

This is England: Growing Up in Thatcher's Britain

David Buckingham

This essay is part of a larger project, Growing Up Modern: Childhood, Youth and Popular Culture Since 1945. More information about the project, and illustrated versions of all the essays can be found at: <https://davidbuckingham.net/growing-up-modern/>.

In a pivotal scene in Shane Meadows' 2006 film *This is England*, the skinhead Combo, recently released from prison, summons the other members of his erstwhile gang. In a blistering speech, he attempts to recruit them to the cause of the extreme right-wing political party, the National Front. Discovering that the youngest member, Shaun, had a father who was killed in the Falklands War, he explodes:

That's what this nation has been built on, proud men. Proud fucking warriors! Two thousand years this little tiny fucking island has been raped and pillaged, by people... two fucking world wars! Men have laid down their lives for this. For this... and for what? So people can stick their fucking flag in the ground and say yeah! This is England. And this is England, and this is England.

As he says these last words, Combo gestures first to the ground, then to his heart and finally to his head. England, he claims, is not just a physical place, a country: it also lives in our hearts, and in our minds.

In a later scene, when Combo brings his 'troops' (as he calls them) to attend a National Front meeting, it is clear how this resurgent idea of England is being taken up in the interests of violent racism. It is this racism that subsequently leads them to terrorise the Asians in the local neighbourhood; and it is invoked by Combo in his almost fatal attack on Milky, the one black member of the gang, that takes place at the culmination of the film.

As its title suggests, *This is England* is to some extent a 'state of the nation' film, yet it is highly ambivalent about the very idea of nationhood. The story is set in 1983, in a town apparently in the East Midlands, in the heart of England (albeit one with a coastline). Yet the action is introduced and interspersed with montages of news footage, which locate it not only within the popular culture of the time, but also in relation to wider political developments – not least the Falklands War itself, with which it begins and ends. In fact, the film reflects a wider sense of crisis in English (or British) national identity during a period of significant economic and social transformation.

And yet *This is England* is also a 'coming of age' story, which is partly based on the autobiography of its director and writer Shane Meadows. The central character is twelve-year-old Shaun Fields (a thinly-veiled pseudonym for Meadows himself), who is played by Thomas Turgoose. Shaun is bullied by his school-mates, and is still grieving for the loss of his father, when he is taken under the wing of a skinhead gang led by the affable Woody (Joseph Gilgun). When Combo (Stephen Graham) returns to the neighbourhood, he challenges Woody's leadership, and the gang splits, with Shaun choosing to follow Combo. Combo becomes a kind of alternative father

figure, tutoring Shaun in how to commit racist intimidation; but when he batters Milky, Combo's psychopathic tendencies eventually get out of control.

The film concludes with a disillusioned Shaun hurling the St. George's flag – a present from Combo, and a symbol of the National Front's racist version of Englishness – into the sea. In the closing shot, Shaun looks straight into the camera, in a self-conscious echo of the end of Francois Truffaut's *Les quatre cent coups* (1959), a much earlier film about a child coming of age. Like the look of Truffaut's hero, Shaun's look is almost defiant: he will survive, it seems to say, but whatever happens to him in the future is unlikely to be easy.

Like Truffaut, Meadows went on to follow his hero's uneven progress to adulthood – and that of his other characters – in his subsequent work. The film was followed by three television mini-series made for Channel Four: *This is England '86* (four 45-minute episodes, broadcast in 2010), '88 (three episodes, 2011) and '90 (four episodes, including a feature-length finale, 2015) – a total of nine hours of television. The film won numerous accolades, notably at the British Independent Film Awards, while the TV series have gained several BAFTAs. The film has been much the most successful of Meadows' nine features to date, while the TV series gained healthy ratings of around 3-4 million.

This is England is especially relevant to my concerns in *Growing Up Modern*, in several ways. Made a quarter of a century after the period in which they are set, the various installments in the story clearly offer a particular interpretation of the past. The historical setting is by no means merely a backdrop, let alone a picturesque or nostalgic one. *This is England* speaks to popular memories, and in some respects attempts to create them; yet as it looks back and attempts to understand the massive social transformations that took place under Margaret Thatcher, it also reflects the concerns of contemporary Britain, the Britain of Tony Blair and David Cameron.

The focus, of course, is specifically on the implications of those transformations for the working class; and to this extent, *This is England* needs to be understood in relation to a longer tradition of social realism in British cinema and television. In the original film, the interpretation is quite sharply political; but the TV series also provide powerful, multi-dimensional stories of working class lives that in many respects go beyond the limitations of earlier film and television representations.

At the same time, the film and the series that followed it are precisely to do with *growing up*. As in several of Meadows' other films, children and young people are central to the narrative – although this is not essentially a film for children. (Meadows was apparently outraged by the British Board of Film Classification giving the film an '18' certificate – although considering its violence and 'bad' language, he can hardly have been surprised.) Shaun's 'coming of age' in the film is followed through in the three subsequent series; but we also see many of the older characters transition, however unevenly and painfully, to some kind of adulthood. While the male characters of the film remain in view, it is increasingly the female characters – especially Woody's girlfriend Lol, who appears somewhat marginally in the film – who come to occupy centre stage. In this continuing narrative of maturation, the

serial form of television plays a particularly important role, as we revisit the characters after two-year breaks between series.

This is England has a certain documentary realism, but it is by no means a merely sociological account. It has a powerful and distinctive aesthetic style, which is evident in Meadows' other films, and is especially apparent in the editing, the camerawork and the use of music. It is also profoundly emotional to watch. Themes of loss, regret, abandonment and even spirituality increasingly come to the fore as the three series proceed – and they operate in ways that, here again, seem unique to 'long form' serial television. However, *This is England* is not some kind of extended 'misery memoir' either: it is often very funny, and sometimes wildly celebratory. It moves between these different elements in ways that are sometimes awkward, but often moving and insightful.

Looking back to the eighties

Like its television sequels, the film *This is England* begins with a short montage of newsreel and television footage from the period. We are shown elements of popular culture: the puppet TV presenter Roland Rat, the Rubik's cube and Pacman, BMX bikes, the band Duran Duran, an aerobics video. Yet much of the focus is on images of social conflict and unrest: the miners' strike, skinheads on National Front marches, the Brixton riots, the Greenham Common protests. The sequence begins with Margaret Thatcher, and we also see Thatcher and Ronald Reagan side by side. A major focus here, and in the montage sequences later in the film, is the Falklands War: there are images of amputated legs and body bags that were apparently deemed too upsetting to be shown at the time. And the first image of the film itself is of a photograph on Shaun's bedside table of his father in his uniform, accompanied by the voice of Thatcher from his radio alarm.

The montage sequence is deftly edited to a reggae/ska track, *54-46 Was My Number* by Toots and the Maytals. The song was originally released in 1968, and was covered by the British reggae band Aswad in 1983, the year in which *This is England* is set. The lyrics refer to the lead singer's time in prison, and are implicitly echoed by Combo when he dramatically appears later in the film. Yet the track, and some of the imagery in the montage, also prepares us for the film's focus on youth culture – and specifically on skinheads and associated groups, such as the anti-racist Two Tone movement that arose right at the end of the 1970s. As we'll see, there are elements of nostalgia, and even of glamour, here; but they are set within a decidedly bleak and dismal portrait of the effects of Thatcher's policies on working-class communities.

Meadows has frequently been represented as a regional film-maker. He grew up in the ordinary market town of Uttoxeter, in the English Midlands; and with one exception (*Somers Town*, 2008), all his films are set in Midlands locations. While there are some rural landscapes (most notably in 2004's *Dead Man's Shoes*), these are rarely pastoral or picturesque. *This is England* was mostly filmed in Nottingham and in the port of Grimsby: almost all the action takes place in run-down public housing estates, derelict buildings and decrepit rented flats. As Jack Newsinger and Jason Scott have described, Meadows has quite pragmatically used the system of public funding in the UK, which (at least for a time in the 2000s) explicitly supported

independent film production outside London. While this system has generally allowed him to retain a high degree of artistic control, it has also enabled his films to reach international audiences and win international awards. Yet these films clearly offer a very different version of Englishness when compared with the 'heritage' costume dramas or posh romantic comedies that are traditionally popular in global markets.

Like many of Meadows' other films, *This is England* portrays a working class community that has effectively been eroded, if not destroyed, by long-term economic decline – and, more recently, by Thatcher's aggressive dismantling both of the country's industrial base and of its welfare state. Thatcher re-appears throughout the film, in further clips and montages, on radio and TV, and even in graffiti – 'Maggie is a twat'. As in Meadows' second feature *Twenty Four Seven* (1997), we see the demoralizing effects of unemployment, poor housing and welfare cuts, both on family life and on the wider community. Elements of traditional working-class culture are still maintained through institutions like the working men's club (where Lol and Woody eventually choose to have their wedding reception at the very end of the TV series); but much of the sense of collective action celebrated in earlier representations of the industrial working class – from Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* to some of the social realist dramas of the 1960s – is all but gone.

Meadows has described *This is England* as 'probably the closest thing to a political film I will ever make'. While it is obviously an interpretation of an earlier time, it also has some parallels with the period in which it was actually made. There are obvious comparisons between the Falklands war and Tony Blair's war in Iraq; and by the time the last installment, *This is England '90*, appeared, its images of decline seemed relevant once more as the effects of the Conservative-led Coalition government's austerity measures began to kick in. Meanwhile, extreme right-wing politics and racism are still widely evident today; and the post-industrial decline of the 1980s has by no means been reversed.

As critics such as Vicky Lebeau and Paul Dave have noted, Meadows frequently uses the figure of the child as a focus for exploring the 'social fallout' and 'dereliction' of Thatcher's Conservatism. Aside from *This is England*, children also feature centrally in *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999) and *Somers Town*, while older young people are key to *Twenty Four Seven* and *Dead Man's Shoes*. However, Meadows' children are not innocent, nor are they idealized: for the most part, these are not happy, carefree childhoods. Yet neither is the child a focus for pity. Poverty is ever-present, but it appears as a fact of life: this is not 'poverty porn'.

Youth culture plays an ambivalent role here. As we have seen, it is flagged up in the film's opening montage, and is central to the first half of the narrative. The grieving Shaun goes to school and is teased for his flared tracksuit trousers (which his father had bought for him); and the playground is full of the youth 'tribes' of the period – skinheads, rude boys, new Romantics. Woody's gang, which he eventually encounters on his way home, are obviously 'second wave' skinheads (the originals date back to the late 1960s and early 1970s); but they are also mostly good-natured and affectionate rather than aggressive or threatening.

In a later sequence, we see Shaun's mother taking him to buy a new pair of shoes: his attempts to come away with a pair of Doctor Martens (compulsory skinhead footwear) are thwarted. Nevertheless, Shaun's initiation into the skinhead gang continues: the girls shave his hair, and Woody presents him with another compulsory style item, a Ben Sherman shirt. Complete with braces and rolled-up jeans, Shaun is given admittance to the gang: while he remains something of a junior mascot, he is congratulated on his transition from boyhood to manhood. Significantly, while Shaun's mother is unhappy about the haircut, she is quite comfortable about leaving her son in the care of a significantly older group of youths. The following sequences – again accompanied by a Toots and the Maytals tune, *Louie Louie* – show a montage of the gang playing street football, jumping into the local swimming pool and generally horsing around. In what has become a slightly over-used Shane Meadows trademark, there are several slow-motion shots of them strutting down the streets, effectively asserting their ownership of the territory. There is also a long sequence where the male members of the gang, all clad in diverse forms of outlandish fancy dress, are shown on a 'hunting expedition', smashing up what remains of derelict buildings in a kind of energetic orgy of destruction.

These are enormously attractive sequences, which capture some of the pleasures of working-class youth culture in a way that is still comparatively rare in cinema. For Shaun, his affiliation with the gang comes close to restoring some kind of happy childhood. It offers him a new surrogate family in the wake of his father's death; but it also provides a nurturing community, even an alternative to the traditional working-class community that has been lost to post-industrialism – however imagined that community may ultimately be. Of course, it's a predominantly masculine culture: at least at this point in the wider narrative of *This is England*, the female characters are relatively marginalized.

As Tim Snelson and Emma Sutton have argued, this image of youth culture has some things in common with academic analyses of the time – particularly the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University. For these scholars, subcultural groups like the skinheads represented a response to social and economic decline, among young people who would otherwise have had little hope for the future. They offered a means of winning back some self-respect, if only through 'style' (fashion, music and other cultural symbols), and in the world of leisure rather than paid employment. There is undoubtedly a degree of romanticism here, both in the academic analysis and in the first half of Meadows' film itself. Unlike the academics, however, Meadows resists the temptation to politicize his image of youth culture: if anything, it is more about escapism and fun than the kind of political or ideological resistance that CCCS critics were keen to identify.

Nevertheless, this affectionate, even glamorous, portrayal is eventually disrupted by the dramatic arrival of Combo, and his subsequent attempts to recruit the gang to his National Front politics. While Combo expresses utter contempt for Thatcher and what he sees as her pointless war, the ideology he espouses is implicitly seen as a consequence of her policies. As is shown in the film's opening montage, Thatcher's rhetoric came to focus on various kinds of enemies, both without (as in the Falklands war) and within (as in the miners' strike). The popular racism of the National Front – which is most directly shown in the meeting that Combo brings his group to attend

– is represented as a reassertion of pride, not just in national identity but also in a particular kind of working-class masculinity. The following sequences show how, having broken away from Woody and his friends, Combo and his ‘troops’ attempt to establish *their* ownership of the territory, intimidating Asian kids playing football and threatening a Pakistani shopkeeper. Here we have a direct echo of the previous celebratory images, as the members of Combo’s new racist gang (including Shaun) are shown walking in slow motion towards the camera, shot from below to emphasise the threat they pose.

If the film looks back to the eighties, then, it does so not with a rose-tinted nostalgia, but with some ambivalence. Meadows himself has been explicit about his attempt to ‘tell the truth’ about skinheads, and indeed to recover and even redeem aspects of skinhead culture. In an interview in *Indie London* in 2006, he described how he became a skinhead himself partly as a refuge from bullying. He apparently based the character of Woody on a boyfriend of his older sister:

[He] took me under his wing and taught me about the roots of the whole culture. He was a nice bloke who bore no relation to the stereotypical racist job that people now associate with that time... 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. This was where the whole skinhead thing came from – it was inherently multicultural. But nowadays when I tell people that I used to be skinhead, they think I’m saying I used to be racist. My film shows how right wing politics started to creep into skinhead culture in the 1980s and change people’s perception of it.

The gang in *This is England* is certainly identified with black music, and it is to some extent multicultural – although it only has one black member, and to that extent the film might be accused of tokenism. However, I’m not convinced by Meadows’ claim that racism was something that ‘crept in’ to skinhead culture only in the 1980s. The relationship between skinheads and black (African-Caribbean) culture was complex, and not all skinheads were racist, but racism was certainly prevalent among them in the 1970s – indeed, it was this that partly accounted for the emergence of the Rock Against Racism movement, and eventually Two-Tone music. It might be argued that Meadows underplays the significant emotional appeal of racism, and its centrality to skinhead culture – a centrality that remains, as studies of contemporary skinheads in eastern Europe or Russia, or indeed online, certainly verify.

By contrast, in *This is England*, racism and fascism appear to come from outside, in the form of the returning character of Combo, who has taken up these ideas in prison. They also appeal primarily to the ‘misfits’ in the gang. Apart from Shaun, Combo’s other followers are relatively marginal characters; and the key members of Woody’s gang clearly disassociate themselves from him. And of course, in the final images of the film, as the St. George’s flag sinks into the water, this is an ideology that Shaun (its central character) decisively rejects.

In some respects, the film might also be accused of personalizing politics, or seeking to explain political motivations in primarily psychological terms. In particular, there is an issue here that recurs throughout Meadows’ work, that of absent or ineffective

fathers. Thus, it appears that Combo's attack on Milky is motivated more by his jealousy of black people's apparently nurturing family life – and in particular, of Milky's 'good' father – than by any racial prejudice. Likewise, Sean initially joins the gang largely because he seems to be motivated by his disenchantment, and even his desire for revenge, at his father's death. The National Front ideology provides him with a cause, even a rationale, that fills the gap left by his absent father. Combo represents a bullying, menacing form of masculine power, yet he also attempts to nurture Shaun; and in a key scene, shot largely in extreme close-up, Combo effectively steps in to take Shaun's father's place. Yet Combo's emotional weaknesses eventually find expression in a loss of control, in his frenzied attack on Milky. Here again, there are echoes of Meadows' other films: characters such as Darcy in *Twenty Four Seven*, Morrell in *A Room for Romeo Brass* and ultimately Richard in *Dead Man's Shoes* all eventually lose control, exposing the almost psychotic underside of masculine power.

If the first part of the film might be accused of presenting a rather rose-tinted view of skinheads, therefore, this is clearly not sustained. I don't think it would be fair to accuse Meadows of a kind of sentimental nostalgia, let alone of backward-looking conservatism. The first part of the film portrays the moment of subcultural pleasure and power with considerable verve; but the events that follow show that the moment is lost, and cannot be recaptured. We cannot return to a 'golden age' – however real or imaginary it may have been. Change and loss are inevitable. Indeed, as we shall see, it is these themes of change and loss – and the difficulty and complexity of our relationships with the past – that become the key preoccupations of *This is England* as it moves into television.

Growing up on telly

The three mini-series that subsequently took up the story of *This is England* appeared over a period of six years. These series share some common ground with other long-running Channel Four drama serials, especially *Shameless* (which is set in a similar working-class community) and the youth drama *Skins* – and in fact some of the writers and directors of both shows also worked on *This is England*. Nevertheless, *This is England* '86, '88 and '90 are perhaps better seen as special, one-off 'event dramas' – and as David Rolinson and Faye Woods have described, this was primarily how they were packaged and promoted by Channel Four. Yet, as in *Shameless* and *Skins*, and indeed more mainstream TV serials, we follow the same cast of characters across an extended period of time. Unlike the film, which focuses largely on Shaun's perspective, this is an ensemble drama, with around a dozen major characters. Numerous minor characters from the film are developed more fully, and some new ones are introduced, especially parents and older adults.

As in a typical drama serial, there are several main storylines that are interwoven across the episodes. Perhaps the least interesting of these (in my view at least) is that of Shaun, the central character of the film. *This is England* '86 begins with him sitting his final examination at school: not coincidentally, the subject is history. Across the following episodes we see him finding work and then attending college, firstly as a drama student, and eventually on a photography course. His mother starts a relationship with Mr. Sandu, the Asian shopkeeper whom Shaun had terrorized in

the film; Shaun is disgusted to find them having sex one day, and leaves home for a while, only to return eventually. His relationship with 'Smell' (Michelle), the girl he took up with in the film, is rekindled in the first series; but we later see him get together with another girl on his drama course, and he breaks up with Smell. By the end of the final series, he has found another girl, a fellow student on his photography course. By this point, Shaun has moved to the margins, and becomes more of an observer and a member of the wider group than a leading character.

As the first two series proceed, it is Woody and his girlfriend Lol who come to occupy the central roles. In the first episode, most of the characters convene for Woody and Lol's wedding, but Woody proves unable to go through with it. His uncertainty is not to do with Lol herself, but with his unwillingness to make the transition to being a conventional adult: when his parents turn up unexpectedly, it is 'a reminder of what we could end up being'. As Woody explains, it was in order to escape this fate that he became a skinhead; and we later learn that his father used to be a 'mod' as a young man, before turning to safe, unfashionable respectability. Woody has a job at a factory, and is gradually being set up to replace the manager, but here again he is less than willing, and eventually fails to take up the opportunity. He does set up home with Lol, renovating a decrepit council flat, but they eventually separate and Woody returns to his parents' home (we later learn that he has attempted suicide). The pair are finally married, but not until the end of the third series, by which time a great deal more has happened...

In fact it is Lol – a relatively minor character in the film – who becomes the main focus of the narrative, especially in the second series. In the first episode of series one, her father Mick returns to the family home after a long absence; and the narrative that then unfolds reveals the details of his abuse of her as a child. When Lol discovers that Mick has raped another member of the gang, Trev, she turns up at the house armed with a hammer; and when he attacks her and tries to rape her, she batters him to death – although ultimately it is the returning Combo who voluntarily takes the rap. The second series focuses on the traumatic fall-out of these events. We rediscover Lol as a single mother, having given birth to a child fathered not by Woody but by Milky, with whom she had a brief affair while on the rebound in the first series. Lol is still haunted by her father, and eventually attempts to take her own life. It is only at the very end of this series that she is reunited with Woody. By the third series, Lol has faded a little, but she has also taken on a maturity and authority that makes her a kind of moral centre for the group as a whole. Meanwhile, the focus of the abuse storyline has shifted to Lol's younger sister Kelly, who eventually takes to heroin as she discovers the full horror of her father's behaviour.

Running through these storylines is the narrative of Combo, who returns unexpectedly late in series one, having heard that his mother is dying. In the following episode, Combo appears at Lol's family home just as she has killed her father. He proceeds to frame himself for the murder, almost as a kind of atonement for his attack on Milky in the film – 'let me do a good thing', he says. Combo is imprisoned, and doesn't reappear until the middle of series two, again at a critical moment: Lol goes to visit him in prison, and her sense of guilt – not so much over murdering her father, but over Combo taking the blame – partly feeds into her suicide attempt. Combo is eventually released in series three, a reformed and redeemed character; although the past eventually catches up with him, as Milky

carries through a promise he had made to revenge Combo's near-fatal attack on him in the film.

Amid these four main stories are those of several minor characters. For example, 'Gadget' (Gary), a member of the gang, is seduced by Trudy, whom we first saw in the film as a shop assistant attempting to dissuade Shaun from buying Doctor Martens boots. Their relationship is played for laughs, as she gets him to perform as Blake Carrington from *Dynasty* and then as Clark Gable, while engaging in various uncomfortable (for him) sexual practices. Meanwhile, Trudy has a son who is frequently described as being the spitting image of another minor character, Meggy, who almost dies after having a heart attack on the toilet at Woody and Lol's abortive wedding. These stories in some respects provide light relief from the main narrative strands: the shifts between comedy and tragedy are occasionally rather awkward, but there are also some striking parallels and painful ironies in the juxtapositions between them. Episodes frequently conclude with montage sequences cutting across the whole range of characters; and there are also more celebratory moments where most, if not all, of the group come back together – to watch or play football, to attend a karaoke night or a music festival, or for the two weddings.

As this brief account implies, the series' central preoccupation is to do with the relation between the present and the past. This is, of course, partly about 'growing up': over time, we see the characters (and indeed the actors who play them) grow up and change. However, it also entails a broader concern with memory, and with the passing of time itself. The past is sometimes viewed with nostalgia, but sometimes with regret and a sense of loss, and sometimes with horror.

Thus, on one level, the narrative is structured in terms of a familiar dynamic of 'lost and found'. When we discover Shaun at the start of series one, he has lost contact with the gang; and the others eventually gather together to invite him back, serenading him from the street outside his bedroom window in the middle of the night. The gang (or group) represents values of friendship, loyalty and solidarity that are frequently invoked by the characters at moments of crisis. Meanwhile, the narrative of Woody and Lol is also one of love lost and found: Woody's attempt to re-run their wedding at the end of series one is overtaken by events (the murder of Mick), and the couple are estranged throughout series two until the very end, where Woody appears at the hospital after Lol's suicide attempt. As he hobbles unsteadily into the room, he tells her, 'I've got a mental idea, me. Why don't we fucking grow up?'

On the other hand, there are other events from the past – Mick's abuse of his daughters, Combo's attack on Milky – that persist into the present, in ways that prove traumatic and destructive. The past contains roads that were not taken, problems that were not resolved, and things that were not said; it includes events that we should remember, but others we would prefer to forget. Forgiveness sometimes proves impossible to achieve. Especially in the second season, where Lol seeks help from a religious nurse (who prays for her), and eventually seeks refuge in a church, these issues take on an almost spiritual dimension, accentuated by the use of a range of religious music. Likewise, there is a different kind of 'lost and found' movement in the departure and return of Combo: by the very end, he has become

an almost saintly figure, but his attempts to atone for his past cannot succeed, and he must be sacrificed.

The fact that the narrative is interrupted – there are gaps of two years in story time between the installments, and an even longer gap in real time between the second (screened in 2011) and the third (in 2015) – accentuates the significance of this theme. We rediscover the familiar characters at the start of each new series, albeit with a mixture of anxiety and pleasure. Finding out what has become of them is sometimes an occasion for comedy, sometimes for surprise, but it can also provoke a sense of loss or regret. Some of these changes are superficial, although they reflect more significant life transitions. Between the end of the film and the start of the TV series, for example, Shaun has changed from a small child to a lumpy adolescent, while Woody has abandoned his skinhead look in favour of a kind of mod hairstyle. Other changes seem more radical, and establish questions that we look to the ensuing narrative to explain. Early in series two, for example, we find the charismatic former gang leader Woody back living with his parents in their middle-class semi-detached home, along with a new, decidedly conventional girlfriend: despite the mod haircut, he appears to be turning into his father, although he is still resisting the prospect. At the start of series three, we discover that several of the female characters have become dinner ladies in the local school; and some of the male characters are there, cadging free meals – and as one of them says (with an implicit reference to the appeal of the series itself), ‘it’s about the nostalgia, innit, that’s why we come here’. Indeed, as the three series proceed, we find that change is never absolute, and that the past will always return in some form.

Memory here is less a matter of popular or social memory – although the episodes do frequently begin with montage sequences of historical material, like the one that opens the film. Rather, memory is more a matter of individual psychology; and even the montage sequences seem carefully selected to match the emotions and experiences of the characters, or to reflect ironically upon them. This is also the case with other historical material that is used in passing: in season two, for example, Lol is seen watching the Christmas episode of the soap *EastEnders*, in which the character of Pauline Fowler visits the villain ‘Dirty Den’ in prison, just before Lol herself goes to visit Combo. This use of historical material is thus rather more than a means of evoking nostalgia, or simply providing contemporary context; but it is also somewhat less politically pointed than in the film. Even in the final episode, where the montage takes us back to the racist politics of the early 1980s and to sequences from the original film, this seems less a matter of depicting the ‘state of the nation’ than reminding us of the motivation that leads to Milky’s final killing of Combo. (He doesn’t do the deed himself, and clearly regrets it, thereby retaining our sympathy. But in keeping with the broader themes, it appears that he had made a promise to his family at the time of the original attack that he would seek revenge. Here again, it seems that the past cannot easily be forgotten or forgiven.)

This theme finds its most harrowing manifestation in Lol’s story, which dominates the first two seasons. Lol’s father Mick – with his wheezing breath and moist beard – becomes an almost demonic presence, even a kind of bogeyman. Lol’s attempt to seek refuge in religion fails, when he appears in the church pew behind her. In the montage that accompanies the pumping out of her stomach (after her suicide attempt), we see a collection of images, some of which are quite abstract and

horrific, but most of which represent memories of events that we ourselves have seen in earlier scenes. Only once the memories are purged (or even exorcised) is she reunited with Woody. If the second series represents Lol's attempts to re-negotiate her memories, it offers a similar function for the viewer.

While the film of *This is England* can be seen as a kind of 'coming of age' story, therefore, the three TV series offer a more complex, multi-faceted set of reflections on the passing of time, and the experience of young people growing into adulthood. Of course, these differences partly reflect the differences between the respective media. At an hour and a half, the film is a fairly economical narrative, focused on one main character. The nine hours of the television series allow it to be much more diverse and even sprawling – although on repeat viewing, I have been struck by how tightly and carefully constructed it is. As I'll argue below, these differences also have implications in terms of the social and political dimensions of both the film and the TV series.

Art cinema and social realism

This is England, and Meadows' work more generally, can to some extent be located within the various traditions of social realism in British cinema. The history here runs from the documentary movement of the 1930s, through the 'social problem' films of the 1950s and the 'kitchen sink dramas' of the 1960s, on to the so-called 'Brit grit' of the 1990s. Such films are often taken as emblematic of British cinema more broadly, although it should be emphasised that social realism (however we choose to define it) remains somewhat marginal within the wider context of film production and exhibition in the UK. Such films are still few and far between: they are often independently produced, on limited budgets, and only rarely provide big hits at the box office.

There are elements in Meadows' work that recall the films of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, and the television work of Alan Clarke, for example; and in some respects, his work was made possible by the international success during the 1990s of popular films set in working-class locations – albeit films as diverse as *The Full Monty*, *Billy Elliot*, *Trainspotting* and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*. Even so, there are some significant differences and departures here: Meadows is a social realist, but he is also rather more than this.

As critics such as Samantha Lay and David Forrest have suggested, Meadows can be seen as part of a broader movement in British film in the last couple of decades that owes as much to art cinema as it does to social realism. This more 'poetic' realism is represented in the work of directors like Lynne Ramsay, Andrea Arnold, Pavel Pawlikowski and Joanna Hogg – whose studies of marginalised children and young people in films like *Ratcatcher*, *Fish Tank* and *The Unloved* will feature in other essays in *Growing Up Modern*. As David Forrest suggests, these films are less concerned with overt political messages, and largely avoid the didactic approach of directors like Loach. Many of them address social issues such as drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, poverty and migration, but they are far from the 'campaigning' films of the 1950s and 1960s. The emphasis in this new 'new wave' is more on imagery and emotional mood. The films frequently take pauses in the ongoing

narrative, featuring long, contemplative treatments of urban space, captured with an almost lyrical style of camerawork. There is a kind of poetic ambiguity here that seems to reach beyond the logic of narrative, theme and character, and indeed any explicit political messages. (In some ways, there are interesting parallels here with Italian neo-realism, which also sought to combine social realism with elements of art cinema.)

Thus, there are elements in *This is England*, and in its subsequent television incarnations, where the narrative is effectively suspended in favour of a more meditative or impressionistic approach. Cinematography and music play a much more vital role than action or dialogue here. One of Meadows' distinctive trademarks is the montage sequence, seen in the introduction of the skinhead gang described above; and while these montages are sometimes used in an almost celebratory way (an informal football match, a karaoke night, an anarchic fight), they can also have a quiet, meditative quality (shots of dilapidated housing or desolate landscapes, or short flashbacks to previous scenes). These sequences are sometimes accompanied by pertinently chosen, more or less well-known songs of the period; but Meadows also makes use of instrumental music, sometimes composed specifically for the score (his use of the work of the pianist and composer Ludovico Einaudi is especially notable in this respect). These sequences are not so much about the onward progress of the narrative, or even the dilemmas of the characters: rather, they are an expression of a kind of authorial voice.

Of course, this is by no means an absolute distinction – between 'social realism' on the one hand and 'art cinema' on the other. There are certainly lyrical, contemplative moments in the work of directors like Loach and Leigh, and of course in the older tradition of British documentary (for example, the work of Humphrey Jennings). As I have suggested, the film *This is England* is also explicitly political in its analysis – although in this respect it is perhaps exceptional among Meadows' films. Nevertheless, I am by no means implying that his other work is *not* political: it is rather that it is not *didactically* so. Meadows by no means flinches from showing the destructive consequences of Thatcherism, but he isn't setting out to recruit us to a particular political position or movement. If we compare, for example, Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) with Meadows' *This is England*, the difference is obvious: while both are about people living in poverty, Loach is didactic, and even propagandist, in a way that Meadows very rarely is. His politics can be found not in a straightforward message, but rather in his sympathetic, complex, rounded view of working class lives.

Meadows' own position here is an interesting, and perhaps paradoxical, one. In writing this essay, I've been struck by how frequently I have referred to him as a kind of individual creative 'auteur' – much more than in writing about the directors of other films in previous essays in this series. To some extent, this is understandable: the government funding that Meadows has largely relied upon to make his films is clearly not without its own constraints, but he has never worked within the context of a major commercial film company. (The one exception to this, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2002), was his only film to use 'bankable' stars, and is generally regarded as his least artistically and commercially successful.) Even Channel Four, which funded the television series, is essentially a publisher-broadcaster, which has a remit to support independent production. In this context, as compared with that of

mainstream commercial cinema, the emphasis is much more strongly on the distinctive creative vision of the individual author.

Furthermore, a great deal is often made of the regional location of Meadows' work, and its autobiographical elements. He has purportedly developed his own system of film-making 'rules', which may not be as restrictive as those of the Danish 'Dogme' directors, but which nevertheless result in a style that is markedly different from what can loosely be called 'mainstream' cinema. This is very much a 'DIY' (do-it-yourself) aesthetic. Meadows' films are largely set in or near the locations in which he grew up. He mostly works with an established group of actors, many of whom were childhood friends, or discovered as amateurs through regional workshops. The cast effectively live together during the period of filming, and much of the dialogue is developed through improvisation. Meadows likes to shoot his films exceptionally quickly, and actually prefers to operate with a comparatively low budget – and indeed he has continued throughout his career to make 'no-budget' short films on video (or even on mobile phones) alongside his features. A good deal of the filming is done in people's houses, and most of the settings are decidedly untidy and 'lived-in'. We might sum this up by saying that Meadows is following the injunction to 'film what you know', although that might be to misrepresent him as somehow merely spontaneous or instinctive.

Social realism and 'art cinema' are in some respects combined here. On the one hand, we can see Meadows as a film auteur, an individual artist with a unique personal vision. Yet we can also regard him as a distinctively working class film-maker. Sheldon Hall has argued that in this latter respect Meadows is 'a native insider rather than a sympathetic visitor', and I would entirely agree with him. Again, the comparison with Loach is pertinent here. Unlike many of the Oxbridge-educated radical film-makers who emerged in the 1960s, Meadows is not a cultural tourist: he is an insider, and despite the glitzy appeals of metropolitan film culture, he appears to have largely remained one.

Representing class

This 'insider' position is clearly apparent if we explore how *This is England* represents social class. Meadows' portrayal of the working class is finely observed and by no means monolithic. It is particularly sensitive to the gradations and tensions *within* the working class. Thus, despite the loss of his father, Shaun's family represents a kind of struggle for respectability: he is the only character who seems to be achieving upward mobility, through going to college and taking up with a succession of notably middle-class girlfriends. By contrast, Woody effectively rejects this when it is offered to him: his parents have already achieved a level of lower-middle-class status, but this is precisely the fate that he refuses. Lol's parents, meanwhile, are much more of the 'disreputable' working class. There are important differences here that are apparent not just from developments in the narrative, but also in the *mise-en-scene* – the décor of the houses, the locations and the costumes.

In the TV series, there are numerous scenes where class differences are made manifest in the form of social comedy. In series two, for example, Shaun goes to visit his girlfriend at her detached suburban house, and meets her excruciatingly middle-

class father, who tutors him on how to eat olives; while in series three, Lol's mother gets involved in a violent argument with Woody's parents over the location and design of their wedding. Woody's discomfort with his boss culminates in a scene where (in a foursome, together with his new, more middle-class girlfriend), they have a Christmas meal at a relatively upmarket restaurant. These scenes are partly played for laughs, although they are also embarrassing and painful, much in the manner of Mike Leigh. Broadly speaking, the middle classes are seen here from the perspective of the working class; and upward mobility is by no means regarded as something to be envied, or even aspired to.

It's interesting to compare this with the films about working-class childhoods (such as Loach's *Kes* and Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot*) that I discussed in a previous essay. There is little sense here of anybody needing or wanting to escape from poverty. Even Shaun's moves into drama and then photography are seen with considerable ambivalence, not least by Shaun himself. He is very uncomfortable in his performance in a Christmas drama production – notably playing the part of a newly-wealthy but uncouth Yorkshire lad – although he is not helped in this respect by a mocking chorus of his old friends in the back row. His move into photography in series three is rather less awkward, and less satirically presented, but it is not addressed in any detail. As I've noted, Woody positively refuses his boss's overtures to join the management; and by series three, Lol is working in a classically working-class capacity as a school dinner lady (albeit as the manager of her team).

Meanwhile, the landscape here is consistently grim: there is very little of the pastoral countryside found in the moments of escape in *Kes* or even Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*. Most of the action takes place on public housing estates, where many of the flats and houses are boarded up and abandoned, the shops are struggling, and cars are few and far between. Public facilities (hospitals, clinics, registry offices, job centres) are typically run down. Yet the characters accept this as home, and don't want to get out: when Woody's parents offer to pay for a wedding reception in a posh country house, Lol firmly tells them that they will be more comfortable at the local working men's club. Even when, in season three, several of the group drive off into the country in search of a rave party (and eventually end up at a hippy festival), they quickly return.

To some extent, Meadows' films might be seen to represent the erosion – or even destruction – of traditional working-class communities. This is certainly a theme in his other work, perhaps most explicitly in *Twenty Four Seven*. However, in *This is England*, the situation is rather different. As I have suggested, the skinhead gang of the film – and the looser friendship group that it gradually becomes – represents a kind of community in its own right. The series regularly feature celebratory sequences in which most or all of the group come together; and there is an ethic of care, of looking out for your mates, that is repeatedly invoked. In different ways, the narratives of each of the television series involve the gang/group being split apart and then reconstituted; and this sense of community (and indeed family) is also something that is cultivated in Meadows' way of working with his ensemble cast. Material circumstances may be difficult, but the sense of community here has by no means disappeared, despite unemployment, poverty and the wider sense of social decline.

Some critics have suggested that Meadows' work reflects the 'crisis' in working-class masculinity resulting from the collapse of traditional manufacturing industry. In many of his other films, fathers are variously either absent, ineffectual, or violent and abusive; and there are instances of these in *This is England* as well. However, I would argue that his images of working-class masculinity are more diverse and ambivalent than some critics have suggested. Shaun's absent father, his replacement by Combo, as well as Lol and Kelly's abusive father Mick, would clearly fit with this analysis; but we also see both Woody and Milky become more effective fathers – even if this isn't romanticized, any more than motherhood is. Some of Meadows' films (most notably *Dead Man's Shoes* and *Twenty Four Seven*) represent an almost entirely masculine world, in which women are either marginalised or abused; although this is not in any sense celebrated. Yet in *This is England*, it is the female characters – especially Lol – who come to occupy the leading roles. If anything, Meadows is offering a critique of traditional notions of fatherhood and masculinity: he is certainly not arguing for the re-assertion of traditional patriarchal authority.

It could be argued that the television series of *This is England* are less overtly political than the film. As a viewer, I found this quite disconcerting to begin with. The '86 series opens with scenes that come close to situation comedy, and the balance between comedy and pathos can initially feel quite uncomfortable. There is a kind of political wish-fulfillment about the film that is missing in the television series. To some extent, the series replaces class politics with gender politics, through its range of stories about domestic violence, abuse and single parenthood; although there's little indication of any explicit political argument here.

However, I would argue that the series moves beyond any overt or schematic politics, and towards a representation of more universal human themes. As the narrative unfolds, *This is England* increasingly addresses much broader, even more timeless themes, of friendship, loss, abandonment and forgiveness – and, above all, of the passing of time itself. In doing so, it is profoundly emotional to watch, and sometimes painfully so. This is partly to do with the cinematography (the 'poetic' elements described above), but it is also about the quality of the acting: Stephen Graham as Combo, and especially Vicky McClure as Lol, provide performances that are often understated, yet exceptionally powerful. (And as the critic Beth Johnson suggests, McClure also bears considerable responsibility for developing her character's storyline, not only for acting the role.) It may well be that in this respect, the series' historical location becomes less significant. The narrative still very clearly evokes a particular time and place, but it could almost be happening anywhere, at any time.

Nevertheless, this is not to imply that the series is somehow 'apolitical', or that it abandons politics for some much more diffuse form of 'human drama'. On the contrary, *This is England* is political precisely in that it represents ordinary working-class people as having complex emotional lives, which can be the stuff of serious drama, and indeed of tragedy. These are people with emotions and struggles like anyone else. They may be poor, but we are not invited to feel sorry for them on the grounds that they don't have the things that the rest of us might enjoy. The emotion we feel is not from outside, let alone that of a middle-class do-gooder. In my view, this takes us a long way beyond the one-dimensional and contemptuous ways in

which working-class people are often represented – and indeed, beyond the patronizing view of them as merely objects of pity.

Conclusion

Almost any representation that looks back to the past, and does so specifically through the lens of childhood, runs the risk of nostalgia. As Andy Pope points out, *This is England* was one of numerous British films released during this period (2005-2010) that looked back specifically to boyhoods in the 1980s. However, I believe that he is largely unfair to accuse Meadows' film of nostalgia – and this is certainly not a charge that can be extended to the television series. There are undoubtedly elements of rose-tinted nostalgia in the early, autobiographical scenes of Shaun's induction into the gang; but for the most part *This is England* cannot be accused of idealising or romanticizing the past, let alone yearning to return to it. It certainly represents nostalgia on the part of some of the characters – or at least their desire to recapture the original closeness of the gang – but it also exposes the limitations of this.

There's a complex debate to be had about nostalgia, which I intend to take up in a later essay in this series. However, it's important to note here that nostalgia is not inherently conservative, let alone reactionary, in any case. Nostalgia can provide an important basis for a critique of the present, and it can reflect a wide variety of personal needs and political values. We can yearn for some the things we remember in the past, without necessarily being under any illusion that they would be achievable or even desirable in the present.

The opposite accusation, however, would be to regard *This is England* as a kind of 'misery memoir' – which is to say, a relentlessly bleak representation of childhood (and particularly of working-class childhood) as suffused with pain and suffering. As Graham Fuller argues, 'miserabilism' of this kind became an equally popular characteristic of British film (and other media) across exactly the same period that Pope considers. Again, however, I do not believe that it is fair to accuse *This is England* of this kind of self-indulgent depression. Some of the scenes – the violent beating of Milky, the rape of Trev and Lol, the pumping of Lol's stomach – are certainly harrowing to watch; and episodes frequently end on a note of melancholy, with shots of characters who are variously bereft or traumatized, accompanied by Einaudi's atmospheric mood music. But *This is England* also contains scenes of great comedy (albeit often of a squirm-inducing kind), and even farce; and there are a great many celebratory sequences as well. To align it with 'Misery Cinema', in Fuller's term, is to ignore that it is much more than this.

Representations of past childhoods may never be entirely exempt from either of these two criticisms – even though they seem to pull in quite different directions. Yet *This is England* largely seems to me to escape both of them: it offers a rich, multi-dimensional narrative of growing up in Thatcher's Britain that takes us beyond the reassurance both of sentimentality and of political oversimplification.

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