

**“Childhood is a problematic category in the modern world because so many social values are founded on it”.**

**Consider the filmic strategies used to probe the social contexts within which childhood is embedded, with examples from more than one film.**

Throughout history there have been questions about childhood, its role in society, and the consequential implications for the adult world. Childhood provides the foundation for adulthood, it is a period of growth, learning, and integration into the experienced, working world. Moreover, childhood lays the groundwork for future generations; good morals and skills must be passed down descendants, to ensure smooth running of the world when the present rulers and workers pass away.

Two films that portray a specific role for society in the nurturing of childhood are Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* and Nicholas Philibert's *Etre et Avoir*. Combined, these two films investigate the extent to which children have a voice of their own, and the relationship between an adult's view of a child's needs in preparation for a successful future in contrast to a child's desires in the present. In *The Kid*, the orphaned boy Jackie has different wants and needs to those deemed necessary by the adult or authoritative world's view. Similarly, Jojo in *Etre et Avoir* expresses his reason for being at school in response to teacher Lopez's question, "why do you come to school?" with a simple answer, "because my mummy makes me". Education, then, both from the curriculum of government schooling and from a parents' attempt to socialise their children, plays largely the biggest factor in the role of childhood in society – and conflict arises when there is disagreement about the importance of, and the methods of implementing, education.

The two films allow for a contrast between the viewer's sympathies. In fictional *The Kid* (1921), audience sympathy lies largely with the tramp and the boy, played by Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan respectively. Love, for these two

anti-heroes, brings them together. State education plays a minor role as it is the social, domestic and emotional needs that the two gain from and give to each other; the dynamics of the father-son relationship within a self-contained family unit supply an unending amount of comedy and melodrama for the viewers as Chaplin aims to teach Jackie the ways of the world. Set against an urban backdrop of poverty, self-reliance and isolation, this 1920 film aimed to merge popular forms of art and high artistic status, creating a world which could be appreciated by critics and entertainment-seekers alike. The two protagonists have a social role to fulfil; the father that of responsibility (where previously he had none) whilst the son must rely on the security and knowledge offered to him by Chaplin. The film has a resonant echo of Chaplin's own upbringing in an orphanage, where he tasted first hand the biting pain of hunger and the frustration of poverty in an urban landscape. It has been described by some as 'Dickensian', having uncanny parallels to Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*. Indeed, Jackie's removal by orphanage officials provides a striking resemblance to Oliver's recapture by Sikes and Nancy.

This film moves the audience to sympathise with this unlikely pair. It incorporates elements of slapstick comedy alongside melodrama, to provide a closeness and empathy with characters that were and still are jilted by society. As John Kimber claims, "with the film's unashamedly direct dramatisation of the sense of loss and vulnerability comes the danger of sentimentality"<sup>1</sup>. The attention to detail of their family life, from when Jackie is a baby and happily cared for by an improvised hammock and bottle, inadequate nappy and an unlikely toilet seat, to when they are both older, enjoying pancake making together, encourages the viewers to see the unique bond between them. Chaplin must teach himself to be an adequate father by fulfilling those filial duties commonly associated with the mother, such as weaning and nursing the baby when it is young, and feeding the boy as he grows older.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Art of Charlie Chaplin*, Shoffield: 2000

The comedy is a device that probes the social situation in both the film and its position within each viewer. It at once distances the audience through action whilst simultaneously drawing them back in through the emotion portrayed on screen. It combines the physical slapstick humour with a new genre – that of “the comedy of feeling”. It enables the viewers to feel sympathies with those labelled as social outcasts. Tramps and children are little cared for by society, and most definitely frowned upon. It may explain why both Chaplin and Jackie take social solace and security in each other – rendering it even crueller to separate them. The juxtaposition between slapstick comedy and dramatic melodrama is nowhere more apparent than the scene in which the orphanage officials arrive to take Jackie away. His violent crying in the corner whilst his ‘father’ Chaplin is being mollified on the bed is heart-warming and anger provoking – yet the next moment Jackie hits the officials over the head with a hammer, provoking laughter. Hence the opening text, “A picture with a smile – and, perhaps, a tear” is justified. The comedy may be said to aid the emotion as it allows viewers to warm towards the characters, enabling the spectator to question the justice of government actions and to examine their own prejudices against children (and, indeed, those living in poverty). The music is just one example of how the two genres – slapstick comedy and dramatic melodrama are both separated yet inextricably entwined – the music breaks the mood between scenes and cues in the different genre for each moment of the film.

The film also offers the strategy of stereotyped figures in order to pursue the particular social context in which childhood is embedded in the 1920’s. State education became compulsory for every child only in the late nineteenth century, and whilst this fact is not explicitly deemed demonic, those figures that try to implement it are. There is a sense of ‘the enemy’ in the characters of the doctor and the police, as well as the orphanage officials. These figures reiterate their view that, “this boy needs proper care and attention”. By attempting to keep the boy fed, educated, well housed and in good health, the government officials are reasserting the importance that society places on childhood, as a preparation for

the country's future. As a child cannot and should not work for money, and does not have the mental powers to understand their situation and position in life, or the physical means to alter it, it seems unjust that a child should endure what they cannot help. However the tramp is iconic in his view that love provides all the emotional and domestic needs of the child. The love is almost selfish however, as Chaplin's distress in the prospect of losing Jackie is inextricable from the loss of his own role as a father figure. He has lost his sense of identity and belonging, and will obviously strive (as the audience strive inwardly with him) to get it back. The film leaves viewers with the sense that action and practical support for the future are inferior to the feeling and emotional support that a child needs in the present. In this same way, the theme of materialism in contrast to invisible love plays a recurring role. When Jackie's legitimate mother meets her son for the first time, the image of the dirty, bedraggled son in comparison to the mother's luxurious, pristine fur coat is jarred –the audience is not drawn in to her emotions at this highly emotive point in the film, wrapped up as they are by her wealth and finery. It is more desirable that love and want for another, in all its bare naked poverty, be fulfilled. Why, it may be asked, are the viewers drawn in by these outcasts? Perhaps it is the very fact that these characters live in poverty that is so endearing. Chaplin and Jackie obviously only have each other to cling to in a large, scary world of strangers and insults. The sacrifices that Chaplin made in order to accommodate Jackie into his penniless lifestyle are in contrast to the selfishness of the mother in abandoning Jackie when he was born for a more materially productive lifestyle. The attention to detail, as previously mentioned, also shows snippets of their bare and loving life together. Jackie makes pancakes for Chaplin, gaining domestic responsibility (or even the maternal role), and in return Chaplin aims to educate him socially, teaching him manners and the importance of prayer. Working together smashing and then fixing windows is yet another example of their co-dependency on one another, this time for financial gain.

*Etre et Avoir* is a more recent film than *The Kid*, filmed in 2002. It contrasts with *The Kid* in many ways, not least because it is set in a tiny rural French town as opposed to an urban metropolis. This documentary follows the classroom teaching of a dozen or so children, all aged between 4 and 10, who are taught together by teacher Georges Lopez. Of course the film projects a different image of state education than *The Kid*, as instead of the heartless officials that try to take Jamie away to an unknown 'institution' in an attempt to instil some acceptable morals in the form of 'care and attention' into him, the teacher is shown to be emotionally attached to his class, be it because of the low number of pupils he must care for, or because the rural situation encourages a more community, and interested, atmosphere. The cane was abolished in England in 1987 and this no doubt reflects on the type of 'punishment' the deviant children receive.

Emphasis has moved from the parents as the major social and emotional educator onto the teacher. This is apparent in the home scenes where the parents are filmed helping their child with homework. Some parents are more helpful and less scolding than others, yet in all of the scenes chosen by the director to film it can be seen that there is a distinct lack of tutoring or mentoring. Of course it must be taken into account that the director no doubt is aiming at showing the teacher as more of a father figure than any of the parents, providing an active role model (most of the children admit to wanting to become teachers when they are older, undoubtedly due to Lopez's influence). The children here have responsibility in a different way to that of the boy in *The Kid*, yet in some ways there are surprising similarities. There is a shot of a boy in *Etre et Avoir* cooking and serving his younger sister's meal, in the same way that Jason in *The Kid* cooked and provided food for Chaplin. There is also a shot of the same boy in *Etre et Avoir* driving a tractor on the farm, evidently aiding his father's business and family income the way that Jason does for Chaplin.

The one striking difference however is the lack of responsibility the children have in the classroom. Here, they are able to enjoy their childhood, and what is more, the teacher joins in, like one big happy family in a carefree world. Playing in the snow with the Lopez, going on summery picnics and having birthday parties are activities that are contrasted with the more maternal role of the teacher in hanging up the children's hats and gloves to dry over the fire (creating a particularly familial image) and of baking together. Even further, the protective father role is reinforced when one of the children goes missing at the picnic – the desperation in Lopez's voice as he calls her name is unmistakable. Indeed, the last shot of Lopez, emotional, watching the children as they leave his classroom for the last time, is ironically similar to a stereotypical image of a mother waving her children off as they leave home for the day to go to school for the first time.

*Etre et Avoir* is a docu-drama, a new genre of screen-media that desires to be cinematic and entertaining in approach, yet informative throughout. The director Philebert creates a story by following the life of Lopez, the teacher, and examining his relationship with some of the children who have particular problems. *The Kid*, set in a different country in a historical time, is nevertheless similar to *Etre et Avoir* in its attempt to portray certain themes, of which poverty, impressionable minds, attention to detail and childhood in vulnerable circumstances all feature.

The teacher takes the role of not only the government officials so hated in *The Kid*, but also of Chaplin's parental role itself. The ongoing argument that the government underestimate the amount of work a teacher must complete before, during and after the lesson is apparent in *Etre et Avoir*. Not only does the teacher work late evenings (there are shots of Lopez bent over a desk in the lamplight whilst darkness ensues outside) and prepare the class of a morning, but is usually called to settle a tiff between the children during the break and lunch times, or supervise those children that must stay in and complete their work due to failure to do so during lesson time (such as the incident with Jojo). The



teaching does not strictly follow the set curriculum either, but is focused also on the child's mental, emotional and social development and problems. There are shots of Lopez teaching two argumentative boys about the necessity of communication and compromise. There is also the poignant scene where Lopez encourages Nathalie to open up to him, and to gain more confidence in a way that she never would with her mother, who previously had claimed, "she won't talk to me. I don't know what to do".

Lopez teaches his pupils to try to stand on their own feet. He claims to Julian, "You won't have personal care [in middle school]. I won't be here to look out for you. Punishment is harder. You have to change your attitude". Presumably the change is to be from one of dependency to independency. Lopez attempts to instil in his pupils the need to conform to a 'norm'. There is a right way to behave, and a wrong way. This is a major factor of modern childhood, and one which causes debate in every educational sector. Lopez imagines, predicts and languishes the norm, attempting to draw Nathalie out of her hard shell and to prepare his students for ridicule, punishment and unhappiness if they do not conform. There lies therein another similarity between *The Kid* and *Etre et Avoir*, and a theme which evidently has not changed throughout history; the need to be educated to obey the rules of the particular society in which they are to live. Reputation and social standing is not such a problem as it was in the Victorian era, when public opinion contributed and dictated ones friends, occupation and family happiness. Yet there continues to be the lingering need to 'fit in', to be socially acceptable, and to obey authority as the law that dictates how adults live to ensure children to best possible chance of happiness. Even if a child has his profession set out for him, to become a farmer in *Etre et Avoir* like their ancestors, education in this all too important aspect is deemed by most as the key to success, despite modern pluralists attempting to draw out pupils' differences and 'uniqueness' through education.

*Etre et Avoir's* very title (To be and to have) suggests the passage of childhood as a time of premonition and pre-emptivity, detailing the past before the future to come. The film has a feel of the past at the beginning, and throughout the school year (which seems too short to a viewer, as it is crammed into the space of two hours) the seasons merge and provide a constant reminder of the inevitability of time moving forwards, and of change. The seasons provide visual and aural testament of this, as only they can in a rural setting, as opposed to the urban sameness of *The Kid*, where characters Chaplin and Jason only look towards their next meal. Ideas for the future are prominent, and the teacher prepares them for it in a way that Chaplin never does in *The Kid*. Lopez asks them explicitly, "what do you want to be when you grow up?" This statement not only hints that a person's occupation is a label that determines one's character, social station and lifestyle, (note the question is most often what do you want to *be*, as opposed to what do you want to *do*) but also implies that their passage of childhood is a preparatory step towards adulthood, where the real fruits of life are to be found. With so much preparation, so much rushing towards the future and an occupation, it is a wonder that the child's innocence is not lost so soon.

Teacher Lopez takes a very liberal teaching method, in that he allows the children to play, and to discuss topics that they are interested in. He enables them to have a go each at completing tasks on the board and to have a say, even if they don't want to; thus the advantages of a small class. He inspires their imaginations through discussion and creative tasks, and through enjoying the rural landscape that surrounds the school. This is a very different image of state schooling that many of us have, or have witnessed. It does not dictate the child's learning curve in a way that strict adherence to a curriculum and minimal teacher-pupil interaction might. It is the reason that Lopez provides such a strong role model for the children and the reason why they can learn from their mistakes and can get along with each other in a social environment. Interestingly, Lopez admits to having a farming family and background, and his reluctance to go into that trade is an example of the increase of white-collar workers, and less skills-



specific training of recent years. Indeed, it is assumed that Lopez does not want his pupils to simply become farmers, but will use their educational advantage to follow their dreams.

Thus the debate still continues. Should education play such a large role in a child's life? Does it define their present, or is it simply a step towards the future? Are a child's needs presumed, or are they real, and does an adult simply provide for those needs by preparing a child for the future, by neglecting the present? Childhood indeed plays a very difficult and ambiguous role in society. With little notice and credit given to their opinion (less so in modern times) and such emphasis and pressure placed on children to conform in one way (yet not in others) it is inevitable that the topic arises continually to adapt to a constantly changing society. Films such as *The Kid* and *Etre et Avoir* attempt to show their audiences the nature of education, of childhood, and of the conflict between a child's voice in the present and the voice of the adult that this child will become in the future. The conflict between time periods, between perspectives (parental, governmental, tutorial) and between children themselves as they struggle to make sense of a world they cannot yet grasp are just a few of the major themes of these two films. Capturing impressions of childhood through the years should help the present society to understand their achievements – and failures – of nurturing, educating and placing the young, and will continue to do so in the future, the notion of childhood holding, as it does, such a hugely important and prominent role in society.