

THE RETURN OF MISERABILISM: RICHARD BILLINGHAM'S *RAY & LIZ*

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Family Portrait: Liz, Richard, Jason, and Ray in Richard Billingham's "cine-memoir" *Ray & Liz*. Photo credit: Rob Baker Ashton

The photographs by Richard Billingham collected in his book *Ray's a Laugh* and in the expanded compilation of his

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work, *Richard Billingham*, document a Birmingham, England, family home of hugs and fists, bloody noses and decorated cakes, drink and jigsaw puzzles, spilled frozen peas and food stains dripping down the walls.¹ These images brought Billingham international recognition when they were first displayed at the notorious Sensation exhibition alongside the work of so-called YBAs (Young British Artists) like

Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1997 and then at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York in 1999. Recently, Billingham has returned to his family history—and, inevitably, to his own photographs—as the source material for his debut dramatic film, the extraordinary “cine-memoir” *Ray & Liz* (2018).

The film creates a wormhole in time between two eras of Tory austerity, since its Thatcher-era setting rhymes with the contemporary Conservative evisceration of the social care system. While Billingham himself describes the timing of the film’s release as “incidental,” he does note the specific resonance of these historical loops, which are both political and personal: “If you go outside London,” he said, “it feels like Thatcherism all over again.”² Alongside the repetition of political crisis is a parallel cultural resonance: the return of “miserabilism” as an artistic sensibility of despair and protest that connects the eras.

This often pejorative label for art that bathes in pain is a bit of an English specialty, associated as it has been with perennial iterations of the homegrown “kitchen sink” drama of working-class life—a tradition with which Billingham’s work has usually been associated by critics and reviewers. In the arch Pet Shop Boys song “Miserablism,” released in 1990, the term was teased as a “new philosophy” with “a message to depress.” In fact, miserabilism has always been a historically multifarious phenomenon. In its original artistic context of Modernist European painting, the word was used to describe Isidre Nonell’s late-nineteenth-century paintings of the poor and marginalized that rejected the “picturesqueness or religious sentimentalism” that encouraged “identification with the infamies of hardship.”³ The reaction against miserabilism, meanwhile, has always accused it of wallowing in pessimism for its own sake, sometimes leading to political paralysis. For David Roediger, writing of the contemporary American cultural context but drawing on the classic critique of miserabilism in the writing of André Breton, it represents a “system” in which “the production of misery doesn’t necessarily yield resistance. It might just be an attraction and addiction to misery.”⁴ Surveying the bleak chic trend of British cinema from the 1990s, especially contrasting the nihilistic aggression of Danny Boyle’s *Trainspotting* (1996) and Gary Oldman’s *Nil by Mouth* (1997) with the more layered portrayals of working-class life in Mike Leigh’s *Secrets & Lies* (1996) and Ken Loach’s *My Name Is Joe* (1998), one can see both polarities of miserabilism at work.

Despair might be a luxury and miserabilism a privilege in many cases, but these accusations clearly miss the mark when applied to Billingham’s work. When art grows out of poverty along with its creator, its connection with misery

inevitably seems less sensationalized and truer to the life it records. Billingham’s images of his family avoid the more obvious traps of miserabilism in part because of their personal status as autobiography and family portrait—mainly of his alcoholic father, Ray, and his casually violent mother, Liz. In the best-known image from his first book, Ray is frozen midfall in a drunken stumble, eyes closed. Ray’s dirty white sneakers lead the eye to the grit on the floor, the color of which, in turn, echoes the brown, gray, and once-white shades of the grubby curtains, while the faded green wall-paper clashes grimly with all of the above. This room’s a perfect mess—but it also bears the traces of whatever happened that day. It’s not an exoticized “cesspool” or a commentary on what’s “wrong with society”; it’s just home.

As for *Ray & Liz*, the film production reportedly shot Billingham’s childhood memories in his family’s former flat in Cradley Heath, outside of Birmingham. The film in some ways takes up where *Ray’s a Laugh* left off, providing narrative continuity and a dramatic extension of stories previously glimpsed in snapshots or shorter video projects. The cinema allows for time to pass in longer stretches, of course, compared to photographs. And the switch in medium has allowed Billingham to structure his film as a series of tableaux transpiring over a longer period, taking in a number of disasters that lead Ray and Liz to lose custody of one of their sons to the state and, eventually, to their separation from one another as a couple. Viewed as stills, many of the images from the new film could be compared side by side with the early photos. Yet despite the production’s emphasis on authenticity, and however meticulous these reconstructions of the past might feel, the overlays of scripted narrative, production design, and performance provide additional layers of complexity that break new ground in the artist’s work.



Billingham captures his father’s fall in *Ray’s a Laugh* (1996).

Courtesy of Richard Billingham/Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

These phases of Billingham's career are connected and looped together—emotionally by what feels like repetition trauma, and aesthetically by their challenges to the ways in which art portrays poor people. There is an implacable resistance to easy interpretation in Billingham's images. The artist's work, like the artist himself, does not "represent" poverty; rather, it emerges from it. *Ray & Liz* inhabits the poignant boredom and repetitiveness of being poor, like the brothers in the film who subsist almost entirely on a giant jar of a pinkish substance—pickled cabbage?—smearred on white bread. When, later in the film, Liz shows up to borrow money from Ray despite their separation, the scene plays out as neither an act of generosity nor one of gratitude; it's just what you do when your family needs the rest of your Department of Social Security payment, not an indication of romantic rapprochement or of any particularly noxious form of grifting.

Ray & Liz shares half of its title and much of its subject matter with its predecessor, the book *Ray's a Laugh*. Both the movie and the still photos depict what Billingham notably calls his "close family," emphasizing their intimacy

and refusing to deny them love.⁵ In the film's opening episode, which frames the entire narrative as a series of memories viewed retrospectively, Ray (played by Justin Salinger as a younger dad and by Patrick Romer in old age) lives in a lonely, flyblown room in a tower block overlooking the city's lack of splendor. He has large plastic bottles of brown home brew delivered to his door daily by a racist friend. As the film's narrative jigsaw pieces assemble, it slowly becomes clear that Liz (Ella Smith/Deirdre Kelly) has left Ray. In Billingham's photos, Liz is tender to household pets (and beams as she weans a kitten) but violent with Ray; in a photograph in *Ray's a Laugh*, her fists are raised and both parents' noses are bloodied. In an episode of the film set many years earlier, Liz finds their babysitter, a relative named "Soft" Lawrence or Lol (Tony Way), passed out drunk and having vomited colorfully on her couch. She proceeds to beat his head with her shoe.

Completing this portrait is Billingham's little brother, Jason (Callum Slater/Joshua Millard-Lloyd), who is taken into foster care at the age of eleven (changed to age ten in the film) by the state. The film's most sustained, troubling, and



Ray (Justin Salinger) alone in *Ray & Liz*. Photo credit: Rob Baker Ashton

brilliant episode depicts the days leading up to Jason's removal from the home by the social services. Jason nearly dies of the cold after sleeping rough in a friend's family's back-garden shed because he's too scared to walk home and too embarrassed to bother anyone. Then there's Richard (Jacob Tuton/Sam Plant), the artist himself, who appears as a minor character in the film, requesting that he be taken away from his parents along with his brother.

What makes *Ray & Liz* so remarkable is Billingham's autobiographical honesty, his strong aversion to direct political messaging, and his deliberate rejection of sentimental notions about the special decency or courage of the poor. On the contrary, *Ray & Liz* presents two parents who, while not vicious, are simply not very interested in the children who share their house. When Liz administers the beating to Lol, she's not overly concerned that there's a baby in the house, and the viewer surmises that the reason why she and Ray have left Lol in charge is to get blitzed. Lol seems kinder and milder—his house provides a refuge later in the film when the electricity gets shut off midway through a television broadcast of *The Children of the Corn* (Fritz Kiersch, 1984) in Ray and Liz's house—but he, too, proves to be a useless parental substitute when he's had a few too many. In the process of dramatizing these scenes, Billingham is also demolishing conventional social realism by making other depictions of poverty on film seem out-of-date, way too clean and tidy and nice.

Billingham has not simply re-created his childhood home in this film, nor has he simply used cinema to bring his still photographs to life, however painstaking the care and exquisite the acting. On one level, the film shares his photographer's sensibility of narrative ellipses, lacunae, and collage-like accumulations of connected images. But Billingham's cinematic style is distinct: the film has an intriguingly different texture from his early photographs, which often presented things as blurry or out of focus, even accidental looking. Billingham has claimed that his photos had to be formally "fucked up" in a fashion as seemingly "incompetent" as the people they depict, the people closest to him.

As a result of this quality in the photos, Kieran Cashell argues, one "key [to] the formal awkwardness is to be found in Billingham's desire to render the medium as transparent as possible in order to reduce the anaesthetizing effects of form and make the images more immediate, more visceral and more violent."⁶ Although he does not invoke the term "miserabilism," Cashell finds in this aspect of 1990s British art an answer to the accusation of "cultural tourism" that was made against many YBAs, instead pointing out the "new prominence" of artists from working-class backgrounds in the "art school generation."⁷ Cashell argues persuasively that

Billingham successfully resists the tourist gaze by implicating and incorporating himself in the social environment he is depicting. Gilda Williams similarly suggests that Billingham's "proximity to the situation saves it from turning voyeuristic, in images so packed with information, patterns and emotion they seem to be holding up against the tide of the family's imminent collapse."⁸

This shared mode of analysis of Billingham's photography feels apt to *Ray & Liz*, yet the film transforms both memories and photos into something equally fascinating but more richly confected and complexly layered—an attribute of narrative cinema that makes the obvious points of continuity in his work somewhat misleading. The formal aesthetic complexity of *Ray & Liz* exists in part due to Billingham's collaboration with cinematographer Daniel Landin (*Under the Skin* [Jonathan Glazer, 2013]), who conjures nuance out of the mundane and the vile with deliberative and loving care. In a recent interview, Billingham related his interest in "shapes and textures" to the "analogue" qualities of the 16mm film that was used on the production.⁹ The film's unrushed sensibility conveys a relationship between image and time that is inevitably more cinematic and less photographic. In some ways it recalls the trashed poetics of Lynne Ramsay's Glaswegian estates in *Ratcatcher* (1999) and the antifashion statements of the Oban sections of Ramsay's *Morvern Callar* (2002) more than the intentionally hasty ethos of his own photographs.

Ray & Liz has been compared with the films of Andrea Arnold in their portrayal of working-class English life. Billingham describes being influenced by Arnold's use of 4:3 ratio framing to emulate the cramped and trapped lives of her characters (who share some traits with his family) in *Fish Tank* (2009).¹⁰ Another potential point of



Richard Billingham (left) on the set of *Ray & Liz*, alongside director of photography Daniel Landin.

Photo credit: Rob Baker Ashton.

comparison involves these filmmakers' use of animals as significant elements in their pictures: the title of Billingham's early documentary video *Fishtank* (1998) and that of Arnold's *Fish Tank*, for example, both imply trapped lives in which the daily routine has become confined and circular. Yet Arnold's work relies on symbolism in a far more straightforward—and, at times, obvious—fashion. The white horse found living in the wasteland of East London by her protagonist, Mia (Katie Jarvis), in *Fish Tank* clearly reflects not only Mia's inner feelings but also her situation in life. Billingham's use of animals is more idiosyncratic, less redolent of heavy metaphorical content, and simply strange. In *Ray & Liz*, Jason sees a giraffe, most likely in the Dudley Zoo near Billingham's childhood home in Cradley Heath. Later in the film, he passes his parents in the park pushing a pram with a rabbit in it rather than a baby. While clearly poetic and surreal, the rabbit arguably operates more like a synecdoche than a symbol, suggesting the family's experience as a whole rather than mirroring any of the characters' interior subjectivity.

The most obvious distinction between *Ray & Liz* and Billingham's photographs involves his use of actors, especially since different actors are deployed to play these real-life personages at different ages. A further complexity involves the choice of casting for "Older Liz," since that role is played (with astonishing creative force) by Deirdre Kelly, who was herself discovered and made famous as "White Dee" in the controversial reality-TV series *Benefits Street* (Channel 4, 2014–15). It's not so much that this choice causes *Ray & Liz* to feel burdened by celebrity as that the intertextuality inevitably provokes viewers to ask themselves pointed questions about the voyeurism endemic to both the portrayal and the consumption of poverty, whether as entertainment or art.

Contrasted with Billingham's early work, then, the film operates in a rather different, more reference-laden zone. Like their photographic precursors, the consciously crafted memories represented in *Ray & Liz* are utterly devoid of sentimentality. In addition, the film subverts both the narrative structure of commercial cinema and the message-driven social commentary one typically expects from more overtly political approaches to working-class subject matter, such as in Ken Loach's critical depiction of the social welfare system in *I, Daniel Blake* (2016), among others.

The carefully composed formal qualities of *Ray & Liz*, such as the retrospective scene of vomit on the couch, serve as a reminder that Billingham's photographs started out as studies for paintings. Those photographs, in turn, were often compared to cinema by critics grappling with their narrative power. Gilda Williams's more general remarks connecting

British photography of the 1990s with the power of the popular describe Billingham's media-spanning impulses well:

Achieving the Picture, the essence of real circumstances, is no longer the imperative of photo-based art, and so it can experiment laterally, borrowing unselfconsciously from psychoanalysis, from political imagery, advertising, autobiography, and from traditional art forms of sculpture and painting. It can borrow from film, it can even borrow from the movie picture.¹¹

Here, Williams presciently identifies what will later become Billingham's "lateral" moves from autobiography to painting to photography to video art to cinema, as well as delineating in advance the overlapping mutual borrowing between media that marks *Ray & Liz*. Williams also usefully sidesteps the entire issue of the film medium's claim to "realism" as a measure of its supposedly indexical relationship with the actual world, recognizing instead that the more interesting problems relate to artistic vision. Billingham's photographs need not be elevated above his film as "more real" simply because they are less carefully planned, nor should *Ray & Liz* be considered to surpass *Ray's a Laugh* simply because fiction is (perhaps) less liable to the charge of exploitation leveled at photographs.

Becca Voelcker's summary of *Ray & Liz* as a "nuanced memoir that eschews melodrama" is valuable.¹² The film's fractured structure and jumps across time, as well as its relentless focus on abjection, feel more closely related to contemporary European cinema than classic studio entertainment. More than anything else, the cinematic comparisons that have been made by art critics confronted with Billingham's photos—such as Williams's perplexing references to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)—serve as a reminder of the extent to which the photographs resist meaning, how difficult they make it to say anything about them at all, despite their immediacy, simplicity, poignancy, and lasting impact on the imagination.

Billingham's film's recurrent focus on his autobiography, his DIY ethos, and his deeply personal family portraiture couldn't be further from either cinematic high modernist style or meditative absorption in genre pictures. For this reason, *Ray & Liz* feels more embedded in contemporary visual-arts culture than in clear cinematic lineages outside the hard-hitting Free Cinema and British New Wave pictures like Lorenza Mazzetti's *Together* (1956) and Tony Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961). Clio Barnard's *The Arbor* (2010), one of their most rigorous inheritors, would seem closest to *Ray & Liz*, as it, too, brilliantly mixes real life with fictionalized elements to present playwright Andrea Dunbar's life on the



Ray & Liz's formal qualities on display in this portrait of "Soft" Lawrence or "Lol." Photo credit: Rob Baker Ashton

Buttershaw estate in Bradford, England. Yet Barnard deploys distancing effects, such as actors lip-synching to recordings of documentary subjects, while Billingham presents his narrative and chronological ruptures through script and actors in order to deepen immersion, not to distance the audience.

Billingham's work derives some of its greatest power from its reflections on the family he could not help loving as a child and remembering unceasingly as an adult; for years on end, after all, one's parents are one's only frame of reference. In this sense, Billingham's work thus retains its resonance with larger contemporary currents in art and literature, such as the intimate wreck of Tracey Emin's famously derelict and realer-than-real *My Bed* (1999) or the "autofiction" of books filled with remarkably private details that are presented as fiction but create the strong impression of having been drawn directly from the author's actual life, such as the

work of Annie Ernaux.¹³ Meanwhile, Billingham's focus on lowbrow localism links him to one of the literary sources for British New Wave films, Shelagh Delaney. An autofiction pioneer who should be recognized as such, her plays and stories about life in Salford became the basis for both *A Taste of Honey*, for which she wrote the script, and Lindsay Anderson's short *The White Bus* (1967).

Something akin to miserabilism—with all its attendant problems and paradoxes—seems to recur in English filmmaking in a perennial attempt to renew focus on areas that the London media prefers to forget, and then to exoticize and sentimentalize in a clumsy rush to "understand" the regions and people who have been "left behind" or simply left out, as if they are the abandoned denizens of a remote island shipwreck. Cashell argues persuasively that Billingham's images reject the "aesthetic disinterestedness" of the "tourist

going native” that too often accompanies these English media rituals, whether well-meaning or otherwise, from the British New Wave to reality TV.¹⁴ The sudden attention to the existence of the poor during moments such as the current Brexit debacle—when, according to new metrics, over four million children are in poverty—raises miserabilism to the level of entertainment without attempting to resolve any of its problematic aspects.¹⁵ This is an issue that goes beyond making deprivation into a consumable spectacle, for it imposes the simultaneous and contradictory demands that poor people be both more noble and more debauched than the middle-class spectators looking in on their lives.

The postwar polarities of English ideology regarding the poor specify either uplift through individual effort and Thatcherite enterprise on the one hand, or the cradle-to-grave nanny state on the other. Both come in for an implicit but very rigorous drubbing in Billingham’s work, which instead highlights the needs and limits of both family and state. Welfare and child-protection services neither hinder nor help this family while, equally, nobody strives successfully to escape from their traps. Billingham himself could provide a possible exception, but he chooses to leave this aspect very much out of frame. His work might be seen, then, as riddled with a very particular form of survivor’s guilt: the compulsion to retell and repeat the stories from those rooms, rather than to concoct any cheering tale about social mobility through the arts.

At first glance Billingham’s early photographs and debut feature film seem to inhabit Philip Larkin’s famously profane and universal maxim about all parents (“They fuck you up”), but Billingham stands as an anti-Larkinian figure in English culture because of his refusal to distance himself from his past via irony, the great national masking power. Billingham’s photographs and films present an expanse of wounding openness that is anti-Romantic and antipastoral to the core, yet at the same time is devoid of modern, postwar cynicism. The text on the back cover of *Ray’s a Laugh* puts things in perspective in Billingham’s idiosyncratic tone:

My younger brother Jason was taken into care when he was 11 but is now back with Ray and Liz again. Recently he became a father. Ray says Jason is unruly. Jason says Ray’s a laugh but doesn’t want to be like him.¹⁶

In addition to containing the title of Billingham’s later film, the passage also conveys what his work is about—or, rather, what it’s not about. An impression of irreducibility marks *Ray & Liz* as a picture that cannot be assimilated easily into marketable categories or an engine of political messaging. The artist himself rejects the reading of his work as deliberately political in any fashion at all. As he wrote in 1996,

“It is certainly not my intention to shock, to offend, sensationalise, be political or whatever.”¹⁷

Nonetheless, it is compelling that two key phases in Billingham’s work coincide with two critical periods in contemporary English politics. In both cases, years of Conservative government welfare cuts and abrupt changes to economic planning and social services have been linked to increased poverty and inequality. When first displayed at *Sensation*, Billingham’s photos spoke to the larger cultural backdrop against which the failure of John Major’s 1997 election campaign had unfolded just a few months earlier. Not without reason, the public found Major’s slogan—“Britain’s Booming”—unconvincing. Billingham, in depicting his family, equally depicted the years of Conservative rule through a West Midlands lens linked with the end of steady manufacturing jobs as a postwar employment staple.¹⁸ It’s far too simplistic to say that Ray’s lack of work drove him to drink, but losing his job as a machinist clearly was part of what first caused him to make alcohol his full-time occupation.¹⁹



“Britain is Booming”? Liz (Ella Smith) kills time in *Ray & Liz*.

Photo credit: Rob Baker Ashton

Today, despite its clearly grounded historical setting, *Ray & Liz* resonates with the current moment in multiple ways. Life outside the city center in London has become increasingly precarious in many parts of the United Kingdom as a result of nearly a decade of relentless government austerity. With local budgets slashed, councils amalgamated, youth centers shuttered, many hospital and social care systems in crisis, provincial high streets in seemingly terminal decline, and working families increasingly relying on food banks, Brexit Britain often feels broken in all the same ways Billingham was portraying two decades earlier. Birmingham voters divided nearly fifty-fifty on the referendum to leave the European Union, making Billingham's hometown an overly tidy synecdoche for Brexit, and thus for the process whereby a larger cycle of political division fueled by the right-wing media successfully pinned the blame on immigration for the damage actually inflicted by austerity.

In the opening sequence of *Ray & Liz*, the friend who brings Ray his home brew mutters nonsense about “the blacks” and gets no argument from Ray. Another parallel between eras may be inferred from this casual racism—a throwback embedded in a previous iteration of xenophobia about immigrants. Somewhat like the European citizens who arrived in Britain to work in hospitals and in the trades during the era of “freedom of movement” under the aegis of the European Union in recent years, the earlier migration of the so-called Windrush generation from the Caribbean nations of the Commonwealth filled badly needed roles, especially in manufacturing and industry (many in Birmingham) during the years when Ray would have been a younger working man. The historical analogy is imperfect, but it illuminates the perennial process by which self-inflicted societal wounds are often ascribed to “foreigners,” making Ray's friend a corollary to today's hard-right Brexit voter.

Billingham provides his audience with a pointed contrast to these perennial English prejudices as a counterbalance within the film. Jason's biracial friend Tony and his family save the boy from nearly freezing to death during his night of camping in their back-garden shed. As Tony's mother rubs his feet back to life, *Ray & Liz* offers its one rare glimpse of parental tenderness. Jason says he's okay, but audiences know, as does Billingham, that it isn't true.

If *Ray & Liz*'s lack of uplift feels essentially British, the film also presents serious challenges to English miserabilism insofar as it rejects aestheticized pessimism as a privileged pose for which people in real trouble simply cannot afford the time. In fact, Billingham resists all default settings about the specific forms of misery he depicts, since neither the individual nor the family nor the state provides any durable

answers to the questions posed by his film. *Ray & Liz* also breaks the unspoken accord that links political reactionaries in power with well-meaning liberals in the cultural industry: he confronts the entire premise of the deserving poor, and everything the term implies. Most conservatives and progressives now secretly agree about this notion of submitting working-class people to a sanitizing process of moral scrutiny before they are permitted to collect their benefits—or allowed to star as protagonists in films designed to empower the disenfranchised. Perfecting the poor? Billingham is not having it.

One of the more obviously disturbing connections between the eras of Thatcher and Brexit is their shared collective mythology about personal and national goodness guaranteeing positive outcomes for the deserving on the one hand, and a moral justification for removing social safety nets for the unworthy on the other. As the Iron Lady once asserted, “There is no such thing as an entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation.”²⁰ This influential sentiment—popular on both sides of the Atlantic despite its ideological absurdity—implies that equality of opportunity is not influenced by one's position at birth. It is as false when applied to the undeserving rich as the undeserving poor, from Queen Elizabeth on down to her namesake in *Ray & Liz*.

It would be illuminating to screen Billingham's film in a double bill on the English welfare system with Loach's *I, Daniel Blake*. But perhaps an even more interesting pairing might be with the exploration of upper-crust addiction, abuse, and family disaster in Showtime's *Patrick Melrose* series (Edward Berger, 2018), based on the novels of Edward St. Aubyn. The characters in *Patrick Melrose* and *Ray & Liz* would not have much to say to one another across the vast chasm of the English class divide. But a dialogue between Billingham and St. Aubyn on the questions of autofiction and the problems of miserabilism might be more fascinating than the one of presumed agreement between Billingham and Loach about what is to be done to solve the dire problems of the British social care system. Billingham and Loach might well concur on the necessity of more caring intervention, but Billingham really isn't interested in answers, only in troubling questions.

It's intriguing to note that *I, Daniel Blake* became a must-watch movie for many Labour Party activists, with Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Opposition, referring to it during one of the weekly Prime Minister's Questions sessions at the House of Commons.²¹ The film's impact was largely due to the specificity of Loach's attack on the misery-inducing cuts and procedural changes brought in to welfare and disability safety nets by Prime Ministers Cameron and May. But surely

it also resulted from the film's embrace of a culture-industry cliché: the quiet heroism and unfailing decency of Loach's protagonist (played with a raised fist by Dave Johns) in his noble but ultimately tragic fight against petty bureaucrats and the powers that be. Billingham's work disqualifies itself from being deployed in such an overt fashion by suggesting that misery is more endemic to the human condition and probably won't evaporate on contact with the correct policies. For this reason, *Ray & Liz* is all the more disturbing and complex.

Notes

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2. Paul O'Callaghan, "Richard Billingham on Ray & Liz: 'I Lived Through the Thatcher Era, and It Was Horrible If You Were Poor,'" British Film Institute, March 7, 2019, www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/interviews/richard-billingham-ray-liz.
3. "Modernism(s): Bohemia, Miserabilism and Black Painting," catalogue description, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, www.museunacional.cat/en/ii-modernisms-6; see also William H. Robinson, Jordi Falgàs, and Carmen Belen Lord, *Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró, Dalí* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 65.
4. "Miserablism and Resistance at the American Studies Association: Sarah Mesle interviews David Roediger," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 9, 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/miserablism-and-resistance-at-the-american-studies-association/#!>.
5. Billingham, *Ray's a Laugh*, artist's statement, back cover.
6. Keiran Cashell, *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2009), 25.
7. Cashell, *Aftershock*, 18, 19.
8. Gilda Williams, "Picture This: Strange Days," in *Strange Days: British Contemporary Photography* (Milan: Charta, 1997/2010), 23.
9. Becca Voelcker, "Locarno Interview: Richard Billingham," *Film Comment*, August 8, 2018, www.filmcomment.com/blog/locarno-interview-richard-billingham/.
10. Voelcker, "Locarno Interview."
11. Williams, "Picture This," 11.
12. Voelcker, "Locarno Interview."
13. See Lauren Elkin, "Bad Genre: Annie Ernaux, Autofiction, and Finding a Voice," *Paris Review* (blog), October 26, 2018, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/10/26/bad-genre-annie-ernaux-autofiction-and-finding-a-voice/.
14. Cashell, *Aftershock*, 19.
15. Patrick Butler, "New Study Finds 4.5 Million UK Children Living in Poverty," *The Guardian*, September 16, 2018, www.theguardian.com/society/2018/sep/16/new-study-finds-45-million-uk-children-living-in-poverty.
16. Billingham, *Ray's a Laugh*, artist's statement.
17. "Richard Billingham," Saatchi Gallery, www.saatchigallery.com/artists/richard_billingham.htm.
18. Stuart Hall, cultural critic and founder of the *New Left Review*, is often credited with coining the term "Thatcherism" from his post at the University of Birmingham, at a time when Billingham was growing up only a few miles away. See, for instance, Stuart Hall, "Thatcherism: A New Stage?," *Marxism Today*, February 1980, 26–28.
19. Tim Adams, "Richard Billingham: 'Statistically, I Should Be in Prison, Dead or Homeless,'" *The Guardian*, February 23, 2019, www.theguardian.com/film/2019/feb/23/richard-billingham-ray-and-liz-interview.
20. Margaret Thatcher, interviewed by David Keay, *Women's Own*, September 23, 1987, www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689.
21. "PMQs: Corbyn Tells May to Watch I, Daniel Blake Film," BBC.com, November 2, 2016, www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-37851425/pmqs-corbyn-tells-may-to-watch-i-daniel-blake-film.