

Wenke Langhof

Realism, Naturalism, Loachism? A study of
Ken Loach's films of the 1990s.

Thesis (M.A.)

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Universität Potsdam
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Realism, Naturalism, 'Loachism'?
A study of Ken Loach's films of the 1990s.

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Wenke Langhof
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Introduction

The 1990s was a very productive decade for the British film industry. It is the continuation of the so-called 'renaissance' in British film, which started in the 1980s.

With the establishment of Channel 4 in the 1980s the biggest obstacle to British filmmaking, the finance, had not vanished, but considerably improved. Between 1982 and 1997 Channel 4 produced or sponsored more than 200 low-budget films. It brought challenging pieces to the screens, which were renowned for "their realism, their simplicity, their absence of special effects and their originality" and often politically, socially and/or ethnically motivated.¹

One of the British directors renowned for precisely this kind of filmmaking is Kenneth Loach, who adhered to his realistic approach to filmmaking from the 1960s through to the 1990s and applied it both to the television and the cinema screen. After a less productive decade during the 80s, when he turned to documentaries rather than feature films, most of which never made it to the screen under the politics and censorship of the Thatcher government, he experienced a comeback in the 1990s. Even if his style developed over the decades of his career, his main aim - to show the life of the British working class - has remained consistent. Critics generally refer to Loach as a realist or naturalist filmmaker, terms which Loach himself would rather substitute with "authentic", which to him seems a less loaded word than "naturalistic" or "realistic"².

So what is he? A realist, a naturalist or should one create a new term, as has been suggested and call his filmmaking "Loachian"³ to do justice to his unique style? Could one define such a thing as "Loachism", rather than "realism" and "naturalism"?

Loach's style can be regarded as a continuum within realist traditions of filmmaking.⁴ From the early beginnings of cinema, realism constituted an important part of the new medium. Critics and filmmakers alike engaged in discussions on the realist issue. Is cinema real? Does it show 'life as it really is'? Could any two-dimensional art ever show the real life? How far can the style of filming manipulate the reflection of reality in film and how does this influence the film's effect on the spectator?

¹ David Christopher, *British Culture: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999) 91.

² Julian Petley, "An Interview with Ken Loach," *Framework* 18 (1982): 12.

³ Tony McKibbin, "The benign but subtly belligerent master of realism: On Ken Loach and the 'Loachian' way of portraying ordinary people," *Hard Times* 69 (1999): 36-37.

⁴ David Nicholls, "Locating Loach," <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Exhibit/5693/locatingloach.htm>

The following work will look at the origins and developments of realist film theory and the connections to naturalism (Is naturalism a kind of realism?). After the establishment of a theoretic framework, I will place Loach and his films within this framework, starting with an examination of his distinguishing cinematic techniques, before subjecting two of the films to a more detailed analysis.

As I am dealing with a director who has made films from the 1960s to the 1990s, it would be beyond the scope of this work to include all his films. I have therefore decided to limit my analyses to his cinema films of the 1990s, which constituted a renaissance in Loach's career and showed a slight change in style, partly due to the fact that they were made for the 'big screen' and not - like the majority of his earlier films - for television.⁵

⁵ Even if I will term the films under discussion 'Loach-films', they must be rather seen as 'Loach-collaborations' with certain editors, writers, cameramen and designers, whose input is just as important as that of Loach as a director. See also chapter 4.

1. Realism and naturalism: a theoretic framework

As long as mankind has existed there has always been the desire to depict and preserve images of the world and the reality around man. Important for the cinema tradition of realism are particularly the art and literature movements of the nineteenth century, which flourished in the wake of a new medium, that captured visual reality in a way never seen before: photography. Photography subsequently became the prerequisite for the development of 'the motion picture' - cinema.

1.1. Realism and naturalism in the nineteenth century

1.1.1. The emergence of realism

Realism was the dominant movement in art and literature from about 1840 until 1870-80. The nineteenth century was a century full of new discoveries and scientists and historians revealed ever more about reality,⁶ changing the human perception of the world. These developments naturally had an impact on the artists of the time, whose aim it became to portray reality as meticulously as possible.

At the same time new democratic ideas sprang up and resulted in a demand for political and social democracy as well as for democracy in art. "Ordinary people - merchants, workers and peasants - in their everyday functions, began to appear on a stage formerly reserved exclusively for kings, nobles, diplomats and heroes".⁷ Realist artists believed they had to be of their own era - *Il faut être de son temps*. They felt they had a mission to reflect their contemporary world⁸, viewing people "frankly and candidly in all their misery, familiarity or banality"⁹.

This notion of *être de son temps* is not only characteristic of painting, but of literature, too, where French writers such as Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert or George Eliot and Anthony Trollope in England, captured human life and experience in their writings. They shaped the realistic novel, in which complex characters were represented, who were "[rooted] in a social class, [operated] in a highly developed social structure, [interacted] with many other characters, and [underwent] plausible and everyday modes of experience".¹⁰ All events are rendered in a "circumstantial,

⁶ Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (1971; London: Penguin Books, 1990) 15.

⁷ Ibid. 23.

⁸ Ibid. 28.

⁹ Ibid. 34.

¹⁰ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1957; Orlando: HBJ, 1993) 132.

matter-of-fact, and seemingly unselective way” and are written so as to make the reader believe that the characters might exist and that the events might well happen.¹¹

This new tendency of focusing on the secular and the ordinary is characteristic of all realistic works not matter if one deals with painting, literature, theatre or film.

1.1 2. Naturalism as the intensification of realism

Naturalism is closely associated with realism and often regarded as a kind of realism, but more intense than the latter. Naturalists depict life even more accurate than realists and take a more scientific and objective approach to art.

In the naturalist view, two forces determine the human being: heredity (compulsive instincts, e.g. hunger, sexuality, accumulative drive) and environment (family, class, social milieu into which a person is born).¹² Every human being's personality and expectations in life emerge as a result of the interplay between those two forces. Thus, there is only a certain degree of control people can exert over their own lives and their ambitions in life. These characteristics also apply to naturalism in film.

Of more significance for a filmic approach to naturalism, however, is the naturalistic development in the theatre of the nineteenth century. Furthering realistic tendencies, which already emerged in the eighteenth century bourgeois drama¹³, the Frenchman André Antoine was one of the first dramatists and directors, who accomplished a 'slice-of-life-realism' on the theatre stage.

Actors were meant to incorporate their characters and 'be them' instead of 'acting them'. The audience should be confronted with a realistic décor, contemporary subject matter and naturally delivered dialogue. Forgetting that they were watching a play, the audience should feel as if they were witnessing a happening in real life. In the same way, actors were to forget the audience, not

¹¹ Ibid. 174.

¹² Abrams 175.

¹³ The three main innovation were: “that the actions of drama should be *contemporary* . . . ; that the actions and resolutions of drama should be *secular* . . . ; and that the actions of drama should move beyond their conventional social exclusiveness . . . and include the lives of all men” see Raymond Williams, “Realism, naturalism and their alternatives,” *Ciné-Tracts* 1.3 (1977/78): 1-6.