**From Pinter to *Pimp*: Danny Dyer, Class, Cultism and the Critics**

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**Abstract:**

Danny Dyer is one of Britain’s most prolific stars, with a career spanning both critically-acclaimed and critically-derided material, the latter exemplified by his work in exploitation movies. This article investigates Dyer’s film stardom, considering some of the central debates surrounding his status as an actor. Central to the discussion is the significance of Dyer within the contemporary cultural landscapes of gender and class, and the various complexities and contradictions that circulate around his persona. The article analyses, in the first instance, Dyer’s stardom in the wake of his role in the cult exploitation movie that consolidated his subsequent ‘hard man’ typecasting, *The Football Factory* (2004), and considers how the marketing of the majority of his subsequent films has been instrumental in perpetuating a particular construction of his stardom which, in turn, informs his reception by the critics. The article traces connections between Dyer’s popularity and recurrent critical derision aimed at him as an actor lacking artistic integrity and genuine talent. It contends that the politics of both Dyer’s star construction and his critical reception are linked to the renewed legitimacy of class hatred in British society, represented by media discourses surrounding the ‘chav’, which appositely reflects his ‘low’ cultural status as a ‘straight-to-DVD’ actor.

**Keywords:** Danny Dyer; British cinema; Stardom; Chav; Working-class; masculinity; New lad; Hooliganism; DVD.

Danny Dyer is one of Britain’s most controversial and divisive stars. His first acting jobs were supporting roles in several successful television dramas of the 1990s such as *Prime Suspect 3* (1993), *Cadfael* (1994), *A Touch of Frost* (1995), *The Bill* (1993, 1996), and *Soldier Soldier* (1997). However, his breakthrough came in his late teens when he was cast as Moff in Justin Kerrigan’s frenetic ode to youth culture *Human Traffic* (1999). Since then, Dyer has gone on to amass an impressive number of credits, appearing in over forty films. He has also been commissioned to appear in special DVD programmes, including the hugely successful *Danny Dyer’s Football Foul-Ups* (2009), which sold over 100,000 copies in Britain and spawned a sequel, *Danny Dyer’s Funniest Football Foul-Ups* in 2010. He has been the host of several television shows, including two documentary series on the satellite channel Bravo (*The Real Football Factories*, 2006-2007 and *Danny Dyer’s Deadliest Men,* 2008-2009), a one-off documentary for BBC Three (*Danny Dyer: I Believe in UFOs*, 2010), and, as he is quick to point out to his detractors, has also starred in several Harold Pinter plays in both Britain and America as well as Andrea Arnold’s Oscar-winning short film, *Wasp* (2003). However, despite this wide-ranging body of work, Dyer—until being cast as Mick Carter, the landlord of the Queen Vic pub in the British soap opera *EastEnders* in 2013—has been known principally for his roles as working-class ‘geezer’ types, in low-budget, critically derided exploitation films said to celebrate homosociality and violence (Hunter 2013: 173).

Dyer’s roles in films such as Nick Love’s hooligan drama *The Football Factory* (2004) and Robert Cavanah’s gangland thriller *Pimp* (2010)draws on his star image as an authentically working-class ‘wide boy’. This is an image which is further confirmed by his actions off camera, which have often involved him conforming to working-class stereotypes, such as swearing, telling crude jokes, and a romantic pride in his class roots. These actions, when coupled with his outspoken and often expletive-laden Twitter commentary, his propensity for ill-advised (and sometimes misogynistic) statements, his past associations with drug abuse and his general lack of restraint in response to negative comments on his work,[[1]](#endnote-1) have led some commentators to surmise that Danny Dyer ‘the actor’ and Danny Dyer ‘the character’ are indivisible. In a typical conflation of on-screen and off-screen personae, Stuart Heritage (2010) suggests that ‘Dyer has never really played anyone but himself’.

In this article, we investigate Dyer’s low culture stardom, considering his career to date and some of the main debates surrounding his status as an actor. Central to our discussion is the significance of Dyer within the contemporary cultural landscape of gender and class, and the various complexities and contradictions that circulate around his public image. We offer an analysis of Dyer’s stardom in the wake of his role in *The Football Factory*—the movie that confirmed his ‘hard man’ persona—before considering how the marketing of the majority of his subsequent films (mostly produced for the ‘direct to DVD’ market) has been instrumental in perpetuating a specific construction of his stardom. We contend that selective marketing campaigns of Dyer’s DVD output partly inform the ongoing critical debates that surround him. Through an exploration of the apparent connections between Dyer’s enduring popularity with a niche male audience, the critical derision he faces for being a ‘bad actor’ who makes ‘lowbrow’ films for the ‘DVD bargain bin’, and his public persona off-screen, we contend that the politics of his star construction and critical reception are inherently linked to what Owen Jones (2011) sees as the renewed legitimacy of class hatred in contemporary British society.

At this point, it should be added that, although we recognise Dyer’s star image as a legitimate focus of academic enquiry, we are not seeking to dismiss some of the more troubling and controversial issues surrounding his media persona or his creative output, nor are we seeking to make a claim that some of the criticisms of his films and media appearances are unfounded. What are of interest to us are the political implications of Dyer’s star image and its critical reception. In many ways, we are offering a tentative reassessment of Dyer’s career beyond the easy dismissal so readily handed out by journalists. Dyer’s star image is comprised of numerous competing discourses—layers of meaning, including deliberate construction, self-awareness and pastiche—that are frequently contradictory. It is these tensions in the construction and reception of his image that make him a particularly compelling figure in today’s media landscape.

Why is Danny dire?

Dyer’s role as Moff, the small-time drug-dealing son of a police commissioner in *Human Traffic*, resonated within the post-feminist 1990s and the concomitant emergence of ‘new lad’ culture. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra describe how the social and cultural landscape of the period is defined by a ‘complex relationship between culture, politics and feminism’ (2007:1), one which does not reject feminist politics explicitly, but rather ‘involves an evident erasure of feminist politics from the popular, even as aspects of feminism seem to be incorporated within that culture’ (Tasker & Negra, 2007: 5). New lad culture emerged out of a culture in which irony, parody and postmodern playfulness were frequently mobilised in order to pre-empt and foreclose critique while deliberately emphasising ambiguity and plurality of meaning and politics (Whelehan, 2000: 69, Tasker and Negra, 2007:6, McRobbie, 2007: 33). Yet, if Imelda Whelehan’s definition of the archetypal new lad as ‘part soccer thug, part larger lout, part arrant sexist’ did not map onto the milder-mannered naivety of Moff, Dyer’s subsequent work with Nick Love (in particular his role in *The Football Factory*) has come to consolidate the actor as the epitome of the more insidious aspects of British lad culture (Whelehan 2000: 58). Dyer’s position as an icon of unreconstructed laddism was further confirmed when he was appointed as ‘agony uncle’ for the lads’ mag *Zoo Weekly* (his column was entitled ‘Ask Danny!’). This magazine, with its emphasis on ‘sport, pop, alcohol, soft drugs, heterosex and soft porn’, is typical of what Whelehan sees as the ‘very clearly demarcated’ frames of reference for lad culture (ibid.). Dyer’s role was to dispense laddish wisdom to readers’ problems in an arguably ironic appropriation of traditional teenage girls’ magazine fare; however, his tenure came to a dramatic end after the magazine published a column in which Dyer counselled a reader as to the best way to get over the end of a relationship. Dyer suggested that ‘going out on a rampage with the boys, getting on the booze and smashing anything that moves’ might be one course of action, before going on to write: ‘Of course, the other option is to cut your ex's face, and then no one will want her’ (quoted in Busfield and Sweeney 2010). Despite Dyer’s claims that he didn’t actually *write* the column—he would ‘talk shit’ to one of the magazine’s editors on a weekly basis, who would then edit his comments into ‘something that people would want to read’ (Dyer 2010: 178-179)—the actor very quickly acknowledged that it was an irresponsible comment nonetheless, and that it should never have been printed. In his autobiography, which was published shortly after the debacle, he explained that ‘even as it came out of my mouth I wasn't proud of it ... But I never thought for a minute they'd stick it in the magazine’ (Dyer 2010: 179). Despite Dyer’s public contrition, his protestations about his respect for women, and his insistence that ‘it just makes me feel sick that people would believe that I'm this misogynist who would advise somebody to cut a woman's face, especially with two daughters and having been brought up by women. I adore women… I love everything about them’ (Gilbert, 2013), the incident has come to symbolise all of the things for which Dyer is reviled.

Reviewers have repeatedly equated Dyer and his subsequent output with laddish behaviour and politics. For example, in a review of *Pimp*, in which Dyer plays an underground crime lord who heads up a porn empire, critic Mark Kermode (2010) remarked that Dyer’s performance is ‘pathetic and tragic’ because of the laddish politics it allegedly espouses. Similarly, Stuart Heritage (2010) in the *Guardian* has contended that, because of his association with the likes of the aforementioned *Pimp*, the vigilante film *Outlaw* (2007), and the z-grade horror film *Basement* (2009), Dyer is no more than ‘a cut-price Ray Winstone, a baby Kray for the *Nuts* generation.’ Based on these critical assessments, we contend that Dyer has been positioned as a ‘bad object’ in relation to three criteria that we wish to unpack in the remainder of this article. Each criterion mobilises discourses of taste and class in some way. The first centres on how Dyer has been framed as one of British cinema’s ‘missed opportunities’. That is to say, while his earlier performances were praised by critics including Xan Brooks (1999) and Anna Wood (2001) in *Sight and Sound*, his latter turn (or regression) to low-budget genre cinema has marked a decline in the ‘quality’ of both his roles and acting ability. The second is his working-class associations on and off screen, and how they have been explicitly referred to in media discourse as a means of simultaneously constructing and discrediting him. The third is Dyer’s brand association with low-grade, direct-to-DVD exploitation films, which are perceived as lacking the quality of mainstream cinema, and are thus positioned as ‘low’ culture—much like the man himself.

A missed opportunity

Dyer’s work since 2005, which has largely consisted of low-budget films for the DVD market, is thought to compare unfavourably to his critically lauded earlier performances in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Reviewers often lament how the actor has delivered ‘abysmal performances in many of the most pathetic British films of the past decade’ (Anon. 2012), which include 2010’s ‘totally forgettable’ (Kelly, undated) *Just for the Record*, 2009’s‘so bad’ (Anon. 2010) *Basement,* and a contender for the ‘worst film in history’ (Clark 2013), 2012’s *Run for Your Wife.* The *Daily Mail*, for example, suggests that Dyer’s ‘consistently degrading roles […] serve only to show up his bewildering lack of talent’ (Anon. 2012). These verdicts sit in stark contrast to reviews of his early work, which suggested that Dyer was a promising newcomer. Reviews of *Human Traffic* and the drama *Goodbye Charlie Bright* (director Nick Love’s debut film, 2001), for instance, saw promise and potential in the young Dyer, and recognised his performance as a high point in both films. For example, Mike Davies of the *Birmingham Post* claimed that Dyer’s performance as Moff in *Human Traffic* was ‘scene-stealing’ (Davies 1999: 14); Xan Brooks (1999) claimed that ‘Good acting gives *Human Traffic* its soul,’ singling out Dyer’s performance in the film as being ‘consistently charming’; and Anna Wood in her review noted Dyer’s performance as one of the ‘the parts to relish’ (Wood: 2001: 50). From these reviews it would seem that Dyer’s position as an iconic ‘bad object’ of British cinema was not always inevitable, and while these early roles trod familiar cultural territory for the young working-class actor they demonstrated Dyer’s capacity to work across drama and comedy convincingly.

Notable among Dyer’s early work is his role as Charlie Millwall in the Brendan Behan biopic *Borstal Boy* (2000) which, by Dyer’s own admission, was the first film he was offered without having to audition (Dyer 2010: 93). While the film was criticised for its overly romanticised embellishments of Behan’s life, including the emphasis on his (fictional) liaison with Millwall,[[2]](#endnote-2) it was, nevertheless, significant in allowing Dyer an opportunity to broaden his acting horizons beyond that of the laddish, lightweight and comedic.

During these early years Dyer’s output ranged across film and television taking in a range of genres and roles. It was also during this time that the actor forged a relationship with playwright Harold Pinter, appearing as a waiter in *Celebration* (2000) and as Foster in the revival of *No Man’s Land* (2001-2). Dyer explains how the Nobel Laureate playwright ‘liked that I was quite raw and untrained’ (Bell, 2011), and argues that the routine critical dismissal he receives conveniently overlooks an aspect of his career which positions him as a ‘serious’ actor rather than a one-dimensional joke (ibid.). Stuart Heritage (2010) ponders the reasons for Dyer’s failure to fulfil this early promise, lamenting that ‘it shouldn’t have turned out like this’ and concluding that part of the problem is that Dyer’s ‘compulsively obnoxious’ persona in more recent years overwhelms the fact that ‘with the right direction, he can be a genuinely talented performer …Beneath the cockney swagger there's a decent actor struggling to get out’(2010). Heritage goes on to argue that the primary reasons for Dyer’s ‘failure’ to realise his full potential are his working relationship with Nick Love—a director who has faced similar criticisms for making, rather than starring in, bad films[[3]](#endnote-3)—and his ‘non-existent quality control mechanism’. However accurate Heritage’s observations might be in terms of Dyer’s seeming inability to refuse work, his observations overlook a key point. Dyer claims to approach his work as precisely that: a job by which he can provide for his family, therefore his apparent lack of a ‘quality control mechanism’ is more complex than Heritage suggests. Indeed, Dyer has spoken about how, in the audition for *Human Traffic*, he allegedly ‘looked at all the other actors with complete disdain, and thought, “What? You want to take fucking food out of my kids' mouths?” It gave me this extra drive’ (quoted in Gilbert, 2013). However, in a critical culture that prizes the selective over the prolific, Dyer represents a failure; someone who has opted for quantity over ‘quality’ and in so doing has demonstrated his own artistic shortcomings.

Working-class identity

While Dyer’s working-class roots are implicitly invoked in the discourses around his ‘lack’ of quality control mechanism, the second way that Dyer has been framed as a bad object, we believe, is related more explicitly with his working-class associations, and the distaste his star branding has generated among certain middlebrow critics.[[4]](#endnote-4) In his book on class demonization in contemporary British society, Owen Jones (2011) discusses how the term ‘working-class’ currently has strongly negative connotations in the UK, due to its contemporaneous associations with ‘chav culture’, ‘Broken Britain’ and ‘the underclass’. In our post-Thatcher, neo-liberal culture, Jones contends, the working class is no longer admired for its ‘communities, industries, values and institutions’ (40), but is instead caricatured as violent and lazy. Those who are part of it, Jones argues, are encouraged to ‘escape’ it as soon as they can: ‘“Aspiration” has been redefined to mean individual self-enrichment: to scramble up the social ladder and become middle class’ (Jones 2011: 10).

Part of the problem for Dyer, then, is that he is best known for his portrayals of morally dubious members of the working-class at a time in British society when the working-class is already repeatedly demonised. Dyer’s work therefore exists in a significantly different historical context to that inhabited by actors of working-class origins such as Albert Finney and Michael Caine, fondly remembered for playing, respectively, the ‘tough, abrasive, self-centred and hedonistic’ Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), and the eponymous ‘working class playboy’ in *Alfie* (1966). (On Finney see Ashby 2000: 183; on Caine see Chibnall 2004: 27). By comparison, Dyer’s most famous roles exist in a climate of political correctness unknown when Finney and Caine honed their craft. As such, the kind of working-class masculinity that Dyer is best known for is considered*distasteful* in the contemporary world, while his films are thought, similarly, to be aimed at a *tasteless* white, working-class, male audience (Anon. 2012; Hunter 2012: 171). He has portrayed ‘lads’ who reject conventional notions of social responsibility through spending their weekly earnings on drugs, as in *Human Traffic* and *Severance* (2006). He has also played frustrated men who, in an effort to restore justice to a criminalised world abandoned by pen-pushing police officers, outstep their day jobs—a nine-to-five office worker, an electrician, a solider—to take matters into their own hands and turn vigilante, as in *Outlaw*, *Straightheads* and *Vendetta* (2013). He has also played gangsters, as in *The Business*, *Pimp* and *Dead Man Running* (2010), and a damaged twenty-something from an impoverished estate in *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* (2005).

There are, of course, significant differences between each of these performances and each of these films, but the predominant class paradigm remains unmistakably and unapologetically working class. However, Dyer has also portrayed characters that are far removed from these environs: such as the pencil-moustached filmmaker ‘Derek La Farge’ in *Just for the Record*, and the eye-liner wearing, villain-of-the-future, ‘Mr Frank’ in *Freerunner* (2011). But it is his brand image as a working-class, cockney ‘geezer’ type, initiated by his role in *The Football Factory*, which has retained most currency for those seeking to discredit him. This film, perhaps more than any other, has consolidated Dyer’s position as the go-to actor for these kinds of roles, alongside fellow ‘bad boys’ Tamar Hassan and Frank Harper. It is therefore worth considering this film in some detail in order to understand its formative role in Dyer’s brand image.

*The Football Factory* marked Dyer’s second collaboration with Love, though it was the first in which Dyer was given star-billing. It was also among the first in a series of retroactive British films which, echoing Alan Clarke’s controversial TV movie *The Firm* (1989), focused on the hyper-masculine arenas of pub culture and football hooliganism. In many ways, Love’s film adaptation of John King’s 1997 novel of the same name was merely another Brit flick capitalising on the renewed interest in British genre cinema following the success of Guy Ritchie’s crime films *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) and *Snatch* (2000), which, as Steve Chibnall notes, were heavily criticised at the time for their laddism and absence of meaningful female characters (Chibnall 2009: 378). By Dyer’s own admission, *The Football Factory* was comparable to Ritchie’s work in that it was a ‘bloke’s film’: ‘a film about lads being lads’, which was set in spaces traditionally gendered as male, such as the pub and the football stadium, and focused largely on ‘male’ pastimes, such as drinking, fighting and banter (Dyer 2010: 144-47).

In the film, Dyer plays Tommy Johnson, an avid Chelsea fan and hooligan firm member, who, in his opening monologue, claims:

There’s nothing different about me. I’m just another bored male, approaching 30, in a dead-end job who lives for the weekend: casual sex, watered down lager and heavily cut drugs… and occasionally, kicking the fuck out of someone.

Tommy’s self-professed ordinariness is implicitly aligned here with the lack of pretention that has typically characterised the white working-class in Britain. More specifically, the monotonous routine of working, and the yearning for weekend socialising, chimes with working-class practices immortalised in films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and what Jones sees as the ‘respectable’ working classes whose communities and cultures were systematically dismantled during the Thatcher era (2011: 10). But it is Tommy’s association with excessive alcohol consumption, drug use and taste for violence that gives him a contemporary and disreputable edge, and which positions him clearly as a ‘chav’ figure in a film made by a director who ‘makes films for the fucking chav generation’ (Love, quoted in Otichi, 2007).

Upon its release, *The Football Factory* faced criticisms for glorifying violence that had been levelled at the first televisual broadcast of the hooligan film *The Firm* in 1989.[[5]](#endnote-5) Numerous commentators ruminated over the potential of *The Football Factory* to incite violent behaviour, in this case specifically among England fans travelling to the European Championships in 2004, which took place shortly after the film’s release. The class dynamics of this commentary are explicit. Typical of most reviews, the *Guardian*’s Richard Williams (2004) proclaimed the film to be ‘irresponsible’ in its treatment of hooligan culture, functioning to ‘further legitimise’ a particularly pernicious problem within English football. In addition, Williams suggests that the film had the potential to incite hooliganism in fans travelling to Portugal because ‘whether the film's director, Nick Love, admits it or not, [that] is the way popular culture works on society’. Williams’ commentary speaks as much to spurious understandings of the relationship between media and culture and ‘media effects’ as it does to assumptions about the working-class audience of the film, who are themselves often stereotyped as aggressive male members of a yobbish working-class (Dunning 1999: 148-53). Dyer was singled out for particular criticism for his involvement in the film by the *Daily Mail*, a paper which epitomises the class demonization that Jones’ *Chavs* describes (2011: 113-4). A reviewer of Dyer’s later film *Deviation* retrospectively admonished the actor for ‘glamourising the thuggery, drunkenness and boneheaded stupidity of football hooliganism’ in *The Football Factory* and accused him of displaying ‘zero sense of social responsibility’, dubbing him, not unlike the chav folk devil, ‘very much a villain of our times’ (Anon. 2012).

In his personal life, Dyer has also openly rejected the aspirations of embourgeoisement and emphasises his working-class ordinariness throughout his autobiography, written in an informal ‘banter’-filled vernacular. He recounts with pride his ‘rough and ready’ childhood growing up in the Custom House area of Newham, ‘a tough neighbourhood, the most deprived in London’ (Dyer 2010: 5). The narrative constructed in his book, about his family relationships, the turbulence of his parents’ relationship and his closeness to his mother and grandmother, are expressed in what seems to be an uncontrived and unpolished manner which further emphasises his position as an ‘ordinary’ working-class lad whose life just happened to take a rather unusual trajectory (Dyer 2010: 5-7). Similar discourses of working-class ordinariness permeate interviews with the actor. For example, in an interview for the *Independent* from 2013, Dyer admits his preference for watching ‘back-to-back episodes of *You’ve Been Framed*’ over reading Shakespeare (quoted in Gilbert 2013). He has also suggested that his own dismissal by critics is strongly linked to his working-class identity, and that he has repeatedly found himself subject to forms of ridicule and derision from which middle-class actors seem to be exempt. As he explained in 2014:

You've got actors like Benedict Cumberbatch—a great actor, but he's a posh boy playing posh boys. He does it well, and he doesn't get mocked for that. I play working class people, and I get mocked for it. I'm stereotyped, he's not. I've done plays at the National Theatre, come off stage and gone into the bar and I ain't got nothing in common with those people. (*Metro*, 27March 2014)

Stuart Heritage’s point that ‘beneath the cockney swagger’ lies a talented actor, would similarly place ‘blame’ not on his lack of talent per se, but on his *cockney-ness*: that is, his class and regional background. Therefore, it is Dyer’s working-class, East End, roots that are understood as the reason for his not being offered more roles of a higher class and calibre. Mark Kermode (2010), a critic who balks at what he sees as the ‘casual sexism’ of films such as *Pimp*, and who claims that ‘we have gotten to the point where people can be forgiven for casual misogyny in a way that you’d never be forgiven for casual racism,’ himself regresses into a shrill, high-pitched impersonation of Dyer, that exemplifies the distaste, condescension, mockery and disapproval which is central to a culture of ‘chav-bashing’ (Jones 2011). As Dyer suggests in his autobiography, ‘It’s like the toffs taking the piss out of the way the servants speak’ (Dyer 2010: 236).

Dyersploitation: Danny’s brand

The third reason for Danny Dyer’s critical disparagement, we argue, is due to his association primarily with direct-to-DVD exploitation films and satellite television. As Linda Ruth Williams has inferred, direct-to-video films are often thought of as being of a lower cultural status (class?) to those films which receive a wide theatrical release, due to home-video’s associations with cheap-to-produce ‘B’ genres such horror, sci-fi and the erotic thriller (Williams 2005: 290-1). It is significant that the consolidation of Dyer’s low-culture branding and ‘hard man’ image was a direct consequence of the ‘replay culture’ (Klinger 2010) surrounding the home video release of *The Football Factory*. The film—which was reportedly shot for £600,000—generated revenues of £4.5 million on DVD, in comparison to its box office takings of £750,000 (Higson 2009: 24). Moreover, the cult around the film continued through Dyer’s violence-centred reality TV shows, such as *The Real Football Factories*, in which he interviews various hooligan ‘firms’ throughout Britain. Dyer’s association with marginal subcultures such as hooliganism afforded him an oppositional quality typically relished by cult film and TV fans (Mathijs and Sexton 2012: 81). His subsequent films with Nick Love, *The Business* and *Outlaw*, and the rape-revenge film *Straightheads* (in which Dyer starred alongside Gillian Anderson), did not gain critical favour. Typical of many reviews, Peter Bradshaw (2005) described *The Business* as a ‘clichéd, naive and dubiously celebratory parade of lairy geezers and Britfilm gangsters... told in the familiar, hectoring freeze frame-voiceover manner’, and *Outlaw* as ‘ugly, naive, and deeply unpleasant: crime-revenge-porn without any style or wit or convincing narrative: another parade of white-geezer cockney crime chic’ (2007). Mark Kermode (2009) more bluntly described *Straightheads* as ‘really, really, rubbish.’ Nor did these films perform strongly at the cinema box-office: *The Business*, which was shot for £2m, made only £1.5m in the UK, as did *Outlaw*, which was shot for £2.5m. And while the figures for *Straightheads*, which was shot for £1.8m, are not available, its direct-to-DVD release in North America (as *Closure*) perhaps reflects an assumed lack of faith in the film’s theatrical potential on the part of its US distributors (all production and box office data: http://imdb.com/pro). Nevertheless, all generated sizeable profits on DVD (see Falk 2012). This happened at a time when many British producers recognised the profits to be had and money to be saved through releasing films that were likely to have moderate to zero theatrical success—namely crime, action and horror films—either directly to DVD, or through limited theatrical releases.[[6]](#endnote-6) Dyer’s ubiquity on DVD and television therefore played a significant part in his growing cult reputation, while his cross-media celebrity and working-class attitude to the acting profession also aligned him with other ‘cult stars’ who ‘tend to represent narratives of graft and entrepreneurial spirit—having to take the work that’s going, or making the most of a fan following’ (Hills 2013: 26). He quickly became a brand name for material that, to many, was merely the detritus of the DVD bargain bin, but to others was highly sought after. His growing reputation for media controversy, and burgeoning cult popularity through non-theatrical channels following *The Football Factory*, was met with a demand for product, and several distribution companies endeavoured to cash-in on the Dyer ‘brand’.

The first company to use this strategy was the distributor Revolver, with the film *City Rats* (2009). The film itself is not a Danny Dyer star vehicle. In fact, it focuses primarily on a lonely, alcohol businessman played by Tamar Hassan (Dyer’s co-star in both *The Football Factory* and *The Business*) who has a recurring dream about throwing a watermelon off the top of a building (a symbol of his own suicidal urges). His story is played out alongside several other interconnecting narratives, one of which features Dyer as a jaded burger-van worker. On the original theatrical poster, Dyer’s role as a supporting actor was made evident: his photograph was featured, along with the six other supporting actors, in a strip across the bottom (Figs. 1a and 1b) **[insert figs around here]**. The rest of the poster was dedicated to a more narratively central image of Hassan looking up to a sky of falling watermelons. Revolver’s DVD cover for *City Rats*, however, adopted an entirely different tone, promoting the film as though it were an action-packed genre film in the vein of Dyer’s and Hassan’s most profitable work. The artwork also conflated symbols of violence and alcohol, as per *The Football Factory* and *The Business*, by showing Dyer menacingly holding a gun above an image of Hassan holding a bottle of whisky. Though neither share any screen time in the film, the pair were also billed as co-stars, positioned beneath the legend: ‘THE EXPLOSIVE STARS FROM *THE BUSINESS*’.

Revolver continued this mode of exploitation by acquiring the rights to *Borstal Boy*. Contra its first release, where it was promoted as a sombre biographical tale with high cultural associations, Revolver repackaged the film as ‘a hard-hitting rites of passage story’ in the mould of Alan Clarke’s controversial but critically-acclaimed Borstal film, *Scum* (1977). Rather than using the full colour image of Dyer as a young, clean-shaven, teenager, as per the original video release, Revolver’s re-issue used a promotional shot of Dyer from one of his TV documentaries, looking rugged and intimidating. Metrodome followed suit, picking up *The Other Half* (2004)—in which Dyer stars alongside another onscreen hard man (and ex-footballer) Vinnie Jones—and packaging it to cash-in on the success of *The Football Factory*. On UK DVD, *The Other Half* drew on the now familiar iconography of hooligan drama, replete with the red, black and white imagery, which has become the ubiquitous colour coding for ‘Dyersploitation’. As with the re-release of *Borstal Boy*, Dyer poses menacingly on the cover, wearing an England football strip and standing in front of the flag of St. George in a way designed to resonate with what was perceived by the distributor (rightly or wrongly) as Dyer’s core demographic. This imagery, however, is misleading since *The Other Half* is a romantic comedy in which Dyer plays a newlywed sneaking off to watch England in the European Championships while on his honeymoon in Portugal. Far from being a hooligan, Dyer’s role in this film is rather that of a hapless but benign ‘every-lad’ and the film presents a very different imagery of England fans abroad than Williams (2005) foresaw in *The Football Factory*.

*Goodbye Charlie Bright*, which had already been remarketed once by Cinema Club in the ‘red and white’ style of the Football Factory poster, was reissued once more by Metrodome, complete with an image of Dyer looking angry and dishevelled (see Figs. 2a, 2b and 2c) **[insert figs 2a,b, and c around here]**; Thomas Clay’s controversial art film, *The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael* (2005), in which Dyer’s character has five minutes of screen time, was reissued (again by Metrodome) with ‘DANNY DYER’ in bold letters on the cover, alongside a still of the actor, looking bloodied and bruised; and *Just for the Record*, a comedy about the British film industry, was promoted using an image from *The Football Factory* and the misleading tagline ‘Get in on the action! Try not to get cut!’

This approach to marketing reveals much about Dyer’s perceived cultural capital among a cult, and profoundly televisual, audience at this time. His column in *Zoo* also helped keep his image and ‘hard man’ persona fresh in the minds of adolescent males. In his autobiography, Dyer recalls how, because of his consistently strong DVD sales, he has not had to audition for a film since 2008, and that, in some cases his involvement alone can be enough to secure funding for a project (Dyer 2010: 320). In a similar vein, the film producer Jonathan Sothcott, who is one of Dyer’s regular collaborators, explained that at one time, a ‘Danny Dyer’ DVD could guarantee the sale of 100,000 copies (Sothcott 2012). In fact, *City Rats* surpassed this, with reported sales over the 350,000 mark. For the majority of critics, however, this commercial reality has remained immaterial. Direct to DVD simply does not carry the cachet of a wide theatrical release, regardless of the audiences reached or the profits gained. As a result, Dyer’s films remain easy to mock for their lowly ‘bargain bin’ associations, and function to reaffirm the idea that they remain, like Dyer himself and the audience he commands, cheap, vulgar and low.

Conclusion: ‘A sensitive soul’?

Through analysing discursive texts such as film reviews, press profiles of the star, interviews and marketing campaigns, we have explored Danny Dyer’s star image and how negative responses to him might be understood in light of current antagonistic social attitudes towards the British working-class. We contend that Dyer’s ‘lowly’ associations—his ‘low’ audience and the low cultural status that his films have been afforded due to their perceived low quality and associations with the ‘low’ medium of DVD—have complemented his stereotyping as a working-class ‘geezer’ with ‘low’ (or negligible) cultural value. This can be productively compared with Dyer’s contrasting popularity with certain cult audiences and his deliberate prominence in advertising campaigns for films he has appeared in, sometimes only briefly.

Since we first began researching this article, Dyer has starred in further decidedly lowbrow fare. This includes the film *Run For Your Wife*, which was critically panned because of its poor production values, its failure to be funny, and crucially its shockingly low box-office returns of £747 (see Bradshaw, 2013; Reynolds, 2013), and an appearance in the critically-denigrated youth-oriented soap *Hollyoaks Later* (Channel 4, 2013), in which he reprised his familiar hard man persona as a ruthless gangster and drug baron. However, in the wake of these appearances, there has also been a discernable change in Dyer’s star image, as he has moved from the margins of cult DVD to becoming more centralised on mainstream television. He has featured on panel shows such as *Celebrity Juice* (2012, S7 E3), on which he gave the show’s host, Keith Lemon, a lesson in ‘hard man’ acting. He has also been regular guests on chat shows, such as *Alan Carr’s Chatty Man* (2013, S10 E7), where he has willingly admitted—to laughs and applause from an empathetic studio audience—that a lot of the films he has starred in have been ‘shit’. He has also taken part in a series of self-mocking online videos, such as *How to be Danny Dyer* (2013), in which Dyer ‘teaches’ us how to be a ‘versatile’ actor (the joke being that all of his performance are the same), and the satirical *Danny Dyer’s Reflective Haikus* (2013), which, in the model of *The Real Football Factories*, finds Dyer ‘tracking down some of the most introspective poetry you have ever heard’ through a dilapidated urban estate.[[7]](#endnote-7)

This ironic and self-aware shift represents an interesting diversification in Dyer’s cultural meaning and significance. Alongside these self-deprecating comments are increased public proclamations about being a father and the importance of spending time with his family which seem to be a key part of his reconstructed star image. Fatherhood, it would seem, has thus become increasingly central to Dyer’s reconstituted imagery, drawing on what Hannah Hamad might term the ‘cultural purchase’ of paternalism within contemporary culture, enabling the mobilisation of an emotionally articulate form of contemporary masculinity (Hamad, 2013: 1). The movement away from his earlier, laddishly loutish persona is further emphasised by his continual insistence that, underneath his macho swagger, he is a ‘sensitive soul’ who sees violence as ‘a mugs game’: ‘I won't let people take the piss out of me, but I'm not a hard man. I can't be bothered rolling about on the cobbles, mate’ (in Gilbert, 2013).

Dyer’s most recent role as Mick Carter, the pub landlord of the Queen Vic in *EastEnders*, further draws on this newly paternalised imagery because his character is married with two grown children. Dyer’s role in the soap was presented as new territory for both actor and programme, not least because of the fact that his character is one of the few positive father figures in the series; in Dyer’s own words, ‘one of the first to come in and be a really good parent’ (Dowell, 2014). Although the reconfiguration of Dyer’s ‘geezer’ persona is achieved via the prism of fatherhood, his casting in a soap opera which has a tradition of portraying ‘unreconstructed’ male characters explicitly draws on his ‘authentic’ image as a working-class East End star. Although Dyer’s move into the soap opera and the concomitant deployment of fatherhood as the primary structuring device for both his character and his star image signals a potential recuperation, he, along with soap opera as a genre, remain mired in the domain of ‘low’ culture (Thornham, 2007: 61). It would seem to us that Dyer’s star image is entering a crucial new phase; on the one hand, there is a seemingly conscious desire to distance himself from his ‘lairy bad boy image’ (Heritage, 2010) but without compromising the ‘authenticity’ and ‘honesty’ that are central to his appeal (Bell, 2011). In many ways, therefore, his role on *EastEnders* makes perfect sense. It enables Dyer to reconstruct a more respectable star image which nonetheless actively draws on his strongly coded working-class identity.

This article has traced some of the key factors at play in Dyer’s star persona, deconstructing the discourses of gender and class which are so central to his image and that inform the ways in which he has been understood as a star. Frequently critically reviled but subject of a strong cult following, and now becoming a more mainstream television star, Danny Dyer’s career and reputation provide a highly productive site for investigating broader questions of social identity in contemporary Britain.

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**Notes**

1. A typical example being the long-running feud between Dyer and film critic Mark Kermode; the actor being quoted as saying he’ll ‘break Kermode’s nose’ should the two ever meet (see Nissim 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the words of one American film critic: ‘Behan was in his own words […] a heterosexual, whose only brush with bisexuality was reading Oscar Wilde. Yet the movie is a simple gay pride, coming-out story, complete with a tender same-sex crush and several secretive kisses in the dark” (quoted in O’Hanlon 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Writing about the film *Outlaw*, Ryan Gilbey of the *Guardian* attacks Love’s more recent work similarly to the ways that Dyer has been discredited: ‘It squanders the potential of Love's 2001 debut, *Goodbye Charlie Bright*, a kind of lyrical south London Mean Streets which is one of the best British features of the decade so far. Everything that made that film so delightful—compassion, style, wit, subtlety—has been gradually stripped away through *The Football Factory*, *The Business* and *Outlaw*’ (Gilbey 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. That is not to say that Dyer is universally disliked by more middlebrow critics. For example, Phillip French’s (2007) review of *Outlaw* in the *Observer* praised the film for being ‘slick, rabble-rousing stuff performed by a strong cast’. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As Dave Rolinson notes, although Alan Clarke had not set out to glorify hooliganism in *The Firm*, critics writing for the likes of the *Daily Mail* and *Sunday Telegraph* interpreted the violence ‘as an act of glorification regardless of context’ (Rolinson 2005: 138). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For a discussion about the economic advantages of limited theatrical releases followed by immediate DVD releases see Walker 2014: 218-219. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Find *How to be Danny Dyer* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_IkxqSa7-4> (accessed 17 September, 2014), and *Danny Dyer’s Reflective Haikus* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXRo0PjzfZw> (accessed 17 September, 2014); [↑](#endnote-ref-7)