

ANARCHY AND OLD LACE: the worlding of the working-class in Calais

This text is first a story, and secondarily a cognitive and political inquiry. The topic is Calais lace, from its illegal import by English labour migrants in the early 19th century, through its customary transmission, to its galvanising effect in the industrial-era workers' struggle. In Calaisien memory, lace is simultaneously object, industry, lifeblood. Its realisation raised this small port town to, ostensibly, lace-making capital of the world by the 1950s, and is thus variously memorialised and mythologised in their culture.

The following discussion draws from fields of labour process theory and body studies as well as art and literary theory in order to probe the potency of lace-work to a community identity. This historic narrative begins with the success story of the first lace immigrants, their integration, empowerment and succession, before considering the embodied experiences and dynamics of their work and protest. At its apotheosis, *la dentelle*¹ was impressed, as icon, above the entrance to the grand auditorium of the Bourse du Travail,² facing out through towering windowpanes onto a once thriving market square. This art-deco monument stands in testament to the prevalence of anarcho-syndicalism in France at the turn of the 19th century, an ideology rooted in worker direct democracy, and whose optimistic vision merits revisiting in the context of current democratic, humanitarian and environmental maladies.

LEAVERS

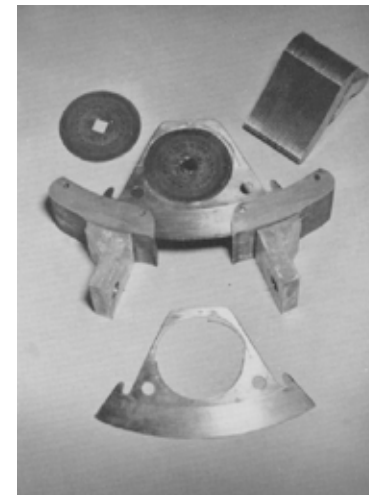
Leavers: the workers of the leading tulle town Nottingham who from 1815 packed their bags and crossed the border to Calais. These leavers brought with them their machines and know-how. Some were perhaps from the radical faction of Luddites whose frame-breaking protests against unfair machine rents and wages between 1811 and 1816 became notorious. Others simply couldn't find stable work in this oversaturated, precarious industry, and saw potential in bypassing the French import tariff. This stream of workers continued steadily for fifty years, despite the fact that the emigration of artisans and the export of machinery was explicitly prohibited until 1824 and 1843 respectively.³ Characterised as traitors by the Nottingham unionists,⁴ these

¹ Translates to "The Lace"

² Translates to "Labour Exchange" or "Labour Council." Originally employment offices, the Bourses became Houses for the People, hosting the congregation of unions in large towns and cities, built between 1887 – the mid 20th century.

³ Fabrice Bensimon, "The Emigration of British Lacemakers to Continental Europe (1816–1860s)," *Continuity and Change* 34, no. 1 (May 2019): 20.

⁴ Rosie Wileman, "'Little Nottingham Beyond the Seas': Were the early Nottinghamshire lacemakers in Calais Smugglers and Spies or



migrants risked their lives making the journey with no guarantee of success on the other side.

Leavers: the name of the lace machines smuggled to Calais that competed with 200,000 women of Normandy and Le Puy for fifty years before their craft culture was made obsolete.⁵ Sold by merchants to Europe's elite, lace had been the ultimate status symbol since the 17th century. Originally hand-crafted, it was an incredibly valuable and political commodity. The British designed Leavers machine combined several inventions to make a near perfect imitation of hand lace, the Bobbinet machine that made tulle in a light hexagonal mesh, and the Jacquard punched card system which could program complex motifs in the tulle.

One morning in 1815, the first lace manufacturer landed at Calais' fortified shores, still a difficult task at the end of the Napoleonic wars. Smuggled in parts from various places on the English coast by French sailors, he set up his Leavers loom in a small house near the canal.⁶ Though no parcel had crossed the channel legally since 1803,⁷ smuggling had played a central role in the Channel economy, a mutually beneficial system for British smugglers and escaping French POWs.⁸ Tooled with contraband technology both material and mental, the enterprising lace immigrants had to operate secretly at first, but were gradually given permission to establish their domicile.⁹ The small town of Calais, shrunken against its fortifications, built on poor soil and of meagre industrial progress, grew with its English population, already by 1821, 50 or so English men were working almost as many machines, with around 200 family members employed in the lace auxiliary processes.¹⁰

There seems to have been a pervasive sense of having made it to better shores, away from the troubles of Nottingham, able to start afresh in land yet-to-be conquered by lace. This turning point was an event that sent ripples into the future, to a present in which their landing is mythologised in a potent story of risk and reward that could be internalised by successive generations of lace-workers. As the Nottingham lace industry declined, it specialised in the production of machine parts or *carcasses* and *insides* for the Calais manufacturers, though this export remained illegal for some time. These parts were compact and could be smuggled on the person of a traveller before being compiled and re-assembled on the other side of the channel,¹¹ a process that could take several months.

Entrepreneurial Europeans?" (CAS diss., University of Nottingham, 1997), 3.

⁵ Bensimon, "The Emigration," 26.

⁶ Martine Fosse et al, *Galerie des collections* (Calais: La Cité de la Dentelle et de la Mode, 2010), 52.

⁷ Wileman, "Little Normandy," 14.

⁸ Ibid, 28-29.

⁹ Ibid, 25-26.

¹⁰ Ibid, 23.

¹¹ Ibid, 28.

As these machines were so expensive¹² they were often rented, bought on credit, or second-hand. Leading to a culture of small businessmen who'd often started as machine operators or mechanics.¹³ In its advent, the lace industry inhabited predominantly marginal, often domestic space, in attics and cellars, even stables and kitchens.¹⁴ However, when in 1821 the mayor of Calais prohibited the operation of their noisy machines at night,¹⁵ the lace-makers again packed up and reassembled, this time to the suburb of Saint-Pierre, from little houses into larger factories built to contain several small businesses. Here, the precedence of the machine became apparent. To accommodate still growing machine lengths, up to 4.5m, Calaisiens constructed unique *boîtes vitrées*, bow windows that leant out on an elbow to the street.



4 On a looping video in the museum, operatives handle the innards of the Leavers, replacing a carriage or easing a stuck dropper, and between their fingers and the machines, a liminal film of grease. Yet, off the beam, the tug of white lace is traced and timed by the touch of their hand. Along the line, the material is washed, bleached and repaired by the women whose keen eyes quickly spot a mis-stitched motif, every spoil or trace of its intimate handling is purged.

Anthropologist Noël Jouenne describes lace as a paradox: “on one side we find misery, dirt, toil, and on the other hand fashion, beauty, elegance, wealth, idleness.”¹⁶ On the side of the dirty work, the reign of the machine coats the world in dark graphite: this lubricant turned the gears and got on walls, floors and fingers. In modern lace manufacture Opalon® is used, for though it has toxic properties and prevents workers from washing hands or smoking, it keeps the lace white.¹⁷ Traditionally, the supreme whiteness of lace was associated with high status; painters like van Dyck refined their intricate painting of this fabric, and would use only the whitest paint for it.¹⁸ In Calais, the machine spilled its lifeblood, marking its site and propagating in scope, imprinting in lace-workers’ skin a reminder of their work, and distinguishing their body as active, toiling and transmitting rather than indulgent or constrained.

When in 1843 machinery export became legal, the number of Leavers machines in Calais was already in the thousands,¹⁹ constituting a significant additional population that began to reorganise the town. For Calais, the machine became spectacle at the centre of the universe. Following Debord, “In the spectacle, one part of the world represents itself before the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is nothing more

¹² Between £17k-£85k in present currency

¹³ Bensimon, “The Emigration,” 18.

¹⁴ Ibid, 18.

¹⁵ Wileman, “Little Nottingham,” 25.

¹⁶ Noël Jouenne, “Force et fragilité de l’industrie dentellière,” in *Et la dentelle ? L’industrie d’une ville : Calais*, 1-38 (Marval: Musée des beaux-arts et de la dentelle de Calais, 2002), 3.

¹⁷ Ibid, 17.

¹⁸ Annabel Talbot, “The Personal Is Political,” *Selvedge* 58 (2014): 32.

¹⁹ Bensimon, “The Emigration,” 25.

than the common language of this separation.”²⁰ We can look at the ordering presence of the Leavers machines as uniting its workforce as other to its spectacle.

PEETERS ET PERRIN L'industrie s'en vont



5

Spectacle features in the story of a child who is transfixed by the sound of the machines spinning on his walk to school, anxious to peer in, visit the work of his father or take him his dinner just to get a glimpse.²¹ Or in the marks of a pattern drawing from the archives, inflected by the vibration of the factory floor above, through the timber joists, down the brick walls, the tabletop and through the pencil.²² The town is remembered as living to the rhythm of its looms,²³ the ambient noise and vibrations animating the inanimate inhabitants of neighbouring buildings. This interruption to daily life reassured Calaisiens that there was work, the sound of the machines broadcast its anthem to inhabitants of a laborious city.²⁴ Brick skins shaking, the town is itself a machine park; the machine metonymically envelops the factory.

COMPARTMENTS

The removal of machines from domestic space didn't prevent the domestic from encroaching on the industrial: it was common in the early years for factory owners to live on the premises, or to include dormitory-style lodging²⁵ for newly arrived workers.²⁶ Later liberated from work, the home then became its site of transmission.²⁷ When lace is in the blood,²⁸ blurred lines of private and public between home and workplace perhaps make it difficult to compartmentalise or organise values in a conventional way. From a personal collection, a grainy photograph shows the study of Edmond Peeters, of Peeters and Perrin Jr, which during the war was re-installed in the ground floor of the Boulart factory along with the rest of his furniture and possessions after his home was bombed. The imposition of this domestic scene, all lampshades, cabinet detailing and ornamental pieces seems absurdly intimate among the Leavers machines, or perhaps the domestic never left work at all.



6



7

²⁰ Debord in Susan Stewart, *On longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 84.

²¹ Jouenne, “Force,” 36.

²² Stéphane Lembré and Audrey Millet, “The sound of design. Listening to the factory, between production and conservation,” *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 48 (2014): 168.

²³ Florence Quille, “La dentelle de Calais, menacée, tente sa chance au musée,” *La Croix*, 16 August 2009, <https://www.la-croix.com/Culture/Actualite/La-dentelle-de-Calais-menacee-tente-sa-chance-au-musee- NG -2009-08-16-538256>.

²⁴ Jouenne, “Force,” 28.

²⁵ Wileman, “Little Nottingham,” 38.

²⁶ Bosses still sought skilled workers from Nottingham, even placing ads in their newspapers.

²⁷ An old Calaisien adage says it takes three generations to make a business, the first learns the machine, the second forms a workshop, the third makes it a business.

²⁸ Calaisiens speak of being born into lace, or learning it from a sibling or parent. Many of these stories involve youths helping out a relation sometimes for free, and often framed as an example of initiative taking.



Steam power led to larger structures for more machines, and by the 1870s the lace industry of Saint-Pierre was divided into thirty-eight grand factories, of which no trace remains.²⁹ Factories were often U-shaped, from the inner courtyard the boiler room provided a driving force for the entire operation via a series of pulleys. The ground floor contained preparation activities like the bobbin-winding, as well as small show rooms and offices, while the Leavers were stationed between cast iron columns laterally on the first floor. Their length caused congestion issues, forcing the circulation onto outside walkways from where each entrance opened onto a machine bay or compartment like on a train. Workers could ascend and descend via the *tourelle*, a turret-like feature that also acted a vantage point. The upper levels were devoted to dyeing and drying processes, involving huge vats of water and racks as wide as roads to dry out the lace. The once sparse district of Saint-Pierre was drastically scaled-up, both concretely and in the abstract terms of an industrial capitalist exchange economy, where the notion of the gigantic is translated from pastoral sublime to a social world of production.³⁰

The cohabitation of businesses led to the cautious partitioning of factories in order to prevent industrial espionage. Should a pattern, which took months to develop, be copied, news of a counterfeit would send shock through the city.³¹ The cellular organisation of spaces regimented access in order to prevent conflict.³² Suspicion was often directed at the English workers, who visited Nottingham as regularly as the nearest post town,³³ and were laden with letters when they returned.³⁴ As well as being suspected spies, the English population of Saint-Pierre experienced volatile, occasionally hostile relationships with native Calaisiens, who were sometimes swayed by the anti-British sentiment that lingered after years of warfare. This manifested in instances of rioting, xenophobia and motions to remove English workers, a 19th century version of a familiar French jobs for French workers rhetoric.³⁵ Aided by various collective public gestures to win friendship from the French, the English immigrants slowly integrated, evidenced by the popularity of their sports and participation in cultural events.³⁶

INSIDES

A rare sight, on Quai Gustave Lamarle stands a lace factory whose innards are intact, still bearing imprints of the bodies that once inhabited it. The worker's body has great significance for the Foucauldian turn in labour process

²⁹ Philippe Cassez of Amis du Vieux Calais, "L'usine Peeters et Perrin: Souvenirs de Jean Peeters." *Bulletin historique et artistique du Calaisis* 191 (May 2011): 55.

³⁰ Stewart, *On longing*, 80.

³¹ Jouenne, "Force," 19.

³² Quille, "La dentelle."

³³ Wileman, "Little Nottingham," 39.

³⁴ Bensimon, "The Emigration," 26.

³⁵ Ibid, 31.

³⁶ Ibid, 30.



theory, which relates Taylorist scientific management techniques to Foucault's concept of biopower and its modern age invention of a "new political anatomy".³⁷ The disciplinary gaze of the employer³⁸ assesses and subjugates the body's potential for production and deviance. Under Taylorism, the docile body is moulded to be more compliant and efficient, rationalised to extent that it becomes like a limb of the machine.³⁹ The conditions and conditioning of this context are illustrated in the story of a Calaisien woman, Francine, who worked in a lace finishing shop in the 60s. She describes physical exertion "we turned the crank, there was no engine," eating lunch on the job, and the "watchful eye of the submistress." Despite all this, she emphasises the joy of working, mastering her tools and camaraderie of the workers.⁴⁰

In order to question the docility of the lace-worker, we invoke two concepts, Merleau-Ponty's *body schema*, an individual's sense of temporal and spatial bodily location, and Bourdieu's notion of embodied *habitus* which considers industrial bodies in the context of class and social relation, autonomous of their work situation even while immersed in it. Foucault believed the subject was made ultimately passive by imposed technologies of power,⁴¹ but we regard this as reductive. Sociologist Douglas Ezzy suggests that workers' subjectivity can be better understood by including their use of "material and symbolic resources"⁴² to resolve their experience and existence.

In the boiler house, the stokers load the coal, engines roaring, gates slamming. Needles flicker. Pencils trace and turn in panelled offices adjacent. Design papers rustle. The draughtsman lays the grid and counts in stretch, the pattern perforators turns coloured lines to numbered boxes.

Bruno Depriester is the last card-puncher of Calais. He demonstrates, his eyes reading the code, in his mind translating it to punches, pressing the keys with his fingers to make the hammers fall, and working the pedals with his feet. Card punchers were the piano-men of Calais, rhythmic and dexterous. Described in literature with great admiration, they produced the 200-800 cards needed for a pattern. Using both hands, he steadily transcribes two streams of information in perfect unison. The cards are then sewn together, checked and installed into the loom.



Warpers lay the gridlines in thread; they are concerned with perfect tension. The beamers ready the gimp and broderie threads that make the motif. Thrown and twisted, the yarns are transferred to reels. These workers read the fragility, the

³⁷ Foucault in Carol Wolkowitz, *Bodies at Work* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 57.

³⁸ In Calais this is manifested in the surveillance architecture of the *tourelle*.

³⁹ Wolkowitz, *Bodies at Work*, 58.

⁴⁰ Jouenne, "Force," 28-29.

⁴¹ Douglas Ezzy, "Subjectivity and the Labour Process: Conceptualising 'Good Work,'" *Sociology* 31, no. 3 (1 August 1997): 430.

⁴² Knights in Ezzy, "Subjectivity," 430.

character and quirks of the thread; balance finders, tightrope walkers. They know how to wind for each speed, how to teach threads not to cross or break. The fabric is in the future, but these operatives know they lay its foundations.

Still upstream of the machine, the wheeleuse winds the brass bobbins which, along with their carriages, symbolise the Leavers. One hundred metres of thread makes a good bobbin, but first she threads them as a set of twenty, working to their millimetre spacing, estimating, slotting them in. Then she winds them up from the drum and again, until the machine's four thousand are done. As she makes her swift and precise motions, she expresses her responsibility to the downstream, to the twisthand.

The bobbin presser stacks and compresses, heats and cools, all bobbins made equal. The inspector checks, the fitter removes and reassembles as the thread runs short. The twisthand, the tullist, the prince of lace devotedly tends the machine; the mechanic mends.

Downstream comes the lace, racked and eyed, touched and chalked for its flaws. The raccomodeuses, women do the repair-work. Motifs are meticulously re-made or mended using hand and foot guided embroidery machines, then bundled and unrolled, to be clipped, scalloped and colour treated all guided by hands, all to the millimetre, to the forensic scale and substance of the epidermal ridges of a fingertip.

In his early work, Marx wrote that labour could be liberated through creative, self-expressive and conscious activity.⁴³

Further, that work engagement that appears docile may actually derive from the embodied skill and agency of the worker.⁴⁴ The drive to motivate our labour can be seen as a key resource of our narrativizing instinct; Ezzy invokes the psychological concept of *narrative identity*, a story of self that is directional, as well as evaluating and reflexive.⁴⁵ Here, the *body schema* provides a tangible present, and the *habitus* a background of cultural and social discourse that informs direction.

Lace-workers originally worked long shifts of up to 14 hours of repetitive labour. "A lifetime to do the same lace, does not it lock in a serene routine?"⁴⁶ one Calaisien reflects on working alongside his father. Though the clock is often regarded as a supreme force of the industrial era,⁴⁷ these workers moved to the rhythm of their different machines, a pace determined by material: the resistance of cardboard to a metal hammer, the strength of a silk thread, the molecular oxidation of bleach in fibres, all these in concert with their

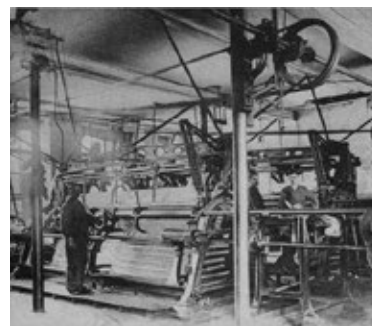
⁴³ Ezzy, "Subjectivity," 437.

⁴⁴ Wolkowitz, *Bodies at Work*, 62.

⁴⁵ Ezzy, "Subjectivity," 440.

⁴⁶ Jouenne, "Force," 28.

⁴⁷ Chris Shilling, "Working Bodies' in *Theory, Culture & Society: The body in culture, technology and society* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005), 80.



12



14

own bodies. The scale of the tool provided a distinct temporal experience for the worker. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart refers to a study in which subjects were asked to imagine themselves undertaking activities within architectural models of three miniaturised scales for what they perceived to be thirty minutes. The results showed that temporal experience was miniaturised with the object, at half the size, the same amount of time seemed to elapse twice as fast. Stewart theorises,

"This compressed time of interiority tends to hypostatize the interiority of the subject that consumes it in that it marks the invention of "private time." In other words, miniature time transcends the duration of everyday life in such a way as to create an interior temporality of the subject."⁴⁸

At the workstation there is an embedded, private compartment that is activated and informed by the size and rhythm of the tool in relation to the body. From this cognitive division, the *body schema* initiates outward links from body to world; the fallible frailty of the body drives an investment in its activities and labours in order to survive and flourish.⁴⁹ Body work becomes an essential part of self-identity, often regarded as skill or achievement where a good pair of hands denoted an individual virtue and set of connections to the wider world.⁵⁰ Though Taylor's labour management mystified the whole process in the name of productivity,⁵¹ these lace-makers arguably developed solidarity and admiration related to the process that they found themselves at a situated point within. As lace is learnt by habit, the co-worker is also teacher; gestures are mimetically reproduced by the next body. Related via imitation, the embodied experience of co-workers is the sharing and saving of strength.

ASSEMBLIES

Turning from the factory and looking out across the canal we can see the low gabled building that used to be the *Cooperative Socialiste*, founded 1888. Now blandly renovated, its diminutive, domestic form suggests it was a workers' cottage. Here its members, of whom the vast majority were from tulle unions, could purchase their bread and coffee cheaper than from conventional shops.⁵² The cooperative had several homes, previously in a small house on the developing high street, then purpose built in 1901 in Romanesque revival style a few doors down. Here it expanded its operations from boulangerie, butcher and grocer to include a cinema, meeting room and a brewery; it now contains a gym called *Basic Fit*.

⁴⁸ Stewart, *On longing*, 60.

⁴⁹ Shilling, "Working Bodies," 98.

⁵⁰ Wolkowitz, *Bodies at Work*, 62.

⁵¹ Richard Sennett, *The corrosion of character: the personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 22.

⁵² Magali Domain, "Syndicalisme et socialisme dans le monde des tullistes calaisiens à la fin du XIXe siècle," pedagogical dossier, (Calais: La Cité de la Dentelle et de la Mode no date), 8.



15



16

Machine lace-workers were skilled and generally better paid than other textile workers. However, it was customary to be paid by rack, 12 yards of tulle, rather than by hour.⁵³ A rack was announced by a hammer bell after 240 meshes and marked by a coloured thread in case of fraud in the former method.⁵⁴ This problematic wage system, alongside shift length and child labour were the key issues that saw lace-workers mobilise in the first century of production. The Nottingham lace-makers brought with them their political approach of Owenism, a self-taught and democratic mentality and a pinch of revolutionary fever leftover from the Luddites.⁵⁵ They stood in solidarity with the French, who at first undertook the industry's menial jobs, by founding soup kitchens, as well as Oddfellow and mutual aid societies that would provide benefits during periods of illness or injury.⁵⁶

These organisations upset local officials, who until 1880 were elected from the ranks of the conservative right and large industry bosses. Despite one successful wage strike in 1867 by the British dominated Union Workers of Tulle, generally the attempts of workers to organise during the Second Empire were met with strict surveillance and suppression.⁵⁷ Yet this period also saw the development of the heart of Saint-Pierre; around the newly formed Place Crèvecoeur various civic buildings were erected, including a washhouse, church and new town hall, opening up new zones of conversation and relation to the working class community. Meanwhile events elsewhere, such as the radical socialist Paris Commune of 1871, contributed to a climate of growing resistance; one of Saint-Pierre's main streets would later be named after this event.

Standing at the junction of this street and Place Crèvecoeur is the looming brown brick of the Bourse du Travail, and opposite a two-storey house we recognise from an 1890 illustration of *Au Réveil Social*, one of the town's first union cabarets. In these cabarets, pre-union 'groups of twenty' from different workshops would assemble to share ideology and strategy.⁵⁸ Occupying ground divorced from the workplace, instead furnished and functioning somewhat within the domestic domain, workers could engage in fraternal rituals of sharing food, drink and stories alongside political discussion.

The *Cooperative Socialiste* was product of the empowered political climate of the Third Republic, and the arrival of anarcho-syndicalist ideas in Saint-Pierre through figures like

18 Achille Cousteaux, lace-worker and union organiser who in 1883 published the first issue of *Le Travailleur* in the Nord region. That year, he rallied the workers of Saint-Pierre in the town hall to support a salary scale via strike action inspired by Nottingham.⁵⁹ Though a far cry from dismantling the



17



21

power structures of state industrial capitalism, these workers were beginning to exercise anarchist principles of self-management and occupation as well as syndicalist solidarity and direct action. Cousteaux was dismissed by his boss for political activity just before the 1884 legalisation of unions, and later fled Calais to Nottingham due to troubles relating to his publication.⁶⁰ He reappeared as secretary to the CGT in Paris,⁶¹ which in 1906 passed the Amiens Charter separating unions from political parties, a victory for the anarcho-syndicalism movement.

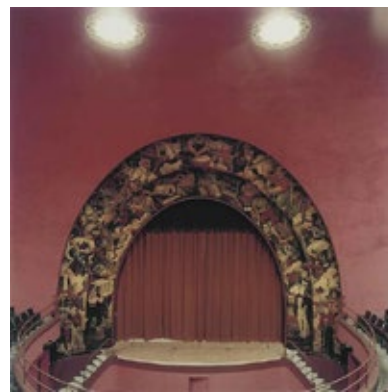
Political leadership remained important to the worker's movement throughout the 1880s. While on the one hand the 1885 municipal merger of Calais and Saint-Pierre celebrated the incredible growth of the lace district, it was the workers who were hit the hardest during the economic volatility of these years. Under the socialist leadership of ex-tullist Salembier of *Parti Ouvrier*, newly legalised union federations took strike actions against pay cuts and for an 8-hour day. Between troubles came small successes, including cross-border solidarity when Nottingham unions conceded a sum of money to support striking Calaisiens.⁶²

At the tail-end of France's Bourse du Travail movement Calais finally built its own union building in 1937, spatially unifying dispersed meeting places into one site of assembly. This structure, with its mighty *Peace & Work* frontispiece and grand red auditorium complete with proscenium arch mural, was designed to host both formal meetings and be a centre of working-class culture, incorporating lending libraries, class-rooms, performances and community celebrations. On its ground floor, a bright covered market still operates on Saturdays, while the rest of its servant space is clad with the same brick at the external skin, evoking the autonomy of Saint-Pierre's narrow streets below. To revolutionary syndicalists, the Bourses du Travail were key instruments towards radical cooperative economics; to anarchists this typology demonstrated the possibility of a local federalist institution that could be directly democratic. Photographs of this era illustrate the vast gatherings in the square, though none depict an address from the Bourse's grand balcony. Still, these lofty features embody the ambition of the movement, from the smuggling of a bobbin in a coat pocket across the Channel, to the rallying of thousands around its icon.

The association of these workers with each other is in part due to the gathering mode of the factory, enabling a new sociality through which political leverage in bargaining power could be established. The root of this association is not singular or banal, rather it involves the various processes of identification in the workplace through labour, as well as through shared narrative enactments like singing or



19



20

⁵³ Jouenne, "Force," 4.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Bensimon, "The Emigration," 30.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 31.

⁵⁷ Domain, "Syndicalisme," 4.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Le Maitron, "COUTEAUX Achille," last modified November 1, 2017. <http://maitron-en-ligne.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?article79465>.

⁶¹ General Confederation of Labour, the first major confederation of French trade unions.

⁶² Domain, "Syndicalisme," 7.

storytelling. The formation of in-groups was simultaneous to the maintenance of a distinct out-group, namely the elite end consumer, wherein lace, to Jouenne, epitomises the division between the bourgeois classes and the proletariat.⁶³ There were only ever a few garment companies and shops in Calais,⁶⁴ so meeting between these two groups was rare. The anarchic leanings of the worker are here in strange contention with their acceptance of the bourgeois other, a hierarchy that justified their luxury product.

In reconciling this cognitive contradiction, lace becomes something other than consumable, instead styled as geography, a river running through the town, a source of energy, a feature that narrativized labour relations, memories, emotions and personal ties. This symbolic landscape is simultaneously fuelled by elements of the physical one; bullets found in the dunes could be emptied of lead and used to crimp the hook that is integral to the threadwork of the tullist. For a long time it was a Calaisien rite of passage to learn how to make this tool from an umbrella rib and wooden handle, the patina of which would come to reflect the repeated gesture of its owner.⁶⁵

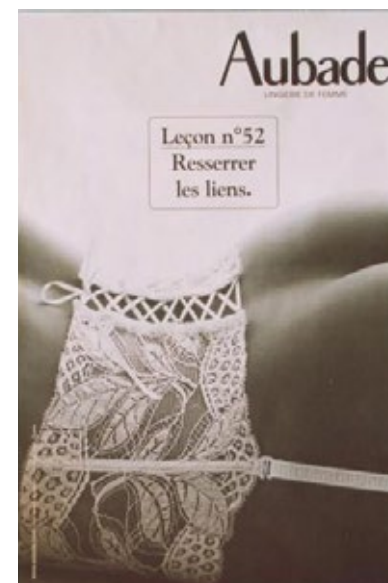
VALENCIENNES

In the cellars of 18th century Valenciennes, 4,000 women hand made lace in unventilated, dark and damp conditions to keep the linen threads supple.⁶⁶ These women were incredibly poor, earning a fraction of the agricultural labourer's wage, and many lost their sight before the age of thirty.⁶⁷ In the 20th century, the Calais industry specialised *Valenciennes* bands, named after this city, for luxury lingerie. In a modern Calais workshop, a young designer, smiling at his desk, has a pair of lace-encased breasts pinned up behind him while female faces stare seductively from his mouse-pad and the sample book clipped to his monitor.

Samples were previously formally arranged in huge leather tomes, some of which can be found in a dark corner of the Calais' lace museum, opening to reveal an incredible range of designs from the decorative to the pictorial. Having already spoken about the spectacle of the gigantic machine, and the private time of the miniature tool, we might consider now the cognitive captivation with *lace itself*. The young designer's lingerie posters can be understood as internalised consolidation from outside in, but in lace we can explore the interiorising effect of the miniature, through the motif. Rather than imprinting external messages onto the subject's internal, at the scale of the miniature motif we can imagine the interior of the subject opening up, like a doll-house, and associating outwards. Either through a creative process of design, or a reflective one, the worker or citizen of the city of lace



22



24

discovers a personal relation to the motif, germinated somewhere in its complex, curving vegetality.

Valenciennes were bands of around 10cm, small strips with delicate patterns; in the museum, a designer re-tells the sublime secret of lace to the camera and shapes his thick masculine hand into a V, extending his thumb outwards to resemble a brassiere. From his creator's chair he tells us that lace imitates nature, which is feminine.⁶⁸ Though subject to fashions and tastes of global consumers, Calaisien designers also drew on their townscape, inspired by crashing waves, fishing nets, masts and local architecture as illustrated on sample cards. Some paper designs from this era survive and demonstrate how delicate mark-making was undertaken in a busy factory. Light trace paper allows a previous tulle to be traced through graphite rubbings, embossing the spidery basis for the motif.⁶⁹ Lines take on the limitations of threads, which cannot turn back on the loom and must be drawn as a global direction; the drawing represents a dialogue between the miniature of the drawing, the human gesture, and the gigantic machine.⁷⁰

Within the miniature motif lies a microcosm and this microcosm of interdependent threads opens up, through its technicity, a macrocosm of the worker and their world. Created of this world, it is a reflection made manageable in scale, while also potentializing the motif as conduit for infinite reverie.⁷¹ The motif, so stared-at, comes to condition, a melodic hook, an emblem, an amulet. Its specificity acts as a pivot point around which personal stories of the lace are read into, and reproduced.

BORDERS

While at macro level lace is sublime, vast, effortful, subject to power, in the miniature it is beautiful, pleasantly social and attendant;⁷² it denotes a closely woven network of elements in-touch with each other. Fundamentally superfluous, lace perhaps represented to its workers the emotion and ambition that were silently integral to this creative community. Whereas the popularity of lace curtains in mid-century East Midlands corresponded to new high-density housing,⁷³ in Calais the neighboured net windows seem less of an attempt to veil the divergence of private space, and more an expression of unity. But if we do consider lace as spatial border, it's one that advertises permeability, adorning portals that are physically adjoined to the accessible street, rather than confronting in mid-air. The lace-worker's fluid compartmentalisation of home and work, their establishment of allegiance beyond workshop to workforce, as well as the precedence of faux domestic spaces within the workers

⁶⁸ Most motifs feature flowers, leaves, branches, feathers, with the occasional geometric or figurative feature.

⁶⁹ Lembré and Millet, "The sound," 175.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 177.

⁷¹ Stewart, *On longing*, 65.

⁷² Burke in Stewart, *On longing*, 75.

⁷³ Nicola Donovan, "CURTAIN TWITCHERS: The Democratisation of lace," *Selvedge* 82 (2018): 34.



25



26

⁶³ Jouenne, "Force," 3.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 35.

⁶⁶ Fosse et al, *Galerie*, 49.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

movement all evoke a psycho-city whose divisions are cut from liminal lace.

In recent years, international media has covered Calais regarding its dense presence of displaced peoples heading to the UK. Further, critical attention has been drawn to the UK border regime and its “hostile environment” on those displaced on French soil. Recent humanitarian crises in Calais coincide with the final stages of decline of its lace industry. The 5,000 workers dismissed in the last 40 years sense what Latour describes as unsteady ground, “that we are all in migration toward territories yet to be rediscovered and reoccupied.”⁷⁴ When Queen Victoria wore tulle for her wedding in 1840, she began a long-lasting association between veiling in lace and a border that signified sacred modesty and a process of becoming, uniting. Now, in the hometown of this symbolic material, its tectonics are realised in 5m high steel fences, appropriated as tools of urban violence, embodying the exclusionary enclosure of a nation and representing policies at state and European scale.

Today only three lace factories operate in the city, now multi-nationally owned, with a workforce of under 300.⁷⁵ Calais’s old Leavers looms, for which replacement parts are no longer in production, can’t compete with new automated machinery and China’s cheap labour. Presented as industry promotion, the municipality built a €28 million lace museum in 2008, consigning lace to history. Subject to waning trade protections, the lace city of Calais has become wise to its subordinate position in a globalised world. Previously a communist stronghold, recent decades have seen Calaisiens side with the patriots against the globalists, with a swing in opinion towards the far right.

PULLING BACK THE CURTAIN

The last functioning factories cluster in the western quarter of the city. Towards Rue des Quatre Coins we pass Galloo Littoral (known as Fort Galloo to the hundreds of migrants who took shelter in this former metal reprocessing plant in 2014), the quiet Noyon factory (now in the hands of a Chinese majority shareholder), a youth den in the bushes of the huge brownfield plot (demarcated by a tangle of unspun vhs tape), the red-brick and blue tiled façade of a 20th century lace factory propped up, barricaded and become wild, and there, just across the way, branching out toward us, the muted hues of a new eco village.

Tim Edensor writes on the importance of industrial ruins as cognitive bridges for the beliefs and values of those who used to inhabit them,⁷⁶ while also potentializing an evolving construction of meaning in which spaces and non-humans have agency.⁷⁷ Behind the gutted perimeter of Calais’ lace

⁷⁴ Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 5.

⁷⁵ Liz Alderman, “Once a Lace Capital, Now Riven by French Politics,” *The New York Times*, 29 April, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/29/business/france-election-globalization-lepen-macron-lace.html>.

⁷⁶ Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005), 149.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 138.



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factories apartment complexes have been contrived. When these ruins are renovated by developers their social memory is commodified, externalised, for their new middle class protagonists.⁷⁸ Of the precious Leavers machines, a few take pedagogical privilege in the museum, the rest perhaps are scrap in the Galloo warehouse; the succession of the lace narrative has been abruptly cancelled. The latest generation have taken to unravelling rather than inter-weaving of threads, as around them their heritage appears to be appropriated and then erased to make way for a future that is both literally and figuratively, out of their hands.

In one of the windows of the Michel-Storme workshop a peacock fans its lacy tectrix, advertising compliance with the brand of Dentelle de Calais. On the brick below this somebody has issued a writ in black spray paint: *NO BORDERS*. It’s difficult not to see the irony in the Calaisien resistance to this motion, for without the practically unpoliced movement of illegal lace artisans and their tools back in 1816, Calais might never have known the glory of lace, never grown or prospered, or burgeoned their lace-worker identity to which they now, desperately, cling. Further, the anarchist spirit that inspired several generations of lace-workers fundamentally rejects the states and its bordered interests. In similarly anarchist spirit, this last decade saw a migrant solidarity squatting movement successfully use Calais’ vacant factories to provide shelter and support to many displaced people. Now outmanoeuvred by targeted legislative changes,⁷⁹ these buildings have been bulldozed, or their skins stapled over with sheet metal, blocked up with breeze blocks, awaiting death or renewed strategy.

In the paintings of Ralph Fasanella, folk artist, machinist, union leader, the post-war struggles of the American working classes are deceptively rendered busy and colourful⁸⁰. Urban patchworks are cut open to reveal tenement dinnertimes, union meetings, sweatshops. As Berger describes, “[he] present[s] their interiors in such a way as to show that they were never interiors. Nothing has an interior. Everything is exteriority. The whole city, in this sense, is like an eviscerated animal.”⁸¹ Written on sidewalks, streets, intimate words like KISS or LOVE are laid bare. Where Berger attributes this emptying out to the surplus-less logic of wage-hours, the anarcho-syndicalists of Calais and beyond

⁷⁸ Ibid, 131.

⁷⁹ Calais Migrant Solidarity, “Trapped on the Border: A Brief History of Solidarity Squatting Practices in Calais,” In *Migration, Squatting and Radical Autonomy*, eds Pierpaolo Mudu and Sutapa Chattopadhyay (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 58.

⁸⁰ Fasanella reflected on Dress Shop, “When my sister saw this (painting) she said, ‘Ralph, what the hell are you doing making everybody look happy?’ I said listen, don’t you remember when you worked in a shop, even though it was a miserable shop, all the women were singing and talking, they had to have fun with coffee time, smoke time, always making games? With the news on the walls, I’m trying to show what the people are thinking about, talking about. And they’re always concerned about their families, how there’s nobody home to take care of the kids, and they’re always talking about the kids, the kids, the kids.” more at image source.

⁸¹ John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 99.



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31

imagined this as a provisional scenario that could be repopulated through cooperative economics.

“What makes the family kitchen no more than a cupboard off the street?” Berger asks. And yet, why not? The anarchist refuses externalisation, reclaiming private property from state protection, occupying and filling it up, inverting the subjective and unknowable interior. We find meaning in what is common, a motif or a set of learned movements. Stripped of this language, Calais seems to have adopted the redundant built encasements that Fasanella cuts away in his paintings, the city’s putative directive being to externalise, and to be careful not to spill. With lace gone, what now can be sacred? What can be shared? It’s visitors who confess onto the town, *20 mins and BORED* says a signpost at the border, *let us live* at the fence. These utterances are tragic in their confinement; can we move them again from the façade, the enclosure, to the visceral and operative nooks of a collective interior – from the beermat to the Bourse?

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