

Irony and Authenticity: new lads and underclass youth in nineties British

cinema

Representations of younger men in nineties British cinema tend to fall into two broad categories. On the one hand there are films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* which are part of the new lad culture phenomenon and on the other there are the more serious social realist films such as *TwentyFourSeven* that present narratives focusing on the social and economic marginalisation of unemployed and underclass youth.¹ Where the former group comprise comedies, crime-caper, heist or 'gangster light' films and present a postmodern, or as Claire Monk terms it, 'post-political' configuration of masculinity, the latter offer an explicitly politicised intervention into the social problems through the portrayal of young men who are trapped by inescapable poverty and limited opportunities.² Although these two dominant forms of representation are, in many ways, opposed they both articulate responses to changing social and economic circumstances.

¹ This term is both loaded and contested. For my purposes Ken Roberts' definition is particularly helpful in framing my analysis. He defines underclass using four criteria. He identifies 'the stratum should be disadvantaged relative to, and in this sense beneath, the lowest class in the gainfully employed population.' (p.42). Further, the situation should be 'persistent', possibly spanning generations. He describes the underclass as a 'socio-cultural formation as well as an economic aggregate.' (p.42). Finally he contends that belonging to the underclass becomes 'another impediment, and sufficient in itself even if other obstacles were removed, to significantly reduce its members likelihood of joining the regular employed workforce.' (p43). Roberts, K. (1997). 'Is There an Emerging British 'Underclass'? The Evidence From Youth Research' in MacDonald, R. (ed.) 'Youth the 'Underclass' and Social Exclusion' p.p.42-3.

² Monk, C. (2000). p.160.

The new lad and the underclass lads present very different styles of young British masculinity. The new lad, described by Monk as 'a regressive escape from the demands of maturity,' is characterised by irreverence, irony and humour, whereas the underclass lad, in his social realist setting, was often situated in overtly politicised narratives. This had the effect of foregrounding precisely the agenda that the new lad was rejecting. These two types of masculinity are not as intrinsically opposed to one another as it might first seem. Key to understanding the cultural resonance of both types is the issue of authenticity; the dominant discourse for both configurations involves the capacity to lay claim to being (very different) forms of authentic masculinity. For the new lad this claim to authenticity is bound up with a rejection of the feminised and inauthentic new man; moreover the apparently explicit rejection of politics obscures the ways in which the lad is both 'a convenient and politically motivated construction.'³ The new lad's claims to authenticity come more through posturing and performance than through social context. Social context is, however, key to the ways in which representations of underclass youth construct their authenticity. Invariably these narratives are inextricable from a context shaped by post-industrial decline and the concomitant breakdown of families and communities. Indeed some of the lad films rely upon the same social context but, rather than lamenting the devastation of their loss, films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *Trainspotting* and *Twin Town* appear to celebrate their central protagonist's disenfranchisement as a sub-cultural lifestyle choice.

³ Benwell, B. (2004). p.6.

This chapter explores the contrasting articulation of British youth in the nineties as presented by the social realist and lad films. I seek to examine the ways in which this fixation on young male characters simultaneously problematises and reifies conservative ideas about masculinity. The first section focuses upon the underclass youth and the social realist films in which this form of masculinity is most often found. The primary texts for this discussion are *TwentyFourSeven* and *My Name Is Joe*, these examples being supplemented by material from a range of other films including *Nil By Mouth*, *Boston Kickout* and *Brassed Off*. The second section of the chapter focuses on the manifestation of lad culture within cinematic discourses of British masculinity and uses films including *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *Trainspotting* and *Twin Town* as examples. A key objective for this section of the chapter is to specifically explore the ways in which irony is often mobilised in order to license sexist, xenophobic or homophobic discourses or in order to shore up conservative discourses of gender and the traditionalist notions of masculinity. The final section of this chapter examines how the rhetoric of laddism expanded to include older men for whom a straightforward identification with laddism was implausible. A range of films including *When Saturday Comes* and *Fever Pitch* present men who are perpetually adolescent in outlook, interests and humour and who expect the women that they are involved with to indulge their immaturity as an endearing characteristic.⁴

⁴ The television show *Men Behaving Badly* exemplifies the ways in which lad culture attempted to recast ineptitude or immaturity as endearing. See Whelehan, (2000). p.71.

Getting Shit 24:7: The Underclass lads

Themes of social dereliction and impoverishment are presented from the opening frames of Shane Meadow's *TwentyFourSeven*. The opening image of a disused, overgrown railway provides a visual indication of the social context and political agenda of the film; moreover it conveys the sense of absolute stasis and entrapment that stifles the film's various characters. The camera is static while a young man and his dog meander along. We follow Tim (Danny Nussbaum) as he pursues his errant dog into the overgrown sidings. Hidden in a burnt out wooden hut is a dirty, unkempt man. This man is Alan Darcy (Bob Hoskins) an erstwhile lynch-pin of the local community who has fallen on hard times. Realising that all is not well with his old friend Tim takes Darcy home. As the film cuts to the interior of Tim's house the iconography emphasises the poverty of the characters that the film is focussing on; as seen in figure 4, the furniture is sparse and old fashioned, the decor is dated and the dark, drab kitchen is rendered even bleaker by the low lighting which casts foreboding shadows across the already dull room.

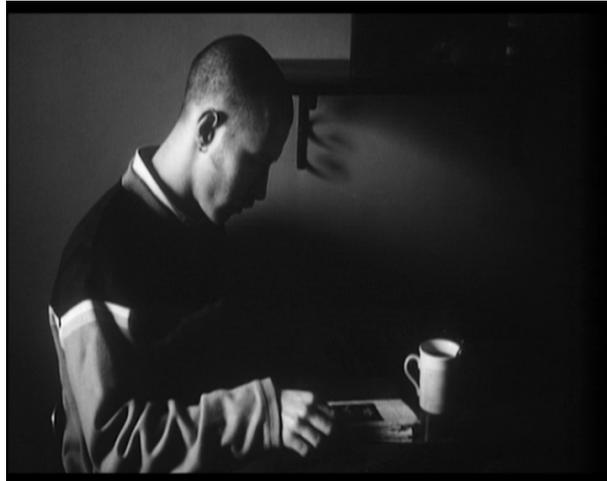


Figure 4: *TwentyFourSeven*: Tim's Kitchen

Passages in Darcy's diary provide the voice over that returns us to the recent past in which the problems besetting the young men of the community first took hold. Darcy's words openly place the blame for the contemporary deprivation in the eighties and the social and economic policies of Thatcherism. A younger looking, better groomed Darcy is seen busily renovating the same wooden structure in which Tim would find him years later. His words, however belie his industrious activity; 'the eighties, a time in which,' he proclaims, 'everything was a boom, a transaction...money was God.' The resurgent affluence to which he refers, however, did not reach the post-industrial heartlands of the Midland regions; while some parts of the country were experiencing exponential economic growth, areas such as Nottingham, where the film is set, were being left behind. The heavy industries that had employed previous generations were being dismantled; despite the vital role that they had played in their communities – socially and economically - these industries had no part in the new economic structure of the nation. The timing of the economic shift inevitably had a more severe impact on

certain generations and the effects, according to Darcy, were disastrous: 'when our town died, we, with our young in hand, were just beginning, but we weren't living.'

The political intervention in Darcy's opening monologue sets the tone for the film and contextualises the narrative of male disenfranchisement within a very specific social and economic climate shaped by the legacy of the Conservative Thatcher government. Furthermore it positions Meadows and *TwentyFourSeven* explicitly within a tradition of politically critical social realist film making. The negative impact of the Conservative government on white, working class men is a recurrent theme for social realist cinema in the nineties and many films foreground an explicit critique of the Thatcher government. *My Name is Joe* (directed by Ken Loach, a long time critic of the Tory government), *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off* all openly comment upon or critique the impact of Thatcherite politics on the lives of white, working class men. Many of these films offer a parallel critique of both Thatcherism as a political ideology and Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. This dual engagement is perhaps evidenced most effectively in *Brassed Off*. Phil (Stephen Tompkinson) is a young father who is on the verge of losing everything: the coal pit that has employed generations of his family is being decommissioned, loan sharks and debt collectors are threatening to take everything from the family home in order to recover outstanding debts, and his wife leaves him, taking their small children with her. In an attempt to regain some control over his life and earn some extra money, Phil resurrects 'Coco the Clown', a children's party entertainer. However, while he is performing for a group of children at a Harvest

festival Phil loses control and his frustration boils over. Against the backdrop of the church filled with offerings from the children's harvest festival Phil delivers a vitriolic monologue: 'So God was creating man. And his little assistant came up to him and he said: "Hey, we've got all these bodies left, but we're right out of brains, we're right out of hearts and we're right out of vocal chords." And God said: "Fuck it! Sew 'em up anyway. Smack smiles on the faces and make them talk out of their arses." And lo, God created the Tory Party.' He goes on 'What's He doing? He can take John Lennon. He can take those three young lads down at Ainsley Pit. He's even thinking of taking my old man. And Margaret bloody Thatcher lives! What's He sodding playing at, eh?'

British social realism is traditionally informed by a socialist stance and as such the level of critique aimed at the Thatcher government is unsurprising. The enduring loathing of Margaret Thatcher is, in itself indicative of culturally pervasive misogyny. The vitriolic critique of Thatcher that is present in this scene is something of a departure from older forms of social realism which, despite being avowedly political, traditionally focused critique on political ideologies rather than personalities. Despite the fact that Thatcher openly discouraged any association with feminism - in fact Faludi goes as far as to claim that Thatcher's success was 'built on other women's failure, and she [had] a vested interest in keeping them in their place.'⁵ The fact that Thatcher was a female prime minister was in itself enough to make her an obvious target for those who were alienated by the political ideologies that came to bear her name.

⁵ Faludi, S. (1993). p.290.

The extent of the impact of the economic shift on working class men is explicitly referred to in many of these films. In *TwentyFourSeven* Darcy labels himself and his neighbours 'forgotten casualties' and 'victims' of a decade of greed and middle class expansion. Throughout this opening monologue the critical discourse of the film is made explicit. The intervening decade has seen further decay within the community. Poverty is embedded within the buildings, the surroundings and the people. Darcy's on-going voice-over about the misleading implications of progress is accompanied by images of small, run down houses. The shot changes to show the prone body of a man sleeping on an old, worn-out sofa while his world-weary wife stands at an ironing board, providing further visual evidence of the damage of interminable unemployment and concomitant poverty about which Darcy speaks. The Nottingham suburb in which the film is set symbolises the decline and poverty that have blighted once prosperous industrial communities all over the midlands and northern parts of England; the men have been broken by unemployment and poverty, the few female characters in the film are presented as similarly trapped. Although it is not the impact of this economic context upon women that the film explores their presence at the peripheries of the narrative maintain the link between discourses of masculinity, femininity and sexuality.⁶ The extent of the broken promises of industrialisation is underlined by Meadows choice of location; Nottingham was the setting for *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*. Despite the disillusion of central protagonist Arthur Seaton the men in the

⁶ A similar incongruity is used in the opening sequences of *The Full Monty*. The opening credits are set against a promotional film from the 70s in which Sheffield is heralded as a town for the future, busy, bustling and prosperous. The silence and dereliction of the now empty steel works that are the setting of the initial scenes of the film exaggerate the extent of these broken promises and the effects that they have had on the men in the community.

area are more fortunate than their nineties counterparts. Seaton and his generation are employed and the film posits the possibilities of social mobility and potential escape. Thus Meadows film contextualises the narratives of working class masculinity within a wider cinematic and social continuum and underlines the extent of the 'broken promises' of post-war reconstruction.⁷

While Darcy's monologue explains how his generation were affected by the cultural and economic changes of the eighties it soon becomes evident that it is the next generation who are the real victims. The world that these lads inhabit could not be further from the consumerist designer labelled milieu of the new lads. These young men, according to Darcy's narrative, were destined to remain lost; they had no hope, no aspiration and no chance of success. As the camera cuts from an image of Tim sat on a mattress on the floor of his bedroom to a group of young men hanging around in a park, smoking, Darcy summarises their situation: 'The lads and the people in this town have been living the same day their whole lives, none of them singly strong enough to break away and say "wait a minute, there must be more than this" no one. That's why nothing ever changes.' This monologue presents the lads as being trapped: the poverty and lack of prospects ultimately precludes them from hegemonic standards of masculinity and in so doing, contains their development within adolescence. The traditional equation of masculinity with work bears no relation to these lads; where the male characters of *Twin Town* and *Trainspotting* may have chosen to reject the burden

⁷ Susan Faludi uses the term 'broken promises' in her study of American masculinity. See Faludi, S. (1999). p.19. See also p.27, 29, & 47.

of work in favour of extended adolescence, the young men in Meadows's film do not have the privilege of choice in this respect. They are, it would seem, fated to a life of poverty and social marginalisation as a result of poor education and the collapse of the industrial base that had employed their forefathers.

Meadows' film rejects the postmodern style of the new lad films both politically and aesthetically. He refuses to turn the issue of male disempowerment into a light hearted comedy in which the lads have chosen to reject employment (as is the case in *Twin Town*) or follow a narrative in which their shambolic attempts at enterprise land them in trouble (as in *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*). Instead Meadows presents the narrative of this Nottingham suburb and the people within it as emblematic of the wider social problems caused by recent social and economic change. Aesthetically the film also counterpoints the slick stylisation of *Trainspotting* or *Lock, Stock*; not only is *TwentyFourSeven* filmed in black and white but the sequences are dominated by long, static shots with unobtrusive editing and as such the film harks back to the style of an older social realist tradition. Further, this style also situates Meadows as a politically driven director more in line with contemporary socialist film makers such as Mike Leigh and Ken Loach rather than his own generational cohort. Where Monk contends that films such as *The Full Monty* or *Brassed Off* 'appear[ed] superficially – but deceptively...to mark a return with a vengeance of the class-consciousness and sense of collectivity and community repressed in the 1980s' Meadows work during the

nineties consciously takes on an unfashionably socialist sentimentality.⁸ The film's claims to authenticity are further cemented through the use of non actors to fill the roles of the lads; although there are a number of established British actors in the cast (Bruce Jones as Tim's father, Jeff, Annette Badland as Tim's mother, Pat and Bob Hoskins as Darcy) the majority of roles were filled by lads from the Sneiton area in which the film was set. The non actor cast of the film gives greater credibility to the authenticity that Meadows wanted to create in telling a story about the housing project he grew up in.⁹

The town's lads are split into two rival groups and one of Darcy's main motivations is to reunite them and lay the quarrels to rest. The issues that dominate the rivalry between the two groups recur in a range of films from the decade (*Nil By Mouth*, *ID*, *Face*, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* are a few examples) and revolve around the persistent need to be seen to conform to a socially sanctioned performance of masculinity and to be respected within the community as well as the compulsion to retaliate to any perceived slight with violence. As the two groups of lads come face to face outside the local chip shop Darcy's continuing voice-over informs us that 'Reputations are so important in a town like this...if your father was a hard man then you're obliged to operate with muscle. Librarians don't pull a lot of sway round here.' A low-level quarrel ensues after the incumbent group spit on their chips in order to prevent the on-coming

⁸ Monk, C. (2000). p. 275. Meadows has continued this as a thematic concern in many of his films including *This Is England*, *Dead Man's Shoes* and *A Room For Romeo Brass*.

⁹ <http://www.filmcritic.com/misc/emporium.nsf/reviews/An-Interview-with-Shane-Meadows> accessed 15th August 2009.

group from taking them. This soon spills over into threats of violence instigated by the new arrivals despite the fact that they are, on the whole, of slighter stature than their rivals; a racist comment from one of the arriving crew sparks a minor scuffle before the two groups split, their acrimonious relationship unresolved. This scene demonstrates how, for Meadows, authenticity comes, in part, through the emphasis on the multicultural, but staunchly homosocial working class milieu in which his film is set. The fractious interaction between the groups is banal and mundane and although it is a fundamental component in constructing an authentic cultural context, Meadows' predominant concern is with the effects of economic disempowerment and as such issues of class, rather than ethnicity, remain the key structuring trajectory for the narrative. The homosocial community of lads that is presented in *TwentyFourSeven* is implicitly heteronormative; in much the same way that the lads are compelled to display and perform a macho masculinity, so too heterosexuality remains unquestioned as the dominant sexual identity. The two gay characters, exchange banter about their (hetero)sexual conquests; it is only at the close of the film that they are seen together, as a couple. Meadows' film, therefore, acknowledges and accepts gayness but contains it and in so doing neuters any potential 'threat' to the heteronormative hierarchy.

Darcy re-forms the town's boxing club partly to bring the two ends of the town together, but more significantly he is driven by a need to give the lads the self respect and sense of purpose that is central to cultural discourses of masculinity but lacking

from the lives of these young men; Darcy's role is one of mentor and facilitator; as Paul Dave explains the lads 'already possess the resources and values that Darcy is seeking to instil in them.'¹⁰ Darcy's work to regenerate the boxing club is as much about his own needs as it is about his altruism and I pick up on this in the chapter on fatherhood. Not only, the film suggests, have these young men been let down by economic change far beyond their control but they are further betrayed by an inadequate education system which has left them without the skills that are vital if they were to stand any chance of success in the new high tech, service economy. The dialogue constantly reinforces the limited education that the lads have received, from the confusion over the salmonella outbreak to the debate between Knighty (James Hooton) and Gadget (Justin Brady) about whether wasps bite or sting. While Meadows plays these snippets of dialogue for a dark comedic value the more serious point is never far from the surface; these lads have been failed by the system at multiple levels. They have been failed by Thatcher's economic policies, failed by the education system and ended up unemployed and trapped in cycles of deprivation, drug taking and subsequent criminalisation. The character of Wesley 'Fag Ash' Fraser (Mat Hand) is emblematic of this life cycle; lacking employment or any sense of direction in life he seeks escape in the form of recreational and prescription drugs. Darcy finds him seated on the floor of his dilapidated flat, half naked and stoned when he is meant to be in court facing charges relating to his substance misuse. Darcy takes it upon himself to represent him and the two of them head off to the court. During the hearing Darcy acts as advocate

¹⁰ Dave, P. (2006). p.85.

for his friend. He argues that the lad has become trapped in a cycle of poverty and criminalisation which he lacks the skills to break.

Once more Meadows uses this scene in order to foreground the sociosomatic symptoms of social deprivation. He tells the panel that it is the situation that Fag Ash is in that is the problem and that his only real crime is 'the degradation of his life'.

Contrary to the aims of the court system, Darcy observes, Fag Ash's cohort will respect him for going to prison and his social standing in the area will actually increase. Serving time in prison becomes a marker of a counter hegemonic form of masculinity that is no longer able to find meaning or definition through employment or other traditional means. Traditional discourses of masculinity which are predicated upon the hegemonic dominance of man as breadwinner and provider/protector for his family have become unfeasible for a generation of young men who have no hope of securing entry into work or meeting any of the other socially sanctioned benchmarks of adult masculinity. Once more Meadows deploys male disempowerment as a structuring device for the film; presenting Fag Ash in this way forecloses any sense of optimism or agency; the shabbiness of his home (as seen in figure 5) underscores his underclass identity. The character of Fag Ash functions as a counterpoint to *Trainspotting's* anti-hero, Renton (Ewen MacGregor). The latter is able to overcome his heroin addiction, move to London and begin a new life relatively easily whereas Fag Ash remains trapped and precluded from the liberating potential of Renton's social mobility.



Figure 5: *TwentyFourSeven*: Fag Ash's Living Room

Fag Ash's story is also evidence of another way in which Meadows' film departs from the frivolities of lad culture; where *Twin Town* plays the drug taking antics of the Lewis Twins (Rhys and Lyr Ifans) for comedy in sequences where they arrange drug deals with elderly clients or take hits from a bong while sharing a bath, *TwentyFourSeven* (like Ken Loach's *My Name is Joe*) does not accord any glamour to Fag Ash's situation. Fag Ash is a tragic and isolated figure who is saved by Darcy's intervention. The scene in which Darcy finds Fag Ash comatose after an overdose further contributes to this portrayal of the lad as a tragic victim rather than the knowing anti-hero typified by Renton and Begbie (Robert Carlyle) in *Trainspotting*; furthermore, as Dave points out, this scene, which is characterised by 'tenderness and mutuality' is crucial in establishing a lexicon of working and underclass culture that is differently inflected from the dominant leitmotifs of violence and aggression.¹¹ After failing to get a response to the doorbell Darcy peers in through Fag Ash's letter box. The reverse shot shows Fag Ash slumped in

¹¹ Dave, P. (2006). p.85,

an armchair, apparently unconscious. When Darcy breaks in the extent of Fag Ash's deprivation becomes apparent. The arm chair in which he has collapsed is the only piece of furniture in the room. The wallpaper is tattered and torn; a door is propped against a wall, being used as a make shift pin board; the curtains consist of sheets hung over a line; there is a small table in front of the arm chair; on it is a range of drug taking paraphernalia. Darcy stares from the table to Fag Ash's prone body as the reality of the situation sinks in. He seems unsure of what to do and takes his hat off in a gesture that suggests he thinks his friend to be dead. The social realist style of the film positions this scene as an unequivocal indictment of how economic and social disempowerment can lead to drug addiction.



Figure 6: *TwentyFourSeven*: Darcy bathes Fag Ash

The scene cuts to the bathroom where Darcy is stripping Fag Ash to bathe him (see figure 6). The bathroom, like the main living room is in a poor state of repair: tiles are chipped, the plaster on the walls is damp and the only light comes from a small

window. The claustrophobia created by the lack of space in the bathroom contributes to the underlying meanings being created in this sequence which directly counterpoint the more anarchic approaches to drug abuse found in more mainstream, laddish films such as *Twin Town*. Darcy carries Fag Ash to an improvised bed (a mattress on the floor) and lies him down. Framed from a high angle Fag Ash's foetal position emphasises his vulnerability which in turn foregrounds the film's preoccupation with the tragic consequences of social change on the young men. There is no dialogue in this sequence only the diegetic sound of the shower running and of Fag Ash's laboured breathing. There is, however, a down-beat bluesy sound track (*Crazy* by Sun House) which adds to the sombre mood of the sequence. The effect of this is to foreground the lyrics of the track which further underscore the articulation of broken promises and wasted lives that seem to blight the young male characters of Meadows' film.

In both visual style and use of music *TwentyFourSeven* departs from the upbeat clubbing glamour of *Human Traffic* or the cult surrealism of *Trainspotting*. *TwentyFourSeven* delivers an unequivocal antidrug message which, in contrast to the glamorisation or ambivalence of films such as *Human Traffic* or *Twin Town*, feels fairly conventional. After this episode Fag Ash rejects drug taking and, by the film's close, he has a child and a partner and has apparently overcome his addiction. Here again, *TwentyFourSeven* departs from the versions of drug culture as represented in the more laddish films; these films, as I will show in the section on new lad cinema, are characterised by a refusal to adopt a moral stance on the drug taking escapades of

their characters instead, opting to deflect potential criticism about the glamorisation of drug addiction through the use of irony and comedy. The portrayal of drug use seems to me to be contingent upon the structuring functions of class and genre in nineties British cinema. Within the social realist films such as *TwentyFourSeven*, *My Name is Joe* and *Nil By Mouth* drug taking is presented as a symptomatic of disempowerment and poverty. The drug use tends to be presented as potentially lethal and the substances in question often include hard drugs such as heroin and the films are, by and large, concerned with the consequences of substance abuse and addiction.

This contrasts with the ways in which the laddish films in particular engage with drug and substance use; although *Trainspotting* is based around the degradation of life as a heroin addict, the social context is refracted very differently and this is evidenced in the narrative trajectory of Renton in particular. Although Renton is clearly coded as belonging to the underclass this is not critiqued but rather commodified by the film;¹² where *TwentyFourSeven* makes explicit connections between social context and drug use *Trainspotting* does not explicate or indeed explore these links, as I will demonstrate in more depth further on in this chapter. Renton's addiction is presented as being recreational use that simply got out of hand; in presenting his drug addiction in this way the film is able to present an easy, if problematic, recovery and resolution. Similarly *Twin Town* and *Human Traffic* present a deliberately a-political stance on

¹² As Karen Lury (2000) points out '*Trainspotting*, rather than a commentary becomes a brand itself, offering a distinctive visual aesthetic, its extension into the market of posters, t-shirts, video sales and cds.' She elaborates pointing out that each character on the poster was numbered with the effect of emphasising the characters status as commodities. p. 106

substance abuse; the latter presents the endemic use of ecstasy as a taken-for-granted component of club culture and the former deploys the drug fuelled antics of the Lewis twins as symptomatic of their pre-oedipal status; I return to this further on in the chapter.

Drug taking is also a central part of the focus on underclass lads in both *My Name is Joe* and *Nil By Mouth*. In the latter the character Billy is a heroin addict who steals from his family to fund his habit. Like *TwentyFourSeven*, *Nil By Mouth* presents Billy's (Charlie Creed-Mills) addiction as bound up with the marginalisation of underclass young men. One note worthy sequence in the film shows Billy's mother, Janet (Laila Morse) driving him to his dealer and looking on, helpless, as her son injects himself in the back of her van. As with *TwentyFourSeven* the scene is pared down. The low angle shots of Billy running up flights of stairs in run down flats to meet his dealer narrow the stairwell and increase the sense of entrapment. The greys and blues of the scene are rendered even bleaker by the torrential rain pour that soaks Billy and conveys the despondency of the situation. To a greater extent than any of the films discussed in this chapter thus far, *Nil By Mouth* gives greater narrative space to female characters. The story is, undoubtedly Ray's, but Janet, Valerie and Kath continue an established tradition of female companionship and community within British cinema.



Figure 7: *Nil By Mouth*: Billy injects heroin while Mum, Janet, looks on.

The relationship between Janet and Billy is one of the few examples in nineties British cinema where the mother son relationship is given any real screen space. Although it remains very much one of the secondary narratives the relationship between mother and son is useful in understanding the wider issues that the film raises about class, generation and gender. While Janet's tone towards her son is harsh the close-up shots of Janet's face as she watches her son prepare to inject himself betray her desperation and sadness at his situation. Intercutting between static close up shots of Janet's face and quicker, hand held shots of Billy's frantic activity in the back of the van renders his mother's sadness palpable as she looks on, unable to save her son from the cycles of poverty and addiction that he is trapped in (see figure 7). When he is finally ready to inject the heroin Janet turns away, unable to watch anymore. Billy's drug use precludes him from attaining the independence that hegemonic discourses of masculinity are predicated upon. The sound during this scene further distinguishes Oldman's portrayal of underclass deprivation and substance abuse from the likes of *Human Traffic*, *Twin Town* and *Trainspotting*. The rain pelts down on to the roof of the van and the soundtrack provided by soul singer Frances Ashman emphasises the predicament of

both heartbroken mother and her addict son. *Human Traffic* deliberately refutes a moralising standpoint on the issue of recreational drug use while *Twin Town* indulges the drug fuelled antics of the Lewis Twins, using them for comedy rather than seeking to critique or problematise the social marginalisation of the characters. *Nil By Mouth* was celebrated for its unflinching, unsentimental portrayal of a troubled family in Deptford, London and, in the same way that Shane Meadows' *TwentyFourSeven* borrowed from his own experiences growing up in the post-industrial suburbs, *Nil By Mouth* was marketed as a semi-autobiographical account of director Gary Oldman's childhood and goes some way to explaining the way in which the film presents the psychic and personal consequences of drug and alcohol abuse. Crucially *TwentyFourSeven*, *Nil By Mouth* and *My Name Is Joe* construct substance abuse as bound up with economic deprivation. In this way they are clearly at odds with the more affluent recreational users of *Human Traffic* in particular.

The consequences of drug addiction on marginalised young men are also dealt with in Ken Loach's film, *My Name Is Joe*. While *TwentyFourSeven* allows Fag Ash to recover from his addiction and take on a socially sanctioned form of adult masculinity in becoming a father (thus validating Darcy's qualities as a surrogate father figure in the process), *My Name Is Joe* refuses to allow the palatable outcome of a happy resolution. The lad in question in this film is Liam (David McKay) a recovering heroin addict who lives in one of Glasgow's deprived housing projects. This character is rather different from both Fag Ash and Billy; he is already a father to Scott (Scott Hannah) and in a

relationship with Sabine (Anne Marie Kennedy). Like Fag Ash and Billy, Liam is represented as trapped and unable to break the cycles of deprivation and addiction that surround him despite his best efforts. It is Joe (Peter Mullan), a recovering alcoholic who takes on the role of surrogate father figure to Liam. Liam's credentials as a positive incarnation of post-feminist fathering are constantly alluded to throughout the film; the young father is seen playing with his son in the park and his wife, Sabine, eulogises his parental dedication to the health visitor, Sarah (Louise Goodall). The two young parents are juxtaposed against one another; Liam is, in many ways, typical of post-feminist father figure in that he is demonstrative and clearly involved in the day-to-day care of his son. Sabine's inadequacy as a mother is used to underline Liam's potential as a father. Where he is presented as doing his best to stay clean and make a life for his family Sabine steals prescription pads, verbally abuses the medical professionals who try to help her and works as a prostitute in order to fund her addiction. As a result of Sabine's addiction Liam becomes indebted to a group of local drug dealers. Against his own better judgement, and Joe's wishes, he agrees to work off the debt because he has no other way of paying it.

The character of Liam is trapped. Even when Joe gives him money to escape from the threats of the dealers he has nowhere to go; he can't bring himself to take Scott from his mother but knows he can't take her with them either. Like Fag Ash, Liam has no family and no support network beyond Joe who, by this stage in the narrative has started drinking again and, consumed by his own addiction, turns his back on the

young father. As the gang members pull up outside Joe's tenement block Liam runs out of options. The image switches from close ups of Liam's trembling hands and fluid hand-held shots of Liam's frantic movements around the darkened flat to static images of Joe, slumped in his chair in a vodka-induced stupor. Joe's failure to protect and help Liam when he needs it most functions as a symbol for the wider systemic and institutional failures that have left Liam desperate. In contrast to earlier parts of the film where Liam plays outside with his young son these scenes are poorly lit. In much the same style as is seen in *Nil By Mouth* a low angle is used to heighten the sense of claustrophobia and entrapment as Liam prepares to take his own life rather than have it taken from him by the pursuing gang. Loach's film functions as a counterpoint to the frivolity of the laddish films and their apparent acceptance of drug taking by refusing to provide a positive resolution for the character of Liam and showing the tragedy and degradation of drug use.

As in *TwentyFourSeven* Liam is part of a cohort who have been most severely affected by the economic changes of recent years. None of the lads are employed; as is the case in Meadows' film, they are simply drifting through life at the margins of a society without the skills or resources to escape. Where *TwentyFourSeven* portrayed a range of fathers, the boys in Liam's football team appear to have no real family ties beyond that offered by recovering alcoholic, Joe. The only central character with a stable job is Sarah, a community health care worker who looks after Liam, Sabine and baby Scott. While Joe does his best to provide a role model for the lads in the football team, his

position as a role model is precarious; he is as alienated from normative versions of masculinity as the young lads. He is unemployed and gets into trouble with the Benefits Agency for working illegitimately while claiming unemployment benefit, he has no family ties and while he is trying to break free from the cycles of deprivation and alcoholism he struggles to become entirely disassociated from the criminal gang that he was once involved with. Even though Joe's re-entry into the criminal gang is done in a misguided attempt to protect Liam from harm, rather than a direct result of his own actions, Joe's failure to break his links with the past effects a cautionary tone about how difficult it is for these men to escape the destructive cycles which frequently go hand in hand with social and economic disempowerment. In many ways *My Name is Joe* takes the sentiments expressed in *TwentyFourSeven* even further. In situating the central characters as victims and denying any positive resolution to their narrative Loach's film is steeped in his typically belligerent socialist politics; Liam's death is used to signal the extent to which young men have been let down by the convergent forces of Thatcherism, deindustrialisation and economic poverty. That Liam is presented as a devoted and caring father adds further poignancy and is in keeping with some of the dominant dictates of post-feminist parenting which frequently recycle narratives in which the father is the 'better' parent.

Out of all of the lads in the films featured in this section, Liam's story is perhaps the most tragic. Where the lads in *TwentyFourSeven* lack the means to break the cycles of poverty and marginalisation Liam's status as a father is mobilised to motivate the

character's desire to build a better life. In some ways *My Name Is Joe* tries to imbue fatherhood with the kind of recuperative potential which, as the next chapter will show, is more regularly associated with middle class fathers. Being a father gives Liam the kind of hope that is lacking in *TwentyFourSeven* but, ultimately, it doesn't save him. His struggle remains a futile struggle to escape from the cycles of poverty and social marginalisation but his death is made more tragic by the fact that he is a young father. Despite a lack of family, role models or any kind of meaningful assistance, Liam understands that he must do something to provide a better life (and to become a better role model) for his own young son. The moment when Liam decides that he is unable to escape the cycles of drugs, violence and criminality that have shaped his life so far is the point at which he chooses to commit suicide in the belief that his son is better off without a father than with a one who can only ever be a negative role model. The tragedy of *My Name is Joe* is in the failure on Joe's part to resist the 'forces that are antipathetic to notions of homosocial loyalty, but also through his own tendency towards violence and alcoholic dependency.'¹³ Within the context of the discourses of fatherhood that were circulating in the nineties this narrative has a particularly poignant resonance; becoming a father leads Liam to try to change his life, he tries to make a fresh start when he comes out of prison. He does his best (within his limited ability) to provide for his son and is clearly invested in doing all he can to help Scott's development and happiness (as the anecdote about him reading or the scenes of the young family in the park show) and yet this is not enough to help him escape the cycles

¹³ Leggott, J. (2004). p.166.

of violence, drugs and criminality that are frequently portrayed as an inevitable part of impoverished communities. *My Name is Joe* can thus be read as a contrast to films such as *TwentyFourSeven*, *Brassed Off* or *The Full Monty* in that there is no resolution, even in symbolic form, on offer.

All of the films discussed thus far deal the problems faced by young, unemployed men. The marginalisation of these lads is inscribed into their surroundings which, as Darcy puts it 'cry out second-hand and poor'. All of these films intervene into the social and political discourse about inner city poverty, the collapse of the industrial sector, the failure of the Conservative government to protect the people who were most affected as a result of these economic shifts. In locating the problems faced by young male characters such as Tim, Fag Ash, Liam and Billy the films situate their narratives as authentic representations of the kinds of situations being faced by communities and men in the most deprived areas of the UK. By maintaining a voice that is often staunchly politicised these films reject the postmodern frivolity and ambivalence that shapes the narratives of the new lad films. One noteworthy anomaly in terms of the social realist representations of younger men is *Boston Kickout* (Paul Hills, 1995). In many ways this film operates as a median between the main case studies from this section and those that figure in the next. Where the films that I have discussed thus far have focussed on underclass, socially excluded characters, *Boston Kickout* is the story of a group of young lads from a lower middle class part of Stevenage. The film presents the various emotional and familial problems faced by the boys growing up in this town

within a social realist mode and deals with a range of social problems. Where the houses in the other films in this section are characterised by their shabbiness the characters of *Boston Kickout* are clearly better off. Rather than offering an overt political critique this film is more of a coming of age narrative which focuses on the lives of a group of young lads as they finish college and make decisions about the rest of their lives. Ted (Andrew Lincoln) disappears after crashing a car into a shop window, Matt (Nathan Valente) gets married, Steve (Richard Hanson) has an emotional breakdown and Phil (John Simm) weighs up his options – working in a dead-end job, going to university with no guaranteed job at the end or taking part in a robbery planned by a local wannabe gangster. Clearly this film departs from the more familiar territory for social realism and the young men in this film are more socially mobile and thus their opportunities and options are presented as beyond the reaches of the underclass lads. Significantly too, this film has a greater thematic engagement with sex and relationships and as such allows the central female character greater prominence than is seen in films such as *Twin Town* and *TwentyFourSeven*. Despite the relative affluence of the characters in *Boston Kickout* the film does not readily embrace the consumerist discourses of choice that were centralised in lad culture instead positing it (most obviously through the character of Phil) as being simultaneously limited and limiting.

While social realism maintains a strong tradition in British film making it is notable that none of the films included in this section had the kind of commercial success enjoyed

by *Trainspotting* or *The Full Monty*. While these films might not yield the same profits as some of the 'post-political' films from the decade they do provide an alternative discourse of Britishness and British masculinity that is shaped by the desire to question, query and critique those problems that do not fit with the 'cool Britannia' notion of 'new' Britain. They are clearly part of a longer cinematic lineage of socially aware, politicised film making and as such they must be seen as part of a wider continuing narrative of Britishness; they create meaning within this context. However, the films that I examine in the following section are also part of a wider cinematic heritage and draw from established tropes and genres of British cinema to rather different effect.

Irony and the problematic politics of the 'new' lad films

When the figure of the 'new' lad began to circulate in British culture in the mid-nineties he was cast as a rejoinder to the 'inauthentic' new man'; where the latter was constructed to accommodate feminist ideas about gender (and thus inevitably became associated with a 'softening' of masculinity). The 'new' lad was positioned as a rebuff, a re-visioning of traditional notions of masculinity which were in turn posited as more 'authentic' than the new man, despite the fact that both models are essentially more 'hyper-real' (media inventions) than 'real' lived identities.¹⁴ Thus the claims that lad culture represented a more authentic configuration of masculinity takes a very different form from that articulated in the films that featured in the previous section. Where the social realist representations of young men and lads featured tragic

¹⁴ See Whelehan, I. (2000). p.p. 58-76; Edwards, T. (2006). p.p.36-44; Gill, R. (2003).

narratives of wasted lives and fore-grounded issues about the links of poverty, criminality and drug use in a poignant or confrontational way, those films that are part of the cycle of new laddism are deliberately ambiguous, refusing to engage in political critique or represent any of these activities as worthy social concerns. Instead the 'authenticity' of the new lad was constructed and performed via a prism of 'natural' and absolute gender difference which in turn facilitated a clear rejection of feminist politics.¹⁵ New lad films, like those of the previous section, also feature unemployed lads or lads who are involved in minor criminal activities. However, rather than presenting their narratives in a realist mode the films that I focus on in this section present the markers of disempowerment and marginalisation through a knowing or ironic mode which, contrary to the social realist examples, works to foreclose serious political critique.¹⁶

In emphasising the ambiguous or multivocal possibilities presented by the ironic new lad these films are both postmodern and post-feminist. The cinematic new lad is implicated in what Angela McRobbie terms the 'double entanglement' of post-feminism (in that they rely upon an understanding of feminist ideas in order to eschew them) while also appearing to simultaneously destabilise and reconstruct discourses of

¹⁵ Benwell (2003) describes the way in which irony and knowingness work to create both ambiguity and what she terms 'constructed certitude' through the processes of 'casting out its other.' (p.17). The new lad films demonstrate her point; their gender politics are evasive, moments of misogyny are bifurcated with a knowing humour that Angela McRobbie (2007) would understand as part of the double entanglement of post feminism, but these moments serve another purpose as well. In constructing a sense of definite gendered identity based around absolute difference from femininity the films delineate the boundaries of masculinity and work to create a sense of certainty which actively repudiates the politics of new man.

¹⁶ Jackson, P. Stevenson, N. & Brooks, K. (2001). p.104.

masculinity.¹⁷ An attempt to understand the ideological construction of new lad masculinity and its deployment within British cinema in the nineties from a feminist perspective is fraught with difficulty; the 'failure' to get the joke becomes evidence of an anachronistic political agenda which has failed to understand the (purportedly) post-political stance of laddism. As Linda Hutcheon explains, 'irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who 'get' it and those who don't.'¹⁸ As Hutcheon goes on to demonstrate, irony is as easily appropriated in such a way that it legitimates rather than challenges structures of ideology and power.¹⁹ Further, as Benwell points out, lad culture 'explicitly circumvented the whole issue of feminism by constructing it as "irrelevant".²⁰ The ideological construction of this trope of masculinity is inherently contradictory; as Whelehan points out, 'everything about the new lad suggests anxiety about the future of the male,'²¹ while at the same time appearing to construct 'certain or unambiguous narratives' of contemporary forms of masculine identity.²² This purposeful instability and ambiguity is sustained through the machinations of such double-edged humour within both the films and the wider cultural perception of lad culture as being inherently ironic. The eschewal of sincerity that characterised the cinematic new lad contrasts with the explicitly political stance of the social realist narratives; the new lad's flippancy is central to his construction as a postmodern version of masculinity which is, in turn, characterised by depthlessness

¹⁷ Benwell, B. (2004).

¹⁸ Hutcheon, L. (1994). p.2.

¹⁹ See 'Introduction: The Scene of Irony' in Hutcheon, L. (1994).

²⁰ Benwell, B. (2004). p.6.

²¹ Whelehan, I. (2000). p.73.

²² Benwell, B. (2004). p.6.

and a concentration on style and surface over political intervention and contemplative narratives.²³ The films that I explore in this section must be understood within a wider context of lad culture with its intrinsically knowing irony that relies upon ambiguity and multiplicity but at the same time acknowledges the specificity of cinematic articulations of new laddism. As a media form cinema operates around a distinct set of codes and conventions and these necessarily augment the configurations of laddism that are found within films. The films that I examine in this section deploy an understanding of lad culture as ironic and playful but tend to employ irony as a strategic narrative function rather than being consistently and constantly ironic.

Visually the lad films tend to be very different to the social realist films discussed in the previous section. Where social realist films are characterised by naturalistic lighting, unobtrusive, continuity editing and purposely 'under-performed' dialogue, those films that I focus on in this section typically feature highly stylised editing techniques (slow motion, accelerated action, freeze frames and other post-production effects), a knowingly over-the-top patois and pop-culture soundtrack.²⁴ Further, these films are all characterised by their relationship to consumer culture and commodity signifiers whether this is the sharp-suited fashion of Ed and his friends, the consumption of

²³ Hill, V. & Every, P. (2001). 'Postmodernism and the Cinema' in Sim, S. (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (London: Routledge). p.101.

Jameson, F. (1992). *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso).

²⁴ In this way films such as *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* or *Trainspotting* are typical of postmodern cinema in the deliberate foregrounding of surface and style over intervention or social critique. The lack of agenda or critique is what leads Claire Monk to term these films 'post-political' (1999) and is a key way in which these films contrast to their contemporary social realist counterparts. p.160.

heroin and popular culture by the *Trainspotting* lads or the obsessive music and book collection of Paul Ashworth, the men in these films have a relationship to consumerism that is not on offer to the characters in social realist films.²⁵ *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* is a film that has, partially due to the timing of its release and the public personas of best friend duo of director Guy Ritchie and producer Matthew Vaughn,²⁶ become synonymous with New Lad culture and encompasses all of these elements as well as featuring a cast which included pop star Sting, and football hard-man and lad icon Vinnie Jones as well as Lenny Mclean, a one-time East End gangster and bare knuckle boxer turned actor.²⁷ In many ways *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* continues a cinematic lineage of the gangster figure from films such as *Get Carter* (Mike Hodges, 1971) or *The Long Good Friday* (John MacKenzie, 1980) and this celebratory pop-culture nostalgia is, for Whelehan, a defining aspect of lad culture.²⁸ In casting McLean in the role of Barry 'The Baptist', Ritchie strategically deploys a nostalgic impulse for the mythologized discursive construction of sixties East London gangland and in doing so invokes a series of assumptions and expectations regarding gendered performances. The world of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* is almost exclusively male and is aggressively macho, deploying what Samir Ibrahim terms 'retro-macho culture' through the various characters and the 'hard man' or gangster stars

²⁵ Edwards, T. (2006). p.41.

²⁶ The two men went on to consolidate their credentials as living the lads ideal by marrying Madonna and supermodel Claudia Schiffer respectively.

²⁷ McLean used the pseudonym 'The Guv'nor' and was known for his association with the East end criminal fraternity including the Krays, Ronnie Biggs and Charles Bronson and thus bringing these associations to the film further draws upon the rich cultural legacy of the East End gangster.

²⁸ Whelehan, I. (2000).p.64.

that play central characters.²⁹ Barry 'the Baptist' (see figure 8) earned his moniker because of his propensity to use drowning as a way of encouraging debt defaulters to pay their dues; Big Chris is also employed as a debt collector for Hatchet Harry and, like Barry, is not afraid to use violence in order to achieve his objective. Both men are physically imposing and the film draws upon their intertextual reputations as hard man footballer and former criminal / bare knuckle boxer in order to emphasise the unreconstructed 'authentic' masculinity that they represent. These characters function to assert a celebration of unreconstructed masculinity which has remained untouched by feminism and thus mobilise a nostalgic recuperation of authentic masculinity which circumvents any need to engage with it.



Figure 8: *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*: Lenny McLean and Barry 'The Baptist'

²⁹ Ibrahim, S. (2006). *A Cultural Studies Analysis of Guy Ritchie's Snatch* Seminar paper published via www.grin.com and www.google.com (<http://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=3pRQSn7i-84C&oi=fnd&pg=PT13&dq=%22lock,+stock+and+two+smoking+barrels%22&ots=-GbF46DJqM&sig=vWqFpW4s3x7b3A4Ns9AJzx0Cm8A#v=onepage&q=%22lock%2C%20stock%20and%20two%20smoking%20barrels%22&f=false>) accessed 18th September 2009.

The postmodern style of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* is established from the very beginning of the film through a series of vignettes which introduce us to the various groups involved in the story. The sequences are differentiated through the use of both colour and music; a menacing electric guitar soundtrack introduces the group who represent the main rivals to Ed and his cohort while the introduction to the middle class dope growers is accompanied by a reggae theme.³⁰ The film quickly establishes the laddish credentials of the four main protagonists; Ed (Nick Moran) is a card sharp, Bacon, according to the narration 'knows that his days of selling stolen goods on street corners are numbered,' Tom (Jason Flemyng) is a wheeler-dealer whose grocery shop is a front for the more profitable pursuit of fencing stolen goods, and Soap (Dexter Fletcher) is a chef who is proud of his job and 'even more proud of the fact that it's legal.' Whereas *My Name Is Joe* presented a narrative that portrayed the desperation of a young lad caught up in debt to a local mobster, *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* plays a similar scenario for comedy. Rejecting a politicised agenda *Lock, Stock* takes the marginal status of the main characters for granted and presents it as a 'cool' performance of supposedly authentic masculinity rather than a social problem with potentially fatal consequences. One particularly striking example of how *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* subverts the iconography of poverty through irony is in the scene where we see inside Ed and the lad's flat for the first time. The space is a cramped room that is cluttered and messy but sparsely furnished. The refrigerator is old and rusting, the walls are shabby and damp. When a train passes by overhead the

³⁰ The soundtrack features a number of 70s stars and hits which is in keeping with the nostalgic aspects of lad culture that Whelehan draws attention to in [Overloaded](#).

electricity flickers. These images are not far removed from those seen inside the homes of *TwentyFourSeven* but Ritchie treats them with what Benwell might term ‘a knowing gloss of irony’ in order to subvert the obvious connotations of poverty into an ironically comic moment (figure 9).³¹



Figure 9: *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*: Ed's Living Room

The performance of the lads within this scene is a key way in which this scene deploys strategic irony to subvert the connotations of the room; where the lads in *TwentyFourSeven*, for example, are portrayed as trapped, hopeless and resigned Ed and his friends are *choosing* to rent the place and their ability to return to more salubrious domestic arrangements is signalled through the ways in which the financial position of each of the group is articulated at the outset. Soap, Bacon and Tom are all introduced to the audience while they are in their respective work settings and Ed's father is a wealthy businessman with the means to take care of his son if he should

³¹ Benwell, B.(2003). 'Introduction: Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines' in Benwell, B. (ed.) *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines* (London: Blackwell Publishing). p.13.

chose to do so. The irony within the scene then comes through the performances of the various characters and the incongruous juxtaposition of their choice with their potential; in other words, the audience understands that Ed and his friends do not have to live in these conditions, the trappings of poverty are rendered superficial and are further counterpointed by the £25,000 investment each of the group has made to the up-coming card game. Ed is positioned in the centre of the frame counting the money. In contrast there is a moment within *TwentyFourSeven* where Fag Ash and Gadget argue about the change from a packet of frozen fish fingers; for these lads a small amount of money matters a great deal whereas Ed and his friends are in a position where not only can they access considerable sums of money but they are prepared to gamble with it.

In a series of different ways *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* appears to subvert traditional discourses of masculinity by transferring some of its most central notions such as responsibility to and provision for family onto the pseudo familial arrangements of the criminal fraternity. While *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* might appear to subvert hegemonic ideals of masculinity it manages to perpetuate a different, but equally entrenched association of masculinity with violence, power and machismo where drinking and drug taking become celebrated markers of an unapologetically unreconstructed masculinity.

The opening scene of the film shows Bacon bragging about the 'hand made in Italy, hand stolen in Stepney' jewellery that he is selling on an illegal market stall. Bacon's vernacular pays homage to the traditional east end market trader patter; his quick speech is littered with rhyming slang cultural references (such as 'these haven't seen daylight, moonlight, Israelite or Fanny by the Gaslight') and the type of 'jokey' sexism ('I took a bag home last night and she cost me a lot more than a tenner...') that is typical of lad culture. This snappy, witty dialogue is a direct contrast to that which is found in the social realist films of the previous section and is indicative of the different relationships that these two cinematic forms have with notions of authenticity. For the social realist films the authenticity of their male characters comes in part through the erratic pace of the dialogue that is designed to resemble improvisation whereas the authenticity of the performances in *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* comes through a simulacrum of East End cockney dialect which has come to be known as 'mockney' due to its fake, over the top stylisation of London parlance. Once more this nostalgic evocation of the mythologized East End culture functions to glamorise the laddish masculinities of the group. In drawing on a tradition of East End market trader as 'rough diamond' masculinity, the opening scenes establish Bacon (and more importantly) Ed as likeable and well intentioned 'jack-the-lads' who get out of their depth.

Benwell claims that irony fulfils a 'strategic disclaimer' in laddish magazines such as *Loaded* and *FHM* and it functions similarly within the narrative of *Lock, Stock and Two*

Smoking Barrels, rendering some of the potentially offensive material jocular, thus foreclosing the potential for political critique or objection;³² to offer comment or observation about the problematic implications of this humour immediately places the commentator outside of the cultural frame as Hutcheon's argument demonstrates.³³

Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels deliberately deploys irony at various narrative moments as I have already shown, but there are several moments in the film where claims of irony do not negate deeply offensive stereotypes and ideas. *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* relies upon an understanding of lad culture as jokey and ironic in order to licence much of its humour but a number of moments are more straightforwardly xenophobic, homophobic or misogynistic. The butt of the most xenophobic jokes is Nick 'The Greek'. Not only is his appearance on screen frequently accompanied by music from *Zorba The Greek* (Michael Cacoyannis, 1964) he is also referred to as 'that greasy wop, shistos, pesevengi, gamouri Greek bastard' by Rory Breaker. The xenophobic dimension to this character is furthered by his portrayal as clumsy, sly and stupid. While the film might, on the one hand, deploy strategic irony in the construction of Big Chris' character (the violent, caring father) for example, I contend that the characterisation of Nick 'The Greek' is less ironic than it is offensive stereotype. The fact that the film is able to regurgitate such objectionable ideas demonstrates how it relies upon a cultural understanding of lad culture as entirely ironic in order to get away with articulating deeply problematic politics while closing down the potential for critique.

³² Benwell, B. (2004). p.6.

³³ Hutcheon, L. (1994). p.2.

A similar case can be made with regards to the portrayal of the Liverpoolian thieves, Gary (Victor McGuire) and Lenny (Stephen Callender-Ferrier). Guy Ritchie takes the cultural stereotype of 'scousers' literally in the construction of the former pair, drawing directly on a tradition of media representation of Liverpoolians as gauche petty criminals. Gary and Lenny are presented as unsophisticated, small time robbers who are out of their depth in their dealings with Harry and Barry. Ritchie draws on a cultural repertoire that has been established in the popular press as well as in television programmes such as *Bread*, *Brookside* and Harry Enfield's comedy characters 'The Scousers' in order to create these characters. In keeping with the stereotype they are dressed in track suits and Lenny sports a spectacularly bouffant perm. They are presented as hopelessly dim-witted; Gary admonishes Lenny for torturing the elderly owners of the stately home that they burgle, exclaiming: 'You twat!...Can't you see they've got no money, they can't even afford new furniture!' The construction of these characters and their narrative trajectory within the film are, in many ways, a straightforward regurgitation of offensive cultural stereotypes that lack the complexity or duplicity that irony would demand. Ritchie's portrayal of the pair is deeply derogatory; they are unremittingly stupid and totally cowardly, neither wishing to be the one to admit to Barry that they have been unable to retrieve the lost guns.

The film once more draws upon an implicit understanding of its position as a jokey, ironic film in an attempt to neuter the offensiveness of these characters and delegitimize meaningful critique but this does not negate the crudeness of their

construction or the straightforward, unironic deployment of cultural stereotypes based around provincial misconceptions and regional variances.



Figure 10: *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*: Gary and Kenny

1990s Lad culture was bifurcated around a regional, north/south divide and the characters of Gary and Kenny clearly articulate Ritchie's credentials (and anti-northern prejudice) as a London 'lad'. The opposition of northern and southern forms of lad culture was played out most explicitly in the rivalry between Brit pop groups Oasis and Blur; these two pop groups came to represent the regional specificities of laddism which were inevitably shaped by class discourses as well as by locale. *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* clearly privileges forms of southern laddism over its northern equivalent; not only is it set in London but the London lads are clearly marked as the main protagonists.³⁴ Within the narrative space of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* the northern fraternity is represented by the two dullard thieves, Gary and Lenny. The discursive distinction between north and south and their attendant versions of

³⁴ The connotations that the London setting brought to the film were rendered more prescient given the *Newsweek* acclaim of London as the 'coolest' city on the planet.

masculinity are articulated most clearly in the exchanges between Gary, Lenny and Barry 'The Baptist'; they tolerate each other but their relationship is characterised by mutual suspicion. The group meet in a strip bar. The difference between the two groups is marked from the start, Barry's shirt, tie and sheepskin coat signal his affiliation to the East End gangster style in much the same way that the leisure wear of Gary and Lenny are visual indicators of their regional identity. Where Barry pays scant interest to the pole dancer, sitting with his back to her, Kenny and Gary are, as figure 10 shows, clearly enthralled (implying a more base level of development) and struggle to concentrate on their business meeting. Their failure to grasp the potential of the proposed robbery is evidence of their lack of sophistication which is in turn contrasted to Barry's supposed refinement as demonstrated through his appreciation of antiques. As the meeting concludes Barry takes his leave. As he walks out of the scene his bulky body fills the frame and he proclaims 'fucking northern monkeys!' Gary and Lenny remain behind, able to return their attention to the pole dancer's performance as Lenny comments that 'I 'ate these fuckin' southern fairies!' In keeping with the hermetically sealed homosocial environment, Barry's lack of interest in the dancer is used as a marker of sophistication whereas Gary and Lenny's enthrallment with the performance conveys their lower place within the narrative hierarchy.

Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels draws on a rich cinematic heritage of crime capers and comedy gangster films and exploits the iconography and character archetypes that have been developed within these genres. Through the use of stylised

editing (for example the alternate use of slow and accelerated motion and freeze frames in the opening sequence of the film and in the card game) in particular the film rejects the conventions of social realism in favour of a postmodern re-reading of the masculinist British gangster genre. The generic hybridity of *Trainspotting* works to rather different effect, juxtaposing elements of realism with surrealism in order to allude to the pleasurable psychic effects of taking heroin as well as the devastating consequences of addiction to it. Where *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* openly glamorizes the gangster characters *Trainspotting* incorporates some elements of social realism (the scene immediately following Tommy's death or the grim state of the rooms Renton and his friends use as 'shooting galleries' for example) alongside moments of heightened realism (Spud's amphetamine driven job interview) and surreal humour ('The Worst Toilet in Scotland' sequence) in order to produce a film that presents a deliberately ambiguous narrative of heroin addiction. The film portrays the squalor and desperation of addicts lives while simultaneously extolling the euphoric virtues of heroin; Renton's voice over enthuses 'Take the best orgasm you ever had, multiply it by a thousand and you're still nowhere near.' Writing at the time of the film's release in the *British Medical Journal*, Declan McLoughlin contends that *Trainspotting* is misconstrued as a pro-drug film; he writes, 'This is certainly not a film that will induce you to start using heroin.'³⁵ Despite this, the film courted controversy for a perceived failure to explicitly condemn drug taking; the right wing press, including the *Daily Mail*, admonished it for an irresponsible refusal to 'judge or condemn heroin

³⁵ McLoughlin, D. (1996). 'A Palpable Hit' in *British Medical Journal* 312(7030) 2nd March, p. 585. Accessed via website <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/long/312/7030/585> (25th September 2009).

addiction.³⁶ *Trainspotting* can be understood as connecting the celebratory laddishness of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* and the social realist films of the previous section; further, *Trainspotting's* blurring of generic conventions shows the complexity and potential contradictions that can be inherent in a cinematic text; it is not a social treatise but it is not an uncritical celebration of the subcultural milieu of the heroin addict.

Renton is the nihilistic narrator of the film and his opening monologue gained cult status for its avowedly anti-consumerist sentiment:

'Choose Life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television, choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol, and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisurewear and matching luggage. Choose a three-piece suite on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pishing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked up brats you spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life...But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life...I chose something else.'

In centralising the discourses of consumerism and choice from the very outset, the film presents Renton's heroin addiction as a matter of choice but simultaneously acknowledges that his choices were circumscribed by the impoverished social and economic environment of post-industrial Edinburgh. Scotland, like the north of England was hit particularly hard by post-industrial poverty and the social and economic policies of the Thatcher government. The old port of Leith in which *Trainspotting* is set

³⁶ Cited in McLoughlin, D. (1996).

was notorious for being one of the most impoverished parts of Edinburgh where drug use, alcoholism and prostitution were rife. As such the discourses of choice that exist for Renton and his friends Begbie (Robert Carlyle), Spud (Ewen Bremner) and Sick Boy (Jonny Lee Miller) are significantly limited; as with the lads in *TwentyFourSeven* or Liam in *My Name is Joe* the young male characters of *Trainspotting* already exist in a liminal cultural space where traditional notions of masculinity (and consumerism) have no relevance. The high unemployment and limited opportunities mean that the likelihood of Renton and his friends ever being in a position to 'choose a starter home' or any of the other culturally sanctioned markers of successful consumerist masculinity are infinitesimal. Whereas *TwentyFourSeven* and *My Name is Joe* mobilise a discourse of victimhood with regards to the disempowerment and marginalisation of the young male characters, *Trainspotting* rejects this device and instead presents the addict lifestyle as an equally valid alternative choice. As Duncan Petrie explains, 'the film depicts poverty realistically, but in a way that encompasses the possibilities of escape as well as stories of entrapment. Moreover, *Trainspotting* exploits the aesthetics of film...to draw a kind of vitality from grinding poverty.'³⁷ In this way *Trainspotting* acts as a cultural counterpoint for Loach's *My Name is Joe* which is much more in keeping with traditional forms of social realism; where Liam could only escape the tragic cycles of addiction, crime and violence through death, *Trainspotting's* formal and stylistic qualities mean that it is able to allow Renton a more positive conclusion without losing credibility.

³⁷ Petrie, D. (2004). *Contemporary Scottish Fictions: Film, Television and the Novel*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) p.103.

As Petrie observes, *Trainspotting* deliberately rejects the conventions of the kind of social realism that is associated with films such as *My Name Is Joe*, eschewing naturalistic lighting for a gaudy colour palette, more highly stylised editing and using a more intrusive soundtrack than is usual for social realist cinema;³⁸ the intertextual qualities and the generic hybridity of the film mark it out as a postmodern narrative. In this way the film contrasts with both *My Name is Joe* and *TwentyFourSeven*; from the opening seconds it is obvious that this is not the typically downbeat treatment of drug addiction that might be expected from British cinema. The pounding beat of Iggy Pop's *Lust For Life* punctuates Renton's opening diatribe while the rapid editing and mix of camera angles create a style that was, at that time, unique in nineties British cinema. The scene cuts to a medium close up of Renton; he is thin and pale, the tight fitting jeans and vest top draw further attention to his emaciated body and the shot is close enough for the red circles that encase his eyes to be obvious. The shot changes to a longer one (shown below in figure 11) which shows him standing alone in an almost empty room, a cigarette in hand and a tourniquet tied around his arm. The walls are bare, one has a large hole punched through it and the colour scheme is dominated by browns and greys which serve to emphasise the drabness. There is no furniture and no carpet. In many ways this shot echoes *TwentyFourSeven's* sparse, bleak domestic spaces. Certainly it draws on a lexicon of images associated with poverty. But where *TwentyFourSeven* uses these images to create a more tangible sense of despair and

³⁸ Petrie, D. (2004). p.101.

disempowerment *Trainspotting* plays on the contradiction between dialogue, imagery and discourse in order to evade any certainty regarding its political positioning.

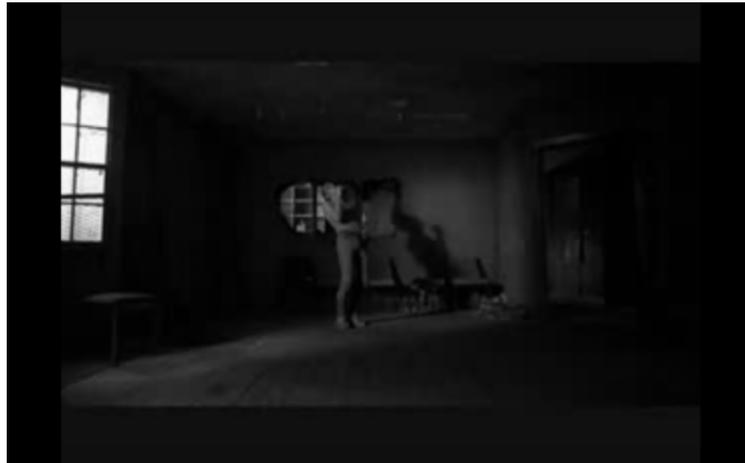


Figure 11: *Trainspotting*: Renton in the Shooting Gallery

The camera pans round from Renton's prone, intoxicated body to reveal the wider space of Swanney 'Mother Superior's' (Peter Mullan) gallery; the walls are graffitied and there is no furniture in any of the rooms (see figure 11). A young baby girl plays unattended amongst the detritus of the floor while her mother and other adults inject heroin in the next room; although the film refrains from passing judgement on the characters, or indeed heroin addiction, the juxtaposition of the neglected baby in the heroin den with Renton's pro-heroin testimony creates a contradiction between what the audience sees and hears. This purposeful discord continues as the shot moves into the action in the adjacent room where Sick Boy, Spud and Alison (Susan Vidler) are preparing for their next hit. Sick Boy is talking about Sean Connery as Bond in *Thunderball* and *Dr No*, saying 'people think it is all about the misery and desperation

and death and all that shite...which is not to be ignored...but they forget the pleasure of it.' The polysemic potential of his speech is deliberate, referring as much, if not more, to mainstream discourses on heroin and heroin addiction than to the Bond movies. The visual images of Spud collapsing onto the floor, eyes closed, with a euphoric grin underline the pleasure to which Sick Boy and Renton both refer. In many ways these opening scenes correspond to the wider cultural context of 'heroin chic' which dominated the fashion scene in the mid nineties: the overt sexualisation of the drug shown in the exchanges between Sick Boy, Spud, Alison and Swanney. Where the lads of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* or *TwentyFourSeven* were defensively heterosexual, heroin is represented as breaking down the rigid strictures of discourses of masculinity by the way it blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy, thus enabling forms of behaviour which would be deemed inappropriate within a different context. These connections are represented as purposefully not responding to sexual attraction in a conventional way (as Alison tells Sick boy that heroin is 'better than any meat injection') but, as the ongoing Iggy Pop soundtrack tells us, 'it's about something called love...' The sexualisation of heroin that is central to this opening sequence is, however, soon repudiated by scenes that demonstrate the devastating effects of heroin addiction on the characters; moreover the potential for challenging or subverting dominant discourses of sexuality is not realised. Despite the fact that the film was clearly drawing on new codes of representing male sexuality, these remained within an explicitly heterosexual framework. The boundaries between the homosocial

and the homoerotic could, on occasion, be blurred by a narcotic high this is only ever transient.

Although sometimes misinterpreted as a pro-drug film, *Trainspotting* deploys the iconography of social realism as a way of counterpointing the potential glamorisation of drug addiction, as my analysis thus far has shown, and to attribute a straightforward reading of the film as being either for or against drug use is problematic because of this contradiction. Although *Human Traffic* did not garner as much media attention as *Trainspotting* it can be seen as articulating a less ambiguous message in its presentation of club and drug culture in nineties Britain. The film engages with recreational drug use (none of the key characters are addicted to 'hard' drugs) in a light-hearted way. The drugs in question are cannabis and ecstasy which are seen as integral to the clubbing sub culture in which the film is set; crucially these drugs can be represented without recourse to addiction in a way that is not possible for a narrative that focuses upon heroin, and in this way the film is able to adopt a more straightforward irreverence than *Trainspotting*. *Human Traffic*, like *Trainspotting* and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* deploys strategic irony at points within the narrative.

This facilitates a satirical appropriation of drug information materials in the scene where Nina's (Nicola Reynolds) younger brother Lee (Dean Davies) is about to take ecstasy for the first time. His voice over is used to present his thoughts and anxieties

about what will happen. The film cuts to a classroom scene where an authoritarian male teacher, wearing a white lab coat, stands in front of a blackboard. He begins to deliver a stern lecture about the mental and physical side effects of taking ecstasy. However his speech is punctuated by interjections from Jip who counters his arguments with a range of positive effects of the drug. Lee, confused by the two opinions that are being presented to him, is pictured looking from one to the other as he tries to make up his own mind on the issue. This scene characterises the ambiguity with which several lad films from the late nineties treat issues of drug taking. *Human Traffic* is typical in that it refuses to take a fixed standpoint on the issue. In this scene the character of Lee is used as a means to explore the contradictions in medical and political discourse on drug taking; Jip advises that 'statistically you are more likely to die by becoming involved in a fight in a pub than you are from taking ecstasy...alcohol kills 30,000 people a year in Britain, but that's alright because it's a taxable drug.' The double standards involved in differentiating between socially acceptable and unacceptable drugs is alluded to in both *Human Traffic* and *Trainspotting*; the contradiction surrounding social attitudes to alcohol are presented in the opening sequence of *Trainspotting* as Begbie and Tommy both admonish Renton, Sick Boy and Spud for their addiction while sitting drinking in a pub, apparently unable or unwilling to acknowledge the hypocrisy of their position. *Trainspotting* alludes to this paradox at several other moments in the film; Renton's father draws on a cigarette while reproaching his son for wasting his life 'filling yer veins wi' that shite' and his mother's valium consumption means that she is, in Renton's words, also a drug addict 'in her

own socially acceptable way.’ These moments are not used to promote a pro-heroin message; rather they are deployed to underline the point that numerous other drugs, substances and addictions remain legal despite causing emotional and physical damage to those who are addicted and thus create a more ambiguous tone.



Figure 12: *Trainspotting*: Renton's Father carries him to bed.

Renton's overdose forces his parents to take him home and nurse him in a narrative turn that echoes Darcy's caring for Fag Ash in *TwentyFourSeven*. Like Fag Ash, drug addiction has rendered Renton child like, incapable of looking after himself. His father carries Renton into his bedroom where his parents undress him and put him to bed (see figure 12); his dependent infantilised position is accentuated by the children's wallpaper and small, single bed. Heroin has rendered Renton incapable of sustaining a mature, independent adulthood. The only means by which his recuperation into mainstream society could be achieved is through his literal removal from his circle of

friends. In this way Renton is more fortunate than Liam, whose entrapment within the toxic environment of the Glasgow tenements proves fatal. After making it through his 'cold turkey' ordeal Renton leaves impoverished Leith for a new life in London; his escape and apparently seamless transition from heroin addict to estate agent would be unthinkable for characters such as Fag Ash and, in many ways, demonstrates how *Trainspotting* must be understood as mediating a market position that draws heavily on proto-Blairite ideologies. But his escape is not straightforward; his friends arrive and he becomes drawn back into the cycles of crime and suspicion that he had tried to leave. Renton's final break from his friends comes when he decides to leave without splitting the proceeds from the heroin deal. Again the film strikes a contradictory note; on the one hand Renton would appear to be disloyal, selfish and immoral but in leaving £2000 for Spud the concluding scene confounds a straightforward reading of the character in conventional terms. The character of Renton is shaped by incongruity and contradiction; he is selfish, narcissistic and nihilistic at times but sensitive and decent at others. The two competing discourses that are articulated in this character are presented as an ironic contradiction within contemporary ideologies of masculinity. That Renton is eventually able to occupy both the mainstream and countercultural subjective positioning is evidence of the film's overarching ambiguity.

Where *Trainspotting* deploys irony at certain points in the narrative to produce a film that refuses to either condone or condemn heroin use, the Welsh film *Twin Town* presents an ironic portrayal of drug use and underclass masculinity that refuses to

accord any sense of gravitas to the situation. The Lewis Twins are represented as immature and irresponsible; their drug fuelled antics are presented as (relatively) harmless juvenile rebellion rather than symptoms of disenfranchisement. They strike drug deals with pensioners, swapping magic mushrooms for prescription pills, and they smoke a bong while sharing a bath, debating football trivia and daring each other to take bigger and bigger hits. The Lewis twins are not heroin addicts; their drug taking is confined to softer 'recreational' drugs such as cannabis and so in this way *Twin Town* is more readily able to strike a light-hearted note than *Trainspotting*. The Lewis twins have a contradictory relationship to lad culture. While they might perform laddish personas in many ways (their rejection of adult masculinity enables them to embrace a life free from responsibility and commitment, they celebrate trivia and silliness), they are socially and economically marginalised and their ability to access or attain mainstream norms of hegemonic masculinity appears severely curtailed. Like their counterparts in *Trainspotting*, *My Name is Joe* and *TwentyFourSeven* they are trapped within cycles of poverty and lacking in social mobility. The Lewis family live in a mobile home, their sister works as a receptionist in a brothel and their father is a local builder. The film turns the twins' alienation from the norms of masculinity into an ironic comedy aimed at the same post-political audience as *Trainspotting*. The pre-oedipal characterisation of the Lewis twins legitimises their lack of responsibility as liberating and indulges the anarchic humour of the boys by juxtaposing it with the corruption of the masculine authorities represented by a range of unappealing characters such as detectives Greyo (Dorien Thomas) and Terry Walsh (Dougray Scott) and immoral local

business man Bryn Cartwright (William Thomas). In many ways this film capitalises upon the discourses of laddism and the celebratory endorsement of an extended or perpetual adolescent mind set. This characteristic extends into the final group of films that I focus on in this chapter. In these films older men are presented as able to indulge in this fantasy of irresponsibility because their economic position facilitates an idealised reconfiguration of adolescence. That fantasy position is simultaneously independent from parental control but yet eschews normative notions of masculine maturity that are associated with commitment, responsibility and familial provision.

Lads...The Men Who Should Know Better

One of the key features of the new lads is that, in spite of the juvenility associated with the term, both the characters featured in laddish media and the men who were the target audiences for the magazines, and indeed films, are in fact men in their twenties and thirties and not the young teenagers that the term implies. Although there were, as the previous sections of this chapter demonstrates, a wider range of younger lad characters in films than perhaps existed within magazines, there were still a number of films that presented older men who clearly corresponded to a laddish paradigm of masculinity. These men are characterised by their refusal to take on the responsibilities demanded by traditional patriarchal discourses of masculinity; they reject established notions of adulthood or at least incumbent middle age, instead preferring to live out an idealised form of extended adolescence. Characters such as JC (Sean Pertwee) in *Blue Juice* (Carl Prechezer, 1995) or the eponymous bachelors of *Martha, Meet Frank,*

Daniel, and Laurence (Nick Hamm, 1998), played by Rufus Sewell, Tom Hollander and Joseph Fiennes respectively, are all able to inhabit this idealised adolescent position in which they have their independence but, crucially, they also have the financial security to be able to live up to the consumer ideals of lad culture. This section focuses predominantly on two movies that figure older 'new' lad protagonists and explores the ways in which anxieties about responsibility, commitment and other attendant markers of mature masculinity are articulated and resolved through the prospect of impending fatherhood.

Where *Fever Pitch* features Colin Firth as the middle class Paul, a high school teacher with a passion for beer and football the other example, *When Saturday Comes*, represents a working class configuration of this trope of masculinity. Jimmy Muir dropped out of high school early to enter a world where his career choices were limited to working in the local brewery or the coal mine. Jimmy's dreams of playing football for his beloved Sheffield United are brutally quashed by his teacher and his father. Both admonish his ambition and insist that his destiny lies in the traditional local industries. Both films centralise narratives about football and as such are clearly marketed to the new lad scene, but there are a number of important differences between them. *Fever Pitch* and *When Saturday Comes* are differentiated by the class positioning of their characters; Paul Ashworth's middle class milieu is a world away from Jimmy's working class habitus. As is the case in a large number of lad films, London and the south East are presented as affluent and metropolitan while northern

towns tend to be characterised as parochial, impoverished and less sophisticated. Both films explore the anxieties faced by these men as they struggle to come to terms with unplanned and impending fatherhood and the implications that this has for their lifestyles. 'Lad' culture and football are often inextricable and so it is unsurprising that football related films were among the more successful British films of the latter part of the nineties. Football found increasing respectability during the nineties, England performed better in Euro '96 than they had in recent years and the violence and hooliganism that had been rampant during the eighties seemed to finally be under control.³⁹ Football was, according to two of the foremost 'new' lad celebrities, David Baddiel and Frank Skinner, 'coming home' as the nation's favourite sport. The revival of England's footballing fortunes occurred after a period which saw a lengthy suspension from international tournaments on account of fans' violent hooliganism, but, perhaps more importantly, it occurred at a time in which football itself was undergoing a renewal in terms of the corporate sponsorship facilitated by the advent of the Premiership, and so was enjoying what Garry Nelson termed a 'resurgence in image.'⁴⁰ The fact that football captured the exact demographic of the newly identified male consumer group no doubt increased the centrality of its importance to various forms of

³⁹ The birth of the Premier League in 1992 and the association of this with the commodification/branding of football are crucial in terms of this increasing respectability. Writing in *The Guardian*, Dave Hill (2006) explains how this links to a perception of feminisation of both the game and the players. 'Footballers are Big Sissies' in *The Guardian*, April 6th, 2006. Nick Hornby was undoubtedly part of this cultural shift in the acceptability of football. The cultures of masculinity that are associated with football are clearly performed in class and regionally specific ways. The contemporary trend among northern football fans is to go shirt-less during the coldest months of the year. This, in many ways performs a rejection of the 'effeminacy' of the premier league and the discourses of metrosexuality that have pervaded in recent times.

⁴⁰ Nelson, G. (1996). *What A Big Girl's Blouse...It Could Be A Dream. Football has all the drama and action needed for film, yet soccer movies rarely work. Why? Charlton Athletic Striker Garry Nelson tells us the real story.* *The Guardian*, Feb, 29th p.10.

lad culture; an emphasis on male bonding, drinking in pubs, 'celebrities' and lending itself to trivia based knowledge while, at the same time, encouraging a form of consumerism which would appeal to the burgeoning male markets meant that the sport and 'lad' culture dovetailed neatly for marketers, corporations and consumers alike.

Fever Pitch was a movie adaptation of a 'lad lit' novel by Nick Hornby and despite being set in 1989 many of the reviews saw the film and Firth's portrayal of the Arsenal mad protagonist very much in terms of lad culture.⁴¹ Paul Ashworth is, in many ways, the archetypal post-feminist new lad; he can be boorish and chauvinistic but his is not the kind of unreconstructed masculinity that is portrayed in *Nil By Mouth* or *Naked*. His attitudes are presented alternatively with a knowing, ironic nod or as an endearing misconception, a characteristic that was further validated by the fact that at points in the film the character demonstrates genuine sensitivity. Dubious as it might still be, Paul's misogyny is more often presented as unthinking rather than malicious and thus is in keeping with the discourses of laddism as being shaped by sexism that is alternately 'harmless' and commonsense. Throughout the film Paul articulates essentialist notions regarding gender identity; moreover the very fact that his girlfriend dislikes football is seen as incontrovertible evidence regarding the 'truth' of absolute gender. Crucially Paul's position as a high school teacher gives him enough disposable income to be able to buy into the consumerist aspects of laddism which distinguish

⁴¹ Brown, G. (1997). 'You are Watching the Men United' *The Times*, 3rd April describes the films 'laddish charm.'

these older lads from the younger ones that have been the focus of this chapter thus far. The scenes in his flat are a testament to his consumerism and thus his complicity with the hegemonic norms of lad culture; in contrast to the sparseness of the living spaces seen in *TwentyFourSeven* or *Trainspotting* his shelves are crammed with records and books but his consumption is shaped by a practical impulse. Upon his first visit to Sarah's flat he enquires about the purpose of some ornaments and a reverse shot of his reflection in a large mirror over the fire catches his bewilderment that 'they're not for anything, they just look nice.' Once more the differences between men and women are mobilised in the film in a way that works to render Paul's sexism the result of total incomprehension rather than being truly misogynistic. The marketing of the film further contributed to a discursive endorsement of natural gender differences with two alternative video jackets, one for women and one for men. The allusion to the regressive retreat from maturity is demonstrated in the language on the jackets: 'girl's' and 'boy's' sides (figure 13). These options knowingly play on the generic framework of the film by drawing attention to it as a film about love or football respectively. In endorsing the notion of 'sides' the film implicitly mobilises a set of discourses which insist upon the conservative and absolute definitions of gender which Imelda Whelehan- perceives as central to lad culture.⁴²

⁴² Whelehan, I. (2000).p.65.

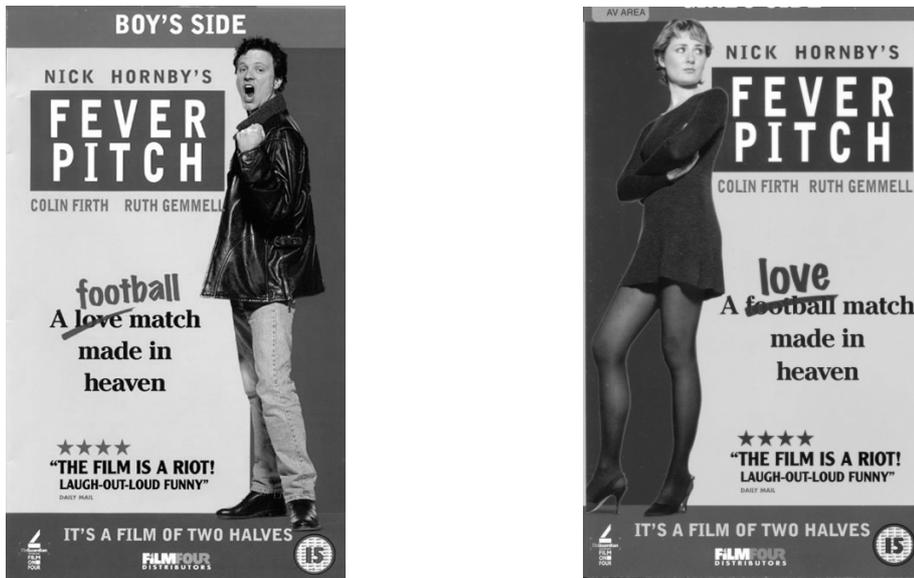


Figure 13: Girls and Boys options on *Fever Pitch* DVD cover

Paul's ambiguous position as somewhere between adult and child is continually reinforced in the film, he plays *subbuteo* with his best friend and even explains to one of his pupils that 'Saturdays are the one day of the week when I'm not a responsible adult and I turn into someone your age.' Paul's flat further adds to his contradictory characterisation as both grown man and perpetual adolescent: the subbuteo table sits incongruously alongside shelves that are crammed full of books. The contradictory icons of maturity (a well equipped kitchen) are undermined by shelves littered with football related knickknacks. His bedroom is also used to continue this contradiction between manhood and childhood through the presence of the Arsenal lamp on his bedside table. The fanaticism for all things Arsenal is deployed throughout the film to highlight Paul's more juvenile characteristics; early into his relationship Paul gets out of bed, the couple are talking about Byron's poetry. Paul is reciting *The Destruction of*

Sennacherib while dressing. The camera remains static, focussed on his back as he stands up to reveal silk, Arsenal boxer shorts. A reverse shot shows Sarah sitting up with an incredulous expression on her face. Paul's recital continues as she tries to comprehend this revelation. When he finally turns round, the leg of the offending boxer short is to the fore of the shot, framing Sarah's face as she asks 'what are those?' The shot cuts to Paul's face and he looks down, clearly unsure as to why this might be a problem before explaining, somewhat apologetically, that 'these are not my best ones.' The very notion of having a 'best pair' of pants positions Paul as the more immature of the pairing and works to restate the liminal space that the man-child new lad inhabits.



Figure 14: *Fever Pitch*: Intercut Images from 70s and 80s Football Matches

The contradiction between maturity and immaturity that seems to be at the heart of Paul's character is continually fore-grounded; one particularly note-worthy example of this is the scene which inter-cuts Paul's attendance at the 1989 Arsenal v Newcastle game with images of him as a child attending an 1972 Arsenal v West Ham game. Images of Paul at the two matches are inter cut (see figure 14) giving a sense of the timeless ritual associated with being a long standing football fan; he crosses the same

roads, takes his place in the same part of the stadium, the pushing, shoving, cheering and jeering in both the past and the present are similar. The fashions, haircuts and ages of the men appear to be the only things that have changed; the traditions of football remain, until that day at least, part of a timeless male tradition.⁴³ Paul's voice over later explains the comfort of certainty which these traditions bring, as if, when everything else in the world (including the construction of male identity and the roles of men within the world) is changing, the certainty of the football season brings a comforting stability and sense of long standing tradition. Further, Paul's ambiguous standing as sometime lad, sometime grown up is given direct voice when he explains, through his narration, his frustration with the idea that: 'adults can't go mad about anything. You have to keep a lid on it. If you don't then people are entitled to say what they like – that you haven't grown up, that you are a moron, your conversation is trivial and boorish, you can't express your emotional needs....bollocks.' In this particular speech the viewer is given an insight into Paul's sense of contradiction and his objection to the idea that football and maturity are necessarily mutually exclusive counterparts.

⁴³ This match took place on the same day as the Liverpool v Sheffield match at Hillsborough. The match ended in tragedy as 96 people were crushed to death after police mismanaged the incoming Liverpool crowd. The Hillsborough tragedy was crucial in the decision to convert all British football stadia into seated only. This move caused controversy and even as recently as 2007 is still seen as a move that was unpopular with many football fans. See for example <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/6444083.stm> accessed 28th September 2009). One of the key criticisms was that in converting the stadia to all seater, football was being 'feminised' and so is seen as being another 'attack' on traditional working class masculinity and their leisure activities.

Paul's laddish rejection of traditional markers of maturity is also coded through his clothing and his approach to teaching. Where Sarah and the other staff members wear suits and smart clothes to work Paul's uniform consists of jeans, jumpers and a leather jacket. His informality is represented as indicative of his maverick status and his contradictory subject position as both teacher and lad. Paul's relaxed attitude is transferred to his classes where, once more, it is deployed to underline the differences between Paul and Sarah and thus between men and women. Paul's classes are characterised by a matey informality where banter about football intermingles with an educational agenda. Sarah's classes, on the other hand, are quiet and controlled but unpopular with the students. The fact that, by the end of the film it is Sarah who adjusts her style serves to validate a laddish agenda in which the importance of humour over seriousness is paramount. Sarah's arch, formal manner is presented as stand-offish and out of touch.

Fever Pitch is clearly informed by lad culture and the discourses of gender that it upholds; in many ways Paul represents a typical configuration of laddish masculinity that is shaped by what Monk terms a 'regressive escape from the demands of maturity,'⁴⁴ and certainly this is demonstrated by his initial ambivalence towards his relationship with Sarah and the potential conflict between her and his footballing commitments. However, the film is also shaped by a cultural environment that invests heavily in the recuperative values of fatherhood and the narrative deploys Paul's

⁴⁴ Monk, C. (2000). p.160.

impending fatherhood in a way that is typical of this discursive construction of masculinity. This narrative facilitates Paul's character's eventual maturity into a culturally sanctioned version of adult masculinity but this transition is fraught as the laddish and post-feminist father forms of male identity combine to heighten the character's boorish, unthinking tendencies. When the couple meet to discuss the pregnancy Paul's assumption that the future is a *fait accompli* is decided purely from his own perspective. As the couple sit opposite one another Paul launches into a discussion that shows no consideration of Sarah's thoughts or feelings. His enthusiasm manifests itself in a boorish display of naivety as he pronounces: 'It's come just at the right time for me! I mean I was getting bored with all that pub, football stuff, I mean you can only play so much subbutteo. It's time to move on, I think having a kid is a brilliant idea!' Despite the concerns that Sarah raises he goes on to proclaim: 'it's all working out, wife and baby that'll do me...'

Paul's naivety and the absurdity of the suggestion that he might be ready for fatherhood is underlined by his accidental setting fire to the napkin, an act which leads Sarah to remonstrate that she's 'been impregnated by a 12 year old.' Paul's enthusiasm for the pregnancy and the change in lifestyle that he visualises accompanying his new found mature status is represented as entirely self-centred, as his incomprehension at Sarah's admission that she hasn't decided what to do demonstrates. On the one hand Paul is, at this stage in the narrative, reconfigured as a post-feminist father. He is ready to embrace patriarchal responsibility and provide for

his wife and child, but his naivety and selfish exuberance are combined with ill-thought out assumptions and a boorish approach that are constructed as evidence of his immature laddishness. The recuperative effects of fatherhood reverberate as Paul's character undergoes some radical changes; he gives up drinking and smoking and applies for the head of year job that previously he'd rebuffed. Most significantly his attitude to football is transformed as he explains to Steve (Mark Strong) as they share a ritualistic pre-match drink; Paul attempts to explain that becoming a father has made him realise that there is more to life than Arsenal. Steve can offer no response other than to look bewildered by his friend's sudden metamorphosis from football supporting lad to reconstructed father. Significantly in terms of the post-feminist discourses of fathering Paul already thinks of himself as a father despite the fact that no decisions have been made and the previous scene illustrated Sarah's ambivalence to the pregnancy through her drinking wine and smoking. The couple proceed to look for a shared house; after looking at a house adjacent to Highbury stadium they argue because Paul is, despite his testimony to the contrary, unable or unwilling to compromise where football is concerned.

Fever Pitch juxtaposes Paul's development as a man with the fate of his team. His failure to get the head of year position coincides with a result that potentially jeopardised Arsenal's capacity to win the league. He misconstrues Sarah's consolatory visit and the couple fight over their mis-matched world views. Even though they are no longer together Sarah checks the football pages in *The Guardian* and comments upon

Arsenal's chances. Despite this the couple remain estranged; a series of exchanges where the couple come into physical contact convey regret on both sides. After Sarah breaks the silence in the car park any chance of reconciliation is rendered unlikely by the revelation of Paul's resignation but in the course of the evening (in which Arsenal win their match and thus the league) Sarah comes to realise that she wants to be with Paul. An unlikely reconciliation occurs amidst the celebrations at Highbury. In positioning this reunion outside the football ground the film appears to position Sarah as the one doing the compromising, but Paul's closing monologue is used to assure the audience that he has truly changed. In the final moments of the film, when his progression from lad to man is almost complete, he proclaims that: 'My relationship with Arsenal changed that night...the lift they gave me enabled me to part company with them that night. I have my own life and my own successes and failures aren't necessarily linked to theirs and that's got to be a good thing.' The film deploys a narrative of impending fatherhood that facilitates Paul's passage from unreconstructed lad to mature patriarch and thus responds to two of the most influential discourses of masculinity that circulated in nineties British culture.

When Saturday Comes also capitalises on a discursive construction of fatherhood as both transformative and redemptive but does so within a milieu that is unequivocally working class. The narrative trajectory of Jimmy Muir is similar to that of Paul Ashworth; at the outset Jimmy is presented as an unreconstructed northern man who comes to change his ways when he realises the importance of becoming a father. The

film opens with a contextualising flashback that immediately positions Jimmy's character in the tradition of industrial northern masculinity. The young Jimmy is in a careers interview at school and his choices are laid out for him: he can either work in the local factory or down the mines. When he protests that he wants to be a footballer his dreams are dismissed by the advisor. Jimmy's resentment and antagonism towards authority is thus contextualised as the result of his bitterness at being trapped by the confines of his life and the limited options for working class men in the area. The markers of unreconstructed masculinity are explicitly coded onto the character; Jimmy's language is coarse and even at this age his ideas about masculinity are very specifically defined. He enjoys his local alpha male status and his frame of reference is defined as football, friends, drinking and ogling women. These various components of his character are all established in this opening flashback; after leaving his careers interview Jimmy joins in a playground football game in which his status as a popular role model for the other lads is conveyed. After scoring a goal (and enjoying the admiring accolades from the other boys) the victorious Jimmy persuades his younger brother, Russell (Craig Kelly) to go to the pub. Jimmy swaggers in ahead of his brother and orders two pints of bitter, when the barmaid goes to get their drinks Jimmy turns to his brother and says 'did you see the size of the tits on 'er then?' The film offers further contextualisation for Jimmy's ideas about the appropriate performances of masculinity in the form of his father. Upon discovering his sons drinking in the pub Jimmy's father, Joe (John McEnery) frog marches them outside, shouting and swearing at them before clipping Jimmy around the head twice. Joe is thus presented as a

damaging role model for the young Jimmy and the film capitalises upon the struggle that Jimmy goes through in trying to break the notions of masculinity that he has inherited.

The film cuts to the present day where the adult Jimmy is working in the local brewery. The industrial environment is established by a shot panning down from the massive steel chimneys to the yard. Jimmy's ambivalence to his job is demonstrated as he runs through the gates just in time to start work, clocking in with just seconds to spare. The macho environment of the shop floor is evoked when the men gather round the paper to look at the day's page 3 girl and exchange banter and sexist jokes. This sequence articulates one of the most common themes in nineties British cinema, the celebration of the homosocial communities of the industrial work place and the mournful nostalgia for its passing.⁴⁵

While Paul Ashworth was positioned very explicitly as a 'new' lad familiar with feminism but unthinking in his sexism, Jimmy Muir represents a more straightforward unreconstructed masculinity. The film is, however, still shaped by post-feminist discourse; the introduction of Annie Doherty (Emily Lloyd) as the new wages clerk and sole female employee of the brewery shows her courting the male attention as she sashays through the factory and quickly becoming at home with male banter, as shown in figure 15.

⁴⁵ *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty* and *Riff Raff* (Ken Loach, 1990) for example all foreground the passing of the communities of working class men.



Figure 15: *When Saturday Comes*: Annie on the shop floor

Where *Fever Pitch* positions Paul as living independently but indulging in an idealised world of extended adolescence, *When Saturday Comes* draws on a more traditionally working class arrangement whereby children remain living at home until they marry. In contrast to Paul's abdication of responsibility, Jimmy is depicted as a loving son and brother who, in many ways, takes on the role of caring patriarch, protecting his mother and brother from his own ill-tempered, alcoholic, gambling father.

Jimmy's life revolves around football, drinking in the pub with his friends, enjoying his status as a local heart throb and his family. The film establishes three main narrative strands: Jimmy's progression from Sunday league footballer to professional player for his beloved Sheffield United, Jimmy's struggle to break the legacies of self-destruction and addiction that he has inherited from his own father and finally how these traditions and practices impact upon Jimmy's burgeoning relationship with Annie.

Jimmy's courtship of Annie is distinguished from his flirtations with other women. In the scenes where the couple are dating he is presented as sensitive and attentive. In comparison to the bedroom scenes in *Fever Pitch* which are dominated by post-coital football discussions, *When Saturday Comes* presents Jimmy as a more traditionally romantic character; he presents Annie with a crucifix for example and when Annie moots the possibility of them moving in together Jimmy is genuinely excited. While *Fever Pitch* juxtaposes Sarah's pregnancy with a series of positive moments in Paul's life, *When Saturday Comes* sees Jimmy lose his job immediately before discovering that Annie is expecting a baby. Thus the potential for positive experiences of fatherhood are mediated through the relative class position of the fathers. The two films offer a clear contrast in the reaction of the expectant fathers; where Paul's reaction was one of selfish enthusiasm Jimmy's negative reaction is equally selfish but comes out of his awareness of his own limitations in being able to provide for Annie and a baby. Despite being portrayed as more mature than Paul in the ways that he takes care of his mother and siblings, Jimmy proclaims that he is not ready to leave home and be a father, telling his distraught girlfriend that 'I don't want a fucking kid.'

Where the news of impending fatherhood has an immediately recuperative effect on Paul the opposite occurs for Jimmy. Instead of staying at home and resting in preparation for his trial at Sheffield United Jimmy opts to go out and celebrate his best friend's birthday. Not only does he get thoroughly inebriated he goes on to a strip club where he ends up sleeping with one of the girls. Jimmy's reaction to prospective

fatherhood initially sends him into a self-destructive cycle in which he jeopardises both his potential to become a professional footballer and his relationship with Annie who finishes the relationship after discovering the infidelity. Annie's pregnancy signals the beginning of a personal crisis for Jimmy. His initial retreat into the safety of the homosocial sets a series of events in motion which eventually lead to Jimmy losing everything that mattered to him. Having already lost his job Jimmy squanders his trial at Sheffield United due to his hangover. Shortly afterwards his brother is killed at work in the mine leading Jimmy to realise that his actions have bought a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure to bear; as the similarities between father and son come to the fore Jimmy is left isolated and bereft.⁴⁶ At the beginning of the film Jimmy was a local hero figure – the younger lads looked up to him and begged to play football with him, his younger brother idolised him and he was the leader of his peer group; even the older men in the factory came to him for advice about women. As Jimmy comes to realise that he has lost everything he contemplates suicide before breaking down at the side of the train track. Russell's death and Jimmy's desperation to make his brother proud are the impetus that Jimmy needs to try and rectify his mistakes; the film thus invests the fraternal bond with the ultimate potential for redemption but in doing so it facilitates Jimmy's reunion with Annie which leads to him taking on the patriarchal role of father.

⁴⁶ At this point in the narrative it is revealed that Jimmy's father was on the verge of becoming a professional footballer until his drinking quashed his opportunity. Jimmy is portrayed as repeating the same cycles of squandered talent and resultant bitterness as his father.

Jimmy approaches Ken (Pete Postlethwaite), his former coach and Annie's uncle and asks for a second chance to prove himself. A crucial part of the regenerative process is recognising the motivation for his previous behaviour and Ken pushes Jimmy to admit that he was scared of both the potential for failure that inevitably accompanies a chance at success and of becoming a father. Following the reconciliation with his mentor Jimmy sets off to find Annie only to be turned away. At this point in the narrative Jimmy has to make a decision about his future and whether he continues along the path that seems pre-destined: living with his parents, playing Sunday league football with his mates and losing the chance for success both professionally and personally or breaking the cycle of self destruction. The first images we see of Jimmy at this point are of him sleeping on a makeshift bed under sleeping bags and blankets accompanied by a soundtrack which states 'I've been a fool when I think of every chance I've blown...' The soundtrack continues to accompany a montage sequence which shows Jimmy working out in sun, snow and rain (see figure 16) underscoring his commitment; this sequence draws on an established convention of sport and male regeneration movies such as *Rocky* (John G Avildsen, 1976) and *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980). The training montage is interspersed with segments which see Jimmy writing letters to Annie in an attempt to win her back. The final scene in the montage has Jimmy seeing Annie's mother and asking her to pass on a message to Annie. However, Annie returns home at this point and he realises that she is keeping their child. Assured of Jimmy's commitment Ken returns to Sheffield United and manages to secure him another trial; the next shot reveals the result as the camera pans down the

player list to reveal Jimmy as a named substitute. Despite his frustration at not getting a chance to play for the first team Jimmy is shown as having matured in the way he deals with it. He is reconciled with Annie immediately prior to gaining his first real opportunity with his new football club as the two declare their love on the pitch at Bramall Lane.



Figure 16: *When Saturday Comes*: Jimmy training

Having been reunited with Annie and proven his mettle Jimmy has only one unfulfilled ambition in his path from unreconstructed factory worker to football playing father, but his opening appearance for the club starts badly, his foul leading to a goal for the rival team. It is an apparition of Russell, his dead brother, which signals a change in Jimmy's fortune. He goes on to set up one goal and score another to bring his team level before being knocked out by an opposing player and coming back to score a winning penalty in the final minute of the game. The film thus balances the recuperative elements of fatherhood with the importance of the fraternal bond to

produce a narrative transformation for the character. In many ways both *Fever Pitch* and *When Saturday Comes* make important connections between two potentially oppositional narratives of masculinity in the form of the extended adolescent figure of the lad and that of the post-feminist father. These narratives are informed by the discursive construction of fathering as a positive, recuperative experience for both working and middle class men.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored three of the main tropes of masculinity that existed in relation to younger male characters in nineties British films by contrasting the modes of representation that were deployed in a range of films. The final section in particular demonstrates how the more post-modern laddish impulses co-existed with films that sought to articulate a different version of authenticity in the construction of industrial and post-industrial lads. As I have shown notions of authenticity are central to the various forms of masculinity that I have looked at in this chapter. This authenticity is, however performed in different ways. The location of these underclass lads within a recognisable world of post-industrial deprivation is a crucial component in constructing the authenticity of the social realist lads. For the new lad characters authenticity comes about more as a result of their nostalgia for traditional, unreconstructed gender discourses. In the final section of the chapter I examined two films that in some way bridge the juncture between this chapter and the next one as they present the competing discourses of laddishness and fatherhood. In many ways both *When*

Saturday Comes and *Fever Pitch* can be understood as typically laddish but at the same time, typical of those discourses of masculinity that posit fatherhood as redemptive and restorative.