

The 'lack' ...and how to get it: reading male anxiety in three British films of the 1970s

Justin Smith

University of Portsmouth

June 2007

Recent debates in *Screen* have deployed D. W. Winnicott's theory of 'transitional objects' in the service of film aesthetics and considered the reception conditions peculiar to 'trash' cinema.¹ Elsewhere, I have previously applied Winnicott's ideas to illuminate the cult reception of *Withnail & I* (Bruce Robinson, 1986).² Here, I develop an approach to understanding fan responses which is grounded in an analysis of the distinctive arrangements of mise-en-scène. And I make recourse to a number of relevant theorists, from Winnicott's contemporary John Bowlby, to Goffman and Lacan.

In the conclusion to her essay cited above, Kuhn notes

the capacity of certain types of cinema, through distinctive 'language' and expressive potential, to evoke the experiences that are fundamental to some of the processes through which we become human beings.³

This article considers as 'types' three British films of the 1970s which have subsequently come to be considered cult: *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *Tommy* (Ken Russell, 1975) and *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (Nicolas Roeg, 1976). And it focuses especially on the ways in which masculinity is problematised as a thwarted, unresolved 'process of becoming'. Certain kinds of popular texts may continue to function for successive generations of fans as sites of displacement,

offering vicarious pleasures, stimulation and solace. In this way, I shall argue, new light may be shed on the relations between identity, social change and cultural texts.

Historical Context

Amidst the proliferation of images of youth in British popular culture of the 1960s, filmic representations of masculinity became increasingly complex as the decade waned. While secure stereotypes of manhood persisted in the international success of the James Bond series, behind such monoliths lurk other masculinities which are more diverse and less stable. I want to consider how social anxieties about male sexuality are represented in three films of the 1970s, and to explore how popular film functions to address, to explain and to reassure in matters of identity.

From 1967, the rise of a palpable counter-culture, the passing of liberalising legislation and a climate of increased permissiveness opened up a complex renegotiation of sexual identities in Britain. While there is some truth in the assertion that the effects of such changes frequently reinforced the exploitation of women, it is also possible to contend that they advanced the women's liberation movement, privileged homosexuality and inter-racial relationships, and raised questions (backed by the dislocation of labour relations in the workplace) about the security of traditional male identities. The destabilisation of sexual stereotypes had lasting consequences for British culture of the 1970s. The key issue here is how such profound social changes are addressed in certain cultural texts of the period. I shall be focussing on visual style and performances of masculinity in three British films which, in different ways, present radical portraits of the problematic male. Later, I will offer some thoughts, underpinned by relevant theory, about narrative structure

and audience response. But to begin with it is important to outline certain similarities in their production conditions which enabled experimentation.

Production Contexts

Innovative film-making is often the result of creative space cleared during the production process which fosters a degree of freedom for the key agents involved. The British production climate of the early 1970s was unique in that circumstances conspired to allow such rare freedom. Firstly, many British film projects were the beneficiaries of substantial investment from the US majors (especially Warner Bros. and Columbia) whose determination to exploit the youth market for radical entertainment frequently raised some executive eyebrows.⁴ Secondly, the twilight of John Trevelyan's reign at the British Board of Film Censorship allowed unprecedented license to explicit material so long as its artistic merit and serious intent were made manifest.⁵ Thirdly, the late Sixties in London saw the emergence of an intimate coterie - the new 'Chelsea set' - of artists, film-makers, dilettantes, fashion people, actors, musicians, advertising executives, entrepreneurs, pornographers, PR agents, and underworld criminals that controlled and produced the cutting edge cinema of this brief era. Previously secure cultural distinctions became blurred. Finally, with the steady decline in post-war cinema attendance, the fragmented exhibition market sought to exploit the predilections of a range of 'niche' taste-communities. Popular film began to be seen in diverse ways, not least as a significant, radical artform. By the end of the 1960s the varied talents and single-minded visions of Stanley Kubrick, Ken Russell and Nicolas Roeg were ready to exploit such

favourable conditions to their own ends. But the particular ways in which they manipulated their advantage are also instructive.

To a degree by 1970 the re-examination of codes of masculinity had already been prefigured in such British films as Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966), Lindsay Anderson's *If...* (1967), Michael Reeves' *Witchfinder General* (1968) and Roeg and Cammell's *Performance* (1968-70). Each of those films was, in its way, an exploration of male alienation, physicality, sexual ambiguity and violence. The films of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Tommy* (1975) and *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976) pursue similar themes, but arguably in ways that are even more stylised and charismatic, analytical and affective, than their precursors.

All three are adaptations, two drawn from literary works and one from a 'rock opera'. While the first was directed by an American, the second funded by an Australian and the third set on location in New Mexico, all are essentially British productions which explore particular crises in British masculinity. In each case, the opportunity arose for the film-maker to utilise the source material as a springboard, or a point of departure to enable innovations to be made. Interest in a filmic treatment of Anthony Burgess's satirical novella *A Clockwork Orange* had emerged not long after the book's British publication by William Heinemann in 1962.⁶ Kubrick rejected screenwriter Terry Southern's (1966) version and manufactured his own adaptation. Kubrick's was based on the American version of the novel which (shorn of its final, redemptive chapter) offers a bleaker, unrepentant tone.⁷ In his search to realise Pete Townsend's 1969 'rock opera' *Tommy* in visual terms, Ken Russell incorporated a great deal of original material from several of his own, unrealised film projects, especially *The Angels* which shares a common interest in false religion.⁸ Nicolas Roeg became interested in Paul Mayersberg's screenplay of Walter Tevis's sci-fi story *The*

Man Who Fell To Earth because it eschewed genre convention in favour of a remarkably human dimension. Not only does the script jettison most of the novel's explanatory context, reducing the alien Newton's motivation to a simple, if obscure, plot device; it also marginalises the elements of detective mystery and political intrigue, in favour, paradoxically, of a greater emotional force and attention to human sensitivity, which Roeg particularly admired.⁹ In each case, such alterations serve to foreground the unresolved, male protagonist as a new kind of 'unaccommodated man'.

Another production practice shared by each film-maker was the establishment of a small team of trusted personnel for what were primarily location shoots. By the end of the Sixties Kubrick's reputation meant he could choose his own projects, work at his own (often very slow) pace, and employ an extended family of production assistants, rarely venturing far from his Hertfordshire home where he had installed studio and post-production facilities. 'I am deeply involved in the administration, because it is in this area that many creative and artistic battles are lost', Kubrick told Alexander Walker in an interview during the film's production.¹⁰ On *A Clockwork Orange*, art director John Barry was deputed to scout futuristic locations in and around London which were carefully adapted in keeping with the overall visual concept.¹¹

Ken Russell adores locations and the imaginative success or failure of a film idea often rests upon his early discovery of inspiring places.¹² In *Tommy* it is Russell's creation of scenes shot in the Lake District as a narrative framing device for the film's beginning and ending, and the use of the Gaiety Theatre on Southsea Pier (together with other locations in and around Portsmouth) that marry the romantic and elemental with a seaside-postcard, post-war, cartoon-realism. However, as with John Barry's

studied dressing of Kubrick's location sets, so for Russell, visual design is crucial. The key personnel here were Shirley Russell (costumes), John Clark (art direction) and Paul Dufficey (set decoration).

Nicolas Roeg took the unprecedented step of employing an entirely British crew on an all-American location shoot, without Hollywood backing or a distribution deal. A first in British screen history, cinematographer Tony Richmond recalls: 'We were aliens!'.¹³ Yet one should not underestimate the outsider's perspective afforded by this creative isolation and the crew camaraderie that grew from it. The team took advantage of New Mexico being one of the first states to declare a right-to-work policy permitting the use of imported labour and brought families along for a vacation on location. However, the strangeness of this remote American landscape is palpable in the film itself and alienation is the dominant point-of-view of its main character.

Of the three pictures, two have rock stars as their central protagonists: The Who's Roger Daltry reprises his stage role on screen as Tommy, while David Bowie produces a remarkable performance as the alien Thomas Jerome Newton in *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. In fact, executive producer Si Litvinoff (in the pre-Kubrick phase of the project) had originally been in negotiation with Sandy Lieberson about casting *Performance* star Mick Jagger and his Rolling Stones in the roles of Alex and his Droogs for *A Clockwork Orange*.¹⁴ While Stanley Kubrick's choice of Malcolm McDowell drew out Alex's 'winning qualities: his total candour, his wit, his intelligence and his energy' as well as his 'very personification of evil', the rock persona and pop style extends across all three films and can be analysed on a number of levels from production contexts, through visual design to performance manner.¹⁵ Clearly the intimacy of film-makers and pop personalities in what was a relatively small London scene even by the late Sixties' flower-power days led to cross-

pollination of all kinds. And in the new decade film producers realised (somewhat belatedly perhaps) the broader potential of what became known as the cross-over youth market. This straightforward economic projection was a trend some in the movie business were slow to latch onto. As late as 1975 Ray Connolly still complained that:

Although you and I may have known for years that the people who buy records in large numbers tend to be the very same people who enjoy going to the pictures, it appears to have come as a recent revelation to the film industry...For 20 years, while rock has been establishing itself as the contemporary music form of the second half of this century, film-makers have continued to view it with suspicion and not a little distaste.¹⁶

This reticence - in the context of the continued decline and fragmentation of cinema markets - opened the way for the intervention of music moguls like Australian Robert Stigwood (*Tommy*) and American Lou Adler (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* [1975]) in musical stage shows and film production. And quickly, financial cross-over found expression in film performance and visual style as pop icons brought a potently charismatic, but dangerously unstable masculine presence to the screen. Now, perhaps as never before, the pop star promised a utopian escape or quasi-religious salvation from generational strife, social divisions, endless tedium or the very ravages of his own hedonistic excesses.

Pop Art and Pop Icons

Both *A Clockwork Orange* and *Tommy* share a flamboyant visual style redolent of the fashionable cartoon-strip acrylics of Roy Lichtenstein and the garish, pneumatic plastics of Claes Oldenburg. Transatlantic pop art was ubiquitous in the late Sixties from Andy Warhol's factory screen-prints to Peter Blake's iconic design for The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album (and its psychedelic derivatives) and George

Dunning's animated feature *Yellow Submarine* (1968). Yet the early Seventies witnessed a media-inflected cynicism in what had been perhaps a modish, naïve celebration of primary colours and comic-book play. The synthetic and the saccharine, the mass-produced and the relentlessly-promoted washed over the public consciousness like a wave of collective nausea. By mid-decade, Glam-rock had reached new heights of space-age hyperbole, adopting images of variously feminised masculinity.¹⁷

Yet in the hands of Kubrick's and Russell's art directors, the pop art influence is more than a chic inflexion, or an assumed manner. It establishes a visual iconography which, in each case, is both seductive and dangerous, promising plenitude yet proving to be hollow. This motif can be traced from Liz Moore's Allen Jones-derived, white female nudes, arched into impossibly extravagant crabs for tables in the Korova Milk Bar, to the gargantuan silver pinballs of Tommy's industrial wasteland. They are what Robert Hughes defined in a 1971 article for *Time* magazine on *A Clockwork Orange* as 'cultural objects cut loose from any power to communicate'.¹⁸ They are eternal signifiers, full of noise yet signifying nothing; rather, stuck in the loop of endless iteration. The plastic and the spherical, with their smooth, impermeable surfaces without edge or opening, are space-age objects of a kind of infinite, sterile doom. This is a feature also of the strange, arid snowscapes of the alien planet Anthea in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. It is infused with a melancholy and nostalgic longing beyond the subjectivity of the alien's memory: a idealised, pre-lapsarian state of reproduction without intercourse, pleasure without penetration.

In these films it is not merely a matter of choice objects carefully arranged; scale and dimension are critical too. Witness Tommy and his mother (Ann-Margret) beneath the towering colossus of the open-legged Marilyn Madonna, and the great

bovver-boots of the diminutive Elton John raising him to the level of the giant pin-table. Or consider Alex (Malcolm McDowell) battering the Cat Lady (Miriam Karlin) with a giant plastic phallus or racing at impossible speed through the country night in the 'toy' sports car. Such objects have the power to distort our perceptions of reality, to loom as potent profane icons, dangerously alluring to our impressionable consciousness. These treatments exemplify a radical new attitude to the world of objects liberated disarmingly from their familiar ideological constraints. I call this effect *hyper-signification*. It works to free objects from their purely symbolic place within the signifying system and according them a greater, if less definable, power. Furthermore, this operates not only through visual iconography but through performance style as well.

The sublime effect of casting stars from the world of popular music to charismatic screen roles invites identification and mistrust in equal measure. Daltry in all his stiff, awkward vulnerability both is and isn't Tommy. The film pities its protagonist and draws our sympathy. Then, it cynically transforms him into the money-grabbing shaman of a fake religious cult. He remains untouchable, sealed in his private (rock star's) world, as if autistic, out of reach. Similarly, Malcolm McDowell's 'seductive charm' is rooted in the juxtaposition of Alex's verbal dexterity, his knowing eloquence and his physical poise.¹⁹ His vulnerability itself is a coquettish mannerism drawn from his unique style-vocabulary. He keeps himself clean and he knows how to behave, to say and do the right things in order to keep the world at one remove, to preserve his own creative-imaginative space, to keep his subjective world of sensation pristine. As such he is a curiously impervious and impermeable figure. Yet Kubrick suggests:

You can regard Alex as a creature of the id. He is within all of us. In most cases, this recognition seems to bring a kind of empathy from the audience, but it makes some people very angry and uncomfortable.²⁰

And David Bowie's alien in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* evinces a comparable, hermeneutic charm – a studied fragility, derived from his stage alter egos, at once endearing and remote. And yet there is more to these screen performances than coquettish ambiguity or an easy pop image trade-off. For example, in casting Bowie Roeg later remarked:

I didn't just want an actor...I think sometimes there's too much acting going on. It's terribly difficult not to...Actors play alien people, alien from themselves. It's a very highly skilled and brilliant actor that can get rid of that performance.²¹

It is not merely here a question of conscious artifice. Because – in the cases of Daltry and Bowie – these are amateur performances, there is also a conspicuous excess in the repertoire of physical gesture and mannerism. There is what we might call a high level of redundancy or slippage. This notion requires further explication.

Freudian Slippage

In trained screen or theatrical acting styles there is an economy of gesture. It is a truism, indeed, that the most celebrated screen actors have developed an almost minimal repertoire of key looks, expressions and physical mannerisms. There is no wastage; everything is orchestrated in keeping with character, nothing is unmotivated. It is an arrangement of highly conscious effort in the deployment of certain physical traits and the suppression of all that is superfluous to the part. And it is a code less visible in women (traditional bearers of the gaze) than men. Such semblances of control aren't confined to actors of course, but are demanded of traditional male *social* performances as well. It is at best a form of containment, which Goffman has

elaborated in his work on interactionism, where he establishes how social performances tend to be routinized, context-specific and reduced to their minimal necessary constituents.

In discussing the way in which social performances are (by mutual acknowledgement of actor and audience) necessarily idealised, or restricted to their summary meaning, Goffman indicates that on occasion gestural signals or other peripheral signs which are intended to corroborate and anchor the communicated essence of the main performance can, conversely, disrupt, negate or undermine this essential presentation. This will sometimes have humorous, sometimes embarrassing or shocking effects. Such situations may, he argues, be either the result of poor, unorchestrated performance, or inaccurate audience interpretation, or both. Either way:

As students of social life we have been less ready to appreciate that even sympathetic audiences can be momentarily disturbed, shocked and weakened in their faith by the discovery of a picayune discrepancy in the impressions presented to them. Some of these minor accidents and “unmeant gestures” happen to be so aptly designed to give an impression that contradicts the one fostered by the performer that the audience cannot help but be startled from a proper degree of involvement in the interaction, even though the audience may realise that in the last analysis the discordant event is really meaningless and ought to be completely overlooked. The crucial point is not that the fleeting definition of the situation caused by an unmeant gesture is itself so blameworthy but rather merely that it is *different* from the definition officially projected.²²

This unintended element is, in screen performance, redundant to the essential meaning. In its accidental nature it must also be seen as a betrayal of an unconscious motive. I agree with Goffman’s suggestion that it is not what the unmeant gesture might mean that is of interest, so much as the fact and preponderance of its occurrence, the scale of its superfluity. I contend that this is a sort of slippage that draws attention (perhaps with charismatic effect) to the performance act itself,

whereas professional convention tends to render it invisible. I would argue further that such innocent self-disclosure contributes to a quality of vulnerability that is traditionally un-masculine; for it displays a certain ambiguity in sexual identity which remains unresolved. It affords, if only fleetingly, a glimpse of the unconscious. Where this tendency in a screen actor of the calibre of Malcolm McDowell is quite knowingly deployed with a barely disguised, naughty-boyish glee, in Daltry it has the effect of a charming, almost pre-pubescent, innocence and in Bowie of an unsettling, androgynous mystique. May Routh, costume designer on *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, revealed that because Bowie was so thin many of the clothes she dressed him in were boy's sizes: 'I wanted to have a feeling like a sort of school uniform'.²³ These performances of masculine ambiguity are thrown into sharper contrast in respect of their relations to the female and, specifically, with regard to the maternal body.

The Maternal Body

Violence against women in *A Clockwork Orange* is as stylised, choreographed and cartoon-brutal as it is throughout, but varies in one important aspect: prurient fascination for the female form as *other*. In each instance, the camera dwells upon the female body with a novice's raw mixture of abhorrence and lust. Note the way in which the gang-rape of the woman in the old casino at the hands of Billy Boy's bikers is lit and choreographed as a performance on stage, exposing her full-frontal to an invisible audience (the viewer); consider also, the rape of the writer's wife (Adrienne Corri) where Alex cuts breast holes in her dress with scissors – an act of misogynistic humiliation certainly, but also one of adolescent play. Similarly, when forced to demonstrate, before an invited audience of society dignitaries, the success of the Ludovico reform technique, we share Alex's prostrate view of the overwhelming

breasts of the naked model looming above, tantalizing, half-desirable but repugnant and beyond reach. This unresolved horror/fascination for the anatomy of female difference is the regressive trait throughout.

The attitude is totally new in British cinema. We are not concerned here merely with the screen exposure of what was previously taboo – full frontal nudity, sexual violence, rape. Doubtless all that was already available to those who sought it in Soho. It is rather the *resistance* of this material to erotic incorporation and its demonstration of a new problematic. Hitherto, sexual difference in bodily display had been repressed, policed as a matter of public and private morality; in these films it becomes politically inscribed, volatile, a site of visible struggle.

Tommy's troubled rite of passage is punctuated by not dissimilar images of female domination: the lurid, seductive Acid Queen (Tina Turner) and the traumatic relationship with his self-indulgent, hedonistic mother. Nora Walker's physical performance is plastic, tactile and fluid; Tommy's is dry, hermetically sealed, remote. Her eyes are moist, expressive, fulsome; his are fixed, unblinking, in a glassy stare. She is sensual, open; he is impermeable, closed. She is lurid, gaudy, voluptuous, all woman; he is clean, white, innocent, androgynous. Nowhere is this set of contrasts more apparent than in the climactic white boudoir scenes: first with the grotesque bathing in champagne, soap-suds, baked beans and chocolate (all pure Russell) and later, after a futile visit to a seductive specialist (Jack Nicholson), the 'Tommy Can You Hear Me?' and 'Smash the Mirror' sequences. Mirrors and reflections (Lacanian or otherwise) abound in the film's infinite lexicon of pseudo-Freudian hyper-signification. But here, in a drunken maternal initiation rite, she performs a frustrated, erotic dance before his heedless gaze, whips her hair across his face and finally flings him through the round-mirrored wall, through which he bursts in a climax that is at

once the breaking of a virginity, an emotional release from the claustrophobia of their possessive/dependent relationship and a transformative awakening of his senses ('I'm Free'). Ann-Margret's sensual, physical abandonment is the perfect foil for Roger Daltrey's (thoroughly appropriate) catatonic woodenness. Their troubled, Oedipal relationship is resolved only after his miracle cure when he tears off her gaudy jewellery and symbolically baptises her anew.

In *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, Candy Clark's Mary-Lou performs the whole range of female role-models from mother to lover, whore and wife. She is an evolution of these circumscribed, male stereotypes of woman. At their first meeting in the hotel she has to physically carry Newton from the lift (after the vertical motion disturbs his sensitive bodily equilibrium) in an extraordinary scene in which she handles him in girlish, breathless panic as if he were a broken doll. Here Bowie's emaciated, bony fragility is markedly evident; it seems as if he will break in her hands. His immediate recovery from this trauma and Mary Lou's faithful attention is intercut with repetitive, repulsive scenes of Bryce's (Rip Torn) student conquests; Newton and Mary Lou's discovery of one another is altogether more innocent, almost pre-lapsarian, certainly adolescent.

They drive out to the aptly named Land of Enchantment, where earlier Newton's space capsule landed in the lake. It is here they build their home and arrive at their first intimacy. Sitting topless on the bed, she lights candles. 'I can't seem to get dry', Newton says, removing his robe, 'I'm still wet'. Liquid is a leitmotif throughout the film. But this is a boy's plea to his mother to help manage his body. Their gentle love-making is adolescent, touching, exploratory, as if mutually fascinated only with the surfaces of each other's bodies, their plasticity, contours and

ability to tessellate. But he is unable to sustain interest in her homespun domesticity (managing his clothes, the house, home baking), and they fall out.

Newton's rejection of the faithful, uncomprehending Mary Lou seems heartless and cruel. He announces he is leaving, providing for her needs. Interestingly, she has donned a straight, black, bob-cut wig, echoing the oriental décor of their house and adopting her own kind of alien disguise. Without realising her own *double-entendre* she rounds on him: 'You're an alien! You know what will happen if they find your visa has expired?' She pleads with him, whispers sweet nothings, fingers his crotch trying to seduce him, and he is repulsed as only someone who is sexually alien could be. She attacks him, tearing the shirt off his shoulder and he stands, cowering, palms against the wall, bony, feminine shoulder and V of throat exposed, vulnerable yet reclusive. We never think him capable of genuine male aggression. Their row is interrupted by the oven-timer for the cookies she's baked. In what is a fit of pique rather than a temper tantrum, he knocks the baking sheet out of her hand propelling cookies into an azure sky like flying saucers. Then, locking himself in the bathroom he studies his own reflection, the fake nipples and stick-on human lenses. Warn down by her persistence he unlocks the door and at last he reveals his alien self to her in one of the most memorable science-fiction moments in screen history. Their night of genuine discovery is intercut with scenes of Anthean erotic pleasure, sealed in weightless, amniotic fluid, their bodies mingle, smothered in a kind of viscous milk. It is as if an impermeable membrane has been breached. 'I lifted you up once,' Mary Lou remembers, as if her maternal nurturing were the only kind of explanatory knowledge she can bring to bear. 'You must believe me, Mary Lou' he responds in earnest. Her tentative, fearful caresses of his fine, dry surface are juxtaposed with the lubricated embraces of his Anthean memory/imagination. In what appears to be an

unassisted orgasm, Mary Lou shrieks and runs naked to the kitchen where we see her, distorted, through his alien cat's eyes, crying 'Why, why, why?'

On his departure she ventures: 'You must hate me.' 'No', he replies, 'I don't hate anyone, I can't'. Presumably he cannot love either. Theirs is the fate of two people who never should have met, but did – a curiously human dilemma, within an alien explanatory system. But, as with other futuristic elements in this film, it is visiting the human dimension from an alien perspective that illuminates the everyday anew. And this familiar story of unrealised sexuality, of thwarted intimacy, of an unlikely, freakish alliance that was never meant to be, is confirmed by the curious old-flame, one-night-stand encounter of their reunion and the corresponding playful, drunken abandon of their aggressive passion. The alienation of the sexes is such that only by artificial means can intimate pleasure be achieved.

For a youth audience, such role-play is both stimulating and reassuring. Intimacy involving role-models offers an intense, vicarious pleasure; while the safety-net of artifice offers protection from self-exposure. It is clear in each film that the central performance combines a physical vulnerability with considerable charismatic appeal. A female David Bowie fan wrote the following personal response to his screen role:

Eventually, when I saw him in *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, taking off his clothes and seeing him in the nude, I began to realise I fancied him even more.

And then it actually became a little more normal and channelled itself into something more erotic, because I was kinky about the fact that he was so thin and he was like a woman. He seemed the perfect vehicle for my sexual needs and fulfilment.

...When I saw *The Man Who Fell To Earth* I got influenced by the idea of skins peeling and the fact that skin can be taken away and produce juices of a kind that can reveal themselves at the height of sexuality.

So that when you make love you actually destroy certain layers of skin and form a liquid mass together.

It was incredibly sensuous and very wild at the same time.²⁴

It may well be that popular cultural icons perform a kind of decathexis function - similar to that of Winnicott's transitional phenomena - in the rehearsal of attachment transition. They may combine some of the qualities of parental authority with a mystical otherworldliness and sexual charisma in a 'relationship' to the fan which normally exists in the realm of make-believe, but which has real pay-offs in the dividends of cultural competence, social acceptance, fashion, grooming and self-image development. Certainly filmic renditions of their emotional vulnerability and physical dependency must act as reassuring symbols of identification revealed beneath their idealised star personae.

Child psychologist John Bowlby's work on mother-child attachment behaviours is illuminating here. He establishes how dependency rooted in physiological needs (food, warmth and protection) and social education (observational learning) exists in changing form throughout childhood, but that sexual behaviours (certain aspects of which attachment behaviour shares) are directed outwards from adolescence towards new kinds of attachment.

As a result individual variation, already great, becomes even greater. At one extreme are adolescents who cut themselves off from parents; at the other are those who remain intensely attached and are unable or unwilling to direct their attachment behaviour to others.²⁵

But Bowlby also considers circumstances where:

A school or college, a work group, a religious group or political group can come to constitute for many people a subordinate attachment- 'figure', and for some people a principal attachment- 'figure'. In such cases, it seems probable, the development of attachment to a group is mediated, at least initially, by attachment to a person holding a prominent position within that group.²⁶

Though Bowlby doesn't discuss this directly, it is worth considering here also the role of the pop group or football team and that of charismatic pop idols or sports stars in teenage fandom as forms of 'attachment figures' which also permit the public display of certain sexual fantasies to be projected onto them. And at the centre of such fictive relationships is the ambiguity between intimacy and strangeness, between serious commitment and playful disregard – the intense preoccupation which is also just a passing phase. To employ a Freudian concept, this is a *fort/da* game of emergent self-recognition. It is just this kind of play that the performances of David Bowie, Roger Daltry and Malcolm McDowell provoke in these films. Their charismatic vulnerability acts as both an erotic stimulus and a reassuring displacement for an audience's own sexual anxieties.

I want next to develop this notion of spectatorship, speculatively, in two directions. Firstly I want to consider more fully the distinctive model of cult reception this scenario implies. And secondly, I want then to try to locate this model, provisionally, within a broader social perspective that might be considered one of post-1968 phallic crisis. Lacanian theory in particular may assist us in this purpose.

The Phallic Order

The ambivalent subject positions constructed across such cultish narratives suggest spectatorial relations of a particularly fluid nature. The strange narrative unevenness and lacunae, and the visual density and signifying abundance of the cult film text both entices and distances the viewer. And the charismatic performance at its centre is frequently both seductively open and frustratingly remote (Bowie and Daltry). Or else it is disturbingly attractive and alluring in its very malevolence and violence (McDowell).

Internet fan responses to *A Clockwork Orange* typically wax lyrical about the 'fabulous style and design in many of the film's scenes... and malcolm was gorgeous when he was young...' (female).²⁷ Or they incorporate aspects of the film's iconic style into their own creative environments:

The imagery, the irony, the evilness, the contradictions, the entire mood and visuals represented in this entire film is something I tried to incorporate into my current website and life (LABYRINTH) - it's what inspires me, the eccentric, the strange...the utterly brilliant (male).²⁸

An email newsgroup on The Who's *Tommy* evinces similar kinds of engagement with the band and film text, and the pleasures of shared personal response.²⁹

10 From: <liszka_pet>

Date: Tue Mar 21, 2000 3:22am

Subject: Stuff about me

Well, if no one else is going to do this besides you, then I will too! ^_^ I don't know when exactly I got into the Who. Maybe it was during my trip to LA when a girl friend and I heard "Squeezebox" for the first time. All we could remember was the chorus "in and out and in and out...." So our friends who didn't hear it thought it was a pretty dirty song. ^_^ Not long after that I saw a behind the scenes/making of Tommy. After that I just HAD to see it so I looked long and hard for a copy of it and just loved it! It was sort of before my time, what with me not quite 21 here, but I've always been an individual.

11 From: <docbb_4469>

Date: Wed Mar 22, 2000 6:32pm

Subject: Re: Stuff about me

That's good, one should always strive to be an individual. I didn't quite fit in with my age group either when I was younger. The Who cross boundaries, I think, of age, gender, class, etc. I have lots of favorite Who songs, not just from "Tommy," but other albums as well. Have you ever heard of the albums "The Who Live

at Leeds," or "The Who Sell Out?" Way before your time, but interesting, non-the-less. And of course I like "Quadraphenia," and "Who's Next."

Key here in the expression of cult allegiance is the identification of the taboo ('a pretty dirty song'), nostalgic appropriation ('it was sort of before my time') and marginality ('being an individual', 'crossing boundaries' and 'not quite fitting in'). Significant too is the fact that both contributors here are female. So how are we to reconcile these retrospective responses with what I have identified as narratives of male anxiety?

I have argued that these films are peculiarly open texts, prompting a dialectical mode of spectatorship, offering stimulus and reassurance, pain and consolation, in equal measure. One recent male response captures the ambivalence of his own obsession rather well:

my favorite quote was i've suffered and suffered and everyone wants me to keep on suffering. i never read the book, but it looks like i'll have to. I totally got the message of the movie though. you know how people can do the rocky horror picture show thats how I am with a clockwork orange. ever since i was 14 the movie is something i need to watch atleast once a month. i get so much from it everytime i see it!³⁰

One wonders whether his habitual re-viewing is about the identification with teenage suffering as much as it concerns its relief.

For male and female fans alike, the common denominator seems to be the ways in which each of the films under consideration here deny the symbolic reassurance of the phallic order in their manifest disinterest in, or rejection of, traditional sites of male authority. In matters of visual style and performance they all

parade camp experimentation with self-identity and image, and flaunt ambiguous sexual excess. They refuse to anchor masculinity according to psycho-sexual and social convention. In this way each resists entry into the phallic order. Their narratives offer instead both temporary solace and endless stimulus; yet their pleasures, like those of the fetishist, are contradictory, perversely unresolved. This is because each film is densely constructed upon patterns of reiterated signification (in visual codes and performance styles) in which the signifiers are never able to rest, in the Lacanian sense, around loci of *points de capiton*.

This idea must be explained more precisely. According to Lacan: ‘While there are no fixed signifieds in language, signification within the symbolic order is made possible by the privileging of certain key signifiers to which the drives, organised around non-incestuous, heterosexual sexuality, become attached’.³¹ These *points de capiton*:

act as nodal points which link signifying chains to one another and prevent an indefinite sliding of meaning. Via their attachment to the drives, which have been organised in a culturally acceptable way, these nodal points structure the unconscious in terms of the positions from which an individual can speak.

These positions are organised in terms of gender.³²

Such positions are also culturally inscribed within texts in a structured manner which secures their ideological function and ensures their subjective pleasure. Cult films, uneven in their structure, hyper-signifying, offer no such security. Rather, their signifying loops seem to fetishise what Lacan called *petit objets autre* – nostalgic yearnings for those first objects of the imaginary register ‘which are not clearly distinguished from the self and which are not fully grasped as other (*autre*)’.³³ Like Winnicott’s transitional objects, these derive their ‘value from...identification with

some missing component of the subject's self, whether that loss is seen as primordial, as the result of a bodily organisation, or as the consequence of some other division'.³⁴

What is the reason for this nostalgic lapse and such patterns of regression in these particular film texts? In terms of Lacanian theory they point towards an unresolved entry into the symbolic order of language - an Oedipal crisis. But at once we must acknowledge the social constitution of language and the cultural basis of texts too. An inability to enter fully the symbolic order as a social subject depends upon a rift in what Volosinov identifies as the 'dialectical interplay' between the psychic and the ideological.³⁵ Volosinov reminds us of the *multiaccentual* nature of the sign: how ideology constantly fails to reduce linguistic constructions to dominant meanings, and how the self and its social performance is continually compromised and alienated in language.

How do such rifts come about, historically? It could be argued that the social changes and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s effected a slippage in the ideological purchase upon language. This was manifested in a variety of ways: for example, the passing of liberalising legislation, the rise of feminism and gay-rights, the counter-culture's rejection of traditional institutions and their specific discourses, the overthrow of conventional cultural forms and the blurring of distinctions between high and popular art. These were supplanted with a diverse range of new experiments in self-realisation through language, many of which were attitudinal, some destructive, most ephemeral. Popular culture itself issued a plethora of conflicting signifiers challenging ideological consensus. In particular, cult texts of the 1970s are object lessons in hyper-signification, resisting settlement around ideological consensus (*points de capiton*).

Cult films, I suggest, were but one manifestation of a fundamental anxiety attendant upon these social and cultural shifts. And this crisis of identity, of 'lack' if you will, is addressed in such films in the pleasurable effects of both stimulation and solace. Yet, their resolution is never finally achieved. Rather, it is as if these films project fantasy worlds where the dominant sexual divisions of the phallic order temporarily don't exist, or wherein the risks attendant on reconciling their pleasures and pains can be imaginatively averted or sympathetically displaced. In this sense, cult texts may be considered at once radical and reactionary. They furnish audiences with alternative subject positions that provide reassurance and identification with models of essential difference. But the solace they afford is that of a shared nostalgia for a lost order and perhaps a failed revolution; certainly consolation for those outsiders who long to belong.

Notes

¹ Annette Kuhn, 'Thresholds: film as film and the aesthetic experience', *Screen*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2005), pp. 401-414, and Ernest Mathijs, 'Bad reputations: the reception of 'trash' cinema', *Screen*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2005), pp. 451-472.

² Justin Smith, 'Withnail's Coat: Andrea Galer's Cult Costumes', *Fashion Theory*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2005), pp. 305-322.

³ Annette Kuhn, 'Thresholds: film as film and the aesthetic experience', p. 414.

⁴ For example, the furore over *Performance* (Cammell/Roeg, 1970), which delayed the film's release for almost two years. Ironically Warners had approached Mick Jagger in 1967 to act as the company's 'youth adviser', an offer which he declined. See Alexander Walker, *Hollywood, England: The British Film Industry in the Sixties* (London: Harrap Ltd., 1986), p. 416.

⁵ John Trevelyan, *What the Censor Saw* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973).

⁶ In 1965, scenarist Ronald Tavel of Andy Warhol's "Factory" adapted Burgess's novella as the film *Vinyl* which, according to J. Hoberman, evoked 'only the bare bones of the book'. Obscure and 'often indecipherable' as Warhol's version may have been, the American reception, treatment and underground positioning of the story, laid the foundations of its future appeal. See Gene D. Phillips and Rodney Hill, *The Encyclopaedia of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2002), p. 65. By the mid-Sixties the possibilities of a feature film treatment were also being considered in England, penned by screenwriter Terry Southern.

⁷ According to John Baxter's biography of Kubrick, the director was 'a good four months into work on the film when he found out the author had intended a radically different ending. Kubrick brusquely dismissed it as "completely out of tone with the rest of the book" and carried on regardless'. Quoted by Nick James, 'At Home with the Kubricks', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 9, no. 9 (1999), p. 25.

⁸ 'Tommy is loaded with material from previous scripts... Variations of the baked beans sequence in *Tommy* were in *The Angels* and in *Music Music Music*, while a variation on the shrine sequence in *Tommy* turned up earlier in *The Angels* and in *Gargantua*. I don't know what I would do without my rejected scripts'. Russell quoted in Gene D. Phillips, *Ken Russell* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p. 158.

⁹ Paul Mayersberg, 'The Story So Far...', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 44, no. 3 (1975), p. 230.

¹⁰ Alexander Walker, *Stanley Kubrick Directs* (London: Davis-Poynter Ltd., 1972), p. 45.

¹¹ From the DeLarge apartment in the newly developed Thamesmead area of southeast London, Brunel University's Ludovico Medical Facility and an old theatre on Tagg's Island (the derelict casino), to a transformed American Drug Store in Chelsea's King's Road (the record boutique) and the futuristic property 'Skybreak' near Warren Radlett in Hertfordshire (the writer's house), each carefully chosen building is dressed to achieve a certain kind of theatrical space.

¹² 'I still enjoy locations... The recce trip is one of the most enjoyable things about film-making'. Ken Russell quoted in John Baxter, *An Appalling Talent: Ken Russell* (London: Joseph, 1973), p. 92.

-
- ¹³ Tony Richmond interviewed in David Gregory, dir., *Watching the Alien*. Blue Underground Inc./Anchor Bay Entertainment (2002).
- ¹⁴ As a measure of the intimacy of cutting-edge film-making of the period, it is interesting to note that Si Litvinoff, who had known Nicolas Roeg from the mid-60s originally considered him to direct the project Kubrick eventually took on. Litvinoff went on to produce *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.
- ¹⁵ Phillip Strick and Penelope Houston, 'Interview with Stanley Kubrick', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 41, no. 2 (1972), p. 63.
- ¹⁶ Ray Connolly, 'Tommy', *Time Out*, no. 265, 28 March 1975, p. 10.
- ¹⁷ In British popular music where the nuances of this glam parade were perhaps most conspicuous, icons ranged from the more traditionally masculine Gary Glitter, Alvin Stardust and Slade's Noddy Holder, through the 'middle-of-the-road' androgyny of Sweet, T-Rex and The Bay City Rollers, to the costumed extremes and attendant ambiguity of Elton John, David Bowie and Detroit rocker Suzy Quatro (the latter offering an interestingly butch rendition of the 'girl rocker'). The glam presence and sexual flamboyance was equally visible in stage shows like *Hair*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Rocky Horror Show* (the latter itself becoming a cult film in 1975).
- ¹⁸ Robert Hughes, 'The Décor of Tomorrow's Hell' in Mario Falsetto (ed), *Perspectives on Stanley Kubrick* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), pp. 185-6.
- ¹⁹ Philip French, 'A Clockwork Orange', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 59, no. 2 (1990), p. 84.
- ²⁰ Phillip Strick and Penelope Houston, 'Interview with Stanley Kubrick', p. 63.
- ²¹ Nicolas Roeg interviewed in David Gregory, dir., *Watching the Alien*. Blue Underground Inc./Anchor Bay Entertainment (2002).
- ²² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1971), pp. 59-60.
- ²³ May Routh interviewed in David Gregory, dir., *Watching the Alien*. Blue Underground Inc./Anchor Bay Entertainment (2002).
- ²⁴ F. and J. Vermorel, '1976: Julie: He's Got a Lot to Answer for', in Hanif Kureishi and Jon Savage (eds), *The Faber Book of Pop* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp. 458-9.
- ²⁵ John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss, Vol. 2: Separation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 207.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Clockwork: A fanlisting. URL: <http://fans.luminosus.net/clock/> [27 June 2005].
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Tommytherockopera Fan Newsgroup. URL: <http://movies.groups.yahoo.com/group/tommytherockopera> [3 March 2005].
- ³⁰ Clockworkorange2 Fan Newsgroup. URL: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/clockworkorange2> [13 December 2004].
- ³¹ Chris Weedon, Andrew Tolson and Frank Mort, 'Theories of Language and Subjectivity' in Stuart Hall (ed), *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 205.
- ³² Ibid., p. 206.
- ³³ Kaja Silverman, 'The Subject', in Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (eds), *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: Sage, 1999), p. 343.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Vladimir Volosinov, *Freudianism: a Marxist Critique* (London: Academy Press, 1976), p. 39.