



The 1960s found a British cinema in transition. Of the studios that had dominated the post-war period, only Rank at Pinewood and Associated British at Elstree survived.

1962 heralded the arrival of the successful James Bond franchise, with the release of 'Dr No'. Later on, in the decade, 'swinging London' attracted international filmmakers such as Michelangelo Antonioni, François Truffaut and Joseph Losey to film in the UK. However, it was the socially conscious kitchen-sink drama films made by the 'British New Wave' of the early 1960s such as Karel Reisz' 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning' and Lindsay Anderson's 'This Sporting Life' that attracted attention.

Other directors associated with the 1950s Free Cinema movement were now at the forefront of British filmmaking. Films such as Tony Richardson's 'The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner' and John Schlesinger's 'A Kind of Loving', featured a new breed of dynamic young actor such as Albert Finney, Tom Courtenay and Richard Harris.

These film makers shared a belief that the cinema must break away from its class-bound attitudes and that the working classes ought to be seen on Britain's screens.

Director Ken Loach had tackled social issues such as homelessness, unemployment, and the workings of Social Services with his ground-breaking television docudrama 'Cathy Come Home' in 1966. His first feature film, "Poor Cow" made in 1967 looks at the life of a a working-class single mother living in the London slums.

Loach's follow up 'Kes' the year later was based on the semi-autobiographical novel 'A Kestrel for a Knave' by Barry Hines.

The film follows Fifteen-year-old Billy Casper, a working class lad growing up in a dysfunctional single-parent family in Barnsley, South Yorkshire. Billy is struggling at school, destined to leave without qualifications. He fears following in the footsteps of his elder brother who has a soul-destroying, low-paying job down the local coal mine.

Loach's authentic treatment of his working-class subject, using real locations and mostly non-professional actors, provides a compassionate portrait of life in the low-paid mining areas of Yorkshire in the 1960s.

Billy's form of escape from this life is via a young kestrel, who he names "Kes". He has rescued the bird and trains it in the art of falconry, teaching himself from a stolen book. This shows his resourcefulness and potential, qualities the school system failed to spot.

The depiction of the state of the British education system and the importance of a good teacher is highlighted by Billy's only compassionate English teacher, Mr. Farthing (played by Colin Welland). He recognises Billy's promise and briefly steps into the shoes of the boy's father, whose absence is palpable. Loach contrasts Farthing with Billy's sports teacher Mr. Sugden (played by former Bradford teacher and onetime pro wrestler Brian Glover). Sugden behaves with authoritarian cruelty in the famous football scene where he referees the game simultaneously fantasising about being Bobby Charlton of Manchester United!

The visuals of Loach's previous work had been influenced by another French New Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, featuring handheld camera work, jump cuts, and cutting to music. However 'Kes' marked a decisive shift in style.

While certain elements of the docudrama aesthetic of 'Cathy Come Home' were maintained in 'Kes', Loach and cinematographer, Chris Menges, decided to adopt a precise, cool, observational style. The camera's job was to record the action in a sympathetic way and to be unobtrusive, not to be overly stylised.

'Kes' has become the quintessential portrait of Northern England and the compromised expectations of the British working class.

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