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Erasing “Knowable Communities”: From *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* to *Brassed Off*

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses cinematic representations of working class communities in British cinema from the pre-war documentary movement to (post-)Thatcher feature films chronicling the decline of traditional industries. A particular focus is given to contrasting Karel Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and Mark Herman’s *Brassed Off*. The former title serves as a model example of British New Wave cinema, marking the “discovery” of the working class with its “knowable communities” that revealed them to the general public. The latter film provides an apt illustration of the impact and consequences of Thatcherism on the very same communities. The paper elaborates on selected narrative and visual motifs, investigating the ways in which British filmmakers have striven to depict social changes in British society over the consecutive decades.

Keywords: realism, British cinema, knowable community, documentary movement, Thatcherism, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Brassed Off*.

Social realism in British cinema has a long tradition beginning with the documentary movement in the 1920s, through the “kitchen sink dramas” of the late 1950s to more contemporary “Brit-Grit” productions (Thorpe). The founding fathers of social realism are commonly associated with the documentary tradition of the late 1920s and early 1930s and with such filmmakers as Paul Rotha, Humphrey Jennings and John Grierson. It was the latter who embarked on a mission to educate and inform the public through the medium of film arguing that “British cinema should carve out a distinctive space for itself, not by competing with Hollywood but by specialising in films of fact and public information” (Leach 33). His feature-length documentary *Drifters* (1929) emphasizes the value of hard work and those who perform it, elevating the images of individuals to “representatives of a nation rather than of a specific class or other restricted social group” (Higson, *Waving* 199). Grierson’s approach was further enhanced by the filmmakers of the Second World War era. The armed conflict significantly influenced the character and message of the films at that time promoting the need for “social integration and harmony” (Forrest, *Social Realism* 19).

NEW TIMES, NEW IDEAS

The late 1950s brought about a new documentary formula with the Free Cinema movement, whose members intentionally rejected the propaganda and commercial dimensions of mainstream cinema in their films. Instead, they expressed a desire “to make independent films, free from profit considerations, free from studio tampering, and with the freedom to choose their own subject matter” (Lay 11). The filmmakers, by directing their cameras at the ordinary person and at the rituals of life, became successful in conjuring up an aura of the extraordinary out of mundane, everyday activities. In a series of programmes presented between February 1956 and March 1959 at the National Film Theatre in London audiences were exposed to a handful of productions of the movement that now comprise the Free Cinema cannon, such as Lindsay Anderson’s *O Dreamland* (1953) and *Every Day Except Christmas* (1957), Lorenza Mazzetti’s *Together* (1956), Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson’s *Momma Don’t Allow* (1956) as well as Reisz’s *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959) to name but a few.

At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s Anderson *et al.* were ready to switch from the documentary format of Free Cinema to the feature dimension of the British New Wave and bring the working class out of cinematic obscurity to the big screen. Striving for authenticity, the filmmakers went for local, often unknown actors and placed them in locations in northern

towns and cities. The characters spoke colloquial language with regional accents and their acting was partly improvised. The visuals (black and white photography, handheld camera) hinted at a documentary form distinguishing the New Wave films from the “phoney” mainstream British productions. Within a relatively short period of time New Wave filmmakers managed to establish a canon of works firmly anchored in the realist tradition of the period. Lindsay Anderson’s *This Sporting Life* (1963), Tony Richardson’s *Look Back in Anger* (1959) and Jack Clayton’s *Room at the Top* (1959) offered a type of realism combined with an authenticity of setting in the industrial cities and towns of the English north. Yet it is Karel Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) that remains emblematic for the whole movement by capturing the spirit of the times and reflecting the realities of working class lifestyles.

At the time of its release, *Saturday Night* looked almost revolutionary for its representation of sexuality and working-class youth although, later on into the decade, it somewhat lost its edge with the arrival of the “swinging sixties.” Arthur, the central protagonist, expresses his harsh masculinity with scathing comments on co-workers, women, television, social relations and life in general. His attitude towards women obsessed with consumer goods and middle-class aspirations is tinted by a New Wave stereotyping since

demonising the women prevents further uncomfortable debate over class identity. *Saturday Night* shares this misogynistic tendency, but whereas in other New Wave films, the male view is privileged, this one is more ambivalent in its audience positioning. Effective examples include the sequence where Arthur deliberately tips a pint of beer over the woman in the club, the sequence where he puts a dead rat on the bench of a female worker and the sequence where he shoots Mrs. Bull. (Welsh 101)

All incidents lack clear motivation, suggesting Arthur Seaton’s desire to just “have a good time,” as he (in)famously proclaims in his opening monologue.

GETTING IT REAL

New Wave films evoke the notion of “realism” that may refer to specific elements of a given work: content, message or visual style. Realist texts are usually “described as ‘gritty’ and ‘raw,’ offering a ‘slice of life’ or a view of ‘life as it *really* is’” (Lay 5). They may also be defined by contrasting with other cinematic practices since they have come to “represent numerous examples of films that reflect a range of social environments and issues, in

a manner that rejects the artifice and escapism of more classically oriented narrative models” (Forrest, *Social Realism* 1). Perhaps for this reason, recounts Philip Gillett, realism still remains “in the eye of the beholder. It signifies something beyond camera technique, affecting the representation of working-class people on screen. . . . Somehow the term realism was never bandied about when upper-class characters were portrayed” (183). Forrest, in turn, charts the tradition of social realism in British cinema from a specific angle, seeking “to highlight hitherto unrealised depths within the textual parameters of British social realism in order to propose its deserved status as a genuine and progressive national art cinema” (*Social Realism* 1). Therefore, it would be perhaps more appropriate to talk about different types of “adjectival” realisms: moral, nostalgic, social, working class, etc.

Discussing the work of Grierson, Jennings, Reisz, Anderson, Loach, Leigh, Herman, Clarke or Meadows would always imply a specifically calibrated critical approach, since Grierson’s version of realism differs from that of Richardson or Meadows. As Hill aptly observes, realism, “no less than any other type of art, depends on conventions” (57). Therefore, films “which were accepted as ‘realistic’ by one generation often appear ‘false’ or ‘dated’ to the next” (59). Forrest evaluates the latest incarnation of realism in British cinema by stating that

new realism has elevated its everyday subjects through lyrical emphasis on ubiquitous landscapes, domestic interiors, familiar buildings, routines and habits. . . . They make clear the political, emotional and cultural forces that shape and determine our lives, and stir the experiences and memories that we deploy to negotiate, interpret and consume them. Realism is no longer instrumental, it is no longer fixed to a specific effect or defined by a particular appearance, rather it provides a site for multiple reflections, inhabitations and contestations. (*New Realism* 196)

Having this in mind, it is worth remembering that what follows neither claims, nor attempts to (re)evaluate the nuances of various strands of realism, but serves as a mere reminder of how complex this term is and how prone it is to (re)interpretations.

A social realist convention seems to be a style of choice for filmmakers engaged in telling stories about common people and their everyday experience. These stories would frequently focus on a group of characters carefully placed in social, historical and geographical contexts. Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*, characterizes the settlements that developed in England prior to the Industrial Revolution as “knowable communities,” a type of community that developed certain values that drew on “many deep and persistent feelings: an identification with the people among whom we grew up; an attachment to the place, the landscape, in which

we first lived and learned to see” (106). The migration from the rural areas to the cities stimulated by the enclosures and Industrial Revolution rearranged existing social structures, destabilizing sedentary lifestyles and disrupting the functioning of the “knowable community.” The long-term nature of this process generated a progressive crisis of values in which local communities as the preferred form of social organization were idealized. Attachment to a specific place and a deep sense of continuity resulted in a particular hierarchy of values based on profound and permanent identification with people from the community. Williams’s “knowable community,” even if located in the pre-industrial period, may well be extended to include working class people in the north of Britain after the industrial revolution as well. The titular process of “erasing,” although beginning much earlier, greatly accelerated as a result of Margaret Thatcher’s economic policies.

LOOK AT BRITAIN

The Free Cinema/New Wave period was a time of profound social and economic change. Post-war austerity was becoming a thing of the past while the society was embracing the era of relative affluence. It was Harold Macmillan who famously proclaimed in 1957 that “most of our people have never had it so good” (Hill 5). Very soon the “era of affluence” turned out to be a mirage as the country entered the 1960s with signs of economic crisis looming on the horizon. Though the working class was (still) doing relatively well, with each passing year Britain was experiencing a gradual decline in her imperial status.

Even if New Wave productions were followed by formally imaginative, socially illuminating and psychologically penetrating films by directors like Nicolas Roeg, Ken Loach, Tony Garnett and Joseph Losey, . . . the vast body of British cinema remained mired in uninspired mediocrity and predictability. It was not until the Thatcher era, 1979–90, that genuine signs of a British film resurgence could again be seen. Margaret Thatcher took power during a time of profound economic trouble, government impotence and declining national prestige. (Quart 16)

If the New Wave films had striven to record the world of the working classes “as it is,” (post-)Thatcher cinema was busy with registering the image of that world doomed to extinction. The social realism of the 1960s was political; (post-)Thatcher social realism was not only political, but also much more confrontational (Kosińska 193). And it could hardly be otherwise. The social reality of the late 1950s and early 1960s had little in common with that of three decades later.

Margaret Thatcher rather mechanically transferred her free-market approach to the economy into other spheres of social life. Although her ideological turn also included cultural transformation, she demonstrated little interest in the arts. Her dismissive attitude towards cinema manifested itself, at best, in ignorance and, at worst, in actions negatively affecting film production. Unsurprisingly, then, many films made around that period directly “attacked the Thatcher government, seeing her free-market philosophy as a callous disregard for everyone but the entrepreneurial buccaneers who plundered the economy” (Friedman xiv). As such, her contribution to British filmmaking “was not the business climate she created, but the subject matter her policies and the culture she helped create provided British directors” (Quart 21).

Stylistically, the films of the (post-)Thatcher era followed the tradition of British social realism, though their approach slightly differed when compared to the New Wave productions. Here, Karel Reisz’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* will be juxtaposed with Mark Herman’s *Brassed Off* (1996) to illustrate this “before and after” dichotomy. (Post-)Thatcher cinema denotes two aspects: the films’ subject matter (the impact of Thatcherism on individuals and on British society in general) and their release date(s). In fact, the films addressing Thatcherism began to be made in the late 1980s, but it was only in the 1990s that the bulk of such productions appeared on screens.

BITTER COMEDY-DRAMAS

The films of the 1980s generally avoided engaging openly in the critique of Thatcherism. But as the decade was nearing its end and the social, economic and cultural effects of Thatcherism were appearing in plain view, the filmmakers, as it were, “took to their cameras.” They began telling stories about the devastating consequences of Thatcherite policy for individuals, social groups, businesses and whole regions of the country. The artistic temperament of British directors was reflected in a variety of narratives and visual formats as depicted in Chris Bernard’s *Letter to Brezhnev* (1985), Mike Leigh’s *High Hopes* (1988), or Alan Clarke’s *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1987) to name but a few. Their films were permeated by an ironic, if not a downright virulent humour underpinned by a sheer sense of desperation resulting from helplessness. While the poetic realism of New Wave was a record of the existing state of affairs (the here and now), the realism of the (post-)Thatcher era is acutely aware of recording the image of a world (literally) doomed to extinction.

All of this became fairly evident throughout the 1990s with a string of titles that did not shy away from spells of bittersweet humour, alleviating an otherwise bleak reality. Still, films such as *Riff-Raff* (1991), *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty* (1997), *Career Girls* (1997), *The Dockers* (1999), or *Billy Elliot* (2000), though stylistically quite varied, resort to situational or verbal humour. At times they turn this into a driving force of the narrative (*The Full Monty*), or use it more sparingly, striking a sentimental note instead (*Billy Elliot*). Yet the comedic conventions only partially mitigate the confrontational stance and political message of those films which makes Herman's *Brassed Off*, in particular, stand out.

Not many viewers saw the director's first feature *Blame It on the Bellboy* (1992) and it was only his second film, *Brassed Off*, that engaged audiences and critics alike. Here, the director demonstrated his skill at creating a story that would combine a feel-good touch with truthful, if uncomfortable, insights into the plight of a collapsing industry. This formula was to colour his later films as well and Herman would prove his talent by crafting "two further provincially-set successes: *Little Voice* (1998), with its rich evocation of seaside culture, and *Purely Belter* (2000), the comedy-drama based around Newcastle United football team" (McFarlane 322). Herman's last work to date is a historical drama, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008), based on John Boyne's book of the same title.

"THE MINERS UNITED, WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED"

Brassed Off remains a politically charged film, identifying Margaret Thatcher as the person chiefly responsible for the collapse of a whole industry, resulting in dire consequences for the miners involved. Released in the mid-1990s, the film's narrative makes references to the miner's strike of a decade earlier. Thematically and stylistically, it meets the criteria of a kitchen sink drama whose narrative offers a diagnosis of the state of a multidimensional crisis: existential (a social group affected by economic and political changes), family (masculinity under pressure, redefinition of the role of women), intergenerational (upsetting the sense of continuity) and class (the management versus the miners).

Brassed Off is set in the fictional Yorkshire town of Grimley. Here, a local pit that has survived the turbulent 1980s is on the verge of closure, forcing the miners to go on strike. When Gloria Mullins, a young Coal Board surveyor, arrives, she becomes torn between two incompatible realities: the world of management attempting to persuade the miners that the pit "has to go," and the world of the "knowable community" of working men and women. Gloria was born in Grimley where, as a teenager,

she was in a romantic relationship with Andy. The two meet at the rehearsal of a local brass band and rekindle their teenage love. Gloria keeps her work for the management a secret while she tours with the band, winning local competitions. This eventually earns them a performance at the Royal Albert Hall. Unfortunately, her secret is revealed to the miners while she also learns that the viability report she has been preparing turns out to be a publicity stunt. Therefore, the majority of miners vote for the closure of the pit in exchange for compensation. Gloria, disillusioned, turns to the miners and helps them finance the trip to London. As they win the competition, Danny, the band leader, delivers a passionate anti-Thatcher speech.

The film received generally positive reviews, becoming the second most successful British production in the UK in 1996. In the course of time *Brassed Off* has generated more in-depth analyses, especially when compared to other films of the period dealing with similar issues. Moya Luckett pointed out that

many 90s films stabilise their representations of regional difference within the UK by articulating the north/south divide in terms borrowed from 1960s cinema. While the 1960s also witnessed changing and uncertain national identity, the passage of three decades has reshaped its images to connote a distinct, recognisable, image of nation. Films like . . . *Brassed Off* borrow the shots of “our town from that hill” from the realist/New Wave films with equal awareness. This return to earlier traditions of local representation invites a critical examination of the dialectic between past and present, memory and current experience, economic power and disadvantage. (94)

Claire Monk drew attention to the way these films exploit the “transformation of underclass material into an appealing, profitable and exportable commodity” (276). Her critique focused especially on the fact that generally tragic subject matter (unemployment, family issues, redundancy and poverty) was turned into feel-good stories for mass audiences (*ibid.*).

The impact of Thatcherism, understandably, was referred to in all critical evaluations of the film. Paul Dave labels *Brassed Off* a “deindustrialising elegy” in which “unemployment still appears to indicate a break in the lives of traditional industries and communities—it marks the shifting of the macro-economic gears which threatens to leave entire workforces on the ‘scrap heap.’ Here ‘unemployment’ is a sign of political crisis—as it was under the consensus conditions of post-war social democracy” (Dave 72). A denunciation of the economic crisis highlights the problem of male disempowerment. Both *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* “pointedly equate the loss of working-class male labour power with the loss of male

gender power—in the case of *Brassed Off*, with obtrusive misogyny” (Monk 279). Therefore, according to Luckett, “*Brassed Off* ultimately exposes the Marxist truism that culture has no value without an economic infrastructure, it leaves its protagonists in abeyance and in transit in the carnivalesque world of London’s nightlife” (96). Yet the film offers little hope as it ends “with a show-stopping tirade against the government from bandleader Danny, a bitter rendition of *Land of Hope and Glory*, and details of continuing pit closures” (Glasby 56).

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As an example of “northern realism,” *Brassed Off* shares a number of features with the New Wave productions. Though it is impossible to judge whether these references to the canonical films are intentional, it is worth drawing attention to some of them as opening up new interpretative possibilities. In this respect, Herman’s film seems to best fit this purpose since, despite its humour, it remains uncompromising in the critique of Thatcherism and its “erasing” impact on “knowable communities.” The starting point is to draw attention to a visual motif that, apart from its symbolic and narrative meaning, evokes associations with a similar one characteristic for New Wave social realist films with Reisz’s *Saturday Night* providing a good example. This is, of course, “that long shot of our town from that hill”—“a shot which lures the eye across the vast empty space of a townscape” (Higson, “Space” 138). In essence, it is a panorama of the industrial areas of the north of England; an urban landscape filled with terraced houses stretching along both sides of the streets of the town with a patch of front garden separated by a fence from a similar patch of garden next to the identical house. Over the rooftops are visible tower mine shafts and factory chimneys with plumes of smoke.

Intentionally or not, *Brassed Off* makes a few nods towards *Saturday Night*. One of the initial sequences in Reisz’s film shows Arthur Seaton riding a bike along a street lined with terraced houses. Similarly, in Herman’s film *Danny*, the band conductor, is filmed cycling against a cityscape down below. This may be a sheer coincidence but the similarity is striking: another day in the north captured here in “that long shot of our town from that hill.” Even if (post-)Thatcher cinema does not necessarily offer a similarly universal cinematic equivalent present across a number of films, it is actually *Brassed Off* which comes the closest. It utilizes “that long shot of the winding wheel on the shaft tower” operating as a visual riff fulfilling a twofold function: it punctuates the story development and serves as a kind of commentary on the unfolding events.

For the first time, a shot of the shaft tower appearing against the blue sky with its rotating winding wheel provides the backdrop for a briskly marching group of miners. The shaft tower can be seen as a symbolic totem pole, a signpost serving as a focal point for the inhabitants of the mining town. Grimley very much feels like a “knowable community” with its inhabitants following the social rules established and developed over successive generations, including the tradition of working in the mine that passes from father (Danny) to son (Phil); the “men only” brass band; and a visit to the pub where one can chat over a beer and play billiards. The times of the day are marked by the sound of the mine hooter announcing the beginning and end of the shift. The shaft tower dominates the townscape. Its rotating wheel, akin to a clock on a medieval church bell tower, sets the rhythm of the day. The town is reminiscent of post-industrial traditions as described in Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*. The fact that it survived until the first half of the last century indicates its durability and adaptability to changing conditions. Just as the Industrial Revolution remodelled the social relations which had prevailed before it, so the working-class customs developed as a result of it found their end.

... BUT NO FUTURE

However, there is not much time left for Grimley. Like many other communities in the industrial north, it too will become a “lost world” caught in the grip of the economic upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s. And, to quote one of the characters, Grimley’s inhabitants, like “dinosaurs, dodos and miners,” will share the fate of other extinct species. Yet for a short while, despite the ongoing protest against the planned closure of the mine, the winding wheel on the shaft tower is still turning to signal that life goes on as usual. If Hoggart in his book was already lamenting the weakening of working-class culture in the 1950s, Margaret Thatcher’s policy dealt this tradition a final blow.

Another shot of the shaft tower comes again on the television screen in the news bulletin. The set is in Gloria’s hotel room and, while unpacking her suitcases, she watches a report on the ongoing negotiations between the management and the miners. The distancing effect of the media coverage provides a glimpse of Grimley’s community from the point of view of a stranger for whom the situation in the town turns into yet another television news item. Gloria’s position is ambiguous. She is a local and an outsider at the same time, and soon she will be confronted with the conflict resulting from the clash between the cold outlook of the economists and the sentiment of the locals.

In his “Lecture on Realism,” Raymond Williams makes a reference to *The Big Flame*, a 1969 BBC television play about the occupation of the Liverpool docks by about ten thousand dockers. The film, based on a script written by Jim Allen, was directed by Ken Loach and produced by Tony Garnett. Since all of them have always voiced their left wing inclinations, it was not surprising that *The Big Flame* turned out to be a realistic drama presented in a gritty documentary style. In his text, Williams discusses the clash of conventions between the reality and the requirements of the news report:

There is a quite effective short scene of a television interviewer who has come to discover what the occupation is about, but to discover this within the terms of his function as a reporter for a particular kind of television service. In fact, we are shown him falsifying in his summing-up what has been said to him, and this is an effective satiric presentation of what many working class people feel about the function of television interviewers when they come to report events of this kind . . . This use of yet another convention dependent on our awareness of the modes of television interviewing and its insertion into the dominant convention of the rest of the film creates a certain unresolved tension, even a contradiction. (Williams, “A Lecture” 112)

In *Brassed Off* it is this contradiction arising from the clash of the cold, matter-of-fact news report that is contrasted with the actual reality of the plight of the miners in Grimley.

Gloria makes an attempt at reconciling the local with the outsider when she decides to take part in a brass band rehearsal. Danny, the band conductor, is initially reluctant to accept not only an outsider but also a woman. But the fact that Gloria was born in Grimley makes her eligible to join the strictly male group of musicians. It is her “locality” that makes her a trustworthy member of Grimley’s community. Yet very soon she finds herself in a difficult position when her work for the mine’s management comes to light. She immediately becomes persona non grata among the miners. Here, the sequence of a band rehearsal is combined with shots of negotiations between the miners and the management. Inserted in the dramatic montage of scenes from the rehearsal and negotiation rooms there comes another image of the shaft tower. Shown from a worm’s-eye view it majestically overlooks the mine like the guardian of a long-standing tradition.

Gloria’s return to Grimley is not just a sentimental journey into the past, but also a kind of “tourist” trip through the social classes as, having a working class background, she nevertheless managed to gain a college degree. Her status is akin to that of the “scholarship boy” Hoggart writes

about in *The Uses of Literacy*: "Almost every working-class boy who goes through the process of further education by scholarship finds himself chaffing against his environment during adolescence. He is at the friction-point of two cultures" (292). Gloria, a scholarship girl, willingly, or not, finds herself on the other side of the barricade, "stained" by her university education in the south of England. Paradoxically, it is the miners who position Gloria as an ideological opponent, contrary to herself declaring her loyalty to Grimley's community. Gloria's alienation is, therefore, threefold. Not only is she a woman in a "man's world," but her education also makes her suspect among commonsensical, plain-thinking locals. In addition, her locality is somewhat doubtful. Yes, she was born in Grimley, but she also committed the act of betrayal of "going down south" to get her college degree and work for the management. She may be, as Danny discovers, "old Arthur's Gloria," but eventually she ended up being a "scholarship girl," a tourist in a working class community.

Karolina Kosińska draws attention to the fact that the issue of class tourism may be applied to the directors who "overwhelmingly represented a well-educated middle class . . . usually coming from southern or central England . . . They probably had little in common with the working class experience and the life of the decayed industrial cities of the north of England" (193). In a way, Anderson, Richardson and Reisz were performing a kind of class tourism within working-class culture, providing the viewer with an insight into the social realities of the class but locating themselves outside its boundaries. Their middle-class sensibilities filtered the on-screen realism, imbuing it with a poetic touch for the sake of a subjective vision of working-class life. This subjective vision, although legitimate, begs to evaluate the New Wave films in a broader perspective. Their version of social realism has a poetic dimension because it is a distanced gaze, it is a creative projection tinged with ideological wishful thinking. It is also an unconscious manifestation of an inability to transcend the class barrier and "feel" for the plight of the Yorkshire worker, which is not an accusation but merely a statement of fact. Although (post-)Thatcher films more frequently resort to humour, they offer a decidedly harsher vision of reality. It is obvious that these films cannot "poeticize" reality since the irreversible damage to the "knowable communities" has already been done, or is about to be done.

Despite the threat of closure hanging over Grimley, the winding wheel on the shaft tower is still turning. The next two shots of it, accompanied by the sound of a hooter, indicate the passing of another day while Gloria works to produce a viability report, and the negotiations with the management continue. Yet, in fact, the fate of the mine and the miners has already been decided. "Coal is history, Miss Mullins," quips Gloria's

boss, and the majority of the miners decide to give up further work in exchange for a severance package. Even those who were in favour of the closure are aware that in essence it is their defeat. As life slows down the winding wheel on the shaft tower also stops and this is where a very telling image comes into view: as the miners, with their heads down, are leaving their former workplace, the shaft tower is reflected in a puddle, in which the stationary winding wheel can be seen. The significance of this shot is fairly obvious: the tower no longer overlooks the mine and the town. Its symbolic collapse entails the real decline of the mine as a place of work and a source of livelihood. The future fate of Grimley's "knowable community" comes into question.

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THIS IS THE END . . .

The collapse of the mining community coincides with Danny's real-life collapse. Upon their return from a performance, the band walk down the empty street of a deserted town when Danny suddenly falls down. Sickness, fatigue and stress have taken their toll. Danny's lying on the ground is linked with another shot of the shaft tower. A collapsed miner and a stationary winding wheel make for a powerful statement: this is what happens to the industrial communities of Britain. Economic decisions taken in a faraway place (London) result in tragic consequences somewhere else (Grimley). Later, as the bedridden Danny is recovering in hospital, the miners stand in line patiently waiting to hand over their mining equipment and thus finally close this chapter in their lives.

There is a direct connection between the operational winding wheel and the plight of the community. As Danny's collapse coincides with the collapse of the mine, so his son Phil not only wants to close this chapter in his life: he wants to give up on his whole life. His attempt to hang himself on the shaft tower is both grotesque and tragic. Phil, struggling on a rope, is saved at the very last moment by his colleagues. Dressed in a circus clown costume, the miner had just delivered a poignant monologue to a group of puzzled kindergarten children. Instead of regaling them with funny stories, he shouted out a desperate accusation against Margaret Thatcher and her government. Phil's suicidal gesture turns into a symbolic expression of the humiliation of an entire social group subjected to economic pressure. A stationary winding wheel marks the end of life for the community and for the individual.

Gloria's mission also seems to come to an end when she realizes that her work has been in vain and her youthful idealism has been cynically exploited. Just as Danny riding his bike is reminiscent of Arthur's cycling

in *Saturday Night*, so Gloria’s conversation with Andy evokes associations with the final sequence featuring Arthur and Doreen in *Saturday Night*. They both look down from the hill at the town in the distance. There are rows of houses being built nearby. “Maybe one of these houses will be ours one day?”, wonders Doreen aloud. For these two “that long shot of our town from that hill” holds a promise of a better future as they walk away holding their hands. Doubtless they will indeed live in one of these houses, fitting in with the customs of their local “knowable community.” Their gaze from the hill over the city is at once a gaze encompassing past, present and future. Towards the end of *Brassed Off*, Gloria meets Andy, also on a hill overlooking the city. However, the backdrop of their conversation is less “that long shot of our town from that hill” than “that long shot of the winding wheel on the shaft tower” in the rays of the setting sun. This is a farewell conversation with a mood of fatalism and resignation pervading the entire sequence. The couple do not look to the future like the couple in Reisz’s film. Here, everything seems to freeze in stillness. This is the end of the relationship, this is the end of the local history, this is the end of the local “knowable community” and its way of life. For the miners, Gloria’s work for the management is the ultimate confirmation of her “betrayal.” Never mind that she was born in Grimley. Now she stands on the other side of the economic and class divide.

US AND THEM

To Andy it is also obvious that Gloria does not see her future in Grimley, hence his question as to whether she plans to “go back south.” Gloria, as a “scholarship girl,” has a way out. “Going back south” is going back to the place where evil comes from, where the decisions are made, where “scholarship girls” like Gloria decide about the well-being of communities up north. Andy’s words make a direct reference to the phenomenon of the north-south divide: the (in)existence of the economic demarcation line between the prosperous south and the less prosperous north of Britain. Whether, and to what extent, the division truly reflects the well-being of British citizens remains a point of contention. But it returned to the public debate at full power as a result of Margaret Thatcher’s policies when “numerous academic studies pointed to the emergence of a significant difference between southern and northern England in terms of employment opportunities, unemployment rates, average income, welfare dependency and other indicators of socio-economic well-being” (Martin 17). Such a division, even if challenged as perpetuating a simplistic image of Britain, functions in the popular consciousness, reflecting mental

and moral, and above all economic, differences. The end of the twentieth century, on the other hand, made it clear “that the idea of a united England is a kind of myth” (Martin 15).

Brassed Off indirectly subscribes to this statement. There seems to be no way around this division and it always appears to be “us” or “them.” The film remains one of many referring to the destructive aftermath of Margaret Thatcher’s economic and social policies. In the process it tries to strike a balance between comedy and drama, and whether it succeeds remains debatable. Nearly three decades after its premiere one can be tempted to refer to some of the jokes as being crude or plain sexist. Those made at Gloria’s expense usually seem fairly one-dimensional: always referencing her sex appeal and physicality as the (in)famous “Gloria Stits” remark uttered by one of the miners at the band rehearsal. Similarly, the film does not make excuses when, for a change, it addresses the issue of male fallibility and inadequacy, although it tries to alleviate the gravity of the situation with humour or occasional tenderness and sentimentality as in the hospital conversation between Danny and his son. If this “kind of tonal tightrope walk is not always successful . . . it is always watchable, and suggests a confidence to match the political commitment of the script” (Glasby 59).

Striking the right balance between humour and seriousness was certainly a decisive factor contributing to the film’s success as stressed by its producer Olivia Steward: “I think the reason why *Brassed Off* was so popular . . . was that it combined anger with the spirit of laughter in the face of adversity” (Glasby 60). This laughter meant that the realism that the film makes claims to has to be taken in context. It is certainly there and it can be uncompromising. Yet since the battles depicted in the story have been lost, they may now seem somewhat antiquated and therefore comic. But the comic factor, as Simon Beaufoy put it, was a “way of sugaring the pill” (Mather 6). Even with its shortcomings, *Brassed Off* remains a kind of tribute to the long tradition of cinematic kitchen sink dramas. The filmic town of Grimley may be elevated to the status of a universal mining town in the North that experienced the “erasing” effect of the social and political changes of the 1980s and 1990s. Grimley, as a “knowable community,” may soon qualify as another manifestation of “Broken Britain” with “that long shot of the winding wheel on the shaft tower” standing as its symbol.

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