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‘Stick that knife in me’: Shane Meadows’ Children

Vicky Lebeau

Abstract:

This article brings Shane Meadows’ *Dead Man’s Shoes* (2004) into dialogue with the history of the depiction of the child on film. Exploring Meadows’ work for its complex investment in the figure of the child on screen, it traces the limits of the liberal ideology of the child in his cinema and the structures of feeling mobilised by its uses—at once aesthetic and sociological—of technologies of vision.

Keywords: childhood; childhood; cinema; class; *Dead Man’s Shoes*; Shane Meadows.

To watch the opening sequence of Shane Meadows’ *Dead Man’s Shoes* (2004) is to participate in a long and complex history: the depiction of the child and of the infant on film. At the close of the brief credit, the image of a sleeping baby fills the screen: pillowed head, up-flung arms, the powder-blue of a knitted jacket, the soft glare of a white blanket. The camera is up close, moving quickly—unevenly, almost urgently—from left to right to reveal a second pram, another child: this baby is awake, looking out towards the camera; a tiny hand clutches the edge of the pram-cover, his head moving slightly from side to side. In that brief moment, in that momentary movement, it becomes clear that what we have been looking at is not a filmed photograph but filmed film.

Dead Man’s Shoes begins in the image of the infant, the child, the family. The grain of these shots—so vital to the idiom of

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Meadows' *oeuvre*—is familiar: we are looking at Super 8 footage, at the type of family album made possible by the various developments in visual technology that, since the mid-nineteenth century, have transformed the representation of the everyday: especially, perhaps, the everyday life of the child.¹ From photography to cinema: it is a transformation—a new 'anthropological fact', to recall Roland Barthes' resonant phrase (1993: 45)—apparent throughout the opening sequence of *Dead Man's Shoes*, its intimate, but ruthlessly generic, exhibition of moments in the life of a baby and young child: baby sleeping, baby in a pram, baby on a gate, baby paddling, baby's christening, baby smiling, baby yawning, baby's first steps. *Dead Man's Shoes* may not be the most obvious example of a film 'about' childhood in Meadows' *oeuvre* but, barely a minute long, this sequence is, I think, vital to understanding the significance of the child to his work. Certainly, this article is driven by an attempt to grasp the 'pull'—the structure of feeling, to borrow Raymond Williams' well-known, if notoriously elusive, concept (1977: 128)—of these opening images, their bearing on the exploration of contemporary cultures of childhood and class emerging through Meadows' film-making.

From *Twenty Four Seven* (1997) and *A Room for Romeo Brass* (1999) to *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands* (2002), *This Is England* (2006) and *Somers Town* (2008), Meadows has forged an aching lyrical vision of childhoods lived out on the margins of a society that fails in its due regard for children and for their futures; the social history of working-class childhood that unfolds through *This Is England*—described by Mark Sinker (2007: 23) as a struggle for the soul of a child (Shaun)—is only the most obvious case in point. On one level, it is easy to associate Meadows' work with a canon of films that dramatise an agitated, and sometimes deeply unhappy, version of childhood and adolescence: François Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959), Ken Loach's *Kes* (1969), Alan Clarke's *Made in Britain* (1982), Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999) and Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009) are key examples in that genre. Such an association comes through with particular force in the closing scenes of *This Is England*: 'The closest I've ever done to a homage,' as Meadows (n.d.) acknowledges in interview, reflecting on his decision to embed the final sequence of *Les Quatre Cents Coups*—one of the founding films of the French New Wave—in his depiction of a childhood marked by the social dereliction of Thatcherite Conservatism. Looking across from *Les Quatre Cents Coups* to *This Is England*, the identification of the child as a privileged object of fellow-feeling comes into view: both films belong to the tradition of using the image of the child in pain, the child in want, to rend the visual field.

But there, too, is a poetic rendition of what Truffaut once described as children's great powers of resistance and survival: that resistance, that capacity to survive, comes right to the fore in the closing scenes of both *Les Quatre Cents Coups* and *This Is England* when the camera fixates on the face of the child, his pain, his defiance, as a means to figure the limits of the liberal consensus on the rights of the child to protection against violence, exploitation and abuse—the right of the child, crudely, to a life that includes more than the bare fact of being alive.²

Over and over again, it is the child's face—the look of the child—that comes to mobilise Meadows' cinema as a mode of public engagement, public protest and public challenge. Think, for example, of Marlene's (Finn Atkins) inscrutable response to the romantic, but not always comic, chaos of the adult world in *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*—a film that uses a young girl's moral intuition as a means to negotiate a way through that chaos towards a 'happy ending': the family, or families, reinstated at the end of the film (is it a coincidence that this is the only occasion on which Meadows puts a young girl at the centre of his work?). Similarly, in *Somers Town*, there is a resilience—at once violent and fragile, spontaneous and arch—carried by the faces of both Tomo (Thomas Turgoose, the actor bringing with him the drama of *This Is England*) and Marek (Piotr Jagiello): the final sequence, in which the boys travel to Paris to find Maria (the young woman with whom they have both fallen in love) is shot again in Super 8, delivering an extraordinary mix of hope, pity and nostalgia. But how do you begin to read a child's face? What is the child's face on film?

It's a question that, agitating through Meadows' cinema, comes right to the fore in that opening sequence of *Dead Man's Shoes*, its complex implication in the legacy of post-Enlightenment investments in children and childhoods: in particular, in what Carolyn Steedman once described as the 'semiology of infancy' (1995: 70). Reflecting on the wealth of childcare literature published from the 1830s onwards, Steedman drew attention to the remarkable example of *Letters to a Mother on the Watchful Care of her Infant*, published in 1831, in which the anonymous author advises mothers on the importance of observing the expressions on their children's faces as well as changes in their behaviour and gesture: the 'little infant's countenance will offer . . . the most interesting and most intelligent page in Nature's book'; 'every change of manner, every unwonted gesture in her infant, speaks to the observant eye, of the tender mother, a language not to be misunderstood' (quoted in *ibid.*: 69). As Steedman points out, this is an investment in the child as a type of visual text to be watched, recorded, interpreted; crucially, trained on the face and body of the

child, that observing eye of a tender mother is one prototype of the looking-questioning, compassionate, loving, sometimes prurient-at children that, running parallel with developments in visual and audio-visual technologies, gains ground throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1898, an advertisement for a new range of hand-held Cyclone cameras cast that watchful mother as fond photographer: 'Baby's Picture is always treasured, more of them might be had by investing in a camera.'

In the same year, C. Francis Jenkins, pioneer of cinema and television, was one of the first to give voice to the promise of the new technologies in relation to the ongoing quest to see and know the child: 'The changes in the human, say the changing animation of a growing baby's face,' he writes towards the end of *Animated Pictures: An Exposition of the Historical Development of Chronophotography*, 'could be followed and recorded' ([1898] 1970: 104-5). In fact, what first struck me about the opening sequence of *Dead Man's Shoes* is its coincidence with one of the most popular and commercially successful genres of Victorian cinema: the 'Child Pictures', or pictures of 'Child Life', in which, for a minute or so at a time, infants and young children eat, drink, crawl, walk, play, smile and cry on screen (Lebeau 2008). On 28 December 1895, the programme for the first public demonstration of the Cinématographe Lumière at the Grand Café in Paris included *Repas de bébé*, one of the earliest, and now canonical, examples of early cinema: a brief 'view' of a meal shared between a baby and her parents, in fact Auguste Lumière and his wife and daughter, making this one of the first home movies). Capturing a few brief but successive moments in the life of a bourgeois French family, *Repas de bébé* both repeats and extends the technology of the photograph, its naturalistic depiction of the world. 'Two very small babies playing with blocks,' is how the *American Mutograph and Biograph Catalogue* advertised *When Babies Quarrel* in 1899: 'One steals the blocks and the other cries. One of the "hit" pictures of the Biograph.' Part of the 'hit' comes through that moment of sudden transition—from playing to quarreling, from pleasure to grief—caught on film: the quintessentially transient time of childhood symbolised by the transience of both tears and smiles. Or, to put it the other way around, it is in its capacity to represent the child—uncontrived, spontaneous, fleeting—that cinema, its new technologies of vision, can begin to ground its claims to capture the world 'from life'.

No doubt Meadows' cinema continues that claim. That Meadows is a film-maker who depicts lives that he knows and shares has been essential to the reception of his art, its aesthetic of the instant

and the improvised, the collaborative and the local: Meadows is the director of what Martin Fradley has described as that ‘deeply and perennially unfashionable’ region of England, the Midlands (2010: 280).³ Availing itself of the naturalism, the haphazard spontaneity for which the genre of the home movie is so often acclaimed—those ‘mini-underground opuses . . . filled with accidental art’, as John Waters (n.d.) has described them—the opening sequence of *Dead Man’s Shoes* embeds itself in the visual archive of the child in motion, drawing on its promise to deliver the child as child, to capture his quintessential transience, his (supposed) quintessential otherness, on film. But why? Why does Meadows use the face of a baby to cue us into a world in which something has happened that cannot be forgiven? In Richard’s (Paddy Considine) words, the first spoken in the film: ‘God will forgive them; he’ll forgive them and allow them into heaven. I can’t live with that.’ What happens when the image of the child is used to begin to uncover the story of the suffering of a ‘simple’ man, neither adult nor child, at the heart of *Dead Man’s Shoes*? ‘Anthony, don’t mess about with that fire, mate’: at the beginning of ‘Day One’, Richard’s words cast his brother as a man who, like a child, needs protection from the harms that he does not see: a state of being that leaves Anthony (Toby Kebbell) open to forms of violation at once ordinary and grotesque. ‘Simple’ is not a simple word, but it is the word used to describe Anthony towards the end of the film: he is ‘a simple kid’, ‘too simple to know what he was doing’.

From ‘Day One’ we know that whatever it is that has happened, has happened to Anthony: ‘He’s one, bro’ . . .’ are Anthony’s first words, and these are the words (and the gesture—Anthony is hiding his face, cowering as he speaks) that mobilise Richard’s acts of vengeance against his brother’s persecutors and, in this sense, drive the film. But what we do not know at the beginning of *Dead Man’s Shoes* is that Anthony is dead, that one of the figures in this Derbyshire landscape is a revenant, a visual correlate to the scream in Richard’s head, a scream to which Richard bears witness towards the very end of the film: ‘When you were torturing him, was he calling for me? Was he screaming my name? He still is.’ As a type of prologue to the film, the ‘family album’, its spectacle of babies and children, is entwined with another series of images, bound by the plaintive baritone of the opening strains of Bill Callahan’s ‘Vessel in Vain’: the momentary view of the baby toddling towards the camera, gives way to—seems almost to disintegrate into—the shot of a landscape, open, rough, empty, a solitary tree breaking the line of the horizon. Once again, for a moment, this could be a still photograph: the landscape is heavy in

its hue, its stillness. In fact, in its scope and size – the fore and middle ground of the frame loom as an expanse of green field almost tactile in its apparent proximity – this shot evokes the photograph as a form of tableau: photographs designed to be hung on walls rather than passed around by hand or put in albums, photographs to be ‘looked at like paintings’, as Michael Fried puts it in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, his fascinating book on this new regime of art photography, a regime that can impact on our experience of the static long shot in cinema (2008: 14). The contrast is stark: from Super 8 to Super 16 and the ‘look’ of digital post-production; from (often interior) scenes of domestic life to ‘Nature’; from the vernacular mode of the home movie to the more painterly vision of a landscape that, in its very emptiness, expects. Into that landscape, one figure – and then another – strides from the right of the frame along the line of the horizon, rhyming with that initial tracking of the camera from left to right across the babies’ faces (and, perhaps, reworking the opening scene of *A Room for Romeo Brass*). Now the camera remains still, recording movement across the image – again, the mode is pastoral, painterly: two figures in a landscape – before dissolving back into the home movie, a shot of the filmed image of two children, a young boy and a toddler, cuddling one another on a bed. It’s a moment of playful, and protective, intimacy, captured on film and now rerun, years later, to coincide with the brothers’ dogged progress through a landscape – to bind this moment, this journey, to the very origins of their lives together, in effect to bind the origins and the ends of a life in and to the image of the child.

Part of the significance of *Dead Man’s Shoes* is its deep engagement with the structures of feeling that bear on the relations between life and death, image and time, image and self, solicited by the artful aesthetic of those opening shots of the child. On one level, that art, its snapshot aesthetic, is propped on the unparalleled capacity of the photograph to capture a moment – or, better, moments – in time. Capturing change, preserving time: this is one of the first, and fundamental, mystifications of the new technologies of the moving image. ‘Now, for the first time,’ as André Bazin reflects in ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’ in 1945, ‘the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were’ (1967: 15). Bazin’s mortuary tone – so reminiscent of early responses to the moving image as a type of triumph over death – is curiously apt in relation to *Dead Man’s Shoes*. Spanning 30-odd years in its uses of visual technology (from Super 8 to Super 16), its opening sequence offers the experience of looking at the infant, the child, in the form of a traversal of time – as if time is

mediated by and as the image of the child. Capturing duration, cinema turns back time; it turns time into a revenant so that we can re-find the origins of the lives of the two brothers whose fate the film uncovers. Traversal of time, traversal of life and death: 'Now life is collected and reproduced,' as one commentator exclaimed in response to the première of the Cinématographe in Paris in December 1895: 'It will be possible to see one's loved ones active long after they have passed away'. Or, as a journalist writing for *La Poste* inflates the rhetoric a few days later: 'Death will have ceased to be absolute' (quoted in Burch 1990: 21).

Reproducing life, preserving life: a naive (some might say apocryphal) response to the contribution made by a new form of visual technology to the long history of naturalistic portrayal. But it is a response that a film like *Dead Man's Shoes* seems able to resuscitate and to exploit. Anthony is dead. We have seen him walking and talking on screen, but he is dead. The effects can be spectral. In the closing sequences of *Dead Man's Shoes*, the image of Anthony's body, hanging from the rafters of a derelict building, delivers a visceral blow in its confounding of our routine perception throughout the film that Anthony is alive—and then, again, as he raises his head to look towards us, in its indication that there is a kind of life in the image of death (an uncanniness that, for me, turns this shot into one of the most unnerving in contemporary cinema). Again, the grain of the image helps to structure the affect. Running throughout the film, the scenes of Anthony's suffering come at us in the form of the black-and-white image, with all its attendant claims to history, memory, truth, atrocity. In particular, the association between atrocity—torture, execution, genocide—and the black-and-white photograph, be it still or moving, comes right to the fore in the shot that reveals the consequences of Anthony's torments (and in 2004, the year that the film was first shown, this is an image—a body hanging, helpless, isolated—inextricable from what Stephen Eisenman has described as the 'Abu Ghraib effect' (2007)). Nothing in the aesthetic of *Dead Man's Shoes* invites us to question the historical status of these images; they arrive—they come at us—with the force of revelation, of death.

At least, this is one way to begin to describe the structure of feeling engaged by *Dead Man's Shoes*, its complex entanglement with the myth of the child that, as Lesley Caldwell has put it, 'actively shapes our epoch and ways of thinking' (2002: 4). It is a myth, an idea, an institution, preoccupied by the divisions between life and death, innocence and experience, body and language, love and loss, and, of course, between adults and children. 'The ability to treat children as

different from adults,' writes Frances Ferguson in her exploration of the legacy of the Romantic child, 'is almost as fundamental to modern political thinking—of a more or less liberal cast—as any distinction we make politically' (2003: 222). Historians continue to document this point, locating, across different institutional knowledges and practices, the emergence of a modern idea of childhood as both a world apart, a distinct time and space (even, at times, a Wonderland), and the creative source of the self: the inner self, the private world of dreams, wishes, fantasy (Ariès [1962] 1988; Steedman 1995). 'Child and self: in modern consciousness these two realities are profoundly linked,' writes the psychoanalyst Michael Eigen, reflecting on what he describes as our contemporary 'Age of the Baby'. With the invention of psychoanalysis, as Eigen puts it, 'for the first time in human history grown people could spend the better part of their creative lives thinking about babies'. (Freud, it should be pointed out, once said that it was his fate to discover 'what every nursemaid knows' (1993: 203).)

Given the exploratory form of autobiography so often taking place in Meadows' filming, the presence of that myth is anything but surprising. In this sense, he is participating in an obligation, at once Romantic and modern, to take the measure of a life, to discover the truth of the self, via the figure of the child. 'I don't believe you can be wholly bad because there is so much good in them young boys': in an 'alternative' ending to *Dead Man's Shoes*, that commitment finds blunt expression in an exchange between Richard and Mark, a man who stood by and did nothing to prevent the torments that have led to Anthony's death. Against that act of doing nothing—however troubled, however riven it may be—*Dead Man's Shoes* sets the prodigious goodness of the child, the (again black-and-white) image of the child at play with the man who has come to wreak vengeance on the world. It is the child who saves his father from the vengeful judgement of a man haunted by the death of his brother; the child who, like a symptom, contains the complex good and bad of a father who did not 'do the right thing' but 'can't be wholly bad'; the child who, in his need for protection from harm, provides the father with the grounds for murder: 'Think of your children'; 'C'mon, stick that knife in me.'

This is stark but nonetheless it falls within the terms of the liberal ideology of childhood: that commitment to the protection of the child from fear, from pain, from threat. As Jacqueline Rose asks, in a different context: 'To what lengths will a parent go to protect a child—to protect herself—from fear?' (2003: 114). The pathos and aggression of *Dead Man's Shoes* is inseparable from that ideology: the

image of the child, the moving picture of infants and toddlers, is a prop to murder, to violence in the mode of belated protection (violence all the more vengeful because it comes too late). Richard suffers as he kills, exacting suffering—from himself, from the men who helped to kill his brother—precisely because he has failed to stop it. Taking to its limits the liberal tenet that casts the child as a privileged object of protection, it is as if *Dead Man's Shoes* exposes the mayhem that ensues when that protection fails—the mayhem of Richard's murders, certainly, but also the mayhem of a familiar mode of judgement in suspense. Until the final sequences we may not know what has happened, but Meadows' film makes little room for the idea that Richard is murdering without reason (in both senses of that word: that Richard is a soldier, a man legitimised to use deadly force in the course of duty, may well help to secure that suspense). In his discipline, his mildness, his (albeit very black) humour, Richard might be described as the very type of the anti-hero, acting on behalf of the child who has suffered.

Like Meadows' cinema itself, then: a cinema that, as suggested at the beginning of this article, is deeply engaged with the breakdown of the liberal contract in the contemporary experience of childhood and class. In fact, one way to grasp the difference of the lives lived out in the disinvested spaces of the Midlands' housing estates is to notice how and why it becomes very difficult to make that privileged distinction between adult and child.

Anthony is a compelling case in point but the theme of the man-child, or child-man, helps to characterise Meadows' films. 'You might look about four but you kiss like a 40-year-old': in *This Is England*, Michelle's compliment (if that is what it is) to twelve-year-old Shaun strikes the familiar note. If children are everywhere in Meadows' work, so are the naifs, both boys and men: children, like Shaun and Marlene, old and young beyond their years (a statement that inevitably begs the question of the norm that allows that 'beyond' to come into view); men, variously vulnerable or violent or both, inhabiting worlds that threaten constantly to exceed their comprehension. 'Not right, a big man like that wanting to hang around with young lads'; 'To be honest, you all look a bit old to be hanging around with him': from *A Room for Romeo Brass* to *This Is England*, there is a refrain to be heard in Meadows' cinema. Whatever it is that is 'not right' about Morell (Paddy Considine) in *A Room for Romeo Brass*—one of the most unpredictable characters on Meadows' screen—is reflected by that misfit between a 'big man' and 'young lads', its transgression of a norm that, via the division of childhood into specific stages of growth and development, segments and separates the worlds of adults and children (and, too,

of older and younger children: in *This Is England*, Shaun's mother is worrying about the skinhead gang of teenagers that has become, in many ways, her son's alternative family).

How do you tell the difference between an adult and a child? What age is a child who looks four and acts 40? Who, in 'taking swings at big men', is cast as the very mirror of a man, Combo, whose love of aggression takes the form of racist fury ('It's like looking in a mirror': the cliché carries its full force in mapping out one possible future for Shaun in *This Is England*)? That he struggles with such questions across his films may be one of the effects of Meadows' commitment to putting his camera on the side of the child in all his—and it is, in most instances, his—complex dealings with the (sometimes adult) world. That which does not fit, that which tends to go unnoticed, that which happens every day, has a privileged place in Meadows' filming, its engagement with what, in a different context, the critical legal theorist Patricia Williams has described as 'historical patterns of physical and psychic dispossession'(1987: 403). Meadows' films offer an outstanding example of cinema as a document of the effects of such patterns on the minds and bodies, the lives and deaths, of working-class men, women and children no longer often named as such. As a constant and visible presence on screen, the child is at the heart of that project, its thematic exploration of lives at once precarious and resilient. Take, for example, the scene in which, towards the end of *Once Upon a Time in the Midlands*, a family is crowded in front of a television visible, but only just, at the right-hand edge of the frame. Again, that snapshot aesthetic—the scene is reminiscent of photographic projects such as Nick Waplington's *Living Room* or Richard Billingham's *Ray's a Laugh*—is both giving image to and extending an insight generated by the sociology of British working-class culture since the 1950s: the pivotal role of television in forging familial cohesion. As Michael Young and Peter Willmott recall in their now classic *Family and Kinship in East London*, first published in 1957: 'In one household the parents and five children of all ages were paraded around it [the magic screen] in a half circle at 9 p.m. when one of us called; the two-month-old baby was stationed in its pram in front of the set. The scene had the air of a strange ritual' ([1957] 1986: 143).⁴ Or, as one of Young and Willmott's respondents put it: 'The tellie keeps the family together. None of us ever have to go out now' (ibid.: 149).

At such moments—visual, aural, densely signifying—Meadows' cinema is itself in the mode of sociology, that mode identified by Les Back as an 'art of listening', an embrace of 'interpretation without legislation' (2007: 1). That embrace may be one of the most

distinctive, indeed invaluable, aspects of Meadows' film-making (in ways that remain to be explored, it brings his work into contact with a psychoanalytic mode of interpreting the significance of categories of class and culture in the twenty-first century). Above all, I think, this is a cinema of the tiny but productive detail that, when we see it, will pull us into the work of questioning, interpreting, linking. Beginning not, or not only, in the image of the child but in the *filmed* image of the child, *Dead Man's Shoes* exemplifies that urge, at once aesthetic and ethical, in Meadows' cinema, its simultaneous commitment to, and complication of, one of the most peremptory commands of the modern world: 'Think of your children.' That command echoes through Meadows' films, refracted through their extraordinary involvement with the child as both visible sign of a crisis – in the family, in the (liberal) political contract – and as idea, image and resource for cinema itself.

Notes

1. Writing in 1998, Anne Higgonet indicated that, according to estimates based on statistics held by the Department of Information and Communications of the Photo Marketing Association as well as the 1992 Wolfman Report, approximately half of the photographic film processed in the United States featured babies and young children (that is, about 12.5 billion pictures are taken of children in America every year), presenting compelling evidence for Higgonet's claim that adults 'make pictures of children almost as much as they look at them, and they use them as part of their daily lives' (1998: 87).
2. For further discussion of Truffaut see Lebeau (2008) and Insdorf (1981).
3. In this, Meadows bears comparison with, for example, photographer Richard Billingham whose 'Triptych of Ray', included in the 1994 Barbican Art Gallery exhibition *Who's Looking at the Family*, marked a new departure in the art of photographing the family. Adrian Searle in the *Guardian*, 13 June 2000, described Billingham as having a 'feral hunger for the unregarded moment'.
4. In *Somers Town*, for example, it is Marek's use of a camera to mediate his ties to a language and culture not his own – to mediate the experience of being on the outside – that first brings him into contact with Tomo (via Tomo's 'theft' of the photos of Maria).

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