

Workers Leaving the Factory

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The film *Workers Leaving The Lumière Factory In Lyon (La Sortie des Usines Lumière à Lyon, 1895)* by the brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière is 45 seconds long and shows the, approximately, 100 workers at a factory for photographic goods in Lyon-Montplaisir leaving through two gates and exiting the frame to both sides. Over the past 12 months, I set myself the task of tracking down the theme of this film – workers leaving the workplace – in as many variants as possible. Examples were found in documentaries, industrial and propaganda films, newsreels, and features. I left out TV archives which offer an immeasurable number of references for any given keyword as well as the archives of cinema and television advertising in which industrial work hardly ever occurs as a motif – commercial film's dread of factory work is second only to that of death.

Berlin, 1934: Siemens factory workers and employees leave the premises in marching order to attend a Nazi rally. There is a column of war invalids, and many are wearing white overalls as if to bring the idea of militarized science into view.

German Democratic Republic, 1963 (without precise localization): A *Betriebskampfgruppe*—a works combat unit or militia made up of workers under the leadership of the party—turn out for maneuvers. Very serious men and women in uniform get onto military light vehicles and drive to the woods where they will encounter men who themselves wear caps and pose as saboteurs. As the convoy drives out through the gate, the factory has the appearance of a barracks.

Federal Republic of Germany, 1975: A small loudspeaker van is parked in front of the Volkswagen plant in Emden and plays music with lyrics by Vladimir Mayakovsky and vocals by Ernst Busch. A man from the labor union calls on the workers leaving the early shift to attend a meeting protesting against the plan to transfer production to the U.S. The labor union uses optimistic, revolutionary music as backing for the image of industrial workers in the Federal Republic of 1975; music echoing from the actual scene and not, as

was the stupid practice in so many films around 1968, just from the soundtrack. Ironically, the workers put up with this music precisely because the break with communism was so total that they are no longer aware that the song evokes the October Revolution.

In 1895, the Lumières' camera was pointed at the factory gates; it is a precursor of today's many surveillance cameras which automatically and blindly produce an infinite number of pictures in order to safeguard ownership of property. With such cameras one might perhaps be able to identify the four men in Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946) who, dressed as workers, enter a hat factory and rob the payroll. In this film one can see workers leaving the factory who are in fact gangsters. Today cameras for the surveillance of walls, fences, warehouses, roofs, or yards are sold already equipped with automatic video motion detectors. They disregard changes in light and contrast, and are programmed to distinguish an unimportant movement from an actual threat. (An alarm is activated when a person climbs over a fence, but not if a bird flies past.)

A new archive system is thus on its way, a future library for moving images, in which one can search for and retrieve elements of pictures. Up to now the dynamic and compositional definitions of a sequence of images—those things which are the decisive factor in the editing process of converting a sequence of images into a film—have not been classified nor included.

The first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory, but a century later it can be said that film is hardly drawn to the factory and is even repelled by it. Films about work or workers have not become one of the main genres, and the space in front of the factory has remained on the sidelines. Most narrative films take place in that part of life where work has been left behind. Everything which makes the industrial form of production superior to others—the division of labor into minute stages, the constant repetition, a degree of organization which demands few decisions of the individual and which leaves him little room for maneuver—all this makes it hard to demonstrate changes in circumstances. Over the last century virtually none of the communication which took place in factories, whether through words, glances, or gestures, was recorded on film. Cameras and projectors are essentially mechanical inventions, and in 1895 the heyday of mechanical inventions had passed. The technical processes which were emerging at the time—chemistry and electricity—were almost inaccessible to visual understanding. The reality based on these methods was hardly ever characterized by visible movement. The cinecamera, however, has remained fixated on movement. Ten years ago, when large main-frames were still most commonly used, cameras always focused on the last remaining perceptible movement as a surrogate for their invisible operations—the magnetic tape jerking back and forth. This addiction to motion is increasingly running out of material, a phenomenon which could lead cinema into self-destruction.

Detroit, 1926: Workers are descending the stairs of a walkway over a street running parallel to the main Ford Motor Company building. The camera then pans to the right with measured self-certainty, and a passage comes into view, large enough for several engines to pass through at the same time. Behind this there is a rectangular yard, large enough to land an airship. On the margins of the square, hundreds of workers are on their way to the exits and will only reach them after several minutes. In the furthest background a freight train pulls past in perfect coordination with the speed of the pan; a second walkway then

jerks into the picture, similar to the first and whose four lanes of stairs are again crowded with descending workers. The camera stages the building with such mastery and self-certainty that the building becomes a stage set, seemingly constructed by a subdivision of the film production company just to serve a well-timed pan-shot. The camera's authorial control transforms the workers into an army of extras. The main reason the workers are shown in the picture is to prove that the film is not of a model of an automobile factory, or put another way, that the model was implemented on a 1:1 scale.

In the Lumière film of 1895 it is possible to discover that the workers were assembled behind the gates and surged out at the camera operator's command. Before the film direction stepped in to condense the subject, it was the industrial order which synchronized the lives of the many individuals. They were released from this regulation at a particular point in time, contained in the process by the factory gates as in a frame. The Lumières' camera did not have a viewfinder, so they could not be certain of the view depicted; the gates provide a perception of framing which leaves no room for doubt.

The work structure synchronizes the workers, the factory gates group them, and this process of compression produces the image of a work force. As may be realized or brought to mind by the portrayal, the people passing through the gates evidently have something fundamental in common. Images are closely related to concepts, thus this film has become a rhetorical figure. One finds it used in documentaries, in industrial and propaganda films, often with music and/or words as backing, the image being given a textual meaning such as “the exploited,” “the industrial proletariat,” “the workers of the fist,” or “the society of the masses.”

The appearance of community does not last long. Immediately after the workers hurry past the gate, they disperse to become individual persons, and it is this aspect of their existence which is taken up by most narrative films. If after leaving the factory the workers don't remain together for a rally, their image as workers disintegrates. Cinema could sustain it by having them dance along the street; a dance-like movement is used in Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to convey an appearance as workers. In this film, the workers wear uniform work clothes and move in muffled, synchronous rhythm. This vision of the future has not proved correct, at least not in Europe or North America, where you can tell by looking at someone on the street whether they are coming from work, the gym, or the welfare department. Capital, or to use the language of *Metropolis*, the factory owners are not concerned with a uniform appearance of the work slaves.

Because the image of community cannot be maintained once the workplace is left behind, the rhetorical figure of leaving the factory is often found at the beginning or the end of a film, like a slogan, where it is possible to leave it detached, like a prologue or epilogue. It is astonishing that even this first film already had something not easily surpassable. It makes a statement which defies immediate extension.



When it is a matter of strikes or strike-breaking, of factory sit-ins or lock-outs, the factory forecourt can become a productive setting. The factory gate forms the boundary between the



The Iron Man

protected production sphere and public space; there, just at the interface, is exactly the right spot to transform an economic struggle into a political one. The striking workers file through the gate, and the other castes and classes follow. That is not the way the October Revolution began, however, nor that in which the communist regimes were

toppled. Nevertheless, one major contributing factor in the demise of Polish communism was that of a group of non-workers who held out in front of the gates of Gdansk's Lenin Shipyard during its occupation, in order to show the police that it was impossible to clear the workers out of the factory secretly. Andrzej Wajda's *The Iron Man* (*Człowiek z żelaza*, 1981) tells the story.

1916: D. W. Griffith presented a dramatic portrayal of a strike in the modern episode of *Intolerance*. At first the workers' pay is cut (because the associations which want to morally improve the workers demand more means), then as the strikers swarm onto the street, police with machine guns move in, take up position, and mow the crowd down. The workers' struggle is shown here as a civil war. Their wives and children have gathered in front of their houses and are watching the bloodbath in horror. A group of unemployed eager to take the strikers' jobs is ready and waiting, literally a reserve army. This is probably the greatest shoot-out in front of factory gates in the hundred-year history of cinema.

1933: In Vsevolod Pudovkin's depiction of a strike by Hamburg longshoremen, *The Deserter* (*Desertir*), a picket has to watch ships being unloaded by strikebreakers. He sees one of the strikebreakers first swaying under the burden of a crate, then for a long time standing firm against the weight, and finally breaking down. The picket looks at the unconscious man lying there with cold social-historical attention, shadows darting across his face. These are cast by the unemployed men hurrying to the gates of the harbor area to take the collapsed worker's place. They are miserable, so sick from poverty that they have entered old age or second childhood. The picket looks deep into the face of an older man, whose tongue is playing with his saliva, and then turns away frightened. With so many people unable to find work or a place in a society based on work, how can social revolution be possible? The film shows the faces of the destitute through the bars of the entrance gate. They are looking out from the prison of unemployment to the freedom called "paid labor." Filmed through the bars they appear to have been shut away in a camp already. In the course of this century, millions of people were declared superfluous; they were deemed to be socially harmful or classified as racially inferior. They were locked up in camps by Nazis or Communists to be reeducated or destroyed.

Charles Chaplin accepted a job at the conveyor belt and was thrown out of the factory by the police during a strike ... Marilyn Monroe sat at the conveyor belt of a fish cannery for Fritz Lang ... Ingrid Bergman spent a day in a factory, and as she entered it, an expression of holy fright entered her face, as though on the road to hell ... Movie stars are important people in a feudal kind of way, and they are drawn to the world of the workers; their fate

is similar to that of kings who get lost while out hunting and thus come to know what hunger is. In Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Red Desert (Il Deserto Rosso, 1964)* Monica Vitti, wanting to experience the life of the workers, snatches a half-eaten bun from one of the striking workers.

If one compares the iconography of cinema with that of Christian painting, the worker is seen to be like that rare creature, the saint. Cinema does show the worker in other forms as well however, picking up on the worker element present in other forms of life. When American films speak of economic power or dependence, they often portray this using the example of small and big-time gangsters, preferring this to the scenario of workers and employers. Because the Mafia controls some of the labor unions in the U.S., the transition from labor film to gangster movie can be a smooth one. Competition, trust formations, loss of independence, the fate of minor employees, and exploitation—all are relegated to the underworld. The American film has transferred the fight for bread and pay from the factory to the main halls of banks. Although Westerns frequently deal with social battles as well, such as those between farmers and the ranchers, these are seldom fought in pastures or fields, but more frequently on the village street or in the saloon.

Even in the real world, social conflict does not usually take place in front of the factory. When the Nazis crushed the labor movement in Germany, they did so in apartments and neighborhoods, in prisons and camps, but hardly ever in or in front of factories. Although many of the worst acts of violence this century—civil wars, World Wars, reeducation and extermination camps—have been closely linked to the structure of industrial production and to its crises, nevertheless most took place far away from the factory setting.

1956: A British Pathé newsreel showed pictures of the class struggle in England. Striking workers at the Austin plants in Birmingham attempt to prevent strikebreakers from maintaining production. They try sit-down protests and turn to violence in order to stop components from entering or leaving the factory. They try to wrench open the door of a truck, to pull out a strikebreaker, but they do not punch him through the open window so as to make him open the door or give up his journey. Obviously this fight follows unwritten rules which limit the extent of the violence. The strikers act with passion, but without the desire to injure somebody or to destroy something. The workers' campaigns are almost always less violent than the ones carried out in their name.

I have gathered, compared, and studied these and many other images which use the motif of the first film in the history of cinema, “workers leaving the factory,” and have assembled them into a film, *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik (Workers leaving the factory, video, 37 minutes, b/w and color, 1995)*. The film montage had a totalizing effect on me. With the montage before me, I found myself gaining the impression that for over a century cinematography had been dealing with just one single theme. Like a child repeating for more than a hundred years the first words it has learned to speak in order to immortalize the joy of first speech. Or as though cinema had been working in the same spirit as painters of the Far East, always painting the same landscape until it becomes perfect and comes to include the painter within it. When it was no longer possible to believe in such perfection, film was invented.

In the Lumière film about leaving the factory, the building or area is a container, full at the

beginning and emptied at the end. This satisfies the desire of the eye, which itself can be based on other desires. In the first film, the aim was to represent motion and thus to illustrate the possibility of representing movement. The actors in motion are aware of this; some throw their arms up so high and when walking put their feet down so clearly, as though the aim were to make walking appear vivid for a new *orbis pictus*—this time in moving pictures. A book dealing with pictures of motion could state, like an encyclopedia, that the motif of the gate occurs in one of the first works of literature, *The Odyssey*. The blinded Cyclops at the cave exit feels the emerging animals, under whose bellies Odysseus and his followers are clinging. Leaving the factory is not a literary theme, not one which has been adopted by cinema from a visualized literature. On the other hand, one cannot conceive a filmic image which does not refer to pictures from before the age of cinema—painted, written, or narrative images, images embedded within the thought process. By straying from the path we may discover something of this prehistory. Immediately after the command had been given to leave the factory back in 1895, the workers streamed out. Even if they sometimes got in each other's way—one young woman is seen to tug at another's skirt before they part in opposite directions, knowing that the other will not dare to retaliate under the stern eye of the camera—the overall movement remains swift and nobody is left behind. That this is the case is perhaps because the primary aim was to represent motion, maybe signposts were already being set. Only later, once it had been learned how filmic images grasp for ideas and are themselves seized by them, are we able to see in hindsight that the resolution of the workers' motion represents something, that the visible movement of people is standing in for the absent and invisible movement of goods, money, and ideas circulating in industry.

The basis for the chief stylistics of cinema was given in the first film sequence. Signs and symbols are not brought into the world, but taken from reality. It is as though the world itself wanted to tell us something.

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