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# Balancing Survival and Dignity: *American Factory* and the Dilemma of Unionization

The documentary film American Factory (2019) can be seen as an anti-union, or more specifically, an anti-UAW (one of the largest unions in North America) film that showcases various negative effects of union formation. The film examines the 2008 closure of a General Motors plant in Moraine, Ohio, and its reopening in 2016 as a Chinese-owned automotive glass factory, Fuyao Glass America (FGA). From rank-and-file workers to the company's CEO, the film explains why the company could succeed without the UAW union. Without the threat of unionization, FGA likely would not have raised wages or improved working conditions for its employees. The film presents the workers as "active, self-determining agents" rather than passive victims, disputing Marx's notion that the working class cannot represent themselves by saying no to unionization (Nicholas p.159, p.161). This approach sets American Factory apart from earlier labor documentaries like Barbara Kopple's Harlan County, USA (1976) and American Dream (1990), which depicted more clear-cut conflicts between workers and cooperation in the industrial era. The film suggests that the company is no longer an enemy to workers and unions as it was from the 1930s to the 1970s. Nowadays, the company and workers need to work hard together to survive in the competitive international market. The essay provides a detailed close reading and analysis of documentary techniques to show how the film defines a new century of anti-unionism.

The beginning of the film portrays a poetic tradition of victim: Jill Lamantia who lost her job after the General Motors factory closed and left the small town in Ohio, causing her to have no money to pay all the bills and forcing her to live in a basement. However, this is different from other workers' documentaries, as Lamantia was not exploited by General Motors, not fired by the company, and did not have low wages or bad working environments. Actually, in *American Factory*, all the interviewees said it was a really good time when General Motors was still operating. There was a happy life until the end of 2008, after which several major car manufacturers rapidly went bankrupt or closed their factories in America, moving the jobs to places with cheaper labor, such as Mexico or Asia. That is, until the savior FGA came along. Lamantia can now have a real full-time job, not several part-time jobs with low wages and no insurance. She is grateful for the job and eventually moves to a nice and warm apartment.

FGA took over the closed General Motors company in 2016 and quickly became profitable in 2018, without the formation of the UAW, a union widely appearing in American automobile factories. This is not the first documentary that is not fully supporting the UAW, especially in Barbara Kopple's works. In *American Dream*, some workers were questioning the international union, saying that the union was delaying the temporary offer of keeping the wages higher than the average around the country, but the union leader Lewie Anderson from New York decided to continue the fight and protest, which caused 80% of people to lose their jobs. During this time, many workers had to break the picket line to work at Hormel to support their families - the protest was becoming more of a political game for Lewie Anderson. In another of Kopple's films, *Harlan County, USA,* there is an old man who lived through the 1930s mine strikes and said that union leaders, police, and officials were all serving the company's capitalists. In the end, the film points more to the fact that it was a strike from the bottom up, not

all directed by corrupted senior union officials in Washington, which weakened the efforts of the union.

*American Factory* focuses on the perspective of the company - that the company needs to be profitable, and the only way to do that is by not disrupting the low efficiency of the UAW. Fuyao's president, Cao Dewang, is a strong anti-union person throughout the film - he said that if there's a union, they'll close the factory in America. The documentary focuses a lot on the thinking of the company's executives, not only from the voice of the workers. The executives only have two goals: one is to make the company survive in a highly non-industrialized United States, and the second is to have as much high profits as possible. Cao and the Chinese management believe that the union is the biggest block to improving efficiency, as it adds layers of management to the workers, meaning that workers have to report anything to the UAW, and then the UAW reports to Fuyao. Fuyao was demanded to have more security rules, which affect efficiency. If a glass bursts in front of an operator without gloves, they will still operate. An operator needs to work in a 400°F room for 10 minutes every hour. The forklift can lift twice as much weight as the allowed weight... This shows the greed of the enterprise, that people are key to boosting efficiency at the cost of human life, and those injuries are clearly one way to exchange for production.

Instead of usually workers in documentaries failing to see the workers as active, self-determining agents of change, In *American Factory* workers are self fate determined - there was no superior union leader who decides workers fate (Nicolus, p. 159). The workers actually have autonomy this time, making their own voices heard, not only listening to the union. They were affected by both the UAW or the consulting firm Labor Relations Institute, after fully learning the pros and cons of unionization, including not repeating the tragedy of the 2014 shutdown of

General Motors. Considering documentary techniques, every perspective and voice in the documentary is considered: they used indirect addresses mainly by recording people's activities and lives, similar to *American Dream*, by filming people on the assembly line, but you can hear their inner thoughts. Through post-production voiceover, it also resembles the narrative style of the Black Power Movement. The documentary is putting observers in the midst of the action, but it doesn't try to make a binary separation between union supporter and non-supporter (Rabinowitz, p. 836). Especially in areas of deindustrialization it's hard to distinguish the union man from the scab (Rabinowitz, p. 845). Fuyao workers wish a union will raise their salary and improve the safety of their workspace but at the same time are anti-union that the strikes and low efficiency of management might lead to the shut down of the factory eventually. It's different from either Harlan County or American Dream, that people "either be a union man/or J. H. Blair."(Rabinowitz, p.836) Many people realized that if there is no Fuyao, there are no other options - all good union jobs are gone, and will fail in the competitive international market. As we see in China, as shown in the film, there are tons of workers without a union, and all of them work 12 hours a day and only have 2 holidays a month, beating out the factories in America. Eventually, by vote, there was a 60 percent to 40 percent win for not establishing a union.

In the narrative of neoliberalism, "advanced" or "mature" economies such as America are service-based, and the Fuyao Glass America Ohio factory is the last gasp of the era of post-industrialism (Hitchcock). The golden time before the 2008 financial crisis, when a unionized factory worker could raise a whole family, is gone - several part-time service jobs in the neoliberal era of America cannot support a family. This is why Fuyao Glass America and the documentary *American Factory* together try to propagate the anti-union ideology and implicitly point out that unions are one factor that caused America to fail in the manufacturing competition

with China, by giving voice to various perspectives and allowing workers to be seen as active agents in determining their own fate. At least for the time being, perhaps for a short period before most of them are replaced by robots, the laid-off workers from General Motors or other factories can live with dignity and fulfillment again.

## Works Cited


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