

Cathy Come Home: Why it is still relevant 50 years on and why the world needs people like Ken Loach

by **Ronda Daniel** – @rondaemily_



Source: British Film Council

TV play *Cathy Come Home* was broadcast for the first time in 1966. Why, in 2016, is it still relevant?

With *Stand By Me* playing in the background, the play begins with Cathy and Reg Ward, a happy couple, dreaming about their future. We are then taken through scenes of their wedding, their new modern home and an antenatal class. Suddenly, Reg is injured at work- their discussions turn to life insurance, money, savings, what they can afford. We are then told facts and figures from the 1960s London housing crisis.

*“In seven central London boroughs, at least one in ten of all households is overcrowded.”
(voiceover)*

“Families of certain sizes, at the rate of building in force, would be 350 years on the housing list before they were offered a house.” (voiceover)

We are then taken to Cathy and Reg’s new home, a flat with his family, surrounded by families with children, playing outside. Residents discussed the overcrowding, and the impact that it had on their everyday lives, including their marriages. Tensions rise in the house, and Cathy wants to leave with Reg and their baby Sean. They move out, Reg gets a new job and baby Stevie comes along. Cathy is pregnant again, and she develops a close relationship with a neighbour and landlady, Mrs Alley.

“Some would say it’s wrong to have more kiddies when you’re overcrowded as it is. But I don’t think so. I think kiddies are God’s gift.” (Cathy)

When Mrs Alley suddenly dies, Cathy is told that her rent needs to be paid urgently. She tries to plead, but is ignored. We are taken to a court scene, and an eviction notice is issued. Searching for a property proved expensive with property prices increasing and wages not increasing to meet this.

“Because Reg couldn’t afford it, not with his wages, it meant that all the week we’d be living on next to nothing.” (Cathy)

“It was as if it was a crime to have children.” (Cathy)

The family are warned by the Public Health department due to damp in the home, and Cathy and Reg respond by saying “we’re getting evicted anyway”.

“Faceless man. Why doesn’t he do something about instead of doing something he doesn’t believe in?” (Reg)

The family are evicted by bailiffs, surrounded by crowds outside the home. The family are taken through the system, in a downward spiral, where they are forced into caravans, squats and shelters. They meet numerous families, with children, some of them ex-soldiers, with not enough money. Politicians and the media work together to demonise and blame these people for their situations, resulting in violence towards people, including migrants.

“These are just scroungers, layabouts. These are the words that come into mind when contemplating these people.” (councillor)

“You people let yourselves get so run down, no wonder they won’t help you.” (A friend of Reg)

“You people are taking all our houses, that’s why we’re here.” (A resident at a homeless shelter for women and children, addressing a migrant woman)

After being accused of speaking to a reporter, and arguing with staff, Cathy is told that her husband Reg has not been paying fees for her and the children to live in the shelter.

“I wish we could start all over again.” (Cathy to Reg)

Eventually, Cathy is evicted and her children are taken from her arms by social services. The play ends with some poignant statistics.

Reading the above, we can see many parallels in 2016. Namely, **the death of council housing**, the impact of discourse in terms of class, victim-blaming and immigration. **Poor families are still told they shouldn’t have had children**. I grew up as one of seven children, living on a council estate in a 3-bedroom house, and I have heard this phrase many times, even though there are countless empty houses and flats owned by corporations for their workers to stay occasionally, and Prince William and Kate Middleton live in a 22-bedroom apartment with their children. London’s housing crisis is worse than ever in 2016, with the average house price at £467,070 in 2014 (**Shelter, 2016**). As in the 1960s, which Ken Loach highlights, **immigration** is still on the tips of people’s tongues in this debate, as migrants are still being scapegoated.

At the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, **director Ken Loach gave a speech**. Ken Loach criticises the ‘*dangerous project of austerity*’, discussing how trapped people feel and ways in which the power of film can impact minds and policy.

“We have to look again at this whole cruel sanctions and benefit system, which is out to tell the poor that their poverty is their own fault.” (Ken Loach)

The world needs to take note of film, and we are lucky to have Ken Loach speaking for those who cannot (or will not) yet be heard.

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About the author: Ronda is a sociology undergraduate at the LSE, going into her third year. She is currently conducting research for her undergraduate dissertation about the impact of poverty porn on the treatment and identities on benefit recipients.

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