

A working class hero's sidekick is something to be: sidekicks and underlings in British social realist cinema (1956-2014)

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/essais/4126>

DOI: 10.4000/essais.4126

ISSN: 2276-0970

Publisher

École doctorale Montaigne Humanités

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 September 2016

Number of pages: 147-162

ISBN: 978-2-9544269-9-0

ISSN: 2417-4211

Electronic reference

Anne-Lise Marin-Lamellet, « *A working class hero's sidekick is something to be: sidekicks and underlings in British social realist cinema (1956-2014)* », *Essais* [Online], 10 | 2016, Online since 15 October 2020, connection on 21 October 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/essais/4126> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/essais.4126>

*A working class hero's sidekick is something to be: sidekicks and underlings in British social realist cinema (1956-2014)*¹

Anne-Lise Marin-Lamellet

Because of its unusual, almost oxymoronic association of terms, the working class hero is a concept that took time to make sense and find a definitive label in the history of British cinema. From the moment it appeared on screen in the late 1950s, that type of hero has often if not always been represented with a sidekick.² Various genres or subgenres of films related to the mode of social realism have been favourable grounds for their occurrence. They show that the working class hero's sidekick is usually a lifelong friend (the "best mate"), someone met at school (or while playing truant), at work or in the army. Sometimes he is a relative. That is why British films show heroes and sidekicks of all generations. The typology elaborated from a corpus of around a hundred films over sixty years shows that the sidekick, building on a whole literary tradition, has performed several functions from the most trivial to the most essential ones. He can alternatively be an underling and a foil or an alter ego and the hero's other half. The major/minor dialectics which is at the core of this relationship generates tension in the binary hierarchy but also reveals that the constant interplay of the two modes can result in some form of interchangeability between the hero and his sidekick, especially in ultra-contemporary films.

1 Although, for different reasons, some directors like Ken Loach disown the phrase and film critics increasingly question it, British social realism is here used for lack of a better word. It is to be understood as encompassing all the films which have somehow committed to the portrayal of working-class way of life since the British New Wave and as a mode of cinematic expression which is stylistically-diverse and generically-hybrid. For a detailed study of the evolution of that phrase and concept, see Lay Samantha, *British Social Realism from Documentary to Brit Grit*. London: Wallflower Press, 2002.

2 In *Sweet Sixteen*, one of the hero's friends is even nicknamed Sidekick.

The sidekick as underling and foil

The sidekick can of course be a mere underling. As his screen-time sometimes shows, he is a secondary character and, as such, the working class hero's sidekick performs most of the traditional functions associated with that somewhat minor figure³. The sidekick is there to express admiration for the hero's deeds (car-racing in *Shopping*; dancing in *Billy Elliot*) or purple patches, like Cliff (*Look Back in Anger*),⁴ Bert (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*) or Bernie (*Carry On at Your Convenience*) who act as an audience for Porter, Seaton and Spanner's monologues. He is a faithful and staunch partner for good and bad times (pub-going in *Looking for Eric*, *The Angels' Share*; nightclubbing⁵ or staying in, looking for a job or stealing in *Looks and Smiles*, *For Queen and Country*, *Human Traffic*, *The Football Factory*, *Kidulthood*, *Somers Town*, *The Angels' Share*). With him, the hero shares memories (*Doghouse*) and family ceremonies (*Raining Stones*). The sidekick is the friend in need the hero can count on when the latter gets out of a Young Offenders' Institute or jail (*Comedown*, *Bullet Boy*, *1 Day*). He provides all kinds of services such as lending his flat when the hero wants to invite a girlfriend (*When Saturday Comes*, *Bullet Boy*).

His role is often to be the hero's confidant for the most intimate confessions (relationships in *Shifty*; homosexuality in *Beautiful Thing*, *Billy Elliot* and *RocknRolla*; impotence in *Human Traffic*; a girlfriend's unwanted pregnancy in *Kidulthood*; guilt over a dead acquaintance in *Better Things*, *Shifty*). He soothes his anger, sympathises in sad moments (*Room at the Top*, *Raining Stones*, *Better Things*, *Looking for Eric*⁶), cheers him up (*Look Back in Anger*) when the hero needs to nurse a broken heart (*Late Night Shopping*, *Shaun of the Dead*, *Doghouse*) and he offers support when the hero shows his insecurities. The sidekick is always there to encourage the hero when the latter is deemed atypical of his class and rejected by his family (*Shifty*) or his neighbourhood (*Billy Elliot*). He also compensates for an absent parent or a dysfunctional family, alleviating the pain endured because of an abusive older brother (*Beautiful Thing*, *Purely Belter*, *Sweet Sixteen*, *Somers Town*, *Boy A*, *Ill Manors*)

3 The phrase is here to be understood in its usual sense, i.e. a smaller, less serious or less important character due to his lower rank in the hierarchical structure.

4 Cliff also admires Porter's talent for jazz trumpeting and his ability to eat like an ogre. Moreover, he acts as a stand-in for Porter who hates his job as a sweet-seller and regularly leaves the market where he works.

5 Many friendships between the hero and his sidekick started over shared musical tastes whether they are in a band, DJs or ravers (*Wild West*, *Young Soul Rebels*, *Human Traffic*).

6 Meatballs, Eric's real sidekick, reads a lot of self-help guidebooks to try and understand his friend's antics. He organises sessions at home to get the hero over his nervous breakdown by asking him to emulate someone famous. Doing so, he contributes to the apparition of Eric's imaginary sidekick, Eric Cantona. He is also the one who organises and leads the punitive expedition against the gangster to get Eric and his sons out of trouble.

or a brutish father (*When Saturday Comes, Meantime*). He sometimes is the hero's only company when the latter is an isolated pensioner (*Harry Brown*). He is just someone the young hero likes to hang about with all day for lack of anything better to do, as shown by the recurrent shot of the two sitting on a swing or a seesaw (*Looks and Smiles, TwentyFourSeven, The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael, Summer Scars, Better Things, Somers Town*).⁷ Together, they play videogames, enjoy car-rides and in the gloomiest cases just take drugs. The sidekick can nevertheless help the hero face all kinds of hardships and turn rather desperate situations into a lighter mood and pranks (*Raining Stones, Purely Belter, Sweet Sixteen, Somers Town, The Angels' Share*).

Maybe that is because another major function of his is that of comic relief. A couple of sidekicks can even be used in a subplot in the form of a running gag, especially to bring humour in genre films such as gangster or survival films (*Love, Honour and Obey, Wilderness, Attack the Block*). The hero likes his sidekick because he makes him laugh and acts as a sort of sparring partner. He can alternatively supplement the hero's lack of humour (*Meantime, Scum, Rage, Looking for Eric*) or enter a sort of double act with him (*Look Back in Anger, The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, Billy Liar, Looks and Smiles, Raining Stones, Twin Town*). The hero and his sidekick often quip in concert. They have routine jokes and sets of impressions. In case of a duo, the roles can be divided. The sidekick can play the trashier pranks and have the cruder jokes, or suffer from the slapstick and physical comic elements in the story so that the hero maintains a certain level of good taste while still being funny (*Raining Stones, Trainspotting, The Angels' Share*). But the roles can be inverted between the funny man and the straight man. The sidekick can thus also be less outrageous than the hero and humour then derives from his impassive or shocked presence (*Withnail and I*). He sometimes has the funniest one-liners to contrast with the hero's more slapstick humour and can be endowed with a sense of irony as he often is the only one who can deflate the latter's ego and make fun of his pipe dreams (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, Billy Liar, Sweet Sixteen*). He can play pranks on the hero just to have a laugh with the rest of the gang (*The Football Factory*).

As becomes rapidly apparent, the hero/sidekick interaction is not always clear cut as, unlike other more traditional heroes, the working class hero does not lack all the qualities that make up a normal, unexceptional man. The sidekick is therefore never completely crushed in that relationship and, most of the time, he takes the shape of the foil whose main role is to enhance the heroic status of a character that originally was not larger-than-life.

7 *Shifty* also shows the hero and his sidekick on a playground but this is meant to emphasise their friendship dating back to childhood although they have not seen each other in four years.

The opposition between the hero and the sidekick first serves the physical beautification of the hero. The hero is literally magnified and even eroticised through the comparison made with his foil (Seaton vs Jack in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*). He is made to look taller when he mixes with what looks like vertically disabled acquaintances (*A Kind of Loving*). This device can sometimes be used with a comic effect, especially in the case when one of the two characters is black, like the giant American Elmo and small Liverpudlian Felix (*The 51st State*).⁸ The presence of a frailer sidekick makes an unimposing hero more masculine and an imposing one even more so. The weaker partner is the one who needs protection either because he is effeminate (*When Saturday Comes, Billy Elliot*), mentally ill or disabled (*The Caretaker, Face, Some Voices, A Room for Romeo Brass, Dead Man's Shoes, Meantime*). In this case, the sidekick is also here to reinforce the humane aspect of a hero who would otherwise run the risk of being too brutish and rough. Conversely, when the hero is a negative figure, like a hooligan, a juvenile delinquent, or a gangster, the weaker sidekick or rather henchman in that case, is often here to reinforce the sense of awe in viewers, either because of the way he is treated or because of his disgust at the hero's shocking evil deeds, even when violence remains off-screen [*A Clockwork Orange, 16 Years of Alcohol, Gangster n°1, Eden Lake, The Firm* (remake), *Cherry Tree Lane*]. It is quite rare for a sidekick to be more attractive or charismatic unless the hero is mocked for his shortcomings (racism in *Love Thy Neighbour*; cowardice in *Carry On at Your Convenience*; impotence in *The Football Factory*). The inversion can also be used to play with the assumptions and expectations of the audience (the debunking of the archetypal American hero in *Green Street Hooligans*) or when the hero is portrayed as a sort of intellectual. In that case, the sidekick is usually a rocker or a Jack-the-lad (*The Family Way, The Angry Silence*) to better emphasise the hero's sense of responsibility as a decent family man.

The opposition between the hero and the sidekick can also serve an intellectual purpose highlighting the hero's personality. The hero's brightness is all the more blatant if surrounded by apparently stupid or naïve sidekicks although he may not be an intellectual himself (*Carry On at Your Convenience, Made in Britain, Purely Belter, Four Lions, The Angels' Share*). A quiet or silent sidekick can make way for the hero's logorrhoea (*Look Back in Anger, A Clockwork Orange, Cherry Tree Lane*). Conversely, a talkative sidekick makes up for a rather silent hero (*Rude Boy, Meantime, Love, Honour and Obey, Late Night Shopping, Harry Brown, Adulthood, Attack the Block*). The sidekick can reveal a hidden side of the hero's personality and he often softens the working class hero's grittiness

8 *Divorcing Jack* also plays on the contrast between Northern Irish journalist Dan and American policeman Charles. Although they are relatively the same height, the difference in weight, demeanour and elocution speed is also used to create a comic effect.

(Porter's kinder side with Cliff in *Look Back in Anger*; Smith's youthful and funny side with Mike in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*). He can also reveal the hero's romantic side as they often go out on dates together but behave differently with girls: the sidekick often proves to be more uncouth and caddish to contrast with the hero's shy and gentlemanly manners (*The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *Looks and Smiles*, *Late Night Shopping*, to a lesser extent *For Queen and Country*). When the hero and his sidekick are from different ethnic origins, the relationship can be used to reveal the hero's ambiguous stance and more or less open racism (*Love Thy Neighbour*, *Made in Britain*) although, most of the time, it rather reveals other characters' prejudice (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, *For Queen and Country*, *Rage*) as the topic is never an issue between them (*A Room for Romeo Brass*, *Human Traffic*).

The main role of the sidekick, however, is to reveal the hero's beliefs and values that single him out from the rest of his class. The working class hero's ambition and aspiration to a better life are thus sometimes underlined by the presence of a colleague who is often moralising and diffident, like Lampton and Charles in *Room at the Top*. This opposition is later confirmed by their respective marriages. Lampton marries the boss's daughter while Charles marries one of the secretaries in the firm where they work. The same pattern is used in the world of juvenile delinquents. Pinball (*Sweet Sixteen*) and Chris (*Shifty*) act as the voice of reason trying to cool down their friends' dream of easy money at the price of an escalation in violence. Similarly, the cheekiness and social irreverence of the hero are often emphasised by the opposition with a more conventional and deferent sidekick who warns the hero of his impending nemesis due to his dissolute lifestyle and inability to comply: Porter and Cliff in *Look Back in Anger*; Seaton and Bert in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*; Fisher and Charlie in *Billy Liar*. The foil device is pushed to the extreme in Borstal or jail films. The rebelliousness of the hero never appears as strongly as when it is opposed to the conformism of a fellow inmate. In *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, Smith is in a sort of duel with Stacey, the other bad boy who still hopes to get in the favours of the director by obeying the rules. He is called the "governor's assistant" by Smith who wishes to keep his underdog status and whose determination wins him the support of other inmates. The same opposition is found in other Borstal films (*Scum*, *Made in Britain*, *Wilderness*, *Shopping*) and in youth films about specific subcultures in which the hero resists selling out whereas the sidekick often gives in to mainstream temptation (*Absolute Beginners*, *Young Soul Rebels*).

The various roles performed by the sidekick thus show how, even if he remains in an inferior position, he helps define the hero's identity as the latter needs him to express his sense of humour, his wit, his kindness as well as his rebelliousness and socially-fuelled anger. Yet the sidekick's presence is so vitally important that a desperate hero can conjure up an imaginary sidekick

if he feels he has no one to talk to (*Looking for Eric*). Going beyond the role of a mere assistant or foil, this close companion holds a strategic position. Although he may not be in the limelight, he has powers over the hero who cannot do anything without him. The bond uniting the hero and his sidekick often clearly turns into a symbiotic relationship.

The working class hero and his sidekick: doubles and couples

The sidekick takes on the role of a close adviser. He provides an alternative point of view on a given situation and often is the only one who can make the hero see things in a different light whether the subject is personal or professional. For example, in films about strike, the hero/sidekick opposition can be used to explain the reasons that lead some to go on strike and others to break it. When the hero is a strike-breaker, the sidekick represents the mob despite his guilty conscience (*The Angry Silence*). When the hero is a striker, the strike-breaking sidekick becomes a tragic figure (*Brassed Off*, *Dockers*). Similarly, the sidekick is the only person allowed to tell the hero when he is crossing the line, like Cliff (*Look Back in Anger*) who can make Porter stop shouting, playing the trumpet in the middle of the night and gibing at his wife or her friend. In coming-of-age films, the sidekick can help the hero grow up when he has managed to get out of the estate and the violence of the underworld to make a better life for himself (*Shifty*, *Adulthood*). Alternatively, he can have a bad influence on the hero when he is the one who drags him into crime (*Bullet Boy*) although he is often quickly surpassed, as if just revealing the hero's fatal flaw (*The Great Ecstasy of Robert Carmichael*).⁹ The sidekick thus sometimes acts as a sort of mentor. Eric Cantona (*Looking for Eric*) becomes Eric the suicidal postman's psychiatrist, coach and trainer. Thanks to hooligan Pete (*Green Street Hooligans*), Matt becomes "the Yank", the only American who earned respect from British hooligans because of his courage and his ability to fight.

Rising above his status, the sidekick can almost destabilise the usual balance of power. Not only contributing to define the hero's characteristics through pure comparison, he also helps elaborating his identity in a more complex way by introducing a dual dimension within the heroic figure as he sometimes turns into a doppelganger or evil twin. If most of the youths found in gangs are just meek followers of their more evil leaders and thus behave like underlings (*A Clockwork Orange*, *Beautiful People*, *New Year's Day*, *16 Years of Alcohol*, *Boy A*, *Harry Brown*), films usually present a twofold, Janus-like figure of leadership. Reminiscent of *Animal Farm* or *Lord of the Flies*, an amoral or reckless leader is

9 Robert is gradually dragged into a world of drug and violence by a truant who acts as a bully, drug-dealer and thief. For each of these, the sidekick ends up being surpassed. After being initiated to pills, Robert becomes a heavy user and because of his initiative the plan for home invasion ends up in a bloodbath.

pitted against a more humane and redeemable sub-leader who finally tries to stop him (*Downtime*, *Eden Lake*, *Attack the Block*, *Comedown*, *Ill Manors*, *Bullet Boy*, *Bradford Riots*, *Adulthood*, *Shifty*). This device is partly used to better point out the psychological complexity of the hero by decomposing it into two separate characters as gang members are often both victims and criminals. In hooligan films, the leadership is also often twofold and stresses the borderline personality of the firm members. The “top boy” or “governor” is put on a par with the “nutter” who acts as an unofficial leader for the younger hooligans [*The Football Factory*, *Green Street Hooligans*, *The Firm* (remake)]. The sidekick is then used as a sort of inverted mirror to point out the evolution of the main character. War veterans generally work like couples of trusted friends as war or army days seal intense friendships. The sidekick has often saved the hero's life (the opposite is rarer) who therefore remains forever grateful, like Eddie and Tommy's father (*Goodbye Charlie Bright*), Fish and Reuben (*For Queen and Country*), Bill and Albert (*The Football Factory*), Miller and Danny (*The Veteran*). Their respective paths usually show what the hero's life might have been if unlucky, notably when the sidekick suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder. In other words, the sidekick embodies the mad soldier the hero could have become (see also *Looks and Smiles*). Whatever the genre of the film, the duality established between the hero and his sidekick usually achieves the same aim: the moral edification of the hero and/or the viewer. When the sidekick is the more extreme character, because of his –sometimes lethal– addictions or viciousness, he appears as unredeemable whereas the hero does not look so bad by comparison (*Small Faces*, *Downtime*, *Trainspotting*, *Boy A*, *Kidulthood*) and is even spurred to get a grip on his life (*Withnail and I*, *Human Traffic*, *Trainspotting*). When he is not as reckless as the hero, he survives the latter (*Shopping*, *The Firm*, *The Veteran*) or can act sanctimoniously (*Shifty*).

However, most of the time, when almost on an equal footing, the presence of the sidekick emphasises the latent homoerotic nature of his relationship with the hero as he becomes the latter's alter-ego. It goes without saying that the hero/sidekick couple is an overwhelmingly masculine trope. This may be accounted for by the fact that women were often side-lined in films and have tended to be depicted first as secondary characters around the male hero (mother, sister, girlfriend, wife) or as solitary figures (single mothers). The corpus shows that female groups are far from being prevalent in all the genres or subgenres studied although recently more and more films have tended to apply the same pattern when they focus on girl groups.¹⁰ Another reason that could explain the prevalence of male heroes and sidekicks is the problem

10 *Smashing Time*, 1967, Desmond Davies; *Scrubbers*, 1983, Mai Zetterling; *Letter to Brezhnev*, 1985, Chris Bernard; *Rita*, *Sue and Bob Too*, 1987, Alan Clarke; *Bend it like Beckham*, 2002, Gurinder Chadha. Some films also tend to be more mixed including boy and girl gangs (*Kidulthood*, *1 Day*, *The Angels' Share*, *Comedown*).

of potential romantic overtones in case of a male/female duo as shown by *Shopping* and *Disco Pigs*. When one of the two members suddenly reveals their new feelings, they destabilise the close friendship. Of course, the male sidekick enables the hero to stay young and carefree whereas a woman almost always stands for maturity (*The Leather Boys*, *When Saturday Comes*, *Sweet Sixteen*, *Shaun of the Dead*). The cosy world offered by the sidekick is a refuge for a hero who refuses commitment and fatherhood as epitomised by the weekend for “lads only” to get away from intrusive wives in *Doghouse*. Yet, the relationship between the hero and his sidekick is much more profound than a mere regressive temptation and male bonding is widespread among youths, hooligans and gangsters. The opening sequence of *Goodbye Charlie Bright* introduces the main characters as they go streaking throughout their estate and Justin, Charlie’s best friend, is nicknamed “the wife” by the other members of their gang as he is so close to him. Homoeroticism is thus felt by all of them even though it is repressed.¹¹ Tension between homophobia and homoeroticism is constant among hooligans and gangsters as well. Real couples are not those officially registered but those born out of the special relationships developed between some of the firm members, such as John and Bob in *I.D.*, the three generations of hooligans in *The Football Factory* (Harris and Billy, Tommy and Rod, Zeberdee and Raff),¹² One Two and Handsome Bob in *RocknRolla*, Freddie Mays and the young gangster in *Gangster n°1*.

At first glance, the sidekick may seem much more attached to the hero than the opposite as he is the one who clearly shows signs of jealousy in this intimate relationship. A number of films thus depict what could be interpreted as crimes of passion committed by desperate sidekicks in sorts of lovers’ triangles. Pinball (*Sweet Sixteen*), Liam’s best friend, sees his symbolical couple jeopardised by the oedipal love Liam feels for his mother and the admiration he has for his boss, the local gangster. Pinball thinks he is being side-lined and accuses Liam of being a traitor because of his infidelities. He gets his revenge by stealing the car of Liam’s employer, destroying the window of his gym club, and burning the caravan Liam had bought in the hope of moving in there with his mother. Doing so, Pinball signs his death warrant as Liam’s employer wants him to sacrifice his best friend. Liam thus faces a dilemma and as he

11 Even the producers saw that homoerotic subtext since they asked the director to include scenes between Charlie and the nurse, Blondie, so that the audience would not think of *Goodbye Charlie Bright* as a gay film. The explanation was given by the director in the DVD commentary (Metrodome Edition, 2004).

12 Besides the firm members, Bill and Albert, the grand-fathers who are not hooligans but are linked to this violent background due to their war veteran status, also develop the same kind of intense relationship. When Albert gives an order to Bill, the latter tells him he is “a nagging old woman” (17’47”). The expression shows both the hero’s misogyny and latent homosociality. Symbolically, soon after Albert’s funeral, Bill collapses in the street (1h07’10”) as if his status as a widower and unbearable grief were more linked to the loss of his best friend than his wife.

cannot bring himself to kill him, Pinball tries to commit suicide in front of his friend to make it easier for him. The way Liam tries to heal Pinball's face as he waits for the ambulance to come shows the highly passionate character of the bond uniting the hero and his sidekick (1h17'40"). The device of the lovers' triangle is similar in *Green Street Hooligan*, *The Firm* (remake) and *Gangster n°1* and each time ends tragically. However, the hero also shows signs of spite and possessiveness. Tommy (*The Football Factory*) feels threatened when Rod moves in with a lawyer he met during one of his trials. The hatred he feels for the woman, a combination of social contempt and misogyny, shows the passionate nature of his friendship. When they first meet, Tommy goes to the toilet as he is so disgusted by the new couple's obvious complicity (46'45"). His jealousy is even spotted by his grand-father as he grumbles on his own (52'45"). Conversely, the beaming smile with which he welcomes his friend back just before the final fight shows how proud he is that his friend chose him over his partner. He kisses him as soon as he arrives (1h11'45"). The male bond thus testifies to the evolution of the sidekick from the position of a double to that of a partner in a couple as the hero simply cannot live without him. He often becomes crazy or desperate if the latter disappears.

The sidekick is so important in the hero's life that he can be on an equal footing with the hero's wife, hence the number of films showing a ménage-à-trois between the hero, his sidekick and his wife (*The Family Way*, *Look Back in Anger*, *The Leather Boys*, *Somers Town*). The words used by the hero to express his affection for his sidekick are always marked by ambiguity. For example, Ezra's memories (*The Family Way*) show that his intimacy with Billy went far beyond the one he has with his wife and the words chosen imply that in his mind Ezra was in a way already married with Billy. "It takes a lifetime to make a proper friend. What was I to do? Desert him? Just because of a few words spoken in front of an altar?" (1h16'35"). The hero's acts and gestures are similarly ambiguous. Porter's games with Cliff (*Look Back in Anger*) look like flirting.¹³ The way he wakes him up by stroking his hair as he sits on the bed (6'20", 1h23') shows a relationship that goes beyond mere male friendship or what some film critics today call bromance. The hero's impotence or at least absence of desire for his wife while the hero and his sidekick's relationship is homoerotically connoted also reinforces the interpretation of the male bond as a true love affair. From the moment Reggie meets Pete (*The Leather Boys*), he stops being attracted to his wife, without having any explanation for it but the timing of events leaves the viewer without a doubt (27'30"-34'55"). Each time, the relationship is said to be "odd and queer", evidently playing on words and some wives accuse their husbands of being homosexual, such as

13 Rebellato Dan, *1956 and All That: the Making of Modern British Drama*. London: Routledge, 1999, p. 222.

Dot (*The Leather Boys*) when she learns that Reggie and Pete live together and sees all the pictures of the couple in their bedroom (1h10'35").¹⁴

If the hero faces an ultimatum imposed by his wife,¹⁵ he always chooses his sidekick as the latter is irreplaceable, which is not the case of the wife as illustrated by the scene following Alison's departure (*Look Back in Anger*). It is absolutely identical to the opening one except that the woman who is ironing while the husband is reading the Sunday papers has changed (1h08'55"). Women thus seem reduced to the status of a charlady while real feelings of companionship are kept for the sidekick as implied by Porter's offhand tone when he comments on Alison's quick replacement with her friend Helena. "Today's meal is always different from yesterday's and the last woman isn't the same as the one before" (1h14'38"). Conversely, he is seriously affected by Cliff's sudden departure and the following kiss and promise of sexual intercourse between Porter and Helena (1h25") seems to come from the disappointment caused by the true soul-mate/lover's desertion. The sidekick can also symbolically take on the role of the wife, like Pete (*The Leather Boys*) after another domestic row which sees Reggie leave Dot. In his company, the hero sleeps in a double bed, one of his obsessions, for the first time. Pete reveals some effeminate gestures, especially in the way he holds his cigarette, and his imitations are reminiscent of Dot's, just as his peroxided hair (48'20"-51").¹⁶ He looks after Reggie like a housewife asking him if he brushed his teeth and suggests running a hot bath (1h05"). The hero's preference for his sidekick rather than his wife is found in hooligan firms and youth gangs as well (*The Firm, I.D.*).

In fact, the hero's affection for his sidekick is so important that the latter has the power to act as a peer whose assent is required for the hero to be set free and start a real relationship with a woman. The assent often comes in the form of self-sacrifice. Only Billy (*The Family Way*) and Cliff (*Look Back in Anger*)'s definitive departures allow Ezra's and Porter's couples to really start or start over. Charlie (*Goodbye Charlie Bright*) cannot commit to any girl or leave his estate until "his wife", Justin, decides to shoot his enemy and goes to jail, thus leaving the field clear for the hero. Extraordinary circumstances are sometimes required. It is only because his friend and flatmate Ed has

14 Pete later reveals his homosexuality to Reggie who cannot assume his real sexual orientation and goes back to his wife. However, the open ending (the hero leaving alone on the road after yet another domestic row) reinforces the strength of the homosocial bond as it seems the hero cannot live with or without his sidekick.

15 Karen (*Looks and Smiles*) is well aware of Alan's strategy and gives Mick an ultimatum (their relationship or the army). In her opinion, Alan is "trying to split [them] up" by inciting his best friend to join with him (1h37"). When Liz (*Shaun of the Dead*) leaves Shaun because she is tired of his dithering, Ed assures him that he does not need her to be happy since they are together and he makes him laugh at the pub (17'45").

16 In the scene where they meet, Pete immediately takes Dot's place in the frame when he first appears on screen.

become a zombie that Shaun (*Shaun of the Dead*), now on his own almost like a widower, can move in with Liz, his long-time partner.¹⁷ Yet he regularly goes back to the garden shed to meet Ed secretly and play videogames with him, just like in the good old days, while “You’re my best friend” by Queen blares on the soundtrack (1h31’54”). The hero’s relationship to his sidekick thus outlives marriage and non-life/death.

A new perspective on the working class hero/sidekick duo: “No more heroes (no more)”? (*The Strangers*, 1977)

If in the end most of the films representing a group whether they be workers, hooligans, youth gangs, inmates or war veterans still give prominence to a heroic figure, in recent years the sidekick seems to have become increasingly instrumental in the hero’s success through his contribution and sometimes sacrifice, so much so that they almost become interchangeable. The sidekick has always been ready to stand his ground by the hero’s side in case of a fight (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Looks and Smiles*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *For Queen and Country*, *Kidulthood*) or to escape the police (*Sweet Sixteen*, *Ill Manors*) and, even though he might hesitate, he can never let the hero down, whatever the consequences (*Shifty*, *The Angels’ Share*). With the rise in knife and gun culture or under exceptional circumstances, he even dies for the hero more and more frequently, thus showing his loyalty and providing emotional power to the film (*For Queen and Country*, *1 Day*, *Shaun of the Dead*, *Attack the Block*, *Comedown*). But more surprisingly, the hero can also make extreme choices out of loyalty for his sidekick. He can botch up a job interview or a trial (*Looks and Smiles*, *When Saturday Comes*), go to jail (*Bradford Riots*) or decide to become a vigilante to avenge his death (*Harry Brown*). And sometimes he too dies for him (*For Queen and Country*, *Bullet Boy*, *Outlaw*). The hero is therefore no longer protected by his leading position. Some recent films are somewhat ambiguous concerning the hierarchy of the main characters as they seem to show an inversion of status. For example, the end of *Goodbye Charlie Bright* shows the sidekick accessing the status of local hero because he shot his best mate’s arch enemy while the hero escapes but without glory. *Shifty* supposedly focuses on the title-role yet the film opens on his sidekick who stays with him in practically every scene and eventually saves him by convincing him to leave the estate. Hillier (*Outlaw*) finds in Bryant the leader he needs for the vigilante group he wishes to create. Yet, he is the one who puts up plans and the only one not to “bottle out” as he says. That is why they end up fighting each other as leadership is questioned.

¹⁷ Interestingly, the question of the real and official couple is also present in this film as, initially, Shaun has yet to introduce Liz to his mother whereas Ed has been part of the family for years.

Recent films also seem to hesitate between focusing on a real hero and presenting multiple sidekicks. Some older films have consciously tried to represent groups of workers like *The Kitchen*, *Carry On at Your Convenience*¹⁸ and *The Black Stuff*. Others have an ensemble-cast look, although one or two characters are often put to the fore in the end (*Brassed Off*, *The Navigators*, *Trainspotting*, *The Full Monty*, *Dockers*, *Late Night Shopping*, *The Firm* (remake), *The Angels' Share*).¹⁹ Recent youth, lad and horror films, however, tend to present teams of sidekicks rather than a hero and his underlings (*Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, *Snatch*, *Kidulthood*, *Adulthood*, *Wilderness*, *Summer Scars*, *Outlaw*, *Better Things*, *RocknRolla*, *Four Lions*, *Doghouse*, *Attack the Block*, *Tower Block*, *Comedown*, *Cockneys vs Zombies*, *Ill Manors*). The ensemble-cast aspect shows through the structure and editing which looks like a collection of juxtaposed vignettes following various characters that are given the same prominence in the story.²⁰ For example, *Kidulthood* opens with a scene set in the school playground and ends with a house party, which allows the introduction and final reunion of the six main characters.²¹ All of them are presented in duos or trios and the film depicts 24 hours of their lives in parallel sequences. In all these films, some characters die prematurely and others finally come to the fore without predictability and some sidekicks prove to be stronger or braver than the supposed leader.²² Genre films obviously depend on certain conventions which

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- 18 John Hill, who complains about the predominance of private dramas over a collective representation in British films dealing with the working class, writes: "While it may appear a little unusual, [...] the plots of the Carry On favour a multiplication of leading characters. [...] Such an attenuation of classic narrativity and emphasis upon more than one character structures, in turn, a different attitude towards the collectivity". Hill John, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963*. London: BFI, 1986, p. 142-143.
- 19 The rather loose aspect of some films that suddenly decide to follow various characters for a while does not mean there is no hero in the story, though titles can be misleading. For example, *Bronco Bullfrog* refers to a character who is not the protagonist.
- 20 In "fake" group films, the same device is sometimes used but the hero disrupts the precarious balance by being the narrator in voice-over, which evidently gives him prominence over his friends (*Trainspotting*, *Human Traffic*, *Goodbye Charlie Bright*, *South West 9*). Guy Ritchie might be considered as a sort of exception to the rule as he is famous for films that present multiple characters and subplots (no fewer than 10 main characters in the credits of *RocknRolla* all introduced in the first 10 minutes of the film), often using a voice-over/character-narrator that nevertheless does not necessarily unbalance the film. Also, *Ill Manors* starts with a rapping voice-over which is dropped after the first scene.
- 21 There are many more important characters but these get a name and a face shown in the end credits. The film seems like a harbinger of series like *Skins* (2007-2013) that also focus on multiple characters in the same school.
- 22 For example, see what Jacques Morice says about *Ill Manors*: "Moult protagonistes s'y croisent, chacun tentant de survivre, hors des limites de la légalité : un Black efflanqué et hâbleur qui sort de taule, une prostituée junkie, un jeune dealeur qui passe une nuit au poste... Selon un scénario imprévisible, certains personnages tombent assez vite sous les balles. Un jeune délinquant plutôt effacé passe au premier plan quand il se retrouve avec un bébé abandonné sur les bras...". Morice Jacques, "Ill Manors." *Télérama*, 3 April 2013. Web. 23 December 2014. In

can account for the rise of multiple sidekicks. The survival horror type that has been successful in Britain recently in its hoodie horror version needs a relatively large cast to better get rid of them as the story unfolds. Whether the characters are friends as in *Doghouse* or *Comedown* or a team of “forced” sidekicks who do not necessarily like one another, like the residents in *Tower Block*, they usually have to learn to get over their initial enmity and show solidarity to escape their attacker. The foil device is here multiplied as each member embodies a type (the brainy one, the crazy one, the voice of reason, etc.) and the “hero” is just the final boy (*Wilderness*) if there are not several survivors (*Doghouse*, *Tower Block*, *Comedown*). Yet, the same trend is noticed in more social realist films. Six or seven main characters are introduced in an egalitarian way through short consecutive or intercut scenes, sometimes ending with their names written on the screen. Musical and rap interludes inserted into the narrative are used to present various crews of characters/rappers (*1 Day*) or provide a backstory for each new character (*Ill Manors*)²³ as split-screens or reels enable the film to move smoothly from one character to another, insisting on the simultaneity of the scenes (*Kidulthood*). The ensemble-cast aspect of these films also shows through the artwork used to promote them. Most of them present two characters (*Meantime*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Withnail and I*, *The Krays*, *Twin Town*, *Purely Belter*, *The 51st State*, *Bullet Boy*, *Somers Town*, *Shifty*) or even a group of teenagers or young adults rather than focusing on an individual as used to be the case in the films of the New Wave for example even though, interestingly, some of these films actually have a hero (*Trainspotting*, *Small Faces*, *The Full Monty*, *The Navigators*, *Goodbye Charlie Bright*, *The Football Factory*, *Green Street Hooligans*, *Kidulthood*, *Adulthood*, *This is England*, *Outlaw*, *Doghouse*, *Attack the Block*, *The Firm* (remake), *1 Day*, *Cockneys vs Zombies*, *The Angels' Share*).

The straightforward portrayal of a working class hero clearly dominating his sidekicks thus seems to have fallen out of fashion, favour or may be more and more difficult to imagine. *Attack the Block* is a good illustration of that trend and could be interpreted as the birth of a new form of heroism dependent on sidekicks. The gang of youths facing an alien invasion thus shows mutual support throughout the film as they try to save each other's lives. One of their key expressions (like hooligans and war veterans incidentally) is “I got your back” as they move like a platoon through the corridors of their tower block to protect one another. All members team up to find a solution to get

fact, the film seems to rely on three leading couples (Aaron/Ed, Kirby/Chris, Marcel/Jake) and flits from one to the other in an unexpected way. When two characters meet, the film loses one to follow another. Moreover, other couples are added (like Michelle/Katya). The final sequence uses the classic intercut device to conclude on all the characters seen on the estate during the film.

23 In this film, each character is thus introduced with a rap song bearing their names and a specific visual style more or less matching their degree of respectability or clandestine secrecy (cut-up montage, slow-motion, grainy super-8 or mobile phone kind of footage).

rid of the aliens and of course some die on the way. Moses, the rather discrete gang leader, finally becomes more prominent in the final sequence but it is a reluctant move based on self-sacrifice. Once his decision is made to lead the aliens to his booby-trapped flat, he is heroised by the way he is shot: a close up on his stern face (1h07"), a shot on his huge back (1h13'30"), the use of slow-motion combined with frequent zooms (1h13'40") and a track shot from toe to head (1h36'35") reveal his growing moral and physical leadership as the viewer, just like his sidekicks, is led to look up to him in a literal sense. Yet his part in the final operation succeeds only because his sidekicks create a diversion and, as the epilogue shows, he is still a nobody for the outside world i.e. outside the estate. He personally does not think of himself as a hero and, as he is about to be arrested by the police for whom he is just another antisocial youth, he needs all the support of his sidekick to eulogise his deed and start spreading his legend to get the crowd to chant his name (see also *Comedown* and *Ill Manors*). The rise of the sidekicks could then be interpreted as a sort of revenge of the underdogs. At a time when the media and some politicians wonder about the existence of a working class and youths on British estates are considered the new public enemy number one, these youths who sometimes call themselves underclass embody a new form of collective heroism resisting marginalisation. So far, there has been no such thing as an underclass hero but the rise in multiple sidekick youth films could be a sign of the difficulty to associate the new British proletarian figures with the concept of hero as was the case earlier in history with the working class hero whom these youths are descended from. Yet, to paraphrase David Bowie, they can be heroes, albeit just for one day (*Heroes*, 1977). They give a new meaning to the well-known slogan "united we stand, divided we fall" that was once used by other working class heroes. The way they stand side by side and roam the streets that scares so many people actually betrays their own fear, which leads them to join gangs to defend themselves (*Comedown*) and their estate as they feel stigmatised wherever they go (shops in *Kidulthood*; fast-food restaurant in *1 Day*). Beyond revealing the increasing interdependence of the hero and his sidekick, the multiple sidekick film could thus be interpreted as a response to the demonization of "Chav Britain"²⁴ in an era of social transition.

At a time of political disenchantment and ruthless individualism, the rise of the sidekick concomitant with the loss of faith in the figure of the hero as an exceptional being may also signal a wish to return to a form of collective spirit as was the case in British WW2 films or Ealing productions²⁵ with films trying to promote a unified, collective effort to re-establish a sort of utopian

24 Jones Owen, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*. London: Verso, 2011.

25 According to John Hill, these films projected "a sense of collectivity on the screen, by loosening narrative form in favour of a more episodic structure and multiplying the number of dramatically central characters". Hill John, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

and egalitarian community mingling generations, classes and races (*Attack the Block*, *Cockneys vs Zombies*). Remarkably, British films, unlike American adaptations of DC Marvel comic superheroes, rarely portray an older hero and a teenage sidekick. When they do, the older man is always seen as a source of threat. Not only does he jeopardise the teenage sidekicks' other friendship but he also disrupts the egalitarian principle at the heart of the working class hero/sidekick relationship because he holds a clear physical and mental ascendancy over his sidekick (*A Room for Romeo Brass*, *Sweet Sixteen*, *This is England*, *The Firm* (remake)).²⁶ The grown man always reveals to be a psychotic personality who fascinates the teenager but ultimately proves a dead-end and order is restored as the youth goes back to his former teenage friend (if not, it ends in tragedy as in *Sweet Sixteen*).²⁷ Attempts at creating multi-character stories in which the working class hero is just the "first among equals" (*primus inter pares*) could thus also paradoxically be considered as the true triumph of British cinema in its endeavour to represent the working class collectively, the failure to do so being a recurrent criticism of film analysts.²⁸

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the vital importance of the presence of the sidekick for the working class hero in contemporary British films. Far from being a mere underling or foil, the sidekick often reveals to be more of a double or a partner in the couple he makes with the hero. The evolution of the sidekick from the position of second to that of an alter ego seems to be confirmed by recent developments in British films which increasingly present multi-character stories. In what may be a sign of the times, the hero is then just the "first among equals" in a group of multiple sidekicks.

Keywords

Sidekicks, british film, british social realism.

26 The American portrayal of that very unbalanced relationship was actually criticised as early as 1954 by psychoanalysts such as Fredric Wertham in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*. He pointed out the sexual subtext of the relationship ridden with Freudian issues. Latent paedophilia evidently comes to mind.

27 Maybe the genre also impacts the outcome of the relationship as all these films belong to the coming-of-age type but *Sweet Sixteen* also has a gangster element which makes it go beyond mere youthful indiscretions.

28 That would be a way to discard "an ideology of individualism cemented into narrative form". Hill John, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

Résumé

La présence du *sidekick* aux côtés du *working class hero* se révèle d'une importance capitale dans le cinéma britannique contemporain. Loin de n'être qu'un second couteau ou un simple faire-valoir, le *sidekick* est souvent un double ou un compagnon au sein du couple qu'il forme avec le héros ouvrier. Ce passage d'un statut subalterne à celui d'un alter ego semble se confirmer dans les films britanniques les plus récents qui présentent de plus en plus des intrigues à personnages multiples, se rapprochant du film choral. Possible signe des temps, le héros n'est alors que *primus inter pares*, un *sidekick* parmi d'autres.

Mots-clés

Faire-valoir, cinéma britannique, réalisme social britannique.