

Conclusion

As the preceding case studies have shown, masculinity in nineties British cinema was a contested terrain in which a variety of competing and sometimes contradictory discourses circulated. Despite this apparent diversity, the films and other representations of masculinity analysed within the course of this thesis are connected by their common thematic concern with mediating the shifting parameters of male gendered identities at the end of the twentieth century. Furthermore they all, in some way, engage with the discursive construction of masculinity as being in crisis. The cultural resonance and commercial viability of these crisis narratives has to do with the wider cultural context of post-feminism within which they first circulated. The eulogistic qualities of films such as *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty* and *TwentyFourSeven* among others appropriate tropes of male crisis, appearing to rely on a tacit understanding of feminism as successful in order to legitimize its subsequent repudiation as socially damaging. Moreover, in some cases this repudiation is extended to suggest that feminism is, in fact, an unnatural aberration of the social order. *The Full Monty* deploys this suggestion to apparently comic ends: a symbolic repudiation of feminism occurring, for example, in the sequence where the women stand at the men's urinals and the explicit ambivalence which runs throughout the film in the form of the male characters resentment of female success and apparent economic empowerment. Furthermore, such films present a nostalgic impulse, idealising a mythic form of white, working class British masculinity and the traditional, homosocial

communities that were intrinsic to the industrial work-place. As Monk contends, the 'ultimate tragedy' of these films is the analogous death of 'the masculine emotional community rooted in the work-place.'¹ In presenting their nostalgic narratives of loss and tragedy many of the films discussed in *Nowhere Men* appear to draw attention to a lack of male power and agency. However, as Modleski and Robinson both point out, these narratives of disempowerment frequently deploy tragedy as a narrative device which facilitates an ideological reinvestment in the very power structures that appear to be under threat.²

This study has explored a range of both popular and lesser known British films from the nineties in order to formulate a feminist response to the issues that they raise with regards to contemporary gender politics. In foregrounding gender over issues such as national identity, this study has sought to provide a different perspective to that which is more commonly associated with the field of British film studies. My approach, informed as it is by the methodologies of cultural studies and sociological theorisations of masculinity, gender and power has aimed to establish a feminist perspective on these issues within British cinema studies. The three case study chapters worked to establish how the dominant cinematic tropes of lads, fathers and damage co-existed within the cultural arena of the nineties, producing a range of male characters that were eclectic and often contradictory. Through these case studies I have explored the

¹ Monk, C. (2000). p.160.

² Modleski, T. (1990). p. 7 & Robinson, S. (2000). p.3.

central tenets of male crisis and their relation to the changing social context of late twentieth century Britain.

The study of masculinity in a national cinema context inevitably foregrounds socio-historic specificity; the resonance of the impoverished post-industrial milieu of films such as *Brassed Off* makes particular sense within the context of British culture and the specific histories of the communities that are being represented in the films.

Furthermore the manifestations of crisis evident in such films are clearly informed by a national specificity; that is, these narratives rely upon their British context in order to be meaningful. Films such as *My Name is Joe*, *Brassed Off* and a number of others examined in the course of the thesis articulate forms of masculinity that relate very specifically to the British context in which they are set. Indeed the concomitant reconstruction of British national identities and discourses of masculinity appear to be inextricably linked; for this reason it was important to devote space to developing an account of that context in as discussed in chapter two, 'Changing Britain, Changing Men'.. A number of nineties British films appear to be marked by their ambivalence, or even antagonism towards feminist politics. In exploring the ways in which these films 'deal' with the problem of feminism I have argued that British cinema of the period developed a specifically post-feminist idiom. Despite the fact that British cinema of the nineties was so preoccupied with questions of gender and played a significant part in making the constructed nature of masculinity visible, via the tropes of lads and damaged masculinity in particular, the area remains, hitherto, under investigated.

There has, however, been considerable scholarship produced regarding the machinations of lad culture in magazines. Similarly there has been a steady flow of material considering the construction of masculinity within wider media studies, but scant attention had been paid to the ways in which British cinema contributed to the cultural discourses of masculinity during the nineties. My work here has gone some way towards filling this gap by exploring some key tropes and idioms of cinematic masculinity and considering them within the wider cultural context in which they circulated.

Hill contends that since the eighties British cinema has turned away from offering a 'unified notion of national identity and culture' and has proliferated to give a 'much more fluid, hybrid and plural sense of Britishness.'³ This plurality has, I argue, a direct correlation to the presentation of crisis within nineties British cinema. As Easthope points out, 'masculinity aims to be one substance all the way through,'⁴ and the profusion of competing and often contradictory tropes of masculinity at this time not only presents a more complex configuration of Britishness but also undermines the notion of masculinity as universal or essential by drawing attention to the ways in which gender identities are continually constructed and open to challenge and interpretation.⁵ Furthermore by addressing these issues from a feminist perspective I have aimed to offer a different inflection upon the cinematic constructions of

³ Hill, J. (2004). P.106.

⁴ Easthope, A. (1992).p. 166.

⁵ Beck, U. & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995). *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

masculinity and crisis than has been presented in British cinema studies thus far. In the process my analysis has drawn on North American feminist film scholarship and additionally shares considerable ground with the work that has been undertaken in the field of masculinity studies within this context. This work is not, however, simply transposed onto the rather different social and historical context of Britain. This North American Scholarship centralises a number of issues that are germane in the British context, notably issues about disempowerment and feminisation. There are considerable points of connection between the socio-historic context of Britain and the US; however there are a range of important points of divergence and difference. One of the most important points of distinction between the discourses of masculinity that are found in the two nations is the intersection between gender and class. The class structures that characterise the British socio-historical context are vital to the specificity of the national context; further there are regional specificities that I have shown to be an important factor in the construction of British screen masculinities. This approach has enabled me to unpack and interrogate the machinations of crisis and its relationship to structures of power as well as explicating the political and symbolic significance of the discourses of crisis and masculinity that endured throughout the period. Further my approach foregrounds a critical understanding of the cultural function of cinematic modes in terms of constructing regionally specific and national idioms and identities and makes connections between genres and across films.

While my analysis has fore-grounded their specificity, the defining tropes of masculinity explored in the case study chapter have retained their resonance as meaningful discursive configurations of male identity beyond the historical context of nineties Britain. At the end of the decade lad culture appeared to be shifting once more as is evidenced by *Human Traffic*. Although the film did not achieve massive commercial success it seemed to mark a turning away from the unashamedly sexist, boorish characteristics towards a more sensitive incarnation.⁶ The central protagonist, Jip, is, in many ways, a reconfiguration of the bolshie and arrogant new lad figure that had proliferated to the point of ubiquity since the middle of the decade. Jip's distinction from the more established trope of new lad is evidenced early on in the film through a piece to camera in which he talks about being impotent (see figure 26); this sequence functions not only to position Jip as far less self-assured than the new lad but also to augment his laddish identity (as evidenced through his friends and his involvement in club /ecstasy culture) with a more sensitive, introspective side. However, this sensitivity and his sexual impotence is symbolically connected to both a lack of social power and the feminising effects of the neo-liberal service economy,

⁶ *Human Traffic* opened on 4th June 1999 in 175 screens. It took £434, 261 in its opening weekend and made a total gross of £2,186,292 by the end of its cinema run in mid July. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0188674/business> accessed 20 Feb 2010.



Figure 26: *Human Traffic*: Jip's impotence is symptomatic of his social and economic disempowerment

In many ways then, *Human Traffic* suggests that the era of the knowingly and unashamedly offensive new lad might be drawing to a close. Furthermore the film suggests that there is the potential for a new median to emerge: a form of masculinity that amalgamates both the sensitive new man rhetoric with those aspects of lad culture that were hedonistic and playful. However, any proclamations regarding the potential end of the more misogynistic forms of lad culture were premature. Lad culture appeared to wane during the earliest years of the 2000s; the bastions of lad culture that were *Loaded* and *FHM* suffered significant reductions in their readership, losing between them 70 000 readers in the six months prior to January 2004, for example.⁷ 2004, however, began with a clear resurgence of laddism in the form of *Nuts* (Emap) and *Zoo* (IPC) magazines, both of which reinvigorated and actually exaggerated

⁷ Dickinson, F. (2004). 'Publishing: What Does Your Magazine Say About you?' *The Independent on Sunday*. August 15th 2004. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/publishing-what-does-your-magazine-say-about-you-556603.html> accessed 20th February 2010.

the quasi pornographic style and editorial irreverence of their predecessors (see figure 27). The commercial success of these two brands demonstrates the extent to which sexist forms of lad culture retained, and indeed extended, their popularity as a cultural trope of masculinity. In analysing the earliest moments of this enduring cultural phenomenon in its cinematic form I have drawn attention to how irony and humour perform a specific function within a post-feminist context.



Figure 27: Front covers of *Nuts* and *Zoo* Magazines

In cinematic terms, laddish discourses of masculinity have also remained persistent since the end of the nineties; the resurgent gangster cycle that was kick-started by *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* continued with films such as *Gangster No 1* (Paul McGuigan, 2001), *Snatch* (Guy Ritchie, 2001) and *In Bruges* (Martin McDonagh, 2008). These films celebrated the homosocial worlds of their unreconstructed male characters and continued to circumvent the issues surrounding their gender politics through postmodern irony and in doing so they continue a trend that was a pervasive part of nineties masculinity.

So too has the troubled figure of the underclass lad remained a persistent trope of social and cinematic masculinities. The concerns regarding boys remained a constant feature of popular media discourse. The locus of this concern has, however, shifted somewhat since the nineties and, by the middle of the 2000s, the debates were dominated by fears about gang culture and a growing knife crime trend among inner city, working class young men.⁸ The discourses of so called 'feral' youth repudiated the claims of victimhood that had been a central feature of nineties social discourses on young, underprivileged masculinity and replaced it instead with a sinister undertone. The inner city, multicultural milieu of these young lads proved to be a productive source for a number of British filmmakers in the early 2000s. Films such as *Essex Boys* (Terry Winsor, 2000) *Goodbye Charlie Bright* (Nick Love, 2001) *Bullet Boy* (Saul Dibb, 2004), *Kidulthood* (Menhaj Huda, 2006) and *Shifty* (Eran Creevy, 2008) placed troubled, urban teenage boys at the heart of narratives about cycles of family breakdown, poverty, gang culture, drug abuse and underage sex. All of these films can be understood as part of a continuing interest in the cultural pathologisation of young, impoverished boys; cinematically, at least, the suggestion is that it is these boys whose life trajectories are the most uncertain in a post-industrial, service economy which values cultural forms of education and knowledge that they simply do not have access to. In many ways these films can be understood as continuing the agenda of nineties British film makers such as Ken Loach and Shane Meadows; they thus form part of a

⁸ Lane, M. & Wheeler, B. (2003). 'Is Knife Crime Really Getting Worse?' BBC News, 7th November, 2003. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/3244709.stm> accessed 20th Feb 2010; Ross, T. (2008). 'Knife Crime Tops Agenda at Westminster Youth Summit' in *The London Evening Standard* 11th July 2008. <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23515048-knife-crime-tops-agenda-at-westminster-youth-summit.do> accessed 20 Feb 2010.

longer tradition of social realist film making that is invested in a politicised interrogation of culture and inequality.

Chapter four, 'Framing Fatherhood' shows how particular models of male parenting have a nationally and regionally specific function; despite a similar cultural investment in the recuperative function of fathering in both Britain and the US, the cinematic incarnations of these ideas speaks to the ways in which these issues must be specifically inflected. The analysis in this chapter showed how the father son relationship became the privileged site through which debates about what it means to be a man were staged and negotiated. Further, my work in this chapter makes connections between discourses of masculinity, family and nationhood and suggests that the crisis in masculinity, which was understood as having wide reaching cultural consequences, was mediated differently within a British context. The concomitant tropes of fatherhood as redemptive and damaging were invariably refracted around the class position of the father himself. The consistent representation of unemployed fathers as inadequate served to connect the economic and emotional functions of parenting in such a way that inevitably reified conservative norms regarding both families and the role of the father within them. My work on the ways in which different cultural traditions of fatherhood became mapped onto tensions between identity, assimilation and cultural hybridity further demonstrates how the generational gap between fathers and sons was ideologically deployed in this period. The centrality of father figures has continued into the 2000s; the absent father (either as a result of

imprisonment, abandonment or divorce) remains a spectre within a range of films including Shane Meadows' 2006 film *This is England* in which Shaun (Thomas Turgoose) turns to the pseudo familial network offered by a group of unemployed skinheads after his father is killed in the Falklands. The quasi-familial structure of the football firm and criminal gang also became important sites where paternal and fraternal relationships are mediated. Nick Love's films such as *The Football Factory* (2004), *The Firm* (2009) and *The Business* (2005) in particular have portrayed a homosocial world in which the 'top boys' take on paternal functions in the absence of biological fathers and traditional family units.

The discourses of redemptive fathering which had played such a central part in the nineties were beginning to look rather less assured in a post 9/11 context as a series of cultural and political developments further called the restorative qualities of nineties discourses of fathering into question. The cinematic engagement with fathers during the nineties was, as my research shows, predicated around issues of class above all else; the transparent conflation between working and underclass families and social dysfunction consistently articulates a neoliberal discourse of the gendered economy. In the 2000s, as was the case in the nineties, the cultural discourse of the restorative potential of fathering did not fully translate onto the cinema screen. The dominant preoccupation remained the figures of the failing and inadequate post-industrial father as typified in *Billy Elliott*. Many of the themes that were characteristic of the nineties working and underclass fathers are present in *Billy Elliott* with familial dysfunction and

disintegration at the core of the narrative; the father figure, Jackie (Gary Lewis) is a classic example of the emotionally remote, misguided father figure that had come to represent the dominant trope of fatherhood in British cinema during the nineties.

The recuperative potential of post-feminist fathering remained limited to the middle class, wealthy men of British cinema and remained an anomaly rather than a central trope of masculinity. In the nineties this was illustrated most appropriately by *Jack and Sarah* in which the eponymous Jack (Richard E Grant) has to come to terms with single parenthood when his wife dies during childbirth. Jack's economic status brings with it the capacity to transcend the cultural boundaries between work and home.

Furthermore, as Deborah Chambers explains, the film is only able to posit fathering as 'played out as both crisis and fulfilment' because of his high powered career as a lawyer.⁹ Financial surety remains a defining factor in facilitating narratives of restorative fathering; while Hollywood cinema continued its fascination with the recuperative potential of fatherhood these tropes remained an anomaly rather than a regular fixture in British cinema.¹⁰ The Hugh Grant vehicle, *About A Boy* (Chris Weitz & Paul Weitz, 2002) is the most notable incarnation of the redemptive fatherhood trope in more recent British film. Will (Hugh Grant), unlike Jack, does not have to work; instead he indulges in a perennial adolescence living off royalties accrued by his

⁹ Chambers, D. (2001). p.p.106-7.

¹⁰ Hollywood's fixation on restorative patriarchs has been on-going since the 1980. All of the biggest stars from the 80s through to the present day have repeatedly engaged with fatherhood and/or nurturing and protective father figures. *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) is a key example but more contemporary engagements include *Signs* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2002), *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) and *Edge of Darkness* (Martin Campbell, 2010).

musician father. When Will decides to join a single parent support group with the sole intention of seducing vulnerable women his motivations are firmly linked to laddish/misogynistic codes of masculinity. However, his cynical manipulation of reconstructed masculinity comes back to haunt him when he comes to understand that not only is he important to Marcus (Nicholas Hoult) but, more significantly, that his life is empty without Marcus. The film ultimately reaffirms the importance of father figures to young boys and in doing so reifies the sanctity of fathering.

It seemed that, for the first decade of the 2000s at any rate, the loss of homosocial community that had been a central concern of nineties films had been relocated within the quasi familial networks of football firms. These films not only facilitate a replacement of the domestic family as a site in which issues such as male violence can be negotiated but crucially they emphasise how the loss of legitimate male communities is deeply detrimental. The football firms thus function, on a symbolic level as a replacement for those male communities that have been expunged elsewhere. The suggestion is that the homosocial community offered by the football firm is the only remaining site in which men can form the kinds of meaningful bonds that have been taken from them through post-industrialisation. The psychic and emotional bonds that were eulogised in *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off* were thus reinvigorated through an oppositional subcultural form. Furthermore, it was in films such *The Football Factory*, *Green Street* (Lexi Alexander, 2005) and *The Firm* that these tropes of damaged masculinity retained their resonance in the new millennium.

Further, films such as *Outlaw* (Nick Love, 2007) provide a generic framework that augments the types of damaged masculinity that were circulating in the nineties. Where the representations of damaged men that I examined in the course of chapter five were distinguished by their isolation from society and other people, the damaged masculinities in the films that came after this period articulated their alienation in a more communal way. The quasi familial structure of both the football firms and the criminal gangs have come to fill a void left by social and familial disintegration and thus, in many ways, they serve as an outlet for the alienation, hurt and anger that typifies damaged masculinity. Thematically these films can be understood as a continuum of the nineties' damaged male characters; they all have in common a sense of alienation and disengagement from society. More significantly perhaps, is that these are communities of violent and damaged men who have no other means of belonging. The continued prevalence of damage as a commercially viable and culturally resonant trope of masculinity is, perhaps, unsurprising given that the dominant discourses of masculinity remain couched in terms of crisis, uncertainty and alienation.

Thus it is clear, from this brief overview, that many of the key tropes of masculinity identified in this thesis as particularly prominent in nineties British cinema retain their cultural resonance in contemporary film. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given that many of the issues that were central to the narrativisation of masculinity in nineties British cinema remain so today. The cultural claims regarding the crisis in masculinity have abated somewhat, doubtless in part as a result of the context of 'war on terror' which

has contributed to a representational/media resurgence in traditional masculine qualities.

Interrogating the discursive construction of masculinities and crisis in nineties British cinema reveals a series of complex factors at play. As the case studies presented here demonstrate, the masculinity seen in nineties British cinema is frequently insecure and uncertain, responding to the fundamental social and economic changes of the period. The films analysed show how it was not only representations of masculinity but also fundamental tropes of British cinema that were being re-worked and re-defined in this period. For example, many of the films examined emerge from a social realist inspired tradition but have reworked their generic and stylistic form in order to remain relevant. In analysing such films from a feminist perspective, this thesis has sought to foreground the relevance of frameworks such as post-feminism for making sense of British cinema. Such an analysis suggests the insistent need to acknowledge and interrogate the misogyny and resistance to change that underpins cinematic discourses of masculinity in crisis, and to refute the implication that women and/or feminism are to blame for it.