Toronto International Film Festival 2010—Part 7

Ken Loach’s Route Irish: the Iraq war comes home

By David Walsh
21 October 2010

This is the seventh and final part of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 9-19). Part 1 was published on September 23, Part 2 on September 28, Part 3 on October 1, Part 4 on October 6, Part 5 on October 14, and Part 6 on October 18.

British director Ken Loach has been a significant figure in filmmaking for more than 40 years. He first came to prominence in the late 1960s, directing television work such as Cathy Come Home (1966)—recently voted number two on a list of the “100 Greatest British Television Programmes”—and The Big Flame (1969) and films that included Poor Cow (1967) and, especially, Kes (1969).

Loach became identified with a sympathy for and interest in the condition of the working class, and the larger fate of socialism in our time. His films have addressed Stalinism past and present (the Spanish Civil War and East Germany), the British general strike of 1926, British oppression and provocation in Ireland, and, most often, the physical and mental state of the working population.

The association of the film director—in the company of many other directors, writers, actors, editors and producers—with the Trotskyist movement in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s provided an understanding of certain questions: that the working class was the vehicle of social change, that socialism was the opposite of Stalinism, that the socialist transformation was necessary to prevent society from descending into barbarism.

While the passing years and events have rounded off his views to a general leftism, which includes a continuing and unwarranted attachment to the trade unions, Loach has retained a definite feeling for the oppressed and the desire to represent their circumstances, thoughts and feelings. One needs to contrast his evolution forcefully with the spectacle represented by so many formerly “extreme left” filmmakers (Jean-Luc Godard and others) who, to borrow the words of André Breton, “radically change their opinions and renounce in a masochistic and exhibitionist manner their own testimony, becoming champions of a cause quite contrary to that which they began serving with great fanfare.”

The British establishment recognizes Loach as a thorn in its side. In 2006, following the release of The Wind That Shakes the Barley, an account of the Irish war of independence (1919-1921) and civil war (1922-1923), Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty came under ferocious attack. The film depicts in graphic detail the brutality of British repression against the Irish population, including scenes of massacres and torture.

The violent response of the media in 2006 was both an effort to conceal the bloody history of British imperialism and to defend its present neo-colonial operations in Iraq, to which the film clearly made implicit reference.

Michael Gove, the current education secretary in Britain’s coalition government, wrote a venomous piece in the Times (a Rupert Murdoch publication) The Wind That Shakes the Barley took white top the Cannes film festival, denouncing Loach and others “who rubbish their own countries.” Gove falsified history, claiming that films like Loach’s “glamourise the IRA,” a movement “which used murderous violence to achieve its ends, even though the democratic path was always open to it.”

On the same occasion, the Times’s Tim Luckhurst went even further in excoriating “the committed Marxist director,” suggesting that while pro-Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl merited a degree of understanding because she “did not fully understand the evil cause to which her work contributed…Ken Loach does not deserve such indulgence.”

As the WSWS noted at the time, another Murdoch newspaper, the Sun, called The Wind That Shakes the Barley “pro-IRA.” The Daily Mail termed the film “a travesty.” Simon Heffer, in the Telegraph, denouncing the movie as “poisonous,” acknowledged that he had not seen it and declared he did not need to “any more than I need to read Mein Kampf to know what a louse Hitler was.”

On the other hand, I have regularly asked film directors over the past 17 years which contemporary figures in cinema they admired the most. As I told Ken Loach in our conversation in Toronto, the name that has come up most often among serious people (from France, Iran, Greece, Spain and elsewhere) has been his.

That being said, it is not necessary to agree with or admire everything about his filmmaking. I have been sharply critical of certain movies (Bread and Roses, The Navigators, for example) and, more generally, of the British neo-realist trend to which he belongs, for its national insularity and its difficulty in imagining and organizing truly enduring drama.

I stand by what I wrote in October 2005:

“One of the approaches in fiction film continues to be associated with the British school of neo-realism, or naturalism, or ‘docu-drama.’ After several decades, the name of Ken Loach still figures prominently. However one may feel about the latter’s artistic limitations and political trajectory, there is little question but that his body of work is a serious, if considerably uneven, one.

“Provided a decent script, performers (professional or nonprofessional) with forceful personalities, locations in which he feels comfortable and permits himself a certain spontaneity, Loach remains capable of genuinely affecting moments, if not memorable dramas as a whole. Thus, the remarkable and authentic portions of My Name Is Joe and Ae Fond Kiss. On the other hand, at its weakest, in unfamiliar or uncongenial surroundings, his work tends toward the politically schematic or emotionally strained (Bread and Roses, The Navigators, Sweet Sixteen).

“At a time of almost universal renunciation of principles, Loach’s ongoing commitment to scenes and problems of working class life, encouraged by his experience with the revolutionary socialist movement decades ago, endures as a pole of attraction to a significant layer of film
do it.” There is no contradiction at work.

However, Fergus, a former SAS man, with extensive and well-paid service in Iraq, is a bird of another feather. Here is someone seriously damaged, who has inflicted serious damage on others. Is such a human being beyond reach? No, but Laverty and Loach have not dramatized the kind of internal revolution that would have to take place for such a figure to face honestly what he and others have done.

It’s never entirely clear, as a matter of fact, what Fergus thinks of the war, of himself, of the mercenary profession. The filmmakers, perhaps in the name of psychological realism, have their central character enter into a conflict with his former employers without shedding his old skin. Is it likely that a mercenary would take on the contractor-military establishment simply out of devotion to a longtime friend? We don’t see enough of their friendship, except a few glimpses, to be convinced. We’re asked to take Fergus’s change of heart on faith, and that is not enough to go on.

It is entirely possible for the spectator to shift his attitudes toward a film’s protagonist, depending on the latter’s behavior. But, in this case, we are never quite certain of the filmmakers’ own attitude. And instead of sharply delineating the different sides of Fergus’s character, toward which one could have various feelings, the film tends to present him in a dull, grey light, as though the spectator should infer from this the intensity of his internal conflict.

Where two seas meet, the water may be as calm as a mill pond—but shots of this mill pond alone would not help one grasp the countervailing force of the two bodies of water. In Route Irish, the result is a certain flatness, despite the mayhem.

In our interview with Loach, he seemed to be aware of this problem, referring a number of times to the challenges this particular film presented. He said at one point, “I think we always knew it was going to be a difficult film to make, a difficult film to pull off.” Unhappily, I don’t think the filmmakers did pull it off.

In any event, Loach and Laverty intend to continue their efforts to shed light on our modern reality, and we will follow their filmmaking with considerable interest. The cultural atmosphere is undoubtedly changing for the better, but they remain an unusual and admirable team.

[See accompanying interview with Ken Loach and Paul Laverty]

Concluded

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