

Cultural Studies: We Are the Lambeth Boys

We Are the Lambeth Boys (Reisz, 1959) is part of the British 'Free Cinema' movement. It follows the daily activities of members of the youth club in the late 1950's. It is an observational documentary, but it shows aspects of the expository mode. The characteristics of the expository documentaries are that they often use voiceover and rhetorical techniques to show actuality. The genre of this text is social realistic. According to Susan Hayward:

The primary characteristic of these film-makers was their belief in the importance of everyday life of the people. They were committed to representing working-class life as it was lived, not as it was imagined. In their images nothing is forced, giving an authenticity that makes their films close in spirit to the humanism (2000, p.144).

My opinion is that it tries to be realistic but there are certain biases. For example, scenes were edited out, where they were not natural, characters were always in a good mood and the Windrush generation is missing from the screen.

Characters in the film are all affected by the media; they have American influences in almost every aspect of their lives. We can see in the mise-en-scene the fashion, the new style, money, smoking and the world. In the club the music and the dance styles are American. Their facial expression is influenced by Marlon Brando. Later, in the school girls are sewing and they are drawing pictures of their idols. Boys are drawing pirates and warriors. They are talking about gangs and crime in the library. The way they talk, their hair style and their clothes are all American style. This new ideology clashes with the traditional English ideology, but the 'Lambeth Boys attempted to deliver a positive portrait of the lives of ordinary teenagers, far from the

usual violent 'Teddy Boy' stereotype' (Dupin, 2003-12). This film is trying to avoid this conflict as much as possible in order to achieve a smooth hegemony. The following part helps to adapt this new ideology of these characters to the wider society, showing that they all study or work hard and they are all still very useful members of the working class. Some are going to school, some are singing in the choir and others are at work. We can still hear the hymn; it is used as a sound bridge. The hymn is used as a framing narrative which hints at both analepsis and prolepsis. After school they need to work. There is a low angle shot of the teacher and a high angle shot of the mass of schoolboys. It may represent the upper class and the working class. Some are working in a food factory and some in an office. Janet is a dressmaker and Woody is a butcher. Everyone is working. Bob is a postman. He has an internal dialogue during work. He is thinking about the evening. This part has poetic elements as well. Boys want to get married. Girls want the same. They are going to school, after that they are working and finally they are getting married. This is their lifecycle and it is normal for them. However John Hill has argued that:

New Wave films of 1956-63 by no means reveal a progressive image of the society in that period. Although new themes are introduced to the cinema screens, they are presented in such a way as to reveal an intensely traditional and conservative bias, class barriers and marital obligations (Hill cited in Hayward, 1997, p.82).

I think this is a good perspective, but we need to consider that in these times Britain was still very traditional, so when these documentaries were produced, society was not yet ready to accept more radical ideologies. The class barriers were still very stable. There were the strict and rigid rules on one side and the turbulent freedom on the other which created a tension between authority and working class. However there was a clash between the old and new ideologies. The

blurring of the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture is characteristic for this time. These films are the gate from 'old' to 'new' and they are trying to avoid a strong clash between the classical and modern view.

Once a year, on a summer afternoon boys and girls go to the public school called Mill Hill to play cricket and to swim in the open air pool. They are the upper class for one day and they enjoy that. Boys wear cricket whites and play cricket. They are at the centre of everything. It is all about rules. They represent authority. The players are the upper class and the others are sitting at the end of the field. They are wearing every day clothes. They do not take part in the game. They are free and relaxed. They symbolize the marginalized. In the evening they go home. They whistle and sing on the lorry so they can be part of the busy and exciting West End. They are trying to draw the attention of the people on the street. We can see point-of-view shots from the lorry. These types of shots encourage identification with the Lambeth Boys. A medium angle shot toward the lorry shows how others could see them. The low angle shots are their point-of-view of Victorian buildings and statues. The Victorian buildings symbolize authority. The high angle shots show the youths who represent or suggest freedom.

References

Christophe Dupin (2003-12) *Screenonline: We Are the Lambeth Boys*. (Online) Available at:
<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/439103/index.html> (Accessed: 10 October 2012).

Hayward, S. (2000) 'Free British Cinema', in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd edition,
London: Routledge, p.144.

Street, S. (1997) 'The New Wave and mainstream cinema', in *British national cinema*. London
and New York: Routledge, p.82.

We Are the Lambeth Boys. (1959) Directed by Karel Reisz [Film] UK: Graphic Films.

www.holyglobe.com