"Maybe I've found him … the man I can't defeat" – A Multi-Modal Critical Discourse Study of Masculinity, Consumption, and Mental Health in Peaky Blinders

Introduction

In terms of issues surrounding class, politics, gender, war, and even race, the content of *Peaky Blinders* (2013-) is so contextually rich that it almost seems created for academic analysis. To date, literature on one of the most popular contemporary European crime series has somewhat narrowly focused on its musical soundtrack (Shine, 2017), historical context (Long, 2017), or hints at the dangers of populism and fascism (Pagello, 2021). When the literature on *Peaky Blinders* has touched upon more implicitly political themes, such as the representation of masculinity and mental health, it does so with dismissive condemnation (Larke-Walsh, 2019). It rarely considers its lessons, capacity for destigmatisation, or potential applications amid the current sociopsychological climate, in which many individuals are being pushed closer to the precipice. In the UK alone, around fifteen people daily committed suicide during 2020, with three-quarters of these being men (Office for National Statistics, 2021). In this light, the current literature on *Peaky Blinders* fails to recontextualise the series in the wider context of the dynamic between masculinity and mental health issues, particularly those relating to consumption and suicide.

This paper offers an alternative perspective. Using a multi-modal critical discourse approach, it progressively re-evaluates the implicitly political discourses littered throughout *Peaky Blinders*, especially those articulated by its ruthless, brilliant, and troubled protagonist, Tommy Shelby. Overall, it argues that *Peaky Blinders* is defined by an underlying dichotomy: while it may glorify the unhealthy coping mechanisms exemplified by Tommy, it also accurately encapsulates the complexity of mental health issues, and could help to culturally destigmatise the stereotypes surrounding them.

Context

A second, more theoretical clarification must be made regarding this paper's ideological stance, which differs to the 'Culture and Civilisation' school of Arnold and Leavis. Despite Arnold's famous claim that (high) culture was 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' (1960, p. 6), he demarcated *popular* culture as anarchic and disruptive

of social class conventions. Arnold's tradition was continued by Leavis, who attacked popular culture as an addictive distraction from reality (1977, p. 100). Originating in the 1930s, Leavisism grew out of the 'cultural crisis' following the First World War, which was characterised by uncertainty around gender roles and widespread mental trauma. The fundamental failings of this theory are epitomised by its nostalgia for a time when 'the masses' exhibited an unquestioning assent to authority, with major political events such as female suffrage in the UK (1928) leaving Leavisite scholars fearing a collapse of traditional authority (Storey, 2018).

Despite being contemporaneous with the historical context of *Peaky Blinders*, with the first series set in 1919, the fifth, most recent series set in 1929, Leavisist thinking would overlook its most profound messages. Rather than investigating why 'the masses' felt (and still feel) the need to use popular culture as an escape from reality, Leavisism simplistically criticises people for surrendering to a vice. Escapist tendencies, may they be passive consumption of popular culture – or, in the later-analysed case of Tommy Shelby, alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, work, sex, violence, and ceaseless ambition – are often a futile attempt to mask deep-rooted discontentment (Jane-Llopis and Matytsina, 2006). Another paradoxical element in critically judging *Peaky Blinders'* overall cultural influence is that, while it does not shy away from tackling issues regarding consumption and escapism, its premise as a television series can trigger these behavioural tendencies in its viewers, according to Ort et al's (2021) study on 'binge-watching'.

Arnold, Leavis, and the later work of Adorno (1940) undervalue the autonomy and critical thinking of the individual. Along with his Frankfurt School peers, Adorno (1940) condemns advertising for perpetuating systemic, capitalist-induced misery, and criticises popular culture for distracting society from that misery. While Adorno's insights on the commercial exploitation and pseudo-individualisation of popular music are compelling, they fail to recognise alternative motives behind cultural artefacts (Storey, 2018). In the case of *Peaky Blinders*, this study argues that one of its primary motives is to raise awareness for the current mental health crisis, which it does by accentuating similarities between its contemporaneous sociopolitical and sociopsychological contexts and the contemporary contexts of the present day.

This is one of three principal criteria in selecting *Peaky Blinders* for this study. The second is the series' wide social impact. From 2013, when the first series aired on the BBC,

to 2018, the number of visitors to Birmingham – where *Peaky Blinders* is set – has increased by 26% (Larke-Walsh, 2019). Across the UK, it has been credited with a boost in sales of the Blinders' iconic flat caps, and an increase in babies named after the series' main characters (Shine, 2017). Its influence can be seen in bars, restaurants, tours, haircuts, and songs. Since its deal with Netflix, *Peaky Blinders* is available in 183 countries, reaching a level of 'transnational fame' (Pagello, 2021, p. 580). This high level of exposure and social impact was a fundamental criterion, as it determined whether or not the series had the capacity to influence attitudes to masculinity and mental health on a large, permeating scale.

Image 1. The opening of a Peaky Blinders' bar in Liverpool, one of the series' filming locations (Shine, 2017)

The third criterion was that its political discourses were represented multimodally. Drawing on concepts from Social Semiotics and Multimodality, this study analyses these discourses not just *linguistically*, but also *visually* and *auditorily*, moving beyond a Barthesian interpretation, which predicates the meaning of images on their relation to verbal text (Barthes, 1972). It aligns more with Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2021) description of a non-linguistic grammar of images, introducing key concepts such as salience, visual demand determined by gaze, and intimate distance determined by the positioning of the viewer relative to the image, which is used as a methodological foundation for this study.

Sample and Methodology

For the purposes of simplicity and clarity, this study recategorises Halliday's (1994) meta-semiotic functions – the interpersonal, ideational, and textual function – into three types of discourse articulation. Focusing on these three categories, the entirety of *Peaky Blinders* was watched, with particular quotes, imagery, audiovisual techniques, and scenes noted down by hand. Four specific scenes were then rewatched multiple times, and their visual, linguistic, and auditory articulations of mental health and masculinity discourses were coded based on the categorisation proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001). Refer to Tables 1, 2, and 3 for empty template examples. Table 1 also incorporates visual techniques from Machin (2007).

Image	Description (context within episode and series)	Visual Techniques						Discourse Articulated (connection with wider sociopolitical context)
		Gaze	Angle of Interaction	Distance	Individuals/ Groups	Cultural & Biological Categorisation	Exclusions & Inclusions (Actions & Agency)	

Table 1. Meta-semiotic analysis of visually represented discourses.

This data categorisation, while useful for coding the visual aspects, only accommodates for one mode. For a more comprehensive analysis, two additional tables were added for the linguistic and auditory modes excluded by Table 1. Table 2 also takes on recommended linguistic techniques from Fairclough (2003), Van Leeuwen (1996), and Van Dijk (1991).

Quote	Description (context within episode and series)	Linguistic Techniques					Discourse Articulated (connection with wider sociopolitical context)
		Inclusions & Exclusions	Namings	Titles	Pronouns	Grammatical Strategies	

Table 2. Meta-semiotic analysis of linguistically represented discourses.

Table 3 is also based on Van Leeuwen's (1999) six major domains of sound theory.

Image	Description (context within episode and series)	Auditory Techniques						Discourse Articulated (connection with wider sociopolitical context)
		Perspective	Time	Sequentiality & Simultaneity	Melody Patterns	Voice Quality	Modality	

Table 3. Meta-semiotic analysis of auditorily represented discourses.

The four selected scenes, each around three to five minutes in length, were then reduced down to one, depending on which contained the strongest articulation of discourses related to masculinity, consumption, and mental health. This scene was taken from the second most recent series of *Peaky Blinders*, with the techniques adopted to construct these discourses unearthed, particularly focusing on the sociopsychological issues of Tommy Shelby.

Analysis

Series 4 Episode 6, 41:57-46:00 ('The Company', 2017)

As *Peaky Blinders* progresses from Series 1 to Series 5, and Tommy's responsibilities and burdens increase, his mental health problems and consumption deteriorate proportionately. While mental health features in the early series, Tommy's fruitless attempts to mask and escape from his deepest insecurities surface more regularly in Series 4 and 5, typically in the form of extreme workload, expansionism, hyper-masculinity, emotional numbness, violence, sex, whiskey, cigarettes, morphine, or opium. When these fail, Tommy's suicidal impulses become increasingly compelling, personified through his hallucinations of his murdered wife, Grace.

Macro-contextually, the selected scene occurs amid the backdrop of Tommy's (and much of male Britain's) post-traumatic stress disorder, with the fourth series set in 1925, seven years on from the First World War (Smith, 2017). As both a tunneller and a Sergeant Major, Tommy learnt to shut off his emotions and focus on 'the job' – strategising, leading, fighting, and killing. This is how he continues to deal with life after the war, from territory wars with illegal bookmakers to his struggle against fascist politician Oswald Mosley. It results in trauma after trauma; being severely beaten and shot at, shooting others, the kidnapping of his son, and the death of his wife and brother. Micro-contextually, this particular scene comes from the finale of the fourth series, during which Tommy endures the stresses of business, family disputes, relationship woes, and a violent vendetta with the New York mafia. It occurs after the vendetta has been brutally won, and Tommy's family tell him that he needs to take a break.

Image 2. A glimpse of Tommy's PTSD ('The Company', 2017, 43:13)

In Image (2), Tommy's PTSD causes him to misinterpret hunting gunshots as artillery fire, taking cover in a lake and protecting his head. As an offer image, in which Tommy's gaze is diverted off camera, an uncharacteristic weakness is implied, reinforced by a top-down vertical angle of interaction (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021). Image (2) deepens the severity of these wartime experiences through distance, choosing a close-up of Tommy's harrowing facial expression to create a sense of intimacy between the viewer and protagonist (Machin, 2007).

While Image (2) focuses visually on the war-induced side of Tommy's anxiety, Example (1) offers a linguistic insight into another cause; intense introspection. Following on from the lakeside PTSD episode, Tommy's maid, Frances, enquires about his health. In response, the triadic structure of the first-person pronoun 'myself' illustrates Tommy's microscopic examination of his internal psyche (Van Dijk, 1991). This is linked with his previous reading of Freudian psychoanalytical concepts in an attempt to comprehend the complexity of his own mental health issues, a vital but overwhelming task.

1) Frances: Mr Shelby, you are not yourself, I should call a doctor.

Tommy: It's alright, Frances … I know what this is. It's just myself talking to myself about myself (points to office door). Right. Thank you.

('The Company', 2017, 43:58-44:28)

Example (1) concurs with Images (3) and (4), which offer a visual insight into the correlation between Tommy's consumption and his mental health. As seen in Image (3), Tommy's introspective burden is deepened through his heavy alcohol intake, and its inability to 'cure' Tommy of his depleting wartime flashbacks. Often used as a coping mechanism for stress, alcohol is a common method of escapism for those struggling to deal with anxiety or depression, due to its cognitively distortive effects (Jane-Llopis and Matytsina, 2006). In *Peaky Blinders*, this representation can be critiqued for somewhat normalising and glorifying the heavy everyday usage of alcohol in individual and social interactions, especially amongst male characters.

Image 3. Tommy drinking heavily ('The Company', 2017, 44:25)

The unorthodox camera shot in Images (3) and (4) adds to the intensity of the scene, with the top-down vertical angle of interaction placing Tommy below Frances, his maid (Machin, 2007). Here, David Caffrey, the director, could be hinting that the crippling severity of Tommy's mental burdens leave him so low that his social status – which, by Series 4, is vastly superior to his maid – becomes void, with the top-down angle indicating his vulnerability. An interesting consideration throughout the series is whether or not Caffrey consciously addresses masculinity, consumption, and mental health through these techniques. However, in this scene, the purpose behind their inclusion seems unequivocally intentional.

In Image (4), Tommy's gaze is not only diverted off camera, but his eyes are completely out of shot. This offer image (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021) could be reflective of the societally-conditioned masculine tendency to bottle up issues, rather than sharing them. Referring to Halliday's (1994) grammatical strategies, Tommy takes agency in this scene, directing Frances, his maid, to leave him alone. As an activated participant (Van Leeuwen, 1995), Tommy simultaneously demonstrates a largely positive 'male' trait of assertiveness, and an entirely detrimental 'male' trait of stoic self-isolation, pushing away people who might help lighten his mental load. This agency perpetuates conventional masculinity, which often mythologises an expectation of dominance, prestige, financial security, and self-assurance, which exacerbate male self-esteem when these societal standards are not met (Larke-Walsh, 2019).
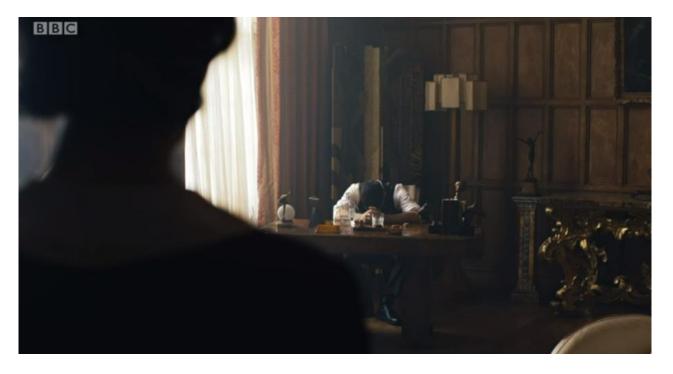
Image 4. Tommy hunched over his desk ('The Company', 2017, 44:27)

Cultural categorisation (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021) is utilised to highlight the flawed belief that individuals who seem to be navigating life successfully are not plagued by mental health issues. Images (3) and (4) subtly indicate Tommy's extensive wealth, from the numerous desk adornments, to the luxurious glass, to the golden mantlepiece. Such material success is juxtaposed to the psychological trauma Tommy has endured to garner it. Although this example serves to raise awareness for the struggles of high-achieving people, it fails to illustrate the struggles of people who barely make ends meet, and the socioeconomic pressures that come with that. Perhaps inadvertently, it sets a high threshold for the acceptance of mental trouble, given that, in reality, most people who suffer from issues such as depression, anxiety, and paranoia do not deal with hyper-stressful situations like Tommy Shelby, but this does not diminish the severity of their issues.

Image 5. Tommy staring at his hands with palpable anxiety ('The Company', 2017, 44:50)

As the scene progresses, and Tommy's alcohol consumption increases, the first of Van Leeuwen's (1999) six major domains of sound, *perspective*, comes to the fore through the backing track, Radiohead's 'Pyramid Song'. Its melodic pattern – major/minor F-sharp piano triads – becomes complemented and then superseded by the drums, forming a closeness of melody, beat, and vocals which empathetically draws the viewer inside Tommy's tormented mind (Van Leeuwen, 1999).

Simultaneously, the camera switches to a side-on angle along its horizontal axis, with a close-up of Tommy's haunted look at his own hands following his inability to sleep, due to being woken by a nightmare, which frequently plagues the protagonist throughout the series. Insomnia, sleep apnea, and REM sleep behaviour disorder have all been identified as risk factors in mental health issues (Anderson and Bradley, 2013). This angle in Image (5) creates a contrasting sense of detachment (Machin, 2007), as if emphasising Tommy's proclivity to endure his struggles alone, and to numb his emotions as he did during the war.

Image 6. Tommy with his arms open, eyes closed, decanter in hand ('The Company', 2017, 45:07)

Images (6) and (7) represent the climax of the scene, soundtrack, and Tommy's painful contemplation. As if embracing his loss of control, Tommy extends his arms, physically and metaphorically accepting *something*, whether that be his past trauma, his current burdens, or simply himself. In Image (6), Tommy is depicted from a bottom-up vertical angle of interaction, connoting power (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021), which contradicts his previous vulnerability. In combination with the glistening smoke, an ethereal white light brings an almost angelic quality to the image, a moment of anagnorisis for Tommy regarding his mental struggles – a change from ignorance, to knowledge, to pain, to acceptance. Auditorily, this potential turning point is complemented by a tense, breathy voice quality to the soundtrack, with its *melody pattern* and *modality* (the fourth and sixth major

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domains of sound identified by Van Leeuwen, 1999) fluctuating in pitch through a series of long, drawn-out high notes, which are emotionally evocative for the viewer.

Image 7. Tommy drinking from the decanter ('The Company', 2017, 45:11)

However, this empowerment is quickly debilitated. While Tommy might be portrayed as an activated participant in Image (7), and throughout the majority of the series, his agency in this scene is entirely self-inflictive (Machin, 2007). In other words, his extreme consumption of alcohol and cigarettes draws parallels with a motif of self-harm. Even if it is not in the conventional, quasi-suicidal sense, Tommy is drawing closer to that particular cliff edge, and is struggling to see reasons as to why he should not jump. In Image (7), the viewer is positioned at an intimate distance, with a close-up of the alcohol, smoke, and Tommy's face placing his issues under a glaring and unavoidable spotlight (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021).

This is reflective of the glaring and unavoidable need for male mental health, consumption, and suicide to be discussed at greater length in the public domain. In 2020, 5,224 people committed suicide in the UK, with 3,925 of these being men, some 75.1% of the total figure (Office for National Statistics, 2021). This distressing figure is largely attributable to the lingering, outdated stigmatisation that mental health conversations do not belong in so-called masculine contexts, as – unlike alcohol and drug consumption – sharing and dialogue are proven to be healthy coping mechanisms (Vogel et al, 2011). *Peaky Blinders* rarely portrays examples of these healthy strategies. This scene represents how the whole series

deals with these issues, usually through a depiction of its male characters silencing their traumas, emotions, and anxieties. Multimodal critical discourse studies on popular culture of this kind can serve as useful academic analyses of a facet of the human psyche which needs deeper examination. The applications of this lie in an improved depiction of mental health across all popular culture, in which characters suffering from psychological distress are no longer represented simplistically for the purposes of a neat narrative. These representations must encourage the viewer who relates to these characters to vocalise their troubles, rather than isolating themselves further.

Conclusion

Through its wide-ranging use of multimodal techniques, *Peaky Blinders* articulates several implicitly political discourses pertaining to masculinity, consumption, and mental health. These vary from discourses with a negative societal impact, such as glorification or justification, to those which positively influence public perceptions of these issues – namely introspection, supportiveness, and destigmatisation. For further study of popular culture's influence on this pressingly important problem, it would be relevant to analyse a cultural artefact which can address contemporary factors contributing towards the current mental health crisis, such as technologically-induced loneliness, or social disadvantage as a result of governmental policy. Nonetheless, by holding a microscope up to the traumas, stresses, and coping mechanisms raised through Tommy Shelby, it is hoped that the causes of these incapacitating issues can be further unearthed, and that working solutions can be suggested.

In the final moments of the last episode, Tommy says to Arthur, his brother: "Maybe I've found him. The man I can't defeat." This final metaphoric amalgamation of Tommy's external battles and internal struggles encapsulates *Peaky Blinders'* most critical lesson – we cannot 'defeat' ourselves, because there is no escaping from who we are and what we have experienced. In the final image of the series, Tommy holds a pistol to his head and howls in anguish. As viewers, we are viscerally reminded of his earlier words: "There are some times, some nights ... when I don't see the point of carrying on with any of it." Little matters more than preventing individuals from reaching that precipice, and wanting nothing more than to go over the edge.

Image 8. Tommy on the precipice ('Mr Jones', 2019, 1:04:38)

3,300 Words

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