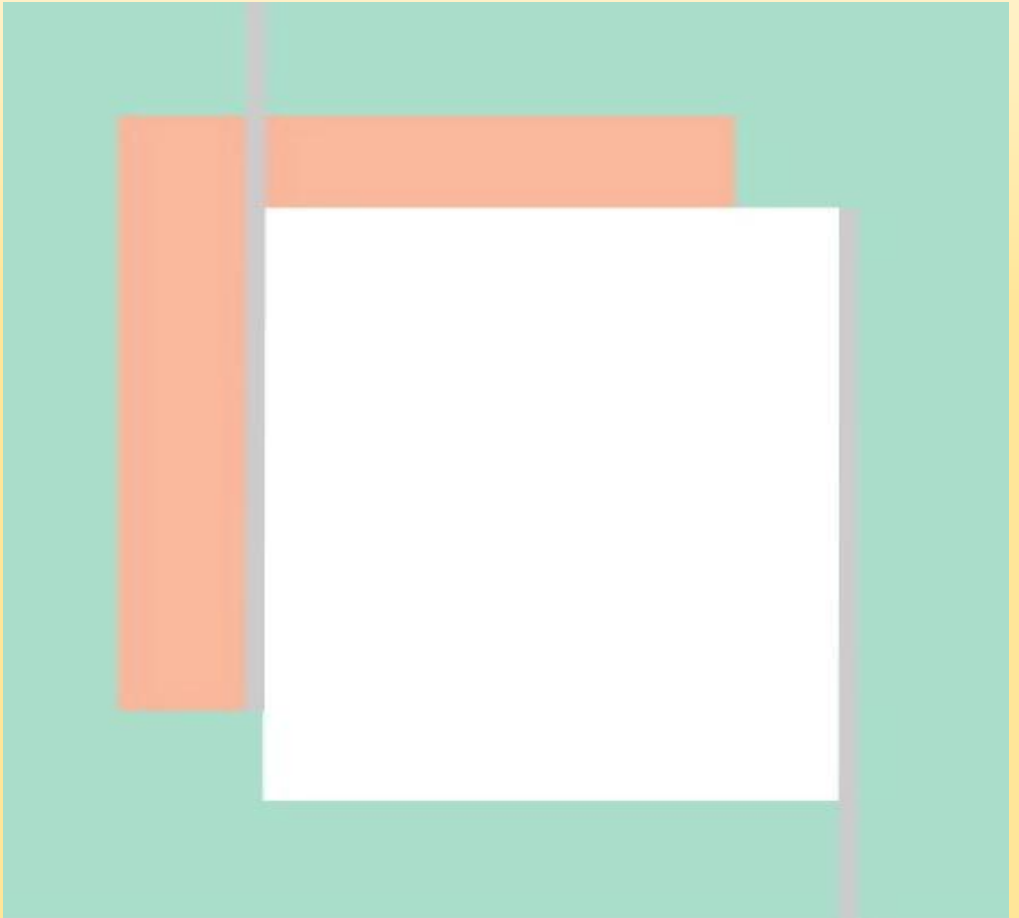


The ESSE Messenger



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The Flight from the Self

Archetypes in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*

Edit Gállá

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Abstract. Evelyn Waugh's first Catholic novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, is widely considered a turning point in his literary career due to the significant shift in theme, style and tone. Many critics deplore the novel's perceived nostalgia, sentimentality and romanticism as well as its treatment of Catholicism. However, it is important to consider that the novel is presented as the memoir of its narrator-protagonist, Charles Ryder, and that his viewpoint is pagan, not religious. Deploying Jungian literary criticism, this paper argues that Ryder can be seen as an archetypal figure, the trickster, whose main characteristic is his unconsciousness. Although his relationship with the Catholic Flyte family provides him with opportunities to leave behind his primitive stage of consciousness, he fails to achieve psychic wholeness. While Sebastian, who stands for the child archetype, presents him with the chance to realise himself through recognising his future potential as an artist, Julia, who embodies his anima, offers him the opportunity to re-establish connection with his feminine side, and learn to be compassionate. However, Ryder, due to his obtuse, envious and duplicitous nature, which makes him similar to the trickster, forfeits these chances by betraying the trust and affection of the Flytes. On the other hand, he receives punishment for his spiteful behavior. This paper concludes that what Waugh really succeeded in portraying in the novel is not so much the Catholic outlook on life as the essentially primitive mentality of the outwardly civilized modern man.

Keywords: Evelyn Waugh, twentieth-century English novel, Catholicism, Jungian literary criticism, archetypes.

1. Introduction

In twentieth-century English literary criticism, Evelyn Waugh was first acknowledged and appreciated as a writer of satirical novels. Later, he was regarded as a Catholic novelist; however, many critics persisted in their opinion that he should have continued in his earlier satirical vein, instead of concerning himself with Catholicism in his fiction (Macaulay 1984, 255; Stannard 1984, 43; Willett 1984, 94). The novel that made critics label him as a Catholic novelist was *Brideshead Revisited*. There was also a wide critical consensus that *Brideshead* "marked a turning point in Waugh's career" (Stannard 1984, 37) as this was his first novel to convey his religious convictions (Carens 1966, 16; Littlewood 1983, 139; Stannard 1984, 4). Critics that were dissatisfied with, or even outraged by, *Brideshead* raised various objections to his style, attitude and theme in this novel. Firstly, they took exception to its cloying sentimentality (Carens 1966, 106), nostalgia (Connolly 1984, 300; O'Donnell 1984, 257) and outdated romanticism (Littlewood 1983, 87; Macaulay 1984, 253; Stannard 1984, 7). Secondly, they chastised Waugh for his snobbery (O'Donnell 1984, 258; Stannard 1984, 5; Wilson 1984, 246) and excessive admiration for the aristocracy, a social class with

which he seemed to equate Catholicism, thus presenting Catholics as an exclusive club for the elite (Carens 1966, 108; Myers 1991, 70). Thirdly, critics also castigated Waugh for destroying the lives of his Catholic characters and condemning them to a pathetic and miserable worldly existence (Kermode 1984, 285; O'Donnell 1984, 256; Myers 1991, 114). Finally, Carens (1966, 105) also draws attention to a serious structural imbalance in the novel.

Some of Waugh's later Catholic novels, such as *The Sword of Honour* trilogy (1952, 1955, 1961), fared much better at the hands of critics. The protagonist of the trilogy, Guy Crouchback, is receptive to spiritual enlightenment and becomes truly religious by the end of the third novel. Even though his actions and choices may be despised by society, he is considered to act in accordance with the demands of his faith, which sometimes involves sacrifices that seem unattractive, unusual or even twisted to non-believers (Littlewood 1983, 103-104). There is no reason why *Brideshead* cannot be interpreted in the same vein. Indeed, some critics justify the seemingly inexplicable and arbitrary suffering of the Catholic Flyte family with the argument that the demands of religion and the workings of providence are often incompatible with everyday notions of health, happiness or social ties (Carens 1966, 30; Littlewood 1983, 135-136, 168; Myers 1991, 73, 77, 112). Nevertheless, there is an important difference between Guy Crouchback, the hero of *The Sword of Honour* trilogy, and Charles Ryder, the protagonist of *Brideshead*: the former accepts faith and undergoes significant psychological development, whereas the latter is completely pagan (Reed 1984, 239-240) and is reluctant either to believe in God or to develop as a person (Davis 1992, 22). Ryder's arrested psychic development and "the self-betraying character of style" (Myers 1991, 93) in his reminiscences seem to demand a psychoanalytical investigation, which has rarely been applied to this novel. Accordingly, this paper deploys Jungian literary criticism as the method of analysis.

Despite the potentially transformative power of Ryder's relationship with the Flytes, the protagonist fails to achieve harmony between his conscious and unconscious self and to attain a higher level of consciousness through the archetypes that he projects onto the Flytes. This is due to his essentially primitive and undifferentiated state of consciousness, which is the main characteristic of the trickster figure. This paper argues that the novel's narrator-protagonist, Charles Ryder, can be interpreted as a trickster figure in many respects, while he unconsciously projects other archetypes onto two members of the Flyte family with whom he is involved in an intimate relationship: Sebastian and Julia. For Ryder, who stands for the trickster, the young Sebastian personifies the child god and Julia incarnates his anima.

2. Theoretical background: Jungian archetypes

This paper applies Jungian literary criticism as the methodology of the literary analysis of *Brideshead Revisited*. There are two main reasons for this choice of method. Firstly, both Jung and Waugh had an affinity for Romanticism, even though they did not openly avow this preference. Baird believes that "[Jung's] predilection for Romantic art marks him as a Romantic in the brief history of psychology" (1992, 50). Jung's Romantic leanings are also apparent in his

insistence that imagination and creativity have crucial importance in human life, both on the individual and social level (Jacoby 1992, 64). Waugh's latent Romanticism is perhaps less obvious. Nevertheless, Littlewood argues that "the tone that is apparently contemptuous of romanticism may conceal a germinal romanticism of its own" (1983, 70). According to Littlewood, Waugh's dandified attitude and ironic tone mask a deep-seated desire to escape the banality of everyday life, and it is this escapism oriented "either towards the past or towards the exotic" that bespeaks his Romanticism (70). Secondly, in *Brideshead Revisited*, the protagonist himself as well as the two characters with whom he develops an intimate relationship—Sebastian and Julia—seem to be presented as archetypal images. Also, these characters appear to fulfill certain unconscious psychological functions in each other's lives, which is a characteristic feature of archetypal images or projections.

In Jung's theory, two layers of the unconscious are distinguished: the personal unconscious, which is the repository of suppressed fears and desires, and a deeper layer called the collective unconscious, which is "the creative primal ground of man's mental life" (Jacoby 1992, 61). The collective unconscious is the territory of "dynamic contents" that cannot be directly perceived or represented: these are the primal images or archetypes. The only indication of their hypothetical existence is their manifestation in such spontaneous products of the human imagination as dreams, myths and fairy tales, which are populated with archetypal images. In short, the archetypes, which are invisible underlying patterns, generate the archetypal images, which are perceptible forms (61-62). Essentially, an archetypal image is a symbol (62). In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1969), Jung introduces a number of distinct archetypes; the following will be described in this section: the anima, the child and the trickster. These basic archetypes will be used for the character analysis of Ryder and the two Flyte siblings who play a crucial part in his life.

The anima can be approximately defined as "the feminine and chthonic part of the souls" (Jung 1969, 59). Describing several visions experienced by members of religious orders, Jung finds that God repeatedly appears as a divine pair, as a male and a female figure (63-65). He draws the conclusion that the unconscious content that gives rise to such visions is "the syzygy motif, and it expresses the fact that a masculine element is always paired with a feminine one" (63). Jung asserts that this motif of a pair of lovers or parental pair "is a fundamental psychic factor of great practical importance" (65). The female figure in the pair is the anima.

In the male child, the anima is first equated with a mythologized, perfect mother. However, as the child matures and discovers that his mother is only an ordinary woman and not a deity, his disappointment at no longer being "the son-hero of a divine mother" makes him repress this image into his unconscious. Nevertheless, this unconscious content retains its dormant power and may be activated and projected onto the first woman who makes an extraordinary impression on him (Jung 1969, 67-69). Therefore, the mythologized and then rejected mother figure haunts the man's love life inasmuch as he keeps projecting this anima content onto his female partners: "The love life of a man reveals the psychology of this archetype in the form either of boundless fascination, overvaluation, and infatuation, or of misogyny in all its gradations and variants,

none of which can be explained by the real nature of the ‘object’ in question, but only by a transference of the mother complex” (69). The anima can only assume definite form when it is projected, but then it has definite characteristics (69-70).

This archetype has a crucial role in a man’s psychic life whenever emotions come into play. A “strongly constellated” anima has an adverse effect on a man’s character, making him “touchy, irritable, moody, jealous, vain, and unadjusted” (Jung 1969, 70). These men are generally disgruntled and disseminate their discontent to others. Jung warns of the dangers of the “permanent loss of the anima” in men of middle age. In these cases, men experience a loss “of vitality, of flexibility, and of human kindness.” This leads to “premature rigidity, crustiness, stereotypy, fanatical one-sidedness, obstinacy, pedantry, or else resignation, weariness, sloppiness, irresponsibility, and finally a childish *ramollissement* with a tendency to alcohol.” Therefore, it is imperative to reconnect with the collective unconscious in middle age (71-72).

The child or “child god” archetype is also very common and takes various shapes. The child motif can manifest itself as an elf or dwarf, which embodies “the hidden forces of nature.” It may take the shape of the little metal man of the alchemists in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Jung enumerates several examples when the figure of a young boy, the *puer aeternus*, either appeared in the visions of hermits or was featured in ghost stories and other fiction. This child figure is often “of evil omen” (1969, 158-159). Imaginary children and homunculi sometimes appear in the hallucinations of the mentally ill. However, the most important manifestation of the child archetype takes place during the therapy of neurosis, in which case the appearance of the child figure marks the beginning of the process of individuation, which is defined as “the maturation process of personality, induced by the analysis of the unconscious” (159). The specific shapes that it may take include “the jewel, the pearl, the flower, the chalice, the golden egg, the quaternity, the golden ball.” The child belongs in the type of motif called “the treasure hard to attain” (160).

Jung interprets the child archetype as “the preconscious, childhood aspect of the collective psyche” (1969, 161). However, the child can also present itself as the manifestation of an individual’s former self because “certain phases in an individual’s life can become autonomous, can personify themselves” (161). This personification of the former self occurs when the person has radically dissociated himself from his original self in an attempt to refashion himself into a completely different persona for the sake of realizing some ambition. In this case, the person has become artificial and needs a confrontation with his real self (161). Even though the child may sometimes represent a former phase of life, it essentially represents a potential future. Therefore, its appearance often presages future developments in the individual’s life. It represents mediation, wholeness, healing and the reconciliation of opposites, which is why symbols of wholeness such as the circle, sphere and quaternity are often associated with it (164).

The child may also manifest itself as a child god or a young hero. These figures can be recognized by “the miraculous birth and the adversities of early childhood – abandonment and danger through persecution” (Jung 1969, 165-166). The wonders and threats surrounding the child are allegorical: they represent the psychic genesis of the self and the precariousness of the psychic process of achieving wholeness in an environment that hinders the individuation process at

every turn. The greatest achievement of the child hero is to defeat “the monster of darkness,” which symbolizes the “triumph of consciousness over the unconscious,” a crucial distinguishing feature of humankind (167). Paradoxically, the child is both vulnerable, helpless, abandoned and persecuted, on the one hand, and the possessor of superhuman and even divine powers, on the other. In fact, the child embodies our compelling urge to realize ourselves. This urge grows into an irresistible and invincible compulsion, even though it seemed unimportant in the beginning (170). An additional feature of the child is its hermaphroditism that symbolizes “the creative union of opposites” (174). The hermaphrodite can be regarded as a “symbol of the unity of personality” since it is also a primordial and unconscious projection of man’s wholeness, the reconciliation of the conscious and unconscious personality (175). Furthermore, the child encompasses both beginning and end, so it is “an initial and a terminal creature.” Thus, it represents both the unconscious state of infancy and the anticipation of life after death (178). Jung summarizes the importance of the child archetype as follows: “The ‘eternal child’ in man is [...] an incongruity, a handicap, and a divine prerogative; an imponderable that determines the ultimate worth or worthlessness of a personality” (179).

Finally, the archetype of the trickster, when it is personified, is a clownish figure who is often duped or cheated. He likes playing underhanded tricks and mischievous pranks on others. He can change his appearance as his nature is partly animal, partly divine. Therefore, he is both subhuman and superhuman. Because he is often subjected to various forms of torture, his ceaseless suffering makes him similar to a savior figure. Even though he is, on the whole, a negative character, he sometimes succeeds in accomplishing heroic feats through sheer stupidity. The shaman or the medicine man of tribal cultures bears a strong resemblance to the trickster since the shaman also often plays spiteful tricks on others and then is subjected to the revenge of his former victims. Moreover, the techniques used by the shaman as part of his vocation also cause him considerable unpleasantness or even suffering. That is why the shaman is also seen as a healer: his suffering makes him a savior-like figure who can relieve the suffering of others. As a rough approximation to, and a forerunner of, a savior, the trickster has the power to change meaningless actions or objects into meaningful ones (Jung 1969, 255-256). In all ages, the trickster is present in various cultural forms: from picaresque novels to carnivals, from magic rites of healing to superstitious fears and religious ecstasy, this archetype reasserts its relevance to human life.

However, it is unconsciousness that is the trickster’s main characteristic. The most clear-cut manifestation of the trickster is the symbolic figure that embodies “an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level” (Jung 1969, 260). Jung argues that the Winnebagos, whose trickster-cycle is the most obvious example of the manifestation of this archetype, were only able to conceptualize this archetypal content because they had already distanced themselves from it. They had left behind the “earlier, rudimentary stage of consciousness” (261) represented by the trickster figure; therefore, they were able to contemplate it with amusement as well as contempt (263). The trickster’s unconsciousness is evidenced by Winnebago tales in which he does not recognize his body parts as belonging to himself and uses them as extraneous objects. For example, he transforms his male

member into various kinds of beneficial plants. This instance also refers to “his original nature as a Creator.” Despite his malicious pranks and extraordinary obtuseness, the trickster is not fundamentally evil. His appalling actions derive from his unconsciousness and lack of integrity (263-264). Even though he is limited by his animal consciousness, he lacks the instinct and gracefulness of animals. Nevertheless, he is able to learn. Jung contends that the survival of the trickster figure is due to the fundamental continuity of a primitive stage of consciousness: “[In Europe today,] [o]utwardly people are more or less civilized, but inwardly they are still primitives. Something in man is profoundly disinclined to give up his beginnings, and something else believes it has long since got beyond all that” (269).

3. Character analysis

The apparent structural imbalance in the novel that devotes the larger portion of the memoir to the youthful romance with Sebastian can be reinterpreted as Ryder’s entrapment in an early stage of personal development. He remains an altogether unconscious person who fails to mature with the passing years, and this unconsciousness associates him with the trickster archetype. More than half of the novel—subtitled *The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder*, hence presented as a memoir—deals with the homoerotic friendship of Charles and Sebastian, their Oxford days and various sojourns together at Brideshead. Carens (1966, 105) points out the lopsidedness that this generates: “Though Waugh [...] prepares for Julia’s emergence in the next book, he has, with a nostalgic sense of loss and regret [...] expended himself more on the Oxford section than on Ryder’s crucial love affair with Julia.” Carens contends that “what ought really to be the center of the novel” is “the religious conflict engendered by the love of Julia and Ryder.” This is certainly a valid point of view provided that the novel is primarily interpreted as Waugh’s first Catholic novel, in which he attempted, for the first time, to “represent man more fully, which, to me, means only one thing, man in his relation to God” (quoted in Littlewood 1983, 139) as Waugh stated in an article. *Brideshead Revisited* is commonly regarded as the work that marked him as “a Roman Catholic novelist” (139). This kind of interpretation insists on the overriding importance of the specific work’s chronological position and biographical context. Approached from a different perspective, in this case, from the ‘timeless’ point of view of archetypal criticism, the novel seems to shift its emphasis from the issue of Catholicism to the self-revelatory qualities of the hero’s narrative. From the angle of Jungian literary criticism, the very structure, the space and time devoted to one stage of life as opposed to another, is an implicit disclosure of the narrator-protagonist’s personality. Therefore, by dwelling altogether too long on these youthful days, the narrator betrays his reluctance and even inability to leave them behind.

The trickster is constantly tortured, and his malevolent jokes often backfire on him; similarly, Ryder is vexed by a deep-seated envy of the aristocratic Flytes and, as a result, he plays sly and malicious tricks on them that only result in exacerbating his own aggravation. Ryder’s relationship with the Flytes is riddled with uneasy tensions from the beginning due to Ryder’s envy and duplicity.

An interpretation that satisfactorily accounts for the peculiarities of Ryder's relations with the Flyte family is provided by Hepburn, who contends that Charles is a social climber who uses sex—homosexual and heterosexual—to become a member of the aristocratic family. His idea of love is inextricably bound up with the idea of material possessions, which is why he is simultaneously besotted with the family mansion and Sebastian's, then Julia's, beauty. For him, love and wealth are inseparable (Hepburn 2007, 247). Moreover, there is an aura of the despicable and servile hanger-on around Ryder.

He shows various signs of resentment at the early stage of their relationship, although these are carefully concealed from Sebastian. When Sebastian lets him know in a letter that he is going to spend the holidays in his father's Venetian "palace of sin," Charles's frustrated fury is triggered as he contrasts his own gloomy and constricted middle-class existence with the charmed life of the aristocratic Sebastian: "I tore the stiff sheet across and let it fall into the basket, and gazed resentfully across the grimy gardens and irregular backs of Bayswater [...]" (Waugh 1981, 37). Moreover, when he finally receives a telegram from his friend, calling him to Brideshead on account of an accident, Ryder is secretly gratified by Sebastian's misfortune and is hoping for the worst. Setting eyes on Sebastian who has only suffered a minor injury, Charles is "conscious [...] of the predominating emotion of vexation, rather than of relief, that I had been bilked of my expectation of a grand tragedy" (39). Whereas Ryder has embarked on his first stay at Brideshead to gloat over Sebastian's suffering, he is bitterly disappointed at the sight of the only slightly injured but outrageously pampered youth, whose nurse and entertainer he becomes by eagerly rushing to the scene of the supposed "grand tragedy."

Yet this incident is only the first in a series of underhanded maneuvers that he performs, trickster-fashion, to harm his friend and gloat over his suffering. During his first summer stay with Sebastian in Brideshead, the friends begin to play at wine tasting: "it was during those tranquil evenings with Sebastian that I first made a serious acquaintance with wine and sowed the seed of that rich harvest which was to be my stay in many barren years" (Waugh 1981, 42). This statement seems innocent enough, conveying, on the surface, no more than a sense of sentimental nostalgia. However, in the light of Sebastian's swift and catastrophic descent into chronic alcoholism, it strikes a sinister chord. The seed that was sowed during these mock wine tastings, which involved much playful shifting about of various glasses so that the tasting of each bottle had to be started afresh until all the bottles were empty, was Sebastian's incipient dependence on drink and the harvest his utter debasement. Ryder also plays on Sebastian's childish predilection for fantasy by engaging in a game of likening each wine to graceful animals or fairy-tale creatures, such as a gazelle, a leprechaun or a unicorn (43)—a dangerous game that encourages his spoilt friend's escapist tendencies. Ryder soon presages Sebastian's doom in a tone of grim satisfaction: "But the shadows were closing round Sebastian" (72). Indeed, within eighteen months of their summer wine tastings, Sebastian is sent down from Oxford due to drunkenness and involvement in scandalous escapades, then packed off to a Levantine tour. Contrary to his mother's hopes, during these travels, he sinks even deeper into chronic inebriation. His return to the family home only marks another stage in his deterioration, partly due to Ryder's slyness. Divested of any money of

his own and barred from consuming alcohol in the house, Sebastian asks Ryder for a loan. With scarcely any reluctance, Ryder gives him enough money to drink himself to a stupor. He also inwardly ridicules the unsuspecting Flytes, who think that their precautions and a day spent outdoors will prove beneficial to Sebastian, and gloatingly anticipates their disappointment.

Even though some of Ryder's ploys cause real and irrevocable damage to the Flytes, Ryder, like the trickster, is punished for his actions by the people that he harmed. When Sebastian returns drunk from the hunting, Ryder describes the atmosphere at dinner: "A blow, expected, repeated, falling on a bruise, with no smart or shock of surprise, only a dull and sickening pain and the doubt whether another like it could be borne" (Waugh 1981, 87). Sebastian cuts a sufficiently pathetic and debased figure to make Ryder satisfied with the cunning stratagems that he deployed to make Sebastian a drunkard. Sensing that the family suspects him of giving Sebastian money, Ryder decides to quietly take his leave. However, Lady Marchmain confronts him with his duplicitous behavior, leaving him with a memory of intense mortification instead of triumph: "I simply don't understand how anyone can be so callously wicked [...] Did you hate us all the time? I don't understand how we deserved it" (87-88). Ryder is furious and vows never to return to Brideshead. Even Sebastian, whom Ryder considers a simpleton, has caught the drift of Ryder's malicious motives in striking up a close friendship with him, and gently rebukes him for his ill will:

'I'm sorry, Charles. I told you I was still drunk. If it's any comfort to you, I absolutely detest myself.'

'It's no comfort at all.'

'It must be a little, I should have thought' (Waugh 1981, 70).

Years later, Ryder is also punished when the affair with Julia ends abruptly. When the dying Lord Marchmain, partial to his beautiful daughter, hints at the possibility of leaving his estate to Julia and Charles, her potential future husband, Ryder is eager to seize the opportunity to appropriate the coveted mansion and playing a part in disinheriting the other Flyte siblings. He strongly opposes the suggestion that the dying man should be given the last rites. Yet, due to his trickster-like clumsiness and stupidity, he effectively sabotages his relationship with Julia by fiercely and persistently attacking her religious beliefs and aggravating the unspoken conflict between the dying atheist and his Catholic family, who would like him to take the last rites but are unsure whether they have the right to interfere. His heated protest, which seemingly expresses his growing antipathy to Catholicism, is in effect, a sign of his stupidity and clumsiness. He evinces an atrocious lack of tact and compassion when he launches a direct attack against the religious faith of the Flytes: "It would be an outrage [...] I've had a certain respect for their Church up till now. If they do a thing like that I shall know that everything stupid people say about them is quite true – that it's all superstition and trickery" (Waugh 1981, 167). This is another self-revelatory speech, in which Ryder issues a childish threat and unwittingly groups himself with "stupid people."

In a risky maneuver, Ryder attempts to exercise his imaginary authority as Julia's future husband and potential heir to Brideshead, to defeat the siblings' claims to their own father and family traditions. Implicitly, he also forces Julia to

choose between her family and him. When Julia breaks up with Ryder, her decision is motivated as much by religious guilt as by the recognition of his spiteful nature. She realizes that Ryder's hectoring zeal in the matter of the last rites masked envy and vengefulness, which he has sought to satisfy through his affair with her. By ending their romantic relationship, Julia deprives him of the possession of Brideshead. In both instances, Ryder manages to cause great distress to the Flytes, yet he, too, is made to feel considerably chastised and aggrieved as a result.

Ryder, like the trickster, dwells in a primitive, rudimentary stage of consciousness, which can be most clearly seen in his penchant for magical thinking. During the sea voyage, he keeps discovering spurious cause-and-effect relationships between his wishes and occurrences in the material world. For instance, impatient with the small talk of the company at dinner, he "summoned cataracts and hurricanoes, and as if by conjury the call was immediately answered" (Waugh 1981, 127). Despite his elitist pretensions, Ryder is still in the thrall of infantile fantasies, thwarted at the stage of "premodern literalism and supernaturalism," in which his psychic projections are equated with material reality (Tacey 2009, 25-26). Another instance of Ryder's magical thinking is his attribution of Lord Marchmain's deathbed repentance to his own half-hearted prayer: "Then I knew that the sign I had asked for was not a little thing [...] and a phrase came back from my childhood of the veil of the temple being rent from top to bottom" (Waugh 1981, 174). These examples show that Ryder, outwardly a sophisticated artist and gentleman, is an essentially primitive man, who cannot let go of a childish view of the world.

In Ryder's unconscious, Sebastian represents the Child, an archetype with many alluring characteristics. The child symbolizes a potential future. It is a harbinger of a development of the self, which is the result of the union of conscious and the newly liberated pre-conscious—or primitive—contents (Jung 1969, 164). The charming Sebastian allows the young Charles, who is lonely, inexperienced and comes from a loveless and bereaved family, to indulge in a nostalgia for a carefree childhood: "it seemed as though I was being given a brief spell of what I had never known, a happy childhood, and though its toys were silk shirts and liqueurs and cigars and its naughtiness high in the catalogue of grave sins, there was something of nursery freshness about us that fell little short of the joy of innocence" (Waugh 1981, 23). For Charles, Sebastian satisfies a strong desire to enjoy youth and experience sensual pleasure. By growing "younger daily with each adult habit" (23), Charles feels as though he started life anew and changed his destiny that used to look glum and suffocating. His life indeed takes a new direction when, under the spell of Sebastian's flamboyant lifestyle and Baroque family mansion, he decides to pursue an artistic career instead of an academic one. The vocation that he finds is a mixture of his conscious, snobbish academic self and his unconscious, playful artistic self: he becomes an architectural painter, preserving the beauty of old mansions on canvas.

A substantial part of Sebastian's charm comes from his androgynous beauty, which links him with the hermaphrodite, a significant aspect of the child archetype. As "a symbol of the creative union of opposites" (Jung 1969, 174), Sebastian as the 'child' merges the most attractive features of both sexes since he offers beauty while not menacing with the radical otherness of the female: "He

was entrancing, with that epicene beauty which in extreme youth sings aloud for love and withers at the first cold wind” (Waugh 1981, 16). His fragile beauty is also evocative of the precarious survival of the child hero, who is constantly at risk of annihilation. The child’s vulnerability and exposure to adversity symbolize the challenges of attaining psychic wholeness. Indeed, as Sebastian’s physical attractiveness diminishes, so does Ryder’s ability to unite his conscious and unconscious personality. Like Sebastian, the hermaphrodite represents an aim that has not been achieved; it also pacifies and heals (Jung 1969, 174).

For Charles, the internal conflict about his future vocation is temporarily resolved by his involvement with the beautiful young man. Sebastian, as a manifestation of the child archetype, enters Ryder’s life at a point when an exaggerated and snobbish intellectualism is threatening to engulf the instinctive part of his self. Surrounded by priggish and conceited ‘embryo dons,’ who explain all the people and experiences that they encounter in the idiom of Modernist theories, Charles begins to suffer from stifling his emotional and sensuous faculties. As Jung (1969, 162-163) explains, the child archetype is a counterbalance to the overwhelming dominance of the intellect. Significantly, their first interaction takes place in the quad onto which Ryder’s windows open. This quadrangle, created by four buildings, is strongly evocative of the quaternity, which is a symbol of wholeness and one of the representations of the child who unites opposites.

Since the child symbolizes man’s potential for self-realization, the severance from Sebastian foreshadows Ryder’s inability to break out of the prison of his unconsciousness. He renounces and condemns illusion and determines to stay realistic and adapt to the world. As a necessary corollary of this stage, he also “turns away from the unconscious as from a source of weakness and temptation – the field of moral and social defeat” (Jung 2005, 43). Ryder embarks on the road to social success but also spiritual vacuity. Although it seems that Ryder has found his vocation as an artist, it becomes clear in the opening paragraphs of Book 3 that he has lost his way. His art, which amounts to creating mementos of condemned buildings, is as lifeless as himself: “For nearly ten dead years [...] I was borne along a road outwardly full of change and incident, but never during that time, except sometimes in my painting [...] did I come alive as I had been during the time of my friendship with Sebastian. I took it to be youth, not life, that I was losing” (Waugh 1981, 116). Sebastian connected him to the unconscious and by parting from him, he also cut ties with his own psychic undercurrents. Thus, instead of moving on to a higher level of consciousness, Charles becomes a stagnant, thwarted personality. Ryder’s art soon deteriorates into professional workmanship. He describes his career in terms of death, decay and parasitism: “I was called to all parts of the country to make portraits of houses that were soon to be deserted or debased; indeed, my arrival seemed often to be only a few paces ahead of the auctioneer’s, a presage of doom” (116). He travels to the jungles of South America for new inspiration: however, for the trickster, who lacks instinct, the wilderness offers only physical hardship and constant torment.

Because of her extraordinary beauty and mysterious sadness, Julia is an ideal target for Ryder’s anima projections. Before the reencounter with Julia, Ryder is a man who has completely lost touch with his inner woman, a state which is characterized by “a diminution of vitality, of flexibility, and of human kindness”

(Jung 1969, 71). He vexes his wife with laconic answers and sardonic repartees; inwardly, he indulges in more scathing satire. Whatever his wife says or does, is interpreted by Ryder as another example of ridiculous hypocrisy, affectation or weakness; he distorts even her genuine gestures of kindness or gratitude into ugly theatrical poses: “My wife seemed to make a sacred, female rite even of seasickness” (Waugh 1981, 129). It seems that his anima is wholly suppressed and finds an outlet in “waspy, poisonous, effeminate remarks by which he devalues everything” and which “contain a cheap twisting of the truth and are in a subtle way destructive” (Franz 1988, 179). Having imbibed Julia’s beauty, Ryder’s stirring unconscious begins the work of projection: “And all night between dreaming and waking I thought of Julia; in my brief dreams she took a hundred fantastic and terrible and obscene forms [...]” (Waugh 1981, 128). According to Jung, the anima can appear as a witch (1969, 29), and she can also change her shape and undergo a series of transformations in dreams, like other archetypal images (189). The monstrous shapes taken by Ryder’s anima, which he has projected onto Julia, bodes ill for the relationship. Another reason why Julia now makes an extraordinary impression on Ryder and thus attracts his anima projections is her anguished state of mind. She is ashamed and grief-stricken because of her failed marriage to Rex Mottram, her miscarriage and a recent adulterous love affair in America. Her Catholic upbringing makes her feel guilt acutely: “I’ve been punished a little for marrying Rex. You see, I can’t get all that sort of thing out of my mind, quite—Death, Judgement, Heaven, Hell [...]” (Waugh 1981, 133). Her uneasy conscience is also burdened by the awareness that her mother opposed the marriage and died soon after.

However, the stirrings of his unconscious generated by the re-encounter with Julia are subdued by his reluctance to relinquish the primitive stage of consciousness in which he dwells. Ryder is relieved by the assertion of his own obtuseness: “she was no longer the alternate succubus and starry vision of the night before” (Waugh 1981, 132). Julia’s tormented conscience interests Ryder only so far as it makes Julia more vulnerable and susceptible to his influence. While Julia is ‘transferring’ her life story, her secrets, into ‘his keeping,’ Ryder manages to regain his equanimity by storing away private information for future use: he is in control once again.

Ryder thinks of Julia as a valuable possession to be attained. Julia’s confessions about her unhappy life in the intervening years seem to Ryder as the first step to ownership: “she had given all that was transferable of her past to my keeping” (Waugh 1981, 132). As Hepburn points out, their first sexual encounter is described in terms of contracts and property ownership (2007, 247): “It was as though a deed of conveyance of her narrow loins had been drawn and sealed. I was making my first entry as the freeholder of a property I would enjoy and develop at leisure” (Waugh 1981, 134). Brideshead is ‘metonymically’ equated with Julia, and through possessing her, Ryder can indirectly become the proprietor of the coveted estate (Hepburn 2007, 247).

His scheming is in sharp contrast with Julia’s abandonment of agency and trust in higher powers that may redeem the sins of the past: “now I suppose I shall be punished for what I’ve just done. Perhaps that is why you and I are here together like this ... part of a plan” (Waugh 1981, 133). When Ryder reiterates the phrase “part of a plan,” it has a different meaning. Seducing Julia is part of his

plan to insert himself into the Flyte family again. Ryder's plans indeed go smoothly for a while. As Julia's lover, Charles practically lives in Brideshead, where Rex and Julia have taken residence.

However, Ryder is only capable of a suave, well-acted tenderness in rehearsed situations; he cannot deal with raw emotions such as Julia's existential despair. He dismisses religion and moral compunctions as childish nonsense: "a jingle of the nursery" or "some ancient pious rhyme." He fails to grasp the importance of faith in the psychic life of Julia and the entire family. Julia is angered by his derisive callousness: "Oh, don't talk in that damn, boulderish way [...] Why must my conscience be a Pre-Raphaelite picture?" (Waugh 1981, 150). Julia senses his tricksterish slyness that wants to soil genuine human feelings with its taint of deception. Another sign of Ryder's emotional inadequacy is his total severance of all relations with Sebastian, which Julia finds 'frightening.' Ryder's self-defense is that Sebastian was a 'forerunner' to Julia and evolves a half-baked philosophy of life that rather clumsily betrays his persistent unconsciousness of himself: "[...] this sadness which sometimes falls between us springs from disappointment in our search, each straining through and beyond the other, snatching a glimpse now and then of the shadow which turns the corner always a pace or two ahead of us" (156). Ryder tries to disguise his psychic crudeness as aesthetic sophistication.

Finally, having missed his chance to differentiate his rudimentary consciousness by means of accepting and integrating the archetypal images of the child and the anima, Ryder also proves incapable of genuine religious conversion. This is due to his persistent trickster-like unconsciousness and unrelatedness. Spiritual insight requires a higher level of psychic development than the essentially undifferentiated and primitive stage at which Ryder is arrested.

Nevertheless, Ryder's religious conversion at the end of the novel is taken for granted by many commentators. For some, it happens in the epilogue, in the reinstated chapel (Crapiz 2020, 172); for others, at the deathbed of Lord Marchmain (DeCoste 2015, 19). On closer inspection, though, neither of these scenes convey a sense of having received divine grace. After surveying the reopened chapel and the red flame of the lamp before the tabernacle, Ryder's thoughts progress from bleak platitudes that reflect his depression to the rekindling of hope, which is in close connection with his own perceived importance:

Something quite remote from anything the builders intended, has come out of their work, and out of the fierce little human tragedy in which I played; [...] a small red flame [...] the flame which the old knights saw from their tombs, which they saw put out; that flame burns again for other soldiers, far from home [...]. It could not have been lit but for the builders and the tragedians [...] (Waugh 1981, 179).

The "tragedians" include himself as a player in "the fierce little human tragedy." Even though the reopening of the chapel is clearly Julia's doing, Ryder attributes it, in large part, to himself. There is no mention of God's mercy: there are only human actors in Ryder's universe. Many critics tend to interpret the deathbed scene as proof of Charles conversion. For example, Reichardt (2003, 135) contends that, sensitized by his relationship with Julia and deeply affected by "the powerful moment of Lord Marchmain's death, Charles, the romantic artist, has

been gradually but inexorably led to faith.” However, such readings ignore the petulant campaign of constant quarrelling about religion that Charles has been engaged in with the Flytes. Moreover, Ryder has no choice but to admit defeat when Julia takes responsibility for showing the priest into her father’s room. It is when they gather around the bed that Ryder’s attitude suddenly changes: “Then I knelt, too, and prayed: ‘O God, if there is a God, forgive him his sins, if there is such thing as sin’” (Waugh 1981, 174). His half-hearted, agnostic prayer is no more than an act of “courtesy,” as he explains: “I suddenly felt the longing for a sign, if only of courtesy, if only for the sake of the woman I loved [...]” (174). Equating a religious rite with a gesture of social acknowledgement, Ryder attests to his wholly profane attitude to life. Furthermore, he is highly inconsistent when he wishes for the father’s repentance for Julia’s sake, having tormented Julia with his objections and petty criticisms. Erasing this from his memory, he proceeds to whip up some bogus religious fervor in himself so that he can mitigate his sense of failure. He has been striving to crush Julia’s integrity and moral sense for years, seducing her into adultery, exposing her to scandal, gossip and the ignominy of a *ménage à trois*, but even so, Julia’s inner strength reasserted itself. Therefore, both scenes prove Ryder’s unconsciousness as a trickster-figure rather than his conversion.

4. Conclusion

In the last analysis, the enduring value of *Brideshead* lies more in its many-faceted characters than in its spiritual dimension. The protagonist, an apparently likeable and intelligent man, proves to be fundamentally unconcerned about the people’s feelings with whom he is involved. The initial stirrings of his repressed unconscious contents are subdued by his overwhelming envy of the material possessions and social position of the Flytes. Sebastian awakens Charles’s playfulness and desire to unite his instinctual and intellectual resources, while Julia allows him a glimpse into altruistic self-abandonment that may lead to a creative and compassionate self. However, both relationships fail because of Ryder’s envy, pettiness and dishonest behavior. Ryder is unable to leave behind his primitive, undifferentiated stage of consciousness, which is why he proves inadequate not only as a friend and lover but also as an artist. Because he remains unconscious of himself, he is incapable of genuine religious conversion.

Like the trickster, Ryder can also be a force for good despite his duplicitous conduct. In the wake of his betrayal, Sebastian realizes that he needs to take care of other people instead of being taken care of, while Julia recognizes her own superficiality and callousness in marrying a rich, attractive but completely mercenary man. They both turn to religion, while Ryder remains unconverted. Thus, this trickster-like protagonist, who caused much distress to the Flytes, also contributed, although in a roundabout fashion and without willing it, to their eventual return to the Catholic faith and their discovery of genuine spiritual consolation.

Indeed, *Brideshead* is more successful in portraying the typical modern man who thinks he is too sophisticated for religion, whereas he still dwells in a primitive, undifferentiated stage of consciousness and thus remains incapable of

insight into his own motives and desires. While this analysis was only concerned with Sebastian and Julia, it might be worthwhile to analyze the other Flyte family members, especially Lady Marchmain, through Jungian archetypes since Ryder's narrative is rich in subtle silences, distortions and contradictions which deserve further examination.

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There is No Such Thing as an ‘Underclass’

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

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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; Sleight 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 deprivation³ 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

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

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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Reviews

Schwanebeck, Wieland. 2022. *Comedy on Stage and Screen: An Introduction*. Tübingen: Narr Studienbücher.

240 pp. €26.99. ISBN: 978-3-8233-8533-2.

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Wieland Schwanebeck, a German researcher in literary and cultural studies, has published and edited numerous studies on films such as *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) or *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Minghella 1999), on directors like Alfred Hitchcock, on movie characters like James Bond, on authors adapted for the screen like Patricia Highsmith and on more transversal topics, whether it be literary twinship, crime literature, masculinity or impostors in fiction.

His latest title, *Comedy on Stage and Screen: An Introduction* (2022), is part of the *Narr Studienbücher* (Studybooks) series of Narr Publishing. The aim of the collection is to reflect on research subjects and issues in literary studies and make them accessible to students. The didactic purpose of the book, underlined by its subtitle *An Introduction*, is reflected in its very clear layout: each of the fourteen chapters ends with a synthetic summary and further reading recommendations (three titles each), an overall structure that, surprisingly, misses a final conclusion. Important terms are highlighted in bold types, special paragraphs about valuable quotes from authors and/or primary sources are offered in boxes, other paragraphs, outlining the main points of the preceding pages or useful definitions of basic terms, come highlighted in grey frames or backgrounds, all with icons pointing to them in the margins to attract the readers' attention. The readers will also find tables and graphs, among thirty-four illustrations (although, incidentally, one may regret their very small format) and a very useful paratext including a seventeen-page list of references and a fifteen-page index.

Chapter one introduces the author's project and plan in their full scope. The latter follows a more or less diachronic structure, starting with Ancient Classical authors to reach the twenty-first century, travelling through Shakespeare's era or the Restoration times on the way. In doing so, Schwanebeck wants to show the outstanding stability of the genre over the years, especially regarding the main patterns or plots followed. He also intends to explore "modes and subgenres" (2022, 11): those include tragicomedy, carnivals, satire, the absurd, the grotesque, farce, slapstick, the working-class comedy, nonsense, cringe humour, to name but a few. All share a common feature: they are intended to provoke laughter in the audience, a goal for which they rely on "techniques, motifs, and character types" (13). This is consistent with David Lodge's definition of the genre: "comedy in fiction would appear to have two primary sources, though they are intimately connected: situation (which entails character [...]) and style" (1992, 110). These are presented throughout the chapters and instantiated by numerous excerpts from theatre, literature and cinema, many of them from English-speaking cultural

areas. While stressing the importance of structure and of the “smallest unit of comedy,” i.e., the gag (Schwanebeck 2022, 14), the author delves into comique techniques and provides an overview of theoretical debates about humour and laughter, ranging from Aristotle and Plato to Nietzsche, Hobbes, Hegel, Bergson, Freud, Butler and Cixous, among others. Humour has indeed been much studied by philosophers, but sociology, anthropology, stylistics and linguistics are called for too, so works by Jakobson, Habermas, Goffman, Eco, Bourdieu, Bakhtin, Lévi-Strauss, Koestler are also drawn upon.

Chapter two is dedicated to Old Comedy, mainly from Greece, first of all Aristophanes’s plays and their “bawdy humour” (Schwanebeck 2022, 22), then to New Comedy, with authors like Theophrastus—whose stereotypical characters are interestingly put in parallel with the *Home Alone* movie protagonists (Columbus 1990) or with Roman playwrights Terence and Plautus, whose tropes are correlated to Sondheim’s musicals and to *A Fish Called Wanda* (Crichton 1988). The master/servant pairing and the slapstick gag are discussed along the way, to explain how violence and the resolution of conflicts have been used since Classical Antiquity to trigger laughter. This synthetic way of proceeding is one of the remarkable qualities of the book, as it relates historical considerations to modern forms of comedy and manages to surprise the readers with very accurate and stimulating digressions, which ultimately prove not so digressive.

Chapter three explores the relationship between comedy and tragedy and the inferior status that has always been ascribed to the former, tracing it back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*; comedy authors have nevertheless repeatedly used dramatic plots and characters to address very serious issues. Black humour and the “laughter of despair” (Schwanebeck 2022, 38) often have to do with death or mortality, as shown by the very appropriate example of *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder 1959), with its carefully built plot where suspense increases the comic power of gags and punchlines that work as tools to release tension. This mix of “thrill and laughter” (Schwanebeck 2022, 40) is also spotted in Alfred Hitchcock’s movies. Schwanebeck argues that comedy and tragedy are complementary rather than antithetical and may even interplay: one just has to look at the subgenre known as tragicomedy, as Shakespeare had well understood in his day. It is no surprise then that chapter four opens up with a review of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies and their place in the Elizabethan theatre context. The link is made with the screwball comedy conventions of the 1930s and 1940s: the split in the social contract based on patriarchal hierarchy and the play on sexual innuendos are often found in both genres, which conclude, however, with a happy ending and a return to more conservative values and organisation (for further details, see Halbout 2013, 2022). On the contrary, the fool figure, a category of clowns, was designed to embody “anarchy and inversion” (Schwanebeck 2022, 65) and hint at political issues. Subsequently, inversion patterns are the object of chapter five and they can be dated back to the carnival tradition, where class barriers crumble (78). Cross-dressing and trickster characters are often resorted to there, prompting the author to analyse Bakhtin’s views on medieval culture. Schwanebeck also focuses on the functions that carnival is meant to fulfil in terms of libido and sexual release (a phenomenon famously described by Freud) and shows how modern cinema is prone to reproduce gender clichés, since carnivalesque scenarios are the backbone of many popular comedies on the screen.

Chapter six turns to the Restoration times and their raunchy plays staging cuckold husbands and sexualised female protagonists in satirical and ribald performances. However, adultery comedies are not limited to obscene farces and often play on witticism, via one-liners or asides. The genre is not restricted to the seventeenth century and still appeals to mass audiences: the rake character, for instance, with his frequent subtext of misogyny and homophobia, can be observed in contemporary long-feature films like the *American Pie* series (Weitz, 1999; Rogers 2001; Dylan 2003; Schlossberg and Hurwitz 2012). This brings us to chapter seven about the comedy of humours depicting laughable human weaknesses at their utmost and the comedy of manners with “wider social implications” (Schwanebeck 2022, 93)—this is also true of political sitcoms—open to satire and the “art of the insult” (96) dear to Irish authors. The chapter presents dandies on stage and the drawing-room comedy subgenre, with its taste for “masquerade and fiction” (99), where identity and reputation are usually at stake. Schwanebeck draws an interesting parallel here with “existential sitcoms” like *Blackadder* (Curtis and Atkinson 1983-1989) or *Seinfeld* (David and Seinfeld 1989-1998), which are not so far removed from the Theatre of the Absurd discussed in the following chapter. Chapter eight explains the philosophy of the absurd and correlates it to the incongruity theory of humour, which conceives humour as induced by a discrepancy or ambiguity which disturbs its addressees to the point that they will laugh to shake off the unease thus produced. On a wider scale, it informs the study of “existentialism on stage” (Schwanebeck 2022, 110), with its bathos and patterns of repetition and circularity (111). These may be at work in highbrow plays such as Samuel Beckett’s or Harold Pinter’s, but are met in popular culture too, the most famous examples being Charlie Chaplin’s tramp series and Laurel and Hardy’s shows, and, more recently, the *Seinfeld* sitcom previously mentioned.

Chapter nine is focused on the history of the grotesque from Nero’s reign on: it puts the emphasis on the aesthetics of the unruly body as a sign of “decadence and over-indulgence” (121) bordering on the horror genre. This has been a laughing matter for centuries, right up to the British Monty Python anarchic, nearly cartoonish sketches, regarded by the author as models of “alternative comedy” (130). Next, chapter ten addresses the social dimension of comedy with its exclusion-inclusion parameters underlying the concept of laughers as a community (which paved the way for the canned laughter heard on TV sitcoms). Laughter depends on shared norms and conventions, a paradigm well exploited by the post-war Ealing Comedy; this British genre of films played on “sympathy for outsiders and eccentrics” (141) and their rebellious spirit. These somewhat survived in the working-class comedies of the 1990s, among others the highly successful *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo 1997), which also provides an opportunity to re-examine gender politics. Chapter eleven moves on to farce, an underrated subgenre that Schwanebeck defines as “a type of comedy full of unlikely plot developments and thoroughly confused characters” (2022, 147). It often relies on slapstick or bedroom stories, appealing to the releasing power of laughter, with well-documented mechanisms such as repetition, inversion and the objectification of characters (158); farcical moments are to be found even in sophisticated comedies, a relevant example being the Coen Brothers filmography. Farce dialogues are rich in Freudian slips, double entendres and puns.

Chapter twelve, quite appropriately, is then devoted to nonsense, a subgenre that has always promoted that same form of “linguistic anarchy” (169). The author cites writers Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, of course, as literary predecessors of the Monty Python sketches or the Marx Brothers’ movies. However, nonsense is not limited to dialogues and it makes great use of visual gags as well to create a feeling of “comic anarchy” (178). It also works well with parody, as shown on screen by Will Ferrell and Mel Brooks. Chapter thirteen, not unsurprisingly, then turns to mockumentary and cringe comedies, “where painful laughter and mechanisms of social exclusion take priority” (179) to provoke the viewers’ embarrassment and question the “acceptable self” (182), which is quite similar to the reactions induced by the neurotic and awkward *schlemiel* character of Jewish origin. Schwanebeck states, very correctly, that the main protagonists of cringe comedies enjoy an ambiguous status as the audience may wonder whether “to laugh *at* or *with*” them (187), as is the case with the iconic *Bridget Jones* (Maguire 2001, 2016; Kidron 2004; Morris 2025) or *Borat* (Charles 2006) heroes, and, on TV, Larry in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David 2000-2024). Responses to cringe humour can be influenced by political correctness, as taboo topics are often at the heart of those comedies, but they have an undeniable cathartic quality (Schwanebeck 2022, 188), which may explain their success.

To conclude, the author dedicates chapter fourteen to a still insufficiently debated issue, i.e., gender and comedy. Given the importance taken by gender studies nowadays, this insight in the part that it plays within the field of comedy is most welcome. Deconstructing stereotypes imposed by the establishment about men and women helps understand the minor place devoted to female comedians: scripts are gender-marked, and the overall marginalisation of women in society, as well as the sexual undertones remarked upon in previous chapters, reflect on stage and screen; either they turn women into a laughing stock, owing to the superiority theory of humour, where the laughers deemed themselves superior to the persons targeted, or they deny women a comic ability, for lack of aggressiveness or, on the contrary, because of the unease induced by the transgressive power shown in comic performances. The author has many examples to quote, ranging from the Medusa figure analysed by H el ene Cixous to the fate of modern actresses such as Greta Garbo or Katharine Hepburn, and that of female sketch writers and comedians, first of all Elaine May.

This book, designed as an introduction, as stated in its title, is aimed primarily at students, yet it will be very useful as a sound synthesis for all scholars interested in comedy, humour, stage and screen. A most solid work in those fields, it can nevertheless appeal to a less specialised readership, thanks to its many up-to-date details and references to popular culture and its very clear style and structure. Schwanebeck has indeed succeeded in making his academic research both entertaining and erudite in this very stimulating monograph.

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