



Fig 1. Brett Gregory. Statue of Friedrich Engels. 2022. Film Still from *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist*.

**You have made the well-received independent working class film ‘Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist’ (2022). What was the trajectory that lead up to making the film?**

Born in Buckinghamshire, I was raised in Nottinghamshire on a run-down council estate through the 1970s and 1980s. It was a terrible place for a child and, in the aftermath of the Miner’s Strike in 1984, it became worse. Poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, vandalism, animal cruelty, prejudice and discrimination occurred on a daily basis. This culture of crime and deviance was normalised by a majority of the estate’s residents however and incidents were rarely reported to the police. Inevitably such history becomes a part of you, your memories, your attitude, your belief system and your future.

Disconnected, disenfranchised and disregarded by Thatcher’s remorseless neoliberalist endeavours, most young males from working-class backgrounds manifested their lack of opportunities, their sense of hopelessness and their anger on to property, on to others and on to themselves. For example, the doctor’s surgery on the estate was ransacked and covered in graffiti, never to be repaired or re-opened. Prols on the prowl destroyed access to their own medicine and their own physical wellbeing and, from then on, young pregnant mothers

had to take the bus into town for their antenatal check ups. I browsed the estate on Google Street View last week in preparation for this interview and the building is still standing there, hollowed out and daubed in self-destruction.

Since this theatre of cruelty wasn't my place of birth however I managed to convince myself as a teenager that I didn't share the same temperament, the same values or the same outlook as those around me. This then made it easier for me to escape the daily humdrum of horror by withdrawing into myself. That is, since I had no money for a bus, I'd walk the three miles into town in my second-hand shoes to hide away for hours in an arcane sanctum where no one – the scallies from the estate, my broken family or even Thatcher herself – would ever find me: the local library, which was nearly always empty and didn't shut until 7pm.

This is the point where my passion for literature, art, culture, the imagination and solitude began to take me over, where I eagerly browsed the aisles and read bits and bobs of every topic and subject I could lay my hands on. In turn, I then started to realise that what was happening on the estate wasn't natural, normal or inevitable but was in fact a part of a historical timeline based on decisions made by out-of-reach people who possessed inordinate power and influence. These are the autobiographical origins of the feature film, 'Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist', which ultimately took me thirty five years to write, direct, produce and release.



Fig 2. Brett Gregory. 20-Year-Old James Ward as Jack. 2022. Film Still from *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist*.

**We are conditioned to not show emotion and ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ but what role might anger play in the film and in class and cultural politics more broadly?**

In my experience anger can be one of the key driving forces behind the creative act and, in turn, can be seen to instigate positive change, either real or imagined, individual or en masse. Moreover, anger is available to all; it’s fairly distributed. However, as mentioned above, how is this anger to be manifested?

From my observations if you’re not an artist, writer, academic, politician or person of expertise, social standing or wealth – i.e. reshaping the world around you in some way through desire and will – the day-to-day anger most people feel due to, for example, class, gender or racial inequalities, economic disadvantage, lack of cultural capital, absence of autonomy etc. is wasted on self-harm. That is, family arguments ensue, friends fall out, neighbours harbour vendettas, work colleagues are ignored on purpose, strangers are looked down upon in the street, the television and internet are screamed at, prescription drugs are leaned upon and alcohol becomes a rationalised response. And, in the UK especially, such misbehaviour takes place almost entirely behind closed doors or under the cover of night because we’re all so frightfully afraid of being openly judged as harshly as we secretly judge others.

I managed to produce a feature film out of anger and misery and, in turn, I chose to dramatise and exhibit these emotions on screen as if they were muses, getting it all out in the open once and for all with determination, depth and originality. We held a free preview screening to over 100 members of the public at an independent cinema in Wigan in January 2023, for example, and once the film had finished you could hear a pin drop. It seems a code of silence had been broken.

**Insofar as the working class have the most to gain from progressive change, how might film, TV, and culture contribute towards conditions for the possibility of change, rather than resignation and consent?**

In this grave new world of ours the working-class generally have no idea that they have the most to gain from progressive change. They don't even know what the term means or that it's under discussion. Raise the subject during 'Match of the Day' or 'Love Island' and see what happens: they either stare straight through you or get annoyed; they either change the subject or start fiddling with their phones. The ceaseless desire for creature comforts, underpinned by a wholly predictable lifestyle and an unwavering binary worldview, is seemingly more powerful than gravity. And the same goes for a majority of the middle-class I've encountered in my life too, with their compulsory trips to Waitrose and their mandatory annual holidays in Trieste. Recent media coverage of the new Public Order Bill, for instance, brought in by the current Tory ultras at the Home Office, might as well be a weather report for most people.

When I was an undergraduate studying English Literature I remember the lecturer applauding James Kelman's recently published novel, 'How Late It Was, How Late' in 1994. 'A Glaswegian stream-of-consciousness masterpiece,' he announced, 'which interrogates and undermines the working-class stereotypes which have held back our society for far too long.' The book and its approach fascinated me, but my reaction at the time was, 'Yeah, but the working-class aren't going to read it. If they read any fiction at all it'll either be Jackie Collins or James Herbert.' And, unsurprisingly, the same goes for 'Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist' today.

The film is predominantly watched, commented upon and sometimes even praised by intellectuals from working class backgrounds or middle-class academics with PhDs in cinema, humanities or politics. I'm not complaining; that's just how it is. The people who *should* be watching it – those whose fictional representatives barge through the narrative with their effing and blinding, dirty jokes and desperation – are far too busy queuing up to see 'Shazam 2' or 'Cocaine Bear'. If 200,000 avoidable COVID deaths weren't enough to force the people out on to the streets, what chance does a poem, a novel, a painting or an art-house movie have in this current ideological climate?

As a consequence, I believe that the working-class of the day are never the target audience for contemporaneous ideas, theories or strategies for hegemonic challenge and change, but tomorrow's audiences might be. George Orwell's 'Animal Farm' had difficulty finding a

publisher in 1944, for example. Even T.S. Eliot, Faber and Faber's director at the time, rejected it, observing that 'we have no conviction ... that this is the right point of view from which to criticise the political situation'. 80 years later and Orwell's notions of power, subservience and corruption are now common knowledge, even amongst a relatively large section of the working-class of a certain age, forming a part of the cultural lexicon of resistance and protest. We just need to be patient and keep the faith, I suppose.



Fig 3. Brett Gregory. City Skyscrapers and Hulme Redbrick Estate. 2022. Film Still from *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist*.

**Independent film projects are notoriously difficult to get off the ground. What were the challenges here in terms of funding and production?**

After lecturing in Film and Cultural Studies for 11 years and then Media Production for a further two years, I knew for a fact that a working-class art-house feature film set in the north of England – structured like a modernist novella as it critiqued the last 40 years of Tory governance – would never in a million years receive any serious attention, let alone any funding, from the risk-free, middle-of-the-road administrators who currently operate our cultural institutions. The 1970s and 1980s are over, Alan Clarke is long gone and the BBC is now nothing more than a state-sponsored QVC channel.

So in 2015 I took my redundancy money and invested in debt: personal loans, credit cards and two overdrafts. This then bought me the three years I needed to meticulously write and rewrite the film's screenplay without any interference from employment or the outside world. Grieving over the sudden death of my best friend – as well as being estranged from my maternal family in Nottinghamshire and my paternal family in Oxfordshire – I fully expected to keel over after the film was finished, and so I didn't really care about the financial consequences.

A few years earlier, while employed in education full time, I had funded, written, directed and produced, amongst other things, a trilogy of non-profit music documentaries to serve as historical records of independent cultural activity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: 'Iceland: Beyond Sigur Rós' (2010), 'Manchester: Beyond Oasis' (2012) and 'Liverpool: Beyond The Beatles' (2014). Although these productions alienated me from the rest of the teaching staff at the college I was working at – a whispering campaign was launched because it was childishly assumed I was throwing my weight around – I did receive some notice from the creative community in Manchester and, as a result, acquired the contacts of a few freelance media technicians. One of these contacts was the film's eventual director of photography, Gwyn Hemmings, who owned camera and lighting equipment which had the capability of filming a feature length production at a relatively high level. He read the screenplay, was impressed and, over a pint at a community-led bar in Hulme, agreed to shoot the film. I told him I had no money to pay him, but he said it didn't matter: he was no mercenary.

Since one of the key themes running through the film's narrative is 'disconnection' it was justifiable in aesthetic terms to film each of the characters individually in isolation. So, taking inspiration from Welles' 'Citizen Kane' (1941) and Trier's 'The Idiots' (1998), I decided we should shoot each of the female characters first in a series of faux interview set ups, as if the protagonist had committed some sort of crime and these women were the witnesses. It was 2018 by this point and Jack Clarke, a 20 year old university student who himself lived on a run-down council estate in Salford, had jumped on board as a camera and production assistant. His energy, dedication and naiveté helped to drive the film forward beyond expectation.

We cast the female roles via social media but chose not to reveal to them that their scenes were a part of a feature film. This was simply because we knew that we wouldn't be believed. How can you possibly make a meaningful feature film in the north of England without a budget and without any support from the Arts Council, the BFI or FilmHub North? The reaction online to the scripted monologues and the self-tape auditions submitted were surprisingly good. I was later told by one of the actors that this was because, due to deep-seated sexism within the industry, there were no decent roles or decent dialogue for women over 40.

I started working for a teaching agency at this point to help pay off my debts, and the rest of the crew had freelance or education commitments so, as a result, we could only shoot at weekends, sometimes months apart, when everybody was available. The female scenes were more or less completed when COVID then suddenly burst on to the scene at the beginning of 2020 and changed everything. I had friends in Kent – Robbo and his wife, Karen – who were fascinated by the production and had begun to contribute to its creation. Robbo, for instance, made the 'Top Dog' name plate featured in the College Manager's scene and he also bought the red Adidas jacket worn by the protagonist as a university student. Tragically, he then caught COVID and died at the beginning of March 2020 and, incomprehensibly, Karen died of a heart attack the next day after she received the news about her husband. They were both in their 50s and had been together since they were 17.

After a couple of months of further mourning and despondency I informed the crew that I needed to rewrite the script to incorporate this tragedy into the narrative, that it was essential that we not only continued to intertwine fact with fiction, but that we kept an historical record of events also. We had a different lead actor in place at this stage and we'd already carried out extensive rehearsals with him. As soon as he heard about my friends' deaths however, and the planned rewrite of the screenplay, he just panicked and ran away to Blackburn, lamenting that the production was 'just too much, just too heavy'.

It was around this time too that I ran out of money. I had invested about £56,000 into the film but the teaching agency work had suddenly stopped due to the pandemic and so I was broke. As a consequence, I began to claim Universal Credit and rely on hand-outs from friends and the film crew. Later in the year Gwyn, Jack and myself decided to take advantage of lockdown and film all the exteriors in Manchester's city centre that form the opening sequence in the

film. A clash of architectural styles and eras, the past in visual combat with the present, felt to me to be an apt metaphor for the protagonist's struggle: born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century only to die in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Around 600,000 people live in the city centre and they were all hidden away, out of sight. The streets were empty, the roads were empty, the late bars, the restaurants and the takeaways were all shut, and the windows of all the sky-high office blocks were blacked out. The end-of-the-world eeriness was palpable and unforgettable. It was deathly quiet everywhere and, of course, it was perfect for shooting undisturbed and for establishing the film's desolate narrative tone. In 2021 we then re-shot the scene with Ruth, the research student, with new dialogue focusing on the Tory government's misrepresentation and mishandling of COVID, PPE and Brexit. In turn, I integrated the actual texts Karen had sent to me while Robbo was dying in hospital into the introductory scene where the protagonist, Old Jack, scrolls through his phone in his bedroom.

Eventually we had enough edited footage – alongside a superb bespoke medieval soundtrack written and performed *for free* by the Ivor Novello nominated composer, Andrew McCrorie-Shand – to cast the three male leads and convince them to perform for the expenses we could afford. The only real problem we faced was casting a 13 year old boy who would be able to, firstly, deliver a ten minute uninterrupted monologue to camera at the foot of Stoodley Pike and, secondly, to openly discuss the physical and sexual abuse his character had endured on a council estate in the 1980s. Since nearly all of the parents of male child actors are only interested in their son becoming the next Harry Potter or Oliver Twist, we received rejection after rejection until, finally, a local theatre manager recommended Reuben Clarke, an 11 year old actor who had previously appeared in 'Peaky Blinders'. Luckily his dad, Jamie, had been raised on a run-down council estate in Wythenshawe in the 1980s, and he immediately recognised the truth in what I'd written. After a couple of months of rehearsals we then shot one of the most original performances in contemporary British cinema.





Fig 4. Brett Gregory. 11 Year Old Reuben Clarke as Young Jack. 2022. Film Still from *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist*.

**There is a clear sense to speak to, and listen to, the audience. The film has had numerous screenings and 'q and a's. What dialogue has occurred and what themes have audiences picked up on?**

My explicit focus when writing 'Nobody Loves You ...' wasn't actually socialism, poverty or male mental health, but the following: to explore the different types of storytelling and storytellers in our personal lives to try and understand how and why these represent, and even help to construct, who we think we are. So, for example, the film features a wide variety of media to help to tell its story but these also cause the narrative to become purposefully overloaded and unstable, i.e. Bosch's 'The Garden of Earthly Delights', the Spiderman poster, the phone texts, the comic books, the diary entries, the missing posters, the computer game, the pornographic magazine, 'The Shining' poster, the song 'Danny Boy', the novels, the photographs, the King James' Bible, the encyclopaedia, the personalised mugs etc. That is, where is our anchor for understanding the protagonist, his world and his background? Does he only exist as a result of the cultural artefacts he consumes? Furthermore, which is the most valid source of information? Which reference is the most reliable? That which is high brow, middle brow or low brow? That which is recorded, immediate or imitated?

In turn, there are also numerous ‘authors’ present throughout, but who is telling the truth? What about gossip, rumour, poor memory and falsehoods? Who should we trust? The dominant third-person narrator; the newsreaders on the mobile phone; Boris Johnson; the Granny’s voicemails; the female interviewees’ recollections; the protagonist as a boy, as a youth or as a man; Brett Gregory as the screenwriter; Brett Gregory as the director; or Jorge Luis Borges who introduces the film with his quote from ‘Labyrinths’:

‘With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he too  
was a mere appearance, dreamt by another.’

Moreover, to muddy the waters even further, all of the characters in the film are based on actual people who I’ve met in my life.

Of course none of the cast or crew really understood what I was attempting to achieve while we were shooting. They thought I’d lost my mind, and often said as much to my face. For example, after 6 years of principal photography, I was in the car with Gwyn when he suddenly turned to me and exclaimed, ‘I’ve no idea what this film is about, Brett!’ I think he might’ve been a bit tired that day though. Nevertheless, following my final sound mix, edit and export, it was necessary that we hired a series of independent cinemas in and around Manchester to host free preview screenings with members of the public to learn how they understood the film.

Generally, after they’d calmed down due to the fact that *the film was not as they expected it to be*, the consensus – which has now been picked up by reviewers and commentators online and in print media – was along the lines of: ‘This is a grim anti-Tory socialist film about working-class poverty in the north of England with some surreal bits in it.’ If I had an established name like, I don’t know, David Lynch I have an inkling that closer attention would’ve been paid to the textual details.

**The film has a lyrical tone and this would immediately make it immune from accusations, often aimed at working class based films in the ‘social realist’ tradition, of ‘miserabilism.’ Or on the other hand exploitative, ‘poverty porn.’ This has always been a tricky terrain – how to reveal poverty, conditions of the working class, and present the state of the nation**

**without falling precisely into those conditions. What are your thoughts here? In turn, going back to the social realist tradition, particularly the films of the 'British New Wave', one complaint has been that these often focus on the redemptive arc of a single (typically male) protagonist rather than offer collective remedies to hostile class relations. How do you read that tradition, its aftermath, and contemporary films with a class focus?**

In personal terms the stylistic contrast between realism and lyricism in the film probably harks back to my childhood outlined above. While the books in the library were tender and beautiful to me, the people on the council estate were violent and ugly. In cinematic terms De Sica's 'The Bicycle Thieves' (1948) is one of my favourite films, but its neo-realist conventions have been replicated over and over again in the mainstream's portrayal of the working-class or underclass right up to the present day. The genre hasn't evolved, and nor has the storytelling, slavishly adhering to the conservative narrative structure of a 19<sup>th</sup> century potboiler novel. It's as if 'Ulysses', 'Last Exit to Brooklyn', 'Meshes of the Afternoon' or 'Mulholland Drive' had never existed. As a result, I believe that most social realist depictions on screen now form of a sort of prison, its characters, similar to plants or animals, treated merely as the physical and emotional consequence of their environment, denying them any interior life, intellect, imagination, dreams, nightmares or metaphysical agency. In 'Nobody Loves You ...' one of my primary aims was to attempt to challenge such limited working-class stereotypes and also the outmoded storytelling techniques which suffocate them.



Fig 5. Brett Gregory. Stoodley Pike Monument. 2022. Film Still from *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist*.

**One platform the film is available on is Amazon. How do you negotiate the exploitative platform capitalism of Amazon with the convenience of reaching a potential worldwide audience that was simply not possible a decade or two ago?**

Amazon Prime was the only option available to us if the film was going to see the light of day and reach some sort of audience beyond Manchester. We spent months and months emailing the film's screener to every single distributor in the UK and Europe, and the 0.2% who actually bothered to reply wrote, 'Sorry. It doesn't fit our acquisition slate.' New ideas, new ways of looking at the world, new ways of filming the world may win awards and receive supportive reviews but capitalism is not really in the business of enriching human experience. Capitalism's servants and enablers are only interested in – shock, horror – making money, and this is how far their imaginations and ethics stretch.

**What is your next project?**

Well, I'm writing this in August 2023 and I'm still claiming Universal Credit from the DWP. Following numerous job interviews it appears I'm too advanced to teach Film and Media in further education, and too poor to fund a PhD in order to teach Film and Media in higher education. This said, due to the impact of the film, I now host a weekly radio slot for Arts Express on WBAI 99.5FM in New York where I remotely and voluntarily interview British film academics about their research specialisms in relation to US cinema culture. There's no business like show business.



Fig 6. Brett Gregory. 50 Year Old David Howell as Old Jack. 2022. Film Still from *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist*.

Brett Gregory, writer and director of the British working-class feature film, 'Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist' (2022). Website Link: [www.seriousfeather.com](http://www.seriousfeather.com)