Mediating the mill: steel production in film

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MEDIATING THE MILL: STEEL PRODUCTION IN FILM

by

Sara Anne Gooch

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Film Studies in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Corey Creekmur
Mediating the Mill: Steel Production in Film counters opinions by film scholars and critics who often see films that represent steel production and its spaces as failed aesthetic projects or as dull propaganda or educational films, and who undervalue the importance of the specificity of the steel mills and the industry represented in them. It argues that such films are aesthetically and historically rich texts for film and history, but that they can only be interpreted as such when their historical and industrial specificity is returned to or brought alongside the film texts. Using the work of Siegfried Kracauer and film and history scholars, it argues that such films can be read as artifacts of collectively held understandings, imaginings, and affects. In particular, it argues that films representing steel production provide unique insight into collectively held responses to macroeconomic events in the 20th century—from monopoly capital’s consolidation and the introduction of Fordism and Taylorism, to the Keynesian compromise, to the Cold War “consensus,” to the breakdown of Fordism and introduction of global overproduction, and finally to neoliberalism. Using the work of Frederic Jameson, it interprets these films as cognitive maps of steel production from subjective position within antagonisms of class and economic control. Indeed, it argues that 20th century steel production was a subject uniquely able to bring forth cognitive maps, due to the difficulty of representing it as a coherent industrial process. When filmmakers “mapped” the process, they created cognitive (and affective) maps that tell us more about the provisional acts of representation, and what drives and informs them, than about what or who is represented. Finally, it argues that this cognitive and affective work can only be grasped by close attention to the films’ aesthetics, which always also allows for “suggestive indeterminacy” and polyvalent readings, especially due to the striking material world made spectacular on film.

This examination of steel production in film also expands the category of industrial film to include documentaries, experimental films, and popular fiction films. As such, this dissertation is made up of case studies of four sets of films of steel
production and its spaces. The first set, state-sponsored social documentaries of the 1930s, includes films by Joris Ivens, Dziga Vertov, John Grierson, and Willard Van Dyke and considers how these filmmakers differently imagined the state’s role in steel production in this period. The second, mid-twentieth century sponsored films, includes films made for US Steel, Republic Steel, and other steel firms from the 1930s through 1960s, and places these films into the context of public relations as an attempt to shape how workers and the public viewed corporate interests. The third, experimental films of the 1970s, focuses on films by Hollis Frampton and Richard Serra that consider the difficulties of connecting the film artist’s perspective with that of the steel worker as the western steel industry began to draw down its workforce and as economic change split the middle class. The concluding chapter examines popular dystopian Hollywood films of the late twentieth century as part of a broader shift in the US to a neoliberal economy that left little room for workers. Despite the breadth of my chapters, this dissertation draws on the work of Walter Benjamin in understanding catastrophe as the line connecting the chapters, but also in following the potential when a mass art turned its attention to the massed workers and mass spectacles of steel production.

Abstract Approved:___________________________________________________________

Thesis Supervisor

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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Corey Creekmur
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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on steel production in film because, as the following chapters illustrate, steel production has been a particularly aesthetically and historically rich subject for film. My examination of steel production in film expands the category of industrial film to include documentaries, experimental films, animated educational films, and popular fiction films. Indeed, films of steel production stand out as spectacular and hard-to-read texts in a range of major film cycles throughout the twentieth century. Such films span the modernist projects of filmmakers Joris Ivens and Dziga Vertov, canonical US documentary films of the 1930s, mid-twentieth-century sponsored films made for US Steel and other steel firms, experimental films of the 1970s, and Hollywood dystopias of the late twentieth century. Images of glowing ingots, phosphorescent sparks, and huge furnace floors are familiar to most film viewers, even if they cannot identify the objects or processes shown. This is understandable; the process of steel production is foreign to most people, and it resists understanding by being surprisingly circular and opaque. In fact, I argue that the films are such rich artifacts due to the complexity of the production process, and the difficulties encountered as filmmakers attempted to “map” the processes and spaces to give them meaning. An understanding of the processes shown makes the films more legible and also aids in the interpretive work that brings out the films as distinct and meaningful maps, a term which will be discussed more later.

To be adequately understood, films of steel production and its spaces also require the historical study of their industrial contexts and relations of production, as well as textual analysis informed by such research. The following chapters will develop a coherent industrial vocabulary and historical trajectory to discuss the processes and social and industrial histories of steel production. My analyses and close readings of these films draw from social, labor, and economic history in order to connect these film texts to the multiple facets of their historical context, including their place in film history. I argue that films about steel production must be placed within the volatile history of the fight for control over the spaces and processes of production. Such a method involves not only historicization but also an argument about the historical trajectory of the steel industry as shaped by different historical agents. I map this historical trajectory onto macroeconomic events of the 20th century—from monopoly capital’s consolidation and the introduction
of Fordism and Keynesianism, to the Cold War “consensus” of capital and labor, to Fordism’s breakdown and the introduction of global overproduction, and, finally, to neoliberalism. I approach this trajectory primarily from the US perspective, but also explore its cross-national interactions and effects, with the USSR, England, Germany, and Japan in particular for my purposes. However, the following chapters do not offer a complete narrative of the US steel industry in the twentieth century—a task more suited to the historian than the film scholar—but rather case studies that describe the intersection of twentieth-century film production and the volatile spaces of steel production.

By filming steel production, filmmakers operated in a field of antagonisms as different collectivities vied for control over production. Their texts had to function across these groups, or at least draw connections between one group and the larger social world. As cultural workers, most, if not all, of the filmmakers I discuss were positioned as separate from the labor they represented. Yet they were also typically separate from the state agencies or industrial leaders for whom they produced their films, and their films bear the marks of their mediating position between labor, industry, and the state. Whatever the class position of the filmmakers, this mediating role points toward the contradictory position of the middle class, which can be almost defined by its mediating position.¹ As such, these films provide insight into the understandings and affects of mediating collectivities at different historical conjunctures.

The “Masses” of Unskilled Workers in Steel Production and Implications for Films of Steel Production

My dissertation focuses on the filmic representation of “unskilled” labor in steel production. Such labor was a major factor of steel work after its reorganization at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Melissa Dabakis in Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture, US industrial labor first found its way into art in the late nineteenth century; however, such representation focused not on unskilled laborers but on the skilled, individualized labor of figures like the machinist, iron forger, and steel rigger. Although this period marked the dramatic transition from skilled to unskilled labor in industrial processes, the unskilled industrial worker received little aesthetic attention during this
time. Dabakis argues that this omission was not a mistake but rather the result of a desire to quell anxieties in the middle-class over the rising masses of unskilled workers. At the end of her study, Dabakis asserts that industrial and social changes in the 1930s led to new ideas about work, and as a result, new representational interest in collective, unskilled labor. Dabakis’ study solicits my examination of twentieth-century aesthetic engagements with unskilled industrial labor. As I will show, although anxieties around collective, unskilled labor continued in the twentieth century, they primarily found expression not by deflecting representation to skilled labor but rather by representing unskilled labor in aesthetic texts. Even when films looked to skilled labor—as in *Valley Town* (Van Dyke 1940)—they engaged with questions of deskilling labor and increasing lack of distinction between skilled and unskilled labor, both of which greatly affected workers in the steel industry.

The connections between steel production and unskilled labor are profound. Almost by necessity, filming twentieth-century steel production means filming mass unskilled labor. As historians note, modern steel production was largely created out of a longstanding battle between skilled labor and capital for control over the production process. Nineteenth-century iron making relied on puddlers, a powerful, well paid, and unionized set of skilled laborers. When the steel industry modernized at the end of the nineteenth century, it began to replace iron. Steel attracted capitalists trying to wrest control of production from workers because its production replaced puddlers with technology embedded in fixed capital that could be tended by unskilled labor. The shift toward technology occurred alongside the rise of scientific management, giving control of production to management and engineers. These changes were the result of conscious decisions made by industry owners to get closer to their goal, as historian Paul Krause describes, of “[running] their factories with as few workers, particularly skilled workers, as possible” (245). As a result, by the early twentieth century, steel dramatically overtook iron, even in products where iron was the better choice. When steel replaced iron, steel production and the unskilled steelworker took on an important and newly central role in the US economy.²

Marxist accounts of labor most directly speak to this history of the steel industry’s battle with labor for control over the production process as a battle over skill and
knowledge. In *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Harry Braverman argues that the deskilling of the labor force was a result of capital’s need to control labor, and emerged from the basic antagonism between capital and labor. Under earlier phases of capital, industrial laborers, especially machinists, maintained control over the shop floor. Capital’s drive for accumulation meant it needed to cheapen its labor to follow its singular drive for profit, which it achieved by deskilling labor and putting it under stricter control. Scientific management appeared as the organizing mode of work, and became known as Taylorism, using shorthand derived from one of chief proponents of managerial control, F. W. Taylor. Braverman makes clear that Taylor’s ideas were not ‘scientific’ but rather innovations from the “point-of-view of the management of a refractory workforce” (59). Taylor’s innovation was the separation of planning and execution between management and workers. The central protest of workers against Taylorism, according to Braverman, was not due to the stopwatch timing of work but to the wider effort “to strip the workers of craft knowledge and autonomous control and confront them with a fully thought-out labor process in which they function as cogs and levers” (94). The machinist’s job was split between engineers, managers, and a machine operator, who was “relieved of all the decisions, judgment and knowledge,” guided wholly by the machine and directions from management (139). One consequence of this separation of labor, Braverman writes, is that the labor process is divided between “separate sites and separate bodies of workers”: one that plans, “visualizes” and records the process and the other that works on the shop floor and “operate[s] like a hand, watched, corrected, and controlled by a distant head” (86). The importance of managerial vision will be discussed more in the next section.

While unskilled workers were a particularly large presence in the US steel industry, they remained unorganized from the 1890s until the 1930s. Even when the steel industry was unionized in the US, in the mid-twentieth century, corporate propaganda by the steel industry continued to diminish the role of workers and their knowledge, as a way to limit workers’ control over production and the industry. The success of these limitations had catastrophic effects in the 1970s and 1980s. Battles over control based on assumptions of skill and knowledge also inform films made outside the US, as others adopted US steel production’s labor organization and Taylorist methods. The films of steel production represent not only this “unskilled” labor force, but also the quandary that
subtends it, as analogous to “the masses,” as both a point of commonality and defeat, of plentitude and emptiness. While this dissertation focuses on the representations of this group of workers, its carries with it the concern that a much broader range of workers, along with the unemployed, share in this quandary, and that this quandary has become more and more apparent from the end of the twentieth century to the present. My dissertation is based on an assumption that the twentieth-century battleground of steel workers and its representations still matter a great deal, even if steel no longer takes a central place in the US or global economy.

“To Make You See”: Film and the Managerial Position

The question of how a filmmaker or viewer positions oneself within the production process is closely connected to questions of sight and the hierarchies of Taylorist workplaces. Two anecdotes of sight, and how two filmmakers described their filmmaking as seeing, will help illustrate the issues as they appear in my dissertation. In his autobiography The Camera and I, Joris Ivens described what he considered a formative event for his later work that took place during his first trip to the USSR in the 1930s, leading up to his film Komsomol (1933; discussed at length in chapter two). During the trip, Ivens showed his films at a Soviet workers’ clubhouse, and one worker asked him to describe his class position and his work. Ivens recounted his middle class background and career in film; the worker said he must be a liar or a fake, telling Ivens, “You say you are from the middle class, yet the film we have seen was surely made with the eyes of the worker. I know, because it is exactly the way I see the work” (59-60, emphasis added). Ivens described this a touching compliment, a keen insight into his intentions, and an impetus for his future filmmaking. In a 1980 interview with Bill Simon, US experimental filmmaker Hollis Frampton told a remarkably similar story about one of the films in Magellan, an unfinished cycle of short films. He screened Autumnal Equinox (1974), which he filmed in a slaughterhouse, for the slaughterhouse’s workers. Afterwards, Frampton recalled that one older man “said something that I rather cherished: ‘You don’t see us in the film, you see what we see’” (“Talking” 250, emphasis added). When Frampton shot in the Homestead steel mill that same year to make Winter Solstice (1974; discussed in chapter four), another film in Magellan, he either continued with this approach or took up the idea articulated by the slaughterhouse worker. Either
way, he filmed steel production from an especially embodied perspective close to the open-hearth furnace and soaking pits. Discussing the film that resulted from this shooting, Winter Solstice, Frampton asserted an ability to see not available to steelworkers: “The worker […] is deprived, is forced out of every possible pleasure or gratification that could come from the work itself, including the fantasia of what is to be seen there, which is, of course, extraordinary” (“Talking” 250). In this quote, Frampton points to the historical situation of the steel worker, as one of exclusion, but also suggests that a film viewer may have access to visual pleasure denied the worker. Frampton’s quote astutely emphasizes the historical context of force that caused the situation. To be sure, the film allows for an experience not possible due to the assault on one’s other senses while on a shop floor, yet his assertion of sight is also problematic.

The emphasis on sight in these two stories is no coincidence. It belongs to a history of how film gets described and recalls one of the most famous lines attributed to D. W. Griffith: “The task I am trying to achieve is above all to make you see.” However, in light of steel production, this focus on sight in a hierarchy of senses, and even an implied hierarchy of sight itself (not just to see, but really see), is problematic. First, sight provides a limited representation of the experience of the work, and leaves out the far more intense sensory experiences of steel production, e.g. heat and noise, of which only the latter can be partially returned to films, and at a much lower intensity. Moreover, while a film might provide access to what workers could see, a text focused on what can be seen from the shop floor cannot capture their collective experience, and it would be a mistake to assume a film can provide anything more than a partial representation.

Second, Frampton’s quote suggests a questionable aesthetic privilege that gives the filmmaker, and viewer, an ability to see over and above the worker. In fact, former steelworkers interviewed by Allison Zippay in the 1980s were able to vividly describe the visual drama that occurred around them, but they described this drama in its complexity both in terms of the psychophysical demands and workplace control. They brought with them knowledge that most film viewers would not have and could not get from the text.

Such privileging of sight is tied to another central problem: the imbrication of class and hierarchical work relations with sight, and assumptions for and about who can see and what they see. In his article, “The Gaze at Work: Knowledge Relations and Class
Spectatorship,” Derek Nystrom directly addresses the knot of sight and class relations in film. Nystrom argues that film’s “epistemic” pleasure has roots in the centrality of sight to the hierarchical divisions of work. Nystrom argues the co-implication between two events of the late nineteenth century: the emergence of film and the reorganization of management predicated on the demand that managers, not workers, retain the sources of knowledge about production. Thus, Nystrom asserts a link between Taylorism’s transformation of knowledge relations and cinema’s mobilization of sight (35). He goes so far to suggest that films often offer a kind of pleasure by “placing the spectator in a position akin to that of a manager” (26). In films of steel production, the act of filming itself most likely widened the distance between the filmmakers and the workers they filmed because it placed them in a position mirroring the hierarchical supervision of the workplace. However, rather than dismiss the films for their mobilization of sight and its hierarchical implications, I argue that such limitations can productively inform readings of the films. In fact, the films provide clues for how the filmmakers responded to the position in which they were placed and the gaze they inhabited.

Key Terms: Representation, Propaganda, and Mediation

The questions above about the filmmaker’s position in relation to the filmed event already suggest that these films are partial representations of steel mill production. They are also often “interested,” that is to say, motivated to construct particular representations of steel production by forces and discourses outside the text. Thus these films are not only documents of steel production but of the relations, interests, and concerns that gathered around the production. They need to be studied as acts of representation, even if they include images and sounds of real spaces. As Stuart Hall writes, representation implies the active work of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping: not merely the transmitting of an already existing meaning, but the more active labor or making things mean. It is a practice, a production of meaning. (64)

Hall focuses on the “work” required to produce meaning, or rather, a text, which, drawing on V. N. Volosinov and Antonio Gramsci, he then links to class struggle in the form of the struggle over signs and meaning (77). Meaning production is thus intimately tied to question of class, with purposes as much social as textual.
While several films in the dissertation can be seen as “representation” in Hall’s sense, the films in Chapters Two and Three, on 1930s documentary and 1950s industrial film, could also be labeled propaganda. However, the meaning of this term is far from clear: as a word, “propaganda” has a negative connotation, and one problem critics of nonfiction film confront is discerning the difference between persuasion and propaganda. From the field of communications, but with insight extraordinarily helpful to film studies, Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell define propaganda as the intent to manipulate an audience to “achieve a purpose that is advantageous to the propagandist” (16). If the manipulation works, the propagandist benefits, “not necessarily the members of the audience” (14). Jowett and O’Donnell also differentiate persuasion and propaganda, asserting that persuasion is interactive and reciprocal, while propaganda is the opposite. The troubling films from the USSR’s Five Year Plan discussed in Chapter Two can be seen as either propaganda or persuasion. By contrast, the US sponsored films discussed in Chapter One and in Chapter Four are more explicitly corporate propaganda. Regardless, analysis cannot, and should not, end because a film can be designated as propaganda. Instead, such a designation should merely help to clarify, or productively complicate, readings of films and their relationship to their historical world.

By emphasizing mediation and contradiction, Fredric Jameson’s work provides important theoretical insights for my approach throughout the dissertation. While I primarily make use of his concept of cognitive mapping, which I will discuss later, I also make use of his approach to textual interpretation as outlined in The Political Unconscious. Jameson begins The Political Unconscious with the famous imperative “always historicize,” and, as a Marxist, this demand to historicize means to embed texts in the historical ground of class struggle. For Jameson, interpretation brings out a text’s position as part of a class discourse. Through the act of interpretation,

The individual text retains its formal structure as a symbolic act: yet the value and character of such symbolic action are now significantly modified and enlarged. On this rewriting [in interpretation], the individual utterance or text is grasped as a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes. (Jameson, Political 85)

Moreover, such texts “cannot be properly assigned their relational place in a dialogic system without the restoration or artificial reconstruction of the voice to which they were
initially opposed, a voice for the most part stifled and reduced to silence” (85). In the same way, the films of my dissertation need to be put into dialogue with their contexts and grounded in antagonisms. This work requires sources from outside these films, and from outside the medium of film in general. Films about steel production provide an interesting point of entry for such interpretive acts: while their construction as texts creates the kinds of utterances Jameson examines, the very content of the films routinely opens them to a confrontation of classes or collectivities. They lend themselves directly and explicitly to the kind of work Jameson outlines.

Despite these explicit links to their social ground, the relationships of the film texts that I discuss to their contexts are not mechanically reflective. Jameson addresses this problem by turning to “mediation,” which he defines as “the relationship between [different] levels and instances” that allow us to establish relationships between a text and “its social ground” (Political 39). In place of suggesting static homologies, Jameson argues that “it seems more interesting to grasp the mutual relationships between […] the text and its social subtext in the more active terms of production, projection, compensation, repression, displacement, and the like” (Political 44); one can find in a text traces of unarticulated contradictions and forces, as well as signs of “collective and class discourses” (Political 76). Moreover, one can analyze how texts attempt to resolve real contradictions through form. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that the films I discuss attempt such active representational work. This dynamism both in the text’s context and between text and context must be returned to such films so that they can be legible. This legibility gives sharpness and meaning to their textual choices that time often obscures.

Films of Steel Production as Historical Artifacts with Affective Dimensions

I approach the films of my dissertation as primary texts that can provide insight into their historical moment. Each chapter contextualizes the films discussed by using secondary historical sources while also developing close readings that bring questions of aesthetics, rhetoric, and form to bear on these films. Their content and form provide evidence not only of historical objects, processes, and spaces but also of attitudes and perspectives, as well as interests and anxieties. In Image as Artifact, historian John
O’Connor emphasizes the usefulness of films as historical artifacts with affective dimensions, which require analysis on a subjective level. Working within film studies, I am particularly interested in what the interaction of context and text reveals about collective subject relations. In this way, my methodology resembles work by scholars in the field of film and history like Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin. In *Cinema and History*, Ferro sketches out key ideas for how films can be used as sources for historical knowledge. Ferro asserts that films, especially in their formal construction and aesthetics, incorporate “ideological and social zones” that provide traces of their social world’s “secrets” and “lapses,” and thus a subjective expression of objective or discursive events (29-30). Similar to Jameson, Ferro identifies the usefulness of close formal analysis to read the expression of social tensions and contradictions, and their attempted imaginary resolution. Pierre Sorlin focuses on historical films as a genre, but similarly asserts that films can provide access to how “people of a period in the past felt, understood, or perhaps expressed the problems of their time” (211).

Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), which preceded both Sorlin and Ferro, offers a sociological study of film in relation to the social tensions and subjective effects of a collective body that has been enormously important for film studies. In *Caligari*, Kracauer analyzed interwar German films as evidence of the problems, contradictions, fears, and paralysis of the German social world, which, he argues, allowed fascists to seize power. Kracauer argues that cinema bears traces of “dispositions,” “attitudes,” and “tendencies”: or, “the collective mentality which extends more or less below the dimensions of consciousness” (5). For him, film bears these collective traces for several reasons: first, films are produced collectively, and the distinctly cooperative nature of film production “[suppresses] individual peculiarities in favor of traits common to many people” (5); second, films, especially popular films, must appeal to the “anonymous multitude” and thus attempt to tap into the “mental climate” of its audiences (6); and finally, films more than other media capture a social world’s “mental processes” because films “are able, and therefore obliged to scan whole visible world” (6). Thus, in showing material spaces and objects, they also transmit signs of the mental world that shaped the material. Although *From Caligari to Hitler* can be criticized for its focus on the “German soul,” Kracauer denies that he refers to a fixed, national
character and insists that the “collective dispositions [and] tendencies” (5) traced are historical, and might only reflect a part of a nation. This part, however, is still collective and can affect the whole. For example, films might reflect middle-class compulsions and pretensions, but these can have national effects and, although he does not use the term, can act as hegemonic.

‘Suggestive Indeterminacy’: The Aesthetics of Steel Films

Kracauer’s later work on the aesthetics of film, Theory of Film, also informs my approach to these film texts. From Caligari to Hitler and Theory of Film are useful to my approach because both read films as aesthetic objects imbricated with their social context. While the first reads film symptomatically, the latter explores the insights made possible by the medium. In Theory of Film, I am most interested in the similarities between Kracauer’s aesthetics of film and the qualities of the films in my dissertation. His delineation of the medium of film captures surprisingly well the visual and aural interest of films of steel production, whose content on the surface might not seem amenable to film aesthetics. In Theory of Film, he argues that film, like photography, has a “marked affinity for the visible world” (xlix). According to Kracauer, film’s affinity for and ability to record physical reality set out, for him, what makes a film truly cinematic. He writes: “[Films] cling to the surface of things. They seem to be the more cinematic, the less they focus directly on inward life, ideology, and spiritual concerns” (1i). Similarly, films of steel production almost always—except in a few animated instances in the 1950s and 1960s—concentrate on the outer, material reality of the mill. The physical reality of the steel mill fascinated many of the filmmakers I discuss in the following chapters. The emphasis of these films on material reality can be overwhelming, especially when the content is so foreign to most film viewers. Often, a film’s exploration of “surface of things” even overwhelms its ideological or discursive interests. However, this focus contributes to the unique interest of the films, at once fascinating and alienating to film viewers.

Kracauer’s aesthetic also intersects with the distinct nature of the “physical reality” found in the films I will discuss. Kracauer argues that film has an affinity for “the animate” or “objects which stand out as protagonists” (44). He holds as aesthetically central those films engaged with the material world, specifically, the “flow of random
events [...] involving human and inanimate objects” (l). Film often shows the objects of
its focus first “so that they appear in their suggestive indeterminacy” even if they are later
woven back into a discourse or narrative (71). This indeterminacy is a key part of
Kracauer’s aesthetics of film. Of course, the world of the steel mill is distinctly
inanimate, for the historically conditioned reasons discussed earlier, and even shots of
workers show people working with, or perhaps for, things. More often, the films show
almost no people, and instead focus on things, either in movement or impressively large
and static. As I will show, films that leave out workers to focus on the fixed capital of the
mill—its things—often promote the prerogative of capitalists and managers to control
production. The apotheosis of a world of things can be a capitalist fantasy. However, not
all films that emphasize the material world of the mills function in the same way, and
even films that are corporate propaganda can be multi-faceted and open texts. The things
of the material world often shift between indeterminate and determinate meanings, as the
film stitches them incompletely into discourse. The result is subjectivity in dialogue with
an outside world, made more alien by its overwhelming materiality. Moreover, in the
process of engagement, due to the content, subjectivity within these films opens to
collective affects, experiences, and questions. 5

Jameson’s Cognitive Mapping

Finally, I argue that Jameson’s concept of the cognitive map is particularly
helpful for understanding how the films I discuss can be read as artifacts of collectively
held understandings, imaginings, and affects. Twentieth-century steel production was
uniquely difficult to represent as an industrial process. When filmmakers attempted to
“map” the process or its spaces, they constructed cognitive (and affective) maps that tell
us more about the provisional acts of representation, and what drives and informs them,
than about what is represented. Throughout his work on the concept, Jameson emphasizes
that cognitive maps are provisional, partial, and “situational” (Postmodernism 51)
attempts “to grasp and represent the social totality” (Geopolitical 36). 6 He argues that,
starting with the rise of monopoly capitalism, a problem took shape in figuration
“between a phenomenological description of the life of the individual and [...] the
conditions of existence of that experience” (“Cognitive” 349). This drift between
experience and knowledge of the conditions for it has only intensified into the present (349). For Jameson, global capital as “the totality of class relations” (353) and/or “class war” (Geopolitical 46) is that driving condition or “absent cause” that is “inaccessible to any individual [yet] can find figures through which to express itself in distorted and symbolic ways” (“Cognitive” 350). He takes the term cognitive map from the work of Kevin Lynch, who used it to describe the mental maps city dwellers create to help them navigate a city. The cognitive map helps to bridge between experience and the larger whole or totality, and make the city less alienating. It bridges the dialectic between “the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality” (“Cognitive” 353). Similarly, cognitive maps are “the mental map of the social and global totality we all carry around in our heads in variously garbled forms” (353).

In Postmodernism, Jameson extends the metaphor to nautical maps so that cognitive maps allow us to position ourselves in relation to “local, national, and international realities” (52). While Jameson doesn’t explicitly make the connection, I think it is important to understand a cognitive map as a text engaged in class discourse, or as discussed earlier, what Jamesone calls “a symbolic move in an essentially polemic and strategic ideological confrontation between the classes” (Jameson, Political 85). Thus, these mental maps are representations of provisional conceptions of totality from class positions that are part of the totality as an antagonism. Films of steel production are uniquely legible as such representations.

**Chapters**

This project seeks to make an implicit argument that expands the category of industrial films, which I might define as films that represent an industrial form of production, framed as such, and, in the process, mediate contemporary questions of capital and macroeconomics. As such, this dissertation is made up of case studies of four very different sets of films of steel production and its spaces. Moreover, it argues that films representing steel production provide unique insight into collectively held responses to macroeconomic events in the 20th century. To this end, each chapter maps on a specific moment in this trajectory, from monopoly capital’s consolidation and the introduction of Fordism and Taylorism, to the Keynesian compromise, to the Cold War “consensus,” to
the breakdown of Fordism and introduction of global overproduction, and finally to neoliberalism. Thus, each chapter attempts to make the central arguments of this dissertation by focusing on a particular set of films tied to a particular moment of 20th century economics.

The first chapter examines the short film *An American in the Making* (Thanhouser 1913), which was sponsored by US Steel to promote its safety program. I argue that prior attempts to locate this film historically have been too broad in defining both its purpose and its location in transitional era cinema. Instead, I argue that the film should be 1) seen in light of an emerging field of sponsored, nontheatrical film and 2) positioned as part of the corporate propaganda of a volatile period in which film was one of many media used as a weapon in class struggle. In this case, US Steel used the film, and its celebration of immigrant steelworkers’ social mobility and US Steel’s corporate safety campaign, to deflect and defuse criticisms by Progressive reformers like John A. Fitch, one of the members of the Pittsburgh Survey, over the corporation’s long working hours and union repression. This work of deflection and defusion is done by both parts of the film—the fictive frame following one immigrant steel worker and the central descriptive segment of US Steel’s safety devices and procedures. I look to the intersection of the two sections, and moments of key elision or evasion in the film, to understand the film as a contradictory and multiply determined text in a contested field.

The second chapter, “Figuring Steel in Documentary in the 1930s,” analyzes a set of documentary films from the 1930s, often identified as a major period for the production of documentary filmmaking, during which central tenets of the form took shape. The chapter takes up documentary images of steel production in canonical films, which cannot be avoided in any study of such films: Dziga Vertov’s *Enthusiasm* (1931), Joris Ivens’ *Komsomol* (1932), and John Grierson’s *Industrial Britain* (1933), along with *The River* (Lorentz 1938), *The City* (Steiner and Van Dyke 1939) and *Valley Town* (Van Dyke 1940). This chapter’s transnational perspective (USSR, UK, and US) and historical moment plays an important stage-setting role for the dissertation. The films are all connected to events in their national context that cannot be separated from events outside their borders. Moreover, the filmmakers traveled across borders and watched each other’s films, and the nations and national industries shaped each other. This emphasizes the
global interconnections of steel production, even when it was understood as a national industry. For each film, I connect the text to their immediate industrial context, and this context to major economic and social events rife with antagonism: between capital and labor, the state and the multitude, or between constituting and constituent power. The texts, then, can be read in terms of the contradictions and antagonisms of their contexts. This provides insights especially into the complex formal qualities of these documentaries.

The films discussed in the second chapter are highly discursive, in the sense used by Bill Nichols: they make arguments about the world. However, a focus only on the arguments made by these films is not enough, or even as easy as it might seem. Rather, I also focus on the “figural,” more visually and aurally abstract sections, which also are the sections that show the production of steel. These sections shed important light on the films, their social ground, and the mediatory position of the filmmakers. For example, in *Enthusiasm* and *Komsomol*, films sponsored by the Soviet State as part of the campaign selling the Five Year Plan, filmmakers Dziga Vertov and Joris Ivens both celebrate the force of living labor and evoke the volatility of this labor in relation to the state project in their visual and aural figural moments.

The chapter then looks to two other films of steel production filmed around the same time, Grierson’s *Industrial Britain* and Van Dyke’s *Valley Town*. Grierson has been the person most often blamed for breaking the modernist impulses of documentary, and producing a “moribund” film form. I seek to challenge this assumption by returning the sense of volatility both to the British context and to Grierson’s section of *Industrial Britain* on the steel industry. Finally, I turn to the US, and the films of Willard Van Dyke made as part of the New Deal. The US films are decidedly ambivalent, even hostile to steel production in general in comparison to the prior films, and only allow glimpses of the figural when nostalgically evoking skilled labor. While every documentary discussed in this chapter seems imbued with promise and peril, the US films focus on the peril. Rather than see this as a failure of the films to imagine labor positively, I believe it points to their position and context.

The third chapter looks at mid-twentieth-century US corporate propaganda, during the high point of sponsored films production and circulation. It focuses on films
sponsored by the steel industry for public relations purposes, specifically films by US Steel and Republic Steel, two major companies, and the trade association, the American Iron and Steel Institute. The chapter places the films within the historical context of corporate public relations campaigns in response to challenges to the business community’s power and authority precipitated by the Depression, New Deal, and rise of industrial unions. Such campaigns started in the 1930s and continued through the reassertion of corporate hegemony in the 1950s and 1960s (Fones-Wolf). Specifically, the films are evidence of ideologies and discourses at work in mid-twentieth-century America, as well as the concerted effort to create imaginary worlds, or cognitive maps, that supported them. Such films focus on narrative structure rather than highlight moments of figuration. Historians of US corporate propaganda and public relations describe the turn to showmanship and “intimate stagecraft,” as a transition “from the rhetorical to the dramatic, from news to culture” (Bird). The turn to a “folksy” Americana approach reached its apotheosis in 1960s animated films sponsored by US Steel and the AISI. The 1960s animated films were also the high point for another strand in steel sponsored industrial films, specifically, a virulent class discourse that sought to exclude workers entirely. In their fantasies of mills working animistically, the animated film presented a capitalist fantasy of a world without workers.

The fourth chapter turns to experimental films of the 1970s, specifically to two films that have resisted interpretation in part due to their focus on steel production. These are Hollis Frampton’s *Winter Solstice* (1974) and Richard Serra’s *Steelemill/Stahlwerke* (1979). I argue that both films need to be placed in their historical context to be understood, and otherwise can too easily be seen as artistic failures. The economy of the 1970s was particularly fraught, in crisis, at the start of the economic downturn in many countries, including the US, Germany, and Japan, and the deindustrialization of the US. Moreover, the rift widened between white collar and blue-collar middle class due to these economic changes. As members of the middle class with ties to industrial labor, both filmmakers produced films in dialogue with historical events that call attention to their historically conditioned ambivalent position with regards to the work they film.

In the final chapter, I move to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when no one could any longer deny that a major economic change was occurring the US. Using history and
cultural theory, I identify this change as deindustrialization precipitated by neoliberalism. I focus on three mainstream fiction films of the period that used steel mills as the backdrop for key narrative sequences: *Robocop* (1987), *Black Rain* (1989), and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). These three films all used recently abandoned steel mills for filming, but none name the sites or explicitly engage with their recent history. In part, the producers’ use of the steel mills as background, while they were still closing or had just closed, is simply the result of vulture-like economizing on the part of the makers. However, the three films, as many film scholars have already noted, are also highly reflexive texts engaged with contemporary economic anxieties. While the recent history of the mills does not explicitly enter the narrative of these films, the inclusion of the mills—and the criminals, cyborgs, and heroes running through them—encourages new readings of the films as even more responsive to contemporary economic change than noted before. I argue that *Robocop*, T2, and *Black Rain* are transitional objects for and about the professional middle class, and reflect the anxieties and fantasies of this group in the transitional period out of Fordism. Thus, they are cognitive maps from the position of the professional middle class. This does not mean that the professional middle class made up the actual audiences of films shown, but instead that the films most effectively replicate and respond to economic changes from an assumption of the position of this middle class in the process of restructuring and cutting ties to industrial workers. While the films might focus on the middle class as their subjects and anxious audiences, their approaches and meanings are very different because class positions and mass culture are contradictory formations. Moreover, I hope to show that these films respond not so much to transition as catastrophe during the consolidation of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s.

Despite the widening distance between the present moment and the original release of the films of the last chapter, its focus on neoliberal catastrophe is an appropriate place to end. Arguably, our present moment is an intensification of the historical events and trends with which those popular films engaged. This dissertation was written in the midst of economic catastrophe, begun during the recession and global turn to austerity, which can be seen as extensions of the twentieth century’s macroeconomic problems. It argues that the films I discuss are particularly rich texts for
mediating this historical trajectory, but that they can only be interpreted as such when their historical and industrial specificity is returned to or brought alongside the film texts. Using the work of Siegfried Kracauer and film and history scholars, it argues that such films can be read as artifacts of collectively held understandings, imaginings, and affects. Using the work of Frederic Jameson, it interprets these films as cognitive maps of steel production from subjective position within antagonisms of class and economic control. Finally, it argues that this cognitive and affective work can only be grasped by close attention to the films’ aesthetics, which always also allows for ‘suggestive indeterminacy’ and polyvalent readings, especially due to the striking material world made spectacular on film.
Notes

1 Between Labor and Capital (1979) is the title of an anthology on the contradictory position of the middle class, with articles by Barbara and John Ehrenreich and Eric Olin Wright.

2 This historical account of steel replacing iron due to the differences in the production processes, and not the products, can be found in several sources, see Brody, Braverman, and Krause. Harvey and Lash & Urry also make use of the account in their social analysis of economic relations.

3 To be fair, I believe Hollis Frampton was very aware of the problems attached to this visual pleasure, as I discuss in my reading of his film Winter Solstice.

4 Lewis Jacobs attributed this quote to D. W. Griffith in The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History, see Jacobs 119. It is used to support Jacobs’ claim that Griffith grasped that “in the movie palace the audience watches first and then listens” (119). While Jacobs identifies other sources for his quotes from Griffith, this particular quote is left unattributed. It might be assumed to be from the same source as the quote before, but it is not, as far as I can tell. I first came across the quote with a citation identifying Jacobs as the source in George Bluestone’s Novels into Film: “Summing up his major intentions in 1913, D. W. Griffith is reported to have said […]” (1). Kracauer, however, is the even more well-known repetition of the quote. He begins an early chapter of Theory of Film with the quote as an epigraph, also identifying Jacobs as the source. Bluestone, and others after him, note the similarity of this quote with the famous line from Joseph Conrad’s preface to Nigger of the Narcissus: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see" (qtd. in Bluestone 1). Indeed, Conrad was quite popular at the time given for the quote and Griffith might well have intended the echo, if he said it.

5 “Affect” is a difficult term, for sure, but recent scholarship has helped clarify the term and its use. The editors of the Affect Theory Reader define affect as, among other things, “the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces beyond emotion—that serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us […] across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability” (Seigworth and Gregg 1).

6 While Jameson grounds his discussion in the call for cognitive mapping as a new aesthetic, he admits that the concept is, in fact, more a means for him to debate “the great themes and shibboleths of post-Marxism” (“Cognitive” 347).

7 Key sections of Jameson’s essay “Cognitive Mapping” show up verbatim in Postmodernism, particularly pages 50-53 and 409-416. In Postmodernism, he again grounds his discussion of cognitive mapping in the call for a new, hypothetical “cultural model [which] foregrounds the cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of political art and culture” (50). However, he also asserts that the concept allows us “to renew the analysis of representation on a higher and more complex level” (51). While Jameson couches the concept in proscription, he mostly discusses it descriptively, as the “production of functioning and living ideologies” that are “distinct in different historical situations” (53).
Cognitive mapping has direct connections to more recognizable Marxist terms, as Jameson admits. In *Postmodernism*, he describes the concept as an “analogue” to Althusser’s concept of ideology (415) and as perhaps simply “code” for class consciousness (418). However, the terms has a different meaning than either of these terms—as a response to post-Marxism. It allows in more easily the notions of provisionality, agency, and specificity.

In *The Subject of Documentary*, Michael Renov posits the essay documentary as the antidote that can “[enliven] the moribund critical discourse surrounding nonfiction” (72).
CHAPTER 1: MAKING AN AMERICAN IN THE MAKING

An American in the Making (Thanhouser Co., 1913) follows a peasant, Eastern European young man as he joins his brother already working in the US Steel mill in Gary, Indiana. The young man becomes educated on the safety measures that will keep him safe while working, takes a job in the open hearth, learns English, marries his English teacher and settles into a comfortable domestic life. While it mostly references US Steel through its safety devices and, indirectly, through the increasingly pleasant domestic life of one immigrant worker, An American in the Making (henceforth abbreviated AM) does direct public relations work for the steel corporation. The president of Thanhouser, the film company, clarified the film’s goals well: US Steel wanted a film to show it “had a heart” and that it was “interested in the health and safety of their employees” (qtd. in Slide 5).

For a short industrial film, much has been written about AM. Film historians and scholars have focused on its sponsorship by US Steel and its story about an immigrant worker’s transition into American life and work. The film histories that discuss An American in the Making place it within broad social trends—for example, corporate paternalism or Americanization—and often position it in the center of the transitional era’s cinema culture. These histories fail to address specifically enough the film’s context in the steel industry and to account for key differences between it and the cinema culture of the period. Instead, AM can more fruitfully be analyzed in terms of the film’s purpose for US Steel, in relation to a series of antagonisms, as well as its oppositional relation to most cinema culture and to the period’s general Progressive trends. Such a film is so impacted with history and historical discourses that it exemplifies the need for the method of my dissertation: textual analysis combined with film, social, and industrial histories to excavate the connections made between what is “inside” the text and what lies “outside” it. Moreover, those who provide summaries of the film fail to note the film’s most interesting aspect as a historical artifact—one can read in it a network of contemporary discourses about labor which were also “in the making,” as it is with hegemony.
*AM*, made in 1913, is part of the so-called transitional period of silent cinema, roughly from 1908 into the late 1910s, which saw the move from single-reel films played in nickelodeons into longer, feature films in theaters. The transitional era saw the development of classical film language, multi-reel films, the model for the classical film industry, and theaters seeking middle-class as well as urban, immigrant audiences.² There are many difficulties with this periodization, as there is with any such designation, especially one that presumes a telos. However, besides its usefulness for film history, it helps clarify *AM* and its cultural context, as well as why sponsored films arguably took shape in the 1910s, even though films of industry can be considered some of the first made. Moreover, it places *AM* within a period of US film history in which, while diminishing, nickelodeons serving urban audience still played a significant role. Finally, the term brings out the aspects of “volatility” and “heterogeneity” of the period that are useful to emphasize (Keil and Stamp 2). In fact, in their introduction to a recent anthology of the period, Keil and Stamp assert that the period is defined by its “instability” (11). While they emphasize this instability as found in film form, production practices, and screening venues, I argue that we need to connect the period also to the volatility of its social context, since social issues also uniquely found their way into a range of films in this period.

Film historians Steven Ross, Kevin Brownlow, and Kay Sloan all take up either *An American in the Making* specifically or films like it and made around it. While they describe their topic broadly as “silent film,” they focus on the transitional era (1908-1917). In exploring the social content of films made in the transitional era, they describe the popular cinema context of the 1910s. They argue that transitional-era films were largely critical of the corporate interests and industrial conditions that *AM* means to show in a positive light. As these film historians show, many popular films took up social issues and adopted reformist, progressive, and even populist, perspectives on their content.³ They assert that there was a greater range and explicitness to the politics of transitional films than can be found in other periods of US film, if one focuses on the mainstream of films produced. However, popular films took a fairly limited class perspective. Kay Sloan positions them as middle-class because their happy endings provided individualist solutions—throwing out the cruel boss, saving the suffering
widow, finding a job for the good man, etc.—or called for “careful reforms” (8). Despite this, Ross argues that transitional-era cinema provided for politically “open and unpredictable” spaces with labor and working-class sympathies due to the class make-up of its audiences, the films’ progressive and populist perspectives, and the access that many socialists and unions had to producers and local theaters (Working-Class 12).

While most popular films were liberal, films from other positions were also part of transitional-era cinema. Many of these more explicitly interested films of this period were sponsored films like AM, but these again ran the gamut of political positions in the already variegated political discourse of the 1910s. As Ross writes, “a wide variety of groups outside the [film] industry,” including businesses, unions, radicals, reformers, women’s groups, and religious organizations, sponsored or made their own films that “presented their cause to the mass public” (“Beyond” 33). Here, Ross provides a good definition of sponsored films, a significant genre for my dissertation; that is to say, films paid for by groups outside the film industry in order to present their cause publically. Of course, film advertised products and promoted industry earlier than 1913 (for example, Edison’s Black Diamond Express [1896], which was sponsored by a train company, and Biograph’s Westinghouse series [1904], which was made for the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair). However, sponsored films which put forward a sustained argument required a developed film language that took shape in the transitional era. For this reason, the transitional era can arguably mark the beginning of industrial sponsored films, with AM right at the start.

Yet part of Ross’s definition quoted above—the inclusion of “mass public” as the intended audience—points to a significant difference between how he presents sponsored film from the 1910s and what is known about sponsored films produced later in the century. The sponsored films I discuss in Chapter Two worked almost entirely outside popular film venues. While Ross, Sloan, and Brownlow do not discuss later sponsored films, they assert that those of the transitional silent era played with popular films in mainstream nickelodeons and theaters without distinction. For example, Kay Sloan asserts that sponsored films made by groups like NAM and the Russell Sage Foundation “circulated through the nation’s movie houses as if they were no different from slapstick comedies, westerns, and historical dramas” (4). She continues: “Essentially, the early
audiences paid their nickels and dimes to see the political tracts of special interest groups on the same program as less controversial material” (3). While this is a fascinating proposition, and one that would show significant differences between the expectations of these films and later sponsored films, I see little proof for such mixed exhibitions. These histories simply do not provide needed evidence from exhibition reports or programs to support the claims, and instead rely on reviewers’ comments, distributor’s catalogues, and blurbs in film and entertainment trade journals, which might overemphasize the popularity of sponsored films. Such sources only reflect what might have been, not what actually happened in theaters.

By contrast, I argue that An American in the Making likely showed in specialized circumstances, such as programs created by local Chambers of Commerce or chapters of the YMCA. In his discussion of industrial film in the 1910s, Anthony Slide importantly notes that such films lacked the kinds of nontheatrical apparatus and venues so important later in the century, such as 16mm projection in schools and community centers. However, Slide then places such films in theatrical showings, which I think is a leap. More likely, special screenings provided nontheatrical screenings in theatrical spaces. Thus, there would be similarities between sponsored films of the 1910s, like AM, and those of the 1940s-1960s, the focus of Chapter Two. More research into exhibition history would be needed to prove my hypothesis, and this falls outside the focus on this prologue, but it fits better with the history of the transitional period and with sponsored film. Moreover, some evidence for my hypothesis of AM’s marginal, but that’s not to say insignificant, status is provided by an article in the July 1913 issue of American Industries, the trade journal for the National Association of Manufacturers, about the group’s safety film program, which included AM (“Practical Work”). Here, NAM offers the program for free, excluding shipping (a common practice for sponsored film), and encourages business and local chambers of commerce to set up screenings. It touts the success of the films already, not in theatrical screenings, but instead as part of NAM’s sponsored “Industrial Benefit” meetings, in which a NAM representative accompanied the films to speak to “organizations of employers and workmen alike, to boards of trade, chambers of commerce, etc., for the better understanding of industrial conditions” (“Practical Work” 15). This is important because it suggests that AM might not have been
in the center of popular film-going, but to the side, with a set of sponsored films, alongside labor and socialist groups who also rented theaters and promote special screenings (Ross).

This set of sponsored films, of which *AM* was one part, can be even more specifically located within transitional-era sponsored films as “labor-capital” films (Ross). According to Ross, labor-capital films presented social issues, as so many films of the period did, but focused on work in basic industries and manufacturing (Ross 30). With shared content, the films were arrayed across perspectives in debates over the relationship between capital and labor. Ross asserts that different sides made labor-capital films “as weapons of class struggle” (“Beyond” 33). For example, NAM produced films in response to attacks after terrible scandals like the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire (1911) and the Ludlow Massacre (1914). For the former, NAM produced two safety films *The Crime of Carelessness* (1912) and *The Worker’s Lesson* (1912), which presented fires as either partly or entirely the fault of careless workers (*Working-Class* 82). *AM* was one of such sponsored films, albeit with less directly noxious interests, commissioned by business interests or specific companies to promote their interests and position through “positive images of capitalists” (63). This corporate propaganda, further discussed below, was made contemporaneously with radical and worker-aligned films, like *What Is To Be Done?* (1914) and the film adaptation of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1914). Although histories by Ross, Brownlow, and Sloan may too quickly bring all films of the period together, as if shown together, they provide an important glimpse of the scope of the kinds of films produced that surrounded and challenged corporate sponsored films like *An American in the Making*.

For my work, *AM* is one of the earliest examples available of the US steel industry’s use of film as corporate propaganda. It was made during the period of “nonunion stability” after the steel industry had thrown out unions representing its workers (early 20th century), and after US Steel had declared itself committed to an open shop (1908). Despite the industry owner’s complete control, forces urging collective organization or public pressure continued to threaten this “stability.” In this way, the period fits closely with Alex Carey’s description of the causes for eruptions of American corporate propaganda. Carey wrote that since the start of the 20th century, corporate
propaganda campaigns have been launched whenever “popular sentiment within the
nation [took] uncongenial forms” (37). The Americanization campaign contemporaneous,
and potentially intersecting, with AM, provides one of his central examples for this thesis.
Carey argues that the pre-WWI Americanization campaign shared with subsequent
campaigns an impetus in “liberal reforms and popular hostility to the large corporation
and the power they exercise” (37). Moreover, there was legitimate concern that workers
might not stop with liberal reforms. According to Carey, New England textile
manufacturers initiated the Americanization campaign in response to the IWW’s
successes organizing foreign employees. The campaign spread, Carey suggests, in part
because of the IWW’s victories in court over free speech. In this period, there was a fear,
and possibility, of radical changes in relations around work.

*An American in the Making* provides a key, early example of corporate
propaganda responding to reformist and radical threats to owner and management’s
complete control over labor and production. It was made in a period of intense volatility,
marked by class polarization, rapid cycles of boom followed by depression, union
repression, and brutal labor practices like overwork followed by layoffs and seven-day
work weeks. As part of a continued effort to defend capital’s interests in this climate, the
film played its small part by mobilizing discourses of Americanization, upward
individualist mobility, and the early 20th century industrial safety movement. The safety
movement, in which business began to address workplace safety, was itself business’s
response to “a complex of external pressures,” including pressure from muckrakers, local
governments, federal agencies, and the public (Aldrich 6). Like the safety movement and
the Americanization campaign, AM was in part a reaction or symptom of these safety and
Americanizing efforts, not an isolated event in and of itself. However, it mobilized these
discourses to respond to other concerns, particularly around its repression of unions and
long, debilitating work hours, as I will show.

Understanding what purpose AM served as corporate propaganda, beyond its
manifest content, involves excavating the concerns and interests that surround it. As the
title shot for AM announces, US Steel produced the film for the National Association of
Manufacturers, one of the most important industrial advocacy organizations in 20th
century America. This partnership already positions the film within a highly reactionary
discourse on labor-capital relations. The July 1913 issue of *American Industries*, NAM’s journal, includes pages of short editorial comments that provide a wealth of evidence for the particular ideological positions advanced. For example, one piece mocks a West Coast poster calling for 3-hour workdays, which, the editors write, would amuse the current US Steel president, as he is known still as a “fifteen hour a day man” (9). The editors chide: “Why set the limit at three hours; why not two or even one—or just long enough […] to get on line at the pay window” (9). Still another builds from a joke story about Boston schoolboys striking for shorter hours to include an attack on the teachers, who now also want unions, which the editors find equally absurd (10). In the last piece from the editorial section, the editors call for an American Federation of Stockholders that can fight the AFL (American Federation of Labor) and develop a “class consciousness” for the owners (10). Editorial comments focused their vitriol on union organizing and popular efforts to limit the workday, an important concern for steel workers and their public advocates, as we will see.

Understanding *An American in the Making* requires a sense of the brutal working conditions in the first decade of the twentieth century; the importance of the safety movement touted in the film; the meaning of sites like Gary, Indiana and its YMCA; and contemporaneous criticisms about US Steel’s labor practices and union repression. The film mobilizes the middle two especially to distance itself from the first and to deflect from the last. First, *AM’s* goal is to present US Steel mills as safe work places and US Steel as interested in its employee’s safety. It also emphasizes safety as a result of worker’s actions rather than changes made to the plant. For example, in *AM*, soon after the young immigrant has arrived in Gary, his brother—already working in the mill—shows him a sign posted outside Gary’s employment office, which announces that only men who care about safety should apply; the company does not want “careless” men. This term “careless” had a great deal of resonance, as liability laws had allowed employers to escape paying anything for accidents if workers were found to be careless. Even when the legal usefulness of the term dissipated, as states passed workman’s compensation laws, historian Mark Aldrich notes that it persisted in corporate propaganda “like the grin of a Cheshire cat” (115). For example, *The Crime of Carelessness* blames both the textile mill owners and workers equally for the fire. Even
while making the work places safer, NAM and US Steel sought to downplay the dangers by suggesting that the changes focused on workers, which was not at all true. The spaces were absurdly dangerous.

Clearly, as with the Triangle fire, “careless” workers did not make the steel industry as lethal as it became in the late 19th century. Broadly, historian Richard Aldrich identifies several factors that multiplied the dangers of industry and manufacturing in the early 20th century, including massive increases in the scale of production; the shift from worker’s control to managerial coordination; the push to economize, mechanize, and integrate; and a situation in which accidents were cheap enough to ignore. The effects of these changes on the steel industry made such work extraordinarily dangerous. As steel replaced iron and massive steel mills replaced puddling mills—and, as Marx would note, fixed capital replaced variable capital—work became much more dangerous. In the period just preceding AM, fixed capital literally confronted workers as a menacing force: machines and tools lacked guards; cranes carrying slag overhead could fall due to the lack of proper handles; conveyances moving on tracks around and in the mill could speed around corners without warning; and giant blast furnaces could explode or slowly leak gas, causing asphyxiation (Aldrich, Fitch). Many of the new dangers resulted from the integration of different parts of production into one large mill since these parts lacked coordination for safety. These dangers required changes to the plant itself, including basic changes like installing safeguards and railings, reinforcing furnaces, and ensuring that ladles had sturdy handles.

Progressive reformers responded to the brutal conditions of industrial work by pushing forward regulations and by investigating and publicizing accidents and dangers (Aldrich 6). For the former, reformers called for workman’s compensation laws and public supervision to force industries to commit to safe production. For the latter, William Hard’s important expose on the Chicago’s South Works Mill of the US Steel branch, Illinois Steel, “Making Steel and Killing Men,” emphasized the dangers of the plant and the catastrophes caused by the failure of management to take responsibility. Hard focuses on inquests made by coroner’s juries regarding 46 deaths at the South Works mill in 1906. Causes of death included electrocution, falls, blast furnace explosions, suffocation, and falling objects, including boiling metal from a ladle (347). In
a particularly vivid passage, Hard points to the mill both as a space of spectacle and as a menace of fixed capital in an uneven relationship with labor. Here, he describes the floor of the open-hearth furnaces, where our protagonist in *AM* works:

That floor was 1,100 feet long, and it looked longer because of the dim murkiness of the air. It was edged, all along one side, by a row of open-hearth furnaces, fourteen of them, and in each one there was sixty-four tons of white, boiling iron, boiling into steel. From these furnaces the white-hot metal, now steel, was withdrawn and poured into big ten-ton molds, standing on flat cars. When the molds were removed, the steel stood up by itself on the cars in the shape of ingots. These ingots, these obelisks of steel, cooled to solidity on their outsides, but still soft and liquid within, were hauled away by locomotives to other parts of the plant.

It was a scene in which a human being looks smaller than perhaps anywhere else in the world. You must understand that fact in order to comprehend the psychological aspect of accidents in steel mills. (345)

Hard noted that the South Works had “shaken itself almost awake” with its new safety program, but he also called for public supervisory agents that could suggest improvements and enforce them, as well as compensation laws that would make safety in industry’s self-interest. He also noted the difficulty of worker’s care and attention given the length of shifts, including the “fiendish institution” at the South Works of the Sunday 24-hour shift every other week (352). Overwork was a major topic for another journalist discussed later, John A. Fitch, and forms an important, unnamed substrate for *An American in the Making*.

In response to bad publicity and censures from local agencies and government officials, US Steel was one of the first and most important corporations to commit to industrial safety, just prior to the wave of workman’s compensation state laws that changed how work was done in the US. In 1908, Gary met with representatives from US Steel subsidiaries and plants and started the corporation’s Committee on Safety, run by the manager who had started the safety program at Chicago’s South Works. US Steel used workers’ committees to allow workmen to act as experts in the dangers of mills. Based on worker feedback, the corporation made major changes to their plants from 1910-1914: installing viaducts and footwalks; enclosing gears; safeguarding machinery; rebuilding blast furnaces; and building pipes to prevent asphyxiation (Aldrich 127-129).
This work in Illinois Steel and its pickup by the corporation was a response to external pressures. In fact, US Steel by its very formation in 1901 immediately became more visible and susceptible to such pressure. US Steel had formed by merging Carnegie Steel and Illinois Steel (or technically, its holding company, Federal Steel) and thus the Pittsburgh and Chicago centers of steel production. Judge Gary, a lawyer, had orchestrated the consolidation of Chicago steel companies into Federal Steel, and became the president of US Steel after the merger. After this major merger, which was illegal, US Steel could be targeted and pressured by public opinion due to its enormity, its illegality, and its quasi-public status (Brody 156-157). It maintained its anti-union position and many harsh labor practices, but also newly sought to court public opinion. *AM* draws on progressive sympathies, since worker safety was an important cause for reformers, and its successful adoption by US Steel was a key victory. However, its purpose is still as corporate propaganda to counter progressive forces.

US Steel’s safety campaign surprisingly turned a profit, which led to a wave of good publicity for the company between 1909 and 1914 (Aldrich 92). *An American in the Making* clearly follows this wave of positive publicity and good feeling toward US Steel. *AM*’s documentary core focuses on the safety measures made by the corporation. At first, both brothers are led through a tour of Gary’s safety measures, but soon the brother whose trip we have followed continues his safety lessons through Gary and into the US Steel’s National Tube Works in Lorain, Ohio, specifically in the finishing mill. In this tour, the fictional framework is abandoned, as the film simply shows new safety devices identified by intertitles: goggles, safeguards, emergency switches, more safeguards, etc. This section focuses on work and areas of the mill on the periphery of the central processes for making steel. Much of it focuses on the finishing mill, where skilled machinists prepared steel products.

After the safety tour, the new worker in *AM* returns to the Gary mill, where he works in the open hearth. Here, surprisingly, there is little about safety. This is a transition back to the fictional framework, but the absence of safety discourse is striking. The film moves through a montage of spectacular images of the blast furnace, open hearth, and Bessemer converters. The images of overflowing ladles and sparking converters is especially notable given the previous focus on safety in other parts of the
mill, which seem tame in contrast to these clearly dangerous places. Moreover, we understand that it is *this* work that *AM*'s protagonist does, not the finishing work that provides the focus in the film’s middle portion. This section of the film recalls the vivid descriptions provided by William Hard of Bessemer converters:

> When they tip over […] they fill the whole building with fluttering sparks and thick, whirling fumes, which vary in color from light gray to deep orange. The clothes of the men in this department are filled with fine holes burned in them by the sparks. When the ladles are filled, the boiling metal exudes queer little tender blue flames all over its white surface. The men call this weird display “the devil’s flower garden.” (353)

A shot at the end of the montage shows the new worker sitting in front of a fan, which almost seems a joke as, by omission, this fan seems to be the only safety measure for workers in the hottest, worst, and most dangerous parts of the mill. The film omits even those changes that made this space safer, including reinforcements to the ovens and attachments to overhead cranes. These changes were likely elided because they pointed to the dangers caused by threatening material world that surrounded workers, rather than the practices of individual workers. Moreover, the film focuses on goggles and guards—tools that could be easily understood and shown, in a way that almost domesticates the work done. By contrast, these spectacular images point to the grandeur of the steel industry, yet any further discussion of work in the hearths or next to the converters would have otherwise troubled the safe, comfortable image of work sought by the film.

**Gary and The Promise of *An American in the Making***

Although US Steel’s newly established safety program is *AM*'s central focus, the film builds a fictional framework around this safety program that also emphasizes the promise of steel work to new immigrants, especially at US Steel’s still fairly new mill at Gary, Indiana. The film presents the benefits offered immigrant workers both in the work they could do in the mill and in the services provided to them in the city, sponsored by the corporation. This points to the fantasy of the film, which works very hard to deflect criticisms made by reformers and critics over US Steel’s harsh labor conditions, especially overwork, “speeding,” and repression of any collective organizing among its workers. I do not mean to say that what the film presents is entirely false; rather, much of
it provides important visual records. Instead, I argue that understanding what it says and why depends on knowing more than what is in the film.

*An American in the Making* is a hybrid film, both fiction and nonfiction. The fiction works as a framework for its discussion of safety devices, but the nonfiction sections also provide realism to the story of the immigrant worker building a middle-class life in Gary, Indiana. The film starts early in its blending of fiction and nonfiction; while following the young man from somewhere in Europe to Gary, Indiana, it places the actor in real settings, including a boat approaching New York; the gates of the Ellis Island ferry; outside the old Pennsylvania station; and finally, arriving at the Gary, Indiana train station. His brother then continues the tour, as they walk through Gary, Indiana and into the YMCA building. This building, paid for by US Steel, is the first space, before the mill itself, which takes over the film briefly, as the story cuts to a pan that emphasizes the largeness of the building. This building, along with the trains and the modern cities—New York and Gary—with paved streets and power lines, clearly contrasts the peasant house and field where the film, and the young immigrant, began.

Gary’s newness, as a mill and a town, allowed *An American in the Making* to avoid troublesome reminders of the steel industry’s recent past and to focus on US Steel’s major achievements in its ‘model’ mill and city and safety program. The steel mill in Gary, Indiana had been built less than a decade earlier, in 1906. It was a modern, entirely integrated mill built by US Steel, which was still a newly formed corporate entity. As with Chicago’s South Works mill, Illinois Steel, a major branch of US Steel, ran the Gary mill. John A. Fitch, one of the key members of the Pittsburgh Survey and an important reformer, provided a description of Gary that helps clarify its importance for *An American in the Making*. In his testimony to Congress during the US Steel hearings, Fitch wrote that unlike other mills in the Chicago area, but especially unlike mills around Pittsburgh, Gary had no history of the violent labor-capital battles that ended unions in the steel industry soon after the Homestead strike of 1892, nor of native employment or the dominance of skilled workers in iron puddling. Instead, Gary had “stolid Slavs […] taking care of the giant stack” (3436). *AM* focuses on one such “stolid Slav,” one of many Eastern European immigrants employed in the steel industry in the early 20th century. It presents the image of this worker happily moving upward, entering middle-class life, and
living outside ethnic or religious communities to take part in Americanizing activities, like English classes, and to settle safely within the domestic sphere. This explicitly presents a picture of docile, isolated foreign workers, contrary to the increased roles such workers played in organizing and their dissatisfaction with working conditions and their compensation, as well as to the important role played by fraternal and ethnic organizations to foreign worker’s lives, which later mobilized workers and communities around labor battles.

*An American in the Making* emphasizes the role of the YMCA and the importance of English classes. Indeed, the new worker marries the English teacher, ensuring his position within mainstream American life. This packages another important aspect of the project at Gary, Indiana, which became known not only as the site for the most modern of American steel mills, but also for its services and progressive education program, all built by and many maintained by the corporation. US Steel in various ways, either directly or through gifts, provided the city with its YMCA building, along with a hospital and Federal building. Carnegie quickly added one of his libraries to the city. Moreover, public schools put in place with the founding of the mill focused on educating mill workers and their families, along with their school-age children. English classes run by the school system started in 1908, and expanded two years later into a full night school modeled and closely linked to the YMCA. These educational efforts were tied explicitly to the need to Americanize workers. It reflected a corporate paternalism. In his description of the good work done by night schools, George Swartz, an administrator who moved between the YMCA and night school, suggests a more troubling perspective than paternalism held by capital and its allies toward labor. In comparing “the great work […] transforming ore to steel” to the school’s work “assimilating foreign races into good American citizenship,” Swartz suggests a collapsing of the difference between things and people, material and labor, endemic to the capital-labor problems around the industry (qtd. in Cohen 33).

In *An American in the Making*, the new worker enjoys free time during the day to attend his English class in town. In the class, he’s dressed in clean, leisure clothes and the English on the board provides lessons on how to describe his hometown and haircut. This pedagogical environment leaves out an important compromise heavy industry needed to make between its desire to teach English to foreign unskilled workers and its extensive
work schedule. Many workers, unable to make night classes or too tired to pay attention, were taught by YMCA workers inside the mills. In the 1910s, industry and manufacturing companies incorporated English lessons into their already existing safety and welfare programs to bring the work of the YMCA and night school into work (Korman 396). The YMCA created a program for English education in industrial sites, which provided all needed materials and teachers, and worked closely with large corporations like US Steel to tailor the program to its needs (400). The English taught thus focused on the lessons that the new worker receives during his tour in An American in the Making, where he learns about safety lights, drill press guards, and goggles. The film splits the lessons, suggesting an outside space for English lessons that would have been nearly inaccessible to immigrant working 12-hours a day, 7 days a week, in the open-hearth furnaces of Gary.

Public criticism of US Steel censured the corporation for overwork, labor policies, and monopoly status, along with extremely high accident rates: Gary focused on the most expedient area for reform in its safety program. US Steel initiated a safety campaign to avoid more threatening changes, like the instatement of a 8-hour work day and abnegation of the hard-line “open-shop” policy that shocked the industry and labor organizations when declared in 1909 (Brody 125). An American in the Making was part of a campaign to support these efforts and counter tough criticism made by figures like John A Fitch. In the early 1910s, John A. Fitch launched a sustained attack on the corporation for exactly what it refused to change, beginning with his contribution to the Pittsburgh Survey, published as The Steel Workers (1910), and continuing through articles popularizing his findings and through his testimony to Congress at the US Steel hearings in 1913. Fitch focused his criticisms on the 12-hour workday—a metonymy for the long work schedules, which included 7-day stretches, and, often, double shifts that lasted 24-hours on Sundays. He also attacked conditions that made healthy, normal life difficult, like the constant alternation between day and night shifts, and, perhaps most importantly, the repression of collective organization.

Fitch highlighted the devastating personal and social effects of US Steel’s labor practices and conditions. He attacked both the long work hours and union repression as socially destructive, preventing steel workers from taking part in their community, caring
for their families, or even acting as citizens to preserve a functioning democracy. Fitch also noted in vivid terms the continued unrest in this period: “The years from 1892 [Homestead strike] are illuminated here and there with flashes of indignation. These have died away […] but each time the embers have glowed a little redder, a little more surely” (“Old Age” 664). Indeed, strikes in 1909 had already worked to create a new image of the immigrant steel worker—not as docile, but as angry and, as Gompers threatened, willing to seek change without the “American idea” for how to seek it (Brody 140).

Unsurprisingly, the 1919 steel strike central demands were for an 8-hour day and the right to form unions. While the workers and organizers lost the strike, largely due to red baiting by US Steel, it established the new image of the immigrant steelworker as open to union organizing and collective agitating. It also allowed the seemingly benign institutions of the paternalist steel industry to show its ability to switch to coercion when needed: for example, the city of Gary instituted martial law to prevent organizing (Brody 252) and a YMCA secretary helped lead a mob that kidnapped and forced organizer William Z. Foster out of a Pennsylvania steel town (T. Winter 44).

In his writing and testimony, Fitch asked the steel industry leaders to follow the good work of the safety policies with even bigger reforms, like the institution of the 8-hour workday and freedom of association. But, he most likely knew that even the safety and welfare work initiated by Gary was only “a veneer on the hard calculus of [American] steelmaking,” (Brody 269). US Steel maintained its autocratic control over work and its harsh labor practices through the spate of early 20th century public criticism by making reforms it was willing to make and by using rhetoric to avoid bigger changes, like allowing workers to organize. *An American in the Making* played a part in this battle, as it used the goodwill created by US Steel’s safety movement and the services provided by Gary to deflect criticisms against it. In his survey of Pittsburgh, Fitch identified four types of employees based on their subjective state: the majority still hoped for major social changes that would alter their working and living conditions; a smaller group had lost hope; others believed that only revolutionary change could alter conditions; and finally, the smallest group, about 5%, maintained an “individual hope,” due to upward mobility and success, and did not see themselves as part of a repressed group. The latter group, Fitch asserts repeatedly, are very rare. *AM* presents this tiny minority as typical,
and connects individual success to the image of a benign and socially beneficial industrial organization, through its focus on the safety movement. That this image is false is obvious. The film is interesting for how even its evasions and half-truths, both fiction and nonfiction, open onto the social world that made it and the relations between labor and capital that were constantly “in the making” and being unmade. This relationship of films to their social world, specifically to the volatile human relations around steel production, as a major industry of the 20th century and a metonym for capital-labor relations, is the focus of my dissertation.
Notes

1 See Brownlow, Ross, and Sloan for more on *An American in the Making*.

2 See Keil and Stamp, *American Cinema’s Transitional Era*, for more on the transitional era of silent cinema. Keil and Stamp’s introduction offers particularly succinct, but careful, description of the period.

3 Ross lists several reasons for this politically charged content, including the high demand and quick turnaround for films; the standard of one-reel films that mitigated the risk associated with any one film; the working class, immigrant make-up of audiences; and the variegated political climate around class and labor issues especially.

4 Historian David Brody used the term “nonunion stability” to refer to the focus of his book *Steelworkers in America*. In it, he identifies the reasons for the industry’s successful repression of its worker’s collective organizing from the 1890s to the 1919 and then, after the failed strike, in the 1930s. With regards to the 1890s to 1919, these reasons included the mobility immigrant labor (home or up), the consent of skilled labor, and anti-union coercion.

5 Hard’s article points to two sources that preceded national attention: first, South Works had been under public attack by local journalists (91-92), and second, the mill had been censured and ordered to change operations by the city of Chicago and the state of Illinois.
CHAPTER 2: FIGURING STEEL IN DOCUMENTARY

IN THE 1930S

Introduction

In the 1930s, several major documentary figures – Dziga Vertov, Joris Ivens, John Grierson, Pare Lorentz and Willard Van Dyke – all either made films about or including images of steel production. This chapter re-examines key documentary films of the 1930s in light of this shared locus of the steel mill and different approaches to the subject. These different approaches to representation not only demonstrate their philosophies and methods, but also the ways in which steel functioned differently in the national contexts of their films. Steel production was an socially significant locus for all of these filmmakers: not only was the industry central to large scale industrial production, both in terms of capitalist production in the West and Communist nation building in the Soviet Union, but for filmmakers these massive steel mills provided unique opportunities to explore documentary film’s engagement with the historical world and the capabilities of the medium. Steel production was undergoing changes in the all three national contexts, the USSR, England, and the US, due to revolution, reform, or the cyclical revolutions of capital, respectively, in the 1930s. These industrial changes took place in response and relation to each other, and the documentaries as well were made with a sense or knowledge of what the other filmmakers in different contexts were making.

The films that will serve as my focus, Vertov’s Enthusiasm, Ivens’ Komsomol, Grierson’s Industrial Britain, along with The River, The City and Valley Town have a specific but secured place in documentary history, but pose problems for documentary studies in their form and politics. The study of them is often logocentric since these films are filled with language, from the use of voices and voiceovers to their argumentative structures. Recent documentary and film theorists have provided approaches to working with the sensible in documentary, especially in relation to late 20th century experimental ethnographies,¹ but do not address these films of the 1930s or the relation of sensibility to expository documentaries. The documentaries, however, cannot be adequately understood without taking up the sensible qualities that exceed discourse, visual and verbal, since the former is a central, not peripheral, part of how the films work.
Second, the political projects of these 1930s documentaries are a thorny area for documentary studies. The way one sees the state projects with which they were aligned affects how the films are seen, and these state politics have been roundly criticized in recent decades. For example, *The River* cannot come out well when the New Deal is defined, in the words of John Tagg, as a “centralizing, corporatist reform which through [...] seemingly benevolent social provision [...] sought to represent, reform and reconstitute the social body [my emphasis]” (9), or when Maren Strange argues that Farm Security Administration photographers were tools of state surveillance, creating their subjects to then have them removed from the land to make space for centralized agriculture (130). Scholars who have done important work on the sound of New Deal documentaries, specifically Jonathan Kahana and Neil Lerner, make historical claims about state projects that dismiss them as projects of control. For other critics, history offers evidence of the state projects’ failure, finiteness, or catastrophic effects. Michael Renov reminds readers of Annette Michelson’s musing on the irony of Vertov’s catastrophic fate to the utopian project he represented in films like *Enthusiasm* (Subject 134). At times, the dismissal is registered in quick assertions that create an inaccurate picture of documentary in the 1930s. For example, Renov short-circuits the complicated institutional history of Grierson’s sponsorship when he writes, “Grierson created a sizable and quite prolific film production group enthusiastic in its pursuit of a single mandate: ‘to bring the Empire alive’” (Subject 134).

Without denying the catastrophes and failures of history, the documentaries I will discuss, including *Enthusiasm* and *Industrial Britain*, deserve a re-evaluation of their resonance with questions about collectivity and collective production and for their aesthetics, two impulses closely tied together in the films. These documentaries do not simply communicate arguments, but also affects, most especially in sequences depicting production. They are more than interesting historical texts, with easily dismissed utopian dreams or “pulverizing” arguments, and instead can be brought into dialogue with aesthetic and theoretical questions still relevant for those producing in a “post-industrial” world. In this way, I see this chapter as creating a constellation of films, borrowing the concept from Walter Benjamin, but more emphatically from Susan Buck-Morss’s formulation of it. Of her own project in *Dreamworlds of Catastrophe*, she writes:
Although historically grounded, these constellations are not history in the traditional sense. [...] They resuffle the usual ordering of facts with the goal of informing present political concerns. Such constellations rescue the past, but not for nostalgic reasons. The goal is to blast holes in established interpretations of the twentieth century, liberating new lines of sight to allow for critical reappropriations of its legacy. (97)

The ‘steel’ documentaries of the 1930s are about the potential and peril of state forms to harness collectivities or mediate between labor and capital, in ways that both control and distribute wealth. An uneasiness or ambivalence about this relationship can be found in all the documentaries, to varying degrees and with different implications. While I see the ‘steel’ films of the 1930s as a specific constellation of films with similar theoretical and aesthetic interests, they are all also very much part of the 1930s documentary moment so important to the history of documentary.

1930s Documentary as Experiments in Form and Discourse

My approach to 1930s documentaries of steel production looks closely at their form in relation to the large economic projects or events that were their content. Film histories of the period support this approach. Film historians point to the 1930s as a period when documentary allowed filmmakers to break formally and politically from the dominant cinematic forms of the time, both in fiction and nonfiction. Jose Manuel Costa, discussing Joris Ivens, identifies the 1930s “documentary project” as a “specific movement,” which involved “the assumption of the avant-garde spirit and its progressive assimilation into a social, political, and historical intervention” (20). According to Charles Wolfe, in the 1930s, documentary filmmakers consciously distinguished their films from other nonfiction genres and commercial films by having “greater formal ambition and higher social purpose” (“Poetics” 352). Wolfe argues that documentary, by asserting formal experimentation and a more direct engagement with the social world, emerged “not simply as a widely recognized more of film practice, but as a conceptual category” (“Poetics” 352). Wolfe writes:

Social documentaries of the 1930s were above all future-oriented, committed to the prospect of a better world, whether forged at the anvil of a revolutionary proletariat, enacted through New Deal legislation, or projected upon a technological utopia [...]. With this in mind, we might examine the films they produced as exercises in problem solving, the terms for which were set both by a tradition
of formal experimentation in the arts and an ambition to contend with urgent social problems of the day. ("Straight" 235)

This differentiates a set of documentary filmmakers from others working at the time: they were seen and saw themselves as artists directly engaged with world historical events. Wolfe calls them “social documentaries,” but this term has come to include many different types of documentary projects—from Jacob Riis *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) to Frederick Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies* (1969) and Frontline’s *The Released* (2009). The documentaries that I focus on could be called “social documentaries,” or “committed” in some cases, but I want to point to their specificity in their incorporation of “formal experimentation,” especially montage, and their focus not only on urgent social demands, but also on specifically state solutions to those demands.

Bill Nichols and Michael Renov, among others, have challenged the hegemony of the above documentary form. They draw historical evidence from the intersection of documentary and the avant-garde in the 1920s and see the shift in the 1930s as a repression of important documentary tendencies. For both, Grierson becomes the figure who forcibly grafted nonfiction to the state and realist aesthetics, giving conceptual and institutional form to the dominant documentary form of the 20th century, as a form that makes totalizing arguments from a position of presumed authority. Joris Ivens, a filmmaker who moved from making avant-garde films to state sponsored documentaries in the 1930s, is an equally important figure for this dialectic between the 1920s avant-garde and 1930s state documentaries. Nichols argues that while modernist elements persist in Ivens’ later documentaries, these elements are given “greater figuration” as he “downplays the poetic pleasures of form” (“Documentary and the Turn” 142, 155). By figuration, I take Nichols to mean that the modernist elements are put in the service of the documentary’s argument. Nichols sees the 1930s as the period in which the nonfiction experimentation of the 1920s was folded into documentary, a newly distinct form of filmmaking, and then repressed, so that its unruly energies would not impede the work of the state (“Documentary and the Modernist” 583).

Renov offers a similar account of Ivens’ move into political documentaries, as an “asceticism” and turn away from subjective and aesthetic exploration. Renov’s description of the period registers the loss:
The priorities enforced by the Depression and World War II reined in the experimentalism and unabashed subjectivity of expression that had so enlivened documentary practice in the 1920s. [...] Individul subjectivity was to be sacrificed to the greater good, the larger historical imperatives” (Subject of Documentary xx).

Renov had earlier allowed, in Theorizing Documentary, that Ivens’ early films “evidence the attraction felt for the cinema’s aesthetic potential, even for those motivated by strong political beliefs” (33, emphasis added). While he here allows a period of overlap between aesthetic experimentation and politics, the “even for” is telling of how he, and others, have seen the two as parallel impulses, and therefore have been inattentive to those films where there’s an intersection of formal experimentation and political thought.8

Brian Winston, in his scathing critique of Grierson, does more than Nichols or Renov to bring out the formal qualities of films like Drifters and Shipyard, but only to condemn these films further. Winston describes the aesthetics of the 1930s British documentary school as romantic “flimflam” that “[concentrates] on surfaces, even while managing to run from the social meaning of those surfaces” (38). Winston charts an aesthetic tradition that influenced the early films of Grierson and his circle, but he dismisses the entire line of aesthetic influence--including Gustave Courbet, John Ruskin, and Robert Flaherty--as equally politically specious and self-interested. While Winston’s critique highlights the formal qualities of 1930s British documentary that often get lost in discussions of them, I would like to place both his sweeping judgments of the realist aesthetic tradition and Renov and Nichol’s reaction against the social documentary in doubt.

Indeed, although Renov’s and Nichols’ insights on documentary as constructed texts that engage viewers’ curiosity and desires are foundational to documentary studies (my work included), the historical assumptions and valuations made by their work, and by much of the work that has followed them, leaves little room to think about documentaries of production, especially production as a collective and social force, as aesthetic and political objects.9 Charles Wolfe’s essays and those on Joris Ivens, especially in the anthology edited by Kees Bakker, encourage us to consider the documentaries of the 1930s as formal and political experiments rather than fully formed authoritative discourse. These films demonstrate an interweaving of sense and discourse more than the domination of one over the other. To get at the specificities of these films,
though, I will need to introduce some theoretical terms that will give documentary studies new ways to discuss these documentary films.

The Figural and Living Labor

The meaning of “expressive” in documentary studies is broad and loosely defined. It’s largely mapped onto the history described above, put forward by Nichols and Renov, in which experimentation with documentary expression ended in the 1930s, only to be picked up again in the 1970s. In Blurred Boundaries, Nichols sees the positive shift in late 20th century documentary back to the “expressive” and away from the “process of identifying a problem and proposing a solution” (100). Describing performative documentaries, the most recent mode of documentary, Nichols also defines expressivity:

Stress falls on the evocative quality of the text rather than on its representationalism. […] Subjective camera movement, impressionistic montage, dramatic lighting, compelling music: such elements fit comfortably within a realist style but, in documentary, they are traditionally subordinated to a documentary logic, which is governed, in turn, by the protocols of discourses of sobriety. Expressive qualities inflect, flavor, but seldom determine the overall organization of the text or the viewer’s overall response to it. Performative documentary, on the other hand, frees these expressive elements from their subordination to a logic. (100)

Renov has also defined the expressive in documentary, as the aesthetic impulse of documentary, which gives documentaries abilities to “evoke emotional response or induce pleasure in the spectator by formal means, to generate lyrical power through shadings of sound and image in a manner exclusive of verbalization, or to engage with the musical or poetic qualities of language itself,” all of which is too often seen as secondary events to the documentary’s “main event” (Theorizing 35). The films I will discuss are indeed “expressive,” and the expressive qualities do more than “inflect” or “flavor” the discourse. There is a specific register of expressivity operating in them, which is inextricably connected to politics. Jean-Francois Lyotard’s work on the figural offers a new method for viewing the interaction of discourse and expressivity in 1930s documentary, and draws out the specific expressivity and preoccupations of the films of steel production.

Lyotard, beginning with his early work in Discours, Figure, counters the Platonic line of Western thought that values intelligibility over the sensible world of appearance.
He defends the sensible not as readable like a text but as able to produce meaning and effects of a different order on the viewer. Early in *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard writes:

The given is not a text, there is a density to it, or rather a difference, a constitutive difference, which is not to be read, but to be seen; this difference […] is what is continually forgotten in signifying it. (“Taking the Side” 34)

The sensible world is exterior to discourse, but discourse is itself lodged in this world and constantly points to it. Visual art of a “scene” also cannot be “read”:

Sitting before a table, one identifies, one recognizes linguistic unities, standing before a representation, one seeks plastic, libidinal events. (35)

The figural is the equivalent of the sensible world, the “given,” in art or discourse. To make use of the figural as a concept, the meaning of discourse, the relationship between figure and discourse, and what this means for documentary film need further elaboration.

Discourse, for Lyotard, is language as signification, or, “representation by conceptual oppositions” (Readings 3). Martin Jay sets out what discourse means for Lyotard:

For Lyotard, discourse implies the domination of textuality over perception, conceptual representation over prereflexive presentation, rational coherence over the ‘other’ of reason. It is the realm of logic, concepts, form, speculative reciprocity and the symbolic. Discourse thus serves as the locus of what normally passes for communication and signification in which the materiality of signifiers is forgotten. (Jay 564)

Lyotard asserts that one of goals of his project is to “attack the sufficiency of discourse,” which he describes as a system in which language claims to enclose meaning (“Taking the Side” 36). Discourse interiorizes the figural into itself, and “forces us to desire the true as the interiorisation (the fulfilled signification) of the exteriority” of the sensible and figural (38). The “coldness” of discourse can vary, depending on how much it is convulsed by what it tries to bring in:

Cold prose almost does not exist […] A discourse is thick. It does not merely signify. It expresses. And if it expresses, it is because there is also movement and force deposited in it, which causes the table of signification to erupt through a quake which produces meaning. It also gives itself over to browsing, and not merely to comprehension. It also appeals to the eye […] If we seize the fixed-movement, espouse the undulations of metaphor, which is the fulfillment of desire, that we will see how exteriority, force,
formed space can be present in interiority, in closed signification. (39).

Lyotard’s discourse is not as inclusive or specific as Foucault’s concept of it, which can refer either to the totality of arrangements that make statements possible or a “group of statements that belong to a single system of formation” (Foucault 107). Foucault however does add to the understanding of discourse in ways important to documentary studies. In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, he unhinges the statement from what is said through “the linguistic structure of sentences.” Classification tables of species, a genealogical tree, an accounts book, and a graph are all statements (82). In adapting Foucault to documentary film, Bill Nichols asserts in *Representing Reality*, “statements need not be verbal” (126). Moreover, the “voice” of documentary is communicated through images, sound and textual construction (128). The “voice” of documentary, or its commentary, is, for Nichols, “how a documentary offers a particular statement about the world” and can be made through direct address, but also through other filmic “tactics and devices” (118). In the simplest definition, documentaries are discursive because they make arguments about the world. They are meant to signify and communicate, and images often serve that function primarily. The expository mode is the most straightforwardly discursive of modes. Nichols at times appears to define all documentary as if it was always expository, but his definitions of documentary are often also criticisms of what he sees as the dominance of the expository mode. The expository mode “addresses the viewer directly with titles or voices that advance an argument about the historical world” and “speaks objectively or persuasively” (34). Such documentaries are organized around commentary or ‘voice’ and “images serve as illustration and counterpoint” (34). Nichols argues that documentary took its identifiable shape in the 1930s when, “[r]hetorical speech, in the form of editing patterns, intertitles, and voice-over commentary [channeled the emerging film form] toward preferred forms of social change” (599).

For Nichols, documentaries are also discursive in that they often serve other discourses and follow specific rules for documentary discourse. Nichols questions and challenges those discursive qualities of documentary, seeing them as limiting more than enabling statements to be made. However, the simplest definition of documentary as discourse – as an argument about the world – is not erased in Nichols, even as he moves on to emphasize the embodied, corporeal discourse of more recent documentaries in
Blurred Boundaries. The documentaries I discuss are discursive, in that they make arguments. Most of the images and sounds used are meant to communicate those arguments in ways that could be translated into language without significantly losing the meaning. They are far from “cold,” however, and include much that “expresses,” or, much that is figural.

Lyotard gives the name of the figural to the emergence of the sensible world into the realm of discourse in a move that is closely drawn from Freud’s ideas of the dreamwork and desire. The figural “is not signified and […] functions at the edge of and within discourse” (“Taking the Side” 37). It is an “exteriority that cannot be interiorized as signification” and “a spatial manifestation that linguistic space cannot incorporate without being shaken” but instead “remains to be ‘seen’” (37). Lyotard describes the difference between the functional use of images in most films and art in film as the difference between lighting a match to start a gas stove and a child who lights a match “to see what happens” (“Acinema” 170).

Lyotard argues that the figural functions in art as a refutation of discourse:

Art wants the figure, ‘beauty’ is figural, non-related, and rhythmic. The true symbol makes us think, but first it makes itself ‘seen.’ And the amazing thing is not that it makes us think […] the enigma is that it remains to be ‘seen’ at all, that it remains sensible, that there is a world that is a store of ‘views,’ or an inter-world which is a store of ‘visions,’ and that all discourse exhausts itself before exhausting it. (“Taking the Side” 37)

He divides the figural into the figure-image, the figure-form and the figure-matrix. The first two are especially useful for film. The figure-image is what is seen “in hallucinations or dreams, or [that] films and pictures present” (“Connivances” 57). The figure-form is the structuring of the visible as mise-en-scène, but is also applicable to film’s rhythm and editing since it is part of the energy “which folds, which crumples and creases the text and makes a work from it, a difference, that is to say, a form” (“Taking the Side” 39). In his essay “Acinema,” Lyotard delineates a concept of arrhythms that can be seen as an aspect of figure-form, in which alterations of visual rhythm are purposeful and expressive, but also dis-figuring to the text.

Martin Jay further explicates the meaning of figurality for Lyotard:
Figurality […] is what injects opacity into the discursive real. It works against the self-sufficiency of […] meaning, introducing an unassimilable heterogeneity into putatively homogenous discourse. Very much like Bataille’s notion of excess, it transgresses the limits of the knowable and the communicable, preventing the recuperation of the incommensurable into one systemic order. (564)

D.N. Rodowick’s definition of the figural is developed freely from Lyotard’s concepts. He defines digital media and postmodern mass culture as figural discourse, in which the image becomes discursive. This in many ways does not fit with the concepts developed above, where the figural is different from the discursive image, and where “figural discourse” muddies more than clarifies. Although it’s important that “the figural and discourse can’t be opposed” (Rodowick 5), they still “operate as two dimensions of meaning: signification and ‘sense’ (Rodowick 10). Rodowick most importantly for my discussion helps foreground the figural as a force. For example, Rodowick describes the figural as “a force that transgresses the intervals that constitute discourse and the perspectives that frame and position the image” (2). Throughout Reading the Figural, the figural as a force is asserted and given different content and effects. The figural is a force of desire but also a disarticulatory force that acts on discourse (6). As a force, “it does not signify, yet in has ‘sense’” (9). It brings difference and multiplicity into discourse.

Rodowick returns to these ideas later in Reading the Figural, when he discusses the time-image in much the same way as he had discussed the figural, now as an interval that allows in “not space, but force, the force of time as change, interrupting repetition with difference and parceling succession into series” (200). The description of the figural as a force, linked to time as change, is important for the specific political valences of Enthusiasm, Komsomol, Industrial Britain and Willard van Dyke’s 1930s documentaries.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s discussions of the constituent power of living labor resonates with the figural as a force constitutive of but not contained by the structures that depend upon them. In the Grundrisse, Marx described living labor as a force alienated by ‘dead’ abstract labor. In the antagonism between capitalists and workers, living labor is both the foundation for capital and dangerously exterior to it. Hardt and Negri take up Marx’s sense of “living labor” and develop it beyond his initial formulations in ways strikingly similar to Lyotard’s figural:10
As it contests the dead labor accumulated against it, living labor always seeks to break the fixed territorializing structures, the national organizations, and the political figures that keep it prisoner. With the force of living labor, its restless activity, and its deterritorializing desire, this process of rupture throws open all the windows of history. (Empire 52)

For Hardt and Negri, the force of living labor is characterized by a “restless energy” and “deterritorializing desire,” which, as constituent power, is needed by, but also acts as a threat to, constituted power (Empire 52). Hardt and Negri discuss living labor as “what constructs that passageway from the virtual to the real, it is the vehicle of possibility. […] Labor is productive excess with respect to the existing order and rules of its reproduction” (357).

In documentary films about or depicting steel production in the 1930s, steel is interiorized in discourses bound up with the state, industrial production, and labor. However, images of steel also at times exceed their discursive functions and enter another register altogether by becoming figural. By tracing the movement between discursive and figural uses of steel, one can begin to grasp the affect and exteriorities that mark the aesthetic and political projects of these documentaries. The figural often points toward questions of constituting power and living labor in a register separate from its discourse, but not without meaning and affect.

The Figural and Living Labor in Vertov and Ivens

Both Vertov and Ivens hold important positions in documentary history as filmmakers who were avant-gardists and Soviet propagandists, sequentially and simultaneously. Vertov’s career took place entirely within the USSR, while Ivens left the Netherlands in 1931 to make films for the Soviet studio Mezhrabpom. The two films I will focus on here, Vertov’s Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass (1931) and Ivens’ Komsomol, A Song of Heroes (1933), were Soviet-sponsored documentaries made as part of the campaign to encourage public support for the rapid industrialization plan, or “super-industrialization,” initiated by the USSR in the late 1920s during its First Five Year Plan. In Elizabeth Papazian’s recent historical study of the Soviet “documentary moment,” she describes the late 1920s and early 1930s as “the high point of the evolution of the Soviet documentary impulse […] the point of maximum participation of literary and cinematic figures,” which was largely motivated by the state’s need for propaganda.
(7). This period also marked the “culmination” of the Soviet documentary moment, which ended when Stalinist cultural control caught up with the rest of its centralization projects and social realism was instated as state cultural policy.

Both Vertov’s *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass* (1931) and Ivens’ *Komsomol, A Song of Heroes* (1933) are celebrations of the work of living labor mobilized by the state to build and run the steel mills in the process of industrialization. The Komsomol were an especially attractive subject, in that they were young Soviets who volunteered their labor to state projects and factories. The films identify the workers as volunteers and shock workers — willing labor — but present throughout and unidentified are people forced by the State to work, including imprisoned kulaks.\(^\text{12}\) The forced labor of peasants was part of a tragic, truly catastrophic national project to collectivize agriculture through the dispossession of peasants and the forced movement of those that remained into group farms run by the party.\(^\text{13}\)

While these films celebrate the constituent power of the labor, they also leave out the fact that a significant part of that labor, even if largely kept out of frame, was antagonistic. Since the Five Year Plan was an attempt to finish the project of the Revolution and make the Soviet Union self-sufficient, the specter of sabotaging kulaks—more explicit in films like Eisenstein’s *The General Line* (1929)—was a symptom of the State’s inability to fully absorb the power of the living labor, its constituent power, into constituted power. In place of including the official discourse of the kulaks as saboteurs, Ivens and Vertov instead use more and more abstracted and figural scenes of steel making. This is significant. According to Lyotard, one of the effects of figuration is that it “takes words literally” (“Dream-Work” 28), and it is hard not to see in these two films a play on the meaning of Stalin, “man of steel.”

This, however, is not simple propaganda and steel is not reducible to Stalin in these films. Rather, steel acts as a trope both for the constituent power of living labor and for centralized state power under Stalin. The images of steel production, however, exceed their function in discourse. Steel literally and figurally spills over, in repeated shots and sequences of molten steel, which give added charge to the trope of the forces that the State has channeled into the industrialization of the nation and the volatility and antagonisms of the fusion between labor and the state.\(^\text{14}\)
With Enthusiasm and Komsomol, Vertov and Ivens moved away from non-narrative, avant-garde work to more discursively coherent, narrative, and explicitly ideological—even dogmatic—films. In Ivens, his progression toward narrative in this period is evident when one compares Komsomol to earlier films like Rain (1929) and Philips Radio (1931), or to later films like Spanish Earth (1937) and, especially, Power and the Land (1941), which tells the story of one farming family and community before and after the New Deal project of electrification. In his writings for Komsomol, Ivens argues for the value of reconstruction in his films, a position that has become a significant aspect of his documentary legacy. This is most evident in his essay, “On the Method of the Documentary Film—in Particular the Film Komsomol,” which Ivens wrote in response to concerns raised by Mezhrabpom. He argues that his previous apolitical, formalist, avant-garde work trained him to make Komsomol, and that he will be able “to make a film with communist content according to the methods which I [developed]” (231). The first time he notes using reconstructed scenes, he opens up the question as to whether he makes documentary, or some other branch of nonfiction film. However, Ivens quickly makes a stronger claim:

I am convinced that reconstruction—organization of past events at the same location using the same workers doing the same activities—is essential for the further development of the documentary film and, when correctly organized, that it will not lessen its documentary value. (232)

According to Ivens, documentary as the mere recording of facts did not work with the content and purpose of the film; acted scenes and performing non-actors better communicated the experience of the Komsomol. He continues to explain and define how acted scenes can be used:

You will understand that, because of the short shooting period, it will be necessary to reconstruct some episodes, because some of the events will have obviously occurred before we arrived on location. The Komsomol on Magnitostroj, for example, will already be a qualified employee in reality. To show his development, we have to include an episode in which he is still working in the mines. He will have to wear the work clothes of a miner and join the mining brigade so we can film him there. The documentary character of the shooting must, of course, be strictly controlled, because that must be the influential element of the film for the spectator. (236)
Vertov’s move toward narrative might have been a bit more fraught. From his first film *Kino-Eye* (1925), which follows the Young Pioneers as they teach adults how to behave in a new Communist state, Vertov had included many of the fictive elements listed by Renov, including “idealized forms, fantasy, identification, reversible time” (*Theorizing Documentary* 3). However, from the publication of “We: Variant of a Manifesto” in 1922 until his concessions in the late 1930s, Vertov railed against acted films made in studios, even if they took up Soviet themes. Vertov also often referred to himself, especially in diaries, as a film poet indebted to Mayakovsky. If it is possible to see Vertov’s films of the 1930s as moves “toward traditional narrative and historical representation [and] a sense of himself as ‘auteur’” (Papazian 109), it is hard not to also see this as a concession. However, in *Enthusiasm*, narrative serves the figural, rather than the opposite in *Three Songs*. Both Vertov and Ivens, in these films, use narrative to justify excursions into the figural, but only so far, so that the figural elements remain energetic, “at the edge” of discourse, and distinctly produced “to be seen” as well as read.

This tension is evident in that, despite a notable shift to narrative, neither film was seen as going far enough by many Soviet critics. Vertov received criticisms of his work throughout his career, including accusations that *Enthusiasm* was a “fetishization of fact” (qtd. in Hicks 83). Interestingly, post-Soviet critics continue to make such arguments against Vertov: writing for *Electric Sheep* magazine in June 2009, Philip Winter called *Enthusiasm*’s Donbass section, “industrial pornography.” Even though Ivens tried to speak the Party’s language, promising that “the material world will not dominate the political perspective” (Ivens “On the Method” 233) and criticizing Vertov’s ideas of documentary, *Komsomol* also met with disapproval for being too formal and “documentarist” (Schoots 80). In the criticisms of both films, “politics” and narrative are placed on one side, the discursive side, and “the material world” and image on another. Such criticisms of *Enthusiasm* and *Komsomol*—as the “fetishization of fact,” as overly “documentarist,” and as “industrial pornography”—understand the films’ turns toward the figural as turns taken at the cost of discourse. I agree. It is important to note, however, that an overemphasis on film documents is not necessarily figural. For example, a newsreel doesn’t have to be figural, even if it lacks a discursive structure, since the figural in art is constructed to carry the force of the exteriority it shows. It is the avant-
garde, formalist construction of film facts in *Enthusiasm* and *Komsomol* that makes these films explorations of the figural in documentary as it was taking shape.

The above criticisms of the films also point to the arrhythmies of the films, or to dramatic visual alterations of rhythm in a film. The propulsive thrust of *Enthusiasm* and *Komsomol* is consistently halted by images from the bigger-than-life material worlds they document in Donbass and Magnitogorsk. The filmmakers also disrupt their films through abrupt changes in rhythm and sped-up, or under-cranked, shots. While the arrhythmies in these two films are not so extreme as to entirely break from their narratives, and could be read simply as intensifications at key moments, I argue that they are dramatic enough within the context of the films to emerge as figural moments.

**Vertov and Enthusiasm**

Dziga Vertov made *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbass* after *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), while working for the Ukrainian company VUFKU after losing his position at Sovkino in Moscow. The Donbass region, in the Ukraine, had been an important site for heavy industry since the 19th century because of its large coal and iron reserves. Vertov had close ties to the area, having worked there during the Civil War and having filmed there since that time. A journal entry about filming done in the Dzherzhinsky plant in the Donbass for *The Eleventh* (1928) suggests that Vertov had an intense relationship to Donbass steel. He writes:

Covered with red dust […] we grew close to the blast furnaces, the Bessemers converters, the molten metal, to the rivers of fire […] the glowing wire that, as if alive, rises, bends, swings […].

Our shoes are charred, our throats parched, our eyes strained, but we can’t tear ourselves away from the blast engines; we just have to wait for still another smelting of cast iron.

I hesitate to talk of ‘love’ when speaking of my feelings toward this plant. And yet I do really feel as though I want to embrace and caress those gigantic smokestacks and black gas tanks… (168-169).

This passage shows a specific relationship toward steel production. Rather than an author as producer, which supposes a continuum of production, we have here the image of the artist in awe of the production of steel.16 This awe is essential for understanding the
stalled narrative structure of *Enthusiasm* once the film arrives at the mill: Vertov can’t stop looking, or showing.

In film history, *Enthusiasm* is perhaps more important for hearing than seeing as a pioneering sound film for the USSR and documentary in general. Not only was it an experiment in synchronized sound recording on location, which was virtually unheard of in documentary filmmaking until the 1950s, but Vertov’s team did this recording in and around a steel plant far from urban and filmmaking centers by using portable sound equipment made for the film. Vertov skillfully used the language of the Five Year Plan to describe this project as “catching up with and surpassing capitalist countries” in sound film (115). The sound is so important to *Enthusiasm* that Peter Kubelka asserts that in his restoration of the film he “only corrected the relation between the sound track and the image” (Fischer 35).17 In order to make this “only” happen, however, Kubelka dismantled the entire film, without the permission of Gosfilmfond, and re-synchronized the sound and image track.18 The synch, as he argues and demonstrates in his version, is especially important to the Donbass section, where the industrial sounds shot on location are combined with other non-location recording to create an industrial symphony. Along with the score and industrial sounds, Vertov used a number of different voices to construct a compilation voice-over, including speeches and radio broadcasts announcing what must happen. In terms of Vertov’s soundtrack especially, the figural can be something heard or seen. While most of the sounds in *Enthusiasm* are complementary to the discourse, including the industrial sounds and the score, some sounds exceed signification. This is most apparent in the steam whistle, which pulls both documentary and symbolic weight, especially as a call to action, but moves to a different register once in the Donbass. In this section, the whistle’s blare is distorted and attenuated, continuing throughout the opening scenes, in a way that points to experimentations with what sound could do as well as how it could communicate.

*Enthusiasm* has two parts. These can be seen as two distinct sections, as they often are by critics who also usually favor the first, or as two parts of a single narrative about the Soviet transformation: the changes to civil society are made, but remain tenuous, as long as the nation is not industrially and agriculturally self-sufficient, but it
does, so equilibrium is restored. Vertov, in his plans for *Enthusiasm*, described these two trajectories of the film:

*Transformed* (not gradually, but in a revolutionary leap), with an explosion of crowns, crosses, icons, etc., with the shades of the past executed by the hurricane blaze of socialist factories. (293)

*Coal has arrived.* The conveyors and sorting machines have started up. The aerial chains of coal-filled carts have begun to move. The blast furnaces are operating at full speed. *Metal has arrived.* […] Rolled steel, open-hearth, rolled, open-hearth, rolled, open-hearth—in a single creative thrust toward socialism. (295)

These can be mapped onto the two parts of *Enthusiasm*. The first half of the film dramatizes the dismantling of religion and its replacement with socialist ideology. Its plot, the shift from religious to socialist ideology, is carried out in a fairly straightforward and punctual way (“not gradually, but in a revolutionary leap”) with formalist digressions that are clearly meaningful, like the church which caves in on itself through a visual trick much like the Bolshoi in *Man with a Movie Camera*. The story of the second section is as simple: coal is needed for industrial production, workers answer the demand, coal arrives, and steel is made and turned into tractors. Vertov, however, stays with the “hurricane blaze” and its processes much longer than would seem necessary, or even useful, for this narrative, and turns the leap into something else entirely. The narrative of this part is much more circuitous than the first, almost entirely losing any linearity or coherence as a narrative at all to become “industrial pornography” for those viewers who quickly tire of it. This change in the movement of the film is apparent in how Vertov glossed the parts, first, as a transformation from one condition to another, and second, as a continuous circular “thrust” of “rolled steel, open-hearth, rolled, open-hearth, rolled, open-hearth.” He will even include the figure for the structure of the second part in one of the last images of the film, as I will discuss later.

In the transition between the two sections of *Enthusiasm*, Vertov makes explicit his priorities. The ideological work is made tangible when a crowd cuts off the steeple of a church and removes its icons, followed by a dissolve that shows that the church has become a meetinghouse for young Communists. The building, shot in high angle, then darkens in a time-lapse and, finally, is replaced by an industrial landscape also shown in time lapse, but sprawling, active, and lit up in contrast to the meetinghouse. In the last
shot of the church-turned-meetinghouse, a flame cuts through the top of the building. Vertov emphasizes the heights of the church and its bell tower throughout the first section using sharply angled shots aimed up at them and down from them in a literalization of superstructure, and this final shot of the first section shows production burning its way through the screen. The transition sequence also includes shots of a model meant to illustrate a future of available tractors and cars. Yet during this sequence, the music darkens, a change in tonality that undercuts the expected affect of Communist triumph and leads the film away from ideology and consumption, and instead into the heart of production and its demands for labor. Industrial work thus eclipses the ideological work celebrated in the first half.

The film’s second half is about industry in the Donbass, the mobilization to increase production for the Five Year Plan, and the plan’s completion in four years. The metronome and church bells of the first section are replaced by the mill’s steam whistle, distorted and attenuated, as mentioned earlier, and ‘industrial sounds.’ The section begins with the announcement of a coal shortage, appropriately made in a movie theater, and then turns to the mining of coal and its conversion into coke as workers respond to national demand. Vertov emphasizes this activity by speeding up the action, as in the sped up footage of a horse-pulled cart racing through the mines. Another sequence points to the need for industry to back up ideology, when coal mining shock workers pledge their commitment to the cause. Their speeches are intercut with images of a skip-hoist, powered by coal, which carried raw materials—coke and iron ore—up to the top of the steel mill’s blast furnaces and loaded the furnace. The shock workers’ pledges get the skip-hoist to move for a moment—but the hoist stops moving soon after each speech, waiting for the arrival of coal and Komsomol workers. From this point forward, the film becomes a montage of industrial scenes—shots of the mill, rivulets of molten iron and steel, men loading the furnaces, rolling machines which work automatically to press steel into sheets—and marches. It provides little guidance to the events taking place on screen, and the actions are again often sped up, including a machine that pushes an ingot into a rolling mill, as well as the hoists that carry coal and ore up to the furnaces. These automatic processes are shown alongside manual labor, in a series of shots of one worker who guides the hooks of a crane around one huge ingot. After more industrial scenes, the
film ends with the steel workers speaking to peasants, which links the new machinery and their labor in a visual and affective denouement to the industrial sequence.

The final industrial sequence of *Enthusiasm* includes a shot that acts as a mise-ène-abyme for the film’s narrative and figural work. At first, it splits between two scenes: one in which a man works with a rolling machine—called a looping guide—to pull steel and form it into rods, and the other in which a group of men shovel sand into the blast furnace. Then, other workers are included, molding ingots and tapping the furnace. The sequence thus shows a range of work, from the skilled roll hands to unskilled furnace workers. This, also, matches exactly the action Vertov describes in his summary: “rolled steel, open-hearth, rolled, open-hearth.” At this point, the industrial sounds that accompany the sequence change to those of a march and cheering. These scenes are shown at different angles in increasingly shorter shots and closer and more abstract angles until the two sides of the machine rolling the steel rods are shown as an arabesque of light. This striking shot is the most abstract, non-discursive, and figural shot in the film. It also burns the circuitous structure of the film onto the frame, an inscription of the arabesques of narrative that Vertov works with in *Enthusiasm*. There is a link, then, between Vertov’s noted self-reflexivity and the emergence of the figural into the film. As with the diary entry, here again the filmmaker in awe attempts to communicate the sensible shocks of the steel mill. He disrupts the discourse of the film to do that. The figural allows visual pleasure in images to overtake discourse, asserting the primacy of that other world and pointing as well to the materiality of the film. These images importantly come from the steel mill, which is the material and sensible world that Vertov seeks to capture, while preserving the constitutive difference, and for him, the primacy, of that world.

*Ivens’ Komsomol*

Ivens came to the USSR to make a film for the state in 1931 and chose Magnitogorsk as his subject. Unlike the Donbass region, Magnitogorsk was entirely new when built in the 1930s, intended to provide a new industrial base for the USSR. Ivens’ film celebrates the building of the mill’s second blast furnace by the Komsomol, the
youth wing of the Communist party who volunteered to build it. In his autobiography, *Camera and I*, Ivens writes of filming in Magnitogorsk:

> It was the first time in my life I felt integrated with my work, a part of my environment. Our film crew was not an isolated strange group temporarily attached to a big industrial project, but part of the project. (72)

An anecdote from earlier in *Camera and I*, about when he first went to the USSR to show his films, offers a glimpse of Ivens’ class-consciousness and his belief in his ability to bridge the gap between himself and the workers. Perhaps of all the documentary filmmakers in this chapter, Ivens most believed in the camera’s ability to directly engage with the reality filmed and in the camera crew’s ability to close the gaps between themselves and those they filmed. Ivens describes showing his films at a construction workers’ clubhouse. A worker asked Ivens to describe his class position, the politics of Holland, and his work. Ivens responded:

> There was unfortunately no revolution in Holland in 1917. The workers of Amsterdam and some other town demonstrated for better work conditions. My father owns and runs a chain of stores selling photographic supplies. He belongs to the middle class. […] I have been making films for three years but it is difficult to make a living from it. (59)

The ‘worker’ called Ivens a fake or a liar. Ivens quotes him as saying: “You say you are from the middle class, yet the film we have seen [*Zuiderzee*] was surely made with the eyes of the worker. I know, because it is exactly the way I see the work” (59). To this, Ivens writes, “I couldn’t have asked for a higher compliment” (59). Ivens had tried to do the work of the stone laborer for [*Zuiderzee*] (1930). Although he quickly became exhausted, he then filmed the work with some awareness of the specific physical work required. He finishes: “The man had discovered a secret of my working method which I myself had not fully realized. No film critic had ever touched the cause of the realistic quality in my films” (61). In this story, Ivens gets the approval of the Soviet “worker,” and suggests that by certain methods, a middle-class filmmaker could film to reflect the experience of heavy labor. With *Komsomol*, it seems, Ivens had the chance to further integrate filmmaking and heavy labor and narrow the gap between him and the workers he filmed. Stufkens notes: “The improbable force of collective labor is shown in Ivens’
images with love and respect” (53). It’s in the figural qualities of *Komsomol* that this is especially registered.

*Komsomol* begins with a dedication to the “Komsomol of the West” with silent shots of German factories, public protests, and pro-Soviet Union banners and graffiti. After this dedication, the central problem of the film is then set up by a map showing radio waves emanating from Soviet urban and industrial centers, which report the need for steel throughout the USSR and call for Magnitogorsk to meet this demand. This begins the film’s first industrial process narrative, accompanied by industrial noises and beginning with the excavation of ore. From there, the ore is crushed, the coke is added, and men tap the furnace outside the factory as iron and steel pour into crucibles at another part of the plant. The process is followed through to the cast iron bars trucked out of the mill and an animated scene of model tractors and cars, circling on conveyor belts, like the one used but undercut in *Enthusiasm*. The next part shows the workers coming to Magnitogorsk, beginning with the work recruitment center. This section introduces Afanaseyev, a young shepherd who has just arrived to the industrial center, who we then follow through the different jobs he takes in building the furnace. The focus of this section turns to the building of the new blast furnace needed to meet the rising demand for steel. The film shows the intense human labor used in its construction, from the carrying and laying of stones to riveting and bricklaying. The building of the blast furnace is interrupted by a second industrial process narrative, which starts this time with coal mining, and not ore. The process of turning coal to coke is interrupted by an acted sequence, in which a worker runs to get the factory’s secretary to fill in for an absent crane operator.

The final section is set up as the “nocturnal assault” by the Komsomol to run the two blast furnaces for the first time. It begins with workers going to the construction site, holding torches, and then shows the final work, which is illuminated by the sparks created by the riveters, and ends with a montage of exuberant shots from inside the working factory, of the furnaces, coke falling in vertical strips, slag, and open hearth steel production. This section is accompanied by the film’s score, composed by Hans Eisler, which for the first time in the film includes the chorus in which the Magnitogorsk workers announce a future that will provide enough for the needs of the Soviet Union.
They thus answer the radio calls from Moscow and Soviet manufacturing centers made at the beginning of the film.

In many ways, *Komsomol* is more discursive and accessible than *Enthusiasm*. It includes something like characters and is careful to explain what it shows. Disagreeing with Vertov, Ivans argued that reenactments could be used in documentaries, as long as non-actors were used and the scenes reconstructed had happened before or were routine events. Characters and acted sequences, he argued, brought spectators into the film (“On the Method” 232). The difference in the soundtracks probably best points to the difference between the two films. Ivans uses a combination, like Vertov, of scored music, folk songs and industrial sounds—but in a much more digestible way. The industrial sounds never reach the cacophonous pitch of *Enthusiasm*. There is also no use of non-diegetic voices, which is how quite a bit of information is conveyed in *Enthusiasm*. Instead, the inter-titles do the work of conveying information in *Komsomol*. Finally, Ivans’ film is more clearly structured around an event—the completion of Magnitogorsk—even if the threads of that event are at times quite circuitous.

Thomas Waugh has discussed how the “fertile atmosphere” of socialist realism in the early 1930s influenced Ivans in making *Komsomol* and further shaped him into “the major ambassador, interpreter, and practitioner of the progressive elements of socialist realism in the Western cinema” (*Joris* 157). Waugh describes the effect of these strategies, in that “every scene can be read” (*Joris* 166). Despite these definite attempts to be accessible, Ivans still remained tied to the figural in *Komsomol*. Certain shots are clearly included more for their visual impact than their discursive narrative work and their visual interest is framed by the structure and editing of the film. For example, the first sequence showing Magnitogorsk is initially sutured to the shepherd who surveys, as best he can, the huge complex. Even if this sequence were not focalized through a character, it would be expected that a documentary would include establishing shots of the factory. However, Ivans includes an almost identical traveling shot into and through Magnitogorsk only twenty minutes later, without diegetic causation, when the second process narrative follows the coal into the factory. Also, many of the shots of Magnitogorsk emphasize its size and complexity through compositions with disorienting scales and from sharp angles. These include shots of the top of the blast furnace, showing
workers setting up the wind heaters. Finally, certain images also fall outside discourse for their striking impact, and are repeated more for the latter than for their service within an argumentative totality. The sequence in which coal is turned into coke, for example, includes two very striking shots, one of the crane moving on its tracks and the other of hot coke falling in tall vertical sheets. The latter image is repeated in the conclusion. These two shots follow an acted sequence about an interruption in production caused by an absent crane operator, which is solved when a Komsomol secretary steps into the role. The sequence is striking in the film for its almost comical shots of men sitting around, resting until work starts up again. While serving a discursive function, showing the ability for party organizer’s to also do technical work, the sequence also serves perhaps a self-reflexive function, as a kind of joke on the film’s periodic interruptions of the discursive propulsion forward with imagistic, impressionistic images.

*Komsomol* is also punctuated by sequences in which the editing speeds up, often including shots that provide different angles on the same object or person. These mark arrhythmias in the film that disrupt the narration of production as a process. They are not irrational, just disruptive and expressive, or figural. Andre Stufkens sees this quality of Ivens’ work beginning improbably early, arguing that Ivens made the discovery while making a film as a child that “it was the interruption of the rhythm that made the viewer aware of the visual rhythm” (50). The film’s first arrhythmia takes place early into the first industrial process arc, as the drilling brigades, who tested for iron ore deposits, work in pairs pulling a cord in tandem with the drilling machine’s movements. After establishing the action, a series of four shots moves quickly, breaking the established rhythm, to show the faces of the two men twice each, followed by a shadow of one of the men and the machine. The rhythm accelerates again at the end of the extended riveting sequence. While riveting was certainly a large part of building a blast furnace, *Komsomol* dedicates a significant amount of time to show, and then re-show, how rivets are put in place, which also involves two men. The film includes the narrative of a contest between the two teams of riveters, which functions discursively to show a productive competition between workers. This set-up gives a narrative and discursive reason for the next arrhythmia, when one team speeds up their work in a last push to win. Here, shots of the
different stages and objects in riveting, all shown before, repeat quickly and at different angles.

Finally, the last sequence not only again accelerates the montage, but also ends with the dramatic, nighttime shots of the steel mill in operation, especially with images of the furnace and of steel pouring down into the crucibles. Workers are present in floor shots of the fiery mill, but not in the most dramatic scenes—which are only of the material world of the factory. Ivens ends his film here, and not with the workers or with a reassertion of the power of the Soviet Union. He does not include the discursive denouement of triumphant marches and happy peasants found in *Enthusiasm*. The last shots are of the factory in the morning.

**Grierson’s Industrial Britain**

While discussing his film shot in a steel mill, *Winter Solstice* (1974), Hollis Frampton described the difference between his relationship to steel production and Vertov’s as an “abyss” (“Talking” 249). Although there’s not quite the same abyss between Ivens, Vertov, and Grierson’s *Industrial Britain*, a huge gap still separates them. Grierson and Flaherty’s politics were quite different from the Soviet-inspired filmmakers, and *Industrial Britain* is not revolutionary. For example, the choice to include coal mining into an imagined community of skilled, individual labor is troubling given the role that coal miners had played in initiating the two major industrial strikes of the 1920s, not to mention the retribution they suffered for such actions.

The attacks on Grierson have been intense in documentary studies, especially those of Peter Morris and Brian Winston, which have been picked up by Bill Nichols and Michael Renov, among others. Nichols, for example, argues that Grierson was a neoconservative, who harnessed the radical potential of Soviet documentaries and made them palatable for “bourgeois democratic ends” and the state’s need to control and dominate its subjects and to preserve the status quo (“Documentary and the Modernist” 583). The difference between reform and revolution has to be measured against the history of Britain, which had had a strong steel industry since the nineteenth century, as well as an established skilled labor force, and the specific interwar context of *Industrial Britain*. Instead, I argue that reading the film in light of this history of the period shows
that Grierson was engaged with serious questions about how the state constitutive of people can work in their interests.

British labor’s caste system had been weakening since the war had opened up machine jobs to unskilled labor. The increased automation also let more people into different types of jobs before unavailable to them. In *The Classic Slum*, Robert Roberts writes:

>The dilution of labor and the employment of women brought communal gains of immense value, not only in engineering but in many other fields. Socially, the barriers of caste that had previously existed between the skilled worker and his family and the lower industrial grade were permanently lowered; the artisan felt less superiority, the laborer and unskilled man more self-assurance. (200).

According to Marxist economic histories by Negri and Harvey, in the interwar period, the British liberal rights state reorganized itself in order to respond to the growing demands of the working class. The threat of revolution, especially as the Soviet state gained strength, played a significant role in the shift. While Keynes’ ideas did not gain authority in Britain until the mid-1930s, we can already see a similar perspective on the role of the state as the mediator of class conflict in *Industrial Britain*. Grierson, like many others in British politics and civil society, did not seek a working class takeover of the government by force, but nonetheless had to recognize working class autonomy in that period. *Industrial Britain* registers this autonomy in the steel mill sequences, especially in the more figural, abstracted images. In *Documentary Film*, Rotha writes that *Industrial Britain* was unique in presenting the “working class of England as a human, vital factor in present day existence” (105). This seems fairly right, especially as the working classes were changing and expanding during the period.

As historians note, this shift in the British government, from liberal rights to interventionist state, worked itself out in several industries and services, but especially in relation to the coal and steel industries. In the 1920s, the Conservative and Labour governments tried to help England’s declining ‘mature’ industries, especially coal and steel, while balancing the demands for a ‘free’ market and stable wages. British workers had a long history of organizing to push against attempts by industry to increase profits or maintain industrial control by lowering wages. The British government first emphasized the benefits of industrial rationalization and cooperation while trying to avoid directly
intervening in industry. Although the 1926 miner’s strike failed, it emphasized the “high social and political price of trying to restore industrial competitiveness and increase employment via cuts in money wages” (Greaves 28) and encouraged government intervention. The government took over the coal industry, but the Bank of England prevented takeovers in other industries, including steel. The National government, under the rubric of “planning” rather than reorganization, acted on a policy of industrial protectionism. Steel was protected by tariffs, starting in 1932. These measures worked as a safety valve to prevent major unrest, but also began a new stage of government intervention in industry and the economy.20

By focusing on coal and steel, Industrial Britain celebrates newly protected industries and the new balance between workers and capital struck by these economic changes. Government intervention into industry is not revolutionary change, but it would be too far to refuse to see anything positive in changes meant to protect jobs and the working conditions expected in England at the time, which were much better than what US steelworkers could hope for. This history of British interwar economics challenges the easy dismissal of Grierson as the preserver of the status quo, since the period was one of economic change and what was preserved in England in the 1930s might have been to the benefit of a least a segment of the British working class. In Industrial Britain, Grierson emphasizes a continuum of these different types of work, from the potter to crane operator. This does not have to be regressive. Industrial Britain is utopian in its argument for a productive, prosperous nation in which the sharp lines of skilled and unskilled labor are blurred and the state mediates between the demands of labor and capital for the good of the collective. The move into the steel mill is an integral part of the film for this interpretation of it.

While Nichols notes the influence of Soviet cinema on Grierson, he also argues that Grierson gutted the modernist techniques of their radical charge and expression of subjectivity as something other than state sponsored. I disagree. In adapting Vertov and Ivens to his context, especially in his film Industrial Britain, Grierson also engages with the dialectic between discourse and the figural, and the ties of the figural in these films with a productive and destructive force constitutive of but not limited to the state and industry: specifically, in these films, living labor. The way the figural emerges in
*Industrial Britain* is, of course, very different from the previous two films, but the films are more similar, or dialectically related, than how they are sometimes perceived. *Enthusiasm* exerted significant aesthetic influence on Grierson, who had a great interest in Soviet filmmaking. In his 1931 review of the film, Grierson criticizes the film on many points:

> It is all dazzle-dazzle and bits and pieces, whoopee for this and whoopee [...] he has brought all his great power over camera angles and all his sense of percussive cutting, to help him. But he has failed. And he has failed because he was like any bourgeois highbrow, too clever by half. [...] He has given us everything of the mechanism and nothing of the people. (129)

However, Grierson also writes, “I have never set eyes on a film that interested me more than Vertov’s *Enthusiasm*” and that *Enthusiasm* “is so full of ingenuities that practitioners like myself will be feeding on its carcass years from now.” The real success of *Enthusiasm* was that Vertov turned steel production into a “fairy tale” (129).

Grierson’s criticisms of Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* and *Enthusiasm* point to a continued theme in his writings on documentary, that is, on the relation between image and discourse. Writing about *Man with a Movie Camera*, Grierson sought to downplay the enthusiasm felt about the film. He praised its “visual virtue” and the tricks of montage that are “infinitely magical” like rabbits out of a hat (127). While Vertov provides important lessons of the potentialities of film, Grierson cautions, “say what you like, according to your sense of ultimate importances, the necessity is that you say something” (128). Grierson’s critique might be less about the film, which might have said more in different reception contexts, than about how Vertov was picked up and celebrated in the Anglo film communities. Throughout his writings in the 1930s, Grierson asserts the need for a documentary to say something as well as be visually sophisticated. That saying also had to have relevance to the social world. His criticisms of the city symphonies are especially trenchant, due again as a corrective to how he saw them being picked up by young filmmakers and film enthusiasts. Criticizing *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* and its many copies, he writes that the films go through the day and, at the end, “nothing having happened and nothing positively said about anything, to bed” (150). He continues, “The highbrows bless the symphony for its good looks and, being sheltered rich little souls for the most part, absolve it gladly of further intentions” (152). Rather,
Grierson favors filmmaking in which “beauty [inhabits] the statement” (151). Grierson, however, is not clear about what kind of the statements are worth making or that he will make.

In the 1930s, Grierson organized and made films for the Empire Marketing Board’s Film Unit. In essays, he argues that the Board allowed more freedom to filmmakers anywhere outside the USSR. He does not quite champion, however, the goals of the E.M.B, but neither does he criticize their purpose. In an article published in the summer of 1933, he describes the E.M.B Film Unit in the past tense, since the Unit was disbanded officially in July, and Grierson and his team moved to the General Post Office. He writes, “we got a very brief commission ‘to bring the Empire alive’” (166). He then continues:

We were instructed, in effect, to use cinema, or alternately to learn to use it, to bring alive the industries, the harvests, the researches, the productions, the forward-looking activities of all kinds […]. (166)

In terms of his own goals for cinema, in encouraging citizenship and instilling civic virtues, those are more clearly articulated in the late 1930s. At the time of Industrial Britain, Grierson only suggests that films should “reveal the essentially co-operative and mass nature of society: leaving the individual to find his honours in the swoop of creative social forces” (148). Grierson fit into the general direction of British economic policy of the 1930s, in seeing the role of government as a mediator between labor and capital. This is not as progressively on the side of the working class as the other filmmakers, but it is also not fascist, as some suggest of Grierson.

Although Robert Flaherty was hired as the principle filmmaker for Industrial Britain, Grierson shot most of the footage inside the steel mill, and, from Rotha’s reports, Grierson enjoyed this coup. Perhaps Grierson thought Flaherty would not be able to capture the beauty of such a modern industry, as he argues in both his essay on Flaherty and in “First Principles of Documentary.” Paul Rotha tells the story of the filming:

Among the industrial processes to be shot was steelmaking. Golightly [Flaherty’s assistant] had great difficulty obtaining permission for Flaherty to film at a particular works near Birmingham. […] Finally, permission was granted, but certain parts of the steel plant, unfortunately some of the best from a
photogenic aspect, were banned to them. Flaherty accepted this ruling with bad grace, but they shot all morning.

The same evening, Grierson […] showed up unexpectedly at the hotel where they were staying in Birmingham. Grierson was in high spirits because that afternoon, on their way up from London, he and Davidson had shot some spectacular steel material, which they had chanced to run across. The more lyrical Grierson’s description waxed, the more apprehensive became Golightly and the more furious became Flaherty because it soon became obvious that Grierson had been at the same steelworks as had Flaherty and had shot the very things that had been forbidden, apparently without seeking permission. (Robert Flaherty 102)

Grierson, however, did not seem to have spent any significant amount of time with the steelworkers or in the mill, something he asserted would be important for filmmakers to do in his writings during the time.

The first section of *Industrial Britain* begins with a nostalgic evocation of village life, with images windmills and loom weaving. It then starts its survey of contemporary British work with coal mining. This sequence reasserts the continued importance of the “human factor” in mining, by which it seems to mean individual. From this sequence, it appears as if two men with hand tools do all the mining, and move heavy loads of coal with their individual strength. This is very much at odds the teams of men who work together in *Enthusiasm*. The first section then goes to an industrial town, but only to show that traditional crafts also happen there. In this sequence, the footage shot by Flaherty is used to show pottery and glass blowing. Craftsmanship is again emphasized. There’s a near total absence of machinery, only tools and individual workers, to then jump right to the engineers who are using the lenses made by the glassblowers for modern science. This first section is the most ideological troubling of the two, in its nostalgia tied to a disavowal of unskilled labor, collectivities, and machines.

The second part of *Industrial Britain* is announced by a sharp change in music, from major to minor keys, from melodic to percussive, and an intertitle in which the word “Steel” comes out from the dark screen. This change in music provides an important cue that steel production is different from what has come before. However, it’s important to consider that, unlike the other films discussed, the makers of *Industrial Britain* considered the sound as something “tacked on” by the distributors (Rotha, Robert Flaherty) and “out of step” (Sussex 24). Moreover, as the music continues, the ominous notes shorten and the syncopation becomes more apparent. The section starts with an
assembly of shots from the steel mill, especially of tapping the blast furnace and the pig iron pouring into ladles, as well as forming streams into molds for iron bars. In these scenes, there are more workers and less emphasis on highlighting individuals as exemplars. The camera follows closely the men working together to tap the furnace. The tight framing and slight movements of the frame, along with the music, create a strong sense of the rhythmic movements captured. It moves fluidly, in a semi-circular swoop, from a vantage point slightly higher that the floor, to follow the pig iron from the taps to their molds.

From there, the film moves to the dramatic images of a steel ladle overflowing with sparks and men tending the molten steel, and then focuses on a single steel ingot. The ingot is captured as it gets picked up by a crane and seemingly floats into the darkness, in a reverse action of how the word “Steel” appeared from the darkness to announce the section. Similar shots show the ingot as it is removed from a furnace that reheats it and moves through the rolling machine (see figure A12). The film then cuts briefly to shots of the construction of a building, and then returns to the steel mill. This time, we see the crane and lever operators who have been making the ingots move. The final sequence of a large ingot leaving a furnace combines shots of the furnace with those of a worker running the cranes. He is dressed like a worker, rather than an engineer, and echoes an earlier shot of a glass worker tending the glory hole. This larger ingot, we are told it will be used on a ship, again disappears into the darkness. The film then returns to its pastoral music to the engineers and craftsmen, now those who work with steel, which preceded the steel sequence.

The steel mill is a central site of Industrial Britain, and the sequence in the mill is the longest sequence in the film, even longer than the celebrated sequence on glass blowing that Flaherty shot. Most likely this is, in part, because Grierson was aware of the recent work of Vertov and Ivens that had brought out the visual appeal of steel making. Steel is also the only industry that gets its own intertitle announcing its arrival. The figural moments of Industrial Britain are in the mill, specifically the ingots shown floating in the dark. They verge on abstraction and are lingered on so they can be “seen” first and then, maybe, interpreted. The mill is the only space in the film where workers who are not craftsmen work with machinery, as well as with tools, and work in groups. It
also leads to other workers, like the construction workers seen and the men working with the steel, in a range of skilled to deskill labor.

*Industrial Britain* is most interested in steel production because it could show in one industry the bringing together of different types of labor for a shared productive purpose, without collapsing those differences into a production line or overly ordered single process. It shows the use of machinery, but at a stage in automation in which people still worked with the machines and in a historical period and place in which the demands of workers registered on a national level and encouraged intervention in industry. It’s easy to criticize Grierson as not revolutionary, and to view *Industrial Britain* especially negatively in light of neoliberalism. The film, however, also offers a look into a different economic world altogether and one worth thinking about along with the histories of revolution.

**Willard Van Dyke and Steel**

The three major films Willard Van Dyke worked on or directed in the late 1930s, *The River* (1938), *The City* (1939) and *Valley Town* (1940), all include images of steel production. It would, however, be inaccurate to argue that Van Dyke was as excited to film in a steel mill as the other filmmakers discussed in this chapter. In one of his letters to photographer Edward Weston about *The City*, he says flatly that he “did not work on” the industrial sequence (40). While Van Dyke did not, most likely, shoot the footage of the mills for *The River* or *The City*, steel serves as a visually striking and socially overdetermined part of both films. In *The River* and *The City* the mill figures as a metonymy for industry as a profit-driven Moloch, ingesting natural resources and living labor. The images are often quite similar to those used by Ivens and Vertov, but the tone is very different. In *Valley Town*, a tinplate hand rolling mill, a longtime obstacle to the American steel industry’s labor-saving innovations, is turned into a montage very different from the slag and coke montages of Ivens and Vertov, but also not as devilish as the smokestacks of *The River* or *The City*. Here, work that a group of men did together is shown as a dramatically lit dance of men and machines. In an otherwise very readable, argumentative documentary, the figural is given a small space in the view into a mill already obsolescent. As with the other documentaries, the figural shows more than what the film can say, especially about the force of labor.
Van Dyke was directly involved in the formal and political experimentation of 1930s documentary. Like many others, he began as a photographer, and worked closely alongside Edward Weston in California early in his career. He left California and photography because of the push he felt to do more socially relevant work, and moved to New York in the fall of 1935. In his interview with Harrison Engle, Van Dyke described the transition: “I was excited and interested in film as a pure medium of expression, but I was more interested in using it for a social end” (346). He soon met Ralph Steiner, who introduced him to Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz, all members of NYKINO. All three worked with Pare Lorentz on *The River*, where Strand and Hurwitz notoriously clashed with Lorentz, leaving the less political Steiner to work closely with him to finish the film. Lorentz then asked Steiner to help with *The River*, but commitments with NYKINO and his partner’s bad feelings from the last project led him to defer and suggest Van Dyke in his place. In this way, Van Dyke got his entry-point into the mainstream, as it were, of American social documentary. After returning to New York, Steiner and Van Dyke broke from NYKINO to work on *The City*, taking with them grant money that would have helped NYKINO continue to make films and, thus, causing considerable bad feelings. After the success of *The City*, Van Dyke made *Valley Town*, probably the film over which he had the most creative control in his career of ‘sponsored’ filmmaking.

Van Dyke worked as one of the principle cinematographers for *The River*. In a letter, he describes shooting in the Tennessee River Valley area into Mississippi and Louisiana. The work he wrote about, like cotton loading and levee building, was of a decidedly agricultural form. Lorentz and Van Dyke started, however, working together in the Tygart Valley, in West Virginia. The area links up to the Monongahela River, and was an industrial site in the 1930s. Most likely, a steel mill was shot in this area, or perhaps a little further up into Weirton, West Virginia. Steel plays a small role in *The River*. It shows up in the first half of the documentary, which describes the Mississippi’s value for the economy, but also points to the threatening overuse of the land.

The mill is preceded by a sequence on lumber, which plays “Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight,” over images of logs shooting into the river, which carries them away. Images of a steel-saw cutting through lumber provide a kind of visual bridge to the steel
sequence. Music is a central aspect to Lorentz’s documentaries. Neil Lerner describes the music used over the steel mill sequence:

This music is [...] full of dissonant tone clusters [...] cacophonous parallel tritons, and the harsh grinding sound of a ratchet, suggesting that the images accompanying it are somehow ominous and evil. The image of the steel mill is here meant to represent the villains of the films [...]. The presence of the devil—signified by the use of melodic and harmonic tritons—juxtaposed alongside several secular tuned reinforces the sense that, at least in terms of musical symbolism, we are in the midst of a fallen, postlapsarian world of sin. (112)

The mills, however, are first introduced with much less ominous music. What Lerner describes only begins when the documentary first moves inside the mill, with an image of coke falling that is similar to images used to great, and very different, effect in Komsomol. The shots that follow are of molten iron and steel pouring into ladles and molds. The mill becomes a faceless netherworld. The film moves back outside, with a quick shot of a line of smoke, then to a bale of hay moving up on a conveyor diagonally against the sky.

Van Dyke’s next documentary, The City, deals more fully with steel production, though still pushing it to the side as an example of urban blight. The transition into steel is also striking in The City, as the transition from the idyllic past of the New England town into the modern, unplanned, world of Pittsburgh and New York. In his essay on sound in The City, Henwar Rodakiewicz, who worked on the film with Steiner and Van Dyke, described the transition, which begins in the town’s blacksmith shop:

Music is born of the anvil beats—and as the camera moves closer and closer to the red-hot iron, the music becomes more intense and ringing. At the last, completely blinding flashes of sparks we cut to:

Sequence B (Industry)

And suddenly we are enveloped in the large, fiery displays of tons of molten metal pouring into a large ladle in a modern steel mill. The music will emphasize the change in scale. (281)

The documentary moves from the blacksmith hammering iron at a furnace to molten metal pouring into a ladle, accompanied by an abrupt change of music. The images are very similar to those used in The River, inside the mill, which are again starkly contrasted images of fire surrounded by darkness, with only silhouettes of men working or
watching. Along with molten metal moving into ladles or molds, the sequence also includes coke falling in sheets. However, unlike *The River*, this documentary moves outside the mill, starting with right outside the mill and then into the town surrounding it.

*The City* first shows waste products from iron-making that are dumped right onto the factory grounds, with a man trying to make his way over the destroyed land. This communicates both the US steel industry’s waste and pollution, in that the metal is not being reused or disposed of more safely. Then the narrator ironically exclaims the progress of industry, over shots of factories expelling smoke:

Machines, inventions, power. Black out the past! Forget the quiet cities. Bring in the steam and steel, the iron men, the giants. Open the throttle, all aboard, the Promised Land. Pillars of smoke by day, pillars of fire by night, pillars of progress. Machines to make machines. Production to expand production. [...] Millions, millions, faster and faster.

The camera pans from the mills and factories to the town across the river, Homestead or Pittsburgh, and then takes up a new location among the housing surrounding the mill. Images show unpaved streets, narrow alleys, the oppressive dominance of the mill on the skyline, and children playing and collecting coal as women look on with stoic faces—all also used by FSA photographers when working in Aliquippa and Pittsburgh in the 1930s. The use of children also recalls the social reform tradition dating to the Progressive Era, the images of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine specifically. Now in the voice of a male worker, the narrator asks a series of questions:

“Who built this place? What good is here? And how do we get out again? We’re asking, just asking. [...] The dirty work alone don’t get us down [...] but how does that make sense with this?” [...] Smoke makes prosperity they say, but does that mean there’s no way out for us? There must be something better, why can’t we have it.”

The unsuitable living conditions, lack of indoor plumbing, unpaved roads, old stoves, unplanned rows of houses, are clearly communicated through the images that accompany the voice. The documentary then cuts in New York City, as the move from steel to skyscrapers.

As many point out, *The City* does not answer the question, “Who built this place?” One of the answers to that question would have to have been the chief sponsors of *The City*, since the Carnegie Corporation had given the American Institute of City
Planners a grant to make the film. G. Roy Levin’s interview with Van Dyke clarifies the role of the sponsoring group in that section’s narration especially:

G.R.L.: When you made the film, was there any question of talking about why cities were like that?

W.V.D.: No, no. The city planners simply insisted there by no sociological or political or any kind of examination of the reasons behind, but simply that this exists and this is what could be. [...] We posed those [questions] in the commentary, you know, a couple of times, but they’re rhetorical questions.

G.R.L.: Did you have any feeling about wanting or caring to talk about the causes?

W.V.D.: Yes, but we simply couldn’t.

*The City* could not say more about steel because of its sponsorship, but it registers visually and aurally its ambivalence about steel production that comes out of the history of the steel industry in the United States. The images inside the mill, as with *The River*, are all extremely dark, with high contrasts that provide aesthetically striking images of molten metal and fire, but which also cut off the mill from a recognizable (for non-steelworkers) world and only include people as shadows on the edges of the frame. The documentary Strand and Hurwitz were making in the late 1930s, *Native Land*, was able to be more direct about the labor struggles of the 1930s, of which steel played a major role. The US steel industry had been brutal to its workers and prevented union organizing ruthlessly until the 1930s, with the passing of the Wagner Act. *Native Land* is a tribute to the Wagner Act, which protected rights to organize and outlawed many of the practices that had been used to prevent it. The Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) won the right to organize US Steel in 1937, but “Little Steel” violently and often successfully resisted the unions. US documentaries in the 1930s come out of a period of labor victories, supported by the federal government, but also violent conflict between the workers and industrialists. The images of mills communicate an almost total alienation from steel production due to this context.

Wolfe sets Van Dyke and Steiner’s *The City* as a privileged example of 1930s documentary’s formal and social ambitions, especially in the visual and aural montages of the middle sections of the film. He sees the formal experimentation as part of a larger emphasis on dynamic editing in the 1930s, attached to the filmmakers’ “passion to
construct.” Wolfe finally suggests that there were tensions between the “assertion of direct propositions concerning social reality” and “something more open-ended, eclectic and loose-fitting in the way in which” the films make their arguments (“Straight” 255). Paul Arthur both develops and counters Wolfe’s claims about 1930s documentary experimentation. First, Arthur describes how formal and social ambitions allow documentary to distinguish itself from dominant cinema, Hollywood especially. Second, he disagrees that the “aesthetic alterity” and “jarring rhythmic montage” of The City especially undercuts its discursive aims, and instead argues that they give the film “a cloak of provisionality and open-endedness” to avoid criticisms of propaganda (“Jargons” 113).

Finally, Charles Keil puts forward a very similar dialectic in 1930s documentary, as between “persuasion and expression” (119), “the poetical and the political” (120), and film as “expressive and an instrument of progressive social change” (120). In the convergence, Keil sees documentary emerging, like Wolfe, as a “particular kind of practice […] politically committed and aesthetically ambitious” (120). Keil sees the visual track in The City in tension with the authority of the voice-over narration, which is also inscribed by other voices. This was part of a larger struggle between expression and persuasion in documentary that was finally won by the latter. Finally, he asserts a primacy to expression, applying it again to the city section of The City, which he calls “the ‘purest’ (and most persuasive) example of documentary expression.” He writes: “Abstract yet ‘real,’ ostensibly unmediated while unquestionably stylized, such a passage abandons any sense of omniscience by granting the experiential dimension the primacy 1930s documentary prized” (133).

The sequences that show steel production in The River, The City and Valley Town all accomplish what Keil calls documentary expression. They are abstracted documentary images, stylized but not staged, and experiential. They are also heavily laden with affect. The dichotomy between expression and persuasion, however, is confusing. The figural works better to describe the sequences because it includes the specific dynamics at work in the documentaries. Even though the montages of steel in The River and The City are visually impressive, there’s not much “living” in the US steel industry they depict. Finally, in Valley Town, Van Dyke lets in the figural play of movement and light, but
only when showing a mill that will close down, to be replaced by continuous rolling mills.

*Valley Town* was produced as part of a film series by New York University meant to provide educational films about economics and technology, with money from the Alfred Sloan Foundation. Sloan, the president of General Motors, blocked the original *Valley Town*, and reedited and re-dubbed the film. William Alexander recounts the trauma of this experience for Willard Van Dyke. However, he also notes that the original *Valley Town* is the version that became available to later documentary film scholars.

According to Charles Wolfe, *The City* and *Valley Town* both bore the marks of “tensions and conflicts” between and with their sponsors (“Poetics” 377). *Valley Town* might bear fewer “marks,” since those changes seen as altering the film mostly came in post-production, when another text was already made (“Straight” 267). Alexander notes that *Valley Town* “is the film that Van Dyke likes best of all his productions, the film he feels to be most completely his” (259) and James Enyeart writes that *Valley Town* was the only film for which Van Dyke was the primary writer and sole director (208). Unlike others, I do think the pressure of Sloan did affect *Valley Town*, even the original.23 For example, Van Dyke got help in finding the location for the film from SWOC organizers in Pittsburgh and continued to be advised and introduced to workers by SWOC through its filming, but the union is not mentioned in the film.

*Valley Town* dramatizes the effects of high-speed strip mills, an innovation especially in ‘labor-saving,’ on a town that had been largely employed by a tinplate mill. The documentary is highly fictional, reflecting both the role of composer Marc Blitzstein as well as Van Dyke’s interest in the theater. The soundtrack takes on the voices of the proud town mayor and an unemployed steelworker and his wife. Unlike the rest of *Valley Town*, which Van Dyke describes as “controlled,” the steel rolling sequence, which shows the work that was being replaced by the automatic mills, was “shot and edited in a conventional documentary manner” (qtd. in Enyeart 212). It’s also the most visually arresting sequence and where I see the figural operating most emphatically in Van Dyke’s late 1930s films. In this sequence, what the steel industry for a period allowed is emphasized, i.e. jobs for thousands of men in the area and certain work requiring skill, and thus a degree of security and respect for a set of workers (Brody 31).
emphasized as that part of the steel industry closes down, to be replaced by the continuous strip mills that drastically cut the number of workers needed (Warren 139-142). That these securities were being fought for and won through the union is not explicitly mentioned, but the force of labor is expressed elliptically in this highly constructed sequence.

The handmill sequence constructs documentary footage into a dynamic, aesthetic text, in the tradition of city symphonies and other documentary montages. It focuses on the workers engaged with the machines. They remove the metal sheets from the rollers, pass the sheets quickly to other men, and return them to be rolled more. The camera shows the men working dramatically silhouetted by the smoke and light, rather than obscured into shadows. Several shots show the feet of the men, as they shift their weight forward and back working with the rollers. These shots, along with the furnace man sliding a sheet to another working at the rollers, are some of the gestures that the sequence enhances with its music and montage. Van Dyke described the precise lighting of this sequence, which was meant to allow as much as possible of the work to be seen and to add drama to it:

Behind the flywheel was a curtain of steam, exhaust from the engine that provided the power to turn it. We lit that white steam, thereby silhouetting the spokes and the rim of the wheel. Then we lit the first pair of rollers in the foreground and one other steam exhaust halfway between. (qtd. in Enyeart 212)

In his interview with Engle, Van Dyke also describes the collaboration between the composer, editor, and himself, in putting together the sequence so that it was “shot as a ballet, edited as a ballet, and scored as a ballet” (349). The music in the mill is jazzy and upbeat, and thus very different from what was used in The River or The City. The sequence is also the least staged, and workers often glance at the camera without seeming overly interested in mugging for the camera.

*Valley Town* later provides a parallel sequence of the recently opened strip mill. The sequence alternates between images of individual men working alone at controls and metal bars moving through the continuous rollers, automatically, with no workers in sight on the floor. *Valley Town* then shifts into the story of a steelworker out of work and his family, including voiceover narration from the fictional perspectives of the characters presented. Here the influence of Blitzstein is most evident, as songs and recitatives are
used to communicate the direness of their situation. The most surprisingly fictive sequence of *Valley Town* involves the steel workers staring at what the film suggests are the stacks of the mill coming down. Van Dyke, however, manufactured the sequence from footage of the dismantling of another mill, not in Newcastle, and reaction shots from the workers, who were told to stare at the mill and “concentrate on it” (qtd. in Enyeart 214). Van Dyke attributes the success of the sequence to his knowledge and use of the Kuleshov experiment. It’s not clear whether he was also aware of how the evident emotions on the men’s faces might have come from their complicated feelings towards their town’s mill, even as it remained intact. The film ends with a call to government and business to train workers displaced by technology for new jobs, in the voice of the mayor over images of despondent men sitting on the ruins of a mill. The war is shown to be helping men find new jobs and get training for them.

The sponsorship of Alfred Sloan, who had just lost a battle with UAW to allow unions into GM, most likely prevented Van Dyke from including into *Valley Town* direct references to industrial collectivity. However, the figural sequence of the hand mill is significant, as one place that had maintained the autonomy of workers for decades until the industry figured out how to mechanize rolling. The new balance reached through collective demands cannot be expressed, but the force of this labor so evident in the 1930s finds expression in the mill sequence. The figural shows more than what the film can say. This results from the limitations of sponsorship, but also from an interest in leaving an imprint of a resistant force onto the film. The aesthetic registers this force. In these ways, it is far from apolitical.

**Conclusion**

In his essay “Documentary and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” Bill Nichols argues that the 1920s was a period of overlap between documentary and “modernist, avant-garde” filmmaking practices (586). These shared impulses, I argue, extended into the 1930s, into films made for the state. This is counter to histories by Nichols and Renov who argue that documentary’s expressive qualities were repressed in the 1930s, when filmmakers turned to making arguments about the world. The films I have discussed also “affirm the close proximity of modernist exploration and documentary address,” along with the films from the 1920s and 1970s that Nichols lists (592), but through specific
aesthetic strategies—especially figural montage sequences—and with different meanings tied to questions of collective labor and state politics. I disagree with Nichols that modernist strategies work specifically to subvert reality and remind us of “the intractable kernel of potentially traumatic disturbance” that defines history (594), especially if that “kernel” is tied to death.

The figural sequences of these films point to exteriority and disturbances, but ones that are decidedly living. The figural, as a term rather than “expressive,” directs us to look at the living exteriorities that the 1930s films point out towards. The figural is what “makes us think” but is first there “to be seen.” It brings heterogeneity and difference into discourse. It also expresses a force outside the text, but constitutive of it.

At the beginning, I described the grouping of films for this chapter as a constellation, which, as Buck-Morss writes, allows one to “reshuffle the usual ordering of facts with the goal of informing present political concerns.” This constellation of steel films allowed me to bring in questions of aesthetics and politics in documentary. They are also engaged with questions that come out of their focus on steel production: specifically about how states incorporate the force of collectives organized through their work and meet their demands. This intersects with questions of documentary representation. The filmmakers in this chapter actively worked with the questions of politics, both state and cultural, to produce aesthetically provocative and multivalent texts that prove the early 1930s was still definitely informed by experimental, as well as discursive, impulses.
Notes


2 Renov, however, includes the passage from the essay by Grierson, in which it is clear that this was a mandate from the Empire Marketing Board, which first sponsored Grierson in making documentaries and putting together a team of filmmakers. Sponsorship is an important question, but it would be inaccurate especially in the 1930s to collapse the goals of the sponsoring agency with those of the filmmakers.

3 “Pulverizing discourse” (147) is the term used by Michael Renov to describe modernist documentaries, again the dialogic postmodern documentary experiments like the L.A. Link video project, in his chapter “Documentary Disavowals” in *The Subject of Documentary*.

4 Social documentary is a fuzzy designation for any documentary that makes an argument for solving a social problem. Description of social documentary can be found in William Stott’s *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (1973) and in the work on Tagg and Strange, who argue that social documentary comes out of a middle-class reform tradition.

5 In *Show Us Life* (1984), Thomas Waugh defines a committed documentary as one produced within a social movement or cause, with the intent of changing the world for the better. As with social documentary, most of the filmmakers I discuss here fit into the category, with Grierson perhaps still belonging more emphatically to social documentary in its reformist impulses, but the category is so big that it does not do much to address my specific interests.


7 “The Documentary and the Turn from Modernism” comes out of a conference on Joris Ivens, which led to the anthology it’s published in. This conference and essay led also to Nichols’ “Documentary and the Modernist Avant-Garde,” in which modernism is identified as a precursor to documentary repressed first by Grierson and then by documentary historians.

8 The anthology *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Contest*, especially essays by Kees Bakker and Jose Manuel Costa, refutes the separation of Ivens’ aesthetic and political impulses and the history that sees him break from the former when he commits to the latter.

9 But not necessarily “productivist,” in the sense of the Russian avant-garde movement that surely was an inspiration for Vertov. Productivism called for the collapse
of the difference between the artist and industrial worker, whereas I think these documentaries, especially Vertov’s, maintain the difference.

10 This “beyond” recalls the title of Negri’s Marx Beyond Marx, but also a note in Multitude, in their discussion of the role of the poor, where they acknowledge that in their project “that goes beyond Marx and takes account of the changes in our world, we have the strange suspicion once again that Marx was here before us” (152).

11 Both films have been circulated under different titles, so either Komsomol or Song of Heroes, or another title, depending on the country. This, in part, points to the mobility of these films within international avant-garde, documentary, leftist, Popular Front networks. I’ll refer to them as Enthusiasm and Komsomol.

12 The kulaks were seen as a specific class of farmers, whose wealth made them antagonistic to the state. However, under the official definition of a kulak farm, made in 1929, “almost any peasant could be penalized” (Conquest 100).

13 The catastrophe of Stalin’s agricultural plan is covered in Robert Conquest’s Harvest of Sorrow, Michael Kort’s The Soviet Colossus, and Lynne Viola’s The War Against the Peasantry.

14 Also, while Ivens celebrates the production of steel at Magnitogorsk, with exuberant imagery that seems to be steelmaking, steel production did not begin at the plant until 1933 due to delays in construction. Steel is a structuring absence for the whole film, as Ivens shifts his gaze to the riveters and cranes of the unfinished steelworks. The history of building Magnitogorsk is covered in “On the March for Metal,” in Kotkin’s Magnetic Mountain.

15 Schoots uses “overshadow” in place of “dominate,” which for reasons related to the aesthetics of Komsomol, I prefer, but preserve here the translation of “On the Method of the Documentary Film” found in Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context.

16 The “author as producer,” obviously is taken from the title of Benjamin’s essay, but this idea of a possible continuum of production from aesthetic to industrial more clearly shows up in Soviet Constructivism and Productivism of the 1920s. Many have seen a strong link between the aesthetic movement and Vertov, which makes his films somewhat belated. However, I see an important difference, in that his films and writing show an awareness of the split between cultural and industrial production.

17 This restoration is, in part, supported by a letter Vertov sent to VUFKU, where he “complained bitterly” about Enthusiasm’s poor synchronization (MacKay 5).

18 The Austrian Film Museum DVD of Enthusiasm, includes a short interview with Kulbelka in front of an editing table, explaining what he did.

19 David Brody discusses the looping guide among the gaps in mechanization. He writes that the automatic looping guides worked on only one side: “On the other, skilled men—called oval and diamond roll hands—worked without pause to catch the swiftly moving rods and put them into the next pass” (37). Another gap in mechanization and Taylorism was tin-plate manufacture, which is the subject of Van Dyke’s The Valley, discussed later in the chapter.

The tensions between Lorentz and Strand are documented well in William Alexander’s *Film on the Left*. A letter by Willard Van Dyke during filming of *The River* recounts the same story, as told by Lorentz, and is reprinted in Enyeart’s biography. It was also one of the letter published in *Film Comment*.

My account of Van Dyke’s development is a synthesis of key points from William Alexander’s *Film on the Left*, Enyeart’s biography of Van Dyke, which is largely based on the filmmakers’ extensive journals, as well as from interviews and letters from Van Dyke.

It’s “his,” but also a “collaboration of all of us,” as Van Dyke described the work on *Valley Town* in his interview with Harrison Engle. Marc Blitzsen, the songwriter and composer of *The Cradle Will Rock*, played a major role in shaping the film. The collaboration of Van Dyke with Blitzstein is part of why *Valley Town* is a different type of documentary from *The River* or *The City*, in its fictive qualities. *Valley Town* is the result of a type of documentary tradition of the 1930s, influenced by Brecht and social realism even more so than Ivens’ *Komsomol*. 

As shown in the prologue, the US steel industry sponsored films—that is, steel companies paid for them to be made by separate companies specializing in film—for public relations purposes as early as the 1910s. However, beginning in the 1930s and continuing through the mid-1960s, the steel industry’s sponsorship of films intensified with the wider US corporate push in public relations. Historian have noted that, during this period, US corporate leaders invested heavily in public relations, funding a network of campaigns intended to remake their image and re-sell their position of control to their workers and to public audiences. Although the sponsored films of steel production I will discuss were certainly part of such campaigns, the films produced by the steel industry also responded to the steel industry’s specific concerns. In fact, due to the position of the US steel industry in this period, and the representational difficulties and opportunities of its form of production, the films sponsored by the steel industry are richer, as a set, for my purposes, than sponsored films of the period by other industries, like cars and plastics. When read through an interpretive lens that emphasizes historical and textual analysis, US films by the steel industry are rich sources to explore a set of related responses to social and economic conditions and to questions of workplace and industrial control.

The films sponsored by the steel industry developed out of the industry’s concerns about its past and current position in the United States mid-twentieth century. The 1930s and 1940s marked a profound change in industrial relations for the steel industry. For decades, steel companies had successfully kept unions out of mills using directly coercive and repressive means, which were often supported by local governments. Their anti-union stance weakened in the 1930s as local support shifted and the federal government intervened in support of the steel unions. Moreover, public sympathy shifted to support the regulation of industry by labor and the government, which challenged the control of owners and managers. The CIO began a unionizing drive in the summer of 1936 and
made a major breakthrough in March 1937 when US Steel, to the surprise of many, signed an agreement with the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). In his economic history of the steel industry, Robert Rogers suggests that US Steel recognized the union, in part, in order to cultivate the goodwill of the federal government in the hopes of receiving needed federal support and subsidies (82). The need for the federal government’s good will on the part of US Steel is important to the rhetorical strategies used in its sponsored films, as I will discuss.

Although the steel industry at this time was marked by profound changes in capital-labor relations, there was also a fundamental continuity with the previous century. By the late 1930s, steel was, as a contemporary observer noted, making a “transition from youth with its vigorous growth and rapidly expanding markets to […] economic maturity” (qtd. in Warren 143). As a mature basic industry that used mostly nineteenth-century technology, the steel industry could not promote itself as particularly new or exciting to consumers. Without new technologies or consumer products to promote—easy “hooks” for films sponsored by the atomic energy and car industries, respectively—the steel industry’s sponsored films instead mobilized discourses about the nation, “folk,” and work. The industry’s use of these discourses and tropes created texts that provide insight into the anxieties and interests of US capitalists as a class in the mid-twentieth century.

I approach the films of my study less as evidence of pro-filmic reality and more as evidence of a particular collective response to social and economic conditions in the mid-twentieth century United States. Such an approach has its grounding in a recurring, if not developed, idea that appears throughout the first anthology about industrially sponsored films, Films that Work (2009), and in scholarship about industrial film published elsewhere. For example, in Films that Work, Rick Prelinger asserts that sponsored films document “the worldview of influential people” (52); elsewhere in the anthology, Thomas Elsaesser suggests that industrial films are “one of the very special resources for our knowledge of the forces that shaped the twentieth century” (33). Furthermore, Alain Michel argues that the images are evidence “of what the firm [Renault] wanted people to understand about its industrial activity” (166). The importance of class discourse for studying industrial films also appears in other sources.
Jason Mittel, in his article on *Industry on Parade* (1950-1960), a television show sponsored by NAM, asserts that while “we must read these segments [of *Industry on Parade*] for their exclusions,” they also provide “knowledge of how a class viewed politics” (205). Along with these scholars, I argue that the sponsored films examined in this chapter provide evidence for the collective “worldview” of the US corporate business class and its supporters. However, I argue that this worldview is difficult to derive from film alone. These films provide representations of the world shaped by a particular worldview; historical context can provide reasons and interests behind this perspective, while the films provide evidence for how this worldview deformed the world as it represented it.

Films sponsored by the steel industry provide evidence for a class discourse, refracted through the steel industry’s concerns about labor and the industry’s position within the nation. These concerns make films sponsored by the steel industry a particular readable refraction of class discourse and capitalist interests. Although the historical and industrial situations change, and the films I study in this chapter are different in important ways, the basic ideological suppositions of films sponsored by the steel industry remain stable: free-enterprise capitalism, technological progress, and business paternalism. Two approaches, however, split the films sponsored by the steel industry, though both link the industry to the nation. The first approach makes a “folksy” appeal for the steel industry or for a particular company, and tries to create the impression of harmony between capital and labor, and between the industry and the nation. The second approach asserts the rightness and authority of the industry in itself as part of a masculine, capitalist Americanism. This approach more explicitly asserts class interests and arguments, particularly about corporate authority and workplace control. The folksy approach does not make these direct assertions, but also never suggests anything other than benevolent corporate and managerial control.

By “Americanism,” I am not referring to the term as it appears in Antonio Gramsci’s important essay, “Americanism and Fordism” (although this meaning of the term bears an important relationship to my dissertation’s overall interest in filmic mediations of 20th century industrial work). By “Americanism,” I more specifically refer to rhetorical strategies or tropes drawn from US history and myths, and from concepts
like “democracy” and “freedom.” As historian Gary Gerstle argues in *Working-Class Americanism*, the term does not point to a particular ideology but rather to “a set of words, phrases and concepts” used to articulate a worldview and press for demands (8). In the 1930s, Americanism became a popular strategy for a range of positions. For example, the Americanization campaigns of the 1920s, which were often connected to the dampening of labor unrest, allowed foreign workers and the unions representing them to seize the tropes of American history and traditions. Gerstle focuses on one such example: in the 1930s to the 1950s, a textile union under the CIO in Woonsocket, RI used the language of Americanism to make demands, organize support, attack strongly capitalist positions as autocratic, and, at times, promote an industrial democracy far beyond what US unions ever accomplished. However, Gerstle notes that, through anticommunism especially, working-class interests “lost control of the language of Americanism” (9). He writes that conservatives “made the control of this political language a brilliant component of their quest for national power” (335). The films I examine, although not especially “brilliant” as texts, are almost nothing other than elaborations of a corporate worldview through the language of Americanism, which the films made by Republic highlight. While I focus on corporate Americanism, I think it is important to keep in mind that, at least in the 1930s and early 1940s, corporate Americanism was contested by other types, which included the Americanism described by Gerstle, as well as the Americanism mobilized in New Deal Hollywood films, which emphasized a pluralist America of shared abundance, described by film historian Lary May. This chapter, however, focuses on the period of when these other mobilizations of Americanism lost ground and corporate Americanism gained it.

To discuss the implications of the approaches taken by the US steel industry to represent itself and its world, I survey films from the 1930s to the 1960s sponsored by Republic and US Steel, two major corporations of the industry, as well as by the industry’s trade association, the American Iron and Steel Institute [AISI]. I also look at a set of animated films sponsored by the steel industry, which were produced by Disney and John Sutherland Productions, an educational and industrial film company that specialized in animated films. The animated films, largely intended for educational purposes, visualize an anti-labor fantasy with images of steel mills as fully automated,
dehumanized capitalist utopias of production. They thus intensify to the point of absurdity both discursive strains, creating a folksy Americanism that ends the capital-labor antagonism by eliminating all workers. Due to the industry’s history, films sponsored by the US steel industry were uniquely situated to reach this bizarre endpoint of capitalist fantasy in the mid-twentieth century. In order to reach this conclusion, this chapter provides two surveys of scholarship, one that defines and situates sponsored film and another that provides a historical account for the mid-century turn to public relations by US industry, as well as discussions of key films that exemplify the two strains of steel sponsored films, and then the animated films that bring the two together. While historical context and summaries of the films should provide a framework for their rhetoric, my readings, I hope, show the usefulness of textual analysis for deciphering the implications of a collectively held worldview that had great power in the US.

Defining Industrial Sponsored Industrially Sponsored Film

The films I discuss in this chapter—films sponsored by industry for public relations purposes—are often called simply, “industrial films.” However, industrial film as a category can include a range of films made for very different purposes, e.g. training employees, teaching engineering students, or advertising products. The films I discuss had their own specific niche and industry in the mid-twentieth century. Bringing together film scholars, archivists, and manuals written by filmmakers who worked in the field helps to create a nuanced and grounded picture of the ‘industrial’ context for films sponsored by the steel industry in the mid-twentieth century. In some ways, training manuals like William Klein’s *The Sponsored Film* (1976), J. Burder’s *The Work of the Industrial Film Maker* (1973), and Jerry McGuire’s *How to Write Direct and Produce Effective Business Films and Documentaries* (1978) provide a clearer picture of US industrially sponsored films than the histories and descriptions of film scholars, since they provide a useful history and description of the sponsored film industry, as well as a sense of the people involved. For example, these manuals clarify that films were made available for free to schools and business and community groups, and that distributors often billed the sponsors for handling (Klein 9). They also note that sponsors received monthly reports from libraries and distributors, which recorded where a film was shown.
and to how many people (Burder 12). These manuals thus make concrete the continued interest sponsors had in the films and their wide circulation.

So far, I’ve used “industrial” and “sponsored” interchangeably to denote films sponsored by the steel industry for public relations purposes. The anthology *Films that Work* includes several attempts either to define “industrial” film or to offer a different term. In the anthology, film scholars Frank Kessler and Eef Masson directly address the problems of “industrial film” as a term. First, the term creates an assumption that such films must depict industrial work and factories, which excludes films sponsored by industry with topics such as science, economic education, and salesmanship (77).

Moreover, through the postwar period, even sponsored films celebrating industry moved further away from the actual shop floor. Kessler and Masson argue that scholars should approach these films as “sponsored films,” i.e. films commissioned by a firm to fulfill a purpose (78). Rick Prelinger takes this approach, and uses sponsored film as a category that includes industrial and institutional films. Such films, he writes, receive funding from for-profit or nonprofit entities and take the perspective of the sponsor (*Field Guide* vi). However, I believe it is useful to identify a subset as ‘industrially sponsored’ or ‘corporate sponsored,’ since such films can share a common worldview and set of interests that they may not share with nonprofit groups or government agencies.

These recent attempts by film scholars to categorize and define different types of industrial films were preceded by similar attempts and findings by the makers and sponsors of these films. Due to their direct involvement with production, these earlier attempts define and separate films pragmatically according to their purposes and methods of production. In his manual *The Sponsored Film*, film producer William Klein addresses the broadness of sponsored film as a term, but offers a production situation to define it. According to Klein, a sponsored film is made when a film producer “solicits or accepts proffered funds for a film from an individual (rare), industry, government, trade association, organization, institution, union, political party, fresh-air camp or sled-dog racer, [and] its content is clearly directed by the sponsor” (xii). This definition resembles the one provided above by Rick Prelinger for sponsored films. Most helpfully, Klein identifies two corporate uses of film: internal communications, including training, and public relations (2). In-house film units often made the former and production
companies were hired for the latter. Public relations films were thus generally ‘sponsored.’\textsuperscript{6} Klein and the other manual writers assert that industries hired outside firms because public relations films needed greater professionalism, but this arrangement certainly had other benefits: Independent film producers also made it possible for another name to appear on the credits rather than the sponsoring company (Burder 76).\textsuperscript{7} An even earlier typology of ‘industrial films’ appears in a 1939 Business Week article. The article classifies industrial film into three categories by purpose: 1) advertising films, shown at theaters (43); 2) training films;\textsuperscript{8} and 3) institutional films, which were “intended as a goodwill builder” (39). In particular, institutional films must work “subtly” to be eligible to be shown at clubs, schools, and “fraternal, religious, and civic organizations” (“Camera!” 44). \textit{BW} reports that institutional films were growing in prominence due to the “new awareness of business that it must do something about public relations” (46).

This article shows that, early in the public relations wave, the business community understood that sponsored films were different from advertising and training films, and that one of the goals for these films was to circulate through a range of nontheatrical venues and, perhaps, not seem “sponsored” to some audiences.

Drawing from these disparate sources, I identify the films I discuss as films sponsored by the steel industry for public relations purposes. Arguably, this is repetitive, since, according to the sources, public relations films were generally sponsored, but it provides, I think, the most careful designation of these films. While it might seem unnecessary to worry over such a proportionally small set of films, the history of the production and distribution of sponsored films, and the films themselves, show that these films, while a small set, were not insignificant: they supported a flourishing mid-twentieth century film industry in the United States, which included production companies, distributors, trade magazines, and consultants.

One of the leading industrial film production companies was the Jam Handy Organization (JHO), which started in 1914 during the transitional period in which theatrical film companies stopped making sponsored films (Slide). In 1923, Chevrolet became the company’s first major long-term client, leading Jam Handy to move from Chicago to Detroit.\textsuperscript{9} Handy’s vertically integrated studio included “slidefilm and motion-picture production departments, a full lab, an animation department, and, reputedly, two
full orchestras” (Prelinger “Eccentricity” 213). While Handy’s films occasionally played in commercial theaters before features, they more often showed at other venues such as newsreel theaters, world’s fairs, schools, exhibitions, and car dealerships. The same film could circulate throughout these sites for years. In order to make films accessible to a range of sites, JHO produced many that “simply mentioned sponsors’ names and nothing more” (214), a popular approach among production companies. While Handy used innovative animation and stop-motion effects, the films that JHO made for the steel industry discussed in this chapter are most notable for their narrative structure and rhetorical flourishes. Other JHO films also used this fictional structure, which consisted of “an entertaining story, […] followed by a sales pitch, […] followed by a summary tying the two parts together” (Oakes 102). Such films were intended “to entertain audiences and to cultivate good will towards the corporation” (103).

A confluence of events bolstered the production of sponsored films in the postwar period. The framework of companies and practices was already established. Along with film production companies like JHO, there were two major distributors for industrial films, Modern Talking Picture Service and Association Films, as well as an international distribution service. The industry also had a trade publication, Business Screen, which started in 1938. However, World War II provided a major boost for non-theatrical film production both in added commissions during the war and increases in available 16mm equipment and projectors after the war. In his introduction to an issue of Film History devoted to non-theatrical film, Dan Streible writes:

The post-war era was a boom-time for industrial and sponsored film. In the United States national economic expansion and the surplus of 16mm equipment spurred the proliferation of such films. Veterans who had served in motion picture units often applied their skills to industrial filmmaking. Civic institutions, schools, businesses—in fact most organizations of any size—were equipped with 16mm film projectors. (341)

Along with the surplus of 16mm equipment and projectors, other institutional changes promoted the postwar “boom-time” of sponsored film. After the war, the number of nontheatrical film libraries, which lent out 16mm films for educational and civic purposes, increased from 897 in 1949 to 2,002 in 1951, and further increased to 2,660 in 1953 (Slide 107). The Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Corporation gave grants to
the American Library Association, which provided resources to libraries to help them develop and manage their film collections (60-61). Moreover, in 1953, new legislation gave educational films the fourth-class mailing status reserved before for books, which made more affordable the circulation of 16mm films (10). Kodak hired two consultants for non-theatrical and sponsored films, John Flory and Thomas Hope, who advised producers and sponsors and issued annual reports on the industry through the 1950s and 1960s (42).

The manuals on sponsored filmmaking provide insight into the community of producers that took shape around this booming industry, particularly their shared concerns and interests. First, the manuals continually assert the importance of professionalism. According to Klein, sponsored films could get a wide showing, the goal of many public relations films, but only if they were made with multiple audiences in mind and effectively distributed; both these tasks required professionals. Second, producers sought to make sponsored films that would interest audiences and could show fairly widely as educational films or documentaries. Klein defended the ability of sponsored films to combine “commercial with educational interests” in ways that were “sensitive and constructive” (13). According to Klein, sponsored films with “good taste” and an understated message are “a far stronger base to make people believe than any TV commercial” (157). Jerry McGuire, a sponsored film scriptwriter, went even further, arguing that a tasteful or “well-produced business film is a kind of documentary” (9). The difference, McGuire argues, is when the script is finalized: for business films, scripts are finalized before filming, while documentaries finalize scripts during editing (15). Finally, Burder provides a useful glimpse into on location staging by the director:

The director sorts out the action. He briefs the people who appear in the scene and makes sure they look right and know what they do. And he ensures that they look smart and efficient and do not appear in dirty overalls, or with untidy hair […] Anyone familiar with factories will know that postcards are often pinned near work benches and official notices are to be found peeling from walls. These must be removed or tidied up before a scene is filmed. When everything is set and ready to proceed, the action will be rehearsed. (35)

Such statements make evident the problems with using industrial films as documentary evidence of workspaces and actions and draws attention to the films as careful
constructions and the people shot as directed performers. Burder notes that postcards, seemingly even when not old or dirty, “must be removed.” This clarifies the depersonalized quality of the spaces filmed. While it’s very unfortunate that the films cannot provide records of the spaces as they were lived and worked in, they do provide evidence for the desired corporate workplace, as empty of personal signs. Although we can see a coherent picture of the industry of making sponsored films begin to take shape here, the impetus for such films, especially for public relations purposes, still needs to be explained.

Public Relations, PR Films and the Two Approaches of
Steel PR Films

US sponsored films must be put into the broader context of corporate public relations campaigns in the United States. Historians of corporate public relations widely note that public relations campaigns intensified in the mid-twentieth century in response to challenges to corporate power and control precipitated by the Depression, the New Deal, and rise of industrial unions. Corporate public relations were a response to the perceived national climate, which included support for collective action and intervention by the federal government, and distrust of business and the free market. In Selling Free Enterprise, Elizabeth Fones-Wolf emphasizes that corporate leaders feared new threats to their control, especially as unions questioned the use of profits and pushed for more decision-making power. Business leaders thus sought to “redefine the meaning of Americanism” (10) away from Depression-era trends that attached the concept of America to ideals of mutualism, economic equality, and human rights (17). Though Fones-Wolf emphasizes the ideological and political battles that continued throughout the period, she notes that by the mid-1950s “capital [was] on the way to securing its hegemony” (9). To secure this hegemony, American corporations initiated media and education campaigns in the late 1930s that continued through World War II and into the postwar period. These campaigns marked an important shift in the goals of industrial public relations from sales to institutional advertising, which promoted “a corporation, an industry, or the economic system as a whole” (Tedlow 174). In the 1930s, institutional advertising became a tool for “protection against the political consequences of […]"
hostile public opinion” (Tedlow 202). In Creating the Corporate Soul, Roland Marchand notes that in their “counterattack against the New Deal, major corporations institutionalized the public relations function within their managerial structures” (203). Public relations and advertising executives encouraged businesses to “tell their story” (205) and “find its voice” (203). Historian William Bird argues that public relations played a direct role in business’s “restored hegemony” following the Depression (3).

Moreover, industrial workers of this period became a new public to be addressed. In his history of 20th century US corporate public relations, Right to Manage, Howell John Harris notes that, starting in the 1930s, “belligerency was no longer a sufficient response” to workers due to changes in union representation, legislation, and government’s willingness to uphold the laws protecting workers (39). Therefore, the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and other industrial organizations “bombarded […] various ‘publics’ with justifications of their own claims to sovereign power within industry” (96). Many of industry’s leaders participated in groups like NAM, which had been revived in response to the New Deal and the growing force of unions. According to Harris, firms attempted to make employees “aware of their place in the whole complex, interdependent scheme of company relations” and to feel part of a “family” or “team” (191). Media campaigns focused on employees and the general public “helped reorientate the climate of public opinion” (204). Harris also notes that another goal of these campaigns was to reassure the elite during a period of crisis that “it was right and good, as well as privileged and strong” (96). He writes: “It often seems that businessmen were the most important, as well as most receptive, audience for their own propaganda” (96). Corporate public relations thus sought to cajole, persuade, and assuage fears—all goals that required a range of rhetorical strategies.

To meet these rhetorical demands, public relations and advertising agents encouraged a novel approach to institutional advertising: they encouraged a shift from direct rhetoric to entertainment and drama, and toward a new vocabulary that emphasized that business can bring people more, new and better things to improve their lives. Business turned to “showmanship” and more “intimate stagecraft,” in both its narrative frameworks for media campaigns and its rhetoric (Bird). They also sold business ideology as distinctly American through particular representations of US history and
through patriotic claims about Americanism (Bird 14). The central creative force behind this trend was Bruce Barton and his advertising company Batton, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO), who consulted for Westinghouse, General Motors, the National Association of Manufacturers, Du Pont, US Steel, and other industrial leaders. Bruce Barton was a major advocate for “broad-spirited public relations” (Marchand 203), and encouraged the move for companies to sell their usefulness to life and to link them to “sturdy [American] qualities” (Bird 64-70). The 1939 World’s Fair played a key role in the shift toward such an intimate stagecraft of better living through industry and showmanship. It “propelled to new heights a popular culture of sponsored films” (Bird 121). The push toward a “new vocabulary” and showmanship also included speaking the “idiom of average citizens” or, more appropriately termed “common folks” (Bird 213). The fair was full of the “studied style of folksy discourse so avidly contrived by corporate advertisers and public relations experts in the late 1930s” (Marchand 297). Two films of the 1930s, Steel, A Symphony of Industry (1936) and Steel—Man’s Servant (1938), demonstrate the transitional period from the “rhetorical to dramatic, from news to culture” (Bird 4). The former falls into the first category, and the latter—and its greater attention in the press—shows the success of the new vocabulary and approach of business public relations. Both films mark important approaches to public relations and articulations of business ideology that continued through the 1960s.

Steel, A Symphony of Industry is the more directly expository of the two films, and was funded by the American Iron and Steel Institute (AISI) and made by Audio Productions. The film’s rhetoric suggests that it is a recruitment film, calling for “more men, and more competent men” to work in the mills. However, knowledge of its role as part of a wider campaign brings out the film’s purpose more clearly. The AISI, the film’s sponsor, was at the time “heavily involved in a campaign to shape America’s political culture” along with groups like NAM and the Chamber of Commerce (Fones-Wolf 7). At the time, Republic Steel played a controlling role in the AISI, and Republic’s influence upon AISI was institutionalized when Tom Girdler, Republic’s CEO, took over as AISI’s president in May 1937. Republic was one of the most brutal steel companies in their resistance to unionization, employing industrial espionage, private police, and munitions to fight organizing and protesting workers. In 1933, Girdler encouraged AISI to become
a client of the conservative Hill and Knowlton public relations agency, several years after the steel company became one of its first clients (Miller 11). In the spring of 1936, the AISI paid for full-pages ads in newspapers throughout the country, criticizing unions as trouble mobilized by forces from the outside (Miller 14; Warren 166). Steel, A Symphony was part of this “aggressive campaign to teach people about steel’s economic position” put together by AISI with Hill & Knowlton (Miller 56). The campaign included print ads, “news releases, a film [Steel, A Symphony], a comic book for distribution in schools, a radio program, [and] three brochures” (56).

With this immediate context in mind, a reading of Steel, A Symphony takes shape. What at first seemed a quaint, if at times bombastic, industrial film, now can be read as an elaboration of a particular, but collectively held, point of view. The film is visually interesting in many ways and bears a number of similarities to the modernist documentaries discussed in Chapter One. Indeed, Steel, a Symphony may have been aspiring to the artistic status of these contemporaries with its opening, which superimposes the image of men coming to work over a canted angle shot of a mill, and its prologue, which features a montage of industrial scenes and construction sites, in which foremen silently call out for more steel. Although the film uses shots, angles, and techniques similar to the artistically ambitious documentaries discussed in Chapter One, it quickly turns much more prosaic and shows itself to be less ambitious than those films. Its interests also are very different. For one, rather than focus on workers, Steel, a Symphony repeatedly eliminates shots of them. Moreover, the omnipresent voiceover establishes the particular argument of the film, which monumentalizes the fixed capital of the mills and emphasizes corporate ownership and management as the guiding force of the industry’s productivity.

Despite claims that Steel, a Symphony is a call for more workers, the narrator sets out the film’s focus from the beginning. Over a panorama of a mill, he establishes that the sprawling industrial scene is the result of investments in place before “the worker even gets a job.” The film, both visually and through the voiceover narration, pointedly emphasizes the plant’s fixed capital throughout the film’s process narrative, from raw materials to the furnaces and rolling mills and finally to finished products. The narrator emphasizes the power of the machinery, at one point describing the Bessemer converters
as monsters that “[blow] like the sunset.” In the rolling mill, machines become even more prominently the film’s focus as the images and narration show how machines make useful products like car wheels and beams for construction. By contrast, the most sustained shots of workers completing actions take place in the laboratory. Other workers are kept at a distance, as in shots of the open-hearth furnace, which maintain a much greater distance that the documentaries discussed in Chapter Two. When workers on the shop floor appear in shots other than extreme long shots, they are shown in isolated inserts, simply sitting or standing, pushing a lever, or demonstrating safety gear, like the full asbestos suit shown several times in the film.

*Steel, A Symphony’s* narration undercuts what the steelworkers know and do. Indeed, the narrator is figured as an authority: his voice is clear and booming, responding as if present at the time of filming by emphatically using words like “now” and “here” to describe the scenes. The narrator tells us during the tapping of the blast furnace that the workers are in control because of management decisions about machinery and safety requirements, leaving out any role their own skills and knowledge might have. Over shots of filling molds, he tells us, “The steel man says that his fiery liquid freezes immediately in the mold. He means that it congeals when its temperature goes down a thousand degrees or so.” By replacing the steelworker’s metaphoric language with scientific descriptions, the film presents steelworkers as a group that not only lacks the knowledge necessary to run production but that cannot gain this knowledge due to their position. Finally, we are told that many accidents happen due to “human carelessness,” which seems to be illustrated by a shot of a worker sitting and vacantly watching something out of the frame. The narrator claims that men work “up above and isolated from the heat,” which further implies than any accidents must be due to careless workers hurting themselves. The following sequence, however, contradicts the narration when it moves to the tapping of a furnace, filmed at a distance. While one man lumbers away in an asbestos suit, other men are visible in simple work clothes shoveling materials into the ladle on the other side. This scene undercuts claims of worker’s complete safety and comfort, and, by implication, claims that the mill is run by fixed capital and experts alone. Despite these moments, *Steel, a Symphony* leaves the impression of an industry
largely run by machines and capital investment with workers who are immobile, protected, and stupid.

While companies like Republic Steel continued to fight unionization until forced to recognize workers’ right to organize, companies like US Steel instead worked to contain the power of unions. Like many films made by US Steel throughout the 1930s into the 1950s, *Steel—Man’s Servant* (1938) presents a largely conservative but conciliatory attempt to build public support, due in part to the relationship between US Steel and the BBDO advertising agency. Moreover, in 1936, the company established a public relations department, run by a director who “preached the gospel of public relations consciousness and humanization” (Marchand 228), and started in earnest to sell itself to its employees and the general public. *Steel—Man’s Servant* was a direct result of this shift and a major production by Roland Reed for US Steel, supervised by BBDO representatives. *Business Week* reported that the film cost US Steel $250,000 (“Cameras!” 46). Although released before the 1939 World’s Fair, it was shown prominently at the fair as part of US Steel’s exhibit, which also included “dioramas that forecast how steel might serve in the future” as well as “a radio-controlled hydroponic tomato farm, a working model of traffic control in the City of the Future, and a futuristic 250-seat theater for showing US Steel’s Technicolor documentary *Steel—Man’s Servant*” (Bird 137). The first issue of *Business Screen* (1938) included an article on the film that called it a “major event” with “real advances” for how the steel industry represented itself (“Technicolor Tells” 20). Throughout 1938, in *Business Screen’s* coverage of the World’s Fair and other stories, the film came up for its popularity and high quality.

*Steel—Man’s Servant* [*SMS*] emphasizes many of the same themes as *Steel, A Symphony*. These include the the quality of the steel produced; the collaboration between the shop floor and the lab in testing samples; the safety and comfort of the workers; and steel’s many uses in modern life, like bridges and stainless steel cookware. The narration, however, is strikingly different. The narrator describes what we see—for example, the mining of iron ore—with quick metaphor-laden phrases. The narrator of *SMS* describes the furnace door “rising like a moon” and a hot ingot, most improbably, as “velvety.” The narration also makes use of alliteration in an attempt to poetically elevate his language, describing the steelworkers “with ramming rods ready they wait,” and noting
the “real rough stuff to come” for the ingot in the rolling mills. He similarly admires the sights poetically, describing the newly poured ingots as they “sparkle and evanesce” and declaring the view into the electric furnace to be a “spectacular sight” as the camera shows the red-hot fire.

Not only is the voiceover narration much more colorful and less direct in speaking the sponsor’s corporate interests, but the images and narration also grant more authority to the workers than in Steel, A Symphony. The workers are shown much more clearly inside the mill than in Symphony, and they are set apart from the machines and metal with the help of their blue clothing and the use of bright lighting throughout. The narrator explains what the men do and their effect on the machines and metal, including one sequence in which the narrator explains the relationship between a man pressing a lever and the actions of the charger. The narrator also emphasizes that workers are skilled and trained in their work, which requires them to make judgments about timing and force. In contrast to Steel, A Symphony’s undermining of worker knowledge, the narrator notes that it is “positively uncanny” how steelworkers know when steel is ready to tap simply by observing it in the furnace. Throughout, workers, including the workers shown shoveling dolomite into the open-hearth furnace, are compared to cooks. Women checking sheet metal are compared to artists. The narrator at one point tells the audience to note the “bright, alert faces” of men working in one of the many rolling and forging machines shown.

The film, in both its full-length and shortened version, Men Make Steel, lasted much longer in circulation than most industrial films. The sponsored film manuals note that most films have a lifespan of under a decade, but Men Make Steel continued showing for 22 years. Business Screen announced in 1959 that the film would be officially retired in December 31st, but had once again been “the film most often scheduled” from US Steel that year. Business Screen claimed the film had been shown to almost 10 million people, “primarily school audiences” (“Over 13 Million”). In its article on the premiere of Rhapsody of Steel, the trade journal mentioned Men Make Steel as a predecessor for the later major film (“Pittsburgh Premiere”). Yet the reasons for the attention paid to Steel—Man’s Servant in contrast to Steel, A Symphony are not immediately clear. The two films are very similar in the story they tell and in the images they show. The answer may lie in
the use of color, as Steel—Man’s Servant was shot in Technicolor, but it may also lie in
the film’s use of the new broad-spirited, folksy discourse, and its praise for the workers
involved. It creates a kind of utopia of happy workers, productivity, harmony, and wealth.

In contrast to the image created by Steel—Man’s Servant, US Steel continued to
fight to maintain its control of the workplace and of decisions for the company. Thus,
rather than separate the two approaches too completely, we might see these films as
different sides of the corporate face. One boldly asserts the autocracy of corporate control
while the other benevolently smiles at workers and the public. Although more inviting
than Steel, A Symphony, the narration of Steel—Man’s Servant also bears a paternalist,
condescending attitude towards the “bright, alert faces” of the workers tending the ovens
like cooks. These two approaches—corporate Americanism and the folksy corporatism—continued through the 1940s and 1950s. Republic Steel often sponsored films taking the
former approach, and US Steel, the latter. The folksy approach especially continued to
develop and change directions in response to immediate historical needs.

WWII and Folksy Approach: US Steel “Turnin’ out the

Tonnage”

The “new vocabulary” of public relations continued through World War II.
Fictional frameworks, especially “friendly stories [with] familiar settings drawn from
everyday life,” continued to play a major role in public relations campaigns (Bird 147).
However, public relations had to confront new challenges to corporate control and
authority, brought on or exacerbated by the war. First, a significant part of the backlash
against business in the 1930s was due to widespread suspicions that business had
engaged in profiteering during WWI, which was also seen as a cause for the Depression.
US corporations thus had to “dispel the idea that business liked war” (Lauderbaugh 41).
Second, corporations felt threatened by wartime government planning in a New Deal
climate. The efficiency of wartime production had to be attached to industry and not
government. Therefore, the job of public relations became to “present World War II as a
success of private industry” (Tedlow 119) and to show its contributions as voluntary
actions initiated by industry (Fones-Wolf 27). The campaigns asserted “management’s
full-throttle identification with the government’s war effort” (Bird 147). Corporations
also had to avoid appearing too eager, lest they seem like war profiteers.
The steel industry found itself within this dilemma, but with its own problems. Corporate leadership certainly had not been overly eager for war. In fact, the steel industry’s company leaders were reluctant and slow to start wartime production, largely due to legitimate concerns about overcapacity and the role of war in exacerbating overexpansion (Lauderbaugh 173-177). Even as the situation became dire in 1941, the steel industry refused to expand, which “had the effect, if not the intent, of impeding the mobilization of the American economy for the changes that lay ahead” (111). Steel companies, especially US Steel, only expanded when the government interceded with direct funding for new plants and tax incentives for other expansion plans (Hinshaw 67).

In general, between 1941 and 1945, the Defense Finance Corporation financed half of the new blast furnaces and two-thirds of the new open-hearth furnaces (Rogers 86). US Steel received the bulk of the government subsidies. While the company did use its own resources, government support equaled, if not exceeded, the company’s own investments (195). US Steel also benefited from government building by buying plants at a fraction of their cost from the Defense Finance Corporation and other government sources after the war (200). Given this history, US Steel had to do significant rhetorical work to present its wartime production as a private, voluntary accomplishment.

US Steel’s *To Each Other* (1943) exemplifies not only the use of ”common folks” from everyday life in sponsored film, but also how this approach worked to respond to the industry’s public relations problems and to promote private ownership and corporate control. Produced by Jam Handy for US Steel, *To Each Other* describes US Steel’s mobilization for war and identifies it as part of the nation’s war effort. To *Each Other* minimizes the government’s role in the wartime increase in steel-making capacity and avoids discussion of the industry’s reluctance to grow. It both emphasizes increased production as the work of US Steel and humanizes its initial reluctance, in the figure of the old father brought out of retirement to do his job. After the credits, *To Each Other* opens with what seems to be documentary footage of workers leaving a mill. It then cuts to a studio background of a park overlooking the mill—the path home, apparently. One older worker, played by Hollywood actor Walter Brennan, looks over to the mill. A fade then shows him sitting on a rock in the foreground as he takes out a piece of paper and reads it aloud. With this, he explains that he is a formerly retired steelworker, back at
work to help in the war effort, and that the letter is from his son fighting overseas, who has won a medal. He then talks as if responding to his son, pointing to his own medal, given to him in honor of the expansion of steel production by “Uncle Sam” and “our company.” Brennan continues as the film’s narrator while images illustrate his monologue about increases in steel production; new plants, especially in the West; expansions to existing plants; and the conversion to wartime production. It shows women working as welders and the launching of a ship, which are both key images of wartime production.

The narration manages to include a large amount of information on wartime expansion of steel production while remaining “folksy” in the style of the new vocabulary of public relations. Brennan describes the speed of making steel in an electric furnace as “quicker than you can say Jack Robinson” and includes a punctuating exclamation when describing the new strip mill: “they tell me it’s a honey.” Rather than use more exact terms to describe the expansion (or for that matter even use the word production), Brennan continually uses the phrase “turnin’ out the tonnage.” While he marvels at the work of women, he also hesitates at identifying the bombs the women workers are shown assembling, and instead settles on calling them “a flock of [pause] calling cards for you boys.” At times, of course, the content strains this approach to the point of absurdity. Brennan gets out this ridiculous sentence in one long push: “I guess you know by now how much the reliable operation of a machine gun depends on good spring steel made into links for the ammunition belts.” The orchestral music and Brennan’s voice, though, help to create the sense of a Hollywood film about simple American life. The end returns to Brennan, still sitting on the rock, as he tears up when he telling his son that he’s proud because “I’m in the service with you,” that is to say, he’s supporting his son by making steel.

The film thus informs audiences about the steel expansion program but more importantly directly links steel production to the safety and victory of those fighting overseas. For this reason, it may have been shown to employees, to help cut down on absenteeism and improve morale, as well as at war bond rallies (“Films Cut Absenteeism” and “US Steel Audiences”). It may also have been shown as part of film programs to troops, in order to mitigate feelings of resentment about those who stayed
behind—like Tom, mentioned quickly in the film, but clearly indicating a man nearly the son’s age who is also working in the mill with his father. While the film quickly mentions that “Uncle Sam” and U.S Steel are behind the expansion, the narration emphasizes the industry’s work without mentioning the federal government. Even more cleverly, the narration and acting of Walter Brennan communicate a sense of determination, without any hint at pleasure in increased production and the boon this meant for the industry. As an older man who will do the job his country needs with pride because it’s his duty, the father becomes a figure for how US Steel wished to represent itself to the public. Brennan plays this metonymy well, letting US Steel represent itself as old but plucky, and grounded in good, solid American values.

**Neighborliness and the “Free Competitive Society”: The Two Approaches in the 1950s**

After the war, corporate public relations continued to play an important role in the public sphere, and in the production of nontheatrical films. While the battles of the 1930s had abated, there were still battles waged around the steel industry and how it worked in the 1950s. Historians list the years of the strikes to point out continued tensions: 1949, 1952, 1955, 1956, and 1959 (Stein 16, Hinshaw 105). In 1952, President Truman seized the steel mills to prevent a strike, an action that the Supreme Court later declared unconstitutional. The government and industry battled over prices and decisions made throughout the 1950s and 1960s, largely due to the Korean and Cold Wars, leading to a very public standoff between the Kennedy administration and the industry in 1962. Due to these tensions, along with the already discussed widespread interest in putting forward pro-business arguments, the two approaches—folksy corporatism and corporate Americanism—continued through the 1950s. By this time, these approaches were wearing thin, and the films show signs of this exhaustion.

The folksy approach, however, again took a turn in a new direction. After Truman’s victory in 1948, an apparent mandate for the New Deal, business “[redoubled] efforts” (Tedlow 46) and began to sell “a message of harmony” (67) along with its products. This campaign dovetailed with the growth of employee and community relations, which also involved extensive media and events. According to Fones-Wolf,
“Firms bombarded their workers with pamphlets, comic books, posters, bulletin boards, letters home, company annual reports, magazines, newspapers, films and even matchbooks” (80). Events included plant tours intended to help employees “integrate their jobs into the firm’s overall operation” (83). Firms included wives and families in programs to create a strong sense of identification between employees and management. The AISI championed community relations programs like those mentioned above, and US Steel took up the AISI’s suggestion with its “neighborly” public relations approach of the 1950s. A public relations executive for the corporation, J. MacDonald, described this approach in a talk to business students later published by US Steel as a brochure, called ....And Be Neighborly. He advised much of what Fones-Wolf describes in her history, including employee education, outreach to families, engagement with local groups and projects, and onsite tours. US Steel also continued to develop its ‘neighborly’ cheerful approach and fictional frameworks in film after the war. The corporation, for example, used this approach to counter criticism of steel’s commitment to postwar reconversion efforts (Unfinished Business 1948) and to sell stainless steel (An Orchid for Mr. Jordan 1948). US Steel dropped the use of fictional conceits but increased the direct claims to “neighborliness” in its film on the building of Fairless Works, New Neighbor (1953), produced by Jam Handy and supervised by public relations personnel within the corporation. In And Be Neighborly, J. MacDonald notes the usefulness of plant tours in building community relations. However, he notes, “present security regulations resulting from the national emergency have curtained sharply the open house activities of United States Steel in recent months” (7). For this reason, perhaps, New Neighbor was part of the public and community relation campaigns of US Steel for Fairless Works. The film both promotes the building of the mill and “sells” the corporation as a national institution committed to the public good. The narration attempts to make corporate expansion and growth seem folksy through the language of neighbors and family.

It would seem hard to sell the Fairless Works mill, or its parent company US Steel, as simply a new “neighbor” in an American town. It’s central position in global markets and the Cold War should preclude such an approach. The corporation by this time was already global, both in production and markets. To build the mill, US Steel bought land along the Delaware River, in large part to be able to transport iron ore from
its new mines in Venezuela (Warren 205-7). The United States was also at this time the leading global producer of steel, making 45% of the world’s total output (Stein 7, Warren 214). This dominance in the early 1950s was largely due to the destruction of the European and Japanese steel industries during the war. In 1951, the Korean War moved plans along for the new plant (Warren 209). The New York Times reported that the construction was spurred by the “international situation” and need for defense (“US Steel to Speed”). Fairless, along with the rest of the steel industry’s postwar expansion, was spurred by highly favorable tax amortization schedules and agreements on write-offs (Hinshaw 109). In response, steel firms grew in what Fortune magazine described at the times as a “rapid and lavish fashion” (qtd. in Hinshaw 110). In fact, the plans for Fairless were only secured when the rapid tax write-offs were confirmed (“US Steel to Speed […] Plant”). US Steel was thus a global steel corporation benefiting from the collapse of other national industries and from continued war, as well as from the Cold War’s military Keynesianism that encouraged expansion. Moreover, the overall publicity for the mill promoted the huge size of Fairless: the New York Times reported it was “one of the largest integrated steel mills ever built in so short a time” (“Fairless Works Shaping Up Fast”); a US Steel advertisement in that paper called it “the largest integrated steel mill ever to be built at one time”; and Business Screen on the premiere of New Neighbor in Chicago in March 1953, at that time called Good Neighbor, simply described Fairless as “the largest integrated mill ever built” (“Steel for Defense”). All these qualities would seem to make it difficult, or even undesirable, for US Steel to use the folksy idiom for its film promoting Fairless. Despite these challenges, or perhaps spurred by them, A New Neighbor attempts to sell the Fairless Works project in a variation of the folksy idiom already well established. It might be a sign of the film’s success that Ed Logelin, the public relations chief overseeing it, was promoted to a vice president position soon after its release, which was proudly reported in Business Screen (“Promotions at Year’s End”).

The choice of narrator fits with J. MacDonald’s “neighborly” but professional public relations style. The US Steel public relations chief called good public relations “newsy,” for example, about production “especially during a national emergency” (12). George Hicks narrates New Neighbor, and had previously narrated Unfinished Business (1948), a film about postwar reconversion. Hicks already made announcements during
the radio program *Theatre Guild on the Air*, sponsored by US Steel, and, starting regularly in 1953, *The US Steel Hour* television show. Both were fictional anthology programs with public relations messages only during intermissions. Even then, these messages often took a low-pressure approach. Hicks, a former ABC radio newsman who had broadcast the Normandy invasion, “brought his dispassionate reportorial style to the delivery of each week’s talk” (Bird 190). This newsy approach combined with folksy corporatism to create a particular approach. Often the segments focused on corporate leaders and managers. McDonald notes the usefulness of this: “The name of a corporation is often cold and meaningless to a great portion of the people. It becomes meaningful and warm when more is know about the people who make up the organization” (13). *New Neighbor* follows both pieces of advice, first in using George Hicks and his “newsy” approach, and then in working to personalize the company through Fairless and his family. It provides tangible evidence of the ‘neighborly’ approach to public relations.

Perhaps pointing to his new visible role as the figure of US Steel on television, Hicks introduces this film, “the story of a new steel mill,” in person, before moving off-screen into the invisible role of narrator. According to Hicks’ prologue, *New Neighbor* is a “typical story” of American success, focusing on the figure of Benjamin Fairless, who is then shown smiling and pointing to a picture of the Works plans. The camera tracks toward this painting, which is replaced by a model. As Hicks describes the parts of the plant, the camera focuses on the attendant areas on the model. While the size is meant to be impressive, the long distances between parts, especially the distances traveled by coal, are snapshots for later viewers of the mill’s long-term problems. The film then describes the building process, beginning with the 1951 groundbreaking ceremony and ending with the 1952 opening of the plant and the christening of blast and open-hearth furnaces by Fairless’s wife and granddaughter. Besides the footage of the ceremonies, most of the images serve an illustrative purpose only to the soundtrack, which does most of the work supplying content and rhetoric. Hicks narrates along the way US Steel’s “neighborliness” to its new area: the many small businesses hired to help in the building of the mill, US Steel’s work to build community relations, and the mutually beneficial relationship between all involved in the mill. Upbeat, harmonic music swells and marches at different times to create the appropriate responses to the narration, and both provide meaning to
the images of construction. While the types of shots used are much like Ivens’s *Komsomol*, the illustrative purpose of these shots in *New Neighbor* creates a much more prosaic effect.

Despite the attention it received in the trade press and the use of George Hicks, *A New Neighbor* lacks the polish and creativity of US Steel’s earlier sponsored films. The narration is effective but prosaic; it lacks the rhetorical flourishes found in earlier films. The real-life characters featured—corporate leaders, managers, engineers, and community business people—are not particularly interesting or charismatic. Moreover, the footage used often seems little more than newsreel footage. The only moment of spectacle appears at the film’s end, when Nancy, Fairless’s granddaughter, lights the open-hearth furnace named after her. Even this sequence, though, is shot from an angle and distance that downplays a sight generally emphasized in sponsored films of steel production. Public relations films sponsored by the steel industry seemed to lose energy and interest in this period.

While US Steel continued to at least innovate of the theme of folksy corporatism, Republic Steel still sponsored films much like those it had made in the 1930s: expository films with direct arguments about the right and authority of corporate leadership and the rightness of the free market as an American value. Republic’s films included *Pioneer of Progress* (1952), *Steel Frontiers* (1953), and *Men Who Make Steel* (1956). The first, *Pioneer of Progress*, begins with stock footage from fiction films apparently showing Western migration. Over these images, the narrator praises the individualism of the pioneers who had iron and steel as their ally to conquer the forests and plow the fields. The film asserts that the contemporary steel industry, particularly the stockholders, continue that pioneer spirit while displaying shots of ladles and furnaces pouring with liquid iron and steel. The film then begins its process narrative, with breaks throughout that remind the audience that a “free, competitive society” has made such growth possible and innovations are due to the industry’s “own initiative.” It shows men working in a rolling mill, comfortably chatting across their controls, something Richard Serra will undercut in *Steelmill/Stahlwerk*, as I will discuss in the next chapter. The film’s last lines remind us that a “free competitive economy needs free, competitive steel.” *Steel Frontiers* similarly emphasizes that private enterprise solves its own problems, especially
in finding new sources for iron ore and replacements in taconite. The narrator in this film takes the persona of a journalist interested in the new frontiers of steel, which he tells us are “good.” He points to the goodness of new taconite processing to create iron pellets, which are needed because US iron deposits were depleted. The shot lingers on the scene of crushing red rocks, and the music stays in a minor key, which at least slightly undercuts the triumphant tone. We are also told that other iron now comes from Liberia. The narrator turns every account of limited natural resources into a story of abundance. Iron is now better than ever before, the film claims, which it supports with a shot of a long conveyance of ore.

Perhaps because of its later date, when corporate interests had secured their hegemony, *Men Who Make Steel* (1956) protests less about the economy than other films. While the narration claims at first that the film is about the industry’s “greatest asset,” its workers, it quickly focuses on machines, the product of “capital investment.” In fact, this is accomplished in the first shots of men loading an open-hearth furnace, which we are told is an almost obsolete scene. The narrator tells us that a machine can now do the same work. For this film, the “men who make steel” are now managers, doctors, and guards in the mills. We’re reminded that taconite production is a “triumph of private enterprise” and the result of “risk capital alone.” The focus falls on machines that test and monitor production. For example, the film includes shots of a strander at a wire machine, working almost exactly like the worker in Vertov’s *Enthusiasm*, but moves immediately to show machines’ speed in producing barbed wire. We’re reminded again about all the uses of steel: for highways, oil drilling, industrial agriculture, nuclear power, and the military, as well as the corporation diversification into titanium, plastic, and kitchens, which are assembled “a long, long way from the blast furnace” and made by “responsible, substantial kind of people.” Finally, the new ideas come from the laboratories and human relations.

The films made by Republic Steel provide compelling evidence for the corporate worldview. As mentioned, Republic Steel was notoriously anti-union and supported anti-union campaigns starting in the 1930s. Republic continually sponsored films that are strikingly the same in their argument and perspective, and strikingly absent of any content besides these arguments. Republic’s sponsored films place all credit for the
industry in the hands of corporate leaders, shareholders, managers, and experts. They almost entirely ignore the role of steelworkers on shop floors, and completely disregard the difficulty and intensity of the work. They link their pro-corporate, free enterprise interests directly to discourses of Americanism and masculinity. Republic’s films also did not get the same press as US Steel’s films and it is unclear how far they circulated. Both sets of films show how two corporations wished to be seen in the 1950s. While the two approaches are very different, I think they are two sides of the same coin for the US steel industry’s corporate propaganda. To prove my claim that the two approaches were compatible, I use one final set of films, which feature ducks and dancing ingots.

**Education and Animation: Bringing the Two Corporate Americanisms to School**

More than ever before, companies like US Steel focused in the postwar period on supplying schools with free teaching aids, lesson plans, and resources (Fones-Wolf 189-204). Corporate contributions to education increased exponentially from the 1950s to the 1970s. While these contributions were still less than one percent of the profits for companies like GM and US Steel, they produced a large number of resources for schools and, in this way, "represent[ed] much more to the classroom teacher” (Harty 2).

Perhaps to speak to this increasingly important audience, or to try to keep them interested, steel companies and the AISI sponsored several animated films in the 1960s. This move both had connections to earlier sponsored films and departed from convention. Sponsored, ‘industrial’ films often made use of animation to visualize maps and graphs, as well as to create images of the future, like the model factories of *Enthusiasm* and *Komsomol*. American car companies used stop-motion animation sequences, with more whimsy, in Ford’s popular *Rhapsody in Steel* (1934) and *Precisely So* (1937), both made by Jam Handy. Indeed, Jam Handy had an active animation department, and other Jam Handy industrial animated films include Chevrolet’s *Down the Gasoline Trail* (1935) and *Something for Nothing* (1940), both about gasoline, and *Drawing Account* (1941), the story of an auto engineer visiting an theatrical animation studio, most likely JHO studio, to offer advice for a realistic cartoon about a team of imps running an engine.
However, the use of animation for an entire sponsored film was less common, especially for public relations films that otherwise took the guise of a documentary or educational film. Despite this, several films sponsored by the steel industry in the 1960s used animation not simply to promote the industry but to promote the rightness of corporate and managerial control over the workplace and the industry. In their choice of animation and their approach, these films took their lead from John Sutherland, an important figure in animated corporate propaganda. The animated films made by US Steel and AISI intersect with those made by John Sutherland, sometimes directly, as in the case of the big-budget *Rhapsody of Steel*, which was made by John Sutherland’s film company. They also intersect indirectly, as I hope to show, in that the corporate Americanism of Sutherland’s films encouraged greater rhetorical assertiveness in the animated films sponsored by US Steel and AISI in the 1960s. Perhaps animation as a medium, and the assumption of school children as the primary audience, also provided greater confidence to simply assert capitalist positions. As with Sutherland’s films, animated educational films produced by the steel industry made the economic system most beneficial to corporate control seem as natural and sensible as basic math or science. Sutherland thus provided a way to merge the two approaches discussed throughout this chapter, by bringing together a folksy, friendly approach with the most strident arguments of corporate Americanism.

Sutherland began making animated corporate films with a series of ‘economic education’ films for Harding College’s “Public Education Program,” underwritten by the Sloan Foundation in the 1940s and early 1950s. These films are some of the most direct and striking examples of corporate propaganda on economic issues produced in the US. The films repeatedly make the claims, for instance, that individual prosperity results solely from high productivity, and that prosperity and productivity depend on free enterprise and the leadership of businessmen, whose interests are always socially beneficial. They use the rhetoric of Americanism widely to promote free markets and corporate control. Through the 1950s, Sutherland’s company in Los Angeles made *What Makes Us Tick* (1952) for the New York Stock Exchange; *A is for Atom* (1953), a propaganda film for atomic energy sponsored by General Electric; and *It’s Everybody’s Business* (1954), sponsored by the Chamber of Congress and DuPont—among many
others. The first and last have almost exactly the same economic message as the films for Harding College—i.e. low wages are the result of low production, all profits are “plowed” back into investment, the US and its people are prosperous, and prosperity is due to free enterprise alone.

Given its location in Los Angeles, John Sutherland Productions could bring in animators from theatrical studios. The company also paid well. Carl Urbano directed the three films listed above, with George Gordon acting as associate director. Bill Melendez, a top-rank animator, could make double the pay at JSP that he could make at UPA. He said: “I disliked what I was writing, but I wrote it because the money was good. About once a year, I’d get fed up and march into the office to say I couldn’t do it anymore. Every time I’d open my mouth to complain, they’d stuff it with money” (Amidi 46). Also, the animators could work with little supervision. Sutherland wrote the story and script, and left the animation to the animators. Eyvind Earle described his freedom: “I was the absolute boss. I never had to check with anybody or show what I had done to get it approved” (Amidi 46). The films that resulted are often creative and charming animation put to the service of leaden messages of corporate propaganda. Destination Earth (1956), sponsored by American Petroleum and directed by Carl Urbano, is a good example of this split between creative film and regressive economic ideology. Tom Oreb and Victor Haboush worked as animators on Destination Earth (they had worked closely before on Disney projects, like Toot, Whistle, Plunk and Boom [1953]). In this science fiction fantasy, an explorer is sent from Ogg, a state on Mars ruled by a dictator. The land of Ogg cannot figure out how to make its vehicles move or to prevent friction. On Earth, the explorer marvels at the wonders of cars, and the usefulness of petroleum. Returning with the knowledge of petroleum, and with the importance of competition to make it available to all, the explorer causes a revolt against the dictator, as the Oggs run to take part in the fun of oil prospecting. The animation is very skilled and modern, creating an even greater interest in the nonsense of the economic “lesson.” However, Sutherland’s company specialized in this rhetorical approach, which promoted both a specific industry and an economic system.

Sutherland continued this formula with slight alterations in his film for US Steel, Rhapsody of Steel, which was in many ways his most ambitious and successful film.
Instead of a direct defense of free enterprise, *Rhapsody* provides a fantasy of worker-less production and constant, happy-go-lucky, consumption. The film also was much more high profile and widely played that any previous film made by Sutherland’s company. The making of *Rhapsody* was announced in the *New York Times* in August 1958, a year and a half before its premiere. The paper reported that US Steel planned on theatrical exhibition for the film, and noted those slated to work on the film, including composer Dimitri Tiomkin and Eyvind Earle, the art director for Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* ("US Steel Plans"). *Business Screen* covered the film’s premiere in Pittsburgh, on December 4, 1959, with a three-page article on the “gala” event ("Pittsburgh Premiere” 25). The journal praised the film and its talent, especially the composer Tiomkin and orchestra who performed the score at the premiere. It also praised Earle and art designer Maurice Noble, as well as Carl Urbano, the director, for what it called “one of the most effective public relations pictures of this or any other year” (26). For nearly a year, *Rhapsody of Steel* maintained a constant presence in issues of *Business Screen*. For example, in its annual production review issue for 1960, *Business Screen* reported the trip taken by a sponsored film conference, held in Los Angeles, to Sutherland’s studios, which included a special screening of the film ("A Western Film Production Workshop"). *Business Screen* continued in later issues to follow the positive reviews and awards won by *Rhapsody of Steel* ("Blue Ribbon"). *Rhapsody* did play theatrically before moving to more traditional nontheatrical venues. When the *New York Times* announced a possible New York screening in January 1960, it reported that the film had already played theatrically in Chicago, LA, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit and Milwaukee ("High Budget Film on Steel Slated"). It played again in a public, semi-theatrical setting when Wieboldt’s department store in Chicago put together a special exhibit advertising the steel consumer products it sold, also called “Rhapsody of Steel.” The film showed continuously for 10 days at the store ("Wieboldt’s and US Steel").

*Business Screen* noted that it expected that *Rhapsody of Steel* would be successful with young people in its goal to “renew confidence in the economic system which has made such progress and provided the sinews of the free world’s new strength” ("Pittsburgh Premiere” 27). Such praise points both to the primary targeted audience and to aspirations that exceed the interests of any one company or industry. To accomplish
these goals, *Rhapsody of Steel* takes on a much bigger scope that prior steel sponsored films. The film begins with the orchestra score accompanying a credit sequence much longer than usual for sponsored films. Over these credits, animated images of a forest, or jungle, with jagged mountains scroll horizontally on the screen. The narrator announces at the end of the credits that the images are those of Earth “as it may have looked” at the beginning. The scene looks very much like primitive Earth as drawn for *Fantasia*’s “Rite of Spring” sequence. It next moves to space, as a meteor rushes down to Earth. From this, we’re told “man” first discovered iron and made tools. The film then provides a global, century-spanning history of iron and steel, moving from Asia Minor, to Egypt and Greece, and finally to India and the Middle East. The figures are shown in profile, resembling shadow puppets. Only the narrator speaks. When the historical line gets to the mid-19th century and industrial steel production, it turns to a fast process narrative. No workers are shown and the parts of the factory, especially cranes and hoists, work gracefully on their own. The production process is shown as magical, with scenes of steel overflowing in furnaces or ladles dramatized by the sound of cymbals and by the image of scattering stars at the end of the gold lines, suggesting fire. The rolling sequence almost entirely lacks narration, allowing the images and music to work to further express industrial processes as magical.

The third section is the most whimsical, as it follows a family man through his day. The steel products in his daily life are drawn in ahead of him as he and his family move into the open space. For example, as his wife drives him to the office, a bridge is drawn as the car crosses it. The wife dances through the kitchen, and steel products appear where her hand lands. The film’s concluding segment moves from the husband at his drawing board to blueprints for a space shuttle, which end with the shuttle’s launch and images from space, returning us to the realm of the film’s initial meteor. In the film’s last seconds, the narrator tells us over a meditative image of space that this completes the cycle and he speculates that perhaps one day “man will set about shaping his civilization on Earth as carefully as he has shaped the metal” that will take him to space. The world projected by the film is one of individuals working and consuming happily and, often, alone. The animation allows US Steel and John Sutherland to create a world in which the sites of production are free of workers, overflowing with consumer products and the
needed consumers to buy them. This rhetorical approach, despite the change to animation and the grander scale, fits very closely to earlier sponsored films by US Steel.

However, other animated films, incorporated the tone of corporate Americanism into their animated, folksy, films. One such film, which merges folksy Americana and corporate Americanism, is Disney’s *Steel and America* (1966), produced by AISI. Along with John Sutherland, Disney made animated films in the 1940s and 1950s for government and industrial sponsors. It made health and hygiene education films for the US Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA) to be shown in Latin America, which was part of larger programs by the US government to build a hemispheric alliance and by Hollywood to expand markets.\(^{25}\) Disney made many training and propaganda films during World War II, including several featuring Donald Duck and one, *Victory Through Air Power* (1942), which promoted the use of long-range missiles. After the war, and in an “effort to maintain solvency,” the studio made industrial and education films for corporations like Dow Chemical, Texaco, and General Motors (DelGaudio 190).\(^{26}\) A team of Disney writers and animators, including William Bosch, Kendell O’Connor, and Frank Armitage, and composer George Bruns made several industrially sponsored shorts and education films in the 1950s and 1960s. These included shorts for the Disneyland television show, *Man in Space, Man and the Moon, Mars and Beyond* (1955); *Donald’s Fire Safety Plan* (1965); and a series of driving films, *Goofy’s Freeway Troubles* (1965) and *Freeway Phobia* (1965).\(^ {27} \)

Disney also made *Steel and America* (1966) for the American Iron and Steel Institute. The film features Donald Duck and combines documentary footage with animated scenes. It begins with footage of an open-hearth furnace, fiery and active, which dissolves into animated scenes of the Earth’s volcanic beginnings. After a description of how iron was formed from geological forces, the narrator introduces Donald, the early ironmaster, who appears in a bubble over a map of iron ore deposits. Alone, he mines iron, carries it up a hearth, and smelts it; pours ore into molds and forges it; and experiments with making steel. Throughout, the narrator points out that early makers did not know why processes worked; for example, they did not know why charcoal and limestone were needed. As the narrator explains the purpose of the ingredients, Donald’s dumb look turns sleepy and the narrator calls him back to work. He tends to his furnace,
and little sparks and stars of fire emanate from it. Donald, of course, makes mistakes, hurt himself, and dozes off, but also scampers around in his work at a manic pace. The film’s middle section describes the history of iron and steel making over static drawings. It also introduces the Saugus mill as the first mill in the US, over images of the mill reconstructed by the AISI for public relations. The narrator tells us that, just like the corporations of today, many people invested in making the Saugus mill possible. After a history of iron in the US from the Revolutionary War to the first Bessemer furnace, Donald returns only to be confronted by the modern version of his tools: trucks moving ore, the blast furnace, steel ingots, rolling mills—each of which pushes or surprises him off his feet. This section most closely follows processes in the mill, and many shots are spectacular, especially of the basic oxygen and electric furnaces with music heightening the effects. The film ends in the research lab, asserting again that Donald could only work through “trial and error” which worked “most of the time.” Now, however, science knows exactly what to do. The film ends by pointing to new uses for steel, developed in research, especially in “outer space.”

Sheila Harty, in her 1979 criticism of corporate propaganda in schools, notes that Steel and America wrongly claims that the steel industry is safe and clean. She points out that the film claims that steel is one of “the safest of all industries”—indeed, the film goes further by claiming a steelworker is safer in the mill than at home—when in fact many workers were still hurt in accidents or suffered from work-related illnesses (66). Of the lead character, Donald Duck, Harty claims he is only a “sugar-coated accessory” used to keep attention and provide credibility to child audiences (67). But Donald is more that the steel industry’s candy-coating in Steel and America. Donald had been a central Disney character since the 1930s, known for his belligerence, which was often followed by a comeuppance. He figured in many films sponsored for the government or about national interests as well as educational shorts for television. Moreover, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart’s study How to Read Donald Duck proves useful in thinking about the choice of Donald as the skilled steelworker of the past in Steel and America. Dorfman and Mattelart wrote How to Read in Chile in 1971 as a defense of new and more progressive children’s literature and entertainment, and as a criticism of US and elite-dominated mass media. They focus in particular on Disney comics featuring Donald
Duck and his extended family of uncles and nephews. They show how the cartoons tried to interpellate children readers, especially from developing areas, into harshly capitalist and neo-colonial ideologies. David Kunzle writes in the introduction to How to Read that Donald was not a figure of “courage and wit” like Mickey Mouse, but instead a “heroic failure” whose “constant efforts […] are doomed to eternal defeat” (Kunzle 19). Dorfman and Mattelart note that Donald searches for work, but never lasts long at it, due mostly to his temperament, but not before “absurd paroxysms of activity” (72). As a worker, he’s incompetent and thus, “having demonstrated his uselessness on the job, is ipso facto overpaid” (73). From this, the authors argue that one could extrapolate a basic desired characteristic of workers, submissiveness, since they contribute so little to the “building of this material world” (43).

Similarly, Steel and America makes use of Donald’s well-known qualities to present a very particular image of the 19th century iron and steel craftsmen, and by extension, workers and their shop floor knowledge. In Steel and America, science supplants the skilled worker, represented by the bumbling Donald, whose anger, impulsiveness, and frustration make the film’s evaluation of the worker’s “trial and error” quite clear. The steelworker of the past, like Donald, was belligerent and careless, hardworking but stupid and doomed to failure. He is supplanted by the new system of production, which is organized around a vast material world he, apparently, had no part in creating and which exists as a force outside him, pushing him to the margins. By the end, Donald has become submissive in relation to the fixed capital and scientists he confronts. He’s allowed to stay, but he no longer moves around, and instead stands waiting to hear what he can do next. Dorfman and Mattelart see in the Disney comics the “self-image of advanced capital” (96) in a representation that the dominant class “seizes, and […] returns veneered with innocence” (76). This describes the animated industrial films sponsored by the steel industry quite well, but only as an extension of what had come before. In moving away from documentary evidence of the shop floor, these later films do not so much betray earlier industrial films as realize their full potential as ideological products.

Perhaps Family of Steel (1962), a surreal animated short made by John Sutherland for US Steel, is the most striking example of a sponsored film as an image of “advanced
“capital” that is “veneered with innocence.” It combines, again, in the most striking way, a folksy rhetoric with capitalist propaganda. For this reason, I’ll conclude by discussing this educational film about the uses of steel alloys in construction and design. The technical language of the middle section—about orthotropic plate decks, hybrid steel beams, and composite construction—suggests perhaps a use in upper-level education or vocational programs. The film’s framework, however, is the most interesting part for our purposes. In these sections, ingots of different types of steel parade across a stage and perform individual spins when introduced by their leader, carbon steel. The carbon steel ingot had been formed at the start of the film during an anthropomorphized, cartoon version of the familiar industrial film sequence of steel pouring from the furnace into a ladle and then into molds. In this film, however, the ladle and molds have faces that wince with pain. Stranger still are the testing and shaping machines, each of which is self-operated and also given a grotesque face. These machines stretch, hit, and cut through the equally personified ingots using their feet, arms, and teeth. Some are small while others are meant to seem as big as the space of the mill itself. No people, not even scientists, are present.

For its anthropomorphized steel mill, *Family of Steel* brought in the artist Boris Artzybasheff, who worked prolifically in the 1930 through the 1960s, illustrating covers for book and magazines. Artzybasheff illustrated hundreds of *Time* covers during and after World War II, and, at times, his illustrations were featured directly in magazines. His pictures repeatedly anthropomorphize machines or merge people, particularly white-collar workers and executives, with machines. Many of these pictures anthropomorphize war machines used in World War II. Artzybasheff included a full series of illustrations of steel production in his book, *As I See* (1954). In this, the fixed capital of the steel mill is shown with faces and bodies, completing the work of steel production on their own. Although Artzybasheff’s ideological position is not explicit, John Sutherland’s purpose when adapting the illustrator’s work in *Family of Steel* is. Sutherland brings together public relations’ folksy rhetoric with the fantasy of steel production without workers. This ends, it would seem, the fight over control between capital and labor, since fixed capital takes over, in a smooth, constant production cycle.
Moreover, the decisions made about representation in *Family of Steel* are symptomatic of the worldview and position that the film takes. This begins the real fun of these films as evidence for a capitalist worldview. While one might argue that any more reading risks over-reading a piece of historical ephemera, I hope I’ve shown that these films had enough of a niche and connection to their context that they can be interpreted in light of larger historical conditions. *Family of Steels*, a smaller film than the others, intended for technical education, not only expresses the capitalist desire for fixed capital’s complete dominance over production, but also includes more subtle cues to the worldview’s understanding of power and relationships. The ingots, the most human of things in this mill, are friendly and smiling but also child-like, and they move through a surprisingly brutal regime controlled by much larger, violent machines. Moreover, the ingots are not in the style of Artzybasheff’s illustrations, although they come into contact with his machines as they shape and test the pieces of steel. In his illustrations in *As I See*, these testing and finishing machines take on the appearance of serious, skilled workers, but in *Family of Steel*, the machines smile with a kind of sadistic pleasure as they stretch and puncture the ingots. Moreover, while the film focuses on different types of steel and how they can be used together to make better structures and conveyances, it does not actually dramatize this cooperation as one might expect from the introduction. After introducing different kinds of steels, the film moves to a very prosaic and dull section, which illustrates how different steels can work together, for example, to make bridges and skyscrapers. This section nearly resorts to line drawings, before returning to the anthropomorphized world of dominating machines and brutalized ingots. The film cannot show the steel ingots cooperating productively as anthropomorphized beings. It can only show one anthropomorphized being brutalizing another productively.

The films I’ve discussed differ in their approaches and purposes; however, they share not only their position as part of an extended propaganda campaign but also more subtle textual qualities. For nearly all of the films discussed, except for the animated films, music and narration do most of the work of making meaning and creating effects. Images are nearly entirely illustrative, in function. As major parts of the text, however, the images can work to support or undermine the narration, raise more questions, or visualize an implicit logic. The films are highly constructed and edited, leaving almost no
gap for the unrehearsed action or unplanned scene. They follow the tight orchestration of the process narrative, which presents the highly complicated and messy work of steelmaking as a simplified narrative: as easy as baking a cake. Animated films allowed a clever way to update this formula, without changing much. Despite the similarities, in the 1930s to the 1950s, two distinct approaches were used. It’s possible to see these as two different approaches of business to the public—folksy corporatism and corporate Americanism—along the lines of Republic versus US Steel, yet both also display paternalism and demand managerial control, albeit in different registers. The animated films did more than just provide a new “look” to public relations, they also provided a way to bring together the two approaches into one intended to reach wide audiences with a particularly brutal capitalist image of industrial work. They also provide, for us, the texts most symptomatic of the lapses and interests of the collectively held worldview of US corporations and the classes and professional groups who sided with corporate interests. This question of class identification and interests will be a focus on the next chapter.

Notes

1 See Bird (1999), Fones-Wolf (1994), Harris (1982), Marchand (1998), Miller (1999), and Tedlow (1979). This history is provided in the third section of this chapter.

2 In their introduction to Films that Work, the editors, Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, make a case for industrial films as evidence, or at least “traces of the social and industrial organizations they once served” (11). However, other contributors clarify the limits of industrial films as historical evidence. For example, Martin Loiperdinger argues that since so much is staged and acted, “industrial moving pictures are not in a position to document actual human labor” (72). Moreover, Loiperdinger asserts, “the entire economics of production are excluded” (72). Michel adds that these films are “a slanted representation of work and labor” (167).

3 Specifically, Industry on Parade downplayed differences between workers, management, and consumers (205). Segments also occasionally included stories and images of working women, suggesting that this “hegemonic capitalist propaganda” also varied somewhat from the dominant discourses of the 1950s (215).

4 In that essay, Gramsci used the term to encapsulate new forms of production and work that took shape in the US. The term included within it scientific management;
automated and mechanized production; unskilled workers and unions to represent them; and the focus on the moral health and mental agility of industrial workers. According to Gramsci, these changes within and around work combined with Fordism, identified for its high wages and output, to bring about a new way of life and system of accumulation. In the essay, Gramsci rearticulated the term, which was often used in criticisms of US hegemony and its effects on Europe, by bringing out the contradictions within the economic and workplace changes. They could be progressive or regressive based on context. While I do not use “Americanism” here to refer to Gramsci, my dissertation is very much indebted to Gramsci, and latter writers, examination of 20th century changes in industrial production and work.

5 Klein lists a range of reasons companies sponsored films for public relations purposes, including: “reaction against government pressures,” “winning over unfriendlies,” “image-building for the sponsor” and “morale building for employees” (51).

6 J. Burder, another producer, also insisted that while in-house units can make training films, those meant for a general audience require professionals to make and distribute them (13).

7 Harty also claims that this is a benefit of the distribution companies for corporate sponsors with films trying to enter the classroom.

8 The importance of training films is also emphasized in an article from the first issue of Business Screen, on how film can help train salesmen as well as serve as an aid in their work.

9 On each building of his Detroit studio, Handy put up a slogan announcing the company’s goals: “To pass along the know-how,” “To dramatize products and activities,” “To help make meetings more effective,” and “To make clear objectives and instructions” (Oakes 98). The site is now a studio for religious programming.

10 Jam Handy’s animation is the focus of Brian Oakes’s article, “Building films for business: Jamison Handy and the industrial animation of the Jam Handy Organization” in Film History.

11 Tedlow sees this as positive, first, in showing that business is dependent on the public, and second, because he credits the rise of public relations, at least in part, with the lessening of violence in labor-management debates. This, however, leaves out the role of important changes in the political climate and rise of industrial unions in lessening the violence, which then may have instigated a change in approach by business.

12 Harris also points to a variety of other causes for the conservative shift in the US, including the Cold War, social and political changes, postwar prosperity, personal management, and welfare capitalism. More than others, he minimizes the effects of media campaigns.

13 Audio Productions was a new company, spun off from Western Electric’s company ERPI (Electric Research Products, Inc.) after the FCC ordered a divesture of its film unit. ERPI was set up to research acoustical engineering and market sound equipment in 1927, and formed a non-theatrical division in 1929. A year later, it started producing 35mm sound non-fiction shorts. ERPI also offered equipment and
projectionists for hire to show non-theatrical films. In 1937, the FCC ordered a divestiture, which led to ERPI’s industrial film unit becoming Audio, an independent company. The new company’s first release, in February 1937, was Steel, A Symphony (Slide 89-91).

14 In March 1937, US Steel capitulated to SWOC, but Republic, among others, held out. In the spring and summer of 1937, Republic simultaneously employed munitions and public relations to fight unions and wage an anti-CIO campaign (Tedlow 131). Republic reported having 552 revolvers, 64 rifles, and 245 shotguns with 2,702 gas grenades. John L. Lewis described Girdler as “a heavily armed monomaniac, with murderous tendencies, who has gone berserk” (qtd. in Tedlow 99).

15 The title also suggests high art aspirations. In the 1930s and 1940s, industrial films frequently used the term, “symphony,” in their titles, perhaps because it “served the purpose of elevating and dignifying” the subject matter (Hediger and Vonderau 47).

16 In Right to Manage, Harris divides companies into three categories according to their response to changes in the 1930s and “the challenges to their power and authority associated with the growth of strong industrial unions” (3): conservative, realist, and progressive. He put Republic into the conservative category and US Steel in the realist.

17 In December 1935, US Steel “converted” to institutional advertising and public relations when it became one of BBDO’s clients (Marchand 163). At this point, US Steel began a “courtship of the common man” in campaigns orchestrated by the agency to sell a positive corporate image and create internal cohesion (223).

18 In an article on color in film, Business Screen called SMS “trailblazing” (1.3), Jam Handy took credit for the film in a one-page ad, for its role as a distributor (1.5), and in an editor’s report on Hollywood’s attacks on industrial film, Business Screen challenged that the film was better than most Hollywood fare (1.6). In another issue, Business Screen republished Pare Lorentz’s McCall’s positive review of the shortened version, called Men Make Steel (1.2).

19 The images into the open-hearth furnace are particularly striking, and look very much like images from Hollis Frampton’s Winter Solstice, discussed in Chapter Three. However, unlike in Frampton’s film, the images are stitched into a shot-reverse-shot framework and a discourse of scientific production. See figures 24 and 25.

20 Business Screen called it “the first completed motion picture record of US Steel’s vast wartime expansion program and production achievements” (‘Pictures Serve Industry’).

21 Eric Smoodin discusses this role for film programs overseas in Animating Culture.

22 Harty’s study has a clear opinion: “Profit-making private interests have no business […] producing curriculum materials” (3). She argues that the role of sponsored films in classrooms is to influence students to adapt long-term pro-business ideas that are heavily skewed, for example about the safety of nuclear power and oil industries.

23 In both films, sequences hyperbolize the speed and efficiency of the Ford system by showing cars that put themselves together. The animated inanimate parts, however, only work to round out a day’s work, rather than replace workers.
One of the Sloan Foundation’s original goals, beginning in the 1930s, was economic education, which included a University of Chicago radio program, pamphlets, funds to higher education and training, and popular films (1945-1946, 7). At first, the Foundation funded New York University to make films about economic life “about which there is believed to be widespread misunderstanding” (1944, 19). In their 1945-1946 report, the Foundation noted a new project in “experimental motion pictures that rely on the techniques of the animated cartoon to convey elementary economic principles” (10). The 1953 Sloan Report notes that the economic education programs, radio and film, had been dropped—and the list of popular education projects shows a move to highway safety programs.

Lisa Cartwright and Brian Goldfarb provide a full history and critique of the series in their article, ‘Cultural Contagion: On Disney’s Health Education Films for Latin America,” in Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom. Also see Eric Smoodin, Animating Culture.

DelGaudio claims the studio stopped making films strictly for income, but it continued into the 1950s for public relations purposes with films like Our Friend the Atom (1957) (DelGaudio 190). This film was part of a wider cultural effort to sell the peacetime usefulness of atomic power.

The first three were part of a series, introducing the Tomorrowland segments of the Disney show, which emphasized the “unfolding technological world” (Lucanio and Coville 115).

The Saugus mill was sponsored by the American Iron and Steel Institute, and built between 1949 and 1954, under the guidance of Roland Wells Robbins, the archeological architect who also worked on restoring Thoreau’s Walden Pond cabin. The Mill was part of a widespread, postwar boom in heritage sites as places of interest. In a film made of the Works in 1955, sponsored also by the AISI, the trade union emphasizes the purposes of it: as a monument to the contributions of the industry to US history, and as a sign of the link between the past and present. See Donald W. Linebaugh, “Walden Pond and Beyond: The Restoration Archaeology of Roland Wells Robbins” in The Reconstructed Past.

Harty’s criticism is specifically focused on Steel and America: A New Look, released in 1974, but the two films are nearly identical. A New Look includes segments on the environmental accomplishments of the industry, which Harty finds especially hard to take, and replaces the promise of space flight with other developments, like new processes that cut down on energy used and better materials for stadiums that allow for less obstruction of view.

These include New Spirit, which encouraged people to pay income tax; Saludos Amigos and El Gaucho, part of the plans to build support in South America; films about the war; and later shorts for Walt Disney’s Wonderful World of Color television show, like How to Have an Accident at Work (1959) and Donald in Mathmagic Land (1961).

Carl Barks wrote some of the stories they discuss in the 1950s but other stories came from the decentralized, though regimented, production centers outside the US.
The cartoons teach, for example, that natives are perpetually childlike, and have no purpose for their raw materials, so it’s good to trade gold for watches (52) and that revolutionaries are adventuring brutes (58).
CHAPTER 4: FRAMPTON’S *WINTER SOLSTICE* AND SERRA’S *STEELMILL* AS EXPERIMENTAL DOCUMENTARIES OF THE 1970S

**CRISIS OF FORDISM AND TAYLORISM**

US experimental films of the 1970s are probably even less likely to bring to mind images of steel production than are 1930s Soviet documentaries or 1950s educational films. However, in the 1970s, Hollis Frampton and Richard Serra, two prominent experimental filmmakers, made films of steel production. Frampton filmed US Steel’s Homestead Works in Pennsylvania for *Winter Solstice* (1974), which is part of his *Magellan* film cycle, and Serra filmed the making of one of his sculptures in a Krupp Thyssen forging plant in the Ruhr Valley of Germany, for *Steelmill/Stahlwerke* (1979). These two films stand out in the filmmakers’ work for their documentary qualities—their direct focus on a shared historical world through the representation of a public space. I argue that these films are also unique in that they are directly engaged in thinking about and mediating major economic changes taking place at the time. Historians and theorists like Michel Aglietta and David Harvey have identified the 1970s as a period of crisis and major economic change in the US and Western Europe. In their experimental films of steel production, a basic economy in crisis at that time, Frampton and Serra took up a set of questions and problems that were not only social or collective, but also macroeconomic in scope. In this way, they are cognitive maps and socially symbolic, to borrow another one of Fredric Jameson’s terms.¹

The choice to enter the steel mills may have been partly due to their biographies, but these biographies map onto larger social experience. Frampton and Serra, as well as several other US artists—all male—working in the 1970s, worked in steel mills in their college years and their twenties. In his interview with Annette Michelson, Serra discussed this shared experience:

> As a kid growing up, I’d worked in steel mills, and I knew that [Philip] Glass, who was a friend of mine, had also worked steel mills. There is a generation of American artists who had grown up that way. [Carl] André had worked in the railroad and [Robert] Morris had worked steel mills, or railroads. So we came from a
postwar, postdepression background, where kids grew up and worked in the industrial centers of the country. ("Films" 75)

Serra, in this quote, not only describes a shared experience among a set of artists, but also locates the experience in a historical moment—postwar, postdepression, and industrial—that his use of the past tense suggests is over by the 1970s. Serra thus notes an important historical shift that I will discuss more later. In the case of Serra, the story that he worked his way through college in steel mills has entered into the mythology of the artist who has become the “Man of Steel.” In a recent interview with The Brooklyn Rail, Serra qualified the myth slightly: “I’d worked in steel mills as a kid and when I was in college—I worked there every summer to make some extra money” (Bui). In his interview with Annette Michelson, he noted that he was aware of the difference between himself, who could “come and go” and “had nothing at stake,” and the other mill workers, “who weren’t just temporarily employed, [and] needed to react in some way to [conditions] that enslaved them to the clock” (Serra, “Films” 95).

Frampton also worked in steel mills when he was in college in the mid-1950s. He described steel mills as “old stomping grounds” in his interview with Bill Simon (“Talking” 250). In Frampton’s case, his past work in a steel mill is not part of his popular biography, at least not to the extent of other stories like his apprenticeship with Ezra Pound, but the work comes up in interviews as an important impetus and shaping factor for Winter Solstice. Therefore, both filmmakers’ accounts are specific enough—they worked in steel mills in college—to be useful for consideration when analyzing the films, even as such an analysis must be careful to keep at bay the “Man of Steel” rhetoric that elides the position that allowed them to work in mills for “extra money” as college students and leave after a short stay.

I would like to emphasize not their particular stories but the shared historical position suggested by the shared biographies, as pointed to in Serra’s quote.

For example, the experiences of Frampton and Serra in steel mills in the 1950s, and their return in the 1970s, may provide insight into both films’ difficult formal qualities. The confusion that most viewers face when watching Winter Solstice or Steelmill is due in part to these films’ resistance to providing orientation into the spaces and processes they show. This suggests that their ideal spectator might have been steelworkers or those with the experience of steel working, who would have recognized the processes abstracted by the formal qualities of these films. Frampton suggested such
spectatorship when discussing a showing of *Autumnal Equinox*, which was shot the same year as *Winter Solstice*, to the workers of the slaughterhouse in which it was filmed:

“Then one man, who’s quite old, said something that I rather cherished. He said, ‘You don’t see us in the film, you see what we see.’ Which pleased me a lot. I myself did once work in a slaughterhouse” (“Talking” 250). Serra described a similar advantage in interpreting *Steelmill* for those familiar with the processes from their work:

> There was a coherent plan for the sequence of images […] to keep the logic of the place consistent. I don’t think anyone who hasn’t been to the mill follows it, but I’ve found that people with working backgrounds understand it immediately. They have no problem knowing where they are in relationship to the place, what is near and far, who is on the right and who is on the left. People who haven’t been in those working conditions seem to see it only as juxtaposed images. (“Films” 99)

Both filmmakers identified an ideal spectatorship for their films quite different from the expected avant-garde film audience. This audience is significant for arguing that the filmmakers took the mills seriously as their subject, but also that these films were oriented toward representing production as it was experienced by those on the shop floor. Moreover, such an audience would not experience the films as “juxtaposed images,” but as a coherent representation, or mapping, of work.

Perhaps as a result of these documentary interests, both films also represent the shop floor as a historically situated space, rife with antagonisms. Frampton pointed to these antagonisms as he finished his discussion of the autobiographical traces in the *Magellan* films, including *Winter Solstice*:

> The one thing that can sustain them [the steelworkers] through a lifetime of that kind of work is that what they do, the actual work itself, is wonderful, elegant, exquisite; and secretly that is known. But, at its worst, the formula applies. The worker in that situation is deprived, is forced out of every possible pleasure or gratification that could come from the work itself, including the fantasia of what is to be seen there, which is, of course, extraordinary. (“Talking” 250)

By the 1970s, many steel mill workers thought that the mills were at their worst. Rather than one “formula” that made the situation bad, historians and theorists have set out a number of factors for the worsening conditions in the US and Germany (Hoerr, Brenner, Braverman). *Winter Solstice* and *Steelmill* are both about “what is to be seen there” and about the ‘formulas’ that deprived workers of any pleasure from it (250). The filmmakers
own positions, however, are implicated in these scenarios as those that can derive “gratification” in aesthetic production. While Frampton invites these implications, as a way of satirizing the role of the artist, Serra can only go so far in this process. The two filmmakers also described different purposes for their films. Whereas Frampton describes an interest in capturing the ‘work’ itself as “exquisite,” Serra described his purpose as an attempt to “demythologize […] an ideal I had about the working class” (“Films” 87). Both, however, walked into shop floors in globalized steel industries with greater insecurities and higher antagonisms than what they would have encountered as young workers in the 1950s. Both incorporated these insecurities and antagonisms into their films.

The Question of “Structural Film”

The critical approach most often associated with Frampton and Serra’s films does not easily encourage a reading of them as socially symbolic of macroeconomic trends. Both have been described as “structural” filmmakers, a continually evoked and benighted category introduced by P. Adams Sitney in the Winter 1969 issue of Film Culture. One of Sitney’s major premises is that “the structural film insists on its shape and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline” (“Structural” 327). Frampton became a figure especially attached to the label of structural film when Sitney used Frampton’s Artificial Light (1969) to defend the parameters of the category against the criticisms of Fluxus filmmaker George Maciunas in their defining Film Culture debate. Sitney also discusses Serra—who had made Hand Catching Lead (1968), Hands Scraping (1968), and Frame (1969) by then—as one of several “distinguished sculptors that have begun to make films in the halfway ground between the subversive ‘Fluxus’ works and the complex structural films” (Sitney, “Structural” 346). These early films by Serra are all single shot, static short films focused on a particular act performed by hands: the attempts to catch pieces of lead dropped from above; two sets of hands picking up steel filings from the floor and placing them to the side; and measuring a window frame.

In his dissertation on Frampton, Bruce Jenkins criticizes Sitney’s approach and, in the process, encourages a different approach for interpreting films of the US avant-garde. Jenkins attempts to free Frampton’s films, such as Zorn’s Lemma (1970), “from a reading which focuses singularly on structure to one which embraces contentual aspects and
broad cultural references” (5). According to Jenkins, Sitney’s definition of structural film has led later critics to a “shallow formalism” that overvalued the films’ formulaic qualities, neglected content, and “closed off considerations of the political and ideological significance of the cinematic forms examined” (48). Jenkins writes that he realized the limits of the structural film model when confronted with Frampton’s *Magellan* film cycle, the “leviathan” serial film he sees as so distended as to defy paradigmatic readings (13). Unfortunately, in place of formalism, Jenkins offers only an auteurist interpretation of Frampton’s films, charting thematic and formal continuities like complex filmic construction, parallels between autobiographical and media history, and references to other modern arts (4). Despite his failure in following through with it, Jenkins’ introduction still argues persuasively for the value of an approach to experimental film that takes seriously the film’s content and cultural references, as well as politics and ideology.

However, there are ways to suggest Sitney was more careful than Jenkins’ criticisms allow without adopting Sitney’s “cinema of structure” as an interpretive model. Moreover, Sitney’s ideas can be very useful for an interpretive approach that examines the films of Frampton and Serra for their meaning, their content, and their historical connections. For example, even though Sitney’s initial definition of structural film in his essay focuses on simple form, he admits later in the essay that “it is precisely when the material becomes multifaceted and complex, without distracting from the clarity of the overall shape, that [such] films become interesting” (“Structural” 329). In his postscript response to Maciunas, Sitney introduces Frampton as a filmmaker who makes the “most critical case [for] the ambiguity of the definition of the structural film” (346). He continues: “With *Artificial Light* […] he challenges the newest historical phase of the formal cinema, the structural film” (348). Rather than put Frampton in the category of structural film, Sitney recognized early a dialogue at work in Frampton’s films with avant-garde trends.

Moreover, although Jenkins identifies Sitney as the one who categorized Frampton as a structural filmmaker, Sitney’s writings on Frampton after the *Film Culture* articles are more nuanced than Jenkins would allow. In his “morphology” of the American avant-garde, *Visionary Film*, published first in 1974, Sitney asserts that behind
the American avant-garde “lies a potent tradition of Romanic poetics,” which includes emphasis on imagination, metamorphoses, and heroic visionaries, as well as experimentation of the lyric form (xiii). While US avant-garde films carried over the Romantic interest in consciousness, the films increasingly severed consciousness from an interiorized, personal subjectivity (351). Sitney argues that Frampton’s serial films, *Hapax Legomena* and *Magellan*, are part of this development of the impersonal lyric, as a form of lyrical film that is elliptical and parodic of the personal quest and of the artist’s heroic interiority. Most importantly, Sitney puts *Magellan* into the larger context of avant-garde serial films and, specifically, into a genre of Menippean satire (410), which he defines as

A dialogue of forms and voices, open to narrative elaborations but not requiring them, in which characters embody ideas rather than manifest complex psychologies […]. All the ideas proposed in a Menippean satire are subject to irony; the very idea of philosophical resolution becomes an occasion for parody. Fantasy and realism alternate or even coincide, more often than not with a concatenation of styles and perspectives. (411)

The Menippean satire is thus dialogic, stylistically heterogeneous, allegorical, parodic, and fantastical. Sitney attaches other qualities to the Menippean satire in later sections of *Visionary Film*, including the genre’s fusion of autobiography, jokes on pretenses of narrative and poetics, and world-historical allusion. The latter is particularly important for interpreting *Winter Solstice* as a key part that makes the *Magellan* series a Menippean satire.

Sitney describes the Menippean satire specifically as a response to the lyrical film, which he closely identified with Stan Brakhage’s films. However, he also identifies defining similarities between the two genres and filmmakers. These similarities can be further found in both films discussed in this chapter. Sitney writes:

The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision. (*Visionary* 160)

The relation between the *Magellan* cycle and the lyrical film can be seen in the first person perspective, and in the use of “the irregularities of movement” as “indices of a self.” (359). Sitney develops the concept in relation to Frampton in *Eyes Upside Down*,
which asserts the Emersonian influence on the avant-garde, especially via mediating poetic figures like Walt Whitman and Gertrude Stein. The characteristics of the specifically American visionary tradition include a primacy of the visible, exhilaration of vehicular movement and emphasis on consciousness through bodily experience. Sitney highlights the significance of the “somatic” handheld camera, a technique first explored by Marie Menken, continued into Brakhage, and found again in many of Frampton’s films. Sitney includes a quote by Frampton explaining his process of filming *Special Effects* (1972), which also helps explains *Winter Solstice*:

> I did the film hand-held, with a long lens, and put myself in a physical position where it was impossible to hold the camera steady... That is my own frame, that is the vibration, let’s say, of my own imagination and my own body, in relation to the bounded possibility of consciousness. (qtd. in *Eyes* 121)

Unlike his earlier films, Serra also chose to film *Steelmill* using a handheld camera, which follows his attention and embodied position in the mill. While this change could very well have had practical causes due to the requirements of filming, it nevertheless registers the presence of the filmmaker in relation to the space and processes of the mill. This self-reflexivity, however, in *Winter Solstice* and *Steelmill* in particular, calls into question the position of the filmmaker in relation to this world filmed.

Despite his elaborations of the *Magellan* series as both satirical and lyrical film, Sitney sees most of Frampton’s later films, including those made for *Magellan*, as disappointments. He writes that the films

> [run] counter to [his] strength and originality as a filmmaker, for it is precisely his masterly engagement with spoken and written language that makes [his earlier films] so fascinating. [The later films] are disappointing insofar as they fail to achieve the ecstatic visuality to which they aspire. (*Eyes* 122)

I do not think the films fail, but I also do not think they aspire to “ecstatic visuality.” Even without sound, they are discursive, particularly *Winter Solstice.* Moreover, I argue that, when understood in their historical and political moment, the *Magellan* films, particularly *Winter Solstice* and *Autumnal Equinox*, are important texts. Sitney’s framework simply cannot allow this perspective. Indeed, in his conclusion, Sitney admits that he does not engage with the political implications of any of the films that he discusses. His readings, whether as Romantic or Emersonian, focus on these films
as part of a “morphology,” or a structural whole of the avant-garde speaking back to itself, or as various visionary projects tied to personal questions. He therefore sees Winter Solstice both as part of “an examination of the topoi of Eisenstein” (Eyes 268) and as a response to Brakhage’s Act of Seeing with One’s Own Eyes, but as a failure in its intertextual efforts (Eyes 262). Taking seriously the implications of the historical site, and how Frampton uses these implications, allows a reconsideration of Winter Solstice.

Following perhaps Sitney’s lead, many film scholars have isolated the formalist films of the US mid-twentieth century avant-garde from politics. In Allegories of Cinema, David James goes further by asserting that 1970s experimental film purposefully separated itself from the social world. James describes structural films as “the historical complement and dialectical other of the engaged cinema” (236). James argues that while the 1960s countercultures may have allowed political themes and aesthetic inquiry to work in tandem, the Vietnam War caused a split between these two forms of alternative cinema (165). Structural film goes even further, though, and shuts out the world and history entirely. It is, for James, a cinema of “social despair” and a sign of the end of cinema (280). He criticizes the Anthology Film Archives, which Frampton and Serra both frequented, because the theater’s practice of showing political films and “pure” cinema side-by-side. Describing in particular the consecutive screening of films by Dziga Vertov and Peter Kubelka, James writes:

[The] equation of the practice of a member of a post-revolutionary collectivity with that of an alienated aesthete—of the art of a worker with the work of an artist—without regard to their social incompatibility is an ideological exclusion, a function of the ideology of the aesthetic avant-garde itself. (21)

James is correct to point to the tension, rather than the coherence, of any program that includes both Soviet 1930s filmmakers and 1970s American and European experimental filmmakers. In his 1980 interview with Bill Simon on the Magellan cycle, Frampton referred to the steel mill as “a pretextual locus dearly beloved by our Soviet predecessors”—a locution that suggests ironic detachment, desire, and mourning [“dearly beloved…”]. Frampton admitted:

I cannot imagine an abyss deeper than that which separates my predicament in that steel mill and Vertov’s predicament as a filmmaker in that other steel mill. […] So that even if my political
beliefs are congruent with those of another time, there is no direct way, no opportunity to construct a direct way, to mate them on the film that is made and to be seen. That entire possibility have been preempted and evacuated before I ever entered the situation. (“Talking” 249)

Frampton also identified his position as “very privileged, which is to say very alienated” (249). Frampton was an “alienated aesthete,” as is Serra. However, Frampton’s quote above points to an understanding of the historical conditions behind his position, which is left out of James’ criticism. Indeed, militants in the 1970s were making similar judgments as Frampton about the climate of steel mills—i.e. the evacuation of certain revolutionary possibilities in the mills. A member of the Revolutionary Union Movement observed in 1972: “Twenty years ago, we would have advised anyone to go immediately to the steel mills if they were to organize for socialist revolution. Today, steel is rapidly dying” (Hinshaw 197). Rather than see the separation as simply one between committed revolutionaries and alienated aesthetes, however, both quotes point to the social conditions that structured their situations. Winter Solstice and Steelmill challenge the dichotomy between structural film and committed film described by James and assumed by Sitney. While not “committed” films, both can be read as engaged in the type of problems that James argues they purposefully ignored.

The Crisis of Steel

In his 1979 book, A Theory of Capitalist Regulation, Michel Aglietta identified the 1970s as a period of economic crisis equal to the Depression in its effects on, and transformation of, the mode of production. Fordism, as the hegemonic mode of capitalism mid-century, took shape after the Great Depression and began to disintegrate in the late 1960s. For decades, Fordism had regulated the relations between capitalists and waged workers to ensure the continued and growing consumption of commodities. Unions played a major role, as did state interventions, to moderate imbalances and act “as necessary conditions for the reign of the commodity” (Aglietta 95). The 1970s marked the end of the postwar Fordist economic boom in the US. In this period, finance took over manufacturing, and new structural forms took shape, specifically giant corporations controlled by financial interests (220). The late 1960s merger wave reorganized capitalist ownership toward “the strengthening of the financial intermediaries and particularly the banking system” (229). Financial agencies and banks led the reorganization of companies.
around this new model, including the consolidation of US Steel (271). According to Aglietta, this change had real effects on workers:

> Control over the formation and investment of these capitals and the concomitant power over industrial decisions are completely beyond the influence of the wage earners themselves. The complexity of the financial mechanisms only reinforces the radical separation of the workers from possession of the means of social production. (235, my emphasis)

As finance changed the nature of American industry, workers felt increasingly alienated from the decisions and workings of corporations like US Steel. While “alienation” is a much used and somewhat empty term, Aglietta here provides insight into the conditions of one particularly historical form of alienation in the 1970s.

Davis Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* draws heavily on Aglietta’s work. Unlike Aglietta, Harvey continually returns to a specific event, the recession of 1973, as the pivotal moment that marked the end of Fordism as the dominant economic regime of capital accumulation. The 1973 recession, Harvey claims, marked the end of the postwar economic boom, “shattered the framework” of Fordism (140), and began a period of “change, flux, and uncertainty” that continues into today (124). Harvey also further develops Aglietta’s focus on the move from manufacturing to finance as a central aspect of the Fordist crisis. The proliferation of financial activities and dominance of finance in historically manufacturing companies like US Steel exploded in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, the US Steel chairman launched a campaign of acquisitions and diversification in 1979 using the argument that his duty was “to make money, not steel” (158). Harvey sees the beginnings of this trend earlier in the decade, especially in attempts to control the economy through inflation: “The new financial systems put into place since 1972 have changed the balance of forces at work in global capitalism, giving much more autonomy to the banking and financial system relative to corporate, state and personal finance” (164). The 1971 breakdown of the Bretton Woods agreement and 1973 adoption of flexible exchange rates are also key events in the transition to a new mode of capitalism. Harvey accedes that the 1973 crisis came out of “accumulated rigidities” of the Fordist-Keynesian period in industry and the state (167), but also asserts that this led to neoliberalism, which redistributed wealth in the direction of the “already privileged” (171). Finally, the hegemonic type of work changed from manufacturing to service, a
trend that began earlier but took off after 1972 with the rapid contraction of manufacturing jobs (156).

More than Aglietta, Harvey is interested in the experiences and cultural mediations of these macroeconomic trends. He argues that the experiences of time and space are historically contingent and constructed and that “in capitalist societies in particular, the intersecting command of money, time, and space forms a substantial nexus of social power that we cannot afford to ignore” (226). Harvey argues that the crisis in Fordism has had effects on temporal and spatial experience, which thus also found expression in cultural mediations (201). He identifies this experience more specifically as “an intense phase of time-space compression that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political and economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life” (284). This compression can be found throughout the economic and social life of the late twentieth century, for example, in the acceleration in production and turnover intended to solve the problems of Fordist overaccumulation and rigidity (285) and in the increased corporate interest in short-term gains derived from financial maneuvering (287).

Robert Brenner’s *Economics of Global Turbulence* fits the history of the US steel industry into a larger, global context which allows this chapter to build a bridge between *Winter Solstice*, shot in Homestead Works, and *Steelmill*, shot in Germany’s Ruhr Valley. Brenner analyzes a system of interlinked economies including the US, Germany and Japan, which boomed in the postwar period, but entered a long decline beginning in 1973. Brenner writes that “economic prosperity was long made possible by a powerful symbiosis, underwritten by the US state, between the earlier-developing bloc of capital in the US […] and later-developing bloc of capital in Western Europe and Japan” (xxx). Brenner sees the downturn that began in the 1970s continuing into the 21st century. He counters those who claim the 1970s downturn was the result of wage pressures and union demands, including Aglietta, since he argues that the decimation of unions and working class demands did not lead to improvements. The problem, he asserts, is the long downturn in profitability caused by the downward pressure on prices, which was in turn caused by global overcapacity and overproduction in a crowded market system. This analysis fits the steel industry especially well: Brenner argues that markets became
overcrowded because older producers are unwilling to leave the market due to their already existing investments in fixed capital and their proprietary intangible assets. These firms could continue functioning at a much lower rate of profitability, which further kept prices down.

Histories of the steel industry in the 1960s and 1970s largely bear out the claims of these Marxist critics. These histories also thicken the picture by bringing in more players and events, as well as the particularities of one industry. For example, in agreement with Brenner, historians identify global overproduction as a major problem for the US steel industry in the 1970s. They find, however, particular actions and decisions that exacerbated the problem for the steel industry. Kenneth Warren, for example, blames the downturn of the late 1960s and 1970s on the complacency of the industry and on mistakes made in the 1950s: specifically on the building of too much capacity for steel production without also innovating on new technologies or more efficient systems (234). He describes US Steel especially as an “ailing giant leading a sickening industry” in the 1970s (241). Other historians are more likely to find broader systemic problems over corporate failure alone. Judith Stein blames the failure of American steel on the US government’s foreign, fiscal and, antitrust policies. Stein argues that there was a widely held belief, from the late 1940s into the Carter administration, that the steel industry was so strong nothing could hurt it. The US government decided to risk US industry to support its Cold War allies in West Germany and Japan by encouraging imports into the US and capital investment out. In 1967, the worldwide “malady of overcapacity” was already apparent, but the US government did little to respond to it (205). The industry remained somewhere between “guardedly optimistic” (228) and “punch drunk” until the late 1970s when, in 1977, fourteen mills shut down. Even then Carter refused to intervene, partly keeping American markets open to quell unrest in Europe (237). Moreover, antitrust policies allowed the late 1960 and early 1970 boom in conglomerates, with few obstacles, but prevented steel companies from trying to rationalize their overcapacity problems.

Historian John Hinshaw describes the effects that corporate trends of financial control and of diversification had on the steel industry and its workers in the 1970s. He shows that, in the 1970s, US steel corporations took investments out of US production
and placed it into finance, fast-return investments, and foreign projects (235). However, while the effects were visible by the 1970s, the trends started before then. Beginning in the late 1960s, profits made were no longer used for investment in plants. According to Hinshaw, Pittsburgh was abandoned in the late 1960s, and, during this period, US Steel “robbed” Homestead to save other plants and killed it by not investing in it (177). Corporations diversified and bought other companies, including steel companies, which were seen as easy capital that could be drained to support other subsidiaries (179). The period also saw an increase in labor unrest, partly evident in higher tension on the shop floor. Hinshaw writes that in 1971, “almost half of the eight hundred open hearth workers at the Homestead Works received discipline slips” (194). They were “bitter about working conditions” as the grievance person told Homestead managers (195). The workers could do little at that point to legally protest the conditions; the no-strike agreement of the early 1970s had provided high wages and automatic increases in pay, but took away the right to strike for work-related problems or company decisions (195).

Hinshaw’s description on Homestead fits into a larger picture of the 1970s as not only a crisis of Fordism, but of Taylorism. In his introduction to *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*, Harry Braverman identified a recent strike in a General Motors plant as evidence of US worker’s continued resistance to Taylorism because the striking workers did not demand changes to their compensation but instead in the work. He quotes the *New York Times*, which reported, “many people feel that the industry is going to have to do something to change the boring, repetitive nature of the assembly line work” (23). While Braverman emphasized the strike as a sign of resistance to longstanding working conditions, he noted that it was precipitated by increases in the pace of operations and work schedules. 7 Journalist John Hoerr, in *And the Wolf Finally Came*, also sees such resistance as a response to longstanding conditions combined with new problems. Taking part in the wide-ranging conversation to figure out who or what caused the devastating deindustrialization of the U.S, Hoerr identifies Taylorism as the culprit. He writes:

On Wall Street, financial analysts explain the tragedy of the American steel industry in macroeconomic terms. It was swept away, they say, by great structural shifts: a decline in steel consumption in the United States, a rise in excess capacity around the world, the inability to raise capital for modernization, a wide disparity of labor costs. Equally important, I believe, a creeping rot
on the inside eroded competitive ability and stymied innovation in the most vital of areas, human relations. (297)

He notes that steel workers were kept from making decisions or innovating, which led to them not being engaged at all in the survival of the industry. While this had always been a problem, conditions improved during World War II into the 1950s. They deteriorated again in the 1960s, due to an increase in college-educated supervisors and bureaucratic rigidity. He writes, “For the alienated worker, a typical workday in a steel mill consisted of ‘punching in, catching hell, punching out’ as the saying goes” (216). Workers also reported to Hoerr feeling demoralized over the turn to quantity over quality from the mid-1960s to mid-1970s: “Sometimes I took green steel out and gave it to rolling. I knew it. Everybody knew it” (323). They read racy paperback books and napped to pass the time. At the same time, management became very aggressive about punishing safety violations: “I saw guys get a slip for not holding a handrail going up the stairs” (320).

Brenner provides more evidence for the breakdown of the shop floor in the 1970s. He argues that the outbreaks of worker militancy in Germany were a consequence of the downturn rather than a cause. Employers, he argues, attacked the wrong source of the macroeconomic downturn by focusing on the workers: lowering wages and speeding up operation. Firms rapidly introduced new technology, pushed to lower wages, shed labor, and intensified the work of those who were kept on (120). Between 1970 and 1975, the manufacturing labor force in Germany dropped 18% and by decade’s end had dropped to 20% below its level in 1970 (180). None of these changes improved the economic situation. The industrial accident rate rose 20% between the first half and the second half of the 1970s. Also, as evidence of the explicit return of managerial force, he notes that the number of charges against employers for firing workers for union activity rose 50% in the years of 1965 to 1973. In these years, the number of workers who won claims that they were illegally fired tripled and the number of claims of unfair labor practices doubled (114). He writes that militancy was an attempt by the working-class “to reverse its decline and counter an ongoing employers’ offensive” (116).

The 1970s was a period of economic crisis that began a downturn in the US, Western Europe, and Japan that some say continues until today. In this period, Fordism went into decline, leading the way for a neoliberal organization of capital. This meant
deindustrialization, along with the hegemony of finance. Corporations run by financial interests increasing disinvested in national industry. The trend had profound impact on workers and industrial regions. However, before this, overcapacity made the global marketplace unstable. The US steel industry both acted “punch drunk,” ignoring the threat of overcapacity and global production, and pressed on workers with sped-up schedules and cheap production. This speeding-up of work can be seen as one part of a larger compression of time and space, as described by David Harvey. Germany also experienced an economic slump, caused by overproduction, as well as increased worker militancy, in part caused by made longstanding poor conditions intolerable. *Winter Solstice* and *Steelmill* takes up these issues exactly—overproduction, the crisis of Fordism, time-space compression, the intensification of work, the vampirism of finance, and alienation in relation both to the new economic order taking shape and the conditions of work within it.

*Winter Solstice* as a parody of US overproduction and Weston’s aestheticism

*Winter Solstice* was shot at US Steel's Homestead Works in Pittsburgh. By filming in Pittsburgh, Frampton’s work followed on the heels of Stan Brakhage’s *Pittsburgh Trilogy* (1971), which consisted of *Eyes*, about the city police, *Deux Ex*, filmed in a hospital, and *The Act of Seeing With One’s Own Eyes*, filmed in a city morgue. Sally Dixon, the Carnegie Institute Museum of Art film curator who obtained the rights for Brakhage’s filming, also negotiated Frampton’s film work in Pittsburgh. Dixon secured permission for Frampton, along with photographer Michael Chikiris, to visit the open-hearth shop, as well as plate and structural steel rolling mills, in Homestead Works on January 22, 1971. Homestead Works was one of the largest, most productive, and most historically significant of the US Steel plants. In regards to the latter, it was the site of a violent labor battle in 1892, which roughly marked the beginning of the forty-year period in which the steel industry successfully denied workers their right to organize. As a large, integrated steel mill with a long history, Homestead Works could be used as a litmus test for the state of the industry. Throughout the 1970s, US Steel and other US companies could still be seen, and saw themselves, as at the pinnacle of a global
industry ready for a revitalizing boom (Warren; Stein; Hinshaw). Yet if the breakdown of American steel was not yet apparent, it was nonetheless clear by the early 1970s that Pittsburgh would not remain the central site of steel production, which had been moving to the Midwest since the previous decade. Thus, before the decline of the industry and its brutal effects were apparent nationally, it was felt at Homestead. Moreover, as Hinshaw notes, Homestead in the 1970s was being systematically “robbed” and killed by the disinvestment of US Steel.

*Winter Solstice* was not a standalone film, but part of Frampton’s unfinished *Magellan* cycle, which the filmmaker planned, when completed, would screen in segments over a full year with an overlapping of films between the last and first days of each new cycle (Henderson 135). The bulk of the film, the *Straits of Magellan*, would have been a series of one-minute films shown individually most days. The *Solariumagelani* were special, longer films—about 30 minutes each—marking the vernal equinox, summer solstice, autumnal equinox, and winter solstice. They include *Autumnal Equinox* (1974), shot in a slaughterhouse; *Summer Solstice* (1974), showing cows in a pasture; and *Winter Solstice*, shot in the steel mill. *Vernal Equinox* was shot, but Frampton decided to change its name and place the film at another part of the cycle. He planned to replace it with a “pornographic” new film, which he never added. He made *Matrix* (1977), a superimposition of the three *Solariumagelani* films, without the vernal equinox.

In an interview with Schott Macdonald, Frampton admitted certain problems with *Magellan*: “You can teach *Surface Tension* or *Zorns Lemma* [earlier films] because they are like the chemistry of cobalt, but if you’re going to get involved with *Magellan*, then, of course, you’re up to your eyeballs in the chemistry of dirt” (73). This points to films in the *Magellan* cycle as more difficult and less accessible than his earlier “structural” films. The continued assumption that such films are not as good as his earlier work, and somehow fail, shows that Frampton very cannily understood that film scholars would be drawn more to the “cobalt” than the “dirt.” Despite this, the series is a major project with many fascinating parts and ideas animating the whole, and has recently begun receiving the scholarly attention it deserves. For example, Michael Zyrd has recently argued that the films made for Frampton’s *Magellan* series in the latter half of the 1970s took an
increasingly ironic turn, after the Solariumagelani series was completed. However, I argue that Winter Solstice is also engaged in the basic move that Zyrd identifies in the later Magellan films, that is, the ambivalent, ironic appropriation and working through of modernist masters. Moreover, I argue that such irony, even parody, is closely tied to how the film also operates as a socially symbolic text.

Winter Solstice at once mediates the social world of its context as well as the abyss between the artist and the site he filmed. While Frampton moves almost entirely into the figural in his Solariumagelani films, the iconic qualities of the mill that he films pull him back into dialogue with history. By the figural, I return to a term used in the previous chapter, adopted by Lyotard, to refer to the sensible aspects of an abstract film, which is not readable but is able to produce meaning and effects of a different order that discourse. Even if not intended to be about the political economics and the crisis of the American steel industry, Winter Solstice solicits those problems, and its political implications are sharpened by the film’s ironic, self-reflexive nature. The film is indeed, then, a major part of what makes the Magellan series a Menippean satire, both of history and of the filmmakers’ position. Frampton’s prolific writings on photography and on film include two important themes for my reading of Winter Solstice: 1) his continued attempts to define his ‘work’ and its relation to machines, and 2) his need to symbolically kill the photographer Edward Weston, who comes across in Frampton’s writing as his obscene father conveying a related legacy of realist aestheticism.

Throughout his lectures and essays, Frampton talks about work. The script for “A Lecture” begins with, “We have come to do work that we enjoy” (193). In the “lecture,” he describes the work of the filmmaker in the third person, in which he “makes the ribbon by joining large and small bits of film together” (197). Continuing, he asserts that this work might seem dull, but “he enjoys it, this splicing of small bits of anonymous stuff” (197). Rather than make films to change “the minds and hearts of men,” he asserts that the artist “simply goes on building his ribbon of pictures, which is at least something he understands a little about” (198). He tells the story of surgeon telling his students he can only teach them if they enjoy their work, which means “cutting flesh and bone” (198). The lecture is a performance suffused with irony and subterfuge. While Frampton constructs a fantasy of the filmmaker as happy task worker, he also presents an injunction
to enjoy work that not only appears in the film lecture but also as that of a paternalist craftsman teaching his apprentices their craft.

Moreover, in “For a Metahistory of Film,” Frampton suggests that, once the object is assembled, the projector, as the machine, takes over.

The act of making a film, of physically assembling the film strip, feels somewhat like making an object […]. But at the instant the film is completed, the ‘object’ vanishes. The film strip is an elegant device for modulating standardized beams of energy. The phantom work itself transpires upon the screen as its notation is expended by a mechanical virtuoso performer, the projector. (115)

Here, the work of the filmmaker, still essentially understood as the task of assembling film, is overtaken by that of the projector, the “virtuoso performer.” The work of experimental artists, however, involves much more intellectual and affective work before, during, and after the assemblage of film than Frampton’s picture allows. Frampton, in fact, denies the otherworldliness that this fantasy entails and admits the performance demands of the filmmaker’s work when brought against real-world issues. In his famous letter to Donald Ritchie, which was part of a wider campaign to change the Museum of Modern Art’s policies about compensating artists for their films and appearances, Frampton powerfully asserts, “I have made the work” (159). The word is hardly used lightly. He demands money for appearing at the screenings because that too is work, just as much as the work of those that made the film and the technicians who developed it, who were compensated for their labor. He refuses what he sees as Ritchie’s injunction to enjoy, if that enjoyment assumes that the filmmaker does not also do work and need money.

Finally, in his writings, Frampton ties film to work in another telling way. In the “Metahistory,” Frampton writes that film comes out of a past age, in which machines “worked” (112), and calls film the “last machine,” which becomes art in its passage to obsolescence. Indeed, the end of the Age of Machines, for Frampton, corresponds to the beginning of the American avant-garde. Art ‘metabolizes’ past artifacts once needed for survival. Film, he writes,

could utterly engulf and digest the whole substance of the Age of Machines (machines and all) and finally supplant the entirety with its illusory flesh. Having devoured all else, the film machine is the lone survivor. (115)
Frampton thus describe his films as post-“work,” or post-industrial. He sees avant-garde film as a sign of this post-industrial turn. Moreover, post-industrial film is described as a monster, which will “digest” the artifacts of the past, leaving only the film’s “illusory flesh.” No film in the *Magellan* series more than *Winter Solstice* takes up the ambivalence about film suggested in this passage, by literally placing the machinery of film in a steel mill, one of the most iconic of industrial sites.

Frampton’s metaphor of avant-garde film as a great maw connects Frampton’s ambivalence toward avant-garde film to his great ambivalence about Edward Weston, the photographer who Frampton chose as a “father figure” when he began as a photographer (Video 185). Frampton describes Weston as a great “carnal parent,” but, as an “intellectual parent,” more like “one of those frowning, humorless fathers who teaches his progeny a trade and then prevents him from practicing it by blackballing them in the union” (“Impromptu” 86). Frampton’s writings on Weston present the picture that, while Frampton struggled with and against the eroticism of Weston’s work, he could not avoid it either as a photographer or as a filmmaker. Frampton describe Weston’s perverse eroticism as “detactilized,” allowing not so much pleasure as the “jouissance […]” that arrives when, with a certain indrawing of breath, we suddenly comprehend that there are ecstasies of restraint as well as ecstasies of abandon” (“Impromptu” 75). He writes that Weston was “propelled toward the sexualization, the genitalization even, of everything in sight” (79). Weston’s prolific production—Frampton often notes the number of photographs he made—also suggests a desire to “gradually [replace] the space of the given world with the inventory of spaces of all the photographs he has made” (74).

This description is very much like the devouring desire of cinema described above. In a 1975 essay on photography, Frampton further develops his concern for photography’s aestheticism. He writes:

> Now, to aestheticize the world, and one’s experience of it, is to embrace, as if unknowingly, a peculiarly insipid and perverse notion of that dynamic mode of conscious activity that we call, generically, art. […] Aestheticism distances experience, objectifies it, simplifies it […] in the furtherance of a passivity that we understand to be symptomatic of alienation. […] The history of still photography […] has been a history of aestheticism. (“Fict…” 96)
This aestheticism, which distances experience and leads to a passivity tied to alienation, finds its exemplar in Weston’s “concupiscent lifework” (97). Frampton criticizes the aestheticism that seems inextricably part of his craft of photography, and by extension, film. It leads to a passive spectatorship of experience. This is very much like David James’ critique of the “alienated aesthetic,” but with resonances also for the passive, alienated experience of workers witnessing corporate disinvestment without an ability to intervene, as described by Michel Aglietta and David Harvey. This, Frampton articulates in this way a historical aporia of the 1970s.

In part, *Magellan* is a history of film, for which the missing pieces of that history sometimes need to be remade. In his essay “For a Metahistory for Film,” Frampton posits the *Magellan* series as a particular kind of history, or a “metahistory,” rather than what he calls the “mechanistic historicism” ushered in by Enlightenment turn. As he tells it, this turn displaced the era of metahistories—histories made up of “concatenated” events as an “open set of rational fictions” that are more about perception and experience than chronology or causality (113). In his interview with Bill Simon, Frampton describes *Magellan* as including “everything from homage and imitation and retesting corroboration [...] to literal workings-out and speculations-in-practice upon suggestions that were made a very long time ago.” Moreover, he continues that “nothing tickles [him] pinker than to take a suggestion literally and seek the consequences of the working out of a literal reading in detail” (“Talking” 241). *Winter Solstice*, as a metahistory, looks back to a specific moment in Weston’s development story, his 1922 trip to the Armco steel mill (Weston 1: 8). Weston described the event in his Daybooks as a strong influence in his move away from pictorialist photography toward realism (2: 40).

Weston’s Daybooks also include one of his “commandments,” which Frampton felt preempted work: “[T]he camera should be used for the recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh” (Weston 1: 55). In *Winter Solstice*, we have the ‘literal working-out’ of the marriage of steel and flesh in what amounts to an extended joke: a pornography of production. In this way, *Winter Solstice* fulfilled the pornographic function of the missing *Vernal Equinox*. Frampton noted:
There are those who have held that Winter Solstice, the steel mill film, is somewhat pornographic. I consider it an erotic film myself, almost inescapably so. [...] It’s also true, by the way, that given presumably a variety of options about how steel can be worked, the culture has chosen a particularly phallic technology. It was other men, other dreamers upon the phallus than myself, who built steel mills and inscribed that suggestion in there. (“Talking” 240)

This erotic impression is very important to reading the film as parodic and socially symbolic, as will be discussed below.

For Winter Solstice, Frampton was able to get beautiful, surprisingly intimate, images of steel production. Intimate, that is, with the material world—the workers are largely absent, though at times, glimpses of them are caught on the dark edges of the frames, and in the brief, punctuating shots of spaces headed outside the mill. Frampton stays close to the center of steel production in and around the open-hearth furnaces and rolling mill. The camera’s constant movement works in dialogue with the energy of the fire and molten metal. The different surfaces, which are visible as variations of yellows and reds, are emphasized by the closely held camera. The images are abstract and fragmented, but repetition gradually orients the viewer to the relatively small number of things represented that make up the film’s vocabulary. These images include: the furnace peeping hole and tapping holes, ladles overflowing with steel and dripping slag, and the ingots passing by on conveyors, cranes and into presses. While a recurring image, almost an anchor, the open-hearth furnace peeping hole dramatically changes throughout the film, at times barely glowing, bluish, and at other times pouring with fire. In this way, Frampton catches the changes in light and intensity of the peeing hole in the front, as well as the emergence of molten metal from the tap hole on the other side. The peeping hole also seems to multiply—shots move from showing one hole, to two, then panning quickly, or editing multiple pans, to show a whole series in a blur, which resembles a map of the moon at different phases of the year. Sparks coming from ladles are shown with their source and then separated, so that the frame becomes filled with glowing lines, which look as if they have been etched into the black leader. Finally, the camera follows lines of streaming metal and the floating of ingots on cranes.

The editing never allows a movement to finish. Unlike Industrial Britain, in which a single ingot carried by a crane floats into the darkness, Winter Solstice includes multiple shots of such ingots without ever mapping a complete trajectory. Moreover, by
focusing on the ingot going into and out of the soaking pit, Frampton captures steel in a state in-between liquid and solid. That in-between quality and the jerking of the camera create an image very different from the smooth path of Grierson’s ingot. Some of the most striking images are those of the bottom of an ingot, still partly molten, emerging from the soaking pits, with glowing red and yellow stalactites forming on what otherwise looks smooth and solid. Shots of the soaking and reheating of steel plates in a rolling machine also allow for striking images of steel that looks like viscous light streaming in lines.

The figural is a key component of this film, as the displays of fire and molten metal punctuate the proto-narrative of the industrial process with uniquely imagistic eruptions. Lyotard described this type of filmmaking, which operates against the productivity of discourse, as “pyrotechnics.” In his ‘Acinema’ (1973) essay, Lyotard praised works of art for simulating “the sterile consumption of energies in jouissance,” which freed them from the productivity of capitalism (171). Winter Solstice travesties this idea of art insofar as travesty appropriately describes the sexual punning at work in the images and rhythms of shots—from the dripping slag, to the explosions of the furnace and plates moving in and out. The sexual punning is a key impression of the film, due not only to its images but also to its rhythmic cycling of them. For example, about four minutes in, the film has already cycled through its central images. After a series of almost static shots of glowing holes, shots are punctuated with a flash of light. These are images of a slab moving in and out of the press, held onto for the entire act, as the camera moves back and forth; two furnace holes glowing; and a billet moving horizontally. The editing then speeds up, including very brief shots of the tapping hole and an ingot being put into the soaking pit, to then rest on the ladle overflowing with sparks. Here we get the first sustained shot of the sparks moving from their source in the ladle and out again, which is then followed by slag dripping onto the floor. The sequence ends with a shot of black leader and a return to a quiet furnace peeping hole. From this point forward, the film’s vocabulary is set, and repeats in different cycles for another twenty-five minutes.

Especially in the last ten minutes until about three minutes to the end, a pattern takes shape of the ingots and billets in rollers, punctuated by furnace holes glowing and the spectacles of steel pouring into ladles and molds. The editing sets up shots that differ in
direction, position in the frame, and intensity. It is no mistake that Frampton noted *Winter Solstice* as “an erotic film, almost inescapably so” (“Talking” 240). Subsequent watching certainly bears this out.

Although Frampton’s work here is quite abstract, its location in the mill pulls it into dialogue with US history. In *Winter Solstice*, figural pyrotechnics are not naively created, nor simply the work of an alienated aesthete, but, in fact, parody the historical experience of US industry in the 1970s, particularly the steel industry’s destructive overproduction and workers’ alienation caused by this pointless production and the weakening ties between them and the maneuvers of US Steel. As mentioned earlier, *Winter Solstice*, as the marriage of steel and flesh, is the “literal working out” of a perversion of one of Edward Weston’s commandments, in what amounts to an extended joke—steel going all night on the longest night of the year. This joke, however, is made bitter when put with the social situation in and around the shop floor of Homestead Works. Frampton depicts an industry that is “punch drunk,” to use historian Judith Stein’s term, and overproductive, but whose productivity in deeply unproductive and all-consuming. Moreover, the images of production do not add up to a coherent picture, but rather a cycle of production and consumption outside reason. The quick cycling through thus captures the feelings of time-space compression theorized by David Harvey and borne out in stories of steel workers resisting increases of production, even as the industry faltered. Finally, the failure of the artist to do anything but fetishize the site of production is registered, and marks an affinity with, rather than distance from, the workers similarly looking on or engaged in non-work related reveries. There seems to be no space for people outside the financial and corporate elite to intervene. Read alongside the history of failure that defines the postindustrial turn, Frampton’s *Winter Solstice* offers an allegory of the period and the continued industrial decline until Homestead’s 1986 closing. As Frampton predicted, the film machine did devour the other machines, leaving the virtuoso performance of film and projector, or editing table, for those lucky enough to see it.
Serra’s *Steelmill/Stahlwerk* as the artist’s critique of Taylorist work

In 1977, Richard Serra filmed *Steelmill* in the Krupp Thyssen forging plant in Germany’s Ruhr Valley. Serra’s *Terminal* (1977), a controversial sculpture installed in Bochum, Germany, had been fabricated there earlier, and Serra chose the plant to make *A Building Block for Charlie Chaplin* (1977), a 70-ton forged cube, under a commission by the German National Gallery. The gallery wanted to document the making of the sculpture, but when Serra and Clara Weyergraf, a German art historian who became his wife and has served as his partner on *Steelmill* and many other projects, saw some of the footage of the team hired to make the film, they were unhappy with its approach that made the workers look like heroes (“Films” 93). They took over the project, which Serra describes as a documentary. He asserts that in making the film, “I decided that there was something worthwhile to say directly to people, and I chose devices for presenting the material that I thought could reach a large audience” (82). He also notes that, in order to be relevant, *Steelmill* spoke not of the personal, but of a “collective repressive situation” (“Films” 86). Therefore, while audiences in New York wanted to discuss the film in terms of Serra’s earlier ‘structural’ film work, he was more interested in the response of audiences in Germany, who wanted to talk directly about the “problems of industrial repression” (86). This assertion that the film is a representation of what Serra saw in the mill leads him to push against Annette Michelson’s repeated comparisons of his film to Soviet films by Eisenstein and Vertov. While both Michelson and Weyergraf claim that the celebratory Soviet films were accurate depictions of the revolutionary moment, Serra questions these claims. Indeed, he is rightly suspicious of manipulations in Vertov’s *Enthusiasm*, as discussed in Chapter One, but Serra goes even further to assert that all work in a mill must by its nature be alienated. In this way, Serra moves close to the ideology of the freedom from work provided by automation and deindustrialization that Aglietta saw forming in the 1970s (Aglietta 122-123).

Serra and Weyergraf describe the work they encountered in ways quite similar to Braverman’s account of deskilled, operative labor, as discussed in the introduction. Serra narrates his process of realizing, after a few days, that the mill workers did not identify with their work, but instead that “it was as though they were automatons which were
being worn down” (“Films” 88). He describes them as “reduced to a dehumanized function” (88) and kept “in the position of not quite knowing what they are doing” (90). The men who turned the turbine in the forging mill had “no notion of how it works, no notion of where it’s going, no real idea of what they are making. They only know that it has to be cut a certain way at a certain point” (90). Finally, he explains why the film does not do more to connect the work of the men to the finished product:

If you show someone attached to a machine without showing what he’s making, or why he’s making what he’s making, one might think that the viewpoint of the filmmaker only reinforces the tragic condition. I don’t think so. I think that is what you actually see. You see parts of people attached to machines, day in and day out. […] You see people serving machines. You see them fragmented, and you see the machines fragmented. (96)

In the interview, Serra discusses what he saw in the mill in terms of the dehumanizing experience of Taylorism as a mode of organizing work on the shop floor. The need to communicate this experience led to an aesthetic very different from Winter Solstice, even though both films deal with alienation and instability. The different aesthetic and, indeed, affect of Serra’s film may also be due to its later date. When Serra made Steelmill, in 1977, the economies of Germany and the US were fully in the downturn only hinted at earlier in the decade, when Frampton made his film. Worker unrest and antagonisms between workers and management had become worse as a result of this downturn, as Brenner and Hoerr discuss.

Steelmill/Stahlwerke structure emphasizes the split between body and mind endemic to the Taylorist shop floor, as well as the dissatisfaction of the workers perhaps caused by this division. It begins with nine minutes of interviews between Clara Weyergraf and workers in the forging plant. The screen is black, and the dialogue is translated into English through written text in the center of the screen. Weyergraf asks about the conditions in the mill, the workers’ feelings about their work, why they work, what they would rather do, and how conditions could improve. The workers respond by pointing out their problems with working conditions, including the deafening noise, accidents from burns and crushing, and the strain of switching shifts and keeping up the speed for piecework. They express ambivalence about the union and their feelings that the plant is like a prison.
Moving from the mind, or language, to the bodies involved directly in production, the film then switches to shots in the forging plant, now with ambient noise rather than dialogue. Serra described the “plot” of this section of *Steelmill*:

[The] block is introduced, it tracks down, it goes into the forge, people work on it, it’s taken out of the forge, it goes back into the oven, they burn it, it comes back into the forge, they work on it, they take it across to the other side, and they flame it, and that’s the end. (“Films” 98)

In fact, the workers are introduced before the block. The first image shows a man in profile at a machine, running a lever and watching something off-frame. The next shot shows the cube in the forge; the enormity of which is made clear in comparison to the workers who pass by in the front of the frame. The film then moves between showing the cube traveling on cranes from the furnace to the forge and back again, slowly, and the workers at different sets of machines and levers. There are two types of workers: men working levers and those on the floor, in asbestos suits, guiding the machines and, finally, welding the cube. Sequences of the first type of worker, those at the levers, emphasize the tedium and exhaustion of the work. For example, one sequence shows a man in profile rhythmically but carefully and constantly switching between a lever in the front and one to his side. Sequences involving the other type of worker, on the shop floor, emphasize the enormity of the fixed capital of the mill, as well as the difficult and dangerous work of the men of the shop floor. For example, the film frequently includes fairly static shots showing groups of workers receding to the edges or in the background, watching the cranes and machines around them work. Some of the workers are occasionally drawn into working very close to the cube and the moving parts of the mill, including parts of the floor, which dwarf them and move outside their control. In one shot, a man touches the cube and his glove quickly flames. Whereas in most films of steel production, flames are a spectacle of the material world, Serra emphasizes the intimate and painful experience of flames on the steel mill’s shop floor. Flames work similarly in the last sequence, which follows a welder who cuts off a part of the cube. However, this sequence has an added self-reflexive quality, in that the worker resembles Serra in his famous portrait slinging lead, from the late 1960s. Only one sequence calls attention to the camera’s position in relation to the work: Towards the end of the film, the camera follows the cube as it again makes its journey from furnace to forge, but this time clearly through glass from a space.
above the shop floor. The camera moves in this shot, unlike most others in the film, as it pans to follow the cube to its destination. This movement, particularly the pan, calls attention to the camera and the position of films, as a pivot point. The scene also calls attention to that point of filming as protected and above the action.

Unlike *Winter Solstice* and most other films about steel production, the light of *Steelmill* is evenly distributed, which allows the workers and the surrounding plant to remain fully visible. This makes the explosions of sparks and the glowing steel less visually spectacular than in other films, which fits with a film that wants to demythologize industrial work. This formal choice also can be understood in terms of the themes and processes Benjamin Buchloh identifies at work in Serra’s sculptures and films. Benjamin Buchloh argues that Serra’s films continued a movement in sculpture to disintegrate the object and place it into a space-time field. Buchloh connects Serra’s work to a generation of post-Minimalist artists who added ideas of process, field, and time to materials, objects, and space. This focus on process replaces the sculptural object with the “visualization of the production process itself and by the presence of sculptural materiality” (414). Along with adding process to sculpture, Serra’s work sought to break apart the relation of figure and ground. Buchloh describes this breaking apart happening in Serra’s process sculptures like *Splashin* and *Casting*, which “[decentralized] the viewers visual field in an amorphous all-over structure, in a de-differentiated distribution of sculptural masses” (418). *Steelmill*, in putting the cube into the space of the steel mill, also works to dematerialize the sculptural object. Further, the lighting and distance maintained decentralize the visual field, allowing the object to be one part of the spatial and temporal field of the mill.

Work is a central concept for Buchloh’s reading of the films as sculptural. Buchloh asserts that Serra’s films are distinctly sculptural for two reasons: their fragmentation and their focus on a real-time process. These are both distinctly tied to work. He identifies the theme of fragmentation in the early films’ focus on single acts, or tasks, like *Hand Catching Lead* or *Hands Scraping*. The second characteristic is an attention to “a task-oriented performance, which defines the films dramaturgically and limits them temporally” (421) and “an objective process involving the transformation of bodily energy and work” (422). Such a definition could also describe industrial process...
films like *Steelmill*. While he tries to keep away from metaphorical readings, he falls into such readings himself when he sees in Serra’s films “the confrontation between manual (subjective) labor power and (objective) matter and physical laws” (424). This fits Serra’s early films and art works, for which he did both the planning and the physical work of casting and splashing lead and, with groups of friends, propping up metal slabs for the Prop pieces. In the 1970s, however, Serra began moving into larger projects that required that the steel be made especially for him, which is the subject of *Steelmill*. This change in Serra’s production methods must also have an effect on his relationship to the work visualized or thematized in his art.

Douglas Crimp makes the strongest case for Serra as a materialist artist who works to challenge conditions of capital and labor. Crimp argues that Serra comes out of a radical moment in art in the late 1960s, which sought to “push consciousness back onto itself and the real-world conditions that ground consciousness” (154, my emphasis). Crimp argues that Serra’s work, from the beginning, “incorporated important components of a materialist critique [including] attention to the processes and divisions of labor” (157). According to Crimp, Serra demystifies the role of the artist by creating works that involve many different laborers, especially riggers. He challenges the space of museums by creating works that stretch their limits. Finally, he continually moves outside of gallery and museum spaces to create confrontations. These site-specific, outside works especially, Crimp argues, are not about the sculptor but about the work of production. Crimp uses *Terminal* to prove Serra’s art is critical to the point of being irreconcilable to liberalism. *Terminal* was placed in the center of Bochum, a steel town, and made in the same mill as *Berlin Block*. It’s a set of four steel trapezoidal slabs propped together. The Christian Democratic Party criticized it, and turned it into a campaign platform, because it didn’t offer anything positive for the steelworkers to identify with. Crimp sees hidden in this demand “the requirement that the artist symbolically reconcile the steelworkers to the brutal working conditions to which they are subjected” (173). He writes:

Instead, Serra presents the steelworkers with the very product of their alienated labor, untransformed into any symbol at all. If the workers are then repelled and heap scorn on *Terminal*, it is because they are already alienated from the material; for although they produced those steel plates or material like them, they never owned
them; the workers have no reason whatsoever to take pride in or identify with any steel product. (173)
In this way, site-specificity is key to Serra’s sculptures, but the specificity of these sites is their brutal historicity, full of contradictions and antagonism.

In these arguments, Crimp cites Serra from his essay on *Sight Point Road*, and largely accepts the artist’s claims. Serra began making these claims most emphatically in the 1980s, in the short essays “Extended Notes from Site Point Road” (1985), and ‘Weight” (1988). In the former essay, Serra describes his work as leading him out of the studio, allowing him to become “an active producer” (“Extended” 169). He argues that his work reveals its construction, demythologizes the role of the artist, and counters monumentality (169-170). In “Weight,” he tells the story of watching the launching of a boat, claiming it as central to his work. He also declares an identity with Vulcan and his “tireless labor at the bottom of a smoking crater” (184). It’s important that examples of Serra making such claims so boldly started in the 1980s, and might not entirely reflect the projects of his earlier works and films. In *Steelmill* especially, he more carefully preserves the distance and tension between his role and that of the workers.

Christopher Bedford has caustically challenged the arguments made by Serra about his work, and closely followed by Crimp. He raises the contradictions in Serra’s own work. Bedford argues that Serra’s steel sculptures, while abstract, carry with them cultural and historical meanings, especially a nostalgia for the steel industry and the manly, heroic laborer. He sees the sculptures as a kind of “labor fetishism” (81) that is augmented by Serra’s self-constructed persona, which asserts his masculinity, affinities with manual labor, and working-class associations. Bedford denies that the focus on process pushes attention away from the artist, and instead claims, “It is Serra the artist who commands the viewers ‘awe and wonder’ at his display of power and virtuosity” (79). Against Serra’s claims, Bedford sees the artist as “the ultimate referent” of his work (82). Moreover, he outlines the process that usually accompanies Serra’s commissions more recently and sees in this not so much Serra acting even as a foreman, but instead as the chief executive of a corporation—drafting plans from a site separate from production and letting others produce it (82). He criticizes *Terminal*, arguing that if *Terminal* is about alienation, such alienation could only be compounded when confronting a work that stands as a testimonial “to the division between the worker who
produces steel for an hourly wage and the artist who has steel fabricated, attaches his name to the structure, calls it a work of art, and reaps the financial rewards” (83). Serra’s work has only “widened and further problematized the gap between the [laborer] and the artist” (84).

Bedford goes too far in criticizing the whole of Serra’s career based on the most recent ways in which he has been able to work. However, the criticisms cannot be ignored. I argue that Steelmill already engages with the contradictions forming in Serra’s work between active critique of labor divisions and the acquiescence to the position of celebrity sculptor and artist-CEO. According to Serra, the earliest film, Hand Catching Lead, came out of trying to capture the experience of the work done by himself and his collaborators, including Phillip Glass, for pieces like One-Ton Prop (House of Cards) (“Films” 66). For the Skullcracker Series (1969), Serra began to work with a crane and riggers, but still used already manufactured pieces or waste materials (“Rigging” 8). The piece made in Steelmill, Berlin Block for Charlie Chaplin, was an enormous project for the mill, unlike earlier pieces. It was a solid, forged cube that needed to be routinely reheated due to its mass and Serra’s specifications for the piece. Such pieces required Serra to become involved in the work of mills, but in a managerial position, overlooking the work. Steelmill is a record of this confrontation, as well as a document of the deteriorating conditions on shop floors in the US and Germany.

While Steelmill was filmed in Germany, Serra’s film takes part in a historical discourse about Taylorism from the 1970s, centered in the United States. More than Frampton’s films, Serra’s film captures the experience of American workers as described by Braverman, Aglietta, and Hoerr. Steelmill’s lack of continuity echoes the Taylorist organization of work, which separates tasks so workers have difficulty comprehending the whole process. The sequences of the men at levers especially communicate the combination of tedium and pressure that made the work so difficult. In Steelmill, unlike in later documentaries and interviews, Serra does little to try to avoid implicating himself. The film does not show him descending into the forge to caliper the edges, as he reports doing in “Rigging.” Instead, the camera maintains a distance, at time calling attention to its position perched above the shop floor. His position is managerial, and the workers, especially his welding double at the end, look back at the camera with no signs of affinity
or camaraderie for him. Again, even if Serra did not intend it, this film does present a kind of self-criticism or at least opens the question that otherwise could have been elided entirely.

Both *Winter Solstice* and *Steelmill* work productively in dialogue with the history of steel in the 1970s, and both also call attention to the failure of the artist, perhaps the historically conditioned failure, in that economic crisis. Frampton’s *Winter Solstice* is arguably overly aesthetic, when compared to Serra’s film. However, when placed in the context of Frampton’s work and writings, as well as the overall *Magellan* series, I argue that *Winter Solstice* has a more nuanced critique, as a parody of aestheticism, as well as a parody of the “punch drunk” overproduction of the US economy in the 1970s, as it headed toward a decades-long downturn. Serra’s *Steelmill* is more directly critical of the conditions of work experienced by steelworkers in Europe and the US, and becoming worse in the 1970s. Serra avoids turning the work of the shop floor into spectacle. However, the position of the filmmaker is not called into question in the same way as in Frampton’s film. Arguably, *Steelmill* marks the beginning of Serra’s position as the artist as manager or CEO, without drawing out the implications of this position. However, this position risks judging the film based on Serra’s later work, which would be unfair. Both films, perhaps more fairly, call attention both to the work on shop floors in steel production, and to the Taylorist division of work. They also position themselves as both in a managerial position and as aligned with the workers they watch, as least insofar as they experience their position as implicated in the “formulas” they critique. This ambivalence and distance captures an important affect over the problem of positionality and intervention captured by Frampton when he notes the irreconcilable abyss he felt between himself and Dziga Vertov. This abyss could only grow as the mills closed down, leaving only ruins on the US landscape of production.
Notes

1 In The Political Unconscious, Fredric Jameson argues that any literary text can be read as a socially symbolic act, or “a symbolic meditation on the destiny of the community” (76), due to the inextricable position of culture within the social world. However, some texts seem to work better in this regard than other, as can be discerned from his use of 19th century British and modernist literature that readily connect to the history of colonialism in particular. Similarly, while I suppose all of Frampton’s and Serra’s films could be read as socially symbolic of historical events and their position, Winter Solstice and Steelmill are particularly open to this interpretation, due to the content and meaning.


3 In this quote, Serra describes the “soldiering” of fellow riveters, who would find ways to fit unofficial breaks into the work. Serra also describes the riveting in ways reminiscent of Ivens’s Komsomol in particular. He worked on the Crown-Zellerbach Building in San Francisco for Bethlehem Steel. He tell Michelson: “I was on a bucker, which is the other end of a rivet gang; the hot steel would be thrown up and we’d catch it and put it in a hole, and what they can a buck, or the bull, would compress the rivet on the other end to make its head. At the end of the day they would go around with a ball-peen hammer and hit the heads and listen to the sound to determine if there are any that are put in wrong or otherwise defective” (95-96).

4 In And the Wolf Finally Came, John Hoerr writes about his experiences as a college student from a working class background returning to the mills for a summer job in the 1950s, about a decade before Frampton and Serra were doing the same type of work (299-312).

5 Contentual is an odd term. Defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, it simply means, “belonging to or dealing with content.”

6 Examples include the film surveys of Paul Arthur and James Peterson, as well as the majority of studies of Frampton, including Michael Zyrd’s scholarship. Film scholarship that does take up the intersections of avant-garde film and politics has focused on the politics of queer and feminist identity, including the work of Juan Antonio Suarez and Lauren Rabinovitz.

7 Michel Aglietta also discussed the crisis of Taylorism in the US. For Aglietta, challenges to Taylorism could be found in reactions against the conditions of production that occurred outside or against the unions in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the rejection of contracts by workers in the 1960s particularly in basic industries like automobiles and steel (198).

8 In the 1970s, Dixon worked in the Carnegie Institute Museum of Art film program, and had significant connections with Pittsburgh elites through her cultural
work. Robert Haller’s *Crossroads: Avant-garde film in Pittsburgh in the 1970s* provides a full account of Sally Dixon’s role in that period and her career.


10 Maureen Turim made this point about Frampton’s *Solariumagelani* films in her 1978 *Abstraction in Avant-Garde Film* (77-78).

11 See Chapter One for a fuller definition of the figural. Quickly, the figural of an aesthetic text is that “which is not to be read, but to be seen [or heard]” (Lyotard “Taking the Side” 34). The figural is both mutually dependent on and in contradistinction to discourse, or language or representation that signifies. Moreover, the ‘seen’ qualities are not only appealing, but also can cause “quakes” in the discourse that produce meaning, and that open the text to exterior forces acting on it. This can be registered as images, sounds, or editing techniques.

12 The peeping hole is used to provide a view into the furnace and a means by which to take samples. Peeping holes are a repeated image in the educational films discussed in Chapter Two, since the peeping hole allowed workers to insert instruments for exact readings and take samples for the lab.

13 “Neo-Fordism, like Fordism itself, is based on an organizing principle of the forces of production dictated by the needs of capitalist management of the work collective. The new complex of productive forces is automatic production control or automation; the principle of work organization now in embryo is known as the recomposition of tasks. The combination of these two lines of development has unleashed the most shameless propaganda about the liberation of man from work. It is certainly possible that automation does contain possibilities, which will eventually, in the very long run, lead mere operative work in production to disappear. But one thing is sure here and now. These possibilities will have no chance of being realized unless capitalist relations of production are abolished” (Aglietta 122-123).

14 Frampton’s *Magellan* also echoes previous genres as described by Sitney in *Visionary Film*. In a grant statement, Frampton wrote that *Magellan* would “constitute a ‘serial,’ or long work in instalments, using the elements of *peripeteia* or discovery customary to the serial mode.” He offered a brief narrative for the work: “During his five-year voyage, Magellan trespasses (alive and dead) upon every psycholinguistic ‘time zone,’ circumambulating the whole of human experience as a kind of somnambulist” (226). The somnambulist was a central figure for the trance film, the earliest genre of postwar avant-garde film discussed by Sitney, who notes that “its quest figure is either a dreamer or in a mad or visionary state” (131). *Magellan* also carries resonances with the Romantic tradition described by Sitney in its interest in life and death, pagan cycle, archetypes, and visionary journeys.

15 Bedford takes the phrase “awe and wonder” from Serra’s essay ‘Weight,’ in which he describes the formative childhood experience of seeing a ship launch and the collective labor needed to make it happen.

In the last chapter, I looked at how 1970s experimental film represented steel mills during the early stages of significant economic change. I argued that the films by Hollis Frampton and Richard Serra also reflected the uneasy relationship between the filmmakers and their class position and the subjects they filmed. In this chapter, I further move into realms outside explicit discourse in the form of popular Hollywood film. I also move to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when no one could any longer deny that the economy had changed. Indeed, as David Harvey writes in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, by the 1980s, it had become “dangerous to pretend nothing [had] changed, when the facts of deindustrialization and of plant relocation, of more flexible manning practices and labor markets, of automation and product innovation, [stared] most workers in the face” (191).

In order to examine how late twentieth-century Hollywood responded to economic change, I look at three mainstream films that use steel mills as the backdrop for key narrative sequences: *Robocop* (1987), *Black Rain* (1989), and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991). The two science-fiction films, *Robocop* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (or *T2*), have received a great deal of scholarly attention as reflexive and socially anxious texts, but, in this chapter, I emphasize the overlooked role of steel mills in their most affect-laden scenes of death, revenge, and self-sacrifice. *Black Rain* is not a dystopia *per se*, but it has significant connections to these two films and it also turns to a steel mill for one of its most spectacular fight sequences. These three films all used recently abandoned US steel mills for filming, but none name the sites or explicitly engage with their recent history. The mills instead stand in as spectacular markers for an industrial past—called “the old mill,” for example in *Robocop*—or for perverse, alienated production.

While these films do not call on the history of the mills used, history can be productively brought into their analysis. For *Robocop*, the recently closed Wheeling-
Pennsylvania steel mill in Monessen, PA serves as the site where Officer Murphy—later Robocop—dies, hides out, and kills his murderers. Filmmakers used the closed Kaiser Steel mill in Fontana, California to film fight sequences for *Black Rain* and *T2*. Both mills had only recently been abandoned in an intense wave of steel mill closings, which extended from the late 1970s through the 1980s. The mills, especially the one in Monessen used in *Robocop*, had been retrenched, cut back, and under threat for decades, but the closings were still devastating economically and emotionally to the workers and the surrounding areas. They were in the process of shutting down and clearing out as filming took place. In part, the producers’ use of the steel mills as background, while they were still closing or had just closed, is simply the result of vulture-like economizing on the part of the makers. However, the three films, as many film scholars have already noted, are also highly reflexive texts engaged with contemporary economic anxieties and despair. While the recent history of the mills does not explicitly enter the narrative of these films, the inclusion of the mills—and the criminals, cyborgs, and heroes running through them—encourages new readings of the films as even more responsive to contemporary economic change than noted before.

In his essay, “Reification and Mass Culture,” Jameson adds Hollywood blockbusters to his career-long development of the idea of texts as cognitive maps: that is, as meditations of the social world that attempt to represent the totality. Jameson, in this essay, focuses on texts as they attempt the ideological closure of real contradictions. Viewed through this lens, a Hollywood film can be interpreted for its “transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies that must have some effective presence [...] in order subsequently to be ‘managed’ or repressed” (33-34). He argues that the films *Jaws* and *The Godfather* tap “genuine social and historical content” and then repress and displace that content through imaginary resolutions (39). This often happens with the help of polysemous figures, like the shark in *Jaws*, which embody social anxieties but displace them onto the struggle with natural, or unnatural, forces. Indeed, figures with such functions have a central place in 1980s Hollywood films, particularly in cyborgs where social and economic anxieties are displaced onto a man-machine battle.
This approach to mass culture texts as tapping “social and historical content,” and, thus, as reflexive of their economic context is very useful when dealing with popular 1980s Hollywood film. This is especially true for those films that open up to the social world through their plots, themes, characters, or mise-en-scène. But what kind of “transformational work” do these films achieve? And for whom do they accomplish this work? Fred Glass identifies films like *Blade Runner* (1982), *Terminator* (1984), and *Robocop* as part of a subset of 1980s dystopian science fiction films, which he called “New Bad Future” films [NBF]. While not all my films fit into his category, Glass’s description of what they do applies to all three. NBF films share a focus on the interpenetration of humans and technology, a critical approach to the social and political world, and cynicism regarding any alternative or better future (11). They resonate with audiences, according to Glass, due to this combination of a critique of capitalism and cynicism towards the future. The films often include cyborg figures that act as “cultural transitional objects”; that is, they allow “social anxiety to be expressed and defended simultaneously”—much like the shark in *Jaws*. In a follow up to the central essay on NBF, he more clearly sets out the historical context:

NBF [New Bad Future] films provide viewers with an unconscious vehicle for dealing with collective issues raised by transition, under capitalist control, from a relatively stable national, mechanical/industrial society to a new and uncertain transitional information technology order. The social anxiety of job dislocation through the wanton destruction of the old industrial base of the American economy is compounded by the felt experience of millions of workers who have to retool themselves to survive. (“Totally Recalling Arnold” 3)

He argues that the stories promise that people can “retool” and survive the changes, but also include enough in the story to make possible critical readings of their social world. However, Glass finally decides that the films are more problematic than anything else, since the primary audience, which he argues are working class male teenagers, easily lose the leftist political message in the films’ spectacle and cynicism.

I don’t doubt that working-class teenagers, along with teenagers from other class positions, enjoyed *Robocop*, *T2*, and other dystopian science-fiction films of the period. Yet the dynamics and contradictions of these two films, as well as *Black Rain*, can be more fully explored by considering a different class identification—one that is middle
class and not working class. Glass asserts that one of the differences between 1980s science fiction and their 1950s predecessors is that the former sought wider audiences and, thus, brought together “older intellectuals and working-class youth” (“New” 8). He further suggests that the films and their cyborg figures act as cultural transitional objects for these different groups and allows them to read and invest in them differently (“New” 9). However, he too easily splits the two groups, the intellectuals and working-class youth with two responses: reflexive cultural critique versus regressive identification. Instead, in this chapter, I argue that Robocop, T2, and Black Rain are transitional objects for and about the professional middle class, and reflect the anxieties and fantasies of this group in the transitional period out of Fordism. Thus, they are cognitive maps from the position of the professional middle class. This makes sense of an important split noted by Glass, in which the films are both critical of capital and cynical of any collective social change. This is almost the definition of the professional middle class, “between labor and capital.”¹ Thus, “film-savvy” audiences too had access to regressive identification, as well as the option for cultural critique. Moreover, working class audiences, who might more quickly recognize the industrial backgrounds as historical spaces, would certainly have access to critique, not only of the economic situation mediated by the films, but also of the anxious professional middle class position at their center.

Derek Nystrom’s study of 1970s Hollywood films informs my approach to these films as cognitive map for and about the position of the professional middle class. In Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men, Nystrom argues that films of the 1970s included working-class characters in stories that were made by and for the middle class. These films acted as sites where the “professional middle class [(mis)recognized] itself in representations of the working-class” (14). He connects the films’ content and position toward that content to changes in Hollywood, as unions were pushed out, flexible production became the norm, and package production increased the power of creative talent and dealmakers. The 1980s and early 1990s films discussed here logically extend from the films of Nystrom’s study. The working-class in 1970s films are often presented as impossibly stuck in the past, unable to change, and thus without a future. By the 1980s films, they had become ghosts. The films from the 1980s and 1990s show one of the key sites of working-class power emptied of workers, either abandoned or running like a
ghost mill. Industrial workers had used their organization in and around these sites to reach middle class positions in the mid-twentieth century, which were then dismantled through the 1970s and 1980s. The Hollywood films *Black Rain*, *Robocop*, and *T2* return to these industrial sites to work out the anxieties, class-guilt, and fantasies most explicitly tied to those in a class position who could make the leap required by economic change.

This does not mean that the professional middle class made up the actual audiences of films shown, but instead that the films most effectively replicate and respond to economic changes from an assumption of the position of this middle class in the process of restructuring and cutting ties to industrial workers. As Steven High notes, deindustrialization and the related economic changes pushed industrial workers to the cultural periphery (25). While the films might focus on the middle class as their subjects and anxious audiences, their approaches and meanings are very different because class positions and mass culture are contradictory formations. Moreover, I hope to show in the next section that these films respond not so much to transition as catastrophe during the consolidation of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s.

### The Neoliberal Catastrophe

According to Lash and Urry, several late 20th century nations saw a change from organized to disorganized capital: that is, from capital organized on a national scale, with industrial unions and firms, to capital working on an global scale increasingly around service and finance. In fact, the United States only fully organized, from the bottom as well as the top, in the 1930s, and soon after began the process of disorganization. However, “disorganized” capital is really a reorganization of capital “from above”: dispersing production and labor, hollowing out companies, and creating new flows of capital (*End 300*). As part of this process, companies shifted from producing identifiable, distinctive products and being “nationally owned and tied to a country” to being “polycentric,” with weakened attachments to any single economy (*End 89-90, 200*).

David Harvey also describes a shift in capitalist accumulation and regulation in the late 20th century, but avoids the use of “disorganized” to describe the new economic situation. Harvey argues that capitalism became, in fact, more organized in this dispersal, especially due to the deregulation of global finance and new telecommunications (*Condition 159*). He terms the new configuration of capital “flexible accumulation,”
which is a system that “rests on flexibility with respect to labor processes, labor markets, products, and patterns of consumption” (147). New forms of production and organization, in small batches or through subcontracting, changed how businesses worked. While greater flexibility of work might have some advantages, Harvey is clear that, overall, it hurt workers. David Harvey argues that the mobility of capital as a form of class struggle is one of the “leitmotifs” of flexible accumulation (294). As one example of how mobility informs class struggle, and how the balance of power has significantly shifted, he compares the early power of the peripatetic skilled iron puddler to that of the lack of power of an indebted homeowner (234). He makes this point even more clearly in A Brief History of Neoliberalism: “The social mobility of capital permits it to dominate a global labor force whose own mobility is constrained” (“Brief” 170). This is particularly apposite for this chapter, as many unemployed steelworkers in areas like Monessen, PA and Fontana, CA found their houses un-sellable in the catastrophe (Bluestone 102-104; Zippay).

In A Brief History of Neoliberalism, Harvey more emphatically ties the changes of capital’s configuration to projects to redistribute wealth upwards. According to Harvey, neoliberalism, as a set of practices and justifications for the concentration of wealth, took shape in the late 1970s and cemented its hegemony in the 1990s. The term denotes a return to the tenets of liberalism via monetarism, deregulation, privatization, tax cuts, and withdrawal of the state from social provisions. While Harvey admits that the 1970s crisis of Keynesianism was real, he argues that neoliberalism was not its necessary answer. In fact, if neoliberalism’s goal was to revive the economy, then it has failed; however, if its only goal was “boosting the rich” (19), then it has been wildly successful. Harvey places blame for the recessionary period of the 1980s, which closed factories and weakened the position of workers, on the shift in economic focus from full employment to quelling inflation “no matter what the consequences” (23). He calls the 1980s a “lost decade” due to its low economic growth, increased inequality, and decreased quality of life due to cutbacks in expenditures for social services and infrastructure (88).

This period of economic transition was, of course, marked by deindustrialization. Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison provide the most commonly used definition of deindustrialization in The Deindustrialization of America: “widespread systematic
disinvestment in the nation’s productive capacity” (6). Bluestone and Harrison find signs of deindustrialization in aging capital stock, plant closings and transfers, and the “diversion of investment” into other industries or to other countries (6). They point especially to the move from productive investment in “the basic industries of the country” to unproductive speculation (6). They describe the different and uneven ways industries de-industrialize: by diversifying and shifting profits; by buying industrial firms and “milking” them for the benefit of the conglomerate; by selling and moving equipment; and by cutting back and closing down facilities (7). Their definition emphasizes the fact that deindustrialization is a conscious decision made by historical agents. They also deny claims that the process is one of Hayekian “creative destruction” since its effects are irrational, especially in labor markets where many able workers remain underemployed for years (11). Rather than a new stage of capital, the authors see deindustrialization as a tactic aided by new technology and used by conglomerates during the downturn of the 1970s to shore up increasingly mobile capital (18). This process, along with “shattering reductions in the social safety net” had devastating effects beyond anything that could be claimed to be economically rational (81).

The intense retrenchment of the American steel industry was one of the major events in the processes described above. Although retrenchment and closing began in the 1970s, the recession of 1980 and 1981 accelerated the devastating wave of plant closings, consolidation, and layoffs. The 1977 “domestic steel crisis,” exacerbated by the economic policies of the Carter administration, set the scene for the next decade (Stein 230). Later, Ronald Reagan began his bid for presidency and his initial years governing by promising to bring back the steel industry, but the influence of supply-side economics led to policies that had devastating effects on the industry, especially its workers (Harvey, “Brief” 273). Historians of the period frequently compare it to the 1930s (cf. Rogers, Warren, Stein, Hinshaw). However, unlike the 1930s, the business community was not cohesive in its interests, and the government was not interested in the industry or its workers. Even when the economy improved in other sectors, the “hemorrhaging of industrial America” continued (Stein 282). The federal government, especially with an “anti-industrial” tax code in 1986, supported the move to a service, technology, and finance-based economy (Stein 277). Steel companies diversified and invested elsewhere,
often by using the money opened up by government breaks in environmental regulations and taxes, which were at least ostensibly intended to help the American steel industry reinvest in its production of steel (Hinshaw 238). For example, in 1982, US Steel bought Marathon Oil in part from money freed up by government breaks intended to help modernize mills. The acquisition of Marathon then led to increased “urgency of cutting losses in […] steel and associated divisions” (Warren 313).

Employment in steel, however, fell at a much greater rate than production, due to dramatic increases in productivity at the same time (Rogers 127). While production decreased by a quarter from 1970 to 1988, labor decreased almost 60% (152). The major technological innovations, including larger blast furnaces, continuous casting, and basic oxygen furnaces, were all “labor-saving” innovations (157). Historian of US Steel Kenneth Warren writes that US Steel made “spectacular progress in efficiency and especially labor productivity” in the 1980s (336). David Harvey makes it clear that emphasis on such technology and its full implementation, in general, in that period was an effect of the “coercive laws of competition and the conditions of class struggle endemic to capitalism” (Condition 105). The new technology “so freed surpluses of labor power” as to encourage the rise of the informal sector, the exploitation of absolute surplus value, and “the revival of domestic, familial, and paternalistic labor systems” in advanced capitalist countries (Condition 187). For example, US Steel’s mill in Gary, Indiana remains open. However, the city has been decimated by the company’s “rationalization” of its processes and new labor-saving technologies that closed parts of the mill, cut jobs, decreased man-hours required, and won concessions from labor (O’Hara).

As mentioned briefly earlier, these economic changes had devastating effects. Lash and Urry emphasize the effects of the decline of organized capital’s social structures, which created a vacuum in those areas and for anyone unable to get access into the new core industries and the professional middle-class. Many of those who would have been working class, or even industrial middle class, became part of the service underclass. The “losers,” or those excluded from the new system, are especially those for whom social structures were not replaced (Economies 143). Lash and Urry note a “structural downward mobility for substantial sections of the organized-capitalist
working class” and a new hierarchy of workers made up of the professional middle-class (often engaged in FIRE industries—finance, insurance, and real estate), a small, weak working-class, and the new lower class often engaged in informal service work (145-146).

Bluestone and Harrison, and Allison Zippay provide evidence of the effects on displaced workers and their communities. Both seek to counter the common-sense ideas that workers without jobs should just move somewhere else, and if they don’t, somehow deserve to remain unemployed or underemployed. Bluestone and Harrison point to the prohibitive costs of moving, both direct and indirect, for many former steelworkers, who often live in newly depressed areas with lowering property values. Zippay also points out the difficulties of selling a house in such areas (87). In her study of displaced steelworkers in the Shenango Valley, Allison Zippay also counters assumptions that workers would be reabsorbed by new industries or the service sector by offering evidence that many instead slide into poverty or became “working poor,” employed in low paying service jobs (16). Steel workers, according to Zippay, fared worst among the displaced manufacturing workers: they remained unemployed and, when they found jobs, worked at a reduced income and status (9). She reports former steelworkers working as janitors, security guards, teacher’s aids, fast food employees, etc. These job losses and lack of intervention by the government led to “regional pockets of unemployment”—especially in the Great Lakes and Mid-Atlantic—which made recovery and better conditions unlikely (14).

The nonfiction filmmaker Tony Buba documented one major “regional pocket,” the town of Braddock in the Mon Valley, throughout the 1970s and 1980s. He started in the 1970s making short films, now collected as the *Braddock Chronicles* (1972-1985), about his hometown Braddock in its long decline. The short films focus on eccentric characters and spaces in the town, like J. Roy, the oft-failed entrepreneur who holds onto a self-help, “think and grow rich,” ideology; Betty’s Corner Café, a local bar; and Sal, a charismatic, middle-aged hustler. While Buba’s company, Braddock Films, describes the films as “portraits and vignettes of the stubborn signs of life in a dying milltown,” the films document a still living town around and behind the oddball characters (“The Films”). Conversely, Buba’s most well known documentary, *Lightning Over Braddock*
(1988), shows an emptied out Braddock, in full economic and social collapse. In this film, Buba combines documentary with scripted scenes and brings back figures from his shorts—like Sal—to perform themselves in an imagined post-script to the Chronicles’ success. Critics and scholars have picked up Lightning Over Braddock as a self-reflexive and postmodern documentary, but the film is less a statement about how reality cannot be known and more a means to question Buba’s role after the collapse.

The most interesting transition film in the Chronicles is not “Sweet Sal,” but “Mill Hunk Herald” (1981) documenting the socialist, steelworker magazine of the same name that was part of the late 1970s efflorescence of radical organizing (Hinshaw 241). The film documents the Herald organizers sympathetically, and switches to fantasy when Steve Pellegrino, one of the organizers, plays “Jumping Jack Flash” on his accordion and turns the Mill Hunk party into a music video. Here, like Lightning, fantasy works with reality dialectically, without either one cancelling the other. In Lightning, Buba does not leave his documentary interests. From the start, he captures the difference between Pittsburgh, emerging as a hi-tech postindustrial city, and Braddock. Moreover, throughout the film, he documents the series of protests preceding the destruction of the Dorothy Six furnace in the US Steel mill in Duquesne, PA. However, the film also follows the fictional plot of Buba offered money to make an “ethnic detective story” in Braddock, starring Sal. In voiceover, he describes the type of film he would make, which would use industrial ruins as “the stereotypical backdrop of a disappearing working-class.” Later, he includes such a scene, in which Sal burns a car on a hill overlooking an unnamed Mon Valley mill. By 1988, Buba must have also been aware of films like Robocop, which used another Mon Valley mill as backdrop. He also imagines, and shows, a music video filmed in an abandoned steel mill as another part of this possible next step in his career. Here, Buba documents how such images have entered the popular sphere as spectacle and implicates his films in this process.

The Industrial Ruin

Due to these concrete economic changes, industrial ruins, including abandoned steel mills, became increasingly visible in the US and Europe in the late twentieth century, both as part of the landscape and as the background of all sorts of pop culture
texts, from film and photography to exercise tapes and music videos. Indeed, abandoned industrial sites became perhaps the most visible markers of economic transition. Some sites were dramatically wrecked, others simply abandoned. Edensor’s *Industrial Ruins* is perhaps the best-known study of the cultural uptake of industrial ruins. Edensor argues that abandoned industrial sites provide an alternative and counterpoint to the increasingly regulated, surveilled, and aestheticized spaces of post-industrial cities. He celebrates industrial ruins as a kind of commons that allows a range of leisure, play, and “encounters with the weird” (4). According to Edensor, these ruins, once regulated and ordered when in operation, are open to different types of bodily and social experiences once abandoned. He brings out the similarities between filmmakers and those who explore abandoned industrial spaces for personal sensory thrills. Edensor describes how people like to break things for fun in abandoned spaces, especially glass and containers of liquid (27). They also use the spaces as racetracks (28). Similarly, for filmmakers, such spaces are attractive sites for production because stunts, explosions, and staging cannot damage them. However, Edensor notes that the sites can exceed their intended position as a convenient background to action in films:

[Their] physical qualities can be transmitted through the screen, and their textures, atmospheres, and aesthetics can potentially undermine their incidental positioning as spectacular, visually apprehended stage sets. (42)

I agree with Edensor that these sites can “undermine,” or exceed, their seemingly “incidental positioning.” However, I argue that the history of these sites remains an important component in their reflexive cultural uptake in contrast to Edensor’s focus on the ruins’ tactile unruliness.

Edensor describes how sites get used once abandoned by industrial production. In his celebration, he refuses to examine history and even tries to make this a virtue. Ruins, he argues, allow the explorer—who only has knowledge of industrial work from perhaps a familial past—to create his own stories and interpretations of what is essentially unknowable and ambiguous. Edensor describes the abandoned mills as filled with ghosts from the past that are felt but that remain “inarticulate” and phantom traces of some broad industrial past (149). Ruins also remind us that there is not one way to tell any story, so we are free to make them up or somehow feel them. In the end, they point to the
“radical undecidability of the past” (164) and deny any assertions of causation or objective history. In reply to Edensor’s assertions, Steven High offers the rather pointed but justified suggestion that Edensor might have travelled down the street and talked to the people who had once inhabited these ruins. Indeed, Edensor makes it a point not to identify or provide histories for the English spaces he discusses because he wants to keep such generality in his approach. By contrast, I want to identify and name the spaces used in Hollywood films, to bring back people and history, rather than ghosts and stories.

In Corporate Wasteland, Steven High and David Lewis counter Edensor’s approach both in explicit argument and in the type of photo-essays they include in the second half of the book. In these essays, they name the sites shown, and complement the images with interviews with former workers who chart out the history before, during, and after the closings. High argues that most popular representations of industrial ruins reify the historical events that made them. For example, public events marking the destruction of industrial structures, like a blast furnace, present the event as inevitable and unstoppable. He argues that the spectacles are often part of a city’s effort to “retool for the post-industrial era” (30). They signal the triumph of post-industrialism, the impossibility of going back, and the new position of the former workers on the social, political, and cultural margins, looking on (35-39). High also criticizes Edensor’s Industrial Ruins, as an extension of the urban explorers who romanticize the ruins they explore and thus mystify the history that created them. He characterizes these explorers as white, middle-class teens and young adults what have the privilege to experience deindustrialization as the creation of new “post-industrial playgrounds” (63). High especially criticizes their “explorer” attitudes as often condescending, reminiscent of colonial exploration.

In place of narratives of progress or inevitable collapse, High holds in doubt whether the widespread, large-scale process of deindustrialization in the US was necessary. He uses his background in Canadian industrial history to show a different set of events, which saw less shutdowns and more successful resistance when they were planned. In Canada, federal and local politicians legislated for workers’ rights in relation to a relocation, which also encouraged companies to reconsider moves, and the government demanded companies guarantee jobs in exchange for help: two moves that
the US certainly did not do. Rather than cyclical history or the undecidability of the past, High encourages looking at ruins as “smoking guns of criminal neglect,” lifting a great line from an art review by Elizabeth Blackmar (18).

Edensor provides a compelling account for how industrial ruins can be used—one that helps make sense of the visceral thrill of action sequences shot in abandoned industrial spaces. However, his understanding of the ruins is problematic, due to its ahistorical approach and focus on the mills as sites of pleasure. Steven High’s account of the ruins seems much more productive for my approach. In popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s, representations of industrial ruins are rife with implicit arguments about postindustrial progress. This is certainly true for the films discussed in this chapter. However, they also can function as “smoking guns” for deindustrialism as a catastrophe precipitated by neoliberalism. The films both put forward and undermine the assumptions of progress.

A Brief Discussion of Late Twentieth-Century Hollywood

Hollywood has clear intersections with this story of economic re-structuring and catastrophe. Lash and Urry assert that the culture industries took on a newly central position in disorganized capital’s core of industries involved in business and communication services (Economies 12). Moreover, they describe changes that occurred in Hollywood as parallel to those taking place in other industries, like steel. They point out that Hollywood studios functioned more like business services in the late twentieth-century: financing, consulting on, and distributing outsourced production companies. For them, Hollywood provides an excellent example of the contradictory processes of disorganized capital since Hollywood studios both dispersed their production and maintained control through finance and distribution (23).

Lash and Urry’s short discussion in Economies of Signs and Space aligns closely with discussions by film scholars of late twentieth-century Hollywood. These scholars—including Geoffrey King, Jon Lewis, Richard Maltby, Stephen Prince, Thomas Schatz, and Janet Wasko—identify a shift in Hollywood starting in the late 1970s and continuing into the 1990s, in which studios became not only part of larger corporate entities but also part of a “landscape of large media corporations” (King 67). Hollywood studios had been the moviemaking sectors of widely diversified conglomerates since the first merger wave
in the 1960s, but in the 1980s, they became central to multimedia corporations. Jon Lewis describes these changes, in part, as an effect of the industry’s deregulation, particularly marked by the failed 1979 Justice Department’s anti-competition case against Kirk Kerkorian, which Lewis argues led to significant corporate restructuring. Deregulation and lack of attention to existing rules allowed studios to consolidate horizontally and reintegrate vertically, most notably by acquiring exhibition sites and channels in defiance of the 1948 Paramount decision. The 1980s wave led to the position of movie studios as central to tightly diversified media empires. This happened not only through mergers and growth, but also through downsizing. For example, both Gulf and Western and Warner streamlined during the 1980s to become tightly diversified media companies focusing on the production and distribution of entertainment products (Balio 62, Prince 62-64).

The opening of secondary markets like home video and cable, as well as increased global demand due to market and media changes, played a large role in the qualitative and quantitative changes in Hollywood (Balio). By 1986, over half of a film’s earnings could come from cable and home video, with only a quarter from the theatrical, domestic box office (Schatz 196; Maltby 35). Hollywood also became tied to multinational capital in the media mergers of the 1980s and 1990s, as companies like Australia’s News Corp. and Japan’s Sony bought studios. However, as Maltby notes, Hollywood remained entrenched in an American perspective (36). Most of the scholars who describe this era only vaguely note that the events in Hollywood map onto a larger set of economic and industrial changes in the US, but it’s clear that the trends of deregulation, high finance, mergers and acquisitions, corporate restructuring, and the loosening ties of companies to countries and products extend far beyond Hollywood. As I hope I’ve shown, Hollywood and the US steel industry had a lot in common.

In the 1980s, major studios, production companies, and mini-majors like Orion Pictures made Hollywood films. The major studios often acted as financiers and distributors, creating one-film or extended partnerships with semi-autonomous production companies. This model took shape as part of a change in postwar Hollywood as studios moved to a package system for production. The move to a package system also increased the power of agents and talent, many of whom also became producers and started or worked closely with production companies. The blockbuster is linked to this
type of production both historically—*Jaws* was famously a package put together by agents and sold to Universal—and because packages often allow studios to hedge risks on the large budgets often required. Studios, however, produce many blockbusters in-house. Schatz describes New Hollywood as producing three classes of films: the “calculated blockbuster,” the mainstream A-class star vehicle, and low-budget cult films. *T2* and *Black Rain* fall into the first two categories respectively, both of which require stars and high profile names to be successful. *Robocop* is more difficult to place, as not low budget, but not a blockbuster or A-class vehicle either. As Stephen Prince argues, many Hollywood films in the 1980s do not fit these rigid categories, and Hollywood continued to produce a range of films including genre pictures.

*Robocop* does have links to 1980s high concept films, a type of film recognizable both for narrative and visual codes, even if it has a satirical relationship to them. Justin Wyatt argues that the high concept film took off in the late 1970s and slowed down by the early 1990s. It’s linked to a set of producers and companies, to 1980s aesthetics and politics, and to Hollywood’s reliance on market research, product tie-ins, and secondary markets. This type of film is, in part, marked by, “a striking, easily reducible narrative which also offers a high degree of marketability” (13). They have simple, in producer Don Simpson’s words “clean,” and easily described storylines based on a catchy premise and clearly typed characters. Visually, high concept films often share aggressive editing and a blend of high-gloss visual imagery and popular music that function as pure narrative excess. Striking images, stars, set pieces, and catchy plot points serve as marketing hooks for high concept films. Film scholars—especially Maltby, Schatz, and Wyatt—often argue that the industrial and aesthetic changes in Hollywood in the 1980s led to an explosion of the formal Hollywood narrative. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell have been the biggest opponents of view of late 20th Hollywood as ridding itself of narrative coherence and formalist interests. They’re right, even if he goes too far to see continuity and closure in the Hollywood formula. All the films I discuss are rigorously formalist, with a strong sense of act structure and establishment of motivation, which is not to say that these are particularly good films. Indeed, many critics of the films discussed here and others related to them, especially the New Bad Future films, often fault the narrative demands of the form for closing down interesting possibilities in them.
The three films of this chapter are thus both cultural and industrial products. To identify them as industrial products is not to undermine their function as cultural texts. In fact, I think both roles play off each other in these films. They are industrial texts uniquely reflexive of economic changes, which altered both Hollywood and the US steel industry. As mentioned already, I assert Robocop, T2, and Black Rain are transitional objects for and about the professional middle class, and reflect the anxieties and fantasies of this group in the transitional period out of Fordism. The new media corporations of Hollywood had definite affinities with this class. It makes all-too-perfect sense that these movies were what late-twentieth-century Hollywood produced in response to deindustrialization.

Black Rain

Black Rain (1989) was directed by Ridley Scott; produced by two Hollywood “players,” Stanley Jaffe and Sherry Lansing, working as partners; and released by Paramount, one of the most successful companies of the 1980s. It stars Michael Douglas, who also took a role as a producer. All these credits mark the film as an ‘A’ picture star vehicle more than a blockbuster, and the narrative and look of the film also fits well with Schatz’s description of such vehicles as “stylish, careening machines” (200). While it comes in the middle of the three films discussed here, it’s the most one-dimensional and jingoistic of the three in its representation of economic change, and so I’ll discuss it first. Black Rain follows a New York detective, played by Douglas, and his partner Charlie (Andy Garcia) as they escort Sato, a young yakuza, to Osaka, lose him on arrival, and, in the process of trying to find him again, take charge of the investigation into a gangster war over counterfeit money plates. Their search leads the two detectives through Osaka’s streets, and, after Sato’s gang kills Charlie, takes Douglas’ character to a Japanese steel mill where the owner, an elder yakuza boss, holds a meeting about the counterfeiting plates.

Scott’s earlier film Blade Runner (1982) is more often discussed alongside Robocop and T2 than Black Rain, largely because Blade Runner is considered one of the first in the late twentieth-century cycle of dystopian science fiction. Blade Runner, unlike the other two, avoids heavy industry and focuses instead on quasi-futurist sites of flexible intellectual labor (e.g. the multiple workshops of Tyrell’s subcontractors). While Black
Rain features no cyborgs as characters, it bears unnerving similarities to Blade Runner (1982). Indeed, Black Rain, which is certainly neither a good movie and nor a piece of dystopian science fiction, echoes Blade Runner in its setting, characters, and thematic pessimism about the social world. Yet there are also important differences between these films, which highlight the later film’s ideological work. First, the later film puts itself in a supposedly contemporary and realist Japan, which appears as dangerous and alien—though less crowded and steamy—as the dystopian world of the science fiction film. Second, in Black Rain, a dehumanized and unsympathetic gang of Japanese gangsters replaces the sympathetic replicants. Most importantly, the villains of the two movies bear a striking resemblance in their questionable humanity: Sato the young yakuza is intended as a human, yet he is far less sympathetic than the equally murderous android Roy Batty. Both villains commit brutal acts, confront their father figures in violence scenes, and seek to extend their position beyond that of mere henchmen. Sato even echoes the memorable, nearly final gesture of Roy Batty plunging a nail in his palm when Sato cuts off his own finger right before the final fight scene. Finally, the space for threatening technology is occupied in Black Rain not by military-industrial hi-tech but by a working Japanese steel mill, albeit one emptied of workers and ghostly automated.

As a method for interpretation, auteurist readings of films usually work to valorize the authorial role and bring out the good parts of less good films (Corrigan). Putting Blade Runner and Black Rain together, however, has the opposite effect by highlighting the Orientalism of the better film, Blade Runner. Black Rain is clearly Orientalist, in ways discussed below. This Hollywood film is evidence of a set of trends described earlier: in which Hollywood remained in perspective tied to jingoistic Americanism even as the industry became multinational. Hollywood’s biggest market in the 1980s was Japan, and two Japanese companies—Sony and Matsushita—bought studios in the 1989 (Maltby 35-36). Despite this, Hollywood produced films like Black Rain that absorbed and rearticulated Japan-phobic discourses.

Black Rain should be understood as part of a tradition of American Orientalism. While Said used the term to refer specifically to the relationship between European nations and the Middle East, he briefly suggests we can extend the term to speak about US discourses of the Far East. Indeed, Said’s discussion of Orientalism reads like a
blueprint for *Black Rain*, especially for the main character’s unchallenged relationship to the country he invades. And as an Orientalist text, *Black Rain* tells us more about the culture that produced it than about the object of its gaze. According to Said, the Orient was Europe’s feared “contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1). Orientalism is a “style of thought” based on an idea of an essential East-West divide, in which the East is a threat but the West remains superior (2). More strongly, it is a “will to control, manipulate, and incorporate a different world” (12). Finally, Orientalism depends on “positional authority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without even losing him the relative upper hand” (7). In *Black Rain*, Nick figures as the hero of an Orientalist fantasy, as if Said’s description was turned into a spec script. He indeed secures the upper hand, despite trouble, and in his actions, manages to gain authority over the Japanese police and gangsters. The characters stand in as figures for the two nations, whose role as economic and cultural adversaries is emphasized through leaden dialogue [e.g., Masahiro, “Try to work like a Japanese!” and Nick, “The Japanese are too tight. They can’t be original”]. Finally, the film as a whole reflects an Orientalist “style of thought” throughout, and even it’s more human moments for the Japanese actors play up stereotypes of their culture.

Jacob and Aviad Raz write about *Black Rain* in relation to another film of the period about the threat of Japan, *Rising Sun* (1993). Their purpose is to critique Japan studies for its continued Orientalist tendencies. They also, though, explore the Orientalism of these two films, which turn Japan into an “imaginary other” with an inscrutable essence (153). Both films also depict a conflict between two cultures, which is understood as a difference between “[American] individual improvisation and [Japanese] organizational formalism” (159). Ridley Scott provided a very similar description of the film, but as a conflict between the “renegade” and the “bureaucrat” (Chase 65). The Razes write that *Black Rain*, as a realist Hollywood film, “seduces us to identify with Nick,” the main character played by Douglas who goes to Japan “carrying the ‘gaze’ to reaffirm myths of individualism and exceptionalism” (157). They also tie both *Black Rain* and *Rising Sun* to a discourse that tried to find causes for Japan’s economic success in the 1980s via Orientalist stereotypes about the Japanese (162). There were, of course, far more concrete financial, industrial, and technological reasons for the
strong position of Japanese products in the US market. This dominance, moreover, was already in trouble by the late 1980s, when Japan’s economy went into a tailspin, and then slowed down as neoliberalism consolidated across national boundaries (Harvey). Even as the Japanese economy stumbled, the specter of Japanese industry took on a demonic charge in Hollywood films.

*Black Rain* begins with a sequence meant to raise the threat of Japanese economic dominance in its initial image of a red sun surrounded by black, graphically matched to the next shot of a statue’s globe. To counter this ominous opening, the film introduces Nick Conklin, a detective, first seen riding his Harley Davidson across the Brooklyn Bridge to a soft-rock song by Greg Allman, who repeats the following lyrics again and again: “When everyone else is gone / I’ll be holdin’ on.” The contest between the US and Japan appears explicitly in the next sequence, where Nick races his Harley against another cyclist on a Suzuki. Inserts of the first three letters of Suzuki and the Harley insignia on Nick’s bike clarify that this is not a race between two men but global competitors. Nick wins, but not because his bike is faster: Nick knows how to navigate the urban detritus of the impromptu racecourse along the water.

*Black Rain* then switches to its main story, a cop film. However, this economic contest and the Orientalist approach to it inform the rest of the film’s plot, themes, and troubling affect. In this way, while it takes a while to get there, the Japanese steel mill plays a central narrative and thematic role. The two New York detectives, Nick and Charlie, get to Japan when they escort a member of the yakuza, Sato, they arrested. They catch him after he kills another member of the yakuza eating lunch with mobsters at the same restaurant where Nick and Charlie eat. Charlie tells Nick when he arrives that the two sets of mobsters are working out a deal for “imported Subaru.” After the killing, Nick and Charlie chase and catch Sato but are told to return him to Japan, which Nick calls “bullshit.” Once in Japan, Nick hands Sato over to gangsters posing as police officers after they present him with insurance slips in Japanese, which he accepts at face value. Strangely, Nick has no clue what official Japanese police paperwork should look like and they didn’t bring a translator. Rather than return home and let the Japanese government find the criminal, Nick demands that he and Charlie be allowed to stay and
catch Sato. A Japanese detective, Masahiro, played by Ken Takakura, is put in charge of watching them as they observe the investigation.

The two New York detectives behave rudely and arrogantly to Masahiro and everyone they meet. They seem either unable or unwilling to pronounce Sato’s name correctly. Nick becomes unable to speak in anything but idiomatic English once in Japan, and translates idiom for idiom when the film’s Japanese characters ask him for clarifications. Finally, they trick Masahiro and run away from him to sneak onto a police trip to Sato’s supposed hangout. Their behavior goes unchecked and un-repented, and seems meant to demonstrate American spirit and irreverence. Nick claims he doesn’t like Masahiro because he’s a suit, not a real cop. But—much like his largely unmotivated hatred for Sato—Nick’s dislike for the Japanese detective is part of the film’s accepted racism. Masahiro is shown as impotent and tradition-bound, yet with a childlike sense of honor that provides an important lesson to the ethically challenged Nick. The Razes provides a pointed description of Masahiro as part of the “legacy of Chan, Wong, and Moto in helping the Americans” (160). Ideas about the essential inferiority of Japan are focused in Masahiro’s characterization as he fails to keep up with the New York detectives.

Although not a love story, Nick and Masahiro’s relationship is similar to assimilation love stories. Gina Marchetti has discussed the history of Hollywood’s Orientalist gaze of the Far East, focusing on films about interracial sex and love. She writes that Hollywood’s depiction is “inextricably linked to the threat of the so-called ‘yellow peril’” (2). Her exploration through the twentieth century makes clear that Hollywood representations of this ‘yellow peril’ changed and took on different meanings based on their historical context. Most films featuring interracial love and sex are about violence, rape, seduction, or the tragedy of impossible love, but some end happily. These love stories are also often stories of assimilation, in which two people overcome their differences and “[suppress] any ‘aberrant’ ethnic or rational characteristics” (8).

Similarly, Jacob and Aviad Raz discuss Nick and Masahiro’s relationship in Black Rain, noting that Nick learns “the importance of team work and responsibility” while Masahiro “discovers the power of individual action” (156). However, Marchetti adds that the work of assimilation and suppression is almost always that of the nonwhite lover. It presents
itself as predicated on both sides overcoming their own boundaries, but the relationship really involves more work for the nonwhite part of the couple. This is quite true for Black Rain, in which Masahiro loses his job to help Nick.

The story of Masahiro’s assimilation appears most clearly in the club scene in the middle of the film, right before Charlie’s beheading by the rebelling gang of yakuza. Charlie, sitting with Nick and about four Japanese women, invites Masahiro to join them. The Japanese detective brings over his cocktail capped with a dainty straw, and Masahiro and Nick bicker. For the first time, the detective criticizes the US as a country that is only good for “movies and music.” The fight ends, only to be followed by Charlie’s desperately condescending banter, in which he tells Masahiro that his tie looks too cheap for him to hang out with New York detectives and then mocks Masahiro’s age. Then the film, as if reveling in this point, has Charlie lead Masahiro up to the stage for a Ray Charles duet. Although Masahiro appears embarrassed and cowed by this act, the scene seems intended to be a set piece for positive intercultural relations. It’s useful to note that this duet was not in the script but suggested by Andy Garcia to explain why Masahiro would help Nick after Charlie’s death. Garcia assumed that Charlie had to “mean” something to the Japanese character (Garcia). Ken Takakura, the established Japanese actor who plays Masahiro, clearly does not enjoy the scene, and described it as “painful” in the same making-of interview. Supposedly, it shows the two men erasing boundaries, but despite the fictional location in Japan, Charlie invites Masahiro to sing an American song, in English, to which he has no connection—in fact just moments after Masahiro mentions his love of Sinatra, Charlie chooses to sing Ray Charles. The scene thus functions as the assertion of power, both in the narrative and, perhaps more disturbingly, among the actors.

The most disturbing Orientalist figuration, however, is not that of Masahiro but Sato, the yakuza chased by the detectives in Osaka. As mentioned, Sato, played by Yusaku Matsuda, is similar to the Roy Batty character in Blade Runner, yet the replicant is given more humanity. Matsuda, the actor playing Sato, also skillfully establishes Sato’s unhinged violence through facial expressions, gestures, and positioning of his body that communicate mania and tension. The film begins when Sato attempts to escape his underling position in the yakuza by staging a coup with his gang over the counterfeit
plates. He is caught in New York after killing a yakuza in town, in a highly theatrical assassination in a crowded restaurant. Once Sato escapes the detectives in Osaka, he continues to stalk them more effectively than they manage the reverse. The film allows access to Sato’s and his partners’ point of view as they watch Nick and Charlie in dark rooms over the streets of Osaka. While Sato speaks and has some motivation, his gang is entirely one-dimensional. They dress in leather and wear large sunglasses, ride bikes through the street, surround and taunt the detectives, and seem unhinged. In the film’s turning point, Nick watches behind a grid as Sato and his gang surround Charlie once again on their bikes. After some taunting and hitting, the sequence ends when Sato theatrically decapitates Charlie. This scene establishes Sato and his gang as depraved.

The steel mill scene in *Black Rain* has a privileged role in the film, not merely as one of its central dramatic set pieces but as its most unintentionally reflexive moment about the sources of the Orientalist fantasy. It takes place after Sato decapitates Charlie, which leads Masahiro to take Nick’s side. Masahiro gives him Charlie’s gun and lets him move freely around Osaka to track Sato, which leads to a steel mill owned by Sato’s former boss, the yakuza leader Sugai. They stake out the mill until the next morning, when Sato meets Sugai in an office inside the mill. The sequence cuts between the conversation inside the office as the yakuza bargain over the plates and bicker over Sato’s insubordination, and the shop floor where Nick and Masahiro watch. The mill, as Nick and Charlie were told earlier, is the cornerstone of Sugai’s wealth. The setting of a yakuza meeting within what we are intended to see as a working Japanese mill presents a dark and nefarious image of Japanese industry. The dark lighting of the mill adds to this effect by emphasizing the red lighting of fire and molten metal. However, given the absence of workers, this is clearly not a working mill but one set up to appear in operation. This uncanny environment, emptied of people and operated entirely by machines, has even replaced the sound of the factory floor with a computer-like whirring noise. This might have a basis in discourses of the time. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the use of robotic technology in Japanese plants became an object of interest for those trying to understand their success over US industry (Duckenfield 4). The detectives are spotted, leading to a spark-filled and chaotic shoot-out in the mill.
The real site of the mill does not matter for the film, since it is presented as a Japanese mill. The site of the real mill in the US, however, does matter when trying to make sense of the film and its problems and contradictions. This sequence was shot at the Fontana mill in California, which was in the process of closing as filming took place. Henry Kaiser, the owner of the Richmond shipyard and a businessman who worked closely with the New Deal, built the mill in eight months during World War II to respond to the demand for steel on the West Coast. Mike Davis writes that Kaiser “personified the spirit of the war-generated, high-productivity, high-wage economy that later economic historians would refer to as Fordism” (441). Fontana opened in 1943. During the 1970s and 1980s, West Coast steel production all but ended. Kaiser was hurt by foreign competition, especially Japanese; government policies during the Vietnam War; and a failure to modernize in the 1960s and 1970s. Through the 1970s, workers accepted retrenchment in the hopes that the mill would bounce back, but it closed in 1983 (464-465). However, Fontana’s story differs from that of Monessen discussed later since production continued at Fontana after Kaiser closed its doors in 1983. While steel production ended, California Steel, a partnership between Japanese and Brazilian steel companies, reopened part of the mill, with a new nonunion and flexible workforce, to process imported steel (Anicic 107-108).Davis writes:

In a mindbending demonstration of how the new globalized economy works, California Steel Industries […] employs a deunionized remnant of the Kaiser workforce under Japanese and British supervision to roll and fabricate steel slabs imported from Brazil to compete in the local market against Korean imports. (468)

The Kaiser company itself went through a process of corporate raiding, buying and selling that depleted the reserves intended to provide continued medical coverage and pension benefits to the former workers (470). It’s probably best known now for its health insurance.

The production crew came in, as Ridley Scott notes in his commentary for the Black Rain DVD, and made the Fontana mill look alive again. While the producers intended to film extensively in Japan, they returned to the US when they encountered logistical difficulties and shot the mill sequence in Fontana and the final race in the Japanese countryside in Napa. While Fontana does not give itself away as American, it’s
difficult not to recognize Napa in the later sequence, which creates the image of Michael Douglas frantically crossing a de-industrialized California, from the steel mill empty except for special effects, to the growing wine country of Northern California. Moreover, like the nightclub sequence, this movement reasserts a form of US dominance based on culture. California might not produce steel anymore, largely due to Japanese exports, but it produces culture. 8

This assertion of culture draws on the final Orientalist theme of Black Rain, in which America beats Japan through immaterial means—the province of the professional middle class—and, to paraphrase Said, incorporates the different world. This theme comes out of Nick, the hero’s, flaw. Despite his motorcycle prowess, Nick is otherwise boxed in by economic problems. Nick and his partner Charlie both live as middle-class, but just barely. Nick’s divorced and his earnings as a detective are not enough to pay for his family’s suburban house, his children’s private school tuition, and his separate, waterfront apartment overlooking Manhattan. He’s been implicated with other detectives in skimming money, and the Internal Affairs investigators use as evidence his expensive obligations that do not match his pay. His partner, Charlie, also lives beyond his means in hopes of moving up the police bureaucratic ladder. When Nick asks if he can afford his expensive clothes and shoes, he responds, “Almost.” Charlie in fact looks and functions more like a lawyer than a detective, and Nick’s jokes about his aspirations suggest that Charlie wants to be professional middle class. Hollywood has often presented characters with lifestyles not fitting their real-life economic counterpart, but they rarely make this dissonance part of a character’s driving flaw. However, rather than have to accept a more humble lifestyle, in Black Rain, Charlie must to accede to the higher-class position suggested by the film’s mise-en-scène. In order for this to happen, the world has to bend and escape reality, allowing Charlie to become a transnational detective despite his lack of people skills and understanding of national sovereignty.

It seems fitting that film’s focus is a counterfeiting ring. Mark Duckenfield, in his reading of T2 discussed later, notes a continuing belief that Japanese “borrowed and mimicked their way to success,” using the US as models to then betray it (6). However, the last sequence is particularly odd, and only makes sense if seen as the final assertion of control and incorporation through decidedly corrupt means. Before Nick’s plane, he and
Masahiro and Nick talk at the airport and exchange gifts. Masahiro asks Nick about the missing counterfeit plates, worried that Nick might still be corrupt despite their talks about responsibility and honor. Nick points out that the person who has the plates will be “made for life” if he knows the right people. He smiles and leaves, framed walking toward the camera as Masahiro opens the present behind him to find the plates. He looks up at Nick, who looks back. Both smile at each other as the Allman song starts and Nick gives Masahiro a thumbs-up, a gesture that seems to prove to Masahiro that Nick is only a little corrupt since he held back evidence as a joke, or to informally pay back Masahiro, rather than for personal gain. From the film’s perspective, this is part of Nick’s lessons about American individualism and improvisation. As Ridley Scott described it, “Ken loses his rigidity” (Chase 65). However, Nick also seems to be giving Masahiro the tools and confidence to counterfeit American money. Arguably, then, Sugai’s speech to Nick, which argued that Americans bring corruption, is revealed to be true. This is a particular type of corruption based on literally fictitious capital that Nick, the American, offers to Masahiro. The scene only really makes sense as a whole as Nick giving the gift of corruption to the Japanese police. It seems impossible, but there it is. Therefore, *Black Rain* suggests that with culture and the more flexible ideas about how wealth is made, Americans can leave steel making as a ghostly, inhuman process to the Japanese.

**Cyborg Films**

Critics often relate *Robocop* and the *Terminator* films to *Blade Runner* as 1980s and early 1990s dystopian films featuring cyborgs—hybrids of technology and humanity. Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (1991) is almost always right behind such work, if not explicitly brought forward or dealt with. In that essay, Haraway defines the cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149). She connects the cyborg with late twentieth-century technology’s impact on how our lives are lived and controlled, from biotechnology to the military. Although cyborgs are the “offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism,” they are also “illegitimate.” Therefore, what they represent can be rethought and used for other purposes. She writes:
The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. [...] The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. (151) Haraway thus uses the cyborg as a model for postmodernist “socialist feminism” and progressive politics, which moves away from essentialisms and dualistic thinking. A cyborg politics, she argues, embraces contradiction and plurality and denies concepts like innocence or guilt.

Among the critics discussed in this section, Haraway alone identifies herself as professional middle class, as a gesture toward situating her position. However, class is an outmoded form of identity in her politics. Haraway focuses on gender as a site that can continue to lead to progressive politics. She argues that within the professional middle-class, hi-tech workers engaged with feminism can start to undo or challenge the exploitative capitalist and militarized uses of technology. From the perspective of the professional middle class, the politics proposed by Haraway, which embraces contradiction and irony, denies guilt, and asserts that “we are all chimeras” (150) looks better than one that implicates their position. Haraway too easily dismisses Marxism, reducing it to a theory of alienation seduced by an imagined, a-historical Eden. This allows her to dismiss class antagonism and locate the vanguard in culture, arguing that “releasing the play of writing is deadly serious” (175). She also argues that “emerging pleasures, experiences, and powers [have] serious potential for changing the rules of the game” (173). After twenty years, I think it’s fair to suggest that this field of culture and ironic affinity failed to create the changes hoped for in the military and economic spheres that Haraway describes so well. This politics is closely aligned with the class position named and held central to it, the professional middle class. This is also the class position hailed by Hollywood cyborg films as well, even if such films are in every other way counter to Haraway’s progressive cyborgs.

Haraway focuses on feminist science fiction as models for progressive, postmodern cyborgs. Most critics describe Hollywood films featuring cyborgs as at best contradictory in their politics, and, at worst, reactionary and fascistic. In their readings, Hollywood’s cyborgs fall into Haraway’s dystopian model of cybernetic and technological control, and the films idealize the cyborgs for it. Critics also read the
dystopias presented as “critical,” though, in that they speak to the contemporary world in their visions of a militarized, corporate America in chaos. Many critics find the endings particularly disappointing. J. P. Telotte, like Jonathan Beller among others, is disappointed, since such sci-fi dystopias offer stories of “a generally satisfying strike against the forces of cultural repression” but keep intact the repressive social world at the end (“Tremulous”). The focus of much scholarly work has been on what these films have to say about being human and the human-technology interface. The very nature of the cyborg as well as themes of the films often encourage readings of biopower—control of bodies—even though this term is rarely used.

Deconstructive critics following Haraway, in particular Forest Pyle, focus on how the films challenge the distinctions between human and nonhuman, and engage with the constructed, artificial nature of human identity. Several critics however oppositely focus on science fiction cyborg films as humanist texts. For example, J.P. Telotte reads the four films (*Blade Runner*, *Robocop*, and *Terminator* and its sequel) as allegories for a human condition that has become artificial and empty, but which longs for self-expression and truth. Sue Short surveys the feminist, deconstructive, and ‘Marxist’ readings of cyborg film, and argues that they all fail. For her, these films really all ask one question: “What makes us human?” (10). This argument seems almost by definition reductive. Moreover, Short’s discussion of how Marxist readings fail is particularly problematic from my perspective. Like others, she finds the cycle’s critique of capitalism one of its most compelling characteristics, but puzzles over their inability to imagine social change or mass resistance. She also cannot make sense of the class position of *Robocop*, as both a victim and the privileged employee (69). She argues that Marxism fails because she cannot answer these questions based on a mode of Marxism focused on alienation and industrial labor. Thus, Short creates a reductive model of Marxist analysis, which leaves her unable to analyze these films via class and economics, and then declares the theory as flawed.

Other writers are more critical of the films, especially from the perspective of gender and power. Claudia Springer and Mark Dery see Hollywood’s cyborgs as troubling, masculine fetishes. Both compare the cyborgs to the Freikorps, German paramilitary soldiers theorized in terms of fascist misogyny by Klaus Theweleit. The
Freikorps were particularly armored against femininity, which was associated with a disturbing fluidity—a monstrous feminine. Of course, this leads to reading the molten steel at the end of T2 as a particularly destructive feminine liquidity (112). Mark Dery convincingly argues that Cameron’s Aliens (1986) and T2 could be feminist, if they were not misogynist. Boiling down the conclusion of T2, he writes: “Linda Hamilton, morphed into a Freikorps cyborg, triumphs over the feminine aspect embodied in the T-1000 with the aid of the male principle manifest in the Schwartzeneggarian model” (506). Robert Wilson also follows this approach, and further argues that the films—Robocop especially—express the desire for “a police state” filled with compliant bodies and cyborg police. The cyborg, for Wilson, is a “transnational cybercowboy” with new frontiers inside and out “to territorialize, sublimate and suppress” (290). Springer, Dery, and Wilson correctly, I think, read Robocop and Terminator as fantasies of empowerment, and provide particularly troubling readings of the films as “soft American spectacle[s] of fascist domination” (Wilson 302).

These readings by Springer, Dery and Wilson importantly temper any pretensions to read Robocop or T2 as successes of critical filmmaking. However, in the end, these critics go too far, especially with the label of fascism. They also miss important economic themes. For example, Springer argues that the cyborgs of Hollywood—Robocop and Terminator—come out of a nostalgic desire for the nineteenth-century industrial past and the “stable masculinist position” enjoyed then (97). She leaves room neither for non-misogynist resistance to deindustrialization, nor for any engagement with industry besides its eroticization as phallic strength. She writes: “Violent, forceful cyborg imagery participates in contemporary discourses that cling to nineteenth-century notions about technology […] and gender roles in order to resist the transformations brought about by the new postmodern social order” (100). This approach reflects an underlying assumption made by many critics of these films, who place industrial labor in the distant past and celebrate post-industrialism as an escape from the perceived small-thinking of this past.

Other critics avoid either the straight humanist perspective or condemnation of the films as strictly fascist. They try instead to account for ambivalence, and attach the films to contemporary experiences of technology. Such readings remain closest to the spirit of
Haraway, even as they submerge their shared class position. Jonathan Beller locates the interest in cyborg films in anxieties and fascination toward the “ever more corporeally encompassing machine-body interfaces” (193) and the “matrix of international forces that circulate over and through the body” (195). He describes his experience watching Robocop 2 as traumatic, watching “the infinite swiftness and scale of social machines and the attendant […] quashing of ego,” but also as a little pleasurable too (195). In this, he sees the film allowing the viewer to experience the transnational social world and capitalism at the limits of expansion. But, since capitalism expands and extracts now by moving inward, into the body and our attention, the films also do this work on us, appropriating desire for capitalism (211). For Beller, work and resistance has moved into the realm of culture. Moreover, Beller admits he accepts the fantasy that everyone is equally hooked into the new networks. While he notes this is a fantasy, it’s unclear why he uses it as structuring fantasy for his theoretical work. At one point, he seems to lose grasp of the fantasy as just that. He describes the cyborg as the figure for “the intersecting of the human being from anywhere in the world (but, in the movies, usually from the metropolitan service sector) and the technology […] endemic to transnational capitalism” (194-195). It’s odd that he notes a limitation on this experience, but only finds it “in the movies,” when critics like David Harvey and Lash and Urry have noted the many people and areas left out of the neoliberal, “disorganized” economy.

Scott Bukatman’s reading of cyborg films is similar, in that he focused on culture as mediating two social experiences: technology moving inward and becoming invisible and “diminishing social expectations” (2). He also sees the central question located in the human-machine interface, or more exactly, the human-technology interface of the computer terminal. He writes that the new subject of such science fiction film and literature is one who can “interface with and master the cybernetic technologies” (2). Like Beller, Bukatmen argues that the sci-fi films allow a particular, “phenomenologically significant” experience of this new technological state. However, even as popular culture produces representations and experiences of a new identity, it also reproduces “an anxious subject armored against the terrors of a reality turned terminal” (328). There’s a problem with figures like Robocop and Terminator, though, as bodies heavily armored. He writes: “Technology is thus introjected and bound to a
subject position strengthened but otherwise unchanged” (21). Bukatman incorporates here the readings of Claudia Springer and Mark Dery on the misogyny of popular science fiction and its cyborgs. He largely accepts the idea that the cyborgs are “bodies armored against the new age” and representatives for some past, long-gone masculine industrial age that fight new technologies. In the final battle in T2, therefore, the “mechanical Terminator expunges the nightmare of a masculine and industrial obsolescence” (306). This reading, again, misses important aspects of both films that come out when the industrial sites used as background are brought to the foreground. Moreover, both Beller and Bukatman describe an experience of economic change that is distinctly hooked in to the terminal, and able to get a kind of pleasure from the destructive, global forces at work. In their readings, they replicate the middle class position the films elicit, even as the settings in abandoned mills undercut the comfort of this position.

**Robocop**

Apropos of a film about a human-machine assemblage, *Robocop* is a hard to categorize Hollywood film. It includes no real movie stars, and was the first Hollywood film by European director Paul Verhoeven. According to the scriptwriter and producer, the studio chose Verhoeven because no US director wanted to do the film, and thus had to move to a list of European directors (Neumeier). Orion Pictures, a Hollywood mini-major better known for its Woody Allen films, produced and distributed *Robocop*. Finally, while *Robocop* in many ways seems like an exemplar of the high concept film with its plot reducible to an image and catchy portmanteau and glossy visual style, it takes this formula to the point of absurdity. *Robocop* combines satire and comic book hero action, allowing audiences to both laugh at Reagan foreign policy and cheer on the armored robot-cop hero.

Most critics (Jeffords, Best, etc) note that *Robocop* is not radical in its politics and finally affirms the social order that it critiques. This, of course, should be a given for a Hollywood action film, but it’s worth surveying *Robocop*’s regressive elements: the fascist desire for a strong paternal figure to bring order, a conception of social anarchy as a human condition rather than historically produced, the denial of collective agency or even competence, and an ending which restores order by killing the criminals and corrupt ‘bad apples.’ Yet even given these regressive features, the critical impulses of *Robocop*
remain interesting in their relation to 1980s America. While most critics focus on
Robocop as a satire of US foreign policy and the military-industrial complex, I think it
can also be read as a satirical fantasy of the new intellectual worker who survives
economic catastrophe only to emerge stronger. Verhoeven provides a very helpful
description of the film’s therapeutic ending, describing it as Murphy’s “acceptance of
what he has become, of having less and having more. He has taken control of what they
have done to him, becoming Murphy again, but in a new way” (qtd. in Telotte,
“Tremulous”). Robocop is a story of survival for one worker— the one with access to the
terminals, and who can “jack in” to them. The film has no idea what to do with everyone
else. While a range of people maybe watched the film, its narrative makes it a film for
those in the audience who can make the leap. The return to the “old mill” for the most
traumatic and redemptive sequence both supports and undermines this narrative by
evoking the assumptions of postindustrial progress and by recalling the failures and limits
of the fantasy of the middle class.

Robocop follows police officer Alex Murphy in a dystopian Detroit of the near
future after he is assigned to a tough precinct. His move is part of a plan by OCP, a
corporation contracted by the Detroit government to fund and run the police. Bob
Morton, an OCP executive, hopes to create a cyborg police officer from one of those
killed in the line of duty to compete with the robotic prototype of OCP Vice President
Dick Jones’ ED 209, which has the unfortunate glitch of killing people after they
surrender. Murphy is killed on his first day of work, after chasing bank robbers to “the
old mill.” As his partner, Anne Lewis, looks on helplessly behind grating—much like
Nick watched Charlie’s decapitation—a gang led by Clarence Boddicker sadistically
guns down Murphy, first shooting off his hand before firing into his body as a group.

OCP turns Murphy into Robocop. It’s important to note that through the
progression from doctors to OCP engineers, the film maintains Murphy’s point of view,
which implies a sustained subjectivity even as the doctor’s pronounce him dead and OCP
engineers work on him.10 Initially, Murphy becomes nothing but Robocop. However,
memories of his murder and his family soon begin to haunt him. Lewis, his partner for a
day, recognizes Murphy when Robocop twirls his gun like Murphy, a move we learn he
has copied from his son’s favorite television cop hero, a futurist Western with laser-guns.
Once Murphy regains his memory, the film becomes a revenge-story as he tracks the gang of criminals who killed him and Dick Jones, the corrupt OCP executive who hired the same gang to kill him again after he was Robocop. The prolonged revenge sequences against Boddicker’s gang returns to the steel mill, where Robocop/Murphy retreats to recover from a police attack. After Robocop/Murphy kills his killers, he returns to OCP. He had been prevented from arresting Dick Jones earlier due to a hidden OCP directive protecting executives, but the boss fires Jones, freeing Robocop to shoot him out the window. In the last scene, the OCP boss asks Robocop his name, calling him “son,” to which Robocop responds, “My name is Murphy,” and walks out.

Scholars discussing Robocop describe it as a critical dystopian film in its narrative, visual style, and the satiric news reports and commercials that frame the story. They also bring up problems with the film, which they cannot square with the capitalist critique except by pointing to their lowered expectations for Hollywood films. Both Julie Codell and Steven Best see Robocop as directly, and critically, related to 1980s foreign and military policies. As with many critics, Codell focuses on the news stories and commercials that interpolate the narrative. She writes that these satiric breaks from the narrative expose “faltering US technology and infrastructure in a world on the brink of self-annihilation.” Steven Best argues that Robocop is critical of 1980s “technocapitalist” society, corporations, and the complicit media. More specifically, Best asserts that Robocop is a “warning against the policies and attitudes behind SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative].” However, he criticizes the film for being unable to imagine a positive relationship between people and technology. Best is also unsure how to approach the ending in which Murphy asserts his identity while retaining the form of Robocop. He is stuck between seeing this sequence as a utopian assertion of reclaimed “human identity” and as a regressive return to the “bourgeois ego.” The two stated aporias in Best’s reading are related, in that the positive relation of humanity and technology resides in the figure of Robocop, as the productive relation that still maintains sovereignty with the worker’s intellectual and affective labor. This promise, however, is not held for everyone, not even for most in the film. The film encourages us to cheer on Robocop. We play that role best when we see the satire at work, but also fall into the fantasy. More recently, Keith Booker argues that Robocop critiques “life under late capitalism and even more […] to working-
class life in Detroit” (208). Booker explicitly draws a link to Detroit and Fordism, the regime also in decline in the 1980s. However, since Murphy recovers his identity, “we are assured we can still remain who we are” (211). It’s again this question of who the “we” here is that I think can be looked at more critically, in relation to signs provided by the film.

The critics repeatedly assert two important points about RoboCop: one, that it is satirical and critical of much about the 1980s American corporate world and military-industrial complex, and two, that it provides an assurance and a fantasy solution to this world. They also agree that it fails to provide any satisfactory collective answer for the fight between the police, as OCP employees, and OCP. Critics point out that RoboCop is not at all concerned with the potential strike of the police, and the ending solves none of those problems. Indeed, it seems to have produced the most efficient scab possible. As Telotte describes the problem of RoboCop and other such films, the wish fulfilled is escape or individual happiness, or “the happy acceptance of [...] objectification” (Telotte, Science Fiction 177), rather than any change to the social order. The last two shared takes on RoboCop, about individual wish-fulfillment and the odd silence on the larger social problems of the dystopia, are connected especially when we turn our attention away from foreign policy towards a closer theme to the film, that is, the world of work and its change in the 1980s. This is the promise that the film offers: economic change will be painful, but it will be okay. However, it’s not available to the other police striking outside OCP or anyone else in dystopian Detroit. Moreover, key sequences in the film—death and revenge—bring us to one particular site where change was more than a painful transition.

While several critics note the surprising violence of Murphy’s death, its meaning and location are mentioned but not explored. Fred Glass, however, points out that the use of the steel mill is not incidental or only for visual effect: “The current dismantling of the industrial working class in America [...] is the unspoken sociological material, the real life social substrate of Murphy’s murder inside the rotting factory in 1999” (“New” 39). Murphy’s mutilation and revenge against his killer both occur in an abandoned steel mill. The mill used for filming was the Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Mill in Monessen, Pennsylvania, on the southern edge of the Monongahela Valley. For decades the mill and
town experienced the effects of a drawn-out decline in steelmaking (Vivian 140). In fact, Cassandra Vivian, a historian of Monessen, called the 1970s and 1980s “one long agony” for the community (134). The 1980s accelerated the process, however, especially when the nation failed to invest in new infrastructure the way that the Wheeling-Pittsburgh executives hoped when they opened a new modern rail mill (141-142). In 1985, Wheeling-Pittsburgh declared bankruptcy, and the judge permitted the company to renege on their labor contract regarding wages and benefits. This led to an unusual strike against a bankrupt company that lasted three months. In 1986, a year later, the steel mill shut down, followed by the rail mill the next year. Robocop filmed in an abandoned steel mill, but one still only recently “abandoned” and closed amid rancor and significant doubt that its closing reflected necessary and uninterested economic change. Cassandra Vivian describes the anger of those living around the mill when she describes the production crew as “treading on sacred ground” (144).

As several critics mention, Murphy’s death is traumatic. It’s fitting that he is literally blown apart on the steel mill floor—which itself had been gradually stripped and dismantled. The image captures one sense of the Monogahela Valley’s experience in the 1980s, which John Hoerr described as “reeling and helpless” in this period (10). The use of the mill, however, is deeply problematic, especially when presented as the “old mill” with no history except a distant industrial past. Fair enough, the mill if it remained would be old by 1999, but very little in Robocop except the robot-cop suggests the narrative’s placement in a future world.13 Bringing together the historical content and the problems of its representation opens Robocop to a reading that brings out more specifically the wish fulfillment at work. Fred Glass has probably done the most to dissect what he calls the film’s “subjectivity ride”: from the horrifying breaking up of the body, to the wish fulfilled that the “little one is suddenly huge,” through Oedipal challenges and trauma, and finally to the assertion of a new self. As discussed earlier, Glass imagines a “film savvy” audience who interprets the film as satire and takes politically left messages from it, but sees “the rest” of audience as more susceptible to missing the politics in the violence and cynicism (“New” 36). I disagree: Robocop works on that film savvy audience at least as ideologically as other members of an audience. It taps anxieties and
provides fantasy resolution. It is definitely a fantasy of empowerment—but for a particular type of worker.

From the start, Murphy is shown to a highly discursive worker. This is suggested in his one interesting trait, which then becomes how his partner Anne recognizes him: the gun twirling he learned from television. This learned gesture then becomes a sign of Robocop as a hero. He’s able to make a space in New Detroit’s economy partly due to an ability to adapt and incorporate technology, but more so due to a fairly random lottery—whoever dies first, wins. He’s able to return and find a new place for himself, but only within the structure as intellectual labor hooked into technology. While critics might have seen this as exemplary of “our” experience, in which hi-tech gadgets become an extension of our bodies (Best), this was not necessarily everyone’s experience in the mid-1980s. This imbalance finds its place in the film as well. Most of the workers in the film are not Robocop. Indeed, the rest of the police department continues to lose their secure working position with no resolution at the end of the film. The police department is thus split between Robocop and everyone else. Robocop/Murphy is not so much professional middle class, but as the middle class position crumbles beneath the department, he clings to the side of capital. In one sequence, Robocop returns to the house he lived in before his transition, which is in a nice, peaceful middle class community far from New Detroit. In this trip, he painfully remembers his past life and everything left behind. Oddly, the street name for the house, “Primrose Lane,” less suggests Eden than the way to a very different place. The unexpected joke works with my reading, though. The hell here is his position as the only one who can survive, but whose survival is made possible through trauma and loss, and by cutting all ties to everyone else.

Pittsburgh’s new nickname “Roboburgh” to replace “The Steel City” and reflect its new postindustrial position as a site of corporate and robotics research, starting in the late 1990s, provides an ironic coda to the film and my reading of it as postindustrial fantasy (Hinshaw 250). Any “film savvy” person would not want to go near Roboburgh. While critics might settle with an argument about what Hollywood films can do to explain the film’s ambivalent ending, my reading makes sense of why this film specifically cannot—since it offers a promise of survival only to some, acting alone, in a neoliberal economy.14
Terminator 2: Judgment Day

Terminator 2: Judgment Day (1991) has been widely discussed and historically situated by film scholars due to its unique industrial history and for its formal, technological, and thematic characteristics. Of particular interest for this chapter, the package system and independent production reached new heights with T2, which the company Carolco made with only partial funding from its studio partner, Tri-Star. Carolco financed this $100 million dollar film in part through foreign investment, selling stock to foreign electronics and communications companies (Balio 207). The film is most definitely a blockbuster, and further inflated this genre of films into a new category, what Tino Balio calls the “ultra-high-budget film.” It features a major star, Arnold Schwarzenegger; an established sci-fi auteur, James Cameron; an already established property in the Terminator franchise; and hi-tech special effects, especially the morphing technology used as the “real” or transitional form of the film’s new terminator villain. In the inflationary logic of Hollywood, T2 features two terminators: the T101 from the first film, who has been reprogrammed by John Connor to protect him from the T1000, a more advanced, shape-shifting terminator sent by the machines to kill John before he can become the leader of the human resistance. These two terminators allowed Arnold Schwarzenegger to return as the cyborg T101 but now given a friendly character, and James Cameron to show off his innovations in morphing technology.

Many scholars have focused on the fight between the two Terminators and its potential meanings, describing it as a battle between armored masculinity and abject (fluid) femininity (Dery and Springer); between masculine industry and the postmodern network-based economy (Springer); between a coalition of US subjects and Japanese industry (Duckenfield); between analog and digital filmmaking (Arnold); and even as a battle between two visions of democracy in which the T1000 more accurately represents difference in the “body politic” (Larson). Others have looked at the film in terms of race and gender, focusing here on the figures of Sarah Connor, John’s mother, and Miles Dyson, the computer engineer working for Cyberdyne Industries on the SkyNet project who gets brought into the fight. Susan Jeffords focuses on how T2 allowed the reproduction of the hard body action figure, and on the assumptions of masculinity wrapped up in it, but now attached to the family and fatherhood. Sharon Willis offers a
more ambivalent, relational reading of *T2* by bringing race into the discussion of gender. She rightly points out that the seemingly incidental detail of Dyson’s race, African-American, creates a series of tensions, bitter ironies, and displacements, especially when Sarah tries to kill him and blames him for the work of all men. These are all useful and important approaches, especially in regards to the displacements of racial and gender politics, which I will draw on to read the film in terms of neoliberalism, deindustrialization, and the professional middle class.

While *T2*’s most striking feature is the T-1000’s morphing, sound design also played a key role on the film’s industrial status and impact. *T2* introduced a new version of digital sound technology that expanded the range and possible effects of film sound (Sergi, *Dolby 29*). Whittington argues that the sound design of the film reinforces the “interpenetration of man and machine” as a violent confrontation from the first sequence (207). Metal percussion and chimes play a large part of the score, which was revised and re-orchestrated from the first movie. While metal sounds follow the Terminators, this music also plays as Sarah Connor tries to kill Dyson, suggesting thin distinctions between human and machine. Whittington also notes another striking feature of the sound design: the close and disturbing sounds of human bones breaking or flesh ripped as an overall “sonic geography” of the body’s fragility (219). While Collins focuses on the music itself, and how it reinforces the film’s hellish atmosphere via recognizable motifs and progressions, she also notes important effects, including the animal-like “groaning” sound that follows T1000, which, she argues “[encourages] us to recognize ourselves” in him (171), distinct from the “mechanical heartbeat” that follows the T101. However, the T101’s sound is not a pulse so much as an industrial clang, which recalls a tolling bell. Clearly, a sonic pun that asks for whom the bell tolls supports Collins death-focused reading of the film’s music, but given an industrial valence. Indeed, Whittington describes how the sound designers created these sounds by striking steel girders in an area under construction at the Skywalker Ranch (218). In part, then, the bell tolls are steel and, as I will argue, for steel.

Mark Duckenfield and Robert Arnold both examine *T2* in terms of what the film says about its contemporary economic conditions. Duckenfield argues that *T2* is an unintended “allegory and judgment” on the failing US industrial sector and plant
closings, specifically of the US’s failed competition with the ascendant Japanese manufacturers. Duckenfield raises important historical points about US industry and foreign competition, but he also reads the film as engaged in “Japan bashing,” even though such bashing depends on his allegorical reading. The battle between the two Terminators thus becomes one between US heavy industry, “powerful, but losing its competitive edge” and, literally, Japanese hi-tech, government-supported steel and auto industries. For Duckenfield, the T101 is the “embodiment of America’s endangered auto and steel industry” (3). These equations lead to some curious leaps; for example, Duckenfield associates Skynet with MITI, the Japanese bank, which leads him to argue that both seek global domination; he further equates “dumping” with the T-1000 attacks.

Robert Arnold also reads the Terminator films as narrating social change, but locates these changes in technology rather than some imagined Japanese onslaught. While he focuses on the auto industry, everything Arnold discusses also applies to steel. He describes the crisis of the late 1970s and the turn to a more aggressive campaign by industry to automate and bring computer controlled machines onto the shop floor (23). Although management promised this move would free workers from drudgery, it instead often meant “no work at all” (23). The industrial robot, Arnold writes, “symbolized management’s dream of factories without workers,” or, at the least, a factory with so few workers that they had no collective power (24). The Terminator expresses and releases those anxieties of automation, especially at the film’s conclusion as Sarah Connor destroys the robot by starting up the automated factory floor. By contrast, Terminator 2 engages with anxieties about flexible production, which often meant the loss of “hard-fought union work rules and pay scales” and greater shop floor pressure and exploitation (26). Interestingly, in the end Arnold criticizes T2 for blinding us to the exploitation and the suffering flexible production causes through the film’s displacements and resolution (29).

Even more than the auto industry, T2 can be productively put in relation to the steel industry, which was largely abandoned by the early 1990s. This reading has a direct relation to the film. The production crew used the Fontana mill, previously discussed for its appearance in Black Rain, to stage its final, spectacular battle between the Connors, now with the T101 as surrogate father, and the T1000. Although Fontana had been closed
for nearly a decade by the time of filming, the film shows it as a working steel mill. Despite the length of time that had already gone by with the mill closed, the processes of dismantling it continued and the raw feelings of workers remained. This is evident from two stories told by Stephanie Austin, a co-producer. Austin describes what was almost a major problem for filming: the company that owned the mill informed the production that a Chinese company was about to strip the mill of its working parts. The producers worked out a deal that ensured the mill would not be stripped until after filming (in fact, it wasn’t stripped until 1993). Austin also tells another story in her musings on the production, which she intends to be amusing that carries a bitter historical truth: while filming, workers came by the location and believed the mill had started production again (Austin).

Between the closing of the mill and filming of T2, Fontana had gone through a real estate boom that, for a while, seemed to serve as evidence of “postindustrial prosperity based on services, finance, and real estate” (Davis 473). However, an inept and corrupt local government made deals with incoming corporations and developers that, Mike Davis argues, “Bolivianized Fontana” (476).16 Whether intended to or not, the choice of Fontana weaves into other key spectacles of the film. Fontana is the birthplace of the Hell’s Angels, which is fitting given Schwarzenegger’s introduction in the film when he strips a biker and takes his motorcycle, leading to the laughter-inducing music cue: “Bad to the Bone.” Schwarzenegger maintains this look through the film. Fontana is also a major site for trucking companies, which makes the film’s final sequence on a semi more geographically plausible than most blockbuster set pieces.

This final sequence into the steel mill begins with a spectacular freeway chase, the Connors and T101 in a van and the T1000 behind them in a helicopter, and ends with the two Terminators fighting in and on a truck carrying liquid nitrogen. The truck crashes through the mill’s gates and onto the shop floor, where workers run out and seemingly stop operations. Yet throughout the sequence, metal continues to pour out of ladles in still more images of a steel mill automated so completely that no workers are needed. Liquid nitrogen freezes the T1000 made of liquid metal but he literally regroups as the heat melts the shattered pieces. The two sides fight and run throughout the space of the mill, and the sequence uses several long shots to map their different routes within the
spectacular space. The sequence ends when the T1000 falls into a vat of molten steel, in an extended death scene that includes transitions through all the guises the machine has taken in the film. The T101 then asks Sarah Connor to operate the switch that will lower him into the vat as well so that the chip in his head cannot be used to build SkyNet. This is the film’s most affect-laden moment, as the mother and son watch their protector lowered into the pit, until finally all that remains is a hand giving the thumbs-up.

While I agree with Robert Arnold that the T1000’s brutal professionalism and shape-shifting makes it the perfect horror film analogue to new flexible production and those most suited to make the transition, James Cameron, like his ex-wife Kathryn Bigelow, works more by creating affect-laden set pieces than allegories. The two scenes of fathers dying both work to create affect and can be read as commentary on the economic context. First, Dyson kills himself to ensure the destruction of his research and then the T101 asks for his destruction to also protect humanity. Both are scenes of sacrifice: one by a figure aligned with postindustrial military-technological capital, and the other with heavy industry. Susan Jeffords also identifies the prescient link between Dyson and the Terminator as father figures, reading this as part of an extended Hollywood project to assert masculinity and then preserve it through inversion. While this is plausible, I think it’s too broad, and while the film certainly asserts masculine, paternal heroes, the identities of these heroes are important.

Although Jefford’s reading makes sense and critiques the patriarchal hero narrative, this shared fatherhood reveals other links between Dyson and the good Terminator. In the first, Miles Dyson sacrifices himself to save others and also blow up SkyNet and his work for them. Dyson is the character most explicitly associated with the professional middle-class; he works in a hi-tech office and lives in an upper-middle class home with his family. Once he’s told the future effects of his research, he agrees to destroy it, but keeps getting pushed into more and more extreme actions that clearly make him uncomfortable. In one of the more dramatic set pieces, police and helicopters surround the Skynet building as the T101 carefully destroys only police property to obey John’s no-killing directive. As they finish setting the bomb to blow up the building, the police enter and open fire, shooting Dyson repeatedly. Before dying, Dyson figures out a way to provide time for the others to escape, ensure the building will be destroyed, but
prevent other casualties through an ingenious set-up where the detonator goes off when he drops it. In his last scene, Dyson, gasps for enough air to give the police who shot him enough time to leave, and this is followed by a spectacular explosion of the building. Through the figure of Dyson, we see the other side of the contradictory professional middle-class position, pulled into the forces of history and forced into making a choice against capital, placed in precarious positions due to their in-between position and the fight happening around them. Thus, Cameron provides an image of the professional middle class as much more dangerously bifurcated than that provided by Donna Haraway. Race also punctuates the death of Dyson, but the visual impact makes the argument that even the professional middle class African-American is supremely unsafe in Los Angeles focused on protecting property.

In the final sequence, the other father figure also kills himself for the good of humanity: the Terminator asks Sarah Connor to lower him into the pit since he, unlike Dyson, cannot self-terminate. The terse dialogue during this sequence and leading up to it are almost comically about death and leave-taking: The T101 tells the bad Terminator, “Hasta La Vista, Baby”; John asks him, “Is it dead?” and he replies, “terminated”; when John figures out Arnold’s plan, he yells, “Don’t go!” and Arnold replies, “It has to end here.” Such dialogue also plays on the steel mill itself and the known recent past of deindustrialization. Rather than see the T101 as a figure like an autoworker, as Robert Arnold argues, I argue that he signifies Keynesian industry. Indeed, the filmmakers understood the scene as proof of the Terminator’s humanization; Cameron emphasizes in his DVD commentary that the Terminator’s sacrifice proves that he now understands the value of human life. But we should bear in mind that it is not so much the thematic humanization of the T101 that matters here so much as the interrelation and usefulness to humanity of the T101 within the context of the film itself. The T101’s maintained gaze between himself and the mother-son couple left on the shop floor as he lowers into the molten pit heightens character-specific affect. However, the scene is at its core a scene of mourning for the machine that cannot stay. The final narration by Sarah Connor points to her newfound hope for the future, but this is accompanied by the empty road in front of a car at night. We understand that Sarah and John are now entirely alone, left in the vacuum of neoliberalism.
Notes

1 *Between Labor and Capital* (1979) is the title of an anthology on the contradictory position of the middle class, with articles by Barbara and John Ehrenreich and Eric Olin Wright.

2 In a highly influential essay, “Jargons of Authenticity,” Paul Arthur argued that *Lightning over Braddock* was part of a 1980s cycle of documentaries that used a postmodern aesthetics of failure to re-instate documentary authority. This film historiography is important, but Arthur didn’t realize that the shorts incorporated were actual documentary films and not imagined for *Lightning*. For Arthur, the “metadiscourse” undercuts everything but the filmmaker’s own position. I read the film almost oppositely. Other critics, however, have taken the film up as “postmodern” in a less nuanced way. For example, Louise Spence in a 2010 article asserts “an aesthetics of ambiguity” as the criteria for interesting documentary, following Bill Nichols and Linda Williams from the 1990s, and establishes *Lightning over Braddock* as exemplary of this postmodern aesthetics, contra Michael Moore. Finally, in a codifying of theory into history, Ellis and McClane’s *The New History of Documentary Film* places *Lightning* into the postmodern category, along with *Thin Blue Line* (1988) and *Who Killed Vincent Chin* (1987). There’s no space here the discuss further the problems with this category and assumptions about “postmodernism” that led to the valorization of a set of film based on a particular type of reading of them as ambiguous and self-reflexive.

3 In fact, in the scenes when Sal moves through crowds protesting, the film points to the influence of Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* (1969), where the fiction plot acted as a device to film the Chicago protests of the Democratic Convention.

4 Rogovin and Frisch’s *Portraits in Steel* is a more extensive project along similar lines, in which Rogovin photographed steelworkers and workers in related industries—especially those working on ingot molds in Shenango firms—in the Buffalo area before and after the closings. The portraits are accompanied by interviews done by Frisch and a research assistant. Frisch calls photographs and interviews both “documentary portraiture” and argues that they present a more complicated, local history than macrohistories can. While I agree, I also see an importance in noting trends and changes that take place on a macroeconomic scale. Allison Zippay’s study of the Shenango Valley exemplifies best this balance between respecting local and individual specificity and making connections to the national and global forces at work.

5 Reasons given by Lash and Urry include the postwar trade relations between the US and Japan, Japan’s adoption of reflexive accumulation, and Japan’s particular industrial rules and institutions than encouraged increasing market share over rapid profits. Moreover, Japanese industry rebuilt after World War II, and thus modernized out of necessity, and continued modernization much more aggressively than US industry.

6 Again, with this actor and role the production story and characterization together is unnerving. Tragically, the actor playing Sato, Yusaku Matsuda, died of stomach cancer soon after filming. Producers, actors, and the director of the film also note that they did not know about his suffering while filming. Sato is further a hard character to watch due to the mannerisms and postures that become somewhat less readable: Is it acting or sickness? The story of his not telling fits into an Orientalist narrative, and the film and story of production are so disquieting, it’s hard not to wonder if anyone asked.
Anicic writes: “In a union-free setting, CSI [California Steel Industries] cross-trains employees to perform any job on their production lines. Many former Kaiser Steel employees worked for CSI into the 21st century” (108).

David Harvey in *The Conditions of Postmodernity* is interested in the postmodern reconstruction of cities, many that built recreation sites when “the grim history of deindustrialization and restructuring […] left most major cities […] with few options except to compete with each other, mainly as financial, consumption, and entertainment centres” (92). Spatial differences act as “lured for a peripatetic capital” (303). Bluestone and Harrison discuss California specifically as a state affected by the flight of industry in the early 1980s, and whose Prop 13 bill was part of the “interregional rivalry to attract capital” (18, 40).

Constance Penley provided this distinction for critical dystopias in her discussion of *Terminator*. She describes critical dystopian science fiction as films that locate causes for the dystopian state in decisions made in the audience’s present. However, she notes that the solutions are either individual or brought about by “a romanticized notion of guerilla-like small-group resistance” (69). The latter seems especially the province of James Cameron. Penley, however, focuses on the oedipal, time-travel fantasy of the first Terminator film. She argues that *Terminator* “generalizes” this fantasy through its use of topical material (78).

We understand throughout this transformation that we hear what he hears; for example, when the OCP executives order the engineers to remove the only part that could be saved, his arm. His other hand was the first shot at by Boddicker. Thus, Boddicker takes one hand, and OCP takes the other. As mentioned, 1980s Hollywood filmmakers, even Paul Verhoeven, are nothing if not formalists.

Perhaps the most interesting reading of *Robocop* as a critique of economic conditions comes from a law journal article. In “Property and Privatisation in *Robocop*” (2008), Michael Robertson argues that the film is in fact a critique of neoliberal laws and policies that encourages the privatization of public services and expansion of what could be considered private property. This reading centers on OCP, the corporation hired to run the police force and that claims ownership of RoboCop. He argues that both acts are tied to actual arguments and policies about what corporations can do and own. He addresses the question that remains unresolved at the film’s end: Can OCP own Robocop? Legally, he argues, the “cyborg is really Murphy in a new form” and thus cannot be owned under law as it exists today (233).

Glass also suggest that Robocop’s failed attempt to arrest Dick Jones in the office not only had oedipal readings, but also can be read as “signifying […] working-class revolt doomed by self-imposed limits” (31). While there is a match in that steelworkers did storm corporate offices in famous protests, as shown in California Newsreel’s documentary *The Business of America* (1984), I think the similarities and differences would have to be further worked out to avoid infantilizing or making oedipal the fight of steelworkers in the 1980s.

In 2000, two young Scottish tourists made it to Pittsburgh looking for the *Robocop* mill. After workers at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette figured out they wanted to be in Monessen, they took a bus and made it to the mill gate. There, they found the mill mostly demolished, but took pictures of the ore pits used in the film. See Bob Batz, “A Celluloid Pilgrimage,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 7 Sept. 2000.
The recent “We tour Robocop” youtube videos further tie the film to neoliberalism and its failures. Most of *Robocop* was filmed in Dallas. Two *Robocop* fans toured the sites, highlighting the city’s economic problems and alienating environment. One of the makers says at one point: “All the good places have died.”

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14 The recent “We tour Robocop” youtube videos further tie the film to neoliberalism and its failures. Most of *Robocop* was filmed in Dallas. Two *Robocop* fans toured the sites, highlighting the city’s economic problems and alienating environment. One of the makers says at one point: “All the good places have died.”

15 Giancarlo Sergi focused on this quality of *T2* in his study of the visceral pleasures of Dolby and digital sound in late 20th century moviegoing. Sergi describes the sound of the skull crushed at the beginning of *T2* as one of those sounds meant to “break through the screen” (“Cry”162).

16 “Students of Latin America have long viewed Bolivia as the land *par excellence* of political instability and military coups. The violence that accompanied the country's transition to democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s enhanced this negative image, and nearly obscured from memory the extended periods of peaceful civilian government that Bolivia has enjoyed, first from 1880 to 1930, and then again from 1952 to 1964. The years from 1978 to 1982 were a time of severe political turmoil, economic catastrophe, and state disintegration. Two constitutionally chosen provisional governments were overthrown, and no fewer than five military governments held power. "Bolivianization" became a byword for political and social decomposition.” Rene Antonio Mayorga, “Bolivia's Silent Revolution,” *Journal of Democracy* 8.1 (1997), 142-156
CONCLUSION

In the first chapter, I discuss *An American in the Making* (1913), a docu-fiction film produced on the temporal edges of Hollywood in the transitional period. The film highlights the establishment of new fixed capital in the Gary mill and surrounding town, and the welcoming of immigrant labor to fill the recently built furnace and rolling mill floors. We see the “stolid Slav”—Fitch’s term for the immigrant workers coming to the mills in this period—shake hands with management and establish a nuclear family. The final chapter ends with a different immigrant committing suicide in the open pit of a steel mill, Arnold Schwarzenegger in *T2*, and the steel pit that appears to be working is in fact abandoned. *T2* cannot imagine a future for such a figure or the space he inhabits.

According to films of the 1980s and 1990s, the mill is a site where the past goes to die. Of course, Schwarzenegger was unharmed by this displacement, and the feminization of the Terminator’s character in *T2* helped Schwarzenegger remake himself into a family film star and launch a political career hitched to the flag of Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan. In retrospect, we can see *T2*’s final scene as unwittingly enacting the effects of the neoliberal policies he furthered as California’s governor.

Despite the widening distance between the present moment and the original release of the films of the last chapter, its focus on neoliberal catastrophe is an appropriate place to end. Arguably, our present moment is an intensification of the historical events and trends with which those popular films engaged. This dissertation is written in the midst of economic catastrophe, begun during the recession and global turn to austerity, which are extensions of the twentieth century’s macroeconomic problems. Contemporary films that mediate our crisis, however, do not seem to turn to industrial labor with the same intensity as 20th century films did. There are still filmic and televisual representations of steel production and its spaces, for sure; these include *Workingman’s Death* (2005) and *Terminator Salvation* (2009), as well as Levi’s 2010 *We Are the Workers* campaign and an episode of *Dirty Jobs* shot in a contemporary US steel mill, which is just a fraction of the size of the mills discussed in the preceding chapters. I decided not to discuss these examples because, in part, I think temporal distance helped me construct and read the films I chose. I also had less to say. Arguably, steel production is still a productive site for cognitive and affective mapping, but I cannot tell now with
the contemporary films. Possibly, this work of mapping the contemporary crisis might be more accessible in other films and media texts, for example, films that turn to biopolitical labor like Duncan Jones’ *Moon* (2009) and *Source Code* (2011), reality TV series about work like Spike’s *Coal* (2011), or situation comedies like *Arrested Development* (2003-2006) or *Party Down* (2009-2010) that mediate the affect of insecurity among the underemployed in the first decade of the 21st century.¹ This is to suggest that while my dissertation makes an argument about the specificity of films of steel production, its interests in texts that represent work and, in the process, mediate macroeconomic concerns about the antagonisms of capital opens out to many other subjects and approaches. Finally, if one were to extend this project on films of steel production into the 21st century, the focus would need to make a decided shift away from the historically developed nations of the West and take a more global perspective, to follow the shift in global steel production. This would be an interesting project, but beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Ending with catastrophe brings to the surface an important substratum of this dissertation, which originates from Walter Benjamin’s ideas on history. I must admit this dissertation is more Benjaminian than I realized at first, especially in its approach to historicizing films. In “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin describes the work of the materialist historian not as “[telling] the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” but as “[grasping] the constellation into which his own era has entered, along within a very specific earlier one” (397). With the continued unraveling of the neoliberal project, it is difficult not to position myself alongside Benjamin’s materialist historian, “turned toward the past” to describe this “one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet” (397). How can one feel other than as Benjamin’s materialist historian, desiring to “awaken and make whole what has been smashed” (397), yet prevented by a storm that blows us into the future? Forced constantly away from the object of his gaze, the materialist historian becomes a caretaker of images that can only recede from his sight. In this sense, I have tried to construct a constellation from the receding images of the Western-Keynesian steel industry in a provisional and situational attempt to understand the contemporary moment.
Yet another Benjaminian substratum supports this dissertation, and that is the significance of film as a mass art. Benjamin makes his strongest case for this significance in his “Work of Art” essay, where he discusses film’s ability to address the masses as a fundamental shift in art. As a form of industrial production made by groups of people, addressed to mass audiences, and infused with collective interests, film is not merely a visual and massified form of art, but an art that must be political because it is collective. However, this new political aesthetics also offers the possibility of its inverse: an authoritarian politics that molds groups to “aesthetic” ends. The films of my dissertation often sit on the edge of these possibilities—a political aesthetic or an aesthetic politics—and they raise questions about the affinities and sympathies of mediating collectivities at different historical conjunctures.

Benjamin’s influence perhaps explains the importance of Siegfried Kracauer’s work in this dissertation, since Kracauer argues in From Caligari to Hitler that film’s nature as a mass art allows films to be read as artifacts of “collective dispositions [and] tendencies” (5). However, Kracauer makes distinctions within the mass. He insists that the “collective dispositions [and] tendencies” might only reflect a part of a nation, but that this part is still collective and can affect the whole. For example, although films may reflect middle-class compulsions and pretensions, these views can have national effects. Although Kracauer does not use the term, when particular collective views take on such importance, they can only be called hegemonic. Moreover, Kracauer’s approach to film in Theory of Film allows me to take seriously the aesthetic of the films. The emphasis of these films on material reality can be overwhelming, especially when the content is so foreign to most film viewers. The result is subjectivity in dialogue with an outside world, made more alien by its overwhelming materiality. In films of steel production, the things of the material world often shift between indeterminate and determinate meanings as the film stitches them incompletely into discourse. Often, this exploration of the “surface of things” (li) overwhelms the film’s ideological or discursive interests. However, this focus also contributes to the unique interest of these films, which are at once fascinating and alienating to filmmakers and film viewers. The look is itself is important, at least in terms of its perspective, because it helps explain how subjectivity within these films opens to collective affects, experiences, and questions: at times, we see from places so adjacent to
production and worker subjectivity as to be within the work itself; at other times we see from places reserved for the managerial gaze, sometimes comfortably, sometimes not. In how these films play with the surface of things, we can begin to map not the mill but the differing collective and individual experiences and understandings of the mill.

For that reason, Fredric Jameson’s concept of cognitive mapping helped provide a method for interpreting the aesthetics of the films as the artifacts of collectively held understandings, imaginings, and affects. I argue that films of steel production often work as cognitive maps for the simple reason that steel production is difficult to represent as an industrial process. When filmmakers attempted to “map” the processes or the spaces, they had to create cognitive (and affective) maps that tell us more about their provisional acts of representation, and what drives and informs them, than about what is represented. Throughout his work on the concept, Jameson emphasizes that cognitive maps are provisional, partial, and “situational” (Postmodernism 51) attempts “to grasp and represent the social totality” (Geopolitical 36). Thus, these mental maps are representations of provisional conceptions of totality from class positions that are part of the totality as an antagonism. Thus, even if these films often tell us less about the unskilled workers filmed than the skilled workers filming them, they can still give us insight into the larger social and economic world in which both lived. As cognitive maps, these films allow us to examine not only the work of these filmmakers but also their relationships to the workers they filmed and to the companies and state agencies for whom they both worked. The self-reflexive nature of these films indicates at least passing awareness by the filmmakers of the mediating role they played, regardless of their class positions. Yet the larger questions these films allow us to examine are the result not of conscious efforts on the part of filmmakers but of the understandings, concerns, and affects they brought with them to a key site of economic and political struggle in the twentieth century.
1 Several of the examples come from the “Lensing Labor: Representing Work in Contemporary Film and TV” panel in the 2012 Society of Cinema and Media Studies’ conference. These include the Levi’s campaign, the reality TV show Coal, the films of Duncan Jones, and the sitcoms of underemployment.
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