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## 'The Angels' Share' at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival 2012

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## Festival Reviews

*edited by Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist of the Film Festival Research Network*

### 'The Angels' Share' at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival

David Archibald

Subverting the usual touristic signifiers of Scottishness – tartanry, whisky, and so on – *The Angels' Share* (Loach, 2012) follows four young people from Glasgow's impoverished East End as they embark on what might be considered a victimless crime in the north of Scotland. Predominantly comic in tone, the film was shot in 2011 and received its world premiere at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival. I attended the festival as part of a research project tracking the film's journey from initial concept and screenplay through the production process and into exhibition, distribution, and reception.<sup>1</sup>

This report opens by outlining Loach's relationship with Cannes before commenting on the film's press screening, press conference, and premiere. It draws on material provided from an interview conducted at the festival with Loach's long-term producer, Rebecca O'Brien, and explores how the filmmakers utilised the platform Cannes afforded to foster debate on the film's thematic concerns and controversies that arose from it. Finally, this report explores how inclusion at the world's leading film festival might assist the film's reception and distribution.

#### **Cannes and Loach: Background**

As Marijke de Valck and Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong have documented,<sup>2</sup> the Cannes Film Festival was initiated in 1939 as an alternative to the increasingly politicised Venice Film Festival, which had been inaugurated under Mussolini's fascist regime in 1932. The outbreak of the Second World War prevented all but the opening day's screenings from going ahead, and the festival took an extended sabbatical before reconvening in 1946. Cannes quickly became established as the world's preeminent film festival, focusing on art cinema but more than tinged with Hollywood glamour. The opulent wealth on display in the festival's French Riviera setting – the expensive yachts docked in its harbour and the numerous Rolls Royces cruising through its streets – sit uncomfortably alongside the programme's

generally progressive politics. However, this is only one of the festival's bountiful contradictions.

De Valck notes that film festivals are 'sites of passage that function as the gateways to cultural legitimization'.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Thomas Elsaesser's work on film festivals and Pierre Bourdieu's work on taste, she contends that festivals add value and cultural capital to films through the distribution of awards and the media attention that they receive.<sup>4</sup> De Valck also notes that film festivals provide an alternative to the studio system's vertical integration model.<sup>5</sup> As such, festival success (inclusion in the programme, positive critical reception, winning prizes, etc.) can boost a film's distribution and subsequent commercial prospects. These are commonly-held understandings in the film industry, though under-theorised areas in film studies. By examining Loach's relationship with Cannes and this specific film's presentation at the festival's 65<sup>th</sup> edition, this report attempts to place some empirical flesh on theoretical bones and industry assumptions.

Loach's Cannes curriculum vita includes 11 films screened in the official competition – an unparalleled record. Those films are: *Looks and Smiles* (1981), *Hidden Agenda* (1990), *Raining Stones* (1993), *Land and Freedom* (1995), *My Name is Joe* (1998), *Bread and Roses* (2000), *Sweet Sixteen* (2002), *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), *Looking for Eric* (2008), *Route Irish* (2010), and *The Angels' Share* (2012).<sup>6</sup> In addition, *Kes* (1970) screened in Critics' Week while *Family Life* (1972), *Black Jack* (1979), and *Riff-Raff* (1991) screened in Directors' Fortnight. *The Gamekeeper* (1980) was screened in Un Certain Regard and the short film *Happy Ending* (2007), which was Loach's contribution to *Chacun son cinéma/To Each His Own Cinema* (an anthology film commissioned to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> festival), was shown out of competition. If we exclude the short film, this represents a total of 16 features which have garnered the following awards: a Palme d'Or (*The Wind that Shakes the Barley*); the Jury Prize (*Hidden Agenda*, *Raining Stones*, *The Angels' Share*); the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury (*Land and Freedom*, *Looking for Eric*); the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury – Special Mention (*Looks and Smiles*, *Hidden Agenda*); the FIPRESCI Prize (*Riff-Raff* and *Land and Freedom*); the FIPRESCI Prize – Parallel Section (*Black Jack*); the Young Cinema Award (*Looks and Smiles*); Best Screenplay for Paul Laverty (*Sweet Sixteen*); and Best Actor for Peter Mullan (*My Name is Joe*). In addition, Loach received the Ecumenical Jury's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Award in 2004 for his entire cinematic output. By any measure, Loach's record at Cannes is remarkable.

This recognition has boosted Loach's reputation internationally, a process which continued with his latest film. O'Brien suggests that Cannes provides the best launch for a film such as *The Angels' Share*, stating that it 'throws a spotlight on a film in such an extraordinary way'.<sup>7</sup> The filmmakers had initially sought an out of competition screening, reasoning that with the unlikelihood of a comedy

winning the festival's main prize, this slot would guarantee significant media attention without competitive pressure. However, they ultimately opted for a competition slot when both possibilities were offered.

Prior to the awarded films being announced, O'Brien stated the following: 'We really don't expect to win. We're well aware that we're not in the heavyweight department.' O'Brien's observations chime with those of Wong, who notes that major film festivals tend to favour weighty, artistic films, often associated with established or emerging directors who fit easily into *auteurist* discourses.<sup>8</sup> She suggests that comedies and musicals 'seem to violate the serious tone of the festival forum'.<sup>9</sup> An analysis of the 2012 Cannes official competition programme, which comprised 22 films dominated by 'heavy' subject matter, confirms this position.

That *Reality* (Matteo Garrone, 2012), a comic critique of reality television, received the Grand Prix and *The Angels' Share* the Jury Prize (regarded as the festival's *de facto* second and third prizes respectively) suggests that films lighter in tone can indeed be successful. However, when one considers that *Amore/Love* (Michael Haneke, 2012), with its focus on mortality, received the Palme d'Or and *Dupa dealuri/Beyond the Hills* (Cristian Mungiu, 2012), an account of the traumatic experiences of two female occupants of a Romanian orphanage, won the Best Screenplay award, it reinforces the impression that serious films are more likely to be celebrated. Given the success of *The Angels' Share*, O'Brien's remarks appear prophetic: 'There's always the outside chance that we might get a Jury Prize.' The jury's favourable opinion of the film concurred with the majority of the international critics in attendance.

### Press events

Two press screenings took place on the evening of Monday, 21 May. Discerning the communal mood of those assembled was difficult; nevertheless, considerable laughter, an audible gasp throughout the auditorium at the moment when the group's plan to liberate some expensive whisky appears to have been literally shattered, and extended applause at the conclusion indicated an enthusiastic response. My own reflections mirrored O'Brien's: 'You could feel in that room there was a lot of warmth to the film. People were clearly enjoying it. They were laughing in the right places.' These initial impressions were confirmed by an analysis of the film's early reviews, which were overwhelmingly positive in nature and which, O'Brien admitted, were better than anticipated.<sup>10</sup>

A press conference was organised on the following day. Although he rejects the term itself, Loach's status as an *auteur* and his inclusion in the official competition ensured considerable press attention. Given that the media tends to focus on celebrities, the attention was less significant than that afforded to the press conference for *Killing Them Softly* (Andrew Dominik, 2012), starring Brad Pitt,

which preceded it. Nevertheless, approximately 100 journalists along with various camera crews attended the press conference for *The Angels' Share*. Henri Behar, the chair of the event, introduced Loach, O'Brien, and screenwriter Paul Laverty as 'bona fide citizens of the Cannes Film Festival'. Two actors joined them on the platform: Paul Brannigan, who plays the main character Robbie, and Charlie MacLean, who plays a whisky expert. Other prominent cast members occupied front row seats alongside key production staff.

Behar opened the conference with three questions dealing with whisky, comedy, and parallels between *The Angels' Share* and *Kes*. This was followed by a number of questions from journalists from Belgium, South Africa, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The first focused on Brannigan's acting plans and two subsequent questions on reports that he had worked with Scarlett Johansson. Other questions were on the use of English subtitles (the film was shown with subtitles in both English and French), similarities with the work of the film's co-producers the Dardennes, casting, directing comedy, how Loach has represented the working class over time, and political leadership.

Responding to the *Kes* question, Loach suggested that the film's central character Billy faces a future of dead-end employment and then contrasted this with *The Angels' Share* and its central characters' prospects of long-term unemployment. Discussion over Robbie's search for work segued into wider societal and political concerns.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Laverty highlighted statistics from an International Labour Organisation report 'Global Trends for Youth 2012', which had been announced in the press that morning and stated that 75 million young people were unemployed worldwide.<sup>12</sup> He added that in Spain, 5.6 million are out of work and that the Spanish youth unemployment rate is 50%. Not all of the discussion was overtly political, and Brannigan's status as a first-time actor with a similarly disadvantaged background to the character Robbie offered a 'triumph over adversity' human interest angle that the journalists pursued and which resulted in extensive UK press coverage.<sup>13</sup> In the discussion over subtitles, O'Brien commented that the BBFC had allocated the film an '18' certificate on the basis of its use of the word 'cunt' and that cuts were required to ensure a '15' certificate: 'We were allowed to keep all the non-aggressive "cunts" and we covered up the other "cunts"'. This controversy became one of the film's talking points and received notable press coverage in the UK.<sup>14</sup>

Loach's response to the question on political leadership will be familiar to those who have followed his politics: 'Our attitude to the working class doesn't change in that they are important because they are the agent of change. If there is to be change ... it will come because of the organization of the working class and for that you need political leadership.' This response marked a return to political discourse, and the final 10 minutes of the conference concentrated on the current economic

crisis, the Arab Spring, and Occupy. Leavening the serious tone, Behar concluded by reminding everyone that the film is a comedy. The UK press did report on the political points raised, although they covered the film mostly in general terms, also devoting space to Brannigan himself (and to a lesser degree the other actors) and the 'cunts' controversy.

### The official premiere

If the press screenings are where Cannes' industrious side emerges, the glamour is undoubtedly attached to the official screenings. O'Brien draws on Loach's previous reflections when she comments: 'France doesn't have royalty, but films are the basis of their royalty substitute. That's how they treat you.' The venerable film critic André Bazin found parallels with another institution, arguing that Cannes is comparable 'to the foundation of a religious Order' at which participation is akin to being 'provisionally admitted to convent life'.<sup>15</sup> Bazin continues, stating that 'the Palace which rises up on *La Croisette* is nothing less than the present-day monastery of the moviemaker'. Cannes might not quite scale such regal or religious heights, but the official competition premiere is undoubtedly a grand occasion.

The screening for *The Angels' Share* took place during the evening of the day of the press conference. The 40-person 'Loach Party' assembled beforehand at a Creative Scotland reception on *La Croisette's* Long Beach. In addition to Loach, Laverty, and O'Brien, the group consisted of the leading cast and crew, co-producers, financiers, a few close family members, and one academic with a notebook. The party, with men sporting obligatory black ties and women in elegant evening dress, then walked the few hundred yards to the Carlton Hotel where they were escorted into a private room. Fifteen minutes later they were ushered through the hotel's rear exit into a street containing a cavalcade of black limousines provided (presumably gratis) by Renault, one of the festival's corporate sponsors.

The cavalcade, escorted by motorcycle policemen, glided through Cannes' crowded streets to the festival's main cinema. Here, to the sound of The Proclaimers' upbeat 'I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)' from the film's soundtrack, the party ascended the red-carpeted steps to the Grand Théâtre Lumière. The first wave of people comprised Loach, Laverty, O'Brien, and the actors, all pausing intermittently for the benefit of the massed ranks of photographers on each side of the staircase. The second wave followed moments later. Inside the cinema, the entourage received an extended standing ovation before the screening and another at the film's conclusion, supplemented by live footage of the filmmakers and actors projected onto the cinema screen. The party was then ushered out, guarded by a phalanx of red-sashed female ushers and burly male security guards, before descending the stairs and re-entering the limousines to be driven to a private party at Château de la Castre,

a castle overlooking the city. It was all a far cry from Glasgow's impoverished East End and yet another of Cannes' contradictions.

## Impact

The response of journalists, the jury, and the official competition screening attendees suggests that *The Angels' Share* had an excellent festival experience. This report attempts to provide an indication of the way in which Cannes, as O'Brien states, 'throws a spotlight on a film'. This is evidenced by the fact that, in addition to the press conference, during their visit the filmmakers and actors conducted 28 interviews with television crews from 18 countries and 68 interviews with radio/newspaper/web outlets from 19 countries. In addition, three television interviews and one newspaper interview were conducted with international syndicated outlets.<sup>16</sup>

The press screening, photo-ops, and official competition screening provided countless opportunities for the marketing of the film. Prior to the festival, the film had been pre-sold to a number of countries, including Germany, Greece, Italy, Benelux, and Spain, while release dates were already scheduled in the UK and France, among other places. During the festival negotiations continued with buyers from other territories, with O'Brien reckoning that the positive response would mean distribution in most if not all territories. She adds: 'It's really interesting how much more money is on the table now as opposed to two days ago because of the reaction.' Indeed, while I was interviewing O'Brien, our discussion was interrupted by telephone calls in which she discussed the details of competing bids for the film's US rights, confirming de Valck's observation about how film festivals add value to the films that they screen. This brief report contains some observations about one film at one festival, though I hope that it has provided enough material to indicate that the study of film festivals would certainly benefit from more empirical work in this area.

## Notes

1. This research will be published as a monograph in due course.
2. De Valck 2007 and Wong 2011.
3. De Valck 2007, p. 38.
4. De Valck & Soeteman 2010, pp. 290-293.
5. De Valck 2007, pp. 87-88.
6. The bracketed years represent the year of the film's screening at the festival, not its cinematic release.
7. Interview with the author, 22 May 2012 (the day following the competition screening). All subsequent quotes from O'Brien come from this interview.
8. Wong 2011, p. 7.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
10. In the British press, for instance, the film received many four-star reviews.

11. Loach, Laverty, and O'Brien have also used the film festival circuit to champion Palestinian rights. See Archibald & Miller 2011 for a discussion on the 2009 film festival circuit controversy regarding Israeli government sponsorship of films and subsequent calls for boycotts.
12. The full report is available at: [http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-employment-trends/youth/2012/WCMS\\_180976/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-employment-trends/youth/2012/WCMS_180976/lang-en/index.htm) (accessed on 10 June 2012).
13. For instance, the *Daily Mirror* (9 June 2012) ran a story with the sub-heading 'Paul Brannigan's life story could make a Hollywood film on its own'. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/from-a-life-of-drugs-on-a-tough-housing-estate-870119> (accessed on 10 June 2012).
14. The 'cunts' controversy was the focus of considerable UK press coverage. See, for instance: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/may/22/ken-loach-bbfc-hypocritical> (accessed on 5 August 2012).
15. Bazin 2009, p. 15.
16. Marketing report provided by Sixteen Films. This does not include any additional press interviews as a result of the film winning the Jury Prize, which was presented on the final day of the festival.

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## The 37th annual Toronto International Film Festival

*Seeking the social in the virtual*

Sarah Dillard

There are 11 days in September when the world's cinematic community turns to Canada for the glitz and glamour of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).<sup>1</sup>