

Working Man's Death

Directed and written by Michael Glawogger. Cinematography (colour, B&W, Super 16mm-to-35mm) by Wolfgang Thaler. Montage by Monika Willi and Ilse Buchelt. Music by John Zorn / Lotus Film GmbH, Vienna and Quinte Film (Austria), Freiburg (Germany) production in association with ARTE G.E.I.E, with the support of Austrian Film Institute, Eurimages, Vienna Film Funds, Austrian Broadcasting Corp., MFG Film Funding Baden-Wuerttemberg. Produced by Erich Lackner, Mirjam Quinte, Pepe Danquart / 2005, 122 minutes.

Glawogger's initial idea and consequent directing along with Thaler's camera brought to us not working man's death, but working and living experience of human beings, as harsh as they may be. The places and times in which people live often determine their lives, and do not provide them with many opportunities to change them. Most of the critiques described this film as a representation of an extreme work, as blistering examination of immense hardship into which the workers are thrown to earn their daily bread, as portrayal of highly dangerous or simply horrible occupations situated at the five corners of the globe. Or as Hollywood Reporter argues: Frightening, stomach turning and deeply moving.¹ The film, first of all, discloses cultural, economical and political specificities that show different environments and approaches to the labour as such. On a deeper level, however, it poses existential questions, such as why and how. Secondly, there is a promotion around the film, which is to a large extent focused on catching attention of spectators and creating a certain 'bubble' around a whole representation.

Glawogger's documentary *Megacities*, from 1998, contains twelve parts about poor folks in separate burghs and their life stories. *Working Man's Death* contains five parts. I would say that it clearly is a continuation of Glawogger's style of filming, where he focuses on and expresses the act of work, its quality and related sense of existence. The topic around the workers has been known for ages and I would argue that each documentarist deals with it. In photography, for instance, it was Sebastião Salgado who photographed principally workers around the world; in film, in the 1920s, it was Dziga Vertov and his *Enthusiasm*; later on, in the 1960s, there were Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch who, in *Chronicle of a Summer*, for example, went to the streets of Paris and asked the people a simple question: "Are you

¹ Ray Bennett. Sep. 06, 2005. Reviewed at the Venice International Film Festival (from - http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/reviews/review_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001054601 - 4.4.2006)

happy?" All of them, just like we do today, dealt with labour and pertaining dignity, which is an important part of our existence. Glawogger's questions, while making this film, were: Will the working class disappear? Will the manual bodily work be less visible? Where can we see it in 21st century? Primarily, however, he wanted to show the work through the images and his own participation among the people he visited. Moreover, he wanted to show their movements and looks, light and darkness, sound and silence, their bodies in a fight for a better future. The opening sequence comes from the archive footage about Soviet mining hero Alexei Stakhanov in the context of Ukrainian coal moles, today officially closed mines. It is incredible to see how Ukrainian people even nowadays continue to spend their days in a hole, in the frozen ground, deep in the narrow tunnels, just to hammer out a sack or two of coal. The camera in this case was spectacular and it is hard to imagine how difficult it was to fit with the camera into that tunnel with maybe one and a half meter space to move.² The working men talk about their everyday problems; they even make breaks in the tunnel and eat together. They are the new heroes of Donbass.



The photograph is from the web side: www.workingmansdeath.com (Oct 2005)

The second part transports us to Indonesia, concretely to East Java, where the men climb an active volcano carrying two shoulder baskets to fill them with blocks of sulphur. They chip these blocks from a cooled lava while inhaling sulphurous gas, and cart them up and down the mountainside. The weight they carry could be around 70 and 100 kilograms. In filming these scenes ' SteadiCam ' was apparently used, which gives very stabile image and one

² I saw Working Man's Death as it was shown on Viennale Film Festival, October 2005, Urania Cinema. After the screening of the film, Michael Glawogger answered some question and mentioned that the whole project took five years to realize. Just moving from place to place and recording took two years.

feels as being one of the men. They make pauses while climbing, they smoke and talk. One notices a similar kind of friendship as the one depicted in Ukraine. There is an interesting moment when the men are on the top, on the road where a bus full of tourists has just stopped. They are surprised with the encounter wondering what for 'creatures' are here and what are they carrying. The tourists take photographs of the men, not only for themselves but in order to show such a curiosity to their friends and neighbours at home. From filmmakers' side, this part was described as the ghosts from the past.

The third part opens with Nigerian 'battlefield', Port Harcourt; an open-air abattoir. In a single day, around 350 goats and almost the same amount of buffalos are transformed from living animals into buyable pieces of meat. This part is full of blood; but there is incredible cooperation. An enormous community of people slaughters, roasts, washes, takes the skin off, cuts the parts, carts, makes a business, runs and screams from the mornings till the evenings. They seem proud and happy. Actually they are responsible that the people living in this area will have something to eat. "They are self esteem and strong as the lions are" (*Filmladen, Vienna*).

The fourth part takes us to Pakistan, to Gaddani, where we meet ship wreckers risking their lives while deconstructing huge tankers. Pakistani men are walking through the old crafts and think about the best ways to deconstruct the ships, how and where to put explosive and how much of it. They reconstruct the metal fragments from the rest of the world, and they hope that nobody will die under a piece of a heavy scrap. They are brothers who live together day after day with the spirits of old sailors and in deconstruction of the past.



The photograph is from the web side: www.workingmansdeath.com (Oct 2005)

The fifth part belongs to the future. We appear on a square of Liaoning Province, where people believe in revival and better tomorrows. The men paint the ground, made from marmoreal material, just with brushes and water. They are writing about the future, about technology, but after a while the words disappear. Nevertheless, the men relentlessly continue to paint new and new places. They circle around the square's monument. "From Chinese to Chinese" (*Filmladen*, Vienna). One would expect credits, but instead of them there comes the monument of the work, a factory in Duisburg, Germany. As a symbol that modernity already lives there; it stands there as a memory of a heavy work experienced at that place and elsewhere. Today the place is empty, but at nights it shines. Young people walk on the stairs, climb the steps, drink beer and scream. Their screams are echoing in this monument of the past. And ...each Saturday there is a wedding under the statue of Stakhanov.

For a summary I would say that the film transported me to really interesting places around the world. The working team of filmmakers had without doubt a hard time, but with the help of technology many difficult situations were solved and the authors were able to realize their ideas. The experiences of different kinds of hard labour, depicted simply in long sequences, without words, create more angles for better understanding of a human being. We realize all over again that what we do for living is often not just a job but also our life. However, there are two questions that spring out from this 'life of work' and 'work of life' film: How far do the humans go in complying with the demands of hardship to be able to say that every working life is worth living? And what about all those who live in the world with no power over their own future, where historical, political and social moment condemns them not to hard work but to endless passive waiting?

Bio-Filmography of Michael Glawogger:

Born 3rd December 1959, Graz, Austria; studied at San Francisco Art Institute and Film Academy Vienna. He works and lives in Vienna.

Filmography:

2006 *Slumming* / featuring film (available winter 2005/06)

2005 *Working Man's Death* / documentary

2003 *Nacktschnecken* / featuring film

2002 *Zur Lage* / Essayfilm; together with Barbara Albert, Michael Sturminger and Ulrich Seidl

1999 *Frankreich, wir kommen!!!* / documentary

1998 *Megacities* / documentary

1996 *Kino im Kopf* / Documentary–drama

1995 *Ameisenstrasse* / featuring film

1989 *Krieg in Wien* / featuring film