

Wondrous Oblivion



ANTICIPATION

Ideas of England

The film *Wondrous Oblivion* begins with a brief introductory piece of exposition - setting the scene and introducing David Wiseman. It also gives us an insight about the kind of interior commentary that might be going on in David's head. It is filmed in a style and provided with a voice-over reminiscent of an old Pathe News broadcast. It shows a sequence of images suggesting England in summer - rural scenes, a bridge over water, green lawns, a couple cuddling on the ground and then a cricket match.

Imagine you had been asked to create a brief sequence of shots suggesting England or Scotland or Wales or Northern Ireland. Using cuttings from newspapers,

old family photographs, illustrations or images from other sources create a display or images sequence that suggests what your idea of your part of the country is. Would it feature sport? Would it reflect the rose-tinted travelogue feel of *Wondrous Oblivion*'s start or would it be more balanced and realistic - mixing some bad with the good?

What's in a title?

Wondrous Oblivion started life with a completely different title - *The Outfielder*. You will only be able to judge whether or not the change was a valid one when you have seen the film for yourself. But before that, consider what ideas the two titles create in your head about the following:

	Wondrous Oblivion	The Outfielder
The hero or protagonist – David Wiseman		
His position at the start of the film.		
His position at the end of the film.		
What might bring about change in his life?		
Anything else this title could refer to in other characters?		
Anything this title suggests about the society around the hero?		

What's in a story?

Wondrous Oblivion contains only very modest special effects. There are no guns - although their presence is implied at one point. There are no explosions or dinosaurs or Terminators. It is a fairly simple tale involving a group of interesting people thrown together and portrayed coping with change.

The following is a list of some of the key characters in the film. Your task is to study the list and anticipate some of the points of likely dramatic contact and conflict that might emerge from this disparate group of people.

- Ruth Wiseman - left her native Germany before the war on one of the Kindertransport. She would have been young - very young given her age in the film. She was one of 10,000 children and teenagers under 17 to leave for England between August 1938 and the outbreak of war in September 1939. Her parents remained behind and were killed during the Holocaust. She would have probably spent her early years in England with foster families. The experience has left her both anxious and wishing to fit in. By 1960 she has been living in England for about 20 years.
- Dennis Samuels – a fairly recent arrival from Jamaica. One of the Windrush generation of Caribbean people that were encouraged to come to England for work from the late 1940s onwards. He has clearly been in the UK for a while since we witness him greeting his daughters at the start of the film. The pattern often was that the father would come first to find work and set up roots. Then his wife would join him and in time they would send for their children from back home where they had been looked after, meanwhile, by a grandmother or other relative. Dennis is clearly having to work in some hard manual job involving shift work. He is nonetheless a man of energy, spirit and great good humour. He has a natural ability to put people at their ease and a facility with children. He is patient and kind.
- Mrs Wilson – a neighbour of the Wiseman's. An uneducated woman. 'We don't have much but we'll protect what we have' – is one of her catch phrases voice early on in the film. She has probably lived in that part of South East London all her life and is now witnessing significant change in her society – change that is due to occur in her very street.

- Mrs Wilson's grandson – a teddy boy (one of the youth groups that emerged during the 1950s). We learn very little of him but he is clearly unimpressed with the presence of black and Jewish families in his grandmother's street. He is a member of a gang of boys, likely to have grown up locally and probably regards the area as his patch.
- Victor Wiseman – Ruth's husband, he is a middle-aged man of Polish extraction – mid-to-late-40s? He is devoted to the idea of improving his family's lot in life. He runs a clothing shop on a South East London high street. He works hard and has very little time for play. Early in the film we see him rejecting a suggestion from Ruth that they go to the theatre and he is clearly unimpressed by anything he regards as an unnecessary luxury. His priority is to move out of rented accommodation and to North London – where there is a significant Jewish population including relatives.
- The boys at David's school. Mainly white, protestant and middle class. Though some are on the threshold of rebellion this manifests itself only in smoking behind the school. Overall the world of the school is a contained and rather complacent one. It appears to be in a sort of grassy vacuum. The main concerns are such things as inter-school competitions and who is selected for the first team. When David gains acceptance with his class and team mates it is clearly highly desirable to him – particularly as his birthday approaches.
- Judith Samuels - Dennis' middle daughter, about the same age as David Wiseman. She has been wrenched from the world and life she knows to come to London. In Jamaica it appears she has enjoyed a life mixing conventional schooling with agricultural duties – 'milking goats, birthing calves'. She misses her grandmother and, it emerges, finds life hard at her school, where her education is suffering.
- David Wiseman – mad keen on cricket, he lives in a bit of fantasy world in which he sees himself as the master/selecter of an ever expanding cast of cricket celebrities – represented in his card collection. He is a gentle and rather naïve boy. At school he is clearly held up as a bit of an object of derision – hopeless at cricket but seeming not to know it. He is also probably a rather lonely boy. His father is clearly distant and a taskmaster. He responds very well to Dennis' attention and cricket coaching and becomes a friend of Judith.

What is this film's genre

A. Rite of Passage Movie.

In the film notes, the film's backers describe how *Wondrous Oblivion* was essentially a rite of passage film. Many religions require young people to go through a ceremony in their early teens that signals that they are no longer a child and have made an adult commitment to their religion and culture.

A rite of passage has come to mean the process by which a young person gains entry and understanding of the adult world.

Down the years there have been a number of famous rite of passage films based, in most cases on famous novels. The list includes *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Lord of the Flies* and *The Empire of the Sun*. In each case, extraordinary circumstances enable a young person to gain insight into the flawed world around them.

Later in these resources you will be asked to analyse David Wiseman's development as a character, but for now, consider all the ways the film might (if you have not seen it) or does (if you have) help reduce the wondrous oblivion which seems to envelop him at the start.

- His attitude to himself – as someone capable of causing joy and pain in others
- His attitude to his being a Jew
- His attitude to friendship
- His attitude to belonging
- His understanding of sex

- His understanding of the flaws in his parents
- His understanding of the flaws in society at large

B. Is the film a comedy?



Although *Wondrous Oblivion* deals with some very serious matters, it is essentially a comedy.

What do you think a comedy should contain?

Of course answering this question is tough, because there are many kinds of comedy ranging from slapstick right through to quite sophisticated verbal exchanges generated by

close-knit groups of highly developed characters, typical of good television situation comedies such as *Frasier* or *Friends*. It is also the fact that the line between comedy and tragedy is a thin one.

Look again at two scenes where David inadvertently highlights the growing danger of a relationship between Ruth Wiseman and Dennis Samuels.

SCENE ONE

The first comes when David suggests to Ruth it would be better if Dennis were his father. How does the director then disarm that potentially highly damaging moment in the very next scene, when Ruth happens upon Victor in the bedroom with the cricket rulebook.

SCENE TWO

The second moment is even more dangerous and requires an even more immediate disarming, this time with something far more obviously comic. Having refused to leave for Hendon, David locks himself in his room and as part of his fury lets out that his mother is in a position to know very well what Dennis' first name is. Victor picks up on this cryptic comment and starts to quiz Ruth about what David means.

How does the director, Paul Morrison, take the potential sting out of this scene?

C. Is the film a musical?

Characters sing on a number of occasions in *Wondrous Oblivion*. We see David singing the Torah and one of the Psalms at the Sunday prize-giving occasion. We also see how the choir curiously drowns his singing out on this latter occasion. But these moments apart, the main source of music is via records, the radio and on one occasion a live band. As in most movies, the music is carefully selected so that it reflects the mood or the precise circumstances that characters find themselves in.

As you view the film consider the added dimension that the following songs have when they occur on the soundtrack.

- Elvis Presley singing *I Want To Be Free* – first over the sequence showing David looking mournfully down into his neighbours garden - a sequence which ends in the rain on his school cricket pitch and the news that he is to be the permanent scorer and does not have to wear whites
- Elvis Presley singing *I Want To Be Free* – second in the scene where Ruth declares her love for Dennis

- Nora Dean singing Barb Wire on the first night the Samuels arrive in their new home
- The Jiving Juniors singing A message to U, Rudy with its main lyric:

Stop your messing around

Better think of your future

Time you straightened right out

Creating problems in town during one of the cricket training sessions.

- Micky Katz singing the Barber of Schlemiel and Dandy Livingstone singing Sugar Dandy - both played during the key scene between Judith and David
- Lord Kitchener singing London is the Place for Me at the conclusion of the film

WHAT IS A NEIGHBOUR?



What is your idea of a neighbour?

What should they be ideally and what can you expect from them and what should they expect from you?

It is said that in Britain, and particularly in England, we tend to treat our homes like castles - retreating behind walls and net curtains. Do you feel this is true of where you live?

It is also the fact that massive social changes have weakened the relationship that existed between neighbours in previous times. Consider how the following might have had an effect on the way we interact with our neighbours:

1. More people are living on their own.
2. Communities are far less cohesive than in the past. The street in Wondrous Oblivion is solidly white and working class (bar the Wiseman family) at the start of the film. Today, there has been yuppification in some parts of towns and cities (rich young people moving in and doing up homes in parts away from their parents homes) and urban decline in others.

3. Working patterns have altered. As a country we work some of the longest hours in Europe and nowadays it is the norm for both partners in marriages or relationships to have full-time jobs.
4. We have become a nation of house and flat owners. This tends to be what we aspire to and it has meant that the pattern of tenure characterised by private landlords owning large numbers of houses, which they rent out has changed. In the film *Wondrous Oblivion* it is hinted at early on that a single landlord might own much of the street.

What clues do you have about people?

The idea of this exercise is not to turn you into a snoop, but it may make you more observant.

People's homes and gardens can give off a great deal of clues about their owners or occupants. Choose a home near your own and attempt to describe all the things that help suggest what the people living inside are like. Think what priorities they might have as illustrated by the way they treat their property and what they surround it with. Gardens – if you can oversee your neighbours – can be also very illuminating.

Now turn the exercise around and think what messages your home gives off about you and your family?

The Samuels Arrive

Once the Samuels arrive they quickly start to make an impression on their neighbours - the Wisemans in particular. Use the following table to suggest the impressions the following might have on the hardworking but rather dull Wiseman's and the wider neighbourhood. It might be hard to define the Wiseman's reactions in a single way - so do break it down according to the specific characters.



Action	The Wisemans David, Ruth, Victor and Lillian (the younger sister and mad keen cello-player)	The Neighbours
1. Arrival and unpacking. Remember the Wisemans have lost close friends from next door – the Glucksteins, a Jewish family that has headed off to buy a home in north London		
The first night party – including loud laughter and music – the music itself unusual in the London of 1960 – a kind of music called Ska – one of the roots of Reggae		
The pile of manure on the doorstep – good for the garden explains Mrs Samuels		
The apology in the street and introductions. Mrs Samuels (Grace) apologises to Ruth Wiseman for the noise and introduces her daughters		
Dennis sets about pulling up the roses and laying out a mysterious construction of posts and netting		
Dennis starts to play cricket in his back garden – the construction revealed to be cricket nets		

Filming a neighbourly exchange

The following exercise asks you to consider how you might set about filming a short sequence from the film *Wondrous Oblivion*. But before you can tackle that you will need to check that you understand some of the key film language and grammar at your disposal. To keep it simple, you are invited here to focus on camera angles and movement, but you are welcome to consider how you might direct the actors or include sound in the final scene.

The following table includes a series of the key camera angles and movements. You are asked to match them with possible moments in the film *Wondrous Oblivion*.

Shot type	Wondrous Oblivion moment
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Extreme long shot (ELS) this is used for views of landscapes or buildings. It might also be the point of view of a character looking out over a vista. 2. Long shot (LS) a character is shown at some distance. They will be dominated by their surroundings. 3. Medium shot (MS) In this kind of shot a character is shown from the waist upwards. The audience will be able to see their reactions but the background will also be prominent. 4. Close-up (CU) A shot of a person's head and shoulders. Not much, if any, background detail appears in the frame. The shot to use when wanting to catch a character's emotional response to something or when they are communicating their thoughts. 5. Extreme close-up (ECU) this is used to show an important detail, object, gesture or moment of contact between characters. 6. Point-of-view shot (POV) this can be any kind of shot but it must be the view of events or people from the point-of-observation of a single character. It is as if the camera is seeing things through a character's eyes. 7. Held or prolonged close-up (HCU or PCU) this is when a person's face is held in frame for a long period of time. This shot is helpful for showing a character experience a range of emotions due to something they supposedly are observing out of the frame. It is an ideal shot for increasing suspense. 8. High angle shot (HAS) this is used to communicate the idea that someone is being watched from above or is alone. It usually (but not always) makes characters seem less important. 9. Low angle shot (LAS) The ideal shot to make someone seem larger than life or to suggest we are seeing someone through the eyes of someone seated or smaller than them e.g. a child looking up to an adult. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. This shot would suit the moment when someone looks down on someone else. Perhaps when Ruth (Mrs Wiseman) catches her husband attempting to learn the rules of cricket using buttons at the end of the bed. b. This shot would work well for showing David sitting looking out of a window on his rail journey home from school. Other passengers might also be in view. c. This kind of perspective would suit a shot showing David's view from out of his window looking down on Dennis building his cricket nets. d. This might be the sort of shot to use to show the point of view of a seated character looking up at someone who is standing. In Wondrous Oblivion this kind of shot is used when David meets Dennis at Lords Cricket ground and Dennis is both a bit drunk but also angry with David for having snubbed Judith. e. This is the shot that could be used to show David alone on the boundary fielding. Behind him is open country it seems, increasing the sense of his isolation. f. This is the shot used when David is sitting at supper with his parents and sister – they are engaged in a family discussion. g. A shot for communicating very detailed information such as when David is cleaning his cricket shoes or pointedly places his ticket on the barrier following on from the racist incidents in the film. h. A shot for showing a character experiencing a moment of strong emotion for example, when David is registering the truth that his father has decided they must leave their home. He will be losing the only friends he has. i. The camera remains on David's face for a time following the Samuel's door being closed in his face.

Possible camera movements

1. Crane shot (CS) The camera is attached to a crane, which can lift it high above the actors' heads. The crane allows movement up and away from the action or down and towards the action. In *Wondrous Oblivion* several of the shots showing life in and around the backyards of the Samuel s home were achieved using crane shots. So too was the bird s eye shot of David standing alone at the start of the film.
2. Tilt shot (TS) The camera is tilted up and down allowing for vertical movement. This is the kind of shot used when Dennis and Judith survey the incredible sight of David in his full cricket whites.
3. Panning shot (PS) The camera remains on one level but moves from side to side – a horizontal movement. This is used on many occasions in the film, showing movement during a family meal or the transactions between David and Mr Woodberry when they are swapping cigarette cards.
4. Tracking shot (TS) The camera is fixed to a running track or rail and can be moved alongside objects or people in motion. This is used to show the feet of people as they run to bowl. It is also employed to show the rapid run for his bedroom that David makes upstairs following his rejection by the Samuels.
5. Zoom (Z) this involves no actual movement of the camera but an electronic adjustment of the camera so that the lens moves in or away from an object.

Coding the scene

On the following page is a piece of what could have been the script. The task is to code the script with one or more of the camera angles and movement instructions.

You will need to think how you are going to interpret this scene because the mood will alter enormously depending on the camera angles and movements you opt for. Also, do not go overboard with angles and movements. If you try to do too much, then you risk sacrificing the dramatic potential of the scene.

DAYTIME. EVENING – THE EXTERIOR OF THE WISEMAN'S HOUSE

Mrs Wiseman (Ruth) is placing empty milk bottles on her doorstep, her back to the street.

A FIGURE APPROACHES HER HOUSE ENTERING THE FRAME FROM THE LEFT. RUTH BECOMES AWARE OF HER.

Ruth: Oh! Mrs Wilson...

Mrs Wilson: Good evening Mrs Wiseman. Do you have any idea who might be moving in next door...after your friends go?

Ruth: I've no idea, Mrs Wilson.

Mrs Wilson: I thought you might know who'd be moving in. I thought you might prefer one of your own people.

Ruth: I hadn't really thought about it, Mrs Wilson. I doubt if it's let yet.

Mrs Wilson: Your petunias are coming on nicely...such a pretty plant, don't you think?

Mrs Wilson turns and leaves.

If there is time, experiment with different ways of directing this scene. You could explore it in drama too, as a way of exploring how it could be performed by the actors in a variety of ways.

Devise it so that Mrs Wiseman has the most authority and status.

Devise it so that Mrs Wilson dominates.

Devise it so that status shifts from one character to another during the scene.

Human Rights Explored

All of us are born with human rights. They are not only for a chosen few. They are not gifts but belong to each and every one of us equally. However, after the horrors of the Second World War, it was recognised that nations needed to agree to a set of basic rights that would apply to all human beings. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was 'adopted' in 1948.

Countries sign up to the Declaration at first. Ratification occurs when a signatory country agrees to ensure a piece of international law influences their courts and legal decisions.

The Convention spells out the basic human rights that children in all signatory countries should have and which their governments should uphold. Put simply, some of the key rights are:

the right to survival

the right to freedom of speech

the right to develop to the fullest of their abilities

the right to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation

and the right to participate fully in family, cultural and social life

None of these rights is considered more important than the rest. Signatory countries cannot pick and choose which rights they wish to guarantee.



During the course of the film we witness the Samuels and the Wisemans both being on the receiving end of various forms of racism and prejudice. Your task is whether or not each of these events could be called an attack on their human rights. Use the various kinds of human rights mentioned in the table to classify these moments. Remember several kinds of human rights might be at risk in a particular act of abuse or unfairness.

1. The Wiseman's background story – escaping persecution under the Nazis, who were responsible for the murder of David's grandparents.
2. References to Jewishness as a form of insult – That's very Jewish says Mr Woodberry when David suggests swapping cigarette cards.
3. References to 'your people' in conversations between Mrs Wilson and Ruth.
4. Mr Woodberry's comments about the West Indian cricket players – You've gone a bit dark, haven't you David?
5. The way the neighbours just stare at the Samuels when they arrive.
6. The skipping songs concerning gollywogs that Judith reports.
7. The fact that Judith feels she is being ignored at school. Not encouraged to explain what she knows.
8. The poison pen letters referring to 'yids' and 'niggers'.
9. The assault upon the ticket collector.
10. David's refusal to let Judith into his party.
11. The arson attack on the Samuels' house.
12. The failure of the police to investigate the attack.

Further research

Conduct a research into the history of immigration into the UK. In the end we are all immigrants, even the Celts that form the basis of Welsh, Scottish and Cornish people migrated thousands of years ago from central Europe or even further afield. The black presence in Britain dates back to Roman times and Caribbean soldiers fought and died in the last century's world wars in this country's armies, navies and air force.

A good place to begin might be the Channel 4 - Black and Asian History Map

<http://www.channel4.com/history/microsites/B/blackhistorymap/>

This site will soon broaden its remit to include all UK ethnic minorities. The new site www.channel4.com/origination will launch at the end of March 2004.

Character Arcs

At the beginning of these materials, you had the opportunity to reflect on the film's title. Now consider the way in which David Wiseman's journey as a character involves the stripping away of his illusions. As the film's caption says - Wondrous Oblivion is about 'A wide-eyed boy in a narrow-minded world'.

First: Assess the means with which director Paul Morrison suggests David's self-absorption at the start of the film. The following are some key moments but you may spot others, so do include them in your analysis.

1. The opening voice-over – that could reflect the kind of interior commentary David has going on in his mind as he goes about his everyday life and particularly his cricket.
2. The way he is filmed during the opening sequence – from above and on the edge of the cricket pitch, by the boundary.
3. His reaction following his hopeless piece of fielding - proudly holding the ball up for all to see.
4. His reaction to the teacher's questions. It is this point that generates the phrase 'Wondrous Oblivion' for the first time.
5. His home life – playing with the cricket cards that seem to spring to life.
6. His friendship with Vinny the next-door neighbour's dog.
7. His view upon the world from his upstairs window.

8. His reaction when first meeting the Samuels in the street.

In films the process of change or the journey characters have to make is sometimes described as their 'arc'. In David's case, his arc mainly involves the stripping away of illusions and the development of a new set of priorities. There is also a large amount of compromise that he has to swallow.

The following table sets out some of the key areas in which David's 'Wondrous Oblivion' is subject to change. If you can, anticipate what might change in each category before seeing the film and then do the exercise again after you have seen it.

How is David's 'Wondrous Oblivion' changed?

Himself – his abilities	
Himself – his friendships	
Himself - his priorities	
His mother	
His father	
His school	
Being Jewish	
The wider society	

Now think of the kinds of similar arcs that other characters in the film have to travel. Draw a rising arc on a page and label it with each character's situation and attitude at the start, some key events that have the effect of transforming them and where you feel they have arrived at the end? Have they progressed or gone backwards? Are you convinced by the arc – is it psychologically realistic? Are there some characters below whose roles are too slight for them to have much of an arc? Are there some characters below whose motives and progression (for good or bad) is left vague? For example, what is Mrs Wilson's 'arc' - does she really have one? There is a brief moment after the fire when Grace sees her retreat behind the curtains of her house opposite - what do you feel that moment signifies - defiance? Embarrassment? Or just more of her busy-bodying?

1. Ruth Wiseman
2. Victor Wiseman
3. Judith Samuels
4. Grace Samuels
5. Dennis Samuels
6. Mrs Wilson
7. The other neighbours

A Sense of an Ending

The film *Wondrous Oblivion* ends in a decidedly upbeat manner. Discuss the decision not to show the Wiseman's actual departure but to concentrate on Victor playing cricket and managing, following some tutoring from David, to hit the ball. What difference would it have made to end showing the Wiseman's removal van leaving and the Samuel's turning back into their home - to await their new neighbours?

In the end *Wondrous Oblivion* is a feel good film - it suggests that the community has been shocked by the treatment that the Samuels suffered and galvanised into action to make things okay again. Similarly, the cricket match cum picnic shown in one of the last scenes of the play suggests a kind of social harmony that is still rare in Britain today. Do you think it was correct for the film to end in this highly positive way or can you detect any loose ends? Should the film have had a bleaker conclusion?

Written by Jerome Monahan