

Somers Town Study Notes



Directed by: Shane Meadows

Certificate: 12A

Running time: 68 mins

Suitable for: A Level Media/Film Studies

Keywords: Britain onscreen, Shane Meadows, asylum seekers

Synopsis:

Two teenagers form an unlikely friendship as they experience London during a hot summer. Shane Meadows' latest film follows the boys as they fawn over the same girl and struggle through the hot months.

Before viewing

Although it was filmed in 2008, Somers Town was shot in black and white.

1. Why do you think a modern director would choose to produce a film in black and white, rather than in colour? What effects might they be hoping to achieve?
2. Below is a list of modern films shot in black and white. Choose three of these films, and find out their release date, their genre, the director's reputation and the critical reaction to the film:
 - Clerks (Kevin Smith)
 - In Search of a Midnight Kiss (Alex Holdridge)
 - Rumble Fish (Francis Ford Coppola)
 - Schindler's List (Steven Spielberg)
 - The Man Who Wasn't There (Coen brothers)
 - Pi (Darren Aronofsky)
 - La Haine (Matthieu Kassovitz)
 - Manhattan (Woody Allen)
 - Sin City (Frank Millar/Robert Rodriguez)
 - Raging Bull (Martin Scorsese)
3. The film is named after Somers Town, the part of London in which it is set. Most of the filming also took place on location in that area.
 - a) Given the London location, what iconographic sights and sounds you might expect from the film?
 - b) What are your expectations about character and narrative based on this setting?

After viewing

Genre

Somers Town was initially conceptualised as a short film, rather than a full-length feature. Running at just over an hour in total the film is shorter than most mainstream releases; it may represent a departure from your cinema viewing experiences in other ways, too.

4. How would you categorise this film in terms of genre? Does it remind you of any other films you have seen?
5. What do you think is the film's appeal for audiences?
6. As well as being in black and white, the film is subtitled during the conversations in Polish between Marek and his father; there are also sections in French. In what ways do these factors affect your responses to the film, the situation and the characters?
7. Shane Meadows' 2006 release, 'This is England', won a number of awards: visit this website to find out more about the film and explore the critical reception it received: www.thisisenglandmovie.co.uk

What similarities and differences can you identify between Somers Town and This is England?

Representation

Somers Town gives the viewer a very close-up portrayal of two teenage boys struggling to fit into an adult world. In various scenes, we see Tomo and Marek being lonely and vulnerable, mischievous and aggressive, intoxicated, infatuated, undressed and attending to their physical needs.

8. To what extent do you think the audience is expected to be 'comfortable' with this portrait of two teenagers?
9. A sign on the estate reads 'children playing on these grounds is prohibited'. In what different ways do Tomo and Marek seek to amuse themselves within this environment? Do you think the film encourages us to judge any of their actions?
10. What messages about childhood and adolescence do you, or could you, take away from the film?
11. Do your reactions towards the boys change at different points in the film? Which moments in particular:
 - a) encourage you to sympathise with the boys;
 - b) make you unsympathetic towards them?
12. Some of the other characters include Marek's father, Mariusz, Graham the cockney neighbour, and the French waitress, Maria. To what extent would you agree that Meadows is playing with stereotypes in his representation of these characters?

Setting

Filming for Somers Town took place almost entirely in and around Phoenix Court, a low-rise council property in Purchase Street in London. This is very near St Pancras train station, a quite beautiful and historic station built in 1868 which since 2007 has served international locations through the Eurostar service. In the film, Marek's father works as a labourer on the construction site around the new station and in some shots, the more famous parts of St Pancras are visible in the background.

13. Read this short transcript from a scene towards the end of the film, and look at this image of St Pancras station then discuss Shane Meadows' choice of setting:

TOMO
Look at that station. It's amazing.

MAREK
Huge

TOMO
It's massive.

TOMO
Maybe like one weekend we could save up some money – go – obviously cos we're not even two minutes away from the station – we should get on the train, and just go



Image by grytr, 2006

Film style

Although many of the settings we see in the film show a rather stark view of London, there are parts where the cinematography is quite beautiful – for example, the scene where Tomo and Marek take Maria home in the wheelchair.

14. What do you think Shane Meadows is trying to communicate to the audience in this scene?
15. Hand-held camera work is used throughout the film, though it isn't always immediately obvious. Where is it noticeably used? What effects does it have in these moments?
16. Before you watched Somers Town you made a list of reasons why directors might choose black and white for their productions. Do any of these seem to apply to Shane Meadows' use of it in Somers Town? Explain your answers, adding new ideas where appropriate.
17. As the film played out did you find yourself distracted by the use of black and white, or did you quickly become used to it? Were there particular scenes where the absence of colour made a difference?

Further Activities

- Use an online map to explore Somers Town in London at street level. Find Phoenix Court where Somers Town was largely filmed. What impressions do you get of the housing and the neighbourhood in general?
- How far in any direction do you have to go to find more privileged-looking neighbourhoods?
- What building or regeneration work has gone on in the area of London near St Pancras station? Do you think this sort of development will have positive effects on people who live in Phoenix court? Explain your answer.