ABSTRACT

This piece is an exploration of the nature, effect[s] and meaning[s] of two films of British school life, *Kes* and *if....*. The case is made that, although different in many ways, these films both function as symbolic indicators of the pedagogical and social cultures of twentieth century British education. It is further argued that the different schools depicted in these films represent polarities: the maturing culture of the public schools and the infantilising culture of the state comprehensives. This is a conclusion that might be reached by other means but, we argue, film is especially suited to showing this.

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Introduction

In what follows we attempt to examine in detail and juxtapose two ‘school films’, *Kes* and *if....*. In some ways they are very different works concerning very different schools, but, we argue, these films are united in exhibiting a distinctively British conundrum which is, in turn, the product of British, post-war social order; we argue further that in being juxtaposed they teach a valuable lesson as to the nature of Britain’s two ‘educational nations’ or school cultures. There have been depictions of schools in British fiction films for almost as long as there have been British films (Gifford, 2000). The earliest work of this sort was *The School Master’s Portrait* (Bamforth, 1898). It shows a boy drawing cartoons of his

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1 Opinion can tend to vary as to how to give the title of this film. Strictly speaking, it features in the credits/titles as *if....* but in its director’s own collected writings it is given as the more conventional looking *If....*. In either case four ellipsis dots appear, rather than the three that might be expected, but *If....* or, simply *If* without using any ellipsis, can often be found in print. Like so much else in the film, the title defies and flouts convention. Paradoxically, in subsequent decades, certain former pupils of elite schools, including some who have become very prominent in public life, have claimed, or affected, to admire and enjoy *if....* (http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2012/jan/06/david-cameron-taste-films-if). One imagines that Anderson would not have approved. But, then again.....

2 Denotes first release date and production company/ies.
teacher on the blackboard in a classroom. For this he is punished by liberal use of the schoolmaster’s cane. At once a trope had been established: the disorderly pupil. But if pupils can be rebellious, they can also be silly. Early films tended to emphasise pupils’ rebelliousness/silliness, as in the innocuous sounding trio of *Girls Indulging in a Pillow Fight, Rebellious Schoolgirls* and *Schoolgirl Rebels* all of which showed more or less eroticised displays of feminine disorder (Warwick Trading Company, 1901; Hepworth, 1907; Hepworth, 1915). The first dramatization of a work from another medium came in 1903 with *Dotheboys Hall; or, Nicholas Nickelby* the re-enactment of a scene from the well-known novel (Gaumont, 1903). The first substantive plot in a school film was also adapted from a novel: *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, the earliest of various film/television versions of this work by Thomas Hughes [1822 – 1896]. Thus both *Kes* and *if….* (one adapted from a novel, and both concerning pupils who are, at the least, uncooperative) have precedents in many ways.

There is an extensive literature concerning school films *qua* school films (that is, literature written by people who are not film critics, those who are interested in such films primarily as depictions of schools, schooling and education, not those who are interested in such film for aesthetic reasons, those writing ‘pure’ cinematic criticism). Much of this is North American in origin. (Ayers, 1994; Bauer, 1998; Cohen, 1996; Dalton, 999; Farber and Holm, 1994a and b; Giroux, 2002a, b, c and d; Glanz, 1997; Keroes, 1999; Koza Eklund, 2003; Mackie, 2001; McCloskey, 1994; McCullick, Belcher, Hardin and Hardin, 2003; Reese, 1995; Robertson, 1995; Robertson, 1997; Shouse, 2005; Smith, 1999; Stuart Wells and Serman, 1998; Trier, 2001a and 2001b; Trier, 2002; Weber and Michell, 1995 and Weber and Michell, 1999. There are very few specifically British examples of writing in this vein, for some examples, see: Ellsmore, 2006; Jones and Davies, 1999 and Limond, 2005).

North American authors frequently examine British films, often searching them for generic lessons as to the nature of teaching. If depictions of non-American school life sometimes seem so familiar to North American writers this may sometimes be because
those depictions have been framed with a more American sensibility than may at first be obvious.

Metro Goldwyn Mayer purchased the rights to Goodbye Mr Chips shortly after its publication in 1934, and [producer] Irving Thalbert [1889-1936] was overseeing its adaptation at the time of his death... [it] was subsequently assigned to the MGM director Sidney Franklin [1893-1972]... [but] it was MGM director Sam Wood [1883-1949] who... directed the film... Franklin, however, maintained a close watch on the film... the film captured an American Anglophile’s preferred view of Britain... [endorsing] the British class system. (Glancy, 1999: 84-86).

It is something of a commonplace in Britain/Europe to say that Hollywood corrupts almost everything it touches. But Hollywood does not so much corrupt as sanitise everything it touches. The original story of Mr Chips was, as Thalberg seems to have understood at least, a story of mediocrity and thoroughly ambiguous. But in subsequent directors’ hands it became one of transcendence. In the original novel but not the film versions (MGM, 1939; MGM/Keep/Apacj, 1969) the eponymous character is outlined in a way that is far more damning. In the novel his life is a ‘sad joke’ and the tone is melancholic, not elegiac. (Hilton 1934/2001:7). The novel’s effect, overall, is equivocal. But Hollywood does not equivocate, no more than does the dominant American culture. Hence, Goodbye, Mr Chips (perhaps especially so in the 1939 version) becomes a story made suitable for American tastes by the addition of several generous, if unhealthy, helpings of sugar. There is a good deal more that is anodyne about the filmic Goodbye, Mr Chips than the written version and the former inhabits a far less convincing Britain than the latter. But our interest lies in two films that are almost defiantly British in their eccentricities.

Locating Kes and if.... in a post-war, British context

and Welsh education settlement in 1943 (with equivalents for Scotland in 1944 and Northern Ireland in 1947) secondary education for all was intended, and expected, to redress the imbalance between those who tried without succeeding and those who succeeded without trying. But sixty years on it is abundantly clear that systemic change without cultural change has not eroded Britain’s aristocracy of privilege – or the privileges of aristocracy – to anything like the degree imagined. Butler himself was content to leave the ‘public’ (ie fee-paying) schools out of the post-war settlement, but what those who believed that systemic reform of education would contribute to building a ‘new Jerusalem’ did not foresee was that inequity would remain so stubbornly and evidently present. Success continues to accrue to public school pupils in ways and degrees that remain less common for ‘products’ of ‘state’ schools. Why is this so? And can Kes and if…. shine any light of the matter? We think they can. We contend that these two films illuminate the enduring cultural difference between public and state schools: that the former promote maturation in their pupils and the latter infantilise them. But given that Kes and if…. are markedly different films, the former realist, the latter avowedly not, are we even entitled to bracket them together and expect them to engage in a dialogue? We believe that we are because they share a common genre.

*Kes, if…. and genre*

One of the more problematic questions around the ‘school as film’ hinges less on whether or not if can be tidily corralled into a type of genre – in itself a taxonomic game – than how, in filmic terms (and conventions) schools ‘became’ recognisable sites to their audiences. In other words how does the ‘text’ of the film (what we see/hear)
make sense to us as viewers? What cinematic (or dramatic) devices are used to portray teachers, pupils and, to a limited extent, parents and/or careers? Despite our reluctance to position these films in a specific genre, it is nonetheless analytically useful to try to locate them. The most compelling reason is out of dealing with the polysemy of film, as much as the notion of genre, even as used as a heuristic tool provides us with a ‘way’ into them as well as common discourse around film. Of the two films, *Kes*, can be placed within the category of social realism, whereas *if....* is an example of a non-realist school film, evident in ways we will outline below. In seeking a working definition of realism it is convenience to appropriate a definition from Tagg, for whom realism is a ‘social practice of representation...which is enmeshes in a complex fabric of notions, images, attitudes, gestures and modes of action which function as everyday know-how...norms within and through which people live their lives in relation to the worlds’ (Tagg, 1987:271).

The power of realism is not that it purports to exert a mimetic quality, but that it contains within it those elements and facets of our received wisdom about how the world works. Hence the power of realism as a mode of representation is bound up with the extent to which it exhibits verisimilitude. But this in itself is inextricably liked to the representational codes, which are both embedded and visible in the film. The concept of realism as a genre (despite being quite elastic in its definition), sets up for both filmmaker and audience (and the academic critic) what Michel Foucault [1926-1984] would characterise as a ‘grid of intelligibility’. That is, both the act[s] of film production and the act[s] of film interpretation are undertaken not on the basis of naivety or ignorance, but through a sophisticated (and sometimes not so sophisticated) array of cognitive and social rules and resources. Filmmakers, audiences and critics are aware of these conventions. In other words we can discriminate (to certain degrees) one kind of filmic experience from another from our prior understanding. With the rise of so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of popular art/fiction/film/music, this distinction was primarily a function of shifts in (borrowing from the Frankfurt School and more specifically Walter Benjamin [1982-1940]) modes of production, rather than any intrinsic class based
changes in ‘taste’. In other words, we learn how to read film through out extensive and informal education – in which we need to see Hollywood as being the largest (through not the only) virtual schoolroom. It is out learnt and continuously developing semiotic sensibility which can have a self-colonising potential.

It has been remarked that when books are rendered as films, the translation from written text (book form) to filmic text has had the effect of metamorphosing (though perhaps this is too grand a notion) one medium into another. Whilst there is always an element of technical complexity in moving from one medium to another (Loach deemed filming the stylised end of the book on which Kes is based ‘impossible’), more problematic (for reasons sometimes entirely unrelated to the technicalities) is ensuring that there the original text is made to conform to the parameters (variously commercial, artistic and ideological) of the film industry. More importantly we are obliged to acknowledge that this amorphous enterprise we euphemistically refer to as the film industry, is actually a complex (and at times interlocking) set of industries: as we argued earlier, Hollywood is the most dominant influence, but is by no means completely hegemonic, in defining what does and what does not constitute a ‘school film’.

This emptying out, and selective interpretation, of the original texts is important in at least two respects 1) it concretises those features of school life that are supposedly instantly recognisable as a property/properties of the social relations of schooling and 2) turns them back on to us by attempting to ‘tell’ us something about the function of these properties vis-à-vis the purpose of schooling. This is most notable in Kes and if.... and it is primarily through our resonance with these films’ institutional rituals that we acquire our understanding of schools. What is important is not that they speak directly to us, but that they act as some form of memorial whereby we can vicariously re-enact what school was like for us. But this universalising of school experience is a problematic one: schools occupy (as we argued earlier) various small and particularistic universes which can only exert any meaning in specific contexts. The ritual of the school prom in US schools (and films) is virtually unknown in British School films and yet it is central,
iconic even, in the US (Best, 2000). However, it is increasingly evident that the iconography and language of the prom is being adopted in British schools, by British pupils and teachers. An unexpected, unintended, if trivial, effect of what might be called globalization by media – a fact that reminds us of the remarks above concerning the learning and developing of new semiotic sensibilities. What is learned visually in each generation contributes to making the shaping the actual expectations of that and succeeding generations. Why do all students now seem to throw their caps, mortar boards or trenchers into the air at graduation ceremonies? Why else but because this is what they have learned to do in numerous campus films. As non-American, we know more about American schools than Americans know about our schools – but, perhaps, we increasingly know more about their schools then they know about their own schools. Genre makes this possible.

**Kes and the comprehensives**

The film *Kes* revolves around the rather pathetic figure of Billy – a boy nearing the end of his compulsory schooling and with no intention of remaining there any longer then necessary. His home life is marred by neglect and abuse. It is a life in which, as he reveals in a phonetically spelled short story he writes at school, an incident not translated into film, he longs for a mother who loves him, his villainous half brother to depart the scene and his estranged father to return, imagining the never-to-happen day when he will experience the ecstasy of simple pleasures. ‘[W]e all went to the pictures...and had ice cream at the intervells and then we went home and had fish and chips for awur super and then went to bed’ (Hines, 1968:90). Miserable at school and home, Billy finds vicarious freedom through the kestrel, the eponymous Kes, whom he adopts.⁴ Physically and emotionally immature (like many of those around him, pupils and teachers, adults and children all alike) in Loach’s depiction, Billy is a ‘typical’ working

⁴ In a macabre twist, the bird of prey used to represent Billy’s kestrel in the film belonged to the enigmatic and controversial British soldier Robert Niarac 1948-1977, then a university student but later to be killed in Northern Ireland.
class ‘victim’.

*Kes* appeared at a time of considerable change in British schools generally. From the mid-1960s there was a more or less wholesale march towards the universal adoption of comprehensive (academically non-selective) secondary schools. Only in Northern Ireland was this move resisted completely, until recently. In 1965, then in opposition to a newly elected Labour government, the Conservatives proposed a motion for debate in parliament which urged caution in the shift towards comprehensive schools (the Labour Party in its long years of opposition after holding office between 1945 and 1951 having shifted away from its support of selective schooling). In January of 1965 the Conservatives called for local education authorities to be discouraged from closing grammar schools and fierce debate raged in parliament, but comprehensive principle won the day and a new system emerged.

The school that forms the backdrop to *Kes* is resolutely comprehensive and the comprehensives were conceived as an expression of mid-twentieth-century modernism. Everything about it screams modernity. It is a new type of school in new buildings, constructed along modernist lines. Its expresses hope for and faith in the future but it is clear throughout both the book and film that we are to understand this to be an increasingly forlorn hope. The school the central character attends is as dilapidated and battered as the policy that inspired its construction. The raising of the school leaving age to 16 promised in 1943/44 did not in fact come about until 1972/73 and the events in *Kes* occur in the hiatus between these two moments of historic policy making. But it is evident that whatever the legislative position, school is seen more as an impediment than an opportunity by the pupils who in habit the shabby mining town fringed by striking green countryside. The story’s hero is no more captivated by the prospect of an extended school day or school life than was the schoolboy imagined by William Blake [1757-1827] who found that ‘to go to school in a summer morn...drives all joy away’. Like Blake’s character, Billy seems to endure a life ‘Under a cruel eye outworn...spend[ing] the day/In sighing and dismay’. The cruel eye belongs,
presumably, to the teacher in each case. The teachers in Billy’s school are indeed ‘cruel’, authoritarian and, for the most part, indifferent to his plight. But there is no genuine spirit or rebellion in Billy’s school, he is no rebel himself; there is only low-level disruptions; silliness. He does not take school seriously and, in turn, ‘the school’ (its teachers and head) cannot take him seriously. A sullen mutual contempt is the result.

if…. .and the public schools

In if…. the central character is a rebellious public schoolboy who, through a chain of events all but impossible to relate, ends up leading a violent coup. He is a one-man vanguard party, issuing revolution from his gun barrel. He is also as confident as are all the schoolboys around him. It is only teachers, ‘masters’ (played by actors including Arthur Lowe [1915-1982] a stalwart of Anderson’s films) who are gauche in this worlds–never quite grown up – though the school’s head (played by Peter Jeffery [1929-1999]) is unctuously oleaginous. .In its narrative and aesthetic conventions and practices, if…. can tend to appear temporally dislocated. The story is anchored somewhat in the latter part of the twentieth century, though it could be the late 1950s as easily as the 1960s but the rhythms, rituals and routines (the other, or real, ‘3-Rs’, as it were) on which the school thrives – many of them infuriatingly petty – are presented as timeless, a characteristic feature of the self-image/self-presentation of public school communities.

Some public schools have always been linked with the needs of empires, for example Haileybury, [re-]founded as a public school in 1862 and United Services College, now defunct. Before it was a public school, Haileybury, from 1806, was the training college of the East India Company’s Administrators. United Services College was specifically intended to train for imperial and military posts sons of families too much sunk into gentile poverty to afford the fees of the better known schools. And the colonial expansion of the nineteenth century necessitated the training of ever more administrators and soldiers. In this fact lies the phenomenal growth of the selective, fee-paying schools in that century. More then half of the institutions currently listed as ‘independent schools’ in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales (taking boys’
school, girls’ schools and co-educational schools together) were founded after 1800. The public schools of the 1800s and 1900s served the British Empire and perpetuated something far older: the dream of Rome. In if.... one of the fascistic whips insists ‘I serve my country’ (‘whips’ being Anderson’s invented name for what are elsewhere typically known, in a Roman imperial reference, as prefects, senior pupils invested with disciplinary powers) and a passage is translated from Caesar’s *Gallic War* – cinematic shorthand for a wealth of classical and imperial associations.

Before the reforms at Rugby associated with Thomas Arnold [1795-1842] the public schools were places of fearful repute: with some justice (Chandos, 1984). During his public schooling the pioneering sexologist John Addington Symonds [1840-1893] witnessed, and recorded in an autobiographical manuscript deemed so scandalous that his family had it suppressed for some years after his death, at least one instance of what may have been a sexual assault (Addington Symonds, 1984: 94-95). Non-sexual violence was also far from being uncommon. One possible inspiration for the violent climax of if.... may lie in the public school rebellions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In these, protracted battles were fought between pupils on the one side and by school-masters on the other. The best-known rebellion occurred at Marlborough in 1851. In some Scottish schools the practice of pupils excluding teachers from the school’s precincts by physical force was common enough to earn the name of ‘barring-out’. The reformers of the 1800s did not so much suppress such violence as sublimate it into systemic discipline.

The public schools purport to be timeless but they are historically located. They were largely created in the nineteenth century to serve the needs of empire; they were culturally reformed in the same century though not before they had taken a stranglehold (still un-relinquished) on the imagination of the British. But the ‘prolific lowbrow families whose sons officered the army and navy and swarmed over all the waste places of the earth…were dwindling before 1914’ (Orwell, 1946/2004:38). And as the needs of the class changed, so too did the public schools. The school in if.... has
evidently been affected by the public school revolution of the 1960s in which academic success – previously disdained in their imperial-physicalist culture – became paramount (Rae, 1981). The headmaster delivers lengthy soliloquies to a seemingly sycophantic audience of whips on the need to prepare for the new rigours of commerce. It is the school’s function, above all else, to make men of boys: quickly.

**Kes and if...compared**

As a film, *if*...stands as far removed from what we identify as social realism as it is possible to be. When placed in the small and erratic archive of films made by Anderson, it does not seem out of place, but functions as a precursor to his *O Lucky Man!* and *Britannia Hospital* (Memorial Enterprises, 1973; Film & General/EMI, 1982), though these are not, strictly speaking, sequels to it. (For elaboration on this point, see Anderson’s own writings, particularly Anderson, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2004e and 2004f and, within this, especially the 1973 interview [2004e] in which he most directly addressed the question of how, if at all, various of his films related to each other). For its part, *if*... is deliberately episodic, with each new segment of the film being introduced by a caption; a device which sets up in the viewer not only a sense of prescribed expectation, but also a shared insight along with Anderson as to what is going to happen next. (For further discussion, see: Gourdin-Sangouard, 2010). Here there is a degree of collusion between director and audience with the captions ostensibly framing in the action. In common with Loach’s *Kes*, Anderson appears to draw his conventions from those of the 1950s documentary film-makers. But unlike Loach, who fills *Kes* with kitchen sink filmic values in which all that is missing is an authoritative voice-over to explain to the audience the finer points of British *lumpenproletarian* existence (what exactly is bingo? and precisely how chips should be eaten?), Anderson plays with the possibilities afforded by film (most obviously in the

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5 For convenience, and to avoid confusion, although items in his collected works were published at various dates, we use only the date of the collection’s publication (2004) for the purposes of citation. For original dates and places of publication, refer to the pieces themselves.
supposedly random switching being black and white and color). Loach’s only departure from rigid social realism, emphasised by the use of amateur performers, comes when sub-titles appear giving the score in the physical education [PE] lesson taking the form of a football/soccer match between ‘Manchester United’ and ‘Arsenal’ but actually involving only the gangly boys of Billy’s class and their teacher. The foot-balling sequence is thus viewing through the eyes of the fantasist teacher (memorably played by the late Brian Glover [1934-1997] one of the film’s few professional actors). He cannot admit his own failure to be a successful footballer and he thus lives vicariously through the pupils whom he teaches but also punished them for his failure – especially Billy whom he will later humiliate in the showers. He is an overgrown schoolboy, who would not have seemed out of place as one of the whips in if.... - were it not for the accident of birth that gave him the ‘wrong’ accent, thus making him seem permanently immature. By contrast, while a game of rugby – a sport literally synonymous with public school life – is played in if.... PE is represented primarily through a scene of lyrical beauty in which one boy watches with ill-disgusted homoerotic longing as another, older, pupil performs a delicate ballet of motion on the isometric bars. The sophistication of the latter’s performance speaks of the pursuit of excellence in all things: the public school ideal. There is no juvenile time-wasting here.

Anderson was also an accomplished stage director, which shows in the quality of the performances given by the actors, and the choreographing of the scenes which do have a staged sensibility to them. In Kes Loach’s camera in an unseen presence, it follows the actors around (like a clinging drunk). People seem to fall into shot, rather then shots being staged. It just so happens that a camera is present when certain events occur. And again, unlike Anderson, Loach’s view of the world through the camera is cinematically two dimensional. The subject matter is too grimly important to be ‘played with’ in displays of aesthetic flamboyance. The political import of the story has to be matched in a style that in no way detracts from this message; a form of cinematic Calvinism as it were. Its credibility as a story, although we do recognise it as a work of fiction, is nonetheless about a reality which most of us can only ever experience
vicariously. It is the cinematic equivalent of the Richard Hoggart’s text on ‘traditional’ working class life, *The Uses of Literacy* (Hoggart, 1957). What ultimately gives *Kes* its credibility (in as much as we allow this) is Loach himself. As genre the realist film/documentary has subsequently been extensively ‘spoofed’ by various other filmmakers (but this was largely a respected sub-genre in the 1960s and, for the most part, free from post-modern game-playing). Loach’s credentials as a serious director of social issues were established with his first film, *Cathy Come Home* which was concerned with homelessness at a time when such problems were, at least in popular and mainstream media consciousness, part of a long forgotten country made distant by the post-war settlement of which Butler’s educational reforms were one of the key elements (BBC, 1966). However, with the so called ‘rediscovery of poverty’ in the mid-1960s in the work of sociologist Peter Townsend, Loach’s film, a stylistic precursor to *Kes*, was considered both shocking and brutal. Loach’s films fall into two broad categories: those portraying the intimate and everyday politics of (largely dysfunctional) family life and those set on a bigger political canvas based around the labour movement. In both there is a sense of Loach (who was Oxbridge educated) playing the role of the anthropologist, the interested outsider, almost to the point of taking up the mantle of those early twentieth century socially troubled class tourists, the Fabians. For *Kes* to impact the ‘shock of the prole’ it can be no other way. To transfer to the story of *Kes* into the world of the Hollywood or even the Bollywood musical would diminish its power. In much the same way as Anderson liberally does in *if....* with non-realism, Loach plays on our knowingness vis-à-vis cinema and, more importantly, television conventions.

Anderson, on the other hand, makes the most of the process and explores and exploits a range of cinematic possibilities. Most celebrated in *if....* is, as we have said, the switching between black and white and color film stock at various junctions during the film. The drama in *if....* opens with the beginning of a new school term. Although the vast majority of the film’s audience would never have been to a public school, it is (we would presume), nonetheless a familiar trope. Other familiar points of reference follow:
rugby matches, bullying, medical inspections, cadet force drills. But events rapidly spiral into new depths of surrealism. The ‘hero’ and his acolytes kill (perhaps) the chaplain and are set to work clearing out the school’s collective unconscious – the space under the chapel. There they find a pickled fetus, a cache of arms and … a stuffed crocodile. This is not *Kes* country. But for all that *Kes* and *if*…. may seem to represent diametrically opposed cultures, classes and contexts, they are united in at least fundamental respect – they share a profoundly pessimistic sensibility. In their separate ways – through ‘realism’ or the contrived absence of realism – each makes the same fundamental claim about the relationship between class and destiny and both rely on tropes and images that are distinctively British to convey class difference: maturity and infantilism. Maturity is both a cause and an effect of self-confidence and, correlative, infantilism follows from lack of confidence and militates against it. The bullying brother and PE teacher in *Kes* both have only a semblance of confidence. Neither is truly grown up. While the young men of the public school assemble in its medieval chapel to hear a sermon from the padre before they march out in the ranks of the school cadet force, the children in *Kes* are seen sitting cross-legged on the floor of a bleak modernist assembly hall listening to a faltering rendition of a passage from Matthew (18;i-xiv) concerning ‘these little one’ and their special place in God’s sight. But they are the little ones – permanent children despite their age (the Billy character is 15, the actor appears about 12).

**Conclusion**

Studying films can be beneficial for historians and it can be all the more so if they undertake this work, metaphorically or literally, in the company of those who are already accomplished in ‘reading’ film. No doubt this exchange of ideas can be mutually beneficial. ‘Cinema scholars can certainly learn a great deal from historians, but historians can also learn from cinema scholars’ (Ross, 2004:130). The same might be said of the benefit accruing to educationalists from studying film – in the company of historians and/or ‘cinema scholars’. Depictions of schooling – when they are not
nostalgic costume dramas – are constructed in time and place: context. Understanding of context is what the historian brings. But films are constructed and understanding of the devices and tropes that make film possible is the cinema scholar’s gift. The educationalist brings knowledge of, and interest in, the process[es] of schooling, its aim[s] and effect[s]. As educationalists we find that juxtaposing if.... and Kes we are able to think using the language of history and that of cinema, this allows us to see one simple and apparently ineluctable fact of British education: the public schools have excelled at maturing their pupils, often by an accelerated and aggressive process of forcing them to grow up. This is evident also in other media, including a 1936 photographic study of Eton College by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy [1895-1946] where swaggering arrogance is much on display amongst pupils. (Grosvenor and Lawn, 2005). Correlatively, the comprehensive schools, the ultimate product of Butler’s reforms, have tended to infantilise theirs. Paradoxically, as Kes serves to show, the infantilising tendency of the comprehensives has its origins in authoritarianism. In contrast it was/is a combination of meaningful opportunities for pupils’ autonomy (as prefects or whips) and, regrettably, the sub-culture of bullying that made/makes for forced maturation in public schools, a theme amply demonstrated in if... and one Anderson intended to communicate, though that of infantilisation emerges by accident from Loach’s victimology of the working class. None of this is necessarily news to anyone familiar with the historic nature of British schools but film makes it possible to see these truths. Our eyes have been opened; our pupils dilated.
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