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‘A Journey Without Direction’: Mapping British Queer Cinema Post-Jarman

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Abstract: This article explores the place of contemporary British-based queer film-making in relation to an allegedly post-Thatcher era in which the struggles and oppressions that were so key to the radical currency of earlier iconic queer film-makers, seemingly no longer hold the same social and political charge. The defiant eroticism, sexual politics and renewed militancy that was so characteristic of Derek Jarman’s work throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, in particular, emerged as a quintessentially British part of a much broader wave of artistic dissidence. But did Jarman’s work, and position as the self-proclaimed voice of political dissent, play a role in influencing the direction of the British queer cinema that has emerged in the decades after his death in 1994? And just how ‘queer’ are such acclaimed films as *Weekend* (2011), *Lilting* (2014) and *Pride* (2014) when viewed through the analytical prism of a contemporary milieu steeped in the neoliberal politics of homonormativity?

Keywords: Andrew Haigh; British queer cinema; Derek Jarman; homonormativism; homosexuality; identity politics; *Lilting*; neoliberalism; *Pride*; queer politics; Thatcherism; *Weekend*.

The films of Derek Jarman were, for many British queers of the Thatcher era, ‘crucial points of reference in [our] generation’s struggle to endure and enjoy life’ (Bartlett 2014). In radical contrast to such contemporaneous ‘homo-heritage’ fare as *Another Country* (1984) or *Maurice* (1987), and to the more ambiguous socio-sexual polemics underpinning such equally bold and provocative films as Stephen Frears’ *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987), Jarman’s films represented an important and unambiguously

irreverent critique of a nation, and a community, torn apart by over a decade of Thatcherite policy that had unashamedly sought to nail the closet door shut. Yet more than twenty years after his death, what role did his undoubtedly 'queer' work play in steering the direction of the so-called British queer cinema that has emerged post-Jarman? Or are his films, as some surmise, merely 'elegies for a lost world' that, in the seemingly more tolerant neoliberal context of a new millennial Britain, has long since faded 'beyond the reach of memory' (ibid)?

In one of the first critical studies to (re)view Jarman's work through the 'analytical prism of *queer*', Niall Richardson argues that 'were Jarman alive today, it is almost certain that he would not have abandoned his uniquely queer sensibility' (2009: 206). For in Richardson's opinion, what gives Jarman's cinema its 'power' – 'more than any other director working in the field of Queer Cinema' – is the unique way in which 'it erodes the boundaries between his personal and artistic life' (ibid). By implication, it is the deviant biographical prism of Jarman himself, and his consequent authorial 'presence', that is key to understanding his work as *queer*, since 'the personal, political and artistic are indistinguishable' (ibid). Jarman thus helped to infuse queer political activism with a theoretically-inflected approach to British cinema that both interrogates and subverts 'the normative continuum of sex, gender and sexuality' (2009: 10). The queer status of his work is thus a far more complex matter than something reducible to the mere fact that they are films about queers. In a new millennial milieu in which there is still a tendency, as Kenneth MacKinnon notes, to 'conflate "queer" with "gay and lesbian"' (2006: 121), the key question this article will address, therefore, is exactly how 'queer' is post-Jarman British Queer Cinema? In what ways do his less personally immersed cinematic successors either mobilise, complicate or rework the strategies through which queerness can be located within the more complicated and contradictory political landscape of today?

The enduring influence of Jarman's cinematic legacy has been much debated in the decades following his death in 1994. A notable contribution was made by his long-time friend, and occasional collaborator, Colin MacCabe who in 2007, in an article entitled 'British cinema now: the lost leader', was quick to lament the creative and political void left by the loss of such a visionary 'leader'. MacCabe praised Jarman 's 'prescience about Britain's future' and lamented that his commitment to the uncompromisingly radical potential that film still holds for interrogating those inevitably complex inter-connections between gender, sexuality and nationhood was glaringly absent from cinema in 2007. Jarman's prophetic work could in fact be labelled 'queer' well before the re-appropriated semantic slipperiness of the term became a staple part of the critical film establishment of the 1990s. Since, as Rowland Wymer reveals, he was 'never comfortable' with the word 'gay', preferring instead the mobility of a term that would ultimately enable him to 'dispense with boundaries and categories' altogether (2005: 3) and, as Richardson similarly confirms, 'explore many of the debates in current queer theory – especially its challenge to fixed ideas of gender, sexuality and the body' (2009: 3). His uncompromisingly deviant stance on the state of the nation under Thatcher, therefore, truly personified the 'irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive' political aesthetics that US film critic and academic B. Ruby Rich described as typical of this 'pleasurable' new queer 'sensation' (1992b). But while Jarman's work arguably represented 'a rare example of dissidence in the midst of triumphal Thatcherism', more recent surveys of the so-called post-Thatcher queer films to emerge in the years following his death, reveal that the traces of his cinematic influence have, as writer and historian Jon Savage observed, to all intents and purposes 'virtually vanished' (2008).

Although it was first coined by Rich in a landmark edition of the UK-based *Sight & Sound* in September 1992 (based upon an article that she had written for New York's *Village*

Voice earlier that year), 'New Queer Cinema' was initially employed as a term to describe a predominantly North American cycle of quite diverse and divergent films that had emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The cycle, it was claimed, collectively constituted a revolutionary break with the established traditions of earlier lesbian and gay filmmaking in its eschewal of the more divisive politics of identity, conformity and assimilation associated with Stonewall-era gay and lesbian liberation. In many ways, New Queer Cinema was seen as the timely yet inevitable product of the unprecedented convergence that had taken place between the emergent postmodern identity politics of queer theory and the renewed agency of a number of 1980s AIDS activist groups and independent film and video collectives. Its aim, as Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin recount, was to overturn more established definitions and representations of homosexuality so as to 'explode taboos, raise controversial issues, and celebrate a variety of queer sexualities' (2006: 221). It was a cinema that, after a decade of increasingly aggressive anti-gay New Right conservatism in both the US and the UK in the 1980s, provided an urgent platform for those that had for so long been silenced and relegated to the margins.

But what was significant, in terms of the initial publication in which Rich first identified this radical new wave, was her choice of image to illustrate and epitomise this new 'queer sensation'. In full colour on the front cover of the March 24 1992 edition of the *Village Voice*, there was a reproduction of a still from Jarman's latest work, *Edward II* (1991), depicting – in all its uncompromising eroticism – two naked men engaged in a passionate kiss. It was an image that, as Rich so poignantly observed, was evidence that 'something extraordinarily queer was going on' (1992a: 41-4). In that moment, New Queer Cinema's proclaimed 'godfather', Derek Jarman, was canonised as 'the most important gay filmmaker ever to have come out of the UK' (Armstrong 2006: 145), thereby enabling him to reach a much wider international audience than his earlier polemical 1980s avant-garde

works had ever imagined. For, as Jarman himself at the time lamented, ‘It is difficult enough to be queer, but to be queer in the cinema is almost impossible’ (quoted in Armstrong 2006: 151).

One of Jarman’s biggest challenges as a radical filmmaker in the UK in the 1980s was the lack of available channels of distribution and exhibition for such queer-themed work: ‘It’s the great weak link. You make [films] and then there’s no one there to pick them up, nowhere to put them on’ (quoted in Andrews 2014: 31). But as Hannah Andrews explains, it was television, and in particular Channel 4, that provided him with the invaluable platform that he needed to project his critically queer vision of the state of the nation under Thatcher. For, in a rather fortunate turn of events for Jarman, there emerged ‘a small window in British television history, in the first decade of Channel 4’s life, where there was some commitment to broadcasting such challenging cinema’ (ibid). And despite the trouble caused for the fledgling network by both the vociferously anti-gay British tabloid press and the ultra-conservative figurehead of the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association, Mary Whitehouse, Channel Four was the first mainstream organisation to take Jarman’s highly provocative work seriously and went on to broadcast his films throughout the turbulent political climate of the 1980s and 1990s, in spite of the inevitable controversy they provoked. In the view of Channel 4, ‘Jarman’s films fitted with their rebellious image’ (ibid) and it was an association that cemented the channel’s place in the 1980s cultural zeitgeist as a crucial alternative exhibition site for non-mainstream, anti-establishment and queer filmmaking in the UK: ‘Channel 4 could use screenings such as *Sebastiane* and *Jubilee* to cultivate its image as broadcasting’s voice of dissent’ (ibid). The network went on not only to play a key role in co-funding most of Jarman’s work throughout the late 80s and early 90s, but, as significantly, was instrumental in the production of a number of other notable, albeit more mainstream, British queer-themed films of the period, including *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Maurice*,

along with the nascent work of Jarman's protégé Isaac Julien such as *Young Soul Rebels* (1991). By the time of Jarman's death in 1994, however, the subversive potential of this largely North American-driven queer 'wave' had ostensibly failed to become the 'force it promised to be' with Rich herself later conceding that New Queer Cinema 'was a more successful term for a moment than a movement' despite the fact that the godfather of the movement 'the late great Derek Jarman [had] pronounced himself finally able to connect with an audience thanks to the critical mass of the new films and videos that burned a clearing in the brush' (2000: 22).

'I offer you a journey without direction, uncertainty, and no sweet conclusion.' (The Garden, dir. Derek Jarman, 1990)

The Thatcher era certainly left an indelible mark on British cinema in the latter half of the twentieth century. As John Hill has argued, studies of British films in the 1980s and 90s have revealed that it is the links with Thatcherism, in all their inevitable complexity, 'that are often taken to be [some] of the most significant aspects of the cinema of the period' (1999: 17). In this respect, Jarman's more politically queer cinema became an important platform for articulating the 'restless fury' of a community aghast at a neo-conservative political 'revolution' that had seemingly legitimised homophobia to a level not seen in the UK since the turbulent 1950s (Armstrong 2006: 145). But while Thatcher's aggressive New Right assault on lesbian and gay rights reached its apotheosis with the implementation of the notorious Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 1988 (consequently prohibiting the so-called 'promotion' of homosexuality), this attempt at silencing and marginalising lesbians and gays conversely 'set in motion an unprecedented proliferation of activities' that not only 'put homosexuality firmly on the agenda', but in a rather ironic turn of events, brought about a much more visible and politically strengthened lesbian and gay community in the UK as a

result (Stacey 1991: 302). Critically astute films such as Jarman's *The Last Of England* (1988) and *The Garden* (1990), for example, not only penetrated deep into the nightmarish Thatcherite zeitgeist of the time, but more importantly, projected an allegorical vision that, as Annette Kuhn observes, had 'considerable purchase in the collective imagination' (1995: 131). But, in the light of the lack of Jarman's influence described by both MacCabe and Savage, this study will explore how far post-Thatcher and post-Jarman cinema has been cast adrift – 'without [his] direction' – and is still struggling to shake off the neoliberal residues of Thatcher-era guilt, social division and internalised homophobia.

The much debated 'revival of British Cinema' (Murphy 2000: ix) in the latter half of the 1990s represented both difficult and inevitably interesting times for the exploration of *fin de millennium* understandings of gender and sexuality on the screen. But while the 'often complex, hybrid and contradictory' (Monk 2000: 157) image of a predominantly heterosexual 'crisis of masculinity' became the characteristic preoccupation of most mainstream narratives of the decade, the queer-themed films that emerged during this time were, in contrast, 'distinctly dull' (Woods 2006: 181). There was, as critics such as Stella Bruzzi observed, a noticeable shift away from the defiant radical politics that had characterised Jarman's uncompromisingly progressive oeuvre to a less queer neoliberal concern with assimilation and conformity. Rich herself lamented the supposed end of the 'wave' in what had become her 'worst nightmare' for all the urgency and political momentum had been replaced with an inevitable drive towards commodification and a politically impotent new cinema of 'homonormativity' (2000: 22).

The transgressive promise of a Jarmanesque new direction for British queer cinema post-Thatcher instead became split between (as Gregory Woods describes) the anodyne positivism of a re-branded and more accessible form of straight-friendly cinema represented by such unsophisticated mainstream, 'coming out', teen-angst fairy tales as Hettie

MacDonald's *Beautiful Thing* (1996) and Simon Shore's *Get Real* (1999), or the unthreateningly camp, post-coming out, mid-life crisis comedies epitomised by Rose Troche's *Bedrooms and Hallways* (1997) or Tom Hunsinger and Neil Hunter's *Boyfriends* (1997). And while some radical potential was still evident via the provocative, polymorphous ruminations on gender and sexuality to be found in such retro art-house fare as John Maybury's *Love is the Devil* (1998) or Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1999), they were films that in the end lacked the erotic and political urgency that had given Jarman such radical currency during the Thatcher era, and were 'confined to art cinema distribution or marginalised on the mainstream exhibition circuit' (Monk 2000: 156). Channel Four's noticeable shift of focus away from a public service remit that had proved to be so beneficial for Jarman and queer filmmaking in the 1980s diminished the network's invaluable status as a public platform for contemporary queer filmmakers in the UK. While homosexuality may have gained some mainstream acceptance and renewed visibility in the seemingly transformative context of the fledgling New Labour era of the late nineties, the dearth of notable new British work to emerge in comparison to the mainstream expansion of an albeit problematically reconfigured and commercially oriented 'queer' film industry in the US, revealed that for all the pro-gay rhetoric of pre-millennial Blairism, in terms of British cinema 'this decade of sexual liberalism was also a decade in which homophobia still lingered' (Monk 2000: 157)

The birth of a new millennium signalled for many the death of any potential return to a more politically radicalised form of 'queer' British cinema. The establishment of the UK Film Council (UKFC) by the Labour Government in April 2000, with a reinvigorated remit to stimulate a competitive and sustainable British film industry, meant that so-called minority filmmaking was seemingly anathema to everything that this new commercially-driven agenda represented. Because, as Danny Leigh points out, 'a large chunk of that agenda specifically

involved *not* making what might be termed Jarmanesque films' (2011), the few queer-themed films to emerge during the first decade of the century were forced to compete in a voracious new market in which radical politics quickly became subsumed into the more commercially regulated compromises of homonormativity and gay assimilationism. For despite the occasional radical potency of such anomalous films as Pawel Pawlikowski's unorthodox, Yorkshire-set, lesbian romance, *My Summer of Love* (2003), it was not until more recently that a small number of British films emerged which, it has been observed, appear to signal an interesting shift in direction for the location of a distinctly queer edge to contemporary filmmaking in the UK.

The key thing to note, however, in mapping British queer cinema post-Jarman, is that the political momentum behind these films has changed in the years since his death. Whereas the radical queer filmmaking of the late 1980s and early 1990s was driven by the devastation wrought by the AIDS crisis and the resurgence in anti-gay political rhetoric that so typified the Thatcher era, the queer films appearing over the past few years are, in contrast, noticeably concerned with addressing a contemporary political milieu that has become saturated with neoliberal ideology. It is this interrogative stance towards neoliberalism with its associated regulation of identity categories and its appeal to assimilation and homonormativity that has thus become the dominant discourse of contemporary queer filmmaking. As Lisa Duggan observes, queer activism has become 'trapped within the historical categories of liberalism – economy, state, civil society, and family' and is, as a result, 'trying to emerge into another conceptual and political universe' (2009: 1) that has contained and made stable what was once impermeable and fluid and thereby rendered queerness impotent in its ability to affect social and political change. It is this sense of entrapment and impotence – the silencing of radical queerness – that has hence emerged as a predominant theme within the new cycle of British queer films that has started to surface over the past five years. As one of the two

central protagonists of Andrew Haigh's 2011 film *Weekend* exasperatedly exclaims about the state of queer politics in contemporary Britain today, 'where is the fight?'

In fact the release of this independently produced film, in March 2011, in many respects marked an unexpectedly intimate yet uncompromising attempt at both demystifying and delineating the problematically complex, yet queerly fluid, contours and contexts of gay life and experience in contemporary Britain. It was indeed quickly hailed as 'one of the best and most individual [films], of the year' (Romney 2011). However, it was also a film that, for the first time, directly addressed the 'schizophrenic' (to use Jarman's term) residues of post-Thatcher-era guilt, social division and internalised homophobia that have both characterised and constrained so many gay-themed narratives ever since: 'All gay men of my generation coming through those repressions have an extraordinary mixture of wanting to conform and be accepted, but also laughing at the same time . . . It's a schizophrenia really' (quoted in *Derek*, 2008). It is those tensions which emerge when (re)negotiating radical queer politics in the face of neoliberalism that therefore underpin *Weekend's* interrogation of gay identity in the new millennium.

In a departure from the rather homonormative preoccupations of a number of other gay-themed narratives of the era, what was unique about this rather unconventional British romantic drama quite was not only its determinedly realistic depiction of contemporary queer experience – in all its unapologetic, cum-drenched mundanity – but more crucially, its visibly interrogative approach to accepted neoliberal notions of the 'homo-ordinary' and the everyday. For in contrast to the negations of sexuality and political identity that characterise a homonormative cinema of assimilation that 'upholds and sustains' (Duggan 2009: 50) dominant, heteronormative assumptions and institutions, Haigh intricately interweaves critical discourses on the complexities and underlying tensions of gay identity and politics in contemporary Britain throughout the film's narrative and thematic structure. In doing so, he

reframes the ambiguities and political silences that were so typical of more homonormatively inclined film-makers in order to make such issues the film's uncompromisingly central concern.

Set in the rather nondescript urban milieu of contemporary Nottingham and taking place over a single weekend, the narrative of *Weekend* principally explores the transitory encounter between two gay men and the burgeoning relationship that develops in the aftermath of a drunken one night stand. But whereas Haigh asserts that the film does not claim to be 'about' all contemporary queer experience, or what it 'means' to be gay in twenty first century Britain (see Noh 2011), upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the discursive preoccupations underpinning the narrative are in fact quite clearly concerned with contemplating the social and political costs of such post-Thatcher neoliberal assimilation in an era when, as Ben Walters contends, the goals of the LGBT rights movement now 'seem to have been substantively achieved' (2014). This underlying political context is no more evident than in the contrasting positions taken up by Haigh's two central romantic protagonists (Figure 1) – swimming pool lifeguard Russell (Tom Cullen) and art student Glen (Chris New) – whose opposing functional roles within the film are as representatives of a much larger discourse around the political stakes and effects of assimilation versus transgression in an era when homosexuality and casual gay sex are seemingly now 'no big deal' (Romney 2011). Straight-acting Russell is the socially awkward and sexually closeted of the two men; a so-called poster-child for neoliberal citizenship and 'homodomesticity', he prefers quietly and unproblematically to integrate himself into his largely heteronormative social surroundings, is visibly uncomfortable with the gay scene and yearns for domesticity and monogamy. By contrast, promiscuous Glen is the stereotypically loud and proud dissident queer; he is a self-proclaimed agent for social change who is quick to make a public display of confronting the homophobia that he also actively courts and whose artwork is itself

designed to articulate and archive the explicit details of his every sexual encounter. He is the very embodiment of the 'antisocial' current in contemporary queer politics that seeks to both challenge and reject the reductive neoliberal structures of homonormality and conformity. The two protagonists thus symbolise the politically polarised ('schizophrenic') mindset of contemporary post-Thatcher queer identity first described by Jarman that is seemingly torn between the desire for conformity and dissent:

Glen: Look. Straight people like us as long as we conform, we behave by their little rules. Imagine your friends if you suddenly started getting all, but really, political about being a fag, or you got suddenly, like, camp and swishy or talked about rimming all the time.

Russell: [interrupting] But that's not what I'm like, is it? That's not who I am.

Glen: Well, just trust me: they like it as long as we don't shove it down their throats.

Russell: Okay, well, why should I just shove it down their throats?

Glen: Because they shove it down our throats all the time: being straight. Straight storylines on television, everywhere – in books, on billboards, magazines, everywhere. But, ah, the gays, the gays – we mustn't upset the straights. Shh. Watch out. Straights are coming. [lisp] Let's not upset them. Let's hide in our little ghettos. Let's not hold hands. Let's not kiss in the street, no.

The differences between the two men are most clearly marked by the film's two contrasting accounts of straight and gay sexuality. In one of the few scenes in which we see Russell in his work environment as a lifeguard at a local pool, his self-imposed isolation is most effectively underscored when he sits in awkward silence as two of his work colleagues

describe, in quite explicit and patently misogynistic detail, a sexual encounter that one of them had with a woman the previous night. The immature, school yard style banter of the two men (in obvious contrast to Glen and Russell's self-conscious yet critically skewed discussion quoted above) leaves Russell visibly uncomfortable. And when the men attempt to encourage his input to the discussion, assuming that he too is heterosexual ('next time . . . we'll fucking go twos up, eh'), his silence on the matter merely serves to reinforce his self-imposed closeted status at work and his inability to engage in the 'fight' that Glen is desperately trying to inspire in him.

By contrast, a later scene shows Glen similarly recounting the explicit details of a previous sexual encounter in a local Nottingham pub. The aggressive and declamatory tone in which his 'deviant' sexuality is publicly asserted in a traditionally sacred heterosexual and homosocial space is described to Russell by one of his friends as merely 'phase one of the attack'. Unlike the matter-of-fact nature of the description of heterosexual sex that took place in Russell's uncomfortable presence earlier at work, Glen's public and deliberately loud conversation is deliberately designed to instigate a response from those increasingly uneasy straight male patrons of the pub in his vicinity who are really the desired audience for his enunciation of queer desire. And while Russell is uncomfortable with the chosen location for such a public 'performance' – 'Why *this* place?' – Glen is ironically disappointed to discover that the locals of this seemingly neoliberal, heteronormative world that he has invaded are not as homophobic as he initially presumed (or hoped) them to be. Rather than taking 'umbrage' with the fact that there are 'a load of gay people in a straight bar' as he claims, they instead reveal that they were more disgruntled about the disruptive loudness of his conversation: 'the sexuality of the loud noise was not an issue'. But undeterred by the disappointing lack of homophobia that he was able to provoke from his audience, Glen still seizes the opportunity to preach to them about their apparent heterosexual privilege: 'the whole straight narrative is

there for you to inherit, it's just there. There to shape your foundations, to set you up'. Haigh effectively emphasises the seeming futility of Glen's 'retro' angry queer polemics which are now apparently out of step with the more liberal and tolerant, post-Thatcher, contemporary urban milieu within which he now finds himself and which he is so determined to escape.

As Bruzzi explains, while British realist cinema has been at times perceivably 'heavy-handed' in its treatment of homosexuality as a 'social problem', within more recent contemporary British films it has become an 'almost incidental' aspect of identity that is instead 'integrated into a wider realist narrative' (2009: 133). The level of uncompromising intimacy that Haigh brings to the depiction of the ordinary experiences of contemporary British gay urban life in *Weekend* (from Russell washing his genitals in the bath in the film's opening scene to him mopping up the semen on his stomach after a final sexual encounter with Glen) presents an explicit yet normalised representation of queer experience that can not only 'offer points of identification for non-queers' but may also, as a result, facilitate a productive 'opening up' of the film that is 'hugely important' (134) for the ongoing debates around the representation of queer desire, identity and politics on the British screen.

The relative anonymity of both Russell and Glen (we are not told their surnames, or given much backstory, in order to underscore the transience of their encounter) allows the film to focus on the role that desire, love and even momentary connection can play in the formation of queer identity and this emerges as the film's overarching theme. As Glen himself explains, anonymous sex with strangers enables him to become 'a blank canvas' upon which he has the opportunity project performatively the person he wants to be: 'what happens is, while you're projecting who you want to be . . . this gap opens up between who you want to be and who you really are. And in that gap, it shows you what's stopping you becoming who you want to be.' His audio art project, therefore, functions as a symbolic means to capture and give voice to what it means to identify with a sexuality which is

seemingly still struggling with the effects of post-Section 28 shame and internalised homophobia: as Glen says, ‘gay people never talk about sex in public unless it’s cheap innuendo. I think it’s because they’re ashamed’. The ‘confessional’ act of publicly articulating queer desire is, therefore, for him (as for Jarman) an important step forward in making visible queer identity and desire at a time when neoliberal assimilation appears to be re-closeting gay sexuality within the private sphere. But it is a public act that he knowingly concedes ‘no-one’s gonna come and see . . . The straights won't come because, well, it's got nothing to do with their world’.

By contrast, however, it emerges that Russell’s overly sentimental desire for a more ‘traditional’ relationship is seemingly the product of his orphaned upbringing. As he confides to Glen, he was denied his own personal gay rites of passage of coming out to his parents and so his internal discomfort with his sexuality and gay identity can be read as part of much wider and complex sense of incompleteness and marginality (as both an orphan and a queer) that underpins his overarching desire to ‘fit in’ and lead a so-called ‘normal’ life. But it is important to note that the narrative of *Weekend* is very much skewed towards Russell’s point of view. By anchoring his world within a largely heterocentrist context (with its ordinary Nottingham tower block flat setting and his predominantly straight circle of friends) and underscoring his discomfort with both the ‘soulless’ local gay scene and the more radical queer politics that Glen represents, Haigh positions Russell as the perfect point of entry for a mainstream heterosexual audience. His loneliness and universal desire for love and a relationship lends him a modicum of unthreatening empathy and, in the end, he is cast as the prototypical, generic, romantic lead, who upon hearing that Glen is about to leave on a two year study trip to America, rushes to the train station to declare his love (albeit with typically expressive awkwardness); in an unexpected act of visibility, he publicly kisses Glen on the platform as his train pulls into the station. As Glen sardonically observes, Russell thus

provides him, and the film, with a 'Notting Hill moment' but the tantalising reference to clichéd romantic melodrama is quickly grounded by the homophobic jeers of a couple of local youths, markedly emphasising the experiential differences between such gay and straight public proclamations of love in contemporary Britain. But, for all the distinctiveness of the emotional and political terrain explored in *Weekend*, Russell is, in the film's closing moments, once again alone. As he poignantly replays the audio recording of his encounter (a parting gift from Glen), his sense of longing, uncertainty and loneliness is once again magnified as he silently looks out across the dusk-lit, urban horizon of the city in the distance. Such loneliness is characteristic of another 'small-scale, naturalistic, bittersweet' British queer film that, as Ben Walters (2014) observes, is part of this transitional new trajectory for 'backward-looking' LGBT cinema which nevertheless is willing to explore a thematic 'present-mindedness . . . so often deferred through the years of struggle': Hong Khaou's 2013 film *Lilting*.

In a similar style to Haigh's *Weekend*, Khaou's London-set meditation on the quietly devastating aftermath of sudden bereavement and its associated feelings of loss, guilt and the fragility of memory is, as a number of critics described, 'remarkably confident and accomplished' (Clark 2013). Like *Weekend*, the central preoccupation of Khaou's narrative is the same neoliberal obsession with that 'problematic division between repression and openness' (Bruzzi 2000: 125) that is so typical of contemporary British gay narratives. Following the sudden death of his closeted lover Kai (Andrew Leung), surviving partner Richard (Ben Whishaw) finds himself tasked with having to unravel the web of lies that Kai has spun to 'protect' his elderly Cambodian-Chinese mother Junn (Cheng Pei-pei) from the truth about her son's sexuality and the real nature of his relationship with his so-called 'best friend'. The lack of communication between the two is here magnified by the language barrier that exists between them, as they struggle to connect. It is only after Richard employs

the services of local translator Vann (Naomi Christie) to mediate the strained dialogue between them that they are able slowly to piece together the fragments of the memories of Kai that they both share. For all his angst about revealing the truth to Junn about her son, Richard discovers that she suspected all along that there was more to their relationship than friendship and, against his expectations, he is able to find some resolution and shared connection in the grief and uncertainty of life without Kai (Figure 2):

Through plenty of crying, I've learnt to be content that I won't always be happy, secure in my loneliness, hopeful that I will be able to cope . . . On this day, everything has stood still, even the trees have stopped rustling, but I'm still moving, I want to move, but I have nothing to move to, and nowhere to go. The scars beneath my skin suddenly surface and I get scared. Scared of being alone.

What is unique about *Lilting*, however, is the way in which the film projects the typical Thatcher-era narrative tropes of internalised guilt and shame onto the relationship between the conservative figure of Cambodian-Chinese matriarch Junn and her closeted son Kai – a man visibly torn between his traditionally conservative, immigrant cultural and familial upbringing, and alternative queer identity as a modern British gay man. By contrast, Richard appears to be far less burdened by such ‘issues’, since within the apparently more liberal and homonormative environs of contemporary London, he is no longer haunted by the same sense of self-oppression and denial. His dilemma, therefore, arises from the desire to honour the wishes of his deceased lover and the sense of obligation he feels in taking over the responsibility for Junn’s care. This displacement of the archetypical coming out narrative, and its associated social and familial repercussions, onto an ‘other’ culture within the film in many respects constitutes a nostalgic desire to revisit certain narrative archetypes in British

cinema that are seemingly less evident within contemporary homonormative cinematic narratives today. In such formative teenage coming out narratives of the 1990s, such as Hettie Macdonald's *Beautiful Thing* (1996), the narrative conflict is intrinsically linked to coming out. The film presents characters that are seemingly trapped within both their restrictive families and wider homophobic communities, and therefore 'makes the idea of "getting out" synonymous with "coming out"' (Henderson 2007: 275). The transformative rite of passage ritual of coming out thus enables the film's teenage protagonists to establish a vital and positive sense of self-identity that is optimistic and hopeful for the reconfigured yet assimilationary future that lies ahead. By contrast, the internally conflicted gay adult men of *Weekend* and *Lilting* are still negotiating the complexities associated with a self-identity still burdened by the residues of the past.

This obsession with the past, and the 'nostalgic turn' which seems to dominate the gay-themed British films that have emerged more recently, is particularly evident in the release of Matthew Warchus' award-winning culture-clash comedy-drama *Pride* in 2014. Warchus' film is essentially a continuation of the *fin de millennium*, 'masculinity-in-crisis' narratives that were very much a cornerstone of British Cinema in the late nineties. The Welsh miners of the Dulais Valley Lodge are almost interchangeable with the disillusioned northern English mining communities of *Brassed Off* (1996) and *Billy Elliot* (2000) and the unemployed Sheffield steelworkers of *The Full Monty* (1997); all share the same struggle to adapt to the inherent trauma of economic change and the subsequent shift in social structures and gender relations that were brought about by the harsh political climate of late twentieth century Thatcherism. However, while the earlier films tended to project the threat to traditional masculine identity onto the female characters (who are persistently framed as 'intruders' into the predominantly all-male, working-class communities that form the central preoccupations of the films), *Pride* redirects this typical narrative trope of masculine crisis,

disempowerment and emasculation onto the intruding queers and shows how it was fuelled by the homophobia of a right-wing, Thatcherite, tabloid media that was quick to mock this support; one of the characters, indeed, quotes from the press coverage: 'we knew the miners were desperate, but now we have the final and compelling evidence that they are finished'. In a reversal of the gender struggle that commonly permeates this quintessentially British storyline in which once proud heterosexual male protagonists are misogynistically positioned in opposition to a perceived feminist encroachment of traditionally masculine territories, *Warchus* presents the community of Onllwyn as an already avowedly feminine domain, presided over by plain-talking matriarch Hefina (Imelda Staunton) and her homophobic nemesis, Maureen (Lisa Palfrey). Although anxieties about the effects of shifting gender roles have been a staple of post-WWII social realist cinema set in northern England, they appear to be less of an issue in *Warchus*' more unified reimagining of 1980s, Thatcher-era Wales. Whereas in *The Full Monty* the community's Working Men's Club has been usurped by women who watch strippers and even urinate standing up, *Pride* presents the club as a more harmonious, integrated and family-oriented 'community' centre whose only threat, therefore, is constituted by the divisive arrival of the queer 'perverts' from London, and their initially unwanted charity. In contrast to the narrative drive towards masculine rediscovery, restoration and 'pride' that was common to the 'masculinity-in-crisis' cinema of the nineties, in *Pride* it is the women of the village who lead the charge to break through the barriers of homophobia that the LGSM first encounter in their community. This struggle, framed from a consistently hetero-matriarchal perspective via Maureen, is allied with the women's ongoing fight to help 'their men' regain some dignity and empowerment. The arrival of the lesbian and gay group and the response of the women thus instigates an unexpectedly unified sense of coalitional identity politics and solidarity at such a time of collective 'crisis' and the men

of Onllwyn seem quite happy to submit to the admonishing diktats of their women-folk: ‘get out there and find a gay or a lesbian right now’ (Figure 3).

However, as critics such as Jonathan Romney have observed, the Welsh characters in *Pride* are in many ways rather problematically portrayed, ‘a little patronizingly, as dour, dusty, beige-clad and very sheltered provincials who need their ways shaken up a bit’ (2014). For all the radical potential of its central premise, the film is on a number of levels constrained by the more conservative parameters of its homonormative contextual preoccupations because in the end it ‘doesn’t want to startle its audience with any of the more challenging aspects of gay life’ (ibid). There are, of course, subtle allusions to the emergent eighties AIDS crisis (in a poignant foreshadowing of LGSM co-founder Mark Ashton’s ultimately tragic fate), and the ever-present spectre of homophobic violence (though, ironically, this takes place in the seemingly more liberal environs of London’s Camden Town, rather than in macho Wales). Nevertheless, the film is essentially a nostalgic attempt to document a long forgotten chapter in British LGBT political history for a younger generation that has perhaps become increasingly detached from the struggles and oppressions of the recent past. The unexpected political unity that the two rather disparate communities are progressively able to achieve between them is further illustrated when self-exiled gay Welshman Gethin (Andrew Scott) finally concedes to return home in defiance of that internalised struggle between his national identity and his sexuality, and exclaims with some incredulity and ‘pride’ that for the first time in his life: ‘I’m in Wales, and I don’t have to pretend to be something that I’m not!’

In conclusion then, this ‘fascination with the past’ that has come to dominate the British queer cinematic zeitgeist in recent years is ‘less about nostalgia than about taking stock, raising awareness and preparing for an uncertain future’ (Walters 2014). The radical Thatcher-era cinema of Jarman and his contemporaries emerged from the AIDS crisis and

collectively constituted an ‘expressionistic *cri de coeur* of alienation, anger and desire’ (ibid). But in a post-Thatcher/post-Jarman age in which the wider social and political struggles for LGBT equality and recognition have made significant progress, the ‘tone’ of LGBT film-making in the UK has ‘softened from radical revolt to aspirational accessibility’ (ibid). The recent shift of focus to the historical period piece with a film such as *Pride* appears to offer a preferred mode for telling gay stories within the mainstream and may be, as Walters contends, a valuable strategy for enabling audiences to become ‘acquainted for the first time – with facets of past queer experience that might be useful in preparing for whatever is to come’ (ibid). But it is also important to ensure that the ‘fight’ that Jarman’s radical work represented is not lost, as Bartlett warned, ‘beyond the reach of memory’ (2014) since, as writer Zadie Smith so rightly observes, within such a reductive neoliberal climate of assimilation and homonormativity, ‘It is not possible to overstate the importance of deviancy. The more accepting everybody gets, the more deviant you have to become’ (2001). The queer films of Derek Jarman encapsulated a transitory moment in British cultural and political history that, for the first time in British Cinema, ‘did not attempt to pander to either heterosexual anxiety or gay assimilationist politics’ (Richardson 2009: 64); nor did it project an image of gay liberation politically compromised by the conservative prescriptions of homonormativity. Jarman defiantly celebrated the sexual deviance and nonconformity of a queer identity that had so often been elided from earlier cinematic representations, and as a consequence attempted to subvert dominant ideologies and more traditional notions of gender and sexuality. While recent filmmakers such as Andrew Haigh have had to rework the strategies through which queerness can be articulated in British cinema today, the subversive potency that such work still holds was effectively underscored by the recent failed attempt to ‘paralyse’ the 2016 Italian re-release of *Weekend* by the Catholic Church, that conversely turned it into a box-office ‘triumph’ (Child 2016). However, despite these small victories, the

small number of British queer-themed films to be produced over the past five years indicates quite urgently that there is still much work to be done in realising more fully Jarman's vision of a radical new cinematic horizon of queer politics and pleasure beyond the violent struggles and silences of the past.

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