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### Sweet Sixteen

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Title: *Sweet Sixteen*

Countries of Origin: UK, Germany, Spain

Year: 2002

Language: English

Production Companies: Alta Films, British Broadcasting Corporation, Road Movies Filmproduktion, Scottish Screen, Sixteen Films, Tornasol Films

Filming Locations: Greenock, Glasgow

Director: Ken Loach

Producers: Rebecca O'Brien, Michael André, Ulrich Felsberg, Gerardo Herrero

Screenwriter: Paul Laverty

Cinematographer: Barry Ackroyd

Art Director: Fergus Clegg

Editor: Jonathan Morris

Runtime: 106 minutes

Cast (Starring): Martin Compston, William Ruane, Annmarie Fulton

**Synopsis:** Fifteen-year-old Liam may be a boy, but he is also a seasoned businessman. The grim socioeconomic realities of childhood years spent on a workless, drug-ravaged public housing scheme in the Scottish Central Belt coastal town of Greenock have rendered his self-reliance and ingenuity as sharp as the knives he refuses to carry for protection on the local streets. While running a number of money-making schemes with his best friend, Pinball, Liam awaits the imminent release of his mother, recovering drug addict Jean, from prison. Desperate to wrest back his absent parent from the clutches of her manipulative partner, small-time pusher Stan, Liam himself starts selling heroin, aiming thus to buy Jean a fresh start, in the shape of a trailer home with stunning sea views, once she leaves jail. Initially, matters seem to go well: success in his latest business venture provides a substantial down-payment for the trailer home and attracts the admiring notice of a major local drug dealer, who makes Liam an offer of permanent employment. Ultimately, however, Liam's hopes, and the new abode that houses them, are turned to ashes. Pinball, fearful that his friend's success will destroy their relationship, burns down the trailer home. Jean, meanwhile, swaps one state of incarceration for another, returning to Stan immediately after exiting prison. Enraged and bewildered by the failure of money to secure his happiness and that of those closest to him, Liam confronts and stabs Stan. *Sweet Sixteen* ends with its central character wandering alone along a local beach on his sixteenth birthday, the prospect of arrest and imprisonment marking the start – and, perhaps, simultaneous end – of his adult life.

**Critique:** *Sweet Sixteen* is the most dramatically and thematically accomplished of all the Scottish-set features made by director Ken Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty in the two decades or so since their first collaboration, *Carla's Song* (1996). Right from the outset, central character Liam's actions and aspirations possess a degree of psychological and political complexity that exceeds those of his counterparts elsewhere in Loach and Laverty's Scottish oeuvre. Unlike similarly deprived compatriots such as Joe – *My Name is Joe* (1998) – or Robbie – *The Angels' Share* (2012) – Liam is figured as both victim *and* villain within the Thatcherite-cum-Blairite socioeconomic model that forms the central narrative backdrop to, and ideological target of, his co-creators' collaborative work. Like Joe and Robbie, Liam's personal circumstances demonstrate the frightening extent to which Free Market ideologies bring about the systematic economic dispossession of whole swathes of society. But unlike those characters, Liam also personifies that political creed's power to impoverish its victims in moral, as well as material, terms, thus rendering them as or semi-/un-conscious agents of their own oppression. As such, he possesses the potential to provoke a degree of emotional care and political questioning unmatched by any other protagonist within Loach and Laverty's Scottish work.

For a representative sense of just how involved and inquisitive a viewer response Liam and *Sweet Sixteen* invite, one need look no further than the film's opening scene, a sequence as explicitly beautiful but implicitly disturbing as anything Loach and Laverty have created together. On a starlit night on the hills above Greenock, Liam and Pinball charge an enraptured crowd of local children twenty-five pence a time for the opportunity to gaze at the planet Saturn through Liam's telescope. The most immediately obvious overtones of the scene seem highly pleasurable and positive in nature: the small-scale innocence of the kids' enjoyment and their guides' entrepreneurialism; the telescope's functioning as a symbol of Liam's intrinsically attractive imaginative ability to seek out worlds other than the deprived one into which he has been born. More fundamentally, however, the sequence also presages the disquieting fact that who and what viewers see as *Sweet Sixteen* unfolds – Liam, Pinball, and the society they inhabit – constitute rigorously monetised entities that are built upon the repression and perversion of human potential. After all, even in the movie's opening moments, the immensity of space is as much a commodity to be sold as it is a pleasure to be shared, while the seemingly harmless fantasy that Liam sells – you can escape to wherever and whatever you want, so long as you are able to pay for the privilege – is also one that he will be seen to buy into, with disastrous consequences for himself and those around him. Though Liam ardently believes that he can build an atomised life of nuclear familial security, both economic and emotional, on the addictions of others, that self-centred aspiration is in the end shown to be as practicably inaccessible as the celestial body that viewers first see him charging children for a fleeting glimpse of.

*Sweet Sixteen's* introductory suggestion that Free Market socioeconomic models commoditise all forms of emotional instinct and aspiration finds numerous echoes as the film progresses. Stan encourages Liam to kiss Jean during a prison visit, not out of respect for parent/child ties, but because this act offers a method to smuggle drugs into the jail for Jean to sell to other inmates. The appearance of the trailer home that Liam sets his heart upon buying – erected slightly apart from

others in the caravan park, decorated with a miniature white picket fence, and set against an uninhabited backdrop of sky, sea and hillside – offers an elegant implication of the boy's belief that personal security lies in an escape from, rather than embrace of, collectivist social practices and values. And, perhaps most pointedly of all, there is the bitterly ironic counterpoint between the sight of Liam and Pinball selling smack to their fellow youths on the Greenock streets and the sound – not to mention, sentiment – of The Pretenders' song 'I'll Stand by You', a personal favourite of Jean's that Liam sends his mother a recording of in order to sustain her spirits during the final stretch of her prison term.

In the final analysis, then, Liam is a strikingly complex and thought-provoking protagonist. If we assume the narrative present tense of *Sweet Sixteen* to be 2002, the year of the film's international theatrical release, then he is quite literally, to coin a much-used phrase from British socio-political discourse, one of 'Thatcher's Children'. Born in 1987, Liam's actions and aspirations a decade-and-a-half later represent a wholesale internalisation of the former Prime Minister's notorious assertion, in a press interview given in the aftermath of her third UK General Election victory that same year, that: "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families... people must look to themselves first." Yet, while Loach and Laverty use Liam's journey as a narrative vehicle through which to emphatically refute the validity of that ideological principle, they never reduce their creation to the level of dramatic cipher or bogeyman. Liam's personal attributes and class background are not exploited as convenient fodder for wholesale idealisation or demonisation, exculpation or condemnation. Instead, the painstaking construction of Liam's character and personal journey work as a nuanced exploration of the fraught (because ultimately one-sided) interplay between individual agency/aspiration and socioeconomic determinism that, in Loach and Laverty's view, confronts significant sections of contemporary Scottish society. As such, they also show his creators' collaborative skills operating at a notable creative peak.

Jonathan Murray