

WORKING-CLASS CINEMA IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CAPITALISM

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The story of cinema starts with workers. The film *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory In Lyon* (*La Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon*, 1895) by the brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière, 45 seconds long, shows the approximately 100 workers at a factory for photographic goods in Lyon-Montplaisir leaving through two gates and exiting the frame to both sides.

But why does the story of cinema begin with the end of work? Is it because, as has been suggested, it is impossible to represent work from the perspective of labour but only from the point of view of capital, because the revolutionary horizon of the working class coincides with the end of work?¹ After all, the early revolutionary art avant-garde had an ambiguous relationship with capitalism: it provided both a critique of commodification whilst also reproducing the commodity form.² Even the cinema of Eisenstein, which so subverted the bourgeois sense of space, time, and personhood, at the same time standardized and commodified working-class reality with techniques of framing and editing that moulded images on the commodity form.³

Such dialectics between art and the commodity form continue to be played out in today's digital capitalism, as exemplified by so-called 'debt-artists', like the hackers collective, Robin Hood, who appropriate the techniques and modes of sociality of financial capitalism to generate spaces of reciprocity and cooperation with the aim of disrupting their commodity logic, but which in fact end up reproducing it.⁴ The tension between critique and commodification is no less in play as the digital medium erases the specificity of cinema, the relation between its material bases and its poetics, opening up as it does to other relations – intertextual, lateral, and cross-media – that recall the synchronic aesthetics of the avant-garde. As well as disrupting the materiality of the film medium, digital film disrupts the temporality of classical cinema, suspended in-between movement and

stillness and experienced in the expanded duration of the time-image. Susan Sontag famously lamented the decay of cinema in her 1996 *New York Times* article on the occasion of cinema's 100th anniversary.⁵ She argued that the commercial logic of Hollywood blockbuster movies – based on short-term profits, stellar budgets, and simplified narratives – was killing people's love for cinema (cine-*philia*), which revolved around the ritual of going to the movie theatre. In the magical zone of the movie theatre, she felt kidnapped and transported and 'learned how to dress, how to smoke and how to love'. But the contemporary movie business, she argued, made film consumption individualistic, disengaged, and voyeuristic – akin to the 'possessive spectator' described by Laura Mulvey. A similar grim assessment of the death of cinema was recently made by filmmaker Martin Scorsese,⁶ who blamed it on superhero movies with Computer Generated Image aesthetics, parasitical economies linking advertising, gaming, and social media, and online streaming and private video consumption that all undermine the economies and representational style of traditional cinema. Under the regime of platform capitalism, the home spectator is also a 'prosumer'⁷ of digital content for the big tech monopolies such as the media service provider and film producer Netflix. Boosted even more during the Covid-19 pandemic, Netflix increased its base of subscribers to 183 million, acquiring a market value of \$190 billion even as other mainstream streamers such as Disney+ and Warner Media were nearly going under.

Notably, the film critic Laura Mulvey disagrees with such grim assessments of the effects of digital video consumption.⁸ Since in the digital image there is no interval – movement happens within the frame and is patterned, complex, and coded – it is in this new field of electronic complexity, information overload, and flickering digital capital that the 'emancipated spectator'⁹ learns to recognize new patterns of meaning.¹⁰ As Mulvey put it, digital technology enhances the 'pensive spectator's' concerns with multiple consciousness and temporalities, thereby enhancing in turn the modernist function of cinema as a key repository of collective historical memory – an imaginary museum, where the great events of the past are stored.¹¹ (Take Godard's *Historie(s) du Cinéma*, which explores world history through a nine-hour long cinematic detour.)¹² For Mulvey, the digital spectator operating from home is more curious, critical, inquisitive, and 'pensive' than the male and bourgeois possessive spectator of modernist cinema, who was voyeuristically absorbed in stereotypically female stars and narcissistically identified with the main male character. The pensive spectator skips and repeats sequences, overturns hierarchies of privilege, and sets up unexpected links that dissolve the chain of meaning invested in cause and effect. In their anti-hierarchic

and horizontal and synchronic aesthetics, the digital spectator is a new type of avant-garde artist.

Yet, because the proletarian condition will not disappear with the death of cinema, we must ask whether, and in what ways, these very developments are reproducing the old dialectics between avant-garde art and the commodity form, or whether they are fostering films which transcend these dialectics in ways that contribute to working-class emancipation.

WORKING-CLASS CINEMA FROM GRIERSON TO LOACH

In the UK, this tension between critique and commodification in working-class cinema was played out in the early documentary movement associated with John Grierson, who gave voice to the working class for the first time in cinema's history. But by the 1970s social realist films were under attack from both feminist and black film collectives for several reasons: their voyeuristic distance, rooted in uneven class relations between the filmmaker (often male, white, and middle class) and the subjects (often 'the poor', 'the marginal', or 'the working class'); their victimising approach; their lack of intersectional narratives; and their excessively materialistic and productivist focus on work, poverty, and inequality. At the same time, the Third Cinema movement in the Global South radicalized cinema, using it as a tool of political mobilization against military regimes and colonial powers. Refusing the imperialist forms of the commercial Hollywood films (first cinema) and of the European authorial cinema (second cinema), 'Third Cinema' devised democratic and participatory film processes, a popular and non-elitist visual grammar, grassroots forms of production and distribution, and a powerful realist style that reflected 'allegorically' the condition of underdevelopment of the global south.¹³ At the same time, media projects among indigenous communities in the global south opened new uses for cinema, which went beyond the mere aesthetics and function of the documentary.

In the 1980s, it was paradoxically the commercial *Channel Four* that gave voice to black and women realist filmmakers from minority backgrounds in the UK and the Global South.¹⁴ Their representation of the British working class was infused with a new sense of hope, openness, and radicalism associated with a new left multiculturalism. The impact of this was such that when 'social realism' was revived in the 1990s as the brand of the British film industry, the British working class was represented as a national cultural subject rather than as a class formation. Unlike the militant multiculturalism of Stuart Hall, this culture was the branded cultural capital controlled by the financial classes, the 'cool' Britannia of Tony Blair, Britpop, and young British artists designated as the YBAs – entrepreneurs from working-class

background who, endorsing New Labour's Third Way, took their distances from both the old power elites and the 'uncool' working class of the previous generations.

The realist aesthetics of New Labour emerged from deindustrialization, an epochal and traumatic change for the working class. As the materiality of manual jobs and lives was replaced by immaterial labour, debt-fuelled lifestyles, and social relations marked by precarity, anger, and fear, these precarious working-class lives proved difficult to conceptualize and represent – unlike the ghostly materiality of post-war society represented so well by Italian neo-realist cinema which, as Mulvey has pointed out, was able to reflect the spirit of reconstruction precisely by engaging the new 'pensive spectator' attuned to 'temporal delays'.¹⁵

Within the broader context of the commercialization and depoliticization of working-class cinema and the parallel emergence of commercial TV, art galleries, and film studies departments – three different locales of cultural reification and engines of post-industrial economy – the epic cinema of Ken Loach was an exception throughout the 1990s, masterfully capturing and staging the tragic struggle between working-class solidarity and the alienating and disintegrative forces of capitalism. As Marxist critical theory gravitated towards Althusserian and Lacanian abstract approaches, Marxist cinema turned over-intellectualising and self-reflexive too, first in the form of the film essay, and then through its post-modernist appreciation of popular culture.¹⁶

In television, Loach's allegorical storytelling, depicting working-class lives as symbols of labour's struggle against the mighty forces of capital, was replicated in the popular genre of soap operas such as *EastEnders* – which is still ongoing. Here, women and marginal social constituencies are given voice in the heightened emotional register of the melodrama, through twisting and baroque storytelling and dramatic plot-reversals driven by passionate love, envy, and revenge. Traditionally aimed at a female audience, eventually soap operas captured the entire social demographic as male breadwinners were made redundant and joined the rest of the family watching TV on the couch, as in the series *The Royle Family*, which takes place entirely by a sofa of a typical working-class family whose members watch TV continuously whilst gossiping, arguing, and caring for each other.

Reality TV, most famously in the *Big Brother* series, was the other form of mainstream working-class entertainment. It pushed the techniques of classical observational cinema – the non-professional actors, the unedited footage, the powerful *mise-en-scene* and working-class subjects caught in their everyday lives – to the limits. In fact, the surveillance aesthetics, the extreme

voyeurism, the sadistic manipulation, the invisible scripted editing, the human captivity, the controlled environment, the inflated and artificial egos, and the productivity of social relations of reality television embodied the alienated subjectivity of capitalism best described by Lukács¹⁷ as a detached and passive spectatorship of one's life. In fact reality TV, by invisibly re-editing and manipulating the contestants' lives and involving the audience in the co-production of stories (as 'prosumers'), anticipated the productive and political regime of late capitalism based on post-produced reality, fake news, production-as-consumption, and the transformation of the Internet into a space of virtual citizenship and an e-public.

Steel Lives

It was the spirit of that time that I wanted to capture with my own film *Steel Lives*.¹⁸ Suspended between Thatcherism and New Labour, a new imaginary of a classless, individualist, and post-industrial society was erasing previous forms of working-class history, solidarity, and livelihood, and at the same time resurrecting Victorian forms of work and labour relations. Living in Sheffield during the 1990s, when profitable steel companies were closed down or downsized by venture capitalists, it seemed that the expansion of the cinema industry and the collapse of steel industry almost went hand in hand. Big EU structural funds went into the development of the Sheffield Film Festival, the Showroom cinema complex, art galleries, and luxury industrial lofts on the sites of abandoned Victorian steel factories. While my steelworker friends battled against management every day, the spectacle of working-class decline, defeat, and unemployment was being played out in local cinemas showing Loach's latest film *The Navigators*,¹⁹ which tells the stories of five railway workers made redundant after the privatization of British Rail in 1995.

Loach's emphasis on the catastrophic social consequences of privatizations clearly resonated with the lives of my co-workers. But by historicizing working-class struggles that were still unfolding, the film made the triumph of neoliberalism seem not only inevitable, but already present. The immense beauty and empathy that Loach is able to evoke from simple working-class stories seemed to pull the viewer into a state of passive witness. Perhaps had *The Navigators* followed the path of advocacy rather than of realism and beauty, it would have achieved a different effect amongst my friends – perhaps prompting them to want to tell their stories in their own voices? In making my film *Steel Lives* I wanted to engage with working-class representation as a site of political struggle. Unlike the archetypical outsider/observer/filmmaker who reifies the working class as a homogeneous political subject,

I wanted the film-making process to bring into the open, to catalyze and socialize the contradictions, power imbalances, and structural violence that were implicated in working-class Sheffield. In other words, I wanted the camera to trigger new social relations of production around a process of collective self-representation, rather than documenting a section of the otherwise disappearing working class.

With *Steel Lives*, I wanted to experiment with the politics of film-making, explore so-called ‘non-western’ ways of telling, to interrogate the double nature of cinema as both an abstract commodity and a materiality. I wanted to make the tension between these polarities present and transparent, and create a space of both capitalist critique and of active construction of a working-class imaginary. I wanted to tell a story that did not reach the spectator already completed but that, instead, pulled the viewer inside a dialogical, polyvocal, and multi-layered space of resonance in which the diverse affective, imaginative, and material facets of working-class identity would all come alive and coexist in the fragile space in between the autobiographical, the fictional, and the historical.

The aesthetics of *Steel Lives* reflects the egalitarian structure of the **labour film** process, our joint commitment to a low-budget and DIY ethics – to find out things together, socialize the process, and pool resources – and our defiant attitude of wanting to narrate a story about the working class that was neither romantic nor cynical, as in mainstream media representations, but showed the grounded and resilient point of view of the steelworkers, a social category that was believed to have disappeared a long time ago. I was interested not so much in realism as a pure ontological class position embodied in a specific aesthetic form. Instead, I was interested in realism’s internal tensions, contradictions, and articulations, particularly as they were played out in the frictions and entanglements between identification and critique. By setting up a DIY, improvised, and egalitarian process of production based on co-editing and co-research, and grassroots forms of distribution and screenings in labour organizations branches, companies, underground art galleries, and film clubs – I created a space for the working class to come together in solidarity, as autonomous and self-producing subject and at the same time as pensive and militant spectator.

Steel Lives ends with a close-up of a reflection of a derelict Victorian workshop floating on the surface of the river Don. Wildflowers and litter are scattered along the riverbank and a small red poppy stands out from a hybrid landscape of electric wires and grass. My voiceover says: ‘Is this what the economists call immaterial economy? Is this the future? And if so, what will come next?’

ARTISTS' LABOUR AND THE NEW EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

In the 1990s the decline of manufacturing in Europe and the US, associated with economic financialization and extreme subcontracting, led to what Negri called the crumbling of 'the factory walls' and the rise of the general intellect – a new invisible, dispersed, and biopolitical productive regime associated with post-industrial capitalism.²⁰ The fragmented, heterogeneous, fluid, and invisible working class emerging from such new capital articulation challenges traditional forms of working-class representation. As artists and cultural workers became the new lumpen within the expanding media and cultural industries, and of the particularly exploitative system of the gallery-factory,²¹ they took up the challenge of working-class representation.

Initially, it was performance artists who, following the genre of 'occupational realism', shaped their practices 'like labour', or, supported by the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork, became 'real workers' especially in the service economy.²² But in the early 2000s the field of visual art went through a re-politicization. Amidst capitalist globalization, where the spread of digital technology accompanied the massive growth of an industrialized working class in the Global South a new working-class cinema, was being born.

Western Deep

Steve McQueen's *Western Deep*²³ is a twenty-five minute long film, shot with a Super-8 camera and later transferred to video, of work in the Tautona Mines in Johannesburg, the world's deepest gold mine (3.9 km). Tautona ('The Great Lion') was built by the British multinational Anglo-American Corporation²⁴ in 1957, as part of Britain's forced industrialization of the colonies. Today AngloGold is the world's second biggest mining corporation with a dismal social record of environmental pollution in Ghana, repression of workers' strikes in Colombia, and generalized debt peonage and anti-black violence across the four continents where it operates. Nearby seismic activities force the management to constantly revise the miners' layout and mining methods, creating even more precarious working conditions. With 800 km of tunnels, the mine is an underground city, inhabited by 5,600 miners. The Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor commissioned *Western Deep* for the international exhibition *Documenta XI*. Enwezor justified the commission by saying that the film rendered 'the terrible nearness of distant places that global logic sought to abolish and bring into one domain of deterritorialized rule'.²⁵

The first five minutes of *Western Deep* is nearly entirely black and silent, occasionally punctuated with shrieking mechanical noises and red blurred

flashes on the miners' faces. We are in the 'cage' with the miners, descending with them down the shaft. We don't know how many miners are around the camera. Some double deck cages can fit up to 120 workers. The gate suddenly opens, the sound disappears and an artificial green light invades the field of vision. The sequences that follow are de-structured and sensorially overwhelming. We pass through dark tunnels, miners drilling into the walls, water spilling, wet faces occasionally hit by cones of light, and human flesh coming in and out the camera's visual threshold. The soundtrack alternates between drilling noise and silence. Images of labour are intercut with images of miners relaxing in a workers' lounge.

Next, we witness a surreal medical examination. Two rows of miners in blue boxer shorts perform a step exercise while monitored by doctors. They continuously step up and down, following a loud mechanical sound synchronized with blinking red lights. They have thermometers in their mouths. We experience the mechanical time of Taylorism. Miners become machines in human flesh. Slowly, the red light accelerates its rhythm to the point of flashing chaotically. Sound and image become detached from each other. The bodies of the miners accelerate, as if out of control. We are experiencing a terrifying ritual of dispossession. The surrealist style of Jean Rouch's film 'Mad Masters'²⁶ – focused on a possession ritual in post-colonial Accra – comes to mind. The sequence ends with a close-up of the red light of the buzzer, an expanded and abstract red zone.

The issue of scale is central in industrial films such as this. How to represent the vast expanse of the mine, the extreme heat (140 degrees Fahrenheit), and the immense value of small grains of gold?²⁷ The strategy chosen by McQueen is to bring the viewer to imagine what cannot be shown and based on a multisensory aesthetics, rather than provide visual evidence. In darkness, it is the soundtrack that leads the action, so that we can 'listen to images' before we see them.²⁸ Art historian T. J. Demos²⁹ argues that *Western Deep's* 'aesthetics of opacity' is representative of a new current documentary practice in art that challenges the false assumption of neutrality and unmediated representation and embraces 'instability' as a new political register. McQueen solves the political dilemma of the impossibility of representing work from the point of view of labour by shifting from realistic representation to abstraction. Bright red, artificial green, electric blue cast on a dark background produce different hues of 'blackness', intended not as representation of an absence but rather as a 'chromatic force' or an 'undercurrent movement'.³⁰

The notion of blackness and opacity as a form of resistance and 'counter movement' is central to postcolonial Marxism and black radical philosophy.

In Marxist terms, every working-class representation quantifies, objectifies, dis-embeds, and reifies the un-representable and unique experience of labour. Thus, black Marxism embraces abstraction to resist the commodity form and the representation of the working class 'as a single being'.³¹

The destabilization of black identity is a central trope in McQueen's work, resonating with the diasporic narratives of the Sankofa Film and Video group and the Black Audio Film Collective in London whose critique of the Thatcherite politics of race and class, as well as of the Eurocentric mode of documentary representation, inspired him. But the focus of *Western Deep* is neither on labour nor on race or class. Rather, it is on the dis-identification and disorientation experienced by the viewer in encountering opaque images, which like ghosts, represent the un-representable. In this sense the film produces not so much a new form of realist aesthetics, but a form of subversive biopolitics, locating the viewer in a zone of doubt and sensory dislocation in which they are able to connect with the subaltern.

West of the Tracks

With the emergence of affordable digital video (DV) cameras in the 1990s, Chinese independent film-makers, avoiding state censorship, started to address the inequalities associated with the post-socialist transition in China.³² In its representation of the exploitative *hakou* migration regime, working-class poverty in rust-belt areas, and the dehumanizing subcontracting system in the apparel and electronic industries, the so-called Chinese 'new documentary movement' went beyond traditional forms of filmic class representation. The independent DV movement embraced a specific amateur and improvised DIY ethics and a realist aesthetics – described as *xianchang*, which translates as 'live' and 'on the scene' – based on the ethnographic method of spending long times with film subjects, shooting in real settings and with no crew. It organized private screenings, informal and online distribution of cheap and pirated DVDs that reached out to disenfranchised counter-publics consisting of ethnic and religious minorities and LGBTQ communities.³³

Wang Bing's *West of the Track*³⁴ is an epic nine-hour long film documenting the decay of the industrial district of Tiexi in the city of Shenyang, and the struggles of its industrial workers to exist in the liminal zone of post-socialism. For fifty years, Tiexi has been China's largest industrial base and the embodiment of socialist planning. During the Reform Era, the Tiexi complex resisted the country's shift to the market economy, and up until the 1980s it still employed around a million workers. By the early 1990s, the district started to decline, and by the end of the decade most of its factories were closed. In 2002, the 16th Congress of the Communist Party

announced the transformation of the area into a high-tech industrial hub. But the promise was never delivered, and the Tiexi district now lies in ruin. As mass unemployment rises in the area, so do mass protests and labour demonstrations.³⁵

The film is divided into three parts. The first part, 'Rust', follows a group of factory workers in three state-run factories: a smelting plant, an electric cable factory, and a sheet metal factory. When they are not struggling with sub-standard equipment, poisonous waste, and hazardous labour, workers spend their time in idleness, waiting for raw material that will never arrive. By the time the film is finished, the three plants have closed. The second part, 'Remnants: Pretty Girls Street' follows the working-class families of the old state-run housing block *Rainbow Row*, focusing on teenage children who struggle to see a future beyond unemployment. The third part, 'Rails' narrows its focus to a single father and son who scavenge the rail yards and sell raw parts to local factories in order to survive.

As a young film student who had never shot a film before, Wang Bing arrived in Tiexi in 1999 with a borrowed DV camera. He left two years later with more than 300 hours of footage (0.02 Shooting.R). Critics have described *West of Track* as a rumination on post-socialist modernity, a melancholic tribute to the working class, and 'an act of mourning'.³⁶ As per McQueen, Wang's observation of the slow dissolution of the industrial working class in China is not rendered through visual evidence, but rather through an imperfect, opaque, and reflexive mode of witnessing. For film critic Ramos-Martinez,³⁷ the aesthetics of *West of Tracks* is marked by a process of oxidation, of rusting of images. Rusts creeps on the factory walls, on train trucks and even in domestic spaces. Rust makes disbanded industrial tools and machines 'vibrant' with matter,³⁸ and at the same time, shows the imperfection, decay, and fragility of images. It creates zones of intensity and invisibility inside the frame. Paradoxically, this enhanced sense of materiality derives from the pixelated quality of the digital medium, which is, by its very nature, immaterial. Especially at low visual thresholds and in scenes filmed at night, blobs, forms, and patterns seem to emerge from nowhere, attacking and distorting the image, whilst human bodies disappear into the digital flow, engulfed in electronic surfaces that 'are screen for other luminous entities'.³⁹ Indeed, as the camera in *West of Track* wanders through industrial ruins, scavenges for waste, and witnesses the workers floating in steaming baths, it pulls the viewer into a mesmerising wandering, akin to the surrealist *derive*.

The oxidation of *West of Tracks*, in addition to producing an aesthetics of opacity, constructs a more-than-human temporality allegorically questioning

the linear logic of the planned economy, of working-class history, and even of the film experience. This temporal challenge comes from the violent and unexpected intrusions of natural elements inside the film – not only rust, but also snow, earth, rain, and dust – which disrupts the workers’ agency as well as that of the film-maker who, through the camera movements, we feel struggling against extreme environmental conditions. We experience nature’s contribution to the slow collapse of a socialist workplace – as an active force – and the fleeting and random movements of rain, dust, and snow being more effective than human actions, in eroding the structural ground of socialism. We ‘feel’ the end of socialism and the beginning of the new cycle of the market economy through the flow of nature, and in the form of corrosion of the monumental – in anti-monumental style.

Bitter Money

Wang’s subsequent film *Bitter Money*,⁴⁰ commissioned for Documenta 14, is a masterful description of the lives of rural migrants working in the booming garment factories of Huzhou. Using a small digital video camera with an autofocus lens, Wang filmed between 2014 and 2016, producing more than 2,000 hours of footage, which he then edited down to two-and-a-half hours. The film starts with a 15-year-old girl and her older cousin talking and fantasizing about the future on the evening before their long journey to Huzhou. Their sense of hope quickly dissipates in the journey – first on bus, then on train, then again on bus, and terminating with a long walk under the rain into the grey building block of their dormitories. During the journey, which lasts twenty minutes in the film, we learn of the desperate working conditions these migrant workers are leaving behind.

Once in Huzhou, Wang’s filming becomes more directed and less observational, as it moves from workshop to workshop, closely documenting the manual skills of these supposedly unskilled subcontractors (their weaving, cutting, and folding), tracking down the movement of value across invisible production chains (from the production of the garment to its packaging), and sketching a visual narrative of re-composition, reconstruction, and reparation that goes against the workers’ material alienation, fragmentation, and separation. Following the gentle weaving and threading of the camera around simple human gestures, we learn the architecture of the flat/workshop where every room has at least three working stations; we overhear workers talking of hourly piece rates, their bosses’ profits, and the wealth they will accumulate before returning home. We overhear one of them: ‘they say you will earn 10.4 million in three months. Who falls for that roams around like a lost soul and behaves like a ghost’. We witness women working hard and

being resilient and men getting drunk, defeated, and abusive. At one point, a worker, Liu, describes her rift with her husband and her wish to split from him. Her cousin warns her, ‘You are too tiny to defeat him. What woman can overpower a man?’

As in *West of Truck*, we feel the filmmaker’s dwelling in the flow of relations – sweeping past in crowded rooms, standing by beds at night and even passively observing Liu’s abusive husband beating and harassing her for ten minutes. In a sequence such as this, we wonder why the angry husband allows the film-maker to film and question the clinical detachment of the film-maker. Towards the end of the film, a traffic accident leads the workers to congregate on their balcony, half absorbed in the scene of the accident and half in a beautiful sunset. From the street, a police officer shouts at them: ‘What are you looking at? Go away’. As the workers return to their rooms the camera takes another quick peek down as if to acknowledge its voyeuristic presence all along.

Bitter Money ends with some workers packing garments into giant plastic bags in a busy backstreet at night. Amongst them we recognize Liu and her husband. That the film ends with the last phase of the production process unfolding in real time (the scene lasts ten minutes and is nearly unedited) makes us realize that the process of filming and the process of producing garments have been running in parallel all along. Besides, we know that these garments will be exported to some European countries for foreign consumption, and we also know that Wang’s film will be seen only outside China. Perhaps the title *Bitter Money* means that as well as alienating the working class, money also has alienated Wang from his native country? In the last sequence, the workers finish packing and run into different directions, seeking shelter from heavy rain. As in *West of Truck*, it is a random natural event that drives the visual narrative. But just before the end, Liu appears from nowhere, runs towards the packed merchandise, checks the label on it, and disappears again.

Miners, Grooms, Pneumoconiosis

We have seen how, in the case of the Chinese documentary movement, digital production and distribution reflected the strategic needs of an increasingly young and precarious working class, and new modes of critical investigation and political assembly. But digital technology per se cannot explain the resurgence of working-class cinema in China or elsewhere. Take for instance the film *Miners, Grooms, Pneumoconiosis*⁴¹ (2019) by Jiang Nengjie. Shot over eight years, the film investigates illegal coalmining in the central province of Huan, and the fatal lung diseases that affect most local

miners. Jiang was born in the mountains of rural Hunan and many of the characters in the films are his relatives. It is because of the social proximity to his subjects that the camera is allowed into the forbidden space of illegal mining. We see miners at work at night to avoid state inspectors and officials, digging pits on mountain tops, taking shelter in makeshift huts under the snow, talking about corrupt and lazy state bureaucrats. We witness children watch their fathers dying in a dilapidated rural clinic.

Jiang, whose income mostly relies on wedding videos, did not submit the film for state approval nor enter it in national or international festivals. Instead he distributed it online, sending instructions to anonymous individuals on how to download it free from the internet. The film became a sensation after going viral on YouTube, where it got more than 10,000 downloads. But *Miners, Grooms, Pneumoconiosis* also received heavy criticism from nationalist party cadres and the film-making community, who argued that it exposed illegal miners to the threat of legal persecution. Indeed, the individualistic character of the film process, the lack of consultation with the subjects despite (or because of) their familiarity with the film-maker, and its distribution according to the logic of social media beg the question of whether this film really speaks for the working class.

American Factory

It is against the background of Wang's films that the significance of the workplace documentary *American Factory*, made by Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert and produced by Barak and Michelle Obama for Netflix, can best be appreciated for what it tells us about the working-class experience in today's global cyber-capitalism. During her early career, film-maker Julia Reichert was part of the group of experimental film-makers associated with Jonas Mekas and Stan Brackage and the radical film collective *Newsreel* in NYC. True to her working-class background (her dad was a unionized butcher), Reichert produced militant feminist films, which she considered as means of labour organising rather than just aesthetic experimentation or working-class representations. Snubbing commercial distribution in cinema theatres, she distributed her films instead in schools, unions, and community groups. Reichert's shift from militant to mainstream cinema is therefore an unexpected departure.

American Factory documents the painful transformation of the General Motors car plant in Dayton, Ohio, which had been closed since 2008, into the new Chinese auto glass manufacturer Fuyao, opened in 2014, and alongside this, the struggles of American workers against the exploitative Chinese regime of production. The film starts with a celebration of the reopening of

the plant, when the residents of Dayton warmly welcome the management of Fuyao and its chairman Cao Dewang – referred to as ‘Chairman Cao’. But the good mood soon fades as the Chinese management starts to regiment the American workforce to a harsh labour regime in order to increase productivity. Salaries are just \$27,000 per year – a supervisor tells us that his daughter earns \$40,000 working in a nail salon – and unpaid overtime on weekends is the norm. Despite the management’s clear determination to crush any attempt to unionize, activists from the local 696 UAW start a unionization campaign on the shop floor, and eventually organize a ballot. Some militant workers are fired. The ballot ends with a crushing defeat: less than 40 per cent of the workers support the unionization of the plant.

Throughout the film, the conflict between the management and the workforce is described as a culture clash. US workers seem lost vis-à-vis the Chinese corporate rituals – the inaugurations, the cutting of ribbons, the misspelled company values, the logos and the flags, and the ritualistic group meetings before the morning shifts. On the other hand, the paternalism of the Chinese management is filled with cultural stereotyping of the Americans. An empathic supervisor commiserates with the Americans for having two jobs at a time. At a Human Relations training meeting, Chinese managers are told that Americans are simple, bluntly honest, and childlike, that ‘they want to be pleased’ and ‘made feel important’. It is touching to see muscular working men adapting to make fragile auto glasses. As these shatter and break in the background, a Chinese manager tells us ‘Their fingers are so fat ... we have to keep on training them’. Eventually, the American management is entirely replaced by a Chinese one and the cultural gap widens. ‘We need to use all our intelligence to help them,’ says a concerned manager.

Towards the end of the film, in the crowded company auditorium, chairman Cao announces that the company has a \$40 million deficit, and it may soon close. The workforce is terrified. In the next sequence chairman Cao, while being driven to the airport, ponders, ‘In the past few decades I have built so many factories. Have I taken the peace away and destroyed the environment? I don’t know if I am a contributor or a sinner.’ In the film’s final sequence two engineers walk with chairman Cao through the empty workshop, explaining the heavy work reorganization ahead. The working stations are filled with robotic arms. One engineer tells to Cao, ‘Here there used to be one worker’. At the next working station, he says, ‘Here I am going to get rid of four workers’. In the end credits, we learn that the company is still open and operates at a profit.

Sorry We Missed You

The central message of Ken Loach's latest film, *Sorry We Missed You*, comes already at the opening credits, when we hear the main character Ricky being interviewed for the job of parcel delivery driver:

BOSS: Let's get a few things straight: you don't get hired here, you 'come on board', we call it 'onboarding'; you don't work for us you 'work with us'; you don't drive for us, you 'perform services'; there is no employment contract there is no performance target, 'you meet delivery standards'; there is no wages but 'fees'; no clocking on, but you 'become available'; if you sign with us you become an 'owner driver franchisee', masters of your own destiny, separated from the fucking losers and one of the warriors. Are you up for that? RICKY: Yes, I have been waiting for ages.

The remainder of the film deals with the consequences of Ricky having signed such a Faustian contract, and with his slow descent to hell together with his wife Abbie, who is subject to a similar exploitative labour regime as a contract nurse and in-home carer. In her soul-destroying affective labour of looking after disabled, elderly, and vulnerable people, Abbie struggles to reconcile the inhuman laws of capital – the zero hours contract, the unpaid transfers, and the piece-work rates — with the intense emotional needs of her 'clients' who constantly push her into uncomfortable physical interactions and maternal 'tuck-ins' in baths, toilets, and beds.

As in previous films, Loach's social realist style – the non-professional actors, the working-class locations, and the hyper-realistic dialogue based on real-life ethnographic observations – draws the spectator into a detached and alienated (in Lukács terms) observation of working-class life, enhanced by the soft and melancholy light engulfing Newcastle's hilly working-class suburbs.

The first alienating effect comes from Paul Laverty's well-researched script, which provides a constant sociological and historical contextualization of the characters' lives, as if they were mere illustrations of the workings of capitalism. 'We lost our house when Northern Rock's crushed ten years ago' says Abbie to one of her patients; 'he ended up with £75,000 debts and now works in a call centre', says the rebellious son Seb about a friend's university experience, to Ricky who is attempting to discourage him from playing truant; and 'I need to work!' screams Ricky to Abbie and Seb who are trying to keep him safe at home, in a melodramatic final scene that recalls De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*. The second alienating effect is triggered by the

occasional glitches of the non-professional actors – Chris Hitchen who plays Ricky is a plumber in real life; Abbie is played by real life teaching assistant Debbie Honeywood; Seb is a graffiti artist; and all of Ricky’s colleagues are real-life delivery drivers. As for reality television and epic theatre,⁴² in this film the perceived artificiality of acting draws the spectator’s attention to the absurdity of the overarching framework – a capitalist system that disposes with the uniqueness of human beings and turns them into mere ciphers.

Historically, the melodramatic genre in cinema has been used to deconstruct middle-class morality, typically in Douglas Sirk’s depictions of the catastrophic consequences of the patriarchy and racism of the affluent bourgeoisie.⁴³ But Loach’s turning of the reflective gaze upon the very working class – upon Ricky’s initial sin of wanting to be like a capitalist – ends up reproducing the power of capital vis-à-vis labour, as either it forces the working class to identify with ‘a fucking loser’ or restricts the restorative power of drama to those middle classes who can afford the noble refusal. ‘Sorry we missed you’ is the standardized message stamped – as if handwritten – on the postcards delivery drivers leave to customers who are absent, and which Ricky uses to write a love message to Abby just before the film’s final dramatic scene. This absence can be read in several and possibly conflicting ways, and it is precisely the gap between the openness of the meaning and the clarity of the message that ultimately tells us that we are stuck with just one reality: capitalism is here to stay.

It has been said that Loach is the most European amongst the British filmmakers, if anything because his films are heavily financed by European companies and EU film-funds. But there is no mention of Brexit in the film, which deals mainly with the white working class. Whether it comes from Loach’s personal views or from the need to reach out to European audiences, this silence is another way in which the point of view of the working class has gone missing.

Labour in a Single Shot

The pensive spectator will have a very different kind of film experience roaming in the online digital archive of the Labour in a Single Shot project, containing videos of one to two minutes in length of work of any kind – of cobblers, cooks, waiters, farmers, window cleaners, surgeons, nurses, tattoo-artists, or garbage workers – taken in single shots. Set up by filmmakers Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki, the archive contains around 150 films from the video production workshops they led in fifteen cities worldwide between 2011 and 2019.

The scope of the project is not only to uncover and render visible

contemporary forms of labour but also to reflect on the labour of the film-maker. How to capture labour as an event, in all its integrity and its fluid internal choreography? How to valorize it, rather than objectify it?

As in all of Farocki's *oeuvre*, *Labour in a Single Shot* reflects on the kind of consciousness generated by cinema since its beginning: 'early films such as the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* and *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* were made in a single continuous shot and implied that every detail of the moving world is worth considering and capturing. They were forced by the immobile camera to have a fixed point of view whereas the documentary films of today often tend to indecisive cascades of shots. The single-shot film, in contrast, combines predetermination and openness, concept and contingency'.⁴⁴

Farocki's film, *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik (Workers leaving the factory)*⁴⁵ refers to the Lumieres' film. It consists of compiled film sequences of workers leaving the workplace, sourced from documentaries, industrial and propaganda films, newsreels, and features. The compulsive reproduction of images of workers leaving the factory reflects the impossibility of representing the agency of labour due to its dispersed, immaterial, and fragmented nature, especially today. Composed as an unfolding visual archive, the film interrogates and re-enacts such fragmented labour agency.

The film montage had a totalizing effect on me. With the montage before me, I found myself gaining the impression that for over a century cinematography had been dealing with just one single theme. Like a child repeating for more than a hundred years the first words it has learned to speak in order to immortalize the joy of first speech.⁴⁶

It is paradoxical that the pristine qualities of the single shot, its magical power of capturing movement, ends up being enhanced by the cut, the moment in which movement is arrested, and in the compositional space of the visual archive, where the labour of the film-maker overpowers that of the worker. Yet this nostalgic wandering in the visual archives in search of labour's original movement feels more uplifting than the nationalistic recasting of class struggle in terms of cultural difference in *American Factory*, or the downcast stories of the British proletariat in Loach's working-class films.

CONCLUSION

What does this survey tell us about working-class cinema today? First, revolutionary cinema is not about specific technologies, aesthetics, or social

processes, but emerges from the encounter between specific conditions of production, circulation, and consumption, contingent working-class struggles and forms of radical imagination. Second, the notion of militant cinema is historically specific. The politics of the modernist film-maker was to gather visual evidence in order to improve working-class conditions; that of the diasporic artist is to bring the viewer to endorse the point of view of the subaltern, achieved through an aesthetics of opacity and dis-identification, whereas the contemporary video maker is engaged in direct advocacy and campaign – as in Jang’s advocacy against illegal mining and, to a certain extent, *American Factory*, which I read as a ‘nationalistic’ call for unionization. Thus, to Mulvey’s typologies of spectatorship – the ‘possessive spectator’ who is fetishistically absorbed in the spectacle of images, and the self-reflexive and historically minded ‘pensive spectator’ – a third should be added: that of the tactical spectator who ‘takes cinema entirely as an instrument, complement or support of a specific political goal’.⁴⁷ But in treating film just as epistemology, ontology, or advocacy, respectively, each of these three modalities of militant cinema lacks an essential dimension of working-class life and therefore is alienated. A working-class cinema made by the working class remains a distant utopia.

The new ethnographic genre of labour representation developed by artists working in digital format such as Wang and McQueen – characterized by an extremely high shooting ratio, opaque aesthetics, irreversible temporality, and sensuous camera presence – reflects not only the new conditions of production and distribution associated with digital film, but also new modes of consumption and access, specifically the format of the film installation in the art gallery, in which Wang’s and McQueen’s films are primarily shown. According to T. J. Demos, the format of the film-installation forces audiences to actively register the materiality and physical presence of film – ‘haptically as well as optically’.⁴⁸ The spectator’s experience of *West of Tracks* in the gallery is nearly mystical. In the liminal space ‘between video projection and exhibition’ as the bodies of the miners disappear in darkness, spectators are touched by the light of film. Existing between materiality and immateriality – luminosity and darkness – viewers are destabilized and sensorially overwhelmed, and at the same time, they engage in an active process of self-transformation. From passive and sovereign observers, they become immaterial, sensuous, and image-like.

From the discussion above, it can be argued that working-class cinema made by artists has the following characteristics: (1) a pensive mode attuned to temporality, memory, and history; (2) individual film-making in which the film-making process is set up as a process of self-discovery, and where

cinematic time and real time tend to converge; (3) a new aesthetics of opacity, fragmentation, and multi-perspectivism; and (4) gallery distribution, under the curatorial mode of production and in the exhibition format, often in the context of group shows and biennials. Demos' mystical appreciation of artist film-installations fits well with art historian Boris Groys' description of the logic of the contemporary art museum. Unlike the traditional museums of historical art, which functioned as a mechanism of neutralization of time and abolition of history, the contemporary art museum embraces the flow of time. Unlike the former, which gave spectators a sovereign gaze, the latter pushes the spectator right inside 'the curated event', where images interact with objects, images, texts, and documents, as well as with the architecture of the space, sound, and light. Thus, according to Groys,⁴⁹ the contemporary art museum 'stages and enacts its own precariousness'.

With Jameson⁵⁰ I would argue that the curatorial mode of production of the contemporary art gallery reflects the experience economy of late capitalism, based on the valorization of precariousness, and in which the precariousness of the public that activates the artwork – as 'prosumer', that is, as both producer and consumer – is an instance of the precariousness of labour in general. In fact, if the opacity and the sensuous and durational quality of artists' films on the working class push the spectator into an emancipated and inquiring posture, their insertion into the curated event ultimately disempowers them and neutralizes their curiosity. In the space where the image-spectator meets the 'abstract real' presence of the workers, the destabilized art spectator lacks the empathy, or the time, to identify with the destabilized worker, despite their common de-territorialized and subterranean existence.

But less opaque modes of labour representations are similarly problematic for how, by turning the gaze back to the working class, they end up reifying it as either a dehumanized cipher of capital, as in *Sorry We Missed You*, or an identitarian and particularistic social formation, as in *American Factory*. If the ontological approach of the curatorial mode of production, by focusing on the pensive spectator, disavows the subject of representation – the working class – the documentary approach pulls the focus back to it but only to 'please' (as per Mulvey's notion of visual pleasure) the possessive spectator.

Besides, the horizontal, creative, and experimental approach of the digital spectator, highlighted by Mulvey, relies on the film-maker validating the viewer with some 'emancipatory power'. The simple nationalistic message of *American Factory* doesn't leave much room for creative interpretation, whereas Farocki's *Labour in a Single Shot* online archive does open up a pensive space of memory, reparation, and experimental reconstruction of

the future of cinema through a glance to its early beginning. It is also telling that these different forms of online distributions – Netflix’s streaming is by subscription only, whereas Farocki’s archive can be freely accessed – imagine different forms of social aggregation: isolated, private, and lonely in the former; collective, dialectical, and playful in the latter – another insight into how cinema doesn’t just reflect existing social relations, but also creates them anew.

NOTES

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- 12 Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, (4h27’), 1998.
- 13 Octavio Getino, ‘The Cinema as a Political Fact’, *Third Text* 25(1), 2011, pp. 41-53 and Ismail Xavier, *Allegories of Underdevelopment: Aesthetics and Politics in Modern Brazilian Cinema*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
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- 22 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practices in the Vietnam War*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2009; and Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.
- 23 Steve McQueen, *Western Deep*, (24'12"), 2002.
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- 25 Okwui Enwezor, The Black Box, *Documenta 11, Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue*, Ostfildern- Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002, p. 44.
- 26 Jean Rouch, *Le Maitres Fous (Mad Masters)*, (28'), 1955.
- 27 Gold is so expensive that a mine such as Tautona only needs to extract 0.35 ounces from a ton of rock to be profitable. It produces 209,000 ounces per year.
- 28 Black philosopher Tina Campt calls 'listening to images' the multisensory and non-fetishistic approach to images, especially with regards to representation of people of color. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- 29 T. J. Demos, 'The Art of Darkness: On Steve McQueen', *October Magazine* 114, 2005, MIT Press, pp. 61-89.
- 30 Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of Nothing: Abstract Art Since Pollock*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. Black philosopher Fred Moten argues that Fanon's post-colonial philosophy embodies movement. Fred Moten, 'The Case of Blackness', *Criticism* 2, 2008 Wayne State University Press, pp. 177-218.
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- 38 This is a reference to Janet Bennett's book *Vibrant Matter*, which emphasizes the active role that material objects have on social and political life. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

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- 46 Harun Farocki, 'Workers Leaving the Factory', *NachDruck/Imprint*, Berlin: Verlag Vorwerk, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2001, p. 32.
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- 48 T. J. Demos, 'The Art of Darkness: On Steve McQueen', p. 70.
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- 50 Frederic Jameson, 'The Aesthetics of Singularity', *New Left Review*, 92, March April 2015, p. 110.