



REVOLUTION, MY ARSE

by David Archibald

'Do you know what you want? A fucking revolution,' roars Tommy (Ricky Tomlinson) at a police helicopter monitoring his movements as he staggers home after one too many. Perturbed by this oppressive and obtrusive intervention, he drops his trousers and thrusts his bare arse skywards, the helicopter's spotlight illuminating his substantial buttocks for police officers and audience alike. Emboldened by his act of naked insubordination, Tommy continues on his nocturnal bacchanalian journey, bursting into song: 'Here we go, here we go, here we go,' a chant popularised on the picket lines during the fierce battles between miners and police during the 1984-1985 strike. Tomlinson has since become a household name in Britain, famed for his role as the proletarian patriarch in the television series *The Royle Family*, where his renowned catchphrase 'My arse' is emblematic of a working-class scepticism, if not cynicism, towards all and everything that surrounds him. In this scene from *Raining Stones* (1993), however, Tomlinson's posterior is deployed for more progressive political purposes.

Absurdly comic, the moment is in keeping with the socialist outlook of the film's director, Ken Loach, and its writer, Jim Allen, a former building worker with an unreconstructed Marxist view of the world whom Loach credits with being largely responsible for the radical shift in his own politics in the late 1960s. It is a political perspective that is evident in their early television plays *The Big Flame* (1969) and *The Rank and File* (1971), both dealing with industrial action, and the controversial four-part series *Days of Hope* (1975), which follows two brothers from the First World War to the 1926 General Strike.

At the time of the release of *Raining Stones*, however, organised labour and socialist ideas were in retreat. Progressive social change, never mind revolutionary transformation, seemed a Utopian dream. It was the fourteenth consecutive year of Conservative Party rule and free-market capitalism appeared to have scored an ideological victory following the collapse of dictatorial communist regimes in eastern Europe. The period posed old political questions anew: was capitalism really the only game in town? Was socialism best consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history? Perhaps Margaret Thatcher had been right all along when she stated: 'There is no alternative.'

It is no surprise that Loach's films of the early- to mid-1990s portray the period as one in which working-class struggle is focused on simply surviving. The day-to-day struggle in *Raining Stones* centres on Bob Williams (Bruce Jones), an unemployed worker who is forced into a series of casual jobs as he attempts to eke out a living for his family. Faced with the added, and considerable, expense of kitting out his daughter for her upcoming Holy Communion, he enters into a series of darkly comic encounters involving sheep and shit, as well as one tragic encounter with loan sharks.

Bob seeks assistance from his brother-in-law, Jimmy, an advice worker in the local community centre. Jimmy appears as some kind of spirit of socialist ideology who reflects on the reality of working-class experience: 'When you're a worker it rains stones seven days a week,' he says. But while Bob seeks Jimmy's input, he can find no practical use for his politics: 'Look, Jimmy, the last thing I need right now is a lecture.' As the two continue their discussion, a young couple, perhaps drug abusers, argue loudly in the street. The scene is shot on location on the Langley Estate in Middleton, Greater Manchester, the boarded up windows signifying the dilapidated state of the area. Jimmy laments the future for the young people and posits the need for the working class to collectively self-organise. 'That's what it is in a nutshell,' he says. 'The rest is just propaganda.'

The phrase 'All the rest is propaganda' is commonly identified with factory worker Arthur Seaton in Alan Sillitoe's 1958 novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, who was played by Albert Finney in the British New Wave cinematic adaptation (Karel Reisz, 1960). But it also features in another project on which Allen and Loach collaborated: *In Black and White*, otherwise known as *The Save the Children Fund Film* (1971). The film was commissioned by Save the Children and London Weekend Television but then consigned to the BFI's vaults for four decades, after the charity objected to its overtly socialist politics and its excoriating critique of the NGO's practices in Africa. In *Raining Stones*, socialism might not be foregrounded but it haunts the film like a spectre. When Bob is in the community centre, Barry Ackroyd's camera tracks his movement before it comes to rest on a poster advertising a public meeting, which reads: 'World in crisis... Is there a socialist alternative?' For the moment the answer appears to be in the negative, as salvation for Bob comes from an unexpected source – one that we might not expect from a Loach and Allen collaboration.

Allen's early work with Loach examined trade union struggles but Loach's output of this period switches focus, from the organised working class with established employment conditions to casualised labour and a world in which unions are largely absent. *Riff-Raff* (1991), which features a group of workers on a London building site, was initially a television production for Channel Four with a small budget of £750,000, shot on 16mm in a 4:3 aspect ratio. It is dedicated to the writer, ex-building worker Bill Jesse, who died aged 48 in advance of the film's completion. Here the employers have the upper hand: organised labour is a thing of the past and the workers suffer the consequences in pay, conditions and safety. In an early exchange they

discuss arranging a squat for Stevie (Robert Carlyle), who has been sleeping rough. Highlighting the absurdity of Britain's housing policy, Larry (Ricky Tomlinson) comments, '1990, eh? Millions of people without homes.' He praises Liverpool's Labour council and its major house-building programme, which led to confrontation with the Conservative government, but as he is in full flow one of the workers intervenes with a blunt, 'He only wants a fucking squat.' Later, when Larry discusses organising the site with builders' union UCATT, his points are ignored by the workers. These moments are reminiscent of Bob's dismissal of Jimmy's politics in *Raining Stones*, indicative of how those championing radical-left politics at the time struggled to gain a hearing even on basic economic issues, let alone on broader ideological questions.



When Larry raises health-and-safety concerns with the gaffers, it leads not to improvement but to his removal from the site (and from the film), suggesting the futility of appealing to the employers' better nature. But the collective action of Loach's 1960s television dramas is not presented as an alternative in this post-miners' strike era. Even when the workers do take action at the film's climax, it is borne of bitter frustration rather than an attempt to achieve change.

How do we cope in such situations? As with *Raining Stones*' buttocks-in-the-air moment, *Riff-Raff* is laced with absurdist humour, memorably when Stevie's family makes a hash of scattering his mother's ashes – note the brief appearance here of a young Peter Mullan, who played the titular role in Loach's *My Name is Joe* (1998) – or when Larry is caught with his pants down in preposterous circumstances and Tomlinson's curves are once more on display. Comic moments pepper Loach's oeuvre, indicative of how humour can be an important defence mechanism when coping with the bleakest of experiences, leavening the load for characters and audiences alike. But comedy can be deployed to provoke new ways of thinking too: as Walter Benjamin observed in relation to laughter, 'Spasms of the diaphragm generally offer better chances of thought than spasms of the soul.'



The humour in *Riff-Raff* and *Raining Stones*, however, is largely absent in *Ladybird Ladybird* (1994), a tale of cyclical domestic abuse that, more than two decades on from its release, still has a raw immediacy and brutality that makes for demanding viewing. If life rains stones on the working class, it seems none have been pelted with such ferocious consistency as the film's central character, Maggie (Crissy Rock). *Ladybird Ladybird* presents her traumatic experiences from her own perspective as she attempts to rebuild her life and start a new family with partner Jorge (Vladimir Vega). The film's origins lie in a letter Loach received from a social worker who had worked with the real-life character on whom the film is based. In collaboration with playwright Rona Munro, a structure was developed that involved extensive use of flashback. In these we are forced to encounter scenes in which Maggie struggles with the authorities to keep her family together and is beaten repeatedly and brutally by her abusive partner, Simon (Ray Winstone). It is difficult to watch but the first viewing is seared into the souls of the audience.

Loach is sometimes critiqued for representing a sanitised view of working-class life. Close analysis of his work, however, shows that the working class is never presented as holier than thou. The ordeals that the characters in these films face are not simply abstractions of capitalism: they are specific interactions, often meted out by other working-class characters. The gaffers on the building sites in *Riff-Raff* are working-class Geordies and Londoners, gone over to the employers for a few extra quid in their pockets. In *Raining Stones* Tansy (Jonathan James) represents that part of the working class that has internalised the worst excesses of capitalism and governs through fear and violence. But perhaps none have gone quite as low as Simon in his violent treatment of Maggie, who is presented as far from saintly; however, the film invites the audience to strive to understand, or at least contextualise, her behaviour or decision making and to respond sympathetically.

Part of the sympathy that audiences feel towards Maggie flows from Crissy Rock's performance. She previously worked on the comedy circuit, a popular source of fresh talent for Loach. In this, her acting debut, she is an electrifying presence, indicative of the director's ability to draw outstanding performances from his cast, many of whom are appearing before the camera for the first time. Performances such as Rock's are a regular feature of his career, the result of the lengths he goes to when working with both professionals and non-professionals, including casting actors with characteristics similar to their roles in the film, linear shooting, releasing script details to actors only when necessary, minimising the presence of non-essential crew on set and positioning the camera at a distance then employing long lenses to shoot. These steps constitute part of what we might call 'The Loach method'. There are other significant aspects to Loach's approach – location shooting, minimal use of non-diegetic music, employment of popular music (*Riff-Raff* and *Ladybird Ladybird* contain songs that are thematically connected to the content, 'With a Little Help From My Friends' and 'Deillah', respectively), unobtrusive sound, natural lighting and positioning the viewer so as to create the impression that they are following the action as it unfolds before them. Coupled with the director's political and thematic preoccupations, these combine to make Loach almost a film genre in his own right.

His career, however, has not been without its troubles. The 1980s represented something of a fallow patch for Loach: the decade began with *Looks and Smiles* (1981), scripted by Kes (1971) writer Barry Hines and exploring the plight of the young unemployed of the period but which Loach regarded as something of a failure. At the time, class politics was being played out nightly on British television screens with events such as the miners' strike looming large in the news. Loach turned to TV, directing documentaries such as *Questions of Leadership* (1983) and *Which Side Are You On?* (1985) in an attempt to make a more direct and immediate political intervention but the programmes were blocked by the censorial actions of the broadcasters. In this period, film funding was not easy to secure and when it was, for *Fatherland* (1986), Loach discovered that he may have shared the same socialist outlook as writer Trevor Griffiths but that they had distinctively different approaches to filmmaking; he is not celebratory about the resulting film.

The success of *Hidden Agenda* (1990), a dramatisation of Britain's shoot-to-kill policy in Northern Ireland scripted by Jim Allen, helped lay the ground for the titles in this collection, which were produced by Parallax Pictures. All three received considerable international recognition. *Riff-Raff* won the critics' prize at the Cannes Film Festival, while *Raining Stones* took the jury prize and Crissy Rock won a clutch of awards, including a Silver Bear for Best Actress at the Berlin International Film Festival.



Working with Parallax, Loach subsequently directed *Tierra y Libertad/Land and Freedom* (1995), *Carla's Song* (1996), *My Name is Joe*, *Bread and Roses* (2000) and *The Navigators* (2001). Sixteen Films was then established by Loach and Rebecca O'Brien and, working mostly with writer Paul Laverty, produced *Sweet Sixteen* (2002) and all of Loach's subsequent films. It is the company with which he has had the most success, winning two Palmes d'Or at Cannes, for his Irish Civil War drama *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006) and for *I Daniel Blake* (2016). The latter is Loach's most impactful film since *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and provoked questions in the Houses of Parliament. Notably, Sixteen Films also produced a number of General Election broadcasts for the Labour Party in 2017. Although the Conservatives won the election, that Jeremy Corbyn substantially increased the Labour vote represents a significant re-orientation towards left-wing ideas; revolution might not be the order of the day but Loach's socialist politics appear to be back in fashion.

As he enters his 80s Loach has had more films screened in Official Competition at the Cannes Film Festival than any other filmmaker and, over five decades, he has had remarkable success exploring social concerns through the portrayal of the daily lives of individuals. Taken together *Riff-Raff*, *Raining Stones* and *Ladybird Ladybird* mark a turning point in Loach's career and an outstanding cinematic triptych of working-class life in the Conservative-ruled Britain of the early 1990s.

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Further Reading

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