



**Radboud University Nijmegen**

Miners, Marxism and Mise-en-scène

*Narrative Patterns and Commodity Culture in Films about the 1984/5 Miners' Strike*

Bachelor Thesis

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Brouwer', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the representations of the miners' strike of 1984/5 in *Brassed Off* (1996), *Billy Elliot* (2000) and *Pride* (2014). The notion of class is preeminent in the reasoning behind this historical event, yet it is hidden in the narrative patterns of these films. With the methodologies of Marxist class analysis, consumerist strategies and mise-en-scène, the depictions of the class conflict are examined in the narratives of these films. This research will show that the film industry is influenced by the consumer culture yet complicit with the contemporary ruling classes. This implicates that historical events are fitted in a narrative pattern and genre that complies with the aspired representation of the hegemonic power and with the (inter)national consumer market.

*Keywords:* *Billy Elliot*, *Brassed Off*, class conflict, commodity culture, Conservatives, consumer society, films, Marxism, miners, miner's strike, mise-en-scène, narratives, *Pride*, working class

## Author's Note

This thesis has, which I can say now that it is written, been quite the journey. It is, however, a significant accomplishment and there are some people that need to be thanked for their help along the way. I would like to quote the woman who, funnily enough, was one of the main reasons that the miners' strike occurred. In 1986, Thatcher said: "[...] I do not know anyone who has got to the top without hard work. That is the recipe. It will not always get you to the top, but it should get you pretty near [...]."<sup>1</sup> I think that this is a fair statement that captures the spirit of writing a Bachelor Thesis well.

I would like to thank Odin Dekkers, first of all, for supervising my Bachelor Thesis. He has helped me greatly to stay calm and focused and provided new insights into my research. He often came up with new ideas or perspectives and had great knowledge and vast sources which could be useful for my writing.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my parents for helping to remind me to stay hydrated and active during long hours sitting behind my laptop. When focused on my masterpiece, it was nice to have a reality check every once in a while.

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<sup>1</sup> Thatcher, interview.

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## Introduction

*“[With] the miners’ strike, or some very recent event, there are lessons to be learnt, balance sheets to be drawn up [and] blame and praise to be allocated which are also the common currency of political discourse.”<sup>2</sup>*

British 20<sup>th</sup>-century history has been filled with wars, protests and revolutions and one that has made its significant mark on history was the miners’ strike of 1984/5. Over the past decades, the miners’ strike has continued to play a role in British collective memory and several films have been made about the period. The films *Brassed Off* (1996), *Billy Elliot* (2000) and *Pride* (2014) attempt to capture the spirit of the time and the narrative of the miners in such a way that makes this historical incident interesting for the audience of today. Contemporary films are made to attract mass audiences so that the commercial film industry can operate and make profit and thereby follow the genres which are most likely to attract a large audience, such as comedies do. As a result, these three films largely follow the same, success-guaranteed, narrative patterns: people fall in love despite their differences, the boy gets the education he dreams of and peace is restored. In other words, the films all have initial conflicts with themselves or others but in the end, the issue resolves itself through positivity and support from others. The films often both capture reality and romanticize the hard circumstances of the period to make the historical event a commodity, thereby creating the sense that the miners’ narratives were a genuine portrayal of that time through manipulation of the narrative. In this thesis, I will investigate to what extent the representation of the miners’ strike in *Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot* and *Pride* is altered by the fact that these films are a commercial commodity.

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel, Bloomfield, Boanas, *The Enemy Within*, Preface.

The remainder of the significance of mining history today as represented in film and other platforms shows its importance in British history. Mining had been a source of income for a large group of the British population until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when many mines had to close due to Margaret Thatcher's political choices. Coal mines were no longer of great importance to the economy due to technological and industrial advances and people had other sources to power their houses. Thatcher was part of the Conservative Party and during her governing period as the Prime Minister from 1979 until her resignation in 1990, she was strict in her politics, especially concerning the striking miners. In previous research on representations of national identity in and of the U.K., such as that of Stephen Brooke and Louise Cameron, the authors note that Thatcher's governmental years "were very much part of the disorder of the 1980s and 1990s,"<sup>3</sup> amidst economic decline and the growing lower classes. John Kirk agrees that Thatcher's politics added to the growing power structures and division.<sup>4</sup> The closure of several British coal mines led to unemployment and very low incomes which provoked the miners to strike, in the hopes of preventing the pit closures and salvaging their source of income.

The miners' strike of 1984/5 led to a large conflict between the government and the miners, where Margaret Thatcher called the miners "the enemy within."<sup>5</sup> Brooke and Cameron explain that "Thatcherism [...] apparently [replaced] the liberal optimism of the 1950s and 1960s with a growing sense of division and disorder of British society."<sup>6</sup> The miners' strike led to the confrontation and polarisation between the government and the lower classes. Since the mines were located throughout Britain, especially in Wales and Scotland, this did not help to create a united set of countries. Geoff Eley expands on the notion of national identity by noting that the miners' strike "brutally delegitimized the [labour]

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<sup>3</sup> Brooke and Cameron, "Anarchy in the U.K.?" 640.

<sup>4</sup> Kirk, "Urban Narratives," 353.

<sup>5</sup> Khabaz, *Manufactured Schema*, 214.

<sup>6</sup> Brooke and Cameron, "Anarchy in the U.K.?" 644.

movement in its national institutional credibility.”<sup>7</sup> The strikers were not taken seriously by the government since the economy needed to move forward and the coal mines would discourage that growth. Unions were created by groups of miners throughout the countries, and they came out to strike against the National Coal Board when the latter “announced that 20 pits in England would have to close with the loss of 20,000 jobs.”<sup>8</sup>

The consequences of the miners’ strike were damaging and unfortunate for the miners in Britain. The website of BBC Inside Out explains that many strikers lost their jobs and were arrested throughout the following years, after which the coal mines closed in 1992.<sup>9</sup> These citizens of Great Britain had their work, which they had known through generations as the driving force behind the economy, taken away from them. BBC called it “the end of the industry that had once been the backbone of industrial Britain”<sup>10</sup> and rightfully so, due to the large impact it has made on society and lack of trust of the working classes in the government that we still see today.

The great impact of the miners’ strike of 1984/5 on British society has been exemplified by the films about the period produced since. While *Billy Elliot* and *Pride* try to capture the sentiments of the period itself in their narratives, *Brassed Off* is based on the narrative of the people living in a period which takes place ten years after the 1984/5 miners’ strike when mining closures were still an important topic in daily conversation. Because each film portrays different stories of the miners’ strike and its aftermath during different decades, these films capture the collective, albeit conceivably unique, perspectives of the miners in the 1980s and 1990s. Taking this into account, along with the fact that this historic event plays a significant role in the collective memory of the British (working class) population, these films display explicit or implicit protests to the governmental choices about class, income and work

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<sup>7</sup> Eley, “Finding the People’s War,” 821-822.

<sup>8</sup> “The Miners’ Strike Revisited.” *BBC Inside Out*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

of the period. In their research on the strike, authors Simon Popple and Ian W. Macdonald explain that “any history of the 1984 strike generally then presents the National Union of Mineworkers as against the National Coal Board, and / or against the Government, and / or against the police, and / or the media of the day.”<sup>11</sup> Peter Hitchcock, however, argues that the notion of ‘class’ in working-class representations are hardly accurate.<sup>12</sup> However unrealistic they may be, the depictions are, as Les Roberts argues, of utmost importance to the consumer in their understanding of the event.<sup>13</sup> W.A. Gamson expands on that by explaining that political issues can be depicted in seemingly innocent things and exemplifies this with the film *Chicken Run*.<sup>14</sup> He notes this ambiguity in his discussion of *Billy Elliot* as well for it “features prominent subtexts on class and gender.”<sup>15</sup>

There are several other recent studies about the miners’ strike, which underlines the lasting impact of the incident on the British society. Popple and Macdonald point to the 2010 conference *Digging the Seam: Cultural Reflections and the Consequences of the 1984/5 Miners’ Strike* about the 1984/5 miners’ strike and its “cultural legacy.”<sup>16</sup> They note that they are aware that the cultural representations, that they discuss of the miners’ strike, do not depict the historical event in its entirety, nor do those portrayals reflect all sides of the story.<sup>17</sup> Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Boanas, editors of the 2016 *Routledge Revivals: The Enemy Within (1986): Pit Villages and the Miners’ Strike of 1984-5* share these sentiments as they observe that the period was filled with miscommunication and false information, where “issues were defined by remembered traumas and every engagement was in some sort a re-enactment of ancient struggles.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, author Katy Shaw takes the

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<sup>11</sup> Popple and Macdonald, *Digging the Seam*, ix.

<sup>12</sup> Hitchcock, “Working-Class Representation,” 21.

<sup>13</sup> Roberts, “Movie-mapping,” 128.

<sup>14</sup> Gamson, “Political Socialization,” 570.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 571.

<sup>16</sup> Popple and Macdonald, *Digging the Seam*, ix

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel, Bloomfield, and Boanas, *The Enemy Within*, n.p.

example of the Billy Elliot film and musical in *Mining the Meaning: Cultural Representations of the 1984-5 UK Miners' Strike* to express that “[the] direct struggle and collectivist action which forms such a distinctive part of strikers’ representations of the dispute are missing.”<sup>19</sup> She underlines this by, for instance, the lack of representation of poetry about the miners’ strike “[which] means several generations have been immersed in a version of history that omits the perspectives of arguably the most important figures – those actually involved in the conflict.”<sup>20</sup> These authors mainly take issue with the depiction of the period which ought to capture the varying but collective perspective of the miners. This research aims to investigate this further and questions whether the latter is possible when taking into account that cultural products about the miners’ strike are produced in a commodity culture where events are made into products which can be bought and sold on the international market. This research will investigate how the fact that *Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot* and *Pride* are commercial commodities and serve to appeal to a large audience, interfere with the representation of realism of the miners’ strike.

In contemporary society, elements of many historical events have been taken from its context to be made into a commercial product. Marxist theory on commercialism expresses that once the film industry provides films that do well in contemporary society, based on previous films that were successful in the consumer culture, they will come and see the films which the directors and producers provide for them. *Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot* and *Pride* will be investigated through the Marxist theories about class and commercialism and through the film theory about mise-en-scène about the director’s control over what appears in the film frame. These theories will be considered in light of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s and will help the examination of the narrative patterns of the three films, additionally to the consideration of the social critique that would occur when the miners’ strike is portrayed realistically. The

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<sup>19</sup> Shaw, *Mining the Meaning*, 190.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 200.

films will be investigated individually with the theories but they will be compared in the conclusion to reveal their similarities within the commodity culture. As a result, this research hypothesizes the significant overweight of the commodity factor within society that takes away from the realistic depiction of the miners' strike. Moreover, the presentation of the miners' strike shows how popular culture can be used to obscure the severity of a situation in order to keep an interest in the conflict over the decades. The contemporary film industry hereby creates successful films which focus on reaching a broad audience rather than only the smaller groups which identify with the historical event.

## Theoretical Framework

*“[...] Humanity has always to some extent ‘consumed’ and attached social significance to specific objects of consumption, and consumerism has been the essential complement to the development of capitalism’s productive forces throughout its history.”<sup>21</sup>*

The miners’ strike of 1984/5 is unquestionably tied to class differences and political stances since the event developed conflicts between the working class and the hegemonic powers. Research on the films *Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot* and *Pride* should consider the representation of this historical event by looking at the class differences, the narrative patterns and the commercial motivation and reason for production. The theoretical frameworks of Marxism and film theory will be the common thread through the investigation in the following chapters. Considering the class differences within the film and the power structures inherent in the process of filmmaking, methodologies of Marxist and film theories will be explicated in forms of mise-en-scène, consumerist strategy and orthodox Marxist class analysis. Firstly, it must be taken into account what these theories meant for the film industry throughout the 80s, 90s and 00s – the periods during which the three films were made.

Films from the 1980s show that class differences are represented through the notion of the city. As John Kirk points out, “the city [...] came to signify deeper changes in cultural and economic life in Britain in the 1980s [...] as emblem, or symbol, of the very fabric and nature of modern life.”<sup>22</sup> Our mental image about the political class conflict becomes very clear here through a divide between the city, where the higher classes make the conclusive decisions, and the suburbs, where the lower classes live in a poorer state. To the working classes, this sense of modernity that lies within the city might have been “allied with an acute sense of

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<sup>21</sup> Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum, *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture*, 89.

<sup>22</sup> Kirk, “Urban Narratives,” 376.

foreboding in the face of history,”<sup>23</sup> as the modernity in the city differed from the traditions and lifestyle in the suburbs and countryside. Les Roberts explains that the city became “a new-found [...] film set”<sup>24</sup> in the 1980s to convey modernity and with that, the scenery of the city contradicted in looks and prestige compared to that which lies outside the city. When united against a political force, the conflict became a matter of ‘we’ against ‘them’, which is, as John Kirk explains through the investigation of a film from the ‘Thatcher Decade’, “an ideological strategy which partly resolved the contradictions of [...] class [...] in its construction of national identity.”<sup>25</sup> The class conflict thus divides Britain yet effectively ties classes, races and genders together within a working-class party that clashes with the conservative party on a political level and for a communal goal. Les Roberts adds that television became a rather important factor “for exposing and resisting the effects of Thatcherism and charting, in drama and documentary, the changing political, economic, and social climate.”<sup>26</sup> Laura Mulvey counters, however, that it was the cinema that “[provided] the raw material for reforging links across the great divide of the 1980s,”<sup>27</sup> which shows the power of the higher classes, as they influence and buy films in the film industry and can mask the severity of the class conflict.

In the 1990s, though, this changed due to the different perspectives towards the presentation of the event. Mulvey explains that “cinema [could] articulate the desire for a better world, [but] its complex way of interpreting and representing could also produce both critique and new ways of seeing.”<sup>28</sup> She expresses that the cinema brought about a “transformation and reinvention of its forms and conventions.”<sup>29</sup> While the 1980s had thus

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<sup>23</sup> Kirk, “Urban Narratives,” 376.

<sup>24</sup> Roberts, “Movie-mapping,” 151.

<sup>25</sup> Kirk, “Urban Narratives,” 369.

<sup>26</sup> Mulvey, “Rethinking Feminist Film Theory,” 1287.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1291.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1287.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

tried to resolve the differences between the working classes and the government, the 1990s offer a platform through the means of cinema, where class differences could be expressed and explored. This would, presumably, have led to an effect on the treatment of classes within films, since “the ‘mainstream’ UK cinema audience of the 1990s and 2000s [were], in any case, largely middle-class.”<sup>30</sup>

In the 2000s, cinema showed a different path yet again – it was a period of competition, comparison and individuality in which class was important. Biressi and Nunn note that it was a period when “the media resurrected and reinvigorated debates about social class and social distinction.”<sup>31</sup> Class became a prominent subject on media and television, especially with the emergence of technical improvements. Biressi and Nunn exemplify this by stating that the decade is especially known for how “social classes, class fractions and social types are labelled through consideration of how media and political discourses tag, frame and characterise the so-called underclass.”<sup>32</sup> This is not a case of class conflict between the lower and upper classes as we have seen in the 1980s, but a power distinction on cultural rather than political level, where the media is the influencer, because the way that classes are presented becomes the way they are thought to exist. The power of representation is thus, again, in the hands of the film directors and producers who are influenced by the general perspective of the media towards classes rather than the conventional and political perspective of classes, such as the different images that are created of upper and lower classes alike. The investigation of films in their context would be interesting when taking in mind what different perspectives there were towards class distinctness through the decades.

Films about historical events often have a political meaning embedded in them, which is interpreted through class differences. Taking the example of war films, it is often seen that

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<sup>30</sup> Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, 58.

<sup>31</sup> Biressi and Nunn, *Class and Contemporary British Culture*, 148.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

the events take place on the battlefield, urban settings or have landscape sceneries. Les Roberts clarifies that, in these settings, “the city’s underlying tensions (social, emotional, political, spatial) are hidden from view.”<sup>33</sup> To investigate the (often implicit) political message in popular films, the solution lies within orthodox Marxist class analysis, since this method focuses on class differences and hegemonic power structures. Wright, Levine and Sober explain that this methodology “approaches specific problems with the presumption that class and related concepts are the *most important* causal processes at work. An orthodox Marxist need not insist dogmatically that class is always of paramount importance, but will be surprised when it is not.”<sup>34</sup> In the instance of the miners’ strike, and in many other class conflicts, lower classes are noticeably exploited by the higher class for the gain of the latter. Film producers and directors are complicit to the higher classes and, presumably, adopt their perspective because they are the hegemonic powers. It thus appears that the higher classes decide what commercial product is made from a historic event such as the Miner’s Strike. Directors and producers then influence the portrayal of the events in films and what position different classes take within the film. Author Peter Hitchcock notes that “whatever the historical claims of working-class constituency, these organisations have often stood in for the working class: they have represented it,”<sup>35</sup> which can be applied to depictions in film about classes as well. When taking into account that films which include a class conflict are produced from the perspective of a political party, it becomes clear that political Marxist elements, such as class, can be found within the film as well as behind the creation of it.

The perspective that the directors and producers take when making a film, depending on the decade and the context of it, is decisive for the message of the film. The notion of *mise-en-scène*, where it is the director’s choice what images and people are shown in the

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<sup>33</sup> Roberts, “Movie-mapping,” 130.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, Levine, and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, 184.

<sup>35</sup> Hitchcock, “Working-Class Representation,” 21.

frame, is especially useful when looking at films about historical events. Directors and producers have the choice of framing an event in a certain genre, such as comedy, and the narrative within that genre is conclusive for the perception of a theme or event. Geoff Eley, for instance, notes that “British cinema has been systematically mining the national past for settings and stories [during the last two decades, yet] World War II seldom appears.”<sup>36</sup> Historical films rarely paint the picture of an event in itself but put the focus on stories and perspectives. Eley explains that this focus essentially means that “film is both the bearer of its own histories and a bridge to wider societal analysis.”<sup>37</sup> The filmmakers are in a power position where they can construct the level of representation and reality through the narratives the film portrays and the meanings it carries.

The *mise-en-scène* of a film means that the choice of setting, actors or actresses, costumes, lighting and sound have a large impact on the message which the directors and producers try to convey. What is of equal importance, however, are the situations, persons or places that are left out of the shot. By focusing on a certain aspect of history, of a person or of a location, the context of the historical event will also point to the opposite side of the story, for example, the story of the women who ‘stay at home’, something which is often not portrayed in films. Geoff Eley observes that cinematic productions are platforms “where particular representations and representational repertoires are also specifically produced and shaped”<sup>38</sup> so that historical events are perceived in a certain way. The narrative pattern that is chosen will thus influence how the film process progresses. Films about historical events are often romanticized rather than made historically accurate. The focus then lies on the narrative pattern of the genre it is fitted in, while the realistic aspects are often not in the shot. When trying to convey realism, however, great attention is paid to detail in terms of the above-

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<sup>36</sup> Eley, “Finding the People’s War,” 823.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 838.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 837.

mentioned setting, actors or actresses, costumes, lighting and sound, all of which can be found through realism. Nonetheless, no matter how realistic the visual and audible effects, it is the genre and plot that are most likely to set the tone of the film.

The creative process behind these films, which lies in the hands of the directors and producers, is closely connected with the demand of genre and narrative of the audience and the economy. The Marxist theory of economic determinism can easily be linked to the creation of film when taking the perspective that we live in a consumer culture. The theory explains the duality of the 'base' and the 'superstructure', respectively the creation of consumer materials and the cultural creations which come from the former. Due to the set standards in commodity culture, we see that things that sell well are recreated, thereby creating an ongoing process or spiral of the things that are created and produced. What is more, Harriman and Nance note that "[under] capitalism, we allow the vast bulk of the economy to be run undemocratically by a tiny minority,"<sup>39</sup> which is the part of the upper class which influences the economic industry. Selwyn explains that we live "[in] the political economy of seduction and enchantment"<sup>40</sup> and it follows logically that themes, persons, and also historical events are taken from its context and made into a consumable item, in this case through making it into a film. Les Roberts elaborates that, as a consequence, "the plenitude of place, history and identity [is reduced]"<sup>41</sup> since certain topics are explored in detail which means that other issues are left unexplored.

In the film industry, especially, one can speak about commercial commodities because films are distributed throughout many countries and make their successes there as well as in the country where they are produced. Paul Swann explicates that "[for] several years immediately after World War II, the British film industry and the British government believed

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<sup>39</sup> Harriman and Nance, "The Environment, Consumerism, and Socialism."

<sup>40</sup> Selwyn quoted in Roberts, "Movie-mapping," 129.

<sup>41</sup> Roberts, "Movie-mapping," 129.

that movies could make more money in the United States than, say, exports of machine tools or scotch whiskey”<sup>42</sup> due to its large market, but the British did not yet grasp their influence in that U.S. economy. Swann expands on these beliefs and notes that, in the 1990s, American television channels even “[offered] extensive lists of British motion pictures and television programming for sale”<sup>43</sup> due to the developed technologies, the popularization of television and growth in international relations. Consumerism appears to have become even more important over the decades due to developments in various fields, as well as the understanding that the British now had about their position in the economic field in comparison to the authority that is America.<sup>44</sup> Hall, Winlow and Ancrum expand on this notion and disclose that, especially in the latest decades, it can be seen that “[in] the Western world, particularly in Britain and the USA [...] neo-liberal capitalism appears to be at its most advanced.”<sup>45</sup> The consumer commodities are the drive behind the portrayal of a topic towards the public, which means that the market economy effectively makes the decisions over what story is worth telling.

We see that the representation of events is dependent upon the producers, the context in which the film is created, the country and decade in which it is produced, the opinions and interests that appear through the neo-liberal market and the influence of the class background of the creators of films. In this research, these aspects will come to the fore when investigating *Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot* and *Pride* and can be applied productively to the miners’ strike of 1984/5. The notion of the consumer commodity, class differences and director’s decisions will help to understand each of the films’ differences but also shows their overlap with each other. The films will not have had equal successes internationally and will show significant distinctiveness in important themes. What can be said is that the films all

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<sup>42</sup> Swann, “The British Culture Industries,” 28.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>45</sup> Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum, *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture*, 20.

have a comedic genre and is intended to leave cinema-goers with the feeling of having enjoyed a 'feelgood' film. The following chapters will be dedicated to the investigation of the representation of the miners' strike of 1984/5 in films made in the contemporary consumer society. The chapters will also focus on the realistic portrayal of the class conflict of the period, considering that the films fit in a 'feelgood' comedic genre.

## Chapter 1: The Miners' Strike through Music: A Discussion of *Brassed Off*

*"I thought that music mattered. But does it? Bollocks. Not compared to how people matter.[...] Because over the last ten years this bloody government has systematically destroyed an entire industry – our industry. And not just our industry – our communities, our homes, our lives. All in the name of progress and for a few lousy bob."* – Danny's speech.<sup>46</sup>

As a film set ten years after the miners' strike of 1984/5, *Brassed Off* captures the social circumstances during the strike and the fact that the pit closures still occur, even a decade after the strike happened. Peter Hitchcock describes the film as "[...] a quirky British film from 1996 that features the efforts of a colliery band to provide substance to the lives of a mining community facing the upheavals of pit closures and unemployment."<sup>47</sup> This substance is portrayed through the participation in the brass band which adds to the sense of community, shared passion and small-town concern for neighbours. The main plotline focuses on the existence of the colliery band, the developing love between Gloria and Andy and the struggles of the colliery closures and poverty which undermine the stability of families. When the film came out in 1996 it made £1,674,359 in the United Kingdom and \$52,534 in the United States, with a total of \$2,576,331 in the USA<sup>48</sup>, an overall success the Channel 4 film likely owes to the collaboration with Miramax productions in America because of the international distribution of the film.

The success of *Brassed Off* cannot only be attributed to the box office results, it also derives from the accomplishments of its creators. The film's producer Steve Abbott and director Mark Herman won the Alexander Korda Award for Best British Film for *Brassed*

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<sup>46</sup> *Brassed Off*, DVD.

<sup>47</sup> Hitchcock, "Working-Class Representation," 21.

<sup>48</sup> "Brassed Off," *Box Office Mojo*.

*Off*.<sup>49</sup> With their other joint successes such as *Little Voice* (1998) and *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988) they collected many awards as well, ranging from Best British Film to Best Foreign Film.<sup>50</sup> These films, as well as *Brassed Off*, fall into the category of comedy and since the Abbott and Herman have made previous films in that genre it should seem natural for them to portray the historical event of the miners' strike in a comedy too. Cuesta notes that *Brassed Off* was released in a period in which films about the working class were made with the intention to portray a more realistic depiction of the working class than that which had thus far been common in mainstream British cinema.<sup>51</sup> In this light, comedy and realism seem to go hand in hand since the subjects of historical events, such as the miners' strike, are advertised in a more accurate yet comedic and fictional narrative.

### 1.1 The contest between band and strike

Working-class films such as *Brassed Off* provide a social critique of the harsh reality of the miners' strike in its message, which is shown through the director's choice and the notion of *mise-en-scène*. The realistic representation of the miners ought to come from the working-class critical perspective towards the miners' strike, yet is ultimately portrayed through the director's choice who frames the scenes. In *Brassed Off*, the noteworthy factor behind the framing of the scenes is the use of music since it expresses the importance of the band and the strike equally. There are scenes in which the colliery band practises for performances, there are marches through the street where they play their instruments, but most importantly, music plays in the background when the frame goes to the miners and pit closures. In *Brassed Off*, the pit closure arouses emotions which are portrayed through music. During the first few minutes of the film, for instance, the happiness of the miners is strengthened by the use of

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<sup>49</sup> "Mark Herman Biography," *Film Reference*.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.; Brennan in "Steve Abbott Biography," *Fandango*.

<sup>51</sup> Cuesta, "Working-Class Cinema," 147.

upbeat band music. The sombre parts of the film are also reflected in the music that plays, which helps to intensify the emotions that are felt, for example, when the brass band pays a tribute to Danny, who seems to be dying. He is the conductor of the colliery and the one who considers the band to be the highest importance considered to the colliery closures from the beginning. Danny even notes that, worrying times aside, “[...] it is music that matters.”<sup>52</sup> The band and the coal mine closures in this film are, essentially, connected: “The pit goes, the band will go the same way.”<sup>53</sup> The fact that the band is so important to Danny comes from his pride of the music they make – with the closure of the mine “in years to come, there will only be one reminder of 100 bloody years hard craft, this bloody band. Oh you can shut up the union, and you can shut up the workers, but I’ll tell you one thing [...], they will never shut us up.”<sup>54</sup> The critique from the working-class towards the pit closures is portrayed in the scenes of protest and discussions with the National Coal Board members, yet it is the music throughout the film which, ironically enough, shows a sense of communal silent protest to the pit closures. After all, with the focus on the brass band, along with side perks of winning prizes so that the miners have some money on top of their small incomes, the colliery closures are regarded as a problem through which the miners can still survive and create their own moments of happiness.

The framing of the protests from the striking miners and their wives are briefly brought into the shot. In these scenes, signs with ‘women against pit closures’ are shown, the battle cry “The miners, united, will never be defeated!”<sup>55</sup> is heard and the miners protesting alongside the gates of the pit terrain. The film makes clever use of the rise of cable television by having news programmes about the pit closures in the background of scenes, where the

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<sup>52</sup> *Brassed Off*, DVD.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

news report states that “[no] one wants Grimley to be closed.”<sup>56</sup> The few minutes spent showing the protesting itself and the poor circumstances in which the miners live, in contrast to the main plotline about the ups and downs of the brass band and the romance developing between Gloria and Andy, establishes the defeated attitude on the part of the miners towards the coal mine closure. This is explicitly stated by one of the miners and members of the brass band when they drive past the women who are striking: “Poor girls. Don’t they know they’re pissing in the wind like the rest of us?”<sup>57</sup> The effect that the closure has on the miners and their future seems to already have been decided and the miners appear to realize that striking will not help matters anymore.

What is evidently left out of the frame, with regards to *mise-en-scène*, is the perspective of the British government. The news programmes give a factual overview of the current situation during the miners’ strike, without explaining the motives of the government. In the scene where the miners and the board discuss the given options of working for lower pay or no work at all, the perspective of the government is inherent in the solutions that board offers, since they represent the authorities. The viewpoint of the government could be interpreted from their political inactivity to help the miners battle their poor living circumstances, as well as the visual absence of the government in the film. The director and producer have chosen, within the genre of comedy, not to portray the government’s side of the story, which they could have done through the news, interviews on television or in the newspapers. Consequently, the subject matter of the film, namely the aftermath of the miners’ strike of 1984/5, is only shown through short intermissions from the main plotline, few lines about the strike itself and the unspoken thoughts of the characters about the hatred towards the governmental decisions.

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<sup>56</sup> *Brassed Off*, DVD.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

## 1.2 Music as the power of a class

The foundation for the social critique that is portrayed in *Brassed Off* through the words and thoughts of the miners, the news on the television and the banners and songs, lies within the conflicts between classes. As the causal process behind the miners' strike, the class conflict between the working class and the government is presented from the perspective of the miners. Peter Hitchcock asserts that *Brassed Off* "is a working-class film [...]" but it is one by virtue of the contradictions it measures between its aesthetic pleasures and the lives that they are intended to depict."<sup>58</sup> The notion of class is balanced by how its presence in the film is only limited and often implicit because the focus is on the narrative of the colliery band.

The injustice of the pit closures, the poverty and the helplessness when someone falls ill are expressed by the working class, although they are not in direct confrontation with the government to express these feelings. These emotions are released, for instance, when Margaret Thatcher is mentioned by Philip, the son of Danny the conductor, who criticizes God for taking people's lives "and Margaret bloody Thatcher lives?!"<sup>59</sup> as if she is not worthy of living because of the situations she puts the miners in. The inferred message behind this points to the feeling of malfeasance. The hard-working miners live in abominable situations or are arrested while those who created these situations, namely the Conservative Party, are not shown to have these problems. Thatcher is named in Philip's outrage, but the government is not mentioned otherwise, even though they embody the opposite of the miners in terms of luxury. The only form of interaction between different classes is seen at Albert Hall and in the management office of the coal mines, where there is no direct contact between the working classes and upper-class audience or management. This indicates that the director and producer are complicit with the ruling classes because they leave the conservative party out of the direct representation of the class conflict. With the representation of the struggles of the

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<sup>58</sup> Hitchcock, "Working-Class Representation," 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Brassed Off*, DVD.

miners, the filmmakers contravene their compliance with the upper classes since they show that they are on the side of the working class. By showing a one-sided representation of the class conflict, the producer and director evidently indicate the horrific situation of the working classes and the ignorance of the upper classes towards the problem of the pit closures, which they caused for the miners.

Class conflict is shown within the conversations of the working classes, where everyone who is from the same neighbourhood is treated as part of the same class, which stands together against the government. When Gloria enters the band practice room, she is initially turned away due to their unfamiliarity with her and because of the fact that she is an outsider, or so they think. Once they know that she grew up there and that her grandfather played in the same colliery band, she is welcomed: “You were born here!”<sup>60</sup> In this mining community people know each other and their problems and activities, so when one does not agree with the communal working-class perspective, they are questioned. This is especially visible at the board meetings, where there is a discussion about the options regarding the closure of the pit, most of the people want to stand up against the government, as in “[we] did not do what the bastards wanted in ’84, did we?” and “Where were you in ’84?”<sup>61</sup> The working class’ mentality to protest against the government, who are using “bloody blackmail”<sup>62</sup> to ensure pit closure without the strikes dragging on any longer than the ten years in which the threat of coal mine closure has continuously materialized.

The consistent background music indicates the importance of class. The song with which the film starts, develops and ends, namely ‘Land of Hope and Glory’, underlines this significance. It is the unofficial anthem of the Conservative Party of the British Government.<sup>63</sup> Due to the importance of class in the miners’ strike and in *Brassed Off*, the

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<sup>60</sup> *Brassed Off*, DVD.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Larsen, *Guide to Possibly All the References*, 227.

anthem is a sign which predicts the ending of the film, the winning party in the class conflict and reflects the outcome of the miners' strike in British history. What is more, at the end of the film, when the band has won the contest at Albert Hall in London, the colliery band chooses to play 'Land of Hope and Glory'. This choice of song might suggest that they know that the miners do not stand a chance against the government and they accept their defeat, but is more likely to point to the perseverance of the miners to stand against the government by playing the patriotic song and showing that they are not afraid to face the authorities.

Producer Steve Abbott and director Mark Herman presumably steer towards the latter meaning since Herman and Abbott both originate from the Yorkshire area,<sup>64</sup> which is noted for its many coal mines.<sup>65</sup> The song 'Land of Hope and Glory' is hardly prominent in the film, yet at the end, it gets significance as it portrays the strength and perseverance of the miners. The subtlety of this addendum, then, is a sign of recognition of the class conflict and empathy towards the working classes from the filmmakers.

### 1.3 The considerate representation of all parties

The film industry is altogether dependent upon the commercial demand of the country and of international markets. As Peter Hitchcock notes, "[*Brassed Off*] tracks a primary contradiction in capitalist social relations namely, the difference between profitability as a principle and a community's desire to maintain its conditions of socialization,"<sup>66</sup> which is something that can be said about both the film and the economic query in the film industry. The profitability of *Brassed Off* can be measured in, when disregarding the box office results, the importance of the comedic genre. This type of film is popular with audiences from around the world and because its broad spectrum of narrative patterns lends itself to a broad audience. Paul Swann

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<sup>64</sup> "Mark Herman Biography," *IMDb*; "Steve Abbott," *IMDb*.

<sup>65</sup> "Pit closures, year by year," *BBC News*.

<sup>66</sup> Hitchcock, "Working-Class Representation," 24.

categorizes “*Brassed Off* (1996) [as a comedy] informed by social realism and populated by protagonists motivated by the specter of unemployment.”<sup>67</sup> Within *Brassed Off*, then, economic determinism is present in the base that is linked to governmental policies of the Conservative Party and the economy about laws on mining. The ‘base’ develops from the need of the miners to find happiness in the immaterial things, the ‘superstructure’, such as the art of music, which materializes in the colliery band. The consumerist strategy, or the power of influencing the economic market through purchases, is visible through the influence of the filmmakers. because they are likely of a higher position in society such as the upper classes. The film industry maintains the status quo, therefore it is the influence of the contemporary governing party, economic market and scripts that are proposed by writers, that create the superstructure of art, or in this case, films.

The elements in *Brassed Off* that make the film commercially attractive throughout the decades for a broad audience lie within the consistent popularity of comedies and the lasting presence of the miners’ strike in the collective memory of a large part of the British population. Peter Hitchcock explains that “[it] would be incorrect to believe that all that is left to working class culture is failure to the extent that it does not shake the capitalist foundations of society to pieces”<sup>68</sup> and underlines the significance of the working-class history on the economy. British collective memory makes working-class films, in particular, very popular and in demand which can be concluded from the box office results of films about historical events such as the miners’ strike. Internationally, *Brassed Off* was nominated for Best Foreign Film at the Argentinean Film Critics Association Awards in 1999, won the Best Foreign Film at the César Awards in 1998 and won many more in France, Japan and Germany.<sup>69</sup> The popularity of the film in countries such as France and Japan stems from the attraction of

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<sup>67</sup> Swann, *The British Culture Industries*, 38.

<sup>68</sup> Hitchcock, “Working-Class Representation,” 25.

<sup>69</sup> “*Brassed Off* (1996): Awards,” *IMDb*.

heritage films.<sup>70</sup> In the same fashion as the British market, the international market hinges upon certain parties, classes or structures which influence the demand for culture and art, which film is a part of. The countries in which *Brassed Off* was a success, based on the awards they won, thereby have the same demand of genre and representation of historical events in heritage films. The international audience and market are presumably equally interested in the factors which make *Brassed Off* commercially attractive, compared to the British market. The present-day success of the film lies seemingly within its status as a ‘classic’ British heritage film, its presence in the collective memory of the former miners and the British nation towards the strike, as well as in its consideration to portray the attitudes of multiple classes.

The results of the investigation of *Brassed Off* into class, commercial commodities and the framing of the miners’ strike of 1984/5 and its aftermath, show that the portrayal of a historical event is determined by the contemporary consumer market. The influence of the public, due to their purchases of products made from the strike, has an immense effect on the demand, on popular genres, on chosen writers which have to embody the event in a script and on the end product. Modern-day representations of collective memories thus lie within the hands of the public, or so it appears in *Brassed Off* in the comedic manifestation of historic event.

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<sup>70</sup> Crouch, Jackson, and Thompson (eds.), *Converging Cultures*, 144, 216.

Chapter 2: The Miners' Strike through Dance: A Discussion of *Billy Elliot*

*"Always be yourself." In Billy's case, this involves pursuing his love of dance in the face of multiple gender and class restraints."*<sup>71</sup>

The popular dance and mining narrative of *Billy Elliot* has been told through a film in 2000 and a musical in 2004.<sup>72</sup> Its narrative captures the apprehension of the miners during the pit closures, while simultaneously following the life of a family in which a young boy wants to pursue his dream to be a dancer. While father Jackie and brother Tony represent the small-town perseverance against the government, Billy wants to dance, rather than meddle with the miners' strike that takes place in the town of Durham. The film's comedic plotline lends itself well to occur during the miners' strike rather than 10 years after, such as in *Brassed Off*, because the film shows that homosexuality is not yet accepted and that Billy wants to escape the daily trials of the ongoing strike. *Billy Elliot* tackles these issues in their contemporaneous context in the film, yet also from the perspective of the zeroes when the film was made.

The creative minds behind the film process are director Stephen Daldry and producers Greg Brenman and Jonathan Finn. Daldry and Finn had their first successes with the film *Billy Elliot*, although the former had been working "as a freelance reader of unsolicited manuscripts for [...] the Scripts Department at the Royal National Theatre."<sup>73</sup> Brenman was already known for the series *Playing the Field* (1998-2002).<sup>74</sup> The three filmmakers enjoyed individual successes after *Billy Elliot*, such as Brenman's accomplishment in series such as *Peaky Blinders* (2013).<sup>75</sup> Daldry and Finn also worked together on the production *Billy Elliot*

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<sup>71</sup> Gamson, "Political Socialization," 574.

<sup>72</sup> Broadway Staff, "Lead in Billy Elliot Musical," *Broadway*.

<sup>73</sup> "Stephen Daldry – Biography," *IMDb*.

<sup>74</sup> "Playing the Field – Awards," *IMDb*.

<sup>75</sup> "Greg Brenman – Managing Director," *Drama Republic*.

– *The Musical*.<sup>76</sup> The narrative of *Billy Elliot* is thus successful to the degree where the adaptations on screen raised \$109,280,263 worldwide.<sup>77</sup> On stage in 2014, the adaptation brought up \$3,413,368 in foreign countries.<sup>78</sup>

*Billy Elliot* shows that it is aware of the difficulties of portraying a class conflict in a comedy film, yet the filmmakers manage to represent both the entertainment and the hardship of the strike. This is often done implicitly since the film associates the importance of the strike with dance and the importance of dance with the strike. Many elements are often rendered ambiguously, for example, when the dance teacher tells Billy to ‘prepare’ in order to succeed. This signifies that you are more prepared for, in these cases, the strike or the dance audition, if you familiarize yourself with the situation. The following paragraphs will look more in depth at the representation of the miners’ strike and how the plotline of *Billy Elliot* improves or denounces that understanding.

## 2.1 The preferred focus in equal representation

The representation of the miners’ strike is, in contrast to *Brassed Off*, imparted through both perspectives of the conflict in *Billy Elliot*. The miners exhibit the perspective of the working classes with banners and protests that have ‘STRIKE NOW’ written on them and by mocking the police and the mineworkers who settle with the decisions of the authorities. The working classes also show their feelings of hatred towards the government by continuing the strike and discontinuing the work in the mines. The perspective of the authorities is expressed through media, the police, the middle-class characters and the dance school in London. What is left out of the frame is their motive behind the perpetuation of the pit closures. They rather show their authority rather than their motives, which is visible in brief shots of the dance lessons

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<sup>76</sup> “Jon Finn – Production Credits,” *Sara Putt Association*.

<sup>77</sup> “Billy Elliot,” *Box Office Mojo*.

<sup>78</sup> “Billy Elliot – The Musical Live,” *Box Office Mojo*.

and longer shots where the police chases and arrests the strikers. Similar to *Brassed Off*, the news is used to present the current climate of the strike. It does not show the progress of the strike since there is no indication of time, apart from the scene where Billy dances through the street in a setting that transforms from summer to winter.

The miners' strike itself is clearly present in *Billy Elliot* in the mise-en-scène: the conversations, background, and music all point to the contemporary circumstances in the film. The shots which illustrate the day-to-day life of the working class families in Durham, mixed with brief shots of law enforcement arriving, shows that the normal life goes on during the strike. This method of framing implies that the narrative of Billy Elliot is placed in the narrative of the miners' strike and vice versa because the daily struggles of striking miners withhold Billy from pursuing his dream and Billy's dream withholds his family from continuing the striking since they want to invest in Billy's ambition. In general, Billy's narrative is only minimally involved with the representation of the strike for he is more concerned with dance. This can be seen in the scene where Billy and Debbie walk through the streets while discussing Billy's doubts about dance to ensure him that there are "plenty of boys [that do] ballet."<sup>79</sup> Their disinterest about the strike is also visible in their ignorance of various posters with protests on them and policemen with batons and bullet-proof shields. W.A. Gamson explains that "[increasingly] with age, the children show awareness of social class elements in *Billy Elliot*, but they never adopt a social justice lens in interpreting it."<sup>80</sup> Billy and his friends Debbie and Michael underline the fact that the miners' strike might be the social, political and economic context of the film, but is not the focus in the narrative of Billy's dance ambition.

Music often predicts the plotline in *Billy Elliot* – it does not only represent the miners' strike and working class but also expresses homosexuality, class and dance. This is obvious in

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<sup>79</sup> *Billy Elliot*, DVD.

<sup>80</sup> Gamson, "Political Socialization," 577.

the opening song of the film, which begins with “I was dancing when I was twelve, [...] I was dancing when I was out.”<sup>81</sup> This is an indication of the plotline that focuses on Billy’s aspirations in dance. There are more instances where clever use of music uncovers the plot of the film, such as the song ‘Get It On’ by T. Rex, which lyrics reflect the homosexuality of Michael. Furthermore, music connects class and dance in the film, since classical music plays when Billy practises ballet and is often connected to upper classes in society. This is especially apparent when Billy needs to pick a song to practise a routine on and when Billy and his father Jackie go to London for Billy’s audition. While the classical music is used during practice, in the dance class and in his private lessons, while the upbeat music is perceived when Billy is not dancing ballet, such as when he jumps on the bed or dances through the street. These examples are an indicator of the role of music as narrator of the plot.

## 2.2 The upper-class world of dance and working-class world of mining

W.A. Gamson explains that the class conflict is evident in the plot of *Billy Elliot* because “the father and Billy's older brother are heavily involved in the labor struggle while at the same time struggling to survive with no income and very limited assets.”<sup>82</sup> The conflict also presents itself in the battle between the classes that is plainly shown in the police’s pursuit of the strikers. Both parties exhibit provoking behaviour due to the shouting, pushing and pelting of vans by the strikers and the road blocking, beatings with batons and the arresting of strikers by the police. *Billy Elliot* shows that class is, ostensibly, the most significant factor behind the miners’ strike.

The prevailing stance of the strikers is evident in their aggressive, fed-up attitude towards the conservatives. The upper-class attitude is present in the visuals but also through the song Fred Astaire which delineates the class conflict. The 1935 song ‘Top Hat, White Tie

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<sup>81</sup> *Billy Elliot*, DVD

<sup>82</sup> Gamson, “Political Socialization,” 571.

and Tails' portrays the upper-class picture of that time, which is embodied in the line "I'm stepping out, my dear, to breathe an atmosphere that simply reeks with class" since it illustrates a gathering of elites. This song is heard in the background of *Billy Elliot* when Billy returns with Mrs. Wilkinson, a middle-class woman, to his working-class neighbourhood. That same lyric refers in this instance to Billy's return from a middle-class to a working-class area that reeks of the presence of their class and, more importantly, the class conflict. The notion of class and dance is here connected through the status of ballet as an upper-class form of art and through the fact that Billy eludes one class to observe the other.

Class also comes forward in the distinctiveness of the two worlds in which the working-classes and conservatives seem to live. When Billy and his dad Jackie go to London to audition, it is made clear that Jackie has never been outside Durham because "[...] there's no mines in London."<sup>83</sup> The class differences are shown in the contrast between the cramped and stuffed rooms in the working houses in comparison to the spacious rooms within the Royal Ballet in London. The poverty in which the working-class families live, where they have to share bedrooms and multiple generations of a family live together, stands in stark contrast to the larger house and garden of the middle-class dance teacher, Mrs. Wilkinson. As an illustration, Gamson points out the scene "[...] in which Billy's father, in order to get money to pay for Billy's trip to London to audition for a scholarship at the Royal Ballet, decides to go back to work during the strike. Billy's older brother Tony follows and keeps his dad from doing it, insisting that they will find another way of raising the money."<sup>84</sup> This scene expatiates the sacrifices they have to make in order to have an income, even if that means to abandon their initial position in the class conflict.

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<sup>83</sup> *Billy Elliot*, DVD.

<sup>84</sup> Gamson, "Political Socialization," 576.

### 2.3 Confrontation with taboos

Similarly to *Brassed Off*, the economic determinism of the film can be construed by the motives for the creation of *Billy Elliot*. The hegemonic powers that have connections within the production process, such as the relations with higher classes, commodities and creators of commercial products, form the base of the economic determinism. They determine what is created in the superstructure, and in this case, it is the portrayal of culture in film. It is likely that the filmmakers created a comedic representation of the miners' strike because of the previous success of such an adaptation of the narrative in *Brassed Off*, but there are other factors that make the 2000 film enticing.

Another factor that makes the story of *Billy Elliot* so interesting, apart from its genre and narrative, is the confrontation with contentious topics such as homosexuality and the crossing of class boundaries. Homosexuality was, as apparent in the film, still a sensitive subject for the working classes during the period of the miners' strike. This is demonstrated in Michael's apprehension to come out as homosexual in the mining village. Michael and Billy even question each other about being 'a poof', a homosexual, because of Michael's interest in female fashion and make-up and Billy's interest in ballet dancing. In similar fashion, Billy's father is angry about his son's desire to do a girl's sport and the piano player at the ballet classes tells Billy that "[he looks] like a right wanker to [him]."<sup>85</sup> At the end of the film, however, Billy's father and brother come to London to watch Billy perform in *Swan Lake* and are only mildly surprised by Michael's presence in drag and with a boyfriend. These instances imply that comedies lend itself well to the discussion of (previous) taboos. They also show the changed attitude in society towards homosexuals between the time of the miners' strike and the society in the year 2000, when the film was created.

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<sup>85</sup> *Billy Elliot*, DVD.

The attraction of the film also lies in its consciousness towards the class conflict in the comedic narrative of an aspiring dancer. Director Stephen Daldry and producers Greg Brenman and Jonathan Finn created ambiguous statements in *Billy Elliot*, which often capture the entire sentiment of the film. This is visible in the scene where Billy is in the boxing ring and dances around to avoid the boxing. The coach responds that “[this] is a man-to-man combat, not a bloody tea dance.” This statement relates to the implicit framing of the narrative of the miners’ strike, which is set in a pleasant, ‘feelgood’ comedy. The self-awareness of the consumer culture in *Billy Elliot* is also visible in the hidden messages of the posters. Billy and Debbie are not very much concerned with the miners’ strike, but the mise-en-scène shows that it is present on the background through, amongst others, posters which advocate striking. Another poster that is clearly brought in the frame is an advertisement about a washing machine, ‘your ever-faithful washday slave,’<sup>86</sup> next to a space which holds a collection of ripped and evanescent posters which vaguely read the letters ‘uni-’ and might refer to some sort of union. The visible poster shows the luxury of a washing machine that points to economic modernity, but it is something that can also be compared to a wish of Billy’s: dancing. What is hidden behind the ripped up posters is something that cannot be seen because it could be interpreted as an antagonism, which is reflected in *Billy Elliot* in how the narrative of the mining community is concealed in the narrative of an aspiring ballet dancer. The miners’ strike is thus portrayed on another level, in the framing of the class conflict. The filmmakers depict this on an implicit level so that the focus of the film is on the explicit narrative pattern. As a consequence, the film does not become an incentive for renewed class struggles.

The director and producers of *Billy Elliot* managed to portray the class differences in a way that represents both classes and made great international successes, which is visible

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<sup>86</sup> *Billy Elliot*, DVD.

through its international screenings in America, Australia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany and Iceland within a year after release.<sup>87</sup> Not only was the film viewed abroad, the creation of it occurred in cooperation with an American organisation as well. Mike Wayne explains that this partnership helped the international film industry to “plug into national and regional cultures and articulate the resulting products across international markets via the American market.”<sup>88</sup> He further clarifies that the curiosity about a small-town narrative springs from the recent interest in British films with “[...] specific regional focus within Britishness [...]”.<sup>89</sup> The international interest in the British narrative of the miners’ strike, which is filmed as a comedy, is an affirmation of the ascendancy of the consumerist culture and hereditary classes (the ‘base’) and shows that adaptations of historical events (the ‘superstructure’) can occur as comedies.

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<sup>87</sup> “Billy Elliot,” *Box Office Mojo*.

<sup>88</sup> Wayne, “Northern Working Class,” 287.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Chapter 3: The Miners' Strike through Solidarity: A Discussion of *Pride*

"[...] Two hands together joined like this. [...] Shoulder to shoulder, hand to hand." – Dai.<sup>90</sup>

Released in 2014, *Pride* is a British romantic comedy about the miners' strike of 1984/5. Its narrative shows how lesbians and gays support the Welsh miners in the strike of the National Union of Mineworkers during the pit closures as an act of solidarity towards a group which also faces oppression from the government. Jeffrey Weeks explains that the 1980s were characterized by the tolerance of homosexuality, which is a form of oppression, rather than acceptance.<sup>91</sup> This position was also taken in the film by the British government towards the miners: arrests were made, noted in how "[they are] pulling the lads in for anything now,"<sup>92</sup> but peaceful strikes and marches were allowed by the government. The topics which are explored in *Pride*, such as dislike and rejection, go hand in hand with the 'tolerance' of the upper classes towards homosexuals and miners during the miners' strike in 1984/5. The attitude towards minority groups and the representation of this attitude has, evidently, changed from exclusion to solidarity, which is visible in present-day society. This sentiment is also visible in *Pride* in how the group Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) surprise the miners in Dulais valley with their support. The leader of the group LGSM, Mark Ashton, explicitly states why the miners should be supported: "Who hates the miners? Thatcher. Who else? The police, the public and the tabloid press. That sound familiar? The only problem we've got that they haven't is Mary Whitehouse and that will be a matter of time."<sup>93</sup> They are sympathetic towards the miners because they recognise the oppressed position that they are in.

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<sup>90</sup> *Pride*, DVD.

<sup>91</sup> Weeks in Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, 7.

<sup>92</sup> *Pride*, DVD.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

The cinematic minds behind the creative process of *Pride* are director Matthew Warchus and producer David Livingstone.<sup>94</sup> While the film is created by British production companies such as BBC Films, Proud Films and the British Film Institute,<sup>95</sup> the producers of *Pride* also collaborated with Pathé, an international production company. *Pride* has won an award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2014, a British Independent Film Awards award in 2014, and in 2015 a Gay and Lesbian Entertainment Critics Association award and a BAFTA Award, amongst others.<sup>96</sup> The combination of a British established director and an American newcomer to feature films, together with internationally based production companies, ensures that a broad audience can be reached. This audience might, even though the film exhibits a historical event, identify with the hardships that are presented in *Pride* due to recognisable repressive laws concerning minorities. Conflicts between the government and societal groups that stand out based on their gender, race, class or employment are, after all, are no new concepts within films, as can be seen, for example, in *Billy Elliot*.

*Pride* lends itself well to the investigation of the miners' strike in films because there are two groups who stand opposed to the British government, namely the homosexuals and the miners. This inclusion means that different parts of the nation, who are in conflict with the authorities, are represented in the class conflict as well, which shows that this is an issue that involves more than one group. The representation of a united front against the government apparently led to high profits in international sales of the film. The film raised a gross total of \$6,331,824 in the U.K. within two months after its release while internationally, it raised \$6,077,000 within a month.<sup>97</sup> When keeping the success of the film in mind, it is interesting to see whether the portrayed image of the social groups and classes is an accurate one when it is compared to the agony of the miners' strike, or whether it cloaks the strike for the sake of

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<sup>94</sup> "Pride: Full Cast & Crew," *IMDb*.

<sup>95</sup> "Pride: Company Credits," *IMDb*.

<sup>96</sup> "Pride: Awards," *IMDb*.

<sup>97</sup> "Pride (2014)," *Box Office Mojo*.

portraying the homosexuals and miners accurately. This chapter will examine the mise-en-scène, orthodox Marxist class analysis and consumerist strategy of the film and consider these methodologies in light of the year that *Pride* was made. In doing so, this chapter will clarify if and why the representation of the miners' strike was needed, decades after the historical event and while several films have already been made about it.

### **3.1 Two separate battles against the government join forces**

The filmmakers Warchus and Livingstone make good use of mise-en-scène in *Pride* to convey tolerance, acceptance and solidarity from outsiders towards the miners' community. The miners' strike of 1984/5 is represented in *Pride* from an outsider perspective from the homosexuals through which the audience gradually gets to see how the pit closures and persistent striking affects the lives of the miners. The homosexual protagonists in this film are not miners themselves but get involved with the protest against the government. Initially, the homosexuals are resistant to helping the miners. After the formation of LGSM, the gays and lesbians help them by raising money which the miners can use for food and bills so that they can continue to strike against pit closures. While the lesbians and gays have their own problems with the authorities, this is all the more reason for them to help the miners. In the conflict between the government and the miners, it is noticeable that the homosexuals change from complete outsiders to integrating with the miners against the government. Consequently, the homosexuals now shift to an insider perspective on the miners' strike.

The perspective of the working class towards the conflict large takes place outside of the frame since there are no direct and observable conflicts. The film largely focuses on solidarity, friendship and union against a common enemy, rather than portraying the class struggle in action. There are several conversations, though, in which the perspective of the working-class comes forward. In a conversation between the miners and homosexuals, they

talk about how “[the] pit and the people are one and the same”<sup>98</sup> to emphasize the importance of the coal and the strike to the miners, who are dependent upon their employment in the mines.

The perspective of the lesbians and gays is shown after initial contact between LGSM with the miners. The former support the mineworkers in many ways, such as raising money through various means and protesting on behalf of the miners and for the miners during the Gay Pride March. The *mise-en-scène* comes forward through musical choices in the film which exemplify this support on an explicit and implicit level. For instance, LGSM plays specific upbeat music at parties to lure out the miners who are not yet convinced of their good intentions and music is used to teach the miners to dance so that they have a form of entertainment in the harsh reality of the miners’ strike. The music which LGSM sing, however, shows more obviously which position the homosexuals take in the miner’s conflict. The notions of solidarity and community are depicted through the lyrics and the *mise-en-scène* in the songs ‘Solidarity Forever’, ‘There is Power in a Union’ and ‘Bread and Roses’. The fact that both LGSM and the miners sing these songs, with the exception of ‘Bread and Roses’ since it is a song that is specifically tied to striking history, shows that both groups feel a connection to the messages of the songs. The ‘union’, which is spoken of in these songs, does not only stand for the National Union of Mineworkers but can also be linked to the union that forms from the solidarity between miners and homosexuals. It can also refer to the unification of the British people, who might be otherwise oppressed by the government and stand against them. This is underlined by the duration of ‘There is Power in a Union’ that is played at the end of the film, where the lesbians and gays support the miners in their Gay Pride march.

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<sup>98</sup> *Pride*, DVD.

The solidarity of LGSM towards the miners is also shown in the mise-en-scène aspect of visuals and text, which are, in this case, predominantly banners and signs. After initial contact with the miners and the establishment of LGSM, the homosexuals make sure to exhibit the existence of the support group and its meaning everywhere they can. This is visible on the buckets with which LGSM collects money, at the benefit concert which they organise and lastly, at the protest march at the end of the film. When the Gay Pride takes place in the final scene, it is exceptionally obvious that the homosexuals are marching to express their support towards the miners because of their large banners and big fonts. Due to the overwhelming amount of support that shows up at the march, LGSM and other supporters of the miners may now lead the march. The perspective of the miners has now also become that of the homosexuals when it concerns standing up against the government.

In *Pride*, the political perspective of the Conservatives is depicted as well, yet the focus of the film is not to show both sides of the conflict. Through several brief clips of or about Margaret Thatcher, the police, the press and the news, their point of view is often shown on an implicit level. The film uses the media to convey a neutral message of the strike or of the government, but not of the miners. Rather, the miners' perspective is found on various sites, such as at the marches and at protests or meetings.

### **3.2 Unity versus diversity**

Class is the driving force behind the political conflict of *Pride*. However, the film shows how sexuality plays an important part in the discussion as well. Class is the most important causal factor behind the miners' strike, yet *Pride* shows that different causes behind political issues, such as class, race, gender and sexuality, often go hand in hand, but they are not the most prominent factors in this film. Class differences, in general, are visible in many aspects of

*Pride*, from issues between working class and government to class conflicts that occur between one group that stands opposed to the government.

Initially, some of the miners were not very supportive of the homosexuals and their help because they were different and perhaps, implicitly stated in the film, beneath them. Dennis Altman notes that this comes as no surprise considering “the extent to which the gayworld is stratified by class [in Britain].”<sup>99</sup> After initial hesitance from most miners, the homosexuals are welcomed and later even become a unity in diversity as they stand as one ‘class’ against the authorities. With their mutual support, the merged support group manages to overthrow previous regulations regarding their classes at the end of the film. *Pride* even ends with the statement that “[a] year after the strike ended, a motion was tabled at the Labour Party Conference to enshrine gay and lesbian rights into the party’s manifesto. Although the motion had been raised before, this time it was passed. This was due, in part, to a block vote of total approval from one key union: the national union of mineworkers.”<sup>100</sup> This illustrates that, victories of the working classes aside, it is the government who decide what happens to the future of the nation’s people. The compliance of the government with the wishes of the miners is not visible in the film, they only get acknowledged in the aftermath of the miners’ strike. While the miners’ strike turns out to be a lost cause, the mutual support of the miners and LGSM did lead to the declaration of the aforementioned gay and lesbian rights in the Labour Party manifesto.

The Conservative Party’s point of view towards the strike is explicitly shown through the behaviour of the authorities and through Margaret Thatcher’s speech on television. Without telling the motives of the Conservative Party, she does declare why she will not relent: “I can’t change my style. It has to be a sign of firm leadership. One does not hear to be

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<sup>99</sup> Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, 42.

<sup>100</sup> *Pride*, DVD.

a softie. You'll hear to be a good, firm leader."<sup>101</sup> The news on television and the press give a more neutral rendition of the development of the strike, rather than taking the political point of view from either side of the conflict. The tabloids and law forces are biased and call the homosexuals 'perverts', which rather points to their attitude towards homosexuality than to the conflict between the miners and the government. The police represent the governmental law enforcement, therefore, their insults towards the miners and supportive homosexuals are expressive of the viewpoint of the authorities as well.

The perspective of the homosexuals towards the authorities in *Pride* is often made through jokes – the statements “[terrific], let's bring down the government” and “is it me or are the police getting soft?”<sup>102</sup> are convincing in their implicit hatred towards the government. The miners, on the other hand, are aware of the seriousness of their situation. Dai, a Welsh striker, explains the false hope they have been given by the authorities: “They've been told the say of pits that go back first. They won't, but, eh, desperate people believe everything.”<sup>103</sup> The working-class voices its thoughts and sentiments on the strike through the use of songs. In the above-mentioned ‘Bread and Roses’, the miners chant about marching on and wanting both bread and roses: the means of survival through food and support and respect.

### 3.3 From reluctance to solidarity in film and history

Director Matthew Warchus and producer David Livingstone worked together on the representation of the miners' strike in a manner that would attract a present-day audience and be different from earlier films about the strike. In contemporary society, the acknowledgement and inclusion of different sexualities become increasingly present. The creation of yet another representation of the miners' strike, which now includes the notion of

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<sup>101</sup> *Pride*, DVD.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

homosexuality, is a consumerist strategy to create a supportive film on homosexuals while also reminding the public about the miners' strike of 1984/5. The combination of the apparent attraction of comedies, the collective memory of the strike and the importance of equality in contemporary society, indicate that *Pride* will attract a much wider audience than if the film had been made during the 1980s, as seen in *Billy Elliot*.

The influence that consumers have with their purchases on the market of production has a great effect upon the central themes that the director and producer use within the comedic genre. The consumers are part of the 'base' within economic determinism and their interests in the inclusion of issues of class, gender and sexuality, leads to the creation of the 'superstructure'. In this case, that is a film which includes the notion of homosexuality, while maintaining a representation of a historical fact that is as close to reality as possible. In *Pride*, the latter notion is conceived by the explanation at the end of the film, about what happened to the protagonists. The fact that *Pride* was based on real events shows that, although the narrative is constructed out of a comedic genre, the film is still meant to convey the political undertone of the film that is the class conflict.

The director and producer appear to take a neutral political stance in the way the film is framed, which might be due to the consumer culture for which this film is made. They do, however, lean more towards supporting of the minority groups of society, since they portray the authority as oppressors: "These mining communities are being bullied just like we are. Bullied by the police, bullied by the tabloids and by the government."<sup>104</sup> The film's support of the miners and homosexuals does not take away from the upper-class influence in many parts of society, whether that is in the film or in the process of creation. Within the film, this comes forward when LGSM has to stand at the back of the Pride March because in that year the "general theme [...] amongst the committee [was] that people have become tired of politics

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<sup>104</sup> *Pride*, DVD.

and that this year, the tone should be celebratory.”<sup>105</sup> This indicates that, even though the Gay Pride march represents a group that stands opposed to the government, the authorities still have control over the manner in which the homosexuals voice their criticism. The influence of the higher classes in the creative process behind the film is reflected in how the main focus is on solidarity and positivity rather than on the hardships of the strike. By focussing on the ‘feelgood’ narrative pattern, however, the director and producer maintain a stance of solidarity towards the miners and homosexuals and show that the strikers can withstand the situations that the government and law enforcement create.

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<sup>105</sup> *Pride*, DVD.

## Conclusion

*Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot* and *Pride* lend themselves well to a comparison of the representation of the miners' strike of 1984/5 as they manage to put the same historical event in a comedy genre while managing to capture a different narrative each. With their respective focuses on the brass band, ballet dance and solidarity from homosexuals, these narratives have a common thread, which is music. Music is used to construct and strengthen the narrative patterns, it can predict events and it can evoke feelings. The producers and directors of the three films have exploited history for commercial gain, but do include a political message through the use of music in these 'feelgood' films, whereby they provide a sense of realism of the class conflict. Kate Shaw notes that the director of *Billy Elliot*, Stephen Daldry, "argued that [the film] could help change people's perceptions of the strike because "art can change the world and does"."<sup>106</sup> The underlying meanings of the film could entail the identification or recognition from people of some the controversial topics in film, which leads to conversations about them. Present-day youth, excluded groups in society and people in different classes might also learn something about an event in history which does not directly affect them, but inspire them to bring about changes in their society.

These films show, nonetheless, that the history of the Miners' Strike has been pushed into a romanticized, comedic narrative so that it is successful on the economic market. The film industry found a niche in filming historical events in a comedic genre since it has generated large profits in box offices and continues to be an accessible genre for a large audience, as seen in the results of *Brassed Off*, *Billy Elliot* and *Pride*. Claire Monk stresses that "[...] most British film representations of the working class were, and are, produced by a middle-class elite – and so, whatever their intentions, are clearly not products of working-

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<sup>106</sup> Shaw, *Mining the Meaning*, 186.

class self-representation or self-determination.”<sup>107</sup> Although most of the producers and directors are British, come from areas in which coal mines were situated and could have relied on their memories of the miners, their adaptation of the miners’ strike is that of an elite influencer rather than a member of the working class. Wright, Levine and Sober note that “on the ideological level, the class capacities of the working class are undermined by mechanisms rooted in capitalist production and distribution itself, as Marx recognized long ago (capital and commodity fetishism) [...]”<sup>108</sup> The working-class narratives are, thus, dependent upon the consumer culture, contemporary political situation and the influence of the upper classes and their purchases in the market of the film industry.

The narrative of each film is very fitting in the decade in which it was made due to the controversies it tackles, despite their focus on the ‘feelgood’ narrative. Homosexuality is a prominent subject in *Billy Elliot* and *Pride* and is, due to their productions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but with the mindset of the 1980s, portrayed with initial hesitance and aversion from the lower classes before it becomes acknowledged. This reflects the changing attitudes in the 1990s to contentious topics and the confirmation of the recognition of homosexuals in this century. In *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot*, it is surprising that people from different classes mingle or fluctuate between classes. Both films show an initial sense of disgrace on behalf of the community towards the protagonists because the latter want to avoid the problems of poverty or conflicts and focus on self-expression and ambition. These aspects of modernity, change and positivity are appealing elements to sell to the present-day society in the form of films. Their successes allow for the conclusion that the representation of the working classes in the miners’ strike is, in theory, important for the British collective memory. However, reality shows that, in the end, the representations of the strike are produced as comedies rather

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<sup>107</sup> Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences*, 191.

<sup>108</sup> Wright, Levine, and Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, 42.

than documentaries because the demands of those involved in the miners' strike of 1984/5 do, in fact, not necessarily reflect those of the deciding parties.

The capitalist society in which we live projects the inability to reflect complete realism in comedies because the contemporary market does not want the creation of such films. The social critique from the working classes towards the authorities that led to the miners' strike is shown implicitly in all three films. This shows that, even though the films *Brassed Off* and *Billy Elliot* are made in different periods, these consumer products can only reflect the social critique when it is ambiguous. What this might implicate is that realistic manifestations of historical events might bring about revolutionary sentiments and 'unnecessary' political conflicts about past occurrences. Present-day consumer society appears to accept and demand this comedic form of representation because these films are, after all, constructs of entertainment.

This research has illustrated the influence of the consumer culture within the narratives of a historical event. It is interesting that the influence of the capitalist society is large to the extent that any realistic critique of the miners' strike is often only portrayed on an implicit level and that depictions of the strike are fitted into the narrative, rather than the other way around. These observations allow for a better understanding of the commodity culture and supposedly realistic portrayals of historical events. The realistic representation of the trials of the working-class society in the above-mentioned films about the miners' strike might be cloaked by the comedic narrative patterns because they are the subject in the film, rather than influencers behind the narrative. When the subject and creators are of the same class, such as the upper classes, this representation might be more realistic. Nonetheless, while the hegemonic powers control the demand of the consumer culture, the audience will have to comply with the underlying meanings and prevailing happy endings.

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