

Salford to Saltburn: NFI

*Nobody Loves You and You Don't deserve to Exist* (dir. Brett Gregory, 2022) and *Saltburn* (dir. Emerald Fennell 2023) were released within a year of each other. Both, in their own way, offer a gothic twist on contemporary matters of British class and economic relations. They are refreshing and innovative, lyrical and sumptuous. Both are from under-represented film-directors, e.g. neither is an affluent white man. Both directors extract remarkable scenes from their actors, in particular a ten-minute single take of Reuben Clark by Gregory. Both have the classic locations found in British cinema, the gritty streets (of Salford) or the sprawling manor house (of Saltburn). But the journey to screen and subsequent destination of these films could hardly be more different. I make a comparison here, not to denigrate one (or other) of the filmmakers, but to try to shed light on class, privilege, and the screen industries.

Brett Gregory is a working-class filmmaker and would no doubt have encountered the obstacles identified by [Carey et al, 2020](#). Working class entrants face at least twelve challenges to work in the Screen (and other) Industries. In early life they face unequal access to cultural experiences, disparity in cultural education, participation and achievement, and lack of role models. 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. 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 who can often count on the 'bank of mum and dad' to sustain their entries into the profession and 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.' 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.

Emerald Fennell is an affluent well-connected filmmaker and would not have encountered the obstacles detailed above or associated issues around funding, production, exhibition, and distribution. This is not to say that she has not transcended other obstacles in her path or that she is any less resilient or talented a filmmaker. But her education, family economic support, networking, and privilege must have greased her development in a way counter to the grit placed in front of Gregory's wheels. In a piece for [Variety, K.J. Yossman](#) sheds light on Fennell's background and education. Fennell is the daughter of society jeweller – 'king of bling' - and old Etonian, Theo Fennell. She attended Marlborough (£15,665 per term), where she found herself a year or two either side of Princess Eugenie and Kate Middleton, now the Duchess of Cambridge. State educated Yossman attended Oxford in 2006 at the same time as Fennell. It is claimed that Fennell was part of a rarefied social set whose family names were recognized from the gossip columns and history books. Yossman describes how she was once introduced to a contemporary whose last name was Roosevelt-Morgan, with the whisper that: "She's that Morgan but not that Roosevelt" — which Yossman interpreted to mean she was descended from the banking dynasty but not the U.S. president.

In a telling anecdote revealing the aforementioned privilege of having the 'bank of mum and dad' and 'old boys network', Yossman recalls that she and Fennell were involved in a charity fashion show. Yossman's contribution was to persuade make-up artists to lend their services for free; Fennell however got her father to donate some jewellery for the accompanying raffle. As the show drew nearer, Yossman says, "select students received silver-embossed invitations in their pigeonholes. The

rest were NFI — not fucking invited.” You don’t have to guess who got the silver and who was NFI. In micro, this is contemporary class relations in macro and the workings of the screen industries today: the working classes can try but they are NFI. There is nothing simpler than a problem you can toss jewels at.

*Nobody Loves You and You Don’t Deserve to Exist* is an independent arthouse film, which is to say, it is not small budget, or even micro-budget, it is a debt-producing feature film. Gregory used a redundancy package and maxed-out credit cards and relied on the good will of crew over six years. In spite of this, there are captivating monologues that focuses on Manchester, austerity, and the effects of the erosion of the welfare state over the decades. The protagonist, shown through distinct stages of life, is appropriately angry and often confused at their socio-economic position (and how this plays out in family dynamics) but also resilient. There is dark humour with exclamations that “no one in the whole wide world would miss me, except for Barclaycard and the Student Loans Company.” As well as a school head’s quizzical, “And all this nonsense about following your heart and chasing your dreams...what would OFSTED say?” There is a sharp edge and truth to this humour – in neoliberalism many only count as a financial entity or quantity to be measured, compared, governed, and controlled. There is the capitulation to hegemony enunciated further by a higher education lead: “Now what this former staff member failed to understand is that our students and their families, they just want to get on with their lives, they don’t want any drama, they don’t want surprises, they don’t want anything to change, they just want jobs.” [Miller](#) suggests the film “stands as proof that the pioneering spirit of independent British cinema is very much alive and well.” The Ozu-esque transition sequences in the film are particularly poignant and effective - time-lapse photography of a derelict pub at night with faded Morrissey posters on the boarded-up windows, or a burial of broken dolls, a viaduct with a John Cooper Clarke stencil, the glitzy financial hub of contemporary Manchester at night, network of canals, elements of rurality in the Manchester environs and so on. These aspects, as well as the medieval musical score, add a lyrical tone. They immune the film from accusations aimed at working class films, often based in the ‘social realist’ tradition, of ‘miserabilism.’ Or on the other hand exploitative, ‘poverty porn.’ Arguably it is *Saltburn* that offers the porn.

In *Saltburn*, Oxford scholarship kid Oliver is desirous of upper-class Felix, and slowly we discover he is somewhat of a con artist. His mark, his love, is the blue-blooded Felix, accurately described by Yossman as “kind-hearted and guileless, a cross between Princess Diana and Harry Enfield’s comic creation Tim Nice But Dim.” Oliver desires Felix but we cannot guarantee at times whether this is due to his beauty or wealth. Felix invites Oliver to his manor house, *Saltburn*. The viewer is invited to share Oliver’s desire for the beauty, wealth and luxury associated with and embodied by Felix. At one point Oliver spies Felix masturbating in the bath. Later he lustfully drinks the semen-laced drained bathwater. Capital often tries to legitimate itself along the lines that wealth trickles down and is therefore good for all. It was probably not intended in such a way but lower/middle class Oliver lapping up the upper-class spoilt ejaculate in the bath water is a marvellous rendering of the reality of such trickle-down economics and distorted class relations today.

There is some significant satire in *Saltburn*. The emotional dysfunction of the family, as well as the sheer banality, emptiness, and boredom of these people, is epitomised by the collective term for associated sex-pest clone-like friends – ‘The Henrys.’ This is the burn-out of wealth and conspicuous consumption with nothing left to buy, except people. Only Oliver, later revealed to be an emotionless sociopathic murderer, could find anything to desire here. Dullness hangs in the air like dust mites in the empty rooms and spaces of the manor house. Just breakfast, lunch, or better, dinner with wine, or something new like a lower/middle class house guest, a neurotic friend, or a piece of spiteful gossip, can stir the dust off these lives already asleep. This is the depressive hedonia, described by

Mark Fisher, as not an inability to get pleasure so much as it is by an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure. There is a real sense that ‘something is missing.’ But also with no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed beyond the pleasure principle. That is, beyond consumption, beyond luxury, beyond wealth.

Oh, for the luxury of time to be bored for protagonist Jack in *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist*. In Jack's life, like it or not, one is an agent. One must be active merely to survive. From this notion of agency and autonomy the working class has the opportunity to recognise and become conscious of itself and change its material condition and relations to production. *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist* hints at the possibility of growth, change, and progress. *Saltburn* demonstrates the pathos of stasis and inertia.

Famously, at the end of chapter one of the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels suggest that modern industry has inadvertently produced a potential assembly of proletarians. Hence, “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.” Alas, things are not quite so simple. The burgeoning middle class will go on to buffer class antagonism, and the repressive and ideological state apparatus will secure hegemony with any means necessary. But the classic gothic imagery of the grave from the time of Marx and Engels also features in the two films under discussion. In *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist* there is a mesmerising time-lapse sequence from a freshly dug grave, a snail circulating, leaves flickering fast on the gravestones. A meditation on time, perhaps the time necessary for progress. In *Saltburn*, in a scene which the TikTok generation has sent viral, Oliver strips naked before Felix's freshly dug grave. He makes a hole and fucks the grave. The only act of intimacy he is afforded with affluence, the closest he gets to social mobility, is of a necrophiliac nature. Instead of digging the graves of the bourgeoisie he is fucking them.

[Gregory's](#) stated aim is to “represent the Northern working class on screen with intelligence, authenticity, and dignity, in direct opposition to the demeaning stereotypes and caricatures regularly churned out by the corporate mainstream media.” *Saltburn* alternatively, relishes in the antique absurdity of the upper-classes (and the muddled middle-class in awe of such lifestyle). But as Yossman argues, *Saltburn* ultimately whitewashes their uglier and exploitative side: “maybe it's because she herself [Fennell] is one of them.” (Yossman 2023) Gregory is certainly not one of them, and he is NFI. If we require from the popular arts that they at least say something meaningful about their times and economic relations then it is clear that Gregory's work is of significance here. It is likely however that *Saltburn* will continue to attract commentary, viral parodies, and online chatter in the millions. *Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist* will be discussed in the small circulation, left leaning, small presses. It's not how it should be, but it is how it is. The distinction between these films reveal inequality from top to bottom. Working-class cultural artefacts and ‘rare utterances’ are an endangered species. They need wider support in this current neoliberalist tech-feudal socio-political climate we're all enduring.

*Nobody Loves You and You Don't Deserve to Exist* is available [here](#) for free.

*Saltburn* is available everywhere for a price.