

La enseñanza de la clase social y de la política británicas a través de películas ambientadas durante el gobierno de Margaret Thatcher

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Resumen

Este documento pretende examinar tanto la representación cinematográfica de la situación psicosocial de las clases trabajadoras durante la legislatura de Margaret Thatcher como Primer Ministra del Reino Unido, como las consecuencias de su gobierno. Este análisis se centra en las películas "Bassed Off" y "The Full Monty", para reflejar la unidad del pueblo a través de la desesperación, así como la búsqueda de identidad, ambas comunes en la sociedad británica de los 90. La enseñanza de un período tan importante es esencial para promover una conciencia social e histórica en los alumnos, integrándolos en su aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: Representación, Cinematográfica, Margaret Thatcher, Gobierno, Clase trabajadora, Desesperación, Identidad, Enseñanza.

Title: The teaching of the British social class and politics through films set during and after the government of Margaret Thatcher.

Abstract

This paper aims to examine both the cinematic representation of the psychosocial situation of the working classes during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and its consequences in society. The analysis focuses on the movies 'Brassed Off' and 'The Full Monty' so as to reflect the unity through despair as well as the search for identity, which were common in the British society of the 90s. The teaching of such an important period in the world's history is paramount to raise cultural and historical awareness among students, integrating it in their learning.

Keywords: Reflection, Cinematic, Margaret Thatcher, Government, Working class, Despair, Identity, Teaching.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims at presenting the cinematic representation of English society taking the premiership of Margaret Thatcher as a pivotal point. The main concern is to observe how the lives and struggles of the working classes have been faithfully portrayed through the lens of social realism. This mode of representation in the arts is based on the accurate depiction of contemporary society with the specific intention of one part of the social strata, to reflect on the 'experiences of real Britons on the screen' (Armstrong, 2013). The term realism as a valid form of expression took force at the end of the nineteenth century and its paramount evolution within the cinema industry led to a wide range of sub-types to explore the lives of people in a realistic way. There has been extensive debate on the question of accuracy as new film makers have attempted to establish their own approaches, either renovating or discarding former conceptions.

Welsh academic Raymond Williams and Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci developed theories regarding cultural analysis and the vision of culture as a product and response to contemporary relations of power in every society, from which three key concepts stand out: structures of feeling, dominance and hegemony. This perspective shows cultural relationships as a 'site of struggle where competing ideologies constantly attempt to gain ground' (Lay, 2002:32). This basis serves to set the methodology employed in this article, which offers a close reading of each work, in order to observe common thematic features beyond the primary comment on each movie.

The filmography chosen for this paper follows a straightforward analysis based on specific areas, which encompasses the different dimensions of social realism. In doing so, readers will get better understanding of the influence of this current regardless of their previous knowledge. The influence of the social climate may adopt several features regarding specific parts of the social structure represented: politics, economy, structure and values. In the films analysed the focus is

placed on how the characters are influenced by the political debate and economic policies. As a matter of fact, 'taking risks', 'individuality', 'alienation', 'free enterprise', 'decadence' and 'Europe' are common features in the films. Then, the plot of each movie is partitioned in two major points: factors that explain change and those dealing with continuity, namely whether the approach from film makers takes previous considerations into account to construct the world of the film or foster new attitudes from scratch.

The historical context is intended as a framework for a social, political and cultural overview of the timeframe this essay takes, 1990s. Then, certain points are further analysed, namely Margaret Thatcher's legacy and how film makers Mark Herman and Peter Cattaneo captured the direct and indirect effects that the 80s and 90s had on the British society as a whole, focusing on how society was united by despair and on the search for identity characteristic at the time.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The socio-economic history of the United Kingdom after the WWII was divided in two political periods: the 'Age of Consensus' where UK bipartisanship scarcely differed in its policies (directed to the spread of the Welfare society); and a period where the counter-culture movements taking place in the late 1960s were developed both in social and political grounds. Under the premise of bringing freedom to the proletariat, liberal principles meant that States reduced its effective presence in many areas either by financial deregularization or tax cuts aimed at fostering private investment and encouraging a higher social mobility. Put briefly, the immense power of mining industry and trade unions in English economy caused trouble to Conservative Edward Heath's and Labour Harold Wilson's terms during the 1970s. The latter decreed the Three-Day Week due to electricity shortages from industrial massive strikes, while the former faced widespread uproars from the public sector, those known as the Winter of Discontent in 1978. The liberalizing agenda followed by both premierships reduced the traditional and economic influence of trade unions, and created an internal debate in leftist ideology. At the light of its results, such course of action reinforced the need for reforms. The state of the English economy from the early 1980s went 'back in business' after a mild recession, and experimented an enormous transformation on the eleven and a half years of Tory government, but not without controversy. England's 'working class revolutionary' – as Martin Durkin sees her (2013) - carried out a policy that was highly contested from those sectors that could not survive once privatized, mainly the heavy industries and the mining sector, and whose effects can be seen in the film *Brassed Off* (1996).

Post-war British society had to tackle a generational renewal from a baby-boom period and the waves of immigration after WWII. A younger, reactive and reformist population offered a vivid diversity on their way of living, fact aimed at being represented in the mass media society they had been born in. Whereas the spread of TV was thought to foster the downsides from this 'new commercial culture', the concerns in cinema looked at how to take a proper representation of the working classes in the arts -which in Lovell's account adduced still and unclear boundary between propagandistic/educational and aesthetic purposes found in former decades (1972).

The sociological, economic and political turmoil had an impact on cultural manifestations. On Adams account, 1956 became 'a prescriptive cultural marker of post-war British theatre' with the invigorating innovations present in the Free Cinema films and its influence towards the New Wave that would extend to the early 1960s (2007:75). In 1969, Ian Jarvie exposed the palpable changes in British cinema, with a contemporary view that is critical to the construct of reality each cinema movement does. At that time, he saw an issue about the vogue on "swinging London" films for television and the fight for social realism to be rational instead of sentimental. The new wave of directors seemed to have brought fresh air to open the scope in the representation, away from commercial constraints, to deal with a wider range of issues and techniques.

This time, authors took part and worked closely with directors in many creations that were meant either for big or small screens. Taking John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger" and following works from the directors Richardson or Schlesinger, British cinema was portraying the magnetism of the youth with a greater freedom of topics. Shafer based on this line of argument to recall the New Wave as the 'most celebrated expression of this approach' (2001: 8). The rest of films that adhere to the social realist cause and aesthetics, even if taking more complex grounds, can be analysed under the prism of this heterogeneous tradition that evolved 'on the sphere of the domestic and the family setting' in the 1990s (Lay, 2002:85).

3. FILM ANALYSIS

Social realism in the 1990s was the paramount purpose of film makers in that decade, which still attacked Margaret Thatcher's political onslaught in a country where the religion of the markets was implemented along with a new conception of self-made workforce. The cinema of the 1990s represents contemporary issues of the working classes and the change of perspective from the 80's hopelessness in *Brassed Off* and Mark Herman's incongruous comicality in *The Full Monty*.

3.1. UNITY THROUGH DESPAIR AND SEARCH FOR IDENTITY: BRASSED OFF, THE FULL MONTY.

Both films *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* represent the definite decline of the traditional working class (associated with manual work, community and attachment to a place), yet their different approaches frame the turning point that social realism underwent in the 1990s. Both fictions depict a pessimistic state of mind where the dialectic and ideological feud is finally lost, and have their characters coping with it the best way they can, together with a 'reorganized' economy that provides an undignified present and an uncertain future. Likewise, 1990s reality presented an uncertain future to the film industry too. Despite interweaving its boundaries with European films in terms of distribution and a certain success abroad, UK productions had only 23% of their own audience, while US films had 73% (Murphy, Todd et al. 2009: 22).

In this respect, film director Danny Boyle recalled how *Trainspotting* in 1996 and the release of *The Full Monty* a year later proved the general climate of change in UK to 'sweep away the Tory years' and the evolution in how the life of the Britons was represented, a change in perspective towards a more naturalistic approach together with more complex representations of male and female roles in the post-industrial society (Salomon, 2008). *Trainspotting* was based on Irvine Welsh's 1993 homonymous novel whose protagonists are young people that get messed up between hits; about a bunch of hopeless youngsters who first do not care and then have no choice but to escape their miserable lives for a boring, consumerist existence (O'Callaghan, 2016). However, Boyle's reinterpretation for the big screen did not follow the dominant current of hopeless social drama that had prevailed in the 1980s, but an alternative current in the arts that sought for comicality over misery or, at least, a non-self-blaming perspective to potential audiences about the problems of their own country. *Brassed Off* (1996) belongs to the former whereas *The Full Monty* (1997) takes the latter approach.

In Mark Herman's film, the neighbourhood of Grimley (Worcestershire) frames the action of miners whose source of livelihood is threatened, i.e. their coal pit. Along with their attempts to tackle the imminent closure, workers lose unity gradually in favour of individual desires that do not take community into account. *Brassed Off* channels anger and despair not in militancy but in the 'town's greatest source of pride, the Grimley Colliery Band, a brass ensemble that has won a number of nationwide competitions' (Holden, 1997:1). Since their economy is in its dead throes the other focal point is relied on music, because their attempts to tackle the situation seem doomed to failure from the beginning of the movie. Miners are divided to whether keeping an active fight or choosing a Voluntary Redundancy Scheme, and in the meantime the brass band director, Danny (Pete Postlethwaite) is determined to continue with the other activity that gather townfolks. In other words, he is determined to win the national band competition although he knows that their peers' commitment is as doubtful as the future of their coal pit. Furthermore, the general state of mind in the community worsens at individual situations from the rest of musicians. While characters Andy Barrow (Ewan McGregor) and Gloria receive a more superficial treatment regarding the main theme – they suffice the romantic comedy quota – , the character of Phil, Danny's son, goes through harsh times of solitude and poverty, even pushed to work as a clown for entertaining children. At one scene, what is supposed to be an innocent function at church to celebrate Christmas turns out to be a lament of his miseries:

'So God was creating Man, and his little assistant...said: "we've got all these bodies left... but we're right out of brains, we're right out of hearts...and we're right out of vocal chords". And God said: Sew 'em up anyway. Smack smiles on their faces and make them talk -And lo, God created the Tory party (Herman, 1995).

His resentment validates the continuity of films with a direct critique to Thatcherite years, together with the last symbolic scene, where the band plays "Land of Hope and Glory" with a solemn expression and in 'transit in the carnivalesque world of London's nightlife' (Murphy, 2009: 95). In the meantime, the spectator has seen how the political decision of closing the pit was made two years prior to the situation depicted in the movie. This also inflicts an implicit negative comment towards the state of the trade unions on taking any actions aimed at changing the status quo - the vast majority of miners choose Voluntary Redundancy Scheme-. Lockett understands that the end of the events follows the logic of 'the Lottery, of a miraculous wealth derived as divine retribution for unfair struggles' (2009:96). They achieve a

sort of bittersweet moment of happiness in front of a standing audience at the Albert Hall Theatre for their music performance, they have won the competition. This acknowledgement allows them to speak out about the “industries, communities and families that have been systematically destroyed, all in the name of progress” (Herman, 1995). Once they have lost the main activity that defined them the general declining row explores alternative ways of recovery, moral at the very least. Therefore, the cast of characters have not been entirely alienated by the adverse circumstances, so their attributed historic sense of community is not lost.

Brassed Off has an overall call for resilience, a concept that regains importance at times of adversity which involves the capacity of adapting to change even if that evolution does not have a clear positive outcome. Along with this line of argument, recovery among general decline is explored in Peter Cattaneo’s *The Full Monty* as well. Again, there is a negative film message on how the development of economic competitiveness entails undoing social progress. As John Hill notes, ‘it is also community spirit upon which the film places most value’ and like the symbolic pride achieved in *Brassed Off*, ‘they are seen to need the support and self-respect that participation in the group provides’ (Murphy, 2009: 183).

The outcome is nonetheless the restoration of their dignity. The film opening scene is a depiction of what Sheffield used to be, the city of steel that provided employment, encouraged urban development and where citizens could enjoy themselves at a lively nightlife or at crowd department stores, a ‘city on the move’, the voice-over commentator recites. Next scene shows the same scenario 25 years later, this time as a space for two adults and a boy for stealing a metal rod. The once busy factory presents the characters of Gaz, his sons Nathan and Dave, male unemployed workers who try their best to make ends meet. In a routine walk to the hills of Sheffield they catch sight of Lamper’s suicidal attempt, to whom they offer empathy for his situation. There is another person they will come across before planning the idea of the striptease, that of Gerald. This middle-aged married man is the only character from a superior position, as a redundant foreman that took control of the other’s activities at the factory. Gaz faces issues over custody for his son, Danny seems to have given up on everything – according to his wife – and Gerald’s pride makes him hide his labour state to his partner. It is in this common atmosphere of tight budget and futile job seeking when the idea of performing a striptease dance in the style of the Chippendale Boys at the night club comes up. In spite of an initial reluctance, the plan is finally agreed and they decide to settle a selection process to gather the rest of the crew. At last, the characters of Horse and Guy join the project.

Paradoxically, the film’s narrative entails in its evolution three values required to prosper in venture capitalism: the need of creativity and new ideas to move on once unemployed; perseverance until an objective is reached (a decent choreography); and dare to take risks (Sánchez-Escuer). Once these steps are accomplished, it is an unexpected hype – they gain notoriety after police detention for improper behaviour-, what turns an initial crazy, desperate and pathetic idea into a successful show for Sheffield citizens.

This feature film achieved a remarkable commercial success – 80% of its box office was from foreign audiences - and gained an important analysis regarding the reverse of male and female roles (Murphy, 2009). The book *British Cinema and Thatcherism* explores, among many other issues, how women were affected by liberal politics and such representation in cinema, the importance of industrial reconversion into the loss of minor manufacturing jobs and new representations on active female characters (Friedman, 2006). A decade later the research of several authors in analysing the state of British cinema in the 1990s deepened the constructions and ‘narrative that film makers had done in the new masculine representations’ envisaged in that decade. Monk suggests that new narratives for women widened in the 1990s in TV series rather than cinema, where the ‘transition’ grew slower. In this context, Hill contends that ‘in focusing on industrial decay in the north of England the 1980s and 1990s films suggests the crisis in masculinity associated with the collapse of traditional roles of the wage-earner that sustained a sense of masculinity’ (Murphy, 2009:179). *The Full Monty* does so in putting male strippers to issues on their bodies, on looking good for their performance in front of an entire feminine audience and the problems of self-confidence brought by the situation.

As a matter of fact, Dave is unable to intimate with his wife and Gerald’s house serves as a fun experimentation of characters into beauty treatments while talking on their own bodies with honesty. Brandson goes along to point out Gaz’s discovery that ‘the working-men’s club is being used as a male-stripping venue for female audiences that provides the film’s initial narrative trigger’ (Murphy, 2009:161), especially when witnessing a bunch of women that use the men’s bathroom and talk on their eagerness for physical contact. Lay takes Hill’s and Monk’s analysis to conclude that the end of this film has an incoherent feel-good mood for men regaining their space but ‘in return for their re-masculinisation they have commodified themselves’ (2002:105). In other words, the political measures have made way to an evolution in the working class, placing the importance of this social group on their consumption patterns rather than on what they

produce. The consumerist behaviour is very present in Gerald's house, where a community of men interacts according to this new reality: characters are interested and some are frightened by beauty treatments.

In sum, the exploration of gender and its deep effects in mapping out a new conception in the working-class context imply a clear factor for change in the 1990s and an overall change in labour and social culture. In the case of *Brassed Off*, Gloria Mullins interacts as a foreigner and as the only woman that joins the music band. Her role as an outsider may be seen from the perspective of a middle-class character that was raised in Grimley but comes back as part of the managing personnel at the pit, in charge of an economic feasibility study that is ignored from her superiors. Regarding *The Full Monty*, men use job centres as an alternative space for gathering, since they know the liberal mentality of self-made workforce does not count on effective measures for them to get back in the labour market.

4. CONCLUSION

The analyses of a selected number of films that adhere to the social realist method show an overall disapproval to the state of English society after the premiership of Margaret Thatcher. Most themes discussed emanate from an adverse social climate where unemployment and uncertainty act as the two essential points of tension. The two movies analysed, *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, pay attention to the demise of the traditional notion of the working classes, with a hopeless perspective, dramatic and comical, and a clear message for resilience among those who may identify with the struggles of industrial workers in a post-industrial society. In social realism, the process of communication between the government and the governed has been subject to issues regarding pressures for commercial success, the pursuit of a creative method with educational purposes and the high degree of verisimilitude expected. It is social realism which contributes in terms of artistic form in this cinematic mode of representation. The role of intellectuals like Grierson in the documentary movement in the 1930s, the treatment of youth alienation in the 1950s and 1960s and its apparent juxtaposition with naturalism in the 1990s are a few examples.

The issues presented here are extremely important to include in the English teaching classroom, since they are an important part of the British history and culture and which, in addition, had a weighty influence in the rest of the world's history. The teaching through movies is proved to increase the interest and motivation of students, and it favours the development of a wide range of activities dealing with the four skills, and the use of ICT, all of which are emphasised by the law.

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