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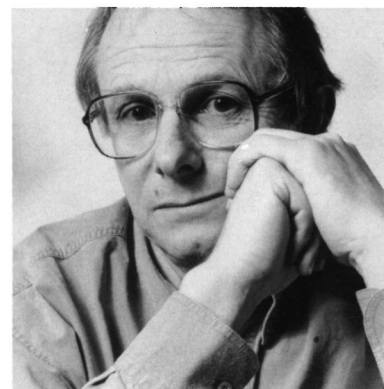
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The Revolution Betrayed:

An Interview with Ken Loach

by Richard Porton



Ken Loach (photo by Robin Holland)

Ken Loach, unquestionably one of Britain's most important filmmakers, is best known for his gritty and compassionate portrayals of working-class life. Early in his career, a series of socially conscious BBC films established the fact that Loach was both a skillful artist and a crusading social critic. *Cathy Come Home* (1966), an accomplished blend of fictional and documentary techniques, was one of his most successful—and controversial—early efforts. Although Loach occasionally returned to television (the even more controversial *Days of Hope* [1976] was a landmark BBC mini-series), he subsequently moved on to feature films, most notably *Kes* (1969), *Family Life* (1971), and *Ladybird*, *Ladybird* (1994), that are justly regarded as milestones of British social realism.

When we recently asked to interview Loach about his new film, *Land and Freedom*, which had its American premiere at the 1995 New York Film Festival, he spoke with us by phone from Nicaragua, where he was on location for his next film, a political thriller which takes place during the Sandinista/Contra war of the late Eighties.—Richard Porton

Cineaste: Was *Homage to Catalonia* the departure point for Jim Allen's screenplay for *Land and Freedom*?

Ken Loach: It wasn't exactly the departure point, although obviously it's a very important book. Several books were very important and that was one of them. We also looked at a book called *The Red Spanish Notebook* by Juan Bréa and Mary Low, two kids who were there. In addition, we looked at Gabriel Jackson's study, Victor Alba's history of the POUM, and Hugh Thomas's *The Spanish Civil War*. We also talked to a lot of eyewitnesses to fill in the details. The story of the Spanish Revolution is part of the folklore of the left, so it's always been in the back of our minds to do something about it.

Cineaste: The subtitle of the film—"A story from the Spanish Revolution"—is key, since, although documentary films have dealt with these events, fiction films have generally not dealt with the betrayal of the left by the Communist Party.

Loach: We were very concerned with this. We put the subtitle in because, immediately, from the start of the film, we wanted people not to start thinking of the Civil War but to think of the social upheaval as well. Part of the mythology of the war is that the left was united against fascism. Another part of this mythology is that all of the so-called democratic countries were against fascism. Both those things weren't true, as we now know.

Cineaste: Would you talk a bit about your collaboration with Jim Allen on the script? I understand that the flashback structure wasn't originally part of the script.

Loach: The film took a very long time to develop. We started with a very broad canvas. The story just kept breaking down. All the effort was to find a set of relationships that would put the political conflict into a personal framework. There's no use making a film where everything says the 'right on' thing when you have no personal drama. It took a long time and many false starts to find a group of people and conflicts which would mirror the political conflict. We tried very hard not to make it seem like a mechanical acting out. We

wanted it to be an emotional story as well, with people who had the limitations as well as the hopes of their times.

Cineaste: How many drafts did the script go through?

Loach: Hundreds, I would think. I couldn't tell you. It just kept evolving. And it was evolving while we were making the film.

Cineaste: How did you decide to make the character of Blanca an anarchist? Was it thought that there should be some representation of the anarchist position in the film?

Loach: Yes, partly that. There was also the fact that a lot of the women we talked to in Spain were anarchists—terrific people, particularly in Barcelona. One woman who, at least until a year ago, was operating a stall in the Barcelona market told us about fighting on the front with her boyfriend. We didn't want everyone to be stamped out of the same political mold. We wanted to reflect the confusion of the time and all the varied personal stories, because a lot of it was haphazard and people ended up fighting along with others for merely accidental reasons. It all happened in a great hurry where everyone rushed off to the front.

In some ways, it was chaotic. But it was also a great, spirited, popular movement. And, of course, Blanca goes along with the POUM because of her boyfriend. I know a man who lives near me in England who went and fought for the POUM. He was very young—seventeen or eighteen—but he just went because he had a good heart.

Cineaste: Is Jim Allen's position close to the POUM?

Loach: Well, that was, in general, the position we identified with, since they were anti-Stalinist Marxists. I hesitate to use the word Marxist, because it can be used as a kind of weight around your neck. They don't see the film, they just see the label. So I try to avoid using the word. People think they know what you mean, but they hang you before they see what you have done. In a way, what concerned us much more than the finer points of the politics was the great amount of human spirit, energy, and potential that was betrayed. Those people had enormously affirmative, heartwarming qualities. People were brave and strong and full of ability—that's the optimism, and the tragedy, of the film.

Cineaste: These qualities are especially evident in the sequence dealing with the collectivization debate. How was this sequence planned? I understand you used a mix of professionals and nonprofessionals. This is one of the film's high points.

Loach: Well, I hope so. It was a question of finding people who still felt passionate about this issue. Spain's still quite a political place—Franco at least did that. He was quite politicizing. You can find anarchists who still have a very strong position. It was very possible to find people who were full of passion from the nearby town. All the villagers were nonprofessionals with the exception of the guy who chairs the meeting and the man who is the main opponent of collectivization. He was an actor because I needed someone who had a bit of grit, to get something going. All of the positions taken by the actors did correspond to their actual positions, except for Tom Gilroy, the actor who plays Lawrence. We didn't want to make him a caricature, but to make his position against revolution as strong as possible. What was very important was that we didn't want to undervalue this argument. It was an honest dilemma, so we wanted to entrust that argument to someone who was an honest and

intelligent person. And ideally, the audience might go along with him for a time. It's quite good if, at the end of that debate, some of the audience is with Tom.

All the time it suits the purposes of our politicians to talk about how cynical people are, how they don't like politics and how things will never get any better. It suits the status quo to say this because it leaves power in the hands of the people who already have power. Nobody gets challenged. The more this myth of cynicism and just look after number one and don't care about anyone else is perpetuated, the more people lose power. The more you can say, 'Look, people have great potential,' the more volatile things will get.

Cineaste: *Would you say there are parallel themes in some of your other films written with Jim Allen, particularly Days of Hope, which deals with an analogous betrayal of the left during the 1926 British general strike?*

Loach: Well, yes. It's obviously a common theme. I think it's the story of the century, really, that there is this great force which is capable of change but it doesn't always lead to something effective. There are other similarities, of course, such as the question of fascism, although it didn't call itself that in Britain. But there was the need to undermine workers' organizations. And there's the support for fascist regimes when they can deliver a compliant working class or deliver a convenient space for the placement of Western capital. You don't have to look much further than America to see that. There's this hypocritical claim that the West is democratic, when it's only encouraging fascism to do the work that democracy can't do.

Cineaste: *Did you talk to many of the POUM veterans?*

Loach: Yes. There were a few memorable days when we went round many of the battlefields with a man named John Rocaber who had fought with the POUM. He took us around to many of the actual places where he had fought and told us exactly what had happened. He was an extraordinary man and what he told us was very vivid. Much of what we recounted in the film had actually happened to him. He was arrested a few miles away from the front by the new detachment from the Popular Army. That was very dramatic—or should I say traumatic—for him. After we had taken that journey we incorporated many of his experiences into the film. This was a great help, especially with the last scene.

Cineaste: *And of course we now realize that the Soviet Union was behind the purge of the left.*

Loach: There were orders from Moscow. It was the time of the purge trials. The same line used to go after the POUM was used against Trotsky and the Old Bolsheviks. It was exactly the same language and around the same time; the Moscow trials were in 1936. This was the Stalinist way of dealing with opponents.

Cineaste: *Of course, the odd thing about the POUM was that, although labeled 'Trotskyist,' Trotsky himself was quite critical of them.*

Loach: Yes, and they were critical of him. Although, perhaps they had more in common with Trotsky than they were prepared to

allow. They both represented anti-Stalinist Communism. The epithet of 'Trotskyism' is also used in Britain against anyone who is a militant or a radical. It is a term of abuse which has stuck for sixty years; it's rather ironical.

Cineaste: *Was there a conscious attempt to construct affinities between what is happening in Britain today and the situation in Spain during the Thirties?*

Loach: No, not really a conscious attempt. We just tried to tell the story as directly as possible. We just tried to pare it down to the bone—to inform the audience of the struggle for people to take power and the political forces that opposed them. If there is a pertinence to the British situation, we shouldn't talk just of Britain but of the whole Western world. The issue today is all about democratic control of resources, democratic control of capital. That's a demand which can't go away, because we're driving civilization over the precipice. The drive for production and new technologies are increasing poverty, unemployment, and overproduction. It's an accelerating spiral; control is in the hands of the big corporations. It's even beyond anybody's control, beyond the state even. The multinationals are operating according to the laws of their own markets. So the question is: Who controls? Who controls

land and technology? Who controls markets?

Cineaste: *I've heard about some screenings of the film where people who fought with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade have had heated arguments with those who espouse the position of the POUM.*

Loach: People who fought with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade have a huge emotional investment, like all of the veterans of the international brigades. In many cases, their lives have been based on what they did in Spain.

So it's very reasonable for them to disagree and find fault with what this film is about. That's OK. As Jim Allen says, they were the cream of their generation. The last thing we would want to do is not acknowledge and admire what they did.

Cineaste: *I read that Santiago Carrillo, the former head of the Spanish Communist Party, attacked the film.*

Loach: Oh, yes. He wrote an article, but his criticisms weren't as strong as I thought they would be. Basically, he reflected some of the arguments used in the film—the POUM were irresponsible adventurists, and so on. He thought that the people who talked of revolution at the time were splitting the left—you know, the usual arguments. I don't think they can now assert that the leaders of the POUM were fascists. I think they now have to admit that this was a terrible lie. It did make a good discussion in Spain between Carrillo and the general secretary of the POUM. They battled it out; that's OK. The response from people in the international brigades has been varied. Obviously, some of them have been quite antagonistic, but others have been very supportive. They're all very old now. The important thing is not to let it be merely an argument between old men. That's fine, but there are more important things involved than digging over the fine print of the politics of '36. ■



Ken Loach prepares the agrarian collectivization debate scene for *Land and Freedom*, for many viewers one of the most politically engrossing and historically authentic moments in the film.