

A CONVERSATION WITH AN ACCURATE TRANSCRIPTION OF THE VOICEOVER FROM THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE VERSION OF HARUN FAROCKI'S *ARBEITER VERLASSEN DI FABRIK* [WORKERS LEAVING THE FACTORY], 1995¹

Cast of characters:

- VOICEOVER (monotone and unexpressive, unnamed and uncredited)
- RESPONDENT (unspecified)

VOICEOVER:

The first film ever brought to the screen is referred to under the title *Workers Leaving the Factory*.

It shows men and women employed by the Lumière company in Lyon leaving the factory through two exits, in the film image to the right and left.

RESPONDENT:

Thus in its very initiating, the new medium emerges into a context of preformed labour relations.

The image, in its movement, is bound up in those relations: what sits behind the workers streaming out, both in the projected image on screen and in the rationale (economic and perhaps other) of the entire enterprise, is a factory producing photographic equipment.

Or rather, a building to structure, organise and control the actions of these exiting people into labour which

¹ Harun Farocki, *Arbeiter Verlassen di Fabrik* [Workers Leaving the Factory] (1995) <<https://vimeo.com/59338090>> [Accessed 2 January 2021].

collectively produces these goods.

The owner of the factory has already shifted to occupy an adjacent space as the owner of the image.

VOICEOVER:

These images were supposed, above all, to show that it is possible to render movement in images.

The remaining impression from this first screening is of people hurrying away as if impelled by an invisible force.

No one remains behind.

1975 in Emden: the Volkswagen factory.

RESPONDENT:

The technological means of representing movement and the desire to do so have hardly changed in eighty years, and barely more so another two decades later when Farocki makes this work.

In 1975, the workers are still leaving the factory.

The stasis of the representation of movement.

VOICEOVER:

The workers are running as if something were drawing them away.

1926 in Detroit: the workers are running as if they had already lost too much time.

Again in Lyon, in 1957: they are running as if they knew somewhere

better to be.

Again in Detroit, in 1926: the Ford workers leaving the factory, their numbers prove the size of the enterprise which can feed this multitude.

Never can one better perceive the numbers of workers than when they are leaving the factory. The management dismisses the multitude at the same moment. The exits compress them, making out of male and female workers a workforce.

RESPONDENT:

Does this multitude live in perpetual anguish and fear?

Detroit. Ford. The very name of an era.

From 1926 to the multitude of the post-war welfare state. Perhaps a feeling of suffocation by the state, by society.

But at least something. Something to occasionally deflect some of economy's logic.

Romantic nostalgia distorts our rearward gaze.

VOICEOVER:

An image like an expression... which can be suited to many statements.

An image like an expression. So often used that it can be understood blindly, and thus not have to be seen.

A song to glorify work, so the music already suggests, but the workers turn

their backs on work when leaving the factory.

Workers and employees from the Siemens factory in Berlin, in 1934. They are grouped into military formation and leave the factory to join a Nazi rally.

Here are the block of the war victims.

Marching in white coats, a symbol of militarised science and technology: a preview of the worst.

RESPONDENT:

Soon Farocki will take our attention towards unions. A territory, an important one, an understandably defended one when the terms of any engagement in a public discourse affecting oneself are rendered through one's labour. But an exclusionary one too, a bounded one. The workers we see leaving the factory are white, predominantly male, in Europe, North America.

The union functions as a territory of resilience, but one mapped onto the permitted space of the factory. Labour comes first and the hard-fought loosening of life (of the 'family wage', of sick pay, of time off) are permitted into the space of discussion upon acceptance of those terms.

Siemens provided vital war materiel to the Nazi state, and exploited concentration camp labour, in part to produce the infrastructures of industrial extermination. It is quite feasible some of these imprisoned workers produced the very machines of their own death.

Do we judge the Siemens employees as they fall into rank? Their position within the bounded security of employment, steady wage and union is predicated upon acceptance of a set of terms which in this case includes the boundaries of a horrific ethno-nationalism.

Siemens now, amongst other things, produces high-speed trains to ever more quickly and seamlessly spirit those within fortress Europe between cities, as national boundaries dissolve in material significance.

Boundaries are not dissolving for those excluded on the outside. And meanwhile, the descendent technologies of film project the life lived within ever more comparatively desirably.

Siemens is also staking out its own platform; invisible proprietorial boundaries around potential data.

The workers are dead. Long live the workers.

VOICEOVER:

Workers changing shifts in the film *Metropolis*. Uniform dress and equal step.

This vision of the future has not been fulfilled. Nowadays one cannot tell with a glance whether a passerby is coming from work, sports or the welfare office.

Workers Leaving the Factory, that was the title of the first film ever made. It was the first time that pictures of people in motion could be seen. It was as if, with film, the world would become visible for the first time.

RESPONDENT:

In rendering visible, for the first time, there was a hope for a new democracy, a new politics of transparency and participation. But a logic of economy, of capital, of vested interest had always been there for film. This remained hidden. The flickering image projected was rarely one of factory gates. It was one of action progressing through a narrative arc, of new human achievements, of the American dream. We were shown a whirl of change and progress, masking an ossified stasis of real power.

VOICEOVER:

The factory out of which the workers are streaming is austere and has no company sign. There is no indication of industrial power or importance.

Nor is there any indication of the workers' power. After all, when this material was filmed the European governments still feared a workers' uprising in the event of war, as in Paris in 1871.

RESPONDENT:

There is a recognition of the potential power of the conceptual-discursive promulgated through these moving images. Then though, the material was not yet so beaten down, so devalorised. The factory, though gradually diminishing, still operated as a site of politics of some equivalency to film. For a while.

What terrain are we fighting on?

Pause

VOICEOVER:

Picketers in the portrayal of a dockers strike in Hamburg, a Soviet film completed in 1933. The industrial disputes turn the area outside the factory into a dramatic scene of events.

The picketer.

Unemployed, waiting for an opportunity.

The strikebreakers, one of whom cannot take the strain.

The picketer takes a closer look at the collapsed betrayer of the working class.

The unemployed push forward to occupy the empty space.

The picketer looks into the face of this old man. A face which stands for millions of undernourished and destitute people obliged to take on any job and unable to preserve any honour. He turns away.

RESPONDENT:

The crowd at the dockyard gates. In this particular instance they are shut out from the work they desire due to strike. But this insecurity and instability, placing all risk upon the would-be workers, was standard day-to-day practice for casual dockyard labourers (who performed the majority of the work).

The unexceptional state of exception.

As they look through the gate, these men's bodies are doubly present. They are a site of hunger, fatigue, cold, no doubt viscerally felt after a few days not picked for work: their bodies serving as physical fixing points for the risk to abstract capital that would otherwise have to circulate.

But their bodies are also performatively presented. A virtuosic show of strength and good health the darkly ironic pre-labour necessary to secure the labour. The crowd at the dockyard gates.

Pause

VOICEOVER:

In this German film about a strike in the Hamburg harbour, the battle between the strikers and the strikebreakers resembles a playground fight.

The big wars and civil wars in this century, prisons, camps, dictatorships. So many are caused by exploitation and underproduction, but the industrial disputes themselves are not particularly violent.

RESPONDENT:

This is a narrow definition of 'industrial dispute'. Are not all of these counter-examples forms of industrial dispute themselves?

The sanctioned, permitted industrial action is by definition an action which will have no structural consequence, the vapid representation of dispute. Sit back and watch from a cinema seat for all it matters.

Where to draw a bounding line between industrial dispute and civil war? Were the 'gilets jaunes' categorically engaged in one and not the other? Were the Communards, the striking miners? Too narrow an understanding of 'industrial dispute' closes down our ability to stand alongside an 'other' in a positionality we are not, but for whom we care. It permits power to segment and fracture our bonds.

In the post-Fordist social factory, this fragmentary denying of the right to stand alongside becomes more acute as we are pushed to proceed towards ever more individuated factories of self.

The reinforced aspiration to be one's own boss.

Pause

VOICEOVER:

A strike by English car workers in 1956. The workers' disputes are far less violent than those carried out in the name of the workers.

Once again, the industrial reserve army.

In this film by the American, Griffith, the industrial dispute resembles a civil war.

RESPONDENT:

The civil wars inscribed in my mind (the Spanish -, the American -) were fought between forces, if not equal, then at least of roughly similar orders of magnitude of capability.

This resemblance of civil war is not that. The workers have nothing to lose. The workers have nothing to be taken but their labour. The workers do not even fight, they simply refuse to fulfil their prescribed role.

VOICEOVER:

This is probably the largest shootout in front of a factory gate in one hundred years of film history.

RESPONDENT:

Asymmetric civil war.

Uncivilised war.

War.

VOICEOVER:

A quieter horror comes from these images, from the faces of these men who don't have any workplace and therefore no place in working society.

RESPONDENT:

The factory enfleshes beyond its gates. It constitutes and deconstitutes the individual.

VOICEOVER:

Behind the bars of the factory gates, the people look as if they were already locked up in a camp.

Pause

Workers are leaving the factory here because the police are clearing the grounds and locking them out. Among the workers is one particularly

concerned about his personal honour.

Pause

This film shows workers evicting the police from the factory. A film made in 1948 in the Soviet occupied zone in Germany.

The workers move like an opera chorus on stage.

This is sufficient to drive away the police. The police fear the significance of the workers more than a beating.

RESPONDENT:

The asymmetrical reverse.

The police - agents of the state, of the current order, of incumbent power - are in the secure position of their bodily materialisation being vulnerable to a mere beating. It is the privilege of power to concern itself chiefly with the disembodied fluctuations of discourse which may circulate through the disseminated images which might subsequently manifest.

For those risking death, one imagines their involuntarily situated bodily vulnerability would be a chief concern.

The agency to be presently embodied or disembodied, or to render others such, is not equitably distributed.

The drone strike, determined by an operator a hemisphere away, kills the forcibly returned, visa-denied migrant.

The police officer, granted the cloak of state-uniform collective anonymity, kills another black person who is inescapably present in the bullet's path.

VOICEOVER:

Workers in uniform.

In the GDR a workers' militia in military vehicles. They are going out on an exercise.

Workers leaving the factory as soldiers.

Pause

1975. The Federal Republic of Germany. The VW factory in Emden.

Outside the factory, the trade union is playing songs by Mayakovsky sung by Ernst Busch.

Through this invocation, historical importance is conferred upon the location.

The management is of the opinion that the square in front of the gate is not a public space but rather private property, and threatens to call the police.

RESPONDENT:

The boundaries are creeping outside the factory.

The idea that there could be an alternative public sphere outside the confines of the factory is unthinkable. And yet, it's 1975: fewer

and fewer of us are working in the factory.

The factory is itself leaving the factory.

VOICEOVER:

Some workers remain, but most have moved on.

Protection of property. Equipment to fortify the factory.

Here the resistance of a road block is tested and demonstrated. A truck is driven into the road block at eighty kilometres per hour and shredded into pieces.

Also this fantasy of violence gives the square in front of the factory historical importance.

Memories of strikes and strike breaking, factory sit-ins and closures, struggles for wages and justice, and the accompanying hope.

RESPONDENT:

Memories of strategies of resistance from a time when we possessed something to withhold.

Memories we might reenact to momentarily feel better.

VOICEOVER:

The road block remains undamaged from the collision.

RESPONDENT:

This text denies you the ocular image of the truck hitting the road block.

In interceding, in abstracting, it cushions the impact. A cushioning not available to those whose bodies are shredded like the truck.

It also obfuscates the material reality. A textual hiding of the power of that image, an image which in turn hides the bodily siting of violence by using an empty truck as placeholder.

An acknowledgement that *that* image, the one we're not shown, might have some power.

VOICEOVER:

The factory as a scene of crime. Not workers but gangsters are leaving the factory. They have stolen wages.

Protection of property. The gangsters entered the factory disguised as workers.

The false workers are to be feared more than the real ones.

RESPONDENT:

Living in the aftermath-of-the-2008-financial-crash-as-justification crisis we know well that when the system fails it isn't the abstract structures which bear the pain.

The worker has everything to lose in the chaos of systemic collapse. The criminal plays a role not unlike the terrorist. External to the system we inescapably find ourselves within, they are an imagined threat which justifies countless injustices. We watch, and alongside the brief escapism of seeing our fantasies enacted safely on screen, find our thoughts nudged into alignment with

those of our momentarily more
apparently comfortable system.

Pause

VOICEOVER:

Where the first camera once stood,
there are now hundreds of thousands of
surveillance cameras.

RESPONDENT:

They point both outward at those who
would enter and inward at those who
would escape. No longer an image on
film.

Analogue, chemical, organic, decaying,
bodily.

Instead, a representation of text,
itself a translation of ones and
zeros. We increasingly cannot read
these texts, even when they are
renderings of ourselves, full of
incontestable consequence, other than
when they are purposefully presented
back to us.

Away from the boundary, each self-
factory is all-but-continuously
watched.

We watch one another.
We watch ourselves.

VOICEOVER:

This camera has spotted a woman who
tugs at another woman's skirt before
they separate.

She tugs at the woman's skirt. The
other woman does not dare to retaliate
under the watchful eye of the camera.

This game is an action which has found no reaction, thus a discrepancy is caused.

Disequilibrium and balance, this is the law of cinema narration.

RESPONDENT:

A disequilibrium within the representation masking the closed loop behind.

Could the film, the artwork, ever produce a disequilibrium within the material? The material that matters?

The (art)worker has everything to lose in the chaos of systemic collapse.

The (art)worker has everything to lose in the stasis of systemic continuation.

Pause

VOICEOVER:

A woman waiting for a man.

A rubbish dump. Marginal work. Badly paid and done by women. A pimp is waiting at the exit.

RESPONDENT:

Women's work. Unacknowledged reproductive, domestic and affective labour, until a state of exception permits entry to the factory.

The work within the factory was always reliant on the work without the factory.

There is no without the self-factory.

Do it yourself. Self-initiated.
Project spaces marginal to markets and
institutions are applauded.

Pause

What else could we do?

VOICEOVER:

A man waiting for a woman.

The workers disperse. The lives of the
solitary individuals can begin.

Most narrative films begin after work
is over.

RESPONDENT:

Self-care very easily slips into work
on the self, which in turn segues into
reproduction of the self better able
to promise more. To further indebt
oneself to the abstractions enclosing
the self-factory.

We make time for self-care when the
work is over.

When the work is over.

Pause

VOICEOVER:

A woman leaving the factory, a man is
waiting for her.

The lives of the solitary individuals
can begin.

The two solitary individuals move away

from the factory and the camera is only too happy to follow them.

The camera accompanies them as they move further and further away from the factory and detach themselves increasingly from this background.

RESPONDENT:

The idea of a background that one can detach oneself from is a common cinematic technique. We cut in to the close up, follow the tracking shot. Or ignore the multitude of others alongside ourselves in the auditorium.

There is a singular focus which we are drawn into to feel an intimate proximity, a short focal length.

Pretending the surrounding context isn't there doesn't diminish its reality. That intimate, private moment is fully social. We look to the screen to do, to feel, what we no longer can in life.

Pause

VOICEOVER:

The workers are leaving the factory, a woman is waiting for her man.

The piece rates have been raised to increase the absolute surplus value.

They walk together slowly as if following a coffin.

They do not look at each other, absorbed in another image.

Death seems a relief to them.

Working in the factory is hell.

RESPONDENT:

The humanity of hell appears almost heavenly from the factory floor.

Pause

VOICEOVER:

This truck brings the woman back into prison with the others.

The woman has committed a crime out of false love.

In one hundred years of film there have probably been more prison gates than factory gates.

RESPONDENT:

The prison is a much simpler site of enclosure than the factory.

In the prison the human, the individual and the body stay as one. Physically incarcerated, disciplined.

In the factory the coalescing together is much looser. The individual floats into an imagined future of aspiration, a recorded past of employability. They remain tethered to the factory irrespective of where the body is when outside gates.

This single axis is now much more complicated. There were other tethers then, but the factory was principal, through which the political and social were controlled.

Now we float 'free', multi-tethered as multiple non-presences. Multiple

pullings down. The human used to conjoin with the individual in the sacramental factory on a daily basis.

Where does the human sit?

Pause

VOICEOVER:

The truck brings the women from the prison to the factory. The factory is a kind of house of correction.

In one hundred years of film we can see more prisons and houses of correction than factories and factory gates.

Whenever possible, film has moved hastily away from factories.

RESPONDENT:

Film seeks to obscure itself.

The culture industries brought about a new means of organising society.

The Lumière brothers' film functions as a bridge from the old to the new, connecting the soon to be antiquated economies of labour (through which society was structured), via their representation, to the emergent new form of dissemination of ideologies of ways of being.

VOICEOVER:

Factories have not attracted film. Rather, they have repelled it.

If we line up one hundred years of scenes of people leaving factories we can imagine that the same shot had

been taken over and over.

Like a child who repeats its first word for one hundred years to immortalise its pleasure in that first spoken word.

Or like far-eastern artists, who repeatedly paint the same picture until it is perfect, and the artist can enter the picture.

RESPONDENT:

We used to see static when we turned on a television screen. A stasis of infinite activity. Molecular workers engaged in an arduous simulacrum of sameness.

Farocki's film montage was broadcast on television in Germany. The workers left the factory and gathered in the auditorium. Then, they watched themselves from the comfort of their own homes.

VOICEOVER:

When we could no longer believe in such perfection, film was invented.

RESPONDENT:

Striving to hold up pictures around ourselves.