

BRITISH
SOCIAL REALISM &
QUEERNESS IN
ANDREW HAIGH'S
WEEKEND (2011)

Upon its release in 2011, the British film *Weekend* by Andrew Haigh was met with a large amount of critical acclaim, both in the United Kingdom and in the United States.¹ One critic praised the film for having “universal appeal without muting its gayness,”² while another noted how the film takes the plot of “your average present-day mainstream rom-com” and “suggests that in a liberated world where casual sex is no big deal, the truly taboo subjects are the need for love, and the cold truth of ordinary loneliness.”³ One of the defining aspects the film’s reception received was how critics responded to it as a work about the connection between two individuals, with considerations of sexuality as being secondary. In light of the reaction to *Weekend*, the question becomes: how should this film be viewed? As a film that just so happens to be gay-centric, or as a gay film that has incidentally been embraced by a larger audience?

This paper argues that *Weekend* can be positioned within a larger context of both British and queer cinema through a few key aspects of the film. In one respect, the main characters Russell and Glen can be seen as juxtaposed positions, representing the assimilationist and liberationist aspects of gay politics. This juxtaposition represents the central conflict in the film: should the self-identified gay subject attempt to fit into a heteronormative framework, or is it more desirable to challenge societal conventions that legitimize specific relationship formations to the detriment of others? Secondly, penetration is used as a metaphor to expose the way that Russell self-consciously isolates himself from other people. This trope is used as both a metaphorical and literal way of bringing the main character of Russell out of his self-imposed isolation, forcing him to simultaneously deal with his own internalized homophobia and his seeming inability to connect with another human being. Finally, the use of social realist aesthetics and narrative techniques in the film link it to a larger tradition of British cinema that speaks from the margins. *Weekend*, however, cannot be unproblematically labelled as social realist, despite the similarities between the film and contemporary examples of the genre.

It is important to first examine the use of the terms “queer” and “gay” within the context of this paper. While “queer” has been reclaimed to a certain extent in North America, to the point where it is used to denote queer theory in general or queer cinema specifically, the term “has had a more contentious history in the UK.”⁴ While this paper will not delve into an exploration of the term and its problematic uses within a British context, it is important to acknowledge that it carries “socio-historical resonance that is not so easily ignored.”⁵

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Some viewers of what is described as queer cinema may embrace such a term as being inherently liberating, while others may see it as derogative. Within the context of this examination of *Weekend*, the term queer should be understood as an umbrella term that represents a specific strategy of challenging normative positions of sexuality, one that represents "disparate sexual identities, viewpoints, and cultural artefacts that resist easy assimilation to the 'norm.'"⁶ Wherever possible, "queer" is used to represent this strategy of challenging sexual norms while the term "gay" stands in for representing male homosexuality. Where the film and critical literature supporting the central aims of this paper use the terms interchangeably, the following discussion will do so accordingly.

Weekend opens with the main character, Russell, visiting a friend's house for dinner. Rather than returning home after supper, Russell heads to a local gay bar where he drinks and dances. His goal becomes clear; he wants to hook up. He takes a liking to another guy whom he pursues but who seems less than interested. The film cuts to the next morning where the viewer is surprised to find that Russell did in fact *get the guy*. The other guy, Glen, then pulls out a tape recorder and traps Russell into confessing his experience of the previous night. The tape recorder, it is revealed, is central to an art project that Glen has been working on, one in which he forces his conquests to recount their sexual experiences in order to get to the core of their actions and how it affects them. It is this act of confession, of *laying it out there*, that shows how uncomfortable Russell is with talking about his own experiences and sexuality. Glen presses Russell on whether he is out of the closet so as to "expose some sexual hypocrisy or self-loathing contempt."⁷ Much to Glen and the viewer's surprise, Russell confirms that he is out to his close friends but keeps much of his life private.

In contrast, Glen "revels in transgression" both through the forced confessional aspect of his art project and through the way he interacts with Russell in private and others in public.⁸ Shortly after he prods Russell into speaking into his tape recorder, shouts of homophobic violence can be heard from outside Russell's flat. Glen yells at the unseen attacker, threatening that if they do not stop he will "come down there and rape [their] holes."⁹ This direct threat of violence in the face of homophobia illustrates the mentality that Glen represents within the film: he is a queer who is not afraid to bash back. A later scene in which Glen invites Russell to a bar confirms his determination to confront a society that he sees as being explicitly homophobic. Glen launches into a story in which he not so subtly describes a hook-up gone wrong, not noticing

a nearby patron eavesdropping on the conversation. He confronts the (presumably) heterosexual man who in turn complains that Glen is being too loud. Glen in response notes that the man obviously has a problem with the sexual orientation of the conversation. He challenges those he sees in public, "eagerly provoking homophobic reactions in public so he can strike back at them with arguments memorized from *Introduction to Queer Theory*."¹⁰ In Glen's eyes, he sees heterosexuals as constantly *shoving* their sexuality down everyone's throats, so it is only fair to do the same. As Brunick notes, his transgressive attitude, while simplistic in its linkage to a larger history of gay liberation and resistance, simply reinforces his belief that heterosexuals act from a position of privilege rather than accepting sexual difference in others.

The juxtaposition of Russell and Glen can be seen as reproducing larger issues within gay political discourses: assimilation versus liberation. Assimilation, as defined by Nikki Sullivan in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, represents the desire of individuals "to be accepted into, and to become one with, mainstream culture," the goal of which being "that tolerance can be achieved by making differences invisible, or at least secondary, in and through an essentializing, normalizing emphasis on sameness."¹¹ Liberation, on the other hand, believed "the imperative was to experience homosexuality as something positive in and through the creation of alternative values, beliefs, lifestyles, institutions, communities, and so on."¹² Rather than attempting to fit into a larger heteronormative framework that emphasizes heterosexual couplings to the detriment of all others, this position exemplifies the belief that "it was necessary to revolutionise society in and through the eradication of traditional notions of gender and sexuality and the kinds of institutions that informed them and were informed by them."¹³ While these positions themselves were intimately linked to liberationist politics of the post-Stonewall Riots era in the United States, Sullivan's analysis is still valid in this instance. Russell represents assimilation in his desire to keep his private life to himself, preferring to integrate himself into heteronormative society while not challenging structures of power that position heterosexuality as dominant to other sexual identities. In contrast, Glen can be seen as representing the liberationist aspects of gay politics in which the individual is an agent of change, actively pushing social boundaries in an attempt to reshape the way society treats sexual minorities.

Despite these political undertones, the film itself is not a didactic exercise in liberationist politics. Rather, the characters' back stories, explaining how each character has arrived at their subject positions, are grad-

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ually revealed throughout the film's narrative.¹⁴ Russell was put up for foster care and thus did not have to go through the experience of coming out to his parents, which Glen notes as a "gay rite of passage." Glen's own coming-out resulted in his being shunned by friends and overreacting to his parent's indifference. He also pushes himself away from relationships and other men due to a past boyfriend cheating on him. The goal of showing how their own subject positions are intimately linked to their lived experiences was to show why "Russell would love to get married to another man and have a family together, and why Glen wouldn't want to do that."¹⁵ These characterizations help to explain where the characters come from and their subsequent psychological transformations in the narrative can be seen as logical extensions of their senses of self and burgeoning emotional connection.

Despite its explicitly queer context, *Weekend* is firmly rooted within social realist narrative and aesthetic codes, linking the film to a larger tradition of British cinema speaking from the margins. Social realist cinema within a British context can be defined based on four key characteristics. First, characters are "inextricably linked to place or environment." Second, the creator of the work has a specific intent. Third, social realism is represented across a variety of mediums, from film to television to literature. Fourth, social realist films "resist resolutions and the future is rarely bright."¹⁶ This genre of film tends to focus on working-class characters, exploring such themes as the "demise of the traditional working class, changing gender roles and questions of identity and belonging."¹⁷ Films produced within a social realist framework have traditionally been seen as films from the margins, often produced on lower budgets, and have relied on, to varying degrees, "[their] otherness from more mainstream film products as a distinguishing feature."¹⁸ *Weekend* can be seen as playing with social realist codes while not entirely engaging in a direct critique of social conditions that typify other examples in the genre.¹⁹ These types of films, on the one hand, operate on what is referred to as a "logic of extension" by which representation is extended to individuals who were typically found in the margins of mainstream cinema; this has traditionally been male, working-class individuals, but it has also extended to women, immigrants, and in a few notable cases, gay men through the 80's and into the 90's.²⁰ Despite this extension of representation within the genre, British film theorist Samantha Lay notes that the white, working-class male still remains the privileged position within these films.²¹ While it may be argued that Russell represents a working-class male (he is a lifeguard), Glen's role as an artist does not

place him within that working-class role. Despite this incongruity with the archetypal social realist character, the film's emphasis on setting along with its aesthetic innovations are directly related to contemporary forms of social realist film.

The image of the tower block is pervasive throughout *Weekend*, and it acts as the setting for the central conflict between Russell and Glen. Early in the film when Glen responds aggressively to the homophobic shouting outside Russell's flat, a dichotomy of interiority/exteriority is imposed on the film. The interior space of Russell's flat is positioned as a safe space, one in which he can be himself, yet "in the street, [he] feels exposed and uneasy."²² Glen challenges this divide by breaking the wall separating the two spaces as well as challenging the perceived violence and threat in the exterior world while opening the interior to a form of instability. The flat itself can be described as having "a sense of alienation given the height of [Russell's] floor," an alienation that is exemplified by both characters.²³ This figure of the tower block is a common trope in social realist film, which often stands as a "striking visual [symbol] for alienation," poverty, marginalization, crime, violence, a "terrain that registers a history of uneven development and the persistence of social and economic inequities."²⁴ Just what Russell was afraid of as Glen shouted below is never broached, but his discomfort in outwardly expressing his sexuality confirms his fears of (violent) reprisal for being who he is. The tower block itself can also be seen as a "signifier for the marginalized and menacing," representing a "history of uneven development and the persistence of social and economic inequalities."²⁵ Russell himself is signified as marginalized in his isolation from his friends and his hook-ups, and his flat itself represents "just how alone one can be, even though surrounded by people."²⁶

The importance of setting in relation to character development in the film hinges on two scenes of confession: the first involving Glen's tape recorder, and the second, later in the film, in which Russell reads from a journal he keeps after doing lines of cocaine. The journal itself details all of his sexual escapades, focusing on his own emotional reactions to the encounters. This contrasts with his earlier reluctance to open up to Glen via tape recorder. The act of confession in this situation illustrates his letting go of his own emotional baggage, allowing Glen into his life. This, however, is not without its own complications. The scene cuts to Glen reading aloud from the journal when he notices that certain details of one of Russell's encounters match his own experience; Russell had slept with Glen's previous boyfriend. The two acts represent violation in a basic

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way: Glen violates the psychic space as represented by Russell's journal, which in turn lays bare the violation that Glen himself suffered. The film, in exposing both people as damaged emotionally, reveals who they are and allows them to connect in a larger way through penetration. Setting is key – this scene, along with their initial encounter, reaffirms “the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity.”²⁷ Their social and spatial location is heavily encoded within the aesthetics of the film, and help to focus the viewer's understanding of character as intimately linked to place.

The aesthetic choices used within *Weekend* are deliberate in how they frame the narrative. Traditional forms of social realism eschew visual or stylistic innovation, indicating “a distinct preference for content over style.”²⁸ This approach is best exemplified by the films of Loach and Leigh, which attempt to document the grit and grime of working-class life with a lack of innovation in terms of how characters or situations are visually represented. However, contemporary British films working within a social realist mode have shifted from this to a “traditionally close engagement with real issues and towards a wider concern for the way images and sounds can render reality.”²⁹ Films by Andrea Arnold (*Red Road*, *Fish Tank*) and Lynne Ramsay (*Ratcatcher*, *Morvern Callar*), which can be argued to function within social realist codes, focus more on how the image or character is represented, with social critiques being implied through aesthetic choices.

Weekend works much in the same way. While the central narrative to the film is explicitly caught up in a debate between assimilationist and liberationist queer politics, the film chooses to use non-traditional modes of visual representation. For example, the film repeatedly uses long takes with a shallow depth of field, forcing the viewer to focus on a shifting perspective between the foreground and the background. In the scene where Glen confronts what he perceived to be homophobia in the bar, the camera is used to focus first on Glen, telling his story, then shifts to the man in the background who is listening, then back to Russell as he arrives with shots for the group. The long take is also used in conjunction with the window in Russell's flat as a framing device, one that represents the interior/exterior dichotomy played out within the film. After reading Russell's journal they proceed to argue about relationships and Russell pushes Glen, noting how he wants one just as much as he does. The film then cuts to Russell in his bathroom, pulling a joint out of

his wallet. The camera focuses on his face using a shallow depth of field, forcing the viewer to look at his eyes, acknowledging the hurt and rejection that Russell feels. The film then returns to the flat's window, represented as a liminal space. Russell offers the joint, his "secret stash," to Glen as a *mea culpa* of sorts. The framing of this scene within the space of the window also acts as a way of breaking down the exterior/interior binary that is reinforced in the first half of the film. Also, the joint itself acts as a symbol and represents Russell letting Glen into his life and accepting that he has seen his own vulnerabilities. Russell holds Glen's hand and while it may not represent the transgressive act that Glen longs for, the fact that it occurs within this framed liminal space between public and private underscores the character transformation both of them are undergoing. Finally, the film cuts to a shot from the outside, both of them illuminated in the window, allowing the viewer to act as a voyeur, seeing into their private sexual space.

At an earlier point in the film, Russell notes how he has never been penetrated but does not go into specific reasons as to why that is. This knowledge is repeated in the scene where Russell and Glen go through his journal. The film implies that he does not like anal sex, but never explicitly states it. As the narrative progresses and Russell finally opens up and allows himself to be vulnerable to Glen, he allows Glen to penetrate him. This act of penetration collapses the exterior and interior, allowing Glen to be a part of his life while simultaneously acknowledging that Russell has gotten under Glen's defenses. This scene illustrates the divide being broken, and shifts into a common theme found within queer cinema: penetration as connection. This symbol of connection links *Weekend* to other contemporary queer films such as *Mysterious Skin* (Gregg Araki, 2004) and *Shortbus* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006). Both *Shortbus* and *Weekend* use penetration as a way to illustrate the dropping of emotional boundaries and collapsing of the exterior and interior.⁵⁰ Penetration in *Mysterious Skin* is represented not as a way to open oneself emotionally, but as a way to force the character of Neil to revisit his past sexual abuse at the hands of his baseball coach.⁵¹ The act of penetration in this case is non-consensual, and serves to "disrobe" Neil, obliterating the fantasies he held with regards to his relationship with his coach. This act of penetration represents the breaking of the internal and the external, forcing a gay male character to "open" up in a way that allows them to come to some sort of greater understanding of himself and to connect with other individuals. In *Mysterious Skin*, Neil is able to open himself up

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to Brian, while in *Shortbus*, James is able to reconnect with his boyfriend. In *Weekend*, penetration acts to collapse barriers between the interior existence of Russell that he lives out in his flat and the exterior world.

Russell finally confides in his best mate Jamie, telling him that Glen is leaving. Jamie pushes Russell, saying they can go to the train station so Russell can say goodbye to Glen. On the station platform Russell and Glen say goodbye. At first their conversation is barely audible, with the background noise obscuring their conversation. As the camera slowly pans inward, their words become clearer. It is implied that Russell has told Glen he loves him, and Glen gets upset, saying, "I don't know what the fuck I'm doing." They kiss and a wolf-whistle can be heard in the background. Instead of Glen confronting the unseen person, Russell turns his gaze towards them. The role reversal here is significant. Glen tells Russell to ignore them; but Russell stares them down. This illustrates the final shift in the film: Russell is finally comfortable with himself. Before Glen says goodbye, he passes him an envelope. The train then pulls out and he is gone. There is no happy resolution, reinforcing the social realist mode that "resist[s] resolutions."³² The final shot returns to the window of Russell's flat. He is seen removing a tape recorder from the envelope Glen gave him, symbolizing that his confession, one that had initially been procured under the guise of the art project, would remain between them.

When looking at *Weekend* within a larger context, it is important to see how it links to a larger context of British cinema. As illustrated above, it utilizes social realist narrative and aesthetic conventions to tell a story speaking from the margins. However, it is also important to look at how the film can be understood as a visual representation of sexuality. As Robin Griffiths states in the introduction to *British Queer Cinema*, a film as a textual document can "[play] a vital role in the formulation and covert articulation of queer identity and desire."³³ This articulation of desire not only reflects how queer subjects see themselves, but also serves as a way for communicating a sense of self to a heteronormative audience. Haigh specifically acknowledges the problems with this sort of approach, noting that the film was meant to touch on universal themes, that gay people "have exactly the same issues as straight people," but still there is the "worry about being pigeonholed and defined only as a gay film."³⁴ This perhaps is a larger challenge which films defined as queer or gay face: speak to those who have the lived experience that is captured on film, or attempt to represent universal themes which a broader audience can understand. Paul Brunick's review of *Weekend* in *Film Comment* also notes how the film articulates a specific repre-

sentation of queerness that hit close to home, speaking of “[his] own generational experience of being queer.”³⁵ And while it is tempting to look at a film such as *Weekend* within its fictional context, its reception does directly reflect how viewers identify the characters and the story. While the director did not have any prior knowledge of just how the film would be received, the film itself is important on a number of levels.³⁶ On a most basic level, it represents an articulation of post-millennial queer politics in England as translated through social realist narrative and aesthetic codes. On a more fundamental level, it represents “the human condition” as something that can perhaps be universally understood, rather than precluded simply because of the queer content of the film.³⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ The review aggregator website Rottentomatoes.com gives *Weekend* a rating of 95%, while Metacritic.com notes a score of 81 out of 100, indicating Critical Acclaim.
- ² See: Eric Hynes, "Modern Love, the Real Thing, Over 48 Hours in *Weekend*," *Village Voice*, September 21, 2011.
- ³ Jonathan Romney, "Weekend," *The Independent*, November 6, 2011: n.pag.
- ⁴ Robin Griffiths, *British Queer Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006), 4.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Robin Griffiths in the introduction to *British Queer Cinema* expands further upon the problems of using the term "queer" to label a film, but instead suggests that it can be used productively to challenge dominant notions of what is considered normal and "also allows for queering (or queering) of the stability of such notions of 'normality,' and the validity of the accepted epistemology of sexuality itself." See Griffiths, *British Queer Cinema*, 4.
- ⁷ Paul Brunick, "Reach Out and Touch Someone: Andrew Haigh's *SXSW Triumph*," *Film Comment* 47, no. 3 (2011): 63.
- ⁸ Brunick, "Reach Out and Touch Someone," 63.
- ⁹ *Weekend*, directed by Andrew Haigh (2011; New York: Criterion Collection, 2012), DVD.
- ¹⁰ Brunick, "Reach Out and Touch Someone," 63.
- ¹¹ Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 23.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 29.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ¹⁴ Haigh notes that "politics doesn't exist in a void – it's shaped by everything that's happened to you." See: Thomas Dawson, "Friday Night & Saturday Morning," *Sight & Sound* 21, no. 12 (December 2011): 15.
- ¹⁵ Dawson, "Friday Night and Saturday Morning," 15.
- ¹⁶ Samantha Lay, *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit-grit* (London: Wallflower, 2002), 21.
- ¹⁷ Samantha Lay, "Good Intentions, High Hopes And Low Budgets: Contemporary Social Realist Film-Making In Britain," *New Cinemas: Journal Of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 3 (2007):238.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 233.
- ¹⁹ For example, see the films of Mike Leigh (*All or Nothing*) and Ken Loach (*Riff-Raff*).
- ²⁰ A key example is Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Laundrette*.
- ²¹ Lay, *British Social Realism*, 14–16.
- ²² Romney, "Weekend."
- ²³ David Noh, "Weekend," *Film Journal International* 114, no. 10 (October 2011): 56.
- ²⁴ Andrew Burke, "Concrete Universality: Tower Blocks, Architectural Modernism, And Realism In Contemporary British Cinema," *New Cinemas: Journal Of Contemporary Film* 5, no. 3 (2007): 178.
- ²⁵ Burke, "Concrete Universality," 177–178.
- ²⁶ Noh, "Weekend," 57.
- ²⁷ Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment, quoted in Forrest, 33.
- ²⁸ Lay, *British Social Realism*, 21.
- ²⁹ David Forrest, "Better Things (Duane Hopkins, 2008) and New British Realism," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 8, no. 1 (2010):41.
- ³⁰ In *Shortbus*, the character of James is represented much in the same way as Russell: he shuts himself off emotionally from those around him. When he allows himself to be penetrated towards the end of the film, the act represents a "[breach] in his own impermeability [...]" in a way that is finally felt. This notion of impermeability is a common theme throughout the film and stands as a metaphor for the way that people close themselves off to connection with others. To be impermeable is to cut oneself off from connection, separate from a "larger social goal of forming a community of 'permeable,' unafraid beings." Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 286–292.
- ³¹ The act itself "represents the turning point in Neil's life when his childhood innocence is finally shattered and he stops romanticizing his sexual interactions with Coach from a decade earlier." Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, *Images for a Generation Doomed: The Films and Career of Gregg Araki* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 76.
- ³² Lay, *British Social Realism*, 21.
- ³³ Griffiths, *British Queer Cinema*, 5.
- ³⁴ The director himself identifies as an out gay man, and therefore could be seen as bearing a sort of responsibility for portraying gay subjectivities from within a queer perspective. David Noh, "It Happened One Weekend," *Film Journal International* 114, no. 10 (October 2011): 18.
- ³⁵ Brunick, "Reach Out and Touch Someone," 63.
- ³⁶ Andrew Haigh, the director, notes that he was uncertain whether it would find an audience. He acknowledges in an interview that he believed "it might find a small niche audience on DVD" and was surprised that it found success in the United States. Dawson, "Friday Night and Saturday Morning," 15.
- ³⁷ Brunick, "Reach Out and Touch Someone," 63.

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