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**We come, our country's rights to save: English rural landscape and leftist aesthetics in *Comrades***

No race of men which is entirely bred in wild country, far from cities, ever enjoys landscape. [...] Landscape can only be enjoyed by cultivated persons; and it is only by music, literature and painting, that cultivation can be given.

John Ruskin<sup>1</sup>

Landscape is a way of seeing that has its own history.

Denis Cosgrove<sup>2</sup>

Bill Douglas's epic film *Comrades* (1986) tells the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, six agricultural labourers transported to Australia in 1834 as punishment for the seditious activity of attempting to form one of the world's first trade unions (the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers). In the film, George Loveless (Robin Soans), James Loveless (William Gaminara), Thomas Stanfield (Stephen Bateman), John Stanfield (Philip Davis), James Brine (Jeremy Flynn) and James Hammett (Keith Allen) experience hardship and injustice, and come together to seek a fair wage from their landlord employer, Mr Frampton (Robert Stephens). In doing so they are charged under an old law that made it illegal to administer oaths, and are sentenced to transportation. The first half of the film is set in England, while the second half follows their subsequent experiences in Australia. The closing sequence - featuring a political, direct-to-camera speech by George Loveless (Soans) - shows how the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union mounted a campaign for the release of the men,

and how they came to be pardoned and granted free passage back to England (where they appear at a welcome event run by the London-Dorchester Committee).

In this article I will argue that *Comrades* - uniquely for 1980s British cinema - incorporates a range of leftist aesthetic devices in order to mark the English rural landscape as a politicised space of socio-cultural conflict. I will demonstrate how far *Comrades* foregrounds the fact that the English rural landscape has been subject to a long and complex tradition of representation, and how, at the same time, the film critiques the ideological nature of much of this representation. But as I make this argument I remain mindful of the fact that Bill Douglas was often reticent to admit to the film's leftist political leanings, and, I readily acknowledge how far his intentions for the film were often articulated in markedly different terms to its visible class politics. Hence, while my central focus is on its politicised representation of English rural landscape, I will engage with tensions that develop between the stated intentions of the director of *Comrades* (and his close friend and confidant, Peter Jewell), the rich thematic, historical and aesthetic aspects of the film, and the critical discourse that the film facilitated on its release in 1987.

In how it represents aspects of rural life in the Dorset landscape, *Comrades* in some ways brings to mind John Schlesinger's 1967 adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel *Far From the Madding Crowd*.<sup>3</sup> Shot in Cinerama, Schlesinger's film opens with a spectacular aerial travelling shot of the Wessex coastline, as a camera moves from sea to land to cultivated fields without a cut.<sup>4</sup> But *Comrades* evidences an aesthetic framework that marks it as a far more complex and politically engaged film. Instead, while it does feature some pictorial depictions of the landscape (as I will show), obviously set-up, lush, spectacular cinematic shots such as the opening of *Far*

*From the Madding Crowd* are not evident in Douglas's film. While the rural landscape might be 'looked at' and even enjoyed at key moments in *Comrades*, the act of looking is encouraged as a political act, and not as any simple, straightforward, or passive enjoyment of beauty. As I will argue, the film is clearly Brechtian in its desire to involve spectators in this important story of political struggle, and, therefore, unlike many British cinematic representations of English rural landscape in the 1980s and 1990s, *Comrades* encourages intellectual curiosity in (and objective judgement on) the socio-cultural events taking place in the landscape. Writing in 1974, Jan Uhde showed how far Brecht's theories had influenced leftist filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard: 'The passive trance-like state of the viewer with his lack of objectivity and activity are elements, which some filmmakers have been trying to remove or reduce since the invention of the cinema.'<sup>5</sup> This was important to leftist artists because: 'a detached theatre or film audience can achieve a higher degree of objective judgement and activity than one which is under the paralyzing influence of a deep emotional involvement.'<sup>6</sup> In *Comrades*, Bill Douglas – a director certainly influenced by European art house cinema of the 1960s – develops a complex Brechtian aesthetic that places the representation of rural landscape at the heart of this story about working-class solidarity.

Bill Douglas's script for *Comrades* was based in part on a volume entitled *The Martyrs of Tolpuddle 1834-1934*, originally published by the Trade Unions Congress in 1934 (a copy of which Douglas's close friend Peter Jewell found in a Bournemouth bookshop).<sup>7</sup> The film project received financial backing from the National Film Finance Corporation (under the stewardship of Mamoun Hassan), as well as a nascent Channel 4. As such, *Comrades* forms part of the flowering of non-mainstream, commercially-risky films that appeared during the 1980s part-funded by the

broadcaster, including *The Draughtsman's Contract* (Peter Greenaway, 1982), *The Ploughman's Lunch* (Richard Eyre, 1983), *Another Time, Another Place* (Michael Radford, 1983) and *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985).<sup>8</sup> Curzon Cinemas also backed *Comrades*. The budget was just over £2 million.<sup>9</sup> Work on the script began in 1979, but it was eight years before the film was eventually completed. During the production Douglas had a number of differences with the film's initial producer, Ismail Merchant, who departed to work on *A Room with a View* (James Ivory, 1985). Simon Relph took over the role of producer of *Comrades*, and the film eventually previewed at the Hampstead Everyman before opening at Curzon West End (London) on 28 August 1987. But it was withdrawn from circulation after only six weeks, and despite a VHS release in 1989 it effectively vanished from public view until its eventual release by the British Film Institute on DVD and Blu-ray in 2009.

*Comrades* received a mixed critical response. Derek Malcolm loved the film. In the *Guardian* he advocated that it was a 'beautiful, romantic, passionate and often funny epic'. Moreover, he opined that 'Douglas is an exceptional filmmaker but has to be taken on his own terms [...] *Comrades* doesn't tell you all you want to know about the Martyrs, even in 180 minutes. But what it does with cumulative skill is to elucidate the modest and extraordinary spirit through which their triumph was secured.'<sup>10</sup> Writing in *The Times*, David Robinson similarly argued 'The images are extraordinary, like period paintings, with never an anachronism to break the mood'.<sup>11</sup> The fact that Robinson noticed the painterly quality of the film will become germane to my argument about its Brechtian nature. In the *Independent*, Sheila Johnston called the film 'an intimate epic'.<sup>12</sup> Quentin Falk, in the *Mail on Sunday*, also thought it a 'genuine epic'.<sup>13</sup> In the *Daily Telegraph*, Victoria Mather recorded that it was 'visually stunning'.<sup>14</sup> Sue Heal, in *Today*, argued that it was 'beautifully shot,

intelligent, compassionate'.<sup>15</sup> And in the *Observer*, Philip French wrote that Douglas was a 'unique talent'. French was reminded of 'the expressive tableauxque structure of classic silent movies, the tough austerity of Brecht [...]'.<sup>16</sup> These critical insights will also become germane to my argument about the aesthetic construction of the film, and, in particular, how far it can be read in terms of its formal articulation of its central political message.

In the academic journal *Films and Filming*, John Marriott was also full of high praise for Douglas and his achievement with *Comrades*: Douglas was 'an auteur in the purest and best sense' who had 'the strikingly vivid imagination of the poet or painter'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, developing the notion of Douglas as a painterly director, Marriott wrote: 'With a painterly ability to light the fertile Dorset landscape, he brings out its special qualities but also grafts his own vision onto it. One is reminded particularly of the Dutch landscape painters with their equal sympathy for both the countryside and its inhabitants.'<sup>18</sup> In a final gushing sentence, Marriott advocated: 'If producers like Relph can tap the visual sensibility of directors like Douglas then we may well develop an indigenous film industry where directors do not just place ideas in the mouths of actors, but inventively graft them onto the fabric of the screen. Let's hear it for poetry.'<sup>19</sup> Writing in *City Limits*, John Wrathall was similarly impressed with the film: 'A fluent feel for light and landscape from the overcast skies of Dorset to the glare of the Australian outback makes 'Comrades', in purely visual terms, one of the most beautiful films to have come out of Britain in the '80s'.<sup>20</sup> Writing in *Time Out*, Geoff Andrew also admired the film: 'the film becomes not merely a chronicle of an historical event but an examination of ways of seeing, ways of showing; an illustrated lecture on cinema and pre-cinema'.<sup>21</sup>

Other commentators focused more obviously on the evidently political nature of the film. Judith Williamson, writing in the left-wing publication the *New Statesman*, saw that in mid-1980s Britain, the Tolpuddle story was ‘as relevant as ever... Their story has to be told and remembered. *Comrades* not only tells it, but engages with the problems of preserving and passing on working class stories in a culture which works to suppress them’. But, significantly, Williamson noted that ‘*Comrades* differs from conventional dramas’.<sup>22</sup> It becomes evident, then, that critics writing about *Comrades* at the time of its release were reading the film as a clear, unambiguous comment of the contemporary political climate in 1980s Britain. Interestingly, Williamson’s response to the film also noted the evident ways in which it deals with the politics of rural landscape and, specifically, how rural landscape is often looked at and admired:

A harvesting sequence begins with close-ups of the heavy, exhausting, repetitive labour; shot by shot, the camera pulls out and the light falls, until from a distance we see in a golden evening glow what looks like a peaceful harvest scene, familiar from countless paintings and postcards. At this moment the film cuts to a reverse shot of the squire’s family driving in a carriage, so that this image becomes *what they see*; picturesqueness is shown to be a middle-class view of labour.<sup>23</sup>

As I will show, paying this amount of attention to the formal properties of particular sequences in the film can produce significant evidence of its leftist aesthetic (as well as thematic) credentials, and how central the rural landscape is to this.

Other newspaper critics (often writing for right-wing titles) found that the evident political message of the film was over-powering, and argued that this spoiled

their enjoyment of its impressive visuals. For example, Geoff Andrew had a negative response to what he saw as the film's leftist agenda: 'With its blend of politics, high adventure, costume drama and sociology, it's a great story for a movie, but its proto-leftist dynamics seem to have presented problems'.<sup>24</sup> Writing in the right-wing *Daily Mail*, Shaun Usher admitted that the film 'offers beauty, craft, and a romantic celebration of bygone strength and sacrifice'. But he also noted (it turns out, accurately) that Bill Douglas 'will be accused of political sermonising and one-sidedness'.<sup>25</sup> In the *London Standard*, Alexander Walker felt that Douglas rather too readily revealed his 'Left-wing allegiances'.<sup>26</sup> Phillip Bergson, in *What's On*, wrote: 'Churlish though it may be to say so, everything about this film is impeccable, except its very subject and pleading'. Bergson was particularly angered by the sequence at the end of the film in which George Loveless (Robin Soans) speaks directly to the camera, which he called a 'naïve straight-to-camera socialist harangue'.<sup>27</sup> This is the sequence in which Loveless effectively communicates directly with spectators of the film, saying: 'I call on every working man in England to shake off that supineness and indifference to their interests which leaves them in the situation of slaves [...] Has not the working man as much right to preserve and protect his labour as the rich man has his capital?' These words are delivered as if across time, out of the text, to all English workers suffering injustice. In the *Spectator*, Hilary Mantel also noted the visual splendour of the film, but felt that watching it was akin to 'three hours of battering with dogma'.<sup>28</sup>

During the period in which *Comrades* was conceived, developed and shot, the rise to power of Thatcher's Conservative government put paid to hopes held by many in Britain for an egalitarian, co-operative society. Indeed, while Douglas was working on the film the year-long miners' strike of 1984-85 occurred, which saw working-



class communities rebelling against pit closures. A movement in support of the miners developed, yet in early 1985 they went back to work, and the power of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was irreparably weakened as a consequence. But the labour movement endured in England throughout this period, and it is significant that the Matryrs' narrative formed a key aspect of this. For example, the Trade Union Congress-organised annual Tolpuddle Martyrs Rally (later 'Festival') celebrated 150 years since the transportation of the men in 1844, and featured speakers such as the Labour leader Neil Kinnock.

But at the time of the film's release, Bill Douglas denied that a political message was central to *Comrades*, telling Sheila Johnston that 'I wasn't really interested in the political aspect of the story at all, more in the optical transformations and the human relationships.'<sup>29</sup> Interviewed by Geoff Andrew, Douglas broadly agreed that *Comrades* is a 'political' film, but 'only with a small "p".'<sup>30</sup> Douglas also said that he thought *Comrades* had much to do with religion as politics. Peter Jewell has spoken of the film as really being about 'surviving and sharing'. But he does acknowledge that Douglas probably saw the criticisms of the film's political nature coming, and that because he hoped it would reach a wide audience, he understandably became sensitive to such criticisms.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, both men were 'left wing' and vehemently hated Margaret Thatcher and all she stood for.<sup>32</sup> And interestingly, Jewell points out that 'A lot of people didn't think the film was political enough. The extreme left wing were furious that the film was not more outspoken!'<sup>33</sup>

So, despite Douglas's public denials, the leftist political standpoint of the film – as witnessed in its subject matter, narrative, but also, as I will demonstrate, in its formal qualities - is clearly evident, and has remained so to critics. Indeed, for Tom Charity, writing about the film on its eventual release on DVD in 2009, *Comrades*,

‘one of the great lost films of the 1980s’, is ‘unapologetically didactic in its class politics.’<sup>34</sup> I want to argue that to read the film against its political contexts and to deny its leftist theme and aesthetic credentials is to rob it of much of its enduring power. Central to the leftist aesthetic of *Comrades* – and what makes it unique in 1980s British cinema – is its distinctly Brechtian representation of English rural landscape.

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, representations of rural landscapes in British cinema were most notably found in what became termed the heritage film genre (as exemplified by *A Room With a View*). These films have often been critiqued for their alleged conservatism (political but also aesthetic) and their ideological perniciousness. In his 1993 article, ‘Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film’, for example, Andrew Higson argues that a number of costume dramas of the period demonstrate heritage iconography and create ‘heritage space’ exemplified by period costumes, opulent houses and idyllic rural landscapes which produce a highly selective vision of Englishness.<sup>35</sup> For Tana Wollen, this fetishization of an objectified past can be read as a response to ‘embattled and fissured years’ of uncertainty in Britain in the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> In the context of the Falklands/Malvinas War (1982), as well as the miners’ strike, it has been widely argued that heritage films presented an imaginative escape from the troubled moment by offering a conservative, rose-tinted fetishization of ‘great’ British traditions.<sup>37</sup> But these heritage films are also usually films about England, much more so than they are films about Britain, and they construct a sense of Englishness that chimes with bourgeois taste, evidencing a desire to celebrate ‘tradition’ and to facilitate social stability.<sup>38</sup>

Instead, through its complex exploration of the rich socio-cultural and political heritage of the British Left (and specifically the Tolpuddle narrative) in a rural landscape, *Comrades* might be regarded as an exemplar of the 1980s anti-heritage British discourse which was evidenced by the publication of Patrick Wright's book *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (1985) and Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (1987).<sup>39</sup> While the film does project an image of the English past, *Comrades* is in no way engaged in the type of heritage industry activity that Wright and Hewison were railing against. Indeed, Hewison argued that this focus on heritage (exemplified by the conservation and restoration of old mansions by the National Trust for the principal enjoyment of the middle classes) was a symptom (and indeed a cause) of national decline in the 1980s: 'hypnotised by images of the past, we risk losing all capacity for creative change'.<sup>40</sup> Instead, *Comrades* depicts a key moment in this nation's history when social change started to become a distinct possibility. Indeed, as we will see, at key moments the film demonstrates a capacity for creative change while also operating as a call for political and socio-cultural change or, indeed, in the closing sequence, a direct call to action.

While *Comrades* might be read as 'anti-heritage', then (in that it appears to actively call for social change), it might be more accurately termed a workers' heritage film. After all, it celebrates a rich heritage – specifically the heritage of working rural communities - and as it does this it engages with the complex relationship between workers and the rural English landscape they inhabit. It depicts this community at home in this landscape - dwelling in it, working it, all the while in tune with the cyclical rhythms of nature and folk and religious rituals. But the film also evidences their intense struggle against the landowner, Frampton (Robert

Stephens), his acolytes, and, as such, the dominant ideology. So, if heritage is celebrated in *Comrades*, this heritage is certainly not bourgeois. Instead, the film evidences – through its narrative, aesthetics and formal structure – the potential to resist the enduring dominant, bourgeois ideology, and to effect change.

In an interview with John Wrathall in 1987, Bill Douglas spoke about the Martyrs thus: ‘I saw these people were prisoners, but within a free landscape – there was nothing ugly or hopeless about the landscape they lived in.’<sup>41</sup> It is clear that the rural landscape became central to the film in its conception, writing and shooting. In her review of *Comrades*, the critic Jill Forbes noticed that it displays ‘Hardyesque touches’.<sup>42</sup> D.H. Lawrence once published a typically insightful essay about the ways in which the poet and novelist Thomas Hardy wrote about rural landscape. In this essay, Lawrence argued that the ‘dark soil’ of Egdon Heath, as featured in the novels *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), is ‘strong and crude and organic as the body of a beast’.<sup>43</sup> Lawrence evidently believed that in Hardy’s celebrated Wessex novels the rural landscape takes on the status of a sentient animal. Egdon is not being depicted as a benign rural idyll.<sup>44</sup> It lives and breathes. It is alive with possibilities. *Comrades* also presents the southern English rural landscape (specifically Dorset) so beloved of Hardy as a space that is alive with possibilities; but, specifically, these are social and political possibilities. While the English landscape in *Comrades* is often depicted as an organic space governed by natural cycles, it is also shown to be a space controlled by a landowner, but only ever properly given meaning by the activities and traditions of those who dwell in it and work it. As the literary critic Terry Eagleton puts it (in another context), ‘Work is what transforms the raw stuff of nature into meaning, gathering it into a human project’.<sup>45</sup>

But in *Comrades* the landscape of Dorset is also shown to be a representation, or a series of representations. Writing about Bill Douglas's 1970s Trilogy (*My Childhood*, *My Ain Folk*, *My Way Home*), John Caughie argues that 'far from having anything to do with the British realist tradition, Douglas is working within the aesthetics of distancing'.<sup>46</sup> These aesthetics, drawn from Russian Formalism and, especially, from Brecht, are further evidenced in *Comrades*; a film in which the Tolpuddle story (a key narrative, as we have seen, in the development of the political ideology of the Left in modern Britain) is fed through a range of representational devices that suggest an emergent historiography of leftist image-making. As he worked on *Comrades*, then, Douglas was evidently not interested in classical realism *per se*, but, while incorporating some realistic elements in the film, seemingly saw that the story of the Martyrs should be told in such a way that might use the ideological potentialities of a wide range of visual (and indeed sonic) representational strategies that, cast in dialectical conflict, could instead foreground the act of representation and, as such, involve the spectator in an intellectual (as opposed to an emotional) engagement with the story.<sup>47</sup>

In an evidently Brechtian move, *Comrades* features a cast of unknowns as the local farmers and labourers attempting to eke out a living in this rural locale, while characters of wealth, power and authority are all played by British establishment actors, such as Robert Stephens, Freddie Jones, Vanessa Redgrave, James Fox and Michael Horden. And in a notable example of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, Douglas has the actor Alex Norton play several characters in the film, including the Diorama man, the magic lanternist, Sergeant Bell, Wollaston, a ranger, a tramp, the sea captain, McCallum, the silhouette artist, and the Italian photographer.

The notion of 'illusion' becomes not only an aesthetic driver of the film but also a key narrative theme. In a short sequence, George Loveless (Soans) walks into town and meets Norton's travelling Diorama man (an artisanal worker, no less), who tries to sell his wares thus: 'The diorama is the highest achievement of human ingenuity, delineating the most interesting parts of the world in varying aspects of light and shade.'<sup>48</sup> The Diorama man subsequently asks Loveless 'How about a trip to the other side of the world tomorrow?' Loveless replies thoughtfully to this invitation: 'What you offer, sir, is illusion. It's the real world I'd like to see. In our short lives we move about so little. See so little. Yes, I'd like to travel one day.' Writing about this exchange, the critic David Wilson insightfully argued that it is hugely ironic, in that 'move about' is precisely what Loveless does later in the film when his dream to see the 'real' world comes true upon his transportation to Australia.<sup>49</sup> But the Diorama man and his show are just one example of the many opportunities that the film takes to explore the politics of representation. As we will see, while *Comrades* sometimes offers a realistic, authentic depiction of the rural landscape of Dorset at a precise historical moment, the film presents this landscape as a series of illusions.

In some ways, then, *Comrades* might be termed a realist text in the Marxist sense of the term 'realism', as it chimes with the leftist concept of realism as verisimilitude in terms of truth-telling. In other words, the film incorporates formal techniques (such as Loveless's aforementioned speech to camera) as a means to 're-present' social reality.<sup>50</sup> This reality, as such, is shown not to be something that simply exists, *per se*, but as something that is thus potentially subject to change. *Comrades* is a film that appears to chime with the critical concerns of Marxist so-called *Screen* theory of the 1970s. To paraphrase Colin MacCabe (who was a key

critical advocate of Brechtian film aesthetics), *Comrades* is not a classic realist text, then, because it does not deny its own status as text, and, as such, it does not unconsciously reinforce bourgeois ideology.<sup>51</sup> Instead, *Comrades* evidently openly questions (and indeed attempts to dismantle) bourgeois ideology, as it questions mainstream cinema's fixity of the passive spectator, and thus, the ubiquity in this cinema of what Stephen Heath termed 'the invisible camera eye'.<sup>52</sup> That is, *Comrades* encourages spectatorial activity, not passivity. And the rural landscape provides a space for this activity.

Bill Douglas places a Brechtian acknowledgement of the constructed notion of representation at the heart of the Tolpuddle narrative in *Comrades* from the very beginning of the film. The first shot is of a white disc, which is slowly eclipsed. Jez Winship wonders if this is perhaps a cap being placed over the lens, or the moon moving across the sun?<sup>53</sup> Here, and later, as the narrative unfolds, the spectator is able to witness examples of visual representations such as trompe l'oeil effects and tableaux that stem from a range of pre-cinematic forms which incorporate many items drawn from the extraordinary collection put together by Douglas and Peter Jewell (now housed in the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum at the University of Exeter). For example, a strikingly beautiful image, witnessed by Loveless when it is displayed by Doubtfire's diorama, shows nightfall over a picturesque rural scene of ruined cottages. Commenting on his employment of these optical illusions and pre-cinematic features in the film, Douglas told Geoff Andrew: 'what I wanted to suggest was the magic of things, rather than just depict them accurately.'<sup>54</sup> In this way, for Andrew, 'the film becomes not merely a chronicle of an historical event but an examination of ways of seeing, ways of showing; an illustrated lecture on cinema and pre-cinema.'<sup>55</sup> Brian Winston has argued that such pre-cinematic devices

operate as exemplars of the development of ‘lens culture’; they are visual ‘realisations’.<sup>56</sup> Within the contexts of *Comrades*, these visual devices again serve to highlight the constructed nature of the text, and specifically, the culturally constructed nature of rural landscape..

In its depiction of workers in a rural landscape in southern England, *Comrades* displays the influence of leftist filmmaking techniques in other ways. The first sequence proper in the film depicts farm labourers disguised as women, smashing machinery. An initial long shot has the workers standing still in the landscape, forming a tableau vivant with the grassy undulations of an Iron Age fort as a backdrop. A subsequent, rapidly edited sequence features close-up shots of the equipment being violently destroyed by these men, who are then brutally attacked by faceless, red-coated, mounted soldiers. This is a re-enactment of the type of event that typified the Swing Riots across eastern and southern England in 1830. Douglas cuts to a wide-angled extreme long shot that marks this grassy, hilly Dorset landscape as a profoundly political space; as a site of human struggle. Small fires light the field, and the group run all ways in fear. The editing schema here evidently demonstrates the influence of Soviet silent cinema on Douglas, specifically the rapidly rhythmical approach of Sergei Eisenstein’s dialectical montage (or ‘kino-fist’), which was designed to facilitate the shocking of the film audience into ‘feeling’.<sup>57</sup> In these moments *Comrades* echoes similarly charged moments in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *October* (1927), films which both famously constructed heroic moments of solidarity. Douglas’s rural Dorset, then, is not represented in a straightforwardly, classically realistic way. It is a world being bent out of shape. The rural landscape here is not a static, heritage space of beauty (a space, that is, to be passively admired), then, but a space of potential change. So,



while the requirement to realistically depict village life was in some ways key to the film, it is important to stress again here that the realism that characterises *Comrades* is Brechtian in nature, in that it comprises competing discourses. In this way, the film problematises the relationship between ‘real’, worked rural landscape and bourgeois notions of landscape as beauty and/or art.

For a film set in rural Dorset, there are relatively few static camera wide-angled images of its archetypically beautiful countryside. For example, one sequence in an early section of the film features images of horses at work pulling a plough, and labourers bending to pick potatoes. But these individuals are usually captured here in mid shot or close up. Their acts of labour are evidently as important (or indeed, more important) to the articulation of the primary message of the film than the landscape’s potential to operate as pictorial spectacle. Another example of this can be found in the sequence in which Young Stanfield (Philip Davis) spreads compost onto a field – an activity shot in medium close up, with horse and cart trailing behind him.

But other shots of the land in the film take on seemingly symbolic and sometimes even Biblical resonances. In one such striking image, the camera captures three individuals on a high, chalky field, pushing carts and scattering seed. This tableau is clearly reminiscent of depictions of the crucifixion of Jesus at Calvary. So, while the landscape is evidently being aestheticized here, its representation remains geared to a sympathetic depiction of the world of the workers, and not, as such, to bourgeois/heritage ways of seeing English rural landscape.

As evidenced by its employment of pre-cinema as a Brechtian device, then, *Comrades* is engaged in mining a long and complex history of visual representations of English rural landscapes. The film clearly displays an awareness of the ideological implications and resonances of such representations. But while the rural landscape in *Comrades* is always evidently presented as a textual construction, Douglas and his collaborators were also at pains to capture and relay a sense of historical authenticity. As we have seen, Douglas and his cinematographer Gale Tattersall shot the first half of the film on location in rural Dorset. In her review of *Comrades* in *Sight and Sound*, Jill Forbes wrote of the ‘splendidly observed [...] detail of the rural landscape – the hedges, ditches, barns and cottages’.<sup>58</sup> The Tolpuddle sequences were shot at Tyneham, an abandoned village situated in an army firing range near Lulworth, in Dorset.<sup>59</sup> Here the production designer Michael Pickwoad created a near-facsimile of nineteenth-century Tolpuddle in this largely unchanged landscape; a ‘ready-made film back lot’.<sup>60</sup> He constructed period exteriors of houses out of mud, straw and stones, and converted newer cottages. But while the village is in many ways realistically realised, it is also, at the same time, always a representation of space. Indeed, in another contemporary review in *Monthly Film Bulletin*, David Wilson observed that ‘The Dorset sequences of *Comrades* reveal to the full this painterly aspect of [Douglas’s] cinema’.<sup>61</sup>

It is significant that Peter Jewell recalls the fact that he and Douglas frequented art galleries and exhibitions in London, and that Bill was a keen painter.<sup>62</sup> A number of shots in *Comrades*, through their framing of characters in rural space, have the distinct look of nineteenth-century English staffage paintings, and as such signal the leftist representational nature of this rural landscape in other ways. We might think here of the shot of local labourers gathering together in the

enclosed fields under ominously dark clouds. These shots can be read through the complex history of landscape painting in England, which developed out of (and later challenged) the classical tradition as exemplified by the profound influence of the seventeenth-century French artist Claude Lorrain. During the eighteenth century a number of painters began to work against this classical tradition (which had often involved linking contemporary rural landscapes to classical mythology), and instead sought to capture the complex, politically charged, contradictory (or indeed, socially 'real') nature of rural locales.

George Lambert's 1733 painting *A View of Boxhill in Surrey* was arguably the first proper British painting of a British landscape for its own sake. There is no mansion visible in this painting. A house does not provide a background to a portrait of wealthy patrons. Instead this image has farm labourers harvesting corn in a bucolic rural setting. Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (1750) was a thoroughly modern painting in this sense, as it also moved away from classical symbolism while at the same time offering evidence of the socio-cultural effects of the Enclosures in England. As John Berger pointed out of the couple depicted in this painting in his celebrated television series *Ways of Seeing* (BBC, 1972), 'Theirs is private land'. In his book accompanying this television series, Berger argues that one of the principal pleasures that this painting would have afforded Mr and Mrs Andrews as Gainsborough's clients was the 'pleasure of seeing themselves depicted as landowners [...] this pleasure was enhanced by the ability of oil paint to render their land in all its substantiality.'<sup>63</sup> Gainsborough later painted a number of rural landscapes in his Suffolk period (1748-59), such as *The Woodcutter and the Milkmaid* (1755), which shows a young couple on uncultivated, common ground. George Morland's very popular rustic landscapes, such as *Bargaining for Sheep* (1794) and

*Ferreting* (1792), perhaps more obviously moved the tradition of landscape painting in Britain away from the classical desires of the upper classes.<sup>64</sup> It is clear that some key landscape sequences in *Comrades* share Gainsborough's emphasis of the power and control of landowners but also Morland's preoccupation with the quotidian activities of the rural poor. An example of a rural image reminiscent of Morland occurs in *Comrades* when we see the character Brine (Jeremy Flynn) desperately and hungrily reaching his arm through a hedgerow to pull a turnip from an enclosed field and eat it in tears of shame.

The art historian Ann Bermingham has pointed out that 'The emergence of rustic landscape painting as a major genre in England at the end of the eighteenth century coincided with the accelerated enclosure of the English countryside.'<sup>65</sup> This is an important point, as it very clearly articulates just how far ways of seeing rural landscape in England are historically contingent, and how far these eighteenth century painters were often articulating what we might now call leftist views of rural life. The struggle of the Tolpuddle men as depicted in *Comrades* can also be read in terms of socio-cultural developments pertaining to the Enclosures. Indeed, many of the painterly, pictorial shots of the landscape in the film feature hedgerows or fences framing or enclosing the landscape. Again, these sequences can be read as distinctly Brechtian engagements with the ideological nature of artistic representations of the British rural landscape, as opposed to classical realist or indeed heritage recreations of a historical moment in rural Dorset for the enjoyment of passive spectators.

In a 1978 interview, Bill Douglas explained that he felt that film, uniquely, is about the observation of people in their environment.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, in Douglas's *Comrades* storyboard notes (held in the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum at the University of Exeter), emphasis is clearly placed on the importance of capturing shots

of individuals (but also, importantly, of communities) working in the landscape, rather than having the landscape framed as something to be looked at and simply enjoyed in the film. Moreover, in Douglas's shooting script, emphasis is also placed on the activity of the labourers and their families in this landscape. Medium and close-up shots of faces and moving bodies are far more frequently described and sketched, again demonstrating the influence of Soviet montage on the writer/director. But Douglas's script is very clear about the importance of these rural landscape shots. It mentions, for example, 'Cornfield workers – the arms flexing'.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Douglas's storyboard displays clearly planned landscape shots: 'Dusk in cornfield'; 'Night in cornfield with lights'. Indeed, the shooting script places much emphasis on 'light'. These images play an important role in how we come to see this rural community in the film - as part of the worked land, and, as such, the proper 'owners' of this land. In other words, they are not merely to be viewed as part of a landscape to be admired and enjoyed, as the script shows in its vivid description of this planned shot:

*43 EXT Fields Twilight*

*43a/1 'It is twilight now and the workers are still back bent across the fields.*

*Muscles quiver beneath a sweating back as the body stretches out to scythe the corn. They have no identity these men, just hands working away incessantly with the rhythm of machines.'*<sup>68</sup>

This haymaking section of the film begins with close-ups of the hands and feet of the labourers, again emphasising the fact that this should be understood to be a worked landscape. This sequence is reminiscent of haymaking paintings such as George Lambert's *Hilly Landscape with a Cornfield* (1733), in which a solitary

reaper works a field. So, *Comrades* is a film that has much in common with the work of Lambert and his artistic contemporaries in terms of its depiction of agricultural toil, both in its evidence of hardship, but also, it should be pointed out, in its moments of celebration; moments of simple enjoyment of life when the day's work is done. In its evocation of the traditions of British rural landscape painting (and staffage in particular), *Comrades* is evidently suspicious of classical compositional frameworks and aesthetics, just as it is suspicious of the type of representations of rural landscapes increasingly being seen in what was to become known as heritage cinema of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>69</sup>

*Comrades* functions as an example of 1980s leftist British filmmaking, and as such might be placed alongside films within this history as otherwise varied as *Britannia Hospital* (Lindsay Anderson, 1982), *The Last of England* (Derek Jarman, 1987), *Looks and Smiles* (Ken Loach, 1981), *High Hopes* (Mike Leigh, 1988), *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Peter Greenaway, 1989) and even *Eat the Rich* (Peter Richardson, 1987). But *Comrades* shares little or nothing with these films in terms of its historical narrative, themes, or aesthetics qualities. It stands alone in the 1980s as a film that celebrates English workers' heritage within the context of a Brechtian representation of rural landscape. Reviewing the DVD released in 2009, Ian Christie argued that 'no other film has made early 19th-century rural England so tangible, showing the impact of machinery and early capitalism on the lives of agricultural workers.'<sup>70</sup> *Comrades* shows how workers might ultimately lay claim to the land – or at the very least forge a real sense of belonging to the land. To do this it draws on or echoes a rich and varied history of leftist aesthetics, including Soviet montage and Brechtian distancing, but also traditions in British landscape painting. As such, *Comrades* demonstrates an acute awareness not only of

the power of illusion in mythmaking, but also of a history of politicized visual representation that stretches back, before Brecht, to the eighteenth century. In *Comrades*, the rural landscape is represented as 'real' in such a way that sees the 'real' as a set of competing discourses. It is a film that deliberately violates classical realist aesthetic norms in order to encourage spectatorial activity and intellectual engagement with the story of the Martyrs, a story that evidently resonated in 1980s Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> Ruskin, *Lectures on Art*, 28.

<sup>2</sup> Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Cardwell argues that later film adaptations of Hardy such as *Jude* (Michael Winterbottom, 1996) and *The Woodlanders* (Phil Agland, 1997) follow Schlesinger's *Far from the Madding Crowd* in the following respects: 'They depict the rural as something with which the people work the land, appreciating its fertile, expansive

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beauty while simultaneously recognizing the potentially threatening power it holds over their livelihoods and subsistence.’ These films ‘thus present an alternative past and also a potential future – their representations are simultaneously “old” and “new.”’ See Cardwell, ‘Working the Land’, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Cardwell, ‘Working the Land’, 23-24.

<sup>5</sup> Uhde, ‘The Influence of Bertolt Brecht’s Theory of Distanciation On The Contemporary Cinema, Particularly on Jean-Luc Godard’, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Uhde, ‘The Influence of Bertolt Brecht’s Theory of Distanciation On The Contemporary Cinema, Particularly on Jean-Luc Godard’, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Jewell interviewed by Paul Newland, 23 February 2015.

<sup>8</sup> See Quart, ‘In the Religion of the Market’, 22-29.

<sup>9</sup> Forbes, ‘The Dark Side of the Landscape’, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Derek Malcolm, *The Guardian*, 27 August 1987, 11.

<sup>11</sup> David Robinson, *The Times*, 4 March 1987, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Johnston, ‘The Magic Lanternist Show’, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Quentin Falk, *Mail on Sunday*, 30 August 1987, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Victoria Mather, *Daily Telegraph*, 27 August 1987, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Sue Heal, *Today*, 28 August 1987, 27.

<sup>16</sup> Philip French, *The Observer*, 30 August 1987, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Marriott, ‘A Picture of the Future’, 18.

<sup>18</sup> Marriott, ‘A Picture of the Future’, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Marriott, ‘A Picture of the Future’, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Wrathall, ‘Window on the World’, 20.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew, ‘Bill of Rights’, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Williamson, *New Statesman*, 28 August 1987, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Williamson, *New Statesman*, 28 August 1987, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew, ‘Bill of Rights’, 15.

<sup>25</sup> Shaun Usher, *Daily Mail*, 28 August 1987, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Alexander Walker, *London Standard*, 27 August 1987, 30.

<sup>27</sup> Phillip Bergson, *What’s On*, 27 August 1987, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Mantel, ‘Muddied Tolpuddle’, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Bill Douglas in Johnston, ‘The Magic Lanternist Show’, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew, ‘Bill of Rights’, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Jewell interviewed by Paul Newland, 13 February 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Jewell interviewed by Paul Newland, 23 February 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Jewell interviewed by Paul Newland, 23 February 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Charity, ‘Light Show: Bill Douglas’ Comrades’, 75.

<sup>35</sup> Higson, ‘Re-Presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film’, 99. See also Vidal, *Heritage Film*, 8, and Cardwell, ‘Working the Land: Representations of Rural England in Adaptations of Thomas Hardy’s Novels’, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Wollen, ‘Over Our Shoulders’, 179.

<sup>37</sup> See Higson (2006). Phil Powrie has located another strain of British heritage cinema, which he calls ‘alternative heritage’. These are exemplified by ‘the rite of passage film set in the past, focusing on child or adolescent protagonists, most of which appeared in the 1980s.’ They are set outside the ‘centre’ (London), and often feature a slowing of ‘freezing’ of the narrative. Alternative heritage ‘deflects us away from linear time to cyclical time [...]’. Powrie, ‘On the Threshold Between Past and Present: ‘Alternative heritage’’, 325.

<sup>38</sup> Vidal, *Heritage Film*, 9.

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- <sup>39</sup> See Vidal, *Heritage Film*, 10. For a critique of the academic dismissal of heritage cinema, see Monk, 'The British heritage-film debate revisited', 176-198.
- <sup>40</sup> Hewison, *The Heritage Industry*, 10.
- <sup>41</sup> Wrathall, 'Window on the World', 20.
- <sup>42</sup> Forbes, 'The Dark Side of the Landscape', 35.
- <sup>43</sup> Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, 25.
- <sup>44</sup> Cardwell, 'Working the Land: Representations of Rural England in Adaptations of Thomas Hardy's Novels', 21.
- <sup>45</sup> Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction*, 192.
- <sup>46</sup> Caughie, 'The way home', 27.
- <sup>47</sup> Webb, 'Bill Douglas Among the Philistines', 32.
- <sup>48</sup> Dioramas (mobile theatre devices) were invented by Daguerre and Charles Marie Bouton. Their first exhibition was in London in 1823.
- <sup>49</sup> Wilson, 'Comrades', 260.
- <sup>50</sup> See Hallam with Marshment, *Realism and Popular Cinema*, xiii.
- <sup>51</sup> MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema', 12.
- <sup>52</sup> Heath, 'Lessons from Brecht', 104.
- <sup>53</sup> Winship, 'Comrades and Pre-Cinema at the Bill Douglas Centre', [sparksinelectricjelly.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/comrades-and-pre-cinema-at-bill-douglas.html](http://sparksinelectricjelly.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/comrades-and-pre-cinema-at-bill-douglas.html). (Accessed 5 November 2013).
- <sup>54</sup> Andrew, 'Bill of Rights', 16.
- <sup>55</sup> Andrew, 'Bill of Rights', 16.
- <sup>56</sup> Winston, *Technologies of Seeing*.
- <sup>57</sup> See Petric, *Constructionism in Film*.
- <sup>58</sup> Forbes, 'A Lanternist's Tale', 66.
- <sup>59</sup> Forbes, 'The Dark Side of the Landscape', 34; Petrie, 'A Lanternist Revisited: The Making of 'Comrades'', 177. For more on Tyneham village see Bond, *Tyneham: A Lost Heritage*.
- <sup>60</sup> Brett, Dorset in Film, 47.
- <sup>61</sup> Wilson, 'Comrades', 260.
- <sup>62</sup> Peter Jewell interviewed by Paul Newland, 23 February 2015.
- <sup>63</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 108.
- <sup>64</sup> Herrmann, *British Landscape Painting of the 18th Century*, 118-119.
- <sup>65</sup> Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 1.
- <sup>66</sup> Webb, 'Bill Douglas Among the Philistines', 30.
- <sup>67</sup> Bill Douglas Cinema Museum (BDC), University of Exeter.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Douglas's film also has much in common with portrait painting. For example, Winship notices the focus on expressive faces in many shots reminiscent of the work of Dreyer, Bresson, and Bergman. Sequences such as the sharing of bread in the Stanfield house – though its enactment of suffering, sharing and sacrifice, and in its *mise-en-scène* and lighting – are also reminiscent of the work of Caravaggio. Moreover, Douglas notices the semantic and poetic power of objects – his storyboard (BDC) clearly states 'Make a feature of the chairs to emphasise George's sentiments.'
- <sup>70</sup> Christie, 'History from beneath', 84.

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