



Image: Ken Loach, courtesy of Sixteen Film.



Image: Wind That Shakes The Barley, courtesy of Joss Barratt.

Ken Loach

40 years of social & political filmmaking

For over forty years Ken Loach has been bringing realistic portrayals of modern day social and political situations to our screens. Ken was born on 17 June 1936 in Nuneaton, Warwickshire. His father, Jack was an electrician and fanatical about education. To his father's delight, Ken passed the scholarship exam and gained entry to the Nuneaton all-boys' King Edward VI Grammar School. After two years of national service Ken went to Oxford University to study law. Here he became president of the Oxford University Drama Society. After university Ken pursued a career as an actor, but realising this was not suitable for him began to direct joining the Theatre Royal, Northampton. In 1963, he moved to the BBC as a trainee television director.

At the BBC Ken worked on the *Wednesday Plays* and *Z Cars*. Perhaps one of the most memorable pieces Ken directed at the BBC is *Cathy Come Home* (1966). Ken utilised a novel drama-documentary technique,

positioning his camera away from the action and thus allowing it to unfold naturally and to appear real. *Cathy Come Home* resonates with people because it shows the gradual descent of Cathy and her family into a crisis situation where the political and social institutions that are supposed to help people fail to help them at all. This social issue drama, along with Ken being inspired by the *Joan Littlewood Theatre Workshop*, which made drama utilising the language of the working classes, was an inspiration for his future work and his development into making feature length films.

Ken's feature length films have explored a vast array of characters and situations. *The Wind That Shakes The Barley* (2006) won the Palme D'Or in 2006. It is an exposition of the period following the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland and the period leading up to and including the Civil War. The brutality of the Black and Tans as an occupying force and the divisions within the Republican movement

are demonstrated between two brothers in an understated way, allowing the audience to come to their own conclusions. As with *Land and Freedom* (1995) where young Spaniards discovered their own history, which had been hidden during the Franco regime, *The Wind That Shakes The Barley* acts as a catalyst for people to see a different view of Irish history.

The way in which Ken works is vastly different from the standardised Hollywood notion. There are no shouts of "action" or "cut" on set, instead Ken lets the action unfold naturally and keeps the camera and other technical equipment like the boom out of the actors' way to capture the real unrehearsed emotions. "I suppose I started out in theatre, they used very traditional methods where actors had to learn their lines. They would repeat and repeat their lines, but by doing this they lost the impetus behind the speech. They did this in TV too, the actor's response would become very



Image: Wind That Shakes The Barley, courtesy of Joss Barratt.

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plain and it didn’t work very well when filming. I think of ways when filming things that are more spontaneous, such as filming in sequence, working around the script and improvising scenes. Acting is stilted on TV and directors insist that every word, every comma in the script should be adhered to. What is really important is the impetus behind speech, the ideas and what’s prompting people to speak.”

Ken also casts professional and non-professional actors, he explains: “You cast the most believable person and who you think the audience will want to watch and will engage with. Whether they’ve acted before is secondary and it doesn’t matter about the person’s background. The actors help to ease people who haven’t acted or filmed before through it. With non-actors you rely on their instinct. You put them in situations and often its things like the texture of their skin or the way they use language, things that they are not self

conscious about which maintain it. These are very productive, all these things they don’t know they have. In that sense you get a balance using actors and non-professional actors.” The use of non-professional actors adds to the naturalism of Ken’s films. In *Kes* (1969) written by Barry Hines, Ken cast local boy David Bradley as the central character Billy Casper. By casting David, Ken could realistically reflect the dialogue of Barry Hines. Ken explains: “The golden rule is to follow the writer. It’s really a question of working in the idiom of the writer, using the dialogue of the writer as the language of the actors. The script is written by the writer so the way the actors speak will reflect this.”

Although Ken’s films are influenced by his socialist politics, they do not define them. It would be easy to categorise Ken as a social realist filmmaker, but every film explores a deeply personal and compelling story, which invariably have been linked to issues such as homelessness, alcoholism, drug abuse and privatisation of national services. “You can’t deal by issue. There has to be something more concrete; an image, a character or something specific that can be focused upon, otherwise it is too generalised.” Ken’s ability to show the intricacies and growth of human relationships in such a delicate and naturalistic fashion is demonstrated in *Riff Raff* (1990). Larry, played by Ricky Tomlinson, is constantly talking about the effects of Tory policies including the privatisation of

gas and electricity and the non-unionisation of the building trade, which leaves the workers fighting amongst themselves, his friends are constantly telling him to shut up. These diatribes expose the realities of the building trade, but also strike an emotional chord with the viewer. Ken explains this subtle balance: “You have to be true to the characters, there is always the danger that characters can become the mouthpiece for the writer or director, but you’ve got to begin and end with the characters. I need to care about the issue, but it has got to be at the heart of the conflict in the drama, not just in one speech or scene.” Ken’s films always have a strong focus on story, which reflects this notion. He says: “The idea is that here’s a story that demands to be told and there is no alternative to telling it, that’s the main thing.”

Ken’s forthcoming film, *It’s A Free World*, focuses on the exploitation of immigrant labour in Britain today. According to Ken the film explores, “Two women who see the potential for being financially successful working with immigrant labour. They are going down the road of ripping people off, and the film explores what it does to them and the people around them. The film is more focused on one or two people, it’s a chamber piece, not the full orchestra.”

Ken Loach’s importance to British, and indeed worldwide cinema cannot be underestimated. *Shona Fairweather*