

Editorial

Class and UK Film and Television: representation, neoliberalism, inequality.

Abstract

An editorial on the journal's special edition on Class and UK film and television. Three areas are considered to be problematic for the working classes: representation, neoliberalism, and industry inequality. These themes are discussed with commentaries on the papers. The editorial introduces the volume's considerations of representation of class in the tradition of British Social Realism, the state of the nation, and the intersections of class and gender. The growth of neoliberalism is considered within heritage texts, taste, and identity, the body, surveillance capital and policing, and the curation of public art. Working-class film production and inequality in the screen industry is discussed, and the commentaries end announcing reviews of the working practices of Ken Loach and the British gangster genre.

Keywords: Class, Film, TV, United Kingdom, Neoliberalism, Inequality.

Contemporary film and TV in the UK, not least from the perspective of class and cultural politics, appears to offer at least three interrelated problems for the lower socio-economic classes and those committed to equality and social justice. There are perennial problems and issues around the textual representation of class, the inculcation of neoliberal ideology in audiences antithetical to certain class interests, and there is inequality, exploitation, and precarity in production and the screen industry. The papers in this journal demonstrate a variety of approaches, methods, and concerns within this scenario, all with an aim to consider the representation of class, the cinematic and televisual contours of class, and the cultural politics of class. They demonstrate that film and tv can embolden and embody capital and class hierarchy and division, yet have the potential to produce, and introduce critique. The volume contains considerations of representation of class in the tradition of British Social Realism and recent films in this mode (*Trifonova*), class and the state of the nation in *Our Friends in the North* (Collins), the intersections of class and gender in *Ray & Liz* (Finnemore), and in *Call the Midwife* (Betts). The growth of neoliberalism and era of Thatcherism is considered within the discussion of heritage in *Bergerac* (Hoffmann), and class, taste, identity, and the rise of individualism in *Play for Today* (May). The reconciliation to neoliberal modes of governance and being is explored in relation to class and the body in *Naked Attraction* (Waitz), surveillance capital and policing in *Happy Valley* (Bonsall) and flows of private capital in the curation of public art (Fabrizi). The difficulties of making a working-class film (Gregory) and inequality in the screen industry with the pernicious myth of meritocracy (Friedman) is discussed in two interviews. Reviews of the working practices of Ken Loach (Wayne) and the film *Bull* (Flint-Nicol), complete the edition.

Representation

Class is a contested concept, and whilst theories of class have necessarily evolved in response to globalisation, neoliberalism, the decline of the state, populism, and so forth., recurrent problems regarding representation remain. The working classes are regularly marginalised, demonised, and divided, with those suffering through recurring systemic and structural problems routinely presented as having personal failings. Such was the case in the now notorious *Benefits Street* and its ilk. Or there is a romanticised, often youthful masculine, authenticity problematically ascribed to the lower classes. Precarity and the gig economy is normalised, and alleged populist and cultural gains are celebrated over material advance. There is a 'new snobbery' and middle-class aspiration appears to elide antagonism, with property porn, a landed gentry aesthetic, and Manor House nostalgia revered under myths of classlessness, meritocracy, mobility, and levelling up. There appears a fetish of the

wealth elite with unexamined privilege, social and cultural capital advantage. Sometimes contestation, resources to reject interpellation, critique, intimations of a utopian sensibility, and a cultural politics of bacchanalian modes of resistance can be glimpsed. What is said to audiences about social class can play out beyond the screen, shaping public opinion and the popular imagination.

The new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, along with academic developments in post-Marxism/-modernism/-structuralism, saw the role of class questioned, decentred, and reimaged as just one, often forgotten, aspect of an identity politics concerning oppression and advocacy comprising race, gender, sexuality, and so on. The emphasis on difference, fragmentation, discourse, and multiplicity of identities tended to eschew the materiality of class and universalist politics of socialism. Whilst certain necessary progressive gains were made the cost was often a fragmentation of the political collectivity. This militated against a coalition politics understood as solidarity and struggle across difference. Recalling E. Franklin Frazier's insight that "the black bourgeoisie has exploited the Negro masses as ruthlessly as have whites," (Frazier in Taiwo 2022: 9) Taiwo suggests that identity politics has been co-opted and serves as another tool for the bourgeoisie to maintain its class domination by keeping workers divided along, for instance, racial and gender lines. Indeed, two reactionary trends in the response to issues such as the *Black Lives Matter* protests of 2020 demonstrate the elites' tactic of incorporating and performing symbolic identity politics to pacify protestors without enacting material reforms. As well as rebranding (rather than replacing) existing institutions using elements of identity politics. The irony here is that identity politics has positioned class politics as "impolite, orthodox, exclusionary, and rigid [which] has underwritten a massively successful capitalist class victory." (Huber 2022: 18-9) It may well be that the socialist invariants of anti-property, anti-authority, and anti-hierarchy principles, organisation, and "the old tools – internationalism, class solidarity, a fierce and uncompromising analytical clarity – will be needed to rearm the left." (Wood 2022: 64) Here, class becomes not just a concept with which to interpret the world "but a force to change it." (Steven 2023: 12)

The British Social Realist tradition of film, with working class protagonists, experiences, themes, and social issues, were once the place where such a cultural politics of the left was thought to have been possible. Temenuga Trifonova's article opening this edition, 'The Working Class in Contemporary British Cinema' surveys recent depictions of class and precarity and traces changes in the tradition of British Social Realism. Considering John Hill's argument that the British New Wave focused on the individual rather than the collective experience of class, and that subsequent films confronting Thatcherism with 'realism' carried the risk of miserabilism, the question becomes can recent representations also be accused of engaging in the same. That is, with quietism and conservative nostalgia for images of unemployment and urban degradation. Do these films offer individual identity or collective solidarity for their precarious working class? Trifonova suggests that recent films in this tradition increasingly focus on a single protagonist and therefore displace questions of class consciousness and class struggle onto questions of national identity, rising populism, and anti-immigrant attitudes (*This Is England*), globalization (*It's a Free World*), gender relations and female empowerment (*Fish Tank*), civil and human rights (*I, Daniel Blake*), and neoliberal restructuring and the gig economy (*Sorry We Missed You*). These fail to imagine an alternative to the existing order and usually end in disillusionment (*This Is England* and *Fish Tank*), metaphorical suicide (*It's a Free World*, *Sorry We Missed You*) or death (*I, Daniel Blake*). In so doing, the films reflect the shrinking of political horizons. *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016) for instance, whilst mostly positively received as another addition to the canon of British social realist drama, is argued however, to perpetuate divisive ideas of the deserving and undeserving poor. Attention is drawn to the protagonist's lack of empathy and solidarity with others who are also victims of the UK's punitive and Kafkaesque welfare system.

Daniel's mini rebellion does not challenge the system but only its inefficiency, and his struggle remains a personal affair, as his autograph beneath his spray-painted verbal revolt testifies: 'I, Daniel Blake', rather than 'We, Daniel Blake'. Through its comparative approach Trifonova's article creates an engaging debate with analysis of social realist films and 'the cinema of precarity,' examining and often lamenting the political potentialities, and recourse to individual indignation rather than collective organisation, in these films.

Class, the Labour Party, and 'State of the Nation' is considered through *Our Friends in the North* (1996) by Jeremy Collins. The series follows four protagonists from 1964 to 1995 through personal and political betrayal as they search for 'impossible familial and social Utopias'. The interweaving of their fates and foibles within class conflict, political disillusionment, apathy, chicanery, resistance and reconciliation to Thatcherism, poverty, homelessness and the corruptions of housing policy and the corruption of the Metropolitan Police is detailed. The historical importance of the series and continued relevance of the political and social issues represented is indicated with reference to contemporary news reports from the political climate of the 2020s. The current false dawn of a change in government on the horizon is also echoed, but with history repeating itself as farce. All themes from the series still resonate, except perhaps today it is worse without the show's political nostalgia of the Jarrow March, civil rights movement, Angry Brigade, Battle of Orgreave, and so on, to draw upon.

The destructive effects on family life and brutal reality of poverty, despair, and frustration amongst the working classes in Thatcher's Britain is revealed in Richard Billingham's autobiographical narrative *Ray & Liz* (2018), scrutinised here by Daniel Finnemore. The relationship between deprived environmental conditions and human psychology is examined in terms of class, regionality, motherhood, patriarchy, and masculinity. The poetic cinematography that Billingham offers, as a photographer, brings a punishing yet beautiful on-screen commentary on working-class communities. Shots are often tightly framed so that the viewer is forced to inhabit the space intimately, and the claustrophobic atmosphere is consolidated by lack of movement. Hegemonic, hyper- and hypo-masculinity are utilised to critically assess Ray's role within his deteriorating working-class domestic dystopia, with his inadequacies in professional efforts and physical characteristics on display. The issues represented in *Ray & Liz* remain potent to the realities faced by many today including the consequences of Brexit, the pandemic, climate crisis, cost of living crisis/emergency, inconsideration of disability and mental health, addiction, unemployment, precarity, housing, education, and an endless et cetera.

Through a reading of costume in *Call The Midwife*, Liza Betts considers popular representations of women's reproductive experiences and rights intersecting with class experience and positioning, poverty, homelessness, domestic and sexual violence, and addiction. The costuming of the working class in the series, with sartorially reductive use of print and colour saturation denotes a lack of sophistication and the fashion capital attributed to those in privileged positions. Betts accounts for how the series, with its brutal and graphic portrayal of women's health issues and abject poverty in East London during the late 1960s, elicits feelings of warmth and soporific nostalgia in some audiences, but not anger or frustration at the lack of progress for working class women. *Call the Midwife* appears to be an example of culture blocking the formation of consciousness, and instead facilitates the integration of the working class into the economic system. While also producing nuanced readings and being 'quietly subversive' the show does not produce the same level of cultural debate or motivate to action as other examples of UK social realism such as *Common* (McGovern, 2014), *Hillsborough* (McGovern, 1996), *Freefall* (Savage, 2009) or *Who Bombed Birmingham* (Ritchie, 1990). The reason for this ambivalence, it is argued, is that these examples

concerning points of law, public order or policing, finance, and politics are still viewed as predominantly 'masculine' fields, maintained by the privileged.

Neoliberalism

As a global abstraction, neoliberalism - the instilling of free market principles, practices, and metrics into every dimension of collective human life - has been concretely entrenched in contemporary UK film/TV production, representation, and reception for many years. Culture and everyday life – singing, dancing, cooking, dating, etc. - is turned into competition and fast spectacle against notions of co-operation and slow cultivation. Reality Television is deemed a 'Neoliberal Theatre of Suffering.' (McCarthy, 2007) There is a move from distraction (of capital's inequities) to instruction (on how to get on, or at least survive, in capital). This is evidenced with reconciliation to the improvement and entrepreneurial nature of the neoliberal subject in shows such as *The Apprentice*, and *Dragons Den*. With a consideration of the foundational concepts in film and tv studies – class, power, ideology, subjectivity - Cooper (2019) suggests that neoliberal theory needs film studies just as much as the converse, as cinema can offer unique insights into neoliberal transformations of the subject, society, culture, and aesthetics.

New accounts of the socio-economic present have been forwarded: Neo-liberalism, the New Authoritarianism, Surveillance Capitalism, and so forth. These analyses are all welcome, however at present, it would appear to be essentially more of the same. Savage and Friedman (2015) talk of the 'old' 'new politics' of contemporary class, disputing notions of the 'death of class.' The pandemic consolidated wealth gaps, capital inequality, digital and platform capital exploitation, and there are tax breaks and avoidance for corporations and the rich. Yet austerity, precarity, and cost-of-living-crisis/emergency for the rest. There is the fostering of neoliberal ideology, subjectivities, and interpellation of the individual against collective moves towards class politics and social justice. That is, more ethos, policies, and cultural politics with a neoliberal signature played out on the screen, in the streets, and on the sands of this Island, which is so welcoming to the flow of international, illegal, imperial, immoral, finance but not hospitable to the flow of desperate people.

Aside from the tradition of social realism and screen reflection upon the state of the nation, there are allegories of class and inequality, fables of class-struggle that in so doing can commodify class-struggle, other approaches and genres, and concern, importantly, with form as well as content. As Shaviro (2010) has argued, the old Hollywood continuity editing system was an integral part of the Fordist mode of production. Whereas now the editing methods and formal devices of digital film and tv production, distribution, and exhibition, belong directly to the computing-and-information-technology infrastructure of neoliberal finance. The contemporary media and social field see the coming together of neoliberal financial flows, media flows, and flows of control, which are characterised by perpetual modulations, dispersed and 'flexible' modes of authority, ubiquitous networks, and the relentless marketing of even the most 'inner' aspects of subjective experience. These mitigate against traditional critical distance, class consciousness, and present a challenge for film and TV studies to consider. Hence why the critical analysis in this edition is so necessary.

Neoliberalism was clearly facilitated by the imperialism, the right-wing, and Thatcher's policies and Hoffman's study of *Bergerac* traces early formations here. The Offshore Financial Centre (OFC) status of the island of Jersey, where *Bergerac* is set, reveals how contemporary real-world issues of heritage related to the series played out much like plotlines on the show: the wealthy have the resources to decide what heritage is worthwhile and what can be destroyed. *Bergerac* is highlighted as an early example of a critical heritage production, questioning the unfettered capitalism of Thatcherism, as well her conception of heritage. The article argues for a broader definition of heritage, suggesting

that while *Bergerac* differs from other heritage productions in terms of its contemporary setting, the series' focus on wealthy lifestyles, class, and its settings in country manors makes *Bergerac* an unusual, but nevertheless important, example of heritage media. Unlike traditional heritage films, the country houses are merely facades, hiding their wealthy owners' crimes. While containing the manor houses, oil paintings, objects of distinction, lifestyles and wealthy characters, Hoffman examines how *Bergerac* is anti-heritage in form, through mise-en-scène and cinematography. The essay examines critical opinions to Thatcher's National Heritage Act, and the academic backlash against heritage films which were seen to be legitimising upper-class lifestyles as the heritage of Britain. While depicting similar wealth and subjects, *Bergerac* is argued to be an early adopter of these critiques, while heritage films were still at their height. Indeed, the island of Jersey in the series can be seen to prefigure the fate and state of the nation as a whole: a faded colonial empire, with free international borders for oligarchs and money but not for the poor and dispossessed; a mere node in the network of global capital, smoothing the flows of finance with deregulation and turning a blind eye to corruption, tax evasion, exploitation, and its very own people.

Tom May considers *Play for Today* (1970 – 84) to discuss class, consumerism, taste, gender and identity, and the rise of individualism that also parallels and traces the rise of Thatcherism. Raymond Williams's insight into structures of feeling are recalled: artistic and dramatic conventions can follow or shape the dominant structure of feeling, or public mood, in a given time period. Through the often-overlooked lens of production design, and drawing on four case studies of house parties, the dramas reflect the mores and changing attitudes and tastes evidenced in the design, class signifiers, and set dressing of the plays. For instance, the design in Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* (1977) shows upwardly mobile, status occupied Southerners flaunting new European tastes and what will be termed 'camp panache.' Their materialism and exclusionary political views – which anticipate emergent Thatcherism – are the object of the play's cautionary satire. Analysis is informed by an interview with a former BBC production designer. The essay shows class and identity in flux, in uncertainty and anxiety across both middle- and working-class settings in these plays, while also prefiguring the emergent British obsession with property and forms of 'new' racism.

Thomas Waitz makes a class analysis of *Naked Attraction*. This is the type of reality television that is often criticised and dismissed as 'voyeuristic', 'tasteless' or as transgressing bourgeois boundaries of decency and shame. However, it is the very exhibition on show which can give pleasure to a bourgeois audience, generating potential for classist distinction, value judgements and discrimination, and reassurance of bourgeois 'value.' In the show sexuality is not understood as a contested arena of social power relations, but as a field of seemingly self-determined lifestyle and identity choices. The desires of its protagonists are presented as free market driven and commodified. Like many reality game shows, *Naked Attraction* makes the neoliberal interpellation and transfer of competitive structures into the context of areas of life that otherwise seem to be excluded from the logic of market forces. The paper situates itself in theories about class, both material and symbolic (Marx and Bourdieu), and in debates around the public and private spheres (Habermas), and governmentality of privacy (Foucault). Surveillance and privacy are posited as 'partners in crime.' Class differences that play a vital part in reality television are made invisible with great effort and translated into questions of 'authenticity', 'privacy' and a supposedly classless form of 'desire'. Ultimately *Naked Attraction* is argued to both deny and help construct class positions, and the programme can be read as the (doomed) notion of a supposedly 'classless' society.

Sally Bosnall reads *Happy Valley* as an exemplar of the popular form of police drama, and as part of social discourse and power in maintaining trust in policing in the context of surveillance capitalism and austerity-focused governments. Surveillance capitalism is regarded as a neoliberal form of

control that monitors a wide variety of citizens' habits, behaviours, and their general presence but which likewise presents threats to autonomy, privacy, and solidarity. Data can, and is, used for market analytics, monetised, and used to target and steer behaviour. Contemporary policing involves stringent monitoring such as the body camera, the approximate 5 million CCTV cameras in the UK, 'stop and search' initiatives (targeting the poor, of course, along racial lines), social media surveillance, and private companies renting their platforms as services for forces. Police operatives in the show are presented as capable of filling the void left by the neoliberal decimation of public services and the accompanying loneliness of intense individualism in poorer towns and cities. *Happy Valley* normalises and justifies operations of surveillance capital by displaying a humanising face to policing, and by presenting police as figures of trust, empathy, and respect in working-class, deprived areas. It also supports the digital capital and neoliberal mantras of decentralisation and disruption and perpetuates decentralised forms of control in the form of the 'rogue' or 'maverick' detective.

Elisabetta Fabrizi focuses on the economic and political pressures and processes that inform artists' film and video cultural production in Britain. Specifically, events at the Tate from the mid-1990s and billionaire Pamela and Richard Kramlich's collecting and advocacy. The state-funded Tate formed alliances with private capital and collectors willing to financially support their chosen art forms and secure the works' institutional recognition. Here film and video art practices are linked to centuries old aristocratic and high bourgeois art collecting. Economic capital is translated into cultural capital which provides the art owners with distinction and promotion of standing. This was, for instance, the case with the Sackler family's sponsorship of culture and the arts to veil the operations of their opioid cartel. Martha Rosler's video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), born out of an independent, non-commercial feminist performance art scene, set in a modest kitchen and about how women are part of the apparatuses of social reproduction is considered. When installed in an affluent, restricted exhibition context it appears caged by economic capital and influence. The role of private global capital in shaping curatorial approaches within state-funded national institutions is appraised. The Kramlich collection points to the curator's role in converting economic capital into symbolic capital. Despite their considered progressive and critical content and ephemeral nature, film and video do not escape the distinction-making role fulfilled by other more traditional art forms, and thus can contribute to the persistence of class domination and distinction.

Industry

Recent research (Carey et al, 2020) into class diversity in the UK's Screen Industries has confirmed intuitive notions of unequal opportunity and privilege perpetuating business practices. Over half of those working in the sector come from privileged backgrounds (53%), compared to 38% of people working in different professions. Those from working class backgrounds are significantly under-represented with only one in four of the screen industries workforces from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Class imbalances are particularly pronounced in creative roles, including writers, producers, arts officers, and directors. 61% of people in these roles come from privileged backgrounds, making it amongst the most elite occupations in the creative industries, or indeed the wider economy. This results in the reproduction of inequality.

Working class entrants face at least twelve challenges to work in the Screen (and other) Industries (Carey et al, 2020). In early life they face unequal access to cultural experiences, disparity in cultural education, participation and achievement, and lack of role models: there is early opt-out, these jobs are not 'for people like me.' In post-16 education, they have unequal access to higher education, are offered flawed technical education pathways, and disadvantaged by a lack of resources to undertake work placements. This is due to a lack of financial capital, a lack of time, often linked to the need to sustain a part-time job while learning. Therefore, they often lack work readiness, soft skills, and

'polish'. When making the transition to work there are the obstacles of informal recruitment practices, and cultural matching and unconscious bias, perpetuating 'jobs for the boys' which alternatively smooths the access of the privileged. Alongside this is the difficulty of internships, due to precarity and pay. This is the apparent need to work for low or no pay in order to establish and sustain a career in the Screen Industries. Here the privileged can often count on the 'bank of mum and dad' to sustain their entries into the profession or rely on the old boy network. Finally, in-work progression and advancement is often challenged by organisational culture and 'fit': that is, mastering the upper/middle class behavioural codes that are vital in 'getting on.' Also, there is a lack of professional development and progression pathways, and lack of leadership role models and sponsorship. The underlying causes of these issues lies in disparity in the financial, social, and cultural capital of those of different class origin and not in notions of meritocracy, intelligence, talent, or hard work. The upshot is a disastrous lack and silencing of working-class voices, narratives, content, considerations, and concerns in the industry and production.

Overcoming such obstacles and producing an independent working-class art-house film is therefore resilient and remarkable and director Brett Gregory is interviewed about class related matters, and his film *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist*. How do you make a working-class film? With great difficulty and at personal cost. Following on from his work on social mobility and the class ceiling (Friedman et al, 2017), Sam Friedman is interviewed on the notion of the class pay-gap, upper/middle class 'studied informality,' and how the self-presentational baggage and cultural capital of a privileged class origin is frequently mistaken in elite occupations as a marker of a person's talent, ability or potential. The latter perpetuates privilege and hinders equality in terms of 'getting-on' rather than the sector's self-congratulatory lip-service on 'getting-in' the industry. There have been some policy inroads however, and push for full implementation of the 'Socioeconomic Duty' element of the *Equality Act 2010*, which ensured legal protections for a range of groups – based on race, sex, gender reassignment, disability, religion or belief, age, and sexual orientation - but did not include class or socio-economic background.

The slogan 'no war but class war,' serves as the rallying cry, and final chapter heading to Steven's comprehensive *Class War – A Literary History*. The phrase, both description and prescription, is claimed by Steven to have emerged from the BBC television series *Days of Hope* (1975) written by Jim Allen and directed by Ken Loach. Tracing England between WW1 and the General Strike of 1926 the four-part series sees the protagonist desert the army after witnessing imperial and colonial military atrocities in France, Northern Ireland, and the Durham coalfields. He becomes a socialist. Explaining his desertion he states, "I'm no pacifist. I'll fight in a war, but I'll fight in the only war that counts, and that's the class war, and it'll come when all this lot's over." (in Steven 2023: 244) The slogan 'no war but class war' picks up currency after this as a group name and call to arms for subsequent anti-war and socialist movements. In today's real (imperialist, etc.) wars and wars-by-proxy (the 'culture wars,' etc.) the slogan remains potent. It is interesting and instructive that the phrase emerges not from the copious literature Steven scrutinises but from a tv drama. This is a reminder of the radical resources film and tv, as a mass medium, can still, at times, offer. Indeed, it is Loach's *Days of Hope* that is recalled by Wayne in his book review of *Tracking Loach, Politics, Practices, Production* (2023) by David Archibald. This is an ethnographic - or 'ethnographafilmic' - analysis of Loach's working methods with the case study of *The Angel's Share* (2012). Finally, there is a discussion of the British gangster genre, where capital's structural violence is often converted into physical violence, with a film review of *Bull* (Paul Andrew Williams, 2021) by Flint-Nicol.

This journal special edition had its origins at the London Metropolitan University conference 'Class and Contemporary UK Film and Television', July 2022, where some of the articles were first

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