

## **Framing Fatherhood: From Redemption to Dysfunction**

As noted in chapter 2 the discursive construction of fatherhood in the nineties was dominated by a dual emphasis. On the one hand the recuperative and restorative potential that becoming a father held for men was consistently valorised, while on the other a pathologised discourse that espoused the many failings and problems of (usually absent) fathers remained pervasive. Further, the patriarchal family unit is traditionally a core component of the nation; as noted previously, in films the breakdown of this unit is coterminous with, and symbolic of, a wider breakdown in the nation state. The gender politics of the family unit are complex and variable; what is significant for me, here, is the ways in which British cinema during the nineties negotiated this contested terrain. Although the cultural context remained heavily invested in the restorative and recuperative potential of fatherhood, British films remained consistently downbeat; the dominant trope of white working class fathers in particular are characterised by failure, inadequacy and despondency. Scholars including Deborah Chambers and Estella Tincknell demonstrate how, during this period, the effects of reconstructed ideas about men's roles within the family were having far reaching ramifications on both ideas about male practices and upon the social ways in which men functioned within the family unit.<sup>1</sup> Chambers explains that in the aftermath of the 'new' man reconstruction of the eighties, fatherhood became

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<sup>1</sup> Chambers, D. (2001); Tincknell, E. (2005).

'recast as a 'newly acceptable form of emotional empowerment for men.'<sup>2</sup> Moreover this reconstruction of men's familial roles invested in the idea that involvement in parenting and domesticity could be potentially liberating for men. Thus, culturally, fatherhood during the nineties was prefigured around a specific set of ideas which emphasised the positive, egalitarian potential of reconstruction.

Despite being seemingly in-line with a pro-feminist agenda, Modleski urges against a premature celebration of these reconstructed discourses of masculinity and fathering in Hollywood films, arguing that their primary function is to re-centre white, middle class men at the narrative core and in doing so actually work to articulate an exclusionary agenda whereby women are 'squeezed' out of the picture. Modleski's critique retains its pertinence with regards to a significant strand of Hollywood cinema. For example, *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005), *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000) and *Edge of Darkness* (Martin Campbell, 2010) all feature father characters (often in relation to their sons) at the epicentre of the narrative with the seemingly inevitable marginalisation of female characters and stories about female relationships and experiences.<sup>3</sup> The specific refraction of tropes of fatherhood within British cinema, was, however managed rather differently to those seen in Hollywood movies. The extent to which ideas about the recuperative potential of fatherhood translated into the representations of fathers in British cinema narratives during the nineties is debatable. Films such as *Fever Pitch* and *When Saturday Comes* posit the

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<sup>2</sup> Chambers, D. (2001). p.55.

<sup>3</sup> Modleski, T. (1990). p.82.

transformative effects of becoming a father on their respective protagonists. Both Paul Ashworth and Jimmy Muir undergo considerable reconstruction from regressive irresponsibility to responsible partner and parent. Crucially, in both cases this transformation is only viable because of the socio-economic status of the characters in question. As a teacher, Paul Ashworth conforms to an implicitly middle class version of post-feminist masculinity; *When Saturday Comes*, on the other hand, negotiates Jimmy Muir's transition via a wish fulfilment narrative where the down-on-his-luck, good natured but slightly rebellious lad realises his childhood dream. A similar narrative trajectory is also seen in *Jack and Sarah*. This film, however, focuses on a middle class father whose wife dies in childbirth and as it is much closer to the Hollywood model of post-feminist fathering as described by Modleski than it is other British films. It is however worth mentioning, not only because of its similarity to the Hollywood narratives of widowed or lone fathers but also because of the ways in which it presents a middle class, professional discourse of fathering as restorative and so demonstrates both continuity and specificity within British cinematic narratives of fathering and the intersections between class and gender.<sup>4</sup> Significantly the men in all three of these films are able to provide financially for their children and it is this that separates them from the more commonly articulated narratives about failing and inadequate fathers.

Paul Ashworth is a teacher, Jimmy Muir succeeds in becoming a professional footballer and Jack (Richard E. Grant) is a lawyer; although Jimmy is working class, his eventual

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<sup>4</sup> Modleski, T. (1990). p.p.76-7.

status as a professional soccer player brings with it an economic status that facilitates his progression to hegemonic fatherhood. The fact that these men are all able to fulfil the patriarchal role of breadwinner allows the restorative qualities associated with fatherhood to remain relatively unfettered by the economic and social problems that hindered many other British cinematic fathers of the nineties. The redemptive potential of parenting for men who are already fathers, however, has a rather more limited resonance within nineties British films. The dominant tropes over the course of the decade were of the lower working class or unemployed fathers who were frequently incapable of providing for their family financially or, alternatively, fathers who are emotionally remote or abusive to their wives and children. Narratives about impending fatherhood are characterised by an optimistic emphasis on the restorative potential therein. Those films that focus upon father son relationships with older children, on the other hand, tend to be rather more melancholic in tone. The kinds of emotional empowerment that Chambers or Modleski describe are not on show in these films; instead the working class or unemployed father is circumscribed as troubled, traumatised and without a clearly defined patriarchal role within post-industrial society.

Where Hollywood films often mobilised narratives of fatherhood as offering a potential solution to men who felt that they had lost their gendered role within a post-feminist society, British cinema was dominated by representations of men whose role had literally been expunged by shifting economic and employment structures. Thus the

figure of the father became a site through which the various problems of post-industrialisation were articulated and negotiated in British cinema of the nineties. As such, a number of films posit the father figure as simultaneously nostalgic and anxious. Fathers in the films that I focus on in this chapter (*TwentyFourSeven*, *Brassed Off*, *My Son The Fanatic* and *East is East*) represent forms of masculinity that are unfeasible for or unpalatable to their sons. The sons, conversely, are often struggling to break free from the cycles of behaviour and identity that their fathers embody. The relationships between the various fathers and sons explored in this chapter are thus frequently fraught with difficulty and misunderstanding as the two generations attempt to reconcile their differences. *When Saturday Comes* incorporates both narrative strands: Jimmy struggles to break free from the form of masculinity represented by his own father but at the same time remain invested in the positive potential of the (right kind of) father. This chapter seeks to map some of the key ways in which the cinematic construction of fatherhood can be conceived of as a crucial part of the wider reconstruction of masculine identities within post-industrial/post-feminist Britain. The cinematic narratives about father son relationships in the films that I focus on in this chapter are all connected by themes surrounding inheritance and tradition, the passing on of some traditions and the decline of others. The conflicted relationship between father and son has a longer history in British cinema; during the sixties the angry young men were rebelling against the perceived conformity of their fathers, for example. During the nineties these issues were exacerbated by the erosion of working class industries and with them, the economic framework upon which the power of the

working class paterfamilias was built. The films in this chapter foreground narratives that are centred on tensions between father and son which take a number of forms. rejection of the father's legacy (motivated by a range of factors but most commonly brought about as a result of violence, drug and alcohol abuse) or anxiety about the 'failure' of a son to live up to his father's expectations or precipitated by the father's awareness that he has no meaningful legacy to bestow upon his son. This chapter is specifically concerned with how domestic and familial masculinities are mediated by class and ethnicity in 90s British cinema. The first section of the chapter looks specifically at how these issues are raised in relation to multicultural and first and second generation immigrant communities, focusing on *My Son the Fanatic* and *East is East*. The second section focuses more particularly on the ways in which British cinema of the period continually connects problems of post-industrial unemployment with tropes of failing or inadequate father figures. Additionally this section explores how these narratives are invariably associated with the social problems presented by white, working and underclass men in particular. In doing so I show how the father, or father figure as it may be, became a crucial site for the mediation of reduced social and economic power and the concomitant discursive construction of masculinity as being 'in crisis'. This section draws upon *The Full Monty*, *Brassed Off* and *TwentyFourSeven* to examine how cinematic narratives in the nineties were intervening into cultural debates regarding the complex social problems being discussed in terms of fathers and sons within nineties British culture.

### **Fathering and Cultural Inheritance in Multi-cultural Britain**

The two films that I analyse in this section raise issues about masculinities and the relationships between men and women in Asian British families. *East is East* and *My Son the Fanatic* are connected by the ways in which their narratives foreground the conflict between fathers and children, who are predominantly male, which as being bound up with issues of tradition and identity. In many ways the two films share common narrative ground; *East is East* presents the father as struggling to make his family understand or value the cultural traditions that he practices. The situation in *My Son The Fanatic* is inverted. Here Farid is the son who comes to loathe his father for rejecting his cultural heritage. Farid becomes increasingly invested in the religion and cultural practices that his father had turned away from. In the course of the narrative issues are raised about both configurations of power and the discursive machinations of masculinity within nineties British culture. Although *East is East* is set in the seventies the ways in which it raises and negotiates the tensions between fathers and sons through the prism of tradition is executed in such a way that makes for a credible connection with the contemporary cultural context of late nineties Britain and discourses of multiculturalism and cultural diversity that characterised the pre-millennial years of the New Labour government.

*East is East* takes the narrative trope of fatherhood and deploys it in such a way that it intervenes into the debates about the specificity of cultural plurality, gendered identities and the role of the father figure within them. Although this film is set in the

1970s it presents a narrative that is very much typical of nineties British cinema in the way that the father figure is positioned as a central yet ambivalent figure through whom issues about national and gender identities within a changing cultural context can be negotiated. The character of George (Om Puri) is represented as a strict, authoritarian father, who, like many of the other fathers seen in nineties British cinema, has a propensity towards physical violence when challenged or disobeyed. His character is also similar in that he is consistently positioned as being emotionally removed and ultimately isolated from his family. Despite knowing the repercussions of disobedience, the attitudes of George's wife, Ella (Linda Basset) and the behaviour of his children are characterised by ambivalence towards him; a notable example being when the children openly flout the dietary laws of both their father and religion in the act of cooking and eating sausages while George attends mosque. The opening scenes of the film show the Khan children taking part in a Christian parade through the streets of Salford. Meenah (Archie Panjabi) carries a crucifix while her brothers carry a statue of the Virgin Mary on a sedan bedecked with flowers and church banners. The family group are far from taking the religious sentiment of the parade seriously, as they laugh and joke between themselves; the older brothers clearly have ulterior motives for their participation in the parade as they use the opportunity to flirt with some of the female participants. The family are enjoying themselves until they realise that their route will intercept their father as he makes his way home from the mosque. Upon this realisation the family take flight from the procession, cutting through the back alleyways and rat runs that connect the terrace houses in the area in order to prevent

George from discovering them before they rejoin the parade safely out of his sight. This opening scene establishes the ambivalence with which the children view their father; the act of running confirms that they are unwilling to risk incurring his wrath by being blatantly disrespectful of his religion, but they do not identify his beliefs or value systems as being appropriate or meaningful for them. As Barbara Korte and Claudia Sternberg explain, ‘the film’s disputes and clashes are caused by George’s determination to enforce Muslim customs on his offspring and marry within the Pakistani-British community.’<sup>5</sup> In rejecting their father’s religious identity the younger generation also reject aspects of their own identity but do not put anything positive in its place. There is a connection between the narrative here and those of working class, post-industrial nineties whereby the entire structure is predicated around a notion of loss of identity. For the men in *TwentyFourSeven* this originates in the employment sector; the decline in industry that began in the seventies fundamentally changed the relationship between masculine identity and occupation. Working class men were no longer able to construct their identity around their work role and a large number of nineties films can be seen as working through the socio-somatic sense of loss that resulted. Conversely in *East is East* this loss is not refracted around nostalgia; rather it is celebrated as a positive even though the film has been criticised by scholars such as Sanjay Sharma for a regressive representation that posits traditional Asianness as ‘backwards-orientated’ while leaving ‘whiteness intact.’<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Korte, B. & Sternberg, C. (2008). ‘Asian British Cinema since the 1990s’ in Murphy, R. (ed) *The British Cinema Book* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (London: BFI Palgrave Macmillan) p.390.

<sup>6</sup> Sharma, S. (2000). ‘East is East’ in *Black Media Journal* (vol 1. No. 2). p.p. 32-4.

Despite the initial signals that George's primary identification is as a Pakistani Muslim the sequence goes on to establish the extent of his integration and belonging within the local community. George is clearly enjoying the parade and this is made evident through the sequence of shots which show him smiling and waving as he greets the various friends and acquaintances that pass by in the parade. The camera zooms out from a shot of George smiling at the passing parade to a large, wide shot that reveals the children's proximity to their father. The evasive actions of his wife and children are designed to leave no doubt that while George is able to enjoy watching his friends in the parade, his reaction would be markedly different if he were to discover his children's involvement. Although George performs or adopts many of the signifiers of cultural integration, these are represented as superficial markers which are often at odds with his personal views and they are certainly contrary to his wishes for his children. George's identity is presented as fundamentally fractured; although he has married a Caucasian woman, dresses in Western fashion, smokes and even signals his credentials as an Anglicised Pakistani through the name of his business, 'George's English Chippy', he identifies first and foremost as a Muslim and a Pakistani. The two elements of George's identity appear to be constantly in conflict throughout the film; while his wife, children and customers call him George, the imam and other men in the mosque use his birth name, for example, and he is frequently shown to be more interested in news from Pakistan than he is in the events in his immediate surroundings. The images in figure 18 show George in the chip shop, the mosque and then in Bradford where he is negotiating the marriage of two of his sons. Furthermore

the fact that it is revealed that, in addition to Ella, George has a second wife who remains in Pakistan marks his identity as ‘other’. The lack of connection to their father’s customs becomes what Korte and Sternberg label a ‘masquerade.’<sup>7</sup> This is notably evidenced when Tariq declares that he is ‘not marrying a fucking Paki.’



**Figure 18: *East is East*: George in Mosque, Bradford meeting and in his chip shop.**

Thus, in many ways, despite the superficial markers of Anglicisation, George is presented as believing in traditional Pakistani ideas about gender and his role as a father. Central to George’s ideas are the conjoined issues of family honour and individual conduct. The narrative is set in motion when George’s eldest son, Nazir (Ian Aspinall) absconds from his own wedding. The perceived shame that Nazir’s behaviour brings on the family is too much for George; the father disowns the son and proclaims him to be dead. Nazir refuses to go through with the marriage is because he is gay; while in this way the film signals the disruptive potential of gay masculinity in terms of patriarchal norms, *East is East* subsequently confines this gay character to the margins. Indeed it is only when the Khan children embark on a mission to see their estranged brother that they discover his sexuality. When Nazir returns his siblings to Manchester

<sup>7</sup> Korte, B. & Sternberg, C. (2009). P.390.

he sees his mother who implores him to leave without seeing his father; thus homosexuality is represented as a spectre which must be contained and denied. It is these attitudes that cause the breakdown of his family and his expulsion from the unit. The problems that beset the Khan family thus seem to be the clash between the father's desire to inculcate a certain belief system in his children and their rejection of the ethnic identity that this implies. In *East is East* then, the sense of loss remains at the forefront of the narrative; unlike *TwentyFourSeven* and the other films in the following section whose focus is invariably on the loss of industrial role upon male characters *East is East* juxtaposes the two generations as a means of negotiating a sense of loss that is predicated around issues of religion, national identity, assimilation and cultural hybridity. The estrangement of father and children that the opening scene of *East is East* establishes continues through the film; where Ella and the various children are presented as unified George, like Joe in *When Saturday Comes*, is more typically at the margins. George is an outsider both in the country and in the domestic space of his family; the questions of belonging are thus posited as central to the narrative preoccupation with how cultural identities and ideas about gender are passed on and negotiated from one generation to the next and in many ways the film maps the familial tensions onto the wider cultural tensions between assimilation, multiculturalism and hybridity. The rift in the family is presented visually by the frequent use of shots that frame Ella and the children together where George is more often presented alone in the frame. This codifies the breakdown in the family relationship and amplifies the ambivalence that the younger generation feel towards

what they see as the imposition of an alien cultural heritage upon them. In contrast to *TwentyFourSeven* the younger generation of *East is East* do not experience this in terms of nostalgia or loss but rather more ambivalently. George and Ella's children revel in their postmodern quasi-'third culture' status and the opportunities for transgression, transcendence and hybridisation that this affords them.<sup>8</sup> In many ways the central crisis that besets the Khan family, and George in particular, is the conflict between cultural identities; where George is desperate for his children to retain their Pakistani heritage they see themselves as integrating into British society and culture. Despite the apparent rejection of restrictive traditions on the part of the younger generation, *East is East* deploys a stereotypical perception of Asian families, and moreover, Asian fathers as being dominant, rigid and despotic, as Korte and Sternberg explain, 'what almost destroys the family in this film is not rejection by a Britain that insists on remaining white, but Muslim patriarchy'.<sup>9</sup>

The ambivalence of the younger generation to embrace the cultural heritage represented by their father is most apparent in the scenes where George introduces his family to the Shah family. In keeping with his traditional status George believes that

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<sup>8</sup>A third culture kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside their parents' culture. The third culture kid builds relationships to the various cultures to which they are exposed while not having full ownership in any. Third culture kids are characterised by their hybridity. The term refers to the ways in which people negotiate the contradictory tenets of differing cultures. Typically they are born in one place and grow up elsewhere. Clearly this is not the case in *East is East*; the children were all born and raised in the UK but they are characterised by an obviously third culture psyche. All of the children draw on their Asianness and Britishness in order to create their own individual identity. See Pollock, D. C. & van Reken, R.E. (2001) *Third Culture Kids: Growing up among Worlds* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing).

<sup>9</sup>Korte, B. & Sternberg, C. (2009). p.390.

it is his role to select appropriate spouses for his children, despite their protests. When Ella challenges George's plans to arrange marriage matches for Tariq and Abdul he forecloses any discussion by counselling that 'Pakistanis believe that if a father wants a son to marry then the son marries.' Tradition is further deployed as a means of circumventing Ella's involvement; the business of arranging marriages is something that is conducted by the fathers, friends and religious elders. George's insistence on the marriage of Tariq and Abdul to the Shah sisters (Tallat Nawaz and Sharmin Rafi) is presented as motivated by his need to assure that the traditions which shaped his own life are made meaningful to his sons; furthermore it is presented as being about preserving the specificities of these diasporic traditions in order to prevent them from being lost. The hybrid identities of his children cause George considerable consternation and his insistence that Tariq and Abdul marry women who live by the traditional dictates of Islam becomes a matter of ensuring that they – his sons – understand and honour the traditions of their forefathers. When Tariq refuses to comply with his father's demands, George remonstrates that the only way for him to teach his children their true identity is by ensuring that they marry within the Pakistani community; the hypocrisy of his declaration about English women being 'no good' is seized upon by Tariq who responds by saying that he will conform to his father's wishes and proceed with the marriage but that he will take a second wife who is white 'just like my dad!' George thus comes to represent a cultural inheritance that is meaningless to his children.

The traditions, customs and ideas that he believes in are without value or resonance to them, and his insistence that the children should accept and respect them results in his eventual alienation from the family group. George's beliefs are manifested in an authoritarian approach to his family; he is positioned as a self-appointed patriarch who demands respect and obedience. On several occasions throughout the film George reminds Ella that he, as the husband and father, is the head of the family and that she is duty bound to obey him; when she is insubordinate or defies his demands he hits her. On one occasion he loses control, hitting and punching her while screaming that if she is unable to obey him then she should 'fuck off and take your bastard kids too.'

Through George and Ella's relationship *East is East* develops a specifically post-feminist trajectory which is mediated through ethnicity. The deference that he demands is presented as problematic and as such the implication is that British culture favours women and has begun working towards greater equality. George's grip on authority over his family is ridiculed during the Shah visit and leads to the final confrontation of the film. After the visitors have gone, George rages about the way in which Ella and the children have undermined his authority and bought shame on him and the whole family; the fight that ensues appears to hasten his expulsion from the family unit as his children all turn against him. During this scene the familiar camera angles that isolate George from the rest of the family return as Ella retaliates to his remonstrations with the charge that his insistence upon the arranged marriages and the standards of behaviour that he demands have nothing to do with ensuring that his children are happy; rather they are used to compensate for the shame he feels at his own family's

miscegenation. Time and again *East is East* appears to straddle a contradictory line; on the one hand it celebrates the liberatory potential of cultural hybridity but in order to do so must cast the racial identity of the father as a problematic obstacle to integration. Moreover, as Korte and Sternberg suggest, George's refusal to acknowledge the schism between his ideas and the social milieu in which his family live and work is increasingly seen by his family as 'the disavowal of his own marriage and the negotiation of his children's dual heritage'.<sup>10</sup>

The film ends with an uneasy reconciliation between George and Ella as she returns to work in the chip shop. In this final scene George appears to be abashed and humble; he is hesitant and less arrogant than before as he fidgets uncomfortably behind the counter of the chip shop. Despite his apparent contrition, it is Ella and not George who extends the symbolic offer of peace by asking him if he would like a cup of tea. George's remorse is apparent in the more gentle tone of his response; this kinder timbre is in marked contrast to his earlier manner and seems to indicate a genuine desire to recompense for his treatment of her and their children although the extent to which this is meant to be understood as translating into a permanent transformation is left unclear. Moreover, that it is Ella who makes the conciliatory gesture appears to suggest that the patriarchal hierarchy remains intact. The questions that remain posed but unresolved in this tentative reconciliation underscore the instability of George's position as family patriarch while also appearing to articulate the ongoing negotiation

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<sup>10</sup> Korte, B. & Sternberg, C. (2009). p.390.

that his diasporic identity requires. The scene cuts to show the children outside in the street going about their day to day activities: Tariq chases after Stella (Emma Rydal) trying to win her back, Saleem (Chris Bisson) is chased by his white girlfriend, Peggy (Ruth Jones) after she finds Sajid (Jordan Routledge), the youngest of the Khan clan and his friend Earnest Moorhouse (Gary Damer) running round with the model of her groin that Saleem had made as part of his art course. Meena comes charging out of the house to join in the fun and pulls Maneer into the fray with her while Abdul looks on smiling at the ensuing chaos. The individual articulations of cultural identity are embodied in the diverse clothes of the group; Saleem wears a flowery shirt and flared jeans, Abdul and Tariq are dressed in suits, Sajid is wearing shirt, tie and trousers, Meena wears a sari and Maneer wears a thobe and skull cap. Each of the children has negotiated their own individual cultural identity embracing or rejecting the inheritance and traditions that their father represents to varying degrees. The shrieks and laughter of the group as they run down the street merge with the closing song to produce an upbeat ending.<sup>11</sup> The implication of these two concluding scenes is that the father will be reconciled with the family unit but that his authoritarian grip has been somewhat curtailed; further he has understood the hybrid identities and ideas of his family and accepted them and is no longer ashamed by them.

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<sup>11</sup> The final song is *Moving* by Supergrass, the lyrics explicitly drawing attention to the ambiguity of cultural negotiation in the film and pointing to the instability of individual and communal and diasporic identities.

The situation that is presented in *East is East* is inverted in the cinematic adaptation of Hanif Kureishi's *My Son The Fanatic*; where *East is East* appeared to celebrate the polymorphous possibilities of hybridity to its third culture kids, *My Son The Fanatic* refused to conform to this rhetoric. Instead the narrative presents Farid's turn to Islamic fundamentalism as being 'his way of claiming a place for himself'.<sup>12</sup> Where George worked hard to retain his Pakistani identity by adhering to the values and practices that have little or no meaning for his children, Parvez (Om Puri), the father figure in *My Son The Fanatic* is faced with the opposite situation as he tries to dissuade his son, Farid (Akbar Kurtha) from embracing Islamic fundamentalism. As with *East is East* the narrative revolves around the tension caused by the incompatibility of the father's legacy with his son's lifestyle; Farid views his father as morally weakened by his adoption of a western lifestyle. The differences between father and son are constructed by their respective rooms within the family house. Parvez uses his basement room as a den and it is cluttered with his possessions. He retires to this room to drink whisky and listen to music alone. In contrast Farid is seen ridding himself of his possessions. Against the dark, cluttered basement room inhabited by his father, Farid's bedroom is spartan and sterile, a place where Farid retreats to pray and study the Qur'an. Where *East is East* equates the importance of tradition as something that matters more to an older generation, *My Son The Fanatic* inverts this narrative and

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<sup>12</sup> Copier, L. (2005) 'Radicalism Begins at Home: Fundamentalism and the Family in *My Son The Fanatic*' in Pisters, P. & Staat, W. (eds.) *Shooting The Family: Transnational Media and Intercultural Values*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press). p.90.

presents a scenario in which it is the son and the younger generation who reject the notion of cultural integration.

Farid rejects his father's integration into British culture, and the westernised liberalism that this entails, as evidence of a corruption of spirit and denial of his true heritage.

Farid and his friends reject the possibility of a third culture kid identity and instead turn to religious doctrine in order to re-create an authentic, coherent sense of identity. The opening scenes of the film set up the central questions about cultural identity. The opulence of the Fingerhut mansion presents a form of British class identity that is rarely seen in social realist films. Parvez and his family are there to celebrate the impending engagement between Farid and Chief Inspector Fingerhut's daughter, Madaline (Sarah Jane Potts). Parvez clearly sees the union between Farid and Madeline as evidence of his family's successful integration within the higher echelons of British society. This is contrasted with Fingerhut's (Geoffery Bateman) obvious disdain for Parvez, a narrative flourish that resonates within a post-Stephen Lawrence context dominated by reports of 'institutional racism' within the police force.<sup>13</sup> Throughout this scene Parvez' demeanour is obsequious as he seeks to ingratiate himself with Fingerhut. Parvez's narcissism blinds him to Fingerhut's contempt; Farid, on the other hand sees Fingerhut's attitude as symptomatic of the wider prejudices that Asian

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<sup>13</sup> The *MacPherson Report* that came in the aftermath of Stephen Lawrence's murder found that the Metropolitan Police suffered a 'collective failure' in providing 'an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin.'

Britons face on a daily basis. Further he sees this as evidence of the intractable differences between East and West.

Where Parvez sees the union between Farid and Madeleine (Sarah Jane Potts), as symbolic of the family's cultural integration, Farid comes to view it as an inappropriate and unfeasible relationship between two opposing cultures. Farid's renunciation of cultural integration is motivated by a desire to uphold the traditions of his ancestors and maintain the links with a cultural heritage that his father seems willing to relinquish. The ideological gulf between father and son appears to be insurmountable; Parvez explains his rejection of religion and 'turn to work' to Bettina (Rachel Griffiths), who in turn explains that one of the central roles of a father is not just to provide financially but also to 'give Farid a better philosophy.' Where Parvez might work hard to provide financially for his family this statement perplexes him; his motivation for work is money, spiritual matters are not important to him and thus he is unable to provide the thing that his son appears to need most from him. Parvez's inability to fulfil his son's spiritual needs is further underlined in the scene that follows. The scene cuts from the exterior of Bettina's house to the interior of Parvez's cab; seated in the back of the car are two Islamic men who comment on the 'disease-ridden, filthy whore' that they drive past. Parvez remains to the fore of the shot playing with a pink comb that Bettina had left in the car while he listens to the opinions of his clients. His resigned expression demonstrates his awareness of the impossibility of bridging the gulf that exists between him and his son. This inability to bond across generations is a common

theme in cinematic narratives about fathers and sons as the previous discussions have shown; *My Son The Fanatic* is distinct from many of the other films that I have examined insofar as it presents a father who wants to be involved with his son but who has come, through his assimilation into Britishness, to represent the very things that Farid finds repulsive.

While Parvez seems to have rejected his own cultural heritage his wife, Minoo, is ultimately little more than a British stereotype of Asian femininity. Minoo is accorded very little agency within the film and, for the main part, her lines are little more than perfunctory. During the opening scenes at the Fingerhut mansion, Minoo plays the role of a subservient wife. She hovers nervously at the peripheries of the scene and says nothing. What is particularly interesting about this, for me, is the ways in which this is used in the film to endorse Parvez's character. Despite appearing to offer a conventional, possibly stereotypical view of an Asian family when Parvez discovers that Minoo has been relegated to the kitchen to eat while Farid and his friends from the mosque eat together, Parvez breaks the orthodox edicts of Farid and his cohort by refusing to join them and instead having food with his wife, in the kitchen. Parvez's choice does more than underscore his feelings about his cultural identity; it mobilises a specific set of discourses and assumptions which we might then understand as indicative of his progressive nature.

Farid's distaste for the more ignominious aspects of British culture sets the father and son up in a dichotomous relationship; Parvez, through his occupation as taxi driver to prostitutes and their clients is complicit in the parts of British culture that Farid objects to most. When Farid accompanies the Maulvi on the journey from the airport to the family home his monologue contrasts directly with that given by his father to the visiting German businessman Herr Schitz. The latter was a proud tribute to British culture which was designed to draw attention to the highlights of the area which the men were travelling through. The tone of Farid's description is marked out by its indictment of an impoverished and immoral culture which is saturated with sex and stripped of moral and spiritual value. Where Parvez sees beyond the material dereliction of the area, Farid sees it as symbolic of the wider cultural decay that he is seeking to escape. Ultimately, Parvez becomes symbolic of that which Farid feels compelled to escape from; his father's involvement in the seedy world of prostitution is evidence of the corrupt nature of western culture that Farid rejects. In contrast to father characters such as Geoff in *TwentyFourSeven* or Joe in *When Saturday Comes*, Parvez is constructed as a sympathetic character; certainly his pronouncement that he works in order to provide the best for his son distinguishes his character from the many of the others discussed in this chapter so far. Yet father and son are constantly presented in opposition to one another. Where Parvez drinks and listens to American music in the cellar of their house, Farid is upstairs with his friends from the mosque studying the Qur'an.

During the reconciliation dinner the distance between the two men becomes self-evident. In one way Farid sees his father's material motivations as symptomatic of his corruption by Western culture and is clearly rebelling against this (he asserts that his father has been duped by the 'white and Jewish conspiracy'). However, Farid's apparent rebellion against his father is also a misinterpreted defence of his father. The son tries to explain to his father that one of the reasons why he rejects British culture so vehemently is because of the attitudes of people like Chief Inspector Fingerhut. Where Parvez's pronounced sycophancy towards Fingerhut in the opening scenes demonstrates the strength of his desire to be accepted, Farid is more perceptive and sees the reaction of his fiancée's family as indicative of their repulsion that Madeline should be engaged to a Pakistani. Thus, at this stage in the film at least, Farid's return to Islam can be understood as born out of pride for his heritage and that of his father.

*My Son The Fanatic* does not allow the reconciliation of father and son and indeed concludes with the breakdown of the whole family unit. After Farid and his cohort attack Bettina and the other prostitutes in the name of Islam, Parvez turns on his son. The two have a furious fight in which Farid admits to being ashamed of his father. At this point Farid is repulsed by his father and the relationship between the two comes to a violent conclusion. Further, the details of Parvez's affair with Bettina are revealed and Farid and Minoo return to Pakistan, leaving Parvez alone in England, unsure what the future will hold.

One of the overriding thematic concerns of *My Son The Fanatic* is the ways in which two different generations relate to their inherited culture and navigate their way through new territories. In many ways this film's portrayal of the father son relationship corresponds to the dominant discourses within nineties British cinema in the way that relationship is presented as fraught with difficulty and disidentification; the generational difference becomes an important site at which questions about identity, gender and power are negotiated and reconstructed.

While the majority of the films that tell stories about father son relationships are bound with issues of tradition, legacy and practices of masculinity, *My Son The Fanatic* and *East is East* position the father characters as ambivalent figures through whom issues of gender and national identity can be negotiated. The central thematic concern of these films: the disparity between the cultural identities and practices of the generations is one that resonates across many of the films that I have looked at elsewhere in the thesis and is certainly applicable to the films that figure in the next section as well.

### **The Untenable Breadwinner Role**

In presenting the decline of traditional forms of working class employment and community and then narrating the effects of these shifts in terms of male characters, the films analysed here articulate nostalgia for a (lost) era of assumed economic and gender certainty. This impulse appears to be driven by a set of anxieties regarding the

uncertain futures faced by their male characters as they attempt to come to terms with what John Hill calls their 'post-patriarchal circumstances.'<sup>14</sup> There are numerous films that make connections between narratives about father son relationships and a nostalgic impulse for the various practices and rituals within white working class communities; this impulse is clearly seen in films such as *Brassed Off* and *When Saturday Comes*, both of which explicitly foreground the idea that younger generations of men should understand the value of traditional homosocial relations and be encouraged to carry on these established traditions. These traditions are often work-related (sons following fathers and grandfathers into local industries) or, as is the case in *Brassed Off*, cultural traditions such as the pit's brass band. The implication is, therefore, that the generation gap is ideological: where the possibilities for communities of men have been curtailed through deindustrialisation the consequences for the male characters (irrespective of generation) are, invariably, disastrous.

Although nostalgia remained the dominant lens through which to frame narratives of counter-hegemonic fathers, there were other configurations circulating in cinema and culture at the time. Alongside those films that mourned the apparent demise of traditional masculinity and its industrial occupation were a number of films whose narratives used father-son relationships to explore tensions between assimilation, multiculturalism and ethnic hybridity. In films such as *My Son The Fanatic* or *East is East* the ideological function of the generation gap performs a different function from that of *Brassed Off* for example.

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<sup>14</sup> Hill, J. (2000). 'From New Wave to 'Brit Grit': Continuity and Difference in Working Class Realism' in Ashby, J. & Higson, A. (eds.) *British Cinema, Past & Present* (London: Routledge). p.253.

Invoking notions of both tradition and inheritance allows films such as *TwentyFourSeven* and *Brassed Off* to make a direct link between post-industrialisation and a break down in male communities. As such the films make a number of connections between social context and discourses of crisis that are specifically negotiated vis-a-vis the father/son relationship. The terms in which these narratives are constructed also echo Faludi's contention that men have been (or feel that they have been) betrayed by the very patriarchal structures, discourses and ideologies that they created and controlled.<sup>15</sup> Social context is critical in understanding both the male characters in the films and the cultural resonance of the narrative that is being told; as such there is a cultural specificity in these texts which means that they cannot just be transplanted into Faludi's narrative.<sup>16</sup> The films locate discourses of crisis on to characters who are (invariably but not always white) northern and working class.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore these films deploy a discourse of generational disparity which is played out through the narrative struggle that characterises the father and son relationship.<sup>18</sup> While the notion of inheritance passed from father to son is ideologically upheld within wider cultural discourses of the family, within British cinema narratives of the nineties it is more commonly conceived of as a site of conflict and disavowal. This more typical

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<sup>15</sup> Faludi, S. (2000). p.13.

<sup>16</sup> Faludi's work within a North American context locates middle class masculinity as the central site of crisis and struggle. British cinema narratives locate this crisis differently and in doing so their cultural function and discursive construction is very different. There are similar issues regarding betrayal and a loss of social role at the core of both the American and British discourses of crisis but they are manifested in very specific ways.

<sup>17</sup> This specific configuration of masculinity brings to bear a specific tradition of gendered ideologies which were pre-figured around the absolute division of labour and gender roles.

<sup>18</sup> The majority of films explored these issues through the prism of the father son relationship. Here again there is a British specificity to the claims of crisis and the ways in which they were mediated.

configuration of the father son relationship is seen in *Human Traffic* where the character Moff (Danny Dyer) rejects the identity and lifestyle that his high ranking police officer father (Terence Beesley) represents. Moff rejects the material trappings of affluence that have been acquired by his parents, preferring to make the money he needs by low-level drug dealing rather than establishing a career ('I'm not ready to become that miserable,' he remarks). Moff views his father as trapped by cultural expectations of masculinity and the compulsion for men to aspire to the breadwinner role. Moff, however, is only able to reject legitimate employment because he remains semi-dependent upon his parents and so the financial implications of long-term exclusion from the job market are very different than for the young men in *TwentyFourSeven*. Furthermore Moff's middle-class status enables unemployment and petty crime to be presented as a rebellious lifestyle choice and not symptomatic of male disempowerment.

A second dominant trope is the destructive father whose legacy the son is compelled to negotiate and disavow. This trajectory is typified by the father son relationship between Jimmy and Joe Muir in *When Saturday Comes*. Where the prospect of impending fatherhood is brimming with transformative and recuperative potential for the father-to-be, the relationship between father and adult son is presented as volatile and acrimonious. In Jimmy's eyes his father fails to live up to his responsibilities, drinking, gambling, getting the family into debt and having to borrow money from his children in order to pay bills. Jimmy is portrayed as a local alpha male character and

thus as the antithesis to his embattled, isolated father. Where Joe is aggressive to his wife, Jimmy is shown to be both an attentive partner to girlfriend Annie (Emily Lloyd) and a loyal, loving son. The film carefully constructs Jimmy's credentials: he steps in to defend his mother (Melanie Hill) from his father's aggression and is shown to be an attentive, caring partner. Further, in scenes where Jimmy is presented as the nexus around which his cohort revolves, his father is invariably presented as an isolated and unpopular figure whose addiction to alcohol and gambling have alienated him from his friends. However, the film shows that breaking free from inherited performances of masculine behaviour is not a straightforward process; despite initially being constructed as very different characters the similarities between father and son become increasingly apparent as the narrative progresses.

The narrative tension revolves around the extent of the similarities and differences between Jimmy and his errant father. Jimmy's brother, Russell (Craig Kelly), informs Jimmy that their father has taken money meant for bills from their mother's purse to feed his gambling addiction. Upon hearing this Jimmy places a bet himself. Unlike his father Jimmy backs the winning horse. Jimmy's victory is both financial and symbolic; Jimmy's success positions him in contrast to his father's portrayal as an addict and a loser. In rejecting his father's choice of horse and opting to place a bet on an outsider, Jimmy is symbolically rejecting that which his father represents; not only does his victory validate this rejection more importantly it serves to emphasise the distinction between the two men; Jimmy is symbolically distanced from his father's negative

legacy. Upon learning that Jimmy has been gambling, his mother, Mary, sounds a note of caution, urging her son against following in his father's footsteps. Jimmy's sister, Sarah, (Ann Bell) however, is more optimistic, proclaiming that her brother is 'nothing like the old man.' Jimmy's claim to being different from (and better than) his father are evidenced not only by his choosing the winning horse but emphasised when he gives the bulk of his winnings to his mother to replace the money his father took. Symbolically Jimmy takes the mantle of patriarch at this point. It is the eldest son who is able to provide the answer to his family's financial predicament. The film continues this investment by allowing Jimmy to attain his dream of playing professional football and thus gain social and economic status.

That Jimmy comes perilously close to becoming his father is a point of tension throughout the film. In the first half of the film Jimmy's personality appears to be very different from his father. The difference in temperament and attitude are highlighted by contrasting the exchanges between Joe and Mary with those of Jimmy and Annie, the former being characterised by sniping and bitterness on Joe's part and the latter by Jimmy's attentive more gentle manner. However as the film progresses the negative similarities between father and son become more apparent and Jimmy struggles to break free from the patterns of behaviour that he has inherited. The two men are contrasted in a number of other ways as well; where Jimmy is consistently represented as being a centre for the action and interaction between other men in work, on the football pitch and in the pub, his father is invariably positioned at the periphery.

Further, Jimmy is characterised as an ebullient force, laughing and joking with his friends and colleagues. Joe, on the other hand, is a more melancholic and ill tempered character who is downtrodden and bitter. Thus the film is invested in what Tincknell terms 'the social agency of 'proper' fathering,'<sup>19</sup> by which she means the processes by which certain forms of fathering are validated and others repudiated or reviled.

Chambers explains the situation thus: the father 'must not shirk his heavy responsibilities, so, as a reward, he is conferred a privileged status and identity within a system of patriarchy, not simply as a father but as a patriarch.'<sup>20</sup> In helping his family Jimmy is seen as capable of taking on the symbolic role of patriarch and thus proving that he is able to move beyond the inherited negativity of his own father.

From the moment when Joe realises that Jimmy and Russell have gone to the pub after school the relationship between Jimmy and his father is acrimonious, marked by confrontation and sarcasm. Joe continually criticises Jimmy; one particularly noteworthy example occurs as the family are gathered in the kitchen. The scene draws on traditions of social realist representation and on the connotations of its iconographical lexicon to underscore the northern, working class sociality of the family (see figure 17): Jimmy's mother is at the sink washing up, his sister, Sarah, is ironing, Russell is seated at the kitchen table and Joe is standing, drinking a can of bitter. When Jimmy explains that he's planning to see Annie and have an early night because of his football trial his father's response is laden with sarcasm. When Jimmy leaves the room

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<sup>19</sup> Chambers, D. (2001). p.4.

<sup>20</sup> Chambers, D. (2001). p.p.4-5.

to take a phone call Joe continues with his disparaging remarks; Joe, however, is isolated from the rest of the family in his negativity. The camera cuts from a shot of him leaning against a kitchen cupboard, can of beer in hand, to a two shot of Mary and Russell. His wife and younger son are united; they do not remonstrate with him but coldly stare him down. When Jimmy returns he explains that he is missing his best friend's birthday drinks because of the trial, he takes his seat back at the table next to Russell while their mother continues the washing up. The shot cuts once more to Joe who seizes the opportunity to criticise his son saying 'I can't believe you're staying in on yer best mate's birthday...some best mate you are! Bloody rubbish!' Russell and his mother keep their eyes fixated on Joe but Jimmy refuses to meet his father's critical gaze; he gets up and leaves the room. As he shuts the door the shot returns to Joe who proclaims, 'I knew it. I knew he couldn't stop in for one night.' Once more the framing of the two men alludes to their contrasting identities and relationships; Jimmy is positioned centrally within the scene surrounded by his mother and siblings.

Conversely Joe is sidelined; not only is he positioned at the margins of the family group but he is situated in such a way that alludes to the oppositional nature of their relationship. Having established Jimmy's potential to take on the mantle of family patriarch, this scene further invests in presenting him as the film's privileged patriarch against the structuring other of his father.



**Figure 17: When Saturday Comes: Muir Kitchen**

When Jimmy discovers that Annie is pregnant he becomes angry and retreats to the regressive/ homosocial comfort of the pub and his friends. Jimmy's reaction to Annie's pregnancy must be interpreted within a complex narrative context rather than being simply a repudiation of responsibility. He has just lost his job and thus has no financial means to support a child. This means that he is unable to fulfil the hegemonically endorsed, if problematically conservative, economic function of being able to provide for a dependent wife and child. Furthermore, on a symbolic level the troubled relationship with his father is deployed to suggest that the fate of the two men may not lie that far apart. The narrative creates a tension that is played out between father and son and revolves around the potential for Jimmy to become the father that he despises. Jimmy's withdrawal from Annie and regression into the homosocial safety offered by his friends suggests the potency of paternal legacies and the cyclical nature of inheritance. Jimmy's coach, Ken (Pete Postelthwaite) reveals that in going out drinking before his trial Jimmy has repeated the same self destructive behaviour as his father. Further Joe's self destructive tendencies are presented as originating from this

episode. The fact that Jimmy replicated the same patterns as his father suggests that the power of the negative paternal legacy can be enduring. The scene in which Jimmy goes to ask Ken for a second chance is crucial in understanding the way in which *When Saturday Comes* intervenes into cultural debates about the cultural legacies of masculinity that are passed from father (or father figure) to sons. Ken represents the kind of working class paternalised figure described by Leggott as believing that 'they are best able to assert their parental status through the reclamation of contested patriarchal territory,' in this instance, the football field. Ken is clearly configured as a traditional working class character; the iconography of his house confirms his status. Ken's association with football brings with it a number of connotations pertaining to this form of working class, northern masculinity. His awkwardness at talking about feelings and personal matters further underscores this part of his character. Crucially, however Ken *is* interested in helping Jimmy and helping him to regain Annie and his chance at a football career and thus he becomes a more obvious fit with the ideological parameters of British post-feminist fathering which tends to invest in mentor figures over biological fathers. Further this sets Ken and Joe in direct opposition; where the latter is harshly critical of Jimmy at every opportunity, Ken is willing to forgive and help Jimmy. Where Joe is negative role model, a character whose patterns of behaviour are prefigured as damaging to his family and particularly detrimental to his eldest son, the potential for damage becomes somewhat negated because Jimmy is able to negotiate them with the help of a positive father figure in the form of Ken. The conversation in which Ken reveals the parallels between father and son is the point at which Jimmy has

to choose whether to break free from the cycles of failure and self-destruction that appear to be dominating his life or to continue down the path that was seemingly pre-determined by his own father. The implication in this scene is that if Jimmy doesn't change then he is risking any potential relationship that he might have with his unborn child. This sentiment is re-iterated by the fact that in managing to break free from a seemingly inevitable destiny Jimmy succeeds where his father has failed, both professionally in becoming a footballer and also personally in being reunited with Annie. His professional and personal successes ensure Jimmy is accorded symbolic supremacy over his father. In presenting this narrative the film reiterates a link between social and economic status and the redemptive potential of fathering.

Joe's symbolic act of contrition and the tentative reconciliation between father and son only becomes possible once Jimmy has broken free from the damaging legacy of his father. The film does not ever allow a full resolution between Joe and his family; while Jimmy's mother and sister are at home watching Jimmy's debut match his father watches on the pub television where he remains on the fringes of Jimmy's jubilant friends. Jimmy's own narrative resolution is, as already noted, rather differently constructed; after an ominous start to his debut game Jimmy goes on to score a winning penalty for his team while Annie and Ken look on proudly. In allowing the character of Jimmy a positively configured outcome the film is able to negotiate an apparently contradictory conclusion that simultaneously rejects a legacy of damaging fatherhood while investing in the recuperative prospects associated with fathering

within a post-feminist cultural context.<sup>21</sup> The role of the father or father figure in maintaining the continuum of ideas pertaining to gender and the appropriate performances therein is, as the case of *When Saturday Comes* shows, often posited as a negative process. The narratives of destructive legacies of masculinity are however, tempered by another prevalent impulse that is seen in nineties British cinema which instead invests in the presentation of tradition and inheritance as a way of negotiating the uncertainties of masculinity within a post-industrial milieu. *TwentyFourSeven*, for example, draws upon the traditions of northern and Midland working class masculinity and specifically the role of the young lads boxing club as something to be cherished and reawakened as a way of bringing meaning and purpose to the otherwise disempowered lads.

*TwentyFourSeven* evokes traditional practices associated with working class masculinity in order to effect a restorative reconfiguration of ideas and localised discourses of masculinity which are presented as compromised, uncertain and lacking in social and economic power. Foremost it is a film about men and practices of masculinity; there are very few female characters in the film and they remain very much at the peripheries. Although the film is not marked by the post-feminist resentment that characterises *The Full Monty*, the lack of female narrative agency within *TwentyFourSeven* raises questions about the ways in which women's stories and experiences of femaleness were being marginalised in British post-feminist media

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<sup>21</sup> Modleski, T. (1990); Chambers, D. (2001); Tincknell, E. (2005).

culture. In presenting Darcy as the most sympathetic of the film's various paternal figures *TwentyFourSeven* is able to mobilise a nostalgic impulse that invests traditional forms of working class masculinity and the homosocial communities that they support with a recuperative potential. The certainties of tradition provide stability against a precarious cultural context that is shaped by uncertainty regarding the roles and futures of young, post-industrial men. All of the other fathers in the film are presented negatively; Geoff (Bruce Jones), Tim's father is lazy, drunk and domineering, Tonka's (James Corden) dad, Ronnie (Frank Harper), continually criticises his son for failing to adhere to his standards of masculinity and Knighty's father, Adrian (Collin Higgins) is emotionally inarticulate and only able to connect with his son when they are talking about Nottingham County Football Club. Thus Darcy, in his role as mentor, fulfils an important function for the lads in the boxing club. Crucially he demonstrates the importance of valuing the individual attributes of each of the lads and as such counterpoints the inadequacies of the other fathers in the film. Darcy succeeds in forming meaningful relationships with the lads where the other dads seem to fail; scenes such as those where he helps Knighty to control his temper or where he works to help Tonka settle into the group present him as a reconstructed father figure who is able to draw on both the traditional ideals of masculinity that are embodied by the ethos of the boxing club (physical toughness, control, loyalty, discipline and so on) and the newer discursive construction which fore-grounded sensitivity and nurturing as key components of contemporary paternal masculinity.

In many ways Darcy's mission to reinvigorate the boxing club is as much about his own need for a meaningful social role as it is an act of altruism. In resurrecting the boxing club Darcy is manufacturing an opportunity to validate his own masculine experiences and establish the centrality of homosocial traditions within a narrative that is otherwise so invested in mourning their loss. Despite the fact that Darcy is shunned by the community after a violent fight with Geoff, his eventual repatriation confers his privileged status; not only has he succeeded in ending the rivalry that existed between the groups of lads in the town but the relationships of the various father son pairings (including Tim and Geoff) all appear to have been positively resolved and Darcy is reified, posthumously, for restoring the homosocial bonds that had been damaged by the lack of male spaces and communities. The father son relationship often functions as a site through which the changing meanings of masculinity can be mediated and reconfigured;<sup>22</sup> the cinematic construction of this dynamic often explicitly links the father figures to those older forms of masculinity that are under threat in the post-industrial, post-feminist cultural context portrayed in nineties British cinema.

This is also one of the central narrative concerns in *Brassed Off*. The connections between this *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* are, for example, readily discernable: both deal with how traditional forms of white working class male identities are both under threat and in crisis within post-industrial Britain. Dave describes *Brassed Off* as a

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<sup>22</sup> Harris, I. (1995) states that 'for most boys their most powerful teacher about masculinity is their father who plays an enormously important role in their development, modelling how men behave.' *Messages Men Hear: Constructing Masculinities* (London: Taylor & Francis). p.22.

post-Thatcher film in that it was ‘part of a coming to terms’ with the ‘epic struggle and defeat of the industrial working class,’ during two decades of Conservative government<sup>23</sup> As is the case in the other films featured in this section, this narrative trajectory is negotiated through the relationship between the central father and son characters Phil (Stephen Tompkinson) and Danny (Pete Postlethwaite). Although *Brassed Off* is most commonly described as a comedy, it is also heavily influenced by social realist traditions of film making. It presents a narrative that is explicitly political and uses captions to bookend the film to contextualise the narrative within social and economic history. Danny represents a seemingly timeless icon of white working class masculinity; he is proud, smart, fierce and passionate about his family and the community in which they live. Danny’s working class pride is demonstrated most clearly in his role as the conductor of the pit band which consolidates his position as the chief patriarch within the film’s diegesis. Danny’s pride in the band and the traditions of working class masculinity that it symbolises are explicated through the care he takes over his band uniform which becomes a symbol for the heritage that is under threat. Even at the practice sessions where the men turn up in casual clothes Danny is always immaculately dressed in band uniform; his identity is inextricable from the traditions of masculinity that it represents. Danny is constructed as a traditional working class man; his determination, stoicism and refusal to give up fighting for what he believes in are deployed as makers of this identity.

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<sup>23</sup> Dave, P. (2006). p.61.

Danny represents a nostalgic incarnation of northern working class masculinity which is traditionally characterised by reserve and stoicism. Although Danny's character draws upon this particular configuration of masculinity, his certainty and faith in the traditions that he has inherited and hopes to pass on become increasingly fragile as the film progresses. Allegorically the decline of the industries and the traditional male communities that they supported are equated to Danny's own ailing health. The fate of the mine (and by implication that of the whole community of men that the mine supports) is metaphorically linked to Danny's illness; both the mine and the man are moribund. When the men return home from the semi final of the band competition to learn that the pit is being closed down with immediate effect, Danny is also overcome by his illness. He collapses in the road in the shadows of the soon to be obsolete pit. This sequence is typical of the pathos with which Herman treats the story about the disenfranchisement of working class men. By linking the destiny of the male space of the coal mine with that of the local chief patriarch the film's allusion to the death of certain forms of working class masculinity is explicitly articulated.

The implications of post-industrial decline upon the cultural legacies of masculinity are also presented as severe. The younger generation of men represented by Danny's son Phil and Andy (Ewen McGregor) are presented as being limited by the cultural legacies that they have inherited; legacies that no longer have much meaning or any real potential within the changed social and economic context. These younger men are victims of industrial decline and the film's overtly political commentary constantly

reiterates the extent of the damage; despite being marketed as a comedy drama the use of captions which detail the impact of mine closures on communities such as the fictional Grimley tempers the ‘feel-good’ conclusion of the film and present it as a more serious commentary on social events than is offered by films such as *The Full Monty* to which *Brassed Off* is often compared (see figure 19).<sup>24</sup> It is through the character of Phil that the devastating impact of post-industrialisation upon working class men is perhaps most clearly shown. Phil has inherited a cultural legacy that is in the process of becoming obsolete. He has no role in society and no way of fulfilling the demands that are placed upon him as either a father or as a son. His circumstances are rendered even more poignant by the dearth of new possibilities and opportunities for him and his cohort; Phil in particular is represented as being trapped by circumstances and becomes increasingly desperate as the narrative progresses.



Figure 19: *Brassed Off*: End Captions

<sup>24</sup> The fictional community of Grimley in which the film is set is based on the real south Yorkshire village of Grimethorpe. *Brassed Off*'s narrative takes its inspiration from the fight of the Grimethorpe miners against the closure of their pit in the early 90s.

The character of Phil is seen to be constantly trying to balance the conflicting requirements of his family and consistently fails to achieve this successfully. Throughout the film Phil is presented as being pulled between two irreconcilable positions and the options that he is presented with invariably require him to choose between doing the right thing for his wife and children, and doing what he can to make his father proud. The impossibility of his position is highlighted when his wife, Sandra (Melanie Williams), proclaims that she needs to have a break from the children on the same day as the band are due to compete in one of the heats for the national Brass Band competition. Phil asks her not to go, saying 'me dad'll kill me if I don't go,' but she is unmoved, responding by handing him their screaming daughter and saying 'aye, and I will if you do...ain't life just shit!' The medium close up on Phil's face as his wife leaves the house emphasises his resignation; the exhaustion of the constant battles at work and at home are etched into the lines around his eyes as once more he is placed in an untenable position of trying to be both the good father / husband and dutiful son. He eventually opts for a compromise and takes his children along to the band competition; his father, however, does not approve nor does he appreciate Phil's predicament. In this exchange between father and son, the film is actively negotiating the terrain of changing roles of men as fathers. Danny cannot understand that Sandra has left Phil to look after the children; this totally contravenes his traditionalised ideas of gender appropriate roles which hold the duties of childcare as the exclusive preserve of mothers. Phil, on the other hand, belongs to a different generation and while these

men remain tied to versions of masculinity that are very traditional, their behaviour and attitudes show some evidence of post-feminist reconstruction.

Another significant narrative development that occurs in Sandra's absence is the return of the debt collectors to the house. Gary (Toni Galacki) watches through the curtains as his father tries to negotiate with the men. When his father comes back inside the house he asks him what the men wanted. In an effort to protect his child from the truth about their financial situation Phil makes up a story in an attempt to circumvent more questions. As a husband and father he is compelled to provide for and protect his young children but Phil's efforts to stabilise his family's financial situation are overwhelmed by the long-standing debt that he incurred as a result of the 1984 miners strike. Phil attempts to supplement his wages by becoming a clown and performing at children's parties. The incongruity of the down-beaten, embattled Phil performing as Mr Chuckles the clown is used in the film to highlight both the impossibility of his situation and the futility of his fight. Phil is, in many ways, presented as a clown-like figure: not only are his attempts to fulfil his role as a provider and protector for his family foolish, but he is frequently positioned as a laughable, inept character. His character is physically clown-like; he wobbles precariously on the back of his father's bike on the way to band practice trying to balance while holding his trombone, he blunders his way around the kitchen while looking after the children and when his wife challenges his decision regarding the mine closure vote he puts his hands in his pockets and fidgets with his trombone. This characterisation is enhanced by his clothes: the red

woollen hat and green parka-style coat further contribute to the construction of this character as naive and childlike.

While Phil might be constructed as a foolish, naive character his alter ego, Mr Chuckles, is not a very competent clown. He only makes two appearances in the film, the first of which is at a child's birthday party. He messes up his tricks and the children are unimpressed. As I noted in the previous chapter, the second appearance of Mr Chuckles is rather more ominous. He takes to the stage at a church's harvest festival and begins to talk to the children about God. His performance develops into a furious, obscenity laden diatribe about the injustice of his situation and the situation of other men like him. The contradiction between the performance required as Mr Chuckles and his own desperate situation precipitates Phil's breakdown and the emotionally charged speech in front of the children in which his frustration and anger can no longer be contained. Monk describes the bitterness of these recriminations as expressing the 'problems of the post-industrial male in a 'feminised' society.'<sup>25</sup> This 'feminised' society is represented by and through Gloria. Gloria has returned to Grimelthorpe after being at college. Her middle class status is continually reiterated through her clothing and her speech as well as through her work for the corporation who are overseeing the closure of the mine. Gloria's well intentioned but futile work writing an (inconsequential) report on the profitability of the mine emphasises the supposed shifts in gendered power relations that are frequently deployed in discourses of male disempowerment:

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<sup>25</sup> Monk, C. (2000). p.160.

the unmistakable subtext, running throughout the film is that the move away from industrialised workplaces and the concomitant growth of the female workforce have irreparably impacted upon working class men.

Phil's attempts to make his dying father happy are seen to have dire repercussions for his own family on a number of occasions. Phil's trombone breaks during one of the band's rehearsal sessions forcing him to make a choice between giving money to Sandra for groceries or buying a replacement instrument that would enable the band to compete in the national brass band competition. The conflict between his need to provide for his family and make his father happy is particularly heightened in this part of the narrative. Phil's initial reluctance to buy a new trombone is confounded by the realisation that his father is seriously ill. *Brassed Off* portrays the distinctions between male and female experiences in the post-industrial economy; the male characters are invariably worn down, resigned but angry about the fate that the middle class managers have planned for the mine. The women, particularly Vera (Sue Johnston) and Ida (Mary Healey), do more than just offer comic relief; these women, alongside Phil's wife, Sandra, are part of a longer lineage of stoic working class femininity within British cinema. The wives on-going protest at the mine closure purposefully harks back to the news footage from the 1984 miner's strike replete with tea brewing on oil-can fires. These communities of women are not, however, celebrated; their defiance and their refusal to give up are seen by the male characters as foolish. As Jim and his wife, Vera, pass on their front garden the bitter recriminations are only half-heartedly exchanged.

The wider community of women and the networks of support and friendship that are formed are very much subsumed within a narrative which concentrates firmly on the effects of post-industrial decline on men; short sequences, such as when Sandra is unable to pay for her shopping and the shop assistant surreptitiously hands her a five pound note with her receipt give glimpses into these female connections but they remain secondary to the wider concern with the impact of poverty and the erosion of the traditional breadwinning role on white, working class men. While Sandra is forced to return items that she can't afford in the shop Phil, oblivious to his wife's humiliation, makes his way home with the new trombone. As he crosses the road Phil sees his wife and children trying to fight off the debt collectors. Phil rushes over to the house to confront the men and try to prevent them from serving the writ. By keeping Phil in his clown costume for this scene the film once more plays the narrative for tragic-comic effect. Phil's remonstrations and threats become excessive and ridiculous because of the incongruity of the outfit and the juxtaposition of his made-up face against the burly bodies and sombre suits of the bailiffs. When Phil realises that his family will lose both their home and their possessions he is forced to compromise his principles by signing up for the redundancy pay off and become the kind of man that he despises. Once more Phil is shown to be in an impossible situation. The only course of action that is open to him is to break ranks with his friends and colleagues and accept the deal which would see the mine closed down but would enable him to re-pay the debt and secure his family's possessions in the short term.

Despite Phil's threats to the bailiffs, he is not there to protect his family when the men come back to remove their belongings; he is at another heat of the band competition. Once more Phil is seen to have put the needs of his father over the needs of his children and loses his family as a result. This point is underscored by a number of the images in the sequence including a shot of the small boys trying to defend their home against the burly debt collectors and Sandra comforting her children, alone in the empty living room. These images are intercut with shots of Phil, Danny and the other men at the band competition. Extending the sound from the competition over the images of the defenceless family clearly implicates Phil's involvement in the band as a contributory factor in the family's plight. Ultimately the film presents Phil as trapped, his best will never be enough. When he turns up for the band competition with a battered and bruised face after his fight with the bailiffs, his father is sympathetic but predominantly concerned about the implications for their success with the judges. At the same time Phil's desperation to make his father proud continually undermines his relationship with Sandra and subsequently his children.

*Brassed Off* mobilises two distinct tropes of fatherhood through the characters of Danny and Phil. Danny represents the traditional, proud working class patriarch who is confident and certain about the traditions, legacies and communities that he is a part of, whereas Phil's character draws more openly on the signifiers of trauma and crisis that have come to be associated with white working class masculinity. Although Phil's efforts to protect his family are often compromised by his need to do the right thing by

his own father both generations are characterised by the desire to protect their children from the realities of a financial situation and terminal illness respectively. Further the lineage of masculinity that passes from father to son is demonstrated through the similar characteristics of the two men; both are stoic and often detached, they are both unable or unwilling to confront bigger issues (such as how the family will cope when the mine is shut down and the realities of Danny's illness respectively), seeming to circumvent these issues by focussing on more trivial matters or simply deferring the conversation to a later point. In this way both men share a legacy of masculinity that is, in some ways, limiting (neither father nor son is able to open up emotionally to the other) but also worthy of protecting.

The film concludes on a point that is both politicised and yet fantastical. Danny's speech at the Albert Hall is used to re-state the political agenda of the movie and locates it firmly within the traditions of British social realism. In this speech Danny's character is used to reiterate the consequences of post-industrialisation upon white, working class men and the communities in which they live. Further this speech functions as an indictment of the impact of post-industrialisation on the men themselves: 'most of these men,' Danny explains, 'lost the will to win a while ago, a few of them even lost the will to fight, but when it comes to losing the will to live, to breathe...' In using the victory speech to return to the explicitly political themes of the betrayal of working class men the film offers a final intervention into the construction of masculinity as besieged and beleaguered by progress and so by implication it is able

to reaffirm a belief in the value of an idealised image of traditional masculinity; thus the film remains invested in eulogising the traditional, northern, white working class masculinity as something worthy of protection. As Leggott explains, Danny's reanimation makes a symbolic link, 'his bodily strength is umbilically connected to the diminishment of masculine spaces and traditions.'<sup>26</sup> In offering a symbolic victory within a politicised agenda the film presents the death of the communities of men as the ultimate tragedy.<sup>27</sup> This nostalgia frequently finds expression in a bitter voice but is confined by a political agenda that is only able to look to the past; the film offers no sense in which things could be any different or any better and circumvents these questions by refusing to look to the future in any meaningful way.

The changing economic and industrial infrastructure of nineties Britain had, as my discussion of *Brassed Off* has shown, extensive ramifications for working class men. Where these male characters are also fathers the implications of unemployment and poverty were represented in films of the period as having even graver consequences than for single men. Those fathers who were unable to rely upon the status conferred through employment are seen to be at risk of depression or addiction, invariably portrayed as violent and dysfunctional. A central preoccupation of nineties British cinema was the narrative negotiation of the impact of post-industrialisation upon men, and as such a recurrent thematic concern was the consequences of unemployment upon male characters. Central to these portrayals are ideas about the emasculating

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<sup>26</sup> Leggott, J. (2004). p.167.

<sup>27</sup> Monk, C. (2000). p.162.

effects of being confined to the domestic spaces of the home and the loss of a clear social role, the key components that Farrell describes as leading to social death for men.<sup>28</sup> The trope of the unemployed father character proliferated in both social realist and comedy films; the characters were rather differently configured in these genres, but the discursive outcomes were invariably similar, upholding the importance of the breadwinner role as a defining characteristic of hegemonic fatherhood by presenting the dysfunctional relationships within families where the father is unemployed. In this section I analyse the different constructions of unemployed fatherhood that are found in both comedy and social realist films in order to explore the ways in which these narratives frequently serve to uphold traditional ideas about the centrality of the breadwinner ethic and the economic role of fathers to discourses of masculinity.

Darcy is the sympathetically paternalised mentor of *TwentyFourSeven*, but his motivation for ‘embarking on a collective strategy for the maintenance or restoration of...patriarchal territories’ is not entirely altruistic.<sup>29</sup> Darcy is the only sympathetic father figure in the film; he is, as Leggott describes him, ‘by turns maternal and paternal – to differing people and circumstances’ but ‘his reclamatory project is revealed to be regressively masculinist, nostalgic and untenable.’<sup>30</sup> As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Darcy’s treatment of Fag Ash spoke not just to ideas about working class communities but to the ways in which male characters can be nurturing

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<sup>28</sup> Farrell, K. (1998). P.11.

<sup>29</sup> Leggott, J. (2004). p.164.

<sup>30</sup> Leggott, J. (2004). p.166.

without being emasculated. Where *Brassed Off* allowed Danny to rail against his failing body to provide narrative reassurance *TwentyFourSeven* strikes a rather more muted tone; Darcy is shunned by the community after his violent outburst at the boxing match and it seems that his dream of restoring a traditional bastion of homosocial bonding (and the various rites of passage that are associated with it) have failed. The final scene, however, suggests a partial recovery of the homosocial bonds as I explain shortly.

The first glimpse of Geoff (Bruce Jones) in *TwentyFourSeven* is a slow panning shot along his prone body, lying on an old sofa (see figure 20). He is apparently sleeping while his wife does the ironing in the kitchen. His clothes are worn and creased, his hair is lank and his face is unshaven. The cumulative effect of these visual messages alongside Darcy's voice over about the problems of unemployment and poverty in the area create the impression of a character who is disengaged with life and who, like the men in *Brassed Off*, has given up hope. The effects of Geoff's confinement to the domestic space of the family house are pathologised; his frustration is manifested in verbal and physical aggression towards both his wife and son. The implication is that his unemployed status has a direct correlation with his abusive behaviour and thus is an important contributory factor in his characterisation as a toxic father. The narrative of *TwentyFourSeven* takes the damaging effects of unemployment on fathers as a starting point from which to explore the wider impact of male joblessness upon family dysfunction.



**Figure 20: *TwentyFourSeven*: Geoff on sofa**

Geoff's inability to lay claim to the markers of authority with which the role of breadwinner is invested in patriarchal society is represented as having major ramifications. Without recourse to conventional forms of fiscal power and the familial authority that the role of breadwinner facilitates, Geoff's only means of exerting power and authority over his family is physical. The untenable basis of his power demands his constant surveillance. Any perceived act of defiance on behalf of his wife or son is thus met with an exaggerated display of physicality which is designed to intimidate them into submission. The hysterical nature of these displays of machismo is, however, often presented as preposterous and serves to highlight the father's lack of power rather than reinforcing his dominance. One particularly notable example of this occurs early on in the film during Darcy's voice-over introduction. Tim is seated on the floor of his sparsely furnished bedroom reading a magazine. We hear his father approaching before he enters the frame; he is furious that Tim appears to have stolen his new toothbrush and sees his son's action as an open challenge to his authority. The next shot is a low-angled one from Tim's point-of-view looking up at Geoff towering over

him as he rants and remonstrates over the offence. The effect is to highlight the threat Geoff poses and to demonstrate the potency of his physical power over his family. These meanings, however, are contradicted by the juxtaposition of close up shots of Tim smirking at the impotent rage of his father and thus the sequence ultimately serves as a point of conjecture regarding Geoff's role within the family and, more importantly for my purposes, his role as a father. Geoff's threatening demeanour is further set up as risible through the use of pratfall humour as he hops on one leg, gesturing to his foot which is covered in throat sweets that Tim had sucked and placed on the floor so that they would stick to his father's feet. The banality of the rebellion is met with an entirely disproportionate response that serves only to empty the display of machismo of any power.

Throughout the film Geoff's overbearing need to exercise power over his family is contrasted with Darcy's calmer persona. Where Darcy encourages the various lads and appears to have a natural understanding of their individual strengths, Geoff appears to feel threatened by his son and looks for opportunities to ridicule and berate him. When Geoff finds out that his son is involved in the boxing club he challenges him to a fight. In much the same way that Joe Muir's character in *When Saturday Comes* scoffs at Jimmy's sporting ambitions, Geoff's tone is unremittingly sarcastic when he reads about the club in the local newspaper. Geoff's constant re-articulation of his power through the verbal and physical intimidation of his wife and son are presented more as evidence of his social and economic disempowerment than as proof of his

unquestionable status as authoritarian patriarch. Again like Joe Muir in *When Saturday Comes*, Geoff's character remains isolated throughout the film. The distinction between the two films comes at the end; where Giese's film refuses to give the errant father any tangible conclusion, Meadows allows Geoff and Tim to be reconciled. In doing so Meadows places a nostalgic investment in the traditions of homosociality, the paternalised bonds and the traditions of masculinity that have been challenged and transformed by the neo-liberal policies of Thatcherism. The qualities of loyalty and respect that were central to Darcy's personal discourse of masculinity ultimately come through despite adversity and thus he remains at the pinnacle of the film's hierarchy of fathers.

Although Geoff is the father who is most central to the film's narrative arc, and thus the one whose character is the most fully developed, the unemployed fathers of the other lads in the boxing club are all presented as struggling to fill the void left by long-term redundancy. Knighty's (James Hooton) father, Adrian (Collin Higgins) is presented as an obsessive football fan, endlessly quoting facts and trivia about his beloved Nottingham County Football Club. In many ways Adrian's obsession with the minutiae of his hobby is presented as a substitute for the male environment of the work place and thus it also figures as a means by which he maintains a masculine performance while being restricted to the domestic environment. Adrian's continual commentary on all matters pertaining to Nottingham County is presented as an attempt to masculinise his enforced leisure and the involvement in consumer culture that this entails. He

opines upon the impact of the club's ill fortune, on the price of replica kits and when his prized commemorative mug is broken he launches into a verbose monologue about the significance of the mug in terms of the history of the club as well as the item's importance as part of his own personal history as a supporter. While Adrian tries to supplant the validation gained through employment by proving his masculinity in the commodified arena of leisure, the lack of self esteem that the film posits as a consequence of long-term unemployment impacts upon his relationship with Knighty in a number of ways. Adrian's disengagement from the work place not only confines him to the emasculatory space of the home but it renders him unable to lay claim to the economic or symbolic authority that patriarchy confers upon the male breadwinner.

Not only is he alienated from these markers of patriarchal masculinity, but their ramifications extend to an inability to fulfil many of the pastoral strictures of fatherhood as well. Adrian's cultural participation is confined exclusively to football. Unable to build an identity based upon occupation Adrian is compelled to construct his identity in relation to Nottingham County Football Club. That he has no interest beyond football directly limits his ability to relate to Knighty; Adrian's conversational topics revolve exclusively around Nottingham County and this is directly correlated to the void left by unemployment. When Knighty and Adrian are together the conversation revolves entirely around football. Indeed Adrian pursues these conversations as way of demonstrating his expertise and importance; football takes on an increased

significance because it is the only form of cultural capital that he has access to and thus becomes his only means of demonstrating his knowledge and expertise to his son. Further Adrian's masculinity is bound up with his status as a football fan; because he is unemployed football becomes the main prism through which he articulates his identity. This contrasts with the (partial) turn away from football in response to fatherhood on the part of Paul in *Fever Pitch*; for Paul the ability to turn away at all exemplifies his middle class status.

*The Full Monty* also foregrounds the detrimental effects of unemployment on fathers. The film is, like *Brassed Off*, explicit in linking the decline of industry with a damaging loss of male roles. *The Full Monty* unashamedly plays upon this conflation from the outset; the film opens with an old tourist information film which boasts about Sheffield's status as the 'beating heart of the industrial north,' a city that employs 90,000 men in its world famous steel works. When the promotional film ends the screen cuts to black and a caption brings us back into the present day. When the black screen fades it reveals the empty, derelict space of a factory floor. Gaz (Robert Carlyle), Dave (Mark Addy) and Gaz's son, Nathan (William Snape) walk into shot. Dave is carrying a steel girder which Nathan berates his father for stealing. The fact that Gaz has involved his son immediately positions him as a reckless, irresponsible father. Despite Gaz's questionable judgement, however, he is presented as an affectionate, caring father; he calls his son 'love' and has a protective arm around his shoulder as the trio make their way across the deserted factory floor (See figure 21). Gaz's

demonstrative and affectionate behaviour towards his son distinguishes him from the unemployed father figures that are typically found in nineties British cinema and establish his credentials as a reconstructed, post-feminist father whose narrative motivation is securing his place in his son's life; even if his approach is inappropriate and misguided his motivations are validated by the successful and restorative conclusion.



**Figure 21: *The Full Monty*: Gaz, Dave and Nathan in the deserted factory.**

Gaz's motivations for stealing the girder from the derelict steel works are revealed; he needs the money from selling the girder in order to meet his maintenance payments without which he would lose access to his son. Gaz has been both betrayed and compromised by economic changes that have destroyed the industry on which he relied for employment but the social and legal changes that have taken place have further made his position untenable. *The Full Monty* functions as something of a riposte to the political and tabloid criticism that was frequently directed at absent or part time fathers during the nineties; although Gaz is presented as misguided in his

rationale for stealing, the fact that he is doing it in order to provide for his son is seen as legitimating his actions, to a point. The film constructs all of the main male characters as suffering as a result of unemployment and concomitant economic disempowerment but it is Gaz that the film consistently infantilises. From the farcical scenario at the steel plant to the job club, Gaz is shown to be immature and irresponsible. The job club is set out like a class room. The former steel workers sit at desks and are admonished by a supercilious clerk; like naughty school boys they are surly and facetious; as soon as the advisor leaves the room they resume their conversations and card games. Later on in the film Gaz is infantilised again when Nathan has to use his savings because his father has no money; the connection back to the main theme is clear: male power is reduced and male roles are compromised, men are now reliant upon women and children. The 'natural order' represented by tradition has been overthrown.

The film is explicit in articulating its position on the state of masculinity in late twentieth century Britain; anxieties about the changing roles of men are a prominent theme which runs throughout the narrative. *The Full Monty* was atypical in the level of commercial success that it attained; in many ways this success came about because of the way in which the film manages to make comedy out of the disempowerment of the male characters and the concomitant suggestion of role reversal that is central to the male stripper narrative. Despite being positioned as a comedy the film does still trade in idioms of anxiety and angst regarding the social and familial roles of the male

characters. These concerns are explicitly articulated, for instance, in the job centre scene where Gaz describes how men are ‘obsolete, dinosaurs’ heading for extinction and also later on in the film when the men discuss the representation of women in magazines. While Gaz might represent a character that is reconstructed in terms of his ability to show affection to his son, his ideas about gender normativity remain persistently rigid. He chastises Dave for being emasculated by his wife; Gaz sees Jean (Lesley Sharp) as usurping the position that he believes is rightfully Dave’s and objects to the reversal of roles that has led to Jean becoming the breadwinner while Dave is confined to the mundanity of unpaid domestic chores. The film also uses Lomper’s (Steve Huison) suicide attempt as a way of highlighting the isolation brought about by the demise of the male communities that were an integral part of industrial work places. While both Dave and Lomper are used to negotiate explicit critiques regarding the implications of unemployment on self respect, pride and an individual’s gender identity, it is the character of Gaz who remains the central point of focus because as a father he is the one who has the most to lose as a result of his reduced economic and familial status.

Gaz’s ability to be a good father is constantly being brought into question from a variety of sources. When Reg (Bruce Jones) auditions for a place in the line up he declines the offer of a cup of tea on the basis that he has his children outside and that it would be inappropriate to bring them in. Reg’s comment brings Gaz’s judgement into question once more because Nathan has been involved in the entire audition process

and the implications are acknowledged via a furtive glance from father to son. Gaz's inadequacies are further highlighted by the contrast between his and Mandy's (Emily Woof) home. Mandy and Nathan live with her new partner, Barry (Paul Butterworth). Although he is not Nathan's biological father, Barry is clearly able to fulfil the financial demands of fatherhood and is thus presented as preferable to Gaz; he lives in a large, modern detached house with well kept gardens and a car in the driveway. Even Nathan reluctantly admits his step father's superiority when he tells Gaz that his house is always clean and warm. Gaz inadequacies are brought to the fore throughout the film; in one of the more poignant moments Nathan asks Gaz if they can go to a 'proper' league football match. When Gaz is forced to confront Nathan's disappointment his alienation from hegemonic fatherhood is heavily underscored; Nathan goes into the school yard, Gaz remains on the other side of the wall physically kept from his son. As Nathan makes his way to class he turns round to look sadly at his father; Gaz stands on the wall, holding on to the railings in a pose that infantilises and disempowers him.

Further aspersions are cast on Gaz's propriety as a father from a variety of formal institutions; child services refuse to allow him to see his son after they discover that Nathan had been present at the strip routine rehearsals, and the police also question Gaz's aptitude for fathering on the same basis. Mandy's application for sole custody of Nathan is successful on the basis that Gaz is no longer able to provide for their son when he has access and has defaulted on his maintenance obligations as well. Because Gaz is the central protagonist in the film and the audience is led to both identify with

him and understand the depth of love that he feels for his son, Mandy's actions are figured as being unreasonable and serve only to damage both father and son. By containing the characters of both Mandy and Barry as peripheral, Cattaneo's film encourages an easy identification of them as unpleasant and manipulative and thus opposed to Gaz's misguided naivety which is motivated solely by his love for Nathan. The film privileges the father son bond and the narrative is used to highlight the damage that social and economic changes have wrought on both men and their boys.

The scene in which Nathan insists upon using his savings to pay the deposit for the hire of the working men's club for the performance functions to uphold the sanctity of the father son relationship in a series of different ways. Nathan's desire to see his father succeed with the show can be read as an indication of how important the relationship is to him. Without the money raised from the show Gaz is unable to pay his maintenance arrears and will be prevented from seeing his son. Despite moments in the film where Nathan is disappointed by his father's actions, the two of them remain close. Nathan is quick to return to his father after leaving him, Dave and Lomper in the steel works talking about stripping; when he realises that his mother and step father are effectively preventing him from spending time with his dad, he shrugs off a hug from his mother and stands at the car looking back at his father, resentful and sad but powerless to change their minds. Another function of Nathan's persistence regarding his savings is to validate his father's actions. Gaz is reluctant to allow Nathan to use his savings to secure the venue. When Nathan explains that he has listened to his father

and believes in him, Gaz acquiesces. Where very few people believe in Gaz his son's support becomes vital; the belief of the son in the father is invested with restorative qualities and becomes essential in preventing Gaz from losing faith in himself and his mission to raise the money he needs. The importance of the father son relationship remains central in the concluding moments of the film. When Gaz gets stage fright and refuses to join his colleagues on stage, it is Nathan who reminds him of what is at stake and in doing so helps his father to overcome his fears.

Investing in notions about the importance of fathers to boys is a fundamental component of *The Full Monty*'s narrative and through this narrative device the film is, like *Brassed Off* and *TwentyFourSeven* able to lament the impact of social change upon white working class fathers whose roles and identities have been brought into question. These three films all cite changing gender roles as a significant contributory factor in men's loss of social, economic and familial power and as such all three of them, in varying degrees, conflate male disempowerment with an over exaggerated sense of female empowerment. In centralising the male characters and father figures within their narratives these films, in many ways, demonstrate Modleski's claims about how narratives of male disempowerment and crisis can function to consolidate male power via an appropriation of victim status.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Modleski, T. (1991). P. 7.

## **Conclusion**

The general preoccupation with masculinity that was a central tenet of nineties British cinema was specifically configured vis-à-vis the father son relationship. Crucially, these narratives foreground a cinematic intervention into debates about what it means to be a man and further underscore both the continuums and the changes that have occurred over the course of one or two generations of men. In this chapter I have identified some of the key tropes of both fathers and sons and shown how these representations and discourses are inevitably refracted through class, ethnicity and regional specificities in such a way that invariably perpetuates a straightforward hegemony of male parenting which remains predicated upon financial status and the normative values of a neo-liberal, capitalist economy.