

# Changing the Subject: Cultural Studies and the Demise of Class

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from *Billy Elliot*

Class could be something in the blood, in the very fibre of a man or woman; a way of growing, feeling, judging, taken out of resources of generations gone before.[1](#)

There is too often a failure to imagine how social class is actually lived on the pulse, how it informs our inner worlds as it conditions our life chances in the outer world.[2](#)

This essay comes out of a recent reading of one of the many books published within that thriving academic industry that is Cultural Studies. More accurately, the text in question belongs to what might be called a sub-genre of publications to have lately emerged which question the direction in which the discipline is moving. Despite the evident truth that Cultural Studies has created and developed exciting areas of research and study over recent years, some commentators have suggested that this has been bought at a considerable cost, and has led to an evacuation of the key concerns which gave birth to the subject in the first place: namely, a radical engagement with issues around history and experience, and a deep commitment to questions of class.[3](#) Thus in her Introduction

to *Cultural Studies and the Working Class* -- the text under examination here -- the editor makes the claim that, 'Cultural Studies was a field formed by social class.' But the purpose of this assertion is to point up a paradox: regardless of the discipline's original and radical engagement with questions of class, class today (in particular the working class) 'amongst the contemporary intelligentsia . . . is irrelevant.'<sup>4</sup> Hence the question, heard in a number of quarters: where is Cultural Studies going? Moreover, what are we to make of the demise of class as a serious concern and topic of study? These are questions I will attempt to address in this essay by focusing on the issues and arguments outlined in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*.

*Cultural Studies and the Working Class* contains a wide variety of thought-provoking essays on the subject of class -- with particular relation to the British working class -- incorporating a range of topics and methodological approaches to show the fundamental importance of class for Cultural Studies. The book is divided into three sections under the following headings: Issues of Working-Class Identity and Methodology; Class, Taste and Space; and Gender, Fictions and Working-Class Subjectivities. Under these headings key areas are examined: the uses of autobiography for exploring configurations of class and self-identity; the legacy of Cultural Studies' relation to working-class life, questioning how this relationship might be both recouped and refashioned in the light of contemporary concerns. Additionally, a consideration of the composite nature of class formations is examined by looking at questions of academic identity, race, gender and the underclass; while the topics of taste and space foreground ideological issues of *circumscription*: in terms of aesthetic value, cultural capital and class difference, and in relation to the negatively 'marked' topographies of daily life for working-class people in the urban world. A focus on representations of the British working class, in recent film and popular fiction, constitutes a further dimension of the text. There is a particular emphasis throughout (and a quite refreshing one at that, if generally out of favour nowadays) on the *lived experience* of class; hence a number of the essays -- not least the Introduction -- are of a moving and personal nature, representing (among other things) what can be best described using an older language as explorations of *embourgeoisment*, revealing the hidden injuries of class for those within the academy, for instance, who are negotiating the tricky terrain between their pasts and their presents. Consequently, the book also has a lot to offer those of us in universities (both students and lecturers) who have never felt quite at home there.

The book opens with an article by Andy Medhurst called 'If Anywhere: Class Identifications and Cultural Studies Academics.' The gist of his argument can be summed up as follows: how do you deal with feeling working class when you get paid a middle-class salary and do middle-class things? The question is an important one, asking us to think about class not simply as objective entity (relationships within the means of production), but as an issue of affinity and identification. No-one would claim that this is necessarily a novel approach to the subject: Medhurst knows Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and the very similar dilemma explored there. Indeed, 'the founding fathers' of British Cultural Studies turn up quite a bit in this study. It is a return to and re-consideration of the analytical trajectories taken by the likes of Hoggart and Raymond Williams in understanding working-class experience (from both within and without) that

Medhurst wants to advocate, rescuing them from the enormous condescension of posterity. But he is aware too of their limitations (not least in relation to questions of gender). Medhurst's article spends considerable time returning to the concerns explored in *The Uses of Literacy* and to its mode of analysis; not, as in a good deal of recent criticism, to deride the text but to point out its real strengths. He describes it as a 'pained and contradictory book', which nevertheless 'moves me, prompting intense jolts of recognition that few other texts can match.'<sup>5</sup> Hoggart's resort to aspects of the autobiographical in the writing of *Uses* -- which results in a hybrid blend of the personal and public, objective and subjective, individual and collective -- lend it acute insights on working-class life, Medhurst claims, as the writer strives to legitimate working-class culture at the same time as he 'attempts to confront and understand the painful contradictions of his own cultural position.'<sup>6</sup> That position is a kind of 'cultural cusp'; an in-betweenness derived from the scholarship-boy experience. This is most clearly exposed at the end of *Uses*, where we find a structure of feeling striving to combine in a useful tension what we might call the cognitive and emotive: what Raymond Williams tried to make sense of in the term 'thought as feeling, feeling as thought.' To be 'uprooted and anxious' is no small matter; the idea of uprooting suggests an almost organic process, a vicious wrenching from native soil. Through this the working-class boy is 'progressively cut-off from the ordinary life of the group'; increasingly isolated 'from the intense gregariousness of the working-class family.'<sup>7</sup> The description represents the event as a crude act of social engineering, the benefits of which are seemingly ambivalent. But in recalling these feelings, Hoggart is calling upon *experience* in an effort to evaluate and comprehend the objective structures which scooped him out of his class background and *habitus* and into an alien social environment. Such strategies represent a forceful challenge to understanding both cultural identity and cultural change, as long as one remains alert to the fact that experience is never the ultimate, unquestioned authority. Even so, how many scholarship boys and girls in the British context can read this chapter without painful twinges of recognition. Much of what is written in *The Uses of Literacy* has always in some significant sense rang true to me, more so in relation to memories of my own parents. The scholarship experience was never mine. I never knew for sure whether or not I passed my eleven-plus exam, which was the stepping-stone to 'higher' things (I've always presumed not, but my mother won't have this), ending up at an establishment that was somewhere in-between grammar school proper and the local Secondary Modern (it had two 'higher' streams and a sixth form stream you could be levered into with the right results, though I stubbornly refused to go). My eventual entry into university and the to the margins of academia was much more circuitous. Yet Hoggart's thoughts and feelings here still ring true to my own later (and continuing) experiences of 'class mobility.' There I was, the working-class man -- somewhat older than Hoggart the scholarship boy and later academic and writer -- entering the (*still* largely) middle-class environment of the university and beginning to do middle-class things. Even at a more mature stage, however, and with years of work and life experience behind me, the excitement of being able to 'find things out,' acquire knowledge (and cultural capital), was tempered by the awareness that I was somewhere I perhaps had no right to be. The voices in whom I was asked to (and wanted to) place trust -- my tutors -- were also the voices of the 'Them' Hoggart so clearly describes in *Uses*. I knew the tones only too well: they judged, disparaged, stood aloof, patronised, exploited. But they had

something I wanted; something I felt somehow I could put to use. But the battle was sometimes painful: both a struggle with myself (as out of place prole) and with a particular institutional context in which I felt at times alienated. In the end I did get what I wanted (and was helped enormously too, by some of those same people with the annoying accents), writing a Ph.d on working-class writing as a way -- I understand now -- of attempting to 'link the two environments'<sup>8</sup> or, as Annette Kuhn puts it, 'heal the split.'<sup>9</sup>

So when Medhurst insists on the analytical usefulness of experience in speaking of working-class subjectivity and examining popular culture, I find myself in agreement. It is the experiential which confers an 'authenticity' to Hoggart's book that still renders it relevant today, at least for those Cultural Studies academics in Britain who want to focus meaningfully on class. The need to 'link the two environments', however, seems increasingly redundant as academic disciplines once centrally concerned with class issues direct their attention elsewhere. In fact, to speak of working-class culture at a time when the topic of social class appears a dead one could be viewed as perverse. In western (post) industrial societies the 'problem' of class has given way to new concerns with identity politics and issues of recognition, ones considered more appropriate to the postmodern condition. Class identities, especially working-class identity or class consciousness, belong comfortably to some other, earlier, phase of history, either to be forgotten or appropriated and reified as part of the ever growing heritage industry. A postmodern pluralism reigns, it seems, and in the triptych of race/gender/class the silence around the last category/formation is often deafening. Recently, Andrew Milner has addressed this development in his book, *Class* (1999), a study which effectively complements the concerns explored in the text under discussion at the moment.<sup>10</sup> Both texts chart the demise of class from academic and political discourse, despite a range of empirical data showing ample evidence of the continued existence of class and people's identification with it (in both a positive and negative sense); where the daily realities of inequality in society speak of deep structural divides, existential misery, economic and cultural exploitation and oppression. These are *some* of the 'common experiences and interests' through which class happens and which get handled in 'cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and cultural forms.'<sup>11</sup> They may be characterised by both change and/or continuity, but either way they constitute what Munt describes in her Introduction as, 'sites of class experience [and] situated knowledges',<sup>12</sup> which need to be recognised as such and re-explored.

Yet, as Medhurst shows in the second part of his argument, contemporary Cultural Studies' fixation with *theory* -- as this body of knowledge has been constructed and developed alongside concerns of gender, race, sexuality -- sidelines class and rejects almost outright the dimension of experience (rightly questioning it; wrongly abandoning it), consequently promoting a 'depersonalising' approach to culture in the name, purportedly, of greater analytical rigour, precluding important understandings and insights into working-class experience as it is, to use Annette Kuhn's compelling phrase in *Family Secrets*, 'lived on the pulse.' But the shift to theory (and its concomitant anti-humanism) produces its own interpretive shortcomings and analytical silences. What Medhurst labels the 'hyper-theorising' of much recent Cultural Studies has left us with a

large hole where matters of 'expressivity, locality, communality and class' used to be.<sup>13</sup> The approach somehow denies that it is feasible to make sense of self and history 'emotively' -- 'on the pulse' -- rather than just cognitively. We lose *feelings*: those of solidarity, injustice, hope. These experiences construct possible interpretive frameworks and ways of seeing, if we accept the concept of experience as 'a key category of everyday knowledge, structuring people's lives in important ways.'<sup>14</sup> Taking experience seriously we might find articulated there structures of feeling in the sense developed by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*: 'specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships; not feelings against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought:: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelated community.'<sup>15</sup> Williams himself never rescinded the concept of the experiential in his work, though he understood its limitations too. He held on to the term at the same time as rejecting the subject of bourgeois humanism, the sovereign individual with the capacity to act in the world unconstrained by structures and ideology.<sup>16</sup> Ideology *does* contaminate experience; yet there continues the life-process, involving an effort after meaning, in the telling of stories, the making of culture. This is also Medhurst's point: seeking forms to express these (continuing) lived processes and relations highlights the value of the autobiographical and personal dimension for finding ways to talk about working-class life and for comprehending how culture works, whilst rescuing class from becoming the 'lost identity', of identity politics.

The reflexivity of Medhurst's essay is characteristic of a large section of the book as a whole, and is evident in Joanne Lacey's piece she calls 'Discursive Mothers.' An emphasis on the autobiographical emerges again, as an interpretive mode enabling scholars 'educated out of their class'<sup>17</sup> to come to some understanding and accommodation with their new and alien class position. This position can be experienced as 'out of place;' the predominantly middle-class milieu of the academy inducing uncertainty in the interloper and the ever-present fear of failure, or, as Lacey describes it, 'being found out.'<sup>18</sup> The title of her essay relates to the importance in recent years of female scholars' engagement with the issue of class background and its influence, and how this has assisted a younger cohort of academics making their way through. Lacey picks out Carolyn Steedman, Beverley Skeggs, Annette Kuhn and Valerie Walkerdine in this context. These women provided the narrative support and space which enabled her own expression and interrogations of being working class, and for coming to terms with being 'educated out' and having to fit into a quite different social and cultural environment. The cultural theory and practice developed by these women writers is informed to a very important extent by their own working-class backgrounds, and rehearses the familiar feminist notion that the personal is political, offering a take on class that resists the colder probings of a more distanced traditional Marxism and ideas of economic determinism, as well as questioning the post-structuralist ideology of the 'death of the subject' and the end of class. The emotional politics of class identity become a central concern, allowing for explorations of structures of feeling that revolve around painful encounters of loss or lack. Steedman's *Landscape for a good Woman* (1986) is an obvious paradigm case, in which she questions a range of theories and positions which claim to 'speak' the working-class subject. This involves castigating some of the more reductive writing on working-class life in Hoggart's *Uses*, while at the same time,

nevertheless, shaping her own text along similar narrative and formal lines. If Hoggart strove to validate a resilient and respectable working-class culture that he felt to be under threat of a fatal penetration by commercialism (I choose the metaphor consciously), Steedman's text aspires to legitimate her mother's (commodity) desire as perfectly proper, in a world which withheld from her what she identified as the necessary trappings of the good life -- mostly small comforts; not too much to expect. The kind of comforts and securities taken for granted by the higher-class women she had to service most of her working life. Central to *Landscape* is *memory*, and how the past remains active and pressing in the present. Memory, of course, is a crucial component in autobiographical discourse, and for Steedman (as evidenced in her other books) life writing is about understanding self and relations with others. It represents a way of narrating difference and sameness, and the memory texts mobilised in *Landscape* recount and reshape the lived experience both of herself and her mother and gives form to the story she tells.

Autobiography and the meaning of memory, then, stand as appropriate vehicles of expression and a strategic approach for exploring feelings: feelings of loss and lack, but also of pride and commonality. Or perhaps *autobiographical fragments* is a better term here, because the uses of memory and experience by the writers referred to so far do not represent autobiography as conventionally accepted -- no neat linear narratives of hurdles jumped, ladders climbed and problems resolved. The past is not just back there, but ongoing, still present, *interrupting*; typically, fragments of memory flash up in an almost Benjaminian sense at a moment of danger and stand as a mode of intervention or interrogation. Kuhn describes the objective of such writing as attempting to tread 'a fine line between cultural criticism and cultural production.'<sup>19</sup> Thus her own work on memory and class in *Family Secrets* has to do 'with the ways memory shapes the stories we tell, in the present about the past -- especially stories about our own lives.' [And] 'with what makes us remember: the prompts, the pretexts of memory: the reminders of the past that remain in the present.'<sup>20</sup> It stands as an antidote to the kind of 'year zero' theorising of postmodernism: the end of *everything* -- master narratives, the subject, history, hermeneutic depth.

Valerie Walkerdine's work follows a similar path. Writing about her own working-class background, she talks in terms of 'coming out,' as though her past stood under the sign of shame compared to where she is now located in middle-class academia. As gays and lesbians have felt the need to disguise their sexuality, so in alien environments in which they want to succeed the working-class subject will smother their identity, those give-away signs which are evident in verbal utterances and are found written on the body -- what Bourdieu has referred to as the subject's *disposition*.<sup>21</sup> But attempting to pass as middle class involves more than masquerade, a change of outfit. In the same way that the middle-class subject can rarely get away with 'slumming It,' so the working-class man or woman will eventually slip up in an arena where the rules of the game have changed. Class is deeply ingrained in lived experience, it is profoundly embedded in institutional practices. I am always taken aback when someone says, 'you've come a long way.' It's an innocent enough phrase and often meant well, but the connotations are pretty appalling. What is this journey you have supposedly made, and why is the trip invariably worth while or wholly positive? What dark forest have you left behind? And why is there the

slightest hint of surprise or admiration in the utterance when it is addressed to the working-class kid? In many important respects, it is inaccurate to refer to Walkerdine as writing of her class *past*, as class (as she makes clear) is still for her a very present and active thing, so that her 'coming out' has meant relinquishing silence and being able to proudly call herself an 'educated working-class woman.'<sup>22</sup> This represents the kind of 'strategic essentialism' referred to by Spivak, vitally important for acts of emancipation; it enables Walkerdine to 'assert my education and my power with pride and claim back my education, not as alienation and a move to another class but as part of a narrative which allows me a place from which to struggle, a sense of belonging.'<sup>23</sup> So feelings of loss and lack; of pride and commonality. But rejection also, because there is no essential need or reason for the class mobile individual to want to identify in this manner. Acts of dis-identification may be more common, in fact. At a conference I attended recently a woman academic stood up during a debate on class and stated: 'I was working class, I'm not anymore. I'm an academic now.' This was greeted with general assent; she had got something off her chest. It tied in with her Lacanian paper, delivered earlier. In a sense, she too was 'coming out.' But is this what is currently meant by classlessness? Why didn't she define herself as 'middle class now'? Surely that would have been closer to the mark. How can anyone be *classless*, which her comment seemed to imply?

There was much talk of *difference* during the conference, though class difference failed to get much of a look in. Constant reference to the proliferation of new identities predicated of the postmodern condition structured the whole event, and this purported fluidity of ontological boundaries seemed to seal the fate of the working-class subject. Some days later, when I came to write up notes on the conference for an article, perhaps, on class, I sought out a quiet place of retreat, outside the office at work. I appropriated an empty seminar room, early in the morning, around eight-thirty. Outside, a cold winter wind lashed rain against the third-floor windows; my trousers were still damp from the walk from the railway station, through streets teeming with commuters about their daily routines. The room I occupied was a bit of a mess: some event had occurred the evening before, tables and chairs were strewn around the place, paper plates contained remnants of buffet food, plastic cups lay on their sides. I found an uncluttered space, set out bits of paper with my scribbled notes. Not long into my ruminations, a group of university cleaners came in. There were three women; I was on nodding acquaintance with one of them, so we exchanged greetings. Usually they were gone before most academic staff arrived. The animated banter with each other dried up on seeing my presence. The papers and books in front of me was giving away my academic status. Now *I* was one of Them. They began work at the far end of the room, cleaning up someone else's mess. Whatever the conversation was about earlier, it wasn't for my ears. They worked systematically, as a unit, re-instating order. It was a job that they had probably done hundreds of times. A woman of Asian extraction, a white (English?) woman and, the one I knew slightly, a woman of Irish descent. Not old: young women, maybe one nearing middle age, and all in the uniform of domestics -- the overall, rubber gloves, hair pinned back to keep it falling over your face as you bent and scrubbed or hoovered. The diaspora workforce of various origins (that fluidity of boundaries); quite clearly, working class. Very probably, they had other jobs to go to when they left this one -- two or three part-time jobs, to 'make ends meet.' Were they being quiet on my account, not wishing to disturb my work? Were

they intimidated by my presence? Were there things that they simply did not want me to hear? I tried not watch them work, they tried not to watch me. Of course they were women doing 'women's work'; those feminist readings were nudging me, reminding me. And I shouldn't really have been there and was in their way. I offered to go. No, no need. They would have cleaned around me, but I got up and shifted everything to the other end of the room, the now clean bit. The best I could manage was to thank them when they had finished. But why and for what? My own mother had been a hospital cleaner and auxiliary all her life.

That woman academic's remark was symptomatic of the powerful supposition that class no longer matters; it is this misguided perception which *Cultural Studies and the Working Class* attacks. In doing so it discloses rare quality in academic texts: it teaches the reader something important about themselves. It is why the tenor of much of the text is one of looking back to look forward. Looking back risks the danger of nostalgia, and nostalgia, we are often reminded nowadays, is a bad thing. It can encode within it a danger of sentimentality, a response which distorts the past in search of some lost golden age; or, the story goes, it stands as a sign of misrepresentation or symptom of alienation and thus constitutes a profoundly unstable method for understanding ourselves or the past. I think occasionally that this is a class position too: that nostalgia is the preserve of misguided sentimentalists (usually 'the proles') who -- unlike the middle-class theorist -- don't know any better and can't come to terms with the new reality or change (it's very 'New' Labour also). It is an oddly undialectical approach: as Raymond Williams pointed out long ago in the pages of *The Country and the City*, nostalgia can be politically *enabling* as well as potentially *disabling*. Memory, or what I have called elsewhere 'nostalgic memory,'<sup>24</sup> represents a symbolic act of recovery; it has a number of effects and is a response to a range of complex needs and desires. Most of the writers in this collection who deal with personal history are well aware of the pitfalls of nostalgia and are willing to negotiate them: in an important sense, in fact, the only alternative to this -- as Walkerdine implies -- might well be silence. Lacey then is insistent on the viability of personal narratives, which in turn can illuminate wider structures and questions around class identity and difference; and contends that working-class academics should continue 'to re-work the tension between Marxism, political economy and the study of social class in Cultural Studies making class matter again.'<sup>25</sup> Some of the feminist writers she attributes with accomplishing this (mentioned above) draw on a range of approaches to explore these questions, including aspects of poststructuralism to posit class as, among other things, 'performance.' This might be offering interesting insights on subjectivity though I am not completely certain that this emphasis alone can help class 'to matter again.' I find the idea of 'passing,' for instance, finally weak and inadequate for exploring configurations of class. Thus as Beverley Skeggs points out, 'class passing rarely works, where sexual passing frequently does.'<sup>26</sup> While the politics of recognition (or the dominant ideology known as identity politics) disenfranchises class through its embeddedness in the discourse of individualism and its curious sense of closure, a kind of essentialism it seeks at other times to disparage.

At the same time there is a paradox here, highlighted by Andrew Milner in *Class*. The paradox is that the new movements which constitute identity politics are grounded



materially in class interests. Here Milner concedes that feminism, ideas of ethnicity and the gay movement have 'effected a quite unprecedented 'decentring' of traditional (white, straight, male, middle class) cultural authority.' And he is quite correct to suggest that this is a good thing, too. Yet these movements are empowered by a professional, well-educated middle class in whose interests they are developed. They are, in fact, what Milner denotes as 'middle-class movements.' And like all dominant classes, they disclose a blindness, a symptomatic silence, with regard their own social positioning. These movements, with increasing influence in governmental areas and key institutions, 'derive their primary identities from an intelligentsia which is itself a socially privileged.'<sup>27</sup> There is no attempt to fundamentally alter society, but a call for recognition within it, and if that recognition and participation generally occurs through processes of market commodification and consumption, then so be it.

So when social class -- the working class -- does come onto the political agenda it is in the form of pathologisation: a problem. In cultural theory (postmodern in hue) it belongs to the triptych referred to earlier and thus becomes the sin of 'classism.' Terry Eagleton has offered a plausible critique of this position.<sup>28</sup> It is a way of seeing class as an unequivocally bad thing, which to a large degree Marx also believed. But he saw class as a good thing too, as it constituted the motor-force of history. And, of course, it was the economically exploited working class who represented the agents of change and the gravediggers of capitalism. There is a long tradition of writing about the working class within this context; it is one, it needs be noted, that only warrants a kind of ghostly presence in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*. Aside from this position seeming enormously 'old hat' at the moment (it appears that few Marxists seriously embrace the notion any longer), there may however be good historical (as well as theoretical) reasons for the omission.

Roger Bromley's article, 'The Theme That Dare Not Speak Its Name,' touches on some of these reasons. The background to this piece, and its exploration of representations of the British working class in recent film, is the Thatcherite eighties, a period which saw the relation between capital and labour (to use again the old language for a moment) alter fundamentally in favour of the former. A radical re-making of the British working class got under way with the election of Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979, as the country's industrial base was eroded and the lived experience of whole communities was transformed rapidly. This, in fact, was an important determining factor influencing the end of class debate in Britain, as elsewhere. As might be expected, a good deal of working-class writing from this period encodes a deep pessimism as a response to the defeats of Thatcherism and the disintegration of working-class communities based around steel, coal, ship-building and textiles. In this restructuring class formations alter, but do not disappear. Yet, as Bromley insists, class is the resounding silence in all contemporary political debate, revealing itself instead, if ambiguously, in popular film. Contemporary British society is now 'Cool Britannia'; a meritocracy has replaced privilege and the limits set in place by class structures. Our rulers invent a new language to re-interpret the presence of poverty and exclusion. In the thrall of technological determinism (entranced by the 'new' economy meant to transcend 'old' manufacturing and somehow the capital/labour relation), captives of globalisation (enabling the language of inevitabilism,

or rather the old Thatcherite mantra of 'no alternative') Blairism constructs a classless society operating, paradoxically enough, through the hegemony of middle-class values. In this context, working-class identity only re-emerges in any significant sense in certain key films from the period: it is here, Bromley suggests, that 'class-belongingness', though hesitant and unsure, constitutes a powerful structure of feeling. The films in question are: *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994), *Brassed Off* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997) and *My Name is Joe* (1998). Bromley contends that the tentative representations of class found here, and in particular class relations, stem from the increasing difficulty in figuring these relations in terms of available representational strategies: historical change has rendered the given set of conventions used to talk about this no longer appropriate in current conditions when the 'enemy' is invisible. The 'unrepresentability' of the ruling class (or power bloc) has obvious ramifications for any understanding of the condition of class consciousness: how do groups become class conscious without some sure identification of the Other. The argument is similar to the one laid out by Frederic Jameson some time ago in his 'Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture,' hence Bromley brings a symptomatic reading to the films under discussion.

Moreover, how does one talk about *the* working class, in a period of class fragmentation and re-making? Bromley suggests that Ken Loach attempts to deal with this by introducing a subtle shift of emphasis in his work, which involves a 'move away from any attempt to depict *the* working class ' to a focus upon ' a social issue or problem confronted by 'negatively privileged' individuals for whom their class position is a crucial dimension of their experience.'<sup>29</sup> Frequently then -- and the same can be said about the other films under discussion -- workers are seen as *workless*. We know by now the reasons for this: capital flight to locations where labour is cheaper, profits fatter. The images proffered by the films tend to be, then, profoundly negative; characters struggling to find, or re-state, an identity coming 'under erasure' (read the narratives of James Kelman for a similar perspective on working-class life). The figures who occupy the housing estates in Loach's films, Bromley describes as 'social victims';<sup>30</sup> or viewed from another angle they are close to the underclass category pinned on them by sociologists of the Right (not only the Right, it might be added), who prefer this terminology to the more accurate description of working-class poor. As Chris Haylett argues in her piece on film and depictions of the 'underclass.' 'distinctions between groups of working-class people is the key tenet of the hegemonic discourses of the underclass the deserving and the undeserving, the married couple and single parent, the male and the female, the young and the old.'<sup>31</sup> The familiar, faithful, well-trying and tested strategy of divide and rule remains useful. What we witness in the films is an exploration of powerlessness, an inability to nail the 'enemy,' because they are camouflaged by the servants of the state. Struggles are carried out in opposition to those agencies who *manage* (social workers in *Ladybird, Ladybird*; in Haylett's analysis of the French film, *La Haine* (1995), the police); controlling and coercing institutions which legitimate the dominant order at the same time as they operate to alleviate the costs of its domination.

The tensions involved in the explorations of working-class identity here are necessarily inflected by issues of gender. One of the strengths of the recent work by scholars concerned with class has been the attempt to examine the intersection of class

with other identities of race, gender, sexuality. Bromley's concern lies with masculinity, especially in relation to the two films *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*. One major fall-out of de-industrialisation, flexibility and the casualisation of the work-force has been a radical shift in the demarcation of gender roles within the working class. It is perhaps the central thematic concern of *The Full Monty* and a significant sub-text in *Brassed Off*. Signifiers of working class-ness permeate both films; they are strongly gender-loaded in terms of working-class manhood and ideas of work, and they are written as somehow 'residual.' Men are seen as occupying enclosed or empty spaces – the fraternal comfort/compensation of the band-room in *Brassed Off*'s mining community, derelict steel works in *The Full Monty*, where the redundant men 'work out.' Paid work is absent, or about to be: working-class masculinity can no longer be re-affirmed in older codes and the 'unspoken' of these films becomes not merely the tensions present for ideas of working-class identity, but the future direction and prospects of class politics in the new dispensation. It is by no means insignificant that in both films the men are seemingly forced in the end to become simply consumerist spectacles. I will return to this later.

Gender and class, then, are inseparably linked in any understanding of subjectivity. In another contribution to the book, 'Can't Help Lovin' That Man,' Glen Creeber provides a close analysis of the Gary Oldman film *Nil by Mouth* (1997), which focuses on working-class masculinity/machismo, and he views the film from within the context of British cinema and social realism, invoking what he identifies as the dominant aesthetic of the 'male norm.'<sup>32</sup> The relevance to Bromley's analysis is obvious, I think. The 'male norm', refers to the tradition of film about the working class dating back to the late fifties and sixties: the New Wave and 'social problem' films of the period which took as their central thematic emphasis aspects of working-class life. As Terry Lovell has stated, '[t]he basis on which the British New Wave staked its cinematic claims was a realism defined in terms of its working-class subject, and a more open treatment of sexuality.'<sup>33</sup> However it is from the perspective of the male working-class subject that the narrative is organised; female subjectivity is subordinated to male desire and fantasy. Women's roles are that of 'enabler': either as sexual object and conquest, or comforter and nurturer. According to Creeber, *Nil By Mouth* differs in significant ways. Ostensibly, the film sets-out on the 'male norm' pattern, figuring male characters as central, subordinating women to this male gaze -- or in the case of this film, *rage*. But the aggressive male culture which defines the early part of the film is undermined as the narrative unfolds and, collectively, the female characters take control of their own lives. Consequently, the film prompts a consideration of the culturally constructed nature of working-class masculinity, at the same time showing female characters claiming 'space and the power to overturn and reinvestigate the narrative through which they would have been previously constructed and contained.'<sup>34</sup> By initially prioritising the male trajectory, then dismantling it, a female working-class voice emerges, marginalizing the 'male norm.'

In *Nil By Mouth*, all this takes place within the domestic sphere (or the domain of culture: the social club/pub). Work is not an issue: Ray's vicious aggression and alcohol dependency is linked by Creeber to little more than an 'oppressive male culture', where the character seemingly defines himself in relation to anything 'feminine' (women, gays). In early social realism films of the New Wave, work remained significant in defining

identity for the working-class male. As it does in *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off*. So in these films male authority is shattered by economic restructuring: essentially it is through this that gender roles are overturned and reversed. In *Brassed Off*, it is the miners' wives who picket to save the jobs and the community; when this fails it is a woman again (the insider/outsider, Gloria) who provides the necessary capital to enable the band to compete in the Finals in London. In *The Full Monty*, the gender reversal is at times almost surreal (women piss standing up!); they are the breadwinners who enjoy nights out at the club entertained by male strippers. Of course all this is in an important sense recuperated at the end of the film, with the men's re-instatement at centre stage at the working-men's club, and this makes *The Full Monty* a more problematic film, ideologically, than *Brassed Off* (though highly entertaining). An emphasis on community resistance (if somewhat residual) is the active structure of feeling evident at the end of *Brassed Off*. This is defined or established in *displaced* class antagonisms: the north/south divide; the metropolitan/periphery border; the geopolitics of place/space. In fact the end of the film represents an attempt at what Frederic Jameson labels 'cognitive mapping:' we see the closing shots of Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, as 'Land of Hope and Glory' plays ironically in the background and as the closing credits tell of the number of jobs lost in mining since 1984 (an almost Brechtian alienating device). Here the audience obtains a glimpse of the power bloc which oversaw and instigated the events. As a class analysis this is no doubt inadequate and pessimistic: it reinforces Bromley's suggestion of the 'unpresentability' of the bourgeoisie in postmodern capitalism and the dissolution of working-class identity and political formation. But Bromley's view that the film 'suggests no continuities', but is 'an end-stopped, terminus film';<sup>35</sup> a film that is an epitaph to a dying way of life, misses some important points. The film's 'double-ending' suggests two things: rejecting the prize in the brass band finals tells us that the miners and their culture are unwilling to become mere heritage spectacles, icons of an industrial past; secondly, the route past the Palace of Westminster, while speaking evasively and ambiguously about class power and its figuration, also compels us to re-think class struggle for the future (it would have been far more appropriate to take this trip through London's financial centre, however).

Other points need to be made too, about both films, in terms of imputed audience reception. Raymond Williams's term 'structure of feeling' -- which is to do with aspects of reception as much as textual production and cultural analysis -- remains relevant here. What made the films successful, it could be argued, is their acute focus of lived, *historical* experience, rather than political analysis (which Bromley seems to be asking for). As I suggested in relation to *Brassed Off*, there is a residual structure of feeling evident -- it explores and articulates the notion of community, or communality, as part of the film's class-belongingness. To a lesser degree the same claim can be made for *The Full Monty*. By the close of this film, the men's 're-invention' of themselves implies not only their re-emergence or re-newed dominance: the working-men's club -- itself 're-invented' by the working-class women -- stands also as a metonym for community, identity, place. In both films there is no question that things have changed and will never be the same again, but this does not constitute a 'terminus' point. It acknowledges change, but within a certain set of continuities. What we need perhaps to consider here, in terms of how the films are read and experienced, is Terry Lovell's idea of the 'pleasure of

identification', where she suggests that, 'the pleasure of a text may be grounded in pleasures of an essentially public and social kind pleasures of common experiences identified and celebrated in art, and through this celebration, given recognition and validation; pleasures of solidarity to which this sharing may give rise; pleasures in shared and socially defined aspirations and hopes; in a sense of identity and community.'<sup>36</sup> To some extent, this returns us to the earlier discussion of nostalgia: in this case, I would suggest that the nostalgia Bromley attributes to the films represents an act of celebration and affirmation, rather than a valediction, or exercise in sentimentalism.

Williams spoke about structure of feeling as comprising 'dominant,' 'residual' and 'emergent' forms of culture. *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, it has been argued, articulate a *residual* structure of feeling. Residual, however, does not imply archaic. Bromley makes this point in a final defence of the films, insisting that they do not signify that class can now be treated as some 'obsolete economic classification', but indeed a condition of 'pre-emergence.'<sup>37</sup> He goes on: '[w]hile appearing to be addressing residual characteristics of class, the films are . . . indicative of emergent symptoms of the contemporary which are 'active and pressing but not yet fully articulated.'<sup>38</sup> Bromley in a sense is flagging-up the political unconscious of these films; that problematic which seems to be circling the theme of class politics and struggle. But another point can be made here about our sense of the residual and ideas of 'pre-emergence.' Residual forms of culture stand in opposition or as alternatives to a dominant culture and formation which will not accommodate its values or needs. They need not be radical, though they can be. A residual structure of feeling is, nevertheless, what Terry Eagleton calls, 'an active element in the present.' Moreover, Eagleton implies that in recent times there 'is an increasingly close interweaving of all three of Williams's categories', in that the 'dominant culture increasingly undermines traditional identities, thus pressurising the residual to the point where it reappears as the emergent'; stirring 'a movement which in challenging the dominant culture of the present, lays claim to what might lie beyond it.'<sup>39</sup> Both these films to some extent pose the residual in the process of rethinking itself and, potentially, re-finding itself as the emergent.

None of the films discussed by Bromley necessarily present an 'imaginary resolution' to the dilemmas experienced by the working-class characters -- even *The Full Monty* refuses the suggestion that the men somehow go on to scale the heights of the male stripper circuit and a kind of fame. And the same is true of *Nil By Mouth*: Val wins some autonomy and respect on her own terms, on her own 'patch,' thereby changing herself and the world around her, maybe irreversibly. *Escape*, it seems, is not necessarily an option here, although the theme of escape has been a potent one in much working-class writing and representation, and in theorising about working-class life. It was there in our earlier discussion on educational mobility -- being 'educated out.' It has a powerful resonance in the founding texts of Cultural Studies, Hoggart in particular, as it was in the fictional works of the late fifties and sixties. The wave of British proletarian writing in the 1930s encoded the narrative of escape in terms of emancipation from a purely negative material existence: exploitation, depravation, shame. The writing spoke of a desire for respectability and recognition: even for social revolution to alter a system which naturalised inequality. Here it was not simply the case of a fortunate individual climbing

the ladder, but of a class rising collectively to claim a proper inheritance. Such a structure of feeling (intensified by the sacrifices of war) lay the ground for establishing of the post-war welfare state. A forceful theme then, in writing about the working class. But what is this border crossing meant to signify? In purely material terms, a chance to economically better yourself, perhaps. Aspirations: the parents' hopes for their children -- a 'better' life. Away from the council estate that carries the stigma of failure -- what Diane Reay refers to in her essay, 'Children's Urban Landscape: Configurations of Class and Place,' as 'negative emplacements.'<sup>40</sup> Here then is the sense of place or space as circumscribed: places marked out in dominant culture as 'Other,' and lived and experienced in a condition of alienation by those within. The intensity of the metaphor as it has been applied to working-class life -- one is rarely literally escaping, unless it is from an abusive relationship of some kind -- speaks to some considerable degree of loss or fear, but also of shame and humiliation. It legitimates one mode of existence as it maligns another. More often than not the trope of escape emphasizes the individual (often seen as special) over the collective, or class: this being the mode of life from which it is necessary to liberate oneself. Looking at this particular representation of working-class life -- the escaper paradigm -- I will end this essay by examining that most recent contribution to the form, the hugely successful film *Billy Elliot*.

The film is set in a mining village in County Durham during the Miners' Strike of 1984-5. At the centre of the film is eleven-year-old Billy Elliot, son of a striking miner. During a boxing lesson Billy becomes fascinated by a ballet class conducted in the hall: he joins in and shows real talent which is then fostered -- against his father's wishes -- by the ballet teacher, Mrs. Wilkinson. She secretly prepares him for an audition for the Royal Ballet School (and by implication, for his ticket out of the strike-torn world where he lives.) Having seen Billy dancing with his friend Michael in the village hall, Billy's father comes to recognise his son's talents and determines that he should attend the audition, even if it means strike-breaking to raise the fare. To prevent him from doing this, his fellow strikers raise the money between them: Billy goes south, is successful and, in the final scene, some fifteen years on, Dad and brother Tony travel to London to see him in *Swan Lake*.

This film has much in common with both *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, and stands in that tradition of British social realist films dating back to the sixties -- in fact it quite subtly references Ken Loach's *Kes* on more than one occasion: the relationship between the two brothers, the scene where Billy steals a library book, even (to stretch it a bit) in the significance of *flight*. As with *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty*, themes of masculinity, working-class identity and community are important. And, as with the two other films, *Billy Elliot* focuses on the culture industries (rather than the 'traditional' industries) as a way for the working class to re-find or, rather, re-invent itself. To do this Billy will have to enter the more privileged spaces of the middle class: acquire the cultural capital which will enable him to reap dividends on his innate skills and talent. Sport, a traditional escape route for the working-class kid, is replaced by 'art': low culture substituted by high, and yet there is a definite sense that the film sets out to deconstruct this binary, as it sets out, too, to problematise ideas about masculinity and the 'male

norm.' Thus at the close of the film, as Billy warms-up in the wings prior to performance, boxing and ballet merge.

Notably, however, it is the working-class *individual* -- something the title of the film reinforces -- who occupies the central focus of this working class narrative of re-fashioning. Billy is the exceptional individual who, in a theme that goes back at least to Lawrence, can only fully express himself outside the stifling confines of the enclosed and embattled community. Though Billy's story could quite easily have been set in the present (as much as any time in the past, for that matter), choosing to set it during the Miners' Strike only seems to emphasise the imperative of escape from an aggressive and disintegrating landscape -- the 'negative emplacement' referred to earlier. In some respects the Strike is the exotic backdrop in which Billy defines his Otherness, only connecting ambiguously with the cross-dressing Michael, as they stand isolated in a world of male violence and threat. That Michael learnt his cross-dressing from his father is a good joke, but the total absence of his father or mother in the film further accentuates the boy's isolation, or *difference*, as well as the sense that here is a culture that cannot nurture, and that the good, the true life, must lie elsewhere. In many respects this typifies the escaper paradigm in some forms of working-class writing and representation: Billy becomes emblematic of the necessity to escape the restricted codes of working-class life. Amid the aggression, there is also a kind of *muteness* about this culture, it is inert: Billy's father seems unable to express emotions that are clearly damaging him, the grandmother has trouble putting together a single, coherent sentence and Billy's brother tends to resort to angry, helpless tirades or demands for silence from his brother. On one level there are evident reasons for these behaviours -- the death of Billy's mother, the tensions of the Strike, the on-set of senility in the old woman. But this all contributes to a certain sense of closure, which represents far more powerfully the terminus point suggested by Bromley in his discussion of *Brassed Off*. Billy escapes south to become William, the film jumps fifteen years, and we never come learn how well he negotiated his border crossing (we assume he did ok), or how the community he left behind coped with economic and social decay. Recoding the escaper-paradigm to suit postmodern times conveys the 'New' Labour message of meritocracy and classlessness as the film's over-riding ideological point of view.

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To argue that class no longer counts has always been a position taken by those usually unaffected by its exclusions and deprivations. As Diane Reay points out, 'contemporary discourses of both widespread social mobility and classlessness are myths which operate to ensure dominant class hegemony and perpetuate social inequalities.'<sup>41</sup> Here I have attempted to consider the demise of class concerns in Cultural Studies, while pointing to some academic work and fictional texts where class is still of central significance. I have suggested that analysing the importance of the lived experience of class (as do the contributors to *Cultural Studies and the Working Class*) can illuminate our understanding of the complexity of class identities. Raymond Williams once argued that there was 'no getting beyond class politics', and that the issues raised by new social movements would inevitably lead 'into the central systems of the industrial-capitalist mode of production

and its system of classes.<sup>42</sup> But it is important now (and possibly always was) to understand class identity in the plural -- as *identities*. Class is complex, class changes, class is multidimensional. The reifying of class -- *the* working class; or class merely as an economic category -- has been a contributing factor in the rejection of class from much contemporary debate: it has been an easy exit sign for those who don't want 'to do class' anymore. An understanding of working-class identity and experience has to be firmly grounded in an acceptance of this multidimensionality; of the fact of class altering over time and in space, while incorporating an awareness of the 'reality that classes are internally stratified along race, gender and ethnic lines.'<sup>43</sup> *Cultural Studies and the Working Class* achieves just that.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Barry Jackson and Dennis Marsden, *Education and the Working Class: Some General Themes Raised by a Study of 88 Working-Class Children in a Northern Industrial City* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 172.

<sup>2</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995), p101.

<sup>3</sup> Most recently an article by Maria Elisa Cevalco, 'Whatever happened to cultural studies: notes from the periphery,' in *Textual Practice* 14 (3), 2000, 433-438. But also see, Michael Pickering, *History, Experience and Cultural Studies* (London: MacMillan, 1997); and Andrew Milner's *Literature, Culture and Society* (London: UCL Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Sally Munt (ed.) *Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Medhurst, 'If Anywhere: Class Identifications and Cultural Studies Academics,' in Munt (ed.), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of working-class life with special reference to publications and entertainments* (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 294.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

<sup>9</sup> Kuhn, p. 101.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Milner, *Class* (London: Sage, 1999).



[11](#) This is E.P. Thompson's well-known definition of class in, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 8.

[12](#) Sally Munt, op. cit., p. 11.

[13](#) Medhurst, 'If Anywhere,' p. 23.

[14](#) Kuhn, p. 28.

[15](#) Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 132.

[16](#) See Peter Middleton's discussion of this in 'Why Structure of Feeling?' *News from Nowhere*, 6 (1989), p. 34.

[17](#) Joanne Lacey, 'Discursive Mothers and academic Fandom: Class, Generation and the Production of Theory,' in Munt (ed.), p. 41.

[18](#) Ibid., p. 45.

[19](#) Kuhn, p. 3.

[20](#) Ibid., p. 3.

[21](#) See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1989).

[22](#) Valerie Walkerdine, *Schoolgirl Fictions* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 158.

[23](#) Ibid., p. 158.

[24](#) I use this in a discussion of Pat Barker's writing: see 'Recovered Perspectives: Gender, Class and Memory in Pat Barker's Writing,' in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol 40/4 (1998). pp. 603-627.

[25](#) Lacey, p. 42.

[26](#) Beverley Skeggs, 'The Appearance of Class: Challenges in Gay Space,' in Munt (ed.), p. 142.

[27](#) Andrew Milner, *Class*, p. 86.

[28](#) See Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions Of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 56-60.

[29](#) Roger Bromley, 'The Theme That Dare Not Speak Its Name: Class and Recent British Film,' in Munt (ed.), p. 54.

[30](#) Ibid., p. 56.

[31](#) Chris Haylett, "'This Is About Us, This Is Our Film!'" Personal and Popular Discourses of "Underclass," in Munt (ed.), p. 80.

[32](#) Glen Creeber "'Can't Help Lovin' That Man": Social Class and the Female Voice in *Nil by Mouth*,' in Munt (ed.), p. 198.

[33](#) Terry Lovell, 'Landscape and Stories in 1960s British Realism,' in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 168.

[34](#) Creeber, p. 202.

[35](#) Bromley. P. 63.

[36](#) Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality* (London: BFI, 1980), p. 95.

[37](#) Bromley, p. 67.

[38](#) Ibid., quoting Raymond Williams, in *Marxism and Literature*, p. 126.

[39](#) Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 123.

[40](#) Diane Reay, 'Children's Urban Landscape: Configurations of Class and Space,' in Munt (ed.), p.151.

[41](#) Ibid., p. 162.

[42](#) Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), p. 172-3.

[43](#) Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 294 Aronowitz and DiFazio use the phrase 'multidimensionality' in their discussion of class and insist on the plurality of class identities whilst refuting the notion of classlessness. Fresh perspectives on class within labour history can be found in, for instance, Beynon, H and Austrin, T., *Masters and Servants: Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation* (London: Rivers Oram, 1994) and Alexander, P. and Halpern, R (eds.), *Racialising Class, Classifying Race: Labour and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa* (London: MacMillan, 2000). The spatial relations of class are explored in Andrew Herod (ed.), *Organising the Landscape: Geographical Perspectives on Labour Unionism* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). I have already referred to a number of significant texts on class by women earlier in the article, and it is worth mentioning two recent publications on working-class life which represent significant, if somewhat

controversial, contributions to debates on class: Simon J. Charlesworth's *A Phenomenology of Working Class Experience* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Royce Turner's *Coal Was Our Life* (Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University Press, 2000).