

Depicting the Gospel of Work: from Moralised Landscape to Mechanical Reproduction.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the association of heroic forms of masculinity with manual work was adumbrated less through political rhetoric than through biblical imagery and also in aesthetics of labour developed by the painters and photographers of the first industrial revolution. We will look briefly at each in turn.

The Victorian Gospel of Work was centred on the proposition that the devil makes work for idle hands, a double connotation which made idleness and self-abuse equivalent and mutually reinforcing male vices, as factors of 'emasculatation'. According to this sermon from the mount, preached as much by 'top hatted' trade unionists as by the civilising missionaries of the middle class, masculinity needed manual labour to channel or sublimate its sexual energies into socially productive ends.¹ In turn, manual labour needed masculinity to enable it to transcend its degrading conditions of work. One preacher of the Gospel wrote about manual work as follows:

Which beads the brow and tans the flesh.
Of lusty manhood, casting out its devils.²

But the devil of sexuality had another string to his bow: the demon drink. It was a heady mix which the Gospel of Work did its best to hold at bay. Behind the moral remonstrance was the Great Fear (1789) that Great Fear was that labour power might turn monstrous, become a demonic force capable of destroying capitalism, unless its bio-energetic capacities, associated with those of masculinity itself, were somehow tamed. The labouring body had thus to be turned into an industrial dynamo and masculinity into a cog in this machine. For if the devil had all the best tunes, one of them might just be the Internationale.

Painters also created moralised landscapes in which the figures of manual labour played a central role.³ Farm labourers have been the preferred subject for depictions of elemental labour from the time of Constable and Turner right through to the Second World War. This is not only because they constituted a large, though ever decreasing, proportion of the workforce, but because they fitted organically into the compositional strategies of English landscape painting.⁴ The fact that England lacked a peasantry as a result of the enclosure movement and the Industrial Revolution in agriculture did not stop landscape painters from re-inventing farm hands as 'yeomen of England' and the backbone of national

prosperity. The notion of the dignity of labour, so central to the Victorian Gospel of Work, was largely derived from this idealised portrayal. The back breaking nature of farm work is rarely if ever shown.

For example, in Stubb's *Haymakers* (1785) the figures are orchestrated into a rhythmic ballet which presents their labours as graceful rather than full of real effort, and the whole picture is carefully organized in the form of a pyramid. Turner's *Ploughing up Turnips* (1809) brings together various elements associated with patriotic feelings about the English landscape and those who work it. In the foreground is a tranquil scene of workers harvesting a field of turnips. In the misty distance is Windsor Castle symbolising the continuity of Britain's national heritage. But neither the historical continuity nor the social stability it was supposed to guarantee was as secure as this picture sought to suggest.

By the end of the Victorian period the countryside was undergoing rapid change. John Robertson Reid's *Toil and Pleasure* (1879) shows the hierarchical structure of the rural community dramatically polarised between those who work the land to live and those who consume its products and use it for purely recreational purposes. The weary workers stand to one side as members of the hunt ride across the field. The working world of the rural poor was set against that of the idle rich and no communication between them was possible.

The advent of mechanization transformed agricultural labour but not always its depiction. John Nash's *Threshing* (1925-78) shows the influence of Eric Ravilious and the romantic tradition of English pastoral painting but gives centre stage to the mechanical thresher, which already looks like a piece of industrial archaeology. The writhing forms on the left, and the treatment of the hay, also owes something to Samuel Palmer, and cast a somewhat threatening aspect over this otherwise idyllic scene of man, nature and machine with a common purpose with one another, indicating perhaps that its days were numbered.

Painters were also exploring the dark satanic mills that had come to dominate the English landscape, seeking to find here elements of the sublime or picturesque. *The Blacksmith and His Forge* by the Nain Brothers was painted in the mid 17th century and was one of the earliest images of manual labour which started a whole genre of cottage industry paintings. In a cosy domestic scene, the family (including the grandfather) are assembled around the blacksmith, and the forge itself is little more than the family hearth put to work. The figure of the blacksmith retained its sentimental appeal as an image of

elemental labour - either as a artisan heroically continuing the craft tradition - or as somewhat more demonic figure - long after it had been officially relegated to the Museum of Labour History.

With the advent of industrialism, the forge moves into the factory, or rather the steelworks where it retains its central role in the mise-en-scene, as in the painting by John Ferguson Weir *Forging the Shaft* (c1874-1877). It is deliberately composed as an animated tableau for the purpose of dramatising the spectacle of labour harnessing energy into a productive force. This is a narrative painting in which the key 'actants' are the furnace and the fire, rather than the workers themselves.

Navvies were another favoured topic of Victorian narrative painting. George Hick's *The Sinews of Old England* (1857) presents an idealised picture of the navy as a yeoman in overalls; his 'yeowoman' bids him farewell in front of their cottage while their son waits patiently, spade in hand, to grow up and follow in his father's footsteps. The day-labourer is here turned into an approximation of the homespun rural artisan.

Ford Maddox Ford's famous contribution to the *Gospel of Work* (1889) shows two navvies 'in full pride of manly health and beauty', as one contemporary commentator put it, laying a water pipe in Heath Street, Hampstead. The labourers are definitely the stars of the show, as they dominate the composition while the idle hands - the unemployed with their misshapen bodies and the bourgeois bystanders in their foppish dress - are literally upstaged and put in the shadow by their brilliantly lit performance of turning the city, if not its class relations, upside down.⁵

Trade union banners were another important source of imagery.⁶ The banner of the Amalgamated Engineering Union shows the *Gospel of Work* from the standpoint of the labour movement. The motto reads 'Be United and Industrious' and the banner shows two blacksmiths rampant with halo lording it over an inventor and civil engineer. William Bell Scott's *Iron and Coal* (1861) forges an alliance between two key groups of workers in heavy industry, but within a pre-industrial setting celebrating manual labour as God's work. The caption reads: 'Whatsoever thy hand hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might'.

In contrast Gustave Caillebotte's *The Floor Scrapers or Finishing the Floorboards* (1875), influenced both by Courbet's realism and by contemporary photography, depicts the decidedly unheroic aspects of manual labour, as man and boy, stripped to

the waist, undertake the menial task, male skivvies, as far from the world of traditional handicraft skills as Ruskin's (1819-1900) idealised vision of the independent artisan was from the factory hand.

The influence of Ruskin, William Morris and the 'arts and crafts' movement on representations of manual labour was profound and lasted well into the 20th century.⁷ But with the advent of fully fledged Fordism, the customary rhythms of skilled employment in the manual trades became increasingly at odds with the tempo of mass production. Handicraft processes were marginalized and were increasingly replaced by semi skilled repetitive work.⁸ Ruskin's vision of the skilled artisan or manual tradesman, who combined traditional pre-industrial handicraft skills with independence of spirit, was the epitome of the yeoman in overalls, and, for him, if not always for the workers themselves, represented a bulwark of resistance against the degradation of work during industrialism.

Stanley Spencer's series of *Glasgow Shipyard Paintings* (1940-6) owes a considerable amount to this tradition. His riveters, welders and caulkers are definitely yeowomen in overalls, as they cuddle/huddle up to their work, turning the yard into a home from home. In moving from rural Cookham to industrial Clydeside, he has somehow managed to imbue these figures with the same kind of robust spiritual qualities that he saw in the Berkshire villagers.

Joseph Herman's studies of tough and tender masculinities within the mining community of South Wales were done by an artist whose own family were miners and who lived for many years in a pit village.⁹ Unlike most of the other material discussed here, these pictures emerge from deep and close observations carried out over a long period by someone who was socially integrated into the community of labour he was representing. And it shows. The bodies of the miners are depicted as at once immensely solid and intensely vulnerable, stoic figures in an industrial landscape that has nothing of the picturesque or sublime about it.

It has been argued that repetitive work and the Fordist production line resisted representation by photographers and painters alike, because they lacked heroic postures, and also because the frozen nature of the image could capture single moments of the labour process but not their reiteration.¹⁰ Yet paradoxically it was Eadweard Muybridge and Edgar Marey's chromo-photographic studies of the 'bio-energetic body' which provided a methodology for 'time and motion' studies and the Taylorisation of the line production process. Their work also

gave inspiration to the cubists and futurists in representing the power of mechanized labour¹¹. For example, C. R. Nevinson's triptych *Making the Engine, Assembling Parts, and Acetylene Welding* (1917) applied cubist principles to depicting the human/industrial dynamo in action.

The Futurists celebrated the capacity of productive forces to transform the conditions of work and mould the bio-energetics of the labouring body in their own image. However, to fully understand the impact of technologies on the social relations of production we have to approach them from the side of living labour, and examine its changing habitus.

It has been left to artists and photographers to explore the deeper continuities, as well as new contradictions in the contemporary culture of manual work. Jean Gaumy worked for several years on deep sea trawlers making his study of *Men at Sea* (2001)¹². The title is deliberately double edged. He explores the fragility of labour confronted with the immense power of natural elements, as well as the strength of the human bonds which are forged in the face of it. He uses strip images to convey the consequentiality of work on deck, where the timing and co-ordination of actions involves making crucial judgements about the ship's behaviour under different conditions. The safety of the deck hands depends on these fine judgements.

Sabastiao Salgado's extended photo essay *Workers: An archaeology of the Industrial Age* (1896-1992) has produced some of the most iconic recent images of elemental labour.¹³ Salgado's work creates sculptural forms out of the labouring body and its environment and his work has been criticised for its 'monumentalism' but this is a conscious aesthetic decision, born of a desire to create a permanent memorial to fast vanishing but still heroic forms of masculinity and manual labour. His *channel tunnel builders* are neither statuesque nor stoic; they seem in their element in the bowels of the earth, a community cocooned in its own rituals of collaboration. But as we can see from the picture these Hard Hats are still very much Mummy's boys.

These visual ethnographies still preach a Gospel of Work, but their portrayal of elemental labour, while accentuating its character, does not moralise. These are exercises in showing, not telling, What they seek to demonstrate is the capacity of living labour to transcend often brutal conditions of work and create new forms of human solidarity even in the post industrial age.

Ken Currie's paintings tell the downside of the story. He

explores the now dysfunctional relationship of masculinity to the labouring body. In the age of voodoo economics, where the human dynamo has become an uncanny reminder/remainder of itself in a world dominated by dead labour and de-materialized production. Currie is part of the 'Glasgow School' which combines strong political commitment with an aesthetic of formal experimentation that breaks with the 'social realist' tradition. In *Hands* (see illustration) the bio-politics of class are directly inscribed on the body, both as metonym and metaphor; the picture refers to a whole category of unskilled factory workers made redundant by the shift to post-Fordist production, as well as bearing eloquent testimony to the physical effect of a life of toil.

Hands are also perhaps an oblique reference to the historical tradition of socialist iconography which used to juxtapose bloated capitalists and emaciated workers. Today the contrast that has to be struck is between the lean, tanned, muscle toned and gym fit business executive and his obese office janitor, still eating a carbohydrate diet designed for heavy physical work but spending most of his time sitting down in front of a TV monitor or computer screen. The difference in their life expectancies and the quality of their lives is however still just as great. These ambiguities have been explored to great effect by Brian Griffin in his photo-essay on *Work* (1991).¹⁴ His managers' look well in their skins, but their social confidence in front of the camera is subverted by placing them in often disconcerting poses. In contrast his manual workers are turned into performance artists, the tools of their trade serving as identity props, icons within a new Gospel of Work in which 'attitude' in the sense of individual assertiveness is linked to pride in skill and counts for more than conformity to workplace norms or rituals. They have become spokesmen for New Labour, not old.

Notes

¹..See Travers, T. (1981). *Samuel Smiles and the Victorian work ethic*.

² Quoted in Travers, T. (1981). p. 56.

³ See Barringer, T. (2005) *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain*.

⁴ See Barrell, J. (1993) *The Idea of Landscape*.

⁵ For a discussion of the public works in London at this time and its impact on class perceptions see Lynda Nead. (2000). *Victorian Babylon: people, streets and images in nineteenth-century London*.

⁶ See Lucie Smith, E. and C Dars, C. *Work and Struggle*. 1979.

- ⁷..See Bursman, N. 'William Morris and the gospel of work' *Utopian Studies* 30: 1. 2006.
- ⁸ See Braverman, H. *Labour and monopoly capital: the degradation of work in the 20th century*. 1974 and Sennett, R. *The Craftsman*. 2010.
- ⁹ See Herman, J. *Notes from a Welsh Diary*. 1998.
- ¹⁰ See Scarry, E. *Resisting Representation*. 1998.
- ¹¹..See Solnit, R. *Motion Studies*. 2003.
- ¹² See Gaumy, J. *Men at sea*. 2001.
- ¹³..See Salgado, S. *Workers: An Archaeology of the industrial age*.1991.
- ¹⁴..See Griffin, B. *Work*. 1991.

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