

British Art Talks podcast

Season 1, Episode 4: Alex Potts, Hard Times and Late Victorian Art

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Anna Reid: *British Art Talks*, from the Paul Mellon Centre, championing new ways of understanding British art, history, and culture.

I'm Anna Reid, Head of Research at the Paul Mellon Center. Welcome to Episode 4 of *British Art Talks*. In this episode, we're joined by Alex Potts, Max Loehr, Collegiate Professor of History of Art Emeritus, at the University of Michigan, and now resident in London. Alex's recent work includes *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making, Politics, and the Everyday in Postwar European and American Art*.

Hubert von Herkomer's 1885 *Hard Times* points to the conditions of migrant and insecure labour in the 19th century. It continues to strike a chord, partly because of its resonance with present-day concerns.

This talk explores Victorian representations of labour and proposes that they continue to inform artwork that examines the fabric of the modern world social environments.

Welcome, Alex Potts.

Alex Potts: Well, thanks, Anna. I'm glad to be contributing to the series you've been organising. The very term, 'hard times', carries strong associations for us with the social realism of Victorian Britain, and with the harsh conditions of working-class life and labour in the period. We may recall Charles Dickens picturing the bleak environments and stark social injustices created by the burgeoning factory system of the North in his novel *Hard Times*. Published in 1854, it came out at the moment when the impact of the new system of industrial manufacture on the social fabric of the country was becoming an acute source of public concern.

Narrator reading from *Hard Times*: "In the hardest part of Coketown; in the innermost fortification at the ugly citadel, where Nature was a strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had come into existence piecemeal, every piece in a violent hurry for some one man's purpose, and the whole an unnatural family, shouldering, and trampling, and pressing one another to death; in the last close nook of this great exhausted receiver, where the chimneys, for want of air to make a draught, were built in an immense variety of stunted and crooked shapes.

Among the multitude to Coketown, generically called, "the Hands" lived a certain Stephen Blackpool, 40 years of age. He was a good power-loom weaver. Stephen bent over his loom quiet, watchful, and steady. A special contrast, as every man was in the forest of looms where Stephen worked to the crashing, smashing, tearing piece of mechanism at which he laboured. The work went on until the noon bell rang."

Alex Potts: The images evoked in such writing of the degrading effects of long working days tied to the repetitive and exhausting factory labour and the devastated environment and living conditions to which industrial labourers and their families were subjected, have become ensconced in modern culture. They stand as pictures of rank exploitation and class inequality, from a past that subsequent modernization and social and political progress supposedly have left behind. Such hard, routine, and poorly remunerated labour on which society depends for its self-reproduction and material wealth and wellbeing may have changed in character, but it's not disappeared.

Well, for the most part, existing submerged and out of sight for the more comfortably off, crisis can force them into view. This happened recently with the fallout from the Coronavirus epidemic as it became apparent how workers carrying out essential tasks such as distribution and delivery of goods, operating public transport, and delivering health care, were having to stay at their ill-paid jobs and bear the brunt of exposure to infections. Images change, but underlying realities driven by calculations of profit and cost, the fruits of which few can share, do not.

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Images of modern industry of the kind found in Dickens, and which briefly featured in other Victorian novels of the period such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, occur very rarely in the visual arts. Until the very end of the 19th century, it is largely in depictions of the rural environment that one finds images of labouring and the conditions of the labouring poor. Social realist painters, such as Hubert von Herkomer, experimented with alternatives to the traditional scenes of rustic pictures that'd been the staple of paintings set in British countryside.

He began his career in the late 1860s and early 1870s, doing woodblock designs for illustrated magazines such as *The Graphic* noted for their extensive coverage of the period's social problems. These printed images received a considerably wider and less exclusively upper-middle-class audience than that attending the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibitions, where Herkomer showed his paintings.

His iconic work, *Hard Times*, dating from 1885 was deliberately named to recall Dickens' attempt to address key social problems of a period in his earlier novel of that title.

Anna Reid: An out-of-work labourer- a digger or navvy- stands at an empty roadside, camped there with his exhausted family collapsed on the ground; a woman, a baby, and a small boy of around five years catching a brief sleep. The unemployed tools of his trade, a pick and two shovels lie on the ground beside him while he and his wife, each hold on to bundles holding their meager belongings. The man gazes into the distance along a country lane empty of signs of life, except for a horse-drawn cart, and a couple of pedestrians barely visible in the very far distance, close by some partly obscured buildings, as if from another world of human activity and habitation.

The surrounding landscape, picturesque and atmospheric in its own way, is bare and desolate. The winter sky clouded over and beginning to darken. The man holds himself upright clutching his hat, but the immediate prospects are bleak, the times and the environment into which he has been thrown hard, lacking in warmth.

Alex Potts: The plight pictured here is not specifically rural. Likely as not, the man is a migrant labourer who has lost whatever job and temporary home he had and he's traversing the country in search of employment, probably at a building site or construction project, rather than a farm. There's no work to be had here, he will have to move on. For him, the countryside is not home or retreat, but an empty byway he has to traverse to reach centres of human activity that might be in need of the labour he can offer.

The difficulties facing him and his family are exacerbated by their homelessness. A very real problem for navvies who would often have to decamp from temporary accommodation once a building project came to an end, but he's not utterly destitute or impoverished. He just about maintains the self-possession of a labouring man who is out of work, but still capable of it and in search of gainful employment, however distant and unpromising the immediate prospects seem.

This is for us a characteristically Victorian image of the hardships endured by the labouring poor but it does nevertheless have a certain present-day resonance. We are becoming increasingly aware of the large numbers of migrant labourers being employed for temporary or seasonal work now that immigration restrictions

threaten to create economic and social disruption by severely curtailing the movement of so-called 'unskilled' foreign labour into the country.

Precarious conditions of employment and casual labour can no longer be seen as Victorian, but are increasingly widespread features of the present-day labour market. The hard times of working people in precarious employment both then and now, have to do not just with the labouring person's conditions of work, but also with the impact these have on family and personal life.

This too is dramatised in Victorian novels such as Dickens' *Hard Times*, and then after the period such as Herkomer's, as well as in present-day cinema such as Ken Loach's film on the gig economy. The Victorian period is one which brought such issues into focus largely because of radical changes in patterns of work brought about at the time by rapid industrialisation and increasingly capital-driven moves of production and employment.

The reverberations were felt not just in urban commerce and manufacture, but also in the rural economy. There developed a particularly rich and politically engaged body of thinking about modern forms of labour and conditions of working-class life. Labour was seen as playing a key role in generating material wealth. There was intensive discussion of how its management and exploitation was generating significant profits for those with capital to invest while resulting in impoverishment and deteriorating employment and living conditions for so many in the working classes.

A rethinking of the basics of political economy in light of these terms took place, not just amongst radical socialist and communist or anarchist thinkers, such as Karl Marx and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Consideration of the 'social problem' and 'the worker question' feature prominently in the standard text in English, on the operations of the modern economy and its social consequences published by the liberal thinker, John Stuart Mill in 1847. Marx's and Proudhon's writing, though, does stand out for its insight into the issues at stake in the period's concern with the labour and its changing formation in the new capitalist world of industrial and profit-orientated production.

Proudhon was an eloquent champion to work as the origin of the production of the goods on which society depended and a defining purpose of human existence. However, as he saw it, under the modern system of organising work based on rationalisation of the production process through division of labour, work had become inhuman and degrading. It was not the division of labour as such which was at fault, as he noted in the treaties published in 1849, but the form in which this was realised in the modern world.

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Anna Reid reading from *Wage Labour and Capital*: "The specification and composition of work into a set of separate processes maintains and fortifies the intelligence, provokes thought to innovation and progress, but how could a being who does nothing every day of its life, but reeling off thread, rubbing and polishing a piece of card, feeding a sheet into the cylinder of a printer, acquire inventive genius? How could his way of life be made ordered and sociable?"

The conduct of life perfects itself and is purified in accordance with the progress of intelligence, that is, with the development of industry, of the arts and sciences, and with the participation of all in the social project. Should I call workers those unfortunate beings of human form who spend their life at the bottom of a mine or in the infection of a workshop, endlessly repeating the same particle of work, their actions like the pestle of a mortar, the striking of a clock, and the hammer of a forge?"

Alex Potts: For Marx, labour had a similar double character. In his earlier writing, he spoke of labour in its most general sense as a combination of vital activity and free conscious activity, defining the species character of man. Actual labour, as realised under the conditions of modern capitalism, however, had lost this quality and become an abstracted, an alien activity for the worker performed solely in order to eke out the means to survive financially.

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I began this presentation with images taken from art and literature staging some of the concerns articulated by thinkers, such as Proudhon and Marx. The traffic between social analysis and political economy on the one hand and literary and artistic culture on the other hand, however, is far from simple and direct.

Art and literature are inevitably responsive in some way to broader social and political changes, but they do not simply illustrate a society's thinking about such matters. The new conditions of industrial manufacture and politics of class that play the key role in the period's social and political analysis are a quite rare and intermittent presence, even in novel writing. The British industrial novel was a brief phenomenon largely confined to the 1840s and 1850s. The classic novels of the period include very few that deal directly with the social environments of modern industry in the way that Émile Zola's *Germinal* or Dickens *Hard Times* did.

In visual art of the period, the images that eventually emerged of the material conditions of physical labouring and of working-class life featured mostly rural rather than urban or industrial scenes. This was not just a harking back to traditional ways of life being displaced by industrialisation and urbanisation. When scenes of farm enter the repertoire of artistic representation and Victorian culture, they did

so as defining images of labour. It was not until the end of the century that the visual iconography of modern industry began to take shape in the visual arts.

Herkomer's *Hard Times* might be interpreted by us more narrowly in the light of the rural poverty that became an issue with the agricultural depression that hit the UK in the last decades of the 19th century. Though, as we have seen, the labourer depicted was not necessarily seeking work on a farm. It succeeded as a painting, however, by staging for contemporaries, hardships suffered broadly by the large body of potentially homeless, out of work labourers suffering the consequences of precarious conditions of employment and changes in the economy over which they had no control.

The scenes of scything and harvesting that began to feature in art of the period were often quite complex, conveying as they did a sense of the harsh realities of hard labour at the same time, as a certain recognition of the coordinated exercise of vigorous bodily effort, such work required. These scenes functioned culturally as resonant images of the demanding labour to which working classes were subjected at the same time as realistically depicting forms of manual labour that still persisted in many parts of the countryside. Scenes of this kind were represented in a similarly gritty, social realist way by writers of the period, such as Hardy in his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Take, for example, this description of the heroine, Tess, and a fellow worker feeding sheaves of week into a threshing machine.

Narrator reading from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: "The unthreshed sheaves remaining untouched seemed countless still, notwithstanding the enormous numbers that have been gulped down by the insatiable swallower. From the West sky, a wrathful shine--all that mid-March could afford in the way of sunset--had burst forth after the cloudy day, flooding the sticky faces of the threshers and dyeing them with a coppery light. Panting ache ran through the growing rick of straw. The man who fed was weary, and Tess could see that the nape of his neck was covered with husks. She still stood at her post, her flushed and perspiring face coated with the corndust, her white bonnet embrowned by it.

She was the only woman who's place was on the machine so as to be shaken bodily by spinning and this incessant quivering in which every fibre of her body participated had thrown her into a stupefied reverie in which her arms worked on independently of her consciousness. By degrees, the freshest among them began to grow cadaverous saucer-eyed."

Alex Potts: Social realism in art is a complex phenomenon. It poses difficult and intriguing questions about the visibility of social problems in art and in culture more broadly. The images deployed often have an anchoring in the past, like the Victorian social realist paintings of more traditional forms of rural labour.

For a time in the earlier part of the last century, modern representations of the hard conditions of working-class life continue to rely on images of sooty townscapes and alienating and humanly degrading factory work of the kind dramatised by Victorians, such as Dickens in *Hard Times*. One finds particularly notable occurrences of such images in modern social realist photography, such as Lewis Hine's of child labour in American factories and Bill Brandt's of workers' living conditions in the industrial heartlands of the UK.

Work of this kind also drew heavily on the visual rhetoric of depictions of homelessness and deprivation in Victorian paintings, such as Herkomer's *Hard Times*. This was a moment, however, when the specifics of these environments, though not the larger reality realities they represented, were changing. Later on, starting in the mid 20th century moment of social democracy and into the present period of deregulated finance and consumerist orientated capitalism. Such scenes began to be thought of as representing a now totally outmoded industrial society along with its associated politics of class and labour.

Recent crises, however, most notably perhaps, the present-day pandemic and its economic and political fallout have exposed this as an illusion. Subjection to hard, demanding, badly paid labour is still the lot of significant portions of the population. Such labour continues to play a central role in the functioning society and in producing and making available society's material wealth for those who can afford it. The particular forms of such labouring have changed, not its persistence.

To appreciate the prevalence of its more egregious manifestations, we may need to look beyond factories to distribution warehouses, and delivery depots and to the often disregarded labour of cleaning and maintenance and providing healthcare. The fallout from modern organisation of labour and exploitation of the working classes with its reserved army of unemployed or underemployed trying to survive on the fringes of the system may not take the same form as in Victorian Britain, but the basic conditions envisioned in a painting such as *Hard Times* have hardly been superseded by the magic of capitalist modernisation.

We live in a world of radically uneven development where seemingly archaic cultural forms and ways of life persist alongside and in tension with newly computerised processes of production and ways of organising and exploiting manual labour. Images of the new forms of work resulting from technological innovation and modernised management may not necessarily displace or take precedence over long standing images of labour.

This is partly because inherited images continue to speak to ongoing realities. Sweated farm labour, for example, is widespread in crop harvesting that cannot be mechanised. There is a further point though: Well after entering public consciousness, recently emerging realities of labour often take time to coalesce into

culturally resonant motifs. Before then, inherited images will still play a significant role in artistic representation of the harsh conditions and ongoing significance of labouring in the present-day world.

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Anna Reid: Thanks, Alex, for your talk and for your powerful repositioning of these Victorian works, its resources, and its current conditions. You're reading of Herkomer's painting and other 19th century works offers us a way into thinking about how artists today are pointing to labour structures in similarly complex ways. I wanted to invite you to comment on further contemporary forms.

Alex Potts: That is an interesting question. I think for one thing what's new noticeable is there has been a turn to engagements with, and representations of labouring, and the life of the labourer. It's probably considerably less common in painting, but really a very pervasive feature of a lot of more significant recent photo work. Thinking of somebody who goes back a bit on this, somebody like Allan Sekula, I think played a huge role, unfortunately, recently deceased.

His analysis, for instance, of shipping, the invisible labouring of people working on these huge container ships in *Fish Story*, and his discussion of the historical and larger political circumstances of this kind of work, I think are very fine and they've received increasing recognition recently.

I think factories and the idea of factory work was really raised perhaps most explicitly by the German artist and filmmaker, Harun Farocki. He did a brilliant retake. He used the Lumière brothers' first film of workers leaving the factory as a basis for a video work on why in film, we only get views representations of workers leaving the factory rather than being in the factory.

There's also some amazing work, particularly from Asian artists, about the conditions of factory work. Most significantly I think, Cao Fei, who has had an exhibition at the Serpentine, unfortunately, closed before most people could get to see it. She really hits the scene with a film video, *Whose Utopia*, which shows our workers in a huge light bulb making factory, which cuts into several of these workers acting out their fantasies of what a good life might be.

There's one woman who fancies, who thinks of herself as realising herself as a ballerina, who then proceeds to perform as a ballerina, going up to the factory. I think it's that double edge there that isn't just talking about the auras of degradations of work. It gives to people working in these conditions a certain agency, a certain dignity and it takes into account their capacity to try to forge a position for themselves in the world. I think that's even true of Stephen in Dickens' *Hard Times*, there's an attempt on Dickens' part to show, how does somebody in

that position actually try to lead a life of some integrity even though conditions are not very favorable?

Anna Reid: You reference the broader art industry and institutions of the contemporary art world. I'm really interested in how there's a reflexivity and in many works that acknowledge the contemporary conditions in terms of the art industry's collusion with exploitative labour structures. I wondered if you could comment on that.

Alex Potts: I suppose it's interesting that a lot of the more 'political art' has to do with examination of institutional frameworks and how that shapes how we receive artworks. I think it's really in discussion though, that there is a lot of concern about to what extent does this political art, or this socially engaged art, actually have any real effect, given the fact, of course, that it's addressing, usually, a relatively restricted audience of people who are fairly like-minded to the opinions and positions being staked out into the work.

It's also something that I feel very strongly. There is a lot of work, really crappy work, that tries to hitch itself to some significance by playing upon social problems: migrants, so many people put migrants at the centre of a picture. I really think that someday like Ai Weiwei is a deeply corrupt and complicit artist who is making a show of this concern, which he knows will speak to people who are concerned with human rights.

I think there's one last issue. I think a lot of the more engaged artists will not say that their work necessarily has an immediate effect. You put it out there, hope that it does shift things. I think it really helps people to negotiate and think about issues. I think this kind of artist, perhaps almost more significant as being symptomatic of the concerns people have than actually playing a direct polemical role in bringing about social change.

This holds as much for film as it does for the visual arts. There are filmmakers like Ken Loach who clearly are guided by a mission, but I think the work is significant because it also works very well as film. They're finely made and very serious films. He's not trying to hitch concerns onto a sort of not terribly artistically well thought through way of presenting things. That I think is a sort of dilemma. To do good work, they have to be committed to producing interesting and significant art.

Anna Reid: To take you back to this idea that artists, and others, of course, would potentially make images that are exploitative or profiting from perhaps poverty or challenged conditions, is that something that's new? Is that something that we also see in Victorian art?

Alex Potts: Yes, very much so. There are those images of sort of a hopeless and painful child poverty which tickle the heart, rouse tears and pity. The trouble is as soon as an image becomes established as a prototype, they just kind of guarantee to have a certain kind of effect or popularity with an audience, it's open to exploitation. I suppose a lot of work, a lot of quite good work may not be totally innocent of that. This comes back to the fact that it does depend upon how the viewer takes it up.

You could in the Victorian period, have a really cheesy exploitative seeming image of child poverty but it might for some reason feature in a major social campaign as an iconic image. What matters is the take up, over which an artist has no control. So, exploitation is woven-- It's not something that you say it's just the artist seeking to exploit a kind of subject matter-- The exploitation is woven into the whole way a work is presented, and perceived, and consumed.

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Anna Reid: Thank you to Emeritus Professor, Alex Potts.

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Hard Times by Hubert Von Herkomer described in this episode of *British Art Talks* can be viewed online at the Paul Mellon Centre website. You can also find previous episodes of the PMCs summer program of virtual events at paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk. Join us for our next podcast episode, exploring London's art scene in the 1960s with PMC director, Mark Hallett in conversation with Lisa Tickner. Thank you for listening.

Narrator: The extracts were read by Jim Johnson.

Hard Times in the 19th century is produced by Alexandra Quinn and Freya Hellier. It is a Loftus Media production.

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