

## 4.7. “I hope I die before I get old”, an approach to British cinema and youth subcultures

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### Abstract

Can British films dealing with youth subcultures be considered a genre within British Cinema? Are all these films just a mere coincidence or can they be understood as part of British Cinema's traditions? These are some of the questions that I will try to answer in this paper, working with some films released during the last years, locating some of their common features and analyzing if they are enough to consider this group of films a genre or a cycle within British Cinema.

**Keywords:** British cinema, subcultures, social realism, film genre.

### Introduction

Can British films dealing with youth subcultures be considered a genre within British Cinema? Are all these films just a mere coincidence or can they be understood as part of British Cinema's traditions? These are some of the questions that I will try to answer in this paper, working with some films released during the last years.

In the last decade there has been an increase in the number of British films that deal with youth subcultures. Films such as: *The Football Factory* (Nick Love, 2004) dedicated to the casual subculture; *16 Years of Alcohol* (Richard Jobson, 2004) which narrates the story of a skinhead; *Green Street Hooligans* (Lexi Alexander, 2005), an immersion into hooliganism; *This is England* (Shane Meadows, 2006) dedicated to the skinhead subculture; *Clubbed* (Neil Thompson, 2008), dedicated to the 80s ska music scene –its clubs, music and people –; *Cass* (John S. Baird, 2008), *Awaydays* (Pat Holden, 2009) casuals; *The Firm* (Nick Love, 2009) also dedicated to the casuals; *Soulboy* (Shimmy Marcus, 2010) that focuses on the Northern Soul scene, as well as *Northern Soul* (Elaine Constantine, 2014); *Brighton Rock* (Rowan Joffe, 2010) related with mods and rockers, and *NEDS* (Peter Mullan, 2010) also dedicated to the skinhead subculture. All these films have been released in Britain and won awards<sup>2</sup>, even international ones.

This recent increase in the number of films that deal with subcultures can be traced back to the late 60's with the appearance of *Bronco Bullfrog* (Barney Platts-Mills, 1969) a film that used some amateur actors that were actually suedeheads, an evolution of skinhead subculture. In the late 70's we find *Quadrophenia* (Franc Roddam, 1979), a film about the mod subculture, based on The Who's album of the same title (*Quadrophenia*, Polydor, 1973). In the next decade Julien Temple directed *Absolute Beginners* (1986), a film about the origins of the mod subculture – the Soho's modern jazz scene –, Franco Rossi released *Babylon* (1980), a film depicting the reggae/rasta subculture in London, and Tim Roth played the role of Trevor, the skinhead, in a TV production called *Made in Britain* (Alan Clarke, 1982). Between 1982 and 1984, *The Young Ones* (Paul Jackson and Geoff Posner), a parodic TV series on subculture, was broadcasted by BBC.

Although I am focusing on British cinema, it is interesting to highlight that subcultures have also gained public recognition in other cinemas. Since the 1990s several films about nazi skinheads have been released in countries such as USA<sup>3</sup>, Australia<sup>4</sup> or even Spain<sup>5</sup>. Another example could be *Foxfire* (Laurent Cantet, 2013) a French film about an American girl gang in the 1950's.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Football Factory* won a Kodak Award for Best Cinematography, *This is England* won eight different international awards and fourteen nominations, *Clubbed* was nominated to the Raindance Award in the British Independent Film, *Awaydays* won the Fringe Report Award to the Best Feature Film, *NEDS* won four international awards and had one nomination and *Brighton Rock* was nominated to five British awards.

<sup>3</sup> Films such as *American History X* (Tony Kaye, 1998) or *The Believer* (Henry Bean, 2001) among others.

<sup>4</sup> *Romper Stomper* (Geoffrey Wright, 1992) with a young Russel Crowe playing the main role.

<sup>5</sup> In 2005 there was a TV production based on Antonio Salas' best seller *El Diario de un Skin*, directed by Jacobo Rispa.

Among the British films listed above only one, *Brighton Rock*, is set in the 1960s, that is, in the notorious “battles” that took place between mods and rockers on the beach in Brighton in 1964. Most of the other films recreate the decades of the 70s and the 80s. *Soulboy* is set in 1974, and depicts the northern soul scene with its all-nighters and venues such as Wigan Casino (Hewitt, 2010). *NEDS* dramatises “the gritty and savage world of 1970’s Glasgow” (Kwok, 2011) while *16 Years of Alcohol*, also set in Scotland in the early 70s, is a reconstruction of the memoirs of its director, Richard Jobson, former singer of the Scottish punk band The Skids (Jobson 2011). *Awaydays*, is set in 1979, the post-punk era, and is based on Kevin Sampson’s novel of the same name. In Sampson’s own words:

I decided to set *Awaydays* in late 1979 for a few reasons. One big thing I wanted to do with the book is to show how, six months into their first term, Margaret Thatcher’s government was already sewing the seeds of discontent and disillusionment among Merseyside’s youth. It was like watching a virus start to take a hold - the symptoms start to show, then people start to drop, one by one, (2008).

Cass Pennant’s biopic *Cass* focuses on the years he was the leader of the ICF (Inter City Firm, West Ham United hooligans) during the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The film is based on his autobiography *Cass* (Pennant 2008). *Clubbed*, which is based on Geoff Thompson’s *Watch my Back* (1995), is set in Coventry in the early 80s – the years of the Two Tone musical explosion<sup>6</sup> – and relates his days working as a “bouncer”<sup>7</sup> at a club’s door. Shane Meadows’ *This is England* is set somewhere around the Midlands in 1983. It is based on Meadows’ own experiences as “a skin growing up in Staffordshire during the 1980s” (Bonner 2006). *The Firm*, which can be considered a remake of Alan Clarke’s TV production *The Firm* (1989), is set in London in 1984. Finally *The Football Factory* is set in the 1990s and is based on the best selling novel by John King (1997).

Considering these dates, it is possible to affirm that there was special interest in subcultures during the 1970s and 1980s. It is also interesting to highlight the number of films based on novels and how many of them were (auto) biographical. Literary fiction dealing with British subculture was not a new phenomenon since a writer like Richard Allen<sup>8</sup> had already reached success with novels based on skinheads, boot-boys, suedeheads<sup>9</sup>, etc.

## Films on subculture and British realism

The way these films are conceived also link with the British tradition of social realism which is “one of the main paradigms in Britain’s film culture” (Cornut-Gentile 2006, 51). According to Raymond Williams’ ideas, realism implies a “movement towards social extension” (Williams 1977, 63). By this he means that attention is turned to, up till then, hidden or marginalised groups, mainly the working class. In Hill’s words, the idea that realism is linked to representations of the working class “derives in part from context, and specifically the perceived absence of (adequate) representations of this group within the dominant discursive regimes” (2000, 250).

The origin of this realistic trend in British cinema was the documentary film movement (Aitken 2001) of the 1930s, led by John Grierson (1888-1972) who thought that “documentary films could play a key role in the society as they provide an effective means of communication between the State and the audience”. The aim of such films would be “promoting the understanding of the connections between the social and the cultural within the nation” (Cornut-Gentile 2006, 51). As Alan Lovell (1972, 35) highlighted, not only was an important difference established between “realism” and “escapism” but soon realistic cinema, with its origin in the documentary movement, became the main reference for an autochthonous British cinema. The decade of the 1940s was the “Golden Age” of documentary. Because of the Second World War, Great Britain needed to create a specific mood and to establish a common objective for all the population. Documentary films played an important role in achieving these aims. Films such as *Millions like Us* (Sidney Gilliat 1943), *Ships with Wings* (Sergei Nolbandov 1941) or *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat 1944) were huge successes in their time.

<sup>6</sup> See Marshall (1993), Eddington (2004) and Thompson (2004).

<sup>7</sup> According to The Oxford Dictionary, a bouncer is “a person employed by a nightclub or similar establishment to prevent troublemakers and other unwanted people entering or to eject them from the premises” (Anon. 2011 E).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Allen was one of James Moffat’s pen names, a famous Canadian pulp writer. He focused on writing novels about British youth cults. See Allen (1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> For detailed explanations respecting the origins and styles adopted by subcultures such as boot-boys, smoothies and suedeheads, see Roest (2011); Anon (2011 D) and Ruffy (2010)

Once the war ended, the next exponent of realism in British cinema history was the cycle of films known as British New Wave. This genre, common in the late 1950s and early 1960s, portrayed working class characters at a key moment of social and economical change. Films such as *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1959) or *A Kind of Loving* (John Schlesinger, 1962) "did not simply represent the working class but did so from a particular social perspective" (Hill 2000, 250). These films presented the existing tensions between long-standing, working-class ideals and the changes introduced in the post-war British society, that is, the clash between the traditional ideas of work, community and attachment to place with the new ideas of consumerism, mass culture and suburbanisation (Hill 2000, 250-51). During these years, one type of films prevailed over the rest of genres: 'kitchen sink films', this is films about social problems (Cornut-Gentille 2006, 55). These New Wave films extended "a degree of sympathy towards the virile, working-class male who seeks to resist the pressures towards embourgeoisement and social conformity (including domesticity)" (Hill 2000, 251), a trend that would be reinforced in the realist cinema of the 1980s and 1990s.

The British films of the 1980s and 1990s focused on the consequences Thatcherism for the working-class. The economic crisis and mass unemployment were also among the factors that weakened traditional working class identities. The decline of the traditional, working-class way of life is a prominent theme in most films of the time, and the situation of the working class is clearly linked to "the collapse of traditional heavy industries" (Hill 2000, 252). Films like *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) or *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) deal with fractured and split working class identities caused by Thatcher's harsh economic re-adjustments and rationalisation of the industry in Britain. There is, in these films, a "re-articulation of working class identity through its relation to national and regional stereotypes and geographical marginalisation" (Hallam 2000, 268). However, a director like Ken Loach focused on working-class domestic tensions, depicting how changing gender roles affected especially male characters, and family disintegration, as in *Ladybird*, *Ladybird* (1994). For his part, Mike Leigh opted for exploring "the interface between the working classes and the lower middle class" (Hill 2000, 254) as in *High Hopes* (1988) or *Secrets and Lies* (1996).

I think that the cycle of films mentioned above can be considered a continuation of this British realism. All of them focus on class issues and changing gender roles but what about youth concerns? Admittedly, *Trainspotting* (Danny Boyle, 1996) dealt with youth and drug-years before the films I am interested in were released. But what distinguishes the films I propose to analyse from Danny Boyle's portrayal of the sub-world in Edinburgh is that this genre or cycle deals with young boys and girls belonging to different subcultures, each of which implies a different world view, different maps of meaning and different styles. In one word, they present or *re-present* specific cultures that co-exist in British society.

## Films on subculture and questions of genre

All these films present a series of similarities: narrative devices, common sites, topics, structures and artistic features. These are a series of conventions in content and form. Can these films be considered a genre in themselves? As Chantal Cornut-Gentille (2006, 103-04) points out, following Tom Ryall's ideas, there are 3 different levels to consider when talking about genres: "genre systems", "individual genres" and "individual films". The first two elements are abstract ideas based on the analysis of films. Thus, for the critic, the first step when considering a genre would be to watch and analyse a corpus of films. Obviously the corpus of films considered in the present work are all the titles mentioned at the beginning of this paper. A film genre is considered a genre, in Cornut-Gentille's own words, as a result of:

a general process (conscious or unconscious) through which some films are mentally associated with others due to a system of shared expectations, previously internalized by the audience after having seen some similar films (...) The appearance of a particular genre is the result or the consequence of a (tacit) agreement between the audience and the film-makers, (2000, 104).

According to Stephen Neale, genres consist of "specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema". These systems involve the knowledge of "various regimes of verisimilitude – various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification and belief". Regimes of verisimilitude entail "rules, norms and laws" (1995, 160) and these are provided through or by means of a series of conventions.

Should the critic consider these films as a genre? It is difficult to give a clear answer to this question. What I can affirm is that all these filmic texts present a series of conventions that at least make them a more or less homogeneous group and consequently they can be analysed and studied as a 'cycle', if not a genre. These conventions that give a sense of homogeneity to the cycle are going to be analysed here.

### Actors

The cast can be considered a defining element when talking about films about subcultures. These films usually use unknown, almost amateur, actors, or actors from the independent/alternative cinema. Moreover, several of these actors appear in more than one film. This would be the case of Stephen Graham who plays the role of Combo in *This is England* and Godden in *Awaydays*. He had already made a name for himself as member of the cast in Guy Ritchie's *Snatch* (2000) –which is also an independent British film. When analysing *Awaydays'* cast the critic discovers that a high percentage of actors had never had a main role in their careers. For example, Nicky Bell's character in this film (Paul Carty) was his first lead in a feature-length film and Lee Battle's participation in this film as Billy Powell is the first time he appears in a film. *This is England's* cast presents a much more surprising case: Thomas Turgoose – Shaun in the film – had never thought about acting before being chosen to play a role in this film when he was only a kid – afterwards he acted in Meadows' *Sommers Town* (2008) which reinforces this idea of continuity among these films and directors. The young Calum MacNab is Dom in *The Firm*, years before he played the role of Raff in *The Football Factory*. Again we find an example of a director, Nick Love, using the same actor in two closely related films – both are dedicated to football hooliganism. Looking back to the forerunners of this kind of film, it is interesting to note that Phil Daniel's first lead role in a film was his interpretation of Jimmy in *Quadrophenia*.

In my view, the use of unknown actors and actresses has become a convention in/of these films. It reinforces their youth appeal and gives them a certain alternative aura.

### Between literary adaptations and biographical accounts

If one of heritage films' defining feature was/is the adaptation of the literary works of great masters of the past, films dealing with subcultures are also often based on British novels – in this case, not classic masterpieces but contemporary best-sellers. *Absolute Beginners* was based on Colin MacInnes' novel of the same title (1959). Rowan Joffe's *Brighton Rock* is an adaptation of Graham Greene's novel (1938). Kevin Sampson's novel *Awaydays* (1998) is the basis for Pat Holden's film. *The Football Factory* is an adaptation of a John King's novel. *Clubbed* was based on Geoff Thompson's *Watch my Back* and, as mentioned before, *Cass* is a dramatisation of Cass Pennant's own autobiography. It is also worth pointing out that *Quadrophenia*, the film which can be considered the origin of this trend, was based on an opera rock by The Who rather than on a literary work. Adaptations to the screen can therefore be read, in my opinion, as a constitutive feature of this particular film cycle.

There is another group of films within this cycle, the ones which are based, or partially based on biographical features or even autobiographical. *This is England* as its director, Shane Meadows, points out, is based on his own experiences as a twelve years old skinhead. *The Firm* contains some autobiographical features as Nick Love, the director, points out in an interview (Love 2010). He used to be a young Millwall Football Club supporter and the film reflects some of his experiences during those years. Finally *16 Years of Alcohol* is, as has been pointed out before, an autobiographical account of the director's youth. This biographical content provides these films with a particular approach to Great Britain's past. In my opinion, such reliance on lived experiences can be seen as representing a step further in the development of British social realism. Indeed, these films do not only portray the living conditions of working-class youngsters. They dramatise particular private memories, which are presented as giving these stories and extra layer of authenticity. Thus, in spite of memory's subjectivity, the autobiographical content serves to legitimize these films' discourse, differentiating them from other approaches to the past.

### Representing a conflictive past

Many films about subcultures centre on past times. However, the past they deal with is not a quiet, idyllic and romantic one. Violence, unsteadiness, anxiety, drug-addiction and despair are some of the problems depicted in these films. Thus in a world in which "the main source of historical knowledge for the population are doubtlessly the audiovisual media" (Cornut-Gentile 2006, 109), these films offer a raw and bitter approach to that past. In their attempt to reflect that past reliably and in as faithful a way as possible, much use is made of real locations.

Clubs, cafés, teenager's bedrooms, pubs, terraces, record shops, etc. are therefore presented in these films with a high grade of realism. Clothes, music, television programmes, radio broadcastings, public transport are recreated to immerse the audience into the lived experiences of youths in past times. As such, these films open a window unto unknown past phenomena, and by presenting gritty pictures of life; they challenge the normative views of a grand past promoted by heritage films. In this respect, the historical content of these films can be read as another characteristic feature or convention of this genre.

Films about subcultures deal with past in a way which link them with the 'Brit-grit'. They represent a problematic past, full of tensions and closely related with working class people's experiences. Therefore it is obvious that these films do not pretend to be a way of escaping reality. They do not invoke perfect past times, quite the contrary, social, political and economical crisis and their effects over youth are issues clearly represented in these films. This fact implies two different features from my point of view. The first one is –as it was mentioned above– that representing this past the subcultural films contests the idea of the past promoted by heritage cinema and other films which present an idyllic view of past times. The second and most interesting feature is that this focus on social conflicts directly links subcultural films with present times. Problems depicted in some of these films can be directly connected to contemporary issues and this sets a series of reflections and debates about problems which are happening now – or what were happening when the films were released. Subcultural films give the critics the chance of exploring contemporary issues through representations of past times. These processes facilitate the analysis of contemporary issues such as youth problems, violence, racism, etc. through a historical perspective. Considering that all these problems are rooted in British social structure that they are not contemporary phenomena, leads consequently to analyse the past, which could be a way of finding solutions to these issues.

### **Subcultures: maps of meanings, worldviews, ways of life and style**

As stated above, these subcultural films introduce a new social actor into their account of the British past: youth subcultures. The world they recreated is inhabited by skinheads, casuals, mods, rockers, etc. whose values and way of life are exhibited. Although these films do not exactly *celebrate* the world of violence, drugs and rage that characterises youth subcultures, their representations of this world does nevertheless serve two different purposes. On the one hand, they introduce new elements in people's view and understanding of the British past. Precisely because subcultures have never been considered part of the country's heritage, such films introduce the audience into a world of different dress codes, moral systems and maps of meaning and thus provide audiences with a window unto these closed worlds which have their own internal dynamics and meanings. Through these films spectators can better understand the role of clothes, music and violence within each subculture, and learn to differentiate one way of life from the other. Secondly, these films deal most particularly with subculture i.e. one of the ways deployed by youth to resolve their tensions with dominant culture. This can be read as a filmic device directly opposed to heritage cinema whose main asset and allure for audiences is its tendency to "praise (...) higher classes' traditional values" (Cornut-Gentile 2006, 109). Unlike heritage films' focus on the lives of wealthy aristocrats the defining element of these films is the protagonism of working-class youngsters.

### **Narrative Features**

The last point I would like to highlight in this section is the existence of some common narrative features within these films – another element that reinforces the idea of affinity and/or genre.

Three narrative features stand out, in my view, as defining elements of these subcultural films. The first is clearly connected with the rite of passage through which a young protagonist succeeds in becoming a member of a particular subculture. In the case of *This is England*, Shaun becomes a skinhead through style. He gets a couple of *monkey boots*<sup>10</sup> and a pair of braces, Lol (Vicky McClure) shaves his head, and Woody (Joseph Gilgun) gives him a Ben Sherman shirt. By thus taking on and adopting the basic skinhead look he is accepted by Woody's gang. As regards *Awaydays* the rite of passage involves and has to do with violence. Carty gets the correct clothes – Adidas trainers, green slicker and tight jeans – to meet *The Pack*, but what legitimizes him as a member of the gang is his behaviour in the first fight against other supporters. He stands the line, demonstrating that he is brave enough to be part of *The Pack*. So his rite of passage proves successful. This feature is also present in films such as *The Firm*,

<sup>10</sup> For a full description of the particular design of "monkey boots". See Rufy (2008, 22).

*Green Street Hooligans*, *Soulboy* or *NEDS*. However it does not appear in films like *16 Years of Alcohol* or *Football Factory*, among others, since in these cases, the protagonist is already a member of the subculture.

Another narrative feature I would like to analyse is what could be called 'the moment of disappointment'. Once the protagonist of the film becomes a member of the subculture, his or her 'adventure' starts. For him, being part of the subculture becomes a way of life and he immerses himself into the subculture's universe. Some tensions appear between the protagonist and the group. Because these are usually solved in a violent way, the main character suffers disappointment and opts for abandoning the subculture or reconsidering his situation within the subculture. This 'moment of disappointment' usually corresponds with the film's end. We find examples of this in *Quadrophenia* – when Jimmy throws Ace Face's (Sting) *Lambretta*<sup>11</sup> over a cliff, after deciding to stop being a mod; in *The Football Factory* – when Tommy Johnson (Danny Dyer) decides to change football fanaticism for greyhound racing after being almost killed in a fight; in *This is England* – when Shaun rejects right-wing politics after Combo almost murdered Milky (Andrew Shim); and in *Awaydays* – when Carty decides to stop being part of *The Pack* after Baby (Oliver Lee) slashes his face after Godden's death and Elvis (Liam Boyle) disappears.

The last narrative feature that should be commented is the role of the "guarantor". This is the character who introduces the main character into the subculture and who guides and supervises his "trip" into the mysteries of the said subculture. The "guarantor" is an important character because he (or she) usually triggers the protagonist's relationship with the subculture, and once he disappears, or the relationship between both characters degenerates, tensions will build up and lead to the "disappointment moment". Elvis is Carty's guarantor in *Awaydays*, Woody acts as guarantor for Shaun in *This is England* and Bex (Paul Anderson) is the one who introduces Dom to the group of hooligans in *The Firm*.

## Conclusions

Over and above the other conventions (actors, adaptations, the past) it seems that the recurrence of these three narrative features in these films confirms that we are not dealing with individual films, but with a homogeneous group that could be labelled a cycle or genre.

Therefore this paper sets the basis for a wider forthcoming work. Once confirmed that it is possible to consider these films a cycle, we should analyse every film mentioned to check if all the conventions appear, and what happens when one of two of these features are not present in any of these films.

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<sup>11</sup> Lambretta was, together with Vespa, a popular Italian scooter trademark.

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