

Après la reprise, la prise

(Cinema – Women – Work)

La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder is a short film from 1968, shot by students of the IDHEC (Institut des hautes études cinématographiques) in Paris, where a strike had been organised at the time. A small crew¹ had taken out a camera and one roll of film and gone to the Wonder factory in Saint-Ouen, which produced batteries. The workers there had also been on strike, like at almost all work places during that period. When the students arrived, people standing outside the factory were about to resume their work after long weeks during which a pervasive revolutionary mood had changed their daily view on things. The camera focuses on the discussing crowd and lingers on a young woman, who refuses to go back into the factory. The film records her pure anger and disagreement with the compromises made in the negotiations and suggests her adherence to a new attitude that had just been unleashed by all the actions. Jacques Rivette wrote in *Cahiers du Cinema* in '68:

"Le seul film intéressant sur les événements, le seul vraiment fort que j'aie vu, c'est celui sur la rentrée des usines Wonder, tourné par des étudiants de l'IDHEC, parce que c'est un film terrifiant, qui fait mal. C'est le seul film qui soit un film vraiment révolutionnaire, peut-être parce que c'est un moment où la réalité se transfigure à un tel point qu'elle se met à condenser toute une situation politique en dix minute d'intensité dramatique folle."

(Cinema – Women)

La Reprise becomes a cult example of how cinema could possibly relate to reality and militancy (and perhaps truth). The woman at the epicentre, a figure who embodies the idea of change and the fight for this change, is both a character of political fiction and yet at the same time completely real. With her looks and on-camera presence she also relates to female presence in the cinema of the epoch. She disappears when the camera turns back to the crowd, which is now slowly making its way back into the factory through a narrow doorway; joined together with the cinematic appearance and actualisation of her presence: being woman, being part of an exploited group and refusing that part, comes her disappearance.

(Cinema)

In 1995 Hervé le Roux made the film *Reprise*, in which he takes the short movie *La Reprise* of 1968 as a point of departure to revisit stories of work, action and resistance in the period of turmoil in May '68 to explore what has happened in the field of industrial labour since then. He seeks out and interviews the people who were present in the single take of *La Reprise*, as part of a mission to find the woman in the centre, who had disappeared back into anonymity.

Jacques Willemont was the initiator of a project, which was going to document the different political organisations that were part of the "mouvement" at the time of the strikes in May 1968. The filming at the factory Wonder was part of this. For more about the background of *La Reprise*: <http://www.artmag.com/autresnouvelles/reprise/reprise6.html>

"The original Wonder footage – so brief, barely a narrative – does not tell the story of a pre-existing 'anthropological' people, the 'working class', who, in the course of their oppressed existence, rise up together and come to say no", Kristin Ross writes in her book "May '68 and its Afterlives". "Rather it shows a woman [...] coming into existence in the pure actuality of her refusal.

[...] For it is only in their 'actualization' that the 'the people' appear – disrupting all the various narratives and representations that anthropologists, social historians, and sociologists mobilize to categorize such an event."

The viewing of the 1968 material recalls memories about labour conditions, strikes, and very few improvements, but none of the workers interviewed by Le Roux knows or has known of the whereabouts of the young woman. *Reprise* does not find her back in 1995 in order to complete the narration of history as a continuum.

(Cinema - Work)

In 2000 Marie-France Collard launched her documentary *Ouvrières du Monde*, in which she makes an analysis of the history of the breakdown of employment in the Levi's textile industry in Belgium and France and traces the route of the production process's relocation to Turkey and Indonesia where labour is not only cheaper, but also the workers' condition is much more precarious. The loss of older forms of industrial work in Northern European countries has been an issue in Belgium as late as 1997 - 1998 with the closing down of a large Renault assembly plant in Vilvoorde, and a bit later that of the Levi's factories in Deurne, Gits, Wervik and one in the North of France: Yzer in La Basée. The struggle against the closures, resulting in strikes and negotiations propelled by the collective force of workers across borders reminded one of the 1980's when workers' union fights were fought with bundled strength – and at times violently repressed – all over Europe, perhaps most vividly commemorated in Britain by works of art and film.

(Women)

At the end of the nineties 1.400 predominantly female employees were collectively defending their jobs and rights in the Levi's factories. After strikes and demonstrations the Belgian unions decided to opt for the negotiation of a social program. The French contingent kept up a longer process of resistance to the actual closure. Two women, delegates for the unions represented in the Levi's plant, mobilized the others to stick behind a refusal to negotiate the nature of a social program after closure. They even agreed to lower their wages by 10% in order to keep their jobs. The arguments were clear and sane: Levi's was not making a loss in those factories, by any means. The production costs were higher than in Turkey, yes, but it meant a difference between a 300% profit on one pair of jeans produced in Belgium or France, as opposed to a 400% profit on one produced in Turkey. The adamant way the women entered into the fight, speaks for more than their attachment to the job for wages alone.

(Cinema)

In *Ouvrières du Monde*, one of the most striking protagonists is Marie Thérèse, the union representative, who leads the struggle in Yzer, La Bassée. Besides her role as union delegate, she reveals herself as a

typical worker of that factory: having started to work when she was fourteen and therefore with a history of twenty years in the same workplace. Using her hands and scissors, needle and thread, she is constantly surrounded by the heavy cadence of hundreds of sewing machines. She fought with conviction for the jobs of all and cried heartbreakingly when the defeat became clear, which she had to announce to the rest. Her clear argumentation as well as her beauty and her calm appearance make her cinematic presence comparable to that of an actress of stature. At the same time the film actualizes her defence of a form of existence in the midst a violent transformation that is taking place. The intense pain that followed the defeat was the pain of a loss which is ultimately, a loss of self; the loss of a context, of a social space taken away by the force of an economic brutality, the violence of which seems so incomprehensible to the individual eye and ear. Like the young woman in *La Reprise*, her cinematic image leaves a very particular imprint on the retina.

(Work – Women)

The factories did close and all these women, many of whom had spent their whole working life – beginning at a young age – with Levi's, found themselves with no employment. And this after all the fighting spirit they had shown and experienced and the hopes and beliefs in their collective strength. That was at the beginning of 1999.

The company offered them job-placement services, but two years after the closure, only about eighty-five of the five-hundred-and-forty who had lost their jobs in La Bassée, had found work, mostly in other factories. Two had committed suicide, a handful had divorced and many were suffering severe depression.

(Cultural Production)

In the summer of 2000, twenty-five of the women joined a two-month writing workshop instigated by dramatist Bruno Lajara, who was interested in creating a play about their experiences. By the following year, they had created an association and written a book of vignettes about their experiences with the title *Les Mains Bleues* (Blue Hands). The resulting theatre piece, called *501 blues* – in which five of the women play out a script based on the writings of the group – toured the whole of France successfully for two years.

(Cultural Production – Work)

Three years later, Bruno Lajara initiated a second play in which four of the women decided to carry on in the role of actresses, while at the same time also being themselves on stage. One of them left the small group to work in a more stable job at the local administration. This second piece, called *Après Coups (conversations)* has a more experimental form, and places outside the scope of the more conventional theatres were sought for it to be performed. Somewhere in this play the women talk about the film *La Reprise* from 1968. One of the women mentions how she would also not go back into a factory anymore and all four characters speak about the fact that they are now enjoying their role on stage and being active as actresses.

(Work)

In 2009 it becomes clear that even when freedom of political action seems guaranteed in Europe, the consequences of acts of disruption can still be precarious. Marie Thérèse, the union delegate of the factory in La Bassée, has had a troublesome time since the lay-offs at Levi's. Being the one responsible for the mobilisation of others, she has been finding it almost impossible to find new work and in her personal life she has met with drama and resentment. After appearing so convincingly in the documentary, after a first take as a character in a film which places her life in context – in which her beautiful presence seems to literally carry across a belief in collectivity and a promise of change – she too has disappeared from the public stage.

"Why can the paradigm of representation not function in politics, nor in artistic modes of expression, and here especially in the production of works that employ moving images?"

I will attempt to answer these questions by using the paradigm that imagines the constitution of the world from the relationship between event and multiplicity. Representation is conversely founded on the subject-work paradigm. In this paradigm the images, the signs and the statements have the function of representing the object, the world, whereas in the paradigm of the event, images, signs and statements contribute to allowing the world to happen. Images, signs and statements do not represent something, but rather create possible worlds."

Maurizio Lazzarato

Struggle, Event, Media 2003

www.republicart.net

"The photographic image itself is constantly suspended in juxtaposition with language and pictoriality. Thus, the presentational format of the slide projection emerges as an ideal device to sustain the dialectics between the pictorial and the photographic, between narrativity and stasis, between language and its performative and theatrical modes."

Benjamin H.D. Buchloch

Memory Lessons and Historical Tableaux: James Coleman's Archeology of Spectacle, 1995

October files

What does cinema retain from theatre? The actor, the actress, the charm, the aura of the actor and the actress. In separating this aura from the powers of the literary text, so fundamental to theatre, cinema has transformed actors and actresses into stars. This is one possible definition of cinema: a means of transforming the actor into a star.

Alain Badiou

Cinema as a Democratic Emblem, 2005

(Work)

Featuring a cast of young students from the Technical Atheneum, KTA-Wollemarkt, who are expecting and expected to enter the work force in various forms of employment soon, together with some of the actresses from *La Bassée, Après la reprise, la prise* will be created on location in Mechelen in an event of filming, posing and acting. The memory of a recent past: the factory closures in the late nineties, is woven together with the memory of cinematic images, alluding to the new work conditions, social structures and the resulting precariousness they have engendered. Guided by the experiences of the women who have already gone from one stage within the 'world of work', to another, while having been involved in various forms of cultural production, the students and the actresses instruct each other to pose in several acts of transformation, their roles hovering between that of spectator, actor/actress and instructor, all at once.

wendelien van oldenborgh

June 2009