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WT2: a low budget experiment in "heart, humour and horror"

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Abstract:

In 1999, the London-based production company, Working Title Films, established a subsidiary called WT2 which was given the remit of producing low-budget films. Between 2000 and 2007, WT2 released 10 feature films including *Billy Elliot* (2000), *Ali G Indahouse* (2002) and *Long Time Dead* (2002) which respectively exemplified the company's creative agenda of 'the three Hs', that is, 'heart, humour and horror'. This article examines the creative and commercial contexts of filmmaking at play within WT2 and, in turn, considers the company's position within Working Title and between its major financiers, StudioCanal and Universal. In doing so, I argue that WT2's films occupy a position between the filmmaking industries and cultures of Europe and Hollywood which is distinct from that of its parent company. On the one hand, a number of WT2's films engage with established trends in low-budget British cinema including social realism and the adaptation of television comedy, and were co-produced by British broadcasters, national film agencies and independent production companies. On the other, these films were largely financed, distributed and marketed by multinational media conglomerates with commercial agendas and transnational or global reaches. Thus, this article examines the ways in which the tension between the national and the transnational was played out in both the company's operation and output.

Keywords: WT2; Working Title Films; Universal; StudioCanal; social realism; television comedy

At the 1999 Cannes Film Festival Working Title Films announced the creation of a subsidiary production company called WT2 which was given the remit of producing low-budget films. The unveiling was one of a series of significant events for the London-based production company that year. Two months earlier, its co-chairmen, Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner, had agreed a five-year production deal with its parent company, Universal (Dawtrey 1999). Just days before the launch of WT2, the European pay-television giant, Canal Plus, agreed to co-finance the operational, development and production costs of Working Title with Universal over the same period (Dawtrey1999a). For Canal Plus, this deal foreshadowed the establishment of StudioCanal the following year which was formed from the company's existing production and distribution arm, Canal Plus Image. Significantly, this rebranding was accompanied by the announcement that Canal Plus would double its investment in film

production via StudioCanal with the aim of becoming a 'major' European studio (James 2000). Thus, Working Title's alignment with Universal and StudioCanal can be seen as part of a greater narrative about the relationship between the film industries and cultures of Hollywood and Europe.

Working Title's particular configuration in this regard has attracted scholarly attention from various perspectives. Michael Wayne (2006), for example, argues that Working Title is governed by the 'Atlanticist paradigm for British cinema' which ensures that the company is subordinate to Universal, and produces films which must take a 'cultural detour' through the American market. Within this context, he argues, Working Title's films have developed a 'brand identity' which encompasses 'neo-heritage locations' and 'white middle class characters' (Wayne 2006, 59). Wayne's observations about such representational tendencies most closely align with Working Title's string of commercially successful romantic comedies written by Richard Curtis – *Notting Hill* (1999), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Love Actually* (2003) and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004) – which take place in a geographical and social milieu that has been dubbed 'Curtisland' in the broadsheet press and more recently in film scholarship (Leggott 2012). Taking a contrary position, Hochscherf and Leggott (2010) assess the validity of the 'mid-Atlantic' label, arguing for a greater acknowledgement of Working Title's place within the film industries and cultures of Europe. Noting that the 'Curtisland' canon is a relatively small, if prominent, part of the company's output, the authors cite the diversity of European representations on display in films such as *The Man Who Cried* (2000), *Mr Bean's Holiday* (2007) and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007).

From the beginning, however, the creative and commercial agenda of WT2 was distinct from that of its parent company in several ways. Working Title imposed a $5 million budgetary limit upon the films WT2 produced, ensuring that its output lacked the production values and star actors typically associated with the output of its parent company. Equally, WT2 was explicitly set the task of attracting new writers and directors, many of whom would make their feature debut with the subsidiary (Dawtrey 1999b). In line with this agenda, the majority of WT2's films were coproduced with other institutions in the British film industry which had variously vested interests in low- to medium-budget film production. These include the filmmaking arms of broadcasters, such as BBC Films and FilmFour, national film agencies including the UK Film Council and the Northern Ireland Film & Television Commission and independent production companies like Tiger Aspect Productions and Big Talk Productions. Simultaneously, however, WT2's films were, like those of its parent company, largely financed and distributed by Universal and StudioCanal, two multinational media conglomerates with

commercial agendas and transnational or global operations. Thus, WT2 was positioned by the competing forces of the national and the transnational in ways which depart significantly from those influencing Working Title.

A year after its establishment, Bevan and Fellner refined the company's remit by aligning its output with 'the three Hs' in the trade press, that is, 'heart, humour and horror' (Dawtrey 2000). Indeed, the 10 feature films which WT2 produced between 2000 and 2007 can be usefully divided according to the genre categories suggested by this label. Heart is exemplified by the drama *Billy Elliot* (2000) and three comedy-dramas, *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004), *Mickybo and Me* (2004) and *Sixty Six* (2006). Humour is to be found in *Ali G Indahouse* (2002), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *The Calcium Kid* (2004). Finally, *Long Time Dead* (2002), *My Little Eye* (2002) and *Gone* (2007) sit most squarely within the horror genre. For the purposes of this article, however, the focus will remain on the 'heart' and 'humour' contingent in WT2's output. While no less worthy of study, two of the subsidiary's three horror films, *My Little Eye* and *Gone*, are set in America and Australia respectively and thus lie outside the remit of this journal. In contrast, WT2's 'heart' and 'humour' films open significant dialogues with established traditions in low budget British filmmaking, repectively, social realism and the adaptation of television comedy. The initial discussion, below, considers the creative and commercial contexts of filmmaking at play within WT2, before examining the subsidiary's output, particularly the ways in which the tensions between the national and the transnational are played out on-screen. Finally, I explore the demise of WT2 and consider its legacy.

The creative and commercial contexts of WT2

The deals which Working Title struck with Universal and StudioCanal in the spring of 1999 were preceded by the demise of Working Title's former parent company, PolyGram Filmed Entertainment (PFE). During the 1990s, PFE attempted to build a European-owned rival to the major Hollywood studios, supported by the resources of its parent company, PolyGram. This venture came to a premature end in 1998, however, when PolyGram and PFE were sold to Seagram, the parent company of Universal (Carver & Petrikin, 1998). Significantly, Working Title had become PFE's most commercially successful subsidiary, producing a number of British hit films including *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Bean* (1997), *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Notting Hill* (1999). This track record of success prompted Universal to secure Working

Title's future at the studio with a long-term deal. Throughout these negotiations, Working Title's priority was to maintain as much operational and creative autonomy as possible. Indeed, this ambition was reflected in the resulting 5-year agreement which permitted Bevan and Fellner the autonomy to green-light up to five films a year with budgets of up to $25 million (Dawtrey 1999). While the deal represented a milestone for Hollywood investment in a European company, Working Title's Chairmen were, nonetheless, also keen to find a coproduction partner. 'We were worried about the studio relationship, so we thought if we brought in some money from Europe there'd be more of a focus on trying to get European content made', Fellner explained. 'Studios do what studios need to do, and that doesn't really encompass the types of films that we were making'.[1] As Working Title's COO, Angela Morrison, notes the production company actively pursued a deal with Canal Plus after closing its deal with Universal as part of a considered co-financing strategy:

> It was part of the strive to maintain autonomy, it was also part of some sort of in-built sense that having a European partner for us was really key because we were based here and there is a different sensibility between the European market and the US market . . . I think, ultimately, it was driven by, if we cost [Universal] less, that's got to be good for us in the long term, and the studio, they responded to having a partner and they responded to having a European partner. Partners were, and still are, hard to find and I think because we'd opened that door the studio were very open to having a partner.[2]

Ultimately, Canal Plus, agreed to co-finance the operational, development and production costs of Working Title on a 50–50 basis with Universal at a cost of between $50m and $100m annually. In return for their contribution, Canal Plus received television rights to all Working Title's films in continental Europe (excluding the UK and Ireland) and French theatrical and video rights for every second film for the first three years of the deal. In the final two years, Canal Plus also received theatrical and video rights in all territories in continental Europe for every second film (Dawtrey 1999b). As I have argued elsewhere (Townsend 2018), this co-financing arrangement did not afford the two studios equal involvement in the output of Working Title. The deal ensured Working Title operational and creative autonomy at the point of development and the ostensible freedom to green-light low to medium budget films. In practice, however, green-light decisions were ultimately made in collaboration with Universal, while Universal and StudioCanal subsequently handled the distribution and marketing of Working Title's films in the territories where they retained distribution rights.

Despite WT2's official launch immediately after the closure of these deals, the origins of the subsidiary can be traced back to earlier developments within Working Title which laid

the groundwork for the new venture. The staff who would act as joint heads of the new company, Natascha Wharton and Jon Finn, had been employed by Working Title in various capacities since the early 1990s. Wharton began as an assistant, before moving into an executive position in the development department, while Finn had made the same progression in the production department. A significant factor in the establishment of WT2 was the creation of the New Writer's Scheme, a project which Wharton had initiated while working as a development executive. As she explained:

> One of the things that I really focussed on through that time, which in retrospect was fantastically generous of Tim and Eric to let me do, was the New Writer's Scheme. We set up, I think, rather a canny structure to support writers whereby they were allowed to hold on to the copyright in the material. We gave them a set fee, helped them ... [along the] path and then took a view on whether we would develop the project. It was a fantastically rich time because, actually, quite a few of the writers that I worked with at that point went on to have careers . . . People who were literally writing their first scripts: James Watkins, Nick Love, John McDonagh, Rowan Joffe . . . It seemed to be less about Tim and Eric finding projects and more about genuinely providing support for emerging talent. At the time, I think, Tim and Eric thought, if out of ten projects one of them came good or there was an interesting relationship that emerged out of one of them, then that would be of value.[3]

The gathering momentum around the establishment of WT2 was also partly inspired by the recurrent critical and commercial success of low-budget British and Irish films of various genres throughout the 1990s. Working Title's first major hit, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) had, alongside *The Full Monty* (1997), been the most remarkable in this regard, each making substantially over $200 million upon theatrical release. There were, however, a string of commercial successes within the $5 million budget range including *The Crying Game* (1992), *Trainspotting* (1996), *Sliding Doors* (1998) and *Waking Ned* (1998). 'It was a mad time because so many writers and directors out there were trying to work in film and that entry system has just disappeared, it's not as vibrant and it's not as full as it once was', Finn explained. 'Most of those people have moved on to television. So there's not that huge competition between companies to get £3 million films anymore, because of the cost of releasing and all the rest of it'.[4] Like Wharton, Finn made clear that WT2's agenda was equally about building relationships with talent with an eye on the future of Working Title as a whole:

> It was a bit like playing the lottery, because enough of those films did work that that you went, 'maybe it's this one'. My feeling about it was what you were really doing there was backing the filmmaker because some of the scripts weren't obvious [commercial successes] … So, essentially, you go back to the reason we set it up in first

> place, which was to give people their first break. Give people their first shout, and give it to people who really wanted to make a film. I think there was two agendas going on there, really, and one of them was hoping that one of those films would catch the zeitgeist . . . You wanted one in every five, six, seven to make some money but at the same time, with the rest of them, you're giving people a chance to shine or not. You're giving them an opportunity to do what they do, and then maybe feed the bigger company with those sorts of people.[5]

WT2 Ltd. was officially incorporated in October 1999 and took up residence in same offices as its parent company on Oxford Street. Despite their close proximity, WT2 had a separate overhead and development budget and focussed exclusively on its own development slate. In doing so, Working Title effectively transferred the autonomy it maintained in development downwards into WT2. Wharton and Finn were joined by Rachael Prior and Amanda Boyle who respectively assumed the positions of Head of Development and Company Co-ordinator, with Prior assisting Wharton and Boyle assisting Finn. In practice, however, the small team worked together closely across the areas of development and production. 'Nat knows her stuff when it comes to production, and I have a lot of opinions on scripts', Finn confirmed. 'If Nat had brought them in, or had a relationship with the writer or director, then she tended to lead on it. But in the early stages we did all the meetings together. When people came in to pitch, we did it together, when we decided to pick stuff up, generally we made that decision together'.[6] Wharton and Finn would, however, report upwards to Bevan and Fellner, whose involvement became crucial in the later stages of the process. 'It was really simple. It was whether Tim or Eric wanted to do it, it literally came down to [that]', Finn explained. 'You would go in and show them stuff and go "we want to make this, we want to make this" and quite often they would say "no", but occasionally you'd find something that they also could see something in'.[7] Describing the general relationship between his approach and that of his co-chairman in supporting the development of projects, Bevan revealed:

> I'd say that there's a sixty percent common bandwidth . . . there's 20 percent out there of stuff that I might do that he wouldn't, and there's probably 20 percent of stuff out there that he might do that I probably wouldn't . . . One of the reasons for splitting up the projects too was that you realise in order to get a film produced, you, the lead producer, has to have an immense and tireless passion for it, and you're not going to have the same passion for everything, basically. If he's more passionate about something than me, that I like, that's great. If I'm more passionate about something than him, that he likes, that's fine. It's very, very rare that either of us make a movie that the other actively dislikes, and probably never does that happen . . . To the outsider, they wouldn't necessarily know what's an 'Eric film' and what's a 'Tim film' . . . so there's a Working Title house style. It's not just us two, it's the osmosis of the projects coming through the system and similar people are working on the development and the production . . . so it's that that makes it a Working Title film.[8]

Indeed, at the point projects on the WT2 development slate were accepted by Working Title's co-chairmen, their supervision would subsequently be divided between the two producers. Adhering to the Working Title house style, then, became a vital factor in a WT2 project progressing towards production. Given the number of writers and directors with whom the company had worked and the diversity of genres and budgets it had worked within, defining Working Title's house style is arguably more about an overarching approach towards commercial filmmaking. 'We run a business, that's what we have to do. We've got to make sure the numbers work as well as the creative', Fellner explained. 'You try, in your choices, to make films that you think will appeal globally or internationally, not just in the UK. A lot of people choose to make movies that they feel will just work here but that's not what we're interested in'.[9] As Wharton acknowledged, the tension between the global and the local had to be contended with as a matter of course when considering WT2's development slate:

> It's quite rare to be making a film at a $5 million level and assume that it will then play internationally. Bizarrely sometimes they do, and the ones that you don't expect do . . . It was quite a challenge because we were looking at really interesting filmmakers and we always did have an eye on audience as well. Again, when you're making films at that sort of level that is quite a challenge. If you look at most of the British films that are made with emerging talent at the moment, they're much more overtly festival driven films, whereas our agenda was to try to find that talent, and to try and make those films, but for those films to have a similar sort of mainstream appeal as the other Working Title films.[10]

On one hand, then, Working Title's house style is explicitly mainstream and of transnational or even global appeal. On the other, the budgetary constraints imposed on WT2 served to mitigate this impulse by ensuring that many of the common features of transnational or global appeal, including high production values and star actors, were missing from the subsidiary's films. In the absence of such factors, a strong sense of authorship became an important ingredient in defining the films. 'The thing about those low budget films is that they become incredibly personal', Finn emphasised. 'They were written by the person that wanted to make them, they weren't Franken-scripts, they were literally [written by] somebody who had spent a long time going "this is the story I want to tell"'.[11] Equally, WT2 made a point of forging a brand identity that was at once within the broad ambit of the Working Title house style yet avoided aping the output of its parent company. As Finn went on to argue:

> The stuff that everybody got excited about, I think, was the stuff that had a really strong flavour and was not cheap versions of the main slate material. It was just however that

> manifested itself. I think that's when it was at its most successful and I think it was at its least successful when it tried to do things that the main slate was doing … There's a lot of noise out there and at the time you had to go 'this has to have a real unique selling point', 'it has to be different', 'it has to be strong' . . . because they literally stood on their own . . . Quite often really good filmmakers make their best films the first time because there's no restriction on them, there's nothing limiting their vision. That was where we wanted to be, and the way we wanted to do stuff.[12]

Notably, the majority of WT2's films involved co-production partners beyond Universal and StudioCanal. As Table 1 illustrates, WT2's co-production partners can be divided into three categories: production companies, broadcasters and national screen agencies. The contribution of production companies was typically creative insofar as

Table 1. WT^2's co-production companies by category (Excluding Universal and StudioCanal)

Title	**Production Company**	**Broadcaster**	**National Screen Agencies**
Billy Elliot	Tiger Aspect Productions	BBC Films	Arts Council of England
Long Time Dead	Midfield Films		UK Film Council
Ali G Indahouse	Talkback Productions Kalim Prod GmbH	FilmFour	
My Little Eye	imX Communications		
Shaun of the Dead	Big Talk Productions Inside Track2	FilmFour	
The Calcium Kid			
Mickybo and Me	New Moon Pictures		Northern Ireland Film and TV Commission Irish Film Board
Inside I'm Dancing	Octagon Films		Irish Film Board
Sixty Six	It is Now Films		
Gone	WBP		Australian Film Finance Corporation

the key talent involved in a project were often attached to a production company. In contrast, broadcasters and national screen agencies usually invested in the films directly. 'The thinking behind that was really just about sharing that risk with other financial partners and not actually shouldering the burden of that risk in its entirety', Wharton explained. 'All film, obviously, is risk, but in particular when you're looking at smaller films and you're looking at emerging

talent there's invariably even more risk involved'.[13] For Finn, securing co-financing partners was equally about legitimising the project within the wider independent sector. 'Part of it was just sometimes going "prove its market worth by getting somebody else to want to put their money into it too"'[14] he recalled. In practice, however, this scenario often worked in reverse when WT2 became the validating party for projects which were circulating within the wider industry. *Billy Elliot*, for example, was initially developed at Tiger Aspect Productions with which Working Title had a 'first look' deal (Dawtrey 1999c), while *Ali G Indahouse* and *Shaun of the Dead* originated at Filmfour. Similarly, films like *Inside I'm Dancing* and *Mickbo and Me* came from talent attached to independent production companies such as Octagon Films and New Moon Pictures (Hofmann 2003). The following sections explore the ways in which the creative and commercial contexts which shaped WT2 were played out on-screen in the company's output. The WT2 canon will be examined within the 'heart' and 'humour' genre groupings with a particular emphasis on how each group engages with traditions in low-budget British cinema, respectively social realism, and the adaptation of television comedy.

'Heart': WT2's dialogue with British social realism

The 'heart' in WT2's output was defined by the drama *Billy Elliot* (2000) and three comedy-dramas including *Mickybo and Me* (2004), *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004) and *Sixty Six* (2006). On the one hand, classifying these films within popular genres serves to distance them from British social realism. As Samantha Lay argues, social realism has 'always been a somewhat marginal, sometimes oppositional mode of expression that has relied – to varying degrees – on its otherness from more mainstream film products as a distinguishing feature' (Lay 2007, 233). Indeed, the label is more closely associated with the work of filmmakers like Ken Loach, Mike Leigh and Shane Meadows in contemporaneous films like *The Navigators* (2001), *All or Nothing* (2002) and *Somers Town* (2006). On the other hand, a more expansive definition of British social realism suggests a number of overlaps. Drawing on Raymond Williams' work on realism, Lay (2002) proposes that British social realism can also be understood with reference to four textual impulses:

> Social realism is secular in that its focusses, specifically in British cinema, are characters who are inextricably linked to place and environment. There are structural reasons for inequalities in society, which social realism posits can be seen in the effect of place on character. Social realist texts have contemporary settings, that is to say that they comment or critique some aspect of life as it was when a film was produced. Social

> realist texts also work towards extending the representations in art and popular culture of previously under-represented, marginalised or subordinate groups, and deal with issues and problems that mainstream cinema has shied away from or avoided. Social realism also conforms to Williams' final criteria of realist work, in that the artist/film-maker/producer of a text often has a specific intent. In the case of social realism in British cinema, the intents of John Grierson, Lindsay Anderson, Ken Loach, and Gary Oldman are all different, but what unites their work is the presence of intent beyond the search from profit and fame (Lay2002, 19-20)

With Lay's schema in mind, there are two readily observable commonalities which link WT2's 'heart' output with British social-realism. First, they consistently use 'secular' settings in which the social inequalities present in the environment directly affect the characters placed within it. Indeed, such settings explore a variety of troubled environments within the UK and the Republic of Ireland which range from a County Durham pit village to bomb damaged Belfast and from a Dublin residential care home to a Jewish enclave in suburban North London. Second, the representation of such environments largely prefigures the characters that are found within them insofar as each film also extends the range of representations typically found in mainstream films to include under-represented or marginalised groups. In social terms, for example, the characters belong to a spectrum which stretches from the entrepreneurial lower middle class through to the impoverished underclass. In turn, each film contends with the themes of collective and individual identity in ways which highlight both the problems associated with belonging to a marginalised group and the difficulties presented by attempting to break free from them.

Billy Elliot is set in a County Durham pit village during the 1984 coal miners' strike. The 11-year old Billy (Jamie Bell) lives with his widowed father, Jackie (Gary Lewis), and older brother, Tony (Jamie Draven) both of whom are striking miners. Having rejected his father's suggestion that he take up boxing, Billy secretly joins Mrs. Wilkinson's (Julie Walters) ballet class to pursue his newfound passion for dance. When Billy's deception is discovered by Jackie he is forbidden from attending, however, the talented Billy persists and secures an audition at the Royal Ballet School. Difficulties erupt when it appears that Jackie cannot afford to take his son to London without crossing the picket line. *Mickybo and Me* is set in early 1970s Belfast and focusses on the blossoming friendship between Jonjo (Niall Wright) and Mickybo (John Joe McNeil) two young boys respectively from Protestant and Catholic families. Their friendship is complicated by the Troubles and living on opposite sides of a bridge which divides the city along sectarian lines. The streetwise and thrill seeking Mickybo lives in a small and squalid terraced house with his four sisters, warm-hearted mother (Julie Walters) and chaotic but affectionate father (Adrian Dunbar) who is a professional gambler and a drunk. In contrast,

Jonjo is the reserved and obedient only child of a fastidious father (Ciaran Hinds) and a depressive mother (Gina McKee) who suspects her husband is having an affair. Despite the threats of older street kids, the two boys decide to become 'partners' after discovering a shared passion for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). Fleeing the problems of the city, Mickybo and Jonjo attempt to emigrate to Australia while re-enacting scenes from the film and committing a series of petty crimes.

In contrast, *Inside I'm Dancing* is set in contemporary Dublin and tells the story of Michael (Steven Robinson), a young man with cerebral palsy living in the strict and lifeless Carrigmore residential care home, run by the formidable Eileen (Brenda Fricker). Michael's life is turned upside down by the arrival of Rory (James McAvoy) a charismatic and rebellious man with muscular dystrophy who has the 'gift' of understanding Michael's severely impaired speech. After escaping from a high street charity collection, Michael experiences Dublin's nightlife for the first time with Rory and they meet a young woman, Siobhan (Romola Garai). While Rory's bid for the independent living allowance is rejected on the basis of insufficient funds and his reputation as a trouble-maker, Michael convinces his estranged father (Gerard McSorley) to buy him a flat. Michael and Rory become flatmates but their relationship is complicated by their feelings for Siobhan, who becomes their carer. Finally, *Sixty Six* tells the story of Bernie Reubens (Gregg Sulkin), an adolescent boy growing up in 1960s Palmer's Green, North London. The bespectacled and asthmatic Bernie struggles for the affections of his family, living in the shadow of his older brother, Alvie (Ben Newton). His upcoming bar mitzvah, however, presents an opportunity for Bernie to take centre stage. While he begins to meticulously plan a lavish ceremony, his chances of success are hindered at every turn. As the England football team progress in the World Cup, it becomes apparent that the date of the final clashes with Bernie's big day, presenting a potential conflict of interest for the invited guests. To make matters worse, the grocery shop owned by his father, Manny (Eddie Marsan), and his uncle Jimmy (Peter Serafinowicz) is rapidly going out of business due to the arrival of a supermarket on the same street.

The consistent representation of social environments which shape the lives of the underrepresented or marginalised characters which inhabit them ostensibly places WT2's 'heart' output within the realm of British social realism. Their classification as such is, however, complicated by the other impulses of social realism which these films lack. First, this includes a contemporary setting which is subject to comment or critique. Noticeably, only *Inside I'm Dancing* is set in the present, while *Sixty Six*, *Mickybo and Me* and *Billy Elliot* are respectively set in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. These period settings are significant insofar as

they banish the spectre of social inequalities and problems to comfortably distant pasts. Moreover, any deeper consideration of these troubling environments is further distanced by adhering to the genre conventions of the comedy-drama which works to subdue social commentary or critique. Indeed, each film tells a rites-of-passage tale which intermittently focuses on levity infused moments in the lives of adolescent boys or young men. Significantly, the relationship between environment, character and narrative is never shown to be deterministic. Billy is accepted at the Royal Ballet School and becomes a professional ballet dancer in London. Jonjo makes it to Australia as an adult and rekindles his relationship with Mickybo. Michael eventually loses Rory, but maintains the physical and spiritual independence his friend inspired in him. Despite an underwhelming bar mitzvah, Bernie's growing maturity sees him support England's World Cup victory, earning the affections of his family and the camaraderie of national belonging in the process. In these ways, the social worlds depicted in these films are largely subsumed beneath individualistic triumph-over-adversity narratives which either propel their protagonists out of their troubled environment or allow them to reshape it to accommodate their needs.

As the most critically and commercially successful 'heart' film within the WT2 canon, *Billy Elliot* has received a significant amount of academic attention which addresses some of these tensions. Judith Lancioni (2006), for example, reads *Billy Elliot* as a fairy tale, pointing to its narrative similarities to Cinderella, including a motherless child, a wicked sibling, a dysfunctional family and a 'fairy godmother'. Alan Sinfield compares the life trajectory of Billy Elliot with Billy Casper, the protagonist in Ken Loach's Kes (1969) to demonstrate the ways in which the tradition of social realism has been modified. Casper's thwarted life, he argues, is 'designed to provoke a demand for a project of social transformation' whereas Elliot's merely enacts a 'fantasy of personal escape' (2006: 170). Later assessments have drawn more explicitly on the connection between *Billy Elliot* and the socio-political changes between the time of the film's setting and it production. John Hill, for example, suggests Billy Elliot becomes an 'emblem of economic rejuvenation' (Hill 2004:108) in the movement from a manufacturing to a service-based economy. Taking a somewhat similar line, David Alderson (2011) suggests that *Billy Elliot* story betrays a national allegory of neo-liberalism which draws on the self-told narratives of the New Labour government. Such work, of course, further complicates the straightforward application of social realism as a label and highlights some of the tensions around the way the tradition has been modified.

'Humour': WT2's dialogue with British television comedy and American popular culture

There is a long established tradition of adapting British television shows for the big screen stretching back to the 1950s. As Adrian Garvey (2010) and Peter Waymark (2012) point out, however, this production strategy became especially prevalent in the 1970s with approximately 30 such examples. In the face of declining cinema audiences, the sitcom spinoff proved especially attractive for several reasons. Chief amongst these was their large pre-established family audience base and their relatively low production and marketing costs. Examples include films based on popular sitcoms like *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, 1965–1975), *Dad's Army* (BBC 1968–1977), *On the Busses* (ITV,1969–1973) and Steptoe and Son (BBC, 1962–1974). By the 1980s, however, this production strategy declined dramatically, and came to a near standstill in the 1990s. One notable exception to the general trend was *Bean* (1997), co-produced by Working Title and Tiger Aspect Productions, the company behind the television series, *Mr Bean* (ITV, 1990–1995). The late 1990s and early 2000s, however, saw a revival in the adaptation of sitcoms and sketch shows from the small to the big screen. Examples include *Guest House Paradiso* (1999), *Kevin and Perry Go Large* (2000), *Stella Street: The Movi*e (2004) and *The League of Gentleman's Apocalypse* (2005), which were respectively adapted from *Bottom* (BBC, 1991–1995) and *Harry Enfield & Chums* (BBC, 1994–1998), *Stella Street* (BBC, 1997–2001) and *The League of Gentlemen* (BBC, 1999–2002). In most cases, this amounted to the transference of established sit-com characters to new situations and locations, while retaining the essential humour of the original shows. Similarly, the antecedent creativity for two of WT2's 'humour' contingent, *Ali G Indahouse* and *Shaun of the Dead* can be found in British television comedy. The former takes the character Ali G from the sketch shows *The Eleven O'clock Show* (Channel 4, 1998–2000) and *Da Ali G Show* (Channel 4, 2000). The latter reteams the writing and directing partnership behind the sitcom Spaced (Channel 4, 1999–2001). The outlier is *The Calcium Kid*, which has no connection to television comedy.

Ali G Indahouse takes Sacha Baron Cohen's established character, Ali G, and places him in a new and substantially expanded situation. The Ali G of *The Eleven O'clock Show* and *Da Ali G Show* was a spoof television reporter and the self-styled 'voice of da yoof' who was deeply embroiled in a combination of African-Caribbean and American hip hop culture. The comedy in the television shows arose from the disparity between the naïvely absurd lines of questioning that Ali G pursued and the reaction of the various experts and public figures who

were unaware that it was a performance. In contrast, *Ali G Indahouse* explored the character's life outside of his apparent profession in his hometown of Staines. Here, Ali lives with his Nan (Barbara New) and leads 'Da West Staines Massiv' a troupe of wannabe gangsters that includes dedicated but ineffectual characters like Ricky C (Martin Freeman) and Dangerous Dave (Tony Way). In his spare time, Ali attends to his girlfriend, 'me Julie' (Kellie Bright), and teaches schoolchildren to 'keep it real' in a local leisure centre. When the venue is threatened with closure, Ali's poorly orchestrated hunger protest comes to the attention of the deputy Prime Minister, David Carlton (Charles Dance). Seeing an opportunity to ruin the career of the sitting Prime Minister (Michael Gambon) by promoting the seemingly unelectable Ali as his party's MP for Staines, Carlton begins to plot. Nonetheless, Ali's unorthodox approach to politics proves to be popular and he ends up 'indahouse' of Commons representing his constituency.

In contrast, *Shaun of Dead* has a somewhat looser connection with *Spaced*. Nonetheless, they both feature the comic partnership of Simon Pegg and Nick Frost, the direction of Edgar Wright and a number of thematic crossovers, particularly the depiction of 20-something slacker culture. Shaun (Pegg) is an unambitious salesman in a consumer electronics shop, living with his infantile best friend, Ed (Frost). His girlfriend, Liz (Kate Ashfield), is unhappy with the routine of her life with Shaun, who is seemingly always in their local pub, The Winchester. When Shaun forgets their anniversary, Liz dumps him and he proceeds to drown his sorrows with Ed. The following day, the hungover Shaun and Ed gradually realise that London is in the grip of a zombie apocalypse. They decide to rescue Liz, Shaun's mother, Barbara (Penelope Wilton), and step father, Philip (Bill Nighy), alongside their friends Dianne (Lucy Davis) and David (Dylan Moran). Indeed, the film was aptly promoted as a 'romzom-com', encapsulating its debt to all three genres. *The Calcium Kid* takes the form of a mockumentary in which the documentary filmmaker Sebastian Gore-Brown (Mark Heap) covers the build up to the world middleweight boxing contest between the American champion, Jose Mendez (Michael Pena) and the British challenger Pete Wright (Tamer Hassan). The project takes an unexpected twist, however, when Pete has to pull out of fight after breaking his hand in a sparring session with Jimmy Connolly (Orlando Bloom) an amateur boxer and milkman from Lambeth. Pete's wheeler-dealer promoter, Herbie Bush (Omid Djalili) insists that the Pollyanna Jimmy replace Pete and his training begins in earnest with the octogenarian coach, Paddy O'Flanagan (David Kelly) and his best friend, Stan (Rafe Spall).

In these ways, all three films are united by a dialogue with America, implicitly through an engagement with American popular culture or explicitly through the inclusion of American

characters and narrative themes. The former is true of both *Ali G Indahouse* and *Shaun of the Dead*. As Richard Howells (2006) argues, the humour of Ali G derives, for most people, from its satire of white suburban men who appropriate the styles and attitudes of black American urban culture. Indeed, much of the humour in the film comes from the chasm between Ail's self-image and his reality. *Shaun of the Dead*, on the other hand, applies the archetypal American sub-genre of horror cinema to a very ordinary British setting. As Kim Edwards (2008) points out, the title of the film both references *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and suggests that Shaun is amongst the dead, beaten down by the drudgeries of modern life. Making further links between the two films, Lindsey Decker (2016) argues that *Shaun of the Dead* is an example of 'transnational genre hybridity' noting the numerous homages to its near namesake while also noting its connection to indigenous traditions of British comedy. In contrast, the more literal approach of *The Calcium Kid* contrasts some of the better known cultural associations of Britain and America. Transposed onto the sporting realm, these respectively include amateurism versus professionalism and down at heel humility versus glamorous grandstanding. In all cases, however, we are introduced to lesser seen cinematic versions of London that range from suburban Staines and terraced street Hornsey to council estate Lambeth.

The demise of WT2 and its legacy

The demise of WT2 resulted from a growing disjuncture between the low-budget remit of WT2 and the evolving production strategy of Working Title. The transition was felt on the ground in the gradual movement of staff and resources away from the company. Jon Finn stepped down as co-head of WT2 in the summer of 2001 and was not replaced (Minns 2001). In 2005, Natascha Wharton was made head of Working Title's development department but also continued to oversee WT2. Shortly afterwards, the company was folded into Working Title but would continue as a 'label' (Hofmann 2006). In practice, however, even the label ceased to be applied to films following the release of *Gone*. As Tim Bevan explains, the decision to shutter WT2 was based upon both a consideration of the resources that the company required and the incompatibility of low-budget filmmaking with the demands of the marketplace:

> We felt we were making bigger movies at the studio level and we wanted to stay in touch with younger, developing filmmakers. Now, what we learned in the process of the five or six years that WT2 was going, was that actually making those lower budget films … was as time consuming and angst ridden and generally as much of a pain … as making a bigger movie. At the end of it we thought 'why are we doing this?' Why

> don't we choose one or two younger filmmakers in any given film cycle, or a younger filmmaker, and one of us actually produce it and put bigger resources behind them, so that their film stands a better shot? So, instead of their first film being a $5 million movie, it's a $20 million movie and they can cast people who we know about in it, they can get production value in it, and it stands a chance in the marketplace.[15]

Significantly, the development of this strategy coincided with Working Title's new four year co-production deal with Universal and StudioCanal in 2004. The latter agreed to fund Working Title at a reduced rate of approximately $40 million per year (James 2004). This contribution was later reported to cover approximately 25 per cent of Working Title's operational, development and production costs which brought StudioCanal all French rights and a backend position in worldwide profits (Dawtrey 2006). As Angela Morrison points out, the re-alignment of the Working Title's relationship with its key financiers was partly based upon the production company's evolving production strategy:

> Their terms changed because they [StudioCanal] didn't want to invest as much. We were making bigger films, they didn't have the balance sheet to support that, so they came down a bit in terms of what they were prepared to fund and then they stopped funding in 2010 ... They had several management changes along the way. The distribution side of it pretty much remained the same, but they were beginning to want to limit their exposure on production cost because, if you look back over the slate some of the films were $70 million whereas at the beginning we'd been making much cheaper films, so the studio [Universal] had the appetite to make those big films, they didn't really, so they reduced down and that was negotiated between the studio and StudioCanal.[16]

The commercial success or failure of theatrical releases do not, of course, take place on a level playing field but are heavily dependent upon the distribution and marketing campaigns which support them. In this respect, WT2's films were at the mercy of decisions made by Universal and StudioCanal. In the international market Universal's films were distributed by United International Pictures (UIP), a company which directly handled the films of Universal, Paramount and Dreamworks in 35 territories and sold them to third party distributors in dozens of others. For WT2's films achieving international distribution was typically dependent upon establishing success in the UK market in the first instance, and using that as a platform to distribute and market successful films in subsequent markets which respond well to British films. The barrier which prevented many of WT2's films from reaching a wider international audience was, for UIP's former Chairman and CEO, Stewart Till, a matter of cultural specificity. As he elaborates:

> *Shaun of the Dead* is a good case in point. It was a huge success in the UK, and didn't really travel outside, didn't work in any other territories. Working Title at the time – and probably still do – maintained that it didn't work because we didn't give it the marketing support, and it could have worked … We didn't give it the marketing support, not because we said 'look guys, we haven't got the time or the resources'. I said, 'I don't think this film will work outside the UK. It's a very UK-centric humour'.. [Similarly] Ali G compared to. . . Sacha Baron Cohen's subsequent films, it is very, very British and low-budget and very few production values, and obviously, the character wasn't known outside the UK as a television character. So, that's another one where it wasn't like we didn't have capacity, the film was inherently a very UK-centric film.[17]

Despite its low-budget remit, however, some of WT2's film experienced significant commercial successes. The most extraordinary example in this regard was *Billy Elliot*, which grossed $109.2 million worldwide upon theatrical release. This was followed by other significant box office hits including *Shaun of the Dead* at $29.9 million, and *Ali G Indahouse* at $23.3 million, and a third tier of relative success in the horror genre with *Long Time Dead* and *My Little Eye* taking $13.1 million and $6.8 million, respectively. The remaining five films, however, grossed just $3.5 million collectively. In practice, the majority of the WT2 slate had a very limited theatrical life which was, in many cases, confined to UK and a handful of international territories. As Table 2 illustrates, only $35.6 million (19.2%) of the worldwide gross was from domestic revenue (i.e., from the USA and Canada). In comparison, $150 million (80.8%) was from international revenue (i.e. all other territories). Within the consolidated international figure, however, $62 million (33.4 percent) was the UK revenue. This trend was, however, distorted by a number of UK only releases (*The Calcium Kid*, *Mickybo and Me*), international only releases (*Long Time Dead*, *My Little Eye*, *Ali G Indahouse*) and extremely limited domestic releases (*Inside I'm Dancing*, *Sixty Six*).

The title of this article suggests that the establishment and subsequent operation of WT2 was an experiment. What, then, did the rise and fall of Working Title's low-budget subsidiary prove? Ultimately, it proved that producing low-budget British films within the contemporary Hollywood studio system was unsustainable in the long term. WT2's films lacked readily recognisable elements of commercial appeal – particularly high production values and star actors – and were thus typically considered excessively risky for wide theatrical distribution. This barrier was overcome, to varying degrees, with films like *Billy Elliot*, *Ali G Indahouse* and *Shaun of the Dead* which achieved wide releases in some territories, particularly the UK. Significantly, WT2 was an experiment made possible by the company's particular industrial positioning. On the one hand, the distribution infrastructure of Universal and StudioCanal

supported its successes. On the other, the sustained funding of its operational, development and production costs by the same companies underwrote its failures. A review of Working Title's subsequent output, however, suggests

Table 2 –WT[2] slate by genre (all figures in $USD million)

Title /Genre	Year	Origin	Prod. Budget	Domestic BO (%)	International BO (%)	UK BO (%)	Worldwide BO
Heart							
Billy Elliot	2000	UK/FR	5	21.9 (20.1)	87.2 (79.9)	25.2 (23.1)	109.1
Mickeybo and Me	2004	UK	5	-	0.4 (100)	0.4 (100)	0.4
Inside I'm Dancing	2004	UK/FR/IRE	-	0.02 (1.6)	1.2 (98.4)	1.2 (98.4)	1.2
Sixty Six	2006	UK/FR	-	0.2 (11.1)	1.6 (88.9)	1.5 (83.3)	1.8
Humour							
Ali G Indahouse	2002	UK/US/FR/ GER	5	-	23.2 (100)	14.8 (63.8)	23.2
Shaun of the Dead	2004	UK/US/FR	4	13.5 (45.2)	16.4 (54.8)	12.3 (41.1)	29.9
The Calcium Kid	2004	UK	-	-	0.1 (100)	0.1 (100)	0.1
Horror							
Longtime Dead	2002	UK/FR	-	-	13.1 (100)	2.5 (19.1)	13.1
My Little Eye	2002	UK/US/FR/ CAN	2	-	6.8 (100)	4.0 (58.8)	6.8
Gone	2007	UK/AUS	-	-	-	-	0.0
TOTAL				**35.62 (19.2)**	**150 (80.8)**	**62 (33.4)**	**185.6**

Sources: Boxofficemojo.com (box office data) imdb.com (origin and production budgets)

that the strategy of producing low-budget filmmaking is an experiment unlikely to be repeated. Indeed, the company's production agenda from 2007 onwards largely involved two distinct impulses. First, Working Title capitalised on its former successes by producing sequels with increasingly large budgets like *Mr Bean's Holiday*, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* and *Nanny McPhee and the Big Bang* (2010). Second, Working Title moved into a creative arena which Fellner dubbed 'intelligent popcorn'[18] exemplified by American thrillers like *United 93* (2006), *State of Play* (2009) and *Green Zone* (2010).

As I have argued,WT2 succeeded in producing films which are distinct from those made by its parent company. The most obvious dividing line between the outputs of the two

companies is WT2's dialogue with two indigenous traditions in low-budget British filmmaking, namely social realism and the adaptation of television comedy. Drawing on these traditions has promoted a diversity of social class representations and locales that are far removed from the environs of 'Curtisland'. Each of the films examined focusses on a set of characters that, in social class terms at least, evoke the ordinary on a scale which extends between the underclass and lower middle classes. Equally, the regions and nations of the UK and Ireland are represented alongside ordinary residential districts of London. Significantly, however, I have also argued that this diversity is tempered by WT2's position within Working Title which, as Wharton highlights, prioritises 'mainstream appeal' over 'overtly festival driven' ambitions. The result is a series of modifications to the conventions of social realism and television comedy adaptations which are made with the transnational and global markets of StudioCanal and Universal in mind. In practice,WT2's dialogue with social realism consistently involved shaping the films around universalistic triumph-overadversity narratives and curbing the genre's propensity towards social critique. In contrast, WT2's engagement with television comedy involved positioning the indigenous in relation to American popular culture or, in one case, American characters and narrative themes.

Such observations both complement and complicate the views of Wayne, Hochscherf and Leggott which focus largely on the transnational dimensions of Working Title and its output. The links which these authors make between Working Title and the film industries and cultures of Hollywood, on the one hand, and mainland Europe on the other, undoubtedly resonate in many of the company's films. An examination of the operation and output of WT2, however, demonstrates that traditions of low-budget British filmmaking have also played a significant part in the output of this company. Despite its short life span, WT2's most remarkable achievement has arguably been as a creative incubator. After the release of the *Billy Elliot* plans were almost immediately made to adapt the film, resulting in the incorporation of Working Title Theatre Productions Ltd. in 2002 and the release of *Billy Elliot the Musical* three years later. Ali G Indahouse proved to be the first of a number of films based upon Sacha Baron Cohen's characters which also included *Borat* (2006) and *Bruno* (2009), both of which first appeared as television characters. While these films were produced by Baron Cohen's own company, Four by Two Films, his later film, *Grimsby* (2016), was a coproduction with Working Title. Similarly, *Shaun of the Dead* became the first film in a loose series of bigger budget Working Title comedies dubbed the 'Three Flavours Cornetto Trilogy' which also included *Hot Fuzz* (2007) and *The World's End* (2013) and respectively parodied the action and science fiction genres. Like the first instalment, these films were co-produced with Big

Talk Productions, the company with which Working Title also produced *Paul* (2011) and *Baby Driver* (2017). Thus, despite Working Title's movement away from low-budget production, WT2 proved to be an experiment with lasting impact.

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