

## ‘Stuff It’: Respectability and the Voice of Resistance in *Letter to Brezhnev*

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The recent publication *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture* (Hadley and Ho 2010) and the biopic *The Iron Lady* (2012) combine to suggest that critical and popular interest in Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism continues unabated, and that this is a timely opportunity to revisit *Letter to Brezhnev*, Chris Bernard’s 1985 film about two working-class Liverpudlian women, Elaine and Teresa, living in Thatcher’s Britain. The film is unusual in its representations of working-class experience in the Thatcher era since it places representations of women and femininity at the centre of its narrative rather than those of men and masculinity which typify contemporaneous and retrospective film narratives. *Letter to Brezhnev* has variously, and justifiably, been positioned as social realism (Lay 2002), as a woman’s film (King 1996) or as contributing to a cycle of British hybrid films (Hill 1999: 174; Street 1997: 107). In this article it is not my intention to attempt to establish a fixed generic category for *Letter to Brezhnev* but, rather, to explore the film’s hybrid fluidity. How does the *dynamic* of hybridisation work to represent working-class feminine experience under Thatcherism? How does the interleaving of film forms negotiate representations of femininity, and to what effect?

Central to my understanding of the film is Beverley Skeggs’ (1997) account of respectability. Skeggs suggests that respectability was a ‘central mechanism through which the concept of class emerged’ (ibid.: 2) and, following on from Bourdieu’s account of cultural capital and Foucault’s understanding of power, she argues that

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*Josie Dolan*

respectability is a mode of feminine cultural capital which functions as a regulatory regime of feminine class. Respectability cuts across adjudications of women's mothering and housekeeping skills; it shapes self-presentation; it regulates sexual activity; it governs women's relationship to public spaces; and it sanctions certain kinds of social relationships. It is a mechanism through which some women are normalised and others pathologised. Like all forms of power, respectability mutates and changes – not simply historically but also in relation to specific instances in which power is exercised and resisted.

In his work on *Brief Encounter* (1945), Richard Dyer (1993) observes the extent to which the pressures of respectable femininity regulate Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson) into bourgeois marital conformity. It is easy to recognise how the loss of respectability is central to the representation of marginalised female figures in British social realism. For instance, Helen (Dora Bryan), Jo's unmarried mother in *A Taste of Honey* (1961), and the widowed Margaret Hammond (Rachel Roberts) in *This Sporting Life* (1963), are constituted as sexually transgressive by the codes of the day, and both suffer damaging losses of respectability. Part of the horror of watching Cathy's decline in Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966) is to witness her powerlessness within state regulatory regimes once she is placed outside the terms of respectability. More recently, Gary Oldman's *Nil by Mouth* (1997) and Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009) offer searing representations of mothers categorised as inadequate and therefore beyond the pale of respectability. In this context, my aim is to revisit *Letter to Brezhnev* and its representations of women through the lens of respectability. Most importantly, this should not be seen as a teleological move. Although Skeggs' book was not published until 1997, it is based on a longitudinal ethnographic study which commenced in 1985 – the year of the film's release – and as such it is remarkably resonant with formulations of femininity in *Letter to Brezhnev*.

#### *A feminine/feminised voice of resistance*

*Letter to Brezhnev* is set in the mid-1980s and is located on Merseyside, partly in Kirkby and partly in Liverpool. The Kirkby location is crucial to the film's cultural verisimilitude since the town of Kirkby is several miles inland from the coastal city of Liverpool; it is neither city nor rural haven nor comfortable suburb, thus carrying the suggestion that it is geographically, culturally and economically marginal. Even in good times, Kirkby was never affluent in the manner of the heavily industrialised northern towns rendered iconic through the

### *Stuff It*

lens of social realism. In comparison to neighbouring Liverpool and Halewood (best known for Ford car production), there was little in reserve during the recession of the early 1980s and Kirkby suffered some of the highest rates of unemployment in the UK, with youth unemployment running at approximately 60 per cent, as well as enduring the material consequences of its reputation for endemic petty crime. Yet the social deprivations of Kirkby never hit the headlines in the same way as those areas such as Toxteth which were brought into full public awareness following the glare of publicity occasioned by the riots of 1981.

The film marks the writing debut of 'local boy' Frank Clarke, was directed by Chris Bernard and distributed by Channel 4 Films. Famously, *Letter to Brezhnev* was produced on a shoestring budget, initially £30,000 raised from a hotchpotch collection of supporters which included the heirs to the Baxi heating company, and rising to about £250,000 once the rough cut was available to secure funding from Channel 4. It was shot in the space of three weeks on Super 16mm blown up to 35mm for the cinema, using borrowed equipment and relying on the unpaid contributions of family and friends—some of whom, in the best social realist traditions, made their acting debut in the film (Shaw 2005). The inevitable low-budget look of the film proved no barrier to critical acclaim and it was nominated for awards at both BAFTA and Venice, as well as achieving a wide popular appeal. The speed of filming undoubtedly contributes to the *cinéma vérité* look of the Kirkby scenes which, combined with a faded colour palette, mark it out as recognisably social realist.<sup>1</sup> These evident 'grim up north' credentials are given further weight by shots of the Liverpool waterfront skyline standing in as 'That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill' (Higson 1984).

With these credentials, *Letter to Brezhnev* can be included in a cycle of realist film and TV texts (both contemporary and retrospective) which includes *Boys From the Blackstuff* (BBC, 1982), *Auf Wiedersehen Pet* (ITV, 1983–4, 1986, 2002, 2004), *Brassed Off* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997), *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Twin Town* (1997), and which represents the effects of Thatcherism on working-class communities during the 1980s and 1990s. Claire Monk (2000) categorises the films from this cycle as 'underbelly' narratives concerned with a newly emerged underclass. As Chris Haylett observes, the term 'underclass' should be used with caution since its common usage refers to 'social groups at the base of the working class whose characteristics are those of long-term unemployment or highly irregular employment, single parenthood and criminality' (1990: 70). This usage is highly contestable because

of both its homogenising tendency (all people on estates, or all single mothers, or all the unemployed are underclass criminals) and its ability to transform the consequences of structural social problems into matters of individual culpability (Tincknell and Chambers 2001). Thus, as Monk suggests, the term is 'condemnatory, portraying a class seen as parasitically dependent and work-shy rather than merely work-less' (2000: 274). Her own discussion 'takes the "underclass" to be a *post-working* class that owes its existence to the economic and social damage wrought by globalisation, local industrial decline, the restructuring of the labour market and other legacies of the Thatcher era' (ibid.).

One particular Thatcherite legacy represented in the 'underclass' cycle, especially when compared to social realist films from earlier periods, is a deep crisis of working-class identity, a crisis produced by the decline of traditional male manual occupations, particularly in the steel, dock and mining industries. As John Hill argues, 'in focusing on unemployment and industrial decay in the north of England, the 1980s films often suggest the "crisis" in traditional definitions of masculinity which followed the collapse of roles (such as wage-earner and head of the family) which historically reinforced a sense of male identity' (1999: 168). Frequently, the 'crisis' of traditional masculinity is also linked to feminist progress and the increasing visibility of women in the paid workforce, but here it is important to make a distinction between visibility and presence. Traditionally, a number of factors have effectively camouflaged the presence of women in paid occupations, such as their role in the 'black economy' as domestic workers in middle-class homes (the treasured 'dear' and its vilified 'other'), or by the part-time working pattern which was the legacy of the Second World War, especially the 'twilight' shift which enabled couples to align shared child care responsibilities. Equally, confinement to the domestic sphere, and consequent exclusion from the workplace, characterised the lives of highly educated, career-oriented, middle-class women, but because these conditions were universalised they served to efface the position of working-class women who worked. With so many social realist film-makers drawn from the middle classes it is little wonder that their representations of working-class experience reiterated this effacement and served only to compound the invisibility of such women. Thus the 'shock' of the working woman and her connection to the 'crisis' of masculinity suggested by social realist film-makers needs to be tempered by a recognition of the imperatives of the mutual support offered between middle-class discourse and the generic verisimilitude of social realism.

### *Stuff It*

The invocation of generic verisimilitude recalls the issue of hybridisation raised by Samantha Lay in relation to the sharp humour of the writing which inflects 1980s social realism through comedy (2002: 90). I find the hybridisation argument to be slightly problematic since it suggests there was an earlier, non-hybrid form of social realism. If, as Higson (1984) suggests, social realism (in the shape of the British New Wave films) inherited some of its conventions from the documentary movement, the form was already a hybrid, a mix of fictional dramatic tropes and documentary narrative strategies. Nonetheless, I am more than willing to recognise that something had changed and to follow Hill's suggestion that *Educating Rita* (1983), *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (1987), *Business as Usual* (1989) and *Letter to Brezhnev* are 'rarely straightforwardly works of social realism' (1999: 174). Referencing Higson's point that social realism in the form of 'kitchen-sink' films is 'less about the conditions of the industrial working class and their collective class consciousness' than about 'the attempts of individuals to escape from those conditions and that consciousness' (1984: 168), Hill follows Justine King (1996) in a convincing argument that *Letter to Brezhnev* et al. feminise the 'kitchen-sink' film in that they formulate working-class escapism through the conventions of the woman's film. Troublingly, however, because Hill identifies the hybrid social realism of the 1980s with 'a weakening of the ideologies of masculinity which had traditionally underpinned work (pride in hard, physical labour) and also trade union power (a capacity for "strong" industrial action)' (1999: 168), there is an implication that feminised 'kitchen-sink' films, like *Letter to Brezhnev*, are depoliticised examples of social realism which have little to say beyond feminine escapism.

Yet there can be little doubt that *Letter to Brezhnev* has a political agenda, not least because, like its masculine counterparts, it articulates and illuminates some of the deprivations visited upon working-class communities in the 1980s. These deprivations are powerfully articulated through a storyline which traces the lives of two Kirkby women, Elaine Spencer (Alexandra Pigg) and Teresa King (Margi Clark), who, on a night out in Liverpool, have romantic/sexual encounters with two Russian sailors, Peter (Peter Firth) and Sergei (Alfred Molina), who are on a goodwill visit to the city just as the Cold War is beginning to thaw. Indeed, Tony Shaw (2005) locates the film in a broader political, anti-Cold War movement which emerged in popular culture at this time and was exemplified by the political underpinnings of Red Wedge and the link forged between the Glastonbury Festival and active CND members such as Paul Weller, Elvis Costello and U2.

*Josie Dolan*

Through a series of snapshot encounters with 'officialdom', the narrative maps Elaine's long struggle to obtain entry to the USSR so that she and Peter can marry. After many setbacks she writes the eponymous 'letter to Brezhnev', resulting in the gift of a plane ticket and a visa from the Soviet leader. At this juncture, sustained pressure to reject the offer of marriage and remain in the UK is brought to bear on Elaine by her family, the press and the Foreign Office. The ostensible justification that it is 'for her own good' is articulated through discourses of Soviet 'otherness', an 'otherness' constituted as geographically distant, culturally alien and economically inferior because of its collective, Communist underpinnings. The graphics of the DVD cover which represent the romantic couple suffused by a red light (the mist of romance, sexual passion and Communism effectively melded) with their bodies divided by a high wire fence, neatly symbolise the mutually supportive ideological barriers between the West and the USSR: barriers which translate into bureaucratic obstacles for Peter and Elaine. Throughout the film, the *mise en scène* is punctuated with red via costume and props and lighting, which combine to suggest an unofficial, or underground, connection which transcends and escapes the repressions of officialdom on both sides of the divide. This strategy effectively prefigures Elaine's eventual decision to choose the USSR over the UK, a decision which constitutes a refusal of Thatcherite capitalism and the dominant discourses of the 'freedoms' and the 'economic opportunities' which support it.

This refusal is most clearly articulated in a sequence in which Elaine is door-stepped by a skin-crawlingly sleazy tabloid journalist brilliantly played by Ken Campbell. His unwarranted insinuations about her assumed sexual promiscuity ('You *do* go out with sailors don't you?') are a clear attempt to position her beyond the pale of respectability. When combined with patronising suggestions that she is being romantically duped and that, at best, she is too naive to recognise the inferior conditions of Soviet life, there is an evident attempt to disavow her integrity and credibility. However, Elaine retaliates and forces from the journalist an admission that he has never actually witnessed the Soviet Union's infamous food queues. She also tells him to 'just take a walk in any back kitchen around here and you'll soon see food shortages. Look lad, going to live in Russia can't be any worse than living here.' This articulates an explicit critique of life under Thatcherism, a critique which is tantamount to a declaration of international working-class solidarity wrought through a shared experience of poverty and deprivation.

### *Stuff It*

Crucially, in marked contrast to the usual privileging of masculine voices in social realism (and in film more generally), these words are uttered by a woman. This is highly significant because it invokes a feminine, domestic experience which echoes, and counters, the formulation of 'good housekeeping' all too frequently deployed by Margaret Thatcher in order to legitimate the erosion of the welfare state. In this context, Elaine's home truths fight fire with fire, articulating a counter-Thatcherite discourse predicated on the experience of working-class women's knowledge of the domestic, and one which has an unmistakable political point. At the same time, if as Hill, Lay and Monks have argued social realist films of the 1980s map the feminisation and domestication of masculinity, then the feminine voice of the unemployed Elaine includes, and represents, that feminised masculinity and serves to unite both women and men in the counter-Thatcherite discourse which she embodies and which is articulated as a desired union with Peter in the Soviet Union that stands in ideological opposition to Western capitalism and individualism.

### *Transformation and respectability*

The critique of Thatcherite capitalism mobilised by Elaine is rendered all the more powerful because, as King and Hill suggest, *Letter to Brezhnev* can be read as a 'woman's film'. Drawing on arguments developed by Judith Mayne (1990), King identifies the film as a powerful expression of women's friendships and female desires; indeed, as Sue Harper observes, 'it is a film which presents female desire as entirely reasonable' (2000: 148). As suggested above, Elaine's desire to emigrate to the Soviet Union on the basis of romantic love is rendered entirely reasonable in the context of life in Kirkby under Thatcherism. But the women's film is not just about romantic love; as established by a wealth of scholarship, the woman's film forges a connection between the cinematic experience and women's primary position as consumers (Allen 1980; La Place 1987; Studlar 1996). Consequently, there is a definite and powerful irony in this particular woman's film since it places characters with very little consumer power at its centre. The ironic commentary of the film echoes the position of those women who are denied full consumer status because of low pay and unemployment, but who nonetheless are endlessly offered the rhetoric of consumer choice.

Moreover, the exclusion from consumer choice is also an exclusion from respectability. Skeggs argues that access to both knowledge and possession of consumer goods, especially clothes, is pivotal to those

*Josie Dolan*

adjudications of respectability through which feminine class positions are produced and which to serve to keep the working classes 'in their place'. As she observes:

The working classes are never free from the judgements of imaginary and real others that position them, not just as different, but as inferior, as inadequate. Homes and bodies are where respectability is displayed but where class is lived out as the most omnipresent form, engendering surveillance and constant assessment of themselves. (1997: 90)

Consequently, the exclusion from consumerism and respectability can be seen as a feminine equivalent of the 'crisis of masculinity' and, by extension, it can be seen as a mechanism which places women in an 'underclass' predicated on the non-respectable.

In *Letter to Brezhnev*, what little money and consumer power are possessed by Elaine and Teresa are accrued from the employed Teresa's weekly wage and the money is rapidly consumed on a taxi ride from Kirkby to a night out in Liverpool. While the journey marks a transition in geographic space it also marks a shift in the emotional and aesthetic register of the film. To borrow Richard Dyer's (2001) formulation, the narrative switches from dystopian deprivations represented through social realist conventions to what, relatively speaking, are the utopian plenitudes of a 'night on the town' constituted through the aesthetics of the woman's film. Some of the film's pleasures stem from its appropriation for its female characters of masculine 'lads on the town' conventions. Away from Kirkby, Teresa is revealed as the female equivalent of the artful dodger as she hatches plans to cheat the driver out of his fare, although these are ultimately abandoned because he is 'one of us'. Later, in a bar, she goes 'minesweeping', that is stealing ('sweeping') drinks from temporarily vacated tables ('that's mine and that's mine and that's mine'). It therefore comes as no surprise when she picks the pocket of a middle-aged lecher, thus funding the rest of the night out. In my everyday life I would consider this to be highly reprehensible behaviour, yet within the film's own terms it is both within the bounds of reason and incredibly satisfying. A subsequent chase through Liverpool's darkened back alleys and subways then becomes part of this feminisation of the 'jack the lad' staple in British popular culture, while relief at the pair's escape is one of the contradictory pleasures of this sequence, which undoubtedly prefigures later 'underclass' youth films such as *Trainspotting* or *Twin Town*, where a witty representation of anti-social behaviour produces a reluctant fondness for disreputable characters.



### *Stuff It*

Once the pair have acquired some money and spending power, *Letter to Brezhnev* exploits the familiar trope of feminine transformation when Teresa vamps up in the ladies cloakroom of The State nightclub (which recalls a similar scene in the same year's *Desperately Seeking Susan*). She casts aside her anonymising workaday factory overalls for what became a 'must have' red dress for thousands of women at the time. With her bleached blonde hair punkily spiked and underscored by a vibrant red lipstick, she emerges as a stunning cross between Jean Harlow and Marilyn Monroe, with a hint of Debbie Harry thrown in for good measure. In one of the film's many cinematic references Teresa's transformation echoes Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis) in *Now Voyager* (1942) and prefigures Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) in *Pretty Woman* (1990). In the case of Teresa at least, it seems that the narrative merely defers the gratifications of consumption associated with the woman's film rather than withholding them completely.

Throughout the sequence, extreme close-ups of eyes and mouth foreground the application of feminine accoutrements—lipstick, eye make-up and hair spray—while an upward pan slowly reveals black, high-heeled shoes and black tights before tracing the whole length of her red skirt and bodice. This is a fascinating series of shots since it fragments the female body in the manner of a fashion magazine and, in a similar way, it fetishises consumer goods rather than the body itself. The sexualised gaze is also discouraged by the dress itself since its glamour is not predicated on exposed flesh. Rather its full, calf-length skirt, long sleeves and high neck mobilise discourses of 1940s and 1950s 'sweater girl' glamour rather than the later, exploitative incarnation which dominates the 'adult' magazine market; it is thus rendered strangely respectable. This version of glamour is one reason why *Letter to Brezhnev* largely avoids the male gaze traditionally produced through the cinematic apparatus. A further reason lies in the fact that there is no exchange of male looks within the frame of the film to confirm her status as an object of male desire. Instead Teresa is produced as a fashion plate which effectively stitches the female spectator into the desires of consumption.

Teresa is, however, very different from Charlotte Vale and Vivian Ward because her transformation is not dependent on male support—either emotional or economic. She is mistress of her own transformation and, as such, mobilises a discourse of independent femininity which resonates with a group of British and American screen texts, such as *Educating Rita* and *Shirley Valentine* (1989), *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS, 1981–8), *Blue Steel* (1989) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991).

*Josie Dolan*

While this discursive continuity is important to the broader feminist context of the film, it is crucial to keep the very different class position of the female characters to the fore. *Letter to Brezhnev* is uniquely concerned with those women who have little economic or cultural capital and who have slipped through the mesh of respectability due to lack of a supporting partner, unemployment or demeaning employment and who consequently have little to lose and very few opportunities for the much vaunted social mobility of Thatcherite ideology, whereas the female protagonists of these other texts are *relatively* affluent and, in various ways, have accrued the cultural capital of respectability. Whereas the narratives of most women's screen texts of this period are driven by the social mobility of female protagonists who already have a degree of respectable cultural capital, *Letter to Brezhnev* is driven by the desire of its characters to accrue the cultural capital which will enable change.

At this point it is worth noting that Teresa's transformation takes place in The State nightclub, an actual Liverpool nightclub which fostered the early careers of Bronski Beat and Frankie Goes to Hollywood and whose gay provenance was set aside for the staging of a heterosexual cinematic romance.<sup>2</sup> The playfulness of the club's name is particularly notable in a film which foregrounds the ideological schism between western and Communist states, which highlights both the dismantling of the welfare state and the state of the unemployed, even as it illuminates the regulation of femininity through that damning phrase 'just look at the state of her'. The state of Teresa is central to the narrative of *Letter to Brezhnev*, not least because of the contrast between her city glamour and her daily employment at a chicken processing plant. She spends her days extracting raw giblets from the carcasses of chickens before packing them in a plastic bag and stuffing them back in again. As she says, 'you can't get rid of the stink off yer hands'. This, of course, is woman's work—low paid, degrading, non-respectable and seemingly beneath the dignity of unemployed men. Working-class masculinity may well have been in crisis as a result of declining heavy industries and women wage earners, but a moment of reflection suggests that masculinity continued to have some pride and privileges. Consequently, Teresa's degrading work stuffing chickens does not simply illuminate the abjection attendant on certain jobs performed by women, it also foregrounds some of the gendered myths of British social realism which all too frequently construct the working-class male as heroic victim (of either the class system, or consumerism, or feminism, or Thatcherism). But, equally, it articulates an unspoken 'stuff it' which forges a link between the escapist pleasures of a night

*Stuff It*

on the town and the desperate desire to escape Thatcher's Britain altogether.

Significantly, Teresa's transformation takes place in Liverpool, not Kirkby. From the outset, Liverpool is established as a mythological space, a place of possibilities and dreams. The film opens with the type of misty, soft-focus shots which have helped to establish Liverpool's Pier Head as an iconic skyline. In voice-over, the first words spoken, in a heavily accented Russian voice, are 'Liverpool, the Beatles'. On the one hand this establishes both the cultural lag of the Russian sailors and the temporal lag of the film, since the Beatles had already split up at the time of its production and Brezhnev had been dead for three years. These seeming anomalies combine to establish a romantic nostalgia for better, or at least more certain, times, an unattainable glamour which had already passed—like Harlow and Monroe. This romantic nostalgia is dominant in the sequence in *The State*, where social realist conventions are completely abandoned in favour of that other staple of the woman's film—the romantic encounter. While Teresa is fully employed in the labour of feminine transformation, a series of cuts establishes the heterosexual desire being played out between Elaine and Peter as they exchange mutual looks of interest across the dance floor. Its formulation as romance is confirmed when the diegetic music, Bronski Beat's 'Beat Boy', fades out to be replaced with an extra-diegetic soundtrack of heart-tugging strings. Throughout, soft-focus close-up shots of Peter are infused with the red light of romantic 'otherness': the light which is reiterated on the DVD cover and which ostensibly trails in his wake. There is something unsettling about this scene: it is teasingly overstated, fully exploiting the pleasures of the romantic meeting while offering a metaphorical knowing wink about its constructedness. This knowingness is later affirmed when, in an ironic evocation of the closing scene of *Now Voyager*, Peter shows Elaine his special star so that she will always know where he is. The actors play it straight, even as the badly painted backdrop both disrupts and foregrounds the romantic staples of the woman's film. But this strange tension between romantic discourse and the knowledge of its social construction does not undermine the pleasurable conviction that Elaine is pursuing the right course of action. More importantly, it shores up the construction of Elaine as the narrative's radical opposition to dominant ideologies, whether romantic or economic.

As the night unfolds, Elaine persuades a reluctant Teresa to stake their remaining money on hotel rooms. Teresa's reluctance stems from a highly reasonable desire to have money in her purse and a

*Josie Dolan*

fear of being skint, as well as a sense that spending money on men makes her 'cheap'. Here, the economic and sexual meanings of 'cheap' foreground the extent to which they are mutually supportive in the construction of feminine self-worth and respectability. Effectively, to lose one is to lose the other. In this scene, Teresa's vulnerability, and the vulnerability of respectability more generally, is coded through the crumbling veneer of glamour as her make-up smudges and her hair begins to collapse, thus offering testament to the fragility of respectability for women in her position—like glamour, it requires constant maintenance and this is no protection against the vagaries of circumstance which cause it to unravel. Equally, however, this scene reveals the extent to which Teresa's self-worth is constituted in terms of the marketplace and economic value. Unlike Elaine, she does not stand in opposition to consumerism but is fully imbricated in and interpellated by its discursive structures. Elaine wants a bigger share, not an escape.

The difference between Elaine and Teresa is further developed through their respective couplings as they trace two very different modes of feminine desire. Teresa is represented in terms of straightforward and uninhibited heterosexuality while Elaine is constituted through discourses of romantic love and deferred sexual gratification. This deferral sets up the narrative drive to the romantic closure of reunion. But as King (1996: 226) and Hill (1999: 179) point out, the pleasures of conventional closure are ultimately denied because we do not see the reunion of the romantic couple. Rather we are left with the parting of close friends, suggesting that this is the relationship which really counts. Significantly the final shots of the film are of a bereft Teresa who is mourning her lost opportunity for escape to the Sergei she finally admits to loving as much as the loss of her best friend: her 'copping off mate'. And given the ways in which Teresa has been aligned with consumer practices, her isolation is similarly positioned. The bleakness of this closure has multiple functions. It suggests that Teresa has sacrificed something lasting and valuable for the immediate gratifications of a wage packet and the few consumer commodities which it can buy. It also suggests that Thatcherite individualist capitalism has destroyed connection and community. This is contrasted to Elaine who has opted out of Thatcher's Britain and opted into the unknown potential of coupledness and collectivity.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, I want to stress that *Letter to Brezhnev* should not be reduced to a feminised and depoliticised account of working-class

*Stuff It*

life in Thatcher's Britain through comparison with its social realist antecedents and their representations of a masculine, unionised workforce. Rather, I argue that the film represents a powerful rejection of Thatcherism, embodied by Elaine and articulated through the alignment of femininity and the 'feminised masculinity' associated with industrial decline under Thatcherism which dominates post-1980s social realism. In many ways, the abject femininity suggested by the film's representations of women's degrading work or by their exploitative partners illuminates the operation of respectability in the adjudications and regulations of a 'feminine underclass' identity commensurate with that of the post-working-class identity characterised by Monk in post-1980s 'underbelly' films. Moreover, Elaine's desire for the 'otherness' of her Russian lover can be equated to the longing of an 'underclass' excluded from both the privileges of employed masculinity and/or the respectability accrued from feminine consumer culture, a longing for a counter-discourse to the capitalist individualism represented by the potential of Soviet collective ideologies, a longing in line with the film's fairytale narrative and what Hill identifies as its 'clear inscription of fantasy' (1999: 179).

This inscription of fantasy shapes the escapist move from Kirkby to the mythological space of Liverpool, a move which opens the possibility for Elaine and Teresa to occupy modes of femininity which do carry cultural capital. Effectively, spatial and social mobility are linked. Here, Teresa's transformation is not simply a fashion statement but is symbolic of this move. While Teresa can be read as a transgressive figure embodying feminist resistance to patriarchal regulation of female sexuality, once respectability is placed in the frame she takes on the hue of a woman struggling to stake a claim within the hierarchies of respectable femininity as a wage earner and through her position as a consumer of clothes, sex and men. However, this is complicated and she does not entirely pull it off. In part this is because she has the wrong kind of job, but equally the narrative closure suggests that consumerism is a trap which leads to painful isolation and alienation.

Elaine's romantic encounter can also be read as a woman using a small store of cultural capital—youth and a pretty face—to accrue respectability through marriage to a 'decent man', albeit to a man coded as 'other'. I am not suggesting that this is consciously calculating—more that it illuminates the structural operations of respectability, something which is a mode of exchange in the regulation of femininity, its hierarchies of class and its opportunities for social mobility. The deferral of sexual gratification does suggest romance, but romance is employed as a strategy to manage her limited resources

*Josie Dolan*

and gain the ultimate prize of escape, rather than the temporary escapism of consumerism. Current conventional wisdom suggests that her departure for marriage is something of a compromise because it recuperates the allotted role of wife, and probably mother too. But to see this as a compromise misses the extent to which a critique of marriage is a luxury afforded to women already in possession of respectable cultural capital. To put it bluntly, you have to be in the game before you can begin to resist it. More importantly, by finding a way out of Kirkby to an unknown future in an unknown society, Elaine constitutes the possibility that there is something not yet formed outside the consumerist option which served to trap Teresa. Finally, it is the interleaving of social realism and the woman's film that represents the material conditions of working-class women's lives, their fantasies and dreams and the limited opportunities for their fulfilment. It is a representation which exposes the operation, opportunities and limitations of respectability as a classed, feminine subject position. This exposure gives the film its affective emotional intensity: an intensity that bleeds between the narrative's romantic and political trajectories.

#### Notes

1. There does need to be a caveat here. The transfer to DVD has affected the quality of reproduction, in part because the original materials were poor quality and also because the intended aspect ratio was 1.75:1 but this was adjusted to 14:9 on transfer.
2. Frank Clarke's original script was based on his own gay encounters, but in the mid-1980s this was thought to be too risky a proposition for mainstream film and the story was adjusted to heteronormative conventions.

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