NORTHERN REALISM An Exhausted Tradition?

by Paul Marris

Two of the most noted British films in the last five years have been *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) and *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000). Both were commercially successful domestically and internationally, and have garnered a fair measure of nominations and awards from the industry's professional academies in America and Britain. Both the films also have in common a setting in the North of England—*The Full Monty* in the devastated industrial landscape of Sheffield following the defeated strike and successful plant closures in the steel industry in the 1980s, and *Billy Elliot* in the pit village of Easington at the time of the 1984-5 mineworkers' strike. In their themes and settings they join a deeply rooted tradition in British audiovisual culture, which has been dubbed 'northern realism.' Bob Millington has described northern realism as "an influential *generic trend* in British fiction that extends across print and screen media" that provides "a space for the exploration of working class life" (see George W. Brandt, ed., *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, 1993). This tradition can be traced as far back as the mid-nineteenth-century writer Elizabeth Gaskell and, in particular, her two novels set in Lancashire, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848) and *North and South* (1855). These announced many of the themes and approaches that have underpinned the representation of the North up to the present: a documentary interest in life in the industrial urban districts; a realism which is in tension with melodramatic devices; the incorporation of elements of demotic speech; a continuing association between northerness and the industrial working class; a portrayal from a vantage point that is not wholly within; and a sense that a diagnosis of the condition of the North holds some kind of key to grasping the 'state of the nation.'

The North was the portion of England where the industrial revolution was born and had its greatest direct effects on the landscape and social structure. Gaskell's novels were at the forefront of the exploration in culture of the nature and meaning of these changes for the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, following the First World War, British heavy industry and extractive trades went into decline, and the impact within England was felt most keenly in the North and vigorously explored in 1930s culture. The work of writers (such as Walter Greenwood's 1933 novel *Love on the Dole* and George Orwell's 1937 reportage in *The Road to Wigan Pier)* and visual artists (L.S. Lowry, Humphrey Spender, William Coldstream) developed a persistent set of themes and iconography for imaging the North. This reached the cinema screen at the end of the decade in Humphrey Jennings's *Spare Time* (1939), Carol Reed's *The Stars Look Down* (1939), and John Baxter's version of *Love on the Dole* (1941).

An image of the North was also central to many of the films of the celebrated British 'New Wave' of 1959-63: in Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top* (1959, locations in Bradford), Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960, Nottingham), Tony Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961, Salford), Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (1963, Wakefield), John Schlesinger's *A Kind of Loving* (1962, Stockport), and *Billy Liar* (1963, Leeds). These films were participants in the public conversation of the late 1950s/early 1960s on the implications for working-class culture and community of rising living standards, new patterns of housing and the spread of mass communications, and of their consequences for democratic politics. The state of mind of their young, mostly male, working-class protagonists seemed to capture a malaise in the welfare state and, once again, consideration of the 'state of the nation' was refracted through representations of the North.

The rising economic pressures of the late 1960s and the 1970s led to attempts to curb wage rises and discipline labor organizations, which in turn generated industrial conflict in the North of England, in the coal fields, the steel plants, the shipyards and on the docks.

In *Business as Usual* (1987), a trade unionist fights to get reinstated in her job after filing a sexual harrassment complaint.

The producer-director team of Tony Garnett and Ken Loach, working with northern writers such as Jim Allen and Barry Hines, produced some of the most noted works of northern realism in response to this crisis. *The Big Flame* (1969, d. Ken Loach, sc. Jim Allen) presciently imagined a workers' occupation of the Liverpool docks and its defeat by the army and the police. *The Rank and File* (d. Ken Loach, sc. Jim Allen, 1971) dramatized the events of a glass-workers' strike in St. Helen's. *The Price of Coal* (d. Ken Loach, sc. Barry Hines, 1977) contrasted official preparations for a royal visit to a colliery to the experiences of the working miners. *United Kingdom* (d. Roland Joffe, sc. Jim Allen, 1981) depicted a massive rent strike on a council estate in the northeast. In marked contrast to the 'New Wave' films, these television dramas were preoccupied with the workplace or the community as a social space, and focused less on desire for individual escape than collective amelioration. Though arguably still masculinist, they were strongly collectivist in philosophy.

In 1979 the Thatcher government was elected on an anticollectivist program of economic neoliberalism and social discipline that was to bring devastation to the North over the course of the 1980s. In England the North became seen as an 'enemy within' (a phrase actually coined to describe the National Union of Mineworkers). This, in turn, became the raw material for northern-realist films of the 1980s. As John Hill suggests:

> *What is novel about these films...is the emphasis that is placed upon urban and industrial decline. It is a north now blighted by unemployment and poverty and that stands testimony to the corrosive effects wrought by the 'two nations' policy of the Thatcher regime. Inevitably, the imagery associated with the north has also altered. The iconography of rows of small terraced houses and cobbled streets characteristic of 1960s realism has given way to run-down housing estates with boarded-up windows* (British Cinema in the 1980s, *1999).*

Two additional developments are apparent. The first is that, in contrast to the 'New Wave' work, several of the films put women rather than men at the center. *Letter to Brezhnev* (Chris Bernard, 1985) tells of two young Liverpudlians, Elaine and Tracy, who take pleasure not in their work but in the nocturnal life of drinking and

The imaginative efforts of unemployed Sheffield steel-mill workers to make some money by mounting a male strip-tease show is the subject of Peter Cattaneo's hit comedy, *The Full Monty* (photo by Tom Hilton).

pickups in the pubs and clubs—like Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* but with far less hint of moral reservation. So low is the standing of living in the North, that emigration to the Soviet Union is preferable, and Elaine applies to Brezhnev for permission to marry a Russian sailor. In *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (Alan Clarke, 1986), set on Bradford's notorious run-down Buttershaw estate, there is a refusal of any moral judgement on the sexual appetites of the two eponymous girls, whose friendship and *joie de vivre* defies the social conditions they inhabit. *Business as Usual* (Lezli-An Barrett, 1987) recounts the story of a more 'respectable' working-class woman, a trade unionist who has to fight for reinstatement to her shop job in Liverpool after being sacked following a sexual harassment complaint. In its depiction of the clothing retail industry, the new entrepreneurial-designer culture of the southern-based Thatcherite economy is contrasted with the social realities of life in the North.

The other major development was the emergence of a preparedness to innovate within the esthetic of northern realism. In *Boys from the Blackstuff* (Philip Saville, 1982), a set of five television plays set in Liverpool about a group of workers negotiating unemployment, the benefits system, poverty and the 'black' economy, the dramatic events and the spoken language switch with dazzling virtuosity from tragic irony to grotesque comedy and back again. The incidents are like Brechtian 'gests,' vividly condensing social contradictions. Updating the 1933 cry of "O God, send me some work!" from *Love on the Dole,* the ubiquity of the catch-phrase "Gizza job!" in 1982 was a confirmation of the widespread popular resonance of a series that found new and telling ways to dramatize the predicament of working-class northerners.

This esthetic innovation was also evident in other work. *Road* (Alan Clarke, 1987), shot in the broken-down pit village of Easington, used lengthy Steadicam takes in tour-de-force stagings of the heartrending monologues and dialogs of its four dispossessed young characters. It culminated in an unforgettable crescendo of repeated chanting by the four, expressing the force of their sheer desire to escape their life situation. Another work scripted by Jim Cartwright, the feature film *Vroom* (Beeban Kidron, 1988), draws on the traditions of northern realism in its tale of a working-class lad on the dole who is seeking to escape, but through its stylization the film distances itself from them, as if critiquing their adequacy for representation of the contemporary North. Arguably, these works represented a 'postmodernization' of northern realism, insofar as recognized conventions of representation were consciously mobilized for the viewer, and then critiqued, developed, played upon. But if this is so, it was a progressive rather than a decadent postmodernization, employed for savage social critique, not artful abdication. The films were working 'in and against' the representational tradition of northern realism.

In contrast, *The Full Monty* and *Billy Elliot* seem to constitute a retrenchment. Both films explore the crisis of masculinity in a postindustrial period; indeed, they effectively cast the crisis of postindustrialism as the crisis of masculinity. In both films the display of the male body offers a new occupation—stripping in *The Full Monty* in which the unemployed men form a troupe, and ballet dancing for Billy Elliot. Branches of the entertainment industry become the new sources of employment. A similar direction is proposed in *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) in which success as a brass band substitutes for the loss of pit jobs for its protagonists. The emotional center of these films lies in male friendship, and this is bought at the narrative expense of women—Gaz's ex-wife is a hate figure in *The Full Monty, Brassed Off* is strongly misogynist, and Billy's mother is simply an idealized ghost in his story, since she has died before the story opens, expelled from the narrative. The films are also mindful to distinguish male friendship and entertainment occupations from gayness: two of *The Full Monty* troupe do fall in love but in this they are marked off from the other four; Billy's best friend Michael is beginning to come out at twelve, but Billy makes plain that this choice is not for him, whilst not eschewing the friendship.

The Full Monty and *Brassed Off* have been aptly labeled as "delayed 1980s" films by John Hill. They refer back from the mid-Nineties to the deindustrializing moment of the Thatcher period. They can also be seen as

A love of dance is seen as the road out of poverty and prejudice for the young hero of Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot* (2000) (photo by Giles Keyte, courtesy of Photofest).

'Ealing in the North' pieces, comedy dramas in which a selection of the put-upon bond together to battle adversity. *Billy Elliot* is a more individualist version, a personal road-to-success story. (Although it should be acknowledged that the narrative pivots on the group resolution of Billy's father's crisis of manhood—should he be a bad 'marrer' and scab, so that he can be a good father and raise the crucial money Billy needs to get to the audition, or vice versa? Collective generosity means his mates both stop him entering the pit and also raise the necessary money at a benefit party.) These are good-hearted films (at least, about men), which contribute to a general cultural assimilation of the experience of the North in the 1980s, but they can afford their retrospective feel-good humor and warmth, because the battles have been fought and the hard choices made. Their visibility prompts the question of whether northern realism is an 'exhausted tradition.' This is not in the sense of its cessation as a tradition of representation: these recent films are evidence of its continuing persistence in British audiovisual culture. Rather, it is in the sense of whether it has dwindled into a decadent mannerism that no longer permits the North and the 'state of the nation' to be addressed with freshness, vigor, and insight. Can northern realist work now only look backwards (in both senses)?

Other recent work suggests this is not necessarily so. In 1996, BBC 2 broadcast a television serial, *Our Friends in the North* (Simon Cellan Jones, Pedr James, Stuart Urban), consisting of nine episodes lasting eleven hours, which told the story of the interwoven lives of four characters from Newcastle-upon-Tyne from the age of eighteen in 1964. Each episode was set in a specific year, most of which constituted major conjunctures in contemporary British history—six of them were General Election years. The four characters represented a variety of trajectories open to northern working-class youngsters setting out into adulthood in the mid-1960s: Nicky, who goes away to university; Mary who remains due to an early pregnancy but through study and commitment becomes a local Labour politician; Geordie, a drifter who falls into poverty and homelessness; and Tosker, the small businessman who becomes captivated by the Thatcher revolution. This is a national history, told from the standpoint of a northern working-class generation. Through Nicky and Mary, the spectrum of left-wing politics over the period is explored: the 1964 optimism over the election of Wilson after thirteen years of Tory rule; the rapid disillusionment; the adoption of 'Angry Brigade'-style armed struggle; anarcho-syndicalist agitation versus Independent Labour electioneering; Labour Party entryism; left Labour local government; and unity around the 1984-5 miners' strike. Through thinly disguised dramatizations of real historical events within Tyneside local government and in London's Metropolitan police force, and the corresponding complicity of parliamentarians, a vivid sense of the sheer corruption of the British political establishment is created. Here, South and North do not function as oppositions so much as apex and base of a single rotten structure.

In some ways this magnificent work is like Zola in its historical and social breadth, and strong sense of 'environmental' determinism. In the moment of its intervention—1996, on the eve of what was to prove Blair's New Labour victory at the 1997 general election—it can be seen as a kind of audit of the left experience of the previous thirty-odd years that made up the period of political consciousness of Blair and many of those who were to become his MPs and ministers. Michael Jackson, then controller of BBC 2, explained why he had commissioned it:

> *I wanted to do the serial because it is so pertinent, with an election coming up and another new Labour Party making promises. The parallels are so much there with 1964. There had been 13 years of a Tory administration and a youthful Labour leader in Harold Wilson. Now it is 16 years of Tories and Blair with his New Labour.* (The Observer, *December 31, 1995*).

Overall, the audit seems to conclude that political struggle is fruitless. The predominant feeling at the end of this long drama is that truly rewarding satisfactions are to be found elsewhere—in lasting friendships, in parent-child relationships, in the possibility of loving companionship. In an interview the writer Peter Flannery confirms this reading:

> *[W]hen I started writing it, I was a 29-year old angry playwright who thought he had all the answers. Now I'm a 44-year old who isn't even sure he has the questions ... I've matured as a writer and now I'm as interested in the people as I am in the politics* (The Daily Telegraph, *January 9, 1996*).

Economically struggling Yorkshire mine workers enjoy themselves by making music in a brass band in Mark Herman's *Brassed Off* (1997) (photo by Sophie Baker, courtesy of Photofest).

The culmination of this long generational odyssey through politics and history can perhaps now be read as a welcoming, almost wearisome, acceptance of New Labour's conservative social democracy, because less seems at stake in politics altogether. The struggles of British labor, and Labour, since the 1960s have been reviewed, and something of the mood of the (temporary) political settlement that was crystallized in the 1997 general election is anticipated at the drama's close.

An illuminating comparison of *Billy Elliot* and *Our Friends in the North* can be made through contrasting their scenes representing police assaults on northeast pit villages in 1984. In *Our Friends in the North* the scene is patiently built: the strikers at the gate restlessly waiting; the police on stand-by drafted from the southern London Metropolitan service commanded by a contemptuous inspector; the call-away of other local miners and supporters from the benefit party in Newcastle civic centre; the police detainment of their coach outside the village; the police mockery of the miners by waving money at them through the windows; the forcing through of a vanload of scabs at the gate; the spilled-over frustration of the picketers leading to the stoning of the nearby terraced houses of the scabs; the calculated charge of the police with their riot shields; the hand-to-hand combat in the cramped gardens; the excessive blows of the police truncheons against the unarmed miners; the shocked reactions of the locally-based police officers; the police determination to prevent any photography; the aftermath of arrests and trumped-up charges.

Chris Bisson, Archie Panjabi and Jimi Mistry star as children of a mixed-race marriage who live in Salford in *East is East* (1999).

In contrast, the *Billy Elliot* scene focuses on Billy's brother Tony tearing through the small houses to escape the police, grabbing refreshments as he goes, aided by willing widows, all set to the adrenalin-pounding soundtrack of The Clash's aptly entitled "London Calling." As Billy rounds a corner he sees the massed ranks of riot police. Tony emerges from one terraced yard too many, and is truncheoned to the ground by mounted police. The *Billy Elliot* version gives identification and excitement, but essentially functions in the narrative as a manifestation of adult irrationality, justifying Billy's drive to get out, get on, get away from all this. In contrast, the *Our Friends in the North* version fulfils the properly realist function for the viewer of developing social knowledge.

Another recent feature film works interestingly within the northern-realist tradition. *East is East* (Damien O'Donnell, 1999) is a comedy-drama about a large family of six brothers and one sister growing up in Salford. They are the fruit of a mixed marriage between a local white woman and a Muslim immigrant from Pakistan. As each child in turn reaches majority they resist their father's impulse to arrange marriage partners for them, whilst their mother feels torn loyalties. The sons' new versions of masculinity are pitted against their father's religious patriarchy—Nazir's running away to come out and open a millinery boutique, Tariq's secret life as a would-be disco stud, Saleem's mysterious art-school sculpture project that turns out to be a pink model of female pudenda, which he claims as a symbolic blow against women's exploitation. The film draws on markers of northern realism—the cramped dwellings, the vigorous children's street life, the fish and chip shop, the northern speech patterns, the 'fag ash Lil' neighbor, the breakfast of chocolate biscuits. The credit sequence sets the scene, as the rest of the family deceive the father by exploiting the very specific geography of the back-to-back terraces, shown in overhead crane shots. The film is set in 1971, which is marked by TV clips—whilst the father is anxious to follow the progress of the India-Pakistan hostilities, the children are more interested in the cult show *The Clangers*. On the streets, the Powellite neighbor campaigns for compulsory repatriation, but his son is eager to be friends with Sajid. *East is East* draws on the vocabulary of northern realism, but its retrospective look is not conservative, sentimental, or nostalgic: it introduces a new inflection to the portrait of the North, which acknowledges the social experience of ethnic intermixing. The significance of this was underscored again as racial violence broke out in Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford in the summer of 2001.

Northern realism persists as one of the strongest traditions of representation in British audiovisual culture. It is a cross-generic trend, and is found in both film and television drama (from soap opera to sitcom). Northern realism can be inflected comically towards the safe and almost complacent (as in the feature films *Up 'n' Under* [John Godber, 1997] and *Purely Belter* [Mark Herman, 2000] or towards the savage and unsettling (*GBH* [Robert Young, 1991]). It can also involve people in the telling of their own stories, as with *Dockers* (1999), on which dockers locked out by the Mersey Dock & Harbour Company and their families collaborated with writers Jimmy McGovern and Irvine Welsh on a scripted account of their dispute, or in *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999) and *Tina Takes a Break* (2001), for which director Penny Woolcock cast residents of a Leeds council estate to enact stories drawn from their lives.

The question of renewal is a key one. Since the nineteenth century, 'realisms' have shared the objective of portraying social life within the compass of 'ordinary' people, not the exalted, the rich, the glamorous, the famous or the exotic. This is the sense in which we can talk about a continuing tradition of northern 'realism.' But classically, 'realisms' are perceived as 'realistic' at the moment of their introduction. That is to say, in contrast to previously established artistic conventions, they are received as giving a more convincing and contemporarily relevant account of the social, offering new insights that speak to their times. Realism should not be taken as a fixed formal recipe. If so, it atrophies: over time, the formerly perceptive becomes routine and conventionalized and is no longer adequate to the changing situation. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, The Big Flame, Boys from the Blackstuff, Road, Our Friends in the North,* and *East is East* can be seen here as examples of renewal; *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot* as conventionalized instances within the tradition, backward-looking and conservative. Northern realism needs to remake itself as newly 'realistic,' and its best practitioners have been able to do so each decade since the 1960s.

The contemporary North of England cries out for economic and social renewal. Film- and program-makers can choose to participate in this, searching to express new perceptions, new insights, new understandings, new contestations, as part of the collective push for a new North. Expanded opportunities for the North to represent itself on the screen over the coming years are likely to arise from the new Film Council's attention to the need for regional filmmaking, and the BBC and Channel Four's institutional quotas for program production in the regions. An understanding of the rich history of the screen representation of the North is a valuable preparation for meeting these opportunities: for any new imaging of the North will be developed 'in and against' the persisting tradition of northern realism. ■