

“We are the martyrs, you’re just squashed tomatoes!”:
Laughing through the Fears in Postcolonial British
Comedy: Chris Morris’s *Four Lions* and Joe Cornish’s
Attack the Block

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Historically, comedy has been employed in the service of a number of masters, ranging politically from the reactionary and conservative to the revisionary and revolutionary. Constructions of Britishness have historically relied upon assumptions of inclusion and exclusion, superiority and inferiority and a series of hierarchies, which have been reinforced through complementary forms of comedy. Comedy has both a political role—mimicking, commenting on, or transparently embedded in hierarchical structures of power—and a psychological one, giving voice to taboo subjects and revealing socially-repressed desires or fears. Postcolonial comedy has played an important role in British cinema over the last three decades, comically raising questions of migrancy and belonging through subversive engagements with stereotypes in films such as Stephen Frears’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), Gurinder Chadha’s *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), Damien O’Donnell’s *East Is East* (1999) and Andy De Emmony’s *West Is West* (2010). I term these films postcolonial not in reference to their directors, most of whom are white and British, but in terms of the migrant communities, residual colonial inequities and counter-hegemonic politics that the films represent.

However, this article will argue that the gentle undermining of stereotypes, social satires and portrayals of multicultural utopias achieved by the above films are comparatively gentle in contrast to the stinging social critiques enabled by Chris Morris’s *Four Lions* (2010) and Joe Cornish’s *Attack the Block* (2011). Whilst previous postcolonial comedy has often been uplifting and inclusive, functioning to “assist the integration of difference,” this has often involved “the problematic homogenisation of culture clashes” (Emig 176). One only has to think of the paralleling of Sikh Jess and white Jules in *Bend It Like Beckham* to understand how this homogenisation has occurred, as concerns associated with religion and ethnicity are subordinated to a more universal problem of sexual discrimination by figuring both Jess’s and Jules’s mothers as the main barriers to their footballing ambitions. Furthermore, Sandra Heinen criticises films like *Bend It Like Beckham*, arguing that:

If the films are problematic, then it is not because of the conciliatory happy endings and the blind eye turned to existing social tensions, but because of the privilege granted to one culture over the other [...], films in which Western values are in the end the only common ground on which the two cultures can meet. (77)

Happy resolution to the comedies is possible only if minority characters conform to Western values of freedom above other (conflicting) cultural values such as respect for elders or religious duties. However, to give such films their due, the work of undermining stereotypes and creating an atmosphere of inclusive (rather than superior) laughter has paved the way for the two films that will form the focus of the rest of this article, as the later works both depend heavily upon irony and an understanding of the unacceptability of racism that may not have been possible without the genre-defining work done by earlier comic filmmakers.

So now we remove ourselves from the comfort zone of happy multiculturalism and generously inclusive laughter enacted in earlier postcolonial British comedies. Historically speaking, the official party-line of multiculturalism introduced with the Labour government in 1997 has soured; following the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent “War on Terror,” Tahir Abbas marks the shift from a “benign multiculturalism to a malevolent one” (5), concluding that “[m]ulticulturalism has strong limitations because it rejects “cultures” that do not correspond to nation states” (17).¹ These critiques of multiculturalism are important to bear in mind in light of the two films that will be the focus of the remainder of this article. Engaging with extra-national cultures (religious and local), these films concern themselves with disenfranchised communities within British society, directly addressing the side of multiculturalism repressed by utopian ideals such as Chadha’s. Whilst I do not want to criticise Chadha’s *vision* of a (largely) benign multicultural Britain, as this vision is imagined into cinematic being, it implicitly serves to exclude those that do not comfortably fit the image. *Four Lions* and *Attack the Block* focus instead on the culturally and politically stigmatised figures of the suicide bomber (in the case of the former) and the gang member (in the case of the latter). The films do not reinforce patterns of exclusion, but instead parody media constructions of particular figures and undermine us/them affiliations encouraged by a form of Britishness that expresses itself in relation to culturally subordinated and “extreme” Others. The article is subtitled “laughing through the fears” to suggest the films’ contributions to the deflation of heavily-mediated cultural fears through the outlet of laughter.

Four Lions is the first feature-length film by Chris Morris, a director notorious for his dark humour and outrageous satire, as evidenced in *Brass Eye*, a televised series of mockumentaries taking the media frenzy surrounding controversial topics such as drug addiction and paedophilia as their inspiration. This time, the focus of hysteria that he brings to light surrounds a group of “jihadis” from South Yorkshire, as they plan and carry out a suicide mission. The group of men spend the majority of their

time in-fighting, which enables Morris to find humour in the frequently hyperbolised threat of the suicide bomber. Also a first-time film director with TV credits, Joe Cornish interweaves a sci-fi alien-invasion plot with comedy in *Attack the Block*. The film takes a Brixton gang and their fight against the alien invasion as its focus, largely deriving comedy from the gang's discourse.

A crucial function of postcolonial comedy is to engage with stereotypes and lay bare their workings, in order that they might lose their power. Homi Bhabha discusses the treatment of stereotypes, arguing that "[t]o judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its *effectivity*": to dismiss stereotypes as outdated or untrue is not enough, and it is only by an understanding of their workings that they might be robbed of their power (67). In postcolonial comedy stereotypes are employed reflexively to provoke ironic laughter, whilst their comical engagement also has the potential to unmask the lack on which Bhabha suggests that they are constructed by unveiling fears or anxieties that are simultaneously contained and revealed through their anxious repetition (66). *Attack the Block* and *Four Lions* work to subvert stereotypes by including stock "types" (the gang member, the student and the nurse, for example) but fleshing them out in order to create rounded and complex characters. By using these stock "types" it is possible to assume certain preconceptions or associations; however, by making characters emotionally complex and therefore believable, they are not constrained to re-enacting a series of stereotypes. As such, any stereotypes that are engaged in the films are done so ironically. This ensures that audiences are encouraged to analyse how and why the stereotypes have gained such currency.

In order to challenge diminishing stereotypes, *Attack the Block* draws on some common associations made about black cultures via references to music, drugs and violence, and undermines these associations through the plot. Brewis, for example, is the film's most dependent consumer of marijuana and is always introduced by a diegetic soundtrack of black rap or reggae music playing in his headphones. However, his white, middle-class status destabilises associations between the music and marijuana as solely emanating from black cultures. The film also portrays black characters as inherently British rather than Britain's Other, challenging the way that racist rhetoric attempts to position those of non-white ethnicity. An emblematic image towards the end of Cornish's film shows the hero, Moses, hanging out of a window; the only thing preventing him from plummeting to his death is the Union Jack flag that he clasps.

Four Lions tackles stereotypes by employing tropes of surveillance throughout the film; indeed, the ring-leader, Omar, is himself a security guard. This trope metacinematically foregrounds processes of observation and representation whilst questioning who is controlling the camera's gaze. Like Morris's earlier work, *Four Lions* also plays with the documentary format through the use of handheld cameras and a plot-line

driven around the build-up to a climactic event. In some senses it parodies “ethnographic” documentaries by taking a marginalised group as its object and working on the basis of grass-roots research. Yet rather than presenting the material as scientific and/or objective, the film is shot in a manner that Fatimah Tobing Rony would describe as employing the “third eye” and evidencing a “sensibility to Subject and Object double-consciousness” (217). By means of bringing the camera to the forefront and exposing viewing perspectives as constructed by the camera, this manner of filming challenges “popular and scientific conceptions of the Ethnographic” in which, “[w]ith the presence of the camera obscured, the viewer is meant to observe and experience the film as if he or she had been there” (196-7). Tobing Rony speaks of the “third eye” predominantly in terms of “a person of colour growing up in the United States,” which renders the term inapplicable to Morris as a white man filming a group that is frequently presented as the Other of British culture. However, the director shows his sensitivity to the danger of presenting the camera’s gaze as objective by constantly drawing attention to it. Whilst films like *East is East* have been criticised for their tendency to reproduce a spectacle of the Other that was easily consumable by a mainstream audience, the self-reflexive camera-work of *Four Lions* assures that the gaze is also turned back on the audience.²

Perhaps one of the reasons why the latest wave of comedy is so much more aggressive than its forebears comes down to the fact that, as white directors, Morris and Cornish are entirely unconcerned with challenging or offending white audiences. Rather than gently pursuing what Emig terms the “integration of difference” in an inclusive and benevolent manner, these directors unflinchingly pose critical questions about the social conditions (of poverty and exclusion) that must be present for the rise of gang culture or Islamism to occur, as well as interrogating the function of media representations in exacerbating the state of affairs. This is not to suggest that white directors have sole access to the luxury of indifference to challenging or offending white audiences, but it is the case that Cornish’s and Morris’s films suggest a new trend in postcolonial British cinema, that has until now been rather more placatory. It remains to be seen how this cinematic genre will develop.

The opening scenes of Morris’s film foreground concerns of observation, representation and performativity in order to further subvert the conventions of traditional ethnography. During the shooting of the initial home video—intended as an explanation of the suicide mission the bombers intend to carry out—cuts between POV shots through a handheld camera and a high-angle, seemingly omniscient shot pave the way for two of the important perspectives in the film: that of the bombers, and a god’s-eye view, suggesting a bigger picture. The third important viewing perspective is introduced later in the film via pervasive closed-circuit television and night-vision cameras that imply the aspect of surveillance that the characters are subjected to. Concerns over providing a convincing performance are expressed during the shooting of this video:

Waj's comically small (toy) gun raises questions of performance and the (thwarted) desire to be taken seriously, whilst Faisal refuses to take a box off his head, illustrating his intent not to be watched but also rendering any attempts to be taken seriously futile. Showing characters as explicitly *acting* and responding to the presence of a camera works to subvert the conventions of traditional ethnography, in which "the individual 'native' [or in this case, migrant] is often [...] taken for real" (Tobing Rony 4).

Yet concerns over an effective performance also serve more seriously to index the spectacle, or what Mark Juergensmeyer has termed the "theatre" (128) of religious terrorism, in which a convincing performance is necessary to convey the "power and ideology implicit in acts of terrorism" (127). The reason for the importance of an effective performance is further elaborated by Nico Prucha in his analysis of online *jihadism* as propaganda in which "habitual denominators (praying *Mujahideen*, recitations of the Qur'an, singing *nasheed*, poetry, burial ceremonies etc.)" are used to indicate a commonality with viewers and to render them more susceptible to the legitimisation of violence also displayed (2). A persuasive performance is, as such, integral to the embedded film's posthumous reception, as its purpose is not merely explanatory, but is also intended to function as an ideological advertisement for the online *ummah*.

Four Lions portrays characters with an extreme paranoia of persistently being observed that is ultimately shown to be warranted, as it becomes increasingly apparent that the characters *are* being watched. This is registered by including integral scenes that are focalised through a CCTV lens, or through extra-diegetic camera clicks that do not visibly originate in the scene being shot. The comedy works in a curious way in this situation, as methods of avoiding observation are shown as increasingly farcical and overblown, yet the reason behind the lions' actions is ultimately justified both within the film and without it, in skewed media representations that tend to present a one-sided, monologic view of Islam and its adherents. Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin argue that what we see in the Western media today "is the distortion of particular features of Muslim life and custom, reducing the diversity of Muslims and their existence as individuals to a fixed object—a caricature in fact" (3). They suggest that this "distortion" is brought about through "framing structures" that "rather than being descriptive and neutral [...] are defined by questions of belonging, 'Otherness,' and threat" (21). This signals the importance of critically challenging the representation of Islam perpetuated by the media.

Internal conflict and contradiction assures that in Morris's film Muslim characters are not taken as representative, meaning that Islam cannot be homogenised and fixed as Other. Amongst various anti-observation tactics employed in the film, some of the bombers take to shaking their heads in order to blur any images that are captured. When he notices this, Omar observes, "CCTV's a video, you're just gonna look like a load of Sufis on speed!" This scene deconstructs monolithic

representations of Islam by performing an internal Othering of Sufi Muslims and comically debasing the mystical element of Sufism by associating it with drug abuse. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam discuss the danger of characters from ethnic minorities becoming “allegorical,” arguing that “within hegemonic discourse every subaltern performer/role is seen as synecdochically summing up a vast but putatively homogenous community”, whereas “[r]epresentations of dominant groups [...] are seen not as allegorical but as ‘naturally’ diverse” (183). By focussing the entire film around a group of suicide bombers and their internal nexus of relationships, Morris assures that a diversity of personalities and belief attitudes – defined by Giovanna Borradori as “the way in which we believe rather than what we believe in” (18) – are shown, and individual characters do not become allegorical or representative.

Morris’s film separates surface signifiers of Muslim identity and actual belief attitudes in order to challenge media stereotypes dependent on stock images. The most powerful example of this occurs during a parallel montage of scenes. Images shot in the flat where the group discuss plans to take their suicide mission to the marathon are alternated with images shot from a shaky hand-held camera somewhere outside, with green lighting used to suggest night-vision. Progressively shorter intervals between cuts bring the montage to a climax as the flat is surrounded by police. At a climactic point, the flat that has been shot from outside is forcefully entered by the police. Inside—rather than the anticipated group of suicide bombers—are a group of older Muslim scholars, who had previously been ridiculed by the bombers for their peaceful and cerebral interpretation of Islam. The comedy climaxes as the police read the wielding of a water pistol by Omar’s brother, Ahmed, as signifying violent intent. The dramatic irony is that the audience will recognise the “weapon” as the same water pistol that Ahmed had previously refused to use when provoked by Omar’s wife, Sofia. The construction of this scene suggests that popular understandings of Islam depend on surface signifiers of Muslim identity—the beards and traditional dress sported by the older scholars—rather than actual belief attitudes.

As such, the plot justifies the farcical anti-observation efforts of the bombers, as Muslims *are* being targeted for observation, only it is the innocent scholars rather than the young men guilty of planning a suicide mission that are targeted. In this case, the extreme actions of the four lions are portrayed as a response to the society that they live in; their fears are justified in the context of the film, putting the critical onus on damaging misrepresentations and superficial stereotypes rather than the bombers as a serious threat. The bombers themselves are ultimately the only human casualties of their bombs.

Having demonstrated how stereotypes are engaged in both films, I will now examine the films separately so as to address the specific fears that they turn into sources of laughter. Unlike the national media, which largely conforms to culturally accepted notions of political correctness, the two films I discuss deploy offensive language, trade openly in stereotypes

and encourage laughter at minority groups. This conversely serves to highlight the hypocrisy of the media by revealing what is obscured by politically correct language. Following an admirable discussion of comedy's "double-edged" expression of both desire and derision, Virginia Richter argues that comedy can be "transgressive since it discloses the aggressive desires habitually glossed over by politically correct language" (71). Overall, her argument makes it apparent that whilst comedy can only ever reproduce hierarchies, however ironically, it does enable the revelation of the "aggressive desires," or fears, which are linguistically repressed. No matter how controversial the films might seem, they only expose prejudices that must already have currency in contemporary discourse in order for audiences to appreciate their irony.

Morris both finds humour and combats fear in the portrayal of suicide bombers that are hopelessly inept. Rather than an organised network of cold killers, Morris's film presents us with an absurdly disorganised array of characters, demonstrating traits of kindness, brotherhood and comic ineptitude alongside their desires to fight the *kafir* (unbelievers). This goes against the grain of representations of terrorists in previous Hollywood-produced films, integral to which is what Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard have described as a "monolithic culture of thuggish male warriors who relish violence, directed mostly against innocent civilians, and who lack motives beyond hatred and jealousy" (347). Boggs and Pollard highlight the inherent contradiction of this, as "[d]espite their lack of intellectual sophistication and political strategy [...] such warriors are depicted as a grave threat to the very foundations of civilized society" (347).

Four Lions exposes discrepancies in the representation of terrorism by aligning the end result more closely with the haphazard strategies adopted by the characters throughout. The name that the group of bombers give themselves—the "four lions"—serves as a further means of tempering serious intent with farcical actions. Their chosen moniker suggests both Osama bin Laden, also known as "The Lion," and *The Lion King*, a key intertext that Omar renarrates to metaphorically explain his actions to his young son. As well as complicating a picture that would be easier to fear in its simple singularity (the suicide bomber as pure evil), the juxtaposition of bin Laden and *The Lion King*'s Simba also serves to deflate the perceived power of the former Al Qaeda leader. A further source of comedy that Morris derives from the figure of the suicide bomber is the uncertainty surrounding the concept of *jihad* in Islam, along with the associated matters of martyrdom, terrorism and suicide bombing.³ Much of the film's comedy originates in arguments over how the group should be training and what would be the best target for attack. The wide array of beliefs surrounding what *jihad* means and how it should be exercised are stretched to ridiculous proportions in Morris's film, in which Barry (the group's white convert and the most illogical and aggressive figure in the group) advocates bombing a mosque to radicalise the moderates, whilst Faisal wants to "bomb Boots" (the chemist's) for the offence of selling condoms that "make you wanna bang white girls."

When Faisal comes to an unfortunate demise (caused by tripping over with a bag of explosives) Barry believes that he is a martyr for damaging the infrastructure by simultaneously blowing up a nearby sheep. However, Omar's question as to whether Faisal is "a martyr or [...] a *fucking* jalfrezi?" illustrates uncertainties in interpretation even from those committed to a suicide mission. Violent understandings of *jihad* are contrasted with the comically pacifist Ahmed, who is so stringent in his non-violent beliefs that he even refuses to engage in a water fight, preferring to quote opinions than squirt water. This comically illustrates that devoted Muslim belief can equally *preclude* violence, giving voice to a dominant understanding of *jihad* that prioritises inner struggle over armed fighting (Ansari 147).

However, there is a more sinister undertone to this proliferation of sentiments regarding *jihad*, as its violent interpretation is shown to thrive only in certain circles; in the case of the film it is the young, disaffected men rather than the older scholars who interpret *jihad* in a violent way. Humayan Ansari discusses interpretations of *jihad* in Muslim communities following a survey of British Muslims in the wake of 9/11. He notes that interpretations of *jihad* have tended to emphasise either its peaceful or its violent nature, positing personal understanding as well as circumstance as influential factors (147). So it might be that what is being mocked in the film is the uncertainty surrounding such a crucial point of belief, but on the other hand the film exercises the critique of a society that produces the "circumstances" in which people choose to interpret *jihad* in a violent way; as is voiced in the film, "why shouldn't I be a bomber if you treat me like one?"

The way that the film operates dares members of the audience to make judgements about the characters in order to illustrate that it is just such pre-judgements that create the right atmosphere for previously peaceful characters to radicalise. During a scene at a public debate Hassan wants to test people's reactions to him as a Muslim. He stands up at the conference and starts rapping: "I'm the Mujahideen and I'm making a scene, now you gonna feel what the boom boom means; it's like Tupac said, when I die I'm not dead; we are the martyrs, you're just squashed tomatoes. Allahu akbar!" At this point he sets off a line of party poppers that are strung around his waist and designed to look like bombs. In response to the screams and shocked faces captured in a wide shot of the audience, he responds "Just cos I'm Muslim you thought it was real?!" During this scene the diegetic gaze of the audience responding to Hassan acts as a foil for the cinema audience, assuming a certain kind of subject: these are people attending a talk panel entitled "Islam: Moderation and Progress." This talk apparently draws a similar mix of middle-class liberals and students that Film4 marketing hopes to attract, by producing films that are "alternative" and aimed at "an intelligent audience."⁴

By challenging the response of this audience, the film attacks the insidious prejudice (disguised in politically correct language) of the middle class rather than explicit racist abuse. In this manner Morris pushes

assumptions to the limit, setting a scene in which prejudgements about previously non-violent Muslim characters engender violent reactions, rather than the reverse; Hassan is recruited by Barry at a later stage in the film. As such, fear creates its object, and by comically exposing the way that fear of suicide bombers engenders a corresponding response, Morris stays true to form by attacking the media that create such hysteria around the threat of suicide missions. When Hassan's party poppers go off the audience is granted comic relief that ridicules any prejudiced preconceptions that may have been harboured, rather than producing a monster that would justify feelings of fear. To laugh at something reduces its power to induce fear; in pursuit of this, Morris provokes laughter at sites of excess (as in the tension built up during Hassan's rap) as a way of *combating* the production of cultural fears.

Scenes such as the one described above illustrate the real work required to rethink the complexities of terrorism and its relationship to national politics and the media. With considerable foresight, Jean Baudrillard argued (in 1993) that "the violence of old was more enthusiastic and sacrificial than ours," whereas now we are faced with "a simulacrum of violence, emerging less from passion than from the screen, a violence in the nature of the image" (75-6). Understanding acts of terrorism in this manner highlights the self-perpetuating nature of violence and its media-generated image; violence does not beget violence *per se*, but by means of the repetition and spectacle of its reproduced image. The cycle feeds off itself. Boggs and Pollard similarly argue that terrorism on film would be better understood as "a mode of political activity that both *reflects* and helps *create* a violent society of the spectacle where pervasive feelings of fear, anxiety and paranoia are reproduced daily" (351). Working against this cinematic trend, *Four Lions* serves to challenge monolithic perspectives on terrorism, calling into question the interrelated domains of media and national politics and their complicity in creating and perpetuating instances of the terrorist subject.

Four Lions mixes the sacred and the profane in a manner that serves to humanise the characters and ensure that they do not represent one-dimensional "types," but instead rounded and humanly flawed individuals, without passing judgment on the religion itself. Dialogues containing quick switches from "*salaam aleikums*" to crudely scatological comments and insults illustrate the hypocrisy of ordinary characters that want to bring about *shari'a* law but cannot control their own profanities, encouraging laughter at the faithful rather than at the faith. By presenting flawed individuals, the film encourages audiences to refrain from homogenising religious believers under simplifying ideological banners.

Waj is the film's main example of a flawed and confused believer; he is portrayed as childlike throughout, with a prayer bear to say his prayers and books like *The Camel that Went to the Mosque* that serve as indexes of his immature approach to Islam. The extent to which his religious belief is divorced from any real understanding becomes apparent when he and Omar go to a training camp in Pakistan and are preparing to pray: Waj

cannot understand why the rest of the men are praying towards the West rather than the East, despite repeated insistences that they have flown over Mecca. His farcical confusion illustrates his childlike devotion to religious practices without comprehending the meaning behind them.

Furthermore, a series of stories that Omar offers to Waj as justifications for what they are doing mimic the bed-time stories that Omar tells his young son. This internal parallel means that Waj's absurd repetition of "rubber dingy rapids bro" (after Omar's analogy for the joy of the afterlife), is filled with pathos as it becomes clear how theologically confused he is and how much he clings onto this childish metaphor for Paradise. Ultimately it is Omar's trickery of Waj—confusing him and thereby denying him the free choice of martyrdom—that engenders the pathos of the ending; the comedy turns sour and Waj is left sitting in a kebab shop about to blow himself and the Muslim owner up, surrounded by armed police and helplessly questioning whether he'll still get points for taking the Muslim man with him, "like Nectar card." I return to the (un)comic endings of *Four Lions* in comparison to *Attack the Block* at the end of the article.

Whereas *Four Lions* challenges the media hype and exacerbation of fear surrounding suicide bombing, *Attack the Block* takes representations of the postcolonial city as its comic and critical focus. To date there has been much critical work on the "transformative potential" and "utopian impulses" of cultural creativity, most notably by John McLeod in his work on *Postcolonial London*, where he focuses on texts that seek to "daringly imagine an alternative city in which divisive tensions are effectively resisted" (15,16). However, I will propose an alternative perspective on imagining postcolonial London that is largely removed from any benign, utopian or transformative inscriptions of the city. Cornish's film depends on a dystopian vision of the city and does not pretend to reimagine London in any "progressive" or "transformative" way (McLeod 16).

Primarily, the film simply does not attempt to address any vision of London at large, instead focussing on a localised drama centred in the Brixton neighbourhood, which is an area long defined in the media and popular culture by riot, poverty, gang culture, violence, drugs and its Afro-Caribbean community. Historically the area has been home to heavy handed policing ("Operation Swamp 81"), hosted riots in 1980, 1985, 1995 and 2011, and has been bombed by a neo-Nazi in 1999. Culturally it has been referenced in James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta* as the place where riots first break out and in The Clash's "The Guns of Brixton" as a place of resistance to unjust policing. Brixton definitely does not signify "benign" multiculturalism: quite the contrary.

London is a city trapped in its symbolism, with even the names of streets or small districts suggesting a chain of significations and associations, well known even to those who have not visited the area. Cornish's film at once plays upon this symbolic over-determination and simultaneously defamiliarises the area, stripping it of its usual associations. Cornish's film defamiliarises Brixton by means of a generic

shift, as aesthetic signifiers of the noir thriller employed in the tense and shadowy opening sequence—perhaps suited to an area (imaginatively) associated with drugs, gangs and violence—are displaced to accommodate the aesthetics of science fiction. In accordance with the genre, the film is tinged with a green light, with all of the action revolving around a tower block that is illuminated to look like a space ship, both stylistic choices serving to create a sense of otherness.

The film's sci-fi elements also relate to the comic aspects of the film, because the character arc of the aliens parodies the history of Brixton's migrant communities and their (problematically termed) "reverse colonisation" of the area. From the first sighting of the aliens, assumptions are made about their intentions to violently colonise; in response, the gang kill the first alien that they find, carrying it around as a trophy and engendering all of the ensuing alien attacks. Like the majority of the gang members, the aliens are black; this is discussed openly by the gang, when one of the members observes that the aliens are "blacker than my cousin Femi". Parallels between the reception of the aliens and of immigrants in Britain are not hidden behind social niceties or politically correct language: they are black, alien, and by settling in the neighbourhood are perceived to pose a threat to the indigenous community.

As in *Four Lions*, fear creates its object, and at the end of the film it is revealed that the gang have brought the attack on themselves by killing the first alien and unwittingly covering themselves in the female's pheromones, designed to attract subsequent male aliens; there is no indication that the aliens would have attacked otherwise. Simon Dentith argues:

[A]ll parody refunctions pre-existing text(s) and/or discourses, so that it can be said that these verbal structures are called to the readers' minds and then placed under erasure. A necessary modification of the original idea is that we must allow the act of erasure to operate critically rather than as merely neutral cancellation of its object. (15-16)

As such, Cornish's parody of migrant "aliens" requires that the audience critically reconsider early responses to British immigration, and whether (as suggested by the barely-disguised parody) subsequent unrest is not the result of migrants' hostile receptions upon arrival to the country. The main character, Moses, can in this sense be seen to inherit the legacy of Samuel Selvon's protagonist Moses Aloetta, who has come to signify the disillusionment with the Promised Land experienced by the so-called "Windrush generation." However, the film's critique is not limited to paralleling us/them relationships between migrant and native communities, but goes on to challenge simple binaries per se. References to "the beast(s)" signify three different groups operating in the film: the aliens, the gang, and the police, all of whom are referred to as beasts or monsters within the first ten minutes. However, the destabilisation of binaries enacted in *Attack the Block* does not pave the way for a "productive" and culturally hybrid space as envisioned by Bhabha in his

construction of the “Third Space of enunciation” (38). Neither does it fall into the trap of the kind of banal multiculturalism that frequently focuses on sites of affluence and in so doing simultaneously represses alternative (maybe less celebratory) stories. Instead, the film explores networks of local affiliations, with the looming tower block representing the focus of identification for characters. This is cinematically represented by the way that characters are introduced in the film, a tool that is often employed to convey defining characteristics. Close-ups of the face might suggest the focus on a character’s psychology, whilst long shots might prioritise setting or location as a way of defining the character. Cornish, however, opts to introduce his characters with shots of their feet, showing little more than their shoes and the streets they are treading; this prioritises local identity as the most important means of understanding a character.

The significance of (extremely) local affiliations, at points not seeming to extend beyond the block itself, is depicted as liberating, cutting across other affiliations such as class, ethnicity, gender and vocation, yet simultaneously entrapping; as such, a local affiliation does not have the power to combat national institutions (represented in this film by the police). The importance of local identity is comically conveyed in the film through a dialogue between the two main white characters, Brewis and Sam, in which Brewis assumes that Sam shares his desire to flee the building (to go to a house party in Fulham), whilst Sam is determined not to be chased out of her home. This flouts his assumptions of a shared identity presumably drawn from ethnicity and/or perceived class and instead prioritises her local neighbourhood as a point of identification. In a similar instance, Moses explains to Sam that they would not have “merked” her had they known she lived in the block, illustrating the gang’s purported local integrity. However, the block—besides being the site of an alien invasion—is often visually represented as a place of entrapment, with the foreground of shots of the characters often sporting bars that mimic incarceration in a prison.

The opposing tropes of liberation and entrapment within local affiliations climax at the film’s denouement, where Sam’s protestations about the gang, “I know them, they’re my neighbours, they protected me” is ignored, as the bars of the police van close over Moses’s face. The neighbourhood’s celebration of Moses’s heroic triumph over the aliens—echoed in chants of his name that penetrate the walls of the prison van—are ultimately futile, as Moses’s fate lays in the hands of a national institution, not a local community. The comedy is not parochial, unduly prioritising the local at the expense of the global, but instead offers small glimmers of provisional resistance to national powers that are unique to local communities drawn together in perceived neighbourly affiliations.

With its large migrant population, the Brixton of the film represents both the global (through migrancy) and the local. Bill Ashcroft argues that such sites can be understood as Deleuzian “smooth spaces” with the potential to challenge, because such a space “mostly ignores, exceeds, surrounds and interpenetrates the striated space of the state.” Ashcroft

goes on to say that the space “is not in itself liberatory, but it is the medium of liberation because it is the medium of the glocal” (though he fails to expand on what he means by glocal in this sense) (80). Yet in the film, despite the intersection of the global and the local, the state cannot be ignored, and it is state intervention that ultimately determines the outcomes of the various characters. The space imaginatively represented can only be the means of ideological liberation if the humour of the film serves to question the socio-political circumstances that are in operation.

The film also comically challenges modes of multiculturalism that are based on the assimilation of minority communities. This is again achieved on a local level, where Brewis—a middle-class student living at home and off his parents’ wealth—represents a minority in the film due to his elevated class status. Whilst all of the members of the gang consistently speak in London Jamaican, whether they are Caribbean in origin or not, the dialect is presented as organic and unaffected in this circumstance; however, when Brewis attempts to adopt the dialect he is cast as Other, an uninvited insider to the linguistic group.⁵ When Brewis switches from a Received Pronunciation standard English accent whilst on the phone to his Dad, to Jamaican English when he meets the gang, he is shown as trying to perform certain cultural signifiers to assimilate to the group. Brewis changes his grammar to include double negatives and words like “shizzle” as an attempt to assimilate, but his failure to master the rhetoric marks him as an outsider and at the same time the awkward silences following his contributions render him laughable.

One such scene involves the gang discussing what they should do with the alien that they have captured and killed, joking about calling Simon Cowell regarding a potential “Alien’s Got Talent” show, whilst passing around a spliff and laughing at each other’s jokes, when Brewis, previously at the edge of the scene, enters the room saying “jokes man, jokes,” to be greeted by a group of hostile faces. A low-angle shot is used to look up at Brewis, but rather than showing the usual power associated with the shot, it shows dislocation, as he is being judged by the group sitting at the eye-level of the shot. This shot shifts the social norm, as we look with the gang up at Brewis, symbolically indicating that cultural and linguistic norms are created by the majority, and in Cornish’s film, Moses’s gang forms the majority. When Brewis drops the affected accent and pretences of poverty he is taken more seriously and incorporated into the group. Cornish’s comedy of reverse assimilation (from the mainstream to the minority) foregrounds the performance required by efforts of assimilation as a kind of mockery.

Attack the Block strives to make gang members the subjects rather than the objects of representation by bringing to the forefront processes of observation and representation. Yet as with *Four Lions*, Cornish’s film also plays with the construction of fear, distinguishing between perceived and actual threat. Comedy is evoked by means of a change in discourse: as the gang runs out of Ron’s apartment shouting “let’s get tooled up blud!” Ron observes, “quite sweet really, ain’t they?” thereby associating their

acquisition of weapons with childish play rather than violent threat. Regarding the gang members as children highlights their innocence and vulnerability, something that is underscored after this comic precursor by focussing on the young ages of the gang members; Moses—who is portrayed as the leader and the most experienced—is only 15 and still owns a Spiderman duvet.

Both the film's comedy and its pathos serve to refocalise the way that gangs are considered, vocally undermining essentialising discourses at times, and employing Sam as a foil for stereotypes about gangs at others. Whereas Sam swears frequently and is chastised for having a "potty mouth," members of the gang use bad language rarely and employ language that downplays the seriousness of events, for example saying, "the man's a sausage" of a man who has just pulled a gun on them. This dialogue also serves comically to deflate the threat that is posed: calling a man a sausage refuses to give credit to threat, even when the threat is (diegetically-speaking) real. Stephen Hessel argues that "[d]espite . . . openness to the incursion of fear, the expectation of laughter postpones the very same anxiety that produces it" (28). It can similarly be argued that Cornish, like Morris, *deliberately* offers laughter as an alternative response to cultural anxieties, thereby reducing the propensity for fear.

By way of conclusion, I will make reference to both *Four Lions* and *Attack the Block* in order to consider exactly how this recent wave of postcolonial comedy differs from what went before. Whereas previous films conform to comic conventions and finish happily, *Four Lions* ends with all four of the "lions" having blown themselves up whilst *Attack the Block*'s protagonist, Moses, is taken away in a police van. When speaking of carnival, which derives laughter from incongruity and (temporary) liberation from hierarchies, Umberto Eco states, "carnival can only exist as *authorized* transgression" through which the individual is sated and returned to society for the remainder of the year (6). However, by refusing to reconcile individuals or small communities to society at large, transgression is not "authorized" in the films and their uncomic endings make them modally rather than generically comic. This is comedy in spite of itself, which (unlike earlier works) wholeheartedly refuses to offer comic appeasement as a solution to social problems. Whilst making this comparison I recognise that there has not been the space to theorise adequately the role of earlier comedies in this article, and I might therefore be found guilty of generalisations that obscure the complexities of previous films and their responses to multicultural politics. In acknowledgment of this omission, I refer readers to critiques of some of the aforementioned films by Ashby, Heinen and Nobil, as the present article has been more focussed upon how the latter generation of postcolonial comedy is different from its forebears, without space to dwell on the roles that they played in their own socio-historical moments.

Indeed, without the work achieved by previous postcolonial British filmmakers, recent cinematic output—with its darkly ironic tone that assumes the luxury of stereotypes not being taken at face value—may not

have been possible. Yet *Attack the Block* and *Four Lions* diverge from their predecessors by addressing what is repressed in utopian multicultural desires, focussing instead on fears exacerbated through hysteric media that affect particular migrant groups. These films posit laughter as an alternative response to a sense of threat, and in so doing critique a society driven by the production of cultural fears.

I do not believe that the emergence of this newly aggressive and relentlessly critical generation of postcolonial comedy at this particular historical moment is coincidental. On the contrary, it points to broader shifts in British multicultural policies and attitudes towards ethnic and religious minorities in a Britain that has witnessed rising support for racist and xenophobic parties such as the BNP and UKIP. The new comic material also reflects a shifting experience of racism, from what James Procter identifies as “old” racisms, based on “‘biological’ difference” to “new” racisms that operate on the basis of cultural differences (*Dwelling Places* 171). Boundaries of inclusion and exclusion increasingly turn to markers of class and religion, though the body still frequently operates as the contested site when it comes to signifying national identification and/or belonging. I have termed Morris’s and Cornish’s comedies postcolonial in spite of their white directors, as they participate in debates surrounding ethnic minority groups that have been the traditional focus of postcolonial British literature and film, countering the racisms manifest in contemporary Britain. Furthermore, by implicating the British population in its entirety as a postcolonial nation, the so-called “burden of representation” or compulsion to “speak for” a community does not rest exclusively on migrants (Procter “General Introduction” 7). These white directors demonstrate ways in which work is required on the part of British society *en masse* not to further alienate people from migrant backgrounds according to prejudices stemming from Islamophobia or classist snobbery. Rather than placing the onus on ethnic minority characters to integrate and/or assimilate, the films challenge the media and national politics for their complicity in perpetuating the social circumstances largely responsible for creating the “monsters” that they love to hate (the terrorist; the gangster). In previous decades, perhaps it was more conceivable, or indeed helpful, to invest cinema with transformative and utopian potential, but in the throes of an increasingly right-wing and nationalist politics, it is more important to be able to laugh at and thereby potentially undermine ways in which cultural fear is relentlessly constructed and disseminated.

Notes

1. For further discussion on the history of multicultural politics in Britain see Abbas 3-17.
2. For an example of this criticism, see Nobil.

3. For a detailed discussion of the concept of *jihad* according to both scriptural interpretation and popular understanding in Muslim communities, see Ansari.

4. See Film4 website for full pitch.

5. The dialect is often colloquially termed 'Jafaican,' although this term has problematic connotations of inauthenticity and is often used to lament a linguistic norm that predates mass migration to Britain from the Caribbean. See further Logaldo.

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