

CASE STUDY: *BULLET BOY* (SAUL DIBB, 2004)

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Discussing his ambitions for the *Bullet Boy*, Saul Dibb has suggested that he wanted the film to have a “really strong British flavour – I don’t want it to have a glossy feel to it. I don’t want it to be sentimental or glamorous.” In its rejection of gloss, sentiment and glamour, *Bullet Boy* might be understood as the antithesis of the kind of internationally exportable popular film exemplified by *Love Actually*. As Dibb’s comments imply, he is drawing on a long tradition of British cinema which, rather than competing with Hollywood, seeks to establish an alternative aesthetic of film-making, one which capitalises on the cultural specificities of life in Britain, attempting to tell stories drawn from everyday life in a realistic way. While the generic conventions of romantic comedy push *Love Actually* towards an optimistic and utopian vision of British society as a place of opportunity and goodwill, *Bullet Boy* is more concerned to highlight the specific inequalities and problems of the community which it represents. Many of its characters are trapped within situations which they work hard to resolve, but the odds are stacked against them. In this sense, the film could be seen as a political drama, although it contains no overt political speculation as to the causes of, or possible solutions to, the central dilemma. Instead it concentrates more on creating believable characters and situations, portraying those characters and their motivations as complex and contingent, rather than generically coded. Nevertheless, while the film eschews the generic address of rom-coms such as *Love Actually*, or the cartoon-like glamour of crime caper gangster films such as *Lock Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (Guy Richie, 1998), it still employs some generic narrative codes, balancing the demands of realism with those of entertainment. Furthermore, the casting of Ashley Walters in the lead role is a key strategy in marketing the film to young audiences who knew him primarily as Asher D, singer with the ‘So Solid Crew’, and his much publicized imprisonment for gun possession in 2002.

The film draws explicitly on the star persona of Walters who plays Ricky, a young man who at the opening of the story has similarly just emerged from prison having served a sentence for a gun-related crime. The story is told through the eyes of his younger brother, Curtis, who hero-worships Ricky but is also aware of his mistakes – “You may find it hard to obtain work with a criminal record” he taunts his brother, reading from a government leaflet. Nevertheless when the gun re-enters the house, Curtis is drawn to it as an object of fascination. Meanwhile Ricky, despite his best intentions, is drawn back into a cycle of violence between feuding gangs, sparked off by a characteristically trivial incident involving a broken wing mirror. *Bullet Boy* is careful to show Ricky as both trapped by a youth sub-culture but also integrated into a wider family structure and community network which is in opposition to that culture. He is torn between his street persona and his loyalty to his mother and brother, and the point at which those two worlds of street and family come together is the focus of the film’s most emotional scenes, when his younger brother Curtis accidentally shoots a schoolmate. It looks as though, despite his mother’s efforts, the cycle of gun violence might be passed from older to younger brother, as the schoolmate reminds Curtis that he has incurred a debt which may have to be repaid later in life, while admiring his gunshot wound as a battle-scar. Nevertheless, towards its conclusion, the film holds out a moment of optimism and generic catharsis for the audience – suggesting in a key sequence that Curtis might have the strength of mind to reject his brother’s legacy. He leaves his mother in church, inspired by the words of the preacher to finally get rid of gun – the music of the gospel service on the soundtrack creates a clear emotional cue at this moment of narrative resolution. The use of the music in this scene might be considered in contrast to the gruelingly realist use of sound in an earlier scene where Curtis and his mother visit his schoolmates’ parents and attempt to apologize for the shooting incident. The awkwardness of the visit is made viscerally apparent to the audience through the use of sound – and silence.

All of the principle characters of *Bullet Boy* are black - a striking contrast to the cosy tokenism of portrayals of ethnicity in more mainstream British films such as *Love Actually*, and one which

reverses the impression given by much casting in Hollywood films. While the black figure of avuncular state authority is a cliché Hollywood cinema, representatives of state power in *Bullet Boy* are in fact the only white characters in the film – teachers, probation officers, policemen etc. These characters remain peripheral to the story however, despite the raw power they wield over the lives of the main protagonists (particularly in the scenes of Ricky being released from prison, and with the probation officer). A scene of Curtis in his Hackney school, where the only white character is the teacher demonstrates the film's commitment both to realism, and to the specificity of its story and location. Some critics have raised concerns about the appropriateness of a white director handling a story so firmly rooted within a black community, but the film is extremely confident both in its assumption that audiences will be able to identify with the principle characters regardless of race, and in the balance it strikes between telling a story which is specific to black urban experience, while nevertheless not producing that experience as an object for inspection 'from outside'. This balance is worth considering in the light of other more celebrated films dealing with the experiences of British ethnic minorities, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985), *Young Soul Rebels* (Isaac Julien, 1991) and *East is East* (Damien O'Donnell, 1999) provide obvious examples, although the focus of these films tends to be more heavily on the notion of 'multiculturalism' than is evident in *Bullet Boy*.

The reach towards a specific cultural 'authenticity' of course, is part of a long tradition of British film-making, which as we have seen, blends fiction narratives with documentary aesthetics and production practices. One might trace the impulse to put 'real people' on the screen right back to the early work of Mitchell and Kenyon, by way of the 'New Wave' cycle of the 1960s, the 'Golden Age' of wartime cinema and the celebrated documentary movement of the 1930s. Film-makers working in this tradition more recently have often been influenced by television experience. Dibb himself has worked extensively as a television documentary maker (although he is now also working in BBC drama) and *Bullet Boy* was primarily funded in a co-production partnership between BBC Films and the UK Film Council's New Cinema Fund. The film has some clear stylistic similarities to the work of other celebrated British realist film-makers who began their careers in television, most notably Ken Loach and Mike Leigh. While works such as Loach's *Kes* (1969), *Ladybird*, *Ladybird* (1994) and *My Name is Joe* (1998) were not world-wide mainstream box-office hits, they were critical successes which gained small scale specialist distribution both in Britain and in America, proving the viability of this kind of modestly budgeted national cinema in the market-place. Nevertheless, in a purely commercial environment, such specialist films would stand little chance of getting made and all to a greater or lesser extent rely some form of non-commercial funding. They are also notable for their political commitment to showing communities and identities which are under-represented in mainstream cinema, presenting life experiences in an apparently un-mediated way.

Such films are often discussed in terms of realism or authenticity, and it is clear by comparison with a film such as *Love Actually* that there are a set of very different film-making principles and generic conventions in play. Working within a tradition established by the films of Loach, Leigh and others, *Bullet Boy* uses professional actors sparingly. The majority of its characters are played by non-professionals, people who live and work in the community being represented, often in the roles they are playing onscreen. Dibb and his co-writer Catherine Johnson devised a narrative based on their research within the community, but they also allowed the actors to improvise much of the actual dialogue in order to achieve a more realistic tone. The film is shot primarily on location in Hackney, using lightweight cameras and in real interiors. The result is precisely the lack of that 'gloss' which Dibb wants to achieve, and yet the film is also highly lyrical in many sequences, making particular use of shots of the landscape from the high-rise viewpoint of Curtis' home, and shots of wastelands and semi-rural locations in late sunlight. Much was made in the publicity for the film of the sense of 'ownership' over the story which members of the local community felt during its making and on its first release – a sense partly engendered by the production techniques of location shooting, use of

non-professional actors, improvised dialogue and community research. Whether these techniques result in a heightened authenticity for other audiences, or whether they might be considered just another set of generic conventions signifying a film aimed at a different kind of film-going audience is a matter for debate. *Bullet Boy's* distribution history certainly suggests that it has been able to cross generic boundaries and address a range of audiences – originally circulated through festivals as an art-house product, the distributors were able to draw on funding from the Film Council to help them capitalise on the appeal of Ashley Walters to get the film released not just in independent cinemas but also in more mainstream Multiplex venues, particularly around London and other urban areas. Nevertheless, the film did not secure a theatrical release in America.