The star and crew of Dirty Jobs, with Mike Rowe, showed up shortly after dawn to start the day's filming at Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.
Like clockwork, a crisis in a major social institution today produces a monstrous representation of that institution’s operations through the form of reality television. Given their proliferation into the hundreds and their enormous success, reality shows—the most popular of which regularly draw between five and ten million viewers—amount to the most significant novel cultural form unique to neoliberal society. While the emergence of reality television has been driven on the supply side by a straightforward search for cheap and fast production, something altogether more contorted seems to be driving demand. What many of these shows dramatize is the demoralizing experience of neoliberalism itself.


Some of these shows deal with the crisis of mass consumption ushered in by the recent financial collapse and subsequent anemic recovery. Others seemingly engage the experience of work—particularly dangerous, physical, and dirty work—in the age of the failed job hunt. At a moment of acceleration in the deskilling and destabilization of the labor market—when the labor force participation rate is at a thirty-five year low—it makes sense that we would develop a televised fantasy life about those exotic jobs that, as one show has it, “make civilized life possible for the rest of us.” Some of the last decade’s most prominent entries have included Dirty Jobs, Undercover Boss, Coal, Ice Road Truckers, and The Deadliest Catch.

These shows seem to share a nearly social-realistic preoccupation with the proletarian decency and stoicism of hard labor. In its press materials for Dirty Jobs the Discovery channel actually refers to the show’s host as “everyman Mike Rowe.” If this seems unusual in a culture that tends to demean labor, it is because these shows are working at a more indirect angle. While they deal in a rhetoric of working-class heroism, they systematically push the human beings whose labor they nominally valorize to the margins. They both awaken the set of (largely nostalgic) desires associated with work before neoliberalism, and they reenact, in each episode, the dynamics of class power by which work has been destabilized and workers made invisible.

These, then, are not really shows about workers at all. Coal follows the attempt by Cobalt Coal President Jim Roberts to make back the millions he lost in two previous mining ventures, with a third, all-or-nothing gamble on a high-grade West Virginia coal seam. The show presents an obviously dangerous speedup as an exciting drama. (Inspectors for the Mine Safety and Health Administration cited Cobalt for safety violations after watching the show’s first episode.) The company’s narrow profit margin and resulting harsh labor conditions appear as an adventure, rather than the stuff of muckraking. In other words, the show’s protagonist and subject is capital; the workers are props.

1Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

Corresponding Author:
Gabriel Winant, gabriel.winant@yale.edu
In these shows, the camera loves the bosses. They guide us through the exotic operations of the workplace. On a show like *Coal*—a season-long study of a single company—Roberts dominates the narrative, which centers on how many tons he needs per day to break even. The show’s attention lingers on his expensive equipment and enlists the workers to criticize each other about who operates it most efficiently.

*Undercover Boss*, an enormously popular example of this genre, is perfectly titled, if unintentionally so, because it personalizes the surveillance regime so common across American workplaces. Shelly Sun, the CEO of for-profit homecare company *BrightStar*, explains, “When J.D. and I first started the business, we were involved in every decision. As we’ve grown, we’ve become a little bit removed. And we want to make sure that the care we say we’re providing to families is being delivered.” The chief of Chiquita Brands International, Fernando Aguirre, going undercover as an unemployed immigrant to work in his company’s fields and factories, lays it on thick: “I’m very disciplined and strict, and I place a lot of emphasis on people doing their jobs right. I see this as a tremendous opportunity for me to find out if my employees really perform at the level I expect.”

Inevitably, the undercover bosses learn a lesson about the hard work and dedication of their help. Aguirre could not operate a forklift or pack lettuce to save his life and relied on his workmates to keep production moving at all in his presence. Sun and her husband, working undercover with their employees at nursing homes and on house calls, hear about how their company relies on patients to train their own caregivers because the workers were spread too thin to share information. One nurse explains to the incognito CEO the effects of the unpredictability of her wages. “It’s been very hard. My husband and I both lost our jobs. We worked for General Motors for over fourteen years, and I’m not getting a forty-hour paycheck from *BrightStar*. We haven’t had a vacation since we got married.” Sun—the very agent of this nurse’s precarious circumstances—nods along sympathetically.

Whatever dramatic tension accumulates over an episode of *Undercover Boss* is discharged when the boss, in a fit of *noblesse oblige*, reveals the truth to the workers, marvels at their grit, and showers them with gifts. Finished slumming, Sun calls her former workmates into her executive office. “You had talked about how when you got married four years ago, the kids weren’t able to be there, and that was your only regret—you’re so family oriented,” she tells the nurse. “And so I’d like to recreate that. I want to send you back to Cancun for a re-do-over of your vows, with you and your husband, all six of your kids, and your two grandchildren. All ten of you.” Sun also promised to pay her employee’s wages while she was gone for the week, and to cover her mortgage for six months. The episode reaches its climax with CEO Sun on stage in front of her employees, basking in their cheering at her bravery and generosity. “Thank you for creating the job,” says the underemployed nurse, and Sun beams beatifically. Each episode displays the benevolent power of the paternalist entrepreneur; it tends to play like a scene out of Mitt Romney’s subconscious.

Each [Undercover Boss episode] tends to play like a scene out of Mitt Romney’s subconscious.

Like *Undercover Boss*, *Dirty Jobs* is episodic in structure, but it has an on-screen editorial voice in “everyman Mike Rowe.” Rowe is a handsome, wisecracking minor celebrity; imagine a cut-rate, slightly campy Clint Eastwood with a career hosting and narrating innumerable reality shows and commercials. So consider for a moment what inevitably happens when his people arrange for him to show up at a company with a camera crew: it is, of course, not the workers who spend the day on camera showing him around but the boss. In a telling episode of *Dirty Jobs* Rowe goes to work at a pig farm outside Las Vegas. The day’s task: to turn castoff and leftover casino buffet food into slop. Through the entire segment, Rowe is on-screen, often elbow- or knee-deep in liquefied food detritus with the farm’s owner, Robert Combs, who is presented as a homespun yokel. At one point, Combs instructs Rowe to shovel waste off the
top of a tower. “That goes to the landfill, it has no value. You should tell José to watch out.” Who, you might ask, is José—about whom we have thus far heard nothing? It seems he actually works at the farm. He never appears on-screen or merits another mention. With labor disappeared and a hammy celebrity seeming superfluous in the worker’s place, the image of the boss becomes distorted. Combs will suffer Rowe’s presence with good cheer but evidently does not need him. In a typical move for the show, the boss is thus made to resemble an independent producer, unafraid, as the voiceover says, “to get his hands dirty.” The proletarian glow of Dirty Jobs shines only for the capitalist; it washes out the actual workers.

At their most popular, Dirty Jobs and Undercover Boss have commanded audiences of several million viewers—the latter, which airs on CBS, often clearing ten million. The strange thing about these shows is that anyone watches them at all. They are boring. Why would we expect otherwise? Even the most dangerous and physically grueling jobs are vastly more drudgery than adventure. For every moment of excitement racing a big rig over the Arctic ice roads or hauling in crabs in the Bering Sea, there is too much monotony to sustain anything like narrative pacing. For that matter, even the moments of danger and excitement all more or less resemble each other. The miner operator hits some buttons, the teeth of the machine dig into the rock, and he stops. The shift changes, and the guy on the next shift does the same thing. Sometimes, the roof falls in. That these workers have lives and cares of genuine human interest is gestured at, but it is not what the show is about. The show is about the motion of capital, a process that is essentially repetitive. The dullness of the work mobilizes the viewers’ sympathetic response; without this, the fantasy that the show seeks to stimulate would not succeed.

On the contrary, the fantasy cannot cut too close to the bone or it would risk undermining the distinctive pleasure it offers: namely, establishing a relished emotional distance from the workaday world of monotony and humiliation. The on-screen protagonist allows the audience distance from the work, distance that in turn produces the drama of the show; nothing about packing lettuce or feeding pigs otherwise bears any interest. The basic plot device—the naif gets his hands dirty, learns his lesson, and, crucially, moves on—depends on the work itself being monotonous, which allows the viewer to examine experiences that somewhat resemble their own, from the safe distance afforded by on-screen, episodic narration. Imagine if Mike Rowe went back to the same pig farm to make slop every time; he would be José, about whom there are no shows. To portray the real lives of actual workers at any depth would evoke the pain of economic insecurity while offering none of the narrative relief—in distance, in humor—that these programs require to be watchable.

Reality television stages, and reifies into commodity form, a utopia of work.

Whether in the physical drama of Coal and Ice Road Truckers or the social drama of Dirty Jobs and Undercover Boss, the viewers’ distance from the work is the final product. The work that these shows do is to stimulate the viewers’ interest in the labor process—an interest emerging from the increasingly common experience of humiliation and insecurity on the job—and then to redirect that interest elsewhere: essentially, to deflect it backward in time, to a (mainly fictitious) moment when hard work—particularly manual labor—was recognized and rewarded. Reality television stages, and reifies into commodity form, a utopia of work: a long-lost no-place in which capital has the qualities of labor, workers are invisible, bosses are heroes, and toil leaves a meaningful—often physical—impact on the world.

Inside the Reality Factory

In 2010, Undercover Boss was the lead-out program after the Super Bowl. The year before, that position had gone to another workplace show, The Office. The contrast between the two
is striking. Both are full of sentiment and melodrama, but it is the fictional entry, The Office, that develops its characters with far more depth and humanity than the reality show, by investing years of study into their lives, their relationships with their work, and with each other. The apparent paradox here is resolved by understanding the political economy of television production. The Office was a high-quality product, made painstakingly over long periods of time, with union labor; its conceit was that it was a documentary. Within the constraints of mass culture, short of actual documentary filmmaking, it was as deep an exploration of the workplace as one could hope for. If Mike Rowe or the makers of Coal really wanted to explore the lives of workers in dirty, dangerous, and unglamorous industries for television audiences, they would not be in the reality business at all. The genre’s economic basis is in its rapid turnover and low overhead; its material conditions forbid an actual human engagement with work or working-class people. Reality television achieves its purpose, and departs from scripted television, by foreshortening the process in which sentiment is turned into cash.

When the workers at Cobalt Coal voted for union representation after the show had been filmed, the company refused to bargain, laid everyone off, and contracted out operations.

In this way, the material process of making reality shows mirrors the dependent and precarious conditions of the work worlds it dramatizes and distorts. These programs mainly circumvent the various entertainment workers’ unions. They are typically much faster and cheaper to produce. As one editor active in the Writers’ Guild put it, “Reality is the Walmart of TV production. Networks pit production companies against each other and bid production budgets down so low that producers often feel that the added cost of union contracts would cost them, and their employees, their jobs.” The same forces that have eroded the quality, security, and availability of work across the labor market express themselves in the production of reality entertainment; the viewers’ own insecurity is reproduced in front of them in the form of the union-free show, made on the cheap.

As if seeking to clarify this contradiction—between proletarian rhetoric and precarious reality—the stars of these shows have aligned themselves politically with the power of the boss. When the workers at Cobalt Coal, a scene of televised blue-collar heroism and danger, voted for union representation in 2012 (after the show had been filmed), the company refused to bargain, laid everyone off, and contracted out operations. In what might be an even more brazen move, Mike Rowe of Dirty Jobs has recently become a spokesman for Walmart. In a voiceover for a Super Bowl ad in which the retail giant announced its intention to bring manufacturing back to America, Rowe speaks in the voice of a personified factory:

At one time, I made things. And I took pride in the things I made. And my belts whirred, and my engines cranked. I opened my doors to all, and together, we filled pallets and trucks. I was mighty. And then one day, the gears stopped turning. But I’m still here. And I believe I will rise again. We will build things, and build families, and build dreams. It’s time to get back to what America does best. Because work is a beautiful thing.

This is the company that is perhaps more singly responsible for the degradation of work than any other. Yet it stakes its brand on the slogan, “Work is a beautiful thing.” It is the same contradictory aesthetic embedded in the famous series of rousing, allegorical Chrysler Super Bowl commercials, which suggested that Detroit cars are the best on the market because of the city’s hard luck and Rustbelt grit: “It’s the hottest fires that make the hardest steel.” Even more explicit is the Levi’s ad set in the old steel town of Braddock, Pennsylvania titled “Go Forth to Work.” “A longtime ago things got broken here. People got sad and left,” says the child in the Levi’s voiceover. “Maybe the world breaks on purpose, so we can have work to do. People think there aren’t frontiers anymore.
They can’t see that frontiers are all around us.” It is a paean to creative destruction and capital mobility, costumed in overalls and spoken through a ventriloquized working class. Here the fetishism of commodities—the manner in which market exchange hides the labor congealed in the product—eats its own tail. In this new mode of salesmanship, the very appeal of the product (whether jeans, a car, or a television show) rests explicitly on the labor that it is advertised to contain—though this labor becomes distorted and mythologized in the process of going on display.

Traditional social realism sought to undo fetishization, to pull its audience closer in toward work and workers. It aimed to close the distance between audience and subject through a de-aestheticizing, grotesque style, full of bulging muscles and sweating brows. This amounted, as Michael Denning has argued, to a “laboring” of the culture, meant to force a political reckoning. The ersatz social realism of reality television, on the contrary, aestheticizes labor, polishing its appearance into a smooth and marketable commodity. If 1930s social realism worked like a splash of cold water, reality television presents a mirage.

Reality shows about consumption bait the viewer with a fantasy about objects they will never own, but they at least do not deal in such ripe nostalgia—there is little pretense of valorizing a heroic consumerist past. Reality shows about working, on the contrary, mock the universal instability of life under neoliberalism by disguising it in a tribute to labor’s past. This is what Dirty Jobs, Undercover Boss, Coal and the rest are doing. The true, if secret, subject of these shows is capital’s contempt for labor, and its attempt, through the culture industry, to rouse the working class to join it in an act of self-loathing. To mock the people the genre portrays while pretending to honor them is bad enough; to implicate the audience in that mockery by drawing on frustrated desire for honorable work is a particularly hideous form of exploitation. A dirty job, indeed.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author Biography
Gabriel Winant is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at Yale University. He is also an elected member of the Steering Committee of the Graduate Employees and Students Organization, UNITE HERE.