

# Not Just ‘Rosie the Riveter’: Feature Films and Productive Industrial Work

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As voters are shuffled like chips in a Trump-owned casino, we wonder how many people know the game being played at the top over industrial workers. The Trump campaign used the idea of iron ore mining (for making steel) on Minnesota’s Mesabi Range to deflect from far more urgent needs of an iconic city that once was known as ‘Steel City,’ Gary, Indiana. The current shrunken city of Gary remains at half its size and over 14,000 houses vacant, schools being closed by ‘emergency managers’ appointed by an efficiency-minded, hostile state government, hospitals teetering on the brink.

One would think that Gary, of all places, the city founded and named after Elbert H. Gary, CEO of US Steel and formerly its lawyer, would be the place to stage speeches about a steel industry comeback, but Donald Trump avoided the situation in Gary, preferring on September 18<sup>th</sup> to visit a much smaller (and whiter) town: Bemidji, Minnesota, making his pitch to the iron ore miners and a few steelworkers. Trump’s choice was no fault of theirs; in fact the people of Bemidji were amazed at Trump’s choice. This slap in the face of Northwest Indiana, the true center of steelmaking in the US, did little to endear this president to steelmakers and their representatives. People who grow up in luxurious surroundings sometimes overcome these disadvantages and get out to meet others far different than they, see how they live. Eleanor Roosevelt would have visited Gary, Indiana, not Bemidji, Minnesota. Both race and class are being used in this electoral cycle at higher pitch than usual. Race is being talked about for good or ill, but class is largely eye winks and rhetorical ‘dog whistles.’ Both race and class are linked in a sort of caste treatment by the larger society: how aspects of life in industrial areas get covered in media, how candidates court or avoid different cities with the media trailing after, creating Media Avoidance Zones.

Caste is made up of diverse threads. We can detect caste in recent revelations about how white people do not experience what African Americans endure every day. Additionally, our unwillingness to discuss class in the US (in some ways perhaps more so than in the UK) will come back to haunt us like Freud’s ‘return of the repressed.’ I can scarcely overstate the idea that everything is geared to some idealized consumerist, suburban middle-class mind. This is in evidence when watching television, when reading sociological texts, when at social gatherings of middle-class dominated organizations. For a white working-class person, it is easiest just to ‘pass,’ to underplay or outright lie about where you are from, to act interested when they allude to possessions they have but perhaps you do not have or even aspire to have, to bite your tongue when casual class slurs are made about city schools by proud suburban parents. One of the most stunning of such themes that came up in a grad seminar (dangerous territory for a working-class grad student) was when my classmates and professor discussed with evident satisfaction that we were now ‘post-industrial.’ I ventured to say that I went home regularly to East Chicago, Indiana,

which has a huge steel mill (now the largest in North America) and that it was still pouring out steel. They responded to this unwelcome interruption of their plans for the ‘post-industrial’ future by looking at me as if someone had allowed a giant fly into the room. I had the feeling, like the old Vincent Price film where a man turned into a fly, of being suddenly transformed from human to post-human or sub-human. *I am for green industry, if and when any can be found, but not for the attitudes involved in making workers invisible.* This is why a film list may help.

Thinking back to those ‘post-industrial’ discussions in grad school in the early 1990s which seemed interminable, I began to understand how deep the chasm was that divided the suburbs from the cities, the working-class student from her middle-class peers. Growing up near Chicago among many people who had family in the steel industry in the 1960s, I saw nothing to be ashamed of. Steel is useful. Try going a week without anything made from steel. We see it everywhere. In Chicago the skyscrapers were made with steel made by my dad and others he worked with. I realized that my suburban colleagues thought steel had to come from somewhere, just not here. Steel should be made in some other place where we don’t have to have factories ruining our view. Just like that. Not a thought to the lives connected in making steel, for instance.

I will need to write another essay about how moving en masse to suburbs made growing children unaware of the production cycle and gave them first-hand knowledge only, exclusively, of the consumption aspect of US society. If there were a way to survey it, we could use comparison pie-charts of the ratio of knowledge of production and knowledge of consumption in the general population. How big was the slice of knowledge of production in 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, etc? This is not just wishful nostalgia for a lost time and social structure as some may believe. The ongoing process of change in mentality concerns how many neurons a person has committed to understanding the actual way the world works. Many suburban households exist with every *evidence of productive industry* carefully concealed, powerlines buried, tasteful boxes with gates around trash receptacles, utilities in general hidden, faux natural cell phone towers imitating trees so as to preserve the ideal that this suburb, which is part of a city and depends upon it, is all about ‘nature.’ The effect upon the young is obvious. What parents work at is often a mystery. The main place to go to explore is the suburban mall where consumerism is made indelible on tiny developing brains. Why is any suburb where it is? To me, they look like backlot stage sets.

Steel mill towns, by contrast, have a focus in the mill itself. The steel mill is the site of *production*. One’s own family may or may not work there. There are also stores, auxiliary industries and businesses, local doctors, clinics, and hospitals. All the parts of the production cycle are represented. The inhabitants of such a town, whatever one thinks of industrial towns, have a far different ratio of neurons given to the production and consumption slices of the social pie. Again, I have no studies to confirm this, but I think removing the science-and-technology- visible landscape in suburbs has caused a shift to *writing fantasy* vs. what is termed ‘hard-science’ science fiction. Not one of my suburban college composition students who proclaimed that he or she wrote genre fiction wrote ‘hard-science’ science fiction, it was always some variant of a well-worn Medieval trope, some secondhand Middle Earth with very little science, technology, or productive industry to get in the way of that static peasant and ‘feudal lord-driven’ society. The vast dimensions of science fiction shrunk to a medievalized shopping mall called a ‘village market faire.’

Representation is key. Because of our national pastime of wanting to move to suburbs and to underplay the role of production in the production and consumption cycle, compounded by the myth of being ‘post-industrial,’ our culture has little to no representation of class in films, television, ‘literary’ fiction, live theatre, and more. I have started compiling a few resources on feature films on how people who work in industry and life in industrial towns. Some of these may be similar to East Chicago, Indiana, where I grew up and to Gary, Indiana, next door, the main Media Avoidance Zone of Donald Trump’s lamentable campaign.

We are starting to shine lights on these places. The next president can do more to stage a comeback for locations that have been so shamefully neglected that they can ‘make a stone cry.’ By emphasizing these low tax base, de-industrialized places as potential growth and development opportunities and by inviting corporations not to avoid African American majority cities such as Gary for investment, we can start to show that we are not two countries, but one.

### **The List of FILMS**

#### *DAVID AND LISA* (1962)

Since writing the above anecdotal description of the ‘welcome’ for working-class grad students, I fear that many drop out silently due to the financial burden, if nothing else, and may have self-hate for failure and depression. So the first film I will list is a rare psychiatric-themed film from 1962, starring Keir Dullea (also in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*). Usually, dysfunction had been socially represented as more a problem of the poor in US films, those less adapted to life. But Dullea is an Ivy League sort of paranoid schizophrenic, the first such depiction in an American film, according to Media Arts scholar Audrey Ricker. His interactions and those of his family with other patients from various social strata below theirs show that class and race travel into upscale country mental retreats. I wondered why the young Puerto Rican from New York City ended up there, but the head doctor was trying out progressive ideas and taking county-funded cases, as well as the privately insured. While not directly about industrial workers, this film shows some important things about class and mental health.

My colleague at University of London, Stanley Wilkin, is doing research on the class issues in psychiatry. He notes that class determines personality and expectations in the UK. Those below middle-class simply do not finish college and especially do not join professions with extremely rare exceptions.

#### *MILLIONS LIKE US* (UK, 1943)

Wartime throws the classes together and this film seems to take a more even-handed approach to class than Stanley Wilkin says is usual in UK films. Eric Portman as the plant manager does an in-depth portrayal of a manager showing the exacting standards to which the threaded steel tubes were made to conform to. These tubes are involved in holding the wings of the aircraft in place. As we learn about the threaded tubes, we see how this manager works with the women who were called up in Britain for National Service in industry (like a draft.) Each of about four women has

a fully developed character and their plots weave together well. There is, I am happy to say, no stereotype of a typical factory worker, despite the title of the film.

*CESAR CHAVEZ* (2014)

This biopic on the migrant workers' leader Chavez is important because agri-business is becoming ever more a huge mass-production affair, politicians' appeals to the family farmer, notwithstanding. Chavez had to deal with a corporate behemoth in many actions, so his biography dovetails well with industrial workers' stories. It is far easier—should I say far, FAR easier?-- to find films about corrupt and criminal union bosses tied to the mob than any attempt to show the variety of people leading workers' movements who actually are out there.

*BREAD AND ROSES* (2000)

*Bread and Roses* is a 2000 film directed by Ken Loach, starring Pilar Padilla, Adrien Brody and Elpidia Carrillo. The plot deals with the struggle of poorly paid janitorial workers in Los Angeles and their fight for better working conditions and the right to unionize. It is based on the 'Justice for Janitors' campaign of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

The film is critical of inequalities in the United States. Health insurance in particular is highlighted and it is also stated in the film that the pay of cleaners and other low paying jobs has declined in recent years. The film's name, 'Bread and Roses', derives from the 1912 textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Though the phrase comes from a 1911 poem by James Oppenheim (which was, in turn, based on a speech given by Rose Schneiderman), it is commonly associated with the Lawrence strike, which united dozens of immigrant communities, led to a large extent by women, under the leadership of the Industrial Workers of the World.

*MY BRILLIANT FRIEND* (2018, TV mini-series)

Elena Ferrante's majestic series of novels called *The Neapolitan Quartet* is an international sensation and a *New York Times* bestseller. This series has been adapted for television by an Italian production company. The precarious lives of Neapolitan Italians are documented and how working-class girls in a small town plan how to overcome the many obstacles in their lives, from getting an education to patriarchally-arranged marriages. These stress points are shown across the lives of a few families. If men in Southern Italy have a tough time 'providing' and 'protecting' their women due to the scarcity and casual nature of work, then southern Italian women have it even tougher and have to learn to be very clever to find openings in which to live. One essayist in the collection I am editing for Routledge wrote her essay upon how class and labor conditions are treated in Elena Ferrante's novels.

*LABOUR OF LOVE* (India: Asha Jaoar Majhe, 2014)

The woman (Basabdatta Chatterjee) works in a handbag factory while the man (Ritwick Chakraborty) works the night shift at a printing press. The film follows that young married couple as they go about their day, how they stay apart all day long except one brief moment when they

get to be with each other. The entire movie has no dialogues. It has background music and some classic old songs thrown in for a soothing effect.

*THE WOUND* (South Africa, 2017)

In John Trengove's first feature, *The Wound*, sensitive factory worker Xolani (played by Touré), must guide young Kwanda through an age-old rite of passage into manhood. Kwanda must learn about his own identity while also learning about Xolani's sexuality. *The Wound* premiered at Sundance and won the jury prize at Outfest, Los Angeles's LGBT film festival.

*DESTINATION PLANET NEGRO* (science fiction, US, 2013)

Racially-biased labor conditions in the south of the 1920s drive the brightest southern African Americans to hold a summit meeting. George Washington Carver has invented a peanut-based rocket fuel that will take his people out of agri-business Jim Crow servitude and to a place to grow and develop. Kevin Willmott has worked with Spike Lee and won Oscar for work on (*BlacKkKlansman*.) This film is an Indy.

### Author Bio

**Gloria McMillan** received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Arizona, and an M.A. in literature from Indiana University. She is a Research Associate at the University of Arizona. She is a co-founder of the Arizona Theatre Company's *Old Pueblo Playwrights*, a group which works closely with ATC in developing new playwrights and play scripts. She has developed science and science fiction-oriented curricula for the University of Arizona's first-year composition classes, including a library unit on H. G. Wells. Her plays have been produced in Tucson and in the Chicago area. Her play *Universe Symphony*, about modern composer Charles Ives, was jointly produced by the Flandrau Planetarium and the Music and Theater Departments of the University of Arizona. She is a contributor to a number of academic journals, including *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *Across the Disciplines*, *Kairos*, *The Adjunct Advocate*, *Extrapolation: MLA Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and *Text Technology*. Her current project is editing *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Class* (forthcoming.)

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