## *WE ARE THE LAMBETH BOYS* (1959)

[Production Company: Graphic Films. Director: Karel Reisz. Cinematographer: Walter Lassally. Music: Johnny Dankworth. Editor: John Fletcher. Commentary: John Rollason.]

During the 1950s many of Britain's younger artists, writers, filmmakers and cultural critics took as their subject matter 'ordinary' people and 'ordinary' life. This may have reflected in part the increasing post-war importance of democracy – ordinary people had done their bit to defeat fascism, they had voted for the benefits of the Welfare State and now they were being represented in all kinds of cultural practices. It may also have owed something to the now familiar desire of younger generations to sweep away the favoured images and ideas of their predecessors which in 1950s Britain were often unadventurous, middle-aged and middle class or nostalgically historical.

From the mid-1950s, new playwrights like John Osborne and Harold Pinter were characterised somewhat loosely as 'angry young men' and a group of young artists including John Bratby and Jack Smith were known as the 'Kitchen Sink Painters'. Two key publications celebrated the culture of ordinary people and pointed the way to the development of British Cultural Studies: one was *Culture and Society* by Raymond Williams, the second *The Uses of Literacy* by Richard Hoggart.

In 1959 Hoggart contributed an article to *Sight and Sound* on a new British documentary film, *We Are the Lambeth Boys*, suggesting

> the questions which the film is bound to raise for anyone interested in the way 'ordinary life' is treated in popular art and entertainments nowadays.

He identified and generally praised the 'subjective approach' of the director Karel Reisz, contrasting it with more cautious documentary work which in seeking 'comprehensive, objectivity and balance' sacrifices 'meaning (and) ... the sense of life itself'. By contrast, Hoggart suggested *We Are the Lambeth Boys* demonstrated 'characteristics of art' in setting out 'to show, not the whole truth, but some aspects of the truth wholly'.

The film offers an account of young people in a London youth club on the southern side of the Thames. It was shown for the first time just along the road from its location, at the National Film Theatre in March 1959, having been shot over six weeks during the





previous summer. It had been sponsored by the Ford Motor Company as part of a cinema series called 'Look at Britain'. At its premiere it was one of four documentaries shown together under the title 'Free Cinema 6'. Christophe Dupin (2006) says Free Cinema was

> Essentially ... the general title given to a series of six programmes of (mainly) short documentaries shown at the National Film Theatre (NFT) in London between February 1956 and March 1959.
>
> (Dupin 2006: 1)

In February 1956 a group of participating young directors had issued a 'manifesto' claiming a common approach in their films. They defined this as including an 'implicit ... belief in freedom' alongside the 'importance of people and ... the significance of the everyday'. This attitude was very similar to that found in much of the art, drama and critical writing of the time.

*We Are the Lambeth Boys* was one of the films in the last programme of these short documentaries, after which Reisz and his fellow directors Lindsay Anderson and Tony Richardson moved into feature films as the leading figures of the short-lived but successful British 'New Wave' which again took as its subjects ordinary people in contemporary Britain.

So in part, the significance of *We Are the Lambeth Boys* is as one of a set of films that allowed this group of young directors to develop their skills before moving into fictional feature films. But if this experience were merely an apprenticeship these short films would not warrant inclusion in any list of significant British films. The Free Cinema movement reflected the growing desire for greater democracy in class-conscious Britain but was also tied to the growing recognition of film as a significant artistic, intellectual and cultural practice. The films, produced in the late 1950s, were linked to new publications, specialist screenings, manifestos and the growing study of film in universities and colleges. For example Anderson and Reisz both wrote for the new film journal *Sight and Sound*.

While the films of the Free Cinema had a serious intent they were produced by relatively young directors and a number offered representations of emerging youth cultures. The first programme of the Free Cinema included a film directed by Reisz and Richardson and funded by the British Film Institute. Its subject was a jazz club in Wood Green, north London and it had the title of a jazz song, *Momma Don't Allow*, performed in the film by the Chris Barber Jazz

Band – one of Britain's most popular jazz bands. The shooting budget of £250 was approved at the end of 1954 and the completion budget of £175 in mid-1955, so this film offers a view of British youth culture just months before Elvis Presley's first British hit and the cinema 'riots' that accompanied the first screenings of *Rock Around the Clock*. At the time jazz and its English off-shoot skiffle were at the hipper end of the popular music spectrum and jazz clubs or coffee bars were the location for the emergence of youth culture.

By the time *We Are the Lambeth Boys* was shot three years later, skiffle was virtually over and jazz had given way to USA pop in the affections of most young people. The soundtrack was provided by Johnny Dankworth who with his vocalist wife Cleo Laine was another key figure of the British jazz scene: but while Barber provided a 'retro' jazz soundtrack for *Momma Don't Allow,* Dankworth was, albeit tentatively, exploring the modern style.

*We Are the Lambeth Boys* then offers a record of young English people in the summer of 1958 just prior to the emergence of the first Mods but with the Teddy Boys on the wane and popular culture taking an increasingly ubiquitous hold. The Lambeth teenagers are neither in a jazz club nor in the less structured surroundings of a coffee bar but in the organised, secular surroundings of a local council youth club. Through the 1950s and 1960s these clubs provided social spaces for young people to interact in a relatively 'safe' environment (all but two of the Lambeth boys and girls have left school and are in employment but we do not see them in pubs, drinking alcohol or mixing with adults). By contrast, just one year later, Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* shows a young rebellious factory worker sharing social spaces with adults, drinking copious quantities of alcohol and pursuing an affair with an older woman. In these respects the Lambeth youngsters anticipate more accurately the social groupings of young people separating themselves by choice from their elders, which would have such an impact in the 1960s and beyond.

The most obvious adult presence in *We Are the Lambeth Boys* is the disembodied commentator (John Rollason) and his role is not straightforward. His authoritative commentary is perhaps too didactic, determined to guide our interpretation of what we see rather than allowing the spectator to interpret more actively what is on offer. The directors of the Free Cinema admired the 1940s documentary films of Humphrey Jennings, yet his major film *Listen to Britain* offers a more open example of documentation, resisting the didactic tradition of John Grierson and other British documentary-makers. In France in the 1950s, Jean Rouch was exploring a more open approach to documentary





and his work was paralleled in the USA by the American innovators Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, DA Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers. Rollason's commentary seems dated today but it is worth noting that Hoggart too criticised its addition to the images and live speech on offer, not least because it contributed to an over-idealistic depiction of young people.

But while Free Cinema pursued new attitudes and *We Are the Lambeth Boys* records a new youth-oriented world, we can see half-a-century later that much of that world has changed significantly. The film opens with some of the young people walking towards the youth club on a bright summer's evening. Others join them and we soon see the boys bowling and batting in a cricket net while the 'Lambeth Girls' stand around chatting. These young working people in their late teens smoke copiously but don't drink and there is no hint of the spread of drug-taking which is now a significant part of teenage life. Almost without exception they dress smartly to relax, while Lambeth 1958 appears to be almost wholly white and working class. Halfway through the film we see two girls walking towards the club past three younger boys in short trousers, one of whom is black, but it is a fleeting moment. They appear to be playing happily together but in that same late summer there were extensive disturbances in the streets of north London, characterised as 'race riots'. Similar problems occurred in Nottingham and the protagonists were mainly young white working-class hooligans, intent on trouble.

Two passages do hint at the possibility of gang violence which the popular press would cover over the following decades in their pursuit of what Stanley Cohen described as 'folk devils' and 'moral panics' (Cohen 1972). In the opening minutes we see 'Harry and his gang' dressed more like Teddy Boys and preferring to smoke and 'hang about'. Later, during a work-place sequence we overhear a discussion about 'Smithy's mob' who may be threatening trouble locally. We hear that Smithy 'don't look hard ... he looks a queer' but he may 'fuckin' have about fifty ... ' – the only bad language in the film.

Subsequently, cultural commentators like Dick Hebdige (1979) noted the creative influence of black taste and style on the young working-class subcultural groups. The early stages of this can be discerned in the film's Saturday night dance sequence where we see the youngsters jiving to a typical twelve-bar rhythm & blues instrumental. Percy, one of the key figures in the film, seems older perhaps because of his pencil moustache or his preference for white ties and dark shirts more reminiscent of the gangster look of *Brighton Rock* (Boulting, 1947). But on this Saturday night, his Brylcreemed quiff

has been brushed forward and he sports a silk pocket handkerchief, hinting at the embryonic mod style which would soon invade the south London estates.

The boys have already declared their interest in clothes in a discussion in the club where one asserts that he would spend 15 guineas on a suit (£15.75) – probably a week's wages for a working man. They also discuss the morality of shop-lifting and the case for and against capital punishment which was then still legal.

The Lambeth boys and girls have apprenticeships or work as unskilled labour in a variety of places including a butcher's, a post office, a dress-maker's, a factory and an office reception. This is a period of full employment and while it is not mentioned, most of these young men will be among the first generation not called up for National Service, enabling them to experience freedoms previously unavailable. Nonetheless we are reminded of the powerful class divide in Britain at the time on the boys' annual trip to Mill Hill public school for an afternoon of cricket, swimming and socialising. While these educational divisions still exist, young people today share a more common popular culture which in 1958 was hardly widespread and appears not to have touched the public school at all.

On the evening of the cricket match back in Lambeth there is more dancing with chips to follow while the commentary reassures us that 'a good evening for young people is much as it always has been'. Would a contemporary version of the film be able to make the same claim?

### *Further Reading*

Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: the Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1972.
Christophe Dupin, '*Free Cinema*' DVD booklet notes, London, BFI, 2006.
Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, London, Routledge, 1979.
Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, London, Penguin, 1957.
——, 'We are the Lambeth Boys', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 28, Nos. 3 and 4, 1959, pp. 164–165.
Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958.

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## *SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING* (1960)

[Production Company: Woodfall Film Productions. Director: Karel Reisz. Screenwriter: Alan Sillitoe. Cinematographer: Freddie Francis.





Editor: Seth Hilton. Cast: Albert Finney (Arthur Seaton), Shirley Anne Field (Doreen), Rachel Roberts (Brenda), Hylda Baker (Aunt Ada), Norman Rossington (Bert).]

Released in 1960, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* is rooted in the new cinematic and literary movements of its day. Its screenplay, written by so-called 'angry young man' Alan Sillitoe, was based on his novel of the same name, and its director Karel Reisz was involved in the Free Cinema movement of the late 1950s. This, Reisz's first fiction feature, was at the forefront of the short-lived 'British New Wave' (1959–1963). With its working-class protagonists, focus on controversial yet ordinary issues, and a commitment to represent working-class life, this ground-breaking movement included films that took a resolutely humanistic, poetic and non-commercial approach to cinema. They were also collectively known as 'kitchen sink' films.[1]

The 1960s saw the rise of the independent film company as a significant force in British cinema and Woodfall was a prestigious example. Formed by another of the 'angries', John Osborne, in partnership with Tony Richardson, it was financed by the proceeds of Osborne's stage success, *Look Back in Anger*. Woodfall's aim, according to Richardson, was 'to get into British film the same sort of impact and sense of life that the Angry Young Man cult has had in the theatre and literary worlds' (Hill 1986: 40).

Independent production gave directors the freedom to represent their society in original ways and tackle issues previously considered taboo. They were helped in this by the new 'X' certificate, introduced by the BBFC in 1951 and granted to all the 'new wave' films apart from *Billy Liar* (John Schlesinger, 1963). This allowed them to be more daring in content, albeit within reason: for example, Arthur (Albert Finney) was allowed the contentious use of the word 'bloody', but 'bugger' was too much and had to be changed to 'beggar'; likewise, a reference to the gin and hot bath abortion had to be cut.[2] Nevertheless, the frank presentation of Arthur's sexual attitudes, Brenda's (Rachel Roberts) adultery, and the unwanted pregnancy seemed adult and contemporary next to Hollywood films still labouring under a draconian Production Code.

It is unsurprising therefore that *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, like *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1959) before it, hit a nerve with the cinema audience. Despite a small publicity budget, it was the third most successful film at the box office in 1961, won the BAFTA for Best Film and was the first film to take £100,000 in the three weeks of its London run alone. This film reflected the political and