Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich, LXVIII, z. 2
PL ISSN 0084-4446 | e-ISSN 2451-0335
DOI: 10.26485/ZRL/2025/68.2/9

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Behind the Façade: Collapse of the Rural Community Myth in *Broadchurch*

Abstract

The article discusses the process of disintegration of a small-town community in the fictional town of Broadchurch, depicted in the first series of a British crime drama under the same title. Although the complete *Broadchurch* series comprises of three seasons, only the first one was chosen for the present analysis due to its relevance to the topic under discussion. In the eight episodes of the first season, its creator, Chris Chibnall, unravels not only the mystery of a local boy's murder but also the way this crime and the ensuing police investigation affect the local community. The present analysis is situated within a broader historical and cultural context of the dichotomous perception of the country and the city, which has entrenched a highly positive and idealised image of small rural communities in British society and culture. The scholarly literature on community-forging factors and processes from the realm of social studies has provided the author with basic concepts and instruments to examine the gradual breakdown of community cohesion in Broadchurch, triggered by murder-induced collective trauma. The paper has also been informed by works from the field of film studies offering a broad perspective on the varied representations of rural communities in British cinematic and television productions. The article presents Chris Chibnall's Broadchurch as a work that deconstructs the romanticised perception of close-knit 'Gemeinschaft' communities celebrated in British literary and popular culture works.

community; trauma; town; disintegration; cohesion; *Broadchurch* series

Received: 2025-04-27 | Revised: 2025-07-08 | Accepted: 2025-08-26

Introduction

Attitudes toward nature and rurality result from historical processes and shifting views of the human–nature relationship, shaped through literature, art, philosophy, and media. Since antiquity, the Arcadian ideal has symbolised a simple life in harmony with nature. Despite change, it has remained central to English collective consciousness and culture (Williams 1973: 2, 248), influencing lifestyles, recreation, and heritage (Newby 1979: 13). In literature, Arcadian utopia inspired Renaissance pastoral poetry, while the Romantic movement added a spiritual dimension to human–nature relations (Newby 1979: 15; Hinchman, Hinchman 2007: 334–335). The rural ideal also shaped landscape painting — England's leading genre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — and country sports, central to gentry life. Most visibly, it was realised in English landscape parks, a style developed in the eighteenth century, which spread across Europe. The seemingly natural gardens of William Kent, Capability Brown, and Humphry Repton are now seen as archetypes of rural beauty (Jarrett 1978: 10–15). Such cultural representations formed "the mythology of the rural" (Laing 1992: 135), idealising the countryside while disparaging the city. Mike Storry and Peter Childs argue that this "countryside ethos" is a key element of British, and particularly English, identity, with Britain's self-image essentially rural rather than metropolitan (2023: 8–9).

In England, the Industrial Revolution intensified the urban–rural divide: industrialisation magnified urban ills, fostering nostalgia for rural tranquillity. Cities offered cultural amenities but also loneliness and alienation (Block 2008), whereas 'Gemeinschaft' rural communities were seen as cohesive and morally grounded in nature (Tönnies 2002: 6). Industrial capitalism thus reinforced the rural utopia as a lasting cultural ideal (Bate 2002: 47–48; Kiersnowska 2020: 55). This enduring tension, idealising the country and disparaging the city, has been explicitly and implicitly reflected in English literature and culture (Wiener 2004: ix; Brooke and Cameron 1996: 637), from the social novels by Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, and Elizabeth Gaskell to contemporary "late-capitalist" works by Margaret Drabble and Martin Amis (Brooke, Cameron 1996: 643).

This idealised vision of the countryside and rural communities, embedded in England's national consciousness, serves as a critical reference point for the analysis of the first series of Chris Chibnall's crime drama *Broadchurch*, as explored in this paper. By

drawing attention to the ubiquity of the rural myth as employed in various audio-visual narratives, the author contends that this cultural construct functions as a recurring and recognisable motif for audiences. Therefore, filmmakers often engage with it, either to reaffirm the country utopia and offer audiences an escapist fantasy or to challenge and subvert it. This paper aims to offer an interpretation of *Broadchurch* as a work that deconstructs the positive country myth and, as such, aligns with a broader trend in British cinema and television that demystifies small-town and rural life. The last section of the paper addresses trauma and its impact on the Broadchurch community; however, trauma is approached not through the lens of trauma theory, but rather as a narrative device employed by the series' creator to expose the shortcomings of the Broadchurch community and the fallacy of the small-town ideal. Accordingly, trauma theory is not incorporated into the methodological framework of this analysis.

Rural ideal and small-town community

The "ideology of rural arcadia" (Short 1992: 5), an established cultural construct of the countryside, romanticises small-town and rural communities as close-knit and cohesive, leading healthy lives in picturesque surroundings, away from urban problems (Alonso 1970: 37; Newby 1979: 23). This notion underpins urban-to-rural migration, driven by the search for a better quality of life, a trend that began in the 1970s and intensified in the 1990s as counter-urbanisation or nonmetropolitan turnaround (Arnon, Shamai 2010: 706–708). It appeals especially to young families, liberal professionals, and empty nesters seeking safer, calmer lives. The persistence of the 'better quality of life' paradigm is reinforced by popular media, such as the BBC's *Escape to the Country*,[1] which perpetuate commodified images of the English countryside and its cohesive agrarian communities sharing a strong sense of identity and pride in the local culture.

The cultural concept of small-town and rural societies rests on their perception as supportive "networks of relationships that weave individuals into groups and communities" (Putnam, Feldstein 2009: 1), bound by shared values, identity, and a 'sense of place' that together generate their 'social capital'. Social capital is believed to be exceptionally prominent in organic nonmetropolitan communities and lacking in individualistic urban populations. It is developed and enhanced by social mechanisms based on close and meaningful interpersonal relations, mutual concern, sharing local culture and lifestyle, conforming to social norms and understanding community needs and goals (Coakes, Bishop 1996: 108; McMillan, Chavis 1996: 318–321; McGregor, Thompson-Fawcett 2011: 175–176). Simple rituals and routines — sharing a drink with neighbours at the local pub, shopping at the local market, or attending a fete — are instrumental in forging strong community bonds. They shape the rhythm of village or town life and create a stable pattern of everyday existence. Neighbours become familiar with one another's habits, gestures, behavioural patterns and develop an understanding of the local social structure (Buikstra et al. 2010: 977; Knox, Mayer 2012: 74). These repeated experiences in a familiar environment acquire meanings and

[1] *Escape to the Country*. Created by Jason Wilton. Thames. Talkback Thames. Boundless Productions Naked West, 2002–present. 24 seasons. BBC One. The spin-offs to the original series include: *I Escaped to the Country* (BBC One 2017–present), *Escape To the Perfect Town* (BBC One 2019–2021) and *Greatest Escapes to the Country* (BBC Two 2020).

associations recognised by community members and become the foundation for their system of social and moral norms, among which mutual trust occupies the prime position as it is instrumental in maintaining community resilience in the face of adversity. Therefore, any transgression of the community's trust and moral standards may result in social exclusion (Putnam 2020: 135–136).

The idea of rural populations as supportive networks — mobilising in defence of community integrity or to assist a resident in difficulty — is so deeply rooted in English culture that it is a recurring motif in numerous audio-visual productions. *Local Hero* (dir. Forsyth 1983), *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain* (dir. Monger 1995), *Saving Grace* (dir. Cole 2000) and *Calendar Girls* (dir. Cole 2003) are but a few examples of films where community solidarity is a salient feature of the plot. For example, in Nigel Cole's comedy *Saving Grace*, set in a small Cornish village, the villagers unite to help Grace Trevethyn save her home, which she is about to lose to pay off her late husband's creditors. When Grace starts growing cannabis to resolve her financial predicament, the locals, out of solidarity, turn a blind eye and even shield her illicit business venture. *Calendar Girls* is a comedy based on a true story of a group of middle-aged women from a Yorkshire village, who mobilise in the face of a personal tragedy affecting one of them. They decide to produce a nude calendar to raise money for the purchase of a new couch for the hospital waiting room where their friend's terminally ill husband is being treated. Such uplifting stories are loved by audiences and help sustain the myth of close bonds uniting small communities.

During World War II small rural community became a politically-charged concept, critical to the war effort. The countryside was vital to the war agricultural production and provided a refuge for evacuees from cities devastated by aerial bombardment. Consequently, many wartime feature films presented pastoral communities living in southern England's bucolic landscapes as paradigms of strength, harmony and consensus as well as ways and values that were worth fighting and dying for. Such imagery was employed to evoke a sense of national community, unity, fortitude and the endurance of the English way of life despite the turmoil of war. *This England* (dir. MacDonald 1941), *Canterbury Tale* (dirs. Powell and Pressburger 1944) and *Tawny Pipit* (dirs. Miles and Saunders 1944) are the most noteworthy examples of such morale-boosting cinema (Butler 2004: 180; Havardi 2014: 119; Ryall 2016: 4). A common feature of these productions was their reliance on the pastoral tradition of depicting rural landscapes and commitment to the nostalgic presentation of rural communities. *This England* presents tranquil villages and farming communities across different historical periods — from the Middle Ages to the First World War — identifying them as "emblematic of England" and highlighting the significance of the land and its people. On a similar note, *Tawny Pipit* evokes nostalgia for quiet idyllic rural communities by opening up with a series of stock rural images: "quaint cottages, leafy lanes, rustic yokels and children playing in the stream" (Ryall 2016: 6–9).

The clichéd rural idyll of the English countryside remains commodified in contemporary film and television, where bucolic settings and close-knit communities are deployed to offer escapist entertainment to urban-weary audiences. These productions rely on the positive connotations that the "chocolate box scene[s]" (Horton 2005: 426) of lush green hills and pastures dotted with country cottages or small

towns with narrow streets lined with well-kept houses evoke in the audience. Such imagery is prevalent in many high-rating period dramas, such as *Lark Rise to Candleford* (dir. Gallagher 2008–2011), *Cranford* (dir. Curtis, Hudson 2007), *Return to Cranford* (dir. Curtis 2009) and numerous adaptations of E.M. Forster's and Jane Austen's prose from the 1980s and early 1990s. Merchant Ivory's quality costume drama adaptations of Forster's prose — *A Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987) and *Howards End* (1992) — set a benchmark for the heritage film in that period. By presenting a glorified, pre-industrial, pastoral vision of the past, these films offered domestic audiences a sense of reassurance and stability in Thatcher's economically unstable and chaotic Britain (Schaff 2004: 126). Their appeal to international audiences lay in their visually pleasurable, sanitised portrayal of stereotypical images of Britain's past, its people and rural landscapes (Higson 2001: 250). The deployed aesthetic strategies produced visual splendour by focusing on meticulously constructed mise-en-scène — period-accurate detail, imposing country houses and their elegant interiors. Visual pleasure was augmented through long shots of sunlit, verdant scenery, offering audiences a 'tourist gaze'[2] of the pastoral landscape — a strategy that has influenced later representations of non-metropolitan life.

Over the last few decades, small rural communities have been used as the canvas for plots of many popular detective dramas, like *Midsomer Murders* (creat. Horowitz and Watkinson 1997-present), *Vera* (creat. Cleeves 2011–present), *Shetland* (creat. Cleeves 2013–present), *The Coroner* (creat. Abbott 2015–2016) and *Beyond Paradise* (dirs. Thorogood and Jordan 2023–present). Some popular crime series, such as *Father Brown* (creats. Flowerday and Guner 2013–present), its spinoff *Sister Boniface's Mysteries* (creat. Tindall 2022–present) and *Grantchester* (creat. Coulam 2014–present), combine nonmetropolitan and retro settings. As Anita Singh (January 11 2024) argues in *Grantchester's* review, the key to the show's popularity is that it presents "a bucolic picture of Britain" that foreigners think still exists and domestic audiences long for. While the first two shows lean on light-hearted nostalgia and humour, *Grantchester* takes a more serious tone, probing into issues like gender roles, class, and attitudes toward homosexuality in 1950s Britain. As Ruth McElroy notes, many recent British crime dramas highlight the broader sociocultural context, addressing contemporary anxieties and concerns (2016: 1).[3]

Undoing the Pastoral Myth: Realism, Anti-Heritage Aesthetics, and the Uncanny Countryside in British Cinema

In English culture, the pastoral myth is accompanied by a counter-narrative that questions and undermines the idealisation of rural and small-town life. In the nineteenth century, some writers adopted the realism paradigm, rejecting the romanticised depiction of rural life. George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) and *Middlemarch* (1871–1872)

[2] The term 'tourist gaze' was used by John Urry in his seminal book *The Tourist Gaze. Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (*Published in association with Theory, Culture & Society*), SAGE Publications Ltd, 1990. He commented on the emphasis on the tourists' visual consumption of buildings, objects and landscapes in the modern tourist industry.

[3] See also Charlotte Brundson, *Structure and Anxiety: Recent British Television Crime Fiction*, "Screen" 1998, vol. 39, no. 3, p. 223–243.

addressed social and economic change and the debate over suffrage, while also revealing how moral judgment, rigidity, and provincial small-mindedness devastated individual lives (Brîndaş 2019: 85–95). Thomas Hardy's novels, rather than eulogise the harmony of the provincial world, showed it as a place riven by gender oppression, social and environmental determinism, where traditional customs and agrarian values were declining under industrialisation and the characters' fate was determined by forces beyond their control (Hasan 1985).

In British cinematic and television productions, the concept of the rural utopia became more ambiguous after World War II. Filmmakers increasingly addressed issues pertinent to rural communities, such as social insularity, intolerance, and the alienation of returning ex-servicemen unable to reintegrate into communal life (Butler 2004: 180). Consequently, the countryside in such productions as the thriller *The Clouded Yellow* (dir. Ralph Thomas 1950) and the comedy *Green Grow the Rushes* (dir. Derek N. Twist 1951) was given a darker, grimmer, and grittier character. It was not a haven of refuge and harmony, but an unforgiving provincial world that trapped individuals and resisted progress. The landscape was not cultivated and peopled, but wild and sublime, with marshes and moors exerting psychological and physical pressure on their inhabitants (Geraghty 2000: 53).

The British New Wave cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s adopted a social realist "slice of life" strategy (Lay 2002: 5), depicting the authentic, often gritty experiences of ordinary people and social issues in ways that resonated with domestic audiences. Directors such as Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, and Karel Reisz focused on urban working-class life, but social realism soon extended to film representations of rural and small-town communities. Rejecting picturesque aesthetics and notions of an organic rural community, these films employed realistic misè-en-scène, everyday experiences, and character motivation to address pressing social concerns (Hallam, Marshment 2000: 33–39; Lay 2002: 5–22).

This approach shaped *Emmerdale* (1972–present),[4] a long-running soap opera set in the Yorkshire Dales. Initially grounded in realistic portrayals of agricultural hardship and local dialect, it expanded to issues such as mental health, disability, domestic violence, and substance abuse. More recent films — including Hope Dickson Leach's *The Levelling* (2016), Clio Barnard's *Dark River* (2017), and Francis Lee's *God's Own Country* (2017) — offer even starker depictions of rural life. Exploring themes of post-Brexit economic pressures, poverty, loneliness, and depression in communities tied to the land. These new social realist dramas celebrate "muddy forecourts and derelict barns" and the "unclean, unpleasant land" of provincial England (Brooks April 28, 2017).

Similar themes and anti-picturesque aesthetics of the mise-en-scène are also characteristic of the Brit Noir genre and its sub-genres: Tartan/Celtic Noir, London Noir and others (Hansen, Re 2023: 188). Peripheral locations, isolated villages and decaying, crumbling estates amidst misty windswept Welsh or Scottish moors harbour unresolved tensions, family secrets and characters bearing psychic scars. Some Brit Noir

[4] Created by Kevin Laffan and broadcast on ITV, the show was known from 1972 until 1989 as *Emmerdale Farm*.

crime series, for example *Hinterland* (creats. Talfan and Thomas 2013–2016) and *Shetland*, explore what Thomas et al. (2019: 1–8) term 'dark heritage' by implying that crimes emerge from old sins, historical injustices or old feuds.

From the mid-1990s, directors aligned with Andrew Higson's critique of heritage cinema adopted anti-heritage aesthetics, rejecting the refined visual language of earlier rural period films. Long takes of "the seductive mise-en-scène" (Higson 2006: 99) were replaced by dynamic camerawork, rapid cutting, and close-ups, lacking the aesthetic polish of heritage productions (Held 2004: 121–122). The overly nostalgic, selective rural vision gave way to bleaker portrayals, as in Roger Michell's *Persuasion* (1995), where muddy, windswept landscapes are shot in muted tones and the splendour of Bath exposes undeserved privilege, snobbery, and pretension (Church Gibson 2011: 117). Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* (2011) similarly foregrounds harsh nature: "The Yorkshire moors are muddy and moody. Animals and insects occupy the screen for extended minutes" (Chew-Bose October 5, 2012).

Anti-heritage elements are most explicit in adaptations of Thomas Hardy. *Jude* (dir. Winterbottom 1996), *The Woodlanders* (dir. Agland 1998), and *The Scarlet Tunic* (dir. St Paul 1998) depict strained individual–community relations, rural monotony, challenges posed by nature and the hardships of farming. Their settings eschew picturesque tropes: *Jude* opens with a bleak ploughed field and the young protagonist carrying three dead crows to protect crops — imagery starkly opposed to heritage cinema's lush visual conventions (Cardwell 2006: 25–28; Church Gibson 2011: 119).

Some adaptations of Jane Austen, such as Patricia Rozema's *Mansfield Park* (1999) and ITV's *Sanditon* (creat. Davis, 2019–2023), further disrupt heritage conventions. They adopt a modern feminist perspective on gender and class while confronting Britain's colonial legacies and wealth built on oppression and slavery. Both engage with dark heritage themes (Thomas et al. 2019: 2), resulting in less polished depictions of rural Britain. In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Bertram's estate prospers from the toil of slaves on his Antigua plantation; in *Sanditon*, Georgiana Lambe, a mixed-race heiress from the West Indies, must confront the fact that her father, a white plantation owner, sold her enslaved mother and erased her from Georgiana's life.

Any discussion of rural Britain's demythologisation must acknowledge a long-standing cultural view of the countryside as uncanny — "a place which seems to offer security, and yet is somehow the location of menaces far more profound than those found in the city" (Kennedy 2013). Far from tranquil and bucolic, it is a space where historical and political forces collide, seemingly benign communities conceal dark secrets, and the pastoral landscape bears traces of past suffering, violence, and forgotten feuds, alongside natural anomalies, ruins, and tombs. Robert Macfarlane's concept of the 'English eerie' (2015) captures this perception, defining eerie as "that form of fear that is felt first as unease, then as dread, and which is incited by glimpses and tremors rather than outright attack." He links the rise of interest in the eerie to cultural responses to contemporary political and environmental crises.

Contemporary eerie culture, especially in horror and thriller genres, often engages with England's past, particularly the Civil War, pagan and occult practices, and environmental degradation. Past violence features prominently in *A Field in England* (dir. Wheatley 2013), a historical psychological horror about deserters fleeing the Civil

War battle, and *A View from a Hill* (dir. Watson 2005), where Dr Fanshawe glimpses past executions through binoculars, suggesting history can be seen through the eyes of the dead. Isolated communities practising ancient rituals appear in *The Third Day* (creats. Barrett and Kelly 2020), a thriller set on Osea Island, where a woman discovers folk-horror traditions, ceremonial rites, and symbolic sacrifices while searching for her missing husband. Overall, the 'English eerie' transforms the idyllic countryside and rural communities, traditionally seen as safe, into spaces that are dark and menacing.

Broadchurch — a model small-town community

Broadchurch is a critically acclaimed British crime drama whose first series (ITV, March–April 2013) is the subject of this analysis because, unlike later seasons, it focuses on a small-town community. Producer Richard Stokes emphasises that the show has "the best elements of a murder mystery but it also has at its heart a local community which feels authentic, grounded in a reality we will all recognise and bonded by a grief we can only imagine and hope never to experience" ("ITV" 2013). Set in the fictional seaside town of Broadchurch in Dorset, the story revolves around a murder of a local boy at the landmark Briar Cliff, which shakes the entire community. Filmed in the serene West Bay near scriptwriter Chris Chibnall's home, the show intentionally evokes Thomas Hardy's Wessex — acknowledged as the archetype of England's rustic beauty — which is reflected in names like DI Alec Hardy and Wessex Police. Chibnall admits that the show was intended to be "a love letter to this coast, to the towering sandstone cliffs and the stunning scenery and ultimately, to honour the importance of community, the positive benefits we all feel when we belong" (Shaw 2013).

He explores these themes by dissecting the crime's effects on the townsfolk, including the trauma caused by the police investigation and the media frenzy. As he explains, the impact of a child's untimely death on a close-knit community with strong social capital is particularly dramatic, as "everything has meaning because people are so inherently connected to each other, not just with family or emotionally, but through business and professionally" (Shaw 2013). Therefore, this act of violence affects not only the victim's family but also the entire town, as it puts into question the community's system of moral values and subverts its social and cultural norms. In Chibnall's story, this aspect appears to be as important to the plot as the murder investigation. To give it its proper weight, the town's community and the local picturesque scenery — an unlikely site for such a heinous crime — are elevated to the show's central characters and subjected to scrutiny.

The series' creator relies on references to fixed routines and rituals enabling social interactions, and images of rusticity to portray Broadchurch as an archetypal small town. The community's life is regulated by the repeated rhythm of daily activities, a market held twice weekly and the annual six-week-long tourist season (e 02). They form a fixed pattern that the town's social life and tourism-based economy depend on. Every year, at the beginning of summer, holidaymakers come to Broadchurch to enjoy its atmosphere and attractions — a wide sandy beach beneath the cliff, boat rides in the bay, seafront amusement arcades and fish-and-chip restaurants and beautiful views. This safe and dreamy seaside town appears to be particularly suitable for family holidays.

From the outset, the show's creator meticulously constructs the picture of a fictional small-town community fitting the cultural construct of a blissful rural utopia, only to subject it to gradual dismantling as the crime investigation progresses and gains speed. One of the characters, Karen White, the *Daily Herald* journalist who comes to Broadchurch to report on Danny Latimer's murder, describes the place to her boss as an "idyllic market town" (e 04). Her words encapsulate the image of a small-town paradise that the viewers are presented with already in the opening sequences of the first episode, when on a bright sunny morning, Mark Latimer, yet oblivious to his son's death, walks down the High Street. The camera follows his progress down the town's main street, lined with typical small-town business premises, housing a newsagent, a local newspaper's office, a tourist information centre and a hotel. The town is waking to its daily rhythm — the audience can hear the sound of shutters being lifted as shops and offices are opening, vendors in the street market are laying out goods for early morning grocery shoppers, and people are smiling, greeting each other and exchanging pleasantries. As he is walking towards the Traders Hotel, where his employee, Nigel, will pick him up, Mark is happily chatting and joking with his neighbours and acquaintances (e 01).

The scene leaves viewers with an overwhelming impression that they have just witnessed a typical daily routine of the Broadchurch community, which is at the root of the place's amicable, harmonious and hospitable ambience. It is in savouring these simple, recurring daily activities and personal interactions — such as a local school football match — that the small community derives its goodwill, contentment, unity, and sense of purpose. Maggie Radcliffe, the editor of the *Broadchurch Echo*, aptly renders this local sentiment for the simple living paradigm when referring to the paper's creed of "celebrat[ing] the everyday" (e 02), which also appears to be the community's defining value. Broadchurch's small-town bliss and benevolence are so overwhelming that they even affect the cynical chief investigator of Danny Latimer's murder, DI Alec Hardy. The remark "I hate their bloody smiling faces and the never-ending sky." (e 03) that he makes to his doctor is biting and sarcastic on the face of it, yet it is clear that the town's charm and amiable atmosphere have penetrated through the investigator's aloof and standoffish façade and moved him.

The influence of the town's familial atmosphere on Hardy is noticeable in the change in his attitude toward his colleague, DS Ellie Miller. From the beginning, Alec makes it clear that his presence in Broadchurch is only due to the ongoing investigation and that he intends to maintain professional detachment from the locals and his partner. Miller, whose interaction with her colleagues at the police station is marked by cordiality that often characterises people who work together and live in the same locality, finds Hardy's conduct incomprehensible and offensive. Not put off by his dismissive attitude, she continues to make small gestures to strike more companionable cooperation. Eventually, Hardy succumbs to Miller's efforts and accepts an invitation to dinner with her family, thus conceding to give their hitherto purely professional relationship a more social character. Hardy's gradual transformation is used by the series creators to implicitly accentuate a striking contrast between his metropolitan manners which are characteristic of atomistic, uninvolved urban populaces and the cordial and welcoming ones found in small, closely-knit communities.

The production team of *Broadchurch*[5] have endeavoured to imbue the series with the defining features of a small-town image culturally familiar to its audience. Chris Chibnall compounds Broadchurch's portrayal introduced in the first episode's opening by a complete description of the town and its inhabitants that Olly Stevens, a *Broadchurch Echo* journalist, gives to Karen White when he shows her around. His words form a near dictionary definition of an isolated and self-contained small-town community. According to Olly, the local population consists of two groups, which, although not homogeneous, are united by a sense of place and appreciation of the small-town lifestyle. The core of the Broadchurch populace is the people who have lived there all their lives, sometimes for generations, and hardly ever ventured away from their locality: "Some of them haven't even been 50 miles outside of town" (e 02). The other group is made up of incomers from large cities who have settled in the town looking for better quality and a slower pace of life. Therefore, it appears that like many other small towns and villages across England, Broadchurch has been affected by the counter urbanisation trend attracting to the locality mostly people looking for a safe environment to raise their children in: "young families [who] left cities when they had babies [and] came here for the schools and the sea" (e 02). The perception of rural areas as virtually crime-free is a noteworthy motive for relocation to a small town. Such opinions are given credibility by criminologists' observations that places where people live in tight-knit neighbourhoods, share some communal activities, and thus know one another well, typically have lower crime rates than anonymous large urban communities (Putnam, Feldstein 2009: 2). Olly Stevens admits that Broadchurch's reputation as a place not afflicted by serious crime is well deserved since the local newspaper's weekly crime column that he runs is filled by reports of nothing more serious than occasional offences: minor thefts, some drug use and drink driving (e 02).

David Melbye (2010: 1) argues that cinematic locations are often much more than just the background for the narrative. The setting and landscapes presented in a film can convey symbolic meanings inherent in a given culture and easily decoded by the audiences belonging to that cultural realm (Lukinbeal 2005: 14; Melbye 2010: 1–3). In many British crime series set in nonmetropolitan communities, such as the historical crime dramas *Poirot* (creat. Exton 1989–2013) and *Miss Marple* (prod. Galaccio 1984–1992) or the contemporary detective series *Midsomer Murders* and *Beyond Paradise*, the rural setting is just a space where the story takes place. It is merely a visually attractive background, like a painting or a photograph, for the story's characters and events. Typically, the viewer is presented with all the characteristic conventional paraphernalia of rurality: thatched cottages, a country church, a local pub or inn, the common green and a country mansion. Some shows, such as *Midsomer Murders* or *Father Brown*, rely on the almost clichéd presentation of small-community life and social relations by depicting events involving the residents: a local festival, a musical or drama society's performance, a reconstruction of a historical event or a regularly held sporting event, such as a cricket match or a bicycle race. As the plot of each episode is self-contained, the local community is depicted in a rather sketchy way, without delving deeply into the bonds uniting

[5] Five episodes were directed by James Strong, who also helped Chris Chibnall in developing the story. Three episodes were directed by Euros Lyn.

its members, exploring the dynamics behind community relationships or analysing the effects of the crime on the residents. The resolution of the crime or mystery by the end of the episode restores the community's equilibrium. Thus, the audience is left oblivious to the psychological and social consequences of the criminal act on individuals and the whole community. Therefore, programmes like these have a minimal effect in subverting the cultural construct of the countryside as a 'blissful Arcadia'.

In *Broadchurch*, contrary to the aforementioned examples, the landscape is not just the backdrop for the main events but is given prominence, it "assumes a persona of its own" (Chakravarti 2020: 38), and is an important conduit for transmitting an encoded message about the character of the place, its cultural values and people's modes of behaviour. As Melbye argues, "The landscapes of our natural world become landscapes of our minds" (2010: 2), because the process of transformation of the natural environment into a space endowed with certain meanings is culture-specific. Consequently, by depicting specific elements of the landscape and employing particular strategies of presenting them, filmmakers can evoke certain associations inherent to a specific culture. The aesthetic strategy of depicting scenery which predominates in the series appears to have been adopted in order to manipulate the audience, particularly the British one, into believing that Broadchurch is a paradigmatic small town, fitting the cultural construct of the rural utopia.

When discussing the function of landscape in the cinema, Martin Lefebvre argues that when the natural space is subordinated to the narrative and is a medium through which dramatic events are conveyed, one should refer to it as the 'setting' rather than the 'landscape'. The setting can be the agent of providing information about the characters and the action (informative function), often being assigned a participating and formative role, or setting the atmosphere of the events (sympathetic function). Regardless of which of these functions it performs, the setting is subservient to the narrative and contributes to the harmonious congruity between various elements of the film (2011: 64–65). In Celtic Noir shows set in Wales, such as *Hinterland* / *Y Gwyll*, *Keeping Faith* / *Un Bore Mercher* (dir. Hall 2017–2020) and *Hidden* / *Craith* (dirs. Bryn, Styles and Forster 2018–2021) or the Scottish drama *Shetland*, the setting performs sympathetic and formative functions, creating the mood and reflecting the characters' emotional state. Eerie, bleak and desolate landscapes, gloomy weather and grey skies complement the storyline and are a visual representation of the characters' psychological and emotional states and moral dilemmas. Shots of wide expanses of open peripheral landscapes devoid of human presence are used as an instrument to evoke the air of dread, mystery and disquiet (Roberts 2016: 9–11). Thus, "landscape steps into the frame as a character or provocateur not merely as a setting provider" (Roberts 2016: 11).

A similar observation can be made about *Broadchurch*. Endowed with culturally constructed meaning and compounded by sound, camera movement and shot duration, the landscape-as-setting in *Broadchurch* is more than the space against which the drama is played out. It is the 'agent provocateur' whose role is to press on the mind of the viewer and incite specific cultural connotations. Long shots of beautiful sunlit rustic landscape, a technique used in heritage films, are supposed to offer the viewers a 'tourist gaze' over the spectacular West Dorset landscape. Presented with images of the coastal landscape in full summer glory, the audience is invited to relish the visual

splendour of Broadchurch's location. Multiple wide-angle shots of West Bay, complemented by seagull cries and the sound of waves splashing on the beach, bring out the rustic and peaceful ambience of the town and appeal to the audience's senses. A broad panoramic vista of the bay from the top of Briar Cliff, the sun reflecting off the sea waves, boats moored in the marina, expanses of green meadows with grazing cows, children flying kites, people walking dogs and jogging on the seafront footpath and the town's narrow streets lined with small houses with well-kept front gardens form the archetype of serene English rurality. Such depiction of the setting plays a meaningful role in *Broadchurch* since it accentuates the incongruity between the cruel crime committed there and the familiar notion of the country as a safe place encoded in English culture. In this respect, the show replicates the strategy employed in *Midsomer Murders* and many other procedural dramas set in rural Britain.

However, the cultural production of space in *Broadchurch* is more multifaceted. Occasional panoramic shots of the coastal landscape at night, close-ups of the edge of Briar Cliff and the use of bleak, desaturated colour palette, in which cool blues and greys dominate, in some scenes, testify to the influence of the Celtic and Nordic Noir on the series. Such aesthetics and strategies are employed to reflect the characters' inner torment or to augment the changes in the town's atmosphere as the interrogation continues and the residents' fears increase. For example, in episode 3, Alec Hardy is presented standing alone on the cliff, wind whipping around him. The isolated landscape mirrors Hardy's turmoil over both his failing health and his fear that the Broadchurch investigation will echo the unresolved Sandbrook case that damaged his career. Similarly, in episode 5, Beth Latimer's lone walk on the empty beach, dealing with her grief silently, reveals the Celtic and Nordic Noir's visual and atmospheric inspiration. In episode 6, the confrontation between an angry crowd and Jack Marshall, the local newsagent and Sea Brigade volunteer, outside the brigade headquarters exemplifies how *Broadchurch* employs weather and setting to amplify the community's mounting social tension and collective frustration. The weather is cold, grey, and windy; the skies are overcast. Dull, gloomy lighting emphasises the irrationality of the mob that has gathered to serve justice on Jack and the latter's loneliness and powerlessness against their rage. Such depictions of the landscape function as a complementary element of the narrative, augmenting the mysterious and disquieting ambience, reflecting the characters' emotional agitation and endowing the audience with a nagging feeling that something terrible is about to happen.

More importantly, the small-community setting functions as a microcosm through which the show's creator examines social relations, rifts, and emotional entanglements, exposing the community's deeper shortcomings and moral failures. These inadequacies become more pronounced and shocking, juxtaposed with the serene rustic scenery and the established commodified constructs of close-knit, 'Gemeinschaft' communities. Thus, *Broadchurch* fits into the model of a well-written crime drama narrative, which, according to Ruth McElroy, in addition to an entertaining value, provides "a 'place' to explore social anxieties, new social relations and often deeply troubling instances of social breakdown and violence" (2016: 2). The series is an eye-opener for the audiences whom Chibnall forces to acknowledge the fallacy of the cultural construct of the small-town community.

Trauma and the loss of communality in Broadchurch

Contemporary psychological and medical scholarship defines 'trauma' as "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind", caused by an emotional shock so powerful it defies simple comprehension (Eyerman 2013, 42). A traumatic event overwhelms perception and shatters one's capacity to comprehend the world and the self. In response, the body and mind mobilise defences that may produce symptoms such as sudden emotional outbursts, numbness, headaches, or temporary amnesia caused by the repression of traumatic memories. It goes without saying that Danny Latimer's tragic death is a devastating experience for his family. Why someone took their son's life escapes the Latimers' comprehension and leaves them helpless and inconsolable in their grief. Attempts to rationalise Danny's murder appear only to aggravate the family's trauma by causing mutual recriminations, inducing a sense of guilt and undermining their trust in each other and family unity.

Broadchurch's creator decided to adopt a broader perspective when presenting the emotional consequences of Danny Latimer's murder. The boy's death is depicted in the series as a harrowing event occurring not only on a personal level of his grief-stricken family but also on a community level, as it deals a severe blow to the town, causing shock, anguish, and traumatising its social organism. In a report written in the aftermath of the 1972 Buffalo Creek disaster,[6] Kai Erikson introduces the term 'collective trauma' to describe the condition that is "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality", causing deep collective and social wounds (Erikson 1976: 154). Individual and collective trauma can reinforce each other, intensifying the sense of shock and loss experienced by both the individual and the community. While both stem from shock, collective trauma unfolds gradually, as the community — once a source of mutual support, identity, and shared traditions — is eroded (Erikson 1991: 460; Eyerman 2013: 43). Chris Chibnall in *Broadchurch* ties the Latimers' personal loss to the effects it has on the entire town, whose self-perception as a safe community with high moral standards is hence subverted.

Scholarship highlights the serious behavioural, social, and psychological effects of crime on communities, including reduced participation in local events, neighbourly mistrust, lower cooperation, and weaker attachment to place (Taylor 1995: 29). As successive stages of Danny Latimer's murder investigation are unravelled in the eight episodes of the series, the audience becomes increasingly aware of the progressive and relentless community disintegration. When the police uncover half-truths, secrets and false alibis, friction and fissures surface and tear apart the town's apparent unity. The discovery of Danny's body beneath Briar Cliff sends shock across the entire town. Disbelief and terror visible in people's faces when they hear the news, and their immediate reaction of deep sympathy for the boy's parents, attest to how devastated the whole community is. As Olly Stevens says to Karen White of *The Daily Herald*, Broadchurch has never before been the scene of such a heinous crime (e 02). The pathologist performing the postmortem confirms that Danny's death was caused by asphyxiation

[6] In 1972, a coal slurry impoundment dam broke in Buffalo Creek, West Virginia, killing 125 people and causing severe property damage.

and adds: "We don't get these around here" (e 01), imploring the two detectives to find the boy's killer. These two comments reveal how incongruous this tragic event is with the self-concept of the Broadchurch community. Understandably, then, the whole town is deeply moved and sympathises with the grief-stricken family — a condolence book is put out in *Broadchurch Echo*'s office, neighbours and even people who do not know the Latimers personally try to comfort them and send them flowers and food.

However, as the police investigation continues and no arrest is made, this initial reaction is replaced by increasing frustration and restlessness as fear sets in and begins to weaken the foundations of the community's unity. The realisation that the murderer is at large and is probably a local person undermines people's sense of security and causes distress. The belief that small towns are safe and free of serious crime, which was the underlying cause for choosing Broadchurch as a new home by many new inhabitants, crumbles down. Similarly, people's perception of the local community as guided by high moral norms sustained by small-town familiarity is altered under murder-induced trauma. When the townsfolk's deeply hidden secrets surface, they begin to realise that their familiarity with one another has been superficial, and their conviction that small-town communities are not susceptible to evils afflicting large metropolitan populations was based on false premises. This change in the perception of Broadchurch is visible in the scene when DS Ellie Miller joins her husband and children for lunch in a restaurant. A local couple approaches her and asks if it is safe to let out the children unsupervised or if they should be watched and kept in all the time. Their vocal concern matches Ellie's own doubts about whether Broadchurch is still as safe as it used to be. The residents' growing apprehension evident in this brief encounter is reinforced by the view through the restaurant window on windswept waterfront, dark clouds and heavy rain. Thus, in this scene, the setting has a sympathetic and formative function, explicitly informing the audience about the change in the characters' mood and enhancing the atmosphere of fear (e 02). The community gives full vent to its anxiety and insecurity at the meeting with the investigators, where the townsfolk's hope for closure and some reassurance that their lives will soon return to the pre-murder blissful state is explicitly expressed (e 04).

The scholarly literature on rural populations identifies two pillars that small communities are based on: a shared place and ongoing interactions between residents (Bracken 2008: 87). Audiences can observe from one episode to another that, in the aftermath of Danny Latimer's murder, the character of interactions between townspeople in Broadchurch is changing. Harmony and consonance spawned by and nourished in the local social network give way to selfish protection of personal interests and fulfilment of individual ambitions, even at the expense of other community members. Individual trust embedded in personal relationships and honesty nested in community norms are eroded, and suspicion and doubt appear in their place. Confidence and congeniality, once characterising interactions between neighbours, disappear, and distrust and detachment appear. The first noticeable sign is the Latimers' list of suspects in their son's murder. Ellie is astounded by the discovery that the names of their neighbours, friends and even Danny's teachers are on it. "These are all your friends", she exclaims, to which Beth Latimer brusquely retorts: "We know" (e 02). It is hardly surprising that the unimaginable suffering caused by Danny's murder has destroyed his parents' faith

in the community, but it appears that under trauma, the relations of other residents with each other and the whole town have been altered, too.

One of the victims of the loss of faith in the local people is DS Ellie Miller. When the investigation begins, she finds it hard to distance herself from the locals and treat them with suspicion. She is heartbroken when she witnesses the Latimers' pain and shows concern for them as a neighbour and close friend, not a police officer investigating their son's murder. When her superior, DI Alec Hardy, admonishes her: "You have to look at your community from the outside now." and learn not to trust anyone, she responds, "I can't be outside it and I don't want to be" (e 02). This short exchange suggests that, first and foremost, Ellie views herself as a loyal community member whose commitment to the town takes precedence over the investigation requirements. She is adamant in her unwavering faith in the community and refuses to accept Alec's view that all people are capable of murder given the right circumstances. Her response that "Most people have a moral compass" (e 02) indicates that she is ready to vouch for her townsfolk's high moral standards. It appears that Ellie's ideas about Broadchurch residents comply with the culturally transmitted image of small-town communities as morally sound and free of vice, typically attributed to metropolitan ones.

However, as the investigation gains speed, she realises that her friends and neighbours nurture many secrets and do not hesitate to resort to lying to prevent their disclosure and the ensuing loss of reputation. Ellie's trust and solidarity with the community are seriously tested when Mark Latimer's alibi is blown off and when he is arrested for obstructing the murder inquiry (e 03). She understands that by withholding information that he had spent the night of his son's murder with his mistress, Mark tried to spare his wife more suffering and protect his reputation as a family man, yet his lies in such a grave matter have changed her perception of Broadchurch. Ellie's steadfast belief in her townsfolk's moral integrity begins to waver, and when the chief of the local police asks her if Mark Latimer could have killed his son, she can no longer rule it out with complete certainty. Alec's comment, "You've changed your tune" (e 05), confirms the transformation that Ellie Miller has undergone during the investigation. She no longer behaves like a trusting, loyal community member defending her friends and neighbours against Alec Hardy's accusations. Instead, she starts acting like an objective crime investigator, treating Broadchurch residents like possible suspects, which she admits to in a comment to her husband after Jack Marshall's funeral: "I'm just starting to suspect everyone" (e 06). As the deeply hidden secrets and half-truths of different members of the community surface, people begin to lose trust in each other. Both the series characters and the audience realise that this seemingly good-natured small-town community is not what they thought it to be, that beneath the veneer of honesty, high moral standards and hospitality are hidden human weaknesses and faults that can be found in all social groups, both large and small.

Scholarly research into community-bonding agents identifies 'resilience' as a mechanism which, when mobilised at the individual and community levels, is crucial in managing stressors and providing support for community members. Adversity, outside influences and stressful events can either strengthen or weaken community resilience. If the latter happens, the community is unable to organise itself to respond collectively to the threat, sustain relationships and interactions between its members, and maintain

its unity (Buikstra et al. 2010: 976–978). In *Broadchurch*, the murder of the local boy and the ensuing police inquiry put the community's integrity and cohesion to the test. The combined effects of the inconvenience caused by the investigation and the possibility of achieving personal gain from the local tragedy cause cracks and fissures in the town's unity. The first to betray loyalty to the community is *Broadchurch Echo* reporter Olly Stevens. As the first reporter on the crime scene, he cynically takes advantage of it to fulfil his ambition of landing a job with a large national newspaper. Thus, upon discovering the dead boy's identity, he bypasses his boss, Maggie Radcliffe, and secretly emails the national newspaper *The Daily Herald*, hoping to pique their interest in the story (e 01). He believes that working with a journalist from *The Daily Herald* on the story could be his gateway into national journalism. Despite being warned by Maggie Radcliffe about how harmful his cooperation with Karen White of *The Daily Herald* may be to Broadchurch, which will be placed in the national media spotlight, and how much more pain press interest may cause to the Latimers, Olly continues to put his ambition over loyalty and solidarity with his town. Thus, the community's peace and his cordiality with Mark Latimer, evident at the start of episode one, become secondary to Olly Stevens once personal gain is at stake.

Fear that the ongoing murder investigation and the inevitable media interest in the story will harm the local economy impairs Broadchurch's communality and solidarity with the Latimers. It is a valid concern in a seaside resort whose reputation as a safe and peaceful place is a crucial constituent of its ideal family-retreat image. Many local businesses depend on tourist traffic during the short holiday season; therefore, the initial sympathy for the victim's family begins to give way to nervousness and irritation with the police's prolonged presence at the beach. At the root of such feelings is the anxiety about the loss of profit in the upcoming tourist season. Fears that residents' livelihoods might be adversely affected surface less than forty-eight hours after Danny Latimer's murder. Becca Fisher, who runs the Traders' Hotel, is worried about cancellations if the beach is not reopened soon (e 01). In an almost deserted bar of her hotel, a local resident, Laurie, loudly complains that although he sympathises with the Latimers, their son's murder is going to cripple the town's fragile economy: "Now we are a murder town. No one's gonna come. […] Who's gonna come to the beach with bloody CSI sat next to them?" (e 02). It appears that Broadchurch unity was developed and sustained by a shared idea of the town as a sheltered and peaceful place. Danny Latimer's murder and the pressure of police investigation in its aftermath jeopardise the townsfolk's hitherto comfortable and relatively untroubled existence and expose their illusory and unreliable sense of community.

How fragile and superficial Broadchurch communality in reality is and how easily people can be turned against each other, is demonstrated by Chris Chibnall in Jack Marshall's strand. The collective trauma induced by Danny Latimer's murder and aggravated by secrets and lies revealed during the investigation erodes people's confidence in each other and wrecks their emotional safety, which was the community's fundamental bonding element. The process of community disintegration reaches a culminating point when *The Daily Herald* publishes Olly Stevens' article, disclosing local newsagent Jack Marshall's criminal past and branding him a sex offender and paedophile. The sensationalist and unobjective story triggers a hate campaign against Jack Marshall.

A petition is signed to have him removed from the Sea Brigade, a scout-like organisation he has been running for fifteen years. Innuendos about his supposed inclination to young boys spread and his townsfolk turn their backs on him. At some point, an angry mob gathers outside the Sea Brigade's headquarters, and Jack is spared a lynching only owing to Mark Latimer's intervention. No one in Broadchurch tries to verify *The Daily Herald*'s revelations or give Jack the benefit of the doubt. Hysteria and fear resulting from Danny's murder make the locals desperate for closure. Thus, they promptly assume that Jack is a paedophile and Danny Latimer's likely murderer. Eventually, hounded by the press, lonely and ousted from his community, Jack throws himself off Briar Cliff, at the foot of which Danny's body was found (e 05). An innocent man, driven to a suicidal death by the people he trusted and whom he had chosen to live among, Jack Marshall is the most tragic victim of the breakdown of community bonds in Broadchurch. His death confirms how deeply the sense of safety that the close-knit community provides has been eroded and how vulnerable people in Broadchurch have become to circumstances beyond their control, such as rumour and muckraking media.

The community has failed Jack in many ways, but most importantly, by isolating and rejecting him, refusing protection and the trust he thought he had earned over the years. It is explicitly articulated in a sermon given by Reverend Paul Coates during Jack Marshall's funeral service: "We let him be smeared and intimidated. We weren't there when he needed us" (e 06). Paul uses Jack's tragic death to assume the leadership of the community, appeal to the values that once cemented the people of Broadchurch, mobilise community resilience and evoke a sense of togetherness that the events following Danny Latimer's murder demolished: "In this, the darkest of time, we have to be better. […] If we are not a community of neighbours, then we are nothing" (e 06). The Reverend understands that fear and trauma that the police cannot address are the leading causes of community breakdown, and his townsfolk need hope that they can overcome adversity and restore the sense of unity expressed by their interactions as a collective unit. Therefore, he tries to mobilise community resilience by reminding his congregation of the values that were once the essence of Broadchurch communality.

Conclusions

Chris Chibnall's *Broadchurch* transgresses the definition of a typical crime drama, depicting the meticulous process of crime solving and disclosing the crime perpetrator's motives and rationale. A haunting and engrossing plot full of twists and turns set in a beautiful rural locale appears to be an instrument for discussing other topics, for example, the effects of trauma on an individual and community and the fallacious assumptions people make about living in the countryside. Murder investigation is a platform to explore such themes as individual–community relationships, seen through the prism of community bonding factors and interpersonal relations, and the cultural construct of rural communities. Solving the mystery of Danny Latimer's death serves the series creator as a pretext to delve into the lives of Broadchurch residents and reveal their hypocrisy, deeply hidden secrets, ambitions and fears. The tragic death of a local boy has portentous consequences for the entire community, affecting each individual and the whole town on a social, psychological, behavioural and economic level. The collective trauma resulting from the event cuts into the fabric of the community, baring its weaknesses and

a false sense of unity. The shock and testing circumstances in the aftermath of Danny Latimer's death dispel the complacency of Broadchurch residents based on the conviction that their small town is immune to the harm and evils typically associated with large metropolitan centres. Familial bonds uniting neighbours in Broadchurch, the sense of unity of the residents with their hometown developed by performing established routines and adhering to the town's rhythm, prove too weak to sustain the community's cohesion. Consequently, the town's resilience to overcome hardships as a collective is impaired. Thus, Broadchurch residents realise that their perception of the place and the people inhabiting it was illusory. It was based on their expectations, hopes and culturally conveyed ideas of what a small-town community should be like, but the harsh reality of the murder investigation proved these beliefs wrong.

Chris Chibnall achieves his purpose of showing the effects of crime on a small-town community by appealing to the long-established cultural construct of the countryside and rural communities. By setting his drama in a picturesque seaside town lying amidst lush green pastures and presenting the residents' daily activities making up their quiet, uneventful course of life, Chibnall evokes specific positive associations that audiences have with rural life. They form a familiar image of the country and rural communities entrenched in literature and culture, which is idealised and utopian. By making such a blissful little town the scene of a gruesome crime and examining how it disintegrates local people and gradually but relentlessly demolishes the town's unity, *Broadchurch*'s creator dispels the popularly held myth of the paradise-like countryside. Notably, remote rural areas are not impervious to crime and evil, and their residents are subjected to the same social and psychological mechanisms that undermine group solidarity and loyalty as people living in large urban centres. Thus, one may conclude that the positive perception of small rural communities is based on a fallacious premise that, owing to their size and remoteness, such communities are more cohesive, consolidated by intense emotional and social bonds and, therefore, more likely to confront difficulties as a whole. *Broadchurch* demonstrates that it is equally unreasonable to assume that such close-knit groups provide better protection and support for their members stemming from close and amicable relationships or that their small size and members' familiarity with one another facilitate control of individual compliance with the moral and social norms of the community.

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