

Film Review

The Old Oak (2023) Director: Ken Loach

This film is the third in a trilogy of films set in the Northeast of England from Director, Ken Loach and Scriptwriter, Paul Laverty. All three films give voice to the experience of working-class communities dealing with the devastating and lasting impact of policy over the last four decades, which has preserved the interests of an elite at the expense of the interests of a much wider public. The first film *I Daniel Blake* highlighted the punitive cruelty of the current welfare system, no longer protecting people in adversity from poverty, homelessness or hunger. The second *Sorry We Missed You* highlighted the rise of the gig economy, and the erosion of terms and conditions which protect workers in employment. This third film explores the struggle to maintain hope and solidarity in working-class communities in the context of relentless attacks on living standards and quality of life. This is illuminated through the relationship of TJ, a pub landlord struggling to maintain his rundown business, and Yara, a Syrian refugee placed in the community with her family, along with other refugee families, by local authorities.

Yara, her family and the other Syrian refugees do not receive a warm welcome into this former mining community. Loach and Laverty offer context to these negative attitudes via conversations between pub users in the Old Oak, that highlight their sense of abandonment by successive governments, where their interests and concerns are almost never addressed. Bringing refugees into a community where people are experiencing such hardship, for some, seems to add insult to injury, creating the conditions for racist hostility towards the incomers. A telling example of this shows local community worker Laura bringing donated supplies to Syrian families (helped by TJ), and being confronted by resentment from local people also struggling with poverty.

The legacy of Thatcherism, the associated attacks on trade unionism and the undermining of collectivism is explored through Yara's interest in photography, with photographs taken during the 1984 miners' strike displayed in a back room of the pub and discussed with TJ. The community solidarity displayed in these images motivates an attempt by Yara, TJ and community activist Laura, to build community between struggling Syrians and struggling local people, by providing free lunches where local families and Syrians can eat together and get to know one another.

Community workers watching this film will identify with the role of Laura¹ in the film recognising the erosion of community resources and the difficulty in finding shared public spaces where diverse community members can meet, talk informally, address differences, learn from each other and recognise shared humanity. The film highlights how online platforms can serve to do the opposite, individualising, distancing and polarising people.

A key theme illustrated via TJ's tense relationship with friends and customers, and the abuse directed by some of them towards the Syrian families, is the way communities become divided: rather than looking up (as TJ puts it) they are encouraged to look down, to blame 'some other poor bastard' who is even worse off, or at least equally as badly off, as them.

Both Yara and TJ discuss their struggles in maintaining hope in the face of trauma and adversity, but Loach and Lavery obviously aim to offer an ultimately hopeful message. Lavery has described hope as a political act. Believing positive change *is* possible can inspire collective action, whereas isolation and hopelessness can leave individuals and communities vulnerable to the alienating influence of the Far Right

In keeping with the two films previously mentioned, this is a powerful film (probably Ken Loach's last) which very effectively addresses key issues of our time, offering a nuanced understanding of the pressures confronting people at the sharp end of inequitable social policy.

Incidentally, the character Yara's interest in taking photographs as a means of social documentary resonated with a recent documentary film also centred on the northeast of England. *Tish* celebrates the life of Tish Murtha, a working-class woman from Elswick in Newcastle, a highly talented social documentary photographer, who documented life in her own community and local areas.

This film, like *The Old Oak*, is worth seeing as a powerful and empathic portrait of the impact of unjust political choices on individuals and communities who, given a chance, could contribute so much - and deserve a great deal better.

Margaret Petrie

¹ In keeping with Loach's practice of using non actors and real people in his films, Laura is played by Claire Rodgeron a community organiser and anti-racism activist living and working in Sunderland. She is a former student of Moray House School of Education's Masters in Social Justice and Community Action. Although I supervised her Masters' dissertation, it is perhaps testament to the power of the film and the credibility of her acting that I did not realise that I knew her.