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A version of this article has been accepted for publication in *Journal of British Cinema and Television*

Criss-Cross: Identity and Transformation in Re-reading *Billy Elliot*

Abstract: *Billy Elliot* (2000) has been widely recognised as an important British film of the post-Thatcher period. It has been analysed using multiple disciplinary methodologies but almost always from the theoretical frameworks of class and gender/sexuality. The film has sometimes been used not so much as a focus of analysis itself but as a conduit for exploring issues such as class deprivation or neoliberal politics and economics. Such studies tend to use the film's perceived shortcomings as a starting point to critique society's wider failings to interrogate constructions of gender and sexuality. This article argues that an examination of the identity formation of some of the film's subsidiary characters shows how fluidity and transformation are key to the film's opening up of a *jouissance* which is enabled by but goes beyond its central character.

Keywords: *Billy Elliot*; British cinema; dance; identity formation; gender-crossing

Introduction: Dance, transformation and *jouissance*

Billy Elliot (2000) is a film set in a County Durham mining village against a backdrop of the 1984-5 miners' strike, about an adolescent boy in a dysfunctional family of father, two sons, and a grandmother, grieving for their recently dead wife, mother,

and daughter; the story is that of the boy Billy (Jamie Bell) who breaks all conventions and stereotypes to achieve success at the Royal Ballet School and triumphs on the London stage. It has been analysed using multiple disciplinary methodologies including cinematography (Boseley 2000), sociology (Ashley 2009), and education (Judy 2010), but almost always from two, sometimes overlapping, theoretical frameworks: class and gender/sexuality. Given the explicitly political context of the miners' strike, and the countering of class, sexuality, and gender expectations seemingly encoded within Billy's , engagement with ballet, the film has sometimes been used not so much as a focus of analysis itself but as a conduit for exploring the author's agenda, such as class deprivation (Ashley 2009) or neoliberal politics and economics (Alderson 2011). Moreover, studies tend to use the film's perceived shortcomings as a starting point to critique society's wider failings to interrogate constructions of gender and sexuality. For example, David Alderson in his 2015 *Camera Obscura* article, 'Making electricity: narrating gender, sexuality, and the neoliberal transition' in *Billy Elliot* , harangues the film for not recognising the contribution made to the miners' strike by gay and lesbian activists.

¹ For Alan Sinfield in his *History Workshop Journal* article, 'Boys, class and gender: from Billy Casper to Billy Elliot' (2006), the film's real failing is to not query the gendering of ballet as feminine. However, the current literature surrounding the film has been limited in its challenge to social norms. While on the one hand its perceived message is accepted as positive in that boys, if they choose, may become ballet dancers, such a reading reinforces as many stereotypes as it subverts. It continues to associate ballet with homosexuality – it is only the accompanying pit village homophobia that it critiqued; it fails to address the complexity of the cultural identities of the other male characters; and it continues to embrace the predominant

social stereotype for women, that they are essentially nurturers. This is seen through the characters of Billy's dead mother, who continues to guide him from the grave, his ballet teacher, Mrs Wilkinson (Julie Walters), and even his grandmother, whose dementia has robbed her of the nurturing role and thus rendered her burdensome to the all-male family.

Instead of narrowly focusing on Billy and his journey to becoming a dancer, I want here to re-read the film thus freeing it from its more familiar interpretations, and examine the film's scrutiny of the complexity of gender and identity with particular reference to Tony and Mrs Wilkinson as well as some of the more minor characters. Drawing on the work of film and gender theorists including Yvonne Tasker, Steve Neale, and Marjorie Garber (whose work in this specific field has been hitherto mainly confined to 'escapist' Hollywood cinema), I will argue that *Billy Elliot* does not challenge existing stereotypes only to set up new ones, but instead looks at socio-cultural identity in complex, layered, and non-binary ways, thus demonstrating that identity is composite, never finite and always transformative. Through close readings of mise en scene, particularly costume and significant props, as well as an examination of the nuances of language and spaciality, I will demonstrate how the film represents the ways that society might seek to construct restrictive gendered norms, but also examine how it suggests that these norms may be subverted by the slippery range of identities encoded within the film's characters. Taking further Tasker's concept of gender transformation and the 'delight' such scenes evoke, often through their 'montage sequences' and 'up beat soundtrack' (1998: 27), I will suggest that *Billy Elliot's* emphasis on performance, and a physicality which is not confined to ballet but includes dance and movement more broadly, has a relationship with Barthesian *jouissance* in its sense of a text which 'abolishes . . . all barriers'

(Barthes 1975: 3). An examination of *Billy Elliot's* form is also relevant for exploring the ways its frequent breaks with classic realism mirror its breaks with social stereotyping.

A re-evaluation of 'British realism'

Billy Elliot is often grouped as a trio with two other films produced within a few years of each other, with superficially similar themes: *Brassed Off* (Mark Herman, 1996) and *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) respectively address pit closures in the aftermath of the failure of the miners' strike, and the problem of unemployment amongst former steel workers in post-industrial Sheffield. All three films are 'inflected by the struggle of the working-class male to maintain his manhood and self-esteem while out of work. In these films, traditional images of masculinity – especially of the father as breadwinner and master of the household – no longer seem relevant' (Lancioni 2006 708). They also have in common the use of a cultural performance – a brass band orchestra, a disco striptease troupe, ballet – as a seeming means of resolving these struggles and deprivations. *Billy Elliot* is also frequently paired with another miserable, alienated, northern working class cinematic Billy, *Kes'* (1969) Billy Casper (David Bradley) who similarly has a brutal elder brother, one absent and one uncaring parent, and is expected to become a coal miner (Sinfield 2006).² However, *Billy Elliot* differs from these films partly through its more creative and complex use of narrative and through its exploration and application of concepts of identity transformation. Essentially, despite a superficial feel-good scene – the competition-winning concert at the Royal Albert Hall in *Brassed Off* and the one time only, money-making striptease act in *The Full Monty*, and the moments when Billy's spirits soar with his kestrel's flight in *Kes* – nothing and no-one is transformed; the status quo is essentially the same at the end and beginning of the films. By contrast, *Billy*

Elliot delineates change. Alison Platt feels it is '[untruthful to childhood that] In effect the family that Billy Elliot has at the end of the film is not the family he has at the beginning: they change, he doesn't' (2003: 10) but in fact all the characters, including minor village figures, and certainly Billy, experience transformation through Billy's dancing, and its mechanism of jouissance.

Michael: criss-cross-identity dressing and breaking cultural boundaries

The film opens with Billy playing his brother's copy of the T Rex album, 'Electric Warrior', and joyously bouncing, rather than dancing, on his bed. It is as if he does not yet really know that dancing exists, but that physical movement is his route to self-expression, and relief from grieving for his mother and his miserable home life. Of course Billy does very quickly become aware of dancing. He is apparently expected to conform to the stereotype of masculine sport, learning to box at the village hall, but instead is beguiled into joining the hitherto all-girls ballet class. When Billy joins in, he has to swap his culturally masculine blue boxing boots for a pair of girls' ballet slippers This has been described as, 'crossing cultural boundaries' (Archard 2008: 138), but I would argue this is not a one way journey, but a boundary that is crossed and re-crossed. Cynthia Weber has noted 'the film's blurring of ballet and boxing, foreshadowed by Billy's balletic boxing before he began ballet lessons, and his consistent draping of his ballet slippers around his neck like boxing gloves' (2003). Thus Billy begins a motif of cross-dressing that recurs throughout the film and is shared from character to character, and which challenges any fixity of identity, in terms of gender, class or sexuality.

Cross-dressing is normally associated with transvestitism and the most notable example of a cross-dresser in *Billy Elliot* is Michael (Stuart Wells) whom we

learn cross-dresses in his sister's clothes when his parents are out. The term 'pouf' is often used in the film, usually connoting homosexuality. Billy wonders if Michael is a 'pouf', and Michael's admission is to ask Billy not to tell anyone. However, male to female transvestites are not usually homosexual in orientation and Michael's father is also a closet cross-dresser, utilising his wife's wardrobe. Michael has learned from his father 'that it's okay to play with gender and sexuality' (Judy 2010: 122), a lesson which in itself challenges notions of the binary gendered culture presumed to prevail in mining villages and counters the stereotyped patriarchy connoted by the ritualistic passing down of Jackie's father's boxing gloves to third generation Billy.. Michael does seem to wistfully desire Billy, and is thus, as a cross-dresser, not a 'pouf' but tentatively transgender or, at least, a man who will choose to live as a woman, at this point desiring Billy as a heterosexual girl would desire a boy. The sustained ambiguity of Michael's character is emphasised in the closing scene when he is in the audience for Billy's triumph in Swan Lake. He is evidently with a male lover, but whether he is 'straightforwardly' gay, or, as might be conveyed by his elaborate make-up and flamboyant appearance – his lover is more conventionally masculine' – or transgender, we cannot ascertain. Moreover, the subcultural discourse of gay slang is, to those with any knowledge of its codings, highly ambiguous, serving as a means of linguistic disguise from 'straight' society, and 'pouf' is one of its slipperiest terms. As Riktor Norton points out: 'No one knows the literal meaning or origin of the British term for pansy, *pouf* [author's emphasis] – or even how it should be spelled (pouf, poove, pooff, puff) or how it should be pronounced (poof, puff, poove)' (2011). Similarly, when first dressed in ballet gear, Billy bleats to Mrs Wilkinson that he 'feels like a sissy'. She tells him, 'don't act like one then', demonstrating a subjective gap between language and definition.

For Michael, cross-dressing is a way of thwarting the biologically male identity with which he feels no affinity. What does it mean for Billy? In *Working Girls*, Yvonne Tasker argues that since cross-dressing is 'subtly suggestive of transgression, of the erosion of boundaries rather than crass opposition or binary logic, the appeal of cross-dressing imagery can be further situated within "queer theory" with its characteristic delight in the gender-fuck and its passionate political challenge to binary conceptions of identity' (1998: 21). Thus I would refine the term to cross-identity dressing and argue that, far from becoming a 'pouf', when assuming ballet costume, Billy is liberating himself from any form of fixed identity.

Tony: cross identity dressing and performance

Although hitherto overlooked, there are other characters practicing cross-identity dressing and social performance, notably Tony (Jamie Draven), Billy's elder brother. .³ Tony is a character who, like Dorothy/Michael (Dustin Hoffman) in *Tootsie* (1982), slips backwards and forwards across binary gendering, the difference being that Dorothy/Michael is aware of the constructed nature of the performance while for Tony, gender flux is simply his way of being. As the film begins, he is preparing to aggressively join the picket line, and is hurrying their father, Jackie (Gary Lewis) out of the house for this purpose, but without losing pace, and giving the question equal import, he asks Billy if he's tidied the room they share. Throughout the film, Tony continues to clean the house, thus performing 'feminine' tasks such as vacuuming and while doing so, matter-of-factly rather than humorously, wears an apron which replicates a scantily-clad, sexualised female body. These domestic activities occur at key moments in the narrative's forward trajectory: the inception of the strike and picket line; the scene after Jackie's acceptance of Billy's dancing when the whole town is now fund raising for his London audition; and the arrival of the audition

results. The scenes each take identity components and incrementally problematize them.

The first of these scenes presents Tony as a conventionally 'masculine', denim-clad male, his performance being further confirmed as 'masculine' through his class-aggression in seeking the picket line. Tony's sexuality is not interrogated at any point; he has no romantic interest in the film, and makes no comment on a female character, with the exception of his non-sexualised tirade against Mrs Wilkinson (Julie Walters). Neither does he evince romantic or sexual interest in a male character, although his masculine heterosexuality might be connoted by his shrill criticism of 'poufs'. However, costume, language and the slippage of subject matter present the complexities of Tony's cultural identities. Pulling on a black donkey jacket with an NUM official picket armband over his jeans, denim jacket and tee-shirt, he shouts: 'Dad, we'll be late. I tell you the whole frigging world will be on that picket line this morning. Oy, have you tidied our room? Dad!' His first clause, addressed to Jackie, and heightened by his costume and expletives connotes the conventions of masculinity as does the urgency of the repeated, 'dad'. But this is undercut by his 'feminine' concern for a tidy room.

The ambiguous dichotomy between 'masculine' physicality and 'feminine' domesticity and the codings of the picket line are further explored in the initial scene in which the strikers battle with the police. The scene opens with Billy and his friend Debbie (Nicola Blackwell) walking along the street, first passing a series of NUM posters exhorting miners to 'strike now', then a row of policemen dressed in riot gear including shields, truncheons and protective helmets. They pause in front of another poster, this time advertising a Servis washing machine. Its image is of a handsome young man, shirt sleeves rolled up, leaning on the machine, captioned 'Your ever-

faithful washday slave'. Like Michael, this poster melds a 'masculine' body with the femininity of domesticity, further adding implied sexual service to the purchaser, who might equally be a heterosexual woman or gay man. The queries set up by this series of visual images is amplified by Debbie and Billy's concurrent discussion about masculinity, sexuality and the male body in relation to ballet. Debbie, the daughter of a dance teacher, tells Billy that plenty of men do ballet. She undercuts his retort of 'poufs' with the example of Wayne Sleep: 'he's not a pouf', she says, and what's more, 'he's a fit as an athlete' and has stamina to match Daley Thompson. Sleep, who might be an implied extra-textual role model for Billy, having spent his childhood in Hartlepool, County Durham and won a Royal Ballet School scholarship, may, as an 'out' homosexual, be a 'pouf' if that is the term's synonym here but the reference to Sleep is more than what John Hill describes as a 'knowing joke' (2004: 105); the connotations of physical strength imply the range of identities within a single individual.

These tensions are repeated in the next linked scene which occurs after the community has accepted Billy's dancing ambitions. Billy and his former boxing club coach (Mike Elliot) are counting donations to the audition fund. Tony interjects at the paucity of the sum raised: 'Look at youse, you're fuckin' scrabblin' around for fifty pences, you've gotta do better than that'. The conventions of masculinity are presented by his profane language and anger but offset by the drag apron and the cloth he is holding which confirm his continued domesticity, and are further complicated now by the additionally 'feminine' demonstrations of caring about his younger brother which we have observed.

The final scene which demonstrates Tony's cross-gender identification opens with Tony with his back to the camera, ostensibly drying dishes, but covering his

nerves by continually polishing a cup. The family's unity is represented by the triptych frame composition of Gran (Jean Hayward) and Jackie sitting at the kitchen table while Tony stands between them. Billy takes his results letter out of the room to open it privately. To contain his own nerves, Jackie practices the conventionally masculine trope of rolling a cigarette while Tony fastidiously hands him an ashtray. Tony maintains his masculine/feminine link to the washing machine poster by standing, cloth in hand throughout the scene, replicating the convention used in television commercials that a woman always stands in service at the table while her family eats.

Mrs Wilkinson: cross-identity dressing and performance

Mrs Wilkinson serves as an obverse parallel to Tony. She is introduced to us at the same time as Billy has his introduction to ballet. The socially stereotyped agenda for her character's function is set by two signs on the exterior of the village hall. A large blue sign highlights 'Everington Boys Club second floor' (alongside the figure of a young male boxer) whilst below it is a smaller pink-toned sign for 'Deborah Wilkinson's Dance School'. Inside, the boxing coach informs the lads that because a soup kitchen has been set up 'downstairs' he's 'going to let Mrs Wilkinson use the bottom end of the boxing hall for her ballet lessons'. Although the ballet class is therefore 'promoted' from downstairs by the (literally) lowly and 'feminine' activity of other women cooking and serving food, the spatial hierarchy of gendered physical activities signalled by the signs is maintained. However, by utilising the tropes of language, signifiers of masculinity and costume, Mrs Wilkinson inverts and transgresses binaries of gender. In direct contrast to the ultra-feminine signification of her pupils' tutus, she conducts her classes in the 'masculine' garb of an anorak and denim boiler suit. And at other times wears a plaid shirt and duffle coat. Her

appropriation of the power encoded in masculine tropes is supported by her heavy smoking, a link she has to Jackie.⁴ Moreover, her performance supports her authority. Unlike Tony who stands to serve his family, she stands in her school because she is in charge, of her pupils and of the male pianist (Billy Fane) who sits to serve both her classes and her brusque directions for the musical accompaniment. Equally, Mrs Wilkinson's language is as profane as the male characters, breaking the taboo that women should not swear and the hierarchical power of masculine language encoded within the taboo for, as Lakoff has argued, in the use of swearing, 'the decisive factor is less purely gender than power' (1975: 57). Her authority is also supported by the use of her title throughout the film. Other characters are referred to by their given names, but the use of a title affords respect, as we see when Jackie is referred to as Mr Elliot at the Royal Ballet School and Billy's acceptance letter is addressed to 'Mr William Elliot'. Despite her presence in the community, the use of her title potentially places Mrs Wilkinson in a different class position from those who surround her.

Mrs Wilkinson is however a more complex character than one who simply reverses binaries. Rather, if Billy 'dons ballet shoes, and in doing so . . . transforms not only himself, but his family's and his community's concept of masculinity' (Lancioni: 710), Mrs Wilkinson uses costume as a permeable membrane of identity. In terms of gender her costume fluctuates between 'masculine' and 'feminine',; crossing between the 'feminine' apparel of understated dresses, discreet make-up and groomed hair when at home and the 'masculine' appearance of her dance teaching. Sometimes she produces a fusion of the two. When she is intending to take Billy to the Newcastle Royal Ballet School audition, she dresses in a denim shirt and skirt which is worn with a heavy leather jacket and cowboy boots. Thus, in

contrast to Jackie and Billy who at the audition merely present more formal versions of their everyday identities, for both Tony and Mrs Wilkinson, 'One of the most important aspects of cross dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of "female" and "male", whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural' (Garber 1992: 10-11).

For Mrs Wilkinson, as for Jackie and Billy when 'bettering themselves' through costume, class is a further complicating factor. For a film often studied from the perspective of class, it is perhaps surprising that the term is very seldom used in the film itself; exceptionally, when she comes looking for Billy after he's missed an audition, Tony, fresh from a night in the cells, calls Mrs Wilkinson a 'middle class twat'. Certainly her house and every detail of its interior is coded as 'middle class', in direct contrast to the 'working class' clutter and material deprivation of the Elliot home. Cross-class female dressing is usually associated with aspiration; for example Jody Foster's Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) is seen by Tasker as being in the process of 'becoming something other', something associated with the poised middle-class 'femininity' evinced by Julia Roberts' transformation from sex worker to apparent socialite in *Pretty Woman* (1990). As Tasker further suggests: 'For working class women, white and black, femininity can be understood as a costume or as a mode of performance that somehow does not fit. When put on it seems excessive, gaudy or parodic' (1998: 26). Mrs Wilkinson's overall 'look' in her dance and audition scenes certainly projects gaudiness and excess. Her hair is in a top-knot with escaping strands, her make-up is heavy, and she is laden with gold jewellery including large hoop earrings. Her costume thus links her to the working-class community she works in and her smoking is also a link not just to Jackie's

masculinity, but to his class status. So too, her denim overalls and leg-warmers connote a specifically working-class 'rags to riches' story in the American dance film *Flashdance* (1983) which follows the transformation of 's Alex (Jennifer Beals) who is like Billy driven by talent. Tasker comments that 'cross-dressing is almost always about status' (ibid) but, unlike the aspirational female characters she cites who use costume and personal paraphernalia as conventionally upwardly mobile tools, Mrs Wilkinson avoids class as much as gender binaries, becoming not a single, but a series of transforming others, while throughout retaining an authoritative status based on her ability to recognise Billy's talent.

Realism, surrealism and *jouissance*

Billy Elliot's narrative form is another means by which it transmits a sense of fluidity. As noted, the film is often studied alongside *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off* and all three films are generic hybrids. On the one hand they are contemporary musicals, albeit ones in which characters burst into dance or musical performance rather than song. In addition, notwithstanding their feel-good endings, they also offer, as a legacy of British social realism, a degree of effective commentary on the impact of industrial decline on the individual and the community. They differ, however, in that *The Full Monty* and *Brassed Off*, notwithstanding the implausibility of their *faux* upbeat closures are inherently classically realist in form, in the mode, for example of *A Taste of Honey* (1961) or *Room at the Top* (1959), while *Billy Elliot* continues the fantastical, surrealist strand of British New Wave films such as *Billy Liar* (1963) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962). *Billy Elliot* opens realistically with a hand (presumably Billy's) starting a record player's diegetic soundtrack. We then see Billy in his bedroom jumping to the music but the scene shades in and out of realism as he is moving both in slow and normal motion,

bouncing much higher than would be possible from mattress springs and within the confines of a small room, whilst in addition to enjoying the movement for his own pleasure, he is also, through his eye contact and facial gestures, clearly performing for an implied audience. The next scene pulls Billy back to 'reality' as he prepares his grandmother's breakfast but even then his physical performance, jumping on to a counter to catch toast and heading a peg bag on the overhead clothesline, is more apparently choreographed or deliberately performed than naturalistic. Similarly, whereas the performances of *Brassed Off* and *The Full Monty* are confined within rehearsals or concerts and stage shows, outside his dance classes, audition, and final climactic performance, Billy 'performs' throughout the Everington settings, the 'realism' of one being undermined by the other, the tension of the two forms made apparent by passers-by paying no attention to his exuberant movements against a non-diegetic soundtrack which they cannot hear. The scene that offers the greatest challenge to realism is one that has no apparent narrative motivation, at least at first. After his initial dance class, a confused Billy is apparently wondering whether he should return next week, while the soundtrack non-diegetically begins to play 'Top Hat, White Tie and Tails'. Hitting the floor with a large stick he has picked up from the street's detritus and subtly tapping his feet, Billy begins replicating Fred Astaire's moves to that number in *Top Hat* (1935) so that *Billy Elliot* then segues into a short extract from Astaire's performance. This is an interesting choice for inclusion and seems to meld *Billy Elliot's* fluidity of narrative as a formal metaphor for its explorations of the fluidity of identity, especially as Gran's dementia seems to recede and a condition that robs the individual of identity is temporarily overcome as she reminisces to Billy about seeing Astaire's films at the cinema.

Dance, performance and the criss-crossing of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'

Steve Neale has suggested that the musical is 'the only genre in which the male body has been unashamedly put on display in mainstream cinema in any consistent way' (1983: 15). Steven Cohan uses this point to consider the ways in which Astaire is feminised in his musical numbers by his assumption of 'a highly self-conscious and theatrical performance that constructs his masculinity out of the show-business values of spectatorship and spectacle' (Cohan 1993: 47). It is the connotations of 'spectatorship and spectacle' that construct for Astaire a masculinity that subverts stereotype drawing as it does on the conventions that musical numbers pause the narrative to display a glamorous female for a scopophilic [heterosexual] male audience. In *Top Hat*, although Astaire's numbers with Ginger Rodgers progress the narrative of their romance, when he dances alone, or rather with background male dancers, in *Top Hat*, *White Tie and Tails*, there is no narrative motivation other than to display Astaire. This 'feminized' masculinity is further problematised by the number ending with a mimed firing of a gun, the most over-determined masculine cinematic trope. Although *Billy Elliot* does not offer the spectacular excess of the classical Hollywood movie with its attendant lavish costumes and sets, Cohan's thesis nonetheless has relevance, particularly in his conclusion that Astaire's films confound masculinity by being taking an approach which is 'far from the phallic posturing of other types of Hollywood spectacle . . . like the Western or gangster shoot-out'. Instead, they posit the male body and its display as spectacle, 'as a site of joy' (Cohan: 55) rather than voyeurism. It is this kind of recurrent *jouissance* in relation to the body which *Billy Elliot* registers. Although one or two scenes are tinged with the eroticism of adolescents edging their way to investigating their sexuality – the tender and slightly troubled glances exchanged by Billy and Debbie after their pillow-fight, Michael's wistful 'hand-warming' down Billy's trousers – at no

point is the young Billy's body displayed erotically. As Matthew Bourne, creator of the all-male *Swan Lake*, in which the adult Billy dances, says of his vision for the ballet: 'It's been interpreted as a homosexual story, but that wasn't the explicit intention. The prince's relationship with the swan is more about a repressed young man's need to be loved, rather than about any sexual desire' (Bourne quoted in Tims 2013).

The 'feminization' through display that Cohan speaks of is rendered ambiguous throughout *Billy Elliot* by continued 'masculine' motifs. Arguably, the musical has a rival category for the explicit display of the half-naked male body in the boxing film. This may be an ironic alternative given Billy's career choice, the over-determined ballet/feminine boxing/masculine dichotomous coding insisted upon by some commentators, and the subtextual homoeroticism of the boxing film for critics such as Robin Wood (1986). In fact the boxing club and its connotative props remain central to the compositeness and fluidity of Billy's identity throughout. In the first scene at the boxing club/dancing school, when Billy is kept behind to practice boxing until he 'can do it properly', he cannot effectively use the punch bag for its intended purpose but, as he hears the ballet practice music strike up, the punch bag becomes his dance partner, his own moves swaying to its rhythms. At the start of the pivotal scene in which Billy joins Mrs Wilkinson for his first private lesson, he enters the gym, framed in an overhead shot, flanked by two baskets of boxing gloves. Carrying a football and satchel, he sees Mrs Wilkinson waiting across the room leaning on a vaulting horse, behind two hanging punch bags and standing speedballs. In terms of visual cues he could be arriving for a boxing training session. Walking towards Billy, she swings the punch bag and it sways in a metronomic rhythm as he tells her about his mother. A further key scene, at Christmas, when Jackie becomes reconciled to Billy's dancing, is set in the boxing club. Billy has

cross-dressed Michael in a tutu and is teaching him the ballet steps usually performed by a girl; he uses the boxing ring as a stage and the rope as a swing into another joyous dance. For Billy, dancing is not tied to a fixed gendered identity or sexual orientation, as is underscored by his musing whether or not it would be better to be Fred Astaire or Ginger Rodgers.

Gary Simmons has noted that within the film 'the older males have to unlearn all their brutish conditioning before they can accept, understand and realize a transformed masculinity' (2006: 120). It is dance and movement that effect this transformation, one which goes beyond that of Everington's adult males. We have already explored the ambiguities of Tony's gender identity. He too loves dancing from the outset and, although his informal disco moves to T Rex might be more socially condoned than Billy's ballet training, Tony and Billy again problematise dance and gender in a cross-cut sequence. Billy is dancing with Mrs Wilkinson at the boxing hall, Tony is at home. Billy dances with a football as a prop, Tony uses a Ewbank carpet sweeper as his impromptu partner. Thus, Billy is in a masculine space, utilising masculine objects, whilst Tony is again in the domestic setting practising feminised chores.

But in more straightforward ways, Billy's dance is transformative as *jouissance* in the sense of blissful pleasure at breaking out of a subject or stereotypical position. Hence, the cross-cut sequence referred to above extends beyond Billy and Tony to include Gran also practising dance moves. Jackie first breaks with stereotypical masculinity when he cries after smashing his dead wife's piano for firewood. This catharsis renders him receptive to seeing Billy dance for the first time and he even visibly controls his prejudicial response at the sight of Michael in a tutu. This catalyses a break with the macho emotional sterility of the family which

has prevailed up to this point. From the outset, much stress has been placed on the relationship between masculine activity and paternity: Billy is a disgrace to his father and the paternal legacy symbolised by his grandfather's boxing gloves. But from the moment of seeing Billy dance, Jackie explicitly refers to him as 'son', and takes over financial, emotional, and organisational responsibility for Billy's audition. Initially, this sees him attempt to act as a scab, but it also impels emotional transformation. Tony tries to prevent Jackie physically, but both men give in to their 'feminine' tears, and Tony is released from his emotional deep-freeze to speak compassionately to Billy about his dancing. From this point on, the family are no longer photographed in isolation or through successive cross-cuts; the frame composition supports their emotional unity. Similarly, the town is transformed, univalently supporting Billy's ambitions, and effectively being animated by the 'electricity' which compels Billy to dance. A small girl often seen as a bystander, seemingly oblivious to Billy's earlier street-dance, now speaks to him, while Jackie's 'dance' to the club to announce Billy's acceptance at the Royal Ballet School exactly replicates Billy's earlier performance. Although Michael does not dance, with the exception of the Christmas scene, Billy's dancing, and the prospects it seems to offer for transformation are clearly inspirational to him. As a child depicted as an isolated figure, left behind when Billy leaves Everington, Michael has followed Billy's career, and is in the audience for the film's final scene's performance of Swan Lake completely at ease in the ambiguous atmosphere the performance creates.

Conclusion

The film's immediate popular and academic reception accepted that ballet, when men are involved, is culturally perceived to be associated with homosexuality, and that this (this what?) challenges conventional constructions of masculinity. In fact, in

a manner unusual for a mainstream film, none of the male central characters in *Billy Elliot* (Billy, Tony and Jackie) are assigned an overtly connoted sexuality and there is no romantic trajectory within the film's story arc. With regard to Billy, the self is ambiguous and he carries the main theme of the film - that physicality, be it dancing, boxing or football, is life-affirming and liberating and is not gendered, nor any longer tied to associations of class or sexuality. These points are summed up by George Rodosthenous: 'The body physicality of the "new" male dancer signifies strength and physical presence which might have been associated with working-class ethics and manual labour in the past. Images of males dancing are being released from their homoerotic associations' (2007: 277).

The strands of masculinity and class will remain central to any discussion of *Billy Elliot* but this article has demonstrated that rigid generic classifications are unhelpful; the presumption that the conceptual categories of masculinity and class each has an appropriately fitting theoretical framework and methodology, within which its interrogation should remain, closes off scholarly debate and interpretation in much the way that gender stereotypes damage society. *Billy Elliot* may have been categorised as British realism but in many sequences its looser narrative form and its employment of *jouissance* establish the on-going fluidity of this field. Likewise, the fruitful application of theoretical tools hitherto applied to Hollywood cinema further confirms the intertextuality of cinema as a medium. Most importantly, the rigorous close readings of the previously 'taken for granted', subsidiary characters such as Michael, Tony and Mrs Wilkinson, and the complex layers of identity thus revealed, establish the need to ask new questions of familiar films. If the identity of characters is recognised as continuing to criss-cross, so too will the meaning of their films.

Please add a short biographical blurb

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¹ This topic was later addressed in *Pride* (Matthew Warchus, 2014).

² *Billy Elliot* makes many intertextual references to *Kes*, including Billy stealing a library book on ballet because it requires an adult borrower's ticket, the same reason why Billy Casper stole a book on falconry.

³ This apron is a storied garment within working class popular culture. It was most prominently worn by the character Robin Tripp (Richard O'Sullivan) in the 1970s sitcom, *Man About the House*. Robin was a trainee chef, and the show's humour, considered groundbreaking at the time centred on his sharing a flat with two girls, under the subterfuge to the landlord that he was gay. Although Robin perpetually tried to get one of the girls, Chrissy (Paula Wilcox) into bed, his sexuality was rendered ambiguous by his culinary skills, the apron, and the assumption by the older generation that he was gay. An audience sharing this cultural memory would overlay Tony's character with these associations.

⁴ Her empowerment, through the appropriation of masculine costume, smoking and relationship with the camera, recalls Marlene Dietrich's similarly ambiguously gendered performances in films such as *Morocco* (1930),