



I, Daniel Blake: Case Study

The aims of this Factsheet are:

- Introduce the film and its director, Ken Loach.
- Explore Ken Loach's film making aesthetic.
- Discuss how the film has been read by different audiences.

The film *I, Daniel Blake* tells the story of a 59-year-old joiner, Daniel Blake, who lives in Newcastle. When the film begins, Daniel is at an appointment for a health assessment. He has recently had a heart attack and has been forced to give up work. However, to continue receiving his benefits, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) requires him to attend a fitness for work assessment which he passes. Declared fit to work, he is required to spend 35 hours a week looking for work in order to keep his benefits, even though he is medically unable to take any job he might be offered. Over the course of the film, Daniel struggles against the bureaucracy of the benefits system, the seeming unfairness of which causes him to fall further into poverty. His encounters with the benefits office bring him into contact with a young woman, Katie, who is also struggling to get by after being rehoused in Newcastle. Daniel takes her under his wing and becomes a father figure to her and grandfather figure to her children.



Loach at a photocall for *I, Daniel Blake* at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016.

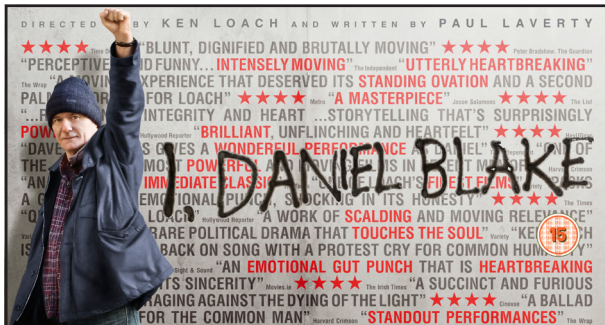
<http://www4.pictures.zimbio.com/gi/Ken+Loach+Daniel+Blake+Photo-call+69th+Annual+blrQFCPIpMI.jpg>

Ken Loach

The theme of working class people in conflict with authority has been a constant presence in Loach's work from the start of his career. He began in television, directing several contributions to the BBC's Wednesday Play slot in the 1960s, including of particular note, the play *Cathy Come Home*. Here, the portrayal of a young couple affected by unemployment and homelessness caused an outcry in Britain and led directly to the establishment of the homeless charity Shelter. While his other films have perhaps not provoked such a profound re-sponse, it remains the case that Loach's work is concerned primarily with drawing the attention of the audience to social injustice in the hope of provoking action to create a fairer society.

After moving from TV into feature films, Loach had a commercial success with *Poor Cow* (1967), but he struggled to find funding and distribution for his projects in the 1970s and 1980s. However, his films achieved greater success in the 1990s and in 2006 he won his first Palm D'or at the Cannes Film Festival with his period drama about the Irish war of independence, *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. Further films such as *My Name is Joe* (1998), *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) and *Looking for Eric* (2009) have cemented his reputation as a champion of the working class.

Loach's films could be said to fit into a tradition of film making known as **social realism**. Films in this style are generally concerned with representing the lives of ordinary people, often also engaging with social issues such as, for example, poverty, homelessness, drug abuse or unemployment. A particular strand of social realism known as "kitchen sink" drama became popular during the so-called British New Wave of film in the 1950s and 1960s (at the time that Loach was beginning his work with the BBC).



Poster for *I, Daniel Blake*.

http://la-cinema.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/I-Daniel-Blake-Poster_v2.png

Daniel is played by Dave Johns, a stand-up comedian performing in his first serious acting role. Katie is played by Hayley Squires, another relatively unknown actor. The most well-known figure involved with the film is unquestionably the director, Ken Loach, who has built a long career in British Film, producing dramas with a social conscience. The film was very well reviewed and nominated for a number of film awards, winning Best British Film at the 2017 BAFTAs and the Palm D'or at Cannes.

Activity

Visit the website *Box Office Mojo* and find out how *I, Daniel Blake* did at the box office in the UK and elsewhere. Which countries did it do well in, and which did it not? Compare the film to a big budget Hollywood franchise movie like *Wonder Woman*. How does their box office performance differ? How have other Ken Loach films performed at the box office?



Films such as *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning* (above) came to be known as “kitchen sink” dramas due to their portrayal of the ordinary lives of their working-class characters.

<http://www.filmandfurniture.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/kitchen-sink-drama-saturday-night-sunday-morning.jpeg>

Ken Loach: Selected Filmography

Loach is well known for directing films that have a political purpose. Rather than providing entertainment, it might be suggested that Loach’s main aim as a film maker is to have an impact on the audience and expose them to injustices in society, or increase their awareness of how life is for people that are often under-represented or stereotyped in other parts of the media.

Kes (1969): A boy, Billy Casper, who struggles to fit in at school adopts a wild kestrel and finds something he can be passionate about. The film explores the way that the education system stifles the creativity and passion of children, to make them into compliant workers for local industries. The results of this are dramatized through the character of Billy’s older brother Jud who has left school and works down the mines.

Ladybird Ladybird (1994): Maggie is a woman with a troubled past whose children have all been taken away from her by social services. After starting a relationship with a political refugee from Panama, she becomes pregnant again and the film follows her struggles with social services and immigration.

It’s a Free World (2007): Shown on TV in the UK (although released theatrically elsewhere in the world) the film offers an alternative perspective on the modern phenomenon of the go-getting entrepreneur as seen in TV shows like *Dragon’s Den* and *The Apprentice*. Angie is an ambitious business woman who sets up a recruitment agency in the hope of making something of herself. However, as the story progresses, the film becomes increasingly critical of the way she exploits others for selfish gain.

Try and watch some of these films, or others from Loach’s extensive back catalogue. What political and social issues do his other films raise? What viewpoints do they put across? If you are studying Film Studies, there is a Ken Loach film on each of the different specifications: *The Angels Share* (2012) is a set text on the OCR syllabus, while *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) is on the WJEC syllabus. The BFI’s Screen Online website provides a very useful starting point for research into Loach’s films.

The Ken Loach Aesthetic

As part of your Film Studies course, you will be required to consider the concept of aesthetics at some point. The “aesthetic” of a film can be thought of as the overall look or feel of a film. Loach provides a useful example to illustrate this concept as his films tend to have some recognisable characteristics.

CAMERA: Loach generally favours long shots over close-ups or medium shots. He tends to keep the camera at a distance from the action to create the impression that we, the audience, are observers, looking in on events in the lives of his characters. This helps create a sense of realism as the camera simulates the point of view of a passer-by who might be observing the behaviour of strangers from across the street, without coming over and getting involved.

The cinematographer Barry Ackroyd, who shot the film *the Wind That Shakes the Barley* for Loach, revealed in an interview with *American Cinematographer* that Loach favours lenses that mimic the human field of vision. This means that the shots in his films look as they would as if you were present at that scene and seeing it through your own eyes. Wide angle lenses are avoided so details in interior scenes are shown by panning, rather than using wide lenses to distort the view and fit more of the scene into the frame.

Keeping the camera at a distance from the actors also helps the actors give a more natural performance. They can relax and inhabit their characters in a way that would be more difficult if the camera and crew were very close to you all the time.

EDITING: Loach tends to favour long takes, allowing a scene to play out in a single shot, or using the minimum amount of editing rather than using more conventional shot-reverse-shot techniques for scenes (although these methods are present in his work). Many film theorists (most prominently Andre Bazin) have suggested that editing within a scene is untruthful as cuts to close-ups and different viewpoints emphasise certain parts of a scene more than others. Bazin suggested that it is more truthful to allow a scene to develop in a single take and allow the audience to decide what they feel is important about a scene, instead of using editing to encourage them to make a particular interpretation.

MUSIC: For similar reasons, Loach’s films tend to make minimal use of non-diegetic music. Music tends to be used to guide the audience’s emotions during a film, letting us know what we should feel at any given point. However, Loach prefers to forgo non-diegetic music and allow the audience to make their own interpretation of events without the guidance of music.



Katie is caught shoplifting in a supermarket, a scene that is shot using Ken Loach’s realist aesthetic.

Snapshot from DVD *I ' Daniel Blake*.

<http://www.dvdsreleasedates.com/movies/8278/i,-daniel-blake>

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The scene where Katie is caught shoplifting neatly illustrates these points. As she enters the store, we see her in a long shot from some distance away. Items on the shelves can be seen out of focus in the foreground, further separating us from her and placing us in the position of an observer, not a participant in the scene. The camera does not move as she exchanges a look with the security guard and collects a basket. There are then a couple of cuts to move the story on – a shot of her moving through the shop and a shot of the CCTV screen to make it clear that she is being watched. Another cut and she is at the till paying for her goods and the remainder of the scene, as she is accosted by the security guard and escorted to the manager’s office, is shown in one single shot (approximately 45 seconds) – this includes a cut to an angle of the security guard as he warns Katie that he is about to call the police, and another cut which returns us to the original shot. The audience are not warned that Katie is about to be stopped by the use of intrusive music to generate artificial tension as she walks around the shop. There are also no close-ups of the security guard watching her that might tip us off. In addition, music is not used to bias our view of the guard, there are no sinister strings to cast him as a heartless villain. We are able to see him as another guy trying to get by, just doing his job. When he hands Katie his number as she leaves the shot at the end of the sequence, there is again no music to warn us that he may have sinister intentions. Loach uses these aspects of film language to create what we might describe as a realist aesthetic. Look at some other scenes from the film and see if the same techniques are used.

Activity

In an interview in 2010, Loach stated that the 3 films that have most influenced his style are *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), *Loves of a Blonde* (1965) and *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). Watch one of these films or carry out some research to find out a little about one of them. What similarities with Loach’s film do you feel they have?

Bicycle Thieves is perhaps the most famous example of the Italian “neo-realist” film style and has been cited by Loach as one of the three films that most influenced him.

<https://assets.mubi.com/images/film/210/image-w1280.jpg?149879944>

Bicycle Thieves was made during a period in Italian cinema known as “neorealism”. Research this period and identify what the key characteristics of neorealist films were. Do you feel these characteristics are present in *I, Daniel Blake*? Does *I, Daniel Blake* have a neo-realist aesthetic?

**Audience Readings**

Like many of Loach’s films, *I, Daniel Blake* was made with an explicit political purpose – to draw attention to the way that people too ill to work were being badly let down by a benefits system that is supposed to help them. Loach has been critical of the Conservative party, whose policies he sees as deliberately targeting the working class: “They know what they’re doing.

We have to change them; they have to be removed,” he said of the Conservative government at the press conference following the film’s victory in the Outstanding British Film category at the 2017 BAFTA awards. The **preferred reading** of this film is clear, audiences are meant to be outraged by the way Daniel and Katie are treated, and be moved to want to do something about it.

The film created such an impact that Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, brought the film up in Prime Minister’s Questions in the House of Commons, urging the Prime Minister, Theresa May, to see the film and reflect on what he described as the “institutionalised barbarity” of the government’s benefits sanctions regime. He also took several of his front bench team along to a screening of the film so they could see it for themselves. It is clear from what we have already seen about the film that Corbyn was making the **preferred reading** of the film.

However, **oppositional readings** of the film were also made. Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Toby Young concludes his article by saying, “But don’t call it ‘social realism’. Judging by its misty-eyed, laughably inaccurate portrait of benefits Britain, it should be called a ‘romantic comedy’”. Young finds Daniel’s situation implausible, asking, “Would a middle-aged man who’s just had a massive heart attack really be declared ‘fit for work’ by the Department for Work and Pensions?”



Daily Mail columnist Toby Young has been an outspoken critic of *I, Daniel Blake*.

<http://i3.mirror.co.uk/incoming/article5439550.ece/ALTERNATES/s615b/toby-young-daughter-easter-bonnet.jpg>

Loach and his screenwriter Paul Laverty would counter by saying that they conducted extensive research before writing the script and they found many people in Britain with stories very similar to Daniel Blake’s. This argument is significant as there is more at stake than an interpretation of a feature film. This argument goes to the heart of our democracy and raises questions about who we would like to run our country.

Activity

Read Toby Young’s article on Mail Online about *I, Daniel Blake* and note down his main criticisms of the film. Then watch the YouTube video “*I, Daniel Blake* Review: How Bad Could it Be? (A response to Toby Young)” by the YouTuber Geeky Glasses which addresses some of the criticisms Young makes of the film.

Do some further research of your own into the UK benefits system. How realistic do you feel Loach’s representation of it actually is?

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Distribution and Exhibition

The process of marketing a film and making sure that copies find their way to cinemas for screenings is handled by a distributor, which is often a different company from the one that produced the film. While making a film isn't easy, many films fail at the distribution stage as competition for screens is fierce and most distribution companies are connected to Hollywood studios and so favour their own films. Low budget, independent films like *I, Daniel Blake* can often find it hard to get shown in mainstream cinemas. *I, Daniel Blake*'s overtly political message may also have made it a controversial choice for cinemas, who may have preferred to stick with some safer films.

In order to get the film out to audiences, the distributor, eOne, appealed to grassroots organisations to put on screenings. For a small fee, community groups were able to rent the film for a screening and charge an audience whatever price they felt was appropriate to see the film. This led to the film being available to be seen in a wide variety of venues, not normally associated with film exhibition.

For example, a screening was organised by the Edinburgh Tenants Association at the Norton Park Conference Centre in Edinburgh. People could see the film for free and it was followed by a panel discussion to allow the audience to talk about the issues raised by the film. Other organisations arranged screenings on a "pay what you can" basis to ensure that people who might not be able to afford to see the film at a regular cinema would still have a chance to see it.

Stars are generally hugely important in the marketing of a film as they can be sent onto chat shows to plug the film or be interviewed for radio shows and magazines about the film, raising public awareness. However, *I, Daniel Blake* does not have any recognisable stars, so sending its featured actors out on the publicity circuit would not likely drum up much interest. The real star attached to this film is the director, Ken Loach himself and indeed it was Loach who was the most prominent figure in the marketing of the film. For example, his is the biggest name on the poster and his name is the first to appear in the trailer.

**Loach appearing on the BBC's Question Time discussion programme**

http://img.huffingtonpost.com/asset/scalefit_630_noupscale/5812872c1900006f00c2f7a1.png

Reflecting the political motivation of the film, when Loach did appear on television to discuss the film it was on news and current affairs programmes such as *Newsnight*, *Channel Four News* and *Question Time*, where he was able to discuss the wider issues raised by the film in front of a politically engaged audience. Many of his appearances are available on YouTube for you to watch as research.

Activity

In another innovative approach to marketing, the distributors of I, Daniel Blake advertised for 5 "Regional Marketing Officers" who's job was to find ways to raise awareness of the film in local communities and engage with people beyond "traditional" film audiences. Carry out some research to find out more about this role and what techniques the officers used to publicise the film.