

SHANE MEADOWS' COUNTRY: *THIS IS ENGLAND* (2006)

Carla Ferreira de Castro
Universidade de Évora
Portugal
ccastro@uevora.pt

This Is England is social realist film portraying racism and poverty in 1980s Britain through the eyes of Shaun, a 12 year old boy, who has lost his father in the Falklands war and as to come to terms with his own identity, the difficult transition from childhood to adolescence and the need to fit in a determined group/tribe/gang. The following article aims at analysing relevant aspects depicted from the film emphasizing the so much debated reality of life during 80s. In *This is England* Shane Meadows manages to rediscover his own self geography, by revisiting his adolescent years. It is a biographical film about the importance of peer pressure and the results of an excess of nationalism, at the same time it typifies some issues related to the 80s youth culture.

This is England é um filme social e realista que descreve o racismo e a pobreza na Grã-Bretanha dos anos 80 através do olhar de Shaun, um rapaz de 12 anos, que perdeu o pai a Guerra das Maldivas e tem de gerir a busca pela sua identidade, a transição da infância para adolescência e a necessidade de pertencer a um determinado grupo/tribo/gang. O presente artigo visa analisar aspectos relevantes extraídos do filme enfatizando a tão debatida realidade da vida nos anos 80. Em *This is England* Shane Meadows reencontra a geografia do ser, através do visitar dos seus anos enquanto adolescente. É um filme biográfico acerca da importância da pressão exercida pelos pares e o resultado de um nacionalismo excessivo, ao mesmo tempo que tipifica alguns aspectos relacionados com a cultura dos anos 80.

Keywords: Shane Meadows; England; 80s; Youth Culture; Skinheads

Palavras-chave: Shane Meadows; Inglaterra; Anos 80; Cultura Juvenil; Skinheads

And what do they know of England who only England know?

Rudyard Kipling: *The English Flag* (1891)

Shane Meadows (born in 1972, Uttoxeter, Staffordshire) classifies himself as a regional filmmaker. From his 1997 feature debut, *Twentyfour Seven*, he has set about establishing his filmmaking scenario in the East Midlands area where he grew up. Following *Twentyfour Seven*, in 1999 he directed *A Room for Romeo Brass* and in 2002, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*, which he considers a 'tinned Spaghetti western'. After his 2004 revenge drama *Dead Man's Shoes*, Meadows returned with *This is England*, which has won the Best British Independent Film at the BIFA awards. Presently, Meadows is considered one of the distinct British voices in the cinema, being ranked number 40 in the 2008 Telegraph's list 'the 100 most powerful people in British culture'. On the 15th and the 16th of April 2010 the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, has held a two day conference entirely dedicated to Shane Meadows' films which contributes to underline the importance that his films have earned at the eyes of the critic.

This Is England is considered a social realist drama portraying racism and poverty in 1980s Britain through the eyes of Shaun (Thomas Turgoose), a 12 year old boy who has lost his father in the Falklands War, and has to face identity issues, concomitant with the difficult and harsh transition from childhood to adolescence and the need to fit in a determined group. In the beginning of the film, Shaun is an average boy who does not have a lot companions with whom he relates to. The action starts when, on his way home from school, Shaun is bullied by a group of skinheads. One of them, Woody (Joseph Gilgun), the leader, finds his awkwardness alluring and decides to take the boy under his wing and initiate him into a set of principles consistent with the formation of a rebellious attitude towards a set of

principles imposed by politics and the dramas the country. The gang provides Shaun with a sense of belonging which is obtained both through the clothes and an urge for violence, which stresses a necessity for independence from the social conventions and habits of their milieu. More than a philosophy and a strong feeling of identity, the gang depends on the appropriate dress code which makes them equal to one another and, at the same time, different from the rest of the gangs.

Bearing in mind the eighties, British youth culture was heavily marked by the emphasis given to naming the trends and the 'ethnicities' which had a determinant influence on community status relations, giving each group/gang/tribe, along with an affiliation, a voice, an identity, and ultimately a feeling of belonging in a society that in political terms completely neglected them, self-absorbed in the drama of unemployment and a war. Mods, Skinheads, Punks, Neo-Romantics, Goths, all wore their tags proudly since by becoming part of any tribe, young people avoided being bullied as individuals and acquired the right to intimidate others. This youth culture with its characteristic multicultural nature, which was attained in post-war Britain, was crucial to the formation of many subcultures. Katie Milestone, writing in the *The Guardian*, 18th December 1999 about youth culture, accentuates these aspects when she states:

The tribes were created through the amalgamation of particular types of cultural goods; music, fashion, hairstyles, politics, drugs, dances - with their boundaries defined through crucial choices: Vespas or Harley-Davidsons, speed or acid, Dr Martens or desert boots. But then, youth culture is full of contradiction: the desire to express individuality by wearing the same clothes as your mates, and rebelling against capitalism at the same time as being a perfect capitalist slave.¹

¹ In: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/1999/dec/18/weekend7.weekend5>

One of the reasons for the instant success of Meadows' formula is rooted in the national identity debate that has been a recurrent topic in the field of cultural studies.

As Higson (2001) puts it:

*Despite the efforts to 'rebrand' Britain and the emergence of 'Cool Britannia' in the late 1990s, the construction of English National identity remains profoundly dependent on the recovery of heritage (...)*²

The quest for an identity establishes a parallel between Shaun's desire to fit in, and the need to be English. The protagonist, much like Meadows as a young boy, finds his place in the group and thus finds a way of escaping ordinary life. In this context, it seems plausible that for a small community in the Midlands, skins were just a name associated first with reggae and then ska music (which accounts for the importance of the twenty-four tracks included in the film). It is undeniable that, in the 80's, the skinhead culture attracted both white and black working class youth who forged a specific English identity: shaved head, a couple of tattoos, military style, Dr. Martens boots, braces, and sometimes a Cromby hat. This is what pours out in Meadows' vision: instead of simply focusing on the misery, racism and hatred commonly associated to the nationalist views proclaimed by the skinheads, he depicts the almost naïve image of a group of unusual boys and girls who find a form of identity, not through a set of established beliefs but through masks of violence that provide them shelter and prevent them from simply being regarded by their peers as pure misfits. The ultimate contradiction of identity is the fact that one of the members of the group, Milky (Andrew Shim), is black and is well accepted in a racist milieu, until the moment he becomes the target of Combo's racist hatred and assault. According to Meadows:

² Higson (2001) 'Heritage Cinema and Television' in: British Cultural Studies, p.249

The Eighties was still a time when the skinheads I hung around with understood where they were from. They knew they were second wave skinheads and they knew they weren't original 1969 skinheads but they wanted to be true to that. It was always a working class thing. There were no middle class skinheads where I came from. (...) we were really proud of being working class and were going to wear the equivalent of work-boots, jeans, a white shirt and some braces, which we can all afford, and are going to create an image of something so powerful. So as a kid I was very drawn to that idea and was made to feel very proud of working class. It was political but it was never extreme, one way or the other. Some would be left or right wing – as in terms of labour or conservative rather than militant or fascist – and the bands were much the same³.

The status quo of the first part of the film is shattered when Combo (Stephen Graham who was cast to this film after drawing Meadows' attention with his performance in Guy Ritchie's *Snatch*), released from a three-year period in jail comes back to town filled with hatred and a matching philosophy. Combo's excuse is that the world has changed a lot during his time in prison, and his presence provokes a feeling of unsafeness especially in Woody. After a first attack on Milky, Combo makes an entrance at a party to ask two important questions which will define the first turning point in the film: he questions Milky whether he feels Jamaican or English; after a few moments where Milky himself seems to come to terms with his own identity issues he says he is English. Combo is contented and starts to deliver his speech about being English and having to cope with all the immigrants that come to England and take the jobs which belonged to the English

³ In: www.futuremovies.co.uk

people by birthright. What is striking is that Combo is using more or less the same regrettable words delivered, in a 1979 speech, by Margaret Thatcher, as a prime minister in waiting, when she declared she ‘understood the fears of the British people of being swamped by coloured immigrants’.

The second determinant moment occurs when, referring to the Falklands, Combo is confronted with Shaun’s assault. However, this moment of crisis brings them closer since when Combo draws an imaginary line on the ground to divide those who are with him from those who are not, Milky and Shaun are ready to cross to his side. Again the view on national identity is stressed and puts at stake the notion of being British against a confused sense of Englishness. Another determinant moment takes place at the summit of the National Front. Historically the National Front was founded in 1967 and claims to be *The party of White family values*, who defends the interests of the British people. In Meadows’ film Lenny, the political leader, having on the back an enormous St. George’s flag, later robbed by Shaun as a memento, delivers a speech that can have a double effect depending on the nature of the viewer’s political affiliations: to the ordinary listener, it is clearly a far-right speech about ultra-nationalism and racism, whereas to the ears of those tired of their condition of being underpaid working class young men, proud to be English, eager for novelty and the sense of belonging, Lenny is the spokesman of a lost country, desperate to find a geographical, religious and political identity, who wants to honour the flag of their ancestors and to continue its tradition, even though their unfamiliar with their roots and with the fact that the idea of being British encompasses four nations.

Near the end of the film Combo’s attack on Milky represents a key moment when he tries to crystallise his conflicting thoughts on what he feels about a friend and the set of rules he has to abide by being member of a political party who hates on account of skin colour. Thus, the National Front speech will ratify the hatred Combo deploys when he assaults Milky. Combo’s motives have been unfolded in the previous scenes and dialogues: he has been sent to jail alone, carrying the

burden of the blame that was not his alone, he has returned to be rejected by the girl he has proposed to, and he has been brainwashed by the National Front to whom he represents the charismatic leader that the NF used as a pawn to recruit more skinheads into their racist agenda.

According to Meadows' view, Combo is just one skinhead among a group of many others who did not turn out to be violent attackers. In the director's words:

(...) most of the real old skins who were into the music and the clothes went on to be scooter boys to separate themselves from the racism. I always wanted This Is England to tell the truth about skinheads⁴.

In search of this *truth* Meadows manages to rediscover his own self-geography, by revisiting his own adolescent years, starting from the name of the protagonist who bears an unmistakable parallel with his own name Shane (Shaun) Meadows (Fields). It is also a poignant state-of-the-nation address film about the importance of peer pressure and the results of an excess of nationalism. However, in order to surpass the realm of the ordinary of making yet another film about the eighties and the skinhead subculture, Meadows created devices to present the image that this is not a film for or against racism, this film is *his* England and Meadows walks down his own private memory lane, trying to cope with his own biography, this time through a director's eye and the comfort of a camera to direct his interests. In order to create a more realistic portrait of the eighties, Meadows has looked into a lot of footage which has been kept at ITN and has got permission to use some original images throughout the film, namely those related to the Falklands War. His vision about the war is demolishing:

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/apr/21/culture.features>

It was an incredibly suspicious war, in the same way America and the UK got involved in Iraq. People can see that now. Obviously there were more people against going into Iraq than there were going into the Falklands...but the shame I carry as a British resident, was that it was a war handled in the media as if it were a World Cup summer. Like when England goes to the World Cup, there are Union Jacks on the papers, and you can look at headlines from the time and it sounded just like that. Ultimately, I was privy to footage from ITN archives – that wasn't shown on television – of the people we were fighting, and it was shameful. It was bullying. It was really horrible. How could we have been proud of winning that? It was the equivalent of putting Mike Tyson in the ring with a 7 year-old kid from an infant school. So that was always running in the back of this film – the root level of that horrible racism, that bullying and violence that exists in someone can also be inherent in a nation without us knowing it.⁵

Some of the identity issues referred above are present in Meadows' report when he starts by confessing his shame as a 'British resident' for having participated in the War and then goes on establishing the comparison with England. Thus, when he talks about a nation, England, he is also, in a broader sense, naming Britain. His own impressions from his childhood and the parallel with the script he has written are easily identifiable; As Meadows unfolds the plot of his film and takes us through the characters of Shaun and Woody he is also recollecting his young boy days. By writing the script and directing the film has helped Meadows perpetuate his own self-image:

⁵ In: www.futuremovies.co.uk

Like most 11-year-old kids who wore jumpers with animals on, I got bullied by the older kids at school. So I looked for my own tribe to join. It was the skinhead movement that enamoured me the most. (...) To be a part of most of the other factions you had to be a little rich kid. But to be a skinhead, all you needed was a pair of jeans, some work boots, a white shirt and a shaved head. (...) My older sister was going out with a skinhead who took me under his wing and taught me about the roots of the whole culture. (...) I learned from him that skinheads had grown out of working class English lads working side by side with West Indians in factories and shipyards in the late-60s. The black lads would take the whites to blues parties where they were exposed to ska music for the first time. Soon, Jamaican artists like Desmond Dekker, the Upsetters and Toots And The Maytals were making a living out of songs aimed directly at English white kids. This was where the whole skinhead thing came from - it was inherently multicultural⁶.

This accounts for the realistic trait which has been one of the major sources of the applause that the film has received both by the critics and the media in general. It is relevant to note, bearing in mind the cultural idea of being English as opposed to being simply British, stated previously, how Meadows often repeats the word *English*, reproducing the discourse of his characters. Through the eyes of Shaun and the rest of the gang, Meadows talks about a country, England that has its own flag, a football team and a patron saint, and reinforces the idea of Englishness in a country that is a United Kingdom with one Queen who is commonly referred to as the Queen of England! It is also this quest for national identity that has enabled the National Front programme to gain some prominence,

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/apr/21/culture.features>

though nowadays the party has been enlarged to accommodate the rest of the kingdom and definitely adopted the consensual name of British National Front (BNF).

Finally, in terms of visual culture, the screen violence delineated in *This is England* is another element to take into account when accounting for the film's popularity. The moment of climax of Combo's rage is cathartic from the viewer's perspective since it fulfils the expectations in terms of the crescendo that has been created from the moment of Combo's homecoming. When it seems that Combo and Milky are bonding, sharing a joint, and using their differences to reinforce what brings them closer, the assault is bloody and explicit and makes the viewers uncomfortable and willing to turn their faces away from the screen. The truth is Combo does not attack Milky because he is a 'nigger' (using the words he utters before he starts the beating), that is the excuse he uses to make it plausible; he does it because Milky has something that Combo never had the chance to have: the comfort of happy family made of loving grandparents, parents, uncles and cousins. The moment Combo regains conscience from his sociopath frenzy he can no longer become a role model, or a father figure for Shaun. The boy's *anagnorisis*, in an Aristotelian sense, coincides with the recognition the viewer experiences after the attack is over. However, unlike the Greek dramatists, Meadows has no restraint as far as maintaining the blood away from the eyes of the spectators: in order to perceive Shaun's experience, we have to witness the close-ups of the punches in Milky's face and the blood being spat when he strikes Arthur.

The final images contrast in terms of total quietness with the previous violent scene: we watch original footage from the Falklands War - the surrender to the British troops and the celebration of victory, on 14th June 1982, 74 days before its beginning - and this establishes the paradox with the bucolic picture of the last image of Shaun, on the riverbank, still dressed in trendy gear but ready to toss away his St. George's flag, which metaphorically stands for his acknowledgement that he has lost his father, that Combo along with his forged beliefs will never replace his

loss and in a cultural perspective, the identity of an Englishman cannot be forged on hatred or on mere 'ethnic' loyalties. Symbolically, the English flag adrift in the ocean represents the state of a nation confounded in a long debate for identity. The film is dedicated to the memory of Torgoose's mother, Sharon, who died of cancer on 29th December 2005, and comparing the biographies of Meadows and Thomas Torgoose we can acknowledge the rapport between them, in terms of personal history, that is why in his construction of the self through the lenses of the camera Meadows has incorporated a bit of Torgoose's personal views as young boy moving on into his adolescent years, during troubling times.

MEADOWS' FILMOGRAPHY⁷

Director:

1. Le Donk & Scor-zay-zee (2009)
2. Somers Town (2008)
3. This Is England (2006)
4. The Stairwell (2005)
5. Northern Soul (2004)
6. Dead Man's Shoes (2004)
7. Once Upon a Time in the Midlands (2002)
8. A Room for Romeo Brass (1999)
9. 24 7: Twenty Four Seven (1997)
... aka "Twentyfour Seven" - UK (*video title*), USA (*video title*)
... aka "Twenty Four Seven" - International (*English title*)
10. Small Time (1996/II)
11. Where's the Money, Ronnie? (1996)

Writer:

1. Le Donk & Scor-zay-zee (2009) (writer)
2. This Is England (2006) (written by)
3. The Stairwell (2005) (uncredited)
4. Northern Soul (2004) (writer)
5. Dead Man's Shoes (2004) (written by)
6. Once Upon a Time in the Midlands (2002) (written by)

⁷ In: www.imdb.com

7. A Room for Romeo Brass (1999) (writer)
8. 24 7: Twenty Four Seven (1997) (written by)
... aka "Twentyfour Seven" - UK (*video title*), USA (*video title*)
... aka "Twenty Four Seven" - International (*English title*)
9. Small Time (1996/II) (writer)
10. Where's the Money, Ronnie? (1996) (writer)

Actor:

1. Once Upon a Time in the Midlands (2002) Bingo Caller
2. A Room for Romeo Brass (1999) (as Shaun Fields) Male Nurse
3. 24 7: Twenty Four Seven (1997) (as Lord Shane Meadows of Eldon) Man with Saucepan on Head
... aka "Twentyfour Seven" - UK (*video title*), USA (*video title*)
... aka "Twenty Four Seven" - International (*English title*)
4. Small Time (1996/II) Jumbo
5. Where's the Money, Ronnie? (1996) Ronnie

Editor:

1. Northern Soul (2004) (as Shaun Fields)
2. Small Time (1996/II)
3. Where's the Money, Ronnie? (1996) (uncredited)

Producer:

1. Small Time (1996/II) (producer)
2. Where's the Money, Ronnie? (1996) (producer)

Cinematographer:

1. Where's the Money, Ronnie? (1996)
- 2.

Camera and Electrical Department:

1. Where's the Money, Ronnie? (1996) (camera operator)

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¹ In: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/1999/dec/18/weekend7.weekend5>

¹ Higson (2001) 'Heritage Cinema and Television' in: British Cultural Studies, p.249

¹ In: www.futuremovies.co.uk

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/apr/21/culture.features>

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¹ In: www.imdb.com