



How the Right-Wing Blockbuster Disposes of the 'Non-Working' Working Class

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The Chavs Are Coming!

Recent political discussions tend to go with the assumption that there is a kind of prototypical voter for right-wing parties which have been on the rise all over Europe in the last decade. He is not your (stereo-)typical young, rebellious skinhead, but more of an older, conservative white man who has been out of a job for a while, who feels thoroughly 'out of time' and thus no longer adequately represented nor taken seriously by the educated political mainstream (Bale 2014: 297). While Ken Loach's Palme d'Or-winning melodrama, *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), narrates the tale of one such man as a left-leaning tragedy of almost futile solidarity and communal spirit in the face of insurmountable obstacles, recent figures would suggest that disenfranchised, middle-aged white men tend to bear grudges against minorities rather than rebel against the system itself (cf. Ford/Goodwin 2014). Another social group is not invoked as often in the debate, even though its most unflattering media image overlaps with traditional skinhead stereotypes in a number of aspects (Jones 2016: 223): the largely uneducated, 'non-working' working class. They may share some attitudes associated with UKIP, but on the social spectrum, they could not be further removed from UKIP's core membership. Indeed, surveys suggest that they largely constitute an apolitical group which does not vote. Nigel Farage, while denying that his party exclusively appealed to elderly white men, at one point admitted that they were "not doing badly" with the "retired half-colonel living on the edge of Salisbury Plain" who is "desperate to bring back the birch, and absolutely hates Europe and hasn't been there since 1945" (qtd. in "Transcript" 2014: 7-8). This 'target audience' is a far cry from what tabloids call the "feral underclass", that is: the former working class which, according to right-wing journalist Simon Heffer, "does not now usually work at all, but is sustained by the welfare state" (qtd. in Jones 2016: 7).

These groups carry different names across the globe and come with their very own history of marginalisation and stigmatisation. But no matter whether they are referred to as 'bogans' (in Australia), 'schemies' (in Scotland), or as 'chavs' (in England and other



parts of Great Britain), their group designation pretty much does what the ‘white trash’ moniker has been doing for decades in the United States: It provides “a useful way of blaming the poor for being poor” (Wray/Newitz 1997: 1). In the UK, it was the chav in particular who rose to notorious prominence in the first years of the 21st century, inspiring crass satirical depictions in a variety of media. The first massive hit of the band Kaiser Chiefs, “I Predict a Riot” (2005), warned of promiscuous girls who would be “frozen” if it was not for “chip fat”; comedians like Catherine Tate (as Lauren “Am I Bovered” Cooper) or Matt Lucas (as Vicky “yeah but no but yeah” Pollard) built a huge fan-base with their serialised chav personas; and even a renowned author like Martin Amis chipped in with his novel, *Lionel Asbo* (2012). Long-running political sitcom *The Thick of It* (2005-2012) could not find a better way of illustrating how out of touch its protagonist, the hopelessly dim-witted government minister Hugh Abbott, was than by suggesting (in episode 2 of series 1, broadcast in 2005) that he had no clue what a chav was – at that point, the chav was everywhere, at least if you went by polemical tabloid accounts which encouraged the nation to partake in regular games of ‘chav-spotting’ (cf. Bennett 2013).

Summing up more than a decade of media-facilitated chav hysteria, Owen Jones argues that the term now encompasses “any negative traits associated with working-class people – violence, laziness, teenage pregnancies, racism, drunkenness, and the rest” (2016: 8). The ‘rest’ may seem like a rather arbitrary choice of idiom, but the reader gets what Jones, in his engaging and thought-provoking book, is on about: that the chav, as a media construction, has grown into a threatening, all-absorbing signifier for middle-class fears, which gives him a function not unlike that of the migrant in right-wing rhetoric. From Jones’s description, it becomes evident that the chav has inherited a number of negative stereotypes from the legacy of colonialism: Chavs are often conceptualised as childlike, hyper-fertile, lazy, inhuman, aggressive mongrels (Kendall 2011: 101; Loughnan et al. 2014: 54).¹ According to their prevalent image, they are the tracksuit-wearing inhabitants of council house ghettos, they follow football and idolise *Big Brother* candidates, and the media scrutinise their alleged sexual promiscuity with a mixture of puritan scorn and lusty voyeurism. One of the first scenes of *Grimsby* (dir. Louis Leterrier, 2016), a comic vehicle for Sacha Baron Cohen, consists of the protagonist, Norman “Nobby” Butcher (played by Cohen), buying a mattress and moving it to his Grimsby-based home. Set to the tune of “Parklife”, Blur’s 1994 anthem about estuary-living idlers, the montage drives home the point that Nobby’s milieu consists entirely of promiscuous school dropouts who are obsessed with football (though totally out of shape themselves) and who procreate at an alarming rate. When Nobby later, in

¹ This kind of subliminally re-introducing racist stereotypes into a seemingly non-racist context is not new. One of the most popular films of the 1980s, Joe Dante’s blockbuster *Gremlins* (1984), sees a middle-American suburb come under attack from an invasion of seemingly cuddly, but in fact quite feral monsters which represent “the full range of negative stereotypes associated with blacks” (Turner 1994: 151).



an even more [cringeworthy scene](#), introduces his long-lost brother to the family, we learn that they have their own kebab machine in the kitchen, that their youngest ones carry bizarre pop culture-inspired names like “Django Unchained” or “Gangnam Style”, and that, in order to give the children a treat, Daddy promises to burn their school down. With its over-the-top depiction of the working class as welfare fraudsters (in the same scene, Nobby explains to his brother that they regularly shave one kid’s head so that he looks like a leukaemia patient and “we can claim the welfare for it”), *Grimsby* echoes a number of discriminatory stereotypes which have been popularised by pseudo-encyclopaedias like the immensely successful *Little Book of Chavs*. The latter dedicates several chapters to mocking chavs as “non-educated delinquents” and as “the burgeoning peasant underclass” who “want money and lots of it, but don’t want to have to work for it” (Bok 2006: 8f). Moreover, according to the clichéd view,

[t]hey tend to live in England but would probably pronounce it ‘Engerland’. They have trouble articulating themselves and have little ability to spell or write. They love their pit bull dogs as well as their blades. And would happily ‘shank’ you if you accidentally brush past them or look at them in the wrong way. They tend to breed by the age of fifteen. (Richard Hilton qtd. in Jones 2016: 4)

In 2009, British fitness company Gymbox went so far as to offer “chav fighting” courses. Its adverts pleaded with the target audience not to give “moody grunting chav’s [sic!] an asbo” but “a kicking. [...] We’ll teach you how to take a Bacardi off a hoodie and turn a grunt into a whine.” (qtd. in Bawden 2009) With this programme, Gymbox was only part of a wider tendency in popular culture, as computer games like *Chav Hunter* or websites like *5 Ways to Kill a Chav* went viral in the early 2000s (Jones 2016: 121). The idea that a chav is a dangerous threat against which one should stock up on pepper spray and hone one’s martial arts skills stems directly from the kind of exaggerated, provocative stories which are regularly featured in the right-wing tabloids and which resort to the most negative and persistent stereotypes inherited directly from at least two centuries of poverty discourse (cf. Kendall 2011; Müller 2016). Popular culture frequently attributes a kind of animalistic horde quality to the chavs: a paradoxical mixture of anti-social behaviour and communal spirit which is somewhat reminiscent of the mindless, greedy swarm mentality of the zombie. Kaiser Chiefs, in the aforementioned song, also warn of “the man in a tracksuit [who] attacks me” and who “wants to get things a big gory”, a warning which some later saw as prophetic of the 2011 riots which occurred in several districts of England:

The adults arrested were almost three times as likely to be on out-of-work benefits as the population as a whole. Nearly two thirds of the young rioters lived in England’s poorest areas. Here, then, was a sliver of Britain’s burgeoning young poor. (Jones 2016: xxvi)



If the reports about disenfranchised people who turn to looting in order to give vent to their frustration seemed like the culmination of a media-fuelled narrative of growing aggression, they were only a harbinger of more horrific chav stories to come. Chavs had begun to populate contemporary feature films in the first decade of the new millennium, and the message usually was that one had “to be afraid of them” (Jones 2016: 130). *Eden Lake* (dir. James Watkins, 2008) cast them as murderous delinquents in a new take on the backwoods horror of the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* variety, while Michael Caine channelled his inner Charles Bronson for a new take on the vigilante film, wreaking havoc in the chav-infected streets of his local council estate in *Harry Brown* (dir. Daniel Barber, 2009). However, the idea of the “lumpenproletariat that might one day kick [the middle-class’s] front door in and eat their au pair” (Stephen Pound qtd. in Jones 2016: 131) was yet to reach its full pinnacle in two right-wing blockbusters of the post-riot era: *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (dir. Matthew Vaughn, 2015) and the aforementioned *Grimsby*.

The Right-Wing Blockbuster

In its early days, British cinema was notoriously reluctant to produce films which featured working-class people in prominent roles. If the 1930s gradually established their presence on screen, often by way of sentimental romances in which love ‘conquered all’ (or at least climbed some social barriers), it was the 1950s which added more nuance and allowed tensions to come to the surface, as playwrights and novelists like John Osborne or Alan Sillitoe saw their works adapted for the screen or began to write their own scripts. Over the next few decades, there were more and more depictions of alienated labourers in films with a social conscience, and ultimately a fully-fledged narrative of social change during the era of Thatcherism (cf. Gillett 2003). Working-class films of the 1980s and 1990s in particular grew ever more pessimistic: “[T]hey portray a world of disintegration where characters survive against the odds through humour or a desperate tenacity of spirit.” (Rowbotham/Beynon 2001: 2) Working-class comedies like *Brassed Off* (dir. Mark Herman, 1996) or *The Full Monty* (dir. Peter Cattaneo, 1997), in which small, insulated communities who have fallen on hard times fight for Pyrrhic victories gradually gave way to the distinctly leftist ‘Brit Grit’ of Shane Meadows or Lynne Ramsay.

Where the working class has been conspicuously absent, by contrast, is the right-wing tradition of blockbuster cinema, and my use of the term ‘right-wing’ in this context largely targets the inherent conservatism of the form itself. The blockbuster label does not so much designate a genre but a successful strategy of producing and marketing films, as blockbusters are associated with big-budget summer releases and the idea of putting ‘money on the screen’ in order to draw the biggest possible audience. As diverse



as its individual examples may be, blockbuster-filmmaking encourages a particular kind of ideological narrative, and if it leans towards the right, that is because it frequently depicts societies in peril. In blockbuster-friendly genres like the disaster movie or the global spy adventure, humanity faces a threat of mass destruction and annihilation, which allows for a straightforward narrative of conservation. The world and its existing social structures are posited as worth retaining and fighting for; at the same time, the films suggest that a kind of cleansing ritual may be needed in order to dispose of those elements unfit for survival. Rather than reform the world, the blockbuster eliminates those who are not content with it (including the villains of the piece, who represent bizarre twists on the idea of the social reformer). This makes it a right-wing form in the original sense of the term: In the French parliament, those sitting on the right-hand side were in favour of *maintaining* the *Ancien Régime* and directly opposed to the social reformers on the left.

Blockbusters of this kind have seen quite diverse manifestations on both sides of the Atlantic. While the United States, particularly from the late 1970s onwards, started a cycle of family-friendly entertainment franchises which resonated with the reactionary turn under the Reagan administration, Great Britain indulged in neo-colonial fantasies like the James Bond films, where the former Empire was once more allowed to reign supreme and where a resourceful white man travels to the former colonies in order to solve “problems which, the viewer is meant to infer, would not have arisen in the first place if the British were still in charge” (Schwanebeck 2016: 509). Both the American disaster movie cycle and the 007 franchise rise to prominence in the face of alleged social threats and a vivid counter-culture which threatens to destabilise the political order, and both are largely xenophobic projects which propagate master narratives of white re-empowerment and of the body politic cleansing itself of foreign contaminants. In the Bond universe, the saviour figure is a hyper-masculine white male who saves the elite, Queen and country from transnational, queer foes with radical individual agendas. While arch-villains like Blofeld or Goldfinger come with their own Nazi-inspired intertextual baggage (a subtext which is very much supported by their foreign accents, queer sexuality, and deficient masculinity), Bond himself appears far from a progressive. His misogyny and racism rather establish him as a highly persistent reactionary force. The popular reception of the Bond films takes its cue from Bond’s promiscuity and his iconic role in 1960s popular culture to read him as part of the ‘Cultural Revolution’ (Marwick), but the opposite is true. More often than not, it is Bond who articulates conservative views as well as strong doubts regarding social reform, emancipation, and the classless society.

The Bond films share their curious obsession with ensuring the survival of the elite with Hollywood’s disaster movie cycle. The latter’s timid display of social diversity in the face of a threat sits uneasily with the way it clearly privileges the wealthy and powerful.



If the disaster movie, as another formulaic take on the annihilation narrative which propels the Bond films, has any use for the working class, it is in the manner of what Slavoj Žižek characterises as the reactionary undercurrent in some big-budget films. On the surface, films like James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) seem sympathetic to the lower classes, yet they are ultimately vampiric narratives. *Titanic's* fantasy of a classless steamer setting sail for a better world remains a utopia, and the iceberg, like the natural catastrophes in most disaster movies, represents "an intrusion that prevents another, true, catastrophe" (Žižek 2001: 167) by averting the more persistent threat of miscegenation across the class barrier. Suicidal, hapless upper-class dame Rose (Kate Winslet) is reinvigorated by her encounter with the penniless painter Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) and sucks the life-force out of him in order to give new blood to her dying caste.²

This fantasy of rejuvenation merges with the zombie-like horde scenario of the chav invasion in *Grimsby* and *Kingsman*. Unlike other classic disaster movies, they direct their dystopian vision of annihilation mostly against one social class: the 'non-working' working class, in a bizarre rendition of the elitist fantasy of sterilising those who are not deemed worthy. Classic Bond villains have been known to toy with this idea in their oft-ridiculed "the end is nigh" monologues. The Bond films, which are much less interested in trench warfare between East and West than Ian Fleming's source novels, either pit Bond against greedy entrepreneurs who are keen on multiplying their fortune, or against megalomaniac mass murderers who harbour eugenic fantasies of creating a superior race. Karl Stromberg (in *The Spy Who Loved Me*, 1977) and Hugo Drax (in *Moonraker*, 1979) are cases in point: Both want to annihilate the world population and repopulate the planet from scratch, starting underwater and in space, respectively. 007's arch-enemy, Ernst Stavro Blofeld, sits at the intersection between both types of villain, plotting mass genocide with the explicit purpose of blackmailing various governments. In *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969), a film severely haunted by the theme of genealogy and creating a pure-blooded family line, Blofeld explains to Bond his vision of

total infertility in plants and animals. Not just disease in a few herds, Mr. Bond. Or the loss of a single crop. But the destruction of a whole strain. Forever! Throughout an entire continent. If my demands are not met, I shall proceed with the systematic extinction of whole species of cereals and livestock all over the world.

This classic plot template, perversely democratic in Blofeld's vision (he targets *everyone*, no matter their creed, nationality, race, or gender), is re-envisioned with a strong class bias in *Grimsby* and *Kingman*, two films which are torn between paying

² Žižek [lays down this critique](#) in *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012). Cf. also Žižek 2001 for his reading of the disaster movie's vulgar Hollywood Marxism.



homage to and poking fun at the Bond franchise.³ Like Bond, the two films were produced by British companies and each features a prominent British cast,⁴ but they clearly have an eye on the global market, as is evidenced by the powerful American studios (Fox and Columbia) that handled the worldwide distribution. They have British talent written all over them, though: *Kingsman* was based on a graphic novel by Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons, two of the most prominent British comic-book artists, and adapted for the big screen by English director Matthew Vaughn, who has excelled both at family-friendly blockbusters (*Stardust*, 2007) and at R-rated action films that quickly acquired a cult following (*Kick-Ass*, 2010). Vaughn had initially made his name as a producer working on Guy Ritchie's first few gangster films, but also on the aforementioned *Harry Brown*, a small-scale production which saw Michael Caine's retired Marine tackle the 'chav invasion' in a manner that resonated with the themes of Caine's other post-millennial vigilante project, the *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012), where he plays Batman's butler. *Grimsby* did not enjoy *Kingsman*'s advantage of being based on a literary property, but it relied (unsuccessfully) on the appeal of its star, comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, to attract viewers. The fifth feature film tailor-made for one of Cohen's comic creations, *Grimsby* saw the actor return to the domestic locations of *Ali G Indahouse* (dir. Mark Mylod, 2002), a setting he had abandoned for three successful US-set collaborations with American director Larry Charles.

"Scum cannot be washed away, ever!"

Grimsby and *Kingman* tell a similar story of an experienced elite spy taking an absolute novice with a working-class background under his wing. In *Grimsby*, it is MI6 agent Sebastian Butcher (Mark Strong) who is helped by his dim-witted brother Nobby on his mission to stop an evil syndicate from releasing a deadly virus upon thousands of people attending the football world cup final; and in the *Pygmalion*-inspired *Kingsman*, it is suave super spy Harry Hart (Colin Firth) who acts as Professor Higgins to Taron Egerton's Eliza figure, Eggsy, adopting the young chav into his King Arthur-inspired circle of immaculately dressed gentlemen adventurers who save the world from terrorists while simultaneously looking good, speaking RP, and holding on to a stiff drink. With the help of his fellow Kingsmen, Eggsy manages to sabotage an ultra-green

³ The intertextual genealogy is actually more complex than that: *Grimsby* references other action-based spy franchises like the *Jason Bourne* series, and its aesthetic is reminiscent of Jason Statham vehicles like the *Transporter* series (the first two installments of which were helmed by *Grimsby*'s director, Louis Leterrier). *Kingsman*, on the other hand, pays homage to other British spy adventures besides Bond, including the *Harry Palmer* films starring Michael Caine (who plays the head of the Kingsmen).

⁴ For instance, both *Grimsby* and *Kingsman* feature Mark Strong, and both cast legendary 'elder statesmen' of English screen acting (Michael Caine and Ian McShane, respectively) in the role of the head of the secret service.



billionaire's plan to rid the planet of all humanity so that it can heal from environmental damage.

Both films are right-wing blockbusters, though with the added twist that they are also comedies, and comedy does, of course, defy clear political affiliation. Through its inherent ambiguity, the genre is forever torn between its own anarchic and destructive energy and the corrective final turn which restores order, and this applies to Shakespearean comedy (where the eventual return to an established hierarchy and the spirit of procreation always serve as correctives to the carnivalesque spirit of transgression which characterises the 'Green World', where the jesters reign supreme) as much as it does to a film like *Kingsman*, the narrative arc of which leads from homoerotic flirting and a shake-up of class distinctions towards the protagonist's absorption into the heteronormative mainstream and the elite. The critical and commercial reception of both films differed immensely: While *Grimmsby* was savaged by critics and its gross-out humour largely failed to connect with audiences on either side of the Atlantic, *Kingsman* fared much better, receiving plaudits for delivering the kind of fun which the latest hyper-serious Bond films had failed to provide, for being firmly tongue-in-cheek, and for its inventive visual effects and picturesque set design.⁵ Its box-office numbers quickly encouraged the studio to greenlight a transatlantic sequel (*Kingsman: The Golden Circle*, 2017). *Kingsman's* immense success is interesting for a variety of reasons, one of which is that it is the far more reactionary film of the two, celebrating the saving of the world at the hands of a small, secret elitist circle. The film differs from *Grimmsby* in that it refuses to make a virtue of the protagonist's working-class upbringing and his affiliation with chav culture. *Grimmsby*, in a manner typical of Cohen's favoured comedic approach, scores many jokes at the expense of the working class, but the film's grotesque style undercuts its dominant strategies of representations similarly to Cohen's most successful film, *Borat!* (dir. Larry Charles, 2006), which was not intended as a *cinéma vérité* piece on cultural attitudes in modern-day Kazakhstan but rather challenged the audience's own stereotypical assumptions. If *Grimmsby's* critical reception was considerably cooler than that of *Borat!* or *Brüno* (dir. Larry Charles, 2009), it is because it lacks their mockumentary approach to the subject matter and thus an important distancing device – paradoxically, the unmediated fiction of *Grimmsby* was taken far more literally than any of Cohen's previous efforts; some reviewers interpreted the film's social panorama as a vision "to gladden a Tory heart" (O'Hara 2016). Crucially, however, *Grimmsby* remains largely unapologetic when it comes to the life choices of its moronic yet good-natured main character. The climax not only extends the film's obsession with faeces and scatological humour in order to literalise the anal anxiety that permeates the Bond franchise (cf. Allen 2005), it also characterises its protagonist as

⁵ As of December, 2017, *Grimmsby* holds an approval rating of 37% on *Rotten Tomatoes* and made \$25 million at the global box office, having cost 35 million to produce. *Kingsman* holds a 74% approval rating on *Rotten Tomatoes* and made more than \$400 million.



one who is perfectly happy to “take one up the arse” in order to save his family and his *extended* family: his working-class peers. In a passionate speech to his mates which riffs on the communal spirit associated with British working-class films, Nobby appeals to them to rise up against the conspirators and their boss, wealthy philanthropist Rhonda George (Penélope Cruz):

She’s gonna release this deadly virus, and it’s gonna kill poor people like us, because she thinks that we’re scum. [...] So we’re scum, are we? Well, let me tell you something about scum: It’s scum who built the hospitals that they’re now closing down. It’s scum who die in the wars started by the bastards in charge. It’s scum that keep the *Fast & Furious* franchise alive. So I ask you to join with us now and to storm that pitch, and to show the world that scum cannot be washed away, ever!

As the gathered football fans strip off their shirts and follow Nobby’s cue, storming the pitch to shouts of “We are scum!”, the film uses slow-motion and a sentimental musical theme to suggest a utopian vision which is clearly inspired by the freedom runners in one of Britain’s most successful and patriotic films, the Oscar-winning *Chariots of Fire* (dir. Hugh Hudson, 1981). For a brief moment, the allegedly apolitical ‘underclass’ seems ready to rise up for a fight (fig. 1), yet the sentiment is undercut only seconds later when the montage comes to a screeching halt – Nobby’s utterly obese friends run out of breath before they are even halfway across the pitch, a sight gag that illustrates the ‘non-working’ working class’s allegedly dismal state of health (obesity no longer indicates affluence but tends to mark poverty), as well as the limits of their political agency. It us up to Nobby to save the day by repeating one of his notorious pub stunts, taking the missile containing the deadly virus up his buttock. In a very class-conscious climax, the implications of which were largely ignored by the film’s numerous outraged critics, *Grimshy* then refuses to obliterate its threat of contamination, opting to redirect it against the elite. In an outrageous yet rather timely joke (the film premiered



Fig. 1: ‘Scum’ storms the pitch (*Grimshy*).



in February 2016, when Donald Trump had just won the first primaries) which felt ill-advised to many reviewers, Nobby's hijinks cause the blood of an AIDS-infected Jewish-Palestinian child to first infect the actor Daniel Radcliffe, and later Trump, a real-life Auric Goldfinger if ever there was one and the most notorious right-winger to score a political triumph on the back of the disenfranchised, angry white man.

Kingsman, by contrast, is all about the working-class protagonist cutting ties with his milieu and closing ranks with the Oxbridge-schooled elite that looks down on the likes of him. The film is no less obsessed with 'anal threats' than *Grimmsby*, as various scenes feature subtle and not-so-subtle subtexts about the infertile elite and their homosocial gathering. Not only do we learn that the Kingsmen were founded by the dying aristocracy at the end of the Edwardian Age, after their sons had not returned from the trenches of the First World War (with the result that the service perpetually depends on recruiting young boys and tends to attract orphans), we also get to see several scenes in which the Kingsmen look after their mentees in clear acknowledgement of the popular legends surrounding the secret gay life of the elite. Harry, codenamed Galahad (after the purest and most chaste of the Arthurian knights), repeatedly teases the viewer with allusions to his own elusive sexuality⁶ and routinely [shows Eggsy the phallic contents of his armoury](#), as if to demonstrate that he is much more comfortable in the closet than another one of Colin Firth's characters: George Falconer in *A Single Man* (dir. Tom Ford, 2009), who resembles Harry in sexuality, style, costume, glasses, and period affiliation. Eggsy appears to remain oblivious to the seduction going on around him, with his body language and his firm working-class accent serving as 'butch' signifiers of his virility and heterosexuality, similar to how the two most hyper-masculine Bond actors, Sean Connery and Daniel Craig, have employed such devices to emphasise some degree of resistance to the tuxedos they wear and the luxurious hotels and casinos which they frequent. But in spite of various allusions to 'stepping out of the closet' and to the queer subtext of the spy genre (tellingly, it is a homophobic remark which sets off Galahad in the film's iconic pub-brawl sequence), *Kingsman* merely offers slight gay flirting; otherwise, the film commits to heteronormativity, at least on the surface. The hero's climactic conquest may see him score anal sex with a princess as a reward for his troubles, but in the sequel, the two of them celebrate a fairy-tale wedding, having remained abstemious throughout the film. *The Golden Circle* tends to play it safe in this respect: it cuts back on the 'rentboy' subtext of Galahad's and Eggsy's relationship, and it largely abandons the predecessor's anal pleasures (with a few notable exceptions⁷); in the film's most controversial scene, Eggsy

⁶ On leaving a gathering of Bible-toting bigots, Harry tells the woman sitting next to him that he is "enjoying congress out of wedlock with my black Jewish boyfriend who works at a military abortion clinic."

⁷ Some scenes in *The Golden Circle* return to the "rectal spaces" which characterise the perilous situations in the Bond franchise (Allen 2005: 30). The film features a sequence in which the protagonist swims

plants a tracking device in his target's vagina. Like most spy movies, *Grimsby* and *Kingsman* tell stories of infiltration, but whereas the former firmly insists on the idea of contamination in its Bakhtinian orgy of toilet jokes, the latter only introduces stains and impurities in order to *resolve* them, and this is equally true of the film's take on class aspirations.

Kingsman's polished mise-en-scène, while never shying away from moments of grotesque violence, is very much in line with the immaculate surface of the Bond franchise in the 1960s and 1970s, where any actual trace of labour and bodily fluids would be but an embarrassment and a stylistic blunder. *Grimsby* is big on sweat, sperm, and shit, but *Kingsman* is not: It may offer the unlikely sights of Colin Firth massacring dozens of people in a church and of various world leaders (including Barack Obama) going up in flames, but none of the carefully choreographed mayhem aims for mimetic realism; it is all in the service of a picturesque, well-choreographed aesthetic experience. By the same token, the film remains content to look at the working class from an aesthetic distance, identifying them as defective in appearance and in dire need of cleaning up. This is where the 'ugly duckling' narrative kicks in, as Eggsy is subjected to a thorough make-over (fig. 2), confidently discussing the cinematic history of the motif from *My Fair Lady* (dir. George Cukor, 1964) to *Pretty Woman* (dir. Garry Marshall, 1990) with Harry.



Fig. 2: From Zero to Hero: the chav's transformation (*Kingsman*).

The film narrates Eggsy's story as that of a young prodigy who overcomes his poor background and rises to the occasion to prove himself as the Chosen One – a mythical

through the sewers, and as a clear homage to the 'princess rescue' of the first film, the spies save singer Elton John from the lair of the villain (thus going for the 'queen' rather than the princess now). Where the Swedish princess in the first installment offered anal sex as a reward, Elton John promises "backstage passes".



quest narrative that corresponds fully to Joseph Campbell's oft-quoted monomyth, which has been frequently adapted in blockbusters like *Star Wars* (1977) or the *Harry Potter* series.⁸ Following the death of his father, a Kingsman agent, Eggsy's mother (Samantha Womack) struggles to keep the family together and descends from her middle-class existence into a council house purgatory of boozing and promiscuity, a portrait very much in line with the "negative stereotyping of poor mothers" which is often associated with chav culture (Kendall 2011: 101). The lesson to be learnt from *Kingsman* would very much appeal to the Tory outlook on poverty: As though to illustrate the accuracy of David Cameron's neoliberal conviction that people are mainly poor because of "personal inadequacies" (Jones 2016: 196), *Kingsman* suggests that a bit of a guiding hand is all that is required in order to make it, and that some elocution lessons and a visit to the tailor will suffice in order to unleash one's inner knight in shining armour. Amongst other things, Eggsy learns from Harry, his surrogate father, that "manners maketh men", and he is soon as comfortable dressing up in double-breasted suits and swirling his umbrella (courtesy of *The Avengers* [1961-1969], another major intertextual reference point for *Kingsman*) as he was drinking pints of lager and nicking cars before the secret service adopted him.

While the film initially hints at the fact that class status is neither a God-given fact nor the direct result of personal inadequacy but can result from a downward spiral (in the case of Eggsy's mother: being left alone by the state after her husband has given his life for it), the film's take on the 'feral underclass' remains ambiguous. *Kingsman's* megalomaniac villain, Richmond Valentine (Samuel L. Jackson), plots the annihilation of humanity in order to heal the planet, but he offers a small part of the wealthy elite a chance to buy their ticket into the future; a constellation that satirises the corruption of alleged philanthropists. While Valentine's 'neurological wave' affects everyone on the planet apart from the chosen few who carry the golden ticket, the film strongly implies that the lower classes are much easier to target and to instrumentalize. Crucially, the neurological wave is triggered via rigged SIM cards, which invokes the mobile phone as the rather stereotypical status symbol of choice for the 'non-working' working class. The SIM cards are first advertised on national television and then handed out for free, and the sight of working-class people (builders, hoodie-wearing youths, ethnic minorities) queuing up for days provides one of the film's few moments in which the working class, attracted by the promise of something *gratis*, behave orderly and are thus literally kept in line. They pay a price for it, however: Once Valentine triggers the neurological wave, everyone on the planet goes berserk, allowing the film to revel in grotesque images of mass violence. With everyone at each other's throats in a series of pub fights and violent brawls not too far removed from the 2011 riots (fig. 3), set to the obnoxiously simple

⁸ *Kingsman* acknowledges its classic pre-texts by casting *Star Wars'* Luke Skywalker, Mark Hamill, in a supporting role. In the graphic novel which the film is based on, it is Hamill himself who is abducted by terrorists.



tune of KC and the Sunshine's "Give It Up", we are back to the image of the violent chav whose vitriolic hatred, once unleashed, is a danger to everyone. Eggsy's mother is affected by the brainwave, too, attacking her own child (Eggysy's half-sister) in a manner similar to Jack Nicholson's 'Here's Johnny!' moment in *The Shining* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980). *Kingsman*, by virtue of being a comedy, clearly employs a deliberately exaggerated rendition of the prevailing view that "the lower orders spen[d] their time rolling around in a drunken stupor" and that "entire communities around Britain [are] crawling with feckless, delinquent, violent and sexually debauched no-hopers" (Jones 2016: 115, 80), but crucially, the film neither affords any opportunity to view the working class much differently (Eggysy's friends are an exception, but both the protagonist and the film forget about them once he has risen from obscurity), nor does it formulate anything which comes close to *Grimshy*'s raised middle finger to Trump and his wealthy pals.



Figs. 3: The 'feral underclass' is unleashed (*Kingsman*).

Needless to say, Eggsy manages to avert the neurological wave, slay the dragon, and rescue the princess, though the film leaves no doubt that this Kingsman is bound by patriotic duty more than by a sense of responsibility for the class from which he has risen. Throughout the film, the working class (unless they have merely 'fallen' into it, like Eggsy's mother, whom the prodigy son eventually frees from her council-house hardship) largely appear as an inarticulate conglomeration of drunkards and wife-beaters, hardly worth the trouble of saving – in the sequel, Eggsy's family hardly features (the climax of part one indicates that they have risen to middle-class affluence anyway), and his friends only pop up in a token scene to give the protagonist some 'street credibility'. Moreover, one of Eggsy's mates is killed as an innocent bystander in the attack which wipes out nearly all of the Kingsmen. It is this vision of the working class as thoroughly expendable which makes the *Kingsman* franchise so very political, for in spite of all the comic strategies of ambiguity, and in spite of its source text's insistence on "the empowerment of a subaltern" (Steller 2017: 190), the film hammers home a



rather right-wing message regarding class. In a manner akin to what Joe Bennett (2013) identifies as the semiotic operation of chav-spotting, *Kingsman* – a spy movie very much in line with the *I-Spy* books Bennett examines – repeatedly points its finger as if to take aim at the animalistic brutes who are threatened with mass genocide by Valentine’s scheme and who are only barely saved by one of their own who rises above his station. The film thus illustrates “the message of the neoliberal, laissez-faire elite [...] that the public world is just the aggregate of personal choice” (Bennett 2013: 160), and that rather than improve the lot of the working class, one should *escape* it by all means (Jones 2016: 88). After all, who would want to be amongst the chavs when the ultimate right-wing fantasy comes true and the bomb *really* drops on them? *Grimshy*, by contrast, may exploit the most horrific stereotypes about the ‘non-working’ working class for comic effect, but crucially, it never adopts an apologetic perspective or establishes an ascent on the social ladder as a particularly desirable goal for its protagonists. Within the narrow confines of the right-wing blockbuster, it is this form of ambiguous solidarity which makes *Grimshy* the somewhat more progressive and emancipatory of the two ‘chav’ yarns.

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