Villains, Victims and Violence: Mediating Discourses of Crisis and Damage in Nineties British Cinema

Narratives of crisis and disempowerment are manifested around a perceived loss of social and economic role for working class men and became a cornerstone of British cinema in the nineties. Indeed many of the films that I have explored in the thesis thus far have explicitly engaged with, and in some contexts disputed, the idea that nineties men were 'in crisis'. Invariably there is an explicit connection between post-industrialisation and male violence/abuse. *The Full Monty*, for example, foregrounds the idea of a crisis of masculinity which has been bought about as a result of post-industrialisation and the association of feminism and increased female empowerment as intertwined with a decline in male social and economic power.[1] In this respect, the representation of masculinity is inextricable from the ways in which the film understands gender politics more widely. The ideas that are articulated with regards masculinity are informed by and necessarily related to those around femininity. The film posits a direct and causal link between male disempowerment and female empowerment and this is most evident in the ways in which Gaz's estranged wife is portrayed for example and I return to this later in the chapter . Overall the film is infused by antipathy towards feminism and this impacts on ways that both male and female characters are constructed by the narrative. There are several instances in the film where male characters appear to be suffering both as a result of the decline in traditional male industries, society's changing ideas about gender roles and the shifting balance of power between men and women that this precipitated. This is evidenced at

[1] Whelehan, I. (2000). p.114.

the outset of the film by the 'women only' Chippendale's night at the working men's club; not only are the women literally taking over a space which was once the exclusive preserve of men, the reversal of roles is underscored by the dependency of the men upon their breadwinner wives. This newly acquired economic autonomy is seen to accord the women a greater level of social independence and privilege, consolidating the impression that traditional familial and social arrangements have been inverted and contributing to a discursive construction of gender that posits female empowerment as intrinsically related to declining male privilege.[2] When, for example, Gaz enquires why Dave did not prevent his wife from attending the event, Dave is forced to admit that his wife's employment confers on her breadwinner status and thus she has not only the economic means for independence but is also the more powerful partner in the relationship. His embarrassed explanation that 'it's her money innit? She can do what she likes,' carries a resentful undertone and demonstrates the damaging effects of this situation not only for Dave but for unemployed working class men more generally. Once more Farrell's arguments about social death that I referred to previously are prescient;[3] Dave, Gerald, Lomper and the other male characters can all be understood in this way. The reduction in social and economic power that Dave is subjected to has far reaching ramifications; he suffers from impotence and throughout the film his low self esteem and pre-occupation with weight are deployed as evidence

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[2] Whelehan, I. (2000). p.114.
[3] Farrell, K. (1998). p.11.

of the emasculatory effects of his disempowered position.[4] Thus the film makes a connection, both ludic and poignant, between employment and sexual surety. That the problems faced by the male characters are continually connected back to feminism (and by implication, women) renders the politics of the film problematic.

Thus from very early on *The Full Monty* suggests that the crisis in masculinity has been brought about by wide ranging changes in gender roles. The concomitant impact of these shifts on the balance of power relations between men and women is defined as being overwhelmingly detrimental to men. Anxieties about the negative impact of these changing gender roles on men is a central concern of the film and is rendered explicit with Gaz's prediction that men are becoming expendable; he warns his friends that men are fast becoming obsolete, proclaiming that 'we are heading the same way as the dinosaurs...extincto!' Similarly the narratives of both *Brassed Off* and *TwentyFourSeven* are predicated on the psychological impact that changing social and economic structures has had upon industrial working class men and the communities in which they live; in *Brassed Off* Phil is driven to the brink of suicide as a result of impending unemployment, crippling financial debt and the breakdown of his family, while Meadows' debut film concentrates upon the ways in which young working class men in particular have borne the brunt of the declining traditional industries and a lack

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[4] The comedy that comes out of Dave's body issues relies directly upon an association of body image issues with women. The film knowingly plays upon this association in a number of scenes; Dave is reluctant to get undressed in front of his friends for fear of ridicule, he is seen reading women's magazines and is also shown comfort eating while wrapped in cling film in an attempt to lose weight. The latter of these scenes takes place in the shed where the incongruous juxtaposition of the masculine and feminine forms the basis of the comedic intention.

of educational opportunity. [5] Both the young male characters and the fathers in

TwentyFourSeven and the men in *Brassed Off* are explicitly presented as *victims* of

economic and social changes that have left them powerless and hopeless, apparently

destined to remain trapped by poverty and circumstance. Thus discourses of

disempowerment and alienation are generationally specific as the previous chapter

showed. Given the pervasive discourse of masculinity as 'in crisis' it is not surprising

that cinematic constructions of male characters as being damaged should gain

increasing prominence during the period. The figure of the male as victim is, I argue

here, a central and recurrent trope of nineties British cinema.

This chapter focuses on the ways in which British cinema negotiated the more violent

manifestations of crisis during the nineties; although, as I have already shown, a large

number of films were informed by the idea of a crisis in masculinity, my particular

focus in this chapter will be on the more extreme configurations of crises affecting

male characters who are perhaps appropriately described by Andrew Spicer as

'damaged'.[6] Spicer contends that, despite the fact that 'one of the most striking

features of masculinity in contemporary British cinema is its heterogeneity and

hybridity,'[7] it was the figure of the damaged man who was 'so frequent in recent

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[5] These films rely upon very specific articulations of regional identity in order to make the claims of crisis make sense. Being set in Sheffield means that *The Full Monty* is contextualised by the now defunct steel industry; *Brassed Off* was set in Yorkshire and thus reflected upon the ways in which the collapse of the coal mining industry impacted upon men.
[6] Spicer, A. (2003). p.p.195-8.
[7] Spicer, A. (2003). p.184.

British cinema that it could be said he has become its most representative image.'[8] My

focus on these more violent manifestations of crisis and damage mean that the case

studies for this chapter are drawn from some of the more contentious and complex

films from the decade, as it is within these films that the violent, damaged male

characters are most often found. A key objective of this chapter is to contextualise the

recurrent tropes of damaged masculinity within the wider cultural discourses of crisis

and to explore the ways in which these representations can function, as Tania Modleski

suggests, to consolidate patriarchal power through an appropriation of victimhood.[9]

Positioning men as victims of social and economic change is a recurrent theme in

nineties British cinema. *TwentyFourSeven*, *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off,* and *My Name*

is Joe are among the films that suggest that by the end of the twentieth century men

have been victimised and disempowered by the shifting patterns of employment and

lifestyle changes brought about by the emergence of a post-industrial economy and

second wave feminism respectively. Invoking notions of victimisation means that many

of these films are engaged in an ongoing repudiation of the egalitarian impetus of

second wave feminism that Modleski sees as central to the emergence of post-feminist

culture; furthermore, positioning the male characters as victims enables a number of

these films to articulate an anti-feminist agenda quite explicitly. The narrative function

of victimhood in the films that I focus on in this chapter further suggests how socio-

economic factors have impacted upon male characters, rendering them disempowered

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[8] Spicer, A. (2003). p.195.
[9] Modleski, T. (1991). p.7.

and alienated from society. Where violent male characters are concerned, the implications of victimhood can be deployed in such a way that destabilises straightforward interpretations of them and their actions; many of these men have lost their social and economic power. Consequently the only form of power that remains accessible to them is the physical. Many of these male characters are represented as using violence in an attempt to bolster the power that they can no longer lay claim to elsewhere. While this is obviously problematic it is, as Lisa Coulthard points out, counterproductive to attempt to understand these male characters within a dichotomous framework of agent and victim.[10] Coulthard suggests that feminist investigations into cinematic representations of violence need to 'take account of the ambivalence, complexity, and disruptive and consoling dimensions' that are deployed in the creation of violent characters.[11] The fact that the films in this chapter actively create tension between the ways in which the damaged male characters are perpetrators of violence yet also simultaneously victimised and disempowered demands a nuanced response that negotiates these contradictory components.

Many of the films explored in this chapter present central male characters, such as Raymond (Ray Winstone) in *Nil By Mouth*, as both disempowered victim of post-industrialisation *and* violent abuser and in many ways these films connect with others that posit a direct link between post-industrialisation and cultural emasculation that

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[10] Coulthard, L. (2007). 'Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence' in Tasker, Y. & Negra, D. (eds.) *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (London: Duke University Press). p. 154.
[11] Coulthard, L. (2007). p.156.

becomes expressed via narrative or character misogyny. Thus the case studies I have

selected for this chapter present a range of male characters that are deliberately

paradoxical and ambiguous, eluding the more straightforward reading that can be

applied to films such as *The Full Monty*. The claims to dispossession and

disempowerment that became a key trope for underclass male characters in comedy

dramas such as *Brassed Off* remain a central component in the construction of

damaged male characters. However, as the case studies explored in this chapter

suggest, this cultural context of disempowerment is deployed in a way that creates

ambivalence and uncertainty with regards to the male characters rather than evoking

straightforward nostalgia or empathy as is the case in the films analysed previously.

What makes the protagonists of films such as *Nil By Mouth* or *Naked* distinct from the

more mainstream manifestations of disempowered male characters is that their

victimhood (of violence or social change) becomes juxtaposed with their actions as

perpetrator of abuse and violence against others. The first section of this chapter offers

a more detailed investigation of the terms crisis and damage, exploring how the terms

relate to each other. In addition this section situates the figure of the damaged man

within a cinematic and historical context and explores why such configurations of

masculinity were resurgent in films from the nineties; this also demonstrates how the

figure of the damaged man can be seen as responding to an historically specific set of

circumstances pertaining to a perceived reduction in male social and economic power.

The case study sections of the chapter are arranged around two broad areas, the first

of which examines the links between damage and dysfunction and the paradoxical

construction of damaged male characters in *Naked* and *A Room for Romeo Brass.* The

second section is a more focused study of *Nil By Mouth* and the ways in which this film

portrays the violence of Raymond's character while simultaneously positioning him as

disempowered and victimised.

Discourses of Crisis and Damage

As we have already seen, the idea of a crisis of masculinity proved to be one of the

most pervasive discourses in the late-twentieth century particularly in relation to

working and underclass men. The nineties crisis of masculinity is discursively

constructed in such a way that it centralises the changing economic status of men and

the concomitant loss of the breadwinner role, thus effectively suggesting a causal link

between social class and experiences of disempowerment, the very things that endow

underclass status.[12] Indeed the definition of underclass that relies upon long term

unemployment and economic disempowerment is intertwined with the concept of

masculinity being in crisis at a number of junctures. Despite being evidenced by

apparently obvious social and economic factors, cinematic claims that men were being

disempowered were met with scepticism by feminist scholars. Modleski, for example,

cautioned against misunderstanding crisis as necessarily being the result of a

fundamental reduction in male power. She asserts that rather than signifying its

[12] Crises for working class and underclass men inevitably revolve around unemployment, poverty and economic disempowerment. Crisis is manifested around a different set of issues for middle class male characters; these crises usually take a personal rather than economic form and as such are more commonly found in romantic comedies such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral, Jack and Sarah* and *Notting Hill*. The privileged status of these middle class characters means that the narratives of crisis cannot lay claim to the same ideas of disempowerment and dispossession that are deployed in narratives of working and under class men can.

effacement 'male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution.'[13] Certainly the eulogistic qualities of films such as *Brassed Off, The Full Monty* and *TwentyFourSeven* suggest that traditional male roles and the power structures that support them are worthy of protection and as such their symbolic demise should not be mistakenly celebrated as evidence of genuine gender parity, but more appropriately considered as indicative of how gender equality becomes inextricable from 'harmful' feminist gains. Thus, the recurrent deployment of narratives which foreground the idea of men undergoing some form of crisis (whether it takes an economic, social, domestic or existential form) has an explicit relationship to post-feminist culture, not only because they serve to reinforce the very power structures which they also posit as being under threat, but because of the ways in which these threats facilitate a narrative justification for a return to traditionalist notions of gender. As Claire Monk contends, narratives of working class male disempowerment are frequently constructed in such a way as to 'arouse audience emotions not around a lost era of stable employment and the old industries in themselves but around the lost homosocial communities these industries represented and the silent yet powerful masculine emotional bonds associated with them.'[14] Many of the films discussed in previous chapters have engaged at some level with the idea that masculinity was in crisis during the nineties and that British men were

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[13] Modleski, T. (1991). p.7.
[14] Monk, C. (2000). p.161.

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increasingly suffering from a loss of social, familial and economic role.[15] This was not

the only form of cinematic masculinity circulating in nineties British culture; alongside

those films that I have discussed thus far there were a number of films that presented

a more casually hegemonic and less self conscious construction of masculinity. Among

these films are *Sliding Doors* (Peter Howitt, 1998), *Martha, Meet Frank, Daniel and*

Laurence, Four Weddings and A Funeral and *Shallow Grave* (Danny Boyle, 1994). A

number of the films that represented counter-hegemonic versions of masculinity were

The Full Monty, *Brassed Off* and *TwentyFourSeven* all of which make connections

between the injurious effects of post-industrialisation with the social and economic

policies of the Thatcher government of the eighties. Responses to issues such as these

invariably, but erroneously, become bound up with cultural responses to feminism

because of the easy conflation between feminism and Margaret Thatcher as Britain's

first female Prime Minister. Despite the fact that, in Beatrix Campbell's terms, Thatcher

'did not feminise politics but offered feminine endorsement to patriarchal power' the

link between Thatcher and feminism remains pervasive within British cinema of the

nineties and so responses to Thatcherism become inextricable from responses to

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[15] The narratives of crisis and damage that are found in nineties British cinema are invariably seen to affect white men. There are a handful of films that present British Asian men as in crisis; these include both *East is East* and *My Son The Fanatic* as well as *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chada, 1993) which touches on issues of domestic violence but is framed much more explicitly as a film about female characters and their experiences of British Asianness than it is about the male characters. Since the end of the nineties there have been an increasing number of films that deploy narratives of social and economic disempowerment within a more racially diverse milieu; *Kidulthood* (Menhaj Huda, 2006), *Adulthood* (Noel Clarke, 2008) and *Bullet Boy* (Saul Dibb, 2004) all narrativise the experiences of black inner city adolescents. The thematic concerns of these films are obviously related to those that were being evoked in the films that I am focussing on in this study and they foreground issues of power, violence, criminality and addiction in very similar ways.

feminism and the deleterious effects of both upon white, working class British men.[16]

Brassed off, the Full Monty and *TwentyFourSeven* are all explicit in their intervention into these issues, but a range of other films including *My Name Is Joe* and *Human Traffic* offer a slightly more subtle critique of both Thatcherism and feminism in the course of their narratives. *Human Traffic*, for example, presents a spectrum of male characters that have all been affected by a perceived feminisation of society alongside changing social structures and shifting discourses of gender. The central character Jip (John Simm) is impotent, his emasculation further exacerbated via his employment as a retail assistant in a clothing store. Yet the film's comedic register means that it holds back from the forms of bitter and explicit polemic that are present in films such as *Brassed Off*.

The films that I focus on in this chapter draw on many of the themes such as male disempowerment and social marginalisation that are endemic in nineties British cinema, but they do so in a much more confrontational, and thus less mainstream, way. The films in this chapter are, by virtue of their positioning as 'art house' cinema, formally more challenging in their depictions of male disempowerment than those which sought a more mainstream audience. Although films such as *Naked* and *Nil By Mouth* were able to offer a more formally confrontational intervention into issues around male violence and are characterised by their refusal to offer facile reassurances, they still frequently regurgitate similar ideas and draw many of the same

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[16] Campbell, B. (1987). *The Iron Ladies: Why Do Women Vote Tory?* (London: Virago) p.40.

connections as those films that occupy a more mainstream position. Using the notion

of damage as a structuring device for certain male characters suggests a greater

severity of marginalisation and thus seems to require a more brutal performance than

is usually possible in mainstream cinematic products. As such the case studies for this

chapter are taken from the grittier, art house forms of social realism because it is

within this realm that the bleakest and most troubling constructions of damaged

masculinity are most often found. Included among the main case studies are *Nil By*

Mouth, *Naked* and *A Room for Romeo Brass* all of which share a confrontational tone

and tackle complex issues including sexual abuse, domestic violence, psychological

dysfunction and drug and alcohol abuse. The representations of masculinity found in

these films have provoked much debate, particularly with regards to the potential

reading of such texts as encouraging misogynistic identification with the male

characters as a result of their own narrative position as disempowered victims; as

Monk contends, films such as *Naked* and *Nil By Mouth* 'reveal the difficulties inherent

in attempting the analytical representation of pathological masculinity and male

brutality on screen.'[17] For Lisa Coulthard, attempts to analyse representations of

violence along dichotomous lines of perpetrator and victim are reductive and

problematic; she argues that the cinematic representation of violence 'is inescapable

from style, theme, narration and reception; in this diversity and plurality it is important

not to approach it as essentially or ontologically either subversive or regressive

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[17] See Monk, C (2000). p.163 and also Burchill, J. (1993). 'Crass Struggle: Cinema' *The Times,* 7th Nov. and Lay, S. (2002) *From Documentary to Brit Grit* (London: Wallflower Press) for examples of the debates about the cinematic representations of male violence and feminist film studies approaches to the issues.

regardless of the gender of its agent or object.'[18] In analysing the representations of

violent masculinity that are fore-grounded in these films I am interested in exploring

the ways in which the tensions created between agency and disempowerment are

repeatedly intertwined to provoke contradiction; these films are distinct because of

the ways in which they deal with violence and the conflicting meanings that violence

can be used to suggest.

Spicer identifies the extent to which the idea of male suffering became pervasive in

nineties British cinema, applying the term 'damage' to a wide range of films which

includes period and historical dramas such as *Jude* (Michael Winterbottom, 1996) as

well as a number of contemporary social realist films that deal predominantly with

working and underclass male characters who, he argues, have been 'irreparably

damaged by social disintegration.'[19] While it is clear that male characters in films as

generically diverse as *The Full Monty* and *Nil By Mouth* are figured as disempowered

and suffering from the consequences of social and economic changes which have left

them without a clear role or any hope for the future, there are some important

distinctions between the films, the characters and their responses to the situation that

are elided by a generalised definition of crisis or damage. In advocating a distinction

between the terms crisis and damage I am arguing for a more nuanced understanding

of the function of these discourses within recent British cinema.

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[18] Coulthard, L. (2007). p.p.153-4.
[19] Spicer, A. (2003). p.195.

In many ways crisis is a trope that has proven to be adaptable for a mainstream audience as the commercial success of films such as *The Full Monty* demonstrates; Monk explains, as I explained in chapter two, that the psychic problems, social exclusion and financial poverty of unemployment (all typical markers of crisis) can be appropriated to turn narratives about social problems into 'incongruously feelgood comedy.'[20] The generic location of the films that I draw on in this chapter, however, is more clearly that of art house forms of social realism which enables a more challenging and visceral portrayal of violent male characters. This forms another important distinction between the films in this chapter and the more mainstream forms of social realism that are found in films such as *Brassed Off*; crucially, where the more mainstream films appear to be compelled to suggest potential for optimism in their conclusions, the films that I draw on in this chapter are typified by a lack of hope as well as a lack of closure or reassurance. The narratives of the films that I deal with here are unremittingly bleak and in this way they are precluded from offering easy resolution. As Monk comments it is only comedies such as *The Full Monty* or *Brassed Off* that are able to suggest any form of narrative closure for the male characters and here it is 'symbolic if problematic' rather than offering optimistic closure.[21] In order to accomplish this *The Full Monty* borrows from the utopian logic of the musical; the male characters are empowered through a celebratory display but crucially the phallus remains hidden throughout.

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[20] Monk, C. (2000). p.159.
[21] Monk, C. (2000). p.159.

The distance of the films that I am interested in here from mainstream cinema means that the case studies which form the basis of the analysis in this chapter often present more open ended narratives, thus circumventing the compulsion to provide an implausible optimism or reassuring narrative resolution. *Nil By Mouth*, for example, culminates in a rather fragile peace; Raymond (Ray Winstone) is reconciled with Val (Kathy Burke) and although his demeanour appears to be significantly more amiable in this scene than it has been for much of the course of the film there has been no real resolution or change in circumstance to suggest this new found congeniality is sustainable. Ultimately the fundamental causes of Raymond's anger and the resultant violence remain unchanged. He is still unemployed, he has not addressed his psychological issues and there is no suggestion that either his substance abuse or alcoholism are being treated. Where *The Full Monty* was able to offer reassurance in the form of a symbolic, if improbable resolution for the male characters, *Nil By Mouth* uses its lack of resolution to underscore the fragility of Raymond's reconciliation within the family and to suggest that the respite from his violence is temporary rather than assured; the violence has only been abated, not solved. Similarly *Naked* does not offer a closed narrative; here the final scenes are of Johnny (David Thelwis) limping into the distance unable or unwilling to form anything more than transient connections with anyone or anything. *Naked* is thus unable to even gesture towards the future in any positive way; Johnny's fate remains as uncertain and precarious as it was at the beginning of the film. As with *Nil By Mouth,* the film allows questions and uncertainties to remain unanswered, suggesting instead there are no easy answers to the complex

circumstances or behaviour of these male characters. Further, the lack of resolution is an important component in constructing male characters that are marked out by contradiction and thus reinforces the instabilities in interpretation in order to purposely elide straightforward readings.

Thus damage implies a greater severity than crisis but there is an inevitable slippage between the terms; both damaged men and men who are more appropriately considered to be 'in crisis' have been marginalised and disempowered by the processes of post-industrialisation and are suffering the consequences of deprivation and poverty. The ramifications of the shifting economic practices are represented as being more severely felt by those male characters who I would consider to be damaged. The damaged men are predominantly white, urban and are invariably destitute; these men form the basis of the nineties underclass for whom legitimate employment is not even a remote possibility. They are more likely to be involved in criminal activities than the men in more mainstream films; additionally they are more prone to drug and alcohol misuse and tend to have less control over their violent tempers. Many of these films draw upon a lexicon that Samantha Lay defines as an 'iconographic shorthand signifying the 'bad' working class or 'underclass'.[22] These male characters are, thus, situated at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy and are presented as attempting to compensate for their lack of social power by exerting their physical dominance over their wives, partners, children and anyone that they perceive as

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[22] Lay, S. (2002). p.107.

weaker than themselves. As Hill explains, violence becomes 'little more than a dubious compensation for a real lack of economic and social power.'[23]

Spicer's framework also provides a useful starting point from whence to begin defining the parameters for the damaged man, stating that they are marked out by 'social and psychic disorder.'[24] Further, in situating this type of masculine character within a historical context Spicer demonstrates the epochal tendencies of representation and discourse. The configuration of male characters as damaged is not unprecedented; the prominence of this trope appears to have a direct correlation with wider cultural anxieties pertaining to the roles of men within British society. Spicer traces the trajectory of the cinematic damaged man back to post-war films such as *The Small Back Room* (Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1949) and *The October Man* (Roy Ward Baker, 1947) which negotiated the problems both suffered and caused by soldiers returning from war. It was not only returning veterans who could be thought of as damaged in some way; violent and brutal men such as Pinkie Brown (Richard Attenborough) in *Brighton Rock* (John Boulting, 1947) are clear predecessors to the images of damaged masculinity that proliferated in nineties British cinema. The popular appeal of such films is intrinsically related to what Spicer terms the 'topical urgency' of the problems being negotiated and thus the resurgence of this type of narrative within the nineties relates to the ways in which post-industrialisation

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[23] Hill, J. (2004). p.106.
[24] Spicer, A. (2003). p.161.

deprived men of their roles within society.[25] The disempowerment that is associated

with long term unemployment and deprivation forms the nexus of the social problems

that Spicer is referring to; the impact is compounded by the fact that many of the

damaged men characters appear to be unable to exert even a 'little mastery over their

emotions, their bodies, their sexuality and their identities. They act violently, often

murderously, under compulsions that are irrational and inexplicable.'[26] Thus an

important distinction can be made between the more diluted configurations of crisis

that are seen in *The Full Monty* or *Brassed Off* and the more excessive displays of

violence that are commonly seen in representations of damaged men such as *Naked*'s

Johnny, *A Room for Romeo Brass*'s Morell (Paddy Considine) and *Nil By Mouth*'s

Raymond.

Nineties damaged men are those who seem to be the least able to cope with the

apparent reduction in their patriarchal power and who subsequently respond with a

combination of self destructive behaviour and physical and psychological violence

towards other people. Key to understanding the gender politics that are at play in the

construction of nineties damaged male characters is the ambiguity brought about by

the deliberate slippage between agent and victim. While these men might be violent

and abusive they are also presented as victims and as a result a straightforward

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[25] Bridging the historical gap between the post war damaged man and those found in nineties British cinema are the 'angry young men' of the British New Wave. Male characters such as Arthur Seaton (Albert Finney) in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (Karel Reisz, 1960) and Joe Lampton (Laurence Harvey) in *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1959) are a product of the wider cultural consternation about the changing economic and social structure of Britain during the sixties.
[26] Spicer, A. (2003). p.161.

response to these characters, and to the films, becomes fraught with difficulty. Many

of the issues that are raised by the configuration of damaged masculinity in the films

that I explore in this chapter dovetail with wider cultural discourses about the

deleterious erosion of male power, and while all of the films position their male

characters as economically disempowered they do not suggest that male violence can

be explained (or resolved) in purely economic terms. To some extent the construction

of this character type in films of the period rely upon contradiction in order to facilitate

the apparently oppositional narrative positions of these men as both victim and

perpetrator. Thus the cinematic damaged man is inevitably contentious and has been

dismissed by cultural commentators as being indicative of a generalised rise in

cinematic and cultural misogyny.[27] The films in which damaged men play a central role

are often confrontational and graphic in their depictions; the violence and brutality of

the damaged male characters are juxtaposed against their dispossession and cultural

disempowerment. These films share common ground with those Anna Claydon defines

as being characterised by themes of masculine 'dejection,'[28] Films such as *Nil By Mouth*

and *Naked* use this tension between the oppositional positions of victim and agent in

order to create contradictory meanings and messages and deliberately destabilise any

sense of certainty regarding these characters. Further uncertainty is created through

the nuanced performances that are given in these films; actors such as Winstone and

Thelwis bring to bear a spectrum of prior connotations to these films which can serve

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[27] Burchill, J. (1993). 'Crass Struggle: Cinema' *The Times,* 7th Nov.
http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=95447263&SrchMode=1&sid=2&Fmt=3&VInst=PROD&
VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1262023336&clientId=45724. (accessed 27 December 2009).
[28] Claydon, A. (2005). *The Representation of Masculinity in British Cinema of the 1960s*. (New York: Edwin
Mellen)

to further impact upon the ways in which the male characters that they play are understood. While the behaviour of male characters such as Johnny and Raymond is not condoned by their respective film narratives both *Naked* and *Nil By Mouth* go some way in attempting to explain the reasons behind their actions by referring to their own personal stories of abuse, deprivation and brutality. This narrative tension is a fundamental component of the nineties cinematic trope of damaged masculinity and forms a key distinction from those films that present more moderate manifestations of masculinity in crisis. Where films such as *The Full Monty* or *Brassed Off* are able to negotiate some form of narrative resolution through romance or comedy, the generic parameters of the films that I am dealing with here preclude these options and thus function as a cinematic counterpoint to the commercially successful narratives of disempowered masculinity.

Damaged and Dysfunctional: Two sides of the same problem?

Damaged male characters are often situated at the margins of society; they are the men least psychologically equipped to reconcile the apparent reduction in their social, economic and cultural status. Many of these characters are detached from societal structures; they are unemployed, they have no families or real social networks and are often chronically unstable, capable of switching from light-hearted banter to menacing threat without warning or provocation. They are both vicious and vulnerable. This particular configuration of the damaged man is most pronounced in both *Naked* and *A Room For Romeo Brass*. Johnny and Morell are both loners, they are, in many ways,

defined by their lack of social role. Unable to fit in they become increasingly

dysfunctional and estranged from society; the tenuous connections that they form with

others are characterised by their transient and precarious nature. Although there are

many points of similarity between the characters of Morell and Johnny there are many

ways in which their alienation from society is differently constructed. Morell is

obviously more troubled by his outsider status than Johnny; he is desperate to fit in

and it is this combination of desperation and social naivety that is at the centre of this

character's dysfunction. Where Morell is victimised by his outsider status, Johnny turns

his marginality into an opportunity to unleash his anger and caustic sarcasm upon the

people he comes into contact with.

Johnny is typical of many nineties damaged men in that he is presented as a victim of

the social and economic reforms of the Thatcher government. But where films such as

Brassed Off and *The Full Monty* explicitly articulate these as forming the nexus of

working class men's problems, *Naked* presents unemployment, poverty and social

dislocation as taken-for-granted in the damaged man's cultural context. Johnny's

regional identity, which is expressed most obviously through his strong Mancunian

accent, brings to bear a number of connotations; firstly there are the associations of

the once 'industrial' north and the consequential dereliction, unemployment and

poverty of post-industrialisation which are such pervasive tropes in narratives of

masculinity in nineties culture. Moreover, once Johnny has fled Manchester for London

his regional identity and his accent are both used to further explicate his outsider

status; he does not belong in London (see figure 22), it is not *his* city. Johnny's

dislocation is enhanced due to the ideological resonance of London as the epicentre of

Thatcher's Britain and the prosperous south east; Johnny's northern-ness and his

aggressive vernacular mark him out as ideologically abject. This sense of dispossession

and alienation becomes a crucial tool that Johnny uses in order to maintain his

isolation from others; in some ways he uses his outsider status as a means of signalling

his position as a social misfit. The suggestion that Johnny is unable to function in

society is constantly underscored by the dysfunctional performance of the character.

Johnny, in some ways, seeks to maintain his isolation and estrangement from other

people and the normative relations that they represent. This is most obviously

evidenced by the final scenes of the film. Johnny promises former girlfriend Louise

(Lesley Sharp) that they will return to Manchester together, but when she leaves the

room Johnny makes a get-away rejecting the possibilities of rebuilding a life together in

favour of continuing his isolation. Johnny's treatment of Sophie (Katrin Cartlidge) is

further evidence of the ways in which his behaviour works to maintain his isolation

from people and society. The more Sophie tries to form an attachment to Johnny the

more he rejects her, literally pushing her away at one point. Sophie's neediness makes

her weak in Johnny's eyes and as such she becomes an obvious victim for his '*Lear*-like

determination to expose human nakedness, frailties and false hopes.'[29] Ultimately,

however, all of the male characters are impotent, their rage can only be enacted

against women and provoke debates around the extent to which the portrayal of this

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[29] Spicer, A. (2001). p.196

kind of sadism and misogynistic attitudes do anything more than function as a quasi-

apologist for male violence.

Figure 22: *Naked:* Johnny in London.

Johnny's behaviour towards Sophie is one of the factors that led journalists including

Julie Burchill, as well as scholars such as Claire Monk, to criticise *Naked* for its

misogynistic overtones.[30] Johnny's treatment of Sophie is callous and calculated to

cause her distress; he encourages her to feel close to him before rejecting her. Sophie

is the first person that Johnny meets when he arrives in London (she shares a flat with

his ex girlfriend). In many ways Sophie's perpetually discombobulated demeanour

combine with her insecure neediness and masochistic tendencies to make her

irresistible to Johnny; he is drawn to her because she is lost and like him she is an

outsider. Sophie is clearly vulnerable and needs continual reassurance; the more

Sophie tries to cling to Johnny the further he retreats and the more dismissive his

attitude towards her becomes. Her continued declarations of love provide the impetus

for Johnny to disappear once more, leaving her distraught and uncertain as to whether

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[30] Monk, C. (2001). p.163; Burchill, J. (1993); See also Birch, H. (1993). 'Dear Mike Leigh' in *The
Independent* (19 Nov).

he will ever return. Given that the opening scene of the film depicts Johnny appearing

to rape a woman, his treatment of Sophie is even more troubling and contributes to

the construction of Johnny as 'aggressively sexist.'[31] For Monk it is the ambiguity of

identification and the lack of diegetic condemnation that make the film so problematic;

she queries the extent to which Sophie is constructed as an annoying and

unsympathetic character and how this is manipulated to foster a form of complicity

with Johnny's actions on the part of the audience. Director Mike Leigh defended the

representation as being designed to be deliberately contentious; Leigh's intention was

to create a character that defied a straightforward response, impelling repulsion and

anger as well as pity. However, as Garry Watson points out, the opening moments of

the film find the audience 'having [also] to identify with – a man whom we have just

seen hurting a woman, a man who has more or less deliberately got himself into

trouble and who seems to be heading for more trouble.'[32]

Spicer describes Johnny as 'bright, well-read, a compulsive talker and philosophiser,

but also violent and aggressively misogynist.'[33] The latter is a definition that Leigh has

countered vigorously in interviews with Amy Raphael amongst others he contends that

far from being a misogynistic film *Naked* is 'a criticism of it.'[34] It is Johnny's intellect

that marks Johnny out from many other damaged male characters in British social

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[31] Carney, R. & Quart, L. (2000). *The Films of Mike Leigh: Embracing the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). p.229.
[32] Watson, G. (2004). *The Cinema Of Mike Leigh: A Sense of the Real* (London: Wallflower Press). p.107.
[33] Spicer, A. (2001). p.195.
[34] Raphael, A. (2008). '*Naked*' in Raphael, A. (ed.) *Mike Leigh on Mike Leigh* (London: Faber & Faber). P.231.

realist films of the nineties; certainly in contrast to other damaged characters such as

Morrell or Raymond, Johnny is more able to articulate his misanthropic rage verbally as

well as physically. The verbal abuse which he aims at all of the characters that he

comes into contact with complicates a reading of Johnny which defines him solely in

terms of his attitude to women; he is equally as callous and offensive to the men that

he meets, and thus is perhaps more appropriately described as misanthropic rather

than misogynistic and I would argue that *Naked* is less vehement in its discursive

relationship to feminism than a film like *The Full Monty*. Michael Coveney describes

Johnny as 'assuming the iconic status of spokesman not so much for the homeless, as

for the lost and drifting, the disaffected, the rebellious, the pissed-off, the ignored.'[35]

When security guard, Brian, (Peter Wright) extends his friendship to Johnny he is quick

to disabuse his faith in society and dedication to his job. Johnny mocks Brian's job

proclaiming that he is doing no more than 'guarding empty space.' Indeed, Brian

represents the epitome of social emasculation; his position is no more than a

simulacrum of power and authority. Brian, like many of the other people Johnny

gravitates to as he travels around London, is an isolated social misfit and in him Johnny

sees someone who is weaker and more vulnerable than himself and so, in much the

same way that he does with Sophie, Johnny mocks Brian. A prime example of the way

in which Johnny's callousness is played out is in the scene where he discovers that

Brian's voyeuristic pastime is to spy on a woman who lives in a flat opposite the empty

office block that he is guarding. Johnny uses this as another opportunity to humiliate

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[35] Coveney, M. (1997). *The World According to Mike Leigh* (London: Harper Collins).p25.

and debase those who have befriended him. He visits the 'woman in the window' (Deborah MacLaren) and manages to sweet-talk his way into her apartment by feigning sexual interest in her. Once inside his character turns, he insults and humiliates her, telling her, for example, 'from over there you look a lot younger.' The woman in the window continues undressing. Her lack of response to Johnny's insults seems to spur him on to deliver increasingly barbed comments; when she is seated at her dressing table wearing only her underwear and playing, coquettishly with her hair, Johnny remarks that she reminds him of his mother, ''n she was a whore n'all!' Johnny is undoubtedly a manipulative and callous individual as his comments to Louise about halitosis and to Brian about body odour attest, and his actions towards others, especially the female characters, are deeply troubling. For Leigh though, the point is not so much whether Johnny is misogynistic per se rather than it is about interrogating the ways in which power is always central to interpersonal relationships. He describes Johnny as 'a frustrated, disappointed, embittered idealist. The very opposite of a cynic…He's entirely disillusioned about the way people and things are.'[36]

While much of this suggests that Johnny is a disagreeable character, his construction by Mike Leigh and David Thelwis is more complex and there are several points in the film that are used to confound a straightforward negative reading. Indeed both director and actor have suggested that the point of the film and the character is to defy this kind of uncomplicated response; Leigh in particular has explained that his intention

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[36] Raphael, A. (2008). P.231.

was to provoke conflicting reactions throughout the film. Johnny is not a sympathetic character as such but he is, at times, presented as pathetic, vulnerable and pitiful and such moments are vital in trying to come to terms with the complexity of the meanings contained within the film. Johnny is presented as both a manipulative and intimidating antagonist but also as marginalised, isolated and pitiful and thus in many ways the film impels a negotiated reading of the character; although Monk correctly observes that Johnny is never held to account for his actions or punished for the ways in which he treats other people, the film does not posit a particularly hopeful outcome for him either.[37] Although Johnny might not be explicitly condemned for his conduct, the film deploys a cyclical structure which prevents him from undergoing a more positive transformation or accessing the kinds of processes of redemption that are, as the previous chapter shows, more commonly open to characters who either are fathers or who are about to become fathers. The final scene in *Naked* shows Johnny in a position that has not really altered; at the beginning of the film Johnny flees Manchester after raping a woman and at the end of the film he takes flight from Louise and the prospect of intimacy and stability that she represents.

Arguably it is impossible to form an entirely positive reading of Johnny; he is obnoxious and cruel to all of the people who try to befriend him and thus in many ways he is actively complicit in maintaining his own alienation and isolation. This sense of agency distinguishes him from many of the other male characters from this period of British

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[37] Monk, C. (2000). P.161.

cinema who might be considered as damaged; many of these men are damaged precisely because they lack the power of individual agency and are consistently victimised by social change as a result. Johnny's intellectual capacity is an important contributory factor in this aspect of his construction; he is able to use his intellect and the quick-witted verbal style that he has developed not only as a form of defence against the potential contempt of others but crucially as a means of maintaining his isolation and distance from others by scorning and insulting them. This is an important device through which both director and actor work to impel a negotiated reading of the character. Leigh's film is not a sociological treatise, rather a more complex psychological consideration of experiences of social dysfunction and economic marginalisation; although Leigh acknowledges the cultural context, Johnny's character is not reduced to it in the same way that characters such as Dave and Gaz in *The Full Monty* or Phil in *Brassed Off* are.

Morell in *A Room For Romeo Brass* contrasts with Johnny in a number of important ways. Both characters are alienated, disempowered and dysfunctional, but they represent very different incarnations of damaged masculinity. Where Johnny has a degree of agency Morell is more typical of the underclass damaged man who has no real sense of control. Similarly, where Johnny appears to willingly perpetuate his alienation from those who he encounters, Morell is desperate to belong and gain acceptance; for Morell the lack of acceptance by the people in his community is central to the dysfunctional construction of this character. *A Room for Romeo Brass* extends

some of the central themes of Meadows' debut film *TwentyFourSeven*; both films

share a preoccupation with male characters that are emotionally inarticulate,

economically disempowered and socially dysfunctional. As is the case with

TwentyFourSeven the detached, unemployed and inadequate father figures are seen as

the products of post-industrialisation and uneven social progress that expunged

traditional male roles within the family and the community. Although *A Room For*

Romeo Brass deploys a number of male characters who could appropriately be defined

as damaged, it is the central character of Morell who represents the most obvious

example of dysfunctional, damaged masculinity; further, his character provides a

productive contrast with Johnny as well as with the characters that feature in the next

section. *A Room for Romeo Brass* is, like *Naked,* more a complex psychologically driven

narrative than it is an intervention into the social and economic context; in this way the

film is markedly different from many of the others that have been included in this

study but it is, nevertheless, an appropriate example of how British filmmakers were

engaging with more marginalised characters during the nineties.

Like Johnny, Morell is a loner and a social misfit; the narrative trajectory of *A Room for*

Romeo Brass follows his developing relationship with two young boys and his

transformation from benign odd-ball character to something more malevolent. Where

Johnny is presented as widely read and astute, Morell's dysfunction is centred on his

childlike naivety; the very fact that he feels more able to form a friendship with two

boys who are much younger than him indicates the extent to which this character is

less intellectually developed than his peers and immediately signals his dysfunction to the audience. The first glimpse of Morell is innocuous enough. Romeo (Andrew Shimm) and Gavin (Ben Marshall) have been playing in the park when some older boys begin harassing them. Just as the playground scuffle threatens to escalate into something more serious, Morell appears and intervenes, saving the younger lads from an almost inevitable beating. For this the two friends are indebted to Morell on whom they confer an almost heroic status; the fact that Morell is an adult who wants to befriend them is, to them, amazing in itself but when they discover he also has the almost talismanic trappings of the kind of adult independence that remain distant dreams for them (a car, a flat, no parents) they are awestruck. For Morell the friendship offered by the two youngsters provides him with the social acceptance that he has failed to gain elsewhere. The film contrasts the burgeoning relationship between Morell, Gavin and Romeo with the ridicule that Morell is continually subjected to by other people in the community. In this way *A Room for Romeo Brass* presents a very differently inflected form of male character from films such as *Brassed Off*; in Herman's film the psychological problems faced by the men are treated with unequivocal sympathy and the supporting actions of the community are deployed to reinforce the sense that the sufferings of the various male characters deserve attention and empathy. Morell's dysfunction is psychosocial in nature. Fradley describes him as 'obsessively sociopathic' and 'seemingly autistic' but lacking the social support networks that he needs.[38] *A Room For Romeo Brass* does not present Morell in a world bereft of community in the

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[38] Fradley, M. (2010). Shane Meadows" in Yvonne Tasker (ed.), *Fifty Contemporary Film Directors* (London: Routledge). Forthcoming.

same way that *Naked* does with Johnny; instead it presents a community that is ultimately ambivalent and this indifference is both scornful and wary of anyone who does not conform. The consequences of this social detachment are questioned in the film through Morell, who Fradley concludes is a character that is 'as tragic as he is menacing.'[39]

Gavin and Romeo's youthful innocence means that, initially at least, they accept Morell at face value; for Morell's part this appears to afford an opportunity for him to construct an alternative version of his identity by fabricating a life story intended to impress his newly found young friends. While Gavin and Romeo are seated in the back of his van Morell regales them with stories of bravery and survival that are designed to create a macho image which would be more in keeping with the discourses of hegemonic masculinity that he appears to have internalised. Morell actively constructs an image of himself as a tough, physically capable man. This image is further consolidated by his quasi-militaristic van and army surplus dress. The young lads are initially beguiled by their new friend's apparent physical prowess until they come to realise that his boastful tales of courage and daring are in fact a self-deluded narrative created for their benefit rather than an accurate account of his life. At this point the boys' attitude to Morell changes from respect to bemusement and quiet mockery. The two boys are quick to sense that Morell is far from being the man who he claims to be and is, in fact, vulnerable, lonely and easy to exploit for their own amusement. When

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[39] Fradley, M. (2010). Forthcoming.

they discover that Morell is attracted to Romeo's sister Ladine (Vicky McClure) they convince him that dressing in a lurid shell suit will charm her. Morell swaggers into Ladine's shop in his new attire only to have his hopes of romance cruelly dashed by a scornful Ladine; meanwhile the boys sit in the van watching and laughing at Morell's humiliation, unthinkingly perpetuating the cycles of damage and dysfunction within which Morell is trapped.

It is this seemingly thoughtless prank that sets the rest of the narrative in motion and eventually brings Morell's more sinister side to the fore. Morell lacked the social skills to discern that Gavin and Romeo were setting him up; his childlike naivety led him to take them at face value with the inevitable result of a particularly public humiliation in Ladine's shop. The scene is deployed for comic effect and in this way Meadows' film lacks the sentimentality that is more often accorded to outsiders such as *The Full Monty*'s Lomper. The extent of the boys betrayal is made more excruciating when Morell is teased by some local teenagers for his outlandish clothes. Despite coming to realise that he had been set up by the boys, Morell does not retaliate immediately and when he does address their behaviour his tone is very different from either the sneering sarcasm of Johnny or the violent outbursts of Raymond. He doesn't do anything until the three of them have gone on a day trip to the beach; Romeo goes off in search of ice cream and Morell tackles Gavin about why they set him up. Initially the tone is conversational; Morell appears to have taken the prank in good humour but he continues to press Gavin to admit that they did it with the sole intention of exploiting

Morell's vulnerability for their own amusement. When Gavin fails to take the questioning seriously Morell's character suddenly changes; he pulls out a knife and threatens to torture and kill Gavin and his entire family.

It is at this point that the film shifts from being a comedy to a more sinister register and the character of Morell becomes increasingly unpredictable in his behaviour. Morell is frequently the target of insults, scorn and ridicule; Romeo's father Joe (Frank Harper), for instance, dismisses Morell when he threatens to kill him. Not only does he refuse to take the threat seriously, he insults Morell by proclaiming him to be 'mentally deficient' and further strikes home with the question, 'Were you bullied at school or are you just a fucking nonce?' As the camera circles the two men and cuts between close ups of their faces, the film implies that Morell has had to contend with cruel taunts and the stigma of alienation throughout his life; in doing so it posits a potential interpretation of this character as being damaged by people and lacking the kinds of defence mechanism that Johnny was able to deploy so effectively. However, any potential feelings of sympathy that might be encouraged towards Morell are immediately undercut by the knowledge that he has threatened Gavin. Like Raymond in *Nil By Mouth* Morell's potential psychosis is brought about as much by his economic disempowerment and social marginalisation as it by the damage that he has suffered at the hands of other people. Morell is continually positioned as being the unwilling and unwitting butt of people's jokes; he is the perpetual outsider who is desperate to be taken seriously as a man but the continual rebuttal of his romantic intentions by

Ladine, combined with the ridicule and rejection from Romeo, Gavin, Joe and the people in the wider community seem almost inevitably destined to have a violent endpoint. Thus while Spicer points to social disintegration as a factor in the construction of damaged male characters it can be inflected in a variety of ways; *Naked* presented a society bereft of any sense of community whereas *A Room for Romeo Brass* presents a community but one that is ultimately lacking in compassion. Despite the fact that 'this world of social limitations is ultimately redeemed by the enduring warmth of friendship and familial bonds,' as Fradley observes, these bonds are on an intimate scale; they do not extend to the wider reaches of the community.[40] For Morell this has serious consequences; his social frustration continues to escalate until the violence that has become a trope of Meadows films becomes inevitable. Furthermore the DVD commentary to *A Room for Romeo Brass* features Meadows explaining how Ladine was complicit in fanning Morell's unrequited love for her own amusement; her character, who remains at the peripheries for much of the narrative, is thus not simply an innocent young woman fending off unwanted attentions, she is toying with Morell and his naivety, and, moreover, in so doing, she comes to represent the uncaring, and at times callous, ways in which the local community treat Morell. Thus Morell is, in many ways, an innocent, naive character whose sociopathic personality is, at least in part, exacerbated by his treatment within the community.

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[40] Fradley, M. (2010). Forthcoming.

Social misfits like Johnny and Morell appear destined to remain on the marginalised

peripheries of society. They both have a violent temper which can erupt suddenly and

with potentially devastating consequences. As is the case with Raymond in *Nil By*

Mouth and other damaged men such as Julian (Phillip Davies) in *Face* (Antonia Bird,

1997) or Geoff in *TwentyFourSeven*, the only form of power that Morell has left to

exert is physical. For Morell, at least, this is intrinsically tied to his own ideas about

masculinity and his overwhelming desire to be acknowledged as a man rather than

constantly stigmatised as a social misfit. This is a recurrent theme in *A Room for Romeo*

Brass and it is particularly pronounced in the scene where Morell and Romeo visit

Gavin upon his return from hospital. Gavin and Morell are alone in the youngster's

bedroom and Morell is clearly enjoying the anxiety that his threat has inculcated in the

boy. A low camera angle positions the viewer with Gavin and enhances Morell's

menacing stature. This scene is something of an anomaly within the film because it is

the only point at which Morell's posturing is presented as anything other than pathetic

and laughable and, like Johnny, it would seem that Morell is only able to be convincing

in his threat when it is aimed at someone who is far weaker than himself. Another

example of this occurs in a scene towards the end of the film where Morell ambushes

Romeo, (see figure 23).

Figure 23: *A Room for Romeo Brass:* **Morell pounces on Romeo.**

Morell's social dysfunction is further in evidence in the narrative strand that focuses on

his pursuit of Ladine; in the course of this storyline Morell is shown to be obsessional

and controlling and once more there are parallels between his character and that of

Johnny. Johnny is controlling in the way that he manipulates Sophie. He is cruel and

callous in the way that he lashes out at the various women who he encounters and the

initial impetus for the narrative is his attempt to evade capture and punishment for the

rape of a woman at the beginning of the film. Where Johnny is a sexual predator who

appears to enjoy humiliating and hurting women, Morell's misogyny is manifested

rather differently and is a result of his jealous and controlling nature. The first

indication that his attitudes towards women might be problematic comes about when

he is talking to Romeo about Ladine; he enquires about her 'purity' and goes on to

explain how the thought of 'other people with their hands all over her' makes him

'quite angry.' Morell is incapable of understanding that these thoughts are

symptomatic of a dysfunctional attitude towards women, instead misrecognising them

and proclaiming that they are the result of 'being overcome with love.' Throughout this scene Morell is more menacing than violent; his anger is stated quietly and calmly and this detachment is crucial in his construction as a dysfunctional male character.

Despite her proclamations that Morell is a 'gizoid and a weirdo,' Ladine is apparently coerced into going on a date by Romeo.[41] This narrative segment is used to once more underscore Morell's social and psychological dysfunction while pointing to the ways in which the wider community is, at least in part, contributing to his problems. Ladine's lack of interest in Morell is strikingly obvious to the audience but he is unable to discern her true intentions. Contrary to his exacting standards of purity he tries to persuade her to kiss him and when she refuses he becomes increasingly insistent. Despite his pushiness Morell is not presented, during this particular scene, as a real threat; his perseverance is figured more as naively irritating and renders him more pitiable than sinister and this is further emphasised when he uses a child's counting rhyme as a means of drawing out their time together. This scene in particular is important in constructing Morell as a character who is dysfunctional and lacking in basic social skills. His obvious naivety is used to evoke pity; the audience is prompted to understand his lack of sophistication and sexual experience as sad rather than sinister as he begs Ladine to bestow just one kiss upon him. But, as is often the case with the films that deliberately deploy more contradictory male characters, a straightforward reading is complicated during a scene some time later in the film.

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[41] As previously mentioned the extent to which Ladine is knowing in her encounters with Morell is discussed by Meadows on the DVD commentary.

Morell pressurises Romeo into facilitating another date between him and Ladine. Reluctantly she acquiesces and agrees to go and see Morell at his flat. When she arrives Morell ushers her into the living room before rushing upstairs. While Ladine is downstairs, alone and apparently unsuspecting, Morell is upstairs undressing and psyching himself up for his much anticipated sexual encounter. In a scene that is reminiscent of *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) Morell talks to himself (see image 24); 'C'mon man, you've waited twenty five years for this. You've gotta be like a prize fighter...go in there and take the title...she's a baby chicken and you're a fox!' This sequence is one continuous long shot of Morell from the doorway of the room; the effect of this framing is to contribute to the absurdity of his posturing when it is already obvious to the audience that his endeavours will end in rejection and humiliation. The film draws explicitly on *Taxi Driver* and Scorsese's infamously damaged Vietnam veteran, Travis Bickle (Robert DeNiro). As Fradley surmises, Considine re-imagined Travis Bickle as 'if he had been raised on the mean streets of Burton-on-Trent.'[42]

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[42] Fradley, M. (2010). Forthcoming.

Figure 24: *A Room for Romeo Brass:* **Morell psyches himself up.**

The scene cuts back to Ladine, seated on the sofa watching television and looking

bored. When she realises Morell's intentions her reaction is a combination of horror

and amusement. When he opens his dressing gown to reveal his blue y-fronts and

demands that she 'fuckin' tuck into that!' she is overcome with laughter. Morell's

assumptions and his attempts at seduction in this scene create a paradoxical tension

between comedy and empathy. The absurdity of Morell's appearance and behaviour in

this scene encourage the audience and Ladine to laugh at him *but* this laughter is

undercut by both pity and a degree of wariness linked to an awareness of Morell's

potential for violence. Ladine tries to limit the awkwardness of the situation by

downplaying it; she advises Morell to get dressed and she'll forget about it, but Morell

does not take kindly to her rebuttal. Where Johnny and Raymond are positioned as

sexual predators that are capable of using violence to get what they want, Morell is

constructed rather differently; although he is upset his initial reaction is disbelief, not

violence. He says, quite calmly, that he thought this was what she wanted. When she

declines he implores, 'Well, can't you just fucking touch it or something?' His

desperation is used to present him as pitiful and pathetic rather than intimidating.

When Ladine realises that he is not going to take no for an answer she gets up to leave

and it is only at this point that Morell's character changes once more as his sinister side

resurfaces and he tries to prevent her from leaving. Morell's desperation counterpoints

his intimidating demeanour and throughout this scene potential threat and pity are

played off against each other. He blocks the doorway and refuses to let her through

until she has complied with his demands. However, Morell lacks the sexual confidence

to assert himself physically and Ladine is able to make her get-away physically

unscathed. She runs from the flat and out into the night leaving Morell standing at the

roadside in his dressing gown and socks, begging her to forgive him and return. Morell

is, once more, constructed as a pitiful rather than an intimidating character and

although his attitudes towards women bear some resemblance to those of Raymond

and Johnny his dysfunction is deployed to offset the degree to which he poses a violent

threat because the audience is led to believe that he will be unsuccessful in forcing

Ladine to submit to his will. *A Room for Romeo Brass* is distinct from both *Naked* and

Nil By Mouth in this respect because the latter two films create tensions around the

audience knowledge that both Raymond and Johnny *are* capable of such violence.

After Ladine's rejection Morell vents his anger at Romeo in another scene that

reinforces the paradoxical position of Morell as both a potential threat and a pathetic

social misfit. The unsuspecting Romeo is pounced upon by Morell who is bare-chested

but wearing tracksuit bottoms and a stocking on his head. He berates Romeo for being a 'whinging pathetic animal' and for not being a good enough 'warrior' in the 'battle.' Morell slaps Romeo about the head before forcing the youngster to the floor and subjecting him to a tirade of humiliating abuse. However, the seriousness of the situation is intrinsically undercut by the ridiculous spectacle of Morell's costume; furthermore Morell's clothes serve as a continual reminder of his delusional state. Morell is desperate to be seen as a macho, warrior man and what he seems to crave more than anything is the very thing that he continually fails to secure: the respect of others. This lack of status contributes significantly to the construction of this character as damaged.

The slippage between comedy and menace that is a fundamental part of the ambush sequence is absent in the scene in which Morell next appears. He waits in his van for Romeo to leave his house and forces him to get into the van; Morell once more takes on the sinister characteristics from the beach scene in which he threatened to kill Gavin. The camera angle is close in on the characters as Morell makes a gun motion towards Romeo's head, enhancing the oppression of the younger boy at the hands of his assailant. Morell's face is contorted with anger as he chastises Romeo once again for behaving like a 'pathetic animal.' Romeo reluctantly follows the order and gets into Morell's van. The scene cuts to a point of view shot of Morell and Romeo as they sit outside Ladine's shop; Ladine is with a male customer and is chatting and laughing with him. Outside in the van Morell denounces her to Romeo, 'She's a fucking whore your

sister...a fucking whore...' When the customer leaves the shop Morell goes after him; he stops the van, gets out and beats him unconscious, unable to contain his anger at Ladine's rejection and the confirmation of his position as a perpetual outsider that her rejection implies.

While Morell is distracted Romeo runs off but Morell tracks him down and finds him with Gavin's parents; Bill (James Higgins) ushers his wife, Sandra (Julia Ford) and Romeo inside before squaring up to Morell who is blood spattered and spoiling for another fight. After punching Bill, Morell returns to the front garden where he sits on the lawn, isolated and almost childlike in his posture. When Bill makes another attempt at getting Morell to leave, Morell threatens to kill him. The use of close up shots of Morell's face conveys the sense of hatred and anger while his verbal repetition and running commentary convey the delusional mental state of the character; he repeats over and over 'I wouldn't hurt a kid...couldn't touch a kid...wouldn't hurt a baby.' The fact that this is not true - he has intimidated and threatened both boys and been physically violent towards Romeo – further reinforces the extent of Morell's psychological damage. The use of monologue in this sequence appears to have a dual function; not only does it emphasise Morell's inherent instability and suggest that he does not have the capacity to understand why others constantly reject or fear him. The sense that he has been continually misunderstood by people in his community and has been ridiculed and marginalised as a result is used throughout the film to destabilise responses to the character; the audience is constantly encouraged to see him as pitiful

but potentially dangerous. When Morell traps Bill he finally sees himself in a position whereby he is able to humiliate and ridicule someone who represents the 'normal' society from which he has been perpetually excluded. It is only when Romeo's father turns up and manages to catch Morell off guard that Morell is finally dispatched from the lives of Gavin, Romeo and their families on a more permanent basis. Joe's intervention leaves Morell crumpled on the road, crying. While Joe returns to make sure that Bill is alright Morell is left, humiliated and rejected once more.

Both fathers are redeemed by their roles as protectors and thus are re-established as the reconstructed patriarch figures while the threat posed by Morell is negated and he is returned to being nothing more than the pitiful social outcast. Although *A Room for Romeo Brass* allows a narrative resolution for the children and their families, it is notable that it is unable to offer any such ending for Morell. The final shot of Morell sees him driving off in his van, clearly distressed. While the narrative resolves his involvement with these families it refuses to offer a resolution for the character himself; the suggestion is that Morell is, like Johnny, destined to remain marginal and dysfunctional. In many ways Morell is abject, the threat that he poses is expunged from Gavin and Romeo's lives but the resolution, or lack of resolution, suggests that the problem he represents is not so easily solved. Morell is desperate to be accepted by his community and has been damaged by the continual rejection and humiliation that his efforts have been met with. Like Johnny he holds problematic attitudes and ideas and in seeking to present them as being bound to his psychological state the film is, in

some ways, more problematic than the deliberately provocative *Naked* not least

because it appears to circumvent some of the most important questions about the

mechanics of misogyny by conflating them with the delusions of a dysfunctional

character. What both films seem to suggest is that these kinds of socially dysfunctional

male characters are the product of a complex set of circumstances and defy any easy

resolution. *A Room for Romeo Brass* follows a similar strategy to *The Full Monty* in

order to offer a fantasy resolution that evades the problematic questions that remain

unanswered. The musical performance of Gavin and Romeo reaffirms the recuperative

bonds of the family as a sanctuary within which the boys are safe from threat but the

fragility of this sanctuary requires a retreat to fantasy and make believe in order to

seem viable.

'I'll Kill you and your slag-shit-cunt-family too:" Violence and Damaged Men

As already noted, representations of damaged, violent masculinities are fairly frequent

in nineties British cinema and are invariably associated with lower working and

underclass men. Among the violent men who might be considered as damaged in some

way are Geoff in *TwentyFourSeven* as well as many of the football hooligans in *ID*

(Phillip Davies, 1995) and characters such as Dave (Ray Winstone) and Julian (Phillip

Davies) in *Face.* All of these men are, in some way, marginalised and alienated; with

the exception of the undercover policeman John (Reece Dinsdale) and some of the key

co-ordinating hooligans in *ID* the men are long term unemployed and, in the absence

of other meaningful forms of community, have turned to the substitute offered by the

football 'firms'. Significantly, what involvement in these firms accords members is a 'meaningful' social role that has been eroded. One of the films in which these themes are more explicitly centralised is Gary Oldman's debut feature *Nil By Mouth* and they are particularly pronounced in the damaged male character of Raymond. From the opening moments of *Nil By Mouth* it is apparent that Raymond represents an unreconstructed form of masculinity; his heavy set body fills the frame as he stands at the bar ordering a large round of drinks. He delivers the drinks to his wife and her family before returning to the table where his male friends are sitting. Raymond is at his most comfortable in the homosocial world of bars and clubs, bragging about sexual conquests, drug and alcohol binges and scrapes with the law; even when he is at home he shows little engagement with his wife and daughter (Leah Fitzgerald). The opening sequences of the film present Raymond as being at the pinnacle of his group's hierarchy. The other men respond to Raymond, with Mark (Jamie Foreman) especially looking to him for approval. It is in these scenes that the misogynistic attitudes of the male characters are most in evidence as the men talk in vernacular terms about women; the attitudes of these men towards women is deeply problematic. Women function as little more than sex objects and domestic servants who are beaten if they disobey, but the extent to which the film encourages complicity with these characters and allows their views about women to remain unchallenged is questionable. Although these men articulate misogynistic attitudes towards women Oldman does not present them uncritically and while the film could be open to a masculinist reading,[43] I would

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[43] Monk, C. (2000).

argue that this is problematised if not negated by the graphic domestic violence that is shown further on.

Nil By Mouth, perhaps more than any of the other films analysed in this thesis, renders the destructive effects of domestic violence in graphic minutiae. The film mobilises the idea of damage as a central thematic concern on two significant levels. Firstly, by framing the narrative as a semi-autobiographical account of director Oldman's upbringing at the hands of an alcoholic, abusive father it draws attention to the authenticity of the kinds of problems and circumstances that are depicted and negotiated in the film.[44] Secondly, and perhaps more significantly for my purposes, the narrative mobilisation of victimhood functions to compel a negotiated reading of the character of Raymond; Raymond is a violent, alcoholic, jealous tyrant whose family live under constant threat of his explosive temper, but he is also a victim of abuse at the hands of his own father and the psychological effects of this position him as trapped in a self-perpetuating cycle of destruction.

Nil By Mouth is a film with domestic violence at the heart of its narrative but what marks it out for criticism by Claire Monk is the way in which the male aspect of the story is fore-grounded for the majority of the film.[45] Despite the fact that it is the women who suffer most in the film, their stories and voices remain marginal and are

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[44] The casting of Laila Morse (Oldman's sister) as Janet further contributes to the conception of the film as being both personal and authentic.
[45] Monk, C. (2000). p.161.

subsumed by the dominance of the homosocial world of Raymond and his cohort.[46]

One of Monk's chief criticisms of the film is that it privileges the violent male voice over the females, thus raising questions about the complicity of the audience in condoning Raymond's behaviour. Although this emphasis on the male voice and experience over the female could be interpreted as encouraging a condoning of Raymond's actions I would argue that the presentation of domestic violence within the film problematises a straightforward reading of his character. Rather than simply negating Raymond's culpability for his actions the film actually presents visceral images of domestic violence and their horrific consequences in such a way that the audience is forced to confront and engage with both the causes and effects of Raymond's actions. The film does not frame the violence as an inconsequential male fantasy in the same way that films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* does, nor does it function to provide an entertaining spectacle. Rather it is intended as a self conscious intervention into debates about the resultant violence of disempowered men. This film, perhaps more than any of the others explored in this chapter, presents the most visceral incarnation of damaged masculinity in the character of Raymond, and the effects of this engagement produce a piece of cinema that is both discomfiting and confrontational. The trauma of cultural and economic disempowerment leads Raymond to assert his physical power over others because it is the only form of power and control that he has left and thus the film suggests that the physical power of violence becomes a crude

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[46] Creeber, G. (2000) notes that it is only in the final stages of the film that the women's voices regain any real form of narrative dominance. 'Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man': Social Class and the Female Voice in *Nil By Mouth*' in Munt, S. *Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change* (London: Cassell). p.p193-205.

substitute for the social and economic power that has been lost.[47] Despite the fact that when Raymond and Valerie are at home Raymond all but ignores his wife and daughter, he is fiercely jealous. It is Raymond's paranoia that leads to the film's most graphic portrayal of domestic violence. The genesis of this scene takes place when Raymond finds Val playing pool with her mother and some friends; Raymond orders her to leave, frog-marching her out to the car. The scene cuts to an image of Val asleep in bed. Raymond is seated at the kitchen table, dressed only in his boxer shorts, nursing a drink and smoking a cigarette. A close up shot of his face conveys the brooding anger that is simmering beneath the surface. He wakes Val up and summons her downstairs where he accuses her of having an affair with one of the men from the pool hall. Val, who is heavily pregnant, denies any wrongdoing but Raymond's rage is unabated. When she proclaims that she 'can't stand' the continual tension between herself and Raymond, his retaliation is vicious. He punches her to the ground and continues to kick her, punctuating each kick with a screamed 'cunt' until she lies motionless on the kitchen floor.

Figure 25: *Nil By Mouth:* Raymond beats Valerie.

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[47] Hill, J. (2004). p.106.

The cinematography is a crucial contributory factor in understanding this scene and the function of violence within the narrative of the film. The viewer is placed both amongst the characters and yet apart from them. We see the rage etched upon Raymond's face as he spits and screams obscenities at his wife; we can see the physical force of his anger as he kicks her; the spit from his mouth and the sweat from his brow mingle together to exaggerate the savagery of the image (see image 25). The camera angles are skewed and the movement jumpy, walls and counters come into shot and obscure the scene, working to defy sadistic voyeurism or audience identification with Raymond and instead creating a sense of discomfort at the brutality that is being witnessed. The camera zooms further out and the shot is framed by the stairwell; the kitchen is further obscured by the distance. We are given glimpses of Raymond standing over Val's supine body; he fiddles with his waistband on his boxer shorts in 'a kind of defiant uncertainty.'[48] The physical distancing of the camera does not work to ease the discomfort of watching; in fact it has the opposite effect. As the camera continues to draw out from the main focus of the kitchen it becomes apparent that, sitting at the top of the stairs, just in view, is Michelle, Val and Raymond's six-year-old daughter. She has witnessed the entire incident, just as we have. What is most notable about this part of the sequence is the way in which Raymond switches from tyrant to father in a split second. Having just beaten her mother into unconsciousness, he reassures his daughter and urges her to return to bed. The sudden switch from raging wife-beater to

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[48] Williams, R. (1997). 'Cinema Doesn't Get More Real Than This' *The Guardian*, 10 Oct. p.6.

caring father forces the contradiction that is central to Raymond's character to come to the fore. From this point onwards the film deploys the tension between agent and victim to create contradiction and to suggest that there are no easy or straightforward ways to interpret this character.

Shortly after this sequence we learn more about Raymond's back story. He is talking to Mark about the violence that he and his mother suffered at the hands of his alcoholic father. The effect of this scene is to suggest that Raymond's behaviour is part of an inherited (and possibly inescapable) cycle of deprivation, addiction and abuse. The fact that Raymond himself is drinking during the conversation implies that the cycles of addiction, poverty and violence are self-perpetuating and, in some senses, inevitable. In a rare moment of reflection Raymond describes the lack of love he experienced as a child, the horror that he felt, watching his father beat his mother and how it felt to live in constant fear of his father's unpredictable temper. Yet Raymond is unable to see how he is replicating exactly the same patterns of behaviour. Raymond describes how his father would get drunk and fall asleep in the chair only to have to be woken up to go to bed. When Valerie describes Raymond's behaviour in exactly the same way later in the film, the patterns of damage and self-destruction that have been passed from father to son are explicated. The conversation between Raymond and Mark is not really deployed as a narrative vehicle for reducing Raymond's culpability, nor does it suggest that male violence can be understood entirely in terms of a loss of social or economic power. Rather, it functions as a way of drawing attention to the complex

ways in which issues such as marginality, disempowerment and social immobility become intertwined with the discursive construction of an urban underclass and the forms of masculinity that are associated with it.

The emotional breakdown that Raymond experiences after Val leaves him and he learns about the loss of their baby is crucial in contributing to the film's political intervention into the debates around violence and discourses of damaged masculinity. In the early part of the film and the scene where Raymond beats Val, his physical strength is emphasised by the way in which he fills the frame. This contrasts with the framing that is used during the scenes leading up to his breakdown. Here Raymond is seated alone in an empty pub; bereft of the homosocial banter and exuberance that has been central to his characterisation thus far, he no longer commands his surroundings but appears lost amongst them. Shortly after this is a scene which is designed to convey the extent to which Raymond's control is unravelling. Continuing to take solace in alcohol, Raymond is alone in the family flat when he breaks down. He rants and raves to himself, he paces up and down the frame of vision like a caged animal. In this sense the violent, controlling abuser becomes almost childlike, needy and pitiful. The conclusion of the film allows a tentative reconciliation between Raymond, Val and her family. The kitchen has been re-fitted by Raymond and for this first time in the film he engages with both Val and Michelle; he is actually there to look after Michelle while Val and her mother visit Billy (Charlie Creed-Mills) in prison. Raymond's apparent commitment to his family is not, however, the reassuring or light-

hearted conclusion that is found in the likes of *The Full Monty*. Rather it functions as a

reminder of the fragility of the peace. In her discussion of domestic violence Andrea

Westlund explains that 'in between periods of high tension, however, life may take on

a semblance of normality, giving the battered woman hope that future bouts of

violence can be avoided and that peace will hold.'[49] In terms of *Nil By Mouth* the lack of

resolution enables the instability and uncertainty to be sustained in such a way that

suggests the problems that the narratives engage with are not easily remedied.

Raymond is alternately abhorrent, pitiful, victim and aggressor and, as such, attempts

at a straightforward or deterministic reading are rendered problematic. The film does

not condone his behaviour; even though it is clearly presenting his story, the extent to

which the audience is encouraged to identify with him is debateable, as I have shown.

In situating him as a victim of familial dysfunction as well as economic and social

disempowerment there is an implicit suggestion that Raymond's violence is

exacerbated by factors that are beyond his individual control. The film does not appear

to negate Raymond's culpability for his actions; indeed through the graphic depiction

of domestic violence and its consequences it brings the extent of damage and

destruction to the fore of the narrative, but it does point to the amalgamation of social,

economic, individual and psychological circumstances that are inevitably part of trying

to understand these violent forms of masculinity.

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[49] Westlund, A. (1999). 'Pre-Modern and Modern Power: Foucault and the case of Domestic Violence' in
Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society (Volume 24:4) p.1047.