There is No Such Thing as an 'Underclass'

Filming the Margins British Cinema versus the Demonisation of Poverty (1989-2023)

Anne-Lise Marin-Lamellet
Université Jean Monnet, Saint-Étienne, France

Abstract. In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's successive governments undertook a complete overhaul of the British class system. Based on the theories of Charles Murray, a controversial American scholar, the official discourse tried to divide the working class into deserving workers and undeserving non-workers, a group of social outcasts gathered under the label of 'underclass.' That rhetoric was taken up by the mass media at the time but some British directors quickly endeavoured to demonstrate the vacuity of such a view and, in a more or less explicit way, questioned this concept, which is a way to criminalise poverty. British films focusing on the underprivileged show that the increasing number of destitute people is not due to their wish to alienate themselves from mainstream society. It is the consequence of degraded socioeconomic conditions. By focusing on how the mass media and the state watch the poor, these films also invite viewers to rethink their own conceptions of the norm and marginality.

Keywords: underclass, margins, poverty, Thatcher, British cinema.

George Orwell once wrote that "England is the most class-ridden country under the sun" ([1957] 1968, 77). That is probably why class and class consciousness—i.e., the feeling of belonging to a specific social class—have always been recurrent issues in both British politics and cinema, notably owing to its social-realist concerns and aesthetics (Lay 2002). This article will focus on the concept of the 'underclass' that became prominent in the late 1980s in the UK and has caused controversies ever since. It will therefore be based on a corpus of films that were released after the term became popular in the British press in 1989, although some films of the late 1970s and early 1980s could appear as harbingers of what was about to happen to the disenfranchised sections of the British working class (*The Black Stuff*, 1978; *That Sinking Feeling*, 1979; *Looks and Smiles*, 1981; *Moonlighting*, 1982; *Meantime*, 1984; *Letter to Brezhnev*, 1985; *My Beautiful Laundrette*, 1985; *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, 1988; *For Queen and Country*, 1988). The corpus ends in 2023 because, even though most of the films cited were released between the 1990s and the mid-2010s—i.e., a time when the term was largely used both in political and media circles, resurging during the 2011 riots (Easton 2011; Riddell 2011)—the questions raised by these films are more topical than ever in 2020s UK. Due to the establishment of a neoliberal consensus that has led both Conservative and New Labour governments to adopt and sometimes extend Thatcherite (anti)social policies since the 1980s, films that represent members of what some might call an 'underclass' come out regularly. However, the article will show how the representation of the socially excluded to this day has in fact rather been a way for film-makers to debunk many stereotypes associated with the concept of the 'underclass' while emphasising how the poor

have been looked at, so that British cinema can be seen as fighting against the demonisation of poverty.

1. 'Underclass,' the origin of a concept

Defining social classes is difficult since it does not only rest on clear, objective social and economic factors such as income, occupation, status or property. It is also based on looser criteria like people's own perception of class position, a rather subjective view related to their lifestyle, social habits and patterns of consumption. Moreover, the perception of one's class position can be strongly influenced, if not partly conditioned, by contemporary political discourses. Class is also a political construct and people are in a way manipulated by their elites, who play a large part in the creation and articulation of social identities. All politicians try to impose a certain vision of society and, in turn, get ordinary people to change the way in which they see things in order to pass their reforms. Depending on their interest, they can opt for a social organisation based on two, three or more groups. They can make up new classes—at least in their speeches—that they can then celebrate or vilify depending on their political agenda (Goldthorpe 1980, 38-63; Marwick 1982, 34-43; Halsey [1978] 1986, 29-32; Cannadine 2000).

This attempt at reorganising the British social hierarchy took place in the UK in the 1980s and early 1990s under Margaret Thatcher's three successive governments (1979-1990). Ironically enough, although Thatcher herself denied the language of class and said that she did not believe in such a "communist concept" (Cannadine 2000, 2), she nonetheless frequently resorted to it in practice to reshape the way in which people thought of themselves and their neighbours. With her, the UK was "subjected to the most sustained and persistent campaign of re-education since Stanley Baldwin" (Cannadine 2000, 162). 'Class struggle' was a taboo phrase because of its Marxist origin, yet she was one of the most divisive Prime Ministers in the twentieth century. She owed part of her success to the fact that she appeared as an anti-Establishment crusader, but the real "enemy within" for her was rather the working class,[1] especially organised labour such as coalminers, who were seen as socialist hardliners to be defeated. In a context of economic and social reforms—privatisation and restructuring of the industrial sector, deregulation of the financial sector, etc.—which accelerated the process of deindustrialisation, thereby deeply affecting workers, some of her government policies could be seen as an attempt to definitively eradicate the language of class by undermining the traditional channels through which it was expressed. For example, the reform of the trade union legislation—with the Employment Acts of 1980, 1982, 1988, 1990 and the Trade Union Act of 1984—made tripartite representation and former collective bargaining agreements obsolete while the right to strike was virtually abolished or at least greatly jeopardised. All of these measures contributed to widening inequalities between

[1] This is how Margaret Thatcher used to call trade unions, likening them to another enemy of the nation, i.e., Argentina during the Falklands War: "We had to fight the enemy without in the Falklands. We always have to be aware of the enemy within, which is much more difficult to fight and more dangerous to liberty" (Wilenius 2004).

British social classes but also within the working class. And as the working class was under attack economically, its existence was also symbolically denied. Based on the theories of Charles Murray, a controversial American scholar and close friend of Thatcher's, the government's official discourse tried to create a rift within the working class in order to weaken its potential political power, if not to annihilate it.

Since the various reforms passed had reinforced the historically heterogeneous nature of the working class, it was easy enough to revive the old Victorian division between workers, although a substantial part of them were rather becoming non-workers owing to skyrocketing unemployment figures. On the one hand, there was a group of skilled workers, employees, craftsmen and shopkeepers who had in some cases benefited from her reforms. These people, seen as hard-working, aspirational, decent, ordinary British people, were to join the then Prime Minister's beloved and all-encompassing Middle England, a pseudo-sociological label standing for the supposedly classless majority (Cannadine 2000, 161, 183-184). On the other hand, there was a group of unskilled or semi-skilled workers who suffered from long-term unemployment and consequently became impoverished due to the massive wave of pit and factory closures, as the country was to move from an industrial to a service-based economy. These non-workers on the brink of proletarianisation were soon put into a group of social outcasts gathered under the label of 'underclass,' a term officially introduced in an article by Charles Murray published in the *Sunday Times* in 1989.

> 'Underclass' is an ugly word, with its whiff of Marx and the *lumpenproletariat*. Perhaps because it is ugly, 'underclass' as used in Britain tends to be sanitised, a sort of synonym for people who are not just poor but especially poor. So let us get it straight from the outset: the 'underclass' does not refer to a degree of poverty but to a type of poverty (Murray 1990, 1).

The definition given by Murray is clear enough. The 'underclass' members are not the lowest stratum of the working class but a class of their own. The will to ostracise the poor becomes even clearer as the article goes on. Murray talks about "the dishonest, undeserving, unrespectable, depraved, debased, disreputable, feckless poor" (1990, 1-2) and he compares the 'underclass' to an epidemic about to contaminate and ravage the UK:

> Britain has a growing population of working-aged, healthy people who live in a different world from other Britons, who are raising their children to live in it, and whose values are now contaminating the life of entire neighbourhoods–which is one of the most insidious aspects of the phenomenon, for neighbours who don't share those values cannot isolate themselves [here we have of course the image of the quarantine to avoid the noxious effects of the disease] [...]. The question facing Britain is the same, haunting question facing the United States: how contagious is the disease? Is it going to spread indefinitely, or will it be self-containing? (Murray 1990, 4, 23).

In Murray's view, the 'underclass' is a sort of tumour leading to an apocalyptic world full of illegitimate children, violent thugs and idle workers, nothing but a minority of layabouts willing to live on welfare alone and that therefore should be isolated.

Contrary to what was implied by Murray, there was nothing new about the appearance of an 'underclass' in the UK that,[2] with hindsight, looks like just another episode in the long history of the demonisation of the working class as shown by John Welshman's (2013) book, subtitled *A History of the Excluded since 1880*. The poor have been frequently stigmatised throughout history and, since the nineteenth century, workers had been accused of all evils (alcoholism, gambling, immorality, violence, etc.). After Thatcher, Blair's governments focused on antisocial behaviour. Whether taken in its medical meaning (unwilling or unable to associate with other people) or in its legal meaning (opposed to laws or customs of an organised community), the word always leads to the same idea: singling out a person or a group thought to be hostile. It can therefore be seen as a perfect complement to the concept of the 'underclass.' Cameron's coalition government also resorted to the old Victorian distinction between deserving and undeserving poor. The same expressions and stereotypes reappeared to refer to those who were once known as the residuum. Some government members talked about a "habit of worklessness" (Helm and Asthana 2010). Iain Duncan Smith, then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, was said to be Norman Tebbit's clone as he encouraged the unemployed to get on the bus (not their bikes) to look for work (Adetunji 2010) and George Osborne, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, argued that unemployment was "a lifestyle choice" (Wintour 2010). As for Rishi Sunak, his action plan to crack down on antisocial behaviour (Gov.uk 2023) was interpreted by some charity organisations as another attack on the homeless and a way to criminalise poverty (Plummer 2023; Sleigh 2023) because of its association of begging with 'causing nuisance on the street.'

However, despite some political responses to Murray's thesis contesting the fact that poverty can be a choice (Field 1990, 37-41), despite numerous studies showing that the poverty trap is the consequence of multiple deprivation[3] and despite the fact that sociological surveys regularly conclude about the mythic aspect of the 'underclass' (Spicker 2002), the coining of the term seems to have been a success and the latter has become an established concept in many British minds,[4] as shown by a mainstream comedy like *Grimsby* (2016), whose main character looks like a potpourri of all the stereotypes associated with the word. The term was increasingly used in the British press in the late 1980s and still is regularly used today although it has somehow been sanitised and purged of its

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[2] He acknowledges the fact that "it is not a new concept." However, what was new for him was that Britain did have an "emerging underclass," following in the steps of the US (1990, 2-3).

[3] Murray's thesis was published with a series of counterpoints written by British political scientists and scholars like Alan Walker who asserts it is useless to "blame the victims" since "what this research and a vast amount of subsequent scientific work shows is *not* that poor people are alienated from society, have different values or behave differently (when we allow for the devastating impact that poverty has on behaviour) but, rather, their remarkable assimilation into the attitudes, values and aspirations of British society" (Walker 1990, 52; original emphasis).

[4] Andrew Adonis and Stephen Pollard (1997, 4) refer to a 1995 Gallup poll which found that 85% of the participants subscribed to the existence of an 'underclass.' Yet, they also mention that "no one virtually confesses to opinion pollsters that they belong [to it]" (9), which is another proof of the mythic aspect of the concept.

more dubious connotations such as animal comparisons and genetic theories. Since the Blair and Cameron years, politicians and newspapers have also used other phrases such as ‘the excluded’ or ‘troubled families’ to refer to the same population (Welshman 2013, 185-227), but the underlying principle remains the same. The concept enables politicians to evade their responsibilities and duties since turning a section of the population into folk devils, not to say monsters, is a way to divide and rule as well as a way to let people think that this state of things cannot be helped, nothing is to be done because you cannot help people who will not help themselves. New pseudo-sociological labels appear regularly—which can be interpreted as a consequence of the eradication of the language of class in British politics—to talk about the members of that supposed ‘underclass:’ ASBOS (referring to the ‘Antisocial Behaviour Orders’ established by Blair’s government in 1998), chavs (a backronym for ‘council housed and violent’) and their Scottish counterparts neds (supposedly standing for ‘non-educated delinquent’), hoodies or NEETs (for ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’). The stigmatising view of poverty remains very much alive in tabloids (Jones 2011; Monbiot 2012) and the ‘underclass,’ albeit sociologically suspicious, has therefore finally become synonymous with long-term unemployment, single-parenting and juvenile delinquency. The ‘underclass’—whose members are easy scapegoats—can therefore be seen as a useful term to talk about a growing minority of people marginalised by mainstream society; in other words, it is the product of a binary organisation of the social system divided into deviance and the norm.

2. The ‘underclass’ on screen

In the midst of such derogatory comments and columns published by newspapers that caught up with government’s rhetoric, some British film-makers decided to use their best weapon to represent what had happened to the working class in the 1980s, maybe because some of them felt that they had not been able to do so at the time.[5] Using their cameras, they started to question this view, which for them was just a way to criminalise poverty. The reaction of these British directors is better understood if one remembers that part of Thatcher’s cost-cutting policy also affected the arts. She is said to have nearly killed off the British film industry (Quart 1993, 23; Hill and Church-Gibson, 1998, 480; Murphy 2000, 1). So there was no love lost between the Prime Minister and the likes of Ken Loach, Mike Leigh or Stephen Frears, to name but just a few of the best-known film directors of the time, even though they may have had different political opinions. British cinema has always been celebrated for its documentary school, ever since Grierson in the 1930s, and social-realism or ‘kitchen-sink realism,’ as it is sometimes referred to, has always accounted for a great part of the British film production, a mode of storytelling that tries to be in touch with the life of common people (Lay 2002, 8-9). It is thus hardly surprising that these British film-makers

[5] Ken Loach’s work, for example, was censored by television channels. He felt that documentaries were more appropriate to keep up to date with workers’ fights as they were occurring (McKnight 1997, 20-25, 99-124; Fuller 1999, 63, 75, 111). The decade was also a particularly difficult time for the British film industry—as the 1970s had been—and few feature films were made overall (Pilard 1996, 194-195; Lemonnier et al. 1999, 175-176).

wished to make a sort of comment on the state of the nation at the time, although their films can belong to various genres. The type of people said to belong to that class by Murray and his followers—the long-term unemployed, single mothers and criminal youths—are largely represented on screen. However, all these films are obviously rather sympathetic towards the predicament of these so-called deviants and thereby rather critical of the concept of a 'separate class' since their characters look exactly the same as the working class used to be represented (Marin-Lamellet 2022, 49-66). Most of these films are not explicitly conceived as a form of straightforward retaliation against the political discourse of their time, except maybe *Riff Raff* (1991), whose very title is an allusion to the kind of vocabulary that was commonly found in certain newspapers when it was released in 1991 and whose opening shot features a rat on a building site symbolising its undeclared workers. Rather, these films offer a counterpoint to a dehumanising political discourse, the aim being to debunk and prove the fallacy of the 'underclass' concept.

Films featuring long-term unemployed people show that, unlike what some disparaging comments insinuated, so-called 'underclass' people are not work-shy. The fact that they are out of work is never a personal choice and most of them are afraid of pauperisation and vagrancy, a prospect that was already felt in the early 1980s (*Looks and Smiles*). *Riff Raff* and *Naked* (1993) insist on the increasing problem of homelessness that earned London the infamous nickname of the 'cardboard city' in the late 1990s because of all the rough sleepers seen in its streets, their estimated number being over 600 in 1999 (*BBC* 1999). The only alternative is to become a squatter because none of them can afford to rent a flat in the private sector and available council houses were drastically reducing at the time due to government's reforms (1980 and 1988 Housing Acts). The setting in these films confirms the impression of precariousness: makeshift flats strewn with rubble, scaffolding that does not hold back workers when they fall, building sites or estates in the process of being demolished (*Riff Raff*; *The Full Monty*, 1997) or located near rubbish dumps (*Shopping*, 1994; *Purely Belter*, 2000). Beyond the sociological relevance, which is that the destitute rarely live in smart residential suburbs, the fact that whole buildings are destroyed by bulldozers is eminently symbolic: the characters literally see their lives being blown apart. Their world is crumbling and the future could not be more uncertain. The piles of rubbish that litter the streets of underprivileged neighbourhoods are a reminder that the 'underclass' is considered the scum of society (*T2: Trainspotting*, 2017; *The Old Oak*, 2023). The precariousness of the excluded is also reflected in the very structure of these films. *Riff Raff* or *Raining Stones* (1993) express atomisation through their dramatic destructuring. Their succession of vignettes or "loose ends of life" symbolise the explosion of all the structures framing the lives of these workers: their lives fall into pieces, disjointed pieces of film (Rousselet 2002, 20, 97).

The jobless really want to work. They are ashamed of their non-working status and are ready to take any kind of jobs to make ends meet or just because forced idleness drives them "mental" as one of them says (*Raining Stones*). These men used to be proud of their manual occupation that gave them a status both in their families and in society as breadwinners. That may explain why some of them dare not tell their wives that they have been made redundant because they are afraid

of losing their respect and esteem (*The Full Monty*; *Secret Society*, 2000). They feel useless and humiliated and are made to feel this way as the few menial jobs that they manage to find are ludicrous. For example, Ray (*Among Giants*, 1998) is hired to paint grey electric pylons in grey. These characters follow Norman Tebbit's advice as they get on their bikes and actively look for work. Some cross the country just for a one-day contract, in order to apply for a job or hoping for better opportunities in the south which is always seen—however wrongly—as an Eldorado (*Riff Raff*; *My Name is Joe*, 1998; *The Navigators*, 2001). These temps or casual workers regularly have to moonlight, partly because they cannot just live on the benefits given by the state, but most of the time because they are not declared by their employers. Ironically, one of the most common stereotypes associated with the 'underclass' is that of benefit fraud or welfare 'scrounging' in the words of tabloids. However, these films show that tax fraud may be more widespread as employers refuse to pay for their employees' social security contributions under the pretext of burdensome bureaucracy (*Riff Raff*; *Ladybird, Ladybird*, 1994; *Among Giants*; *The Navigators*). It is therefore little surprising that the working poor turn to other means of survival, some of which are not always legal. Smuggling is recurrent (*Raining Stones*; *Shooting Fish*, 1998; *My Name is Joe*; *Sweet Sixteen*, 2002) and some become involved with local mobsters—the only people who ironically appear like respectable, successful businessmen in the neighbourhood as they mix legal and illegal activities and the only people who seem ready to give them a chance to prove themselves and give them responsibilities (*Raining Stones*; *Sweet Sixteen*). However, the officially unemployed often become the victims of loan-sharks and drug-dealers who take advantage of their predicament to further exploit them; for example, by forcing them to sell drugs to pay off their debts (*Raining Stones*; *Streetlife*, 1995; *Brassed Off*, 1997; *The Full Monty*; *My Name is Joe*). While this shocks the victims' relatives or friends (*Raining Stones*; *My Name is Joe*), those who exploit them often gain a status and respectability in a society that measures people's worth by their financial success. Yet, these shady characters are perhaps the true representatives of Murray's infamous 'underclass' who make a living out of crime and are seen as traitors by the unemployed, who still consider themselves members of the working class: the poor prey on the poor. The struggle between these two usually ends badly. The mobster-like methods employed by criminals to get their money back lead to homicide (even if unintentional, as in the case of the loan-shark in *Raining Stones*) or suicide (failed in *Brassed Off*, successful in *My Name is Joe*). The poster for *My Name is Joe*—with its hero almost crucified in a high-angle shot—emphasises the ordeal that awaits those who struggle to get out of the poverty trap.

Films that focus on single mothers similarly go against the usual clichés perpetrated by the government or the press. Their status has often led them to be stigmatised by a self-proclaimed respectable society, who sees in their condition the proof of their loose morals, but few of them actually chose to be single mothers (the only exception being *Downtime*, 1997). Most of them dreamt or still dream of Mr Right even though they were abandoned by unscrupulous men who left them when they learnt about their pregnancies. Films do not hide the fact that the problem of teenage pregnancies tends to repeat from one generation to another (*Beautiful Thing*, 1995; *Babymother*, 1998; *Sweet Sixteen*; *All or Nothing*, 2002;

Wild Rose, 2018). But they let viewers imagine the kind of life that can lead sixteen-year-old teenagers to contemplate a quick marriage and a large family as their only prospect because they are already so bored with their lives (*Purely Belter*; *The Navigators*; *Goodbye Charlie Bright*, 2001). Moreover, these young women quickly meet the inconsistency of their age and so their pregnancies rapidly become a burden (*Sweet Sixteen*; *All or Nothing*). The increasing number of single-parent families since the late 1980s is therefore not only due to the general evolution of mentalities and the result of years of permissiveness as was sometimes argued by Thatcher herself (*BBC* 1998). It is above all related to the fact that fathers go missing—another indirect consequence of long-term unemployment that turns young men into immature, drinking and cheating post-adolescents that force mothers to leave behind irresponsible partners who drag the whole family down (*Streetlife*; *Babymother*; *New Year's Day*, 2001; *A Way of Life*, 2004; *Fish Tank*, 2009). Single mothers are also the consequence of broken homes due to men's violence as estrangement becomes the only solution to bring up children in a more peaceful environment (*Bhaji on the Beach*, 1993; *Ladybird, Ladybird*; *There's Only One Jimmy Grimble*, 2001). However, their portrayal does not corroborate the vision of passive victims of the system and of men's cowardice, since all these women are presented as real fighters who try to be role-models for their children. They sometimes must fight to keep custody as social services are always suspicious of the children's well-being and ready to put them into care (*Ladybird, Ladybird*; *A Way of Life*), but they constantly stress the importance of education (*Streetlife*), hard work (*Young Soul Rebels*, 1991; *There's Only One Jimmy Grimble*; *All or Nothing*), spirit of enterprise and resilience (*Beautiful Thing*); in other words, all the values promoted by the government and the norm. Most single mothers are brave and strong characters who are the real heads of their families and they are proud to be self-made women (*Beautiful Thing*; *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*, 2002; *It's a Free World…*, 2007). Those who are dragged into the lurid world of occasional prostitution and/or pornography—soft-core pictures in girlie magazines, hostesses in late-night bars—do so out of necessity to financially support their children (*Streetlife*; *There's Only One Jimmy Grimble*; *Twin Town*, 2001; *The Football Factory*, 2004). The few single mothers who do not keep up with their prerogative are always suffering from extremely bad living conditions and strong social determinisms which make them neglect their children, such as drug-addicts who can no longer cope with their low life and try to get away from it all (*Riff Raff*; *Trainspotting*, 1996; *My Name is Joe*). Overall, films seek to demonstrate that what the norm or mainstream society judges as deviants are in fact just ordinary women who desperately try to come to terms with their hardships and all dream of living a decent life.

Young men who are juvenile delinquents or belong to various subcultures tempted by petty crime have been featuring massively in films about the so-called 'underclass.'[6] These films do not obliterate their criminal acts, yet they never pass ready-made judgement on them, even though these characters sometimes feature in genre films that put contemporary fears and fantasies into perspective such as

[6] Few films allude to the existence of girl gangs, except *There's Only One Jimmy Grimble*, *Red Road* (2006), *Antisocial Behaviour* (2007), *Fish Tank* and *Attack the Block* (2011).

the ‘hoodie horror’ cycle in which the said hoodies terrorise respectable society (*Eden Lake*, 2008; *Harry Brown*, 2009; *Heartless*, 2009; *Cherry Tree Lane*, 2010; *F.*, 2010; *Tower Block*, 2011; *Citadel*, 2012; *Comedown*, 2012; *Community*, 2012; *The Disappeared*, 2012) (Marin-Lamellet 2020). Their prominence can be explained by the obsession with antisocial behaviour that marked the end of Blair’s third term and Cameron’s coalition government. Antisocial behaviour that “must cause or be likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to any person not of the same household” (Crown Prosecution Service 2012) thus regularly features in these films whether it is central to the plot or not and whether it is a one-off or a regular occurrence. It ranges from incivility through petty crime to serious offences. At first sight, the portrayal of these youths may seem to illustrate Murray’s thesis perfectly, often being the product of dysfunctional families. Many seem to be looking for the parental figure that they need in neighbourhoods where adults are either dead (of overdose), jailed or unable to exercise their prerogative because they are drug addicts (*Shopping*; *Purely Belter*; *Sweet Sixteen*), ineffectual single mothers (*New Year’s Day*; *Goodbye Charlie Bright*; *Sweet Sixteen*) or violent or incestuous fathers (*Nil by Mouth*, 1998; *The War Zone*, 1999). However, these youths do not become immoral because they are the hypothetical product of a reproducing ‘underclass’ as in Murray’s nightmarish vision. On the contrary, it is because they want a better future for themselves and their relatives who often happen to belong to the two aforementioned categories (*Heartless*; *Sweet Sixteen*). The depiction of juvenile delinquents in these films shows that it is not so much poverty that leads these youths to crime as the will to get out of it, the will to succeed according to the norm’s standards, i.e., being able to consume (*Sweet Sixteen*; *The Angels’ Share*, 2012; *The Selfish Giant*, 2013).

All the youths who belong to subcultures—and therefore appear as potential threats to mainstream society—suffer from the same angst. Even though some claim that they chose to live a life that some call deviant (drug-taking, joy-riding, ram-raiding, rave-going, etc.) because they like to shock people, their rebellion seems fake (*Shopping*; *Trainspotting*; *Martha: Meet Frank, Daniel and Laurence*, 1998; *Human Traffic*, 1999; *The Acid House*, 1999; *South West 9*, 2001; *Ecstasy*, 2012). Most of them pretend to hate consumerism, but that is not the result of a long thought-out political act. It is rather due to the fact that they have not got the means to consume anyway. Provided that they can earn enough money, all these youths are happy to join the consumer society, like Renton at the end of *Trainspotting* albeit in a cynical way. They all seem to dream—however secretly or unconsciously—of a way to reintegrate mainstream society as their rather conventional hopes and plans show (a long-term girlfriend, a steady job, reliable friends and looking after an aging parent as in *Human Traffic* or *Ecstasy*). If these young people reject the norm’s values, that is because they cannot fully take part in them since happiness and even family seem inextricably linked with purchasing power (*Shopping*; *Under the Skin*, 1997; *Purely Belter*). In those films, the picture of the ideal family watching TV is made of puppets covered with brands and price-tags displayed behind a shop-window, unaffordable items as a reminder to those youths that, although they can watch, they will never touch and reach this dream.

Glass, whether in glass walls or windows, is one of the devices used by films to give a concrete meaning to worsening inequalities in the UK as it perfectly

emphasises this fake proximity with the norm or mainstream society while revealing the reinforcement of invisible yet tangible social boundaries. It is indeed no coincidence if shops whatever their sizes look more and more like fortresses, impregnable strongholds barred with crisscross, heavy gates, metal shutters and equipped with video-surveillance systems to protect them from the assaults of the underprivileged at night since they are not welcome by day, as the suspicious looks from both clients and sales assistants show in *Shopping* or *Purely Belter*. Everything is made to remind them of the fact that the consumer society is not for them as all these devices materialise the frontier between two worlds that live side by side but never mix. This display of unattainable wealth reinforces the feeling of frustration among brand-addicted youths (*Shopping*; *Sweet Sixteen*). They are literally locked out and their will to get inside those buildings can be interpreted as their desire to be integrated into mainstream society. These films thus show that marginality is not due to youths' will to alienate themselves from the norm but due to their rejection by the norm. And the latter's lifestyle remains forever out of reach as some characters die or end up in jail as if they were punished for trying to get above their station (*Shopping*; *Sweet Sixteen*).

Similarly, the basements or the cellars of the estates where these youths live are to be interpreted as metaphors of the semi-clandestine status that has been imposed on them. Obviously, the 'underclass' and the underworld meet in these locations where all sorts of trafficking are carried out and that are used as warehouses for hiding stolen goods. That is why the road to these hidden places is often winding, even labyrinthine, and when questions are asked, young people are always reluctant to explain what goes on there. Yet, these locations are also the consequence of the gradual collapse of the welfare state. They are sometimes close to a hard discount supermarket for people in the neighbourhood who cannot afford to buy their everyday items elsewhere (*Shopping*). They substitute for closed community centres and offer a place where all the important decisions are made during ritual and secret meetings. The basement is a headquarters (*Goodbye Charlie Bright*), a graffiti-covered refuge halfway between a squat and a youth club where people come to drink beers with their friends when their parents become unbearable (*Downtime*).

When films focus on the long-term unemployed, single mothers and juvenile delinquents, they therefore rarely associate poverty and intentional criminality. Even though films do not shy away from poor people with loose ethics, they do not condemn these characters. They rather denounce the criminalisation of poverty going on.

3. Putting the 'underclass' into perspective: Mass media and CCTV in films

British cinema is a sort of witness of the growing demonisation of the underprivileged in several ways. Films try to force their viewers to rethink their own conceptions of the norm and marginality not only by siding with their characters but also by focusing on how the supposedly 'underclass' appears in other media.

The press and television are both seen as channels for dominant discourse (i.e., that of the ruling class) and as suspicious towards poor people. That is why

these media bear the brunt of criticism. Not only do they use people's prejudice in their reports (*The James Gang*, 1998; *The Football Factory*) but they also try to create a climate of fear (*Shopping*; *Heartless*; *F.*) whether it is for political or economic reasons. Youths always appear rather negatively as if their age was already a crime. Young people from subcultures such as ravers (*Weekenders*, 2011; *Ecstasy*) or from council estates (*Antisocial Behaviour*; *Heartless*; *Harry Brown*; *F.*) regularly hit the headlines because of their inclination towards loud music, garish clothes, rowdy behaviour, illicit substances or promiscuity that mark them out as folk devils. Journalists are seen as ambiguous and even hypocritical since they seem to relish in making up moral panics; for example, by describing a wave of crime as an epidemic spread by semi-feral youths (*Shopping*) or obsessing over a potentially murderous mask-wearing gang (*Heartless*). They deliberately spread false rumours and release erroneous information about crime rates (*The James Gang*; *Heartless*). Reports about single mothers who allegedly train their children to steal in supermarkets flourish on television to edify the masses despite the fact that these reports are proved wrong by police inquiry (*The James Gang*). The lecturing tone of journalists and the arrogance of the respectable citizens interviewed are undermined since films show that their behaviour is sometimes no better than that of so-called deviants (greed in *The James Gang*, (il)legal drug use in *Trainspotting* and *Boy A*, 2007). Sensationalism and moralising combine to increase ratings. Television channels especially are shown as scoop hunters who turn a suicide attempt into a real-TV act (*Downtime*). The succession of gruesome stories and lighter news show how little they really care (*The James Gang*; *Purely Belter*; *Antisocial Behaviour*; *Boy A*; *Harry Brown*). The experts invited to debate over poverty are all dogmatic and grandiloquent (*Downtime*; *Heartless*) as the media never try to understand what can lead some people to crime (*Purely Belter*). Yet television is simultaneously clearly identified as one of the main promoters of fame, greed and consumerism, which are the sources of young people's materialistic values and criminal tendencies (*Fish Tank*; *Harry Brown*; *Looking for Eric*, 2009). That may be why some gangs get increasingly obsessed with their image and shoot all their evil acts on their mobile phones in a celebrity-addicted society that feeds on violent web images (*Eden Lake*; *Harry Brown*; *Looking for Eric*; *Attack the Block*).

Supposedly 'underclass' people are well aware of the condescending or hateful ways in which they are portrayed in the media, which leads them to total distrust of the press and further isolation from mainstream society (*Shopping*; *Attack the Block*) as denunciation is encouraged and rewarded (*Boy A*). When they have their say on television, some of them choose to deride interviewers by overacting and exaggerating the behaviour that is expected from them to show their contempt in a satirical way, like the young clubbers who heavily insist on all the drugs that they take to scare the reporter away from the party that they want to go to (*Human Traffic*). Some vent their anger and complain about the way in which they are regularly compared to animals living in a zoo (*Downtime*; *Face*, 1998).[7]

The mass media thus seem to play a big part in creating and reinforcing negative stereotypes in the wake of government policies and in contributing to the

[7] In *Riff Raff*, the employer compares his undeclared workers to rats and pigs.

gradual dehumanisation of the poor. Simultaneously, these films are careful to make subtle portraits of the characters presented as if to remind the audience of the rather one-dimensional sketches that they get to see on television or read about in the newspapers. A film like *Attack the Block* is meant to show how the country could benefit from the energy and street-wisdom of council estate youths provided that it knew what to do with them. However, most of the time, because of name-and-shame tabloid campaigns, former criminals have no hope of rehabilitation whereas they clearly appear as redeemable (*Bradford Riots*, 2006; *Red Road*; *Boy A*). Because of the media's constant obsession with scaring and moralising the country, society never forgets and, therefore, never forgives. Yet, ironically, in a world that is full of greed and promotes individualism, the only people who can still show some empathy or solidarity are often the so-called monsters (*Naked*; *Attack the Block*).

Films that tackle the question of the perception of the 'underclass' also show that the increasing climate of suspicion disseminated by the mass media results in a growing feeling of insecurity that is turning the oldest democracy in the world into an Orwellian police state, notably because of the extensive use of video-surveillance (CCTV). The soaring number of cameras testifies to the rise of a form of war on poverty, albeit symbolic. 'Underclass' people may not be in jail but they still suffer from this oppressive climate that turns everyone into a potential criminal. The irony lies in the fact that they are officially forgotten or ignored by mainstream society, yet they are in fact constantly watched, in every sense of the word. Paradoxically, the more they become socially invisible as they are relegated to ghettoised neighbourhoods, the more they are scrutinised by the cold eye of the camera wherever they go (*Red Road*). CCTV in films shows a society that no longer knows how to look at its poor population. This *mise en abyme* device—a camera shoots another camera—is used to make viewers react and question the voyeuristic aspect of modern society which seems to have an unavowed reason. Arresting the poor and putting them in jail would lead to an open conflict and they would only think of getting out. So it looks simpler to just lock them out, making them believe that they are free to go wherever they please, even though actually testing one's freedom of movement soon proves its limits, as experienced by Tania in *Last Resort* (2000). CCTV was first used in shops and banks—in other words, tempting places for people who cannot afford anything (*Shopping*; *The Football Factory*). Then it gradually covered high streets, pubs, stadia, schools and neighbourhoods (*The James Gang*; *Purely Belter*; *Dirty Pretty Things*, 2002; *Yasmin*, 2004; *F.*). Today, whole cities are wired up as networks are combined and literally turn the UK into the land of Big Brother (*Last Resort*; *Sweet Sixteen*; *Red Road*; *Bradford Riots*; *Outlaw*, 2006; *Fish Tank*).

CCTV truly is one of the tools used by the state and mainstream society to impose its codes on supposedly deviants. Originally designed as a deterrent to crime—which proves unsuccessful despite the possibility to zoom and report on any offender—it is now meant to avoid loitering, which is often associated with the jobless and homeless (*Outlaw*; *Red Road*). It thus forces people to consume if they do not wish to arouse suspicion (*Shopping*). Supermarket security guards quickly ask people who come regularly but buy too few items to justify the purpose of their visits. Paranoia therefore develops rapidly as 'underclass' people look for those cameras wherever they go for fear of being betrayed by an atypical

behaviour. Sometimes rebellious youths play with them in a reckless way (*Shopping*; *Purely Belter*; *Boy A*).[8] Queues in front of cameras enable immigration services or the police to arrest and evict undocumented migrants (*Last Resort*) or council residents since CCTV operators must call them whenever something suspicious is noticed (*Red Road*). Monitor walls are another device used in films to symbolise the growing divide between British social classes as they act as a filter or a protection for the norm never to be in direct contact with supposed deviants. But the fact that the same technology is used both for real criminals and ordinary citizens—at the cost of civil liberties—tends to show a society that is obsessed with its poor because it is afraid of them (*Last Resort*; *Dirty Pretty Things*; *Red Road*). What films show is therefore the paradoxical reinforcement of all sorts of boundaries at a time when Margaret Thatcher had famously wished to "roll back the frontiers of the state." But if the welfare state has more or less vanished as public sector services keep closing down (*Face*), it seems that the punitive aspect of the state in the form of CCTV, police and private security subcontractors has been strengthened despite Tony Blair's claim to reunite the country under one nation.[9]

4. Conclusion

When British films represent the poorest sections of the UK, they do so in order to question viewers' assumptions and lead them to conclude that, whatever some politicians and newspapers may think, there is no such thing as an 'underclass.' The people who are called deviants and end up being criminalised because they are poor are those who, for whatever reason, come into conflict with the norm's values. The long-term unemployed and now the working poor represent the rising precariat (Standing 2011), i.e., casual jobs in a gig economy (epitomised by *Sorry We Missed You*, 2019) whereas Middle England has rested on steady, full-time jobs for decades. Single mothers clash with the nuclear family ideal that was advocated by Thatcher and has been the norm for centuries. Juvenile delinquents or youths from subcultures are a reminder that human existence should not be reduced to hyper-consumerism and the standardised commodified lifestyle that it generates. In any case, all these people in films do not see themselves as marginal and do not wish to be perceived as such. Their demonisation and rejection is mostly due to the fact that they embody the norm's worst nightmare in an increasingly divided society. The use of the term 'underclass' may have declined in political circles but the regular release of such films is a reminder of the continuation of Thatcherite attitudes and policies by later governments when dealing with the poor. Films indirectly highlight the discrepancy that there is between more emollient official speeches on the one hand, and harsh, not to say

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[8] Yet films show that thieves are not always those that one might expect as little old ladies who bear all the outward signs of respectability prove to be more astute than 'underclass' people in the cat and mouse game that they play with sales assistants as shown by the precursor film *Moonlighting*.

[9] In the 1997 Labour Manifesto, Tony Blair stated: "I want a Britain that is one nation, with shared values and purpose, where merit comes before privilege, run for the many not the few, strong and sure of itself at home and abroad" (Press Association 2012).

punitive, policies on the other, the victims of which can be seen on screen. Despite some Prime Ministers' voluntarist stances such as Theresa May's wish to return to one-nation Conservatism in 2016 (May 2016) or Boris Johnson's "levelling up" plan announced in 2021 (Johnson 2021), their words have been contradicted by their Chancellors' uninterrupted austerity policies. Rishi Sunak, who was castigated for his awkward attempt to make conversation with a homeless man in a soup kitchen (Savage 2022), was also accused of not doing enough for the poor (*BBC* 2022), a growing section of the population due to the rising cost of living and inflation that the UK has experienced in recent times (Partington and Allegretti 2022). That fear of pauperisation shows in the numerous pay strikes that have been initiated by various trade associations since 2022. Othering the poor (Cadwalladr 2011, 25) is therefore just a desperate attempt to make them remote from or alien to mainstream society's comfortable world because more and more people, whatever their social background, are scared of pauperisation and declassing. Hence the phantasmal nature of the 'underclass'—which is always someone else's class (Adonis and Pollard 1997, 4, 9)—to try to keep the wolves at bay. By putting on screen an alternative representation of poverty, these films therefore ask the question of what should be considered the most shocking fact: being called a marginal or being part of those who marginalise a whole section of society?

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