

L
CINEMA

B
POWER

R **The Controlling Image: Cinema Power, Labor Power**

In an era when video cameras are omnipresent and no location is too remote, no subject too bizarre or exotic to be filmed and broadcast, the simple act of work—doing a task, making or creating something—has almost disappeared from the mass media.¹ Except for the lawyers, doctors, police detectives, cowboys, and soldiers who populate weekly television series, images of workers or the workplace are virtually absent. While taboos against sex and violence in cinema have fallen away, work has become the new pornography, inaccessible to the inquisitive eye of the camera. Today, most people know more about what celebrities eat for breakfast than what their neighbors do on the job—and in a media-oriented society, what the camera does not see, ceases to exist. The mathematical equation of the visual era could be written like this: visible = reality = truth.²

Of course, business executives have always had reasons to ban cameras from the workplace: fear of industrial espionage, of legal action because of unsafe conditions, or simply because the presence of an outside observer violates the sanctity of private property. On a more primitive level, since the act of filming is also an almost-magical exercise of power—to capture an image is, after all, to control it—there is always the possibility that the camera could reveal what is not visible to the naked eye. Workers too are often suspicious of media and rightly since a camera in the hands of an efficiency engineer is a weapon that could be used against them.

How this state of affairs came about neither was neither an accident nor a great conspiracy, but a result of the complex relationship that grew up between cinema, work and power in the 19th and 20th centuries. There is a certain irony in the current dichotomy between

1. This situation exists in its most extreme form in the United States. In France, Nicolas Hatzfeld, Gwenaële Rot, and Alain Michel have identified a substantial number of recent films on the subject of work. See, “Le travail au cinéma: un réapprentissage de la curiosité sociale” (*Esprit* #326, July 2006). The implications of their research will be discussed later in this article.

² See Régis Debray, *Vie et mort de l'image* (Gallimard, 1992) p.499.

cinema and the workplace because the development of the technology necessary to record and project moving images was inextricably linked to the world of work and the motion picture camera played an important role in determining its very nature. While moving images are now the dominant form of mass entertainment, the impulse to record them began with the efforts of 19th century scientists in Europe and the United States to extend the range of the visible world. Still photography could record and preserve isolated moments yet capturing movement in both space and time proved to be elusive. One of these scientists, Etienne-Jules Marey, a professor of Natural History at the College de France, had begun experimenting with various techniques to assemble a visual record of human and animal physiology in the 1860s, but had been consistently frustrated by cumbersome equipment and insensitive photographic emulsions. Then, in 1882, Marey developed a hand-held camera that could record twelve images per second at a shutter speed fast enough to capture images of birds in flight. Marey's apparatus consisted of a telephoto lens mounted inside a long barrel, a revolving chamber holding small photographic plates mounted on a disk that turned when the operator pulled the trigger, and a rifle stock to hold the device securely against the operator's shoulder. Appropriately, Marey called his camera a *fusil photographique*—a camera gun. Even though the motion picture camera's form soon changed, early operators were known as *chasseurs d'images*, a tacit reminder of the hunter's power over what appeared in his sight, and that the prototypical tool of the cameraman's craft was a weapon.³

Marey's research was part of a larger scientific movement that saw the body as a thermodynamic machine that transformed and distributed power as it was needed. In the same way that engineers could determine the best conditions for machine production, scientists would teach "...how best to utilize the muscular work of man and of the domestic animals; they will lay down rules which shall control the physical exercises of young people, the work of the artisan, the drill of the soldier."⁴ Early applications of Marey's research did indeed involve athletes and soldiers and he is usually considered a precursor of cinema in the same context as Edwaerd Muybridge, whose photographic studies of human and animal movement appeared around the same time, but "the most enduring and pervasive effects [of Marey's studies] were on the workers of the world...

³ Language in the U.S. has come full circle. While the expression "shoot film" has been in use for years, only recently has the term for a cameraman become "shooter".

⁴ E.J.Marey, "The Physiological Station of Paris", *Science*, no.2 (30 November 1883):711. Quoted in Armand Mattelart, *The Invention of Communication* (Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 261.

Marey's lifelong project to describe the laws that govern movement, the photographic, and cinematographic instruments that he created to carry out his project, and his fundamental strategy of decomposing movement into minute temporal and spatial coordinates were the foundation of a revolutionary science of labor that ultimately transformed both the conception and execution of work in the modern industrial workplace.⁵

Scientists in France and Germany studied how the body moved, how its energy was affected by the amount of oxygen in the blood, by what food was eaten, and by the onset of fatigue. In laboratory experiments, volunteers pedaled stationary bicycles or manipulated tools while attached to breathing tubes and electrodes in order to record the effects of different levels of activity. Movements of the best workers were also filmed "to show how the stroke of a skilled blacksmith differed from that of a novice, something that would be the same in all manual professions."⁶ In Marey's utopian vision, economy of effort would improve not only the human body's efficiency and health, but the physical and mental well-being of the nation as a whole. In the real world, however, Marey's images became part of a body of objective, scientific evidence that gave enormous power to whoever controlled it.

For an American engineer named Frederick Winslow Taylor, a worker's mental and physical health was of secondary importance; efficiency, lower cost, and managerial control were paramount. While studying at Harvard University, Taylor was sent to do manual work in a machine shop as therapy for his weak eyes. What he saw appalled him. Instead of working as fast as they could, skilled machinists worked at their own pace, took rest periods when they wanted, and chose their own tools. Management owned the machines, yet the knowledge of how to operate them went home with the workers at day's end, a situation Taylor found intolerable. For him, the key to industrial efficiency lay in removing control of the labor process from the shop floor. Management would think; workers would simply carry out their orders. In Taylor's system, which he called Scientific Management, tasks were broken down into their simplest components and time standards set for every job, usually at the pace of the fastest

⁵ Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992): 320. Chapter 8 "Marey and the Organization of Work", discusses the subject in detail. See also Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1948): 14-44 and 101-106.

⁶ Marey, *Movement* (New York: Appleton, 1895): 139. Quoted in Braun: 324.

workers. Those who exceeded the rate were given bonus pay; those who could not keep up were transferred or fired.⁷

Though he used lantern slides in his lectures, Taylor had no interest in motion pictures; close observation with a stopwatch provided sufficient evidence. On the other hand, an engineer named Frank Gilbreth saw the camera as an indispensable tool. Gilbreth was familiar with Marey's chronophotographs of men and animals, and saw how this technique of motion study could be combined with Taylor's time study system to achieve what he called "the one best way to work". Gilbreth made what he called chronocyclograph photos of champion fencers, brick layers and typists as well as famous surgeons and the champion oyster opener of Rhode Island in order to find "the points of similarity between their motions."⁸ In a darkened chamber he attached small lights to a worker's hands. As the hands moved, the lights made an indelible path on the film while the worker's image dissolved into a blur. These motion paths were made into wire models which provided templates for the most efficient way to do a particular task. Like Taylor, Gilbreth's aim was not the worker's health but management control, and the movie camera was its primary instrument.

In Gilbreth's work, Marey's desire to account for the laws that govern movement and force, and his belief that their discovery would ameliorate the fate of humanity, was transformed into a desire for control and uniformity.⁹

While Marey was only interested in perfecting his machines and research methods, and Taylor and Gilbreth focussed their efforts on the workplace, others saw how motion pictures could have lucrative commercial applications. In the United States, Thomas Edison developed a motion picture camera and hand-cranked viewing device he called a Kinetoscope which he patented and licensed to arcade operators throughout Europe and North America between 1893 and 1896. Kinetoscopes proved to be extremely popular but their small, grainy images could be seen by only one person at a time. Film viewing was an individual, not a group experience. In France however, Auguste and Louis Lumière, owners of a successful photographic supply company in Lyons, developed a camera/projector that could reproduce an

⁷ Aside from Taylor's own work, discussion of the impact of Scientific Management can be found in David A. Noble, *America By Design: Science, Technology and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) and Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degredation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974)

⁸ Frank B. and Lillian M. Gilbreth, *Motion Study for the Handicapped* (London, 1920):15. Quoted in G. Giedion: 104.

⁹ Braun, 347. Gilbreth organized the lives of his wife and 12 children around the principles of efficiency, a story idealized in the film *Cheaper By the Dozen* (1950).

image on a screen bright enough to be seen by an audience. In January 1895 they took their camera outside their factory, placed it on a tripod and filmed their employees leaving through the front gates. A few months later, this 45 second film, *Workers Leaving the Factory* was shown to a group of scientists in Paris and the Lumiere employees became cinema's first "actors".¹⁰ Later that year, on December 28, the Lumiere brothers held what is considered to be the first public motion picture screening at the Salon Indien on the boulevard des Capucines in Paris. Over the next eighteen months, motion picture shows took place in more than 150 cities around the world, and the Lumière catalog contained more than 1000 films.¹¹ Cameramen traveled widely to satisfy the new medium's thirst for images, but the motion picture camera, first assembled in the Lumière factory, rarely entered the factory again.

One exception could be found at the 1904 Universal Exposition in St. Louis (USA), where the Westinghouse Company constructed a 300 seat movie theater in the Hall of Machinery that gave visitors a cinematic tour of the company's huge steel works outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania three times a day. Beginning with shots aboard a train moving through the countryside around the plant, the cameras then moved inside, filming a seemingly endless line of women punching time clocks then winding motor coils in a large workroom while men were shown working with steam hammers, ladeling molten steel from the blast furnaces and foundries. Cameras mounted on transport cranes and gantrys high above the factory floor provided aerial panoramas of the turbine assembly plant. The camera never moves close enough to identify individuals in these scenes. One is left with the impression of overwhelming power—the power of a vast industrial enterprise in which workers are dominated by machines.¹² No first-hand testimony of visitors' reactions to these films survives but it is not hard to imagine the impression they must have made on people who had traveled to St. Louis from farms and rural towns where even electric lights were not yet a common household convenience.

The years between 1895 and 1905, cinema's first decade, were a time of enormous social and cultural change in the United States. Expansion and consolidation transformed the face of industry and vast waves of immigration brought a seemingly endless supply of cheap

¹⁰ Harun Faroki considers the Lumiere film as the archtypical image of cinema. In *Arbeiter verlassen die Fabrik (Workers Leaving the Factory 1997)*, Faroki juxtaposed scenes of workers in front of factories taken from various fiction films and documentaries throughout history.

¹¹ For a list of the Lumière films and screening locations, see Jacques Rittaud-Hutinet, *Auguste et Louis Lumière: les 1000 premiers films* (Paris: Philippe Sers éditeur, 1990).

¹² Under the title *Westinghouse Works*, these films are available from the U.S. Library of Congress Paper Print Collection.

labor to America's cities. Working 70 or 80 hours a week and living in crowded, slum-like conditions, these immigrant workers had neither the time nor the money for traditional middle-class leisure pursuits. Motion picture content may have been similar to dime novels or stage melodramas but what was distinctive about the movies "was their success in providing entertainment and information to an audience that did not need English or even literacy to gain access to urban popular culture for the first time."¹³ Motion picture "theaters" could be set up quickly in almost any location and the license fees were much less than those for a traditional stage playhouse; at five cents a show, these nickelodeons as they were soon called, proved enormously popular. Film technology progressed rapidly and the brief comic situations, documentary scenes and simple dramas of early cinema gave way to longer, narrative films which could be shown in theaters before hundreds, then thousands of people. In 1908, investigators for civic groups found more than 600 such theaters in greater New York, with a daily attendance of between 300,000 and 400,000 admissions and annual receipts of over \$6,000,000 in New York City alone.¹⁴ Moving pictures became immensely popular in part because they were capable of creating the illusion of life—not what could be imagined or described in words, but what could be *seen*. But how could flat, two-dimensional images on a piece of perforated film give the impression of reality when they were projected on a screen?

One answer was provided by industrial psychologist Hugo Munsterberg, who became intrigued by the power of cinema when he was a professor at Harvard at the time of World War I. As a visiting scholar from Germany, Munsterberg was depressed at the outbreak of hostilities so he did what many people have done since in similar situations: he went to the movies. What he saw challenged his ideas of how the human mind worked. "What we are seeing when we watch a film", Munsterberg wrote, "is not true motion or true depth but only a suggestion", a product of our own reaction, what he called "the inner development of the moving picture". "Depth and movement alike come to us in the moving picture world," he wrote, "not as hard facts but as a mixture of fact and symbol. They are present and yet they are not in the things. We invest the impressions with them."¹⁵ The power of cinema depended upon the active participation of the audience. A trade paper of the time echoed Munsterberg's sentiments:

¹³ Robert Sklar, *Movie-made America* (New York, Random House: 1975): p.30.

¹⁴ Sklar: 16.

¹⁵ Hugo Münsterberg, *The Film, a psychological study; the silent photoplay in 1916* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970): 30.

Once images moved the spectators forgot that they are only at pictures and that the acts before them are not carried on right in front of them and by real people, and so well are they acted that the absence of spoken words is hardly noticed, and the necessary conversation supposed to be taking place between the characters is carried out in their own minds.¹⁶

Though Munsterberg conceded that susceptible viewers might be corrupted by images of deviant social behavior, he believed that “any wholesome influence emanating from the photoplay must have an incomparable power for the remolding and upbuilding of the national soul.”¹⁷ This power did not go unnoticed by America’s guardians of virtue: churches, civic reform groups, politicians, the courts, and the police. Motion pictures intended for a working class audience could easily become a political as well as a moral threat to the social order. At a time when conditions in the United States might have favored the development of working-class consciousness and new radical organizations for workers, their attention was captured by opportunistic entrepreneurs, often from the same immigrant backgrounds as their audience, with a very different set of values from the American middle class.¹⁸ Films like *The Quarry Man* (1908), *Unemployed and Unemployable* (1908), *A Workingman’s Dream* (1908) and *Hard Times* (1909) featured workers as their central characters but with a clear moral message intended to discourage any sort of collective action.¹⁹

Scattered attempts at censorship took place throughout the United States but never had much effect until New York’s mayor George McClellan revoked the licenses of every theater in the city during Christmas week of 1908 at the request of the police department. The nickelodeons soon reopened, now under police jurisdiction with new laws regulating children’s attendance, and higher license fees. Since New York at this time was both the center of motion picture production and its largest market, the message conveyed by the license revocation was heard clearly by producers and exhibitors around the country. Faced with public criticism from religious organizations and the possibility of government control, the nine principal production companies, which had recently organized a monopoly over production and

¹⁶ Bioscope, 2 October 1908: 8, quoted in Stead: 9.

¹⁷ Munsterberg: 95-96.

¹⁸ Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature Film in British and American Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991): 3.

¹⁹ See Stead: 23-24.

distribution, attempted to create their own regulatory body, now a common pattern in American industry²⁰

On the other hand, some early movie entrepreneurs saw these developments as an opportunity. Since motion pictures intended for a working class audience had proven to be extremely profitable, it made sense that one might make even more money by attracting the middle class—and give the medium respectability at the same time. One way to do this was by producing longer movies with greater production values, as was being done in Europe. Another was to take motion pictures out of shabby tenement storefronts and nickelodeon arcades where middle class patrons felt uncomfortable, and put them into exotic, fanciful “palaces” where movie-going became almost a religious experience. Soon, what had begun as a tool for the scientific study of movement that had evolved first into a novelty viewed by individuals and small groups was now a collective experience available to an audience of thousands in a single theater.²¹ Over time, an unspoken pact developed between Hollywood and a public that had become accustomed to a fantasy world inhabited by attractive men and women played by recognizable movie stars. According to one critic,

the whole basis of popular cinema was that audiences had developed an expectation of tales which were full of humor, romance or adventure and which were set in a world that was recognizably related to real life without in any way being a mirror-image of it... Hollywood succeeded because it celebrated the beauty, vitality and diversity of individual Americans at precisely the same time as it celebrated and propagated the notion that society as a whole allowed a resolution of so many tensions.”²²

As American cinema came to dominate the world market, producers had even less incentive to make films about social problems in the United States.

Of course, the media industry is not monolithic; films about work and workers have been made and continue to be, particularly in the documentary field, but their numbers are relatively minor in relation to the media industry’s output as a whole, and their influence is even smaller.²³ Nevertheless, these films do contribute to the way work is perceived in

²⁰ See Sklar: 30-32 for this story and the creation of the New York Board of Motion Picture Censorship, which became the National Board of Review.

²¹ When New York’s Radio City Music Hall opened in 1932 it was the largest movie theater in the world, with nearly 6000 seats.

²² Stead:238-240.

²³ See Tom Zaniello, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Organized Guide to Films about Labor* (Cornell University ILR Press,1996), a guide with descriptions of approximately 150 documentaries and fiction films about labor and Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class: The Feature*

contemporary society, by inclusion or exclusion. While a complete survey of films about work is well beyond the scope of a single article or journal, certain themes and historical developments can be pointed out.

Perhaps the most significant theme is the enduring legacy of scientific management that “work” is something you do with your hands, not with your mind. In spite of the enormous changes that have taken place in the past thirty years, particularly the increasing numbers of people employed in service industries in Europe and North America, who now greatly outnumber those in manufacturing, the myth persists that “real” work is manual labor. More specifically, it is a particular kind of manual labor. A survey by the French journal *Images* (#37-38) divided up 200 documentaries about workers produced between 1968 and 2000 into subject categories. The vast majority dealt with manual labor and almost half were concentrated in three industries: automobile manufacturing, mining and dock workers. Office workers, farmers, truck drivers, hotel workers, nurses, were all absent from the list. The same holds true for feature films with workplace themes produced in the U.S. in the late 1970s and 1980s, a period that saw a brief resurgence of films about labor, like Paul Schrader’s *Blue Collar* (1982), Martin Ritt’s *The Molly Maguires*, Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County* (1979), John Sayles *Matewan*, Ron Howard’s *Gung Ho* (1986), Norman Jewison’s *F.I.S.T.* (1978) and Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me* (1989), all of which concern traditional “blue collar” work. In spite of the reality around us, the archtypical American worker in most people’s minds remains Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*, a film produced in 1950.

Of course, the reason for this is obvious: manual work and physical activity are inherently visual, therefore more attractive and interesting for the camera than someone sitting in front of a computer or behind a desk; it is easier to film what people are doing than what they are thinking, which in any case is not considered *real* work. On the other hand, human relationships in the workplace, particularly power relationships between labor and

Film in British and American Society (London: Routledge, 1989) provides historical analysis and a context for more than 200 features. The French film journal *Images* has published two special issues dealing with work: *Filmer le travail* (#24, 1996) and *Parole ouvrière* (#37-38, 2000) with critical essays, film descriptions and bibliographical information, primarily about documentaries.

management, or office and assembly line workers, are more complex and less visual, therefore more difficult to capture on film or tape unless they involve dramatic confrontations.²⁴

Another consistent theme is social mobility, the bedrock of the American Dream. One of Hollywood's conventions is that change takes place not through collective action but by the heroic efforts of individuals, incarnated by movie stars, i.e. Sally Field in *Norma Rae*, Sylvester Stallone in *F.I.S.T.*, Meryl Streep in *Silkwood*, Julia Roberts in *Erin Brokovitch*. When workers do band together, the result is either comedy (*Gung Ho*), criminal activity (*Blue Collar*), mob violence (*F.I.S.T.*), or anarchy (*The Molly Maguires*). Herbert Biberman's *Salt of the Earth* (1953) the story of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers strike against Empire Zinc in Hanover, New Mexico in 1951 is a rare exception. While the focus is on one particular Mexican-American family, the solidarity of the workers and their families is the film's primary message. Biberman, screenwriter Michael Wilson, and actor Will Geer had all been blacklisted by Hollywood because of their refusal to answer questions of the House Un-American Activities Committee so the film was produced independently. When it was completed however, no distributor would touch it. It remained a rarely seen underground classic until the late 1960s, when a renewed interest in labor history brought it out of the shadows and inspired a number of younger filmmakers. The 1970s and 80s in the U.S. saw the production of a number of documentaries that looked at the past history of the American labor movement—films like *Union Maids*, *The Wobblies*, and *Rosie the Riveter*—a subject considered “safe” enough to be funded by grants from foundations and the Federal government, something that would be unimaginable today. There was even room for an eccentric, big-budget documentary like Godfrey Reggio's *Koyanniskatsi* (1985), which featured a number of spectacular scenes of work in the global marketplace.

In Canada on the other hand, the National Film Board continued its long-standing tradition of support for documentaries about social issues, including labor, but controversy was not unknown. When Denys Arcand completed his film *On est au coton* (*Cotton Mill/Gin Mill*, 1983), about the closing of Quebec's textile mills and the health problems of the workers, the mill owners interviewed demanded that their images be removed before the film was shown to the public and it was several years before the film was released.

Recently, documentary films have gained increased visibility, both in Europe and the United States, in part because of the widespread use of small format digital video, which has

²⁴ See, for example, Barbara Kopple's two Academy-award winning documentaries, *Harlan County* (1979) and *American Dream* (1983).

made it possible to begin projects (if not complete them) on minimal budgets. In their survey of films about work in France, published in *Esprit*, Hatzfeld, Rot and Michel found an unexpectedly large number of films as well as a diversity of subject matter, style, and tone, ranging from “derision to discrete empathy” but only a very few—Laurent Cantet’s *Resources Humaines* was one example—were able to capture the complexity of relationships in the workplace.²⁵ However, one overall tendency comes through quite clearly in the article: class bias. For middle-class filmmakers—and filmmakers in Europe and the U.S. tend to be middle class or higher—the factory is a foreign culture, and workers are “the Other” as much as Indians in the rain forest are subjects for anthropological study. The authors are aware of this and emphasize the importance of filmmakers being conscious of the choices they make in how they film and how they ask questions, as well as the context in which films are shown, which provide “the link between what one sees of the world of work and one can understand it. Spectators come not only to see but to ask questions, to re-learn how to understand... un réapprentissage de la curiosité sociale”.²⁶

However, documentaries are not immune from the tendencies of the media industry as a whole, and a world in which Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle” has become a “society of the spectacular”. In an era when a motion picture can open in 3000 theaters across the United States, be seen by millions of people in a single weekend then be distributed around the world, spectacular action and special effects have become the global cinematic language. To compete in this marketplace, documentaries have adapted... or not. Two recent films—*Workingman’s Death* (Michael Glawogger, 2005) and *Ils ne mouraient pas tous mais tous étaient frappés* (*They Didn’t All Die But All Were Stricken*) (Sophie Bruneau and Marc-Antoine Roudil, 2005)—raise interesting issues about the relationship between cinema, work, and power of images.

The films couldn’t be more different. *Workingman’s Death* is a spectacular, visual film with little dialogue that shows us dangerous manual labor in five situations: a village in the Ukraine where the men dig coal from seams in abandoned mines that are less than two feet high; an Indonesian sulfur quarry on the side of a mountain that belches steam; a beach in Pakistan where huge tankers are taken apart for scrap by workers using blow torches and hand tools; an outdoor slaughterhouse in Nigeria awash in blood and entrails and the smoke from fire pits fueled by rubber tires. An epilogue shows us two sides of the future: an

²⁵ Hatzfeld, Rot and Michel, “Le travail au cinéma”, p.81

²⁶ Op cit. p.98

abandoned smelter in Germany that has been turned into a theme park, and a Chinese steel mill where the workers' optimism and dedication recalls Soviet cinema of the 1930s.

The film's title is, of course, ironic: the working man hasn't died...but he is being driven until he is nearly dead. Supported by John Zorn's music and the outstanding camera work of Wolfgang Thaler, *Workingman's Death* is an extremely well crafted, beautiful documentary that has deservedly won festival prizes and theatrical release in Europe and the U.S. One could say that *Workingman's Death* is the cinematic equivalent of photographer Sebastio Salgado's *Workers* project, and in both cases, the beauty of the images is both a strength and a weakness: work is aestheticized at the same time it is condemned, a process that begins with the choice of exotic locations. In reality, dangerous manual labor has not been completely relegated to Africa and Asia; it can easily be found in slaughterhouses, mines and factories in the U.S. or Glawogger's native Austria. It is highly unlikely however, that a film crew would have the same freedom to film in those locations that they appear to have had in Nigeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia. *Workingman's Death* gives us what the camera does best: capturing the visual surface in powerful sequences that have, in the words of one critic, "a dreamlike beauty". What the film does not show is the invisible power that put the workers there in the first place.

Ils ne mouraient pas tous... on the other hand, is almost an anti-visual film that relies entirely on the spoken word; camera movements are virtually absent. What we see and hear are workers who have come to clinics outside Paris for counseling about on-the-job injuries that are psychological rather than physical. Aside from an end sequence in which doctors and psychologists discuss their work with a supervisor, *Ils ne mouraient pas tous...* consists of fixed shots of one or two people, recording the therapy sessions between either doctors or a psychologist and the workers. We never see what kind of factory work the people do but their descriptions of the conditions that have brought them to the clinic are vivid enough. A woman assembly line worker tells us that the constant speedups in her factory have made her impatient and irritable at home, where no one works fast enough. A foreman breaks down in tears describing his inability to impose unreasonable controls on the men under him. A salesclerk is fired from a long-term job for no apparent reason. What emerges from the interviews is a portrait of the modern workplace as devastating as the one in *Workingman's Death*, one that is normally invisible and cloaked in silence. There is no visual pleasure for the audience here; we are locked in a room where it is difficult to breathe. The film's formalism is so unrelenting that one of its most powerful moments occurs when both psychologist and

client leave the room at the end of a session and the camera holds for five seconds on the empty chairs. Of course, the film is also a portrait of the work of the psychologist, whose job it is to listen and ask questions.

In the special issue of the French journal *Images on la parole ouvrière*, several critics remarked on the absence of workers' voices in either fiction films or documentaries, unless they are responding to filmmakers' questions. In the 1940s, American anthropologist John Adair gave movie cameras to the Navajo indians he was studying and asked them to make short films of the world around them. The results were in a visual language that was totally different from that of the scientists studying them. Of course, it is the task of the filmmaker to take us places we cannot go and show us things we cannot normally see, but it is interesting to think about what kinds of films would have been made by the workers themselves in either of these films.

The phrase *Ils ne mouraient pas tous, mais tous étaient frappés* comes from La Fontaine's fable, *Les animaux malades de la peste* (*Animals Sickened by the Plague*), which begins with these lines:

Un mal qui répand la terreur,
Mal que le Ciel en sa fureur
Inventa pour punir les crimes de la terre,
La Peste (puisqu'il faut l'appeler par son nom)
Capable d'enrichir en un jour l'Achéron,
Faisait aux animaux la guerre.
Ils ne mouraient pas tous, mais tous étaient frappés....

La Fontaine's language is almost Biblical—the Plague is Heaven's punishment for the Earth's crimes, a sickness akin to terror that is making war on the animals, who cannot understand what they are being punished for. The workers in both these films might ask the same question.

Cinema began with images of workers—Marey's graphic abstractions, the shadowy figures trapped in Gilbreth's chronocyclograph grid, and Muybridge's naked men wielding sledgehammers. More than a hundred years later, cinema's technical capacity to record workers' movements has improved dramatically, but the social relations of the workplace—of a system that enables some people to control the labor and the lives of others—remains elusive, an invisible power that the camera cannot see. Today, we don't have to go to a movie theater or sit in front of a television set to see images; they can be received or sent, in real time, anywhere in the world, by portable devices that can fit in a shirt pocket. Seeing a crowd of

people, each of whom was focussed on a grainy image on a small screen would not have surprised Thomas Edison, whose Kinescope parlors provided the same service in the 1890s. And entrepreneur that he was, Edison would have welcomed the idea of having the fee deducted automatically from a customer's bank account, instead of putting a nickel in a slot.

Of course, we are not limited to film loops or movies supplied by Hollywood studios. Certain internet sites receive tens of thousands of short videos a month—what is now called “user generated content”—and millions of download requests for video clips, most of which are forgettable versions of Super 8mm home movies. A recent survey found that the preferred length of these videos was three minutes, and television series are now being re-edited into “minisodes” not much longer than an Edison Kinetoscope reel. Movie-going as a collective experience still exists but it is being superceded by an atomized, fragmented audience of individuals, looking at films of their own creation on computers or portable viewing devices. What this audience will look like if it ever comes together remains to be seen. In the meantime, the nature of work remains elusive as ever.

Eric Breitbart is a filmmaker and independent scholar living in New York City.