Finding a form: politics and aesthetics in *Fatherland*, *Hidden Agenda* and *Riff-Raff*

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In 1986, Ken Loach completed *Fatherland*, his first feature film since *Looks and Smiles* in 1981. In the intervening years, Loach had concentrated on documentary work. The reasons for this were partly economic, insofar as Loach was unable to raise the finance for film features, but also political. For Loach, the rise of Thatcherism in Britain "felt so urgent" that he wanted to produce material more quickly and in a more "head on" manner than was possible with feature film production.[1] If the resulting confrontations with broadcasters provide any measure, it is clear that this "head on" approach was achieved. *Questions of Leadership* (1983), a four-part series on trade union democracy, was made by Central Television for Channel 4. However, despite a re-edit, the series was still refused transmission.[2] *Which Side Are You On?* (1984), a documentary about the songs and poetry of the miners' strike, was made for London Weekend Television's *The South Bank Show*. LWT, however, declined to show the programme, which eventually appeared, logo-less, on Channel 4. Despite such setbacks, Loach still considered documentary to be "the appropriate form for the time".[3] In going back to features, therefore, he not only began a new phase of his career, but also returned to the question of how fiction, rather than documentary, could provide the appropriate form for engaging with political concerns.

For Loach, *Looks and Smiles* represents "the end of an era" in his work.[4] This film charts the experiences of three young people as they come to terms with the realities of life around them. It focuses, in particular, on the young school-leaver, Mick (Graham Green), as he engages in a futile search for a job, and reconciles himself to the prospect of life on the dole. For Loach, however, the film was insufficiently hard-hitting. Unemployment surged dramatically in Britain during the early 1980s, and Loach believes he "missed creating the outrage in the audience that should have been there".[5] A reason for this, he suggests, is that the distanced and observational methods which he had evolved with *Kes* (1969) were no longer fresh, with the result that the film came across as "old and lethargic".[6] This is undoubtedly too harsh a judgment upon the film which achieves much of its effectiveness precisely because it is quiet, rather than openly angry. Nevertheless, given Loach's feelings about the film, it

was unlikely that his first feature to follow *Looks and Smiles* would simply take up from where it had left off. Thus, while *Fatherland* does display some undoubted continuities with Loach's previous films, it also represents a significant departure for Loach from the aesthetic strategies which he had previously adopted.

This may be explained in part by the circumstances surrounding the film's production, but it also seems to reflect a certain rethinking of the relationship between aesthetic form and political content. Loach's work has characteristically been associated with a tradition of "realism". During the 1970s, in particular, the conventions of realism were subject to considerable criticism for their apparent inability to deliver a "genuinely" radical cinema, and Loach's four-part television drama, *Days of Hope* (1975), became embroiled in the ensuing debate.[7] Above all, what fuelled "the realism debate" was the question of how well different aesthetic strategies serve radical political ends. Insofar as Loach has remained committed to the making of overtly political films, this is a question which continues to be pertinent. However, with *Fatherland*, and his two subsequent films, *Hidden Agenda* (1990) and *Riff-Raff* (1991), Loach has adopted three quite diverse sets of aesthetic conventions. This suggests that, following the hiatus of the early 1980s, Loach's films display a certain hesitation about the aesthetic form most appropriate to the changed political circumstances of the period. As such, they provide an instructive illustration of the possibilities and pitfalls facing radical filmmakers in the late-1980s and early 1990s.

Clearly, the changed conditions of British film and television financing were an important factor in the production of *Fatherland*. Loach is a director who has always moved easily between film and television; and a part of the importance of his early television work, such as *Up the Junction* (1965), derived from the use of cinematic techniques. At the end of the 1970s, Loach was also tempted from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to Associated Television (ATV) by the prospect of making films for television (such as *Looks and Smiles*) which would also be seen in cinemas. This particular arrangement effectively anticipated the relationship between film and television which became the norm in Britain during the 1980s. Thus, while the television single play continued its decline, the drama series and the television-funded film grew in importance for the broadcasters. As a result, the number of films produced or co-produced by television companies during the 1980s grew from virtually nil to a total of 49% of all UK productions in 1989, a figure which would be even higher if the "offshore" – and nominally British – productions of American companies were excluded.[8] Channel 4, launched in 1982, was particularly important in this regard, and its Drama Department (which was responsible for *Film on Four*), as well

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as its Department of Independent Film and Video, contributed many of the decade's most distinctive British features. Although financed by advertising, the channel possessed a clear "public service" remit, which was evident in the support which it gave to original drama dealing with contemporary Britain. It was thus Channel 4 which provided 52% of the budget for *Fatherland*, contributed (together with British Satellite Broadcasting) to the financing of *Hidden Agenda*, and fully funded *Riff-Raff*.

Fatherland (together with *Looks and Smiles*, which was partly German-funded) also reflected another trend within the British film industry. Due to the relative lack of finance available in Britain for British filmmaking outside television, European co-production became an increasingly attractive option for British filmmakers during the 1980s. Thus, whereas in 1980, only three out of 31 British features were international co-productions, the corresponding figure for 1991 was 22 out of 46.[9] However, while co-production has had undoubted economic benefits for British filmmakers, it has not always clearly benefited the films themselves. The financial involvement of different countries has exerted pressures on the types of project which have been put together, and many of the films financed in this way have suffered as a result of the incorporation of spurious pan-European elements, or the avoidance of material which has been considered too culturally specific.

Certainly, there are a number of features characteristic of the European co-production to be found in *Fatherland*, which, in addition to Channel 4, was financed through production partners in France and Germany. Thus, unlike so much of Loach's previous work, the film's story lacks a firm grounding in English social life, and offers instead a self-consciously international mix of both characters and settings. Klaus Drittemann (Gerulf Pannach) is an East German *Liedermacher*, or protest singer, denied work in the East, but permitted to move to the West with a one-way visa. In West Berlin, he is involved in a number of dealings with Taube Records, and their American record executive, Lucy (Cristine Rose). He decides, however, to depart for England with a young French woman, Emma (Fabienne Babe), whom he believes to be a journalist in search of his father who had apparently defected to the West over 30 years before.[10] This shifting in localities and mixing of nationalities undoubtedly have consequences for the way in which the film is able to deal with each country and culture, and for the sense of genuine engagement which it can provide. This is partly in evidence in the film's treatment of Berlin (where Loach was hampered by not speaking German), but also, more surprisingly, in its representation of England.

Writing on the aesthetic and cultural implications of European co-production, Vincent Porter has suggested that it is "how a film-maker

deals with the sense of place" which is crucial in identifying "the cultural and ideological world...the film inhabits" and whether the filmmaker "is a tourist or a resident".[11] Loach does, of course, live in England, but, in contrast to his previous work, *Fatherland*'s treatment of place appears to lack inwardness, providing curiously unresonant images of the England portrayed. Thus, while the choice of Cambridge may have some validity as a hideout for Drittemann's father, it is also an archetypically "tourist" location which fails to offer the opportunity for socio-political comment which the film otherwise seeks to make.[12] It may, of course, be the case that the film's disengaged viewpoint mirrors the estrangement of Klaus and Emma as they move through a foreign country. Nevertheless, the film fails to make use of this distancing perspective to present fresh perceptions of English society, and, as a result, is dependent upon rather heavy-handed narrative insertions, rather than textured *mise en scène*, to deliver some kind of political perspective. Thus, when the couple listen to their car radio, they coincidentally hear a phone-in host dismissing a question on cruise missiles; and, when the same couple are stopped at a police checkpoint, striking miners on their way to picket lines are observed being prevented from travelling further. The treatment of England as a landscape which reflects the primarily psychological "alienation" of the two central characters may be linked to the characteristics of the film more generally.

According to the film critic Derek Malcolm, *Fatherland* represents "a complete change of style" for Loach, and this results from an attempt "to tell a European story in a European way".[13] Malcolm does not explain what he means by this, but it is evident that he wishes to locate the film within a tradition of European "art" cinema, rather than within that of British social realism. The implications of this point for an understanding of the film can be pursued. For David Bordwell, the European art film is characterised by a distinct set of narrative and stylistic conventions. In contrast to those of "classical" narrativity, the main features of the art film, he argues, are confused or goal-bereft protagonists; looser and more episodic plots which often make use of a central "boundary situation"; expressive effects; and narrational self-consciousness.[14] It is these conventions which *Fatherland* may also be seen to employ. Like other Loach films, the plot is loose and lacks the highly wrought causal dynamics of "classic" Hollywood. It also relies on a certain degree of parallelism which, Bordwell suggests, may take the place of causality (as when Drittemann finds himself being followed in the West as well as in the East). But, unlike other Loach films, the central protagonist, Drittemann (particularly as played by an impassive Pannach), is troubled, introspective and equivocal in a way more typical of the European art film. He also undergoes what Bordwell, after Horst Ruthrof, describes as a "boundary situation",[15]

when he discovers that his father was a traitor, working firstly for the Gestapo and then for the Americans. The film is also unusual for Loach in its more overt use of expressive techniques.

For Bordwell, the European art film characteristically combines realist and expressionist techniques. Loach's work is usually distinguished from Hollywood by its use of documentary devices (such as distanced camera placements, unobtrusive lighting, long takes and unexpected camera movements) in the context of film fiction. This "documentary realist" approach is in evidence in *Fatherland*, but it is also combined with more obtrusive, modernist elements which have largely been absent from Loach's work since *Up the Junction*.[16] Thus, there are a number of temporal jumps, the introduction of dream and memory sequences (Drittemann running from his pursuers; Drittemann fantasising about his father), and the adoption of loosely Brechtian techniques, as in the use of titles, songs and music. Indeed, the central character's role as a musician, politically at odds with both East and West, is itself something of a commentary upon the film's own efforts to use art as a means of political intervention.[17]

The reference to Brecht does, of course, suggest that, under the influence of scriptwriter Trevor Griffiths, *Fatherland* may represent a move towards precisely the kind of "anti-realist" cinema which Loach's critics in the 1970s sought to champion, and which Bordwell suggests may be identified as "historical-materialist", rather than "art", film.[18] However, the Brechtian elements in the film are relatively muted and do not significantly interrupt or intrude upon the basic flow of the film. What might be said is that the "historical-materialist" elements are effectively incorporated into, and subordinated to, the more general use of art cinema conventions. This, in turn, has a consequence for the kind of politics which the film is then able to deliver.

Conventions are not, of course, neutral, and both permit and constrain what may be said within them. The conventions of the art film in this respect tend to encourage meanings associated with the themes of "alienation", communication breakdown, uncertainty and emotional discontent, which are themselves conceived in primarily psychological, rather than social, terms. As such, the conventions of the art film are not necessarily congenial to the political filmmaker concerned with social and political considerations. To this extent, the conventions employed by *Fatherland* work against its political objectives, and its apparent concern with the limits of freedom in both the East and the West tends to become subordinate to a more general, more existential sense of malaise. Thus, while Drittemann may contain elements of the "typical" hero characteristic of the historical-materialist film (his name translates as "third man" – in suggestion perhaps of a third politics between Stalinism and capitalism), his predicament is primarily communicated in terms of personal and psychological

unease. This becomes more so once the plot moves to England and Klaus is almost exclusively preoccupied with the search for his father. Again, the father's revelations have emblematic value (given his successive involvement with the Communists, Nazis and Americans), but the film's final focus on his son on his own with some session men tends to add to the sense of melancholia and isolation which much of the film has communicated.

Loach himself has acknowledged how "damaging" the ending is.[19] The original intention was to film Drittemann at a peace concert amidst a large crowd, and so communicate his involvement in a larger movement. Undoubtedly, this would have tempered the film's pessimism, but it would not have overridden what had preceded. Drittemann has been isolated throughout the film (reaching no real rapport with Emma, and choosing not to reveal his identity to his father who mistakes him for a Stasi), and he has never successfully understood the powers which are arraigned against him.[20] On arriving in the West, he is accused by Lucy of paranoia, and then again in England when she phones him. But what the film appears to indicate is that this paranoia is warranted. Klaus is followed not only in West Berlin, but also in England, where his phone calls are monitored and he apparently leads his pursuers to his father (who dies in mysterious circumstances). However, the precise nature of his pursuers – or "they", as Drittemann refers to them – is never revealed. What the film suggests is a vague sense of conspiracy and hidden power stretching back to Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany and Roosevelt's America. For Loach, the film is concerned with "the unfreedom of the West that arises out of the economic system".[21] However, this is not an analysis which the film actually provides. As a result of its narrative and stylistic conventions (ambiguous, episodic plot; psychologically introspective and troubled hero; fusion of realist and modernist techniques) and the mood of melancholia and paranoia which results, the film is quite vague in its diagnosis of the economic and social ills of the West (a mixture of conspiracy and, as in the belaboured party scene, straightforward "decadence"). Ironically, it is a reliance upon a vague sense of conspiracy which is also evident in the otherwise quite different *Hidden Agenda*.

Hidden Agenda is a political thriller (written by one of Loach's regular collaborators, Jim Allen) which sets out to investigate events both in Northern Ireland (the question of a "shoot-to-kill" policy in the early 1980s) and in Britain (the "dirty tricks" campaigns of the security services during the 1970s). The conflict in Northern Ireland is a topic which most filmmakers have preferred to avoid. Those few films which have tackled this complex subject, such as *Angel* (1982) and *Cal* (1984), have successfully hammered home the destructive consequences of the "Troubles", but have shed little light on the

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motivations and causes which have sustained the violence.[22] With its more overt political concerns and readiness to ask uncomfortable questions about the role of the security services in both Britain and Northern Ireland, there can be little doubt that *Hidden Agenda* represents a serious attempt to engage with the situation in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the way that it does so is not without its problems.

As with *Fatherland*, these problems relate to the formal conventions which the film adopts, and their suitability for the expression of political ideas. During the 1980s, political thrillers, such as *Defence of the Realm* (1985) and the two television series, *Edge of Darkness* (1985) and *A Very British Coup* (1988), proved sufficiently popular for the BBC arts programme, *The Late Show* (11 March 1991) to declare that "the conspiracy drama" had provided the "perfect form" for 1980s writers. However, while there can be no doubt that the work being referred to was both impressive and important, the political thriller format was not necessarily as "perfect" as this comment would have it. For at least one critic, *Hidden Agenda* represents the type of "political thriller...that might have been made by Costa-Gavros [sic]", and, by referring to the debates which initially surrounded his films, it is possible to identify some of the relevant issues.[23]

The background to "the Costa-Gavras debate" was the worldwide social and political upheavals of the 1960s, when it was only to be expected that questions regarding what political role films could perform would come to the forefront.[24] In common with the realism debate with which it was associated, the central issue concerned the possibility of making a radical film employing conventional cinematic forms. Two directors, in particular, seemed to crystallise the choices at hand. On the one hand, the films of Jean-Luc Godard, especially from *La Chinoise* (1967) onwards, demonstrated an insistence on the need for revolutionary messages (or content) to be accompanied by an appropriate revolutionary form, and were characterised by a deliberate abandonment of the traditional Hollywood conventions of linear narrative, individual, psychologically-rounded characters, and a convincing dramatic illusion (or "classic realism"). On the other hand, the films of Costa-Gavras, beginning with his exposé of political assassination, *Z* (1968), exemplified a model of political filmmaking which sought to bend mainstream Hollywood conventions to radical political ends. In doing so, they attempted to "sugar the pill" of radical politics with the "entertainment" provided by the conventions of the thriller. For supporters of political thrillers, their great strength was their ability both to reach and to maintain the interest of an audience who would normally be turned off by politics; for their detractors, the weakness of such films was that their use of popular forms inevitably diluted or compromised their capacity to be genuinely politically

radical and to stimulate active political thought. From this point of view, radical political purposes were more likely to be bent to the ends of mainstream Hollywood than vice versa.

What critics of political thrillers highlighted was how the use of the general conventions of narrative and realism characteristic of classical Hollywood, and of the specific conventions characteristic of the crime story or thriller would, by their nature, encourage certain types of political perspectives and discourage others. Hollywood's narrative conventions characteristically encourage explanations of social realities in individual and psychological terms, rather than economic and political ones, while the conventions of realism, with their requirement of a convincing (or "realistic") dramatic illusion, not only highlight observable, surface realities at the expense of possibly more fundamental underlying ones, but also attach a greater significance to interpersonal relations than to social, economic and political structures.[25] Moreover, it is because of these tendencies, implicit in the conventions of Hollywood's narrative realism, that political thrillers so often gravitate towards conspiracy theory or, as Kim Newman drolly observes of US thrillers of the 1970s, the view that society and government are run according to "the same principles as the coven in *Rosemary's Baby*".[26] Conspiratorial actions can be seen and dramatised (as in *Hidden Agenda*, when a senior Tory politician and senior member of MI5 are brought together to admit what they have done) in a way that underlying social and economic forces cannot within the conventions of narrative and realism. As a result, "conspiracy" becomes the preferred form of "explanation" for how power is exercised in society, and how events are to be accounted for. In *Days of Hope*, Loach and Allen presented the failure of the British 1926 General Strike as simply the result of individual treachery on the part of Labour and trade union leaders; in *Hidden Agenda*, no less than two conspiracies are unveiled – both the conspiracy to pervert the course of justice by the security services in Northern Ireland in the early 1980s, and the conspiracy on the part of a small group of businessmen, security personnel and politicians (led by a thinly disguised Airey Neave) to overthrow a Labour government and replace Edward Heath with Margaret Thatcher as leader of the Conservatives in Britain in the 1970s.

To be fair to the makers of the film, they appear – on the basis of the revelations of Colin Wallace (who read the script), Fred Holroyd (who acted as adviser to the film) and the magazine, *Lobster* – to be convinced of the evidence for conspiracy in 1970s Britain.[27] Moreover, there is undoubtedly a case to be answered. Conspiracy, nevertheless, provides a singularly problematic basis for political analysis and explanation, and is certainly of little value in helping us to understand the crisis of social democracy and labourism which occurred during

the 1970s, and the subsequent rise to power of the New Right. According to Malcolm, "the film seems almost ludicrously committed to a view of things that could only be sustained by the most paranoid of Marxists".[28] On the contrary, it seems to me that the underlying viewpoint of the film is fundamentally a liberal one, insofar as it places such stress on the capacity of strong individuals to will change and alter events almost outside of history. What is lacking is some sense of the context in which such actions occurred and the constraints imposed upon them. The rise of the New Right was not simply willed or manufactured, but grew out of a complex set of economic, political and ideological circumstances.[29] Conspiracy would, at most, have been a response to these circumstances, just as the likelihood of its success would have depended upon them. In this respect, conspiracy theory has the virtue of neatness, but its cost is the loss of genuine social and political complexity.

The tendency towards personalisation which is encouraged by the conventions of narrative realism is reinforced by the specific properties of the crime thriller, especially when it is structured around the investigation of an individual detective and his quest to reveal, or make visible, the truth behind a crime or enigma. Moreover, as a number of critics have suggested, the detective story formula is also characteristically a conservative one.[30] It depends upon the superior powers (either intellectual or physical) of an individual investigator (who is often a loner) and, in doing so, tends to prefer the values of individualism to those of the community. In addition, the conventional narrative movement towards a solution of the crime will encourage both an identification with the forces of "law and order" (even when the investigator is not actually a member of the police), and a general confidence in the ability of the current social set-up to triumph over injustice and right wrongs (which are then characteristically identified as the responsibility of an isolated or atypical individual, rather than of social institutions or political regimes). It is partly in recognition of these problems that political thrillers have attempted to blunt the affirmative and socially conservative impulses of the crime story by stressing the limitations of the individual detective hero and the difficulties of actually getting to the truth. Thus, the investigator may prove unable to solve the crime due to the complexity and deviousness of the forces confronting him, or he may indeed succeed in solving the mystery but then find himself unable to do anything about it – the most paranoid example of which is undoubtedly *The Parallax View* (1974), in which Warren Beatty's reporter uncovers the inevitable political conspiracy, but is then himself assassinated. *Hidden Agenda* adopts a similar, if less dramatic, strategy. CID Inspector Kerrigan (Brian Cox), loosely modelled on John Stalker, is brought from England to Northern Ireland to investigate the murder of Paul

Sullivan (Brad Dourif), an American lawyer who was working for the League for Civil Liberties.[31] He uncovers evidence of both a shoot-to-kill policy and a conspiracy to overthrow a democratically elected Labour government, but is unable to do anything about it, having been effectively silenced by the military and political forces arraigned against him. Admittedly, Ingrid (Frances McDormand), Paul's widow, is still in possession, at the film's end, of an incriminating tape which Harris (Maurice Roëves), the renegade Special Branch officer, has provided. However, given that the film has already made clear that the tape will lack credibility without Harris (whom we now know to be dead at the hands of the security services), the film's ending remains resolutely pessimistic.

While such an ending avoids glib optimism about the prospect of social reform, the film's negative inflection of the thriller format has its limitations, not only projecting the paranoia characteristic of the political thriller genre, but also engendering a sense of powerlessness about the possibilities for social and political change ("You can't win against these people", Kerrigan informs Ingrid). Ironically, Loach himself has criticised the limited politics of his own *Cathy Come Home* (1966) on precisely these grounds. "It tried to make people concerned about a problem", he observes, "but it gave them no indication of how they might do anything about it".[32] However, if this is the case with *Cathy Come Home*'s treatment of homelessness, it seems even more so of *Hidden Agenda*'s grim brew of conspiracy and paranoia. For, if *Cathy Come Home* failed to offer solutions and simply rested upon the hope that, by exposing social ills, it could do some good, *Hidden Agenda* not only offers no solutions, but also, given its conviction that it is virtually impossible to make the security services democratically accountable, seems even to cast doubt upon the political value of its revelations. From this point of view, one possible explanation for the popularity of the political thriller with film and television producers during the 1980s was the way in which it allowed expression of the sense of political impotence felt by liberals and the Left during this period (the grafted-on attempts at optimism of *Defence of the Realm* and *A Very British Coup* notwithstanding).

This concern about the absence of any perspective for political change is linked to the final criticism which has traditionally been directed at the political thriller. For, whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the actual message which the political thriller succeeds in communicating, it is still one that is, so to speak, "pre-digested". That is to say, opponents of the political thriller have argued that, by virtue of a reliance upon individual characters and stars with whom we identify, and upon the tightly structured patterns of narrative suspense which engage us emotionally rather than intellectually, the political thriller "makes up our minds for us". It may challenge, as

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Hidden Agenda does, the prevailing ideologies of society, but it does so by employing the same emotional patterns of involvement as films which offer the contrary view, and hence fails to encourage audiences to engage critically with political ideas. To some extent, this is true of *Hidden Agenda*, which is generally content to present us with an interpretation of events which we can either take or leave, rather than engage us in active political dialogue.[33] It does make some attempt, however, to meet this type of complaint. While, in comparison to Loach's earlier work, the film employs relatively well-known actors, it seeks to encourage identification less with individual characters than with their situation. Thus, the "honest cop" Kerrigan represents more of a "type" than a fully fleshed-out hero. In the same way, by staging the killing of Paul early in the film, the reliance of the narrative on delayed revelations and the mechanics of suspense is kept to a minimum. However, such tactics tend simply to subdue, rather than subvert, the thriller elements, with the result that *Hidden Agenda* ends up falling between two stools, offering neither the narrative energy and visual expressiveness of the best thrillers, nor the "authenticity" and distance from conventional dramatics which are the hallmark of Loach's earlier work.

This problem is also evident in the film's use of visual imagery. The cinematic thriller is, in origins, a North American genre which has evolved an elaborate iconography of dress, objects (such as cars and guns) and settings, often in relation to specific places (New York and Los Angeles, for example). This iconography is not, of course, inanimate, but cues many of the genre's characteristic meanings. Thus, it is not always easy simply to transplant the thriller to a novel environment (as thrillers set amidst the streets and traffic of London have often discovered to their cost). In the case of *Hidden Agenda*, the attempt to find the right iconography for a thriller set in Belfast leads it towards the most typical images of the "Troubles": an Orange band; murals; a cemetery; religious icons; and security forces on the streets. The problem with this is that, while such images clearly conform to the thriller's demands for the dramatic and striking, and also cue an audience (to the "universe" of the "Troubles") in the way that thriller icons conventionally do, they nevertheless do so only by virtue of being the most obvious and, indeed, clichéd of images. Thus, a film which, at the level of manifest content, seeks to challenge dominant perceptions of the "Troubles" actually reinforces them at the level of formal imagery. In this respect, the thriller format has encouraged too easy an acceptance of conventional ways of depicting the city and hence the "Troubles", but at the expense of the freshness of observation which might normally have been expected of Loach's documentary realism.

It may be no coincidence, therefore, that Loach's next film

abandons his experiments with art cinema and the political thriller to return to more familiar territory and techniques. *Riff-Raff* takes as its subject the lives of ordinary people, struggling to survive in the late-Thatcher era. Indeed, in a kind of metaphor for the period, a group of labourers (some themselves homeless) convert a disused hospital into luxury apartments. The plot itself is loose and episodic, often devoting time to apparently incidental business (such as the funeral sequence). In style and approach, the film also strives for the appearance of documentary accuracy. The script was by Bill Jesse, based on his own experiences on building sites. The cast were expected to have worked on a building site, and were encouraged, through improvisations, to bring their own experiences to bear upon their performances. The film was shot on a real building site and in a style designed not to interfere with the action.

This style is not, however, straightforwardly "invisible". As John Caughie suggests, it is the "classic realist" film which "depends to a greater or lesser extent on the illusion of unmediated vision". Documentary drama, on the other hand, "operates a rhetoric of mediated style which is clearly marked, but which has a prior association with truth and neutrality" by virtue of its use of techniques associated with documentary.[34] In this respect, the special feature of documentary realism is its use of "the documentary look". Thus, whereas "classic realism" engages the spectator in a system of "dramatic" looks between characters through the use of such techniques as reverse-field cutting, eyeline matches and point-of-view shots, the documentary look is more observational, and looks at, rather than looks with, those in front of the camera. It is this blend of dramatic and documentary looks which is also a feature of *Riff-Raff*.

However, if *Riff-Raff* does seek to explore contemporary social problems through the use of documentary drama methods, the issue remains as to how successful it is as a political film. The strength of the form, as Caughie suggests, is simply its ability to *show*, and give testimony to, experiences which are not traditionally dignified with cinematic representation. For Loach, this is possibly the main purpose of the film: to present the lives of "people who get by on the margins", and to give recognition to both their plight and their fortitude.[35] However, as has already been noted, the question traditionally raised in relation to this realist mode of presentation is its ability to move beyond observable realities and to provide a more analytic or explanatory perspective. One solution, often resorted to by realism, is that a character is required to state verbally the film's preferred explanation of the situation or issue at hand. The danger of this, however, is that the very conventions of the film, which rely upon the creation of a convincing dramatic illusion or sense of "authenticity", risk being ruptured by virtue of the implausibility of the

speeches which characters have to make in order for the film's politics to emerge clearly. In *Riff-Raff*, it is the character of Larry (Ricky Tomlinson) who is allocated this role, making a speech, for example, to his fellow workers about the iniquity of housing policy under Thatcher's government. In this case, the film is probably able to contain the potential strain placed upon its "authenticity". Larry is linked to both union activism and Militant politics, and his speeches are the source of humour to his colleagues ("he only asked for a fucking squat", remonstrates a fellow Liverpudlian in the face of Larry's anti-Thatcherite sermonising). Indeed, what the film successfully demonstrates is that the resistance to change comes not only from ruthless, cost-cutting employers (who eventually sack Larry), but also from the workers themselves, who generally lack the will and the means to fight back. When they do, as in the final arson attack, it is this which strains plausibility, signifying an unprepared-for action which goes against the grain of what has preceded – a sort of grafting-on of defiance which does not emerge "naturally" from the drama.

The film also has some difficulty in welding together the personal and political aspects of its drama. For Loach, the benefit of combining fictional and documentary methods is the ability to move between private and public worlds: "to get the insights into personal relationships and experiences that you can get through fiction, and yet to set them in a firm, concrete context".[36] In *Riff-Raff*, this twin focus is particularly evident in the combination of the scenes at the building site with those concerning the evolving relationship between the young Glaswegian, Stevie (Robert Carlyle), and his would-be singer girlfriend, Susie (Emer McCourt). For Caughie, there is always a risk involved in this mix of documentary and drama, public and private. As he explains, "though documentary drama within its naturalist project wishes to be about the community and the social environment, there is always the risk that the balance will fail, the dramatic narrative will impose its resolutions on the documentary disorder, and the drama will end up being about the privileged, centred individuals".[37] In the case of *Riff-Raff*, however, it is less that the balance swings too much in favour of the private, personal drama (although certainly a rather excessive amount of time is devoted to it, given the limited insights which it provides) than that the personal drama lacks a clear sense of relationship to the communal drama. As one critic complained, the film "builds a central relationship round, but not from, the scattered bricks of a communal experience".[38] Therefore, while there are undoubtedly scenes which do link private emotion with communal solidarity (Susan's singing of "With a Little Help from My Friends" following Larry's reproach to a club audience; the builders' applauding of the couple's embrace), the film does nevertheless tend to keep separate the "political" world of work from

the private sphere of relationships and romance. In this respect, the relationship between the couple does not really connect with the "concrete context" of work, and often appears to be set in opposition to it. The effect of this, as Sheila Johnston suggests, is problematic. Thus, while "the romantic relationship" of the young couple is presented as "a nagging, dead-end one", "the male bonding" provided by Stevie's fellow workers is seen as "energising and supportive".[39] In this respect, Loach's return to the conventions of documentary realism may have brought with it a too clear-cut version of class politics. While this has the undoubted virtue of drawing attention to the severe economic divisions which continue to be a characteristic of British society (and which significantly widened during the Thatcher years), it may also be at the expense of an ability to deal adequately with other social divisions, such as those of sex and ethnicity, and the ways that these may be seen to complicate a basic class perspective.

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that *Riff-Raff* did strike a chord when released, and that it was welcomed by many for its revivification of political filmmaking in Britain.[40] What this suggests is that the significance of such films cannot be viewed in isolation or in purely "textualist" terms. One of the weaknesses of "the realism debate" and of its variants such as the political thriller debate, was that it tended to be conducted in relation to the textual properties of films, independent of the context in which such films were produced and consumed. However, with the waning of 1960s and 1970s radicalism, and a corresponding shift away from both political and artistic vanguardism, it is evident that support for the "revolutionary text" (as exemplified by the work of, for example, Godard) has also declined. At the same time, there has been much greater tolerance (and, given the experiences of the 1980s, even gratitude) amongst the Left for the strategies of the political thriller and documentary drama, despite the often quite limited politics which they can provide. In the case of documentary realism, it might also be the case that it is precisely its straightforwardness and simplicity which has made it attractive in a culture increasingly dominated by the significatory playfulness (and very often emptiness) of postmodern culture. Thus, for Michael Eaton, the "comeback of British realism", signalled by the work of Ken Loach and Mike Leigh in the early 1990s, represents not only "a return to a particular style", but also "a return to value".[41]

In revisiting some of the criticisms of realism and the political thriller, it should be clear that I am doing so from a changed political context, and that I am not therefore advocating any return to the Godardian or "counter-cinema" model of political filmmaking. Indeed, two major shortcomings of the traditional critique of realism was its characteristic reliance on crude binary oppositions (*either* narrative realism *or* the revolutionary avant-garde; *either* Costa-Gavras *or*

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Godard) and general tendency to assume that certain aesthetic strategies (primarily Brechtian) would almost necessarily deliver a radical politics. It is evident that the unitary model of political cinema which underpinned such formulations is inadequate, and that changed political circumstances now require more diverse forms of political filmmaking. It is for this reason that the revival of the concept of "third cinema" has also been helpful.[42]

The concept of third cinema was initially employed by the Argentinian filmmakers, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, to identify an emergent political cinema which was distinct from both mainstream Hollywood (first cinema) and European "art" cinema (second cinema). Current usage of the term has continued to emphasise third cinema's original commitment to political explanation and dialogue, but has also recognised that this commitment cannot be fulfilled by any pregiven artistic recipes. As Paul Willemen has stated, third cinema is not only engaged in the creation of "new, politically... (and)...cinematically illuminating types of filmic discourse", but also is aware of "the historical variability of the necessary aesthetic strategies to be adopted".[43] What artistic means are appropriate to third cinema, therefore, will vary according to the social, political and cultural contexts in which it is produced and to which it is addressed. The virtue of third cinema in this respect is that, unlike models of counter-cinema, it does not prescribe one "correct" way of making political cinema which is universally applicable, but recognises the need for aesthetic diversity and a sensitivity to place, and to social and cultural specifics. In doing so, it also insists upon the importance of constantly rethinking and reworking (but not necessarily overthrowing) traditional artistic models (including those of both Hollywood and the avant-garde) if cinema is to continue to be critically lucid and politically relevant. The great strength of Loach's work has been, with some exceptions, its rootedness in a specific social context, and its nuanced relationship to both first and second cinemas. However, Loach's work at the end of the 1980s and start of the 1990s does also suggest that it may have been too dependent upon pregiven aesthetic recipes, and, as a result, failed to re-imagine, in a way which was entirely successful, a political cinema appropriate to the changed circumstances of the period. Loach is a formidable filmmaker whose continuing commitment to using film for political purposes places him in an uniquely important position in British cinema. As such, his work demands both attention and respect. However, precisely because he is such a significant filmmaker, it is important not simply to celebrate his achievements, which are considerable, but also to enter into dialogue with his work and engage with the issues which it raises.

Notes

[1] Quoted in Paul Kerr, "The Complete Ken Loach", *Stills* 27 (May-June 1986): 148.

[2] See Julian Petley, "Union Blues", *Stills* 14 (November 1984): 44-47.

[3] Loach on *The South Bank Show*, LWT, 3 October 1993.

[4] Kerr: 148.

[5] Ibid. In the period 1979-82, unemployment in Britain more than doubled, reaching well over three million. See Stephen Edgell and Vic Duke, *A Measure of Thatcherism: A Sociology of Britain* (London: HarperCollins, 1991).

[6] Kerr: 148.

[7] See, in particular, Colin MacCabe, "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian theses", *Screen* 15: 2 (summer 1974): 7-27; Colin McArthur, "Days of Hope", *Screen* 16: 4 (winter 1975/76): 139-144; and Colin MacCabe, "Days of Hope – A response to Colin McArthur", *Screen* 17: 1 (spring 1976): 98-101. The relationship of Loach's work to "realism" is not straightforward. MacCabe's critique is of the "classic realism" or "illusionism", characteristic of mainstream Hollywood, and, as such, applies to films which are often not regarded as "realistic" (such as *The Wizard of Oz*). MacCabe discusses *Cathy Come Home* as a socially "progressive" form of classic realism which simply challenges dominant discourses at the level of content. John Caughie, however, distinguishes Loach's work from classic realism in terms of its use of naturalist and documentary techniques; see John Caughie, "Progressive Television and Documentary Drama", *Screen* 21: 3 (1980): 9-35. For a recent reassessment of the realism debate, see Christopher Williams, "After the classic, the classical and ideology: the differences of realism", *Screen* 35: 3 (1994): 275-292.

[8] See Richard Lewis, "Review of the UK Film Industry: Report to BSAC", mimeo (London: British Screen Advisory Council, 1990).

[9] *Screen Digest* April 1992: 82.

[10] The casting of Fabienne Babe as Emma, the French Nazi-hunter, provides a clear example of the compromises struck in the interests of co-production. The original character was Dutch, and the casting of Babe adds an element not only of confusion to the plot, but also of unintelligibility, given that the French actress's command of English is so poor. This is particularly unfortunate insofar as Trevor Griffiths' script gives much more weight to the dialogue than would be characteristic of most of Loach's other work. For a discussion of the film's production by Trevor Griffiths, see Simon Banner, "Drittemann, poor man", *The Guardian* 26 March 1987: 13. His original screenplay has also been published; see Trevor Griffiths, *Fatherland* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987).

[11] Vincent Porter, "European co-productions: aesthetic and cultural implications", *Journal of Area Studies* 12 (autumn 1985): 7.

[12] The film, in this respect, is somewhat at odds with Griffiths' screenplay which seeks to incorporate the traditional images of Cambridge into what he describes as "an essential imagery of a rotten Britain": "King's College Chapel choristers progressing down the street; skins on the town; punks at corners; paired police; NF slogans; dole queues; banks, churches; bad TV in pubs; dossers and dogs picking a decorous way through the Bentleys and Mercedes". See Griffiths: 53.

[13] Derek Malcolm, "Loach's song for Europe", *The Guardian* 4 September 1986: 11.

[14] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Methuen, 1985): 205-213.

[15] Ibid: 208.

[16] Loach's early television work was influenced by the anti-naturalistic polemics of Troy Kennedy Martin and John McGrath, who scripted the six-part series, *Diary of a Young Man*, three episodes of which Loach directed in 1964. However, as Kerr suggests, Loach's career has largely been characterised by "a gradual shedding" of the "non-naturalist devices" which were a feature of his early work. See Kerr: 145.

[17] According to John Tulloch, Griffiths' intention was to use the "cool" conventions of the European art film, but to invest them with greater social and political "matter". He also indicates how Griffiths' screenplay was intended as a kind of response to Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. See John Tulloch, *Television Drama: Agency, audience and myth* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990): 152-165.

[18] Bordwell: 234-273. For Bordwell, the most pertinent characteristics of "historical-materialist" film are the refusal of psychologically-defined, individually-centred plots, an emphasis upon typicality and historical reference, and overt and politically-conscious narrational strategies.

[19] Quoted in Gavin Smith, "Voice in the Dark", *Film Comment* 24: 2 (March-April 1988): 42.

[20] Drittemann's relationships with women in the film are significantly different from the relationships described in the screenplay, where Drittemann makes love to his ex-wife before leaving East Berlin, has sex with Lucy, and evolves an uneasy "comradeship" with Emma. According to Tulloch (163), the lovemaking scenes were shot by Loach but then omitted "on the grounds of naturalistic plausibility". For Tulloch, this is symptomatic of a more general tension within the film between the "critical realism", or interpretive approach, of Griffiths and the "naturalism", or observational approach, of Loach.

[21] Quoted in *Stills* December 1985/January 1986: 33.

[22] For a discussion of these films and their relationship to an ongoing tradition of representing the "Troubles", see my analysis, "Images of Violence" in Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988): 147-193. An earlier discussion of *Hidden*

Agenda appeared as "Hidden Agenda: Politics and the Thriller", *Circa* 57 (May-June 1991): 36-41.

[23] Derek Malcolm, "The plot thickened", *The Guardian* 17 May 1990: 27.

[24] For an influential account of the Costa-Gavras debate, see Guy Hennebelle, "Z Movies or What Hath Costa-Gavras Wrought?", *Cineaste* 6: 2 (1974): 28-31. For a retrospective overview, see John J Michalczyk, *Costa-Gavras: The Political Fiction Film* (London; Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984): especially chapter 1.

[25] For a fuller discussion of these matters, see my "Narrative and Realism", in *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (London: British Film Institute, 1986): 53-66.

[26] *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Film, 1968-88* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988): 79.

[27] Colin Wallace (who is loosely the model for Harris in the film) and Fred Holroyd were Army Intelligence officers who subsequently made allegations of "dirty tricks" against the security forces in Northern Ireland. See Paul Foot, *Who Framed Colin Wallace?* (London: Macmillan, 1989). Jim Allen acknowledges his debt to *Lobster* in an interview: Patsy Murphy and Johnny Gogan, "In the Name of the Law", *Film Base News* 19 (September/October 1990): 13-17.

[28] Malcolm (1990): 27.

[29] For a discussion of these circumstances and an indication of their complexity, see Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Macmillan Education, 1988); Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London; New York: Verso, 1988); and Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley and Tom Ling, *Thatcherism: A Tale of Two Nations* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988).

[30] For a trenchant critique of the social conservatism of the crime story, see Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A social history of the crime story* (London; Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984).

[31] John Stalker was the Deputy Chief Constable of the Greater Manchester Police Force who was asked to undertake an enquiry into the deaths, at the hands of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, of six men in Northern Ireland in late-1982. Stalker was removed, in controversial circumstances, from the case before his report was completed. For further details, see John Stalker, *Stalker* (London: Harrap, 1988) and Peter Taylor, *Stalker: The Search for the Truth* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987).

[32] Quoted in Kerr: 146.

[33] One of the weaknesses of the political thriller debate was its tendency to assume that realism necessarily implied a "spectator-position", and that audience response, or "ideological effect", could simply be read off the text. In contrast, more recent work in media studies has stressed the creativity

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[36] Kerr: 146.

[37] Caughie: 29-30.

[38] David Wilson, "Riff-Raff

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[41] Michael Eaton, "Not a Pi
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[42] See Jim Pines and Paul
(London: British Film Institu

[43] Paul Willemen, "The Thi
ibid: 4, 7.

and interpretive licence enjoyed by media audiences. However, while it is evident that texts cannot simply determine audience response, it is still appropriate to suggest that some aesthetic strategies are more likely than others to engender a dialogue with audiences.

[34] Caughie: 27. In identifying Loach with documentary drama, Caughie is, in effect, distinguishing documentary drama from drama documentary. Drama documentary, in this respect, derives its "documentariness" from its content, which is based upon real people and events. Documentary drama, on the other hand, achieves its "documentariness" on the basis of its style and formal techniques. Thus, while Loach's films have only rarely dramatised actual events (as in *Ladybird Ladybird* [1994]), they have characteristically aimed to provide a documentary look (even though the methods used to achieve this may involve careful planning and rehearsal). For discussion of the issues raised by the mixing of drama and documentary, see Andrew Goodwin, Paul Kerr and Ian Macdonald (eds), *Drama-Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 1983).

[35] Annalena McAfee, "Hard labour for tragic Bill", *Evening Standard* 20 June 1991: 35. In her discussion of realism, Terry Lovell also suggests how the pleasure of a text may be grounded in "pleasures of an essentially public and social kind" such as "pleasures of common experiences...solidarity... and...a sense of identity and community" (*Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, Pleasure* [London: British Film Institute, 1980]: 95). It is some of these pleasures which *Riff-Raff* also appears to invite.

[36] Kerr: 146.

[37] Caughie: 29-30.

[38] David Wilson, "Riff-Raff", *Sight and Sound* 1: 1 (May 1991): 61.

[39] Sheila Johnston, "Another brick in the wall", *The Independent* 19 April 1991: 18.

[40] According to Lizzie Francke, "[i]f the British political film might have seemed [to] have lost its way, Loach brings it back home" (*City Limits* 18 April 1991: 24). Gilbert Adair also praised Loach's success in reviving political filmmaking but tended to confirm the argument of this article by describing *Riff-Raff* as "the finest mainstream 'liberal movie'" he had seen in recent years ("If you don't buy the politics, we'll shoot the movie", *The Guardian* 27 February 1992: 22).

[41] Michael Eaton, "Not a Piccadilly actor in sight", *Sight and Sound* 3: 12 (December 1993): 32.

[42] See Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (eds), *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989).

[43] Paul Willemen, "The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections", in ibid: 4, 7.

Agent of Challenge and Defiance

The Films of Ken Loach

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