“Which Side Are You On?: Labor Movements in American Documentary from 1970-Present

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I. Introduction

Under the current conditions of labor in the mid-2020s, working-class Americans find themselves at a crossroads. 62% of Americans live paycheck-to-paycheck, and 74% of Americans are stressed about finances,[1] but profits across industries have been at record highs since the COVID-19 pandemic. The federal minimum wage in the US has not risen since 2009, with its current value being $7.25/hr,[2] despite costs of living rising 46% since then. A minimum wage worker cannot afford a one-bedroom apartment in 92% of counties across the United States.[3] Every marker for success and prosperity has declined, with people no longer being able to afford housing, buy groceries, and save for retirement, most of all the newest generation. This has precipitated due to the decline of unions in the US. Unions once were the force that was able to advocate against the exploitation of workers and demand better working conditions, better wages, job stability, and benefits. However, unions in America have been smeared as the enemy of workers in the press, creating the strawman of the "lazy worker" as a way to discourage union formation and action. The availability of union jobs has decreased from 27% in 1970 to 10.3% in 2021.[4] However, the labor movement in the US has generated momentum, with many strikes occurring from 2020 to 2023.[5] Such unions include the formation of the Starbucks Workers Union, under Workers United, the UAW, WGA and SAG-AFTRA, UPS and the Teamsters, nursing unions, teacher's unions, and many more. The movement of these workers has brought

[1] Dickler, Jessica. "62% of Americans Are Still Living Paycheck to Paycheck, Making It 'the Main Financial Lifestyle,' Report Finds." CNBC, October 31, 2023. Accessed Jun 6, 2024. https://www.cnbc.com/2023/10/31/62percent-of-americans-still-live-paycheck-to-paycheck-amid-inflation.html#:~:text=That%20CNBC%20survey%20found%20that,LendingClub%20and%20other%20reports%20show.

[2] U.S. Department of Labor. "History of Federal Minimum Wage Rates Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 1938 - 2009." 2023. Chart. *DOL*. Accessed June 6, 2024. https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history/chart.

[3] National Low Income Housing Coalition. "NLIHC Releases Out of Reach 2023: The High Cost of Housing ," June 14, 2023.

[4] "Trade Union Dataset." 2021. Chart. *OECD.Stat*. Accessed June 6, 2024. https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD#.

[5] Poydock, Margaret, and Jennifer Sherer. "Major Strike Activity Increased by 280% in 2023: Many Workers Still Need Policies That Protect Their Right to Strike." Economic Policy Institute, February 21, 2024. Accessed June 6, 2024. https://www.epi.org/publication/major-strike-activity-in-2023/.

the discussion and merits of a union back into the American consciousness, with no sign of stopping. To know what will be successful, and how to operate the strikes going forward, we must look back to the roots of the American labor movement through documentaries.

Through each movement of documentary practice, the worker's image has been used to document the current conditions of life and labor in a given area. How the worker is depicted has oscillated between a victim of their circumstances recorded by a filmmaker or an "active, self-determining agent of change."[6] During the British documentary movement in the 1930s, the expository len victim lens was the more common route, stripping the subjects of their agency, and putting them below the status of the filmmaker. This was largely due to the many interventions required to make a documentary, such as staging, lighting, and non-synchronized sound. Once technological developments such as the smaller, 16mm camera and portable synchronized sound equipment, the hierarchy of filmmaker over subject dissolved. At the same time, the 1960s and 1970s were a period of formation and organization for advocacy groups based on gender, race, and class. These groups could now be recorded from a distance, or captured on cheaper equipment that amateur filmmakers did not have access to in the past. The barrier of access to both the material equipment and to the social subjects was lowered in this era, as the filmmaker and the subject could work together to craft their message. The camera and the filmmaker could blend in on the street, or capture spontaneous moments on a picket line, and propagate oppressed and marginalized voices and experiences into the mainstream. Technological developments and radical politics restored the worker's agency and leveled the field between the subject and the filmmaker in documentaries.

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[6] Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition*. 3rd ed. Indiana University Press, 2017. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005t6j, 141.

Documentaries as a form of cinema are wide and varying, all with the ultimate goal for the audience to understand the documentary's subject from their point of view, authenticated by the recent historical record and the environment around a particular subject. Bill Nichols, a prolific documentary historian, calls this point of view the documentary's "voice… that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us."[7] This is also known as the documentary's larger argument, which can be presented through different modes.[8] Documentaries, as opposed to fictional films, bind image, voice, and historical facts together which locates "an argument all the more forcefully in relation to the historical world and in relation to our own engagement with the world", and arrange the materials as such to convince the audiences.[9] Documentaries always contain a "voice", and as such, filmmakers have a responsibility to the audiences and the people they represent. To stand by the argument of the film, the filmmaker must stand by the subjects they record. In doing so, the persuasive and revelatory aspects of recording "lived experience" and the "sense of fidelity to what occurs" make the argument for the filmmaker and the subject.[10]

For labor documentaries, many filmmakers operate under an observational lens and style for many reasons. However, observational documentaries are shaped by the presence of the camera, whether the filmmaker tries to resist it or not. Once documentarians realized that they need not hide their presence, but instead lean into and take part in the events transpiring in front of them, the participatory mode was birthed. Participatory documentaries "add the active engagement of the filmmaker with her subjects or informants" which "situates the film more squarely in a given moment and distinct perspective."[11] In conjunction, observational and

[7] Nichols, Bill. "The Voice of Documentary." *Film Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (1983): 17–30. https://doi.org/10.2307/3697347, 18.
[8] The other modes, and their descriptions, can be found in Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary,* Ch. 6.
[9] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary,* 57.
[10] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary,* 113.
[11] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary,* 123.

participatory documentary modes can reveal both the environmental and historical circumstances and emotional truths of a social group and their struggle, and create political agents out of the subjects. When these two modes are focused on labor documentaries, the struggle and voices of workers are raised to the status of political agents who can influence and reach audiences to work in solidarity with their efforts, and see the value of labor organizing. The documentarian behind the camera is the agent responsible for representing these voices and aligning with their cause for this goal to be achieved.

One such filmmaker is the American documentarian, Barbara Kopple. Kopple grew up in Scarsdale, NY, attended Northeastern University, and studied political science and psychology.[12] During that time, she heard of the miner's strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, and brought together a small crew to go and document the strike. Her philosophy for creating documentaries is "to record first-hand their story as told by them", which is demonstrated through her direct cinema style.[13] In her two documentaries, *Harlan County, USA* (1976) and *American Dream* (1990), there are rarely any staged talking-head interviews, voice-overs, or cutaway infographics. These films largely consist of images of workers and how they build solidarity, develop strategies, and talk through the difficulties of striking. These attributes are why these films are worthy of study as to how, in this day and age, unions can be revived in the American discourse as something to pursue, and worthy of the effort it takes. It is difficult not to be inspired by the workers taking a stand against the exploitative owners of the mines or the factory, and witnessing the workers find their strength in their ranks and auxiliaries. By analyzing Kopple's works, and the labor documentary *American Factory* (2019, Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar) I will discuss the effective and ineffective methods of labor documentary filmmaking, what elements are

[12] Legiardi-Laura, Roland, and Barbara Kopple. "Barbara Kopple." *BOMB*, no. 38 (1992): 36–39. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40424177, 36.
[13] Legiardi-Laura, Roland, and Barbara Kopple. "Barbara Kopple.", 36.

lacking in today's labor movement and documentation of the movement, where we can improve, and how we can employ this mode to better the lives of workers in America and around the world.

In each section of this thesis, I will analyze 1) the observational and participatory modes and their function in each of the films, 2) the presence, or lackthereof, of the union and collective community, and 3) the company versus the workers, and the forces they exert on their workers and the avenues in which they do so. In the first section of the thesis, I analyze *Harlan County, USA* (1976) and argue the strike was won from the cohesion of the miners that comes from the shared history of mining in Harlan County, their binary thinking of union man versus scab assisting in their resistance, and Kopple staying by their side over the course of filming and participating in the strike cementing their strength united. In the second section of the thesis, I analyze *American Dream* (1990) and argue how the schism that occurs at the beginning of the strike threatened its potential success from the start, how widespread neoliberal business practices outpaced the union paradigms of the time, and Kopple, unable to see the divisions for what they are, gets caught in the middle and resigned to only observe. In the third section of the thesis, I analyze *American Factory* (2019) and argue that the spread of global capitalism has broken down any recognition of workers' globally shared struggle, and is obfuscated through differences of culture. I also analyze how current mainstream observational documentary practices cannot contend with the global repositioning of owner-worker relations. I conclude that future labor documentarians must observe and participate in the union efforts they wish to document. Their presence strengthens the workers fighting together, and spreads their goal to others who wish to join their fight. Methods and practices of labor documentary must be updated to contend with changing dynamics brought about by forces such as global capitalism and

neoliberal policies. The best method is to put the camera in the hands of the workers, and keep them close throughout production. In doing so, the voices and actions of workers are faithfully communicated and propel change in the United States and globally to take action against the domination of capitalist enterprises that oppress us all.

II. Working with Workers for a Contract: *Harlan County, USA*

The mid-1960s to the early 1970s in America was a time of upheaval and social change. The dawn of television brought violent images of the Vietnam War and riots into the homes of Americans for the first time. The footage of the war was plastered next to the mass mobilization of student protesters, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, the Black Panthers, and the second wave feminist movement. At the same time, documentary cinema was evolving from its British documentary roots and taking a new shape. The direct cinema ethic of documentary filmmaking arose, influenced by the cinéma vérité movement in France, and made possible with more mobile, and less expensive camera equipment.[14] Intervention into the lives of those filmed was a primary characteristic of cinéma vérité films, such as Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). This included staging meetings with the different people involved in the film, filming their discussions with the filmmakers present, and the people knowing they are being filmed. The direct cinema approach in America minimized such mediations. This fly-on-the-wall style, known as observational documentary, was exemplified in Frederick Wiseman's *High School* (1968) and continued into the 1970s and 1980s. It is characterized by minimal to no voice-over, or intertitles giving the audience more information about the events captured in the documentary.[15] Instead, this mode relies solely on the actions and emotions of the observed population to tell the story.

This mode, in some cases, such as the films discussed here, blends with another mode; participatory documentary, where the documentarian and their crew are involved in the events they capture, and intercede from behind the camera. Rouch and Morin's interventions into the

[14] Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary, Third Edition*. 3rd ed. Indiana University Press, 2017. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2005t6j, 109.
[15] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary,* 111.

lives of those in *Chronicle of a Summer* are part of the participatory filmmaking ethic. Their presence can impact filming, and the actions of those in front of the camera, and what is revealed is the "film truth", or *kinopravda,* the truth of the encounter.[16] The presence of the camera and filmmaker negotiate what power dynamics are at play, and at its best, level the positions of filmmaker and subject. This leads to a faithful representation of the captured subject, and when covering important social movements, can impact and result in a favorable outcome for those fighting for their rights. In labor documentary and documentaries covering conflicts, the participation of the filmmaker on the side of the workers or oppressed group can act as a shield to their struggle against more powerful coalitions, and strengthen their resolve in the face of their oppressors.

Harlan County, USA (1976) is a documentary directed by Barbara Kopple that centers on the Brookside Mine miners of Harlan County, Kentucky, and their strike for their company to recognize their union, United Mine Workers of America. Kopple traveled to Harlan County in 1973 to film the strike and give voice to the workers' struggle. Harlan County historically occupies a prominent space in labor history, with "Bloody Harlan", a small war between the miners and organizers on one side, and coal companies and law enforcement on the other.[17] This event prompted the folk singer, Florence Reese, to write the labor ballad, "Which Side Are You On?" The residents are largely dependent on the mine for employment. Being a miner is a generational job in Harlan County, as shown by a picketer's shirt that reads, "I'm a coal miner's son".[18] Mining is more than a job in Harlan County; it is a source of pride, a hereditary burden, and a symbol for the legacy of their elders and what they fought for. This pride through work and

[16] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary,* 118.
[17] Hevener, John W. *Which Side Are You on? : The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978, 177.
[18] *Harlan County, USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple (1976: New York, NY: MAX, 2024), https://play.max.com/video/watch/ce720469-b8bf-4383-9eee-0863a4b4d7fc/f7bf8547-96fa-4abd-951e-65dacaddea75, 1:11:22

a shared, embodied history is what powers much of the fight in the strikers, and the clarity of their labor thought is binary and unwavering. You are either a union man or a scab for the company. The historical ties to labor present in Harlan County are what make *Harlan County, USA* an impactful and lasting source of what images of labor were popular and supported in America, and represents the conceptual framework of organizing and striking that has been lost in the proceeding sixty years.

When confronted with the living conditions of the miners and their families in Harlan County, the binary framework of picking a side in the struggle becomes clear. The first half of *Harlan County, USA* focuses on the workers and their material conditions that outline how this strike came to be, and their life experiences of being a coal miner. The film starts with the camera taken down into the mines while the folk song "Dark Dungeon" plays. The visuals of the coal dust and sweat on the skin of the miners, along with the song recall previously circulated images of Appalachia that viewers may be familiar with.[19] After the harsh conditions of work are shown, images of the impoverished conditions the workers and their families endure are presented. Old men are fighting off black lung and physical disability due to the harsh mining life, while the young men have to bear that this will become their lives if they do not fight. When options for employment are limited, and life conditions are inherited, the clarity of who consigned this population to this fate becomes clear. Kopple's choice to focus on the striking miners is the right choice, and through that choice she becomes filmmaker-activist for the miners, putting her on equal ground as the workers.

Before the premiere of *Harlan County, USA,* Appalachia was a popular place for out-of-town photographers and filmmakers to capture images of the impoverished conditions of

[19] Hale, Grace Elizabeth. "Documentary Noise: The Soundscape of Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A*." *Southern Cultures* 23, no. 1 (2017): 10-32. https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.2017.0002, 16.

the people who lived there. Many of these artists would then exploit the images for their personal artistry or personal gain without giving back. Appalachia was portrayed as a place forgotten by then-modern America, and instead inhabited by "supposedly primitive people", but boasted an "authentic culture." [20] This conception of Appalachia was corrected in the late 1960s and 1970s by Appalachian Film Workshop, later renamed Appalshop, and the collective of filmmakers involved took charge of their own representation in the face of a narrative that portrays Appalachian people "mostly as victims, without the agency to help themselves."[21] Much of what Appalshop produced were documentaries about local history and issues people in Appalachia face, with those who lived in those conditions behind and in front of the camera. One such documentary, *Stripmining in Appalachia* (dir. Gene DuBey, 1973), explored the human and environmental costs of open pit mining, by interviewing locals and environmental experts, and included voice-over.[22] These documentaries function not only as recording history, but also advocacy for, and spreading information to the people who needed it the most, Appalachian residents, made by Appalachian residents. They were de facto participatory documentaries, foreshadowing what Kopple would use for *Harlan County, USA.* The Appalshop productions, through their use of interviews, archival footage, and non-diegetic sound, took back control of their images and what they meant in the larger conception of Appalachia.[23]

As a practitioner of the observational and participatory modes of documentary, Kopple had to "gain their trust" and "immerse" herself in the town surrounding the mines.[24] She and her crew lived with the miners, in the coal fields for three years, and filmed *Harlan County* over

[20] Hale, "Documentary Noise", 14.
[21] Hale, "Documentary Noise", 16.
[22] Hale, "Documentary Noise", 18.
[23] Hale, "Documentary Noise", 18.
[24] Legiardi-Laura, Roland, and Barbara Kopple. "Barbara Kopple." *BOMB*, no. 38 (1992): 36–39. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40424177, 37.

thirteen months.[25] By living amongst the people they want to represent in this film, Kopple and her crew commit to the miners and their families that they is aligned with their fight. In return, they give her access to their lives and stories, which she captures most often in extreme close-ups. Kopple incorporated the methods of Appalshop documentaries into *Harlan County, USA*, such as interviews with town residents and incorporating archival footage, but brings her perspective as an outsider to the town to add further context to reach a wider audience. Kopple does resist employing voice-over, and opts for residents to be the only disembodied voices in the film, which is one difference between the Appalshop documentaries and *Harlan County, USA*. To accurately represent and further the message and motives of the workers, Kopple embeds herself in the struggle, and shows what is at stake for the workers: this contract is life or death. The dividing line of who is on which side means more than where economic alliances lie; it also means a willingness to align with the company that has killed your fellow workers.

Throughout *Harlan County*, three funerals take place that reemphasize that this fight is life or death for the workers. The first event shown that emphasizes these stakes is the explosion of the Mannington Mines that killed 78 men.[26] This sequence begins right after John O'Leary, Former Director of the Bureau of Mines for the United States, remarks that the record for safe mine examinations is "very poor." Interviews with the wives of the dead workers follow, as well as statements from the surviving miners still in their hospital beds. Immediately, we see the people who were affected by this failure of policy. They are made concrete and personal, and not anonymized through an intertitle. This tragedy explains the skepticism the workers, and the larger community, have towards the mining companies, as they did nothing to ensure their safety

[25] Legiardi-Laura, Roland, and Barbara Kopple. "Barbara Kopple.", 36.
[26] *Harlan County, USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple (1976: New York, NY: MAX, 2024), https://play.max.com/video/watch/ce720469-b8bf-4383-9eee-0863a4b4d7fc/f7bf8547-96fa-4abd-951e-65dacaddea75, 0:32:55

in the mines. The memorial service for the miners is shown while the song, "Mannington Mine Disaster" plays on the audio track, the lyrics of which express this skepticism and warn against believing what the radio and TV tell young workers about the safety of the mines. A woman, unable to stand due to her grief, is carried by two men from the memorial site to a car. The style of the song incorporates hallmarks of Appalachian folk songs, such as the banjo, fiddle, and a country-tone of singing. The words of the mourners and survivors along with the song position this tragedy as specific to the lives of Appalachian residents, and one that must be endured repeatedly unless someone steps in and forces companies to pay for their negligence and greed.

The second funeral is for John "Jock" Yablonski and his wife and daughter. Yablonski was in the running for the president of the UMWA and was killed by men who worked for Tony Boyle, the current president of the UMWA.[27] The antagonism between Boyle and Yablonski is described in the song, "Cold-Blooded Murder", in a matter-of-fact tone. This song plays over a montage of Boyle shaking hands with businessmen, contrasted with Yablonski shaking hands with miners. This demonstrates which side the UMWA president is on, as Yablonski alleges that Boyle was "in bed" with the coal operators. On December 31, 1969, Yablonski, for deigning to challenge Boyle and advocate for the miners, was killed by gunmen Boyle hired. Yablonski's son, Ken, gives his eulogy for his father and has decided for the miners to carry Yablonski's casket out of the church. Over this scene, "O Death" is sung by two residents of Harlan County off-screen, and then are embodied on-screen. This ties the tragedy of Yablonski and his family's murder to the hearts of the mine workers in Harlan County. Absent are the banjo, guitar, and fiddle from earlier songs, and instead the focus is on the aged, rough crooning of an older man

[27] *Harlan County, USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple (1976: New York, NY: MAX, 2024), https://play.max.com/video/watch/ce720469-b8bf-4383-9eee-0863a4b4d7fc/f7bf8547-96fa-4abd-951e-65dacaddea75, 0:44:43.

and younger woman. Through this montage, Boyle's crime is a crime not only against the Yablonskis, but also against the workers: he has chosen his side, allied with the mine operators and companies, and will kill to ensure his position will not be threatened. He put his own wealth and power above the wellbeings of the coal miners, and for that, he resigned the miners to die in another mine or be killed on the picket line.

The third funeral is for a murdered striker, Lawrence Jones, who was killed by a scab, allegedly Bill Bruner, on the picket line late at night.[28] His murder occurs right after a turning point for the strike: Basil Collins, a strikebreaker and gun thug has been detained by the county sheriff, and the strikers' picket worked at last. A rally was held in celebration of this win, but the murder of Lawrence Jones squashes the high spirits. During Jones's eulogy, an older, retired mine worker gives dignity to his death, saying he died for this contract, and while it is a tragedy, he was not the first. During the funeral, the choir sings the hymn "What Will I Leave Behind?", and the sound of wailing is mixed with the singing. Jones's mother stumbles to her son's casket, where she weeps and has to be carried away by two men. Her posture reflects the woman who mourned at the Mannington Mine memorial and links these two tragedies. The circumstances of the Mannington miners' deaths and Jones' murder are different, but the meaning behind them is the same; the workers were killed, indirectly but not prevented, by the company. Yablonski, if he had lived, would have worked to prevent deaths like these in the future, but trying to make the lives better for miners brought about his demise. The families that are left behind after the murders are emphasized in all three funerals, relaying that this labor is generational, and deeply tied to their identities as workers and families. Each slain worker, either in the mines or at the

[28] *Harlan County, USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple (1976: New York, NY: MAX, 2024), https://play.max.com/video/watch/ce720469-b8bf-4383-9eee-0863a4b4d7fc/f7bf8547-96fa-4abd-951e-65dacaddea75, 1:24:54

hands of another man, is cause for mourning in the whole community, and only strengthens their resolve against the companies that do nothing to prevent these deaths.

One woman who has been embroiled in this labor struggle for decades before the production of *Harlan County, USA* is Florence Reece. Reece's appearance in the film splits the film in two, and transitions the focus from the violence of the historical past into the present struggle. She is the keynote speaker at a rally for the miner's strike in Harlan County. She delivers a short speech, telling the workers they "have nothing to lose but their chains, and a union to gain," then explains the circumstances under which she wrote "Which Side Are You On?"[29] During the "Bloody Harlan" struggle from 1931-1939, her husband, a striking miner, was assaulted by "gun thugs" in her own home, and shortly after she wrote the lyrics on a ripped sheet of paper.[30] The camera remains trained on Reese as her weathered voice sings this song, and cuts to the audience and their attention on her. This intercutting shows the recognition between generations who fought in the past for a contract and a union, the conditions they fought under, and the connection to the fight for a contract now. Reese has dedicated her life to militant, organized labor struggle, and knows that fighting for this contract is the right thing to do. Mining work is inherited by the men, but the fight for the union is an ongoing, generational struggle for all of Harlan County. Reese asks both the audience physically in front of her, as well as those watching decades later, "Which side are you on?"[31] It is a question that has been asked since Reese was young, and one that must continually be answered by the people present in the town hall, and the audiences far away from Harlan County.

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[29] *Harlan County, USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple (1976: New York, NY: MAX, 2024), https://play.max.com/video/watch/ce720469-b8bf-4383-9eee-0863a4b4d7fc/f7bf8547-96fa-4abd-951e-65dacaddea75, 0:50:38.

[30] Hevener, John W. *Which Side Are You on? : The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-39*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978, xviii.

[31] Hale, Grace Elizabeth. "Documentary Noise: The Soundscape of Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A.*" *Southern Cultures* 23, no. 1 (2017): 10-32. https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.2017.0002, 26.

Placing Reece, an icon of the labor movement and a woman, at the center of the film emphasizes the role women play in the strike in Harlan County. The men's union meetings and women's auxiliary meetings are delivered in conjunction throughout the film as a way to compare and contrast how the men organize and how the women organize. Women accompany the men at every picket line, handing out banners and stickers to spread the word. One woman, Lois Scott, stands out from the rest and is one person Kopple returns to and captures her read of the situation in which they find themselves. After one almost violent night, Scott speaks to both the men and women as the camera stays close in on her. She speaks about escalating the violence due to the violence they face, and delivers an ultimatum to the coalition that to be with us is to be on the picket line at 5 in the morning.[32] When watching her speak to the coalition, the image of Florence Reese is recalled, and the cyclical nature of this fight is made apparent once again. Scott and the women's auxiliary are the engines behind the success of this labor movement, and their strength is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the film.

The strength and power of the women in this labor struggle is no more apparent than in the climactic showdown between the sheriff and the strikers. Scott's speech led to the largest group of strikers on the picket line in months. With their cars lined up across the road that leads to the mines, the strikers prepare for the confrontation. The editing in this sequence recreates the tense environment of the morning through close-up interviews and captured hushed conversations between the strikers. When Basil Collins, head strikebreaker, arrives, the audio is almost silent, which has not occurred on the picket line yet. The women standing in the open break into song, "We Shall Not Be Moved", with the camera placed firmly behind the picket line. Kopple, both physically and ethically, has remained on the side of the strikers. Shortly after, the

[32] *Harlan County, USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple (1976: New York, NY: MAX, 2024), https://play.max.com/video/watch/ce720469-b8bf-4383-9eee-0863a4b4d7fc/f7bf8547-96fa-4abd-951e-65dacaddea75, 0:50:38.

sheriff, Billy G. Williams, arrives and talks to the strikers, but mainly Lois Scott. The sheriff and Lois speak curtly to each other, while a young man next to them wears an "I'm a coal miner's son" t-shirt, reminding the audience and the strikers what they are fighting for. The men stay behind the picket as Lois and other women confront the sheriff directly, before delivering him an arrest warrant for Basil Collins. The captured audio becomes muddled, but the close-up faces of both the Sheriff and Scott display that the strikers pulled this maneuver off. The camera remains trained on Scott's determined brow, and the women behind her recall many other examples of the dramatic tableau of the strike. Their strength united is undeniable.

The camera position in this climactic showdown visually demonstrate the sides of this fight, between the workers and the sheriff and scabs. The sequence is captured in one continuous shot, placing the audience in the middle of the confrontation, and convey the experience of what it was like to witness this on the ground. Throughout this scene, Kopple and her crew stay close to the strikers and sheriff, but when the sheriff crosses the road to Collins to arrest him, the camera leaves the strikers for a moment. The crew captures an apparent chumminess between the sheriff and Collins, a friendly demeanor that was missing in the sheriff's attitude and tone when talking to Lois Scott. When the sheriff comes back and talks to the strikers, the camera moves from the side of the sheriff to stand between the two. The camera swoops back and forth as they have this argument, then returns to Lois Scott's side. At this angle, the sheriff has his back to the line of cars driven by scabs ready to cross the picket line. This framing conveys two realities to the audience; first, he is defending the scabs, as police are generally on the side of the company to protect their capital interests. Second, Scott's confrontation by extension becomes the audience's confrontation with the sheriff and the law, and thus the two sides of a labor struggle are made distinctly apparent in this scene. Those who align with the workers are the ones who

get to decide their fates at the hands of capital, while those who choose to protect it, serve at its beck and call. The men, women, and children of Harlan County, as well as Kopple's crew, stood united against those that wish to break their strike and solidarity, but would not be moved. The success of this picket leaves the community in high spirits, and solidifies a strength in their ranks that would carry them across the finish line.

This sequence exemplifies how the participatory mode of documentary filmmaking operates in *Harlan County, USA.* The presence of a camera alters how people act, and captures a truth that "is the truth of a form of interaction that would not exist were it not for the camera."[33] At different points, Kopple's camera acts as a shield for the workers and is an object of disdain for the scabs and police in the film. During one confrontation on the picket line, Basil Collins pulls his gun, but then the light of the camera captures him, and he pulls it back. Later that same night, the scabs went after both the workers and the camera, shattering the lens.[34] The camera's presence is not neutral, and their aggression towards the camera proves that. In the sequence discussed above, had Kopple not been present, this interaction may have gone awry in several different ways; Collins may have been more aggressive with the strikers, the sheriff may not have been as calm, or apprehended Collins with the arrest warrant. Simultaneously, the camera being positioned on the side of the workers gives strength to their cause and emboldens them. At this point, Kopple and the crew have been living in Harlan County for almost two years and know the workers and what space they occupy and how they operate within this dynamic. The camera and the crew during the film participated in and protected the workers, and contributed to the strike's success. By choosing the side of the workers in Harlan County and participating in

[33] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary,* 118.
[34] *Harlan County, USA*, directed by Barbara Kopple (1976: New York, NY: MAX, 2024), https://play.max.com/video/watch/ce720469-b8bf-4383-9eee-0863a4b4d7fc/f7bf8547-96fa-4abd-951e-65dacaddea75, 1:04:43

the strike every step of the way, Kopple was able to share in the joy of their success and telegraph that elation to the audience.

Harlan County, USA is a foundational touchstone in American labor documentary and is a valuable document to analyze. The history of labor movements in America is a history that is often exploited for how it can denigrate workers currently striking as not needing a union while forgetting how the powers that work counter to labor movements were violent and unfair to them. *Harlan County, USA*, with the faithful and loyal effort of Kopple and her crew, sets that narrative straight. The observational aspects of the film lay bare the material conditions of the miners and their families, and place the blame for these conditions at the feet of Duke Power. It also captures how tightly linked the workers are with their community, and their collective spirit and will to win a contract is undeniable to the audience. It also drives home the message that the fight for labor rights is never over, and can be taken away at a moment's notice. They will even kill your fellow workers to break your spirit and your picket. Kopple and her crew setting the camera at the side of the workers and participating in the strike is the exact mode that future labor documentarians must adopt if they wish to recreate the moving spirit during the 1976 strike in Harlan County, Kentucky.

III. Neoliberalism Descends: *American Dream* (1990)

The strike's success in Harlan County is a contagious joy that one cannot help but be jealous of, but successful labor strikes captured in documentaries are few and far between. Kopple's next documentary, *American Dream* (1990) takes us to the opposite end of the spectrum: a deep, tragic defeat of a labor movement crushed under the growing corporate boot.

American Dream documents the Hormel meat packing plant in Austin, Minnesota. The Hormel Meat Strike in the film occurred when neoliberalization had driven deep enough into US domestic financial policy that it was finally descending upon the middle classes of America. "Enjoy Austin where the good life is here to stay" (20:15) welcomes us into the town where the meatpackers' wages have been cut from $10.69 to $8.25 per hour, deeply affecting the lifestyles of the union workers. The local P-9 union reaches out to Ray Rogers, a Corporate Campaign representative who promises the workers the press coverage and outreach they need if they choose to strike over their wages being cut. Lewis Anderson, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) lead negotiator, sees this move as a betrayal of unionism. He and the dissenters distance themselves from the union, saying that they are asking for too much too quickly. A third faction is also present- Hormel Meat Products, the employer of the workers. However, the schism between the union and its negotiators gives Hormel the room to lowball the workers on a contract and sit this conflict out. All the while, they are making more profit than they ever have; over $25 million in profit, while the workers have to take a pay cut. The three distinct factions displayed in this film unveil the changing attitudes of workers, unions, and corporations in a time when the rules of operations and the economy are changing year after year, and the workers cannot keep up. With the population split in three, *American Dream* reveals what emotions, rhetoric, and material pressures convince workers to abandon their union

and cross the picket line. In this section, I will examine how *American Dream* documents the birth of neoliberal thinking, policies, and practices that influenced and changed the economic and political landscape, and how it marked the 1980s as the end for labor power in America.

The time and distance gap between *Harlan County, USA* (1973) and *American Dream* (1990) is crucial in understanding the attitude difference and the tensions that arise in Austin, Minnesota. While both the miners and the meat packers draw from their history of union jobs and the protections they provided, the Hormel workers possess a more comfortable lifestyle than the miners and have experienced more benefits. Early in the film, they boast about their benevolent, late CEO, Jay Hormel, who included an employee profit-sharing model that has since been phased out. Archival footage of a promotional short for Hormel plays as they recall the days when union workers had fair pay and benefits. At the same time, Hormel brought in a profit.[35] That benefit structure is a far cry from where Hormel is when we encounter it in the film, as the corporation proposed a $2 pay cut for new workers, or a wage freeze for current employees for 3 years, to preempt "out of line" costs that Hormel deemed necessary. This is despite their profits growing year after year. This was unacceptable for workers, and once deals soured at the table, the workers walked out on strike. This policy is neoliberalism in action, and Hormel's choices at the table exemplify what many companies across the United States chose during the onset of this era.

Neoliberalism is a term that describes different policies for how sectors of public life should be run - it is economic policy, attitude shifts, societal rule changes, and shifting global dynamics. In theory, it is the privileging of the individual entrepreneur and their freedom in all facets of life. It is the promotion of the private sector over the public, privileging business and

[35] *American Dream,* directed by Barbara Kopple (1990; New York, NY: Internet Archive, 2019), https://archive.org/details/americandream_201908, 0:09:53.

financial interests over the well-being of the people, and continuous budget cuts and austerity measures.[36] During the 1950s and 1960s, the wealthy saw that unions were growing in power and influence, and they had to capitulate and compromise with them or see their wealth be redistributed.[37] This was a time of competition between two world powers and their economic and social systems - capitalism in the United States, and socialism in the USSR. The United States wanted to show and prove that capitalism, as an ideology, could provide better benefits and living standards for workers than socialism or communism. Once the USSR was defanged and overthrown in the late 1980s, the wealthy no longer felt pressured to provide for the workers they exploited. They could now chip away at the standard living conditions of workers to extract more profit and tell workers to expect less and less from their companies.

Neoliberal thought and ideology originated with the "Chicago Boys" in the 1970s, under Milton Freidman, and quickly spread through financial institutions and business schools. It was implemented in Chile following the killing of the socialist president Salvador Allende and the installation of the dictator, Augusto Pinochet. Simultaneously, neoliberal policies and practices were implemented in cities like New York, and then in the United States writ large. The policies, though maybe not their stated goal, were implemented "to achieve the restoration of class power" of the elites.[38] In the United States, from 1973 to 1988, the top 0.1 percent of income earners went from holding 2 percent of the national income to over 5 percent.[39] Neoliberalism in practice functions to allow more corporations to become monopolies, and increase owner's control of the government through their money and lobbying efforts by having the market decide.[40] In practice, companies are at liberty to maximine profit by all means, with all other

[36] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.
[37] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 15.
[38] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 16.
[39] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 17.
[40] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 16.

decisions being based on that principle. This leads to the degradation of workers' living standards and conditions, environmental destruction, and concentration of wealth and power at the top.

The goal of neoliberalism in the social sector, regarding how people relate to one another, is to obscure the class lines between who has the power and who does not. In a town like Austin, Minnesota, workers and their families have means; a $32,000 house that is not buckling, a backyard, clean water, and health care. They are comfortable compared to most people living around the world, and certainly compared to Harlan County. The pay cut threatens this lifestyle, but the dissenters, rather than see the company as taking away this way of life, see it threatened instead by the strikers. Rather than seeing their struggles as intertwined, the P-10ers remove themselves from the rank-and-file, deciding not to stay by the side of their fellow workers. They do not criticize the strike based on morals or ethics, and understand why it is important to stand up and strike. Instead, they criticize the methods of the strikers- they see it as too risky, a failed strategy, and reminiscent of Reagan's hyper-individualistic ideology of "I'll get mine, and to hell with everybody else."[41] This shows a fundamental misunderstanding of what the strikers are fighting for, and "the paradox of union politics in deindustrializing America."[42] If one refuses to stand with the strikers, they are a scab, but what they say and their reasoning for betraying their union convinces Kopple to give credence and screentime to their claims. The documentary itself is confused about who holds the power in these conflicts, and in the end, concludes it was the P-9 strikers who were too naive to see the flaws in their plan. Kopple and the documentary see the dissenters, the scabs, as a sympathetic force trying to steer the union on the right track. In doing

[41] Kopple, Barbara, dir. *American Dream,* 0:23:20.
[42] Paula Rabinowitz, "Melodrama/Male Drama: The Sentimental Contract of American Labor Films ," essay, in *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism*, ed. Jonathan Kahana (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2016), 836–48, 845.

so, they have divided the power that the UFCW International and the P-9 local had previously that won them the contracts.

Though Kopple attempts evenhandedness in *American Dream*, the outsized screen time given to the scabs and Andersen makes her an ally in their fight against the local union. Lewie Andersen is a character Kopple raises as a main protagonist and moral center, and allies herself and the camera at his side. During a town hall between Andersen and the P-9 local, the camera is not in the audience as it was during the meetings in Harlan County, but instead on the stage with Andersen. The camera follows Andersen into backroom negotiations with a representative of Wilson Foods, an action the union membership would see as a betrayal. As a defense to the allegations that the UFCW is selling out the P-9 local, Andersen defends by citing his decades of negotiating with companies like Hormel. However, it is a new economy and a new era for corporations. Hormel is no longer interested in negotiating fairly with the union, and instead has transitioned to a "lean and mean corporation with national and international subsidiaries linked to other major corporations during the era of mergers and buy-outs."[43] Unable to change tactics during this evolution, "the UFCW comes off as retrograde and suspect,"[44] and unwilling to ally with the strikers, even when the strike spreads to multiple plants across the region. The paternalistic rhetoric and actions from the dissenters and Andersen have sunk into the strikers' minds too much for them to regain their ground and push forward. The lack of support and the unwillingness to listen from the start doomed the strike, not the tactics.

The observational style of *Harlan County, USA* follows through to *American Dream*, but it cannot encompass the participatory style that gave much of *Harlan County, USA* its power. Early in the film, Kopple is even-handed in her coverage between factions, but she is drawn to

[43] Rabinowitz, "Melodrama/Male Drama ," 845.
[44] Rabinowitz, "Melodrama/Male Drama ," 845.

Andersen and his group of scabs, and as the strike drags on, she, along with Andersen and the P-10ers, cannot pivot. In a fight between Andersen and a different union negotiating committee, Swift Independent, Andersen slams his hand on the table and storms to the steward screaming about how he cannot give him what he is asking for, for daring to question his tactics.[45] The camera remains behind Andersen, and his back is hunched and looming over the seated steward. He is intimidating and loud, and will not listen to his members' concerns. Tight close-ups of the other committee members are shown back to back. In a rare moment of non-diegetic narration, Kopple gives the privilege of voice-over, effectively the narrator, over to Andersen, who talks about the significance of the strike, and how "you have to pick your battles." The voice-over endorses his justifications, which actively go against what the workers want. Andersen's emotions and ego have restricted what solutions he can entertain, and he digs his heels in further. Kopple bears witness to the factions fighting and keeps the camera on the side of this paternalistic coalition, unwilling to intervene and see this conflict from the side of the workers.

With the workers divided as they are, she focuses on the coalition that invokes "the rhetoric of sentimentality"; the dissenters, the scabs.[46] The rhetoric of sentimentality refers to those whose expressions of heightened emotions and tears are seen as legitimate and are then legitimized by pillars of power. The structure of the strike film, whether nonfiction or fictional, treats the success and triumph of the workers as an inevitability, and imagines it as a good vs. evil narrative with a foregone conclusion, much like a melodrama.[47] This was the case with *Harlan County, USA*, and the dichotomy worked in its favor. Here, the dichotomy is not as easily applicable, with the waters muddied about who is a union man - "good" - and who is a scab -

[45] Kopple, Barbara, dir. *American Dream,* 0:46:34-0:47:19.
[46] Rabinowitz, "Melodrama/Male Drama ," 843.
[47] Rabinowitz, "Melodrama/Male Drama ," 838.

"evil." In lieu of this framework, and the rhetorical power it provides, a different image of melodrama is raised instead; the crying union man. During a private meeting with four of the P-10ers, they discuss if they are going to cross the picket line.[48] They repeat that they are "union men," and were brought up to respect and never cross the picket line. They share their reasons for considering crossing the picket line and cry at the positions they are in, at the pain the striking workers have inflicted on their masculinity and pride. However, like Andersen, they cannot entertain returning to the picket line or reorganizing with the union and supporting the strike. They do not take an active role in the strike, rather they are simply waiting for it to end. One P10er was against the strike from the start, as he was part of the committee Andersen formed. He did not quit his job at Hormel, finding it was better to keep his job, keep receiving strike pay, and work against the union to raise his position. He has ended in the position he was always going to: he crossed the picket line. By focusing on the P-10ers and Lewie Anderson, the strike failure is treated as an inevitability by the film.

The professed neoliberal principle of monetary gains and perceived stability of the middle classes is also the primary reason given for the P-10ers and Andersen, to undercut and go around the striking workers. Andersen repeatedly states to the strikers and in negotiations that the current contract is the best they can get from Hormel, despite the profits they garnered in the past year. The P-10ers privilege their emotional and financial needs above their fellow workers, and express they feel emasculated by staying home while their family goes to work and school.[49] Many of the P-10ers pride themselves on their ability to provide a "family wage", an ideology they thought to be their lived reality. Their wives and children were out working while the men sat back at home. This family wage ideology justifies staying home and honoring the strike, or

[48] Kopple, Barbara, dir. *American Dream,* 1:14:29-1:16:45.
[49] Kopple, Barbara, dir. *American Dream*, 1:15:36.

going back to work at Hormel despite the pay and benefits cuts.[50] The men who were particularly wounded by staying home while the family went out to work moved to tears about their predicament, but "these tears were an edifice, an excuse for undercutting the union local."[51] During these conversations, the men do not mention that they spoke to their wives and families about their decision and if they said no or yes; it is a completely individualistic notion they are justifying. The sentiment expressed, combined with the image of the working class All-American man being moved to tears by his predicament, is an image that Kopple highlights and feels drawn to, despite the tears being employed as a manipulation for the audience to sympathize with the scabs.[52] Neoliberalism is about the individual working for their best position, no matter the cost to their fellow workers or the wider community, and is the thought process behind the men abandoning their union and breaking the strike.

The main conflict in *American Dream* is not between Hormel and the union but between the striking workers and the dissidents. The dissidents disagree with the strikers' tactics and goal, and the striking workers believe in their strike and actions, no matter the cost to them or their family. Both sides justify their actions to the other with the same claim; this job at Hormel should be able to support a whole family on this wage, and either the reduced pay in the contract or the strike pay, is not enough. The strength and unity that the strikers in *Harlan County, USA* does not extend to Austin, Minnesota, due to different material conditions, outdated negotiation tactics and union organizing strategies, and spreading neoliberal ideologies and manipulations by Hormel. This divides the workers, and the fights they have within themselves are conversations that never occurred to the striking workers and their wives in *Harlan County, USA.* They knew

[50] Cady, Kathryn A. "The Death of Fordism and the Family Wage in Labor Documentaries: A Feminist Analysis." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 48, no. 1 (February 5, 2023): 90–107. https://doi.org/10.1177/01968599221150651, 100.
[51] Cady, "Death of Fordism and the Family Wage", 101.
[52] Rabinowitz, "Melodrama/Male Drama", 844.

they would win one way or another, but this surety in their power has left the minds of many of the workers. The rhetoric of Andersen and Hormel has spread enough seeds of doubt in the workers that once they doubt their mission, the unity has completely gone. The breaking of airline traffic controllers strike planted those seeds of doubt; the fleeing of jobs to south of the border planted that seed of doubt, the failure and eradication of the USSR as a contrasting pole to the capitalist USA planted that seed of doubt. That doubt is all Hormel, and many other companies, needed to break down unions and force them out of the labor market.

IV. The Blue Collar Worker in the Age of Global Capitalism: *American Factory* (2019)

American Dream (1990) foreshadowed much of what we come to confront in our next film, *American Factory* (dir. Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar, 2019). Both documentaries take place in cities that struggled after a major economic shift in the 1980s- the outsourcing of meat packing jobs in Austin, Minnesota resembles what happened to automobile manufacturing jobs in Ohio. One of the last standing manufacturing jobs, the GM plant in Moraine, Ohio, near Dayton, closed in 2008 due to the global recession. 10,000 jobs were lost in the area, and the people struggled. *American Factory* begins at the reopening of the shuttered GM plant, now owned by Fuyao Glass manufacturing company, a Chinese-based company. *American Factory* documents how transnational, global capitalism operates currently, how workers across the world relate to one another under this new context, and what work under these conditions could look like in the future.

Reichert has been an influential documentarian since the 1960s, and her early works established topics and methodology that follow through feminist and labor documentaries. Her first documentary, *Growing Up Female*, is a 50-minute interview-style documentary about girls and women in various stages of her life. Her faithfulness to the statements and experiences of the women she chose for the film was revolutionary to how they saw themselves as humans primarily, as well as political beings.[53] To distribute the film, Reichert and her then-partner Jim Klein founded New Day Films, a feminist documentary production and distribution organization.[54] New Day Films produced and distributed feminist works covering the

[53] Lesage, Julia. "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film" Essay. In *The Documentary Film Reader: History, Theory, Criticism,* edited by Jonathan Kahana, 668-679. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2016. 674.
[54] Aufderheide, Patricia. "JULIA REICHERT AND THE WORK OF TELLING WORKING-CLASS STORIES." *Film Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2019): 9–22. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26907814, 10

intersections of gender, labor, and class. Reichert has been distinguished for her "humanist Marxist" lens through which she films the world, and shapes her documentaries and the arguments, questions, and concerns contained within.[55] Another production of Reichert and Klein's is *Union Maids* (1976), a highly influential and important short documentary focusing on both women's labor relations and living conditions inside and outside of work. The three women interviewed, Kate Hyndman, Stella Nowicki, and Sylvia Woods offer their testimony about how they found their way within male-dominated labor sectors and fought for women's rights in the workplace. *Union Maids* was the widest screened of her films yet and was her first Academy nomination. Julia Reichert, no matter who her co-director is, has a long history of intersectionality with a focus on labor rights, which made her and her partner Steven Bognar the perfect team to tackle the complicated and under-researched realm of global capitalism that takes place in *American Factory*, which takes place in their residence of Dayton, Ohio.[56]

Reichert's film *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2009) documents the closing of the factory that *American Factory* takes place in. The GM plant has reopened after being purchased by Fuyao Glass Industry Group. *American Factory* documents the working conditions and laborers of the Fuyao car glass manufacturing plant in Moraine, Ohio from 2015 to 2017. In the interim between the closure and re-opening, the local economy surrounding the plant had declined, and the family-wage myth had been broken apart, yet still something to strive for. When the factory was set to reopen, many workers were eager to return, but their wages had been cut.[57] Returning to work also meant not being part of a union workforce. The previous GM plant was unionized, so the workers that were being hired back at the new Fuyao plant had

[55] Aufderheide, "JULIA REICHERT", 9.
[56] Wilkinson, Alissa. "Work Is Going Global. American Factory's Directors Explain How They Captured Its Challenges." Vox, August 21, 2019. https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/8/21/20812012/american-factory-interview-netflix-reichert-bognar.
[57] Reichert, Julia and Steven Bognar, dir. *American Factory.* 2019; United States: Higher Ground Productions, 2019. Netflix. https://netflix.com/watch/81090071, 00:19:45.

experienced first-hand the benefits of a union's protection. Unions can advocate and ensure that injuries that occur at a hazardous job such as glass manufacturing plants are documented and remedied, and the injured party has been restored. The Bureau of Labor Statistics observed that glass manufacturing plants have injury rates twice as high as all other private industries.[58] The absence of a union at the new plant was a drawback for some workers, but many signed on anyway. The hope for eventually forming a union is what kept workers there, but in the end, forces within and outside of the Moraine plant would prevent that from happening.

American Factory, unfortunately, continues the decline of dedicated, supportive labor documentaries like *Harlan County, USA,* to the middle-of-the-road observational style of the *American Dream*. When the union strike fails, it is devastating for the workers fired for their union involvement. The audience sympathizes with them, but no other option is presented for workers to gain power in this sector. Workers are fired for their organizing efforts on camera, but no legal recourse is pursued. *American Factory* paints a grim portrait of the labor movement in this country and how we situate labor in cinema and the larger consciousness. In this section, I will analyze how *American Factory*, through its mainstream, observational lens, division between workers from China and America, and coverage of the forces intersecting at the Moraine plant, gives incredible insight into how labor looks and will look under the current and future conditions of global capitalism, but fails to push the larger goals of labor movements globally - to unite along lines of class, not nationality.

One of the mandates for Reichert and Bognar to make this film was complete independence - "no money from the plant or owners, complete access, and sole control of

[58] Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. "Motor Vehicle Manufacturing Nonfatal Injury and Illness Rate Twice as High as Private Industry." The Economics Daily, June 29, 2020. Accessed June 6, 2024. https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/motor-vehicle-manufacturing-nonfatal-injury-and-illness-rate-twice-as-high-as-private-industry.htm#.

editing."[59] This arrangement allows for a fuller portrait of the workers and upper management involved in the business. Each sector and level is covered to some degree, including exclusive executive meetings and captive audience meetings, secretly recorded by an employee at the request of Reichert. They spent three years visiting and filming the Moraine plant, the employees, and the larger community. During the sections that took place in China, they corresponded with two Chinese filmmakers, Yiqian Zhang and Mijie Li.[60] This complete coverage is captured from an observational lens, blending in with the factory's machinery. This observational mode is a common, mainstream approach to documentaries that audiences are familiar with, with a Hollywood-style continuity editing technique that renders invisible the work of filmmaking. Reichert and Bognar, along with their other camera operators, do not appear, nor refer to, the camera equipment or their presence in the factory, and instead choose to foreground the events taking place at the Moraine plant, as well as the plant in Fuqing, China. This privileges the workers' and the management sector's voices and perspectives and makes them the authority about what is happening at the Fuyao plant.

The observational, direct cinema style is also one that is characteristic of the feminist and direct cinema movements that Reichert was a part of in the 1960s.[61] This approach, though highly influential and intelligible to an audience, was criticized in the past by some for a "lack of perspective" in the authority of historical events to be given over to interviewees.[62] Film critic B. Ruby Rich derided this type of documentary as "soothsayer cinema" in which "the filmmaker captures the emotional commitment of the viewer with attractive and engaging characters rather than situating them in a historicopolitical context."[63] The lacking context of *American Factory* is

[59] Aufderheide, "JULIA REICHERT", 18.
[60] Wilkinson, "Work Is Going Global"
[61] Lesage, "The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film", 674.
[62] Aufderheide, "JULIA REICHERT", 12.
[63] Aufderheide, "JULIA REICHERT", 12.

the constraints outside of the film. The production company, Higher Ground Productions was founded by the Obamas, who are liberal capitalists intent on stabilizing the American economy, not uplifting and liberating workers from capitalism. This was also a co-production with Netflix, that while it may distribute the film wider, will not produce a film that challenges their audiences on their conceptions of capitalism, nor go against their profit or company motives of neoliberal capitalism. Reichert may care about American workers, but forces behind the film do not, and that prevents this film from being a more radical message for workers globally. While appearing to be all-encompassing, *American Factory* does not conceptualize the deep problems already existing under global capitalism, or compounding problems going forward Instead, the film limits itself to describing the emotional toll of the labor the workers perform in the United States and China, rather than what could be done to better their circumstances.

A moment where this message partially comes through is with the centerpiece of the film; the trip to Fuyao headquarters in China. During a factory tour, the workers on the assembly line are as mechanical in their movements as the machinery.[64] The footage captured inside the factory in China is rare, especially in an American film, and the short interviews conducted with the workers are beneficial in providing insight into working conditions in China. One woman states that she works 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, and only goes home once a year.[65] She has a son she rarely sees, and she sends money back to him every week. This sympathetic, personal story demonstrates that the workers in China deserve much more for their labor than they currently receive. In another scene, workers pick through glass fragments without eye protection or cut-resistant gloves. The editing of the sequence, in conjunction with the exclusion of rank-and-file workers on the trip, does not lead to the conclusion that they also need to fight for

[64] Zhang, Ling. "An 'American Factory' in the Era of Global Capitalism." Sixth Tone, September 7, 2019. https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1004528.
[65] Reichert, Julia and Steven Bognar, dir. *American Factory,* 00:48:51-00:49:18.

better pay for themselves and work with the American workers. American audiences are watching from the point of view of the American managers, confronting their schema of work of "only" 8 hours a day, 40 hours a week, while Chinese audiences are looking at the Americans looking at the Chinese workers, "who might feel equally perplexed at the visitors' 'excessive' response to such daily routines."[66] It is a moment of confrontation with their expectations of labor conditions in China, their personal expectations of what their jobs should provide for their workforce, and care for them.

This confrontation with how different work culture is followed by how different, yet similar American culture is with Chinese culture. The managers of Fuyao America are invited to the Fuyao Corporation's New Year's celebration. While workers at the Chinese plant perform songs and dances related to the company itself, the American supervisors perform a deeply American tradition and form a conga line, then sing and dance to The Village People's "YMCA". The difference between the coordination and execution of the performances by the Chinese workers versus the American workers is played for laughs. However, it demonstrates a difference in work culture between the two groups. A moment of celebration for the American workers is performed with a minimally thought out, prescribed dance that limits their creative capabilities, and does not mention Fuyao. The Chinese workers' performances include original songs sung live, choreographed dances, and coordinated costumes that all reference Fuyao in some manner. The American worker does not think about work outside of the hours mandated, much less make a dance praising their place of employment. On the other hand, the Chinese workers planned and coordinated with each other the dances, outfits, and songs to perform for the Chairman and their "family" at Fuyao. In meetings at the Moraine plant with only Chinese workers, Cao, and other

[66] Yang, Jing, and Kaiju Chen. 2023. "To De-Exoticize Chinese Stereotypes: US-Sino Communication in *American Factory*." *Critical Arts* 37 (4): 57–71. doi:10.1080/02560046.2023.2277294, 66.

executives repeatedly invoke socialist rhetoric of working as a family and providing for Fuyao to keep up morale so production can stay up. The American managers have the same interest as the Chinese managers at the New Years' celebration, which is generating profit for Fuyao, but this intention is masked through cultural exchange and merging of traditions.

One group in this merging of cultures is left out - the production line worker back in Dayton, Ohio. After a moving moment where an American manager sheds tears at the group wedding at the celebration, we cut back to a worker in America who was not invited on the trip. He sits in the breakroom and watches stock footage of children playing on the TV in the break room. He remarks, "This is America. We don't need Chinese children singing and praying."[67] The brief moment of cultural integration and appreciation is popped by a bitter, racist remark by an American worker. But this remark comes after the news that the break room is being taken away from the workers and replaced by more manufacturing equipment, and a more regimented work environment implemented by the managers. The legitimate grievances of the American workers have been edited next to off-color, racist remarks and resistance to changing work conditions to undercut these complaints. This editing constructs the film's conflict around cultural differences between workers and in the workplace and not the inherently antagonistic relationship between the workers and the owner and stockholders. If the workers on the floor had more of a say in their pay and working conditions, they would not be so bothered by the break room moving and the tightening of production procedures.

American Factory is the first time Reichert has hired an editor for her work, Lindsey Utz.[68] Utz's editing style is that of the Hollywood documentary - invisible, flowing, and made to

[67] Reichert, Julia and Steven Bognar, dir. *American Factory,* 00:59:45.
[68] Wilkinson, Alissa. "Work Is Going Global. American Factory's Directors Explain How They Captured Its Challenges." Vox, August 21, 2019. https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/8/21/20812012/american-factory-interview-netflix-reichert-bognar.

feel a natural sequence-to-sequence edit that carries the story well. However, it often leaves behind key aspects that would help to make concrete what the workers are going through. In its worst moments, the editing blames the union vote failing on the Chinese workers, despite the vote being 868 no's to 444 yes's. The reactions we see first after the result of the union vote is known are from Chinese workers, and only later are American workers asked why they believe this vote failed. There are 2,200 Americans and 200 Chinese workers at this Fuyao plant, and only 1,312 people voted in total. In most union contracts, supervisors or managers are not included in the rank-and-file. The manager and supervisor positions at the Moraine plant are mainly held by Chinese workers, placing them in a position of authority over the American workers. Fuyao, to prevent the formation of a union, brings in the Labor Relations Institute, a union-busting company that holds captive audience meetings. In these meetings, a representative comes into the plant and lies, intimidates, and misinforms the American workers about voting for a union.[69] Fuyao paid The Labor Relations Institute $1 million for their services, for which they were successful, as the union vote did not pass. Many companies and private institutions in the United States are willing to pay these companies large sums of money to keep unions from forming, at large cost to them in the short term, though they see it as saving money in the long term. This lack of context is one example out of many in *American Factory* that should be brought forward, and as a result of editing, obfuscates the real reasons of what workers face when trying to organize.

The conclusion that the film draws on blaming Chinese workers' anti-union activities is built up over the course of the film and how it depicts the workers relating to one another. The first half of the film focuses on the workers at the new factory, with little mention of the working

[69] Reichert, Julia and Steven Bognar, dir. *American Factory,* 1:30:15.

conditions. We meet workers and managers who give personal testimony in voice-over for the audience to understand their living conditions and current problems. Once Fuyao opens the factory, the focus shifts to the problems that arise at the company - namely, the language barrier between the workers, and different expectations of work ethic at almost every level of operation, with many workers contributing what they think the work ethic should be. Tasks have to be handed down through translators and told to workers, text messages are translated, and at each of these stops, there is the possibility of being misunderstood. The 40-hour, 5 days-a-week structure that is instilled in American workers is foreign to Chinese workers, who know a 10-12 hour, 6 days-a-week work schedule. The Americans are frustrated at the pushy managers, and the Chinese workers are frustrated at the slow pace of the Americans. Some friendships form and flourish outside of work, but while inside the factory, Chinese and American workers conflict, or at least misunderstand each other. The implication that the Chinese workers caused the union vote to fail is set up throughout the film every time the American and Chinese workers squabble and fight in the factory, with the editing focusing and making a point of this antagonism.

The humanist lens was a very effective way of covering issues in the 1970s and 80s, but in a world as complicated as in 2015, there is an abdication of responsibility in explaining the whole picture of the current relations between China and America. There are moments where workers come together interpersonally, but the conflict at the center of all labor under capitalism is never amended or overcome. Interpersonal amends simply are not enough to combat the mounting pressure and changing relations between companies and their employees around the world that come with global capitalism. *American Factory* is a documentary of its own moment; it is a post-Trump, pre-COVID-19, optimistic capitalist ideal before the pandemic split open and revealed the rot at the core of the institutions that run our lives globally. With the humanist lens,

Reichert and Bognar attempt to grapple with the unprecedented situation of a foreign company planting roots in an American town, and show all sides of those involved in this venture. However, it lacks the final cohesive call for workers to join forces together and unite to take back power from the capitalists by not appropriately situating the film in this historicopolitical context. The methods of obfuscation that *American Factory* leans into are the same methods that news outlets, capitalists, and government officials use to keep the working class down. It is a liberal gaze; one that accepts the presence of Chinese workers in America and sees the benefit of reopening the factory in this small town. However, it fails to question the larger models of capitalism that all the workers are subject to. What a union is, how it operates, and what it provides are underexplained and underdeveloped in the film, and that does nothing but help the capitalist and owner class.

V. Conclusion

The economy in America and globally shifted massively following stagflation in the 1970s and neoliberal thought coming into dominance. As we saw in *American Dream,* these changes outpaced the old frameworks for labor action and movement in the United States, causing it to become outdated and toothless. Workers could not adjust in time before their wages, social programs, and benefits were cut. This has directly led to the current predicament workers face in the United States and worldwide; precarious jobs with wages that do not keep up with inflation and rising living costs. The films outlined and analyzed here detail the regression from militant, binary labor thought, a union man versus a gun thug, to the neoliberal pyramid of capitalists, CEOs, managers, with the hourly wage workers below them, into a new era of zero-hour contracts and gig work, a rising sector of hyper-exploitative service sector work, who are all workers with little to no union representation. The old union thought, such as displayed with Lewie Andersen and some veteran workers in *American Factory*, has been outmaneuvered and forcefully phased out by the think tanks and policy changes that arose from the 1980s, and have prevented any popular labor movement to develop, until recently.

One framework that is present in all three documentaries and should be carried forward in further labor documentaries is the alliance and support of the American worker that fights for the union. As said in *American Factory*, "Nothing in America has changed in terms of working people working hard…. What changed in America was the people at the top wanted to change the rules to take advantage of people."[70] The documentarians discussed here stuck by and gained the trust of the workers, and did not manipulate or take advantage of that trust. They must never recreate the systems of exploitation that the capitalists operate under. Though the filmmakers do get sidetracked by the drama and sentiments of management, this allegiance with workers must

[70] Reichert, Julia and Steven Bognar, dir. *American Factory,* 01:22:15.

never fade for those interested in documenting labor movements. With documentarians working side-by-side with workers, the camera has proven to protect workers from the violence of the state and private sectors. The unionized workers are the only coalition left to fight the exploiting classes, and they must continue to be highlighted and held up.

Labor documentary as a form mandates both the observational and participatory lens to make effective and persuasive the arguments, sentiments, and struggles workers face. *Harlan County, USA* employs both lenses to craft an authentic, historical image of the worker in America through using on-site sound, protective camera techniques, and allegiance to the striking workers. In the confusing and evolving times of the 1980s, *American Dream* tries to stand by the workers but is caught in the crossfire by gravitating toward the drama of the scabbing workers, rather than the heart and unity forged by the P9 union and their charge. Through the short montages, Kopple provides accurate context to the conditions of their lives but misses out on a larger political life that is only apparent after the fact. The primary critique of observational documentary mode, that these images are without context or a bigger picture is validated in American Factory. Reichert not interceding on behalf of the workers and participating in their labor, rather choosing to become part of the machinery leaves out the context of the age we are living under. Without consideration for the nature of the conflict at its core, between workers and the owners, the friction at the Moraine plant is chalked up to cultural differences, and ends by leaving no route or hope for the workers and viewers on how to navigate this new era of global capitalism. As we move into yet another new era of labor - post-pandemic, precarious, neofeudal labor[71] - documentaries about workers need to craft and bring to the forefront a new framework of labor, labor organizing, and answer the questions of

[71] Dean, Jodi. "Neofeudalism: The End of Capitalism?" Los Angeles Review of Books, May 12, 2020. Accessed June 6, 2024. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neofeudalism-the-end-of-capitalism/.

what we want the future to look like for workers worldwide. The primary way to achieve this is for the hands that do the work must also hold the camera.

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