

**“Almost Psychopathic”: British Working Class Realism and the Horror Film in the late  
1950s and early 1960s**

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*Room at the Top* (1959) was released in the UK only two years after Hammer’s *Curse of Frankenstein* (1957). The former was the first film in a “‘new wave’ of working class realism” (Hill, *Sex 2*), which is often seen as one of the major aesthetic achievements of British cinema, while the latter enjoyed phenomenal commercial success and established a new British horror cinema. Given the virtual coincidence between these two cinematic events, it seems strange that these events are rarely discussed in relationship to one another in histories of British cinema.

For example, John Hill’s *Sex, Class and Realism* makes only two references to Hammer or horror more generally, while neither David Pirie’s *A Heritage of Horror*, nor Chibnell and Petley’s *British Horror Cinema*, engage with this relationship, even though the latter features an article on *The Innocents* (1961), a horror film that was directed by Jack Clayton immediately after *Room at the Top*. Much the same is also true of Rigby’s account of the British horror film, which makes repeated references to isolated moments of interconnection but does not bring these together in a larger argument. Murphy’s *Sixties British Cinema* is even structured as if to isolate these events from one another so that working class realism is contained within chapter one, the popular horror films of Hammer and others are dealt with in chapter eight, while chapter four is given over to “the possibility of constructing a tradition of ‘art cinema’ from among British films” (5), an discussion that includes many of the films that could be demonstrate overt crossover or traffic between realism and horror, films that include *The Innocents*, *The Servant* (1963), *Night Must Fall* (1964) and *Repulsion* (1965).

Consequently, the absence of any detailed consideration of the relationship between working class realism and horror is due to the ways in which they are compartmentalized and discussed in terms of “traditions” of British film making, in which realism and fantasy are imaged as parallel tracks that are fundamentally at odds with one another. For example, Pirie’s defining study explicitly sets out to identify a “heritage of horror” within which to locate the horror films of the late 1950s and the 1960s; and Petley’s now classic essay on “the lost continent” of British films takes this strategy one stage further and presents the horror film as an alternative to the critically celebrated tradition of British realism that challenges, subverts and “perhaps even works to deconstruct, a critically privileged realist aesthetic” (Hutchings 13).

Certainly Petley’s article has been crucial in bringing whole areas of British cinema to academic attention, and in challenging the perceived superiority of realism, but Hutchings has rightly identified severe problems with this model. First, while the “realism/fantasy dichotomy upon which this metaphor [of the lost continent] depends is a central one in much critical writing on British cinema” (*Hammer* 13), Hutchings stresses that working class realism and horror both shared established cinema conventions, conventions that were not exclusive to them but were central to the Classical Hollywood cinema, too. As Hutchings puts it, both “invariably come in the form of 80-120 minute fictional narratives peopled by psychologically individuated characters” (Hutchings *Hammer* 14). For Hutchings, then, Petley actually reproduces and reinforces the dichotomy between realism and fantasy and so obscures elements that they both shared. Second, as Hutchings points out, despite critical judgements of value, the British horror films of the late 1950s and 1960s were commercially more successful than the realist films of the period so that, rather than a “lost continent” of British cinema, they can be seen as precisely the

inverse. They may have been ignored or denigrated by critics but, for the cinema going public, these horror films were probably the most visible examples of British cinema at the time.

Again, however, this is the limit of Hutchings discussion of the relationship between working class realism and horror, a relationship that this article will demonstrate was far more complex and involved than is commonly acknowledged. Rather than existing as parallel tracks, working class realism and horror were closely related to one another in numerous ways and even engaged in explicit exchanges that demonstrate the presence of shared features and concerns. For this reason, there are real dangers with the ways in which British cinema history has compartmentalized materials (even though there are certainly some benefits in doing so) and, rather than parallel tracks, realism and horror have been deeply entangled with one another throughout their history.

This entanglement is due to the ways in which both realism and horror work through notions of the repressed, or taboo, in which the surfaces of “reality” are presented as the product of repression. In this way, the “real” is distinguished from “the world as it appears to be” and defined as that which lies beneath or behind surface appearances; or as the processes that produce those appearances. It is for this reason that both realism and horror are so often claimed to be both shocking and disturbing: they identify the “real” with repressed (or censored) materials, the ugly truth that supposedly lies behind the sanitized surface.

In fact, this relationship is made explicit by one of the most celebrated British films of the mid 1960s, *Repulsion*, which was not only a horror film but one that was also celebrated for its realism. For example, marketing for the film claimed that it was “a frightening film that takes the everyday world and distorts it”, but not to escape from realism and into fantasy. On the contrary, it was claimed that “no other film has shown, with such intense *reality*, the terrifying journey

into madness” (my emphasis), a claim that was supported by the *New York Times*, which not only identified *Repulsion* as “one of the best films of the year” but one that was not simply “a detailed and gruesome account of a crumbling mind” but a realist film that sought “penetrate and expose” the hidden and repressed forces that explain its protagonist’s murderous actions (Crowther 7).

Consequently, the dichotomy between realism and fantasy is not only misleading but obscures processes that can only be understood by questioning the distinctions between them. Realism, fantasy and horror are therefore better understood as interconnected terms, and are often linked to the psychological (as in *Repulsion*) through a common interest in the distinction between perceptions of “reality” and the “real”. This concern with the psychological also, in part, accounts for the way in which key directors of working class realism turned to horror so quickly, a trend that did not go unobserved at the time so that, as early as 1963, it was claimed:

While it would be early to proclaim that realism is dead in the new British cinema, it is noticeable that during the last year or so many of our newer directors have shown signs that they no longer find it enough. Mr. Jack Clayton has moved from *Room at the Top* to *The Innocents*. Mr. Tony Richardson from *Look Back in Anger* to *Tom Jones*, and the most notable recent recruits to the feature film [have started] by firmly throwing realism out of the window [and in his second film] Mr. John Schlesinger joins the move away from realism. (Anon, “Billy Becomes”)

This comment was made in relation to *Billy Liar* (1963), a film that explicitly moves beyond “realism” to detail its protagonist’s fantasies; and the claim is that the “move away from realism” is due to a situation in which filmmakers “no longer find it enough”, that it was insufficient and limiting.

To understand this dissatisfaction, it is worth returning to John Hill's analysis of working class realism, where he notes the tension between narration and description (terms similar to Lukacs' distinction between realism and naturalism, where description simply depicts the social world while narration seeks to represent the underlying processes that structure and produce the social world). However, Hill also relates this tension to one between the subjective worlds of characters within these films and the pictorial focus on the depiction of objective environments within they are located. Hutchings even quotes Lindsay Anderson in this context, a director who is cited as a key reference point in the review quoted above, and who claimed that his own contribution to working class realism, *This Sporting Life* (1963), already rejected the objective depiction of environment: "I have tried to abstract the film as much as possible so as not to over-emphasize the locations and keep attention on the situation between the characters" or, as he also put it, to make a film that "is almost entirely subjective" (quoted in Hutchings "Beyond" 148). The attraction of horror was therefore specifically an attraction to its psychological aspects and particularly its concern with "abnormal" psychologies, psychologies that either a product of the delusions that arise from repression, or challenge conventional perceptions by offering alternative ways of seeing "reality".

This article will therefore explore the relationship between working class realism and horror during the late 1950s and early 1960s, a relationship which was deeply entangled; but rather than simply read this relationship off the films, the article will largely focus on an analysis of reviews published at the time, reviews that may have reproduced the dichotomy between realism and fantasy but also provide evidence of these relationships, and of how they were understood. The article will also predominantly focus on the first three films of the "new wave"

of working class realism”, films that established the type and perceptions of it, and after which those associated with the form began to demonstrate a dissatisfaction with it.

The article will also be developed in three key sections, the first of which focuses on industry professionals. As we have seen, Hutchings has stressed the established cinematic conventions within which horror worked, conventions that were also shared by working class realism; and the section will start with the way in which professionals, such as Seth Holt and Freddie Francis, were not restricted to working class realism or horror films but worked in both. The section then moves on to examine more deliberate exchanges between working class realism and horror; before moving on to examine the ways in which many of the key figures in working class realism turned to horror even before 1963, when “British production companies and their financial backers had removed their support from northern working class subjects” (Laing 138).

The second section then moves on to examine the ways in which realism and fantasy were strongly connected in industrial and aesthetic terms, particularly (as we have seen) around their relationship to censorship. In other words, in the late 1950s, Hammer already used X rated material to market its films as distinctive, a strategy that made a claim for “realism”. If Hammer’s “realism” was largely defined by its handling of gore, the working class realist films, which followed shortly after, were also marketed through their X rated material, although their “realism” was associated with sex. In this way, Hammer can be seen to have established a strategy for marketing films through their “realism”, a realism that is defined by their explicit handling of materials that challenged the censors.

In other words, working class realism and horror can be seen as almost mirror images in relation to censorship; and the section then moves on to examine another way in which they mirrored one another. Hill and others have stressed that working class realism does not identify

with its working class protagonists but displayed “a kind of sexual fascination with ‘otherness’” (136) so that the films indulged in a form of middle-class voyeurism that marks “a separation between spectator and subjects” so that “the pleasures delivered may well rely less on recognition than the very sensation of class difference.” (136) This accounts for the ambiguous response to the films’ protagonists, who are both rebellious challenges to middle class mores and problems to be investigated and resolved. To this extent, then, these films display a fascination with “abnormal” psychologies from the start, in that this psychological deviance both operates as a challenge to middle class norms, and the inverse: the dangers of modernity. The Gothic horror films also established “a separation between spectator and subjects” that involved a “sexual fascination with ‘otherness’” (136) so that their monsters were both attractive and repulsive. The fundamental difference then was that while Hammer’s Gothic monsters were associated with aristocratic despotism that should have been consigned to the past, but returns as the living dead; working class realism dealt with monsters that were associated with modernity and with a supposedly “new” working class that was the product of affluence and which also refused to “know its place”.

Finally, the last section examines the central male characters associated with working class realism and ways in which they were discussed in terms of psychopathology. Despite *A Taste of Honey* (1961), which featured a female protagonist, the films that established working class realism (and indeed the majority of the films that followed them) were insistently centered on male protagonists. Furthermore, while characters such as Joe Lampton (*Room at the Top*), Jimmy Porter (*Look Back in Anger*, 1959) and Arthur Seaton (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, 1960) were very different from one another, they shared specific features in common, features that made them figures of fascination, attraction and repulsion for middle class

filmmakers. As we have seen, then, these figures mirror the fascination with aristocratic despotism found in Hammer's Gothic horror films, but their relation to horror is still more explicit. If they were figures of virility and rebellion against middle class mores, they were also discussed in terms that evoked, often explicitly, the figure of the psychopath, a figure central to horror production at the time. It is for this reason that, as will be seen, when Finney was explicitly cast as a "homicidal maniac" (Amis "Night Must"), reviewers displayed no surprise and claimed that he was already "an actor with a line in charming psychopaths" (Shorter). As a result, it is hardly surprising that both the actors and the directors associated with working class realism would be drawn to horror materials that made these interests in "abnormal" psychologies explicit.

### **Professional Relationships: Expertise, Strategic Choices and Career Moves**

If, as Hutchings has argued, horror films worked in relation to established cinematic conventions of length, fictional narrative and psychologically differentiated characters, the same is also true of working class realism; and for this reason, both horror and working class realism often employed the same professionals in their production, professionals whose standing in the industry was based on professional expertise that did not limit them to specific types of film. For example, Seth Holt was not only the editor of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, but also directed Hammer's *Taste of Fear* (1961), *The Nanny* (1965) and *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* (1971). Alternatively, Freddie Francis was the director of photography on *Room at the Top*, *Sons and Lovers* (1960) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* on the one hand, and Hammer's *Never Take Sweets from a Stranger* (1960), Clayton's *The Innocents* and Karel Reisz's *Night Must Fall* on the other. He also turned to directing with credits that include *Paranoiac* (1963),

*Nightmare* (1964), *The Evil of Frankenstein* (1964), *Doctor Terror's House of Horrors* (1965), *Hysteria* (1965), *The Skull* (1965), *The Psychopath* (1966), *The Deadly Bees* (1966), *They Came from Beyond Space* (1967), *The Torture Garden* (1967) and *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (1968).

If these figures are probably best understood as professionals, who took work when offered and were offered work on the basis of their professional expertise, others cases can be seen as more strategic choices that demonstrate more self-conscious exchanges between working class realism and horror. For example, *Look Back in Anger* was adapted for the screen by Nigel Kneale, whom reviewers explicitly identified as “Nigel (Quatermass) Kneale” (Whitebait, “Look Back”), Prof. Quatermass being the protagonist of a number of BBC serials written by Kneale and that Hammer adapted for the screen and had provided the catalyst for the studio’s focus on horror production. Certainly, Kneale was a writer known for his skill with fictional screen drama, and it is claimed that he was also one of the few people who would collaborate with John Osborne (Adrian, “Nigel Kneale”). However, his association with working class realism is also testimony to the fluidity between realism and horror on the one hand, and between the professionals who made them on the other. He had met Tony Richardson and George Devine while working at the BBC, when he had not only made the Quatermass serials but also a range of other productions including an adaptation of Chekhov’s *Curtain Down*, which Richardson had directed and in which Devine had starred (Petley, “The Manxman”). Furthermore, Kneale was recommended for *Look Back in Anger* by Kenneth Anger, after Anger and Kneale had collaborated on an adaptation of *Lord of the Flies*, an adaptation that was never filmed, although Peter Brook would film another version in 1963 that was explicitly reviewed in terms of art-house horror (Jancovich “Beyond”).

*Room at the Top* also had a notable relationship to horror through the casting of French star, Simone Signoret. Critics were generally effusive about her performance, but also saw her as an odd casting choice given that, in the original novel, her character was profoundly English: “unhappy, English-to-the-core Alice, warm of heart, wanton of blood.” (Conway, “Simone Sizzles”) This choice was probably due to the films supposedly frank handling of sex, at a time when Continental filmmakers were heavily associated with sexual explicitness but the British filmmakers was not (an issue that, as we will see, reviewers clearly noted). However, while one can see that a French actress might have been cast add sexual frisson, Signoret was not the kind of sex symbol exemplified by Brigid Bardot, particularly after the success of *And God Created Woman* (1957) in the US (Gomery, “Shared Pleasures”). None the less, in 1955, Signoret had starred in another major art-house hit and one that had largely initiated the horror boom of the late 1950s, *Les Diaboliques* (1955), a film in which she played another tortured mistress.

If *Room at the Top* used Signoret due to her associations with art-house horror, Hammer returned the favor and cast the actress who had played Signoret’s rival in *Room at the Top* (Heather Sears) in a key role in the studio’s most ambitious production, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1962). This casting can be seen as an attempt by Hammer to acquire some of the prestige associated with *Room at the Top*, and it is significant that, on posters for the film, Sears receives equal billing with Herbert Lom (who plays the phantom), a rare distinction for an actress in the years before Hammer began making vehicles for sex symbols such as Ursula Andress and Raquel Welch.

If *Phantom of the Opera* was made 1962, when funding was drying up for working class realism, this funding crisis was not the primary reason that filmmakers moved away from working class realism and some had already turned to horror projects long before funding ended.

Laing has noted the influence of Tennessee Williams on Richardson's theatrical work and, by implication, his first cinematic efforts (88), a playwright simultaneously associated with realism and Gothic horror. If this influence can be found in *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer* (1960), Richardson then made his first Hollywood film, *Sanctuary* (1961), an adaptation of another writer of Southern Gothic fiction, William Faulkner. Even then critics associated the film with Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1959), which featured horror elements that reviewers repeatedly made explicit. For example, while the *Spectator* found *Sanctuary* to be as unbelievable as "the cannibals in *Suddenly, Last Summer*" (Quigly), the *Daily Telegraph* complained that the film "offers nothing compared to the cannibalistic feasts ... served up by ... Tennessee Williams" (Gibbs "Sanctuary"), but only because its horrors were ineffective.

The film was also linked to horror through its producer, Richard D Zanack, whose first film, the previous year, had been a tale of two psychopathic killers, *Compulsion* (1959), a film that had starred Bradford Dillman, who also appeared in Richardson's film. *Sanctuary* was therefore referred to as "an outright shocker" (Anon, "Sanctuary" *Saturday Review*) and as a tale of "Gothic tedium" (Hill, "Sanctuary"). It was also supposed to feature the kind of "old fashioned heroine" found in a "Victorian novelette" (Barker, "Belle"), and to be contrived to induce "shock", "disgust" and "horror" (Quigly). In fact, it was claimed to be so "horrific" (Gibbs "Sanctuary"), and so "nightmarish", that "mere rape as a conclusion comes almost as an anti-climax" (Gibbs "Sanctuary"). Certainly, critics poured scorn on the film, but not due to these horror elements, except to accuse them of being "too mild" (Gibbs "Sanctuary") or of lacking "atmosphere" (Walker "This Ain't"). Instead, critics recognized that the film was a psychological drama about "guilt and neurosis" (Mosley, "Half-Hearted"), but they condemned

its “muddled psychology” (Anon, Guardian “Sanctuary”) and expressed doubt that the film “means something” (Perrick).

In response, Richardson quickly turned back to working class realism with *A Taste of Honey* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), before moving onto historical films such as *Tom Jones* (1963). However, he returned to horror related materials twice with *Mademoiselle* (1966) and *The Sailor from Gibraltar* (1967). The former was described “an exercise in abnormal psychology and sadistic cruelty” that was written by Jean Genet and featured “a good many echoes of Bunuel”, even if the critical response was similar to that of *Sanctuary*: it was accused of lacking “any apparent meaning beyond its surface” (T.M., “Mademoiselle”). *The Sailor from Gibraltar* fared even worse and was roundly dismissed as “incredible farrago of philosophico-romantic tosh” (T.M. “Sailor”).

Jack Clayton also jettison working class realism for horror and followed *Room at the Top* with *The Innocents*. Indeed, critics were much more complementary about *The Innocents* than *Sanctuary*, despite claiming that it was “as far away from ‘Top’ as you can get” (Lewin). It was therefore clearly understood as a horror film but also as a “spine-chiller of distinction” (Hibbin “Innocents”) that was not “the latest werewolf-cum-Frankenstein horror comic from Hammer films” (Mosley, “Quite Terrifying”). It was also praised as a psychological film that offered a “Freudian study” (Crewe; Robinson “Innocents”; Gilliatt) so that, like Clayton’s *Room at the Top*, it was praised as an “adult” film (Wiseman “Innocents”) in which the terrors were “horribly and enormously *real*.” (Partridge, my emphasis). Nor was this Clayton’s only foray into horror and he had already made a short ghost story, *The Bespoke Overcoat* (1954). He also returned horror for his fourth feature film, *Our Mother’s House* (1967), before returning yet again for his

sixth film, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1983). It might therefore be claimed that, for Clayton, it was realism rather than horror was the detour in his career.

As we have seen, by 1964, when Karel Reisz followed *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* with a horror film, *Night Must Fall*, critics had already predicted the demise of working class realism (Anon, “Billy Becomes”). However, while *Night Must Fall* reunited Reisz with the star of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Albert Finney, this horror project did not receive the critical acclaim that *The Innocents* had enjoyed, and it was generally condemned for failing to work as either an effective horror film – it lacked the ‘cold shivers’ that one expected (Wilson “Night Falls Tepidly”) – or a convincing psychological study – the audience ‘know no more about Danny at the end of the film’ than they did at the start (Barnes “Mad Killer”). Critics did not object to Reisz or Finney’s turn to horror and this study of “the mind of a homicidal maniac” (Amis “Night Must”) was hardly seen as a departure for Finney but as directly related to his earlier roles. Indeed, these similarities were seen as the sole justification for making the film: “It is hard to see exactly why [*Night Must Fall*, which had already been filmed back in the late 1930s] should have been thought worth reviving ... except as a vehicle for an actor with a line in charming psychopaths. Albert Finney of course does the psycho stuff well.” (Shorter) However, if this film fared poorly with critics, Reisz’s next film was yet another psychological project, *Morgan: A Suitable Case for Treatment* (1966), although it used comedy rather than horror as a vehicle for its psychological concerns.

Consequently, figures associated with working class realism turned to psychological horror with remarkable speed and this can be seen as a response to the perceived limitations in realism and to a clear association between these horror films and the psychological features of working class realism. As we will see, then, working class realism explicitly associated its

central male protagonists with psychopathology, and in a manner that established a fundamental communality with the horror film.

### **“Shock Tactics”: Gore, Sex and Class**

However, the psychological also relates to another aspect of the working class realist films. As Hill notes, for all their apparent preoccupation with class, the class narrative is actually worked out in relation to sex (Hill, “Working class” 304), and this preoccupation with sex in working class realism raises another way in which the working class realist films were related to horror. As Hutchings notes: “The X certificate had been introduced in the early 1950s as an attempt to open up a space for the exhibition of artistic film (usually European art-films) for a ‘cultured’ audience.” (“Beyond” 148) The X certificate was therefore a response to long running criticism of Hollywood by British cultural critics who championed a cinema of realism that would deal with *adult* material that were censored by mainstream conventions, materials that were most easily and readily identified with sex and violence. For example, Hollywood had long presented itself as clean and healthy through its rejection of “realistic” sex and violence, and an association of such materials with the decadent cinemas of Europe (Schaefer).

This placed British cinema in an awkward position where it was presented as less courageous than the rest of Europe but not as entertaining as Hollywood: too respectable to be either daring or diverting. In the 1950s, however, Hammer began to exploit the X certificate for marketing purposes and entitled its first Quatermass adaptation, *The Quatermass Experiment* (1955) in the UK. As Hammer realized, the X certificate could be used to market their films as offering something distinctive through their handling of taboo materials shunned by other filmmakers. This strategy was well established by the late 1950s, when the production of

working class realist films began; and while it may be stretching things to claim that the working class realist films were a response to Hammer's success (although it was certainly a response to the growing success of the European art film in the 1950s and the "Adult Film" that Barbara Klinger identifies as a feature of Hollywood production in the same period [1994]), there was one sense in which the relationship between working class realism and horror was clear.

Although Hammer is today remembered for its sexual elements, the studio largely avoided nudity and sexual explicitness until late in the 1960s, when it began to experience problems. Indeed, Ivan Butler even claims that *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (1968) is distinguished by its "emphasis on the sexual basis of vampirism" (Butler 46). Prior to this point, then, while the studio certainly exploited sexual materials, its claims to 'realism' were largely organized around violence and gore (Street 159). Conversely, for all the violence (physical and psychological) of figures such as Joe Lampton, Jimmy Porter and Arthur Seaton, the working class realist films were largely marketed through the "realism" of their sexual content. As Geraghty puts it: "'new wave' films such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* ... established British cinema as being both contemporary and *shocking*: this was a cinema 'for adults' in which the sexual promise of the 'X' Certificate' was legitimated through their supposed examination of contemporary social phenomena (Geraghty 107).

The explicitness of this connection between working class realism and horror is captured in an anecdote told by Rigby:

Jack Clayton's 'X' certified film [*Room at the Top*] introduced a gritty vein of social realism and sexual frankness to British screens, though its producers were initially unsure how it would be received. Sneak-previewing it at a Tottenham cinema showing a double-

bill of *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, they would substitute it unannounced for one or the other to the hooting derision of horror-hungry North Londoners. (Rigby 7)

In other words, unsure how to promote and exhibit *Room at the Top*, its producers tried it out with horror audiences, who had already demonstrated an appetite for X rated materials, and it was only when this strategy failed – and it became clear that the audience for gore was not identical with the audience for sex – that a different strategy was devised for the film’s release. It was still a strategy that sold sex, but one that did so through its association with the sexually candid art house cinema, rather than the gruesomely explicit Hammer horrors.

In fact, reviews of *Room at the Top* explicitly claimed that the filmmakers had adapted John Braine’s original novel in a manner that had earned it an X certificate. Not for meretricious horror or peep-hole sex but for sheer blatant honesty ... The sex is there in torrents. The horror is there and the course, down-to-the-common-earth words. This is in no sense a U-story. But it is real and straightforward and rings true. In this case at least, and at last, the X certificate looks very like a badge of honour. (Monsey)

Similarly, the *Star* claimed: “So often is the censor’s kiss-mark awarded for sheer salacity or horror that I welcome one whose X is neither a warning to the decent-minded nor an invitation to the dirty-minded.” (Adams “X Marks”) If others saw the film as “proof that British studios can produce something as sexy as the offerings of the craftiest Continental sin-peddlers” (Carthew), these “Continental sin-peddlers” were the art-house filmmakers that others revered, and elsewhere the film was championed as a “raw *adult* revolution” that bravely tackled “taboo subjects” in a way that was “savagely frank and brutally truthful” (Mosley “Raw Adult”; my emphasis). As another review claimed, the film was “the most *adult* film on sex ever to be made

in this country” (Frank; my emphasis) and most reviews clearly identified *Room at the Top* as a film whose “shock tactics” (Harman, “Mr. Skikne”) were not prurient but were essential to its “realism” (Anon, “Thanks to TV”).

Sex was also central to discussions of *Look Back in Anger* but here the focus was less on the love scenes than the verbal battles in which Jimmy Porter performs “emotional vandalism” on those around him (Anon, “Unloved Hero”), most particularly his wife: “he needs her sexually, but treats her like a brute” (Dixon, “World”). The reviews therefore focus on the verbal aspects of his “sexual violence” (Dixon, “Premiere”), even though it is acknowledged that he is both “mentally and physically cruel” (Harman “Look Back”). If the film is “sensational, shocking and timely” (Mosley “Saw It”), it is therefore its handling of sexual relationships, rather than actual sex scenes, that are the focus of its supposed realism and honesty.

*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, on the other hand, integrates the two, and while some reviews described it as a story of “beer and sex” (Anon, “Council Ban”), the film’s “shock tactics” (Whitebait, “Quiet Arrival”) were neither its verbal battles nor its love scenes. Certainly, there was some discussion of the latter, which were claimed to be “every bit as real” as those in *Room at the Top*, (Shand) and considerable coverage was given to the production company, when it refused to accept demands that cuts be made to the film: “We are not prepared to agree that a film of outstanding importance and merit should be re-edited by the Mrs. Grundies of Warwickshire County Council.” (see for example, Anon, “Council Bans”). However, the stress was on its frank handling of taboo issues such as abortion (Anon, “Welcome or Condemn”), and on Seaton’s anti-social character.

However, while the horror films traded on gore and working class realism traded on sex, there were other ways in which they seem to have complemented one another or operated as two

sides of the same coin. For example, Pirie has made much of the way in which Hammer's version of Dracula can be seen to represent aristocratic despotism, a force that refuses to be consigned to the past and is resurrected as the living dead. Furthermore, while he associates Baron Frankenstein with the new bourgeois rationality of science, the very title of "Baron" calls this claim into question. Rather than a bourgeois, Frankenstein has all the aristocratic arrogance that marks him as, like Shelley's original character, another figure of aristocratic despotism, a suggestion emphasized by his contempt for bourgeois respectability including that of the scientific establishment and of petty officialdom.

If Hammer's Gothic horrors focus on these despots, there is a clear sense of separation between these figures and the spectator, a separation that views these monsters with a sense of both fascination and repulsion. A similar relationship is also established between the spectator and the protagonists of working class realism, although rather than associating these figures with the an aristocratic and Gothic past, these protagonists are associated with modernity and the future. Consequently, these protagonists did not represent the "traditional" working class but a "new" or "emergent" working class. As Laing has pointed out, the 1950s witnessed the genesis of an opposition, often represented by Hogart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), between the idea of a "traditional" working class and a "new" working class associated with affluence. Hill even argues that the idea of the "traditional" working class was an invention of the 1950s (Hill, *Sex* 154). Consequently, working class realism did not focus on the traditional working class, who were largely seen as "knowing their place" and figuring in the background, but rather on the new affluent working class male that represented "a timely reminder that affluence has not diminished 'the revolt of the masses.'" (Anon, "Just to Show Them") These working class males were supposed to not know their place and to be dislocated from the "traditional" working class,

without being bourgeois. Most are outsiders, who have achieved a distance from their class. Lampton may have been “born into a small milltown slum” but he has achieved both geographical and social mobility by making “good use of his time in a P.O.W. camp during the war ... to qualify as an accountant” (Monsey). Porter has a “university education” (Waterman) but has not achieved social mobility and is described as “a young university graduate educated beyond his background through the goodness of the welfare state” (Anon, *Time* “Look back”). As one review says of the central character in *Billy Liar*, he is not only “trapped” but has “just enough intelligence, education and independence to realize the horrors of his situation, but not quite enough to extract himself from it except in his dreams” (Anon, “Billy Becomes”). Only Seaton seems to lack this educational history, but he is clearly associated with the new affluence through his consumption: his clothing, his quiff, and his frequenting of bars with skiffle bands. As the *Evening News* put it: “He feverously slaves at the factory machine simply and solely to get oodles of money to spend on beer and girls at the week-ends.” (Harman, “Saturday Night”) If women often operated as one representative of the new affluence, Arthur is an example of another key figure, youth.

### **“Mentally and Physically Cruel”: Psychopathology, Masculinity and Working Class**

#### **Realism**

Of course, while Hammer is best remembered for Gothic, supernatural horror monsters, such as Frankenstein and Dracula, the psychological horror film was not only crucial to the period but the type of horror favored by prestige producers and directors (Jancovich “Beyond”). Some of these psychological horror films focus on the psychologically tormented victim who does not trust their own perceptions of the world, while others focus on a psychologically disturbed threat,

often defined as a psychopath. By 1960, this latter option had become a key figure in the horror film following the success of *Les Diaboliques* and low budget productions such as those by William Castle. The year therefore saw the release of a range of such films which included Ross Hunter's *Midnight Lace*, Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Powell's *Peeping Tom* and Hammer's *Scream of Fear*, all of which featured psychopathic killers.

Furthermore, while the first type of psychological horror revolves around one type of insecurity – can one trust one's own perceptions - most of the horror films featuring psychopaths were effectively whodunits that revolved around the difficulty of identifying the psychopath from other, “normal” characters. Furthermore, in most of these films, the psychopath is a fantasist who not only exists in their own private world, the logic of which cannot be imagined, but therefore cannot relate to others as independent beings, but only as projections of their own fantasies.

In this way, the psychopath is related to broader anxieties about social isolation and atomization: that people don't really “know” one another, even those supposedly close to them. Such anxieties may be the product of many different, complex and even interrelated processes but, in the case of working class realism, there is not only a preoccupation with the figure of the psychopath, and in terms that are very similar to the horror film, but in these films the psychopath is presented as a direct product of the affluent society and the erosion of class hierarchies which it is supposed to entail.

As a result, the new working class males, who are the focus of these films, were not figures of Lukacsian realism, in which they represented the dynamic and contradictory forces of history – they do not represent a larger working class struggle (Lukacs “History”). On the contrary, as has been argued, they are distanced from their class and often presented as railing against that class. As Laing has argued, they are frustrated individuals who may be at odds with

the world, but are not engaged in collective action to change it. This focus on individual frustration also results in a focus on psychology in which the problems faced by the central character are presented as being as much internal and psychological as they are external and social. This might seem least applicable to Lampton, who is a “social climber” (Carthew; Alpert) that doesn’t want to end the class order but only to achieve individual social mobility.

Furthermore, his story was read as a fairly old fashioned morality tale about the “pitfalls of excessive ambition” (Staloff), in which he recognizes his “empty triumph” at the end of the film (Gibbs “The Perils”). However, while Lampton was discussed in less psychologized terms than Porter or Seaton, and was largely dismissed as “a cad”, reviewers also recognized that the fierceness of his ambition hinted at something more psychological: “A Chip on the shoulder is too trivial a description of his aggressive attitude towards society. It is rather an obsession.”

(Gibbs, ‘The Perils’)

Alternatively, Jimmy Porter is overtly presented as caught in a psychological dilemma, in which he is trapped in a “nagging love-hate marriage with his drained, middle-class wife” (Hinxman, “Screen Hasn’t Cooled”), a relationship which certainly had class dimensions, but does not involve him in an attempt to change the class structure. On the contrary, reviews made a lot of the film’s circularity, in which “the film fades out on a repetition” (Dixon, “World”). In other words, his entrapment is due to his contradictory and irreconcilable feelings about his wife: “He needs her sexually, but treats her as a brute.” (Dixon, “World”) Seaton is also psychologized but without Porter’s conflicts. As we will see, Seaton was seen as following a single-minded and pathological pursuit of self-gratification that violently lashes out at anything that might frustrate him.

The psychologization of the male lead reaches its logical conclusion, then, in *Billy Liar*, which Laing is right to see as a key film for this and other reasons. Originally performed on the stage by Finney, Billy is an explicit fantasist who is trapped in his internal world and, while, he only achieves the level of petty criminality, it is only a short step from Billy's fantasy world to that of Freddy Clegg in *The Collector* (1965), who is clearly a psychopathic serial killer in the making. In fact, *Billy Liar* and *The Collector* make the psychological concerns of earlier examples of working class realism explicit, given their concerns with the socially mobile youth who ends up trapped in a pathological fantasy life; and the casting of Tom Courtney and Terence Stamp also stressed the importance of youth as an issue. While Harvey, Burton and Finney (who played Lampton, Porter and Seaton) were manly in appearance, their characters were strongly associated with youth, so much so that reviewers even complained that Burton was too old for the role of Jimmy Porter. For example, Hill notes that these figures were associated with youth through their troubled relationship with their origins, particularly their absent or inadequate fathers, but there were also other and, more explicit, associations. Porter is a figure of youth culture as demonstrated by his love of jazz – one review even refers to him as a “skiffle group Hamlet” (Majdalany) – and, like Seaton, he is explicitly referred to as a “teddy boy” by reviewers (Harman, “*Look Back*”; Anon, “The Truth”; Gomery, “Brilliant, Yes”). The accuracy of these references are not the point (the term teddy boy is not being used in a precise way but simply to conjure images of violent working class youth) but it directly associates Porter and Seaton with one of the key youth cultures of the period and one that operated as a powerful folk devil.

The references to the teddy boy not only associates Porter and Seaton with youth but also with violence, which again links these working class males with horror or, at least, foreshadows

the shift to horror materials. Lampton, Porter and Seaton have significant differences, a point made by the reviews which saw the former as “a social climber” (Carthew; Alpert), the second as an “artist” (Alpert) and the third as a hedonist who was “just out for a good time” (Alpert; Harman, “Saturday Night”; Walker, “New Films”; Gomery, “Brilliant, Yes”; Wells). None the less, similar terms circulate around the psychologies of all three, terms that not only clarifies that which links them, but also that their shared psychological characteristics were strongly associated with horror from the outset. Most revealingly, *Variety*, which in this case may have had the benefit of distance, described Porter of “almost psychopathic” (Rich), a description that is not as glib as it might at first appear. Similarly, as we have already seen, by the time of *Night Must Fall*, Finney was already seen as “an actor with a line in charming psychopaths.” (Shorter)

The point here is not whether these diagnoses are psychologically accurate but rather that the terms in which these three characters were described by reviews was precisely those that would commonly be applied to the psychopath of horror narratives, particularly given that this psychologization is so insistently associated with aggression. Again Lampton is the least explicit example and is largely seen as having “a chip on the shoulder” (Gibbs “The Perils”; Adams “X Marks”) although, as we have already seen, his aggression is seen as verging psychological pathology through references to “obsession” (Gibbs “The Perils”). With Porter, however, this becomes more explicit, and he is claimed to be “savagely kicking out at life” and “the personification of all the aimless, unhappy, frustrated, blind-alley youths who were thrown up after the war.” (Mosley “Saw It”). However, this aggression becomes most horrific with Seaton, who is not just seen as a “rebel” (Walker “New Films”) or an “anarchist” (E.S.; Gomery, “Brilliant Yes”) but as someone who will violently oppose any frustration of his desires –

“Arthur Seaton is very much All Right, Jack, and nobody is going to stop him being that way” (Harman, “Saturday Night”).

Elsewhere, then, the psychologization is made explicit. For example, Porter is described as “neurotic, schizoid and paranoid” (Dixon, “Premiere”). But these psychological features are not simply about violence but also a psychopathic lack of empathy with others, which gives their violence a quality like that of the psychopaths commonly found in horror films. They are “ruthless” (Monsey), “callous” (Kay; Dixon, “World”; Redburn), “insensitive” (Kay) and just don’t “care” about anyone or anything beyond themselves (Harman “Saturday Night”). As the *Times* noted, in the case of *Billy Liar*, “real people are enigmas to Billy” (Anon, “At Home”). These male protagonists are therefore also seen as “self-centered” (Mannock; Adams, “Look Back”), “egotistical” (Anon, “Welcome and Condemn; Anon, “Welcome and Condemn”) and as filled with “self-pity” (Anon, “Anger Diluted”). As the *Daily Telegraph* said of Porter, “When his father and Ma Tanner die it’s his suffering, not theirs, that seems to worry him.” (Dixon, “World”). Consequently, these protagonists do not just lack any regard for the feeling of others but explicitly desire omnipotence and control or, at least, insist that the world should be organized to fulfill their desires rather than to frustrate them – hence the frequent sense these characters as being driven by resentment, frustration and fury.

However, as many commentators have pointed out, women usually suffer as the victims of their actions. Certainly, all three are presented as attractive to women, often to an excessive degree. For example, Lampton was described as “charming” in reviews (Gibbs, “The Perils”) and as having “a way with women” (Monsey), while Seaton is claimed to share his “charm” (Gomery, “Brilliant, Yes”) and his “sexual athleticism” (E.S.). However, their “virility” is not only repeatedly commented on (Burnup; Mosley “Saw It”; Robinson, “Saturday Night”;

Harman, "Saturday Night"), but is described in terms that return to pathological aggression and even present them as being uncivilized. Seaton, for example, is described as being "instinctive" (Whitbait, "Quiet Arrival") and like "a lusty young animal, trapped in a working class cage" (Hinxman, "New Films"). In other words, these characters are presented as being driven to fury by the frustration of their desires, fury that results in "emotional vandalism" on their part (Anon, "Unloved Hero"). They are therefore seen as not only virile but this virility is associated with behavior that is "arrogant" (Harman, "Saturday Night"), "aggressive" (Mannock; Anon, "Welcome and Condemn") "bullying" (Knight; Kay; Anon, "Welcome and Condemn"), and "vicious" (Monsey). They exhibit "savagery" (Betts, "Saga"; Mosley "Saw It"; Dixon, "World") and "brutality" (Powell, "Saturday Night"); and are both "mentally and physically cruel" (Harman, "Look Back").

Of course, as we have already seen, these features are seen as due to their immaturity, despite their manly exterior. Their aggressive front becomes simply an overstated defense mechanism so that they are described as "craven" (Burnup) and "cowardly" (Adams, "Look Back"); as being a "whiner" (Mosley, "Saw It") or a "weakling" (Dixon, "World"); and as "adolescent" (Hibbin, "Look Back"), "young" (Anon, "Satisfying Film") and no more than a "boy" (Robinson, "Saturday Night"). Like many horror villains, they display a childish desire for the world to revolve around the gratification of their desires; and try to assert their dominance through a "sadistic" (Dixon, "World") "cruelty" (Lovell) towards others that is precisely the megalomaniac's mechanism for disavowing their own fears of weakness. It is no surprise then that the most commonly discussed fantasies in *Billy Liar* are those in which Billy "is dreaming about a country called Ambrosia, where he's a sort of fabulous dictator" (Sharpley), a fantasy

that makes explicit (if also comic) the fascistic tendencies of these characters, tendencies that are the product of their childish desires for omnipotence.

### **Conclusion**

As this article has tried to demonstrate, there are problems with the ways in which British cinema history tends to compartmentalize films into different “traditions”, a practice that often neglects the relationship between these traditions (except as binary opposites). Furthermore, if one of the most fundamental oppositions has been between a tradition of realism on the one hand, and fantasy on the other, this article has argued that both realism and horror (one of the key forms of British cinematic fantasy) have long shared an interest in the shocking and taboo; and both revolve around a challenge to conventional perceptions of social reality. In other words, both present conventional perceptions as the product of repression and counter this repression with through the willingness to deal with taboo materials that are supposed to be shocking. This challenge to conventional perceptions also leads to an interest in “abnormal” psychologies that are either associated with delusions that result from repression or with alternative ways of seeing that offer a corrective to conventional perceptions. Finally, if Hammer’s Gothic horrors tended to focus on an aristocratic despotism that refuses to be confined to the bourgeois past, working class realism tended to focus on the psychopath (another staple of horror in the period). In other words, working class realism presented its working class male protagonists as the product of contemporary forces, particularly postwar affluence, that were claimed erode class distinctions and herald a terrifying future.

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