



KEN LOACH SELECTION

Cathy Come Home (1966)



*"I think **Cathy**'s a film about a social situation; it's not a political film because it doesn't deal with structure at all – the structure of what makes people homeless.*

It accepts the fact of homelessness without analysis, and it's the story of a family caught in that grip and how it's shattered by it. But it doesn't try to explain the cause, and therefore it doesn't deal with politics; it deals with personal tragedy."

[Ken Loach]

Cathy Come Home remains a landmark of British television, a synonym for verite drama.

Over 40 years on, it's difficult to assess the first devastating impact of its haunting conclusion - a technically ambitious, long-lens only-one-chance set-up - on a nation of viewers. But it remains shocking, superbly performed and too infrequently (re)viewed, despite its reputation.

Much has been made of its influence in the founding of the charity **Shelter**, a legacy which Loach is characteristically unconvinced by ("*what's inadequate is the idea that homelessness is a problem that should be solved by a charity*").

Likewise its style - something of a synthesis of Loach's work for the BBC in the 60s - which may have gained him his first major recognition but which he soon modified: "*everybody started copying that early documentary style, and I felt that this chasing after events would quickly become a mannerism. It became plain that really, if what was in front of the camera was important, you needed to photograph it as simply and economically as you could.*"

In many ways, Loach has been achieving this ever since.

Director	Ken(neth) Loach
Producer	Tony Garnett
Script	Jeremy Sandford
Photography	Tony Imi
Editor	Roy Watts
BBC TV (Wednesday Play)	
Cast	Carol White, Ray Brooks, Winifred Dennis, Wally Patch
Running Time	1 hour 20 minutes

From: <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/C/htmlC/cathycomeho/cathycomeho.htm>

Cathy Come Home was screened by BBC1 on 16 December 1966, within the regular *Wednesday Play* slot. The program is a "drama-documentary" concerning homelessness and its effect upon families. Written by Jeremy Sandford, produced by Tony Garnett and directed by Ken Loach, the programme has become a British TV "classic," regularly referred to by critics and researchers as well as by programme-makers themselves. Part of the status accorded to *Cathy* is undoubtedly due to its particular qualities of scripting, direction and acting, but part follows from the way in which it has been seen to focus and exemplify questions about the mixing of dramatic with documentary material and, more generally, about the public power of television in highlighting social problems. After the screening, the issue of homelessness and of various measures adopted by local authorities to deal with it, became more prominent in public and political discussion and the housing action charity "Shelter" was formed. The more long-term consequences, in terms of changes to the kinds of conditions depicted in the film, remain much more doubtful, of course.

Cathy is organised as a narrative about a young woman who marries, has children and who then, following an accident to her husband which results in his loss of job and the following family poverty, suffers various states of homelessness in poor or temporary accommodation until her children are taken into care by the social services. The programme adopts an episodic structure, depicting the stages in the decline of *Cathy* and her family across a number of years. Both as a play and as a kind of documentary, it is held together by the commentary of *Cathy* herself, a commentary which is given in a self-reflective past-tense and which not only introduces and ends the programme but is heard regularly throughout it, providing a bridge between episodes and a source of additional explanation to that obtained by watching the dramatic action.

The "documentary" element of *Cathy* is partly a matter of depictive style. But is also partly a matter both of the large amount of research on the problem of homelessness which went into the writing of the script and then the amount of time which the script gives to depicting aspects of this problem as it advances the storyline concerning *Cathy* and her family. Stylistically, the programme has a number of scenes which are shot in the documentary mode of action-led camera, with events appearing to develop spontaneously and to be "caught" by the filming. The resultant effect is one of high immediacy values, providing the viewer with a strong sense of "witness." Where the script broadens its scope to situate *Cathy's* story in the context of the more general problem, camerawork and sound-recording produce a scopic field and address to the viewer which is that of conventional reportage. So, for instance, in a scene in a crowded tenement block, we hear the anonymous voices of occupants on the soundtrack whilst various shots are combined to produce a montage of "place," of "environment." Similarly, when towards the end of the film *Cathy* and her children enter the lowest class of Hostel accommodation, the camera not only situates them in the crowded dormitory they have entered but offers "snapshot" case-histories of some of the other women who are living there. Some of this information comes through voice-over, some in speech to camera, as if addressed to *Cathy* herself. The documentarist element is more directly present in the use of commentary and brief "viewpoint" voice-over at several points in the film. These moments offer statistics on the housing situation and allow various perspectives on it to be heard in a manner which directly follows conventional documentary practice.

Cathy therefore plays with the codes of reportage and merges them with those of realist drama. The developing story, however, often shown through an exploration of private, intimate space, requires that the film be organised principally as narrative fiction, moving outwards to establish a documentary framing of context at a number of points and then closing back in on "story." Since the story is a *particularization* of the general problem, however, movement between "story" and "report" often involves no sharp disjunctions, substantive or stylistic. The initial critical response to the programme was generally positive but public discussion tended to circulate around two issues--the possibility of the audience being deceived into according a greater "truth" to it than was warranted by its fictional status, and the way in which the account was a "biased" one, depicting officials as uncaring and often hostile in a way which would have been unacceptable in a conventional documentary.

It is hard to imagine a viewer so unskilled in the conventions of television as to believe that *Cathy* was "actuality" footage, so extensively is it conceived of in terms of narrative fiction. However, doubt clearly existed in some viewers' minds as to whether it was a story based directly on a real incident, or whether (as was actually the case) *Cathy's* tale was a construction developed from a range of research materials. The legitimacy of combining the dramatic license to articulate a viewpoint through character and action with the documentary requirement to be "impartial" was queried by several commentators, often with a certain amount of naivety about the veracity of "straight documentary."

Against these complaints, other critics defended the programme-makers' right to use dramatic emotional devices in order to engage the viewer with public issues and pointed to the way in which the programme's view of officialdom was essentially the view of *Cathy* herself--in their eyes, a perfectly proper use of character viewpoint from which audience members could measure their own empathetic distance. In British television history, then, *Cathy Come Home* remains an important marker in the long-running debate about television and truth. This should not be allowed to overshadow its own qualities as a work of social imagination however, and as an exploration in "hybridized" forms which sometimes brilliantly prefigures much later shifts in the modes of address of factual television.

-John Corner