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Workplaces in the Cinema

Introduction

Representations of the workplace are an important aspect of popular culture. Genres from the thriller to the situation comedy are played out against a backdrop of offices, schools, hospitals, factories, police stations and other workplaces. Attention to the representation of the workplace is of central importance in the visual media, especially film and television, as they require either the construction of studio sets or the use of real locations. Such locations leave less to the imagination of the audience than is the case with non-visual media. In many cases the film and television sets form an unobtrusive background against which human drama can unfold. In a few cases the sets dominate the action; an example is Jacques Tati's *Playtime* of 1967 which has a minimal plot but used a specially constructed, and very expensive, set to convey an impression of a disorientating modernist business district (Neumann 1996). Whether the set dominates the plot or not the representation of the workplace in popular culture may provide a route for facilities management research to explore popular beliefs and understanding of the workplace, a realm that is not easy to enter through more conventional research approaches.

There are parallels for such work in organization studies where a number of researchers have explored the messages, beliefs and ideologies about organizations that have been represented in popular culture. White (1957) set precedents for this type of study in the *Organization Man* in which he included analyses of popular novels such as *The Caine Mutiny*. There have been explorations of particular organizations roles such as those of the efficiency expert (Lee 2002) the school administrator (Smith 1999) and trade unions (Stead 1998). There have also been studies of particular media genres such as *Cinéma Vérité* (Hassard 1998), popular cartoons (Rhodes 2001) or science fiction (Corbett 1998). A particular value of such studies is that they provide insights into aspects of organizations that are not dealt with adequately by mainstream organizational research. As Hassard and Holliday (1998, p1) put it:

“..where organization studies texts present rationality, organization and monolithic power relations, popular culture plays out sex, violence, emotion, power struggle, the personal consequences of success and failure, and disorganization upon its stage.”

Studies of the development of office design have also used popular culture as a source of material. Pélegrin-Genel (1996) and Budd (Undated) make extensive use of references to film to illustrate trends in office design. There are also a number of works exploring the relationship between architecture, urban space and film including Shiel and Fitzmaurice (2001), Shonfield (2000) and Clarke (1997).

The exploration of popular culture in organizational and design studies suggests that parallel developments in facilities management research should be possible. Culture is increasingly recognized as an important factor in the way in which facilities are perceived and used (Lindahl and Granath 2006, Vischer 2008). Recent research into the usability of facilities and buildings suggests that usability is contingent on the values held by users at a particular place and time rather than being an intrinsic function of the physical environment (Lindahl and Granath 2006, Alexander 2006, Granath and Alexander 2006, Alexander 2008, Fenker, M. 2008). Such contingent user values are not easy to explore using conventional facilities management techniques such as post occupancy analysis and there have been calls for multi-method approaches (Blakstad et al 2008) and a greater range of methods for understanding user experience (Alexander 2008). Popular culture and the representations of the workplace it contains are part of the cultural background that users bring with them to facilities and buildings. An analysis of these representations therefore has the potential, as part of a developing array of approaches, to contribute to an understanding of how users perceive

and react to the workplace.

Methodology

This study aims to explore how work and workspace have been represented in film and how such analysis might inform facilities management research. Most, if not all films contain representations of workplaces to some extent and clearly an exhaustive treatment of the subject would be a vast undertaking. The approach taken has been to select three films for detailed analysis. These have been selected on the basis of two main criteria; firstly that they have aspects of work or the workplace as central themes and secondly because they have been particularly influential as archetypes or seminal influences on a genre of cinema.

Each film is analysed separately for its particular representation of work and the workspace. The analysis is of the representation of work and the workplace in each film and does not contain a detailed evaluation of the screenplay or make aesthetic judgements. The plots are only discussed to the extent that they help in understanding of the representation of work and workplace. After individual analyses of the films are made a comparison is drawn between the representations and finally general conclusions are drawn.

The first film is *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Laing and released in Germany in 1927. This silent movie is one of the central works of Expressionism and has proved very influential on subsequent cinema (Neumann 1996, Elsaesser 2000). There are a number of versions of the film, some of which were truncated and have lost a considerable amount of footage; the version referred to in this paper is the version digitally restored by Martin Koerber and released by the F.W. Murnau Foundation in 2001. The second film is *Wall Street*, directed by Oliver Stone and released in 1987. This is perhaps the archetype of a series of films such as *The Secret of My Success* (1987), *Dealers* (1989), *Rogue Trader* (1999) and *Boiler Room* (2000) that explored the moral dilemmas associated with the deregulation of financial markets in the 1980s and 1990s. It has been selected as an example of the way in which cinema explore the relationship between older forms capitalism and the more dynamic forms that were emerging at the time. The third is *Clerks* (1994) directed by Kevin Smith. This has been selected as an important example of genre sometimes known as the slacker movie that explores the culture of individuals disaffected by the materialism of the 1980s and 1990s. Foundational influences on this genre were the 1991 film *Slacker* directed by Richard Linklater and the novels of Douglas Coupland (1996), particularly *Generation X* of 1991.

Metropolis

Metropolis, the film, is set in an eponymous future city where a class of planners/technocrats led by Joh Frederson rule over the workers who labour in the city's machine halls. *Metropolis*, the city, is technologically advanced and contains vast machines that appear to be integral to its function but have no clear purpose. It is divided into distinct areas including a subterranean workers' city, industrial areas containing the machine halls, sports arenas, gardens and the entertainment district of Yoshiwara. At the centre is the vast "Tower of Babel" that houses the control centre of Frederson and his entourage. There is also an older, gothic element to the city including the cathedral, the house of Rotwang, a scientist/sorcerer, and a series of subterranean catacombs. The sectors of the city are connected by elevated railways and roads and the skies are full of aircraft.

The plot of *Metropolis* is convoluted and need not be discussed in detail. In essence it involves Freder, Frederson's son, being awakened to the plight of the workers through a relationship with Maria. She is a prophet like figure, who has kept the workers from uprising against Frederson by announcing the coming of a mediator who will reconcile them with the ruling class. Rotwang, the

scientist/sorcerer and rival of Frederson, kidnaps Maria and creates a robot in her image. This robot is used to ferment unrest amongst the workers who rise up and destroy the machines of Metropolis. In doing so they cause the workers' underground city to flood. Maria, who has escaped from Rotwang, and Freder save the workers' children trapped in the city. The workers destroy the false Maria in scene reminiscent of a medieval witch burning. Freder saves Maria from Rotwang who has recaptured her and in the process Rotwang falls to his death from the Cathedral. The film finishes with Freder playing the role of mediator as he reconciles his father with the workers.

Metropolis presents a very powerful portrayal of work and the workplace. The workers are highly regimented and exploited. In the early scenes they can be observed shuffling, in regimented ranks with heads hung down, between the workers' city and the machine halls. All wear identical uniforms. However, they are not visibly coerced; there is no obvious police force or army. Rather it seems to be the city itself that controls their lives. Surveillance is an important theme. Frederson can observe what happens in parts of the city from his control room; Rotwang can secretly watch assemblies of workers in the catacombs. Management of time is also of great significance. Metropolis is full of clocks, gongs and whistles marking out the working day.

The machines of Metropolis have no obvious product but they make enormous demands on the workers. The day is divided into ten hour shifts and these involve backbreaking and regimented physical toil. Machines are central to several scenes in the film. In one Freder observes an industrial accident at the M Machine. This is a towering machine in the shape of a pyramid; it is both anthropomorphic, having apparent eyes and a mouth, and similar in form to an ancient temple. Workers perform regular orchestrated movements on the face of the machine. The accident occurs when one of the workers becomes too tired to manage the controls. Temperature rises to dangerous levels and there is an explosion in which numbers of workers are killed or injured. Freder's mind transforms the incident into a scene of the biblical temple of Moloch in which priests sacrifice victims into the mouth of a god; the machine becomes at the same time both temple and the god itself. The theme of transformation of machine into living being is taken further with transformation by Rotwang of the robot into the false Maria with dire consequences for Metropolis. This image has parallels with Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* of 1936 where machines also devour humans, although in this case to comic effect.

In a later scene Freder takes over the operation of another machine from a worker. This has a giant dial with two hands, analogous to a clock face. The circumference of the dial has numbered lights that are illuminated in pairs. Freder's task is to physically align the hands with the paired lights. At the end of the shift he is completely physically exhausted and his position on the dial is reminiscent of a crucifixion; again this appears to be symbolic of the sacrifice of people to the machine.

The workers' uprising results in the wrecking of Metropolis' machines. Their fury is particularly directed against the Heart machine which by implication must be the central electricity generating plant. Grot, the chief foreman, realises that this action will result in flooding of the workers' city endangering their children and he attempts to stop the action. However, he is overcome and the machine is destroyed. The elevators connecting the workers' city with the machine halls crash to the ground, flood waters rise and power is extinguished in both the upper and lower levels of Metropolis.

In summary Metropolis is a powerful but abstract representation of a workplace. Work in the city is oppressive and characterised by regimentation, surveillance, hard physical toil and alienation from any product of labour. People are sacrificed to machines and machines can take on the characteristics of living things. The film is an exploration of the power of machines both to create the technological future represented by the city itself but also, and more importantly, of the potential for the machine to destroy the quality of human life. This is a representation of work more akin to

the Arts and Crafts sensibility of William Morris with its contrast between useful work and useless toil than either a Marxist representation of economic relations between classes or a liberal representation of progress through technological development.

Wall Street

Wall Street is set in the financial world of New York in the mid 1980s. It centres on an ambitious young trader, Bud Fox, and his relationship with two role models. The first is Gordon Gekko, a successful but amoral corporate raider, and the second is Bud's father, Carl Fox, who is a maintenance engineer and trade union leader with a small airline called Bluestar. Bud longs to escape from managing the accounts of small clients and enter the financial big league epitomised by Gekko. He tips Gekko off with insider information on Bluestar gained from Carl and in return Gekko gives him the opportunity to manage his trading account. Under Gekko's tutelage Bud becomes rich but is required to participate in industrial espionage and insider dealing. Bluestar is faced with ruin and Bud comes up with a plan to turn it around with the support of the unions; he persuades Gekko to finance the deal. However, without Bud's knowledge Gekko plans to break up Bluestar for his own financial gain laying off the workforce including Carl. Bud discovers Gekko's plan and manipulates the stock so that Gekko is forced to sell off to a rival corporate raider at considerable loss. Bud is arrested for insider dealing but turns state evidence. Having been rigged with recording gear he confronts Gekko in a park; Gekko assaults him but admits a number of illegal deals in the process. The film ends with Bud entering the courthouse and facing jail having been reconciled with his father. Both his and Gekko's futures are left uncertain but with Bud having cleared his conscience.

There are three worlds of work explored in Wall Street. Firstly there is the world of the financial services industry in which Bud begins his career. Secondly there is the world of the successful financial magnate in which Gekko lives and to which Bud aspires. Thirdly there is Carl's more traditional world of work as an engineer in Bluestar.

Bud's life in financial services is hardly inspiring. He works in a noisy, untidy open plan office surrounded by the paraphernalia of the emerging electronic information explosion of the 1980s (for the film a functioning replica office was constructed at considerable expense (Stone 2001)). Computer monitors and paper reports pile the desks; these are interspersed with occasional attempts at workplace personalisation. Everything is illuminated by hard fluorescent light. Bud is under considerable pressure to produce results. He works with colleagues and has friendly relations with them but they are also rivals whom he must outperform; an indication of this is the firing without compassion of a long-standing employee by the trading room boss. A major part of Bud's work is cold-calling potential clients, a task which gives him little satisfaction and for which he receives little thanks. His clients are remote and the products of his work are intangible. However once he takes on Gekko's account he becomes the star performer in the firm. This leads to his being given the traditional reward of an individual office and personal secretary.¹ Despite Bud's reward this is a workplace over which people have little control. Their activities are determined by performance targets and the endless barrage of electronic information from the trading screens.

Gekko's workplace is very different from that of Bud. Although he has a large and lavish office his workplace is wherever he happens to be, at home, in a club, in an airplane or limousine. He is surrounded by trusted support staff and advisors who can attend to his needs. Full use is made of

¹ In this respect Wall Street follows the tradition of films in which the characters aspire to escape from the open-plan office to their own private office (*The Apartment*, *Working Girl*, *The Secret of My Success*). This tradition is subverted in the UK TV series *The Office* where the main character, David Brent, continually vacates his private office in order to participate in office floor life.

emerging new technologies such as personal computers and cellphones. Gekko is in full control of his environment and can surround himself with the best of everything whether it is clothes, food, buildings, cars or art. This is a work environment to which many aspire but few achieve.

Carl inhabits a different world from either his son or from Gekko although only glimpses of it are seen in the film. Unlike Bud or Gekko he has a direct relationship with the physical product of his work and can be seen getting his hands dirty maintaining aircraft. His relationships with work colleagues are also very different; in particular they can trust each other, even in negotiations with Gekko and are supported by the stable institution of the labour union. Much is made of the way in which Bluestar has been built up by its owners from small beginnings over a long time period and this is contrasted with the short term perspectives of Bud and Gekko. For example Carl remonstrates with Bud “Stop going for the easy buck and start producing something with your life. Create, instead of living off the buying and selling of others.” This outlook contrasts with Gekko’s “I create nothing, I own” (Internet Movie Database 2008).

In summary Wall Street tries to portray contrasting worlds of work. On one side there is Carl and Bluestar Airlines with values of long-term asset creation through cooperation and trust. On the other is the emergent world of Gekko with its short term money making through destructive acquisitions. The new world is a tough one and there are few winners. The work is driven by ambition and the workplace represents status. Successful traders move from the floor to their own office; the very few who reach the top can work where and how they like. Those who remain on the bottom rungs of the ladder are subject to a stressful environment of competition, targets and endless information streams. Technology can be both oppressive and an enabler of success.

Clerks

Clerks is a black comedy portraying a day in the life of Dante and Randal who work as sales assistants (clerks in US English) in a convenience store and adjoining video rental outlet in New Jersey, USA. The plot centres on Dante’s failure to choose between his current girlfriend and an ex girlfriend who has unexpectedly returned from college. The action plays through a number of scenes involving the main protagonists together with customers and other visitors to the two stores.

The workplace portrayed is very different from that of Metropolis or Wall Street. The owners/managers of the two stores do not appear in the film and the two clerks are left much to their own devices. Although it is his day off Dante reluctantly agrees with his boss over the telephone to work the morning. During the day he is informed that his boss has gone to Vermont and that he will have to work the whole day despite having arranged to play in a hockey match in the afternoon. Randal’s boss does not appear in any guise during the film.

The stores are decrepit and a source of annoyance to their occupants. When Randal arrives for work the metal shutter over the window cannot be opened as the lock has been jammed with gum. He improvises a sign announcing “I assure you we are open” using a sheet and boot polish. This sets the tone for the rest of the action. The fluorescent lights are inexplicably intermittent in operation. The space outside is inhabited by Jay and Silent Bob, two small time drug dealers.

The two clerks run the stores according to their own whims and with very little consideration for customer service. Randal arrives very late for work and then spends a considerable part of his time next door with Dante. They close business when it suits them. On one occasion Dante rearranges the location for his hockey match, to the flat roof of the store. This meets with indignation from the customers below who want to be served. Dante and Randal are routinely rude and sometimes physically abusive to customers. On one occasion Randal inadvertently sells cigarettes to a four year old, an offence for which Dante is blamed and receives a 500 dollar fine.

In summary the world represented in the film is an antithesis of modern customer service culture. It is run primarily for the benefit of the employees. However, although Dante and Randal are depicted as flawed characters one can sympathize with them as many of the customers they deal with are themselves repugnant. Furthermore the stores' owners clearly have little interest in their businesses other than, we can assume, banking whatever takings are made. The physical workplace is dysfunctional although capable of being adapted to ad hoc uses such as the rooftop hockey game. However, despite its shortcomings this is not an unsuccessful workplace. It meets Dante and Randal's presumably modest need for income and presents them with opportunities for social interaction. Moreover they have a high degree of control over their environment and what they do over the working day. They are working below their level of ability but this gives the opportunity to pursue their own interests. The customers may meet with abuse but they keep coming back and the stores are presumably meeting a variety of local needs.

Cross-case analysis

The three films discussed are very different in time and genre. However, each in their way has interesting things to say about work and the workplace. All are to some extent a reflection of their times: Metropolis of the economic and social turmoil of Germany in the Weimar Republic; Wall Street of the heady days of deregulated markets and "Reganomics" before the "Black Monday" stock market crash in October 1987; Clerks portrays the leaner years of the USA in the early 1990s. Both Metropolis and Wall Street have ambiguous social and political messages and have been both praised and criticised from a broad spectrum of political opinion (Elsaesser 2000, Denzin, 1990).

Each of the films portrays a negative view of the workplace it represents. That of Metropolis is one of immense and seemingly pointless physical effort. Wall Street presents a world driven by greed and ambition in which position in the work environment is an indicator of a person's success. This is contrasted with a rather nostalgic view of an earlier form of capitalism. Clerks presents a dystopian workplace, physically neglected, and underperforming. It is interesting in this context to consider Coats (2005, p1) characterization of the factors that characterise "bad jobs":

- *"a lack of control over the pace of work and the key decisions that affect the workplace*
- *limited task discretion and monotonous and repetitive work*
- *Inadequate skill levels to cope with periods of intense pressure*
- *an imbalance between effort and reward*
- *limited "social capital" - whether informal friendship networks or formal associations like trade unions which make workers more resilient."*

From this list work in Metropolis is unsurprisingly "bad work" on all counts. Wall Street gives the message that there is a historical movement from "good" to "bad" work. Although we are not given much detail of Bluestar airlines the general impression is of responsible worker participation in workplace decisions, reasonable reward for effort and considerable "social capital". In contrast the new financial world offers little control over their work for the majority of people, limited task discretion, disproportionate rewards for success and diminishing "social capital". Clerks, more surprisingly, comes out more positively. Dante and Randal clearly have considerable control over decisions in the workplace although their work is relatively monotonous and repetitive. They have the skills to deal ingeniously with problems that occur. Effort and reward are probably balanced although neither is high and there is considerable "social capital".

Conclusions

Cinema is not a window on reality. It consists of images and representations created by its makers

and then interpreted and reinterpreted by audiences. It would therefore be wrong to expect the study of film to reflect what happens in any particular workplace. However, successful films have a resonance with their audiences and can give insights into how people may think about, and perhaps react to, their work environment. They are part of the cultural milieu within which the workplace is experienced. Historically we can see within the cinema a commentary upon important workplace issues of the times and this is clear from the films studied.

In research terms is this analysis might be seen as little more than an interesting byway. However, as Vischer (2008) has discussed, many of the approaches currently taken to analysis of user experience of the workplace are grounded in rather simplistic measures of functionality and there is a need to understand deeper cultural meanings:

“...users do not assess their functional comfort on the basis of simple physical comfort . They bring feelings, memories, expectations, and preferences into their assessment, and this increases the complexity of the outcomes being measured. Some of these psychological processes are personal and individual, but many are shared and indeed are a function of the values and habits of the culture in which we live as a society”

Studies of the workplace in popular culture, including the cinema, may be one way of enriching our understanding of the meanings and values that individuals and social groups attach to the workplace. Most approaches to studying the user response to the workplace focus on particular individuals and groups to particular workplaces. Study of the workplace in popular culture provides some access to shared social understanding of, and beliefs about, generic workplace types. This shared knowledge is likely to inform and shape the responses of individuals and groups to particular workplaces. It may therefore help in the interpretation of user responses to particular workplaces.

From the perspective of the facilities management practitioner an understanding of the representation of workplaces in popular culture may also be valuable. These representations can give insights into popular concerns that may impact upon initiatives and actions taken in the workplace. For example, reactions to change management programmes are likely to be informed by cultural representations of management motivations and actions. An understanding of such representations may help anticipate user responses and enable actions to take potential concerns into account.

This paper has tried to demonstrate that the study of the representation of the workplace in the cinema might contribute to facilities management research. It has been shown that particular films in particular historical contexts have contained powerful representations of the workplace. However, the study is a limited one looking at only three films, albeit ones that are regarded as important examples of their genres. Future research might build on this initial study in a number of ways. One direction would be to investigate the representation of particular workplace types in much greater depth. Certain workplaces such as offices, hospitals and police stations appear frequently in the cinema and would provide considerable raw material for such studies. Potentially the development of cinematic representations over time could be investigated, potentially illuminating how concerns over the workplace have changed over the years. Research could also be widened from the cinema to include a range of types of popular culture such as television, music and literature.

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