

Review Article

Twenty-four Hours at Work: A Filmic Survey of Transportation Corridors in Europe

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The deregulation policies implemented in the United States and the European Union in the early 1980s brought forth a significant rise in employment in the field of logistics, but at the same time, they contributed to the deterioration of work conditions in the industry – a paradoxical situation, largely invisible in the age of online shopping. In recent years, a number of cinematographers showed interest in this type of work, depicting it in documentaries like *Forgotten Space* (Noël Burch and Allan Sekula, 2010), *Boatmen* (Dirk Rijneke, 2012), *A Modern Odyssey* (Davide Monteleone, 2012), *Exotica, Erotica, Etc.* (Evangelia Kranioti, 2015), *The Weight of Dreams* (Francesco Mattuzzi, 2016), *Freightened: The Real Price of Shipping* (Denis Delestrac, 2016) and *Watna* (Lorenzo Casali, Micol Roubini, 2018). While clearly not a direct form of experiencing someone else's work, the documentary offers a way of exploring the complexity of an activity that might otherwise pass unobserved since it doesn't happen in an assigned space and according to an established schedule. Referring to one of these films, *The Weight of Dreams*, this review analyses the implications of the deregulation policies over work conditions, focusing on the relation between workers and space.

The Weight of Dreams is the result of five years of field research conducted by director Francesco Mattuzzi who started with the intention of mapping the road freight transport that supports consumption in Europe. Francesco Mattuzzi discovered an entire 'itinerant city' populated by five million truck

drivers.¹ In the end, he selected the case of two drivers, husband and wife, who share the same truck – perhaps an exception, but at the same time, an extreme response to the ever-increasing demands for efficiency in the field of logistics. The film is more than a portrayal of work in logistics; it gives an insight into a lifestyle constantly on the move, yet confined to the limits of a minimal space. [Fig. 1]

The days of the fat contract are over²

The lifestyle depicted in the film reflects a situation that has its roots in the process of removing and reducing regulations in the transportation industry starting in the United States at the end of the 1970s. In his book *Il posto dei calzini* (The place for the socks), Swiss economist Christian Marazzi stresses that transportation is the economic sector that best embodies the logic of the deregulation policies of just-in-time production. In his view, this was achieved through measures such as the development of a network of companies external to production, the maximisation of working time in order to reduce initial investments, and the recruitment of flexible labour power.³ He points out the effects of the shift towards a more flexible production by comparing the consequences of two strikes that took place in 1979⁴ and 1994 respectively, both organised by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) in the United States. In April 1979, after an unexpected collapse in negotiations over a new three-year contract, three hundred thousand truck drivers went on strike – roughly

90 percent of the IBT's members – paralysing the entire economy of the country. Conversely, the strike in 1994 involved only seventy-five thousand workers (15 percent of the IBT's members) causing no major interruptions in the delivery of goods.⁵ 'The company had selected alternative carriers as backups for the small percentage of our carriers who are Teamsters', revealed a Walmart spokeswoman when asked how the 1994 strike affected the company.⁶

The 1979 strike coincided with the beginning of the end for the regulatory period in the history of the trucking industry in the United States. Alfred E. Kahn, the 'father of deregulation' and chairman of the Council on Wage and Price Stability, convinced President Jimmy Carter that giving in to the Teamsters' demands would affect the anti-inflation programme the administration had initiated at the beginning of 1978 to fight against the effects of the 1973 oil crisis.⁷ 'Within the course of a year, I expect definite movement toward deregulation of trucking and more thorough deregulation of the railroads', prophesied Kahn at the American Executive Institute.⁸ In 1980, President Carter signed the Motor Carrier Act, largely lifting restrictions on entering the market, setting rates, deciding what goods can be transported and what routes must be followed.⁹ As expected, the price of packaged consumer goods dropped. But this came at the expense of the employees in the trucking industry. Only five years after the Motor Carrier Act, the number of unionised truckers had halved from approximately 60 percent of the total trucking force in the late 1970s to 28 percent in 1985 as a result of the increasing number of non-unionised carriers registered with the Interstate Commerce Commission.¹⁰ This translated in diminished bargaining power, which subsequently meant lower wages for employees in the entire industry. Between 1978 and 1990, unionised workers' wages dropped by 28.6 percent while non-unionised workers saw their pay cut by as much as 50 percent.¹¹

In the European Union, the deregulation of the transportation sector happened later than in the United States and more gradually. The first step was taken by the Council of Transport Ministers which decided, on 14 November 1985, to establish a free transportation market by 1992. Free cabotage, however, was only reached in 1998. As a consequence, road transportation became cheaper, coming to be the most efficient form of transportation in the European Union (approximately three-quarters of freight is transported by truck). Similar to the United States, this entailed lower wages and more precarious working conditions for employees.¹²

In the contemporary globalised and liberalised European transportation market where the unions' voices have significantly quieted down, the employee is much more vulnerable. That is the picture that Francesco Mattuzzi sketches in *The Weight of Dreams*. The two protagonists, Alfredo and Latifa, switch from one trucking company to another in search of an employer who doesn't demand impossible working hours and offers a decent salary. Unlike the days when union leaders sat firmly at the negotiating table with their employers, the two negotiate their conditions over the phone, during working hours and without the mediation of a third party, from a clearly unequal position.

Life in four square meters

For most of its part, *The Weight of Dreams* is set in the cabin of the truck that Alfredo and Latifa drive. In fact, several truck cabins feature in the film, but this is hardly noticeable since the standardised design leaves little room for variation. The two drive a type of truck called a cab-over, where the driver's seat is located over the engine, resulting in a vertical front. This configuration became ubiquitous in Europe as a result of European Union regulations on truck length and weight, introduced so that no operator benefits from undue advantages over competitors from other member states. Within the limited truck length imposed by Directive 96/53, the cab-over

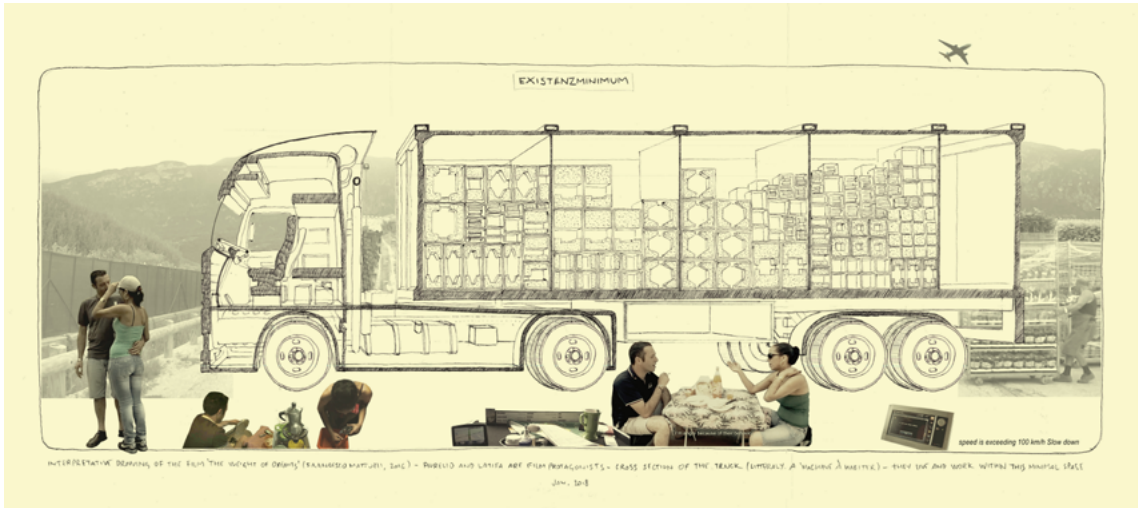


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4a



Fig. 4b

Fig. 1: The truck cabin is an all-in-one living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, while the parking lot serves a place for recreation and socialising. Collage *Existenzminimum* by Alex Retegan and Renzo Sgolacchia.

Fig. 2–4: *The Weight of Dreams* (Francesco Mattuzzi, 2016), digital frames. Courtesy of the director.

truck allows for more stock than the long-nose truck, where the driver sits behind the engine – a type especially popular in the United States, which regulates only the length of the trailer. Due to the demand to maximise stock, the design of cab-over truck aimed at reducing the dimensions of the cabin as much as possible. As a result, most cabins in Europe measure 2.35 metres in length, enough to fit a sleeper berth of approximately eighty by two hundred centimetres. In this space that barely accommodates one person, the film's two protagonists often share the bed.

To understand the two drivers' routine, the director recorded hundreds of hours of footage, at first accompanying them during their journeys and later leaving them the camera with clear instructions on where to place it in the cabin. The opening scene is shot at night and shows Latifa engaged in an erotic dance standing on the passenger seat while Alfredo is driving. The joy the couple displays gives the impression that they live a free and happy life. This, however, is quickly spoiled by Latifa's words: 'My total dream is having a normal life... yes, living like normal people... having a child.' The reality of their life is revealed in the following scene where Latifa wakes up early the next morning in the uncomfortable-looking sleeper berth. We see her brushing her teeth using a water bottle and a plastic basin in a simulacrum of a bathroom. [Fig. 2] Her husband wakes up a few hours later with coffee waiting for him, prepared by Latifa on a camp stove – the truck cabin has become a kitchen.

The truck cabin is more than Alfredo and Latifa's workplace; it is an all-in-one workplace, living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. Caught between meeting ever-more-demanding delivery deadlines and complying with European speed limits (according to Francesco Mattuzzi, for every two thousand kilometres, drivers can afford to 'waste' fifteen minutes at most, while maintaining a maximum speed of ninety kilometres per hour),

the two take turns driving, carrying out their morning ablutions, cooking, and occasionally entertaining each other in the four square metres of the cabin. Their life appears to unroll independent of the circadian cycle. They have a meal with other drivers at night while waiting to board the ferry at Igoumenitsa, they drive at night and sleep during the day. In fact the film takes place almost entirely at night. Indeed, extended night work and working irregular hours are common practices in the transport industry, as a study by the European Commission reveals, despite the regulation of working hours by the European Union.¹³ Regulation 561/2006 states that the daily rest period must be at least eleven hours, or nine hours for a maximum of three days a week. Alternatively, daily rest can be split into periods of three and nine hours. More often than not, the exceptions seem to be the rule, as the film shows. Or even worse: while complaining about the unfairness of the employer, Alfredo confesses that he had been asked to manipulate the tachograph and carry on driving during rest hours.

The moments when the couple can enjoy an escape from their routine are the mandatory stops for loading and unloading merchandise, refuelling, and passing through customs. It is then that they can meet other people, usually other drivers, have lunch or dinner seated at a table or even play hide-and-seek between parked vehicles. The parking lot, the gas station and the customs office are not just places where the flows of goods temporarily come to a standstill but also places of interaction and socialising for people working in logistics. Recreation, which in the days of large unions took place in clearly-defined places such as the canteen and the worker's club at precise moments of the day, now happens in appropriated spaces whenever possible. [Fig. 3]

The shift from an organised and collective form of entertainment to an improvised and individual one coincided with a shift in the way workers in

the field of logistics are controlled. During the time of the large unions, the unity of workers undoubtedly represented a force that employers needed to listen to. The fact that all employees shared the same interest and enjoyed the same forms of entertainment also meant their behaviour was easier to anticipate and therefore to control. Bread and circuses was the way to keep the masses happy. After the fragmentation of the unions the power of workers arguably diminished, but the ways to control them also had to become more complex. Technology substituted politics. As *The Weight of Dreams* shows, the truck's cabin is constantly monitored by the shipping company's command centre. Through the satellite navigation system, the truck's position is checked against the previously defined trajectory, while sensors monitor fuel consumption and speed. Alarms signal when the driver exceeds the speed limit and when a window is opened (meaning more fuel is needed to maintain the cruising speed), contributing to a neurotic atmosphere of surveillance. Thus the employee's performance is always under the company's scrutiny, a fact that weighs considerably when (re) negotiating a contract.

The Weight of Dreams shows that work in the field of logistics is a struggle between the desire for an efficient movement of goods and the desires of the humans who move the goods. [Fig. 4a, 4b] This translates in an ambivalent use of the common space, which on the one hand is planned for movement, but on the other is appropriated by users with the illusion of a sedentary life. The more the film's two protagonists are consumed by what they hope is a temporary condition that will eventually enable them to lead a stable life, the more it seems they cannot escape this condition: 'Do you think that if you quit as a truck driver you could work as construction worker?' Latifa asks her husband. Alfredo jokingly avoids the answer. Eventually, the couple succumbs to the need for privacy, indicating

that their partnership has little chance to survive: 'It's impossible to understand each other when you are in such close contact, inside a truck cockpit ... it splits you apart and separates one from the other,' laments Latifa after having an argument with her husband.

Notes

1. Interview with Francesco Mattuzzi, 11 October 2017.
2. A spokesman of the Council on Wage and Price Stability quoted in 'If the Teamsters Strike, Blame Kahn', *The Executive Intelligence Review*, 3–9 April 1979, <http://larouchepub.com>.
3. Christian Marazzi, *Il posto dei calzini. La svolta linguistica dell'economia e i suoi effetti nella politica* (Belinzona: Edizioni Casagrande SA, 1994), 47. This book is translated in English as *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).
4. *Il posto dei calzini* incorrectly states that the strike took place in 1989.
5. Helen Dewar, 'Teamsters Order Selective Strikes Against Trucking Firms', *The Washington Post*, 1 April 1979, <https://washingtonpost.com>.
6. Jesus Sanchez, 'Teamsters Strike Shuts Down 22 Trucking Firm', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 April 1994, <http://articles.latimes.com>.
7. 'If the Teamsters Strike, Blame Kahn', *The Executive Intelligence Review*, 3–9 April 1979, <http://larouchepub.com>.
8. 'On Carter's Anti-Inflation Policy', *The American*, 5 February 1979, <http://aei.org>.
9. The deregulation process in the United States was completed in 1994 when President Clinton signed the Trucking Industry Regulatory Reform Act, which eliminated the requirement that freight rates be subject to approval from the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC). See Trucking Industry Regulatory Reform Act of 1994, Pub. L. No. 103-311, 108 Stat. 1673
10. Ibid.
11. Michael H. Belzer, 'Collective Bargaining after

- Deregulation: Do the Teamsters Still Count?' in *Industrial and Labor Review* 38 no. 4 (July 1995): 653.
12. OECD, *Liberalisation and Structural Reform in the Freight Transport Sector in Europe* (Paris: OECD, 1997), 15–16
 13. SafetyNet, *Fatigue* (2009), <https://ec.europa.eu>.

Biographies

Renzo Sgolacchia is an Italian architect active in Rotterdam. He is the founder of Cinema Architecture, a project combining research and film screenings, which investigates architectural space through cinema. He graduated *cum laude* from the Faculty of Architecture of Roma Tre University in 2010. He is currently curating the new programme of Cinema Architecture 2017–18 called *Itinerant Movies*, focusing on films shot entirely in a vehicle.

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