

## Is Resistance Futile?: The Clash of the Individual and Society in *Educating Rita*, *Billy Elliot* and *Trainspotting*

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**ÖZET** Direniş, bireyin, katmanlaşmış ve belirli bir toplum içerisindeki iktidar sahiplerince üzerinde hüküm kurulan sosyal sistemle mücadele etme biçimidir. Sınıfsal ayrımları gözetken ve sınıf farklılıklarını önemseyen İngiliz toplumunda, direniş, çağdaş sinema da dâhil olmak üzere, pek çok edebi ve kültürel metin türüne konu edilmiştir. Lewis Gilbert'in yönettiği ve Willy Russell'in oyunundan uyarlanan *Educating Rita* (1983), Stephen Daldry'nin yönettiği *Billy Elliot* (2000) ve Danny Boyle'un yönettiği, Irvine Welsh'in romanından uyarlanan *Trainspotting* (1996) filmlerinde direniş ana tema olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır ve yönetici ve bağlı sınıflar arasındaki çatışmanın merkezinde yer almaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı, hiyerarşik hatların keskin biçimde çizilmiş olduğu ve sınıf ayrımcılığına önem veren bir toplumda direniş ihtimalinin bulunup bulunmadığını tartışmak ve bunu, ismi geçen bu üç filmde örneklendirmektir. Bir başka deyişle, sınıf hareketliliğinin olabilirliği bakımından birey ve toplum arasındaki çatışma, çağdaş İngiliz sinemasının bu üç örneğinde incelenmektedir.

**ANAHTAR KELİMELELER** direniş, sınıf hareketliliği, *Educating Rita* (1983), *Billy Elliot* (2000), *Trainspotting* (1996)

**ABSTRACT** Resistance is the individual's way of coping with the stratified social system, which is dominated by the power holders within a given society, and in the class-conscious British society, resistance has become an inevitable topic for many genres, including the contemporary cinema. In Lewis Gilbert's *Educating Rita* (1983), which is based on Willy Russell's play, Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot* (2000), and Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996), which is based on Irvine Welsh's novel, resistance stands as the major theme, lying at the core of the clash between the ruling and the subordinate classes. The aim of this essay is to discuss whether there is a possibility of resistance against the mainstream values of a class-conscious society, where the hierarchical lines are strictly drawn, and to exemplify the argument through these three films. In other words, the conflict between the individual and society as regards the possibility of class mobility is examined in the three examples of contemporary British cinema..

**KEYWORDS** resistance, class mobility, *Educating Rita* (1983), *Billy Elliot* (2000), *Trainspotting* (1996)

The idea of resistance appears in cultural studies as a clash between society and the individual. In fact, resistance can be defined as the individual's way of coping with the stratified social system, which is dominated by the power holders within a given society. In line with this definition, British cultural critic Keith Kahn-Harris argues that "in a capitalist world in which the possibility of revolution [seems] improbable, there [is] nothing left but to look for the possibility of anti-hegemonic resistance in the margins of

societies.”<sup>1</sup> This suggests that, on having not much power to revolt against the corrupt institutions of a certain society, in which the discriminative behaviours towards any possible *other* are often encountered, the individual tries to react against the corruption in the governmental, social, religious and cultural bodies of the society s/he lives in through various ways, all of which could be clustered under the umbrella term “resistance,” which has been mainly dealt with in contemporary British cinema, especially as resistance to class inequality. The three major examples of such films, which take the individual’s resistance against class inequalities as their subject matter, are *Educating Rita* (1983), *Billy Elliot* (2000) and *Trainspotting* (1996). In these films, it is possible to observe that the major characters are, successfully or failingly, resistant toward the mainstream culture and its expectations, as they are in an attempt to overcome the difficulties in their lives that are posed by “the persistence of class inequalities,” as John Westergaard titles his chapter in *Contemporary British Society Reader*. In fact, according to Westergaard, the definition of class structure involves people’s “unequal places in the economic order.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Chris Barker defines class as “a relational set of inequalities with economic, social, political, and ideological dimensions.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, by characterization, the issue of class is a matter of inequality, and it inevitably entails issues of hegemony and resistance. This is why the three films analysed in this essay involve the hegemony of the mainstream culture and the resistance of those who are marginalised and/or left behind in the social ladder. While in the first two films, *Educating Rita* and *Billy Elliot*, education seems to be the key to success in resisting against the expectations of the mainstream culture, in the third film, *Trainspotting*, resistance seems to be futile because drug abuse, as a method of resistance, is nothing but the key to the individual’s death.

To begin with, in the works where the characters manage to cope with class inequality, the individual’s success is rendered possible through his/her consent to move upwards in the social ladder as well as the mainstream culture’s readiness to embrace him/her in his/her new social position. In this regard, it can be argued that Antonio Gramsci’s term “consent”<sup>4</sup> applies not only to the ruling classes, but also the subordinate

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1. Keith Kahn-Harris, “The ‘Failure’ of Youth Culture: Reflexivity, Music and Politics in the Black Metal Scene,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 (2004), p.96.
  2. John Westergaard, “The Persistence of Class Inequalities,” Nicholas Abercrombie and Alan Warde (eds.) *The Contemporary British Society Reader* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.69.
  3. Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), p.382.
  4. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks: Volume I* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p.153.

ones. According to Gramsci, the subordinate groups within a society cannot exist without the consent of the dominant class. They may offer resistance to the ideas of the dominant class, but the alternatives they offer “are always negotiated within a cultural context which emerges from ruling class (or a fraction of its) ideas.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, it is possible to say that resistance can succeed only when the mainstream culture of the dominant class gives consent to it. If this consent is not given, the failure of resistance appears in only the ways that affect the subordinate individuals at their own expenses: deprivation, poverty, or worse, death. In fact, the impossibility of resistance and the sad consequences of such an attempt can be observed in *Trainspotting*, where the individuals are faced with the death of a baby and a friend. Alison’s baby, Dawn, dies because of parental negligence and hunger, while Tommy dies of an overdose.

At the same time, however, the idea of consent can be reversed, and it can be argued that social mobility becomes possible only when the individual is ready to fight against the barriers between himself/herself and the ruling class, as can be seen in *Educating Rita* and *Billy Elliot*. The difficulties that the individual needs to face are generally observed in two different aspects. First, s/he has to fight with his/her own immediate environment to gain the consent of the community that he/she lives within in order to alter his/her lifestyle. Second, the individual needs to struggle against the complications brought about by the new environment. S/he has to survive against mockeries, insults, and various forms of humiliation. Only through persistence against repeated failures can the individual achieve success in class mobility. Bearing all this in mind, the only possible way to cope with class inequality in British society successfully seems to be education in most cases, as can be exemplified in both films.

To be more precise, two similar success stories in resistance through education and persistence lie in Lewis Gilbert’s *Educating Rita* and Stephen Daldry’s *Billy Elliot* (2000). In the former example, the audience is presented with a working class woman, whose primary aim is to find herself through education. She wants to be learned, well-read, and intellectually satisfied, in order to cross the borders of class inequality. The latter one, likewise, provides the audience with the story of a young boy, who pursues ballet dancing instead of boxing as a leisure activity, and then, a career, making his way through working class toward upper-middle class.

In both *Educating Rita* and *Billy Elliot*, the primary focus is on the distinction between high culture and low culture as class markers. Coming from the working class

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5. Michael Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.5.

background, Rita is at first ignorant when compared to the upper class professor of literature, Frank. Through her persistence, however, Rita catches up with Frank's higher status, and even manages to teach him a lesson about life choices. In fact, in her perseverance in educating herself, Rita becomes the symbol of what Beverley Skeggs touches upon in her article, "Women Avoiding Being Working Class": "[t]he real working class for these women is something from which they are desperately trying to escape. It is why they are doing college courses. They want to be seen as different."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Billy achieves his dream despite his economic and social deprivation. Since he is not even an adult when he obtains the result he wants, his achievement seems even more miraculous than Rita's and thus promotes hope for change in class issues.

The main similarity between the two is that both begin their struggle to become different by educating themselves, and this is how they respond to class inequalities they experience. Rita's way of explaining herself to Frank is like the thesis statement of the essay that she writes about herself:

"I've been realizin' for ages that I was, y' know, slightly out of step. I'm twenty six. I should have had a baby by now; everyone expects it. I'm sure me husband thinks I'm sterile. He was moanin' all the time, y' know, 'Come of the pill, let's have a baby.' I told him I'd come off it, just to shut him up. But I'm still on it (She moves round to Frank). See, I don't wanna baby yet. See, I wanna discover meself first. Do you understand that?"<sup>7</sup>

Just as Rita states her opinion clearly, Billy's manner of resistance is also sharp in his own way. His secret continuation to the lessons with his dance teacher Sandra Wilkinson's help in spite of his father's forbidding him from dancing is his way of resistance. In their determination to discover and realize the inner selves, both Rita and Billy endure the social pressures of their immediate environments, namely, their families, who are of working class background. They both reject the values that are imposed on them: to be a mother or to be a manly figure. Moreover, as a "poorly educated, culturally impoverished, socially powerless" woman, as Michael Mangan points out, Rita has to tolerate and resist the humiliation brought about by her new environment.<sup>8</sup> At first, Frank simply insults Rita while talking on the phone with his girlfriend by stating that she is "some silly

6. Beverley Skeggs, "Women Avoiding Being Working Class," in Nicholas Abercrombie and Alan Warde (eds.), *The Contemporary British Society Reader*, p.120.

7. *Educating Rita*, dir. Lewis Gilbert, perf. Michael Caine and Julie Walters, Acorn Pictures, 1983.

8. Michael Mangan, "'Appalling Teachers': Masculine Authority in the Classroom in *Educating Rita* and *Oleanna*" in Daniel Meyer Dinkgrafe (ed.), *The Professions in Contemporary Drama*, ed. Daniel Meyer Dinkgrafe (Oregon: Intellect, 2003), p.21.

woman” who “attempts to get into the mind of Henry James or whosoever [...]”<sup>9</sup>, while Billy experiences the misfortune of being labeled as poof as well as missing the audition due to the political and social environment that surrounds him. By the end of the film, however, Rita overcomes the barrier of class inequality and gains a variety of choices to pursue in her life. Likewise, at the end of the movie, Billy is able to realize his dream, while at the same time carrying his family with himself in the social ladder. Thus, resistance through education becomes both Rita’s and Billy’s ways of coping with class inequality, through which they show the audience the fact that resistance is not futile.

The last example that is to be dealt with in this essay is Danny Boyle’s *Trainspotting* (1996), which offers the account of a total failure in the form of a black comedy. In *Trainspotting*, the characters seem to have chosen the wrong way, unlike Rita and Billy. In fact, they have chosen not to choose anything. The resistance toward class inequality in this film comes from drug abuse, which stands for the characters’ inner rejection of any value that is imposed on them by the British mainstream. For instance, refusal to identify oneself with one’s national identity is the first step to resist for the characters, as Renton says:

“Fuckin failures in a country ay failures. It’s nae good blamin it oan the English for colonising us. Ah don’t hate the English. They’re just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can’t even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. No. We’re ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation. Ah don’t hate the English. They just git oan wi the shite thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots’.”<sup>10</sup>

No matter how hard they try to resist, though, they end up in the depths of the consumer culture, the deadliest form of which takes place in drug abuse. Hence, the characters’ strife to react to and cope with class inequalities, in all cases, seems to fail, although they mock the consumer culture very itself:

“Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage repayments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yerself in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye’ve produced. Choose life.”<sup>11</sup>

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9. *Educating Rita*, 1983.

10. *Trainspotting*, dir. Danny Boyle, perf. Ewan McGregor and Ewan Bremner, Channel Four Films, 1996.

11. *Trainspotting*, 1996.

While Renton seems to reject all the values brought about by the consumer culture, it becomes a vicious circle for him as well as his friends since in the end they are bound to die because of an addiction to a commodity. This is what Ian Haywood also suggests as he says “[d]rug addiction has become the demonic and demonized reflection of a commodified, fetishized and irresponsible capitalist system.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, it is obvious that the trainspotters fail in their attempt to cope with the class inequality and in rejecting the values of the mainstream, as one can also read the death of Dawn, the baby, as a foreshadowing of the possibility of failure to resist and the unlikelihood of survival in the future. In *Porno* (2002), the sequel to Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1993), the novel version on which Boyle’s film is based, the characters are seen in a struggle to take place in the system to cope with class inequality as so-called businessmen, but this also ends with a failure right from the beginning because they ironically take part in porn industry.

In conclusion, the individual’s ways of coping with class inequalities and the pressures brought about by these can be categorized under the headings of success and failure, as well as hope and despair. While a tone of perseverance is salient in *Educating Rita* and *Billy Elliot*, which promote a hope for the possibility of coping with these inequalities, a tone of mockery and irony prevails in *Trainspotting*, which suggests no hope for the individual to be able to overcome class disparities. All in all, the three films are successful examples that deal with class inequalities that pressurize the working class and the underclass, and they handle the issue of resistance from different angles.

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