MATERIALISM AND UTILITARIANISM IN HOT FUZZ: A CULTURAL MATERIALIST ANALYSIS

Anugrah Bulan Mauludi¹; Johny Alfian Khusyairi²; Edi Dwi Riyanto³

^{1,2,3} Master Of Literary And Cultural Studies Program, Faculty of Humanities, Airlangga University

E-mail: ¹anugrah.bulan.mauludi-2023@fib.unair.ac.id, ²johnykhusyairi@fib.unair.ac.id, ³edi-d-r@fib.unair.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine how the sociocultural aspects in *Hot Fuzz* (2007) are portrayed as materialistic, supported by Marvin Harris's theory of cultural materialism. We employed qualitative methods, using both narrative and non-narrative contexts for film analysis, as these two elements encapsulate the data of the film. The study reveals that the materialistic system is reflected in the behaviour of the characters, which revolves around the infrastructure. This behaviour is taken to an extreme by the structure, within the complicity of utilitarianism, as the pursuit of material rewards outweighs natural and social outcomes within the community. Our research shows that *Hot Fuzz* is a film that is beyond humour, caricaturing capitalist systems.

Keywords: behaviour, cultural materialism, film analysis, utilitarianism

INTRODUCTION

The study of film as a means to identify cultural phenomena has become a compelling trend among scholars. As a research object, film provides valuable knowledge and empirical data for students. This can be achieved through the study of signs and meanings, employing structural and post-structural approaches. Furthermore, films often serve as reflections of society (Novianti et al., 2022, p. 26). A notable example is the extensive research on the character of the Joker, particularly in the 2019 film. Many scholars focus on the psychological issues underlying this troubled character, exploring the complex experiences that shape his psyche, including the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego (Yulicia, 2021). Ultimately, it becomes clear that mental health is a significant issue that should not be underestimated, highlighting that films—particularly moving pictures—offer far more than mere entertainment.

On the other hand, there is a research method that studies films in their entirety. This approach involves examining elements such as the posters, the studio in which the

films are produced or released, the actors, and comparisons between films. For instance, the study of *Hot Fuzz* was undertaken by Neil Archer in 2015, who provides a critical overview starting from its production. He highlights scholars' views on its genre, identifying it as a comedy. However, Neil argues that although the film is classified as comedic, its content is characterised by cultural and capital elements (Archer, 2015, p. 14). Money is one of the elements controlled in capitalism (Mahanani & Khusyairi, 2022, pt. 606). These aspects, therefore, are central to the focus of this research.

Hot Fuzz is not a recent arrival, yet it presents one of the most intriguing issues that challenge sociocultural conditions in real life. The movie conveys a powerful message to the audience, which has the potential to influence their lives (Haqqu & Pramonojati, 2022, p. 68). After winning two awards in 2007 and 2008, the story is set in England, particularly in locations like the city of London and the village of Sandford. The sociocultural dynamics in Hot Fuzz reflect a broader reality, showing that wherever a group of people exists, there is also a symbol or ideology being adopted. While one individual may accept it, others may begin to question it, only to ultimately find it unreasonable.

Although some sociocultural phenomena may appear illogical and inexplicable, such cases open the discussion of cultural materialism. This paradigm seeks to understand illogical phenomena from a different perspective (Muis, 2021). Marvin Harris builds on the concept of cultural materialism derived from Marx, developing it into a comprehensive framework. He divides the sociocultural system into three levels: the infrastructure, the structure, and the superstructure. These levels influence cultural development (Redman, 2022). The infrastructure, as conceived by Harris, refers to the modes of production and reproduction (behavioural), determined by factors such as ecology, technology, demography, and environment. The structure represents the social organisation that shapes both the domestic and political economy. The superstructure encompasses the symbolic or ideological aspects of society, including religion and mindset. Therefore, we propose to study how the sociocultural aspects in *Hot Fuzz* (2007) are portrayed as materialistic.

There have been studies conducted on *Hot Fuzz* (2007), but these mainly focus on the field of film studies and linguistic aspects. However, we found some articles that also explore cultural materialism. The first is a study conducted by Jaylin Redman in 2022, who examined the phenomenon of the Kardashian family, particularly through their TV series. Redman found that the "fame environment" they inhabit influences their behaviour,

turning them into a cultural product. This is quite different from the focus of our article, as Redman's study centres on the Kardashian family as a cultural product, using Raymond Williams's theory of cultural materialism. The second study, written by Fatima et al. in 2022, looks at a collection of stories addressing the issue of women's clothing. They explored the differences in infrastructure between the main character's background and that of her in-laws. This issue is also present in *Hot Fuzz*, where the main character, Nicholas, a police officer, is transferred to a small village called Sandford. However, our focus is on the portrayal of the three levels of cultural materialism in Sandford, analysing the underlying reasons behind its illogical system.

METHODS

The methods of this study combined a qualitative research approach with both narrative and non-narrative analysis. The data were derived from the film *Hot Fuzz*, released in 2007, directed by Edgar Wright and co-written with Simon Pegg. Edgar Wright directed three films, or a trilogy—*Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz*, and *The World's End*—but these films did not share a common storyline. *Hot Fuzz* was chosen for this study due to its exploration of socio-cultural issues. Some scholars even argued that this film could be classified as a cultural capital movie (Archer, 2015, p. 14). Thus, it provided a solid foundation for focusing on the main issue.

We gathered the data by watching the film and taking notes on key moments that contained information about the infrastructure, structure, and superstructure, as explained by Marvin Harris. This data collection process should not have been confused with the gathering of text or words from a story, as the object of this research was a film. Motion pictures differed from texts because they not only had a narrative element but also a non-narrative one. The delivery of the story was given sequentially, so the audience could see objects in the form of characters, characterization, questions, conflicts, locations, and time (Afifah & Riyanto, 2021, p. 4599). Narrative elements referred to the textual aspects, such as dialogue, monologue, and the storyline of the film, while non-narrative elements included the visual and audio components. Together, these two aspects embodied the data of a movie.

Next, we analysed the data by exploring the three social systems found in the film and their interconnections to address the research problem. The first step was to identify the cultural-material systems in the film, examining how the sociocultural system in *Hot Fuzz* was materialistic. The second step involved classifying the infrastructure, structure, and superstructure elements in the film before providing a discussion and analysis of

these three components. Finally, we presented the conclusions based on the answers to the problem raised in this article. The process of analysing a film was divided into two main elements: narrative and non-narrative. While we had already explained the narrative elements, we then turned to the non-narrative aspects. Non-narrative elements in films included mise-en-scène, which described the world of the film, its mood, details, and the reality that could be measured in terms of representation (Villarejo, 2013, p. 28). Another important aspect of film analysis was setting, which did not necessarily represent real life. Additionally, figure behaviour described the movement, expressions, and actions of characters or animals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, we will divide the analysis into two sub-chapters. The first will focus on the findings related to the infrastructure, structure, and superstructure in the film. The second will provide a detailed elaboration on these findings. Both analyses are supported by Marvin Harris's theory of cultural materialism.

The Infrastructure, Structure, and the Superstructure of Hot Fuzz

Cultural materialism, as introduced by Harris, refers to the correlation of sociocultural systems (Harris, 1999, p. 141). This system encompasses the members of a society and their connections as a whole. In this section, we will explore the sociocultural system in *Hot Fuzz* by first examining the settings. As mentioned earlier, setting is a key aspect of the non-narrative elements approach.

Nicholas Angel, a police officer, is transferred to a village called Sandford by his superiors in London. Sandford is claimed to have won the award for Village of the Year, yet Nicholas is far from pleased, as the decision was made without his input or consent. He reluctantly moves there, leaving behind his former partner and the city. Just before his arrival, he notices a street sign stating "Model Village," referring to Sandford. From this point onwards, we will use the term "village" instead of "town."



Figure 1 Sandford the Model Village (Source: movie-screencaps)

The idea of a model village is not an unfamiliar concept in the United Kingdom. The notion has existed since the late 18th century, referring to areas created by landowners or business owners to house their employees or workers. In this case, the village stands as a self-contained entity, meaning that Sandford itself could be seen as the infrastructure element of the system. Officer Nicholas Angel, eager to learn about the village, visits the local pub and is shocked to find children drinking alcohol. However, the pub owners insist they allow it, as it prevents chaos from spilling into the streets (Wright, 2007, pt. 11:52). This further supports the idea that the village is a self-sufficient community, evidenced by the lax enforcement of general laws, such as those prohibiting underage drinking. This mirrors a finding by Fatima et al., who argued that jeans, while just strips of cloth to the main character, represent an entire identity that is deemed unacceptable by the character's in-law (Fatima et al., 2022, p. 3744). However, *Hot Fuzz* presents this issue through the lens of the village of Sandford, rather than the protagonist's life in London.

Nicholas Angel, the main character, is transferred by his superiors against his will, despite his exemplary record in the city. This highlights the reality of power dynamics: those in control dictate the actions of those who are controlled. It is clear that a materialistic system exists in his previous place of work as well. His superiors did not want him around because his presence threatened the jobs of other officers, including their own. As a result, the entire department worked in unison to transfer him to the "village of the year."

Before starting his new role in the village, it becomes evident that the owner of Nicholas Angel's boarding house does not like him. She sarcastically refers to him as a fascist. This could be a hint at how the infrastructures of London and Sandford operate differently. These two social systems function according to their own benefits and costs (Lloyd, 1985, p. 281). However, Nicholas soon realises that the village will treat him no differently than the city did. Their treatment of him, which is aggressive and violent, will be further addressed in the analysis. Such behaviour is often a result of adverse conditions, which relate to the superstructure (Cihon & Mattaini, 2019, p. 706). Trying to distract himself from his landlady's slurs, Nicholas does not go to sleep immediately.



Figure 2 The Pub Owners Reacting to the Eviction of Underaged Customers (Source: movie-screencaps)

The behaviour of the pub owners in the scene from Figure 2 in *Hot Fuzz*, towards Nicholas Angel, provides further insight into the village's role as the infrastructure. The owners, a married couple, argue that it is more beneficial for them to allow children to drink inside the pub, despite acknowledging that they may be misbehaving. This suggests that the pub owners gain more advantages by permitting this behaviour, while also helping maintain the image of Sandford as a "clean" and orderly village. This decision reflects a shift in sociocultural values. After Nicholas Angel has the underage drinkers removed, the pub appears nearly empty.

Cultural materialists argue that the behaviour of individuals or communities is determined by their material conditions (Price, 2008, p. 709). This is true for the community of Sandford, where general rules seem inconsequential as long as they serve the community's interests. Nicholas Angel, newly arrived in the village, is unable to grasp the local mindset, including their collective vision and goals. Consequently, he finds himself trapped once more in a space shaped by cultural materialism, just as he was in London. I will now move on to examine the structure of this society.

The structure within the film *Hot Fuzz* can already be seen in the actions of the pub owners. Cultural materialists view the infrastructure of a system as the most influential element, shaping the structure and superstructure. The factory serves as the infrastructure, while the organisers or the organisation constitute the structure, and their ideology forms the superstructure (Harris, 1999, pp. 141–143). While this is a somewhat straightforward description of the concept, it helps clarify the essence of cultural materialism. The structure of a society defines its key actors. In *Hot Fuzz*, these actors are the Watchers.

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Figure 3 Nicholas Angel and the Watchers in A Welcome Party (Source: moviescreencaps)

The name Watchers refers to those who hold influence over the village and its inhabitants. They range from a geographer who put Sandford on the map, to a pastor, and a store owner. These individuals are often shown interacting with Nicholas Angel, the protagonist, even though the village has many other residents. Figure 3 illustrates the importance of these figures as they convey to a stranger, or newcomer, the lifestyle expected of those who adhere to local norms and values, albeit in indirect ways.

Relevant to Sandford's title as a model village, it is inhabited by landowners, businessmen, and their workers, such as Nicholas Angel himself. The infrastructure leads to similarities and adaptations within their organisation. The Watchers identify as a unified group, despite their varying professions, all with the goal of preserving Sandford and its reputation. Without this collective effort, they would not survive in their environment, as cultural materialists often emphasise. Behaviour is shaped by the surrounding environment, rather than the other way around (Harris, 1999, p. 142), and not by psychological factors either (Kangas, 2007, p. 37). Consequently, the villagers rely on the community for their survival.

In order for the influential people and the wider community to align with the infrastructure, there is a guiding doctrine. I have found that the residents, including those in charge, share a common belief in utilitarianism. This forms the superstructure of their system in Sandford. Officer Nicholas Angel experiences cultural shock every time he witnesses a violation of the law, ever since his arrival in the village. The real issue he faces is the lack of law enforcement, as his superiors disregard actual crimes. The Watchers are more concerned with a mime on the street than with issues like underage drinking, drunk driving, or shoplifting. When he tries to address these crimes, his inspector dismisses them, saying "for the greater good" (Wright, 2007, pt. 16:39). In conclusion, the sociocultural elements present in *Hot Fuzz* do not primarily revolve around the economy, though I will explore this further in next section.

Furthermore, the superstructure in Sandford conditions its people to accept the status quo as their *etics* (culturally accepted norms). One apparent reward is the lack of conflict within the community. However, significant changes begin to occur once Nicholas Angel arrives as the new police officer. His ignorance or lack of awareness about the local customs leads him to treat his new role in Sandford the same way he did in London. As a result, the sociocultural systems become disturbed and unbalanced (House, 2023). This leads to the emergence of conflicts, not only with Nicholas Angel, who begins to recognise the system, but also with the local people, including Officer Danny and the rest of the police department, with the exception of Inspector Frank, who has long been aware and is even a key figure among the Watchers.



Figure 4 Inspector Frank Reveals Himself to Nicholas Angel (Source: movie-screencaps)

Figure 4 reveals the ideology of the village residents through its mise-en-scène. In this scene, Nicholas engages in a dialogue with the Watchers. They are dressed in a manner reminiscent of a cult, all in black. However, Nicholas is taken by surprise when his inspector, Frank, reveals himself as one of the Watchers. Frank further explains the reasons behind the murders of several of their own members, including one from within the Watchers group. They are not committing these acts for trivial or irrelevant reasons. The utilitarian ideology they have adopted provides further clarity. In short, their actions are all in service of Sandford and its reputation.

To summarise these findings, the infrastructure in the film can be understood through the behaviour of the people towards Sandford. In fact, the name *Watchers* itself signifies the "keepers" of the village. Thus, the residents revolve around Sandford, the village in which they have embraced utilitarianism.

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Analysis of the Materialistic System of Hot Fuzz

The evidence for the infrastructure in *Hot Fuzz* is found in the behaviour of Sandford's residents towards their village. When there is behaviour that seems inexplicable, such as the disapproval of a mime or a "living statue" on the streets, it points back to our understanding of Sandford. The reasoning for this infrastructure is expressed both consciously and unconsciously by the villagers. For example, one person might claim that the living statue disrupts the view of the street, while another might allow children into the pub, despite breaking the rule prohibiting underage drinking, simply to keep them off the streets.

Sandford, as the infrastructure of the film, shapes the behaviour and mindset of its people. This represents the villagers' unspoken effort in the production and reproduction of their community. The village faces challenges related to its economy and ecology, which in turn emphasise the importance of the infrastructure. This mirrors the economic and ecological conditions that, for example, compel farmers to separate calves from their mothers' milk (Mostowlansky & Rota, 2020, p. 5). However, the residents not only engage in actions that some might deem extreme, but they also monitor their village closely. As a result, Sandford has become a community where the norms and values concerning cultural and legal life are inextricably linked to its infrastructure.



Figure 5 One of the Watchers Holding Access to the Security Cameras of the Village (Source: movie-screencaps)

In addition to the findings about the structure and superstructure revolving around the village, there are a few points worth noting. Firstly, the village has won the prestigious "Village of the Year" award. This achievement offers insight into the connection between social issues, trends, and structures (Redman, 2022). When a community receives such recognition, there is often a tendency to become complacent and look down upon others. The same can be said for the people of Sandford, who claim that their village is the safest.

However, in reality, many crimes are overlooked. As a result, they resort to the most extreme solution—"fighting evil with evil"—all in the name of preserving Sandford's reputation.



Figure 6 Inspector Frank and the Watchers Will Do Anything to Make Sandford Great Again (Source: movie-screencaps)

Secondly, Sandford Village is referred to as a model village. In some countries, this type of place is known as a company town rather than a model village (Patowary, 2017). This concept is also part of cultural life in the United Kingdom, aside from the *Village of the Year* distinction. As the film takes place in an English setting, Sandford is rich with sociocultural discourse for its community. For instance, two actors are employed at the village theatre, under the management of one of the key figures, although they may not necessarily be a Watcher. This further reinforces the idea that Sandford itself represents the infrastructure of the film. The actors who play Romeo and Juliet are murdered by the Watchers because of their secret affair and Juliet's irritating laughter. Even their manager is killed after he hears the news. Again, all of this is done in the name of Sandford.

As previously mentioned, the behaviour of killing others requires an explanation of the superstructure adopted by the system in place. The mindset of "for the greater good" can first be found in the pub owners' justification when Nicholas arrives in the village. This reflects the ideology of utilitarianism, which is often used to justify wars or colonisation. However, the people of Sandford share a common belief, untroubled by the extreme consequences. Harris' theory of cultural materialism emphasises the infrastructure over the superstructure, arguing that many people believe their ideology controls the situation (Harris, 1999, p. 148). In reality, it is the materialistic aspects that are truly in control.

The ideology of utilitarianism deserves attention for its depiction in the film. First, utilitarianism is regarded by some as a moral philosophy. However, it has been criticised by many scholars for endorsing universal sacrifice as wisdom (Scarre, 2020, p. 1). This

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critique is exemplified in multiple instances throughout the film. For example, the two actors and their manager are killed in the name of Sandford. But utilitarians reject partiality and regard it as undesirable. There are even members of the Watchers who become victims of the organisation itself. In short, utilitarianism is inherently tied to sacrifice, and the sacrifices made in the movie involve anyone who brings harm to the reputation of Sandford and its community. Nicholas is seen to set a somewhat desperate face just to convince that there is no such perfection in the village as shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7 Nicholas Angel Trying to Convince Police Department Because Inspector Frank and His Group Are Killing Anyone Who Rejects the Perfection of Sandford (Source: movie-screencaps)

Marvin Harris argued (Gaeini et al., 2019, p. 17) that earthly problems lead people to have different social lives within each community. This article does not claim that the ideology of utilitarianism, as discussed earlier, is entirely negative. However, it is important to reference scholars and their perspectives on the ideology, many of whom oppose it. From the positive side of Sandford and its people, one notable aspect is how they view most problems, which often lead to their brutal and unnecessary judgments. The Watchers and Nicholas Angel would agree that the mistakes made by the Sandford journalist are serious. However, this does not mean that he deserves a death sentence—or, more specifically, that he should be murdered for it. He frequently includes a typo or two in his newspaper, which the Watchers cannot tolerate, as seen in Figure 8.

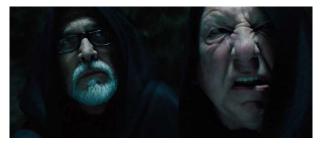


Figure 8 The Watchers Dislike Their Newspaper to Be Tabloid Journalist and Be Flawed by the Journalist of The Village of the Year (Source: movie-screencaps)

The *Village of the Year* award does not only bring fame to Sandford; it also offers economic benefits to local residents. This is because the *Village of the Year* in *Hot Fuzz* is similar to several real-life awards in England, such as *Best Kept Village*, *Essex's Village of the Year*, and *Calor's Village of the Year*. Among the prizes that the village can achieve, there are common benefits, including social solidarity, increased tourism, and financial support for local businesses. Although the natural advantages are overlooked in favour of human effort (Hart-Davis, 1996), the competitions in the village primarily result in materialistic outcomes for the participants. As a result, people from different villages will do their best to win this award, even though the portrayal in *Hot Fuzz* is taken to an extreme.

CONCLUSION

Hot Fuzz presents a vivid example of a materialistic system, despite being a fictional film. The three key elements of cultural materialism outlined by Marvin Harris are evident in both the narrative and non-narrative aspects of the film. The movie emphasises the role of sociocultural systems, particularly through the materialistic behaviour of the characters. Analysis reveals that the people of Sandford would struggle to survive in their environment without regulating behaviours such as restricting nighttime gatherings, targeting the street performer, obsessing over the drama and secret affair of their local theatre actors, resisting the suggestion to paint a house in harmony with the village's aesthetic, and allowing the village's media to publish negative stories. To achieve their vision of a "perfect" village, they resort to extreme measures, eliminating those who stand in the way of their goals.

The film also portrays the relationship between structure, superstructure, and infrastructure. The residents of Sandford, or more accurately, the Watchers, are the masterminds behind the organisation. The entire village revolves around their strict utilitarian values and ideology. They are willing to resort to deadly actions against ordinary villagers, viewing even a single individual as a threat to the sanctity of their community. This behaviour is justified by their belief in the greater good, particularly in their quest to win the title of "Village of the Year." Despite the sinister actions they take, they perceive them as necessary for the greater benefit of the village.

This analysis demonstrates how cultural materialism can be used to study the means of production and reproduction within sociocultural systems. Although previous studies have analysed both aspects, focusing on one provides clearer insights. It's worth noting that choosing different theoretical frameworks can yield necessarily different

results, as seen in studies examining individuals as cultural products. Nonetheless, our research emphasises the materialistic portrayal of the sociocultural system in *Hot Fuzz*.

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