

Representations of Work in Literature and Visual Culture

Raul Calzoni - Valentina Serra

Abstract

The issue *Representations of Work in Literature and Visual Culture* is part of the studies on the material and immaterial imagery of the world of professions and its representation from a diachronic perspective and in different disciplinary fields. The articles focus on twentieth-century Italian, German and French culture and deal with aspects related to theories and methods of representation of the working world, enterprise and craftsmanship from different points of view without avoiding the development of methodological and aesthetic approaches that come from different schools of Western thought relating to work. What emerges from the articles as a whole is a treatment of work in its various meanings – including that of the writer and the artist – which has taken place over the last hundred years in the context of Freudian, Marxist and Weberian theories, which are among those discussed by the contributions collected in this issue of «Between».

Keywords

work; alienation; identity; collective; exploitation

Representations of Work in Literature and in Visual Culture

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The topic of this issue of «Between» is work, the representation of its imagery, its conflicts and its potential and often utopian ambitions to revolutionise society. Work in itself as a defining element of human identity is a topic that has caught the interest of numerous scholars, be they philosophers or anthropologists, sociologists or literary scholars¹. In recent years, Italy has also seen renewed critical interest², as demonstrated by the double issue 31/32 of «Narrativa» (2010) and the section “Il lavoro nelle raccolte di racconti dagli anni Ottanta a oggi” (“Work in short story collections from the 1980s to the present”) in Issue no. 15 of «Ticontre» (2021).

Over the last two centuries, the artistic-literary transposition of work and the imagery related to it, a key topic in the nineteenth-century novel, has become a core issue around which the discourse relating to the ontological dimension of the human being and their role within society has revolved³. Work activity, be it fatigue or gratification, agro-pastoral, mining, manual, bureaucratic or artistic, as well as the joy and/or the despair that arise from its absence, are themes that have fascinated writers, essayists and artists from every nation and every era. However, the focus of this issue of «Between» lies in the twentieth century, the age of machines *par excellence*, the moment that in the history of European culture marked the definitive change of pace from an artisan and peasant population to a mass of proletarians. Such a process and theme is still of interest in our country, also with reference to the work of immigrants, as demonstrated by the anthologies and collections of short stories that have appeared in recent times, such as *Laboriosi oroscopi. Diciotto racconti sul lavoro, la precarietà e la disoccupazione* (Labour Horoscopes. Eighteen Short Stories About Work, Precariousness and Unemployment, 2006) and *Lavoro da morire. Racconti*

¹ See Weil 1951; Terkel 1974; Hobsbawm 1964, 1984, 1998.

² See Kocka 2001; Kocka-Schmidt 2015.

³ See Totaro 1998.

da un'Italia sfruttata (Work to Die for. Tales of an Exploited Italy, 2010)⁴. This was a veritable anthropological turning point that occurred at different times on the European geopolitical scene, under the banner of an apparently progressive project, ascribable to the constitution of an organized and industrialised civilization. Such a change posed a series of important ethical, aesthetic and methodological questions, whose roots can already be found in writings of Charles Dickens⁵. At the age of twelve Dickens had been forced to leave school by his father to go and work for a brief period in a shoe polish factory in London and it was Dickens who played a key role in introducing the theme of social conflict into the tradition of the modern novel. A social phenomenon that was already recognised as a part of the class struggle that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels would only fully theorize in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848. It is not difficult to think that the English Industrial Revolution laid the foundations for thinking about work and its drift into the alienation of the individual, social injustice and mistreatment of young people⁶. Thus, in Dickens' most famous novels, which represent a veritable critique of the world of work in the nineteenth century, the need for an anti-utilitarian education is always defended, a system that can give young 'workers' hope for the future and restore that beauty that had been destroyed by an adverse fate and/or irresponsible fathers who had sent them, just like their author, to work in one of the dreary factories of Victorian England. Just think of the orphan Oliver Twist, the protagonist of Dickens' novel that appeared in 1838, a true emblem of child labour and its exploitation at the time, or of the characters in *Hard times* (1854), which opens, not by chance, in a schoolroom in the imaginary English Coketown where the teacher Thomas Gradgrind is questioning Sissy Jupe, the daughter of a circus horse trainer. Dickens compares Mr Gradgrind, the model of reason and mathematics, with his student who, due to her circus background, not only represents the naivety and candour of childhood but also embodies the values of the anti-utilitarianism of education and, at the same time, of work conducted in harmony with nature.

Sissy Jupe and the other female figures in Dickens's work allow the theme of the individual's lack of active occupation as an annulment of social constraints to re-emerge. This topic can already be found in the great

⁴ See Laporte 2016.

⁵ See Menke 2018.

⁶ See Whitefield - Strauss 1998.

German (anti-)bourgeois novels of the classical-romantic period, such as J.W.v. Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-1796) and, later on, Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) and J.v. Eichendorff's *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* (1826), in which active life – and in a certain sense material work – is opposed to reflection, to the contemplative life and the intellectual occupations, which are elevated to the expression of true humanity. The fact that, in the end, Wilhelm Meister led by the pedagogical and secretive organisation called the *Turmgesellschaft* ('Tower Society') re-enters the public sphere and the active life of the bourgeoisie is part of Goethe's narrative machine and stems from the author's desire to defend, in a period such as the one in which the novel was written, i.e. around the time of the French Revolution, the ideal of an established social order, in opposition to any desire to disrupt the *status quo*. On the other hand, Novalis' and Eichendorff' novels, dedicated to the contemplative 'work' of the poet and the artist, have definitively subverted the long tradition of the German *Bildungsroman*, to which *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* actually belongs. A shared and important fact that emerges from the thematization of work in the literature preceding the Machine Age in Europe is the circumstance that work has been approached from an existential perspective, i.e. in its entanglements with the question of identity. In the long tradition of European Romanticism, work idealistically corresponds to identity, i.e. one is what one does professionally in life; see, in this respect, the proliferation of doctors, poets, artists and teachers that characterize Romantic writings and art, as evidenced in various writings by E.T.A. Hoffmann, or in the many works of the time that speak of craftwork, also through fairy tales, such as the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812) by the Grimm brothers⁷.

After the idealistic approach to the world of work and its characteristic representation during the romantic age, it was Dickens who placed the problem of the deprivation of the dimension of the individual's identity, because of certain economic, social or political conditions, at the centre of literature. This would find its radicalization in the representations of work in Naturalism and Verism in the works of Victor Hugo with *Les Misérables* (1862), Giovanni Verga with *I malavoglia* (1881), Émile Zola with *Germinal* (1886) and Gerhart Hauptmann with *Die Weber* (1892). Labour-related social issues, moreover, also inspired the figurative arts of all times in those same years, as demonstrated by the famous paintings *The Third-Class Carriage* (1862) by Honoré Daumier, *Idleness and Work* (1863) by Michele Cammarano.

⁷ See Zipes 1988.

no, *Work* (1865) by Ford Madox Brown, *The Foundry* (1872-1875) by Adolph von Menzel, *The Coal Workers* (1875) by Claude Monet, *The Ironworkers' Noontime* (1880) by Thomas Pollock Anshutz, *A Woman Ironing* (1884) by Edgar Degas, *The Potato Eaters* (1885) by Vincent van Gogh, *Washerwomen* (1888) by Paul Gauguin, *For Eighty Cents!* (1893) by Angelo Morbelli or *The Fourth Estate* (1901) by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo. Moreover, the works that focus on women's work⁸ and the use of manpower in warfare are particularly significant – Stanhope Forbes, *The Munitions Girls* (1918) and Henrietta Mabel May, *Women Making Shells* (1919) –, or those that reflect with particular clarity on the depersonalising dimension of factory work: George Grosz, *Ants* (1920) and *In the Shadows* (1921), Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry Murals* (1932-1933), Laurence Stephen Lowry, *Going to Work* (1948), Fernand Léger, *The Builders* (1950) and, on child labour, Banksy with *Slave Labour* (2012).

In the wake of Dickens' novels, various works insisting on labour and the exploitation of child labour, on the role of women in society and on the working-class and proletarian-revolutionary struggle⁹, made their appearance in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was when a new perception of the world linked to a widespread artistic-literary sensibility was making its way, fuelled by the themes of the decadence of the bourgeoisie and its values, which were progressively consumed by the *Zeitgeist* of a modernity that was overwhelming a geopolitical and social order destined to be swallowed up by history.

The so-called *Arbeiterliteratur* or workers' literature¹⁰ is generally linked in various respects to the world of the working class and extensively encompasses the artistic expression of all workers, including manual and agricultural labourers. However, this term is used to specifically indicate the writings of factory workers, which, especially in the first half of the last century, focused on the subjects, recipients and aims of the literary expression of the proletariat¹¹. The strand of workers' and proletarian-revolutionary literature, whose narratives were anchored on the one hand in a factual restitution of factory life and, on the other, animated by

⁸ See Morini 2010.

⁹ See Marsh 2022.

¹⁰ The study of workers' literature has recently attracted renewed critical interest, as demonstrated by the works of Menger 2016 and Ferrari 2019. For an analysis of the characteristics of proletarian-revolutionary literature, see Friedrich's extensive study published in 1981.

¹¹ See Chiellino 1995 e 2000.

the ideals of Marxism, thematised class unity as a counter-offensive to exploitation by capitalists¹². It is an artistic production that, during the 1920s and 1930s, aims to promote a real change in society, binding itself, sometimes in a paradoxical manner, to the cultural heritage of the bourgeoisie. This created a literary season steeped in idealism and political pragmatism which, precisely because of its utopian and ideological ambitions, ended up taking on social cohesion and transnational objectives with controversial implications¹³. While, on the one hand, such literary production shows its rootedness in the cultural heritage of bourgeois extraction, the developments in workers' literature reveal the introduction of a significant 'perspective from below' that will mature into a more direct – and, in this sense, 'revolutionary' – representation of reality compared to the canons of Realism. The discussions that have matured around the potential of a literature written by and for the proletariat are especially focused on the very possibility that the workers can acquire – and spread – their own culture. The very ambition to create a workers' literary expression can in itself be considered an act of revolution and rebellion and, indeed, scholars like György Lukács accused the first autobiographical accounts of factory workers' lives of falling into line with the dimension of a 'case study' to be offered to the bourgeois class which then edited editions of the very works that were prohibitive for the proletariat themselves. Worker writers, for their part, are often proudly aware of their dual identity as workers and artists and devote themselves to writing with the ambition of producing works that today would be called culturally, politically and socially 'engaged'. This was a change of episteme that had an impact on the world in all its complexity, affecting traditions, arts and crafts from East to West, underlined by the fact that the crisis in the world of work also forms the backdrop to the narrative of the novels by Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906), Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks* (1901), Jack London with the dystopian drifts of *The Iron Heel* (1907) and with *Martin Eden* (1909), up to Maksim Gor'kij with *Mother* (1902).

These works also reveal a specific interpretation of work that is not only narrated as a value or residual of an individual or collective identity, but which also becomes the subject of a psychological reflection that, with the help of Sigmund Freud's contemporary discoveries, insists on the worker's alienation and its impact on individual personality traits. Nicole

¹² See Gallas 1974.

¹³ On this topic, see also Serra 2023.

Siri moves in this context with her article published in this issue of «Between» and dedicated to the formulation of some hypotheses on the Freudian theory of the representation of work in the novel genre. In particular, the article uses a theoretical perspective to explore the problem of the representation of labour in the genre of the novel and discusses «the plainness and iterativeness of work», two aspects that, according to James Agee (2019), make it a particularly complicated narrative theme. By offering a meta-psychological reading of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904), the contribution advances an interpretation of capitalist ethics from a psychoanalytic conceptual framework, and then discusses Francesco Orlando's *Per una teoria freudiana della letteratura* (For a Freudian Theory of Literature, 1987), his notion of the «return of the repressed» and his theorisation of the representation of «obsolete objects».

If it is true that unserviceable and forgotten objects convey the «return of the repressed», in *La vita delle cose* (The Life of Things) Remo Bodei dialogues with Francesco Orlando and his monographic work, *Gli oggetti desueti nelle immagini della letteratura* (The Obsolete Objects in the Images of Literature, 1993). As he writes:

To a greater or lesser extent, we all give meaning to things, but only artists do this methodically and according to particular techniques and research paths. They give mute things their own voice and sometimes, as with children, even pretend to make them speak [...]. Each generation is surrounded by a particular landscape of objects that define an epoch thanks to the patinas, signs and aroma of the time of their birth and modification. In their own way, objects grow and decay, like plants and animals, they are burdened with years or centuries, they are attended to, cared for or neglected, forgotten or destroyed. (Bodei 2011: 30: our translation)

One author who was particularly fond of «obsolete objects», even when dealing with the theme of the world of work, was undoubtedly Franz Kafka. Mauro Nervi's article illuminates previously unpublished aspects of the Prague author's production in the light of the concrete *realia* of his writing. By choosing not to focus on the much-debated theme of alienation at the workplace from which so many of Kafka's characters suffer, he is able to address the theme of labour relations in Kafka's fiction, a topic that has often been overlooked particularly by Marxist-oriented critics¹⁴. His essay examines the main occurrences of the theme in Kafka's macro-text and

¹⁴ See Hughes 1981.

focuses on the distinction between 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' work. Nervi also investigates the theme in Kafka's first novel fragment: *Der Verschollene* (1912-1914). Here work is addressed in a more direct and in-depth manner and with a meticulous realism that is rarely found in Kafka's later works, since its setting is in the largest capitalist society of the time, the United States of America.

Objects from the world of work are also the subject of Francesca Goll's article, which is dedicated to the epic of the collective in the novel *Union der festen Hand* (1931), published during the Weimar Republic by Erik Reger, journalist and later editor and director of the Berlin daily newspaper «Der Tagesspiegel». The novel deals with the relationship between culture, literature and industry – including the latter's technological advances and its effects on workers understood as individuals. One of the most striking aspects of *Union der festen Hand* are the instructions for use placed before the text, which reveal the cornerstones of the author's poetics of the collective, which Goll highlights in its aspects related to the world of work, drawing on reviews, archive materials and also unpublished writings that also highlight Reger's literary theory in dialogue with the pamphlet by Sergei Tretyakov *Biografiia veshchi* (1929).

These are the years in which the question of work in literature became a leading theme in Germany in the light of the process of technicalisation to which the capital of the Weimar Republic in particular was subjected. This clearly emerges in *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) by Alfred Döblin, an author who, like Reger, worked as a journalist for several Berlin newspapers in the 1910s and 1920s. The novel's protagonist Franz Biberkopf moves around an alienating city dominated by machines, the futuristic model of which is depicted in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927). It is precisely the literature of the Weimar Republic that, in the face of an extremely serious economic, social and political crisis, proposed a varied artistic and literary production hinged on a representation of the working dimension of characters who were grappling with the drama of survival in an extremely hostile and problematic metropolitan reality¹⁵. The great novels of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* have often been investigated in the light of an innovative compositional practice that can be likened to the technique of film editing and a singular ability to restore the critical dimension of the Weimar Republic's reality. As is well known, these works explore the liminal dimension of individuals forced to the margins of a society, dominated by the capitalist

¹⁵ See Ponzi, Guerra, Padularosa 2019.

principles of mechanisation and productivity, which leads to the weakening of the workers' social function and, consequently, to the destruction of their very reason for existing. Hence filmic and literary representations of that time – such as Walther Ruttmann's masterpiece, *Berlin. Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927) and, among the various fictional examples, Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* and Hans Fallada's *Kleiner Mann, was nun?* (1932) – juxtapose in perfect intermedial harmony a swarming crowd of workers alongside herds or flocks of animals destined for slaughter, or various figures of office workers forced into a repetitive and exhausting work with exotic animals in the Berlin zoo or dogs set upon each other by masters who keep them firmly on a leash. In the words of Johannes Pinneberg, the protagonist of Fallada's novel, those who sit in the small Tiergarten – a real little zoo – are the harmless, starved, hopeless 'beasts of the proletariat'¹⁶. In the years leading up to the Second World War, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Man* (1937), Archibald J. Cronin's *The Citadel* (1937) and George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) will deal with alienating cities and jobs that wear down the psyche and frustrate the desires and expectations of the individual.

Even after the Second World War, the risks of the reification of the self in the workplace innervated the artistic-literary discourse, as is demonstrated by Niccolò Amelii's article dedicated to corporate work between neo-feudal dynamics and liturgical rituals. The essay offers an articulate critical *aperçu* focused on the 'objectification' of man in Goffredo Parise's *Il padrone* (1965). At the beginning of the 1960s, Parise embraced a neo-Darwinian vision of individual and collective existence, which was reflected in the motifs of his texts, within which alienation germinates from man's biological substratum, where the law of the natural selection of the strongest is inscribed. In the light of these methodological premises, the essay not only analyses the unravelling of the process of the 'objectification' of the individual in Parise's production, a phenomenon that was characteristic of the advanced phase of the neo-capitalist system, but also examines the modes of expression through which his novel discusses the transition from «natural man» to «artificial man».

The tension between «natural» and «artificial» is also emphasized in Irene Cecchini's article that analyses the representation of work on the basis of its profound relationship to environmental issues and ecological thinking. By means of an eco-poetic analysis of Simona Vinci's *Strada Pro-*

¹⁶ Fallada 2019.

vinciale Tre (2007), the author focuses on the interrelation between the act of working and environmental changes on the one hand, and the potential power of work-related ecological images on the other. The first aspect is investigated in the light of the effects caused by capitalist «re-production» (Ongaro 2001) on the body-work and the body-earth. The second is analysed through three different narrative processes that characterise Vinci's novel: immersive walking, natural and anthropic rhythms, and the social and spatial aspects of mobile practices.

An ecocritical, indeed even ecofeminist, approach to the work also emerges from the analysis of Martine Sonnet's *Atelier 62* (2008). Raissa Furlanetto Cardoso's article in this issue of «Between» interprets the social phenomena represented in the story, also in the light of reflections drawn from Marxist theorists and the so-called “ethics of care”, with the intention of criticising capitalist logic and its blind pursuit of economic growth, with no thought for the individual. At the centre of the analysis is Martine Sonnet's father, a former craftsman who never said anything about his work as a metalworker at Renault in Billancourt. Through the analysis of how work is represented in the text and its impact on this man's life, the article aims to provide some possible interpretations of the metalworker's silence, investigating its origin in the physical and psychological traumas he had suffered in the process of the 'proletarisation' of the artisan but without forgetting the fact that the alienating distance between the individual and the sphere of social production had been created by the man's profession.

The theme of the 'proletarianisation' of the craftsman also emerges from the second article in this issue of «Between» which discusses the contemporary French-speaking author, Michel Houellebecq. In his Joycean-inspired essay a «Portrait of the Artist as a Worker», Aldo Baratta traces the «aesthetic postures», i.e. the transformations that the aesthetic craft undergoes within the late capitalist and post-Fordist logic, through a reading of the French writer's *La carte et le territoire* (2010). Faced with an artistic product that has spread beyond the worst expectations of the technical reproducibility so feared by the historical avant-gardes of the early 20th century¹⁷, the art market in which the artist operates today responds to unprecedented hierarchies of value and assumes a professional habitus fuelled by a new deontology. In Houellebecq's novel, one can observe the professional attitudes of three different artists: the photographer and painter Jed Martin, the autofiction writer Michel Houellebecq and – through a

¹⁷ See Guerra, Blanco, Padularosa 2020.

metanarrative refraction – the real Michel Houellebecq. All three speak of the professionalisation of artistic activity through a dialectic that oscillates between the poles of craft and industrial work, but also those of creativity and reproducibility.

A central theme in contemporary artistic creation is work in all its declinations from manual and artisanal to immaterial or linked to the era of computerization and the reflections thereon, above all those centred around the great social and trade union demands. Work is at the centre of the literary reflection that denounces the exploitation of minors (Dominique Manotti, *Sombre Sentier*, 2010), the precarious work of legal and illegal immigrants (Marco Rovelli, *Servi*, 2009; Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs*, 1995; Alessandro Leogrande, *Uomini e caporali*, 2016) or the tragic white deaths (Marco Rovelli, *Lavorare uccide*, 2008). Of course, it is also a key topic in cinema, in the critical representation of the relationship between human beings and work, in its alienating tendencies, anticipated by Charlie Chaplin with *Modern Times* (1936) and oppressive tendencies (Michael Winterbottom, *In This World*, 2002, Francesca Comencini, *Mi piace lavorare – mobbing*, 2003), in trade union and libertarian demands (Andrzej Wajda, *Człowiek z żelaza*, *Man of Iron*, 1981; Mark Herman, *Brassed Off*, 1996), or in the alienating dimension of unemployment (Peter Cattaneo, *The Full Monty*, 1997; Ken Loach, *Riff raff* and *The Navigators*, 2001)¹⁸. Dramaturgy has also contributed to the theme of work, as Alessandra Goggio demonstrates in her article dedicated to the German theatre collective *Rimini Protokoll*. The group tackles the representation of work in performative and interactive shows, which the author investigates by focusing on the performance *Gesellschaftsmodell Großbaustelle*. By ironically resorting to different theatrical traditions, the performance by the *Rimini Protokoll* theatre aims to counteract the alienation and depersonalization brought about by the mechanisms

¹⁸ Still in the context of visual culture, comics (Ernest Riebe, *Mr Block*, 1919) and graphic novels are also particularly interesting in this context, since they often focus on the representation of the historical demands of the working class (Gerry Hunt, 1913. *Larkin's Labor War*, 2013; Graphic History Collective, *Direct Action Gets the Goods: A Graphic History of the Strike in Canada*, 2019; Graphic History Collective, David Lester, 1919: *A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike*, 2019; Graphic History Collective, Paul Buhle, *Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working-Class Struggle*, 2016; Robin Folvik, Sean Carleton, Mark Leier, Sam Bradd, Trevor McKilligan, *May Day: A Graphic History of Protest*, 2012; Sean Michael Wilson, Robert S. Brown, *The Many Not The Few*, 2018; Paul M. Buhle, Nicole Schulman, *Wobblies! A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, 2005).

that regulate post-capitalist work. In the wake of what had happened before the fall of the Berlin Wall, particularly in the German Democratic Republic¹⁹, the group's aim is to rehabilitate work – including theatrical work – as a truly productive dimension of man, but also to encourage a reflection on the condition of (post)modern *homo laborans*.

The latter topic and its television *mise en abyme* is addressed in detail in Matteo Macaluso's article which closes this issue of «Between». The scholar analyses the Italian adaptation of the television series *Undercover Boss* (*Boss in incognito* in the Italian translation) which is unusual as it is one of the very few TV shows focused on the theme of work. The show has been aired during prime time on the RAI (Italian Radio and Television) since 2014 and the essay addresses the series as a source of investigation of the power dynamics between the boss and his employees that exist in the working world. It also explores how, in a similar way to the original format, *Boss in incognito* provides Italian viewers with a narrative of these norms that is not free from ideological implications.

¹⁹ See Calzoni 2018: 67-111.

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