Boys, ballet and begonias: *The Spanish Gardener* and its analogues

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THE SIXTH SENSE, an American film of 1999 from an Indian director, M. Night Shyamalan, with an all-American star (Bruce Willis), seems a very long way from British cinema of the 1950s.¹ But the boy in this film (Haley Joel Osment) seems almost a revenant from the British post-war era, with his lack of teenage quality, his innocence of youth culture and, more importantly, his anguished concern for and with the adult (Willis) whom he befriends. Here there is something of Carol Reed's *The Fallen Idol* (1948), Anthony Pélassier's *The Rocking Horse Winner* (1949), Philip Leacock's *The Spanish Gardener* (1956) and other films of the period that centre upon the child/adult relationship or incorporate it as a theme: Anthony Asquith's *The Winslow Boy* (1948) and *The Browning Version* (1951), and Philip Leacock's *The Kidnappers* (1953). Perhaps the template for this type of isolated child is Pip in David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946). Anthony Wager as young Pip seems an irrevocably old-fashioned child victim, the Little Father Time of Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, as does John Howard Davies asking for more in Lean's *Oliver Twist* (1948). This sensitive-looking child returns in *The Sixth Sense* and indeed in another film of 1999, Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia*.

Neither of the children who feature in these films exemplifies today's idea of 'normal' children in cinema, which is based on a concept of young, tough 'kids' that does not show children as people. Stuart Jeffries recently bemoaned the similarities of late 1990s/early 2000 British films, including 'the spate of sentimental films about the travails of small boys in the provinces.'² He attributes this to British cinema's desire to play it safe, to

I lecture in English Literature at the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Liverpool where I did my doctorate on the fiction and philosophy of George Eliot. I became interested in the films of the 1950s through the Sunday afternoon television of the 1970s, such films now irrevocably associated with childhood and the digestion of roast dinners. Particularly interested in literary adaptations, both past and recent, I have published on Hardy and Eliot, including an essay on the BBC *Middlemarch* with Ian Mackillop in *The classic novel* (Manchester University Press, 1999). I must confess there are no begonias in *The Spanish Gardener*. Alison Platt

take a successful formula and ‘continue mining the same seam’ (p. 4), a view particularly applicable to Stephen Daldry’s *Billy Elliot* (2000), which surely looks back to Ken Loach’s *Kes*, recycling a motif that worked in 1969 but is stale in the year 2000. It is a manipulative pretence of realism that mars *Billy Elliot* (streetwise kids of the 1980s never attempted to erase spray-painted graffiti off gravestones by licking their sleeves and rubbing) and in the general scheme of things it feels like a greater achievement to watch Billy Caspar rear and train a wild kestrel in a mining district than to see Billy Elliot gain a place at the Royal Ballet School, even if, as Billy’s father points out, ‘lads do football or boxing or wrestling not frigging ballet’.³ Perhaps it’s not simplistic to propose that *Billy Elliot*, so to speak, *trusts* ballet less than *Kes* trusts falconry or, more importantly, Leacock’s *The Spanish Gardener* trusts gardening. The ancient sport of falconry and the primal experience of gardening feel like lessons in growth in that they contribute to a changing character, but in *Billy Elliot* ballet functions simply as entertainment for a toe-tapping audience. It feels replaceable, it is an obviously ‘feminine’ alternative to that masculine sport of boxing (Billy’s mother and grandmother are both associated with dancing and Billy uses his father’s boxing gloves) and a complicated means of escaping from the pit, the profession of the male line. If falconry in *Kes* functions as inspiration, enriching Billy’s constricted existence with new meaning rather than replacing it altogether, it does so unsentimentally and believably. His harsh family life (absent father, ineffectual mother and brutal half-brother) is not suddenly transformed into ‘The Waltons’ part way through out of recognition of his talent, as occurs in *Billy Elliot*. In effect the family Billy Elliot has at the end of the film is not the family he has at the beginning: they change; he doesn’t.⁴ In *Kes* the opposite is true – the child grows, the family remains static, which is at least a more truthful response to childhood.

So what of the British post-war era? In *The Sixth Sense* there is an unashamed example of the sensitive relationship between males, adult and child, that figures as so strong a motif in British post-war cinema. It is therefore tempting to say that Britain in this period left a legacy that America inherited. Although films such as Alexander Mackendrick’s *Mandy* (1952), Roy Baker’s *Jacqueline* (1956), Leslie Norman’s *The Shiralee* (1957) and J. Lee Thompson’s *Tiger Bay* (1959) all deal in varying degrees with a young girl’s relationship with her father, or father-substitute, it is also the male child’s ‘search for a satisfactory father-figure’ which most interests this era in its portrayals of child-as-hero.⁵

In Michael Anderson’s *Waterfront* (1950) a 12-year-old boy whose father has absconded to sea gets into a fight at school with a boy who has told him

‘there’s some who have fathers alive and some who have fathers what’s dead but some don’t have any fathers at all’. Implied illegitimacy, a traditional male taunt, was a particular concern for a post-war generation. (In Melvyn Bragg’s 1999 novel of post-war familial readjustment, *The Soldier’s Return*, Wigton’s prosperous bookmaker says ‘there are women in this town with little kiddies whose fathers have nothing to do with Wigton and have moved on to faraway places! Say nothing’.) The boy, George Alexander, has at his older sister’s request not been named after his father, Peter McCabe (a wonderfully villainous Robert Newton), but after a well-known actor, Sir George Alexander. His name therefore incorporates another man’s surname. George Alexander, like Dickens’s Pip, gains a good education, a passport to a life far removed from that of the male parental figure.

At the beginning of Lean’s *Great Expectations* there is a similar concern with names. We learn that Pip is so called because he is unable to pronounce his father’s family name, Pirrip, or his Christian name, Phillip. ‘So I called myself Pip and came to be called Pip,’ he says, in an act of self-naming. The film then shows young Pip running across the marshes against a darkening sky between a pair of gallows like a miniature saviour. He enters a churchyard and places flowers upon a grave on which the name ‘Phillip Pirrip’ is deeply engraved. As he looks fearfully round, already sensing Magwitch (Finlay Currie), just the name ‘Phillip’, without the surname, is highlighted on the far right of the screen. In effect Pip’s real father is erased by the time Magwitch appears. Joe Gargery (Bernard Miles) is no substitute due to his wife’s resentment at being ‘a second mother’ to her young brother; and the space is filled instead by Magwitch, who is able to offer Pip an inheritance, a true father’s legacy. ‘Why I’m your second father Pip and you’re my son,’ he informs him proudly. The film, unlike the novel, ends with a very definite promise of union between Magwitch’s actual child Estella (Valerie Hobson) and his substitute one, Pip (John Mills). In one sense Magwitch has unwittingly brought Pip up to be fit to marry his daughter, who has lost her rich suitor now that her true parentage has been revealed, a shadow which also partly covers Pip but which can now be kept in the family.

Parentage, the place from which one is made and named, is a concern in Anthony Asquith’s *The Winslow Boy* (1948), adapted from the play by Terence Rattigan. Young Ronnie Winslow (Neil North), having won a scholarship to naval college, shows off his new uniform to his father, Arthur Ronald Winslow (Cedric Hardwicke), who says, ‘he’s no longer our master Ronnie. He’s Cadet Ronald Winslow, Royal Navy’. ‘R. Winslow’ is highlighted several times on screen as Ronnie’s trunk is forwarded and we see it

again on his locker at college. Accused of stealing a five-shilling postal order, Ronnie is discharged ('sacked') in disgrace, and sent home without his trunk. 'They're sending it on later', he informs his father. 'R. Winslow' is separated from the name that makes him his father's son. The letter addressed to his father detailing his discharge refers to the theft of the letter 'by your son, Cadet Ronald Arthur Winslow'. The signature of the letter is indecipherable; there must be no distractions from this issue of the Winslow name. The father's unremitting fight to clear his son of all charges is, above all else, a fight to clear his name, a name that is contained within his own ('Ronald Winslow'). It is, in a sense, then, a question of providing the most basic of birthrights: a father's name. This is emphasised in the House of Commons when the representative of the Admiralty refers to the 'Onslow' case (perhaps a Freudian slip, given the substitution for 'win'). On a train two businessmen argue over the case. 'Winslow's only doing what any father would do,' says one. 'Nonsense,' replies the other, 'if he hadn't made such a fuss no one would ever have heard the name Winslow.' This is what the case is reduced to: 'the name Winslow', that of a father and that of a son. 'I'm going to publish my son's innocence before the world,' Arthur informs his wife, a gesture of very public ownership. This is how a father lets 'right be done', that phrase which has, to quote the Winslows' debonair barrister, Sir Robert Morton (Robert Donat), 'always stirred an Englishman'.⁶ In spite of being set in pre-World War I England the film has a post-World War II concern with names, with legitimacy, with ownership. The opening scene refers to Arthur's retirement and the film asks, 'What legacy can be passed on from father to son?' Virtually bankrupting himself, Arthur is forced to withdraw his daughter Catherine's marriage settlement and take his eldest son from Oxford; but at the end of the film the Winslow name is intact and Catherine turns down two suitors. holding on to the patronymic for the foreseeable future.

The child/adult bond resonates again in Asquith's *The Browning Version* (1951), where the desiccated classics teacher Mr Crocker-Harris (Michael Redgrave) finds himself, at the very end of a long and undistinguished career, unable to say, like Mr Chips, that he had many children 'and all of them boys'. In fact it is this recognition of his inability to 'father' that causes him such regret. His pupils refer to him as being already dead, his unfulfilled wife (Jean Kent) has emasculated him and he has also, he says in his improvised farewell speech, 'degraded the noblest calling that a man can follow – the care and moulding of the young'. A running motif in the film concerns Taplow (Brian Smith), the only pupil who is able to understand Crocker-Harris enough to actually like him and for whom the film functions

as a kind of quest narrative (he seeks promotion from classics Lower V to science Upper V with the groovy Mr Hunter). Taplow's desire to find out if he has been promoted is given so much space in the film that it represents more than a simple graduation from one class to another (the sign that Crocker-Harris's private tutoring has paid off), but comes to signal a kind of fatherly bequest. Taplow is the sole pupil who wants what Crocker-Harris has to give, a reciprocation which has been painfully absent from the Crocker-Harris marriage. 'A single success can atone and more than atone for all the failures in the world,' Crocker-Harris tells his unimpressed successor Mr Gilbert as he 'bequeaths' (his word) him the Classics Room. More important than Crocker-Harris's 'I am sorry' speech is the film's final moment when he not only finally informs Taplow of his promotion, but tells him by means of a joke: 'If you have any regard for me you will refrain from blowing yourself up next term in the science Upper Fifth.' For once it is a joke that Taplow finds funny, rather than one of Crocker-Harris's Latin apophthegms that he laughs at out of politeness. What Taplow has given to his teacher, the grammatically correct epigram he writes in 'the Browning version', Crocker-Harris returns here in language Taplow appreciates. The dead cannot make jokes and this humour at the end is the sign of returning life.

Michael Redgrave's wonderfully understated performance in *The Browning Version*, a compelling study of mannerism and temperament, is owed much by that of Michael Hordern in Leacock's *The Spanish Gardener* (1956).⁷ Hordern's portrayal of the British diplomat Harrington Brande who becomes jealous of his young son Nicholas's relationship with his gardener may be captured in wonderfully bright Technicolor VistaVision, but like Crocker-Harris his character is coloured only in shades of grey. In *Fatherhood Reclaimed: The Making of the Modern Father* (1997) Adrienne Burgess discusses the way in which our culture has severed the ancient association of males with nurturing, with birth and rebirth, in favour of the image of father as ruler, the nexus of patriarchy and domestic fathering.⁸ In *The Spanish Gardener* this battle between 'earth father' and 'patriarch' takes place over the parenting of young Nicholas Brande (Jon Whiteley) and takes for its field the garden of Harrington Brande's newly acquired house, a garden that has been previously attended to by his predecessor's wife. Brande's wife has left him at a very bad time, a time when the nuclear family model was being heavily promoted. Not only does he not have a wife as homemaker but his role of breadwinner is also in doubt as he fails to gain the promotion he believes he deserves. Brande's separation from his wife, the other contender for his son's affections is, then, the reason why he needs to hire a gardener in the first place (and he believes it is the reason why he has been passed over

for the consulship in Madrid; 'my wife left me of her own volition, without cause or motive,' he protests too much to his son's physician, Dr Harvey). Dr Harvey's 'the boy is perfectly well' is set against Brande's 'my son is delicate', a belief dictated by his own Crocker-Harris sickness of the soul. However, Crocker-Harris is in part a victim of his unhappy marriage; Brande, one senses, is more purely the victim of his own inhibited and bitter nature. 'It's as a man that you've failed,' the consul general informs him. Yet how one fails 'as a man' is in this film inseparable from how one falls short as a father. Raymond Durnat in *A Mirror for England* is right to point out the absence of female characters which, he says,

suggests the primacy of male allegiance in the public school spirit. The feeling of growing up as something that goes on between boys and men, not involving, or only very elliptically, a feminine presence, has sufficient anthropological precedent to be defensible as absolutely normal and not, as it's latterly fashionable to allege, homosexual. (Durnat, p. 178)⁹

The exclusion of women in the film may seem to be taken quietly for granted but it is certainly not allowed to pass uncriticised. Not only is Nicholas's most intense relationship formed with a nurturing male but he is 'restored' to the companionship of his mother at the end of the film (albeit in the school holidays). Brande's involuntary flinching every time his wife is mentioned (Hordern's deep facial lines visibly straining for recomposure) clearly highlights the exclusion as a problem; it is undoubtedly one reason why his love for his son is so tenacious.

Although Brande's love for Nicholas includes ensuring that he is fed a balanced diet, administering tonic and watching over his prayers, there is an unnecessary fussiness that makes it feel like supervision rather than care. It is the gardener José (Dirk Bogarde) who makes Nicholas a swing after his father tells him he is too busy and it is José who takes him on that recreational male pursuit, fishing. He plays with him on the beach, shelters him from the corrupt and insinuating butler Garcia, in fact provides him with the opportunity to be a child, something which his father's regimen inhibits. There is a telling scene near the beginning of the film when Brande's 'personal treasures' arrive in a box marked fragile. 'Look Nicholas,' he says, 'they've arrived at last, all our friends. Isn't it nice to see them again?' Nicholas is unimpressed, his mind on his real friend José and his newfound gardening duty, watering the seedlings. With his father's desire to contain him within the house (as well as in his shirt, jacket and hat which Nicholas removes at every opportunity) set against Nicholas's desire to garden, the symbolism is clear: he is not a piece of porcelain to be hidden away and he is in danger of etiolating if he is not given the right kind of care. ('I did it to

make him strong,' José explains, in defence of Nicholas's outdoor pursuits.) At the local pelota competition where Nicholas has taken his father as a surprise to see José play, Brande sees himself for the first time as a fallen idol in his son's eyes. In one of the most chilling speeches of emotional blackmail ever made to a child on screen he says, 'you and I are alone now since your mother left us. There are times when it isn't easy but I've never wavered in my devotion to your care. I ask little in return Nicholas but the knowledge of your love', sounding latterly like a jealous god. Brande's constant resort when his own shivering ego is threatened is to insist upon his son's fragility: he is too 'delicate' to attend the local boys' club and the fish José brings as a peace offering are 'too rich' for him. When Brande forbids his son to speak to José, José and Nicholas decide between them that such a command is 'childish' ('we'll be like men and not like children,' José says). It is an important word to describe Brande's behaviour for childishness is easily recognisable to a child and it is this that fuels Nicholas's newfound ability to judge his father's actions. It is not, as Brande assumes, José's 'poisonous' influence that has filled his son with 'new boldness' and 'disobedience' (turning him into a teenager).

In 1950 Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites in *Movies: A Psychological Study* used three stills to differentiate between the father/child relationship in American film (*All My Sons*: 'son judges father'), British film (*The Rake's Progress*: 'father judges son') and French film (*Marius*: 'son will resemble father whom he now fights').¹⁰ In *The Spanish Gardener* there is an over-riding sense of Brande judging his son (and getting hot and bothered about the night Nicholas spends with José when Garcia threatens him), but what fuels Brande's increasingly unfair behaviour is the sense he has of being judged by his son, which is subtly conveyed through a series of scenes in which Nicholas glances from his father to José, a mental weighing up that occurs at his first sighting of the gardener when, momentarily arrested, he looks him up and down. This is *not*, I think, the initiatory moment in a gay love story, as Andy Medhurst has articulated (see note 9 below) but rather the signal that he recognises a quality quite unlike his starched, oppressive father and that he is going to like it.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century the image of the father as playmate and confidant was actively encouraged, but Brande falls short on both counts. 'You don't like games,' Nicholas tells his father bluntly when he offers to take him to the boys' club. Brande only knows how to be that paternal archetype, the cold and distant father.¹¹ Between 1940 and 1970 the father's importance as sex-role model was heavily emphasised, as remarked by Adrienne Burgess, and during the 1950s in particular it was felt

that fathers should not exhibit ‘maternal’ tendencies towards their children for fear of emasculating them. In this sense emotional distance had a specific function in terms of gender development. What is interesting about *The Spanish Gardener* is that the child chooses an alternative to this aloof kind of father, chooses instead the kind represented here by Dirk Bogarde, an actor who himself epitomised a new, sexy form of English manhood, most notably in Relfh and Dearden’s *The Blue Lamp* (1950).¹² In fact Bogarde’s persona broadened the era’s accepted definitions of masculinity, something which he was to explore more fully in the 1960s in his post-Rank years. It is easy to see why *The Spanish Gardener* could lend itself to a gay reading. The relationship of man and boy is easily the most analysed kind of homo-erotic relationship and its basic nature is initiatory, plus Bogarde’s looks conform readily to a primary homosexual symbol of the Mediterranean lover.¹³ Also there is a strong undercurrent of unresolved repression in the film, an overflow from A. J. Cronin’s source novel of 1950 which depicts the relationship between adult and child in a much more ambiguous way (José is only nineteen and is not given a fiancée, and Nicholas shares a bed with him when he runs away rather than just staying in the family home). However, the novel’s Dr Halevy, a rather caricatured French analyst, has more in common with the film’s thieving butler Garcia (Cyril Cusack) than with the sensible Dr Harvey who speaks of this ‘perfectly ordinary friendship’ between man and boy. The butler, barometer of a master’s moods, insinuates exactly what Brande wishes to hear, that Nicholas and José are inseparable, and when he gets drunk his pursuit of Nicholas has a surprisingly lascivious manner to it. To read this relationship between Nicholas and José as being anything other than ‘ordinary’ is to fall into the same trap Garcia sets for his employer. Medhurst asks why Brande reacts to the friendship with such alarm if it is not out of his own inexpressible feelings for the handsome gardener. But Brande has already lost his role of husband, has been passed over for the consulship in Madrid and now feels faced with the loss of his role of father (‘after he’s gone perhaps I’ll regain my son’s affection,’ he remarks to an incredulous Dr Harvey). Returning from Madrid, where another man was appointed in his place, Brande finds at home an identical situation regarding his son. It is this redundancy that terrifies him, the loss of the final role open to him.

But what of Brande’s painfully maintained repression? No other male figure in the film has anything in common with him; even the consul general, whom we might expect to share this particular ‘brand’ of upper-middle-class, public-school masculinity, tells him to try and ‘behave like a human being’. What this film records, beyond the overt ‘father judges son and is

judged accordingly', is the passing of a type of Englishness, a stiff-upper-lipped, three-piece-suited paternalism that no longer works. In Cronin's novel *Brande is American*; in the film his Englishness is central to the theme. This is why it is significant that Bogarde maintains his particularly suave English accent throughout; he's not really Spanish, the film implies, even if he is the popular pelota champion of San Jorge (Saint George). Bogarde never removes his shirt in the film, but no doubt would have done had his physique more fully expressed his manual profession (Bogarde often wore a sweater underneath his shirt as padding to improve his build), but it is Brande who is, as his colleague points out, 'a stuffed shirt'. It is José who signifies the dawning of a new kind of fathering that differs from the patriarchal norm, that offers intimacy and involvement beyond that pattern strictly in place in the post-war years when demobilisation dictated the reinforcement of the gender roles so heavily disrupted by World War II.

Ultimately this is the story of an innocent child's first brush with human fallibility – sin, of a kind. Brande makes poor moral judgements but his son works by astute instinct: 'the little boy knows who is good and who is bad because he sees and feels. He understands already what kind of man you are,' José's fiancée tells Brande when he has had José imprisoned for a theft he did not commit (and inadvertently answers his own earlier question to his son 'who are you to say what's good or bad?'). If certain 1950s British films, Leacock's being one, detail an adult world in which restraint and solitude are givens, they also convey the cost to the child who must inevitably enter that world. What the post-war era seems to capture is a time when childhood, impinged upon by an uncomprehending adult world, is no longer tenable as a place for children. At the end of *The Spanish Gardener* José, having been framed for theft by Garcia, escapes from a moving train and seeks refuge in the mountains. Nicholas, unable to understand how his father could think José guilty, finds him and in the most climactic moment of the film tells him that he hates his father. Brande, realising how unjust he has been, travels through a heavy storm to find his son and begs José's forgiveness. There is a peculiar moment when José looks at Brande who looks at Nicholas, who is looking at his father before turning to look at José, who, in turn, looks back at Nicholas. As a set of stills this might combine all of Wolfenstein and Leites's categories but with a twist: 'father judged son who judged and fought with the father he will not resemble'. There is no convenient restoration of what has gone before – Brande will head to a posting in Stockholm, a climate better suited to his attire, and Nicholas will go to boarding school and to his mother in the holidays. Only José, the eternal gardener, returns to his old life (although it is not clear who is now paying his wages). The film

leaves him in front of the house, facing the sea with his back to us, the same position he was in when Brande first met him. It seems fitting given that Brande and Nicholas are the ones whose lives have been irrevocably changed.

When José told Nicholas that he must find a way to forgive his father he said ‘what has happened between your father and me is our affair’, which rings falsely in a film in which a child has been caught between two adults and forced to acknowledge the nature of the trap. In spite of Nicholas’s excitement at leaving for school the ending sounds an elegiac note and Brande is right to acknowledge that he and his son will never forget José. The same might be said of Phillipe (Bobby Henrey), the young boy in Carol Reed’s *The Fallen Idol* (1948) who experiences an adult world of moral complexity through the agency of his father’s butler. That the upper-middle-class father is either absent (*The Fallen Idol*) or ineffectual (*The Spanish Gardener*, *The Rocking Horse Winner*) partly explains the child’s readiness to find a suitable paternal substitute, that of the domestic servant. In *The Fallen Idol*, based on Graham Greene’s short story ‘The Basement Room’ (1936), Phillipe’s father leaves him in the care of Baines (Ralph Richardson) whose malevolent wife affects his heart not by rendering it diseased in the manner of Mrs Crocker-Harris but by sending him into the arms of another woman.¹⁴ The film is structured around a series of ascents and descents both literal (the main staircase is used to good effect) and metaphorical (Phillipe is caught up in a sort of adult game of snakes and ladders), and it is clear that Mrs Baines dies an accidental death, something which is far less clear in the story, where Baines moves the body to cover up his involvement. The story also makes it clear that Phillipe’s involvement in marital intrigues and his desire to extricate himself from a world in which secrets lead somehow to death, ultimately destroy him, leaving him broken, an earlier version of L.P. Hartley’s own tale of a young boy’s traumatic initiation into the world of adult passion and deception, *The Go-Between*, published in 1953. The film shifts the child’s desire to protect himself, to be free of all adult secrets, to a desire to protect Baines, his idol, at whatever cost. In the story Philip (not French as in the film) expresses a ‘merciless egotism’; he refuses the burden of knowledge and reveals Baines’s culpability, punishing him in a sense for involving him in a world that destroys his childhood.¹⁵

In the film Phillipe lies for Baines *because* he assumes he is guilty of murdering Mrs Baines and feels a responsibility towards him, even to the point of trying to take the blame himself. A child’s conscience, the film implies, is governed by an instinctive care for the befriending adult, a theme explored more fully in J. Lee Thompson’s *Tiger Bay* (1959). At the end Phillipe rejects only secrets and not life itself as he does in the story, but his

oddly blank expression as he descends the staircase to greet his parents seems to register the change he has undergone: it is a look which has put aside childish things.

This brings me back to *The Sixth Sense* and *Magnolia*, to that child who started life in post-war British films. Raymond Durnat has chronicled the era's obsession with the juvenile delinquent, a way of addressing an 'issue' (social unrest) that could be given an easy solution (a good hiding, better housing).¹⁶ Delinquent teenagers, too old to seek alternative father figures, go up against the Establishment and invariably lose. Their younger selves were not the child heroes of early post-war cinema and their battles are portrayed as less complex.¹⁷ This particular type of teenage delinquent no longer exists for contemporary cinema yet the child hero of this period undoubtedly does. Haley Joel Osment's Cole in *The Sixth Sense* begins as a case history (an acutely anxious child of divorced parents) for the adult, Dr Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), but like *The Fallen Idol*'s Phillipe he is a figure burdened by secrets which he cannot comprehend. Cole wears his father's glasses without their lenses (which impede his vision) and his father's broken watch (abandoned in a drawer). Malcolm Crowe, the child psychologist who befriends him, is careful not to make the same mistake with Cole as he had made with a previous case, Vincent Grey. Crowe, honoured as Philadelphia's 'son', not knowing that Vincent, like Cole, can see and hear the dead, mistakenly puts Vincent's troubles down to his parents' divorce. Yet, complexly, this is Crowe's story too and like Harrington Brande, if he knew the truth about himself he would understand the child's needs too. If the 1950s were able to pinpoint one-parent families as being undesirable, 1999 seems too sophisticated to overtly blame child problems on marital separation; on the surface Crowe is simply wrong in this initial diagnosis.¹⁸ Yet there are no happy families in this film any more than there are in Paul Thomas Anderson's tale of broken children and their cancer-ridden fathers, *Magnolia*. Crowe's wife speaks of the sacrifices he has made for his job; 'I haven't paid enough attention to my family,' Crowe tells Cole; Vincent Grey and Cole are both from broken homes; Tommy who bullies Cole remorselessly appears in a cough syrup commercial which harks back to a bygone age with its perfect mom and dad; the ghosts who visit Cole are primarily the ghosts of children past: a boy who shoots himself with his father's gun and a girl whose father fails to realise his new wife is poisoning his daughters. This, then, is a film in which fathers do not protect their children. Cole is visited by the ghost of his dead grandmother but no mention is made of his father's visiting rights; his religious icons and church visits are miserably ineffective – his metaphysical Father is as elusive as his

literal one. Willis fills this particular role instead, finding a workable means for Cole to deal with his fears.¹⁹

The Sixth Sense, with its problem families, its isolated, serious boy and his complex relationship with an older paternal figure resonates with a previous (British) age. The righting of a wrong in order to protect a child is a theme this film shares with *The Fallen Idol*, *The Winslow Boy*, *The Spanish Gardener*, even *The Browning Version*. It takes a whole film to achieve it; there can be no miraculous adult shifts of heart (*Billy Elliot* take note) because the child's vision is a complex thing, as complex as that of the adult whom he befriends. More importantly, when the adult figure seems to be solving the child's problems he may also be solving his own if he knows where to look. It is this correlation between child and adult that permeates 1950s British cinema and is so evocatively recaptured in the contemporary Hollywood movie.

Notes

- 1 I take 'the 1950s' to refer not to a strict chronological timeline but to the post-war years, an historical era.
- 2 *Guardian* (13 July 2001), p. 4.
- 3 And indeed they do in two other British films of 2000, Mark Herman's *Purely Belter* and John Hay's *There's Only One Jimmy Grimble*.
- 4 Which is why 'adult' ballerina Billy makes so brief and hazy an appearance at the end, the film reverting back to the image it seems most comfortable with, the opening scene of Billy dancing on his bed to T-Rex.
- 5 Raymond Durnat, *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (Faber, 1970), p. 143.
- 6 One thing which is notably absent from the film is the father's own grilling of his son. He simply asks him twice if he stole the postal order and is satisfied enough with the answer to carve the Sunday roast. It is Sir Robert Morton who has the role of browbeating Ronnie in the family sitting room. Arthur knows he has one son who is dishonest (his eldest son Dickie), which perhaps fuels his determination to accept his younger son's word.
- 7 Brian McFarlane calls this 'one of the finest films of the 1950s', *Sixty Voices: Celebrities Recall the Golden Age of British Cinema* (British Film Institute, 1992), p. 156.
- 8 Adrienne Burgess, *Fatherhood Reclaimed: The Making of the Modern Father* (Vermilion, 1997), pp. 5–6.
- 9 See Andy Medhurst, "'It's as a Man That You've Failed": Masculinity and Forbidden Desire in *The Spanish Gardener*", in Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin (eds), *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1993), pp. 95–105.
- 10 Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Free Press of Glencoe, 1950), quoted in Durnat, *Mirror for England*, p. 141.
- 11 Both José and Dr Harvey abbreviate Nicholas's name, using Nico and Nicky respectively. Brande only calls him Nicholas and refers to José as 'the gardener'.
- 12 See Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 145.
- 13 Robert Aldrich examines this symbolism more fully in *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy* (Routledge, 1993).

- 14 This was the first of three Reed/Greene collaborations, Greene calling it his favourite picture. It received a number of awards and Reed's direction of Henrey earned him a reputation as a great director of children.
- 15 Graham Greene, 'The Basement Room' (1936), in *Stories* (Heinemann, 1965).
- 16 Durgnat writes, 'the feeling for military-style paternalism, for the system and for the police, are special forms of a general acquiescence to father-figures of a quietly heavy kind' (*Mirror for England*, p. 140).
- 17 Unlike the American version, as complex a being as our child heroes.
- 18 In J. Lee Thompson's *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957) Jim Preston (Anthony Quayle)'s decision to leave his frowzy wife for his groomed mistress brings him to hit his son and drives his wife to drink. His reaction to his son's final farewell as he leaves arrests him much more strongly than the torrent of words his wife unleashes and he changes his mind. Harmony is restored as he bonds more closely with his son (Andrew Ray) and his wife (Yvonne Mitchell) abandons her dressing gown.
- 19 Above all else *The Sixth Sense* is a very good ghost story, the form that the critic Edmund Wilson predicted would die out with the dawning of electric light. It seems apt, therefore, that the opening shot depicts a bare light bulb glowing into life.