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Working class films for middle class desires: power distribution, escape and damage in Billy Elliot, Brassed Off and the Full Monty

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WORKING CLASS FILMS FOR MIDDLE CLASS DESIRES:
POWER DISTRIBUTION, ESCAPE AND DAMAGE IN
BILLY ELLIOT, BRASSED OFF AND THE FULL MONTY

Ryan Gerald Wilkinson

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in
fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Masters by Research

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the representations of the working class in three British films made in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They are *Brassed Off* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997), and *Billy Elliot* (2000). Although the films purport to be championing the working class, this dissertation will show how the films are more suited to a middle class audience as the working class is largely portrayed in a negative light. The reason the working class is portrayed in a negative light is so the hierarchical class divides remain in place and the working class are placed at the bottom of the social pile, subservient to the middle and upper class.

Introduction – “I know my place!”

“Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your psyche, at the very core of your being” (Kuhn 1995).

Popular culture in the 20th Century proliferates with working-class figures - musicians, actors and sometimes politicians proudly talking of their working-class heritage. But what is the working-class? The ‘class sketch’ which was featured on *The Frost Report!* featured actors John Cleese, Ronnie Barker and Ronnie Corbett giving a

satirical portrayal of the class system during the 1960s. The upper class man looks down on the middle class man, the middle class man looks up to the upper class man but looks



Figure 1 *The Frost Report!*

down on the lower class man and the lower working class man looks up to both men and “knows his place!” (Cleese et al. 2008) However, determining a definitive definition of what it is to be working-class has been notoriously problematic. If the image of the characters from *The Frost Report!* is to be taken in its most simplistic terms, class is basically defined through hierarchical divisions with the upper classes at the top, the middle class below that, and the working class at the bottom of the social pile.

This dissertation will explore this concept by considering representations of the working class in three specific films: *Brassed Off* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997) and *Billy Elliot* (2000) with specific focus on how the working class is portrayed negatively throughout the films. In it I argue that they encourage the hierarchical divides that are shown in *The Frost Report!* to be considered

as an accurate reflection on British culture in the 1990s. The representations, largely constructed as negative and inflicted on the working class by middle and upper class powers, mean that hierarchical divides between the classes become more and more defined between the classes despite the films purportedly championing the working class.

Although *The Frost Report!* offers a snapshot of what class is like, it has been explored by a number of different people. In 1957 Richard Hoggart published the book *The Uses of Literacy* in which he attempts to define specifically what the working class is. He draws on his own experiences and upbringing, having lived in poverty in Leeds during the 1920s. In what has been described by Clarke as a “deeply personal book” (Clarke 2010), Hoggart draws particular attention to stereotypical representations of the working class:

How many English writers are there who do not, however slightly, over-emphasize the salty features of working-class life....When we come to our own more consciously manipulative times we meet the popular novelists' patronizingly flattered little men with their flat caps and flat vowels, their well-scrubbed wives with well-scrubbed doorsteps; fine stock – and amusing too! (Hoggart, 1957 p7)

Hoggart also believes that such writers “do not always have an adequate sense of the grass roots of that life” (Hoggart, 1970 p17). Hoggart could claim to give an accurate representation of what the working class is, as he classes himself as being from this type of community. However, as Hoggart himself states, even those from the working class have “temptations to error” (Hoggart, 1957 p4). He later highlights how the perception of class and interpretations of it are symptomatic of a specific time stating, that had *The Uses of Literacy* been published “ten years earlier, or later, it might have had much less effect” (Hoggart 1992). Hoggart highlights how things that define the working class could be as ephemeral as commentaries on it, and that the

very nature of a definition of the working class is hard to pin down, due to its ever changing nature.

The idea that classes and in particular the working class change markedly over time was also a theory put forward by E P Thompson in his book *The Making of The English Working Class*, published in 1963. Thompson concentrates on the relationship between class and its historical context, as well as indicating that the concept of class is difficult to specifically define:

More than this, the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure. The finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class any more than it can give us one of deference or love. (Thompson, 1963 p9)

Thompson did however attempt to define the English working class, and through this historical framework he sought to “to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity” (Thompson, 1963 p12). What Thompson is in effect doing in his quest to save these stereotypically working class people, is highlighting that the working class had been created as a construct and was not realistically represented at the time of his writing. There is not what he sees as an accurate representation of the working class. However, critics of Thompson have argued that, “the book often converts probabilities and possibilities into accepted facts” (Currie & Hartwell 1965). In essence, Thompson created his own construct or version of the working class through his personal experiences.

In popular culture, Raymond Williams coined the term “structures of feeling” as a way of pinning down the working-class communities with which he interacted. He wrote that structures of feeling “operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense the structure of feeling is

the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization” (Williams 1961). The term has prompted a plethora of discussion and debate about what exactly “structures of feeling” means.

Williams also wrote,

The term is difficult, but ‘feeling’ is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’.... We are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable.... An alternative definition would be structures of experience...not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. (Williams, 1977 p129)

The term is particularly ambiguous and difficult to define. As Pickering notes, “it is made up of the formally undefined” (Pickering 1997) and Kaplan has called the term “slippery” (Kaplan 1995). Despite this, the term has helped to define what working-class culture is like. John Kirk asserts that the working class stereotypically stood for “community spirit and strong moral values” but also points out that the notion of class is “implicated in all manner of lived experience” (Kirk, 2003 p1).

Essentially these terminologies and commentaries emphasise the difficulty in asserting a complete definition of what the working class is. They also point out that the working class as its own entity has been constructed and is open to personal, cultural and historical biases. From an economic perspective the working class has been labelled as “the bottom of the social pile” (McDonough, 1997 p186). Generally speaking McDonough also states that in the 1950s a typical member of the working-class included someone who:

Left school without any qualifications to find a job as a manual worker. They had a regional accent, a trade union membership card and lived in a close-knit community of ‘two up two down’ terraced houses owned by a landlord or the council. They enjoyed a pint down the local pub, a bet and a trip to a football match...They always voted labour and enjoyed a shared experience.(McDonough, 1997, p187)

Again McDonough relies on vague ambiguous terminology such as “enjoyed a shared experience” (McDonough, 1997, p187) to assert a complete definition on what the working class was. McDonough also makes sweeping statements about what people can expect from the working class, offering little more than a homogenous society that abided by these ideals.

The British New Wave films that emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s represented the working class in a new way. Hill states that the new wave films marked a change in how the working class was represented, saying that the films offered “the presentation of the working class on the screen no longer as the stock types or comic butts of “commercial” British cinema, but as “real”, “fully-rounded” characters in “real” settings (the regions, cities, factories etc) with “real” problems” (Hill 1999) Some of these films include *Room At The Top* (1959), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *The Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner* (1962), *This Sporting Life* (1963), *Billy Liar* (1963) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961). There needs to be a specific focus that these are still *representations* of the working class, not the working class itself. As Thompson notes, “The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.” (Thompson, 1963 p1) However, it is through these films and other media that the construct of the working class has been made.

A specific set of attitudes, locations, dialects, signs and signifiers were present in all of these films, meaning that the British New Wave films were all intrinsically and intertextually linked. These signs, such as terraced housing, close knit communities, the portrayal of sex, and more often than not a rebellious male lead character, brought the working class to mainstream film from the working class perspective for the first time. Karl Reisz, director of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, said that this new wave of cinema was showing "people and events that had not been seen on the British screen"

(Lambert 2002). The films, followed these conventions such as terraced housing and colloquial accents to achieve what Hill refers to as a “reality effect” (Hill 1986). Essentially Hill argues that because these aspects of British life were being portrayed in a new realist way, the films presented an authentic representation of working-class life.

However, these films were given this working-class label in order to differentiate them from the standard, ‘middle-ground’ of British film. Arthur Sillitoe, who wrote the novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* before it was adapted for film, touches on this idea of labeling the working class:

The greatest inaccuracy ever was to call the book a working-class novel for it is really nothing of the sort. It is simply a novel, and the label given it by most reviewers at the time it came out, even the intelligent ones who should have known better, was simply a way of categorising a piece of work they weren't capable of assessing from their narrow class standpoint. (Sillitoe 1961)

As Hill states, previous representations of the working class saw them as “comic butts” (Hill 1999) and these new depictions of the working class had to be categorized in order to process them into a cinema dominated by middle-class figures.

Sillitoe isn't the only one to highlight that the pieces of working-class film and literature had to have these labels asserted on them in order for them to be pigeon-holed as separate from mainstream film. In a wider cultural discourse McDonough has stated that “what we know about the working class is more often than not what the middle class think about them” (McDonough 1997 p187). In this one quotation McDonough sums up how the working class should be viewed: as a fictional construct, constructed by those with more power than them – the middle class.

The construct of the working class, which was created with the emergence of these British New Wave films continued throughout the rest of the twentieth

century, both in film and in a wider cultural discourse. Three late twentieth century film examples I will be looking at in detail are *Brassed Off* (1996) *The Full Monty* (1997) and *Billy Elliot* (2000). *Brassed Off* is a film written and directed by Mark Herman and follows a colliery brass band struggling with the closure of their local pit. It is set in the fictional town of Grimley, South Yorkshire. The setting of Grimley is a thinly veiled representation of the real South Yorkshire town of Grimethorpe, which suffered their own plight against pit closures. *Brassed Off* addresses many issues surrounding class, gender economic policy, and even suicide in a very direct way. It has been referred to as a “Ealing-esque comedy” (Bergan 2011) but this is a simplified view on what is a troubling film in many ways. As Gibson-Graham highlights:

It foregrounds the familiar left emotions of class hostility, victimized self-regard, and pure animus in the face of a powerful enemy. It expresses a desire for fundamental redress as well as the bitterness, resignation and guilt that accompany the thwarting of that desire. (Gibson-Graham, 1999 p63)

Gibson-Graham highlight that the film battles with many issues surrounding class and the desire to change their lives. They also point out that there is an inability to fundamentally change their lives against this powerful enemy. The film was funded by Film 4 and Miramax Films and from a financial perspective just about broke even.

The Full Monty was written by Simon Beaufoy and directed by Peter Cattaneo. The film achieved huge success worldwide and was nominated for four Academy Awards in 1998. It has been described as having “an unprecedented impact on British popular culture” (Farrell 2003). Such was the success of the film, that without a hint of irony, Tony Blair promised to go “The Full Monty” (Parry 1998) on a visit to Japan in 1998 in promoting the UK in an attempt to boost the economy and create jobs. The film is still used today to promote Sheffield, such is the resonance within British Popular Culture. The film follows a group of unemployed men from Sheffield,

struggling to make ends meet. They are threatened both by their inability to find work but also the infiltration of women into their traditional masculine spaces. Their resolution is to strip for money in a working-men's club for a paying audience consisting of women – leading to the men questioning their role in society both in reference to their working class heritage and also their masculinity.

The final film I will be considering is *Billy Elliot*, which was written by Lee Hall and directed by Stephen Daldry. Similarly to *The Full Monty*, it also achieved huge worldwide commercial success as well as a number of National and International awards. The film is set in north-east England and its subtext centres around the Great Miners' Strike of 1984. The lead character of Billy played by Jamie Bell, has a talent and passion for ballet dancing which the narrative follows against this backdrop of economic and social upheaval. *Billy Elliot* has been described as being “bold, attractive and emotionally generous...a film with a lot of charm, a lot of humour and a lot of heart” (Bradshaw 2000). There is sympathy created on multiple levels for Billy and his journey away from the working class: the Great Miners' Strike in which his family is embroiled and the financial implications of it, his mother's death when he was young, and the initial resistance from his family to his emerging dancing talent.

All three films either explicitly or implicitly refer to a period of mass de-industrialization in Britain during the Conservative governments led by Margaret Thatcher between 1979 and 1990. Reser comments that these three films “provided stinging commentaries on how the Thatcher government failed this region” (Reser, 2005 p218). Kirk writes about the complete shift in attitudes as a result of Margaret Thatcher gaining power in Great Britain. He writes, “the state's struggle for working-class assent to

mainstream values and beliefs would shift decisively from the nurturing of consent to the politics of coercion” (Kirk, 2003 p19). The Conservative governments forcibly imposed huge changes on the working class, leaving them no choice but to accept government policy. During this period Margaret Thatcher chose to move the British economy away from manufacturing and towards a service economy, favouring capital over labour, affecting many communities and lifestyles but most notably the working class. Raymond Williams called the new policies of the conservative government, “a return to class politics” (Williams, 1979 p336), suggesting that the working classes suffered while policies favoured those from outside the working class.

The working class communities of the north were hardest hit by the de-industrialization policies of the Conservative government during this period. As early as 1983, just four years after the Conservative government had come to power, nearly a third of manufacturing had ceased to be undertaken in Britain (Jones 2012). In the early 1980s more than 50,000 people lost their jobs in the steel and engineering industries alone. In 1983, there were an estimated 230,000 miners working in the UK and in the spring of 1984 many of them (an estimated 187,000) went on strike to protest against pit closures and the potential loss of 20,000 jobs. The miners went on to lose the battle against the closures. Despite striking for almost a year, some miners, squeezed by poverty went back to work before the end of 1984 and the strike formally ended in March 1985. During the 1980s the national unemployment figure peaked at just under 12 per cent in 1984. Such was the devastation to mining communities, this figure was close to 50 per cent in areas where a pit had closed. From 1951 to 1979 unemployment had never grown above 1.5 million. Since 1979, unemployment has been as high as 3.5 million and rarely fell below 2 million (McDonough, 1997 p189). McDonough, writing in 1997 at the same time *The Full Monty* was released and a year after

Brassed Off, states that “a great many male unskilled workers have fallen down a black hole of despair, with no job, little hope and no future” (McDonough, 1997 p190); this is precisely what is depicted in all three films for the majority of the characters.

As well as de-industrialization and promoting *laissez-faire* politics, an important part of the Thatcher government’s policy was promoting the idea that there was “no such thing as society” (Beresford 2011). Essentially she was emphasizing her desire for people to move towards a more individualistic way of living. This came in complete contrast to the “close-knit” communities in which the working class lived. She also went into a direct conflict with trade unions – so often the voice for the working class – and ultimately defeated them. She also managed to turn the general public against the striking miners and trades union, labeling them “the enemy within” and insisting they were “much more difficult to fight and more dangerous to liberty [than enemies abroad]” (Wilenius 2004). The unions and, as a result, mining communities were stigmatized and opinions were polarized.

Such were the drastic changes in the British economy and way of life that a new form of politics emerged: “Thatcherism”. David Cameron, the current Prime Minister, recently said: “we’re all Thatcherites now” (Morris 2013). Even when New Labour was elected into government in 1997 on a wave of optimism, many of the policies which Margaret Thatcher and her government had put in place continued. Tony Benn, an influential member of the Labour Party said just before New Labour came into power: “The paradox is that at the very time the public is rejecting Thatcherism, new labour is embracing it” (Richards 1997). Benn has also spoken about the fact that Margaret Thatcher said that “New Labour was her greatest achievement” (Farndale 2009). This

highlights not only her influence on the traditional opposition to Conservative governance – the Labour Party – but also that the political and cultural landscape had changed irrevocably during and since her tenure as Prime Minister.

Margaret Thatcher's policies, and her legacy became topical again in news after her death in April 2013 and it is clear to see that her life and her policies still split opinions, despite her having been out of office for over twenty years. Around the time of her death and funeral, mainstream media proliferated with both supporters of her policies and snapshots of communities torn to pieces as a result of them. David Blunkett, former home secretary for New Labour, said shortly after her death: "I cannot forgive her (Thatcher) for what she did to Sheffield" (Lynch 2013). There were even protests by some groups when it was her funeral, further indicating how her policies still divide people and their communities. Comedian Russell Brand writing in *The Guardian* reflected on the impact that Margaret Thatcher had had on his childhood and the attitudes that were instilled in him while growing up: "All of us that grew up under Thatcher were taught that it is good to be selfish, that other people's pain is not your problem, that pain is in fact a weakness and suffering is deserved and shameful" (Brand 2013). Again this is in direct conflict to the close knit communities and shared feeling, which commentators have said is fundamental within the working class.

All three films were made after these irreversible changes had been carried out by Margaret Thatcher's Conservative governments. *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* are set at the time they are filmed, in a de-industrialized Britain. The shift in economic policy had already occurred and these two films depict the working-class communities struggling to cope with these changes. *Billy Elliot*, which is set mostly in the time of the Great Miners' strike in 1984, offers

an insight in to what the conditions were like for those communities, and shows throughout the hardship and worry that was every-day life for many mining communities. All three films create an underlying longing for the past, and are often nostalgic about the past, particularly through their soundtracks and the dialogue between characters. By creating a discourse of nostalgia underlying the primary narratives, the films also show how the various struggles that the working class characters have to deal with become a *fait accompli*; their endeavors and sometimes the battles they undertake are a pointless exercise.

It is important to understand the complexity if the relationship films have with their cultural contexts. Ryan and Kellner put forward the concept of 'transcoding':

Films transcode the discourses (the forms, figures, and representations) of social life into cinematic narratives. Rather than reflect a reality external to the film medium, films execute a transfer from one discursive field to another. As a result, films themselves become part of that broader cultural system of representations that construct social reality. (Ryan & Kellner, 1990 p12)

The films exist not only as their own representations of the working class but also influence wider cultural discourse. Often in the case of these films there is a discourse of disdain for the middle and upper classes. Hall describes the process of recognition as being "constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation" (Stuart 1996). Essentially, the films influence a wider cultural discourse, but the cultural discourse also influences the films. Kellner and Ryan go on to say: "One's being is thus shaped by the representations of oneself and of the world that one holds" (Ryan & Kellner, 1990 p12). This cyclical process shows how the negative construct of the working class creates a desire to escape it, not only within the film being watched, but also popular culture as a whole. The reason that

these films have to be labelled working class is so that they are separated from the traditional centre ground of middle-class discourse and therefore maintain these hierarchical class divides. Films that were released around the time of the three primary texts that showed middle-class life include films such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Croupier* (1998) and *Notting Hill* (1999). However, none of these films were labelled as middle class. *Four Weddings and Funeral* was described in *The New York Times* as a “deft English comedy” (Maslin 1994) whereas the review for *Billy Elliot*, in the same publication, made direct reference to its working class setting (Scott 2000). This distinction from the generally accepted “middle” allows the same forms, signs and signifiers to be re-created in different texts, ensuring that the form of “working-class” films and literature exist intertextually between different films, but also transfers into popular culture. Through this transcoding process films play an important role in making the lines between classes become more defined and pronounced. Therefore, somebody who recognises themselves as a member of the working class on screen adopts the hierarchical divisive ideals that constitute class definitions that were so clearly embodied by Cleese, Barker and Corbett in the *Frost Report!* sketch: always recognising the middle-classes as their superior and subscribing to the role of being subservient to them. In the very same way the middle classes recognise themselves as such. They do this through this same construct with the working class construct forming, as Lawler puts it, “the constitutive outside to middle-class existence” (Lawler 2005). Thereby, the working class is ‘othered’ from middle-class life.

The construction of the working class exists within a middle-class gaze. Beverley Skeggs uses the term to discuss the making of middle-class ‘selves’ (Skeggs, 1997 p93). She argues that there is an anxiety about the working class, which has led to them being portrayed as of lesser value, leading to the middle classes shoring up ideals about their own heightened

sense of identity. Skeggs also draws on the work of film theorist Laura Mulvey who theorises a male gaze “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance” (Mulvey 1975) and draws on the patriarchal discourse which is apparent in the majority of mainstream films. Mulvey argues that there is “pleasure in looking (and a) fascination with the human form” from a sexual scopophilic perspective. I argue that the same principles are at work when viewing the construct that is the working class in film. The pleasure that is created when viewing through a kind of scopophilic middle-class gaze ensures that hierarchical structures are maintained from a middle-class perspective. This occurs on two levels. First there is pleasure in viewing the working-class in crisis and struggling with the issues that are represented on screen. Secondly the opportunities for success are limited, carefully regulated and contained in ways that suit middle-class needs.

This dissertation will demonstrate how these three working-class films, far from championing the working class, actually continue the tradition of constructing the working class as a way of reinforcing class hierarchy and thereby maintaining power structures. The narratives are fuelled in some way by the economic policies of the Conservative governments of the 1980s, but are unable to address this in an effective way. On the surface these films appear to be commentaries against the divisive policies of de-industrialization, which directly affected the working-class. Indeed, the films purport to be championing working class culture, they are in fact enforcing the ideology of that the working class is subservient to other classes and the policies they implement.

In the first chapter I will demonstrate explicitly how the working class is constructed and displayed as something that the characters need to escape. I will also highlight how this escape is presented as the ultimate goal for all

the characters, but that only a very limited number of characters are constructed as *managing* to escape. In the second chapter, I will explore what happens to the characters that are left behind as a result of the limited opportunity made available for escape, and how they are depicted as damaged as a result of the abandonment of the working class in popular culture. I will also look to how middle and upper classes are ultimately in control of who escapes the working class, and who are constructed as being condemned to staying within the working class. The working class must be portrayed in a mainly negative light in order to maintain these class divides.

Chapter 1 – Escape to succeed.

The worst fault of the working classes is telling their children they're not going to succeed, saying: "There is life, but it's not for you."

(John Mortimer)

The idea of existing successfully in the working class without attempting escape is something that is a relatively alien concept in British popular culture. Barbara Ellen suggests,

Have you ever noticed how successful people aren't permitted to remain working class; that there is no such thing as a visible high-achieving working class? The mentality still persists that being working class is something that all self-respecting go-getters shed asap. (Ellen 2012)

Ellen is not alone in her observation that the working class is generally presented as something that needs to be escaped. Gilson notices that the idea of escape is prevalent in political and popular discourse: "Narrow definitions of 'aspiration' and 'social mobility' have encouraged the idea that being working class is something to escape from" (Gilson 2011). Escaping the working class is also something that appears in a political discourse, and is actively promoted. The Labour Party, whose roots are founded in working-class identity and working-class representation in Parliament, have been recent champions of this idea of escape. According to Johnson, "the goal of New Labour was not to improve the lot of the working class, but helping people to escape the working class" (Johnson 2011). This political discourse of escape was overtly promoted throughout the late 1990s and 2000s. Whether it was Tony Blair, Gordon Brown or John Prescott who first said "we're all middle class now", the message that the working class was of little importance and needed to be escaped from was clear. Labour's 2010 election manifesto was hinged around creating "a bigger middle class than

ever before” with Gordon Brown professing, “We are the party appealing to middle class voters in every constituency” (Prince 2010). Evidently, the Labour party, formed to look after the rights of working class people had effectively abandoned the working class. It seems as though not only is the idea of escaping the working class the way forward, but political discourse also abandoned the working class through this discourse of escape.

In popular culture, the working class is generally represented negatively. Owen Jones, political commentator and author of *Chavs: The Demonization of the working class* makes comparisons to representations of the working-class in modern day television and film such as Channel 4’s *Shameless*, which plays on the stereotypes of the working class as “jobless layabouts” in a fictional suburb of Manchester (Jones 2012). According to Yvonne Roberts, the debauched behaviour of Frank Gallagher and the other characters are set against the backdrop of Labour’s plan to “correct working-class behaviour” (Roberts 2013). In addition, Jones points to the caricature of the obnoxious ‘chav’ Vicky Pollard in the BBC series *Little Britain* as being an accurate representation of the working class. According to Martin, a YouGov poll found that the majority of people in the television industry thought of Vicky Pollard as an accurate representation of the working class in Britain (Martin 2006). Despite Vicky Pollard being used for comedic effect, it is a negative representation of a person who has been attributed to the working class. These wholly negative representations of the working class reinforce the discourse of escape.

As well as fictional television programmes such as *Shameless* and *Little Britain*, reality television programmes also portray the working class negatively, which exacerbates the idea of the working class as something from which to escape. Lorna Martin reported on The Edinburgh Television

Festival in 2006, where television programmes such as *Wife-Swap*, *Big-Brother* and *The Jeremy Kyle Show* were debated and criticised for exploiting and ridiculing the working class (Martin 2006). Other television programmes, specifically talent shows such as the *X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent*, offer an escape for people, whose hardship has been displayed in formulaic tales of tears and troubles. *The Full Monty*, *Billy Elliot* and *The Full Monty* function in the same way as these television programmes. *Billy Elliot*, in particular, functions as a dramatized version of the *X Factor*, with Billy plucked from his working class background and into the sphere of middle class 'success'. Instead of singing, Billy dances his way to the top.

The idea of escaping the working class in film is not something that is bound to the three films studied in this dissertation. Some of the British New Wave films of the late 1950s and 1960s perpetuate the notion of characters escaping from their working-class communities. The very title of *Room At The Top* gives an idea as to what the film itself is about. The film constantly gestures to the individualistic idea of self-progression and upward social mobility: as Sinyard puts it, "the young man striving to get 'the top'" (Sinyard, 2002 p87). Arthur Seaton's rebellious streak in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and his battle against the community around him is couched in an overall discourse of escape from the working class. Even films from this period that do not intentionally promote the ideal of escape from the working class seem to provoke these feelings anyway. One such example is *The Loneliness of The Long-Distance Runner* with Peter Bradshaw stating:

it's the soul-swampingly defeated ending that's a lot to take, especially when you're hoping that Colin's twin talents for running and rebellion are going to lead to an escape attempt. No such luck (Bradshaw 2002).

Colin is condemned to staying in the prison, but also as a member of the working class. Such is the prevalence of the discourse of escape throughout

the film, because Colin cannot escape the working class, it is made clear that he is unlucky in that he has to *remain* a member of the working class.

This notion of escaping the working class has continued and is actively promoted through the constructs of the working class throughout the three films under consideration in this dissertation. There are specific scenes from the three films where escaping the working class is presented as something that the characters must do, and this discourse runs throughout these films. It is difficult in many ways for the viewers *not* to align themselves with this notion. This is particularly because a great deal of sympathy is created for the working-class communities. There are a number of problems these communities are going through collectively, as well as character-specific individual problems throughout each film. The transcoding that occurs as the sympathy is created reinforces the discourse of escape, as it heightens this sense of sympathy. As Kaplan notes when talking about *The Full Monty*, "the film's focus is on a social crisis" (Kaplan, 2004). In the three films there are crises in gender, values, money, aspiration, and identity. The communities on screen are turbulent groups, lacking direction and any real prospects other than the individual successes that, in comparison, affect very few characters. Even the activities that are constructed as successful still ultimately leave the majority of the characters in crisis, constrained and trapped within the working class that leads to a desire for escape.

One of the ways that a desire to escape is created, is through creating sympathy for the problems that the working class are going through. There are a number of scenes throughout the three films that are particularly upsetting and promote the overall discourse of escape. Bromley states that these scenes portray "the human costs of closure in a number of powerful and moving scenes" (Bromley 2000 p.62). Bromley is referring to the

closures of the mines and other industries by the Conservative government in the 1980s. Billy's father has to contend with a series of conflicts that are imposed on him because of de-industrialisation and strikes in which he and Tony – Billy's brother – take part. These scenes depict the “human cost” to which Bromley refers. Angry scenes of conflict between the working-class miners and the police are depicted throughout the film, with Billy's father and brother shown repeatedly opposing those who break the strike and go back to work in the mine. In these scenes where Billy's father and brother are shown opposing the ‘scabs’ and the enforcing police, there is little focus on the individuals inside the buses. The camera focuses on the tumultuous crowd of striking miners, in which Billy's family are present. High angle shots are used, looking down on the angry crowds emphasising their insignificance and futility in battling against the forces of de-industrialization, and also the pointlessness of the strike in which they are taking part. The buses that carry those who have decided to break the strike always make it through the colliery gates, despite the vociferous protests by those on strike. This creates a great deal of sympathy for the working class, as their battles are constructed as heroic but ultimately pointless.

The main crisis that underpins *Billy Elliot* and *Brassed Off* is the plight that the mining communities of Britain went through during this mass de-industrialisation period. *Brassed Off* is set in 1992, eight years after the Great Miners' Strike of 1984, and *Billy Elliot* is set within this strike period. As *Billy Elliot* is set retrospectively, the audience is aware of how that strike ended, and indeed how these mining communities were greatly affected by the pit closures under the Conservative government. There is, therefore, an inherent sense of inevitability to the struggles the characters and communities go through. Margaret Thatcher said during The Great Miners' Strike; “The rule of law must prevail over the rule of the mob” (Blundell 2008 p122). Her point

was, essentially that the government and ruling powers must win in the battle against the working-class miners. The viewer knows how the conflicts between the miners in *Billy Elliot* ended – with the closure of the pit and mass redundancies – even though it is not explicitly shown on screen. In *Brassed Off*, the decision to close the pit is shown perspicuously, to ensure the viewer sees the demise of the mining community thus reinforcing the sympathy for them. Furthermore, in *Brassed Off*, Phil's attempted suicide comes after his wife takes herself and their children away after he fails to pay a loan shark. This is compounded by having to deal with the ultimate betrayal of his workmates and indeed his working-class community by breaking the strike and being a 'scab'. At this point Phil has taken up additional employment performing as a clown, another attempt at escape but also a demeaning embarrassing occupation, starkly contrasting with, and indeed mocking his mining profession. As a final desperate attempt at escape, he tries to hang himself and is found hanging from the colliery. This symbolism of Phil attempting suicide, almost at the hands of the mine, ensures that it is the impending pit closure and overall miners dispute which is culpable, not any other of the problems he has in his life. When Phil is found hanging at the mine, it is lit up against the black night, making it appear monumental and thus ensuring that it stands out as a figure of extreme importance. A low angle shot is used, further emphasising the centrality and importance of the mine to the working-class community in which it is situated; it is the one thing that could ease their worries and major problems by staying open. However, it does not stay open and so there is little to keep the working class characters going. The problems that affect the working class leads to sympathy for their plight, but furthermore, the desire for them to escape from these problems and ultimately to escape from the working class.

The working class is shown on screen as trapped within their working-class environment, and as unable to get away from the problems they face. This entrapment is again placing ultimate control with the middle class, in that status-quos are preserved as long as the majority of the working class stay put. In *Billy Elliot* Billy's frustration at being trapped within his working-class background is shown through his dancing. His dancing is the means by which he will eventually make his escape, his frustrations fuelling the desire and constructed ambition to escape. When Billy's family are confronted with the fact that he has been ballet dancing as opposed to boxing, as they had previously thought, an argument between Tony and Mrs Wilkinson ensues. Billy is clearly presented as the central figure around which they are arguing by him standing on a table and remaining in the centre of the shot while the camera circles around them. The dialogue completely fades away as the non-diegetic sound of The Jam's 'Town Called Malice' begins to play, suggesting that what they are saying pales into insignificance next to the importance of Billy's dancing. Dancing is thereby presented as the tool he can use to escape these conflicts. The song, according to guitarist and lead singer Paul Weller, is "based on a series of observations about tough times for families like the Wellers in Woking in the early days of Thatcherism" (Sandall 2007). Billy embodies the sentiment expressed in the opening lines of the song, "stop dreaming of the quiet life 'cos it's one you'll never know"; the lyrics put him in his place and within the hectic lifestyle he currently has. The rest of the song captures the problems that Billy and his family face: being in the working class. The record sleeve echoes



Figure 2 Town Called Malice Cover

the run-down terraced houses in *Billy Elliot* and the other working-class films. The picture used on the sleeve was described by the bassist, Bruce Foxton as, “a picture up north of some rundown houses that just captured the sentiment (of the song)” (Simpson 2012). This is another example of the cyclic process of transcoding that Ryan and Kellner discuss in that this is popular culture influencing the film, and the film projecting this influence onto the audience. As the soundtrack to Billy’s dance, it emphasises the discourse of escape from the working class; the dance itself becomes a symbol for escape in the entire film. After he escapes the argument and runs out of the house, he is shown in an outside toilet, hitting the walls in frustration. The low angle shots make the walls tower around him further emphasising his entrapment in his surroundings and, as a result, in the working class. All the shots in the scene show Billy surrounded by walls and urban, working-class signifiers: outside toilets, corrugated iron sheeting, the terraced, back-to-back housing. These symbolise Billy’s entrapment while the song articulates his anger. Most of the shots are tight shots, emphasising the focus on Billy’s actions and ensuring that Billy looks trapped within urban signifiers, which Billy repeatedly kicks and smacks in choreographed frustration. Low-angle shots emphasise the importance and talent of Billy, as do the tracking shots, which follow him throughout the scene concentrating on his footwork and therefore on his dancing skills. These low-angle shots also allow the red-brick walls to tower over him, emphasising his current inability to escape. He attempts to jump out over the walls, trying to find a foot hole or a grip or to break them down but he is unable to do so. The dance he does is very angry in its tone – his tap dancing footwork seem to be more like stomps into the ground and his hands pound the walls around him as he makes his way out of the house and up the street. At the very end of the dance sequence he bangs against an old rusty corrugated iron panel, another indication of his entrapment within these surroundings. At this

moment in the narrative his escape is limited to the end of the road and is stopped by the iron panel. The viewer sees Billy sitting in front of this iron panelling, then the camera pans around and it is snowing. This passing of time indicated by the changing seasons shows that Billy has remained in his current surroundings, has needed to repeat this same dance, and has therefore felt the same frustrations over a sustained period of time. This scene shows Billy as desperate to break down the metaphorical and physical barriers placed in front of him, and ultimately to escape from his working-class setting.

In *Brassed Off* the entrapment within the working class is shown throughout the film with all the characters living in difficult conditions and with their jobs under threat. One of their main forms of avoiding these difficult circumstances is by playing in and focusing on the band, led by Danny. However, where in *Billy Elliot* Billy seems to have the tools to escape his working class background, the characters in *Brassed Off* are not in charge of their own destiny, or indeed of their escape route out of the working class. It is the middle class who will decide the fate of the miners, showing the influence of the middle class gaze within the narrative. In the same way that Billy's actions of dancing down the street angrily reflect his inner feelings of desperation and frustration, the Grimley colliery band play a sombre piece which reflects their inability to influence their destiny. The band plays 'Concierto d'Aranjuez' by Joaquín Rodrigo. It is played predominantly in a minor key and was described by Rodrigo as being "full of melancholic emotion" (Martinez 1999). While the piece is being played, the band's fate is being decided by trade union representatives and the owners of the mine. Initially the focus is on the band, and particularly Gloria who is performing her first piece with the band. The piece forms a sound bridge, as the scene is crosscut with shots of trade union representatives negotiating and arguing

with management at the pit. Crucially, this scene gives an indication as to how helpless the miners of Grimley were in deciding on, and indeed defining their own future. They have no influence or say over proceedings and in essence are reduced to providing the soundtrack to their own demise as management and the trade unions fail to reach an agreement. In this instance the band is used partly as an avoidance technique to attempt to shy away from the grim reality of their current predicament of unemployment and oppression. It is also used as a way of emphasising their inability to have any control over their futures: the working-class band of forty or fifty members practice, while one or two middle-class members of management decide their fates.

The activity that the characters in *The Full Monty* do in order to try and escape from the working class is, like Billy, dancing, but also stripping in order to earn money. One of the most significant and well-remembered scenes in *The Full Monty* is the scene where the aspirant strippers are queuing in the dole office to collect their benefits. The scene has been praised by many film critics with Jones in the *Radio Times* describing it as “simply inspired” (Jones n.d.), and Russell on the BBC website calling it a “classic scene” (Russell 2001). The dole queues are, as Pearce surmises, “composed almost entirely of grim-faced men, unresponsive and sapped of will, whose next move is on to the Job Club to wait without hope for the employment that no longer exists for them” (Pearce 2013). What is initially depicted in this scene is nothing like what Pearce describes. She infers that the dole queues are settings in which it is so grim that it is out of the ordinary, recognisably different from every-day life. However, what is portrayed in the opening moments of the scene is men going about their normal business. They are seen reading papers in a well-lit room, as though it is something they are used to doing. So it is additionally surprising when in and amongst

the queuing men Dave, Lomper, Gerald, Horse and Guy begin to individually enact the routine, which they have been practicing as part of the stripping act, after the song comes on the radio. The scene in the end completely contradicts the impression of dole queues that Pearce gives of “grim faced men, unresponsive of will” and is shown as a jovial, comedic place. However, the characters have to go through the ritual of claiming their money in order to survive day-to-day and have to abide by the rules that confine them in the working class and in financial poverty. The characters’ confinement in their financial plight is not only depicted in the setting itself but also by the formal rope queue barriers within the job centre office, effectively keeping the men in line. As the men start to dance Gaz looks on at them going through the moves of their routine in sync, albeit with each man not realising the other members of the group are participating. Significantly Gaz does not participate in the unconscious dance and looks approvingly on at his fellow dancers. By abstaining from the dancing he is placed in a position higher to that of the other members of the group. He is asserting his role as leader and it becomes clear that he has developed key entrepreneurial skills to create a means of escape from the surroundings in which the scene is set.

However, the way the scene in the dole office queue is constructed means that the overall discourse or impression is one of complete fantasy. The diegetic soundtrack of Gloria Summer’s “Hot Stuff” gets louder until it represents the immersion of the characters in the dance routine. The characters do not even notice each other. Instead, they seem lost in the dance they do, seemingly daydreaming as they focus on different parts of the room. Furthermore, they do not notice the vague glances they receive from the other people queuing, they are completely lost in the dance, and removed from any reality of having to wait for their benefits. Simon Beaufoy, the writer of *The Full Monty* admits that the scene itself is “daft” (Marriot 1997)

indicating this scene is not supposed to be a realistic representation of what dole queues were like. Wayne states that, “in a musical proper, the scene would have been developed and extended into a utopian transformation of the drudgery of the labour market” (Wayne 2006). However, there cannot be any utopian transformation on the state of the labour market as then hierarchical divides would be broken between the classes, and would challenge the middle class gaze which enforces these divides. Wayne goes onto say that the scene is kept short in order to “remain within the boundaries of realism” (Wayne 2006). The scene ultimately needs to end to maintain the idea that the working class are still in the queues and the status quo is preserved, and is sympathetic to the middle-class gaze. Furthermore, the soundtrack and the almost outrageous comedic elements are hard to believe within the boundaries of realism. In particular Gerald’s bold unashamed twirl as he reaches the end of the routine, remove the scene from any form of grim reality and help to promote the idea that escape can be achieved, even if it is not entirely believable.

As discussed, certain scenes in *The Full Monty* have elements of fantasy in them but the overall narrative of *Billy Elliot* is one of fantasy. By ensuring that it is only Billy who escapes, maintains the hierarchical class divides that are in place, and makes Billy’s story of escape fantastical. Lee Hall, who wrote *Billy Elliot* said that, “obviously I’d written *Billy Elliot* as a kind of fantasy” (Thomas 2013). Lancioni comments on the similarities of *Billy Elliot* and *Cinderella*. She writes, “*Cinderella* is transformed from a household drudge into a princess. Billy is transformed from a frustrated young boy into an assured young man, from the working class to the professional class, from an inept boxer to a talented dancer” (Lancioni 2006 p710). *Cinderella*’s tale of rags-to-riches escape is exactly the same as Billy’s escape as Lancioni points out. The different things that have to happen to Billy in order to get him

to the stage in London are nothing short of a miracle, which evokes the feel-good feeling that commentators and reviewers have discussed. On the surface the film promotes Billy's escape as an achievement. However, what this fairy tale ending is doing is highlighting that the likelihood of anybody else escaping from this community is very slim indeed, resulting in the majority of characters failing to escape.

The desire to escape the working class is also created by representing the working class as nostalgically longing for the past. Wayne argues the films have a, "nostalgic pull towards the past" (Wayne 2006). For example, Mark Addy, who played Dave in *The Full Monty*, commented that the choice to use Donna Summer as the soundtrack in the famous dole queue scene was of great significance;

The reason Peter Cattaneo chose to use Seventies disco is because he wanted it to be the kind of music the characters were listening to when they were growing up, when they had prospects. You were maybe doing an apprenticeship or whatever Donna Summer was playing. It's stuff that's from a better time (Guardian Online, Film Features, Moments 2011)

Similarly, in *Billy Elliot* the soundtrack was dominated by acts that released their music before the film was set, most notably T-Rex. It is not, however, so much a nostalgic pull towards the past or reminiscing about the past, as a longing *for* the past. In *Brassed Off* the longing to return to days gone by is more overtly displayed. It is done through their traditional working class brass band, a tradition that Danny holds in extremely high value. He says, "If they close down the pit, knock it down, fill it up like they've done with all the bloody rest, no trace. Years to come there'll only be one reminder of hundred bloody years hard graft. This bloody band." Danny clearly believes the brass band are in essence 'carrying the torch' for the working class, as has been done for generations before them. In addition to this, there are a number of political outbursts from different characters that make the film's standpoint

against the Conservative government very clear, indicating they long for a time before the Conservatives came to power. Phil's rant in a church asking, "Margaret Thatcher lives? I mean what's he playing at, eh?" Danny also talks about government policies at the end of the film, "Because over the last ten years this bloody government has systematically destroyed an entire industry. Our industry. And not just our industry, our communities, our homes, our lives". The miners are also extremely proud of their participation in the Great Miners' Strike in various exchanges throughout the film. The focus and longing for the past shows the working class wanting both a return to times when their communities were not under threat, but also a desire to escape from these threats.

The activities that the working class communities undertake both detract from the problems they are facing, but are also constructed as the vehicles that they can use to *potentially* escape the working class. The idea that the working class can be the masters of their own future is something that Jenkins believes Margaret Thatcher had a significant hand in. He says her Conservative governments "turned the working class from a repository of nostalgia and cultural romance into an aspirant bourgeoisie" (Jenkins 2007 p164). What Jenkins is asserting is that the working class altered as a result of what the middle and upper classes wanted them to be, and this can be seen within the three films, as they are sympathetic to the middle class gaze. In essence, the working class are not in control of anything they do and have to fulfill the fantasy of this middle class gaze. Jenkins' argument can be seen at points within the three films, with varying degrees of success. The only character that is successful in entirely removing himself from the working class is Billy, with the other two films quest for escape remaining at least partially unresolved. Billy does accomplish what is constructed as an achievement, which is his escape. His aspiration to dance, and to escape is

fulfilled in the end but only after the middle class, represented by the audition board, allow him into the middle class. In *The Full Monty*, stripping gives the characters a specific focus, detracting from the fact they are unemployed and rely on welfare. Their futures are undetermined at the end of the film, despite the grand finale. However, as Gaz is the character that decides to put the group together, who uses his aspirational bourgeoisie qualities, he is rewarded the most. He has the money to pay his wife in order to see his son, and she is also in the crowd to witness his gamble pay off. It is as though all his problems are resolved in that moment, and he can potentially use this entrepreneurship in the future. He is constructed as succeeding both romantically and economically *because of* his aspirations to escape the working class. The exception in the three films is *Brassed Off* as there is a distinct lack of aspiration displayed by the characters. The discourse of the film encourages the characters to escape from their problems but nobody escapes, and they all have to deal with socio-economic problems that are represented throughout the film. Where Billy has an outstanding talent, and a chance of leaving his oppressive surroundings and Gaz uses his entrepreneurial spirit to escape, the miners of Grimley have no such opportunity, nor do they want it. They want to live in this grimly depicted setting and are determined to hold on to their “old” working class identity and reject anything that attempts to change this equilibrium.

The fact that there are two tales of escape (*The Full Monty*, *Billy Elliot*) and one story of entrapment in *Brassed Off* is indicative of the activities the characters undertake in each of the films. Billy’s ballet dancing is a distinctly middle-class activity. The conflict that his working-class family feel when he goes to classes behind their back is one of the devices used to create the discourse of escape. Similarly, in *The Full Monty* the idea of forming a group and performing in exchange for capital is a middle-class aspirational ideal.

However, in *Brassed Off* the entire narrative is based around an entirely working-class activity: the brass band. Brass bands are often attributed the working class community, described by Bragg as “the orchestras of the working class” (Bragg 2012). The brass band is vital to the characters in *Brassed Off*, and as a result re-iterates their desire to remain working class. Bromley refers to, “(the) symbiosis between the pit and the brass band. Both are seen to be facing closure as there is no logic in having one without the other” (Bromley 2000 p61). Because the pit is ultimately doomed, so is the band, regardless of how good they are at it. Indeed throughout the film there are various instances where the characters are clear on the relationship between the two. The band members tell Danny, “if (the) pit goes, band goes with it”. The discourse of the films is, therefore, in order to escape the working class you must be showing middle-class values or undertaking middle-class pastimes in order to have a chance of succeeding. Because the characters in *Brassed Off* still undertake a traditionally working class hobby, this means that regardless of how good or talented they are (they win the national championships), they will forever remain within the working class and be unable to fulfil the constructed desire to escape.

Unlike the characters in *Brassed Off*, Billy is constructed as managing to escape from the working class. The moment that signifies Billy’s complete escape from the working class is the triumphant ending in *Billy Elliot*. Billy’s leap across the stage is a metaphor for him breaking free of the working class chains which once inhibited him, but still constrain his family. Billy’s leap signifies his successful transition from his working-class background into spheres that are constructed as being more desirable. Particularly as his father, still looking the same as the last time he was on screen and so still markedly working-class, is there to witness it. When Billy’s father and brother arrive in London to watch Billy’s show, his father is clearly shown to be

astonished by many things that surround him. Billy's father is presented as needing to keep himself distracted: reading while on the London Underground and seemingly reluctant to get off the train. In these moments Billy's father is exemplifying his own form of escape so as not to become overwhelmed by what he is seeing in these unfamiliar surroundings. The whole scene builds to the crescendo of Billy's almost super-human leap across the stage. The sound bridge of the *Swan Lake* finale music places the scene in the theatre before Billy's family arrive there, emphasising the importance of the leap that is about to occur. In contrast to his brother and father, Billy is now unrecognisable to the last time he was on screen. Billy is the undoubted focus of the scene despite his family's appearance at the show and also his old friend Michael declaring, "he wouldn't miss it for the world". Billy walks towards the stage from the wings, a tracking shot following him at a medium low angle, emphasising his importance and also his large and muscular masculine frame. The other dancers in the show look on at Billy, and there is an obvious fuss made around his appearance. He has enough power to be afforded the information that his family is in attendance, and does not even have to remove his dressing gown himself. The stage appears in the background with Billy's back foregrounded in shadow. Billy is literally waiting in the wings, but also waiting in the shadows to make his definitive leap into the spotlight of the stage and into the privileged spaces that are constructed as being the ultimate marker of success throughout the film. This movement into the middle class and out of the working class affords him the ability to be expressive through dance without fear of oppressive stigmas that had previously stunted his enthusiasm for dance. This therefore shows that Billy cannot be a "working class dancer" but simply a dancer that is naturally middle class. As the *Swan Lake* finale reaches its climax the camera is placed behind Billy, looking out into the audience as he performs. However, the audience is blinded out by the bright lights, which

focus on Billy, again emphasising his importance and the insignificance of the onlooking audience, including Billy's brother and father. In this moment he is being watched by the audience from the front, the other members of the dance group from the sides and also the viewer from behind; all eyes are on him to witness his escape.

The characters in *The Full Monty* also have a captivated crowd witnessing their attempt at escaping the working class. Where Billy's entrance to the stage is built up to a crescendo throughout the scene, the striptease the characters perform has a similar affect, although it maintains a comedic undertone throughout. All the characters apart from Gaz line up on stage, on display for the women in the crowd to objectify. The absence of Gaz from the beginning of the scene ensures that he is portrayed as the most important member of the group. While he is having his doubts backstage his son Nathan makes him acutely aware that the excitement of the crowd is all his doing. Nathan says to Gaz, "Listen, I'm gonna get really annoyed with you in a minute. They're cheering out there; you did that. Now get out there and do your stuff." Gaz's entrance to the stage is met with a cheer, and is cross-cut with a shot of his ex-wife being there to witness the performance, showing she is supportive of his new entrepreneurial instincts. Throughout the scene there are various nods to the working class heritage in which the film is steeped. The setting is within a working men's club and there is even a brief appearance of a brass band playing along to the Tom Jones soundtrack. However, it is a working class that has inherently changed. Where the characters of the group would have previously been sitting, perhaps watching a brass band or even a female striptease act, the women are now in their place at the bar while they perform on stage and the brass band have a token section they play along to. These changes represent the dying influence of the working class men, but also the working class as a whole.

The role reversals and role changes further reinforce the desire to escape the traditional working class and adopt new roles for themselves. Gaz in this instance is representative of the successful escape. For the final reveal-all moment he is placed in the centre of the shot with the lights of the stage shining on him and his stripping team. Gaz's desires to win back his wife and escape from the working class are complete all in this moment, even if the future is less concrete for the other members of the team.

Again, *Brassed Off* is different to the other two films, despite dealing with many of the same problems. In contrast to Billy's dramatic escape, *Brassed Off* gives a damning insight into the loss and struggles of working-class communities, but without the high-spirits finale. There is no fairytale utopian ending; as Danny says in his closing speech at The Royal Albert Hall, "aye they can play a good tune. But what the fuck does that matter?" The political standpoint, if the viewer needed any convincing, is cemented with a series of facts and figures at the end of the film lambasting the Conservative government that closed down the coal pits of the north of England. The film portrays a community unable to move forward easily after losing one of the key elements which held it together. The brass band is similar to Billy's leap across the stage in that commentators have said that the band, and in particular its participation in a national competition, is what the film uses to "solve an economic predicament through a humanist gesture to community spirit" (Hitchcock 2000 p25). The brass band is adhering to a working-class stereotype of being community led. However, Billy's leap across the stage is used as a device to resolve previous conflicts but is only successful for him. Similarly Gaz's will to escape, frames him as being successful. However, the band's victory at the national competition is not portrayed as success, and does not offer any form of escape for any of the characters. Danny refuses the trophy, emphasising the ultimate insignificance of the band's activities

and successes. The ending of the film is the only one considered in this study that has a definite conclusion for all the characters. They have failed to escape and will remain within the working class. The end of the film is marked with the text overlaid 'The End', with the band ironically playing 'Land of Hope and Glory' while they drive past the Houses of Parliament. Danny is placed just off centre of the shot with the camera looking directly at him, just below eye level. He is standing up and is more elevated than all the other characters around him, signifying his importance and influence in this instance. 'The End' appears just to the left of where Danny is standing. Next to appear in the overlaid text are altered dictionary definitions of words, which all perpetuate the idea of ending and conclusion. The nouns and definitions are, "1. closure (as in 140 pits since 1984) 2. Termination (as in 250,000 jobs) 3. Conclusion (as in draw your own)". In simple terms "The End" marks the end of the film but its positioning so close to Danny makes it attributable to him, and essentially the working class as a whole. This overlaid text, along with Danny's closing speech, are basically reinforcing the idea of the ending of the working class.

The ending of *Brassed Off* leads the viewer into believing that the focus of their efforts, in their case the band competition, will provide a similar "feel good" ending as those offered by *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot*. On the surface the ending directly challenges the class struggles that the other two films fail to question, but ultimately enforces the notion of the end of the working class. Kirk argues that this ending,

tells us that the miners and their culture are unwilling to become mere heritage spectacles, icons of an industrial past; secondly, the route past the Palace of Westminster, while speaking evasively and ambiguously about class power and its figuration, also compels us to rethink class struggle for the future" (Kirk 2003 p.22).

However, it could as easily be argued that *Brassed Off* cannot evoke any re-think on class culture as it is still re-asserting hegemonic power structures.

Instead of the closing speech given by Danny used to re-open debates on class war struggle, the miners go home to the same problems they left with: a lack of jobs and a community in ruins. The speech could also be an epitaph to a dead way of life that will die with Danny's generation. As the band finish playing and are announced the winners of the competition, Danny makes a speech to highlight how the working class had been under attack from the Conservative governments, and how they have struggled greatly. He says,

Because over the last ten years, this bloody government has systematically destroyed an entire industry. OUR industry. And not just our industry, our communities, our homes, our lives. All in the name of progress. And for a few lousy bob. I'll tell you something else you might not know, as well. A fortnight ago, this band's pit were closed - another thousand men lost their jobs. And that's not all they lost. Most of them lost the will to win a while ago. A few of them even lost the will to fight. But when it comes to losing the will to live, to breathe.... They're just ordinary common-or-garden honest, decent human beings. And not one of them with an ounce of bloody hope left.

In this long speech, Danny directly highlights and challenges the attacks on the working class that have greatly affected them as a result of Conservative-led de-industrialisation. As he approaches the stand to deliver his speech the camera angle is behind him, looking up towards both him and the crowd looking down at him. Throughout the speech the camera is placed below his eye line, looking up at him to signify that what he is saying is important in both the context of the film and also to the working-class community as a whole. Significantly, Danny directs his speech up into the crowd, as though he is directly addressing the powers above him, and he is addressing them very directly. What Danny does in this speech is bring the problems that appear as undercurrents in the narratives in all three films to the front of the narrative, clearly indicating where the blame lies and what it has meant to the working class. The speech is provocative and intentionally so, however Danny is describing the past, what has already happened to the working class, asserting that the working class has been attacked which further emphasises the desire to escape. Kirk's assertion that this can open new

debates on class is an idealised reading of the speech, just as the other films' have idealised endings. Danny depicts a community and class completely in ruin and what the speech does, instead of opening class debates, is definitively close them. He walks off the stage and is greeted with applause, marking the end of the speech and also the end of what needs to be said about it. The importance of the speech is also somewhat undermined by the fact that the band choose to accept the trophy as opposed to refusing it. Jim walks back across the stage and collects the trophy, telling the master of ceremonies, "don't talk so bloody soft" when it is pointed out that Danny wanted to refuse the trophy. This gives the scene a humorous element, and ultimately undermines the principle and the speech Danny has just delivered. In the end, as a result of this comedic act, the scene seems to tentatively flirt with the issues Danny discusses, and evokes a 'feel-good' feeling while attempting to close the issue of class debate.

It is significant that these 'feel-good' endings all culminate with the working class on stage. As outlined above, Laura Mulvey asserts that the cinema "satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking" (Mulvey, 2004 p171).. She asserts, however, that it also goes further: "developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect" (Mulvey, 2004 p171). As I have already explained, Mulvey's focus is on the male gaze upon the female form, stating that "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 2004 p172). Women are the focus and the objects to be looked upon, and significantly it is the male gaze that is active in "advancing the story, making things happen" (Mulvey, 2004 p173). The woman becomes the object of male desire, with women performing as the male gaze wants them to. In the ending of *Billy Elliot* in particular, but also in *The Full Monty*, I argue that there is a similar gaze at work. Instead of the active male gaze focussing on the passive female form, it is the active middle-class gaze focussing on

the passive working-class form. What Billy does in *Billy Elliot*, by performing the middle-class activity of ballet, and what Gaz does in *The Full Monty*, by showing his entrepreneurial ambitions, satisfies the desires of the middle-class gaze. In other words, the working class are acting how the middle class want them to act. Mulvey draws on examples of female characters initially being used in narratives as being “isolated” and there to be looked at. She also highlights how these female characters fall “in love with the main male [protagonist] and [become] his property” (Mulvey, 2004 p174). The same ideals are at work in these films, and in *Billy Elliot* in particular. He falls in love with the ideals of the middle class, and in performing his leap at the end of the film, he is accepted into the middle class and effectively becomes their property. Furthermore, what the viewer views on screen is the crowds watching the working class. In effect, in watching the films, the viewer is watching the working class being watched. Mulvey points out the three different looks at work during this process: “the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion” (Mulvey, 2004 p175). Mulvey points out that the conventions of film mean that the most important part of the three is the looks between the characters. The camera becomes the gaze of the audience watching the film, and in these instances also becomes the gaze of the characters in the film viewing the working class, leading to the middle-class gaze of being imposed on the viewer of the film. Here we can see transcoding at work.

Significantly, however, there are only two characters – Billy and Gaz – who ultimately escape. Importantly, with so few working class characters escaping they are nevertheless still fulfilling the desires of the middle class gaze in that the majority of the working class stays where they are, and only a very select few are constructed as managing to escape the working class.

The characters in *Brassed Off* are performing a typically working-class activity in the brass band, and are not fulfilling the desires of the middle-class gaze. In this film, ultimately, all the characters remain working class, which is constructed as unsuccessful.

The activities that the working class characters are seen to be doing are used in many ways as resolutions to the problems that they encounter. For example, the conflict that damaged and affected Billy, his family and the wider working-class community appears resolved after his leap across the stage. As Dave states, the leap is itself a “transcendent gesture which resolves all previous conflicts and struggles” (Dave 2006 p75). The only *successful* resolution that is presented is Billy’s escape, embodied by this leap. However, no obvious resolution is offered for the community he left behind, represented in this scene by his father and brother. It is already clear through their appearance and demeanour that while Billy has been upwardly mobile and moved into a higher class, Billy’s family have been left in the working class. Their lives are set in direct opposition to Billy’s success, indicating that their decision to remain working class is in fact a failure. Therefore, Billy’s leap only offers a resolution for him, and does not help or resolve any previous conflicts as Dave states. Similarly in *The Full Monty* the characters have alleviated some of the pressures by doing the striptease and earning money. Despite the ending being shown as a successful moment in the characters’ lives it does nothing to challenge or solve the problems that made them resort to stripping in the first place. It is not a sustainable new profession or new trade which can replace their old jobs which they lost. This underwhelming fact, however, is not the overarching discourse of the films, with the happy, ‘feel-good’ discourse dominating the narrative, instead of wholesale change for the working class.

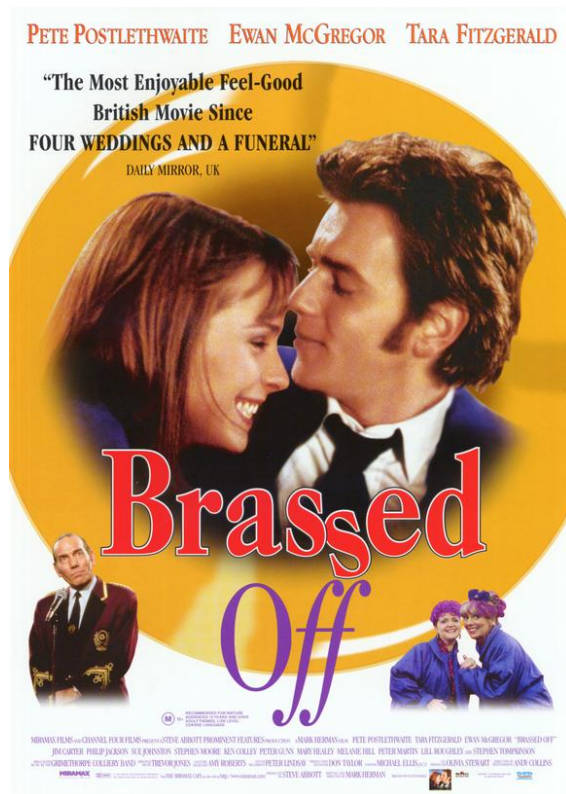


Figure 3 *Brassed Off* poster

Despite the films offering virtually no resolution for the majority of working-class characters, many reviews refer to these films as “feel good films”. Indeed, *Brassed Off* was marketed as being, “The most enjoyable feel-good British Movie since *Four Weddings and a Funeral*”. However, these films are nothing of the sort, which Keven Maher points out. He argues that *Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot*, *The Full*

Monty and other films from this

genre fail to deal with the really pressing issues within British society. He writes,

It’s no wonder, then, that the feel good British film is terrified by modern realities. It tentatively flirts with difficult issues such as race, gender roles and sexuality, yet it does so merely for narrative frisson and is quick to reassert the power of tradition and to subsume all unresolved conflicts into the high-spirits finale (Maher 2005)

The Full Monty and *Billy Elliot* certainly seem to close with a high-spirits finale and, on the surface evoke the “feel good” feeling to which Maher refers. The “tentative flirtation” to which Maher refers is missing the point that it is these issues of the working-class in crisis, or as he puts it the “modern realities” that drive the discourse of escape. Without these themes as an undercurrent in the films, the discourse of escaping the working class would be lost. However, the modern realities that drive this discourse – families and communities in crisis – are lost in the focus on Billy’s dancing talent and the comedic moments in *The Full Monty* as Maher points out. The entrepreneurial spirit in *The Full Monty* is driven by individual crises and a struggle to get by

in a difficult economic climate. Its reveal-all ending is not offering a sustainable continued source of employment for those who suffered as a result of the economic downturn. By offering no resolution for the working class the films are depicting the working class as doomed to failure and only a lucky few will escape.

In these three films there are not a few characters that escape the working class but only definitively one: Billy in *Billy Elliot*. His story is one of individualistic escape, rather than wholesale change for the working class. This ultimately exposes the problem with the discourse of escape in that it is not what the working class need, but rather what the middle class need to think and what the middle class allow. The discourse of the film encourages the viewer to side with the notion of Billy succeeding and ultimately escaping this doomed community. One particular scene which demonstrates this is a scene where Billy's dancing is set in opposition to his father and brother protesting against 'scabs' who have broken the miners strike and gone back to work in the colliery. The protest is crosscut with Billy taking part in a dance class led by Mrs Wilkinson. The class is made up of children, almost entirely girls, and they are dressed completely in white, signifying their innocence. In contrast the black uniforms of the enforcing police, the dark clothed striking miners and the black buses carrying the non-striking workers provide an opposition to Billy's serene innocent dance lesson. Significantly, Billy's outfit is a white vest with dark shorts – indicating his life could potentially follow one of two paths, as he has the chance to dance and escape (signified by the white vest) but could remain in the working-class (signified by his black shorts). The striking miners pelt eggs and other debris at the buses as they pass by and angrily shout "scabs" at the non-striking workers. The scene then cuts to the tranquil, serene surroundings of the dance class, calmed by the piano soundtrack. The oppositions between the two groups continue as

the scene progresses. At this moment the fates of Billy and the miners, both striking and non-striking, are being decided and perhaps irrevocably altered. The piano soundtrack signifies that the focus of the scene, despite the crosscut shots of the miners striking, is on where he is (This technique emerges again at the end of the film when Billy is performing in London). Mrs Wilkinson takes Billy out from the rest of the class and brings him to the front, ensuring that the focus is on him. This is in contrast to the striking miners who are shot from above as a collective hoard, not showing their individual features. This places a distinctive focus on Billy's individual quest for escape; he is not just one of the mob and his destiny should not be working in the pit. The diegetic sound provided by Mr Braithwaite's piano playing in the dance class becomes the sound bridge that connects the class with the raucous crowd striking at the pit. This pairs the two scenarios together and although the differences between the two activities are vital to creating the discourse of Billy's escape, this ensures that they are inextricably linked and the activities that are taking place could have an indelible influence on each other. In the end, of course, it is Billy who escapes the working class but in doing so, he inevitably leaves his family and his working-class community behind.

The construct of escaping the working class as being the only way to succeed is a discourse which does not only run throughout the films' narratives but also extends into their production. For example casting northern characters from working class backgrounds in the lead roles ensures the discourse of escaping the working-class also functions outside the films. Pete Postlethwaite who plays Danny in *Brassed Off* was born in Warrington, Cheshire and funded his theatre school education by taking on a typically working class job as a sheet metal worker (Bergan 2011). Pete Postlethwaite himself acknowledged this saying; "You can't possibly be an

actor, somebody from Warrington. It's not what you do" (Bergan 2011). Jamie Bell, who was cast as Billy Elliot, has a fairytale story of his own to tell, which mirrors the narrative in the film itself. Described as "a working-class boy from the northeast of England (being) transported by the movies all the way from his local Odeon to the high tables of Hollywood" (Bhattacharya 2011). Finally Robert Carlyle, who was employed as a butcher and a painter and decorator from Glasgow, was cast as Gaz in *The Full Monty*. Robert Carlyle said that his greatest achievement is "becoming an actor at all, considering my background" (Greenstreet 2008). What is clear is that the actors themselves are subscribing to the notion that it is deemed a success to escape from the working class. The narrative of their personal lives seem to mirror that of the films in which they are cast, particularly *Billy Elliot*. They are, in their own ways, versions of *Billy Elliot* themselves. Defining what is fiction and what is factual when it comes to representing stereotypically working class figures therefore becomes problematic. The lives of the actors and the lives of the characters become intertextually linked and become transcoded into the overall discourse of working class escape. The actors who have been cast for these roles have been typecast, not as a result of the films they have been in previously, but rather as a result of their social background and upbringing.

It is clear to see how the portrayal of the working class as something that needs to be escaped from is inherent in many forms of media, in the films I've studied the portrayal is just as negative. This negativity surrounding the working class contributes to a discourse of being successful only if you can escape this negative environment. Billy's escape is constructed as the ultimate accomplishment, and it is through his hard work, conflict and his family's sacrifices that he makes that leap into more privileged spheres. Gaz's relative success is shown in his triumphant strip at the end of *The Full*

Monty; and is again constructed as the way to be successful, by escaping the working class. The other characters' futures are less defined, and how successful they will be in the future is less certain. However, they were involved in something that, even though it does not allow them to escape the working class forever, allows them to show that they could potentially remove themselves from the constructed doldrums of it. The *Brassed Off* characters presumably return back to Grimley to seek new forms of employment and attempt to move on from losing their main source of income. Whether the band stays or goes is really a formality, and the victory at the final in London is an empty one. The community, as all the communities in these three films, is left in ruin. Throughout the films there are examples of escape that are the ultimate focus. In the next chapter I will analyse what is happening to the communities that are sacrificed in order to facilitate the individualistic stories of escape.

Chapter 2 – Who decides who is left behind?

“You think you’re so clever and classless and free, but you’re still fucking peasants as far as I can see” (John Lennon)

In the previous chapter the focus was on the creation of the desire to escape from the working class that is prevalent in *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot*. These stories of escape and triumph over adversity are individualistic stories and do not represent wholesale change or benefit for a class ultimately in crisis. In this chapter I will concentrate on the characters and communities that are left behind as a result of these individual escapes. What we see on screen is a community damaged by the sacrifices made by them in order to facilitate one member to escape. The sacrifices the working class make as a whole mean they are constructed as condemned to remaining working-class, and are represented as remnants of the successful upward mobility of the characters that *manage* to escape.

The concept of upward mobility is discussed by Owen Jones in his book *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. Jones points out that there was a marked shift in what the Labour Party stood for in terms of their working-class roots during the 1990s. He argues that Old Labour (pre Conservative governments of the 1980s) “celebrated, or at least paid tribute to, working-class identity” (Jones 2011 p88). In contrast, as discussed in the previous chapter, New Labour’s rhetoric encouraged people to escape the working class. Jones goes on to argue that the “non-aspirational working class had no place in New Labour” (Jones 2011 p89). Essentially Jones is suggesting that unless you had the desire to escape the working class, to conform to the ideology of bettering yourself, you were simply left behind and ignored. This is reflected within the three films studied in this dissertation; the working class are damaged and left behind if they do not escape.

This dissertation's main discussion is on realist film representations of the working class in the late 20th Century. Although it focuses on film representations of the working class, "honest" narratives and reflections on the hardship they suffered also appear in literature. Robert Tressell wrote in the beginning of his novel, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914) that he sought to present "a faithful picture of working-class life" (Tressell 1914 pp13) *Love on the dole* (1933), written by Walter Greenwood, was heralded not only for its literary achievement but also its authentic portrayal of the working class with the *Manchester Guardian* declaring, "We passionately desire this novel to be read; it is the real thing" (Harris 2010). Both novels offered a grim representation of working-class life, with Warden labelling *Love on the dole* as depicting the working class as, "inarticulate, uneducated and reactionary" (Warden 2013) and Kirk highlighting that *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* shows the working class "downtrodden by economic conditions" (Kirk 2003 p33). In addition, there were commentaries on the working class such as George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) in which he laments the north-south divide and the conditions of the working class. There were, therefore, a number of representations that sought to be "honest" and many of these "honest" representations presented a working class in turmoil, unable to flourish and, as a result, as able to do little more than simply subsist.

In film, prior to the British New Wave of the late 1950s, the working class had been represented, according to Hill, as generally "stock types or comic butts of 'commercial' British cinema" (Hill 1999 pp130). Indeed, there is little other than negative representations of the working class prior to the British New Wave, as Gillett points out. He states that there is, "scant evidence of a coherent working-class community (in post-war films)" (Gillett 2003 p178).

Another damning verdict on the state of the working class in film came from Lindsay Anderson: "The number of British films that have ever made a genuine try at a story in popular milieu, with all working class characters can be counted on one hand" (Anderson 1957 p158). It seems therefore that the working class in film is represented as being unable to survive on their own, and this is also apparent in the British New Wave. Even though the films that came as part of the British New Wave movement placed a spotlight on the working class, they do little to change the negative representations of the working class that had gone before it.

The working class first appeared as the focus of narratives in popular mainstream film during the British New Wave films of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The British New Wave represented an emerging influential social group that, according to Marwick, "was now more visible in a way it had never been before" (Marwick 1984 p130). Sinyard states that prior to the British New Wave the "national cinema (was) hitherto predominantly South of England, middle class and genteel" (Sinyard 2002 p86). Sinyard also points out that these films "launched the British new wave, bringing realism, the working class, and sex to the British screen with a new candor and honesty" (Sinyard 2002 p86). This new movement marked a change in how the working class was represented. Films such as *Room at the Top* (1959), *Look Back in Anger* (1959) *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), *Billy Liar* (1963) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961) offered realist, gritty representations of the working class,

The British New Wave films placed a spotlight on the working class, and brought some controversial issues to the screen, already sympathising to the middle class gaze, showing the working class in various difficulties. For example, in Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1961) a multitude of controversial subjects appear in the narrative. These include, pre-marital sex,

inter-racial relationships, questions about gender roles, homosexuality, alcoholism, greed, and conflicts between mothers and daughters. Another film, *Look Back in Anger* (1959), based on John Osbourne's play of the same name and directed by Tony Richardson, also deals with some topics that were current at the time of release. These include abortion, domestic violence, sexual promiscuity, and hatred of the upper classes. These are just two examples but many of the films in the British New Wave have controversial themes. Even though these events could potentially occur within any demographic, because these controversial topics appear in the British New Wave films, which explicitly show working class characters dealing with them, they are attributed *only* to the working class. As Lay points out, "these issues were explored first and foremost as 'problems'" (Lay 2002 p56). Because these problems are explored within a working class context it perpetuates the idea that the working class are in themselves problematic: unable to function effectively and successfully.

However, the economic climate in which the British New Wave films are set is completely different to *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot*. One film from the British New Wave which epitomised the working class in Britain during the British New Wave was *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and in particular, the lead character of Arthur Seaton. Arthur Seaton was paid a healthy wage and could afford himself weekends in the pub and working men's club. The *Guardian Online* describes Arthur Seaton as, being "the original angry young man who fights against the sterility of his working class life" (Guardian Online, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* n.d.). Despite the fact that the three films under discussion in this dissertation also show the working class battling as Arthur Seaton did, there is a shift in the overall representation of the working class in them. Brendan O'Neill argues in *British films we used to get*, "angry young men in the late 1950s and 1960s. Now

they just give us damaged young men and damaged young women” he goes on to say that the working class is depicted as “just going through the motions of a depressing existence” (BBC News Today - Does Film Stereotype the Working Class? 2011). On the surface, films that emerged from The British New Wave depicted the working class as a community that could support people and families despite the anger to which O’Neill refers. The attitudes that are displayed by these communities in *Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot* and *The Full Monty* are attitudes that are distinctly different as their main purpose is not “having a good time” as Arthur Seaton did, but merely surviving through difficult factors imposed on them as a result of de-industrialisation. The working class on screen is still used as a place to display instances of conflict and suffering, ensuring the working class is in crisis and as a result is sympathetic to the middle class gaze. They are as, O’Neill states, damaged as a result of these policies but also they are depicted as being already defeated. Ultimately in these films the working class are already left behind. In *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot* many of the characters are going through the depressing existence to which Brendan refers, and are often shown in specific moments of desperation. This is because the narratives of each text are based around demoralising problems, which ultimately depict the working class communities as desperate.

How the working class functions in film, either successfully or negatively, is dependent on the policies and relative successes of the middle and upper classes. The British New Wave came when economic conditions within the working class were changing, with many working-class communities having a larger disposable income. John Kirk asserts that it was a shift from “poverty to affluence” (Kirk 2003 p3). For example, Arthur Seaton’s lifestyle in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was fuelled by capitalist economics that

helped the period of prosperity which gave rise to working-class communities. Essentially, the wage he gained dictated and fuelled the lifestyle he desired and allowed him to continue “having a good time”. Where the British New Wave came at a time of economic prosperity for the working class, *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot* represent a time of economic decline. This economic decline was arguably as a result of Conservative policy through the 1980s. Ironically, the label given to the working class, that they are *working*, is markedly absent in the three films studied. The problems that arise as a result of the lack of work are represented as the working class’s fault, and they must use the new ideology of aspiration in order to better their lot. There is an inherent change in what it means to be working class in *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot*, specifically as a result of the middle class.

The working class are represented as inherently damaged in these three films, and one of the aspects that is most damaged is masculinity. One of the factors that altered during the time the films were made was the change in the way women worked in Britain. Monk highlights this change in the 1990s:

The structural changes of the post-industrialist era had, by the 1990s, virtually obliterated two employment strata overwhelmingly dominated by men—unskilled workers and middle-management—from the workforce. By contrast, the 1990s saw women making increasingly confident inroads into the expanding white-collar and service industries.... Even though this feminisation of the workforce was substantially founded on the flexibility of women in tolerating work which was part-time, insecure and ill-paid, the impression grew of a society in which women were in the ascendancy in the workplace and beyond. (Monk 2000 p156)

Despite the low paid wages and insecurity which Monk talks about, the films do depict femininity in the ascendancy and masculinity in decline. The rise of women into the workplace is a direct threat on working-class men already squeezed by economic policies, which meant work was harder to come by. Schreiber asserts that these three films are, “steps of a cultural healing

process of the scars and mutilations of masculinity brought about by social and economic change” (Schreiber 2007 p6). However, I would argue that the three films actually portray a masculinity still struggling to come to terms with the social and economic changes that Schreiber mentions. There is little doubt that the male characters feel threatened by their female counterparts. In *The Full Monty* there is a humorous exchange between Gaz and other men in the job centre. He is horrified by the fact that he sees two women urinating in the men’s urinals in the working-men’s club. Gaz is obviously perturbed by this female infiltration: “A few years and men won’t exist except for in zoos or summat. I mean we’re not needed no more are we? Obsolete, dinosaurs, yesterday’s news.” Gaz is reflecting not only the infiltration of women taking men’s jobs, but also women taking men’s identity.

The role men fulfilled in the working class changed, and it is the focus on the change in work, which Monk describes, that affects them most drastically.

Shreiber highlights how these films comment on the,

social structures and the changing gender relations that were brought about by this economic decline. Men, once proud workers in heavy industries like coalmining or steel, suddenly found themselves without a job, without hope and without a ‘proper’ role in society (Schreiber 2007 p1).

The men cling to this ideal of being “proud” when it comes to work, in particular Gaz in *The Full Monty*. Despite him wanting to catch up with the maintenance payments in order for him to see his son, he refuses to take the packing work that his ex-wife offers him because he feels it is beneath him. Similarly Dave does not want the job as a security guard that his wife wants him to do. The characters in *Brassed Off* cling on to their working-class ideals, and in particular Danny is an extremely “proud” man. He sets himself and those around him very high standards, and clings on to his working-class values. It is significant, however, that Danny is extremely ill; he clearly represents a dying breed. It is clear his ideals and his beliefs will ultimately

die with him and it is his son Phil who has to do adopt a new attitude. Phil has to do more demeaning things such as dressing up as a clown in order to make ends meet. These markers of the illness in the old working class, represented by Danny, and the new attitude of Phil and Dave doing work that is traditionally out of the working class, is representative of Britain moving away from a manufacturing industry (which needed the working class), towards a service industry. This emphasises how generational changes have meant that Phil's generation of the working class is damaged. Ultimately how the male characters' attitudes have changed, shape the course of the working class as a whole.

It is men that dominate and drive the narratives, but women play a huge part in deciding the paths that working-class male characters take. Kaplan rightly argues that the changes in the working class are "largely imagined through the mutation of working-class masculinity and its aspirations within and across generations" (Kaplan 2004 p95). However, behind the men who take centre stage in the narratives, there are a number of female characters that have significant influence; they are part of the mutations in masculinity to which Kaplan refers. Gloria in *Brassed Off* has a big influence in that she will contribute to the decision on the fate of the pit. This puts her in a position in which she can have more influence on the working-class community than any other character, in that the workplace is central to the community's survival and identity. Gloria also provides money to take the band to the finals in London. Furthermore, it is her ability as a flugel player, and in particular her performance in Concerto D'Aranjuez, which prompts Danny into believing the band can succeed in the competition. In influencing the fate of the pit, driving the band forward, then funding the trip to London she is an extremely important character. By providing the talent and the money in the band, the rest of the male band members are ultimately beholden to her. In *The Full*

Monty, Gaz's ex wife, Mandy, holds the power in their relationship and can dictate to him when he sees his son. Her offers of a job, which Gaz thinks are beneath him, prompt him to seek alternative forms of employment and ultimately to form the stripping contingent. She also has the power to take Gaz's son away from him and is ultimately backed up by the state, further emphasising her position of power above Gaz. The growing influence of women in *The Full Monty* is also shown when the men worry about what the women will think of their bodies while they are stripping. The men are uncomfortable even discussing the prospect of them being judged by the onlooking women. Dave says; "what if next Friday four-hundred women turn round and say 'he's too fat, he's too old, and he's a pigeon-chested little tosser?' What happens then eh?" Horse's response is one of genuine worry; "They wouldn't say that, would they?" These worries prompt them into practicing more, and make them try to be more appealing to the opposite sex. They are worried about the objectifying gaze that they themselves have projected onto women their entire lives. This shows that the gender roles are reversed and is a firm marker of their emasculation. Despite the absence of influential women in Billy's family life in *Billy Elliot*, Billy's absent mother still has a huge influence on the path that Billy's life takes. It is her possessions that ensure Billy can go to the audition, and ultimately secure his escape from the working class. Furthermore, his mother has an influence on the dance that he and Mrs Wilkinson choreograph for his audition, as Billy draws inspiration for the dance from his mother. Mrs. Wilkinson is, of course, a female teacher, who initially spots Billy's talent, then teaches him the skills he needs in order to succeed in his chosen profession of ballet. Despite men dominating the time on screen and men being the lead characters in all three films the influence of women on their lives, and as a result the working class as a whole cannot be understated. Furthermore, this indicates how masculinity is ultimately under threat and is markedly changing, as women

can have such a profound effect on them and their communities, despite their relative absence, and men can do so little and provide so little in return.

What is also absent in the three films is a working class which has steady, reliable jobs to go to, and as a result there is a distinct feeling of uncertainty amongst them. The communities and characters that are represented in *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot* have a distinct focus on the work they undertake, but in their cases it is the lack of work and the uncertainty surrounding what work they have that shapes their lifestyles. Instead of affording themselves weekends in the pub, purchasing new clothes, eventually buying a house as Arthur does in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, the characters in the other films are unable to achieve such simple things, which became synonymous with the working class during the British New Wave movement. Friedrich points out the importance of the workplace in working-class culture, “the local factory did not only determine the workers' lives but also the life of the whole community” (Friedrich 2007 p7). There is an obvious lack of work in *The Full Monty* but the overall narrative in *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot* is that the working class is unsure as to whether they will be working from one day to the next. As a result, the working class is shown as stagnant and unable to progress, completely contrasting the upward mobility that the government promoted. At least in *The Full Monty* the characters know that they do not have jobs and can attempt to get themselves a job, or move forward in their lives, however difficult that may be. In contrast, *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot* show the working class in the middle of indecision. In the British New Wave films where all the working class are working, they have a certain amount of disposable income and enough money to “have a good time” as Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* did. However, all three films are the same in that the viewer sees the working class damaged as a result

of unemployment, poverty, destitution, uncertainty and essentially societies deprived of the characteristics that define them.

One of these characteristics that defined the working class is the community hub of the workplace. In these films, the community hub of the workplace is replaced with a number of different places, or often there is an absence of a specific place for the characters to occupy. The characters are themselves products of a post-industrial climate while also appearing within a post-industrial setting. In *The Full Monty*, Gaz and his entourage repeatedly wander aimlessly around open empty spaces, clearly indicating their lack of direction but also that there is not a specific place for the working class to inhabit anymore. These scenes were filmed on location in Sheffield, which the audience would have been acutely aware of. Robert How, the location manager, spoke about the significance of the scenes being filmed on location. He said the settings were, "Lots of grim exteriors of Sheffield, of desolation" (Marriot 1997). In an ironic twist, the space the characters in *The Full Monty* use to practice for their dance routine is an abandoned steel factory, which highlights the absence of jobs and industry. The desolate exteriors to which How refers are not the only spaces that the working class occupy, they are also forced back into the home as a result of the absence of a community hub.

The significance of the working class moving back to their homes is indicative of a class in crisis. Significantly the characters' homes in *The Full Monty* are only ever seen on screen very briefly, inferring a nomadic existence, moving from place-to-place without anywhere definitive to either live or interact. The absence of jobs and industry also forces the characters back into their homes, which are often portrayed as bleak and unwelcoming. Phil's home in *Brassed Off* is reduced to a shell after he has all his

possessions repossessed, and so is portrayed on screen as again not having a specific functional space to inhabit. In *Billy Elliot*, many of the exchanges between Billy and his family occur in their house. Furthermore, there is a systematic dismantling of parts of Billy's house. Most notably Billy's father has to destroy the piano so they can burn it in order to heat the house. This also signifies another destroyed hub – getting round the piano to sing is now impossible without the piano. Billy's father also pawns Billy's mother's possessions in order to fund his trip to London. In these instances Billy's family have to make great sacrifices in order for Billy to have a chance at escaping the working class, but also just to subsist. Billy's house also becomes a sort of homage to the past. Wallpaper that is markedly 1970s in style and as Wayne points out, "the spacehopper and rolleromatic hoover (are) (both resonant of the 1970s rather than the mid 1980s)" (Wayne 2006 p293). The old décor could signify a financial inability to update but could represent a longing for the past, a longing for a time when their communities were not under threat and the working class occupied spaces they chose to.

A further example of the shift in the spaces the working class occupy is the shift from working men's club to the job club. Working men's clubs and pubs were traditionally used as areas for social interaction and were strongly associated with the working class. When these spaces appear on screen they are shown in a different way to how they appeared in The British New Wave. In The British New Wave they are hives of activity, full of working-class people. In the three films, despite fleeting moments where they are busy, these working men's clubs and pubs are often mostly empty indicating that they have disintegrated and fail to draw in the community from surrounding areas. What we do see are characters congregating in the job centre, which marks a shift in the natural spaces the working class occupy. In particular, in *The Full Monty* many of the interactions between the characters happen in

what they refer to as “job club”. This obvious play on words for the job centre epitomises the change that has taken place in the working class and specifically the damage that has been done to it. It also highlights the influence of the state over the characters in *The Full Monty* as it was a term that was created by government. Usually a ‘club’ is somewhere where people can go to enjoy themselves, away from day-to-day life, somewhere where activities and environments can be enjoyed, as in a working men’s club. To assert the label of ‘club’ to somewhere where the men are required to go in order to receive their benefit money instead of a ‘club’ where they can enjoy themselves shows that they are no longer allowed or free to interact in ways that the working class used to. It highlights not only the change in the working class but the overarching influence of government in that the only club the characters go to is a club which is compulsory and is their source of income.

Moments of positivity and happiness do, however, often appear in these traditionally working-class spaces such as the working men’s club. For example, *The Full Monty*’s triumphant reveal-all ending is in a working men’s club and this offers a clear moment of community cohesion. Although it is a predominantly female crowd, the important characters of Gaz’s wife and Dave’s wife revel in their respective partners striptease. Gaz’s son also is there looking on from the wings to watch his father perform. Similarly, in *Brassed Off* the moment the band get the money to go to the competition finals in London, the characters are in the working men’s club, as they are when Andy wins back his trumpet which allows him to re-join the band. Also, some incidents that are positive in *Billy Elliot* also occur in the working men’s club. There are shots of a party at Christmas and also the moment Billy is accepted into the dance school in London it is the first place Billy’s father runs to in order to tell the community. These moments of happiness,

however, are only fleeting nostalgic glimpses of a more coherent society before mass de-industrialisation. These locations are evidently only used to ensure that the plot remains within the realms of the working class.

What is portrayed on screen more often than these moments of coherence is the working class fighting amongst themselves. This is another example of the shift in the working class not being angry young men and fighting against the sterility of their working-class life, but accepting their role within the working class and fighting against each other. Through transcoding, this ensures that the problems that are attributed to the working class are seen as an 'in-house' problem, a problem that is the working class's fault. The characters in *The Full Monty* are seen, most notably, at the beginning of the film, arguing with each other and disagreeing about their futures and the right way to make money out of the strip show. Despite Gerald's middle-class history and aspirations, he is still on the same social rung as the other characters looking for a job in the job club, and he and Gaz have a particularly tense relationship. Their attitudes towards each other are overtly abrasive, and this tension comes to a head when they nearly have a fight at the job club when Gerald insults Gaz. Similarly in *Brassed Off* there is tension between Jim and Andy when Jim refers to Andy as a "scab" and a "stupid fucker" when Jim finds out Andy is romantically involved with Gloria. The striking miners in *Billy Elliot* battle against the miners who break the strike, as opposed to the classes that have imposed the difficult conditions on them. They are unable to fight against these ruling classes, and as a result resort to fighting against the working-class miners who side with the middle-classes: the non-striking miners. These conflicts that erupt between the working class manifest themselves as a result of stresses that are caused by the wider economic policies that are imposed on them by the ruling classes.

In order to keep these conflicts to a relative minimum there are certain elements that represent the state, which keep the working class in its place. This is most clearly represented in *Billy Elliot* by the constant presence of the police. As Dave notes, “the police presence in Billy’s pit town is presented as sinister...police army are seen to be encamped or drilling whilst in the foreground Billy goes about his life, not unaware but precisely what is worse, habituated to this enemy within” (Dave 2006). The constant conflict between the miners and the enforcing, oppressive police is represented both extremely overtly when there is direct violence between the striking miners and the police themselves. It is also shown less explicitly; sometimes there are simply police in the background of the shot, watching over the working-class communities. The police become woven into the fabric of the working class communities to the point where they simply do not stand out. In one such instance, Debbie and Billy walk past the police, Debbie bangs a stick against the plastic shields of the police as though it was a wall. This moment shows how their presence is the norm within the working-class community. Debbie does not think anything of hitting their shields as she walks past, nor do the police react in any way. Whichever way the police are shown, they are there to maintain the power balance and keep the miners and the whole community in check. Billy is accustomed to their presence and also the threat of violence and confrontation that comes with it. Similarly in *The Full Monty*, the scenes where the men have to queue for their money in the dole queue ultimately signifies that they are being controlled by the state. The subtext of power distribution is apparent throughout the narratives, regardless of the events that unfold.

During the British New Wave one way of establishing the entrance into the working class, or a coherent society, was a long establishing shot, usually at the beginning of the films. Hill has discussed the significance of these long

establishing shots in creating authenticity, arguing that the factories, terraced housing and industrial settings create a “reality effect” (Hill 1986). Higson explored the idea further, arguing that the method is formulaic and easily recreated. He refers to “That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill” (Higson 1996 p154) leading to the shot removing itself from a gritty reality as opposed to it placing it within a specific area. Higson is also stating that this establishing shot is clichéd, and a marker for a working-class community. What this shot does do, despite it being a cliché, is show that there is a specific place or area for the working class to inhabit. The shot places the viewer of the films markedly outside the working class community, and consequently show a portrait of the area in which the working class live. In contrast, *Billy Elliot*, *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* do not have these standard establishing shots. The lack of an establishing shot to portray a portrait of the working-class is indicative of the fact there is no specific community to take a long shot of; the communities that existed during the British New Wave are now no longer there. What is presented instead is an immediate entry into the *new* working class and the *new* spaces they inhabit. The opening shots are placed within homes, streets and derelict factories as though there is an infiltration into the working class and its settings.

The infiltration of the working class is something that also happens on screen, most significantly by middle-class characters. In the same way there are signs and indications for what it is to be part of the working-class community, there are also signs that indicate which characters are middle-class. Hitchcock states how middle-class figures can “pass” into the working class while still retaining their middle-class identity. He notes, “An identification with the Other (working class) does not erase difference but produces it in the realm of the symbolic” (Hitchcock 1994 p5). In the instances of the three films, the symbolic differences are the signs that

represent the middle classes. For example in *Billy Elliot*, Mrs Wilkinson owns a car and lives in semi-detached suburbia but still manages to come into the working-class area to teach children a typically middle-class pastime: ballet. In *The Full Monty* the middle-class infiltration is represented by Gerald, the redundant foreman forced to go to the job centre with the men he used to manage. In contrast to the other members of the job club, he wears a suit to sign on and search for jobs, ensuring his symbolic difference to the working-class characters. He, and, in particular, his wife indulge in typically middle-class “vulgar inspiration” (Marriot 1997 p3) enjoy skiing holidays and collecting garden gnomes. Luxuries, comfort and essentially the ability to consume more than the working-class groups defines them as ‘the other’ and as a result as middle-class. In *Brassed Off* the character that represents the middle class is Gloria. When the men in the band initially discover she is part of the management that runs the pit and ultimately will choose to close it, she is viewed extremely negatively and Andy – who is romantically involved with her – also receives some abuse for being associated with her. Despite professing that she is on the side of the miners, she is ejected from the band. She admits that she does not belong in their community at that moment by referring to ‘their’ side as opposed to ‘our’ side when talking about the on going dispute with the colliery management. All these infiltrations are markedly apparent on screen and yet the working class characters seem at ease with them in their community.

Despite this infiltration of the middle class into the working class there is an inherent dislike of the middle class by working class characters. The characters define themselves through not only the dislike of the middle class, but, as Lawler states “on the basis of *not* being middle class” (Lawler 2005). In *Brassed Off*, the contempt shown by the members of the Grimley brass band when they find out that Gloria is part of management they direct their anger at Andy who has a relationship with her. The group refers to their

relationship as “a mistake” and asks, “what does it make Andy?”. They are collectively questioning whether Andy belongs in the working class as now he is associating himself with someone whom they see as middle-class. As far as the band is concerned Andy is having a relationship with someone who is their arch enemy. One of the characters says, “There’s nothing wrong with shagging management. They’ve been shagging us long enough”: a clear indication that the working class feel they are being exploited by management and the middle class. In *Billy Elliot*, there are obvious examples, such as when Tony calls Mrs Wilkinson a “middle-class bitch” in their altercation in the kitchen of Billy’s house. The middle class do not need to completely infiltrate the working class in order for them to be disliked. Gaz’s wife’s new partner is disliked by Gaz and is constructed on screen as being above Gaz. On one occasion when Gaz visits his house, he looks down on him from his large house and raised step. Gaz even steps down a step as his wife opens the door so as to assume the lowest position of the working class. The working class characters are very open and forthright about their dislike of the middle class, which helps to ensure they differentiate themselves from the middle class and their values. However, it is the characters that embrace the middle-class values – values that the working class purport to hate – who are constructed as being most successful.

There are also more subtle examples of the dislike of the middle class, but also of the middle class looking down on the working class. This comes when Billy visits Mrs Wilkinson’s house after his father has banned him from attending dance classes. Billy is shown running up his own street, with terraced red brick houses as he goes past the ever-present police at the top of his road. In contrast, the middle class suburban setting of Mrs Wilkinson’s house shows an area with cars on detached house drives, along with gardens and trees in the background and Billy looks distinctly uncomfortable

in it. When Billy arrives at the door, he voices his concerns about his appearance at her house: "My dad will kill me if he knows I'm here". Inside, Billy encounters Mrs Wilkinson's husband who discusses the miner's strike with Billy. Mr Wilkinson is constructed as a grotesque opinionated chauvinist, and he talks to Billy but does not look directly at him, indicating he is quite dismissive of him. He asks Billy about his father in a condescending way: "He is out on strike isn't he?" Billy seems to be put off by his frank question and frowns back "course". Mr Wilkinson then openly states that "they (the miners) don't have a leg to stand on" and that it's "if they had a ballot they'd be back tomorrow. A few bloody commies stirring up." While he talks about the economic benefits of closing "un-economical pits" the camera cuts back to Billy; his facial expression is the focus as he listens to Mr Wilkinson, with his frown becoming more pronounced with obvious worry and conflict. His dislike for the things Mr Wilkinson is saying and as a result the dislike of his class and those who are attempting to repress the miners is clear. Mr Wilkinson is presented as obviously self-righteous, saying "If it was up to me, I'd shut the lot of 'em (the mines) down tomorrow". When Billy finds out that Mr Wilkinson has been made redundant his expression immediately changes to a satisfied smile and he looks completely at ease in comparison to the angry frown he expressed earlier in the conversation. This scene portrays distinctly that there is a tension and dislike between the classes, not only from the working class towards the middle class but also in the other direction.

Billy seems markedly uncomfortable in this middle-class setting and the working class characters seem uneasy in middle-class environments in all three films. For example, when Billy's family visit him at the theatre before his performance Billy's father is bewildered by the sights of London, transfixed and mesmerised by travelling on the underground or up an escalator. Similarly a fuss is made about the Grimley band's visit to London in *Brassed*

Off, with photos being taken by the characters and a repeated focus on London landmarks such as The Houses of Parliament. In these moments the working class characters are tourists in their own country, but are in an environment that is not representative of them. Also, in *Brassed Off* the PA announcer in The Royal Albert Hall is unable to pronounce the word “colliery”, indicating the difference between the working-class brass band and the middle-class spaces in London. Even in *The Full Monty* Dave and Gaz joke about Gerald’s garden gnomes when at his house, as though frivolous possessions such as garden gnomes are an alien concept to them. Furthermore many of the uncomfortable scenarios happen in Gerald’s middle-class house, such as when they first take their clothes off in front of each other or when they first take a look at their stripping underwear. Ensuring that working-class characters are either uncomfortable in middle-class surroundings highlights that the working class do not belong in these environments, and only a privileged few can be comfortable in these spaces. This again shows the middle-class gaze influencing the discourse of the film. If the working class characters seemed comfortable in these surroundings, it would mean that more of the working class could potentially remove themselves from their damaged communities.

In order for working-class characters to have a chance of being comfortable in the middle class, or to be accepted into it, the middle class characters have to offer different forms of capital to the working class. Pierre Bourdieu writes about the different types of capital in *The Forms of Capital* (1986). He refers to economic capital which he describes as “directly convertible into money” (Bourdieu, 1986 p242) essentially the capital in money. In *Brassed Off* it is Gloria who stumps up the money to fund the trip to the Royal Albert Hall to compete in the brass band finals, and is essentially providing the economic capital to which Bourdieu refers. Bourdieu also coins another term

known as “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986 p242). Grenfell describes cultural capital as, “forms of knowledge, taste, aesthetic and cultural preferences” (Grenfell 2008 p42). In *Billy Elliot* it is Mrs Wilkinson who introduces Billy to ballet and teaches him the skills he needs to gain a place at the dance school. Similarly, it is Gerald in *The Full Monty* who teaches the group to dance and perform. Both Gerald and Mrs Wilkinson are providing the cultural capital to the working class characters. Hegemonic power structures are still in place and adopted on a smaller scale within each film, in that the middle class are offering their capital as they choose to the working class. This influence ensures the middle class retain power over the working class if they can enter such small close-knit communities and exert their influence to a willing set of students, despite them generally being disliked. It is only through the leadership and talents of the middle class, and the capital they offer the working class, that the working-class characters attain any of the goals they set out to achieve.

In contrast, the working-class characters have little or no capital to offer anyone, especially their children. Bourdieu talks about the importance of parents providing cultural capital to their children (Bourdieu 1986) and many of the working class characters do not provide their children with anything. For example, in *The Full Monty* Gaz cannot afford to take his son to watch a football match, nor can he provide the money to give to his ex-wife in order to keep up to his child-maintenance payments. Similarly, in *Brassed Off*, Phil’s financial circumstances mean that his wife leaves him and takes the children with her. Furthermore, what cultural capital has been passed onto the next generation between the working class is rendered obsolete. For example the importance of music in the band in *Brassed Off* from Danny to Phil, or Billy’s father leading Tony to a life working in the pit in *Billy Elliot*. These values are of no use in the de-industrialised period in which the films are set. This

emphasises that working-class characters must get their capital from other sources, primarily, the middle class.

When the middle class are not providing capital it is the children who take up the role of capital providers to their parents. This is most obviously shown in *The Full Monty*, with the relationship between Gaz and his son Nathan. Gaz's actions throughout the film are a source of embarrassment for Nathan, and as a result Nathan actively asserts his dominance over his father in many scenes and exchanges between the two. He highlights his father's faults and failings in bringing him up, leading to a shift in the father being dominant in a father-son relationship. Nathan is present in many of the scenes where the group are rehearsing their dance, and even advises his father when he is out of time in the dance. In these instances he is providing his father with the cultural capital needed to be financially successful. Furthermore, it is Nathan who provides the money to the landlord of the working men's club to secure the room for the show as Gaz does not have the money for it. Gibson-Graham highlight the change in the traditional father-son relationship: "The son in this film acts as moral judge of and then banker to his father. The world, it seems has been turned upside down" (Gibson-Graham 1999 p63). The fact that Gaz needed his son's help in order to be a success is a complete shift in the way capital is ordinarily passed down.

The influence of children on their parents leads the fathers to challenge their own beliefs. The idea that the younger characters prompt their fathers to re-think their beliefs is a theme that Schreiber points out, asserting that these challenges make the male characters, "redefine and reposition themselves in their changed environment, as husbands, fathers and, consequently, as men" (Schreiber 2007). What Schreiber does not identify is that they are re-thinking their identity, not as simply men, but as *working-class* men. One

scene that perfectly demonstrates this direct challenge is a scene in *Billy Elliot* where Billy's father catches Billy and Michael dancing in the sports hall. As Sinfield notes, "(Billy) is giving off the wrong gender signals for his community....The film is unable to frame ballet as a normal, male activity" (Sinfield 2006). Again Sinfield needs to state that the film cannot frame ballet as a normal male *working-class* activity, and this is precisely what Billy's father feels. The scene is laden with homosexual overtones with Michael initially wearing a tutu when Billy's father walks in. He promptly removes the tutu and stands still, guilty, as though he has done something wrong. Michael is also quickly distancing himself from the activities that he knows Billy's father dislikes. Over the shoulder shots looking down at Billy and looking up at Billy's father signify that his father is the dominant figure initially in the exchange. There is a standoff between Billy and his father with a low angle camera shot looking up at the two characters to indicate the significance of what is about to happen. Billy begins to dance directly in front of his father and Billy's unwavering stare at his father indicates he is confronting him and his ideals about his dancing. Billy continues to dance for his father while the audience sees it repeatedly from his father's perspective, with the boxing ring in the background. Billy's father does not only represent his own ideas and beliefs, but the beliefs of the entire working-class community. The intense focus on Billy's dancing frames the activity as special but also as the anomaly to what is expected of someone from the working class. From this, the conflict that Billy's father is going through is perpetuated and his expressions of dismay are shown in close-up camera shots at the beginning of the scene. Billy dances towards the boxing ring, which signifies the route his father wanted him to take. The dance that Billy does mixes traditional ballet moves with moves that represent the working class. He mimics kicking a football up in the air and his dancing is less refined. Towards the end of the dance Billy dances away from the boxing ring, signifying his movement away

from the traditional values his father has and also the traditional path he wanted Billy to follow – that of boxing – and he does so by performing a series of chaînés all the way back to him, which is in stark contrast to pretending to kick a football while dancing towards it. Billy is showing that he is embracing his new direction, away from the working class by doing a middle-class pastime of ballet. It is from this moment that Billy's father is forced to re-think his opinions on Billy's dancing and realise he has a special talent. By the end of the scene the camera angles are on a level for both characters signifying the change in Billy's father being entirely dominant over him. As Billy's father runs away down the street Billy ends up looking down on his father, further signifying the re-distribution of influence. From this direct confrontation and Billy's father noticing the talent that his son has, Billy then has the opportunity of going to dance school. The questioning of Billy's father's beliefs – which will have been engrained in him for a long time – further highlights the crisis in the working class but also indicates the influence of the new generation of the working class.

As well as sometimes providing capital to their parents, and altering their parent's perspectives, the young characters seem to be exempt from the influences of class in many ways and are never shown on screen campaigning or battling like the adult working-class characters. By removing them from battles against ruling middle and upper classes they are embracing the notion that their class is not important to them, and essentially does not exist – enforcing the ideology that we're all middle class. Billy never confronts any police, despite the attack on his brother and indeed the attack on his community, nor does he comment on the plight of the miners. In *The Full Monty*, Nathan never passes judgement or talks about his father's inability to find work, he merely accepts it as a fact of life and assists him in any way he can. A specific focus on young characters is almost missing in *Brassed Off* but in the brief moments they are on-screen they focus on family

problems. For example Phil's son tells his mother, "I'd sooner see Dad sad than not at all", not mentioning the circumstances which have led to them moving away from Phil. Billy's open mind when it comes to both taking up a stereotypically non-working-class hobby like ballet and his openness to Michael's sexuality indicate he is free from some of the working class prejudices that grip his father when he finds out that Billy is learning ballet as opposed to boxing. It is clear that Billy's father and brother have still maintained their homophobic prejudices when in the final scene they are shocked at Michael's transgender appearance in the theatre. Although the children in the films do suffer as a result of the working class coming under threat, they are presented as free from the prejudices that seem to occupy the adult characters.

In many respects the adult characters in the three films act more like children than the children themselves. There are a number of instances of this throughout the films. Tincknell and Chambers point out how the characters in *The Full Monty* "are increasingly represented as infantilized" (Tincknell & Chambers 2002), and the same can be said of the male characters in the other two films. There are a number of occasions where the dialogue or topic is simplified in order for the working class characters to understand. For example, in *Brassed Off* Concerto D'Aranjuez is simplified to "orange juice" in order for the band members to know the piece they were about to play. In simplifying what is being said it makes it more relevant to them, indicating that the working class would not find Concerto D'Aranjuez – which was written about the Spanish Civil War, inspired by the palace of Arajuez – relevant. Similarly, in *The Full Monty* Gerald struggles to get the men to all stand in a straight line at the same time. To get them all to do it, Horse simplifies the dance move into the "Arsenal offside trap", at which point they all complete the dance move with ease. Gerald tells Dave that "Fat is a feminist issue" but when questioned on it retorts, "I don't bloody know do I?"

But it is.” Phil’s language throughout *Brassed Off* is extremely slow and he is portrayed throughout as being simple and seems not to understand the importance of extremely worrying events, such as the pit closure or his father being ill. By simplifying and infantilising the adult men it perpetuates the idea that they are damaged and are regressing to child-like behaviour in order to get through life. It also leads to the working class being portrayed as subservient to the other, evidently more eloquent, intelligent class: the middle class.

The infantilization of the male characters renders them unable to fulfil their roles as fathers. Segal argues that the films were produced at a time when “men’s actual power and control over women and children is declining...Men’s hold on their status as fathers is less firm and secure than ever before” (Segal 1997 p257). There are various conflicts between men, their partners and their children highlighting that they are not the dominant force in deciding their family’s future. Again, while the working class is fighting amongst itself, it is not challenging the middle class gaze and therefore not challenging the power distribution between the classes. The driving force behind Gaz’s quest to earn money is so he can see his son more and in order to do that he has to pay his ex-wife the maintenance money that he owes, indicating previously he is not fulfilling his role as a father. As Gaz’s wife puts it to him after he gets arrested, “Unemployed, maintenance arrears of £700 and now arrested for indecent exposure. Still think you’re a suitable father do you?” Similarly in *Brassed Off* Danny and Phil clash over the importance of the band. For periods Danny keeps a strong hold over Phil and ensures he attends practice and spends what little money he has on being part of the band. There are, however, moments where Phil chooses to defy his father, showing that Danny does not have control over his son. In *Billy Elliot* despite his best efforts, Jackie is unable to control Billy.

Billy's father is opposed to him taking dancing lessons, preferring him to take up boxing. Significantly Billy has his father's boxing gloves that are used to express a right of passage for him, as a traditional route for him to follow. After Billy gets knocked down while boxing, the trainer says to him, as if to emphasize his right of passage and tradition, "Jesus Christ Billy Elliot! You're a disgrace to them gloves, your father and the traditions of this boxing hall!" While Billy continues in secret to defy his father by dancing there is increased tension, building towards a conflict between the two parties. When the conflict comes to a head it is Billy's expressive dancing that forces his father to alter his somewhat archaic, traditionalist opinions. The adult male characters cannot fulfil their roles as fathers in that they cannot control what their children do, or influence what they believe.

What comes across in these films, primarily through the instances of conflict, stagnation and damaged communities, is that there is a fundamental shift in what it is to *be* working-class. However, what is now the prescribed role for the working class is simply just subsisting. What is also clear is that the working class is inherently damaged in these three films. Not only is their class under threat – eroded by economic policy and redundancy – but also by the popular discourse offered by those that make the economic policy. The Conservative governments of the 1980s, led by Margaret Thatcher and the subsequent Labour governments of the late 1990s attempted to erode the notion of class. As Gilson points out "(Margaret Thatcher's) government set about stripping class from the nation's vocabulary" (Gilson 2011). Thatcher's tactic was to label class "a communist concept" (O'Hagan 2011), thereby attempting to remove the idea of class as something which was relevant in society.

In contrast the Labour rhetoric was to insist that class still existed but to assert that the working class no longer even exists. What is left behind as a

result of the discourse for escape of the working class is, as discussed, a damaged and incoherent community and what these films are representing are a demographic that governments have said no longer exists. Johnson states that Labour's plan was to strip the working class of their values "In many ways the goal of New Labour was not to improve the lot of the working class but to escape the working class. The 'modernisation' it sought hinged on devaluing those traditions solidarity and stoicism" (Johnson 2011).

It is true to say that the "old" working class depicted in the British New Wave does not exist but there is a new working class struggling to find its feet in a post-industrial society. In the three films the working-class characters made choices to make substantial sacrifices throughout the narratives. These sacrifices are to their own values, their jobs, relationships and livelihoods. In reality however, their sacrifices have been taken out of their hands, and forced upon them as a result of socio-economic policy. The films become problem films, discussing what to do with a working class that is left behind. As Hallam and Marshall point out, within the realms of social realism this is a common theme; "the individual's problems present a *for* society (how to educate, police, to contain, to treat) rather than being perceived as a problem caused *by* society" (Hallam & Marshment 2000 pp190). This is precisely what is at work within these three films. What is left is a working class fighting amongst themselves, and being encouraged to embrace attitudes held by their children who are not implicated by the ideologies of class. The British New Wave films fought the fight against the sterility of working class life, on occasion showed moments of resistance but ultimately lost. The working class is irreversibly damaged and only subsists.

Conclusion

“This business of the working class is on its way out I think”

(Margaret Thatcher)

Billy Elliot, *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, on the surface, purportedly challenge class divides; they supposedly show that anything is possible. They are laden with signs, dialects, activities, even actors that represent the working class, making them look and feel entirely authentic. However, although certain characters are constructed as managing to escape the working class, the films themselves *cannot* escape the fact that they depict a working class damaged by government policy and ultimately in crisis. In this dissertation I have argued that the desire to escape is constructed through the negative portrayal of the working class, which is ultimately shaped by the middle class gaze. What is shown in these films are a few working-class characters that escape but, significantly, the majority remain where they are. As a result, the films do little to challenge the hierarchical class structures in place. They thus remain sympathetic to the fantasies of the middle-class gaze. The only thing that could challenge this middle-class gaze would be wholesale change for the entire working class, removing them from the grim depictions that are shown in these three films. This therefore shows that, despite the rhetoric that these films are championing the working class and working-class talents, they actually remain focussed on determining what the working class ought to be *through* the gaze of the middle class.

When viewers see these negative portrayals of the working class, the transcoding that takes place ensures that negative representations of the working class become the accepted rhetoric in wider popular cultural discourse. This cyclic process of recognising negative representations

influence one another in a wider cultural discourse, until the widely accepted rhetoric is that the working class must be portrayed in a negative light and must be escaped. This ensures that the working class continue to have an inherent desire to escape their working-class background. This allows the middle class to remain in control of the working class as ultimately it is the middle class who allow limited numbers of the working class to escape the *constructed* doldrums of the working class. The middle class need the working class to want to not be where it is. The working class cannot be seen in any positive light, as anything but negative portrayals break this accepted discourse, and break the hierarchical power structures.

Such is the prevalence of this discourse, nobody is shocked to see the working class suffering, or a working-class community as the setting for the exploration of problematic or challenging themes; this has just become the norm. The widely accepted discourse, therefore, is that the working class is something that people need to escape. However, in a survey conducted by the BBC in 2013, just under half of the UK was described as being part of an, albeit changing, working class (Savage et al. 2013). Of course, the idea that half of the country is suffering such hardships that are portrayed in the three films studied in this dissertation is something that is hard to believe.

Therefore, the working class in these three films, far from being realist, gritty representations of the working class, are constructed representations of the working class, which are sympathetic to middle-class desires.

Brassed Off's political commentary is unashamedly promoted throughout the film. The dialogue between the characters and in different monologues throughout offer a damning verdict on the Conservative government's policies after the Great Miners' Strike of 1984. However, although the film overtly points the finger at these ruling powers it still uses the working class

as the vehicle through which to point out the government's failings. Of course, the policies directly affected the working class, but the ruling powers are effectively a silent enemy, rarely shown on screen, with the focus being on the negative portrayal of the working class. Similarly, *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot* show the impact of the socio-economic policy but never overtly apportion blame to the ruling governments. It is as though the problems shown on screen are primarily the fault of the working class, not the powers that rule them.

The Frost Report! sketch I drew upon in the introduction offers a snapshot of class in Britain. It gives a very simple overview of the hierarchical ideals that class needs to sustain, in particular the utterance from the working class character "who knows his place" at the bottom of the social pile. Although the sketch is primarily used for comedic effect, it offers an emblematic visual representation of the working class at the bottom of the social pile. Through the analysis of the three films, it is clear to see how the middle class maintain this power structure by inflicting portrayals of the working class to suit their desires, as opposed to the desires of the working class.

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Illustrations

Figure 1 *The Frost Report!* Available at http://static.guim.co.uk/sys-images/Guardian/Pix/maps_and_graphs/2010/1/26/1264528258206/Inequality-cleese-and-bar-002.jpg Accessed on 17th August 2013

Figure 2 Town Called Malice Sleeve Available at http://www.musicvf.com/wp/cache/img_song/25/JMGSong_74025.jpg Accessed on 19th July 2013

Figure 3 Brassed Off Poster Available at

<http://i2.lial.com/image/926030/600full-brassed-off-poster.jpg> Accessed on
17th August 2013

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