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Resistance through realism: Youth subculture films in 1970s (and 1980s) Britain

Introduction

With 2014 marking its 50th anniversary, the past few years have seen a great deal of scholarship reflecting on the legacy of the Birmingham School (cf. Bland, 2013; Clarke, 2013; Gilroy, 2013; Hall, 2013; McRobbie, 2013). This article uses film to contribute to this ongoing process of reflection and re-evaluation, revisiting that moment in the Birmingham School's history when its focus was on working-class youth subcultures. It looks at four lesser-known British social realist films whose release roughly coincides with the Centre's period of research activity on subcultures. They are *Pressure* (1976), *Babylon* (1980), *Bloody Kids* (1979) and *Made in Britain* (1982). In their portrayal of British working-class youth subcultures, these films are highly evocative of the scholarly work produced at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s. As social realist films that articulate a politicised critique of society, *Pressure*, *Babylon*, *Bloody Kids* and *Made in Britain* address many of the same issues as the CCCS subculture work, and they so in a similar manner. There is a tendency within cultural studies to present films as mirror reflections of a reality that affirm what we already know (Tarancón, 2012). This is not my intention. Rather, looking at these films as artistic constructions of reality that draw on a discourses that circulated in Britain during the 1970s and early 1980s, I describe how these films articulate a set of concerns about youth and class that are strikingly similar to those found in the British Cultural Studies canon.

British Cultural Studies and Social Realist Cinema

This article is inspired by the precedent of film scholarship that draws attention to the confluences between the social realist films of the British New Wave and the early work of British Cultural Studies scholars. British Cultural Studies (as opposed to 'cultural studies') refers to a set of practices and paradigms that emerged from Worker's Education Movement and the New Left in Britain during the late 1950s and early 1960s (Harris, 1996; Turner, 2002). British Cultural Studies responded to profound changes in British society (Carrington, 2001; Dworkin, 1997; Gilroy, 1996; Steele, 1997; Turner, 2002) and sought to validate working-class culture against the dominance of 'bourgeois' culture at a time when political struggle was shifting from the point of production to the point of representation (Pfister, 1991; Steele, 1997). While educators were coming to terms with mass culture at the NUT's 1960 'Popular Culture and Personal Responsibility' conference (Turner, 2002) and books like Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), E.P. Thomson's *The Making of the English Working-Class* (1963) and Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1966) were highlighting the value of working-class culture, another response came from cinema in the form of the social realist films of the British 'New Wave'. This cinematic movement included such films as *Room at the Top* (1959), *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (1960) and *This Sporting Life* (1963) (Hill, 1986). These dramas claimed to depict working-class life as it really was (Hallam and Marshment, 2000), and just as Cultural Studies had begun looking at working-class life in terms of culture rather than work, the New Wave films shifted attention from the site of production to the new sites of leisure (Hutchings, 2001; Sargeant, 2004).

The overlap between British Cultural Studies and social realist drama is seen clearly in the impact of Richard Hoggart's seminal cultural studies text *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) on the

New Wave. *The Uses of Literacy* was a best-seller read widely both within and outside the academy (Dyer, 1981) and Lovell (1996) argues that the New Wave films, with their romanticised nostalgia for the richness of the working-class culture of England's industrial North, reflect the social concerns articulated by Hoggart. Leach (2004: 56) notes that the Northern accents of the New Waves films are evocative of *The Uses of Literacy* and that most of these films depict popular culture as 'debased and trivial, in line with Hoggart's analysis'. Sargeant (2004) and Hill (1986) also look at the negative portrayal of commercialised popular culture in the New Wave films. Hill observes that *Saturday and Sunday Morning* is in keeping with Cultural Studies' interest in sites of leisure as the places in which the identity of the new, affluent working-class was being formed. Murphy (1992) points out the similarities between Hoggart and Raymond Williams' writing on working-class culture and the themes explored in the films of New Wave director Lindsay Anderson. All three disparaged working-class leisure practices while looking warmly upon traditional forms of working-class culture. Finally, Leach (2004) looks at how New Wave films worked to reproduce the 'directness' of working-class culture, a feature of working-class culture that was cherished by cultural studies scholars (cf. Hoggart, 1957; Willis, 1978) and New Wave filmmakers alike.

At this point it is necessary to qualify my use of the terms 'realism' and 'social realism'. Realism was deployed in the New Wave films as part of a 'moral' commitment to addressing serious social issues (Higson, 1984); Lovell (1980: 65) describes social realism as grouping together a number of artistic styles that agree upon the idea that 'the business of art is to show things as they really are'. 'Realist' and 'social realist' are often used interchangeably, but the latter term emphasises a commitment to social critique. As Samantha Lay (2002: 8-9) puts it 'A key feature of social realist texts, particularly in the British realist tradition, is the way character and place are linked in order to explore some aspect of contemporary life', sometimes exploring 'contentious issues in a society, especially at moments of crisis or conflict'. Social realist films are guided by the reforming, if not revolutionary spirit of the writers and filmmakers in their attempt to show life as it really is. This is why Raymond Williams (1977) famously argued that social realist dramas extend dramatic narrative to the hitherto ignored working class in order to interpret that class's social action for a wider audience and for itself. Another aspect of realism is aesthetic, with Higson (1984) arguing that the New Wave films made use of the tension between the drabness of the settings and their aesthetic, poetic, quality. Realist drama creates an air of authenticity by having real-life situations reproduced in the real-life accents and modes of speech of the people the films portray (Williams, 1977). The notion of realism was problematized during the 1970s in the radical film journal *Screen* (Leach, 2004, Turner, 2002), particularly by Colin MacCabe (1985). Nevertheless, realism remained a popular cinematic form and even though some film scholars argued that it was impossible for art to depict things as they really are (Lovell, 1980), this did not stop filmmakers from trying. As a window not into reality but into the ideas circulating amongst left-wing intellectuals and creative professionals during the 1970s, the social realist films discussed in this article provide unique insights into the social and historical context of that produced them.

Youth Subcultures and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

Established by Richard Hoggart at the University of Birmingham in 1964, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies maintained Hoggart's interest in working-class culture but took a decidedly different direction in the 1970s under Stuart Hall's[i] leadership (Turner, 2002).

Hoggart (1957: 193) was suspicious of the new mass culture's 'shiny barbarism' and as Gilroy (1996) points, out this was a nationally chauvinistic position, pitting the earthy, organic Englishness of 'the pub around the corner' (Hoggart, 1957: 248) against the 'particularly thin and pallid form of dissipation' found in the American-style milk bars where the teenage 'juke-box boys' hung out. In the 1970s the researchers at the Centre continued to romanticise working-class culture but instead of denouncing Britain's new youth cultures, they celebrated them as forms of cultural resistance. Following Muggleton (2000) I use to the term 'CCCS approach' to refer to this body of work, which includes the anthologies *Resistance through Rituals*, and *Policing the Crisis* as well as Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* and Paul Willis' *Profane Culture* and *Learning to Labour*.[ii] As in Hoggart's work, the CCCS analysis of working-class culture took place in the fields of leisure and consumption rather than at the point of production (Clarke, 1976a).[iii] Where Cultural Studies had been interested in working-class culture in general, the CCCS researchers were interested in those stylised youth groups that formed *sub*cultures. This research focused only on those spectacular working-class youth groups who were identifiable by their distinctive stylistic ensembles, groups like the teddy boys, mods and skinheads (Clarke et. al., 1976). The CCCS approach provided a novel understanding of the everyday culture of underprivileged groups who were at best ignored and at worse criminalised. Whereas subcultures had hitherto only been addressed as 'problems' by society or targeted as consumer markets by the manufacturers of youth commodities, the CCCS recognised subcultures' value as distinct cultural formations, granting them agency in the process. Youth subcultures had only been studied by sociologists in terms of their deviancy (McRobbie, 2013) and the CCCS approach set out to deal with youth subcultures in a way that did not pathologize them (Hesmondhalgh, 2005).

The CCCS researchers employed the ideas of continental theorists like Gramsci, Barthes and Levi-Strauss to interpret subcultures as resistance to the experience of class oppression. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony was used to conceptualise the experience of subculture as part of a struggle for cultural power. Subcultures were seen as distinct cultures that were a double articulation against both the parent culture (community) and the dominant culture (society). The CCCS scholars used Barthes' semiotics to interpret the stylised ensembles of subcultures, 'reading' subcultures as texts (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Thus the skinheads' hard appearance and heavy boots were read as a way in which working-class youth attempted to 'magically' recover community (Clarke, 1976), while the Teddy Boys' Edwardian clothes were described as subverting the privilege of the upper class (Jefferson, 1976). Levi-Strauss's concept of 'bricolage' was used to explain how subculture members re-order and re-contextualise cultural objects to communicate new meanings (Clarke, 1976a), while Levi-Strauss' 'homology' was used to describe how subculture members' outfits 'fit' their lifestyles and concerns (Hebdige, 1979).

This work has been widely critiqued for its a-priori application of Marxist cultural theory that treated subcultures as static, class-based formations in order to make youth out to be a radical vanguard of the working-class. Such was the theorists' eagerness to locate resistance that contradictory or reactionary behaviours on the part of subculture members, from casual sexism to racial violence, were explained away as responses to contradictions within the superstructure. Critics point out that in many cases, this 'heroic'[iv] reading of subculture relied on theory, semiotics and secondary research at the expense of fieldwork. In the cases where CCCS researchers did actually carry out ethnographic fieldwork, their findings were made to fit their theoretical perspective (Clarke, 1990; Cohen, 1980; Muggleton, 2000). The class-dimensions of

subcultures were over-stated so that these groups could be categorised as working-class resistance. This over-looked the fluidity of membership in subcultures as well as their dynamic relationship with commercial popular culture (Clarke, 1990; Laughey, 2006; Osgerby, 2012; Waters, 1981). In one of the earliest critiques of the CCCS approach, McRobbie (1980) pointed out that female subculture members had been ignored at the expense of their more-visible male counterparts. More recently, scholars have debated whether subcultures even exist anymore, with some preferring to speak of post-subcultures (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003; Redhead, 1990), neo-tribes (Bennett, 1999; 2005; Malbon, 1999), scenes (Straw, 1991) or club cultures (Thornton, 1996). Others have argued for the continuing importance of subculture (Hodkinson, 2002; McCulloch et. al., 2006; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006), advocated the revision of its theoretical formulation (Evans, 1997) or insisted on a more rigorously sociological application of the term (Blackman, 2005; Laughey, 2006). These debates notwithstanding, the CCCS formulation of subculture quickly became orthodoxy (Griffin, 2011). What remains significant, as Davies (1993: 128) puts it, is that 'The strength of this research was that it located the fragments of British society and brought them into the centre'. While the work of the CCCS researchers may have had many shortcomings, it is important to remember that they were almost all graduate students and, in the words of Stuart Hall (1990: 17), 'making it up as [they] went along'.

To understand why this research was so concerned with subcultures as a form of working-class resistance, one must look to the historical and political context in which it was carried out. While the 1960s are associated in the popular imagination with radicalism, it was in the 1970s that the radical ideas of the previous decade took hold and were put into practice (Forster and Harper, 2000). The 1970s were a tumultuous time of class conflict and hardship, characterised by an 'intensifying atmosphere of crisis' (Dworkin, 2009: 524) with widespread strikes, three-day weeks, high inflation and political instability (Cannadine, 1990). In the 1970s, even the artists went on strike (Walker, 2002). Dworkin (1997) argues that the British New Left's turn to cultural Marxism represented an effort to understand post-war transformations in British society that orthodox Marxism's economic determinism could not account for. The crisis in socialist thinking that had culminated in the failures of the 1968 uprisings caused the CCCS to search for new ways of coming to grips with the relationship between 'structure and agency, experience and ideology, theory and practice' (Dworkin, 141). This led them to structuralism and the ideas of Althusser and Gramsci in particular, with an emphasis on the role of the struggle over meaning in the battleground of culture (Agger, 1992).

Writing at the end of the seventies, Paul Corrigan (1979) tells us how the CCCS subculture research emerged from an 'ultra-left' movement looking for a new revolutionary vanguard. Disillusioned with the reformism of the traditional left, Corrigan and his peers had set out to research subcultures in hopes that it would provide a new impetus for revolutionary action. The subject of their analysis, subculture, was very much a product of the period; once-coherent class cultures were fragmenting in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of widespread social and economic change. Along with the new affluence and independence of teenagers, this fragmentation facilitated the emergence of subcultures. With a pervasive sense of social and political crisis characterising the 1970s (Osgerby, 2012), subcultures were treated as a symptom of the disintegration of the post-war consensus. The CCCS researchers saw subcultures as one of the most distinctive characteristics of post-war British culture (Hall and Jefferson, 2006). Walker (2002) argues that subcultures were just one example of the conflict, pluralism and fragmentation that characterised the 1970s in general, as British society became divided along multiple axes

such as taste, music, style, sexuality and politics. Other historians note that the counterculture of radical cultural theorists was itself a sort of subculture (Dworkin, 1997; Forster and Harper, 2010).[v] In a 2004 interview Willis (2004: 205) described the Centre as a radical experiment in student-directed education: the 'permanent revolutionary council of the [1968 Birmingham University] sit-in extended indefinitely - in our minds at least'.

Out of this heady period came not just subcultures and scholarship about subcultures but also films about subcultures. The British New Wave films coincided with the era that saw the rise of the teenager (Chambers, 1986), but youth subcultures are conspicuous in their absence from this corpus. For a social realist depiction of youth subcultures we must look ahead to the 1970s and 1980s. Discussions of realist film tend to skip straight from the New Wave films to the late-80s realist renaissance led by Mike Leigh and Ken Loach (cf. Lay, 2002; Leach, 2004), leaving the social realist dramas of the intervening period overlooked because they received a limited release or were produced for television (Barber, 2013; Newland, 2013). *Pressure*, *Babylon*, *Bloody Kids* and *Made in Britain* all portray youth subculture and were all made during those intervening years, a time period which coincides with the years in which the CCCS was most active in publishing on subcultures. We cannot assume that the writers and directors of the films discussed here were familiar with the CCCS subculture research, but as I will demonstrate, there is a distinctive confluence between the concerns articulated in these films and the concerns articulated by the CCCS researchers.

It is also worth noting that just as the works of Hoggart and Williams were read widely in the 1950s and 1960s, the popularity of Cultural Studies in the 1970s (Hunt, 1998) meant that the scholarly discourse surrounding youth subcultures penetrated the popular discourse. Sociologist Stanley Cohen, whose work on mods and rockers in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1980) was a forerunner to the CCCS research, appeared in a 1971 BBC North documentary about Hells Angels and skinheads called *All Dressed Up and Going Nowhere*. *Resistance through Rituals* contributor Simon Firth helped prepare a 1979 episode of the *South Bank Show* about Rough Trade records and anthropologists Ted Polhemus and Lynn Proctor, whose 1978 book *Fashion and Anti-Fashion* owes much to the semiotic reading of subcultures developed by the CCCS, introduced a 1981 London Weekend Television documentary about New Romantics (*Posers – New Romantics*). Laing (1994) describes how what he calls the 'Birmingham thesis' was incorporated into journalistic music writing, particularly on the subject of punk, while Hunt (1998) and Osgerby (2012) note the overlap between subcultural theory and the 'youth cult' pulp fiction published by New English Library in the seventies. For a sense of the impact of Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, we can look to the fact it was reissued annually for more than a decade after its initial publication (Beezer, 1992). Hebdige (2012: 401) recounts how 'For better or worse, the two British exports – spectacle punk and Birmingham School cultural studies – got sort of welded together in *Subculture* and the package went viral'.

Pressure

Horace Ové's *Pressure* is Britain's first black-directed feature film (Pines, 2001). Made in 1975, it did not receive a commercial release until 1978 (Walker, 1985). As Newland (2013) notes, *Pressure* is an extension of the social realism of the New Wave films as it brings marginal groups to the centre of dramatic narrative. In keeping with the social realist tradition, it does so because of the director's political convictions. As Ové stated in a 2005 interview, *Pressure* was made to both document and represent the racial conflict and political upheaval of the time. Ové

explained that 'I was part of it — and I was covering it. I was photographing all those things. Out of all of that came the script of *Pressure*' (Kelly, 2005). A strongly didactic film, *Pressure* depicts its young protagonist Tony`s increasing alienation from British society as racism prevents him from finding employment after leaving school. Tony is the British-born son of Windrush-generation Trinidadian immigrants. While Tony assumes he is part of British society, institutional racism pushes him into the petty delinquency of the rude boy subculture and eventually into the oppositional Black Power movement. As a radical commentary on the black experience in Britain, scholarship on *Pressure* has focused on issues surrounding race (cf. Brundson, 2007; Young, 1996). Walker (1985) contextualises *Pressure* in terms of the rising militancy within London's black community at the time, describing the film as a response to employment discrimination, racist policing and the resurgence of organised racism. Pines (2001) describes how *Pressure* combines narrative with documentary realism to critique the failure of institutionalised race relations and multiculturalism. He argues that the making of the film should be understood as a political act because it is a black director's intervention in an ongoing cultural struggle over the representation of blackness.

Yet as Stewart Home (2005) points out, *Pressure* is as much about class and youth as it is about race; it is in its approach to the Black British experience as an experience framed by class, age and style that *Pressure* echoes the CCCS subculture research. In its depiction of Tony's interactions with his white friend Dave from school, the film takes for granted the multi-racial character of British working-class youth culture, a theme explored in great depth by Hebdige in *Subculture* (1979). It is during these scenes that *Pressure* is most explicitly about working-class youth culture. When Tony runs into Dave and his friends from work at the youth club, they are dressed in the post-skinhead style of the 'smoothie' (see Ferguson, 1983). The banter between Tony and Dave about Tony's out-of-date clothing, as well as earlier scene in which Tony is seen staring longingly through the windows of high street clothing shops, makes it clear that Tony wishes he could afford to dress in that style as well. With their long hair, tank tops and spread collared shirts, Tony's white friends are dressed in the same style as the 'lads' in *Learning to Labour* (1977), Paul Willis' study of why working-class kids get working-class jobs.[vi] Willis described how for white working-class youth in the mid-70s, the goal was to get into work and gain disposable income as soon as possible. We see this phenomena in *Pressure's* portrayal of Dave, who despite having graduated with fewer qualifications than Tony, is in work and thus able to afford the leisure activities and clothes that Tony cannot. When Dave invites Tony to ditch the youth club for the disco, Tony is hesitant as he has no money, so Dave and his friends offer to pay Tony's way. The sort of financial pressure experienced by Tony here is described by Willis in *Learning to Labour* (1977: 39)

> The pressure to go out at night, to go to a commercial dance rather than a youth club, to go to pubs rather than stop in, to buy modern clothes, smoke, and take girls out – all these things which were felt to constitute 'what life is really about' – put enormous financial pressure on 'the lads'.

The following scene shows Tony and his friends at a commercial dance, with loud rock music, flashing lights and scenes of a young, multi-racial crowd dancing. In contrast to denigration of commercial leisure spaces in *The Uses of Literacy* and the New Wave films, this site of working-class leisure is depicted as vibrant and full-of-life, a place where working-class youth create their own culture. The depiction of youth engaging in popular culture on their own

terms reflects the implicit assumption articulated by Willis in *Profane Culture* (1978: 1) that 'oppressed, subordinate or minority groups can have a hand in the construction of their own vibrant cultures and are not merely dupes'.

The next time we see Tony with other youths, it is with a new group of friends who are exclusively West Indian and dressed in the rude boy style analysed by Hebdige (1976; 1979): short trousers, blazers, Crombie coats, pork-pie hats and wrap-around shades. Tony's economic exclusion from white working-class culture has pushed him into this street culture of unemployed black youth. Here, as in *Resistance through Rituals*, *Pressure* depicts racialised working-class youths using style to articulate their identities against both their parent culture and the dominant culture. A great deal of the narrative in *Pressure* revolves around the generational clash between Tony and his parents, who do not understand why he cannot take advantage of all the opportunities that British society supposedly offers. Tony's parents exhibit what the CCCS researchers would describe as 'bourgeois consciousness' as they attempt to conform to a racist system. In *Policing the Crisis*, the authors describes how second-generation West Indians are more acutely aware of racism because they have the same schooling as white youth yet are denied jobs. The second-generation lacks the first-generation's immigrant optimism and feels their oppression more acutely, especially due to the 'constant pressure of police harassment on the streets' (Hall et. al., 1978: 354), harassment repeatedly both referred to and depicted in *Pressure*. Second-generation West Indians are described by Hall et. al. as rejecting both the parent culture and the dominant culture as they join the black youth subcultures of the rudies and rastas.

This is exactly what happens in *Pressure* as Toby comes into conflict with both his parents and the dominant culture as he is first drawn first into the subculture of the rude boys, then into what the CCCS would describe as the *counter*-culture of black power militants, whose oppositional politics distinguish them from ordinary working-class subcultures (Hall et. al., 1978). The rude boys that Tony hangs out with embody the street-hustler cool that Hebdige (1976) was so impressed by. Smoking marijuana, hanging out on street corners, squatting in abandoned houses and carrying out petty-theft, the rude boys display the sort of 'badges of half-formed, inarticulate radicalism' (Waters; 1981) that are highly unlikely to bring about radical political change (Bennett, 2011; Mungham, 1982). Even the CCCS acknowledged that there was no 'subcultural solution' to the problems of unemployment and dead-end jobs; there were only 'imaginary solutions' (Clarke, Hall and Roberts, 1976). Yet they saw subcultures, with their basis in working-class culture and resistance to bourgeois culture, as a necessary pre-condition for a 'struggle for State power' (Corrigan and Frith, 1976: 238) and concluded that the 'final question is how to build on that culture, how to organise it, transform resistance intro rebellion'. For Ové as for the CCCS, the answer was Black Power; the closing shot of *Pressure* shows Tony at a Black Power demonstration against police brutality. While the racial dimension of the rude boy subculture opens up a path to radicalism for Tony in *Pressure*, most subcultures offered only 'imaginary solutions'.

Babylon

Capturing reggae culture at the end of the seventies, *Babylon* is another social realist film about black working-class youth in London (Barber 2013; Brundson, 2007; Park, 1984). *Babylon* explores many of the same themes as *Pressure*, which is a major influence both aesthetically and thematically (Newland, 2013). Newland (2010: 96) argues that 'filmed entirely on location in a

realist style, [*Babylon*] now stands as a document of the type of racial conflict that blighted English cities during the period that saw Margaret Thatcher come to office'. *Babylon* features a number of genuine reggae sound systems, stars the reggae group Aswad and drew most of its actors from estates around the South London areas where it was filmed (Shaw, 2012; Walker, 1985). Like Tony in *Pressure, Babylon*'s protagonist Blue is young, black, working-class and the son of West Indian immigrants. Blue's style identifies him as what Hebdige (1979) would describe as a 'secular' rasta. The other members of his sound system Ital Lion also dress in the style of either the rastas or the rude boys. At the beginning of *Babylon* Blue has a respectable job in an auto garage, but a confrontation with his racist supervisor leaves him unemployed. This is the first of a number of set-backs experienced by Blue throughout the film, some personal, others structural. Like Tony in *Pressure*, Blue develops an increased sense of racial consciousness from his experience of racial oppression. The racial abuse from Blue's boss is followed by assault and arrest and the hands of racist police clothes officer who try to stop him for simply looking 'suspicious'[vii]. Throughout the film there is a series of confrontations with the racist white working-class residents of the council estate opposite the railway arch where Ital Lion keep their sound system. This conflict escalates over the course of *Babylon* and upon returning from a night out, Blue finds that the sound system has been trashed and the walls of the lock-up covered in racist slogans, swastikas and National Front emblems.

After the vandalism has been discovered by the rest of Ital Lion, their white friend Ronnie arrives at the lock-up only to be told by sound system member Beefy that 'his kind' is responsible for the damage. Ronnie protests in the reggae argot that he uses throughout the film, but this time he is head-butted by Beefy who tells him 'don't talk fucking black, white man'. Everyone but Blue leaves the lock-up while Ronnie is still on the ground nursing his broken nose, with Blue making no move to help. Dressed in the pork-pie hat and 'Harrington' jacket of the 2-Tone subculture, Ronnie's presence in the film points to the overlap between black and white working-class youth subcultures explored by Hebdige (1976; 1979). Earlier in the film, Ronnie and Blue had even reminisced about their school days together as skinheads. Blue's rejection of this friendship with Ronnie is presented as a failure of multi-racial society – where Ronnie was once integrated seamlessly into Blue's social group through a mutual love of reggae, the racism of other whites has made their friendship untenable. In the scene that follows Blue is seen walking to the neighbouring council estate and confronting one of the suspected vandals. The estate resident then unleashes a torrent of racial abuse upon Blue, who stabs him. The film's finale shows Ital Lion carrying out a millenarian reggae sound system performance as the police gather outside. The film closes with the crowd barricading the doors to the club as the police come charging through, suggesting an escalation into full-blown conflict as Blue tells the crowd to 'stand firm' and repeats the refrain 'we can't take no more of that' to a heavy reggae beat.

The work of white writers/directors Franco Rosso and Martin Stellman, white producer Gavrik Losey and white photographer Chris Menges (Walker, 1985), *Babylon* reflects the white interest in black culture that we also find in the CCCS approach.[viii] It similarly continues the tradition of social realist filmmakers looking to oppressed and subordinate groups' culture for inspiration. Co-written by one of the authors of nostalgic mod rock opera *Quadrophenia*, *Babylon* was positioned as a movie about youth and class rather than one about race. When the film was released, its producer Gavrick Losey told *Film and Filming* that while the film's cast was predominantly black, this did not 'separate it from other stories about poor kids pouring their hearts and souls into making music as a way out of the slums' and told *Time Out* that 'it's not a black movie' (quoted in Shaw, 2012: 82). While I agree with Shaw that this was likely a way of

tempering *Babylon's* racial politics in order to sell it to white audiences, Losey's statement does not seem disingenuous. There is a long history of British white working-class youth subcultures identifying with black culture (Hewitt, 2002) and *Babylon* was produced at a time when reggae was being championed by white punks. Most famously, the reggae-influenced Clash championed the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival rioters in their song 'White Riot' (Gray, 2004; Letts, 2008). As a film about rude boys, *Babylon* really *is* a 'youth movie'- Newland (2010) and Savage (2008) compare it to other subcultural music films like *Rude Boy* (1980) and *Breaking Glass* (1980) that show Britain in a state of crisis and decline.

Babylon celebrates the independence and vitality of the London reggae scene, echoing the CCCS' interest in the politics of style and its analysis of reggae as 'cultural resistance'. The expressiveness and joy of the sound system clash and reggae dance contrasts with the characters' day-to-day experience of exclusion, racism and boredom. The film's sub-text is clear: reggae is a response to the oppression experience by black working-class youth living in what *Babylon'*s rasta cleric calls 'second Babylon'. This resonates with Hall et. al. (1978: 357)'s description of the rasta subculture in *Policing the Crisis*:

> In and through the revivalist imagery of the 'dreadlocks', the music of the dispossessed and insistent, driving beat of the reggae sounds systems came the hope of deliverance from 'Babylon'. The 'culture; of the back-to-Africa sect, the Ras Tafari is crucial here; both in Brixton and in Kingston, in recent years, it is the dress, beliefs, philosophy and language of this once marginal and despised group which has provided the bases for the generalisation and radicalisation of black consciousness amongst sectors of black youth in the cities: the source of an intense black cultural nationalism. It is this 'religion of the oppressed', as embodied in the rhythm and imagery of reggae, which has swept the minds as well as swayed the bodies of young black men and women.

As if scripting Babylon's film's final scene, Hebdige (1979: 38) describes the sound system as 'a precious inner sanctum' where 'an exclusively black audience would 'stare down' Babylon, carried along on a thunderous baseline'. *Babylon* emphasises the central role of the sound-system in its characters' lives, showing them assembling it, using it and mourning its destruction. The sound system is presented a sort of subcultural totem, matching Willis' depiction of the motor-bike in *Profane Culture* (1978). Willis (1978: 61) also points to way in which such totems function as vessels for subcultural meanings and attitudes, performing as expressive function that makes them 'increasingly *the form* of cultural, *everyday* life, for underprivileged groups' (italics his).

Throughout the film Blue develops a radical racial consciousness and becomes increasingly drawn to the church of Rastafari, with *Babylon* portraying rude boys and rastas as a sort of political vanguard of black working-class youth. As Cashmore (1984) notes, the rastas fit the mould of the other spectacular youth subcultures in that they were mostly young, drew their inspiration from music and had a collective identity and a style of dress that both distinctive and cohesive. The main difference was that the rastas could be truly considered an oppositional subculture in their response to racism and policing. Writing on rastas and rudies, Hebdige (1976: 146) describes 'a trend away from the undirected violence, bravado and competitive individualism… towards a more articulate and informed anger'. In *Policing the Crisis* the CCCS researchers refer to British Rastafarianism as 'the seeds of an unorganised political rebellion' (Hall et. al. 1978: 357-358), 'the ideological point of origin of a new social movement amongst

blacks' that 'rereads the culture of oppression from 'the roots' up as the culture of suffering and struggle, every activity touched is given a new content, endowed with a new meaning'. Just as it is portrayed in the film, the reggae culture of South London is described in *Policing the Crisis* as the staking out of a 'political battleground' (Hall et. al. 1978: 358).

Bloody Kids

One of director Stephen Frears' more obscure films, 1979's *Bloody Kids* is a good example of the sort of realist film that shown on British television during the 1970s. Due to economic and structural constraints affecting the British film industry during this decade, television became the medium of choice for Britain's best-known directors and producers (Auty, 1985). Because of its mass audience, television became, in the word of Raymond Williams (1977: 67), the main site for bringing 'the working class to the centre of dramatic action'. Guaranteed revenue-streams meant that serious, challenging and often radical work was produced for television in the 1970s and 1980s (Fitch, 1989; Rolinson, 2014). For directors like Fears, television was the path to cinematic success (Goodridge, 2012; Park, 1984; Street, 2009). While *Bloody Kids* mixes in film noir elements to surrealist effect (Johnson, 1986), Frears works in the realist tradition (Allison, 2007) and *Babylon*'s photographer Chris Menges provides *Bloody Kids* with a formal realist aesthetic. Described by James Saynor (1993: 7) as 'a highly fevered piece of social commentary about young drop-outs rampaging through the night-time public spaces of Southend', *Bloody Kids* extends dramatic narrative to the working-class youths who were the object of analysis in CCCS subculture research. Known, in his own words, for 'scruffy, anti-establishment films' (Goodridge, 2012: 94), Frears was yet another director to look to working-class culture for its authenticity (Littger, 2006). Allison (2007) sees *Bloody Kids* as indicative of Frears increasing politicisation, with its dystopian vision of a town centre overrun by bored teenage delinquents and a public infrastructure crippled by labour conflict and under-investment.

Bloody Kids follows two 11-year old boys as a pretend stabbing goes awry, sending one boy (Leo) to the hospital and the other boy (Mike) on the run from the police. Mike ends up falling in with a gang of punk rockers and their leader Ken takes him under his wing for a long and eventful night of mischief and mayhem. Mike and Leo are too young to be fully-fledged members of any one youth subculture, but they dress in the snorkel parkas, monkey jackets and boots that had 'defused' (Clarke, 1976a) from the mod and skinhead subcultures into the mainstream of 'ordinary' working-class kids (Clarke et. al., 1976). Although Ken tells off a group of punks in a cafe for looking like 'last year's record cover', he and his friends are all punk rockers themselves. Mike accompanies his new teenage friends to a disco, crossing the threshold of adolescence into a liminal world full of alcohol, girls, amphetamines and new wave music. Like in *Pressure*, the disco is depicted as vibrant and exciting. This contrasts with the New Wave films' denigration of commercial leisure practices in the same way that the CCCS' interpretation of leisure practices contrasts with Hoggart's. Willis (1977: 5) writes 'For all the shit, there is a freedom in the market, on the streets, in the pubs and in the dance halls'.

Paul Corrigan (1976: 103) states in *Resistance through Rituals* that 'the main action of British subculture is, in fact, "doing nothing" ', arguing that the minor delinquency of working-class youth is a response to this pressing problem of boredom. *Bloody Kids* similarly approaches petty delinquency as an 'imaginary solution' to the problem of boredom. Boredom and alienation are core themes of *Bloody Kids* and the film is full of scenes where we see youths get up to no good for lack of anything better to do: stealing policemen's hats, vandalising hospitals, pulling smoke

alarms and so on. When Leo is caught marking the walls of the hospital, the policeman asks him 'what do you think you're doing?' to which he responds 'I was bored'. Similarly, Ken's gang of punks roam around the town, from milk bar to disco to shopping precinct, looking for anything that will alleviate the boredom of off-season life in a seaside town. The punks' juvenile delinquent leader Ken complains bitterly of boredom. Violence is also depicted as a response to boredom, in both the CCCS approach and *Bloody Kids*. Corrigan (1976: 105) explains that fights '…arise out of Saturday's 'Nothing' rather than any territorial or group factor on its own…. If these fights were *real*, the streets of British cities would be littered with corpses' (italics his). Willis (1977) similarly describes 'having a laff', which includes fighting, as an antidote to boredom. Frears paints town-centre violence in much the same way, with Ken leading his group of punks into a late-night scuffle with a group of youths spotted at the other side of shopping centre. For all its jeering and posturing, this is a playful response to teenage boredom in which no-one gets hurt.

In its depiction of the school-life of working-class kids, *Bloody Kids* is reminiscent of Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour* (1977). This ethnography describes how the 'counter-school culture' of Willis' 'lads' works to reproduce their subordinate class position. Willis nonetheless admires the creativity of the lads who create their own culture against the rules and expectations of the dominant culture. Willis (1977: 12) describes an opposition to school culture 'expressed mainly as a style. It is lived out in countless small ways which are special to the school institution, instantly recognised by the teachers, and an almost ritualistic part of the daily fabric of life for the kids'. *Bloody Kids* similarly shows the counter-school culture that Leo and Mike create as they ignore the teacher with what Willis (1977:13) would describe as an 'aimless air of insubordination ready with spurious justification… impossible to nail down'. When Leo is confronted by a teacher over the marks he had made on the school walls, he cheekily admits to it. When told he's going to wipe it off Leo cheekily replies 'Its very hard to get off sir its indelible', exhibiting the sort of ritualistic, stylistic opposition lauded by Willis. Willis argues that the 'counter-school culture' demonstrates an awareness of class domination that is potentially radical because of the challenge it poses to the dominant ideology. This goes some way in explaining why scholars and radical filmmakers alike found creativity and resistance in the kinds of hostility to authority and petty vandalism depicted in *Bloody Kids*.

Made in Britain

This kind of heroic approach to Leo, Mike and Ken's 'Badges of Half-Formed, Inarticulate Radicalism' (Waters, 1981: 1) in *Bloody Kids* is taken to the next level Alan Clarke's 1982 television film *Made in Britain.* Unlike most of the social realist directors, Clarke was from a working-class background (Kelly, 1998) and although Clarke was not as doctrinaire in his socialism as some of his peers, he was ardently anti-establishment (Kelly, 1998; Schuman, 1998). In a 2000 documentary about Clarke, Stephen Frears explained that Clarke was drawn to television because it told the story of 'ordinary working-class people' (*Alan Clarke*). Park (1984: 17) describes *Made in Britain* as a work of 'documentary-style realism' and argues that it is high-point of television film. It tells the story of Trevor, a 16-year-old racist skinhead sent by the courts to an assessment centre prior to sentencing for putting a brick through the window of an Indian-owned shop. The film follows Trevor as he gets into a series of often violent confrontations with various figures of authority including a judge, a job centre clerk, an assessment centre cook, a social worker and a policeman. Early on in the film, Trevor's social

worker hands him off to the assessment centre, where he befriends a 15-year-old black youth named Errol. While under the centre's care, Trevor smashes the windows of the local Job Centre, assaults the cook and gets locked up in solitary confinement. Then, along with Errol, Trevor destroys his files in the records office, urinates on the filing cabinet, steals a van and throws bricks through the windows of a South Asian family's house.

Trevor's friendship with Errol is an uneasy one and at the end of the film Trevor turns on him. Trevor's racism speaks to the popularity of the National Front amongst working-class youth, and skinheads in particular, during the 1970s and 1980s (Brake, 1980; Cashmore, 1984; Frith, 1981; Pryce, 1979). Yet the audience is invited to sympathise and identify with Trevor, not as a racist but as a rebel. Tim Roth, who plays Trevor, explains that while Clarke would have hated Trevor's politics, the idea was to show Trevor as an intelligent individual with agency (Kelly, 1998). Where members of the skinhead subculture had, in Roth's words, hitherto been depicted as 'marauding idiots' (quoted in Kelly, 1998: 144), *Made in Britain* showed them as individuals with their own voice. In this sense *Made in Britain* carries on the project started at the Birmingham School by turning attention to the most marginal of youth cultures. *Made in Britain's* writer David Leland explains in an interview that the film was part of a series of film about victims. This instalment was intended to show an 'active victim' who, while trapped by their circumstance and poor life chances, would not go down without a fight. A highlight of the film is a long monologue delivered by the assessment centre's superintendent wherein he explains to Trevor that he is doomed to a life of crime and unemployment. The scene makes it clear to the viewer that Trevor's inchoate anger, violence, vandalism and racism are what the CCCS would terms an 'imaginary solution' to the experience of alienation and oppression caused by the intersection of Trevor's age and subordinate class position.

Leland goes on to describe how he identifies with Trevor and 'his wonderful sense of survival'. Asked about the violence in the film, Leland replies 'I think the violence Trevor indulges in is the violence of the time' (*Interview with David Leland*). This is a rhetorical move worthy of the CCCS. As the critics of the CCCS approach have pointed out, this kind of 'heroic' reading of subcultures is highly problematic, revelling in subcultures' superficial rebelliousness while failing to take subculture members to task for their racism and sexism (Calluori, 1985; Clarke, 1990; Waters, 1981). In *Made in Britain*, Trevor's racism is glossed over, much like the original 1960s skinheads of Clarke's (1976b) analysis. Their 'Paki-bashing' and 'Queer-bashing' are described as the 'the ritual and aggressive defence of the social and cultural homogeneity of the community against its most obviously scapegoated outsiders' (Clarke, 1976b: 102). Such was the CCCS researchers' faith in their theoretical framework that even these reactionary and contradictory aspects subcultures could be explained away as 'magical' attempts to solve working-class subordination. That which did not fit with the CCCS scholars' description of a working-class vanguard could be dismissed by recourse to the notion of 'false consciousness' (Clarke, 1997; Cohen, 1990).

Trevor uses the sort of racist language that Willis describes as being simply part of the everyday language of both the bikers (1978) and lads (1977) in his ethnographies. Willis is equally unfazed by his research subjects' sexist language, a limitation of Willis' work highlighted by McRobbie (1991). She argues that because the CCCS researchers like Willis were young, male and veterans of the 1960s counter-culture they were much more likely to identify with their research subjects than critique them. The Birmingham School scholars related to the objects of their study through common interests such as rock music, motorcycles, football, drinking and drug-taking. Their celebration of these activities led them to gloss over oppressive

aspects of heteronormative adolescent masculinity, privileging those subcultural spaces in which males were dominant. This left the CCCS scholars oblivious to the ways in which patriarchy made spectacular aspects of subcultural activity, such as hanging out in the street, riding scooters, fighting and experimenting with drugs, more difficult for females. This sort of uncritical identification with subculture members and inherent masculinist bias characterises all of the films discussed in this article. As in the CCCS subcultures research, women are marginal if not invisible in these films (McRobbie and Garber, 1976; McRobbie, 1980). While the CCCS may have ignored female subculture members, there *were* original female teds, mods, skinheads and so on, with their own feminised take on subcultural ensembles (cf. Ferguson, 1982; Rawlings, 2000). Yet only *Bloody Kids*, with its female punks, includes female subculture members. Even here, their role can be describes as marginal at best. Otherwise, females appear only briefly in the four films, and only as one-dimensional love interests or family members. All four films celebrate aspects of rebellion, delinquency, leisure and creativity in their masculine and homosocial forms, characterised by aggression, violence and casual sexism. *Babylon* has the dubious honour of being the most uncritical in this respect. When Blue suspects that his girlfriend Elaine has been out with another man, he grabs her roughly and threatens to hit her. The film presents this as nothing more than a spot of 'girl trouble'.

Conclusion

In this article I have detailed some the ways that *Pressure*, *Babylon*, *Bloody Kids* and *Made in Britain* echo seminal British Cultural Studies research in their depiction of working-class youth subcultures. Understanding society to be complex, these films are most certainly not, in the words of film scholar Juan Antonio Tarancón (2012: 463), a 'comprehensive, homogeneous description of the mindset of society', but they *do* reflect discourses at work among left-leaning and radical cultural workers and intellectuals at a specific historical juncture. These films show that it was not just cultural studies scholars who saw youth subcultures as a radical response to an experience of oppression that was shaped by age, class and race. The fact that these films demonstrate exactly the same critical flaws as the CCCS research helps us contextualise some of the Birmingham School scholars' oversights and theoretical excesses. Perhaps this might encourage us to be a little more forgiving as well. Both the work of the CCCS researchers and these films should be recognised for their achievement in bringing pathologised working-class youth into cinematic and scholarly focus.

Pointing out the confluence between these films and canonical subculture studies also provides us with a useful resource as educators. While it may have seemed really hip and 'right-on' to integrate mods and skinheads into the curriculum thirty-five years ago, young people today are unlikely to be familiar with canonical youth subcultures, especially as British cultural studies' work was so nationally-specific (O'Connor, 1989). British working-class youth subcultures figure into discussions of a wide range of subjects from fashion theory to critical criminology to popular musicology, but these discussions are meaningless if students have no idea what a rude boy or a punk rocker is. All the films discussed in this article are highly-evocative of the both the CCCS approach and the socio-historical context from which it emerged. While they may be very much of their time, the books and movies discussed here remain highly-relevant. The continued demonization of British working-class youth groups like Chavs (Jones, 2011) and Hoodies (Ruddock, 2008; Wayne et. al.) and the youth riots that swept across England in 2011 suggest that we still have much to learn from the 1970s.

[i] Incidentally, in the 1960s, Hall had praised New Wave films like *Look Back in Anger* as he and Paddy Whannel introduced film to the study of culture (Murphy, 2001).
[ii] Muggleton's description of this corpus does not include *Policing the Crisis* or *Learning to Labour*. I have added these two works because Hall and Jefferson place them in this body of work in the introduction to the 2006 edition of *Resistance through Rituals*. They argue that *Policing the Crisis* should be seen as part of the same sequence as *Resistance through Rituals*, noting that whereas the late-70s are described in *Subculture* as the 'moment of punk', *Policing the Crisis* captures the 'moment of reggae'.
[iii] Hebdige (2012) explains that *Subculture* was an attempt to 'revisit' Hoggart's work on the impact of Americanized mass media and consumer culture on British working-class culture
[iv] The labelling of CCCS subculture work as 'heroic' comes not just from critics but from Paul Willis' own work, in which he describes the hippies' living out of their ideals as 'heroic' (p.89).
[v] It is also worth noting that many CCCS subculture scholars came from working-class backgrounds and had been subculture (or counter-culture) members themselves (Mungham and Pearson, 1976). Hebdige (2012: 401) reminisces that he approached *Subculture* as 'someone shaped in part by mod' while Bland (2013) and McRobbie (2013) both remember their time at Birmingham as one shaped by punk and 2-tone. Willis (2004: 203) recounts coming to the Centre in the late 60s as 'a bit of a hippy' while Gilroy (2013) remembers being attracted to the Centre after seeing Willis deliver a 1978 lecture dressed in teddy boy clothes.
[vi] Willis' (1977: 17) lads are not part of a canonical youth subculture, but the description of their look ('longish well-groomed hair, platform-type shoes, wide collared shirt turned over waisted coat or denim jacket, plus the still obligatory flared trousers' is consistent with post-skinhead working-class youth styles described by Ferguson (1982).
[vii] A reference to the controversial 'sus' laws of the time (Pryce, 1979).
[viii] Although it should be noted that Rosso was intimately involved with reggae culture. Rosso worked on Ové's documentary *Reggae* and directed a documentary about Black British poet Linton Kewsi Johnson called *Dread, Beat an' Blood* (Allen, 2012).

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