

American Factory and the Difficulties of Documenting Neoliberalism

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Abstract

Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert's documentary *American Factory*, a project purchased by Netflix and distributed by Barack and Michelle Obama's Higher Ground Productions, won the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature at the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020. It is a stunning and poignant movie about how a Chinese company comes to establish an auto glass factory in Moraine, Ohio, on the site of a former GM production plant. In light of *American Factory's* critical success, this essay focuses on the contemporary capacity of the documentary form to capture the specific logic of socioeconomic and geopolitical contradictions. This is explored through the rubric of neoliberalism, especially as it complicates how a story of a factory might be told. It also links the style of documenting workers to a longer cinematic history.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, labor, China, Obama, representation

Introduction

Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert's documentary *American Factory*, a project purchased by Netflix and distributed by Barack and Michelle Obama's Higher Ground Productions, won the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature at the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020.¹ It is a stunning and poignant movie about how a Chinese company comes to establish an auto-glass factory in Moraine, Ohio, on the site of a former General Motors (GM) production plant. For some, it may not better Reichert and Bognar's other work on US labor and gender issues and, as they aver, it is strenuously apolitical.²

1. The awards ceremony took place on February 9, 2020, at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, Los Angeles. Bognar and Reichert received their Oscar from the actor/producer Mark Ruffalo. Both filmmakers had their heads shaved. Reichert has been struggling against terminal cancer for two years. Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, dir., *American Factory* (Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2019).

2. See Alissa Wilkinson, "Work Is Going Global: *American Factory's* Directors Explain How They Captured Its Challenges," Vox, August 21, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/8/21/20812012/american-factory-interview-netflix-reichert-bognar>.

Reichert is no stranger to the Oscars: several of her films (*Union Maids* [1976], with Jim Klein and Miles Mogulescu; *Seeing Red* [1984] with Klein; and *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* [2010], with Bognar—a preface to the Oscar winner based on the same factory) have been nominated for awards before, and Reichert is one of the top US documentarians of the last fifty years (even her early work such as *Growing Up Female* and *Methadone* strike one as radically rigorous, resonant, and politically incisive).³ The economic aura of Hollywood will hover at the edge of this critique but here we will focus on the contemporary capacity of the documentary form to capture the specific logic of socioeconomic and geopolitical contradictions.



Figure 9.1: Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert filming *American Factory*. Source: © David Holm, Netflix, 2020.

3. In 2019, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) presented a retrospective of Reichert's contributions to cinematic history: Museum of Modern Art, "Julia Reichert: 50 Years in Film," MoMa, May 30–June 8, 2019, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/film/5068>. Also, see Jim Klein, Miles Mogulescu, Julia Reichert, dir., *Union Maids* (Newburgh, NY: New Day Films, 1976); Jim Klein and Julia Reichert, dir., *Seeing Red* (Newburgh, NY: New Day Films, 1984); Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, dir., *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (New York: HBO, 2010); Jim Klein and Julia Reichert, dir., *Growing Up Female* (Newburgh, NY: New Day Films, 1971); and Jim Klein and Julia Reichert, dir., *Methadone* (Newburgh, NY: New Day Films, 1974).

Neoliberalism

In order to understand both the achievements of *American Factory* and the problem of representing the major themes in play, it may be useful to consider the political and economic ideology that forms its backdrop and space of contention. Neoliberalism set out to break the hold of Keynesian nostrums on the function of capital markets and the state.⁴ For at least the past forty years, using a heady mix of free trade, globalization, and deregulation, neoliberalism has significantly changed the landscape of production and consumption, and it is hardly extraordinary that culture both expresses and resists this hegemony in political economy. It is certainly the case that cinema as an industry is broadly symptomatic of such changes, but to what extent does film offer a counter logic at the level of form? Several studies have already noted the ways in which documentary and film in general relate to the homilies associated with faith in market forces,⁵ but can a critique of neoliberal globalization as a subject also confront the perquisites of marketization in the form of documentary itself?⁶ Rather than place the burden of this aesthetic struggle on a single film, I would like to think of *American Factory* as being caught up within significant structural antinomies of representation, for which some of its solutions are both prescient and problematic in addressing, for instance, the future of the US workplace in a world of globalization. Neoliberalism can be told as story by documentary but not in a way that necessarily changes the manner in which that story is told.

One way to negotiate the intervention of *American Factory* is to consider its forthright attempt to make tangible the material conditions of globalization concretized in the opening of a factory by Fuyao Glass Industry Group Co., Ltd., (a major Chinese corporation and globally the seventh largest producer of auto glass).⁷ The very title,

4. There is a veritable publishing industry dedicated to the exegesis of neoliberalism. Some useful texts in this regard include Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017); Matthew Eagleton-Pierce, *Neoliberalism: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2016); and David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

5. See, for instance, Daniel Worden, *Neoliberal Nonfictions: The Documentary Aesthetic from Joan Didion to Jay-Z* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020); Anna Cooper, "Neoliberal Theory and Film Studies," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 17, no. 3 (2019): 265–77; Michael J. Blouin, *Magical Thinking, Fantastic Film, and the Illusions of Neoliberalism* (London: Springer, 2016); Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner, eds., *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2011); and Shakti Jaising, "Cinema and Neoliberalism: Network Form and the Politics of Connection in Icíar Bollaín's *Even the Rain*," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 56, (Winter 2014–2015).

6. While such questions may not drive the filming decisions of the documentarians, it can affect the editing process (see note 2). In general, Bognar and Reichert aimed to represent a multiplicity of viewpoints from their almost-three years of shooting and twelve hundred hours of film. For Netflix, this certainly helped smooth issues around marketing and exhibition and, at last count, the documentary was available in at least twenty-eight languages—a remarkable achievement that accentuates the importance of globalization as an underlying theme.

7. For basic background on the emergence of Fuyao in the auto-glass industry, see Forbes, "Fuyao Glass Industry Group," Forbes, accessed December 24, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/companies/fuyao-glass-industry-group/#3b540a5124a2>.

American Factory, announces the paradoxical dilemma of such a project. Does *American* reclaim a historical identity for industrial production and does that sound not unlike “Make America Great Again”—an ideology and policy vigorously opposed by Reichert and Bognar (although a phrase enunciated by Jeff Liu, the Chinese manager of the factory in the current film)? Interestingly, in *The Last Truck*, one of the GM workers about to be fired says, “Let’s take care of our own people here. Let’s make it here, buy it here. Take care of our own.” Is this not the sentiment behind a slogan such as “America First”? “Popeye,” the nickname of a vital interlocutor in *The Last Truck* (he also provided some of the factory interior film when GM refused access to the documentarians), notes that Walmart does not sell anything that is made in the United States (actually, Walmart sells a lot of groceries that are made in the United States, although 80 percent of its total goods suppliers are Chinese⁸). Popeye continues, “We don’t have a manufacturing base anymore—it’s going to be foreign-owned.” This way of viewing the world serves as a reminder that, in the 2016 presidential election, Trump won Ohio by 8.13 percent (a 10 percent swing—he also won the state’s union vote by 9 percent).⁹ To call the factory owned and run by Fuyao “American” is simultaneously to identify and misunderstand the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Reichert and Bognar’s documentary demonstrates this problem, which, for narrative, can be indicated in the contradictory logics of neoliberalism itself rather than primarily in the language of image.

To clarify this further: neoliberalism is not a monolith. It is not simply a mantra or a slogan (and cannot be defeated by one). It is not a single directive and, in true postmodern or post-postmodern parataxis, it does not submit to logical location (this is why, within actually existing globalization, the United States is not solely American; China is not only Chinese). As a further example of the peculiar locution of location, Occupy Wall Street saw no point in actually occupying Wall Street, since all of the stock-trading servers are elsewhere and global finance has no street address. You cannot beat an algorithm with a barricade, but the latter is at least photogenic, representable.¹⁰ If neoliberalism has dimension, it is one of relation, specifically and primarily, of complex economic exchange. It emphasizes individual entrepreneurship, private property, and the decisiveness of markets. It never merely abjures the state but desires one that supports its operative logic strategically. In fact, it can appear sovereign

8. There is much contention over the exact proportions of Walmart’s product sourcing. On its website, the company claims that its domestic purchases account for two-thirds of the total, but obviously the dollar amount is not distributed evenly for goods procured. Nevertheless, the company promises to purchase \$250 billion of US goods per year by 2023.

9. Despite victory, the margins were hardly uniform across the state. In Montgomery County, for instance, where Dayton is located, Trump won by less than two thousand votes. My point here is that the sentiments expressed by the local workforce are relatively consistent with Trump’s appeals to his base at that time.

10. Obviously, the political tactics of the Occupy Movement were varied and situational and, at times, included taking space itself. For an interesting if informal account of how to “occupy” at the level of economics, see Richard D. Wolff, *Occupy the Economy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012).

and nonsovereign, nationalist and wildly postnationalist, without ever giving up on its central tenets of flexible accumulation and what David Harvey refers to as “accumulation by dispossession.”¹¹ Shade it a little further toward markets and it becomes quasi-libertarian; color it with more policy and it becomes benevolent state capitalism; mix in some arch ethnocentrism and it can sanction forced labor. Because there is no scenario in which neoliberalism could fully deliver redistribution as public good, it cannot embrace postcapitalism of any kind (which of course does not negate the possibility of it as a precondition). If, as some contend, neoliberalism is on the wane, folks at the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the majority of central banks are not yet losing sleep over the prospect.¹² If capital is “dead,” as Mackenzie Wark offers in the title of one of his books, or capitalism is a “zombie,” as Chris Harman puts it in the title of one of his, we have reached the afterlife before actual extinction, and we live in a world of speculation as veritable specters (a novel reinterpretation of Marx on dead labor).¹³ This may not sublimate in advance the possibility of narrating neoliberalism via documentary and/or social realism, as Reichert and Bogner effectively do, or perhaps even displace, it to a degree, through emphasis on human and humanist empathy, which is very much in evidence in *American Factory*, but it deeply questions how the globe gets told and who, from within neoliberalism and within any transition from it, gets to tell it.

The Factory Today

To the extent that the ideologies of neoliberalism get sutured at the level of information, *American Factory* attempts to tell a different story, a mode of counter factualism, whose very anachronism might function as an intervention. It is almost as if because the film does not have time to say, or is not in the time to say it, it disturbs its own field of representation.¹⁴ To some extent, this is indicative of the immanence of labor in the

11. Harvey is interested in, among other important factors, the spatial and territorial desires of neoliberal accumulation. See David Harvey, “The ‘New’ Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession,” *Socialist Register* 40 (2004): 63–87.

12. For a critique of the centrality of these institutions, see, for instance, Richard Peet, *The Unholy Trinity: The IMF, World Bank and WTO* (London: Zed, 2009); Eric Toussaint and Damien Miller, *Debt, the IMF, and the World Bank: Sixty Questions, Sixty Answers* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010); and Ngaire Woods, *The Globalizers: The IMF, the World Bank, and Their Borrowers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

13. See McKenzie Wark, *Capitalism Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (London: Verso, 2019); and Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (London: Bookmarks, 2009).

14. The problem of time in documentary film is well discussed. I am thinking in particular of temporal noncoincidence in how film “documents” and the extent to which this can be materially specified. For work on the phenomenological implications of such temporality, see Mahlin Wahlberg, *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). For the most part, *American Factory* follows spatial disjunction/continuity between the United States and China but it is difficult to relate the longue *durée* of neoliberal globalization as a function of living memory alone. In what ways could one edit not just the footage of the film but the time of neoliberalism itself?

production of the documentary in contrast to the form of labor to which it otherwise dedicates representationality; yet this is compounded by a kind of temporal disjunction, as if US factory labor can only exist as a phantasm that floats among the ruins of postindustrialism.¹⁵ Work today is obviously never only factory bound (and never was, of course), but because wage labor saturates the socius, it places greater pressure on a narrative hook, a mode of distinction at once vulnerable to aesthetics of displacement. One of the many achievements of *American Factory* is that, in the twenty-first century, it dares to show a factory with labor by workers laboring within it (a cinematic anomaly even at the height of industrialization and rarer still in an economy dominated by service industries). Much commentary has attempted to slot the visual aesthetics of *American Factory* into a veritable Cold War discourse that pits China against the United States, a kind of bad exploitation of the worker versus an eminently humane version (which is at least one reason why one needs to see Bognar and Reichert's *The Last Truck* too). Even at the annual World Economic Forum at Davos, there have been calls for a more fair, equal, and sustainable capitalism, and an early booster of neoliberal rapacity, Joseph Stiglitz, can today appear on the progressive talk show *Democracy Now!*, urge Apple to pay taxes, and believe in a kinder, gentler capitalism.¹⁶ Postcolonial states of the Global South are increasingly overdetermined by this geopolitical tension/whiplash, which, for some, is preferable to rejecting the substance of a false opposition (false only because the winner is still capitalism).¹⁷ Certainly, there are moments in the documentary when the narrative comes close to endorsing a stark China/US division. In a training seminar, when the Chinese expert on US labor relations tells the Chinese workers, "We're better than them [Americans]," there is a strong possibility that Chinese viewers might agree while US viewers may discover a complementary reflex of jingoistic or xenophobic opprobrium. Certainly, the narrative fights this hopeless binary, but it is not easy because its very form seems to edit out the conditions of its own possibility. Could the absence of such frames or framing be a mode of documentary interpellation, a way

15. Phantom labor usually describes undocumented or unaccounted labor, often deployed to exploit lax rules over migrant workers and terms of employment or else refers to various scams to claim wages for workers who do not otherwise exist. Here I am thinking more of the spectral remains of industrial labor left behind by strategic deindustrialization; for instance, a real person with skills rendered ethereal by changes in the form or location of work. As Reichert indicates at the end of this piece, such workers are specters, not just of what was but of what could be.

16. There are many examples of this kind of thinking, but Stiglitz is particularly noteworthy because of his expertise and the gusto with which he argues the case. See, for instance, Joseph Stiglitz, *People, Power, and Profits: Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

17. Aihwa Ong is not the first to note how neoliberalism collapses inside/outside demarcations, even if several critics, including Harvey as she points out, seem to reinscribe an earlier dichotomy of the West and the rest. See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). For an alternative reading of both postcolonialism and globalization in this regard, see Sankaran Krishna, *Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009). If indeed the Global South is being drawn into a new Cold War between China and the United States, it is over the grounds of capitalist modernity rather than through alternatives to the same.

of hailing the underlying relation the antinomy of *American Factory* otherwise represents? Is it useful to think of documentary as symptomatic of what it cannot convey through images? While the pertinence of the nonvisualized is a standard approach to the possibility of the image (in the off screen and off frame, for instance), here it bears crucially on how temporality is perceived, how the “event” of the factory is managed, situated, captured.¹⁸

The History of the Factory

There is, then, the history of this factory. Briefly, Moraine Assembly began as a Frigid-air production facility in 1951—a key moment of US working-class prosperity (after the hardships of the Second World War and previously in the Great Depression) when workers could start to buy the appliances they made. When GM came to this suburb of Dayton in the late seventies, they decided to go big, and the factory became a behemoth larger than the Pentagon, with a capacity to produce over two hundred and fifty thousand cars and trucks a year. Yet, at this very moment, political economy was undergoing key structural changes (in part produced by the upheavals of the early seventies: the oil crisis, the end of the gold standard and Bretton Woods, automated trading, and a growing perception that state-sponsored social-safety nets and unions stood in the way of robust accumulation on a global scale).¹⁹ Not long after the first Chevrolets rolled off the line at Moraine, president Ronald Reagan was already working hard to reduce state and corporate responsibility and ramp up antiunionism. In 1978 China, Deng Xiaoping’s Four Modernizations program kickstarted capital accumulation and joint ventures, soon followed by rapid intensification of the industrial base, the unleashing of a vast reserve of Chinese labor power, and a flood of foreign direct investment and foreign-currency reserves.²⁰ One of the early victims of the new global order was the US steel industry, leaving the greater Cleveland area and the Mons Valley of Pennsylvania

18. *Event* here has to be seen in contrast to Alain Badiou’s conception, which philosophically (and perhaps mathematically) more or less ties *Event* to a rupture in the conditions of Being, and is thus transformative. Here, event exists as potential and perhaps could only figure in Badiou’s idea as a future conditional. The factory is indeed a historical site, as I detail, but the adequacy of its meaning also arrives from the future, which may necessitate alternative visual registers. This theme is connected to that indicated elsewhere as precarity and automation. It is also related to Badiou’s following comment: “In France, where we’re under the illusion that we live without workers now, we’re aware, thanks to the cinema, that workers still exist in China. A great Chinese cinema has grown up around this very question: What is becoming of our factories and our workers? Such testimony about the world is unique to cinema; no documentary-style reporting can ever be a substitute for it.” See, Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

19. This narrative can be told in several ways. A good example is that of Arrighi’s *The Long Twentieth Century*, especially part four in which he considers the changed dynamics of the US economy within financial globalization. See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994).

20. The Four Modernizations do not constitute an uncontroversial topic in recent Chinese history. For an economic perspective, see Satyananda J. Gabriel, *Chinese Capitalism and the Modernist Vision* (London: Routledge, 2006), especially chapter 8.

some of the original postindustrial wastelands (pertinently, several complete steelworks were dismantled, shipped by container vessels, and then rebuilt in China). Coincidentally, beginning in 1982, the heartland was visited by the Japanese car industry, and anti-Japanese populism quickly bubbled close to the surface of US culture (seen in films like *Gung Ho*, *Black Rain*, etc.²¹). Yet, the reason Moraine did not close earlier was because labor costs and demand were relatively stable domestically. What changed?

Globalization rapidly reduced labor costs per unit in the car industry. Audi recognized this in China by the late eighties (the Audi 100 was then made in Changchun), but they did not move more aggressively because of legal and economic restrictions on private car ownership in China. By the time GM got their investment strategy together and built a factory in China, companies like Volkswagen (VW) were already well entrenched. At last measurement, GM now has ten joint ventures in China, two wholly owned factories, and fifty-eight thousand workers, each of whom costs less than a quarter of their US counterparts in the United Auto Workers (UAW). In 2018, GM produced over 3.5 million vehicles in China.²² On the outskirts of Shanghai, the Cadillac Jinqiao factory alone has a capacity to produce one hundred and sixty thousand cars a year. As part of its strategy in China, GM first marketed a US cast off, the Buick Regal, with the logic being that Chinese executives would buy or requisition large sedans of this kind. When the Moraine plant closed in 2008, the last car off the line was an SUV, the GMC Envoy. It is featured both in *The Last Truck*, of course, and in *American Factory*, and it now sits in the Carillon Historical Park in Dayton next to a piece of Fuyao auto glass signed by its CEO (the signing event is included in *American Factory*). The Envoy was cobranded as the Chevy Trailblazer (which was also made in Moraine). This is significant because the latter became part of GM's model lineup in China (made in Shanghai). In 2009, the year following the closure of the plant in Ohio that Fuyao would then buy in 2014, GM built 727,620 cars and trucks in China. This capitalist chiasmus is not represented in *American Factory* at all, but it could be argued that it is its material condition. In its story of globalization, *American Factory* primarily resorts to "slice of life" aesthetics, which foregrounds the human drama of Moraine but radically truncates an understanding of the worker at a world scale (including

21. Some of the stereotypes seen in a film like *Gung Ho* feed off discourses with a long history in US culture. I mention these examples from the 1980s because they tend not only to trivialize culture difference (Americans are also stereotyped) but displace the political unconscious at work in the narratives around the newfound power of the Japanese economy. See Ron Howard, dir., *Gung Ho* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1986); and Ridley Scott, dir., *Black Rain* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1989).

22. Much of this data can be found on GM websites. See, for instance, General Motors, "About GM China," General Motors, accessed December 24, 2020, <https://www.gmchina.com/company/cn/en/gm/company/about-gm-china.html>. Michael J. Dunne's book, *American Wheels, Chinese Roads*, paints a somewhat rosy picture of GM's move to the Chinese market. See Michael J. Dunne, *American Wheels, Chinese Roads* (Singapore: Wiley, 2011). For a critical assessment of GM's China strategy, see also Edward Neidermeyer, "The Secret History of GM's Chinese Bailout," Quartz, January, 24, 2016, <https://qz.com/594984/the-secret-history-of-gms-chinese-bailout/>.

the meaning of *American* in its title). The largest and most luxurious version of the Envoy was called the Denali (an anagram of denial).²³ It is not that the documentary consciously refuses the circumstances of its story, but it is as if the field of vision is also structured by an optical unconscious mediated by necessary economic elisions.²⁴ Even the most fervent documentary realism cannot assimilate or represent these absences without jeopardizing its capacity to narrate—especially, as in this example, when the film participates directly in the process it might otherwise critique. The logic of the factory in contemporary capitalism is a dynamic relation that does not easily distill in the subject of the factory itself, and film is compelled to measure the difficulty of that disjunction (see figure 2).



Figure 9.2: The last truck to leave the GM factory in Moraine, Ohio.

23. Denali (meaning “high” or “tall”) is the Koyukon name for the highest mountain peak in North America. Given the carbon footprint of some GM SUVs, I find the anagram somewhat apposite.

24. For more on what Walter Benjamin means by the “optical unconscious,” see Walter Benjamin, *On Photography*, ed. and trans. Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion Books, 2015). Benjamin believes that photography is the first technology to reveal this possibility; that is, a visual space at the limits of human intentionality. I invoke it here as a cinematic corollary, particularly regarding how the image figures the logic of the capital/labor relation.

The closure of the Moraine factory occurred because GM (United States) basically presented itself as broke. In the same year it produced those vehicles in China, it declared bankruptcy in the United States, with \$82.29 billion in assets and \$172.81 billion in debt (the relationship between the debt and the investment in its GM Chinese subsidiaries makes for an interesting narrative by itself, not least because it would lead to GM importing its joint-venture Chinese production to the United States following the bailout). If the prelude to GM's foray into China was a global reorganization of capital and labor, it was the financial crisis that almost killed the US-based auto industry as a whole. Again, this is absent as the ground for *American Factory*, as is the controversial story of the bailout of GM at that time led, coincidentally, by President Obama.²⁵ Because of the conditions attached to the bailout, the autoworkers featured in *The Last Truck* were largely sacrificed as a cost of neoliberal disruption and labor reorganization. The debate about the financial bailout and the terms of globalization continues (Elizabeth Warren, for instance, who chaired the congressional oversight panel of the Troubled Asset Relief Program, wondered how GM's financial-services division came to be caught out speculating in the housing market in Spain?²⁶). The point is, the story of this factory is indeed a template for understanding the contradictory logic of neoliberalism (and its afterlife). Even with the Obamas' direct support, the filmmakers do not paper over the excesses of free-market/state-capitalist double-speak, but the circumstances of *The Last Truck* present them with nigh impossible narrative demands so that the story of *American Factory* (which begins with some shots taken directly from its predecessor) tends to record cultural differences around labor practice—some of which, as Reichert and Bognar clearly indicate, are filtered through crude stereotypes. For instance, Americans, we learn from the Chinese cultural consultants in the film, are very obvious: “They don't hide anything”; “They dislike abstraction and theory in their daily lives”; at work, “they're pretty slow and have fat fingers” and are even alleged to be scared of heat. The Chinese, according to the American workers at the factory, “refer to us as foreigners, they don't help us at all, they don't respect you, and don't even know what the rules [in the United States] are.” Such prejudice is leavened by comic interludes and genuine human warmth. There is a scene of recently arrived Chinese workers fishing and exchanging pleasantries with local Ohioans. Later, the documentary records a US delegation performing the Village People's “YMCA” at a Fuyao party in China, and one rep, albeit tipsy, gets teary

25. Given that GM had received an almost \$50 billion bailout from the Obama administration, critics were surprised at this eventuality. See, again, Neidermeyer, “The Secret History of GM's Chinese Bailout.”

26. Warren's point was that, given the taxpayers' ownership of GM at the time (61 percent), some explanation was owed regarding GM's financial speculation in property markets across the globe. Partisan critiques quickly followed that accused Warren herself of property speculation in the 1990s. Here, the fate of GM and its factories is mediated by financial decisions typical of neoliberal economics.

repeating “we are one” to his Chinese counterparts. And so it goes on, dialogically, perhaps, feeding a narrative about labor relations as basically a question of cultural attitude, not a condition deeply embroiled in market forces. While one position obviously does not exclude the other, the question for the documentary is how they can be effectively mediated.

The Workers

But then, even as cultural difference has generated the most discussion about the documentary among Chinese and US communities (and sometimes between them),²⁷ the documentary is careful to humanize both sides. Wong He, the furnace expert (and shown to be an inveterate Twinkie eater), is separated from his family for up to two years, which is not just a proclivity of Chinese capitalism but is seen as a necessary condition of labor mobility in the present. The consanguine idea of remittance is old, for instance, but it has become a central mechanism of worker migration (temporary or relatively permanent) in developing countries and a symbol of cheap labor in the developed world (particularly, of course, among agricultural, construction, and domestic workers). While three quarters of labor migration globally is internal—a process of proletarianization from the countryside to the city (led in the last forty years by China, one that stands as the largest migration in history)—almost one hundred and eighty million workers now find themselves in foreign countries.²⁸ Importantly, both *The Last Truck* and *American Factory* signal new regimes of labor management through the precarity this entails. One worker, Rob Haerr, befriends the Chinese at the factory and has them come over for Thanksgiving to shoot his guns but later he is dismissed from Fuyao (apparently for being too slow). Even the head of the company Cao Dewang, referred to as “Chairman Cao” (a title which cannot help invoking Mao Zedong), has reason to worry, not just because of the challenge of US unionism (ostensibly in contrast to the shadow

27. Much of the discussion is overdetermined by the state of China/US relations, which have markedly deteriorated in recent years. The online debate in China is particularly interesting, since the documentary is not officially available for viewing there. That some of the labor issues discussed have such global reach is also testimony to the achievement of Bognar and Reichert in this film.

28. The question of global labor migration is at the margin of *American Factory* yet has a significant role in how the factory today can be cognized at a world scale. A consistently reliable source for research initiatives in this area is the International Labour Organization (ILO), a UN agency. See International Labour Organization, “Labour Migration,” ILO, accessed December 24, 2020, <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/lang-en/index.htm>. Much polemical research is available. See, for instance, Michele Ford, *From Migrant to Worker: Global Unions and Temporary Labor Migration in Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); and Pun Ngai, *Migrant Labor in China: Post-Socialist Transformations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).



Figure 9.3: Inspecting windshields at Fuyao Glass America.



Figure 9.4: Cleaning windshields at Fuyao Glass America.

of unionism seen at Fuyao's headquarters in Fuqing, Fujian²⁹), but because, as a billionaire, Cao is unsure of the benefits of all of the factories he has built (which may or may not spur his extensive philanthropy). Reichert and Bognar suggest, correctly, that capitalism is always a people's story but, as I have attempted to indicate, the factory itself is a key interlocutor of narrative possibility that yet resists its story in images. The question of unionism is important and long-standing (one activist invokes Sally Field's character of Norma Rae in this regard), but surely the factory itself is the last gasp of industrialism and that, even though Cao believes it is an important vehicle for enhancing the image of China transnationally, *American Factory* remains a tombstone to human productive capacity under the terms of labor globalization.³⁰ Despite this caveat, it is clear that the unionization of any worker across the globe remains an existential threat to capital accumulation. When, on the official opening day of the factory, the Ohio senator Sherrod Brown mentions that he hopes the company acknowledges the workers' desire for a union, the American managers of Fuyao are apoplectic; one, Dave Burrows, says Brown's people will never be allowed in the factory again while Cao says bluntly, "If a union comes in, I'm shutting down." This is read as Fuyao's imperative but, given the history of the factory and the circumstances of GM's departure, it is very much part of the political economy of neoliberalism.

Labor Unions and Globalization

If the conversation between the filmmakers and the Obamas is to be believed (recorded as a supplementary document to *American Factory* itself), much of the friction portrayed in the main film will become superfluous through the rise of automation.³¹ Therefore, if the tone and taxonomy of the documentary is demonstrably and appreciably for labor, the resolution of its story comes close to displacement, as if the *mise-en-scène* of worker struggle is rendered moot in a flourish. Since Marx wrote of factories as automata in the nineteenth century, automation is hardly a new discourse (interestingly, it

29. Again, given the filmmakers' career-long commitment to labor issues, it is somewhat surprising such differences are not explored further. How a putatively worker state inhibits unions and unionism is a topic too large for the present discussion but it is obviously connected both to GM's move to China and Fuyao's deep resistance to the UAW. Given the difficulties in union-organized collective bargaining, Chinese workers have had to resort to other forms of agency. See, for instance, Hao Ren, ed., *China on Strike: Narratives of Workers' Resistance* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016).

30. Joshua Freeman shows in his extensive research that, while the functions and form of the factory have changed demonstrably, it still maintains a remarkable presence in the production and reproduction of everyday life. See Joshua B. Freeman, *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).

31. See Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, *American Factory: A Conversation with the Obamas* (Chicago: Higher Ground Productions, 2019).

was not seen by Marx as simply regressive regarding the end of capitalism³²), but the sight of robotic arms juxtaposed directly with the firing of American workers in the film remains a warning, if not an obvious imaginary mediatory condition for all that has come before. To be fair, automation is indeed a framing device of the documentary (the opening shots are also machine filled), and yet it is clearly not its thesis. You do not have to feature a Chinese auto-glass corporation in Ohio to illustrate the prospect of automation. GM did not flee Ohio because it could not automate its production. The chronotope of the documentary is positioned, if not overdetermined by, transformations in the globalization of capital (accepting, with Trinh Minha, that such determinants do not an unalloyed objectivity make³³). Yet, GM goes to China because of its market and because surplus is easy when labor is cheap and relatively unprotected. Fuyao comes to the United States because Americans still buy a lot of cars, and who wants to pay import tariffs and shipping costs? At the heart of *American Factory* is a constitutive nonsaid—by which, I mean that its formal surfaces seem constrained not to narrate the conflicted globality that is its very possibility.³⁴ But surely all Reichert and Bogner have to do is invite a few talking heads onscreen to relate the above and the narrative will be said, verifiable, real? *American Factory* is not completed by making it more sociological, or more attune to political economy, or more consistent with the skillful socialist syntax of *Union Maids*, a standout film in Reichert's justly revered career.³⁵ Even if we say the factory "speaks" in the film, albeit of its own dereliction and aphanisis (its fading or disappearing subjectivity³⁶), are its images adequate to

32. Marx conceived of the factory itself as a vast automaton that would, in order not just to harness but to control labor power, intensify automation. Yet, since automation presupposes "superfluous hands," as Marx puts it, "capital thus works towards its own dissolution as the form dominating production." The production of abject alienation from labor activity is also a sign of how the worker via automation can be liberated from that form of production itself. As Marx puts it, "This will redound to the benefit of emancipated labor, and is the condition of its emancipation." Of course, the individual experience of such redundancy will be severe where socialization still pivots on the sale of labor power, but Marx is attempting to identify the antinomies of capital accumulation. To this extent, the robot arms in *American Factory* are, like the figuration of labor itself, "gravediggers." See, Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. and foreword Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 690–711.

33. Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity," in *The Documentary Reader*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 758–62. Trinh puts pressure on the false assumption that the mechanics of documentary cinema permit "authenticity" in representation. In art mediated by difference, difference itself challenges the basis, the "eye," of the cinematic apparatus.

34. In part, this recalls Benjamin's point again regarding intentionality but it also accentuates the importance of attending to the silences of storytelling that are not themselves produced by the filmmakers' expressive will. To the art of cinematic silence, one must consider, too, the silences of the text produced by more than cinema itself, including ideological imperatives.

35. Reichert's contributions to feminist and labor documentary art are immense and individual films beyond the discussion of *American Factory* here would require much more space. Among many pertinent assessments one might include the long interview with Reichert in Alexandra Juhasz, ed., *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 121–36; and Bob Kotyck, "The Good Fight: the Films of Julia Reichert," *Cinema Scope* 79 (Summer 2019), <https://cinema-scope.com/features/the-good-fight-the-films-of-julia-reichert/>.

36. I use this in Jacques Lacan's sense rather than that deployed by Ernest Jones regarding desire, primarily because it permits a focus on the status of the subject in narrative beyond empirical detail sui generis, the seen, and the sensibility. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 207–8.

the contradictions of its logic? Is its success its affective approach, a sensitivity to the dilemmas posed that lets even viewers less defined by precarity in the workplace the possibility of appreciation (the problem of audience here would provide another crucial line of inquiry³⁷)? While I do not think the film is primed by an appeal to a bourgeois liberal *I*, it nevertheless tends to obfuscate any outright rejection of that warm embrace. Does the factory, however, become a touchstone about the US economy rather than a tombstone because it is now owned by a Chinese corporation? This question is also not devoid of structural antinomy in how contemporary neoliberalism comes to haunt storytelling in the present.

The polemical heart of *American Factory* is a lot more than whether China and the United States play political games around tariffs within globalization, but it is a lot less than a critique of the neoliberalism, waning or otherwise, that links global workers through value extraction and exploitation. In part, this tussle between insight and provocation is produced by what has elsewhere been termed the cognitive capture of neoliberalism or, perhaps more formally, dissonance or disruption as itself the salve for global cognition; the logic of neoliberalism's slippery register disables counter critique by immediately absorbing its discourse as negotiable and/or as monetized.³⁸ In terms of narrative, several alternative strategies have been proposed, including those that favor some kind of oppositional synthesis and cohesion in the face of discursive fragmentation and blatant incoherence.³⁹ On the face of it, this sounds user friendly and pedagogically promising, and there are sequences in *American Factory* that could be deployed in this way, even as such an approach might risk didacticism and stridency. We have mentioned the human story, and Reichert and Bogner are particularly adept at linking cultural difference around the Fuyao project by foregrounding moments of desire for basic understanding and social exchange. This, indeed, is the most translatable aspect of the film's meaning, often enhanced by the Coplandesque vernacular of Chad Cannon's score, which, like Lindsay Utz's editing (a first for Reichert and Bogner), carefully integrates the workers' experience of each other. Wong's story, for instance, that of the aforementioned dedicated glass-furnace expert who struggles with separation from his family, provides a sympathetic image of the human costs of globalization. Even so, Wong is willing to defer happiness in order for the Fuyao experiment in the United States to work: "I think the most important thing is mutual understanding." This is something that Reichert and Bogner's juxtaposition of

37. See, for instance, Julian Hanich, *The Audience Effect: On the Collective Cinema Experience* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

38. See Judith Barish and Richard Healey, "Beyond Neoliberalism: A Narrative Approach," *Narrative Initiative*, August 2019, <https://narrativeinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Beyond-Neoliberalism-Final-8.21.2019-v-1.2.pdf>.

39. This can also be seen in Lazzarato's post-Foucauldian critique of autonomy. See Maurizio Lazzarato, "Neoliberalism in Action: Inequality, Insecurity and the Reconstitution of the Social," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 26, no. 6 (2009): 109–33.

personal narrative—mixed with fly-on-the wall misrepresentations of each other by the Chinese and Americans—aims to complicate: how can one now read a corporate multinational? Another worker, Jill Lamantia, a forklift operator, has suffered through the lean times of Ohio’s economy, and we first see her living in her sister’s basement. Regular pay at Fuyao allows her to rent her own apartment and, for a while at least, her life appears to resume some form of normality. Yet the question of labor organization as a way to mitigate the will to precarity in neoliberalism hangs over Fuyao and the film as a whole (see figure 5).

The crisis over the unionization of Fuyao’s Ohio factory is the closest the documentary comes to themes that Reichert’s career in particular has emphasized: labor rights, women’s rights, worker dignity, and the capacities of class consciousness. The film offers a significant ideological divide among the workers themselves, some of whom believe that, after years of just getting by (particularly after GM’s controversial departure), management’s job demands are a hardship worth risking. Other workers at the factory side with the efforts of the UAW to bargain on behalf of Fuyao’s labor force, and some join the demonstrations outside the factory gates in support of the unionization effort (those who are deemed “agitators,” including Lamantia, are denied further access to



Figure 9.5: UAW union organization drive outside Fuyao Glass America.

the work site and are fired). To head off the possibility of a union, Fuyao hires (for a reported \$1 million fee) a consulting firm, Labor Relations Institute, who are tasked with conducting seminars (with mandatory worker attendance) to go over what might be lost and gained in this regard. The filmmakers include audio secretly recorded by a worker at one of these meetings, where it is clear what kind of “labor relations” the company desires: one based on individual decision (basic stakeholder parlance) rather than the power of collective bargaining. The “no” vote is overwhelming, and the idea of the factory is then much closer to Cao’s vision: a project to improve China/US relations, but not by sacrificing the very work regimens that have made that relationship relevant in the past forty years. While Reichert and Bogner are hardly cheerleaders for this position, Cao himself does not come off as an archcapitalist roader. Indeed, one of the striking elements of the directors’ approach is to provide backstory to Cao’s position, which he seems more than willing to offer (they film him on his corporate jet, but we also see him praying at a Buddhist temple, with his voiceover appreciating the fact that while he was poor when he was young, the simplicity of peasant life was bound up with the intimacy of nature). For Cao now, the idea is stripped of romanticization: “The point of living is to work.”

Cao’s worldview is not beyond contradiction and however much he might simultaneously pine for the bucolic and the necessity of labor, his monologue is quickly juxtaposed with what we might read as a visual denouement via the rollout of factory robotic arms that almost literally occlude workers on the shop floor. Subtitles solemnly declare: “Up to 375 million people globally will have to find entirely new kinds of jobs by 2030 because of automation. How workers, governments, and businesses tackle these seismic shifts will define the future of work.” As we have noted, technological advance is not simply a function of neoliberal efficiency, even as it clearly permits a narratological pass for opposing unionism and firing workers on behalf of progress.⁴⁰ The subtitles at the end of the film document a certain inexorability to this process that Cao’s company both accelerates and heroically inhibits: “Fuyao Glass America made a profit from 2018. Starting wages remain \$14 an hour. The company now employs about 2200 American workers and 200 Chinese workers.” There is profit, there is work, and there is a framework for crosscultural China/US understanding. Must the documentary settle for a description of globalization rather than a syntax that might more forcefully challenge its inertia?

40. There are certainly critiques that think through the implications of automation with employment and class constituency although not beyond dire consequences. See, for instance, Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work* (New York: Putnam, 1996). As I have already indicated, the specter of automation is not simply outside narratives of emancipation. The question is not about whether automation is coming; it is about the optimum form of economic socialization in which that can take place.

Documenting Labor

Daniel Worden's *Neoliberal Nonfictions* argues for the salience of a "documentary aesthetic," one that, for instance, is "a rejoinder and accompaniment to the ways in which finance capitalism and its intensifications of exploitation, dispossession, and state-sanctioned violence have made the world seem vertiginous and precarious."⁴¹ On the surface, such a view appears at one with the ambivalent position of the factory at the center of this narrative, although we have suggested its material history could be supplemented and engaged. Nevertheless, when Worden notes that "works that employ the documentary aesthetic engage in juxtaposition, offsetting emotional and personal experience with the structures that produce their possibilities,"⁴² *American Factory* signifies within this lineage, even as documentary itself is mediated by multiple and disparate narrative modes. The question remains about the extent to which the proximity to neoliberal subject relations disables or otherwise renders obtuse reflexive narration and creative modes of critique. On what level might we think of *American Factory* as counter hegemonic?

In Gramscian terms, this is something of a war of position that intimates a new vision and builds toward an alternative and liberatory hegemony. True, one could be more confrontational as in war of maneuver in Gramsci's parlance, that seizes on crisis to shake power—but taking it to the streets also depends on a high degree of relative autonomy from the braided front of state and civil society, and its effects are assessed on a case-by-case basis.⁴³ In the documentary, this would be registered primarily as content, in the struggle to unionize the factory space, yet of course this is neither the scale nor the form of the labor/capital relation I have otherwise indicated. Between gradualism and insurrection, there is no formula for telling the story of the world system as such. Thus, the idea is not to embrace such generic inability but is at least to reflect on the limits globality represents and the persistence of abstraction/displacement that neoliberalism, even in decline, pursues. If naming the factory *American* introduces a primary antinomy of contemporary capitalism (how to reconcile labor identity with global circulation), are the film's formal components under any obligation to concretize that reality? In the documentary's denouement, Reichert and Bogner juxtapose eye-level shots of workers leaving Fuyao factories in both China and the United States. It is a powerful montage that intimates several layers of signification. Some of the distinctions the filmmakers' visualize include differences in dress (the Chinese uniforms evoke the workers'

41. See Daniel Worden, *Neoliberal Nonfictions: The Documentary Aesthetic from Joan Didion to Jay-Z* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), 7.

42. Worden, *Neoliberal Nonfictions*, 9.

43. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), particularly part 2, section 2. Gramsci's ideas on cultural hegemony continue to influence theory across a range of disciplines. See, for instance, Lee Artz and Bren O. Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (London: Sage, 2000).

version of the Mao suit, a sign both of solidarity and the negative link between uniform and uniformity—the Americans by contrast are not uniformly uniformed through that connotation); the figures of the US workers are much more racially diverse, suggesting a specific and irreducible history of racial capitalism that also pinpoints a key dimension of how a factory might indeed be deemed “American”; the regimen of labor is indicated by revealing the Chinese workers in a shift change (workers are filing in and out at the same rate and an assistant keeps the lines separate and moving; and the differences in facial expressions are more subtle but there is perhaps an unsurprising relief in those for whom the workday is ending, perhaps mediated to some degree by the visibility of the camera and the depth of vision deployed). Cinematic referentiality in this sequence is just as provocative and reminds us that films tell stories that are simultaneously stories about film itself. There is a certain invisibility in worker identity and practice (derived in part from the abstraction of labor as concept in political economy) that cinema has insistently sought to overcome, to compensate for, or radically displace. One thinks, for instance, of one of the first films, the Auguste and Louis Lumière brothers’ project of 1895 called *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*.⁴⁴ It is not just happenstance that workers are “captured” in this way; as I have argued elsewhere, the problem of representing labor as relation haunts cinema, as if film must assume worker subjectivity is available, eminently visual, and communicable or else reveal its absence as constitutive to modernity as such.⁴⁵ From *Metropolis* (1927) to *24 City* (2008), the workers leaving the factory and/or entering it is a primary if changing challenge of visual art.⁴⁶ Labor was always and more so now much greater than the factory worker, yet exiting the factory is a punctum of sorts, a reminder of the passage of a particular form of work and those who do it. It is part of the narrative of neoliberalism that “advanced” or “mature” economies are service based and that Fuyao’s factory near Dayton is a last gasp in postindustrialism. Yet one of the many lessons of China’s participation in globalization in the past forty years is that the farm-to-factory transition is integral to what neoliberalism represents. Such proletarianization in the Global South dwarfs all narratives of industrialization in the West and is a key reason that Fuyao has the capital to locate

44. Auguste and Louis Lumière, “La Sortie de l’usine Lumière à Lyon” (often translated as “workers leaving the Lumière factory”), first exhibited in Lyon, France, December 28, 1895.

45. See Peter Hitchcock, *Labor in Culture: or, Worker of the World(s)* (London: Palgrave, 2017), especially chapter 6.

46. See, for instance, Ewa Mazierska, ed., *Work in Cinema: Labor and the Human Condition* (London: Palgrave, 2013). See also Harun Farocki, “Workers Leaving the Factory,” translated by Laurent Faasch-Ibrahim, *Senses of Cinema*, 21 (July 2002). Farocki notes, “The first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory.” The number of films on or about labor is, of course, immense. Those mentioned here that reflect on workers leaving the factory are Fritz Lang, dir., *Metropolis* (Berlin: UFA GmbH, 1927); and, Jia Zhangke, dir., *24 City (Er shi si cheng ji)* (North Chelmsford, MA: Xstream Productions, LLC, 2008). The Labor Film Database is extremely useful in this regard but is, itself, like the Lumières’s film, only a provocation. See the Labor Film Database, “Home,” Labor Film Database, accessed December 24, 2020, <https://laborfilms.com/>.



Figure 9.6: Workers leaving the factory, Fuyao Glass America.



Figure 9.7: Workers leaving the factory, Fuyao Glass, Fuqing, China.

itself in the US auto market, and GM has the capacity to produce in China. The workers are leaving the factory, but for neoliberalism, crucially, they have not quite left it.

Conclusion

It is too soon, perhaps, to judge whether *American Factory* marks a key juncture in the reorganization of labor and cinema's relationship to it, or whether it marks time by being vaguely anachronistic or workerist. The Obamas, in the face of the quandary *American Factory* presents, argue for uplifting stories, a "higher ground," and a stubborn yet conscious capitalism. There are few places where Reichert and Bogner polemically challenge that prescription in their documentary, not because the Obamas' distribution facility becomes part of its process, but because the film's images empathize with and humanize its subjects so closely as to reproduce the substance of their dilemma. The "last truck" is seen in a museum in *American Factory*. The reason and systemic logic behind it have yet to be consigned to or to be imaged as history (the image of history as collective—and how to image this time, this socialization). Such a history remains a provocative challenge for storytelling and more, as Reichert put it in her acceptance speech at the Oscars: "Working people have it harder and harder these days—and we believe that things will get better when workers of the world unite."