TO THE BOUNDARY OF THE ZERO: POSTMODERNISM AS WHIMSICAL TRAGEDY IN TRISTRAM SHANDY: A COCK AND BULL STORY AND 24 HOUR PARTY PEOPLE

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and have recommended that be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to solve the problem of postmodern tragedy by examining two films by British director Michael Winterbottom, *Tristram Shandy: a Cock and Bull Story*, and *24 Hour Party People*. Actually, I am not certain that the notion of postmodern tragedy is problematic as much as it is non-traditional in terms of classical critical definitions of tragedy. The films suggest that the postmodern protagonist faces the same trials as the protagonist from any other era, but responds to them differently, if at all. My thesis states that the protagonist's failure to respond adequately to the consequences of his choices, indeed, his failure to learn from his own repeated failures, is the basis for the tragedy presented in the films, as well as the basis for tragedy in the postmodern era. Certainly choice has always been key regarding the tragic fall of characters, from Oedipus to Willy Loman, and beyond. The particular circumstances of the films in question, however, suggest that the fall is not here the ultimate tragedy. Rather, these films clearly portray their respective protagonists as incapable of falling, in the tragic sense, because, whether consciously or unconsciously, they tend to reach not for greatness, but for failure, and as each failure mounts, they descend a little lower, as though the true glory of endeavor is to dig as deep a hole as possible by mounting failure on top of failure. In a sense, as the paper makes clear, the protagonists of these films attempt to define success by failure, or, to use a mathematical metaphor, they attempt to define themselves by their proximity to zero.
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INTRODUCTION

The zero is the point at which formlessness becomes form, and at which form becomes formless. Regarding language the zero is the convergence and resulting diaspora of ambiguities, connotations, and binary oppositions, sign becoming signifier, signified becoming insignificant, meaning becoming non-. In the narrative postmodern, the zero is tragedy, the point at which meaning should dawn on the protagonist, at which the full implications of the protagonist’s actions should become clear to the protagonist, at which, unburdened by fear and self-pity, the protagonist collapses and falls from a metaphorical height (even if that height is only in the mind), and realizes that fate chose him, as indeed fate chooses us all, and that power, authority, wisdom, and control are illusions, but fails to grasp that meaning and repeats his mistake, again. Such is postmodern tragedy, and such is the protagonist’s plight in two films by the director Michael Winterbottom, *Tristram Shandy: a Cock and Bull Story*, and *24 Hour Party People*, each a prime example of postmodernism in action and in theory.

By utilizing every postmodern trope at his disposal – narrative self-awareness, deconstructive construction, embrasure of ambiguity, distrust of language-as-mythmaker, a subjective view of reality as opposed to acknowledgement of universal truth, the acceptance (as opposed to the fear) of meaninglessness – in the two films, Winterbottom manages to apparently suggest that adherence to said tropes are the only path to any notion of truth, and satirize the very idea. Indeed, ultimately story matters more than form, and by using the very forms to which his characters cling, and suggesting that their need to cling to such forms leads to their final respective failures, Winterbottom demonstrates that form is a mere vacuum without engaging character and story to give it shape. In other words, form itself is formless, and to adhere to
formlessness is to suffer tragic consequences. The films themselves, then, are tragedies, but only as tragic as postmodern tragedy can be; the tragedy is not so much the fault of the characters‘ actions as with the entire system in which they act. Postmodern thought itself is the real subject, and the real tragedy, and only on its own terms.

A RHETORICAL TAUTOLOGY

The target at which the characters in both films aim is failure, though (perhaps ironically) they mostly fail to realize that they have any target at all. Their utter earnestness, variously masquerading as aesthetics, intellectual acumen, irony, or some vague philosophical point-of-view – however aimlessly espoused, if not doggedly avoided – serves to undermine, for them at least, the very idea of tragedy. Indeed, their lives are consumed by one failure after another, defined by these failures, even predicated on the notion that to strive is to fail, as Tony Wilson explains to a representative of London Records, who wishes to purchase the entire Factory Records back catalog (for five million pounds): “I protected myself from the dilemma of ever having to sell out by having nothing to sell,” (Winterbottom 24). For Wilson, to “sell out” would be the true tragedy, though it would mean he and his label, and the bands who work for the label, as well as everyone else associated with the label had met with success, had accomplished what any record label sets out to accomplish, which is to make music that people want to hear. His failure, then, is his success, his tragedy his triumph. In Wilson‘s mind, the line between such seeming oppositions is gossamer thin. When he points to the dead body of Ian Curtis, at rest in its casket, and says to a journalist, “That is the musical equivalent of Che Guevara,” he means it, most sincerely (24). Never mind that the journalist laughs so hard that he has to leave the room.
Wilson mistakes his laughter for tears; or, rather, presumes the laughter is tears. What else could it be? Wilson's almost willful obliviousness is one of the engines that drive the narrative; his utter lack of self-awareness in an age of self-reflexivity makes him a sort of heroically pathetic protagonist. A tragic figure, yes. A man who sees himself in the company of Christ and Hamlet, men whose every breath, in their respective times and narratives, might change the world for everyone involved, for generations, even; yet, who can't afford to give up his day job.

Tony Wilson hang glides in the Pennines. He interviews an ancient Mancunian whose only memory of working on the Manchester canals is the stench. He pretends to marvel at a goose that herds sheep. He compares a Sex Pistols concert at the Manchester Lesser Free Trade Hall, attended by 42 people, to the Last Supper. He is, in his own words, "a serious fucking journalist, living in one of the most important fucking times of human history," (24). Next day, he interviews a dwarf who washes elephants. As Ebert says, Wilson processes contradiction by embracing it (798). A journalist asks him to "answer the charge that you're a fascist," with regard to the name of the Factory band Joy Division, to which he replies, "It's situationism, postmodernism, the freplay of signs and signifiers," an utterly meaningless response that neither affirms nor denies the question. Given that a record label is a collective society, and that each band with a label is itself a collective in which the identity of each member is subsumed by the identity of the band as a whole, Wilson, as a record producer, necessarily practices a form of corporate fascism, wherein the company is the state. His ambiguous response, probably no more than a litany of contemporary intellectual buzzwords, certainly suggests an attempt to proclaim his own position as superior to both the questioner and the question, to appoint himself and Factory Records as cultural elites. Is Wilson therefore a fascist? Doubtful, but his response to the question suggests on inherent contradiction: by neither affirming nor denying the "charge," he
leaves open the possibility that he is, indeed, a fascist, and simultaneously that he is not, indeed, a fascist. In a thoroughly postmodern sense, Wilson has exposed himself as a tragic figure; by being either one or the other (fascist or not-fascist), while concurrently being neither one nor the other, he has raised himself to be nothing at all, a sentient pluralism, the aggregate of which is zero.

But postmodernism itself is a kind of intellectual, cultural, zero, not even a wasteland, as Eliot foresaw, but a system more vacuous, more tragic; at least a wasteland is something. If nothing else, postmodernism as a philosophic is simultaneously – rather, intrinsically – expansive and reductive. By viewing reality as subjective, truth as relative, the universe as personal as well as cosmic, postmodern thought questions all assumptions of universality; paradoxically, this questioning leads ultimately to an inquisition of relativity and subjectivity themselves, i.e., an inquisition of the inquisition, of the skepticism that leads to the distrust of universal assumptions. While the postmodern line of inquiry initially leads outward from the base premise of a chaotic universal non-structure, its line inevitably turns inward. Postmodern inquiry finally interrogates itself, and must reject itself as just another universal assumption, even if that assumption is that nothing is universal. Rejection is at the core of the assumption, rejection of system, of structure, of form, of ideology, in favor of unending entropy, of collapse, of failure, of the expanding and contracting zero.

If the previous paragraph presents a rhetorical tautology, then so be it. Freeplay embraces tautologies as essential to determining structure to be indeterminate, given the “interplay of absence and presence” that forms the totality of a structure while negating the notion of structure due to the absence of a fixed center (Derrida 384). Take for example the relationship of actor to character in Winterbottom’s *Tristram Shandy*. Several actors in the film, notably Steve Coogan
and Rob Brydon, portray themselves playing actors playing roles in a film version of Sterne’s (probably) unfilmable novel. The actors are both absent and present from the film. While they physically appear, speak lines, play roles, they, in their roles of themselves, are not truly themselves. They are “other.” Logically, of course, all actors, while in roles, are “other.” However, when the “other” is in reality another version of the “self,” then a tautology is in place; when one is asked to “act” like “oneself,” either the actor or the self is removed from the process; either one becomes oneself or an other, while either the self or the other is constantly present given its absence; such a paradox is an inherent tautology, as every scene involving said actors is a representative repetition of said structure (or, non-structure).

*Tristram Shandy*’s surface, however, is not rhetorical. Simply, the film presents actors playing themselves as actors in a film about the making of a film version of an unfilmable faux autobiographical novel, in which the autobiography never actually gets written. The surface structure of the film mirrors the surface structure of the novel. Subtext in the film is deliberately incidental. That a rhetorical tautology threatens to undermine any thesis under the aegis of which the film may be working only serves to bring to light its essentially tragic nature; the film never actually gets made. Actors act, the director directs, the producers produce, costumers costume, set designers design, the screenwriter writes, the cinematographer shoots, gaffers gaff, go-fers go forth, assistants assist, re-enactors re-enact the Battle of Namur, ad infinitum, but in the end, most of the footage lands on the cutting room floor. The largest set-piece of the film, the battle re-enactment, completely disappears from the final edit. “Where is the battle scene?” asks one of the producers. “Wasn’t funny,” the director replies, deadpan (Winterbottom *Tristram*). Gillian Anderson, playing herself in the role of the Widow Wadman, observes that her two weeks’ work comes to nothing. Notably, her scene with Rob Brydon as Uncle Toby provides one of the film’s
biggest laughs: wondering about Toby's wound at Namur (a groin injury that rendered him impotent), she says, “I must see exactly [emphasis added] where you were injured,” as the two stroll through the garden, which has become a scale model of the battle. “Madame,” Toby says, “I'll show you. You can put your finger on it. It's just beyond the asparagus,” (Tristram). Clearly, neither director nor editor is aware of the comic heart of the film, though by cutting scenes because they were not funny, they claim to be. Such lack of insight seems directly to factor into the tragic nature of postmodern thought. As ideas become deconstructed, layers of truth discarded as unreal, systems of language and thought flayed and recontextualized, signifiers become less able to signify, and meaning disintegrates; the search for meaning, then, becomes of secondary importance to the ways in which both the search and meaning itself can be reduced to the zero. Indeed, for the makers of the film, the process is more akin to a family gathering with a payday at the end than an examination of systems of thought, either rhetorical or philosophical, but therein lies the tragedy: rather than search for truth, or at least some centrally binding idea, the powers behind the camera deconstruct and reconstruct their own work (and the work of others, no less) to the point that no system of meaning remains; and this they call the finished product.

*Tristram Shandy’s* film-within-a-film structure exemplifies the problems created by the absence of a center, be that center an abiding ideology, an intersection of ideas, a thematic locus, any point that either brings together or out from which ideologies, ideas, themes, etc., sprout. Without a central focus, the filmmakers – producer, director, actors, extras, assistants – have no binding sense of direction, of purpose, of the meaning of their efforts. Absent that, they spend their energies, waste them, perhaps, creating petty rivalries and situations that threaten the integrity of the production and the focus of those involved. Granted, these problems provide
much of the film’s comedy; however, they also contribute to *Tristram Shandy*’s ultimately tragic revelation, that the entire project is an abject failure. The most compelling and destructive (not to mention hilarious) of the many personality clashes occurs between Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon. Coogan plays himself playing both Tristram and his father, Walter, while Brydon plays Uncle Toby. We first encounter them in adjacent make-up chairs, discussing which of them has the lead role. Coogan argues that as he plays two roles, including the title character, he gets top billing. Brydon believes that since his character has more lines, and is central to the film’s largest set-piece, then he should at least share the bill, as perhaps the featured co-lead,” or even claim the top spot because Brydon leads Coogan alphabetically, to which a scoffing Coogan replies, “That doesn’t make any sense at all” (*Tristram*). End of debate. End of debate, in that form, anyway. They later bicker about shoes. Coogan wishes Walter to tower over Uncle Toby to physically suggest their relationship, but Brydon is the taller of the two. The costumer’s response is to build higher heels into Walter’s shoes. No, Coogan says, that will simply make Walter effeminate, going around in high heels. Could they possibly shorten Uncle Toby? And what about teeth? Shouldn’t a leading man have glimmering white teeth? Coogan describes Brydon’s as too not white.” Brydon parries with a sliding scale,” describing their color in decorative terms such as “Barley Meadow,”” and “Tuscan Sunset.”” Still, Coogan says, “not white,” though they are a nice color. You could decorate a child’s nursery in this color.” Brydon has the final word, however: lucky they’re not too white.” Otherwise, he might get bogged down in the leading man thing” (*Tristram*).

A Lacanian theorist would have a field day, as it were, with the previous exchange. Coogan and Brydon clearly mirror each other’s behavior, each attempting not only to one-up the other, but to become the mirror image of the other. They fail, however. Critical to the
-[f]unction of the I” is the recognition of oneself in one’s reflection (Lacan 1285). Neither Coogan nor Brydon sees himself, or his own behavior, ego, or childishness reflected in the attitude of the other. This failure of recognition constitutes a zero; the two see each other, but not themselves, and attempt, in their fashion, to destroy each other (or, each “other”), without regard to the consequences to themselves. Indeed, neither even envisions any consequences to his self, so absorbed is each in the destruction of the other. Should either pause for a moment and consider, however, the implications of destroying one’s mirror, then he might realize that to destroy one’s image is to destroy one’s self, as the image and the recognition of the image cannot be separated, either rhetorically or philosophically. Therefore, by failing to recognize his own self mirrored in the other, the condition of zero exists between the two, and entropy of the self occurs, as nothing is either gained or lost in their verbal transaction, nor is a vacuum of language even opened – no signs or signifiers disappear, because none appear. In a narrative of failure, the sparring match between Coogan and Brydon amounts to something less than failure, or other than failure (though not its opposite), as the entire exercise is void, and as such, a Lacanian probably would not bother to analyze it in the first place.

Formally, of course, the scene in question is perhaps the most vital in the film. Not only does it provide expository information about the actors playing themselves, it also establishes the dynamic between Coogan and Brydon that will drive the narrative, affecting not only the scenes between the actors, but the relationship between the characters they play, Walter/Tristram and Uncle Toby. Coogan and Brydon no more mirror each other than a sycamore tree mirrors the oak that grows next to it, and the oak the sycamore. Their duel over which character is the film’s protagonist establishes their respective positions; Coogan as the protagonist and Brydon as the antagonist, or, Coogan as the antagonist and Brydon as the protagonist. Which narrative role
either occupies depends more on the perspective of the viewer than of the film, though such a statement hardly supports a formal analysis. Unless, of course, the viewer might be considered as the signifier in the freeplay of the discourse between film and audience, audience and non-audience, actors and film, director and actors and film, director and actors and film and viewer, etc., et al, and so forth, to the extent that, when examining a film (text) as a whole, the viewer (reader) becomes a part of the process, as well as the makers, the space of the film encompasses more than just the film itself – indeed, everything becomes the film itself – and the interplay and oppositions created by these various relationships therefore are crucial to any analysis of the film. Nothing from “outside” the film is brought to bear with regard to the “meaning” of the film; rather, that which lies outside the film is also a part of the film and as such is open to inclusion in a formal analysis. Deconstruction, then, becomes more an extension of formalism than a playground all its own, which in turn renders a dialog such as the make-up chair conversation between Coogan and Brydon at once vital to an understanding of the film and completely unnecessary as a locus of analysis. From one perspective, the meaning of the film depends on the establishment of the basic relationship between those two actors, and the way in which that relationship suggests the relationship between the characters they play. From another, they are no more than actors playing actors playing roles; their relationship is, simply, their relationship. They also relate to other actors, who play other characters; they relate to the director and the rest of the off-camera crew; they relate to the audience, which in turn constructs the film as it views the film’s construction, frame by frame, acting in the role of signifier to the signs who are the actors in the film. Brought together, those two perspectives oppose each other, but complete each other as well, as though they hold a metaphorical mirror up to Lacan’s mirror (here functioning as metaphor) and reflect each other into infinity, to the point that both disappear, to the zero.
The poet Adam Hammer described the postmodern world as “the landscape of déjà-everything,” (29). Nothing is original. Ideas, products, art, etc., all is simply a repetition of, perhaps a comment on, what came before. The two films certainly argue Hammer’s point.

*Tristram Shandy* attempts to film a novel published in the mid-eighteenth century, while Tony Wilson wrote a novelization of *24 Hour Party People* two years after the film’s release. Déjà-everything, the great cultural tragedy, the failure of culture to create, only to repeat. The fictional Wilson of *24 Hour Party People* reaches an epiphany while wandering Manchester’s nighttime streets. Accosted by a homeless man under a bridge, Wilson listens as the man explains Boethius’s theory that existence is a great wheel, lifting us, dropping us, lifting us, dropping us again, its only constant inconsistency, dooming us to redundancy, as the wheel can only spin, each point upon it returning again and again to its zenith and its nadir, ever moving, in tragic terms, from hope to despair (Winterbottom 24). At this point in the film, Wilson’s life has reached a Nadir; his long-time companion, Lindsey, has left him, Ian Curtis is dead, his record company is in debt, and his career as a “serious fucking journalist” still has him interviewing dwarfs and hang gliding. Enter his Boethius of the downtrodden, for whom the wheel of existence has an even lowlier nadir than our protagonist’s. “What makes for tragedy, often enough,” Eagleton says, “is exactly the fact that we can indeed conceive of a more [tolerable] condition” (344). Nothing is tragic if we lack the capacity for hope, because only via hope can we recognize our worst circumstances. His relationship, his career, his avocation each a failure (or, at least, failing), Wilson, thanks to the unsolicited philosophical musing of a man covered with newspapers, lying in repose under a bridge, suddenly realizes that the only way his wheel has to go is up. Unfortunately, the rest of his decisions will move him only laterally, as the wheel
breaks free of its axel and lands, spinning, on its side, tracing the shape of a zero into —the landscape of déjà-everything.”

But first, a digression. If redundancy and contradiction are his method, then an undying love, if not of the music of Manchester and his own Factory Records, then a love of the idea of loving said, are what drive Wilson’s madness. The film, at times a quasi-documentary, at others a farce, occasionally a tongue-in-cheek melodrama, always serious in its satire, honest in its love of its characters, music, and the city of Manchester itself, is Wilson’s, despite what he says, directly to the audience: —This is not a film about me. I’m not Prince Hamlet, nor was I meant to be. I’m a minor character in my own story. This is a film about the music, and the people who made the music,” (Winterbottom 24). Of course, such momentary humility provides the perfect example of his own contradictory nature. 24 Hour Party People suggests that Wilson’s, indeed Manchester’s, love affair with music begins on a June evening in 1976, when the Sex Pistols play for an audience of 42 at the Manchester Lesser Free Trade Hall. Wilson, trying to explain the importance of the event to his Granada Television producer, who wonders at the significance of a concert attended by 42 people, says flatly, —How many people were at the Last Supper? Twelve. Twelve people. Well, thirteen” (24). As the camera pans around the Hall, Coogan’s voice-over narrative relates the significance of the show in terms of who is in attendance: Pete Shelley and Howard DeVoto of the Buzzcocks, Vini Reilly of The Derutti Column, three members of The Stiff Kittens, which shortly became Joy Division, Rob Gretton (Joy Division’s manager), and Martin Hannett, who produced Joy Division and later the Happy Mondays for Wilson’s Factory Records and who is, according to the narrative, —the only bona fide genius in the film. Well, one of only two bona fide geniuses in the film,” (24). Wilson’s argument wins him a weekly Granada show, So It Goes, which becomes the only television outlet for punk and
new wave music in Britain, the conservative BBC having banned most rock-and-roll. Of course, the show blows up in his face and is cancelled after Wilson allowed Iggy Pop to yell "Clap your FUCKING [sic] hands!" at the studio audience during an outro (Wilson 38). Like all tragic protagonists, Wilson reaps his own destruction by first planting the seeds of it, as if to guarantee the net sum in the mathematics of his life will be zero.

And now, a second digression. Wilson, Gretton, Alan Erasmus, and the members of Joy Division knock back a few pints in a Manchester pub. Wilson, Gretton, and Erasmus have recently decided to form Factory Records, and want Joy Division to climb aboard. The prevailing question is of contracts. "Couldn’t we have one contract, saying there is no contract," Gretton asks. Seizing the moment, Wilson takes a pocket knife from Gretton, a napkin from the table, slices his thumb, dips the tip of the knife into the running blood, and begins to write on the napkin. Moments later, if this particular napkin could speak, this: "The musicians own everything, the company owns nothing. All our bands have the freedom to fuck off," signed Tony Wilson (Wilson 67). No crossroads, no devil, no guitar, just some guys who want to make music, and an egomaniacal situationist manager/producer – Cambridge educated, no less – who happens to be one of the few in the group with a substantial day job, interviewing dwarves and shepherds for television being more substantial than working for the national dole, maybe. (By day, Ian Curtis helped people who needed help to obtain government assistance.) The situationists wished to overthrow the capitalist order by staging situations to create environments designed to reveal the artifice placed by capitalists over the true nature of capitalism, which is inherently dehumanizing and corrupt. Wilson’s version of situationism amounts to anything that causes a disturbance in the ordinary manner of living, especially if it brings him any sort of attention, though when the original situationists conceived of a world in which people could
pursue pleasure without the hand of capitalism creating the outlets for pleasure and then guiding the masses to them, as opposed to fulfilling one’s desires by masquerading them as philosophical theater, while missing the essential irony of the situation and passing off the lost irony as being postmodern, as though terms such as —situationism‖ and —postmodern‖ are simply buzzwords, cultural memes that explain the point of view of having no point of view, or suggest weight and substance where neither exists, such as inside the zero.

THE ZERO

Nothingness, absence, utter emptiness, each is nearly impossible to conceive, to imagine. Even nihilism itself is a conception, and therefore antithetical to its thesis. Is nothingness, then, its synthesis? Mathematically, zero is the point at which all numbers converge and from which all numbers diverge. In and of itself, zero has no numerical value. However, any mathematical function surrenders its functionality in the absence of zero – that is, in the absence of absence. Zero, the absence of value, defines the value of numbers, the value of presence. Nihilism, then, when subjected to a mathematical formulism, becomes meaningful only as a philosophical zero point, a synthetic gathering and departing juncture for meaning, though meaningless itself. Neither film is, of course, nihilistic. They are both filled with too much whimsy to be meaningless in any nihilistic sense. The inherent tragedy of nihilism is that its adherents believe that nothingness is a philosophical counterpoint to somethingness, that to deny any identification with an abiding mode of thought, and its opposite, is to create a meaning out of abject meaninglessness, that the absence of meaning precludes its presence, and is therefore more meaningful. Nihilist thought begins at the point of tragedy and denies any other point; the films
in question move toward tragedy as the bumbling failures of their characters to create meaning bring them into contact with zero, though not a zero in any mathematical sense, either. Diehl concurs, though her milieu is linguistics:

The structures investigated in algebra don't have zeroes [in the linguistic sense] even though they may contain elements called -zero." For instance, every field—a specific type of algebraic structure—contains an element that leaves each element unchanged under the field's addition operation. In the field of real numbers, this additive identity element is named -0," but, unlike the linguistic zero, the real number zero does not stand in any oppositional relations. (94)

The same is true in terms of the tragic zero, which is in part defined by oppositional relationships, such as Wilson's attempt to avoid -selling out" by creating a situation by which, if such a time arrived, he would have nothing to sell. While, "He Never Sold Out" might have made a moving epitaph, Factory Records went belly up, and neither the artists nor management saw any profit, despite the amount of time and effort spent by everyone involved in making the music. Told by the London Records executive who wants to buy the Factory catalog that he's -mad," Wilson responds, "That's an opinion." Further, he explains that Factory is not really a company, but -a experiment in human nature" (Winterbottom 24). A more apt description would have been that the label was an exemplar of Tony Wilson's nature – after all, here is a person who compares himself to Hamlet, never fails to mention that he attended Cambridge, fancies himself a serious journalist . . . living in one of the most important times in . . . history," but who cannot not fail at every opportunity. Cocaine, car trouble, and discourtesy ruin his only chance to prove his seriousness as a journalist, when he arrives four hours late for an interview with a controversial MP, then proceeds to insult the man on camera, which leads to a terrific
shouting match during a break. His next job involves a rancher, a goose, and a flock of sheep. For all of his Promethean bravado, as it were, Wilson is a man who cannot afford to lose his day job, as his avocation invariably leads to an inevitable zero, and who nevertheless threatens his own security by nearly tanking his best (and last) opportunity to be taken seriously.

Despite his obvious flaws—hubris, vanity, hyperbole—however, we cannot help but sympathize with Wilson, root for him, even. He is a man who dreams large, and who possesses the will to chase his dreams, even as he lacks the understanding to actually fulfill them. He seems at times to want to fail, and to fail spectacularly, disguising this motive as some intellectual, philosophical adventure in ―situationism,” or ―postmodernism,” or the freeplay of signs and signifiers,” the terms themselves building ramparts between how he would like the public to view him and who, probably subconsciously, he knows he really is, the postmodern Oedipus, the tragic figure who is willing to chase the zero to its limit.

TRAGEDY

Maffesoli sees tragedy in the postmodern sense as modern society’s failure to adequately reconcile the individual with society. The aims of the individual, or, the modern emphasis on the individual, thwarted the aims of society to be both comprised of individuals and for individuals to come together to create a cohesive order beneficial to both the individual and the group. As a result, postmodern society tends toward clannish pluralism; that is, the individual is subsumed by any number of groups comprised of like-minded members, groups formed on the basis of a shared identity of religion (including neo-paganism), or anger, or distrust, or some political cause, any set of mutual values, membership in which depends almost entirely on the submission
of the needs of the self to the goals of the group, the inherent tragedy being that both the individual and society-at-large suffer, as neither is allowed any room to evolve. The evolution of the individual and society is in fact replaced by a return to older values, a kind of devolution:

It is against this form of Christianity [in the construction of social institutions such as capitalism and politics] that the impiety of the present is in revolt. The youthful quality of its effervescences, the freshness of its acts of revolt, the heightened search for polymorphous pleasure in the present, all lead it to see the "ancient world" as its country of origin. Of course, we have to understand the "ancient world" metaphorically, that is, as meaning everything that contravenes the various categorical imperatives formulated by modern moralism, whether sexual, economic, or ideological. What distinguishes postmodernity is indeed this return to antiquity.

Like Wilson using a medieval philosophy to explain his own capriciousness, postmodernists practice a devolved philosophical strategy by looking to pre-modern thought and organizational models in their effort to create their world. Maffesoli believes postmodernists view modern ideals as stern and moralizing, the reaction to which is to seek pleasure for the sake of pleasure, even in the construction of groups. Indeed, only by forming groups can the postmodernist pursue and experience pleasure, for the individual is defined more by others' perception than his/her own self awareness, as that awareness is defined by the reflection of the group: "In the tragedy of postmodernity there is a concern for entirety [sic] leading to the loss of the individual ego in a greater self of natural or social otherness. The narcissism of the individual is dramatic; the primacy of the tribal is tragic . . .” (320). Referring to Greek tragedy, Eagleton describes this difference thus:
Oedipus, broken and blinded, stands before Colonus. As he once returned an answer to the Sphinx, so his presence now poses a question to the nearby city of Athens. Is it to gather this unclean thing to its heart, or cast it out as so much garbage? Is it to dismiss this beggarly king as a monster, or find in his disfigured visage an image of the monstrosity of the human, which is to say of itself? Can it bring itself to pity what it fears? Will it discern in the death-in-life condition of the dispossessed the shadowy outline of a new way of living, one which preserves a pact with failure and mortality?

Then Theseus, ruler of Athens, deciphers the riddle. He knows that by making this obscene thing in to the cornerstone of the polis, a great power for good will inevitably follow. The terror which threatens to undermine civility will be turned outward to protect it. Thanatos will be harnessed to the service or Eros, but only in the perilous, reverent awareness that it can always blow it apart. The West has yet to learn this tragic lesson.

Maffesoli clearly believes that the West has learned from the Oedipal saga, and that the population has reverted to a tribalism by which the individual becomes not an object to be heard and followed, but an abject example of the danger of singularity. Just as Oedipus had to know the truth of his life, the public good be damned, so must the modern individual stare into the same abyss, often to the detriment of many. Nazi Germany under Hitler serves as a fine example of the modern apotheosis of the individual. He will be remembered as the singular force that united Germany, indeed, but he will longer be set forth as the example of the terror which threatens to undermine civility,” the real-life modern drama turned into the postmodern tragic.
Neither the Tony Wilson of *24 Hour Party People*, nor the Steve Coogan or Rob Brydon of *Tristram Shandy*, can by any measure be compared with Hitler. Wilson, especially, however, comes to stand in the Oedipus position with regard to his failures as a record producer and as a club owner, and the influence he has on the creation of a cultural scene that is uniquely Mancunian, that sets Manchester apart from its big brother, rival, and nemesis to the south, London, and its more famous cousin to the east, Liverpool. Via Factory Records and the Hacienda, Wilson is able to give Manchester the sort of tribal identity Maffesoli says characterizes postmodernism; by virtue of his complete failure as an impresario, a record producer, and a businessman, Wilson also provides “that cornerstone of the *polis*” that demonstrates the self-destructive tendencies that society constantly battles to keep from tearing it apart. The night his club, the Hacienda, closes, its furnishings to be repossessed, its floorboards sold for scrap, its legacy bound forever to the birthplace of “rave culture,” the drug ecstasy, and the DJ, Wilson invites the patrons to “storm the offices and loot” *(Winterbottom 24)*. A bit of tongue-in-cheek humor, yes, a smile in the face of catastrophe, an ironic end to a bar that in ten years failed to show a profit because the patrons would rather have taken illegal ecstasy than paid for alcohol, indeed, but also an invitation to anarchy, the anarchy that so often occurs in the wake of tragedy. Think post-Oedipus Thebes or the divided kingdom of Lear. Certainly Tony Wilson does not stand astride history, even fictional history, as stands an Oedipus or a Lear, but he clearly demonstrates, if only by virtue of that scene alone, Eagleton’s point that the tragic figure can become, not a thing of reverence, but an example of what to fear, of society’s potential to descend into its own zero.

Then again, according to Wilson himself, *24 Hour Party People* is not even his own story. It is, to repeat, about the music and the people who made it. That Wilson is in every scene
betrays his words, but as he personally fails at every endeavor, and as his failures cost other people their respective livelihoods, why would he not make such a claim? The music of Joy Division and the Happy Mondays, and the production of Martin Hannett, will in all likelihood outlive the memory of a schlock journalist with an ear for melodic talent, a self-confidence that borders on narcissism, a gift for persuasion, and a few extra bob tucked away to rent some studio space. That his failures, and lack of insight into them, make for some genuinely funny moments in the film, only adds to the tragic outcome that defines *24 Hour Party People*. Wilson’s is perhaps the epitome of the postmodern dilemma, the illusion that the individual, though sovereign over himself, must somehow reconcile his personal sovereignty with the need to submit to the will of the group. His inability to reach that détente leads inexorably to his downfall, and though the group remains rather indifferent, he does bring them down too. Perhaps the only character in the film who falls farther, faster, and harder is Martin Hannett, whom Wilson says is “the only bona fide genius in the film. Well, one of only two” (24).

Hannett’s production helped to define the post-punk sound: music reduced to its minimal elements, electronic soundscapes crafted from instrumentation, aided by digital track overlays, all the background haze common to analog recording removed, so that each instrument on each song seems to inhabit its own sound space even as it harmonizes with the others. Hannett’s particular ear created the signature Joy Division sound, and he became the house producer for Factory Records. According to the film, he was one of the original 42 in attendance at the Sex Pistols’ Free Trade Hall show in 1976. By 1991 he was dead, the victim of overindulgence in alcohol, heroin, and food. His nickname was “Zero.” Among other accomplishments, Hannett invented multi-track digital recording. He also may have tried to kill Tony Wilson, though the facts are a bit hazy. As Wilson says, though, “if the facts interfere with the legend, print the
legend” (24). That he died young, of multiple abuses to his body and mind, is fact. Joy Division’s Ian Curtis died young, as well, a victim of suicide, also fact. In the intervening years, both have achieved a rather legendary status, perhaps moreso Curtis (for, how biographies have been written or filmed about Martin Hannett?), but are either the stuff of tragedy? Do their lives and deaths matter, in the same sense as an Oedipus or a Hamlet? Does a life cut short by suicide or substance abuse, when weighed against any accomplishments, add up to zero?

Does Hamlet’s life add up to zero, for that matter? He fails to avenge his father, though he perhaps understands that vengeance is the simplest form of justice, the manner of a bygone age, and to bring vengeance upon the murderer of his father is to become like the murderer of his father. Ironically, such action would also serve to make him more like his father. Hamlet’s actions (and inactions) have consequences beyond the personal, the family, or even the tribal drama; the future of his entire country, of his culture, of his values, is at stake. The same cannot be said of Curtis or Hannett. Yet their choices have consequences, as well. In some sense, perhaps in the sense that only a media-driven age can comprehend, death by any other than natural causes after a long life, is tragic. Postmodern culture does not produce Hamlets. In an age of information and skepticism, colossal figures are not borne up to show us how the mighty fall. Hamlet is no Oedipus, however. He is not driven by the same singularity of purpose; he does not set himself up to fall and thus bring down his entire community. Hamlet is introspective, one might even say enlightened. He stands at the brink of modern thinking; a singular man, indeed, a colossus, yes, but a reluctant one, motivated, even in vengeance, not by his absolute personality but by his need to question and understand. Still, his personal tragedy will be the community’s tragedy, as the community is not yet prepared for his brand of enlightenment. It remains bound
by its need to be led by the singular man, the colossus. Hamlet cancels out community, in the equation. Fortinbras comes to reign. Denmark falls into the abyss of the zero.

Manchester never falls into that abyss. Maybe it was already there. Manchester came into its own as a textile center during the Industrial Revolution, and boasted the world’s first railway station. Prior to that, the city fathers had supported Parliament during the English Civil War, and the city itself seems always to have had something of an inferiority complex about the South, especially London. Like many British cities that thrived during the Industrial Revolution, Manchester fell on hard times during the twentieth century, when it became less expensive for cotton-producing countries to ship to Southeast Asia, where labor was cheaper and more abundant, labor laws were less stringent, and trade tariffs were practically non-existent. Though still a vital part of the country's economy, by the 1970s the city faced massive unemployment, economic crisis, high crime and poverty rates, and the general malaise that settles over once-proud communities that are brought low by factors beyond their control. The city has since recovered, thanks to the technology industry and a series of labor-friendly parliaments in the post-Thatcher years, but also thanks to the efforts of Wilson, Hannett, and Curtis to create a culture that was unique to Manchester, that rivaled London's of the —swinging 60s.”

Again, and ironically, this cultural revitalization began in 1976 thanks to a band from London performing in front of 42 people in a dilapidated meeting room three floors above the city, not exactly the obvious starting point for a tragedy that would play itself out over the next two decades. Certainly not Thebes or Elsinore, and definitely not a tragedy by classical standards, given how strongly Manchester returned from the brink of the zero. But, while Manchester itself actually benefitted from the efforts of our three protagonists, our protagonists themselves each
fell on their metaphorical swords to make it happen (though Wilson managed only a flesh
wound).

Opened in 1982, the Hacienda eventually became the birthplace of rave culture. However, its first five years were marked by financial struggles and near-closure. Joy Division’s, and then New Order’s manager, Rob Gretton, conceived of the place, and Factory Records, with the help of sales of New Order singles and albums, opened the place to the tune of around a million pounds. Upon learning of the expenditure during a pre-opening tour, Hannett made this observation: “I’m a genius; you’re all wankers. You’ll never see me again” (24). And they did not, until a few years later, when Wilson answered a knock on the Factory office door to be fired upon by a drunken, overweight, pistol wielding Hannett, who exited the scene laughing and disappeared for another five or six years. By 1987 the Happy Mondays, led by heroin addict Sean Ryder (whom Wilson wistfully compared to Yeats), had become the house band, ecstasy had been discovered by the masses, rave culture had dawned, and the Hacienda had become home to Manchester’s cultural elite. Of course, the place still bled money, as ecstasy, while sold on the dance floor and in the queue, brought the profits that were supposed to be made by the sale of alcohol to the local drug dealers rather than to the club, which simultaneously became a great success and a total failure. Hannett turns up in the story one last time, producing a Happy Mondays album in 1988. He is stoned, overweight, and demanding. The album, *Bummed*, reaches number two in the U.K. indie chart and launches the Mondays. After the album, Hannett disappears from Factory again, and dies four years later. He was so large his coffin would not fit into the grave. –Martin Hannett: larger than life, even in death,” Wilson said (24).

In a sense, Hannett is the Hamlet or Oedipus of the film. Though Wilson’s comment is an ironic statement directed toward Hannett’s weight, he also calls Hannett a genius. Perhaps, from
an intellectual standpoint, Hannett bestrides the film like a classical tragic colossus. His invention of digital production and his musical direction most certainly contribute to Factory’s greatest successes. Ultimately, the company fails, but without Hannett on board from the beginning, Factory would never have had the opportunity to not fail. His rejection of the Hacienda demonstrates his status as a singular individual. In the tragic sense, Hannett lacks the postmodern need to be a part of the group; he’s a modern man in a postmodern world. Like Curtis, his own path leads to his own fall. Ironically, in a postmodern tragedy, the two most classically tragic characters are not even the tragic protagonists. Even in an Ibsen tragedy, Hannett’s rise, fall, and death would have greater repercussions. Not here, though. Felski writes:

In fact, as I have noted, the word “tragic” is often used in everyday speech to describe a wide span of accidents, calamities, and mishaps, from the trivial to the catastrophic. But “tragic” is also an aesthetic term that refers to a distinctive forming of material; here it describes not just suffering but a particular shape of suffering. . . . Exposing the limits of reason, the fragility of human endeavor, the clash of irreconcilable desires or incommensurable worlds, the inescapability of suffering and loss, tragedy underscores the hopelessness of our attempt to master the self and the world. . . . Indeed, if there were no possibility of acting otherwise, tragedy would be evacuated of much of its anguish and terror. (10-11)

Hannett’s death, Curtis’s death, while tragic in the sense of “everyday speech,” have no bearing on the overall tragedy upon which the film insists. That alone belongs to Wilson, who, while he smiles through every failure, refusing to suffer (at least publicly), nevertheless returns time and again to the point of the tragic zero, largely because of bad decisions and his own nature. The form of the film makes that clear. From an audience point of view, Wilson’s lack of suffering,
his refusal to step back and actually view himself in terms of his hubris and poor judgment, and the consequences thereof, translates to our suffering. We cringe when he compares a dead singer to a career revolutionary and murderer. Wilson sees himself as a postmodern prophet. Indeed, how can an “experiment in human nature” fail? We see him as a buffoon. Winterbottom’s (and Coogan’s) gift is to make us like Tony Wilson, and root for him even as we know he is headed for failure, for the zero. The film’s curse is that it follows Wilson down and down, over and over, through failure after failure, and never allows him to stop and reflect. Therefore, neither he nor the audience achieves catharsis. Instead of seeing Wilson as a figure to be pitied, and his actions as those we should fear in ourselves, the film sees him as an extraordinarily ordinary man, insignificant in his significance, and suggests that that is the most we can hope for. Yes; he is happy with his life, but should he be? The tragedy is in the answer to that question, any answer.

Eagleton makes the point that the tragic figure—Oedipus, in his example—becomes an object of fear and pity. We must fear what we pity, lest we become it. Tony Wilson is a pitiful character, a puppy in the rain, and he knows it. Stoned on the roof of the Hacienda on the morning following the night of the foreclosure, he wanders to the edge, and sees God, who tells him, in essence, at least he tried. Returning to his mates, he says, “I just saw God.” They ask him what he looks like. “Me. . . . If you’d seen God, he’d look like you. But you didn’t. I did. And he looked like me” (Winterbottom 24). With no human to confirm him, Wilson conjures God out of the ether to both acknowledge his failure and praise his effort. In his own imagination, Wilson, to risk cliché, gets to have his cake and to eat some of it, too, but only a small bite. The moment should be transcendent; instead, it is the pitiful fulfillment of a fragile ego, an ego so fragile that its possessor, the film’s protagonist, functions also as the film’s antagonist. A similar opposition controls the characters in *Tristram Shandy*, though they are not excused from themselves by the
ego-driven arrival of a postmodern deus ex machina. No; they are forced to face themselves on
their own. That they never do may be the tragedy of the film.

Few films successfully capture the essence of working on a movie set. Truffaut’s *Day for Night* and Fellini’s *81/2* come to mind. *Tristram Shandy: a Cock and Bull Story* belongs on that short list. What sets *Tristram Shandy* apart from its brethren is its focus. Both Truffaut’s and Fellini’s films tell their tales from the director’s point of view. The director in Tristram Shandy shows up to morning call, participates in the nightly screenplay treatment, blocks scenes, and provides advice and encouragement to everyone from the actors to the caterer, but never seems to be really involved in the narrative thread itself. He is constantly overshadowed by the dominating (and domineering) egos of the film’s two lead actors, Coogan and Brydon. Their clash of egos in the dressing room, during interviews, at nightly meetings, is so strong that one wonders how the film will ever end up in the can. In essence, it does not. What passes for the finished version of the film leaves everyone involved wondering what they have spent the past few months of their lives doing. For Coogan and Brydon, this means not self-reflection, but some kind of justification for their behavior, which at times is so toxic it threatens to poison the entire production. While *Day for Night* and *81/2* chronicle the agonies, demands, and finally the joys of filmmaking, *Tristram Shandy* uses filmmaking as a metaphor for the inherent tragedy of postmodern life and thought. The structure of the film suggests a documentary about the making of a movie. The choice of an unfilmable novel suggests that the film will inevitably fail. But that fact that the film fails is not the point; how the film fails is. Too many egos cross each other; too few of the dominant characters have even read the novel. The effort is doomed from the outset. On a graph of an x-y axis, the shooting begins at zero and ends at zero, and there is no arc. On the surface, Tristram Shandy plays like a farce, but the farce belies the deeper tragedy of failure,
failure with no regret. Indeed, the novel fails in what it claims to wish to accomplish, which is to chronicle the Life and Opinions of its protagonist, but its apparent failure is actually its triumph, a notion those involved with filming it do not seem to understand.

—Tristram Shandy was a postmodern classic, written before there was any modern to be post about.” So says Coogan, in a direct address to the camera (Winterbottom Tristram).

However, as Porton points out:

. . . early reviews that identify Sterne’s comic masterpiece as a mere predecessor of modernist and postmodernist fiction are a bit off the mark. While contemporary experiments in metafiction often deliquesce into solipsism or cynicism, Sterne’s robust eighteenth-century humanism can be viewed as an antidote to modern paeans to alienation. Sterne’s engagement with the empiricism of Locke and Hume inspired him to consider the quandary of the isolated individual—supposedly doomed to only comprehend reality through sensory experience. Yet, as an antinomian clergyman who also derived sustenance from the Renaissance humanism of Rabelais and Erasmus, Sterne’s radical skepticism and playful subversion of linguistic propriety and linear narrative is inextricable from a celebration of creative fecundity and the power of literature to transcend the prison of the self. (28)

In other words, Coogan misunderstands the novel so much so that his characters (Shandies, father and son) can never see themselves in the context in which they were created. They become postmodern rather than enlightenment protagonists; therefore their every action and word becomes imbued with an irony and a subjectivity that are nonexistent in the novel, which is not to say that the novel lacks irony. Sterne’s tone is not ironic, however; his form is. The —ife and
opinions” of the title demonstrate, for the most part, neither the title character’s life nor opinions. Instead, as Shandy narrates, the text takes the form of a series of digressions in which he discusses matters that largely occurred before he was even born. The tone is comic and sympathetic in the face of human folly, warm in its attitude toward every character and every action, no matter how absurd. Even uncle Toby’s war injury is treated as a circumstance that, rather than having tragic consequences, served to create the Toby of the book, a complete character who lives not in spite of his "condition," but along with it; it is simply a part of who he is. No tragedy emerges from The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy. The same cannot be said of Tristram Shandy: a Cock and Bull Story.

Winterbottom’s characters drive heedless and headlong toward the zero. The film plays like farce. Characters bicker, producers beg for money, writers are forced to rewrite pages every night, family members arrive on set at the least opportune moments, disrupting the family atmosphere of the set, squashing the little romances that have not quite crossed the line into consummation. Entire set pieces, such as the battle of Namur, are constructed, and hours of film shot, only to be dumped for the final edit (Probably a good idea, in the case of the battle scene; it originally spanned about a third of the film; the scene itself is nonessential in the novel.). At one point, Coogan is left for hours upside down and naked inside a large-scale model of a womb. The filming of the film-within-a-film is so fraught with giant egos and bad ideas that the film never actually gets filmed. Yes, Tristram Shandy: a Cock and Bull story is essentially a comedy. Winterbottom approaches his material in much the same way that Sterne approached his, with a genuine sympathy for and interest in his characters and all of their weaknesses and shortcomings. However, given that his characters fail, largely due to their self-absorption and colossal misunderstanding of the subject matter, the film is also a tragedy, an exemplar of how people
should not behave. In the postmodern sense, the tragedy is that the end result for everyone involved is zero.

Winterbottom’s major coup with Tristram Shandy is twofold: 1. he manages to make two films, the film itself and the film-within-the-film, without which the structure of the tragedy would unravel; and 2. he creates stories that parallel situations in Sterne’s novel. As Porton notices:

Winterbottom’s generosity towards his self-absorbed characters takes a huge cue from Uncle Toby’s famous propensity to straddle his hobbyhorse while reminiscing about his youthful glory on the battlefield. . . . All of the characters are celebrated, not admonished, for their determination to ride disparate hobby-horses with a combination of vigor and dyspepsia. Cinema, and by implication life, is conceived of as a convivial convergence of half-crazed obsessives. To wit, Walter Shandy’s monomaniacal interest in eighteenth-century obstetrics is easily translated into Coogan’s New Agey immersion in childrearing. In a similar vein, Coogan flirts shamelessly with Jenny, a pretty production assistant—whose “hobbyhorse” consists of a charming tendency to flaunt her enthusiasm for movies (particularly obscure Fassbinder films) at inappropriate times. The equanimity with which the film views its characters’ diverse quirks perhaps suggests that Sterne’s tolerance for all varieties of human folly can be seen as a premodern equivalent of Jean Reno’s credo in Rules of the Game—Everyone has their reasons.”

(28)

However, Winterbottom’s tolerance for the follies and oddities of his characters does not mitigate the tragic circumstances under which the film ends. While these eccentricities are
excused as the products of humanity, they do not overshadow that fact that this collective human effort fails, the result of too much folly, eccentricity, and self-absorption, too many oddities and quirks. In the equation that pits the characters to the left of the equals sign, and the film (their objective) to the right, Winterbottom uses enlightenment values to demonstrate how, when coupled with postmodern values, they cancel each other out.

CONCLUSION

The shadows of Sophocles and Shakespeare hover over every tragic narrative. The voices of Oedipus, Antigone, Hamlet, Lear, echo behind every word of dialog spoken by every tragic protagonist. Or, they do not. Classically, when the tragic protagonist falls, society crumbles with him. Thebes descends into civil war; Norway overpowers Denmark. Aristotle saw tragedy as a means by which we could purge ourselves of fear and pity; the mighty stood and fell for our benefit, so that we might be mindful of how tenuous are the bonds of society, how closely we court chaos. Tragedy was a ritual, a public cleansing, and a message. As democratic rule (or something like it) became the mode of the West, ordinary people became the figures of tragedy. Ibsen and O’Neill focused on the home and the family—a microcosm of society—suggesting that if we do not keep our houses in order, if our mother and father figures fall, then as one household falls, so might many; as many fall, so might society. What is society if not the macro version of the home? When the bonds that bind a household together break, a part of the larger structure weakens, and perhaps cannot be repaired. Such modern narratives as The Master Builder, Long Day’s Journey Into Night, and even Death of a Salesman, showed that the individual can be brutalized by the need to remain true to his/her nature in an indifferent world.
If the focus of tragedy had changed, the form had not. The fall of an individual brings others down, as well. Society as a whole is fairly safe, despite what happens to a Willy Loman. However, if Willy Loman stands for a great number of individuals in society, then society might be in trouble.

Poststructuralist thought has changed the nature of narrative, and therefore the nature of tragedy. Psychology and deconstruction have turned the narrative inward, or shifted the focus to language itself. As a result, the innate function of language to create myth has been challenged, perhaps even lost. Consequently, the mythic hero seems to be a thing of the past, an idea the time of which has passed. To a great degree, postmodern tragedy is a lament for this loss. As the films examined herein demonstrate, tragedy no longer occurs at a level that threatens society; on the contrary, tragedy hardly seems to be affective at all. Tony Wilson, Steve Coogan, and Rob Brydon, our respective protagonists, simply lack the insight to see how their flaws and failures might affect others; by the same token, others seem not to be affected by those flaws and failures. The films themselves are whimsical quasi-documentaries that chronicle these flaws and failures with a great deal of sympathy and love. Winterbottom and his screenwriter, Frank Cottrell Boyce, regard their characters closely, but from a safe enough distance that precludes catharsis. This absence of cathartic experience, coupled with the characters’ complete lack of insight, here provides the stuff of tragedy. In the end, Winterbottom uses these films to say that the new tragedy requires no crumbled colossus; the new tragedy requires only failure to the point of meaninglessness, a meaningless wrought not by nihilism, but by the further failure to understand just what failure means. These characters fall without even realizing it. Their efforts amount to zero because they aim for nothing in particular. That aimlessness, that flirtation with the boundary of the zero, is the real tragedy of our time.
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