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## Filmed images of women factory workers: work, gender and dignity, variations on a classic trilogy (1962-2011)

*Figures filmiques d'ouvrières : travail, genre et dignité, variations sur une trilogie classique (1962-2011)*

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## **Filmed images of women factory workers: work, gender and dignity, variations on a classic trilogy (1962-2011)**

Nicolas HATZFELD

While it has often been admitted that over the past few decades industrial workers in general have become almost invisible in French society, to a degree well beyond the decrease in their real numbers,<sup>1</sup> what is to be said about women factory workers? Must we paraphrase about them the slogan used by the MLF<sup>2</sup> at the Arc de Triomphe on 26 August 1970, to describe the wife of the Unknown Soldier (that they are “even more unknown”)? To have a clearer idea about this, and to contribute to an outline of their role in recent social history, an examination of the representations that have been put forward of them can bring to light a field of reference within which the images of women factory workers are endlessly being reconfigured. If it is prepared to go beyond evoking their merely illustrative function, an analysis of these portraits will allow us to question the relationship between the actual situations of women workers and their representation on film. The similarities that one may find between these two domains, and more importantly the differences, can reveal the image that society itself forms of women workers.

Among these representations, cinema offers material of singularly expressive force, all the more significant since it is able to mobilize resources that are generally considerable and varied. Every film consists of an overall process of constructing images: moving from

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<sup>1</sup> Beaud & Pialoux 1999; Vigna 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The MLF (Mouvement de libération des femmes) is the equivalent of the Women’s Liberation Movement.

the initial conception, the negotiations needed for starting production, and the mobilization of various skills, expertise, and approaches, to the different phases of filming, distribution and reception<sup>3</sup>. Certain film historians have shown the fruitfulness of an analysis based on this sequence<sup>4</sup>. The study presented here, however, will restrict itself essentially to the surface of the finished films, and will only make occasional comments on their creation and trajectory. The objective is rather to explore, from amongst those productions destined for public distribution, a primary corpus of films linked by the fact that they offer us representations of women workers, which further research may later correct and diversify.

Our corpus immediately proves to be particularly composite, notably mixing documentaries and fiction films. Distinguishing between these two genres, although it remains pertinent, tends to accentuate differences that on closer examination show themselves to be more nuanced. Undoubtedly, the fact that documentaries are rooted in real situations reinforces their status as sources for social history. Nonetheless, the choices made by many directors of documentaries in the course of production amount to a process of selection, covering such things as preliminary negotiations, recourse either to actors or to the people directly concerned, the authenticity of the sets or their reconstruction, direct recording as opposed to the acting of the scenes filmed, the nature of the sound track, the voices heard, what is said, etc. The combination of these cinematic choices reduces the classic divide between documentaries and fictions, and can suggest rather that it is worth concentrating on what they have in common, which is the approach adopted here. A different typology, based on the ultimate destination of films, would also offer fertile paths for interpretation. The distribution of films to cinemas, the size of their audience, the scope for re- diffusion through television channels, film clubs or militant networks or, as may also be the case, the near-total absence of any projection at all, are significant aspects that are very rarely addressed, any more than the gap between the directors' intentions and the effective careers of films. Including both documentaries and fiction

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<sup>3</sup> Rot & de Verdalle (eds) 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Lindeperg 2007.

films in the analysis helps in turn to identify the way in which certain themes can circulate *across* film genres and echo one another, according to other factors such as period, country, branch of activity, etc. It encourages us to underscore the two major relationships at the intersection of which the condition of female factory workers is located: their relationship to work, and gender relations<sup>5</sup>. These two primary domains, on which the films considered here concentrate in different ways, raise questions about the types of women workers represented, their activities and their struggles, as well as the configuration of their identities.

### **Films made by women, in France and elsewhere**

In order to consider these different horizons and nonetheless keep a degree of focus in the selection, this survey is based primarily on the impressive pioneering work that has been undertaken over the past 35 years by the organizers of the Women's International Film Festival in Créteil, a valuable source of openness, inquiry and sensibility<sup>6</sup>. It is these features, rather than any selective bias, which should be borne in mind in any overall interpretation. The core of our corpus is therefore drawn from films selected from the start by this team. Other titles resulted from group research<sup>7</sup>, the work of Michel Cadé,<sup>8</sup> the holdings of the *Génériques*<sup>9</sup> association and finally, from the author's personal searches. The constituted corpus therefore consists very largely of films directed by women directors about women workers. This criterion puts the accent on the emerging phenomenon

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<sup>5</sup> Gallot 2012.

<sup>6</sup> The Women's International Film Festival of Créteil has taken place every spring since 1979 at the Maison des Arts in Créteil. Unique in the world, it introduces and supports films by women directors from all countries. It aims to promote the female gaze on societies and to emphasize their different cultures. For the past several years, this Festival has developed a center for resources, the IRIS, which classifies and digitizes the archives from the annual events. This center offers over 6,000 films and numerous documents on the history of cinema and women for study year round. A thematic catalogue is available for consultation.

<sup>7</sup> Groupe Nigwal. Hatzfeld, Rot & Michel 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Cadé 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Thanks here to Tanguy Perron.

of films made by women. Future research may discover earlier examples, but film-making by women on this subject appeared during the 1960s, if still to a marginal degree, and became more frequent after 1968, even though some professions in the film industry had long been open to women. But the survey is not confined to women directors, and certain films directed by men, such as *Norma Rae*, *Coup pour coup* or, more recently, *Rêves d'usine* have been integrated into the group. Although few in number, their inclusion in the sample invites investigation as to the potential gender specificity of these films, in the form of possible avenues for exploration, pending a more systematic comparison. On the other hand, films showing the wives and companions of male workers were not selected, even when they were directed by a woman, as in the important documentary *Harlan County USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple (1976). Another choice was to venture beyond the boundaries of France, in order to outline comparisons with other countries of Europe, America or Asia, even if, here too, we are far from targeting a systematic group.

Over the course of the five decades considered, the status of this kind of film has evolved. The two earliest films identified, during the 1960s, were supported by institutions, the administration of the state cinema in Czechoslovakia during the period of liberalization, and the Italian communist party. In the years after 1968, a group of films appeared that to some extent steered clear of the established film industry, or opposed it. Their women directors often appropriated new technology, first the 16 mm camera with synchronized sound, then video cameras – economical techniques that required only minimal teams. Facilitating the proximity between film makers and the people being filmed, these techniques corresponded to the critical, protest-based or militant approaches of some of these moviemakers. Nonetheless, Hollywood did not disdain this current, since it gave Academy Awards to Barbara Kopple's documentary *Harlan County USA* in 1976, and then, in 1979, to the feature film *Norma Rae*. The 1980s saw a long period of silence on the subject in France while, elsewhere in the world, works appeared that prolonged and diversified questions inherited from the protest movement. The first decade of the new millennium saw a revival of French productions, notably documentaries, while the heritage coming from

elsewhere grew richer. Diversification in the means of diffusion has favored this renewed attention to the subject.

What emerges from the corpus as a whole is the blossoming of films on this subject, from the 1960-1970s on, in both Western and Eastern Europe as well as in North America. Such films share certain developments with French cinema, at least until the decade after 2000, when the obsessive anxiety over factory closures becomes a distinguishing feature of films made in Western Europe. Other films coming from actively industrializing countries in Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Korea, Vietnam) offer a distinct contrast during this last decade.

### **Works and days**

A few films trace the initiatives of women who, alone or as a group, are shown conquering their place in traditionally masculine occupations: a female dry-waller of Finnish origin in Canada (*Laila* 1982), a feminist group creating a frame-house company in California (*Raising the Roof*, 2005), a woman truck driver in Kerala (*Manjuben, Truck Driver*, 2002) or a female agricultural worker trimming Bordeaux vines (*Femmes précieuses*, 2005). But in a general way, the branches of activity depicted offer similarities. The images of car factories generally show the relatively commonplace presence of female workers in mixed workshops where they clearly remain minorities, working on the assembly line or “feeding the robots” (*Sochaux : cadences en chaîne*, 2010). The same minority presence is found at Michelin (*Paroles de Bibs*, 2001), inside a printing house (*Elefantenhaut*, 2009) and at the Legre-Mante chemical factory in Marseille, where, in truly antiquated workshops, the workers are manufacturing tartaric acid. Such chemical risks reflect a health hazard referred to in another film, *In future costruzione* (2011), in regard to the many workers who died from inhaling asbestos in a timeworn cement factory

Most of the films, however, show female workers performing activities in which they are usually in the majority, sometimes almost the only visible paid labor. This appears in the cabling or lining workshops at car factories (*Humain, trop humain*, 1974). It is also the

case at the Samsonite factory (*Liquidation totale*, 2009) and above all, in the three classic sectors of industry employing female workers. The first sector groups together precision assembly of household electrical appliances, watch making and electronics (*Essere donne*, 1965; *Lip*, 1973; *Grandin* 2010; *Calor, une usine en perspective*, 2005; *Mon travail c'est capital*, 2000; *Sauf la lutte*, 2002). The textile industry is another sector widely represented, whether fabric production or the garment industry, on all continents and in all periods. The activities vary from the hand weaving of artisanal tapestries (*Daughter of the Sun*, 2000), to Filipina seamstresses, "able to work under pressure," according to one job advertisement (*Ouvrières du monde*, 1998), or to sewing workers in Brittany, whom a manager taunts to the point of breakdown, while on camera (*Maryflo*, 1997). Finally, the food industry shows here, unvarnished, the harshest of faces: fruit and vegetable preserving (*Sassedkata*, 1990), and especially the slaughter and cutting up of poultry in Russia (*With Love, Lily*, 2003) and fish-gutting in France (*En avoir (ou pas)*, 1995; *Les filles de la sardine*, 2000). Young women workers in Tangier are in no doubt about which is best, as between the relatively fortunate textile group and those shelling shrimp (*Sur la planche*, 2011), the worst off.

Between these activities, working conditions differ, but the films tend to underscore their harshness. Animal canning factories are characterized by the coldness of the workshops and by the stabbing contact with chopped flesh, the odor of which seems to stick to the skin (*Sur la planche*, 2011). Noisy conditions are more prevalent (*Grandin* 2010; *Elefantenhaut*, 2009; *We Are Not Defeated*, 2006), and are particularly trying in weaving workshops. Unable to make herself heard, a woman worker has to write on a cardboard box to call her neighbors to join in solidarity (*Norma Rae*, 1979). Amongst the common characteristics of these factories, one finds the low wages paid, on all continents and in all periods: in Austria in 1918 (*Marianne. Ein Recht für Alle*, 1984), in the United States in the 1930s (*Union Maids*), in post-Soviet Russia, in industrialized Korea (*We Are Not Defeated*), in England before the Equal Pay Act of 1970 (*Made in Dagenham*, 2010), in Portugal in 1974 (*Nous, ouvrières de la Sogantal*, 2010) and in current day Southeast Asia (*Rêves d'ouvrières*, 2006; *Ouvrières du monde*, 2000). France is no exception, even if the garment

workers regret that their Filipina counterparts work for “a bowl of rice” and the latter, when they see on a video screen the houses, furniture and cars belonging to the former, conclude soberly: “There’s a big difference”. This low level of remuneration is usually based on the absence of recognized skills:

At Siemens, according to the terms of the contract, there are 2000 of us who ought to be promoted to category 3. But until now, only 150 have been moved up. This is truly shameful. (*Essere donne*, 1965).

Women are typically shown doing repetitive and limited tasks performed at a fast pace. When the organization of a garment factory (in *Coup pour coup*, 1972), or an Italian pasta manufacturer is still rudimentary, the browbeating of workers by the “forewoman”, who “screams at us all the time”, is enough to ruin one’s life. The canning factory in Tangier employs the same kind of overseeing forty years later, with a forewoman going down the lines, behind the backs of her shellers. The piece-work system (performance-related pay) is another mechanism for forcing the pace, as one French woman worker at Levi’s indicates:

The rate of work isn’t imposed by management, everyone works according to her needs. Me, I work according to my capacities, relative to my budget and my health. Because the required rate can give you all sorts of occupational illnesses, and also repetitive gestures, you have to see what that can do to your shoulders. There are people who have had shoulder operations because of that. All that for what? For higher performance, to try to have a decent wage.

Technology changes the kinds of constraints applied. An electronics assembly factory will be organized by mechanized belts, with women seated at an assembly line that moves past them at an automated pace. While the voice off of *Essere donne* (1965) refers to visual fatigue and nervous tension, one witness account mentions 18 welds a minute and fear of the time keeper. In the Calor gas factory in the early 2000s, the image soberly shows women who are similarly hunched over assembly operations which they appear to be doing calmly. Until a group of former workers, now retired, stops by and starts up a conversation. The evocation of the work rate of former times and of today is made in similar terms, and there is similar talk of pains in the joints. But when Taquin, a former worker, asks: “And if you want to stop the line, which



button do you press?” – “There isn’t one”. The height of sophistication comes, however, from Indonesia where, in a sewing factory working for Levi’s, computerized production tracking allows the forewoman to follow the bathroom breaks of each worker on a screen, and to “identify bad workers, excuse me, bad work”, in the words of the guide showing around western visitors, who immediately corrects her slip of the tongue.

The visual record of the severity of the work is matched by what the women have to say. Numerous films allow women workers to express themselves about the wear and tear they suffer. Some mention nervous strain, as in Fanny Gallot’s analysis of a scene from *Coup pour coup*, developed with the participation of the workers themselves<sup>10</sup>. In the case of Grandin, other women workers say something very similar:

I remember one very, very hard day. There had been several cases of nervous exhaustion on the assembly line, so that the line was stopped for a whole day. And that was because all of a sudden we were required to produce much more than usual in exactly the same working conditions. As soon as we walk in, we are asked for a lot, a maximum, at night when we go home we’re completely wiped out. That explains the nervous attacks. We can’t take any more. It’s nervous exhaustion, it comes from the noise, and the tension with the next part coming along before we’ve finished the one in our hands.

An Italian woman worker echoed these words:

After 8 hours, you go home broken. You can’t feel your bones any more, and people don’t realize that you die twenty years younger than you should.

As if this fatigue was a matter of course, a Latvian short film focusses, dumbfounded, on one women worker who has for twenty years, been breaking 20,000 eggs every day by hand without displeasure, separating the whites from the yolks (*Egg Lady*, 2010). While her performance is exceptional, she is nonetheless not alone in seeming to find a sort of calm in the workshop (*Sburale*, 1991). Certain films, sometimes made during disputes, mention or underline the attachment not only to having a job, but also to the work, to the

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<sup>10</sup> Gallot 2009.

activity exercised and to the social life surrounding it. The woman trade unionist in the French Levi's factory admits, in an aside, just before she has to make the assembly of female workers accept with pride their defeat in a dispute (*Ouvrières du monde*, 2000):

Now, I'm going to say goodbye to my machine. If we look around ourselves, it's going to be empty. To go where? Yeah, we were alright here, in spite of everything, we were alright. I'll miss my factory. It isn't mine, but still, I'll miss it.

### **Struggles and their polysemy**

The appeal of films about female workers comes not merely from the fact that these women work their fingers to the bone, but also that they rebel. Nearly half of the films evoke struggles, which are the central subjects of several productions, some of them historical, based on valuable legacies from the past, and combining archive images with interviews of former activists. The harshness of working conditions, the struggles undertaken from 1945 onward, and the construction of a female union movement are driving themes of the South Korean film, *We Are Not Defeated*: what it amply demonstrates, with abundant use of archival images and testimony, is a logic of continuity between past and present. Other films translate one generation's rediscovery of struggles led by those who came before, such as the Americans of the 1970s rediscovering the testimony and traces of the action of three pioneers of women's unionism in Chicago in the 1930s (*Union Maids*, 1976). Similarly, in 2009, a young French woman of Portuguese origin uses old film footage from the spring of 1974 (*Nous, ouvrières de la Sogantal*, 2010) in order to explore the circumstances of a prolonged occupation of a textile factory in the suburbs of Lisbon, and to question its women organizers. In a remarkable scene from the earlier period, a circle of very young recalcitrant female workers are listening to a man in suit and tie, hardly any older than themselves, who is none other than the Minister of Labor during the Carnation Revolution, and has come to give them a lecture:

Workers cannot make demands as you have done here. They can expose their problems... A union or a worker cannot demand this or that.  
— Can't he? — No he can't. He can present his problems, ask that they

be resolved... but not in the form of a demand as was done here. The possibility of finding solutions depends on the way that problems are presented.

Most of the depictions of labor disputes are, however, filmed in the present. Some conflicts have to do with wages, work conditions or the despotism of management, although few are actually triggered by these motives: ones that include *Tout va bien* (2010); *Made in Dagenham* (2010); *Maryflo* (2010); *Une part du ciel* (2001); *On n'est pas des steaks hachés* (2002). Filmed struggles are often composed like sagas, rich in twists and turns. The triggering of a strike, altercations, factory occupations, the various initiatives that follow, are presented in more explicit scenarios in most of the fiction films than they are in documentaries. But the latter sometimes present an astonishing rawness. The boss in *Maryflo* (1997), who insults the strikers after having harassed them at their machines, displays such virulence that the viewer believes for quite some time that it is all a joke, an illusion reinforced by the propensity of this man to appeal to the camera to witness his outbursts. His (female) boss is no less colorful, a woman who, once the manufacturing has been relocated elsewhere, declares: "With factories you get problems, but without factories, it's boring." From one continent to the next, images of strikers, demonstrators, stand-offs and confrontations with the police present a revitalized and feminized image of the class struggle. In the 1970s, this image, even when it related to defending jobs (*Lip; Grandin*), was still characterized by a degree of self-confidence, as in the films on the famous case of the Lip watch factory, where the loss of employment formed to some extent a backdrop for dealing with other questions.

#### *Between protest and alternative*

Over the course of time, the corpus of the films concerned has tended to separate into two types, geographically distinct one from the other. In Asia, and perhaps on other continents, the theme of protest is continued in films which consider jobs, working conditions and wages. One documentary with an intriguing title, *Lesbian Factory*, follows a group of Filipinas under a temporary contract in Taiwanese companies, fighting for their back pay. In Western Europe on the other hand, the *loss* of jobs and the closing down of factories have

taken on critical importance, in the form of a threat, as a present reality, or as the echo of a past trauma. French examples of this phenomenon are the cases of Epeda and Moulinex, Levi's and Starissima, Samsonite and Legre-Mante, often connected to relocation abroad. Representations of these cases in film differ primarily by the circumstances of the factory's fortunes. Managerial strategies are shown as varying, sometimes marked by lengthy preparation of workers' mindsets, other times imposing abrupt shutdowns. According to circumstance, their tactics may take the form of interventions in the media, bland interviews, or impromptu face-to-face meetings with strikers. The dynamics of worker mobilization and the modalities of action are presented in even greater detail, and in some cases constitute the sole object of the film: assemblies and debates, more demonstrations, disruptive appearances in public spaces, debates, etc. The differences also have to do with the cinematographic choices of the directors. Some of the films perpetuate an alternation of sequences shot live and off stage interviews, in keeping with the type of documentary that took hold in the 1960s and 1970s. Others prefer to capture, in the course of the action, informal exchanges between women workers, which begin imperceptibly and little by little to reshape opinions: assemblies then formalize them in speeches and collective decisions. Finally, some films tend to situate themselves in a time after the struggle. This is the case of a reflective Belgian film, in which factories are no more than architectural ruins (*Devenir*, 2011). In Italy in 2011, a young woman worker, threatened by the closing of her factory, realizes that her familiar surroundings contain the remains of another, much larger factory, now in the final stages of destruction, for the greater profit of speculative tourist building (*In future costruzione*).

Several films offer a concrete alternative: the cooperative. The idea had already formed the basis in 1936 of a tragi-comedy, *Le crime de Monsieur Lange*, in which Jean Renoir treated somewhat lightheartedly a short-lived initiative by a group of seamstresses. The films on the Lip watch factory in the 1970s, paradoxically, barely mention the cooperative formula which has nonetheless been attached to this name. But the principle of cooperative manufacturing, sales and payment is found in the case of Sogantal. In the 1970s again,

cooperation features in the filmed story of an all-women outfit, a group of women carpenters, fed up with craft and trade union discrimination, who created their own company in 1978 (*Raising the Roof*). Later, the same idea is at the center of an Italian fiction film tracing the industrial, managerial, and emotional fluctuations of a female collective forming a textile cooperative in Milan in the 1980s (*Gentili signore*). Two other films, one fiction and one documentary, consider the process by which the personnel of a company in liquidation opts to regroup as a cooperative (*L'Amour sur un fil*; *Entre nos mains*). The subtlety of the latter film comes from the close attention paid by the director to the various processes by which the women workers reinvent the project in the first decade of 2000. Once more, the initiative was sabotaged by the managerial collusion between banks, commercial rivals, and customers in the chain of distribution, according to a class mentality made explicit in the words of the boss of Maryflo, who decided to close her factory: "They [the workers] want it all. Let them figure it out. That way, they can be dignified all the way to the dole office."

### **Gender at work and work of gender**

As expected, some films depict discord between men and women in the factory, including conflict between male and female workers. Some women refuse the work medal that their bosses want to pin on them (*Revers*), others sing to their thunderstruck [male] boss, "And now, big cheapskate, big jackass, stick your dough up your ass, up to the last penny" (*Nous, ouvrières de la Sogantal*). On the whole, it is the movies from the 1970s that expose with most clarity the gender contradictions, often associated with professional, hierarchical, or class conflicts. Nonetheless, an Austrian film made in 1984 underlines the internal conflict within the workforce. On returning from the 1914-1918 war, the men, struggling to find work, wanted to expel from the workshops the women who had implanted themselves there (*Marianne. Ein Recht für Alle*). The heroine, who is a worker's wife as well as union representative, finds herself caught in the dilemma. In a more targeted way, several films present a more or less pronounced masculine ascendancy within the trade unions and during labor disputes (*Rêves*

*d'usine, 300 jours de colère*). Others show how the disputes offer an occasion to challenge gender relations. It's not a new phenomenon. Already, as can be seen in the archive-based scenario about militant American working women in the 1930s (*Union Maids*, 1976), the fight against the sexist prejudices of male workers and union representatives toward the women who had fought alongside them was part of the very construction of unionism. Over the course of the 1970s, we see this conflict appearing closer up, with more or less virulence depending on the situation and according to the film.

Challenges to union leaders are found in some films (*Coup pour coup*, 1972). The documentary *Quand les femmes ont pris la colère* (1977) traces the action, in the Loire-Atlantique *département* in western France, of wives on behalf of their worker husbands, the repression they encounter, and the mobilization that follows. One of the militant women later looked back on it to conclude:

I discovered that we also have little conflicts with the men, workers, unionists, even political militants. They have trouble recognizing the strength that women can bring to certain fights. Women are prepared to push open doors when the men themselves are afraid of being cornered. They [the men] need, as the saying goes, a bit of education.

On this point, the feminist gaze offers particular acuity, for example, the films Carole Roussopoulos made about the Lip case. Monique Piton's monologue is, in this respect, a text worthy of an anthology (*Lip V. Monique et Christine*, 1976):

I'm going to tell you a little about what goes on at Lip. But I'm going to replace the word "men" by the word "white", and the word "women" by the word "Arabs". So each time I say Arabs, I mean women.

In this picaresque film, the images of work and those of the ongoing struggle are interspersed with numerous forms of male domination, from deciding who gets to speak to the composition of a delegation to the police station. The difficulty of inserting gender conflicts and the issue of rape into assembly debates, or the discreet evocation of conjugal violence is a new element in the years around 1968 (*Lip V. Monique et Christine; Quand les femmes ont pris la colère*, 1976). Finally, women workers develop certain modes of action, most notably songs

and theater<sup>11</sup>, which are more frequently found in factories with a female workforce (*Nous les ouvrières de la Sogantal*, 2010; *Entre nos mains*, 2010). A former Portuguese woman factory worker commented on how valuable these could be:

You know, they're inspired rimes... These rimes were made up by everyone. I can't say exactly, but there were a lot of us and each one had her word to say. Suffering feeds our poetic vein - that must be it. There is a lot of feeling behind it.

A number of films look at the gender relations in which women workers are entangled outside of work, as described by Cecilia Mangani in 1965 (*Essere donne*): the double shift annihilates the emancipation brought about by factory life relative to the patriarchal attitudes and exhausting housework experienced at home. Later films show challenges to this inequality of gender relations within the couple, which may emerge during labor disputes. In many cases, women will make their decisions about initiatives discussed at the factory "individually", that is, by a discussion within the family (*Entre nos mains*). Nonetheless, the families evolve in various ways (*Quand les femmes ont pris la colère*). Some are strengthened:

It brought me closer to my wife; it's wonderful what she did. (...) I was expecting more the reaction of a little, normal woman, the little wife of a working man, who stays at home and says, "I'm sick of this, I've had enough of eating potatoes, you gotta go back to work".

*Norma Rae* offers, on the contrary, the archetype of growing tension between the heroine and her husband, while she gets along better and better with her union representative (although this is depicted as a purely professional relationship). In a parallel scenario, a kindly foreman might replace the generous trade unionist, as opposed to a brutal husband (*Sassedkata*, 1990). Others depict the obstacles placed by the husband in the way of his wife's militancy, or a separation: "After what happened at Tréfimétaux, it doesn't work for us any more. My husband didn't earn enough money, so he left and was transferred." The wife follows him, but they are unable to avoid a break-up: "Now, I'm fine, I have a job, I do what I can with my kids,

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<sup>11</sup> The importance of songs in workers' strikes was underscored in Gallot 2012.

I feel good, I have my quiet little job, my kids with me". Beyond these crises or break-ups, several films also consider private life by following the habitual loneliness of women workers, whether as employees of Moulinex or in a Russian slaughterhouse, a Bordeaux vineyard, a Latvian pastry shop or an Austrian printing house (*Mon travail c'est capital*, 2000; *Femmes précaires*, 2005; *Egg Lady*, 2000; *Elefantenhaut*, 2009). Sometimes the working-class heroine brings up her children alone (*Laisse un peu d'amour*, 1997), sometimes she has to care for her aging mother or elderly father. The difficulty in finding a compatible partner may never be evoked or, on the contrary, sometimes provides the basic framework for a determined quest, which may be treated in jocular mode (*With love, Lilly*, 2003). Finally, one way of life presented, the hostels for young women workers, may look like a hangover from former days (*Un sac de puces*, 1962). But the phenomenon is commonplace in the new industries of Vietnam or Taiwan. The (female) director of the Taiwanese film, *Lesbian factory* (2010), in the course of one labor dispute, discovered the propensity of young immigrant women crammed into Spartan dormitories to find comfort in a homosexuality that might fade away when the end of their contract disperses the personnel.

### **Head low, head high**

Protesting against the tear-jerking program made by a television channel about workers at Samsonite, the director of *Liquidation totale* (2009) explains that she has by contrast set out to underline their combativeness, their resistance, their courage. More than the subject matter of the film, which is soberly treated, it is the argument which recalls the heroic vein of the films produced in the 1970s, and is found again in more recent productions by both male and female directors (*300 jours de colère*, 2002; *Garder la tête haute*, 2006). Without always explicitly taking this approach, most film makers agree in accentuating the dignity of the women workers represented, and try to express sympathy without condescension, which they achieve by



different concrete choices<sup>12</sup>. In recent decades, one frequent approach has been to film from the standpoint of accompanying the workers, rather than by acting as their spokesperson. Thus, when the Vietnamese woman director of the film *Rêves d'ouvrières* (2006), armed with a light camera, asks a woman worker in a dormitory in Hanoi about the conditions, the latter tells her to leave the camera aside and to come sit next to her so that she can “talk to her like a sister”. In complying, the director agrees to adopt a relationship of proximity and equality.

Age is a significant indicator of the difficulty of being a woman factory worker. Most of the younger women featured are seeking at all costs to avoid the factory and the life of an assembly line worker, and might take any risk to achieve this (*Sur la planche*, 2011; *La vie rêvée des anges*, 1998). In *En avoir (ou pas)*, the heroine lashes out at her male partner, a building laborer, paradoxically refusing to go on seeing him: “Anyway, you’re not made for me. Too broke, just a laborer. You’re shabby. That’s what I’d say.” To escape her destiny, she has left a fish cannery in Boulogne-sur-Mer, the smell of which she long believes stays on her hands, and has traveled across France. Escape like this is in some cases dealt with from the angle of a passion for some leisure activity, in which all hopes are invested (cf. *Secret Society*, 2001, where the passion in question is for Sumo wrestling). Acceptance of one’s occupation does not come without effort, as this exchange between the film director and the worker (both women) demonstrates (*Calor, une usine en perspective: Rovetta, le dragon et la pieuvre*, 2005):

I asked you what trade you operated at Calor, and you corrected me, saying, “Ah, you mean my job”. You mean there’s a difference? – To have a trade means you’ve learned a skill. Me, all I’ve ever done is repetitive work. That’s not a trade. – You mentioned your daughter. When she had to give her parents’ occupation, and she asked you, what did you say? – I called myself a factory worker in front of the other pupils’ parents. I didn’t much like saying that. I oughtn’t to have minded though. I don’t have to be ashamed about being a factory worker. It’s honorable, I’m not doing anything dishonorable. When little girls say my mommy is a school teacher, a secretary... It’s stupid, but... Still, I’m not

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<sup>12</sup> Their preoccupation in many cases is similar to that of Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron. *Le Savant et le Populaire. Misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature*. Paris: Gallimard/Le Seuil. 1989.

ashamed to be doing it. It's honest, it's satisfying, I get my pay. But sometimes the look of other people. Depending on who you're with: oh right, you work in a factory. My husband tells me that I shouldn't be like that. But I am, I feel it.

This same worker tells the film-maker how, in her childhood, she was very proud of her mother's occupation, a really skilled one in this case, of dressmaker. As if in echo, a Flemish woman at Levi's tells how she put on her best clothes for her first day at the factory (*Ouvrières du monde*, 2000). Should we see these examples as spelling the end of the dignity of the industrial worker, something that remained strong until the beginning of de-industrialization and the crumbling of the labor movement? Another testimony, from a communist activist in 1976, reminds us not to view that past as too rose-tinted (*Quand les femmes ont pris la colère*, 1976):

What I'm fighting for is to be happy. To be a woman who's comfortable in her own skin. Not boastful about herself, but... The thing I would like the most, would be to have a job I liked. Not to be ashamed to say, "I'm a warehouse packer." Anyone who could bring us that, something like that, it would be a political change. And I think that afterwards, relations between men and women would be transformed. It will never be perfect, we chase after perfection, without ever reaching it, but...

In this definition, where once more we find combined private and public, work and what is outside work, the quest for dignity is located in a different time-frame – here, the future – whereas the present is simply a synonym for dissatisfaction.

*Translated by Melissa WITTMER*

## Filmography

**1936:** *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, Jean Renoir, France (♂). **1962:** *Un sac de puces*, Vera Chytilová, Czechoslovakia. **1965:** *Essere donna*, Cecilia Mangini, Italy. **1973:** *Lip 1. Monique (Lip)*, Carole Roussopoulos,

France. **1972:** *Coup pour coup*, Marin Karmitz, France (♂). *Tout va bien*, Jean-Luc Godard, France (♂). **1974:** *Humain trop humain*, Louis Malle, France (♂). **1975:** *Grandin*, Nat Lilienstein, France. **1976:** *Quand les femmes ont pris la colère*, Soisig Chappedelaine and René Vauthier, France; *Lip V. Monique et Christine*, Carole Roussopolos, France; *Union Maids*, Julia Reichert, James Klein, Miles Mogulescu, USA. **1979:** *Norma Rae*, Martin Ritt, USA (♂). **1982:** *Laila*, Diane Beaudry, Canada. **1984:** *Marianne. Ein Recht für Alle*, Käthe Kratz, Austria. **1987:** *Naplo Szerelememnek*, Marta Meszaros, Hungary. **1988:** *Komplizinnen*, Margit Czenki, West Germany. **1989:** *Gentili signore*, Adriana Monti, Italy. **1990:** *Sassedkata (La voisine)*, Adela Peeva, Bulgaria. **1991:** *Shurale*, Renita et Hannes Lintorp, USSR/Estonia. **1992:** *Revers*, Daisy Lamothe, France. **1995:** *En avoir (ou pas)*, Laetitia Masson, France. **1997:** *Laisse un peu d'amour*, Zaïda Ghorab-Volta, France; *Rue des filles de Chantelle*, Danielle Lefebvre and Dominique Ménard, France; *Maryflo* (série Striptease), Olivier Lamour, France (♂). **1998:** *La vie rêvée des anges*, Erick Zonca, France (♂). **2000:** *Mon travail, c'est capital*, Marie-Pierre Bretas, Raphaël Girardot and Laurent Salters, France; *Les filles de la sardine*, Marie Hélie, France. *Daughter of the Sun*, Maryam Shahriar, Iran; *Egg Lady*, Una Celma, Latvia; *Ouvrières du monde*, Marie-France Collard, Belgium. *L'amour sur un fil*, Michaela Watteaux, France. **2001:** *Paroles de Bibs*, Jocelyne Lemaire-Darnaud, France; *Une part du ciel*, Bénédicte Liénard, Belgium ; *Secret Society*, Imogen Kimmel, Germany ; *Rêves d'usine*, Luc Decaster, France (♂). **2002:** *On n'est pas des steacks hachés*, Anne Galland, Alina Arouali, France ; *Sauf la lutte*, Catherine Tréfousse, France; *Manjuben, Truck Driver*, Sherna Dastur, India; *Ouvrier, c'est pas la classe*, Patrick Jan, France (♂). *300 jours de colère*, Marcel Trillat, France (♂). **2003:** *With Love, Lilly*, Larisa Sadilova, Russia. **2005:** *Calor, une usine en perspective: Rovetta, le dragon et la pierre*, Martine Arnaud-Goddet, France ; *Raising the Roof*, Veronica Selver and Françoise Flamant, USA; *Femmes précaires*, Marcel Trillat, France (♂). **2006:** *Rêves d'ouvrières*, Tran Phuong Thao, Vietnam; *We Are Not Defeated*, Lee Hye-Ran, South Korea. **2009:** *Liquidation totale*, Hélène Desplanques, France; *Elefantenhaut*, Ulrike Putzer, Severin Fiala, Austria. **2010:** *Made in Dagenham*, Nigel Cole, UK (♂). *Sochaux, cadences en chaîne*, Laurence Jourdan, France; *Entre nos mains*, Mariana

Otero, France; *Lesbian Factory*, Susan Chen, Taiwan; *Nous, ouvrières de la Sogantal*, Nadejda Tilhou, Portugal. **2011:** *Disparaissez, les ouvriers*, Christine Thépenier and Jean-François Priester, France; *Devenir*, Loredana Bianconi, Belgium; *In futura costruzione*, Giulia Casagrande, Italy; *Sur la planche*, Leila Kilani, Morocco/ Germany/France. *Garder la tête haute*, Martine Gonthié, France.

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