

Behavioural Patterns of the Social Classes Through British Movies

A Close Reading of *Billy Elliot*

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Just like individuals, works of art, such as paintings, novels or films, are always and necessarily products of their age and cultural surroundings.¹ Clearly, the more we know about the constituents and the processes of the given 'culture' – which, based on Graeme Turner's concept, we could define as the totality of the phenomena "which construct a society's way of life: its systems for producing meaning, sense, or consciousness"² – the more the certain work of art or problem investigated becomes alive in front of our eyes. The topic of this paper – a short and condensed version of a more elaborate thesis – obviously demands the application of this more complex type of examination, too, as we are to deal with the movie *Billy Elliot* and scrutinize individuals' behaviour in the motion picture as an example of a wider social context.

Therefore, the main aims of the present paper would be the following: the methodical application of the devices of interdisciplinary research to point out the organic connection and mutual relationship between single entities and cultural context, how they affect each other – meaning by this both the relationship between the cultural background and the movies, and the social context and the individual. More concretely, I am going to examine the behaviour of the members of different social classes, both on a collective and on an individual level, as it appears in the movie. This investigation definitely requires a social psychological focus, along with the justification of the theme of film analysis, the concept of "film as social practice"³ that provides the theoretical basis for the subsequent detailed examination of the motion picture.

The Movie Focus – "Film as Social Practice" and Guidelines to Watching a Movie

Graeme Turner, a cardinal figure in the discipline of film studies, uses the expression "Film as Social Practice" as the title of his book dealing with the cultural integration of movies. "The world 'comes to us' in the shape of stories," explains Turner.⁴ Right from the first years of our lives, we are introduced into the world and the order of our culture through narratives, such as children's tales, short stories and novels, anecdotes told by family members, friends and acquaintances, accounts of certain events reported by the media or any people around us, perhaps just overheard in a vehicle of public

transport.⁵ In the narratives and meaning of these stories we can always find various appearances and components of “the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself”⁶ and also diverse characteristics and ways in which individuals belonging to different groups in our culture make sense of the world and transmit their reality to others surrounding them, especially their children.⁷ That is, from these stories we get to know the order of the given cultural world from the perspective of different people or groups.

Therefore, cultural systems, including the problem of social classes, gender and many more, are just as visible in movies as in any other narrative mentioned above.⁸ In films, all of these processes and components appear probably in an even more conscious way, as the director and other members of the crew, wishing to show a realistic picture of the world, have to recreate and reproduce all the details that make the scenes, the events and the characters in the movie credible and authentic. Accordingly, the social dimension of the film we are interested in does not appear only at the level of the narrative or the plot of the story, but also in the form of codes from everyday life.⁹ “We look at gestures, listen to accents, or scan a style of dress, in order to place characters within a particular class,... or subculture, for instance”.¹⁰ The listed phenomena are all social and psychological codes used for communication and the organisation of a culture. These points are exactly what Graeme Turner suggests for further examination when analysing a movie from the social perspective. He says that the most revealing method is to scrutinize the things we take for granted, and to close-read the film in this manner, looking into those devices that make the film “appear to be an unmediated view of reality”¹¹.

A central concept is *mise-en-scene*, a term linked with André Bazin and referring to “the arrangement of elements within the frame or the shot”¹². He examines factors, such as the movement and placement of characters and props, the position and focus of the camera, the editing, the use of lighting or the set design, in order to see how it is possible to generate certain meanings with the help of all of these. This method indicates that the aesthetics of the film, the devices or components taking part in the completion of a scene, the overall “language” of the movie, as Turner calls it, and the ideas or concepts it expresses are not really separable.¹³

The Social Focus – The Social Identity Theory and the Sociology of Knowledge

For all of those who are somewhat familiar with English culture, it is common knowledge that strong class consciousness is a crucial peculiarity of this country and different groups of society can quite easily be recognized by their ways of self-expression, speech, clothing or movement, their representation of certain values, as well as their habits – to conclude, their behaviour as a whole. All these aspects can be discussed through the lens of the so-called ‘social identity theory’, which Michael Argyle, a central figure of twentieth century social psychology, applies as “the social psychological model of class system” in his book titled *The Psychology of the Social Class*¹⁴. This work is going to serve as the social psychological basis of the upcoming analyses respectively.

English society is historically class-conscious, still regarding class as the most important and definitive type of all social groups.¹⁵ Although in sociology, using the

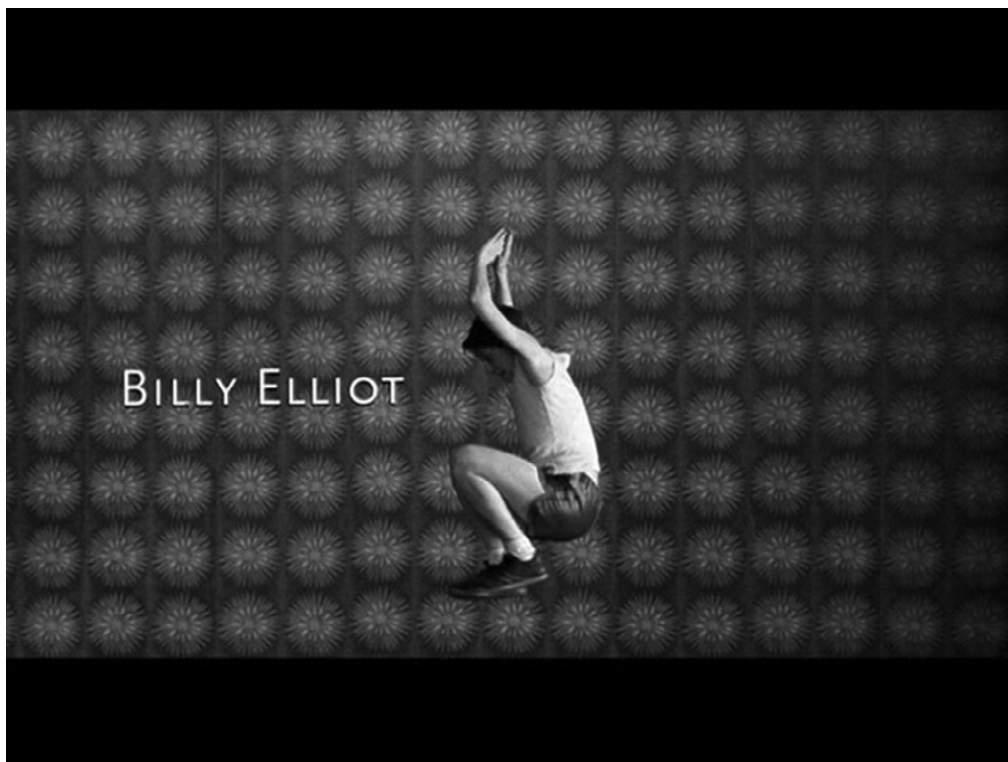


Fig. 1. Opening scene. Billy Elliot. 2000

simple three-level model (upper class, middle class, working class) or the alphabetical system (A, B, C1, C2, D, E), a person's class is most often decided based on his occupation, the question is much more complex than that.¹⁶ A much more subtle way of examination is especially necessary because of the phenomenon of social mobility.¹⁷ As a consequence of the fact that class borders are less rigid nowadays, a kind of mixture might be perceived concerning the characteristics once typical of certain social classes; we could, for example, distinguish different concepts of the social class based on occupation, income, life style or manners.¹⁸ All these are heavily influenced by the social groups that an individual is surrounded by in certain phases of their life.

Social identity theory was first developed by Henri Tajfel in Britain during the 1970s.¹⁹ Based on Peter L. Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's earlier research, he defined 'social identity' as "that *part* of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership."²⁰ Communities' situations, relations or conflicts are largely defined by the *beliefs* that the certain groups cultivate about themselves, the other party and their relationship.²¹ The problem of the definitive beliefs in certain social groups has raised several further questions.²²

Towards the end of the 1970s John C. Turner joined Tajfel in his research,²³ and carried out a shift in focus during the 1980s: instead of examining the relations between social groups, he took a micro sociological direction, and concentrated more and more

on the cognitive dimension of social identity theory, including questions of the individual's socialization and self-categorization as a consequence of his intercourse with the members of the community in which he is present.²⁴ Turner's 'self-categorization theory' elaborated on the problem of social influence processes, such as 'normative influence' within a group, which discusses how the individual acquires and internalizes the values, motives and behavioural norms displayed by the significant in-group members surrounding them.²⁵ These influential people, with whom the individual is able to identify in some way, are called the 'reference group'²⁶, or 'the significant others'²⁷.

Peter L. Berger states the following: "Society does not stop at the surface of our skins. Society penetrates us as much as it envelops us."²⁸; while James W. Vander Zanden adds that "The structures of society become the structures of our own consciousness"²⁹. Indeed, the society and the social group that surround us shape our identities, personalities, emotions, way of thinking, fortunes, behaviour and view of the world and life in several ways;³⁰ that is, our social surroundings create the reality we live in, and as a consequence, people belonging to different segments and groups of society live in different realities. The discipline that tries to understand the process through which these realities evolve and "penetrate us" is called the 'sociology of knowledge'.³¹

All human actions, both social and private, are carried out under pressure of habitual routines. When we repeat the same actions regularly, they become patterns, which can be practical, because behaving according to them minimizes the necessary input of energy and the psychological burden of responsibility for the decisions made during the given activity.³² With the hardening of these patterns, social reality gets its shape, grows less and less easily modifiable; the habitual order undergoes the process of 'objectivisation' or 'institutionalisation', and stands before the new generations, who have to get socialised into these patterns and in this environment, into 'the world' as such. This institutionalised world, which we internalise during our socialisation, existed before our birth and will continue to exist after our death; therefore, we tend to, as we are made to, perceive it as an objective reality. The process through which the child becomes a member of society is 'primary socialisation', while the later phase in which the individual joins in certain new segments of society and acquires various new roles is called 'secondary socialisation'. Usually, it is primary socialisation that is the most important in life, and all the further experiences, changes and developments need to be compatible with the basic structures learnt at an early age.³³

A child is therefore born into what is for them an objective community and environment, where the 'significant others' they are to identify with are already given; at this stage, a conscious choice on the individual's side is, of course, out of question. The people responsible for his socialisation define the child's reality, selecting from and interpreting the phenomena of the world for him based on their own social position and personal history.³⁴ However, socialisation is never completed or over. In contrast with primary socialization, in the case of secondary socialisation we have more chance to choose the significant others whom we 'allow' to influence us, but deep, emotional identification is much less usual at this stage. Secondary socialisation means acquiring new roles and the knowledge involved, most often connected to work: from the vocabulary and the previously unknown concepts, through the behaviour and emotional delicacies necessary, to the attitudes and values to advocate.³⁵



Fig. 2. The audition scene. Billy Elliot. 2000

Social groups coming to life during the socialisation process described above are perceived in terms of social categories – such as social classes, for example –, which serve as the basis of the social identity process on the individual's side, and a central concept of the social identity perspective in social psychological research. "People cognitively represent a category or group as a prototype"³⁶, 'prototype' referring to a set of characteristics and norms attached to the given group. Prototypes do not only have descriptive functions, but prescriptive as well: they summarize the qualities of the behaviour expected from members within the group. When we categorise people, it means that we look at them searching for the characteristic attributes of the community they belong to, we measure them against the prototype. This so-called 'depersonalisation' is usual in the case of both in-group and out-group members; thus, it helps the social identity process and contributes to 'group cohesion' from the aspect of both the intention to conform or 'converge', to come as close to the prototype as possible within our own group ('normative behaviour'), and the wish to differ or 'diverge' from other groups' prototypes. Group cohesion, logically, has to be maintained to assure the existence of the group; as a consequence of which members diverging from the prototype and converging to another community usually trigger disapproval. What happens in the case of these marginal in-group members is usually that their 'reference group', the one they have chosen as an influence group, is, for some reason, not the same as their in-group.³⁷ A nice example of this is the situation when the individual emotionally identifies with a significant other during the process of his secondary socialization, and this influential person, in addition, is a member of one of his out-groups. In such a case, a radical reformation can be expected to evolve in the subject's perception of reality.³⁸

The fact of choosing an 'outsider' necessarily indicates or involves that the individual has realized or starts to realize the fact that the world, at least at some points, is more subjective than it may appear to be during the primary socialization process, and, as a consequence, this subjective reality can be altered. This is the social psychological model of social mobility. Berger and Luckmann point out the process of becoming a member of the upper-middle class as that change in social position which means the greatest alteration in the individual's reality, with all the new patterns and knowledge to internalize in order to gain admission and fit in. Although this transformation lacks real 'resocialization', that is, the *total* restructuring of the primarily learnt reality patterns, in some ways it can be even more problematic than that. In contrast with a man who starts a new life among aboriginals, for example, a socially mobile person has to build his developing reality on the basis created through primary internalizations; in other words, he needs to reconcile his basic and presently evolving world, with all the emotionally and socially important significant others involved. The more the situation approaches resocialization without actually becoming that, the more compelling the individual's circumstances will be: amendments, modifications and reinterpretations of the basic reality and patterns are absolutely necessary. The former or long-time-present significant others, although probably supportive and accepting to some extent, may disapprove of the changes, as the world in which the individual spent their earlier years is still the objective, or at least the dominant, reality for them; which differences possibly cause clashes and serious strain in the socially mobile person's life.³⁹ With this question, however we are moving into an area of more specific problems, which I would rather discuss during the analysis of *Billy Elliot*, applied to the concrete situations emerging in the movie.

Billy Elliot⁴⁰

Billy Elliot is the story of a young boy from a working-class family, developing a passion for ballet, which is to change his life and some concepts traditional in his miners' town entirely. The eleven-year-old Billy gets acquainted with ballet while attending the boxing lesson his father forces onto him. Billy joins the dance class secretly, as he knows that most people around him, including his father and brother, would not approve of his ambitions, which are way too strange for the community. The middle-class teacher, Mrs. Wilkinson, recognizing the talent and the possibilities in the young boy and finding out about the father's objections, teaches Billy privately; however, when the process takes a serious turn and the Royal Ballet School comes up as a real option in Billy's life, further clashes between the classes, groups, their values and convictions are unavoidable. The conflicts are emphasised by additional factors, such as the setting: Lee Hall, the scriptwriter, chooses to put the story in the context of the 1984 miners' strike, which was, as he says "a class war where the state was mobilized against a small group of people."⁴¹ The movie also includes a piece of the news saying "In a speech to Tory MPs yesterday Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher referred to members of the striking National Union of Mine Workers as the 'enemy within.'" The strong working-class at-

titude of “we against them”⁴² is, therefore, fuelled by the tense and critical historical situation, as well as by some other aspects to be detailed later, making it even harder for Billy to pursue his dream encouraged by the middle-class surrogate mother figure, Mrs. Wilkinson. Lee Hall, moreover, made a research while writing the script, visiting the Royal Ballet School to interview dancers coming from social environments similar to Billy’s background, which must have contributed significantly to the realistic and vivid description of the character’s road of both psychological and physical hardships to an upper-middle class life.⁴³

As Graeme Turner suggests, the opening scenes of a movie are crucial, carrying lots of important pieces of information regarding the whole work, creating interest in the viewer and the basis of the audience’s identification with the characters.⁴⁴ We would have a closer look at the first few minutes of *Billy Elliot* and the themes and points anticipated by this part before getting down to the actual analysis of the behavioural patterns. The first thing that we can see of the movie is the inscription “Durham Coalfield, North East England, 1984” on a monochrome black screen. This line, and the less than cheerful colour perhaps, immediately create expectations in us about what is going to come next, even if we do not have a full picture of the historical background. However, in the following seconds we get something very different instead; that is, the first symbolic conflict of the movie evolves right at the very beginning. At this point, we cannot see any typical working-class areas, miners, members of the police or scenes of a riot and clashes between social groups. First, two young, longish hands, definitely not associated with physical workers, appear on screen putting a record on really carefully, with sensitive movements; then the protagonist’s childish side comes to be introduced, Billy jumping on the bed, making acrobatic moves and unembarrassed facial expressions (Fig. 1). The scene is slowed down, which has further consequences: the illusion of childhood’s carefree state is emphasized by the mimicry becoming funny in slow motion and the apparent lightness of the figure. As a result, we tend to perceive a peaceful and happy atmosphere, instead of a threatened, heavy one that, connected to *heavy* industry and a problematic social situation, we would expect based on the initial inscription informing us about the setting.

The music, T-Rex’s ‘Cosmic Dancer’ contributes to the effect of the pictures a lot, which is not only because of the fact that the lyrics fit the story perfectly, telling about a boy’s love of dancing, the possibility of the opinion that this passion is strange, and even attaching the artistic interest to the mother’s character in a way, but because of the general associations evoked in the audience familiar with the concepts of glam rock or glitter rock, as well. As the title also indicates, a characteristic motif of this branch of music is the topic of space and the desire of defying tardiness and ‘gravity’⁴⁵ – just like the impression we get watching Billy jumping –, the physical phenomenon often symbolizing social and psychological burden or limiting conventions imprisoning the individual. Another important feature of this style is that the representatives wish to transmit their message through relatively feminine means of expression, which obviously puts an emphasis on the question of gender as well. It might be interesting to add, moreover, that T-Rex, especially as assumed in the film through the details of the tracks ‘Cosmic Dancer’, ‘Get It On’ or ‘I Love To Boogie’, lack really elaborate lyrics, and rather rely to a great extent on non-verbal communication, such as the use of voice,

music, clothing or movement, just like Billy does, expressing himself typically with the help of dancing from the very first scenes of the movie to the very last one.

Right in the first four minutes, however, another switch comes again, reinforcing the dissonance present in the movie: Billy goes out to the kitchen, which is a relatively unassuming, cluttered and apparently somewhat abandoned interior with the dirty cooker, the bowls loosely thrown onto each other at various points of the room, the plastic bags and kitchen clothes hanging from above or the paint peeling off the wall; it does not maintain the carefree illusion any more. He makes breakfast and takes it into his grandmother's room, but she has disappeared, so the boy rushes out to the street, the houses of which represent a typical working-class environment,⁴⁶ to find her. Thus, we learn about some of the difficulties and the social context of the family, and the task of the boy to take care of the old lady and play the role of the responsible adult in their relationship, which fact is expressed especially well by the next scene, where we can see the two characters in the field appearing under the threatening, armoured forces of the police preparing for a possible clash with the group of the miners on strike. Watching the young boy's now careworn and adult facial expression, we tend to sympathize with him and know that the illusion of a carefree childhood, created previously, is ruined for the rest of the movie. All the motifs visible in the first four minutes and mentioned above come up again and again in the motion picture, wrapped in the patterns of behaviour attached to the social classes.

Turning our attention to the detailed analysis of the behavioural patterns in the movie, I would like to start with the discussion of the characters' speech, which is one of the main signals of social position.⁴⁷ Ferdinand de Saussure points out the difference between the concepts of '*langue*' (language) and '*parole*' (speech): the former refers to the grammar, the vocabulary and the possible utterances within the system, while the latter means the individual utterance, which involves choosing certain expressions, structures, and so on, from the language. Naturally, this selection from the components of the language on the individual's side is greatly affected by his identity, both social and personal, as a consequence of which it is possible to acquire plenty of interesting pieces of information about the individual, or character, by paying close attention to his speech – from the aspect of both the style and the message content.⁴⁸

The differences in accent and style between the members of the working class and the upper-middle class, for example, in the audition scene (Fig. 2), which is perhaps the most emblematic part concerning this clash, are striking. I am not going to deal with pronunciation differences here; I would rather focus on the use of language. We can associate different 'linguistic codes' with the social groups in question, which Michael Argyle calls 'high' and 'low' versions of language. While middle-class and upper-class speakers express their thoughts in a more sophisticated way, using standard grammar, lots of subordinate clauses and a large vocabulary, working-class speech can be characterized by the lack of complex sentences, the use of shorter clauses, smaller vocabulary, less varied adjectives, or tags, such as 'didn't I' or 'you know'.⁴⁹ It is enough to think of the examiner's long, elevated sentences, such as "Mr. Elliot, I'm afraid that mutual respect and self-discipline are absolute prerequisites for any pupil in this school." and the father's short, perplexed answers, like "Yes. Yes, of course." or the four-letter words that occur so often in the speech of the lower class male figures in the other scenes. Tony



Fig. 3. Practice. Billy Elliot. 2000

alone, for example, uses the word ‘fuck’ more than twenty times in the movie, applying it in order to express feelings, dominance and emphasis – factors that the examiners definitely achieve in different ways; for instance, through moderate gestures, mimicry or by altering the tone of voice, and they also typically indicate imperatives with the help of elegant expressions such as “Would you like to...” or saying “Thank you” at the end of the audition.⁵⁰

Naturally, speech is also primarily formed by the family and the immediate environment. Argyle points out an interesting fact in connection with the question of elaborated talk in the family: he says that while middle-class parents usually answer questions in a more detailed way and give more information, in the case of lower classes the reply to ‘why’ questions is often ‘because they do’, which obviously does not help the children’s development neither in communication skills, nor in logical thinking.⁵¹ A good example from the movie is Billy’s enquiry about what is wrong with his doing ballet and the father’s repeated answer “You know”, or Billy’s question to Tony about death and the brother’s not too informative reply “Fuck off”. As a contrast, we could mention the conversation about the strike between Billy and Debbie’s father, in which the man always gives elaborate answers to Billy’s questions; for example, when he, not getting the point the father is trying to make, asks “Who doesn’t [have a leg to stand on]?”, he gets an explanatory reply and some food for thought: “The miners. It stands to reason, doing it. Some pits are just uneconomical. If it costs more money to pay everybody to dig the coal out than you get for it when you sell it, what does that tell you?”

Another reason for a more simple speech in lower-class circles is the fact that the members normally have to communicate only with people from the same environment,

using the same layer of the language – the residents of a miners’ town, for example –, in contrast with the members of the middle or upper middle class, who usually meet a lot of different people because of their job – like teaching at a university –, which obviously results in better communication skills. In accordance with these conditions, working-class speech really presumes that the listener will be a friend or a neighbour, that is, someone who has the same background and knowledge about the world, and, this way, often omits explanations, uses a less diverse vocabulary, half sentences and more concrete phrases with less general information on a certain issue; while middle and upper class speech is more abstract, reflecting on categories instead to express ideas more clearly and elaborately.⁵² At this point we could mention the change in Billy’s speech during the conversation with the examiners. We, who have seen his story, know what he means by answering only “Dancing” to the question of the man about what he loves about dancing, but those who do not have this background knowledge, do not have much chance to grasp the point.⁵³ However, right before leaving he manages to express his thoughts about this new phenomenon in his life in a more elaborate way – comparing his dance experience to electricity: “I sort of disappear. Like I feel a change in my whole body. Like there is a fire in my body. I’m just there flying like a bird. Like electricity. Yeah, electricity,” which also indicates his ability to adapt to the other class, their ways of a more sophisticated, sensitive self-expression.

The somewhat closed or limited state of the lower classes discussed above is apparently in connection with their habits and concepts connected to travelling and the perception of space and distances, as well. It is worth contemplating a little on the meaning of the word ‘neighbour’ – the differences of its possible understandings for certain classes are rather telling. For lower classes ‘neighbour’ refers to someone living next door, for the middle-class it indicates someone living in the same street or nearby. A working-class person really feels at home in his house, street and the local pub, where he continuously runs into the people he knows – as it can be seen is *Billy Elliot*, too. Tony’s sentence “I’m telling you, the whole world will be on the picket line this morning”, is quite telling, although obviously not meant literally: probably, most of *his* world will really be there. Therefore, a working-class person is less geographically mobile, as Argyle puts it,⁵⁴ and travels less, which is clear from the bus scene of the movie, with the father admitting that he has “never made it past Durham”. In contrast, for the middle and upper classes making trips in the country and going abroad are natural activities.⁵⁵ Probably we do not suppose, for example, that the friendly and relaxed boy at the audition, taking it for granted that he, as well as Billy, can attend the entrance exam any year, had any problems or difficulties coming to the Academy.

Focusing still on the audition scene, we may deal with another problem that has already been referred to, namely the phenomenon when people from different groups or classes meet, and try to accommodate to each other’s style, either to make themselves accepted by the other, or simply to avoid communication difficulties – which effort is, of course, not always successful, as it is indicated in the movie as well. Here, it might also be useful to remember the ‘convergence-divergence rule’. When somebody wishes to be approved of, liked and admitted by a group, he tries to live up to the norms and the prototype of the given group as much as he can; and the more he approaches the ideal type of that group, the more attractive he is found by the members. Quite

obviously, in the case of an entrance exam this factor plays a central part, with the applicant converging towards the examiners.⁵⁶

The audition scene serves as a peak of the movie, expressing that Billy is definitely getting closer and closer to the social group denoted by the Academy, which is shown by his divergence from the working-class prototype of speech, movement, values or view of life in general. This situation and marginal position he acquires in his original social group is, accordingly, honoured by disapproval on the working-class characters' side in the beginning, but accepted and supported later.⁵⁷ It is important to note that, in spite of the problems, we can see signs of the father trying to live up to the atmosphere of the Academy, too – a significant part of the motivation for this is probably his wish to help his son's advancement. Among these signs we could list some thought-out answers – like “I wouldn't exactly say I was an expert” –, the quite everyday idea of putting on elegant clothes, or taking up relatively moderate gestures and movement. The last criterion, body language is, however, a more complex issue, both in the movie and in general, and leads us to further questions, such as problems of gender or aggression.

It is common knowledge that non-verbal communication is harder to control than verbal, as the former is not consciously learnt, but more basic and instinctive; consequently, it is harder to change our habitual facial expressions, gestures and movement than our words.⁵⁸ The father is, therefore, just as unsuccessful in moving elegantly as in his less than sophisticated answers. In contrast, the gestures of the examiners are delicate, even graceful, which can be taken as a by-product of ballet – a very special form of expressing emotions through movement. Such a coordinated, we could say aristocratic, body language Billy acquires through hard work and many years by the end of the movie. A beautiful, again emblematic, moment of transition is the “angry dance”, where we can perfectly see how the aggression present in Billy is turned masterly into energy for self-control, self-development and the creation of an artistic self-expression.

The feminine tinge of ballet is obvious from several factors in the work; for example, it is especially emphasized by the presence of Michael as the only male figure to like the idea of Billy dancing from the beginning, the relation assumed between homosexuality and the love of ballet, or by the fact that all characters supporting Billy in dancing are female (Mrs. Wilkinson, Debbie, the grandmother) or feminine (Michael) figures. To some extent, it is natural that this type of dance is associated with women rather than men, and that, for the lower classes in particular, the movement and gestures of the upper classes in general may seem more feminine than their own, as well, which problem is also connected to the issue of male gender roles in different groups of society. As I have already mentioned, while we see the movement of the upper classes, even apart from ballet, as quite elaborate, similarly to their speech, lower-class movement is much rawer, more masculine – it is enough to think of the typical leisure activities Billy is expected to take up: boxing, football or wrestling.

The choice of the ballet *Swan Lake* for the movie carries special significance as well. Motifs of orientalism and melancholy are well-known features of Romanticism; accordingly, the upper-middle class of the nineteenth century constituting the audience of ballet performances was attracted to adaptations of legends and fairy tales with lots of magical elements and wizardry. Romantic fantasy embodied on stage required new ways of expression and techniques that are considered the most complicated bal-

let steps still today, evoking the atmosphere of flying and lightness – a component of the so-called ‘elevation-technique’ is visible in the final scene of *Billy Elliot*.⁵⁹ The style wishing to defy gravity was and is really seen as feminine, even in the field of ballet: the illusion of flight and fairylike floating achieved through slow jumps (like the one we see at the end of the movie) and long-kept-out tiptoe poses or other movements involving tiptoeing (such as the ‘pas de bourrées’ Mrs. Wilkinson mentions) made female dancers come to the headlights and men had to serve this idea of femininity, too. This feminine atmosphere of ballet reached its peak in the second half of the nineteenth century, when it became normal for women to play male roles in order to bring the air described above to completion. Probably, it is no exaggeration to call Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*, written in 1875–1876, choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov, the most significant manifestation of this ballet era and philosophy.⁶⁰ It is important to note, however, that the performance appearing at the end of the movie is not the classic version of the ballet, but a peculiar adaptation directed and choreographed by Matthew Bourne. The most controversial point of his work was that he exchanged the genders, having men play the swans and casting the role of Odette, the Swan, on a male dancer, too – renamed as Odile –, which rearrangement of the piece triggered praise as well as disapproval after its world premiere in 1995; naturally, the main charge was the advocacy of homosexuality. In the final scene of the movie we can see the dancer Adam Cooper in the role of the grown-up Billy, playing the part of the Swan, which Bourne gave him in his production of the ballet.⁶¹ From all these, it is quite clear that the choice of a certain ballet, along with other factors in the film, serves to emphasize the gender problem evolving in this situational and social context, the conflict between the lower-class male role and the feminine tinge of doing ballet, in order to point out the basic and penetrating nature of the obstacles before Billy.

The father pushes his son instinctively to behave according to the male role accepted in their community because of the problem of integration. Adhering to behavioural norms is not only important because of the cohesion of the given group, which is especially significant for the miners’ community in these harsh times, but it also helps the individual’s life inside the group, making him an accepted and respected member.⁶² The man, clearly, wants the best for his son by not only providing him with a model of working-class male behaviour every day, but also pushing him to do boxing, indicating social and family tradition by the fact that the gloves were Billy’s grandfather’s. He also forbids him to do ballet, the feminine tinge of which would be embarrassing both for the boy and for the whole family in this rawly masculine miners’ area and a historical situation that requires the display of strength. It is interesting to note that the father and Tony start to support Billy’s plans diverging from the working-class model when they realise that he has the chance, indeed, to get into the Royal Ballet School, which is not only significant from the aspect that they eventually recognize how talented Billy is, but also because if the boy is admitted and becomes a ballet dancer, the working-class role will no longer be relevant for him. In short, the emphasis is not on making Billy behave according to the working-class patterns (any more), but on the fact that he should fit the social context he is going to live in. There are some cases, however, where, in turn, Billy expresses his attachment to his original group.



Fig. 4. Closing scene. Billy Elliot. 2000

From this aspect, it is interesting to pay attention to the scene in which Billy hits the boy in the dressing room. Billy feels perplexed and naturally still alien from the place, the people, the atmosphere present at the Academy, which he aspired for before. This feeling of disappointment or failure obviously generates great tension in him, which problem he solves, so to say, by seeking relief in physical violence. So, what happens here is that psychologically, and also symbolically, as a consequence of feeling out of place at the Academy, he expresses a kind of attachment to his own social class and male model, which he previously tried to break loose from. The tension, of course, is not only created by the concrete situation evolving at the Academy, but it is probably bottled up by the time of the emotional explosion in question. Here we should remember Berger's argument about the psychological burden of social mobility.⁶³ Applying the model to Billy, we can say that even before the audition scene he has to cope with a complicated issue, as he continuously makes efforts to adapt to all of his significant others: the original ones, his family as well as the chosen one, Mrs. Wilkinson, balancing between the two parties, more or less successfully. The pressure is indicated by several confrontations along the movie, such as the ones between the father and Mrs. Wilkinson, Billy and his father, or Tony and Mrs. Wilkinson, during which Tony even calls the teacher "middle-class cow", making the social nature of the clash clear. The case is further complicated by the fact that, as later everyone admits, Billy's late mother, belonging to the group of the original significant others, would join Mrs. Wilkinson in the debate;⁶⁴ thus, the sides are levelled. Naturally, as all of these characters are really important for him, Billy tries not to betray anyone, which is, apparently, impossible. After making his serious decision and, as a result of hard work, having everyone around supporting him, it is not surprising at all that, feeling defeated at the audition, the tension in him culminates and he displays signs of "anxiety, insecurity and

psychological disorder”, which John H. Goldthorpe lists as natural consequences of the frustration involved in social mobility,⁶⁵ in a working-class way, showing his loyalty to the community that eventually stands beside him.

The lower-class male role is associated most typically with masculinity in all levels of society. Lower-class speech is, for example, considered more masculine, and middle-class men tend to use working-class, or ‘under-correct’ speech styles to appear more manly. Similarly, a man is expected to be strong and able to keep order, often through means of violence. Generally speaking, such occurrences of violence are more usual in working-class environments. This phenomenon is partly a result of the fact that working-class parents are prone to use physical punishment instead of reasoning, the typical approach in the case of middle-class ones.⁶⁶ In the movie both Billy and Tony are hit by the father; in contrast, when Debbie’s father passionately argues that the mines should be closed, and Billy tells Debbie afterwards that “I thought he was gonna hit me”, the girl’s answer is only “Don’t be silly”, meaning that such a scene is unimaginable for her, even when the man is “under a lot of pressure” and “drinks too much”. On the other hand, it is often quite natural for working class children that, because of the environment they live in, which might as well be dangerous, they need to learn how to protect themselves; and the ability of displaying physical strength might be necessary for boys to reach a respectable position in the community as well.

For the upper classes, however, the importance of refined manner is greater than this common masculine role discussed above, which is indicated, for example, by the fact that while in the working-class environment hitting someone is an accepted, manly act, at the Academy it is assessed as a serious disciplinary problem. Still, we should not think that the display of power has less significance here: methods of dominance exist in these circles as well. One sign of this is the ‘dominant speech style’, that of the examiners, which is “loud, confident, expressive, of lower pitch, with more talk,...more interruptions”⁶⁷ and an even, measured speech rate, concerning the content, it can be characterized by statements, strong opinions and commands, accompanied by a serious facial expression and the head held still.⁶⁸ In contrast, the ‘deferential style’, that of the father and Billy, is “less loud, nervous, high pitched, less expressive, with less talk and no interruptions”;⁶⁹ accompanied by fidgeting, moving jerkily, holding onto something or assuming a restricted space.⁷⁰ In spite of the moderate, and perhaps in a way less masculine, atmosphere of this more aristocratic way of keeping order, it is very effective, which is perfectly shown by the behaviour of Billy and the father in front of the board of examiners.

It is clear that Billy’s figure is a typical in-between character moving upward the social ladder. He is luckily in possession of some properties, like energy or will-power, that help him a lot with the process of social mobility. The keywords of upward social mobility are all grouped around the concept of self-development, which is strongly attached to education, and which we assess as a prototypical middle-class feature. While in working-class families the main aim is usually to discipline the child, middle-class parents are more concerned with his encouragement or achievement motivation, transmitting knowledge, teaching him how to think and develop self-direction.⁷¹ The acquirement of these abilities creates the notion of internal control in the individual, that is, the view and belief that he is a powerful and responsible person, and can bring

about change in his life and environment. Clearly, this conviction, strengthened to a great extent by education, means a lot of help with shaping one's future. In contrast, working-class individuals tend to believe in external control, that is, they think that they have no real effect on the upcoming events around them, which obviously has its realistic causes, but often they apply this view, as a stiffened pattern, even in situations they could alter, creating unnecessary limits.⁷² The signs of the differences regarding how parents raise and handle their children, and the result of the fact that middle-class parents tend to read more to the child, tell more tales and buy more educational toys and books, can be seen by the second year of the child concerning his abilities such as communicational skills, handling of abstract notions or attention span.⁷³ Therefore, while middle-class children are prepared consciously for education, working-class children are at a disadvantage by the time they go to school.⁷⁴

This is the problem Gillian Evans deals with in her book titled *Educational Failure*: how it is possible that, although the main device of social mobility, education,⁷⁵ is more or less available for everyone today, most working-class children are still unable to utilize the opportunity.⁷⁶ The main answers are concerned with the disadvantages from the beginning, the concept of school as a middle-class institution and the labelling process of teachers. We find that school as such, requiring responsibility, diligence, efficiency, thoroughness, and self-control from the pupil, embodies middle-class values and morality,⁷⁷ which may not only cause frustration and resistance because of the lack of preparedness on the child's side, but also because of his reluctance to accept and switch to the guidelines or rules of the other group,⁷⁸ to succumb to the so-called 'hidden curriculum', which attempts to make everyone middle-class.⁷⁹ Moreover, the display of some working-class social values, like toughness or the expression of the 'we-against-them' attitude, at school – which most often serves as an avoidance strategy triggered by the sense of failure⁸⁰ – is highly impractical, contributing to the teacher's labelling of the child, which, based on the discipline and the perceivable educational skills, usually happens by the eighth day.⁸¹ This categorisation, which is both natural and dangerous in such a situation, has the power to work as a self-fulfilling prophecy: as these children are neither believed or expected, nor helped in proper ways to learn, they are likely to be unable to profit from the chances theoretically provided by the school.⁸²

Therefore, it is crucial that Billy internalizes many of the values described above. He certainly acquires some of them, in a basic form, during his interaction with the mother. We cannot see much of this process; however, we may follow how Mrs. Wilkinson's character becomes especially important in his later development, cultivating these traits and aiming to complete them (Fig. 3). The fact that the teacher, logically, represents the principles concerning child raising discussed above is not only shown by the numerous certificates of merit on Debbie's wall, and by her rewarding the boy's work by caring for him, but by her comments and orders towards Billy and the other pupils, too. We find examples in the form of sentences like "Look ahead! Where is your confidence?" addressed to the whole class, "I think, you are good enough to go for it." or "It would mean an awful lot of hard work" addressed to Billy, and the recurring topic of the necessity of concentrating and making efforts to succeed. The following conversation between Billy and Mrs. Wilkinson, in which the teacher is pushing the boy to (want to) achieve his potential, can be found in the movie twice:

- Concentrate! / That’s because you’re not concentrating!
- I am concentrating.
- You’re not even trying.

Encouraged by his teacher, Billy becomes more and more enthusiastic about ballet and the idea of self-development and education.

In the last scene (Fig. 4), the setting is London, approximately ten years later – based on the date of Bourne’s production of the ballet *Swan Lake*, and the supposable age of the characters. Billy is already a successful ballet dancer, and has acquired all the technical and psychological skills required. We can see him dancing the main role in the performance, carrying out a long jump, a step of the elevation technique, evoking the same illusion of weightlessness that we could see at the beginning of the movie, although in a different way. Indeed, we may as well feel that, apart from the anti-gravity atmosphere and a sense of lightness, everything has changed. Billy has gone a long way from his spring bed to the stage of the Theatre Royal Haymarket, and from dancing around happily to T-Rex for his own entertainment to becoming part of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*, appearing in front of influential audiences. This situation, implicitly, also involves the expectation to perform excellently on all occasions and means a lot of hard work, not only up to the point where the dancer reaches the level of proficiency, but permanently, too. This factor, I think, can be perceived very well in the whole scene, especially through the serious, tense and excited facial expressions of both Billy and the others.

Some people I have talked to about the movie are of the opinion that we actually miss the most exciting part: the years of hard work – to meet “the highest standards not just in ballet, but in ordinary academic work”, as the examiner says – and the adaptation to a new world are omitted. However, we may as well have educated guesses about what could have happened, based on the last few minutes of the movie and the secondary literature. We can read a really telling description of the expectations a ballet dancer has to meet and the most important rules he has to follow in Richard Johnson’s article entitled “Ballet: The Secret Lives of Dancers”. In the report, the Royal Ballet’s finest members talk about the competition in the profession, the aim to achieve and maintain perfection concerning both technique and personal beauty, the strict diet, the painful process of learning the often inhumane steps, the regular injuries, or the long, exhausting and demanding hours of practice every day.⁸³ The article also adds that the situation is the “worst when the company is doing *Swan Lake*”,⁸⁴ because it contains numerous examples of the hardest steps in ballet; that is, the choice of this work in *Billy Elliot* also serves excellently as an expression of the amazing technical achievement on the protagonist’s side. From this success and the circumstances mentioned above, we know, moreover, that work plays the central role in Billy’s life; it is, certainly, present as a most significant target and cause of his actions, a source of aspirations, pleasure and satisfaction, which attitude is typically associated with the upper classes.⁸⁵

We come to the conclusion that Billy, becoming a recognised ballet dancer, has found his way into the upper-middle-class world of this profession, adapting the necessary, prototypical traits we have mentioned. As it is assumed, this socialization into his new group is assured by the Royal Ballet School; thus, education, which we have already identified as the main device of social mobility.⁸⁶ Zanden calls boarding schools,

just like prisons and monasteries, ‘total institutions’, which restructure the behavioural patterns of the ‘inmates’ to a considerable degree so as to prepare them for a certain way of life in a given community,⁸⁷ a new reality. Here we should think of the social psychological features of social mobility, such as having two separate social networks, possibly involving tense situations at times, or the reduced frequency of meeting and communication with the original group.⁸⁸ The latter we can also see from the fact that the father still navigates London rather awkwardly; he cannot have visited his son too often, and Billy, as a pupil of a boarding school, cannot have spent much time at home, either. Tony feels more comfortable in the city, which might suggest that he is more mobile, in either sense of the word, too. Another somewhat obscure point in the final scene is Michael’s presence. It is clear that the father and Tony do not expect to meet him in the audience; still, it is curious that they have their seats next to each other. Provided that Billy invited Michael, it is strange that he has not mentioned it to his family, and indicates a limited kind of communication; while if the young man, who used to be the supportive and enthusiastic best friend, arrived spontaneously, because he “wouldn’t have missed it for the world”, that shows us a break in the old relationships even more – just like Mrs. Wilkinson’s absence.

Therefore, the audience does not get much information about the years and the circumstances of the protagonist’s nice transition from a rawer, premature representative of the working class into an elevated, and actually celebrated, member of the higher circles of society. Still, even if the perhaps hardest and most exciting phase, the years of persevering work and tricky situations in a different social group, remains unseen, it becomes clear that we can examine the characteristics and behavioural categories through the points that the writer and the director choose to show us, viewers from this long and edifying psychological development of a child and a young man, and from the influences around him, as well as the organic connection between the individual and the social context.

Notes

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- 40 *Billy Elliot* (BBC Films/Arts Council of England/Studio Canal/Tiger Aspect/WT2/Working Title Films, 2000) *Director*: Stephen Daldry; *Script*: Lee Hall; *Cast*: Julie Walters (Mrs. Wilkinson), Jamie Bell (Billy Elliot), Jamie Draven (Tony Elliot), Gary Lewis (Jackie Elliot), Jean Heywood (Grandma), Stuart Wells Michael Caffrey),

- Mike Elliot (George Watson), Janine Birkett (Billy's mum), Nicola Blackwell (Debbie Wilkinson)
- 41 Billy Elliot Official Home Page; David McDowall, *An Illustrated History of Britain* (Harlow: Longman, 2004), 178–180.
 - 42 Argyle, 1994, 184.
 - 43 Billy Elliot DVD; Geoff Mayer, *Guide to British Cinema* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003), 12–13, 24.
 - 44 Turner, 1993, 93.
 - 45 The most emblematic example is David Bowie's 'Space Oddity' and his 'Ziggy Stardust' project, but another T-Rex song appearing in the movie, entitled 'Ride a White Swan' could also be mentioned.
 - 46 Argyle, 1994, 113.
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 - 61 John Cunningham, "Coming on in Leaps and Bounds," *The Guardian* 16 September 2000.
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 - 64 Mrs. Wilkinson's and the mother's figures are also connected very efficiently by the scenes of the appearance at the fridge and the dance instructions at the sport hall, put right next to each other. In the two parts we perceive the same peaceful and intimate atmosphere, with Billy paying attention and accepting the caring instructions devotedly, which creates continuity between the scenes. While the psychological relationship between the two characters on screen remains, the mother's figure is replaced by Mrs. Wilkinson.
 - 65 Goldthorpe, 1980, 176.
 - 66 Argyle, 1994, 85, 89, 106, 136.
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- 80 Evans, 2006, 55, 69, 72, 97.
- 81 Argyle, 1994, 182.
- 82 Evans, 2006, 1–2; Zanden, 1988, 474.
- 83 Today the practice at the Royal Ballet normally happens in the form of seventy–five–minute classes followed by six–hour–long rehearsals often without a break, which fact is quite revealing regarding the everyday of ballerinas; just like the fact that the pain threshold of ballet dancers is three times higher than that of ordinary people. Johnson, 2009.
- 84 Johnson, 2009.
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- 88 Goldthorpe, 1980, 152, 176–177; Berger and Luckmann, 2011, 161–163.