suggested that in the case of Ealing, 'Since comedy involves the infringement of ideals and accepted structures, it is possible for men to be involved, but not women'.[35] The communities depicted, therefore, tend to be male oriented and defined in somewhat masculine terms. The Lavender Hill mob are all male, and it is the men who most enjoy consuming the whisky in *Whisky Galore*. The films still tend to value social groupings which include both men and women, while implying that the male characters may be more likely to harbour private fantasies and ambitions than the more level headed female members of the community. This feature of the narratives can also be found to pervade a number of the 1990s British comedy communal dramas, particularly *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*.

Ealing comedies (although comparatively small in number) have earned themselves a permanent place in world cinema, and are regularly revived and regarded fondly. The films clearly benefited from having been produced within a studio system which allowed directors, writers and producers to exchange ideas, and to feel that they were contributing to the formation of a body of work, rather than just to the production of a single film which might have no immediate or recognisable successor.

In considering the mechanisms and techniques of Ealing comedy, Charles Barr suggests that *Passport to Pimlico* and *The Man in the White Suit* are both predicated upon what he terms a 'comedy gimmick', a method of examining 'the workings of a society by artificially speeding them up: the white suit, like the Burgundian document, throws society into turmoil, intensifies conflict, forces people to declare allegiances and define their philosophies'.[36] The result is that an intense situation of potential farce and social chaos is created, which also

creates a need for characters to take sides and adopt a point of view towards the moral and ethical questions posed by the initial situation.

Charles Barr proceeds to highlight the potential advantages and disadvantages of employing a comic framework to engage with important and topical themes and subjects. He notes that 'by using the form and tone of comedy, *The Man in the White Suit* (1951) is able to say the startling things that it does. Equally', Barr observes, 'because it's a comedy, these things can be dismissed with a laugh and even blurred in the memory' by audiences and critics.[37] Hence, as Barr suggests, the licence granted to comic forms to freely speculate and innovate within narrative forms freed from an adherence to 'realist' tenets or dominant political ethics can be liberating and exhilarating. The comic and ironic modes of narration adopted by the Ealing film-makers allow them to avoid slavishly 'shadowing the real', and to instead concentrate on engaging with latent societal conflicts in fantastic or allegorical ways. The absurdities of particular social situations can be pointed out through comic exaggeration.

As Barr suggests, however, comic narratives, because of their creative investment in structures of fantasy and 'playfulness', may be critically undervalued within particular film cultures, with their political insights being marginalized, precisely, because of the films' tendency to reduce situations to 'comical' states of exaggerated or 'unrealistic' farce and mayhem. Several of the Ealing films discussed above do seem to find it difficult to formulate resolutions to the stories and dilemmas which are funny, logical *and* emotionally satisfying. Hence, perhaps, the resort to noisy chase scenes in the final sections of the narratives, followed by scenes of wistful reflection, as characters contemplate their futures in the light of previous events.

A more satirical and topical kind of humour was produced by the Boulting brothers (Roy and John) in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which dared to go beyond Ealing's stringent, but fundamentally benign studies of the 'moral state of the nation'. Their most commercially successful and critically contentious film was *I'm All Right Jack* (John Boulting, 1959), a film presenting industrial relations in Britain as synonymous with industrial conflict, with greed and laziness seen as affecting both management and workers during a period of relative full employment and job security. The narrative follows the fortunes of Stanley Windrush (Ian Carmichael), who expresses a desire to go into industry,

albeit a form of 'light industry', rather than 'a thumping great business like iron and steel'. His Aunt Dolly (Margaret Rutherford) hopes that this won't mean that he has to join a union: 'I do so hate violence', she observes sardonically.

Workers in the film are presented as aiming to do as little as possible for the maximum amount of pay, and, whereas in *Sing As We Go*, the workers downed tools only when made redundant, in *I'm All Right Jack*, there are constant stoppages at every possible opportunity. A strike is welcomed as a 'nice little break'. Management is characterised by an equal type of virulent self-interest. The business of the industry concerned in the film is that of making missiles which are ironically promoted as 'contributing to the peace of the world'. Characters on both the shop floor and executive office are revealed as casually racist. Major Hitchcock (Terry Thomas) announces that the 'Deputy chairman is bringing those group of darkies we're doing that contract for' on a visit to the factory. Shop steward Fred Kite (Peter Sellers) worries about 'coloured labour' being brought into the factory, with 'blacks doing our jobs here, like they do on the buses in Birmingham' (the television series *Love Thy Neighbour*, 1972-76, to be discussed in part three of the thesis, had its origins in this kind of 'comically held' viewpoint).

I'm All Right Jack concludes with a television discussion programme, 'Argument: the programme that puts you in the picture', in which the various sides involved in the labour dispute are allowed an opportunity to state their side of the story. Stanley claims that 'we've all been betrayed', and denounces the 'phoney patriotic claptrack' of the employers *and* the 'bilge and talk of workers rights'. To his uncle, Bertram Tracepurcel (Dennis Price), he declares that the only reason 'You're always waving such a ruddy great Union Jack' is so 'nobody can see what you're up to behind it'. Stanley is eventually designated as mentally and emotionally unstable by a Judge, acting on behalf of 'British society', and he retires from everyday life to the seclusion of a nudist colony. The final image is of him being chased by a group of naked women, implying that he may never find a stable and non-threatening community.

The film remains remarkable for the sheer level of cynicism displayed by its characters, and for suggesting that if capital and labour continue to "carry on" in this fashion, then the future of British industry will indeed be grim. Characters within the story are depicted as being trapped within their respective social and

ideological positions – a situation which Anthony Carthew, reviewing the film in the *Daily Herald,* described as 'both funny and sad', with the 'pathos' of the film contributing to a sustained critique of the 'false values that have stained the 1950s'.[38]

Comedy, when deployed in this satirical fashion, could be used to present a grotesque version of what the film-makers felt had become the distorted and unhelpful values of a whole society, and it was not coincidental that the conflict was allowed to play itself out in what is depicted as the shallow and insincere world of television. *I'm All Right Jack* refuses to make suggestions as to how these class-based conflicts might be alleviated or avoided, and the distanced tone in which the disputes are recorded, implies a new kind of manner and tone in British film comedy, one which refuses to take sides, or as in *Sing As We Go,* encourage feelings of optimism and hope that better times may lie around the corner.

The cycle of films known as the British 'new wave' or northern based social realism explored the effects of relatively full unemployment on a group of male characters. These films were dramas, rather than comedies (although *Billy Liar*, John Schlesinger, 1963, fuses the two modes), but there was a kind of 'Bakhtinian' humour to be found in many of the main characters' iconoclastic attitudes and lack of regard for tradition and notions of social decorum. Several of the male figures do seek alternative spheres of fulfilment to those generally offered by their immediate situations: Joe Lampton (Laurence Harvey) takes up amateur dramatics in *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1958), miner Frank Machin (Richard Harris) plays rugby league in *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1963), and 'daydreamer' Billy Fisher (Tom Courtney) in *Billy Liar* writes pop songs and jokes for comic performers (while using most of the material to fictionalise his own life).

In *A Kind of Loving* (John Schlesinger, 1962), the subject of the position of brass band music in popular British culture (a key topic in *Brassed Off*) is specifically addressed. Vic (Alan Bates) is forced to settle down with Ingrid (June Ritchie) after she becomes pregnant, and live in her mother's (Thora Hird) house. A key scene around the kitchen table has Vic trying to persuade Ingrid to accompany him to watch his father playing in a brass band performance. Ingrid claims that the music is old fashioned, and indicative of a pastime for elderly

folk. The scene concludes with Vic stating firmly that they will be going. The film then cuts to the actual performance, and the camera pans along a section of the audience before focusing on two empty seats which denote Vic and Ingrid's absence. There then follows a sudden cut to the image of a television quiz show. The picture on the set keeps going out of focus, the quiz show host cannot get the details of the contestant correct, and the contestant himself somewhat bizarrely lists 'watching people' as one of his hobbies. The camera then pulls back to reveal that Vic, Ingrid and her mother are viewing the quiz show ('watching people', like the contestant), rather than the brass band recital in which Vic's father is an active participant, much to Vic's annoyance and disgust.

The transition tends to suggest that contemporary (1962) television is somewhat mindless and trivial compared to active participation in a brass band outfit, and John Hill in *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (1986) notes that in instances such as this sequence from *A Kind Of Loving*, 'modern mass culture is being…defined negatively in relation to traditional working-class culture'.[39] Andrew Higson in *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (1995) claims that 'the community of the neighbourhood and the workplace' in the 'new wave' films tends towards images which are 'claustrophobic and debilitating rather than warm and cosy, a source of conflict and tension rather than the microcosm of the united nation'[40].

One can see from the images of communal and regional (particularly northern life) discussed so far, that film-makers did not find it easy to present comic or dramatic images of community life in Britain which were not also images of conflict, dissatisfaction or restlessness. Equally, the directors, performers and writers of the films cited were stimulated by the prospect of producing narratives which engaged with the specific, the regional and the complicated 'mini-society'.

As a working generalisation, it could be argued that one of the inspirational motivations behind the production of the Ealing comedies discussed earlier, was a sense that the British State was assuming an excessive level of control over the typical citizen, through the processes of nationalisation and increasing state intervention in matters of education, health and social welfare. Films such as *The Man in the White Suit* and *I'm All Right Jack* implied that class conflict in British society was both comic and potentially tragic, and that technological changes were likely in the long run to make lasting changes to the nature of the national

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economy. *A Kind of Loving* and *Billy Liar*, in particular, presented protagonists who longed for a more exciting and authentic community, without knowing how this could exactly be achieved.

Looking ahead, it could be argued that Ealing and British 'new wave' film scenarios did not quite fit into the *Film Four* narrative and ideological paradigms associated with the auteur oriented, art house films of a certain strand of British cinema in the 1980s. I would suggest that a defining feature of several of the communal/regional narratives which emerged in the 1990s was a concern to resurrect a tradition of British film-making which was topical, provocative and entertaining, and which lamented a perceived *lack* of government and collective intervention in ensuring a reasonable and tolerable standard of living for current-day citizens.

As a result, the comic edge of several of the 1990s communal narratives has, arguably, more in common with the tone and mood of the British 'social realist' films than with the 'classic' Ealing comedies. However, a group of regional based comedy dramas from the nineties did, specifically, seem to emulate and aspire to Ealing tropes and traits, and I will examine these films briefly, before embarking on a case study of the two major communal comedy-dramas of the 1990s, *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*.

(2.2) The 'Ealing spirit' and 1990s regional comedies.

Three key films within this category of recent British cinema were not set in the north, and did not deal with the problems of unemployment. *Up 'n' Under* was set in Yorkshire, but lacked a specifically social perspective, and had its origins in regional theatre and television situation comedy. *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain* (1995) concerned the ideological conflict between two English cartographers and a small Welsh community over the legal and geographical definition of a prominent feature of the local landscape. *Waking Ned* depicted the wily efforts of a Southern Irish community to outwit the representatives of the mainland lottery. *In the Bleak Midwinter* (Kenneth Branagh, 1994) focused upon a group of 'resting' actors who are encouraged by a passionate theatre director to stage a production of *Hamlet* in a church hall on Christmas Eve. The 'Ealingesque' collective aims of the regional groups in these films are outlined in the table below:

Table Two –

Title	Location	Aims of community
In the Bleak Midwinter (1995)	Hope village Southern England	Stage an amateur production of *Hamlet*
The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill (1995)	Ffynnon Garw South Wales (1917)	Have a local hill designated as a mountain by English cartographers
Up 'n' Under (1998)	Yorkshire	Demonstrate that a local rugby team can beat difficult local opponents
Waking Ned (1999)	Tullymore Southern Ireland	Keep £7 million lottery winnings of deceased local resident

From a consideration of this table, we can discern certain similarities in themes and plot structures between these films and the 'classic' Ealing comedies discussed earlier. Both *Whisky Galore* (1949) and *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill* (1995), for instance, revolve around communities seeking to outwit the

representatives of an English establishment attempting to impose a kind of colonial rule over the local inhabitants. *Waking Ned* (1998), similarly, features a groups of islanders in opposition to the mainland, desperately striving to hang onto an unexpected financial windfall which chance has placed in their vicinity. *Waking Ned*, despite some striking instances of black humour, is able to depict a community capable of working together to achieve its objective, and so, as in *Whisky Galore*, the extended group is eventually rewarded with an unexpected victory.

The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill is the only film within the table to be set in the past, a factor which distinguishes it from the contemporary concerns generally prevalent within the genre of communal comedy/drama. The story of the film is relayed by a grandfather to his grandson, a narrative device alluding to the ways in which social myths and legends are constructed, elaborated and passed down to younger generations. This narrative device also, implicitly, warns audiences that the events subsequently to be relayed may be the result of a highly romanticised and comically inflated account of past incidents.

The narrative is set within a tragic period of European history, namely, the First World War (1914-18), an era in which the Reverend Jones (Kenneth Griffith) describes the small Welsh community at the centre of the tale as 'exhausted by loss'. In working together on the practical task of trying to turn a hill into a mountain, the local inhabitants find a common sense of purpose in the sheer physical effort and native guile needed to accomplish their ambition. Scenes depicting the villagers moving strips of earth from nearby fields to extend the size of the hill can be read as images of noble labour, in contrast with the futile fighting taking place in the blood soaked trenches of nearby France, which are evoked in the film's narrative in the form of flashbacks experienced by the character known as Johnny 'Shellshocked' (Ian Hart).

From a distanced perspective, both the 'mountain building', and the conflict of the war could be considered to be equally futile and meaningless. The desire to restore local pride by remaking the hill as a mountain, can, though, be interpreted as an attempt by the villagers to restore some kind of positive relationship between human beings and the natural world, a relationship which is simultaneously being sundered on the battlefields of World War One. In an ironical twist, Reginald Anson (Hugh Grant), the upper class English surveyor at

the centre of the tale, is also revealed to be recovering from shell shock, and so he too is psychologically damaged and socially vulnerable. Being an Englishman in 1917, the film implies, also leaves him without the emotional assurance of a vibrant and supportive community.

The Englishman, despite its period setting, shares with contemporary set films such as *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, a sense that the comedy of its narrative is unfolding against a background of evolving social tragedy and distress, meaning that the film's comic elements are always qualified and defined in relation to the moral seriousness of the overall situation. Of these three films, *The Englishman*, despite being set during the war, is somewhat ironically the most light-hearted (perhaps because the community at the centre of the story appears to be economically self-sufficient). Grant's character in the film is helped to emotionally recuperate from his disturbing memories of the war (which unlike Johnny's are not conjured up in the form of flashbacks), by forming a cultural and romantic alliance with Tara Fitzgerald's Welsh maidservant, 'Betty of Cardiff', a relationship which serves to symbolise at the end a possible rapprochement between the Welsh and English nations (the wedding in *Whisky Galore* served a similar purpose).

In an ending which reworks the conclusion of *Schindler's List* (Stephen Spielberg, 1993) for comic effect,[41] *The Englishman Who...* concludes with the film cutting to the present day, and presents the descendents of the original 1917 villagers rallying around to save the status of the mountain, which is now at risk of subsiding back into a hill. Armed with buckets and shovels, the contemporary generation are shown enthusiastically trying to maintain and reinforce the work of their ancestors, to ensure that their efforts are not dissipated or destroyed by the passing of time. In this closing image (which is more socially optimistic than its 'equivalent' Ealing narrative, *Whisky Galore*), the film is able to suggest that shared humour and social co-operation are capable of acting as a 'bridge' between past and present generations, and that history and geography can be 'living' subjects in British culture with tangible, purposeful meaning.

Grant's eponymous English character is fortunate to survive the war, and by the close of the film, he is moving away from the England which sent him to Flanders, and moving towards settlement in the Welsh village. Thus, the narrative may move towards an idealistic, utopian conclusion, but the film still

implies that this past Britain was a divided country, with the Welsh and English regions being mutually suspicious and ignorant of the ways of the other.

In *Waking Ned,* a contemporary comedy set in Southern Ireland, the local villagers also set out to trick and bamboozle the mainland authorities. A lottery jackpot dividend of £7 million is sought by two wily characters (played by Ian Bannen and David Kelly), after they realise that a local citizen has dropped dead in the Irish village of Tullymore at the shock of winning the lottery. In order for the money to be claimed from the lotto, the recently deceased Ned has to be impersonated, and this deception has to be supported by the community of 52 inhabitants, who, in return for their co-operation (and crucially, their silence), become eligible for a share of the winnings.

Only an elderly woman in a wheelchair, Lizzy Quinn (Eileen Dromey) opposes the masquerade, although this response is more due to her cantankerous and contrary personality than any inherent moral scruples. (She is also aware that the lottery might offer a reward for information about the fraud.) At the crucial moment when she seeks to inform the 'Lotto' about the deception, via a public telephone, a car accidentally swerves into the phone booth, and knocks her to a watery death in the sea, serving to remove the threat she posed to the community. This incident is the narrative's supreme moment of black comedy and high farce, and represents a kind of divine intervention on the part of the film's writer, which allows the islanders to inherit the money, rather than go to jail.

In a *Screen Education* article, 'Directions to Ealing' (1977), Philip Simpson noted the prevalence of scenes featuring 'sing-songs, scenes in pubs, offers and acceptance of tea' as emblematic signifiers of communal life in many of the Ealing comedies.[42] In *Waking Ned*, the scenes revealing Lizzy Quinn's attempt to inform on the locals are intercut with images of the rest of the community enjoying a celebration with flowing Irish music and drink in the island's public house. When she, and the public telephone booth, are knocked into the sea, the film's juxtaposition of 'warm' images of group activity, are starkly contrasted with the fate accorded to the outsider who dares to reject the will of the community.

The harsher side of the comic frameworks structuring *Whisky Galore* and *Waking Ned* can be witnessed in the fates of those characters who oppose the community at large, and suffer disparagement, disappointment and (in extreme

cases) death as a result. The comedic impulses of this tradition of British communal comedy are, thus, not necessarily benign or blameless, as James English's study referred to earlier, suggested, and may work towards a diminishment of characters who exhibit an overly individualistic or independent streak in their character. (The treatment of Tara Fitzgerald's character in *Brassed Off* will prove to be especially telling in this respect).

In *Waking Ned*, the villagers are allowed to succeed in illicitly claiming the money because it will be used for the good of the whole community, and also, by subverting the individualist ethics of the lottery system, whereby only separate and unrelated individuals are arbitrarily rewarded, they demonstrate a collective rationale which is capable of benefiting everyone but the lone objector. In keeping Ned's winnings, the villagers are also, in a way, avenging his death at 'the hands of' the lotto – Ned dies clutching his lottery ticket, with an incredulous look on his face, the surprise having proved too much for his heart to bear.

A recurring motif, common to a number of the 1990s communal based comedies, was the notion of a group assembled together to realise a particular cultural, dramatic or sporting ambition. Much of the humour and the accompanying dramatic tension within this set of films came from the discrepancy between the collectively-held aim, and the actual levels of ability, patience and discipline displayed by individual members of the group.

Up 'n' Under (1998) was directed by John Godber, who wrote the original treatment as a play, first staged in 1984. The popularity of *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* had created favourable conditions for *Up 'n' Under* to finally be produced as a film, and the presence in the cast of three actors associated with popular BBC television situation comedies of the 1990s, Gary Olsen (*2 Point 4 Children*, 1991-1998), Neil Morrisey (*Men Behaving Badly*, 1994-1998) and Samantha Janus (*Game On* 1995-1998), resulted in the film being modestly successful at the UK cinema box office.[43] The narrative revolves around a declaration by Arthur Hoyle (Gary Olsen), a self-employed painter and decorator, and banned rugby league player, that he can train any group of players to defeat a local pub team of rugby 'sevens' regulars. In an introduction to the published text, Godber stated that he had been inspired by the irony of trying to recreate the mood and tone of a Hollywood 'underdog' story in a starkly English

regional setting: 'at the time of 'writing the most popular videos available on the mass market are the *Rocky* videos. This is an attempt to stage *Rocky*…and where else? In Yorkshire, of course'.[44]

The film version of *Up 'n' Under* rewrites the original ending of the play, in which Arthur fails to score at the last minute to ensure victory, in accordance with the kind of triumphant scenario associated with the *Rocky* (1976-90) films. Arthur and his team manage to defeat their awesome rivals, after he succeeds in scoring an invaluable try in the last second of the game. Despite the 'comic' optimism inherent in this alternative ending to the play, there is a sense of strain at the suspension of disbelief which is needed to bring about this affirmative conclusion. Impressions that the film did not constitute a renewal of British 'northern comic realism' were accentuated by the subsequent death of its main stars: Gary Olsen, from cancer in 2000 at the age of 42, and Brian Glover, who had died of a brain tumour before the film was even released.[45]

In the Bleak Midwinter (1995) plays out a similar scenario to *Up 'n' Under*, but replaces the depressed northern setting with a southern setting (a village appropriately named Hope). Joe Harper (Michael Maloney), an unemployed actor, gathers together a group of equally 'resting' actors, and seeks to stage a production of *Hamlet* on Christmas Eve in a local church threatened with closure. Joe's sister, Molly (Hetta Charnley) in a keynote speech, complains that 'There is nowhere for people to go apart from the pub…There's no village hall, there's no art centre. We need this place to give people a focus', and prove to the council that there is a community worth maintaining'. Molly's lament echoes an observation made by Roger Scruton in his study, *England: An Elegy* (2000) that 'Gone are the institutions – the village shop, the market…the bandstand in the park – through which local communities renewed themselves'.[46]

Molly expresses surprise, however, at the choice of play for a village Christmas Eve performance: 'Why not do a comedy?' she enquires, rather than a story about 'a depressed aristocrat in a 400 year old play?' If the selected piece is a tragedy, the backstage events leading up to the play are nonetheless farcical, and enshrouded in chaotic mistakes and disputes. The film is shot in black and white, a feature chosen seemingly to echo the black and white post-war Ealing comedies and the monochrome films of Woody Allen, although Anne Billson of

the *Sunday Telegraph* felt that this was more of an 'acknowledgement that the story has more to do with cosy old comedies than with life as we know it'.[47]

As the performers fail to remember their lines, or agree on how the play should be staged, what Joe describes as 'The 'miserable, tormented life' of Hamlet comes to seem only too apposite to the production's faltering progress. Declaring that 'Churches and theatres close every week, because… people don't come to them', Joe appears set to leave the play and take up a role in a Hollywood picture. Nina (Julia Sawalha), a young widowed woman, and comically short sighted actress, begs him not to go, but the group feels that he should take the opportunity, knowing that the prospects for an actor in British theatre and cinema are inevitably somewhat limited.

He subsequently does leave, and the lead part of Hamlet in an unusual piece of casting is taken over by Joe's sister, Molly. Once the figurehead of the community has departed, though, the spirit and sense of belonging which he generated, tends to depart with him. (Such a figure is also crucial to the eventual outcomes of *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*.) In an ending redolent of the optimism associated with traditional comedy, rather than tragic drama, as the production of the play uncertainly begins, Joe returns with a Hollywood film producer, Nancy Crawford, who agrees to watch the show before flying out with him to Los Angeles. (The fact that she is played by British comedienne, Jennifer Saunders, registers the film's links with television situation comedy traditions, and its concern to somewhat caricature and distance itself from Hollywood.)

Joe subsequently turns down the opportunity to go to America (another member of the cast will go in his place) and acknowledges that he and the widowed Nina are in love. The film ends with an image of them dancing together, looking forward to the prospect of getting 'depressed together' as actor-managers in British theatre. As in *Whisky Galore*, the film closes with a couple representing a wider community, and symbolising many of its values of cohesiveness, warmth and pride.

Several of these films, while celebrating notions of British community life, were produced with American capital or made to specifically appeal to American audiences. *The Englishman* was financed entirely by American money after no British backing could be raised.[48] David Shipman in the *Story of Cinema* (Volume II, 1984) notes that *Whisky Galore*, renamed as *Tight Little Island*, was

'a particularly big hit in the U.S.'[49] and the American market, arguably, influences, on occasions, the types of British community to be privileged, and affects the manner in which these societies are consequently represented. Kevin Maher, reviewing *Waking Ned* in *Sight and Sound* accused 'Writer-director Kirk Jones' of fashioning his 'movie shamelessly for a US audiences', and of being over-dependent on reproducing the kind of stereotypes Maher felt belonged to 'a creatively bankrupt tradition'.[50]

Waking Ned (1999) was, in fact, financed partly out of a grant from the national lottery, an ironic touch given the film's vision of the lottery enterprise being defrauded and exploited by an entire community. Despite the film's Irish setting, the production was shot on location in the Isle of Man under a tax transfer credit scheme, suggesting that the film's dialogue about the intricacies of modern capitalism bears some relationship to the complicated processes involved in setting up the film.[51] Despite the specificity of place at the heart of many of the contemporary communal dramas, the designated setting did not always correspond with the area in which the filming was undertaken. *Up 'n' Under*, for instance, makes a good deal of the authentic, low budget 'grittiness' of its rugby league, Yorkshire setting, but those who wait for the very end of the credits will learn that the film was shot entirely on location in Cardiff.

This group of films represent an honourable attempt to commemorate regional communities in Britain, and do so by privileging a comic mode over more drama based modes of expression. *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* made a significant impact in British and world culture, however, by combining comic and dramatic modes of narrative within film forms which owed an allegiance to speculative and ingenious Ealing scenarios, and elements of the irreverent tone and mood associated with the British 'new wave' cycle of films. I will now turn to an examination of the antecedents and achievements of these seminal 1990s narratives.

(2.3) Case Studies of 'Brassed Off' (1996) and 'The Full Monty' (1997)

'…what we have here is a fine social-realist tragicomedy, a bit like Ken Loach but with the wedges of political ranting more smoothly integrated into the story'. Anne Billson, review of *Brassed Off, Sunday Telegraph,* 3 November, 1996.

'This is a comedy in the Ealing mode, but with explicitly anti-Tory bias. The two intentions…don't go any too well together…The film wins its case by sentiment, not argument'.
Alexander Walker, review of *Brassed Off, Evening Standard*, 31 October, 1996.

'*The Full Monty* was made in the traditions of Ealing…with a clear sense of identity and with a moral certainty about its audience'.
Ian Johns, 'It's that Ealing feeling', *The Times*, 1 August, 2002.

'*The Full Monty* can be seen as a hybrid film…combining realism and fantasy, seriousness and humour'.
Lez Cooke, 'British Cinema' in *An Introduction to Film Studies* (second edition), edited by Jill Neames, Routledge, 1999.[52]

The above quotations suggest that *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) and *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) can be interpreted as paying homage to traditions of Ealing comedy and social realist drama, but also of initiating new and innovative traditions of their own. Both films emerged within a political period notable for the ending of eighteen years of Conservative government and the election of a Labour government in May, 1997.

Perry Anderson in his political study, *English Questions* (1992), summed up the effects of such a sustained period of one-party rule in the following terms:

> income taxes reduced, public industries privatised, municipal housing sold off, trade union power broken, local government checked. The momentum of this programme never flagged…if the economic cure has failed to take, the social body has nevertheless been notably altered. Mass unemployment became a normal part of the landscape…In Britain, social polarisation went further than anywhere else.[53]

David N. Ashton, in an essay studying 'Unemployment' in *Beyond Thatcherism* (1989), similarly claimed that 'Over the period 1979-88, the Government steadfastly refused to raise the importance of unemployment in its hierarchy of values'[54], and observed that 'we now face a situation of second-generation unemployment, and there is evidence that unemployment is being inherited'.[55] If the ethnic comedy dramas to be discussed in the next section take as their subject the lives and experiences of second and third generation immigrant communities, *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* can be seen as focusing on the lives and experiences of first and second generation unemployed white males. Danny in *Brassed Off* will bemoan the fact that the fates of 'seals and whales' appear to exert more fascination in the public sphere than the fortunes of such men and the communities from which they originate. The films, themselves, through a

mixture of pathos, social outrage and irrepressible comic energy will seek to redress the balance and suggest that, perhaps, a reconsideration of the social and economic priorities of British society needs to be undertaken.

I would suggest that a decisive creative and political influence on *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* in this respect was the re-emergence of Len Loach as a major British director following his 1991 film, *Riff-Raff*. In *British Cinema in the 1980s* (1999), John Hill notes that the narrative of *Riff-Raff* is focused 'firmly upon…the experiences of the male working class (rather than the female working class'), a factor which it shares with its two 1990s successors.[56] In *Riff-Raff*, Robert Carlyle (the leading performer in *The Full Monty*) plays Stevie, a Scottish labourer, working with a group of men to convert a former hospital into luxury homes for the rich. Loach has admitted that he was especially keen to imbue the drama with a pervasive comic element, which could reflect the men's determination not to let their difficult and increasingly dangerous working conditions (and vulnerability in the job market) destroy their self-belief or hope.

In an interview in the American journal *Film Comment* (1994), Loach stated that 'Humour's very subversive; it's a way of maintaining your own bit of territory in your mind'.[57] Loach also argued that the presence of a great deal of comic banter in the narrative served as a realist device aimed at evoking the ways in which men interact in such communal working situations: 'It'd be quite unrealistic to make an earnest film where everybody looks very solemn, because life isn't like that'.[58] Equally, he felt that the integrity of the characterisations should take precedence over a desire to create comic moments: 'In getting the laughs you can't undermine the truth of the characters', he suggested.[59]

Much of the humour in *Riff Raff*, however, is of a bitter and ironic nature. When a new worker offers his P45 to the foreman, the latter replies, 'I don't want to know about your private life', illustrating that the builders will work at their own risk and without insurance. This becomes a key issue as safety procedures are ignored by an impatient management team, who simply want the job to be finished as quickly and economically as possible. The building team, which includes workers from Liverpool and Scotland, gradually disintegrates as men who speak out about the dangerous conditions are sacked. Communities in this film are fragmentary, and the men's jovial banter cannot hide the unsatisfactory and insecure nature of their lives.

Stevie and another builder eventually burn down the apartments they are building, following the death of a fellow worker on the site as a result of the negligent safety conditions. The men's humour, thus, appears finally helpless in the face of the stark economic conditions prevailing as the Conservative government (1979-90) entered its third decade of office, a feeling symbolised by the close of the film which sees the two arsonists staring into a flaming abyss. Loach denied that this ending was nihilistic, claiming that 'there's got to be an anger before you can start to organise or do anything more conscious'.[60]

Riff-Raff was financed by Channel Four on a production budget of £0.75m, but despite being critically well-reviewed, the film received only a short cinematic release in London, taking just £61,069 at the UK Box Office.[61] The film had, however, subtly rekindled an interest amongst British film-makers in the workings of ordinary lives and tight knit communities, and *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* would draw upon *Riff-Raff*'s representations of group activity and resilience, but imbue their own narratives with an idiosyncratically 'fantastical' view of working class culture, which sought to re-envisage the possibilities for social opposition to capitalist ethics in modern Britain.

Table three –

Title	Location	Aims of the community
Brassed Off (1996)	Grimley Yorkshire	Win a national brass band competition Keep the local coal mine open
The Full Monty (1997)	Sheffield	Stage a successful male strip show, and regain pride

Brassed Off, significantly, for a film based around a coal mine on the verge of extinction, begins in darkness, with a series of lights gradually moving towards the centre of a black background, accompanied by the sound of jaunty brass band music on the soundtrack. These images gradually become identifiable as lamps worn by miners to guide their way from the murkiness of the pit towards daylight, safety and society. The film will conclude with these same men having become ex-miners, and close with them evocatively travelling through the

darkness of a London evening, towards an unclear and unpromising future. The narrative is, thus, predicated on the notion of the men catching up with a future in which coal turns out to be 'history'.

A synopsis of the plot of *Brassed Off* in *Sight and Sound* [62] locates the events of the narrative as taking place in 1992, and the pit closure scenario does seem to be based upon the real life mine closures initiated by the Conservative government during this period. The film text, itself, however, does not identify a particular year or date, and, in a dispute amongst a group of miners about attitudes towards the 1984-5 miners strike, one miner declares that was 'ten years ago, pal', putting the date of the film's events nearer to 1994 or 1995 (the film was released in October, 1996). *Brassed Off*, in certain respects, possesses a kind of 'timeless' allegorical quality, as the film develops its particular moral fable about the harsh consequences of unemployment and the fading away of cultural traditions.

The narrative is generated out of a series of journeys undertaken by the members (and supporters) of the Grimley Colliery brass band. These journeys increasingly acquire a portentous and metaphorical significance, culminating in a prestigious trip to the Royal Albert hall in London, where the band succeed in winning the national brass band competition, having failed in their efforts to keep the local coal mine in operation. The men, thus, meet with Rudyard Kipling's famous combination of 'triumph and disaster', simultaneously. [63]

The dominant force behind the band is Danny (Pete Postlewaite), an ex-miner, who, as conductor, possesses an overwhelming ambition to witness the band's talents being displayed on a national (rather than just a local) platform. This aspiration to succeed at the highest possible level is all the more pressing in that Danny appears to be dying from an illness brought on by his work down the mine. Danny's precarious state of health can be read in some respects as a symbol of the precarious state of the British industrial working class, and of the cultural values and skills represented by his character, which are presented as threatened by an increasingly pragmatic social order. By the close of the narrative, his physical state is in a critical condition, and, significantly, the final shot in the film is a close-up of Danny's face, a lifetime of striving and suffering engrained in his proud features.

Danny's commitment to the importance of music, and striving for excellence, is rooted in a respect for northern working class traditions of self-education, and of communities refusing to be ground down by external circumstances. Danny delivers a number of keynote speeches during the film in which the camera pans towards a close up of his expressive face, the camera movement serving to underline the dignity and validity of his view of the colliery band as a symbolic reminder of what he terms a 'hundred bloody years of hard graft'. 'They can shut up the unions, they can shut up the workers', declares Danny, in his position as a conductor desperately trying to maintain a link with previous generations of musicians and miners, before concluding that 'They'll never shut us up. We'll play on, loud as ever'. Danny's words recall Karl Marx's observations in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1869) that 'Men make their own history…under circumstances directly encountered from the past', and that honouring the past is no straightforward matter: 'The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living'.[64]

The film is seemingly aware that its real subject is, perhaps, what comes after the end of the story, when a particular social and economic history has drawn to a close (*The Full Monty* begins at a point in the 1990s when work in the steel industry has become a distant memory for citizens of Sheffield). A sequence early in the film depicts the wives of two of the band members, Vera (Sue Johnston) and Rita (Lili Roughley), chatting over a backyard fence in the style of a 'time honoured' tradition of British comedy and television soap operas. Rita is shown drinking a mug of tea, and talking with a cigarette in hand, against a backdrop of bras hanging on her washing line. The women state that if the pit shuts down, and the band follows suit, 'We'll all have bugger all to do'. At this point, the film cuts to a previously unseen character, a grey haired man, reading a popular and sensationalist newspaper in his backyard (we catch a glimpse of a naked woman on the front cover of his paper, as he changes pages). 'You get used to it' is his laconic summation of the social changes wrought by unemployment.

The 'joke' of this scene turns out to be that the women are actually separated by the length of his backyard, and are talking across his living space, as if he doesn't really exist or matter - what appears as an intimate, unmediated conversation would in reality have involved the women shouting to be heard.

This short scene, with its almost subliminal comic 'message' about the dangers of getting 'used to' having no compelling reason to leave the house, ends in a brief shot, framing all three characters in a momentarily frozen tableau to the sound of wistful brass band music on the soundtrack.

This character (referred to as 'elderly man' in the credits, although he does not appear to be that old) does not re-appear in the film. This could be simply that he is a figure needed for a punchline to the scene. Equally, it could be that his resigned and apathetic attitude is so alien to the ideological and emotional impulses determining the narrative that the film deliberately wishes to banish him from the rest of the story. He stands for the loss of hope, pride and purpose which the men will do their utmost to avoid through their battle to keep the pit open, and be crowned the brass band champions of Britain. The implication of this sequence is that the blackness of the pit is preferable to the grey emptiness symbolised by the unemployed man's backyard.

The film then compares passive and active responses to the modern world by cutting to a shot of Danny, pumping up his bike tyres, and preparing to make his way to the band's rehearsal room. The contrast between having a purpose and a goal, and having nothing very much to do on is subtly indicated. This juxtaposition is emblematic of a pattern to emerge in the narrative in which the 'comic' elements have a serious point to make, and cannot be abstracted from the meanings generated by the narrative as a whole.

The opening scenes of the narrative economically introduce the major characters, and maintain a steady level of exposition, reflecting the characters' steady determination to achieve their joint objectives regarding the coal mine and the national brass band competition. Once the former aspiration is consigned to history, the pace of the film itself slows down, as if the characters themselves now appear excessively weighed down by the burdens and disappointments placed upon their shoulders.

An early scene in the narrative introduces Danny's son, Phil (Stephan Tomkinson), and his family, watching a television news item about a proposed redundancy offer to be made to the Grimley coal miners. The film will set out to personalise and dramatise the details of the problematical redundancy situation, which the television coverage is seen as presenting in a distanced, impassive tone, in the form of localised events happening to other people, somewhere else.

Sandra (Melanie Hill) urges her husband to accept the redundancy money, while it is on offer, before they are 'out on street', highlighting the differences of opinion which will emerge between the male and female characters as to how to respond to the events unfolding. 'There's always Mr. Chuckles', observes Phil, in an allusion to his alter ego, and alternative form of employment as a children's entertainer. Ironically enough, it is in his guise as a clown that Phil will launch his fiercest denunciation of the political and economic state of the nation, and reach his most profound sense of personal despair.

The reference to 'Mr. Chuckles' has the effect of driving Sandra to a form of 'comic' violence, and she hurls a plate at Phil as he climbs onto the back of his father's bike, as he collects him for the band practice. The plate lands on the fence, as if at this early stage of the narrative, events are moving too quickly for characters to be pinned down or laid low. Phil will subsequently be beaten up by money-lenders, and lose everything that is most dear to him. The 'comic' violence of this opening scene will, thus, escalate into a more real tragic and painful violence which will leave physical and mental scars which no clown's make up can quite hide.

In *Brassed Off*, music serves to bind a disparate group of individuals together, and provide a common aim for an increasingly beleaguered and divided community. At the band's first practice session, two of the men, Jim (Philip Jackson) and Ernie (Peter Martin), had declared an intention in 'the present climate' to quit. Persuaded to 'carry on' (and the term seems appropriate in this context) by the unexpected presence and participation of the sexually desirable flugelhorn player, Gloria (Tara Fitzgerald), Jim, Ernie and the other band members accompany her in her chosen audition piece, the second movement from *Concierto de Aranjuez.* This piece of music was written in 1939 by a blind Spanish composer, Joaquin Rodrigo, while exiled in Paris, during the Spanish civil war. The work was premiered in 1940 upon his return to Spain, and has been described as almost 'a second national anthem, with its haunting melody evoking distinctly Spanish moods and colours'.[43] Its prominent position within a text about British social tragedy and economic turmoil, suggests a desire by the film makers of *Brassed Off* to imply a link between the tragic struggles of the Republicans in the Spanish conflict (who were supported by thousands of British

sympathisers in their cause, who went to Spain to fight [66]), and the British miners who have lost their jobs in the last thirty years.

The sequence juxtaposes Gloria's audition (representing the beginning of her association with the band) with night-time scenes of union representatives and coal board officials meeting to discuss the future of Grimley colliery (a meeting which will herald the end of the pit as an ongoing concern). The elegiac Spanish music performed by the band is played over the sounds of the men's voices in the crucial discussion, so that we never hear what is actually said. Alexander Walker in his *Evening Standard* review of *Brassed Off* suggested that 'Loach wouldn't have missed this class-confrontation opportunity'.[67] In *Brassed Off*, the implication of the sequence appears to be that nothing that is said by the union officials can affect the moves in operation to close down the mine. The music, thus, connotes a more timeless humanist ethos, which is, however, helpless in the face of stark current-day economic and political realities.

Father-son relationships, a major structural element and emotional force within the narrative as a whole, are prominent in the subsequent scene of Phil's son, Shane (Luke McGann) watching his father speak to two "loan sharks", who have come to collect their payments. The effect of watching the scene through a window, and from the perspective of a child struggling to comprehend what is occurring, encourages an audience to share the child's feelings of helplessness in the face of external threats to the sanctity of the family. Phil tries to laugh off his son's concern by claiming that the men are from the pleasure department, and are only there to exhort the family to have fun. 'I'm not a child, dad', is the son's telling response.

The film then cuts to Gloria's lodgings, and in a medium close up, depicts her looking into a mirror and admiring her appearance in her new band uniform, whilst simultaneously watching her employer (Stephen Moore) through the mirror proclaiming on a television screen that 'No one wants Grimley to close'. This representation of an authority figure mediated twice over (through the television screen, and the full length mirror), contrasts with the more direct viewing experience of the boy in the previous scene. There is also an inference that management, through its distance from the messy business of actually digging for coal, draws upon a form and use of language which is inevitably less

rooted in a tangible, material reality than the earthier, less mediated discourses of the miners.

The subsequent competition scenes set in various Yorkshire villages present cinema audiences with a sense of a thriving local brass band culture. As we observe the Grimley band marching proudly down a neighbouring high street, their distinctive purple outfits are intermingled with the uniforms of other bands, such as the Yorkshire building society and Uppermill village, creating a sense of the Grimley band as one amongst many (real life) enthusiastic regional competitors. As the defeats mount up for Danny's band, an increasingly relaxed and casual attitude, however, becomes evident in the performances of the group. As the effects of several pints of beer begin to lessen their skills of co-ordination, Phil's trumpet disintegrates, and the band itself seems to fragment before our eyes. The film assumes a kind of 'fly on the wall' documentary approach at this stage, downplaying narrative development in favour of recording the 'carnivalesque' behaviour of the band.

In the inquest which follows, conducted by Danny, Ernie will describe this casual approach to the music as the band's way of going 'out on a high note', a view which does not find favour with Danny, who is horrified that audiences were 'Laughing…bloody laughing at us'. For Danny, the band's disintegration is tantamount to artistic blasphemy, and indicative of a lack of respect shown for both the noble beauty of the music, and the memory of their working class predecessors in the band. Danny's viewpoint is, thus, capable of making audiences re-assess their own responses to the band's performances in the local villages, making the question of how spectators are encouraged or expected to respond to the more farcical elements of the film problematical and perplexing.

A subsequent scene relocates to a local fish and chip shop, whose motto 'In cod we trust' is noted in an establishing shot. Gloria and Andy (Ewan McGregor) have reconvened here for a meal, and the sparseness and lack of sophistication in the setting is highlighted by the amplified sound of the fish shop waitress, artlessly dropping cutlery noisily onto their table. Gloria wryly comments that if she'd realised they were 'going this posh', she'd have got 'dolled up'. The table is adorned with tomato ketchup and vinegar bottles and both characters are smoking. These features anchor the film in a kind of implicit form of protest

against antiseptic 'new worlds' in which coal fires, unhealthy eating and harmful cigarette smoking have all been banished.

The unglamorous and mundane nature of the setting appears to mitigate against the romantic possibilities inherent in having the film's youngest and most attractive characters alone together in a restaurant. The sequence suggests that the characters are divided by class and differing political views, but are also attracted to each other, allowing a romantic or sexual sub-plot to be introduced. (The subsequent scene will suggest that they do, indeed, pair off, and have sex together before the night is over).

The burgeoning class conflict between the characters in the fish and chip shop is dissipated by the sudden intervention of the waitress, who comes between them and enquires, 'Who's the haddock?' Andy replies 'She is', and they both dissolve into laughter, amused by the image of Gloria as a haddock. There may be a misogynist tinge to this 'joke', although equally, at this stage, any laughter from the characters of the film comes as a relief for audiences from the dramatic intensity created by the impending pit closures.

The essentially repetitive and circular structure of the narrative is evident in a following scene, which begins with Danny, once again, checking names against a list of participants in a local brass band competition. This particular event is of more significance than the local villages event because it constitutes the semi-final of a national brass band competition, the winners of which will go through to the final at the Albert Hall in London. The contest takes place in what appears to be a former textile mill (cf. *The Man in the White Suit*) in Halifax. The Grimley band performance on this occasion is composed and confident, but, nonetheless, as in Gloria's audition scene, an underlying impression of crisis and despair permeates the sequence. Scenes of the band's performance in the contest are interwoven with the results of the coal pit ballot. The result is announced as 'four to one' in favour of redundancy. Shots of the managing director (Stephen Moore) being informed of the result of the ballot on his mobile phone, and smiling at the result, suggesting that his professed desire to keep the pit open was always false. Grimley colliery band are declared the winners of the competition with 198 points, but the montage of events and incidents makes it clear that this statistic counts for little besides the result of the miners' ballot.

The hollowness of their musical success is starkly illustrated by a shot of the band returning home, and being greeted by a town which is now 'ghostly silent', and in an apparent state of mourning. Miners and town-folk are pictured walking in slow motion, as if time itself has stopped still. Danny is depicted walking away from the town, setting off on his journey home, with the now immobile pithead clearly visible in the background. This particular journey is interrupted by his collapsing to the ground. The band, led by Phil, rush to his aid, and the camera is positioned within the group in order to convey a sense of the urgency and despair of the moment. Personal crises and social tragedies are inextricably linked by this stage of the proceedings, with the comic elements of the narrative seemingly banished to the margins. Danny is hospitalised, and seemingly no longer in a position to criticise either the band's performances or attitudes. Phil is unable to inform Danny that the men no longer wish to play on, and so the band survives in a kind of limbo.

A number of suspenseful strands consequently pervade the narrative, based around the following questions, now that we know the pit will close. Will Danny live or die? Will Gloria's position as a 'viability assessor' be discovered by the men she has befriended, and, if so, how will they respond? Will the band members relent and play in the final?

The film will reveal a degree of ambiguity and complexity in detailing the resolutions to these dramatic situations, suggesting that the narrative's commitment to its working class characters works against the formation of a wholly tragic tone, while, equally, shunning what might be interpreted as a too easily achieved submission to the consolations offered by predominantly romantic and comic scenarios. Danny's condition is revealed as serious and probably terminal, but he does live on to see the band's excellence affirmed by a national audience. Gloria, having been largely responsible for the initial continuance of the band, is publicly vilified, once it is revealed that she has a 'management logo on her key ring'. Having been subjected to a male gaze which desired to know her sexually, she is now objectified as an enemy of the male working class. It as if she has to be punished for the erotic desire she has once generated, and can now only be viewed as a destructive intruder upon the community.

The next scene serves to heighten the sense of failure and to illustrate the day to day struggle of Phil's family. Sandra has not enough money to pay for her groceries at the supermarket, and this scene is played out from the viewing position of Vera, the shop assistant, whose witnessing of this incident is, thus, analogous to the spectator's own positioning in the scene. In an act of class and gender solidarity, Vera lets Sandra off what she owes, and even goes so far as to slip her ten pounds from the till.

This moment of sympathetic kindness is harshly shattered in the next scene, which presents the "loan sharks" taking away the remaining contents of Phil and Sandra's home. A medium close up shot shows Phil, dressed in his clown's outfit, rushing to remonstrate with the perpetrators, but being held up by his huge clown's feet. The incongruity of his cheerful appearance and made-up smiling face, given the seriousness and menacing nature of the scene, lends the incident a tragic-farcical ethos. The scene ends not with a comic punchline which could dissipate the tension and allow spectators to appreciate the power of wit and humour in a difficult situation. Instead, the dramatic 'social realist' elements of the film are privileged over the comic features of the narrative, and Phil is knocked to the ground by a punch in the face from one of the removal men, and the sequence ends with the sound of a crying baby, and a shot of the distraught family.

In a makeshift job-finding club erected on the pit site (aptly or ironically) named the 'rescue room', Phil is depicted as existing in an increasingly disturbed state of mind. There is no work of any substance on offer for the men. Phil reappears in the next scene, seated alone in an empty home, bereft of family and furniture. By some magical oversight, the phone has not been cut off, and he receives a call summoning him for another performance as 'Mr. Chuckles'. His 'alter ego' persona allows him to berate 'Margaret, bloody, Thatcher' to a group of six year olds in a church celebration of the harvest festival, and to ponder why God lets her live. The incongruities of the situation mean that the attack on Mrs. Thatcher is partly qualified, and moderated, by the way in which it is presented to an audience of children, by a character apparently undergoing a nervous breakdown. The setting of the church does make a serious point, though, about the implied silence of God in the face of social catastrophe.

Having been harried out by appalled mothers, we next witness Phil hanging from the top of the pit head in a failed attempt to kill himself. Ironically, this time his huge clown's feet prove to be his salvation, as they draw attention to his plight, and he is saved by two security guards who respond to the ghastly sight they encounter with the exclamation, 'Jesus Christ'. Phil is first presented in long shot, allowing us to observe his suffering from afar, before the film cuts to a close up of him struggling with the noose around his neck, caught between a state of wanting to die, and yet struggling to live. Phil attempts to end it all in the place where he has previously earned his living, and which has now had its own 'life source' terminated. The image succeeds in being simultaneously farcical, absurd and disturbing, both melodramatic and emotionally authentic.

The next image is of Phil being wheeled into hospital, with only his huge clownish feet, sticking out from the foot of the trolley, identifying the figure as him. Danny, observing the patient being brought in from his hospital bed, ironically recognises that it is Phil through the 'cartoon-like' image of the clown's feet: previously, Danny has not appeared to recognise his son's troubles when confronted with them, face to face. 'Have you lost your marbles?' asks Danny, as they are later seated face to face on a hospital bench. 'I've lost everything else', replies Phil, before listing the items he has lost: 'house, kids, job, self-respect...'

In William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606), Edgar declares on the barren wasteland that 'The lamentable change is from the best/ The worst returns to laughter' (Act IV, Scene I, lines 5-6), suggesting that humour can withstand the worst forces of social change and misfortune. He shortly declares, however, that 'the worst is not/ So long as we can say/ This is the worst' (lines 29-30),[68] implying that the 'worst' is always indicative of a pain which is, in fact beyond human expression and articulation. *Brassed Off* hovers between these two points of view, suggesting that humour may be a bitter, but cathartic means of dealing with distressing situations, but indicating that there may also be situations which are so painful and depressing that only music, not words, are adequate to the challenge of conveying deeply felt emotions of loss and despair.

Phil's misfortunes constitute the narrative thread for the middle section of the film. After the failed suicide attempt, his character is depicted sitting disconsolately by a canal. Jim tells him to 'stop being a bloody drama queen' (as

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if the film itself is, perhaps, acknowledging that the plot has become excessively melodramatic and pessimistic by this stage of the proceedings). Phil is welcomed back into the fold by Jim and the gang, despite his admission that he, in fact, voted for the pit to close. In the working man's club, the all male group is broken up by the return of the banished Gloria, who offers to devote her wages to enable the band to take part in the final at the Albert Hall. Jim talks of 'guilt', and Gloria of 'dirty money'. Gloria's role in the narrative is here literally equated with Propp's concept of a 'magical donor',[69] a helper and enabler, who provides the necessary financial means for the band to compete. 'I hope you've budgeted for booze', is Jim's grudging way of accepting the offer.

The band embark on their final journey of the narrative to perform at the Albert Hall. As the band wait to be given their cue to take to the stage, a female announcer on the internal intercom service has difficulty in pronouncing the words 'Grimley colliery'. To which Ernie remarks sarcastically, and ironically, 'I bet she's glad they closed the bugger'. Harry, who has assumed the role of replacement conductor for the sick Danny, conducts without a baton in the style of a 1950s 'rock and roll' performer. Framed with the audience behind him in the giant Albert Hall arena, he conducts in a charismatic, impassioned style. Midway through the band's performance, an ailing Danny emerges onto the concert hall platform, like a 'ghost from the past', acknowledging, with an appreciative glance, the high standard of their playing.

Danny's lifetime goal of winning the competition is accomplished, as they are judged to be the finest performers on the day, but the cruel irony of events is that he has come round to the sceptical way of thinking which was prevalent amongst the band members at the beginning of the narrative about the real worth of musical performance in the midst of mass unemployment and dashed hopes. The final unexpected twist of events is that his acceptance speech becomes an act of disavowal, his final emotional journey ending in anger and dismay. His refutation of the trophy becomes a refusal to consider music outside of its social and economic contexts, with his 'anti-acceptance' speech emphasising the rights of human beings to possess the right to work and a future.

Danny is framed in a series of close up shots from below, providing his words with added dignity and gravitas. The sequence alternates shots of his protest with images of the audience taking in the daunting implications of his speech. He

castigates a government which has 'destroyed our industry…our communities, our homes, our lives, all in the name of progress'. His condemnatory speech is made more powerful by the fact that a film audience may have been led, through the use of comic banter and buoyant, inspiring music throughout the narrative, despite the disturbing scenes interspersing these features, to possibly expect a sentimental or optimistic conclusion, which the film resolutely refuses to provide. Danny's views and sentiments echo the observations of Raymond Williams in a *New Socialist* article written during the miners strike of 1984/5 in which he rebukes 'the logic of a new nomad capitalism, which exploits actual places and people and then (as suits it) moves on':

> What the miners, like most of us, mean by their communities is the places where they have lived and want to go on living, where generations not only of economic but of social effort and human care have been invested, and which new generations will inherit.[70]

Danny displays a canny willingness (recalling the cynicism about the media in *I'm All Right Jack* and *A Kind of Loving*) to exploit the media to make his points. Not accepting the prize in British television and newspaper culture is 'news', as the sudden flashing cameras of photographers illustrates. At first there is an uneasy round of applause from the audience at the Albert Hall, which soon grows into a crescendo of emotional support for his stance, the band's playing, and their sad plight. As the band leave the stage, Jim goes to collect the trophy. The official understandably demurs that Danny had declared they were not accepting the prize, to which Jim replies, 'Don't talk so bloody soft': a final example of the seriousness of a moment being capped by a wry or ironic comment, and of the essential ambivalence of their situation of having experienced major wins and losses within such a short period of time.

The closing shots of the film complete the movement away from work which has been evolving throughout the narrative. As the beleaguered community winds its way home in a victory celebration on an open top bus, the ironic performing of 'Land of Hope and bloody Glory', as the Houses of Parliament pass by in the background, suggests that the gap between democracy, equality, and social justice may be widening. The characters appear finally reconciled to each other, if not to their fate. After the hustle and bustle of the ceaseless activity conveyed in the narrative, what appears to lie ahead for the men is the prospect of a stilled and silenced society, without clear work and leisure distinctions, a

scenario anticipated by the rustling sound made by the redundant man's newspaper pages in the opening sequence of the film.

The characters in *The Full Monty* are also presented as in flight from the boredom and spiritual emptiness of enforced unemployment, but in this film, industrial disaster has already occurred by the beginning of the story. *The Full Monty* opens with a rueful look back at images of the past, contained in a promotional documentary feature, *Sheffield –City on the Move* (Coulthard productions, 1971) which is screened over the credits. This film is at pains to promote Sheffield as a progressive, vibrant city, with a thriving steel industry (so the narrator informs us) providing an economic basis for the social improvements in housing and shopping areas which are taking place. The documentary informs us that 'steel employs some 90,000 men', but that 'it's not all hard work for the people in Steel City', and the promotional film draws upon images of people dancing in discos, and scenes of local football teams in action to illustrate the leisure aspects of Sheffield.

City on the Move appears to be referring to the present and suggests an enthusiasm about the future prospects of the city. It is therefore disconcerting for audiences when the screen subsequently fades to black, followed by a caption reading '25 years later'. A film which has been presented as topical, turns out to actually be a period piece, detailing hopes for a future which were never to be realised. There is no obvious audience for this documentary within the fictional world of *The Full Monty*, and the film appears to be being deployed to suggest a certain scepticism about officially licensed views as to what life is like in modern Sheffield. *The Full Monty* will proceed to offer an 'unofficial', non-documentary view of life and economic prospects in nineties Sheffield, which can subsequently be compared with the relentless enthusiasm of *City on the Move*, making the fictional narrative, conversely, more 'truthful' and pertinent than the non-fictional promotional film. Alexander Walker in his *Evening Standard* review of *The Full Monty*, wryly interpreted the significance of the documentary as 'a reminder of the booming Britain that was intended to be in which everyone would have a job and no one need go naked'.[71]

The subsequent events dividing the 1970s from the 1990s, and leading to a dystopian, rather than a utopian state of affairs, are not outlined by the narrative of *The Full Monty*, and the film subsequently may lack some of the sense of

history and myth which underpins *Brassed Off*. In *The Full Monty*, the central character, Gaz (Robert Carlyle) and his friends tend to live in the present, rather than remembering what has been lost, and are rather cynical, if not entirely pessimistic about the future. *The Full Monty* in certain respects can be seen as 'carrying on' the story of *Brassed Off* about what happens to a group of Yorkshire men after they have been made redundant, although it is unlikely that the ex-miners of the latter film would ever consider stripping for a living.

The narrative proper of *The Full Monty* begins after the transformation in time from 1971 to 1996, and opens with two men, Dave (Mark Addy), Gaz and his son, Nathan (William Snape), moving through an abandoned factory, carrying a large steel girder, which Gaz apparently hopes to sell as scrap metal. The abrupt transition from a documentary film, claiming that facilities and prospects in Sheffield are improving all the time, to this contrasting scene set amid unmistakable signs of urban decay, creates an immediate sense of dramatic irony and comic incongruity.

Gaz's plans are quickly revealed as impractical, when father, son and friend are locked in the disused factory by a security guard, and end up trying to escape by standing upon a car, slowly sinking into a canal. Having once been employed in this very factory 'for ten years', the men are now reduced to scavenging and appropriating. A brass band associated with the defunct steel factory (the British Steel Stocksbridge band) passes by, creating another link with *Brassed Off*.

Father and son become separated in the farcical antics of trying to get the girder out of the factory, and Nathan expresses disapproval at the immature attitudes and behaviour indulged in by his father. A relationship which forms a sub-text in *Brassed Off* (Phil's relationship with his son, Shane) will become a central focus of *The Full Monty*. When the gang of three are shortly reunited, Dave complains about his jeans having been soaked in the watery escape from the factory. Gaz replies that he 'should have taken' his 'kit off', unconsciously alluding to the more ambitious scheme which will shortly occupy his mind and dominate the rest of the film. Gaz invites his son to accompany him to the 'job club' - 'it'll be a good laugh', he suggests bizarrely - but Nathan, tiring of his father's relentless escapist and elusive dreams, goes home instead.

The following sequence in the film takes place at the job club, where the leader (in a teacher-like manner) is warning the men that he wants to see their

CV's finished by the time he returns to the room. As soon as he leaves, however, the men take out playing cards, and start bickering amongst themselves. The impression is that these men are trapped in an intolerable situation, applying for jobs which don't exist, and forced to regress to the level of recalcitrant schoolboys. Gerald (Tom Wilkinson), who is wearing a suit and typing on a computer complains (like Nathan) about Gaz's attitude and behaviour, but he is told, 'You forget Gerald, you're not our foreman anymore...you're just like the rest of us'. This exchange leads to a fight between Gerald and Gaz, accentuating the impression of a school classroom situation getting out of control. It is notable that there are no unemployed women present in the room, and, as in the scene depicting the 'rescue centre' serving as a makeshift job centre in *Brassed Off*, an underlying sense of despair and depression amongst the men can be detected, beneath the boisterous humour and banter.

The film proceeds to sketch the personal relationships and contexts within which the men live. Gerald has not dared to inform his wife that he has lost his job, and so pretends to go out to work each day. Dave feels that with his lack of a job and weight problem, he cannot possibly be attractive to his wife. Gaz is estranged from his ex- wife, who has settled with a new partner in a more affluent part of town. Lomper (Steve Huison) is rescued by Dave from killing himself by inhaling poisonous fumes into his car. When Lomper returns home, and finds his elderly and crippled mother struggling to get up the stairs, she says to him, 'I thought you'd gone', without specifying where she thought he had headed. She, herself, will be dead before the close of the narrative.

Both *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* structure their narratives around the concept of "putting on a show", and Gaz and his fellow performers spend as much time practising their dance moves, as they do taking their clothes off. Gerald's skill at ballroom dancing suggests that he may prove to be an effective chorographer, but his co-operation is only secured by Gaz and Dave, after they thwart his interview for a new job. By making his garden gnomes appear to be attacking each other, in a kind of "Punch and Judy" show going on behind the backs of the men interviewing him, Gerald finds himself fatally distracted, especially at the moment when one gnome head-butts and smashes another!

As he subsequently informs Gaz and Dave, at what one might term the "non-joy", job club, he has lost the chance of a job through their actions. The gnome

scene treads a fine line between comedy and cruelty. We can be drawn towards laughing with the unseen perpetrators of the gnome's act, and at Gerald's attempts to keep a straight face, while his normally static gnomes are darting about in rapid motion. When an angry and emotional Gerald demands of Gaz, 'Why did you do it?', it is telling that he has no real answer, just as Andy offers no reply to Gloria's question in *Brassed Off*, 'If my job's so bloody irrelevant, how come you hate me so much?' Both films suggest that unemployment and social despair may lead to men taking leave of their senses, and not always considering the possible consequences of their actions and attitudes.

Gerald's outraged despair is quelled in the following emotionally understated outdoor scene, where Gaz, Dave and Gerald are eventually reconciled. Gerald is presented with a model wheelbarrow for his rockery, and a repaired gnome, whose bruised head reflects something of Gerald's own pain and dismay. In its setting and bittersweet sentiment, the scene echoes the sequence in *Brassed Off* where a despondent Phil is sitting forlornly by a disused canal, and is taken back into the male group, despite admitting that he voted for redundancy.

The Full Monty, having reconciled the main characters to each other, sets about auditioning for other men willing to help realise Gaz's dream of staging a successful male strip show. Bruce Jones, who played the father desperately trying to raise money for his daughter's communion dress in Ken Loach's *Raining Stones* (1993), briefly appears as a man apparently prepared to try anything in these difficult times. In a medium close up, composed within a still frame, the camera observes his uneasiness with the demands of stripping. He finally halts the audition, and signals a desire to collect his children outside, adding that this scenario is 'no place for kids'. Gaz's son, Nathan, is present throughout many of the rehearsals, and the film never seems disturbed by the thought of his presence. This may, however, be to do with the essential "innocence" of the spectacle, and the film's desire to re-orientate audiences into taking a more relaxed and positive attitude towards the human body and nakedness.

The auditions take place in the abandoned (but still guarded) steel factory, as if the men are inexorably drawn back to a place where they used to belong and have a social role. Gerald hides his face in a newspaper on realising that one of the applicants, Guy (Hugo Speer), is the man who plastered his bathroom. Such

examples of the breakdown of conventional British social class divisions between the characters testifies to the more subversive undercurrents of the film, and to its 'carnivalesque' philosophy, which can imagine a world where men can be naked with each other, without sexual desire necessarily emerging, or people thinking that the situation is peculiar.

Nevertheless, the men are speechless at the size of Guy's penis (he is a "well-hung" guy), and Lomper later will take the opportunity of escaping from a police raid to kiss and fondle Guy, suggesting that sexual as well as social despair may have led to his suicidal condition in the opening stages of the narrative. In the privacy of his bedroom, Dave will later ask his wife whether she has ever been out with a black man, a reference to his own feelings of sexual inadequacy.

In his *Observer* review of *The Full Monty*, Philip French declared that 'two sequences between Dave…and his wife (the admirable Lesley Sharpe) are more tender, moving and convincing than any conventional Hollywood cinema'.[72] An extract from a Hollywood picture of the 1980s, *Flashdance* (directed by a former British director of advertisements, Adrian Lyne), will also serve to distinguish *The Full Monty*'s treatment of class, sexual and characters' aspirations from well-publicised Hollywood productions, although it is notable that *Flashdance* was a Twentieth Century Fox production, and *The Full Monty* was distributed by Twentieth Century Fox Searchlight, after Film Four had rejected the film.[73]

The extract from *Flashdance* (1983) occurs when Gaz and Dave steal the video of the film from the local supermarket, in order to learn from its dance moves. This extremely popular (in its time) Hollywood film has an added resonance and meaning for the former male steel workers, in that the central female character, Alex Owens (Jennifer Beals) is a welder by day, and a dancer by night. Dave focuses on the poor quality of her welding techniques, rather than the exceptional nature of her dancing, noting, for instance, that her 'mix is all too cock'. The other men are amused by Dave's obsession with detail and his concern for realist accuracy over an uncritical enjoyment of Hollywood spectacle. The film *Flashdance*, itself, shows little interest in Alex's job as a worker in a steel factory, despite the apparent novelty of her involvement in such an occupation, and is much more fascinated by her night-time position as an exotic, and somewhat avant-garde dancer in a local bar.

A slighting review in *Sight and Sound* described *Flashdance* as a movie which 'is in fact nothing more than a series of dance montage sequences, shot in loving close-up but unable to open out any kind of articulate emotional perspective. The effect is numbing'.[74] This review underestimates the vitality of the central performance, and the exhilarating quality of the dance sequences, I would contend, and I think it could be claimed that the makers of *The Full Monty* have been influenced by the film's storytelling techniques of fast editing, relatively short scenes, and sympathy for the 'underdog' and the character with an unquenchable urge to realise a creative ambition.

Alex in *Flashdance* really desires to become a ballet dancer, but she lacks confidence to apply for the local ballet school, feeling that she is from the wrong social class. In view of *The Full Monty*'s view of male stripping as one possible route for the disenfranchised Sheffield men, it is ironic to note that in Adrian Lyne's film, Alex dives into a local strip bar, and actually pulls a female friend off stage, who has descended into stripping for a living, artistic dancing having proved to be unprofitable. Alex suggests that stripping is a form of degradation. 'Call that dancing?' she enquires of her friend, making 'a living, rolling around' with no clothes on. When she finds money stuffed into her friend's garter, the dollar notes fall into the wet street of the gutter, as if it is 'dirty money' (Gloria's phrase for her earnings in *Brassed Off*), and thus, permanently tainted. The relationship between the Hollywood and the British film is, thus, more complex than may appear initially to be the case.

Alex appears to succeed in achieving her ambition, although the narrative ends in a freeze frame (as will *The Full Monty*), leaving her future unsketched. She gives a superlative, gymnastic performance in her audition piece, enhanced in the film by the use of a dance double in key sequences, and the imaginative use of camera angles in the finished film. The final shot is of her running towards her boss (Michael Nouri), who is also now her boyfriend.

With the insertion of this intertextual reference to a modern Hollywood example of narratives which dramatise the 'impossible dreams of ordinary people', the goals and aspirations of these men to succeed as male strippers, may seem quite realistic and feasible in comparison. The representations of Alex's goals in *Flashdance* are more complicated than may have been recognised, and *The Full Monty* is certainly keen to depict the logical stages of development in

the men's desire to realise their own less culturally respectable 'dream'. What *The Full Monty* does possess, which *Flashdance* tends not to, is a sense of humour about its own narrative, and an awareness that other's people's aspirations may always appear ridiculous to outside observers.

Gerald's increased willingness to enter into the 'dream world' of his comrades, despite his reservations - 'I used to have a proper job', he observes - is nowhere better illustrated than when he allows the men to practise stripping off in his front room. Any homoerotic undertones conjured up by their activities are dissipated by the unexpected arrival of "loan sharks", who threaten to take away his material possessions in lieu of payment for the £120 owed by Gerald. A half naked Dave tells the men to 'piss off', and the sight of what appears to be a homosexual orgy taking place in a suburban house, encourages the debt collectors to flee from the house.

A similar scene in *Brassed Off*, where Phil's house is emptied because of the debts he owes, ends with him being knocked to the ground by one of the debt collectors *and* concludes with his possessions being taken away. Crucially, at this juncture, he lacks the support of his fellow miners, but whereas in *The Full Monty*, the men move emotionally closer together as the narrative proceeds, in *Brassed Off*, the men become fragmented and increasingly at odds with each other. The contrasting end results of these two comparable scenes are an illustration of certain subtle differences between the two films. (Gerald's possessions are eventually taken away from him, so the reprieve is somewhat temporary.)

In a subsequent practice session, Nathan inadvertently reveals that his father has been in prison, a detail which appears to relate Gaz to Stevie, the character played by Robert Carlyle in *Riff Raff*. The son emerges as the only person willing to finance Gaz's dreams, even taking out his £100 savings in order to bankroll the venture. Their relationship increasingly acquires the tone of a contemporary British version of the father and son relationship depicted in *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De sica, 1948), and, as Alexander Walker noted in his review, it was perhaps not insignificant that the producer was 'one Uberto Pasolini'.[75] Newly revitalised, the men are able to imbue even the deadening and humiliating experience of signing on at the Labour Exchange with a sense of rhythm and life,

as they spontaneously start moving in unison to the sound of a Donna Summer track playing overhead.

Gerald, however, remains sceptical about their chances of success. 'You're too old, you're too fat, you're pigeon chested', he tells the others, and when the men are arrested for indecent exposure during another rehearsal in the disused steel factory, it seems as if the venture is unrealisable. The notoriety of the group's arrest, however, leads to a frenzy of interest in their 'one night only' performance, with two hundred tickets being sold. Ironically, at the last moment, Gaz is the only member of the group to have second thoughts, and initially, he refuses to appear on stage. In front of an excited crowd, the other men take to the stage dressed in the uniform of security guards, a final symbolic overturning of repressive structures of authority.

Nathan succeeds in convincing Gaz that his place is out there with the other men, and so, to the sound of Tom Jones exclaiming, 'You give me reason to live', Gaz takes his place with the other performers. Shots of the audience reveal that Dave's wife and Gaz's ex-wife are amongst the audience, and both are depicted as enjoying the spectacle. Dave's discarded shirt is caught by his wife, and Gaz throws his belt to ex-wife, Mandy (Emily Woof), suggesting that channels of communication between the sexes have been re-opened and potentially revivified by the close. Dave introduces their act by stating that they may be neither pretty, good, nor young, but they 'are here', and for their sheer nerve and presence, the spectators, and, seemingly, the film applauds them.

Having taken the men to the culmination of their objective, and the climax of the act, the film concludes with a freeze frame of the men from a rear shot, indicating that they have nothing left to shed or hide, and have shaken off some of the "dead weight of the past", so that they can, perhaps, begin their lives again as if they have just been born or christened. In *Brassed Off*, the band are last seen fading away into the darkness of a London evening, amidst an atmosphere of social and economic gloom. At the close of *The Full Monty*, the group's triumphant performance is captured in a freeze frame shot, as if the cost of their liberation is to be frozen into an eternally still moment within history.

(2.4) Conclusion

In his essay, 'Entertainment and Utopia' (1977), Richard Dyer argues that 'Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into...that our daily lives don't provide',[76] and the concepts of brass band playing and stripping to music would seem to offer the prospect of a momentary escape from the mundane features of the men's lives. Dyer stresses the importance of notions of community in the production of entertainment and of making music, pointing to the sense of 'togetherness...belonging', and the 'network of phatic relationships' established by the teamwork necessary for a musical sequence to work.[77] Dyer notes that a kind of yearning for what he terms 'historical utopianism'[78] is implicit in the musical genre, but neither *Brassed Off* nor *The Full Monty* can envisage an ideal world in which the men's musical performances can take place outside the confines of a determining history which is adversely affecting the lives of the group. For Danny in *Brassed Off*, music constitutes both social and historical continuity, *and* the possibility of spiritual transcendence, but the film makes clear that a real and seemingly irrevocable break between past and present economic and cultural traditions is being enacted as the narrative unfolds. Hence, there is a pervasive mood within the film, connoting a kind of 'Last of England' or 'Last of Ealing' impression.

Thomas Elsaesser in his influential essay, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama' (1972), offered a definition of melodrama as 'a dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects'. Elsaesser goes on to argue that 'Music in melodrama...is both functional (i.e., of structural significance) and thematic...because used to formulate certain moods – sorrow, violence, dread, suspense, happiness'.[79] In *Brassed Off*, music is used to underline and articulate particular emotional states, with the rousing 'William Tell Overture' at the close suggesting lowly members of the community rising to stake their rightful place in society. The poignant rendition of Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance' on the bus home reflects the band's sense of battered pride, but their determination to keep on playing to the bitter end.

In *The Full Monty*, the men respond to music through their body language, and the popular songs deployed by the men in their routines evince a nostalgia for the 1970s (when the steel industry in Sheffield was still functioning to some degree). Songs such as 'You Sexy Thing' by Erroll Brown and 'Hot Stuff' (performed by

Donna Summer) are used somewhat ironically in the film, as the men initially appear far from sexy and appealing. As a result of their dancing activities, however, the men do come to gain an enhanced sense of their body image, and an awareness of the ways in which societies and popular culture work towards classifying and objectifying men and women. The men's bodies may be deemed redundant by conventional capitalism, but by the close, the male strippers have succeeded in what Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955) described as the aim of 'making the human body an instrument of pleasure rather than labour'.[80]

Both films contain sequences (or in the case of *The Full Monty*, entire narrative premises) which might be considered by some commentators as excessive, improbable and melodramatic. *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, however 'fantastic' some elements of their plots may appear, are, nonetheless, rooted in ordinary, everyday experiences of unexceptional people. In the finest traditions of British and American film melodramas, the films are not afraid of depicting strongly felt emotions, be they of pain or pleasure, joy or despair.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse claims that 'Men can die without anxiety if they know that what they love is protected from misery and oblivion'.[81] The most tragic implications of *Brassed Off*, are, I would suggest, contained in this observation. When Phil is swinging from the pit head in a failed attempt to commit suicide, or Danny is thinking about the coal corrupted nature of his insides, neither character can rest assured in the knowledge that their immediate family or the social and cultural traditions which they value most will continue after they are gone. This factor, paradoxically, does in the last resort encourage Phil and Danny to fight on for what they believe in, taking the film beyond conventional generic classifications of comedy, melodrama and tragedy in the process.

If *Brassed Off* is a more tragic narrative than *The Full Monty*, that may be because it has a greater sense of the important working and cultural traditions which are in danger of being lost forever, and of musical and social talents which are perpetually overlooked by the media. The men in *The Full Monty*, in contrast, are able to explore and exploit contemporary obsessions with sexual spectacle and 'sensationalist' exposures in contemporary British culture. When Claire Monk interprets the narrative trajectories of both films as implying that 'a

flexible workforce' could 'remould themselves…into new careers in the creative and entertainment industries',[82] I feel that she is in danger of reading the resolutions of the films too literally. The ex-miners in *Brassed Off* are deeply troubled by the lack of a viable future for the community as a whole, and the men in *The Full Monty* emphasise that their performance is for 'one night only'.

Both narratives are indebted to certain traditions of Ealing comedy and films of the British 'new wave'. *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953) and *Brassed Off* each depict communities who fight to combat the impending closure of an institution deemed to be central to the local area's sense of identity and specific needs. The villagers in the southern community featured in *The Titfield Thunderbolt* succeed in their aims, while the northerners in *Brassed Off* have their hopes dashed. *Passport to Pimlico* explores connections between the local and the national, and constructs its story out of juxtaposing the 'ordinary' and the 'fantastic' within the same narrative. Each film depicts the consequences of pursuing a particular form of logic to an extreme conclusion, and poses a specific question. How can the inhabitants of Pimlico be foreign if they live in London? How can a group of not especially attractive men make a success of taking their clothes off in public? The comic and dramatic elements of both films are contained in the narrative processes involved in finding the answers to these questions. In his study, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970), Tzvetan Todorov suggests that concepts of the 'fantastic' must always be defined in relation to notions of 'the real', and claims that the 'fantastic' occupies and denotes a period of uncertainty when sceptical individuals are confronted by extraordinary events.[83] This definition would apply to the situations of both *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*.

Characters in both narratives are also indebted to traditions established within the northern 'social realist' narratives of male characters who refuse to conform to conventional behavioural standards. *Brassed Off*, in particular, is attracted to the kind of saucy humour associated with the films of George Formby and the 'Carry On' series. For all its striving for a more democratic and accountable form of society, male characters in *Brassed Off* are also committed to a way of perceiving the world which draws heavily upon the framework of the "mother in law" joke, a comic world where women are to be desired or feared, but certainly not entrusted with positions of power or responsibility. George Orwell in 'The

Art of Donald McGill' (1941) described such a world as one where 'marriage is...a comic disaster' and the 'rent is always behind and the clothes up the spout'.[84] In *Brassed Off*, Jim and Ernie try to escape from their wives in order to chat up Gloria, but the wives get wind of what is happening, and follow them on the excursion in typical seaside postcard fashion.

Orwell defined a 'dirty joke' as 'a sort of mental rebellion, a momentary wish that things were otherwise'.[85] The men in *The Full Monty* begin by treating the business of stripping as something of a joke, but they come to realise that timing, skill and precision are important, and that such a philosophical entity as sexual politics may exist. In adopting an occupation associated with women (of baring their bodies for the pleasure and edification of spectators), the men are forced into some kind of empathetic relationship with female experience. The male characters in *Brassed Off*, perhaps, remain, rather too tied to appraisals of the female role in society which are outdated and unhelpful. In this sense, they may represent a type of male 'dinosaur' facing extinction, while *The Full Monty* strippers can be witnessed mutating (however reluctantly and bizarrely) into 'new men'.

In his study of *British Cinema in the 1980s* (1999), John Hill suggested that neither film 'could have worked so effectively as *comedy*' if they 'had actually been made during the early 1980s'[86] when struggles to keep heavy manufacturing industries open were an ongoing concern. Both films are about what has already transpired. *Brassed Off* will mirror real life developments in British society, and even a 'comic approach' to the subject (unlike in *Sing As We Go*) will not attempt to rewrite history, or to imply that romantic entanglements can be a panache for deep rooted social and economic problems.

Brassed Off was produced on a budget of £2,530,000, and took £2,873,429 at the UK box office, making the film dependent on overseas sales to make a significant profit.[87] However, an article in *The Guardian* claimed that its 'US distribution' was minimal'.[88] In the light of such financial considerations and calculations, *Brassed Off* can be partly interpreted as an allegory about the difficulties facing an indigenous cinema, struggling to survive in a situation in which it is difficult to raise funding for native films in a market dominated by American imports, and hampered by a lack of distribution and exhibition outlets for British films.

Ealing Studios did not produce any more films after 1959, and the British 'new wave' with prominent northern settings became less evident after 1963, as a result of increasing critical disdain and audience apathy. I have sought to demonstrate that much of their legacy of combining comedy and drama, within narratives built around vividly imagined characters, meaningful stories and serious themes, has been vitally continued by the group of 1990s films considered in this section of the thesis.

This contemporary cycle of films exploring the intricacies of regional communal life may already have peaked in British culture, which may be an appropriate response to the elegiac mood of *Brassed Off*, in particular. The most obvious successor to Mark Herman's film has been *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000), a narrative also concerned with cultivating a specialised cultural interest, within the confines of a troubled mining community in a recent embittered period of British social history. *Billy Elliot* contains less explicitly humorous material than *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, partly, because it is set in the midst of the miners strike of 1984/5, a time of harsh conflicts and unforgiving attitudes, and also because the transcendent activity at the centre of the film (ballet dancing) takes the individual away from his community, and does not have its creative roots in the local area.

The local mining community in *Billy Elliot* is depicted as torn between those who are for and against the strike (cf. the miners in *Brassed Off*, who are in favour of taking redundancy, and those who wish to keep the pit open), and the town is depicted as existing in a war-like atmosphere, resulting in a heavy police presence. The eponymous Billy (Jamie Lee), finds in dance a release from the pervading atmosphere of bitterness and resentment. His talents are harnessed into an example of 'high culture' which his father (Gary Lewis) sees as effeminate, elitist and irrelevant, especially, when considered in relation to more traditional working class masculine pursuits, such as boxing and mining. In *Billy Elliot*, ballet is presented as something (at first) which is alien to the local mining community, although, ironically, its 'alien' quality (what one might term as its 'otherness') is, in fact, one of its major appeals for Billy.

The antipathy and contempt displayed by Billy's father and brother towards the notion of practising and valuing the art of ballet becomes a tragi-comic motif in the film; tragic in the sense that the men's own culture and way of life based

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around working down a coal mine is shown as existing in an advanced state of irrevocable decline, and comical in the ways in which the film generates humour out of what might be perceived as an incongruous and unusual situation (a miner's son who desires to become a professional ballet dancer).

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1871), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-90) described comedy as offering an 'artistic release from the repellence of the absurd', and argued that comedy was a kind of illegitimate offshoot of Greek tragedy:

> But when a new artistic genre did spring into life, honouring tragedy as its predecessor and its master, it was frighteningly apparent that although it bore its mother's features they were the features she had borne during her long death struggle…It was in comedy that the degenerate figure of tragedy lived on, a monument to its miserable and violent death.[89]

In *Billy Elliot*, as in *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, a kind of tragedy of the working classes is being played out, with the humorous elements of the narratives serving to lessen some (but not all) of the pain caused by observing the plights of the respective striking or unemployed working class characters featured in the films. In the two films set in mining towns, the miners are depicted as being engaged in a 'long death struggle' to keep the local pits alive, and, as spectators of the films, we witness the 'miserable and violent' death throes of a culture which has previously been defined by shared values and combined efforts at the workplace. Billy Elliot, in taking up the occupation and 'dream' that he does, has to extricate himself from the community, and take up a position within a very different type of community and workplace. In *Billy Elliot* (and in a slightly different fashion in *Brassed Off*), it is the community itself, which is ultimately distanced in the closing shots, and observed glimpsed fading into history.

A major feature linking the 1990s communal comedy dramas discussed in this chapter was that they aspired to draw attention to a large number of characters in particular settings who felt that circumstances had brought them to a kind of emotional standstill and social impasse. These were not narratives which suggested that a consistent level of sequels and related films could easily be generated from the impact made by the formative 1990s films within the genre, and that was indeed part of the narratives' underlying 'message'. I would conclude, however, that the past and present films discussed here, nonetheless, in their various ways, testify to the strengths of this particular sub-genre within

British cinema, and, at the very least, seek to contradict and dispute Mrs. Thatcher's famous claim that there is 'no such thing as society'.[90]

Notes

1) The sub-heading 'Things Can Only Get Better' comes from a 1993 song by D:Ream, which was used as the theme tune to the Labour party's election campaign in 1997.

The website www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/nov98/getbettr.html describes the tune retrospectively as 'the relentless backing track to an illusion'. A political memoir by John O'Farrell, *Things Can Only Get Better: 18 Miserable Years in the Life of a Labour Supporter, 1979-97* (Black Swan, London, 1998), draws upon the phrase to refer to the sustained period between the dates of the title in which the Labour party was out of office.

B.F. Taylor, a University of Kent PhD student in Film Studies, suggested that this phrase might sum up the particular strand of British cinema discussed in this chapter.

2) Chris Peachment, review of *Up 'n' Under*, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 January, 1998.

3) Tom Charity talks to Mark Herman, *Time Out*, 30 November, 1996.

4) Mark Herman, interview with Devin O'Leary, *Weekly Alibi*, November 6, 1997.
http://desert.net/filmvault/alibi/b/BrassedOff_f.html

5) Claire Monk, 'Underbelly UK: the 1990s underclass film, masculinity and the ideologies of 'new' Britain' in *British Cinema Past and Present*, edited by Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (Routledge, London, 2000), pp.274-287.

6) Simon Beaufoy interviewed in *Story and Character: Interviews with British Screenwriters*, edited by Alistair Owen (Bloomsbury, London, 2003), pp.286-87.

7) Graham Fuller (editor), *Loach on Loach* (Faber and Faber, London, 1998), p.86.

8) Philip French, review of *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain*, *The Observer*, 6 August, 1995.

9) Tom Hutchinson, review of *Waking Ned*, *Hampstead and Highgate Express,* 19 March, 1999.

10) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, London, second revised edition, 1991) p.7.

11) See Chapter Sixteen, Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1973).

12) ibid., p.165.

13) ibid., p.176.

14) James. F. English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humour, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth Century Britain* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1994), p.209.

15) ibid., p.x.

16) ibid., p.31.

17) ibid., p.9.

18) ibid., p.14.

19) ibid., p.25.

20) ibid., p.28.

21) Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (Routledge, London, 2002), p.68.

22) Martin Green, *A Mirror for Anglo-Saxons* (Longmans, London, 1961: first published in 1957), p.49.

23) ibid., p.50.

24) Charles Barr, 'Opening up the Drama Archives', *The Listener*, 18 November, 1976, volume 96, number 2484, p.651.

25) ibid.

26) David Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929-39* (Exeter University Press, Exeter, 2000), p.5.

27) Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society 1930-1960* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991), p.337.

28) Marcia Landy, 'The other side of paradise: British cinema from an American perspective' in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, edited by Andrew Higson and Justine Ashby (Routledge, London, 2000), pp.68-69.

29) David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction* (McGraw Hill, New York/London, 1994), p.455.

30) Charles Barr, 'Projecting Britain and the British Character: Ealing Studios', *Screen*, volume 15 number 2, p.138.

31) English, p.20.

32) Duncan Petrie, *Creativity and Constraint in the British Film Industry* (Macmillan, London, 1991), p.155.

33) Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997), p.137.

34) Bordwell and Thompson, p.455.

35) John Ellis, 'Made in Ealing', *Screen*, Spring 1975, volume 16, number 1, p.123.

36) Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (Third edition, Cameron& Hollis, Scotland, 1998: first published in 1977), pp.105-6.

37) ibid., pp.105-106.

38) Anthony Carthew, review of *I'm All Right Jack*, *Daily Herald*, 14 August, 1959.

39) John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (British Film Institute, London, 1986), p.154.

40) Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995), p.270.

41) Alexander Walker in his review of *The Englishman...*in the *Evening Standard*, 3 August, 1995, notes that the director is 'sly enough to take a leaf out of *Schlinder's List* for his finale, which half persuades you, through the witness of today's townsfolk, that it all happened this way 80 years ago, or near enough'.

42) Philip Simpson, 'Directions to Ealing', *Screen Education*, Autumn 1977, no.24, p.14.

43) According to the *BFI Film and Television Handbook* (1999) edited by Eddie Dyja, *Up 'n' Under* was produced on a budget of £2.00 million. The film went on to make £3,206,994 at the UK box office, making it the third most popular British film in 1998: source: *BFI Film and Television Handbook* (2000).
Details of situation comedy dates of transmission are taken from Mark Lewisohn, *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy* (BBC Books, London, 1998).

44) John Godber, 'Notes', *Up 'n' Under* (Amber Lane Press, Oxford, 1985).

45) Brian Glover died 24 July, 1997
(www.geocities.com/area51/lair/8421/glover.htm).

Gary Olsen died 19 September, 2000 (www.breakingglass.net/people/garyo.htm).
Ian Bannen, the leading actor in *Waking Ned*, died in a car accident in November, 1999 (www.a/bagubrath./net/news/2002), making the fatal road accident, which resolves the narrative, more disturbing than amusing on subsequent viewings.

46) Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (Chatto and Windus, London, 2000), p.246.

47) Anne Billson, review of *In the Bleak Midwinter*, *Sunday Telegraph*, 3 December, 1995.

48) Tristan Davies, *Daily Telegraph*, 10 September, 1994.

49) David Shipman, *The Story of Cinema: Volume Two: From Citizen Kane to the Present Day*, (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1984), p.804.
Shipman distinguishes in his study between *The Man in the White Suit* which he feels 'juggles its complications inventively' (p.805), and *The Titfield Thunderbolt*, where he concludes that 'the qualities peculiar to Ealing comedy are used without restraint' (p.805).

50) Kevin Maher, review of *Waking Ned*, *Sight and Sound*, April, 1999, 9:4.

51) Details taken from Alexander Walker, review of *Waking Ned*, *Evening Standard*, 18 March, 1999.

52) Lez Cooke, 'British Cinema' in *An Introduction to Film Studies*, edited by Jill Nelmes (second revised edition, Routledge, London, 1999), p.376.

53) Perry Anderson, *English Questions* (Verso, London, 1992), pp.303-304.

54) David. N. Ashton, 'Unemployment' in *Beyond Thatcherism*, edited by Phillip Brown and Richard Sparks (Open University Press, Milton Keynes/Philadelphia, 1989), p.25.

55) ibid.

56) John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999), p.200.

57) 'Sympathetic Images', Ken Loach interviewed by Gavin Smith, *Film Comment,* March-April 1994, 30:2, p.60.

58) ibid., p.60.

59) ibid., p.62.

60) ibid., p.63.

61) UK Cinema Box office receipts for *Riff-Raff* taken from the *BFI Film and Television Handbook* (1993), edited by David Leafe, p.38.

62) Geoffrey Macnab, review of *Brassed Off*, *Sight and Sound*, November, 1996, 6:11, p.44.

63) 'If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to…
  Watch the things you gave your life to, broken
  And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out
      tools…'
Rudyard Kipling, 'If', *Sixty Poems* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1939).

64) Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1967: first published in 1869), p.10.

65) Information on Joaquin Rodrigo (1901-1999) taken from –
http://hem.passagen.se/alkerstj/worldofclassicalmusic/late20th/joaquin_rodrigo.html

66) Eric Hobsbawm in *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (Michael Joseph, London, 1994) claims that approximately 2,000 British volunteers fought in Spain for the Republican cause. Hobsbawm suggests that the Spanish Civil War 'even in retrospect, appears as pure and compelling as it did in 1936' (p.160).

67) Alexander Walker, review of *Brassed Off*, *Evening Standard*, 31 October, 1996.

68) William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (1608), *The Arden Shakespeare* edition, edited by R.A. Foakes (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 2001), pp.304-306.

69) Vladimir Propp in the *Morphology of the Folktale* (University of Texas Press, Austin and London, 1971: first published circa 1928 in Russia), refers to the narrative functions of donors and helpers (magical agents) in his appendix 1: 'Materials for a tabulation of the tale' (pp.123-124). Propp notes that the hero of a tale might have two objectives: 'goal as an action (to seek out, to liberate, to rescue); goal as an object (a princess), p.123. Young hero, Andy (Ewan McGregor), in *Brassed Off* fails to 'rescue' the mine in the film (what Propp refers to as the 'liquidation of misfortune or lack' within a narrative, p.153), but he does gain, latterly, the 'princess', who, in turn, saves him and the men from their immediate spiritual despair. Gloria is wrongly accused of being a 'false hero' (p.125) by the men, although she is rehabilitated (just) by the close.

70) Raymond Williams, 'Mining the Meaning: Key Words in the Miners' Strike' (1985) reprinted in *Resources of Hope*: *Culture, Democracy, Socialism*, edited by Robin Gable (Verso, London/New York, 1989), p.124.
Williams concludes that 'what lies ahead of us, within that alien order, is a long series of decisions in which one industry after another will declare more and

more people redundant' (p.124). *Brassed Off*, through Danny's address to the Albert Hall audience (and, implicitly to spectators of the film) comes to a remarkably similar conclusion to that of Williams.

In his biography of *Raymond Williams* (Routledge, London, 1995), Fred Inglis traces the demise of the British mining industry to the failure of the 1984/5 strike: 'The miners were crushed...when they went back to work behind their union banners and their local brass bands, they went back to the certain loss of... jobs, neighbourhood, union, culture, everything' (p.289). After his suicide attempt in *Brassed Off*, Phil talks of having lost his 'house, kids, job, self-respect...'

The Guardian reported that in 2003, there were only '15 pits remaining in the UK, employing 8,000 miners' in 2003: see article entitled '60 million package will save four pits', 12 February, 2003, p.2.

71) Alexander Walker, review of *The Full Monty*, *Evening Standard*, 22 August, 1997.

72) Philip French, review of *The Full Monty*, *The Observer*, 31 August, 1997. French concludes that 'much of its political and sexual meaning resides in the absence of glamour or triumphalism'.

73) Alison Boshoff, 'Channel 4 bares its soul over rejection of *The Full Monty*', *Daily Telegraph*, 16 April, 1998, p.13.

74) Double Takes', Almereida, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1983, 52:3., p.183.

75) Alexander Walker, review of *The Full Monty*.

76) Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', *Movie*, Spring 1977, no.24, p.3.

77) ibid., p.5.

78) ibid., p.13.

79) Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama' (1972), reprinted in *Movies and Methods Volume II*, edited by Bill Nichols (University of California Press, Berkeley, London, 1985), p.172. In the essay, Elsaesser notes that 'In England, Dickens...relied heavily on melodramatic plots to sharpen social conflicts' and point out the 'existence of extreme social and moral contrasts' (p.170). The naming of the town Grimley draws upon a British comic tradition of naming places in ways which may symbolise key aspects of their being (the mining town in Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854), for instance, is named 'Coketown'). *Brassed Off*, with its combination of wry observation, social concern and melodramatic plot developments, thus, has certain features in common with the nineteenth century 'Condition of England' novel, as exemplified by Dickens and Disraeli.

80) Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Allen Lane and the Penguin Press, London, 1966: first published in 1955), p.13.

81) ibid., p.188.

82) Claire Monk, *British Cinema, Past and Present*, pp. 281-286.

83) Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (translated by Richard Howard, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1975: first published in France, 1970), p.25.

84) George Orwell, 'The Art of Donald McGill' (1941) in *Decline of the English Murder and Other Essays* (Penguin books, in association with Martin Secker and Warburg, 1980), p.152-154.

85) ibid.

86) John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s*, p.168.

87) UK cinema production costs and box office figures for *Brassed Off* taken from the (1997) and (1998) *BFI Film and Television Handbooks*, edited by Eddie Dyja.

88) Emma Forrest, *The Guardian*, 27 June, 1997.

89) Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (translated by Shaun Whiteside, Penguin, London, 1993: first published in Germany, 1871), pp.40-55.

90) Margaret Thatcher quoted in *Woman's Own* interview, October, 1987. Reference taken from Arthur Marwick, *A History of the Modern British Isles 1914-1999: Circumstances, Events and Outcomes*, Blackwell, 2000, p.312. Renton (Ewan McGregor), the central character in *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1995) echoes this sentiment when he declares, 'There was no such thing as society, and if there was, I was most certainly not a part of it'. The films discussed in this section of the thesis would all (in differing ways) contest such a statement and 'world view'.

Part Three:

Racial discourses, ethnicity, and the 'comic mode' in contemporary British cinema.

Black Film Bulletin: 'Have you always been interested in making films with a black theme?'
Simon Channing-Williams (producer of '**Secrets and Lies**', 1996): 'No…What do you mean by black? Black in terms of having black people or black in terms of its humour?'
Onyekachi Wambu and Kevin Arnold, *A Fuller Picture: The Commercial impact of six British films with black themes in the 1990s* (British Film Institute and *Black Film Bulletin*, 1999).[1]

Part three of the thesis will examine a group of significant 1990s British films which sought to explore issues of national, cultural and ethnic identity in the form of scenarios specifically combining comic *and* dramatic narrative developments, incidents and perspectives. *Leon the Pig Farmer* (Vadim Jean, Gary Sinyor, 1992), *Wild West* (David Attwood, 1992), *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chadha, 1994), *Secrets and Lies* (Mike Leigh, 1996), *My Son the Fanatic* (Udayan Prasad, 1998) and *East is East* (Damien O'Donnell, 1999), all meditated on what it meant to be Jewish, Asian or African-Caribbean in contemporary British society, and suggested that layers of humour, irony and ideological conflict were inherent in many of the situations and cultural encounters depicted.

This group of films, despite formulating some disturbing and, at times, decidedly non-comic portraits of contemporary British society, were identified by many critics as operating within comic parameters which acknowledged traditions of cultural and cinematic humour in British society, whilst also seeking to engage with issues of race and ethnicity from innovative and evolving perspectives. Hugo Davenport in the *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, described *Leon the Pig Farmer* as a 'demented comedy of manners', which extracted 'much comic mileage from *kosher*' customs and cultural codes of conduct, whilst drawing upon an element of 'ripe, seaside post-card naughtiness'.[2] Philip French in *The Observer* categorised *Wild West* as 'funny, sad and tough…and full of sly observation',[3] and Leonard Quart in a *Cineaste* review of *Bhaji on the Beach* defined the film as 'a work of social realism suffused in charm and a deft sense of comedy'.[4] Alexander Walker of the *Evening Standard* summed up *Bhaji* as a 'complex excursion into multi-ethnic manners' which was 'funny' and 'racially

truthful'.[5]

Nigel Andrews in the *Financial Times* described a later film about British-Asian life, *My Son the Fanatic*, as 'grimly funny', and claimed that the film showed 'golden age liberalism meeting its nemesis...in today's ideological solemnities'.[6] James Christopher of *The Times* interpreted *East is East* as a 'gleefully irreverent comedy', which nonetheless presented a 'flinchingly real' depiction of a 'bruising culture clash',[7] although Anthony Quinn in *The Independent* expressed a sense of unease that the 'comedy' of the narrative was 'upended in the final quarter by some incongruously grim domestic violence'.[8] Christopher Tookey in the *Daily Mail*, however, suggested that *East is East* possessed that 'treasurable Ealing-comedy quality of helping to redefine Britishness',[9] whilst Nigel Andrews in the *Financial Times* felt that the film was 'funny, in a "Carry on up the Khans" style' of comedy.[10]

Jonathan Romney, writing in *The Guardian*, suggested that *Secrets and Lies*, a drama about a black woman discovering that her biological mother was white, succeeded in being 'Hilarious and gruelling',[11] while Quentin Curtis in the *Daily Telegraph* concluded that Mike Leigh's film contained the potential to be therapeutic and socially beneficial: 'Leigh has made a humane comedy that not only laughs at the agonies of class and racial difference, but also helps to heal them'.[12]

It is clear from these selected critical summations that the role and purpose of comedy and the 'comic mode' within these narratives is perceived as being very varied in tone, style and content, and the respective films are subjected to a number of differing interpretations and evaluations from critics. This chapter will examine how these particular 1990s films seek to explore contemporary social, cultural and ethnic identities from a range of comic outlooks and through a series of approaches which attempt to balance established and original approaches to issues of race and class in British culture. I shall also consider the relationship between the nature of the films' generic hybridity, and their hybrid and fluid conceptions of cultural identity.

Earlier and established British traditions of commenting upon ethnic groupings in a 'comic' manner or irreverent style have long been subject to debates about the social and political implications of 'joking' about first and second generation Asian, Indian and African-Caribbean communities in Britain. In an essay 'The

Whites of their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media' (1981), Stuart Hall argued that such practices served to reinforce social divisions around unhelpful and pernicious notions of 'otherness':

> Telling racist jokes… reproduce[s] the categories and relations of racism, even while normalizing them through laughter…The time *may* come when blacks and whites can tell jokes about each other in ways which do not reproduce the racial categories of the world in which they are told. The time, in Britain, is certainly *not yet arrived.*[13]

Sarita Malik in an essay, 'Is it 'cos I is black: the Black Situation in Television Comedy' in her study, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (2002), was even more sceptical about what she felt were the reasons sometimes offered to justify the use of racial abuse for comic purposes in various forms of light entertainment:

> Comedy writers frequently pledge their commitment to irony or elevated liberal ideals to shield themselves and their comedy creations from accusations of being anti-black. This is a very British form of defence. Much of the British comedy tradition needs to be recognized as working within this culture of racism, while using the alibi of comedy to give the illusion of being outside of it'.[14]

The opening section of my discussion on comedies about ethnicity, will, thus, examine the legacy of British comic treatments of race relations and ethnic representations in film and television, as established in the late 1960s and 1970s. The pertinence of Hall and Malik's observations will be considered in relation to feature film versions produced from two popular television situation comedies of this period, *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965-75) and *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972-76), both of which raise questions about the ethics of generating comedy through depictions of racist attitudes, actions and discourses. The implications of treating 'race relations' as a "laughing matter" will be subsequently probed and considered.

The intention is to gain a clearer sense of the continuities and disjunctures which exist between these earlier 'dubious' examples of British film comedy engaging with issues of ethnicity in visceral and uncensored ways, and the more probing and contemplative 1990s films developed by film-makers aiming to formulate new kinds of humour and drama from representations of cultural clashes and ethnic interactions in British culture. A subject for consideration will be the extent to which contemporary film-makers were able to draw upon (or re-

assimilate) some of the defining features of their indigenous television and cinematic predecessors. Did many of the trends and traits associated with such programmes and films as *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour* simply have to be jettisoned? What was once amusing about these 1970s situation comedies that could, perhaps, no longer be deemed acceptable or funny?

A case study of the film *East is East* (1999) will provide an opportunity to explore these issues and themes in particular detail. This commercially successful comedy-drama, based around a British-Asian family struggling to reconcile modern conceptions of British cultural behaviour with Muslim absolutist beliefs, was able (through its 1971 setting) to present a view of 1970s Britain as conceived from a late 1990s viewpoint. The film's particular form and style of humour (like *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour*) was deemed by some writers to be in questionable aesthetic and political taste.

Cary Rajinder Sawhney, in an essay, 'Another Kind of British: An Exploration of British Asian Films' (*Cineaste*, 2001) noted that the narrative 'was perceived by some parts of the [Asian] community as reinforcing negative stereotypes of Moslems (and Asians generally), raising the old question of whether they are laughing with us or at us'.[15] The film's willingness to dramatise extreme ideological and social positions, and to show British-Asian characters themselves making racist remarks raises important questions about *East is East*'s relationship to controversial comedies such as *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Till Death Us Do Part*, issues which I shall explore in the case study and during the course of this chapter.

As in the communal comedy-dramas discussed previously, several of the films to be analysed in this section display a concerted interest in issues pertaining to the role of communities and particular social groupings in contemporary British society. Just as the miners in *Brassed Off* are depicted as a fragmented and fragile sub-section of society, with no discernible economic future in the short or long term, many of the alliances formed within the ethnic comedy-dramas of the 90s can be interpreted as similarly tenuous and endangered. Andrew Higson in an essay 'National identity and the media' (1998) noted that in the seminal 1980s film about relationships between white and Asian characters, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985), 'Allegiances are forever being made, unmade and remade; communities cannot be taken for granted' and 'are insecure, and

often self-destructive'.[16] The comic and dramatic consequences of such features will be discussed in relation to this important film.

I would suggest that the 1990s British films to be discussed subsequently are also concerned with exploring the kind of philosophical commitments and cultural alignments appropriate to characters living within a modern multi-cultural society, with the films reflecting on the factors influencing (or impeding) both an individual and social group's position in British culture. *Leon the Pig Farmer*, for instance, juxtaposes the counties of Surrey and Yorkshire, compares a stockbroking and a farming family, and offers gleeful caricatures of both white, northern working class culture, and Jewish, white middle class southern culture. *My Son the Fanatic* sets British pluralist views about a person's right to pursue pleasure in a consumer society against opposition from Muslim authoritarian traditions, frowning upon hedonistic behaviour enjoyed and pursued for its own sake.

East is East explores such conflicts within the context of a family home in Salford, while in *My Son the Fanatic*, both the more mundane and exotic features of Bradford society are counter-pointed with the intellectual and emotional appeal of 'imaginary homelands'[17] (to draw upon the title of Salman Rushdie's collected essays published in 1991), semi-mythical places which can provide disaffected ethnic groupings in British society with alternative forms of inspiration and guidance.

These cultural contrasts and challenges create a series of comic and highly dramatic situations in the films under discussion. The Asian women's community group who travel from Birmingham to Blackpool in *Bhaji on the Beach* have to decide whether concepts of female unity and mutual support might, finally, be more important than a rigidly conceived adherence to Asian creeds of conduct and belief. *Wild West* and *Secrets and Lies* both revolve around London based, Asian and black characters, who question and reject imposed or unambiguous definitions of their cultural identity and social position, opting instead to be open to a greater range of influences and viewpoints enabling them to determine their own personal history and sense of self. *Secrets and Lies* specifically explores what happens when the racial or ethnic 'other' (which may have been banished from memory), turns up at the front door, and seeks entry into an all white household already heavily steeped in conflict.
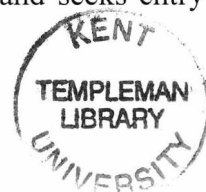
I will seek to illustrate that such precarious, exploratory and 'open' dramatic situations create possibilities for the production of British films containing moments of narrative unpredictability, capable of dramatising characters involved in the process of reformulating their values, aspirations and spiritual touchstones. The differing ways in which the films generate humour, irony and social satire from the cultural clashes at the centre of their stories, and the extent to which the 'comic' features of the various films work towards deconstructing separatist, or overly fixed notions of race and identity, will be explored.

Before turning towards these more recent manifestations of ethnic comedy/drama in British cinema, the comic and contentious representations of 'race relationships', as exemplified by two television situation comedies of the 1970s, whose popularity with audiences led to the production of three feature films, will be investigated.

(3.1) **To Love (or Hate) thy Neighbour?':**

Situational comedy and racial tensions in 1970s British culture.

The 'right targets' of comedy shift over time, are deemed (in)appropriate in different historical moments and are inescapably dependent on who delivers the joke, how the comedy is enunciated and the context within which it is read.[18]
Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television*, 2002.

Alf (Warren Mitchell) and Else (Dandy Nichols) are babysitting Enoch, a black child from next door:
Alf: 'What d'y bring that thing in here for? Bloody coon'.
Else: 'What do you mean? He's as English as you. He was born here, wasn't you Enoch?'
Alf: 'Born here? It must have been a bloody hot day, the day he was born!'
The Alf Garnett Saga (Bob Kellett, 1972).

Eddie (Jack Smethurst) and Arthur (Tommy Godfrey) are discussing the differences in skin colour between Jamaican born, Bill (Rudolph Walker), and British-Pakistani, Winston (Azad Ali):
Eddie: 'He's paler than you, but he's browner than what we are'.
Arthur: 'That's because he's a Paki'.
Eddie: 'He's not as black as you, because they don't have as much sun in Paki-land as they do in Africa'.
Winston: 'Please, I am from Putney'.
Arthur: They don't get a lot of sun in Putney, either, do they?'
Eddie: 'Blimey, it's not that long ago that you lot descended from the apes'.
Bill: 'We all descended from the apes…'
Love Thy Neighbour (John Robins, 1973).

These two extracts of dialogue from *The Alf Garnett Saga* and *Love Thy Neighbour* provide a sense of the films' controversial and outspoken attempts to dramatise issues of race and colour by way of allowing a free flow of racist insults and innuendos to be perpetuated by the central (and, on occasion, by the subsidiary) characters of the narratives. The exchanges between these various figures are based around a level of frankness, and a lack of subtlety, which can appear shocking and unacceptable today, but which was, nevertheless, conceived of as 'light entertainment' (i.e. suitable for nearly "all of the family") during the early 1970s. The films received AA and A certificates, meaning that they were deemed suitable for spectators fourteen years and above, with parental discretion advised.[19]

The racist remarks and assumptions of characters in the scenes cited above do tend to be counter-pointed by the observations of other characters, such as Else and Bill, who take a more thoughtful, rational and positive view of the racial/cultural situations being discussed. The presence of these other non-racist (or in some cases, less racist) figures and perspectives meant that the programmes could not necessarily be considered as unambiguous propaganda for racist views, and the comic and dramatic formats in which the TV series and feature films unfolded, thus, exemplified Howard Jacobson's view of a joke as 'a plot, a set of characters' and a 'complex of warring voices'[20] (as outlined in his study, *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime*, 1997).

Bill, in the *Love Thy Neighbour* sequence quoted above, evokes Darwin's theories of evolution in response to Eddie's racial slur about black people descending from apes, but logical thinking and liberal-minded debate in these texts has to compete with the more tangible (if socially conservative) pleasures offered to audiences by characters such as Eddie Booth and Alf Garnett daring to speak the 'unsayable', or think the 'unthinkable'. The language and imagery deployed by these two characters, and their drawing upon such terms as 'coon', 'Paki' and 'apes' could always be potentially utilised by spectators who desired to inflame (rather than ease) racial tensions and relations in 1970s British society, with the result that the supposed 'anti-heroes' (according to their screenwriters and producers), Garnett and Booth, were always capable of being re-imagined and appropriated as comic heroes by television viewers and cinema audiences

who possessed racist tendencies or sympathies.

In the quoted dialogue from the *Love Thy Neighbour* film, racist remarks are not restricted to the central character (who is noted for his fanatical racism), but are also uttered by a more sympathetic member of the cast, Arthur, who works in the same factory as Eddie, and, who is generally presented as a normal, ordinary character, enjoying reasonably good relationships with his fellow black and Pakistani workers. Arthur's observation about Winston – 'That's because he's a Paki'– is an example of casual racism employed for comic purposes, which also implies that the fanatical racial hatred of an Alf Garnett or an Eddie Booth was not necessarily an isolated or unsupported phenomenon in 1970s British culture.

The naming of black characters Enoch and Winston, in the respective scenarios, suggests an obvious reference to Conservative politicians, Sir Winston Churchill (1874-1965) and Enoch Powell (1912-98). The 'joke', underpinning the namings, might be that in a truly multi-cultural society, even names associated with white Conservative Party politicians could be extended to black children born in Britain, thus, serving to break down ingrained cultural and ethnic distinctions regarding notions of Britishness. Alf Garnett, inevitably, sees the christening of a black child, Enoch, in the early 1970s, as neither ironic or iconic, but as a calculated outrage ('Bloody sauce!') on the part of the black parents.

Stuart Hall, in an essay 'The Whites of their Eyes' (1981) accepted (with some fundamental reservations), the argument that 'the appearance of blacks, alongside whites, in situation comedies' might have helped to 'naturalise and normalise their presence in British society'. He concluded, however, that 'The comic register in which they are set' had the effect of insulating viewers from a recognition of 'their incipient racism',[21] suggesting that these were not just *comedies about racism*, but were possibly *racist comedies*. Leon Hunt, in his study, *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Sexploitation* (1998), noted that 1990s 'Terrestrial television has steered clear of *Love Thy Neighbour* and been cautiously selective in its repeats of *Till Death Us Do* Part'.[22] The fifty-five television episodes of *Love Thy Neighbour* have not been repeated on satellite channels such as *Granada Plus* and *UK Gold* which specialise in repeating archive comedy and drama television programmes, indicating that its brand of insult based humour is now viewed as "politically incorrect", irredeemably dated,

or currently undesirable. *Love Thy Neighbour* was, however, unexpectedly made available to purchase on DVD during the summer of 2003.[23]

Although much of the humour of these programmes and films, might, when viewed from a retrospective 1990s perspective, be seen as more childish than threatening, or over-dependent on a kind of incessant and inane process of "name calling", it is important to recall that in the context of when *Till Death* and *Love Thy Neighbour* were originally produced and transmitted, debates about race, ethnicity and national identity in Britain were taking place within a highly emotionally charged and politicised cultural context.

Arthur Marwick in *A History of the Modern British Isles 1914-99* (2000), records that immigration from the West Indies, Pakistan and India to Britain increased from 28,000 to 136,400 between 1953 and 1961.[24] Brian Spittles in *Britain Since 1960* (1995) reports that in 1967, Kenya began expelling citizens of Asian origin, and that by February, 1968, a thousand Kenyan Asians a week were entering Britain.[25] This situation of enforced exile was followed by General Idi Amin, dictator of Uganda, deciding to expel the entire Asian population from Uganda in 1971 and 1972.[26]

In a speech delivered in the West Midlands in April, 1968, Conservative politician, Enoch Powell, responded to these developments, by predicting, that by the year 2000, 'Whole areas, towns and parts of towns across England' would be 'occupied by sections of the immigrant and immigrant descended population'.[27] This prospect, in Powell's view, needed to be avoided by government attempts to stop the 'further inflow' of immigrants, 'and by promoting the maximum outflow' of those who had already settled in Britain:

> We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre…Only resolute and urgent action will avert it even now. Whether there will be the public will to demand and obtain that action, I do not know. All I know is that to see, and not to speak, would be the great betrayal.[28]

Brian Spittles notes that Powell was 'immediately dismissed from the shadow cabinet' by leader, Edward Heath, but records that Powell 'retained supporters within the Conservative Party', and amongst London dockers, who 'within days' called a 'spontaneous strike and marched to the House of Commons to voice

their approval of Powell'; a response which 'caused a great deal of embarrassment and bewilderment to many radicals and liberals'.[29]

The character of Alf Garnett was notably an East End dockyard worker, and the cultural conflicts of *Love Thy Neighbour* took place within the housing estate of an outer London suburb, Richmond upon Thames. In *The Alf Garnett Saga* (1972), Alf tells his wife that Enoch Powell opposes the Conservative Party's desire to join the Common Market, claiming that 'Old Enoch's against it... He don't want no more bloody foreigners over here'. In *Love Thy Neighbour*, Eddie delivers a speech to his wife in response to Bill's father coming to visit from Trinidad, which is sympathetic to Powell's views as expressed in a 1972 speech, delivered in Ramsgate, where he spoke of 'hundreds of thousands of our fellow citizens' who feel 'as if they are trapped or tied to a stake in the face of an advancing tide'.[30] In the film, Eddie declares of his black next-door neighbour, 'I knew it, he's moving the whole bloody tribe in...I don't want any more nig-nogs living next door...Before we know where we are, we'll be overrun with them. Maple Terrace will become a suburb of Trinidad'.

The insults exchanged between the opposing characters in the films' screenplays are consequently intensely politicized and potentially inflammatory when considered in the context of their original reception and production. Hanif Kureishi in his essay, 'The Rainbow Sign' (1986), which accompanied the published screenplay of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (directed by Stephen Frears, and written by Hanif Kureishi, 1985), argued that 'Powell allowed himself to become a figurehead for racists', and that, similarly, the prevalence of 'Television comics' using 'Pakistanis as the butt of their humour' during the 1970s, constituted a 'celebration of contempt in millions of living rooms'.[31] Kureishi, thus, linked the speeches of Enoch Powell and the 'comic' tirades of figures such as Eddie Booth and Alf Garnett, and found them both contributing to an atmosphere of increased racial intolerance and potential conflict.

A fantasy sequence in *Till Death Us Do Part* (Norman Cohen, 1969), presents Garnett dreaming that he has an audience with the Queen and the Prime Minister of 1969, Harold Wilson. Alf complains about there being 'too many foreigners' in 1960s British society, declaring that 'Old Enoch Powell, he's got the right idea. Chuck 'em all out, especially the black ones'. Garnett goes on to suggest to Her Majesty that the position of Prime Minister should have been

offered to Powell, who had, as noted above, been removed from the Conservative shadow cabinet in 1968 by Edward Heath, following his speech about immigration and repatriation. Garnett's comments in this dream sequence were extremely topical and contentious, as he seeks to rewrite history from the point of view of a fantasizing racist. The scene concludes with Garnett asking the pipe-smoking figure of Harold Wilson how he would feel if his next door neighbour at Downing Street, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Roy Jenkins, 'sold his house to a family of coons.'

The film version of *Love Thy Neighbour* also makes one brief reference to actual political figures. A competition question about good neighbours - 'Do you share the same political beliefs?' – is 'answered' by the film with a glimpse of Bill removing Eddie's poster of Harold Wilson in his front window, which claims 'Labour will get things done', and replacing it with a Poster of Edward Heath, who is identified as a 'Man of Principle'. Between the period 1964 and 1976, British political elections were dominated by the figures of Wilson and Heath. Wilson was elected Prime Minister in 1964, 1965 and 1974, and Ted Heath was victorious in the 1970 election.[32] The 'comic' conflicts between Alf and his family, Eddie and Bill, were consequently shaped and influenced by these wider political and ideological swings and tendencies in British society, as personified by the opposing Labour and Conservative party leaders, Wilson and Heath. When Margaret Thatcher replaced Heath as Conservative leader in 1975, and Harold Wilson retired from his position as Prime Minister in 1976, a period in politics and British film and television comedy came to a close.[33]

Stuart Allen, the producer of *Love Thy Neighbour*, suggested in a 1972 *TV Times* article that the show was 'about integration. We want to cool things, and we think we're going to succeed'.[34] Salman Rushdie in an essay, 'The New Empire within Britain' (1982), expressed scepticism, however, about this notion of 'integration' which he felt 'meant in practice…that blacks should be persuaded to live peaceably with whites, in spite of all the injustices done to them every day'.[35] This formulation might be perceived as pertinent to the implied moral of *Love Thy Neighbour*, that racial harmony might eventually be forged out of visible disharmony and distrust, by characters who nonetheless express their deepest and most ordinary fears without restraint or censorship.

The film adaptations of *Till Death* and *Love Thy Neighbour* were part of a

policy of British film production, initiated by *Till Death* in 1969, and lasting until approximately 1980, which sought to capitalize upon the popularity of certain television situation comedies by converting them into feature length film narratives. The filming techniques of the television episodes, with their emphasis on unobtrusive medium shot camera set-ups, close ups, and a lack of in depth or expansive framing shots, tended to be carried through to the cinematic versions of the programmes.

In *The Dialogic Imagination* (Moscow, 1975), Mikhail Bakhtin argued that subjects for comedy have to be brought close: 'Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity'.[36] Such a conceptualization was perfectly in tune with the aesthetic principles of television situation comedy, and its emphasis on the close-up, but visual styles appropriate for television were less obviously suitable for cinematic presentations. Equally, the extending of narrative time for the situation comedy characters did not necessarily lead to a broadening of the depth of their characterizations, or a greater emphasis on developing more linear and dramatic plotlines.

An essay by Andrew Higson, 'A diversity of film practices: Renewing British cinema in the 1970s' (1994), claimed that the policy of turning television situation comedies into cinema films constituted 'a rather desperate strategy' in terms of creating a viable, national film industry: 'Despite the box-office successes' of many of the films, 'they were bound in the long run to fail...As production costs spiraled in the latter part of the decade, the strategy was no longer so feasible',[37] concluded Higson. The films themselves tended to be heavily criticised by British film reviewers. The *Monthly Film Bulletin*, for instance, concluded that the film of *Till Death* was 'formless and uneven', with 'Alf's essential crudity...matched by Norman Cohen's direction', with 'the second half of the film' consisting of little more than 'a series of disconnected sketches'.[38] The unnamed reviewer claimed that 'the didactic purpose of the original' television series was completely absent from the film adaptation, and noted that 'watching the film at a public showing one noticed that the audience consistently laughed with Alf rather than at him'.[39] The critic, here, makes an interesting distinction between the more private responses to the series when transmitted in the confines of people's homes, and the more observable responses

of spectators to its projection in a public space.

David McGillivray, writing in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (August, 1973), summed up *Love Thy Neighbour* as 'Another example of domestic farce every bit as asinine and charmless as the TV series from which it derives'.[40] Paul Madden, in his *Monthly Film Bulletin* review of *The Alf Garnett Saga* (October, 1972), declared that 'Inevitably, other characters…tend to pale beside that of Alf, as he bulldozes his way through a series of static set-pieces' and that 'Johnny Speight's script only occasionally rises above the crudity of its protagonist',[41] suggesting that the film's digressive, episodic, and essentially inconsequential structure, was perhaps the result of the author failing to achieve a significant level of critical distance from his comic creation.

Till Death Us Do Part (1969) provided a kind of background history to the Garnett family, following the fortunes of the Garnetts and the East End of London from the outbreak of war in 1939, to the winning of the World Cup against Germany in 1966. *The Alf Garnett Saga* (1972) lacks this historical perspective and symmetry, and takes place in an early 1970s setting in which the family have been moved to a high rise flat, the power is constantly being switched off due to disputes by workers in the public sector, and Alf and his son-in-law are both worried that Rita (Adrienne Posta) may have been made pregnant by a black man.

Love Thy Neighbour (1973) contains two main strands of narrative. Bill and Eddie's wives (Kate Williams and Nina Baden-Semper) enter a competition aimed at rewarding good relationships between black and white neighbours. Eddie and Bill are simultaneously involved in a dispute about union membership, which escalates into a racial conflict in the factory where they both work. Until 2003, episodes of the television series had not been made available on video or DVD, so the 1973 film version produced by Hammer films had, until then, been the only example of the series available for contemporary home viewing. The film consequently assumed something of the status of a 'video nasty', partly, because of what Leon Hunt in his study *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Sexploitation* (1998) termed its 'sense of the forbidden, the unsaid, the repressed'.[42]

The film's narrative opens with shots of Buckingham Palace, the white cliffs of Dover, country fields, and a leisurely game of cricket, each image evoking

idealised and idyllic symbols of 'Englishness'. These images are accompanied by a male voice on the soundtrack quoting from Shakespeare – 'This happy breed of men' - and extolling the virtues of Britain as 'a land where all men are equal, irrespective of race, creed or colour'. The film then abruptly cuts to images of Eddie Booth accusing his neighbour, Bill Reynolds, of being a 'bloody black trouble maker', and the film proper begins. A gap is immediately opened up between flattering and 'officially sanctioned' images of British society and culture, and this starker image of a harsher, unprepossessing 'reality'. The narrative will proceed to depict early 1970s Britain as culturally depressed, economically stagnant, and plagued by industrial disputes, none of which contributes to promoting or encouraging states of harmonic co-existence between differing ethnic groups.

Bill objects to paying his union dues to Eddie, who is the factory trade union official, partly because of his racist views. This results in a strike in which the workers and strikers become differentiated by their skin colour. The black workers want to form the A.B.U. (the All Black Union) and continue working, while the white workers vote for strike action, and refuse to recognise any other union. Winston, a British-Pakistani character, caught in the middle of the dispute, exclaims that he does not know to which side he belongs, or to whom he should express an alliance. 'You're not white', Bill informs him, in response to his enquiry. 'He's not bloody black, either', counters Eddie. The film is not concerned with exploring his particular social and cultural dilemma, and his character remains outside the terrain which the narrative has selected for its attempt to portray "black versus white" conflict in comic terms, but it is notable that the Pakistani character is here presented as a doubly alienated figure, unclaimed and disavowed by both white and black communities in the British workplace.

Earlier in the narrative, Eddie has remonstrated with the figure of an Indian bus conductor, played (in one of the stereotyping conventions of the 1960s and 70s) by a white actor (Norman Chappell), in black make up.[43] The comic elements of this sequence are partly developed out of the conflation of identities, with the Indian voice emerging 'ventriloquist-like', from within the white character-actor, coated in black dye. Eddie, subsequently, refers to the Indian character as 'Ali Babi' and 'Gungha Din', before being thrown off the bus for

insulting behaviour.

In the film, insults such as 'King Kong', 'nig-nog, go home', 'jungle boy', 'savages', 'sambo senior', 'Did I just see my mother go out with a golliwog?' are all uttered by the central white character. The black character responds with such expressions as 'white honky', 'pale skinned loudmouth', and 'ignorant poof'. Such self-perpetuating racial insults constitute the primary means by which the narrative generates its comedy. This paranoid obsession with the language of colour distinctions makes the use of even 'innocent' phrases such as 'looking on the black side' (or, the less innocent term, 'blacklegs', a reference to strike-breakers) problematical for characters in the course of the narrative. When the two wives, Barbie and Joan, have their one argument in the film, it is over the nature of Joan's defence of the language used by her husband (i.e. that he only calls 'a spade a spade'), which leads to Barbie accusing even Joan of calling her 'a spade'. Even though the film promotes itself as a comedy, which therefore shouldn't be taken *too* seriously, the narrative reveals how racial insults can escalate and lead to a state of civil unrest and social unease.

In the film's most provocative and disturbing sequence, Bill provides Eddie with his worst nightmare by pretending (along with his black workmates) to be a cannibal, who is prepared to eat Eddie alive in a boiling cauldron. 'We've declared war on the white man', and reverted to the 'law of the jungle' declare Eddie's kidnappers, as they bundle him into the work's canteen. ('You wouldn't like me, I'm all gristle', declares Eddie in a desperate effort to appeal to their sense of discrimination and good taste). This astonishing scene is played for what one might term 'serious laughs', and is accompanied by the non-diegetic sound of atmospheric drumming on the soundtrack, and features the black men stripped to the waist. Bill dons a pair of vampire-like fangs to add to the sense of terror and unease, and is framed leering menacingly over Eddie as he lies in the canteen 'cauldron'. The men circle the melting pot, and only the addition of some potatoes and vegetables, and the use of utensils from the factory canteen by the 'cannibals', indicate that the scene, if shown separately from the rest of the narrative, was not necessarily to be taken at face value. Even so, there is still a sense of uncertainty as to what will be the final outcome of the black men's 'joke' on Eddie, which is only resolved when Eddie faints from shock, and Bill and the other "cannibals" leave this primal 'scene of the crime' for fear of being

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discovered by the firm's cleaning women.

Eddie, at this point, is presented with a situation which threatens to go beyond language and laughter, at the same time as he is graphically faced with having to accept responsibility for the effects of his own discourses and references (the kidnapping is a response to his description of the black workers as 'a bunch of savages'). The black workers in an almost literal and metaphorical sense force him to "eat his words", even if it means that they have to regress to one of the earliest stereotypes of black representations, the image of the native savage. Stuart Hall in his 'The Whites of Their Eyes' essay, pointed out that such an image has traditionally constituted one of the defining images of black nationality in adventure films and narratives about the British Empire:

> Cannibals…are likely to appear at any moment out of the darkness…
> threatening to boil, cook and eat the innocent explorer or colonial
> administrator…And against them is always counterposed the isolated white
> figure…confronting his Destiny or shouldering his Burden in the 'heart of
> darkness'…[44]

The comedy in *Love Thy Neighbour*'s parody of such images emerges from the essentially unheroic character of Eddie Booth, who enjoys no hallowed or exalted position in British society, being forced to see his distorted view of black cultural history affirmed in a way which suggests that the 'revelation' might cost him his life. Black audiences could possibly gain some pleasure in seeing the irrepressibly indignant and hostile character of Eddie Booth, fear, for once, that he has met his match. The sequence could also be read, however, as promoting negative and regressive images of black masculinity and history, and implying that the anxieties and fears expressed by such figures as Enoch Powell (and Eddie) about black communities gaining a threatening 'upper hand' by stealth and numbers, may have some basis in a kind of heightened fantasy, always capable of turning into 'reality', if unchecked. 'It was only a joke, he didn't actually eat you', declares Eddie's wife, when he returns home. 'He might have done if I hadn't have fainted', replies Eddie, suggesting that for him the implications of the situation are more disturbing than the humorous 'reality' of the situation.

This confrontation in the works canteen might be interpreted as an example of the film's willingness to push its characters towards extreme states of being in which conflicts (even if they are treated essentially comically, rather than

dramatically), are brought out into the open. Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1975), in fact, suggests that comedy's lack of fear about giving or causing offence may be one of its most potent and productive features:

> Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter draws the object...into the hands of free experimental fantasy...laughter means abuse, and abuse could lead to blows. Basically this is uncrowning...the destruction of epic distance...The object is broken apart, laid bare...the naked object is ridiculous; its "empty" clothing, stripped and separated from its person, is also ridiculous. What takes place is a comical operation of dismemberment.[45]

Bakhtin does not romanticize or underplay the more cruel and ruthless aspects of a comic based approach to dramatising problematical situations, but he does admire the frankness of the comedic impulse, and its desire to disrupt complacency and the status quo. This process of constructing an alternative "comic" reality may necessitate a flight into fantasy (as is evident in Eddie's worst nightmare, about the mythical social customs of black men, seeming to materialize before his very eyes), but it could, arguably, be inferred from Bakhtin's thoughts cited above, that the end result of this robustly humorous interrogation of conflict-ridden states ('laughter is abuse, and abuse could lead to blows'), may, finally, help to bring about a more healthy and robust view of art, society, and the possibilities for relationships between individuals of differing classes and ethnic groups to prosper and develop. (Eddie, in Bakhtinian terms, is notably rendered impotent, naked, and ridiculous in the cannibalistic scene.)

It would be difficult to argue, however, that *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Till Death Us Do Part* were fundamentally aimed at improving society, and indeed both texts depicted characters who appeared trapped in an endless cycle of repetition from which there was no escape, unless Booth and Garnett, as the main perpetrators of all the disputes, suddenly decided to change their views and conduct. The comic structure of the television episodes of *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Till Death Us Do Part* was dependent on racial and social conflicts being revived on a weekly basis, and so neither series was able to develop its narratives and characters beyond a certain point, without ironically helping to bring about its own demise. Hence, perhaps, the peculiarly tortured nature of each programme's 'world view', with Alf always 'going down the pub' as his family

refused to accept his arguments, and Eddie always insisting on having the last (and usually racist) word.

The ending of the film version of *Love Thy Neighbour* does try to find a way of going beyond such deadlocked situations, by providing an ironic twist to narrative events, implying that even if Eddie Booth won't moderate or update his views on race and issues of cultural identity, changes in British society occurring around him will eventually render him outdated and less significant as a disruptive and malign force. The film contains several false and premature endings before reaching its concluding moment. When Bill and Eddie finally shake hands and pledge to put aside their differences in order to claim their prize in the 'Good Neighbour' competition, a caption appears on screen, stating, 'No, this is not the end.' The narrative actually concludes with Eddie learning that he is now related to Bill, through his wife's brother having (without Eddie's knowledge) married Barbie's sister. 'Welcome to the family, brother Eddie', announces a gleeful Bill, as the three couples, one white, one black, and one mixed race couple, briefly share the same social space. The statement - 'That really is the end' - is flashed onto the screen, over a freeze framed shot of Eddie's face, now presented as half black, half white, over which the film's credits unfold. In terms of ethnic integration in British culture, the merging and coupling can be viewed as something of a new beginning.

Eddie's character would probably conclude that this inter-racial marriage (to which he is tentatively related) serves to diminish and taint his status and ideological position, by rendering him somewhat less purely 'white' than before. In terms of the overall verbal and visual conflict depicted in the film, Eddie's final 'fantastical' mutation into a half white and half black man, might be read as a progressive moment which signals the possible eventual breaking down of rigid black and white binary oppositions, creating opportunities for a more genuinely multi-cultural and interconnected society to emerge in decades to come.

The Alf Garnett Saga (1972), also concludes on the issue of mixed race relationships, but does not suggest that a positive or progressive denouement can be reached. Alf has to face the possibility that his daughter may have engaged in an adulterous affair with a black singer (Kenny Lynch), leading to a chance that she may give birth to a black child. The film ends with Alf having scorched himself, after causing a fire in his bedroom by smoking in bed. Else remarks that

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'The way you look now, you'll suit a black grandson'. 'Piss off, you fat cow', replies Alf, remaining socially unreconstructed or tamed until the end of the film.

In *Till Death Us Do Part* (1969), one scene depicts Garnett at his daughter's wedding reception, putting his arm around a black woman and stroking her arm. 'Watch it, it comes off' she replies, referring to her skin colour, after he has made a demeaning reference to the jungle. 'The coon's got a sense of humour', declares Garnett, before drunkenly staggering around the room. The scene ends with Alf being pushed backwards by a young woman, and consequently spilling his drink over daughter Rita's (Una Stubbs) wedding dress, before crashing to the floor. This fall 'from grace' might be read as Alf's physical punishment for his indomitable racism, although he equally possesses a cartoon-like, comic resilience, which means that he will always upright himself, and, in due course, resume his former behaviour and outlook.

In *The Alf Garnett Saga*, the only occasion in which Alf is friendly to a black character is as a result of his having taken his son-in-law's LSD by mistake, and hence, experiencing the effects of a 'trip'. ('Where's he going? He didn't say nothing to me about a trip', enquires Else innocently.) He subsequently fantasises that he is yachting with Edward Heath and limbo dancing to the sound of a Caribbean band. The drug also makes him embrace a black couple in the local pub, declaring them to be the 'salt of the earth', and highly desirable citizens, who 'add a bit of colour to life'. Only the side effects of hallucinogenic drugs can 'cure' Alf's incorrigible racism, it appears, and if Eddie has reached a stage of possessing 'mixed' feelings about black people by the close, it is still unlikely that he can be considered a reformed or radically altered individual.

These programmes and films were, thus, able to dramatise in a farcical and exaggerated manner, anxieties and concerns about relationships between different ethnic groups in 1970s British society, but were not able to go beyond a continuous restating of the white leading figure's contempt for black people, and his unease about the social effects of the immigration process. I have sought to demonstrate that the strategies of these 'comic' narratives may be more complex than has generally been accepted, and that the films of the respective situation comedies do contribute to the overall (if inevitably somewhat contentious) achievements of the series. The television episodes and cinema films could, perhaps, be commended for their vitality and willingness to be volatile and

outrageous, even if the central white characters within the texts are far from admirable.

Equally, a limitation of both programmes and the subsequent films is that the scenarios tend to privilege the experiences and settings frequented by the white characters. The lack of a drama based narrative, capable of adding variety to plot developments, and a more socially extensive viewpoint on ethnic interactions, does mean that the humour tends to be repetitive and, at worst, rather futile and nasty. Characters from, and spectators of *Till Death* and *Love Thy Neighbour*, were, thus, doomed to experience a strong sense of *déjà vu* with each new episode, until there was no way that situations could be developed beyond a certain point, and both series finally came to an end.

New approaches to dramatizing and representing issues of ethnicity and cultural identity were clearly needed, and the following section will briefly discuss the movement away from situation comedy-style treatments of such themes which occurred during the 1980s, and the development of more serious drama orientated and documentary based approaches. *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) will be discussed as an example of a film combining drama and ambivalent comic observations about ethnic interactions in mid-1980s Britain, in ways which made it something of a template for 1990s British films, which subsequently set out to explore ideas about ethnic groupings and mixed loyalties in British society.

(3.2) 'My Beautiful Laundrette' (1986), a 1980s ethnic 'soap opera', and 'Rita, Sue, Bob, and Aslam Too':

The 1980s saw a distinct movement away from the kind of portraits of ethnic cultures enshrined in the situation comedies discussed in the previous section. In 1982, a new television station, Channel Four, began broadcasting, and one of its founding aims was to encourage more independent film-making by under-represented groups and communities.[46] The channel encouraged the growth of film and video workshops examining contemporary black culture in Britain, and Sarita Malik in an essay on 'Black British cinema of the 1980s and 1990s' (1996) reported that two thirds of black and Asian films in distribution in Britain during the 1980s were documentaries.[47]

There was a danger, however, that the documentary or avant-garde oriented

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films emanating from these workshops could be reduced to circulating within an overly circumscribed sphere, reducing their political impact and general accessibility to a wider public. *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), was a Channel Four film which sought to construct ethnic characterizations outside of "politically correct" notions, and realist/ art film/ documentary generic distinctions, and create a story in which audiences might be interested in the fate of key characters, while not quite knowing how to emotionally respond to them. Screenplay writer Hanif Kureishi attempted to depict a range of subject positions and cultural themes, within a narrative form centred upon the themes of illicit love, mixed race relationships, and the presence of racist behaviour in British society. In an introduction to the published screenplay of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1986), Hanif Kureishi claimed that the film was envisaged as 'an amusement, despite its references to racism, unemployment and Thatcherism. Irony is the modern mode, a way of commenting on bleakness and cruelty without falling into dourness and didacticism', he suggested.[48]

In a *Monthly Film Bulletin* interview (November, 1985) at the time of the film's release, he claimed that the observational and somewhat detached tone and style of the narrative had been determined by a sense that 'Satire and irony are probably the only ways we can approach the complex problems of our time. At the moment, everything is so horrific that if you wrote straight social realism people wouldn't be able to bear to watch it'.[49] The wry humour and idiosyncratic outlook prevalent within the narrative, was, thus, partly the result of a semi-tragic situation in which racial conflict and inequality were still felt to be rife. *My Beautiful Laundrette* contained its own observational and ambiguous perspectives on the situations and characters which it portrayed. The film was different in tone to the abrasive manner, fixed characterisations, and comic approaches typical of *Till Death* and *Love Thy Neighbour*, but the film shared with these programmes a desire not to produce essentialist 'positive' representations of British society, or to adopt a pious or censorious attitude towards the conduct and language of its central characters.

My Beautiful Laundrette was predicated upon a series of digressive and seemingly disparate strands of narrative, and drew upon a range of naturalistic, romantic and comic modes of expression. Part of the film's radical aesthetic and social appeal was to suggest that the continued fragmentation of consensual

values in British society had opened up the possibility for new individual and group alliances to be formed, which cut across established and conventional demarcations, based on skin colour, identifiers of ethnic status, and ingrained cultural differences. The film sought to illustrate that diverse social and ethnic groups might, for instance, be linked at the level of mutual sexual desires *and* shared economic interests.

The film was released during the midway point of Margaret Thatcher's eleven years as Prime Minister (1979-90), and just as *Till Death* and *Love Thy Neighbour* were influenced by the discourses of Labourism and Conservatism which dominated the political landscape during the 1970s, *My Beautiful Laundrette* meditated on what Mrs. Thatcher and her brand of Conservatism symbolized for British society in the mid-1980s. In an article for *Marxism Today* entitled 'Brave new World' (1988), Stuart Hall stated that 'Thatcherism…has powerfully organised itself around particular forms of patriarchy and cultural or national identity. Its defence of 'Englishness' is a key to some of the unexpected sources of Thatcherism's popularity'.[50]

Margaret Thatcher's policies and philosophical credos are acknowledged as pervasive and powerful forces in the narrative, but the film does not suggest that her influence is only destructive or baleful. Instead, the logic of unbridled free enterprise is shown as applying equally to criminal operations involving drugs and pornographic videos, and the renovating of an amenity such as the local laundrette. Nasser (Saeed Jaffrey), who describes himself as a 'professional businessman', not a 'professional Pakistani', proposes a toast to 'Thatcher' *and* the 'beautiful laundrette' during the course of the narrative. The laundrette is, of course, far from beautiful, particularly after it is vandalised by the actions of white racists. Significantly, in terms of its symbolic significance as a meeting place for various ethnic members of the local community, it is extremely damaged by the close, but not quite destroyed.

One of the implicit aims of *My Beautiful Laundrette* was to undermine conventional representations of 'ethnic types'. Hence, the traditional figure of the bearded and wise religious figure is brought into the story, only to be subsequently revealed as a disguise adopted by a character to bring drugs into the country. Characters strive to resist being defined solely by their outward ethnic appearance, and, as a result, a kind of 'unofficial' and 'alternative' vision of

multi-cultural Britain is tentatively formulated. Frears and Kureishi's film does not flinch, however, from depicting inter-racial relations in inner London as fuelled by antagonisms similar to those displayed by Bill and Eddie in *Love Thy Neighbour* - only in these instances, farcical comic antagonism is replaced by scenes of street violence suffused with a tangible sense of danger and menace. *My Beautiful Laundrette* has comic moments and contains a series of ironic observations, but it is in the end, not quite a comedy.

The 'comic' and more optimistic elements of the film are evident in the relationship between Johnny (Daniel Day Lewis), a white ex-National Front sympathizer, who admits 'I ain't made much of myself', and Omar (Gordon Warnecke), a young Asian male, anxious to impress his extended family. Johnny and Omar's interactions are constantly threatened by external forces, and by shifting balances of power within their own relationship. Omar needs Johnny to repel the menacing group gathering outside the laundrette, but as Johnny maintains connections with the disaffected group (and was formerly supportive of their racist ideologies), neither Omar, nor spectators of the film, can ever be sure of his real loyalties or future intentions. Part of the eroticism of their relationship may indeed emanate from this sense of social uncertainty, with its hint of a masochistic reworking of the traditional colonial servant-master relationship.[51] Johnny, subsequently, remains a fluid character, involved with two distinct cultures, and neither quite embracing nor renouncing the other (although he does oppose the menacing behaviour of his former associates at the close).

The narrative concludes with the laundrette (like the house in Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs*, 1972), nearly destroyed by English thugs, conveying a sense of Britain as an increasingly lawless place. The final shot is of Omar and Johnny tending to each other's wounds, the sensuality of their relationship still intact, even if the localized social and economic structure which generated their coupling is now shattered. Racism in the film is not presented as an amusing and inevitable part of everyday British life, but as a destructive force, particularly identified with those groups of men (symbolically representing a kind of "sons of Eddie Booth" generation), who are disenfranchised from experiencing the material rewards of what Nasser refers to as 'the new enterprise culture'.

My Beautiful Laundrette was originally conceived as a television drama to be

shot on 16mm film.[52] Kureishi (as earlier quoted) was critical of the ways in which he felt that the kind of comic traditions discussed in the previous section, oppressed and demeaned, immigrant communities and their descendents. He was an admirer, however, of 1970s television drama: 'The great advantage of TV drama was that people watched it; difficult, challenging things could be said about contemporary life', he noted in his introduction to the published screenplay of *Laundrette*, adding that 'For me *Film on Four* had taken over from the BBC's *Play for Today* in presenting serious contemporary drama on TV to a wider audience'.[53]

My Beautiful Laundrette went on to benefit from also being granted an influential cinematic release in Britain and abroad, which meant that it was discussed as a British feature film, rather than as an example of television drama. John Caughie in *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture* (2000) noted that one of the effects of its success was that television drama became 'more and more defined by its aspiration to be cinema'.[54] The film aspired to challenge the aesthetic, political and sexual preconceptions of audiences watching a film about Asian culture in a British setting, whilst seeking to frame its treatment of topical subject material within a strong dramatic framework capable of finding space for digressive and comically stimulating incidents, and examples of philosophy in action.

Rita, Sue and Bob Too (Alan Clarke, 1987) was a film which, too, offered its own unique perspective on British society in the 1980s, but in ways which looked back to the more outspoken and 'politically incorrect' types of British comedy discussed earlier. With its harsh view of relationships, and stark northern setting, only partially alleviated by the pleasure-seeking activities of its eponymous white characters, *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* develops a somewhat curious sub-text in the final third of its narrative, when it presents a mixed race relationship between Sue (Michelle Holmes) and an Asian male, Aslam (Kulvinder Ghir). Sue initially declares that she has never been out with a 'Paki before', but suspects that he will turn out to be just the same as all her other boyfriends, and the film seems to bear out the truth of her observation, as Aslam is finally displaced from the narrative after hitting Sue, and is last glimpsed running away from a police car, after neighbours have reported the presence of a suspicious figure in the area.

Alan Clarke's film, which John Hill in *British Cinema in the 1980s* (1999) suggests 'virtually abandon[s] perspective altogether'[55], features a scene in which Aslam tries to intercede with Sue's father in the course of a family dispute. The father (Willie Ross), in a drunken and demented state, warns Aslam to 'Keep out of this, you black bastard'. 'There's no need for that', replies Aslam attempting to reason with him, adding self-deprecatingly, 'I can't help being a Paki'. 'Yes, you fucking can', says Sue's father, pursuing his own Alf Garnett/Eddie Booth-like deranged reasoning to its logical conclusion. The wreckage of ravaged sensibilities and lost hopes, prevalent in the 1970s situation comedies which featured cultural exchanges between white and black characters, are still highly visible in the 1980s social wasteland which *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* inhabits.

My Beautiful Laundrette had succeeded in moving ethnic characters who may have been associated with the margins of representation in British cinema closer to the mainstream, but there were no unambiguous intimations about how such cultural depictions could be further updated in a fragmented and piecemeal film industry, which itself lacked a stable production base, and a clear sense of its own identity. It was possible to wonder if *Laundrette* was so original, idiosyncratic and unpredictable, that its highly innovative view of a multi-cultural environment could not be easily repeated or expanded upon. *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, while celebrating the anarchical impulses of its white characters, offered little indication that mixed relationships could prosper in late eighties Britain, and (in the end) openly acknowledges that only an arbitrary ending to the film is possible.

Film-makers in Britain at the beginning of the 1990s who wished to explore themes of ethnicity and cultural relations in their own work, were, as a result, faced with the prospect of creating appropriate forms drawing upon those indigenous traditions from the recent past which could be salvaged, and those which were still in a tentative state of development. A feature linking the 1990s films to be discussed in the next section is that they tended to be built around convincing and interesting situations which allowed a number of characters to express varying and differing points of view on issues arising from cultural and ethnic conflicts within society. This represented an attempt by directors and writers (unlike in *Till Death* and *Neighbour*) to go beyond the repetitive stating of fixed positions by characters, and to show that the cultural crises depicted

could be seen as both comic and tragic, stupid, yet, at times, unavoidable. The 1990s films did not suggest that there were straightforward or easy solutions to the problems addressed, and this was reflected in their narrative conclusions. Whilst the scenarios tended to be formulated (as in *Brassed Off*) out of a series of crisis points, somewhat in the style of film melodrama or 1950s 'social problem' dramas, these 1990s studies of ethnic life (as I shall seek to illustrate) still found space to see the 'funny side' of events at key moments.

(3.3) Developing notions of ethnic comedy drama in 1990s British cinema

The key British films exploring issues of ethnicity and cultural identity produced during the 1990s were the result of a movement away from both documentary *and* more broadly conceived comic narratives. Instead, a significant group of films tended to focus on character based stories in which situations of high drama and comedy were generated out of many of the difficult and complex choices faced by central characters during the course of the narratives.

Earlier British cinematic and television traditions were not completely renounced, however, and *East is East* (1999), as I will discuss in the case study, appeared to gain a particular level of creative inspiration and artistic freedom from its 1970s setting, and some of the more culturally contentious comic paradigms and attitudes associated with that era. *Leon the Pig Farmer* (1992) also drew upon structural features of television situation comedy, as was evident in its deployment of stereotyped characters and exaggerated plot developments. *Wild West* (1992), in contrast, was an idiosyncratic attempt to reproduce the kind of ethos prevalent in 1960s Cliff Richard musical comedies about 'putting on a show', but within the confines of a much less idealized and romanticised setting (the Asian band in the film live on a 'run-down' estate in Southall, London).

Bhaji on the Beach (1994) resurrected the tradition of communal based, multi-narrative dramas produced by Ealing Studios in such films as *It Always Rains on Sunday* (Robert Hamer, 1947), *Train of Events* (Basil Dearden/Charles Crichton/Sidney Cole, 1949), and 'Home Front' British Second World War movies, films which featured a series of diverse characters brought together by a shared common experience, and who find their lives changed in the process. By making first and second generation Asian women characters the central figures in such a mosaic pattern of intertwined stories, the film-makers, Gurinder Chadha

and Meera Syal, were promoting more extensive indigenous cinematic representations of race and gender with regard to issues of 'Britishness' and Asian cultural identities. The film's privileging of Asian women characters in its narrative was also something of a riposte to such films as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which had predominantly focused on male desires, anxieties and aspirations.

My Son the Fanatic (1997) heralded the return of Hanif Kureishi to writing films about British-Asian life in a drama based around 'a comic clash of generations and cultures',[56] depicting the lack of common ground between Muslim fundamentalist and liberal Western values, as embodied in a conflict between a father and son, and raising the question of which of them in the end is the more deluded or misguided in their beliefs. *Secrets and Lies* (1996) was another family drama from the period, but unusual in that it focused on a black, rather than an Asian central character. The film represented Mike Leigh's concerted attempt to produce an intimate (yet in some ways, epic) psychological drama about a white working class mother and her black daughter, coming to terms with each other and their respective situations.

A number of recurring themes can be identified in this small, but significant group of films: the multi-faceted nature of 'home' for first, second and third generation immigrant families; the complex relationships between 'roots', 'origins' and notions of the 'future'; the difficulties of reconciling inherited cultural identities with personal desires for freedom of expression and behaviour; the sometimes ironic positioning of the 'other' or the 'outsider' in British culture, both, internally and externally; the relationship of Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities to white, working class lifestyles; the persistence of racist attitudes and humour in British culture; the mixing of genres and cultural identities in post-modernist, multi-cultural societies.

Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994) referred to the 'unhomeliness' that is the 'condition of extra-territorial and cross cultural initiations',[57] and several of these films, dramatising the experiences of second and third generation immigrants to Britain, are imbued with a pervasive feeling of sadness and uncertainty, as to whether British society represents for characters, a kind of home and haven, or rather an unfriendly and ultimately temporary place of residence. Paul Gilroy in *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures*

and the Allure of Race (2000) related this sense of cultural ambivalence to the notion of 'diaspora', a concept which he describes as disrupting 'the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness', resulting in what Gilroy terms 'a new phase in which displacement, flight, exile, and forced migration... transform the terms in which identity needs to be understood'.[58]

As a result of these features, the notion of diaspora can possess both positive and negative connotations. The positive implications rest upon a perception of the state of exile or emigration as an opportunity for immigrants and their descendants to improve their lives, and experience fresh social and economic opportunities in a new environment. A negative sense of such a transition is always possible, however, if immigrants to a new country are made to feel unwanted, and gain a sense that a previously unsatisfactory history is merely repeating itself in a new setting.

Julia Kristeva in her study, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991) posed the question 'Can one be a foreigner and happy?', suggesting that travellers to another culture and place may always feel somewhat "in addition" to the new society in which they reside.[59] Kristeva suggests that psychological factors may also lie behind the foreigner's desire for exile, leading to a permanent sense of dislocation in time and space: 'should one recognize that one becomes a foreigner in another country because one is already a foreigner from within?'[60] Kristeva goes on to claim that individuals who have broken from their original surroundings, cultural reference points and beliefs, may face 'a life in which acts constitute events because they imply choice, surprises, breaks, adaptations, or cunning, but neither routine nor rest'.[61] Such aspects of the experience of feeling exiled, from within and without, are inherently promising for narrative scenarios, due to both the sense of promise and uncertainty held out by becoming residents of a new land and culture, and this is reflected in the 1990s films.

By focusing on the elements of 'choice' and the occurrence of 'breaks' in the everyday lives of their characters, and contrasting memories and representations of the homeland with the vivid reality of the present, the 1990s British films under discussion were able to draw upon melodramatic, social realist, and comic narrative elements in their overall stories and accounts of ethnic experiences of life in contemporary Britain. Both images of the 'imaginary' or distanced

homeland', and the current nature of British society, could be probed in the course of the narratives by the adopting and mixing of such generic and modal frameworks. The films also conveyed an impression that endings to the stories were not predetermined or predictable, and very much represented 'work in progress'.

Thus, the Asian women's group in *Bhaji on the Beach* travel from Birmingham to Blackpool for a 'female fun day', but Bombay and India remain significant cultural and religious touchstones for the older women on the bus, whilst Birmingham is described as 'the land that time forgot' by the youngest members of the group. The film ends with the women embarking on a journey home with some dramatic situations having been resolved, but others remaining disturbingly open. *Bhaji on the Beach* appears to have been made to reflect a view that notions of British society had moved on from eras when people could simply be classified as black, Asian, white, Indian, and so on. This was not to suggest that such categories were not still important, both politically and socially, but, as Gurinder Chadha stated, 'People like me have a plurality of influences and my work is about a celebration of this mixing and mingling'.[62] As a result, *Bhaji* was composed out of a number of generically hybrid categories. Principally, the film is a drama, telling the story of a group of women engaged on a day trip, and the narrative unfolds in a series of parallel stories interlinked and introduced in the style of a television 'soap opera'. These relatively 'low key' stories are, however, interrupted by satirical and playful dream sequences, in which serious concerns are 'played out' in the form of extended jokes and reflections on tensions and ideological conflicts within Asian communities.

Women characters within the film constantly engage in a type of animated comic banter, which also evokes the comic textures of the more male-dominated worlds of *Till Death* and *Neighbour*. *Bhaji* is also keen to celebrate the simple pleasures of Blackpool promenade and sea front (cf. Gracie Fields in *Sing As We Go*, 1934), and to illustrate how the characters experience the location as a space of relative freedom.[63]

The narrative focused upon the anxieties and concerns of three women characters in particular: Hashida (Sarita Khajuria), who has been made pregnant by her black boyfriend, and is considering having an abortion in order to be able to fulfil her parent's hopes that she train as a doctor; Ginder (Kim Vithana), who

has decided to leave her violent Asian husband, Rajid (Jimmi Harkishin), and Asha (Lalita Ahmed), a middle aged newsagent and housewife, who feels unappreciated by her family, and, as a result of her general anxieties and fears, experiences strange visionary hallucinations in which an image of the Hindu god, Rama, watches over her menacingly.

Asha's visions enable the film to break away in an almost subliminal comic fashion from its linear, realist-based structure, and to point towards alternative constructions of 'reality', based on lurid fantasies about Ginder and Hashida. Asha is unnerved by what she perceives as disloyalty and treachery within the group of women, and imagines that Ginder is poisoning her husband's family, and that Hashida has been so corrupted by Western ways, that she has mutated into a heartless, disrespectful, blonde woman, brazenly trampling over the traditional pieties and rituals of Hindu culture. Alexander Walker of the *Evening Standard* described 'the brief fantasy sequences of Indian gods rebuking Asian girls who've gone native' as Chadha's 'sole concession to wholly Asian filmgoers' and a 'satirical plus' for the narrative.[64] (*Till Death* and *The Alf Garnett Saga* also notably contained fantasy sequences which represented Alf's wildest desires and deepest anxieties.)

The unnerving scenarios taking place in Asha's sub-conscious hint at how the more exotic scenarios associated with Bollywood cinema might treat such subject material, and the returns to mundane reality heralded by the end of the fantasy sequences might conceivably result in a feeling of disappointment for some spectators, as they are made to realise that the film is not constructed within the mode of 'magical realism', and, hence, ultimately, cannot transcend its immediate and somewhat prosaic settings. This is finally a very British film, where the settings are not inherently aesthetically pleasing, and are composed of motorway service stations, cafes and seaside promenades, making the film an 'emotional journey', rather than a 'road movie' in the American cinematic tradition.

Asha's hallucinations are usually concluded in the manner of a joke, with an unexpected or ironic punchline, as she is brought back 'down to earth' unexpectedly. When she first announces that sometimes she sees 'things', the film cuts to a close up shot of a group of men exposing their backsides in a passing mini-bus. A later dream sequence features Asha being pursued by a

white Englishman, Ambrose Waddington (Peter Cellier), blacked up as an India suitor. The scene ends with the rain penetrating his disguise, and making the dye on his face run, suggesting that a long British comic tradition of white performers mimicking Indian characters (cf. *Love Thy Neighbour*) can perhaps now be laid to rest, or re-visited nostalgically, before being finally dismissed.

Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976) claimed that 'melodrama regularly simulates the experience of nightmare', and, that in melodramatic narratives, the 'end of the nightmare is an awakening brought about by confrontation and expulsion of the...person in whom all evil is seen to be concentrated'.[65] In relation to this observation, it is surely significant that it is the sceptical and doubting Asha who crucially attacks Ginder's husband at the close for his violent, oppressive conduct towards his wife and child. The setting under the pier, where this confrontational encounter takes place, becomes a kind of theatrical arena in the style of a Greek tragedy, where violent emotions are unleashed, and conflicts are brought out into the open. Asha, having 'awakened' to the dramatic reality of the situation, after her 'comic' visions, is consequently prepared to intervene decisively in the affairs of others, however, painful and threatening the experience.

When the women head off for 'home' at the film's conclusion, the constant anxious glances made by the driver and group leader, Simi (Shaheen Khan) in the rear view mirror of the mini-bus, suggest that their difficulties will be travelling with them, but that (at least) the process of facing some of these dilemmas, and issues pertaining to their sense of cultural identity, has begun. The unveiling of a cake in the shape of two large bosoms, declaring 'Blackpool or bust' on the ride home, allows the women to momentarily forget their worries, and enables the film to end with the carnivalesque sound of laughter (rather than tears) echoing, as the group travels through the famous illuminated lights of Blackpool sea front. Symbolically, the 'body' of women in the bus have journeyed from Birmingham to Blackpool without going 'bust', and the experience, for all of its traumas, has proved therapeutic and revivifying.

The women's vulnerability to openly hostile actions and racist attitudes in public places is somewhat offset by the progress they have made in engendering a greater sense of group unity during the outing. Like the band of ex-miners

drifting through London at the close of *Brassed Off*, the group may face an uncertain and painful future, but, by the conclusion, there is an impression that the individual and parallel stories outlined at the beginning have, at least, become part of a more unified and inter-connected story.

In an interview in the *Black Film Bulletin* (1999), Gurinder Chadha described *Bhaji* as a sort of 'poor cousin'[66] to *Wild West* (1993), an earlier film about a British-Asian community. *Wild West* was a Film Four comedy-drama with musical sequences about a group of Pakistani brothers whose dream is to become Country and Western singers. The film includes a romantic sub-plot involving lead singer, Zaf Ayub (Naveen Andrews), falling in love with a beautiful Asian woman, Rifat (Sarita Choudhury), and rescuing her from an abusive husband (who, on this occasion, is white and not Asian). Music and creative ambition are valued more highly by the brothers than notions of inherited traditions or enforced allegiances.

Their disaffected mother (Lalita Ahmed, who plays the troubled Asha in *Bhaji*), however, views the aspirations of her sons as an undesirable consequence of living in a dissolute society: 'There are no Pakistani cowboys', she solemnly declares. For Zaf, country music represents the prospect of liberation, and the lyrics of their songs, 'I'm going over to the other side', and 'Anyone can be somebody too', represent a rejection of a future based overwhelmingly on inflexible codes of conduct. When one of Zaf's aunties discovers him buying pork sausages, he lies that they are for his dog. He is outwitted by the auntie, though, who counters that 'Even the dog must obey God's law'.

The comic and dramatic tensions forged out of setting fundamentalist ideals and individualist beliefs in close proximity and opposition are further explored in *My Son the Fanatic*, and *East is East*, whose very title seems to acknowledge its relationship to *Wild West*. The 'wild west' of the title refers to the name of a record company, but also serves as a coded comment on the lawlessness of contemporary British society as represented by 1990s Southall in the narrative. Hence, the comic parody of a lawless frontier town in *Wild West* increasingly becomes a critique of post-industrial Britain, with its barren landscape, and limited opportunities for young people of seemingly *any* ethnic origin. It is notable, for instance, that the brothers turn to Nashville for creative inspiration, rather than to any particular aspects of contemporary British culture.

In *Wild West*, both mother and sons are drawn to places (Pakistan/Nashville) whose power and lure lies as much in their imaginative and symbolic connotations, as in their actual physical existence. The mother of the would-be country and western band in *Wild West* dreams of returning to Pakistan, even though her sons tell her that 'it's real primitive back there…It's all repeats on the TV. A lot of people think Sgt. Bilko is the new military dictator on account of him being on so often'. Zaf and his brothers are determined to resist any kind of nationalist project aimed at encouraging them to become good Asian or British citizens. The film allows 'alternative' and contrasting constructions of identity to flourish, which enable the film to close with a pair of contrasting conclusions, one ending sadly in the band's failure to sign a record deal, the other comically, suggesting that an unquenchable optimistic spirit, with the aid of an unexpected legacy, can result in the realization of a 'dream'.

The record company are only willing to sign and promote Rifat as a solo performer (without the band) because they say that she possesses the kind of 'dusky looks' which can be marketed in America, implying that female sexuality can be commodified for popular consumption, in a way that an Asian Country and Western band might not be. (One of the brothers had originally feared that they could be lynched if they performed in Tennessee.) Zack despairs that the record producers 'got no sense of imagination, just like the rest of this whole damn, deadbeat country. We're just brown faces to them', he declares.

Wild West's ultimate commitment (unlike *Bhaji*'s) to non-realist strategies of narration, does provide the film with space to produce another type of ending, though, one which grants the band their wish to leave Britain for the USA. Using money given to them by their mother from the sale of the family home, they head off to Nashville in the final images of the narrative, while she takes the plane to Pakistan. The film, thus, arguably contains a realist based, pessimistic ending about the failure of the boys' ambitions, and another ending, predicated on notions of wish fulfilment, where sombre failure can unexpectedly and belatedly mutate into comic hopefulness.

In his monograph, *Laughter* (1900), Henri Bergson claimed that 'A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time'.[67] This paradigm is highly appropriate to many of the

situations faced by characters in this group of 1990s ethnic comedy-dramas, and the ways in which spectators (themselves) may have mixed feelings about which courses of action characters should choose to pursue. Both audiences and characters in several of the films may be torn between differing beliefs and responses, leading to feelings of mixed emotions. Om Puri's Asian taxi driver character, for instance, at the end of *My Son the Fanatic*, having lost his son to Islamic fundamentalists, and his wife to Pakistan, declares ironically to his white English mistress (Rachel Griffiths), a prostitute in Bradford, 'I have managed to destroy everything…I have never felt worse, or better'.

The central situation of *My Son the Fanatic* (1997) was wittily summed up by Philip French in *The Observer* as 'They thought he was into drugs, but it was worse. He'd got religion'[68], referring to the film's central scenario in which Parvez, an Asian taxi driver, is disturbed by what he sees as his son, Farid's (Akbar Kurtha) extreme and damaging commitment to unyielding fundamentalist beliefs (Parvez refers to these concepts as 'funny ideas'). The film examines the 'fanatical' elements of absolutist codes of conduct, and their relationship to ordinary lived experience, a topical subject in the late 1980s and 1990s (and one seemingly without any comic features, or obvious settlement or resolution).

In an 'afterword' to the 1995 edition of *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Edward Said claimed that 'We all need some foundation on which to stand; the question is how extreme and unchangeable is our formulation of what this foundation is'.[69] Salman Rushdie had written in 1991 that he found himself 'up against the granite, heartless certainties of Actually Existing Islam, by which I mean the political and priestly power structure that presently dominates and stifles Muslim societies'.[70]

In *My Son the Fanatic*, Parvez works for a German businessman, Mr. Schitz (Stellan Skarsgard), whom he mistakenly hails at the airport with a placard welcoming 'Mr Shits'. The irony of this rather obvious joke is that the businessman turns out to actually be "something of a shit", physically abusing Parvez's prostitute girlfriend, and generally contributing to the oppressive atmosphere pervading the story. Parvez hopes to maintain his permissive lifestyle without dismantling his family, but this does not prove to be possible. The final scenes feature a bitter struggle between women prostitutes and male fundamentalists, with father and son positioned on opposite sides of the conflict.

Son Farid walks away from his family in the film's final images, becoming an indelible part of his 'band of brothers' and fellow fundamentalists. Parvez's mistress suggests that they take a vacation from Bradford and travel to India, but Parvez feels that this would offer only a temporary and illusory solution to their problems, and the film's last shot is of him alone, drinking whisky, listening to jazz, and reclining on the stairs of his empty home. 'There are many ways to be a good man', he tells his son in their last exchange. Om Puri, ironically, would play a character who adopts 'hard-line' fundamentalist beliefs in *East is East*, connoting something of the schizophrenia inherent in the extremities of the 'foreigner' in exile situation outlined by Julia Kristeva in her study.

My Son is generally sympathetic to those Asian characters who seek to fit into British culture, and attempt to avoid or resist the stranglehold of absolutist beliefs and isolationist stances, but one particular scene, which reconstructs the comic ethos and 'world view' of *Till Death* and *Love Thy Neighbour* for a contemporary era, indicates why some ethnic groups might find emotional solace and intellectual support in philosophies which openly criticise and oppose what they see as Western-style decadence, and the tendency of white English culture to mock those publicly who are designated as different or 'foreign'.

Parvez, a character sympathetic to Western culture, is put under the spotlight (literally) at a Bradford night spot, while watching a white English comedian (Andy Devine) at work in a club named Manninghams (Manningham is an area in Bradford, where according to an *Observer* supplement on 'Race in Britain, 2001', 'young Asians' rioted for two nights in 1995[71]: ironically, the name also conjures up images of the comedian, Bernard Manning, notorious for the deployment of racist material in his comic routines).

The comedian on stage decides to insult Parvez as part of his act, declaring, 'I can smell shit somewhere' on spotting Parvez in the audience, before continuing

> It's Salman Rushdie himself. What you're smelling here folks is the Satanic arsehole…If you fuckers all left town on the same day, we'd all have two hours extra bleeding daylight.

This racist ridicule spreads to the audience, and a nearby spectator repeatedly throws a piece of paper at Parvez, to which his prostitute friend, Bettina, responds by hurling a drink at the perpetrator, before they are forced to make a hasty exit from the club. The German industrialist who has invited Parvez to the

club, comments sarcastically that 'this is the celebrated English culture I have heard so much about', and resolves to 'inform the police of this disgust'. 'They were sitting at the next table', observes Bettina, matter of factly.

This sequence begins with a panning shot of a white audience enjoying the comedian's act, whose humorous material, initially, is not concerned with race. This serves to set the context for what will follow, emphasizing that the setting and situation are of a perfectly ordinary and unexceptional nature. The ugliness and unpleasantness of his racist remarks, thus, emerge from within the confines of local 'light entertainment'. The stand-up comic's patter and manner of delivery contains echoes of Eddie Booth's 'comic racist' discourses, but here there is no equivalent of a Bill Reynolds to counter the offensive and hurtful insults, and it is left to the white woman accompanying Parvez to register her disgust with what is transpiring, and to counter and disrupt the laughter of the club audience at the comedian's observations and language.

Unlike *Love Thy Neighbour*, the flow of the narrative is interrupted after a character is revealed expressing racist views (however 'comically' intended), and this represents a significant change from the process of ongoing racial insults at the centre of programmes such as *Neighbour* and *Till Death*. Howard Jacobson in *Seriously Funny: From the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (1997), suggests that 'In comedy the hyperbole of hate makes an instant ass of intolerance, while not denying you the extravagant pleasures of indulging it'.[72] Jacobson acknowledges that comedy is always double edged, and not necessarily morally responsible, as it is always possible for a comic performer to claim, "I may be making racist remarks, but that does not necessarily make me a racist". This scene in *My Son the Fanatic* illustrates, though, how jokes and barbed observations presented under the guise of comedy can have tangible consequences, particularly for the unlucky victims and targets of a comic's stand-up routine.

In his monograph, *On Humour* (2002), Simon Critchley, suggests that 'Ethnic humour is very much the Hobbesian laughter of superiority or sudden glory at our eminence and the other's stupidity',[73] and admits that 'Perhaps one laughs at jokes one would rather *not* laugh at…As such the very relativity of humour might be said to contain an indirect appeal that this place stands in need of change'.[74] The nightclub scene in *My Son the Fanatic* does not imply that such humour in a public place can comfortably facilitate social improvements and

increased integration. Instead, the comedian's patter leads to physical abuse, and leaves Parvez seemingly without an immediate community to which he can express allegiance, or feel that he truly belongs.

This group of 1990s British films, as a whole, testify as to the ways in which conceptions of ethnicity and cultural identity were becoming more complicated and involved within the contours of 1990s Britain, and imply that representations of a modern indigenous multi-cultural society, as a result, needed to become more challenging and searching. The films, themselves, move on from the relentless antagonisms of the 1970s situation comedies discussed earlier, and often pause to reflect on the events occurring within their respective narratives. *My Son the Fanatic*, in the nightclub sequence, also makes the point that earlier traditions of racist based comedy are by no means completely banished from British culture.

The search for an authentic personal and cultural identity on the part of key protagonists is one of the traits which links the characters of the films, who pursue their enquiries to some kind of ultimate position. This relentless search for the 'truth' of a situation is nowhere more evident than in *Secrets and Lies* where black optician, Hortense (Marianne Jean Baptiste) seeks out her biological mother who gave her up for adoption. In so doing, Hortense unknowingly (or sub-consciously) uncovers the white, working class culture she was denied. The comic elements of *Secrets and Lies* emerge from the farcical sense of "skeletons falling out of cupboards", as acts which have been suppressed from memory rise to the surface and demand acknowledgement. Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn), it transpires, did not look at her baby girl after she was born, and consequently never realised that the child was black. This process of looking away initiates a series of tragic and ironic misunderstandings. 'I took a couple of wrong turns', explains Hortense, as the reason why she is late (twenty one years late to be precise) for her half sister's birthday party. When recognising that Hortense is black on meeting her for the first time, Cynthia suggests that someone is 'having a joke' at both their expenses. The 'joke' turns out to be the truth, however, and the narrative explores at what cost this 'truth' can be incorporated into ordinary daily life in British culture.

Judith Williamson noted in an interview ('Changing Images', 2001) that Mike Leigh's penchant for creating parodic forms of characterisation, with characters

(particularly female characters) being defined by their heightened and highly stylised forms of speech in *Secrets and Lies*, did not apply to the character of Hortense, who was presented as particularly quietly and carefully spoken:

> *Secrets and Lies* is a very funny film, but Mike Leigh didn't dare make the black woman in it comic. All the other characters are hysterically over the top, completely surreal characters, they seem almost mad, and then, right in the middle of the film, you have this black girl who is incredibly thoughtful and normal. Everybody else is caricatured.[75]

The comic and dramatic tension of the narrative is, in fact, generated out of the contrast between the stillness and quietness of Hortense, and the raucous, more impulsive and unrestrained behaviour of the Rose family. Leigh may have felt that it was politically and commercially expedient not to represent the female black character in terms which could be defined as exaggerated or caricatured. Hortense's restrained and dignified persona also provides a contrast to Cynthia and her daughter Roxanne's (Claire Rushbrook) unmediated frankness and determination to express whatever is on their mind (a tendency which links with them with such characters as Eddie Booth and Alf Garnett, albeit minus their extreme racism).

These contrasts of personality also suggest that each character can gain something from her opposite 'other-half', and the film concludes with an image of cultural integration and ethnic harmony as Cynthia and her two daughters, Roxanne and Hortense, are shown appearing to be reconciled and happy in each other's company. Neither is quite as lonely or incomplete as previously, now that they are aware of the existence of their cultural 'other' and 'double'. The film concludes with Cynthia in the presence of her extended family, reclining on a sun lounger in the backyard, declaring, 'This is the life': an ironic conclusion, given the pain and anguish dominating the film from its very beginning, and one suggesting that racial harmony and ethnic integration can be achieved out of a process of inner and outward searching, amidst scenes of melodrama, borderline tragedy, and comic conflict.

Leon the Pig Farmer also involves characters searching for their origins, but this film adopts a humorous and ironic perspective, rather than a potentially tragic approach to its material. *Leon* concerns a Jewish man from a southern middle class family who learns that he is the product of artificial insemination, and that his biological father is a Yorkshire pig farmer. *Leon* proceeds to imply

that grotesque acts of miscegenation may serve to modify existing cultures and bridge cultural and geographical divisions when he accidentally creates a mutant pig-sheep during an act of artificial insemination undertaken on his biological father's farm. Contemplating the implications of this transmutation, he speculates that 'It might be kosher', meaning that the pig-sheep mutant (in time) might prove acceptable to Jewish culture. This hypothesis remains only tentative in the film, and the result of Leon's experiments is left to roam unseen (and die?) in the wilds at the end of the film. *Leon* (like *Secrets and Lies*), does, however, close on a note of cultural reconciliation, with the Yorkshire and Jewish families pictured together in a restaurant, exchanging confidences, and appearing comfortable in each other's company.

Despite such textual images of integration, there was still the contentious (if not easily verifiable) question of what kinds of audiences went to see this group of films at the cinema. Gurinder Chadha in a 1998 interview claimed that *Bhaji* was a success 'not because black people went to see it, but because white people went to see it',[76] suggesting, that while the film may ultimately be committed to bringing various ethnic groupings closer together, divisions within British culture may resist such overtures.

This group of films on the whole, I would suggest, though, reflected a desire by film-makers in Britain to move beyond the reductive and inflexible binary oppositions of 1970s situation comedies, and yet avoid the sense of esoteric isolationism engendered by some of the films produced out of the 1980s workshop movements. This impulse may, in part, have been due to the fact that the financing and commercial reception of a significant number of 1990s films became more internationally-oriented during the decade. Ian Christie, in an essay, 'As Others See Us: British Film-Making and Europe in the 90s' (2000) reported, for example, that *Secrets and Lies* was 'largely funded' outside Britain by 'France's CIBY 2000' network', [77] and Andrew Anthony in an article entitled 'British Cinema' (*The Observer*, 1999) observed that Mike Leigh's film 'made more money in Paris alone than it did in the whole of Britain'[78]. Sales of British films abroad were also increasingly important in the 1990s. Gurinder Chadha proudly claimed that *Bhaji* was sold 'to every territory in the world', and 'did well' in America, which helped it to make an eventual profit on its £1.0 million budget.[79] (The film in fact took only £309,715 during its original UK cinema

release.)[80]

Not all of the ethnic films discussed were equally successful, however, at the UK cinema box office. Mark Steyn, while reviewing *Bhaji* in *The Spectator*, claimed that its predecessor, *Wild West*, was 'a box office dud'.[81] Sarita Malik in the *Journal of Popular British Cinema* reported that BBC films pulled out of financing *East is East* after *My Son the Fanatic* received what executives felt was a 'lukewarm response' from cinema audiences which left the corporation 'reeling'.[82]

The following case study of *East is East* will, thus, continue and extend the issues raised in this discussion so far, and explore the ways in which this particular film engages with these themes from a populist and imaginative perspective.

(3.4) **Case Study**: '**East is East**' (1999).

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat...[83]
Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West* (1899).

This discussion of *East is East* (Damian O'Donnell, 1999) will seek to explore how this particular film extends many of the themes, dilemmas and conflicts discussed in the chapter to date, and consider the ways in which the film reopens debates about relationships between comedy and racist discourses, the mixing of comedy and drama within a single narrative, and the treatment of issues pertaining to questions of identity, integrity and individuality. *East is East*, like several of the films discussed above, presents these thematic and aesthetic concerns within the form of a vividly delineated family, struggling to feel spiritually 'at home' in British culture, and yet conscious of the continuing gulf between conceptions of East and West as outlined in Kipling's poem, despite the global changes taking place between 1899 and 1999.

East is East, a Film Four production, succeeded in being the most popular British film at the UK box office in 1999 (a fact which sets it apart from the 1990s films discussed in the previous section), opening on 200 screens across the country ('instead of the art house average of 10 or 15 prints in circulation around the country', according to a newspaper report), and gaining admission receipts of over £7 million in relation to its production budget of £2.40 million.[84] This made

the film by far the most commercially successful of the ethnic comedy dramas produced during the 1990s. BBC films, ironically, decided to withdraw their financial and developmental participation in the film because, according to producer Leslie Udwin, 'there were no star names in it', and 'it was, they thought of limited appeal'.[85] (Channel Four made a similar decision with regard to *The Full Monty*, which they later openly regretted.)

East is East was adapted from his successful stage play by Ayub Khan-Din, whose own familial and cultural experiences are interwoven into the narrative. One of the film's most recent antecedents in its redrafting of autobiographical material into dramatic fictitious narrative was Terence Davies' account of Liverpool family life in the 1940s and 1950s, as reconstructed in *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988). Where it differs most significantly from Davies' film is in its commitment to lessening the more disturbing insights of its incursions into the past, by drawing upon traditions of radio and television situation comedies, based around observations of the daily routines of family life. Both *Distant Voices* and *East is East* conclude with images of the father being ejected from the narrative, but only in Davies' more tortured and avant-garde, mosaic-style narrative, is the father implicitly punished for his sins by death.

East is East was deliberately promoted as a populist narrative, and, in an interview with the film's producer, Leslie Udwin, a *Black Film Bulletin* writer, did express concern that 'The marketing for the film implied that the film was much more comedic than it actually was', although Udwin replied that audiences found that 'it was more than just a comedy', but was 'still a comedy, so they weren't disappointed when they got there'.[86] The filmic style adopted by director Damien O'Donnell seeks to play down *East is East*'s origins in a theatrical stage play, by imbuing the narrative with a sense of constant motion and movement, created by fast editing within scenes, skilful use of a varied range of musical accompaniment to the visual images, and a tendency to present particular viewpoints from unusual angles (suggesting a world in the process of being turned upside down). This fluid and brisk style is in stark contrast to some of the techniques evident in Mike Leigh's study of ethnic family tensions in *Secrets and Lies*, which deploys long takes and relatively static camera positions in the quest to reveal its own kind of emotional truths.

The release on video and DVD retail versions of four scenes deleted from *East*

is East as cinematically released, does, however, point to the existence of a rather different telling of the same story, which is less buoyant and comical, and much more critical of racist attitudes in 1970s Britain. The fact that these scenes were suppressed from the original film, but have now seen the light of day (admittedly as appendices to the film, rather than having been re-inserted into the narrative as a whole), provides a fascinating insight into some of the creative tensions behind the making of the film as to how far comedy or drama should constitute the dominant mode of expression. A later section of this case study will, subsequently, explore the issues at stake in the exclusion and belated re-emergence of these scenes from the film.

Om Puri appeared as two diametrically opposed characters in *My Son the Fanatic* and *East is East*, exemplifying two sides of the debate about the extent to which first, second, and third generation immigrant communities should seek to assimilate themselves into British culture by playing down their religious and political beliefs. In the former film, he plays a Pakistani taxi driver who embarks on an affair with a prostitute, and worries about the 'funny ideas' his son is coming up with. He is shocked by the boy's sympathies for Islamic fundamentalist beliefs, and longs for a time when his son will 'tire of his moral exertions'.

In *East is East*, Puri plays a Pakistani chip shop owner, who, with the passion of a true zealot, tries to force his British-Asian children into accepting the tenets of the Muslim faith: 'You not English, English people never accepting you. In Islam, everyone equal see, no black man, or white man', he informs his recalcitrant son, Tariq (Jimi Mistry). This idea of the 'double' haunts both characterizations, and at the end of each film, his character has been abandoned by his children, and his marriage has been extremely damaged, suggesting that whichever side of the cultural dichotomy is favoured, the end result may be the same.

The juxtaposition and alternation of farcical and melodramatic-type modes of narration in *East is East* did unsettle and disturb some reviewers. An American writer, Molly Sackler, felt that the relationship between George Khan (Om Puri) and his white wife, Ella (Linda Bassett) was depicted in the form of 'an interracial Punch and Judy show, replete with beatings that veer between cartoon and tragedy'.[87]

In *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (1995), Murray Smith defined the co-text of a film as the 'set of values, beliefs and so forth which form the backdrop to the events of the narrative'.[88] In *East is East*, discourses of Muslim isolationism, patriarchal authoritarianism, white English racism, and teenage rebellion are all circulating within the narrative, which via its early 1970s setting, is able to present these discourses and patterns of behaviour as potentially on the verge of new stages of development. The spectator is, thus, encouraged to construct readings of the film by discriminating between the claims of the competing polyphony of voices, values and discourses propelling the narrative.

One brief exchange in *Secrets and Lies* points to what will form the basis of an entire narrative in *East is East*. In the former film, a young Asian man is having his picture taken for his 'Auntie', and explains to photographer, Maurice (Timothy Spall), the reason for the picture: 'It's time I got married'. 'Pick a bride time, is it?' replies Maurice, pragmatically. In *Secrets and Lies*, such moments point to the multitude of stories which could be picked up and explored. Mike Leigh's film, however, proceeds to explore clashes between white and black culture, and does not dramatise the tensions and difficulties hinted at in this reference to arranged marriages in Asian and Indian culture.

East is East begins by detailing how Nazir (Ian Aspinall), the eldest son of the Khan family, refuses his own arranged marriage. To mark this act of ungrateful transgression, a family portrait of him is later shown de-materialising on the wall, and he is consequently pronounced dead by his own father. By fleeing the family home, and abandoning the Muslim cultural tradition, he sets in motion a spirit of defiance which the other children will reluctantly and haphazardly continue. Tariq (Jimi Mistry) develops a non-Muslim, British identity as 'Tony', and Nazir himself becomes known as 'Mr. Nigel', an implicitly 'gay partner' in an Eccles boutique. Abdul (Raji James) and Maneer (Emil Marwa) are depicted as more dutiful sons, whilst Meenah (Archie Payjabi), the only daughter, is seen as lively and free spirited. The youngest, Sajid (Jordan Routledge), attempts to shield himself from the world by viewing it solely from the perspective of his parka hood. He is too young to be subjected to an arranged marriage, as he himself points out, but he suffers the pain of an enforced circumcision, when his father decides to 'bloody fix him' (referring to him as if he is a cat or a dog, in urgent

need of neutering).

George Khan as portrayed by Omni Puri, is a complex figure. Speaking a kind of broken English throughout ('I ask you who doing this', is a fairly typical utterance), he is also capable of seeking violent retribution, when thwarted in his desire to instil Muslim values in his children. We sense that underneath his self-assured demeanour, George, is a deeply divided character. On a family outing to Bradford, he reveals that he came to Britain in 1937 to appear in a film about Anglo-Indian relations and colonial wars, uttering lines such as 'I kill bloody English' (cf. Ambrose, the amateur actor in *Bhaji on the Beach*, who recalls dressing up to play Indian figures in Anglo-American films about Britain's relationship with India). *East is East* examines how in his role as a patriarchal Pakistani father, George may be trying to sustain a part beyond its limits of cohesion and reasonableness, and, like those frustrated figures from 1970s situation comedies, Alf Garnett and Eddie Booth, will seek to discredit those who stand in the way of creating the kind of community he wishes to establish and validate.

In the opening stages of the narrative, George is depicted trying to make out the details of a radio report on East Pakistan's fight for independence during its conflict with India and West Pakistan in 1971. Neither George, nor the film's audience, can discern the exact state of the war because of the noise and bustle of the fish and chip shop in which the scene is set. The indirect manner in which this conflict is presented may suggest that the film itself is indeed not concerned with these wider international historical issues, that they do just perhaps constitute background listening. *East is East* is clearly more concerned with the personal dimensions of the story it is conveying, but the film does go on to imply that these wider political currents may influence George's behaviour and attitudes. Watching a television news broadcast of the failure of East Pakistan to achieve independence towards the end of the film makes him aware of the vulnerability and divided nature of the Pakistani state, and leads to a renewal of his own attempts to impose 'home rule'. In an example of how the film parallels public and private worlds, he is finally defeated and overthrown by the uprising of his own intransigent family, who finally revolt at his authoritarian tendencies and undemocratic methods of persuasion.

The film's fascination with dual and potentially antagonistic discourses is

introduced in the opening sequences featuring the Khan children taking part in a Christian Whitsun parade. Meena is framed holding an icon of Christ on the cross, as two of her brothers mutter such irreligious sentiments as 'Check out the nurses', suggesting that religious worship can be fun and life affirming. This sense of harmony and shared beliefs is suddenly broken by the intervention of Ella, who frantically warns her children that their father is back early from the mosque. The sons and daughter scuttle down a side-street in a hurried, hectic fashion to avoid incurring the wrath of George, whilst carrying the icons of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. The effect is to create a sense of urgency and farce, with the sight of Christ on the cross speeding through a Manchester back alley appearing comic and (possibly) faintly scandalous to the spectator.

The sequence which follows also depicts a religious occasion being disrupted, when Nazir abandons his own wedding. Whereas the Khan teenagers can be shown rejoining the Whitsun procession at a later stage, after a circuitous detour, the film emphasizes that once the Muslim ceremony has been interrupted and rejected, there can be no return to a state of original innocence, once the 'spell' of the occasion has been broken or questioned. The narrative structure of the film is based around three arranged marriages, each of which ultimately fail to take place. The effects of the debacle of the first planned wedding are presented as painful and dramatic, whilst the concluding two arranged marriages are depicted as comic and farcical in tone, although all three occasions have serious dramatic consequences for the family's future and emotional well-being.

The extended scene which draws the narrative to a close focuses on the problems engendered by the very concept of arranged marriages. In this ill-fated encounter, the appearance of the brides to be is revealed prior to the event, marking a break with the ritualistic tradition as depicted in the first marriage. Contrary to the attractive woman who is revealed at the final moment as Nazir's selected bride (the published screenplay describes her as 'stunningly beautiful'[89]), and who is the real victim of his simultaneous flight from Muslim and heterosexual cultures, the two women chosen as brides for Abdul and Tariq are caricatured to appear extremely unattractive and undesirable. Both wear black framed glasses, have large faces and buck teeth. Even George has initially winced at their appearance, when presented with a framed portrait of them, before pronouncing the girls 'beautiful'. This remark is clearly in the film's

terms ironic and insincere, but George's response illustrates that aesthetic concerns will not stop him trying to realise his ambitions. (Ella, once relations with the prospective in-laws have irretrievably broken down, will describe the two daughters as 'monstrosities').

The film, from this stage in the proceedings, pushes its own dramatic and comedic logic, of holding no character or philosophy sacred, to extreme positions, and out of the resulting anarchy will emerge a somewhat desperate struggle to identify and re-establish shared meanings and values by the close of the story. The last two arranged marriages are aborted in the final instance of a series of escalating social embarrassments and tensions. A model of a woman's pubic area and thighs made by art student Saleem (Chris Bisson), ends up in the lap of George's prospective mother-in-law, who is predictably horrified. An image symbolizing women who won't stay in the subordinate places mapped out for them, finally defeats George's hopes of forging a cultural, economic and spiritual link between the areas of Salford and Bradford, two northern towns and cities associated with providing key settings for the British 'new wave' cinema of the late 1950s and 60s.

East is East's own period setting - of the early 1970s - is evoked by images of space hoppers, with their propensity to burst, and then lie deflated in the street, being used to connote the fragility and ephemeral quality of some of the decade's more colourful innovations (and social hopes?). The film, as a whole, does not succumb to post-modern nostalgia about the recent past, preferring instead to recreate it in the spirit of what Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1975) referred to as 'contemporaneity', a form of 'contemporary reality', which implies 'a simultaneity of times' in which conceptions of past, present and future are linked together.[90] For cinema audiences of *East is East* in 1999, the film's emphasis on perceived problematical areas of British society in 1971 (racial unrest in economically depressed towns, organizations permitted to promote racist viewpoints, philosophical and practical debates about whether disparate communities should be more integrated with each other), is still extremely relevant to analyses of the state of multi-cultural Britain in the late 1990s. In *East is East*, the past is not so much another country, but one with rather disturbingly similar concerns to the present.

The links connecting British culture from the 1970s to the 1990s, and the

film's refusal to romanticise or fetishise the recent past, are exemplified in a pivotal scene which juxtaposes sights and sounds from the 1970s children series *The Clangers*, with the Khan family's disconsolate emotions after George has berated them for their resistance to his plans. Mother and children are pictured mutely watching the series, the extracts from the programme adding a surreal, defamiliarising tone to the scene, and functioning as a kind of meta-commentary on the family's disturbed psychological state. The 'alien' family of the Clangers was composed of a Major Clanger, who was recognised as the most important member, and a Mother Clanger who worried when the Tiny Clangers misbehaved and tried to open up the boundaries of their world [91]. The inclusion of this imaginary world into the world of the Khan's serves an ironic purpose. The line 'That made them laugh' is intoned by the narrator of the Clangers just as the Khans are pictured at their most solemn and perplexed. The innocence and childish fun of the Clangers is thus counterposed with the increasing distress felt by the family.

The intertextual elements point the narrative away from its mood of overwhelming melancholy, and heighten an audience's awareness that they (like the Khan family) are watching a constructed fiction. The TV narrator's references to the 'lonely planets, with no life on them at all', echo in allegorical form, the family's own feelings of alienation, and allude to the difficulties of putting down roots in an inhospitable landscape. 'No trees, only rock', observes the programme's narrator, as the film cuts to a shot of George (the 'Major Clanger' of his family) in a separate room of the house. George, too, at this stage, seems like a character from another time and place, an alienated and forlorn figure, who might have been happier living in a distant past when children were less recalcitrant and influenced by twentieth century Western values and beliefs.

The uneasy silence in the family living room (apart from the strange noises produced by the Clangers) is broken by Tariq, who rails against what he reads as his mother's acquiescence in their collective oppression. 'You can both fuck off if you think I'm getting married to a fucking Paki!', he declares. This results in the youngest son cowering to his mother, and Meena appearing shocked and bewildered. Tariq, with his embittered language, could be interpreted as bringing racism directly into the family home, and hence insulting and threatening his own brothers and sister. Equally, he resists what he sees as impositions on his

liberty, by voicing his opposition through harsh and hateful language.

Tariq's outburst is shocking, because from an outsider's perspective, it can appear as an example of self-contempt. The cruel irony of the language deployed in his disavowal is that this is precisely the kind of language which white racists might use in relation to British-Asian families such as the Khans.[92] In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin referred to the concept of alien language as 'a language not one's own, at any level', and acknowledged the power contained within the 'unofficial side of speech, with its rich store of curses', capable of pushing 'to the limit the mutual non-understanding represented by people *who speak in different languages*'.[93] This scene works within the paradigms outlined by Bakhtin as to how communication between fragmented groups may disintegrate into mutual loathing and incomprehension. George and his children are ultimately not speaking the same kind of language, and either they do not understand each other, or they understand each other only too well. I shall consider how the film ultimately seeks a way to break beyond this cultural, ethical and linguistic deadlock (which we saw affected *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Till Death Us Do Part*) in my concluding part of the case study.

'Come and hear Enoch speak! (Mr. Moorhouse).

In this next section, I wish to explore the ways in which two sequences (numbered as scenes 82 and 88 in the published screenplay) allude to the symbolic power of Enoch Powell, a figure much cited in Alf Garnett's 'comic' rants, to incite racial conflict and tension in the 1970s. With regard to these scenes in *East is East*, Claire Monk, writing in *Cineaste*, interpreted them as evidence of what she termed the film's depoliticization of 'Britain's recent past', and evidence of a screenplay which 'barely' acknowledges the 'racism being inflamed at that time'.[94] It may well be that commercial considerations, and a desire to succeed in achieving a level of populist appeal, influenced the amount of space allotted to this aspect of British social history. I will seek to illustrate, however, that in the two scenes where Powell's influence *is* evoked and suggested, the disturbing and disruptive nature of his pronouncements are acknowledged, and conceivably debunked, through the economical use of humour and levels of irony.

In the first scene, a poster of Enoch Powell's face is highlighted promoting a

speech to be given by him in Salford town hall. This visit predictably encourages some local people to become openly hostile to black and Asian ethnic communities. George's neighbour, Mr. Moorhouse (John Bardon) and his grandson, Earnest (the spelling of his name in the screenplay suggests the well meaning "earnestness" of his character) are depicted distributing leaflets to advertise this talk by the Conservative Member of Parliament. In the opening image, George Khan is framed next to the posters as he makes his way to the fish and chip shop. The sequence is predicated on glances directed at each other by the characters on opposite sides of the road, and on the comical ways in which virulent racial hatred is subtly undermined by the actions of Earnest (Gary Dalmer). Mr. Moorhouse shouts 'Let's send the buggers home' when noticing George in the street, the incident recalling the personal disputes at the heart of a wider malaise in *Love Thy Neighbour*. The encounter, in which George does not speak, reveals that for all his attempts to subject others to the authority of his own discourses within the confines of the family home, he (in turn) risks being objectified and undermined by the disapproving gaze and language of others, when stepping out into public spaces.

In the scene Earnest is depicted enthusiastically handing out leaflets aimed at fanning the flames of racial tension and discrimination, whilst ironically interrupting these activities to shout a greeting to George Khan ('Salaam-alacum') which earns him a rebuke from his grandfather, and a puzzled stare from the subject of his interpellation. It could be concluded from this disjunction between Earnest's words and deeds that he is involved in actions without fully understanding what he is doing, or being expected to represent. His spontaneous address to George also suggests how he might ultimately resist attempts at indoctrination.

The implications of this sequence are responded to in another short scene featuring the poster of Enoch Powell prominently displayed in the front window of Moorhouse's terraced house opposite the Khan's home. This particular scene serves as a kind of riposte to the veiled menace and unresolved tension implicit in the earlier sequence. Here the street location is a play area for young children and teenagers who are presented as more culturally integrated and at ease with each other than the adults in the earlier scene. (Meena, for instance, is shown as accompanied by two white girls on her way home from school.) Events in this

scene are initiated by Earnest (referred to by Meena in another of the double discourses of the narrative as 'Pongo'), who invites Meena to play football with him. She seizes the opportunity to physically and symbolically attack both the racist neighbour and the 'mythic' figure of Powell who fuels and legitimizes his racism. Meena kicks Earnest's football through the poster of Powell in the front window, hitting the 'man behind the man', so to speak, before (in a typical 'slapstick' technique) leaving the innocent party (Earnest) to bear the brunt of the racist's wrath.

This moment exemplifies the potential of humour to take aim at a number of culturally over-determined targets in a single instance, suggesting that would-be-tyrants are always capable of being brought down to earth by what Freud termed the comic process of 'unmasking'.[95] On this occasion, the use of comedy functions as a form of wish fulfilment, implying that beleaguered communities are always capable of fighting back when least expected. Equally, the conclusion to the scene, suggests that the forces of oppression may be shattered, but not necessarily destroyed. As the camera pans in to frame the face of Earnest's racist grandfather through the broken glass of the window, we note that his awesome and farcical appearance (his face bears the imprint of flying food) is still, however, capable of emptying the street simply by the intensity of his gaze. The image of Mr. Moorhouse, half-man, half-Powell supporter, as he rages at Earnest to 'Come back here, you little bastard' is used to symbolise what one might describe as the ultimate facelessness of racism, when exposed to daylight, and the searching scrutiny of the camera.

Restoring the 'missing pieces': deleted scenes from *East is East*

The DVD and video retail copies of *East is East* both contain four scenes originally removed when the film received its cinematic release in November, 1999. These scenes form a rather odd coda to a spectator's home viewing of the film, prefaced as they are on the video release, by a caption simply announcing them as 'Deleted scenes from *East is East*'. Their inclusion adds a different perspective to the film's treatment of racial themes, with the extra scenes (lasting accumulatively about eight minutes in length) all lacking the comic punchlines and denouements largely prevalent elsewhere in the narrative. The film makers may have felt that these particular scenes were over-polemical or solemn, making

their presence in the finished film too disruptive to the overall mood and tone which was sought. Referring to the excised scenes in an introduction to the screenplay, Ayub Khan-Din noted that he 'had input from the director and producer, which had to be taken into account' and that 'some scenes and characters' he 'felt passionate about fell by the wayside, but ultimately' he didn't think that their loss had 'been detrimental to the film in any way'.[96] This section of the chapter will briefly consider the impact produced by the inclusion of these scenes on the versions of the film now made available for home viewing.

The first deleted sequence (scene 44 in the published screenplay) features the Khan teenagers playing by a canal bank, a familiar location in northern social realist films of the 1960s. Saleem is sketching the plump and somewhat comical character, Peggy (Ruth Jones). In response to a derogatory comment from Meena about Peggy's suitability for portrait work, Peggy replies, 'Shut it, Paki!' This riposte is quite startling, emerging as it does from a character who (while surly and cynical in the released version) does not express any racist statements, and indeed stands outside that particular strand of the narrative.

This exchange leads to a more meditative discussion in which the Khans attempt to suggest positive and affirmative terms pertaining to their British-Asian status, which as Saleem puts it are 'more romantic than Paki'. He proffers the term 'Anglo-Indian', Meena suggests 'Eurasian', while Tariq expresses a preference to be known as 'English'. Maneer (Emil Marwa) responds by claiming that what is really at stake is not how they perceive themselves, but the ways in which members of their immediate community seek to identify and classify them. His conclusion is decidedly downbeat and unglamorous: 'No one round here thinks we're English. We're the Pakis who run the chippy'. The scene as a whole concludes with Tariq offering a virulent rejoinder to Maneer ('Oh, stop whinging, you soft twat'), responding to the abstract nature of his family's contemplations with calculated obscenity. This scene by the canal is notable in presenting the younger Khans as engaged in a process of self-scrutiny and speculation about how cultural identities are forged through language. In the film as released, while it is clear enough what the younger Khans are against, it is more difficult to determine their views on how they may like to be seen and perceived. The emergence of this edited scene helps to restore such a balance.

The second revived scene displays George expressing his intellectual and

emotional commitment to Muslim precepts, whilst out shopping with Sajid in a Victorian fish market. Sajid, however, is more interested in gaping into the mouth of a giant fish than in listening to George's home spun musings on Muslim culture. George's recommendations to Sajid echo a speech made later by the father about the fraternal and egalitarian qualities of Muslim precepts to a rather sceptical Tariq, and so perhaps the deleted scene was considered to be reduplicating material, rather than advancing or enhancing the narrative.

The third additional scene (number 115 in the screenplay) also features Sajid, this time in conversation with Abdul by the canal riverbank. He is revealed as in a downbeat state of mind, caused by recent family conflicts. During the course of their discussion, Abdul strokes Sajid's hair, encourages him to believe in himself, and in a response to Sajid's account of Tariq's outburst noted earlier, tells him not to call 'people Pakis, it's not nice'. This suggestion is noticeably absent from the cinema version, which appears less keen to suggest limits to language usage and expression, and here anticipates Abdul's concern about the power of language to degrade and stunt the freedom and dignity of others, a concern which will explode with wounded rage in the final 'restored' deleted sequence.

The canal scene concludes with glimpses of a space hopper floating slowly down the waterway, perhaps suggesting that many of the wishes of the decade by black and Asian communities for a better future in Britain were to be similarly "sold down the river". An image in a concluding scene of the cinema release, featuring a deflated space hopper, abandoned in the street, possibly makes a similar point (although, one can, of course, over-interpret on occasions – sometimes a punctured or floating space-hopper might be just what it seems).

The final 'unearthed' sequence (originally scene number 119) is by far the most disturbing of the restored episodes, seemingly taking the film in such a radically different direction that perhaps its excision was inevitable. The scene features an esteemed Scottish actor, Gary Lewis, who played important roles in *Orphans* (Peter Mullan, 1999) and *My Name is Joe* (Ken Loach, 1998). In the released version of *East is East*, Lewis appears in two scenes as Mark, a mechanic in the garage where Abdul works, and it is not initially clear why an actor of Lewis' stature was needed for this seemingly inconsequential part.

The deleted scene reveals that the original intention was to expose *his character* as an indefatigable and indefensible racist, who, unlike such figures as

Eddie Booth and Alf Garnett, cannot be deemed to be in any way comic or amusing in his racism. Lewis' character's relentless and non-ironic taunting of a group of black sailors ('Look out, banana boat's in') with references to cannibalism and primitive cultures (cf. *Love Thy Neighbour*), becomes too much for Abdul, who having originally laughed along with the remarks, comes to realise that Mark's venomous observations are also derogatory to his identity as a British-Asian. He pins Mark to the floor and demands that he be called by his proper name, Abdul, rather than 'Gunga Din'. A member of the group, trying to appease matters, suggests that 'it were just a joke, he's not having a go at you, Abdul. Just the sambos'.

The scene presents the otherwise gentle and philosophical Abdul as forced into taking a violent stand against the kind of 'comic racism' which was a common feature of *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Till Death*. Considered in this perspective, one might interpret the aggressive response by Abdul's character as representing a wider attack on the discourses of racist terminology inherent in such traditions of British situation and 'stand up' comedy. Abdul's moral intervention (what one might term his "standing up" to racism) suggests a desire to make explicit a link between Asian and black oppression, and the need for both communities to unite in a shared refusal to accept racist slights, an inference which remains absent from the cinema release of the film, which contains no black characters.

The restored sequence concludes with Abdul leaving the pub (significantly named *The Britannia*, although only the part denoting *Brit* is visible), and returning home. George is depicted praying (an action also absent from the released film version, where George appears more concerned with the religious life of his children, than with his own soul). Abdul enters the family home, and is seen slumping against a wall, expressing his despair to his father through tears and intimations, rather than words, an acknowledgement that the emotional hurt caused by expressions of racial contempt may sometimes be beyond language. George comforts his son, without really knowing what to say or do, his own physically aggressive persona, briefly downplayed in favour of a representation of him as a family man, a religious person, whose sceptical view of British culture now appears more understandable and justified. This scene ends on a note of almost complete despair, the implication being (as in *Bhaji on the Beach*) that there is possibly no safe place in which the descendants of first generation

immigrants to Britain can feel 'at home' in British culture.

In the screenplay, the conclusion to this scene was intended to be followed by Sajid's declaration that 'the Pakis are here' (which is in the original film release), and heralds the arrival of the potentially new Pakistani family members. This remark, presented in the form of what one might term 'comic racism', would clearly be at odds with the preceding sequence in the public house, which depicts the unfunny and unacceptable face of white British racism in a markedly non-comic fashion. By presenting these sequences to home viewers in the form of additional extras (separate from the film, and yet distantly related to it), the makers acknowledge that in order for *East is East* to reach beyond an appeal to a liberal based, art house audience, certain compromises and exclusions, perhaps, had to be made. It is clear that taken together, the excluded scenes do not present 1970s Britain as a land of equal opportunity for the Khan children, and indicate some of the reasons why George may have assumed such a hard-line position, and offer reasons why even 'moderate' and well-adjusted personalities, like Abdul, may react violently to racist remarks, if pushed far enough.

'Never the twain?': concluding *East is East*

In the final section of the film, as noted above, Sajid gives a v-sign to the Pakistani visitors from Bradford, and announces their arrival with the phrase, 'The Pakis are here!' His mother does not chastise or correct the boy for his language or terminology; only a shot of George Khan looking askance at what he faintly hears, hints at the complex layers of prejudice and discrimination circulating within the discourses of the film. *East is East* has consistently raised questions about issues of ownership regarding language usage and reception in each successive scene, and of *who* is allowed to say *what* in *which* circumstances.[97] Sajid's exclamation could be read as another example of verbal negativity, or even (as racist commentators might claim) of self-delusion. It could be argued that the film is seeking to destroy the sacred power and mystique of racist language, by allowing it to be voiced by victims and aggressors alike, implying that no communities are immune from discrimination and hatred, and that any social grouping may on occasion resort to the use of hurtful and offensive comments and viewpoints.

Only in the closing moments of the narrative is there an indication that certain

characters might succeed in escaping from the sense of solitude and of being misunderstood which they have experienced throughout the narrative. In a concluding sequence, George is allowed a brief respite from his feelings of alienation, failure and regret by the exchanging of a greeting in Arabic with another lonely figure, Earnest. When George is expelled from the family home ('It's over', Abdul tells him), Earnest catches him at his lowest moment and greets him with the expression 'Salaam-alacum' ('God be merciful upon you'). George replies, 'Waalacum-salaam' ('And you too').

These mutual blessings are ironic given that the situations created by George have resulted in his family spiritually rejecting him, while young and impressionable Earnest has received only blows and abrasiveness for his own attempts at social integration. Nevertheless, this scene of pathos between two exiled characters does suggest a kind of tentative breakthrough, in comparison to the ideological blockages and divisive language prevailing elsewhere. Here, the cultural exchange between sender and receiver is invested with a sense of mutual dignity and respect, based on underlying notions of the need for disempowered individuals to seek some form of shared language and common ground. A fleeting moment of recognition between these two ultimately marginalized figures is thus circuitously and movingly achieved.

George Khan's separate marriages in Pakistan and Britain have rendered the official status of his own children somewhat ambivalent (the mother refers to George's children living under his 'bastard roof'), and Earnest, too, is called a 'little bastard' by his grandfather. The scene is indicative of how audience expectations have been subtly subverted and disrupted by the end of the film. Earnest, the grandson of a racist figure of the community, is a character whom one might expect to express racist statements, given his upbringing. The ironical twist of the film is that Earnest is, in fact, prepared to utter a welcoming phrase in an Arabic tongue in an effort to reach out to other cultures, while two of the Khan sons are themselves prepared to speak contemptuously and 'comically' of 'Pakis' (the picture is more complicated, as we have seen, when the deleted scenes are taken into account). Language in the film is always double edged, but *East is East* does attempt to distinguish between the language of democracy and discourses of totalitarianism and oppression. In so doing, the film is not pious or high-minded, and does believe in some of the virtues of plain speaking inherent

in the phrase, 'calling a spade a spade'. George is not interested in the concept of shared cultural discourses, and so is left somewhat marooned by the close. The brief exchange with Earnest, at the close, nonetheless, suggests that there may still be hope in the future, if George can accept defeat, and a reduced sense of linguistic potency.

The final fate of the Khan family is left open in the closing shots, and there is no attempt to detail, in the manner of Victorian literature, those characters who go on to live fulfilled or disappointing lives. Abdul's parting comment to George before he leaves the house – 'It's over' - indicates a desire to inject a note of finality into the proceedings, but George has not previously revealed an inclination to accept the setting of limits to his authority. The failure of George's plans and aspirations at the end of the narrative also mirrors the failure of East Pakistan to achieve independence in 1971. Stanley Wolpert in *A New History of India* (1989), states that 'Pakistan emerged from this third undeclared war with less than half its population, its army and economy on the brink of collapse, its myth of Muslim unity destroyed, its spirit sorely deflated'.[98] The final image of George, glimpsed in the dawn light of the family fish and chip shop, accepting 'half a cup' of tea from Ella, is of a man whose own 'myth of Muslim unity' has been dented, and whose spirit is also 'sorely deflated'.

The film ends with shots of the Khan teenagers leaving the house, and merging into the frantic activity of the street which is once again peopled by children, now that the ogreous figure of Mr. Moorhouse (and George?) is no longer visible. The implication of this open-ended conclusion might be that family life of whatever culture continues despite all upheavals, and that in terms of the chronology of the film, 1971 will soon turn into 1972 (the year in which *Love Thy Neighbour* began transmission, and *Till Death Us Do Part* returned to British television screens after a four year break).

(3.5) **Conclusion**

In his *Evening Standard* review of *East is East*, Alexander Walker noted that 'East and West once co-habited in the same redbrick English street in the TV series *Love Thy Neighbour*. We've progressed since then: *East is East*'s first-generation Asian Brits now put "Hate Thy Father" at the top of their agenda'.[99] When summarized in such terms, it may not seem as if the film necessarily

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represents that much of an aesthetic or ideological advance upon the kinds of situation based comedies discussed previously, which tended to reject subtleties of character, and nuances of plot, in favour of a more general air of noisy conflict in which characters rarely had any narrative time to reflect on the reasons underlying their behaviour and attitudes. *East is East*, notably, does represent a return to northern culture, however, as opposed to the outer London suburban housing estate featured in *Love Thy Neighbour*, and the East end setting where Alf Garnett sought to make his views public.

East is East, with its theatrical origins, can be placed in a tradition of plays set in the north of England, which were subsequently filmed, such as *Hindle Wakes* (Victor Saville, 1931) and *Hobson's Choice* (David Lean, 1953). *East is East*'s similarities in theme to the subject matter of these two films – rebellious young men and women who reject their parents' codes of conduct and deepest wishes, in a quest to fashion their own lives – places the film within a British dramatic and cinematic tradition of narratives about frustrated northern characters (as discussed in part two of the thesis), who face the prospect of stunted existences, if they do not register their protests against conformity.

The Salford setting of *East is East* also suggests a certain relationship to the 'Weatherfield' Manchester setting of the Granada television serial *Coronation Street* (1960-onwards), which was criticised in an essay by Stephen Bourne in *Black Images in British Television: The Colour Black* (1989) for the absence of ethnic characters from its storylines, despite its setting: 'Of all the soap operas to have achieved success and popularity in Britain, *Coronation Street* has probably failed more than any other to have represented black and Asian people', claimed Bourne.[100] In the late 1990s, the 'soap opera' has tried to rectify this omission by having an Asian family run the corner shop, and featuring such actors as Saeed Jaffrey (who appeared in *My Beautiful Laundrette*) and Jimmi Harkishin (who starred in *Bhaji*, and had a brief part in *East is East*) in featured roles.

East is East's links with aspects of northern 'comic realism' (as exemplified by such traditions as the British 'new wave' films of the 1960s, and *Coronation Street*), provides the narrative with a sense of integrity and purpose, so that for all its pithy and insult-strewn language and emphasis on bodily functions, the film never becomes merely a series of loosely connected scenes, without any wider overall meanings or points of reference, as was sometimes the case with the

feature film versions of popular situation comedies adapted from television.

East is East does convey a sense that its makers consciously sought a mass audience for the film, and one of the ways in which that was achieved, as the deleted scenes imply, was by downplaying the sense of social tragedy and cultural deadlock, hovering away at the edges of the narrative. The film does not shy away, however, from showing some of the possible consequences of intolerance, or by suggesting that the kinds of oppositions dramatized within the family can be easily resolved. Like several other Asian-British films of the 1990s, *East is East* suggests the influence of *My Beautiful Laundrette*. In an interview in *Re-Viewing British Cinema 1900-1992* (1994), Stephen Frears suggested that 'if it had been a bleak film', *Laundrette* 'wouldn't have been as well received. To the contrary, it is rather spirited', even if 'there isn't much happiness at the end'.[101]

This dramatic and philosophical paradigm can be applied to the endings of *Bhaji on the Beach*, *My Son the Fanatic*, *Secrets and Lies* and *East is East*, all of which illustrate a creative tension between what one might term the optimistic and socially hopeful tendencies of the comic mode, and the more downbeat and pessimistic impulses of a certain type of social realist drama. The films do not suggest that there are simple solutions to the problems dramatized, but they do reject the typical situational comedy framework outlined earlier, which implied that cultural interactions between differing ethnic groups were doomed to exist in repetitive and somewhat futile cyclical patterns. The 1990s ethnic comedy dramas discussed in this chapter present characters engaged in a genuinely exploratory journey in narratives which seek to avoid being obscure, overly-judgmental or excessively frivolous.

The plots of the 90s films highlight the pain and uncertainty suffered by the central characters, who may feel torn between a loyalty to the religious, spiritual or familial side of their character, and a desire to transcend superficial or simplistic ethnic definitions of their personal identity, leaving many of the films with an impression of bitter-sweetness and unresolved tensions as they conclude their stories. One of the boldest aspects of *East is East* was its determination to present its Asian characters as rounded individuals, who were capable of being racist, stubborn and isolationist, while maintaining a kind of comic exuberance

(which could also be claimed for the figures of Alf Garnett and Eddie Booth, despite their otherwise obvious failings as role models).

East is East tries to salvage and recuperate what it can from the 1970s traditions of British comedies about ethnicity, and problems with the coloured neighbours next door, and, where possible, re-appropriate some of the sub-genre's terms of abuse, perhaps with a view to lessening some of their power to wound and hurt. Speaking the language of one's enemy is always a difficult and potentially dangerous practice, as it can lead to a general escalation in virulent abuse, and the formation of situations where there are no limits to what can be uttered or argued. Johnny Speight, author of *Till Death Us Do Part*, which walked a fine line between showing racist behaviour as both funny and absurd, and having underlying liberal intentions, claimed that 'You cannot attack racism without showing it', while admitting that 'We are racist in this country'.[102]

My Son the Fanatic, *Bhaji on the Beach* and *East is East*, all contain examples of racism by white British characters, but they also suggest that Asian characters can be bigoted, repressive and self-righteous. The films do not revel in racist language enjoyed for its comic pleasure or cruelty, but suggest that prejudiced views, in general, mitigate against the creation of a genuinely multi-cultural society, and a healthier British film and television culture. In aiming to reach a mixed and wide audience, the films hold out the possibility of demonstrating that racist behaviour and separatist attitudes are undesirable and divisive in a modern society, without ever being pious or utopian. The racist insults conveyed and perpetuated in *Neighbour* and *Till Death*, in the television episodes at least, were accompanied by the sound of audience laughter, suggesting that in certain circumstances, racist terminology could be funny. In *Bhaji* and *My Son the Fanatic*, examples of racism by white characters are presented as horrific and demeaning, but the women in *Bhaji on the Beach* are still depicted as capable of laughing as a community at the end of their day out, despite the emotional havoc and uncertainty pervading the atmosphere inside the mini-bus.

American film reviewer, Pauline Kael, writing about the British 'new wave' cinema of the 1960s, and referring to such films as the racial murder mystery, *Sapphire* (Basil Dearden, 1959), and the industrial conflict comedy, *I'm Alright Jack* (John Boulting, 1959), suggested that there was a whole tradition in British films of what she termed characters living 'without grace', who exist in 'little

ugly rooms, and…get on each other's nerves', and whose 'speech is charged with petty hostilities'.[103] *Till Death Us Do Part, Love Thy Neighbour, My Son the Fanatic* and *East is East,* can all be seen as embracing and extending that tradition, which can be seen as a positive movement in so far as second or third generations of immigrant communities may now be experiencing a greater sense of belonging in British culture, but negative, to the extent that some of the original hopes held by immigrants to Britain may have been betrayed or seem lost and elusive. The lack of an extended and expansive dramatic space to formulate and cultivate individual dreams and aspirations may lead to a succession of disputes which become sour and petty, and one would have to acknowledge that several of the 1990s films discussed, do contain characters who dream of escaping from Britain to America or Pakistan, in search of a more fulfilling and authentic existence.

If films such as *Bhaji on the Beach* and *East is East* are prepared to depict Asian or African-Caribbean characters in an unflattering light, or make fun of their foibles and viewpoints, they do so in order to extend and deepen the range of ethnic characterizations available in British cinema; and, unlike *Till Death* and *Love Thy Neighbour*, these films emanate from a culturally mixed, rather than from a prominently 'white' production base, adding a wider range of cultural influences to their resulting narratives.

Comedy as a form is often envisaged as something of a disaffiliated and independent genre, and so is always capable of mutating into new dramatic forms when least expected. The comic mode, when effectively mixed with dramatic and compelling explorations of ethnicity in 'everyday' British society, is thus particularly well suited to depictions of 'hybrid' groups and communities, who may be involved in the process of formulating new identities and priorities, but do not necessarily wish to forget or deny the emotional, spiritual and cultural journey which they have undertaken, en route towards a new future, spiritual home or 'promised land'.

Notes

1) Interview with Simon Channing-Williams, conducted on 6/10/98 by *Black Film Bulletin* in *A Fuller Picture: The Commercial Impact of Six British Films with Black Themes in the 1990s* by Onyekachi Wambu and Kevin Arnold (British Film Institute and *Black Film Bulletin*, London, 1999), p.59.

2) Hugo Davenport, review of *Leon the Pig Farmer*, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 February, 1993.

3) Philip French, review of *Wild West*, *The Observer*, 16 May, 1993.

4) Leonard Quart, review of *Bhaji on the Beach*, *Cineaste*, Volume XX, number 4, 1994, p.48.

5) Alexander Walker, review of *Bhaji on the Beach*, *Evening Standard*, 20 January, 1994.

6) Nigel Andrews, review of *My Son the Fanatic*, *Financial Times*, 4 November, 1999.

7) James Christopher, review of *East is East*, *The Times*, 4 November, 1999.

8) Anthony Quinn, review of *East is East*, *The Independent*, 5 November, 1999.

9) Christopher Tookey, review of *East is East*, *Daily Mail*, 5 November, 1999.

10) Nigel Andrews, review of *East is East*, *Financial Times*, 30 April, 1998.

11) Jonathan Romney, review of *Secrets and Lies*, *The Guardian*, 23 May, 1996.

12) Quentin Curtis, review of *Secrets and Lies*, *Daily Telegraph*, 24 May, 1996.

13) Stuart Hall, 'The Whites of their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media' (1981), reprinted in *The Media Reader*, edited by Manuel Alvarado and John. O. Thompson (British Film Institute, London, 1990), p.18.

14) Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (Sage Publications, London, 2002), p.106.

15) Cart Rajinder Sawnhey, 'Another Kind of British: An Exploration of British Asain Films', *Cineaste*, volume 24, number 4, Fall 2001, p.61.

16) Andrew Higson, ' National identity and the media' in *The Media: An Introduction*, edited by Adam Briggs and Paul Cobley (Longman, Harlow, 1998), p.356.

17) Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (Granta books in association with Penguin, 1991).

18) Malik, p.106.

19) *Till Death Us Do Part* received an A certificate (source: *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February, 1969, volume 36, number 421), *The Alf Garnett Saga* an AA certificate, (source: *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October, 1972, volume 39, number 465), and *Love Thy Neighbour*, an A certificate (source: *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August, 1973, volume 40, number 475).

20) Howard Jacobson, *Seriously Funny: from the Ridiculous to the Sublime* (Viking, London, 1997), p.36.

21) Hall, p.17.

22) Leon Hunt, *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Sexploitation* (Routledge, London, 1998), p.55.

23) The series was unexpectedly made available in Britain during August, 2003 on AV-Umbrella releases:
source: *The*   *DVD*   *Review*:
http://www.memorabletv.com/dvdreviews/lovethyneighbour.htm

24) Arthur Marwick, *A History of the Modern British Isles 1914-1999: Circumstances, Events and Outcomes* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2000), p.260.

25) Brian Spittles, *Britain Since 1960: An Introduction* (Macmillan, London, 1995), p.97.

26) *The Observer Race in Britain Special Edition*, 25 November, 2001, p. 4.

27) Text of Enoch Powell's speech delivered in the west Midlands, April, 1968, reprinted in the *New Statesman*, 17 April, 1998, pp.14-19.

28) ibid.

29) Spittles, p. 98.

30) ibid., p.99.

31) Hanif Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette and The Rainbow Sign* (Faber and Faber, London, 1986), p.12.

32) Information on Prime Ministers and election dates taken from Spittles, op. cit., pp.xxiii – xvi.

33) ibid., p.xvi.

34) Stuart Allen quoted in '*Love Thy Neighbour*' article from *TV Times*, 1972, reprinted in *Black and white in colour: black people in British television since 1936*, edited by Jim Pines (British Film Institute, London, 1992), pp.28-31.

35) Rushdie, p.137.

36) M.M Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981), p.23.

37) Andrew Higson, 'A diversity of film practices: renewing British cinema in the 1970s' in *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure ?* edited by Bart Moore-Gilbert (Routledge, London, 1994), p.223.

38) *Monthly Film Bulletin* review of *Till Death Us Do Part*, writer not identified, February 1969, 36:421, p.36.

39) ibid.

40) David McGillivray, review of *Love Thy Neighbour*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August, 1973, 40:475, p.172.

41) Paul Madden, review of *The Alf Garnett Saga*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 39:465, p.207.

42) Hunt, p.55.

43) For example, Kenneth Williams played an Indian Raj, the Khasi of Kalibar, in *Carry On up the Khyber* (Gerald Thomas, 1968), and Peter Sellers played an Indian character in *The Millionairess* (Anthony Asquith, 1960) and *The Party* (Blake Edwards, 1968).

44) Hall, pp.15-16.

45) Bakhtin, pp.23-24.

46) Amon Saba Saakana in 'Channel Four and the black community' in *What's this Channel Fo(u)r?: An Alternative report*, edited by Simon Blanchard and David Morley (Comedia Publishing Group, London, 1982), claimed, however, that 'Channel Four's administration is bereft of any type of political philosophy which can place it in sympathy with the aspirations of black people', p.123.

47) Sarita Malik, 'Beyond 'The Cinema of Duty'? The Pleasures of Hybridity: Black British Film of the 1980s and 1990s' in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, edited by Andrew Higson (Cassell, London, 1996), p.207.

48) Kureishi, 'Introduction to *My Beautiful Laundrette*, p.43.

49) Hanif Kurishi, quoted in an interview with Jane Root in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1985, 52:622, p.333.

50) Stuart Hall, 'Brave New World', *Marxism Today*, October 1988, p.29.

51) David Thomson describes the process of cultural exchange in *My Beautiful Laundrette* as 'The Indo-Pakistanis... hiring the unemployed white kids as

workers, and having them as lovers. It's a way to soothe the fascist beast'. See 'Listen to Britain', *Film Comment*, March-April, 1986, 22:2, p.60.

52) Kureishi, 'Introduction', p.43.

53) ibid., pp.41-42.

54) John Caughie, *Television Drama, Realism, Modernism and British Culture* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000), p.194.

55) John Hill, *British Cinema in the 1980s* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999), p.184. Hill concludes that the film refuses 'to engage seriously with the Asian characters...or to tackle the questions to which the relationships between the Asian and white characters (many of whom indulge in racist remarks) give rise' (p.184).

56) *My Son the Fanatic*, described as a 'comic clash' of cultures and generations on the cover of the video retail edition, VHS, VC3719, Feature Film Company.

57) Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, London, 1994), p.9.

58) Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 2000), p.123.

59) Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (translated by Leon. S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991), p.4.

60) ibid., p.14.

61) ibid., p.7. 'Constantly feeling the hatred of others...hatred provides the foreigner with consistency...Hatred makes him real, authentic so to speak, solid, or simply existing', suggests Kristeva (p.13) in a description which might offer a partial explanation of the behaviour and attitudes of the father in *East is East*.

62) Gurinder Chadha quoted in 'Argy Bhaji' by Alkarim Jivani, *Time Out*, 19-26 January, 1994, p.19.

63) Blackpool is a symbolic presence at the end of the Channel Four documentary, *Bernard's Bombay Dream* (broadcast on the 26th of June, 2003, produced and directed by Norman Hull), profiling the comedian Bernard Manning, who is often accused of racist humour (although he claims, 'A joke is a joke', and that one should 'never take a joke seriously' in the programme). The documentary ends with Manning returning from Bombay to Blackpool, and praising the virtues of Blackpool as emblematic of the British nation as a whole, and, particularly in comparison to Bombay: 'Lovely sea front. Nice cool breeze. Not like India. Flies all over the fu**ing place...What a wonderful country we live in', he declares, as he walks along the seafront.

64) Alexander Walker, 'Chips with chilli sauce', review of *Bhaji on the Beach*, *Evening Standard*, 20 January 1994.

65) Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1984: first published in 1976), p.204.

66) Interview with Gurinder Chadha (12 November, 1998) in *A Fuller Picture*, p.38.

67) Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (1900) in *Comedy: An Essay on Comedy* by George Meredith, edited by Wylie Sypher (John Hopkins university Press, Baltimore and London, 1980), p.123.

68) Philip French, review of *My Son the Fanatic*, *The Observer*, 3 May, 1998.

69) Edward Said, 'Afterword', *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Second edition, Penguin, 1995: first published 1978), Penguin, p.333.

70) Salman Rushdie, 'One Thousand Days in a Balloon' (1991) in *Imaginary Homelands*, p.436.

71) *The Observer Race Special* 2001, 25 November, 2001, p.10.
Christie Davies in *Ethnic Humour Around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996: first published in 1990), suggests that 'The pattern of ethnic jokes does change systematically in response to profound social and economic changes, but it does so slowly and often after a marked time-lag'. (p.139).

72) Jacobson, p.36.

73) Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, Routledge, 2002, p.70.

74) ibid., p.75.

75) 'Changing Images: Judith Williamson in Conversation with Huw Beynon and Sheila Rowbottom' in *Looking at Class: Film, Television and the Working Class in Britain* (Rivers Oram Press, London/New York/Sydney, 2001), p.105.

76) *A Fuller Picture*, p.38.

77) Ian Christie, 'As Others See Us: British Film-making and Europe in the 90s' in *British Cinema of the 90s*, edited by Robert Murphy (British Film Institute, London, 2000), p.77. The £150,000 budget for *Leon the Pig Farmer* was raised by the film makers after the script was rejected by the BFI, British Screen and Channel Four, according to Hugo Davenport in a review of the film in the *Daily Telegraph*, 25 February, 1993.

78) Andrew Anthony, 'British Cinema', *The Observer*, 3 January 1999. In contrast to the film's popularity in France, Nick Thomas in the *British Film and Television Handbook* (1998), describes the British box office performance of *Secrets and Lies* as 'respectable if not earth shattering' (p.36).

79) *A Fuller Picture*, p.38.

80) Box office figures for *Bhaji* taken from the (1996) *British Film and Television Handbook*.

81) Mark Steyn, review of *Bhaji on the Beach*, *The Spectator*, 5 February 1994. According to the *BFI Film and Television Handbooks* of 1993 and 1994, *Wild West* generated receipts to the value of £30,349 at the UK box office, in relation to a production budget of £1.32 million.

82) 'Money, Macpherson and mind-set: the competing cultural and commercial demands on Black and Asian British films of the 90s' in the *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, number 5, 2002, p.94.

83) Rudyard Kipling, 'The Ballad of East and West' (1985), from *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*, edited by T.S Eliot (Faber and Faber, London, 1941).

(84)) *The Independent on Sunday*, 10 October, 1999. Box office and production figures for *East is East* taken from the 2000 and 2001 *British Film and Television Handbooks* edited by Eddie Dyja.

85) Leslie Udwin interviewed in *Black Filmmaker*, 3:9, 21 June, 2000, p.6.

86) Responding to a question from *Black Filmmaker* about whether it was the 'comedy element' that made '*East is East* hit such a nerve when other films such as *My Son the Fanatic* didn't', Leslie Udwin, producer of *East is East* replied, 'I don't think that *My Son* was that universal a film…whereas with *East is East* you're talking about something that every parent and child knows about. Parents trying to stamp their set of values on their children' (3:9, 21 June, 2000), p.6.

87) Molly Sackler, Review of *East is East* in *Bright Lights Film Journal*, http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/30/eastiseast.html.

88) Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995), p.194.

89) *East is East* screenplay (*Film Four* Books, London 1999), p.14.

90) Bakhtin, 'Glossary', p.426.

91) See *The Clangers* website, http://wwwclangers.co.uk.

92) The *Daily Mail* reported on the 17th of June, 2003, that two High Court judges ruled that 'The word Paki is racially offensive and not merely an abbreviated form of Pakistani', commenting that 'It is odd and a shame that this is so in this country, but the unpleasant context in which it is so often used has left it with a derogatory or insulting, racialist connotation', ruled Lord Justice Auld, in a case referring to a football supporter who was charged with 'chanting of a racialist nature', p.28.

93) Bakhtin: 'alien' language, p.430; 'the unofficial side of speech', p.238; 'mutual non-understanding', p.356.

94) Claire Monk, 'Projecting a new Britain', *Cineaste*, 26:4, 2001, p.35.
Monk, p.35.

95) Sigmund Freud described 'unmasking' as 'a procedure for making things comic with which we are already acquainted...The unmasking is equivalent here to an admonition: such and such a person, who is admired as a demigod, is, after all only human like you and me'. See *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious* (1905), edited by James Strachey and Angela Richards (Penguin, 1981), p.263.

96) Ayub Khan-Din, 'Introduction' to *East is East* published screenplay, p.xii.

97) Bakhtin makes a similar point in *The Dialogic Imagination*: '*Who* speaks and under what conditions he speaks: this is what determines the word's actual meaning', p.401

98) Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989: first edition published in 1977), p.390.

99) Alexander Walker, review of *East is East*, *Evening Standard*, 4 November, 1999.

100) Stephen Bourne, 'Soap Operas', in *The Colour black: black images in British television* edited by Therese Daniels and Jane Gerson (British Film Institute, London, 1989), p.122. Jimi Mistry from *East is East* appeared in the BBC serial *Eastenders* (1985-onwards) during the 1990s.

101) Stephen Frears interviewed by Lester Friedman and Scott Stewart in *Re-Viewing British Cinema 1900-1992*, edited by Wheeler Winston Dixon (State University of New York Press, New York, 1994), pp.227-228.

102) Johnny Speight quoted on the backcover of *If There Weren't Any Blacks You'd Have to Invent Them* (London Weekend Television, 1968, Oberon books, London, 1998).

103) Pauline Kael, 'Commitment and the Straitjacket' (1961) in *I Lost it at the Movies* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1966), p.77.

Part Four:

Romantic comedy and new beginnings in 1990s British cinema.

Gareth (Simon Callow): 'Tom, how's the speech coming along'?
Tom (James Fleet) : 'It's pretty good, I think.
Something for everyone…tears…laughter…'
(*'Four Weddings and a Funeral'*, Mike Newell, 1994).

This section of the thesis will focus on the emergence of a specific genre - romantic comedy - which became a prominent feature of British film production during the 1990s. Following the international commercial success and critical interest generated by *Four*

Weddings and a Funeral in 1994, a series of films exploring the complicated love lives and courtship patterns of young couples in contemporary British society were produced: *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1997), *Fever Pitch* (David Evans, 1997), *Martha: Meet Frank, Daniel and Laurence* (Nick Hamm, 1998), *This Year's Love* (David Kane, 1999), *Gregory's Two Girls* (Bill Forsyth, 1999) and *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999) were key films within this particular cycle of 90s British cinema.

The impact of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* on indigenous film-making, and its aesthetic and political suitability as a template for subsequent romantic comedies produced in Britain, was a topic much debated amongst critics and cultural commentators. Certain writers suggested that the narrative style and form of *Four Weddings* was essentially conservative and regressive. Anne Billson, for example, in the *Sunday Telegraph*, summed up the 'overall tenor' of *Four Weddings* as that of a 'TV sitcom with a tear-jerking interlude'.[1] Celia Brayfield in a *New Statesman* (1999) article entitled 'He [Richard Curtis] makes us nice enough for export', noted that *Four Weddings* was more successful in America and the rest of the world than *The Full Monty*, and concluded from this that 'Diffident, floppy-haired England is definitely a more successful export than England in a post-industrial masculinity funk'.[2]

Gerald Kaufman, a Labour MP, writing in the *Evening Standard*, accused Richard Curtis and Mike Newell of constructing an excessively falsified picture of Britain: 'The celluloid never-never-land we were shown for 117 minutes bore next to no resemblance to what goes on in this island of ours', argued Kaufman,

whilst simultaneously wondering, 'Does any of that really matter? After all, it was only a comedy'.[3] Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant in their introduction to *British Historical Cinema* (2002) criticised Richard Curtis' second major romantic comedy of the 1990s, *Notting Hill*, for its failure to engage with ethnic themes and issues, noting that although the film 'takes its title from the district of London most famous for its black community', it 'portrays the area as inhabited entirely by whites'.[4]

Differences in tone, social observation and character traits, were, however, noted within other romantic comedies released during the 1990s which were not written by Richard Curtis. William Leith, writing about *Beautiful Thing* in the *Mail on Sunday*, observed that the director and screenplay-writer had constructed the 'toughest' possible 'social milieu for a teenage gay couple' (a council estate in South London) and had then set out to 'show the couple triumphing in spite of it'.[5] Alexander Walker of the *Evening Standard* described *Sliding Doors* as a 'two date movie', and a 'romantic tragic-comedy', a reference to the narrative's development of two parallel, but diverging stories, one ending happily, and the other tragically. Walker concluded that the film 'doesn't have anything to say about the state of Britain...But it has a lot to say about the state of a girl's heartbreak and says it intriguingly in the alternative lives led by the heroine'.[6]

These British romantic comedies of the 90s clearly differ in their approaches to social and cultural concerns from the communal comedies and ethnic comedy dramas discussed in the previous two sections. This may, in part, be due to the fact that of these three generic forms, romantic comedy appears to be the least rooted in British cinematic traditions, and the genre most indebted to Hollywood modes of narrative and ideological perspective.

George Steiner in *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), conceivably, had the kind of story patterns associated with certain American romantic comedies in mind, when he referred (somewhat sceptically) to 'That great dawn into which Hollywood lovers and heroes walk, hand in hand, at the close of the story'.[7] Such romanticised endings, for Steiner, were indicative of a sentimental evasion on the part of artists to challenge audiences and avoid situations in 'our contemporary theatre and films', where in 'defiance of fact and logic, endings must be happy'.[8] The studies of British romantic comedies to follow will implicitly consider the issue of whether the British elements and components of the films resulted in

what one might term optimistic and affirmative 'Hollywood-style' moods, tones, and narrative resolutions being favoured over some of the more 'realist' based and less inherently transcendental tendencies of certain forms of British cinema.

The romantic comedy genre in its typically American format existed in something of a state of flux by the early 1990s. Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans in *Affairs to Remember: the Hollywood Comedy of the Sexes* (1989) noted that if 'relationships' in society were henceforth to be 'ruled by experiment and uncertainty, flexibility and reorientation',[9] then these factors would inevitably affect the types of narrative frameworks and generic forms within which comedic and romantic films were constructed. Steve Neale in *Genre and Hollywood* (2000) pointed out that although 'the happy resolution of romantic comedies are generically requisite', the unfolding of plot developments was far from predictable 'at the moment by moment level' of the narrative.[10] Each dramatisation of a love story was, therefore, in some respects, unique, and, depending on how far a particular film's story drew upon other generic modes such as melodrama or aspects of tragedy, the plot developments and revelations of character in a romantic narrative could not necessarily be over-anticipated or taken for granted. (*Sliding Doors*, for example, was promoted as a romantic comedy, but in one story, the main female protagonist dies after being knocked down by a car.)

In his study *Film/Genre* (1999), Rick Altman stated that 'the practice of genre mixing is necessary to the very process whereby genres are created'.[11] In part three of the thesis, I will examine the particular ways in which the 1990s British romantic film narratives to be discussed combined comedy and drama in order to create a 'new' kind of popular genre in British cinema. I shall consider the critical, aesthetic and cultural issues at stake when the romantic aspects of a film narrative are filtered through a specifically 'British' comic perspective.

The chapter concludes with case studies of the two most commercially successful films within this indigenous form of film-making: *Four Weddings and A Funeral* (1994) and *Notting Hill* (1999). Both films were predicated upon a wry consideration of the possibilities for Anglo-American relationships to flourish in modern Britain, and could be seen as symptomatic of a wider desire by British film producers, directors and writers, to forge closer working relationships between British and Hollywood based production companies, and

to demonstrate that 1990s forms of British cinema were capable of producing films with outstanding appeal to international audiences. The case studies will consider the allegorical implications and symbolic connotations of *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill*, and discuss the ways in which the films generate humorous and ironic scenes out of incidents detailing examples of British emotional reserve, and social ineptitude, alongside plot developments featuring moments of mutual incomprehension and exasperation between characters from Britain and America.

Richard Curtis, the screen writer of both films, has acknowledged the difficulties involved in finding an appropriate balance between the comedic and dramatic elements of each narrative. Mike Newell, the director of *Four Weddings*, commented of an early script draft, that 'It was so funny…it was unsupported by any other range of emotions', adding that 'Richard did a lot of work so that it took on some darker tones'.[12] Curtis observed that *Notting Hill* was initially felt to suffer from an opposite kind of deficit: 'In fact, at one point' the producer 'Tim Bevan said to me, 'The film isn't funny enough', so I thought, 'Right. I'll go away and make it funnier', recalled Curtis.[13]

Both films allude to deaths and accidents which border on the tragic and irredeemable, and the central love affairs are plagued by situations involving misunderstandings and separations familiar to traditional melodramatic scenarios. Characters and situations are pulled back from looming disappointments only at the very end-points of narratives, and it is made clear that total failure in certain areas is only narrowly averted by key characters eventually revealing a willingness to consider their decisions and outlooks on life more carefully and reflectively.

Comedy, I will seek to illustrate, is aptly positioned to perceive the farcical and sombre side of these errors of judgement, and, through its fundamentally hopeful perspective, able to contemplate and work towards 'positive' denouements (it could be claimed that to be able to laugh at a situation is partly, in some cases, to lessen its power to threaten or disarm, although, clearly, real tragedies cannot be lessened merely by laughter or good intentions). The dramatic effects created by the contrasts and changes in mood and tone within *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill* will be discussed, alongside an examination of

the films' respective representations of contemporary romantic courtship patterns, problems and pleasures.

Prior to these generic developments during the 1990s, it could be argued that British cinema had not developed an instantly recognisable or sustained tradition of romantic comedy in a similar fashion or style to that of American cinema. Nonetheless, I would suggest that certain key films, which constructed a particularly 'British' iconography of native romanticism, and featured couples searching to achieve a level of sexual and emotional intimacy in sometimes unpropitious (and, on occasions, downright strange) circumstances, can be usefully considered as laying down some of the creative 'building blocks' which the 1990s British romantic comedies would draw upon in their particular narrative formulations.

Such films would include *Rich and Strange* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1931), *Pygmalion* (Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard, 1938), *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, from a script by Noel Coward, 1945), *A Matter of Life and Death* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1946), *Genevieve* (Henry Cornelius, 1953), *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963), *Alfie* (Lewis Gilbert, 1966), *Sid and Nancy* (Alex Cox, 1986) and *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (Alan Clarke, 1988). I shall explore the ways in which these films combine comic and dramatic images of love to produce resonant images of emotional interactions between vividly realised individuals, during particular historical conjunctures in British society.

Theories of romantic comedy have been predominantly drawn from, and based upon, examples of Hollywood, rather than British cinema, which was, perhaps, an appropriate enough critical stance in the past, given the prominence of American film production in this area. This critical tendency is in need of urgent revision, however, following the 1990s British film contributions to the genre. This chapter of the thesis will discuss some of the key features and aspects of the genre known as 'romantic comedy' in Hollywood cinema, and examine some of the issues raised by its status as a hybrid or dramatically variable form of narrative.

The intention is to gain a clearer and more informed sense of the kinds of plot structures, recurring motifs, and ideological tropes which film-makers in Britain working within this area, could seek to emulate and personalise in their own work. The next section will begin with a brief discussion of theories of romance

and comedy drawn from literary and philosophical sources, before proceeding to a discussion of these themes with particular reference to popular cinema.

(4.1) **Conceptualising the 'comic romance'**

Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957) linked specific genres with particular seasons, associating tragedy with autumn, comedy with spring, and romance with summer.[14] Frye noted that one of the distinctive features of comic narratives was their tendency to conclude in scenes of happiness and triumph for the central protagonists. Such emotionally pleasing or satisfying resolutions impressed audiences as 'desirable', rather than as 'true', argued Frye, who suggested that such endings were often engineered through careful plot 'manipulation', which symbolised 'a victory of arbitrary plot over consistency of character'.[15]

The combining of romantic and comic themes, within a single form, enabled two distinct dramatic modes to be brought together ('spring' and 'summer'), in forms which allowed spectators to follow, with interest, the twists and turns of a particular relationship, safe in the knowledge that within this mixture of romance and comedy, events would generally turn out satisfactorily in the end. The romantic elements of a narrative thus provided the framework for constructing a dramatic and potentially engaging storyline, while the comic features of the story could be utilised to reflect on (and illustrate) the often absurd nature of romantic infatuation or sexual obsession, and the obstacles possibly placed in the way of its fulfilment by a sceptically observing or disapproving society.

The comedic aspects of a romantic based narrative could manifest themselves in a range of differing forms, such as instances of farce, slapstick, satire and parody, all of which were susceptible to producing astute observations about the disjunctions between idealised views of romance, and the sometimes more prosaic and less inspirational nature of characters' experiences of love. Romantic comedy could, nonetheless, be seen as a dramatic form which essentially (as part of its implicit ideological agenda) sought to celebrate the idea of a union between two 'star-struck' and well suited lovers, even as its narratives simultaneously formulated a series of conflicting viewpoints, events and circumstances, capable of keeping the couples in question apart until the very end.

Patrick Murray in *Literary Criticism: a Glossary of Major Terms* (1978) states that 'The great English writer' in the form of romantic comedy was William Shakespeare, who presented 'mythic' characters in 'idealized settings' at a 'distance from everyday reality',[16] and established the basis of a British or English sensibility towards theatrical constructions of romantic comedies based around notions of farce, deception, disguise, and last minute reconciliations between fathers and daughters, and suitors and heroines.

In her study, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995), Kathleen Rowe, in turn, defined romantic comedy as a socially progressive dramatic form, because of its emphasis on the need 'for *a* woman, in the narrative itself',[17] and its tendency to work towards establishing an order and vision of society which was improved and revivified by the close of the narrative. The genre, in Rowe's view (countering possible claims that romantic comedy as a dramatic form was, perhaps, over-concerned with the lives of individuals, whose romantic fixations tended to render them somewhat uninterested in society), was significant for the ways in which it sought to present a kind of totalised view of social relations in which aspects of 'work and play, the social and the sexual' were seen as intertwined with each other.[18]

Rowe identified a series of attributes which she associated with tragedy and comedy: concepts of death, the aristocratic, and finality were linked with tragedy, while, in contrast, sex, the bourgeoisie and circular narratives were related to comedy.[19] (In *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, we shall see how these tragic-comic distinctions are dispersed, and re-envisaged throughout the narrative.) Comic narratives, in turn, can be adapted from tragic and melodramatic plots, which are then transmuted into farcical or low comic forms, with alternative kinds of narrative resolutions being substituted for the original tragic or melodramatic endings.

David Sutton, in his study, *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929-39* (2000), has usefully pointed out that in British film culture, both comic *and* melodramatic modes of narration have tended to be under-valued by dominant critical and cultural discourses. Sutton, however, concludes that such negative responses, ironically, generated positive effects because they facilitated a process whereby both comic and melodramatic genres could 'flourish and create their particular worlds away from the overseeing gaze of the dominant

culture...producing a relative freedom' for these genres not to have to be associated with works of 'quality' and significance.[20] This distancing, from both the perceived norms and values of British society, and its attendant film culture, meant that the two generic forms could be allowed space to develop without needing to be overly concerned about being denigrated by reviewers, critics and cultural commentators (unless adverse comments severely affected the box office takings of the comic or melodramatic films).

Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans in *Affairs to Remember: the Hollywood Comedy of the Sexes* (1989) defined a particular species of Hollywood romantic comedy, known as Screwball comedy, as 'inspired by misrule, rebellion, irrationality' and a 'topsy-turvy vision of life'.[21] Such characteristics allude to the anarchical impulses of certain forms of romantic comedy, which take great delight in tearing down repressive structures of narrative and society, and imagining freer, looser forms of cultural signification and social structuring in their place.

In an article, 'Screwball Comedy: An Overview' (1986), Wes. D. Gehring, nonetheless, expressed a certain degree of doubt about the level of political and dramatic significance which could be attributed to these types of comic/romantic narrative rebellion. He pointed out that Hollywood romantic comedies of the 1930s tended to be concerned with such "crucial" (i.e. trivial) "issues" as 'how to dunk a donut' correctly in *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), and the question of 'who gets custody of the dog in divorce proceedings' (*The Awful Truth*, Leo McCarey, 1937).[22] The genre of romantic comedy (when perceived from such sceptical viewpoints) raises questions about the extent to which the personal *is* political in such contexts, and whether the issue of individual lovers finally getting together is, in the wider scheme of things, ultimately an unimportant or inconsequential matter.

Clearly, there are dangers in concluding too much about a genre from particular instances, and my own accounts of the motifs, themes and plot developments of key contemporary British romantic comedy dramas will seek to link overall conclusions with individual readings gleaned from careful scrutiny of specific texts. Totalising or all encompassing theories can underrate the contributions of particular performers and directors to individual films, and downplay or ignore exceptions to the general rules being established.

In the examples of seeming nonsensical triviality offered by Gehring, one could argue a case that the treatments of the 'donut' and the role of the dog in a divorce case are used symbolically and satirically in both films to raise questions about how the respective couples should behave towards each other, and the types of values on which they should seek to base their relationships. Screwball comedies tended to emphasise the importance of play in the relationships of adult couples, and of remaining in touch with one's earlier, and less sophisticated or self-conscious self. The only liaisons and marriages frowned upon in these films were those in which a relationship had become overly formal, lifeless or serious.

Within this dramatic and philosophical framework, I would conclude that such examples of romantic comedy, while open to charges of narcissism and self-indulgence on occasions, can also be considered to possess a radical ideological and aesthetic dimension, based on an inherent opposition to concepts of stultifying social conformity, and an adherence on the part of film-makers to atrophied and excessively predictable story-telling techniques.

Stanley Cavell's seminal examination of the romantic comedy genre, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, (1981), produced a strong case for seven 1930s and 1940s comedies of 'remarriage' to be considered as intellectually sophisticated, dramatically nuanced, depictions of challenging male-female relationships. The films analysed by Cavell were all produced between 1934 and 1941, and while he concedes that these romantic comedies have been described as 'fairy tales for the depression',[23] he is wary of critical approaches which result in reductionist readings, based on over-simplified models of relating texts to contexts, or analyses which conversely imply that the primary types of pleasures provided by these films for audiences were simply of an escapist or fundamentally illusory nature.

In line with Frye's studies of classical romance in myths, fairy tales and stage plays, Cavell stresses the significance for romantic comedies of situation, time and place: 'the narratives requires a setting…in which the pair have the leisure to be together…A natural setting is accordingly one of luxury [where] work can be postponed without fear of its loss.'[24] The "could be" couple, therefore, need a place where they can see and appreciate each other's qualities more clearly and resonantly - a process of discovery which may consequently involve a certain withdrawing from everyday society, so that the couple can learn to accept and

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expand their views of each other, and society itself can work towards welcoming and valuing the couple on their return (a dramatic process enacted in several of Shakespeare's late plays).

Despite Cavell's sense of the life enhancing and worthy explorations of human relationships carried out in what he terms 'comedies of remarriage', when alluding to these particular films in his study, *Contesting Tears: the Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (1989), he detected the presence of a 'moral cloud', and what he identified as a 'structure of unhappiness' that was not totally dispersed by the narrative conclusions of the seven selected romantic comedies.[25] This implicit feature of the films, I would suggest, exemplifies another aspect of comedy, when combined with melodrama; namely, an awareness on the part of both modes, of the intrinsic fallibility of individuals, and their infinite capacity for error: leading to the construction of situations in which the gap between human aspiration and achievement may loom disturbingly, yet (at times) amusingly large.

Cavell's discussion of Hollywood romantic comedy is not extended to include more contemporary examples, and in a (2002) interview, he pondered whether 1980s and 1990s films categorised as belonging to the genre, could, in fact, be accepted as operating within the same kind of dramatic registers and cultural codes as his 1930s and 1940s classical examples: 'Do these films continue to be made? Well evidently, they don't continue to be made in that form. So what does one expect of them now, what's come together now? I don't really know how to answer that question', he admitted.[26]

In an essay, 'Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or impossible?' (1978), Brian Henderson had earlier suggested that such developments as 'the doubling of the divorce rate…the rise of the single parent, the political and social impact of feminist movements and gay right movements' were not propitious developments for the producing of modern romantic comedies.[27] The removal of censorship restrictions, and the consequent frankness of language applied to contemporary discussions of sexual and emotional matters, were in Henderson's view, counter-productive to modern re-enactments of the more traditional paradigms and dramatic movements associated with the genre in its classical heyday.

Steve Neale in a *Screen* essay, 'The Big Romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today' (1992) suggested, that in the late 1980s, and following the success of films such as *Pretty Woman* (Gary Marshall, 1989), romantic comedy was experiencing a new lease of life in American cinema.[28] Neale, however, found many of the 1980s Hollywood examples of the genre to be rather conventional and overly-traditionalist in the kind of relationships which they envisaged, despite (or, perhaps, because of) their recurrent harking back to 1930s models of screwball comedy: 'New romances have difficulties in sustaining eccentricity. Hence the significance of its mildness or artificiality...[and] dominant ideological tendency...[to counter] any "threat" of female independence'.[29]

If Steve Neale was sceptical about some of the ideological traits and aesthetic achievements of 1980s Hollywood romantic comedy, perhaps because the genre commonly reaches out to dramatise some kind of ideal or perfect union, whilst evincing a readiness to highlight the potential pitfalls and calamitous confusions involved in instigating any kind of romance, the mode has remained a popular form with film audiences. I would want to suggest that romantic comedy (like other generic forms and modes), has had to adjust its narrative patterns to accommodate and reflect upon changes in society, and the state of current moral and ethical debates. Women's desire for greater individual autonomy and recognition in the workplace, and the legalisation of abortion and gay sexual practices between consenting adults, are all factors which makers of British and American contemporary romantic comedies have to take into account when formulating and conceptualising their narratives. The genre may be based around certain universal and repetitive features ('boy-meets girl, boy-loses-girl etc'[30]), but the routes to happiness and romantic fulfilment undertaken by the central characters in a love story will always be faced with the problems created by certain contemporary concerns and social anxieties.

In an essay entitled 'Citylife: Urban Fairy-tales in Late 90s British Cinema' (2001), Robert Murphy, however, wishes to emphasise the formalist roots of such films as *Four Weddings*, *Sliding Doors* and *Notting Hill*, as well as their implicit political significance within British culture.[31] Murphy suggests that an examination of the underlying patterns of many of the 1990s British romantic comedies testifies to the influence of fairy tales and folk tales on the

distinguishing narrative features of the scenarios, particularly in their emphasis on the setting of a 'magical quest' to be participated in by modern-day kinds of princesses and princes, alongside their constructing of alternative, attractive surroundings in which true lovers can discover each other (often depicting London, unexpectedly, as an 'enchanted village' in the process).[32] The occurrence of these features in recent British films may testify to the existence of a "timeless" formal element with regard to narratives about romance, where characters may enact particular movements and actions almost as if they were pieces on a chess board, or functions in a Proppian theory of narrative.[33]

From such formalist or structuralist perspectives, the wider ideological and social significance of filmic romantic comedy partnerships might be considered questionable. Thomas E. Wartenberg's book, *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism* (1999), is, in part, a concerted attempt to emphasise the political and cultural implications and dimensions of romantic pairings in British, American and European cinema. His account of potentially transgressive partnerships in a range of films, subsequently, focuses on narratives revolving around troubled relationships of 'a cross-class, interracial, or homosexual character'.[34]

Wartenberg defines an 'unlikely couple' as 'a romance between two individuals whose social status makes their involvement problematic',[35] and uses the film version of George Bernard Shaw's play, *Pygmalion* (Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard, 1938), as a British example of a couple divided by class, gender and social outlook. Wartenberg's examinations of specific films seek to suggest and demonstrate that films dramatising romantic entanglements repeatedly cannot help being bound up with wider issues of race, sexuality, and pressures from certain sections of society to conform to dominant norms and axioms.

Such narratives, in Wartenberg's view, should not be viewed simply as individualistic films or generically determined tales, but ought to be examined as films capable of making contentious contributions to debates about personal freedom, and commenting upon male-female interactions in the context of specific societies encountered at critical stages of their historical development. It may be that the films selected by Wartenberg to discuss, emphasise the dramatic, rather than the comedic elements of their stories and characterisations. I would

agree, however, that both romantic comedies, and romantic comedy-dramas, are linked by their concern to explore the personal and political dimensions of relationships in ways which are potentially provocative, insightful and enlightening.

The following section will examine traditions and trends relating to the production of romantic comedy/dramas in British cinema from the period of the 1930s to the 1990s. The aim is to discuss a series of key films in relation to some of the aesthetic and cultural issues regarding narrative, character, settings, and the production of meanings in romantic comedies and dramas outlined, so far, within the specific context of British film culture. I shall then proceed to examine how the films under consideration sought to combine comic and dramatic modes of narration and expression in forms which reflected some of the particular concerns of their times.

(4.2) **Trends and traditions of romantic comic drama in British film culture**.

Algernon: 'I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly'.
Cecily: 'Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it?'
(*The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde, 1895, Act II, Scene I, filmed by Anthony Asquith,1953).

Liza: 'I want a little kindness…I come – came – to care for you…'
Higgins: 'You find me cold, unfeeling, selfish, don't you? Very well…Marry some sentimental hog or other with lots of money, and a thick pair of boots to kick you with. If you can't appreciate what you've got, you'd better get what you can appreciate'.
(*Pygmalion*, George Bernard Shaw, 1914, Act V: filmed by Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard, 1938).

The rest of the story need not be shewn in action, and indeed, would hardly need telling if our imaginations were not so enfeebled by their lazy dependence on the ready-mades and reach-me-downs of the ragshop in which Romance keeps its stock of "happy endings" to misfit all stories.
(George Bernard Shaw, a coda to *Pygmalion*, 1916).[36]

This part of the chapter will seek to highlight significant and influential narrative patterns and characterisation traits in British films exploring the subject of romance, within dramatic forms influenced by a comic or ironic perspective from the period of the 1930s to the late 1980s. Examining such a broad period of film history inevitably involves a process of selectivity, but I have sought to emphasise films which examine romantic relationships in a specifically British or Anglo-American context, or, conversely, seek to distinguish their narratives from

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established Hollywood models of romance, by taking as their particular subject, the possibilities for couples to find romantic fulfilment and happiness in specific and often unconventionally romantic settings or situations within British culture. The intention is to gain a clearer impression of the traditions of romantic comedy drama which British films of the 1990s both responded to, and, in some cases, repudiated, and to consider the role of humour, irony and farce in pre-1990s films, leading up to the contemporary British manifestations of romantic comedy.

One feature of British cinema which does distinguish it from Hollywood generic conventions is that British films (unlike Hollywood cinema) did not develop a tradition of producing 'screwball' romantic comedies in the 1930s. Alfred Hitchcock's British films of this period were probably the nearest equivalent to this sub-genre, with the comic and romantic interactions between certain of his male and female characters acting as a key component of the films' thematic concerns and narrative pleasures. In *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *The Lady Vanishes (*1938), for instance, the trusting, but playful relationships between the characters played by Robert Donat and Madeline Carroll, Michael Redgrave and Margaret Lockwood, acted as encouraging signs for a humanity increasingly threatened by the prospect of world war and mass destruction.

The romantic liaisons formed in George Formby's 1930s comedy films served a similarly hopeful, but more culturally specific purpose. The narratives were recurrently based around George's indefatigably northern character, falling in love with a well spoken, middle class girl from the South of England, who would enjoy listening to his musical renditions, and support him in his efforts to win a race and/or expose wrong doers, spy rings and saboteurs! The films would invariably conclude with George being rewarded with a kiss from the young woman in question, and declaring euphemistically, 'It's turned out nice again'. (The female role was played by a series of different performers, including Googie Withers, Phylis Calvert and Kay Walsh, but the characteristics of the part rarely altered.) This culminating embrace could be read as symbolising a potential reconciliation between the "two nations" (north and south) of British society in a period of severe economic recession, linking his films tangentially to the communal comedies discussed in part two.

Romance in Formby's films was generically motivated, perceived as an important (if subservient) part of the narrative structure, along with the musical

numbers and comic action sequences. The romantic interludes, however contrived and perfunctory they might appear to a modern-day audience, provided an emotional basis for the otherwise episodic and inconsequential events of a Formby film narrative. George's character's relationships with his leading ladies were depicted as fundamentally asexual, largely being based upon notions of genial affection and companionship.

Alfred Hitchcock, by way of a contrast, was more concerned to explore the sexual undercurrents between his male and female characters in his 1930s comedy thrillers. In *The 39 Steps*, Richard Hannay and Pamela are handcuffed together by enemy agents pretending to be police officers. She fears that he is an escaped murderer of women, while he describes her as the 'white man's burden'; to the Scottish innkeepers providing them with refuge for a night, they are a 'runaway couple'. The pair's eventual 'authentic' relationship is consequently established out of a series of disguises, antagonisms and mutual suspicions. The bleak (studio based) setting of the Scottish moors forces the prospective lovers into developing some kind of emotional warmth towards each other. The fact that Hannay and Pamela spend a night (handcuffed) together, without being married, renders them something of an "illicit couple" in terms of dominant 'British' moral and cinematic discourses of the period.[37]

Earlier in his career, Hitchcock had dramatised the dynamics of a male-female partnership within the state of marriage, outside of the generic tropes of the thriller. In *Rich and Strange* (1931), he focused on a marriage which is emotionally stunted by the lack of opportunities for romantic excitement in urban British culture during the period of the early 1930s. The lead characters, Fred (Henry Kendall) and Emily (Joan Barry) are allowed an opportunity to escape from their rather dull existence through a legacy from an aunt offering them the opportunity to embark on a world cruise. The film goes on to explore the effects of environment on their desires for passion and greater empathy with each other, and, in the process, allows British cinema a space for exploring these themes in a new international context.

On board ship, Emily meets a passenger, Commander Gordon (Percy Marmont), who falls in love with her, and offers the possibility of a new life abroad with him. Emily speaks of how difficult a business is the state of being in love, because, as she states, in a relationship 'everything's multiplied by two –

sickness, death, the future'. In the closing sections, Fred and Emily do indeed face illness and death together, when the ship sinks, but the film closes with the couple back home bickering about their future plans: a conclusion which can be read as ironically comic in its inference that married life, despite all the difficulties placed in its way, continues, or more pessimistically, as a sign that the English couple's relationship will never really progress, or aspire to anything beyond the ordinary and the mundane.

The most challenging representation of male-female relationships in 1930s British cinema, probably, remains the film adaptation of Shaw's 1914 play *Pygmalion* (1938) in which Wendy Hiller plays Eliza, a London flower seller, who wishes to learn how to speak English like an upper class person, so that she can better herself, both socially and financially. Leslie Howard plays the dialects expert and language coach, Henry Higgins, who seeks to demonstrate that anyone can speak received pronunciation English if they are taught well. The entry on Anthony Asquith in the *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*: *Directors* (Volume II, 1997) reports that the film of *Pygmalion* 'was especially popular in America',[38] suggesting that the film helped to create a climate for later British films based around Anglo-American relationships, or featuring examples of spirited disputes between British male and female characters, which were capable of appealing to American audiences.

Asquith's film details the somewhat harrowing experiences involved in affecting Eliza's transformation from common flower girl to an English lady, and Higgins is depicted as a sort of semi-demented scientist, who cares only for his experiments, and nothing for the people around him. This makes him a good and ruthless teacher, but a limited human being. *Pygmalion* is both fascinated and repelled by Eliza's life on the streets – 'She's so deliciously low', declares Higgins of Eliza – and yet both the play and film find that there is a curious void at the centre of English upper class society, which makes the change in her being seem somewhat superficial to the teacher, and rather damaging for the pupil, who consequently feels that she belongs nowhere in particular.

In his chapter on the film, Thomas Wartenberg interprets *Pygmalion* as a bleak example of the repressive sexual and emotional climate of British culture (circa 1914-1938). A notably comic instance of this English unease at matters of physical and emotional intimacy comes when Eliza gives the mildest of kisses to

a hapless suitor outside of the professor's house, and is immediately reprimanded by a police constable, who informs the couple, 'This isn't Paris!' *Pygmalion* ultimately forms a kind of antidote to the dominant tendencies of 1930s American screwball comedies in which the woman is shown emotionally liberating the male, and a worthwhile, energetic couple is finally constructed. Wartenberg suggests that

> *Pygmalion*'s men are either bachelors or dolts, so that Eliza is left without the possibility of genuine intimacy...England's men are simply not fit partners for independent women like Eliza...The film concludes that gender roles so constituted offer no hope for genuinely reciprocal relationships.[39]

The film (like Higgins) demonstrates a tension between its coldly observational and satirical strand of narrative, and the incipient romantic elements bubbling under the surface, threatening to turn the work into a more recognisable and conventional narrative about the "battle of the sexes". This is most evident in the film's two final scenes, which slightly modify the play's original ending in which Eliza and Henry finally part after their ideological differences prove insurmountable. The movie adaptation concludes with shots of a distressed Higgins, pacing the streets in search of the absent Eliza, who eventually returns unexpectedly to his study as he is listening to gramophone recordings of her original speaking voice. She is framed in close up, for once displayed as towering over him, an indication of the change in the power structure of their relationship. In the closing shot of the film, however, the seated Higgins turns his back to Eliza, and the camera, and demands (in the notorious closing line), 'Where the devil are my slippers?'

Wartenberg reads this revised ending as 'an aesthetic as well as an ethical lapse', which compromises the film's 'demonstration of the destructiveness of traditional masculinist postures'.[40] Both the play and the film are aware, however, that for all its rigorous banter and frantic energy, neither the romantic nor the comedic elements of the text have been easily formulated; relationships between male and female characters are depicted as flawed and troubled, and both working class and upper class societies are shown to function by unspoken prejudices and axioms making significant social change and progress in British society difficult to initiate. In adopting such viewpoints, the film rejects any complacent acceptance or celebration of upper class English life, and, in so

doing, distances itself somewhat from the American screwball comic tendencies of the 1930s.

David Lean worked as a film editor on *Pygmalion*, and in 1945, he collaborated with the playwright, Noel Coward, on a film which would also portray relationships between British male and female characters as existing in a state of crisis and turmoil. *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945), premiered six months after the end of the Second World War, but was significantly located in a kind of "timeless", pre-war British setting, a period before personal concerns became secondary to issues of national survival. *Brief Encounter* notably narrated its story from the point of view of the woman figure, who in her role as storyteller, places an audience in the position of a privileged eavesdropper. The film's use of surging orchestral music to underline emotional climaxes and dilemmas adds a sense of operatic grandeur to what Laura (Celia Johnson) herself often dismisses as the ridiculous thoughts and imaginings of a 'romantic schoolgirl'.

The tale grows out of ordinary situations which are not normally invested, outside of melodramatic scenarios, with momentous emotional significance, such as accidental meetings and missed trains, and like *Rich and Strange*, the film ultimately returns to the setting and situations outlined in the opening scene, which are then imbued with a retrospective layer of significance. The comical interludes featuring a station master's attempts to ingratiate himself with a railway canteen manageress bear a relationship to Shakespeare's use of a comic sub-plot to parallel, from a farcical or irreverent point of view, the events and characters at the centre of the narrative. These burlesque and brusque moments provide the audience with some brief comic respite from the suffering experienced by Alec (Trevor Howard) and Laura, and, in contrast, increase the sense of noble tragedy associated with the emotionally adulterous couple.

From the perspective of the critical concerns of this thesis, it is instructive to note that in mid-forties British film culture, the comic and dramatically significant moments in *Brief Encounter* are clearly demarcated and serve differing dramatic purposes - the upper classes are associated with notions of high tragedy and drama, and the working classes with instances of low humour and comic relief. Raymond Durgnat in *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (1970), reported that to a mid-1960s cinema

audience, however, the whole film was capable of appearing ludicrous, and impossible to take as seriously as it seemed to take itself: 'the audience…couldn't restrain its derision and repeatedly burst into angry exasperated laughter'.[41]

The aching sincerity of the middle class couple in *Brief Encounter* could lead to modern audiences finding the strangulated vocal sounds and uncompleted speeches emanating from Laura and Alec, as they struggle to articulate their emotional feelings within the available class and social discourses, more comically pitiful, than genuinely tragic. The film itself is aware of the incongruity of dramatising a deeply felt, emotionally intense love affair within the polite tones of English upper class voices. This is highlighted in a scene where Alec and Laura watch a preview of a film entitled *Flames of Passion* at the Palladium cinema. The movie is introduced with adjectives in capital letters, proclaiming the film as 'STUPENDOUS! COLOSSAL! GIGANTIC! EPOCH-MAKING!', coding *Brief Encounter* as an implicitly British cinematic repost to the more self-promoting and aggrandising tendencies associated with certain types of Hollywood cinema. Following the hyperbole for *Flames of Passion*, an advertisement for prams in the local high street is flashed onto the screen to the amusement of the audience, implying that childbirth and childcare is the inevitable (and perhaps proper?) consequence of all this "stored up" heterosexual passion.

Brief Encounter concludes with the couple's relationship remaining forever unconsummated, with the pair lacking even the chance to say a proper goodbye to each other. Alec leaves for Africa, and Laura is forced to return to her previous homely and comfortable, but essentially unexciting existence. Inwardly, they have both, perhaps, been changed forever. Laura's haunted and tormented expression is the final image of the film, a testimony to the power and danger of true love at this point in British cinematic history.

In *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger also invested the subject of love between a man and a woman character with a high degree of social and ideological significance and speculation. Their knowingly ironic and playful drama contemplated the future state of the post-1945 world order, through an allegorical "ghost-like" love story between an English pilot, Peter Carter (David Niven) and an American air force radio

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operator, June (Kim Hunter). Carter is suspended in a state between death and life, having accidentally survived a plane accident. A French aristocrat (who was beheaded by his own people) is sent down from the heavens to persuade Carter to relinquish his life. Having fallen in love with the American woman, though, Niven's character pleads to be allowed to carry on living.

His rights in this matter are debated in the celestial "other world". The case for the prosecution is argued by an American who was killed in the American War of Independence against the British, while the case for the defence is presented by an upper class English brain surgeon, killed in a road accident, while trying to save Peter. 'He's gone ahead', Peter is told about his saviour's death, and the film, produced in the aftermath of the mass deaths caused by the Second World War, tries to suggest through its incredible premise that death is not necessarily the final end, or the last word.

Ian Christie in his *BFI Film Classics* (1992) study of the film suggests that one of the key questions posed by the film is whether a 'life in England is a suitable fate for an American woman'[42] (*Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill* will also pose and explore this theme in the 1990s.) The American representative in *Life and Death* casts doubts about whether the 'vibrant humour of a young American girl' should be 'stifled in the pages of *Punch*' in a country distinguished by 'smoky chimneys' and imperialist ambitions. The conclusion to the narrative, though, is determined by a willing act of self-sacrifice on the part of June, who declares her willingness to die if Peter be allowed to live. This selfless declaration convinces the Judge that their love deserves to be granted a prosperous existence on earth, as an example that nation states (as well as human relationships) can be founded on tenets of love and optimism, rather than scepticism and mutual distrust. The film, thus combines social comment, ironic satire and romantic wish-fulfilment, and finds the fragmented state of the post-war world to be both tragically sad, and, in certain respects, comically absurd.

Post-war Britain was initially dominated by the administration of a Labour government in office from 1945 to 1951, which laid down the foundations for a welfare state, and a society based on the concept of greater opportunities for all members of society. Between 1951 and 1964, the Conservative party governed Britain,[43] and certain indigenous romantic comedies from the early stages of this period dramatise the tensions implicit in this movement from a desire to affect

social change, towards a concern that specifically 'English' cultural and social traditions be preserved.

In *Genevieve* (Henry Cornelius, 1953), the characters played by John Gregson (Alan) and Dinah Sheridan (Wendy) represent aspiring upper-middle class couples of the kind celebrated in the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Alan and Wendy are contrasted with Ambrose (Kenneth More) and Rosalind (Kay Kendall), a recently acquainted couple. Ambrose is a bachelor and something of a "cad", whilst Rosalind is a woman aware of her sexual appeal and attractiveness to men.

Tradition in the film is symbolised by the vintage car, Genevieve, which Alan desperately tries to use to defeat the competitive Ambrose. The ensuing race between the two men is also indicative of a sexual rivalry based on insecurity and fear of failure. 'Ambrose seems to think of only two things. That silly old car and the other thing' observes Rosalind. 'My husband only thinks about the car', replies Wendy. The film quietly affirms tradition and emotional restraint, as embodied by Genevieve and Alan respectively, with the eponymous car managing to pass the finishing post single-handedly, at precisely the moment in which Alan has almost given up all hope of winning.[44] Both the comic and dramatic incidents of the narrative are generated by the clash in lifestyles, and the conflict over who will win the race. Alan is the nicer and more trustworthy of the two men, but Ambrose is freer and appears to have more fun. The implication of the ending, though, is that he too will settle down and probably marry Rosalind.

Anthony Asquith's filmed version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1952) played down the more subversive implications and context of Oscar Wilde's play (*Earnest* had opened only eight days after he was arrested for indecent conduct in February, 1895, and had closed in London by the 8th of May [45]), but still depicted Wilde's characters as embarked on an endless series of verbal games and performances, in which sincerity is a weakness, and 'truth' merely another kind of performance. Parody, irony and facetiousness are presented as ways of keeping one's private life private, even if a character's origins may turn out to be rather humble and involve such 'down to earth' settings as a railway station (cf. *Brief Encounter*).

The 1960s witnessed the release of a number of movies (particularly amongst those films designated as belonging to the British 'new wave', circa

1958-63, discussed in part two), which reflected on the changing social and sexual mores of British culture in the context of a new decade. In *Only Two Can Play* (Sidney Gilliat, 1962), Peter Sellers portrayed a Welsh librarian tempted into an adulterous affair with an exotic Norwegian woman, before realising the error of his ways, and returning to his wife and humdrum existence. Kingsley Amis, the author of *That Uncertain Feeling* (1955), on which the screenplay was based, commented, that in the film, the married man 'has an attack of principle', rather than, as in the novel, succumbs to sexual desire, because the British 'heroes of romantic screen comedies didn't fuck in those days'.[46]

Billy Liar (John Schlesinger, 1963) presented Billy Fisher (Tom Courtney) with a 'fantasy' woman, Liz (Julie Christie), who offered the possibility of an escape from the unromantic and unpropitious circumstances of his own social situation, and a journey from north to south. Like the male characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* who develop dual identities as a means of resisting confinement or identification (John Worthing is 'Ernest in town and Jack in the country'[47]), Billy ultimately refuses to completely relinquish his commitment to a world of fantasies, which he can conjure up (and banish) at will.

The close of the narrative sees Billy leaving Liz to travel on her own to London, while he returns home in a scene of imaginary glory, at the head of a phantom army. Despite its profusion of fantasy sequences, which render the narrative something of a dazzling mosaic, rather than a coherent whole, the film's bitter-sweet conclusion reflects the unbridgeable gap between the prosaic reality which Billy inhabits, and his determination as a committed fantasist to withdraw into a make-believe world of endless heroism and excitement.

The increased possibilities for romantic and sexual experimentation associated with the concept of 'Swinging London', and the advent of the 'permissive society', did, however, lead to the production of romantic comedy dramas which acknowledged that individuals might pursue an independent and lively sexual existence outside of the confines of marriage and committed relationships in British society.

Alfie (Lewis Gilbert, 1966) replaced the female voice-over nervously reflecting on experience in the troubled drama of *Brief Encounter*, with the voice-over and perspective of a confident male character as portrayed by Michael Caine, recalling the various women characters with whom he has had affairs.

Alfie has no qualms about dating married woman, but after one such affair ends in a squalid and painful abortion for the woman, and he is subsequently jilted by a sexually liberated and experienced American woman (Shelley Winters), he, too, becomes a character forced to dwell upon the spiritual emptiness of his life, in ways ironically suggesting a certain level of continuity with the inner conscience expressed by Laura's narration in *Brief Encounter*. Approximately the first two thirds of *Alfie* are composed of a comic celebration of the character's lifestyle, but the final section of the narrative gives way to an increasing sense of loss and potential tragedy. Even in its 'liberated phase', the British romantic comedy drama, arguably, retained a moralizing and judgmental dimension.

The figure of a prospective 'Casanova' style lover did, however, grace 1970s British cinema screens in the shape of the Robin Asquith character from the *Confessions of* series of films (1974-77). These sex comedies promised greater sexual explicitness than could be displayed on television, but audiences discovered that with the exception of brief moments of sexual interaction (which were usually quickly interrupted), the films were constructed in an episodic form similar to the dramatic structure of television situation comedies, and consequently tended to retain something of the censorship principles governing such programmes. The 1970s, as a whole, remained something of a barren decade in terms of British romantic comedy dramas, with indigenous film production being partly dominated by the making of family based, situation comedy-type narratives, as discussed in the chapter on ethnic comedies.

It was not until the release of *Gregory's Girl* (Bill Forsyth, 1980) that there was something of a revival in narratives centring upon the day to day idiosyncrasies and agonies of romantic relationships. John Sinclair's Gregory (like Billy Fisher) is mesmerised by girls, but unable to break with a penchant for being overwhelmed by fantasy and social ineptitude. Andrew Higson in an essay on *Gregory's Girl* in the *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers*: *Films* (Volume 1, 1997) claimed that the film represented a particular aspect of British filmic responses to the 'popularity of Hollywood films' in British film culture; namely, 'the making of tasteful romances for all the family, which carefully resist indulging in the excesses of Hollywood melodrama'.[48]

Following the establishment of Channel Four in 1982, there was, however, an increase in drama-based narratives, focusing on relationships underpinned by a harder edged, more bitterly comic perspective, evident in films such as *Educating Rita* (Lewis Gilbert, 1983), *A Letter to Brezhnev* (Chris Bernard, 1985), *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (Alan Clarke, 1988) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Stephen Frears, 1989). Channel Four had been created 'to commission the work of independent programme makers',[49] and Peter Catterall in *The Making of Channel 4* (1999) reported that The Annan Committee of 1977 had suggested that the channel 'should encourage programmes which say something new in new ways'.[50]

The result was a series of films which sought to update and regenerate the BBC tradition of producing topical and contentious plays, particularly by exploring relationships in the context of life under a Conservative administration (1979-97) in contemporary British society. *A Letter to Brezhnev*, a key comedy drama from the period, was described by John Pym in *Film on Four:1982/1991 A Survey* (1992) as 'a rough-edged Liverpool love story'.[51] The film took the theme of a relationship between a Russian visitor to Britain, and an English woman (a plotline explored in the wartime film *The Demi-Paradise*, Anthony Asquith, 1943), and set the story in Liverpool, a city revealed as existing in a state of economic decline and social deprivation. This modern day international romance evolves out of a relationship between a young Kirby woman, Elaine (Alexandra Pigg) and Peter, a Russian sailor on shore leave.

In *The Demi-Paradise*, the Russian visitor was played by Laurence Olivier, and in *Brezhnev,* an English actor, Peter Firth, similarly, plays a Russian character. The major difference between the two films is that in the contemporary dramatisation, British society is presented frankly and unflatteringly. Elaine's family home is a site of foul mouthed conflict, and couples are depicted in states of mutual antagonism, bound together only by sexual desire or habit. Consequently, the Soviet Union tends to be viewed by Elaine as a more attractive alternative to Liverpool, and so she begins a quest to be allowed to move from Kirby to the Kremlin, so to speak.

Teresa (Margi Clarke), her friend, accuses Elaine of having read too many 'Mills and Boon' novels, but latterly comes to realise that it is better to have some kind of dream than to face being reconciled to a daily routine which

promises only repetitive monotony and limited outlets for creative pleasure. Elaine (like Alec in *Brief Encounter*) leaves Britain at the close for a new way of life abroad, but it is not clear whether she is in the grip of a romantic delusion, which can only result in social and emotional disappointment (the British Foreign Office inform her that Peter is a married man), or whether her leaving of Liverpool and British society is an affirmative act. The humour in the film comes from the women's robust repartee and carnivalistic approach to life, but the drama is a reminder of the oppressive social situation existing in declining cities during the mid-point of Margaret Thatcher's eleven year position as Prime Minister.

Rita, Bob and Sue Too (1988) was another Film Four production, providing a raucous, savage satire on marriage and monogamy, and on what it perceives as the tragic-comic 'state of the nation'. The film details an affair between two young women (who have no opportunities or apparent urge to escape from their dour surroundings), and a married man. Set in Bradford, the film's sex scenes are presented in a detached, dispassionate style, and the film emanates from an urge to endorse (if not to uncritically celebrate) the essence and world view of a certain type of British "low brow" humour in the tradition of George Formby and the *Carry On* (1958-78) series of films.

A *Time Out* reviewer of the film accused its makers of displaying 'humour in the worst possible taste' during the freeze frame ending, which has Bob diving onto his Union Jack bedspread, beneath which lie *both* Rita and Sue in amused anticipation of sexual pleasure.[52] This moment of narrative closure, arguably, parodies the European 'art-house' ending of *Jules et Jim* (Francois Truffaut, 1962) where the film's three lovers, on deciding that they cannot live with or without each other, opt instead for a lethal combination (initiated by the woman character) of suicide, murder and spiritual desolation.

Two films of the late 1980s, by depicting the doomed love affairs of dramatist Joe Orton (1933-67) and punk musician, Sid Vicious (1958-79), were able to construct narratives depicting love as a phenomenon capable of moments of extreme black humour, before they too descended (within their particular contexts) into incidents of murder and suicide, and a corresponding sense of spiritual desolation and exhaustion. In *Prick Up Your Ears* (Stephen Frears, 1987), the relationship between Orton (Gary Oldman) and his romantic partner,

Kenneth Halliwell (Alfred Molina) deteriorates into a parody of an emotionally traumatic heterosexual marriage, culminating in death and destruction. *Sid and Nancy* (Alex Cox, 1986), similarly, presents the relationship at the centre of its narrative as a kind of grotesque parody of motifs denoting ideals of true love (in this instance, of the kind of Anglo-American relationship, posited and privileged, in *A Matter of Life and Death*).

Nancy (Chloe Webb) introduces Sid to hard drugs, which serve to aid his rejection of straight society and conventional behaviour in ways far exceeding the earlier solipsistic antics of Billy Fisher and Gregory. This couple's notions of 'reality' are increasingly determined by the effects of the drugs consumed, and concepts of courtship, love and commitment are re-imagined from a nihilistic British punk perspective, defiantly promoting itself in opposition to the Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations of 1977. The film's stridently anti-romantic imagery and outlook (Sid declares that he was 'so bored once, he fucked a dog'), led veteran film critic, Dilys Powell to declare

> If this is romantic, the cinema has suffered a revolution. But then it has. *Sid and Nancy* is a British film; we have come a long way since the days of Margaret Lockwood. No doubt we were right to move. All the same, we might have stopped short of the repulsive.[53]

On meeting Nancy's parents, and being asked about his intentions towards her (as if they were a conventional romantic couple, beneath their outlandish costumes and disaffected poses), Sid replies that they are 'going to go down the methadone clinic on Monday, and go off to Paris, and just sort of go out in a blaze of glory'. This seemingly haphazard, but actually quite formulated plan, puts Cavell's much quoted definition of the ideal filmic romantic couple (he takes his example from *It Happened One Night*, Frank Capra, 1934) into a new, specifically modern perspective:

> What this pair does together is less important than the fact that they do whatever it is together…that they would rather waste time together than do anything else - except that no time they are together could be wasted.[54]

In one contemporary usage of the term, all that Sid and Nancy really aspire to do is to get "wasted" together. Prior to their demise, and realising that America may be a land for the wrong kind of opportunity, Sid announces that he is going back to London to be with his friends and 'people who care'. But Nancy persuades him not to make the journey, and the film suggests that they die out of a bungled

suicide pact. The closing   inscription - 'Sid and Nancy R.I.P.' – is inevitably ironic, as the film presents them resisting any possible moments of peace and reconciliation during their lifetime. Their drug induced fantasies result in terrible and tragic incidents, and while the film records their excesses with a certain gleeful detachment, the comic outrageousness of the narrative is gradually eclipsed by a sense of a situation - and a couple - spiralling hopelessly out of control.

The Anglo-American relationship in social and cinematic terms seems to arrive at a literal and symbolic 'dead end' by the close of *Sid and Nancy*, with a certain brand of nihilistic hedonism seen as emerging from the British 'punk' movement of the 1970s crossing over to America to meet a violent end. Efforts to revive notions of more romantically inclined Anglo-American relationships would have to take very different forms in subsequent British films. *Sid and Nancy*, like a number of the narratives discussed in this section, did not suggest that the forming and depicting of successful romances in British film culture was a straightforward or easily maintained process.

Pressures from a somewhat repressive society to conform or refrain from sexual encounters outside of marriage, responsibilities felt by lovers to other partners, all played their part in ensuring that the course of 'true love' in many of the films discussed, invariably, did not run smoothly. The next section will discuss how a group of 1990s British films both expanded upon (and engaged with) these themes from contemporary perspectives.

(4.3) **Constructing romantic scenarios in 1990s British cinema**.

The beginning of the 1990s witnessed the release of two films which presented romantic and sexual passion in a sombre and intense fashion, without the 'sensationalism' of *Sid and Nancy*, but in ways far removed from the more 'comic based' approaches which would follow later in the decade. *Close My Eyes* (Stephen Poliakoff, 1991) and *Damage* (Louis Malle, 1992) drew upon modes of detached social observation, interspersed with melodramatic plot developments in their studies of transgressive, incestuous and doomed relationships. The former film depicted the consequences of a brother and sister developing a sexual relationship in the context of a British society in its twelfth year of living under a Conservative government. Harriet Waugh, reviewing *Close*

My Eyes in *The Spectator*, drew particular attention to the bleak and emotionless mood of the film, with its sense of an emotionally constricted and morally vacant society, remarking that 'life' in the narrative is deadly 'serious, there are no jokes', a character 'gets Aids…All this happens without a vestige of wit'.[55]

Nigel Andrews in the *Financial Times*, linked *Damage* with *Accident* (Joseph Losey, 1967), an earlier drama about obsessive relationships meeting a traumatic end in an upper class English setting.[56] Both *Accident* and *Damage* were made by non-British directors, and possess titles alluding to the destructive passions being acted out within each film. The affair in *Damage* between the British Conservative Minister for the Environment (Jeremy Irons) and his son's girlfriend, Anna Barton (Juliet Binoche), a kind of French *femme fatale*, led Andrews to observe ironically that with 'tariff barriers crumbling, not even passion now bothers to stop at borders'.[57] In *Sid and Nancy* and *Damage*, passionate relationships between English men and American or French women are presented as equally destructive and careless of human life.

Truly, Madly, Deeply (Anthony Minghella, 1991) constituted a transitional film between these passionate, but fundamentally pessimistic dramas, and the narrative and character paradigms formulated by *Four Weddings* following its release in 1994. In contrast to *Close My Eyes* and *Damage*, Minghella's film explored an intense and sombre subject (the premature death of a loved one) in a narrative and stylistic form which drew upon modes of humour, fantasy, and psychological drama. The film charts the grieving process endured by Nina (Juliet Stephenson) as she mourns the loss of her lover, Jamie (Alan Rickman, giving a particularly reflexive and self-mocking performance). Judging by her relationships with a group of supportive male admirers, she appears to be coping, but meetings with a psychiatrist reveal that she is actually in an acute state of despair. Overcome by the distress of observing this situation from beyond the grave, the dead Jamie returns as a ghost to the flat and Nina's life, and the film allows the two lovers to briefly withdraw from the everyday world into a magical setting, where they can be truly alone (and *alone truly*) together.

Having imbued the opening stages of the story with an acute sense of loss and sadness, the film subsequently initiates a plot development predicated on notions of 'comic' wish fulfilment (Jamie's return from the dead), before introducing a further level of ironic absurdity to the narrative, signified by Jamie inviting his

dead friends to come and live in Nina's flat and watch videos in the living room where *Brief Encounter*, significantly and resonantly, is one of the films viewed by the ghosts. (The closing line spoken by the deceived husband in *Brief Encounter* -'Thank you for coming back to me'- can be seen as appropriate to the rather tragic elements of both films.)

The ghosts, however, increasingly resemble a group of wanderers in a state of exile, and one can speculate that they may have lost their lives in the context of opposition to the harsh strictures of various totalitarian regimes around the world, or may even have been AIDS victims. *Truly, Madly, Deeply* (like *Close My Eyes* and *Damage*) implies that British society in the early 1990s cannot be judged to exist in a vibrant or inspiring state of being, and during a sequence set on a London embankment (involving a parody of a first date), Nina declares that she hates 'what this country is doing to itself and other races'.[58]

As in *A Matter of Life and Death*, political issues and speculations are intertwined with the fate of a pair of lovers. The resolution of both films is dependent on one partner being willing to sacrifice him or herself, so that the other can live. In Powell and Pressburger's film, June reveals a willingness to die for Peter, and in *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, the situation is reversed, with Jamie coming to the conclusion that he needs to die (again), so that Nina can create a new life for herself. *Truly, Madly, Deeply* may present the "after life" as an entity beyond understanding (hence, the tragic-comic absurdities of the ghosts' behaviour), but the key line in the film's mythology is perhaps a reference to the rising of Christ from the cross, uttered by the friendly, Camden council pest control expert, who, despite being a widower himself, declares that 'Death shall have no dominion'.[59]

Truly, Madly, Deeply was initially filmed on 16 mm for BBC television as a *Screen Two* presentation, and then enlarged to 35mm after the finished product was deemed suitable for cinematic release. Mark Shivas, the head of BBC drama during this period, recalled that 'All the contracts had to be renegotiated for its new incarnation, at a cost of several hundred thousand pounds'.[60] Anticipating the promotional policy of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, the film was premiered in America to what Shivas described as 'decent reviews and business'.[61]

Truly, Madly, Deeply was able to situate its moments of painful drama within a comic and spiritual schema which both celebrated and gently mocked notions

of undying love. Anne Billson, film critic of the *New Statesman*, still felt that the film was symptomatic of a cultural malaise affecting British film production during the period of the early 1990s: 'Someone asked me recently why I hadn't reviewed *Truly, Madly, Deeply* or *Close My Eyes*. My reason: there is not enough money in the world…to tempt me to go and see these movies', she stated, before going on to suggest that the 'general public' could not be persuaded to see the films either, 'if one is to judge by the dearth of punters flocking in to see them'.[62]

The Rachel Papers (Damian Harris, 1989), an adaptation of a novel by Martin Amis, represented an attempt to resurrect representations of Anglo-American relationships in British cinema in a more comic and sexually explicit context. The film included two American film performers in its cast (James Spader and Ione Skye), and referred back to *Alfie* in the way its central character, Charles Highway (Dexter Fletcher), is presented speaking his innermost thoughts directly to the camera. Changes in censorship regulations meant that the film (which was rated 18) could be more graphic in its depictions of the couple's sex life than many previous British films about relationships: Highway declares that, 'To Rachel, sex was Disneyland, and I was the ride'.

In the film, Rachel chooses Charles over her American boyfriend, although eventually she leaves both Highway and London, and returns to New York. Julian Petley's review of *The Rachel Papers* in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* was sceptical about the film's use of American stars to tell its story: 'Presumably, Rachel's transmogrification into an American had more to do with budgetary than dramatic considerations', he suggested, adding this might 'also explain why London appears to have experienced a trans-Atlantic takeover in certain scenes'.[63]

Soft Top Hard Shoulder (Stefan Schwartz, 1992) did not feature American performers, but sought to demonstrate that British cinema was capable of producing popular films which drew upon narrative patterns and motifs associated with Hollywood cinema, such as the 'road movie' and 'screwball comedy'. Revolving around Peter Capaldi's character's frantic drive from London to Scotland to be eligible for an inheritance from his Italian grandfather (Richard Wilson), the film records the geographical and emotional journey which he undertakes with Yvonne (Elaine Collins), an independent minded Scottish woman, who it emerges, has just run away from her own wedding. *Soft Top Hard*

Shoulder, in paying homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, suggested that modern British films about relationships did not need to be overtly stark or melodramatic, and that pleasure could be found in observing the fortunes of unexceptional couples unravel, in the midst of authentic British surroundings.

This attempt to create an updated model for indigenous romantic comedies was criticised by Adam Mars-Jones in *The Independent*, who argued that it could be considered 'unpromising from a box-office standpoint, that an independent British project should be so preoccupied with, and almost parasitic on, the cinematic tradition it has no part of: Hollywood'.[64] His review went on to suggest that the locations used in the 'road movie' features of the film (London, Morecambe and Scotland) could not be made to compete with the wide open spaces and vistas of America, as regularly featured in Hollywood films:

> For full enjoyment of *Soft Top Hard Shoulder* it may be necessary to like American movies, even to be mildly knowledgeable about them, but not to want to see one just at the moment – a rather tenuous niche in the marketplace…*Soft Top Hard Shoulder* gets much mileage out of a British cultural dilemma that won't go away – of being haunted by imported dreams inappropriate to our habit, our temperament or simply, our climate.[65]

Early 1990s British romantic comedies which employed American actors, or were felt to be too obviously seeking to recreate Hollywood style plots and situations were, thus, prey to criticisms that their approaches were misconceived or doomed to failure. The international success of *Four Weddings* in 1994 and *Notting Hill* five years later, did, however, serve to create more favourable conditions for British films based around a study of relationships between characters from the two nations.

Martha - Meet Daniel, Frank and Laurence (1998), one of the Anglo-American romantic films to emerge from the revivification of this sub-genre in British cinema, revolved around an American woman desired by three men. Martha (Monica Potter) eventually chooses Laurence (Joseph Fiennes) as the most romantic and sincere of the three suitors to be her 'perfect partner', and, by the close of the narrative, they are heading out of London towards the 'magical setting' of Iceland, a place chosen for its cheapness ('a ticket for anywhere for £99'), and its potential for their love to grow in a less artificial and cynical environment than the big city. A subsidiary character in the film played by Ray Winstone comments that the tale told by the film's narrator, Laurence, is really

about a group of 'self-obsessed friends' who are 'locked in a futile rivalry', and it is difficult not to see this statement as a pertinent observation about the schematic and somewhat contrived nature of the film itself.

Sliding Doors (1997), after *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill*, was the most successful 1990s British film to incorporate an Anglo-American alliance into its narrative. The twist in this particular film was that its American star, Gwyneth Paltrow, appeared as a British woman (Helen) who regularly employs such indigenous expressions as 'Ease up, for Christ's sake' in her speech. Paltrow was also required to perform two variations on the same character, illustrating that even love stories which turn out well in the end are haunted by the possibility that everything could have turned out differently (cf. *Brief Encounter*).

In one of the contrasting scenarios in *Sliding Doors*, Gwyneth Paltrow's character misses a tube, and does not realise until the end of the narrative that her boyfriend is seeing another woman. In an alternative story (and parallel universe), she catches the tube *and* her boyfriend in the act of being unfaithful, and meets a potential new love, James (John Hannah). This character then goes on to make a new life for herself, but ends up dying in the arms of James, after being run over by a car; knowledge in this case proving to be both dangerous and fatal. Helen number one survives a fall downstairs, caused by the belated recognition that her boyfriend is unfaithful, and the film ends with a curious sense of *déjà vu* as she meets James in a lift without recognising him, hinting that the seeds of her future were contained in the tragic parallel plot (or, more disturbingly that the film's narrative can have no real meaningful or coherent conclusion).

Each of the endings to Helen's stories are somewhat melodramatic, but only one is tragic. *Sliding Doors* places its famous Hollywood performer within the confines of a domestic situation comedy-style narrative, and then problematises the film's treatment of time in the manner of a European avant-garde film. By not making Gwyneth Paltrow's character American, audiences can appreciate, and be fascinated by her sustained and skilful impersonation of a British character, and her willingness to participate in a British movie (albeit, one largely American funded), suggesting that while *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill* may represent the peaks of such Anglo-American film star interchanges, they do not necessarily constitute the last word in such cultural exchanges.

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Mark Steyn in his review of *Sliding Doors* (*The Spectator*, 1998), even went so far as to suggest that 'Gwyneth Paltrow presents a far more enchanting vision of Englishness than any other English actress I can think of; on the other hand, she seems more far more natural as an Englishwoman than she does as an American'.[66] From such a perspective, the process of assimilating and competing with American film culture might appear as if it had been taken to a logical (if extreme) position.

A British film released during the same year as *Sliding Doors*, *Love and Death on Long Island* (Richard Kwietniowski, 1997), also focused on Anglo-American relationships, detailing how an esoteric British writer, Giles De'Ath (John Hurt) becomes obsessed with a young American actor, Ronnie Bostock (Jason Priestley), whom he observes in a "trashy" teenage Hollywood movie, after entering the wrong auditorium in his local cinema; thus, missing the English E.M. Forster 'heritage' movie he was originally seeking out. Giles becomes infatuated by the star, but not by the strand of American popular culture which Ronnie represents. Moments of humour and pathos are consequently generated out of Hurt's character's attempts to establish contact with Bostock at his Long Island home, and his desire to encourage him to find work in more dignified and worthwhile parts.

Gilbert Adair's first person novella has De'Ath declaring that Ronnie 'should not lazily fly out to Hollywood and make *Hotpants College III* as though there were no alternative...I would write the kind of role and the kind of film which his gifts merited'.[67] The film adaptation ends in a tragic-comic fashion, with Giles daring to 'come out' to both America and Ronnie. 'What have I done?' ponders De'Ath, as Ronnie politely, but firmly, rejects his offers of love and total devotion. The final image in the film is of Giles once more being reduced to watching his idol on the cinema screen, rather than in a state of close personal proximity, an indication of a cultural and sexual gap between the two characters which cannot quite be bridged.

Beautiful Thing (Hettie Macdonald, 1996), the other most significant gay British romantic comedy of the 1990s, was a very different kind of 'coming out' drama. Mark Steyn, reviewing *Notting Hill* in *The Spectator*, argued that he would have respected the makers of that film more

if they'd 'had the guts to make a film called *Tower Hamlets* or *Broadwater*

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Farm especially given that, whatever, the estate agents say, the differences between the Portobello Road and the Commercial Road are to the average Hollywood star…virtually undetectable.[68]

The Thamesmead tower block where the story of *Beautiful Thing* unfolds was an attempt to make an 'unlikely couple' movie (without well known British or American actors) in a setting which was imbued with 'social realist' credentials. The film-makers sought to produce a film, however, which focused on sexual and emotional themes, rather than the social problems and employment difficulties which often dominated British films situated in such environments.

The tale begins with Jamie (Glen Berry) being bullied at school, and vainly looking to his friend, Ste (Scott Neal) for support. The film will close with them openly dancing together and embracing each other in front of the inhabitants of the housing estate: a utopian image of what relationships could be like in a perfect society, and a striking illustration of the gap between ideal outcomes and everyday reality in British culture. Humorous observations and dramatic developments in the narrative tend to stem from the characters' antagonistic and explosive confrontations with each other. Jamie's mother, Sandra (Linda Henry), complains that she works 'all the hours God sends to keep' her son 'in insults', and the film is based around remarks and observations which allude to unpleasant and unfunny realities. When Ste announces that he is being taken to watch a boxing match with his father, Sandra quips that she thought he would have had enough of that by now (a coded reference to the beatings he receives from his family). Jamie objects to her finding humour in such a distressing situation, and reminds her that it wasn't funny when *her* ex-boyfriend was beating her up. This exchange ends with Sandra slapping Jamie, and both of them rolling around on the floor in a state of extreme frustration and anger, indicating a sudden transition from 'comedy' to despair, which is emblematic of many of the films discussed in this and the previous two chapters.

Most of the characters in *Beautiful Thing* are depicted as fighting with their inner 'demons' and social nightmares, and some take out their anger on those nearest to them, and others (particularly Sandra) try to channel their aggression towards making a better life for themselves. *Beautiful Thing*, I would suggest, significantly, does not envisage humour as an end in itself, or simply as a defence mechanism employed by characters at the end of their tether. Instead, the film

seeks to find a way through the bitter exchanges and harsh remarks, and the sense of a world turned upside down.

The film does not suggest that humour, borne and forged out of traditions based around coping with adversity, can cope with non-ironic homophobic abuse, such as when Jamie's mother discovers that her son's school exercise books have the words 'bum fucker', 'queer', and 'bent bastard' scrawled all over them. The magical place where love might blossom in such a context remains distant (*The Gloucester* gay bar and a 'magical woods' setting are the nearest the boys come to finding a kind of sanctuary from a harsh and unforgiving society), but the film implies that this is no reason for gay (or heterosexual lovers, for that matter) not to still dream of, and work towards establishing such a place.

Beautiful Thing is important for the ways in which it seeks to expand the British romantic comedy format in terms of setting, sexual preference and character construction. Equally, the film harks back to a series of themes and indices of mood identified in a number of British films about romance produced between the 1930s and 1980s. The mixture of broad farce, sexual desire between characters, and naturalistic observation present in *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*, can also be observed in an updated, raw fashion in *Beautiful Thing*, which nonetheless seeks to go beyond the northern based heterosexual groupings of Alan Clarke's film, and its corresponding sense that none of the characters really have much of a future.

The relentless comic banter and innuendo between the characters in *Beautiful Thing* can be read as an attempt to appropriate the discourses of Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton for a contemporary working class environment, while the unfulfilled couples of *Rich and Strange* and *Brief Encounter* can be perceived as hovering in the filmic background to the narrative. The longing for something emotionally richer and more meaningful than that offered by the film's setting can also be discerned in the ending to *A Letter to Brezhnev*, where Elaine refuses to renege on her belief that true love (and a more just and equal society) does exist somewhere over the horizon.

The case studies of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill*, which follow in the next section, will seek to explore the themes and topics outlined in relation to British films from the 1930s to the 1980s, in the context of detailed examinations of these two major 1990s films' treatments of love, romance,

sexuality, the influence of place on achieving states of emotional fulfilment, and the possibilities for meaningful relationships and dialogues to take place between British and American characters.

(4.4) **Case Studies: 'Four Weddings and a Funeral'** (1994) **and 'Notting Hill'** (1999).

Four Weddings and a Funeral (Mike Newell, 1994) was one of the most commercially successful British films of the 1990s, but the unanticipated extent of the film's international popularity did lead to some dissension that the British film industry had not been better positioned to benefit from its success. *Four Weddings* was produced on a budget of £2.9 million, with seventy per cent of the cost (some sources put the figure at ninety per cent) being provided by PolyGram, and thirty per cent by Channel Four.[69] Michael Grade, Chief Executive of Channel Four during the period of the film's initial release, claimed that the channel would eventually receive 'around £4 million' for its initial £800,000 investment.[70]

Labour Member of Parliament, Joe Ashton, at a 1995 committee meeting discussing the future and state of the British film industry, suggested, however, that Channel Four (in the wake of the huge and ongoing profits made by the film) had been 'taken to the cleaners' by their financial arrangement with PolyGram: 'It does seem there should have been some sell on rights that you weren't aware of', he told Grade.[71] Such queries led to a virulent response from Michael Kuhn, President of PolyGram Filmed Entertainment, who claimed that 'Channel Four puts 2p into our films and then complains when they get £5 million back, so screw them'.[72] A fellow Labour M.P., Gerald Kaufman, concluded that on the basis of the film's funding by a 'foreign-based multi-national company', it should not be perceived as a 'British film', especially as 'most of its profits' would 'end up in Eindhoven, Holland, home of Philips, the parent company of PolyGram Filmed Entertainment'.[73]

Four Weddings was also criticised on aesthetic and cultural grounds by a number of commentators. Howard Feinstein of *The Guardian* contended that the film 'responds to the American nostalgia for things British, even if anachronistic and embalmed'. Referring to the lack of African-Caribbean or Asian characters in the story, Feinstein commented, 'It foregrounds one same sex couple, but then

the gay market, unlike, say, the Indian or Caribbean, is one to be tapped'.[74] Feinstein's cynical comments imply, perhaps, that the film's images of gay life were overly calculated to appeal to gay *and* heterosexual audiences, presenting a gay couple, Gareth (Simon Callow) and Matthew (John Hannah) as ironically the embodiment (within all the many heterosexual relationships on display) of an ideal stable couple. This contented homosexual partnership is, nonetheless, terminated in the narrative by Gareth's fatal heart attack (an appropriately deathly motif, perhaps, amidst the spectacle of so many wounded and broken hearts, even if his demise may constitute a coded reference to the tragic effects of the AIDS virus).

The narrative structure of *Four Weddings*, and the placing of characters in relation to the film's settings, were also criticised by certain writers. Richard Combs, in an article written for the American journal *Film Comment* (1995), criticised *Four Weddings* for what he perceived as the lack of depth to the characters, arguing that what was missing was a real 'sense of place', which would 'lend some resonance to its comic ideas beyond the level of a sitcom jokiness'.[75] His verdict was that the film could only be generically identified in ironic and contradictory terms, as being 'a popular movie', which became 'by default', through its 'frustrations, omissions, and halting narrative style...a kind of art movie.'[76]

Four Weddings and a Funeral, thus occupies a prominent, if somewhat critically ambivalent position in contemporary British film culture. This case study of *Four Weddings*, along with a subsequent discussion of Working Title's 'follow-up' film, *Notting Hill*, will seek to explore and assess the validity of such critical observations, and the film's relationship to issues of 'Britishness' and ideas about cultural exchanges between Britain and America. I shall also investigate the ways in which the narrative combines comic and (melo)dramatic modes of narration to produce an enormously popular contemporary British romantic comedy.

In presenting its characters as constrained and contained in significant respects by their cultural surroundings, *Four Weddings* alludes to the thematic preoccupations of both British 'realist' and 'heritage' pictures which concern themselves with the choices and options available to characters in specific settings and situations. *Four Weddings*, I would suggest, attempts to

defamiliarise the more familiar thematic concerns of these genres by placing its characters within an unusually tightly structured series of public situations, from which a state of freedom can only be attained through death (as in the case of Gareth), or by characters who, in the end, make a decision to reject the conformist and repetitive structures in which they find themselves (Carrie and Charles consciously make a commitment *not* to get married to each other at the close, as if their accumulated experiences have taught them that weddings represent a curse, rather than a blessing).

'Who is it today?', asks Charles, as a second wedding follows three months after the first (although the narrative crucially presents these events as following one after another, so accentuating the impression of audiences that the ceremonies completely dominate and determine the lives of the characters). Paul Dave in an essay, 'The Bourgeois Paradigm and Heritage Cinema' (*New Left Review*, 1997), suggested that the film is based around the riddle of 'how to imagine a ceremony which does not turn out to be closed'.[77] The uniqueness and value of these series of variations on a theme is that the characters can be presented *as if* they have no existence or meaning outside of the ceremonies attended, which some critics of the film might regard as a limitation adversely affecting the amount of social detail and psychological depth generated by the characters. (Perhaps in response to such criticisms, *Notting Hill* displays a clear interest in what its characters do for a living.)

The repetitive and pre-determined structure of the narrative is also partly a result of what Richard Curtis conceives of as a particularly effective method for constructing scenarios out of which comic situations can be initiated, deepened and refined: 'having thought of one thing, I just exaggerate and expand and move it around...[in] a very simple line of expansion and repetition'.[78] Curtis' explanation of his favoured imaginative strategy points to the natural relationship between comedy and acts of repetition, in which characters persist in making the same mistakes again, and fail to learn from their errors and misjudgements. In *Four Weddings*, Charles and Carrie (Andie MacDowell) come close to acting out, to its logical conclusion, a scenario of tormented moves in which neither of them is able to acknowledge, or act upon their true desires or instincts.

Charles is presented as someone who suffers from an unease about displaying emotions or having clear aims and objectives in life. Carrie is presented as a

liberated, cosmopolitan (although she works for *Vogue* magazine!) and sexually experienced woman. She is also depicted as someone who is prone to making self-destructive choices (after the marriage to Hamish (Corin Redgrave) quickly fails, she declares that she will never again 'marry someone three times my age'). Both characters have to be pushed to a stage where they are forced into abandoning their 'surface' demeanours, and have to make a decisive break with past and present relationships and attitudes. Charles and Carrie, thus, have to fight against both their own instincts *and* the structural flow of the narrative to keep them apart. The film has to reach a stage where the declaration, 'I do not', can also, in an emotionally meaningful sense, really signify, 'I do' or 'I will'.

Beginnings and Endings: '**It was nice not quite meeting you**' (Carrie to Charles).

The first wedding of the narrative is signified by an invitation card announcing the wedding of Angus and Laura to be held in Somerset, England, on May 1st . The seemingly unnecessary information (as far as British spectators are concerned) that Somerset is in England, signals that the film is aimed at a worldwide audience, who may not be aware of such details. The use of the wedding invitation motif to initiate dramatic events is a means of making spectators almost feel that they, too, are being hailed by the film to attend the ceremony, and observe the series of ritualistic events to follow. Part of the viewing pleasure for those who do respond positively to the film may lie in the "fly on the wall" documentary aspect to several stages of the narrative, where comparatively few plot developments are instigated, and instead we witness the procession of vows, speeches, and minor details of the wedding receptions.

The first wedding ceremony sequence is based upon comic scenarios familiar from television situation comedies, such as the joke that the best man is late *and* has forgotten the ring. The second ceremony is completely dominated by Rowan Atkinson's comic performance as an incompetent and tongue-tied priest, who at one stage enquires if anyone knows of a reason why the couple 'may not be johned in marriage'. This scene concludes with applause from the congregation, affirming the sketch-like nature of the sequence, which is clearly distinguished from those romantic comedy-threads of the narrative which specifically seek to initiate both comic and dramatic developments.

Charles' keynote 'best man' speech at the first wedding allows the film to move from situational comedy to a form of 'stand up' comedy, which also serves to deepen and complicate the nature of the film's attitudes to marriage and issues of emotional commitment. His talk, delivered in a style which is both guardedly playful, mocking and heartfelt, mixes references to sheep, unfaithful partners, bridegrooms who sleep with their loved one's sister *and* mother, and two day marriages which immediately become a 'nightmare of recrimination and violence'. Unsurprisingly, in view of the horrors which he alludes to for comic (rather than dramatic) purposes, Charles expresses his 'bewildered awe' and admiration for those couples who, despite these troubled references to decaying and tormented relationships between the sexes, are prepared to make a commitment to marriage and to each other, regardless of all the possible disturbing and disappointing consequences.

Charles is presented as being immediately fascinated by Carrie, who first appears wearing an enormous black hat in the style of a visitor to 'Ladies Day' at Ascot races. Upper class English aristocrat, Fiona (Kirsten Scott Thomas), perhaps sensing Carrie as a future rival for Charles' affections, dismisses Carrie as a 'slut' and an 'American' in a tone which implies that, in her view, the two categories may be mutually inclusive or complementary. In the scenes which serve to establish a tentative relationship between Carrie and Charles, Carrie is portrayed as the more sexually confident figure, who informs Charles where she is staying, seemingly as an invitation for him to spend the night with her, and then ingeniously pretends to be his wife in room twelve, in order to prize him away from the bar room bore, who (at this stage) constitutes the major obstacle, aside from Charles' own diffidence, to their sexual encounter.

When they do succeed in having sex together in the Boatman hotel, the shots which compose the scene focus briefly on images of Charles' back and Carrie's outstretched thighs, as if the total experience of their sexual engagement with each other cannot be completely represented or comprehended. Whilst engaging in sexual activity with each other, the couple ironically and irreverently wonder about what the symbolic figure of the vicar might think of their behaviour, but the film's narrative from this stage onward will come to rest upon what exactly their moment of sexual intimacy means in emotional and practical terms to Charles and Carrie.

Carrie will subsequently joke to Charles about expecting to get married after they have now slept together (implying that she is not the 'slut' of Fiona's derogatory moral judgements), and Charles will respond in kind by expressing concern that he has woken up and found himself in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), a film concerned with the terrible events that can occur when a man chooses not to marry his mistress. This scene of psychological and social intimacy, and 'screwball comedy' type playfulness between the couple, is abruptly concluded by Carrie's sudden announcement that she has to immediately leave for America. Charles declares that this constitutes a great tragedy (what one might term 'An American Tragedy'). The ambivalent, contradictory side of Carrie's nature is subsequently evident in her statement to Charles that 'I think we both missed a great opportunity here'. It is not exactly clear what Carrie means by this observation, although it seems to suggest that they could have (and should have?) more readily contemplated having some kind of emotional relationship together in the future.

Carrie's departure the day after their sexual intimacy means that this prospect cannot be discussed, however, and the next time they meet, Carrie makes another yet more startling and unsettling statement - that she is now engaged to be married to a Scottish politician, Hamish. Carrie's mobility and unpredictability is linked to her transatlantic lifestyle which allows her to operate in differing spheres of action in marked contrast to Charles, who appears more restricted to specifically British settings. Carrie's emotional and geographical elusiveness will become the main story, binding together the other supplementary strands of the narrative. Carrie and Charles notably *do* sleep together after Carrie announces her engagement (introducing an adulterous element into their relationship, even before Carrie is married), but on this occasion, unlike their previous tryst, the scene concludes with Charles leaving Carrie alone in bed the following day.

Such sequences allude to the changing social and moral codes and values of romantic comic traditions, suggesting that whatever other difficulties the couple face, an absence of sex is not one of their problems. The romantic comedy structural motif of the 'wrong partner' is still significant in the narrative, though, and is represented by the role played by Hamish in Carrie's life, and Henrietta's (Anna Chancellor) unreciprocated affection for Charles.

Carrie and Hamish's relationship will soon become associated with death and an irrepressible sense of futility. Following Gareth's death at her wedding, Carrie will go on to describe her marriage in curious metaphors, informing Charles that 'March was hell', and by 'April, it was sordid'. Carrie's choice of language implies that her desire for romance has been contaminated and undermined by a misguided pursuit of wealth and privilege (Hamish is described as 'owning half of Scotland'). Carrie does embrace traditional Scottish dancing at her wedding reception, suggesting a willingness to adopt to the ways of her new cultural milieu, but ultimately she comes to a realisation that money cannot compensate for a lack of empathy and sexual compatibility with her chosen partner. Carrie, despite her liberated, confident profile, consequently has to be saved from her own actions by the unlikely hero figure of Charles, who is the only character able to provide her with an alternative to the domestic unhappiness caused by her marriage to the wrong person.

In this sense, the film might be read as operating within the moral terrain of the classic 'screwball' Hollywood comedies of the 1930s, with its implicit message that happiness cannot be purchased, and that personal relations are ultimately much more important than profits and percentages. Tom (James Fleet) may be the seventh richest man in England (he acknowledges the greater wealth of the Queen, and Richard Branson), but the film reveals that his main hope in life is to find 'a nice, friendly girl' who is not made 'physically sick' by the sight of him, and who might subsequently be willing to share her life with him. Gerald Kaufman complained in an article cited earlier that 'It was impossible to understand' how the characters in *Four Weddings* 'managed to outfit themselves so expensively, since none of them seemed to have any kind of job and only one was independently rich'[79].

Such a literal reading, however, does not take into account the fact that classical Hollywood screwball comedies, similarly, tended to take the economic prosperity of their leading characters for granted, as it was *precisely this freedom* from financial constraints and considerations, which enabled the couples in question to explore the nature of their passionate feelings for each other, within a privileged dramatic space unencumbered with everyday worries and concerns.

Hugh Grant's persona in the film of harassed, but thoughtful inarticulateness, and his tendency in moments of stress to put on his old-fashioned pair of glasses

as if they might help him to see situations more clearly, brings to mind the bespectacled, philosophically inclined, but unworldly character played by Cary Grant in the classic Hollywood romantic comedy, *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938). In that film, Katharine Hepburn enacts a disruptive, but ultimately liberating influence on the central male character. In *Four Weddings*, the woman is explicitly presented as more sexually experienced than the man, and we learn that Charles has only 'slept with nine people', compared with Carrie's thirty three lovers. Enquiring, perhaps, on behalf of the audience, what constitutes a 'fair run' sexually in the late twentieth century, Charles learns that Carrie had slept with six men by the age of seventeen, and that subsequent lovers included two men simultaneously, a boyfriend's father, and an English lover (number 22) who 'kept falling asleep on the job'. Carrie sums up her sexual experiences in terms of 'American experience' compared to 'British innocence', claiming that she has had fewer lovers 'than Madonna', but more than 'Princess Diana'! Charles, feeling somewhat impotent and ineffectual, in comparison, wonders what he has been doing with his life. 'Working', he concludes, although the film notably does not tell us at what.[80]

The dramatic and cultural significance of this discussion between the characters is that, whereas, in certain previous traditions of Hollywood and British cinema, such unrepentant accounts of sexual activity on the part of the woman character might have led to her being ostracised or marginalized by the narrative, in *Four Weddings*, Carrie's sexual worldliness is coded as one of the potential rewards for Hugh Grant's character. In the narrative, only Fiona refers to Carrie as a 'slut', and that remark may be motivated by jealousy of Charles' incipient attraction to this experienced American woman.

Nevertheless, despite the relatively 'advanced' or liberated sexual moral values hinted at (if not actually displayed in the narrative), characters in the film find it difficult to equating word with deed, and express their true emotional feelings. Matthew has to turn to the poetry of W.H. Auden to express his acute sense of loss at Gareth's funeral, stating that the poem, 'Funeral Blues' (1936), constitutes what he 'actually' wants 'to say'. On the embankment in London (the setting for Nina's date with the man who will replace Jamie in her life in *Truly, Madly, Deeply*), Charles seeks to state his feelings for Carrie in an authentic and considered fashion, but he is forced to resort to a post-modernist parody of the

phrase, 'I love you', by expressing himself through David Cassidy's lyrics from a Partridge family song, 'I think I love you'. In response to Charles' statement that he feels that it is important 'to have said it', Carrie perceptively asks, 'Said what exactly?' To which Charles replies, still deferring to another, 'What I just said about David Cassidy'.

In Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977), Barthes points out that 'Once the first avowal has been made, "*I love you*" has no meaning whatever'; further declarations 'merely' repeat 'the old message'.[81] Jean Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943) emphasises that being in love is always something of a provisional state because the object of one's affection may at any moment transfer their affection to another: 'One would have to be alone in the world with the beloved in order for love to preserve its character as an absolute axis of reference'.[82]

Charles' situation in these terms is one of troubled sincerity and vulnerability. His disrupted and disruptive relationship with Carrie is only consolidated when they work out their emotional difficulties through language, even if this means drawing upon essentially negative formulations: 'You might agree not to marry me for the rest of your life', ponders Charles at the close – to which, Carrie is able to respond by saying, 'I do' in a truthful and purposeful manner, rounding off the film's probing of romantic discourses in a modern age, and allowing her to say 'I do' without having to get married. Ironically, this final reconciliation is engineered by Charles' deaf brother, David (David Bower), who, through sign language, is able to force Charles into expressing his true feelings about loving Carrie, and not Henrietta, and thereby accepting the truth of the maxim that marriage is only justified if you love the person 'with all your heart'.

The other, seemingly well suited pair, Gareth and Matthew, who are presented as a couple at the beginning of the narrative (in contrast to Charles and Carrie, who are only emotionally united at the close) are wrenched apart by Gareth's sudden and unexpected death. Carrie's Scottish wedding ceremony, where Gareth cheerfully invokes Oscar Wilde, before dancing enthusiastically with an American woman, proves in effect to be Gareth's 'last fling'. He expires in the midst of what he has termed *Brigadoon* (Vincent Minnelli, 1954), a reference to a Hollywood musical set in the Scottish Highlands in which members of the community live for only one enchanted day each century, a utopian setting where

the price of true love conversely depends upon a character's willingness to die (as in the ending of *Truly, Madly, Deeply*).

Gareth comes to be perceived as the possessor of a carnivalesque attitude towards life, which manifests itself in his colourful waistcoats and extrovert manner (especially when compared to Matthew's more sober and understated Scottish persona). It is noticeable, however, that the highest degree of intimacy we witness between Gareth and Matthew occurs during the credits sequence at the beginning of the narrative, when Matthew wipes a speck of food from Gareth's grey beard. Just as the details of Carrie's 'sordid' marriage, can be alluded to, but not actually represented in the narrative, gay sexual acts between a loving couple were also presumably considered to be antithetical to the romantic comic aspects of the film, and so were omitted or suppressed.

The most explicitly sombre elements in the narrative are the occasions recording Gareth's death and funeral. His demise leads the film to a very different setting where modes of farce, fantasy and comic narration are briefly, but significantly, banished. The location of Gareth's funeral (in striking contrast to the film's desire to locate the weddings in particular places) is *not* identified, adding to the symbolic resonance of the sequence. The film cuts from an image of Charles informing Matthew of Gareth's death as the wedding guests sing, 'For he's a jolly good fellow' at Carrie's wedding, to a crane shot of a rainy day in a semi-industrial area where Gareth's funeral is taking place. Philip French in *The Observer* described the setting as one in which 'a dull suburban church' is 'over-shadowed by Thames-side factories and refineries',[83] and Anne Billson in the *Sunday Telegraph* drew attention to the unexpected break in narrative style, genre classification and images of the nation represented by the funeral sequence: 'The once cheery characters are set against a bleak, grey backdrop of smoking chimneys and the industrial north. It's as though Branagh and Ivory had run slap-bang into Ken Loach', observed Billson.[84]

Paul Dave in the *New Left Review* essay cited earlier, suggests that the creative inspiration for the geographical and historical terrain implied by the funeral lies in the movement of British film-making identified as representing a 'new wave' of socially aware and gritty dramas, and exemplified by such films as *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1958) and *This Sporting Life* (Lindsay Anderson, 1963).[85] Richard Curtis reported that what one might term the neo-realist effect of the

funeral scene was partly achieved by 'all the people in the church', apart from the main performers, being made up of 'extras who lived around there, marvellous found faces who came on the day'.[86]

The emotional impact of the occasion on the lovelorn characters in *Four Weddings* is ultimately therapeutic, in that it cures them of some of their more habitual and regressive attitudes (Fiona, for example, abandons her 'traditional black' clothes at Charles' wedding). The over-riding impression of the funeral section of the narrative is that Gareth had embarked upon a geographical and cultural journey, which removed him from his humble origins, and enabled him to take up a position amongst a new class of wealthy, upper class socialites. This emotional distance between his past and present (conjoined with the infinite void represented by his 'future') adds to the pathos of the occasion. Gareth's parents are not shown speaking at the funeral, and this pained silence and look of incredulity on their faces implies that they may feel that their son had been led astray by his "well to do" friends, and that his flamboyantly gay lifestyle, at odds with the greyness of the provincial industrial town where he is laid to rest, could possibly (in their unexpressed view) have contributed to his premature demise.

The film is conscious of the cruel irony involved in killing off one of its most life-affirming characters, and fleeting medium close up shots of selected mourners at his funeral (which include a black man, a smiling elderly man with a hearing aid, and a couple of men presumably coded as gay by their wearing of leather jackets), testify to Gareth's social accessibility, and acceptance outside of the close circle of friends who constitute the film's main area of interest.

The funeral sequence, as noted earlier, continues the film's thematic concerns about the difficulties of finding an appropriate language to express feelings of love, and once again the forlorn and desperate lover cannot find the words to convey the depths of his emotions, and turns instead to quoting the words of another (echoing Charles's use of David Cassidy, and Carrie's reference to John Lennon's line, 'Love is the answer', in her own wedding speech). Gareth's undisguised homosexuality is represented by his reading from a poem by W.H. Auden, which despite its initial playful mood, ends with the bleak refrain:

> Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
> For nothing now can ever come to any good.[87]

Auden's bleak prophecy is not confirmed by the end of the narrative, however, which contrives to bring about a series of affirmative and glowing endings. Charles and Carrie express their true feelings for each other in a torrential rainstorm, suggesting that the 'ocean' is being poured back into the universe by the couple's belated and (hopefully) permanent reconciliation, enabling them to break out of the patterns of circular and futile repetition in which they have hitherto been trapped.

The final photographic montage sequence informs us through a series of photographic images of the future lives of individual characters which serve to parody the Victorian novel tradition (which Henry James ironically termed as 'a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, wives, babies...and cheerful remarks'[88]) of speculating about what transpires *after* the story proper has finished. The sequence of photos reveal that Henrietta went on to marry a member of the Royal Guards, Scarlet (Charlotte Coleman), who initially feared that Americans were as 'dull as shit' is pictured wedding the tall, dashing American she met at the ill fated Scottish ceremony, and even Tom achieves his aim of finding a nice girl with whom to settle down, and live alongside in his castle with his Labrador dog. Matthew is photographed drinking with a handsome young man in uniform, suggesting that he has succeeded in forming another kind of loving relationship. Fiona's future is the only one which apparently cannot be seriously imagined, and she is pictured alongside Prince Charles, replacing Princess Diana at the Royal wedding of 1981, a concluding joke which has taken on something of a tragic dimension following Diana's death in 1997. Charles and Carrie are pictured together holding a baby boy, but significantly their picture is a snapshot image, and not a wedding photograph.

Charlotte O'Sullivan, whilst reviewing *Notting Hill*, suggested that in *Four Weddings* 'vulgar America is in thrall to cultured, wealthy Britain', but that 'aside from such embarrassing worship, the US barely figures in it', concluding that 'Andie McDowell's character could have been any nationality'.[89] The commercial significance of MacDowell's presence in the film is that it indicates an awareness on the part of the film-makers of the importance of stars (as opposed to character actors), in promoting a film to international audiences.[90] The cultural significance of Carrie's American nationality, beyond allusions to her greater degree of social mobility and sexual experience than her English

counterparts, is not explored or dramatised in any great depth by the narrative, which tends to privilege Charles' English-based struggle to achieve a state of romantic fulfilment and happiness.

Carrie's American "otherness" does imbue her character with the possibility of broadening the horizons of Charles' more socially confined and claustrophobic world, with their liaison offering the possibility of a synthesis of progressive and traditional tendencies and social outlooks. In *Notting Hill*, Richard Curtis and Hugh Grant would return to this question of the English gentleman and the modern American woman, and instead of surrounding it with a series of digressive sub-plots, would make it the central subject and theme of the narrative.

'You think I should do Henry James instead?': Anna Scott (Julia Roberts) to William (Hugh Grant) in '**Notting Hill**' (1999).

This concluding section of the case studies will consider *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell, 1999) in the context of debates concerning the film's representation of Anglo-American interactions, creative interactions between Hollywood and British forms of cinema, and the extent to which the film (like its predecessor), effectively combines comic and dramatic modes of expression in a single narrative. David Kosse, Universal's head of international marketing, for instance, was quoted as saying that the 'biggest issue' regarding the promotional strategies for *Notting Hill* 'was striking a balance' between stressing 'the romantic and comedic elements' in the film's advertising.[91]

Notting Hill dramatises the confusions and the possibilities for transcendence created by a romance between an English man and an American woman. In this film, the presence of Julia Roberts ensures that the narrative is centred around the collision between a Hollywood superstar's exalted, if somewhat rarefied world, and the ordinary, undramatic, but possibly more comforting universe inhabited by Grant's divorced, upper class English character. Roberts' character is a very particular kind of American, a Hollywood based, world famous superstar, representing in the modern, celebrity obsessed sphere of Western culture, an almost mythological figure. The film alludes to the self-referential nature of its basic premise in a conversation between William and his friend, Max (Tim McInnery):

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Max: This was always a no-go situation. Anna's a goddess and you know what happens to mortals who get involved with the gods.
William: Buggered?
Max: Every time.

Notting Hill, subsequently, becomes a narrative about the conditions of its own making, exploring (in the process) both the influence of Hollywood film-making on British cinema, and the dialectical opportunities for reciprocal enrichment when the two contrasting film cultures and nations are brought together by romance and mutual commercial interests in the world of high capitalism.

Notting Hill, unlike *Four Weddings*, was officially categorised as a USA/UK co-production, produced on a much larger budget of £15 million, and distributed by Universal pictures.[92] Producer Duncan Kenworthy described the film as 'not a sequel' to *Four Weddings*, which he identified as concerning itself with 'big social events with none of the real life in-between', in comparison to *Notting Hill* which, in his view, focused on 'the day to day details of a love affair'.[93] The relationship at the centre of *Notting Hill* is, thus, both ordinary and extraordinary. The sense of spiritual emptiness, loss and self-doubt pervading those moments of the narrative in which William has been left by Anna Scott echo the similar feelings of abandonment experienced by his character in *Four Weddings* when Carrie disappears from view. Shorn of the distractions provided by the weddings of that narrative, *Notting Hill*, arguably, emerges as the more personal and emotionally intimate narrative of the two films.

Richard Brooks in *The Observer* suggested that the difference between the two films was that *Four Weddings* was 'very much a film of the hesitant John Major era', whereas *Notting Hill* portrayed 'a Britain where an ordinary person's dreams can come true'.[94] John Smith, Leader of the Opposition, had died unexpectedly on May 12th, 1994, the day before *Four Weddings* was released in British cinemas, and Tony Blair went on to replace him as Leader of the Labour Party, in which position, he subsequently guided the Party to victory in the May 1997 election.[95] *Notting Hill* was, hence, conceived and produced under a Labour Party government. The film's ethos, ironically enough, though, tends not to be imbued with (or inspired by) notions of 'Cool Britannia'.[96]

The Demos research monograph produced on behalf of the Labour government, *Britain: Renewing Our Identity* (1997), claimed that after 'an autumn of slow decline' in which 'Britain's power and influence were in retreat',

the nation was 'now ready for its spring, a period of renewal and increased self-confidence'.[97] Ironically, the British group of friends in *Notting Hill* display none of these qualities or feelings about themselves, or the 'state of the nation', and spend most of their conversations together discussing which of them constitutes the most abject failure, within a group who consider themselves to be chronic under-achievers.

William, for example, who is promoted by the narrative as the ideal partner for Anna, the fifteen million dollars a picture superstar, is thirty five,[98] divorced, and the proprietor of a specialist bookshop which is financially unviable (Anna is the only customer whom we witness buying a book in the film, and William, in his typically self-deprecatory manner, even does his utmost to persuade her that the travel book she has selected to buy is not really worth purchasing). It could be inferred from such scenes and modes of representation that the United States (as represented by the figure of Anna Scott) is presented as successful, dynamic and questing, in contrast to the English characters, who are depicted as hopelessly provincial and are regularly glimpsed relentlessly bemoaning their lack of social success and achievement.

The British newspaper press is equally depicted in an unflattering light in certain scenes of the narrative, pursuing Anna with no regard for her feelings or safety, and gleefully exploiting her uncovered nude photographs for commercial purposes (although it is implied that this may be an international, rather than a solely British phenomenon: the pictures of Anna, which we tantalisingly never see, were presumably originally taken in America)

Andrew Anthony in *The Observer* felt that *Notting Hill* suggested that the supporting characters had not been imagined with the same 'subtlety of characterisation' as was evident in *Four Weddings*, and that the scenes featuring William's flatmate, Spike (Rhys Ifans), led parts of the film to resemble a television situation comedy, despite its 'big cinema stars'.[99] The character of Spike, I would suggest, is used to embody parts of the narrative with the kind of 'low humour' associated with the 'Carry On' series of films (as in the scene where Spike is preparing to show his appreciation of the topless pictures of Anna Scott in the *Daily Star* by masturbating over her image: in a 'surreal, but nice' moment, he suddenly discovers that the 'real' Anna Scott is actually present in the bathroom behind him). Spike is too isolated a figure to truly embody a

Bakhtinian 'carnivalesque' approach to the world, but he does provide a contrast to the more 'high-minded' and wistful personas of the other characters.

For example, when William philosophically declares that through meeting Anna Scott, he has 'opened Pandora's box', Spike replies that he 'knew a girl at school called Pandora', but he never 'got to see her box though!' His failure to pass Anna's message onto William also serves to perform a 'blocking function', whereby the lovers are kept apart from meeting that bit longer. Despite his broadly drawn 'comic' limitations and "lovable slob" persona, Spike, as the narrative unwinds, is the character most prepared to criticise William for his emotional reticence, and adherence to a personal set of principles and beliefs which refute risk taking and taking leaps into uncharted territory:

Honey (Emma Chambers): 'William has just turned down Anna Scott'.
Spike: 'You daft prick!'

Anne Billson of the *Sunday Telegraph* noted that both *Notting Hill* and *Four Weddings* were predicated on the same episodic and repetitive structure of 'Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy meets girl again, boy loses girl again and so on'.[100] The impression of entrapment implied by this circular narrative form (with its disturbing implication that, logically the two films should never end, and the lovers will never succeed in being together) is only broken in the closing moments of each film, when the Hugh Grant character finally realises that he has made a bad decision, and should henceforth commit himself forever to Carrie/Anna. Hence, for the duration of most of the two films, Charles/William is a divided character, caught up in a state of anxiety brought upon by a fear that he will not be able to break out of the vicious circles impeding him in his search for a lasting romance, and a sense of definite narrative closure.

One notable difference between the two Hugh Grant/Richard Curtis films is that following shots of Anna Scott at various film premieres, *Notting Hill* opens with a voice-over narration from William, introducing the spectator to the eponymous London setting –which he describes as 'not a bad place to be'- where the story will unfold. *Four Weddings* begins with Charles oversleeping, and subsequently, being late in his role as "best man" at the first wedding, adding a comic note of urgency to the proceedings, and implying that he needs some kind of emotional 'awakening' to make the most of his life. *Notting Hill*, in contrast, depicts William moving calmly and confidently through his surroundings, where

he claims to 'lead a strange half-life', before his narration suddenly changes from its travelogue-style manner, and adopts a more portentous tone, as he recalls the incident which transformed his existence: 'And so it was just another hopeless Wednesday, as I set off through the market for work, little realising that this was the day which would change my life forever' (cf. Laura's narration recalling the mundane setting out of which her tempestuous love affair in *Brief Encounter* emerged: 'It all started on an ordinary day, in the most ordinary place in the world').

The narrative strategy implied by William's voice-over (which disappears as his past is subsumed by the present) might be that he conjures up the story, or becomes both a participant and an observer of events which he cannot control. The removal of the first person narration, after this initial scene setting, suggests the difficulties the character has in gaining a distanced perspective on the events which follow, and of consequently continuing in the role of disinterested observer of his own life. Nigel Cliff in *The Times* cynically claimed that the voice-over narration served a more dubious purpose of providing a guide 'before the entertainment begins. Just so the Americans among you won't be too confused'[101], a viewpoint, I would contend, which is too cynical and suspicious of the film's motives to be a sustainable observation or helpful deduction.

Anna, the 'unquiet' American, is introduced in the second scene of the narrative, depicted surreptitiously entering William's travel bookshop, and subsequently his life and inner being. It is somewhat fitting that she is seeking a travel book, as she herself is on a journey from America, and a key question addressed to Anna (to which her own responses will fluctuate) is 'How long are you staying in Britain?' Whereas *Four Weddings* revolves around a series of public occasions commemorating private events, *Notting Hill*, will be predicated upon Anna Scott's visits to and from Thacker's flat and bookshop, William's journeys to luxurious London hotels to 'interview' Anna, and the successful return of both of them to the 'magical setting' of the private park; first, discreetly by night, and secondly, by day, as a private couple in a venue to which the public have limited access.

Having met each other by chance, William and Anna subsequently bump into each other by accident on the street, when he spills orange juice on her: such an incident in the iconography of romantic comedy indicating that the couple are

torn between expressing antagonistic *and* erotic feelings towards each other. For the first of two occasions, his nearby apartment, distinguished from other buildings by its blue door, offers refuge from the public arena. Anna (understandably, given the paucity of attractions unveiled by William) refuses offers of sustenance from his fridge, and the two characters begin the process of looking intently at each other, with neither expressing their underlying thoughts or emotions. Upon leaving, however, she unexpectedly kisses him on the mouth, thus introducing and initiating the possibilities of a romantic entanglement to follow (although the fact that she kisses William *when leaving* indicates, that as in *Four Weddings*, Grant's character's love of an American woman, will turn out to be a painful and frustrating affair, defined more by a sense of absence than plenitude).

William and Anna are both associated with concerns about the *passing of time*, particularly in relation to unfulfilled ambitions and dreams. Anna initially says to William, 'You played it pretty cool here, waiting for three days to call', not knowing that Spike's inaction has in fact caused the delay. The male character (Matthew Modine, uncredited) in Anna's black and white ('Woody Anna'[102] according to the screenplay) romantic comedy film turns to her in a Manhattan art gallery, and announces, 'In about seven seconds, I'm going to ask you to marry me': to which Anna's blonde haired character seductively smiles, leaving William, whilst watching her on video, to contemplate the fine line between reality and fantasy in his own life.

William is worried that he will never find the right woman, and imagines that in 'thirty years time', he will still be an unattached bachelor, spending time on the couch of his two best friends. Anna observes that William has only been subjected to the intrusive attentions of the press for 'ten minutes', while she has endured 'ten years' of 'this garbage' in which her private life is converted into 'entertainment' for the masses: 'Our perspectives are [therefore] different', she informs him. The glimpses of Anna's science fiction film, *Helix*, which we observe William watching, portray her (this time red haired) character rotating and drifting in a space ship, suggesting something of the circular, aimless motion of the meta-narrative itself at times, and connoting a 'fantastical' sense of time which may ultimately be beyond human comprehension.

The film's most visually innovative sequence denoting the passing of time depicts William embarking on a stroll through Portobello Road, telescoping a 'six months journey' into ninety seconds of screen time, filmed in an extended tracking shot and encompassing the seasons of autumn, winter, spring and summer. This sequence captures and exaggerates the changeable nature of British weather, even within a single day, and its tendency for showers of rain to break out at any moment to dampen romantic ardours (or to correspond to human passions as symbolised by Andie MacDowell's line in *Four Weddings*: 'Is it raining? I hadn't noticed').

The scene equally denotes the cyclical inevitability of the seasons, summer revealed as coming to an end, but eventually being eagerly anticipated once again, by the emergence of spring, and so on, as outlined by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*: *Four Essays* (1957) discussed earlier. A pregnant woman is glimpsed in the first sequence of William's walk, and, in the final images, she is pictured holding a young baby, suggesting the infinite renewal and enlargement of human narratives and forms of existence.

Frye associated tragedy with autumn, comedy with spring, and romance with summer. This sequence from *Notting Hill* significantly concludes with William taking off his jacket due to the heat of the sun, and depicts the woman gazing lovingly at her newly born child, an image of optimism and hope, in contrast, to the sentiments of the song, 'Ain't No Sunshine when she's Gone', accompanying these seasonal transitions on the film's soundtrack. Just as *Notting Hill* combines comedy and drama, and features musical interludes and incidents of farce in a generically hybrid mixture, this particular sequence refuses to treat the seasons as separate entities, insisting instead on the inter-connectedness of setting and mood, humour and romance, in the mysterious processes involved in forging human relationships and connections between the individual and wider cosmic and natural forces.

In another key reflective scene in the film, centred around exchanges of dialogue, rather than images of nature and extracts from popular records, Anna is integrated into William's surrogate 'family', a group which defines itself in terms of social and personal failure. William is described by Max as 'Very unsuccessful professionally. Divorced. Used to be handsome', implying that beneath the playful tone of his remarks, William has not really fulfilled his

promise: an observation which does raises the troubling question of why indeed, given the evidence, *should* Anna Scott commit herself exclusively to William?

The ensuing discussion treads a fine line between comic playfulness and irony, and more despairing moments of pathos. The most disturbing admission comes from the one person present, who actually does seem to have genuine cause for regret and disappointment, Bella (Gina McKee) who will be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life, following a fall down stairs, and who, as a result, cannot have children. Her intervention briefly reduces the rest of the group to silence, hinting at a deeper tragedy than the other more wistful disappointments being aired.

Following this extended scene of discussion and character exposition, the couple leave the party in thoughtful, pensive mood, and through Anna's physical agility and determination, break into a private park in the area, allowing the film to present the incipient couple in a magical setting far removed from everyday contexts. Anna looks at a bench containing a dedication from a husband to his dead wife, concluding that 'some people do spend their whole lives together'. She sits alone on the bench and the camera soars above the couple at this point, providing the spectator with a god-like view of the burgeoning romance between the English gentleman and the American goddess. This briefly idyllic moment in the park will prove to be the peak of their relationship, until the close of the film, when they will once be again be pictured together in the private park, and (like the woman in the 'four seasons' sequence), expecting a baby.

William, like Charles in *Four Weddings*, is the main focus of the film, and his importance to the narrative is indicated by his presence in each scene. The film is structured around the places occupied by William, and his relationships with his employee/lodger/friends, and sister. Anna inhabits more transient and public settings, appropriate to her status as a visiting superstar, such as the Ritz and Savoy hotels, and Kenwood House, the country mansion used as the location for the final day's shooting on an unnamed Henry James film. She also lives in a world in which 'illusion' can be profitably marketed as entertainment. When William approaches the setting of Kenwood House, the film suddenly seems to have unexpectedly turned into an English 'heritage movie'[103] as horse-led carriages and figures dressed in period costumes dominate the landscape. This activity is soon revealed, however, to constitute the process of actively recreating

and appropriating images of the past for dramatic, aesthetic and commercial purposes (the making of a costume drama movie in which Anna will be the star).

William, subsequently, finds it difficult to interpret appearances and underlying realities with regard to Anna's declarations and statements, just as she on her part is conscious of the difficulties involved in unambiguously expressing her emotions in an era of post-modern surfaces, lacking in depth and solidity, within the context of a culture dominated by "gutter press" journalistic practices, ever eager for any opportunity to expose, embarrass or humiliate her. William is contrasted with Anna's American film star boyfriend (Alec Baldwin), who is presented as the opposite to Grant's clean cut, diffident, well spoken character. His arrival reduces William to the level of a support player, rather than a match for the star, and Anna once again becomes a remote, almost imaginary figure, apt to turn up in images on the side of buses advertising her new film.

Thacker is now reduced to having to go to the cinema (or watch her on video) to see Anna, just like everyone else. He is depicted, looking star-struck, watching Anna in *Helix* at the local cinema, where she impersonates an astronaut in space, presented floating inside a space ship. This sense of drift pervades subsequent stretches of *Notting Hill* where the two characters are presented as deeply separated by their existence in completely different kinds of worlds and environments. It transpires that William is the only one of his group not to know that Anna had a boyfriend. 'My whole life ruined because I don't read *Hello* magazine', he remarks in a sarcastic aside about the celebrity infatuated culture of Britain and America. His friends consequently attempt to set him up with three women, one rather blowsy and loud, the second (in a homage to Woody Allen traditions of comedy) presented as an excessively earnest character (a 'fruitarian') lamenting the 'murdered' carrots in Max's meal. In a twist to this particular sequence, William is introduced to a woman whom he describes as 'perfect' (she is listed in the credits as 'perfect girl'-Emily Mortimer). However, William (and subsequently the film) is not interested in the kind of perfection she represents, and she quickly disappears from the narrative. After she leaves, William watches in awe as Max picks up the crippled Bella and carries her off to bed, their relationship (despite its tragic aspects) representing for William, a kind of ideal.

William's aloneness is broken by Anna's return to his flat, as she seeks refuge from the British press which has published topless photographs of her taken several years ago. 'With your papers, it's the worst place to be', she observes. William has earlier passed a news-stand with headlines referring to Anna's exposure (the *Daily Star* declares 'Watta lotta Scott', and the *Daily Mirror* 'Anna Stunna', whilst the more serious minded *Daily Telegraph* emphasises 'Gloom over Middle East talks'). His lack of interest in the populist culture of contemporary British society means that he walks by the headlines without even noticing their existence.

In a subsequent conversation with Anna, he will reference Henry James as a possible cinematic source of inspiration, rather than the romantic comedies and science fiction films she has been making. Such a direct suggestion could be read as a clear allusion to the 'heritage' films produced within the British cinema industry, and a tacit endorsement of their value and worth. (It is notable that many of the 'heritage' films have been subjected to similar criticisms as *Notting Hill*, regarding their emphasis on upper class characters, and pictorially attractive images of Britain.)

Anna, after her immersion in the British past evoked by Henry James, will return to the present, and more particularly, William's travel bookshop, conferring an original and valuable painting upon him, and declaring her love. In a turn of phrase, unlike any other she utters during the course of the narrative, Anna pleads that she is 'just a girl...asking a boy to love her'. In a film which, for all its fascination with the splendours and wonders of love, has nonetheless largely downplayed excessively verbalised expressions of love and devotion, this statement stands out for its directness and winsomeness (cf. Carrie's concluding rhetorical question in *Four Weddings*: 'Is it raining?'). William will subsequently declare that as an actress she would know how to deliver a line, but the film, I think, encourages an audience to take the admission at face value, and acknowledge the effort made by Anna to articulate her true feelings.

As *Four Weddings* began with a frantic effort by *Charles* to get to the church on time, *Notting Hill* concludes with a frantic effort by *William* to reach Anna before she leaves both him *and* Britain. Resorting to impersonating a film journalist once more - he offers his *Blockbuster* card as proof of his status, in a line alluding to the increased importance of video rentals and sales in the total

success of a film[104] – he infiltrates the inquisitive world of popular newspaper culture, and uses their own methods to both apologise to Anna for doubting her sincerity, and ask her to reconsider her position. Anna, after asking to have a journalist's question repeated, announces that she will stay in Britain 'indefinitely'. William's friends are placed in the position of the film's potential real audiences and critics at this point, asking such intertextual questions as 'What happened?' and declaring that the proposal scene 'was good'.

The film, like *Four Weddings*, concludes with a series of codas and images which allude to what happens in the future, after the temporal narrative is over. In *Notting Hill*, these wordless vignettes concentrate on what becomes of William and Anna, and are not presented in quite the same ironic style as the concluding sequence of *Four Weddings*, which (as noted earlier) juxtaposes Fiona and Prince Charles in one of its photo-montages, suggesting that the images are not to be taken at face value, or entirely seriously. At the close of *Notting Hill*, William and Anna are pictured getting married, and then attending a premiere of (presumably) Anna's Henry James film in Leicester Square Odeon cinema, symbolising a further fusion and strengthening of Anglo-American culture.

The couple are last glimpsed, relaxing peacefully, in the private park on the bench which symbolises a lifetime of togetherness for a loving couple. William is reading what appears to be *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (which Roger Michell was due to film next![105]) and Anna is clearly in an advanced state of pregnancy. This concluding image is able to celebrate the triumph of romantic love over all obstacles, the combining of career and motherhood on the part of the central woman character, and the forging of a relationship between what the British advertising posters described as a love affair between 'the man in the street' and the 'most famous star in the world'.

Julia Roberts' performance as a world famous film star enables *Notting Hill* to self-reflexively consider the financial rewards, lifestyle and more problematical aspects of achieving fame on such a level. Richard Dyer, in his study, *Stars* (1979), proposed a number of conceptual categories under which issues of stardom might be explored. These included the notion of 'star as person', 'star as image', and 'star as auteur'.[106] In reference to the category of 'star as person', one can note that Anna Scott is so wary of revealing her true feelings to anyone

because of the risk of being exploited or misinterpreted, that it is not easy for William to gain a clear sense of her 'real' personality and 'true' nature. Her star image, as constructed in the extracts from her movies, appears to signify both emotional openness and a certain aloofness and distancing. This latter feature of her persona is symbolised by the images of her face on the side of London buses, depicting Anna as a larger than life figure, always on the point of disappearing from view around a corner. Anna's decision to make a movie based on a Henry James novel could be read as an indication of her desire to exercise a greater degree of creative control over her career, and so initiate the process of establishing herself as more of an 'auteur' figure in the Hollywood film industry.

In *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1987), Richard Dyer noted that there may be both convergences and conflicts between the ways in which film studios seek to promote stars as a means of publicising their movies, and the media's desire for "unofficial", unsanctioned exposures or revelations regarding the private lives of stars, which can be used to improve newspaper sales.[107] In *Notting Hill,* Anna Scott draws upon the media to promote her new movie through a series of individual and group interviews with representatives of the British press, but she is also the victim of unwanted publicity which she cannot control or contain, when topless photographs of her appear in the daily papers. This incident recalls the publicity generated by Marilyn Monroe's nude photographs as featured in the first (1953) edition of *Playboy* magazine. According to Richard Dyer, the cover 'Golden Dreams' photograph had been taken in 1948 and 'used for several different calendars... However, in March 1952, the fact that this image was of an important new Hollywood star became a major news story'.[108] The photographs of Monroe contributed to the mythologizing of her image and were subsequently recuperated into the realm of art photography.

There is no sense in *Notting Hill* that the pictures of Anna Scott can be similarly reclaimed or redeemed in this late period of twentieth century culture, or that the relations between stars, media organisations and studio production companies can be revitalised or revised. The failure of Anna's sincere plea to William in the privacy of his bookshop, compared to the success of their interaction in the midst of a press conference, does suggest, however, that for

major stars, distinctions between private and public aspects of their lives are inevitably blurred and sometimes indivisible.

Notting Hill is a film, partly, about an American actress, such as Julia Roberts, adjusting to the slower tempo and drama based style of a particular strand of British film-making, which does not utilise spectacular special effects or outlandish plot developments to achieve its narrative effects. In an essay entitled, 'But do we need it?' in a collection, *British Cinema Now* (1985), Geoffrey Nowell-Smith commented that 'When matched against American films...their British counterparts come across all too often as restrictive and stifling, subservient to middle-class artistic models and...values'. He concluded that 'the British cinema is in the invidious position of having to compete with an American cinema which...is by now more deeply rooted in British cultural life than is the native product'.[109]

Notting Hill reflects thoughtfully upon such claims and tendencies, but seeks to question and challenge such preconceptions and prejudices. In deciding to be with William, 'indefinitely', Anna is also choosing to be with his circle of friends, thus, implicitly accepting the British middle-class values and modes of conduct which they represent: a course of action which could be read in symbolic terms as contemporary Hollywood cinema acknowledging and supporting the very kind of drama-based British cinema which Nowell-Smith suggested in 1989 was disliked and unpopular in this country. *Notting Hill* strives to combine the strengths of popular American cinema – its accessible and clearly told stories, and creation of imaginative fantasies through legendary stars – with British cinema's ability to construct small scale, emotionally intimate, and socially concerned narratives, making it a film about emotional, national and generic attempts at fusion and mutual interaction.

Notting Hill is a meditative British-American film about the possibilities of British-American relationships in 'What if ?' situations where Hugh Grant can represent the character of the English gentleman, at his most diffident, modest and likeable, and Julia Roberts can personify the film star goddess, who (like Madonna?) is prepared to quit America (if not its entertainment industries), and settle down in Britain, while still remaining a world famous star. *Notting Hill* exploits the international appeal of Hugh Grant, a performer who, in his own low-key manner, is able to appear as a suitable partner for Julia Roberts in an

Anglo-American romantic comedy. *Notting Hill*, though, is equally capable of suggesting that not all American films are successful with British audiences: one notes that while Hugh Grant's character is predictably awe-struck by Anna Scott's performance in the Hollywood science-fiction movie *Helix*, the auditorium screening the movie is by no means full…

(4.5) **Conclusion**

I have sought to illustrate that there are both important continuities and significant differences between past and present examples of British romantic comedy dramas. David Thomson in the *New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (2002) described *Truly, Madly, Deeply* as 'one of the funniest and yet most serious films about death and mourning'.[110] I would contend that such a combination of humour and serious intent is a recurring feature of many British films in the category of narratives about romances, marriages, weddings, sexual encounters outside of wedlock, and gay relationships. The films I have selected as emblematic of certain key tendencies in British cinema stress the importance of a compelling narrative that still leaves dramatic space for comic interruptions, observations and digressions.

These films often contain a strand of social criticism within their narratives, implying that the social arrangements of British society, which serve to aid or abet the happiness and well-being of individual couples, could still be improved upon. *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill* notably incorporate a mythic dimension into their narratives (Anna Scott being perceived as a 'goddess'), which is always capable of being dissipated or fractured by the actions or attitudes of subsidiary characters (Carrie, for example, is referred to as a 'slut'). Both films suggest that romantic courtships pass through seasonal changes, a factor which can be reassuring (characters will eventually find true love) or unsettling (relationships may break up because characters will always want something better or more elusive).

The thematic concerns of the 1990s British-made romantic comedies remain somewhat universal in that they often revolve around concepts of chance, accident, and the difficulties characters experience in fathoming their true desires, but wider, more socially oriented issues ('the doubling of the divorce rate…the rise of the single parent…gay right movements'[111]) are still referenced,

and are important in certain cases, to the overall impressions generated by the narratives.

Continuity and advancement are always difficult to achieve in the context of British cinema because of the lack of structure and central planning in the industry, but certain narrative patterns and character traits can be identified which link past and more recent films within this particular thematic category. Anglo-American relationships (central to a number of the 1990s films discussed) are central to two idiosyncratic films, *A Matter of life and Death* and *Sid and Nancy*, and constitute a sub-plot in *Alfie*. Examples of male dreamers who prefers private fantasising to engaging with 'real' women can be found in *Billy Liar*, *Gregory's Girl* and, arguably, in aspects of the roles played by Hugh Grant in his two high-profile 1990s comedies. The 'no-holds barred' verbal exchanges of characters in *Pygmalion* find an echo in the harsh words and views expressed in *Beautiful Thing*. Both *Rich and Strange* and *Letter to Brezhnev* suggest that Britain may not constitute an especially propitious setting for fulfilling romances to flourish, leading to situations where characters look abroad for true love and real passion (a process continued on a grander scale, and in a more obviously comic manner in *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill*).

A series of films (often coming to symbolise the hopes and anxieties of a particular decade in British society) sought to derive both humour and drama out of the romantic and unromantic aspects of 1930s Britain, the 'Swinging Sixties', 'Thatcher's Britain' of the 1980s, and the 1990s decade when Britain was governed by John Major (1990-97) and Tony Blair (1997 onwards). One can discern in many of the narratives discussed, a creative and productive tension between the more 'realist' and 'fantastic' elements of the narratives. *Letter to Brezhnev* and *Beautiful Thing* find both comedy and near-tragedy in the bleak conditions of their settings, and resort to endings which are deliberately vague in terms of what finally happens to the characters, but are stylistically and emotionally pleasing in their emphasis on life as a series of events and moments, which are always capable of evolving into something unexpectedly beautiful and pleasing.

The popularity of *Sliding Doors*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Notting Hill*, amongst other films produced during the decade, and the continuing critical interest created by many of the earlier films discussed, testifies that this is a

thematically rich and important aspect of British film culture. When Tom (James Fleet) is asked how his best man's speech in *Four Weddings* is coming along, he replies that he predicts that it will cause 'tears and laughter', resulting in 'something for everyone'. The eventual speech, with its reference to the bridegroom's ex-girlfriends as 'complete dogs', whom he nonetheless welcomes 'here this evening', causes both comic pleasure for the *Four Weddings* circle of friends, and discomfort for the bridegroom and his father.

In this respect, Tom's declared intention, if not entirely fulfilled in practice, can stand as a fitting metaphor for what the vintage and contemporary British films about romance have strived to achieve and accomplish in their own particular and striking ways. True love, the films imply, may be both a comic and potentially tragic business (the object of one's affection may leave, die, or love someone else), but in movies, both British and American, the attempt to seek emotional and sensual pleasure and compatibility will always be applauded, if not necessarily easily achieved.

Notes

1) Anne Billson, review of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 May, 1994.

2) Celia Brayfield, 'He makes us nice enough for export', *New Statesman*, 5 July, 1999, pp.11-14.

3) Gerald Kaufman, '*Four Weddings* and an Oscar? Let's hope not', *Evening Standard*, 27 March, 1995, p.6.

4) Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant, *British Historical Cinema* (Routledge, London, 2002), p.8.

5) William Leith, review of *Beautiful Thing*, *The Mail on Sunday*, 16 June 1996.

6) Alexander Walker, review of *Sliding Doors*, *Evening Standard*, 17 April, 1998.

7) George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (Faber and Faber, London, 1961), p.135.

8) ibid., pp.135-136.

9) Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Affairs to Remember: the Hollywood Comedy of the Sexes* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989), p.171.

10) Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (Routledge, London, 2000), p.209.

11) Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (British Film Institute, London, 1999), p.143.

12) Mike Newell, quoted in an article by David Thomas on *Four Weddings* in the *Night and Day* section of *The Mail on Sunday*, 1 January, 1995, p.29.

13) Richard Curtis quoted in *Story and Character : Interviews with British Screenwriters*, edited by Alistair Owen (Bloomsbury, London, 2003), p.93.

14) See the section entitled 'Third Essay. Archetypal criticism: Theory of Myths' in Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1973: first published in 1957).

15) ibid., p.170.

16) Patrick Murray, *Literary Criticism: a Glossary of Major Terms* (Longman, London, 1978), p.26.

17) Kathleen Rowe in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1995), p.102.

18) ibid., p.212.

19) ibid., p.103.

20) David Sutton, *A Chorus of Raspberries: British Film Comedy 1929-1939* (University of Exeter Press, Exeter, Devon, 2001), pp.57-58.

21) Babington and Evans, p.18.

22) Wes. D. Gehring, 'Screwball Comedy: An Overview' in the *Journal of Popular Film &Television*, Winter 1986, 13:4, p.5.

23) Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1981), p.2.

24) ibid., p.88.

25) Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: the Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London, 1989), pp.116-17.

26) 'A Philosopher Goes to the Movies: Conversation with Stanley Cavell and Harry Kreisler, 7 February, 2002:

http://globetrotter.berkely.edu/people2/Cavell/cavell-con5.html

27) Brian Henderson, 'Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?' (1978), reprinted in *Film Genre Reader*, edited by Barry Keith Grant (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1986): 'The effective prohibitions of romantic comedy are prohibitions within language… speaking the question "Why haven't we ever fucked?" [is] destructive of romantic comedy' (p.327). *Four Weddings*, as noted, is also concerned with finding an appropriate language for love, and Charles' tentative and stumbling discourses are eventually recognised by Carrie as sincere and worthy.

28) Steve Neale, 'The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today', *Screen*, 33:3, Autumn, 1992, p.284.

29) ibid., pp.297-298.

30) Anne Billson's summary of the plot of *Four Weddings* in her *Sunday Telegraph* review of the film.

31) Robert Murphy, 'Citylife: Urban Fairy-tales in Late 90s British Cinema' in *The British Cinema Book* (Second edition), edited by Robert Murphy (British Film Institute, London, 2001).

32) ibid., p.297.

33) Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1968: first published in Russia, circa 1928).

34) Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism* (Westview Press, Oxford, 1999), p.7.

35) ibid.

36) George Bernard Shaw, untitled coda to *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Parts* (Penguin books, London, 1953: first published in 1916), p.141.

37) Robin Wood in *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1989), claims that Hitchcock used the espionage plot in *The 39 Steps* as 'a cover for the film's real concerns with gender and sexuality' (p.275), classifying the narrative as a "double chase" story 'combined with romantic love story' (p.283).
Barney Taylor, a Kent University P.h.D. Film Studies candidate, usefully pointed out the possible link between Hitchcock's 1930s British films and Hollywood 'screwball' traditions.

38) Nicholas Thomas in Laurie Collier Hillstrom (editor), *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers Volume II: Directors* (St. James' Press, Detroit, 1997), p.41.

39) Wartenberg, pp. 41-42.

40) ibid., pp.42-43.

41) Raymond Durgnat in *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (Faber and Faber, London, 1970), p.180.

42) Ian Christie, *BFI Film Classics*: *A Matter of life and Death* (BFI Publishing, London, 2000), p.70.
William Whitebait in a review of *A Matter of Life and Death* in *The New Statesman and Nation*, 9 November, 1946 (p.338), was explicitly sceptical about the influence of Hollywood conventions on the film's style and content: 'all the obstacles to dramatic excitement put in our way: Hollywood story, tinsel characters, the usual airport heaven...a pointless side-tracking into Anglo-American debate!', noting that this was 'good for export: Mr David Niven is English, Miss Kim Hunter American'.

43) Brian Spittles, *Britain Since 1960: An Introduction* (Macmillan, London, 1995), and
Arthur Marwick, *A History of the Modern British Isles 1914-1999, Circumstances, Events and Outcomes* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2000), provide informative and illuminating accounts of British post-war political life.

44) Christine Geraghty in *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (Routledge, London, 2000), interprets the ending of *Genevieve* as not presenting 'the men and women moving equally towards each other, as the romantic comedy model suggests', but rather depicting the women moving into a 'more sympathetic position with their men', thus, endorsing the men's greater capacity to be enthusiastic about British traditional customs, pastimes and values (p.164).

45) Dates taken from William Tydeman (editor), *Wilde: Comedies: A Casebook* (Macmillan, London, 1982), pp.16-17.

46) Kingsley Amis quoted in *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* by Roger Lewis (Century, London, 1994), p.544.

47) *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895: Nick Hern books edition, London, 1995), Act 1, Scene 1.

48) Andrew Higson, 'Gregory's Girl', *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers, Volume 1*: *Films*, edited by Nicolet V. Elbert and Aruna Vasudevan (third edition, St. James Press, Detroit, 1997), p.413.

49) John Pym, *Film on Four 1982/1991 A Survey* (British Film Institute, London, 1992), p.9.

50) Peter Catteral, *The Making of Channel Four* (Frank Cass Publishers, London/Portland, 1999), p.60.

51) Pym, p.50.

52) Elaine Paterson, review of *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* in the *Time Out Film Guide* (seventh Edition, edited by John Pym, Penguin books, 1999).

53) Dilys Powell, review of *Sid and Nancy*, *Punch*, July 30, 1986, p.49.

54) Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, p.83.

55) Harriet Waugh, review of *Close My Eyes*, *The Spectator*, 7 September 1991, p.37.

56) Nigel Andrews, review of *Damage, Financial Times*, 4 February, 1993.

57) ibid.

58) *Truly, Madly, Deeply* and *Close My Eyes* were amongst the first post-Thatcher films, following her resignation as Prime Minister in November 1990.
The basis of Nina's lament about the unattractive qualities of British cultural attitudes in the early 1990s is echoed by Andrea Stuart in an essay, 'Original Sins' (*Marxism Today*, January 1991), where she argues that 'In the 90s, collective action' had been 'replaced by individual salvation' (p.49).

59) The quotation alluded to in *Truly, Madly, Deeply* is from *The New Testament*, Romans, Chapter VI, Volume VIIII: 'Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; Death hath no more dominion over him'.

60) Mark Shivas, 'Little Big Screen' in *Cinema: the Beginnings and the Future*, edited by Christopher Williams (University of Westminster Press, London, 1996), pp.184-189.

61) ibid.

62) Anne Billson, 'Celebrating Croydon', *New Statesman*, 4 October, 1991, 4:171, p.29.
Box office figures taken from the (1993) *British Film and Television Handbook* (edited by David Leake), pp.38-39, and the (1995) *British Film and Television Handbook* (edited by Nick Thomas), p.38, illustrate that the films could not recover their costs solely or predominantly from exhibition in British cinemas:

Title of film (£millions)	Production cost	UK Box Office
Close My Eyes (1991)	1.20	0.38
Truly, Madly, Deeply (1991)	0.80	0.60
Damage (1992)	6.6	1.91

63) Julian Petley, review of *The Rachel Papers*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November, 1989, 56:670, p.344.

64) Adam Mars-Jones, film review of *Soft Top Hard Shoulder*, *The Independent*, 1 January, 1993

65) ibid.

66) Mark Steyn, review of *Sliding Doors*, *The Spectator*, 2 May, 1998, p.44.

67) Gilbert Adair, *Love and Death on Long Island* (Minerva press, London, 1992: first published in 1990), p.134.

68) Mark Steyn, review of *Notting Hill*, 'Follies of Fantasy', *The Spectator*, 29 May, 1999.

69) Nick Roddick, '*Four Weddings* and a Final Reckoning', *Sight and* Sound, January 1995, 5:1, p.13.

70) David Lister, 'C4 "taken to the cleaners" over cash for film', *The Independent*, 20 January, 1995.

71) ibid.

72) Michael Kuhn, quoted by Mike Ellison, in 'Four Weddings and a bust-up', *The Guardian*, 23 May, 1994, p.4. This article claims that PolyGram contributed 90 per cent of the budget for the film.

73) Kaufman, p.6.

74) Howard Feinstein, 'Transatlantic Crossings', *The Guardian*, 3 May, 1994, pp.4-5.

75) Richard Combs, 'New British Cinema: A Prospect and Six Views', *Film Comment*, November/December 1995, 31:6, pp.53-59.

76) ibid.

77) Paul Dave, 'The Bourgeois Paradigm and Heritage Cinema', *New Left Review*, July/August 1997, number 224, p.125.

78) See 'Richard Curtis: A slow-motion career', interview in *Now That's Funny! Conversations with Comedy Writers*, by David Bradbury and Joe McGrath (Methuen, London, 1998), p.100).

79) Kaufman, p.6.

80) Tony Parsons in an article in the *Daily Mirror* (21 July, 2003), 'Men can't handle a worldly woman', describes the scene 'where Andie MacDowell tells Hugh Grant about her sexual history' as the 'most unrealistic scene in cinema history', because of the way Grant's character responds so passively to the revelations. Parsons argues that women spectators as a result 'loved' the film because 'it pretended that men find the sexual history of their partners full of charm and wonder'.

81) Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (translated by Richard Howard, Penguin books, London, 1990: first published in 1977), p.147.

82) Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel Barnes (Methuen & Co, London, 1957: first published in France, 1943), p.377.

83) Philip French, review of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The Observer*, 15 May, 1994.

84) Anne Billson, review of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Sunday Telegraph*, 15 May, 1994.

85) Paul Dave notes that the 'actual location' of the funeral scenes was Deptford in London, but argues that the iconographic features 'mark them as belonging to the discursive construct of 'Northernness' (p.120).

86) Richard Curtis interviewed in *Story and Character: Interviews with British Screenwriters*, edited by Alistair Owen (Bloomsbury, London, 2003), p.80.

87) Joseph Warren Beach in *The Making of the Auden Canon* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1957), describes the poem 'Funeral Blues' as a 'lively composition in a vein appealing to world-weary modern readers as well as sophisticated nightclub audiences (p.184).
The use of Auden in the funeral sequence cleverly evokes Auden's ambivalent position in British literary culture, with regard to his leaving Britain for America in 1939. Humphrey Carpenter in *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1981) records that Auden did return to Britain during the final period of his life, but was buried in Kirchstetten (Austria), following his death in 1973 (p.451).
James Fenton in 'Four Weddings and a circle of poetry', *The Independent*, 30 May, 1994, p.12, observed that 'a large number of people, since the Aids epidemic, have become familiar with the experience of funerals at which a devastated boyfriend has to pay tribute to his prematurely dead lover…So Auden's poem found an audience which needed it – nearly 60 years after its composition'.

88) Henry James, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harcourt Brace and World, New York, 1954), pp.26-27.

89) Charlotte O'Sullivan, review of *Notting Hill*, *Sight and Sound*, June, 1999, 9:6, p.50.

90) Prior to appearing in *Four Weddings*, Andie MacDowell had starred with Gerard Depardieu in *Green Card* (Peter Weir, 1990), a romantic comedy about an American woman and a French man set in New York. In 1989, she had played a woman troubled by modern sexual mores in *sex, lies and videotape* (Steven Soderbergh, 1989). Stanley Kauffmann in the American journal *The new Republic* (4 April, 1994) claimed that 'the English rapier play around her' in

Four Weddings 'makes her look a bit stolid'. Kauffmann concludes, however, that 'Of course, she couldn't, and shouldn't, have played in English style' (p.24).

91) David Kosse quoted in an article on the marketing of *Notting Hill* in the *Financial Times*, 24 April, 1999, p.10.

92) Information on *Notting Hill* taken from the *BFI Film and Television Handbook* (2000), p.20, and the *BFI Film and Television Handbook* (2001), p.41, both edited by Eddie Dyja.

93) Duncan Kenworthy quoted on the official web site for the film: http://www.notting-hill.com/

94) Richard Brooks, *The Observer*, 5 April, 1998.

95) http://www.labour.org.uk/historyoflabourparty/ provides details of the date of John Smith's death.

96) Michael Quinion in 'World Wide Words' claimed that the phrase 'Cool Britannia' 'started to appear in the British press near the end of 1996, shortly after *Newsweek* declared London to be the coolest city on the planet. Most people who live in that scruffy and under-governed metropolis didn't recognise this description…However, the press soon changed its mind and it has been taken up with enthusiasm', he noted.
http://www.worldwidewords.org/turnsofphrase/tp-cool.htm

97) Mark Leonard, *Britain* ^{TM}*: Renewing our Identity* (Demos, London, 1997), p.72.

98) Age of William (35) taken from the screenplay by Richard Curtis at http://home.online.no/~bhundlan/scripts/Nottinghill.htm.

99) Andrew Anthony, *The Observer, Screen* section, 4 April, 1999, p.7.

100) Anne Billson, *Sunday Telegraph*, review of *Notting Hill*, 23 May, 1999.

101) Nigel Cliff, *The Times,* 20 May, 1999, p.37.

102) 'Woody Anna' term used in the screenplay of *Notting Hill*.

103) The novel being adapted is not named, although *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), filmed by Jane Campion in 1996, and starring Nicole Kidman, seems the most suitable vehicle for Anna Scott.
Describing his heroine in the preface to *Portrait*, James ponders, 'What will she do? Why, the first thing she'll do will be to come to Europe; which in fact will form…no small part of her principal adventure', from *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* introduced by R.P. Blackmur (The Scribner Library, New York and London, 1962).

104) The 'Blockbuster' joke in *Notting Hill* hints at the increased importance of video and DVD transactions by the close of the 1990s. According to the (2001) *BFI Film and Television Handbook* edited by Eddie Dyja, *Notting Hill* was the 15th most popular rental video in Britain during 1999, and the 7th most popular retail DVD, pp.48-49.

105) Andrew Anthony in *The Observer* article cited above describes the concluding image of *Notting Hill* as 'insufferable' (p.7).

106) Richard Dyer, *Stars* (British Film Institute, London, 1979), pp.181-183.

107) Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (British Film Institute/Macmillan, London, 1987), p.15.

108) ibid., p.29.

109) Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'But do we need it?' in *British Cinema Now*, edited by Martyn Auty and Nick Roddick (British Film Institute, London, 1985), p.152. Casting American stars in British films had been one of the practices of British film production in the late 1950s (for example, American character actor, Brian Donlevy, appeared as the very British figure of Professor Quatermass in *The Quatermass Experiment*, Val Guest, 1955), but these films often featured American actors who were no longer stars or popular in America, and the films themselves were often supporting 'B' features, rather than major film releases. Richard Curtis' films clearly operate in a different kind of commercial and aesthetic territory, testifying to the changed conditions of British and American film production in the 1990s.

110) David Thomson, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (Little Brown/Time Warner books, London, 2002), p.599.

111) Henderson, p.327.

Part 5:

Conclusions to thesis

My thesis has examined the significant and innovative role played by three distinctive genres in British film production and film culture during the 1990s. The genres, in question, explored the fortunes of specific regional communities, particular ethnic communities and groupings, and the experiences of heterosexual and homosexual romantic couples in British society. These three strands of film-making considered the situations of men rendered redundant by the British economy, the emotional and intellectual values of first, second and third generation immigrants to Britain, and the hopes and fears of associated characters seeking love and personal fulfilment.

In his study, *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975), Tzvetan Todorov points out that 'works need not coincide with categories', and that 'a work can…manifest more than one category, more than one genre'.[1] The three generic strands discussed in the thesis are, I would suggest, individually distinct in terms of their selection of subject material, and the kind of characters and social groupings whose lives are privileged in the narratives. Nonetheless, each of the genres shares a common interest in issues of identity, and an individual's relationship to his or her family, place of residence, and position in society. The thematic strands of the three genres, thus, complement each other, and support the dramatic explorations being undertaken in each form of narrative.

Films within each of the studied categories are also linked by their shared tendency to seek out instances of humour, farce, and irony in the situations depicted, with the comic elements of the various scenarios opening up self-reflexive debates about the events unfolding, and the ways in which characters (and, implicitly spectators) are being encouraged to react to situations as they emerge and deepen. Thus, the miners in *Brassed Off* consistently discuss the issues regarding their economic situation, and Hugh Grant's character in *Four Weddings* and *Notting Hill* meditates on what he needs to do in order to feel that his life is more complete and worthwhile. In *East is East*, the authoritarian father and his disobedient children are also engaged in an ongoing debate, which turns into an aggressive struggle about who or what determines the way they should lead their lives.

Comedy is often forged out of situations in which there is a sender of a joke, and a receiver, a teller, and a target of humour, and, subsequently, in the films above (and the genres which they represent), the presence of a comic element within the narratives serves to animate the dramatic conflicts and ideological disagreements, enabling important concerns to be explored in a vivid and unpredictable process of cultural exchange and interaction. Comedy, like melodrama, becomes in such dramatic frameworks a means of bringing tensions and conflicts to the surface, and allows characters to openly stand up for the codes of conduct and values which are precious to them (as in *Brassed Off, My Son the Fanatic* and *East is East*).

The heightened characterisations common to both comic and melodramatic treatments of social and personal themes allows for the formation of characters such as Charles in *Four Weddings*, Anna in *Notting Hill*, Danny in *Brassed Off* and George in *East is East*, figures, who in the narrative landscape of their particular films, are both ordinary *and* extraordinary in certain vital respects. Their 'final' positions within the respective narratives are followed with interest by spectators because these characters come to symbolise much more than themselves, as they become embroiled in 'larger than life' situations in which issues of love, power, the relationship between the past and the present, and the universal and the everyday, are imaginatively opened up and dramatised.

I would suggest that the melodramatic and comic aspects of the narratives combine to produce scenarios in which the film-makers do not flinch from presenting scenes of social breakdown, emotional fragmentation, or psychological confusion. Some of the examples of humour within several of the 1990s scenarios can appear harsh, and even cruel, at times, connoting an atmosphere of antagonism, rather than of reconciliation, as humour becomes one means of self-defence when situations turn nasty and unpredictable.

The filmic style of particular narratives, at crucial moments within the stories being related, is, nonetheless, capable of offering subtle judgements on the behaviour and attitudes of individual characters. When the camera notably moves towards the character of Danny in *Brassed Off*, as he eloquently points out to the band the importance of their honouring and continuing the efforts of their predecessors, an elegiac mood of sadness and respect is engendered, and we, as spectators, are brought emotionally nearer to an understanding of the kinds of

cultural tradition which Danny personifies so concretely and vitally. Conversely, George Khan in *East is East*, is presented as both a conservative and revolutionary figure, a zealot-like character who is prepared to destroy his own home in order to build a newer, more spiritual base.

When he goes too far, however, and attacks his wife in front of their youngest son, the camera gradually, but perceptibly, pulls back from what is being witnessed, and focuses instead on the pained and confused expression of the son, who feels both betrayed and threatened. The film at this stage, thus distances itself from George when he resorts to domestic violence and becomes manically intolerant, suggesting that underneath what may have appeared to be initially funny or farcical within the narrative, lies something much darker and disturbing. It is important in the film that George is not just a comic figure, but, equally, the narrative does not suggest that he is a totally bad character, or that his beliefs are completely misguided.

East is East and *Brassed Off* (to take merely two examples from the 1990s films discussed in the thesis), never fall into the trap of suggesting that anything or everything can be considered humorous if viewed from a certain perspective. Laughter does though (in both the past and present films examined during the course of the study) often serve a purpose of puncturing pretensions on the part of characters who may have an inflated impression of themselves. George, for example, pumps up his precious barber's chair to create a sense of himself as an important and influential figure, but, by the end of the narrative, the anarchistic and carnivalesque antics of his family have humiliated him and reduced the level of his status and position of authority.

A concern with language can also be seen as linking the strands of communal, ethnic and romantic comedy which have been scrutinised. A particular dispute in *Brassed Off* centres around whether the character of Andy can be classified as a 'scab', or a 'stupid fucker'. Carrie in *Four Weddings* tells Charles she liked hearing him say what he said on the Embankment, even if she is not quite certain exactly what he said or implied, given the indirect nature of his discourse. *East is East* closes with the two outsider figures of George and Earnest, man and boy, briefly, managing to make contact with each other through a shared cultural greeting, at a time when communication appears to have broken down between all other characters.

In *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976), Peter Brooks defines melodrama as a 'form for secularised times',[2] a description which fits in with the ways in which the mode is utilised within the 1990s films studied. Brooks suggests that 'melodrama may be born of the very anxiety created by the guilt experienced when the allegiance and ordering that pertained to a sacred system of things no longer obtain',[3] and many of the narratives explore ethical and political questions in situations in which there are no easy answers to problems, or magical solutions just around the corner.

In the communal films of the 1990s, as exemplified by *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, a stable system of employment, and clear prospects for the future, no longer exist for the characters and the communities of which they are a part. In the ethnic comedy dramas, characters who are entirely sure about what is right and wrong, are (in turn) contrasted with figures who are confused about what to believe in any longer. In the romantic comedies, individuals are often torn between how to reconcile sexual desires, which may be in a permanent state of flux, with latent urges to settle down and live a more orderly and family based existence. Both the past and present films discussed in the thesis (but particularly, I would suggest, the 1990s three predominant generic forms studied) respond to the challenges posed within individual narratives, creating situations which are highly charged dramatically and ideologically, but which can always be altered suddenly by an unexpected remark or plot twist.

In the introductory chapter of the thesis, I noted how the significance of genres in British film culture has been contested and queried by certain commentators. Film Studies academic, John Hill, speaking with Paul Webster, Chief Executive of *Film Four* in the *Journal of Popular British Cinema* (2002), wondered whether 'one of the difficulties for British cinema' was 'that it had a history of genre filmmaking, but now mainly produces occasional one-off hits?'[4] Alexander Walker, reviewing the prison comedy, *Lucky Break* in the *Evening Standard* (August, 2001), conversely, argued that 'Genre films – crime, sitcom, slasher, tear-jerker(s)' had 'always been Hollywood's strength', whereas the 'strength' of British cinema 'used to' reside in 'one-offs, the hard to categorise picture that was sometimes an unexpected hit and raised morale and aspirations'.[5]

I have sought to illustrate that important links can be made between films produced within very distinct periods of British film history, and that British cinema has often returned to key themes and concerns of communality, cultural, sexual and national identity, and treated these subjects in imaginative and thoughtful ways. The commercial success and critical interest generated by *Bhaji on the Beach* (1994), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) and *Brassed Off* (1996) may initially have been unexpected, but these films encouraged writers, directors and producers in Britain to explore and extend further the stories, situations, and character types outlined and brought to our attention in the respective scenarios.

Brassed Off, *Bhaji* and *Four Weddings*, all notably deployed elements of physical and verbal comedy, integrated with topical and vibrant social observation, and dramatic narrative developments. The film-makers, without romanticising or sentimentalising the various characters in the narratives, also seemed to *care* about the figures and people within their stories, encouraging audiences to do likewise, empathising with their plights or aspirations, and considering the merits of their responses to particular situations.

Brassed Off drew attention to cinematically neglected areas of northern working class culture and society, whilst paying homage to (and extending) traditions of committed social realist cinema *and* Ealing comedy within British film culture. *Bhaji on the Beach* sought to expand the nature and depth of representations of Asian communities in British cinema, whilst *Four Weddings* reflected upon the position of marriage, and the role of romantic ritual in modern Western culture, while conjuring up the possibility of new opportunities for creative and commercial interactions between British and Hollywood cinema to take place.

It is too early to assess whether the generic forms initiated by these particular films will proceed in playing an important role in British film production and continue to resonate with audiences. It is in the nature of generic cycles that there will be periods of expansion and retrenchment, cinematic peaks and lows. Two post-1990s films, *Lucky Break* (Peter Cattaneo, director of *The Full Monty*, 2001), a communal comedy, set in a men's prison, and featuring musical comedy sequences, and *Crush* (John McKay, 2002), a romantic comedy-drama starring Andie MacDowell, both performed disappointingly at the UK Box office,

suggesting that the appeal for audiences of comedic narratives focusing on small, localised communities, and romantic comedies, based around the presence of American film stars in British settings, was possibly waning.[6]

British films offering a comic-dramatic account of the emotional ebbs and flows of regional communities were less evident in recent British cinema, a development which in many ways was anticipated by the mood of resignation prevalent in *Brassed Off* (1996), and the 'for one night only' tone of *The Full Monty* (1997). *Purely Belter* (Mark Herman, director of *Brassed Off*, 2000), did, however, return to the plight of economically depressed and socially troubled areas of the north, but concentrated on dramatising the effects of these harsh conditions on a second generation of unemployed males, rather than focusing on the lives of the communities as a whole. This tendency to privilege the formative experiences of young adults could also be discerned in three other comedy dramas released in 2002: *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha), *Anita and Me* (Metin Huseyin) and *About a Boy* (Chris and Paul Weitz).

In terms of a desirable range of ethnic representations in British film culture, the lack of mainstream British films exploring aspects of African-Caribbean societies remained a perplexing absence, although in 2003, a BBC 1 television situation comedy, *The Crouches*, based around the lives of a black family living in London, and featuring Rudolph Walker from *Love Thy Neighbour* in a leading role, was broadcast to mixed reviews.[7] The Asian sketch based, satirical and parodic comedies on BBC 2, *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998-2002) and *The Kumars at No 42* (2001- onwards) continued to be popular, and contributed to the formation of a cultural climate in which subjects and topics which might have been considered taboo or sacrosanct, could now be represented in a comic and open-minded manner.[8]

Gurinder Chadha and Meera Syal had done much to initiate the 1990s cycle of ethnic comedy dramas with their work on *Bhaji on the Beach* (1994), and therefore it was fitting that the new century saw them produce belated follow-up films: *Bend It Like Beckham* (directed by Chadha) and *Anita and Me* (scripted by Syal). The near ten year gap between their first and second British films tended to suggest, however, that the place of the ethnic comedy drama within contemporary British film culture was by no means assured or secure, and that the genre was dependent on new writers and directors being allowed the

opportunity to make films within this area, if it was to flourish and become a truly established feature of British film production and culture.

Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* was a determinedly populist narrative, aimed at breaking out of the art-house circuit, and appealing to a multiplex generation of cinema audiences. The director was quoted as saying that she was 'tired of issue films' that continually presented aspects of 'race and culture as a problem', and, therefore, she had set out to 'make a feel-good comedy'.[9] *Bhaji on the Beach* had initially opened on only five screens in Britain, while in April, 2002, Gurinder Chadha was able to proudly announce in the *Eastern Eye* Asian newspaper that *Bend It Like Beckham* was 'the 'Number One film across the UK'.[10] Such an extension in exposure and interest was, she declared, an indication of how the United Kingdom had 'changed enormously' in the eight year period separating the two films.[11]

Bend It Like Beckham does not seek to dramatise or make explicit the kind of social changes which Chadha may have perceived as taking place in British society between the years 1994 and 2002, but instead engages with the theme of young teenagers being allowed to follow their own instinctual urges, rather than having parental or communal aspirations foisted upon them (*East is East* and *Billy Elliot* also explore this theme). *Bhaji on the Beach* had sought to reveal the motivations and fears of characters through an ongoing series of dialogues between central figures, and (apart from the dream sequences) was filmed largely in the televisual style of a drama shot on film in the early 1990s. *Bend It Like Beckham*, in contrast, contained a number of sequences shot in the style of a modern 'popular music' video, constructed out of fast and frequent editing, and regular changes of scene. This more recent film also seemed unabashed about working its way towards what might be interpreted as a 'Hollywood-type', life affirming resolution (the two main characters are actually depicted leaving for America at the close).

The result was a fluently composed, accessible film which privileged the 'impossible dreams' of its young characters. It could be argued that the lack of depth and range in some of the film's characterisations and dramatic situations (along with the accompanying restlessness of the film's editing style) were necessary features of a film about football aimed at an international audience. *Bend It Like Beckham* can, in fact, be interestingly compared to *Mike Bassett*

England Manager (Steve Barron, 2002), a comedy which parodies the provincial thinking and social inadequacies of English football and culture, as particularly personified by white managers and players. This film both laughs and despairs at the dire state of the national game when placed in a wider context, depicting the fortunes of the England football team as a catalogue of failures and social disgrace, and English culture itself as provincial, self-interested and petty-minded.

Bend It Like Beckham, contrastingly, affirms the potential of the game to encourage sporting and cultural ambition across divides of race and gender, even if like other British ethnic comedy dramas from the 1990s, a dream of leaving Britain is nurtured, and Pakistan or America are used to symbolise the possibility of a new life and a fresh start. The film confidently parallels the aspirations of its British-Asian heroine with the achievements of a white, English footballing hero, suggesting that Britain can now, perhaps, be perceived as a more integrated and unified community in the form of an 'extended family'. Ironically, in view of these symbolic connotations, the two female football fanatics (as noted) head for America at the close, and Beckham, himself, left Britain for Real Madrid to pursue his own 'footballing dreams' in the summer of 2003.

In both *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Anita and Me*, Meera Syal's autobiographical based film about an Asian girl growing up in the midlands of the 1970s, a racist remark or action by one of the (female) characters is not presented as funny or as an example of comic banter which need not be taken too seriously. Racist observations in these two films result in the flow of the narrative being interrupted, and the victims of the remarks feeling hurt and emotionally lost. The racist epithets of *Love Thy Neighbour* may appear less frequently in 1990s (and beyond) ethnic comedy dramas, but when such moments do occur in a modern context, the narrative tends to be temporarily suspended in order to highlight the heinous nature of the racist behaviour and attitudes, whereas in *Till Death* and *Neighbour* such language was part of the discourse of the narratives, and central to the entertainment experience which they offered. In *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Anita and Me*, racist remarks are met with the narratives themselves entering a 'time out' situation where audiences are given a moment to register and recognise the hurt caused by such behaviour.

Within the iconography and emotional landscape of British romantic comedy, Hugh Grant (along with Colin Firth), remained a key figure. In *Love Actually* (Richard Curtis, 2003), Grant played a modern day, Prime Minister, who is more concerned with the state of his love life than the 'state of the nation' (while in the same film, Colin Firth played a cuckolded lover, who falls in love with his Portuguese maid, despite the fact that neither, initially, can speak the other's language). The film, as a whole, intriguingly suggests that the relationship between American and Britain should, perhaps, be treated warily in the future, although a young, bereaved boy does find emotional solace by admiring an American girl from a distance, and another story presents a sexually frustrated British male enjoying sexual success in a representation of America as indeed a 'land of opportunity'. A more serious (and unresolved) strand of the narrative records the potential breakdown of a middle class marriage between a couple played by Emma Thomson and Alan Rickman. This aspect of the film recalls the characters played by Rickman in *Close My Eyes* and *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, as well as conjuring up memories of *Brief Encounter*, the final images of which (in many ways) continue to haunt and influence representations of relationships in British film culture. In its mosaic form of interconnected stories, and depiction of Britain as a 'kind of family' watched over by Hugh Grant's Prime Minister character, *Love Actually* also recalls the narrative style and ethos of films such as *Millions Like Us* (1943).

The two most far-reaching attempts to interrogate and extend Hugh Grant's post-*Notting Hill* screen image were in *Bridget Jones' Diary* (Sharon McGuire, 2001), and *About a Boy* (Chris and Paul Weitz, 2002). In the former film, he played a publisher with a great deal of energy and drive, who was also a confident seducer of women (the antithesis of his Charles and William roles). *About a Boy* (2002), conversely, drew upon some of the incipient melancholy and resignation of his character in these defining parts, casting him as Will, a 'blank' featureless thirty-something male, whose life consists of voluntary unemployment, and 'units of time' spent shopping, listening to music, and watching the afternoon television quiz programme on Channel Four, *Countdown* (c.f. *The Full Monty*, where the characters long for something to do to erase the boredom caused by unemployment). In *About a Boy*, as the title suggests, the deepest and most important relationship is not between Grant's character and his

various girlfriends, but between Will and a boy, Marcus (Nicholas Hoult), whom he accidentally befriends, suggesting an attempt by the American film-makers to broaden the scope of the contemporary British romantic comedy genre.

In keeping with this implicit intention, the final images of *About a Boy* concentrate not on the formation of a romantic couple (although liaisons have been established), but depict a kind of extended family, or loosely constructed mini-community, celebrating Christmas together. The film concludes with a close up, freeze framed shot of Marcus over a voice-over commentary in which he pointedly states his belief that couples are not necessarily the answer to everything: 'You need more than that, you need back-up', he exclaims. This observation is based on his own experience of family break-ups, but may also be interpreted as an indication that in this latter-day example of British romantic comedy, the genre can be read as drawing upon some of the social dimensions and emphasis on common values promoted in the communal comedy films discussed earlier, whose own post-1990s future in British film production schedules is open to question.

The most recent concerted attempt to broaden the horizons of British romantic comedies is *Birthday Girl* (Jez Butterworth, 2002), which begins as a low-key, 'unlikely couple' comedy/drama about emotional and spiritual loneliness, as experienced by an English bank clerk, John (Ben Chaplin) and his Russian mail order bride, Nadia (Nicole Kidman), but ends with acts of violent betrayal taking place, within the context of an unstable and threatening world landscape. In the video he produces for a dating agency, John hopes for a girl who is 'intelligent, kind, pretty', and lists among his interests, 'running, reading' and watching 'films - if they're any good'. Into his dull suburban life, comes an attractive, but troubled and duplicitous Russian woman (played by a major Hollywood star).

Nadia, it transpires, exploits her sexual appeal to lonely and vulnerable men, by blackmailing and robbing them of their possessions and money. However, John's life in Britain is presented as so predictable and ordinary, that a new and uncertain life with Nadia in Russia at the close is depicted as preferable to John's probable future in the United Kingdom. In an updating of *The 39 Steps* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1935), Nadia and John are drawn to each other as they seek to survive amidst hostile situations in which John becomes exiled from his own country,

and no one (including Nadia) can be trusted. There is no equivalent of the 'Memory Man' to belatedly offer them a kind of resolution of events or a form of salvation. The final shot of the couple, as John leaves for Russia on a false passport with Nadia, is modestly optimistic, which, the film implies, is the most that can be hoped for in the case of such an 'unlikely couple', existing within a climate of increasing international tensions and conflicts.

The resurgence and diversification of comedy in British cinema which occurred during the 1990s was also reflected in other international cinemas of the period, particularly those of Spain and France. Nuria Triana-Toribo in *Spanish National Cinema* (2003) states that 'Comedy made a strong comeback in the early 1990s',[12] and Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas's *Contemporary Spanish Cinema* (1998) reports that 'Genre films in post-Franco Spain have been dominated by the comedy' genre, through which such themes as 'the problems of social and sexual identity, the conflicts between parents and their children…as well as the traumas involved in establishing viable relationships' have been explored.[13] Keith Reader and Phil Powrie in *French Cinema: A Student's Guide* (2002) refer to 'the success of the popular comedy' in the late 1990s and post-2000 period, and conclude that 'the most popular genre in French cinema is the comedy'.[14]

Comic film narratives are well positioned to critically probe and deconstruct the preoccupations, anxieties and aspirations of particular nations, individuals and social groupings. Part two of my study discussed the ways in which a group of British films drew inspiration from a number of 'classic' Ealing comedies, and British 'new wave' films which had pondered the state and future of post-war society. Films such as *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot* dramatise related concerns about relationships between the individual and society, and, in turn, become films about the course of history and 'progress' in British society.

The ethnic comedy drama of the 1990s sought to 'read against the grain' and re-appropriate what could be gleaned from very different traditions of British cinema and television. *Bhaji on the Beach, My Son the Fanatic* and *East is East*, all engaged with television situation comedy-style scenarios of awkward neighbours, and conflicts both inside and outside the walls of the family home. These 1990s examples of the genre did not flinch from representing the harsher aspects of racial intolerance, and several of the films did contain characters who

dreamt of escaping from Britain to begin the kind of fulfilling spiritual and emotional life which appeared to them elusive or unattainable on British soil.

In part three of the thesis, I sought to demonstrate that the dramatic frameworks of the films' respective narratives provided a basis for adding meaning and resonance to the comic moments and perspectives arising within the stories. *Bhaji on the Beach* and *East is East* both sought to address a number of important issues pertaining to contemporary British society in ways which were entertaining and accessible, without, as a result, becoming either shallow or cynical. Neither film implied that its ending could be anything but provisional, but both narratives notably conclude with the sound of women laughing after a sometimes traumatic day out, or children happily playing in the street. Such films suggest that there is hope for the future of multi-culturalism in Britain, if individuals can succeed in maintaining both a sense of humour and perspective.

My case study of *East is East* aimed to elucidate the ways in the film negotiated the tricky terrain of 'racist humour', and sought to offer a more purposeful mixture of comedy and meaning than had tended to be achieved in the 1970s situation comedies dealing with issues of race. Equally, however, I attempted to show that these programmes are not without academic interest, and may have been working in more complex ways than has been generally recognised. In *East is East*, racist abuse is not enjoyed for its own sake, but the film does not shy away, either, from acknowledging its existence or, on occasions, its comic potential. The film, taken as a whole, suggests that there may always be a place for the comedy of cruelty, hardship and outrage, even within the most utopian and harmonious of societies.

Part four of the thesis examined the emergence of romantic comedy as a popular and prolific form in British cinema, a genre which owed a great deal of its success to the performer, Hugh Grant, and screenplay writer, Richard Curtis. The romantic comedy genre, in similar ways to the ethnic comedy drama, was centrally concerned with issues of individuality, the problems involved in relating to others, and assessing the authenticity and validity of one's desires. By mediating dramatisations of these themes through the medium of comedy, these 1990s British contributions to the genre could illustrate (in a fundamentally benign fashion) the potential for deeply felt emotions to fade over time, alongside a depiction of the difficulties involved in finding one's 'true love' in

the first place. The presence of a comic element to the films' explorations of courtship patterns meant that the makers could approach their subject material without preconceptions, and seemingly melodramatic events and incidents could be carefully incorporated into the plots, adding to both the dramatic complexity and comic irony of the narratives.

Although heterosexual relationships remained the dominant feature of the majority of the British romantic comedies, there were signs that gay relationships and partnerships were being examined by a small, but significant number of imaginatively conceived films. The British romantic comedy during this late 1990s period of British cinema was also able to celebrate its own burgeoning relationship with American cinema, by bringing the Hollywood film star, Julia Roberts, over to Britain to make a film about a popular American film star making a film in Britain…

During the period 1990 to 2003, the generically flexible and robust narrative forms of communal comedy, ethnic comedy drama and romantic comedy aimed to revivify and regenerate contemporary British film culture, whilst paying homage to, and drawing creative inspiration from previous traditions of British cinema. When the rich, but hapless, Tom (James Fleet) is asked how his best man's speech is coming along in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, he predicts that it will bring about 'tears' and 'laughter', and provide 'something for everyone'. It succeeds in these intentions, but not in quite the ways he had anticipated, the humour proving too harsh and outspoken for some members of the audience, and too near the truth for others. As a symbol for much of the work undertaken by the films I have examined, the incident can stand as a worthy and fitting monument.

In *Human All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (1878), Friedrich Nietzsche defined the 'comic' as occupying a momentary transition in human perception from a state of 'fear' to one of 'short-lived exuberance', and concluded that, on balance, there was more of the 'comic than of the tragic in the world'.[15] One of the achievements of the 1990s British films discussed in this thesis, is that while they reveal an awareness of tragic elements in modern British and Western culture, they also seek to celebrate the continuing existence of the 'comic', with its attendant qualities of spirit, resilience, and belief that mankind will persevere and prosper until the bitter end.

Notes

1) Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: a structural approach to a literary genre* (translated by Richard Howard, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1975), p.22.

2) Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1984), p.200.

3) ibid.

4) Paul Webster, Chief Executive of *Film Four* interviewed by John Hill in the *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, edited by Julian Petley and Duncan Petrie (Flicks books, issue 5, 2002), pp.53-63.

5) Alexander Walker, review of *Lucky Break*, *Evening Standard*, August, 2001.

6) Alexander Walker, reviewing *Crush* in the *Evening Standard*, 6 June, 2002, wondered 'How does Film Four allow' such a film 'to reach production, never mind exhibition?', concluding that 'A shake-up there is long overdue'.

7) Tim Lott in an *Evening Standard* article, 'Where are the black stars of the UK screen?' (11 September, 2003), claimed that *The Crouches*, 'Britain's first all-black sitcom…was not nearly as dreadful' as reviewers had suggested. Lott observed, however, that he was 'eager to discover which member of London's black community had written it, and more than a little taken aback to find it was penned by a white Scotsman'. *Time Out*'s review of the series claimed that 'having cocked it up so spectacularly, nobody will attempt to do a black sitcom on BBC 1 for another decade' ('TV listings', October 8-15, 2003).

8) Transmission dates of *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars At No 42* taken from the second edition of the *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy* by Mark Lewisohn (BBC Books, London, 2003). Lewisohn notes that 'Although the subjects' of *Goodness Gracious Me* 'were inspired by the writers' Anglo-Asian experiences the humour was broad enough for the comedy to…make waves in the mainstream' (p.328). The comic elements of *East is East* achieved something of a similar 'cross-over' effect.

9) Gurinder Chadha quoted in the *Asian Age*, article by Rithika Siddhartha, 18 April, 2002, p.20.

10) Article by Chadha in the *Eastern Eye*, 19 April, 2002, p.6.

11) ibid.

12) Nuria Triana-Toribo, *Spanish National Cinema* (Routledge, London, 2003), p.152.

13) Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, *Contemporary Spanish Cinema* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998), p.63-74.

14) Keith Reader and Phil Powrie, *French Cinema: A Student's Guide* (Arnold, London, 2002), p.49.

15) Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Human All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (translated by Marion Faber with Stephen Lehmann, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1984, Aphorism no.169, p.115: first published in Germany, 1878).

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Filmography

Case Study films

Brassed Off (1996), certificate 15, 107 minutes, distributed by Film Four, produced by Channel Four Television Corporation/Miramax Film Corporation/Prominent Features Ltd, written and directed by Mark Herman. Cast: Pete Postlethwaite (Danny), Tara Fitzgerald (Gloria), Ewan McGregor (Andy), Jim Carter (Harry), Philip Jackson (Jim), Peter Martin (Ernie), Stephen Moore (Mackenzie).

The Full Monty (1997), certificate 15, 91 minutes, distributed by Twentieth Century Fox, Twentieth Century Fox Searchlight, a Redwave Films production,

developed by Channel Four Television Corporation, screenplay by Simon Beaufoy, directed by Peter Cattaneo. Cast: Robert Carlyle (Gaz), Tom Wilkinson (Gerald), Mark Addy (Dave), Emily Woof (Mandy), Steve Huison (Lomper), Hugo Speer (Guy), Bruce Jones (Reg).

East is East (1999), certificate 15, 96 minutes, distributed by Film Four, An Assassin Films production for Film Four in association with the BBC, directed by Damien O'Donnell, screenplay by Ayub Khan-Din. Cast: Om Puri (George Khan), Linda Bassett (Ella Khan), Jordan Routledge (Sajid), Archie Panjabi (Meenah), Chris Bisson (Saleem), Jimi Mistry (Tariq), Ian Aspinall (Nazir).

Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994), certificate 15, 117 minutes, distributed by Rank, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment/Channel Four Films/a Working Titles production, directed by Mike Newell, screenplay by Richard Curtis. Cast: Hugh Grant (Charles), Andie MacDowell (Carrie), Kristin Scott Thomas (Fiona), James Fleet (Tom), Simon Callow (Gareth), John Hannah (Mathew), Corin Redgrave (Hamish), David Bower (David).

Notting Hill (1999), certificate 15, 123 minutes, distributed by Universal, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment in association with Working Title Films, directed by Roger Michell, screenplay by Richard Curtis. Cast: Julia Roberts (Anna), Hugh Grant (William), Hugh Bonneville (Bernie), Emma Chambers (Honey), Rhys Ifans (Spike), Gina McKee (Bella).

Other films cited in the thesis arranged alphabetically

About a Boy (Chris and Paul Weitz, 2002)
Accident (Joseph Losey, 1967)
Alf Garnett Saga, The (Bob Kellett, 1972)
Alfie (Lewis Gilbert, 1966)
Anita and Me (Metin Huseyin, 2002)
Beautiful Thing (Hettie Macdonald, 1996)
Bend It Like Beckham (Gurinder Chadha, 2002)
Bhaji on the Beach (Gurinder Chadha, 1994)
Billy Elliot (Stephen Daldry, 2000)
Billy Liar (John Schlesinger, 1963)
Birthday Girl (Jez Butterworth, 2002)
Bridget Jones' Diary (Sharon McGuire, 2001)
Brief Encounter (David Lean, 1945)
Brigadoon (Vincent Minnelli, 1954)
Bringing up Baby (Howard Hawks, 1938)
Close My Eyes (Stephen Poliakoff, 1991)
Confessions of a Window Cleaner (Val Guest, 1974)
Crush (John McKay, 2001)
Damage (Louis Malle, 1992)
Demi-Paradise, The (Anthony Asquith, 1943)
Distant Voices, Still Lives (Terence Davies, 1988)
Educating Rita (Lewis Gilbert, 1983)
Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain, The (Chris Monger, 1995)

Fatal Attraction (Adrian Lyne, 1987)
Fever Pitch (David Evans, 1997)
Flashdance (Adrian Lyne, 1983)
Genevieve (Henry Cornelius, 1953)
Gregory's Girl (Bill Forsyth, 1980)
Gregory's Two Girls (Bill Forsyth, 1999)
Hindle Wakes (Victor Saville, 1931)
Hobson's Choice (David Lean, 1953)
I'm All Right Jack (John Boulting, 1959)
The Importance of Being Earnest (Anthony Asquith, 1952)
In the Bleak Midwinter (Kenneth Branagh, 1995)
It Always Rains on Sunday (Robert Hamer, 1947)
Kind Hearts and Coronets (Robert Hamer, 1949)
A Kind of Loving (John Schlesinger, 1962)
The Lady Vanishes (Alfred Hitchcock, 1938)
Lavender Hill Mob (Charles Crichton, 1951)
Leon the Pig Farmer (Vadim Jean and Gary Sinyor, 1992)
Letter to Brezhnev (Chris Bernard, 1985)
Love and Death on Long Island (Richard Kwietniowski, 1998)
Love Actually (Richard Curtis, 2003)
Love Thy Neighbour (John Robins, 1973)
Lucky Break (Peter Cattaneo, 2001)
Man in the White Suit, The (Alexander Mackendrick, 1951)
Martha: Meet Frank, Daniel and Laurence (Nick Hamm, 1998)
Matter of Life and Death, A (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1946)
Mike Bassett England Manager (Steve Barron, 2002)
My Beautiful Laundrette (Stephen Frears, 1995)
My Name is Joe (Ken Loach, 1998)
My Son the Fanatic (Udayan Prasad, 1998)
The Navigators (Ken Loach, 2001)
Only Two Can Play (Sidney Gilliat, 1962)
Orphans (Peter Mullan, 1999)
Passport to Pimlico (Henry Cornelius, 1949)
Poor Cow (Ken Loach, 1967)
Pretty Woman (Gary Marshall, 1989)
Prick Up Your Ears (Stephen Frears, 1987)
Pygmalion (Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard, 1938)
Purely Belter (Mark Herman, 2000)
The Rachel Papers (Damian Harris, 1989)
Raining Stones (Ken Loach, 1993)
Rich and Strange (Alfred Hitchcock, 1931)
Riff-Raff (Ken Loach, 1991)
Rita, Sue and Bob Too (Alan Clarke, 1987)
Room at the Top (Jack Clayton, 1958)
Sammy and Rosie Get Laid (Stephen Frears, 1989)
Sapphire (Basil Dearden, 1959)
Schlinder's List (Stephen Spielberg, 1993)
Secrets and Lies (Mike Leigh, 1996)
Sid and Nancy (Alex Cox, 1986)
Sing As We Go (Basil Dean, 1934)

Sliding Doors (Peter Howitt, 1997)
Soft Top Hard Shoulder (Stefan Schwatz, 1992)
Straw Dogs (Sam Peckinpah, 1972)
The 39 Steps (Alfred Hitchcock, 1935)
This Sporting Life (Lindsay Anderson, 1963)
This Year's Love (David Kane, 1999)
Till Death Us Do Part (Norman Cohen, 1969)
The Titfield Thunderbolt (Charles Crichton, 1953)c
Train of Events (Basil Dearden, Charles Crichton, Sidney Cole, 1949)
Truly, Madly Deeply (Anthony Minghella, 1991)
Up 'n' Under (John Godber, 1998)
Waking Ned (Kirk Jones, 1999)
Whisky Galore (Alexander Mackendrick, 1949)
Wild West (David Attwood, 1992)