

Arts of Work: Making Sense of Films about Working People and their Jobs

by Alan Clardy

For decades, films have opened a window into the world of work (the major life activity of productive economic activity) and *working* (the personal experience of work) for mass audiences around the world. Although surprisingly many films deal with these topics in a peripheral manner, far fewer focus primarily on these twin issues. Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) – inspired by his visit to the huge Ford Motor plant at River Rouge – famously shows the plight of his “tramp” character at a factory, where he becomes so much a part of the machinery that he cannot stop and is literally swallowed whole.¹ A year earlier in *Black Fury* (1935), Paul Muni plays an immigrant coal miner whose anguish over lost love makes him a pawn in a game of increasing labor strife, fueled by a Pinkerton-type agency stirring up conflict as a marketing ploy to get strike-breaking and union-busting work from the mine owners.

Two decades later, in *Executive Suite* William Holden erupts in a boardroom battle over the succession to the corporate presidency. His character's cause? To save the soul of this manufacturing company from lifeless bureaucrats threatening to rob it of its proud heritage. In *The Hospital* (1970), George C. Scott prowls the caverns of a New York City hospital seeming on the verge of collapse, snarling and growling from the alienated anguish of his life at the insanity of trying to get an institution like that operating with some degree of compassion and effectiveness. In 1980, we get a glimpse of working in the 9 to 5 “pink ghetto” of an insurance firm. Ron Howard's *The Newspaper* (1994) showed the behind-the-scenes struggles in publishing a newspaper in a competitive marketplace, exposing the demands of a journalist's job to report the news under the constant pressure of scooping the other dailies. That same year, in *Disclosure*, Michael Douglas was caught in his new female boss's web of sexual harassment, itself part of a larger plot framed by an upcoming merger. In *Office Space* (1999), we see the Dilbert-like, cubicle-mazed workplace and the escapist plots and tribulations of those young minions trapped in the inanities of vapid reports and organizational restructuring while searching for release, revenge, and redemption.

These glimpses reflect the nature and demands of the workplace as seen at very different times and provide serious lessons about the meaning of work to the people involved. Often, though, work issues are simply a back story to the main drama of the film. For example, in *A Thousand Clowns* (1965), the alienation of Jason Robard's character from working provides the background for the film's real

dramatic focus on personal adjustment and sacrifice. In other films, the occupation of the main characters is more central to the plot, but only in the sense that it defines the genre of the story; films about private detectives or the police are really dramas of mystery and action. In other films, like *American Beauty* (1999) the working situations of the main characters (here played by Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening) are somewhat more important ingredients to the story, framing the real dramas of a broken marriage, teenage and adult rebellion, and deliverance. Finally, a number of films implicate issues and aspects of work as ways to illustrate the larger context of class. For example, we see a young Loretta Lynn's hardscrabble life as a *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), yet learn little about the actual work of coal miners. In general, then, in many films, occupations and the work they involve provide essential background elements for the films' main plot lines; however, the films are not directly about work *per se*.

Yet, as suggested by the opening examples, there are some films in which the issues and themes of work are the story, defining the basic parameters of the plot itself. This class of films has not been recognized as its own genre, however, an oversight I attempt to redress in this paper. There are three reasons why I hope that readers will find this analysis important. First, it highlights how films both reflect and shape our understanding of the meaning of work in human experience. Second, it offers a new framework for examining films about work and working. Finally, for educators in particular, it recommends a set of films that have important pedagogical value.

In the coming pages I first briefly review key earlier writing on films about work. The second section describes the procedure followed for identifying and analyzing the body of films about work used as the basis for this study. In the third section, I identify the four major themes covered by work films – organized in terms of 10 plot variations. Finally, I examine these films in terms of their historical evolution and socio-cultural connections, and look at the lessons these films can teach us about work and working.

How the Ivory Tower Views the Silver Screen

In his influential book *Working-Class Hollywood*, Steven Ross has explained how the first silent films were often one of the main sources of leisure entertainment for the newly emerging working class and catered to this group's interests.² Working-class films fell into three main categories: a large number of romance comedies or

melodramas; social problem films; and films about workplace struggles between labor and capital. The latter two sets of films established themes that would characterize a genre of “labor” films whose halcyon days coincided with the rise of American industrial capitalism in the early Twentieth Century.

Such films shared a common perspective of a socialist, radical, and/or Marxist kind, and instantiated confrontations between Owners and Workers or between Capital and Labor as the basic story device. They also shared a typical plot: “a union leader, outside agitator, or radical troublemaker stirs up previously content workers into a frenzy and turns them into an uncontrollable mob. Strikes are ordered ‘on the slightest excuse.’”³ Such films presumed an inherent conflict between Owners and an emergent organized Labor at the workplace, a conflict that epitomized the broader and more inclusive matters of class and economic station. The films from this era were not one-sided, as business owner interests offered their own slate of anti-union films. Regardless of viewpoint, though, while clearly tied closely to work and working, such films tended to emphasize the dimensions of power and conflict at the workplace, and class in society.

Other scholarship amplified this tradition of labor films. For example, Zaniello provided the most comprehensive catalog of “films about unions, labor organizations or ... labor history.”⁴ Brandon and Pierce created a directory of short films and videos produced mainly by labor unions, often for use with their members, while Glass provided a similar listing along with a classification of the types of these films (films for training, public relations, membership communication, and other purposes).⁵ Several articles reviewed specific films that had labor unions as the center of the action. Leab reported on two films about the 1937 strike against General Motors: *The Great Sitdown* (1976) and *With Babies and Banners* (1978).⁶ Walsh noted four films about labor-management conflict made between 1934 and 1954 that “we never saw” because of their radicalizing message: *Black Fury* (1935), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *An American Romance* (1944), and *Salt of the Earth* (1953).⁷ Zieger and Zieger traced the history of labor films, particularly in the years after World War II, noting that since then there have been “only a handful of films dealing even secondarily with labor unions.”⁸ However, they looked at three films that appeared in the late 1970s that had unions at their center: *Blue Collar* (1978), *F.I.S.T.* (1978), and *Norma Rae* (1979).

More recently, several authors have ventured beyond the boundaries of the labor film genre to examine the broader contours of films about work and the workplace. For example, Moss described how films have been used to teach about economics in general.⁹ Thomson reviewed three recent films about the modern workplace: *American Job* (1996, about the experience of low-wage, low-skill jobs); *Struggles in Steel* (1997, the history of African-Americans in the steel industry); and *Dadetown* (1996, a faux documentary of a community’s transition from manufacturing to high-tech work).¹⁰ Hassard and Holliday offered up essays on how films both reflect

and shape our perceptions on work, organizations and economics.¹¹ More recently, Hunter analyzed cubicle “office movies” of the 1990’s, including both expected (*Boiler Room*, 2000; *Office Space*, 1999), and unexpected (*American Beauty*, 1999); *Being John Malkovich*, 1999; and *Fight Club*, 2000) bill of fare under the rationale that they “reflect the position of the ‘disempowered’ middle-class white male....each highlighting the self-estrangement and repressed anger of men lost in the alienating ranks of management culture and cubicle grids.”¹² A reasonably comprehensive listing of films about work in general can be found in two *Washington Post* reviews of 2005. While suggestive, these reports have not attempted to categorize and define systematically films about work and the workplace.

In summary, it is clear that an identifiable genre of films has focused on labor in its organized struggles with management and owners. Even though Gehring’s¹³ extensive listing of popular film genres did not have a labor film category, Ross¹⁴ has clearly shown a long history of films that do fit into this mold. Although there are recent examples of labor films (e.g., *Bread and Roses*, 2001), it also seems clear that the trend is away from the classic labor film genre. Instead, a variety of films have appeared that focus on work and working but in which a union is of marginal if any importance to the story. As suggested by the opening examples, these films deal with themes outside of traditional labor-management conflict; they explore the meaning of work in human experience, portray what the working experience is like apart from a manufacturing setting, show the dramas of challenge and achievement that work offers, and chronicle the internal operations and dynamics of workplaces. As we shall see, a number of films fall within a well-defined set that can be called a film genre about work and working. These films exhibit several related, but nonetheless distinctive plot structures. The next section will describe how that set was identified, and how the underlying plot structures were ascertained.

Methods of Discovery, Selection, and Analysis

Without an established canon or genre of films about work, a methodology was needed for defining and explicating this proposed genre. The methodology followed here was designed to (1) identify possible candidate work films, (2) screen them for fit with the emerging genre definition, and then (3) summarize the story lines of each. Using these summaries, (4) the underlying basic plot of the stories was developed. Two films made about the same time -- *Working Girl* (with *Melanie Griffith*, 1988) and *The Secret of My Success* (with *Michael J. Fox*, 1987) – can illustrate this process. Despite differences in the origins, settings, gender, and circumstances of the two central characters, both tell the same basic story of ambition, risk-taking, disguise, innovation, and eventual success. Following this method, four basic plots (in 10 different variations) were uncovered (reviewed in the next section of this paper). The general research strategy followed here was that of “grounded theory.”¹⁵ Such a strategy is indicated when exploring uncharted territory: the researcher casts a wide net to observe as wide a range of phenomena (here, films) as possible; through this process, criteria

and categories are developed, refined, tested, and sharpened through a continuous dialogue between the emergent concepts and the observations being made.

In order to generate a list of films that might qualify as work films, I began by scanning the complete and extensive list of films contained in the Cinemania 95 DVD (*Microsoft*, 1994); from that scan, I created an initial listing of films that seemed to be work-related, based upon my prior viewing of the film or on the review provided. Articles, monographs, indexes, and reports about labor, work, and business films were also consulted. Occasional reviews of films being released also suggested candidates.¹⁶ Summaries of these films were reviewed to confirm that the films fit within the broad set of work-related films. From all these sources, the total list grew to more than 150 candidate films.

These candidate films were screened in order to exclude films that might not be fully representative of the emerging category of work films; as already noted, films may touch on work issues without really being about work. Two sets of screening criteria were used. First, only modern cinematic, artistic interpretations about work and the workplace were considered. Second, the kind of work depicted had to be non-exceptional in nature (i.e., the kind of work to which most people could aspire without having special talents). Based on these considerations, the following kinds of films were excluded from further analysis:

- films made before 1930 (Ross's *Working-Class Hollywood* has already covered the silent films of that era.)
- films made for TV (for two reasons: such films would be historically available only after c. 1950, and made-for-TV movies would potentially have greater imposed or implied censoring constraints, limiting the full potential expression of the artistic imagination);
- biographical films about economic figures (like *Tucker* (1988) or *Hoffa* (1992));
- documentaries (such as *Roger and Me*, 1989) that were limited by the phenomena being covered;
- films about artistic, entertainment, or sports occupations;
- films about military or paramilitary (police or first-responder) professions;
- murder mysteries, westerns, or action adventures, in which the work and the workplace provided an incidental backdrop to the key and defining plot.

This screening reduced the list to approximately 100 films.¹⁷ The remaining films were then screened more thoroughly using four criteria: the extent to which the films 1) take place primarily at worksites, 2) involve characters primarily in work roles, 3) focus primarily on issues intrinsic to working and the workplace, and 4) offer lessons about the nature and meaning of work and working.

Four rating scales (each with a low score of 1 and a high score of 5) were used to evaluate the remaining candidate films according to the extent to which they satisfied these four standards. Polar illustrations for each scale are included below:

1. The location of the story. To what extent did the action or plot occur in work settings (offices, board rooms, factories, mines, ships, home offices)? In *Death of a Salesman* (1999) most of the action occurs away from the workplace; in *Car Wash* (1976) virtually everything happens at the worksite.

2. The extent to which the central characters of the films remain in their occupational roles throughout the films.

Characters in a story can be depicted playing various roles: spouse, parent, citizen, consumer, worker, congregant, and so on. To what extent do the central characters remain in their work roles throughout the film? In *Avalon* (1990), the central characters appear primarily in various family roles; in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992) they appear almost exclusively in the role of salesmen.

3. The extent to which the plot is based on work-related issues.

There are certain issues and conflicts that are intrinsic or inherent to working in an organization, firm, or institution, including job promotion, production or job performance, managing an enterprise, work safety, dealing with a boss, and so on. To what extent are the key themes of the plot only associated with or derived from the work experience? In *A Thousand Clowns* (1965), the key issue is custody of the teenager and the protagonist's emerging love interest with the social worker; *Human Resources* (1999) is almost exclusively about union busting and employee organizing.

4. The extent to which the film draws clear lessons about the nature of work and/or working in human experience.

To what extent does the movie advance a particular point of view and establish conclusions about the nature and meaning of working? *Time Out* (2001) essentially concerns the depths to which a person could go to deceive himself and others about his failings and needs; *9 to 5* (1980), depicting the oppression and insecurities of working in the "pink ghetto," provides almost a training film on ways to humanize the workplace.

Based on summaries and reviews, each of the candidate films was rated on these four criteria, producing a total score for each film (from 4-20). After excluding films for which adequate reviews could not be found and/or copies were not available for viewing, about 75 films eventually were rated based on a full viewing of the film. For purposes of this study, 54 films rated with a total score of 15 or higher were considered as prototypical examples defining the genre of films about work and working.

For each of these 54 films, I wrote an extended summary of the plot, along with an abstract that interpreted how the film met the four criteria. In particular, I identified the film's most obvious and

compelling lessons. Following grounded theory, I used the summaries to develop basic groupings of films that showed underlying similarities in the plots, even as their surface stories might differ. As these films were forming into groups, I wrote definitions to describe and characterize the common theme of each emerging group of films. As these films were added to a category, definitions were revised and refined to reflect nuances and variations emerging from the stories. That set of categories and descriptions were then analyzed, resulting in four major plots (and 10 variations on those plots). The list of the 54 films identified as prototypical films about work and working, along with their respective plot category, appears in Table 1.

Four Plots on Work and Working

Across this diversity of films, four recurring plots tell generic stories about work and working.¹⁸ Within these four major plot lines, ten distinctive plot variations were identified. There are two caveats. First, although I do not claim this list to be final and exhaustive, I believe it is reasonably extensive and representative of the full variety of ways that films portray work and working. Keep in mind that the grounded theory approach followed here does not mandate that every possible film be screened. Rather, one observes as diverse a sample of films as possible until category or theme “saturation” occurs. That is, when the researcher is no longer finding new and different information in the observations being made (i.e., the films being seen), then the observation and classification process can draw to a close. Second, these films often involve a variety of plots, making it possible for films to be placed into multiple categories. *The Whistle at Eaton Falls* (1951) is one such film that touches on a number of topics that remain relevant even today: labor-management cooperation, automation, union relations, downsizing, adjusting to global competition, the inescapability of the laws of business, the imperatives of innovation, and organizational change. Even so, I classified films based on the overarching plot under which any subplots could be subsumed. In short, to some extent, classifying films into a single category is a something of a simplification. The four major plot themes (and their subplot structures) follow.

Plot 1: Production And Control. As would be expected, a major theme for a number films about working focuses on the act of production or getting the work done. This means that production deadlines, goals, or quotas, set by the top bosses (sometimes for their personal benefit), must be met. There are three plot variations on this major theme. In the first, workers are inspired, pushed, threatened, and/or intimidated into working harder, better or faster. The second variation shows that the force pushing for production does not occur in a vacuum: force begets counterforce, as the primacy of production at any cost can turn tragic or even lethal, and the workplace becomes embroiled in conflict. As the counterforce, employees often find an ally to help them confront the often overwhelming presence of the employer. In short, the dynamic process of production and control often evokes its dialectical

antithesis. This variation is the closest to the labor films noted by Ross. 19 The third plot variation looks behind the curtain at the faces of the management oppressors and finds them either venal and/or clueless. The hero surrenders whatever membership he or she has in this system of oppression to walk away and perhaps join the opposition. Each subplot is now described.

Subplot 1. When the tough get going, the going gets tough. The work group must meet relentless and challenging production goals and deadlines, sometimes dictated by the market and the industry in which the work group is located. To do this, tough supervision is needed, and managers are depicted as driven, ruthless, and even immoral. As such, they know no boundaries or limits, and any technique that squeezes more output is acceptable, including public humiliation, the arbitrary and even whimsical exercise of power, and/or blackmail, intimidation, and bullying. Regardless, when a tough supervisor gets started, it’s tough times for all, making the need for a job and paycheck the only thing keeping the workers from walking away or walking together.

This type of work film plot has two sub-variations, depending on whether the focus is on the back-end of production, or the front-end of sales and service. In the back-end versions, this issue is getting the work done (*Under Pressure*, 1935; *The Perfect Storm*, 1999) or the product out (*The Paper*, 1994) under relentless deadlines. There is some kind of tangible output that results from the work. In the front-end version, the production pressure is about making sales. This pressure both attracts as well as corrupts the workers qua sales reps, making the sales process sleazy, disreputable, and dishonest, with the workers needing and willing to do anything to make the sale (*Glengarry Glen Ross*, 1992; *Boiler Room*, 2000). The pressure to make sales comes from a single-minded boss or company whose only concern is to make more money. In this system, people are only as good as their most recent sales performance, and self-worth is defined by sales prowess as tabulated by the most recent results.

Subplot 2. Confronting the Evil Empire. This sub-category begins with much the same premise as subplot 1: management is bad and repressive, creating and sustaining terrible working conditions that stress people’s lives. The workings of top, executive management, though, are not always transparent, and “they” are some vague and undefined group pulling the strings. The hero in these films usually starts as a member of the work system but is increasingly alienated by the very operations of this system; soon enough, the hero rebels, taking on the system and trying to change it or even bring it down. The hero’s loyalty and allegiance to the system is destroyed after he or she witnesses or otherwise learns about a life-changing event that reveals the callous indifference of the system to human suffering, perhaps even its evil intent. In *Norma Rae* (1979), the event is the death of the title character’s father; in *Business as Usual* (1987), it involves hearing about the sexual harassment of a regional boss; in *Disclosure* (1994), the hero recognizes that he is being manipulated and trapped. As a result, the hero begins opposing this very system.

Often, opposition ends in their personal tragedy – being fired (*The Insider*, 1999), humiliated (*Norma Rae*), or even killed (as suggested in *Silkwood*, 1983). Only occasionally, as in *9 to 5* (1980) and *Disclosure* (1994), does the main character come out successfully. In some cases, heroes remain on the payroll even as they are shunned and isolated, but more often, the system excludes them and they must operate from outside. In this vein, they receive help from an ally of some sort: CBS news in *The Insider* (1999); a lawyer in *North Country* (2005); or coworkers and/or a union, as in *Bread and Roses* (2001) or *Human Resources* (2000). Throughout, we see how opposition and confrontation stresses and strains the hero's personal life.

Subplot 3. Malevolent Buffoons are Rejected. In these films, we see more clearly the faces and motives of the organization's top executive rank– and that view is not comforting. That is, we view work organizations that are run or controlled by leaders that can be selfish and even evil, or simply dotty buffoons (*The Apartment*, 1960; *The Devil and Miss Jones*, 1941; *The Hudsucker Proxy*, 1994). Regardless of the characterization, the key is that the senior managers' only interest is in taking advantage of their position for their own personal aggrandizement. If there is effective leadership, it appears more accidental than intended. The hero is initially enlisted as an unwitting dupe of this elite for reasons other than his personal performance, becoming a clown prince puppet. Soon, though, the hero responds to a love interest, realizes his complicity in this corrupt system, and stands up to it by exiting from the status quo. This may involve either taking over control (*Hudsucker*) or withdrawing from it (*The Apartment*). He doesn't fight it, though, as in subplot (2). In the *Devil and Miss Jones*, the hero (the richest man in the world) is the distant owner of a department store filled with labor troubles brought on by his own hard-charging but callous managers. Going undercover to root out the troublemakers, he eventually is disillusioned with his own management and walks the picket line against himself.

Plot 2: The Community Of Workers Is Tested. This major story line positions work as the unifying foundation among a community of workers, where community is depicted as a shared neighborhood of families joined by their common dependence on a dominant means of livelihood (that is, on a single employer or industry). These films tend to be set in a mill town or one-industry small town, featuring the homes and community locales (like pubs) of the workers more so than depictions of the worksite itself. Indeed, we may see relatively little of the work and workplace itself, as the overpowering edifice of the mine or the plant stands dark sentinel, looming impersonally over the lives of the villagers. In this context, these films are about class, particularly proletarian, working-class life. At first, we see life in these towns as stable and livable, made possible by the hard, manual labor of the principal bread-winner(s) of the family. Soon, though, trouble arrives in various disguises, turning stability into uproar and conflict. On this basic plot, there are two major variations.

Subplot 4. The Kindness of Strangers Turns Ugly. The lives of the workers are seen more in the family home and local community or village settings. There is a single dominant industry (in at least two cases, a mining operation) in a company-town, for whom the men work while their wives tend the households. Any middle or upper-class areas of the town remain unseen. The plant is owned and run by distant, impersonal, and greedy figures, often not shown; we sense the precariousness of working-class life. Predictably, some problem occurs – often an accident that kills or maims a loved and/or respected member of this community – that polarizes the workers into collective action. In *Black Fury* (1935), discord arrives as a trouble-maker, secretly employed by a Pinkerton-type agency, to stir up labor antagonism; he succeeds in dividing union members, leading to labor strife and conflict. Worried about maintaining production, the mine owner gives the Pinkerton-type agency a contract to enforce labor discipline and break up the union. In *Country* (1984), the oppressor is a lender that is calling the loan of debt-ridden farmers; this pummels the farm family and acts to unite the local farming community. We see the members of the community working together off the job, organizing, holding meetings, walking the picket line, and so on. The resulting strike is prolonged, and the community of workers is increasingly fragmented and riddled with conflict. The resolution of the strike is often less than the *status quo ante*, and the community of workers has been fundamentally changed.

Subplot 5. The workplace under assault, the community triumphant. Again, there is a community of workers, this time seen more at the workplace as co-workers who are good friends than as neighbors who are co-workers. We are introduced to a workplace that is homey, comfortable, and stable, where the workplace is as much a place of socializing and friendship as it is of production. The sense that this comfortable, domesticated way of working may be threatened, though, soon becomes palpable. Typically, there is a kindly old owner-executive who recognizes the need for reform and innovation in that production process, even if he's not sure about the details. He enlists an agent for change, typically a consultant, that represents a more professional or pragmatic set of business solutions. The consultant is nose-to-the-grindstone and recommends solutions that seem to lead to the displacement of workers and the conversion of the workplace into a more serious, controlled, and managed (less humane) atmosphere. Won over by the community of workers, though, the consultant sees the errors of his ways; other changes are made and the workers are actually brought back to the status quo, if not improved (in *The Efficiency Expert*, 1992, by employee ownership; in *Desk Set*, 1957, by a computer; in *The Whistle at Eaton Falls*, 1951, by the ex-union-head-now-president who masterminds a cost-saving reduction that leads to more jobs).

Plot 3: The Working Experience And Its Consequences Working can uplift the spirit or degrade the body and soul. It can be a source of rewards (money, status, power, achievement, or contribution) or a source of agony and despair. Four variations are found on this theme:

Subplot 6. Working alienation: The war on the body and the spirit. These films depict work in its most debilitating, alienating, demeaning, and oppressive forms. The agony it imposes is seemingly inescapable. Workers are like zombies, going through the motions, burned-out automatons at the whim and caprice of a bone-crunching system of mindless repetition or hopeless struggling against the odds of success. On this stage, the personal dramas of the main characters play out, creating some modest relief against the inexorable and deadening rhythms of the job. The real enemy is the nature of the work being done and the worker's alienation from it. In *The Working Girls* (1986), the central character is a lesbian prostitute who uses her body to make money, going through all the motions but without passion or psychological involvement. In *Clockwatchers* (1997), the temporary clerical staff pass the day doing mindless tasks, wondering if anyone knows they exist. In *Modern Times* (1936), Chaplin's tramp, unable to let go of his task, is literally swallowed whole by the assembly line. Nicolas Cage's ambulance technician character in *Bringing out the Dead* (2000) is burned out and lives in a world of ghosts, haunted by the memories of those he tried to save.

Subplot 7. Rewarding Honest Work. In these films, work becomes the way to earn material rewards that feed the body, if not the ego. These rewards come from hard, innovative, and sometimes unconventional work; indeed, it is the hero's decision to follow a higher work ethic that leads to the rewards. The central character is introduced as a misfit, unwilling to accept his or her station, aspiring for something different in work, ambitious for a better and more satisfying occupation. Often, the reward is not simply a better job but also a love interest. The classic Horatio Alger version of this plot can be seen in *Working Girl* (1988) and in *The Secret of My Success* (1987). Both stars Melanie Griffith and Michael J. Fox pretend to be executives, put together historical deals, and get a promotion and their love interest in the process -- as well as prove to others and perhaps more importantly, to themselves, why they deserved these rewards. In another variation, the ambitions and desires are for rewards, albeit not in the classic Horatio Alger form. In *Employee of the Month* (2007), the underachieving hero adopts a stronger work ethic based on his belief that the new temptress cashier will sleep with the best worker. In *Office Space* (1999), the hero wants honest, natural work instead of the mind-numbing inanities of his Dilbert-like current job; he works himself out of this situation and lands, for him, the more desirable work of manual labor -- and gets the girl. A defining characteristic of these films is the work ethic of the central characters: they are driven by an inner ambition to succeed. (This work ethic will be contrasted with more general ethical principles that define the actors in the *Character Defined* plots to be discussed shortly.)

Subplot 8. Competing for the next rung. A distinctive type of hard work and reward plot involves competition for status or position. Unlike the prior subplot, here the reward is specific -- a promotion -- and two workers are engaged in a head-to-head competition for a zero-sum prize. The goal is not to get the girl or more money, but

rather to gain recognition and approval for advancement up the corporate ladder. This competition sets in motion a series of interactions between the competitors that spreads to workplace cliques and to family members. Competition becomes rivalry as each aspirant attempts to outshine the other. The emerging issue is how far each will go to win. This plot is exemplified in the aptly named *The Promotion* (2008)

Subplot 9. Character defined: confronting the adversities of work. In these films, work creates moral dilemmas: the siren call of riches and fame is heard against a nagging and incessant metronome of selfishness, arrogance, wrong-doing, and moral bankruptcy. In this morass, the most important reward is self-respect, which can be earned only by making difficult choices about work. Work becomes the medium through which integrity is challenged and character tested. The triumph of character and integrity comes at a high price, though. In *Executive Suite* (1954), William Holden's character explodes against the imminent approval of the corporation's smooth-talking chief financial officer, who promises cheap goods, uninspiring leadership, and an ethos of bland indifference to quality and contribution. Instead, Holden challenges his fellow board members to a vision where work stands for both craftsmanship and integrity and is ennobling and meaningful in the process. In *The Fountainhead* (1949), the hero, driven by his ethical principles, refuses to participate in a corrupt work process and willingly does manual labor instead; he even destroys the fruits of his labor rather than having it tarnished by corrupting minions. In *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), an eccentric inventor driven by a new idea, works as a laborer to get access to research and development labs in order to bring it to fruition. He eventually succeeds but refuses to sell his potential industry- and job-destroying new product to a cabal of owners and an employee union. *The hero of Wall Street* (1987) is transformed from a willing participant in a process consumed by venal motives (for profit, self-aggrandizement and the pure desire for power) when that process strikes his family. He loses his faith in the figure leading that process and eventually orchestrates actions that lead to the leader's downfall -- and the hero's arrest. Nonetheless, the hero, battered and punished, seems destined to emerge as a better person. (The sequel, more the personal story of Michael Douglas's character after being released from prison and his attempt to restart his life, did not meet the minimums to be included in this analysis.)

In *Gung Ho* (1986), Michael Keaton's hero, the prototypical American Everyman worker, is challenged to meet the high production standards established by the new, inscrutable Japanese management overlords of his auto plant. The system requires adapting to a new, more standardized and rigorous system of working -- or lose the plant that is the source of livelihood for the community. Keaton and his American worker-colleagues do rise to the challenge, but not until the mettle of the American workers is questioned. Eventually, they regain their self-esteem from hard, cooperative, selfless commitment to production. In these films, it is not a question of working hard but rather of making hard decisions.

It is not about getting more and better, but rather about doing right, and that can occur only when personal transformation and sacrifice occur in the context of a more desirable and ethical imperative that trumps personal convenience and aggrandizement. The sacrifice yields self-respect.

Plot 4: Accommodating Chaos. The final major plot focuses on the institution of the workplace, presenting the drama(s) of the central character (s) as illustrations of a system gone amok. We see heroes who try to adapt to and operate in a system barely able to function, or veterans of the system who try to keep the jalopy of the system running, or stars of the system that embody and exemplify the system's bizarre and twisted logic. In these films, Kafka's apparition of institutions defined by the absurd and surreal looms large.

Subplot 10. Kafka's ghost appears. These films show work occurring in institutional settings that are bureaucratic, mindless, and even insane, without a reasonable, moral compass. It is the institution that is corrupt, operating according to its own perverse rationality and logic. Plans, decisions, and rewards have nothing to do with merit or good sense. In *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), rookie teacher Sandy Dennis tries to work in an overcrowded urban high school without textbooks or supplies. In *the Hospital* (1971), George C. Scott's administrator fights a seemingly losing battle to keep it operating. In *Network* (1976), Faye Dunaway's character exemplifies the insanity of the system, rising to the top and in the process, maintaining the idiocy of the very system that produced her. The central characters adjust and adapt and even learn how to make the system work for them, as in *Car Wash* (1976), *Head Office* (1986), or *Putney Swope* (1969). The work being done in the institution may be demanding and complex; even so, it is often being advanced for selfish purposes, such as personal aggrandizement (*Network*, 1976; *Putney Swope*, 1969; *Used Cars*, 1980). At the same time, people are often caught up in life-destroying dramas (*Hospital*, 1971; *Network*, 1976) that are the normal byproducts of a system out of control. These black comedies depict the workplace as an absurd system that verges on the Kafka-esque.

Summary and Discussion

Since the 1930s, an entire genre of work films has emerged, primarily American-made but some from other national cinemas. This genre, not specifically articulated until this paper, overlaps but is still distinct from two close cousins: films about socio-economic class and films about labor unions per se. The work films examined here are distinctive in that they are staged mostly in or near workplaces, show the central characters principally in work roles (be they owners, executives, managers, or workers), are based primarily on plots derived from working in economic organizations that create outputs for consumers, and provide lessons about the meaning and nature of work. This paper has identified 54 films that meet and exemplify these four criteria. In these films, one finds four generic plot themes: 1) the dynamics and dialectics of production and control, 2) the testing of a community of workers,

3) the experience and consequences of working, and 4) the dysfunctional, even chaotic operations of work institutions. Within these major plot themes, ten variations on those themes have been identified.

There are at least three reasons why developing this genre of work films is important. First, the new genre gives film historians and researchers a new domain of analysis and an opportunity to extend knowledge of film genres. For example, a number of films not yet reviewed that deserve examination; how well does the framework proposed here accommodate those films? Further, how accurately do work films represent the workplaces of their times? *Norma Rae* (1979) vividly captured the travails of working and organizing textile workers, but in the context of a declining labor union presence in the American workplace. That is, when this film was released, it was already out of step with the larger trends in the workplace. Can and should films be critiqued in terms of how accurately they reflect their contemporary workplaces? Finally, an extreme test case in this context would be to look at national cinemas where working might have been highly politicized; I'm thinking of the cinema of the Soviet Union or of Nazi Germany, where film was put to the interests of the State. In these situations, how was work glorified and depicted? How was film used to build a work ethic or otherwise advance the interests of the State?

Second, for cultural analysts and researchers, this new genre suggests ways to examine linkages between the workplace and the cinematic interpretations and presentations of that workplace. These films often mirror the times in which they are made, spotlighting how the forces at work in society and the economy operate in the workplace. Such films put issues that are in the headlines, debated in courts, reported by academics, and/or examined by Congressional hearings into graphic narratives that people can understand. *Black Fury* (1935) showed how labor conflict can be manufactured by the very people hired to prevent it; *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), how institutions are set up to operate dysfunctionally; *Gung Ho* (1986) how the vaunted American worker may be temperamentally unsuited for the global workplace. Moreover, such films not only reflect issues but may ignite concern and action. *Silkwood* (1983) raised concerns about nuclear safety; *Norma Rae* (1979), about the plight of textile workers. The political fallout of these films often makes them targets for suppression and censorship, as amply illustrated by the classic *Salt of the Earth* (Walsh, 1986).

A third reason for developing this new genre is to enhance the value of films as pedagogical resources. As just suggested, work films not only entertain, but they also educate the general population about the material and spiritual importance of work in human experience. They also offer ideas about what the workplace could be. But what are those lessons? What do these films teach? *The Whistle at Eaton Falls* (1951) is a veritable cornucopia of lessons about work and working, lessons still resonant today. *9 to 5* (1980) offers a primer on innovative ways that the workplace could be transformed to

make it more humane and productive. On the other hand, films can also paint work and working in an unflattering light. Certainly, *Office Space* (1999), *Employee of the Month* (2007), and *Boiler Room* (2000) are less than ringing endorsements for regular jobs. In reviewing this genre of films, I singled out 10 films that I thought captured both historical and existential issues of work and the workplace in the most vivid, informative, and provocative manner; they are: *Black Fury* (1935), *Boiler Room* (2000), *Clockwatchers* (1997), *Executive Suite* (1954), *How Green was my Valley* (1941), *9 to 5* (1980), *North Country* (2005), *Office Space* (1999), *The Perfect Storm* (1999), *The Whistle at Eaton Falls* (1951), *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), and *Wall Street* (1987).

Films can provide a gripping and engaging experience, both entertaining and informing us about the nature of working and the meaning of work in human experience. This newly proposed genre can help us understand how work is portrayed by the artistic imagination, both in what such arts of work teach and also in how they can help us better learn about this essential dimension of the human experience.

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REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 14, no. 1 (Fall 2011)..

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NOTES

- 1 Brinkley, David, *Wheels for the World, Henry Ford, His Company and a Century of Progress*. (New York: Viking Press, 2003). To aide recognition of the films, actors will be identified by their real names and not the names of the characters they played in the films.
- 2 Ross, SJ. *Working-class Hollywood: Silent film and the shaping of class in America*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Ross, SJ. "American workers, American Movies: Historiography and methodology." *International Labor and Working-Class History*, vol. 59 (Spring, 2001): 81-105.
- 3 *Working-Class Hollywood*, 64.
- 4 Zaniello, Tom, *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraffs*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.) Quote on p. 3. See also the reviews in: F. Ahrens, "Workplaces stimulate Hollywood's vivid imagination," *The Washington Post* (October 30, 2005): F 4; and Anne Hornaday, "In the Derivatives Business," *The Washington Post* (January 16, 2005):N3.
- 5 Brandon, T. and William Pierce. "A Directory of American labor films." *Film Library Quarterly*, vol. 12 (no. 2/3, 1979): 88-104, 112; Glass, F. "Notes toward a morphology of labor video." *Afterimage*, September (1989): 8-12.
- 6 Leab, DJ. "Writing history with film: two view of the 1937 strike against General Motors by the UAW." *Labor History*, vol. 21 (1980):102-112.

- 7 Walsh, FR. "The films we never saw: American movies view organized labor,1934-1954." *Labor History*, vol. 27 (no. 4, 1986), 564-580.
- 8 Zieger, GP and RH Zieger. "Unions on the silver screen: a review-essay on *FIST*, *Blue Collar*, and *Norma Rae*." *Labor History*, vol. 23 (no. 1,1982), 67-78. Quote on p. 68.
- 9 Moss, LS. "Film and the transmission of economic knowledge: a report." *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 17 (1979):1005-1018.
10. Thomson, P. "On *American Job*, *Dadetown*, and *Struggles in Steel*." *The Independent*, June (1996): 33-38.
11. Hassard, J. and R. Holliday, editors. *Organization – Representation, work and organization in popular culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1998).
12. Hunter, L. "The celluloid cubicle: regressive constructions of masculinity in 1990's office movies." *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 26 (no. 1, 2003): 71-86. Quote on p. 72.
13. Gehring, WD. *Handbook of American Film Genres* (NY: Greenwood Press, 1988).
14. *op. cit*, *Working-class Hollywood*; "American workers, American Movies".
15. BG Glaser and AL Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).
16. David Ansen, "The elusive executive [review of *Time Out*]," *Newsweek* (April 22, 2002): 62.
17. This is not meant to imply that these categories are unworthy of study as films about work in their own right. Documentaries about work and films about working as artists, sports figures, police or firefighters are certainly fertile possibilities. Likewise, depictions of work on TV are extensive, varied, and probably reach and influence more people than cinema. As noted, however, such films either concentrate on very atypical work and/or would be limited by the medium in terms of depictions and characterizations. The goal here was to isolate pure examples of artistic, cinematic sensibilities about the typical experience of working.
18. The idea that different stories may share an underlying, common plot, in spite of the apparent or surface differences has its latest *tour de force* explication in Christopher Booker's volume on *The Seven Basic Plots* (London: Continuum, 2004). In his masterful accounting, he showed that stories embodied in such diverse literary and comparable artistic media as novels, short stories, dramas for the stage, fairy tales, myths and opera could be meaningfully analyzed in terms of their underlying or deep plot structure. While acknowledging the value of his thesis, my interpretation of the stories found in work films does not attempt to – nor does it indeed– match his seven basic plots.
19. *op. cit*, *Working-Class Hollywood*.

Table 1
Work Films: Major Plot Themes, Variations, and Examples

| Major Themes | Plot Variations | Examples |
|---|--|--|
| The dynamics and dialectics of production and control | 1. When the tough get going, the going gets tough a. Production b. Sales 2. Confronting the Evil Empire 3. Malevolent Buffoons are Rejected | 1. a. The Paper (1994), The Perfect Storm (1999), Under Pressure (1935) 1.b. Employees Entrance (1932), Boiler Room (2000), Glengarry Glen Ross (1992), In Good Company (2005) 2. 9 to 5 (1980), Bread and Roses (2001), Business as Usual (1987), Disclosure (1994), Silkwood (1983), The Garment Jungle (1957), The Insider (1999), Human Resources (2000), Norma Rae (1979), North Country (2005) 3. Hudsucker Proxy (1994), Take This Job & Shove It (1981), The Apartment (1960), The Devil in Miss Jones (1941) |
| The community of workers is tested | 4. The Kindness of Strangers Turns Ugly 5. The workplace under assault and the community triumphant | 4 Black Fury (1935), Country (1984), How Green Was my Valley (1941), Native Land (1942), The River (1984) 5. Desk Set (1957), Gung Ho (1986), The Efficiency Expert (1992), The Whistle at Eaton Falls (1951) |
| The working experience and its consequences | 6. Working alienation: The war on the body and the spirit 7. Rewarding Honest Work 8. Competing for the next rung 9. Character defined: meeting the adversities of work | 6. Bringing out the Dead (2000), Clockwatchers (1997), Executive Suite (1954), Modern Times (1936), Working Girls (1986) 7. Employee of the month (2007), Office Space (1999), Working Girl (1988), The Secret of My Success (1987) 8. The Promotion (2008) 9. Shattered Glass (2003), Fountainhead (1949), Wall Street (1987), The Man in the White Suit (1951), American Madness (1937), Up in the Air (2009) |
| Accommodating Chaos | 10. Kafka's ghost appears | 10. Car Wash (1976), The Hospital (1971), Network (1976), Putney Swope (1969), Up the Down Staircase (1967), Used Cars (1980); Head Office (1986); The Informant (2009) |