

This is England

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When I saw the selection of films for this autumn I was very excited and pleased to see Shane Meadows' *This is England* included because this film brilliantly portrays a side of England which is often misunderstood or rarely shown at all.

The plot takes place in the small town of Uttoxeter, which is half way between Birmingham and Manchester, over one summer in 1983. The story is that of a young boy coming of age and finding his feet with his new found friends. The director's attention to detail throughout the film is truly stunning, from the decor of the houses to the clothes and music. *This is England* perfectly captures the suburban atmosphere of that time and has quickly become a cult hit, going on to spawn (produrre in grande quantità, come i pesci quando 'depongono le uova') two sequels *This is England 86* and *This is England 88*, with a third instalment *This is England 90* currently scheduled for release next year.

Shane Meadows is renowned for his 'Kitchen Sink' realism, reminiscent of filmmakers such as Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, the term 'Kitchen Sink' meaning that everything is shown in an honest light no matter how harsh the reality. One particular aspect that stands out with all of Meadows' films is his casting. Thomas Turgoose, the young actor who plays the character Shaun was not even an actor at all prior to this production. In fact he was asked to audition after being spotted on a council estate in Grimsby. Most of the young children auditioning were just thrilled to be considered, but as the director recalls, Thomas was the only child who asked if he was going to be paid. Once you have seen his incredible performance in this film it's clear to see why that kind of tenacious nature made him ideal for the part.

LANGUAGE

From a language point of view *This is England* is colourful and full of authentic dialogue. The use of colloquialisms and slang is, as we English would say, 'spot on' and reflects not only the language of the 80's but also the common language used today by many across the UK. The film also offers a range of accents, the main character Shaun has a fairly general and light East Midlands accent (the Midlands being the central area of England, from Northampton up to Nottingham and stretching to East Anglia and Wales, with the main city being Birmingham), whilst fellow lead character Combo has a strong 'Scouse' /skaus/ accent (Liverpool). Other characters are also varied; Woody speaks with a Yorkshire accent, Milky with a 'Brummy' (Birmingham) and other members have Mancunian and London accents.

FASHION & MUSIC

Two of the most striking aspects of the film are the fashion and music. As most of you probably know the English are notoriously tribal and none more so than when it comes to music. Nowadays things have changed and calmed down a lot but going back through the 60's, 70's and 80's individuality through music burned brightly. Like with every tribe, uniform is all important and British society used to be a real melting pot as various groups and gangs wore their colours with pride.

Throughout the 80's England was awash (inondato) with a mixture of styles from Goth to 'Adam Ant' Glam, from Rocker to Punk and from Mod to Skinhead. The Skinhead subculture is what *This is England* highlights in particular and, as you'll see throughout the film, the style is incredibly sharp (netto, nitido) and distinctive. The origin of the Skinhead was neither racial nor political but instead born from a working class environment that was heavily influenced by West Indian and Jamaican culture. The Skinhead was a mixture of Jamaican 'rude boy' and 'Mod' and it's said that the short hairstyle was more practical than anything else, safer for industrial work and less of a liability (ostacolo, svantaggio) in a street fight.

The director himself used to be a Skinhead and has talked about his own path being similar to the one followed by Shaun in the film. Meadows describes how he was in awe (in soggezione) of Skinheads when he was young, with their almost "aggressive marine" look. The Skinhead style is famed for the *Dr.Marten* boots, worker jeans or *Sta-Prest* trousers, braces (bretelle), badges (SPILLE), button down *Ben Sherman* shirts, *Fred Perry* polo's, *Crombie* coats and the odd trilby (cappello di feltro) or 'pork pie' hat to cover the shorn scalp. For Skinhead girls the 'Feather' or 'Chelsea cut' became very common, with the fringe and sides left long. It's easy to see why this style captured the imagination and right from the very beginning of the film the importance of image is underlined as Shaun feels as if he's targeted or held back by his dull conforming fashion, and in particular his "massive flares" (pantaloni a zampa d'elefante) which were popular in the 60's and 70's.

When most people think of 'Mods' they usually think of bands like *The Who*, *The Yardbirds* and the *Small Faces* but with the Skinheads it was the musical influence of Ska, Rock Steady and early Reggae that powered the movement. The most significant and popular music emanated from the *Trojan* record label and, as we can enjoy in the film, artists such as *Toots and the Maytals*, *The Upsetters*, *The Specials* and Desmond Decker provided the soundtrack.

CULTURAL RELEVANCE & RACISM

The common association with Skinheads today is that of punk and violence but this came about during the Skinhead revival which was often linked to far right politics and football hooliganism in the media. The Skinhead image was hijacked (dirottata) by racist groups such as the *National Front* and this caused many splits within the social scene. We see in *This is England* that there was often a line drawn in the sand and groups of friends became separated into factions. Throughout the 80's there were many variations on the Skinhead style, with the more far right Skinheads cutting the hair even shorter and tattooing the forehead. Unfortunately natives from colonial countries such as India and Pakistan were heavily targeted with racist abuse (insulti) during that period. Even at my own school and in my community, it was known that some of the fathers of my classmates were part of the *National Front*. There was an idea that foreigners were coming to the UK and taking away jobs from English people but of course this was nothing revelatory. Books such as *The Lonely Londoners* by Sam Selvon, published in 1956, had already detailed some of the discrimination suffered by minorities.

People will always be angry and ignorant, and some people during the 80's were poor, out of work and looking for someone to blame. As we see in the character Combo there is a sense of aggression and hatred that appears confused. He and Shaun envy the unity that appeared to be stronger within

colonial families, something that had already started to drift away from British homes. I think it's clear to see how this confused anger was channelled and manipulated by groups like the *National Front*. We see examples of the horrible and terrible racism that was very prevalent at that time. The racist language and intimidation used were something that I and my brothers witnessed regularly. Growing up some of our best friends were half Jamaican or Indian and it's very sad to remember how common this sickening abuse was. However I think it's also important to note that this behaviour was abhorred (detestato) by the majority and as an Englishman I can honestly say how proud I am to come from such a diverse and tolerant country.

At a time when Britain had 3.5 million unemployed, many young people were uninspired by the opportunities presented to them. As the Sex Pistols sang in '77 "*When there's no future, how can there be sin? We're the flowers in the dustbin... no future for you, no future for me*". At that time, to be able to stand out in the crowd was something very appealing (attraente, piacevole). Many disillusioned youths wanted to go against the grain (controcorrente) and wanted to show the upper class establishment that they wouldn't go about their day quietly but would instead cause havoc (caos, scompiglio) and have as much fun as possible. Job opportunities for the working class were limited at best, especially in the suburban council estates (le case popolari) away from the big cities. Factory work was about as good as many young people could expect. Also in 1982 there was the Falklands War to contend with (da contrastare). As with many wars, the Falklands had mixed support. Around two hundred and fifty five British military personnel died during the seventy four day conflict and Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party was bolstered (rafforzato) by the United Kingdom's success. The youth took pride in what they had: their music, their friends and their tribe. Sticking together became a way of life and a way to survive. This was a nation that was slightly depressed, you could even say exhausted or despondent (abbattuto, scoraggiato). But it was a country that was also full of vibrant individuals who wanted something better for themselves, who wanted to push the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable. This was and still is a population unafraid to be different; this is a nation unapologetically honest and unafraid of self-defamation. This is England.