

Kidulthood



INTRODUCTION

Kidulthood tells the story of a turbulent 48 hours in the life of a group of fifteen-year-olds living in West London. Filmmaker Menhaj Huda and his youthful cast set out to show what life was really like for young people growing up today and the problems and issues they face. The film was shot in the UK in just four and a half weeks on a minimal budget but incorporates all the action and suspense of a big Hollywood production.

BEFORE YOU VIEW THE FILM:

- If the film aims to portray real life for fifteen-year-olds, what do you expect it to be about? What sort of characters do you expect to see and where do you expect the action to take place?
- Now look at the poster image. How does this confirm or contradict your expectations?
- Why do you think the title 'Kidulthood' was chosen? Think about all the different parts of the word - what associations does it have and what impression does it give of what you are about to see?

SETTING THE TONE

In the early stages of a film we, as an audience, are watching intently for indications of character and genre and clues as to where the narrative will lead. It is important for the filmmaker to use this time to set the tone of the film so that we can build certain expectations of what will follow. By creating a mood or atmosphere the filmmaker can engage us fully in the narrative on an emotional level. The opening sequence of *Kidulthood* makes it clear right from the start that the action is set in a world where tension and aggression are part of everyday life. We are prepared for the conflict to come and eager to see how it will be resolved.

- The action is set in a school playground. How does this contradict traditional associations of the playground and what effect does this have?
- How is tension and/or aggression conveyed through the body language and facial expression of each group of characters?
- Is it easy to identify the 'outsiders'? If so, how?
- How does the filmmaker build tension into the story of Sam and Claire at this point?
- What words would you use to describe the images of Trife we see in the opening sequence of the film? How do they support what is going on around him? How do they contrast with them? What do you assume he is doing?
- How does the soundtrack add to the feeling of tension?

REPRESENTATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Representing young people in film can be problematic, not least because filmmakers are invariably almost a generation away from the age they are trying to represent. In an attempt to avoid misrepresentation, the characters in *Kidulthood* are played by young actors who were encouraged to improvise, particularly with regard to language, as filming progressed.

Kidulthood aims to give an accurate representation of what young people are really like. Filmmaker Menhaj Huda said that between finishing production and awaiting distribution he was constantly aware of incidents and issues reported in the news that directly paralleled those in the film.

The film has been a success with young audiences who reported in test screenings that they felt that they 'knew' the characters in real life and could identify with the way in which they looked, spoke and behaved.

- What are the main stories in the film? Are these representative of the majority of young people?
- What kinds of activities do we see the 'kids' doing throughout the day?
- How do you feel about the language used in the film? Is it an accurate representation of how young people speak?
- How do we feel about the incident where Trife is accused of stealing the Burberry cap? How does the filmmaker influence our thoughts by the way in which it is presented?
- How are the adults in the film represented? Who is seen in a) a positive light b) a negative light? How is this shown as influencing or impacting on the actions of the teenagers?
- How do you feel about the way in which young people are represented by the media in a) film b) print media?
- What do you think the reaction of someone aged 50+ might be to the film? What would you say to them?
- Do you think the film raises issues of gender or race?
- In what ways do you think the film could help empower young people?

STYLE

Although *Kidulthood* aims to present an accurate picture of teenage life, this does not necessarily mean that it has to be shot in a 'realistic' style. The locations, sets and props that we see are those that we are familiar with from everyday life, establishing the film in a modern, urban environment and enabling us to identify with the characters and the action that takes place. However, filmmaker Menhaj Huda uses a variety of different styles within the film to convey the range of events and emotions that the 'kids' experience. It will not surprise you to learn that Huda comes from an MTV background and you can see that he employs many of the techniques commonly used in music videos to create a funky, stylised effect which complements and enhances the film's soundtrack.

Many of the most memorable scenes in the film make skilful use of mise-en-scene, where all the different elements of film language (lighting, sound, camera position and movement, sets, clothes and props) combine to create a certain mood or atmosphere. For instance, when we see Trife on his way to his uncle's house he turns off the busy street to walk alone down narrow alleyways, dwarfed by the back side of buildings on either side. He's in the dark for much of the time, and the soundtrack is menacing. The camera is set at a low angle and at one point he appears to step over it as the image reverses. All these elements combine to create an atmosphere of unease and suggest that he is entering 'the underworld', where normal rules no longer apply. Trife himself is seen as a small figure, insignificant and overwhelmed in this new environment.

- When Trife first enters his uncle's house we are temporarily reassured - it looks like a normal house party is taking place. However, the equilibrium is soon disturbed. How does the film language create a sense of unease? How does the editing add to this?
- How are we made to identify with Trife and his horror during and after the torture scene?
- Think about the scene where the girls are in Becky's house, drinking and taking drugs before going out shopping. How do the elements of film language combine to create an atmosphere of partying? What MTV-style techniques can you identify? Look carefully at the décor of Becky's house. What is the effect of setting the action here and what do you think the filmmaker might be saying about her character, through this set?
- Who do we identify with in the scene where Katie is bullied? How is the position and movement of the camera used to affect our point-of-view?
- How does the mise-en-scene create atmosphere in the scene in the bedroom where Katie commits suicide?

VIOLENCE IN THE FILM

Kidulthood has received mixed reviews, accused by some of glamourising gun culture and promoting 'happy slapping.' However, the film does carry a strong moral message. Whenever we see episodes of violence, whether bullying, fighting or torture, we experience the full visual horror of the situation. This is not stylised Hollywood violence, seen from a safe distance as an onlooker, inciting feelings of macho power. Here, we are placed in the position of victim or, equally uncomfortably, in the position of unwilling perpetrator, and we are close enough to feel the blows. The death of Trife at the end of the film juxtaposed as it is with the promise of a new start with Alisa and their baby only serves to reinforce the message to young males that street violence is not cool and can have tragic consequences.

- Think of all the instances in the film where people are bullied. Who is the bully in each case and what are the results of it? Remember that bullying may not always be physical.
- Who are the heroes in the film and why? Are they heroes in the traditional sense of the term?
- Would the film have had such impact if Trife had not died at the end?
- Make a list of all the factors in the film which you consider to be a) pro and b) anti violence. Think about the narrative, characters and also the style of the film.
- Write a letter to your local paper in support or defence of the idea that Kidulthood promotes violence and therefore should or should not be screened at your local cinema.

RITE OF PASSAGE

In an interview with the cast, Aml Ameen says that he feels his character, Trife, 'wants to know what it is to be a man'. Red Madrell, who plays Alisa, talks about the 'journey' her character undergoes in the film and how she has developed during the course of the 48 hours. In this way the film can be seen as a rite of passage, a film about circumstances which mark the change from childhood to adult life.

- How have a) Trife and b) Alisa changed by the closing sequence of the film? What experiences in particular do you think were influential in this?
- Do any other characters change? In what way, and through what experiences?
- What other 'rite of passage' films can you think of? What similarities and differences can you find with Kidulthood?

Author: Anita Abbott

©Film Education 2006