

One of Ken Loach's most strongly political films — *Land and Freedom*

Art versus propaganda?

Clive Bradley looks at the films of Ken Loach

WHAT does it mean to make socialist films in contemporary Britain? What is the relationship between art and propaganda in modern cinema? The work of Ken Loach, one of Britain's leading film-makers, hinges around these questions. The tension between art and propaganda, drama and politics, runs through his films.*

Loach is unusual not so much in that he is a socialist — indeed a Marxist, indeed some kind of Trotskyist — who makes films; there have been a fair number of film-makers who are or were Marxists of some description. He is unusual because he frequently attempts to make films about politics with a capital 'P', to put the class struggle on the screen. His politics inform his choice of subject matter to a degree which is, as far as I am aware, unique in contemporary film.

Loach made his name in the 1960s with a seminal TV drama, *Cathy Come Home*, about homelessness. *Days of Hope*, a TV series written by Jim Allen, traced the British class struggle from the First World War to the General Strike. *Fatherland* is about an East German who moves to the West and discovers capitalism is as bad as Stalinism, *Hidden Agenda* about the shoot-to-kill policy in Northern Ireland, *Land and Freedom* the Spanish Civil War, and the recently-released *Carla's Song* is about Nicaragua.

Even his films which deal with less 'big' political issues have political themes. *Riff Raff* is about a group of building workers. *Raining Stones* about two unemployed men in the north of Eng-

land struggling to survive; one of them needs the money to buy his daughter a communion dress, and gets into trouble with a loan shark. *Ladybird, Ladybird* is about a woman's fight against social services to keep custody of her children.

Added to this are a number of documentaries, for example on the often treacherous role of the trade union leadership, and the current Liverpool dockers' strike.

There are very few films in recent years which deal with such issues, and no film-makers who try to do so with such consistency. There can be no doubt, therefore, that Loach is a vitally important director for socialists. We should be glad someone is making such films: the world would be a poorer place without them.

The question remains whether Loach has successfully resolved the tension between art and propaganda, and what his work might tell us more generally about it. I want to argue that he has not, and that this raises an interesting question for any project of socialist film-making. Put bluntly: is such a thing possible?

This article looks at the question by focusing on just three of Loach's films — *Land and Freedom* and *Carla's Song*, his two most recent, which are among his most strongly political, and *Kes* — an early film which is probably the least political in his career.

LAND and Freedom, written by Jim Allen, is set in the Spanish revolution. A young Communist Party member, David, played by Ian Hart, goes from Liverpool to fight in Spain against Franco, is assigned to a POUM (an independent Marxist) militia, and witnesses at first hand the betrayal of the revolution by Stalinism. The story is framed with the discovery by his grand-

* Throughout this article, I am using the word "propaganda" in its neutral sense, to mean politically educative material.

daughter, after his death, of letters he wrote to his fiancée.

It is a powerful film, often — especially at its climax, where the Communist-led official army disarms the POUM militia by force and murders the film's heroine — very moving. There are three distinct levels at which the film has a political, or propagandist, meaning. First — and most important for the general audience — it is an assertion of the possibility of socialist struggle in a time when such things are considered old hat. Second, I think less forcefully, there is a resonance to do with the resurgence of fascism. Third — and clearest to many readers of *Workers' Liberty* — it is an account of the treacherous role of Stalinism in the Spanish Civil War.

There is no doubt that the film moved and affected many people, including those who knew nothing about the Spanish Civil War — and apparently many Spanish people, too. Moreover, it was denounced by the Communist Party, so it obviously got something right. Does it work, though, as art or as propaganda? I would argue that it doesn't entirely succeed as either.

As a film with a political message, *Land and Freedom* is ultimately confusing. The framing device with the grand-daughter was apparently an after-thought, added when the rest of the film had been shot, and it shows, I think. You could find the historical account convincing but still feel that such struggles are a thing of the past. Similarly, it's not clear what lessons we should draw in how to fight to fight fascism now.

As a polemic against Stalinism it's not clear, either. A crucial moment in the film takes place in Barcelona, where anarchist and Communist Party militias are shooting at each other from opposite rooftops. An old woman walking between them shouts up, waving her fists, that they should be fighting fascism not each other. It would be easy, I think, to conclude that Loach's criticism is of the general fractiousness of the left, rather than the role of Stalinism in particular.

In part this is a result of the limitations imposed by money. The decisive moment in the Spanish revolution was May 1937 in Barcelona, when the mainly anarchist workers were massacred by Stalinists. It would be fantastically expensive to recreate these events, so a small incident is used to represent the whole conflict. The entire film is like that, choosing to locate the bulk of the action in the hills rather than in the city where workers were occupying factories, and highlighting the discussion among peasants about collectivisation of the land, rather than a more "proletarian" debate.

But it is also an incoherence at the heart of the film's politics. The Communist Party is given an articulate spokesperson in the shape of the American, Gene, who emerges as tragic villain in the film's climax; the revolutionaries rarely construct a coherent argument. The overall effect seems to be that there were great, socialist ideals in the revolution which Stalinism crushed, but that this is what happens in a world of realpolitik; the POUM, the anarchists, etc. were the good guys, and doomed to failure in a nasty world. I don't think this is what Loach intends us to conclude.

It is a political incoherence which affects the drama — the art, or a central part of it — of the film. Loach tends in all his films to treat the class struggle only as a kind of elemental revolt against oppression, which rarely — I will not say never, but rarely — transforms into a coherent, still less intellectual, vision. This is especially clear if we look at his central characters. David in *Land and Freedom* is typical.

The film chooses to take us through the Spanish Civil War from the point of view of an English worker who knows next to nothing about Spain, who has never heard of the POUM, and who apparently knows very little of the politics of his own party. On

one level this is an understandable dramatic decision — most of the audience will also know nothing about Spain and thirties communism, and it is a film made in the first place for an English-speaking public.

But it is, nevertheless, a fundamentally lazy decision, which weakens the dramatic energy of the film. David remains an essentially passive character, an observer, to whom things happen, who witnesses things — but who is not an active agent. He is the typical Loach image of a working-class hero: salt-of-the-earth, heart-in-the-right-place, but naive, ignorant, and ultimately a bit thick. Rarely — again, I will not say never — in a Loach film is there a working class character with a coherent, politically educated world-view — and when there are, they tend to speak in clichés, like the POUM characters in *Land and Freedom*, none of whom is given a real argument to make in the way the Stalinist character is.

The whole dramatic form of *Land and Freedom* exacerbates this problem. Because Loach is trying to tell the story of the whole Spanish revolution, and David's personal story is in effect just a hook to hang the big story on, the personal story lacks force.

This is true even — or perhaps especially — of David's journey from Communist to ex-Communist. The key moment dramatically is where he tears up his Party card. Yet because he arrives in Spain so naive, this lacks the dramatic power it might have had. We are never inside the "mind set" of a loyal CP member, so

the discovery that the Communist Party is betraying the revolution is simply that — finding out something we (and he) didn't know. If we had been first asked seriously to believe, with David, in the Communist Party, his emotional journey would have been a lot more profound.

This is especially important since most of the audience presumably don't think much of the Communist Party to begin with. Of course, getting an audience today to care

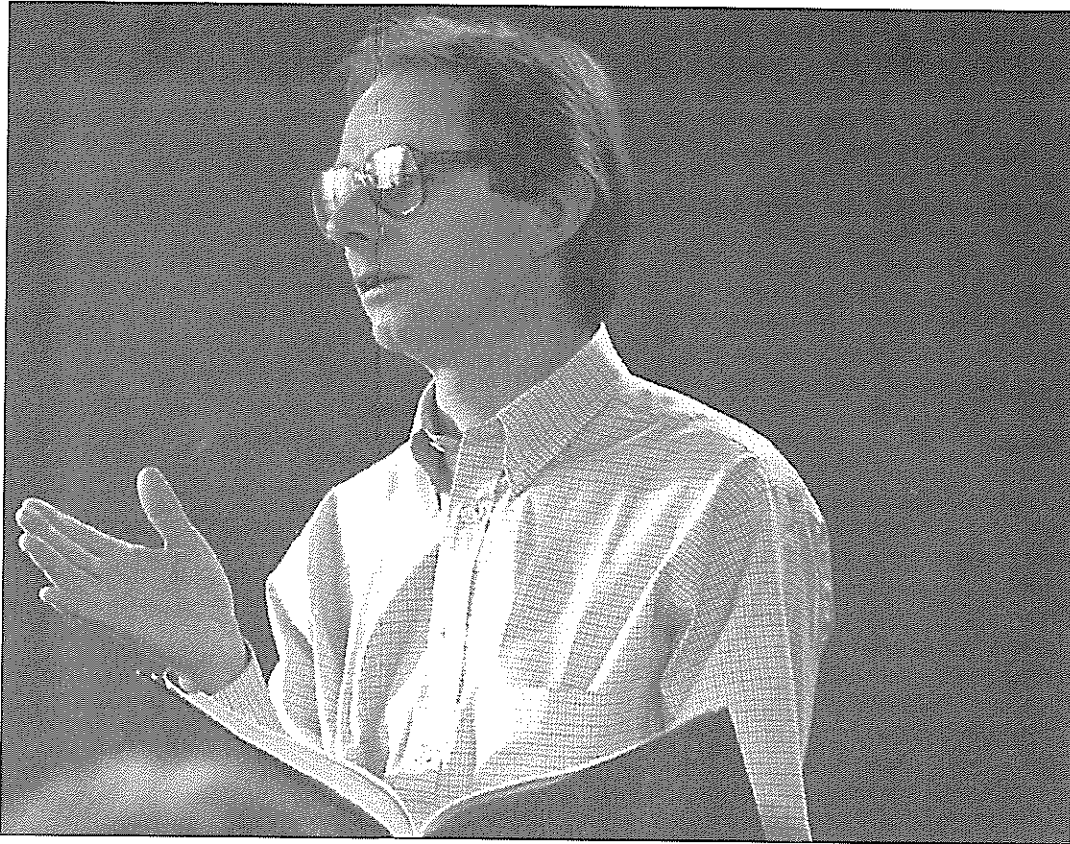
about the CP in the thirties, and so share David's disillusionment, would not be easy; but the film barely tries. Even a short argument between David and, say, a Labour Party member before he leaves for Spain, in which he is allowed to develop a train of thought, express himself politically, would have helped. Yet this story would presuppose a character with some political sophistication, a militant for a certain ideology which he learns is false. Because David has only joined the CP because he is a good bloke, but doesn't know much about them, his decision to leave them is dramatically far weaker than it might have been.

David's relationship with the POUM militant, Blanca, thus feels like an artificial attempt to give the story some more personal dynamic, a love story around which to hang the politics. It is also undermined, I think, by the fact the story is being told via letters to his fiancée in Liverpool. Elements have been shoved together, rather than flowing from each other organically.

KES, made in 1969, stands at the opposite pole in Loach's work. It is a very small story, about a young boy in a mining village who doesn't want to work down the pit when he finishes school. He is an outsider, bullied by his brother, who doesn't get on well with other kids, doesn't like football (and often forgets his PE kit) — but has found a kestrel, which he trains — you can't tame them, he tells his teacher at one point. The bird represents the boy's striving for freedom and self-worth. In a marvellous scene, in a class where he isn't paying attention, one of the other kids tells the teacher, played by Collin Welland, about 'the hawk', and the boy is told to come to the front of the class and explain about his kestrel. As he describes how he trained it, he comes alive.

The kestrel is eventually killed: it's not so easy to escape from

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for Antonio, eventually find him, and discover why nobody will tell her where he is. Finally, Carla must choose between the two men. In the meantime, George is caught up in the war between the Sandinistas, whom Carla supports, and the contras, and discovers the contras are backed by the CIA. This is a film which doesn't know what the hell it is about, except that it's got something to do with Nicaragua. Apparently, the original script was set entirely in Glasgow, so God knows why they chose to spend so much money on an incoherent location shoot. It's a classic case of a film which aims to be "political", but never sorts out what its politics are, and ends up being about virtually nothing.

the pit village and his future, which seems preordained. Yet he has the potential to do so.

It is a powerful, beautiful film, which has politics in it — about the crushing of working-class hope and creative energy — but here the politics are subsumed in the personal story. Unlike David in *Land and Freedom*, this character is a real protagonist — the drama flows from his actions, he isn't merely reacting to the world around him. It's simple, clear, but profound and moving.

It is true, of course, that the politics are far more general than in *Land and Freedom*, far less polemical; and there is a limit to how far socialist films can be limited to making these general, anti-capitalist, points. There comes a time when art perhaps needs to say something more 'programmatically'. Loach couldn't spend his whole life making versions of *Kes*, and if he did, he would be slagged off for it by socialist critics. But this points towards an agenda for socialist filmmaking: can the emotional depth of a *Kes* be integrated into the political or historical sweep of a *Land and Freedom*?

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MOST of this article is based on a talk I gave at a *Workers Liberty* public meeting in London, before which, unfortunately, I hadn't been able to see Loach's new film, *Carla's Song*. Watching *Carla's Song*, it seemed almost as if the film had been made simply to prove this article's argument. It reveals every weakness in Loach's work, writ large — all the problems of *Land and Freedom* magnified enormously. Where *Land and Freedom* was a good film with flaws, *Carla's Song* is a pretty awful film with a couple of redeeming features. It is by a large margin Loach's worst film.

George, played by Robert Carlyle, is a feisty Glaswegian bus driver who falls in love with a mysterious, suicidal woman, Carla, who turns out to be from Nicaragua. To help her come to terms with whatever is screwing her up, which is something to do with her ex-lover Antonio, he takes her back to Nicaragua. They search

for Antonio, eventually find him, and discover why nobody will tell her where he is. Finally, Carla must choose between the two men. In the meantime, George is caught up in the war between the Sandinistas, whom Carla supports, and the contras, and discovers the contras are backed by the CIA. This is a film which doesn't know what the hell it is about, except that it's got something to do with Nicaragua. Apparently, the original script was set entirely in Glasgow, so God knows why they chose to spend so much money on an incoherent location shoot. It's a classic case of a film which aims to be "political", but never sorts out what its politics are, and ends up being about virtually nothing.

George has all the problems of Loach characters I have described, only more so. He apparently doesn't even know where Nicaragua is, never mind anything about it, and the sum total of his knowledge before his journey is delivered to him by his kid sister, who has fortuitously managed to remember the facts accurately from a modern history class. George couldn't, it seems, go to a library and read a book.

Once he gets to Nicaragua, like David in *Land and Freedom* — only worse — he is a completely passive character who has things explained to him, watches dancing, smiling campesinos with wide joyful eyes, and eventually is told, for no apparent reason, that the real villain is American imperialism. Then he goes back to Glasgow, although what he, or the audience, have learned —

except that American imperialism backed the Contras, which is hardly shock-horror news — is difficult to say. What does this story tell us? It might have told us that there are battles to be fought in Glasgow which George should go home and fight. But there are no battles in Glasgow of which we are ever made aware. It might have told us that human beings have marvellous, heroic capacities for struggle. But this is all warped by our discovery

that the big secret about Antonio is that he has been horribly mutilated, which leaves us dreading the prospect that Carla will turn out to be an insensitive monster and leave Antonio to his fate while she goes back to Scotland (and utterly bemused as to why nobody just tells her this to begin with — although apparently she witnessed it anyway, so how can it be a secret?) People mutter profoundly about the need to face the past. But what past are they on about? Carla didn't do anything wrong or bad or harmful in the past: she was traumatised by her lover's near murder. None of it holds together.

The cast for the most part struggle through this with good performances, especially Robert Carlyle. But there is no dramatic tension. Little of it is believable. The story is a mess. Almost every



Raining Stones: here, as in other Loach films, the characters are likeable rogues rather than intelligent, fully rounded characters.

turning point in the plot is confusing: what's he doing following her to her hotel? Why are George and the ex-CIA man ambushed by (strangely inefficient) Contras on their way to the ex-CIA man's village? Why is everyone pretending they don't know where Antonio is? Where did Carla's daughter come from, and why hadn't she mentioned her before?

There are dramas you can detect lurking beneath the surface. It could be the story of a working class man dissatisfied with his life who learns in Nicaragua that it's worth fighting for freedom rather than just crashing his bus into passing taxis and picking fights with inspectors. Or the story of a man who falls in love with a woman who, he finds, has a far deeper love than she could ever feel for him with a man who has lost his physical beauty, so that he learns something about the nature of love (perhaps that a common experience counts for something, so he goes back to his former fiancée). Or even of a man who thought the CIA were great, but discovers they are murdering bastards. *Carla's Song* ends up empty, a series of pretty (but stereotypical and largely patronising) pictures.

If *Land and Freedom* is not entirely successful either as art or propaganda, *Carla's Song* fails badly as both. Clearly there is a propagandist aim — but the only plain message is the banal one about the CIA which leaps out of nowhere and has zero effect on

the plot. The pro-Sandinista politics barely get off the ground, because everyone knows that the Sandinistas have been out of power for a decade. There is a general sense that revolution can be wonderful, and the people who try to crush revolutions are evil, but you would expect the man who made *Days of Hope* to do better than this. If the Nicaraguan revolution is relevant to the British, or any other, working class, we need to be told why. Otherwise there is the strong danger, I would think, that audiences will leave the cinema concluding that revolution is a dangerous business which the CIA is likely to drown in blood, so best stick to driving buses. This is leaving aside more specific questions about the Sandinistas and the nature of the Nicaraguan revolution.

Carla's Song is strong evidence, in other words, that overtly political stories are hard to tell. Everything that is wonderful about *Kes* is missing.

Does this mean that films like *Kes* are generally more successful as art than films dealing in bigger politics? There are modern films with overtly political — socialist — themes, which work better than Loach's. Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg*, for example, manages not only to tell the story of the great Polish-German revolutionary, but to convey a sense of the period, and a pretty good idea of Luxemburg's politics, digestible even by an audience which knows nothing of Marxism. It is hard to imagine Loach doing a film like this — in which the central character is immensely clever, and never for a moment comes across as a naive idealist who hasn't really got a clue.

One of the central characters in John Sayles's *Matewan* (I don't seem to be able to write an article for this magazine without mentioning *Matewan* — but it is a great film) is very simply and economically shown to have wide experience in the class struggle. He is quizzed about American labour history by the striking miners he is sent to organise; and then — most effectively — he has to argue with them why they should not be racist towards the scabs, who are Black or Italian, but should win them over. They do win them over (in a glorious scene where the Italian scabs refuse to cross a night-time picket line and march off singing *Bandera Rossa*). This is a character, we know, who has some education in the labour movement.

He is not, in other words, a Loach character. At the heart of the problem with Loach's more political or propagandist movies is an attitude towards the working class itself, or rather, the relationship between the film-maker and the working class. It is as if Loach thinks the working class "out there" are all like David or George, or the heroes of *Raining Stones* or *Riff Raff* — charming but simple folk in need of enlightenment. He as film-maker is there to do the enlightening. It is rather like the pseudo-Leninist theory of the revolutionary party as a group of intellectuals who bring socialism "from the outside", with the film-maker as a substitute for the party. It would be wrong to overstate this; but it is, I think, an underlying thought.

Films such as *Rosa Luxemburg* and *Matewan* are very rare. The most effective political dramas are those in which the politics are implied rather than stated

baldly — do not attempt to be propaganda. This is not to say that socialist film-making is impossible, only that the best films will be informed by socialist politics in a more subtle way — as in *Kes*. Art and propaganda seem to be uncomfortable bed-fellows. It is good that a film-maker like Ken Loach continues to look for ways to resolve the tension between the two, and normally he is interesting and original, and certainly preferable to most mainstream American cinema. But so far, he hasn't found an answer to the problem. The less 'political' he aims to be, the higher the artistic achievement.

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