

“Disappointingly Thin and Flaccid”: Gender, Authorship and Authenticity in Shane Meadows’ *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2002)

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“Do you wanna watch *The Weakest Link*?”

– Carol (Kathy Burke) in *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*

In the wake of the industrial “buzz” created by his short films *Where’s the Money, Ronnie!* and *Small Time* (both 1996), Shane Meadows’ first two features garnered much praise for the director’s distinctive conflation of raw talent, idiosyncratic humor and class-based provincial worldview. However, while the critical reception of *TwentyFourSeven* (1997) and *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999) served to underscore Meadows’ emergent status as the most exciting young British filmmaker of the 1990s, the third film in the director’s “East Midlands trilogy,” *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2002), was unanimously interpreted as a bathetic non-event. Still widely perceived as the “weakest link” in Meadows’ otherwise acclaimed back catalogue, the critical disdain for *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* was echoed by the abject commercial failure of the film. During a period in which the domestic film industry was intent on producing films that would replicate the international success of titles such as *Four Wedding and a Funeral* (1994), *The Full Monty* (1997), *Sliding Doors* (1998), *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) and *Notting Hill* (1999), *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* failed to find an overseas audience and recouped barely £500,000 of its £3 million production budget at the UK box office.

As FilmFour’s last release before its belated dissolution, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* has – in its production, reception and critical reputation – since come to serve as a cautionary tale about commerciality, creative compromise and the would-be ideological deadlock between mainstream funding mechanisms and what Sarah Brouillette (2009) dubs Meadows’ auteur authorship. Moreover, since the rejection of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* by both critics and filmgoers, Meadows’ career has continued to flourish, to the point where he is now established as perhaps the best-loved British filmmaker of the past two decades. This status has been underscored by the success of *The Stone Roses: Made of Stone* (2013), which – perhaps uniquely for a British documentary – played to large audiences in multiplexes across the UK early in the summer of 2013. While scholarly work on Meadows has long validated the director’s status as an established British auteur (Hall,

2006; Fuller, 2007; James, 2007; Brouillette, 2009; Fradley 2010, 2012), it is symptomatic that academic criticism has also served to marginalize *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*. In an article promoting the triumphant *This is England* (2006), for example, *Sight & Sound's* Nick James retrospectively argues that while Meadows' reputation as "a true auteur" was firmly established by the time of *A Room for Romeo Brass*, these auteurist credentials were almost immediately rescinded in the wake of the poorly received *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2007: 41). Even given *Sight & Sound's* well-established auteurist editorial policy, the overdetermination with which an experienced critic such as James readily applies the always already judgemental binary of gifted "auteur" and workmanlike *metteur-en-scene* to a filmmaker like Meadows reveals the limitations of this particular brand of popular critical orthodoxy. Indeed, the perpetuation of a critically circumscribed interpretation of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* as little more than an anomaly in the director's career continues to the present day. The absence of any kind of sustained reading or revisionist account of the film in either the anthology *Shane Meadows: Critical Essays* (2013) or the October 2013 special issue of the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* on Meadows' work significantly perpetuates this trend, both publications effectively consolidating *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* reputation as a mere footnote in Meadows' oeuvre.

Despite an increasingly voluminous body of critical material on Meadows' film and television work, the present essay is the first scholarly piece to engage with *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* in any detail. What we wish to do here, then, is offer a tentative rethinking of this derogated film text. For the most part we do so by examining the discourses surrounding Meadows' work and, in turn, by raising question marks over the cultural prejudices and critical blindsides that have become enshrined in debates over Meadows' status as an auteur. *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands'* maligned position within orthodox critical discussions of Meadows' output invariably reduces the film to an overly commercialized aberration within Meadows' career, a *faux pas* which emphasizes by proxy the low-budget "authenticity" of the remainder of his back catalogue. Yet as Brouillette usefully points out, framing narratives surrounding Meadows and his films are invariably characterized by "two sets of pervasive contradictions: between art and commerce, and between practices of collective authorship and the idea of individual expressivity" (830). While this conflict is always already at the epicentre of auteurist discourse, Brouillette suggests that with Meadows' films – and *Somers Town* (2008) in particular – this dialectic typifies the logics of a neoliberal economy in which the artistic process is euphemistically reconfigured as "creative labour" wherein associated claims to individual authorship are bound up within the ideological rubric of "intellectual property." In this way, we argue, critical narratives framing Meadows' authorship often invoke

nostalgia for a romantic artistry that stands outside the brutalist logics of capitalist realism. In an echo of the textual resistance Brouillette finds in *Somers Town*, for example, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* was sponsored by Pot Noodle: a form of low-rent product placement that both acknowledges the Hollywood-style commercialism of the project whilst simultaneously mocking it (Sandhu, 2002).

In using *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* as a case study, then, this essay examines what might be described as the cultural politics of "the Meadowsian." First mobilised by Fradley (2012) and widely adopted by the contributors to *Shane Meadows: Critical Essays*, the adjective "Meadowsian" refers to "a recurrent set of motifs" in Meadows' body of work: "certain key themes, specific regional locales and distinctive character types" that mark out Meadows' authorial signature (Fradley, Godfrey and Williams, 2013: 2). As such, this essay uses *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* as something of a litmus test through which to interrogate the critically circumscribed assumptions and culturally policed borders that inform and underpin "the Meadowsian" in both popular and scholarly discourse.

Meadows and Mythos

In a recent overview of contemporary British filmmakers, Robert Murphy brackets Meadows alongside Michael Winterbottom, Nick Love, David Mackenzie and Lynne Ramsay as directors who have the "potential to develop into interesting auteurs" (2009: 339-340). Similarly, John Fitzgerald (2010) is eager to categorize Winterbottom and Meadows as contemporary British auteurs due to a consistency in style, structure and theme, arguing that both directors have "created a signature across either similar [Meadows] or a diverse [Winterbottom] set of films" (2009: 116). This unambiguous categorization of Meadows as a distinctly British auteur with a recognizable signature is not a recent development, however. As early as 1998, Geoffrey Macnab offered an influential profile of Meadows on the cusp of the theatrical release of *TwentyFourSeven*. In this enthusiastic portrait of the artist as a young working-class rogue – rhetorically entitled "the natural" – one particular passage serves as something of a template in the construction of Meadows' emergent media persona. In person, "Meadows cuts a striking figure," suggests Macnab:

Thickset, close-cropped, he looks like a more imposing version of Darcy [Bob Hoskins' character in *TwentyFourSeven*]. He is opinionated and articulate. A one-time teenage tearaway, he combines the entrepreneurial air of the self-made businessman with the defiance and humour of the young rebel who likes to boast that anyone can make a film for £100 – and have enough left over to get legless with yer [*sic*] mates. (14)

Anyone familiar with critical discussions of Meadows' work will recognise a series of (over) familiar tropes in play here, not least in the way Macnab draws a direct autobiographical parallel between the director and on-screen protagonist. The young director's attitude and physical appearance are also cited as distinct markers of social class. **[1]** An allusion to his "troubled" formative years subsequently functions to segue into Macnab's valorization of Meadows' raw talent and commercial expediency. As typifies early profiles of the director, the 24-year-old from Uttoxeter is depicted as a preternaturally gifted, working-class opportunist with a canny post-Thatcherite glint in his eye.

Almost a decade later *Sight & Sound* offered a more succinct – but equally purposeful – summary of Meadows' auteurist credentials:

Shane Meadows is an authentic natural film-maker and a scion of the British working class [...] His reputation as a true auteur was cemented by his tough childhood memoir *A Room for Romeo Brass* [...] confirming him as one of Britain's reliably distinctive talents. (James, 2007: 41)

While carefully distilled, the rhetorical tropes ("authentic," "tough childhood," "scion of the British working class," "reliably distinctive," "natural film-maker," "true auteur") remain the same as they have done since his emergence in the mid-1990s. Yet as Kate Ogborn has pointed out, from as early as the release of *Where's the Money, Ronnie!* in 1996, Meadows has been carefully marketed as a "maverick outsider" who "begged, stole and borrowed to get his films made" (2000: 65). In this way, Meadows came pre-packaged with an "inspirational" and wholly marketable back story that, not coincidentally, chimed all too clearly with the populist ethos of New Labour during their push towards the 1997 General Election. In this framing narrative, the emergence of the Meadowsian persona was – as Ogborn memorably puts it – "an immaculate conception": a bolshie working-class film-maker with a defiantly non-metropolitan outlook and an undiluted anti-commercial stance taking advantage of the meritocratic possibilities of the 1990s (neo-) liberal, pro-entrepreneurial culture:

The interesting aspect to Meadows' progression and development as a film-maker is that he paid no attention to the kinds of films he was supposed to make, and didn't waste time trying to second guess the successful formula for getting funding. Instead he concentrated on the resources that were available to him on his doorstep, and on telling the stories he and his friends wanted to hear. (65)

In Ogborn's breathless account, then, Meadows is "a film-maker who came from nowhere, who proved that you didn't need to go to film school, that all you needed was a strong enough desire to make films and the gift of the gab" (65). This kind of romantic hyperbole is, of course, integral to the commerce of contemporary auteurism. In his article "Boys to Men," for example, Graham Fuller (2007) outlines the founding "lore" of Meadows' emergence as an "authentic" grassroots filmmaker:

As a teenager, he dabbled in petty crime, stealing darts, a custard tart, and a breast pump (as Meadows lore has it). In 1993-94, he took some photography classes at Burton Technical College, where he played in a band with future collaborator Paddy Considine. Borrowing video equipment from a Nottingham film collective [Intermedia], Meadows began churning out shorts using his friends as actors. After making a Channel 4 documentary, *The Gypsy's Tale* (1995), about a Uttoxeter bare-knuckle fighter, he presented his calling-card, *Where's the Money, Ronnie?* (1996), a fluid 15-minute black-and-white film about local crooks, wiseguys and a bungled heist. Full of jaunty, handheld flourishes, it attracted producer Stephen Woolley, who helped get Bob Hoskins on board for Meadows's full-length-feature debut, *TwentyFourSeven*. (45)

Fuller's account flits seamlessly here between biography and back catalogue: Meadows' lawless, youthful expediency feeds directly into his DIY filmmaking practice, these autodidactic endeavours subsequently invigorated and sustained by a combination of working-class *nous*, unrefined talent and the romantic allure of serendipitous events such as his teenage encounter with Paddy Considine. The homology between Meadows' personal biography and the characters in his films is exacerbated in turn by the casting of his friends in *Where's the Money, Ronnie!*, *Small Time* and *TwentyFourSeven*. As is evident from Macnab's hyperbolic descriptors above, not only does Meadows play central roles in *Ronnie!* and *Small Time*, but in person he is casually described as looking, sounding and behaving like one of the low-rent, would-be wiseguys from his early films. This compelling tale of organic, working-class filmmaking practice is subsequently consolidated through unreflective repetition. In *Shane Meadows: Critical Essays*, for example, the editors breathlessly describe *Small Time* as "that rarest of things: a genuine grass-roots feature for, by and about the community it represents" (5).

The trope of class-based authenticity recurs time and time again in discussions of Meadows' work. Indeed, the construction of Meadows as a proletarian native-informant from the provincial frontlines of the Thatcher-Major years begins with his earliest output. For example, in 1999, Claire Monk argued that *Small Time* was the work of a participant observer and a film that had "genuine origins in the (non-) working-class

community it depicted rather than observing it with the gaze of the socially concerned outsider” (185). Similarly, Martin Fradley’s (2010) overview of Meadows’ career confidently asserts that “there are few contemporary British filmmakers with Meadows’ genuine understanding of the communities he represents” (282). [2] Monk and Fradley’s comments conveniently echo each other, illustrating the process through which the work of film scholars serves to consolidate the auteurist discourse which has coalesced around Meadows. This is further demonstrated by Fradley’s impressionistic sketch of Meadows’ professional ethos and distinctive working methods:

Bolshie and independent in spirit, the director is both creative romantic and self-made businessman. A working-class idealist who began his career making zero-budget short films on borrowed video equipment [...] Meadows is a cinematic entrepreneur who has continued to employ family and friends as a way of maintaining his autonomy from the restrictions of mainstream filmmaking [...] Like the emphasis on community and mutuality in his films, at the heart of Meadows’ creative practice is a fundamentally humanist belief in the benefits of reciprocity. (Fradley, 2010: 281)

Whether consciously or not, this passage once again reiterates the pivotal tropes that sustained earlier accounts of Meadows’ emergence, constructing the director as both emblematic child of the neoliberal turn and as a grass-roots artist existing independently of the commercial trappings of the mainstream British film industry, the profile ultimately depicting Meadows as an idealistic and defiant outsider.

Of course, the various methodological pitfalls, theoretical blindsides and romanticized projections of the auteur theory are well rehearsed and scarcely need regurgitating here. However, the casual normalization of a term such as “the Meadowsian” is fraught with problems, not least due to Meadows’ enthusiasm for collaboration in his creative practice. One can scarcely conceive of the “Meadowsian” imaginary without the strikingly naturalistic and often improvised performances of actors such as Andrew Shim, Vicky McClure, Thomas Turgoose and Paddy Considine, for example. Childhood friend Paul Fraser, meanwhile, has co-scripted many of Meadows’ most resonant and affecting films, while *Dead Man’s Shoes* was largely improvised and loosely co-written with Considine. Similarly, the acoustic melancholy and world-weary tones of musicians Gavin Clarke and Ted Barnes add layers of emotional depth to what might otherwise be slight tales such as *Somers Town* (2008) and *Le Donk and Scor-zay-zee* (2009). Elsewhere, Meadows’ productive long-term working relationships with both Channel Four and Warp Films are integral to the shape and tone of his output. Indeed, from *Dead Man’s Shoes* (2004) through to *The Stone Roses: Made of Stone*, Warp Films producer Mark Herbert was

regularly foregrounded as a close friend and an integral part of Meadows' creative team. The emergence of the spin-off *This is England* television franchise (2010-) is acutely problematic in this respect. Co-written by Jack Thorne and co-directed by Tom Harper, *This is England '86* was Meadows's most commercially collaborative work to date. Indeed, the creative input of Thorne – who has also written episodes of Channel Four's celebrated comedy-dramas *Shameless* (2004-2013) and *Skins* (2007-2013) – is quite clearly marked across *This is England '86* in particular. [3] Nevertheless, it is the enduring emphasis on Meadows' would-be "personal" and "intuitive" brand of cinema that has directly shaped the discourses that frame the reception and continued interpretation of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* and its place within Meadows' oeuvre.

Making and Marketing *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*

After several years making zero-budget short films, Meadows' career officially begins with the impressionistic ten-minute documentary *Tales of Battered Britain: The Gypsy's Tale*, first broadcast on Channel Four on 27 September 1995. This was followed by the short *Where's the Money, Ronnie!*, which claimed first prize at the Channel One/National Film Theatre competition. The subsequent support of producer Peter Woolley led to the development of *Small Time*, a 60-minute BFI-funded film made on a budget of just £5000 which was showcased at the prestigious London and Toronto film festivals. However, Meadows' first feature-length film, *TwentyFourSeven*, signalled a significant shift with regard to production context. Produced by Scala Films and funded by the BBC to the tune of £1.4 million, *TwentyFourSeven* marked an epochal increase in resources and production values. Despite *TwentyFourSeven's* failure at the box office – grossing just £236,000 – the BBC in conjunction with the lottery-funded Arts Council continued to show faith in Meadows' talent and provided £3.2 million to subsidize the production of *A Room for Romeo Brass*. Meadows' second feature received favorable reviews and widespread acclaim for debut performances by Andrew Shim, Paddy Considine and Vicky McClure; however, *A Room for Romeo Brass* was poorly distributed and catastrophically badly marketed, ultimately grossing less than £100,000 in box office returns (Newsinger, 2013).

Nevertheless, the critical approval that continued to greet Meadows' commercially disappointing releases refused to abate. Following the acclaimed prime-time broadcast of a lively compendium of short films – entitled *Shane's World* – on Channel Four in 2000, the production of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* was backed by a legion of established funding bodies and producers, including the UK Film Council, Film Four, Slate Films, EM Media and the German production company Senator. Significantly, after a string of box-office failures in the late 1990s,

FilmFour had been undergoing a fundamental shift in strategy towards a more market-driven approach. As Andrew Higson notes, this signalled “a new departure in their production and funding policy, away from the innovative and often risky low-budget fare with which they had made their name and towards more expensive international co-productions” (2011: 18). The commercial pragmatism adopted by FilmFour was in turn mirrored by the UK Film Council, and *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* – a mid-budget British film self-consciously constructed to sell a “quirky” version of Britishness to international markets – is symptomatic of these industrial shifts. During the promotional campaign for *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*, Meadows attempted to differentiate the film from the swathe of disappointing British releases that had failed to replicate the success of the British cinema “renaissance” in the 1990s. “[I]t’s a disheartening time for the British film industry,” he told *The Observer*, whose Neil Spencer agreed. “The current downward spiral of British film, following unrealistic hype about its prospects, follows a regular pattern and, in [Meadows’] opinion, hasn’t been helped by what he dubbed ‘minute-made fiascos that sucked up huge amounts of available money.’” “Without being rude to filmmakers here,” Meadows continued, “a lot of people were given funds before they were ready to make a film [and] [...] it seemed like everyone decided, “let’s make a gangster film, or a *Full Monty*-style comedy” (in Spencer, 2002).

Once Upon a Time in the Midlands would ultimately be historically marked as FilmFour’s swansong. With a typical reiteration of his advocacy of personal, low-budget filmmaking, Meadows later noted that making *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* “was a strange experience”:

FilmFour was sinking without me really knowing it and there was a producer [Andrea Calderwood] with whom, quite publicly, I did not get on with. It wasn’t quite a flop, but what I learned is that whether a film costs 50 pence or £50 million there has got to be a challenge and mean something personal [...] I was so shattered with developing the script that I just went along with it. It’s not a terrible film, but I am far more complicated than that. (in Lawrenson, 2004: 35)

Despite co-writing the script for *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* with regular collaborator Paul Fraser, Meadows was denied final cut for the first – and, at the time of writing, only – time in his career. Subsequently, the creative “castration” the director suffered in his notoriously troubled working relationship with Calderwood has passed into the annals of Meadows’ lore. By all accounts, the production of the film was fraught and often fractious, with last-minute demands for significant plot alterations a major point of contention. One week prior to the start of the shoot, for example, Meadows and Fraser were instructed by Calderwood to cut

around 25 pages of their co-written script (Morales, 2003). "The main problem," Meadows later complained when interviewed on *The South Bank Show* (2007), "is that it doesn't feel like one of my films." It is revealing that when promoting *Dead Man's Shoes* and *This is England* – both films that were seen to reinvigorate Meadows' status as an auteur – the production of *Once Upon a Time in Midlands* remained a constant structuring reference point. In conversation with *Sight & Sound* in 2007, Meadows suggested that he had "grown to realise that my films don't necessarily come together according to a strict plan. That's what I learned from *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* and I'm never again going to be involved in something where someone gives me a load of money to make a film I don't care about" (in James: 41).

While *Small Time's* frugal analogue video images, the downbeat monochrome aesthetic of *TwentyFourSeven* and the televisual look of *A Room for Romeo Brass* all seemed unashamedly to flaunt their limited production values, the showy formal flourishes and uncharacteristically famous cast of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* clearly signal a shift in both tone and commercial aspiration. With both his previous features underperforming at the box office, Meadows was beginning to question openly the lo-fi ideology of his earlier work. "It's not like I just sat there and thought 'I need to make a commercial film.' But I did wonder what was holding my films back, stopping them getting a wider audience" (in Bradshaw, 2002: 18-19). In another interview, Meadows discussed his previous use of non-professional performers, enthusiastically stating that the route to crossover success lay in employing recognizable and established screen personae. "I am far more excited and energetic than if I just made another film with a group of mates," he told *The Independent*. "I think if I had done that again, public interest would have dropped off too" (in Sweet, 2002: 10-11). With the ensemble cast of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* including an impressive range of film and television personae, the film was built around its pre-sold commercial appeal.

Indeed, the range of contemporary British talent on display in *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* is particularly striking in retrospect, and FilmFour's desire to market the film to an international audience was clearly signalled by the casting of Robert Carlyle and Rhys Ifans. Although suffering something of a dip in his Hollywood career after the failure of the attempted crossover *The 51st State* (2001), Carlyle remained a powerful multiplex draw in the UK. Building on credible work with Ken Loach – *Riff-Raff* (1991) and *Carla's Song* (1996) – and the bleak, Jimmy McGovern-scripted *Priest* (1994), Carlyle's breakthrough roles were in key 1990s British films *Trainspotting* (1996) and *The Full Monty* (1997). Gaining further popularity with the denizens on Middle England as the star of popular BBC1 series *Hamish Macbeth* (1995-1997), Carlyle had

bolstered his international standing with performances in high-profile films such as *The World is Not Enough* (1999), *Angela's Ashes* (1999) and *The Beach* (2000). Rhys Ifans' fame, meanwhile, was founded in large part upon his scene-stealing supporting performance in *Notting Hill* (1999), a film that had established itself – however erroneously – alongside *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) as a globally recognized marker of “ordinary” Britishness. Kathy Burke, meanwhile, was an increasingly well-respected actor, as evidenced by supporting roles in the acclaimed *Nil by Mouth* (1997) and the internationally successful historical drama *Elizabeth* (1998). Perhaps more significantly, Burke was well known to the domestic audience for playing a range of popular comic grotesques on UK television, many of which were grounded in her long-term association with comedian Harry Enfield, including the successful theatrical spin-off *Kevin and Perry Go Large* (2000). Like Burke, Ricky Tomlinson was a well-established television performer after long-running roles in *Brookside* (1982-1998), *Cracker* (1994-1996) and the working-class sitcom *The Royle Family* (1998-2010), with film appearances in *Riff Raff* and the titular role in *Mike Bassett: England Manager* (2001). Shirley Henderson had already worked alongside Carlyle, featuring in a long-running romantic plot in *Hamish Macbeth*, and had appeared regularly in films directed by the widely admired Michael Winterbottom – *Wonderland* (1999), *The Claim* (2000) and *24 Hour Party People* (2002) – alongside notable supporting roles in international hits such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002). Finally, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands'* supporting cast also included notable cameos from such well-known television personae as Vanessa Feltz and comedians Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer.

Instead of being marketed *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* as “a Shane Meadows film,” then, the director's third feature was heavily invested in the pulling power of its cast. Asked by the BBC whether, through his use of “big names,” he had made “a conscious decision this time to reach a bigger, more mainstream audience,” Meadows somewhat defensively espoused a mixture of pragmatism and creative continuity:

It wasn't solely because of the names. When you've made two films – *TwentyFourSeven* and *A Room for Romeo Brass* – and no-one's really seen them, it becomes more and more difficult for you to keep making films. It's simple economic terms – I want to keep on making films, but I don't want to make a Hollywood film and sacrifice everything. So with this one I was really trying to find a way of getting a hook for people. There's the western angle, the cast and the music – it's all slightly bigger and more commercially viable in some respects. But it still has the realism of my characters and my use of music, so I haven't given too much up. (in Michael, 2002) [4]

The emphasis on star personae is encapsulated by the promotional poster for *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*, which featured Ifans and Carlyle prominent in the foreground with Burke, Tomlinson and Henderson clearly identifiable behind them. The image thus obeyed the multiple commercial logics of contemporary film promotion. *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* could be interpreted by the audience as an impressive ensemble piece featuring a mix of well-established British talent; as the latest film from a talented young British auteur with roots in the social-realist tradition; as a hybrid of Brit-Western, offbeat domestic melodrama and "quirky" suburban rom-com; or as any combination of the above depending on the *habitus* of potential viewers. Although Meadows' auteur-brand was not yet sufficiently established to secure the interest of a mainstream audience, his reputation *within* industrial circles as a promising and artistically credible grassroots talent was central to securing a weighty cast willing to work for greatly reduced fees in exchange for the hip quotient granted by association with the director (Spencer, 2002). In an interview included on the DVD release of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*, for example, producer Andrea Calderwood described Meadows as having "a great reputation in the British acting community":

All we had to do was phone up and ask 'would any of the actors like to come up and meet Shane' and they all said yes immediately [...] [T]hey had all seemed to have heard about Shane and were curious to meet him.

Echoing Calderwood's comments on the same DVD, Meadows also alludes to the powerful influence of artistic credibility within industrial circles, pointing out that "even though my films haven't been widely seen by the public, it's gratifying to discover that people like Rhys [Ifans] and Robert [Carlyle] knew my work." [5]

Along with an established cast, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* also foregrounded a more conventional romantic narrative than his previous films. Like both *Small Time* and *A Room for Romeo Brass*, however, the plot is structured around troubled domestic relationships across two interconnected families: mechanic Dek (Ifans), his girlfriend Shirley (Henderson) and her daughter Marlene (Finn Atkins) and Shirley's neighbours and surrogate family Charlie (Tomlinson) and Carol (Burke). Suburban equilibrium is initially ruptured by Shirley's refusal to marry Dek (who publically proposes on a reality-TV show), a situation exacerbated by the unexpected return of Shirley's ex-boyfriend Jimmy (Carlyle) – also Marlene's father and Carol's adopted brother – after an absence of three years. Jimmy manages to split the couple, luring Shirley into a false sense of security and, in turn, further humiliating the beleaguered Dek. Jimmy eventually proves feckless and immature compared to dull-but-reliable

Dek, and the narrative is resolved after a climactic confrontation between the two men. The film ends with Dek happily reunited with Shirley and Marlene as a family unit.

Despite its commercial trappings, the film is in many ways not so dissimilar to Meadows' earlier work. Like so much of his output, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* pivots around absent or troublesome fathers, and the film is entirely consistent in its "Meadowsian" critique of flawed and problematic masculinities (Fuller, 2007; Fradley, 2010, 2012; Fradley and Kingston, 2013). Jimmy is a small-time criminal and irresponsible absentee father; Dek is a perpetual adolescent, his problematic relationship with the responsibilities of parenthood underscored by a fetishistic investment in his souped-up Ford Sierra (tellingly named "Baby"); and country singer and would-be cowboy Charlie is one of Meadows' many deluded child-men. Although the film softens Meadows' typically abrasive provincial demotic – summarized in the broad post-devolution mix of regional accents and Jimmy's repeated use of "fanny" as a mildly contemptuous adjective for Dek – much of the film's humour is characteristically grounded in the latrine (Fradley, 2013). A repeated image of Charlie/Tomlinson sitting on the toilet is practically a signature shot, for example. Elsewhere there is a memorably gratuitous shot of Donut (Andrew Shim) lying in bed, his "g"-string-clad backside gloriously exposed while apoplectic girlfriend Donna (Kelly Thresher) accuses her mother Carol of trying to seduce her beau. *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* also employs a more self-consciously cinematic formal style than Meadows' previous films. Uncharacteristically sweeping crane shots nod towards Sergio Leone's celebrated visual hyperbole and ostentatious wide-angle framings serve to transform Nottingham's working-class suburbs into a *faux*-mythic space. However, the film remains grounded in Meadows' patented working-class suburban milieu, what Fradley (2010) dubs his "trademark semi-detached *mise-en-scene*" (283). Moreover, the exaggerated compositions and nods to Leone's visual style serve to underscore Meadows' critique of the rituals of male rivalry and masculine performativity. To all intents and purposes, then, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* is almost immediately recognizable as a "Shane Meadows" feature.

Rethinking *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*

Once Upon a Time in The Midlands was theatrically released in the UK on 6 September 2002 and received widespread mediocre reviews. In *The Guardian*, Danny Leigh (2002) placed the film within a broader narrative of cinematic decline, suggesting that Meadows "is the latest British filmmaker to fall for the bunkum that packing a movie with stars will lead, inevitably, to full cinemas and satisfied customers" (8). In *Sight & Sound*, long-term admirer Geoffrey Macnab felt that the film suffered from a

sense of creative stasis. "Apart from the spaghetti-Western conceit [*Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*] doesn't take us anywhere new," he argued, complaining that the casting was "disconcerting" and that the film as a whole "can't help but seem like a compromise" (2002: 68). In *The Observer*, Neil Spencer (2002) argued that "*Midlands* doesn't have quite enough story or script" and lacked "mileage or surprise." It is symptomatic of Meadows' cult appeal at this juncture that Spencer's half-hearted attempt to defend aspects of the film did so with recourse to the raucous tone of his earlier material, suggesting as he does that the film's characters nevertheless serve as "an amiably nutty reflection of millennial Britain."

Later articles were no kinder in their retrospective assessment of the film. For Jonathon Romney, "Meadows prefers to make films the way he talks, off the top of his head. He had an unhappy encounter with mainstream practice when he made *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* [...] and faced a bigger budget than he was used to, pressure to please the audience, and a famous-faces cast [...] who collectively failed to exude the charisma Meadows habitually squeezes out of non-professionals" (2004). On *The South Bank Show* in 2007, Meadows explained that "after my first two films [...] I basically couldn't get any funding. You get this *wunderkind*, auteur tag, but because the films never made any money you go from being [hot]-property to people going, 'Well, we love his films but they don't sell,' and the market dropped out. So I ended up making a film [*Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*] for the wrong reasons. It was like, this is the only way I can get a budget: I've got to use my famous people and give it a more easily accessible storyline. And I said to myself, 'If that's all that's open to me I won't make another one.'"

Even the more positive reviews tended to damn the film with faint praise. In *The Daily Telegraph*, Sukhdev Sandhu suggested that, while the film was certainly a disappointment, "Meadows on crutches is still better than most English directors on steroids" (2002). Not coincidentally, Sandhu's telling use of a metaphor suggesting emasculation – "on crutches" – echoes accounts of Meadows' relationship with his female producer. The same metaphor was reiterated some years later by Sheldon Hall:

Once Upon a Time in the Midlands is a disappointingly thin and flaccid follow-up [to *A Room for Romeo Brass*], an attempt at a contemporary English 'Western' which fails to come off as anything other than a quirky conceit. Its cast of stars (*Rhys Ifans, Robert Carlyle, Kathy Burke, Ricky Tomlinson*), none of whom is readily associated with the Midlands, is the first sign that *Meadows* might be willing to compromise his regional loyalties in order to reach the mainstream, though he has yet to achieve a major popular success. (2006: 421)

Hall's critique of the film as "thin and flaccid" implies that what he – and, by extension, the multiplex audience who turned their back on the film – required was a more virile film; one that is – presumably – thematically and textually "thick" and "tumescent." This is not intended flippantly. Indeed, perhaps the key trope in retrospective accounts of the trajectory of Meadows' career is the director's defiant – and, ultimately, triumphant – return to his authentic filmmaking "roots" following the painfully compromised production of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (Fuller, 2007; Fradley, 2010, 2012). While the low-budget *Dead Man's Shoes* was not a huge commercial success, it is widely considered – alongside *This is England* – to be Meadows' strongest film. Not coincidentally, *Dead Man's Shoes* is also his most unrelentingly masculine film, featuring a virtually all-male cast and a thematic emphasis upon the homosocial. Moreover, like his earlier output, *Dead Man's Shoes* was semi-autobiographical, produced with creative autonomy and grounded in Meadows' often brutal experiences growing up in the East Midlands.

It is difficult to ignore the sense that the "flaccidity" of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* functions on two interwoven levels. Firstly, it compares unfavourably to the films that both precede and follow it in terms of its commercial grounding and compromised authorship. Secondly, there is a perceived textual "softening" of the otherwise masculine terrain of Meadows' oeuvre. In his review of the film, for example, Macnab bemoans *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*' "half-hearted" denouement in which "we're presented with a lacklustre one-punch exchange" (68) rather than the disturbing violence of the earlier *TwentyFourSeven* and *A Room for Romeo Brass*. Moreover, rather than adopting a strictly social realist aesthetic and focussing on the fractious nature of intra-male relationships, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* is whimsically comical and grounded in more gently "feminine" territory. The film pivots around a romantic love triangle between Dek, Shirley and Jimmy, and *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*' generic conflation of domestic melodrama and romantic comedy marks it out from the typically masculinist concerns of social realism that – rightly or wrongly – have so often served to frame discussions of Meadows' work. Moreover, it is notable that with Burke, Henderson and Finn Atkins at the emotional heart of the film, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* stands out as having by far the strongest female presence in any of Meadows' features to date.

Whether implicitly or explicitly registered in various critical accounts, this would-be "feminizing" of the "Meadowsian" signature seems to unite the critics in disapproval. To this end, it is far from insignificant that the 12-year-old Finn Atkins' impressively naturalistic performance in *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* is regularly overlooked by commentators who elsewhere acclaim the youthful precocity of Andrew Shim and Thomas

Turgoose's performances in *A Room for Romeo Brass* and *This is England*. The non-diegetic soundtrack's heavy emphasis on contemporaneously popular female artists such as Norah Jones and Sarah McLachlan is another shift from the typical terrain of Meadows' films, and the film's overlooked emphasis on female friendship and the powerful bonds between mothers and daughters is similarly interpreted as incompatible with his earlier work. *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands'* emphasis on the progressively "feminine" is emblemized in a series of Meadows' signature domestic tableaux featuring double beds and cramped living rooms heaped with overlapping bodies indicating unselfconscious intimacy and nurturing communal warmth. As Paul Dave notes, in Meadows' work "space, both public and private, supports individual and collective flourishing [...] Meadows' often cramped interiors radiate an informal ease – these are spaces in which the comfortable intimacy of many individuals creates an image of 'equality of being'" (2011: 35-36). Yet these intriguingly understated political aspects of the film have hitherto been ignored. Despite flagging the more female-oriented slant of the film by describing *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* as "a surreal suburban soap opera," Fradley (2012) still ultimately dismisses the film in terms that echo Hall's metaphor of phallic failure, pigeonholing the director's third feature as "Meadows-lite." (64).

Finally, the sense that the *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* stands outside Meadows "authentic" body of work is reiterated in fan discourse, as evidenced in online discussions at Meadows' official website (www.shanemeadows.co.uk). [6] Outright hostility towards the film is exemplified by "jtrodrigezm," who unequivocally states "I watched *Midlands* on FilmFour the other night and I have to say that from the very beginning it was a complete pile of shit. I am and always have been a massive fan of Shane's and I think that may lead me to be harsher on this film than maybe I would but it is still shite no matter what." "Curls1999" concurs, suggesting that "new viewers shouldn't go into this film expecting a Shane Meadows film as you have come to know and love them," arguing that "it's only a Shane film by name really." Elsewhere, "Jill" posits that the film was derailed by commercial imperatives. "There's almost a sort of mythology grown up around *OUTIM* being the 'disappointing' or 'bad' film [...] It's just a shame the original vision of the film wasn't realised (for various reasons)." While some contributors praise the performances of Finn Atkins, Rhys Ifans and Shirley Henderson, the general sense of disappointment is reaffirmed by "wheatabeat," who remarks that "I think the meaty casting had an adverse affect on the film" before affirming his/her own habitus over a more "mainstream" audience. "It has Shane's trademark humour running right through it, but the people who the film was targeted at were mostly your belly-laugh-a-minute mob seemingly, hence the poor reviews and reception." These views are ultimately endorsed and legitimated by the director himself,

who describes the film's production as "a great learning curve." "To be honest," Meadows remarks, "I feel pretty lucky that I managed to gather so many mistakes (Big Budget, Script Development Hell, Nervy B[astard], Superstar Cast...) in one film and get them out of the way. I now make films for myself first and then everyone else after." Perhaps most significantly, Meadows' clashes with the film's female producer – a castrating personification, of course, of the film's commercial underpinnings – are described with specific colloquial relish. "[Me] and the producer didn't get along [...] [and] I learnt the art of not smacking the woolly mammoth in the piehole as she was purest of evil and seemed intent on driving me into the nuthouse at all costs."

Conclusion: Do You Wanna Watch the Weakest Link?

The disruptive intrusion of outsiders upon circumscribed social worlds is a recurrent theme in Meadows' work. While the ostensible interloper in *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* is Jimmy, the dominant discourses surrounding Meadows' least-loved film bespeak a different kind of interjection: that of commercial and industrial forces that fatally compromise the tone and distinctive signature of Meadows' authorship. In retrospectively bracketing the film as a creative failure, "feminizing" commercial forces are understood to neuter Meadows' creativity and mute his specific authorial stamp. We have argued that the perceived creative failure of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* has been used as a retrospective rhetorical prop that has regularly served to structure the critical valorization of the remainder of Meadows' output. As we have demonstrated, Meadows has repeatedly asserted that the experience of making *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* served as a necessary rite of passage that has significantly informed his approach to subsequent projects. When promoting *Dead Man's Shoes*, for example, Meadows' previous feature was an almost constant reference point:

Dead Man's Shoes has no outward commercial pressure because it was made for less than £1 million. I met producer Mark Herbert [...] and at that first meeting I'd just made *Midlands* and I wanted to do a film that was the complete antithesis of that process [...] There was absolutely no development up-front almost as a two-fingers up to the process of *Midlands*. (in Lawrenson: 35-36)

There are a series of rigid binary oppositions in play in critical discussions of the two films. These can be summarized as follows for *Midlands/Dead Man's Shoes*: impersonal/personal; commercial/non-commercial; mainstream/alternative; commerce/art; artificiality/realism; high budget/low budget; compromise/freedom; industrial product/personal filmmaking; fantasy/realism; soft/hard; flaccid/phallic; inauthentic/authentic. These in turn pivot around an implicitly gendered

binary. Both the experience of making *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* and the film itself are negatively designated "feminine," while *Dead Man's Shoes* is both a vigorously "masculine" film and a triumphantly *remasculinizing* experience for the director. Hitherto unchallenged discourses surrounding the continued interpretation and evaluation of the "un-Meadowsian" *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* thus clearly illustrate Joanne Hollows' (2003) influential argument about the "masculinity of cult." For Hollows, discourses surrounding a "cult" auteur like Shane Meadows are often informed by a masculinist logic which is structured upon the imaginary rejection of a supposedly "feminized" mainstream. In this way, *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* is effectively "othered" as a mainstream-feminine cultural product through a conflation of key discourses: media reception, fan appraisal, scholarly analysis and Meadows' own self-commentary. What we suggest here is that the derogated status of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* reveals a potent series of prejudices and presuppositions about gender, authorship and cultural value that have thus far been accepted without question in the extant body of Meadows scholarship to date.

The reasons for any film's commercial failure are complex and multivalent. Given that *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* has served as a useful prop rhetorically securing the "authenticity" of Meadows work before and since, it is tempting to speculate what would have happened to Meadows' career – and the reputation of the film – had his third feature been a box-office success. In this essay we have attempted to think about *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* not – as critics have usually done – as an aberration in his career, but instead how the film has functioned within discourses of Meadows' authorship. These discourses, we argue, have in turn served to obfuscate or marginalize intriguing aspects of Meadows' work that are not easily sutured into established conceptions of "the Meadowsian." To this end, we suggest that *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* is long overdue for careful re-evaluation outside the critical tunnel vision of the auteurist approach that has for too long dismissed the film as little more than a botched *faux pas*. It remains to be seen, however, whether *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* can ever come to be judged on its own merits, outside its circumscribed cultural bracketing as Shane Meadows' least "Meadowsian" film.

Notes

[1] See Fradley (2013) for more on the ways in which the body – and Meadows' physical appearance – is regularly used as a corporeal signifier of class.

[2] Some years later, critic Mark Kermode's enthusiastic endorsement of *This is England* on BBC2's flagship arts show *The Late Review* was

emblematic in this respect. “It’s really great to see a movie that doesn’t just describe all skinheads as racist thugs. It’s not *Romper Stomper* [1995], it’s not *The Believer* [2001], obviously it does owe something to Alan Clarke’s *Made in Britain* [1983], but it’s a really compassionate portrait of that culture [because] it’s seen by somebody who was inside of it, who understands that it was originally a multicultural movement [...] I think it’s one of the best portrayals of British youth culture I’ve seen in ages [...] So often when people portray youth culture, particularly British youth culture, it’s done from the outside by people who don’t understand what it was actually like to be part of that” (originally broadcast on BBC2, 27 April 2007).

[3] The apparent emergence of “Shane Meadows” as a convenient brand name – or, indeed, the “Meadowsian” as a replicable style of filmmaking – is an important aspect of Meadows’ career that requires a more sustained scholarly interrogation than we have scope to provide here. However, *The Scouting Book for Boys* (2009) – written by Jack Thorne, directed by Tom Harper – serves as something of a litmus test for Meadows’ growing influence. Starring Thomas Turgoose, the young actor most closely associated with Meadows, the film is both thematically and visually a virtual checklist of ‘Meadowsian’ traits: dysfunctional masculinity; problematic paternal figures; troubled adolescent males; unambiguously parochial, working-class milieu; unfashionably provincial setting on the Norfolk coast; wistful sub-Gavin Clarke acoustic soundtrack; evocative location cinematography; violently disturbing conclusion; and so forth. Similarly, such distinctive “Meadowsian” traces were similarly difficult to overlook in *Rough Skin* (2011), a short film screened as part of Channel Four’s “Coming Up” season and starring Vicky McClure.

[4] Ironically, the highly commercial use of music in the film later became one of Meadows’ main points of frustration with *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*. Having wanted to score the film with original compositions by Gavin Clarke and been overruled, the director avowed in 2012 that he hoped to reissue the film on DVD with a new soundtrack entirely of his choosing.

[5] Although Meadows has been careful not to apportion blame to any of his cast, it is widely understood that the majority of the main performers were reluctant to give up time to work on lengthy character development in Meadows’ preferred improvisational workshops prior to shooting (Fradley, 2010, 2012). As Meadows later explained to Jared Wilson (2004) when promoting *Dead Man’s Shoes*, “having famous people in your films makes a difference to your box office, but it’s not something I’d do regularly because it doesn’t fit with how I work. It wasn’t my choice in the first place to fill the cast with lots of big names [...] [and] the problem with working [with] successful actors is that it’s totally different to the

way I normally like to work [...] Usually we all live together for six months before I start shooting, so I'm getting to know the cast. When you're working with famous people they're so busy they can only turn up for the odd week here and there." To this end, rehearsal footage included on the double-DVD release of the film shows only Kathy Burke improvising enthusiastically with Paddy Considine, again suggesting that Meadows originally had very different ideas about the casting of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*.

[6] All quotations taken from <http://shanemeadows.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=midlands&action=display@thread=487> (accessed 11 January 2013).

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