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Up the Junction

Ken Loach

Clapham, England (1965)

Up the Junction stands out for me amongst Ken Loach's authoritative body of work as being perhaps the director's most dynamic and celebrative film. Whilst Loach's work has in more recent years fused his signature politically-driven social realism with the more celebratory register of popular comedy in films like *The Angel's Share* and *Looking for Eric*, the classical narrative structures and distanced, stationary camera mean neither film seems quite able to achieve the same sense of momentum or exuberance that the director found in 1965 with *Up the Junction*. Loach has described how he was inspired at the time by Jean-Luc Godard's mobile, 'breathless' brand of cine-verite and it's a style he wears well; the film has a sense of a living, breathing, complexly-entangled community that some of Loach's more classical, didactic films perhaps do not.

Which is not to say that *Up the Junction* is in any way escapist or fanciful. The film's harrowing scenes of back street abortions in particular shocked conservative audiences at the time, and they retain a scalding sense of anger today. Also interesting, however, is the way in which, through the film's relatively non-linear narrative, Loach refrains from positioning the film's events into a didactic structure. *Up the Junction* manages to retain both a sense of social critique and a sense of celebration without either being diminished. Indeed, the way in which the film eludes a sense of determinism whilst keeping its anger and societal address resolutely intact seems to be a core part of its power and significance. With the exception maybe of Billy in *Kes* or Maggie in *Ladybird*, this is perhaps the most *alive* Loach's characters have ever been; allowed to be themselves outside the strictures of didactic narrative design.

Thinking of *Up the Junction* as folk cinema makes us question some of the dominant images we associate with notions of folk. For me at least, the knee-jerk associations I bring to the word 'folk' are of pre-industrial, rural, oral-based cultures, complexly related to land-based labour (crofting, fishing, herding, etc) and to the land itself. The notion of folk invoked by *Up the Junction* however, is urban, industrial, proletarian, and deeply contemporary; it is resolutely presentist, committed to the present. There remains a sense of orality – of talk, opinion, testament, gossip, memory and spoken story – and (as in Timothy Neat's *Play Me Something*) of that sense of orality somehow binding a community like glue. But here, the 'folk' songs that drive the film are not

traditional, history-infused ballads inherited from previous generations, but rather the contemporary popular music of the present, such as The Searcher's 'Sugar and Spice' which plays the film out.

There are intriguing comparisons to be made between *Up the Junction* and Sergei Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* which was also made in 1965, albeit in a very different historical context. Despite the films deeply contrasting historical / geographical milieus (60s Clapham is a far cry away from the Parajanov's mythic portrayal of the Carpathian Mountains!) both films share a dizzying sense of rhapsody; of cinematic structure driven more by music and movement than by the linear dictates of plot. Both films have almost the sense of a dance; a breathless burl among the many members of a community. (Indeed, *Up the Junction's* editing was apparently geared towards matching the pace and rhythm of the 60's pop songs on its soundtrack). In both films mobile, handheld cameras refuse to stick with one focal character (or group of characters even), always moving outwards or sideways to foreground folk that many other films would background as extras. As such, both films seem to locate a social sense of inclusion and pluralism at the heart of their respective, complex aesthetics.

Given its place in Loach's wider body of work, *Up the Junction* raises interesting questions about what form a political cinema committed to progressive class discourse should take. Does political cinema need to be consistently didactic in order to be dialectical? Is there a place in political cinema for celebration, and for presenting characters as themselves rather than as 'every-man' or 'every-woman' pawns in an overall determinist design? In their 'scientific' didacticism and reliance on tragedy, Loach's bleaker films (such as the Glasgow-based *My Name is Joe*) have been criticised in some quarters as voicing, in Gramscian terms, too much pessimism of the intellect and not enough optimism of the will. Conversely, the apparent optimism of Loach's later comedies (such as *Looking for Eric*) has also come under fire for being escapist and utopian. *Up the Junction's* non-linear, celebrative realism seems to allow Loach to hold a wilful optimism and mindful pessimism in tension, sacrificing neither a celebratory presentation of working class culture, nor a resolute critique of the disadvantage looming over its characters.

And – in terms of folk cinema – *Up the Junction* (alongside its uncanny relation *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*) raises the thrilling question of a cinematic aesthetic driven as much by music and dance as by linear, 'literary' narratives. *Up the Junction* is 'multi-textual' or polyphonic in every sense of the word; song and orality overlap and have equal prominence with literary and cinematic narrative. And in a different sense, the film is also deeply polyphonic in its perspective, which remains staunchly plural throughout. A challenge to classical, McKee-esque notions that all film narratives must focus upon central characters and goal-driven plots, *Up the Junction* chooses instead to move outwards, inclusively, to encompass the wider concerns of a community.

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