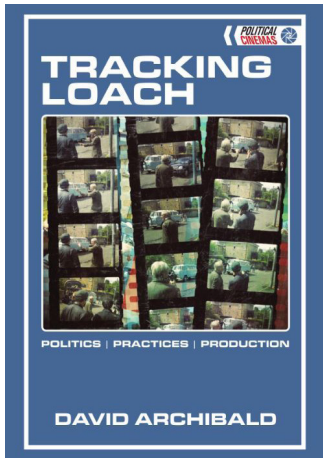


## DANIEL MOORE

*Tracking Loach: Politics, Practices, Production*, by David Archibald



David Archibald's excellent study *Tracking Loach: Politics, Practices, Production* arrives at the supposed end of the career of its subject, one of the most controversial and acclaimed filmmakers of the last sixty years: British director Ken Loach. If his most recently released film, *The Old Oak* (2023), marks his

retirement, a reexamination of what makes him a distinct presence in global cinema is timely. In contrast to previous, more comprehensive studies of Loach's oeuvre, Archibald's approach is based on his close observation of the production and reception of a single film, the whimsical Scottish-set dramedy *The Angels' Share* (Ken Loach, 2012). Archibald's fluid and inclusive analysis, combining textual and cultural criticism with the unprecedented access Archibald had to what he calls "Team Loach," provides many eye-opening benefits for the reader—most notably, a deeper understanding of the uniqueness and radicality of Loach's directorial approach, the role of the director in a collaborative and anti-auteurist production model, and the role of a director in the reception, financing, and marketing of a film.

In the introduction, Archibald defines his titular approach of "tracking Loach." From 2011 to 2012, he was able to observe key parts of the production of *The Angels' Share*, interview several prominent actors and crew members, and follow the cast and crew to the film's premiere at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival. Archibald defines his production-observation-based approach as "ethnographic analysis," a description of how "the process by which the ethnographic study of filmmaking influences analysis of the completed film, and criticism more broadly" (12).

Archibald's goal is not to favor a production-observation approach over textual analysis, but to showcase "how the latter might benefit from insights gleaned from the former" (15).

The first chapter, "Politics On-Screen," departs from the rest of the book's singular focus in providing political and textual analyses of Loach's long engagement with left-wing politics in his films. The most effective element of this chapter is Archibald's engagement with the theory of sociologist John Holloway. Referencing Holloway's 2010 book *Crack Capitalism*, Archibald positions Loach's career-long cinematic engagement with the economically and socially downtrodden as a powerful demonstration of how the Left can "develop spaces, or cracks of resistance within the current social formation" (35). Archibald's emphasis on Loach's cinema as representing acts of resistance provides a reminder of the often-subversive qualities of cinematic social realism.

The second chapter, "Form," focuses on the narrative and aesthetic attributes that have defined Loach's cinema by mixing textual analysis with observations from the making of *The Angels' Share*. This chapter picks up on the tradition of theorists, such as André Bazin, who rigorously examine the artifice that goes into creating the illusion of cinematic reality. Archibald's interviews with production designer Fergus Clegg, cinematographer Robbie Ryan, and editor Jonathan Morris, among other many creatives, highlight how the stubborn pursuit of realism inevitably results in the need for heavy creative manipulation in front of and behind the camera.

The third chapter, "Team Loach," discusses Loach's collaborative approach to filmmaking, and in doing so fills a void in existing Loach scholarship. As previous studies have noted, despite Loach's disdain for the term *auteur*, his films are produced and discussed in the context of auteurism. Archibald instead depicts a Loach set as a site of interdependence. This is best articulated by Morris in describing the relationship between him and Loach during the editing process: "[H]is cut is my cut and my cut is his cut" (97). Archibald compares the collaborative hierarchy of a film set and the relationship between the director and crew to the roles played by club owners, managers, and trainers in sports like soccer. Loach's collaborator Abbas Kiarostami previously made this comparison in Kiarostami's documentary *10 on Ten* (2005), but it has been little explored in contemporary analysis of film direction. Archibald foregrounds the communal spirit in Loach's

*Film Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 3, pp. 100–110. ISSN: 0015-1386 electronic ISSN: 1533-8630 © 2024 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2024.77.3.100

productions while also acknowledging the essential role his hands-on leadership takes in the realization of the film. This chapter ultimately reveals the ways auteurist theory fails to take into account the director's role in simultaneously leading and collaborating with the many voices involved in the processes of making and publicizing a film.

Chapter 4, "Performance," offers an up-close look at the practices that define Loach's work with film actors, notably nonprofessional or first-time actors. Most revealing is the analysis of Loach's famous method of withholding parts of the script from actors, which results in moments of heightened authenticity and bridges the gap between performer and character. Through an analysis of crew call sheets and interviews with the actors, Archibald emphasizes the comfortability of this approach for both professional and nonprofessional actors. Archibald effectively analyzes two sequences of comedic shock in *The Angel's Share* that utilize this approach, by relating their power to Loach's wide observational approach to shot setup. The chapter also features an account of Loach's direction of a sequence depicting a whiskey tasting. What may seem at first like an insignificant or unmemorable scene in the film is given more importance through Archibald's observation of Loach directly interacting with and instructing extras, and his use of a hole-in-the-wall observational camera setup, where we see so much of what has been theorized about Loach's style become tangible.

Chapter 5, "Words: Between Script and Screen," interrogates Loach's notion that the writer has the most important role in the construction of a film. While focusing primarily on Loach's ongoing partnership with Scottish screenwriter Paul Laverty, Archibald considers Loach's past collaborations with writers such as Nell Dunn, Jim Allen, Barry Hines, and Rob Dawber. Archibald connects Loach's interest in authenticity to his preference for writers with strong regional ties, such as Laverty with Scotland, the setting for *The Angel's Share* as well as some of his other films. The chapter excels with Archibald's analysis of the film's on-set production in relation to Laverty's screenplay. Focusing on the filming of two scenes, Archibald examines how Loach remains faithful to the written script but leans on input from actors to add verisimilitude in dialogue and staging.

The final chapter, "Politics beyond the Screen," explores Loach's engagement with film festivals and his films' tendency to spark wide political engagement and debate within England. Archibald centers this chapter around the premiere of *The Angel's Share* at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Jury Prize. Archibald revisits the tension between Loach's reception in Europe as an auteur and his steadfast rejection of the label. Loach's status and celebrity

let him use the platform of his Cannes press conference for the film to spark discussions on the crises of capitalism.

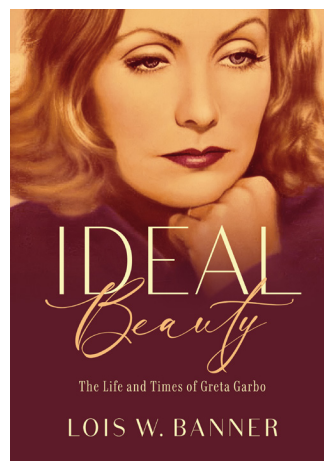
Successfully building on past studies of Loach and new observations of the making and reception of *The Angel's Share*, Archibald demonstrates the benefit that in-person observation can have in analyzing the politics, aesthetics, and reception of a film. *Tracking Loach* successfully distinguishes what makes Loach's approach to filmmaking politically distinct and radical in contrast to commercial modes of filmmaking and the larger structures of capitalism. In its focus on Loach's technique, Archibald's analysis offers a path forward for future directorial studies that deemphasize auteurism for a more nuanced focus on the team dynamics that inform the process of filmmaking.

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BOOK DATA David Archibald, *Tracking Loach: Politics, Practices, Production*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. \$120.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper; \$24.95 e-book (EPUB); \$110.00 e-book (PDF). 216 pages.

## GABRIELLE STECHER

### *Ideal Beauty: The Life and Times of Greta Garbo*, by Lois W. Banner



More than thirty years after her death, the sphinxlike Greta Garbo continues to elude, despite the best efforts to posthumously pin down the woman who so famously rejected public life. The mononymic Garbo, not unlike her successors Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor, remains a lumi-

nary in Hollywood's pantheon of stars. These glamorous icons of the past still inspire hero worship, creating an appetite for biographical studies that address the yearning for authenticity and intimacy among their fans. This presents a particular challenge when the subject is as famous for her desire for privacy as her performances; such is the case with Garbo. While there have been numerous biographies published on the Swedish film star over the past three decades, Lois Banner's *Ideal Beauty: The Life and Times of Greta Garbo* is unique in the way that Banner privileges context as much as she does chronology.