Visions of Labour: Socialist Realism, American Reality TV and the Politics of Documentary

by

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Centre for Comparative Literature
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Abstract

This dissertation considers a number of ideological visions of labour constructed through film and television. The socialist realist vision of work is considered through Soviet films of the 1930s within the context of the building of a workers’ state. This was a modernist dream of non-alienated human labour where the workers create and master the world, their labour revealing and capturing the utopian content in the now. In contrast to this utopian vision are several documentaries that depict technocratic dreams or nightmares of post-apocalyptic societies only to reveal that that future is already here for some. In the documentary central to this project, Michael Glawogger’s Workingman’s Death, workers inhabit the nowhere places of the global economy, their work unrecognizable as modern day labour. In construction of labour within global capitalism, the workers are rendered as alien and indeterminate, making identification and solidarity difficult if not impossible. The last section of the dissertation considers the vision of labour and the worker as constructed by neoliberalism not in faraway places but in our living rooms: workers competing on reality television for our entertainment. These pictures of labour reveal that work and the worker are socio-historical constructs, and that one of the central goals of emancipatory politics should be the self-representation of workers. The worker must be
brought back to the forefront of politics and to the analysis of how the worker is represented in film, television, and in our society as a whole.
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I can’t tell you what art does and how it does it, but I know that often art has judged the judges, pleaded revenge to the innocent and shown to the future what the past suffered, so that it has never been forgotten. I know too that the powerful fear art, whatever its form, when it does this, and that amongst the people such art sometimes runs like a rumour and a legend because it makes sense of what life’s brutalities cannot, a sense that unites us, for it is inseparable from a justice at last.

John Berger, “Miners”

In the factory, there is the worker.

Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*
Introduction

In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams describes how pastoral poetry imagines and depicts the English country life. The idealisation of the countryside in the pastoral tradition is not only a dream of a primeval utopia, but in some important poems is “commonly read as describing an actual rural economy: an existing social base for the perpetual peace and innocence” (26). In these poems, the social structure is seen as a natural order and culture as an expression of nature itself. In contrast to the city, which is a place of commerce and industry, the country is a place where peasants live in harmony with nature. This mystification of the countryside, writes Williams, is made possible by “a simple extraction of labourers” (32). The workers are erased from the pastoral vision of the country:

The actual men and women who rear the animals and drive them to the house and kill them and prepare them for meat; who trap the pheasants and partridges and catch the fish; who plant and manure and prune and harvest the fruit trees: these are not present; their work is all done for them by a natural order. (32)

The bounty of the countryside is given to the lord by nature itself, not by the labour of the poor. The workers who create the wealth, then, rely on the charity and *noblesse oblige* of the lords who profit from the workers’ labour. These are visions of the aristocracy, idealizing the feudal order and the exploitation of the peasants, hiding the labour of the many exploited people behind the promise of the Paradise. This vision of the Golden Age also figures in the naive radicalism which opposes the brutality and exploitation of capitalism, as it is represented by the city. The idealization of the rural agricultural economy elides the fact that agriculture was as brutal and exploitative as the work in the factories: “this economy, even at peace, was an order of exploitation of a most thoroughgoing kind: a property in men as well as in land; a reduction of most men to working animals [...]; an economy directed, in all its working relations, to a physical and economic domination of a significantly total kind” (37-8). The contrast between the country and the city is based on a fiction that the rural economy is somehow gentler, more natural than the harsh modernity of the city. When we look at the countryside and see the idyllic vision of peasants and cottagers existing in a peaceful harmony with nature, what is hidden from our view is the labour of the rural workers, “the brief and aching lives of the permanently
cheated; the field labourers whom we never by any chance see; the dispossessed and the evicted” (54). The countryside is not an harmonious natural order, it is created by the labour of people whose existence and work is obscured. The contrast between the town and the country is a fiction that serves “to promote superficial comparisons and to prevent real ones” (54).

When I started this project, I too did not see the labour of many generations of workers when looking at the countryside landscapes or at historical artifacts despite being raised in the last years of the Soviet Union, where we were taught that the world is created by human labour and that the world belongs to the working people. The inspiration for my research came from a fortuitous viewing of Michael Glawogger’s documentary Workingman’s Death, which left a deep impression and made me think about the difficult labour of workers in faraway places. Their labour, as depicted in the film, is gruelling and unimaginable. Yet, the leap from knowing that there are people labouring today in difficult and exploitative conditions, just as there have always been throughout human history, to recognizing that everything is made and remade by human labour did not come until later. In his poem “Questions from a Worker Who Reads” (1935), Bertolt Brecht asks, “Who built Thebes of the 7 gates? / In the books you will read the names of kings. / Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock? / And Babylon, many times demolished, / Who raised it up so many times?” The realization that human labour created everything around us is an uncomfortable one. Suddenly, every object begins to reveal the exploitation of workers both present and past: who created this and how did it come to be where it is? What kind of life did the men and the women whose labour is concealed in this object lead? There is a chain of workers between extraction of raw materials and the existence of this object. Yet both their lives and the relations between them are obscure and unintelligible.

The disavowal of human labour as the force that creates the world is also present in the academy. The classical Marxist focus on the work and the worker is often considered to be too simplistic or outdated in the postmodern world. The working class is part of history, not of present-day reality in the post-work society where there are no longer any classes. We live in the knowledge economy, or information economy, or creative economy and the old Marxist concepts of alienation, exploitation, or class are no longer relevant. In one of the seminars on radical leftist thought that I attended as a graduate student, I naively asked what the relevance of all this theory is for the lives of the working people. The old question of “what is to be done?” was judged as too simple and reductive. I had revealed an inability to think beyond the material
daily existence. The worker is left behind both by neoliberalism and by much of the leftist theory. This project, as it is in its present form, emerged as I began asking “where is the worker?”

This dissertation puts together reflections on work and the worker that have emerged as I began to see the world of academia and the world outside of it, especially in popular culture and the pages of daily newspapers, through this question of the worker’s absence. It is at times polemical, but I believe that politics requires us to pick a side and argue for it. The Soviet portion of the dissertation was an obvious choice, both because of my background and because, despite its failures, the Soviet Union was an historical experiment in the creation of a worker state where human labour would no longer be alienated. As I considered various aspects of labour in Soviet film, the comparison to reality television became apparent. The paradigmatic worker in the neoliberal economy was to be found not on Hollywood screens or in independent or leftist cinema but in our living rooms, and increasingly on our computer screens—on the people’s medium of television. Reality television often provokes horrified reactions from more discerning viewers. But its construction and depiction of work and the worker reveals much about our society; it constructs narratives of who is worthy of our admiration and who deserves our derision.

In between the chapters, there are several brief sections that I called intermissions. These are about the intersections of labour and art; they are not meant to provide in-depth analysis but inform the reading of the chapter that follows. They also signal that this project does not seek to create a unified theory or overarching argument about labour as such but rather to look at the representation of work and the working people from a number of angles. If there is an overarching argument, it is that the worker must be brought back to the forefront of radical politics and to the analysis of how the worker is represented in film, television, and in our society as a whole.

Chapter one, “Work, Society, Cinema,” attempts to establish a framework for understanding labour in relation to contemporary society and to cinema. This project relies on the understanding of labour as a socio-historical construct and the initial impulse was to try to define work, but that project would be both enormous and futile. In any case, there are excellent studies that provide a historical foundation for viewing labour as a historical construct,
especially Herbert Applebaum’s *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (1992). This chapter, then, while relying on some historical material, sets up the metaphor of factory-worker, drawn from the writings of Alain Badiou, as a way of conceptualizing worker-centered politics in the neoliberal economy. The factory-worker pairing is a metaphor for a specific configuration of work and politics. The second half of the chapter discusses the relationship between the factory-worker pairing and cinema. Using the metaphor of cinema at the factory gates, which is central to Harun Farocki’s film *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), I consider the possibilities of materialist cinema which bypasses the problems of representation and concretizes the worker.

Chapter two, “Socialist Realism and Labour in the Workers’ State,” focuses on the Stalinist society of the 1930s and its representation of labour in film. Despite its problems and failures, the Soviet society was a daring modernist experiment in creation of a workers’ state. Drawing on Boris Groys’ theory of Stalinism as a total work of art, this chapter combines the aesthetic understanding of socialist realism as a literary theory with the Stalinist conception of labour. Stalinism attempted to integrate labour (and the factory) into all parts of society; it is not just an economic activity but a world view. Because Soviet society was conceptualized as a post-historical society, the socialist realist idea of labour contains a utopian element which attempts to capture the utopian future in the now. This utopian surplus is the irrational element in socialist realist labour, representing that which cannot be quantified but only approximated. It is this element of human labour that is suppressed when labour is quantified into the wage-form.

The next chapter, titled “Workingman’s Death,” is a leap forward from the previous chapter into the future. In contrast to the Soviet society, which was based on the idea of the worker as the maker of the world, the worker in the future is unknowable and unrecognizable. Here I seek to combine the themes of labour, technology, and environmental concerns with the metaphor of the workingman’s death and Glawogger’s film of the same title forming the center of the chapter. Drawing on Ulrich Beck’s concept of risk society, I consider how the erasure of labour in neoliberal society comes together with the pressing ecological concerns caused in large part by global capitalism. I argue that any attempts at dealing with the possibilities of human-caused environmental catastrophe must be centered around work and the working people. It is only by centering on the worker that we can have the necessary politicised subjectivity. While I rely on Beck’s description of risk society, I disagree with him that worker-centered politics belong to an
earlier age and that cosmopolitan subjectivity is capable of forming the necessary bonds of
politicised international solidarity. I should note here, that in discussing work outsourced to the
so-called developing countries, I use what is considered to be an outdated term—the Third
World. This is a conscious choice to highlight the global relations of power but also because I
reject the euphemism “developing countries,” which hides the fact that the developed countries
rely on exploitation of the workers in the Third World nations.

The last chapter, “Work, Now as Entertainment,” looks at representation of work in American
workplace-based reality television. Once the figure of the worker is depoliticized and rendered
invisible and unrecognizable, the worker can now reappear but now as entertainment. While in
the Soviet Union, workers had to engage in socialist competition which, in theory, meant
betterment for all, here workers compete against each other with only one emerging victorious.
The worker is celebrated only insofar as he or she conforms to the demands of the market; the
rewards are charity from either the sponsors or the boss. Constructions of work and the worker
are, of course, always ideological. But in contrast to the Stalinist project, here the worker can
only be understood in individualized terms. As the viewers are invited to pass judgement on the
workers appearing on reality TV, they are also given lessons on how to be a worker in the
precarious neoliberal economy.

The four chapters seek to capture different visions of labour. The socialist realist vision of
labour is now part of history but should not be dismissed as obsolete, despite the tragedies and
failures of the Soviet society. The utopian content of this vision—that non-alienated human
labour creates utopian surplus in the now—can help us imagine a future different from the
technocratic nightmares of post-apocalyptic societies. Chapter three, which serves as a transition
from the socialist utopia to the capitalist utopia, looks at an imagined future of science-fiction
only to reveal that that future is already here for some. Chapter four, then, gives the vision of
labour and the worker as constructed by neoliberalism, where the workers compete for our
entertainment. These visions of labour reveal that work and the worker are ideologically
constructed, and that one of the central goals of emancipatory politics is self-representation of
workers.
March 25th, 1911 is an important date in the history of American labour. On that day, as the workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City were getting ready to leave at the end of their shift, a sudden fire erupted in the cluttered work area. In a matter of minutes 146 workers, mostly immigrant women, were dead due to poor working conditions and the lack of fire safety provisions. Some chose to die by jumping out of the windows because they were trapped in the burning building with locked doors. The Triangle Factory disaster mobilized the public and resulted in many labour and workplace reforms, especially workplace safety and health laws. The aftermath of the fire also spurred wider reforms and passing of laws on minimum wage, maximum hours, and child labour.¹

At the official ceremony commemorating the centennial of the disaster on March 25, 2011 Hilda Solis, the United States labour secretary, said that the victims are “146 reminders that we could and should do better” and that “they paid a very high price for the workplace protections we enjoy today” (qtd. in Greenhouse). During the same week, over the weekend of March 26–27, 2011, Governor of Maine, Paul LePage, ordered the removal of an 11-panel mural depicting the history of Maine’s workers from the lobby of the Department of Labour because “it presented a one-sided view that bowed to organized labour” (Canfield). The mural by Judy Taylor was installed in 2008 and depicted scenes from Maine’s labour history, including child labourers, textile workers, two strikes, women workers during WWII, and the introduction of the secret ballot.² The governor’s office explained that the mural was removed because it was too pro-labour, and “not in keeping with the department’s pro-business goals” (Catapano). The spokesperson for the governor said that the office received several complaints from business officials. Instead of producing multiple complaints, the governor’s office released a single anonymous fax, signed “A Secret Admirer.” This letter compares the 36-foot mural to something in “communist North Korea where they use these murals to brainwash the masses”

¹ See Leon Stein “The Triangle Fire.”

² The mural panels can be viewed on the artist’s website: http://www.judytaylorstudio.com/mural123.html
and implores the governor to “tear down this mural.” The mural was dismantled and moved to an undisclosed location.

In addition, LePage ordered the renaming of the Department of Labour conference rooms, which were named in honour of prominent figures in worker’s history, including Cesar Chavez, a civil rights activist who founded the National Farm Workers Association; William Looney, a Republican legislator who helped pass child labour laws; and Frances Perkins, US Secretary of Labour and the first woman appointed to the US Cabinet. The renaming was to be done by the staff through a contest and an internal memo suggested that “renaming the conference rooms after mountains in Maine would be appropriate” (Cover).

The removal of Judy Taylor’s mural is not the first time that depictions of the workers’ history and causes have been censored and destroyed. “Lawrence 1912: The Great Strike”, a painting by an American painter and union organizer Ralph Fasanella, was donated to the US Congress by 15 unions and was hung in the Rayburn Office Building hearing room of the House Subcommittee on Labor and Education. It depicts the historic strike by immigrant workers against poor working and living conditions in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. After the 1994 elections, the word Labor was removed from the name of the committee by the Republican majority and the painting was moved to the Lawrence Heritage State Park. Many commentators have also noted the parallels between the removal of Taylor’s mural and the destruction of Diego Rivera’s mural “Man at the Crossroads” in 1934 by Nelson Rockefeller. Rivera’s painting depicted workers facing various choices during the Great Depression, one of them being a portrait of Lenin. When Rivera refused to remove Lenin from the mural, offering instead to balance the mural with a portrait of Lincoln, Rockefeller ordered the mural destroyed. The location of the mural was eventually revealed after 22 months, numerous protests, and a federal lawsuit. It was boxed up and stored for almost two years at the Department of Labour headquarters. The mural was returned to the public display January 2013, now no longer at the

3 Peter Dreier, Professor of Politics at Occidental College, mentions this example in his article “Battle over Censorship of Maine Murals Part of a Larger Struggle for Basic Rights and Justice.”

4 Rivera later recreated the mural in Mexico City at the Palace of Fine Arts. The new mural included a portrait of John D. Rockefeller in a nightclub.
Department of Labour but in the atrium which serves as the entrance to the Maine State Museum, Maine State Library, and Maine State Archives. The mural is displayed there on loan from the Department of Labour under a three-year renewable agreement. The new venue is described by one Maine resident as “more appropriate than a hidden-away state office building” and “much more visually appealing setting” (Canfield).

While the new location might be more publically visible than the offices of the Department of Labour, moving the mural from the governmental agency responsible for improving working conditions and advancing the rights of workers explicitly depoliticises the painting and disassociates the history of workers and their struggle for workers’ rights from the current mission and role of the Department of Labour. Museums, libraries, and archives are where the past is stored. But contemporary capitalism exists in the eternal present: it is no longer the best socio-economic system, but the only possible one. Mark Fisher terms this ideology _capitalist realism_, an idea that capitalism is the only realistic socio-economic system and any alternative is not only unrealistic but literally unthinkable: “it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative” (Fisher 2). This creates an atemporality where the future, to use Terry Eagleton’s phrase, “will be pretty much like the present, only rather more so” (qtd. in Rooksby). And without the future, the past also becomes irrelevant and similarly unthinkable. The removal and subsequent relocation of the mural came at the time of collective amnesia, when labour unions are deemed to be no longer relevant or necessary. A number of states have launched successful assaults on workers’ rights and collective bargaining.

Capitalist realism not only permeates all aspects of society but also colonizes individuals’ psyche, creating limits on what is thinkable or imaginable. Fisher argues that this makes it the first successful totalitarian system. The removal of the mural was justified by invoking the spectre of totalitarianism and communism. But unlike Diego Rivera, Judy Taylor does not depict revolutionary leaders but workers of Maine and includes a panel that celebrates the introduction of the secret ballot, a crucial component of democracy. What does link Taylor’s mural to communism, however, is that it implies that history is necessary for understanding the

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5 This term was also used by Michael Schudson to discuss advertising practices. Thanks to Elspeth Brown for bringing this to my attention.
present. By focusing on the history of the workers, the mural also points out the simple but often obscured fact that it is the workers who work and that the history of people is the history of work. This, more than anything, is what makes it incendiary.

* * * * *
Chapter 1
Work, Society, Cinema

Work is the inescapable starting point for all social inquiry.

Robert Heilbroner

In 2012, after failing to negotiate worker layoffs with the labour union, Goodyear put up for sale its tire plant in Amiens, France. The sale endangered over a thousand jobs at the time when Francois Hollande’s socialist government was struggling with rising unemployment and international perception that France was “becoming the next sick man of Europe” (Alderman).

In an attempt to save the jobs, the French industry minister, Arnaud Montebourg, approached Illinois-based tire company Titan International about a potential buy-out of the Goodyear plant. Maurice Taylor, Titan’s CEO and a 1996 Republican presidential candidate known for his blunt style, visited the plant and responded to Montebourg with an incendiary letter which was leaked to the business daily Les Echos, causing an outrage in the French media. Taylor’s letter “delivered a crushing summary of how some outsiders view France’s work ethic” (Jarry) and encapsulated neo-liberal capitalist beliefs about work and about the relationship between capital, labour, and government.

Taylor writes that while companies like Goodyear and Titan International create good businesses that pay good wages, governments and unions only interfere, create obstacles, and do nothing but talk. The workers, protected by unions and governments, get paid to idle and chit-chat: “they get one hour for breaks and lunch, talk for three and work for three. I told this to the French union workers to their faces. They told me that’s the French way!” In France “government is more government” and even in the U.S. government is “not much better.” Meanwhile, the Chinese government understands the value of attracting businesses and, thus, subsidizes them while providing cheap labour. Two paragraphs from the letter are worth quoting in full:

Sir, your letter states that you want Titan to start a discussion. How stupid do you think we are? Titan is the one with the money and the talent to produce tires. What does the crazy union have? It has the French government. The French farmer wants cheap tires.
He does not care if the tires are from China or India and these governments are subsidizing them. Your government doesn’t care either: “We’re French!”

... Titan is going to buy a Chinese tire company or an Indian one, pay less than one Euro per hour wage and ship all the tires France needs. You can keep the so-called workers. Titan has no interest in the Amiens North factory. (qtd. in Wile)

The main message of the letter is that capital does not need labour to be productive and, in fact, labour stands in the way of capital’s productivity. Since it is capital, and not workers, that produces value, governments and workers must compete among themselves to attract businesses, rather than businesses competing for workers. And because labour is redistributed globally, French workers are now competing directly with workers in India and China. Workers and their labour are interchangeable, easily replaceable, and disposable. This is taken to be such an obvious truth that Taylor can actually boast of paying workers less than one Euro per hour. Profit, efficiency, productivity—these are capitalist virtues. The response to the letter in major news publications has focused on French protectionist labour laws and their viability, rather than on what the letter says about the global relationship between capital and labour. *Fortune Magazine* asked “Are the French really that lazy?” and concluded that if France does not make it easier to fire workers, there might not be any good jobs left in France. Good jobs, of course, are understood to be jobs that are favourable to the employer rather than to the employees.

This attack on workers is perhaps shocking because it is so blatant, but the attitude it displays is commonplace. How did the worker go from being a heroic figure to this? This chapter seeks to establish a framework for understanding labour as a socio-historical construction in relation to contemporary society and to cinema. This is not an attempt at a definition but rather a broad explication of the nature and the role of labour in today’s society. In my understanding of the concept of work, I rely on classical Marxist theory. I maintain that despite many arguments to the contrary, present day economic system is not a radical break from the production stage of capitalism but rather a continuation. The worker, therefore, is still central to radical politics. This chapter, then, sets up the metaphor of factory-worker, drawn from the writings of Alain Badiou, as a way of conceptualizing worker-centered politics in the neoliberal economy. The factory-worker pairing is a metaphor for a specific configuration of work and politics. The
second half of the chapter discusses the relationship between the factory-worker pairing and cinema. Using the metaphor of cinema at the factory gates, which is central to Harun Farocki’s film *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995), I consider the possibilities of materialist cinema which bypasses the problems of representation and concretizes the worker.

The classic Marxist concept of alienation is based on the relationship between objective conditions of labour and the subjective activity of the worker—or between dead capital and living labour—in the capitalist mode of production. In capitalism, surplus value created by living labour is objectified and appears as alien to itself, as the property of capital. Capital, which is congealed living labour, now appears to be its own product independent of labour. This gives labour an alien quality, separated from itself and from the worker; as Marx puts it:

> the value-creating possibility, the realization [Verwertung] which lies as a possibility within him [the worker], now likewise exists as surplus value, surplus product, in a word as capital, as master over living labour capacity, as value endowed with its own might and will, confronting him in his abstract, objectless, purely subjective poverty.

(*Grundrisse* 451)

This is the source of alienation in capitalism—the worker confronts his own labour as something alien to himself. He is alienated from his own labour, from the product of his labour, and from his species being. Work in capitalism is not recognized as creative human activity and, therefore, as value in itself. Rather, human activity is recognized “only in so far as it attracts a wage: money” (Dinerstein 2) and only if it contributes to expansion of capital even as capital appears to be self-reproducing. Exploitation in capitalism is not merely exploitation of labour as a pre-constituted category but, rather, the “simultaneous transformation of human doing into labour, the simultaneous desubjectification of the subject, the dehumanisation of humanity” (Holloway 37–8). This is what allows a CEO to claim that his company does not need “the so-called workers”; in capitalism, workers and their labour appear to be not a pre-condition of value-creation but rather an impediment to it. This reversal creates a situation where productive and socially useful work is disparaged, while those who extract wealth from others through rent-seeking are praised as value-creators. George Monbiot notes that in the past, those who created wealth, or the nouveau riche, were looked down upon by those who inherited their wealth. Today, however, “the rentiers and inheritors style themselves entre preneurs [sic]. They claim to
have earned their unearned income” (Monbiot). This creates a perception that it is capital that creates value. Businesses also create jobs, but since capital is productive *a priori*, “job creation” is now leveraged by businesses as a kind of value-added community service. While the rhetoric of “job creation” has become all-pervasive in current political discourse, the category of work is often invisible and suppressed. Jobs are discussed as an end in themselves without any reference to what kind of work they entail, how that work is organized, who profits from it, or the various ways in which those jobs and workers are subsidized by governments. When work is discussed exclusively as wage-labour form, or jobs, the workers and their labour are erased while capital is elevated as the source of value. The focus on jobs is actually an intensification of the denial of work.

In Marxist analysis, capital, in addition to being all the materials necessary for production—such as tools, raw materials, previous goods that are being processed, transportation, and money—is a social relation. Likewise, labour is not a “thing” but a complex set of social relations that are organized for commodity production and private ownership. Work conceptualized as a job, that is, sale of labour for a wage, obscures the socio-economic relationship. Capitalism is indifferent to what workers are making or doing; all wage-form of labour is abstractly the same. The nature of the product of labour is irrelevant, as long as that product is measured in terms of exchange value. Knowledge labour or affective labour, for example, can also be, and in fact are, rationalized and commodified. In emotional labour, feelings are treated as commodities and, therefore, valued through wages. Labour in capitalism loses all specificity and becomes a purely abstract activity, or abstract labour. The value of the job is determined not by its content but by the market. One result of this is that people whose work has no immediate social utility, like marketers or corporate executives, are seen as more socially productive than workers whose work contributes directly and immediately to public good and to the functioning of society. British sociologist David Graeber notes in his 2013 article for *STRIKE!* magazine, “On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs,” that public anger is usually directed at those whose work has social utility: “In our society, there seems a general rule that the more obviously one’s work benefits other people, the less one is likely to be paid for it.” Thus, public-school teachers can be blamed for economic crises: “The ineffective tenured teacher has emerged as a feared character, a vampiric type who sucks tax dollars into her bloated pension and health care plans” (Goldstein qtd. in Denby). Similarly, whenever
public transit or garbage workers go on strike, they are attacked as lazy and overpaid leeches
who hold entire cities hostage by disrupting the functioning of the society. Yet, as Graeber
points out, “the very fact that tube workers can paralyse London shows that their work is
actually necessary, but this seems to be precisely what annoys people.”

Devaluation and erasure of the worker is a precondition to “free labour”—the worker has no
value but only the power to sell her or his labour. Inequality can be legitimized by a belief that
one’s wealth is a reflection of individual hard work, character, and ability. A link between
income and merit is explicit in this belief and has an economic name: marginal-productivity
theory. This theory links “higher incomes with higher productivity and a greater contribution to
society. It is a theory that has always been cherished by the rich” (Stiglitz). At the same time,
unlike in the Protestant ethic where work and morality are brought together, in the current stage
of modernity, work has been “stripped of its eschatological trappings and cut off from its
metaphysical roots” (Bauman, Liquid Modernity 139). In the earlier stages of capitalism poverty
and deprivation could be conceived in terms of moral failure. But work stripped of all meaning
can no longer function as a foundation for ethics or morality and, by extension, as an anchor for
one’s identity. Work emptied of meaning leads, in Graeber’s words, to “profound psychological
violence”: how can a worker feel dignity in work if work is rendered essentially meaningless?

Work is fundamental to human existence. There is no outside of work; even concepts like
laziness, play, or leisure depend on the concept of work to be coherent. Our lived reality
acquires meaning through our relationship to work—it is “like a spine which structures the way
people live, how they make contact with material and social reality, and how they achieve status
and self-esteem” (Applebaum ix). For Marx, work is not only central to human existence but is
inextricably connected to our humanity: “Man is alive only inasmuch as he is productive,
inasmuch as he grasps the world outside of himself in the act of expressing his own specific
human powers, and of grasping the world with these powers” (Fromm 29). The relationship
between humanity and work is dialectical—humanity creates itself through its productive
activity. In turn, history is “nothing but the self-creation of man through the process of his work
and his production” (Fromm 26). Throughout human history, work has been understood in many
ways: as craft, labour, creative activity, vocation, paid employment, source of class
consciousness and objective historical identity. It has been subject to varying values and
beliefs—from repugnance towards wage labour in Ancient Greece, to the Protestant fusion of work and morality, to the modern link between capitalist wage labour and abstract freedom.\(^6\)

Work cannot be explained or defined simply by reference to economic rationality. It slips between economic, social, aesthetic, and moral spheres, encompassing “representations, meaning, values, and interpretations” (Wajcman, *Politics* 22). At its broadest, work is human activity. But such a definition does not provide any meaningful way to distinguish work from non-work, and social organization is, in the final instance, based on the distribution of work: who works, whose work is recognized as work, whose work is valued, who owns the products of work, and so on. This is problematised further by the slippage between work and non-work as some are rewarded for not working while some work for no reward. Work is a dynamic concept that is “quintessentially a social phenomenon,” for even when an individual works alone, they do so in a socio-historical context (Wajcman 22). Work, then, is a fundamental social institution which is historically organized, defined, and mediated. The bare fact of productive human activity is constant but its meaning, status, form, content, and value are socially and historically determined. This includes what counts as work, how work is distributed, what social meaning is attached to it, how its value is measured, and what kind of a relationship exists between work, those who perform it, and the results of their activity. Organization of work is also directly linked to how resources are distributed within a society and, thus, to the ownership of property. This is not to say that there is a one-way causal link between work and the organization of a society. Herbert Applebaum writes:

> The anthropological perspective is one which views a basic institution such as work as influencing and being influenced by all other basic institutions in a culture. The currents and crosscurrents that affect human activity in any society are affected by the manner in which work is organized and the way in which it is conceptualized. (ix)

Work is a socially determined organizing principle of a society; the dialectical relationship between organization of work and social institutions sets conditions for both by creating possibilities for some developments while excluding others.

\(^6\) The various permutations and meanings of work in the Western society are traced by the American anthropologist Herbert Applebaum in his definitive 600-page study *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern.*
With the beginning of modernity and development of capitalism, work has become separated from other life activities and turned into something separate from the normal processes of life. As Zygmunt Bauman writes, work became “a ‘thing’ which could be treated like all things—that is, to be ‘handled’, moved, joined with other ‘things’ or set asunder” (Liquid 141–2). This turns work into an instrumental category, separated from “productive activity,” which is an essential creative and transformative aspect of humanity. In the wage-labour form, work is reified and treated as just another commodity to be sold and bought, as in, for example, the notion of a labour market. The alienating nature of such a concept of work is evident in Marx’s discussion of fetishism of commodities, where the use-value of a commodity derived from useful labour appears to be a mysterious property and the social relationship between human beings, or relations of production, assumes “the semblance of a relationship between things” (Marx 45).

Towards the end of the 20th century, work had disappeared as a political category and had been recreated “as a sociological device which denies its critical capacity” (Dinerstein 16). This goes hand-in-hand with the separation of political economy into political science and economics and, therefore, the transformation of economics into a discipline divorced from political, social, or historical context. Discussing work as wage-labour without interrogating its current socio-historical organization implies that “the biographical, social and political norms of the work society will continue indefinitely into the future” (Beck, Brave 8). The capitalist mode of work is so thoroughly naturalized that, for example, a psychologist writing about the importance of meaning and engagement in one’s work concludes that “when employees have work that they want to do, they are happier. And when they are happier, their work is better, as is the company’s bottom line” (Schwartz). The assumption that self-expression, meaning, and personal satisfaction in one’s work is compatible with capital’s demand for ever-increasing productivity, efficiency, and profits is accepted as if it is a self-evident truth. Happiness is not an end in itself but must be inevitably rationalized and, ultimately, understood in terms of the bottom line. Reification and naturalization of the current organization of work obscures its many contradictions and forecloses new possibilities. While there has been a rapid growth in anti-commodification publications and movements, the structural commodification of work is almost never discussed. It is puzzling that “the existence of a global market in which billions of people sell their labour typically goes unmentioned” (McNally, “Commodity” 40). How can
commodification be understood without discussing the fundamental structural feature that makes it possible: without labour, there can be no consumption and, more importantly, if it is possible to sell oneself in the form of commodified labour, then it is possible to sell anything. In a society where “essential elements of our being, such as time, skill, energy, and creativity, are regularly put up for sale” (McNally 50), commodification becomes a totalising framework for understanding reality and a basis for subjectivity.

In the earlier, heavy stage of capitalism, or what Bauman calls solid modernity, the relationship between capital and labour was functional. The two opposite sides were mutually dependant: “Confrontation, tests of strength and the ensuing bargaining strengthened the unity of the conflicting parties precisely because none of them could do it alone and both sides knew that their continuous survival depended on finding solutions which they would consider acceptable” (Bauman, Liquid 146–7). The workers’ movements and the rise of trade unions and of workers as a social class are tied to the production stage of capitalism as well as to solid modernity’s key assumption—trust in progress and agency and belief in “the historic act of putting the human species in charge of its own destiny” (137). In modern capitalism, or liquid modernity, this mutual dependency no longer exists and capital no longer needs to negotiate with labour: a unilateral disengagement has occurred (149). In Western society, this has meant the disembodiment of labour “which serves as the principal source of nourishment, or the grazing ground, of contemporary capital” (121)—disembodied labour means weightless capital. Thus, “embodied” labour must be moved elsewhere so that it has no possibility of weighing down capital and impeding its movement. This elsewhere is an empty space, not empty in a literal physical sense but rather empty on our cognitive map. Bauman explains the meaning of empty space in Liquid Modernity: “The emptiness of place is in the eye of the beholder and in the legs or the car-wheels of the city-goer. Empty are places one does not enter and where one would feel lost and vulnerable, surprised, taken aback and a little frightened by the sight of humans” (104). Embodied labour is labour we can no longer recognize—not just labour of workers in Bangladesh or China, but of those labouring invisibly right beside us.

The acceptance of the historically contingent as natural hinges on its social and institutional representation. Representation is constitutive of the thing or event it represents through the process of meaning creation; it both depends on and forms frameworks of intelligibility which are socially and historically determined. As Stuart Hall shows, culture itself is a system of
representation which, in turn, acculturates a subject to internalize that system. The adoption of market rationality by civic institutions has seemingly freed individuals from materiality in the same way that capital has become light. Social institutions, structures, and normative frameworks have been dismantled and recast in terms of the market. Bauman writes that this has an effect of displacing the project of identity-creation onto individuals, who are now “freed” from social institutions whose function is to form and sustain social identity. This has the effect of making individuals greatly susceptible to risks and all responsibility for failure is now theirs. Moreover, individual subjectivity is now also recast in terms of capital—individual identities are conceptualized as flexible and nomadic. Without the social and political structures to sustain the individual and to provide social frameworks for identity formation, the individual is uprooted at the very core of their personhood. In the resulting crisis of meaning, economic structures are left as the only source of identity formation and affect: the worker is made in the image of capital. And with the increased use of behavioural sciences and psychology in human resource management, the workers must not only sell their labour but also actually enjoy it. New forms of exploitation are rebranded as flexible employment, self-branding, or transferrable skills. Having nothing but one’s own labour to sell is recast as a positive basis for self-identity.

The weightlessness and fluidity of capital seems to suggest that the organization of production and, consequently, the society and its institutions have undergone a qualitative change. Daniel Bell’s *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, written in 1973, argues that there has occurred a fundamental shift in the capitalist mode of production. This change arose out of technological and scientific advances along with the shift in the social structure from integral to disjunctive organization. The differences between industrial and post-industrial societies articulated by Bell are summarized by Barry Smart as follows:

Industrial societies are goods-producing; employ machine technology; and their axial principle is economic growth. Their transforming and strategic resources are ‘created energy’ and ‘financial capital’ respectively. […] Postindustrial societies in contrast are based on services; employ intellectual technology; and their axial principle is the codification of theoretical knowledge. The transformation and strategic resources are information (computer and data transmission systems) and knowledge respectively. (36)
In industrial society, the worker is transformed from an artisan to engineer and semi-skilled labourer. In post-industrial society there is a shift to “scientific, technical, and professional forms of employment” (Smart 36) along with de-skilling and unemployment caused by automation: “Out goes the industrial blue-collar worker, in comes the robot, the service and professional worker” (36). The shift to post-Fordist or post-industrial capitalism is seen as a fundamentally new form of capitalist production which also creates a new form of labour—equally post-industrial, or, immaterial labour. The concept of immaterial labour has its roots in the Italian operaismo (workerism) movement and is intimately connected to post-modernist and post-structuralist theoretical streams of thought. It became popular with the publication of Maurizio Lazzarato’s 1996 essay “Immaterial Labour” as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire (2000) and its sequel Multitude (2004). The concept’s post-structuralist roots are reflected in the narrative style used by Hardt and Negri to discuss it. The style of Empire has been described as rhizomatic in that it moves through the problem by making network-like connections between often disparate elements. The network narrative structure becomes a representation of the networks of subjectivities that characterize immaterial labour and, according to the authors, its liberatory potential.

Simply put, immaterial labour is labour that does not produce material goods, that is, labour in the service, knowledge, communications, and cultural sectors of production. In his essay Lazzarato writes that immaterial labour refers to two aspects of the new labour process: increased use of computer and cybernetic skills and forms of communication (this is the informational content of the commodity); and increased use of activities that are not traditionally recognized as work, such as cultural values, public opinion, consumer beliefs (this is the cultural content of the commodity). These processes are not seen as quantitative change in the relations of production—redistribution of labour between the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy—but as a qualitative change where immaterial labour has become hegemonic. As Lazzarato discusses, one consequence of this change is that now all social experience becomes a “social factory” where any activity can be analyzed as productive—or, as work. Secondly, because labour is structured around immateriality, its product is now direct production of subjectivity. This formulation of work in post-industrial capitalism allows Hardt and Negri to theorize new forms of resistance and social change. In particular, since they see cooperation and autonomy as a key feature of immaterial labour, which then creates equally
immaterial networks (affective, linguistic, and communicational). Hardt and Negri theorize that immaterial labour can be a basis for some sort of communism: “In the expression of its own creative energies, immaterial labor thus seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism” (294). This implies, in contrast to classical Marxist theory, that immaterial labour can somehow operate independently of capital – over and above it—while still being within the capitalist mode of production. Thus, it treats relations of production created by the capitalism as potentially or actually liberating. In general, this view of labour follows a larger trend of treating classical Marxist theory of labour as outdated and no longer applicable and comes at the same time as the “end of work” analysis whose main spokesperson has been Jeremy Rifkin with his *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* published in 1995.

Treating work in cultural or narrative terms disembodies it from material conditions of production, or, in classical Marxist terms, from the economic base. Representation is freed from what it represents just as work and the worker are “freed” from economic and material constraints. Writing in 1992, around the time the concept of “immaterial labour” gained prominence in academic discourse, Aijaz Ahmad notes: “One is impressed by how very much the increasing dominance of the poststructuralist position has had the effect, in the more recent years, of greatly extending the centrality of reading as the appropriate form of politics” (3). The so-called textual turn casts the absence of the material in theoretical discourse in positive terms. The focus on the cultural, textual, digital, and immaterial when discussing work reveals both the power of representation and the complexity of work’s social organization and of its nature; it goes hand-in-hand with

the namelessness and placelessness of modern capitalism: the franchise model which ensures that workers do not know for whom they toil; the companies registered through network of offshore secrecy regimes so complex that even the police cannot discover the beneficial owners; the tax arrangements that bamboozle governments; the financial products no one understands. (Monbiot)

But while capital is made weightless and fluid, no longer tied to the physical location of the factory, workers remain very much material, rooted both in physical space and in their socio-economic position. Their situation is made even more acute by what Michael Burawoy calls the
double retreat of the state—the cuts to the guarantees of basic livelihood combined with the weakening of constraints on businesses and employers in all spheres, both in labour regulations and in the accountability for externalities: “Global competition gives the impetus to intensify control over labor on pain of capital flight ... instead of capital making concessions to labor, labor makes concessions to capital in order to hold on to their jobs” (Burawoy, 27). While capital is freed to move “nomadically,” “its lightness and motility have turned into the paramount source of uncertainty for all the rest. This has become the present-day basis of domination and the principal factor of social divisions” (Bauman, *Liquid* 121). Flexible network structures appear liberatory—for some—but they come with new forms of insecurity for others. The places to which individuals could anchor themselves and their identities have lost all solidity. Liberation from materiality is one-sided.

Capitalism is fuelled by an endless drive towards higher efficiency and increased production. It is logical then that, given the limitations of production and accumulation of material goods, “capitalists... turn to the provision of very ephemeral services in consumption” (Harvey, qtd. in Smart 55). This, however, does not necessarily signal a fundamental break. Sociologists such as Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman have coined terminology that highlights continuity with industrial capitalism while still noting a significant change between the present and the earlier modernity—late modernism, reflexive modernism, liquid modernity. According to this view, postmodernism is not a rupture but a cultural development within the logic of modernism: “The post-modern world co-exists with modernism and the two are in a symbiotic relationship with each other. It is for this reason that post-modernism is not so much a stage of historical development as a form of consciousness under the structural framework of advanced industrialization” (Neal 149). The current changes in social and economic organization are significant but these “features or trends [were] already strongly evident within industrial society” (Smart 38). Affective, cognitive, and communication labour existed before the computerization of work and the so-called flight of capital into immateriality. The Great Recession and the housing crisis have revealed that weightless capital in the form of financial products is based on future material exploitation of labour. Even though there have been massive advances in technology, the need for human labour has not decreased. On the contrary, “technology has been marshalled ... to figure out ways to make us all work more” (Graeber). Capital is accumulated materialized labour and while commodification of all aspects of life
changes the tools of labour, the capital-labour relation remains qualitatively the same, only capital is becoming more efficient at its own reproduction. Due to the slippage of the principles of capitalism and its forms of management into everything, aspects of life and society which are not normally considered to be work are now seen as value-producing. Since the capitalist form of work permeates all aspects of existence and encompasses all social practices, its analysis can turn into analysis of life in the abstract and, therefore, relations of production and materiality of work can be sidestepped, leading to a tangle of contradictions. If capital has become weightless, the radical step is not valorization of the immaterial but a return to the material.

Solid modernity was an era of materiality—“the epoch of weighty and ever more cumbersome machines, of the ever longer factory walls enclosing ever wider factory floors and ingesting ever more populous factory crews, of ponderous rail engines and gigantic ocean liners” (Bauman, *Liquid* 113). The factory, bulky and immobile, was one of solid modernity’s “principal icons” (25). In the space of the factory, protected by walls and guards, power and wealth were “‘embodied’ and fixed, tied in steel and concrete and measured by their volume and weight” (115). The materiality of the factory made it both the fortress and the prison of capital. In liquid modernity, the factory’s size and territoriality are a liability. As capital becomes weightless, the factory is moved to the margins of perception. Today, from the perspective of the West, the factory is an anachronism; one imagines the factory, if at all, without workers, fully computerized and automated. No longer the center of production, the factory is displaced both physically and symbolically. It is at once nowhere and everywhere, as the rationalization and routinization of the Fordist factory colonizes all perception, becoming a “metaphorical frame of reference ... for everyone trying to comprehend how human reality works on all its levels” (Bauman 57). Factory spaces, places where human activities were reduced to “simple, routine and by and large predesigned moves meant to be followed obediently and mechanically without engaging mental faculties, and holding all spontaneity and individual initiative off limits” (Bauman 25), have been emptied out, converted into lofts, museums, and art galleries, remade into spaces of leisure and consumerism. Hito Steyerl considers this conversion in her essay “Is a Museum a Factory?” and, echoing Marx’s formula M-C-M’, maps out the sequence *factory – museum – factory*. The places of industrial production are converted into museums that, in turn, become places of a new mode of production where “even spectators are turned into workers.” This economy of perception, according to Steyerl, “is much more intensive than the industrial
one. The senses are drafted into production, the media capitalize upon the aesthetic faculties and
imaginary practices of viewers. In that sense, any space that integrates cinema and its successors
has now become a factory, and this obviously includes the museum.” Jonathan Beller argues a
similar point in his Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the
Spectacle (2006). Beller argues that in post-industrial capitalism, the industrial processes have
extended to the senses—“to look is to labour”—and cinematic perception has become the new
hegemonic mode of production. The Matrix provides a cinematic model for this kind of post-
industrial analysis of production. In the matrix, there are no workers as such and the economy is
based on extraction of value from perception. While the material reality exists, it is both
obscured and denied—perception is divorced from materiality or, to use Alain Badiou’s
terminology, representation is separated from presentation.

In Badiou’s language of the event, each situation is structured in such a way as to be incapable
of analyzing the foundational element, which is both unrepresented and unrepresentable. To
attempt to analyze this element is to threaten the stability of the structure itself. In neoliberal
capitalism this unrepresentable element is the figure of the worker: the non-representation of the
worker is central to the structure of society. This can be best understood within reference to set
theory, which is the framework for Badiou’s ontology:

The two basic relations of set theory, belonging and inclusion, the first referring to all
the multiples that make up a situation and the latter referring to the count that represents
the situation, make possible a rigorous division between presentation and representation.
Thus, belonging designates presentation, an inconsistent multiple, and inclusion is part
of a second order, that of representation, the multiple structured according to a definition
of what counts as one. (Read 128)

The differentiation between belonging and inclusion allows for three possibilities; Badiou
writes, “I will call normal a term which is both presented and represented. I will call
excrescence a term which is represented but not presented. Finally, I will term singular a term
which is presented but not represented” (qtd. in Read 128). The worker is such a singular term—
it is not merely not-represented but this non-representation is foundational to the situation. Thus,
the company or the corporation is pure representation that “represents the factory without
presenting the workers” (Read 129). Badiou sees factory work as the most marginalized and
uncounted type of work today. Thus, politics must base itself in the factory; for Badiou, the properly political statement is: *in the factory, there is the worker* (*Metapolitics* 41).

The museum is not a factory. But the fact that the question could be formulated, that factory and museum could appear to be the same, reveals much about both the factory and the museum. In neoliberal capitalism, consumption and everyday life follow the logic of the Fordist factory and the discipline of the assembly line. Displacing the factory onto the field of culture similarly reproduces the logic of the capitalist mode of production. This erases the worker and mystifies the processes of production as well as broadens the category of work to such an extent as to make concrete analysis or resistance impossible. Cinema, aesthetics, or perception separated from concrete socio-economic processes become autonomous and interchangeable, acquiring the property of abstract economic value. They can be considered the “new mode of production” not because the museum, cinema, or television have become the factory, but because the factory and its workers are excluded. This is, to use Badiou’s phrase, “a vision of the affluent” (*Ethics*, 114).

Badiou writes in “The Factory as Event Site” that Marx was the first to perceive that “modern politics could not be formulated, even as a hypothesis, otherwise than by proposing an interpretation-in-subject of these astounding hysterias of the social in which workers named the hidden void of the capitalist situation, by naming their own unpresentation” (176). The factory is the site of the unrepresentation of the worker and, therefore, the exclusion of politics; from the perspective of the state, the factory and politics belong to two separate spheres of knowledge and representation:

> The declaration that the ‘factory is a political site,’ the invocation of the political figure of the worker is not only invalid from the perspective of the state, it is undecidable from the site itself. It must be named as such through the intervention of a political subject, a subject that constitutes itself in the fidelity to this event. (Read 129)

This is why for Badiou, “Emancipatory politics today must continue to anchor itself in the reference to the workers in the factory as a key site—if not the only one—of all possible political events” (Bosteels xi). Political movements based in the factory and around the figure of the worker are properly political because, unlike movements based around identity they cannot be easily absorbed by capitalism “without threatening capitalism itself” (Hewlett 77). Badiou
opposes all politics based in identity as incoherent; identity-politics is a contradiction in terms since “all genuine politics seeks to change the situation as a whole, in the interest of the universal interest” (Hallward, “Badiou’s Politics” n.p). For Marx, such universal interest is represented by the proletariat: “The very nature of the proletariat is to be generic. It’s not an identity. It’s something like an identity which is non-identity; it’s humanity as such” (qtd. in Badiou, “Saturated” 22). Emancipatory politics require identity of non-identity.

For Badiou, the figure of the worker is “a political subjectivity constituted in the factory, in an ability to make declarations about the factory and the worker that are different from those of management, the unions ... and the state” (qtd. in Hallward, “Badiou’s Politics” 7). Badiou consistently uses the word ouvrier (blue-collar worker) rather than the more general travailleur—the political subjectivity of the worker is tied to the symbolic, as well as real, space of the factory. Because worker is not an identity but a political process of subjectification, the figure of the worker can stand in for generic humanity. The figure of the worker as political subjectivity is irreducible to a unit of capital and, therefore, “the word ‘worker’ is a condition of the freedom of thought”; Badiou notes that “political thought has become inert, unified, in short totalitarian, since the term disappeared” (qtd. in Hallward, Badiou, 232). The worker, as obsolete and anachronistic as the factory, has disappeared from politics, leaving a void—a factory without workers. Badiou stresses that “it is essential to ask whether, in politics, we count the figure of the worker for something, or for nothing. What is counted is the level of the stock market, the Euro, financial investment, competition, and so on: the figure of the worker, on the other hand, counts for nothing” (Ethics 103). The factory is no longer a place of work, but a place of capital, “a place of industrial production regulated by managerial decisions” (Hallward, Badiou 232). If the figure of the worker is absent from the factory, only values of capital remain: productivity, competition, consumption. In neoliberal capitalism the worker can only be counted as a unit of capital. Thus, “there are no longer workers, only employees” (Badiou, Metapolitics 41). And, in any case, everyone is now “an entrepreneur, even if it is only of their own human capital” (Read 125). The productive pairing is no longer factory/worker, as it was in solid modernity, but factory/capital. The political force of in the factory, there is the worker, therefore, is not the invocation of the worker as such but, in the pairing of the worker and the factory, and the acknowledgement that factory is a place where work is performed by the workers.
“The first camera in the history of film was pointed at a factory” writes Harun Farocki in the companion essay to his film *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik* (Workers Leaving the Factory, 1995). Farocki’s films consistently interrogate how ideology is materially manifested and much of his work focuses on visibility and invisibility of labour in film. In *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik*, Farocki studies how the image of workers exiting the factory has been represented in cinema over its hundred years of existence. It is composed entirely of clips taken from other films, all of them depicting factory gates. Farocki’s film was made for the one-hundredth anniversary of Lumière’s 46-second *La sortie de l’usine Lumière à Lyon* (Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory in Lyon, 1895), which is commonly considered to be the first film. Lumière’s film created a primordial cinematic image of workers at the factory gates, which is repeated in variations throughout cinema’s history. *La sortie de l’usine Lumière à Lyon* shows a mass of workers pouring out of factory gates, dissolving into individuals, and exiting the frame to the left and right. This is framed by the opening and closing of the factory gates, thus creating a basic narrative structure. The scene is staged (there exist three versions of it), but the film hides its fiction. In it there is no indication of the economic power of the factory or of the men behind the camera, as Farocki’s narrator notes. There are also no signs of the power of the workers, even though it was made at the time of labour unrest. An observant spectator, however, will notice that the representation of both the workers and the factory is managed. The workers are orderly, clean, well-dressed; they are “without any external trace of labour, without any ‘borrowed’ tools in their pockets” (Voltzenlogel). Those who do not fit this vision of the worker are excluded: “On the one hand, strikers, unemployed or underemployed workers, the ill-disciplined, saboteurs, recalcitrants; on the other hand, the chronically unemployed, those living on the margins, housewives, the disabled, etc.” (Voltzenlogel). The gaze of the camera shows the vision of the bosses while hiding its own power to shape representation and perception.

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7 One of Farocki’s last projects before he passed away in 2014 was Eine Einstellung zur Arbeit (Labour in a Single Shot). Conceived with his partner Antje Ehmann, the project invited filmmakers from around the world to capture labour in a single unedited shot no longer than 2 minutes. The over 400 submissions from around the world can be viewed at http://www.eine-einstellung-zur-arbeit.net/de/filme/
The camera is positioned outside the gates, never showing the inside of the factory where work is done. Factory walls maintain a “strict separation of the ‘inside’ from the ‘outside’ and a vigilant defence of the boundary between the two” (Bauman, *Liquid* 115). This strict separation is endangered at the factory gates, the space where labour and capital confront each other. The factory gate is a threshold between work and leisure, public and private, worker and individual. In the factory, workers are indistinguishable masses; when they cross the boundary that is the factory gate, they become individuals with thoughts, feelings, identities. It is at this boundary that work ends and cinema begins. While Soviet films and Leftist cinema entered the factory in an attempt to unite art and production, Hollywood cinema is about lives of private individuals outside of work. It is only when the mass of workers dissolves into individuals that melodrama can begin. It is no coincidence that Lumière’s film hides its own unrepresentation of labour by showing the factory that manufactures photographic plates.

John Roberts writes in his article “The Missing Factory” that cinema is the opposite of the factory and it is “the place where the production of representation is itself blocked.” On the practical level, cinema cannot represent labour in the factory because a factory is private property protected by security and various laws. Farocki notes that the factory gate is a place of intense surveillance: “Where the first camera once first stood, there are now hundreds of thousands of surveillance cameras.” At its most extreme, it is illegal for the camera to enter the factory, except to monitor and discipline the workers. For example, it is illegal in a number of US jurisdictions to capture video of livestock, thus protecting large factory farms from whistleblowers reporting animal cruelty, health hazards, and unsafe or illegal working conditions. Roberts, however, argues that the incompatibility of cinema and factory is in the realm of the symbolic:

*Labour has to stop before it can be represented*, that is, before workers are able to establish the conditions for their own autonomous speech. No wonder then that the factory is a symbolic dead zone: inside its disciplinary boundaries the labour process and value-form destroys representation and ultimately expels the camera. (italics in the original)

In the factory, the workers are silenced both by management and by the discipline imposed by the very process of production (factory noise, the assembly line). Capital does not want the film
camera in the factory because it interrupts the efficiency of the production line as well as potentially documents the oppression of the workers. But, Roberts argues, the camera in the factory is equally problematic for labour because “the representation of labour means workers are being encouraged to take pleasure, or pedagogic instruction, from their own alienation.” Roberts writes that, for example, in Godard’s Tout va bien, workers speak only when they are striking, that is, when they are not working. The unrepresentability of labour and of the factory, however, is a political issue, not a metaphysical one. Labour cannot be represented not because cinema and factory are incompatible but because erasure and invisibility of work is the foundation of capitalist ideology. In Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik, Farocki shows images of desperate unemployed workers with faces pressed against the factory gates, looking in. In a scene from Vsevolod Pudovkin’s 1933 Deserter, the workers “are looking out from the prison of unemployment to the freedom called ‘paid labour’” (Farocki, in Elsaesser 241). Here the camera is behind the gate, looking out at the masses. Paradoxically, being locked outside the factory gates without employment, makes the individual lose their identity and individuality. One’s identity is tied to labour and being outcast from the factory means also being outcast from the society.

Cinema developed alongside factory-based production and even though cinema is not a factory, it is the factory’s counterpart. Miriam Bratu Hansen writes that “cinema figures as part of the violent restructuration of human perception and interaction effected by industrial-capitalist modes of production and exchange” (“Self” 362). It was not just one perceptual technology among others, but “the single most expansive discursive horizon in which the effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or denied, transmuted or negotiated” (366). Both the factory and the cinema are a means to organize—and regulate—time. Labour-time is the new measure of value in modernity and the cinema, at its core, is “a specific mode of organizing and regulating time” (Doane 35). Cinema as entertainment is escape from labour and from the factory, but it is also the place where the discipline of the production line and the rationalization of labour are formally reproduced and constructed.

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8 “One good example: Charles Sheeler’s work for Ford, both his precisionist painting and his photography. He made these works using a perspective from within the factory gates, but eerily not a single person therein” (Elspeth Brown, personal communication).
Nineteenth century positivism and belief in scientific progress gave rise to a new vision of the human body: body as a motor, or a self-regulating mechanism. In his influential study, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, Anson Rabinbach traces how the metaphor of the human motor was central to the social and economic revolution that was modernity: “The language of labor power was more than a new way of representing work: it was a totalizing framework that subordinated all social activities to production, raising the human project of labor to a universal attribute of nature” (4). The universalisation of labour, however, led to it being “reduced to its physical properties, devoid of context and inherent purpose” (47). Once the human body was reconceptualised in terms of thermodynamics, work could be seen as “a universal concept, the conversion of energy into use” (46). This leads to work being reduced to a purely quantitative phenomenon—“‘cleansed’ of all of its social and cultural dimensions ... work could be applied to nature, technology, and human labour without distinction” (46). This is the origin of capitalist abstract labour, but it should be noted that the modernist impulse behind the application of scientific knowledge to social problems is not inherently alienating.

Rabinbach argues, contra Foucault, that scientific rationality and productivism were not merely “an ever-expanding instrumentarium of power”, but contributed greatly to relieving suffering. The danger of this concept of work, though, is that “the body—not the social relations of the workplace—was the arena of labor power” (11). This positivist view of work reduces the worker to the working body and the body is not the worker-as-human-being. It makes sense, then, that factory labour appears to be incompatible with cinema. The question should be not about representation of work, however, but about representation of the ideology of work. If work and the worker are conceived in terms of the mechanical processes of the body expanding energy and interacting with the machines, then representation becomes problematic. As Roberts argues, cinema is not able to adequately represent the monotony and the physical experience of factory labour. However, if work is conceived in terms of relations of power, as political rather than mechanical processes, then the worker can become a political subjectivity rather than be just a labouring body.

Roberts is correct that “labour has to stop before it can be represented” only because the worker in the factory is a tool rather than an agent. To establish his or her “autonomous speech,” the worker has to stop working. But that is not a necessary condition of work as such. It is, however, a necessary condition of work in capitalism. The erasure of the worker from the production
processes, ironically, was assisted by the movie camera. The cinematic apparatus was used by the capital to develop, refine, and optimise industrial routines. It is through representation of workers by the camera that their unrepresentation was achieved. Hollywood cinema and the “non-fiction industrial films subsumed the workers’ bodies into the factory works or industrial processes” (Fusco 181, note 19). As the historian of working-class film Steven J. Ross documents, the bourgeois mass culture prevailed only after a period of struggle for mass culture and it was not a foregone conclusion but rather a result of actual historical processes. During the early years of cinema, the Left, unions, and worker-filmmakers used the movies as a political weapon used to inspire and empower the working class. Ross writes that “when given a choice, audiences would also go to see films with serious political messages. While worker-made films certainly contained strong doses of fantasy, the fantasies were those of the working class” (359). Ross argues that the working-class film movement of the early 20th century did not collapse because of some innate properties of mass culture or cinema. The working-class resistance “collapsed because of the superior resources and collective opposition of the industry and the state ... Control of the screen, like control of the workplace, was only achieved through a process of struggle and the exercise of power by one class or group over another” (366). The struggle for cinema is the struggle for the power of representation. To put it simply, work is unrepresentable because, in Godard’s words, “the exploiter doesn’t show the exploitation to the exploited.”

In Bodies and Machines, Mark Seltzer argues that scientific management of labour created a fundamentally new form of work: representation of work as work itself. Seltzer observes that “the real innovation of Taylorisation becomes visible in the incorporation of the representation of the work process into the work process itself—or, better, the incorporation of the representation of work process as the work process itself,” (159, italics in the original). With the creation of the new managerial class of workers, “whose job is to monitor, represent, and then alter work procedures, without themselves participating in those tasks” (Molesworth 53), representation of work through charts, graphs, and reports becomes work. With this Taylorised division of labour and the removal of all control over the labour process from the shop floor, the

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9 This quote is from a 1972 interview “Godard on Tout va bien”. Godard points out that because filming is prohibited in factories, museums, and airports, the majority of labour in France is invisible.
workers are being represented to themselves by the managers through the process of work itself. This means that the definition and meaning of work is controlled by the management and, moreover, it is management that decides what counts as good work. The quality and quantity of labour performed by the worker is predetermined and evaluated abstractly by the manager, rather than by the foreman, a worker who is intimately familiar with the work being done and who would evaluate the workers’ labour concretely. Frederick Taylor in his *Principles of Scientific Management* dismisses the tradition of the foreman in favour of the manager with a clipboard and a stopwatch. Taylor’s time studies were met with resistance from the workers, however. The stopwatch was not entirely objective. The manager’s eyesight was as insufficient and as inefficient as the workers’ bodies: “Taylor presents a dilemma that hinges on the insufficiency of human bodies: not only were working bodies in need of regulation, but managers needed help seeing and correcting labor inefficiency” (Fusco 155). For modernity’s utopian desire to make life scientific, the cinema offered a seemingly objective means of recording and representing labour: “the early twentieth century’s theorists of work used the cinema to render efficiency visible” (156). Frank B. and Lillian Gilbreth improved Taylor’s model by replacing human eyesight with the objectivity of the camera. In their motion studies, the camera records the human body in order to visualize labour in a seemingly neutral and objective way. The camera becomes a prosthesis for socially constructed vision of human labour—“a technological addition that replaced workers’ control and craft knowledge with the mind of management” (Brown 118).

In time motion studies, lights are attached to the workers’ hands and a stationary camera captures the worker performing repetitive tasks. Because of the long exposure, the worker is blurred out and only the paths of his or her motions remain. The worker is no longer human, but a completely abstracted process of labour, “leaving only a reified trace of labour in its most efficient form” (Corwin 146). The camera visualises efficiency by abstracting the worker. The workers, in this vision of labour, are not merely alienated from their labour but become actual “obstructions to pure representations of labour” (Fusco 183, note 33). We can go further and say that in “post-industrial capitalism,” workers are obstructions to labour as such, and not merely to its representation. One of the most striking photographs from the Gilbreths’ motion studies shows a blur of the worker created by her motions, with a manager sitting in the background, motionless (Figure 1). The worker is necessarily abstracted because she expands energy through
motion in the process of working. The manager has the privilege of not moving but only observing and supervising. The worker disappears, while the manager is concretized and individualised. Because in capitalism labour is abstract, the worker must also necessarily be abstract. This is the capitalist fantasy of labour without the labourer—pure surplus value. The Gilbreths’ pictures are part of the socio-historical process of subsuming the worker into industrial production, that is, the conversion of worker-human-being into abstractions. Fusco writes: “Corwin’s claim that in the Gilbreth pictures ‘workers are pictured with little regard for their corporeal integrity and are at times violently cropped by the picture frame’ can be applied more broadly and might also have represented a kind of strategy within industrial representation” (181 note 18). In non-fiction industrial films, the workers’ bodies are shown, if at all, as extensions of the machine. The camera frames, organizes, and systematizes the worker. In this, it functions in tandem with the assembly line and other forms of industrial systemization, complementing and reinforcing it: “With its emphasis on timing, organization, and editing, the film positions itself as the media equivalent to the factory system and also the scientific experiment, offering a space to visualize efficiency and industrial processes from a seemingly neutral and scientific view” (Fusco 165). In an early industrial film, the 1919 Ford Motor Company Where and How Fords are Made, the labourers are completely erased from the production process. The film is shot as scientifically objective and the voice-over emphasizes processes, rather than workers. The images do not show workers except when the machinery is shown in medium shots. This has the effect of cropping “the worker’s head and feet, leaving only the laboring torso and hands visible—a visual rendering of the passive voice that emphasizes acts completed without agents” (Fusco 165). The camera’s vision is presented as objective and value free; any critique of representation or organization of labour is already pre-empted.

Cinema, as it developed alongside with the capitalist processes of production, treats the worker as indeterminate. In capitalist system of production, the link between work and creation of value is disguised. The viewers can recognize work, but both the expansion of capitalist production system to global scale and the insinuation of capitalist labour-form into all spheres of life makes it difficult to envision, let alone understand, how the parts interrelate. Benedict Seymour argues that the presence of the capitalist labour-form in all spheres of life, as seen in Farocki’s films, is not an expansion of work but, rather, an involution: “Increasing precision is applied to
increasingly unproductive and outright destructive functions. Work becomes an endlessly rehearsed performance in which nothing is re/produced but work.” Definitions, in this situation, become meaningless and something can appear as both work and not-work at the same time. Once the worker is abstracted, the problem of representation becomes linguistic or epistemological.

In *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor, and Liberation*, David McNally argues that Saussure’s use of the economic notion of value for the science of language creates a problematic relationship between the word, as it is conceptualized by Saussurean linguistics, and reality. McNally suggests that by defining language negatively—through differential value and not through meaning—Saussure adopts the nature of the commodity, defined by its exchange value, for the system of linguistic signs. Thus, the nature of the commodity—a capitalist phenomenon—is treated as a general character of language. McNally argues further that Derrida’s deconstruction, the post-modern embrace of Saussurean linguistics, and theories of simulacra and virtual economies not only accept but promote the commodity fetish. The way out, as Farocki’s films show, is grounding in materiality. Pantenburg writes that Farocki, like Godard, has “always insisted on the inseparability of image and reality. Talking about the image in film means talking about the reality portrayed, and talking about reality also implies the medium through which it is portrayed. In *La Chinoise*, Godard condensed this to a succinct formula: art doesn’t have to do with the reflection of reality, but with the reality of reflection” (32). Without grounding analysis, representation, and politics in materiality, the worker-as-human-being disappears, and so does the factory. Attempts to concretise the work and the worker can be seen in leftist films. In Soviet film, for example, the worker is concretized as a political agent (as well as, quite literally, monumentalised in concrete). Concretising the work and the worker is political, and politics cannot be based in metaphysics.

Farocki’s materialist cinema is built around the politics of image. While he is mistrustful and deeply critical of images, his criticism of the image is visual. Despite his critique, “a strong belief in the effectiveness and power of the image can also be discerned” in Farocki’s work (Pantenburg 256). For Farocki, images “criticize other images, and in this critique delineate an alternative visual space ... Farocki’s position is thus that of a specific realism in which filmmaking becomes a political act” (Pantenburg 46). In Farocki’s work there is always present—often through its absence—the industrial mode of production, “the factory principle,
the assembly line and the kinds of discipline associated with mechanised labour” (Elsaesser 22). In his films we see production processes and metaphors that link industrial production to war, prisons to shopping malls, people to commodities. Elsaesser writes that Farocki “noticed how the visible and the intelligible were drifting even further apart” (12). His films, therefore, rely on a central metaphor that “suddenly [reveals] in miniature a social or political reality” (16).

The most striking example of how Farocki uses visual metaphor to make something visible despite the inadequacy of representation is in one of his earliest films, *Nicht löschares Feuer* (Inextinguishable Fire) from 1968—69. The film is the most explicit statement of Farocki’s politics and of his theory of the image. In the opening scene of the film, Farocki sits behind an empty table in a bare room. The static camera films him as he reads out an eyewitness report describing a napalm attack on a Vietnamese village. After finishing the report,

> Farocki faces the camera to say: ‘how can we show you the deployment of napalm and the nature of the burns it causes? If we show you pictures of the injuries inflicted by napalm, you will just close your eyes. At first you will close your eyes before the pictures, then you will close your eyes before the memory of the pictures, and then you will close your eyes before the realities the pictures represent.’ Farocki then takes a cigarette from the ashtray, draws on it to make it glow. As the camera slowly tracks into a close-up, he takes the cigarette from his mouth and extinguishes it on the back of his hand. A voice-off in the meantime explains that a cigarette burns at roughly 500 degrees Celsius, while napalm burns at approximately 3000 degrees Celsius. (Elsaesser 16-7)

The image is not sufficient, but it can reveal contradictions and create an openings for politics to emerge. In *Nicht löschares Feuer*, the connection between production and destruction is shown to be entangled with the division of labour. Napalm is manufactured by DOW Chemical, but the scientists working there do not recognize their role in war. Farocki narrates that “if the viewers want nothing to do with the effects of napalm, then it is important to determine what they already have to do with the reasons for its use.” It is these links between oneself and the globalised system of production and destruction that are hidden when work is abstracted. When speaking about the Viet Cong, Farocki asks how he could have been blind to believe in the promise of a revolution. He concludes that “to be faithful to an idea means not to exchange it right away for another, more opportune one. Perhaps one has to be prepared even to endure the
death of an idea, without running away. To be faithful means to be present even in the hour of
death” (qtd. in Elsaesser 19). Elsaesser suggests that for Farocki this idea is “that it is work
which defines and dignifies human existence, and protects it finally, from both fantasy and
violence” (35). It is this ‘dying’ idea that makes, in the end, both representation and politics of
work possible.
Mastery of the world through narrative is fundamental to modernity; it is through narrative that human beings are able to create the world and to achieve self-determination. While postmodernism is characterised by Fredric Jameson as the reign of narrativity, the postmodern condition is, at the same time, marked by the loss of the social function of the narrative. In modernity, narratives represent human mastery over meaning or “the transformation of the world into a representation, with man as its subject” (Owens 342); this is the social function of modernity’s master narratives. Martin Heidegger in his “The Age of the World Picture,” which was originally delivered as a lecture in 1938, explains that,

The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture. The word “picture” [Bild] now means the structured image [Gebild] that is the creature of man’s producing which represents and sets before [des vorstellenden Herstellens]. In such producing, man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is (134).

In modernity, what is no longer simply presents but becomes an object of representation and, henceforth, is in this way alone. To represent is “to set out before oneself and to set forth in relation to oneself” (132). Thus, through representation, humanity becomes the “repreanter of all representing” (150), gaining mastery over the world, over temporality, over history, and over itself. The creation of the world picture is self-creation of human beings as subjects.

Representation frees humanity to itself by turning it into a force that “goes forward and masters” (150). Modernity begins with the invention of the subject and the separation of the object and the subject. In this view, the subject or self is a purely formal construct—the existence of the

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10 “We will show the world a new path; labour will be the master of the world”—from Vladimir Akimov’s loose translation of the French revolutionary song La drapeau rouge.
object presupposes a position from which it is observed. The self no longer has an *a priori* essence but is constantly created in the act of representation. This gives the subject the power of self-determination. Liberated from pre-modern conceptions of essence and from “the revelational certainty of salvation” (148), humanity is now free to create its own certainty.

Transformation of the world through autonomous human will is central to one of modernity’s most daring projects of self-determination—the Stalinist experiment in collectivity and creation of a workers’ state. Stalinism, like other forms of modernity, sought to eradicate the metaphysical, or in this case the bourgeois consciousness, and create a society that was a total expression of humanity’s mastery. The means of this mastery was free human labour, as the force that creates and transforms the world. The Stalinist project of modernity, however, went further than modernity’s focus on the rational and the objective. Boris Groys, writing about socialist realism, argues that Stalinism was an attempt at a creation of society through a total aesthetico-political project, which merged all aspects of society into one. In Stalinism, the economic, political, social, and aesthetic spheres are merged and all contradictions are unified. The method of this project is socialist realism, which should be understood not as merely an aesthetic theory, but as a procedural system of representation for all aspects of Stalinist society. Socialist realism is a specific world view which unifies contradictions. It contains an element of the irrational, which is its utopian surplus. In a sense it radicalizes modernity itself by not merely overcoming the irrational but by integrating it as one of its most prominent features, its revolutionary content. In the realm of labour, this revolutionary content is non-alienated work, which is fundamentally transformative and reveals the utopia in the now. This chapter seeks to combine the aesthetic understanding of socialist realism as a literary or artistic theory with the Soviet understanding of labour. Labour in Stalinism was not merely an economic activity but the central part of the total social, political, and aesthetic project. It was, in essence, socialist realist labour, realist in form and revolutionary in content. The framework for this understanding of Stalinist labour is provided by Groys and his concept of the Stalinist society as a total work of art, although I focus here on labour. The discussion of socialist realism attempts to capture its logic and contradictions—it is best understood as an accumulation of concepts that are united into a whole but always exceed it. The films analysed are some of the most successful films of the era but they also highlight different aspects of socialist realist labour: labour as a means of transformation the society, labour as war, labour as creation of subjectivity, and labour as a
celebration. These films, while often formally uninteresting, express socialist realist ideals that must be understood in their social use. The films discussed are Nikolai Ekk’s *Road to Life* (1931), *Chapaev* by Brothers Vasil’ev (1934), *Counter Plan* by Fridrikh Ermler and Sergei Iutkevich (1932), and finally Grigorii Aleksandrov’s musical comedy *Radiant Path* (1940).

Before the revolution, worker writings in Russia were permeated, along with themes of degradation, humiliation, and the insult of labour in capitalism, with themes of human dignity and the inherent worth of an individual. Preoccupation with these themes is especially evident in Russian labour press of the period:

> Hundreds of articles, essays, and letters by workers (encouraged and echoed by these papers’ nonproletarian activists) repeatedly voiced moral outrage at the treatment of workers as ‘beasts of burden’ (or ‘cattle,’ ‘machines,’ even ‘camels’), at conditions that forced workers to sell not only their labor but also their human dignity, at society’s blindness to workers’ ‘human personality’ (*lichnost’ chelovecheskaia* or *lichnost’ cheloveka*) and ‘common human dignity’ (*obshchechelovecheskoe dostoinstvo*), and at the refusal of the upper classes to recognize the ‘freedom’ and ‘autonomy of the human person’ or the simple fact that ‘a man is a man’. (Steinberg 70)

Worker writings articulated the capitalist relations of production not only as economic exploitation but as “moral oppression” (Kubikov, qtd. in Steinberg 73). In Marxist ontology, labour is central to human self-development and self-realization; degradation of work, therefore, destroys the worker’s humanity. Thus, after the revolution, the workers’ society was founded on a radical yet simple premise: “identification of the worker as a human being—that is to say, the very particular construction of all human beings as subjects possessing natural dignity and intrinsic rights” (Steinberg 73). In his “How to Organize Competition” (1929), Lenin writes that after the revolution “for the first time after centuries of working for others, of forced labour for the exploiter, it has become possible to *work for oneself*” (italics in the original). With revolution, the workers reclaimed their agency as subjects who create the world and the new workers’ society recognized them as individuals with intrinsic human worth. This conception of workers as human beings with intrinsic worth can be seen in the socialist realist tropes of enthusiasm and optimism that are always present in Stalinist society and culture.
After the revolution, the workers could not only create their own society and culture, but also claim their right to the entire cultural heritage of humanity. Yet, the culture inherited by the Soviet state was tainted by its origins in the bourgeois societies that excluded workers from cultural production. A radically new society requires radically new forms of representation in order to differentiate and define itself. Soviet culture and art needed to be the self-expression of workers who would recognize themselves in the culture of their state. After the revolution, Soviet culture faced a crisis of representation—in an overwhelmingly agrarian nation, art had to both construct and reflect workers’ revolutionary consciousness. If representation is understood both in its political and aesthetic senses—and in the Soviet Union the aesthetic and the political are always merged—the problem of aesthetic representation becomes intimately tied to the legitimacy of the state. The legitimacy of both artistic and political institutions in the workers’ state rests on their claim to be the self-representation of the workers. The vast majority of the Soviet population, however, was not the industrial proletariat which, according to the Marxist theory, is the bearer of revolutionary consciousness. The Soviet Union lagged both in economic and cultural development behind Western capitalist nations; without a developed industrial base, transition to a society without scarcity was impossible. Representation became an important tool in the building of a new society, on the level not only of ideology but also of material conditions of existence. The Soviet government carried out a number of cultural campaigns promoting literacy, hygiene, sobriety, productivity, liberation of women, and so on, in order to raise the population’s consciousness and improve both cultural and economic conditions. In what was an essentially modernist project of the creation of the subject, agitation and propaganda was used to construct a new social narrative and a new subjectivity.

Modern technology such as electricity, cinema, telegraph and radio were integral to government’s efforts to modernize the country. Lenin recognized the crucial role of technology and mass communications in the building of socialism; in 1920 he approved a plan to electrify Russia, famously stating that “Communism is equal to Soviet power plus the electrification of

11 In Jacques Rancière’s The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France, the radical potential of worker-writers is not only that they create art, but, more importantly, that they trespass on the cultural territory of the ruling classes, asserting that they too have a right to access and participate in the cultural sphere from which they are excluded. Such exclusion is institutionalised and reproduced through various social institutions, as Bourdieu has shown in Distinction.
the entire country.” Lenin also recognized the potential of cinema to effectively reach illiterate masses, especially the rural population, across the country. The Soviet All-Union Cinema Company (Sovkino, 1924-1930) was tasked with carrying out a campaign of cinefication of the countryside, which “had for some time been regarded as an urgent priority” (Taylor, Politics 88). Cinema was to help “in unifying the whole of the Soviet Union into a coherent political entity” and to equate, in the minds of the rural masses, “Bolshevism with technology and modernisation” (Taylor, Politics 88). The potential of film as a tool of education and propaganda was quickly recognized by the Soviet authorities. Lenin said that “of all the arts, cinema is the most important,” and Stalin called cinema “the most important means of mass propaganda” (qtd. in Günther 178). In Stalinist culture, cinema “constituted a particular mythopoeia in its own right. Of all arts, the cinema of the 1930s and 1940s most amply developed Soviet myths” (178). Cinema was an especially suitable medium for the new post-historical society: it was unburdened by tradition, it was technological in nature, and it was collective both in its production and consumption. But cinema, like other technologies of mass communication, was not merely a tool of propaganda. As Dikerman writes, Soviet agitation and propaganda campaigns “cannot be understood simply in terms of a cynical political instrumentality” (13); the Party programme was genuinely committed to raising the level of culture, political consciousness, and economic well-being of the population. Contrary to the view that Soviet art was politicized only in the 1930s, technology, politics, and aesthetics were always necessarily interconnected.

In the 1920s, the Soviet artistic avant-garde enthusiastically advocated a revolution in the arts to complement and complete the revolution in the political and economic spheres. The political and aesthetic role of cinema especially was widely debated as film makers attempted to formulate film’s specificity and its own language. Ultimately, this specificity was located in

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12 While this project focuses on ideology and representation, the material conditions of film production in the Soviet Union should be noted. The film industry requires sophisticated equipment and technical expertise in all aspects of production, including manufacture of film equipment and stock. Despite the Soviet government’s realization of cinema’s importance both ideologically and economically, the industry faced numerous problems such as shortages of film-stock, outmoded or inferior equipment, lack of personnel with adequate expertise, a high entrance bar for new personnel, as well as issues related to the increasing bureaucratization. Centralization of the film industry, thematic planning, and bureaucratization of all stages of production reached “extreme proportions” by 1938, paralyzing film production (Miller, Soviet 137). Various aspects of Soviet film production during the 1920s and 1930s are discussed by Jamie Miller in Soviet Cinema: Politics and Persuasion under Stalin.
montage. But, like other avant-garde art, montage cinema represents a society in flux, an emerging society in revolutionary times, which makes it unsuitable for articulating the narrative of legitimization, stability and normalcy. The films created by montage film-makers “were experimental and were, on the whole, popular only with the avant-garde both inside and outside of the Soviet Union” (Taylor, “Soviet” 187). The theoretical debates over film in the 1920s were not concerned with accessibility or intelligibility and the viewers could not recognise themselves in montage cinema. Even more problematically, montage linked cinema to high art. The avant-garde originated as a rebellion against the bourgeois culture which remained, therefore, its point of reference. In his *Kinematografiia millionov* (Cinema for the Millions, 1935) Boris Shumiatsky, the leader of the Soviet cinema industry in the 1930s, writes that if the revolution had not occurred, the “petit-bourgeois rebellion,” as he calls the avant-garde, would have merged completely with the bourgeois culture that gave birth to it. Ironically, this is exactly what happened to the avant-garde in capitalism as it became institutionalized and fully integrated into the bourgeois culture and into the logic of the market.13 The avant-garde recognized its problem of origin—one of the persistent themes in avant-garde movements was the call for elimination of art itself. In 1912, the Futurists published their manifesto, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste,” which famously demanded that society “throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.” Such a stance was not unique to the Russian avant-garde; demand for the destruction of art and culture in their various forms was a feature of other avant-garde movements in Europe: Tsvetkov writes that the “liquidation of art as a special(ist) sphere is a consistent motif in all utopias that seek to overcome alienation” (translation mine). But in calling for the destruction of tradition, the avant-garde also calls for its

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13 The logo of the 2013 G-20 summit held in Saint Petersburg, Russia, was inspired by the art of the revolutionary Russian avant-garde. The Group of Twenty is a forum for discussing international financial system and setting global economic policies; it operates independently of the United Nations, promotes neoliberal economic policies and has advocated austerity measures during the global financial crisis.

According to the official website of the 2013 summit, the design of the official logo was based on “the traditions of Russian avant-garde art, pioneered by the great Russian artists Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich—a proud period in the country’s rich historical and cultural heritage.” The logo’s graphical elements are meant to be “an expression of will, progress, transformation, a commitment to innovation, candor, and bold ideas—the values personified by the Group of Twenty.”

During the 2013 summit, *The New York Times* reported that Malevich’s grave site had recently become a location of a luxury housing complex for the new Russian economic elite.
own end: “If there is no alienation and pathological automatisation of the psyche, the artist has no work. Everyone becomes an artist” (Tsvetkov). In Marxist understanding of work, aesthetic creation is work inasmuch as it is a transformation of the world through creative human activity. There is no qualitative difference between aesthetic work and work in other spheres of life. The separation of aesthetic work from other types of labour in capitalism stems from capitalist relations of production and the logic of the market, rather than from any kind of inherent quality of artistic production as such. Marx writes that a society without private property would require a different mode of artistic creation: in communism there will be “no painters but, at most, people who engage in painting among other activities” (German 109). In such a society, “the artist would no longer stand apart as the only free creator; everyone would be free to develop his or her powers to the fullest” (Shiner 236). It follows, then, that since there was officially no alienated labour in the 1930s Soviet Union, art must have fully merged with life and the avant-garde necessarily ceased to exist.

The transition from the avant-garde to socialist realism is the subject of Boris Groys’ still controversial work *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (originally published in German in 1988). Its central thesis is the inevitability of socialist realism: Groys argues that socialist realism is the logical outcome of the avant-garde and its final triumph. In this view, Stalinist culture is not a betrayal or abandonment of the avant-garde project but, on the contrary, “a radicalization that the avant-garde itself was unable to accomplish” (37). Groys challenges the commonly accepted theory of decline which “argues that the 1930s are marked by the suppression of the avant-garde activity that had characterized the 1920s and by the simultaneous imposition of Socialist Realism from above” (Taylor, “Soviet” 185). According to the theory of decline, Soviet culture of the 1930s was monolithic and rigid, characterised by excessive political control of aesthetics and by imposition of the official doctrine of socialist realism. Richard Stites, in his *Revolutionary Dreams*, describes the 1930s as the death of revolutionary utopia. In contrast, Groys argues that Stalinist culture and socialist realism are not a decline or abandonment of the revolutionary project, but a continuation and evolution of the experiment in the creation of workers’ culture which began in the 1920s.

The avant-garde’s destructive impulse is fundamentally at odds with the goal of constructing a new society. The Soviet Union was a society premised on the modernist vision of workers who
are in control of their destiny, having the power of self-determination. But the avant-garde can only question social reality. Through *ostranenie* (defamiliarisation) it can reveal alienation, but it cannot be the cure to the problems it diagnoses. The avant-garde undermines any attempt at mastery and stability through constant questioning. The avant-garde was also problematic for the Soviet government because it was a movement “operating on the same territory as the state” (Groys, *Total* 35), seeking to create a radically new reality through unification of politics and aesthetics. Socialist realism emerged not merely as a negation of the avant-garde, but rather as a “laying bare of the avant-garde device” (Groys, *Total* 44). Just as, according to the Marxist theory, socialism emerges when capitalism can no longer sustain its own contradictions, socialist realism and Stalinist culture as a whole resolved the contradictions of the avant-garde and “satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project” (Groys, *Total* 36). In this understanding of socialist realism, the formal differences between the avant-garde and socialist realism are due to the internal logic of the avant-garde itself and cannot be simply attributed to external factors such as mass tastes or state control. In Stalinism aesthetics merged with economics and politics as art became subject to political planning and government control just as any other sphere of production.14

The avant-garde was officially defeated when all artistic groups were disbanded by a Party decree on April 23, 1932. All artists from then on had to be organized into official professional unions. This decree begins the Stalinist phase of Soviet culture (Groys, *Total* 33). And in 1934, at the First Congress of the Writers’ Union, socialist realism officially became the unifying artistic method of Soviet literature. In his address to the Congress, Andrei Zhdanov formulated the doctrine of socialist realism, declaring that Soviet literature should be full of “enthusiasm and the spirit of heroic deeds” and serve “a new cause—the cause of socialist construction.” The writers, in Stalin’s words, are the engineers of human souls; their task is to build socialism and aid in the creation of a new socialist subjectivity. The writer must depict life ‘truthfully’ and not “in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as “objective reality” (Zhdanov). Socialist realism “demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its

14 “LEF leader Maiakovskii was thus granted his wish that the government analyze his poetry together with other achievements on ‘the labor front’” (Groys, *Total* 33).
revolutionary development” and has as its ultimate goal the “ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism” (Zhdanov). The language used by Zhdanov to characterize socialist realism is imprecise; his description of socialist realism is not a definition but “rhetorical approximations” (Bowlt 225). In addition to the often repeated phrase “realist in form, socialist in content,” socialist realism can be described by a series of terms associated with it, but these do not add up to a coherent definition. They include: narodnost’ (national/popular spirit), tipichnost’ (typicality), partiinost’ (Party-mindedness), dostupnost’ (accessibility), ideinost’ (ideological commitment), and so on. Socialist realism is in its essence indefinable. The seeming ambiguities and contradictions of socialist realism, however, are not simply a totalitarian imposition; the function of socialist realism in Stalinist society contains its own immanent logic which reveals the utopian content of the Stalinist aesthetico-political project.

The main demand of socialist realism is that artists depict elements of the future as concrete elements of the present. The two poles of socialist realism (realism plus socialism) appear as oppositions. On the one hand, we have realism: truthful, historically concrete, objective reality; on the other, utopia: enthusiasm, heroism, revolutionary development, spirit of socialism. Katerina Clark calls this combination of realism and utopia “modal schizophrenia” (Soviet 37). Yet, in socialist realism the utopian mode (“what ought to be”) is not depicting a temporality that differs from the temporality of the realist mode (“what is”). Both exist simultaneously in a single socialist realist mode. Reality in socialist realism contains its own utopian development, the utopian surplus of the now: what ought to be is what is. There is no ontological hierarchy between the real and the utopian. Similarly, socialist realism does not distinguish the past from the present or the future. In the logic of Stalinist culture, everything that comes before (linear temporality) becomes simultaneous with the present (eternal conception of time):

All ‘progressive’ world culture acquires a superhistorical significance and eternal relevance that make it the contemporary of any new ‘progressive’ aspiration, and ‘antipopular’, ‘reactionary’, ‘decadent’ culture assumes no less superhistorical, universal significance that reveals its inner sameness at any given moment in history. (Groys, Total 46-7)

Accordingly, Soviet Marxism did not separate the humanism of the early Marx from his later formalist political economy, considering “the latter to be theoretical instrument for positing and
realizing the former” (Chukhrov, translation mine.). Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Lifshitz believes that “art is realist precisely insofar as it reflects ideal reality, and art is communist insofar as it seeks reality of the ideal in a human being” (in Chukhrov). In Soviet Marxism, idea and reality are not in conflict and socialist realism formally unites the two. Since in Stalinist culture, the present (reality) and the future (utopia) are collapsed, Stalin could declare the building of socialism complete in 1936 when socialism was legislated by the Constitution.

Initially, socialist realism was articulated with reference to literature but it was soon applied, in theory, to all arts, regardless of form, medium, or genre. This indifference to specificity reveals that socialist realism is neither a style nor a method but a “set of concrete practices” (Petrovskaia, translation mine). It follows that it can also be expanded even further into all spheres of life, fulfilling the avant-garde’s demand that art transform life—“there is nothing aesthetically specific in [socialist realism’s] definition, nothing that relates properly to art: it orients art on ‘political bias’ and could be equally applied to history as science, to journalism, to propaganda and agitation” (Borev 287, translation mine). Art in Stalinism is not a separate sphere of activity, but signifies the totality of social practices. Aesthetics are made properly political through their use by political subjects. The infinite translatability of socialist realism across art forms as well as across societal spheres and institutions makes it impossible to define. Attempts at a definition inevitably contain apparent contradictions which are, nonetheless, an integral part of socialist realism’s nature. It must remain open enough to allow for an infinite variety of form and content. Rather than being monolithic or totalitarian, socialist realism is inherently oscillating, ambivalent, and polysemic. At the same time, however, it must be stable enough to provide access to truth and reality, because it is the narrative mode of a political system. Socialist realism, as the evolution of the avant-garde, shifts “the ideological emphasis [...] from form to its social use” (Groys, Style 79). It is no accident that socialist realism was formulated first and foremost in connection to literary production which uses the same medium—the word—as political and ideological discourse.

Socialist realism must remain empty at the center to allow for collective consciousness—and collective dreams. This utopian dimension of socialist realism is captured by Fridrikh Ermler who writes:
What is socialist realism? I have thought endlessly about this, and this is how I have resolved it for myself. It seems to me that in everything we create—be it cinematography, or a tractor, the construction of a house, or a fashion salon—in everything, always and everywhere, the thought must exist: ‘and communism.’ Understand me, everything that we create is a movement, a step that leads to the greater goal toward which we are striving, in a word—‘communism.’

And so it seems to me that if in the films we make, in every episode, every frame, every movement of every actor, every line of dialogue, that thought exists—‘and communism’—if that word is not taken as a cliché, a mere slogan, but is understood, deeply felt, stored away in the brain and the heart, then I believe that this indeed will be socialist realism. (qtd. in Dobrenko, *Stalinist* 109-10)

Ermler equates aesthetic creation with other branches of production. In Stalinism all activities are interchangeable—the creation of film is the same as the creation of a tractor. The product of this creative activity is not commodities but ideology. All production is the production of communism. This is made possible by socialist realism, understood here as the surplus element in socialist production, or what we could call utopian surplus, the “and communism.” This utopian surplus is the irrational element at the center of the Stalinist project, the element that makes Stalinism more radical than any other incarnation of modernism. The irrational element is that which cannot be fully captured by representation and can only be approximated—this is the revolutionary utopian content discernible in the now through the method of socialist realism. The social function of socialist realism in Stalinist society is to capture the traces of the future contained in the present and, thus, both depict and transform reality. As a collection of representations authored by and addressed to the masses, socialist realism collapses the gap between collective imagination and collective praxis, completing the political project of building socialism. It is based on a modernist conceptualization of rational humanity that controls and changes the world through its active will. Its roots in the project of Enlightenment are evident: its task to educate the workers is combined with the humanist goal of transforming the world. In socialist realism, the revolution and the spontaneity of the 1920s become the conscious ordering of the world.
One of the main goals of socialist art is to incorporate the individual into the collective while making the collective an expression of the individual. Soviet Marxist philosopher Evald Ilyenkov argues that the collective is that which is human (*chelovecheskoe*). The reality of the other is experienced through collectivity, which is not metaphysical, but is part of the concrete development of the world. Ilyenkov believes that “the collective forms not when some characteristic is shared by individuals or is present, let’s say, in two individuals, but when, in the absence of such a characteristic in another, one is ready to supplement its absence through one’s own effort” (Chukhrov, translation mine). Collectivity is not given *a priori*, but appears in certain types of societies, such as societies without private property or societies in which the “feelings of others can be thought to be ‘my’ own.” In a society where human relations are mediated by commodities, such collectivity is obstructed. In capitalism, commodity fetishism inverts the subject-object relationship between the worker and the product, disguising human relations as relations between objects and, thereby, alienating the workers from their humanity. This established order is destroyed by revolution, which overthrows all familiar relations, reveals that which was hidden, and renews the world. Revolution celebrates “freedom from the rule of things, the overcoming of alienation, and attainment of mastery over the material world” (Margolit 77, translation mine). Once the workers “recognize themselves in the world of objects they have created, discovering their authorship of history and culture” (77), they can attain a new sociality both as a ruling class and as individuals. With the recognition that labour creates the world, the masses acquire the right to a social voice, the right of the word (Margolit 142). This right of the word was given to the Soviet hero with the invention of sound cinema, which in the Soviet Union roughly coincides with the adoption of socialist realism. In montage, the individuality of the hero is subsumed into class belonging, but with voice, the hero acquires voice, individuality and agency, just as in the new communist society the workers acquired the power of political speech (143-4). Analytical montage, just like the revolution, destroys reality and reorders it into new relationships. With sound, the spontaneity of montage is mastered into a narrative which formally mirrors the transformation of the revolutionary masses into conscious individuals. Socialist realist film is formally conservative because it prioritizes social use and utility over aesthetic innovation. One of its main requirements is intelligibility by the masses. Socialist realism works by ritually concretizing the abstract meaning of Marxism, allowing the subject to ritually pass into the correct ideology (Clark 9). While the masses are the heroes of montage cinema, most notably in the films of Eisenstein, where they act as the lever of history,
in socialist realism, it is individuals who achieve correct social consciousness. This is the transformation from revolutionary destruction to socialist construction and it is, as Margolit and Filimonov argue, the source of interest in the concrete individual in socialist realist cinema.

The first Soviet feature sound film, Nikolai Ekk’s *Road to Life (Putevka v zhizn’)*, combines elements of montage with the emergent socialist realism. *Road to Life* was released in 1931, toward the end of the First Five Year Plan and well before the proclamation of socialist realism as the official artistic method. It was very successful and popular with the audiences; the film was screened internationally and Ekk was voted the best director by the audience at the 1932 Venice Film Festival. *Road to Life* is set in the 1920s with a plot centering on besprizornye, street children who were orphaned during the Civil War. These children were an acute social problem in the Soviet Union. In the film, they are reclaimed from a life of crime and deprivation through productive work in a labour commune. The work the children do is transformative in nature: it re-educates and reforges the individual. This pedagogy of re-education through labour is most famously developed by Anton Makarenko, an influential education theorist, who established a children’s labour commune in 1921 near Poltava, Ukraine. He recounts his experiences running the commune in *Pedagogicheskaia poema (Pedagogical Poem, 1925-1935; published in English as Road to Life, or, Epic in Education)*, which is one of the sources for the plot of Ekk’s film. Ekk’s film is also based on another experiment—the 1926 creation of the OGPU15 Bolshevo Labour Commune by a Cheka member, Matvei Pogrebinskii. *Road to Life* was made on the order of Cheka (OGPU) and many of the actors in the film were real graduates of the Liubertsy OGPU colony (Dobrenko, Political 225). In 1935, Izvestiia published a profile of Pogrebinskii describing his “stubborn struggle for the soul of each individual former criminal.” This was not an easy task and “it often took three years intensive work before a former criminal was ready to make the ultimate break with his old milieu and recognize that his primary loyalties were not with them but the broader Soviet community” (Fitzpatrick 78). The re-education of the individual through work is the main theme of the film and it is central to Stalinist ideology and ontology. The idea of reforging of the individual through socialist labour was also genuinely popular with the masses; Sheila Fitzpatrick writes that “even in the Gulag

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15 Joint State Political Directorate, a secret police organization.
labor camps, where reforging theme was strongly emphasized, it seems to have had some genuine inspirational impact” (76).

According to Margolit and Filimonov, *Road to Life* is already a socialist realist film but its origins in montage cinema are clearly evident. It is still concerned with the masses and their historical transformation and contains some elements of montage. *Besprizornye* are a spontaneous mass (*stikhiinaia massa*) pushed into the film’s plot by history. As the plot develops, the spontaneous energy of the masses is harnessed into an inner energy of self-consciousness. The crucial scene in the middle of the film where the boys fight during the absence of the colony’s organizer, Nikolai Sergeev, is read by Margolit and Filimonov as an inner struggle between spontaneity and consciousness; the final struggle against the criminal gang, correspondingly, is “the self-assertion of the masses as a single whole, as a conscious historical force” (76, translation mine). In Marxist-Leninism the transition from revolutionary masses to conscious individuals and the resulting change in the relationship between the individual and the collective is driven by the spontaneity–consciousness dialectic which is the catalyst of historical progress. This view of history is based in a conception of rational humanity capable of rational social organization, a philosophical view that originates in the Enlightenment and is the fundamental premise of modernism. Spontaneity (*stikhiinost’*)\(^{16}\) refers to actions that are not politically deliberate; they are disorganised and sporadic, driven by historical forces rather than by rational will of the subjects. Spontaneity has both positive and negative connotations: it is the opposite of restrictive and artificial, but it is also the uncontrollable, often destructive force of nature (Clark 21). Opposing spontaneity is consciousness (*soznatel’nost’*), fully thought out political actions guided by the vanguard. Class struggle in its early stages takes the form of spontaneous actions, but in its developed form is a conscious struggle which requires the vanguard to control and discipline the spontaneity of revolutionary masses. In historical materialism, history is a dialectical struggle between spontaneity and consciousness and the final synthesis of this dialectic is communism which resolves the conflict between the

\(^{16}\) *Stikhiinost’* is derived from the noun *stikhiia*, the four fundamental elements of nature in Greek philosophy, or matter in its basic form (Gr. *stoicheion*). *Stikhiia* is defined by the *Ushakov Dictionary* as a natural phenomenon independent of human activity and manifested as a powerful elemental force. In spontaneity–consciousness dialectic, *stikhiinost’* is the metaphorical manifestation of *stikhiia* in the social sphere.
spontaneous tendencies of the individual and the interests of the collective. Conscious actions are premised on the subject’s recognition that the interests of individuals and their class coincide. In Soviet ideology, the absence of private ownership of the means of production is the objective condition necessary for the subordination of natural historic and economic forces by the society. This is the prerequisite for the development of collective consciousness. Communism is the triumph of consciousness, but in communism, consciousness will “be such that it will no longer be in opposition to ‘spontaneity’; there will no longer be a conflict between the natural responses of the people and the best interests of society” (Clark, Soviet 16).

The spontaneity–consciousness dialectic in Stalinist culture is reflected in aesthetics where it is present both on the level of plot and on the level of form. The hero of a socialist realist plot undergoes a transition from spontaneity to consciousness. As Katerina Clark has shown, the dialectic is concretized in socialist realism by encoding Marxist Leninism in personal biography (Soviet 16). The transition from spontaneity to consciousness is portrayed in socialist realist film not only as “the right path of development for all citizens,” but as “a moral and political necessity” (Miller 162). Socialist realist films “constantly return to the idea that spontaneity must give way to a strict Soviet ascetism where happiness can only be found in self-control, discipline, hard work and responsible domestic relationships” (162). This is expressed formally through long takes, eye-level camera angle, and an often stationary camera. The hero’s transformation is most evident in production films, where he or she is transformed through socialist labour, which is itself an enactment of the spontaneity–consciousness dialectic, combining the workers’ enthusiasm with the central planning by the Party. In Road to Life, however, there is still a tension between the two sides of the spontaneity-consciousness dialectic. While consciousness triumphs, the film still contains elements of spontaneity that cannot be easily subsumed by consciousness. One of the more problematic elements of the film was the inclusion of a song performed by the leader of the criminal gang, Zhigan. While according to the conventions of the socialist realist plot, the masses and the socialist realist hero

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17 Katerina Clark notes that in Marx, the main opposition is freedom and necessity and not spontaneity and consciousness as such (21). In classical Marxism, transpersonal historical forces drive the change even if allowing for some interaction between the personal and the impersonal (17). See German Ideology.

18 By the middle of 1930s, the prison song and the criminals’ song (blatnaia pesnia) became underground genres; the scene with the song was subsequently cut out of the film (see Stefano Garzonio).
emerge victorious against the criminals, the audiences who flocked to see the film loved the song. This was one of the reasons for the film being shelved in the mid-30s. Ekk also synthesizes the emergent socialist realist style with dynamism that recalls montage cinema of the 1920s. These dynamic elements are completely absent in the later 1955 adaptation of Makarenko’s *Pedagogicheskaia poema*, which uses the static socialist realist style. In the central scene of railroad construction, Ekk uses low-angle shots characteristic of montage cinema, emphasizing the power of the worker’s body. There are also frequent close-ups of body parts, creating fragmented anonymous bodies that move in and out of the frame and are conceptually reconstituted as a collective. Here, labour exceeds the boundaries of the frame. The scene of construction is accompanied by the sound of labour mixed in with the sound of singing. Vincent Bohlinger points out that in this scene the sounds of work are, at first, “accents within the rhythm of the song, but then these sounds occur both against and along the rhythm of the song, further complicating the rhythm of the song itself” (173). The layering of the sounds of labour with song “helps to demonstrate the union of pleasure with work” (173-4). The rhythm of work is represented by the rhythm of montage. In the montage, fragmented bodies become a collective social body building the new society just as the boys’ collective work incorporates them into the social whole. This unity of form and content in the representation of labour reveals that cinema, just like the train, is also a means of mastery. Since film is mechanically reproducible and, by virtue of being a visual medium, accessible for the diverse or illiterate population, it is a highly effective means of constructing social and ideological narrative. Just like the railroad that the boys are building, the technology of film unifies vast spaces and links remote communities into a collective whole. And as the masses recognize themselves on the screen, they can form a new, mass consciousness. The radical potential of cinema is that it creates a possibility of self-articulation of the masses, or, in words of Kracauer, “self-representation of the masses subject to the process of mechanization” (qtd. in Hansen 53). In cinema, unlike in other aesthetic forms, the masses encounter their own reality.

Reforging of individual through labour is the central theme in *Road to Life*. It is through work that *besprizornye* can leave behind the life of crime, delinquency, and poverty and become productive, valued members of society. In contrast to rebirth, which carries connotations of organic, natural processes with mythical undertones, re-education and reforging signify a wholly different ontology. The latter are essentially human rational processes, part of a technological
world view. Reforging is explicitly industrial, casting a human being as a material that is moulded by the work of and within human society. Re-education, similarly, points to the shaping of a human being by his or her social environment; education is a process of socialization in addition to being a means of knowledge transmission. It too implies human mastery over human behaviour and human psyche, since education is a social institution. In the film, the most important work project in the commune is the building of a railroad—a symbol of modernisation and technology, as well as a classic symbol of Russia and its historical progress. While previous work performed by the boys in the commune and shown to us in a montage sequence that recalls montage cinema of the 1920s represents their transition from being criminals to being workers, the railroad project is the culmination of their socialist re-education. The construction of the railroad begins after Sergeev travels to Moscow. His journey is not shown to the audience; we are, instead, left to see the effect of idleness and absence of authority on the boys. Sergeev’s trip advances the common socialist realist theme of the wise Party mentor who guides hero’s transition to consciousness. His authority derives from his connection to Moscow, the ideological heart of the Soviet Union that represents the authority of the Party. Work as such is not enough. In socialist realism and in the project of modernity in general, there is a need for social reinforcement and structuring of human behaviour. In socialist realism this process is teleological: there is one correct goal and the path to it is highly ideological (only the Party can provide proper guidance). The film, however, does not propose simple determinism or authoritarianism; the early scene where Sergeev gives the boys an option of going to the commune shows interplay of (ideologically correct) authority and free will. In this world view, the individual’s work structures society while the work of the society structures the individual.

The catalyst for the railroad-building project is the river’s thaw, which cuts the commune off from supply lines, leading the boys into idleness and, consequently, disorder and regression to their earlier criminal behaviour. In contrast to Pudovkin’s Mat’ (Mother) where the river’s thaw

19 A journey to Moscow is a common trope of Stalinist film, where the arrival of the hero in the Soviet capital functions as epiphany or rebirth. Moscow is not merely a geographical location, but a mystical center and a place of transformation. The actual journey of the hero or heroine is usually not shown and, at times, takes on magical elements such as the flying car in The Radiant Path.

is a positive symbol—the gathering force of the water as the ice breaks mirrors the gathering force of the workers—in *Road to Life* the thaw (nature) affects the commune negatively and must be conquered through the construction of the railroad (technology). Technology aids human beings in mastering nature, both the external world and the inner self of the individuals. The train is both a symbol and concrete material means of human mastery; the railroad with its linearity and undeviating path is an apt symbol for the teleology of communism. The boys are building the path into the future where the goal, or destination, is clear. The future too is created and mastered by humanity. The climax of the film is the death of Mustafa and his symbolic ride at the head of the first train to arrive at the commune. He rides out of the commune to meet the train on a handcar, but his body returns on a locomotive. The technological progress from a human powered vehicle to steam engine echoes the ideological rebirth of the hero, Mustafa having been symbolically reborn in the character of Kol’ka, whose family life prior to commune displays the vicious circle of social problems caused by alcoholism, abuse, and poverty. Both processes are shown to be products of human labour. The nature–technology opposition in *Road to Life* contrasts starkly with the representation of labour in the 1955 adaptation. In the later film, released after Stalin’s death, the central work activity is agriculture, as opposed to construction of a railroad. The contrast highlights the modernist focus on the rational and technological in *Road to Life* and in early Stalinism in general.

While elsewhere in the film Ekk uses cinematic means to signify and enact transformation through labour, in the prologue the word takes prominence over the image. The prologue is delivered to the camera by Vasilii Kachalov, a distinguished actor who worked in Stanislavski’s theatre. Starting with the powerful image of orphaned children hardened by brutality of war and hunger, the prologue presents wars and, by extension, imperialism and the tsarist regime as historical causes of the children’s plight. He asks,

> What will save them? Charity? Moral education? They and we laugh at that! We know better: Man is created by his environment. The Republic of the Soviets which had realized the might of free, universal labour will give them a ticket to life. We build giants of metallurgy across the emptiness of taiga. We found a living lever for human destiny. We will teach these orphaned children how to fight through to the new world. We will re-forgé them into builders of the world. (translation mine)
The prologue and the subsequent opening sequence, which shows the criminal activities of children dressed in filthy rags on the wintry streets of Moscow, set up an ideological perspective for viewing the film through a sociological and not individualistic lens. And by showing the audience the life of besprizornye before they arrive at the labour commune—they do not get there until 43 minutes into the 106 minute film—Road to Life invests the viewer in the boys’ journey. The opening sequence establishes a strong link between criminality and social context and, therefore, between the individual and the collective. The later introduction of Kol’ka, who embodies the birth of the socialist hero via the sacrificial death of Mustafa, further underscores the social origins of the problem. Through Kol’ka the viewer is shown the cycle of criminality: his mother’s death leads to the deterioration of the family, father’s alcoholism, and Kol’ka’s life on the street. Thus, the problem of homeless children is presented explicitly as a social problem that impacts the entire society and reproduces itself. The problem is structural—as Kachalov states, “man is created by his environment.”

The prologue considers solutions offered by the bourgeois welfare state—charity and moral education. Both solutions are clearly flawed. They rely on assumptions about poverty and the poor that ignore structural causes and the context of poverty. The bourgeois solutions provide only an individualized understanding of both the problem and the solution. The workers’ society offers a wholly different approach to the problem—the power of free, living labour. Instead of relying on the charity of the rich or condemning the poor for their alleged moral failings, the new society built by the labour of free workers will empower the hitherto marginalized poor to create their own future. This is an ideologically compelling argument powerfully delivered by Kachalov. He faces the viewers and addresses them in the first person plural—we. In Road to Life, we can see the formal experimentation of montage being subsumed by the social function of film and narrative in general. The primary characteristic of film in Stalinism was intelligibility; the main criterion for evaluation of a film adopted by the First All-Soviet Party Conference on Cinema in 1928 was the requirement that it had a form understood by the millions. The importance of film for Stalinism is not in its aesthetic and formal features, but in its social use. While Road to Life still contains formal elements of montage, the prologue sets up

20 Kol’ka was initially conceived as the hero of the film. The audiences, however, chose Mustafa (Margolit).
a sociological understanding of the film. The substance of the film is the “responsibility of each member of society for the existence of homelessness and for its eradication” (Margolit, “Interpretatsi” 90). It is important to remember that the transformation of the masses and of the individual in communism is not a metaphysical but a concrete process. The working class acquired new sociality through the recognition of their labour as world-creating—this is the source of their new consciousness. As citizens of the new workers’ state, the viewers have the power to change the fates of the orphaned children, just as they have the power to change the world.

During the early 1930s, the main focus of Soviet cinema shifted to themes of industrialization and labour: the Five-Year Plan, productivity, class consciousness, socialist competition, struggle against the wreckers and saboteurs. As the political and economic focus turned toward normalization and stabilization, cinema had to reflect the shift in ideology; the film industry was part of socialist construction and had to aid in the drive for rapid industrialisation. Margolit and Shmyrov write in their Iziatoe kino (Withdrawn Film) that during this period films were shelved not only because of ideologically inappropriate content or form, but also because their themes no longer corresponded to the contemporary needs. Themes of Revolution and Civil War, with their focus on revolutionary masses, were no longer a priority. Yet, the most popular and successful Civil War film was released during the Second Five-Year Plan in 1934—Chapaev, directed by Georgii Vasil’ev and Sergei Vasil’ev.

Chapaev was a socialist realist propaganda film with a slow linear narrative propelled by dialogue, yet it captured the humanity of its heroes in a way that the audiences could relate to. The film is based on the book by Dmitrii Furmanov, political commissar of the historical Vasilii Chapaev who was a commander of a rifle division on the eastern front during the Civil War. The book is an example of literatura fakta (factography), which blurs the line between memoir, biography, and fiction, and the film reworks the source material further to turn it into a

21 Since socialist realism treats aesthetics as a social institution, censorship is also, in part, tied to social use. Despite its ruthlessness, the Soviet censorship was inefficient, unsystematic, and inconsistent, as Jamie Miller shows. Some highly problematic films made it to the screens before being banned after a week or so of showing in the theatres. See Soviet Cinema: Politics and Persuasion under Stalin, especially Chapter 2 “Censorship.”

22 The directors are commonly referred to as Brothers Vasil’ev, although they were not related.
mythologized historical biography. The film, set during the era that is part of the Soviet founding myth—the Revolution and the Civil War—is a legitimization narrative for the state and the Party. “In reworking Furmanov’s material,” writes Jeremy Hicks, “the Vasil’ev Brothers’ film adaptation amplifies the heroic and mythical aspects of the story so that their Chapaev resembles myth more than document. This reworking of the story is less an individual reinterpretation than an updating of it in accordance with the cultural norms of the 1934” (28). As “the very apex of Soviet film art” (Shumiatsky 148), the film is a paradigmatic socialist realist film. While not a formally innovative film, it effectively combines the socialist realist aesthetic with action scenes of Civil War. Usually Chapaev is analyzed as a socialist realist biography and myth creation, or as an example of revolutionary or socialist romanticism. For example, Zorkaia writes that Chapaev bridges the era of the poetic and epic cinema of the 1920s with the cinema of the 1930s, which focuses on individuated characters and takes a dramatic, psychological, actor-centered approach. Similarly, Dobrenko argues that it had “laid the foundations of the tradition of mythologisation of historical biography” (Stalinist 67). However, if we consider Chapaev within the context of the early 1930s Stalinist culture, with its focus on labour and productivity as well as the all-pervasive atmosphere of militarisation, the film must be understood as an ideological representation of socialist labour. Socialist labour, after all, is not confined to production in factories, but encompasses all facets of life—it is a way of being in the workers’ society.

The plot of Chapaev follows the basic socialist realist master plot. Chapaev, who is from a peasant background, is the leader of a Red Army division on the Eastern front. He is uneducated but possesses spontaneity and instinctually knows what is right. His transformation from spontaneity to consciousness is guided by his political commissar, Furmanov. The two argue at first, but eventually their relationship deepens and Chapaev attains proper ideological consciousness. The film “re-enacts the resolution of the consciousness–spontaneity dialectic through the figure of its hero [...] who is guided towards tempering his wilful side the better to serve the needs of the nascent Soviet Union” (Haynes 162). The plot culminates in a surprise attack by the White Army. In the film’s ending, Chapaev dies while attempting to swim across a river. Chapaev embodies the qualities of socialist realist heroes, and his transformation follows the same path as that of the heroes of the 1930s production films. In him, the contemporary audiences could recognize the exemplary and officially celebrated workers of the Five-Year
Plan. In *Chapaev*, the viewers are shown heroic, revolutionary work that is the foundation and historical precursor of socialist labour.

*Chapaev* premiered on the seventeenth anniversary of the Revolution (November 7, 1934), and quickly became the most popular socialist realist film ever made (Kenez 155). It earned praises both at home and abroad, becoming an integral part of Soviet popular culture. In Shumiatsky’s opinion, *Chapaev* was the best Soviet film made by 1935. It successfully combined popular entertainment with correct ideology and “had everything that Stalin and Shumiatsky required from the new Soviet cinema” (Taylor “Soviet” 198). Stalin watched Chapaev thirty-eight times in his private Kremlin screening room between November 1934 and March 1936 (Volkov 155). In a 1935 letter to Shumiatsky, Stalin wrote:

> Soviet power expects new successes from you, new films that, like *Chapaev*, present the greatness of historical events in the struggle for workers’ and peasants’ power in the Soviet Union, mobilise us to complete new tasks and remind us of both the achievements and the difficulties of socialist construction. (qtd. in Taylor, “Soviet” 198)

Stalin clearly links *Chapaev* to the contemporary task of socialist construction. The film, argues Jeremy Hicks, “makes the spectator feel the continuity between the Civil War and Soviet Russia of 1934” (30). The Civil War ethos of the film parallels the contemporary atmosphere of militarization and the feeling of an impending war. The climate of militarization during this era extended to all social spheres: there was the labour front, literary front, cinema front, and so on. During the Five-Year Plan, labour was mobilized like an army that was waging war on nature, reality, space, and time itself. Both in the film and in the contemporary society, the line between work and war is blurred and, often, not present at all. Thus, the campaigns promoting the Five-Year Plan appropriated the imagery and symbolism of War Communism. Both struggles—on the Civil War front and on the labour front—are urgent, require superhuman effort, and face

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23 There is an entire genre of Soviet and Russian *anekdot* (joke) in which Chapaev, his aide Pet’ka, Anka the machine-gunner, as well as Furmanov are stock characters. With time, the characters lost their historical specificity and became abstract types.

24 War Communism (*voennyi kommunizm*) refers to the political and economic policies during the Civil War; it ended with the adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921. NEP, as the official economic policy of the Soviet Union, was replaced by Stalin’s Five-Year Plan in 1928.
overwhelming odds. Chapaev and his army, just like the Stakhanovites and shock workers of the early 1930s, fight to build a new society and new consciousness.

By transposing political discourse of War Communism onto economics, Stalin “turned the terrain of economic development and peasant collectivization itself into a war zone” (Buck-Morss 37). War Communism was mobilization of economy for war; Stalinism was mobilization of “the economy as war” (37, italics in the original). With the Five-Year Plan, Stalin’s economic policies turned away from the reconciliatory politics of NEP towards rapid industrialization and collectivization. Because Russia’s economic backwardness was incongruous with it being the most socially and ideologically advanced society, rapid industrialization represented historical acceleration, a race to build the communist society of the future.25 This created urgency that went beyond the need to improve material conditions. The drive to industrialize was a race against time itself: “Workers inspired by the vision of socialism would bend time to their wills, just as the powerful blacksmith of so many Soviet posters bent the iron hot out of the forge” (Weitz 56). According to Stalinist ideology, historical progress was a matter of will, rather than of material conditions. This meant that material limitations, such as equipment shortages, could not in themselves hinder historical progress. Thus, rapid industrialization could be accomplished purely through enthusiasm (entuziazm), socialist attitude towards work, and “creative initiative” (tvorcheskaia initsiativa).

The sense of historical urgency and the focus on the workers’ will went hand in hand with a form of labour called shock work (udarnyi trud), which was officially adopted during the Five-Year Plan. This was labour done in storms (shturm), a military-type mobilization of all available resources. Shock work was “predicated on the belief that vastly higher productivity could be achieved through a combination of labor exploits and better work organization” (Kotkin Making 282). It was partially necessitated by the material conditions. Stalinist production chronically suffered from shortages of materials, lack of modern technology, outmoded equipment, and lack of worker expertise. While, as Kotkin points out, shock work could be done with new technology, it was mainly associated with construction, which had a low level of mechanization.

25 Moshe Lewin writes that “the sense of urgency in the whole upheaval is baffling: the pace imposed suggests a race against time, as if those responsible for the country’s destinies felt they were running out of history” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 37).
The superhuman effort required by shock work “became the main method of ‘rationalization’” (Kotkin “Coercion” 282) during Soviet industrialisation. The shock labour movement (udarnichestvo) “had complex origins in the Civil War” (Payne 212) and was appropriated by the government during the Five-Year Plan as a form of socialist competition. In “How to Organize Competition,” Lenin describes socialist competition as one of the forces driving the development of socialism and correct consciousness. The complexities and contradictions of the shock work movement are discussed by Matthew J. Payne in his Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism. He writes that while in some Western analyses shock work is seen as an instrument of exploitation or indoctrination, the reality was more multifaceted. Since shock work was initially “part of a genuine grassroots movement contesting craft exclusivity and inefficient management, shock workers called on their peers to ‘emulate’ their labor enthusiasm and self-sacrifice, thus (in theory) transforming the worksite from a locus of exploitation to a moral community” (211). Once the movement caught attention of the government, it was promoted through official campaigns and became part of the official economic policy. The shock labour movement, however, faced resistance both from the management and the rank-and-file workers. Moreover, the workers who did embrace socialist competition were not in agreement on what it meant. Payne divides the shock workers at Turksib (Turkestan-Siberia Railway) into rationalisers and enthusiasts. Rationalisers saw labour rationalisation and Taylorisation as the main means of increasing productivity, even in the context of shock work. Enthusiasts, on the other hand, preferred the intense superhuman storms. Shock labour encompasses both of these polarities: this was the socialist realist form of labour that combined rationalisation with utopianism. Thus, writing about the Five-Year Plan, Stephen Kotkin argues that “Soviet industrialization could be ‘utopian’ [...] precisely because it was ‘scientific’” (Magnetic, 30). The language of the Five-Year Plan was the language of science, rationality, and modernity; the Plan combined scientific planning “with the ultimate science of society, Marxism” (30). At the same time, it contained irrational, utopian elements exemplified in shock labour and socialist competition that required feats of human labour and constant intensification of production. By combining spontaneity and consciousness, rationality and utopia, materiality and the power of the human will, shock work was an expression of socialist realism in the economic sphere.
The official adoption of shock labour as part of Soviet economic policy roughly coincides with the adoption of socialist realism as the official narrative mode of Soviet aesthetics. Socialist realism was literary in its origin, and socialist realist labour, analogously, was primarily a mode of narrating the practice and nature of labour in the Soviet Union. The symbolic aspects of labour were often privileged over the economic ones and this is most evident in the practice of socialist competition and shock labour. The push for the ever-increasing productivity created an inflation of productivity on paper. Kotkin writes that while on paper most workers at Magnitogorsk exceeded set norms, the overall production was always short of the target. In some cases, a production site had more shock workers on record than actual workers employed there. As shock work became institutionalized, it became mandatory: “In practice, what this meant was that singular feats of daring and overexertion compelled almost everyone else to do likewise or risk ridicule, suspicion, and, in some cases, arrest” (282). While the requirement that everyone exceed records is self-contradictory, it follows the logic of socialist realism—the utopian, irrational element is expressed through the workers’ will. Because shock work and socialist competition was most suited for work with low levels of mechanization, the symbolism and rituals of labour could acquire a greater importance. Socialist labour is not merely a material practice; just like the socialist realist novel, it attempts to capture in its “realist form” elements of the future. It combines the realism of production planning with the utopian impulse and the power of human will. The symbols and rituals surrounding the practice of socialist labour were not merely tools of propaganda but an integral part of socialist labour’s internal logic.

In “Peopling Magnitostroi,” Stephen Kotkin describes the construction of a dam on the Ural River in 1930, the first significant project in Magnitogorsk. Kotkin shows that during this project, celebrations and rituals took precedence over scientific planning and quality of production. The start of the project faced a number of problems: shortage of labour, lack of mechanization, no clear directives from the management. Soon, a local party organization had to be formed to aid in realization of the project: a special decree was issued, “speeches were made, mobilizations were ordered, brigades were organized, shock work began: ‘Everyone to the dam! Everything for the dam!” (78). The work was carried out around the clock in extreme temperatures: “There were not enough heaters to keep the cement from freezing, and sometimes, when the electricity went down, cement was mixed by hand” (78). The low skill level of the workers was compensated for by ideology and “motivation derived from a sense of higher
purpose” (79). Those who were labelled slackers and shirkers were publicly shamed. In order to speed up the construction even further, a socialist competition between the construction on the left and right banks of the river was devised, against objections of the American specialists. Finally, the local party leadership decided that the dam should be finished for the November 7th holiday, despite the technical difficulties of achieving this goal. This date was then pushed even earlier in a counterplan that demonstrated even greater ideological commitment. The dam was declared finished in early October, in record time of 74 days: “Banners were hung, speeches were given, ‘heroes’ were decorated, and busts of Lenin and Stalin were made from the cement. The atmosphere was described as ‘saturated’ with labor enthusiasm (although at first, as one Soviet journalist tells it, the workers had not even been able to pronounce the word enthusiast)” (79–80).

It was soon discovered, however, that the dam was not deep enough and water froze, causing an acute water shortage that persisted for years. The dam was clearly inadequate and a new, larger dam had to be planned almost immediately after. When the new dam was built, the original one was submerged. This, however, did not matter:

> What mattered instead was the fact that the dam had been built—not only built but built ahead of schedule—and in the process hundreds of youths had come of age as loyal partisans of the cause ... This was not a dam but a gigantic crusade in which the lowest individual could become a great hero by straining to pour an extra load of cement. In a way, experiences on the construction site, such as building the dam, cemented Soviet power as much as the production of the steel plant itself would. (Kotkin 80)

The gap between reality and ideology, or how the reality is narrated, is closed by socialist realism. Socialist realist labour overcomes all obstacles to build the dam and, although it is deficient as an industrial structure, the dam is a symbol of harnessing the irrational elemental energies—spontaneous will of the workers as well as the water current—and turning them into human mastery. The building of a dam is often used in Stalinist production films both as a symbol of Soviet industrialization and as a metaphor for the transformation of workers’ consciousness, such as in Dovzhenko’s *Ivan* (1932) or Aleksandr Macheret’s *Dela i liudi* (*Works and Men*, 1932). Shock labour and Stakhanovism were material practices that had some
success in raising productivity; the real aim of socialist labour, however, was creation of socialist consciousness.

Shock labour, initially, was done in shock brigades. During the Five-Year Plan, however, the emphasis shifted towards individual exemplary workers. In the early 1930s economic policies, there is a shift in emphasis from the labouring masses or the working class towards individuated socialist workers. This shift corresponds to the shift to socialist realism in the aesthetic sphere. Payne writes that even though shock labour was promoted in the official atmosphere of collectivism, it was primarily a way to transform individuals and to create a model socialist worker. The movement did have “a profound effect on worker identity,” even if majority of workers joined socialist competitions “not from a sudden leap in proletarian consciousness, but from a combination of accommodation to the demands of a highly coercive state and a calculus of self-interest” (Payne 220). Shock work, Stakhanovism, and other forms of socialist competition were explicitly political forms of labour: “a means of differentiating individuals as well as a technique of political recruitment within the working class” (Kotkin, Magnetic 205). Workers who embodied socialist labour represented “a new paradigm of individuation” (Payne 225). The change in focus from class to the individual was reinforced through economic policies. In 1931, Stalin reversed the policy of “specialist baiting.” The equalitarian wage policy adopted during the First Five-Year Plan was also reversed and the new individualized wages and piece rates policy rewarded individual productivity. The focus was now on idealized individuated workers. The worker valorized by the regime was a civic role model exemplifying the socialist approach to labour and life: “productionist in orientation, civic-minded, disciplined, and vigilant” (Payne 221). According to the resolution of the First Congress of Shock Brigades in December 1929, a shock worker was not just a labourer but a revolutionary in all spheres of life: “in production, in social life, and in the everyday [v bytu]” (qtd. in “Udarnichestvo”). Hero workers received recognition and material rewards, but socialist competition also had a moral dimension—shock workers modelled the proper way to live in the new socialist society. Thus, shock workers were also rewarded with rituals and symbols, such as the Order of Lenin and the title of Hero of Labour.26 The ritual aspects of socialist labour foreground its role in society as a

26 In 1938, the title was changed to the Hero of Socialist Labour; this title was awarded until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.
whole where the concepts of work and citizenship are collapsed. To be a revolutionary, a hero, a citizen, or a worker are all facets of the same identity.

A socialist worker possesses the same traits as a socialist realist hero: keen intellect, strong will, sternness, and self-restraint. These are the traits that Shumiatsky enumerates in his *Kinematografiia millionov* when describing Chapaev. As a socialist realist hero, Chapaev embodies discipline and vigilance, but he also possesses spontaneity, which is tempered by the guidance of the Party. He “knows that the truth is on Lenin’s side, he knows what he is fighting for and dreams about the wonderful life that will come after the war.” In him, the audiences can recognize the contemporary heroes of labour. Paradoxically, this is also why, at the end of the film, Chapaev must die. Boris Babochkin, the actor who portrayed Chapaev explained:

   Chapaev is a character that developed historically ... his death became inevitable not because his bravery bordered on carelessness, but because a new epoch was beginning, and Chapaev, as a historical type and a representative of a certain social formation embodying the spontaneous revolutionary force of the people, had to disappear. (qtd. in Margolit and Filimonov 97)

Chapaev belongs to an earlier, revolutionary era, not to the era of socialism. At the same time he bridges the two periods. Revolution, War Communism, and socialist competition, after all, are expressions of the same historical forces. It is significant that Chapaev dies crossing a river. Just like in the metaphor of the dam in production films, the river is an elemental current that must be overcome. Chapaev can reach the future only as a symbol and a myth; thus, he must die before reaching the other side.

Chapaev is a historically specific figure, but as a socialist realist hero, he possesses qualities that are universal. In socialist realism, the individual contains the typical, and the singular contains collective. Socialist realist heroes are particular individuals who embody the universal. This

The award was resurrected as Hero of Labour by Vladimir Putin in May 2013: “In a speech at the ceremony, Mr Putin said that Russia was ‘obliged to restore a respectful attitude to labour and raise the prestige of those professions on which Russia depends: engineers, designers, factory workers, farmers, teachers, and doctors’” (“Russia Seeks New Generation of ‘Heroes’”).
makes the heroes of socialist realist films, in principle, interchangeable. Shumiatsky writes, “Couldn’t Maxim [from *The Youth of Maxim*] become Furmanov [in *Chapaev*]? Is it so difficult to imagine the kolkhoz workers from *Peasants* as soldiers in Chapaev’s division?” (17). This interchangeability is not a shortcoming of socialist realism (i.e. formulaic plot and characters), but is part of its inner logic, demonstrating the commonality of class struggle. While the details of individual lives differ, the meaning of those lives remains the same. The unity of particular and general, or collective and individual, creates typicality (*tipichnost’*), which is one of the goals of socialist realism. The typical is not that which is the most common, “but that which most persuasively expresses the essence of a given social force” (qtd. in Groys, *Total 50*).

Socialist realist characters are both archetypes and individuals in concrete socio-historical locations. The dialectic between concrete and universal makes them *typical* characters: their “innermost being is determined by objective forces at work in society [...] the determining factors of a particular historical phase are found in them in concentrated form” (Lukács, 122-3). The typical heroes of socialist realism represent everyone in their singularity; in them, the viewers should recognize themselves.

In *Chapaev* the objective forces of history work through the spontaneity–consciousness dialectic, making the film’s hero a typical character. Chapaev is a peasant who becomes a revolutionary hero—“a spontaneous (*stikhinyi*) communist who grows into a true Bolshevik, a disciplined member of Lenin’s Party” (Shumiatsky 150). The central conflict in the film is not the military and ideological conflict between the Red Army and the White Army, but the internal struggle taking place within Chapaev himself. This is the same conflict that is shown in production films which depict the worker-hero’s enlightenment and journey to consciousness. The worker-hero also begins, often as a peasant, with a natural, spontaneous, and undisciplined drive and enthusiasm; this drive requires the discipline and guidance of the Party so it can be harnessed and used productively. In the logic of socialist realism, the transformation of a revolutionary and that of a worker are expressions of the same historical forces: war and work are thus linked. The ideological unity of war and work also has a more pragmatic purpose, as Stephen Kotkin writes:

> What the Red Army had been for the regime in the 1920s, the new construction sites became in the 1930s: its device for transforming and assimilating the peasantry into the
collective crusade, ‘the revolution,’ the building of socialism, the Five-Year Plan—in short, the new civilization. (‘Peopling’ 81)

The assimilation of soldiers and peasants is a major plot element of the film and it is linked directly to Chapaev’s own transformation. His moment of enlightenment occurs when the peasants complain about the soldiers taking their pigs. At first, Chapaev does not recognize why this is problematic, but Furmanov sets him on the correct path while explicitly evoking the authority of the Party. The reaction of the peasants triggers Chapaev’s epiphany and he delivers the film’s central speech to the audience of soldiers and peasants, telling them that they are fighting and sacrificing their lives “for the peasant [and] for the working man.” The kind of future they make possible by their sacrifice can be glimpsed when Chapaev speaks to his aide Pet’ka and Pet’ka’s love interest, Anka the machine-gunner.27 In a scene before the decisive battle in which he will die, Chapaev tells the young people that they are fighting for the future and a beautiful, happy life for everyone. Unlike Chapaev who embodies the revolutionary era, they must not die, but live and work together in this bright future. The future Chapaev dreams of is the world of socialist labour. In 1935, at the First All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites, Stalin famously declared,

Life has improved, comrades. Life has become more joyous. And when life is joyous, work goes well. Hence the high rates of output. Hence the heroes and heroines of labour. ... If people in our country lived badly, drably, joylessly, we should have had nothing like the Stakhanov movement.

Happiness is linked directly to socialist labour—Stakhanovism and shock labour are expressions of the people’s joy. Chapaev’s death makes this world possible both literally and symbolically.

In the film, Chapaev’s charisma and spontaneity are directly contrasted to the intellectualism of Colonel Borozdin. The two characters represent the opposition between action and contemplation; the latter is often associated in socialist realism with the bourgeoisie. During the battle scene, intellectualism is explicitly linked with the Whites as Chapaev’s men watching the

27 The romantic subplot was added after Stalin requested that the Vasil’ev Brothers introduce a female soldier character who would represent the Soviet woman.
advance of the White Army remark, “They march beautifully! Intelligentsia...” Colonel Borozdin’s appearance resembles the stock capitalist characters of the 1920s films—he is bald, stocky, and wears pince-nez. His surroundings are darkly lit, sumptuous, with heavy curtains and leather chairs. In a key scene he is seen playing the Moonlight Sonata, the piano denoting introverted intellectualism and bourgeois decadence. While both sides are engaged in armed conflict, Borozdin’s surroundings imply leisure. Labour here is performed by a servant, Petrovich. The relationship between Petrovich and Borozdin is a direct representation of the prerevolutionary relation of labour. During the scene where Borozdin plays the piano, we are shown a close-up of Petrovich moving rhythmically to the music. He appears to be dancing. The camera then pulls back and reveals that he is in fact polishing the floors with a brush attached to his foot. The master-servant relationship is problematised further when Petrovich pleads for Borozdin to help his relative, who is facing execution. Borozdin refuses to help: the reliance on the benevolence of the oppressors is not an adequate solution. In contrast to the headquarters of the White commander, the lodgings of Chapaev’s men are peasant houses and stables, places of daily work. Warfare, domesticity, and everyday life are explicitly linked in Chapaev. In one scene, Chapaev explains military tactics using potatoes as props, linking byt (everyday existence) with the necessity of war. During the Stalinist push for rapid industrialization, militarisation was extended into the civic, domestic, and other spheres of public and private life. The war extended the house, and into intimate relationships. In one scene, Anka and Pet’ka are in a peasant izba and Anka is practicing putting together her machine gun (Figure 2). The foregrounding of the weapon, which she is cleaning on the table, suggests the militarisation of domestic work. In this ideologically radical scene, gendered work in the setting of domestic everyday life is subverted and replaced by the revolutionary work of fighting for a new society on all fronts. War intrudes into the domestic sphere but, more importantly, the domestic sphere is also a proper site of war in itself. The ideological nature of domestic rituals is also shown in Chapaev through the motif of drinking tea. Drinking tea is a social ritual and how it is done is symbolic of how social intercourse is understood within the ideology. There are two contrasting scenes where tea is served. In the first scene, Petrovich serves tea to Colonel Borozdin. This is the first time we see Borozdin in the film. Petrovich adds sugar to the tea while Borozdin discusses his views on servants and on class relations. This is immediately followed by a scene where Furmanov serves tea to himself and then offers some to the visiting peasants. Similarly, after the battle, Chapaev and his men have tea together. The relationship of labour is changed:
instead of master and servant, or capitalist and worker, there is collective labour and the workers are equal, even if one is the Party official.

Life in the Soviet Union, as Stalin invokes it, is made joyous through socialist labour and, in particular, through enthusiasm of the workers. This word is used frequently in official propaganda promoting Stakhanovism and shock labour. This is the irrational element of the socialist realist labour—the element that bridges the gap between reality and utopia. It is the workers’ enthusiasm that wages the war on time through shock labour. The war is primarily psychological: it both creates the new worker subjectivities and channels them into socialist labour. In Chapaev, a series of contrasts between Chapaev’s army and the White army as well as between Chapaev and the White Army commander, Colonel Borozdin, foreground the ideological and psychological aspects of war and link them to labour. Chapaev and his army are represented as spontaneous, elemental forces, while the White Army and Colonel Borozdin are represented as mechanical and artificial. In the famous battle scene depicting the apocryphal psychological attack by the White Army, the enemy advances in a strict formation, relentlessly, stepping over the bodies of their dead. This scene was considered especially effective by Stalin. The soldiers led by Chapaev, in contrast, ride into the battle on horses, raising clouds of dust, like an elemental force sweeping across the land. Their advance is exciting and pulse-quickenning, showing enthusiasm analogous to that of Stakhanovites and shock workers. The juxtaposition of the two armies reveals the White Army to be methodical and merciless, in short, inhuman (Figure 3). The battle is won by Chapaev and his division despite a shortage of ammunition. Material constraints cannot limit the soldiers because they possess that supra-quality: enthusiasm. Enthusiasm, of course, must be harnessed and steered by the discipline of the Party, but it first must be present as an essential component. Enthusiasm is the revolutionary content of the realist form.

Enthusiasm is an element of spontaneity that is present in all aspects of Stalinist culture—it is the utopian surplus that makes socialist realist labour possible. A 1931 agitation poster by a Constructivist graphic artist Iakov Guminer states: “The arithmetic of the Counter Plan 2+2 plus the enthusiasm of workers = 5” (Figure 4). The poster refers to the completion of the First Five-Year Plan in four years (1929–1932). This “arithmetic” is possible only because of the surplus element—enthusiasm of the workers—which is the foundation of socialist labour. The enthusiasm of the workers, in the words of Dickerman, is the “algebraic unknown, the missing
element which would close the gap left by the planner’s impossible goals” (29). In capitalism, labour is commodified and can be rationalized and measured through the wage form; this rationalization hides the value-producing nature of human labour through the mystification of the commodity fetishism. Socialist labour, however, exceeds the Taylorized rationalisation. It eludes quantification and measurement because how can one measure the workers’ enthusiasm? Enthusiasm of the workers is only possible in socialism because only in socialism is the workers’ labour unalienated. Through this surplus element, the value-producing nature of human labour is explicitly acknowledged. The utopian element of socialist labour that is denoted by the “enthusiasm of the workers” finds its official expression in the economic policies of the period—shock labour, socialist competition, Stakhanovism, and the Counter Plan. These forms of socialist labour depend on the irrational—in them spontaneity and consciousness are expressed together without contradiction. This resolves the ideological problem of proclaiming communism—the most advanced form of civilization—in a country without a developed industrial base. Through socialist labour, the workers wage war on time itself, revealing the elements of the future that are already in the present.

A Counter Plan (vstrechny plan) is one of the main features of Soviet production planning. It is a form of socialist competition, and to an outsider, it appears as one of the oddest features of the Stalinist economy. A Counter Plan is a plan to surpass the Five-Year Plan and not merely meet its targets and timeline. It is because of the Counter Plan that Stalin could declare the First Five-Year Plan complete in four years. A Counter Plan, in theory, is proposed by the workers as a counter to the official government plan. It is an expression of the workers’ spontaneity and enthusiasm. However, it is built into the official planning, because the government actually requires that a Counter Plan be proposed. The first Counter Plan was proposed by the workers at the Leningrad Karl Marx factory in July 1930. Counter Plans were then widely used during the First Five-Year Plan and later new types of Counter Plans were developed—tekpromfinplan (1931) and smenno-vstrechny plan (1930). According to the Soviet Historical Encyclopedia (1973–1982), the Counter Plan was “an expression of the creative initiative of the working class, the means of inclusion of the working masses in the process of production planning, mobilization of their experience and its utilization in the struggle for the fulfillment of the national economic plan” (translation mine). In this description, several characteristics of socialist realist labour are highlighted, including creativity, initiative, and participation of the
workers in the process of planning, at least in theory. This is in stark contrast to the rationalization of Taylorism, which removes all worker control over production. Rabinbach writes that “above all, Taylorism was concerned with the needs of the management to reduce costs and maximize profits through an intensification of productivity” (243). In Taylorism separation of the managerial and administrative labour from the shop floor guarantees complete hegemony of the management and removes all possibility of “creative initiative” from the workers.

The entire concept of the Counter Plan goes counter to Taylorisation while, at the same time, evoking its language of rationalization. A Counter Plan is part of “the struggle for the fulfillment of the national economic plan,” yet a Counter Plan sets goals that exceed those of the original national plan, thus negating it. The workers propose a new plan that supersedes the initial plan, proposing higher targets in a shorter amount of time. The Counter Plan is constructed as the workers’ answer to the state bureaucracy, inverting the Taylorist relationship between the workers and the management. Yet, a Counter Plan is not optional; it is institutionalized as an official requirement in production planning. Thus, the official plan anticipates and contains its own negation. A Counter Plan does not simply replace the original plan, but exists as its integral part. This is complicated even further by the fact that Counter Plan targets are in constant flux, with new goals and new timelines constantly supplanting the previous ones. While exceeding production goals and increasing efficiency might be desirable in a Taylorised workplace, that excess is not quantified and set up as an official and concrete goal over and above the original goal, while still keeping the original plan. A Counter Plan is a kind of anti-Taylorism which brings the element of the irrational into the rationalized language and structure of Taylorism. The new goals do not exist here because of efficiency or newly found labour-saving mechanisms; they exist regardless of whether or not the previous target has even been met. They are not calculated using scientific rational methods; rather, they exist as intensification of the previous targets (bigger, faster, etc). The realism of these goals is qualitatively different from the realism of Taylorism—it is socialist realism in the realm of labour.

In January 1932, Fridrikh Ermler and Sergei Iutkevich were requested to make a movie about industrialization for the 15th anniversary of the Revolution. It was to be dedicated to the heroism of the workers and the building of socialism. The result was Counter Plan (Vstrechnyi, 1932), a film about socialist competition, shock labour, and the Counter Plan. Boris Shumiatsky calls this
film “the real beginning of socialist realism” (124). When it was released, Counter Plan became “the leading model for entertainment film” (Turovskaya, “1930s” 44). Counter Plan dealt with contemporary themes and “opened the way to a torrent of optimistic, cheerful pictures glorifying the heroism of labour and mass enthusiasm” (Egorova 31). While the official culture of Stalinism was hierarchical, the ideas of equality and socialism were both powerful and popular. It was “realised through the mechanism of a unique kind of representation, formulated in the words of the popular song: ‘When the country orders us to become heroes, any of us can become a hero’” (Turovskaya, “1930s” 39). Stalinist culture was not monolithic but multilayered and complex, despite the official ideology oriented towards “unification of perception” (36). The methods and themes of socialist realism were utopian in their aims and content, “enabling the spectator to ‘rise above’ reality and regard it in a more sublime and optimistic manner” (Enzensberger 97).

Shumiatsky considers Ermler to be the most Party-minded (partiinyi) figure in contemporary Soviet film, despite Ermler’s formalist influences (95). Peter Kenez also considers Counter Plan to be a model for socialist realist film, but he does note that the film was not as well received as Shumiatsky’s praises suggest:

When the film was completed in October, it was heavily criticized by the collective at Sovkino and had to be hurriedly recut. Even contemporary critics agreed that it contained nothing new artistically ... It was important, however, because it offered a model and set the tone for many future films. Significantly, Counter Plan was made two years before the official doctrine of socialist realism was articulated. But that should not be surprising. Socialist realism did not come down from on high as a fully developed theory imposed on entirely unwilling artists. The doctrine grew out of a mixture of influences: Russian literary tradition, Marxist-Leninist ideology, and the political atmosphere prevailing in the country. (167)

The plot of Counter Plan revolves around the building of an electrical turbine at a Leningrad factory. The factory proposes a Counter Plan to build a 50,000kW turbine (up from the 24,000kW one seen at the beginning of the film). The work, however, faces equipment problems that threaten to shut down production for two months. Unknown to anyone at the factory, engineer Skvortsov is a saboteur or wrecker (vreditel’). He is portrayed as a bourgeois
intellectual complete with a snobbish mother who plays Lermontov romances on her piano. The equipment problems are solved when the sabotage is discovered by a self-taught worker-engineer and the turbine is completed in time. There is a parallel plot of an old alcoholic worker Babchenko who undergoes a crisis of conscience when his work is suspected as contributing to the defective production and who at the end of the film acquires proper ideological consciousness and joins the Communist Party.

The key concept in the film is that of numbers. Numbers and measurements are referenced constantly, with the main conflict of the film arising out of an error of 0.03mm put into the blueprints by the saboteur. The central speech of the film is made by the Partkom Secretary, Vasia, in reaction to the news that production has to be shut down due to a problem with the machine tool. Work stoppage would prevent the fulfillment of the Counter Plan and even the enthusiasm of the workers would not be sufficient to overcome this problem. Vasia speaks to the shop foreman, Pavel, in an emotional speech: “Numbers! If these numbers are against the Counter Plan, then they are not our numbers but enemy numbers! And the people who approve these numbers are not our people but our enemies! You are a communist-engineer! How could you forget that numbers can also be party-minded?” (translation mine). Later, at the Party meeting, Vasia states that “rules of engineering (tekhnicheskaia zakonomernost’) that are against us are politically dangerous” and that “the job of a communist-engineer is to fight against such rules.” Numbers are clearly not objective, but ideological—there can be such a thing as enemy numbers. And yet, despite all the talk of enemy numbers along with suspicion of experts and engineering laws, the central problem in the film is caused by a very precise number, 0.03mm. The spontaneous/irrational aspects of socialist labour necessarily coexist with the conscious/rational: just one side of the dialectic is not enough. Thus, while numbers are ideological, the error in calculation is still a very real problem that cannot be simply overcome with faith.

There are numerous other references to measurement in the film. Notably, Pavel is referred to as an “engineer-communist,” with the two parts of the compound noun always present together, suggesting that engineering is not ideologically neutral. Pavel was educated with the workers’ money: he represents the new worker-intellectuals who are given new, hitherto impossible opportunities by the Soviet state and the Party. Vasia calls Pavel “slide rule”—as a foreman, Pavel the “slide rule” measures people just as Pavel the “engineer-communist” measures
numbers. In the first sequence of the film, Pavel mocks Vasia for bringing him the wrong ruler. However, Vasia in turn chides Pavel for focusing on the ruler instead of on the people who are much more important and need to be corrected first and foremost. Pavel’s focus and priority must shift from numbers to people. Since the ruler is a measuring instrument, contraposition of rulers and people suggests a kind of equivalency between the two; if numbers can be ideological, people can be measured and corrected. This echoes the epigraph of the film, a quote from Stalin—“The realism of our programme lies in living people, you and I”—which also suggests that the key to fulfilling the plan is the people. The objective reality of the plan rests in the subjectivity of the workers. There is a scene at Skvortsov’s apartment in which his student Chutochkin, the worker who aspires to become an engineer and who later discovers the error in the diagram, is performing mathematical calculations. Chutochkin says, “If the Party wishes it, I can become not only an engineer but an artist.” Aside from being a very party-minded statement, it quite clearly links science to aesthetics via ideology. This line echoes the unification of labour and art undertaken during the 1920s and also quite strongly highlights the ideological outlook of the film—that engineer does not merely calculate objective measurements but is an artist creating and reflecting ideology.

*Counter Plan* is not artistically innovative. It consists mostly of many static shots and long takes. The film has a very slow pace with only two dynamic scenes with rapid cuts—Babchenko’s march into the Party meeting and Vasia and Katia’s walk through night-time Leningrad. The film contains many close-ups with actors’ facial expressions often displaying exaggerated emotions reminiscent of silent cinema. The actors quite often look directly at the viewer and, at times, speak into the camera. In contrast to the dynamism of the 20s montage, the static shots, slow-paced editing, and the often geometric mise-en-scène suggest a measured approach. This can be seen as an innovation that is the model for socialist realist film. *Counter Plan* represents work as a stable narrative and ideology, which is signified both through the film’s reliance on dialogue and through the static shots with deliberate pace. Work in *Counter Plan* is not the dynamic montage of fragmented anonymous bodies that exceed and escape the confines of the frame; it is stable and normalized. Nonetheless, there is an apparent contradiction between this stable form and the irrational elements of the Counter Plan. This contradiction is expressed in the film’s insistence on science being inherently ideological. But in the logic of socialist realism, this contradiction is actually a unity—it is not that we have to
throw out the numbers, but that we must understand them only through ideology. To paraphrase Trotsky, in Counter Plan engineering is a form of cognition of the world. It is precisely because the film perceives reality ideologically that it can perceive reality objectively and, thus, have a stable form.

One of the most curious aspects of Counter Plan, a film about industrialization, production of a turbine at a factory, and the Counter Plan is that we do not see actual work being done at the factory. There are only a few brief scenes where workers who are not even the focus of the shots, can be seen working. Notably, we see workers in the scene where saboteur Skvortsov is about to be confronted about the error in the diagrams. The closest we come to seeing manual work represented on the screen is during the night scene where we see a montage of machines—asphalt rollers, steam ships, and so on. The factory, however, is almost never seen as the place where labour of manipulation of material objects using machines is performed. The actual work of building the turbine is skipped. Once the ideological error is discovered, the film skips directly to the final test of the turbine—the test not of the engineering soundness of the object but of the ideological soundness of the subject. It is as if the turbine is created out of/by ideology and not by the material labour of the workers. The factory that produces turbines is in actuality producing Communism. The work of this factory is the production of ideology, which is also the work of Counter Plan itself. Thus, the actual material labour of building the turbine must not be shown. Consider Lenin’s famous slogan, “Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country,” which is referenced in Skvortsov’s monologue where he contemplates his sabotage. Skvortsov says, “So you say, Comrade Chutochkin, that electrification plus some other thing is Communism. And what if there was no electricity? Then there would also be no…” Thus, the sabotage of a turbine used for the generation of electrical power is the sabotage of Communism itself. The illumination of the workers’ state via electricity is also the enlightenment of its subjects via Communism. Appropriately, the final scene of the film is a celebration in honour of the “new communist—Semion Ivanovich Babchenko.” In a film that centers on construction of the turbine, the finale is not the successful operation of the turbine but rather the ideological conversion (Enlightenment) of the old worker. The production of the factory and of the socialist labour is the construction of a subject in ideology. This is precisely why engineering laws and numbers can be suspect.
Counter Plan is one of the first Soviet sound films and is scored by Dmitri Shostakovich, who also composed the film’s theme song Pesnia o vstrechnom (Song of the Counter Plan) which became one of the best known Soviet songs. Counter Plan is considered to be a forefather of the song type of musical that became popular and highly successful in the 1930s. The song and its melody form a musical leitmotif in the film, often hummed and sung by Pavel’s wife Katia. Song of the Counter Plan represents the type of mass song that was both promoted by the authorities and popular with the audiences. The song is used in the film not as diegetic performance or as part of a vaudeville-like structure but as a leitmotif that creates a central, unifying theme: “The joy of the collective constructive labour of the people—the builders of the first five-year plans” (Egorova 31). Mass song, according to Boris Asafiev, a Soviet musicologist, brings people together “in a common purposeful striving for a happy and joyous life through labour and defence” (qtd. in Egorova 32). Song of the Counter Plan plays on the meaning of vstrechny whose root is related to the verb vstrechat’ (to meet) as well as to the adverb navstrechu (towards). In the song, the speaker entreats his beloved, who is linked in the song to his nation, to wake up and meet the new day. The description of the morning—breeze over the river and the sound of the factory siren—unite nature and industry in an overall mood of happiness: “the nation rises gloriously to meet [na vstrechu] the day.” And further, “We go towards [navstrechu] life, towards work and love.” The song unites the industrial and ideological theme of the film with the themes of love and life. Just as the aesthetics of the 1920s sought to reunite the realms of life, work and art, Counter Plan creates an essential link between the three.

The conflict over the Counter Plan, that is, Pavel’s belief that work must be stopped for two months, creates a conflict in his friendship with Vasia and his relationship with Katia. Katia leaves Pavel for a time and during the white-night-walk through Leningrad, there are repeated intimations that Katia wishes to confess her love for Vasia. The love-triangle subplot shows an interconnection between work, domesticity, friendship, and romance. All of these hinge on the ideologically correct subjectivity and in the Stalinist culture, subjectivity and identity are always mediated by work. For the three characters, their identities as workers are central to their subjectivities. The possibility of a romance between Katia and Vasia is interrupted by a montage of night-time work in the city. Vasia observes that “tonight, there is no room for lovers in this city.” Finally, Katia states that “only now” does she understand what love is. This revelation is
followed by the turn in the plot where the sabotage in the diagram is discovered. The relationship between the three is reconciled via the montage of work and technology. The resolution to both the production and the domestic plots in *Counter Plan* rests on ideological faith. The earlier numbers speech by Vasia implies that Pavel’s flaw is his lack of faith in ideology and an excessive faith in engineering and numbers. This is the reason that both the friendship and the romantic relationship are threatened. At the factory, the turbine test is successful because Lazariov insists on being allowed to continue the test, stating that he vouches for the soundness of the turbine.\(^{28}\) Significantly, the foreign expert is not the saboteur; the English diagram is correct and the Englishman’s failing is only that he has no faith when he stops the test, fearing disaster. The test continues and succeeds because of an ideological faith in the outcome. The centrality of the worker identity to the lives of Vasia, Pavel, and Katia is not naive ideology, but the foregrounding of the centrality of work in the structuring of society, and, by extension, of the everyday life of the subjects in that society.

By the end of the 1930s, the excitement and dynamism of Stakhanovism, shock labour, and the workers’ enthusiasm has been supplanted by the focus on stability and normalization. With socialism officially realised and happiness for all officially assured, labour could be represented as a celebration of the achievements of the Soviet people. The form for this celebration was the Stalinist musical. One of the most memorable images of factory gates in the Stalinist cinema is from the Grigorii Aleksandrov’s 1940 musical comedy *The Radiant Path* (*Svetlyi put’*). The film's heroine, a simple country girl named Tania Morozova, played by Liubov’ Orlova, has just lost her job as a maid. She is taken in by the local Party secretary, Pronina, who promises to get Tania a new job at “our palace” in the morning. As Tania falls asleep, she dreams of a fantastical palace, made out of a collage of Moscow buildings, such as the Kremlin and Bolshoi Theatre (Salys 329). In her dream, filmed in soft focus, Tania is led towards the palace by Pronina and they arrive at elaborate metalwork gates flanked on either side by towering sculpted figures bearing torches (Figures 5-6). As the gates open, the scene dissolves into the floor of a

\(^{28}\) Curiously, the saboteur is never punished, just as we do not see what happened after Lazariov is falsely accused of sabotage. Skvortsov is present at the final test and is listened to when he translates the foreign engineer’s orders to stop. After the successful test, he is shown alone, huddled, in a high angle shot, visually overpowered by machines. In contrast, the socialist workers are shown as a group from a low angle.
textile factory. Pronina leads Tania along rows of spinning oversized bobbins that dwarf awe-struck Tania as she looks around with wonder. The dream ends and Tania and Pronina are now at the door to the shop floor, speaking to the factory foreman. Tania is given a broom and told she can start working right away. She enters the shop floor, crossing the threshold that represents the beginning of her radiant path from being an ignorant peasant girl to becoming a Stakhanovite weaver and, later, an engineer and a deputy to the Supreme Soviet. Tania’s story enacts a typical socialist realist hero’s evolution from spontaneity to consciousness and “metonymically models State policy—the transformation of the peasantry after collectivization into an urban working class” (Salys 315). Each stage of this journey is marked by a gate, either literal or metaphorical, starting with the monumental gates in Tania's dream and ending with the gate to Stalin's palace to Soviet agricultural workers—VSKhV (All Union Agricultural Exhibition) in Moscow, where the film's finale takes place.

While the Central Committee Propaganda Division was critical of The Radiant Path, claiming that it “lacks a depiction of the real labor life of workers” (Salys 304), Tania Morozova represents the real possibility of success and social mobility that could be achieved through labour. Maya Turovskaya writes that the embellishment of reality in Soviet musicals should not be seen as “distortion of the truth” because “faithfulness to life was never their aim” (Enzensberger 97). Rather, the Soviet musical “elevates its subject matter into the realm of a ‘dream’ or Utopia, enabling the spectator to ‘rise above’ reality and regard it in a more sublime and optimistic manner” (97). The Radiant Path resonated both with contemporary audiences and with later generations. In the 1970s, workers from a Nizhny Novgorod textile factory wrote to Liubov’ Orlova after the screening of the film: “Dear Comrade Orlova, this film and you—our People’s Actress—are our life” (Enzensberger 108). During the 1930s, Soviet women were entering the workforce in large numbers. Women made up 45 percent of industrial workers by 1935 and during the decade “82 percent of those who entered the work-force for the first time were women” (Grant 155). This was due to both the drive for rapid industrialization and the campaigns for liberation of women, although towards the end of the 1930s the official focus has shifted towards the more traditional image of women as mothers. Women who entered industrial work were taking up opportunities never available to them before and “some of these embraced the prospects of the new socialist life that were on offer, seizing the chance to work their way up in society” (Grant 155).
The Radiant Path takes place in the early 1930s, during the era of rapid industrialization and the Stakhanovite movement. Originally it was titled Cinderella (Zolushka), as it was inspired by Viktor Ardov’s contemporary theatrical adaptation of the Charles Perrault story, but the film was re-titled on Stalin’s suggestion. According to Aleksandrov, Stalin objected to the original title as inappropriate: “The old Perrault fairy tale […] was part of the past life, but here it’s a question of the new man” (qtd. in Salys 302). The new title, therefore, evokes “revolutionary rhetoric—the radiant path to socialism” (302). While by the time the film was released the enthusiasm of the Stakhanovite movement was already in the past, “the fall of 1939, when Aleksandrov began filming, still seemed a golden era for the country, even to sophisticated observers like Eisenstein” (Salys 288). The factory gates in Tania's dream unite fairy tale, socialist realism, and realities of labour in the 1930s Soviet Union. The fantastical gates were filmed at one of the stations of the Moscow Metro which, as Rimgaila Salys notes, has been described as an underground palace (329). The two worker figures flanking the gates and lighting Tania’s way are symbolic of the workers who have paved the way for Tania’s success in the worker state. They also foreshadow the film’s ending that features prominently another monumental sculpture—Vera Mukhina’s iconic socialist realist work Factory Worker and Kolkhoz Woman, the apotheosis of ideological unity of working people in the Soviet Union.

The Radiant Path superficially resembles American musical comedies. Notably, the beginning of the film, where Tania is still a peasant working as a maid, features slapstick scenes inspired by Hollywood. But, as Tania moves towards achieving political consciousness, the tone becomes more elevated and the film ends on a monumental note, even though Aleksandrov did insert some slapstick elements into the final sequence. The script of the film was reworked a number of times to make musical comedy compatible with socialist realism as well as with the political aims of the plot. The classical Hollywood musical, as shown by Rick Altman in his classic study, is structured around two central characters presented through parallelism and comparison. The difference between male and female is presented as primarily sexual, with other differences, such as class or race, being suppressed. The typical musical ends in marriage, neutralizing the opposition between the two characters. Since all other differences aside from

29 For a detailed history of the making of The Radiant Path and its reception, see Chapter 4 of Rimgaila Salys' The Musical Comedy Films of Grigorii Aleksandrov: Laughing Matters (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2009).
the sexual opposition are suppressed, marriage is represented as a means of achieving social harmony. Even a musical such as Busby Berkeley’s *Gold Diggers of 1933*, which shows signs of economic deprivation and social unrest, subsumes all differences and inequalities into the sexual difference. As Patricia Mellencamp argues, “the inequalities of both class and gender are collapsed into marital salvation. The film equates marriage and the couple—the happy ending—with capitalism” (67). In contrast, the central difference that must be overcome in the Soviet musical is not sexual but economic. The resolution of difference—between urban and rural and between peasant and worker—is represented by Tania’s progress from a poor peasant to a successful shock worker and, finally, to an educated urban engineer. As a peasant, Tania represents spontaneity and enthusiasm that needs to be tempered by intellect and ideological consciousness. Tania’s romantic interest, engineer Lebedev, does not represent her opposite; rather, he is a symbolic reminder that she has not yet attained her full potential as a worker and as a human being. Neither is he a means or vehicle of her growth. The resolution of the contradictions must come from within herself, aided not by a male romantic interest but by the ideological and, importantly, material guidance of the Party. The Party provides Tania with education, work, accommodations, friendship, and means of achieving dignity. Tania better herself first through education and then through socialist labour. It is only when she realizes her full potential as a worker that she can become a fully realized human being. A romantic relationship is delayed by Tania because a true romance free from exploitation can only occur between equals. Resolution of oppositions is not the result of the romantic relationship, but its prerequisite. The means of the resolution is not in the private sphere of romance but in the public sphere of socialist labour. Appropriately, in the film’s final scene, Tania and Lebedev walk along the stone reliefs at VSKhV—images of heroic Soviet labour as well as of the material abundance forming the backdrop to the possibility of romance at last (Figure 7).

The VSKhV exhibits and Mukhina’s sculpture represent the dialectical relationship between the individual and the state: the individuals create the material conditions necessary to achieve harmony, and in turn, those material conditions allow the individual to realize their full potential. Salys writes that “the final episodes of the film gradually move the couple from the organic to the monumental and from the personal to the universal. In Marxist terms, social harmony once existed—and will again exist—when man is not alienated from the means of production” (Salys 330). VSKhV also features prominently in another musical comedy of the
period—Ivan Pyrev’s *Swineherd and Shepherd* (*Svinarka i pastukh*, 1941). In it, a swineherd from northern Russia and a shepherd from Dagestan meet at the VSKhV. They agree to meet there once again in a year’s time: romance here is also delayed for and mediated by socialist labour. The couple sings a song with the refrain “I will never forget a friend if I met them in Moscow.” They are brought together by socialist labour which unites all the Soviet peoples with Moscow, and with VSKhV in particular, as the symbolic center of the nation. In *The Radiant Path*, the unity of public and private is encoded in the final shot. Tania and Lebedev stand in front of Mukhina’s sculpture, which they mirror (Figure 8). This creates “the special mise-en-abîme effect popular in both Socialist Realist poster graphics and paintings: the ordinary human subject is depicted against a background of larger sculptural figures […] so that the larger image is symbolically doubled in a smaller human version” (Salys 330). The couple turns away from the camera as it cranes upward, moving “the narrative from the localized story of a single couple into the greater world of Soviet peoples” (Salys 332). The final shot of the film is of Mukhina’s sculpture against the sky while an operatic voice performs the film’s theme song: the synthesis of the public and the private is achieved.

Tania’s transformation from a peasant to a socialist worker is reminiscent of Eliza Doolittle’s transformation in *Pygmalion*, but unlike Eliza, Tania is not dependent on a man to bring her to life; she is not an object to be molded. Similar to *Pygmalion*, every stage of Tania’s journey is encoded in her speech, body movements, appearance, and dress. As a peasant she is frumpy, her speech and body movements are unrefined, and she has a loud laugh with a snort. As she becomes a successful factory worker, her hair is cut short, she wears overalls, and her speech and manner become more refined. At the end of the film, Tania wears a smart suit and has a calm sophisticated manner. But while in *Pygmalion*, appearance and speech are signifiers of class, in *The Radiant Path* they signify the betterment of all the Soviet people through labour and material prosperity. Eliza is created by a man, even if she surpasses him in the end, but Tania creates herself by following her dream of becoming a celebrated worker. She is aided by the Party in the form of Pronina, who functions as a fairy godmother figure, but it is Tania’s own desire for self-improvement and recognition that drives her forward. Tania is not an object

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30 I thank Elspeth Brown for suggesting this phrasing.
to be molded by a man. The woman in the Soviet musical is presented “outside the sphere of domesticity that is traditionally assigned to her and which includes an exclusive preoccupation with romance or any other conventional ‘female’ pursuits, such as clothes or physical beauty” (Enzensberger 98). When she is a maid, Tania peels potatoes and tends to a baby, typical female activities, although she displays ingenuity by constructing a crude device to make cooking potatoes more efficient. At the end of the film she is an engineer and a deputy—professional and political positions traditionally inaccessible to women.

In *Cinderella*, the heroine is rewarded for goodness and hard work with marriage, or the life of domesticity and an escape from work. The fairy godmother in *Cinderella* signifies the double oppression of women by religion and the bourgeois conception of family, which is a gatekeeper of class mobility. Women’s social mobility is possible only by entry into the privileged class through marriage. *Cinderella* represents a fantasy where the reward for being a good worker is private liberation from work through patriarchal institution of marriage—public exploitation is replaced by the private one. In the Soviet fairy tale, in contrast, the reward for socialist labour and correct ideological consciousness is self-fulfillment, public recognition and, most importantly, material betterment for all. While socialist competition encourages workers to beat existing records, Tania is told not to be upset that someone did better than her. No matter who wins, it is the society that benefits, or as Marx wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” The private domestic sphere in *The Radiant Path* is represented as decaying and degrading, as seen in the scenes with Tania’s first employer who is shown to be a vulgar and insipid woman. Tania’s family is her coworkers, the Party, and the Soviet people as a whole.

While socialist labour is heavily saturated with ideology, the rewards are not merely moral, metaphysical, or emotional, as in the bourgeois narrative of work. Stakhanovites were given access to goods and privileges ordinary workers could not reach, but the possibility of material betterment and social mobility for all in the collectivist society was very much real. This is reflected in the film: after Tania becomes a weaver, the material rewards of her labour are evident when she moves to new accommodations. In contrast to the previous scene where she is thrown out on the street with only an old-fashioned trunk, here she travels on a cart loaded with goods, representing material prosperity. This is in line with the communist ideology of work in that the reward for work is ownership of the products of one’s labour. Later, she travels to
Moscow to receive a medal in recognition of her achievement. In a fantastical scene at the
Kremlin, Tania speaks through a mirror to her earlier self and then meets her future self. Her
future self invites her to step into the mirror and both of them fly across the country in a
convertible. It is significant that Tania’s guide in this scene is not someone else, such as a fairy
godmother, but her own self. During the sequence, Tania sings the film’s theme song, *March of
the Enthusiasts*, composed by Isaak Dunaevsky. The song’s lyrics celebrate Soviet workers who
create the world through their heroic labour: “Our labour is a matter of honor / It is a matter of
courage and a feat of glory” and “Our world was created for glory / The work of centuries was
achieved in years, / We seize our happiness as our right.” Tania flies over cities and mountains,
finally arriving back in Moscow and driving her convertible through the gates of the VSKhV.
While in the Hollywood film, the factory gates demarcate the separation of the worker and the
individual, in *The Radiant Path* the many gates Tania steps through signify unification of public
and private, of the individual and the masses. It is not by exiting the factory gate that one
becomes an individual. Rather, by entering the factory, the private self is transformed into a
fully-fledged individual through socialist labour. The gate is not a barrier but rather an
opportunity opened for the Soviet people by the state. The factory is not shut off from society
but is an integral part of defining the collective and integrating the individual into it. The gates
operate dialectically: the individual enters the factory while the factory becomes part of the
society. While the Soviet government sent artists into the factories to better integrate arts with
labour and intellectuals with workers, the more radical move was to take the factory out into the
world. This project was started by the avant-garde, but became fully realized in Stalinism where
the factory merged with life.

In the society where workers, as the subjects of history, conquer the physical world as well as
history and time itself, the boundaries of abstract-concrete or utopian-real are blurred. Utopia in
this world view is not abstract or ideal. On the contrary, it is both concrete and real. This is the
crucial difference between naturalism and socialist realism: in socialist realism, the utopian
future is concretely present in the now. Utopia in Stalinism is a concrete practice embodied in
socialist realist labour. Socialist realism unites and resolves the conflict between representation
and construction, truth and propaganda, reality and utopia, individual and the collective, subject
and object, form and content, the artist and the viewer. Stalinist films were made within the context of an actual attempt at the building of a socialist society and at the merging of the individual and the collective. Keti Chukhrov uses the phrase oreol kommunizma (aura of communism) to discuss the avant-garde, but the same phrase can be used to discuss socialist realism. The aura of communism is present in the consciousness and aspirations of all Soviet modernist projects. Chukhrov writes:

There exists within the life-building a real anticipation of and hope for a communist life, which is not yet built. Faith in this communist life transects through both individual and collective consciousness—it places the collective into an individual body and, conversely, forces the individual body to experience the building of the collective. (translation mine)

This is the real merging of the individual and the collective into the universal, which is possible only in the conditions of the absence of the market and private property. The utopian other to alienated labour is not idleness, laziness, or leisure. These evoke a desire to escape labour—a desire which is created by the alienated labour itself. Utopia cannot be a simple negation. The utopian other to alienated labour is not the absence of work but non-alienated work. The complete negation of work is impossible for it would mean negation of one’s subjectivity. The desire for complete cessation of work is a result of the subject’s alienation from the object, from one’s own productive activity and, by extension, from one’s humanity. The utopian residue of Stalinist film, which seeks to represent utopian aspects of non-alienated labour, is the recognition of labour as world-creating. Both capitalism and socialism are systems of representation that circumscribe the terrain of the imaginable and of reality itself. Both deal with representation and the symbolic terrain of labour. Yet while in capitalist realism, labour is either erased or converted into something else, such as entertainment, in socialist realism, socialist labour represents a fantasy of a world created by the workers for themselves. The Stalinist experiment in modernity attempted to create a society where labour was not merely celebrated

31 “The doctrine of the unity and the struggle of opposites constitutes the underlying motif and the inner mystery of Stalinist totalitarianism—for this variant of totalitarianism lays claim to unifying absolutely all conceivable contradictions. Stalinism rejects nothing: it takes everything into its embrace and assigns to everything the position it deserves” (Groys, Art Power 161)
but recognized as the fundamental world-creating force. Socialist realism gave expression to the enthusiasm of the workers—their elemental drive towards mastery of the world and of themselves.
Intermission 2

The First International Antarctic Biennale was held between March 16th and March 29th, 2017. According to the project’s official website, the biennale included “about 100 people from around the world—artists, architects, researchers, poets, writers, musicians, and philosophers.” It was set aboard the Akademik Sergey Vavilov, a research ship refurbished into “a perfect, exhibition cruise vessel.” During the biennale, the ship travelled around four thousand kilometers, starting from Tierra del Fuego and making a number of landings along the way, during which the artists created temporary installations and performances. The official website notes that the biennale held “over 20 artistic projects ... including performances, exhibitions and sound-art experiments, as well as over 15 research sessions and philosophical discussions.” It concluded with a reception in Buenos Aires where the Minister of Culture of Argentina, Pablo Avelluto, stressed that “it’s impossible to overestimate the cultural significance of this project.” A selection of artworks and documentary material from the biennale will be shown at the 2017 Venice Biennale’s Antarctic Pavilion.

The project, held under the patronage of UNESCO, was conceived by Alexander Ponomarev, a Russian Navy veteran and, more recently, an avant-garde artist. The exhibition, according to Ponomarev, is an “international socio-cultural phenomenon” and “a revolution that changes the direction of the vector,” although he does not explain what this might mean. Most of the funding for the project came from Eugene Kaspersky, the CEO of Kaspersky Lab and one of the richest people in Russia, who participated in the biennale as one of the visionary business leaders. The official website explains that the goal is to create an “Antarctic Vision Club” which is “a unique community of people who are interested in reimagining the future of shared spaces, beginning with Antarctic culture as a model for global development.” Describing this club, the website lists words that sound both current and vaguely important: interdisciplinarity, interculturality, supranationality. The club is composed of select artists, scientists, and visionaries. The visionaries are the “technological innovators and visionary business leaders, that seek to address 21 century challenges through new technologies and business models.”

Anna Somers Cocks, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the biennale, writes that the project is both spiritually and ecologically clean. Ponomarev has been to the Antarctic numerous times before and is “fully acquainted with the conservation rules of the polar stations, so no
trace will remain of this event except in the images and people’s minds” (Cocks). He calls the Antarctic “the last open, clean, white place on the planet” (qtd. in Cocks). In this fantasy, which echoes the colonial dreams of earlier centuries, the Antarctic is a metaphysical reality. It is pure and clean, somehow separate from the rest of the world and untouched by pollution and global warming. In reality, however, as Noah Strycker writes for the Slate, the Antarctic is not as pristine and inaccessible as one might imagine. It “has become more of a frontier of adventure tourism than scientific discovery.” Antarctica has no limits on the number of tourists and there are no entry fees; all the rules for minimizing the environmental impact are completely voluntary. For this reason Strycker believes that the Antarctic Biennale is a good thing. He writes that it:

could be the best defense against the outright exploitation, environmental degradation, and manifest destiny hovering around our polar regions, as they become increasingly accessible. If wealthy patrons who value contemporary art can get interested in penguins and icebergs, so much the better. Who else has the clout to prevent strip mining the last pristine continent? (Strycker)

The Antarctic will be impacted by global climate change whether we go there or not. Strycker argues that “perhaps a concerted artistic look at [Antarctica’s] mystique could offer new arguments for its preservation—and for the preservation of the world as a whole.” Perhaps, he continues, to save the world, “we need to be inspired” (italics in the original). And what better way to inspire environmental protection of our planet than to send a ship, sponsored by rich art collectors and technocrats, representing prestigious art institutions, from galleries to auction houses, floating through the rising oceans towards the imagined sacred and pristine space. The ship is an apt metaphor for our environmental realities. In the face of environmental destruction, we turn to science and technology to save humanity. And technology developed and championed by business visionaries might save humanity from extinction, but it will be the elite who sail away in the ark, either on the ocean or into space.

The same year as the Antarctic Biennale, another art exhibition without audience occurred on the Ilet de La Biche, a tiny patch of land off the coast of Guadeloupe, the French territory in the West Indies. Billing itself as the world’s smallest biennale, the exhibition opened on January 6, 2017. It is housed in an abandoned shack on the piece of land so small that the organizers did
not need a permit to use it. The founders and curators are Alex Urso and Maess Anand and the first biennale featured works of 13 artists, most of them from Poland. All the artworks were donated by the artists who had to “make sure that they were all small enough to fit in a suitcase” (Cascone). The organizers packed the artworks, flew to the Caribbean, and, after installing the art, flew back to Poland: “We just left all the artworks there. We don’t know if people are going there or not” (qtd. in Cascone). The art installed there is on view indefinitely; the organizers’ idea was that the artworks “die on the island.” The organizers also do not know if the second biennale will happen, since the patch of land might not exist in two years’ time. The island is either a shifting sand-bar or a piece of land submerged by the rising sea levels. Technically, Ilet La Biche has no land above water: “You can walk around the structure but you walk in the water, basically” (Urso, qtd. in Cascone).

The Guardian art critic, Jonathan Jones, describes the Biennale de La Biche as self-consciously futile. It is, however, this futility that makes it akin to the larger, more well-known and well-funded biennales. Jones writes that “it is arguable that none of these self-regarding events leaves any more of a trace than the art which will be left on this pimple of sand. Intentionally or accidentally, the world’s smallest biennale is a mirror of the emptiness that will consume so much energy for so little purpose at its bigger rivals.” Claire Voon similarly argues that Biennale de La Biche is “very much like those grand, international affairs, where privilege is your ticket to access.” Voon, however, is critical of the biennale for leaving traces of human presence on the disappearing island (Voon). Unlike the Antarctic Biennale which touts its environmental awareness and zero-footprint, Biennale de La Biche makes no official statement on its environmental impact. Yet, should leaving art in an abandoned shack in the middle of an ocean be seen as a moral failing? This act could be a more suitable commentary on the relationship between art, capitalism, and the environment than a ship full of wealthy and privileged individuals sailing around the Antarctic and somehow leaving no trace of their presence. Not leaving anything on the island is not going to save it, just as having an artistic performance in the Antarctic is not going to halt environmental destruction. Reflecting on the two biennales and their diametrically opposed philosophies and methods puts into question the role of art, especially in relation to the global nature of contemporary capitalism. Can the global reach of climate change be combated by a system of art that is fully implicated in capitalism? And will those most impacted by global climate change be the ones who travel to visit a
Biennale, no matter how progressive or important it might be? Lastly, one must ask, can these artistic interventions, to use a phrase popular with intellectuals, have any systemic impact? Art removed from collectivity and solidarity cannot lead to collective change. Both the ship sailing around the Antarctic and the considerably less well-funded curators of the Biennale de La Biche move with ease that mirrors the movement of global capital. If art should have any systemic effect, should it not, instead, turn to those who might most benefit from systemic change?

* * * * *
Chapter 3

Workingman’s Death

And when I search a faceless crowd,
A swirling mass of grey and black and white,
They don’t look real to me,
In fact, they look so strange.

The Rolling Stones *Salt of the Earth*

In the year 2154, Earth is polluted and overpopulated. The rich live in a beautiful orbital habitat, called Elysium, with access to advanced technology which can cure all diseases and reverse the aging process. The rest of humanity is left behind on the planet, where they are lucky to get work in factories building robots that police them. This is the basic setup of the 2013 Hollywood science fiction film *Elysium*, directed by Neil Blomkamp and starring Matt Damon and Jody Foster. Blomkamp’s previous film was *District 9*, which also explored social inequality in a science fiction allegory of apartheid. With Blomkamp’s liberal credentials already established, the right-wing media attacked *Elysium* before it was even released; *Breitbart News* called it “hard left” propaganda that pushes a socialist agenda (Toto). Despite its intriguing premise, however, *Elysium* falls back on action movie clichés and is mired in a secondary plot of power struggle within the habitat government. Far from advocating socialist revolution, the film relies on the hero to save the poor by giving them access to the much-needed medical care. Rather than a fantasy of a future socialist revolution, the film is an obvious allegory of the current socio-economic divisions as well as of the American health-care system. If *Elysium* can be called socialist, it is not because it depicts class struggle but because it shows a disparity between the haves and have-nots so extreme that it cannot be denied. The luxurious life on the space habitat is made possible by the misery and deprivation of those left behind. Critics have noted that the plot of the film has obvious parallels to the Occupy movement’s focus on the disparity between the one percent and the rest of the population. The film, however, should be considered in a broader context of globalized production. *Elysium*’s overpopulated, crime-ridden, and polluted cities appear not as a metaphor but as a fairly accurate representation of the poor in the Third World. The movie suggests, but does not explore, connections between global labour, poverty, environmental collapse, and technocratic fantasies. This chapter seeks to bring
these together through a consideration of several documentaries: Godfrey Reggio’s Qatsi trilogy (1982–2002), Werner Herzog’s Lessons of Darkness (1992), Michael Glawogger’s Workingman’s Death (2005), as well as Sasha Friedlander’s Where Heaven Meets Hell (2012).

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the end of the historical experiment in a workers’ society, one which now appears to have been discredited as a failure. In neoliberalism, the figure of the worker has been displaced by the consumer or the cosmopolitan subject. But what happened to the worker in the post-work society? Drawing on Ulrich Beck’s concept of risk society as well as the metaphor of the workingman’s death, from Glawogger’s documentary of the same name, I consider how the figure of the worker has become alien, unknowable, and unrecognizable. The denial of the materiality of the worker is paralleled to the threat of environmental catastrophe: within the risk society, both the global system of production and the environment are rendered as complex systems too vast to understand, thus preventing any possibility of radical politics. For both, the solutions cannot be technocratic fantasies of escape into immateriality, or into space, but a return to humanism and materiality—the recognition of the direct connection between the exploitation of the worker and the exploitation of the environment. The chapter concludes with Joris Ivens’ 1954 pro-labour documentary The Song of the Rivers as a classic depiction of worker solidarity. If in neoliberalism the figure of the worker appears outdated and naïve, then the response should not be further dematerialization of the worker, but, rather, the return to the material and a call for worker solidarity.

In the middle of Godfrey Reggio’s 1982 experimental film Koyaanisqatsi, there is a shot of workers exiting Lockheed factory. The workers leave the factory building and then exit through the factory gate. This brief image is unremarkable and blends in with all the other images of modern urban life. It occurs in the film’s middle sequence, which is a montage of scenes of modern civilization: cities, highways, factories, shopping malls, arcades, and so on. The images are visually similar and are sped up to match the frenetic speed of the minimalist and repetitive score by Philip Glass. One image in particular stands out—hot dogs coming down the assembly line with workers’ hands fixing any mistakes made by the machinery. The film then cuts to a visually similar scene of a flood of people exiting a row of escalators and, later, to an image of highway lanes with cars moving so fast that they appear only as lines of light. We also see other lanes at the arcade, bowling alley, supermarket, and subway entrance. The meaning is clear—in
modernity, all human activities are abstracted and become a variation of the factory assembly line. Just as in Harun Farocki’s films, here we see how all aspects of modern life are subsumed into production. Leisure, entertainment, and consumption—whether shopping or eating—is not something separate from the production line, or something that happens after the worker exits the factory gates and becomes an individual. These activities are not only a continuation of, but an inherent component of the factory processes. *Koyaanisqatsi* shows modern technology abstracting work, nature, and human beings into microscopic components of a vast system, which is both orderly and incomprehensible. The film’s title is a Hopi word meaning life in turmoil, life out of balance, or a state of life that calls for another way of living. The frenzied montage sequence, intercut with recurring images of complex networks of highways, speeds up until finally the traffic is just lines of light, foreshadowing the abstraction of the digital world and the ubiquitousness of the Internet. The sequence ends abruptly and we see an aerial shot of a city—the next shot is zoomed out so far that the city is just a grid. The image fades out into a shot of a microchip. The two images are strikingly alike: the city and the microchip are the same. While in *Metropolis* or *Modern Times*, human beings are enslaved by a machine that is both visible and comprehensible, here the machine is, at the same time, microscopic and immensely large. This dual scale and the relation between capitalist production and war are even more apparent in the last film of the Qatsi trilogy, *Naqoyqatsi* (2002), which means a life of killing each other, war as a way of life, or civilized violence. In *Naqoyqatsi*, Reggio uses digitally manipulated and computer-generated images to create virtual cinema. The images alternate between science, warfare, and entertainment; biology and the human body become simulacra and are linked to warfare. Humanity is shown only through seductive images of advertising that construct romance, family, and happiness. Life itself, through medical technology of artificial insemination and biogenetics, becomes part of capitalist production. Just as Farocki has shown that Dow Chemical’s civilian and military productions are two sides of the same process, in the Qatsi trilogy, the capitalist factory processes are shown to be the other side of war, war which extends to nature itself. The factory shown in *Koyaanisqatsi* is Lockheed, which manufactures both civilian and military aircraft. Both *Naqoyqatsi* and *Koyaanisqatsi* end with the dream of escape. The former ends in space, but it is revealed to be merely a virtual reality. The latter begins and ends with a space shuttle lifting off and exploding, never leaving the planet. While technology and capitalist production colonize nature and all aspects of human life, they offer only an illusion of escape from the devastation left behind.
The middle film of the Qatsi trilogy, *Powaqqatsi* (1988), begins with an extended sequence shot at Serra Pelada, a Brazilian gold mine that operated from 1980 to 1986. Serra Pelada was one of the largest mining operations in the world and when it closed, the area was left with environmental devastation created by the process of gold extraction. In *Powaqqatsi*, we see hundreds of mud-covered men climbing up a mountain while carrying sacks of dirt on their backs. In one scene, the workers carry a mud-covered man who was struck by a falling rock. His body is glistening and looks very much like the sacks of dirt other workers carry. These scenes look more like a nightmare from a Bosch painting than anything we might recognize as work (Figure 9). Whereas the other two films in the trilogy were estranging because of the speed of the montage or because of the digital manipulation, here reality is estranging in itself because it is no longer recognizable as real. The capitalist abstraction of labour also abstracts the worker so when we are confronted with images of labour, the worker appears not as human but as something strange and alien. While neoliberal politics tend towards individualization, the neoliberal subject becomes incapable of grasping the complexity of the system and their position within it. This ignorance is an inherent feature of neoliberalism. While in the Soviet Union, the factory merged with life because being a worker was fundamental to being human, in capitalism the factory merges with life to take the humanity of the worker away.

The erasure of the worker as a human being is not some active process undertaken by capitalism, but is part of the global expansion of the capitalist economic system as well as of the shift towards technocratic thinking within the global risk society. In the West, the visible places of work are replaced by the invisible structure of a corporation, making it difficult to make connections between global economic structures and one’s daily existence. Thus, in America “everybody thinks they’re middle-class,” to quote a headline from *Bloomberg Businessweek*. It is difficult to connect labour done elsewhere to one’s life; this makes solidarity with the workers who handle the refuse of the West impossible. The labourers in the invisible places of the Third World are human waste: they are the new untouchables in the global caste society and “only untouchable people could (and had to) handle untouchable things” (Bauman, *Wasted* 59). These workers are invisible and incomprehensible not because of the distance between us and them but because of how global capitalism constructs the meaning of labour. German sociologist Ulrich Beck, who is best known for his concept of risk society (*Risikogesellschaft*, 1986, published in English in 1992 as *Risk Society*), argues that there has been a fundamental shift in the structure
of society from the previous stage of industrial capitalism. His position is similar to Bauman and much of Bauman’s own analysis is based on Ulrich Beck’s work. However, while Bauman looks at the experience of modernity in Western societies and argues from the point of view of economic relations, Beck writes about global society and argues primarily from the point of view of environmentalism. Whereas in the earlier stages of capitalism, the society was organized by the logic of distribution of wealth, now it is organized by the logic of distribution of risks on a global scale. Risk is defined by Beck as “a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself” (Risk 21). Risks are fundamentally different from previous dangers that humanity has faced. They are not personal risks or known hazards, but are products of global industrialization. Because the capacity of technology has exceeded our ability to calculate its consequences, the dangers become unknown and, by their very nature, endanger life on a global scale. Risks, such as radioactivity, toxins, and pollutants, can no longer be tied to a specific time and place of origin and their consequences can last for generations. Risk society is a society of social, political, and scientific management of the definition, construction, and distribution of risks.

Risk society is based on management of knowledge: it is epistemic and linguistic. The effect of toxins on human bodies, for example, are considered theoretically, as in the effects of a toxin on a theoretical person, divorced from realities of material experiences. When discussing risks, science is considered to be objective and requires strict causality. This requirement prevents any analysis of the interrelation between social positions, accumulation of risks, and socio-economic systems. Any potential for pre-political (moral) or political action is pre-empted by the complexity of the system. Risk society, therefore, has an inherent affinity to neoliberal individualization and prevents any communality or bonds of solidarity. Risk society can only offer “biographical solutions of systemic contradictions” (Risk 137; italics in the original). What Beck diagnoses in his theorization of risk society is the loss of social thinking (25). In class societies, the gap between classes is still visible; in risk society the gaps, while still there, are rendered invisible. The globalization of risks and the reliance on scientific rationality make it impossible to ascribe responsibility to any actor. Thus, in risk society, “one acts physically, without acting morally or politically” (33). Because individual factors cannot be isolated, one has to act “as if they were subject to a natural fate” (33). It is no coincidence that with the rise of risk society, economics is divorced from political philosophy and becomes a science. The
science of economics hides the social and the political behind a veneer of objectivity, all while discrediting social rationality.

According to Beck, risk positions must be understood differently from class positions because they are a result of the globalization of risks. Beck notes that in the earlier forms of social stratifications, being determined consciousness, but in the risk society, consciousness determines being. That is, politics are organized around knowledge of risks. Beck writes that “one can possess wealth, but one can only be affected by risks; they are, so to speak, ascribed by civilization” (Risk 23; italics in the original). However, risk positions create new kinds of class positions and the two do overlap: “Hazardous industries have been transferred to the low-wage countries of the Third World. This is no coincidence. There is a systematic ‘attraction’ between extreme poverty and extreme risk” (41). It is true that risks tend to be equalizing, obey no borders, and have an inherent boomerang effect as when the pollution of the “developing nations” through the outsourcing of toxic industries comes back to the West in imported food, toys, and other products. However, there is an overlap between the lumpenproletariat of production capitalism and the working poor of the risk society: “The proletariat of the global risk society settles beneath the smokestacks, next to the refineries and chemical factories in the industrial centers of the Third World” (Risk 41). As Jim Puckett puts it, “Toxic waste will always run downhill on an economic path of least resistance” (qtd. in Bauman, Wasted 59).

Risks are moved to the “nowhere” places of the Third World where “the ‘industrial naiveté’ of the rural population, which often can neither read nor write, much less afford protective clothing, provides management with unimagined opportunities to legitimize the ways of dealing with risks that would be unthinkable in the more risk-conscious milieus of the industrial states” (Risk 42). This naiveté, however, is at least partially a choice; in the choice between the “visible threat of death from hunger and the invisible threat of death from toxic chemicals” (42), the visible is always victorious.

The labourer in the Third World is unrecognizable not because we do not understand that dangerous labour is outsourced, but because the construction and management of risks make the worker indeterminate. In risk society, class conflict itself becomes epistemological—a struggle over definitions. The logic of risk society requires scientific and technocratic thinking; the human element is too subjective and too unpredictable. The requirement for rigorous proof,
however, renders risks to be always indeterminate. It follows, then, that those most exposed to
global risks must also become indeterminate. The workers become abstract parts of a global
system too complex to understand—a system in which strict causation is impossible to establish.
Thus, even though the economic system is global, the problems of work are presented, at best,
as local issues requiring local solutions. Or, even more insidiously, they are private issues that
affect private individuals. The fundamental assumption of neoliberalism, as argued by Douglas
Spencer in his *The Architecture of Neoliberalism* (2017), is that “individuals can achieve only a
narrow and very limited knowledge of the real complexities of the world” (2). Any attempt at
human mastery of the society or of the economy is both doomed to fail and will inevitably lead
to tyranny or oppression. Because the economic system is too complex for any individual to
comprehend, the individuals must trust the economic market which is “better able to calculate,
process, and spontaneously order society than the state is able to” (2). In neoliberalism there can
be no collective project to master and change the world; the society is subject to immanent
development guided by the rules of the market. Friedrich Hayek writes “that the primary
requisite for understanding society is that ‘we become aware of men’s necessary ignorance of
much that helps him to achieve his aims’” (qtd. in Spencer 17). Because the system is so
complex, only “the market” can guide it: “…the only possibility of transcending the capacity of
individual minds is to rely on those super-personal ‘self-organizing’ forces which create
spontaneous order” (Hayek qtd. in Spencer 21). Thus, in neoliberalism, the individual’s relation
to the economic market is that of wilful ignorance. Unlike in Soviet socialism, human subjects
no longer seek mastery of the world, but rather must strive to adapt to the supra-personal forces
that are the market. The individuals must take on characteristics of the economic forces:
adaptability, flexibility, and self-regulation. In this world view, the individual’s fate within the
complex economic system cannot be understood in any kind of systemic way. The connection
between concrete daily practices and global economic systems is rendered not only *a priori*
impossible to understand but, more importantly, not desirable to understand or reflect upon. The
belief in the natural laws of the market disavows labour by obscuring struggles and
contradictions: “Life as competition is affirmatively ontologized as the natural way of things”
(Spencer 76). Because there is no qualifiable difference between work as employment and work
on the self, work is depoliticised and individualised. Spencer writes, “In neoliberalism,
everything is productive but nothing is laboured.” Even though we know the worker exists, he
or she exists in an indeterminate position within a system that both makes everyone into a
worker and disavows the role of work in the economy. The globalising reach of capitalism as well as the ever-increasing complexity of the global economic system of production, distribution, and consumption means that the worker is both unknowable and incomprehensible.

The connections between capitalist production, war, environmental degradation, and the abstraction of the worker can be seen in Werner Herzog’s 1992 documentary *Lessons of Darkness*. The film is not usually discussed in the context of representation of labour. Made at the end of the first Gulf War, *Lessons of Darkness* documents the Kuwait oil fires. The fires were started by the withdrawing Iraqi forces that set fire to nearly 500 oil wells. While composed entirely of documentary footage, *Lessons of Darkness* is edited and presented as a science-fiction film about a planet being destroyed by fire in some future intergalactic war. The conflation of fiction and non-fiction creates a new “sense of veracity that is only obtainable when the bounds of representational accuracy are exceeded” (Bozak 68). The film is often analysed in the context of the environmental effects of capitalist production and war. It is also read as a critique of the so-called clean war, or the post-industrial war, which is “defined by a principle of deference, wherein the casualties, environmental as well as human, surface later, after the conflict has been forgotten, and thus take on a burden of invisibility” (Bozak 77). The first Gulf War was the first “trans-human” military conflict characterized by smart bombs, pilotless aircraft, and unmanned drones. Paul Virilio described this war as “pure” “in the sense that the casualties were as yet undetected” (qtd. in Bozak 77). The new technology of war and of entertainment allowed the war to be abstracted: it played out on CNN as a virtual and bloodless spectacle. *Lessons of Darkness* seeks to defamiliarize the familiar images from the oversaturated CNN coverage. Herzog shot the film in 16mm, avoiding the disposable digital media; the film:

polarizes itself against the digitizing video-game aesthetic that characterized 1991’s war in Kuwait and thus remains almost archaic in its decision to avoid what was then the emergent new media technology utilized by both the U.S. military and the media to create a spectacular onslaught of urgency, present-tense liveness, and maximum efficiency. (Bozak 68)

The digital media complement the system of production and consumption based on over-extraction and waste of resources, such as oil. Digital cameras and digital images are disposable and interchangeable. In *Lessons of Darkness*, Herzog attempts to create images that are more
lasting and timeless. Thus, melancholy and apocalyptic images of the landscape ravaged by war, “turn warfare back into an unspeakable monument to horror and despair” (Bozak 68). Yet Herzog was attacked by the German press for aestheticizing war and the film was booed when it was screened at the Berlin Film Festival. Prager argues that for many audiences, the problem was not the aestheticization of war as such, but rather that the film “fails to provide sufficient context for the destruction. Herzog does not even once indicate who attacked whom, which city he is presenting at the onset of the film, or even who it is that is putting out the fires. We see only apocalyptic images and decimation” (181). The images are completely abstracted from their socio-political context. The landscape itself is not recognizable as Earth. The human beings appear as extraterrestrial beings. The firemen in the film do not speak. They move around the strange apocalyptic landscape, their faces are covered in strange masks, their actions appear incomprehensible. At the end, after the fire is extinguished, they reignite the wells: “We know their actions are ‘reasonable’—that one must continue to burn the oil in order to manage the fires—yet they are presented to us as madmen” (Prager 180).

For Herzog, the casualty of war is the planet itself. He has called his film “a requiem for a planet that we ourselves have destroyed” (in Ames, n. p.). The war can only be grasped through its traces: the billowing smoke, the charred landscape, the rusted vehicles and other detritus of civilization scattered across the desert. The scorched earth tactics of the Iraqi forces are not merely an aggression of war; the destruction of land and natural resources are, in the end, the result of capitalist production and consumption that requires oil to fuel it. The ideology that has borne the war needs destruction to sustain it. In the film’s fifth chapter, titled “Satan’s national park,” we see a forest covered in oil. Herzog narrates: “Everything that looks like water is, in actuality, oil. Ponds and lakes are spread out all over the land. The oil is treacherous because it reflects the sky. The oil is trying to disguise itself as water.” While water is necessary to create and sustain life, oil kills all life it comes in contact with. Yet oil is the liquid that gives life to global capitalism. It, therefore, disguises itself as water, as something necessary to sustain life. The very thing causing the total destruction of land appears to be a necessity for life. In chapter twelve, “Life without fire,” as the workers reignite the wells, Herzog narrates:

Two figures are approaching an oil well. One of them holds a lighted torch. What are they up to? Are they going to rekindle the blaze? Has life without fire become
unbearable for them? Others seized by madness follow suit. Now they are content. Now there is something to extinguish again.

Without the fire, what purpose could these figures find in the desolate and devastated landscape? Perhaps, without the fire, these alien figures would have to confront the realities of their environment and of their own role in it. Might such a confrontation with reality cause an even greater madness? The fire must continue to burn, just as the capitalist production replicates itself despite the increasing devastation it causes.

The workers in Lessons of Darkness are just as indeterminate as the effects of the war and of the environmental devastation. The fact that Texas firefighters are in Kuwait fighting fires lit by the Iraqi forces is already strange in itself, because the links between production, consumption, and warfare on global scale are obscure and difficult to grasp. Herzog’s representation of labour is effective precisely because he is not showing it as labour. These figures of the workers extinguishing apocalyptic fires have no relation to what we recognise as work in our daily life. In the global risk society, it is the workers who are lost. While the links between industrial production, environmental catastrophe, and war are easier to understand, the workers remain hidden. Workers are either abstracted as in economic analysis, or they are individualized so that their place and role within the system is obscured. In Lessons of Darkness we can readily recognize the interrelations between global capitalism, the environment, warfare, and even media and representation itself. Yet, the worker remains lost even as we watch the labour of firemen. Just as war became ‘trans-human’ during the Gulf War, so labour becomes ‘post-worker.’ Both are of course ideological constructions, for no matter what advanced technology is used, both war and capitalist labour leave behind human casualties. And, in the end, technological advancements both in warfare and production create environmental risks that threaten humanity as a whole. The mysterious figures in Herzog’s film reveal the contradiction of environmentalism which is divorced from socio-political analysis of labour. It is labour as material activity upon the world that is implicated in and affected by the environment.

Workingman’s Death: Five Portraits of Work in the 21st Century by the Austrian documentary film director Michael Glawogger also touches on the themes of Lessons of Darkness, but instead centers on the worker. In an interview about the film, Glawogger has noted that while workers are often shown and idealized, “the actual labour process [is] nearly always absent” (qtd. in
Schiefer). Work is shown only to introduce the worker, but labour itself, as a material process within socio-political context, is never represented. In *Workingman’s Death*, the global system of production and risk distribution along with their impacts on the environment are always present but they are only a background to the workers who carry out extreme and dangerous work. Glawogger is interested in the possibilities of representation of labour made “visible in a meaningful way” (qtd. in Schiefer). He argues that this can be shown only by depicting physical labour through its violence and its effect on the human body. Glawogger depicts work not as an abstract process but as violence embodied in the figure of the worker. Just like Herzog, Glawogger uses film rather than digital media as he considers film to be able to convey the sensual experience of labour in a way that digital media cannot. The texture of the film and the highly aestheticized framing of the subjects create estranging effect on the viewers. The contrast between the material violence of labour and the estranging representation reveals the contradictions within the figure worker—are these workers heroes or the refuse of society? The film often is uncomfortable to watch precisely because of how it both concretizes and abstracts the workers. The film has no narration and limited dialogue; while in some segments the workers talk about their work or their lives, the film undercuts any attempt at identification or construction of a coherent narrative. Any impulse at creating a narrative is driven by the logic of labour. Thus, in the Indonesian sulfur mine segment, the camera follows the workers as they carry sulfur from the mine; in Nigeria, the camera circles around the abattoir to create a sense of chaos and repetition. There is no other, separate narrative of these people’s lives; their labour determines everything.

*Workingman’s Death* is composed of five segments plus an epilogue. The five chapters are: “Heroes” about illegal coal miners in Donbass, Ukraine; “Ghosts” which follows sulfur miners at the Kawah Ijen sulfur mine in Indonesia; “Lions” which is set in an open air abattoir in Port Harcourt, Nigeria; “Brothers” about ship breakers in Gaddani, Pakistan; and finally the shortest chapter, “Future,” which is set in China and shows steelworkers. The “almost post-apocalyptic epilogue” (Hoeij) takes place in Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park in Germany, which is a former coal and steel plant converted into a multi-use recreational facility. Glawogger also wanted to shoot in Austria’s VOEST steelworks, among other places, but was rejected. He believes that this is because “the Austrian steelworks wants to get rid of the heavy labour image, which is certainly telling” (in Huber). The film begins with a montage of archival footage of manual
labour in the early days of the 20th century with the score by John Zorn mimicking the sounds and rhythms of industrial work. The opening images appear as a historical curiosity, quaint or even naïve to the modern viewer, playing as an overture to the eulogy that follows—the death of the workingman in the postmodern world of information age and globalization.

What all segments have in common are images that suggest death and the after-world—or other-world. In “Heroes,” the images of coal miners deep underground, in narrow passages only forty centimeters high, are directly evocative of a grave but also of the underworld. The images link the workers to the earth, but not in a regenerative sense of the farmers’ link to the land. Rather, the miners descend into the chthonic space of death, as the coal is devoid of the productive, life-giving quality that characterizes earth. The space is liminal—they exist between life and death, which is also a metaphor for their position in the global world. Above ground, like tombstones, the old Soviet structures and monuments litter the post-apocalyptic winter landscape of Donbass with its collapsed mining industry. This is the afterlife of the Soviet labour heroes. In “Ghosts,” the sulphur fumes are always present and the nature of labour separated from the regenerative powers of earth is underscored by the rocky terrain. The segment opens with a sacrificial slaying of a goat to protect the workers from the potentially deadly volcano but it has an eerie quality of a rite of the after-world. While the Nigerian abattoir chapter links work to both death and life through the cyclical rhythm and images suggestive of the cycle of life, the segment also presents death most explicitly—slaughter, blood, cries of animals in the final spasms before death. While the slaughter of animals could be linked to the cycle of life, the other images of death here do not suggest renewal: the landscape is scattered with garbage, the river is polluted, the potentially life-giving fires are made by burning old tires from a landfill. The tires are the waste of civilization, the discards that have lived through their usefulness and are now given a new use in the after-world of the abattoir. We see a shot of the sun in the black haze of the rubber tire smoke, evoking a post-apocalyptic image of the Judgement Day. Glawogger repeatedly points out (in Hoeij, Huber) that the “Lions” segment is evocative, for him, of the works of Hieronymus Bosch whose paintings are grotesque and gruesome. Full of symbolism and figures in macabre positions evocative of pain and suffering, Bosch’s paintings present to us a world of nightmares. Death and the brevity of earthly existence are constant themes in Bosch, as they are in Workingman’s Death. The images of death link to the next segment which takes place in the ship graveyard where workers also inhabit a space of the after-life, dismantling dead ships with
fire. The opening of the sequence evokes imagery of the countryside and farming through the worker’s song; this is in stark contrast to the devastated landscape of death where the ship breakers work. Initially, Glawogger wanted to include a segment set in a village in Pakistan as part of the segment to be titled “Farmers” (rather than the final title “Brothers”). Slowly it would be revealed that the farmers are actually the ship yard workers. The idea was abandoned due to problems with permits and the difficulty of filming in an “ultrafundamentalist area” after the Iraq War. But also, some of the footage shot was not included in the final film because “it all looked so idyllic, it’s really one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been to […] so I couldn’t bring myself to have those idyllic images in the film” (in Huber). The worker in “Brothers” talks about his work as death itself: one misstep and a worker can plunge off a ship towards his death or he could be crushed by the massive pieces of steel that the workers break off. In a rather strange sequence, the ship-breaking yard is visited by a photographer. He carries a toy submachine gun that the workers hold in all the photos in awkward poses. The violence of war and the violence of their work are never far apart. While they are dehumanized by their labour, in these photographs they are humanized by posing as warriors. Glawogger films the workers posing for photographs as still images, a technique he also uses in “Heroes” where the workers stand still in poses that recall monuments to Stakhanov. The contradiction in these forgotten workers on the margins of society posing as heroes is depicted not with irony but melancholy. The workers’ gaze into the camera and the stillness of the shot demand that the viewers reflect on the humanity of the worker and, more importantly, on their own act of looking.

The point of departure for Workingman’s Death is the image of the worker as a hero—an iconic socialist image that is apparent in the opening montage sequence. Glawogger sees something “undeniably heroic there” except that now nobody cares anymore (in Huber). The film is, for Glawogger, a hymn to the worker with all the sensuousness this implies: “We selected places where the images would be resonant enough: sulphur mists, giant, dying ships torn apart with tools of fire. I want people to feel the blow of a pick, the knife that cuts into the living flesh, the weight of the carcass carried away” (in Huber). The act of working is consciously foregrounded in the film—“there’s this whole cult of the worker, more or less the same regardless of which ideology it’s supposed to serve, but real working is hardly shown in the films, just glimpses. Work is simply asserted. In Workingman’s Death I reverse things: it’s people at work and little else” (in Huber). In the film, Glawogger often frames the shots of workers working in a way that
evokes iconic images of heroic labour. In “Ghosts,” for example, a miner is shown in an extreme high-angle shot as he is breaking off sulfur. The effect is to link the labour of these workers who could be characterized as “human waste” to the anachronistic ideas about heroic labour. Major inspiration for Workingman’s Death is the Stalinist cult of Aleksei Stakhanov, who has given the iconic expression to the worker-hero image. Glawogger had initially planned to start the film with Stakhanov but due to the difficulty of obtaining archival footage from the KGB archives, the Stakhanov sequence is moved towards the middle of the Donbass segment. It is assembled out of many different newsreels and tries to capture the spirit of Stakhanov movement through showing clips of the miners marching and singing about the joys of collective labour. Glawogger went to the biggest mining site in the world for his Ukraine segment; workers from this region had co-financed a mining strike in England in the late 80s but now “they’re simply forgotten, worthless” (in Huber). What Glawogger found in the region was “what is probably the most devastated place in Europe … It’s a major catastrophe. People are so desperate, they work in the state-owned mines for wages never paid: money only comes from work in illegal mines!” (in Huber). The cult of Stakhanov, however, still persists as can be seen in the miners’ dialogue after the Stakhanov montage. While the miners admit that Stakhanov is a somewhat mythological figure, they also revere him and are uncomfortable with the suggestion that Stakhanov’s record was staged in its entirety.

The Donbass chapter ends with a wedding sequence where the newlyweds bring flowers to the statue of Stakhanov as a symbolic ritual and a remnant of the communist past. The newlyweds kiss in front of the statue and the camera films them in a high angle shot with Stakhanov looming in the background, reminiscent of the closing shots of The Radiant Path. The anachronistic optimism of the shot, however, is undercut by the final shot of the chapter: the statue at night in the winter landscape, the bouquet ravaged by the cold winds. There is no radiant path awaiting the newly married couple, only poverty and devastation left behind in the post-history. The entire chapter strongly evokes post-apocalyptic science fiction, especially Tarkovsky’s Stalker. The opening shots show frozen landscape drained of colour with abandoned industrial sites standing like corpses of Soviet industry and mythology. These opening shots do not have a musical score but only the sound of wind blowing through the desolate landscape. The man digging for coal in the open mine seems out of place, like a post-apocalyptic scavenger. Later the miners state that they, unlike Stakhanov, are “not driven by
enthusiasm. … Sure, but we’re motivated by something else…. Our enthusiasm comes from the will to survive. We work to survive… If you don’t work, you’ll freeze to death. And that’s that” (Glawogger). This work is truly post-industrial in a literal sense—the industry has collapsed and disappeared. The post-work for these people is not freedom but harsh economic reality that threatens their very survival. Glawogger states that “the real disappearance, however, is not of work, but of the recognition the miners get for their work. The title of the film, then, is a provocation rather than a statement. It should have a question mark after it” (qtd. in Sandhu).

The workers shot in the poses of Communist worker-hero statues is also a provocation, pointing to the invisibility of the labour in today’s Western society, to the disappearance of the worker as an icon, and to the fact that in these other places that are empty in our imagination, manual work is an integral part of survival.

The next chapter, “Ghosts,” shows a different aspect of work in the 21st century. In Ukraine we see a break from the communist past and a collapse of industry that had thrived previously. In Indonesia, by contrast, we are confronted with manual labour that appears to be primitive and almost mythical. The rhythm of the sulphur carriers walking with their load and the rhythmic sound of their baskets combined with the sulphur mists create a sense of a mythical space and time. When Glawogger asked why they have people carrying sulphur, “they just looked at me incredulously: ‘Because it’s the cheapest way!’ There’s always a simple cost-benefit calculation” (in Huber). The sulfur miners work as “independent” labourers, carrying sulfur from the active volcano to the collecting station where they are paid by weight. A miner can carry anywhere between 150 and 250 pounds of sulfur at a time. The path they take is steep and dangerous and they must walk over three kilometers, most miners making two trips in a day.

While the illegal miners of Donbass are connected to the global economic system as a negation or detritus, the sulphur carriers are, in principle, directly linked to the global system of production through mining of raw materials. Yet the viewer is never shown what happens to the sulfur the miners carry. It is loaded on the trucks but where does it go? Sulfur is a component in many aspects of modern production from electronics to pharmaceuticals, but for these workers, the path is three kilometers long. The global exploitation of labour is obscured as it is not clear how this brutal and dangerous labour connects to global production. The global leisure class benefits from their labour but the connections are impossible to understand. In the segment, we see many tourists who visit Kawah Ijen. They pose for photographs as the sulfur miners walk by
them. One tourist poses with the baskets full of sulfur, pretending he is carrying them. The miners sell pieces of sulfur as souvenirs, although one tourist complains they are too expensive. There is no obvious direct connection between the exploitation of the workers and the privilege of the tourists who can afford to travel abroad for holidays. At the end of the chapter, as the sulfur is being loaded on the trucks, two miners talk about their taste in music. One prefers Western music and his favourite band is Bon Jovi although he cannot afford to buy any CDs. In a comical dialogue, he explains to the other miner that Bon Jovi is only one member of the band even though the entire band is called by his name. Without directly evoking globalization, Glawogger provokes us to place what we are watching within the context of global relations of production, power, and privilege.

In Nigeria, the workers seem happy with their jobs as their positions give them a certain prestige in the community. Nonetheless, there is the same sense of fatalism that permeates every segment. At the end of the chapter, a worker says,

He who was born with and through blood will pass through all forms of suffering. Especially if he began life in a place that has yet to learn the meaning of civilization. We are born into suffering because in this country nothing is as it should be. So everyone here does his job patiently. And if God in his infinite mercy should bestow us with success, so be it. (Glawogger)

The workers are happy within the context of their possibilities but they do express concerns over governmental policies on exports, thus placing themselves within the context of larger political-economic issues. This segment is also the one Western reviewers find the most problematic because it shows slaughter of animals but, for this very reason, it is most fruitful for thinking about the place of labour and alienation of humanity from its own productive activity. Glawogger comments on this segment:

I almost gave up on this slaughtering idea until I found these places in Nigeria and to be honest, I would have filmed them even if I were making a film about astronauts! It is something that tells a lot about humankind and the eating of fellow creatures, but that being something completely normal. When people get offended by it, just because they
have become alienated from the normal processes of life and what we are about, then that is not my problem. (qtd. in Hoeij)

Glawogger’s language recalls Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism—the disassociation of a commodity from the (invisible) labour that went into producing it. This is accomplished by displacing labour into the “nowhere” spaces, preventing any realization of fundamental solidarity of working, or exploited, people. It is particularly disturbing that this alienation extends even to food, which is fundamental to sustaining life. If we are disturbed by the graphic images of animal slaughter, where do we imagine the meat we consume comes from? Are the cows we consume killed in some kind of completely painless way? Do they not make the same noises when they die? Perhaps the shock at confronting death is because we see men cutting the animals’ throats and holding their heads as their bodies convulse. Perhaps we would not be as shocked if humans were not implicated directly and the process was automated. This is the essence of commodity fetishism: the worker is removed from the process through erasure, abstraction, and technological fantasies of complete automation. This abstracts the worker not only from the process of labour but from his or her very humanity, as well as ours.

God and destiny are also invoked in “Brothers,” but this segment is the most direct about “the relationship between the so-called First and Third World, Us and Them. We send our trash, in this case, our ships, to be wrecked in a place that lacks certain resources, in this case, iron ore, and can make use of our waste as raw material” (Glawogger, qtd. in Huber). “Brothers” opens with a ship slowly coming in and a worker singing what, at first, appears to be a traditional song but is in fact a song about working in the ship graveyard. A man who has left the village to work at the ship yard addresses his sweetheart: “I beseeched British government to stop sending ships so that I can return to you.” The ships that come in have foreign names—where do they come from? What did these ships carry during their life? About 60 percent of the world’s decommissioned ships are dismantled in Asia, where labour is the cheapest because the company owners need not follow any health, safety, or environmental guidelines. Even if regulations exist, the company owners routinely ignore them. The toll of ship breaking on human lives and on the environment are documented in Al Jazeera’s 2016 report With Bare Hands: The Human and Environmental Costs of Shipbreaking. The labour in ship breaking yards is extremely dangerous, leaving workers with debilitating injuries and little access to medical care due to its prohibitive costs. Not only are workers trapped in slave-like conditions, the ship breaking
industry has devastating effects on land and sea, threatening the livelihood of farmers and fishermen. The ships leak toxic materials and oil residues into the land and sea and while the local populations are the ones immediately impacted by the destruction of local ecosystems, environmental devastation has a global impact. *Workingman’s Death* does not provide this context, but in the closing credits, we see footage of people relaxing on the beach near the ships that are being dismantled. The images are startling as we realise that these ship yards are not some isolated places, but are in the middle of every-day life. The refuse of the First World, is central to these people’s very existence. Could these ships have carried raw materials, oil, or even goods that we buy at the mall? Just as we do not know where things come from—as in sulfur or other components of goods that we purchase—we do not know where they go in their after-life or who the workers are that mined, built, shipped, and ultimately dismantled the components of modern life.

While all workers in the first four segments mention lack of choice in one way or another, the Chinese workers in “Future” emphasize that there are choices for the new generation of Chinese. Their comments combine the ideas of worker as a hero whose work benefits and advances the society and the competitiveness of capitalism: “Progress is coming steadily. We are competitive in the international market. Looking back over the past few years, one can say that the situation has improved steadily.” While they stress China’s technological advancement, they still hold the belief that “work must be done in any case.” Perhaps this is not surprising as most Western companies outsource the actual production process to China. While this segment is called “Future,” it also seems most anachronistic because of this centrality of work still being present in the minds of the workers. Their comments are intercut with images of an elaborate monument to Mao with the base surrounded by workers, peasants, and revolutionary heroes. The statue was erected in 1969 during the Cultural Revolution. Two young people interviewed in the film say that they often come to the statue to pose for photographs by emulating the dramatic poses of the figures: “We think these poses look really funny and avant-garde.” There is a disconnect between the steel workers and the youth for whom the socialist realist figures of the monument are already decontextualized. While China looks to the future and undergoes rapid industrialization, the workingman is already in danger of becoming a relic of the past. The workers speak of self-sacrifice—they are ready to become anachronisms if it means better life for their country. These are the true heroes of labour, but we have already watched what
happens to the heroes of labour as they become refuse in the progress of globalization. Who will benefit from the self-sacrifice of these workers and who will be left behind? While the Chinese workers dream of the future, the future is already realised in Germany where work no longer exists and the workingman is dead.

The epilogue, or perhaps the eulogy for the workers we have just seen, visits the Duisburg-Nord Landscape Park which was once the Duisburg-Meiderich Steelworks. Duisburg is in the Ruhr valley, which was the center of the German coal and steel industry. With deindustrialization, the region was left with many abandoned plants and coal mines and substantial pollution. A number of plants and mines have been converted for leisure use—into museums, galleries, and mutli-use recreational centers. The Duisburg-Nord leisure park radically displaces work because the smelting-works are not even preserved as a museum of industrial past. Rather it is radically transformed through de-contextualization. It could just as well be a Las Vegas-like simulacrum rather than an actual place of industrial labour. The young people on the site have no connection to its industrial past or to the workingman in the mines or ship breaking yards across the globe. Yet, after we watch the film, these youths appear as strange and alien as the workers in previous segments. The contrast between the workers and these young people confronts us with surprise and shock. The epilogue forces a recognition, not of these young Germans but of the workers in previous segments. Whereas earlier, it was the workers that appeared strange and alien, from the perspective of their labour, it is now the young people enjoying leisure time in former places of industrial labour that appear incomprehensible. The epilogue forces us to connect ourselves to the labour of the workingmen we have just watched. Workingman’s Death accomplishes this not through identification but through estrangement that forces a recognition. Whereas in Lessons of Darkness we are confronted with alien figures, forcing us to ask who these strange alien creatures are and what they are doing, here we are confronted with ourselves. The workers are concretized in their physical labour and in the violence done to their bodies, while we are the abstracted other always present in the background, like tourists or Western youth who visit the graveyards of labour. The film does not offer any commentary or political statements but it leaves us with a discomfort of recognition that somehow we are connected to these people labouring in extreme conditions in far away places. Glawogger humanizes them as workers, not as individuals. We are asked to recognize in them the worker-as-human-being, which is the precondition of solidarity.
Glawogger’s approach is in direct contrast to another film that, like “Ghosts,” is also set in the Kawah Ijen mine—Sasha Friedlander’s 2011 documentary *Where Heaven Meets Hell*. In contrast to Glawogger, Friedlander takes a conventional documentary approach, telling the stories of four men who work at the mine. It is a compelling human-interest story set in an exotic location. The majority of the 80-minute film is about the miners’ families’ lives with only a few scenes of the men working at the mine. The workers and their families talk about poverty, limited choices available to them, as well as their dreams and aspirations for their children. The workers are all family men who make the best of their situation and are grateful for what they have, despite their constant struggle to provide for their children. One miner says, “this is my fate. I’m grateful that I still have air in my lungs to breathe. I don’t regret that my life is the way that it is. I thank God every day for giving me this rich life. There are so many people who have harder lives than we do. I am so lucky to have my own home with my wonderful wife and daughter.” The official film website provides biographies of the workers featured in the film.

One worker, Anto, is skilled at learning languages and is teaching himself English and French so he might one day become a tour guide. His desire for self-improvement gives him “the best shot at a better life” out of all the workers we meet. We are encouraged to cheer him on as “throughout the film, we watch Anto stumble as he attempts to escape from the harsh realities of life.” These workers are all “deserving poor” who are moral and hard working. The movie invites us to empathise and identify with these people who only want the best for their children. And it is much easier to empathise with the poor who are content with their lot, showing no anger nor challenging the viewer to consider his or her own relation to what is being shown. In contrast, sulfur miners in “Ghosts” do not discuss their families but they do talk about drinking, bar fights, and their favourite prostitutes.

In *Where Heaven Meets Hell*, there are also scenes with tourists who talk to the miners and take photographs. In one scene, a miner tells a tourist that “everybody who comes here says like, ‘Oh, it looks like Hell here.’ But I think … this is my life.” The tourist keeps responding with “yeah, yeah” and then, seeing to the volcanic lake, says how beautiful it is and starts taking pictures. The tourists going down to the crater get in the way of the miners who are carrying the heavy sulfur up the steep and narrow path. One miner says that without knowing English or other foreign languages, it is difficult to tell the tourists to move out of the way. Yet the tourists also sometimes give the workers tips, if the workers are chatty and friendly. Some workers learn
rudimentary English so they can talk to tourists in the hope of receiving tips. There is something obscene in seeing tourists who are enjoying an exotic vacation interacting with these men. The tourists obviously understand that inhaling sulfur fumes and carrying heavy loads for several kilometers is dangerous and difficult. However, the workers are just part of the exotic landscape, something barely comprehensible. Similarly, the film viewers understand that the miners struggle to survive and we can appreciate that their labour is extremely difficult. During the Q&A with the director at the 2012 Toronto Hot Docs documentary film festival, the audience members expressed their admiration for the workers who do not give up in the face of such unimaginable difficulties. A number of people inquired how they can donate to help these workers. At the end of the film, the viewers are invited to visit the film website and donate to a fund set up through the Women’s Empowerment Network. The fund is “organizing a school fee assistance program, trainings for women in home industry-style empowerment projects, as well as addressing the miners’ health and safety needs.” This impulse and encouragement to “get involved” after viewing the film, however, does not require the viewer to ask how the labour of the sulfur miners in East Java might be connected to their own life. The film never challenges us to consider that we can donate money to improve the workers’ “harsh realities of life” precisely because these workers on the other side of the planet have to perform such dangerous labour for little pay. The viewers watching Where Heaven Meets Hell are tourists who are visiting this exotic place through the film and we can even tip the miners at the end. As tourists, we can sympathise, but being a tourist prevents the possibility of asking political questions. We can identify with these people as human beings who, just like us, struggle, have dreams, and love their children, but we cannot recognize them as political subjects in a global system of production. The film makes them both too familiar and, at the same time, too far removed from our own daily realities. While Glawogger’s images are strange and disturbing, forcing us to question how such labour can exist, Friedlander makes the brutal labour banal as we cheer for the poor workers struggling against “realities of life” rather than against the oppression we are complicit in.

The repeated motif in the workers’ narratives is that there are no other options available to them. What they make at the mine is enough only for day-to-day existence, barely enough to pay for food and children’s school. Should a worker suffer an accident, the livelihood of his entire family would be in peril. The dream of social mobility for their children is a modest one. One
worker in the film is forty-nine years old and he has been working at the mine since he was fourteen. Despite working all his life to provide for his children and grandchildren, his family still relies on his income as a miner. Most miners follow in their fathers’ footsteps as lack of education severely limits their options. Yet, the movie elides any possibility of systemic analysis. We are never invited to ask how someone can work so hard and be so poor. The ending of the film leaves the viewer reassured that everything is okay. The film opens with a worker recounting a nightmare in which he has an accident while working at the mine. He falls into the pit of the crater and is carried out by other workers. This hellish nightmare, which is all too real for some, is in contrast to the closing monologue:

Until the day I die, I’m going to keep trying. As long as I am able, I’ll fight to find better work and a better life. If I’m not successful, I’ll work to help my son find success; and if not my son, then my grandchildren.

For us, Kawah Ijen is the only way we know… and so we return. But after I pick up my paycheck, I have the love of my family to return home to. It makes me happy to know that I can support them. When I am with them my mind is at ease. For me, that’s heaven…

This closing narration is comforting for the viewer; the workers, at the end, are sufficiently happy.

There is one scene in the film which hints at a possibility of politics. Fourteen minutes into the film, there is about a two-minute interview with the Japanese mine owner. He reassures us that sulfur is not toxic and that the miners make a fair amount of money for only three hours of work. To prove that sulfur is completely safe for human health, he offers to eat a piece of it. However, he remembers that he had some medications earlier in the day and the sulfur might interact with it. So, he asks one of the Indonesian workers at the office to eat the sulfur instead: “Eat it. Eat it here in front of them, for the camera.” The office worker eats the sulfur while making an appreciative “mmm” sound. “No problem,” comments the mine owner. The scene concludes with the mine owner saying, in English, how beautiful Kawah Ijen is while he eats a banana: “I go to USA, I go to China. This beautiful mountain. You go to Japan, Sakura in Japan, Fuji mountain. No good. This is better.” This brief scene encapsulates the global relations of
production with the worker literally ingesting toxic sulfur while the foreign owner, who can speak with ease about travelling the world, discusses the beauty of the mountain. This scene shocks more than the images of the miners working. Yet, the miners too ingest the sulfur daily as they work within the suffocating clouds of sulfur fumes without protective equipment. The dangerous working conditions and health hazards are not abnormal but part of the distribution of risks within the global economy. We do not have to eat sulfur because they do.

One could of course argue that Friedlander’s film does more to immediately help the sulfur miners of Kawah Ijen than Workingman’s Death ever will. There is no denying that the fund has helped the miners and improved the opportunities for their children. But, as the prologue of Road to Life has asked, is charity enough? In charity we recognize these people as human beings who suffer and we recognize that their struggles are somehow morally wrong. But the properly political recognition is to recognize them as workers. We must not discount reformism in favour of waiting for the revolution. Nonetheless, without solidarity, without the recognition of worker-as-human-being, we cannot effect systemic change. Charity, especially in the digital age where clicktivism replaces political action, is a kind of absolution which does not demand of us to recognize our own role within the system. As Badiou has argued, capitalism cannot be challenged through economic arguments for it will always win on the economic terrain. Boycotting stores that use exploited labour in Bangladesh or China, for example, is a futile activity for it implicitly supports exploitation, but only exploitation done to an acceptable degree. In a global economic system that is complex and opaque, how does one live without in some way benefiting from the exploitation of workers elsewhere? If our own subjectivity is depoliticized, can we recognize a fellow worker as a political subjectivity, or can we only emphasize with him or her through an individualized narrative, as in Where Heaven Meets Hell?

One need not go to exotic locations to find exploitation and erasure of labour. There are empty nowhere places in our cities where invisible workers labour. Andrew Norman Wilson’s video Workers Leaving the Googleplex (2011) and his ScanOps project (2012) reveal exploitation of invisible labour by marginalized workers at Google. Wilson worked as a contractor for Google and filmed Google workers whose job is to scan pages for Google Books. He was fired for filming his video. In the information age, we have access to vast amounts of digital data without any understanding of the material labour that goes into its creation. Terminology such as
“immaterial labour” or fantasies about liberation facilitated by virtual technologies obscure that even in the digital world, there is no escape from the materiality. There are still physical servers, offices, electrical stations, and people’s bodies at work, whether coding or scanning books. Within this realm of material labour, there is a caste system revealed by Wilson. While programmers and other “brain” workers at Google enjoy freedom of movement and have access to full range of amenities, the workers who scan books have access to only one building, have set departure times that separates them from other workers, and must wear yellow badges (full time workers wear white badges, contractors red ones, and interns have green ones). These workers are often visible minorities and they must not interact with other workers. Yellow badge workers all leave at the same time—when they are told to leave—while other workers arrive and depart at various times. Other workers also have access to the gym, free lunches, and so on. This flexibility and extensive amenities, with some companies even including free dry cleaning, is what makes the tech sector appear to be so progressive in labour relations. Wilson’s work is digital, suggesting a transition from analog to digital media and from material to immaterial labour. But the digital is always grounded in materiality. Wilson explains: “There are voltages in electronic circuits, server farms, upgraded tech for every product cycle, and a persistent necessity of repetitive, manual labor” (qtd. in Doulas). Wilson’s ScanOps project foregrounds this materiality further. ScanOps collects errors made by Google workers while scanning books, such as folded pages, visible impression of a finger, etc. These are evidence of low paid factory line work at Google. We might stumble upon these traces of material labour while browsing Google Books, but there they appear only as digital imperfections. Yet, there is no outside of materiality—all human labour has material dimensions and relations of labour have real material effects on the workers’ lives.

Wilson’s projects highlight the shortcomings of technocratic thinking. The thinking that celebrates the seemingly non-hierarchical labour places and the flexible economies elides the power relations and exploitation of labour that is still present and even intensified in such post-work workplaces. Douglas Spencer for example, writes about how flexibilisation and casualisation of work is encoded into the very architecture of postmodern workplaces while hiding power relations, intensification of work, and surveillance of the workers. The architecture of neoliberalism erases the distinction between work and life by encoding both places of labour and leisure in the same way. The logic of the coffee shop is used to construct workplaces and
the logic of the workplace is used to construct spaces of leisure, thus neoliberal demands on the workers—demands for flexibility, productivity, adaptability—extend beyond the nine-to-five. In one example, Spencer discusses the design of the BMW Leipzig by Zaha Hadid Architects, who are one of the foremost global architectural firms of neoliberalism. The design of BMW Leipzig is seemingly in response to the workers’ complaints about difficulty of communication with the management. The new open design of the plant follows managerial logic of a “marketplace for information” (Spencer 84) where it is no longer enough for the workers to show up to work; now “they must feel themselves to be part of a community. They must share, with management and each other, a common set of values, beliefs and goals” (84). The workers must disavow themselves as workers. The BMW Leipzig project also disavows the fact that the new mode of management encoded into the building itself is possible because BMW received numerous subsidies and concessions from labour when building the factory in the impoverished post-communist territory. Because of the high unemployment rate in the region, BMW negotiated wages twenty percent lower than in other plants in Germany as well as a flexible “labour regime based upon variable shift patterns” (87). In these conditions of lower wages and significant concessions by labour, the encoding of neoliberal ideals into the architecture of the building functions as a construction of worker subjectivity which internalizes neoliberal values. Far from liberatory, this model of cooperation and community between the worker and the management is doubly oppressive.

The technological or aesthetic solutions to economic and environmental problems obscure the material realities of human beings. In Elysium, humanity escapes environmental destruction on Earth but it was human labour that built the ark, and, in the end, the workers were the ones left behind. Technocratic or scientific rationality cannot produce the type of collectivity that comes from considering the worker as a human being. The concept of risk society foregrounds the danger of technocratic rationality—unlike social rationality, it discounts the human as too subjective. Yet, technocratic rationality can only produce indeterminacies. Beck argues that risk society is radically different from class society because risks are equalizing; they affect both the poorest labourer and the rich who breathe polluted air. While he recognizes uneven distribution of risks between the rich and the poor, his conclusion is that a new type of subjectivity is necessary, what he calls the cosmopolitan subjectivity. For Beck, the cosmopolitan subject replaces the anachronistic idea of the worker as a lever of history. In his World Risk Society,
Beck opens with a “The Cosmopolitan Manifesto,” which ends with the call “Citizens of the world, unite!” (18). But while I rely on Beck’s description of risk society, I very much disagree with his conclusions and his concept of the cosmopolitan consciousness. The cosmopolitan subject is trans-national, bridging local and global, able to overcome the ethnic and nationalist interests and perceptions. Yet is it not clear how such cosmopolitan consciousness might emerge as the new political lever of history, beyond the already existing very limited scope of cosmopolitan subjectivity. Beck quotes Bauman who writes, “The decoupling of income entitlements from paid work and from the labour market may serve the republic in only one, but a crucial, way: by taking out the awesome fly of insecurity from the ointment of freedom” (Beck, World 12; italics in the original). Freedom from need is, therefore, a requirement for cosmopolitan subjectivity. But our freedom from need depends on the exploitation of workers elsewhere. Should they then wait for the cosmopolitan subjects to liberate them? Cosmopolitan subjectivity cannot develop consciousness necessary for the type of solidarity with the most vulnerable and the most exploited that moves beyond the moral and pre-political stage. The worker as the lever of history appears anachronistic only because in neoliberal capitalism, the worker is obscured. Radical politics must not follow the logic of capitalism and discount the figure of the worker as outdated, but, rather, must return to the worker. This does not mean the return to some idyllic past of worker-heroes, but simply the recognition that organization of human labour is still the defining factor in the structuring of the global society. Production, ascription, and consumption of risks are inherently tied to labour processes. While environmental catastrophe is the biggest threat facing humanity today, exploitation of the planet is the flip side of the exploitation of the worker. Marx’s concept of the fetishism of the commodity has never been more relevant: we cannot stop exploiting the planet if our society is based on exploitation of other human beings, regardless of how far removed they are from us. Solutions can only come when our work and our environment are truly ours; collective action must be premised on foregrounding the worker as a human being.

The type of solidarity that comes from recognizing another worker as a human being, is fully realised in The Song of the Rivers (Das Lied der Ströme), a 1954 documentary by the Dutch film maker Joris Ivens. Ivens, who was a trade-union activist, co-founder of the Dutch Film League, and the first foreign director to work in the USSR, created The Song of the Rivers in collaboration with 32 cinematographers across the world for the 1953 World Federation of
Trade Unions (WFTU) conference in Vienna. The film won Ivens the International Peace Price of the World Peace Council in 1954 and he collaborated with a number of progressive figures, including Dmitri Shostakovich (music), Vladimir Pozner (commentary), Bertolt Brecht (song lyrics), and Paul Robeson. The film is composed of several segments that depict workers labouring along the shores of major rivers—the Mississippi, the Nile, the Amazon, the Ganges, the Yangtze, and the Volga. The unifying imagery of the rivers also serves as a metaphor for the working class movement flowing towards the congress in Vienna. The river is not only a metaphor for the workers’ movement but also for the harnessing of nature and the full expression of the humanity’s creative potential—that is, the transformative power of collective human labour. At the beginning of the film, the narrator says, “Workers, all of us. We create all the wealth for the world. If it were up to us, man would be happy” (Ivens). This is a phrase that is repeated throughout the film, stressing that all wealth is created by the hands of the workers. Imagery of hands is another recurring motif in the film—it is by their hands that workers recognize each other at the congress. The hands of the Amazon tribesmen who start fire with sticks and build boats with simple tools are the same hands that could “make a chronometer or a turbine” (Ivens). The same hands that make pottery or operate machinery are the same hands that “went up in favour of a strike” (Ivens). In The Song of the Rivers, work is global but in the sense of being collective and international. The workers recognize each other as workers and as human beings; the editing moves between the individual and the mass by intercutting floods of people with individual faces. Each individual is an integral part of the collective but their unity is their strength and freedom.

For Ivens, the documentary is a rhetorical genre that is used by an ideologically-committed filmmaker to tell his interpretation of reality. The authenticity of the film comes not from how well it reproduces objective reality, but rather from the honesty of intentions: “Documentaries, to Ivens, like all other films are directed by someone, and built around a central idea; their authenticity will depend mainly upon the validity of this idea, and on the expertness with which the reconstruction is done” (Böker 14). Coupled with honesty of intentions is the need for responsibility, which is always social in nature and must be understood ideologically. The function of the documentary is the development of consciousness and the task of a committed filmmaker is to produce necessary social change. Ivens, who is committed to Marxism, sees work as the main expression of humanity: “Showing work as a dignifying force will create
conscience about work as the only creator of riches and of the ‘better life’” (Böker 28). The common people, to whom Ivens’ films are addressed, are workers whose creative activity has transformative liberatory power. Work, when liberated, is a sign of harmony between people and between people and nature. Capitalism uses work only as a tool for profit, stifling people’s creativity, vitality, and dignity.

The idea of workers’ solidarity is necessary precisely because it strikes us as anachronistic. If we work in an office or at a university, we might no longer recognize a fellow worker by looking at his or her hands. In contrast to ship breakers in Pakistan, our hands and bodies have other, considerably less violent and invisible injuries of labour. But we are brought together by the global production and consumption. We are also brought together by the benign sounding process of recycling, which also includes ship breaking on the shores of Pakistan and dismantling of electronics in China by hand, both of which have devastating effects on the environment and the workers’ bodies. The concept of risk society might be the new way towards solidarity. Concern over the environment cannot in itself move beyond the moral dimension. But, total environmental collapse is, in the final analysis, amoral. If humanity becomes extinct, such an event would be morally neutral. Only coupled with humanism and with the realization of the ties between exploitation of the environment and exploitation of workers, will environmentalism become properly political. Environmental catastrophe cannot be averted by philosophical, artistic, or even purely economic considerations, regardless of how many thinkers and visionaries we send to sail around the Antarctic. We must ask what effect these might have if we do not account for those most impacted by our actions, or inactions, as the case might be. Bringing together environmental concerns in the global risk society with the recognition of workers-as-human-beings allows us to bypass the indeterminacy created by capitalist relations of production, technocratic thinking and neoliberal politics. Since risks are transnational, they can also be the new way of framing worker solidarity in the age of globalization and bypassing the complexity of the global production and supply chain which obscures each worker’s role within it. And recognizing one’s own position of power and privilege within this global system—after all typing is far less dangerous than illegal coal mining—can create politicized worker subjectivity. If there are technocratic solutions, if we can escape environmental risks and devastation, we must consider that it will not be us on that ark or in that habitat. Current drive towards space colonization is led not by governments but by some of the richest men on the
planet, such as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. Bezos is the third richest man in the world and the
dfounder and CEO of amazon.com, which has well-documented history of poor working
conditions, labour abuses, and a devastating effects on small businesses and publishing industry.
Can ordinary workers look to solutions proposed by the super-rich who profit from exploitation
of these same workers? Just as for Ivens and Farocki, the crucial step to liberation is faithfulness
to the idea—in this case, to the idea that workers create the world. If neoliberalism obscures the
worker, we must work to concretize him or her, to recover the worker as political subjectivity.
Workers of the world, unite!
“The only rule in art is what works,” says the host of Bravo’s reality TV series *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist* in the elimination preamble. The show, which ran for two seasons in 2010–2011, puts together a group of artists who receive challenges to create a work of art. The artists fall into a number of stereotypes, including a clichéd obsessive-compulsive art school graduate, a self-taught artist who has never visited an art gallery, and a rich girl who manages to use nude photos of herself in a surprising number of her works, regardless of the challenge theme. The show formula is the same as in other reality TV competitions such as *Project Runway* or *Top Chef*: the artists are given a theme and they have to produce an original work of art in about 24 hours, which is then judged by a panel of art critics. The winner receives $100,000 and a solo show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The culture critics and bloggers were divided. Some “hailed the program for its demystification of the artistic process, others trash-talk the show for its artifice and vow never to watch” (Miranda). Even before it aired, the show caused quite a bit of outrage among the cultured types, with critics lamenting that such crass commercialization is unacceptable. Lauren Wetmore asks, “Will we so easily surrender all semblance of substance? Should we not maintain at least the veneer of scruples?” Other critics dismissed the show altogether; Christopher Knight of the *Los Angeles Times* called it “vacant television piddle.”

Like other Bravo’s shows, *Work of Art* had considerable social media and online presence, inviting the viewers to discuss and judge the art works in each episode. Everyone could become an art critic and people who otherwise had no access to the art world could voice their opinions. Jerry Saltz, Pulitzer Prize nominated art critic for the *New York* magazine and one of the judges on the show, applauded this as a positive development in art criticism: “Somehow an edge of criticism was reached; on these wilder shores of criticism ‘impurities’ bred, definitions blurred, rules broke down.” Saltz sees this as an evolution of art criticism into a non-hierarchical form made possible by the new digital medium of the Internet. This is the democratizing power of the television and of the Internet. Knight, however, dismisses these arguments, claiming that one cannot pass judgment on art without seeing it and being in its presence. Simply seeing art on television, with representation edited to conform to the reality television competition format, is not sufficient for forming an informed opinion. While this might be true, other reality television competition shows invite the viewers to pass judgments and form opinions on things that are not even visual, such as food prepared on the myriad of cooking competition shows. What sets art
apart? Regardless of criticisms, the commentators did not question one thing—is it art? Art is, according to the current understanding, whatever the artist says it is. The works created on the show might be bad art, but they are art. And, as Saltz says, the art created on the show is not worse than art that hangs in art galleries: “The art world looks at a lot of the art on the show and thinks it’s crap, but when I find myself going to Chelsea these days, I find that the art on our reality TV show is not much worse or much better” (qtd. in Miranda).

The unease with *Work of Art*, as well as its often confusing and self-contradictory narrative arcs, reveals the contradictions inherent in the meaning of art in capitalism. In a sense, creating art on *Work of Art* is like preparing food on *Top Chef*, especially since with the rise of cooking shows, food is now also required to tell a story. Both activities need technical skill and creativity. Yet, even in the commercialized format of a reality television competition, art and artistic creation need to maintain a mystique of genius and inspiration. The artists on the show create not so much objects as concepts. The objects they create often seem banal and, as they discuss their ideas in confessional interviews, it is often evident that they are just throwing things together. When discussing their art work with the judges during the critique portion of the show, however, they produce elaborate conceptual explanations that often rely on art-school jargon. This often produces a jarring contradiction, demystifying the art work and revealing that, often, the explanation is largely nonsense. The contrast between the form and content of the show is especially evident in the episodes where the artists have to be inspired by the show sponsors: in the first season episode “Art That Moves You,” the artists have to create works based on their “Audi experience,” and in season two, they must create high art out of Fiat parts. Art has always coexisted with commerce and relied on patronage and commissions, but here the commercial side of art is both embraced and disavowed. We are asked to believe that driving around in an Audi was inspirational enough to create a meaningful work of art that is either about profound personal insights or is an important social commentary. The artists, however do not create a work that questions the existence of the Audi challenge itself.

All the small controversies over *Work of Art* are, in the end, insignificant and, as Wetmore writes, the show turned out to be “extremely boring” and largely inoffensive. The most curious aspect of the show, however, was left without commentary. The reality television competition formula requires weekly challenges that form the episode’s theme and narrative arc. Often these challenges are designed to expose a contestant’s weakness, thus creating drama in what
otherwise might be rather boring viewing. But while asking a chef to cook variety of dishes makes sense, asking artists to produce art in style and medium they never work in is somewhat odd. Most of the artists who participated on Work of Art have their preferred genre or medium, such as photography, sculpture, portraiture, performance art, and so on. Yet, the judges remind the artists that they must be adaptable and flexible, able to create anything asked of them, whether it is shock art or subversive street art. Just like any other worker in the post-work economy, the artist must adapt to the requirements of the market place. The contradiction is not that art must be inspired under conditions of extreme commercialization, but that this requirement now applies to all work. Just as the artist uses art to express his or her thoughts and creativity, so must all workers treat their jobs as a means of self-fulfillment and the expression of the self. After all, Subway calls their employees sandwich artists. So, when in the episode “Sell Out” the artists are tasked with selling art to the public at a New York City park, they are judged both on how much money they make and on whether their art (some of it taking the form of a printed t-shirt) is worthy of a gallery showing. On Work of Art the boundary of art and commerce, or art and labour, is both erased and reaffirmed, revealing some of the contradictions of labour in the neoliberal economy.

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Chapter 4
Work, Now as Entertainment

We all want to put America back to work, but what is work anymore? Sitting at a computer? Going to meetings? Texting? Being on a reality show?

Hank Stuever, *The Washington Post*

With globalization, economic restructuring, and the Great Recession, the worker has become alien, unknowable, and unrepresentable. With the metaphorical death of the workingman, images of labour have becomes historical artifacts separated from our reality by time, just as images of workers from other parts of the globe are separated from our daily life by an equally inviolable barrier of space. The figure of the manual labourer has become irrelevant and antiquated as we are now said to inhabit an information-based service economy where labour has become immaterial. Manual blue-collar jobs have been replaced with knowledge or service sector jobs while the recession had a further disastrous effect on manufacturing and construction sectors. Just as work as a category has disappeared from much of scholarly discourse, so too has the working class disappeared from popular culture. Since the early 1990s, the working class has been disappearing from the people’s medium: “TV has evicted its mechanics and dockworkers to collect higher rents from yuppies in coffeehouses. Even cop shows have been taken away from beat cops and given to eggheads on CSI and Numb3rs” (Poniewozik 21). Television and film has come to be dominated by the middle classes, with working classes being reduced to caricatures when they are represented at all. A recent article in *The Guardian*, for example, discusses “How chavs have replaced working class on Britain’s TV.”

32 Owen Jones, the author of *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* explains: “The 1980s saw a dramatic assault on all aspects of working class life, on unions, and council houses, and communities, and with it working class pride. It’s been replaced by middle class pride, and the working classes have

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32 *Chav* is a derogatory term used to describe a particular stereotype: a loud aggressive person whose manner of dress and behaviour show their lack of education and low social class.
come to be seen as something to escape from” (qtd. in Cadwalladr). The displacement of working class with chavs on British television suggests that the working class is to be feared and derided as subhuman; as Jones puts it, the salt of the earth has been replaced with scum of the earth. Analogously, in the United States, the stereotypical feckless poor are shown on TV as white trash to be despised and ridiculed. The white trash stereotype has reached its apex with the infamous Here Comes Honey Boo Boo on TLC (2012–2017), a show about a family of poor working-class freaks which became part of popular culture lexicon.

Yet while audiences “don’t want to see snaggle-toothed working class people” (Everett) and academics ask “Whither the working class?” (Brayton 237), after a day’s work one can go home and unwind by watching other people work, often doing difficult manual labour. Since the Great Recession, the number of reality television programs about work has exploded. There are shows about every kind of work imaginable. There are shows about fishermen, mechanics, fashion designers, cooks, hairdressers, undertakers, miners, artists, loggers, cattle inseminators, forensic experts, movie set designers—“There is such a diversity of workplaces depicted on reality television it would be easy to think that the working class, instead of being invisible, has become the class that everyone aspires to join” (Ryan). At a time of economic collapse, chronic unemployment and underemployment, workers and their labour are on every channel, as a spectacle for our entertainment.

The term “reality television” is ambiguous as it potentially encompasses genres and forms that are vastly disparate, ranging from current-events documentaries to lifestyle programming and game-shows. Nonetheless, the term is useful because it points to the myth of the “mediated centre,” which is “the idea that society has a ‘centre’” and that “the media’ has a privileged relationship to that ‘centre’, as a highly centralised system of symbolic production whose ‘natural’ role is to represent or frame that ‘centre’” (Couldry 45). All of the disparate formats and genres that are covered by the term have in common a claim to represent the real. The phrase “reality television” suggests that this form has a privileged access to reality, to truth, to the “natural centre” of “our” values and way of life. As such, reality television plays a crucial

33 A study by Goldsmith’s University and the London School of Economics found that only 10 percent of actors in Britain come from manual working class background (Singh).
role in constructing the meaning of labour in the neoliberal economy as well as reveals the contradictions inherent in that construction. On reality television, the working people, instead of uniting, are competing against each other in a game show format. Labour here is not the source of dignity and value: everybody labours but only some win. The viewers are invited not to identify with and recognize fellow workers but rather to judge and discipline them. This chapter looks at how work-place reality television constructs the meaning of labour in the post-work world where the labour of others is entertainment. The chapter first considers reality television’s affinity to neoliberalism and its historical origins in the economic restructuring of the 1980s. The various aspects of the meaning of labour in neoliberalism revealed through reality television are discussed in relation to a number of programmes, with close reading of Coal (Spike), Undercover Boss (CBS), and Does Someone Have to Go? (Fox).

Starting in the 1980s, the rise of unscripted television programming, or reality television, has coincided with the process of labour restructuring. As Chad Raphael explains in “Political Economy of Reali-TV,” reality television emerged as a means of cost-cutting for the networks that were facing numerous economic challenges in the 1980s. The measures undertaken by networks and production companies “translated into an attack on labor, mainly on below-the-line workers such as technicians, engineers, and extras” (Raphael). This was accompanied by attempts to eliminate union labour from the industry. As networks proliferated, they needed 24-hour-a-day programming and reality television can fill the schedule cheaply. There are now entire channels that specialize in unscripted programmes, such as the Discovery Channel or The Learning Channel, which, as one reviewer caustically noted, does not contain much of what we traditionally might call learning. According to Nielsen, in 2014 “almost half of all programming on broadcasting and cable is unscripted, generating $6 billion in annual revenue” (Dayen). Lack of unionization makes reality TV labour cheap and open to abuses; reality TV workers receive no overtime, no benefits, and no sick days. Reality television is low-budget, “with no high-paid actors, union writers or crews. And no one has rights to residuals or ancillary benefits after the shows wrap” (Dayen). The rise of reality television is mostly due to its profitability with margins up to 60% of the production cost.

Reality television has low production values, cheap labour costs and, moreover, it is an excellent format for global licensing of programming:
As Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins note, the challenge for contemporary media distributors “is to transcend vestigial national difference and to create standardized global markets, whilst remaining sensitive to the peculiarities of local markets and differentiated consumer segments.” Reali-TV has participated in this strategy of “global localization.” (Raphael)

Most of the reality television franchises are licensed to be produced in local versions in various countries around the globe. Not all of these franchises originate in the United States. Many popular reality television franchises, especially ones that focus on work and class, originated in the UK, for example. And many American shows are inspired by or are remakes of European or Japanese programmes. The type of reality TV programming that is predominant on television today emerged with the original Big Brother series broadcast in the Netherlands in 1999. This programming is “the result of an international circulation, and recirculation, of products through globalized media markets” (Raphael); global circulation of reality television complements globalization and the global exportation of neo-liberal capitalist forms of labour.

Reality television as a mode of production is well suited for the neoliberal capitalist economy: it is cheap and easy to produce, recreate, and export; it relies on the unpaid labour of its participants; and it provides a perfect platform for the delivery of audiences and demographic data to advertisers, as can be seen in the recent development of “participatory” entertainment programming which functions simultaneously as an advertisement for the product the audience is urged to purchase. Reality television seems to be a perfect reflection of the current conditions and organization of work: it provides both lessons on how to be a worker in the neoliberal deregulated economy and shows the effects of that economy on the working class by exposing, however implicitly, the role of structural positioning in how one relates to and participates in the current form of capitalist labour. As a genre, reality TV is “obsessively focused on labor” (Hendershot 244). Unlike in other programming where the working class is largely absent or invisible, in reality television the working class is overrepresented precisely because of its socio-economic positioning (Skeggs and Wood, “Introduction” 2).

Reality television is a site where the interests of capital and of the neo-liberal state are played out and naturalized but, as Raymond Williams writes, television “is at once an intention and an effect of a particular social order” (Television 128). In his Ordinary People and the Media: The
Demotic Turn (2009), Graeme Turner has argued that reality TV and the increasing presence of “ordinary” people on television signals a fundamental shift in the media and its relation to representation, what he calls the demotic turn. This reconfiguration of media and its function means that “media production companies are now the ideological ‘authors’ of their own interests, rather than those of the state” (Skeggs and Wood, Reacting 4). The demotic turn is celebrated by some for giving “normal” people access to representation, but it also opens up new ways of exploitation within a complex network of ideologies around class and work. But, as Raymond Williams had shown, texts contain both dominant and counter-hegemonic tendencies since hegemony does not simply exist but is a constantly negotiated process. Thus, reality television reveals and suppresses the struggles and contradictions of class and labour. While it is complicit in the naturalization of the current ideology of work, it also exposes the fault lines of the class divisions that are repressed even as socio-economic inequality is intensifying.

At the same time as it ostensibly democratizes access to media and representation, reality television had played a significant role in changing the nature of public service programming and, therefore, in redefining what it means to be a member of a society. Writing about America’s Most Wanted, which premiered on Fox in 1988, Raphael points out that in the Reagan-Bush era of deregulation, producers of reality TV redefined “public interest” away from “discussion of public affairs, coverage of local issues, and developing children's intellectual or emotional abilities” to a vision of public service where “surveillance of criminals replaces debate over public affairs, an oxymoronic ‘nationwide neighborhood watch association’ offers a false sense of localism, and education is reduced to instructing viewers on how to avoid becoming a crime victim.” This was touted by the executive producer of the programme as “the birth of a new era in citizen involvement” (qtd. in Raphael). Today, reality television promotes “audience participation” through the use of social media and e-commerce, a shift that is driven in part by profit generated through media convergence (for example, partnerships with telecommunications companies). In the reality television version of democracy, the viewers are asked to “vote” for participants of various game-shows and talent competitions. Some programmes use this “citizen involvement” as a means of selling a product—on the singing

34 “Of or for the common people,” from the Greek demos.
competition show *The Voice*, for example, the viewers can cast a vote for their favourite contestant by buying the track of the singer’s performance on iTunes, in addition to the more “traditional” voting through the Internet and texting. Each viewer can cast their “iTunes vote” ten times by purchasing ten copies of the same track. This version of participatory democracy can, on occasion, have a larger voter turn-out than its civic counterpart: in several countries with voluntary voting systems, a larger portion of votes have been cast in the finals of reality TV competitions than in civic elections. During the second season finale of American Idol, 24 million votes were cast through text messages, sparking a controversy when inconsistencies in the voting were revealed: “As one fan explained in our survey, ‘Hanging chads in Florida is nothing compared to this stupid voting procedure’” (Jenkins 357).

While the performances of contestants in reality television programmes are being sold for profit, they are not paid for their work. And the work of judging is outsourced to the viewers who, moreover, have to pay for the privilege. This link between capital, entertainment, and commercialized version of citizenship is made nakedly apparent in a 2012 NBC fashion-design competition show *Fashion Star*, which aired for two seasons. *Fashion Star* is modelled on *Project Runway*, a highly popular international franchise with local versions around the globe, for example in Brazil, Norway, Taiwan, Russia, and in the countries of the Arab World. In order to understand the innovation of *Fashion Star*, we should consider *Project Runway*’s more traditional skill-based competition format first. *Project Runway* is a talent competition for aspiring fashion designers; in each episode they are given a very limited time and small budget to complete various challenges. *Project Runway* is one of the few talent competition shows that are primarily about the contestants’ work, with personality conflicts and personal stories appearing to be secondary to the plot; it is a rare reality television show that is not “driven first and foremost by character conflict” (Hendershot 248). In fact, personality conflicts are often shown to be an impediment to work when the designers must collaborate in teams. Within the logic of *Project Runway*, designers are rewarded primarily for creativity and innovation in fashion design, with challenges that include unconventional materials and avant-garde designs, but the designers are often questioned as to whether their designs are sellable or whether they

35 Henry Jenkins in “Buying into *American Idol*: How We Are Being Sold on Reality Television” discusses the role *American Idol* played in promoting texting in the United States.
would photograph well for the pages of magazines. The show, while acknowledging that fashion is big business, attempts to maintain the fiction that what fashion is really about is self-improvement and expression of one’s individuality. It presents the work of fashion design as a calling and a form of self-expression. Thus, the designers participating in the show gladly offer their free labour for a chance to realize their dreams. This opportunity for creative expression is fulfilling in its own right. As many contestants state during their exit interview, the experience of merely participating is rewarding and will help them to become a better person and a better designer—that is, a better worker. It should be noted, however, that all designs created by the contestants become property of the show, with the designer retaining no rights over their creation. Because the show represents creative work, it promotes the romantic myth of the artist who labours purely “out of love of the work or craft without sullying oneself with concerns about marketplace viability”; this myth “provides an ideal rationale for encouraging labor without compensation” (McGee, qtd. in Hendershot 249-50). The reality of fashion, however, is that “the commodity being created is one whose exchange value outstrips its use value by about a million to one. Although Runway celebrates a meritocratic work ethic, it also celebrates the fashion industry, a business that thrives on managed obsolescence—not to mention sweatshop labor” (Hendershot 256). Fashion industry is also known for its abusive use of unpaid internships, thus profiting from the illusion of work as self-fulfillment.

In contrast to Project Runway, the designers on Fashion Star explicitly design for mass production and consumption. Fashion Star dispenses with any pretension to high fashion and is more akin to a glamourised version of the shopping channel, now repackaged as entertainment—“it is creative only if it sells,” observes the buyer for Saks Fifth Avenue. The contestants compete to sell their designs to buyers from three retailers (Macy’s, Saks Fifth Avenue, Express in season 2, and H&M in season 1). The buyers bid for the designs, but the show never explains what those bids mean for the designer: if the buyer bids $80,000 on the design, what portion, if any, of that money will the designer receive? Unlike on Project Runway, where, in keeping with its narrative of haute couture and artisanal work, the designers must do all the work of creating the garments themselves, the designers on Fashion Star are not shown to be making the garments. There are glimpses of pattern makers, seamstresses, and other anonymous workers who are not acknowledged, whose work is not shown, and we are, of course, never told how their work is compensated—an accurate reflection of the fashion
industry. The designers still talk about their “vision,” but it is clear that their designs must be cheap to produce and appeal to as many consumers as possible, while at the same time the buyers maintain the myth of individuality expressed through fashion, for example, “the Macy’s girl” as a distinct and desirable form of self-identity. Immediately after a store purchases the design, the viewers can buy that article of clothing on that store’s website. Throughout the show, the host excitedly announces to the viewers how many minutes are left until they can start shopping: “Only fifteen minutes left until you can start shopping!” “Which design will you buy, America?” and so on. This, furthermore, casts the work of consumption as a patriotic activity, an act of citizenship (vote with your wallet). This is a fantasy of empowerment for the citizen and the consumer that reality television format as a whole perpetuates in one form or another. It is a complement to the myth of worker meritocracy which is central to most work-place based reality television programming. More importantly, media convergence and audience participation reveal that the viewers are not merely consumers of the programming or of the products being sold, but also workers in the reality TV economy.

Reality TV, and talent competitions in particular, promote the myth of the neo-liberal talent-led economy. Most of the high-end talent competitions that focus on work and judgments of taste rather than on the melodrama of character conflicts, such as Project Runway (fashion) or Top Chef (cooking) promote bourgeois tastes and judgments while appealing to the “creative class” with their focus on haute couture or haute cuisine as a form of individualized self-expression, style, and taste. On Project Runway, the designer’s taste level is often questioned—a dress should be sexy but not cheap. On Master Chef, amateur home cooks are judged on whether their culinary creations can be served in top end restaurants and whether they can, for example, boil an egg according to criteria of proper taste. But the economic reality for creative workers is that it is “increasingly common for [them] to subsist on freelance work, to receive little or no pay and no benefits, and to work ridiculously long hours, all in hopes of being ‘discovered’” (Hendershot 246). The same can be said about the participants on reality television.

The talent show format is only one of the reality television formats that explicitly focus on the work of its participants. There are numerous sub-genres of reality television programmes about work and workplaces—shows about extreme, dangerous, and dirty workplaces where heroic working-class masculinity is on display as in Discovery Channel’s Dirty Jobs or the History Channel’s Big Shrimpin’; various makeover, aspirational, and self-improvement programmes;
shows that focus on family businesses such as *American Chopper* or *Family Plots*; pedagogic entertainment such as *Supernanny*; and so on. There are also various contest franchises such as *The Apprentice, American Idol,* or *Top Chef.* On *The Bachelor* women compete to win a marriage proposal, which is its own type of labour. In these shows, the private, the emotional, and the domestic become public spectacle where viewers are encouraged to pass public judgment on private lives and often working-class bodies since “the class profile of those appearing on reality television is skewed towards the working class” (Skeggs and Wood, “Real Class” 7). On reality television, everything is work: “Work is work. Play is work. Banter is work. Sex is work” (Hendershot 245). It is, in short, a perfect genre for the reality where work has colonized all aspects of being, including the private and domestic.

While contestants on shows like *Project Runway* compete for significant prizes, often in fields of work done by only a very small portion of the population (modeling, fashion design, special effects makeup), a recent reality television competition on CBS “has rarest [sic] prize in our shattered nation—a middle-class job” (Callahan). The series, titled *The Job,* premiered in February 2013 and was cancelled after only two episodes due to low ratings. The show’s executive producers were Michael Davis, who specializes in producing game shows (*Who Wants to be a Millionaire* US), and Mark Burnett, who has produced such successful reality TV programmes as *Survivor, The Apprentice,* and *Shark Tank.* The show provoked bitter and outraged reviews from critics who called it “America’s Hunger Games” (*New York Post*) and described it as offensive, depressing, and exploitative. Stephen Colbert on his *Colbert Report* described it as “despertainment.” *The Job* is a competition for positions as the assistant manager of *The Palm* restaurant (episode 1) and an editorial assistant at *Cosmopolitan* magazine (episode 2). Most of the show takes place in a studio where the contestants stand on a stage and face a number of questions from a hiring panel. This is done in a game-show format.

In episode one, each applicant “must step forward and explain why they would like the

36 “But for all of the exploitations reality TV has to offer—from on-camera sex to drunken hillbillies—*The Job* may be the most offensive in television history” (Callahan).

37 Colbert quips: “Reality TV is always putting a spotlight on the latest cultural trends—where the real-est housewives are, who thinks they can dance, and what noun America is currently at war with, which is why I’m giving a big tip of my hat to CBS Television, for a new reality show that draws inspiration from a real-world issue. Yes, ‘The Job,’ where contestants battle for some place to go during the day” (qtd. in Moraes, *Washington Post*).
unspecified job with The Palm, with unspecified wages and benefits” (Callahan). In the back, there is also a panel of representatives from smaller businesses who have an opportunity to “steal” an applicant—the contestant must decide whether to take their deal or hope to be hired by the featured company. Michael Davies defended the show against criticisms by saying that he is helping the unemployed by offering job interview tips throughout the show, such as advice to comb your hair for an interview. The show’s website also has a section with “exclusive job tips” for the unemployed, who, one must assume, should be looking at entertainment programming for help on how to find employment.

Writing about the cancellation of *The Job*, Dusten Carlson of inquisitr.com observes that the show is “not just reality TV, [it] is reality. It wasn’t such a bad little show, or even a bad premise. It was just too depressing and too real” (italics in the original). The reviewers were offended by the fact that the show focused immediately not on the contestants’ skills but on personal tragedies and triumphs in overcoming adversities. But the recent concept of “self-branding,” which is promoted by self-help books on work and careers, asserts that gaining a job is more a matter of the aesthetic presentation, personality, and performative abilities than of job-related skills and experience. It makes sense, then, that a genre based on the public performance of the private self should coach the viewers in the art of job interviews. Skeggs and Wood show in their *Reacting to Reality Television* that for working class groups with limited choice due to their structural positioning reality television represents an otherwise unavailable opportunity for advancement. In *The Job*, this is played out literally, in a kind of enhanced version of the real. Since, as the show’s opening narration tells us, more than 12 million Americans are out of work, the fabricated game-show world of *The Job* in fact becomes reality for those with no other means to advance socially and economically. In his review of the series, Corey Levitan writes,

> The reason most of us watch TV is to escape our realities, and *The Job* instead rubbed our faces into them. It consistently reminded us of how sad the state of our economy

38 “Different forms of labour are valued very differently according to history, positioning and investment. The working class women, in their acceptance of reality television as a structure of opportunity, embrace the possibility to erase the past (and why wouldn’t they?) in order to reap the financial rewards of profiting from performing ‘being oneself.’ They were not convinced by the ideology of the self-work ethic. It only meant a lot of hard unrewarding work for little return” (Skeggs and Wood, *Reacting* 211).
must be when the most impossible-to-attain prize a competition show can think to award is a middle-class job to someone who is completely qualified for it. (qtd. in Carlson)

Levitan points to the discomforting contradiction in being evaluated in a job interview not on one’s skills but precisely on the performance of one’s “brand.” This is not a mere construction of reality television which consistently intensifies melodrama through “frankenbiting”\(^{39}\) and creates dramatic tension out of every-day banalities. Applying for a job in the “real world” is a ritual that is in many ways a game of self-performance and observing the rules that often have little to do with the skills required for the actual job. A 2011 French documentary also titled The Job in English (La Gueule de l’emploi) focuses on the process of a real job interview. This observational documentary by Didier Cros aired on the French national television (France 2) in October 2011 and sparked a controversy and a discussion on the humiliating and dehumanizing methods used during the job interview. The recruitment company was seen by the public as exploiting the desperation of the job candidates during an economic crisis. While it is not a reality TV competition, the documentary highlights the parallels between reality and reality television by using the reality television technique of the “confessional” interview where participants provide commentary on what is happening and how they feel about it. Didier Cros called his film a “comedy on the cruelty of work” and during the Toronto Hot Docs Festival screening, the film’s producer said that the film shows that violence of work begins before the person is even hired.

La Gueule de l’emploi focuses on ten unemployed people of varying ages who attend a multi-stage group interview for an insurance company conducted by a recruiting firm. The candidates do not know what job they are interviewing for, or any details about pay, hours, and such. The two-day interview conducted by a panel of recruiters is a series of tests, tasks and competitions that are designed to intimidate and wear down the applicants. The recruiters, who did not read the applicants’ resumes so as to make the process fair, proceed to set traps, insult the applicants, and turn them against each other in a Darwinian process of dehumanization. The tests are not

\(^{39}\) Arnovitz defines \textit{frankenbite} as “an edited reality show snippet, most often found in contestant testimonials, that splices together several disparate strands of an interview, or even multiple interviews, into a single clip. A frankenbite allows editors to manufacture ‘story’ […] efficiently and dramatically by extracting the salient elements of a lengthy, nuanced interview or exchange into a seemingly blunt, revealing confession or argument.”
meant to determine skills but to evaluate personalities and attitudes—the performance of the self under pressure and scrutiny. Towards the end of the process, the remaining candidates are informed that the job is a minimum wage position as a salesperson. Despite tangible disappointment, the applicants continue with the interview. Cros explained that the situation was not unusual or exceptional. He had met with numerous recruitment firms and several agreed to be filmed. He chose the recruiting firm featured in the film in part because he found their practice to be less discriminating than that of the other firms. The recruiters prided themselves on their “innovative methods,” and the firm thought of the documentary as an opportunity for self-promotion. The documentary, however, created a major public backlash against the firm, going as far as the names and addresses of each recruiter being published online by an angry anonymous blogger.

In *La Gueule de l’emploi* the job-interview has nothing to do with the candidates’ skills but rather is about testing their ability to submit, as one applicant observes in a confessional interview. While they are not asked about their tragic personal stories, like they would be on a reality TV competition show, the candidates have to perform according to the rules and logic of the game. And just as reality television exploits the contestants’ personal stories and tragedies for profit, the recruiters in *La Gueule de l’emploi* exploit the candidates’ desperation for a minimum wage job that they need to survive. The applicants see the process as dehumanising and infantilising, yet the majority remain. Analogously, even if the viewers see through the manipulative editing and production of reality television shows, they incorporate them into their internalized system of values that reaffirm the naturalized constructions of work (Skeggs and Wood, Reacting). *La Gueule de l’emploi*, just like reality television, demonstrates the management of the self, required in the neoliberal economy where the values and practices of executive and managerial jobs have trickled down to low-paying service sector jobs. Harun Farocki reveals the type of management of the self taught to executives in a five-day seminar on “rhetoric and dialectics” in *Indoctrination (Die Schulung, 1987)*; this same type of self-management required to sell one’s self is now demanded from minimum-wage workers.

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40 See “When the Guy Making Your Sandwich Has a Noncompete Clause” in *The New York Times* (Oct 14, 2014) about the rise of non-compete clauses in low-level or entry-level positions such as sandwich makers, delivery drivers, and hair stylists.
Among the many types of work depicted on reality television, there is a sub-genre of programmes focusing on work that is most closely associated with the traditional image of the worker. This is the iconic white working-class male manual labour that is now reformulated for television in the genre termed real-men-in-danger. This genre is popularized by Thom Beers, who has created an empire out of watching working class men doing difficult and dangerous jobs. These shows are “about men, almost exclusively: men sweating and swearing, men powered by coffee and doughnuts, men revving heavy equipment to heavy-metal sound tracks” (Poniewozik). Thom Beers is known for producing reality programmes about dangerous and dirty jobs such as Verminators (2008–9), a show about pest control workers (Discovery); Ice Road Truckers (2007–16), which follows truck drivers in remote Arctic locations (History); Ax Men (2008), a series focusing on loggers in American Northwest (History). He is described by The New York Times as “the unchallenged king of a reality television form variously known by names such as ‘macho TV’ or ‘testostero-reality’ that has swept across cable channels like a ratings-driven wildfire” (Carter). Many of the series produced by Thom Beers consistently rank among the top shows on cable. The show that started the trend, Deadliest Catch (2005–present), is the top rated show on Discovery Channel; it airs in 150 countries and there are two video games based on the show. Deadliest Catch follows Alaskan fishermen who fish for crab in the Bering Sea, an occupation that has the highest fatality rate according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (Stanley). These shows are, as Beers puts it, “all about ingenuity and good, honest labour.” It is the authentic salt-of-the-earth quality that attracts the viewers: “Our hero is the common man now. Once it was the World War II hero, then the superhero, then the Wall Street wizard. Now it’s the mechanic next door” (qtd. in Stanley). These shows appeal to the fans because “these guys work hard, battle the elements, get paid and move on. They’re throwbacks to a simpler, more basic time. They’re the last American cowboys” (Ice Road Truckers fan qtd. in Stanley). Another fan of the genre says “I’d love to sit down and spend time with these guys because they’re real people” (qtd. in Stanley). The men on these shows are the new working class heroes.

41 Other fishing themed shows include Lobster Wars (Thom Beers), Swords: Life on the Line (Thom Beers), and Wicked Tuna (Mike Nichols).
One of Thom Beer’s shows that “celebrate[s] the working man” (Heffernan) and working-class endurance and masculinity is Spike TV’s 10-episode series Coal about coal miners in Appalachia. The depiction of coal mining in reality television is interesting because the figure of the coal miner is, historically, one of the most iconic representations of the working class. Mining in general has been central to the development of the capitalist mode of production and coal mining in particular has been key to the expansion of industrial production in the 19th century. The image of the coal miner has come to stand for an unambiguous representation of working-class masculinity and heroism.\(^\text{42}\) Coal mining is a man’s job—it is dirty, dangerous, and physically demanding. A coal mine is a perfect setting for the show that, according to the press release for the series, gives the viewers “an unprecedented look at one of the world’s most dangerous and valuable professions.” Coal debuted on March 30, 2011 and aired for one season on Spike TV, a channel whose programming is aimed almost exclusively at the male demographic. The series follows a group of miners working in an underground mine owned by Cobalt Coal in West Virginia. Ten videographers, who are never seen in the show and whose presence is never acknowledged, trained for 80 hours and were certified as apprentice miners in order to film inside the mine. The show presents the stereotypical image of the miners in cramped underground environment. The miners mine a narrow vein of metallurgical coal in tunnels that are 42 inches high. The space inside the mine is tight, creating an atmosphere that is “dramatic but atypical: The U.S. industry is largely dominated by corporations with massive mines that often have hundreds of workers and mining machines larger than houses” (“Coal” TV). The miners in the show are stereotypical working-class heroes who labour stoically to provide for their families. When they talk about their work, their families, and their dreams, they are human and relatable. And yet they are as unknowable and alien as the workers in Glawogger’s film—a writer for The Hollywood Reporter described Coal as “a glimpse into a life as obscure as something from the other side of the world” (Goodman).

Coal mining in the United States is most closely associated with Appalachia. Once the center of American coal production, Central Appalachia is now one of the most impoverished regions of

\(^{42}\) In the United States, women could not legally work in a mine until 1973. The history of female miners in the United States is discussed in Suzanne E. Tallichet’s Daughters of the Mountain: Women Coal Miners in Central Appalachia (Penn State, 2006).
the United States. The coal-dependent economy has meant that Appalachia has had low economic diversification, poor infrastructure development, and low education rates. Historically, the region has been economically isolated and underdeveloped, and its integration into the national economy was based primarily on extraction of natural resources, which were shipped to other parts of the country. In recent decades, coal production in the region has been declining due to the depletion of easy-to-reach coal, increased costs of production, and competition from other coal-mining regions. The main form of coal mining in Appalachia today is mountaintop removal, an aggressive form of surface mining that uses explosives and heavy machinery to remove rock and soil, termed overburden, from mountain tops to expose the coal. This method of mining is cheaper and requires less labour than the traditional underground mining. But the practice, which radically alters the landscape and creates large amounts of contaminated overburden, has had a serious impact on the environment and communities in the region. And because mountaintop removal mining is less labour intensive, it further contributes to the depressed economy and high unemployment in the region.

While in Workingman’s Death, the miners in Ukraine are framed within the context of history that always looms over them, in Coal, the history of Appalachian coal mining is elided. The Ukrainian miners are individuals trapped within history, here we merely observe individuals without any context. On Coal, there is no outside context, whether economic, political, or environmental—coal is extracted and trucked off site but where does it go and what is it used for? Instead, the show focuses on the dangers of mining and the constant threat of accidents which could damage both the working men’s bodies and, perhaps more importantly, the company’s profits. What the viewers see and what the miners talk about is mining: “how to mine, why they mine, what they love and hate about mining” (Heffernan). As one commenter on The New York Times review of the show summarized it: “It’s pretty simple and you don’t need a 10 part series to explain the obvious: coal mining is dangerous, hands-on work done by men who need work.” And the show creates seemingly endless drama out of the dangers inherent in the job—in the first hour alone the viewers learn about the continuous miner, a machine that is dangerous and difficult to control, and roof bolters whose job is to secure the mine roof to be

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self-supportive, although this process has been automated in modern mining, something the show fails to mention. In one episode, the foreman goes directly to the owner to complain about poorly administered bolts: “Not only was his shift’s productivity at risk, but so were their lives” (official website). The relative importance of risks here is obvious: while coal mining is a dangerous job, threatening workers’ health and their lives, the threat to profit is far more significant. In Coal, the interests of the workers are identified with the interests of the owners without any hint of contradiction or antagonism—all aspects of work are understood purely in terms of productivity and profit. Heffernan writes that in the show the “miners don’t see themselves as enemies of nature or management. In Beers’ world all forces conspire for maximum profit” (italics in the original). The central motif of the show is not mining itself but the pursuit of profit for the mine owners as a common goal for both the workers and the owners.

The dramatic arc of the narrative is centered on cash flow problems as both the workers and the owners are constantly worried about meeting daily quotas of coal. Even though their reasons are different—the workers are anxious to stay employed while the owners are anxious to turn a profit—in the show, “the owners’ financial risk is repeatedly likened to the physical risk the miners face” (Heffernan). The mine, in other words, is not represented as a place of work, even though the show appears to be about workers. The mine is a place of profit. The miners, who are expendable and interchangeable, are understood only in their relation to production and to generation of profit. The miners in Coal are not unionized and constantly worry about being replaced if their bodies betray them. And for anyone familiar with the history of unionism in coal mining, there is an unspoken and repressed subtext of scab labour in the show. The miners’ bodies are equipment for the extraction of surplus value; they can be discarded or replaced when damaged. The workers, whose faces and bodies are covered in soot and dirt even in the confessional-style interviews, are doubly exploited—surplus value is extracted out of their bodies first by the mine owner and then by the show producers. Even the potentially disruptive narrative elements, such as an older miner being diagnosed with Black Lung disease and his nurse explaining that there are no other jobs available for him, are incorporated into the logic of the show. The nurse is female and is performing typically feminine care-giving work. Even if she is worried about the effects of the depressed economy on the man’s health, her own labour is
instrumental to the reproduction and maintenance of labour for the mine. The men, however, are desperate to work in the mine and take pride in their work despite obvious dangers and lack of choice. As one miner puts it, “Either you flip burgers or you are a coal miner”. And flipping burgers, along with other service sector jobs, is seen by these men as women’s work.

The main hero of the show is Mike Crowder, the CEO and co-owner of Cobalt Coal, who spends his time up on the surface in the safety and comfort of his office. Yet he is presented not as some weak corporate type, but as a heroic entrepreneur. His biography on the official website for the show describes him as the businessman of the operation battling the constant threat of equipment failure, work-place accidents, and governmental oversight:

His two constant headaches on the job are the mechanical breakdowns and keeping up-to-date with the federal regulatory requirements of the mining industry to keep the mine in compliance and working. Cobalt Coal’s goal is to mine 6-8,000 clean tons of coal a month. Every breakdown, of which there are many, or violation costs the mine much needed revenue. Mike puts in a lot of time trying to minimize those losses, but it’s a tough and constant battle.

The equipment in the mine is in poor condition and is constantly on the verge of a breakdown. Furthermore, some of the workers are not qualified to operate or oversee the equipment. When the miners have to relocate the belt for moving the coal out of the mine, production is delayed by seven hours. The official recap of the show explains,

Not having the right tools to attach the new belt properly, hours were lost, costing Crowder and his company $3,500 an hour in lost production. It wasn’t until after the belt was forced into operation and long after the night shift went home, that Supervisor JC Wooldridge noticed that night shift had attached the belt’s clips backwards, contributing to a seven hour delay.

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44 While Appalachian culture was patriarchal before the development of the coal industry, some scholars argue that as the coal mining became dominant, women had fewer opportunities for paid employment and became more reliant on men. The ideology of gendered labour persists even today, especially in the rural areas. See Tallichet.
Even though the delays and stoppages in production are often due to faulty or old equipment, it is the miners who are blamed when the quotas are not met. Nonetheless, the crew manages to fulfill their quota, the owners’ profit is safe, and the workers can go home “with their heads held high.”

In one episode, there is a threat of methane gas, which can cause mine explosion. The recap on the official website explains that “ordinarily, mines use a series of curtains and fans to thin out the gas levels, but in this particular instance the curtains had fallen down and no one on the crew had taken care to put them back up. Negligence is a miner’s worst enemy.” The recap goes on to mention the West Virginia Upper Big Branch mine explosion on April 5th, 2010, which killed 29 out of 31 miners: “To this day, investigations have proved inconclusive as to how this actually occurred, but one thing is for certain it is a lesson well learned for other mining companies: leave nothing to chance.” The narrative created by the show is that miners are often negligent if they are not supervised by management, who are somehow more acutely aware of the dangers of mining than the workers. We should note here that the owner of the Upper Big Branch mine was cited for numerous safety violations prior to the disaster and was subsequently found to be directly responsible for the explosion. The lessons “well learned” by the management of the mining companies, however, have fallen short, as on the first year anniversary of the Upper Big Branch disaster, Cobalt Coal was cited by the Mine Safety and Health Administration for numerous safety violations based on the viewing of the show’s pilot. Citations included improper use of tools and failure to wear protective clothing; the miners in the show do not wear reflective clothing or carry air packs which produce oxygen in case of contaminated atmosphere. The miners have no dust masks or hearing protection, and equipment is handled in an unsafe manner; for example, there is no obvious emergency stop system for the continuous miner or the belt. Cobalt Coal has also been cited prior to the airing of the first episode; during the filming of the show, it was cited for 19 health and safety violations. Yet, this reckless endangerment of the miners’ lives and health is glorified on the show as heroism. Regulations and government inspectors are an obstacle: “The daily risk of injury and, in some cases, death bolsters the connections between rugged manliness and labor, which of course
would erode under safer work conditions” (Brayton, 241).\textsuperscript{45} It is precisely the dangerous working conditions that make these men embodiments of American grit and self-reliance.

The working conditions could be improved if the miners were unionized, but in the universe of \textit{Coal}, as in all other working-place-based reality television, unions do not exist. Unions endanger profit, and consequently, in the logic of capitalism, they endanger the miners. The risks, including those to the workers’ bodies, are risks taken by capital, not by labour, since a damaged body means interruption of production. Yet, even though union and governmental oversight is represented as undesirable, the workers are subject to surveillance by the employer. The workers must undergo compulsory drug testing, suggesting “that workplace injuries are the result of slipshod and intoxicated workers […] here problems of production apparently rest with unreliable workers rather than the avarice of capital” (Brayton, 244). Brayton notes that while on \textit{Black Gold}, a Thom Beers show about Texas roughnecks, drug use is framed “in the neoliberal terms of self-management,” on \textit{Coal} drugs are linked to suppression of pain and maintenance of the working body broken down by manual labour.

The miners know that their bodies are exploited, yet they take pride in their work; they want to provide a good life for their families and their children, and they believe that mining is the means to do so. Their attitude towards their work is not due to simple false consciousness. Jeff Torlina, a sociologist who has worked in construction for two decades, explains in his book \textit{Working Class: Challenging Myths About Blue-Collar Labor} (2011) that blue-collar manual workers often take pride in their labour and “prefer working in a dark, dirty, dangerous coal mine over a cubical \textit{sic} in a comfortable, safe office building” (4). Torlina identifies several reasons for this, which confirm insights found in Terkel, Applebaum, and other writers who have studied blue-collar culture. Manual labour that workers find rewarding involves skilled work creating tangible, material things. Their work also involves a traditional trades hierarchy where they have little interaction with white-collar managers or supervisors who have little understanding of the job and instead report to a foreman who has practical knowledge of the work performed. All of these are evident on \textit{Coal}, which also shows workers’ camaraderie and

\textsuperscript{45} Representation of safety regulations and government oversight in media in general is either negative or ambivalent. The \textit{Daily Show} segment on the West Virginia chemical spill (January 13, 2014) parodies the news media by suggesting that it is interested in the story only as long as there is a possibility of a terrorist plot.
intergenerational male bonding. Despite the show equating the interests of capital and of workers, the workers are aware that the owners and the workers have divergent interests. A worker on *Black Gold* says that oilfield is “like anything else in life: the rich get richer and the poor get fucked!” (qtd. in Brayton, 241). In *Coal*, as in *Black Gold*, there is a constant undercurrent of threat of unemployment and poverty, even if it is glossed over.

The miners are represented as authentic through their stereotypical appearance, complete with soot and dirt, which covers them even in confessional interviews. This authentic demeanor, however, signifies not working class subjectivity but commodified working class masculinity for consumption by the middle classes. Each series produced by Thom Beers comes with products that viewers can purchase in order to “express their masculinity and affinity for each series, not by logging, roughnecking or mining but rather through brand allegiance, adorning their (sedentary) bodies with fan gear like t-shirts, hooded sweatshirts and hats emblazoned with the series (and company) logos” (Brayton 246). The viewers, moreover, are encouraged to help the workers, whom they can get to know on official message boards, by spending money on swag, rather than by supporting the workers’ right to organize.

The authenticity, however, cannot be too real. Most of the miners on *Coal* have brilliant white veneers on their teeth. Beers had admitted that “he wanted the miners to come off as little as possible like the hammy derelicts of the controversial 2009 documentary, ‘The Wild and wonderful Whites of West Virginia’” (Heffernan). Since teeth are such an important cultural signifier of class and affluence, having miners with perfect teeth makes them safer for the middle-class target demographic. Yet the show still others the workers by at times including subtitles, assuming the viewers will not be able to understand their low-class speech. The construction of the working class labour in order to appeal to the young male viewers, “who watch less TV than women, and whom marketers pay a premium to reach” (Chozick), is also evident in the show’s product placement. Some of the miners drive brand new trucks which recall the stereotypical advertisements for all-American trucks featuring tough working class men. The rise of the real-men-in-danger genre coincided with the Great Recession and crisis of white middle-class masculinity. In his analysis of how the labouring white male body is shown in reality TV, Brayton writes that “the same images of working bodies that may have receded during times of economic prosperity in service industries now maturate in the wake of economic collapse, massive waves of unemployment and masculine anxiety during the Great Recession,
especially on reality television” (239). In media discourse, the recession has been heavily
gendered—“Can Manhood Survive the Recession?” asks the title of a 2011 article in Newsweek
which goes on to say, “the same guys who once drove BMWs ... have now been downsized to
BWMs: Beached White Males” (Marin). And a 2010 article in The Atlantic, titled “The End of
Men,” asks if post-industrial society is better suited to women due to their “more-nurturing and
more-flexible behavior” (Rosin). Three quarters of the eight million jobs lost in the Great
Recession were lost by men—“the worst-hit industries were overwhelmingly male and deeply
identified with macho: construction, manufacturing, high finance” (Rosin). The majority of new
jobs since then have been in the service sector, which is traditionally feminized. The crisis of the
middle-class is here synonymous with the economic troubles of white men (Peck). While
Hollywood and television have always been interested in the emasculating effects of white-
collar employment and detailed the disillusionment of white middle-class men trapped in the
middle rungs of corporate America⁴⁶, these reality shows “present an imagined revival of
masculinity through the valorization of muscle work” (Brayton 237). The anachronistic
portrayal of romanticized white working class masculinity in the wilderness uses the working
class body “as a proxy” for the middle-class viewers. The analogy the show draws between
dangerous manual labour in the mine and the sedentary labour in the office is that both are
heroically producing surplus value for capital. The heroic work of the miners is extraction of
surplus value, not of coal. Thus, political action is not necessary. If the miners are heroic
because they will do whatever it takes to ensure the quota is met and the owners make a profit,
then the office worker can be heroic for the very same reason.

While in the Soviet Union, all workers are asked to be heroic for the betterment of all, the
heroism of the reality television workers exists outside of social structures and is only for the
enrichment of the employer. The workers are rewarded only in a highly individualized manner
either through the benevolence of the sponsors or the benevolence of the employer. The
collectivity of socialist competition is replaced with the competition that leaves only one
contestant standing. The clichéd phrase used by contestants in almost all reality television

⁴⁶ Since the early 1990s, there have been a series of office films such as Glengarry Glen Ross (1992), In the
Company of Men (1999), Office Space (1999), American Beauty (1999) and, more recently, Up in the Air (2009),
Company Men (2010), and Horrible Bosses (2011). On television, white collar alienation has been depicted most
competitions is that “I am not here to make friends.” Yet, while being based in an understanding of the world where workers compete against each other, reality television also promotes the gentler version of capitalism: capitalism with a human face. The idea of a caring capitalism is popular with the elites. A 2012 editorial in *The New York Times*, titled “When Capitalists Cared,” extols the virtue of the bygone era when the capitalists promoted “the virtuous circle of growth,” a philosophy whose chief practitioner was Henry Ford. The editorial concludes that “it’s time for America’s business elites” to recognize the wisdom and insight of the executives from that golden age of caring capitalism. The author does note in passing that strong unions were “just as important” as the wisdom of the business leaders, but the reader is left to conclude that union activity, and by extension worker self-determination and self-representation, is at best equal in importance to the role of enlightened capitalists for the economic well-being of the workers and of the nation. More recently, an article in *The Washington Post* (which was also reprinted in *The Independent*) explained to the masses that the $51,500 (USD) jacket worn by the First Lady Melania Trump on an official government trip represents “noblesse oblige and all” (Givhan) of the new ruling classes. Givhan argues that, far from being obscene, it serves as a “reminder of one’s good fortune and subsequent responsibility to society.” Even within the context of democratically elected governments, the populace should rely on the charity and goodness of the rich. The obscene displays of wealth by the families of elected representatives are also reformulated into a narrative of caring capitalism. Caring capitalism is of course embraced by the superrich, as evident in the existence of the “Conference for Inclusive Capitalism” where the world’s richest people meet to discuss how to create, as the official website puts it, “long-term and broadly shared prosperity.” The conference is organized by E. L. Rothschild and the opening speaker in 2014 was Prince Charles. The 250 participants in the 2014 conference represented $30 trillion in assets, or 1/3rd of the total investable wealth in the world (Shapiro, NPR). Among various topics discussed was “the nature of work and the culture of the workplace.” In one panel, “Stuart Roden highlights the moral aspect of business, and the purpose of pursuing a career in business; Ng Kok Song similarly challenges business leaders to consider ‘spiritual capital’, achieved through meditation and reflection.” There were no representatives of the working classes.

The belief that the problem with capitalism is not capitalism itself but rather the practices of a few predatory executives is not new. It goes hand-in-hand with the re-valorization of the
working class, accompanied by a “remoralization of the work ethic” and the return of “that discredited and obscene Victorian utilitarian distinction between ‘the deserving’ and ‘the undeserving’ poor” (Hall 12). The trends that Stuart Hall describes allow for a simultaneous glorification of work and attack on the workers; they make possible the coexistence of the rhetoric of job-creation with the dismantling of social structures that are in place to protect the workers and their jobs. The restructuring of the economy and the changing nature of work in Western societies in the late twentieth century created a new landscape of work, one marked by precarious employment, compulsory individualization, and retreat of the state. The solutions to the social and economic problems created by this long-term restructuring of work lay not with workers taking what belongs to them, but rather with benevolent capitalists (or ‘the market’) who will take care of the deserving poor. The stereotypical image of the benevolent capitalist which was common in the early days of cinema finds its contemporary expression on reality television in shows such as *The Secret Millionaire* (2006–2013) and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003–2012). One of the most interesting programmes in this genre is *Undercover Boss* because it explicitly positions itself both as a reaction and a solution to the current economic conditions.

*Undercover Boss* is a popular television franchise created in the United Kingdom by Stephen Lambert in 2009 and since then produced in five countries, including the United States.\(^\text{47}\)

*Undercover Boss* is an interesting case for examination of the construction of work on television because it focuses on the CEO (or a high-ranking member of corporate management), rather than on the workers, and it features a broad range of workplaces. The opening narration of the US version informs the viewer that:

> America is struggling to shake off the recession. Public distrust of wealthy CEOs remains high, but more and more bosses are looking for radical ways to reconnect with their workforce in order to find out what’s really going on in their companies. Each week we follow the boss of a major corporation as they go undercover in their own company.

\(^{47}\) Here I will consider the US version with some comparisons to the UK and Canadian versions; other international versions are not considered.
Here the show explicitly acknowledges that the crisis is both economic (recession) and ideological (distrust). The narration also acknowledges that there is some kind of a gap between the bosses and the workers, since the bosses need to “reconnect” with their workforce. It then proposes that the show’s premise is the answer to the crisis: if the boss re-connects with the workforce, it must mean a return to the state where such connection existed, presumably before the crisis. The nature of the gap that needs closing necessarily remains undefined, because if the gap is structural, no such re-connection is possible without fundamentally changing the structural relations of labour. The narration, at the same time, contains a contradiction: while it contrasts public perception (distrust) with reality, the distrust is actually justified since the bosses really are disconnected from the workforce. The emotional denouement of each episode presents the viewer with a re-connected state, a condition of equilibrium between the boss and the workers. How this equilibrium looks and how the show’s narrative arc arrives there constructs for the viewer a particular meaning of work, created by the inner logic of the series, and what it means to be a worker. The constructed meaning is implicitly posited as a solution to the current economic condition. This solution is presented from the point of view of capital, however, since Undercover Boss represents the point of view of the boss while, through the structure of the programme, the workers are denied self-representation. Thus, a consideration of what meaning the show attaches to work reveals the hegemonic vision of work in our socio-historical moment.

Undercover Boss US premiered in February 2010 on CBS and has since had eight seasons. The premise of the show is that the company owner, CEO, or another person in a high-level position within the organization goes undercover in their company to find out how company operations have been impacted by the changes that were made to deal with the recession, to learn about employee experiences, and to see how the company can be improved. The boss wants to see how to improve customer service, how to listen to the needs of the workers, and how to increase efficiency and profit; these are not seen as in any way contradictory or mutually exclusive. Each episode follows the same structure and a narrative arc that can be best characterized as a ritualized enactment of the Bakhtinian carnival. For Bakhtin, the carnival is a world upside down, a place where social hierarchies are subverted and the sacred is profaned. Thus, for example, fools become kings and kings become beggars. This condition, however, is only temporary, functioning as a kind of political safety-valve, as some theorists suggest, for
relieving social tensions and popular disaffect. After the carnival, the order is restored and everyone returns to their place in the social hierarchy.

After the opening narration, the viewers of Undercover Boss are introduced to the boss with the phrase, “and at the head of this company is one man/woman” or variation thereof. Thus, it is established right away that the success of the company rests on one person at the top, or at least on the corporate management team, and not on the workers. The boss then gives a short speech about the company and quickly moves to talking about his or her personal life. Here we are usually told about the boss’s humble beginnings, sometimes as an immigrant (although it is never acknowledged that being an immigrant does not necessarily mean that one is poor or working class) and in almost all episodes the boss describes some personal tragedy or setback/difficulty in his life. The boss’s individual moral worth thus established through the narrative of origin and/or tragedy, the viewers can now be shown his house, family, and affluent lifestyle. Here the boss’s harmonious family life is usually established as the bosses exemplify traditional family values that are crucial to the vision of work the show constructs. Next, the boss adopts a disguise so that the employees do not recognize him and his family sees him off. The show never acknowledges that the likelihood of the boss being recognized varies between businesses—for example, a migrant farm worker from Mexico is unlikely to recognize the CEO of Chiquita Brands International. Of course, since the show is promoting a vision of caring capitalism, as we will see, the employees must be assumed to know, at minimum, what the CEO looks like. The company is a “family” but then why does the boss need to use an undercover disguise in order to re-connect with the employees?

In the second act, the boss visits a number of locations within the company, performing a variety of jobs as a trainee. The presence of cameras is explained in some way, for example, that the boss is a participant on a reality TV show about people who lost their jobs and are trying to get

48 The majority of bosses featured on the programme are male. Out of 44 episodes that have aired in the first three seasons, only five featured female bosses. One of the female bosses, out of the five, is the CEO of BrightStar Care which provides homecare, childcare, elder care, and medical staffing, all fields traditionally associated with women. Only one episode featured a black “boss,” who was an elected official and not a CEO of a private business—the mayor of Cincinnati in episode 2.16. Also, episode “Baja Fresh” (2.20) featured a Korean boss, and the CEO of Chiquita Brands in 2.06 is originally from Mexico. Thus, overwhelming majority of the bosses featured are white males. Henceforth, I will use the masculine pronoun to refer to the bosses, except when the episode discussed featured a female boss.
back into the workforce. The boss almost always struggles to perform the jobs he attempts. The viewers are treated to a carnivalesque montage of the boss attempting to, for example, work on the assembly line or, often, performing “dirty” jobs that involve refuse or human waste, and so on. In this part of the show, the boss meets a number of employees who are usually admirable, hard-working people with an inspiring but often tragic life story that they share with the boss, who is of course pretending to be someone else. We are told time and again how stressful this experience is for the boss who is “forced to” deceive his employees, especially when they are sharing personal details of their difficult lives. The fact that these details are shared with full awareness of the camera is not acknowledged—the sharing appears natural and spontaneous. In remarkably many cases, the employee’s story mirrors the boss’s own personal tragedy or struggle. For example, a boss who lost his father in a car crash meets an employee whose father was severely disabled, also in a car crash (2.22). In the first episode of the US series, “Waste Management” (1.01), the president and COO of the company, Larry O’Donnell, works as a garbage collector with Janice, a female garbage truck driver. At one house, a woman comes outside to read a letter she composed for Janice, her favourite garbage collector. This woman is developmentally disabled, which echoes the first act of the episode where we met Larry’s daughter who had suffered brain damage and now has to live in a home care facility. This remarkable coincidence moves Larry to tears. Since this is reality television, the viewers must overlook the increasing improbability of such coincidences. The show asks the viewer to believe that these workers are not specifically chosen for the narrative as well as for public relations purposes (the companies featured in the show are always depicted positively). These workers are supposedly representative of company employees, even if, at the same time, they are presented as extraordinary individuals. When the boss does, on a rare occasion, come across a disgruntled or “bad” employee, the potentially negative image for the company is minimized or eliminated by stressing that the issue is not structural but stems from the employee’s poor fit for the job. The boss states that these are not the kind of people they want in their “family,” but this

49 This is not as frequent in the UK version, which is also not as over-produced as the US one. In the UK series there is less stress on personal life stories and there is much less weeping and strong emotions that are a staple in the US version. In the UK version, the narrative arc is also not as pronounced as in the US version, where each episode follows a strong narrative arc reinforced by emotionally manipulative music. There are also occasions in the UK series where the constructed nature of the show is made apparent, as when the production team can be heard off-camera during the direct interviews. The American version, in contrast, consistently uses direct cinema approach.
happens rarely. Occasionally, the boss discovers some unhappiness about the working conditions or about pay. For example, in “Oriental Trading Company” (3.07), employees have to work in a warehouse where it is very humid and the temperature often exceeds 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38°C). Due to the budget cuts, employees are not given sports drinks that are in a fridge in the employee lunch room. There is a sign on the fridge warning that taking any drinks is prohibited and will result in disciplinary action. One employee says that she had once passed out from heat exhaustion. At the end of the show, the CEO announces that he will change the policy and the drinks will now be available to employees (only) during the two hottest months. The employee complaints are dealt with by explaining that the boss did not know about the issue, as in the above example, or that the problem is with local management. The problem is presented as a singular occurrence and not a structural problem; in any case, the boss was not aware of any problems and will right any wrongs.

Through his “journey” within the company, the boss undergoes an emotional realization that these jobs are difficult and that the employees are good, hard-working people who have many difficulties and setbacks in their lives. The boss is humbled, honoured, and inspired. In “Fast Signs” (3.12), during a work break a worker informs the boss (who is one of the few female bosses on the show) that he lost his house that very morning and that his family is now homeless. Through all this the employee maintains a positive attitude and displays dedication to his job. He says, “Good things come from bad things.” The boss is moved; the worker is inspiring both to the boss and, presumably, to the viewer.

In the last segment of an episode, the boss returns to the headquarters and ritually sheds off the disguise, once again putting on the suit. The order is restored; everyone is back in their rightful place. Now the employees are brought to the headquarters and the boss reveals who he really is. The viewers are not told how by the employees how they feel about this deception; their reaction, which is in front of their employer, is that of a surprise and amusement. The boss thanks these chosen workers for being hard-working and inspiring and for changing his life. Their dedication to the company and their inspirational positive attitude are rewarded as the boss hands out a series of rewards in a feudal gesture of appreciation. The employees act suitably emotional and thankful, using varying degree of hyperbole to express their gratitude. The rewards are at times very generous and indeed life-changing, such as the company paying off the employee’s mortgage or student loans. Usually the rewards are smaller, such as a vacation,
charitable donation in employee’s name, or an offer of mentorship. These also have lesser impact on the employee’s welfare—a vacation or a charitable donation is certainly nice but what if the employee is burdened with debts and would much rather just take the cash? Rarely are the changes structural or, if they are, substantial. In “Frontier Airlines” (2.04), the employees receive a raise, which is greeted with enthusiastic cheers by the employees. This raise, however, is equal to the cut the employees took voluntarily some years back (the amount is not disclosed). Raises for all employees in the company, however, are rare. Perhaps reflecting this lack of structural change is the altered ending of the show in the third season. In the first two seasons of the US series, the final segment of the programme was a gathering of the company employees where the boss gave a presentation on stage about his experiences undercover. This segment has been eliminated in the third season (January–May 2012); instead, the last segment now focuses on the boss and sometimes his family. For example, in “Yankee Candle” (3.08), the CEO, Harlan Kent, goes fishing with his father. Inspired by his employees to realize importance of family, Harlan thanks his father for everything he has done for him. Along with this change in format, the rewards for the chosen employees tended to become more generous.

One of the central motifs on the show is the boss’s inability to perform the jobs of his employees well. The most challenging aspect of the jobs is usually due to the pace or time requirements; the viewers are often informed that due to the recession, the employer was forced to increase the performance expectations by lowering the time assigned for each task. The bosses find the time targets difficult to meet and are impressed by the employees’ work. Often, the bosses working in jobs that involve assembly lines or conveyor belts cause the whole system to shut down because they are too slow. The bosses say to the camera that they did not realize how difficult these jobs are, and they had no idea how the decisions they make in the boardroom impact the employees on the front lines. None of this leads to easing of the targets. However, in the episode “Oriental Trading Company” (3.07), Sam Taylor, the CEO of the company, discovers that Kim, an employee whose job is packing boxes with merchandise for delivery, works slower than required in order to ensure that the boxes are packed neatly for the customer. Because of this, Kim, who has six children and six grandchildren, misses out on the performance bonus, but she thinks it is worth the personal monetary loss if the customer is satisfied. But, of course, the customer will never know who packed their package; they only know the company they purchased the goods from. So, in reality, the employee is doing this for the company, and not for
the customer as such. Taylor is impressed by her dedication to customer service and to the company. He states that it is employees like her that make the company a success; however, this does not lead either to change in performance targets or to any kind of recognition of the employee’s initiative.

While the boss’s failure to perform the jobs in his company is comic and makes for interesting television, there is a more fundamental ideological reason the boss cannot perform his employees’ work well. On *Undercover Boss*, the power imbalance and the hierarchy of the workplace is repressed; structural inequality is displaced through “human equality” divorced from any socio-economic context. The workers’ competence contrasted with the boss incompetence reassures the viewer that the system is working as it should—everyone is in the place they should be. At the start of each episode, the bosses are humanized through a personal narrative: they are human just like us, and they achieved their position through hard work, which in this universe is a moral category intimately tied to personal suffering. Yet, it is the work of the employees on the shop floor, as it were, that is being watched and, thus, monitored in the show. While the CEOs do briefly talk about the company, they do not talk about what they do in their own work. They focus on the personal lives and their family. Their work, which remains hidden in the narrative, is not surveilled. There is a strict separation of the shop floor and the administrative office.

The division of labour and the structural inequality is thus naturalized and the myth of meritocracy, assured by the free market, is reinforced. In this fantasy, people do not work in jobs they hate but need in order to survive or jobs that are difficult and dangerous but inadequately compensated, rather, people find jobs they enjoy, jobs that allow them to be their best self, even if it involves cleaning trash bins. This is what Marx calls “free labour”—labour bought and sold for wages as if it were any other kind of commodity; the workers in this mythos are free to sell their labour to the highest bidder and are not constrained by the necessity of survival. The occasional disgruntled employee frustrated by his job is told that he needs to find a job that he will enjoy more (“Kendall-Jackson,” 3.03), because in the free market one can be anything they want—as we are often reminded, this is America. Thus, despite showing all the contradictions inherent in capitalism, *Undercover Boss* still reaffirms capitalism’s “natural” order. Through the focus on how the bosses do not perform the work of their employees well, *Undercover Boss* maintains a Taylorist separation between labour and administration of that labour, or between
labour and capital. Moreover, the boss now acquires an authenticity and an authority granted to them by the experience of “honest” work, however staged and controlled. More than that, this authenticity is actually legitimized by the presence of the camera and the TV viewers that witness the performance and are an integral part of it. The boss’s moral enlightenment must be witnessed if we are to believe the vision of caring capitalism the programme constructs. Without the viewers watching, the conversion is rendered meaningless.

In the early years of cinema, the central genre for the representation of the working class in film was melodrama (Ross). In these early 20th century films, the working class was sympathetic but essentially powerless. Even if the film empathised with the workers, it promoted moral virtue and endurance for the working class and reflected, in the words of Kay Sloan, the “process of ideological containment through romance, redemption, and privatization” (qtd. in Ross 54). While cinema was developing its potential for political and social commentary, the films important for the pre-WWI reform movement relied on melodrama for their impact and also for their proposed solutions (like the one we are promised in the opening narration of Undercover Boss) to socio-economic problems. In Children Who Labour (1912), for example, “the only solution offered comes through the personal conversion of the factory owner and not through action by workers themselves” (Ross 54). The same can be said, a hundred years later, about Undercover Boss.

There is a strong affinity between the reality television genre and melodrama as noted by a number of scholars. Skeggs and Wood write that melodrama’s manipulation of affect is reflected in the reality television editing that emphasizes the close up “coupled with ironic music and juxtapositional editing” (25). Reality TV’s emphasis is on individualized emotions and conflicts even if the show is ostensibly about jobs or workplaces. The genre, with its predominant theme of surveillance, by its very nature breaks the barrier between the private or intimate and public, moving the political into the realm of the personal. One of the effects of melodrama is reduction of suffering to individual emotions divorced from any socio-historical, ethical, or economic context. Melodrama represents the moral “reaffirmation of society” (Skeggs and Wood 26), which is depoliticized and emptied of any public import. For example, if we compare the US and the UK versions of Undercover Boss, the frequency of the American workers facing financial hardship because of medical expenses becomes sharply apparent. Since England has a single-payer health care system which is fully publicly funded through the
National Health Service, the bosses in *Undercover Boss* UK do not need to help their employees to pay off medical bills. This is also the case on the Canadian series where, for example, the boss of FedEx Express Canada (1.10) meets a worker who has cancer, but he is not burdened by medical bills; the cost of medical care does not come up. In the UK and Canadian versions, the presence of the state and public institutions is not explicitly acknowledged as such, but it informs the meaning of work and employee-boss interaction constructed by the series. In the US version, in contrast, the state is present only in its absence. The workers struggle with medical bills or the cost of postsecondary education. In “TaylorMade Golf Company” (3.09) the CEO, Mark King, meets Christian, a young man with a soccer scholarship who had to drop out of college to help his ill mother with medical bills. Christian works as a golf club assembler and spends more time working than at home. At the end of the episode, King is very impressed by Christian and gives him $10,000 for his mother’s medical bills as well as $15,000 supplementary income so Christian can return to school; King also offers to help Christian pay for school. This is a very generous and life-changing reward for Christian’s hard work and dedication to his family. However, the problem that Christian faced was structural: the exorbitant costs of medical services borne by the individuals in the absence of healthcare insurance, whether funded publically or by the employer. If the state were present to begin with, there would be no need for intervention and, we might assume, Christian would not have needed to drop out of school. The employer’s largesse in individual *deserving* cases is not an adequate solution to this problem. But collective action, public institutions, or any aspect of government as solutions to the workers’ problems are entirely absent. Government is present in only one episode, “City of Cincinnati” (2.16), in which the mayor of the city goes undercover. Through this, government is equated with private enterprise. The premise here is that government has to operate according to the same premises and rules as the private sector. The absurdity of this is evident when the rewards for the chosen municipal workers are provided by the mayor’s (unnamed) “friends” since such individual rewards given out of the public purse would conflict with the very notion of government.

50 The boss does pay for the worker’s dental work that he needs because of the side effects of the cancer treatment. Dental care is not covered by public insurance in Canada.

51 When healthcare and employer health insurance is mentioned on the show, it is not discussed what the employee co-pay and deductibles are.
*Undercover Boss*, along with other reality television formats, “model[s] a post-welfare circuit of privatized giving that implies that governmental aid has (for reasons unknown) been superseded. Government bureaucracy or public help of any kind are simply absent from the picture and those who offer private aid are lauded both for caring and for being so efficient about it” (Deery 93). While the employees we meet on the show are burdened by the absence of structural support, almost none of them complain about the social system that places them in this situation. Yet, as the show applies “a heart-warming band aid to a chosen few” (Deery 100), it is never explained how someone can be a hard working and basically good person and still struggle to afford basic needs. In order to deal with this contradiction, the show presents a vision of work that is clearly moral. The workers rewarded are deserving, as we have seen above. But what makes them deserving—what are the criteria and who decides on it? In the moral vision of *Undercover Boss*, those who are deserving are morally good and have a positive, optimistic attitude. But the criteria for these are decided upon by the employer: one is morally good if his or her character and attitude fit with the employer’s vision of a good worker. This moralization of labour is an attempt by both the capital and the state, as Skeggs and Wood have argued, to shift the burden of work-force reproduction onto the workers themselves.

One of the fascinating aspects of *Undercover Boss* is the incredible variety of jobs that are featured without any differentiation. Regardless of the nature of work, the show follows exactly same format. Thus, there is no distinction between unskilled labour, skilled trades, professional work, intellectual labour, or between unionized and non-unionized work. In a rather extreme example, on the UK version of the show the boss of the Blue Cross (3.03), a registered national charity for animal welfare, goes undercover to observe the work of volunteers, as well as of professional veterinarian staff. There is also no differentiation between workers in a company and the company’s franchisees, whose relationship to the headquarters is fundamentally different. There are two episodes in particular that stand out: “University of California, Riverside” (2.22) featuring the university’s chancellor and “City of Cincinnati” (2.16) in which the city’s mayor goes undercover. Here, a municipal government and a public research

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52 On *Undercover Boss* Canada, the Chair of the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) who is an elected City Councillor goes undercover in this publicly funded transit company. After working undercover as a cleaner, she voted to outsource the cleaning jobs at the TTC to a private contractor, an irony pointed out by local newspapers.
educational institution are put in the same category as private enterprise without any differentiation being made or acknowledged: government services and education are just like any goods or services provided by private enterprise. These episodes are structured just like any other. The suggestion is that work in all workplaces is essentially the same and that the relationship between the boss and the workers is the same across all workplaces as well. This leads to such absurd situations as the Chancellor of UC Riverside, whose PhD is in exercise physiology, working as a teaching assistant in organic chemistry, struggling to pronounce highly specialized terminology in front of a class of 250 students. That this position would ordinarily require high level of specialized education is not considered.

This levelling also extends to race and, to a lesser extent, to gender. Both are not acknowledged even when gendered and racialized labour is shown in episodes that feature migrant farm labour such as “Chiquita Brands International” (2.06) and “Kendall-Jackson” (3.03). The fact that the workers do not speak English and are suspicious of cameras is brushed over; the viewers are not told why the workers appear mistrustful. The allegations of human rights and worker rights violations by the Chiquita Brands International are also not mentioned. At the end of the Chiquita Brands episode, the boss informs one of the chosen employees that the company will pay for his citizenship application, which the worker cannot afford on his own. The worker is from Mexico but we are not informed how he came to work in the United States and what his material conditions are due to not having an American citizenship. That migrant and illegal labour is a political issue in the US is not discussed and mentioned. The only episode to address worker rights and race is a UK episode “Stena Line” (4.06) featuring a UK ferry company. The company employs Filipino cleaners who work 11 hours a day for 6 months straight without any days off, earning £3 an hour. The episode informs the viewers that there has been controversy in the press over this but that the company can do this because the workers work in international waters. The boss defends this practice and, after working with the Filipino crew, concludes that these workers are treated fairly and “equally,” something he is proud of. This is also a rare instance where the wage of the worker is mentioned on the show. Gender is discussed more often, as we do meet some women who work in traditional male occupations such as a female electrician or cable tech. The bosses are surprised and impressed, but gender issues of women in traditional male occupations are not discussed. “Waste Management” (1.01) contains a fascinating segment in which the male boss learns that female garbage truck drivers must use
jars to urinate because they have no access to toilet facilities while on a route. The boss is stunned: the gendered aspects of work have never occurred to him. The episode promises the viewer that this issue will be resolved within the company but this is the only episode that addresses work and gender in any significant way, however unsatisfactorily.

As we can see, on *Undercover Boss* all work is equated and emptied of all socio-economic specificity. It is evident that the workers, including those doing intellectual work, are performing abstract labour—labour that is indifferent to its content and is measured purely through exchange value, i.e., wages. Labour performed by these workers is emotional labour and not labour specific to their occupations: this work is divorced from material conditions of their occupation. In the show, emotional labour is moralized and now extended to all workplaces, including the ones that traditionally do not contain any kind of emotional or customer service components (both are traditionally part of feminized jobs). Today’s heroic labour is not manual work but emotional labour of internalizing the values of the capital. While the symbol of heroic labour was a male manual worker in the early 20th century, now the iconography has changed. The heroic workers of *Undercover Boss* are the ones who display moral strength while opening up emotionally. The earlier symbolism of manual workers was one of masculinity, strength, a labouring muscular body. Now work, and therefore workers, are feminized, which is in line with the paternalistic vision of caring capitalism.

Emotional aspects of work have begun to be studied by sociologists fairly recently. Arlie Russell Hochschild coined the term ‘emotional labour’ in her pioneering work in the field, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983). Emotional labour is defined by Hochschild as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (7). Additionally, Morris and Feldman define emotional labour as “the act of expressing organizationally desired emotions during service transactions” (qtd. in Blyton and Jenkins). In the last couple of decades, the number of jobs and activities that require emotional labour as part of the job description have rapidly increased. This form of labour is purchased by the employer just like any other form of labour, and the emotional performance of the employee, including in many cases his or her sincerity, is monitored and supervised just like any other aspect of the job. Hochschild distinguishes between surface and deep acting in performance of emotional labour. In surface acting, the employee simulates the emotions; in deep acting, the employee internalizes their work role and actually experiences or attempts to experience the
emotions required of them. In the process of deep acting, the employee internalizes an identity that identifies with the company. The employees performing emotional labour are encouraged to project the “real” self but, at the same time, this is limited by the framework of the company policies and objectives. Thus, the employee in “Yankee Candle” (3.08) who is annoyed by children messing up the candle-colouring station is reprimanded for poor attitude even though he expressed his frustration privately to his co-worker (in actuality the CEO undercover) and not in front of a customer. Surface acting is clearly not sufficient.

The growth of emotional labour and its expansion into more jobs means that employees must sell not only their physical labour but also their personhood to the employer. In emotional labour, the barrier between the public and private self or between the workplace identity and the private identity is either strained, as in the cases of acute emotional dissonance, or erased. Just as in melodrama the public/private boundary is erased and everything is reduced to emotions, emotional labour reduces the political (relations of work) to private (depoliticized feelings). The worker performing emotional labour is estranged or alienated from his or her own self.

Management and commodification of employees’ feelings ensure that the structural antagonism between the employer and employee does not spill over into the employee–customer relations (Edwards and Wajcman 33). Alienation is not a subjective feeling but an objective condition intrinsic in the structure, now literally extended to the workers’ personhood. The worker must not only work but also enjoy it, as the employer monitors not only employees’ behaviour but their feelings as well. This is aimed at developing company consciousness where workers identify their well-being with the employer and not with the state or any other social institutions. This is a perfect example of Marx’s concept of alienation, which consists of alienation from the product, the process, our species-being, and our very selves.

The opening narration of Undercover Boss, as cited above, acknowledges that there is a potentially alienating disconnect between the public (workers) and the capital. The boss is therefore attempting to reconnect with their employees—a radical step, we are told.\(^{53}\) It is also implied that short of such covert surveillance, there is no other way for the boss to connect with

\(^{53}\) This is an interesting word choice within the context of a Marxist analysis of the show. Capitalism, for Marx, was revolutionary both in cultural and economic (productive) sense.
the workers or to get honest feedback. But the solutions proposed at the end of episodes do not include an establishment of some type of a system aimed at soliciting employee input and feedback. The companion book, *Undercover Boss* by Lambert and Holzman, contains a section at the end with tips on how *any* boss can go undercover in their own company. What is not mentioned is that without the cameras and the viewers, such an undercover operation would be fundamentally different. The helpful tips in the book include things like “plastic surgery isn’t necessary” and “open up” emotionally: “If you’re going to go undercover you need to put aside your own self-absorption and think about the people you’re working with. This experience is about them” (252). Yet, the show is clearly framed as a personal journey for the boss. And, while this experience is supposedly about the employees, the boss re-connecting with his workers is commercialized as entertainment and as public relations/advertising.

The narrative of the programme is told strictly from the boss’s point of view. The workers’ point of view is not expressed and the viewers are never informed how the workers feel about being deceived and about telling their personal life story to the boss who was pretending to be someone else. Only once in the first three seasons of the US show does an employee express anger over being deceived ("American Seafood," 3.05). He does, however, express reluctant gratitude at the end, after being given his reward. Since one of the stated objectives of the boss going undercover is to find out what the employee experience is at the company, the complete absence of the workers’ point of view is significant. The boss speaks for the employees because a model employee internalizes company goals. The life stories that they share are framed, through the show, by their work. The meaning of their story and of their life is filtered through their work and, since the personal and the emotional is being commodified, it becomes yet another aspect of their job. Even as the work processes of the employees’ jobs are not shown but are used only as a narrative device, the emotional and personal sharing itself becomes labour.

The workers rewarded on *Undercover Boss* are the ones that perform the emotional labour through internalization of the company identity. But they are also being rewarded for performing emotional labour of sharing their “inspirational” life stories with the boss and with the cameras. Value is being extracted not only from their physical labour but also from their private life. The fact that they are given a reward, measured in monetary value, underscores that this is an economic exchange. In the episode “MGM Grand” (2.18), the President and COO of MGM Grand in Las Vegas is inspired by his employee’s volunteering to deliver flowers to
elderly care homes. He wishes to teach his children not to take their wealth for granted and so asks the employee if he and his children can join her during her charitable work. Even the employee’s volunteering outside of her employment becomes emotional labour providing moral education for the boss’s children. The worker’s private life is being doubly exploited, as the workers are also “inspiring” the viewers of the show that is, in large part, PR for their employer. Thus, economic and ideological value is being extracted from the work of being watched and from the work of watching. Mark Andrejevic has suggested “that in taking part in reality television we allow our intimate experiences to be harnessed as forms of consumer labour in the advancement of the capitalist economy” (qtd. in Skeggs and Wood 30). And by watching the show, the viewer is also invited to perform the labour of internalizing the work values presented by the show through personal identification with the workers who are modelling the correct attitude. If being on a reality television show is work, then this indicates an “economic imperative to perform oneself as a form of labour” (Skeggs and Wood 38). Self-branding is a form of labour that is a consequence of the naturalization of precarious employment: “Self-performance is now an ultimately commodified endeavour” (Skeggs and Wood 38-9). By emptying labour of its material and economic content and then filling it with emotional and moral content such as the values of “perseverance” and “positive attitude,” the show constructs a fantasy of work that is the solution to the economic/ideological crisis. But this is not the working-class fantasy, as The New York Times review calls the show, but the fantasy of capital: workers who not only maintain a positive attitude, regardless of their material circumstance, but also are also grateful to their boss for commodifying and profiting from their private struggles.

While the logic of Undercover Boss is that the boss is “out of touch” and the employees are, for the most part, hard working and dedicated, a 2013 workplace reality TV series on Fox—Does Someone Have to Go?—reverses that feel-good premise and argues, instead, that the problem is actually the workers. This is stated by the show quite directly: the background on the official website states that “Bad business are made from bad employees.”54 Does Someone Have to Go?, which premiered on May 23, 2013 and aired for 6 episodes, was cancelled after universally negative reviews and a change.org petition with 15,000 signatures for Fox to cancel the show.

54 The official website for the show on Fox.com has been taken down. Cached versions of the site can be found on Wayback Machine at archive.org by searching for www.fox.com/does-someone-have-to-go
*Does Someone Have to Go?*, described in the publicity materials as “a new unscripted workplace experiment,” features mid-sized companies with “workplace dysfunction” allegedly caused by employees, whom the show reduces to stereotypes by giving them catchy labels. The labels range from actual work-related issues such as “micromanager” or “slacker,” to subjective personality problems such as “annoying laughter,” to potentially criminal such as “sexual harasser”; all of these are grouped together as “workplace dysfunction” without any kind of differentiation or nuance (Figure 10–11).

The promotional blurb on Fox.com explains the show’s premise thus:

> Almost every office across the country has some level of dysfunction, which often can be attributed to just a few select individuals—those co-workers who might be viewed as anything from lazy to incompetent to quite simply having a toxic personality that poisons the entire workplace. The difficult part for the employees is that, most of the time, the boss isn’t even aware of how bad the problem is, and the only person who can do anything about it IS the boss. That is, until now!

The viewers are informed that “dysfunctional staff […] is causing profit loss for the company” but the boss cannot solve the problems created by the employees, although it is not clear why. So the boss gives the employees control over the company for 48 hours and the employees then have to come to a collective decision as to which co-worker to blame for all the workplace dysfunctions and whether to fire them. The show asks the employees to decide who is “undervalued and, more importantly, overvalued,” who needs to be demoted or take a pay cut, and who “has to go”—the show’s euphemism for firing a worker on national television. While there have been many reality television shows that are premised on firing people, most famously *The Apprentice* which turned “You’re fired” into a catchphrase, those were variations on the competition format with the elimination of the contestant presented as firing. The novelty of *Does Someone Have To Go?* is that the employees are not participating in a staged competition but are in danger of losing their actual employment; the only prize on the show is keeping the (low paying) job they already have. It should be noted that while the press material for the show states that employees were not required to participate, it is not revealed how and under what terms the workers have consented to participate in this “drastic step” decided upon by the company owner.
The format of the show follows a formula with each company being featured over the course of two episodes. The first episode introduces the company and the workers. The workers are informed of the rules of the “experiment” and the viewers are shown their shocked reactions—“this isn’t a game, this is real” is a frequent comment. Before the workers have a chance to think about their situation for too long, they are invited to a boardroom for “additional information” they will need to make their decision. Here, instead of being given information about the structure of the company and what each person’s role in it is, the workers are shown their previously taped confessional interviews where they have talked candidly about their co-workers. The show does not attempt to disguise the fact that the point of this exercise is to intensify interpersonal conflict and drama by turning workers against each other. Soon after, the employees attend another meeting where the salary of each participant is revealed to the group; the salary information is given without any context, such as job description, experience, education, or what each person actually does on daily basis. The employees are then required to nominate three people for potential termination, a decision they are invited to make not based on any kind of consideration of what each worker’s contribution to the business is, but rather based on resentment, spite, retaliation, jealousy, and fear of losing their own job. As the nominations deadline approaches, the workers scheme, form strategic alliances, and attempt to stir resentment towards “the weakest links,” that is, the least popular co-workers. The word ‘nomination’ evokes aspirational aspects of reality television, suggesting that there is a prize at the end of the show. Here, however, the workers are nominated to lose their job and income.

In the second episode, the three workers who got the most votes have to make a presentation which amounts to them standing in front of their co-workers and begging to keep their jobs, often crying and explaining how they need the income to support their children (Figure 12). Finally, the boss returns and the workers mete out their judgement on those chosen to be potentially fired. The end of the second episode contains a very brief “three weeks later” segment tacked on in a clear attempt to reassure the viewer that everyone benefited positively from the experience, including the fired employees. We are asked to believe that after turning on each other and humiliating their coworkers on national television, the workers are now peacefully coexisting and are actually happy to have gone through the process. Everyone is happy and the workplace is now peaceful and productive. Mike Darnell, Fox’s president of
alternative programming at the time, explained that the show is really about making a business healthier and is not at all mean-spirited:

In all three offices, it’s been cathartic. All these businesses have improved [both their earnings] and on a functional level. All their employees, to a man, are happy they went through it — and that includes some of those who were fired because they went on to better things. It’s what company retreats are supposed to do, but don’t end up doing.

The show was developed by Endemol USA\textsuperscript{55} several years earlier in 2009 under a different title, \textit{Someone’s Gotta Go}, but the idea was scrapped due to negative advance publicity. \textit{Someone’s Gotta Go} was to focus on financially struggling companies that needed to cut staff and an employee was to be fired in every episode. The show, described by Fox as “Survivor meets The Office,” was received poorly by the media, with one writer calling it “another bold step towards live televised executions” (Brown). In the new version that did make it to air, the format is not as brutal—the title is rephrased as a question, the firing of the employee is optional, and the businesses are “dysfunctional” rather than financially troubled. The premise, however, remained basically the same—workplace dysfunction is created by employees. If something is wrong at your workplace, the problem is not the management, but your co-workers. The moral, as Linda Holmes of the NPR’s \textit{Monkey See} writes, is that

when you feel frustrated at work and economically helpless, the problem is the person you bump into at the coffeemaker who is earning just \textit{slightly} more than they should, doing just \textit{slightly} better than they should, getting a little too much for a little too little, and that by rendering that person unemployed, or knocking him or her down a peg, you will be better off. (italics in the original)

The first two episodes feature Velocity Merchant Services, an Illinois-based credit-card processing company. The company employs around 70 people and is financially thriving, we are told; dysfunctional workplace culture, however, prevents the company from reaching its full potential. The company’s CEO who is also the company owner’s husband explains that “it’s not

\textsuperscript{55} Endemol is a Dutch production company that owns several global reality TV franchises such as \textit{Big Brother}, \textit{Deal or No Deal}, and \textit{Fear Factor}. Endemol USA produces Endemol’s global formats for the American market.
bad to sit there and hear what your colleagues think of you … How many times in your life does someone sit you down and say, ‘Here are the things I don’t like about you’? That’s great. Now you can correct them and go on the right path. Some people can, and some people crumble when they hear negative things” (qtd. in Bauder). Yet, despite the CEO’s positive take on the situation, it is not the management that gets to listen to criticism. The problem, after all, is co-workers, not management. The majority of the people nominated for firing do crumble and in the second episode the audience is treated to a scene of a middle aged black man tearfully pleading to keep his low-paying job. Two of the three employees chosen in the VMS episodes are black men (the only black employees) who have the lowest salaries in the company—one man makes $25,000/year while the other makes $37,000. Following the show’s rationale, all workplace problems and dysfunction at this company are caused by the worst-paid employees on the lowest rung of the company hierarchy and, despite these workers having absolutely no power in the context of company structure, the bosses are powerless to deal with the issue. They outsource the dirty work of firing workers to their employees, which is achieved through a game-show style pseudo-democracy. The workers get the responsibility that comes with a nonhierarchic workplace, without any of the benefits. While the employees are left “in charge” of the company, they cannot make any changes in the company except fire someone. They cannot critique management or owners or demand any changes on structural level. The show takes place in a vacuum: all the work places featured are interchangeable in the absence of any larger context of the company, industry, or economy as a whole.

*Does Someone Have to Go?* was universally derided by critics as awful “train-wreck television” (*Businessweek*) that is “really most sincerely bad” (Holmes), a show where “human degradation is played for sport” (*Businessweek*). But what appalled the reviewers the most is the fact that in this show workers are fired on air. Even the reviewers that gave the show strongly negative reviews conceded that the premise of the show is not bad, but what makes it mean-spirited and offensive is the execution (Poniewozik). One reviewer writes that the show is built around the *common-sense idea* that in every workplace there is wheat and tare, and in many cases, the individuals disrupting the organization and preventing the realization of its potential don’t understand how they are perceived by their peers. If there was a show that used that idea to reflect criticism back on employees in an effort to build a more cohesive team, it might be worth watching (Alston; italics mine).
In the same vein, some reviewers noted that the original version of the show was to be hosted by a professional business coach, which would have presumably given the show a veneer of respectability and credibility. After all, workers are also fired on national television on *Undercover Boss*, albeit quite rarely because the trope of “undeserving employees,” while adding drama, conflicts with the underlying logic of the show. The bosses on *Undercover Boss* are benevolent, just like the bosses on *Does Someone Have to Go?* and are shocked to discover that not all employees identify with their minimum-wage job. Occasionally the boss is so shocked that he must take the “drastic” step and fire the employee on the spot. Yet, such episodes of *Undercover Boss* do not provoke critics’ venom or spark any kind of petitions. It could be argued that this is because on *Undercover Boss*, it is the boss who makes the decision, rather than co-workers—this gives the firing legitimacy. But on *Undercover Boss*, “bad” employees get in trouble because they are too open with their co-workers, since they do not know that the person they are interacting with is in fact their boss. The lesson here is that one must watch what one says at all times.

Both *Undercover Boss* and *Does Someone Have to Go?* present the same pedagogy: being a worker in a neoliberal economy is a performative skill. Experience and technical proficiency are not as important as performance of the (correct) self. No one has compared the firings on *Undercover Boss* to public executions, however. On *Undercover Boss* the boss is unambiguously good and benevolent—while he might be (temporarily) out of touch, he means well and, without exception, always makes correct decisions. And the fired employees are not given an opportunity to present their perspective in any meaningful way. On *Does Someone Have to Go?* on other hand, the workplace bickering and scheming revealed over the course of the first episode make the nominations for termination not as clear cut. Moreover, the nominated employees get to make an appeal to their co-workers and, by extension, to the viewers: one man in episode two delivers a tearful speech about how he has four children and another job where he works until one in the morning. This reveals the violence inherent not just in the firing but in the neoliberal form of work itself. The decisions appear arbitrary and the economic and psychological violence of workplace is laid bare. It seems that what is the most reprehensible about *Does Someone Have to Go?* is that it televisuals the violence that is quite banal and commonplace. The petition on change.org states “in this economy it is gut wrenching” to watch people fight to keep their jobs and that the show “mocks and degrades hard working Americans
and attempts to turn their tragedy into entertainment. We find this to be abhorrent and unacceptable.” There is no petition, however, to change the conditions that have created such economic situation to begin with.

It is telling that while the professional critics panned the show, reviews from the viewers have been mixed, with some praising the show for being realistic and educational. One comment on the show’s Facebook page argues that the show

really drove the point home that the best time to convince people of your value as a person, or as an employee, is every single day, in everything you do, both large and small. If you wait until your neck is on the chopping block to try and sell people on your value proposition, its WAY [sic] too late. The moral of this story is a simple one: actions speak far louder than words. (Michael Beckerman)

Similarly, a commenter on an *Entertainment Weekly* review of the show writes that,

It’s easy to dismiss this as almost “disaster” TV, but it’s certainly a show that makes you think about how everyday things are ran, about perceptions & their power (vs. reality), about how people are compensated and treated. It can’t help but make you reconsider how you “live your life” at your job … Unlike UNDERCOVER BOSS - which is just pure propaganda, this show seems to have a point. (Rob Postuma)

And another commenter on the same site puts it bluntly: “People don’t deserve employment positions, they earn them. Life’s tough. Be an adult and cope with it.” These comments by the viewers demonstrate not only naturalization of neoliberal form of labour but that the situation staged on *Does Someone Have to Go?* is far from abnormal but is, similarly to the situation in *La Gueule de l’emploi*, an accurate reflection of what people must do to to keep their low-paying job.

One question that comes up in the reviews of the show is why the workers consent to the entire proceeding:

Most reality shows beggar belief at some point, but the idea that the “bottom three” wouldn’t just quit the stupid job is downright insulting, not only to the pawns in this nasty game, but to the people who are supposed to watch it with an understanding of its
stake. Why wouldn’t the whole staff just walk out? Why does no one object to this? (Alston)

The answer given by La Gueule de l’emploi is that the lowest paid employees are the ones who have the least choice. They cannot simply walk out of the job and readily find a new one, not only because there are no jobs but also because of logistical problems that go into working low-paying and often low-skill jobs and that are often not an issue for the more well-to-do classes—childcare, transportation, schedule conflict with other job(s), fluctuating and unpredictable working hours, debt, living paycheque-to-paycheque without any savings, and so on. Job satisfaction, dignity, and meaningful work are fantasies for the middle classes, not for those struggling to live hand-to-mouth. And the worker-against-worker “gladiator style” environment shown on Does Someone Have to Go? is an accurate reflection of work in a society where unions are under siege—on the show there is no option for the workers to band together (that is, to form a union) and negotiate with the management as a group, instead of turning on each other.

The show has received some oblique praise, not in the entertainment but in the finance sections of news publications. One of the more interesting articles about Does Someone Have to Go? appeared in the finance section of The Daily Telegraph, a conservative British newspaper for the well-off classes. The article by Katherine Rushton, titled “If Companies Can Fire At Wil, They Can Also Hire At Will,” argues that the ease with which American companies can fire employees, as opposed to the British companies constrained by employment laws, is something the UK should try to emulate. The central argument is that freedom to fire workers at will “has a significant upside for employees” as it removes the “stigma attached to losing a job.” If being fired at will is normal and commonplace, then it makes people “confident that the rejection reflects the economic conditions more than it does their ability.” This is, in the words of the article, “the strongest social argument […] for handing employers more power.”

While Rushton’s argument might hold some merit when applied to some very specific high-skill or high-tech work sectors, it is not clear how normalizing job insecurity might make the working classes more “confident,” especially in the post-Great-Recession economy where even professional fields are becoming casualised. The article, after all, refers specifically to Does Someone Have to Go? which features low-paying, often low-skill jobs. What is clear is that the
logic of work in creative or high-tech sectors which often feature horizontally managed work environments, is once again being applied to low-paying service sector jobs with traditional top-down work hierarchies. Yet, similar techniques of self-management and performativity are now required in both types of work—it is assumed that flexibility and security are coextensive for all types of work and forms of employment. Risks are downloaded to the workers and reformulated as benefits. Rather than rely on workplace regulations or union contracts for job security and workplace protections, workers should rely on their own psychological tools—i.e. develop confidence and “brassy swagger of American employees who get laid off” (Rushton).

*Does Someone Have to Go?, Undercover Boss,* and other workplace reality television shows are “cultural technology” that teaches individuals how to govern the self in the neoliberal economy. As Ouellette and Hay have argued, reality television “operates as a dimension of the private ‘outsourcing’ and outreach through which the current stage of liberal government rationalizes public welfare and security” (15). Reality TV teaches self-governance and self-improvement, supporting the neoliberal governmental rationality of self-reliance “with its strategies of privatization, volunteerism, entreprenuerialism, and responsibilization” (24). Reality television not only “disseminates technical strategies of self-management and care” but also is “an integral component of post-welfare government” (30). In the age of the double retreat of the government and private capital, it becomes the new state of welfare, as in “charity TV.” Reality television has even become a resource for constitution of citizenship through its enactments of democracy, as on various shows that stage and test group governance (*Survivor, Big Brother,* and so on)

Workplace reality television teaches techniques of how to be a worker in a neoliberal economy. The pedagogical aspects of workplace reality television is evident in the fact that publicly funded media corporations, such as BBC and CBC, now prominently feature reality television programmes, demonstrating to the viewers the rationality of the neoliberal market economy. One of the highest rated shows on CBC is *Dragon’s Den,* on which entrepreneurs pitch their business ideas to a panel of investors. *Dragon’s Den,* as well as its US version titled *Shark Tank,* lays bare the economic violence of capitalism. While it extols the virtues of self-reliance and hard work and promotes the myth of the self-made millionaire (all the investors on the show come from what are presented as humble and often difficult backgrounds), it also reveals contradictions in the very myths it promotes. For example, the investors often turn down entrepreneurs because no matter how hard they might work, they will never be able to compete
against the multinational corporations that dominate a given sector. That *Dragon's Den* airs on the network with clear public service mandate reveals that it is not merely entertainment, but is a form of education. Even shows that are far removed from the everyday experiences of the audience—such as *Coal*—enact techniques of worker self-management that are independent of the specifics of the work performed. Since all wage-form labour is abstract, the lessons taught by reality television’s depiction of workers and workplaces are universal. The reviewers were appalled that two of the workers nominated for termination on the first episode *Does Someone Have to Go?* were black men with the lowest-paying positions in the company. But self-management and correct performance of the self is an acquired skill. It requires cultural capital that people from marginalized or working class backgrounds cannot access, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown. In the absence of other resources or opportunities for the working class, reality television becomes a tool that teaches the workers how to protect themselves in the era of precarious employment and how to become entrepreneurs of the self.
Conclusion
or, Staying Faithful to a Dying Idea

In 2009, The Puffin Foundation commissioned a mural for the Museum of the City of New York from the internationally renowned pro-labour muralist Mike Alewitz. Alewitz’s art is inspired by, and serves as an inspiration for, the labour movement; it can be seen not only on walls of public buildings and union halls, but is also “proudly carried on picket lines and demonstrations by people engaged in vital struggles for decent working conditions, an end to racist violence, or the rights of immigrant workers” (Sheen ix). According to their official website, the Puffin Foundation provides grants to artists “who are often excluded from mainstream opportunities due to their race, gender, or social philosophy.” Alewitz’s proposed mural, “The City at the Cross Roads of History,” was approved by the representatives from both the foundation and the museum. However, after the mural was completed in February 2014, the museum refused to exhibit it without any further explanation. The museum finally issued a statement almost a year later in January 2015, saying that because they are a history museum and not an art museum, the mural “did not meet the curatorial standards or purposes” (Rubinton).

The mural was to be exhibited in the museum’s gallery dedicated to the history of social activism. It presents a left wing, pro-labour, working class view of history, showing the slave trade, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, child labour, and the solidarity of the working people. The chief curator, however, stated that the mural did not express the full “diversity and conflict inherent in New York City history.” She requested some changes, including additions of figures that conflict with Alewitz’s politics. Alewitz was also asked to remove the panels that show the distant past and the imagined future as well as reduce the prominence of Martin Luther King, who is the central figure in the lower half of the mural. The changes requested were meant to create a more objective view of history. The museum defended itself against the charges of censorship by asserting that a museum has the right to curate its content. While this is true, the claim that the mural is too one-sided reveals that it was the political content of the work that did not meet the “curatorial standards” of the museum, its patrons and its donors. Alewitz has stated that the museum objected to his “unabashed, partisan defence of the labour movement.”

Even when exhibited at a history museum, art is not a work of historical analysis and it has no obligation to be objective or neutral. And history itself is not objective but is always told from
some perspective. Alewitz’s mural, just like his other works, tells history from the perspective of the marginalized and the excluded. It shows the struggles of the working class and imagines a future where working people achieve dignity hitherto denied to them. That working-class art is still provoking controversies and being censored shows its power to challenge the powerful and to unite the working people in their struggle against oppression. The censorship of pro-labour art reveals that the working people have the power to change the world. Alewitz’s art, committed to expressing the vision of the oppressed, “makes sense of what life’s brutalities cannot,” as John Berger puts it, and it is art “that the powerful fear.”

The power and dignity of work is in many ways an obsolete idea, along with the ideas of communism and revolution. Their strength, paradoxically, lies in the fact that they are dead ideas, that is, ideas that cannot be alive within the logic of capitalism. In capitalist realism, any alternative to capitalism is wholly unimaginable. The supposedly dead ideas serve only as a proof that there are no alternatives. In The Communist Hypothesis, Badiou writes,

"Failure of the Idea leaves us with no choice, given the complex of the capitalist organization of production and the state parliamentary system. Like it or not, we have to consent to it for lack of choice. And that is why we now have to save the banks rather than confiscate them, hand out billions to the rich and give nothing to the poor, set nationals against workers of foreign origin whenever possible, and, in a word, keep tight controls on all forms of poverty in order to ensure the survival of the powerful. (5)"

Instead of discarding the Idea as an irredeemable historical failure, we must seize on it and stay faithful to it. For Badiou, the Idea of communism is a hypothesis that denotes the possibility of “the deprivatization of the production process, the withering away of the state, and the reunification and polymorphism of labor” (What Is To Be Done 51). This communist hypothesis cannot be appropriated by capitalism because it stands as a complete negation of capitalism as such, as not-capitalism.

Historical failures of the idea are not sufficient arguments against the idea itself. In the Soviet Union, the realization of communism “ended up being completely abandoned in actual fact, [...] because of unresolved political problems in the stage that came after the seizure of power, not because of the project per se” (Badiou, What Is To Be Done? 22-23). Despite its failures, the utopian remnant of the Soviet project is the knowledge that working people create the world.
The Soviet people were raised to see the world as its creators and, therefore, its masters. This consciousness that the world is created by the labour of workers and that it rightfully belongs to them is the Idea that must be recovered. This is not to say that we must look to the past with nostalgia, or that we should return to the historical figure of the worker. The worker need not have heroism or pathos. The idea we must be faithful to is simply that the worker is a human being and a political subjectivity that is central to enunciation of emancipatory politics. The political is that which leads us out of individualism to the universals, to a true internationalism. The invisibility and erasure of the worker in neoliberal society along with the threat of environmental destruction make emancipatory politics so much more urgent. Harun Farocki writes that one must be faithful to the Idea even in the hour of its death. If the system based on the oppression of the worker tells us that the figure of the worker as the agent of history is dead, then perhaps we should not be quick to abandon it, but should redouble our vigil.
Figures

Figure 1 (page 22): One of the most striking photographs from the Gilbreths’ motion studies shows a blur of the worker created by her motions, with a manager sitting in the background, motionless.
Figure 2 (page 57): In *Chapaev*, gendered work in the setting of domestic everyday life is subverted and replaced by the revolutionary work of fighting for a new society on all fronts.
Figure 3 (page 58): The contrast between the White Army advancing methodically in top 2 images and Chapaev’s men riding into the battle as an elemental force in the bottom 2 images.
Figure 4 (page 58): A 1931 agitation poster by a Constructivist graphic artist Iakov Guminer states: “The arithmetic of the Counter Plan 2+2 plus the enthusiasm of workers = 5.”
Figure 5 (page 67): The palace/factory in Tania’s dream.

Figure 6 (page 67): In her dream, filmed in soft focus, Tania is led towards the palace by Pronina and they arrive at elaborate metalwork gates flanked on either side by towering sculpted figures bearing torches.
**Figure 7 (page 69):** Tania and Lebedev walk along the stone reliefs at VSKhV—images of heroic Soviet labour as well as of the material abundance forming the backdrop to the possibility of romance at last.

**Figure 8 (page 70):** In *The Radiant Path*, the unity of public and private is encoded in the final shots. Tania and Lebedev stand in front of Mukhina’s sculpture, which they mirror.
Figure 7 (page 82): In Powaqatsi, we see hundreds of mud-covered men climbing up a mountain while carrying sacks of dirt on their backs. These scenes look more like a nightmare from a Bosch painting than anything we might recognize as work.
Figure 8 (page 148): *Does Someone Have to Go?* reduces employees to stereotypes by giving them catchy labels.
Figure 9 (page 148): Publicity poster for *Does Someone Have To Go?*
Figure 10 (page 149): Promotional photo from the show’s Facebook page. In the second episode, the nominated workers make a presentation on why they should keep their job.
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