

Bypass, Obscure Forces and Ontological Anxiety

This essay seeks to go beyond the positions adopted in academic debates concerning the aesthetics and politics of contemporary British social realist film. It seeks to do so with reference to a recent film which helps to focus these debates, Duane Hopkins' *Bypass* (2015). A good place to start opening up this debate is with David Forrest's argument that Ken Loach's instrumentalised use of style in the service of class politics can be contrasted with those recent social realist directors whose work is 'thematically diverse, expressive, ambiguous and author driven' (Forrest 2013: 31). Forrest is thinking of figures such as Lynne Ramsay, Shane Meadows, Pawel Pawlikowski, Andrea Arnold, Samantha Morton, and Duane Hopkins. He views this contemporary 'New Realism' as a liberation from the confining narrowness of 'socio-political didacticism' (Forrest 2010: 31). In this way, British social realism joins a global realist cinema of auteurs. Most commentators agree with Forrest that British social realism has changed, becoming more aesthetically self-conscious and less engaged with what Forrest refers to as 'leftist propaganda' (Forrest, 2013, 3). However, for some, these changes are far from positive ones. Clive Nwonka, for instance, sees this New Realism as decontextualized, de-politicised, sentimentalised naturalism that reproduces character studies of the working class – individualising and moralising its subjects and isolating the predicaments of their lives from causal, determining socio-economic structures (Nwonka 2014). He has in mind critically feted recent films such as Clio Barnard's *The Selfish Giant* (2013) and Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009). In particular, Nwonka takes these directors to task for focusing on *intra-class* conflict as opposed to *inter-class* struggle or the 'antagonistic relationship of the social structure and the protagonists that determines their life choice and behaviour' (215).

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Whilst I sympathise with Nwonka's advocacy of a politically motivated social realist aesthetic focused on 'the possibility of struggle and change', there nevertheless may well be conjunctural reasons for what he sees as lamentable aesthetic departures from his preferred Lukascian realism with its dramatisation of the contradictions based in social relations (216). Despite Nwonka's scepticism, there may be other, more positive ways we might understand the cultural politics of New Realism. For instance, I have argued elsewhere that some of the filmmakers covered approvingly by Forrest are no less engaged than Loach with the political consequences of the determining socio-economic forces of neoliberalism (Dave 2011). But at the same time it seems probable that my own interest in the representation of internal working class conflicts and the difficulty currently in re-grounding a working class 'common culture', would for Nwonka, concede too much to what he sees as a social realist cinema beset with depoliticising and decontextualizing forces.

Despite the differences between Forrest and Nwonka, both make assumptions about the 'social' in social realism that are either insufficiently historicised and/or politicised. For Forrest, the social is often reified as that which remains unchanging or constant (what he refers to as 'traditional thematic concerns') whilst it is aesthetic strategies that shift and are alive (responding to expressive techniques of art cinema) (Forrest, 2010, 32). This forestalls the need to simultaneously consider the nature and extent of the changes in social relationships under neoliberalism alongside the fine grain of the relationship of the

aesthetic changes he describes to these socio-economic developments. This is of a piece with Forrest's undialectical oppositions between content and form, art and politics. Nwonka's guiding assumption is that the social substance, as traditionally theorised in Marxism, with its antagonistic class relationships, remains largely unaffected and available for politicisation through traditional cultural strategies of realism. This is not to argue that the classic Marxist analysis of the nature of the social bond under capitalism is any less relevant. However, when Nwonka complains that new social realism 'undermines' the 'class significance' of its social representations by placing too much emphasis on 'conflict within working-class communities' and too little on the wider origins of social inequality, he is ignoring the degree to which these conflicts within struggling working class communities have become critical under mature neoliberal post-industrial conditions (Nwonka, 2014, 220).

There are critical discussions of contemporary realism in world cinema that usefully supplement the debate I have just outlined in British film studies. For instance, Thomas Elsaesser offers an account of aesthetic changes in the realist mode common to many world cinema auteurs – including British ones. His list includes, among others, Abbas Kiarostami, Wong Kar-Wai, Carlos Reygadas, Michael Winterbottom, Werner Herzog, Guillermo Del Toro, Jane Campion, Alejandro Amenabar, Catherine Breillat and Lynne Ramsay (Elsaesser 2009). There is support here for Forrest's argument concerning the relationship of British New Realism to international art cinema, however, Elsaesser's interest lies in the crucial issue of the relationship of realism's established epistemological imperatives to a renewed interest in matters ontological in world cinema. This is interesting because in the British context detractors and admirers of social realism alike often link the aesthetic features of the films to a particular epistemological attitude. Thus 'gritty', 'raw', 'no frills' – or an aesthetically direct/efficient style transparent to the intrinsically shocking power of the subject matter – is often assumed to result from the cognitive drive of a crude, naïve English empiricism. We might sum up this particular straw target thus: traditional or vulgar social realism believes that *to see is to know is to change*. This imputed belief, however, is hard to imagine anyone holding in an era when the phenomenon of 'poverty porn' is widely commented on as an adjunct to such hegemonic realist forms such as *Reality TV*. We might, in the light of shows like Channel 4's *Benefits Street*, reformulate the imputed trap of such realist forms in this way: *to see is to enjoy what we already know and what we don't expect to change*.

But if naïve realism is not what it once was, the general suspicion of realism is no longer driven by the fearful warnings tirelessly repeated in postmodern constructionism – that is to say, the philosophical position that insists that all representations are culturally coded and do not reflect external realities. This epistemological scepticism, which in film culture found its counterweight in the presumed naivety of a Bazinian photographic ontological realism, is now clearly waning. As Elsaesser observes, a renewed, non-positivist interest in the way filmic representations reference the world and an acceptance that not everything is culturally constructed is unmistakable (7-8). This pull towards what was once kept securely in the scare quotes of the inaccessible, unknowable natural domain is, however, not to be understood as a simple rejection of constructionism. For Elsaesser the New Realism of world

cinema sees our shared illusions as necessary and negotiable, giving us a 'post-epistemological ontology' of subjectivity and the social (6). It is in this way that Elsaesser provides a convincing account of key textual features of contemporary realism in world cinema. For instance, he cites two characteristics that will be important in our analysis of *Bypass*: characters who endure a systematic disordering and extension of conventional sensory and mental capacities, and the utilisation of what he calls *post-mortem* situations involving apparently impossible exchanges between the living and dead. The upshot of these frequently repeated character types and situations is to create a more expansive sense of consciousness, subjectivity and identity. Released from the confines of the solipsism that epistemological scepticism can trigger, the subject is relocated within a wider world of things and others. In this way, our apprehension of reality becomes much more complex than it could ever be under constructivist scepticism, but so too does our sense of our own essential nature. For instance, Elsaesser describes characters in New Realist world cinema acting 'as if' *post-mortem* situations that bring living and dead together are normal – despite transgressing the laws of physics and/or psychological verisimilitude. He adds that these enactments of trust and mutual confirmation between characters in such unusual circumstances, far from being evidence of solipsistic game playing are in fact 'the very condition of keeping the world 'real' or 'consistent' (10).

This ontological turn in world cinema might be related to the political concerns and frustrations of Nwonka. That is to say, whilst Nwonka is dismayed by an epistemological deficit in British New Realism (often we are not being shown the wider picture, the structures of socio-economic exploitation that impact on character choice and disposition – a criticism which may well have validity in the examples he studies), he nevertheless fails to give enough attention to the degree to which these films' lingering on 'tabloid caricatures' (Nwonka, 2013, 213) or vividly isolated character sketches of the working class points to the ideological dilemma represented by 'capitalist realism' (Fisher 2009). This is Mark Fisher's term for a capitalism that has become, precisely, an untranscendable, natural horizon. In so far as New British Realism's gallery of characters becomes one dimensional, associated with behaviourist reflexes, stuck in the profiles of what Imogen Tyler refers to as neoliberalism's 'dirty ontologies' of class, such films foreground a dilemma for a form which traditionally seeks to invest in struggle and change but which is now is gripped by the spectacle of its supposed impossibility (Tyler 2008). And furthermore, to the extent that this profound naturalisation of capitalism becomes hegemonic, intruding itself in this way into the social realist form, then any stirring of the spirit of transcendence may well announce itself by a degree of what Elsaesser refers to as 'ontological unrest' (Elsaesser, 8). That is to say, questions about ontology become essential in an era in which the very possibility of imagining change falls into doubt. If not competitive individualism, and the drive to make solitary solutions to collective problems - the 'business ontology' of capitalist realism - what else is at the human subjective and social core (Fisher, 17)? And how do we encounter within ourselves the resources of change, assuming they are within our powers to activate? Let us now turn to *Bypass* and see how it helps frame possible answers to these questions.

Aesthetics and politics

Tim belongs to a working class family that has fallen apart. Mother dead; father left home; elder brother Greg in prison and sister playing truant. It is Tim's job to bring in the money and keep the bailiffs out, which he does through criminal means – as a fence and later, a drug courier.

The criminal milieu Tim inherits from Greg is one in which working class communities are shown to often fall victim to the depredations of their own – Greg is shown unwittingly robbing the house of someone related to the partner of his own criminal associate.

In addition to these problems and dangers, Tim is suffering from a serious undiagnosed illness which he leaves untreated. His girlfriend, Lily is pregnant, but already forced by circumstances into the position of a parent to his own younger sister, Tim is unwilling to become a father. He remains, in name, a son, grandson and brother. But the substance of these relationships is denied him by absence or death. Eventually, he succumbs to his illness and is rushed to hospital for life saving surgery. In a flashforward Lily is shown giving birth to his baby and he appears happy and reconciled to being a father.

The issues that preoccupy the film are the following: how does the social bond survive amidst the accumulation of harms flourishing under neoliberal regimes; what are the dilemmas faced by contemporary working class youth in the face of this neoliberal problem of the social, and do these dilemmas cast doubt on the very possibility of a working class *coming of age*; and finally, outside older, dismantled sustaining social structures, how can working class communities, families and individuals access the means of resisting neoliberal regimes. As the title of the film suggests, this is a story about what is *bypassed*. And this master metaphor has, of course, many faces. But the structure of the idea is clear enough, and its general import can be understood in the distance the film takes from the principal road form of the metaphor. With the latter, bypassing suggests smooth convenience, a problem avoided, an elegant curving away from congestion, traffic, trouble, blockage, which is a neoliberal escape fantasy par excellence. It is precisely this idea that the film ironises by situating it within the framework of class experience. In Hopkins' film, in other words, the bypass, in its function of offering advantageous avoidance, is unavailable. Or rather, Hopkins shows how bypassing is a class inflected experience. For working class youths, such as Tim, what is bypassed is lost: the stability of certain core social and familial relations through which the individual can develop. To turn the metaphor around then – there is the smooth road and there is the rough place. The *bypassers* and the *bypassed*.

Being bypassed, or missing out, needs to be understood as an interruption inflicted on the working class life-story. The film lays down that older pattern at the start. The generational transmission of skills and jobs (football and welding) celebrated by the circle of drinkers in the working men's club recalls a lineage stretching from great grandfather to great grandson. Against the background of such continuities, *bypassing* captures a condition in which such men find themselves out of synch with the desired or expected sequencing of the story of their own life and in which a confidence about the future is impossible. These are life trajectories which come to grief because necessary steps must be skipped. The *way of the world* no longer offers initiation or meaningful apprenticeship. Instead contemporary necessities have become so intrusive that young people can no longer go at their own pace, building themselves up, refining their desires, making themselves ready for their futures. The figure of the bypass then is Hopkins's original, poetic trope summing up some obscure force, one operating according to an almost fairy tale fatality that is imposed on individuals,

families, and communities, producing a sense of loss, disconnection, out-of-placeness, broken continuity and substitution. Indeed, in this film, *bypassing* is the radical disordering and disabling of an entire socio-symbolic order. Siblings becomes parents; the dead return to guide the living; the sick seek no cure; what should be shared is borne alone; and what should be passed on in terms of tradition is passed over.

The source of this mysterious agency is neoliberalism – but it needs to be recognized that it is not political or even socio-economic causes that Hopkins is interested in detailing and exploring. Which is not to say these structural causes are ignored. Indeed, they are acknowledged in the opening scenes between Greg and his grandfather, and in a later scene between Greg and Tim in which a rare panoramic shot of the city shot from Greg's workplace is glossed in terms of the decline of the steel industry and its relationship to their family history. The contentious political economy of de-industrialisation is, however, not just distant in time, it remains un-immediate in experience. We might imagine that as an immediate horizon it might have stopped resonating with Greg and Tim's disappeared father. But if the ruptural moment of de-industrialisation has passed so too has a particular narrative of post-industrial regeneration – captured in the 1990s with the comic social realism of working class escape, the New Labourite Third Way films, all the leaping *Billys* and the crazy *Montys*, propaganda for *Cool Britannia*. Equally, the tragic social realism of the disillusionment following 1997 in the new millennium is not at the centre of the film (although this is one way of understanding the peculiar presence of the film's parental ghosts, locked into such a tragedy – but these ghosts are complex figures as we shall see later). So, Forrest would be right in arguing that here, a certain kind of politics, that of class struggle is missing, relegated to the background, but he would be wrong in assuming that this is because of a principally aesthetic re-focusing. Rather what *Bypass* seeks to understand is the enigma of the contemporary neoliberal real, which it needs to be stressed, can be disorienting, especially if we try to confine it within available frameworks. For instance, neoliberal *bypassing* is far too subtle a process to be understood as simple post-industrial abandonment of industrial labour. Nor can it be fully understood as social exclusion (Winlow and Hall 2013). Ideas of abandonment and exclusion or even venerable capitalist ideologies of idleness clearly do not capture the experiences represented in the film. The *bypassed* generation of Tim and Greg is not a 'lost' generation, it is one that has never been busier – just as Greg is referred to as a 'good worker', so Tim is recognized to be a 'grafter'. Indeed, as Tim's crime boss puts it before sending him out to complete a task which ends with a beating, this is a world in which the 'wheels of industry' continue to relentlessly turn. Terminal visions of post-industrialisation are then in some ways unhelpful when it comes to understanding the neoliberal present in which capitalist realism offers no respite, not even for the economically superfluous.

Clearly in making this argument the film is resisting any absolute division between the formal and informal economies, and instead places crime and capitalism within the same frame. Tim is included in a social that represents little more than the chaotic flux of a Hobbesian competitive individualist nightmare. But so we don't assume that this is a distinct, pathological world of crime, separate from some functional, civilized world of capitalism, the film persistently transcodes signs of civility and criminality. Thus, just as crime bosses sagely refer to the 'wheels of industry' and worry about divisions between private time, public obligation and punctuality, so gang members refer to distinctions

between professionals and part-timers to legitimize violent hierarchies and at the same time use the idiom of friendship and sociability - 'take care, look after yourself' one of Tim's criminal assailants advises him. Perhaps the best example of this process of transcoding are the bailiffs. Entrepreneurial thieves dressed in suits and ties, they knock politely and respectfully using formal titles and pushing formally worded letters through Tim's letter box. After they have finally gained access, the shots of emptied rooms present visual evidence indistinguishable from burglary. Such images help to sum up what Steve Hall calls 'pseudo-pacification' (Hall 2012a: 84). Capitalist modernity is misrecognized as the historical product of the so-called 'civilizing process', instead for Hall it simply stimulates and institutionalizes competitive accumulative desires, minimally insulating their anti-social effects which are then sheathed in flimsy structures of norms and laws we call civilization. The discussion of the debtor's legal rights between Tim and his social worker are a comical expose of this pseudo-pacified culture. The bailiff needs an invitation to enter - he is restrained by the forces of law and order that protect the debtor, however, that invitation can be bypassed if the door is left unlocked. The unlocked door invites the bailiff to turn burglar with the blessing of the law - a privilege denied the vampire, that other figure of capitalism in action. The vampire's need to be invited in seems quaint in the neoliberal era.

What the film presents us with is paradoxical (exclusion as inclusion; an apparently functional dysfunctional archipelago of harm), and this signals its determination to get into focus precise contemporary dilemmas in working class existence. At the same time, much in it appears to be historically familiar - as befits the peculiar retro-temporality of neoliberalism itself. For instance, *bypassing*, especially as it impacts on the young, has a long class history. Think of the child-workers of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that working class childhood, or adolescence, started to acquire some recognition. But we need to remember the historical exception this moment represents. In the cultural traditions of the nineteenth century, for instance, in the realist novel, adolescence was an experience that belonged purely to bourgeois life stories. What made the British social realist films of the late 1950s and early 1960s fascinating in this respect was their exploration of a working class coming of age made possible by the same postwar cultural, economic and demographic shift that produced the teenager (the baby boomers of social democracy). Of course, the young male protagonists of the New Wave often sought escape from working class socialization - according to the ideally integrative logic of the classic bourgeois *bildung*, this was therefore no socialization at all.

But if working class individuals of the New Wave sought to escape from the working class, in our period escape is sought by the capitalist class. But it is escape not just from the working class - a perennial dream of the capitalist - but also from the social itself. I wish at this point to bring in Hollywood for the purposes of comparison and clarification of what I see as different inflections of these narratives of class and the social. At the same time, I would like to consider an aspect of film style which seems both critical to Hopkins' work and to this issue of the class based experience of the social under neoliberalism. Recently Kristen Whissel has persuasively suggested a link between what she calls the 'new verticality' of the Hollywood blockbuster's 'digital special effects emblem' and the experience of economic and political polarization that we associate with neoliberalism (Whissel 2014: 28). Hollywood, in the last twenty years, has appeared to take on the task of registering, in non-verisimilar, often mythic or epic forms, the struggle of such polarized forces. This dynamic is

condensed emblematically into repeated special effects figures which in the instance of the device she refers to as 'new verticality', locate characters and narrative events poised in landscapes stretching from the dizzying heights to the darkest deeps. The vertigo of this kind of exhilaration can be seen across a wide range of mainstream genres and Whissel interprets this emblematic device in terms of a dramatization of the individual's relationship to 'powerful historical forces' (26), or to struggles over 'desired or thwarted' change in the 'course of history' itself (45). In this way, we might argue, for instance, that the delirious freedoms, the defiance of the laws of time and space, captured by 'new verticality' figure, in part, the escape velocities of the neoliberal capitalist class whose dominance has led to the stretching of the social structure, such that distant, cocooned elites float in all the magnificence of their material and symbolic power above a disregarded human mess whose abandonment is now seen as a given. Think, for instance, of Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013) or *District 9* (2009). If this is taken as the mediated context for all these sporting gravity defying plunges and ascents, then it might be necessary to qualify Whissel's account of the representation of history through this figure of 'new verticality'. This energetic, epic world of momentous, imminent change acquires its spectacular vividness in the context of a stalled history. The figurative re-inscription of grand narratives of political class polarization – this would include the emblem Whissel refers to as the 'digital multitude', which features so prominently in science fiction and fantasy films with their grandiose apocalyptic battles – feeds off a broken dialectic. After all, 'new verticality' also suggests the agon of modernity (class struggle or revolution for instance) whereas it is a frequently noted characteristic of the contemporary world that there is a fundamental lack of engagement between master and slave, rich and poor, and that this represents a broken or arrested dialectic (Hall and Winlow 2013). The wealthy elite of the neoliberal moment simply don't perceive any need to engage politically with the impoverished masses. The once socially and politically charged space between the two poles has thinned and dissipated; Hollywood special effects re-animate it.

An intriguing extension then of Whissel's work would be the exploration of these dynamics outside of the Hollywood mainstream. What evidence is there of a distinctive, contemporary *social realist horizontality*? Obviously, we are not talking about expensive special effects now, but more prosaic dimensions of cinematography such as the tracking shot. If new verticality often represents a postmodern kinetic, sublime bypassing of the social – the ground on which history turns – then horizontality has an important relationship to modernity. Indeed, Whissel offers a useful periodization here, pointing out that up to the late 1980s, early 1990s, 'cinematic-being-in-the world' was anchored on the horizontal plane, and this helps us to fix quite precisely the relationship of new verticality to neoliberal polarisations (Whissel 28). But equally, it prompts us to think carefully about the horizontality of the contemporary tracking shot in social realism as a potential mediation of neoliberal dynamics. If generally the pre-1980s tracking shot often expressed, in its delight in free flowing motion, certain utopian possibilities - think of the French New Wave or the MGM musical of the Kelly-Donen era; or if we link the shot, as Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan do in their study of 1970s liberal New Hollywood, to that aspect of realism that has been closely associated with metonymic modes of representation and as they put it 'a certain sense of the world, a more egalitarian or horizontal and contextual phenomenal reality', then we have to recognize the rarity of any such contemporary uses other, I think than in music video, in which, along the lines established by say Massive Attack's *Unfinished*

Sympathy, the tracking shot remains a common way of suggesting a working class collective being-in-the-world (Ryan and Kellner 1988: 94). Horizontality, then, as a figure, is closely related to the radical, even revolutionary twentieth century concept of the everyday – ‘the complex web of material, metonymic connections’ linking characters to one another and to their environments in such a way as to suggest commonalities, equality of being and mutual interests (94).

It should immediately be apparent, when we turn to consider the social realist form, that the figure of horizontality resonates with normative aspects of the social which are at play in my argument. Later I will seek to make a defence of this normative order in which an authentic social requires a dependable sense of inclusion or belonging, a presumption of equality, and abiding guarantees of solidarity, trust and security. What I am exploring, with the help of Hopkins’ film, this obscure force of *bypassing*, obviously works to undermine, disorder and empty out these defining social values. How then, does a consideration of that privileged aesthetic figure of horizontality, the tracking shot, assist us in this exploration of *bypassing*? Briefly, I would like to consider three instances, across both *Bypass* and *Better Things* (2008) – Hopkins’ earlier feature film. Firstly, a group of shots which form a motif: Tim on his BMX; secondly, the early foot chase of Greg by the police; and thirdly, another group of tracking shots taken from inside moving cars which form a motif in *Better Things*.

The tracking shots of Tim, particularly those of him at work as a fence, are characterized by tight framing. Every tracking shot, depending on how it is framed, has the potential to unfurl more or less of the pro-filmic space before the camera. Travelling shots from moving vehicles, for instance, are often used to give us panoramic views. The shots of Tim on his bike, however, are closely framed, restricting our view of the space into which he is moving. Even when shot from behind, the view ahead is obscured (by using Tim’s own back to obstruct our vision). We might say then that here off-screen space intrudes itself into our consciousness because it systematically remains off-screen. Crucially, the combination of motion and a restricted view which is side on to the direction of that motion creates not just an uneasy sensation of being deprived access to off-screen space, but also, a feeling of vulnerability, naturally intensified in a narrative context of crime in which we are primed to expect danger – or even more prosaically, by the fear of collision. The repeated use of this shot suggests an uncomfortable sense of imminence – the fact that nothing happens does not alleviate our sense that it may, at any moment. This then is not new verticality’s dramatic imminence of historical change, the *peripeteia* of epochal shifts, the dawns of new eras, but the imminence of an internally generated breakdown of the individual’s relationship to the everyday and the social. This pressure – of uncertainty and danger – is underlined in the key early scene of the foot chase (Greg pursued by police). Apart from the section in this chase shot with a telephoto lens where the compression of the planes of action leaves Greg and his policeman pursuer framed in a single shot, this sequence is remarkable for the moment when Greg stops on what appears from his reactions to be a panoramic summit. This wider view is also withheld from us by tight framing, which in turn intensifies our sense of the approaching off-screen threat of the pursuer. We are then forced to witness a blow that Greg is unprepared for – absorbed as he has become during the chase in the memory of his interrupted dream – and whose timing is withheld from us by the framing. With the effect of the blow detached from its embedding in cause-effect sequencing, the legitimacy of the social function of policing is problematised. As is often

noted, policing in the British context has, in the past, been an established index of social unity. The disproportion of the blow – falling on the head of unprepared man no longer in flight – in the context of the systemic class injustices of neoliberalism, strongly suggests a social struggling for legitimacy.

That Hopkins is setting out to systematically elicit similarly unsettling effects can be confirmed by the use of the tracking shot in *Better Things*. Here it is often used from inside moving vehicles, both head on to the direction of movement and side on, and is at times accompanied by a manipulation of the sound track. Exaggerated revving engine noise alerts us to the anxiety of speed and the potential for collision. However, this is accompanied by moments when the ambient diegetic sound is removed totally – a rare use of silence – leaving us in a speeding car, travelling on unsighted, country lanes, but listening to the gentle, calming clarity of affectless voices and spare dialogue. This relief on the soundtrack disembodies and pacifies the sense of jeopardy conveyed visually. Nevertheless, the peculiarly affectless voices, suggestive of states of dissociation or irrealisation, also conjure up the romantic-melancholic, suicidal compulsions the film is exploring, thereby re-introducing the abiding affect of anxiety.

To sum up then, Hopkins' adaptation of the tracking shot condenses an inhibiting sense of the imminence of the possibility of unwanted events, the untrustworthiness of space, and the undermining of those necessary preconditions that sustain the substance of social experience. Here we might make a connection with what Steve Hall calls 'objectless anxiety' (Hall 2012a). In brief this represents a sense of precarity and insecurity generated by cultures of capitalism which, seeking compliance with the principles of competitive individualism, exploit the widest cultural awareness of the abyss of possible poverty, insignificance and failure that shadows each one of us, without respite, within fully marketised societies. My argument is that the diffuse, unsettling experience of being *bypassed* is related to this. Hall argues that 'objectless anxiety' is radically de-politicising precisely because it prevents the formation of a perception of bounded, clearly identified, rational fears, such that might mobilise collective, coherent, determined resistances and struggles. It is a spasmodic state – one that, hemmed in by a social space eliciting gnawing unease, is ideologically exploitable by simplistic, scapegoating solutions to the multiple dysfunctions and frustrations of neoliberal society.

Hall and Winlow's Žižekian/Lacanian inspired reconstruction of the 'transcendental materialist' ontology of the subject in the context of their discipline of criminology, can be used to better understand the dilemmas of contemporary neoliberalism that *Bypass* attempts to meet square on (Hall and Winlow, 2013). They argue that it is in our nature to be plastic, adaptable - as contemporary neuroscience indicates, we are 'naturally unnatural' or radically indeterminate as befits a creature that is both unique in its pre-maturational helplessness, and that needs to adapt itself to wide range of environments and conditions. At the same time, because of this radical human indeterminacy we desperately pursue and cling to stabilising socio-symbolic orders to anchor our subjectivities, whether or not such orders offer individual or social flourishing. Thus, in periods of social disarray, such as we are experiencing under neoliberalism, the poor surrogate socio-symbolic transfixing our nature that we call 'capitalist realism' is difficult to dislodge. For Hall and Winlow this problem is

only exacerbated by the hegemonic scepticism of postmodern subjectivities which whilst incapable of fundamentally challenging capitalist realism, have helped to deligitimise all commitment to shared meanings, leading to a culture of cynicism that is entirely congenial for neoliberalism. This is what Žižek refers to as the problem of symbolic inefficiency (179). We can no longer mobilise ourselves to believe in universal values and truths. Only the severe dislocation in which ideological struggle is pursued doggedly into its complex affective and emotional roots has any chance of success in mounting a challenge to this state of affairs. The bad clichés of capitalist realist competitive individualism go deep. Simple epistemological demystification is insufficient to liberate us from them – we know things are bad, but we carry on regardless, a robotic skill that apparently the English are proud of, and one which surely Žižek would recognise. As Hall and Winlow put it Hollywood is useful here in pointing to the deep seatedness of the problem – take the contemporary disaster movie. In these films, a conjoined crisis of the socio-economic and socio-symbolic (typically, the infrastructure crashes and those in charge flail around ineffectively), eventually produces a survivor's consciousness, one fitted for progressive, rational, collective action, glimpsed on the other side of the disaster in the films' cursory post-apocalyptic codas. If we turn to social realist culture, this kind of scenario is rare for obvious reasons, however, it is exactly what Loach is gesturing to in his documentary *The Spirit of 45* (2013). Out of the experiences of war comes the desire for welfare. So how does this ontological dilemma – a radically indeterminate creature, jammed in a version of itself and an accompanying social which clearly prevents its own flourishing - leave signs of its presence in *Bypass*?

I think it is important here to hang on to the peculiarity of the figures of the father and the mother if we want to understand Tim and his relationship to larger cultural and political developments. Crudely put, Tim and Greg are stranded between a *phantom residual socio-symbolic order* (the social democratic compromise formation struggled for by their forebears out of the core nineteenth century social solidarity project) – and an *inefficient existing surrogate symbolic order* which is presiding over the extreme demoralisation and economic immiseration of working class communities such as the one they belong to. Their father is an emblematic, contradictory figure who condenses these historic shifts. He is a relic of the older order, which despite its many, substantive advantages over the present, can no longer command general assent amongst those whose lives would be immeasurably improved by anything resembling its return. But this is a matter not just of symbolic inefficiency, and the poisoning of the valuable legacies of the past, as the father's peculiar presence cannot but help suggest the problems of patriarchy. Consider the key signifiers used: muscle, height and breadth (accentuated by shooting from below and in slow motion), stubble, chains, grim mouth. The figure is titanic, minatory, 'massive' as Greg calls him. He is a crag of a man. An implacable force his gestures of parenting are highly ambivalent – both protective and controlling. Our impression of the father, mediated by the childhood memory of Greg, is that of an anxiously observed enigma. Specifically, this polyvalent figure collapses not just the relative stability, security and coherence associated with social democracy, but also the peremptory and *special freedoms* of the radical individualism of the contemporary moment. How else are we to understand his disappearance before his wife's death – the same woman who, bizarrely, he places in a position of competition with his delinquent son, Greg. That the character does not, in this respect, 'ring true', so to speak, is not, however, the result of some storytelling deficiency. It

is precisely the father's ability to provoke in Tim and Greg profound feelings of puzzlement that indicate his significance in the film for Tim's coming of age predicament.

His mother has a key role in resolving this problem, but to explain how, we need to consider the ideological core of capitalist realism. To overcome the latter it is necessary to do what has become unthinkable in our era - open ourselves to the need for others and a corresponding need for a renewed solidarity project - and any attempt to do this produces, a visceral reflex of rejection. Under neoliberalism, dependency is, of course, in any form, *the* sign of abjection. It is the place of the loser. It is this perception which is clearly adopted in the most significant contemporary realist films - see for instance the Dardennes brothers *Two Days, One Night* (2014) - and this surely helps us to understand Tim's mother. This *post-mortem* figure is a very public ghost - her first appearance is shoeless at the doctors' surgery, it is an appearance that demonstrates a shameless abjection. Note the odd constancy of her many subsequent appearances. Whether alive (in memory), or dead (hallucinated), there is a consistency in her expression and presence. Abject, vacant, she is also, tenaciously, paradoxically attentive in the seeking out of eye contact and in exchanging looks. Whereas the father is vital and moves energetically, always away from the onlooker, the mother is often motionless and devitalised, but turned to face Tim. Crucially, the father's final appearance triggers an epistemologically sceptical reflex (variations in the cinematographic choices - focus, lighting, and angle creating a deliberate uncertainty about what we can know about the father which is mimed in Tim's response. Is he inside or outside Tim's dream? There at the hospital, or not?) Such concerns about access to the real are ultimately irrelevant in the mother's case. The father is not then an absent presence in the same way that the post mortem mother is. She has a different function. That is to say, she enters into an exchange with the present which he does not. The scene around Tim on the operating table is critical here. He accepts her presence, disregarding any implied barriers between real/illusory manifestation. Such distinctions are simply beside the point. It is 'as if' she was available to him, and in as much as she is, a connection can be forged - around the idea of helplessness/dependency and its relation to reviving the social. This surely explains the point about the obscurity of Tim's illness - that he does not know the cause makes him more in need of the help he refuses. The body's significance in the film - beaten, bloodied, demoralised, fitting, injured - helps to register this fundamentally social aspect of our human nature.

This concluding scene of the film is interesting in the light of Elsaesser's argument that we have undergone, not just in film theory and new realist world cinema, but across the humanities generally, an ontological turn which has subjected to critique the epistemological scepticism of radical constructivism. Here in *Bypass* are characters with strange sensitivities, sustaining intersubjective exchanges and operating in worlds that defy known realities but which are untainted by any sense of solipsism. For Elsaesser the tendency of new realist protagonists to engage with others in these strange worlds opened up by their reshaped perceptive and subjective states demonstrates a spirit of trust (acting 'as if' impossible exchanges are possible) and signals a sublation, not rejection, of constructionism, with its limiting, dogged sense of the ultimate unknowability or unreachability of the other. In this sense it is revealing that epistemological doubts shadow the presence of the father and his blocked narrative, in contrast to the sustaining exchanges set up with Tim by the post mortem mother. What Hall adds to this, in the context of the

class over-coding of British social realism, is a distinctive inflection of Elsaesser's account of the ontological turn. Rather than 'unrest', ontological *anxiety* might better describe Hall's view. His critique of constructionism, which he associates with liberal postmodernism, is connected to what he sees as a crisis in transcendence. That is to say, he views as disastrous liberal postmodernism's over-investment in change through the promotion of cultural flux and mobile identity and its phobic distancing from essences, as well as its political disinclination to engage with systemic action directed at the socio-economic basement. His immediate political concern, which he shares with the work of many of British social realist film makers, is the context provided by demoralised working class communities fully exposed to the social harms of neoliberalism, and it pushes him in the direction of a Lacanian 'biosocial essentialism' (Hall 2012b). This is a scary, exacting ontology, rather than the contemporary cheery ones – Deleuzian and vitalist – that Elsaesser also avoids. For Hall, the primordially distressed subject, at its deepest level characterised by flexibility, lack, tension and anxiety, is hard-wired to crave and adapt to existing socio-symbolic structures, regardless of their suitability for individual or collective flourishing. In this sense, working class conditions of everyday life under neoliberalism have made capitalist realism the horizon of our social and natural world – and this is the source of the exhausting, paradoxical dead-ends faced by the working class protagonists in *Bypass*. Hopkins's film then has the virtue of posing, in its concluding scenes, the extremity of the current situation – when just getting by, getting on itself, seem confounded, then only fundamental change answers. Lily's belief in Tim's future (as father); Tim's impossible response to his dead mother's solicitousness and his experience of the abjection of extreme sickness, and the birth of Tim and Lily's baby, are all decisive moments pointing to change. Which of course is not to say that these emblematic moments resolve the inhibiting complexities and determining pressures of the socio-economic context. The final paradox of the film lies here – that its conclusion, in investing in a sense of necessary fundamental change, characterised by states of dependency and trust, at the same time risks appearing, in these sharply cynical times, as little more than naive and unrealistic wish fulfilment.

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