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Ken Loach: Rebel with a cause

Loach's films about poverty in modern Britain are the most powerful of his career. Now in his eighties, the director is still taking the fight to anyone he sees as the enemy

by [Wendy Ide](#) / November 13, 2019 / [Leave a comment](#)



ILLUSTRATION BY TIM MCDONAGH

When Ken Loach and his regular screenwriter Paul Laverty were researching *I, Daniel Blake*, their 2016 film about a punitive unemployment benefits system, they noticed something alarming. The people visiting food banks were by no means all without jobs. A substantial number were trapped in zero-hours contracts and relied on charity to feed themselves and their families. It soon became clear to Loach and Laverty that there was a film to be made about

the working poor. Their new film *Sorry We Missed You*, also set in Newcastle upon Tyne, is an archetypal Loach/Laverty examination of the life of a working-class family stuck on the treadmill of relentless graft, with debts accruing.

It was, Loach tells me when I meet him in the unassuming Soho offices of his production company, conceived as a companion piece to *I, Daniel Blake*, both formally and thematically. "That's one of the reasons we went back to Newcastle, apart from it's a great place to work. The idea was to tell a story in the same way: as economically, as simply. It's a kind of spare way of filming so that there's nothing surplus. But the aim is that it should be very simple so that the complexity of the relationships and the nuances of the parent, child, sibling [interactions]—there's space for that not to be over simplified."

His approach works. These films are two of the finest of his career. *I, Daniel Blake* won the Palme d'Or in Cannes, the second time that Loach has won the top prize at the festival (the first was for the harrowing *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, a 2006 work about a family tearing itself apart during the Irish war of independence). *Sorry We Missed You* also premiered in competition in Cannes to glowing reviews. In both recent films, the economy of approach magnifies the power of key moments: the food bank scene in *I, Daniel Blake*, where a desperately hungry single mother eats beans from a can using her fingers, is matched in impact by a devastating hospital scene in *Sorry We Missed You*, in which a mild-mannered wife launches into an expletive-heavy tirade on the phone to the manager who has worked her husband to breaking point. These are blunt, brutally effective moments designed to give the audience pause.

A deft blend of dry humour and (mostly) understated outrage, *Sorry We Missed You* portrays a struggling family. Ricky (Kris Hitchen) is a former builder who takes on a contract as a parcel delivery driver; his wife Abbie (Debbie Honeywood) sells her car to bankroll his new position, placing additional pressure on her own job as a care worker and home visitor. Their precarious existence is upended when the couple's teenage son gets into trouble.

Loach is not a man who pulls his punches. Over a career spanning five decades, the 83-year-old director has produced films such as *Kes*, the seminal 1969 drama about a working-class boy and his pet kestrel; *Ladybird, Ladybird*, about a woman's battle with social services to keep her children; and *My Name is Joe*, starring Peter Mullan as a recovering alcoholic. He believes in blistering candour—both as a filmmaker and as a public figure. And, despite making modestly budgeted, left-wing, arthouse-friendly films rather than mass-market multiplex fare, a public figure he most certainly is. Depending on your perspective,

he's either a vocal thorn in the side of an uncaring political establishment or a hectoring ideologue. This slight, bespectacled football fan is a scourge of the right-wing and, occasionally, the liberal press. Having previously cut his ties with the Labour Party during the Blair years, he was involved with Arthur Scargill's breakaway Socialist Labour Party and in 2004 went so far as to stand for the European Parliament for George Galloway's Respect Party. He is now a firm supporter of Jeremy Corbyn.

Loach prides himself on holding up a mirror to the problems of ordinary folk. But he does not merely produce worthy entertainment. He wants to encourage the audience to engage with issues, to motivate them to organise. Cinema can be a sop. But Loach believes it can also be a force for political change.

Famously, one of Loach's earliest films, the BBC television drama *Cathy Come Home*, was just that. Written by Jeremy Sandford and broadcast in 1966 as part of the regular Wednesday Play, it told the story of an indebted young woman facing homelessness, the breakdown of her marriage and the loss of her children to the care system. In an era where it was complacently assumed that the post-war welfare state had "abolished poverty," the film helped to raise awareness of real social issues and got more attention for homeless charities like Shelter, which coincidentally was launched a few days after the film went out.

"In 2004, he stood for George Galloway's Respect Party. Now he is a firm supporter of Jeremy Corbyn"

When *Cathy Come Home* aired, it showed on one of just "two and a half" television stations. In our fragmented digital age, does cinema still have the same capacity to shape public attitudes? "It's an idea, images, thoughts, analysis, judgments, concerns," Loach tells me, "that you put into the public to be considered and put forward to be argued over and thought about. So, I mean it is part of the noise, isn't it?" There's rather more noise than there used to be, however. "I agree, but just occasionally you can cut

through it."

If *Cathy Come Home* dispelled the illusions of one generation, 50 years later *I, Daniel Blake* pulled the scales from our eyes about the effects of austerity. It touched a nerve with audiences and claimed a share of the conversation. Comedian Dave Johns, who played the title role of a man ensnared in a labyrinthine benefits system following a heart attack, spoke about the film's ongoing

impact a year after its release. He recalled a pensioner who instructed him to pass on his gratitude to Loach for making a film that had given a voice to the working classes, “a voice that nobody’s listened to for the last 50 years.”

The film was even mentioned in parliament: Corbyn suggested Theresa May go and see it. Does Loach know if May ever got around to watching it? “I’ve no idea. I’m not bothered about Theresa May, to be honest. I mean, they’re the enemy. We’ve got to remove them. There’s no negotiating with them.” So pleasant is his delivery that the force of his words takes a moment to register. He adds, “They asked for a private screening for Iain Duncan Smith,” the minister who introduced the benefit changes the film excoriated, “and we said no. I mean what a sanctimonious, appalling man he is. And the idea that he should get a special screening. No: if he wants to see it, he’ll have to pay.” Duncan Smith did watch the film in the end, and criticised it for both the negative portrayal of Jobcentre staff and for the fact that it took “the very worst of anything that can ever happen to anybody and lumped it all together and then said this is life absolutely as it is lived by people, and I don’t believe that.”

In person, Loach cuts a spry figure. Not frail exactly, but whittled down to essentials. He’s a bracing conversationalist: springy, engaged, questioning, but with the occasional touch of the caution that comes with knowing that his quotes make headlines—not always in the context that they were intended.

Forthright in getting his message across, his uncompromising steeliness can rub people up the wrong way. In 2009, a few months after the IDF unleashed the devastating Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, Loach called for the Edinburgh Film Festival to return £300 the Israeli embassy had paid for a young filmmaker to travel for the festival. The artistic director of the festival later said she felt personally targeted by his threat to call for her dismissal should the festival fail to act. There were media reports of bullying. The festival returned the money and paid for the filmmaker’s flight themselves.



Birdmen: David Bradley, who played the hawk-loving teenager in *Kes*, with Barry Hines, the author of the novel Loach adapted, in 1970. Photo: AF ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

There is no doubting Loach's passion for the Palestinian cause. But his relentlessness, his instinct to stick with one side and regard the other as being simply—like Theresa May—the enemy, has had divisive consequences. He brushed aside controversial remarks about the Holocaust reportedly made at one Labour fringe meeting by saying “history is there for all of us to discuss,” and he is also a prominent supporter of Jackie Walker, the former deputy leader of Momentum, who was expelled from the Labour Party after posting on Facebook that Jews were the “chief financiers of the sugar and slave trade.” In a recent interview, Loach described a *Panorama* focusing on Labour Party anti-semitism as “probably the most disgusting programme I've ever seen on the BBC.”

It would be a mistake to underestimate just how uncompromising, trenchant and radical Loach remains, even in his eighties. He is serious about socialist economics. *I, Daniel Blake*, he explains, is not just a film about the dehumanising nature of the benefits system, just as *Sorry We Missed You* is not only a film about zero-hours contracts and the gig economy. “It is about what creates that poverty in the first place. The questions go right to the heart of the economic system, because in a planned economy there would be social engagement for everyone.” So the aim is not just to agitate for more generous benefits or stronger legislation to protect workers: it's nothing less than the disintegration of capitalism itself.

Born in Nuneaton, Warwickshire in 1936, Loach has working-class roots but was nonetheless raised as a Tory. The son of a hairdresser mother and a father who was the foreman in a local factory, he was a bright student who attended grammar school and then read law at St Peter's

College, Oxford, where he also developed an interest in theatre. Like his father, the young Loach was a reader of the *Daily Express*.

"My dad was from a mining family," he tells me, "but I hadn't engaged with them in the way that I did when I worked with Jim Allen," a socialist playwright, "and Barry Hines," who wrote the novel on which *Kes* was based. It was his exposure to a group of television writers, including Allen, Hines and Nell Dunn, at the beginning of his directing career in the 1960s, which brought about his own political and creative awakening. "Just entering their world, listening to people speak, learning their experiences, and particularly with Jim, his political analysis of that."

Those early television dramas shaped everything that came after. "That sense of the class struggle, the front line, and the inevitability of the conflict of interests: I think it is central to everything we've tried to do and is central to understanding politics. That society is based on a fundamental conflict that's irreconcilable, and until you base your politics on that you're actually endorsing the status quo."



Authentic: Carol White and Ray Brooks in *Cathy Come Home* (1966). COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION

Integrity in his work has sometimes come at a cost. Loach found himself repeatedly censored and pulled from transmission. In the late 1960s, Save the Children provided the funding for a documentary about the charity. Rather than the chummy puff piece that the charity had evidently hoped for, Loach produced a savagely unflattering portrait. By allowing Loach's cameras in, the organisation had unwittingly also provided enough rope to hang itself. Focusing on an Essex holiday home for deprived children, and a school in Nairobi, Kenya, the film is scathing about

what it describes as “fire-brigade rescue jobs,” which deal with the symptoms rather than the causes of childhood hardship. It also revealed some snobbish attitudes towards the children among those who were meant to be their champions. It was in many ways prescient, pinpointing the white-saviour narrative that subsequently became a concern within the charity sector. At the time, though, *Save the Children* demanded that the film be banned. A compromise was reached whereby the film was stored in the BFI national archive, to be screened once the charity gave its permission. Forty-two years later, it finally did, and the film was screened as part of a Loach retrospective at the BFI in 2011.

“I didn’t have a choice,” says Loach. “In the end, if you’re committed to something, you can’t live with yourself if you say, ‘Oh well, I’ll toe the line. I won’t say these things.’ I mean there’s a kind of bloody-mindedness, isn’t there, to people who just say, ‘Oh, bugger it, I’m going to do this.’”

The 1980s was an especially difficult time for Loach. In 1987 *Perdition*, a play by Jim Allen he was due to direct about Jewish collaboration with the Nazis, was pulled by the Royal Court after complaints from Holocaust historians. He found it harder to get films made. By 1990, he resorted to making advertisements for McDonald’s and Nestlé. His children (one of whom, Jim Loach, is also a film director) have said that they were banned from referring to this stage of his career, and he himself admitted in a 2016 documentary that he was embarrassed by it.

Were the 1980s when he felt most powerless? I am asking about him personally but, tellingly, Loach gives me an answer which talks collectively. “It wasn’t the sense of feeling powerless because the movement was huge, the movement to oppose Thatcher was huge.”

The term “Loachian” has entered the vernacular of film writing—becoming a shorthand for a certain kind of direct, no-frills, humanist storytelling. But while there are other filmmakers who share his combination of naturalistic performances, political awareness, empathy and urgency—Belgium’s Dardenne brothers; Icíar Bollain in Spain—there is nobody else who is doing what he does.

Inspired by the Italian neo-realist tradition—he cites Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) as a lifelong influence—Loach has developed a way of working that facilitates authenticity and honesty. He shoots chronologically, and only gives his actors a few pages at a time, allowing them to discover their characters’ journeys as they unfold. He is also fond of setting up surprises, in order to capture his performers’ natural responses.

Talking about his experience on *I, Daniel Blake*, Dave Johns recalled: "The way Ken works, it's a very safe environment. Ken has used the same crew for years. The camera is in the corner. He never tells you what lens he's got on the camera, so basically it's just Ken, the sound guy, and the film crew and you, who are in the scene. There are times you don't feel like you're making a movie, you forget that the camera is there."

"There's a kind of bloody-mindedness, isn't there, to people who say, bugger it, I'm going to do this"

Producer Rebecca O'Brien, a regular collaborator since his Northern Ireland-set *Hidden Agenda* in 1990, initially found this technique "both challenging and really fun. I really enjoyed the way he worked and it made sense to me. So I was happy to change my ways to work with Ken."

But it is, she adds, an approach that is hard to pull off if you don't happen to be Ken Loach. "I think people want to make films like Ken, but they can't because they don't necessarily get that you need to do the whole thing. It's a way of life. You can't just cherry-pick bits of how we work... there's no circus involved in the film. Actors don't get special treatment, they are treated like the crew. It's very difficult for a young filmmaker to pull that off. The actors won't trust them not to give the whole script. The agents won't trust a new person working in that way."



Just in time: Kris Hitchen and Katie Proctor in *Sorry We Missed You*. Photo: © JOSS BARRATT VIA WILDBUNCH, BBC

Another central element to Loach's way of working is collaboration. He does not subscribe to the individualist

auteur theory of filmmaking, and is at pains to credit the input of his regular team, which includes Lavery, O'Brien, editor Jonathan Morris and composer George Fenton. Lavery, in particular, is singled out for praise. "I think I'd have stopped a long time ago if it weren't for that partnership."

There was a rumour, a few films back, of Loach retiring, the result of a passing comment, he says, during the filming of the biopic of Irish socialist leader Jimmy Gralton, *Jimmy's Hall*. "I only said it once and it was a rash thing to say. We were in an Irish bog, in Leitrim, and my feet were wet and it was early in the morning. I thought, I'm going to have wet feet for the next 12 hours. And I thought 'I can't do this anymore.' But of course the people in the film were hilarious and funny and imaginative and creative and within an hour you're trying to forget your wet feet and enjoy being with them."

And that collectivist spirit is what distinguishes Loach. Like his films, he is unshowy, natural and authentic. He lives what he believes. Which is why he insists that he doesn't get special treatment on his film sets. "You can't make films in comfort," says O'Brien. "He won't sit down all day. It's not what he wants. To be able to direct films, you need to be on your feet running around and active. He doesn't sit behind a monitor, he's running around engaged in everything. And if he's not engaged in everything, he's not making the film. He needs to be present in all ways. It's all or nothing. It has to be, it's the only way he can do it."

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