NCAD DUBLIN

National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed: Michael O' Reilly

Programme / department: Sculpture & Visual Cultures. Joint Degree

Date: 30/01/2023

Essay Title

What Role does Film play in the Public Sphere?

Humanity, Compassion and Hard Facts.

Word Count 6,280

What Role does Film play in the Public Sphere?

Humanity, Compassion and Hard Facts.

How can a film become a conscientious object, that has purpose beyond mere entertainment? That lives in the public realm long after its release? Does film have the language and scope to make a difference? Can film caused a responsive wave of country-wide interest, where the masses will not rest easy until social action is taken?

“I am not a client, a customer nor a service user. I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar nor a thief. I am not a national insurance number, or blip on a screen. I have paid my dues, never a penny short, and proud to do so. I don’t tug the forelock, but look my neighbour in the eye and help him if I can. I don’t accept or seek charity. My name is Daniel Blake, I am a man, not a dog. As such, I demand my rights. I demand you treat me with respect. I Daniel Blake am a citizen, nothing more and nothing less. Thank you”. *I, Daniel Blake*. (2016). Ken Loach. [Film] British Film Institute.

This quote is uttered by the protagonist of Ken Loach’s film *I, Daniel Blake* at the climax of the movie. Daniel Blake is at his wits end, after months of torturous bureaucracy force him to defend his broken self in a welfare benefits court of appeal. Within these dignified lines, the director has captured the pride, frustration and anger of his lead character. It is a riveting display of how Loach imparts his political ideology using emotional intelligence and an adroit awareness that is sadly lacking in the British benefit system, the films subject matter. Daniel Blake is a widowed 59 year old construction worker specialising in joinery and fine woodwork. He is recuperating from a serious heart attack. Despite his GP and cardiologist's assessment that he is not yet fit enough to return to work, he is denied employment and support allowance based on the standardised criteria assessment by the government’s employment agency. With no savings and no personal support, he is relying on some sort of governmental benefit assistance. ‘‘He does have assets, but not the kind that the market rates highly since they have little monetary value: qualities such as integrity, honesty and compassion’’ (Turk, Littlewood and

McDonagh, 2016). While Daniel handles his interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically, the cogs of the appeal system are rusted to the point of bluntness. The film was released in 2016 as the Conservative Party or Tories had re-established their strangle hold over Great Britain, having gained leadership in 2010 on the back of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent 'Bank Bailouts'. The Tories implemented an austerity agenda to save the public finances. Their policy of reducing the government deficits to honour its debt obligations, worked in the short term but massively increased the levels of unemployment. Those at the bottom of the financial rung were squeezed hardest. 'The benefits bill has been one area targeted. Between 2010 and 2015, the Tories cut £16.7bn from the welfare budget, shrinking it by 7% in real terms. Tax credits were cut by £3.9; changes to disabled people's benefits "saved" around £1bn; and by reducing the rate at which benefits rise, the Tories cut nearly £9bn off the overall budget' (Gelblum, 2019). In times of austerity**,** governments construct financial equations to explain their purse tightening policies. These explanations are open to interpretation: are they a genuine stopgap or a ruthless profit before people tactic? History has shown this strategy of embedding an argument by 'cooking the books' to have been successful but only ad interim. As with any great art, film has the capacity to absorb the complex and reshape it into a recognisible form. Loach, weary of mathematics and government speak, converts their impenetrable language of fiscal abstracts into a simple but human narrative. The accessibility of information is key. Gelblum continues his article with this observation that 'Inequality, poverty and homelessness were the charges brought against the government in the parliamentary chamber debate; and while the theme tune for Tony Blair's Labour Party in 2007 was D'ream's 'Things can only get better', once the Tories took up the mantle, the song quickly changed to Cat Steven's 'The First Cut is the Deepest' (Gelblum, 2019). *Guardian* journalists Polly Toynbee and David Walker reviewed this period in their book, *The Lost Decade; And what lies ahead for Britain*, by concluding 'The Conservative cuts destroyed the fabric of society as we know it. What happened in the UK between 2010 and 2020 will scar us for the rest of our lives. David Cameron's conservatives sold austerity as a necessary response to the 2008 financial crash. For the first time in a century, life

expectancy has stopped growing and for women in poor areas actually fallen' (Toynbee and Walker, 2020, pp 13).

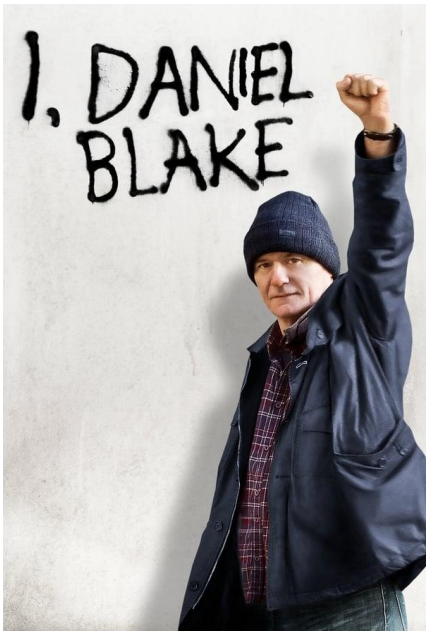
Austerity Kills Protest.

It is within these stressful and taxing circumstances that an ill, and middle-aged Daniel Blake tries to set in motion the appeals process for his employment and support allowance; or any government maintenance program for which he may be remotely eligible. He is seeking what he is rightly due as a paid up citizen - temporary help until he is healthy enough to return to work. But this is not a simple fix, he runs into one bureaucratic quagmire after another. Each process is

seemingly designed to make vulnerable people like him fail and give up. There is the matter of computer literacy. Daniel Blake is not “illiterate” – he is resourceful, creative and willing to work, and we see him using his skills and sharing his knowledge. ‘He is told that the benefit system he is forced to navigate is “digital by default”. Daniel’s riposte is that he, as a craftsman, is “pencil by default”, reflecting one of his key challenges’ (Jones, 2017). Loach employs the pencil as a symbol of versatility and openness to change. However, it can also be rubbed out and replaced, like the generations of workers Daniel represents in post-industrial society. Daniel is not the only one enmeshed in the politics of the welfare state. Katie Morgan, a single mother to adolescents Daisy and Dylan, has just moved to Newcastle from London for the simple reason that it is the only place where social housing is available. Katie too has fallen into the bureaucratic runaround at social services. Nonetheless, she is determined to make a home for her two children despite her financial problems. Daniel can clearly see Katie is struggling to have her voice heard in the eerily soundproofed corridors of officialdom. They become friends, united in their battle for impartiality. Loach deftly practises humanity as the counterbalance to the rigid deafness of the governments unbending credit system. It is here that the film registers with its audience, and gathers momentum in the public sphere.

The seismic implications of being kept at a distance and consequently ignored, is what Loach as a filmmaker and contemporary commentator wants to raise in *I Daniel Blake.* The need for social awareness is at the heart of this film. And yes, although *I, Daniel Blake* is fictional, it reflects real experiences. It is not just a one-off case or the exception to the rule, but an amalgamation of hundreds of thoroughly exaimed factual stories. Loach, along with his long-term writing partner Paul Laverty, spent months rigerously researching and analysing the testimonies of the victims of austerity. Their goal was to produce a film that was willing to raise its head above the parapet. To speak out in defiance. To inform it’s audience of an alternative

to the tapered decisions of the policy makers. Writing about the film's portrait of the governments wilful incompetence in the *Observer Film*, Mark Kermode described it as 'a battle cry for the dispossessed' (Kermode, 2016). The seasoned Kermode, a reviewer highly aware of his influential position as a respected critic and social commentator, used the printed word to inform and encouraged his dedicated readership of the films immense value, 'On one level, it is a polemical indictment of a faceless benefits bureaucracy that strips claimants of their humanity by reducing them to mere numbers' (Kermode, 2016). And yet amid this Kafkaesque nightmare of red tape, the ever attentive Loach still 'Manages to celebrate decency and kinship of (extra)ordinary people who look out for each other when the state abandons its duty of care' (Kermode, 2016). This incisive film, a biting piece of social realism, starts its protest before a single frame of footage is viewed. The creators have designed the film's promotional poster to visually alert and arrest potential cinema goers. Daniel Blake is seen dressed in old jeans, a cloth shirt, a tattered black jacket and a knitted hat. He stands clenching his fist in the air. A closed fist symbolising solidarity. This expression of unity, boldness and resistance is at the core of the film's narrative. This non-verbal encounter with the film's lead character, Daniel, conjures an image of a dignified man fighting a world of social injustice. An underdog, a 'regular Joe' with his back against the wall, and in this case a graffiti wall. His name is spray painted black on the wall behind him, suggesting that Daniel is a leader of a revolution, a singular force enduring and facing off against the hostilities of the welfare system. This relatively simple poster has been formulated to grab the attention of the film's target audience. Loach, looking to the future, wants to prime a younger audience with the tools for political change. Reminding those who feel undervalued that they are citizens, that their citizenship can and should be the nucleus to transform and rewrite the imbalance of biased laws. To tackle the tilted policies of a conservative British government.



I,Daniel Blake Poster.

In Girish Shambu's essay 'An Authentic Cinema', he reports 'It is uncommon for a movie that describes normal, everyday life, as *I Daniel Blake* does, to spark passionate public discourse, so when that did happen, it was a surprise.' (Shambu, 2018). So why did the film cause such a stir in the public realm? If we evaluate the back catalogue of Loach's film oeuvre, this offers us a telling and frightening insight. Fifty years prior to making *I,Daniel Blake*, Loach, then working for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a publicly financed institution, directed the 1966 made for television film *Cathy Come Home*. The film follows 'the story of Cathy Ward, played by Carol White, living with husband Reg, and their two children

in a new flat with parquet flooring and tin openers fixed to the walls' (Wood, 2020). Reg a lorry driver has an accident and loses his job, so they move to lodgings, a caravan, a hostel. Cathy becomes a single parent and her children become homeless. Social workers finally take the children into care. The public were horrified by the separation of mother and children. Their rage grew into a vocal outpouring. 'It was a time of job security, reciprocity and solidarity; the working class received accolades, rather than insults, as the source of much of the talent that propelled the swinging 60's' (Wood, 2020). It would be easy to underestimate the quiet brilliance of this moving film. It constitutes a historical record of the precise techniques by which the disenfranchised are further degraded. Loach is an innovator, pioneering a new type of story telling, by creating what is now known as 'Docudrama'. *Cathy Come Home* engages the viewer with traditional dramatic scenes but also employs a documentary style voiceover delivering facts about the housing crisis. And more shockingly, interviews with real people describing the appalling conditions in cheap rental accommodation. 'The effect was startling. Many viewers confused the fiction for reality, and there were stories that Carol White was approached in the street and offered money by members of the public believing her to be Cathy' (Puddicombe, 2016). Loach had landed an emotional punch by confronting these awful experiences yet to be widely discussed in the popular media. Sociologists Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend published an unexpected bestseller, *The Poor and the Poorest*. One historian commented 'The poor family and the poor working family were about to be reborn as a political issue' (Monroe, Garnham and Roberts, 2016).

Cathy Come Home Poster.

At the start of his career, while still unknown and without any industry clout, Loach organised special screenings of the film for government representatives. He convened a meeting with the minister of housing to discuss the devastating effect of poverty, and to lay down a strategy for its resolution. Tackling any problems requires initiating action. Girish informs us that '*Cathy Come Home* had an audience of 12 million viewers on its first airing and led a member of Parliament to announce in the House of Commons 'The conscience of the nation has been jolted, by a television Play' (Shambu, 2018). *Cathy Come Home* directly inspired the formation of one housing charity organisation (Crisis), and significantly contributed to the success of another (Shelter) that was launched weeks after the film was broadcasted. Both these charities are still in existence 50 years later, and provide essential services to thousands of struggling families and isolated individuals. 'As recently as 2020-2021, Crisis helped 1,569 find safe and secure accommodation, while giving 3.2 million pounds to local organisations tackling homelessness during the pandemic. Crisis championed change in legislation and campaigned against new immigration rules targeting non-UK nationals sleeping rough' (Downie, 2022). *I,Daniel Blake*, its latter day relative, garnered great momentum when the leader of the opposition Labour Party and confirmed hardened democratic socialist, Jeremy Corbyn, used Facebook to announce that Ken Loach's critique of the British benefits system was 'one of the most moving films I've ever seen' (Shambu, 2018). When Girish explains that 'The secretary for work and pensions, Damien Green, had to circle back and apologise after calling the film "monstrously unfair", only to later admit, that he hadn't actually seen it' (Shambu, 2018), it becomes apparent the political power a film can exert. The devastating social issues raised in *I, Daniel Blake,* just like in *Cathy Come Home* had unnerved and rattled the government. The political elites recognised both films' growing stature and public presence. Upset and angered by the then government's ineptitude and blatant denial of the severity of the problem, the left-wing *Guardian* assembled and published hundreds of first-hand welfare testimonies. These experiences became the subject of heated debate. A common thread amongst the feedback was how people felt the system was rigged so as to frustrate and humiliate the job-seeker to such an extent that they dropped out of the system before being offered any assistance. Paul Laverty, the films screen writer, who's first collaboration

with Ken Loach was in 1996 on *Carla's Song*, spent almost a year unearthing, listening, and compiling these serpentine dole office encounters. He succinctly and pointedly referred to them as 'intentional inefficiency of bureaucracy as a political weapon' Or to put it more bluntly 'They'll fuck you around, make it as miserable as possible, that's their plan!!' (Monroe, Garnham and Roberts, 2016). This authenticity that Laverty was able to evoke carried great emotional weight, especially in one harrowing scene involving the film's female protagonist, Katie. Without enough money to pay for food, a starving Katie, on the verge of collapse, finds herself at a food bank grasping a meagre tin of beans. Kermode recounts the sequence 'The scene displays both an exquisite empathy for Katie's trembling plight and a pure rage that anyone should be reduced to such humiliation. I was left a shivering wreck, awashed in tears, aghast with anger, overwhelmed by the sheer force of its all-but-silent-scream' (Kermode, 2016). This anger is typified by the opening scene in *I, Daniel Blake* where an invisible Daniel is being interviewed by an employee of the department of work and pensions. 'The screen is black' scrutinises Gillie Collins of Seventh Row, 'The governments representative asks him yes or no questions, and when Daniel chafes or elaborates, she cuts him off. She is unable to see him as a person- that's against the rules' (Collins, 2017). It is this complete rebuffal of Daniel by the welfare officer that characterizes what is so unfair and debilitating in the set up of the system. The refusal of a state institution to work outside or even consider a system change enrages the inner sense of fairness we possess as empathetic human beings. And one of the reason why the film was such a springboard for public discourse.

These films, with their well-made arguments and political opinions are specifically devised to stir up a storm in the Public Sphere. But what exactly is the Public Sphere? What is its history? It's potential? Its purpose? Its remit? Historically, its genesis was ancient Greece. A time and place where citizens directly participated in political decisions. In the later centuries the Royal court was the public sphere, undemoncratic by nature where the King alone determined what was public. Over

the course of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, coffee-houses (England), salons (France), and table societies (Germany) became places where aristocrats and members of the middle class met to discuss art and politics. In these gatherings, ‘authority of argument supplanted the authority of title’ (Price, 1992, Pg 9). Social status became disregarded entirely. With the development of the first mass medium, the newspaper, the groups that gathered in the salons & coffee houses became truly public: ‘newspapers made public affairs and discussions about such affairs accessible to individuals scattered across space’ (Splichal, 1999, Pg 23) Technically, this denotes the advent of what is understood today as the public sphere. Until the invention of the printing press, citizens congregated in a specific space where they conversed with other people. The evolution of mass communication has transformed the public sphere from a physical space into a virtual one. People can now communicate via telephone or the Internet, and they can learn what other people think by reading a newspaper editorial or watching breaking reports on television. As a result, today's public sphere extends beyond space to include all communication channels through which citizens can send and receive information. This two-way communication flow is critical. A public sphere does not exist, for example, if a government publishes information but does not listen to its citizens. The contemporary understanding of the term is mainly based on the work of German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, who provided a comprehensive analysis of the nature of the public sphere and its historic transformations. He defines the public sphere as a ‘network for communicating information and points of view, the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions’ (Jürgen Habermas, 1992). The public sphere is situated between private households on the one hand, and the state on the other. It is a space ‘where free and equal citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns’ (Odugbemi, 2008).

Twitter is often accused of sensationalism, of omitting facts and being deliberately obtuse, but when a topic supersedes the divisive rhetoric, it can calm the unreasonable, and offer hope to the disillusioned. If your tweet catches fire, then Twitter can become a global tool for real change. Information is power, and when Ken Loach and his production team at Sixteen Films launched the hashtag #WeAreAllDanielBlake, they could never have known how it would trend. Not only in England but also in France. ‘Activist began putting the film’s title onto T-shirts, and at a protest against unemployment in Paris, hundreds of “Moi, Daniel Blake” placards were on display’ (Shambu, 2018).

#WEAREALLDANIELBLAKE!

The noisy commotion of the public response was at odds with the film itself, which is quiet, understated, and sprinkled with unexpected humour. What was also unexpected was the diversity of the victims of austerity. Although the film is located in a working-class area of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, with regional accents and a

localised framing, the story resonated far beyond its setting. Poverty and its consequences were revealed as a country-wide pandemic. Twitter had opened up the conversation, the assurance that comes from shared stories gave people the confidence to express themselves. One example of this was Helen Wheeler, a language teacher who suffered mental fatigue after the death of a family member, lost her job, and turned to the state for help. ‘I attended sessions at the welfare office, where the premise is you are a liar, you must disprove that in the allotted 20 minutes. They make you feel you are a criminal, that you are a cheat’ (Rahman, 2016). This estrangement really struck home with the general public. ‘What comes to light strongly in the film is the powerful sense of alienation experienced by the two main characters. When support networks and social safety nets they both desperately require simply don’t appear, they are left to cope alone’ (Scholes, 2016). Helen found herself selling the side-board for £20 pound in order to buy her daughter a new school uniform. *I, Daniel Blake* shone a spotlight on the inhumane treatment of poverty-stricken people. It personifies those who are failed by the institutions created to protect and serve them. A prime example of this behaviour is the use of administrative jargon dished out by the social welfare officers. When Daniel asks a straight forward question he is brushed off by ‘that will be up to the “decision makers”’. However the decision makers are never on site, can’t be reached by phone, and therefore never have to look into the eyes of the grappling applicant when they are ultimately turned down. It’s not just Daniel who encounters the absurd logistical conundrums when applying for jobseekers allowance. A constant theme that runs throught the film is the welfare’s inflexiblity to individual circumstances. There is no distinction made between a single mother and an injured craftsman. The daftness of not understanding different people have different skills is highlighted when a character asks the welfare officer ‘what is the solution to IT illiteracy?’ and is schooled with ‘all you need to know is online’ *I, Daniel Blake*. (2016). Ken Loach. [Film] British Film Institute. In the openness of the public domain, the ranks of the disabled, the sick, the lone parent, the bereaved, the divorced, had now be joined by the ever increasing stories of the recent graduate, the free lancer and the sole trader. The governments ‘one-size-fits-all’ panacea was exposed as an erroneous diagnosis given by a bean counter who had no relationship or desire to engage with his clients.

It is Daniel's young neighbour China who explains that 'the federal employees who run the endlessly frustrating bureaucracy are incentivised to discourage those seeking benefits. The more miserable and confusing they can make the process, the more applicants will give up, saving the government money' (Peters, 2021). *I, Daniel Blake* and *Cathy Come Home* are not universally held up with love and praise. There is a mountain of opposition to the 'liberal' portrait of what some consider the 'unworthy'. Hard-working taxpayers are subsidising those on benefit is one argument. The language of skivers and scroungers is bandied about by the uniformed. These pariah are sucking up the life blood from regular and decent folk is projected like a firework to distract and confuse. It's the toxic rhetoric of those defending their wealth and position. 'In 2012, the poorest 10% of Britons, many in work, spent 47% of their income on debt repayments. A single person like Daniel, on jobseekers allowance, is eligible for £73.10 a week in a system that gives childcare tax breaks to couples on £300,000. The Institute for Fiscal Studies says government policy is both increasing and reshaping poverty, dragging in even those on moderate incomes' (Monroe, Garnham and Roberts, 2016). Loach's films are often branded as 'didactic', left wing propaganda. Yet the popular media informally ratify the violent and corrupt, the flammable and disconnected as entertainment. They too are 'didactic' in their own way promoting greed and individualism. 'This is a political choice, not the outcome of a feckless sub-stratum of society. Facts are no longer believed. That's why we need the visceral emotion of Loach' (Monroe, Garnham and Roberts, 2016).

Filmmaking does not have a single winning formula. The process for every film will change according to the subject matter. Fact-finding and comprehensive preparation must be given their due diligence but the bottom line is an accurate and honest script. Frank Berry is an Irish filmmaker, and like Ken Loach, deals in stories anchored by social realism. He's latest release *Aisha*, which came out in November 2022, explores the issue of Direct Provision in Ireland. Frank is an artist who believes in building trust. This is the cornerstone of his success. He

creates this certitude by listening, and by allowing the individual, the group, the community to tell their story uninterrupted. ‘I don’t ask questions. Because it’s really about getting to know somebody. And then whenever a person feels comfortable sharing, they’ll share with you if they know you’re making the film’ (Barry, 2022). *Aisha* tells the story of Aisha Osaige, a young Nigerian women who travels to Ireland seeking asylum. The idea for the film came out of research Berry was conducting for another of his films *Michael Inside* which highlights the Irish prison system as a gullible 18-year-old ends up behind bars on a three-month sentence. Berry discovered the Department of Justice oversees both the criminal justice system and the Direct Provision system. This started a five-year period of ‘listening’. ‘Berry says he tries not to make anything up in his films. He describes them as a ‘tapestry of lived experience’ (Barry, 2022). The direct provision system for asylum-seeker accommodation has been a source of controversy for two decades. Yet the subject has had limited play on film or television drama. The issues will still be obscure to many otherwise well-informed people. ‘We need a system that’s more mindful of human rights. With dignity, with medical care – and all those fundamental human rights that are outlined by the UN. The system as it is – and as it was – doesn’t respect those rights’ (Clarke, 2022). An example of this kind of treatment can be found in a scene where Aisha is denied the use of a mircowave. Aisha follows a halal diet which is dictated by a humane process for the slaughtering of animals. The Direct Provision centre cannot verify where their meat is purchased, so Aisha buys her own food from an authorised butchers. The officers refuse her access to the kitchen on the grounds that the meat is not from one of their suppliers. This situation arises out of the privatise nature of Direct Provision centres. There is no independent governing body to oversee the chronic issues regarding health, hygiene, civil and human rights of those housed within. ‘There’s been a really powerful campaign over the few years to dismantle the system. And that’s throught journalists, activists, writers, artists, citizens, everybody has objected to direct provision and put pressure on the government’ (Hennessey, 2022). The viewer watches as Aisha endures both large and small stresses. The staff at her accommodation are dismissive of her concerns. There are endless delays on her application. ‘A lot of the people told me

they had no faith that the centre managers had been trained to deal with vulnerable people, somebody early on said to me that the manager in their centre worked his way up from the kitchen. Great for him, but is this manager the right person to be dealing with people who are traumatised?" (Clarke, 2022).

Letita Wright as Aisha

In another particularly uncomfortable scene, the film illustrates how Aisha is being prepared by her solicitor for her interview with the 'Decision Makers'. He wants her to describe the intrusive story of why she had to leave her homeland in the first place, asking for as much detail as possible. The more specifics the more persuasive the agrument, the better the chance of her succeeding in her application. 'That came up a lot, the pain of having to retell your experience, often of a sexual nature'. The truth is sometimes not enough on its own. 'If you remember the scene when Aisha is talking to her solicitor and she says, "I've written it down" and he says "I need you to say it again for me now"'. Its the aggregate effect, it takes it toll on you' (Hennessey, 2022). It says a great deal about Berry's commitment to this project and his overview of how Aisha needed to be portrayed, that he was determined to secure the exceptional Letita Wright as his lead actress. Wright - who had only just finished *Wakanda Forever, The Black Panther* sequel, a fictional place where superheroes

keep the peace - was now looking for a real champion of social injustice in *Aisha.* ‘Aisha is a beautiful contribution to my catalogue of truth-telling, It’s on the page, I just got to sit with it and allow myself to be a vessel for these stories and to feed that into the character of Aisha, but it's even more so when you're speaking to people on a real level’ (Gregory, 2022). It is this truth, this reality that is the focus of Berry’s filmmaking. Being able to conjure this sensitivity allows the audience to journey through the character’s dilemmas, to empathize and identify in a very real way. The mark of good story telling is how it lingers. If it endures in your memory, in your consciousness. That is definitely a trait of *Michael Inside.* This film came on the back of celebrating the creativity of the marginized in *Ballymun Lullaby* and championing youth mental health in *I Used to Live Here.* Here is the story of what happens when everything goes wrong. In the vein of Ken Loach, Berry directs with the eye of a documentary filmmaker but displays plenty of dramatic skill by maintaining tension from start to finish. Michael is a teenager from Dublin, living with his grandfather because his dad is in prison. Already on probation for riding in a stolen car, naive Michael is pressured into “moving” a bag of drugs for older, scarier acquaintances. ‘We are introduced to the abusive and dysfunctional world of prison gangs and the ritual of “holding” things for tough guys higher up the food chain: drugs, money, mobile phones’ (Bradshaw, 2018). Berry is asking questions about cowed responsability, indebtedness and subservience. But mostly he is quizzing why a ‘child’ of eighteen is sharing a cell in an adult prison with hardened criminals. A place of no hidding, no escape, and where survival is only possible by sinking yourself deeper into a world of violence and criminality. What lifts this film up above others in the same genre is Berry’s humanism. He manages to balance rage at the system with an unstinting compassion for his characters; all the while accentuating a dangerously malfunctioning system. Donald Clarke chief film critic for the Irish Times informs us that ‘The film-makers developed the project with Pathways, a prison rehabilitation service, and, although mistakes are made, no cheap shots are taken at the men guarding and processing the prisoners. The film is down on the system. But it allows for decency among all those trying to keep its creaky gears moving’ (Clarke, 2018). Where the film really pushes the audience to squirm in their seats is the grim anticipation of incarceration and the tremendous cost of a prison conviction. ‘Forget

about buying a house, forget about going to the States. Your sentence only starts when you're released' (Michael Inside, 2017). As with *I, Daniel Blake,* Berry's film achingly illustrates the racking slowness of process, recovery and resolution. Often it's the drafting of the smallest details that sting with the greatest impact for the audience. A familiar feature that exists within these films is the sense of the ensemble. Forging a working crew who are committed to pressing for change. Professionals willing to take risks under financial restraint. This can only happen if the director leads by example. Berry and Loach trust their scripts, this is the backbone that everything else hangs off. They direct in an thoughtful style, believing in the silences, the pauses, the physical nuances of their actors. So much of their work is done before the camera is set to roll, that they can afford to get out of the actors way. This is the nature of true collaboration, and a brilliant method for authenticity. Both Loach and Berry have the keenest of eyes. Mindful of the everyman, the everywomen, it's their tolerant critique of the characters that amplifies these stories into the heart of the nation Their ambition to tackle untrendy material and infuse it with sensitivity and concern marks them out as specialist in their fields. These are not shiny films that glimmer and sparkle as they walk down the red carpet. They are challenging, notable for their portrayal of people at the edge of society. A voiceless minority who need and deserve to be championed. These filmmakers have spent their careers patiently building up an audience - one that is intelligent, aware and activated.

But as Oscar Wilde so vividly informed us, 'There is only one thing worse than being talked about, and that's not being talked about'. Discussion breathes debate breathes action. On visiting the IMBD (Internet Movie Database) site, (www.imdb.com, n.d.) we encounter thousands of reviews, evaluations and considered arguments. There is a collective energy that resonates from a shared viewing of films. To take time out of your busy life to watch a film is one thing, to return and watch it a second and a third time is another step; to be so lit up by the subject matter, that you debate, exchange and express yourself formally in the

written word, gives witness to the impact of film in our society. Taking a moment to return to the top of this essay and the opening statement ‘I am a man, not a dog. As such, I demand my rights. I Daniel Blake am a citizen, nothing more and nothing less, Thank You’. This is the defining statement delivered by Daniel Blake to a stony faced welfare committee board. The core of Loach’s cinema is in his capacity to transform abstract concepts and phenomena - such as how the rise of neoliberal capitalism coexist with the harrowing alienation of the welfare state- into human scale dramas that feel engrossingly realistic and sincere. *I, Daniel Blake* more than merely surfed the public water coolers, it dove deep into our bloodstreams. The film awoke a burning rage against injustice. Through its unwavering resolve, it brought significant change. ‘Loach has very self-consciously made one of his most mainstream movies here, in a bid to infiltrate the multiplexes and spread the word of humanising those in society who have been cruelly stereotyped despite living in dour circumstances’ (Ryder, 2016). There is criticism that films about social issues don’t hold water, their small budgets and limited cinema release deter audience numbers. In the case of *I,Daniel Blake,* it returned a worldwide box office of $15,887,187 on a £2,415,585 outlay (Services, 2018). It was awarded the Palme D’or at the Cannes Film Festival, which is widely recognised as one of the most prestigious accolades in the film industry. It was screened at the Labour Party Conference to the next generation of policy makers. It reignited Loach’s back catalogue, including *Kes*, *Raining stones* and *Cathy Come Home* as stunning examples of working-class stories. Netflix have revealed their attachment to *Aisha,* which follows on the very successful ratings of *Micheal Inside* on the same platform. Berry can expect this level of visibility to help in the financial hunt for his next social project. These films are broadening the palate of the viewing publics taste. Distributors are searching out more discerning filmmakers, they want to collaborate with truth-seekers. What is best for the story is the preeminent starting point and finishing line for Loach and Berry. The red blood cells of human reality keep cinema rarefied. Oxygen is essential for the body’s survival but aesthetically its a colourless, odourless gas, and this is where the art of storytelling elevates cinema.

Stories are not one colour, nor are they black and white, but film helps us shape the texture of how we experience them. Important messages are there in every frame but nuanced filmmaking allow them to operate in a vacuum of osmosis. We, the audience, on paying for our ticket are transported by the suspension of disbelief. The light that shines within a character is the emotional conduit that give us the passage to navigate language and structure. The theatre of narrative is a complex space, both singular and co-dependant. It is a complementary craft, that enhances the way we view and understand the world. It can be admired as a statement of collective reasoning and as an important visual remedy. Film illuminates, it magnifies our imagination by firing us up inside. Great filmmaking respects the public by adhering to the material, it defies our expectations, impacting us in ways we never thought possible. Film has exhibited its faculty in challenging social iniquity by transcending age, skin, class, religion and prejudice. Its role of educating, elucidating and provoking has served the public dynamically.

Bibilography

Barry, A. (2022). *Aisha: How this Irish film gives a look inside the Direct Provision system*. [online] TheJournal.ie. Available at: https://www.thejournal.ie/frank-berry-interview-aisha-film-direct-provision-letitia-wright-josh-oconnor-5928225-Nov2022/?utm_source=shortlink [Accessed 19 Jan. 2023].

Bradshaw, P. (2018). *Michael Inside review – unflinching portrait of prison's grim toll*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/sep/12/michael-inside-review-frank-berry-dafhyd-flynn [Accessed 24 Jan. 2023].

Clarke, D. (2016). *I, Daniel Blake review: Ken Loach at his most moving - and most vital*. [online] The Irish Times. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/i-daniel-blake-review-ken-loach-at-his-most-moving-and-most-vital-1.2833976 [Accessed 18 Jan. 2023].

Clarke, D. (2018). *Michael Inside: An Irish prison drama par excellence*. [online] The Irish Times. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/michael-inside-an-irish-prison-drama-par-excellence-1.3450186 [Accessed 24 Jan. 2023].

Clarke, D. (2022). *Aisha director Frank Berry: 'We need an asylum seeker system that's more mindful of human rights'*. [online] The Irish Times. Available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/2022/11/12/aisha-director-frank-berry-we-need-an-asylum-seeker-system-thats-more-mindful-of-human-rights/ [Accessed 19 Jan. 2023].

Collins, G. (2017). *Review: I, Daniel Blake is a declaration of personhood*. [online] Seventh Row. Available at: https://seventh-row.com/2017/05/03/i-daniel-blake/.

Downie, M. (2022). *Crisis | Together we will end homelessness*. [online] Crisis. Available at: https://www.crisis.org.uk/.

Gelblum, B. (2019). *A decade of Tory austerity in numbers*. [online] The London Economic. Available at: https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/politics/a-decade-of-tory-austerity-in-numbers-172536/ [Accessed 27 Feb. 2022].

Gregory, C. (2022). *Letitia Wright on Aisha: Black Panther star says new film tackling the struggles of asylum seekers in Ireland helps give 'voice to the voiceless'*. [online] Sky News. Available at: https://news.sky.com/story/letitia-wright-on-aisha-black-panther-star-says-new-film-tackling-the-struggles-of-asylum-seekers-in-ireland-helps-give-voice-to-the-voiceless-12747590 [Accessed 24 Jan. 2023].

Hennessey, D. (2022). *Profit before people - The Irish World*. [online] The Irish World. Available at: https://www.theirishworld.com/aisha/ [Accessed 20 Jan. 2023].

I Daniel Blake. (2016). [Film] British Film Institute. Director Ken Loach.

Jones, S. (2017). *I, Daniel Blake reveals the rich complexity of literacy – and why it matters*. [online] The Conversation. Available at: https://theconversation.com/i-daniel-blake-reveals-the-rich-complexity-of-literacy-and-why-it-matters-72554.

Jürgen Habermas (1992). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Wiley Uuuu-Uuuu.

Kermode, M. (2016a). *I, Daniel Blake review – a battle cry for the dispossessed*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/23/i-daniel-blake-ken-loach-review-mark-kermode.

Michael Inside. (2017). (Film) Wildcard Distribution. Director Frank Berry.

Monroe, J., Garnham, A. and Roberts, Y. (2016). *I, Daniel Blake: Ken Loach and the scandal of Britain's benefits system*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/sep/11/i-daniel-blake-ken-loach-director-film-movie-benefits-system.

Odugbemi, S. (2008). *Public Opinion, the Public Sphere, and Quality of Governance: An Exploration*. [online] GSDRC. Available at: https://gsdrc.org/document-library/public-opinion-the-public-sphere-and-quality-of-governance-an-exploration/ [Accessed 1 Nov. 2021].

Peters, J. (2021). *I, Daniel Blake Review*. [online] Independent Magazine. Available at: https://independent-magazine.org/2021/06/14/i-daniel-blake-review/.

Price, V. (1992). *Public opinion*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Puddicombe, S. (2016). *50 years on, Ken Loach's Cathy Come Home is as powerful as ever*. [online] Little White Lies. Available at: https://lwlies.com/articles/cathy-come-home-ken-loach-50-years/.

Rahman, H. (2016). *https://twitter.com/kenloachsixteen/header_photo*. [online] Twitter. Available at: https://twitter.com/KenLoachSixteen/header_photo [Accessed 18 Jan. 2023].

Ryder, A. (2016). *I, DANIEL BLAKE: A Wake Up Call To Right-Wing Britain*. [online] Film Inquiry. Available at: https://www.filminquiry.com/i-daniel-blake-2016-review/.

Scholes, L. (2016). *Film review: I, Daniel Blake - An activist sensation - Reader's Digest*. [online] www.readersdigest.co.uk. Available at: https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/culture/film-tv/film-review-i-daniel-blake-an-activist-sensation [Accessed 18 Jan. 2023].

Services, N. (2018). *I, Daniel Blake (2016) - Financial Information*. [online] The Numbers. Available at: https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/I-Daniel-Blake-(UK)#tab=summary [Accessed 27 Jan. 2023].

Shambu, G. (2018). *I, Daniel Blake: An Authentic Cinema*. [online] The Criterion Collection. Available at; https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/5277-i-daniel-blake-an-authentic-cinema [Accessed 8 Jan. 2020].

Splichal, S. (1999). *Public Opinion*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Toynbee, P. and Walker, D. (2020). *The lost decade 2010-2020 : and What Lies Ahead for Britain*. London: Guardian Books.

Turk, G., Littlewood, M. and McDonagh, M. (2016). *I, Daniel Blake: Ken Loach and the scandal of Britain's benefits system*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/sep/11/i-daniel-blake-ken-loach-director-film-movie-benefits-system [Accessed 7 Jan. 2020].

Wood, M. (2020). *Cathy Come Home*. [online] Bbc.com. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/anniversaries/november/cathy-come-home.

www.imdb.com. (n.d.). *I, Daniel Blake (2016) - IMDb*. [online] Available at: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5168192/reviews [Accessed 18 Jan. 2023].Images

Images

End Austerity Now. The lost decade: the hidden story of how austerity broke Britain | Public sector cuts | The Guardian

I, Daniel Blake. Poster. TEAM — SIXTEEN FILMS

Cathy Come Home ; Feministfightback.org.com

#WEAREALLDANIELBLAKE ; Redbubble.com

Letita Wright as Aisha ; Torrent-movie.fun

.