What can a poor boy do?
Representations of child poverty in British cinema, 1969-2013

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Despite the looming calamity of Brexit, the UK remains the fifth or sixth largest economy in the world. For seventy years, it has been an established welfare state, which claims to ensure a decent standard of living for even its most disadvantaged inhabitants. Yet child poverty has remained a stubborn fact of life in modern Britain.

Official government statistics claim that 2.3 million children are currently living in poverty in the UK, although other estimates are much higher. The Child Poverty Action Group puts the total at 3.7 million, seemingly based on the same government figures. Unicef's figure is roughly the same; while the campaigning group End Child Poverty puts it at four million – that is, one in three UK children.

Of course, child poverty is not a new phenomenon. Throughout the nineteenth century, successive governments attempted to address the problem by implementing the Poor Law, which provided limited (albeit often punitive) state relief; while philanthropists set out to 'rescue' poor children from environmental degradation and parental depravity. Yet by the early years of the twentieth century, the persistence of child poverty was undeniable – and indeed well documented by social researchers such as Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree. Such accounts typically evoked fears about the dangers posed by large numbers of poor children – especially in cities – and sought to distinguish between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.

Following the establishment of the British welfare state, there were limited attempts to address the problem, although it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that real progress began to be made. However, the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 saw a complete reversal: the numbers of children living in poverty tripled over the 1980s. By the end of the 1990s, children in Britain were some of the poorest in Europe and the 'developed' world. Despite the New Labour government's commitment to eradicate child poverty within twenty years, figures dropped only slightly during the 2000s, and have since levelled off.

Of course, distinctions should be made here between relative and absolute poverty. Poverty means something very different in an affluent country like the UK as compared with much poorer countries. Yet the UK regularly scores very highly on international comparisons of inequality, and the differential between the rich and the poor (known as the Gini coefficient) has continued to rise after taking massive upward leaps in the 1980s and 1990s. Predictably, child poverty is more prevalent among lone-parent families, among certain ethnic minorities, and where parents have disabilities; and while it is most obviously associated with unemployment (and under-employment), current figures are now showing a rise in child poverty in households with working parents too.

Despite the efforts of campaigners and social reformers, the experiences and perspectives of poor children have largely been 'hidden from history', and from contemporary public debate. Social class is an issue that the British people will talk about, directly and indirectly, all the time. Yet class is often considered primarily in cultural rather than material terms, as a matter of individual taste and morality, rather than poverty or deprivation. As critics like Owen Jones and Imogen Tyler have argued, there is a widespread form of 'class disgust' in the contemporary media, which focuses particularly on the figure of the 'chav'. Yet 'chavs' are often represented as relatively affluent: they have money, but they spend it on the wrong things – on designer clothing, on drink and junk food – rather than on the consumer goods favoured by the refined middle classes. From this perspective, class is not a matter of inequality, but of lifestyle choice.

For all the invective directed against this apparently undeserving underclass, it is still rare to find media representations of real material poverty, and especially of child poverty. The three or four million children who live in poverty in the UK regularly go to bed hungry. They lack adequate clothing, and their homes are poorly maintained and heated. They cannot follow the same consumer fashions, or participate in the same leisure activities, as their peers. They do not go on holidays or school trips. They are more likely to be bullied, and to play truant or be excluded from school. The list goes on… yet these are lives we rarely witness on screen.

In this essay, I analyse and compare representations of child poverty in four British films, made across a period of almost six decades: *Kes* (dir. Ken Loach, 1969); *Ratcatcher* (Lynne Ramsay, 1999); *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000); and *The Selfish Giant* (Clio Barnard, 2013). While these films are spread apart in time, two of them also address intervening decades: *Ratcatcher* is set in the mid-1970s, and *Billy Elliot* in the mid-1980s. All of them feature boys as central characters: I'll be looking at girls, from a slightly older age group and with a rather different focus, in a later essay.

Despite their many differences, there are a great many echoes and similarities across these four films, which will emerge in more detail as I take each of them in turn. While they are by no means the only films of the period to portray the lives of poor or working-class children, each of them deals directly with material poverty as a central theme. They focus on the *facts* of poverty – for example, in terms of the daily struggle to find money to buy food or to keep warm, the lack of basic comfort and hygiene, and the constant threat of financial collapse. They also focus on what follows from that: the characters' sense of exclusion from their peer groups and from institutions like schools, the loss of dignity and self-esteem, and the limited opportunities and horizons that are available to them. And in different ways, each of these films focuses on the possibility of an *escape* from poverty, however temporary or illusory it may be.

Of course, these films focus particularly on the worlds of *children*: to a greater or lesser extent, they purport to show the world through the eyes of the child. They show children doing 'child-like' things that are different from the things that adults generally do. They show how children are ignored, belittled and misunderstood by adults; and how, in turn, children often fail to understand aspects of the lives of adults. Each of them addresses the problem of 'coming of age', of transitioning

towards (or at least coming to terms with) a different, 'adult' world. In representing childhood in particular ways, they also inevitably represent, define and construct adulthood as well.

Kes

Released in 1969, *Kes* has been widely regarded as a classic of British cinema. Among other accolades, it came seventh in the British Film Institute's list of the top ten British films. Its director, Ken Loach, and producer, Tony Garnett, are well-known for their socialist politics. Both had a background in television, and specifically in the more socially realist dramas of the BBC's *Wednesday Play* slot; and Loach in particular has of course gone on to enjoy great success (and numerous international awards) as a committed, left-wing director.

Kes was their second feature film. It initially had only a limited release, and (as William Stephenson has documented) it took a concerted campaign before it was able to reach a wider audience. It failed to gain traction in the US, perhaps largely because of the northern English accents (and despite some partial over-dubbing, which remains on the DVD version). The film is based on the novel *Kestrel for a Knave* by Barry Hines, published the previous year; and the book and the film have been a staple of secondary school English courses ever since.

Briefly, *Kes* tells the story of Billy Casper, a boy in his last year of school in a mining town near Barnsley in Yorkshire. Small for his fifteen years, Billy is bullied by his older half-brother, Jud, and by his schoolmates. He has difficulty paying attention in school, and is picked upon by his teachers. Billy's mother is a single parent, who despairs of Billy's future prospects: Billy himself is insistent that he will not be working 'down the pit', but he seems to have little other hope. However, Billy occasionally escapes to the surrounding countryside, and early one morning he takes a kestrel from a nest on a farm. In attempting to find out about falconry, he goes to the local library; but when he is required to produce adult authorisation, he steals a book on the subject from a secondhand bookshop. Despite Jud's claim that he cannot read or write, Billy uses the book to teach himself to train the kestrel, christened 'Kes'. He is also praised by his English teacher, Mr. Farthing, for delivering an impromptu talk in class about training Kes.

The story moves towards its climax as Jud leaves money and instructions for Billy to place a bet on two horses. After being told by another gambler that the horses are unlikely to win, Billy spends the money on fish and chips and intends to purchase meat for Kes. However, the horses do win, and when Jud finds out, he is enraged, and takes revenge by killing Kes. Grief-stricken, Billy retrieves the bird's broken body from the waste bin and then buries it on the hillside overlooking the field where he had been training her.

Billy's life is clearly represented as one of poverty. He has to work delivering newspapers in the early morning, his clothes are torn and shabby, and he doesn't have the right sports kit for school. His house is dirty, and he has to sleep in the same bed as his brother. Although Jud is earning money, he is also dependent on gambling to make extra cash; and Billy's mother frequently leaves him to feed and

look after himself. Although Billy claims that he has given up 'nicking' things, we later see him steal milk from a milk cart. Billy is victimized by the other, bigger boys, and is clearly failing at school. His brother repeatedly says that Billy is unable to read and write, while his mother writes him off as 'a hopeless case'.

The film persistently aligns us with Billy, both through the editing and the narrative. We see things that only Billy can see – for example, in one scene we 'read' a comic book with him – and point-of-view shots invite us to see the world through his eyes – as in the sequences where he is training Kes. There are very few scenes where Billy is not present. We generally learn of events (such as the outcome of Jud's horse race) at the same time as Billy does, and we frequently share narrative information with him that the other characters do not. We are encouraged to see Billy as the victim of unfair treatment, but also as more intelligent (at least in a non-academic sense) than any of the adults gives him credit for.

To some extent, *Kes* can be aligned with the social realist tradition in British cinema, dating back to the late 1950s – the tradition of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. The northern, working-class setting; the use of several amateur actors, including David Bradley, who plays Billy; the observational, documentary-style cinematography (by former documentary cameraman Chris Menges); the natural lighting and settings; and the focus on mundane, everyday details are all characteristic of this 'kitchen sink' style. At times, the documentary elements are very much to the fore – especially in one sequence where Jud and Billy's mother go for a Saturday night outing to a local pub, and in the briefer scenes of the pit.

Yet *Kes* has elements of other genres as well. One extended sequence features a school football match, in which Billy is victimized by a self-important, sadistic PE teacher. The match is played for laughs, with brass band theme music reminiscent of TV football programmes, ironic captions showing the scores, and a bravura performance by Bryan Glover as the obnoxious, vain teacher – although it turns nasty later on, when Billy is ritually humiliated in the changing rooms. Likewise, the scenes featuring the school's headteacher – his disciplinarian address to a school assembly, and a subsequent monologue in which he bemoans the failings of the younger generation – also come close to comic caricature. While the younger English teacher, Mr. Farthing, presents a more humane and caring face, the film's critique of the school system seems almost parodic.

More significantly, the film has elements of sentimental melodrama, which are partly cued by the music. The scenes in which Billy escapes from the town into the countryside, and is seen running through the woods, are accompanied by lyrical folk-like music, featuring harps, flutes and strings. Sequences of the flying kestrel are frequently accompanied by a theme on the flute, sometimes played solo. The physical spaces of the film establish a straightforward opposition between industrial and rural (or indeed pastoral) settings. And it is the rural – and more specifically, the symbol of the kestrel itself – that represents the possibility of freedom and escape, not only from the present, but also from the future that is marked out for Billy.

Indeed, the central narrative is clearly posed in these terms. Right at the start, Billy announces 'I'm not gonna work down the pit', and the recurring question (posed at

various points by his family and his teachers, and most directly in a sequence where he attends an interview with a careers adviser) is whether he has any alternative. In a discussion with Mr. Farthing, Billy presents himself as a victim of injustice: he claims that the teachers are 'not bothered about us', and that he doesn't have 'much choice' about work. And yet, as he points out, the fact that he doesn't like school doesn't necessarily mean that he's going to like work.

However, Billy's difficulties – and his options for escape – are partly specific to him as an *individual*. It's interesting in this respect to consider the theatrical trailer, whose American voice-over suggests that it was intended specifically for the US audience (or at least for industry executives). 'This is Billy Casper,' it intones over a montage of clips. 'Billy Casper cheats, steals, lies, fights. Because, well, because he has to. You see, if you're not like the others, if you simply don't belong, then you have to manage alone…' Billy manages alone, the commentary goes on, but with the help of a 'special friend', Kes, who doesn't mind that Billy is 'different', and with whom he can share his 'secret'.

On this account, Billy is a misfit, a lone individual rather than a representative of a class. While I doubt that it would have been acceptable to Ken Loach, this is an interpretation that the film certainly permits: by isolating Billy from his peers, by representing him (in his brother's words) as 'a weedy little twat', and by seeing his potential escape (via Kes) in individualistic terms, the film sanctions a psychological, as distinct from a more political, analysis. Likewise, the film's rather overdrawn critique of the school system leads to an individualistic, autodidactic solution. With the help of his stolen book, Billy teaches himself to train the kestrel, and acquires a kind of unofficial expertise. Mr. Farthing, the liberal teacher, comes onto the scene somewhat late in the day to offer him support. He is visibly impressed both by Billy's technical knowledge and by his lyrical account of the experience; but he is not in any way responsible for Billy's success. Indeed, in these scenes, it is Billy who is teaching his teacher, rather than the other way about. Escape might be possible, but it is inevitably an isolated, individual form of escape: there seems to be little prospect of change within the formal education system itself.

Loach has always been keen to present his work as a manifestation of class politics. He sees himself as taking the working-class 'side', and presenting the 'value and dignity' of working-class people; and he is particularly concerned with 'people's attempts to be articulate or to come to some understanding of their situation; their attempts to develop a class consciousness'. The moving scene in which Billy speaks to the whole class at length, capturing their attention, is the most obvious example of this here. Yet while this kind of political analysis is potentially apparent in *Kes*, it is somewhat undermined by the drift towards pathos – especially at the very end, where there is little option but to take pity on poor little Billy as he mourns the loss of his only friend.

Billy Elliot

The next film I want to consider breaks slightly with the chronological sequence, yet Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot* contains so many echoes of *Kes* that it really needs to be read alongside it. Like Loach's film, it is about a young boy who seeks to escape from

the constraints of his poor, working-class upbringing – in this case, in order to develop a talent for dance. Like his namesake, Billy Elliot has a missing parent (in this case, his mother), and is routinely belittled by an older brother. Both Billies reject the traditionally masculine activities (football, boxing) they are encouraged to pursue, as well as the potential future that is laid out for them in working down the coal mine. Instead, both find a passion that they struggle to develop in secret. Some scenes seem like direct echoes, especially the sequences where the boys steal a book in order to learn more about their new-found interest; and there is a key moment in both films where each of them is able to articulate in a more public setting how it feels to engage in their passion.

Nevertheless, the outcomes of their two stories are very different: unlike Billy Casper, Billy Elliot is supported by a charismatic teacher, and eventually by his family and local community; and where *Kes* ends in tragedy, *Billy Elliot* ends in triumph. They are also very different kinds of films: *Kes* is a naturalistic drama, produced by a small UK independent company, while *Billy Elliot* is a high-budget entertainment, produced by Universal Studios and clearly targeted at a large global audience. Where *Kes* initially struggled to achieve widespread distribution, *Billy Elliot* gained Oscar nominations and BAFTA awards, and has made over $100 million at the box office. As I intend to show, the politics of these two films are also quite different – even if both of them ultimately focus on an individualistic form of escape.

Released in 2000, *Billy Elliot* is set against the backdrop of the miners' strike in the north of England in the mid-1980s. Billy lives in a small mining village near Durham with his widowed father, Jackie, and older brother, Tony, who are both coal miners out on strike; and also his maternal grandmother, who has dementia, and once aspired to be a professional dancer. Billy's father sends him to the gym to learn boxing, but Billy dislikes the sport. By chance, he finds and eventually joins a ballet class that is using the gym. He tries to keep this secret from his father, concerned that he will be seen as a 'poof'; but when Jackie finds out, he forbids Billy from attending. However, Billy secretly continues lessons with his dance teacher, Mrs. Wilkinson.

Mrs. Wilkinson believes Billy is talented enough to study at the Royal Ballet School in London, but due to Tony's arrest during a fight between police and striking miners, Billy misses the audition. When she tells Jackie and Tony about this, they are outraged at the prospect of Billy becoming a professional ballet dancer – not least because they think he will be considered to be gay. Meanwhile, Billy has a friend, Michael, who is gradually revealed to be gay, although Billy's own sexuality remains somewhat ambiguous.

Later, Jackie catches Billy dancing in the gym and realises that his son is truly talented; he resolves to do whatever it takes to help Billy attain his dream. Mrs. Wilkinson tries to persuade Jackie to let her pay for the audition, but he refuses. He attempts to cross the picket line and return to work in order to pay for the trip to London, but eventually his fellow miners and the local community raise the money, while Jackie pawns Billy's mother's jewellery. At the audition, Billy is very nervous, and punches another boy in frustration, fearing that he has not performed well enough. He is sternly rebuked by the examiners, but when asked what it feels like when he is dancing, he describes it as being 'like a fire in my body… I fly like a bird…

it's like electricity'. Seemingly rejected, Billy returns home with his father; but some time later, the Royal Ballet School sends him a letter telling him he has been accepted, and he leaves home to attend. In the final scenes, fourteen years later, Billy takes the stage at Covent Garden to perform the Swan in Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*, as Jackie, Tony and Michael watch from the audience.

Like Billy Casper, Billy Elliot is clearly identified, not just as poor and working class, but also as oppressed: he is the main carer for his grandmother, he is bullied and verbally abused by his brother, and he lives in fear of his father's vicious anger. Although he is less obviously a misfit, this Billy also fails at traditional masculine sports. His true passions and talents are vilified and misunderstood. Billy has lost his mother, and throughout the film her presence is invoked both directly and indirectly. Thus, in one scene, she appears as a vision, upbraiding Billy for drinking milk out of the bottle rather than using a glass; while Billy's love of music is implicitly linked to his mother, and when Jackie smashes up the family piano to use as firewood at Christmas, it's as though her memory is being destroyed ('do you think she'll mind?' Billy asks). We are encouraged to pity Billy; and the film rarely forgoes opportunities to pull at the viewer's heart-strings.

Throughout the film, Billy's father and brother are frequently seen on the picket line, and in pitched battles with the police. The heavy police presence in the village is constantly made apparent: police (sometimes in riot gear) appear in the background whenever Billy is shown walking through the village, although this is rarely remarked upon. On one level, it's obvious where the film is seeking to direct our sympathies. Tony in particular is a victim of police brutality, although he is not entirely innocent: at one point, he sets out to sabotage the strike-breakers' vehicle, although his father prevents him. Tom, Mrs. Wilkinson's husband, is highly critical of the strike, yet he is clearly presented as an unsympathetic, unattractive character (an alcoholic and an unfaithful husband). Even so, the motivations for the strike remain unexplained, and it isn't clear whether we are expected to see it as justified.

Nevertheless, the miners' strike is more than simply a backdrop to the story of Billy's discovery of his creative talents. In fact, there are striking parallels – reinforced by the editing – between the two narratives. Thus, Billy's father goes back to work as a strike-breaker explicitly in order to 'give the boy a chance' and earn some money for him to attend the audition; as he announces to his fellow workers that Billy has been accepted by the Royal Ballet School, they inform him that the strike has collapsed; and the shots of Billy leaving for London are inter-cut with shots of the miners being shut in the cage and descending into the pit as they return to work. The gradual defeat of the miners' strike is also a defeat of traditional masculinity. Jackie and Tony are seen confronting a strike-breaker in the conventionally female location of the supermarket; and Jackie is mocked on his return to work with the words 'who's a big man now?'

As Billy's individual escape attempt succeeds, so the struggles of organised labour are defeated: Billy's rise is the miners' fall. It is as if the film's two narrative arcs are inversely related to each other. The individualistic story of salvation through art seems positively to require, not just escape, but the negation of collective social movements. Thus, when Billy and his father travel to London, we learn that Jackie has never been to the capital city; and when Billy is asked by another boy at the

audition about Durham cathedral (near where he lives), it emerges that he has never been there. The working class child can only succeed if he escapes from his origins; and in the process, those origins must be defined as merely a constraint.

Like falconry for Billy Casper, dance is Billy Elliot's means of escape; and some of the most remarkable dance sequences in the film show him chafing against the frustrations imposed by the small mining village – in one scene, literally crashing into a corrugated iron barricade across the street. Billy is clearly marked from the outset as a 'natural' dancer: even when he tries to carry on the masculine family tradition of boxing, he is effectively dancing in the ring. He has to overcome the homophobic prejudices of his father and his older brother, and their resistance to the 'middle-class' Mrs. Wilkinson, who recognises Billy's potential. Yet Billy's father and brother gradually learn to set aside their prejudices as the story proceeds – and thereby win the viewer's sympathy. The community likewise rallies round Billy, in an almost magical reversal (there appears to be no resentment of Billy's aspirations, despite the deprivation the striking miners are enduring).

As I have argued elsewhere, *Billy Elliot*'s view of salvation through creativity makes it in many respects a paradigmatic New Labour movie. It reflects the view of culture as a means of overcoming 'social exclusion' (a euphemism for poverty) that was strongly propounded in government policy at the time, especially by the Culture Minister, Chris Smith. As in much of New Labour policy, class struggle is seen as an irrelevant relic of the past: inequality, it seems, will somehow disappear in the magic fairy dust of culture and creativity. The music that plays over the final credits begins with a sickly power ballad sung by the former Boyzone star Stephen Gately: 'you can choose what to be', the lyrics run, and if you believe, 'nothing can stand in your way'. It is not the anthem 'Things Can Only Get Better' that was played through Tony Blair's victory celebrations in 1997, but it might as well have been.

Many critics have found a more progressive dimension in the film's treatment of sexuality. The traditionally masculine miners Jackie and Tony – and seemingly, the rest of the community – gradually overcome their homophobic prejudices, in a manner reminiscent of the more recent feel-good movie *Pride* (2014), in which miners and gay activists unite during the strike. Yet in other respects, the message seems more ambivalent. The film constantly insists that male dancers are not necessarily gay, not least by referring to (presumably) heterosexual dancers such as Wayne Sleep, Gene Kelly and (in one clip that must have cost the producers a fortune to acquire) Fred Astaire. Billy's friend Michael eventually comes out to him, but only after Billy has discovered that he is a cross-dresser. Is transvestitism somehow considered a tell-tale (or even necessary) characteristic of being gay, one wonders. Meanwhile, Billy's own sexuality remains ambiguous. He refuses the advances of Mrs. Wilkinson's daughter Debbie, and he kisses Michael on the cheek as he leaves the village, but he does not seem to have desires of his own. When he punches another boy at the audition who tries to comfort him, he accuses him of being a 'bent bastard'. Even his final appearance as the lead dancer in Bourne's defiantly gender-bending *Swan Lake* does not resolve matters: the camera lingers on his muscular torso, but is this implying that gay people can be physically powerful (and not 'sissies', as his father suggests), or something else?

Billy's rejection of homophobic stereotypes is undoubtedly encouraged by his teacher, Mrs. Wilkinson (brilliantly played by Julie Walters). Yet she too is an ambiguous character. In a recent article, Ahmet Atay has argued that Mrs. Wilkinson is an embodiment of 'feminist' or 'queer pedagogy', along with Miss Jean Brodie (in Muriel Spark's novel and the 1969 film, directed by Ronald Neame). Yet I see no evidence for this. Mrs. Wilkinson's teaching style is in fact highly traditional and disciplinarian, and her aim is to gain Billy entry to the most rigidly formal kind of dance education. She constantly corrects Billy and challenges him to do better, although she also makes it clear that this authoritarian persona is somewhat of an act. To be sure, she supports Billy outside the classroom, in an unsentimental way that is characteristic of 'hero teacher' characters more generally (Mr. Farthing in *Kes* does the same, although he is less obviously a hero). At the outset, Mrs. Wilkinson appears to be cynical and bored with her teaching (she is constantly smoking), and she only displays enthusiasm when presented with a potential star pupil: this isn't exactly an egalitarian, feminist approach, especially as it entails ignoring the girls in the class ('can't we have a go, miss?' one of them asks). Her motivation is explained by her daughter Debbie as a result of sexual frustration: Debbie tells Billy that her parents no longer have sex after her father had an affair, and that her mother is 'unfulfilled', which is why she is so interested in teaching dance. Again, it's hard to see how this can be seen as 'feminist', let alone 'queer'.

This might appear unduly cynical, but it isn't entirely unfair to describe *Billy Elliot* as a kind of fairytale – an argument convincingly advanced by Judith Lancioni. Like Cinderella, Billy has an absent mother, a neglectful father and an evil step-sibling (although both of the latter are eventually transformed). He is born to dance, and through the intervention of a chain-smoking fairy godmother, along with hard work and determination on his part, he eventually achieves the fairytale happy ending. 'Instead of boxing gloves or a glass slipper,' Lancioni writes, 'he dons ballet shoes, and in doing so he transforms not only himself, but his family's and his community's concept of masculinity as well'. As Lancioni argues, *Billy Elliot* is no fairytale; but seeing it in these terms does allow one to realize how it elides realism and myth, and how it holds out hope in the face of disillusionment. The extent to which this addresses the difficulty and complexity of the political issues at stake is certainly debatable; but hope (and even sentimentality) can, in certain circumstances, serve as an important motivation for political action.

Ratcatcher

It would be hard to imagine a film that is any more different from *Billy Elliot* than Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*. Released in 1999, *Ratcatcher* was co-produced by the BBC and Pathé, with support from the Arts Council of England. Although it has achieved significant critical acclaim (including selection for 'Un Certain Regard' at Cannes and winning the *Guardian* New Director's award), it has earned less than a million US dollars at the box office. *Ratcatcher* is very clearly an art movie, which critics have described using terms like 'visionary', 'assured and masterly' and 'hauntingly beautiful'. Yet they also describe it as 'relentlessly bleak' and 'hard to stomach': unlike *Billy Elliot*, this is not in any sense a feel-good movie.

And yet there are some interesting points of comparison between *Ratcatcher* and the other two films I have considered thus far. The central character, James, experiences poverty in much the same way as the other boys: there is never enough money, or food, or adequate clothing to go around. Like them, he is constantly ordered around, criticized and bullied by adults and older siblings (in this case, his sister). Like *Billy Elliot*, the film is set in the past, and in the middle of an industrial dispute – in this case, a refuse workers' strike in Glasgow in the mid-1970s. The poverty we see in *Ratcatcher* is certainly more extreme than in the other two films – the tenements in which the action takes place are decaying and due to be demolished – although this is made worse by the vermin that infest the piles of abandoned rubbish. Like both Billies, James has a dream of escape, in this case to a newly built home on the outskirts of the city. Yet James bears a guilty secret, rather than a hidden talent; and the outcome of the story is (at least in one of its endings) bleak indeed.

The film opens not with James, but with his friend Ryan Quinn. Ryan's mother is taking him to visit his father, who is in jail, but he runs off while his mother is not looking. Ryan meets James at the canal and during some rough-house play he is accidentally drowned. James runs away, believing the events have gone unnoticed. After Ryan's funeral, his family is re-housed; and as they leave, Ryan's mother hugs James and gives him the sandals she had bought for Ryan on the day of his death. A seemingly arbitrary sequence of events follows, but there are constant reminders of Ryan's death, and implicitly of James's guilt.

James befriends a girl, Margaret Anne, who is being sexually abused by a gang of older boys. In later scenes, James carefully removes nits from her hair, and they take a playful bath and eat sandwiches together; and when James escapes from the arguments in his family and goes to her flat, they sleep in the same bed. James says that he 'loves' her, but their relationship seems to be based more on a need for mutual comfort than on sexual attraction. Meanwhile, one day, James randomly takes a bus to the end of the line and finds himself in the outskirts of the city, where a new housing estate is being built. He explores the half-constructed houses, and looks out at the view from the kitchen window: there is an expansive field of wheat, blowing in the wind and reaching to the horizon. He climbs through the window and gambols around in the field.

One of James's friends, Kenny, is given a pet mouse as a birthday present. After the gang throws the mouse around to make him 'fly', Kenny ties the mouse's tail to a balloon and it floats up into the sky, where it joins a whole colony of other mice frolicking on the moon. Kenny later falls into the canal and is rescued by James's father, making him briefly into a local hero. James revisits the new house, but this time it is raining, and he can't get in. When he returns, he finds that soldiers have cleaned up all the rubbish in the neighbourhood, and the strike is over. The film ends quite ambiguously. James is seen jumping into the canal, and apparently drowning; yet there is another ending, in which James and his family are shown crossing the wheat field to take up residence in the new house. The final shot is of James smiling; yet over the credits, we see an extreme slow motion shot of him drifting underwater.

Of all the films considered here, *Ratcatcher* has attracted much the largest amount of attention from academic film critics. Much of this analysis focuses on the film's remarkable formal qualities, especially its cinematography and use of sound. The

visual style of the film, with its washed-out colour, owes much to Lynne Ramsay's initial training as a still photographer; and the film contains several moments of quiet visual contemplation. However, these formal qualities also very much serve the narrative. While James's sense of guilt is never explicitly articulated – William Eadie's performance as James is largely blank and expressionless, and seemingly numbed (as Laura McMahon has argued) – it is nevertheless constantly implied through images and sound. The film is full of visual 'rhymes' which stress the parallels between James and Ryan Quinn; and images of immersion or drowning recur throughout (James's sister, and later Margaret Anne, in the bath water; James's father dropping a dead mouse down the toilet; James in the plastic-lined bath at the new house). As viewers, we believe we are alone in sharing James's guilt; and it is only towards the very end of the film that Kenny reveals that he witnessed the scene of Ryan Quinn's death.

However, these formal qualities also reflect the way the film is constructed from the child's point of view. Extreme close-ups and closely recorded sound create a sensation of tactile intimacy: James tucks his mother's toe back inside her torn stocking; he tickles his sister and tentatively touches a scab on Margaret Anne's knee; and he playfully drops pieces of breakfast cereal on his father as he sleeps. We hear the characters breathing, the canal water lapping, and rain falling, with the sound of trains in the distance. Many of these close-up shots and sequences focus on children at play: James's sister plays with a mouse she finds in their flat; James pours salt on the table and makes patterns in it with his finger; Kenny finds a dead rat in the rubbish and swings it around his head. The film begins with a close-up of Ryan wrapped in a net curtain, spinning around in slow motion, which also seems to prefigure his later drowning – although, like many of these other moments of childhood reverie, it is abruptly ended by adult interruption, in this case in the form of a slap from his mother.

At the same time, the film is also about the *end* of childhood, or its loss. As Lynne Ramsay herself points out, James is not 'totally innocent'; and yet she argues that the film shows 'the death of childhood', or at least 'a metaphorical death – the death of James's spirit'. The ending is, in her account, deliberately ambiguous in this respect: if James drowns, it is as though he has 'abandoned hope', but even if he lives, there is still a sense that this is 'a childhood that happened too fast'. Interestingly, Ramsay also explains that she chose to make the central character a boy, in the belief that boys have fewer opportunities for 'emotional release' than girls. James clearly does not want to end up like his father, and he tries to evade the bullying and brutality of the older boys in the gang. But his options are limited: even Margaret Anne eventually 'betrays' him by returning to the abuse of the gang.

As in the other films I'm considering here, the theme of escape is central to the narrative. To some extent, this is a matter of escaping from adulthood: as the film's theatrical trailer asks (over a slow-motion shot of James running along the canal), 'have you ever tried to escape from growing up?' Yet it is more specifically about escaping from poverty. Throughout the film, there is mention of the hope that (like Ryan Quinn's) James's family might be re-housed. The images of the new house, where James plays with the building materials, and especially of the wheat-field, have an almost dream-like quality – especially realized in a memorable shot where the camera appears to float through the unglazed kitchen window, leaving the frame behind, and follows James into the field beyond. In one key scene, inspectors from

the council's housing department arrive, finding James's father and their flat in disarray. 'We have all the information we need', they say on leaving; and James's father subsequently blames James for letting them in, and covers up the visit from his wife. It seems possible that the family have missed their chance: James's subsequent return to the new house is much less hopeful, although the ambiguous double ending leaves the final outcome unclear.

This oscillation between hope and despair runs throughout the film: scenes of brutality alternate with scenes of warmth and intimacy. Margaret Anne is repeatedly abused by the gang; but we also see the caring and chaste relationship that develops between her and James. On receiving his bravery award, James's father abandons the family to go drinking; but then we see his mother dancing around and joking with the children. James's father returns drunk, having been slashed in the face, and hits his mother; but later we see them dancing closely together to a Frank Sinatra record. The gang threatens to kill or steal Kenny's pet mouse; but then we see the mouse running around joyfully with other mice on the surface of the moon. As in *Kes*, these alternations in mood are often marked via the use of music. Some of the bleaker scenes are accompanied by a sparse solo piano theme; and there is a more upbeat marimba theme that plays when James gambols in the wheat-field, and as Kenny's mouse drifts up to the moon – marking them as moments of escape and release, but also perhaps of fantasy. In other scenes, there are moments of absolute silence, as when James simply lies on top of Margaret Anne after being encouraged to have sex with her by the older boys.

Despite its bleak and unflinching view of childhood poverty, it would be a mistake to see *Ratcatcher* as merely a work of 'gritty realism'. The film has a very specific historical setting: one can find images and descriptions of the 1974-75 Glasgow refuse workers' strike online, and the news reports included in the film seem to be authentic. As Lynne Ramsay suggests, there is none of the 'kitsch nostalgia' of other such historical films (a charge that might well be leveled at *Billy Elliot*). Yet while the sequence of the mice on the moon is certainly the most obtrusive breach of social realism, the film's generally 'poetic' approach is very far from the documentary style of *Kes*. While *Ratcatcher* might be accused of providing an almost pictorial, aesthetic view of childhood poverty, it is also these formal qualities that enable it to capture aspects of childhood experience in a way that is genuinely rare and powerful.

The Selfish Giant

The final film I'm considering here is more obviously 'social realist' in its approach than *Ratcatcher*: indeed, *Time Out*'s film critic described it as '*Kes* revisited'. *The Selfish Giant* was Clio Barnard's second film, after the ground-breaking quasi-documentary *The Arbor*, in which actors lip-synched to previously recorded interviews with the troubled Bradford playwright Andrea Dunbar and her friends and family. *The Selfish Giant* is also set in Bradford, and features characters based on people Barnard met during her research there. It uses several amateur or first-time actors, and there is a spontaneous, documentary feel about some of the scenes shot in scrap metal yards and at amateur harness races. However, the film was apparently inspired by a fairy tale of the same name written by Oscar Wilde in 1888. According to Barnard, this is 'a story about what happens when children are excluded', and one that shows 'the

wounds of love' – although frankly the parallels between the narratives are not immediately obvious.

The Selfish Giant focuses on Arbor and his friend Swifty, two thirteen-year-olds living on a run-down council estate. Arbor lives with his mother and his drug-addicted older brother, and has some form of ADHD, which often gets him into trouble. When the boys are suspended from school after a fight, they decide to earn money collecting and selling scrap metal. They quickly realize that stealing copper from telephone, railway and power lines can be lucrative. They take their scrap to a local dealer, Kitten, who initially resists their attempts to get involved in the business, although he eventually allows them to borrow a horse and cart to collect scrap. Kitten also owns horses and competes in harness racing; and after he fires his main rider for losing a race, he recognises Swifty's experience and talent with horses and asks him to take his place.

Arbor is envious of Kitten's interest in Swifty. He steals pieces of copper scrap from Kitten and tries to sell them to another dealer. When he is refused admission at the other yard, he makes a deal with some men who offer to sell the scrap for him: however, they recognize it as stolen and keep the money. Kitten finds out about this and intimidates Arbor into stealing some high voltage wire to make up for his loss. After Arbor cuts the wire, wearing rubber gloves and boots Kitten has given him, Swifty helps to lift it out of the manhole, but is electrocuted and killed. Arbor returns to the scrap yard and attacks Kitten, but Kitten tells the police he is responsible, and is arrested. Arbor gets away, but he is distraught about Swifty's death. He sits day and night outside Swifty's mother's house until, after several rejections, she allows him to hug her. In a final scene, Arbor is shown grooming the horse Swifty had been working with.

Arbor is probably the least sympathetic of the central characters in these four films, although he is far from wholly to blame for what happens. His ADHD makes him prone to bursts of anger and impulsive behaviour, especially as his older brother steals his medication to feed his drug habit. Arbor is never still for long, and is constantly climbing lampposts and swinging on gates, and generally looking for mischief. He is insolent to his mother, and to the teachers and the police who visit the home, although he is clearly scared of Kitten even as he seeks to emulate him. He and Swifty are both bullied at school and mocked by their peers, largely on the grounds of their poverty. However, Arbor gives his mother some of the money he earns from scrapping; and he is not directly to blame for Swifty's death – Swifty goes down into the manhole of his own volition without gloves and rubber boots. Arbor's grief, and the final shot of him grooming the horse, also imply some form of redemption: we feel that he has learned a painful lesson, even if it isn't clear how he will be able to act upon it.

Here again, there is an element of 'coming of age' in the narrative, although the visions of adulthood seem wholly undesirable. Arbor is small for his age, and the scrappers are initially amused by the laddish swagger he adopts in his efforts to enrol as an apprentice to their masculine world – although he does enjoy some success, at least initially. The adult male characters are all unreservedly brutal. The ironically-named Kitten is aggressive, cruel and unscrupulous, and rules the scrap yard like a tyrant: he is, one assumes, the 'selfish giant' of the title, although unlike Oscar

Wilde's character (and despite his final, somewhat surprising confession to the police) he is not ultimately redeemed. The other scrappers who offer to sell Arbor's stolen metal are equally mocking and deceitful. Meanwhile, Swifty's father constantly bullies his family, and especially his wife; and in one scene he is shown selling the family sofa in order to pay off the electricity bill, leaving his children to eat their dinner sitting on the floor. The female characters – the boys' mothers and Kitten's partner, who also works at the scrap yard – are much more caring and sympathetic, but they are utterly intimidated and downtrodden by the men.

As in *Kes* and *Ratcatcher*, the possibility of escape from these circumstances – especially for Swifty – is partly associated with nature. Yet this is not a pastoral vision of nature. The film is repeatedly punctuated with still, contemplative shots of the fields near the town, where sheep and horses graze; yet the animals are surrounded by crackling electricity pylons and vast cooling towers that loom ominously in the mist. Like Billy Casper's kestrel, Kitten's horses need to be trained, in this case to run in punishing road races; and as Arbor makes clear, the primary motivation for Kitten in this respect is to do with the money he can make through gambling. In fact, unlike Swifty, Arbor doesn't care much about the horses (at least until the final shots); and at one point, Swifty accuses him of electrocuting a foal with a stray wire from one of the pylons, although he denies this.

Right from the start, Arbor appears to be the dominant partner. While Arbor prickles with excess energy, Swifty is overweight and a little slow. The boys are excluded from school after Arbor intervenes to stop Swifty being beaten up by bullies – although Swifty's suspension is only temporary, while Arbor's is permanent. While Arbor is delighted to be sent home, Swifty continues to attend school at his mother's insistence, sitting in the foyer even though he is not allowed to attend lessons; and when Arbor turns up to fetch him, the school receptionist accuses him of being a 'bad influence'. However, their relationship eventually starts to fray. When Kitten refuses to pay them for a burnt-out car they have brought in (with considerable effort), Arbor takes revenge by stealing from him; and when Swifty finds out, Arbor accuses him of being 'soft' and tells him 'you need to harden up'. Swifty's care for the horses, and his expertise in training them, means that he is favoured by Kitten; and it is partly jealousy of this that feeds Arbor's wish for revenge, and eventually leads to Swifty's death.

There is little that is 'child-like' about Arbor or his world, even when compared (for example) with James in *Ratcatcher*: indeed, he is eager to leave childhood behind. Here again, children are persistently victimized, deceived and exploited by adults. Confined to chaotic homes, living on the detritus of a declining post-industrial economy, their lives are almost unremittingly bleak. There are a few moments of intimacy here – Swifty strokes the horses, Arbor and Swifty bounce together on a trampoline in the garden, Arbor comforts his mum after their house is smashed up by drug dealers – but very little joy or fun to be had. The boys' families seem unable to cope, not just with poverty itself but also with the challenges and problems (such as drugs, alcohol and disability) that accompany it. As the *New York Times* critic argued, the film's eventual outcome is perhaps too obviously foreshadowed, not least by the insistent buzzing of the electricity pylons throughout. This isn't so much a 'spoiler' problem as a matter of the film's grim ideological determinism:

> *Intent on showing that Arbor and Swifty live in a world of radically limited possibilities, barely sustained by their families and failed by the state, Ms. Barnard locks them into a narrative prison.*

In this respect, the final shot of Arbor grooming the horse seems little more than a token gesture – and it is notable that an alternative ending, in which Arbor is seen winning a horse race, was not used. If *The Friendly Giant* is indeed '*Kes* revisited', it provides even fewer grounds for hope than Loach's film.

Politics and realism

There are a great many points of comparison across these films, but in conclusion I want to focus on two that are particularly relevant to my wider concerns in 'Growing Up Modern'. The first relates directly to their politics, and to the issue of realism.

To state the obvious, all of these films are about individual children. Indeed, with the exception of Arbor's friendship with Swifty, each of the heroes is strikingly isolated from his peers. Billy Casper, Arbor and Swifty, are all bullied by other chidren, not least because of their poverty itself. James tries to fit in with the group of older boys, but can't quite manage it. And Billy Elliot is set apart from other boys by his passion for dance, rather than boxing. Both Billies, as well as James, are characterized by a dislike of the compulsory boyish preoccupation of football. Meanwhile, none of them enjoys harmonious relationships with their siblings: all four are bullied, abused, or simply neglected by older brothers or sisters. They are all largely alone in their attempts to come to terms with their circumstances.

As I have argued, the possibility of e*scap*e is a recurring preoccupation across all four films. Escape is often associated with nature, most obviously with Billy Casper and the kestrel, or Swifty and the horses – a very traditional theme in representations of childhood. While this recurs in *Ratcatcher* – in the form of the new house and the wheat-field – it is also parodied in the figure of Kenny, who is dubbed 'animal boy' by the gang, and who frequently displays his RSPCA badge. *Billy Elliot* is different, in the sense that the central character's passion is for artistic expression rather than nature; and of all of them, his escape is the only one that ultimately succeeds. James's final escape to the new house is ambiguous and dream-like. For Arbor in *The Selfish Giant*, the possibility of escape through scrapping is doomed; and in the final shot, we see him too grooming the horses. It may be that a commercial film like *Billy Elliot* effectively requires a happy ending; but it also reflects what I have called its more Blairite political stance.

However, to a large extent, these are all *individual* forms of escape. Billy Elliot's escape entails self-discipline and effort, but it is achieved quite literally at the expense of the community that supports him: he escapes just as their collective struggle is defeated. He is inspired by his teacher, but she is abruptly left behind. By contrast, however vocal he may be in Mr. Farthing's classroom, Billy Casper cannot 'cash in' his self-taught passion for falconry into educational success: while we do not see into his future, he seems almost predestined to enter the pit. Meanwhile, Arbor might be seen as the perfect Thatcherite entrepreneur: his initial success at scrapping involves

an entry to an adult economic world, albeit one that is presented as brutal and corrupt. However feasible and desirable these different escape attempts may be, they are all to do with the *individual* somehow transcending or reaching beyond their circumstances.

One predictable political criticism would be to argue that most of these films fail to present a wider social picture: they are trapped in a kind of descriptive social realism. The show people living in poverty – in effect, the casualties of capitalism – but they do not present the wider socio-political context of inequality. Clive Nwonka makes this argument in relation to *The Selfish Giant* (and a similar film, *Fish Tank*, which I'll be considering in a later essay): these films, he argues, are merely naturalistic, portraying conflicts at the level of individuals' everyday lives (within classes) while ignoring the wider conflicts (between classes). As such, he asserts, they are essentially *depoliticizing*. Thus, for example, we see Swifty's father selling the family sofa, and then berating his wife and kids, but we don't see the 'structural determinants' that make this necessary. It is a tragedy of individuals, rather than of a whole political system. Nwonka argues that this sanctions a kind of sentimentality, which he compares unfavourably with the (apparently) Marxist analysis of Ken Loach's films.

This argument might have some mileage in relation to Loach's later films, but (as I have implied) I don't believe it holds up in relation to *Kes*. Some commentators – such as Ken Jones and Hannah Davies – point to the film's highly critical view of the contemporary education system; but whether this amounts to a more systematic political critique is doubtful. There are strong elements of pathos and sentimentality in *Kes*, especially in the lyrical representation of nature, which make it appear quite manipulative. The more schematic political analysis of Loach's later films results (in my unpopular view) in thin characterization and a lack of narrative plausibility – as in the case of the wildly over-praised *I, Daniel Blake*. Perhaps paradoxically, the film that provides the strongest sense of the contemporary political context here is actually the Blairite commercial hit *Billy Elliot*.

Even so, when looking at the critical reception of *Ratcatcher* and *The Selfish Giant*, one might be forgiven a degree of scepticism about their political implications. It would not be fair to accuse either of these films of 'class disgust': on the contrary, they are both essentially sympathetic to their central characters, despite the fact that both of them are guilty of some pretty horrendous deeds. These are not 'chav kids' held up for mockery. And yet these are art-house movies, to be largely consumed by audiences whose lives are light years removed from those of the children they represent. Are these films not, on some level, a kind of voyeuristic 'poverty porn' – the cinematic equivalent of volunteering at the local food bank, before rushing home to our designer kitchens, feeling smug and self-satisfied?

Representing childhood

Children obviously appear in a great many films; but the films I have been discussing here are fundamentally *about* childhood. Their protagonists don't just happen to be children: the experience and meaning of childhood is central to what the films are doing. And yet, paradoxically, these are not 'children's films'. Indeed, with the

exception of *Kes*, all of them are classified in the UK with a 15 rating, meaning that they should not legally be shown to young people who are the same age as their leading protagonists. This is partly a result of the use of 'bad' language, and in some cases sex and violence; but more broadly we could say that these films (and especially *Ratcatcher* and *The Selfish Giant*) are not intended for a child audience. Rather, they tell stories about childhood to an audience of adults.

Much of the critical discussion of childhood in the cinema focuses on similar 'art films'. Academics such as Vicky Lebeau, Emma Wilson and Karen Lury have written eloquently about films as diverse as *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser*, *L'Enfant Sauvage*, *Spirit of the Beehive*, *Pan's Labyrinth* and *All About My Mother*. However, none of these are aimed at (or, I would suspect, widely seen by) children themselves. However, such critics do draw attention to some inherent qualities of cinema that seem to make it particularly effective as a means of representing children's experiences and children's point of view. As they suggest, there is something about the visual or the cinematic that can take us back to early childhood, and even to infancy: the hallucinatory quality of cinema, its ability to move beyond the limits of language, enables it to address the sensations of childhood (the sounds and visions, as well as the bodily experiences) and the emotions (of loss, of anxiety, of bewilderment…) that often accompany them.

As I have suggested, this quality is especially apparent here in *Ratcatcher*, not least in its use of sound and close-up cinematography. These qualities are also evident in *The Selfish Giant*, especially in the moments where the narrative appears to stop, and we are left simply observing the landscape – although these shots are notably not linked to the child's point of view. They are less apparent in the more commercial entertainment of *Billy Elliot* or the more traditional social realism of *Kes* – although the narratives of both of them clearly work to align the viewer with the perspective of the child protagonist. One aspect that runs through all four films is the emphasis on *play* as the distinctive preoccupation of childhood: in all of these films, we see the characters engaging in what seem to be entirely aimless, pleasurable forms of play with everyday objects. Even in *Billy Elliot*, there are moments where artistic expression is presented as a form of play, rather than exclusively of self-improving *work*.

In different ways, all four films present some kind of 'coming of age' narrative. Billy Casper stands on the edge of adulthood and leaving school; Billy Elliot likewise has to escape from an adult future trapped in a (now declining) mining industry. James is surrounded by older boys, who bully him and sexually abuse Margaret Anne, and his life isn't exactly overflowing with adult role models. Meanwhile, Arbor's attempt to find a place in the adult world of the scrappers leads to disaster. These adult worlds are all very clearly represented as masculine, in some cases quite brutally so; and it's important to note that these children are all boys. It may well be that, as Lynne Ramsay suggests in relation to *Ratcatcher,* the options for boys in this kind of situation are more limited – although one could certainly argue that girls are equally limited, but in different ways.

Either way, as children, they are all downtrodden, exploited, and misunderstood; although the prospect of adulthood doesn't seem to offer them much relief. As such, growing up is generally regarded with great ambivalence, if not with despair. The

obvious exception here is *Billy Elliot*, whose Blairite faith in the idea that 'things can only get better' leads to a highly optimistic (if utterly individualistic) conclusion. By contrast, *Kes* offers no hope for Billy Casper's future; and the endings of *Ratcatcher* and *The Selfish Giant* are at best ambiguous, offering only small glimmerings of hope.

And yet in all the films, children are nevertheless active agents, who retain some ability to influence – if not ultimately to determine – their own fate. In this, they frequently have to act without the support of adults, and in some cases in the face of their powerful opposition. Again, *Billy Elliot* stands out as the most optimistic in this sense: Billy's attempt to 'follow the dream' succeeds in a way that is not obviously the case for any of the others – although he is also the least isolated of them all. Yet even in the desperation of dire poverty, amid exploitation and oppression, and in the face of disastrous accidents that are well beyond their control, the children retain a degree of hope and persistence. Only in the first alternative ending of *Ratcatcher*, with James's apparent suicide, do we see complete abandonment and despair. Quite how adults might ever speak to children about these issues, and how children might respond to them – and how children's cinema might come closer to representing such experiences – are at this point genuinely open questions.

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