***This Is England* (Dir. Shane Meadows, 2007): BBFC Case Study**

* BBFC Rating: 18 uncut

*This is England* was awarded an 18 certificate in 2007 for very strong racist violence. The film also contains some aggressive uses of very strong language. The use of the word 'c\*\*t' was exacerbated by its combination with the highly offensive racist terms ‘w\*g’, 'P\*\*i', 'n\*\*\*\*r' and 'c\*\*n'. The BBFCinsight noted that the film contained ‘very strong racist violence and language’.

The question of whether the work could be contained at the 15 category was carefully considered, given the potential appeal and relevance to a younger audience. A number of scenes and elements placed the work on the 15/18 borderline:

* The scene in which Combo verbally and physically threatens an Asian shop keeper whose shop he and his gang have just robbed and defiled. He calls the shop keeper a 'Paki c\*\*t' and violently swings a machete into the shop keeper’s face deliberately scaring him. The threat is palpable and realistic, even though no blood is shed
* The representation of racist ideology as attractive to the child character Shaun, and the artful ambiguous presentation of his developing world view and the impact of racist views upon this
* Sight of Combo threatening some children, racially abusing them and stroking a serrated knife along their cheeks.

Arguably the strongest scene was towards the end of the film when a vulnerable character, Milky, is subjected to a brutal and realistic racist attack.

The attack shows Shaun’s idol, Combo, start to punch and pummel his mixed race friend Milky’s face, kicking and stamping on it. Some of this is shown from Milky's perspective and has a particularly visceral edge, despite the lack of blood or gory detail. It is realistic, intense and shocking with sudden tension as the scene changes from a drinking and smoking session to a verbal diatribe and possibly lethal beating.

If each individual component of the scene was considered in isolation it is possible to mount an argument for rating them 15 because of the lack of bloody detail, the impressionistic nature of some of the kicks or punches, and the lack of dwelling on pain or injury. However, the BBFC Guidelines make it clear that the viewing context and effect of a work on a viewer must be taken into account. The scene, taken as a whole, has a strong, visceral impact on the viewer, and is likely to confound public and parental expectations at 15, given its mixture of strong, realistic, brutal and unexpected violence and racial abuse, all witnessed by a distraught child.

The key factors which therefore placed *This is England* at 18, rather than 15 are:

* The violence is directed against a vulnerable character – Milky is easily the most gentle of all the characters, vulnerable throughout because of his race and lulled into a false sense of security in the scene leading up to the attack
* The violence and language are unexpected and shocking – the scene starts very calmly; the other characters don't realise what's about to happen
* The scene is distressing – we see most of the film through Shaun's eyes and he is especially upset and confused by what is happening
* Repeated aggressive use of the word 'c\*\*t' along with racist terms within the scene.

Research for the BBFC Guidelines showed the public support for restricting the strongest language, when it is aggressive, to the highest category. BBFC Guidelines at the time the film was classified stated that ‘the strongest terms (eg 'c\*\*t') will be acceptable only where justified by the context. Continued aggressive use of the strongest language is unlikely to be acceptable’.

In the BBFC’s 2005 Guidelines research there was extensive discussion of very strong language, and the factors which the public felt made that language inappropriate in works available to children. The combination of very strong language and violence was regarded as particularly worrying. *Veronica Guerin* was another example of this concern. The film was rated 18 because it includes a scene where a drug baron beats an unarmed female reporter whilst calling her a ‘c\*\*t’.

As with all works there was discussion over the classification of *This is England* and a variety of opinions were taken into account. The work was seen several times, and in the end by most of the BBFC’s examiners, the BBFC’s Director and the Head of Policy. The arguments for passing the film 15 were carefully considered, including the appeal of the film for a younger audience, but the clear arguments for 18 were stronger.

Director Shane Meadows spoke publicly about his disappointment that the film was restricted to an adult audience as he felt it had strong messages and appeal for a younger audience. Some local authorities overruled the BBFC certificate granting the film a 15, in particular the local authority where the young lead actor in the film grew up.

Other films that star actors who were too young to watch the work in the cinema include *The Exorcist*, *The Sixth Sense* and*Sweet Sixteen.*