

Sweet Sixteen

(2002, Ken Loach, UK)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Filmmaking

Core Study Areas Key Elements of Film Form Meaning & Response The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area Narrative (AS & AL) Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

A moving and exhilarating portrait of a young man's struggle to find a place for his family in a community afflicted by poverty, drugs and crime.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and timings/links

Opening/title sequence - 00:00-00:04:00

Prison visit - 00:05:00-00:12:00

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

Main image: Stan's comforting arm around Liam belies the actual situation: Stan threatening Liam and pressuring him into passing drugs to his mother in the prison visiting room. In the foreground we can see the subtle desperation in his mother's posture as she leans forward. This is the deeply dysfunctional family situation Liam has to cope with, the illusion of a caring family disguising the exploitative reality. Liam stares away, his facial expression hiding his hurt and his refusal to take part. His baseball cap and patchy facial hair show his youth and innocence.

Sequence 1: Like most of the cinematography, these

early scenes are shot on lightweight 16mm cameras and have the feeling of a documentary. There are lots of LS and MS as the boys sell cigarettes in the pub, showing their ease in their community and establishing the lower class environment. There is a brief use of POV to show the view of Saturn through the telescope and the children's wonder. The fact this is the first scene shows that Liam, despite his circumstances, literally and symbolically has the vision to see beyond his deprived environment.

Sequence 2: The camerawork becomes more intimate in these scenes, with extended use of CUs and POVs. Firstly, to emphasise the threat of Stan when he is prepping Liam to hand over the drugs. These shots evoke a sense of claustrophobia within the confines of the car, which also suggest how trapped inside his circumstances Liam is. In the conversation between Liam and his mother, the camera distance is also very intimate, so we can see the mixture of concern and anger on Liam's face and the combination of desperation and defeat on his mother's. Outside the prison, as Rab and Stan beat Liam, the camera feels further away and is handheld, like we are a bystander, partially complicit by not intervening.

Mise-en-scène

The film is shot entirely on location, an approach typical of social realist films. The use of documentary cameras from the 1960s onwards meant filmmakers could leave studios and shoot in the actual places their films are set. This adds authenticity to the narratives and shows environments often not featured in more mainstream UK cinema.

Sequence 1: A number of props, though part of the naturalistic setting, also have a symbolic element. The telescope represents the desire to see 'beyond' the council estate on which the children live; yet – along with the contraband cigarettes – it also symbolises Liam's ability to make money out of his circumstances. The police motorbike and helmet he steals are used to show Liam's disrespect for authority. Yet they also suggest a joyous, mischievous side to him that

reminds us he is a child, despite the pressures he faces in the following scene at the prison.

Sequence 2: The prop of the heroin that Liam secretes adds both suspense to the scene (will Liam get caught? Will he go through with the plan?) and becomes an emblem of his moral code. Not only does Liam not want to partake in the drug trade (at this point), he doesn't want to further incriminate his mother and possibly extend her sentence. This refusal then becomes the catalyst for Stan beating and throwing Liam out the house. The location is a real prison visiting room, and this, plus the natural lighting, makes the scene downbeat and unglamorous, forcing us to focus on the emotional meeting between mother and son.

Editing

In common with other social realist films, the editing techniques are mostly match-on-action or shot/reverse-shot for conversations. This creates a naturalistic tone and the feeling that what we are seeing is 'real', almost like a documentary.

Sequence 1: Most of these short introductory scenes use simple match-on-action to introduce Liam and his world. There is a juxtaposition between the opening scene where the children look through the telescope, which captures their wonder at seeing planets, and the more gritty reality of Liam and Pinball selling contraband cigarettes. The following scene with the motorcycle policeman shows another, cheekier side to Liam and also his lack of respect for authority.

Sequence 2: After a fairly light-hearted opening, this subsequent scene contrasts by showing us the grim situation that the adults in Liam's life have created. During the dialogue between Liam and Jean, conventional shot/reverse-shot is used, but this allows us to see the complex array of emotions being felt by both characters. Cutaways to Stan and his 'accident' with the coffee add a suspenseful time limit to their fraught conversation.

Sound

Music is kept to a minimum throughout the film, with most of the score simply complimenting the dramatic scenes and emotions of the characters. It is deliberately unobtrusive, again adding to the naturalistic feel typical of social realism. The Greenock dialect continues to stress the authenticity of what we are seeing; in the US, the film had subtitles as the accent is so thick. The swearing – at times very strong – is again in keeping with the film's setting, but created issues when it came

to awarding a certificate (see Political Context).

Sequence 1: Slightly at odds with the obvious enjoyment Liam takes in letting the local children use the telescope is his making them pay for the privilege – but this also marks Liam as an almost natural entrepreneur, able to make a quick buck out of any situation. His dialogue when he talks to the customers in the pub is relaxed and friendly, and his tone makes it seem like this scam is almost a form of community service. When he greets his friend after selling all his cigarettes he states 'I'm buzzing', again showing his natural flair for business. This emphasises the idea that in a different set of circumstances, Liam would be a successful entrepreneur, celebrated by mainstream society instead of demonised as a criminal.

Sequence 2: The hissed demands of Stan to Liam in the visiting room encapsulate what passes for Liam's home life: 'Give your fucking mum a kiss, you cunt!'. The mixture of what should be an affectionate urging with aggressive swearing shows the exploitative (and dangerous) nature of Liam's relationship with his parents. This establishes a clear context and motivation for everything he does later to try to escape this situation.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

Teenagers

Despite the title, most of the film takes place in the months leading up to Liam's 16th birthday. Technically still a child, he nonetheless takes responsibility for his family, willing to compromise his values to provide a stable home for his mother. In a different social milieu, he would be seen as a bright and motivated young entrepreneur: he is resilient, courageous and resourceful, and brings verve and imagination to his work. Unfortunately, due to his environment, these skills can only be used in criminal activities. Nonetheless, Liam still has a moral code: he initially refuses to deal drugs, and he never uses them himself. There is a purity to his single-minded pursuit of enough money to buy his mother the caravan. He seems a world away from more stereotypical representations of teenagers (especially those in American High School films): he isn't distracted by sex or hedonism, and has no time for 'petty' youth obsessions like sport, music or fashion. Though he is forced to engage in criminal behaviour (some murderous),

he is never portrayed as a violent delinquent like the characters in British 'urban' dramas like *Kidulthood* (2006). Instead, he determinedly takes on the role of 'breadwinner', entirely focused on trying to improve the situation for his family – despite his mother rejecting this assistance.

Adults

By contrast the adults in the film are entirely corrupted by their environment. His mother's boyfriend (Stan) and his grandfather (Rab) offer no kind of security or encouragement – in fact in the opening scenes they do the opposite: emotionally blackmailing Liam into passing drugs to his mother in prison. When Liam refuses, they beat him and throw him out of what passed for his home. When Liam shows initiative and steals from them they plot revenge. Liam's mother acts more like a helpless child than parent, emotionally fragile enough to return to Stan despite Liam's best efforts to offer her an escape. There are no adult role models in the film – though his sister Chantelle is more sympathetically portrayed as someone who has managed to escape the cycle of poverty, crime and drugs.

UK

The film offers a bleak and despairing view of early 21st-century British life. The community - Inverclyde in Scotland – is portrayed as one riven by poverty, unemployment and addiction. The prosperous ship-building industry has fallen into decline (denoted by the wreckage of cranes), the working class abandoned by government. Liam has no possible escape route in education (his family cackle with derisive laughter when Jean asks how his schoolwork is going) or gainful employment. The only legal job is to work for low pay and limited prospects in a call centre like his sister, but this is not enough for Liam to provide effectively for his family. This representation of the UK is in common with many 'social realist' films which challenge the more 'tourist-friendly' portrayals of modern Britain in romantic comedies such as *Notting Hill* (1999) and *Love Actually* (2003) which tend to focus on upper middle class lifestyles.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual Style, Influences, Auteur, Motifs)

In order to achieve a high level of naturalism in his films, Ken Loach will often use non-professional actors drawn from the communities that he is portraying. Martin Compson, the actor who plays Liam, was found during auditions at the local school, and his mother is played by a drugs rehab counsellor.

This reduces the artifice of cinema by eliminating self-conscious acting (and filming) technique. Though Loach works closely with his screenwriters (Paul Laverty is a regular collaborator) and sticks closely to the script when shooting scenes, he adopts a more improvisational approach to the actual filming, eschewing storyboards and instead allowing the actors to move freely and ad-lib. Compson commented that 'wherever I stood, that's where he filmed'. Despite the often bleak subject matter, Loach's films have a sense of energy (often angry) and excitement – this is created by filming scenes in sequence, and 'drip-feeding' the script to actors one page at a time to create spontaneous performances.

Loach is associated with left-wing political filmmaking, but his films – though often motivated by anger and frustration with political situations – are rarely simple polemics. Instead, he is renowned as a 'humanist' director, who aims to encourage audiences to empathise with characters who are often demonised by mainstream media. *Sweet Sixteen* could be seen as a critique of capitalism, the failure of the education and prison systems, of the impact of mass unemployment on working class communities. However, the focus is on the complex lives and struggles of the characters: the 'real people' behind the headlines – and the way social issues impact on their decisions. This is especially evident in *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) which explores the catastrophic effects of the Conservative government's 'austerity' measures.

Despite the naturalistic setting and almost documentary style of shooting, there are a number of resonant motifs throughout the film. The caravan is not only a goal for Liam to achieve, it comes to symbolise the home (security and stability) he lacks. It is also indicative of the limits of his 'dreams' - a small caravan wouldn't be considered by most people to be an aspirational abode. The telescope featured at the very start of the film is also symbolic of Liam's 'vision'. He thrills at looking at Saturn, showing his need to look beyond the deprived immediacy of his environment. However, this ability to see beyond Greenock is destroyed when Stan and Rab smash the telescope. Another motif is the river and sea: though they seem to represent freedom and dreams, the sea and the River Clyde are still controlled, invisibly, by the moon, in the way that all the characters are controlled by socio-political influences beyond their control.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Social

The film offers a bleak window into the life of many young people in the UK. At the time of the film's making, there were 11,000 children in care, and over 100,000 documented as living with domestic violence. 75% of children in care in Scotland do not leave school with any qualifications, and only 1% attend university – severely limiting their life choices. The Inverclyde community that is the film's setting is one that was decimated by the end of traditional industries in the UK during the 'Thatcher' years of the 1980s. Since 1981 over 6,000 people lost their jobs in the shipbuilding industry. Though there are some jobs available in call-centres (where Chantelle works), these are usually short-term contracts with little opportunity for career progression. It is notable that there are no middle class characters in the film, and it also lacks the 'inspirational' roles of teachers, sympathetic police or social workers that have featured in other Loach films. This creates the impression that Liam is entirely alone in the world, his admirable self-sufficiency is a necessity for survival.

Political

Sweet Sixteen was controversially awarded an 18 certificate by the BBFC, for bad language. Loach and Lavery attacked the decision in the press, accusing the BBFC of 'class censorship' and of pandering to middle class prejudices. Loach pointed out that the film accurately reflects the dialect of the community where it is set, and that it was ludicrous that the age group the film is about would be banned from seeing it. The BBFC defended its decision, citing their 1999 public consultation where 70% of those polled said that the strongest language (especially aggressive and repeated use of the word 'cunt') should be limited. The local council of Inverclyde, the location for the film, used their cinema licensing powers to overturn the BBFC's decision and awarded the film a 15 certificate. The controversy re-ignited debates about how films are classified and what material is deemed 'offensive'. Loach said it highlighted a problem in British culture where 'language is seen as corrupting, but violence is not'.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Ideology and Narrative - STARTING POINTS

Ideology: humanist vs political filmmaking

Ken Loach is known around the world as the prime

exponent of British 'social realist' cinema. This is a genre/movement that aims to show the ordinary lives of marginalised people, or those often not portrayed in mainstream (middle class) media. Many consider him a political filmmaker who uses his characters to voice Marxist opinions about the way the working or underclass are victimised by the very social systems that are supposed to help them. Others consider him a 'humanist' director, whose main concern is to authentically portray people's lives in a way that challenges stereotypes. Though characters in films like *Bread and Roses* (2000), *Land and Freedom* (1995) and *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) give clear political speeches, in *Sweet Sixteen* both Loach and his screenwriter Paul Laverty aimed to create something more intimate. This was partially in response to other UK 'youth' films of the late 1990s that reinforced tabloid stereotypes of teenagers as delinquent thugs. It could be argued that the choice to portray characters' lives in a sympathetic way is itself a political decision and one that can have political consequences: his early TV drama *Cathy Come Home* (1966) prompted a change in homelessness legislation, and *I, Daniel Blake* opened debate across the political spectrum about the current government's cuts to benefits.

Ideology-morality

Despite Liam's actions, which escalate from selling knock-off cigarettes to implied murder, the film encourages empathy rather than moral judgement. This links to the key left wing belief that crime is the result of poverty and lack of opportunity rather than moral evil. Liam initially refuses to deal drugs – most obvious in Sequence 2 – but his desire to help his family conflicts with his ethical code. Throughout his journey, it isn't the temptation of money as goal in itself that motivates him to more serious crime, but the end result of a more stable home environment for his mother and sister. First, his willingness to murder a rival as part of a gang initiation, is purely because this is the only way he can earn enough to buy his mother the caravan. Secondly, his acceptance of the task of 'taking care' of Pinball is for the reward of the luxury flat. The message is that crime, even murder, is *contingent* rather than a result of personal weakness or immorality.

Narrative - 'Coming of Age'

Sweet Sixteen follows the typical narrative structure of a 'coming of age' drama, especially those set in a tough, deprived urban environment. There are similarities in the narrative structure of films as

diverse as *City of God* (2002), *Fish Tank* (2009) and *Girlhood* (2014). They usually chart the development from adolescence to adulthood. At the start, childhood has already been left behind and the heroes understand that the world is not a safe and stable place – this is usually exemplified by a single event that illustrates their lack of control (e.g. Stan and Rab beating then throwing Liam out). Next there comes an opportunity that offers the hero some kind of escape from this situation (Liam's decision to sell drugs and buy the caravan). There then follows a series of challenges or conflicts that – whether the hero is successful or not – show them that they cannot rely on friends, family or allies, and that they are individually responsible (Pinball burning

the caravan, Liam's mother returning to Stan). This creates the hero's 'individuation'. The hero is no longer an innocent, the world is still an inhospitable place; but, because of the challenges they have faced, they now have the skills and strength to live within it. *Sweet Sixteen* doesn't entirely conform to this, as the final scenes feel more bleak than triumphant. Liam may have achieved the tangible goals he earlier declared, but he has failed in saving his family, and lost (perhaps killed?) his best friend in the process. As he begins his official adulthood, the audience is left unsure as to what his future may be.