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## PRIDE REVISITED: CINEMA, ACTIVISM AND RE-ACTIVATION

# 'No politics ... We're a Mardi Gras now': Telling the story of LGSM in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Britain

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What does it mean that *Pride* was released in 2014, 30 years after the formation of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) and the same year in which a Conservative government made same-sex marriage a legal reality in the UK? In this article, I explore the narrativising of LGSM's story, in order to consider how nostalgia operates in the film. Chiefly, I consider the choices that the screenwriter, Stephen Beresford, made in reconstructing the story of LGSM, and examine what these choices reveal about the changes that have taken place in the political landscape of gay Britain over the last 30 years. Through an analysis of these choices, I argue that *Pride* offers contemporary audiences a story of radical LGBTQ activism that they can enjoy and celebrate, while side-stepping uncomfortable questions regarding identity politics, single issue politics and the demise of collectivist politics.

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*Pride* was released the same year that my husband and I were able to get married in Britain, and the dramatic shift in British society's attitude towards homosexuality arguably contributed to both the success of the film and the passing of same-sex marriage legislation by Parliament.<sup>1</sup> The reception *Pride* received upon its release in 2014 cannot be separated from the increasing political and social acceptance that some gay men and lesbians in the UK now enjoy, and which the introduction of same-sex marriage codified in law. In this article I want to consider how the newfound sexual citizenship enjoyed by a section of the queer community in the UK frames the way *Pride* tells the story of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM). In particular, I want to explore how the film mobilises nostalgia in order to frame the history of LGSM, while containing the political ideology that underpinned this group.

In drawing attention to the way nostalgia is deployed in the film, my intention is not to criticise *Pride* for its sentimentality. I am very fond of this film, and it is this personal enjoyment that drives my critical interest. I was eight years old when LGSM was formed and along with the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp,<sup>2</sup> the Miners' Strike of 1984–85 is one of the first memories I have of political protest. However, I knew nothing about LGSM until I went to university a decade later, and the nostalgia I feel when watching this film is only partially related to a history I remember. Nevertheless, the story told by *Pride* is familiar to me, not least because it maps onto a narrative paradigm that now dominates the contemporary landscape of lesbian and gay politics, and which shapes (re)tellings of 'our' political past. This is the paradigm of *progress*; a paradigm that situates lesbian and gay history as being on a linear path towards inclusion and acceptance, and which relies on the belief that 'it gets better'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It should be remembered that, at the time of writing this article, queer folk in Northern Ireland continue to be refused the right to enter into a same-sex marriage.

<sup>2</sup> From 1981–2000, the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp protested against nuclear weapons. Throughout the 1980s, protesters engaged in acts of civil disobedience in a response to nuclear arms being stored at the RAF base in Berkshire, England.

<sup>3</sup> For those unfamiliar with the relevance of this term to lesbian and gay activism, I am referring to the

What I want to do in this article, then, is to develop an understanding of the film that foregrounds the role this paradigm plays in narrating the story of LGSM. I argue that this allows the history of a left-wing activist group to be turned into an enjoyable and uplifting story about the politics of solidarity, without that history raising uncomfortable questions about the path that lesbian and gay politics in Britain subsequently adopted. In this respect, I deploy an active understanding of nostalgia along the lines set out by Pickering and Keightley:

Rather than dismissing it [nostalgia] as a concept, we should perhaps reconfigure it in terms of a distinction between the desire to return to an earlier state or idealized past, and the desire not to return but to recognize aspects of the past as the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future. Nostalgia can then be seen as not only a search for ontological security in the past, but also as a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present (2006: 921).

It is this notion that nostalgia can provide a method for 'taking one's bearings' that I want to utilise in my reading of *Pride*. Doing so allows me to explore what a film about lesbian and gay activism in the 1980s reveals about lesbian and gay politics in Britain today.

### **A Welcome in the Hillside**

In a deleted scene on the DVD version of the film, featuring a conversation between 'Bromley' Joe, the youngest (and most naïve) member of LGSM, and Mark Ashton, the leader of the group, the former confronts the latter about hiding during a visit to the mining community in Dulais Valley:

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digital activist initiative of the same name, set up by activist and journalist Dan Savage, and his partner Terry Miller, in 2010. This US-based organization uses web-based videos, often featuring celebrities, to communicate stories of endurance, perseverance and hope to LGBTQ youth around the world. The project has won praise from many quarters, including President Obama, but has been criticized for promoting a narrow version of queer life and identity by some. See Majkowski, 2011; Goltz, 2013 and Meyer, 2017 for discussion.

**Joe:** They'd have been really pleased to see you.

**Mark:** I should never have come.

**Joe:** You were the leader!

**Mark:** It was sentimental, I tried to make myself feel better and I failed.  
Serves me right.

(*Pride*, 2014)

Popular culture typically looks back on previous eras through the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia, and films such as *Brassed Off* (dir. Herman, 1996), *The Full Monty* (dir. Cattaneo, 1997) and *Billy Elliot* (dir. Daldry, 2000)<sup>4</sup> are routinely charged with the crime of sentimentality (see, for example, Ellen, 2000; Noble, 2000; Bromley, 2000). Britain's long-standing anxiety around sentimentality is exacerbated when it comes to matters of social class. For instance, Lawler (2014) has argued that British nostalgia often serves to glorify a mythical vision of (white) working-class life (manual labourers living in tight-knit communities), at the same time that it denigrates today's working class (commonly depicted as slovenly, out of control and feckless). Perhaps most importantly, Lawler identifies the important role that 'the "heroic worker", charged with bringing about the revolution and valued for his role in production plays in sympathetic representations of the Left' (2014: 708).

Similar accusations of nostalgia can be levelled at *Pride*, which unashamedly celebrates a vision of white working-class life smoothed of its rougher edges. The Welsh mining community in the film is, by and large, portrayed in a positive light. The men are hard-working husbands, fathers and sons who provide for their families, and the women are cheery souls with lilting voices, and neat and tidy homes. The only negative character trait permitted in the portrayal of the Dulais Valley community is that of homophobia, which, while initially diffuse, becomes concentrated in the character of Maureen (Lisa Palfrey), the uptight widow and mother to two striking miners, who informs the tabloids of LGSM's activities. When other characters express

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<sup>4</sup> I single out these three films because they are regularly mentioned in discussions of *Pride*, as is evidenced by other articles in this collection.

a reluctance to speak to or accept LGSM, the narrative assures us that this is because they've never met queer folk before. Their initial homophobia is borne out of having lived a sheltered life, something that LGSM members are seen to rectify with a few moves on the dance floor and a couple of drunken heart-to-hearts. Although the film portrays the hardship endured by the miners and their families during the year-long industrial dispute, as well as tensions surrounding women's involvement in the strike, the narrative ultimately paints a picture of the mining community as proud, respectable and hard-working (even when they are refusing to work).

The director, Matthew Warchus, telegraphs this nostalgic vision of the industrial working class in the first scene of the film, simultaneously identifying the striking miners as heroic *and* marking them out as extrinsic to the avowedly middle-class tone of the film. We are first introduced to the miners through the eyes of Ashton (played by Ben Schneider) as he watches a news report about the industrial action. Following a soundbite from an enraged Arthur Scargill (the President of the National Union of Mineworkers at the time of the strike), the report cuts to a striking miner who informs viewers that 'all we've got left is our pride and our self-respect and we'll carry on keeping that'. From the outset, *Pride* offers us a vision of working-class life triply refracted; firstly, through the gaze of the urban-centric media; secondly through the metropolitan (though no less working-class) gaze of Ashton; and finally through the backward-looking gaze of the director. This triple mediation renders the working-class community of Dulais intelligible at the same that it frames and guides our understanding of the miners. It also serves to romanticise the miners' struggle through the reductive (and seductive) stereotype of the proud working-class man.

This romantic vision of working-class life is thrown into relief by the portrayal of other working-class characters in the film. Several members of LGSM, including Ashton, are identified as working class. These include Steph (Faye Marsay), Mike (Joseph Gilgun) and Gethin (Andrew Scott). Such identification relies primarily on the use of regional accents, costume and (where portrayed) the homes that these characters live in. The working-class background of these LGSM members is also underscored via characters such as Jonathan (Dominic West) and Joe (George MacKay),

who represent other classed identities. Jonathan's accent, 'luvvie' mannerisms and references to theatre and literature mark him out as decidedly middle class, while Joe's suburban family home, his enrolment in further education and his accent carry all the hallmarks of a lower-middle-class life.<sup>5</sup>

However, Warchus's treatment of LGSM differs from his portrayal of the Dulais community. Where class *informs* the characterisation of LGSM, the latter are arguably *defined* by their social class: their class precedes their identities. The class position of the striking miners is communicated through the television report Ashton watches at the beginning of the film, and this mediation serves to frame the Dulais mining community *before* the film introduces them. Meanwhile, and drawing on classed notions of physical and social mobility (Lawler, 1999; Binnie, 2011), the members of LGSM (again through accents but also through the narrative) are granted a freedom of movement (from their hometown to London, around London and from London to Wales) denied to the Dulais community for much of the film. Indeed, when members of the mining community are able to leave their local environs, it is often via the actions of LGSM (as is the case for the Pits and Perverts concert). Meanwhile,

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'suburban' conjures up a specific class position – somewhere towards the lower end of middle class – and during the preparation of this article this class position was questioned by one of the reviewers, who asked me to justify my labeling of Joe. To answer this question, I point to several pieces of material evidence. Firstly, the location (Bromley) twinned with the style of house (1960s semi-detached located in a quiet cul-de-sac) signifies a particular socio-economic position. The sterile conformity of both the front garden and the car parked on the driveway underscore this assessment. Meanwhile, Joe's birthday gift – an SLR camera – and his college enrolment both point towards a level of cultural and educational capital commensurate with a middle-class upbringing. While I cannot be certain, there are suggestions in the film that Joe's mother does not go out to work (or at least does not work full-time) and is a 'homemaker' through 'choice' rather than a paid employee: another class-based signifier. Finally, and perhaps trumping all of the material evidence I have presented, is the fact that I know Joe's class position because it is one that I anxiously occupied for a significant portion of my life. While racial otherness differentiates my family's experience from that of Joe's, I can nevertheless *hear* the same quiet nervousness expressed by Joe's mother in the voice of my own Mum. I can *feel* the sense of confinement that comes from living in a similarly suburban cul-de-sac. I can *smell* the furniture polish used on the teak effect dining table that was once fashionable but now just sits there, silently marking its place out of time. I know Joe's class position because, in many ways, I have *been* Joe – just a bit browner, a bit heavier and with a funny-sounding name.

the portrayal of this movement – namely from Dulais to London – does little to challenge the nostalgic portrayal of the rural working class who are marked out as naïve and bewildered visitors to the 'big city'.

As this initial reading of the film perhaps demonstrates, nostalgia is often read as a conservative and reactionary response to both the present day and to historical reality (see Rosaldo, 1989; Jameson, 1991; Higson, 1993; Coontz, 2016). Contemporaneous to the miners' strike of 1984–85, Turner (1987: 150) was sketching out his 'nostalgic paradigm', which suggested that nostalgia signposts 'a sense of historical decline and loss, involving a departure from some golden age of "homefulness"'. At the same time, discourses of nostalgia are said to promote a belief in the 'loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty' and 'the disappearance of social relationships' (Turner, 1987: 150). It is not difficult to read *Pride* as the cinematic projection of Turner's paradigm and the film positions the strike as a staving off of *both* industrial *and* community decline. As Cliff (Bill Nighy), an elder of the Dulais community, states in a scene mid-way through the film:

[...] Without it [the mine], these villages are nothing, they're finished. That's what I'd say if I ever came face to face with Margaret fucking Thatcher, that's what I'd tell her. The pit and the people are one and the same.

Cliff's comment foreshadows Margaret Thatcher's infamous declaration in 1987 that 'there is no such thing as society' and that 'no government can do anything except through people, and people look to themselves first' (Thatcher, 1987). From this perspective, *Pride* can be seen to wear its nostalgia on its sleeve, unafraid to tell its story using the broad brushstrokes of sentimentality and the primary colours of good and evil, which typically characterise texts that dwell on nostalgic retellings of the past.

However, to read the film's nostalgia as wholly conservative and melancholic is to ignore the dynamic process of meaning-making required in the production of nostalgia. Nostalgia engages the audience in a specific form of looking back at

history, and it is as much the audience as the text that activates and gives meaning to nostalgia. This is identified by Radstone (2010: 189), when she asks 'if we say that a novel or a film "is" nostalgic, then who are we suggesting it is nostalgic "for"? For whom, that is, and in which circumstances, do "nostalgic" texts become nostalgic? Is nostalgia, like a prescription lens, suited only to certain eyes?'. Radstone contends that nostalgia is in fact 'an intermediate or transitional phenomenon', one that should be considered 'not as an end-point or theoretical home-coming but as point of departure, opening out into those questions of knowledge and belief, temporal orientations and cultural, social and sexual politics that it condenses' (2010: 189).

Radstone's reading of nostalgia allows us to use the concept as a starting point for analysis, rather than as a conclusion. From this perspective, nostalgia becomes a method for cleaving open a critical space in which we can recognise the dialogue that narrative cinema can form between past and present, and the way in which each temporality informs understandings of the other. This framing of nostalgia provides a method for understanding how *Pride* offers a vision of the 1980s that celebrates the radical politics of LGSM, while also reaffirming the politics of assimilation, which has come to dominate lesbian and gay culture since the early 1990s. Nostalgia thus becomes a conceptual tool through which we might interrogate *Pride*, not just as an act of fondly looking back, but also as means of doubling down on the present.

### **Don't Look Back (in Anger)**

The 1980s might at first seem a strange decade for lesbians and gay men in Britain to look back on with any fondness. Being a child of this decade, I've always thought of it as the temporal equivalent of *The Empire Strikes Back*; that darker and altogether more bleak episode in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, sandwiched between the rebelliousness of the 1970s and the millennial hope of the 1990s. Alongside the ongoing harassment of queer folk by the police and the media, this decade saw AIDS claim the lives of hundreds of gay and bisexual men in Britain and fuel various forms of judicial and extrajudicial homophobia. Buoyed by her election victory in 1983, Thatcher was already talking about a return to family values at the time of the miners' strike, a line of argument that would lead to the development of Section

28 and steer its successful passage through the House of Commons and into law.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in those rare instances where lesbians and gays *were* offered support and protection (primarily by Labour councils), such support was lambasted by the press and the Government, used as a signifier of the 'Loony Left' and as further evidence that Labour was not fit to govern (Weeks, 2007). Given all of this, it would appear that the decade offers little for British gays and lesbians to get sentimental about.

However, nostalgia isn't bound by the constraints of historical 'fact', but instead places a premium on (re)imagining our relationship to history from the position we currently occupy. This is identified by Richard Dyer (in an interview with Grant & Kooijman, 2016) when he discusses the nostalgic pleasure of films that are far from 'gay friendly' and which are set in historical periods that were avowedly homophobic. Here nostalgia works to look back on those periods from a more secure present. Dyer identifies this when he considers the different meanings of the word 'queer': 'Queer in the old sense meant you had to be witty in the need to survive. Queer in the new sense is posited on the assumption that things are basically much better'. We can thus have a 'queer nostalgia' and a nostalgia for queerness, but such a nostalgia is predicated on the different social, legal and cultural position that many queer people find themselves occupying today.

It is through this recognition of difference that *Pride* reimagines the 1980s and allows gay men and lesbians to reclaim this decade. This is not to suggest that in reality queer folk lacked a sense of purpose in this decade. The health activism around AIDS and the protests against Section 28 provide but two examples to the contrary. Rather, nostalgia provides a method for foregrounding lesbian and gay activism and works as a vehicle through which the film performs a rewriting of the 1980s. This

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<sup>6</sup> Section 28, also known as Clause 28, of the Local Government Act (1988), stipulated that no local authority shall 'intentionally promote homosexuality' or publish material intended to do so. The vagueness of Section 28 meant that arguments could be made against any publicly-funded entity that discussed homosexuality and served to gag educators from talking about non-heterosexual lives in any context outside of the strict confines of health and disease control. Section 28 prompted mass demonstrations in Manchester and London and has been considered a defining moment in the history of British lesbian and gay politics. See Weeks (2007) for a detailed history of both the legislation and its opposition.

rewriting serves to (re)locate the role of lesbian and gay men within one of Britain's longest-running industrial strikes. Ironically, this (re)situating of lesbian and gay folk in the story of the miners' strike hinges on the pariah status of queer people at the time of the strike, and this outsider status is central to the narrative of *Pride*.

Throughout the film, we are reminded via speeches and public declarations that lesbians and gays were outsiders in 1984–85. Indeed, they are portrayed as the *original* outsiders, and it is their own newfound position as outsiders that allows the Dulais community to recognise (and accept) their queer comrades. This facet of the film reflects historical fact. As one spokeswoman states in a contemporaneous documentary about LGSM, 'it's only over the last year that we've come to know gay and lesbian people, you know because their struggle is something similar to ours' and that 'we've suffered in the last year with the police and different things, what they've been suffering all their lives, and are likely to continue' (LGSM, 1986). Thus, the nostalgia performed in *Pride* might best termed a nostalgia for the subaltern. Of course, the subaltern status of queer people is not a nostalgic production but historical reality. Likewise, the motivation behind LGSM was a recognition of the shared status of lesbian and gay men and miners, and the need for solidarity. In the documentary cited above, Ashton (the real one) discusses this solidarity stating that:

The group started off in July [1984] after Gay Pride, so that one community could give solidarity to the other. It is really illogical, when you think about it, to say 'well, I'm gay and I'm into defending the gay community, but I don't care about anything else'. It's ludicrous. It's important that if you are defending communities, that you defend all communities, and not just one (LGSM, 1986)

Ashton's cinematic doppelgänger makes a similar point on the evening of the 1984 London Pride parade:

Is it me? Or are the police getting soft? [...] My guess is they went somewhere else, to pick on someone else. My guess is that while we are enjoying a

temporary reprieve, they're here, [holds up front cover of tabloid paper depicting miner's protest] giving these poor sods the shit we usually get. Now the mining communities are being bullied, just like we are. Bullied by the police, bullied the tabloids, bullied by the government.

The history of lesbian and gay activists supporting the labour movement goes back further than 1984 (see Robinson, 2011 for a detailed discussion), and throughout its history the Gay Liberation Front (represented in the film in the figure of Jonathan) supported a range of trade unions, protesting against the Industrial Relations Bill in 1971 as well as showing solidarity with a broad range of social justice organisations (see Power, 1995). Likewise, the biography of Ashton is important in understanding the sense of solidarity and shared oppression that motivated the creation of LGSM. Many have pointed to the fact that *Pride* fails to acknowledge the young activist's political affiliations, and Mark was not only a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, but a leading figure in the Communist Youth League, becoming its General Secretary in 1985 (Smith & Leeworthy, 2016). As such, LGSM drew from the political wellspring of the radical Left, and its commitment to both the labour movement and to the working class. It is striking that *Pride* reduces Ashton's political biography to a small badge worn on his jacket, and this is a point I shall return to later, as I believe this absence is key to understanding how the film manages the politics of Ashton and LGSM. At this juncture, however, I wish only to signpost the historical reality of queer folk in the 1980s and the shared outsider position that mining communities found themselves in, which connected them to their lesbian and gay supporters. It is this shared status that the film capitalises on in nostalgising the story of LGSM.

This shared position as outsider invariably raises questions as to how and why the subaltern status of gays and lesbians (and all queer folk) becomes currency for nostalgia in *Pride* and the answer to such questions requires that we recognise the radically different position that many lesbians and gay men find themselves in today. If the statute books and newspapers of Britain in 1984 told a story of intense

homophobia, today those same texts suggest that the UK is 'another country'.<sup>7</sup> The website for *Stonewall* proudly displays a timeline of legal rights won by and for LGBT people since its foundation in 1989.<sup>8</sup> These include a lifting of the 'gays in the military' ban in 2000, the lowering of the age of consent in 2001, adoption rights for same-sex couples in 2002, the repeal of Section 28 and enactment of workplace protection in 2003, the passing of the Civil Partnership Act and Gender Recognition Act, both in 2004, a strengthening of sentencing guidelines for homophobic crimes in 2005, The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations of 2007, the Equality Act of 2010 and the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act of 2013. While *And Tango Makes Three* – the children's book about a pair of male penguins raising a chick – still managed to upset the reactionary press in 2011 (Loveys, 2011), it has since gone on to become a staple on the bookshelves of many state schools. This is a far cry from the uproar elicited by the English translation of *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* which, when published in 1983, was considered a piece of 'blatant homosexual propaganda' by the education secretary of the time, Kenneth Baker (Masad, 2017).

These tectonic shifts in the legal status, rights and protections of gay men and lesbians in Britain help us to understand why *Pride* came to be made in 2014, and why it was such a success. Pope (2016: 24) cites the 'twenty-year rule' regarding retrospective work that producers and directors have historically abided by, before pointing out that the 1980s began to be discussed 'a mere six years after the end'. Yet even 20 years after the miners' strike had ended, it was arguably still too soon to tell the story of LGSM. Civil Partnerships for same-sex couples in the UK became a legal reality in 2005, but *The Sun* newspaper still found it acceptable to publish news of singer Elton John's union to David Furnish with the headline 'Elton Takes David Up

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<sup>7</sup> 'Another Country' is a reference to Julian Mitchell's 1984 film of the same name, which is loosely based on the life of Guy Burgess, a British diplomat and Soviet agent who defected to the Soviet Union in 1951. Burgess was also homosexual and a Communist.

<sup>8</sup> Stonewall, which takes its name from the famous Stonewall Riots of New York, 1967, is the UK's longest running and most well-known LGBT civil rights group. Having been founded in the aftermath of the Section 28 protests, it has since gone on to become the dominant voice within lesbian and gay politics.

the Aisle' (Whitaker, 2005). *Pride*, a film about a gay activist group designed to have broad appeal, required further legal milestones – and further social acceptance – to be attained before it could be made.

It is from the vantage point of 2014, and the intervening years of legal, political and social acceptance that gay men and lesbians have achieved, that *Pride* tells the story of LGSM and lesbian and gay life in the 1980s. It is from this position that we are invited to engage with the film, while also feeling assured that 'we' have moved on from those bad old days. 'We' here refers to both gay and lesbian viewers of the film and to the heterosexual audience. While the former is invited to recognise how far 'we' have come and acknowledge the success of the political path that brought us to where we are, the latter is invited to celebrate how accepting 'we' as a nation are today.

This is the perspective from which *Pride's* nostalgia can be performed: a looking back that recognises the former outsider status of lesbians and gays while simultaneously underlining the belief that citizenship has now been fully granted to *all* sexual minorities. Rather than conforming to Turner's reading of nostalgia then (the longing for an imagined past, which is contrasted with the decay of the present), *Pride* activates a nostalgia for yesterday's oppression in order to celebrate the lesbian and gay progress of today. In this sense, the traditional understanding of how nostalgia operates is 'queered' by *Pride*, although it is important to acknowledge that this queering does not extend to the overarching politics of the film. Indeed, having established how nostalgia operates queerly in the film, I want to move to consider how the 'queer' politics of LGSM are contained in *Pride*, in order that they do not disrupt or undermine the dominant paradigm of sexual politics in Britain today.

### **Happy Ever After**

While Ashton was arguably the figurehead of LGSM, *Pride* tells the story of the group through a fictional character – Joe – an 18 year old boy who lives at home with his parents in the London suburb of Bromley and who accidentally becomes a part of LGSM. It is through Joe's eyes that the audience witnesses the formation of the group, its first journey to Wales, the Pits and Perverts concert and the mining community's

presence at London Pride in 1985. This viewpoint becomes literal as well as figurative when Joe takes on the role of official LGSM photographer, and we learn far more about Joe's personal life than we do of any other character.

Simpson (2014: np) has criticised the deployment of Joe in *Pride*, writing that the inclusion of his coming out narrative 'tap[s] into the clichés of "the big gay movie" that we've seen too many times before' and that the 'LGSM story is not a coming out story'. Stories of transformation and personal growth have become the hallmark of lesbian and gay narratives over the last two decades and can be seen as a response to both the shifting social, political and legal status of homosexuality in the West and to the longer history of gay and lesbian representation. Where once homosexuality on screen signalled deviance, danger, decadence or disease (Dyer, 1977; Russo, 1987; Medhurst, 2008; Lawrence, 2010), contemporary representations of gay men and lesbians often focus on narratives of individual success and personal growth: today the (right kind of) queer folk also get to live happily ever after.<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, *Pride's* deployment of Joe ensures that it conforms to the ideology of the 'big gay movie' and, in doing so, speaks to the expectations of contemporary audiences: this is what we have come to expect of mainstream representations of homosexuality. In his beige jacket and pressed jeans, Joe not only provides a comfortable and unthreatening figure for identification, he furnishes the audience with the pleasure of watching a 'small-town boy' transform into his true 'authentic' self.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the film, Joe has literally walked out on his closeted suburban existence and embraced his outsider status, exchanging the homophobia of his biological family for the acceptance of his family of choice. In this respect, Joe fits into a narrative of mobility and flight that Gray (2009) finds characteristic of gay and lesbian narratives in the 1990s. Simpson is correct in identifying *one* of the roles that this fictional character plays in *Pride*, but I contend that there is more to Joe than his

<sup>9</sup> I am here thinking of British films such as *Get Real* and *Beautiful Thing*, as well as US offerings including *G.B.F.* and *Love, Simon*. Likewise, television shows such as *Glee*, *Ugly Betty*, *The Real O'Neals*, *Sex Education* have all included gay characters and storylines who subscribe to the narrative of personal growth and transformation.

<sup>10</sup> With its story of homophobia, rejection, desire and queer flight, *Smalltown Boy* was a 1984 hit for Bronski Beat, who headlined the Pits and Perverts concert depicted in *Pride*.

critique suggests. For Joe is in fact central to the nostalgic depiction of LGSM that *Pride* conveys, and it is through him that the film mobilises but also *contains* the nostalgia I discussed earlier: a nostalgia for 'the dark days' of a subaltern existence, and the resistance that grew out it.

To understand this containment, we need to recognise that Joe's story of personal growth operates within a film that must contend with two troubling historical facts: that the miners lost their strike, ultimately resulting in mass redundancies and the decline of traditional working-class communities; and that HIV/AIDS (a spectral presence throughout the film) affected thousands of gay men in the UK and claimed hundreds of lives during the 1980s, including that of Ashton. This is not to downplay the fact that LGSM was a successful activist organisation which raised a considerable amount of money to directly support the miners and their families. LGSM's work was also central to getting the Labour Party to formally support LGBT rights and the group achieved a great deal both during and immediately after the period covered by the film. But the battle at the heart of *Pride* – between the National Union of Mineworkers and the Conservative government – that battle was lost. In this context, Joe's personal journey, which reaches its climax as he defiantly marches out of his parent's home amidst a family christening (could there be a more heteronormative setting?), brings a familiar sense of narrative completion – the happy ever after – to a story that might otherwise struggle to provide such a conclusion by providing the positive affect – that warm, fuzzy feeling – we typically associate with nostalgia.

Joe is therefore necessary for the development of the film's nostalgic coherence; a coherence that, echoing Radstone's assertion, is produced by and for a contemporary audience. He acts as an intermediary between the history of LGSM and the conventions of contemporary narrative cinema. He also provides a vehicle for this history while translating it into a format that is box office friendly. Finally, he offers a method for looking back at the radical Left-wing politics of LGSM without raising questions regarding the current state of political activism today. In this respect, *Pride* evidences Lawler's (2014: 703) claim that 'nostalgia, as well as subverting modernity's progress narratives, may work to entrench them'. The film provides an opportunity to live vicariously through the actions (and identities) of LGSM, without necessarily

having to acknowledge the ongoing need for activism of this kind. Further evidence of this political manoeuvre can be found in the way *Pride* handles Ashton's political biography, and, in particular, his role in the Communist Party of Great Britain.

### **Coal, but not Commies**

**Pride Steward:** There was a general feeling...

**Mark:** Amongst who?

**Pride Steward:** Amongst the committee, that people have become tired of politics and that this year the tone should be celebratory, with affirmative slogans and a positive atmosphere.

**Mark:** Bullshit

**Pride Steward:** If you insist on marching with your banners, you'll have to march at the back with the fringe groups

**Mike:** But mate, mate, we're LGSM – we fought alongside the miners

**Pride Steward:** Congratulations, but now it's time for a party.

*Pride* bookends the story of LGSM with two Pride parades, both of which take place in London. The 1984 parade symbolises the beginning of LGSM, while later we witness the legacy of this organisation, as families from South Wales travel to London and lead the 1985 parade. But as the dialogue above illustrates, the banners and brass band almost don't make it into the parade. The audience are, of course, not left in any doubt as to who to side with in the argument. Yet while *Pride* invites the audience to identify with Ashton and LGSM, it does not actively challenge the message of the Pride steward, that people are bored of politics and that 'now it's time for a party'.

Earlier, I mentioned that Ashton's involvement with the Left was largely overlooked in the film, and while there are references to 'Commies', 'Comrades' and to 'bringing down the Government', these do little to signpost his long-standing commitment to the Communist Party of Great Britain. Such an oversight is worth noting not least because Ashton refused to separate out his queer identity from his broader political beliefs and, like many on the Gay Left, he saw parallels between the struggles of the working class and those of sexual minorities. As Smith and Leeworthy

note, '[C]ommunists not only took a lead in the British labour movement in linking gay liberation with the social and political instincts of the Left, they continued to articulate a liberationist rather than rights-based position' (2016: 641). Writing specifically about Ashton's political history, Kelliher notes that 'Ashton himself was an openly gay activist in the traditional left, having joined the Young Communist League two years earlier, in 1982' (Kelliher, 2014: 246). In the same article, he argues that the motivation behind LGSM was not only to show solidarity with the working class, but to also challenge 'the middle-class nature of the lesbian and gay scene in London' (Kelliher, 2014: 251). Given the important role the Communist Party played in Ashton's life, and the political interests of LGSM, the absence of this broader political context in the film is less an accidental oversight and more a conscious decision.

I argue that the erasure of Ashton's radical politics allows the film to accommodate the recent gains made in the name of lesbian and gay men in Britain, without having to consider the *costs* of those gains – namely the pursuit of lesbian and gay equality through single-issue campaigning, instead of the more expansive and radical politics of the Left. *Pride* has to contend with the fact that while the lives of some lesbian and gay men have improved over the last 30 years, other queer folk continue to face multiple forms of discrimination. Meanwhile, the quality of life for working-class folk (irrespective of sexual orientation) has, if anything, declined. Contrary to what former Prime Minister David Cameron claimed in 2009, we are not all in this together.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as some scholars have suggested, the success of gay and lesbian single-issue politics might have come *at the expense* of the working class.

Gavin Brown's (2015) work on the relationship between same-sex marriage legislation and the so-called 'bedroom tax' is particularly relevant here. Reminding us that '[e]ven where new equalities legislation has come into operation, the effects

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<sup>11</sup> In a speech at the Conservative Party Conference in 2009, David Cameron (Prime Minister 2010–2016) famously suggested that 'we're all in this together' when referring to his party's proposals to address Britain's financial deficit in the wake of the global economic crisis. These proposals translated into cuts to public sector spending, welfare payments and financial support for the poorest households.

of these social changes have often been complex and contradictory' (977), Brown discusses how the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act in 2013 legitimised the liberal claims of the coalition government at the same time that other legislation put forward worked to punish kinship and familial relationships that did not fit into the prescribed format of marriage. This punishment came in the form of the 'under occupancy penalty', a benefit-related piece of legislation that critics also refer to as the 'bedroom tax'. This penalty, which only pertains to council or social housing, requires housing benefit payments to be reduced if it is deemed that there is a 'spare' room in the property. The reduction in benefit payment invariably creates a shortfall in rent, which then becomes the responsibility of the tenant. Those unable to pay this additional sum face court proceedings and potentially eviction, irrespective of how long they have lived in the property or what they use the 'spare' room for.

Critics (e.g. Cross, 2013; Moffatt et al. 2015; Greenstein et al. 2016) have pointed out that while the penalty impacts anyone with a living space deemed 'spare', the legislation disproportionately affects disabled people, non-nuclear families and older people. In some cases, 'spare' rooms are used by children who otherwise live elsewhere (e.g. a grandparent who offers short-term care for a child while the parent manages a difficult health episode). In other cases, the room is used by a family member or friend who provides unpaid informal care to a disabled tenant. Not only does the penalty ignore the multiple ways in which people live 'together', occupy space and care for one another, it also fails to acknowledge the fact that, even if the tenant is willing to pack up their life and move to a smaller home, the chronic lack of available social housing in much of the UK means that they are unable to move into a smaller property, making it impossible for them to avoid this 'tax'.

Brown concludes that:

[w]hile marriage equality (re)privileges certain types of couples and domestic economies, simultaneous attacks on the welfare system are disproportionately affecting single people and those couples who find their relationships outside the reconfigured normative values of austerity-era Britain (2015: 985)

Considering the fact that middle-class couples continue to benefit financially from marriage far more than working-class couples (McCreery, 2008) and that marriages are more likely to be entered into by middle-class than working-class couples (Scott, 2013), one has to conclude that the politics of the government in power at the time of *Pride's* release served the interests of middle-class gay and lesbian folk *at the expense* of working class people (irrespective of their sexual identity). Same-sex marriage legislation allowed Cameron's government to portray itself socially progressive at a time when it was actively reducing public spending in the name of austerity.

Brown's work helps to maintain an image of the Conservatives as the 'nasty party' but in truth Cameron was continuing a trend set by the Labour government of Tony Blair, who adopted a similar strategy of 'reform' from the late 1990s onwards. Browne (2011) identifies how earlier legislation pertaining to same-sex relationships (the Civil Partnership Act of 2004) also had class-based consequences. This legislation, a precursor to the Marriage Act, offered same-sex couples in the UK an opportunity to have their relationship legally recognised. The majority of financial and legal benefits previously reserved for married couples became available via civil partnerships. This was rightly considered a landmark victory in the history lesbian and gay rights in the UK but, as Browne points out, the fruits of this success have not been evenly spread and she urges us to consider 'how previous 'enemies' of the 'state', 'nation' and 'families' became legitimated through the 2004 Act 'in ways that may affect same sex couples differently depending on their positioning in relation to state support' (2011: 100).

In particular, and as a direct result of the Civil Partnership Act, the domestic relationships of queer folk receiving state benefits were automatically reclassified, meaning that even if they did not enter into a civil partnership, they were treated as if they had (see Barker, 2006). Overnight, an unknown number of poor, unemployed, disabled and/or older queer folk who lived with a partner went from being 'invisible' to being part of a 'new couple', in the eyes of the state. Furthermore, any failure to register this new status meant these couples were also at risk of committing benefit fraud. While this change in status brought queer recipients of state benefits into line with their heterosexual neighbours, such alignment only serves to further underscore

the larger point I am making here: the cost of pursuing a specific portfolio of lesbian and gay rights (namely those rights pertaining to property, inheritance and kinship) has been disproportionately borne by working-class people. This is, of course, an anathema to the ideology of LGSM, an organisation set up to support the working-class and founded on the belief that the oppression of one group is an issue for all oppressed groups.

There is thus an ideological gulf between the political energy that spawned LGSM in 1984 and the political agenda that has dominated an increasingly apolitical lesbian and gay public sphere since the 1990s. This gulf goes some way to explaining why Ashton's political background was largely absent in the cinematic retelling of the LGSM story. For while the film celebrates the politics of solidarity within the specific context of the miners' strike, the narrative works to contain this approach to social justice by foregrounding the story of suburban Joe and his personal journey. In doing so, it avoids the uncomfortable questions scholars such as Brown and Browne raise about the world we have won, questions that Ashton himself might well have raised were he alive today.<sup>12</sup>

### **Whatever Happened to the Working Class?**

Watching the end of *Pride*, as the colliery bands play and the miner's families march under their banners, I cannot help but feel an overriding sense of guilt. Sadness and joy too, but mainly guilt that the progress people like myself (gay, middle-class, educated, professional) have enjoyed since 1984 has not been mirrored in the lives of working-class people, including and especially those who went on strike in 1984–85. This guilt is also born out of a recognition that the success of gay and lesbian single-issue politics has come at the expense of the labour movement, trade unions and working-class folk. Finally, this guilt refers to the fact I get to enjoy this story of solidarity and struggle while reaping the financial and social benefits of neoliberalism, an ideology that has decimated the working class while providing

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<sup>12</sup> I use the phrase 'world we have won' to acknowledge the important work that Jeffrey Weeks has undertaken in mapping a history of lesbian and gay life in the UK. *The World We Have Won* is the title of Weeks' 2007 reflection on the advances in gay and lesbian civil rights.

political space for a sexual minorities who conform to a set of middle-class values and identities that Lisa Duggan (2002) refers to as homonormative.

To some extent, the film anticipates this sense of guilt and seeks to foreclose the risk that the nostalgia it has worked hard to produce curdles into that altogether more negative emotion – melancholia. It performs this foreclosure while maintaining a focus on the individual, providing a typically individualistic answer to the question 'whatever happened to the working class?'. Thus, in the biographical coda to the film, we are offered the story of Siân James, the Dulais housewife who first invites LGSM to visit the village, and who is portrayed in the film by Jessica Gunning. Siân becomes the symbol of success at the end of the film and we learn that following her involvement in the community's women's committee, she went on to serve in the Welsh Assembly, becoming the first female MP for Swansea East. This is an achievement to be celebrated, and the work Siân James has been involved in, both as a campaigner for women's rights and later as a member of Parliament, is indeed something to be proud of. Nevertheless, and echoing the role that Joe performs for much of the film, the community of Dulais is, by the resolution of the narrative, reduced to a story of individual success: the story of a woman who, the film implies, managed to 'escape' the working-class confines of the coalfield and community centre and make something of herself. This celebration of individual mobility (social, geographical and political) is avowedly neoliberal in tone and is at odds with the sense of community spirit and collective identity that the rest of the film communicates. Its appearance at the end of the film is also deeply ironic given that Britain's engagement with neoliberal individualism can be tied to the very same government the film sets up as its unseen antagonist. Meanwhile, the larger truth – that mining communities of South Wales were devastated by Thatcher's privatisation initiative and have yet to recover 30 years on – is papered over by the film's conclusion.

Reflecting on the state of the Welsh economy almost a decade after the miners' strike, MacKay (1992: 99) reported that 'employment decline has been severe, particularly for males and even more notably for those employees who relied on major employers within Wales'. The figures he cites provide a stark contrast to the smiling faces at the end of *Pride*:

In 1979 there were 50 manufacturing establishments employing over 1000 employees; by 1986, only 18. The forms of employment which identified and defined industrial and mining communities disappeared. The major employers created local economies: without them, community and economy lack direction (MacKay, 1992: 99).

25 years on from MacKay's sobering report, research continues to identify the ongoing legacy of de-industrialisation, with Wales (once again) having the highest levels of poverty outside of London. In 2016, a year that saw national poverty rates in Britain increase by 1%, a deeper dive into the data reveals that the proportion of Welsh pensioners living in poverty increased from 12% (in 2010) to 21% (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017). According to this research the time of writing this article, more than one in five older people in Wales now lives below the poverty line (ibid.).

## Conclusion

Given the critique I have offered here one might be forgiven for thinking that I dislike *Pride*, but the truth is I have a genuine fondness for this film in spite of the way it contains the politics of solidarity and intersectionality that led to the formation of LGSM. My own mediated memories of the miner's strike, the government's AIDS advertising campaign and the music of the era come flooding back whenever I watch the film. *Pride* is an important film that tells current and future generations that queer folk were involved in one of Britain's longest-running industrial disputes: a dispute that left an indelible mark on both the cultural psyche of the nation and on the lives of those directly involved. The history of LGBTQ people remains precarious, marginalised and unknown by much of British society. *Any* attempt to tell part of that history is important.

Likewise, my critical reading of lesbian and gay single-issue politics should not detract from the legal and political successes of the last 30 years. To repeat my earlier statement, I have directly benefited from these legal reforms and legislative wins. Indeed, the critique I perform in this article is perhaps made possible only because

of the success of lesbian and gay single-issue politics. Critiquing homonormativity, the fight for same-sex marriage and the push for assimilation is often the preserve of those who have otherwise benefitted from such a political trajectory, not least middle-class academics in secure jobs. In this article I have attempted to critique rather than to complain, and to do so in a self-reflexive (as opposed to self-flagellating) fashion that acknowledges the privileged position I occupy. In this sense, and while occupying a different social position to the miners of Dulais or the members of LGSM, I have sought to forge an argument that speaks to the politics of 1984–85, while recognising the very different social, political and legal contexts in which I have developed that argument.

Finally, and working from this sense of changed landscapes, it is vital that I end my discussion by signposting the work that *is* being undertaken by queer activists working outside of the equalities framework of organisations such as Stonewall. Another LGSM – Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants – was set up in 2015 in response to the rising tide of violence and hate speech directed at those seeking sanctuary from poverty, war, famine and genocide. LGSMigrants identifies LGSM as their inspiration and, in the same way that Ashton identifies the similarity between the miners and queer folk in the documentary about the group, this new activist network articulates a politics of solidarity that recognises the need for queer people to support *all* oppressed people:

Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants (LGSMigrants) is a queer group that stands in solidarity with other communities facing state violence and media attacks. [...] Not long ago, LGBT+ people were the 'illegals' and queer pubs and bars were being targeted in police raids and subject to state violence. Now, it is homes and workplaces of migrants that are targeted (LGSMigrants, 2016).

At the same time, LGSMigrants avoids nostalgising this alterity in the way *Pride* does by recognising the shift towards lesbian and gay inclusion that has taken place in the UK, and acknowledging how that inclusion has been mobilised by the Right:

Our queerness is weaponised by the state and media. Hard-won rights for LGBT+ people are presented as part of 'British' or 'European' values and migrants, particularly Muslim migrants, are constructed as a threat to these values. We see through this attempt to pit oppressed and exploited groups against each other (LGMigrants, 2016).

LGMigrants is not LGSM and never could be. They may share a common politics, a common ideology and a common belief in justice, but the newer group also recognises how, in an era of what Jasbir Puar (2017) labels 'homonationalism' – a time when some gay men and lesbians have been granted a form of sexual citizenship – queer folk risk becoming ammunition for politicians who, just 30 years ago, may well have been fighting against the tolerance and acceptance they now see as under threat from groups who migrate to Britain seeking refuge. The revolution that Ashton and others believed in may have failed to materialise, but groups such as LGMigrants demonstrate that the spirit of that revolution lives on, even if *Pride*, working within the narrative confines of the gay success story, struggles to acknowledge this fact.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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