



FILM: **AMERICAN FACTORY**

FDG RATING: 4.1 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

documentary

Julia Reichert: film maker/director

Steven Bognar: film maker/director

DATE: May 17, 2020

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **AMERICAN FACTORY**

The 2019 documentary, American Factory is notable for several reasons: It deservedly won the 2020 Oscar for best feature length documentary. It is the first movie that Barack and Michelle Obama's company Higher Ground Productions released with Netflix. It not only shows the current challenges of the American factory worker but also opens our eyes to the challenges of the not too distant robotic future. And offers a unique perspective: we see and hear, in their own words, how the Chinese describe American workers.

Several years earlier, film makers, Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar, (residents of a small town near Dayton, Ohio), documented the 2008 closure of the Dayton General Motors automobile factory in their 2009 Oscar-nominated short, The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant, capturing the final months through the workers' eyes as 2,500 workers and 200 management staff were left without jobs two days before Christmas. It was a devastating collapse of livelihood for so many as the economy took a nose dive. Fast forward to 2015 when a Chinese billionaire decides to invest in the abandoned plant and reopen it as Fuyao Glass America, producing windshield glass for automobiles using a Chinese factory as the infrastructure-production model. Two thousand American workers would be hired and paired with workers brought from China; American managers would be paired with Chinese supervisors. Julia and Steve seized the opportunity to again document the events that were taking place in the same Moraine Assembly plant once occupied by General Motors. During the next few years, with pretty much unrestricted access to the workers and the plant, they filmed what began as an optimistic partnership and evolved into a clash of cultures. The American workers were thankful to be rehired, and were willing to stifle their doubts about the odd relationship in exchange for a steady paycheck, although they were making half of what they had been paid a few years earlier at GM.

Many documentaries are created to support a predetermined perspective but this film was handled evenly to help us understand every side especially when the American workers sought out the union to push their causes. Extremely informative, revealing and entertaining, we clearly see and hear what the Chinese think of American workers (some of our favorites scenes): A Chinese manager tries to explain America to a cafeteria filled with Chinese workers at long white tables, eating food out of foam boxes and wearing neon yellow vests. He wants to help them acclimate. "America is a place to let your personality run free," he says. "As long as you're not doing anything illegal, you're free to follow your heart. You can even joke about the president. Nobody will do anything to you." He also notes that Americans dress casual, are "very obvious" and that "everything is practical and realistic." However, when the Chairman comes to visit, a Chinese supervisor explains that the American workers are pretty slow, they have fat fingers and need to be trained over and over. He adds that Americans also like to take off weekends which is not the work ethic instilled into Chinese workers. Since childhood the Chinese are indoctrinated with the notion of sacrificing personal needs, desires, happiness, and family for the good of the country (ie country's wealth, world status). They work 12 hour shifts, see their family 2 days a month, overtime is mandatory without compensation, the work environment is disciplined, regimented, military-like, with extreme respect for superiors/management, thus creating a tight, very efficient and highly productive unified work force. On the flip side, the safety of employees did not seem a high priority. In short, the Chinese live to work while the Americans work to live.

There are many insightful scenes such as when some American managers are invited to visit the headquarters in China because the Chairman believes they will take back the best practices in order to increase production, meet higher quotas, and better manage their work force. What we see is a propagation of propaganda style posters, signs, and dinner entertainment consisting of songs that further indoctrinate policies.

We each had favorite scenes, quite a number were even humorous. One was the unexpected bond between a big, tattooed, Harley Davidson, gun shooting manager with a small framed, Chinese supervisor (guns are not allowed in China), as they barbequed together in the American's back yard. An unexpected, perspective was when the billionaire investor, in one of the final scenes, is at Buddhist shrine, reminiscing how happier he was when young, enjoying nature, and he wonders if he made the right life choice pursuing wealth in business.

Kudos to the film makers for an excellent editing job whittling down several years of footage to an engaging, compelling, candid, two hour film. The cinematography was exceptional.

We gave American Factory high marks all around resulting in a highly productive score of 4.1 on our quota of 1-5, 5 being the best.



See you at the movies!

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