

Ken loach's articulation of social concerns in kes essay



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Ken Loach's 1969 masterpiece *Kes* is rich in social narratives. The 1960s was a decade of cultural and political upheaval in Europe and America. Some of these changes were captured in the film within the structures of narrative story telling. The late 1960s witnessed an end of an era in British economics, for it marked a turning point (arguably a turn for the worse) in British history. From that point onwards Britain, following suit American economic policy, had opened up its economy for global investiture. What is now called the global neo-liberal regime was adopted then and continues till date. It is undoubtedly a momentous occasion for not just the British economy but for British politics, culture and social life as well. In many ways the old bastion of solidarity and nationalism was coming to an end. The coal mining communities that are portrayed in *Kes* were perhaps that of the last generation of miners. In a span of a decade the complexion of British industry would change from manufacturing-based to that of finance. The heart-beat of British economy in 1969 was industrial towns of North in which the film is set. In a matter of a few years, London would become the nerve-centre of British economy with its transformation into a global financial hub. A central social theme in *Kes* is that of alienation. It is about how an individual feels cut off from emotional or moral support even when he has relatives and social institutions to call upon. Billy Casper signifies that individual, whose troubled life is a metaphor for a whole generation of the British working class. The film is successful because Loach manages to invoke a strong representation of this collective pathos through the character of Casper. The author of the novel upon which the movie is based, Barry Hines, was instrumental toward this end, for his very visual style

helped Loach. Together the two artists were able to project the powerful central image of Kasper's Kestrel – “ that lowest of the hawks – its an eagle for an emperor and a kestrel for a knave – is a wonderful image for the boy's life and prospects. This central image not only helps hold the whole piece together but stays in people's minds”. (Macnab, 1999) To boot it is socially relevant and resonant even today. For example, Loach never allows us to forget “ the social and economic circumstances which underpin Billy's existence. He lives on a rough estate and looks destined to end up working in the mines. Billy's prospects wouldn't be any better today.” (Macnab, 1999)

To fully comprehend the director's choice of social themes, we have to look at the original novel from which the film is adapted. In Barry Hines' *A Kestrel For A Knave*, the coal mining communities in and around Yorkshire were documented very well. Hines details how poverty and desperation force people of the region to take up jobs as miners. But coal mining is a very risky enterprise with high rates of mortality and disability among the workers. Though the medium of film or the narrative constraints of *Kes* do not allow for showing these social contexts, Loach tries to throw light on “ class militancy against the brutal new conditions of low pay contingent service work, but characteristically as much on the personal costs and pain of that struggle.” (Forsyth, 2003)

When we look at Ken Loach's films since *Kes*, we find direct and pronounced engagement with the neo-liberal theme. In this sense, *Kes* can be grouped together with these later films although it preceded the actual implementation of neoliberal policies. Loach's films since the 1990s contain

bold pronouncements against the evils of such economic policies. The films of this period have

“repeatedly come back to the ravages of and struggles against the ruling class offensive known as neo-liberalism. The attack on working people's living standards, wages and unions, the relentless erosion of the social, health and educational provisions of the so-called welfare state, the polarization of rich and poor, the familiar mantras of privatization, deregulation, free market magic are all too well known... it is now generalized as blatantly imperialist globalization, borne by the World Bank, the IMF and American military might.” (Forsyth, 2003)

Seen in this light, *Kes* is a precursor, an eerie harbinger, for some of these negative consequences of globalization. For, *Kes* deals with issues of increasing poverty, delinquency, public schooling standards, individual alienation, decline of the institution of family, rampant commercialization, etc. For its treatment of these neoliberal themes, *Kes* is a critique of this economic system, even if it is attributed retrospectively.

In terms of technique one could see refreshing cinematography in *Kes*. Considering that the 60's gave birth to the Nouvelle Vague (of the French New Wave) of cinema, one could see its influence in Loach's approach and style. In a marked deviation from films of an early era, the visual capabilities of the medium are explored to the full. Dialogue is used minimally, while ambient sound is used as a signifier of feeling, emotion or an event. Despite the visual beauty of the film, that was not how Ken Loach conceived it to be. Consistent with the dark social themes in the film Loach wanted it picturized

in black and white. But citing commercial appeal of black and white in the late 1960s Loach had to abandon this plan. It might have been a blessing in disguise, for the beautiful country landscapes of the film's setting add irony to the personal outcomes in the plot. The final tragedy of the death of the Kestrel is made more poignant by all the beautiful visualization of the bird and its habitat that had preceded it.

Finally, the social concerns raised by Kes are relevant even today. This is learnt from the fact that the film's echoes are evident in numerous subsequent British films, including Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*, Shane Meadows' *A Room For Romeo Brass* and Robert Bangura's *The Girl With Brains In Her Feet*. All these works evoke "working-class childhoods in a lyrical but unsentimental way which would have been unthinkable without Loach's example." ("Touching Take on a," 2009) Loach's films in general and Kes in particular have powerfully addressed

"the politics and betrayals of unions, strikes and revolutions, the painful daily struggles with family, sexuality, race, housing, poverty, drugs and alcohol, the contradictions and inhumanity of the welfare state, the solidarity and oppression of the workplace; every aspect of working class life interests his humane realism. Loach's is a cinema of emotion and analysis, sometimes didactic, always partisan. But victories are few and far between, triumphs often solely of working class spirit against overwhelming odds." (Vallely, 2002)

References

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