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Many Cantonas: Mental Health and the "Invisible Companion" in *Looking for Eric*

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This videoessay analyses Ken Loach's *Looking for Eric* (2009), primarily its exploration of (male) mental health via an invisible companion (footballer Eric Cantona). The imagery used is found to resonate with previous films (*Harvey*, *Fight Club*, etc.), whilst the reconstruction of mental health paraphrases a broader transformation of working-class masculinity.

Content Advisory

The film *Looking for Eric* contains depiction of attempted suicide and discussion of suicide, which are included/analysed in this videoessay. There is also an edit in the dialogue, to remove a sexually explicit reference (a single word), which may detract from realism (such as we can speak of this in a videoessay). Nevertheless, this edit should hopefully enable wider access to the film than its inclusion might have.

Creator's Statement

The Ken Loach movie, from a script by Paul Laverty, *Looking for Eric* (2009), stands out. On its release it marked something of a shift towards more overtly comedic works for Loach and Laverty. But more than that, it stood out, as it does still, for its use of an invisible companion (sometimes referred to as an imaginary friend) to explore the reconstruction of a working-class man's mental health and masculinity. In this instance the invisible companion is the French footballing legend who played for Manchester United, Eric Cantona. Like many British films of the era, *Looking for Eric* mingles comedy along with an otherwise at times grimly-real exploration of working-class life, the result of which is a positive resolution to the film both in terms of the individual and the societal realm (or at least, the homosocial, as this mostly plays out in terms of working-class masculinity). In both these arenas there is a sense that solidarity—between working-class men in the societal and between the different internal "parts" of a person in the individual—is the key to mental wellbeing.

But how is this visible in the film?

More to the point, how did this realisation arise in the first place?

What sparked the audiovisual exploration of the film in this videoessay was the way in which it triggered a memory of a very different film, *Being John Malkovich*

(1999), for reasons which I could not initially put my finger on.[1] Then, later, I returned to *Looking for Eric* when personal circumstances prompted an increased interest in how (and in what ways) mental health is depicted on screen. After much contemplation and research, the videoessay became structured by specific, intertwined primary and secondary research questions—which are embedded in the film itself—which arise from repeated viewing that focuses on *Looking for Eric*'s depiction of mental health. The aim of the piece, then, is to try to understand the model of the self and its therapeutic reconstruction which underpins the narrative by focusing in particular on the imagery used. It is found that, in contrast to existing interpretations of the film—e.g. after Melanie Klein (Free 2021)—a different model with which to analyse the depiction of postman Eric and his conjuring of an invisible companion in *Looking for Eric* is that of Internal Family Systems (Schwartz and Sweezy, 2020). Or at least, whilst this approach to therapy is not precisely that of the film per se, there seems to be a strong resonance between the film's conceptualization of postman Eric as a man of many parts, with how the self is understood by Internal Family Systems very broadly speaking. The idea of the invisible companion thus informs the analytic approach to the videoessay, and also—and this is key—its visual logic.

The videoessay's analysis of how the invisible companion functions in the film is accompanied by an exploration of *Looking for Eric*'s invisible cinematic companions, in particular the films which may have influenced it, or, at any rate, with which it resonates in its depictions of masculinity, mental health, and invisible companions. It is here in particular that the videoessay focuses as much on the imagery used as it does the narrative. For example, *Looking for Eric*'s imagery and depictions of mental health seem to resonate with the famous giant rabbit movies *Harvey* (1950) and *Donnie Darko* (2001), as well as those featuring humanoid invisible companions, like *Drop Dead Fred* (1991) and *Fight Club* (1999). The videoessay also briefly acknowledges the scholarly invisible companions—the writers of the books and articles upon which the argument draws—by rendering their names quasi-ghostly presences at relevant points. This is true of those who research and write about mental health directly, those who discuss invisible companions, and those who write about films—whether in terms of mental health, Loach's works more broadly, masculinity, and/or British cinema. All have informed the audiovisual analysis. A similar technique is also used for the main acting

[1] This resonance is also mentioned by Stephen Glynn, in his book on British football films (2018: 222) which I did not discover until after the videoessay had already been submitted for peer review. Glynn notes the similarity in imagery but does not draw the same links which this videoessay does—with the notion of the self being made up of many parts which is found in Internal Family Systems Therapy.

roles (Steve Evets's postman Eric, Eric Cantona's Cantona, John Henshaw's Meatballs, Matthew McNulty's young postman Eric) to highlight the presence of the actors playing these roles as yet more invisible companions contributing to the audiovisual argument. The scholarly input of peers on seeing a roughcut, indeed, provides further examples of the videoessay's invisible companions (discussed further below).

This rendering visible of the underpinning and informing scholarly research, in fact, is indicative of this videoessay's attempt to maintain a dynamic relationship with the more traditional written scholarly essay in Film Studies. This was a deliberate decision, born out of a sense that whilst sometimes videoessays can be illuminating in unexpected and exciting ways, they can also at times seem somewhat mysterious, ambiguous or intuitive in respect of what they might reveal. That is to say, in terms of a rather foundational debate in this area (or so one might perhaps speculate on how this debate may be seen in the future), this particular videoessay stays very much in an explanatory (as opposed to poetic) mode (Chiara Grizzaffii 2020 provides a useful introduction to this debate, which involves different scholars). This particular videoessay, then, can be understand—to purposefully come down on one side of this debate—in terms of what Thomas van den Berg and Miklos Kiss (2016) consider a "thesis film." This is due to its designation, early on, of a research goal. That said, the videoessay does try to remain playful in its audiovisuality, even if it is debateable as to whether it reaches the creative heights of the poetic. For example, and fittingly considering the footballing subject matter, the setting out of the "goal" of the thesis film is accompanied by a playful visual pun.

Less obviously, several other aspects show this convergence of written and audiovisual forms. The videoessay commences with an opening montage akin to an (audiovisual) "abstract"—prior to the title—which both summarises the argument in miniature and establishes a brief roadmap for its progression. This montage also serves to indicate the (audio)visual logic of the piece, in particular: its use of triptychs and diptychs; of looped and repeated footage (which indicates the protagonist's mental state and his repeated working through of his inner "parts" with the help of Cantona as invisible companion); the invasive remixing of sound and image (including reaffirming repetitions); the haunting return of musical themes and other diegetic sounds (e.g. crowd noise) when certain parts of the argument reprise or recap; and recourse to other films, and scholars, as invisible companions which can help explain the role of the imagery in *Looking for Eric*. The foregrounding of repetition in the videoessay emerges from *Looking for Eric*'s own examination of how routine physical behaviours (at work, in the home) can impact on mental health, and how different

repetitious activities—physical fitness training such as running, or sport, or dancing, so on—may positively impact on mindset in spite of their being, similarly, quite organised forms of repetitious movement (e.g. there are recognised dance moves to learn, sporting strategies, and so on).

Establishing this (audio)visual logic early on became a key aim of the creative process once a colleague—a researcher and videomaker—indicated the potential for this on seeing a rough cut. Their constructive and generously offered insights, in fact, were integral to this attempt to develop an overarching cohesion to the thesis audiovisually, making their input that of a key invisible companion to the work. The need to name the creative work's invisible companions (other films, other scholars), similarly, was suggested by another colleague with extensive videoessay experience seeking to help the work retain coherence but with a light touch for the viewer. Another key aspect of the piece, then, creatively, is the (absent but structuring) clamour of the voices of critical friends who have contributed to its final shape. This is much as one would also expect of a written article, except that their contributions shaped audiovisual form much more than the content of the argument.

The decision to use voiceover extensively in the videoessay was much-considered but ultimately chosen because it seemed the most appropriate way to maintain the thesis through-line over the length. The attempt was made, however, to alternate the voiceover with extended periods in which the creative work could speak for itself audiovisually. The patchwork this creates—with dialogue, sound, and music from *Looking for Eric* and various other films—is intended to render the voiceover less a voice of God, and more the comings and goings of another invisible companion to the audiovisual argument. Focusing on trying to find this balance was also a key suggestion from a further critical friend who sent feedback. Taking on board Ian Garwood's (2016) influential work on the voiceover in this medium, the videoessay aims for a fairly relaxed visually-engaged address in line with the lack of clarity to the dialogue at times, especially when Cantona does not enunciate clearly (which is itself not altogether surprising of Loachian realism). Noticeably, one of the first drafts of this work—as a storyboard—several years before its finalisation, went under the working title of "Cantona Mumbles: Why?" The videoessay, indeed, includes moments when Cantona's lines are repeated more clearly by other actors, keeping in play the same clarifying strategy which *Looking for Eric* itself deployed to keep the videoessay similarly clear. Finally, on the voiceover, the decision to retain the creator's own voice indicates something of the shift which has occurred since Garwood's videoessay on the topic eight years ago. With the increasingly widespread impact of AI on both

audiovisual and written forms, suddenly the idea of using an automated voice, whilst admittedly gender-neutral, might suggest different connotations regarding authenticity and originality of creation. Instead, the videoessay retains the voice of the creator, emerging from his "stupid man suit."

In terms of gender, whilst this is integral to the piece, the videoessay seeks to engage primarily with the film's depiction of mental health. Masculinity is bound up with this, it is true. Even so, the latter topic of masculinity, remains a secondary emphasis in the videoessay. The reconstruction of Postman Eric's mental health does involve a related reconstruction of his masculinity, but this is mostly foregrounded audiovisually rather than directly via the voiceover or intertitles—e.g. through the incorporation of scenes of Postman Eric dancing with Cantona, washing up, hugging his sons, and so on. These scenes compliment the repeated references to Eric's "stupid man suit," and indeed, the fact that he learns that Eric Cantona is not "man" (in the more traditional sense, the depiction of which was explored so famously by Steve Neale [1983]), but in fact, he encompasses the many parts of a more rounded and softer masculine personality which Postman Eric must also accommodate himself to in order to recover his mental health. This understanding of a cinematic emphasis on a softer masculinity, which is very evident in *Looking for Eric*, is not dissimilar to the academic discussions of the 1990s–2000s concerning British cinema's specific depiction of changing post-industrial conceptions of masculinity, including working class masculinity, the literature on which is referenced in the videoessay itself.

The videoessay ends with a "concluding montage" which responds to the opening one in light of the intervening audiovisual argument. As with the Introduction, this Conclusion does not seek to introduce new material, but rather, to recap in brief the argument which is made in the videoessay. Perhaps unfashionably, this technique further attempts to (re?)occupy the blurry but dynamic terrain in which the videoessay emerges with and at once departs from the written Film Studies essay: to locate and dwell within the connecting fibres as they strain but hold together, and to question whether we may at times move a touch too quickly to create the distance we have between the two—some might argue, as evidenced by the explanatory/poetic debate referenced above—if the aim is to both educate (perhaps more accurately than instruct) and delight.

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Biography

David Martin-Jones is Professor of Film Studies, University of Glasgow, UK. His specialism is film-philosophy and his research engages with what it means to study a world of cinemas. He is the author/editor of ten books, including titles shortlisted for the BAFTSS Annual Book Award and the MeCCSA Best Monograph Award. He has published in numerous journals including *Cinema Journal*, *Screen*, and *Third Text*, and his work has been translated into several languages for publication internationally. He serves on several editorial boards and is co-editor of the Bloomsbury monograph series Thinking Cinema. He remains an amateur dabbler in videoessays, some of which are available on Vimeo, including two included in the TV Dictionary.

Review by Huw D. Jones, University of Southampton

The video essay explores the significance of the "invisible companion" in *Looking for Eric* (2009), where postman Eric Bishop, following a mental breakdown, begins seeing the iconic French international footballer Eric Cantona. Drawing from Schwartz and Sweezy's (2020) "internal family systems," the essay clearly and persuasively demonstrates how the various roles enacted by the imagined Cantona (such as personal trainer, dance partner, and best friend) contribute to restoring Eric Bishop's well-being.

Throughout the video essay, insightful comparisons are drawn with other films featuring invisible companions (e.g. *Harvey*, *Drop Dead Fred*, *Donnie Darko*), as well as British social realist comedy dramas featuring male homosocial relationships (e.g. *The Full Monty*). At the same time, the essay keeps in mind the specificities of the imagined companion in *Looking for Eric*, highlighting, for example, how it serves as a political commentary on the decline of public services to support people facing mental health problems.

The video essay cleverly employs its visual format to reinforce its arguments, with triptychs used to evoke the concept of the "many Catonas" and looped clips to signify the character's mental health struggles. The decision to include some (though not overly didactic) voiceover enhances clarity without detracting from the viewer's ability to form their own intellectual connections and insights.

Overall, the essay makes an important contribution to film scholarship on mental health and the cinema of Ken Loach.

Review by Christina Wilkins, University of Birmingham

Many Cantonas insightfully explores the way in which male mental illness is portrayed onscreen. In its use of plurality and repetition, the piece shows the pressures and constraints of masculinity and their shaping of the experience of mental illness evident in *Looking for Eric*. It is clearly situated in wider scholarship, and provides a unique intervention into working-class British cinema that deals with the topic of gender and mental illness.

At times, the piece echoes the overwhelming feelings associated with Eric's mental illness through the repeated dialogue and multiple images onscreen, leaving the viewer shifting between images and sounds. The analysis of the film is split into two key questions: the role of the invisible companion and how the depiction of mental health reflects class-based attitudes. The division and attention to each offers the space to think through some of the key moments of the film, from the doubling implied in the film's title to the resolution and acceptance of community. The repeated moments of Cantona's dialogue return us to the key ideas here, notably the ways in which classed notions of gender shape responses to mental health and the idea of the "team," or community. This creates a persuasive discussion around the invisible companion in the film and adds nicely to broader scholarship on class and mental health.