

VIEWERS AND IDENTITY CONSCIOUSNESS: THE ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES OF *GREEN STREET*'S VIEWERS

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ABSTRACT

Research analyzed the viewers' responses after watching the film Green Street (2005). The responses were taken from a number of film websites, such as IMDB and Film Focus. Green Street is a film that shows a cultural phenomenon called football hooliganism. In general, the viewers' responses could be categorized into two: the viewers who accepted the representation of hooligans and the viewers who refused it. From the analysis on their comments, it can be concluded that in giving responses to the film representation, the viewers put themselves in certain social positions. In other words, they show their identity consciousness when they see and respond to certain phenomena.

Keywords: *identity, consciousness, viewers' responses*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian menganalisis respon pemirsa setelah melihat film Green Street yang diproduksi pada 2005. Respon diambil dari beberapa website film, seperti IMBD dan Focus film. Green Street adalah film yang memperlihatkan fenomena budaya yang disebut football hooliganism. Secara umum, respon pemirsa terbagi dua, yaitu yang menerima dan yang menolak hooligans. Dari analisis komentar dapat disimpulkan bahwa seseorang dapat menempatkan diri mereka dapat suatu posisi tertentu, dengan kata lain mereka menunjukkan identitas hati nurani ketika mereka melihat dan merespon suatu fenomena tertentu.

Kata kunci: *identitas, hati nurani, respon pemirsa*

INTRODUCTION

The opposition between British culture and American culture often becomes a theme either in literary works or in films. Henry James is one example of authors who frequently wrote down this theme in his novels, such as *The Europeans* (which later was filmed and directed by James Ivory, 1979). Meanwhile in the film industry, *The Patriot* (Emmerich, 2000) and *What A Girl Wants* (Gordon, 2003) are only two instances from a number of film titles that describe the clash of the two cultures.

The recent case of films with this subject is *Green Street* (with the USA title *Green Street Hooligans*, 2005), directed by Lexi Alexander. Even though this film is about a phenomenon in football (or known as soccer in USA), *Green Street* also comes up with an idea of meeting of two cultures with the character of Matt Buckner, a university student from USA, who has to face hooliganism in English football. These two sides – Matt and the hooligans – represent two nations with cultural aspects that look slightly the same but are actually different in little things. One of the examples is on which side they should drive. These little differences appear in the film, but I will not discuss about it further. The interesting thing is there are many various responses towards the representation of Matt and the hooligans in the film. There are people who take the character representation in the film for granted, but there are also they who gave bitter criticism. These arguments over the film representation serve as the reason for me to analyze further the responses of English and American viewers on *Green Street* – especially on aspects related to hooliganism and the characters who represent English and American cultures. The primary data that I am going to analyze is reviews from film websites and discussions of common viewers in film forums in the internet. The purpose of this essay is to observe how viewers' identity consciousness connects with their interpretation of *Green Street*.

About *Green Street*

A film about sports is not a rare thing in film industry. However, typically this kind of film focuses more on how the protagonist character struggles to become the champion, for instance *Goal!* (Cannon, 2005) and *Rocky* (Avildsen, 1976). On the other hand, *Green Street* pays attention more to football fanatics who often create riots – or known as hooligans – therefore the football match itself only receives a small portion. Even in football match scenes, the camera focuses more on the hooligans on the bench.

Another fascinating element is that the narrator of *Green Street* is a Harvard journalism student named Matt Buckner (played by Elijah Wood). *Green Street* is the name of the street where Upton Park, West Ham FC's stadium, is located. Matt has been dismissed by the university since a pack of hashes was found in his cupboard (which actually belongs to his roommate). He then decides to go to England to meet his married sister. Matt's encounter with hooliganism appears when Pete (played by Charlie Hunnam), his sister's brother in law, takes him to see West Ham FC's match. Pete is the leader of Green Street Elite, a group of West Ham's supporters. From Matt's point of view, who knows nothing about football, the viewers are taken to witness hooliganism in England. His journalistic background places Matt as an observer, and the use of indirect-subjective point of view camera takes the audience to feel what the protagonist feels.

Responses to Hooligan Phenomenon

Film is a form of representation. Through audio and visual aspects and dialogs, film makers re-present many things in life, either events, people or places. According to Giles and Middleton (1999), *[S]igns stand for or represent our concepts, ideas, and feelings in such a way as to enable*

others to 'read', decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way that we do (p. 59). In films, many elements are seen as signs, for example actors' gestures, time and place setting, costumes etc. These audio-visual signs do not merely exist but are constructed in particular ways to deliver meanings. To quote Hall (Giles and Middleton, 1999: 56), 'the production and the exchange of meaning' always happen in culture, even in films as one of cultural products. In other words, *Green Street* is an effort from people involved in the making to present a hooligan phenomenon in English football. With many bloody fighting scenes and the hooligans' pleased expression when getting involved in a fight, this film tries to create an image that hooligans are a bunch of fierce and violent guys.

In his review about *Green Street* in *Metromix Chicago Tribune*, Michael Phillips (who represents American viewers) uses certain dictions to describe how cruel these hooligans in the film are (Phillips, 2007). The words used by him are 'vicious subculture' and 'loyal psychopaths' (italized by me). According to Oxford electronic dictionary, the word 'vicious' means 'violent and cruel' and is related to crime. Meanwhile, 'psychopath' means someone with mental disorder. Phillips even uses the phrase 'ultra-violence' (not just 'violence') to refer to what the hooligans commit. By choosing those words, we can see what kind of image that Phillips captures as a viewer.

Roger Ebert, a film critic from *Chicago Sun Times*, also gets the same image. In his review, Ebert says that the hooligans have 'an addiction to violence' and also treat violence as a hobby. It seems that they acquire satisfaction from beating and battering other people. To describe the intense fighting between hooligans, Ebert uses the word 'brutal'. The reason why he employs this word is "... because the gangs don't for the most part carry firearms, preferring to beat each other with fists, bricks, iron bars and whatever else they can pick up". The visualization of rough and chaotic fighting (because the hooligans basically use anything they can get) causes Ebert to choose the word 'brutal' to describe it. Besides that, the word 'gangs' in the same quotation also constructs a negative connotation. They are not just football fans, but a 'gang' which is often related to crime.

Not only American viewers, English viewers also capture a certain meaning delivered by the rough fighting scenes. However, different from Phillips and Ebert, English viewers tend to show their social and cultural backgrounds in giving comments about the film. Yatesy, a member of film community *Film Focus*, responds to the violent scenes in *Green Street* in a discussion:

Being a Liverpool fan away from home I have once seen first hand accounts of violence and football hooliganism of which I wish to never witness again. However this feeling was thoroughly brought back when watching the film and at times i [sic] felt genuinely afraid.

This quotation shows how Yatesy positions himself or herself when interpreting the film, as an English and as a fan of Liverpool FC. She/he makes a connection between *Green Street* and her social background as a football fan who has directly witnessed violence committed by hooligans. The fighting scenes between hooligans triggered Yatesy to feel what he/she once felt in the past. J. Bobo, in analyzing the responses from black females after watching *Colour Purple* directed by Steven Spielberg (in Giles and Middleton, 1999: 64), mentions that "... when a person comes to view a film, she/he does not leave her/his histories, whether social, cultural, economic, racial, or sexual at the door.". Based on that statement, it can be assumed that either consciously or unconsciously, Yatesy has put himself/herself in a certain position, and this provides him/her with a frame to react to the film from his/her own point of view, which is his/her personal experience as a football fan.

A very different rejoinder comes from a same film community member with nickname littlebadger. Just like Yatesy, littlebadger highlights his/her cultural and social background as an English and a football fan. Yet, different from Yatesy, littlebadger is a West Ham supporter. As a supporter of West Ham FC, Pete's favorite club in the film, littlebadger remarks that the illustration of West Ham supporters in *Green Street* does not suit the reality seen by him/her:

As a West Ham fan for nearly 30 years and local from the area, I can honestly say that this film is one of the most unrealistic, far-fetched nonsense I have ever watched. It bears no resemblance to the culture, people and way of life of football hooligans (I'm NOT one myself but I did grow up around the West Ham IFC and aggro in general).

Littlebadger's familiarity with the culture of West Ham FC fanatic supporters causes him/her to disagree with hooligans' representation in the film. Here, it can be seen how littlebadger's cultural experience affects his/her way in responding to *Green Street*. By saying that *Green Street* does not resemble the reality, littlebadger has placed himself/herself on the side that denies the meaning constructed by the film makers.

From the analysis of some responses above, it cannot be easily deduced that American viewers easily accept hooligans' representation while English viewers strongly oppose it. Disagreement can also be found among the English audience. Cultural experience and how they position themselves while responding to *Green Street* are the factors of the argument. Both Yatesy and littlebadger come from England, but their self-positioning in social community (in this case of football supporters) causes different signifying practices and also leads to different responses.

Responses towards Two Characters

If we see the viewers' responses in some discussion forums and in critics' reviews, Matt Buckner and Pete Dunham are characters who steal the spotlight the most. Matt character in *Green Street* does not only function as the narrator and the protagonist but also a representation of an American, more specifically a Harvard student from upper-middle class. Meanwhile, from all hooligans that appear in the film, Pete is the most outstanding character for several reasons. From narrative aspect, Pete has an important role since he accidentally takes Matt to the world of hooliganism. From technical aspect, cinematography often places Pete on the centre of the frame or as a camera focus. In the next sub-chapter, I am going to analyze viewers' responses towards those two characters, still related with representation issues.

Compared with American football, football is not really popular in USA. On the other hand, in England football is a religion to many people. Therefore, some film critics tend to see Matt's character as the wrong person in the wrong place. Not simply as a narrator, Matt also gets involved in fighting between hooligans; he even thinks that he feels more comfortable among the hooligans than in Harvard: "*I'd never lived closer to danger. Yet I'd never felt safer*".

However, Matt's participation in a football firm is considered irrelevant by some film reviewers. One of them is Joe Utichi from Film Focus (who represents English viewers) who says that the transformation of a Harvard student to a football hooligan is something 'ridiculous'. Utichi (2007) also writes that "[W]e're given no motivation for Matt's transformation from Harvard undergrad to football hooligan ... ". He concludes that the tale of Matt's change is 'unbelievable'. It can be seen here that Utichi doubts the story of how an upper-middle class Harvard student can easily mingle with English working-class hooligans.

Michael Phillips (from Chicago Tribune) also expresses the similar thing in his review (Phillips, 2007). He mentions that English hooliganism should not be viewed from an American's point of view: "*Instead of digging into the psyche and daily life of English football hooligans, we have to have a movie starring a theoretically bankable American, playing a nice guy who gets mixed up with the Other.*" American viewers also question Matt's involvement in English hooliganism. Matt is considered too 'clean' and 'dandy' to enter the dark world of hooliganism. Even though they come from two different cultural backgrounds, both Utichi and Phillips question about how easily English hooligans accept an American into their community.

Utichi and Phillips might have the same opinion about Matt, yet in writing reviews, they have different ways in positioning themselves. Generally, Utichi sees *Green Street* as a ‘patronizing’ film. One of the factors is Matt who serves as the narrator. Then he says that *Green Street* is a film for “one who knows not a single thing about football and UK than one with even the slightest knowledge”. From this sentence, it can be concluded that Utichi thinks that people who know much about football and England will not like this film. At the same time, because of his dislike to *Green Street*, Utichi places himself as someone who has enough knowledge about football and England. Meanwhile, Phillips feels closer with Matt character. It can be seen from how he mentions the hooligans as The Other and Matt as Self while actually from narrative-wise, Matt is positioned as *The Other* by the hooligans. Both reviewers disapprove of Matt’s function as a ‘window’ to see hooligans’ world; however, they put themselves in different positions in their refutation. If Utichi puts himself closer to English culture, Phillips puts distance by mentioning the hooligans as The Other.

This objection to Matt character is also caused by the actor’s physical appearance, Elijah Wood. Generally, some responses obtained say that Wood’s appearance is not convincing enough as someone eager to join the rough world of hooliganism. Cfcoibhoy, in Film Focus website, states that: “Wood while a good hobbit i [sic] find hard to buy him in any role as a tough guy”. The same problem is also mentioned by stockey in the same website: “Wood is the wrong man for the job, as no-one can take him seriously as a football hooligan, whrn playin [sic] [F]rodo”. There is no doubt that both viewers have watched *Lord of The Rings* trilogy (directed by Peter Jackson) in which Wood plays as a Hobbit named Frodo. This information affects their assessment on Wood’s performance in *Green Street*. Implicitly, Cfcoibhoy and Stockey state that a hooligan – or in other words, someone who enjoys riots – should be played by an actor with a fierce figure. Consequently, the representation of this ‘new’ hooligan called Matt is considered unimpressive.

The next part will be discussing responses towards Pete Dunham character. If younger viewers (especially young girls) focus more on the actor’s, Charlie Hunnam, physical appearance, older viewers pay attention more to his unsuitable accent. Back to Joe Utichi, he writes that Pete’s accent “flits between Northern, American, and Australian at will without ever finding cockney As a viewer who places himself as someone knowledgeable about football and England, Utichi underlines Pete’s flawed accent. Pete is a Londoner and comes from working class; therefore his accent must reflect that identity.

Pete’s weakness in accent keeps getting exposed. Even in IMDB, one of the biggest movie websites, Pete’s dialect becomes a specific topic to discuss by the title “The least authentic accent I ever heard ... “with user paul-miles-1 as the discussion’s pioneer. From the title, it can be concluded that authenticity is an important issue in *Green Street*. Pete character is meant to be a Londoner hooligan, and for that reason, he has to look and sounds like a true Londoner. However, one of the character’s identity features, accent, does not manage to show that. Paul-miles-1 expresses his disappointment about the accent inaccuracy:

Yeah, I could accept it if it was just a slight slip here and there.....but this sounds absolutely nothing like a London accent. Surely it would have made more sense to just get a London actor to do it?? I’m not looking for faults or being over critical because this movie was just total *beep* anyway, but the guys voice made it so much worse. I just dont understand how a movie can get through all the stages of production without someone saying 'hold on that sounds *beep* and either getting someone else or getting him some voice coaching.

From his opinion, it is clearly seen that paul-miles-1 considers Pete’s accent as something significant to discuss and even makes him dislike the film more. Besides that, the citation above also shows how paul-miles-1 is very emotional when giving his response. To say it in a different expression, accent as a signifier of identity becomes a crucial aspect for paul-miles-1 in interpreting *Green Street*.

In the same forum, a viewer with nickname krd2003 initially did not notice this accent inaccuracy. However, after reading comments and watching *Green Street* several times, he or she spotted how Charlie Hunnam's Northern English accent sometimes appears: "... i [sic] can hear his northern england accent come through quite often. i [sic] can understand why people from england caught it right away". Krd2003 obviously puts himself or herself in a particular identity by saying "as an american ...". This positioning also explains his or her lack of knowledge about English regional accents. Furthermore, he or she also shares his or her experience as an American related with accent:

... i [sic] can immediately point out when an actor is doing a shoddy southern accent, or far northern accent, or new england accent. You get accustomed to your region's way of speaking ... it's a bit harder to discern between the regions of another country.

Even though he or she admits that he or she does not really understand various accents in England, krd2003, like Utichi and paul-miles-1, regards accent as a part of one's cultural identity. Based on that reason, he or she understands why English viewers create such a fuss over accents in *Green Street*.

One viewer from Sweden (a neutral position in this case), ersken_90 says that most of American viewers will not consider Pete's accent as a problem. This can be found in reviews written by American reviewers. Roger Ebert does not touch this issue at all; he does not even give a special paragraph for Pete (his review is more about Matt's transformation). Stefanie Jackowitz, a reviewer from Cinemablend, concentrates more on Lexi Alexander's personal experience as a hooligan. The two American reviewers discuss the film (that takes English culture as the setting) in two different approaches. Nevertheless, there is one similarity that can be figured out: Pete's regional accent, even Pete as a character, does not have a special portion in their reviews.

Responses towards Matt bring up the issue of Matt's function in *Green Street*, meanwhile responses towards Pete focus more on how he should be constructed as a character. Matt's appearance (a Yank, as called by the hooligans) is considered unexpected and also inappropriate to view English football hooliganism. Several examples discussed above mention that the film should focus more on the hooligans. Objections coming from English viewers originate from the opinion that as a narrator, Matt is too patronizing.

In the meantime, responses towards Pete discuss more about the inaccurate representation. English audiences seem more active in giving comments about Pete. Paul Manning in a discussion in Film Focus states that "... because the accents are so bad it makes it unbelievable." The citation shows how the film does not manage to deliver 'truth' that cause this film to be believable. A film is indeed not a reality, yet in films, signs have to be constructed and arranged in certain ways so that the viewers can comprehend the meaning and believe that the film looks real.

***Green Street* for American Viewers?**

In the end, the meaning carried by cinematic representation will be interpreted in different positions. *Green Street* film makers construct and arrange signs – such as cinematography, camera and costumes – to deliver something. In its official website (www.hooligansthefilm.com), Alexander the director expects that the viewers will take something from the film. One of them is: *Whether you're addicted to coke or skull-cracking, the addiction will affect your entire community*. 'Patronizing' aspect is clear in the expectation. Hooliganism is a form of violence addiction, and the sad ending for Dunham brothers is the example of how addiction will lead to tragedy. The violence eventually brings something positive only to one character, Matt. His experience with the hooligans teaches him to be a stronger person so when he gets back to America he can defend himself from his bullying roommate.

In my opinion, *Green Street* is a film for American viewers. One of the reasons is the American narrator. Surely American viewers will identify themselves easily with Matt. Along with

Matt, they are taken to see a new world, the world of English football hooliganism. Behind the casting of Elijah Wood as Matt, there also must be a commercial reason. Wood is one of Hollywood money-making young actors after his role as Frodo. Another reason is *Green Street* tells more about Matt's transformation. The hooligans only serve as a catalyst to transform Matt into a better person. Even if the film takes England as the cultural setting, the narrative still focuses more on Matt character, a Yank.

Since the film is dedicated more to American viewers, signs like point of view and narration are also arranged to fulfill the needs. The representation of English culture inside the film is constructed for viewers in a particular context, so the viewers in another context (English viewers generally) question and even doubt this representation that they consider as flawed. Among the English viewers, opposition also occurs. Different cultural backgrounds (such as their identity in a certain social community) definitely influence the way they decode *Green Street*.

CONCLUSION

In simple ways, the responses from *Green Street's* viewers can be categorized into two: the viewers who accept the meaning (American and English viewers) and the viewers who object to the meaning (mostly English viewers). However, after further analysis it can be seen that English viewers show their identity consciousness in giving comments. This consciousness is not merely related to their own identity as an individual (how they position themselves) but also to their expectation of others' identity (how they position other people, for example Pete character). Besides identity positioning by the viewers, social class is also a keyword in understanding the responses from English viewers. For a long time, the English have been famous for their social hierarchy. O' Driscoll says that even though this social stratification is not as rigid as it was in Victorian era, '... *people in modern Britain are very conscious of class differences*' (1995: 49). Class consciousness becomes a significant aspect in their identity construction. This aspect differentiates the viewers with English cultural background with the viewers with American cultural background. Whether they realize it or not, this class consciousness also takes part in their watching and interpreting activity. The most obvious example is how English viewers strongly react to Pete's inaccurate regional accent. The responses analyzed show how English viewers are more critical in positioning Pete character in a certain social class with all of its characteristics. A text, either a film or a novel, can be categorized as multicultural due to the culture encounter theme in it. However, viewers' responses after watching the film can also show multiculturalism since they do not leave behind their cultural experience and background when giving comments. The responses of *Green Street's* viewers that have been discussed in this paper have pointed out that thing, especially responses from English viewers who demonstrate their identity consciousness. As emphasized by Terry Eagleton, readers (or in this case, viewers) do not encounter a text without their cultural background or pure from anything (2006: 128). Therefore, viewers are not a blank paper. They are also a text that moves actively when they come upon another text.

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