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Title

'With films like that I sometimes think the people that go and watch them are not the people that necessarily need to see them', *Viewing I, Daniel Blake* in the English Regions: Towards an Understanding of Realism Through Audience Interpretation

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Abstract

This article examines focus group responses to Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016). Conducted in four English regions (North East, North West, South West, and Yorkshire and Humber) the focus groups were structured around a process of film elicitation that gathered a set of plural and richly textured responses to the film. Focusing on the participants' understanding of realism within the film, the article complements existing textual analyses of realism to better understand the kinds of interpretative resources that audiences bring to their engagement with films such as *I, Daniel Blake*. We examine in detail how participants drew on different interpretive resources, as a set of personal, emotional and intellectual anchoring points that they used to situate and articulate their readings of the film. These resources ranged from related life experiences and personal memories, to emotional responses and political views. In particular we examine how participants interpreted the film through differing degrees of personal familiarity and empathy with the narrative, characters and places depicted, how the participants dealt with the emotional labours of realism and the feelings evoked through representations of place. Using film elicitation to understand the plurality of interpretations of realism has allowed us to develop a

located and multifaceted understanding of the affective dimensions of realist film, and to extend the reach of audience studies to a hitherto underexplored genre.

Keywords

Ken Loach; *I, Daniel Blake*; Realism; Interpretative resources; Film elicitation.

Introduction

This article is based on a large mixed-methods study into the audiences of specialised film in four English regions (North East, North West, South West, and Yorkshire and Humber)¹. The project used digital humanities methods to analyse multiple datasets including interviews, focus groups, secondary quantitative data and policy documents to understand the meaning, experience, and value of film for audiences, as well as assessing how film policy and industry developments impact on engagement with different types of film. In this article, we directly draw on the focus groups. These were designed within the wider project to provide an understanding of how participants interpret and engage with the formal elements of specialised film. The focus groups were structured around a process of film elicitation, a method similar to photo (see Kolb 2008) or object elicitation, that seeks to evoke interpretations, emotions, and memories in relation to a person's encounter with specific visual materials, in this case a series of film extracts (Philippot 1993). In total, eight film sequences were used (four in each group), drawn from eight films screened in independent cinemas between 2016 and 2018, including both

¹ Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project: AH/P005780/1 - 'Beyond the Multiplex: audiences for specialised films in English regions'. The term 'specialised film' is used by the British Film Institute (BFI) to define non-mainstream films including documentaries, foreign language films and re-releases of archive and classic film (see BFI, 2018).

foreign language and British films². The aim of using film elicitation was to foreground the viewer as a social subject, as an individual with their own biography, knowledge, lived experience, political views and emotional engagement with the world around them (Livingstone 2019). In each group, participants were shown the short film extract then asked by the facilitator to reflect on how what they had seen made them feel and think, or anything else they found important. The role for the facilitator in film elicitation is therefore more pronounced than in traditional focus group methodologies because the central point of focus (the extract) works as an explicitly centralising focal point for participants – while this enables concerted collaborative discussion, it also works against the natural flow of dialogue between members because collective focus is necessarily tethered to the clip. As such, while the moderator’s initial prompt is open, typically along the lines of ‘what did you make of the clip?’ they are required to repeatedly rejoin the focus group discussion to respond to and stimulate further reflection and to invite responses to the clip from each group member. Despite this, shared meaning-making was evident, with participants frequently responding to other responses which, taken together, provided insights into the way the group constructed multiple and varied interpretations through the narrative and aesthetic elements of each different film extract. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and coded thematically to develop a set of frequent and significant themes within the responses that we have drawn upon here (Forrest et al, 2020)³. In this article we have provided each focus group participant, where quoted, with a pseudonym to retain their anonymity.

² The eight films were: *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, 2016), *Things to Come* (Mia Hansen-Løve, 2017), *Call Me By Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017), *Dark River* (Clio Barnard, 2017), *God’s Own Country* (Francis Lee, 2017), *Loveless* (Andrey Zvyagintsev, 2017), *The Eagle Huntress* (Otto Bell, 2016), *Happy End* (Michael Haneke, 2017).

³ Individual focus group transcripts are available from Forrest et al, 2020. Each quote used here is referenced with the title of the focus group transcript and page number of the quote.

This article is centered on our focus groups' responses to Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* (2016). The film was selected on the basis of its prominence as a particular exemplar of recent specialised cinema programming in Britain, as an example of contemporary British cinema (to sit alongside examples from other national cinemas released in the UK), as a film supported with public funding via the BFI's production and distribution schemes⁴, the concern of one of our other work packages; and as a film that had frequently been cited in our audience interviews (another of our work packages, see Wessels et al, 2020) as a reference point for discussion of specialised and independent cinema experiences. This particular clip was shown alongside three clips from other films, but was the first film to be shared with our groups, meaning that focus group participants' responses were not comparative and were focused solely on the film in question. The selection of clips was used in half of the groups, and therefore the data discussed in this article is drawn from 8 groups with roughly 6 members in each group, equating to 48 independent responses to the film. The groups took place between September and November 2018 in a farm house in the rural South West (one group), an independent cinema in the urban South West (one group), an independent cinema in the urban North East (one group), a mixed arts venue in the rural North East (one group), an independent cinema in the North East (one group), a gallery in the urban North West (two groups), and an independent cinema in urban Yorkshire (two groups). The participants were drawn from a range of ethnic and national backgrounds; a mixture of graduates and non-graduates; some who professed a passion for a cinema, others who had rarely if ever visited an art cinema; and a range of ages, and life experiences. Focus group participants were recruited through local film networks, social networks, community groups, social media and developed by snowball sampling. Participants were not paid but were provided with a gift token in recognition of their time.

⁴ The producers of *I, Daniel Blake*, Sixteen Films received a £350K grant from the BFI's production 'Film Fund' and the film was theatrically released in the UK by Entertainment One who received a £300K grant from the BFI's 'Big Audience' distribution fund (BFI, 2020).

Some of our participants had seen the film before, and clearly the data and analysis should be understood in this context - this is reflected in varying depth and length of the responses. However, to ensure both a diversity of participants and to enable us to work with a range of films, we did not want to make prior knowledge a condition of participation. The facilitator provided a fulsome introduction to the film which thoroughly contextualised the clip, explaining that the film concerns Daniel Blake (Dave Johns), a widowed joiner, recovering from a heart attack who learns at the outset of the film that in contrast to his cardiologist's advice, he had been deemed 'fit for work' following a Department for Work and Pensions assessment. It was explained that Blake sets about appealing the decision, which sets up the clip that was shown in the group. It begins with Blake visiting the job centre in Newcastle, having a demeaning exchange with an overly officious DWP worker (Stephen Clegg) in which his computer illiteracy is revealed, encountering a more compassionate worker, Ann, (Kate Rutter), and then meeting Katie (Hayley Squires), a single mother who is despairingly remonstrating with another job centre worker because she has been denied her benefits. Blake intervenes on Katie's behalf, which sets in motion the film's central relationship, as the pair then leave the centre together and Blake is invited into Katie's home, meeting her young children and learning of her plight in the process. The clip was eight minutes long, and taken as a whole worked to distil the film's core themes centred around Daniel and Katie's attempts to negotiate an unforgivingly labyrinthine and brutal benefits system, while also providing examples of Loach's approach to form and the nature of performance and dialogue in his films.

In examining the responses from a range of viewers to this particular clip, our article seeks to understand some of the ways in which meaning is formed within the film, and to subsequently make some claims around the ways in which British realist texts more broadly operate within their local contexts to generate and call upon particular kinds of interpretative resources from

their audiences. The article suggests that in drawing on audience responses as a mechanism to augment textual analysis, we might move to a more multi-layered understanding of the affective dimensions of realist films.

Realism is a complicated and contested term within histories of British cinema, and film theory more broadly, but it is fair to say that in the context of national traditions of realist cinema Ken Loach is most readily associated with the mode and, more specifically, with *social* realism. It is telling in this regard that one of our focus group participants whose access to specialised cinema was minimal had heard of Loach, and associated him with *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1967), which she had compared to *I, Daniel Blake*. Indeed, it has been suggested elsewhere (Forrest, 2020), that what is understood as the more specific tradition of ‘social realism’ is a shorthand for the films of Loach. As Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment put it, social realist films, ‘associated in Britain with a reformist or occasionally revolutionary politics’ aim to ‘show the effects of environmental factors on the development of character through depictions that emphasise the relationship between location and identity’, deploying an ‘observational style of camerawork’ in the process (Hallam and Marshment 2000: 184). Despite the diversity of Loach’s oeuvre – a result of his collaborations with multiple writers – the commitment shown in his films to the mode of environmental determinism implied by Hallam and Marshment is unerring, and is evidenced once more in *I, Daniel Blake* through Daniel’s and Katie’s hopeless – and in the case of Daniel, fatal – journeys through a brutal benefits bureaucracy, journeys they are both forced to take because of circumstances beyond their control (Daniel’s heart attack, Katie’s experience at the hands of an uncaring landlord resulting in her forced migration from London to Newcastle). As Deborah Knight puts it, Loach’s protagonists are ‘seldom able to break free from the constraints of their sociocultural environments’, indeed to see them do so would be to imagine a sense of autonomy that in Loach’s view is not possible under neoliberalism. Frequently this denial of agency is framed through the dialectical oppositions

between 'individuals and those empowered by the state to supervise and govern their lives' (67: 1997), and results in a seemingly natural conclusion whereby the protagonists' plights turn from 'bad to worse' (77: 1997). Such a trajectory is what forms the symbiosis between political analysis and emotional response in Loach's work, as Knight argues '[w]hile viewing a naturalist film, an audience does not just experience frustration empathetically through a projective engagement with the character [...] an audience experiences frustration directly as a consequence of the dramatic structure of naturalist films' (77: 1997), a framework which is designed to mirror the societal structures in which the characters – and as Loach would have it – the audience exist. Expressions of empathetic frustration felt on watching Daniel's difficult encounter at the job centre, and sympathy for his situation as he is caught in a system which so uncaringly dispatches him, were clearly evident in the responses we recorded to the clip, as we will go on to explore in more detail.

In the majority of our responses to the film, then, viewers were able to engage empathically and sympathetically with the characters' plights, often discussing them as though they were real people - a result of the plausibility of the scenario and the aesthetic depiction of the narrative (citing particular formal characteristics of realism) – which formed the basis of their political response to the text. Empathy, in the way Knight describes, is a stimulus to political engagement with the realist text, formed through the dramatic structure and compounding any sympathetic identification with the characters' situation. The presence of emotion in discussions of realism and film theory has, through the shared lenses of structuralist and Brechtian thought, been frequently positioned as a barrier to political engagement. As Murray Smith puts it, such interpretations identify 'empathic emotions' as 'an instrument of subjection' (1995: 54). Here, oft-cited critiques (see MacCabe 1974) condemn the apparently 'naïve view of realism' (1995: 33), identifying 'reality effects', 'verisimilitude' and 'naturalization' as mechanisms of 'deception' (1995: 53). More recent interventions into the academic discussion of realism have shown the legacies and

influences of the 'realist debate', with Clive Nwonka's work on contemporary British realism critiquing the 'comfortable...mode of representation for the working-class through sentimentality' in evidence in Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (Andrea Arnold, 2009) and Clio Barnard's *The Selfish Giant* (Clio Barnard, 2013), with their 'sympathetic' approach at the expense of class analysis (2014: 219). Such criticisms have been central to destabilising notions of authority and monolithic truth telling in realist art, but they run the risk of homogenizing the audience and denying the agency of viewers in constructing meaning in and through the textures and layers of their own experiences. As Hallam and Marshment (2000: 125) argue, realism, rather than casting the audience into a position of collective, passive obedience, can operate at the level of 'familiarity and recognition' by representing and thus actively calling upon sites of 'everyday experience':

Realism articulates a relationship between the conscious, perceiving individual and the social world, activating a mental *mise-en-scene* of memory, recognition and perceptual familiarity. Culturally embedded knowledges of characters and events held by individual viewers, [...] recognise similarly coded behaviour of characters and events represented on the screen, facilitating process of identification and comprehension. The active process of engagement is the basis of an approach that situates meaning as interactive and in process [...]. (2000:125)

What is enacted in this interpretation of the effects and processes of the realist text is a porous exchange of narratives between viewer and film whereby the invitation to feel with (empathy) and through (sympathy) the characters and environments depicted is predicated on a degree of shared understanding of their plights, or at the very least an investment in and a recognition of the reality of their situations. This relational notion of interaction chimes with Thomas Elsaesser's (2009: 4) critique of the limitations of theoretical positions which assume that 'a film was only able to produce subjects'. As Elsaesser asks, 'rather than seeing human beings as

victims of the constraints imposed by constructed identities or representations, why not see them as empowering factors?' In this context, then, in drawing on what audiences actively bring to realist texts, we are better positioned to anatomise the processes of what Elsaesser terms 'contractualism', where:

what allows one to cope with social constructions both in real life and in visual representations are in each case not only hidden power structures, but also openly negotiated conventions, usually well understood, such as the codes of verisimilitude applicable to individual genres, or institutional markers that tell us what horizon of expectations to assume? (2009: 7)

Rather than blind 'subjects,' audiences are 'partners in negotiated conventions'; 'neither master nor dupe' (Elsaesser 2009: 4). As we will argue, in line with Elsaesser's identification of 'empowered' audiences, our data shows that many viewers registered an awareness of the conventions and thus construction of *I, Daniel Blake* and texts like it, while also engaging with its themes and narrative through shared emotional and political lenses -- simultaneously recognising its artifice and experiencing it as though it was a depiction of real life. The nature of these responses are not systemic or uniform but rather richly diverse and textured, and reflect varying and diverse levels of lived experience. As John Caughie (2000:105) argues, 'debate about 'progressive realism' and 'political modernism', and other debates about 'naturalism' and 'non-naturalism' reduce the positions to their polarities', and in order to 'fill in the spaces between and restore some complexity to the polarities' it is necessary to recognise viewers as 'social' as well as 'textual subjects' (2000: 108). In doing so we register the ways in which 'individuals with their own social histories and their own experience of contradiction and injustice' bring 'these concrete histories and experiences' to their consumption of and engagement with the realist text (2000: 108). Our research therefore seeks to complement

existing textual analyses of realism to better understand the kinds of interpretative resources that audiences bring to and which are called upon by films such as *I, Daniel Blake*, and the contexts in which they deploy them.

To analyse the focus group responses, then, we concentrated on identifying the recurrent interpretive resources used by participants. We did this through a thematic analysis of the different ways participants discussed their responses to the film clips. From this analysis we established interpretive resources as a set of personal, emotional and intellectual anchoring points that participants used to situate and articulate their readings of the films. Participants drew on these resources in different ways to make sense of what they saw, heard, and felt as they watched the clip, to justify their engagement and their disengagement with the film and to evidence their critical judgments and personal responses to its merits or otherwise. Across the focus groups, multiple and varied types of interpretative resources were evoked by participants, ranging from relevant life experiences, and personal memories, emotions and political views, which, taken together offered a polysemic sense of meaning of the film from all the participants.

Knowledge-based resources were often deployed, including those gained through a person's formal education, but also a wider sense of general cultural knowledge. This manifested as film-related knowledge, such as clear awareness of a director's work, or of genre traits, for example around social realism. These resources were also complemented by frequent articulations of knowledge of current affairs, as well as subject-specific knowledge relating to people's work or places they had visited. Sensory and emotional resources were also drawn on by participants to explain their response to the film extracts. These resources related to emotions or feelings the participants had experienced at specific times, in relation to events, people or the situated reflections on places they had lived or visited. Memory was therefore a central feature of participants' interpretive resources — participants often framed their responses to the film clips

by first reminiscing about people, places, situations or events from their own past which they used to frame their engagement with the films. These personal narratives were deployed as forms of evidence or comparative examples in relation to the participants' understanding of something depicted on screen - thus, the realism of the films was primarily authenticated through recourse to lived experience and reflective engagements with everyday life. Vivid and multi-layered accounts of work, holidays, parenting, relationships, love, romance, disability, illness, education, unemployment, of gender and sexuality thus formed the basis for participants' primary responses to the films we shared with them.

These different types of resources were drawn on in varying measures and in selective ways to interpret each film extract. With *I, Daniel Blake*, emotional, political and experiential resources as well as specific knowledge of Ken Loach's work were given primacy by the participants in their interpretations. The most frequent responses used emotional resources to interpret the situation of the characters. This was predominantly expressed in terms of empathy with the sense of frustration created by Loach in the scene depicted, or sympathy and compassion for the plight of the characters. Participants discussed how the scene was moving in different ways, through a sense of empathetic familiarity with the situation depicted, of not just themselves experiencing similar situations at a critical distance, but returning to the embodied *feeling* of those similar situations. Often then, the focus group participants shared in the sense of anguish and frustration expressed by the character on screen, with some participants directly described empathetic interpretations, discussing how if they were to find themselves in similar situations they would react and feel as the characters had on screen.

'it feels very familiar' - a sense of having been *there*

For many of our participants, then, the primary response to the clip was -- to return again to Hallam and Marshment – one of ‘familiarity and recognition’ (2000: 125). The depiction of the job centre scene in particular was largely perceived to feel realistic and this perception was authenticated through participants drawing on their own experiences of similar locations and experiences, many often expressing powerful emotional responses and empathy in the process. For example, in a city in the North West, Mark described how the film’s emotional power was strengthened by his memory of comparable situations:

I [...] felt emotional watching it because I’ve also claimed Jobseekers’ Allowance so it brought back some of those memories and I particularly remember how there were loads of women there with children and thinking that, actually, the cost of childcare’s so expensive that it’s easier, well not easier, it’s financially better for them to claim Jobseekers’ Allowance than get a job, and just thinking how wrong that is. There must be something wrong with our system if that’s the situation. But yeah, then also just the whole sort of ‘computer says no’ response and how frustrating that is as well

(FG_01_NW:5).

Mark’s default interpretative resource is empathy grounded in his own experience of an encounter with the Department for Work and Pensions. In turn, the representation of Katie’s plight provokes a further authenticating narrative of his own, as Mark reflects on the mothers, like Katie, that he would see in the job centre — this memory is therefore animated and made tangible through interaction with the realist text. It is not solely born of sentiment, however, as the emotional interpretation of the film through the lens of personal experience provokes a political analysis of the inequities of the benefits system. Like Mark, Nancy in the same group responded to the film by calling upon a memory of a job centre, as again, the interrelationship between the film’s depiction of a situation and the spectator’s identification of the situation as

familiar and thus plausible from their own life experience generates the capacity for a mode of empathy which is at once emotive and politically engaged:

[...] it feels very familiar there to see it there, just the kind of glazed, emotionless way that you're dealt with and that you see the other people being dealt with. I was in a fine situation really but I saw plenty of people that were just having a lot of difficulty like what was shown in that clip (FG_01_NW:4).

Nancy's response, like Mark's, is focused on the corrosive effects of the centre's faceless bureaucracy and the film again provides a bridge between the empathetic engagement with the fictional Daniel and Katie and with real lives glimpsed through Nancy's own memory of her experience as a claimant.

As we have outlined above, for some of our participants it was professional rather than personal experience that generated the framework for interpretation and authentication of the film's realism. Here the anger and frustration was no less palpable but was filtered through a less straightforward emotive register, enabling participants to present – albeit sensitively – their authority on and measured experience of the subject. Ray, in the rural North East, saw the film as a way into explaining the impact of benefit reform, he legitimised his contribution by explaining that he was 'on the board of a housing association explaining that reforms were 'already starting to have a major impact on our rent collection rates and people's distress as they move onto Universal Credit and have six to eight weeks of no money coming in'

(FG_01_NE:8). While Ray's discussion of the wider policy context in which the film is situated is qualified by his stated authority on the subject, it has been prefaced by an awareness of the film's formal methodology, describing how its 'hidden camera' effect gives the viewer a sense that they are 'party to all that's going on, all of the emotions within that area', with Ray praising

the film's comprehensive exposition for augmenting the primary focus on Daniel with the narratives of Katie and Ann (FG_01_NE:7). Thus, an awareness of the film's formal conventions – its very construction – does not contradict, obscure or displace Ray's analysis of the political situation it depicts, rather it consciously and identifiably enables it. It is useful to think here of how such a response authenticates Loach's aspiration in his earlier film *Kes* (1969) to

light the space so that it fell democratically but unostentatiously on everyone. Not only is it more pleasing that way, but the lighting isn't then saying, 'This is the leading actor in the scene or the film and these other actors aren't so important. (1998: 41)

Loach's dispersal of attention away from the singular focus on Daniel towards a more comprehensive representation of space in *I, Daniel Blake* has a similarly democratic effect – illuminating the existence of parallel narratives, of stories besides those that the fiction has chosen to focus on. We might suggest, then, that this sense of dispersal generates the interpretive space for participants' experiential reflections of similarly affected lives.

In the same group as Ray, we also heard from John:

It's familiar because I worked in Newcastle and North Tyneside, but I get a sense of agitation because it really annoys me. I have actually seen the film, my annoyance comes from the way that people are treated but equally, in my line of work I do counselling for mental health but I see a lot of people accessing the service because of the treatment going through benefit systems and Job Centres. I find it really quite hard-hitting (FG_01_NE:4).

Like the other response we have discussed so far, the strength of John's feeling emerges from a combination of sympathy for the plight of the characters and empathy through a deep sense of familiarity with their situations. Like Ray, his working life in particular makes the filmic world credible, and illuminates the ways in which realism – with its tendency towards the quotidian - calls upon interpretive resources born from personal experience and first-hand recognition of everyday life and lives. John's narrative is also significant for the way in which it reveals the locational specificity of realist texts – with the use of 'real' location providing another layer of authentication and another interpretative resource for those with access to and experience of Newcastle.

'too close to work and too close to home': On the Labours of Realism

While participants' experience of work was, as we have seen, a frequently cited and central interpretive resource in realising the film's dual emotional and political appeal, it also provided a site of contestation and critique of realist subject aesthetics and thematic concerns. For example, Lee in Yorkshire cites similar levels of engagement with the film as with the participants mentioned already – on the grounds of empathy, personal experience, and an authentic sense of recognition of the robotic bureaucracy of public services depicted in the clip, yet his response also hints at the ways in which such interpretative resources might also prove a barrier to engagement:

Yeah, I can completely empathise with the main character Daniel because in my everyday job I'm finding more and more I get really, really frustrated because I'm dealing with a lot of government agencies. I work in a school; I'm dealing with a lot of government agencies where common sense is pretty much dead when applied to people's personal circumstances nowadays. [...], I've been doing the job ten years, and

more and more now I'm finding that. With regards to the film, I'd call it a heavy film, where I'd probably watch it once but I don't know if I'd go back and watch it again (FG_01_YH:8).

Lee's identification of the film as 'heavy' and thus ultimately not palatable emerges not from a sense that he cannot find anything to relate to, but rather because this example of realism is too much like Lee's 'real life'. Lee's response points to the emotional labours that realist texts demand of their audience, a theme that was returned to repeatedly by our participants. In many of these responses the very proximity of the film to everyday life was a barrier rather than a bridge to engagement. As Kevin, in a city in the North East, made clear:

I deliberately didn't want to go and see this film because I didn't want to feel the feelings that I was going to feel! I know this [...] director has a way of getting in touch with those sort of feelings of angst. I'm also {...} a Registered Mental Nurse and 60 years of age, so I've been through this bureaucratic nightmare with various people in my time and the frustrations of it and also computer literacy, that I'm not particularly brilliant at myself but had to, and the round and round of telephones that you get when you're trying to contact any organisation, you know,

[...]

I just don't want to invoke those feelings in me again. I go out to be entertained, I go out to come out of my body if you like and have an experience that's something I would never experience, that's too close to work and too close to home so I deliberately didn't go and see it. So it's a bit annoying when I'm sat here now and I have to watch a bit of it!

(FG_03_NE:6).

Kevin points here to the specific kinds of labour that are experienced by the realist spectator. His personal experience as a nurse reveals the emotional demands of his daily life which in turn works to contextualise his positioning of cinema as both an art form and as a leisure activity. His life experiences and subsequent capacity for empathy reveal the recognition of an interpretive resource that he chooses *not* to enact because of its particular sensitivities, and a prior understanding of Loach's particular affective strategies, 'his way of getting in touch with those sort of feelings' (ibid). Kevin makes therefore an active and informed decision *not* to watch the film on the basis of both its realist subject matter and an existing knowledge of the director -- here, Kevin exhibits a mode of agency born both from resources of acquired cultural knowledge and lived experience.

While Kevin was a regular cinemagoer, living in a city with both a good provision of specialised cinema and showing an awareness of a diverse contemporary film culture, and an urban milieu that was recognised within the mise-en-scene of *I, Daniel Blake*, our discussion of the clip in a rural community in the South West of England, naturally provoked fewer engagements where direct experience was invoked as an interpretive resource. However, we also found that Kevin's narrative about the film's uncomfortable proximity to everyday life had echoes amongst this community. Teresa, an older woman who only very occasionally made visits to the city some 90 minutes away from her home to engage in cultural activities, responded to our first question by describing the film as 'deeply depressing', when asked to elaborate, Teresa showed an awareness of Loach's oeuvre: 'It reminded me of *Cathy Come Home*, the same sort of depression and it's a dark film', thus unlike some of our participants who immediately identified the film as 'real life', Teresa's intertextual reference identifies it as a filmic construction, which perhaps explains her later comment: 'I wouldn't go to watch a film like that where I'd come out depressed. I like to come out feeling elated or excited of having something that I really enjoyed'

(FG_01_SW:4-5). Teresa once more points to the labours of realism; that the experience of cinema should always be an escape from, rather than an engagement with the everyday. Teresa's dismissal of the film does not, however, point to an absence of sympathy for those the film seeks to depict. When asked if the clip felt familiar, she responded sympathetically: 'Oh yes, yes, I'm sure that is real life for a lot of people' (FG_01_SW:5). Teresa therefore does not dispute the 'reality' of the film and the authentic struggle of the lives contained within it, she disputes its status as 'entertainment'.

Responses such as Teresa's suggest that realism's role in illuminating hitherto marginalised narratives -- what Samantha Lay (2002: 9) building on Raymond Williams (1977) sees as its 'function' of 'social extension' -- and enlightening hitherto oblivious audiences, needs to be nuanced. Teresa *is* aware of the issues portrayed in the film, but, like Kevin, she makes an informed choice *not* to engage with them through cinema. Mary, in the same group, builds on this notion:

Well it was certainly gritty, wasn't it? And you do feel compassion for the characters involved and I agree that the sound and the lighting were all very muted, I guess it just brings it down to that sort of down to earth, down to like a gritty level. And the dog, three legs, scavenging, it just piles on the, what some people are going through. You know it goes on but you're not always exposed to whatever and it's very depressing, so it's not something you would want to go and watch. Most things you want to watch and come out upbeat or feel good about it and that's certainly not going to achieve that but it does make you think about what less fortunate people are going through, which I guess is what the whole aim of the film would be really (FG_01_SW:6-7).

Mary makes the point that the film seems to offer a painful reminder of the lives of those 'less fortunate', but that while a worthy endeavour this is what makes it unpalatable. She recognises realism's 'social extension' function - what she calls the 'aim' of the film - and its specific formal characteristics, and she does not deny that profound social problems resulting from inequality exist. Thus, the film is not revelatory to her, rather the experience of watching it is 'too much like' reality. For Mary, *I, Daniel Blake* does possess sympathy evoking qualities, but these are not seen as a positive outcome of the cinematic experience.

While Mary's and Teresa's criticisms of the film's realist methods are therefore more complex than they might first appear, their preferences for films which provoke feelings of unambiguous optimism suggest that the broader film culture in which films like *I, Daniel Blake* operate is one which they choose not to inhabit. However, in urban areas of greater provision and access to specialised cinema, and in focus groups where the majority of members self identified as 'cinophiles', the film also received criticisms, as we have already seen with Kevin, and it is worth exploring these further. For example, in Yorkshire, in a focus group that took place in a city and in an independent cinema where *I, Daniel Blake* and films like it are a central part of the programming, Barry drew attention to the paradox that exists between realism's contextual position as rarefied art cinema and its apparent social function:

In terms of whether I'd go and watch it, I think it's an important film and it is realistic, I just don't know. With films like that I sometimes think the people that go and watch them are not the people that necessarily need to see them, they're the people that already kind of empathise with the people that are in the film or perhaps have political leanings towards a similar way (FG_01_YH:7).

Barry's critique can also be aligned with those of Mary and Teresa because it acknowledges the film's worth and the credibility of its subject matter but doubts its viability as a personal film choice. Taken alongside his criticism of the film's 'echo chamber' politics - no doubt reinforced by the location of the focus group and the cinema's spatial-cultural associations - Barry's concerns speak to the wider complexities of the political function(s) of cinema. These more directly political reflections on the role of realist texts such as *I, Daniel Blake* did tend to recur in the urban groups. Alongside Kevin, the most damning criticism of the film came from Claire in a city in the South West of England:

Right, well with Ken Loach, I think it's didactic. It's black and white. I have worked with people such as [inaudible] and there's no question, or it's very low key and I just think it's dull, it's a typical British film I have to say. Even the environment that people spoke about was absolutely far worse than is portrayed, you get cockroaches, damp stains. She wouldn't be dressed like that, it's just not real. He just annoys me. I was thinking of Andrea Arnold, do you know her? 'Fish Tank', that is spot on, working class council estate. It's just too refined. He's got a point to make (FG_03_SW:4-5).

Claire's narrative is fascinating for the complex layers of interpretive resources it reveals, resources which are subsequently used to challenge Loach's form of realism. Her identification of Loach's didacticism has clearly been arrived at through a consideration of his oeuvre consistent with her status as a regular and long standing independent cinema goer, further reinforced by the reference to Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009) a film which eschews the purposefully 'dialectical' approach that Claire identifies and that Loach himself acknowledges (Fuller 1998: 12) as central to his filmmaking in favour of something more ambiguous (see Forrest 2020). Crucially, her criticisms, in a similar way to those accounts that praised the film's realism, hinge on the question of the realist text's plausibility, and just like those whose life

experiences brought them closer to the film, Claire authenticates her interpretive position by drawing on the credibility of her professional background: 'I used to be a social worker in Tower Hamlets, so I know the reality' (FG_03_SW:5).

'I suspect in real life the people there wouldn't be quite as nasty as that': The 'feeling' of location

The film's sense of place frequently resonated with our participants, with some directly calling upon memories of the specific physical locations depicted on screen. This is perhaps unsurprising given that two of the focus groups were held in the urban north east England, but analogous place-related experiences and knowledge, and comparisons of place were also deployed by those living in other regions. In one of the Yorkshire groups, Gordon explained, 'I used to live in Newcastle...so it was rather depressing, really. I suspect in real life the people there wouldn't be quite as nasty as that, but this is probably Ken Loach trying to make his point as usual' (FG_03_YH:5). Gordon's personal experiences of living in the city where Loach set the film not only gives him a resource to frame his reading of the clip, it also evokes an empathetic response borne out of a personal experience of and a subsequent stake in Newcastle. This personal experience of place enables Gordon to evaluate the realism of the scene, and brings his more textured, lived experience of the city and its people into opposition with what he sees as Loach's didactic use of it.

While experiences of work were a common interpretive resource, John described familiarity with the film's location through his work, 'it's familiar because I worked in Newcastle and North Tyneside, but I get a sense of agitation because it really annoys me' (FG_01_NE:4). This mention of place is not necessarily deployed directly as an interpretive resource but works instead as a means to frame a relational sense of anger to the emotional response the scene evoked for him. Identification and interpretation through place were not always about

recognising the general urban milieu of Newcastle in which the film was set. The clip in the focus groups and the rest of the film had little direct recognisable scenery that would uniquely have identified it as Newcastle to anyone other than those very familiar with the city. Beyond scenery, one participant, Dawn from Yorkshire, discussed the characters' dialect, with the identification of place through dialect offering a means of engaging with realism: 'Um, I quite liked the use of the local dialect, I guess it's set in Newcastle or that kind of area and then again it was contrasted with her Essex, London accent. In that respect it was quite real, a variety of different people use the Job Centre' (FG_01_NE:5). Authenticity here was valued in both the effect of the dialects deployed by the actors and the specificity of places they connected to, but also in the sense that the accents functioned as markers of class-specific, locational authenticity. In contrast for Luke, a North East resident, the connection between dialect, place and on-screen representation was drawn on to reflect on the wider understanding of the social and economic changes in Newcastle:

I suppose it reflects how little you do see that accent, it sort of makes you think, you know, where you come from and what Newcastle has been in the past. Like, he was 60, I know the film, I think he was working in the, he says he can build, what is the North East now? It makes you think about what it is (FG_03_NE:11).

Luke's account of the absence of regional accents on screen could be taken as a comment on wider screen representation issues in British culture – but here the overall narrative, the character of Daniel's central story and the problems he faces, are viewed allegorically as reflecting the state of Newcastle more generally. Accurate or not, the experience of place as an interpretive resource contributes significantly to Luke's interpretation of the film, and his understanding of the largest city in the region where he lives. Raising this as a set of questions, rather than a definitive statement, Luke points to a sense that the identity of the city might not be

fixed but open to interpretation and that the film itself is playing to existing imaginaries of place but perhaps not in a rigid way.

In stark contrast, Mel from the South West, gave a much more definitive view on the realism of the representation of place in the film, despite having never visited the city herself, 'I've never been to Newcastle, but I think the film does kind of give you an idea of what Newcastle can be like, quite dark, quite poor, a lot of unemployment, so it gives you that idea of what life is like in Newcastle' (FG_01_SW:11). Rather than the reflexive and open interpretation offered by Luke, with his direct experience of the city, Mel gives over her understanding of Newcastle to the realism she believes to be portrayed in the film. This reductionism aligns the city with a set of generic signifiers which are reinforced by Mel's understanding of Loach's realist style.

Similarly, knowledge of place imagined through film played an important role in the interpretive resources Mary brought to their account:

It kind of reminded me, I can't remember the name of the film, the Michael Caine film when he goes up north... *Get Carter*... Set in Newcastle and it just, yeah, just really reminded me of that film, the whole sort of ambiance of the sound and the filming style I guess and the place itself... I lived in Bradford for a year but other than that I've had very little exposure to the north of England (FG_01_SW:10-11).

Although confessing their limited experience of the region where the film is set, Mary identifies other films set in Newcastle as means to 'locate' and verify their interpretation of the film. *Get Carter* uses the iconic architecture of Newcastle, Gateshead and the wider North East as the background for many scenes in contrast to Loach's approach that foregrounds a situated sense of place through dialect, dialogue and the narrative experiences of his characters. In this

account from Bradley, he shows how he felt a sense of authenticity from the scene but not specifically through how place was represented visually within it, rather through the performances and dialogue:

I was certainly captivated by the performances and the acting so it could have been shot anywhere in the country I suppose, just focused in on what the dialogue is, on what's been said and the scenes it's in. Yeah, it's quite authentic when it comes to the acting (FG_01_YH:6).

Unlike Bradley's account, the strong sense of place inherently evoked by *Get Carter* for Mary, becomes a resource to engage with *I, Daniel Blake*. This is a reminiscence not of personal experience of place, but of a sense of place evoked *through* film.

In some cases, participants were drawn to interpret the clip through their memories of place not depicted on screen, but by drawing emotive or sensory parallels to other places they were more familiar with. This was the case with focus groups outside of the north east. Teresa in the South West discussed how it reminded them 'of the East End years and years and years ago. Not now but years ago... I used to live there, on the edge of the East End, and you'd come into contact with a lot of people who were in that situation. It does remind me of that' (FG_01_SW:10). Here, place and memory combine to create a sense of authenticity for Teresa that is rooted in her personal experience, but detached from a sense of direct relation to the specific place represented on screen. Here representation and recognition of place is filtered porously through the lens of personal geography. In this dynamic, investment in realism is not dependent on the specific recognition of place, but markers of authenticity work through the frame of the participants' own encounters with and narratives of analogous locations.

Conclusion

Using film elicitation with groups in different English regions, from a variety of backgrounds, to gather audience responses to *I, Daniel Blake*, has allowed us to draw together a set of diverse and richly textured accounts. In analysing these narratives we have shown the plurality, nuance and variety of different engagements these viewers had with the film.

In applying these methods, our research complements existing textual analyses of realism to better understand the kinds of interpretative resources that audiences bring to films such as *I, Daniel Blake*, and the contexts in which they deploy them. Doing so allows us to see the ways British realist texts, such as Loach's film, operate for audiences in different parts of the country, and how these audiences use different kinds of interpretative resources to make sense of the film through contextualisation via their own life experiences, knowledge and emotions.

The focus group participants brought their own social histories and experiences to the realist text, with these emerging as different forms of knowledge and memory which went on to frame their emotional, sensory and political engagements with the film. Most commonly these encounters and dialogues with the film were articulated through reference to differing degrees of identification and empathy with the scenes depicted and sympathy for the characters' situations, with these readings and interpretations evaluated through a sense of realism. Participants deployed life experience as a central resource, notably through references to work, place, and on many occasions relational interpretations of the characters narrative based on personal anecdote, memory or experience.

Following Elsaesser (2009:7), we have sought to understand the way audiences are 'empowered' in their interpretations of realism. Our analysis shows how viewers understood the conventions and formal construction of *I, Daniel Blake*, as well as the wider traits of realism that it deployed, but also how the film offers a platform to articulate convergent narratives of emotional and political engagement. This active sense of audience interpretation, that acknowledges 'everyday experience' (Hallam and Marshment 2000: 125) as an interpretive resource, challenges any abstract sense of passive, uniform audience reception.

Drawing on the audience responses from the film elicitation focus groups, in supplement to textual analysis, has moved us towards a more polysemic, located and multifaceted understanding of the affective dimensions of realist film.

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