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Bread And Roses

Release Date: 2001

Ebert Rating: *** 1/2

By Roger Ebert Jun 1, 2001

If you work in a building with janitors, how much do they get paid? Is it enough to decently support a family? Have you given any thought to the question? I haven't. Ken Loach's "Bread and Roses," a drama about a janitorial strike in Los Angeles, made me think. It suggests that the people who manage your building pay the janitors as little as they possibly can, and pass the savings on to your employers. Here is a statistic: In 1982, union janitors in Los Angeles were paid \$8.50 an hour. In 1999, non-union janitors were paid \$5.75. Do they have a health plan? Don't make me laugh.

Under the trickle-down theory, if the boss makes millions and the janitor makes \$5.75, in the long run we all benefit. How does this work in practice? A simple illustration will suffice. When both parents have to moonlight in underpaid jobs, that gives their children an opportunity to get in trouble on the streets, leading to arrests, convictions and millions of dollars pumped into the economy through the construction of new prisons and salaries for their guards. Right now America has a larger percentage of its population in prison than any other Western nation, but that is not good enough.

"Bread and Roses" tells its story through the eyes of Maya (Pilar Padilla), an illegal immigrant newly arrived in Los Angeles. Her sister Rosa (Elpidia Carrillo) gets her a job in a sleazy bar, but Maya is a good girl and doesn't like it: "I want to work with you cleaning the offices." Rosa gets Maya hired in a high-rise, where she has to kick back her first month's salary. Maya meets Sam (Adrien Brody), an organizer for the janitors' union, who is trying to sign up the workers in the building.

For some of my readers, the key words in the previous paragraph are "illegal immigrant." Why, they are thinking, should such a person have a job in America at all, let alone complain about the low wages? This attitude is admirable in its idealism, but overlooks the fact that the economy depends on workers who will accept substandard wages. The man who hires Maya certainly knows she is illegal. That man's boss, as they say, "knows but doesn't know." The man above him doesn't know and doesn't care--he's only interested in delivering janitorial services to the building management at the lowest possible price.

If the janitors were paid a decent wage plus health benefits, there would be no shortage of American citizens to take the jobs, so it is better this way, especially since the illegal workers have no rights and are easily intimidated. If the Mexican border were sealed, Los Angeles would be a city without janitors, gardeners, car washes and maids. And in Michigan, who would pick the fruit? Sam the organizer encourages Maya and her friends to organize for the union within the building--secretly, of course. Rosa, the sister, is not so enthusiastic: "We could all lose our jobs, and then who would pay the bills?" There is a juicy scene where the striking janitors invade the house-warming of a big Hollywood agency that has just taken offices in the building. Do the star clients know their agents are exploiting the workers? (Credit here to Ron Perlman and other actors who play recognizable extras.) Sam is played by Brody as a complex character, filled with anger but also with a streak of zany street comedian. He's trapped in the middle because the union's bosses, like all bosses, are basically establishment. When his boss argues that a strike might cost the union too much money, Sam snaps back: "No more \$40 million to give the Democrats." Sam and Maya are drawn to each other, and there is a shy little love scene, but Ken Loach is not the kind of director to confuse his real story with the love story; he knows that no matter what happens between Sam and Maya, the janitors are still underpaid and the strike is still dangerous. That same stubborn integrity prevents him from giving the movie a conventional happy ending. Just think. If he had directed "Pearl Harbor," it would have ended sadly.

Loach, from Britain, is left wing but realistic. The best scene in "Bread and Roses" argues against Sam, Maya and the union. It is a searing speech by Rosa, delivered by Carrillo with such force and shaming truth that it could not have been denied the Oscar--if the academy voters in their well-cleaned buildings ever saw movies like this. Rosa slices through Maya's idealism with hard truths, telling her sister that she worked as a prostitute to pay for Maya's education, and indeed slept with the supervisor to get Rosa her job. "I've been whoring all my life, and I'm tired," she says. Now she has a sick husband and kids to feed, and they take priority over the union and the college-boy organizer.

The more you think about it, the more this movie's ending has a kind of nobility to it. Loach, who has always made films about the working class ("Riff-Raff," "My Name Is Joe," "Ladybird, Ladybird"), is too honest to believe in easy solutions. Will the union get its contract? Will Maya and Sam live happily ever after? Will the national minimum wage ever be a living wage? Will this movie change anything, or this review make you want to see it? No, probably not. But when you come in tomorrow morning, someone will have emptied your wastebasket.

Cast & Credits

Maya: Pilar Padilla
Sam: Adrien Brody
Rosa: Elpidia Carrillo
Perez: George Lopez
Ruben: Alonso Chavez
Simona: Monica Rivas

Lions Gate Films Presents A Film Directed By Ken Loach. Written By Paul Laverty. Running Time: 106 Minutes. Rated R (For Strong Language And Brief Nudity). In English And Spanish With English And Spanish Subtitles.

Coming Clean

FILM: Bread and Roses

DIRECTOR: Ken Loach

STARRING: Adrien Brody and Pilar Padilla

GRADE: A-

One of the most aggressively political filmmakers at work in world cinema, British director Ken Loach has been making movies with a keen social conscience since his debut with 1967's *Poor Cow*. His outstanding body of work has included such pictures as *Riff-Raff* and the award-winning *Land and Freedom*. In his current work, *Bread and Roses*, Loach shifts focus from the struggles of the European working class to the plight of contemporary American immigrants. A mixture of *El Norte* and *Norma Rae*, *Bread and Roses* is a memorable, affecting work.

Written by Paul Laverty, *Bread and Roses* is the story of a pretty and bracingly spunky young Latina named Maya (Pilar Padilla) who crosses the border from Mexico to live with the Los Angeles family of her sister Rosa (Elpidia Carrillo). Eventually, Maya lands a job alongside Rosa at a janitorial company that cleans the offices each night in a huge L.A. skyscraper.

Maya's experience, of course, stands for that of so many people in her circumstances. She is illegal and thus vulnerable to those who are strangers to pity. Maya promises, "I will work hard," and she's as good as her word. But her job pays milium wage and comes with no benefits of any kind, no health insurance, no paid vacation days, no sick leave accrual. And if that's not bad enough, Perez (George Lopez), the janitorial boss in her building, is a modern-day Simon Legree. He agrees to hire Maya only after negotiating a kickback of her first month's salary. In his relations to all his employees, Perez is routinely abusive, occasionally firing someone for a minor infraction so as to terrorize the others into meek compliance. Maya is not so easily manipulated as her co-workers, however, and she responds to the recruiting invitations of a union organizer named Sam (Adrien Brody). Eventually, she convinces many of her janitorial colleagues to join in an organizing effort.

Here Loach and Laverty nicely examine the competing motivations of those Maya and Sam need to convince if they are to achieve a decent wage and the kinds of minimal benefits most Americans take for granted. Most of the employees are Hispanic, but other ethnic groups are represented as well. A Russian woman is afraid of joining a union because she believes they are corrupt and won't really represent the interests of those they are supposed to serve. A handsome young man named Ruben (Alonso Chavez) has been assiduously saving his money to qualify for a university scholarship that requires a 20-percent match. Should he go on strike or be fired for union activity, his dreams could go up in smoke. Saddest of all, Maya's sister Rosa is simply defeated. Rosa tells Maya in denouncing the union, "We just have to recognize and accept that they are stronger than we are."

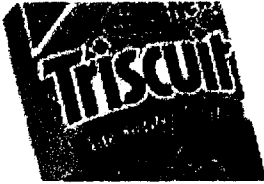
The filmmakers also nicely concede that the union is not a

solution to all the problems that these people face, that the union itself is made up of entirely fallible human beings. In fact, Sam's union superiors think he is wasting his time trying to organize the workers in Maya's building.

Throughout, the picture sustains an important tension concerning Sam's behavior. He's an Anglo plying his trade in a largely Hispanic world. He's irresponsible at times. And his showboating, confrontational style remains a debatable, arguably counter-productive strategy. A key question persists about what Sam will do if the union bosses pull the plug. Will Sam protect his own income, or will he stand beside those he has encouraged to risk what little they have? In short, the union preaches an idealism that it doesn't, perhaps can't, practice without qualifications. To survive, it must succeed. And in that pragmatic determination it is different less in kind than in degree from the forces it would strive to topple.

Ken Loach has always had to work with small budgets and often with unknown and little-trained actors. The result in *Bread and Roses* is the occasionally clunky scene when the players are simply not up to the demands of their roles. But such moments are few and limited to those in minor parts. The principals are all terrific. The decision to include a romantic connection between Sam and Maya is a mistake that actually diminishes, rather than heightens, narrative tension in that it makes the story feel more conventional and stagey.

On the whole, though, as almost always with Loach's work, *Bread and Roses* is a film of power and insight. A person living on minimum wage, one man points out, spends three-fourths of what he earns on rent. As anyone who has ever traveled abroad knows from first-hand experience, America is such a rich country, we disgrace ourselves by not affording all those in our midst a real chance for a decent life.



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"Bread and Roses"

The problem with Ken Loach's half-Spanish, half-English film isn't the lefty politics, it's that the Brit knows nothing about Los Angeles.

By Andrew O'Hehir

June 7, 2001 | For Ken Loach, the veteran English leftist who is in some ways the ultimate anti-Hollywood director, to make

a movie about the striking Latino janitors of Los Angeles is an act of admirable bravado. I only wish it wasn't such a patchy affair. Loach's best work is his semidocumentary exploration of the desperate fringes of the British working class, but the Los Angeles of "Bread and Roses" is almost entirely unspecific, a blank screen on which he can project a predictable drama of class struggle. It's ridiculous to suggest that a foreigner can't "get" L.A., since "Sunset Boulevard" and "Chinatown" were both directed by Europeans, but Loach, for all his hard work and boundless good intentions, doesn't have the remotest feeling for the place.

Before I had seen any of Loach's movies he was described to me as "the other Mike Leigh," and as unfair as the comparison may be on a number of levels, to American viewers it's still likely to seem appropriate. Both have their roots in documentary-style British TV drama, and both are avowed leftists who gained a reputation for exploring the underside of British life in the Margaret Thatcher years. But while Leigh focused on bittersweet portraits of sub-bourgeois family life (like "Life Is Sweet" and, of course, "Secrets and Lies"), Loach's world in films like "Riff-Raff," "Raining Stones" and "Ladybird, Ladybird" was the world of crap jobs and their absence, of the grasping poverty that's a half-step above desperation.

Loach's last film, "My Name Is Joe," starring Peter Mullan as a Glasgow alcoholic struggling to rebuild his life, was brutal and riveting drama, perhaps the best work of his entire career. But throughout that career, Loach's left-wing, anti-imperialist politics -- which I admire, with certain reservations -- have occasionally lured him into the doldrums of didactic drama. "Land and Freedom," his long-awaited Spanish Civil War saga, was somehow less memorable than it should have been, and "Carla's Song," with its peculiar segue from Scotland to the Sandinista revolution, was an uneasy work, sometimes bitterly etched, sometimes treacly and sentimental.

"Bread and Roses" is clearly a labor of love for everybody concerned, and no doubt its raw material is a gold mine of stories: the lives of the immigrant workers, often undocumented, who clean the office buildings of L.A.'s entertainment-industry power brokers. There is also no question that Hispanic life in America is drastically underrepresented on-screen (unless you count [Jennifer Lopez](#)), but after its dynamite first 10 minutes, "Bread and Roses" isn't much more than canned political-organizing drama, "Norma Rae" with a little norteño music. (For an immigration drama, try the far superior "El Norte"; as a portrait of Latino East L.A., see the modest but appealing "Mi Vida Loca.")

We start with a bang as Maya (Pilar Padilla), a spirited young woman from rural Mexico, is ferried across the

border by vicious "coyotes," or smugglers, and must escape from the one who kidnaps her as a sex slave. First Maya finds her beleaguered sister, Rosa (Elpidia Carrillo), who gets her a job working for the janitorial company managed by the loathsome Perez (George Lopez). Then she meets Sam (Adrien Brody), the young white activist trying to rally the unorganized janitors to the union cause, and most of her spirit seems to leach away into the movie's plodding formula.

When her hunky co-worker Luis (Frankie Davila), himself a paragon of virtue who is saving to go to law school (it's unclear whether he intends to go to college first), quite plausibly suggests that Maya is mainly interested in the labor struggle because she's sweet on Sam, she denies it. "I'm doing this for the 40 million people who have no health insurance in the richest country in the world!" she pronounces. Oh.

As that example suggests, Paul Laverty's screenplay is frequently balky, unidiomatic and laden with clichés, whether in Spanish, English or the territory in between. There are a couple of nicely compact scenes showing exactly what members of the janitorial staff do when they work, always a fascination of Loach's and an invisible arena in most American movies; and the core group of Latin, Caribbean and Eastern European actors (mostly nonprofessionals) is undeniably appealing.

But we get few glimpses of their home lives or idiosyncrasies, with the lone exception of Rosa, an embittered, weather-beaten beauty (wonderfully played by Carrillo) and the only one among them who does something selfish and apparently evil. The explosive scene when Rosa finally tells Maya why she has betrayed her own sister and her co-workers almost redeems this halting, stuttering movie, and lends its ending an unexpected sting. What it really suggests is that Loach and Laverty, on their American adventure, have chosen the wrong story and the wrong central character.

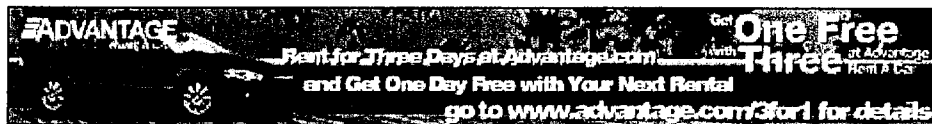
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Beyond our Ken

Film of the Month: Bread and Roses



Ken Loach's latest film is his first set in Los Angeles, but this exposé of labour relations in the City of Dreams is no Hollywood sell out, argues Peter Matthews

Bread and Roses can't be called one of Ken Loach's greatest works, but the fact is that virtually no other director would think of attempting a film about the plight of non-unionised janitors in Los Angeles. While this may not sound like a terrific inducement for popcorn junkies, the keen sense of moral responsibility informing the production makes most current cinema look fatuously self-absorbed by comparison. In a career spanning more than three decades Loach has never budged from his radical principles, describing the everyday truth of the marginal with few concessions to political or aesthetic fashion. His sheer doggedness is often taken for a species of naivety - as if he were a Marxist country bumpkin whose sentimental addiction to the proletariat consigned him to the ash-heap of history. Yet in a period of stylistic ostentation, Loach's modest transparency of means is salutary.

There's something very British about a film-maker who turns parochialism into a strength, knowing his art depends for its force on a sodden familiarity with those domestic institutions (such as the social services in *Ladybird Ladybird*, 1994) that circumscribe the lives of ordinary people. A Loach film stakes its claim to authenticity on the concrete particulars of class, region and (to the despair of his foreign distributors) dialect - which is why the idea of him setting up shop in Hollywood has always seemed anathema.


It would be easy to blame the inadequacies of *Bread and Roses* on the director's rash decision to forsake his native sources of inspiration and test himself in an environment for which he was mentally unprepared. Even the most honourable film artists suffer attacks of hubris. The last time for Ken Loach was in the disconcertingly schizoid *Carla's Song* (1996), which connected with reality so long as it kept to the straight and

But if Loach feels spiritually dispossessed in Tinsel Town, then so do the Mexican illegal immigrants whose story he tells. It's here that the prosaic look of the movie betrays an ethical dimension - Loach denies us a touristic spectacle the characters themselves have scant leisure to enjoy. Instead he sticks to the immediate vicinity of the steel and glass tower where the janitors work, framing them simply in anonymous windows and corridors. It may not even matter that one can't always say where the protagonists' alienation ends and the director's begins. A supposedly comical episode in which the exploited casuals invade a swank Hollywood party with their vacuum cleaners is so poorly staged it suggests Loach has never been within miles of such an event. But the stiff, unconvincing quality of the sequence also reveals something - for it effectively denudes the show-biz types of conventional glamour and mimics their squirming embarrassment at the social contradictions staring them in the face.

Throughout there are similar small victories of transfigured awkwardness. An elderly cleaner's stricken expression when she's peremptorily fired for being late appears to spring as much from a non-professional actor's discomfort as from her character's misfortune. Yet this fleeting moment delivers the shock of reality caught red-handed - which is to say that Loach remains steadfast in his commitment to blurring the boundaries between documentary and fiction.

The film's spartan *mise en scène* is largely co-ordinated with the cleaners' dull blue uniforms - mustering a pictorial flourish or two only after they've switched to red Justice-for-Janitors T-shirts. One epic shot of the new militants crossing a bridge en masse evokes 20s Soviet cinema, and the steal appears deliberate. Like *Land and Freedom* (1995) and some earlier films Loach made for television (*The Big Flame*, 1969; *Days of Hope*, 1975), *Bread and Roses* comes near to realising the Eisensteinian ideal of a collective hero. Though the class struggle in this case remains on the molecular level (as in *Riff-Raff*, 1991), the characters are basically emblems of dissent rather than individuals in their own right. The immigrant workers sport anonymous livery, while their corporate masters are portrayed as so many headless suits and shuffling shoes.

Loach could hardly be more graphic in announcing a method based on group dialectics and social typage. There's a gestural heroine in the shape of feisty Maya (Pilar Padilla), but she's a Latin spitfire straight out of central casting whose sole narrative function is to be politicised. Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty are so unequivocally on the janitors' side they're willing to forego a degree of moral subtlety. Time and again, one feels ambiguities have been quashed in the interest of a clear revolutionary sales pitch. For a brief season it looks as if Sam (Adrien Brody), the eager labour organiser who hazards human lives at little personal risk, will be ascribed a pair of clumping clay feet. But that would complicate Loach's proletarian hero-worship, so any lingering suspicion gets transferred on to the higher-ups (represented by one of his typically cautious and self-seeking union officials).



Just about the only time the movie plumbs murkier depths is in the emotionally overpowering scene where Maya's sister Rosa (Elpidia Carrillo) explains why she finked on the activists to management and pours forth her scalding resentment of the whole family. Suddenly you're torn apart because you recognise that everyone has their reasons. For a few precious moments, Loach achieves the same quality of naked observation he sustained in his 1998 masterpiece *My Name Is Joe* (and one is similarly reminded that realism can't always be distinguished from melodrama). Otherwise, *Bread and Roses* should do much to placate those critics who have charged the director with miserabilism - there are even dollops of sprightly ethnic music to punctuate the janitors' merrier assaults on the capitalist order. Yet an upbeat Ken Loach isn't necessarily what we want. For against the facile solutions to working-class decline proposed by the likes of *Billy Elliot* or *The Full Monty*, Loach's best work dares to speak an everlasting nay.

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MOVIE REVIEW

Bread and Roses

The Political Is Personal in 'Bread and Roses'

By KEVIN THOMAS
TIMES STAFF WRITER

May 10, 2001

Friday May 11, 2001

It is somehow appropriate that "Bread and Roses," a film depicting the struggle of predominantly Latino Los Angeles janitors to form a union, was directed by a foreigner. After all, who is better equipped to make such a film than England's Ken Loach, who has spent his entire distinguished career making social, economic and political issues personal and involving rather than preachy?

Indeed, that this is Loach's first film made in the U.S.--but outside the mainstream Hollywood industry, to be sure--is undeniably a plus, heightening Loach's identification with his largely immigrant characters.

"Bread and Roses" begins in a rush of jagged images as a group of people hasten through a thicket of foliage to cross a remote spot along the border between Mexico and the U.S. Two men swiftly herd the illegal immigrants into a van, depositing them in a spot in downtown Los Angeles, where friends and relatives eagerly await them.

Among the group is Maya (Pilar Padilla, a terrific newcomer), a young woman who is dismayed that the men won't release her to her older sister Rosa (Elpidia Carrillo), who has been unable to meet the full price of Maya's journey.

One of the men wins Maya in a toss of the coin with his partner, preparing to rape her in a seedy downtown hotel room. But Maya demonstrates right off the luck and pluck that will serve her well when she escapes and makes her way to Rosa's home on the edge of downtown and Rosa gets her a job working as a cleaner in a high-rise where she works.

Maya is as eager to prove herself as she is appalled at the working conditions. Her sister and her new co-workers live in terror of their boss, Perez (George Lopez), as villainous and tyrannical as a sweatshop boss at the turn of the last century. The workers are underpaid and have no insurance or job security. Perez fires people on a whim, with older workers especially vulnerable. Many are clearly undocumented, most have families either here or south of the border (or both) and therefore have too much to lose to dare stand up to the abusiveness of Perez, an employee of a large agency for janitorial workers.

Consequently, when labor organizer-lawyer Sam Shapiro (Adrien Brody) manages to elude the security guards, with an unhesitating though puzzled assist from Maya, he does not elicit enthusiasm from her co-workers when he finally manages to give them his spiel. They understandably feel they have everything to lose and cannot believe they have a chance at winning. Maya, however, is just naive and idealistic enough to respond to his message, and she shares with him a fearless, even reckless spirit.

Ever so gradually, the two of them are able to get their co-workers to stage a demonstration boldly orchestrated by Sam to embarrass the high-profile law firm that has a 50% ownership of the high-rise.

Written by Paul Laverty with broad--sometimes almost too broad--strokes of melodrama and comedy, "Bread and Roses" is imaginatively plotted to intertwine the personal and the political and is well sustained by Loach's vitality and passion. There's much that Maya doesn't know about Rosa, who has a husband (Jack McGee) increasingly endangered by diabetes but without insurance and two children. The film builds to an unexpected and stunning moment of truth between the sisters, which reveals Carrillo, a notable presence in "Salvador" and "The Border," as a formidable actress.

It's perfectly natural that the sweet-natured, gangly Sam and the earthy Maya would be drawn to each other, just as Maya and Ruben (Alonso Chavez), a handsome co-worker with a law school scholarship almost within reach, would be mutually attracted. The strength of this vibrant, stirring film is that it doesn't get sidetracked by trying to encompass a love story, and furthermore dares to end on a note that is decidedly bittersweet.

"Bread and Roses" hits home when one of Maya's co-workers observes, "When we put on uniforms, we become invisible." It's a truth as uncomfortable as it is undeniable.

Bread and Roses, 2001. R, for strong language and brief nudity. A Lions Gate Films release. Director Ken Loach. Producer Rebecca O'Brien. Executive producer Ulrich Felsberg. Screenplay by Paul Laverty. Cinematographer Barry Ackroyd. Editor Jonathan Morris. Music George Fento. Production designer Martin Johnson. Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes. Pilar Padilla as Maya. Adrien Brody as Sam Shapiro. Elpidia Carrillo as Rosa. George Lopez as Perez. Alonso Chavez as Ruben. Jack McGee as Bert.

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

Bread and Roses

Director: Ken Loach

Cast: Pilar Padilla, Adrien Brody, Elpidia Carillo, George Lopez

(Lions Gate Films, 2000) Rated: R

by Jonathan Beebe

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Foreign Voices

What I love most about Ken Loach's films are the voices he gives us. It's rare to hear in his films the standard British accent we get in most British productions. Loach is one of the few filmmakers (along with Mike Leigh) who actually gets his characters speaking accurately, in language you might hear in the real world. Since most of his protagonists come from the working-class in Britain and Ireland, their accents are completely foreign to me, anything but the genteel voices I grew up hearing in *Mary Poppins* and *Lawrence of Arabia*. If you've not seen a film by Ken Loach, try to remember David Niven's or Alec Guinness's voice and then imagine the exact opposite.

These accents are important to Loach's films because he's most concerned with portraying working class lives in as realistic a way as possible. With films like *Ladybird* and *My Name is Joe*, he's trying to make visible and audible an underclass all too often ignored in movies. Consequently, an American viewer like me sees -- and hears -- in his films something I've not been exposed to before. This is why I was eager to see Loach's new film, set on U.S. soil. I wanted him to show me something about my country that I wasn't accustomed to hearing and seeing. In *Bread and Roses*, he does just that, although in a way that I had not anticipated.

The film centers on a young Mexican, Maya (Pilar Padilla), who illegally crosses the border into Southern California in order to be with her sister, Rosa (Elpidia Carillo), who had come over years before. Maya struggles to find work without official papers, and finds herself manipulated and exploited in job after job. Rosa eventually finds Maya a regular position at the cleaning company where she works, although it comes at the price of a full month's salary. Soon Sam (Adrien Brody), a representative of the organization Justice for Janitors, shows up, trying to convince the workers to unionize, and it's through this struggle that we see Maya come to political awareness.

In many ways, *Bread and Roses* is not very different from Loach's British films, concerned with representing the working class and the social institutions that serve them so inadequately. What I find most interesting about the film, though, once again goes back to voice. In Britain, accent maps onto social class in a much more systematic way than it does in the States. (This is what drives *My Fair Lady*, for instance, with Eliza Doolittle continuously repeating, "The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain," as a way of advancing social class.)

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In the States, accent also has meaning, but in a different way. It is not as closely tied to ideas of class as much as it is to geographical region, race, and ethnicity and, even among these categories, different voices mean different things. In the first case of geographical region, an accent is less invested with value. This is not to say that regional accent never has anything to say about class, especially as the accent gets thicker. (In *Silence of the Lambs*, for instance, Clarice Starling continuously tries to shed her southern twang in order to hide the fact that she grew up on a farm.)

It's when we get to voices that code (according to current stereotypes) as non-white that class comes much more readily into the mix. And so, when Ken Loach decided to turn his gaze on the U.S., I think it makes a lot of sense that he chose to give us voices that much of the time do not even speak English. Using a Mexican immigrant to talk about class in America, Loach explores the ways that race and ethnicity are intricately bound to questions of empowerment and wealth. The issue is complicated even more by the fact that Rosa cannot possibly represent the varieties of disenfranchised people who find themselves in similar situations in the U.S. She can't represent Hispanic Americans in a broad sense, because they come from numerous backgrounds and cultures. Just because she speaks Spanish does not mean that she feels much in common with people from other South American countries. And yet, much of the time this is how she is looked at by the white characters in the film. They see her as "other," regardless of the particularities of her own situation.

It's this type of reaction that comes closest to duplicating the limiting nature of class in Britain. In the U.S., you can be anything you want to be -- despite impoverished beginnings -- as long as you don't look a certain way and as long as you don't talk a certain way. Because his protagonist doesn't even speak English for more than half of the film, Loach emphasizes that many Americans are not living in a land of "freedom and plenty." We don't even speak the same language, both literally and in the sense that our daily lives involve very different considerations. To borrow from the title, one American population smells "roses," while another struggles for "bread."

Because Loach is British, he is able to look at the U.S. without many of the preconceived notions most American directors buy into. He offers a compelling picture of what it means to be blocked from full access to the public sphere. Being from the outside, though, does have its drawbacks: in some senses, Loach never really gets to know his characters. He observes the multiplicity of immigrant experience and the exploitation of workers, but his vision seems simplified at moments. The film doesn't spend a lot of time thinking about the ways that unions, for instance, do not always represent the best interests of their members. It doesn't spend enough time looking at Rosa's resistance to the union despite her own struggle to send money -- any way she can -- back to her family in Mexico. Most glaringly, the film doesn't think in any systematic way about the implications of its choice of an illegal alien to be the hero of this American tale. The film never really explores what it means for Maya to struggle for representation in a country where she does not hold citizenship. While she embodies what it even means to refer to someone living in the U.S. as "illegal," it still might be too easy for a viewer to dismiss the exploitation Maya faces, by attributing it to her "illegal" status, rather than realizing that legal aliens and full citizens are disenfranchised daily.

Despite its occasional over-simplification, however, *Bread and Roses* is a powerfully affecting film. Loach reveals American lives that are not always seen. For this fact alone, one can forgive him the occasional agitprop (at least I can, when it's agitprop with which I tend to agree). He makes audible voices that many Americans are unwilling to listen to for all sorts of complex reasons. It's not just that people treat Maya the way they do because of racism or classism alone.

The film shows how racism can become a type of classism. We're used to seeing media images of racial or ethnic subpopulations associated with an economic underclass, while being perpetually forced into that underclass all the time by any

number of factors. It's when you look at any given "other" in terms of the several discourses out of which it is constructed that you are able to see the people behind the preconception. This is primarily what Loach offers us -- a way to understand and listen to the U.S. populations who are usually not welcome as citizens. Of course, he wants us to do more than just listen, but his portrayal of Maya's quest to be counted is a significant start.



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