

Not asking questions any more: The Navigators, a film by Ken Loach

By Paul Bond
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Ken Loach's films always deal with serious social and political issues. *The Navigators*, his latest, deals with the results of rail privatisation on a group of track workers in South Yorkshire, England. Despite having been shown at film festivals around the world, it failed to get a British cinema distribution deal and was screened recently on television by Channel 4, one of the film's backers.

The Navigators is well acted, but unconvincing. Throughout his career, Loach has often elicited excellent performances from his actors, allowing them a great freedom to improvise in an effort to strive for naturalism. This worked particularly well, for example, in Loach's film about the betrayal of the Spanish revolution, *Land And Freedom*. The same style is employed here, but there is no corresponding depth to the material. False notes are struck repeatedly.

The film is made up of a number of set pieces, which come across as somewhat lifeless didactic exercises. The film script was by Rob Dawber, a rail worker and secretary of the Sheffield All Grades Branch of the National Union of Rail Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT). Dawber was also supporter of the Socialist Alliance (SA), with whom Loach enjoys friendly political relations. He died in February 2001 of mesothelioma (lung cancer), caused by exposure to asbestos dust whilst working on equipment at the track side. The trouble is that the film only tells us what we already knew—rail privatisation has endangered lives, has cost jobs and wages. There are bad guys (management) and there are good guys, who are simply portrayed as victims. There is an idealised past (when the railways were nationalised), which is implicitly held as the model for the future. There are unions, which the films admits have been ineffectual, but workers should be in them nonetheless.

In the opening scenes, a new company, East Midlands Infrastructure, has to compete for business with the other splinters of the old nationalised British Rail. A low-ranking manager struggles with the corporate jargon as he tells the workers in the depot about the new company's "mission statement", much to their amusement. Voluntary redundancies are being offered as part of the restructuring. Len, the oldest worker in the group, throws away his long-service certificates and signs up for the redundancy payments.

This scene epitomises the problems that beset the film. As the film begins, workers are arriving at the depot to see the new company sign being erected. There are expressions of surprise. The privatisation of British Rail—breaking up an integrated rail network into competing train operating companies and a separate infrastructure business—had been one of the most widely discussed and bitterly opposed of the Conservative government's privatisation programmes. Loach wrong-foots his characters from the start, as they are all seemingly

unaware of these antecedents.

(There are important political reasons for this, and they have a serious artistic impact on the film, which I will discuss later.)

We are shown first the destructive tendencies of privatisation. Workers are sent to demolish perfectly good equipment. Teams that have worked together are prevented from collaborating because they now work for separate companies. The lower levels of management warn them about industrial espionage committed by other gangs. At the site of a train crash, collaboration to retrieve evidence degenerates into a scramble to find out which of the various independent companies is likely to be held responsible.

Gradually, working practices are eroded. The new managing director insists that there are no established agreements. New agreements are torn up almost as soon as they are made. In all of this, the union representative is depicted fighting the good fight, but with only limited success.

The depot changes hands again—becoming Gilchrist Engineering—before being closed down as uncompetitive. The workers who had taken redundancy are approached by an agency offering only casual work with far worse conditions.

Gone are guaranteed working hours, holiday pay, sickness benefits and concessionary travel arrangements. Mick (Tom Craig), a worker who did not take voluntary redundancy because his short length of service would not have entitled him to very much compensation, argues about unskilled workers being brought in to do skilled jobs, and safety measures being ignored. His repeated complaints about breaches of regulations lead to him being dropped from the work teams and blacklisted by the various sub-contractors. Desperate for money, he agrees to work to the agency's requirements.

Inevitably there is a fatality. Too few workers, operating with inadequate safety precautions, are sent to rebuild a signal post. The offer of further employment is dangled before them like a carrot, if their work is good enough. Because there are only four of them, they have to continue working after it falls dark, and one of them, Jim (Steve Huison), is struck by a train. Under pressure to safeguard their jobs, Mick persuades the others to move Jim's body up an embankment and put him in the road. They then lie about what happened, claiming a car must have hit him while the rest of them were working on the track.

The Navigators paints a bleak picture of the break-up of the rail industry, and there are some telling points. Privatisation results in the death of a worker, yet the workers themselves are shown as largely oblivious and even somehow culpable in their own fate due to a cover-up that is at best highly implausible. The destructive results of privatisation are presented as the story in themselves, yet they are the

end product of another story which Loach does not explore at all—how the significant opposition to privatisation was neutered by the rail unions, who thus acted as the midwife in the birth of the train operating companies.

Gerry (Venn Tracey), the union steward, is portrayed as almost quixotic in his defence of the rulebook. In the end, however, with Jim (a staunch union man) dead, the workers implicated in covering up his death meet with Gerry. When he suggests they go and see Jim's family, they ask him to go instead. Although Gerry is presented in the film as being somewhat bureaucratic in his outlook, he has at least stood by his members and defended basic principles, as he understands them. The message is: it is the workers who have abandoned the union, and not vice versa. The film portrays the union as being the only solution, even though it has been found wanting. (At one point Gerry ponders a chess puzzle: "It's checkmate—whatever move you make you lose".)

An appeal for working class solidarity permeates the film. (As the depot fragments, one worker is heard to ask, "Why can't we stick together?").

Loach's essential proposal is that workers should return to the unions, which, however flawed they may be, still provide an instrument to defend the collective interests of working people. All that is needed, therefore, is a renewal of industrial militancy. Over the years, his representation of the working class has followed a definite pattern. The more he has sought to express the plight workers face in relation to their traditional organisations, the more they are represented as abstractions: generally depicted as either heroic militants or stoically suffering salt-of-the-earth types.

Whereas Loach once sought to politically criticise the bureaucratic misleaders of the working class, this aspect of his films has been downplayed in recent times.

Days of Hope was a television series he made in the 1970s, about events surrounding the 1926 General Strike in Britain. It sought to make a serious critique of the betrayal carried out by the Trade Union Congress, the Stalinist Communist Party and the reformist Labour Party. Yet Loach recently said of it, "Films are some way back from the front line. If you're making a film, you're not actually in the political dispute... From that privileged position, you try to give support to those who have got their lives on the line—or their livelihoods, I should say".

If Loach now seriously views his films as not being part of a political struggle, then this can only reflect his own growing accommodation to the trade union bureaucracy he once politically opposed. As well as lending support to the Socialist Alliance, which brings together many of Britain's middle-class radical groups, he also supports the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), led by National Union of Mineworkers President Arthur Scargill. Although he certainly does not share Scargill's Stalinist politics, he agrees with the common position of the SLP and the SA that the essential task confronting the working class is a renewal of trade unionism, and the type of militant struggles that took place in the 1970s. From this standpoint, Loach regards workers' alienation from the trade unions as entirely negative, rather than representing a limited recognition of the disastrous impact of the pro-business policies that the unions have actively and openly pursued since the mid-1980s.

His uncritical identification of the interests of the working class with the very organisations responsible for their present predicament has made his films increasingly tortuous and divorced from reality. In his last movie, *Bread & Roses*, he singled out the fight for union

recognition by low-paid immigrant office cleaners in Los Angeles as representing a beacon for the future.

In *The Navigators*, Loach has gone a step-further. He essentially blames the workers for their own predicament, rather than the betrayals of the unions. It is little wonder that his latest picture reeks of political disillusionment and resignation. It is not that the film is without humour or human moments, but they are all constrained by the same problems of vision and perspective. The humour tends to be only of the broadest and bleakest kind. (Having been forced to re-apply for his own job and provide his own equipment, Jack the cleaner's reaction to the closure of the depot is "Oh f**king hell! I'd just bought a new mop and bucket!"). Worse, the humour is used to cover over essential problems of perspective. Although the opening scene, for example, might depict the authentic voice of workshop humour, it is used to present the creation of a new company as a novelty to the workers. This is all somewhat lame.

Only two of the characters are afforded a story outside their work on the railway. Paul (Joe Duttine) is facing the attentions of the Child Support Agency for maintenance, following his estrangement from the mother of his two daughters. Mick is struggling to keep his family afloat and retain his dignity. Both of these are familiar stories, not very well told. Tom Craig, who plays Mick, deserves great credit for portraying something more than the script seems to have given him.

The new company's managing director is a caricature. He only makes two major contributions to the film, appearing in a corporate video announcing the end of the "job for life" and threatening a junior manager with the sack unless he implements the necessary changes to working practices. And that, as they say, is that.

In this context it is worth quoting the Bolshevik art critic Aleksandr Voronsky's comments on the Russian theatre director Konstantin Stanislavsky's book *My Life In Art*:

"Stanislavsky's aphorisms also are directly related to the question of artistic truth: ... 'The colour black only becomes truly black when, for contrast, at least a little bit of white is put into use.' In the art of our times, people often forget about this rule: more often than not, only one colour predominates. Such a method of portraying a character or event rests, in the final analysis, on a vulgar, pseudo-Marxist, pseudo-Leninist understanding of the class struggle and of art as a class phenomenon. People forget that there is no need to make a bourgeois steal handkerchiefs, thirst for proletarian blood, or be a monster or an idiot in order to show his socially reactionary position in contemporary society. The *subjective* thoughts and feelings of people might be very lofty, but *objectively* shameful and socially despicable."

Nowhere in *The Navigators* do you feel that characters are much more than monochrome ciphers.

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