

## Shane Meadows: Autobiographical Fiction

There is a scene in Shane Meadows 2004 film *Dead Man's Shoes* where the character Sonny, leader of a gang of drug dealers, has knocked out the protagonist's brother, Anthony, and wakes him by throwing a pan of cold water over his face. The scene itself is instantly shocking, yet more so when, on the DVD's accompanying commentary Meadows states that he had seen the same happen himself, first hand. Expanding on this in the documentary *In Shane's Shoes* he explains that as a youngster, aged 11 or 12, he had begun to associate with Skinheads, and had become obsessed with seeing men fight and reputations (and earning a reputation himself). One of these men offered to take him to see a fight he 'owed' someone and Meadows accepted. He continues:

"He knocked him out with one punch... He was dragged into a corner, his head was balanced in the right angle of the corner, and he basically stamped down on his face, basically booted the fuck out of him for about twenty minutes, just beat the fuck out of him."<sup>1</sup>

But what stuck in Meadows mind was what happened afterwards:

"He goes into the kitchen, gets a pint of water, comes out, chucks it over the guys face, slaps him round, is dead kind to him now, like 'Are you alright? Can you hear me? I'm just going now, do you want me to turn your chips off? I'll go and turn the cooker off shall I? D'you want the telly leaving on?' It was disturbing... You'd had this incredible rage followed by this kind of bittersweet comedy afterwards."

The aforementioned scene is shown as flashback using grainy black and white footage (fig.1), alluding to both the character's and the director's history. Anthony, a character with learning disabilities, is, through a series of unfortunate events, caught up in the gang's drug taking activities and taken up as a puppet or plaything by them. Prior to being knocked out he is brutally traumatised, told to suck Sonny's penis or receive 'The Mystery Prize' (the punch), yet another memory from Meadows:

---

<sup>1</sup> *In Shane's Shoes*, dir. Steve Watson, 2004

“...There were younger guys in our group, you’d have five or six guys...every now and then it’d get a bit serious – like blokes all taking their trousers down, saying ‘*Come on, suck my dick*’ They would never let them do it, but they’d push them to a point where they were going to and then pretend that it was all a joke”<sup>2</sup>.

The recollection and re-telling of memories is a theme which has run through Meadows directing career to date, appropriating certain memories from his past to inspire and authenticate his fiction.

Born in Uttoxeter in 1972, into a working class household, Meadows left school before reaching his O-levels, eventually finding his way into film-making through Nottingham based Intermedia Film and Video, where he was allowed to borrow cameras and use editing equipment in return for him working there for free. After amassing a significant body of short films (all funded by himself, featuring his friends and family) most notably *Where’s the Money, Ronnie?* (1996), he was asked by Channel Four to make a documentary for their *Battered Britain* series. The result, *King of the Gypsies* (1996) got Meadows the money to produce *Smalltime* (1996), a 60 minute short written during Meadows lunch breaks at Intermedia. Due to the attention and critical acclaim this film received, investors and distributors were interested enough to give Meadows the opportunity to make his first feature length film, *TwentyFourSeven* (1997). To date Meadows has co-written and directed four feature films; *TwentyFourSeven*, *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999), *Once Upon A Time In The Midlands* (2002), and *Dead Mans Shoes* (2004). These were all (apart from *Dead Mans Shoes*) shot in and around Nottingham<sup>3</sup>. His fifth film *This Is England* is to be released later this year. Based on Meadows experience of the skinhead culture in early 1980’s Britain he has once again filmed in Nottingham.

At the time of *TwentyFourSeven*’s release, Meadows said

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Joe Field, *Exposed*, October 2004.

<sup>3</sup> *Dead Man’s Shoes*, shot in Matlock, Derbyshire, an hours drive from Nottingham, can hardly be seen as a definitive location shift for Meadows, and would seem more to do with the small town ethos inherent in his and Considine’s screenplay.

“I’ve been trying to show that, irrelevant of what situation working class people are in, they’ll make the best of what they’ve got. The people no one else will touch are the people I want in my films”<sup>4</sup>.

A little reminiscent of Lindsay Andersons claim in 1957, that “the number of British films that have ever had... working class characters all through, can be counted on the fingers of one hand”<sup>5</sup>, this comment perhaps has more in common with the films of Ken Loach, whose 1966 film *Cathy Come Home* dealt with precisely this ‘untouchable’ (at that time) section of society in a very direct and meaningful way, leading to the setting up of the housing action charity Shelter.

Meadows dedication to his working class roots extends to co-writing the screenplays for his films and to date these collaborations have been with childhood friends; Paul Fraser for his first three features, and Paddy Considine for *Dead Mans Shoes*.<sup>6</sup> The experiences of their youth greatly inform their writing, and ultimately the film. Of *TwentyFourSeven* Meadows has stated that:

“I was in a boxing club when I was a kid which was closed down. Most of the lads from the town went down there... the majority of them were kids off the streets... maybe seen as trouble causers”<sup>7</sup>.

This is almost a description of the film itself. As well as the boxing club, Meadows also mentions that a football team was set up by a man hoping to help the disadvantaged kids in the area. It is clear from these examples that Meadows commitment to his stories seems to extend further than an ‘interest’, the screenplays must have an actual biographical basis in his past to develop away and generate a new story from, though it seems quite apparent that there remains an element of truth to the work<sup>8</sup>. This method of introducing real events in a

---

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Sheila Johnston, *Variety*, February 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Anderson, ‘Get Out and Push’ in Tim Maschler (ed.), *Declaration*, St. Albans, MacGibbon and Kee, 1957, pp. 158-9.

<sup>6</sup> Considine made his screen debut as Morrell in *A Room for Romeo Brass*, and had been a friend of Meadows since their teens.

<sup>7</sup> Interview by Geoffrey Macnab, ‘The Natural’, *Sight and Sound*, March 1998, pp. 14-16

<sup>8</sup> Meadows used the name of his boxing club, The 101 Spot, for the clubs name in the film.

fictional story produces problems for the viewer. One asks the question whether we are watching biography, autobiography, or drama influenced by real events.

Focussing on the changing relationship between two young boys as one of them is convalescing from an operation, *A Room for Romeo Brass*<sup>9</sup> sees Meadows return to an unhappy period of his childhood. Instead of standing by his friend, the eponymous 'Romeo' (Andrew Shim) of the film, gravitates towards twenty-something Morrell (Paddy Considine), an eccentric loner. Through the course of the film we follow Morrell's downward spiral into more and more extreme behaviour and Romeo's realisation that he is perhaps too young, to be in such a situation. Meadows describes the film as

"Completely about me and Fraser, but at the same time it's completely about childhood"<sup>10</sup>

It seems that Meadows is reluctant to describe the film as autobiography, correctly so, as he has drawn on aspects of his youth to provide weight to his fiction. Later in the same interview he states that "If you make a film completely as events happen, they become boring", acknowledging that sometimes autobiography is far less interesting than the storyteller believes them to be, and that to make a (artistically) successful film, there must be a certain level of detachment. Meadows detachment is not quite as distant as most directors but, as he describes, the process of removing himself from his writing occurs most significantly in casting, rehearsals and improvisation:

"What started off being an autobiography... became biographical, but not a true representation of what had happened. I'm not one to tie things down... I'll just go with whatever happens with the actors"<sup>11</sup>

This statement is indicative of the way the director works in general, and how he develops the script away from its biographical basis. The casting begins with workshops where groups of

---

<sup>9</sup> Written by Meadows and Paul Fraser.

<sup>10</sup> Interview by Stephen Applebaum at <http://www.britmovie.co.uk/features/applebaum/meadows00.html>

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

actors improvise around the script, once the cast has been decided upon, they move into rehearsals where improvisation once again diffuses biography.

There is a scene late in *A Room for Romeo Brass* which marks the turning point in the film and introduces more graphic and disturbing violence, which will accelerate to the film's close (fig.2). The scene is a single shot from the top of the stairs looking down on the protagonists with no camera movement or cutting. Romeo arrives at Morrell's flat which appears to be empty, Morrell jumps out from a cupboard and subdues Romeo, telling him:

"If you want to play it rough, and you want to be a man, we'll play it fucking rough, d'you get me? [pulling Romeo to the ground]...we can play it rough as you fucking like... Not such a hard man now are we? Not so strong..."

He doesn't beat him, just overpowers him, displays that he is a man, and clearly much stronger than the twelve year old, a fact highlighted by the camera position, showing the differences in size and stature between the man and child. It is a difficult scene to watch, as to this point we have seen what Morrell is capable of, yet Romeo hasn't. Still full of adulation, we see on screen Romeo's disaffection in that situation. It is the ultimate breakdown of their relationship as Romeo realises he's too young for the world he has entered.

On the DVD commentary of this scene Meadows suggests:

"That didn't cut away, and it's all shot from above, almost like the audience now, as the film's drawing to a close, are starting to look in...we're almost in the room with people, and that was another conscious decision."

There is some confusion in this comment, as I would argue that we can either be 'looking in' or 'in the room', but not both at the same time, as the two are mutually exclusive. If we are looking in, outside of the action, then we cannot possibly be in the room with the characters, and vice versa. There are elements of both of these in Meadows' films, but here the audience feels trapped in the same room as the protagonists. Because the camera is static, and with no cutting either into or away from the action, we are forced to endure the event, subjected to

it in a very passive manner; that is to say we are forced to be passive; while we may wish to help Romeo escape Morrell, we cannot and must therefore face this inevitable process.

The high-angle shot and static camera work to provide us this sense of voyeurism, we are watching an uncomfortable situation and there is no escaping from it. This sense of wanting to escape yet being unable to do so, re-surfaces in a couple of scenes time. In it Morrell has accosted Romeo and forced him to sit in a car watching Ladene (Romeo's sister) speaking to a suitor in the shop she works in. The suitor leaves the shop, and as he is walking away Morrell drives after him, stops the car, and begins beating him. Romeo runs away, and we are left with the view of Morrell beating this unnamed character. Slowly the camera draws back, away from the violence, until Morrell gets in the car again and drives off.

Whilst Morrell and Romeo are watching Ladene in the shop, Morrell says awful things about Ladene, and Romeo must sit, watch and listen, captive, as we are too, in the car. Though there is cutting between Morrell, Romeo and Ladene, we never leave the car, even the shots of Ladene have a windscreen wiper cutting across the frame (fig.3). With the exterior audio muted and Morrell spouting vulgarities from within the vehicle, the audience is firmly placed within his car, imprisoned with Romeo and a madman until the director allows us some escape. The escape is a false one though, as we are immediately confronted by the beating (fig.4-5). This scene is played out in a single shot, from the man leaving the shop to Morrell driving away. Meadows said of it:

“That’s where the scenes of violence and the harshness and the coldness and the single fucking single-shotness of the end of the film, where the camera’s just there and it’s moving back and it’s not on a steadicam and straight and neat, comes from”<sup>12</sup>

This is another example of Meadows re-using, and in a way re-living, specific events from his life. The unprovoked attack from his youth, which he still feels guilt for, returns here when the psychotic Morrell beats the suitor. Because this is shot with a handheld camera the violence

---

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

is suffused with a sense of realism which would be lost with a more classical or Hollywood approach. The combination of the single shot without cutting, the handheld camera and the withdrawal from violence produces an effect which Meadows once again associates with memories of witnessing fights:

“When you’ve seen a fight in a town, there’s no turning away from it, there’s no cutting in, there’s no glamour, they’re just disgraceful and despicable.”<sup>13</sup>

Although there is no cutting, and certainly no glamour to the violence here, upon further analysis the technique seems quite confused and the image remains unresolved. While stark and shocking, the withdrawal of the camera pulls the audience away from the action, leaving the viewer with a feeling of censorship and removal. It is not clear whether we are pulled back out of fear, for a sense of detachment or for an impression of the image as *Spectacle*<sup>14</sup>. This perhaps tells us more about Meadows aversion to the violence than providing a particularly strong visual metaphor to witnessing a ‘real’ fight. We are drawn into the violence through the actions of Morrell, yet when we are finally prepared to see the culmination of this we are pulled away from it. It does however allude to Meadows earlier comment on *looking in* on the action and by withdrawing from it there is a lull in the intensity of the scene. After the claustrophobic and suffocating scenes of Morrell’s flat and inside the car, by pulling away from this very severe violence, Meadows provides us with room to remember we are watching a film, and are not too tied up in the action. We are no longer in the film, but quite clearly watching it from the safety of the cinema. His use of the shot would also seem to be a detachment from autobiographical elements in the work. By removing himself from the action and quite intentionally drawing back from it, Meadows has given himself the artistic ‘distance’ from his own past that he might need, and though the scene is horrific, the withdrawing camera movement does allow us some distance from the story, and Morrell’s actions, after the previous scenes intensity.

---

<sup>13</sup> Shane Meadows, directors commentary on *A Room for Romeo Brass*, DVD, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> An important aspect of cinema for the *Kitchen Sink* filmmakers of the early 1960’s.

*A Room for Romeo Brass* is not the only time Meadows has pulled us away from the story though. In *TwentyFourSeven*, as the boys are participating in their first boxing match against another team, Darcy (Hoskins) begins attacking one of the boys fathers, Geoff (Bruce Jones<sup>15</sup>). The violence here is treated in a much more conventional manner than that of *A Room for Romeo Brass*. Using handheld cameras and quick cutting<sup>16</sup> we see much, if not all of the violence. Instead of the violent act, it is the aftermath of the fight we are pulled away from. As the fight is stopped (by the man's son), we, as well as Darcy, realise what he has done, and the camera slowly pulls us backwards, out and above the scene, to see the group of spectators standing in silence (fig.6). While we have witnessed the violence, it is the moment when we are pulled away, where we can view the whole scene, as an outsider, that we realise what has happened and the consequences of Darcy's actions.

The audio mix between dialogue, sound effects and the soundtrack here is interesting, it begins in the boxing club, where a song by an African choir<sup>17</sup> becomes apparent. As the fight falls outside this becomes more dominant and the dialogue and sound effects fade out, then back in for a few lines of dialogue;

Darcy: "Don't bring these lads down to your level!"  
Geoff: "[laughing] You've fucking lost it Darcy, and when I get home, I'm going to cut her [his wife's] fucking throat."

The dialogue and sound effects are then subsumed into the soundtrack again, and as the violence reaches a climax, the choral music does too, giving way in the final crane shot of the scene, when the son appears and pushes Darcy away, to the dialogue again. As the camera begins to move backwards over the crowd of people the soundtrack to this shot and the subsequent montage, *Parce Mihi Domine*<sup>18</sup>, another choral piece, begins quietly.

---

<sup>15</sup> who later went on to play Les Battersby in ITV's *Coronation Street* (1997-).

<sup>16</sup> There is a series of 20 shots between Darcy pushing Geoff out of the club, and the crane shot which ends the scene.

<sup>17</sup> *Les nouvelles Polyphonies corses – in paradise*, Introitu.

<sup>18</sup> Performed by Jan Garbarek and the Hilliard Ensemble.



Despite the complexity of this mix and obvious emotive intent, the audio seems to be far too invasive for it to have any effect on the viewer. Rather than appearing shocking, the violence, while brutal, is given an unearthly quality because there is no accompanying sound. For greatest effect, if the viewer sees a punch, then he must hear a punch, without this there is a decreased effect. By removing the sound effects, Meadows has removed a fragment of reality, and reduced the possible impact of the scene. The treatment of the subsequent montage works despite the lack of sound effects because it has a much more relaxed pace than the fight. Here the music suggests a reflective mood, a theme confirmed as we watch the montage; images of Darcy drinking, the scene of the boys burning/sacrificing the club, playing football and Darcy walking down a railway track. The series of images pushes along the narrative, giving us the impression of a passage of time, whilst investing in the film a sense of poetry, beauty in the realism. The music provoking an emotive response from the viewer.

By coupling the withdrawal from the action with music, Meadows suggests responses or prompts for the viewer, a technique he returned to in *Dead Man's Shoes*. The very last shot of this film, after Richard has been stabbed by the remaining gang member, features the man leaving the scene of the crime as choral music swells in the background. The sound fades, and the camera takes us up and away from the action, though this time, rather than moving backwards, removing us from it, we move forwards and have an aerial shot of the town (fig.7), Meadows has said of this shot that:

“Its meant to be... that's [the character], that's his 'spirit' – that classic thing where people say 'I looked down on myself from the corner of the room.' That's the basic idea, it does sum up the film.”<sup>19</sup>

The pairing of choral music<sup>20</sup> with the shot lends it a religious tone, reinforcing the impression of the 'spirit', yet it also allows us a final view of the town, from a position we have not seen

---

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Neil Young, August 2004, <http://jogsawlounge.co.uk/film/shanemeadowsinterview.html>

<sup>20</sup> “De Profundis”, *Arvo Pärt*, 1981, performed by Polyphony.

before, above and outside the usual environment of the film. This shot, unlike those *in A Room for Romeo Brass*, keeps us within the story, and as it is the closing of the film it gives us a chance to reflect on the events leading up to Richards death and provides a lasting memory of the setting of the film. This is an important aspect for Meadows, as he feels that the gang mentality and drug use depicted in the film is a common problem for small towns such as Matlock [the location used in *Dead Man's Shoes*] and Meadows own hometown of Uttoxeter. Making such problems the subject of the film marks another return to personal territory for Meadows. He states in an interview that:

“Growing up in a town [Uttoxeter] which has been ravaged by heroin and losing friends to drugs, I have my own anger. Spiking peoples drinks with drugs was a regular occurrence. I used to sit in the pub with my hand over my drink.”<sup>21</sup>

And in another interview, cements the ties between the film and his past:

“I lost a friend when I was 19; a kid I'd grown up with... committed suicide as a result of being schizophrenic. It wasn't just the illness... that drove him to his death – it was the crowd of people that we were around at the time preying on him... These [people] are wandering about now, we're all getting to our 30's and have little kids and they've not paid for any of it. It can happen... from mine and Paddy's [Considine, co-writer and actor] point of view it's almost like the people from our lives – it's us whacking them.”<sup>22</sup>

*Dead Man's Shoes* can be treated almost as Meadows revenge movie on those who he feels are to blame. It is this connection between his own past and his films, which mark Meadows out as a social commentator in British cinema and serve to place him within the historical context of that movement and British film history in general. There are however areas of this autobiography which Meadows deals with in a less than satisfactory manner. By making semi-autobiographical works, it seems clear that there are aspects of the violence he witnessed as a child which he has not come to terms with, or feels uncomfortable about. There appear scenes of violence which the audience is not allowed to dwell on, or which are

---

<sup>21</sup> Interviewed by Mark Blacklock for the Telegraph, 06/10/2004, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/10/07/bfshane.xml>

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Joe Field, *Exposed*, October 2004.

subverted through use of soundtrack, so we are never allowed to witness what Meadows himself has.

It is the scenes from *TwentyFourSeven* and *A Room for Romeo Brass* where we are reminded we are *watching*, looking in on the story, which do the most damage, and suggest that Meadows also has become an outsider from his own past and social upbringing. We move away from the action, and look down on it from above, all the while reminding us that we are not a part of this world. We are looking in on the working class because Meadows has located us outside and above it. Countering this external viewpoint, the director suffuses each piece with a poetic realism and beauty, his own love of the locations, characters and stories becomes apparent through this, but is ultimately undone by his own technique. Despite his love for them, Meadows must show us that these are bleak and unforgiving places, and terrible things can happen here. Of the *Dead Man's Shoes* screenplay he comments:

“It’s quite cathartic... you’ve got all these pent-up feelings that every now and again you examine... - me ad Paddy... still feel rage for things that went on 10 years ago. Its nice to find a way, an avenue where you can express it.”<sup>23</sup>

and despite their mixed messages through technique and the directors own emotional ties with his work, it is this expression of personal feelings and experiences which Meadows captures most articulately in his films.

---

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Joe Field, *Exposed*, October 2004.



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig.3



fig.4



fig.5



fig.6



fig.7