SORRY WE MISSED YOU: A RESOURCE GUIDE

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The documents listed below provide resources you can use if you want to look further into the film and the issues it addresses, whether you participated in the live discussion or not.

The first document is a thirteen-page reflection on key facets of the film. Each of the others is just one page long. Every document is a self-standing piece. This allows you to focus on the topic or topics you want to explore and, if you are interested in more than one, to choose the order in which you want to proceed. If you want to read everything, the order here suggests one plausible route to follow.

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NOTE

You are welcome to download and/or print all or any part of these materials, to use them in any way you wish, and to pass them (or the link to them) to anyone you think might be interested.

If you choose to summarize or quote from documents #1, 2, 3, or 5 in something you write for a class, for publication, or for wide online circulation, please reference the source as follows:

Rouse, Roger (2020) *Sorry We Missed You*: A Resource Guide. [Insert document number and title if relevant]. Available at https://www.cmu.edu/faces/ (under *Sorry We Missed You*) or on request from the author at rogrouse@pitt.edu.

(1) A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT THE FILM

Written in the wake of the live, Zoom-based discussion of *Sorry We Missed* that was staged by the Carnegie Mellon International Film Festival on Saturday, May 23, 2020

Thirteen days later…

I thought I'd planned for everything. I had a spare pen on hand in case my regular one ran out. And I had an empty soda bottle by my feet in case my aging bladder couldn't last through an extended live discussion. (I ended up needing the spare pen but, thankfully, not the bottle.) However, I hadn't reckoned with my internet connection being cut.

As those of you who participated in the live discussion may remember, I was made to disappear just as I was starting my concluding comments. That may have been a blessing for all concerned: for participants growing weary after an hour or more on Zoom, and for me as I scrambled to work out what to highlight from a very energetic and engaged discussion, what, if anything, to add, and how to do all of that in five minutes or less. But the festival organizers weren't willing to let me off the hook so, at their request, I started working on an extended version of what I would have liked to say.

Almost two weeks after the event, that doesn't seem the most helpful thing to offer. Instead, what follows are a few thoughts about three aspects of the film: (1) its main concerns, (2) the ways it works to get them across, and (3) its relevance to what's happening today in the Pittsburgh area, the U.S, and the wider world.

You don't need to have attended the discussion to make sense of what I have to say though, if you weren't there and would like to catch up, a recording is now available on the festival's website. If you want to look further into the film and the issues it addresses, you can try other documents in this Resource Guide, each of which I mention at least once in the pages below.

In my reflections, I have simplified a great deal in the attempt to be as brief as possible. This includes making it seem as though Ken Loach, the director, and Paul Laverty, the screenwriter, are the only creators of the film. They are not. Minimally, we should add the name of Rebecca O'Brien, the producer of almost all of Loach's films since 1990. But, as all three of them repeatedly make clear, the movie is, like all the others they have worked on, the outcome of a rich collective process involving a large number of people contributing in a wide variety of ways.

Talking of collective labor, my efforts to think about the film have benefitted a great deal from the comments of Lisa Frank and everyone else who spoke during the discussion, conversations at various points with Lauren Berlant, Edith Doron, Michael Goodhart, Susan Hoppe, Jolanta Lion, Gale McGloin, and Mel Packer, the articles and videos listed in documents #4 and #6 plus many others I did not include, and the chance to watch almost every piece Ken Loach has made since he began directing plays for prime-time broadcast on the BBC in 1964 (document #8).

What are the film's main concerns?

Sorry We Missed You was released in the U.K. in late November 2019 and in the U.S. in early March of this year. As you'll already know if you're reading this, it focuses on the daily lives and struggles of four fictional but credibly real members of a working-class family who live together in a rented house in Newcastle, a city in the northeast of England that's quite similar in size and social history to Pittsburgh (document #5). Ricky Turner, in his early 40s, is dealing with the first days and weeks of his new job as a delivery driver. Abby Turner, about the same age, has been working for a long time as a home care nurse. Seb, their fifteen-year-old son, and Liza Jane, their eleven-year old daughter, are both in school, though Liza Jane seems much more accepting of the education process than her brother.

In thinking about the film's main concerns, we might start with at least three meanings artfully embedded in its title: first, "Sorry We Missed You" as the line across the card that Ricky has to leave on the doors of customers who aren't available to receive their packages (a card that Liza Jane fills in playfully at one point in the film and that Ricky uses, much later, to convey a desperate, apologetic message to his wife and kids); second, "sorry we missed you" as a succinct expression of what growing numbers of overworked couples feel regarding one another and any children they might have; and third, "sorry we missed you" as a regretful but perhaps galvanizing acknowledgment of the need for all of us to learn more about people such as Abby and Ricky, whose labors are so vital but whose conditions of existence are so frequently obscured in contemporary capitalist stories about freedom, flexibility, autonomy, and choice and by dominant incitements to focus our attention on the commodities we are pressed to purchase.

So what is the film encouraging us to do? In general terms, I think it's prompting us to develop a kind of critical X-ray vision, that is the ability both to see *through* the dominant stories we are told and the images that accompany them and to see *past* the goods or as services we consume and the immediate interactions through which they are delivered to us. More specifically, it is an urgent invitation to explore significant changes under what is often called the "neoliberal" phase of capitalism (document #3) in the organization and performance of labor, especially by ill-paid members of the working class, and the pressures these are placing on people's home lives and their family ties. At the same time, it encourages us to looks critically at the dominant forms of cultural influence used in efforts to make the pressures seem appropriate and the changes feel worthwhile.

By "labor," I mean two kinds of effort: those involved in producing and distributing goods, including the constituent raw materials, and handling the related waste (sometimes amalgamated under the term "production") and, just as importantly, those involved in producing and maintaining people and interpersonal connections (sometimes referred to as "social reproduction" or, at least partially, as "caring labor"). The dominant tendency in contemporary capitalism is to describe these two kinds of labor as "work" only when they are done for money but this obscures how much capitalists depend on reproductive labor they

don't pay for, at least directly. It also devalues the kind of people who carry out most of this unremunerated labor, i.e. women. (Other analysts of the interplay of class and gender, including Lisa Frank in her opening remarks, reverse these terms, using "work" to refer to what I'm calling "labor" and vice versa. That's fine. What's key here are the conceptual distinction the terms are used to mark and the distinction's practical significance in people's daily lives.)

Loach and Laverty use their focus on Ricky, Abby, Seb, and Liza Jane to concentrate our attention and concern on key shifts in *both* kinds of labor and the relations between them as they are currently being played out in the U.K. And, as Michael Goodhart pointed out near the start of our discussion, they do so in ways that critically engage not only class-based inequalities but also deeply entangled gender hierarchies as well.

They highlight the growing prevalence of work that is doubly insecure: poorly compensated in terms of pay and associated benefits and available in unpredictable amounts that are determined largely by the demands of the organizations that make use of it (e.g. via the assignment of routes in Ricky's case and of home visits in Abby's). They also show the growing reliance of capitalist businesses and allied agencies on forms of compensation tied solely to the completion of required tasks (or "gigs") that are deemed individual and distinct (e.g. the on-time delivery of packages and time-bound visits to people's homes). And they illustrate the increasing efforts by these businesses and agencies to allocate tasks and to discipline the people doing them via apps and electronic monitoring devices, most notably, the "gun" that Ricky is told he needs to guard with his life and constantly keep happy (document #2).

At the same time, they highlight and critiques important shifts as well as dogged continuities in the performance of reproductive labor. They remind us that increasing amounts of this labor are being done for money and that growing numbers of companies are trying to use it as a medium to make profits. Abby, for example, is paid for care work that, in earlier decades, might more commonly have been carried out by family members, especially, of course, women. And she apparently performs this work under the aegis of a money-making business subcontracted by the state. Loach and Laverty also call attention to the fact that the great majority of the reproductive work that is poorly paid is assigned to women, many of whom are increasingly obliged to seek these jobs and stick with them either by the absence of other sources of income or by the low and insecure earnings of others in their households and beyond. And they underline and question both the continuing inequalities in the gendered distribution of unpaid reproductive labor (e.g. Abby being the parent who constantly attends to Seb and Liza Jane, either in person or, increasingly, by phone) and the growing, gender-based pressure on girls as young as Liza to look after themselves, their siblings, and even their exhausted parents.

Crucially, though, Loach and Laverty are equally concerned with the many ways these developments regarding labor ripple through the rest of people's lives. They emphasize how limited incomes and the threat of having one's assignments cut back push de facto employees such as Ricky to work increasingly exhausting hours ("fourteen hours a day, six days a week") and workers such as Abby to accept challenging schedules and often to take on extra tasks

when pressed to do so. They also highlight how people's limited incomes in the face of rising costs (e.g. for rent and fines imposed by employers and by schools) push many like Ricky and Abby into ever deeper debt and how this in turn reinforces the pressure to work long hours and keep their heads down in the process. At the same time, they call attention to the ways in which an increasingly polarized job market and the growing commodification of higher education through mounting fees and the growing promotion of interest-bearing loans are inducing many working-class teenagers like Seb to question the merits of pursuing a college degree, often leading to upsetting conflicts with parents who, like Ricky, are still persuaded by promises of upward mobility through schooling.

Indeed, throughout the film, Loach and Laverty emphasize the need to look carefully at the dominant images and narratives used to encourage workers to accept or, better yet, enthusiastically embrace the continuing reorganization of capitalism along neoliberal lines even as this makes life more difficult for many (document #3). They ask us to consider what's *differentiating* in these forms of cultural influence, especially along gender lines as well as lines of class. And they stress the importance of examining how people such as Ricky, Abby, Seb, and Liza Jane engage what they encounter.

The first and most obvious example concerns the "company line" laid out in the film's early scenes by Maloney, the warehouse supervisor, with its insistent emphasis on the merits of becoming a self-employed entrepreneur capable of freely choosing how to act and succeeding solely on the basis of personal ability and effort while avoiding any reliance on state aid. ("Like everything, Ricky, it's *your* choice.") It's probably no accident, given Loach and Laverty's concerns, that "Maloney" is only one syllable away from "baloney." Yet Ricky initially finds the supervisor's imagery compelling, perhaps because it resonates with a great deal of widely circulated neoliberal ideas and, just as importantly, with gendered ideologies that have collapsed capitalist crises into crises of masculine authority and cast successful self-employment as a solution to problem. Significantly, however, Abby is more critical, not just in her angry riposte to Maloney as the film nears its close ("How's he self-employed? He works for you. How does your company get away with it?") but also in her wary response when she first hears about what Ricky has in mind. Her husband clings to aspects of the neoliberal narrative for a long time, as we see in his angry assertion to Seb that good jobs are still readily available to people who "knuckle down" and work hard. ("Give yourself some *choices*, mate.") And, even when he finally accepts that he's been conned by Maloney's story and by the broader neoliberal views that it condenses ("Son, I've *got* to go to work; *I haven't got a choice*"), he seems to remain at least partially caught within images of the heroic male breadwinner and the conviction that the only way he'll save his family from its mounting debts is by continuing to "knuckle down" and work his body to the bone.

There's a lot more that could be said here about the ways the film encourages us to think critically about gender ideologies as they intersect with those concerning class. Ricky internalizes dominant ideas not only about proper masculinity but also, in a self-denigrating way, about his place at the low end of a class hierarchy justified by a supposed difference between "brains" and "brawn" (e.g. his exchange with Liza Jane about who has all the brains in

the family and, close to the end, with a concerned Seb: "You know me. Strong in the arm, thick in the head.") Meanwhile, in Abby's case, as we are repeatedly reminded of her extraordinary kindness, we are, I think, also being asked to consider to what extent she's caught within a gender ideology that pushes her to fulfill herself through endless rounds of self-sacrificial care. It's notable that, after her angry attack on Maloney and everything he stands for, she turns apologetically to the people in the emergency room and says: "I'm sorry. I don't swear. I'm a *carer*. I care about people." It's also striking, though, that she is much more willing than Ricky to confront her the firm she works for, insisting that there are limits to how much they can take advantage of her commitment to caring. And, as the film unfolds, she becomes increasingly willing to remind her husband and her son, sometimes angrily, about the added burdens that come with having to combine the demanding reproductive work she does for money with all the reproductive labor she seems expected to perform "for love."

However, the person who most openly rebels against dominant images and narratives is, of course, Seb. In his angry exchange with his father about skipping school, he defiantly challenges the story his father echoes about good jobs being available for the people who work hard, get into university, and exit with a degree, pointing out that his friend Harpoon's brother, having been taken in by the promise, is now £57,000 in debt, working in a call center (a classic "gig economy" job), and getting "smashed" every weekend. Instead of relying on his family to provide him with emotional support, he looks to his "crew," a small group of similarly rebellious friends who are inventive taggers and graffiti artists and cleverly adept at appropriating dominant idioms to talk their way out of a tight corner (as in their comical exchange with the Park Authority worker). One way they use their art is to critique the reduction of so many personal interactions to violent shouting matches. Another is to deliberately interfere with what Seb tells his father is "shitty advertising trying to get people to buy stuff that's not in their league."

For Loach and Laverty, all these developments come together with particular force in the increasingly stressed family lives of people like the Turners. As the film unfolds, they carefully chart the mounting tensions and mutual recriminations between Ricky and Seb and then the growing frictions between Ricky and Abby. Towards the end, Ricky asks Abby "What are we *doing* to each other?" Abby says she doesn't know. In many ways, the film is organized to answer Ricky's question. But its first move, logically if not chronologically, is to reject the terms in which it's cast. For Loach and Laverty, it's crucial to look well beyond the frictional interplay of different personalities, the imputed universality of adolescent angst, or careful calculations of how blame should be distributed among the four members of the family. Abby, Ricky, and indeed all of us need to find ways of recognizing how the increasingly aggressive pursuit of capitalist profits and power are *imploding* in the homes of so many ill-paid workers and the relationships they value most. We need to cast aside dominant ideologies that seek to justify the neoliberal project by inciting people to blame themselves as individuals or the people to whom they're most closely tied for their problems that they face and, even worse, to channel their anger and aggression along the same lines. And we need, instead, to direct the blame and anger *upwards* at the systemic sources of the problems and the people who gain most from

their current workings and *outwards* through collective movements that seek to replace current arrangements with others that are markedly more decent and humane.

Indeed, although the film is certainly an attempt to stir our feelings about the difficulties faced by Ricky, Abby, Seb, Liza Jane and so many people like them, it is also encouraging us to *do something* in response, especially by working to transform the system that produces them. The claim that I am making may seem strikingly at odds with the film's apparent emphasis on a narrative of inexorable decline and loss of hope and by its related lack of attention to any organized responses to the arrangements it portrays. Would it have been both plausible and rousing, for example, to have the drivers at the depot respond one of Maloney's despotic diatribes in unison by walking off the job at the same time? (document #7). However, the trajectory of the story is, I think, more complex. Running counter to the family's continuing material descent is what Loach has called "the journey of Ricky's consciousness, and Abby's too" (document #6, The idea of capitalism…) from varying degrees of fidelity to dominant ideologies to vary degrees of rejection and critique (though, as I've tried to indicate, the routes they take are not quite the same.) Moreover, it's possible to read the final image not simply as a despairing shot of Ricky trapped within the cabin of his van and, by extension, within the inexorable demands of his job and debts, but more fully as pressing question. If there's no way that Ricky can solve his family's problems on his own, what do the rest of us need to do help? As Mel Packer suggested near the start of our discussion, the movie refuses to provide a neat Hollywood conclusion in which all of the problems raised at the outset have been properly resolved. Instead, it ends with both a powerful reminder that these problems continue deepening *and* an urgent incitement to think hard about what needs to happen next.

In addition, as Lisa Frank emphasized in her opening remarks, the film provides important indications of the interpersonal support and inventive defiance from which more expansive forms of collective action might emerge. There's the remarkable resilience and refortified solidarity that Ricky, Abby, Seb, and Liza Jane mange to produce in the midst of so much stress; the camaraderie of Seb and the other members of his crew as they forge creative forms of resistance to all the corporate advertising, screaming hostility, and micro-discipline around them; and, perhaps above all, there's the care that Liza Jane devotes to rest of her family, that Abby devotes to everyone, including all the people she visits, and that at least some of these people show her in return (think of the key scene in which Abby exchanges photos and stories with Mollie, the woman who had worked so hard to feed the striking miners back in 1984; and the scene in which Rosie, as she wrestles with her dementia, lovingly combs Abby's hair and sings her a song – a version of Lead Belly's plaintive ballad, *Goodnight Irene*, with its uncanny tension between soothing melody and troubling words). What would it mean, I wonder, to free that imperative to care from the constraining interplay of gender inequality and labor exploitation?

Concerning the film's politics, it's also important to note that, in researching and writing the story, Laverty and Loach worked closely with several groups involved in organized forms of pushback. According to the credits, these included the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain, the General Municipal Boilermakers union (much more wide-ranging in its membership

than the name suggests), the Social Workers Union, and Acorn Newcastle. Moreover, they have repeatedly emphasized that they see all of their films, separately and together, as collective interventions in cultural struggles against stories and images promoting the interests of capital through the combined influence of corporate-owned media (including mass-marketed movies), supportive politicians and religious leaders, and, as Seb maintains, constrained and frequently compliant universities and schools (documents #3 and #7).

In their promotion of what a critical X-ray vision, they lay out key parts of capitalist story-telling and image-making under neoliberal conditions (document #3), especially as articulated by Maloney, and then shown the varying kinds of harm caused by the policies and practices they are used to promote. And at the same time, they prompt us to look beyond the products that come to us, whether as goods in packages or as services such as healthcare, and the often fleeting encounters through which delivery takes place, by learning as much as we can about what life is like for the people involved, at work and beyond, what shapes their experiences, and, if we don't like what we find, how we can help produce worthwhile change. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people who have seen *Sorry We Missed You* claim that they will never look at the products they've received or the people who've delivered them in the same superficial ways. If that's true, it's great. The bigger issue, of course, is what we do with the knowledge that our x-ray vision summons into view.

How does the film work to get its concerns across?

I have no expertise in filmmaking or the study of film but that's not going to stop me highlighting two broad techniques among the many that Loach and Laverty use in *Sorry We Missed You* to convey their concerns and render them as compelling as they can. One is their meticulous structuring of the story, which I'll turn to later.

The other is Loach's long-standing emphasis on what he calls the credibility or authenticity of the characters and situations he portrays. This builds on the immediate post-war work of the Italian neo-realists and also on the vivid portrayals of daily pleasures and dilemmas that emerged in what was then Czechoslovakia following the Prague Spring of 1968. Yet Loach has frequently expressed discomfort with attempts to describe him as a social realist, partly because this opens the door to conservative assertions that he's disguising distorted fictions within the trappings of the documentary form, with its allegedly transparent relationship to what's real. When he stresses his commitments to credibility and authenticity, what he seems to mean is that he wants his audiences to feel that his stories have the ring of truth and, especially, that he wants people similar to the characters in his films to feel that he has been properly attentive to the rich complexity of the lives, the pleasures they enjoy, and the daily challenges they face.

The techniques that Loach and Laverty use to make *Sorry We Missed You* as true as possible to the experiences of people like Ricky, Abby, Seb, and Liza Jane are ones they've practiced and refined over their many years of filmmaking, both separately and together (document #8). They begin with extensive research. This includes attending carefully to the work of academics

and activists expert in the issues they're planning to explore. But also, and perhaps more importantly, it involves extended discussions with people similar to the characters they have in mind and, whenever possible, accompanying them as they go about their daily lives. Then, as they turn what they have learned into the outlines of a story, they choose actors whose experiences overlap at least to some extent with those of the characters they are going to portray. This often involves hiring people with either limited acting experience (e.g. Kris Hitchen, who plays Ricky) or none at all (e.g. Debbie Honeywood, who plays Abby, Rhys Stone, who plays Seb, Katie Proctor, who plays Liza Jane, and Ross Brewster, the ex-policeman they chose to play Maloney).

They shoot entirely in the area(s) they have chosen as the setting for the story, in this case Newcastle, treating local working-class accents and turns of phrase not as impediments for audiences from outside the area but as a key resource in making the film seem firmly grounded in the realities it will dramatize. They shoot the story in sequence, never let the actors see the entire script, and give them the part they will need for an upcoming scene only a day or so in advance. This means that the actors experience the story in the way their characters (and the rest of us) experience life, that is without really knowing what will happen next and only able to draw on their understandings of what they've gone through before. (They do have lengthy two-way discussions with the main actors before the filming starts about the personal and family histories of the characters they will play.) Loach works hard to make the cameras and other equipment as unobtrusive as possible and he emphasizes for everyone in the cast the importance of never acting "for the camera." All this enhances the sense for audiences that they are intimate observers of what's happening. We sometimes refer to this as feeling like "a fly on the wall," though in so doing we may underestimate the agency of flies!

In addition, and quite famously, Loach often shoots especially dramatic moments by telling one or two actors what they will be saying and doing but hiding this from others central to the scene. This allows him to capture the spontaneity of their responses, especially once he's sure they know they're able remain in character as they react. The best example in *Sorry We Missed You* is the scene in which Liza Jane reveals to her parents that she was the one who took the keys to Ricky's van. Katie Proctor knew she would be saying this but Debbie Honeywood, playing Abby, and Kris Hitchen, as Ricky, did not, so the tears they shed when they heard Liza Jane's account were apparently genuine and completely unrehearsed.

I'll now turn to the ways Loach and Laverty structure the story they are telling. Put very simply, good structuring matters because it helps audiences sense consciously or otherwise that there is an intelligible shape to what they're seeing and hearing and thus make at least preliminary sense of what might otherwise feel like an overwhelming succession of disparate and independent details. It also matters because the significance of any single statement or episode is amplified considerably for audiences if they can understand it, again consciously or otherwise, as extending, enhancing, or reworking elements they have encountered earlier in the film, especially if these elements gradually congeal into something like a thread or theme. The structuring techniques that Loach and Laverty deploy in *Sorry We Missed You* are, in my

view, at once artfully meticulous and easily accessible, neither clumsily crude nor arcanely cryptic. In the interests of brevity, I'll focus on just three.

The first is one I've already addressed to some extent. It's the organization of what happens to Ricky and the other members of his family, from his job interview with Maloney to the final scene of him in his van, as an increasingly forceful debunking of the neoliberal story that Maloney relays in the interview and other moments in the film. As I've suggested, the debunking narrative unfolds in countervailing directions. One is the seemingly inexorable material descent that the Turners suffer as the compounding costs of being an "owner-driver-franchisee" become increasingly apparent along with the closely related emotional descent that Ricky suffers as he moves from early excitement about the promise of autonomy and freedom to the growing realization that he's been conned and trapped – from embracing Maloney's claim that everything's "*your* choice" to telling Seb "I've *got* to go to work; *I haven't got a choice*." At the same time, there's what Loach has called the potentially productive "journey of Ricky's consciousness, and Abby's too" from varying degrees of adherence to dominant class and gender ideologies to increasingly critical positions. We are shown this, for example, in their late appreciation of what Seb's artwork seems to be saying about the interplay of advertising and interpersonal aggression and, more explicitly, in Abby's defiant message to Maloney that ends by suggesting where he should put his phone.

The second kind of structuring involves introducing objects and issues early in the film and then having them return, reverberate, and get reconfigured as the narrative unfolds. We might see this as elaborating skillfully on the advice to dramatists by the Russian playwright and short-story writer, Anton Chekov: "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired." Among the many "pistols" that Laverty puts into play are the scanner (also called a "gun") that Ricky is told he must guard and keep happy, the van that he buys on installment and must pay to maintain if it suffers any damage, and, of course, the empty soda bottle that his friend, Henry, tells him he should always have on hand in case he needs to pee but doesn't have the time to find a toilet. (Is this, for Laverty, the ultimate Chekovian pistol or "piss-tool"?) What's particularly significant about these objects and the ways they might be used is that, by conspicuously hanging them on the wall as the film begins, Laverty primes the audience to remain anxiously attentive to what might happen to them, when they might be "fired," and who will end up being shot. He carefully returns to all three as the story unfolds, directly in the case of the scanner and the van, indirectly in the repeated instances of people being unable to control their bladders. And then, close to the end, he brings them all together in the scene in which robbers attack Ricky in his van, steal his packages, smash his "gun," and then douse him with the pee he's recently released into his bottle – leading Abby to ask him in the emergency room if he passed out during the attack and, in so doing, peed his pants.

The third kind of structuring is played out through a series of allusions to a much longer narrative about key developments in the introduction, consolidation, and increasingly desperate protection of neoliberalism in the U.K. (document #3). This story is particularly important because it situates the "choices" Ricky and then Abby make at the beginning of the

movie in the context of steadily unfolding processes of capitalist restructuring beyond their immediate influence as individuals that have, nonetheless, had profound effects on the trajectories of their lives from childhood onwards, well before the events with which the film begins. Like anyone who decides to get out of bed at some point during the day, Ricky and Abby certainly make choices but, as Loach and Laverty are keen to stress, the extent to which people's choices are unconstrained and freely made varies considerably along the interrelated lines of class, gender, and other forms of systematic inequality. (Several scholars have argued that many of the actions taken by multiply subordinated individuals may, at best, derive from "choices of last resort.")

Although the longer narrative is a key element in the argument that Loach and Laverty advance, the allusions that they make to it may not be readily apparent to people unfamiliar with broad shifts in global class dynamics since the late 1970s (document #3), the particular ways these have been played out in the U.K., and/or some of the episodes now seen as crucial to their unfolding. So what are these allusions? And what are being used to do?

The most important scene in this regard is the one in which Abby and Mollie show one another their photos. Mollie is able to use hers to talk about the miner's strike of 1984-5 and its brutal defeat by the Thatcher government, a major step in the broader strengthening of capital and weakening of organized labor that brought lasting harm to workers not only in the area around Newcastle (document #5) but throughout the U.K. As Mollie says when looking at Abby's list of visits from 7.30 in the morning to 9 at night, "What happened to the eight-hour day?" Ricky and Abby, perhaps six or seven years old when the miners were defeated, would have entered as young adults into a world in which many of the protections won for their (presumably) wage-earning parents and grandparents had already been eroded by the aggressive policies and practices of big business and its allies in government. (Two quick notes: Mollie is played by Helen Wood, someone new to acting but well-known for the lead role she played in feeding the striking miners in Easington, a small colliery town southwest of Newcastle. And a rough U.S. equivalent to Thatcher's defeat of the mineworkers in 1984-5 is Reagan's rapid crushing of the air-traffic controllers' strike and the subsequent decertification of their union in 1981).

In the same scene, Abby's discussion of the photos that she's brought to share highlight a later development that affected her and Ricky even more directly, namely the 2008 collapse of Northern Rock, a bank based in Newcastle but prominent throughout Britain. As in the U.S., the rapid deregulation of the financial sector from the 1980s onwards allowed entities like Northern Rock to engage in highly risky forms of financial speculation and aggressive mortgage marketing that they did not have the funds to support. The company's collapse meant that Ricky and Abby were unable to use the mortgage they'd obtained to acquire their first house and had to continue being renters. The broader contraction of the U.K. building industry resulted in Ricky losing his job as a construction worker and having to turn to the various kinds of casual labor he describes in his opening interview with Maloney, work that Abby tells Mollies was more poorly paid and much less regular. And the subsequent efforts of capital and government in the U.K. (as in many other countries) to recover from the crisis through a mix of corporate bailouts and the imposition of increasing austerity on workers no doubt helped push

Ricky and Abby ever deeper into debt and make Ricky increasingly desperate to find a solution to their problems.

All this may, in turn, shed more light on the first kind of structuring technique I mentioned, especially Loach and Laverty's emphasis on a narrative of seemingly unstoppable decline. They are, I think, trying to help audiences imaginatively inhabit what it's like for people to be pushed so close to the edge financially that one extra nudge, such as the collapse of Northern Rock, can send them tumbling downwards. And, in their emphasis on the ways the restructuring of employment in contemporary capitalism has made workers so isolated from one another both physically and through pressures to compete, they are, I believe, suggesting that it's much more difficult for people such as Abby and Ricky to find collective sources of support that might help them check their fall.

Yet the countervailing aspect of this structuring technique is crucially significant as well. As I've argued from the outset, the film is much more than an incitement to feel sorry for the Turners and others like them or to imagine, by extension, that feeling bad for them is a sufficient political response to the kinds of challenge that they face. We need to act on what we feel. Leaving a good tip for the next delivery driver who comes to our door is OK. And if we're ever reliant on the help of home care nurses, so too is adjusting our appointments so they can visit us at times much better suited to their personal and work schedules. These gestures do, at least, signify some recognition of how much we all depend on others and how important it is to think about what they need and want. For Loach and Laverty, this means listening hard to what they have to say, joining collective efforts that are pushing to make things better (document #7), and being willing at least to ask whether, ultimately, a world that is just, humane, and decent can be forged within capitalist constraints.

What is the relevance of the film to what's happening today in the Pittsburgh area, the U.S, and wider world?

I will be brief.

In the film itself, Loach and Laverty are carefully attentive to what's specific about the changing circumstances of ill-paid workers in the U.K. and more narrowly, about how these changes have been playing out for people from Newcastle and its immediate surroundings. However, they are well aware that, when they make a movie about such an important issue, they will be asked by at least some media outlets to elaborate on what they've done by giving interviews and participating in press conferences. And in these contexts, they have commonly been much more explicit than in the film about broad changes in the workings of contemporary capitalism and their implications for the lives that they portray.

In the process, they have often emphasized that they see these changes as affecting workers on a worldwide scale. The impacts are by no means the same in every setting partly because the kinds of labor that capitalists draw on vary a great deal but for Loach and Laverty there is evidence from all around the globe of dominant efforts to keep labor costs as low as possible,

to suppress organized resistance, and to circulate images and narratives encouraging acceptance if not enthusiastic embrace of what's happening (document #3). More specifically, they call attention to the rapid spread of the "so-called" gig economy and its ways of using labor, at whatever level of generality people have in mind when they invoke the term.

It is certainly the case that the shift to neoliberal policies and practices since the late 1970s has been pursued in quite similar ways in the U.K. and the U.S., though in relation to somewhat different versions of the state-regulated class compromise developed in the two countries following the Great Depression and the Second World War. It is also reasonable to argue that there are many more similarities than differences in the particular ways that capitalist businesses and supportive governments have promoted increases in precarious work and precarious lives, the pursuit of income through the performance of what are cast, justifiably or otherwise, as distinct "gigs," and the deployment and regulation of paid labor through the medium of websites and apps (document #4).

For those of us who live in Pittsburgh, the film may have even more immediate relevance than these broad national overlaps and commonalities suggest. This is because Newcastle is, in many respects, quite similar to Pittsburgh. As I indicate more fully in document #5, it's a regional center on a major river with a current population of just over 300,000. It went through an accelerating process of industrialization from the mid 19th. century to the 1960s, partly fueled by extensive coal mining in the surrounding area, and then through a wrenching period of deindustrialization from the late 1960s as key forms of manufacturing were moved abroad and the area's coal mines were closed down. Since the 1980s, it has experienced a "rebirth" organized around the office complexes of corporate HQs, educational institutions, digital technology, and cultural attractions but this "rebirth" has been marked by growing contrasts between prosperous professionals and many people struggling with ill-paid and irregular work, poverty, and ill health. Largely as a legacy of its industrial working class and the militancy of mining communities in the surrounding hills, it's seen by many people in the U.K., including many locals, as having a distinctive local culture that mixes toughness, generosity, and good humor, strong if not fanatical support for local sports teams, and a distinctive way of speaking that can, on first encounter, seem challenging to outsiders. Notably, a growing number of people in the city's working class are involved in various gig-related activities, either as their primary source of income or as a supplement to inadequate earnings from the other kinds of work they do. (There may also be significant *connections* between the two places, perhaps mediated by increasingly globalized markets for key resources and the increasing opportunities for capitalists to move investments freely to wherever they see the greatest economic and political advantage but I haven't had a chance to look into these as yet.)

The relevance of the film for people in Pittsburgh and beyond has, of course, been heightened considerably by the onset of the coronavirus crisis which, after significant delays, finally brought major lockdowns to Britain and much of the U.S. In the U.S., an incidental result of these lockdowns was rapid halt to planned public screenings of *Sorry We Missed You* only a week or so after it opened in New York. (In the U.K., it had been released some four months earlier, just as the holiday season was about to accentuate the importance of the care provided by workers

like Abby and, especially, to intensify people's reliance on delivery drivers like Ricky as well as all the other workers around the world involved in producing and distributing the goods that are given and received and processing the resulting waste.

It's been fascinating since the crisis came into focus in this country to see the sudden emergence of the category, "essential workers," and the ways in which mainstream politicians and the corporate-owned media have often referred to nurses and delivery drivers as primary exemplars of this newly elevated group. In such circumstances, *Sorry We Missed You* is clearly a resonant reminder to look more closely at the conditions under which delivery work, nursing in general, and home care nursing in particular are being delivered and how these conditions impact on people's home lives and the relationships that matter to them most. It's also, as I've argued, a powerful provocation to mobilize collectively in pursuit of whatever changes are necessary to make the lives and labors of the people who perform these kinds of work a great deal more secure

What's considerably less clear, however, is whether the political and media rhetoric will end up serving as a springboard for serious inquiry and worthwhile change or simply as an expedient smokescreen for the continuation or intensification of dominant strategies and the damage they create. Recent articles such as those in document #4 by Busby and Semuels raise serious concerns about what's happening to many of the workers now acknowledged as "essential" but others like the one by Shenker and Sainato in the same document make it clear that creative forms of pushback have been increasing for some time and may well be gaining new momentum in the context of the coronavirus crisis as the gap between rhetoric and reality hits home. Just like at the end of *Sorry We Missed You*, the key question is "What on earth should we all do next?"

(2) Gig economy as a term

The term "gig economy" (along with the allied term, "gig worker") has been **increasingly widely used** in English-language contexts since the mid-1990s. However, people employ the term in a **variety of ways** and some, like Ken Loach, the director of *Sorry We Missed You*, and Zeitgeist Films, its distributor, prefer to talk of the "so-called" gig economy, implying that most if not all uses of the term are inadequate to the complexities it is meant to capture.

To get a handle on the variation and the cautions of people such as Loach, I find it helpful to tease out **three main uses** of the term, ranging from broad to narrow.

(a) Very broadly, it is used to refer to the growing prevalence of **insecure work** and, more generally **insecure lives**, especially in parts of the world where, between the 1940s and the 1970s, many but not all workers had managed to obtain relatively secure, reasonably paid, life-long employment and decent benefits from their employers, the state, or both. According to this narrative, there has been a marked growth since the 1980s in jobs with inadequate pay, insufficient hours, or both, a marked reduction in benefits, and a related growth in individual and household debt; **precarious work** has increasingly produced **precarious lives**. This is, I think, what Loach and Zeitgeist have in mind when they refer to the "so-called" gig economy.

(b) More narrowly, the term is used to refer to the growing prevalence of arrangements in which people earn money by ***performing "gigs,"*** that is tasks that are treated as individual and separate. In the U.S., organizations that orchestrate the supply and use of labor in this way want to characterize the people who perform it as "independent contractors." In the U.K., they want to treat them as "self-employed" (like Ricky) or, if necessary, as (casual) "workers" but not "employees"; this is linked to the growing use of "zero-hour contracts" in which people like Abby are effectively on call and paid only for time they spend on the tasks they are assigned. Employers are thought to favor such arrangements when feasible because they absolve them of all or most responsibilities to the people who perform the work, transfer the risks and costs to these workers, and expand disciplinary influence over the labor they provide. Growing numbers of workers are critiquing and challenging gig-based employment for the same reasons.

(c) Slightly differently, the term "gig economy" is used to refer to situations in which the provision and conduct of a growing amount of work (however it's officially classified) is organized and carefully regulated through ***websites or apps***, especially ones deployed by powerful businesses that claim they are simply acting as "digital matchmakers" between people who are offering labor or goods and the people who are seeking them. These businesses are sometimes called "platform companies," leading some analysts to suggest that we are seeing the increasing significance not just of "gig work" but of a **"platform economy"**. There is concern in some quarters that has come to be dominated by a small number of giant corporations.

(3) Reorganizing capitalism (relate to documents #2 and #5 and the videos listed in document #6)

The changes that terms such as "the gig economy" are used to grasp, adequately or otherwise, are embedded in much **broader shits in the workings of capitalism** since the late 1970s. Characterizing these shifts in a single page is impossible but I'll give it a shot, focusing mainly on key terms and concepts relevant to developments affecting the U.S. and the U.K. If nothing else, my version of the story should complement the one Lisa Frank sketched during the live discussion and clarify the references to neoliberalism in a couple of the videos in document #6.

Owners and controllers of capital faced **profound crises at a global scale in the 1930s** as a result of the Great Depression and the growing power of organized labor and anti-imperial movements. In the richest industrial countries, they responded by making **partial concessions to workers** -- from the New Deal onwards in the U.S. and via the adoption of welfare-state arrangements in NW Europe after WWII, though the benefits fell primarily to white men. By the late 1960s, capitalists faced **a new round of crises** as rates of profit fell, political and cultural challenges grew, and signs of dangerous damage to the environment increased.

After trying out a range of responses, leading capitalists focused from the **late 1970s onwards** on **refortifying their wealth and power** by abandoning earlier concessions and adopting much more aggressive corporate and governmental strategies (while actively heightening the environmental dangers). The U.S. under Reagan and the U.K under Thatcher were at the forefront of these moves, now often referred to under the broad heading of **neoliberalism**.

Corporate efforts to **refortify rates of profits** depended heavily on **cutting labor costs**, a goal pursued by strategies such outsourcing, subcontracting, offshoring, and (as in document #2) employing labor in ways that minimized contractual commitments and wage-enhancing benefits. They also involved **increasing the demand** for corporate products via both the intensification and globalization of direct and indirect advertising. And they involved **expanding avenues for the pursuit of profit**, for example in finance (speculation but also lending people money to buy products they couldn't otherwise acquire) and by selling services, including care of the sick and elderly, that had previously been done "for love," especially by women.

These efforts were **reinforced politically** by inducing states and international agencies to make **major changes to the "rules of the game"**: *freeing up* the transnational mobility of capital and corporate-produced goods, *deregulating* businesses (including in finance), *privatizing* public services and holdings, *cutting taxes* on corporations and wealthy individuals, *slashing state-based social supports*, and *heightening the repression of workers* by attacking unions and intensifying the punitive policing of poor neighborhoods and ill-paid immigrants.

Finally, while impeding resistance to these changes by fragmenting labor processes, promoting servitude through debt, and repressing unions and communal forms of solidarity, they relied just as heavily on a **cultural offensive**. Partly illustrated by Maloney's opening summary of "the company line," this has been designed to generate both **overall consent** to the neoliberal project and **"desirable" attitudes towards everyday activities** such as laboring, consuming, operating politically, and organizing family life. For Loach and Laverty, telling stories that counter this cultural offensive is a key step in encouraging people to challenge the economic and political dimensions of the neoliberal project and, ultimately, of the capitalist project as whole, especially as crises that threaten all of us come increasingly into view.

(4) Gig economy in practice

Links to just a few of the many short, accessible pieces on the **workings of the gig economy** in the U.K. and the U.S. that have appeared over the last two years. The ones by Busby, Semuels, and Sainato address the **impacts of the coronavirus crisis** on gig economy workers at particular moments since the crisis became apparent in the two countries. Conditions continue to shift rapidly so it's good to look for up-to-date reports that can supplement the ones here.

U.K.

- **Nicole Kobie** -- What is the gig economy and why is it so controversial? (September 2018) – Wired -- https://www.wired.co.uk/article/what-is-the-gig-economy-meaning-definition-why-is-it-called-gig-economy

- **Larry Elliott** -- Some praise our gig economy flexibility. I call it exploitation (April 2018) -- https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/26/gig-economy-flexibility-exploitation-record-employment-low-wages-zero-hours

- **Jack Shenker** -- Strike 2.0: how gig economy workers are using tech to fight back (August 2019) -- https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/31/the-new-resistance-how-gig-economy-workers-are-fighting-back

- **Mattha Busby** -- 'The government has abandoned us': gig economy workers struggle to cope (March 2020) -- https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/mar/17/the-government-has-abandoned-us-gig-economy-workers-struggle-to-cope

U.S.

- **IRL School & Aspen Institute** – Gig Economy Data Hub: The Basics (2020) -- https://www.gigeconomydata.org/basics

- **Robert Reich** -- The gig is up: America's booming economy is built on hollow promises (June 2019) -- https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jun/02/gig-economy-us-trump-uber-california-robert-reich

- **Alana Semuels** – "It's a Race to the Bottom": The coronavirus is cutting into gig worker incomes as the newly jobless flood apps (May 2020) -- https://time.com/5836868/gig-economy-coronavirus/

- **Michael Sainato** -- Strikes erupt as US essential workers demand protection amid pandemic (May 2020) -- https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/19/strikes-erupt-us-essential-workers-demand-better-protection-amid-pandemic

(5) Newcastle and Pittsburgh

The film is set in Newcastle-on-Tyne, a city in the northeast of England. (Loach's previous film, *I, Daniel Blake,* was also set there.) Newcastle is, in many respects, quite similar to Pittsburgh. Knowing about the similarities as well as a few significant differences may make it easier to consider the film's relevance to what's happening today in Pittsburgh and the surrounding area. (Loach and others talk about why they chose Newcastle as a setting and what they like about it in the video of the Cannes press conference that is listed in document #6. The discussion begins at the 6 minute, 46 seconds mark and continues for just over three minutes.)

- Newcastle is a **regional center on a major river**
- Like Pittsburgh, it has a **current population of just over 300,000**

- It has a **history of population rises and declines** that, while less extreme than those of Pittsburgh, reflect a similar relationship to:
    - **accelerating industrialization**, especially from the mid 19th. century to the 1960s, linked to extensive coal mining in the surrounding area as well as nearby iron and steel mills, though in Newcastle's case the key industry was shipbuilding
    - **deindustrialization** from the late 1960s as key forms of production were moved abroad and the area's coal mines were closed down
    - **an uneven "rebirth"** since the 1980s organized around the headquarters of major corporations, education, digital technology, and cultural attractions
- During its years as an industrial center, it developed a **large blue-collar working class**, much of which was unionized
- The transition to service activities since the 1980s has produced **growing socioeconomic contrasts** between prosperous professionals and many people struggling with ill-paid and irregular work, poverty, and ill health, with growing numbers involved in gig-work of various kinds

- Largely as a legacy of its industrial working class and the militancy of mining communities in the surrounding hills, the Newcastle area is seen by many people in the UK (and sometimes stereotyped) as having **a distinctive local culture** marked by
    - a special **name for people**, "Geordies," that is proudly embraced by local residents, especially those born and raised in the area's working class
    - a **down-to-earth attitude** mixing toughness, generosity, and good humor
    - strong if not **fanatical support for local pro sports teams**, especially the soccer team, Newcastle United
    - **ritualized rivalries with cities nearby** that have similar histories, often played out around their competing sports teams
    - a **distinctive local accent** and turns of phrase that can, on first encounter, seem challenging to some outsiders

- One of the few major **differences** is that Newcastle has **never had a significant black population**; currently, it constitutes about 2% of the city's total

(6) Behind the scenes

Links to videos in which Ken Loach, the director of *Sorry We Missed You*, and Paul Laverty, the screenwriter, talk about their reasons for making a film about labor in the so-called gig economy and its impact on family ties. In the fourth, they are joined by the film's producer, Rebecca O'Brien, and its four lead actors.

Loach, Laverty, and O'Brien are well aware that making a movie about such an important issue will lead to them being asked by at least some media outlets to participate in interviews and press conferences addressing what they've done. In these contexts, they have commonly been much more explicit than in the film itself about broad changes in the workings of contemporary capitalism and their implications for the lives that they portray. Videos such as the ones below thus complement and amplify the movie in important ways.

- **Cannes 2019: Ken Loach takes a dig at gig economy** -- 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1t6pBP2Jb9k – first 8 mins.

- **Paul Laverty on Sorry We Missed You** -- 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jV6-e04L96s – 10 mins.

- **Ken Loach, Paul Laverty – The idea capitalism can be regulated is ridiculous** – on *Sorry We Missed You* – 2019 -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDzj36D_8Lo– 28 mins.

- **Sorry We Missed You – Press Conference – Cannes 2019** – 2019 – Loach, Laverty, O'Brien, and the four lead actors -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfuLdV2Zvco – 45 mins.

(7) Pushing back

Sorry We Missed You does not present any examples of **organized collective challenge** to the rise of "the so-called gig economy" (document #2) and the broader processes in which it is embedded (#3). However, as I suggest in #3, director Loach and screenwriter Laverty see the film, in itself, as a kind of **collective challenge on the cultural front**. And, as I suggest in #1, their story mixes a sense of remorseless decline with **counter-images** of the interpersonal solidarity, mutual care, and creative resistance from which more expansive forms of collective challenge might emerge. Moreover, in researching and making the film, they worked closely with several **groups involved in organized forms of pushback**. Here, I list just a few such groups in the U.K. and then a few I've learned about in the U.S. There are sure to be others you can search for if you're so inclined.

U.K.

- **IWGB – Independent Workers Union of Great Britain** – https://iwgb.org.uk/en/page/about-us
- **UVW -- United Voices of the World**, the IWGB's sister union – see Shenker's article listed in document #4 -- https://www.uvwunion.org.uk/about
- **GMB -- General Municipal Boilermakers** – much more wide-ranging than the name suggests -- https://www.gmb.org.uk/what-we-do
- **Social Workers Union** – part of British Association of Social Workers -- https://www.basw.co.uk/social-workers-union/what-we-do

U.S.

- **SEIU Healthcare PA** – where Lisa Frank is the Executive Vice President for Strategic Campaigns -- http://www.seiuhcpa.org/about/
- **National Domestic Workers Alliance** -- https://www.domesticworkers.org
- **Delivery drivers**
    - workers at UPS and UPS Freight are represented by the **Teamsters** -- https://teamster.org/divisions/package -- Pittsburgh area locals have apparently been pushing the national leadership to take a harder line
    - workers at none of the other main delivery companies have union representation nationally though there are recurrent efforts to organize locally
- **Rideshare drivers**
    - **Gig Workers Rising** – https://gigworkersrising.org/get-informed/
    - **Rideshare Drivers United** -- https://drivers-united.org

Both countries -- Wildcat strikes, walkouts, and other protests by "gig workers" over working conditions, low pay, and lack of safety protections are increasingly common, especially amidst the coronavirus crisis – see, for example, Sainato's article listed in #4

(8) Ken Loach's work

Ken Loach is one of the world's most widely acclaimed directors. He was born on June 17, 1936, in the English midlands. He made his first works for the BBC in 1964 and has since directed more than 30 feature-length dramas for British television, 6 documentaries, and 27 films for theatrical distribution. (See *Wikipedia* for a complete list.) He has worked with renowned screenwriter, Paul Laverty, on every fiction film he has made since 1996. A fascinating 2016 documentary, *Versus: The Life and Films of Ken Loach*, can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fD82aXgu9uM. It's 94 mins. long.

Loach has won significantly more major awards at Cannes, the world's most prestigious film festival, than any other director in history. He is one of only eight directors or directorial teams to have twice won the Palme d'Or, the festival's highest prize, and he is one of only two three-time winners of the Jury Prize, its second most important award. He is also the only director whose works appear in the British Film Institute's (BFI's) top ten lists of both the greatest British films of the 20th. century and the best British TV programs of the 20th. century.

This is a selection of Loach's best-known works. Unless otherwise noted, the pieces are fictional films made for theatrical release. I recommend them all, though some once-topical pieces may have become a bit dated. I use an asterisk to identify personal favorites.

- *Up the Junction* (1965) – TV – big impact on debates about legalizing abortion
- **Cathy Come Home* (1966) – TV – #2 on the BFI TV 100 -- huge impact on debates about homelessness
- **Kes* (1969) – #7 on the BFI's list of *greatest British films of the 20th. Century* -- major impact on debates about the education system
- **Family Life* (1971) – originally released in U.S. as *Wednesday's Child*
- *Days of Hope* -- four-part miniseries (1975) -- TV
- **The Price of Coal* -- two parts (1977) – TV
- *Hidden Agenda* (1990) – Jury Prize, Cannes Film Festival
- **Riff-Raff* (1991)
- **Raining Stones* (1993) -- Jury Prize, Cannes Film Festival
- **Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994) – devastating but brilliant
- **Land and Freedom* (1995)
- *My Name Is Joe* (1998)
- *Bread and Roses* (2000) – his only film set in the U.S.; about Justice for Janitors
- *Sweet Sixteen* (2002)
- *McLibel* (2005) – documentary
- *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006) – Palme d'Or, Cannes Film Festival
- *The Angels' Share* (2012) -- Jury Prize, Cannes Film Festival
- **The Spirit of '45* (2013) -- documentary
- **I, Daniel Blake* (2016) -- Palme d'Or, Cannes Film Festival – major impact on debates across Europe about cuts to social supports for people in need
- **Sorry We Missed You* (2019)