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Jensen, Mikkel

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# Laughing all the Way to the Closed Factory: The Deindustrialization Comedy

Mikkel Jensen, Aalborg University

## Abstract

This article explores the comedic treatment of deindustrialization in three films: *Gung Ho* (US, 1986), *De frigjorte* (Denmark, 1993), and *The Full Monty* (UK, 1997). Examining the films' different ways of portraying deindustrialization, the article discusses how symptomatic it is that these films offered their audiences a form of comedic silver lining in an era when deindustrialization was still felt acutely as a crisis. *Gung Ho*'s comedic take on the 1980s deindustrialization crisis invokes hopeful discourses of reindustrialization, *De frigjorte* explores a crisis of masculinity after its protagonist is laid off after two decades' employment at a local factory, and *The Full Monty* offers a story of men overcoming deindustrialization in a communal way. Reading these films in relation to each other, the article argues that these films offered viewers faced with the realities of deindustrialization a moment of comedic distance to economic hardship.

## Keywords

Deindustrialization, unemployment, film, economic recession, crisis, industrial work, comedy

Literary scholar Sherry Lee Linkon argues (2018, 10) that fictional narratives about the long-term consequences of industrial closures started to emerge in the U.S. around the year 2000. Exploring what Linkon calls *the half-life of deindustrialization*, these narratives do not present deindustrialization as an acute crisis but more as a state of affairs where the long-term ramifications of industrial closures loom large in specific communities. Philipp Meyer's novel *American Rust*, for instance, portrays how some young men 'struggle to redefine working-class masculinity and adulthood in the absence of industrial labor' (Linkon 2018, 17). One needs only read as far as the second paragraph of the novel to see how Meyer emphasizes the effects of deindustrialization on this fictional Pennsylvania community. Having only just introduced its young protagonist, Isaac English, and his situation, the novel outlines how the now closed steel mill 'had been like a small city, but [...] now stood like an ancient ruin, its buildings grown over with bittersweet vine' (Meyer 2010, 3). Such deindustrialization narratives portray situations in which the factory closings of the 1970-80s continue remain 'an active and significant part of the present' (Linkon 2018, 2).

Since the publication of economists Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison's *The Deindustrialization of America* (1982), many sociologists and historians have contributed to our understanding of the historical and political realities of deindustrialization (e.g. High 2003, Koistinen 2013, Sugrue 2014, Neumann 2016). Linkon covers a cultural approach to this topic, focusing especially on literary works. Her work thus responds to a call for research that she articulated alongside sociologists Tim Strangleman and James Rhodes in 2013. They argued (2013, 11) that 'while scholars from varied fields have examined the economic, social, and political causes and effects of deindustrialization, we would argue that a cultural approach to understanding deindustrialization ... is also valuable.' Though Linkon's strong literary focus does also

encompass a few screen narratives that touch on deindustrialization (e.g. Curtis Hanson's film *8 Mile* (76-80) and David Simon's TV series *The Wire* (2002-2008) (49-53)), it seems pertinent to pay more attention to some of the, albeit relatively few, screen narratives that broach the topic of deindustrialization.

This article zooms in on three films (one American, one Danish, and one British) that all explore deindustrialization in different ways but which all embrace a comedic angle to this topic, namely Ron Howard's *Gung Ho* (1986), Erik Clausen's *De friggjorte* (1993), Peter Cattaneo's *The Full Monty* (1997). This article thus aims to supplement Linkon's work in several ways. By analyzing three films from different national contexts I aim to expand how we discuss deindustrialization narratives: in a different form (film), in a slightly earlier era (the 1980s-1990s), and in geographic terms (I include British and Danish texts). Linkon remarks that most of the narratives she studies 'focuses not on those who were displaced when plants closed but on those who are still living with the effects of those closings' (9), which is different from the films under scrutiny here. These films center on the men (women don't figure prominently in these films) that themselves were laid off because of deindustrialization.<sup>1</sup> However, given the fact that I examine these films' take on deindustrialization, I want to explore in greater detail what deindustrialization is before I proceed to my analyses of these three films.

## Deindustrialization

Historian Steven High defines deindustrialization as situations when a region experiences a relative decline in industrial employment. This happens, for instance, when factories and steel mills close, causing major challenges for many regions, cities and states (High 2003, 8-9). This process was spurred by interlinked causes, especially automation, capital flight, and disinvestment (Winant 2021, 16). Foreign competition on home markets also played a role as political scientist Dale Hathaway points out (1993, 30) in the case of the competition that the American steel industry faced. All put together, this economic transformation amounted, in Hathaway's evaluation (1993, 2), to a transformation of the economies that rival in importance the 1930-1940s, which saw 'the collapse and reconstitution of U.S. capitalism.' For thousands of workers, this meant the 'loss of good jobs and the social benefits they provided' (Linkon 2018, 164), but for many communities it also came with a legacy of toxic waste, depopulation, 'long-term unemployment, mental and physical health problems, rising rates of addiction and suicide, distrust of institutions, and political resentment' (Linkon 2018, 6).

Historians Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott note that this downturn in industrial employment meant acute crisis for the men and women (and their families) who relied on that work, but they emphasize (2003, 4) that 'What millions of working men and women might have experienced as solid, dependable, decently waged work really only lasted for a brief moment in the history of capitalism.' Deindustrialization is often associated with the 1970s-80s in the United States, but Linkon emphasizes (2018, 22) that one should see this phenomenon as a more long-term process that has forced industrial workers to reinvent themselves and their communities (22). Indeed, David Koistinen's work in *Confronting Decline* (2013) shows how

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<sup>1</sup> This gendering seems somewhat typical given how film scholar Sarah Attfield notes that 'heavy industry in the west has been traditionally male-dominated' (6), which is very much the case in the three films under scrutiny here.

the deindustrialization of the New England textile industry in the interwar period foreshadowed some of the developments that happened in the auto and steel industries in the 1970-80s.

Historian Tracy Neumann (2016, 5) notes that in the 1950s ‘the Great Lakes manufacturing belt had seemed impervious to rust’, but by the 1984 the Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale talked of a ‘vast Rust Belt with tragic unemployment and broken dreams all through the great industrial Midwest.’ As time passed, the moniker of the Rust Belt meant that deindustrialization, according to Steven High (2003, 192), became strongly associated with that specific region. Indeed, Linkon notes that the Rust Belt is the setting of most deindustrialization narratives (Linkon 2018, 13), which for instance is seen in the several documentaries that center on Rust Belt deindustrialization: Michael Moore’s *Roger & Me* (1989), Heidi Ewing & Rachel Grady’s *Detropia* (2012), and Steven Bognar & Julia Reichert’s *The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant* (2009) and *American Factory* (2019). Neumann, however, talks of a ‘North Atlantic Rust Belt’ to emphasize how certain regions in Europe have faced similar challenges to those in the American Midwest:

The Rust Belt may have been discursively situated in North America, but by the 1980s Western Europe’s steel and coal country, from Lille and to the Ruhr to Sheffield and Glasgow, was corroding as well. (Neuman 2016, 5)

Neumann’s emphasis on seeing deindustrialization in a transatlantic fashion motivates how we can read together *Gung Ho*, *De frigjorte*, and *The Full Monty* as part of and as responses to this wide-ranging socio-economic transformation. I focus on two films that don’t look at the long-term effects but which rather portray deindustrialization as an acute crisis (*Gung Ho* and *De frigjorte*). Only *The Full Monty* arguably is about the half-life of deindustrialization in the sense that the factory closings in Sheffield are presented – through archival footage – as a matter of historical record when the film’s narrative starts. But this film is still about men who were laid off when the factories closed, not the children of displaced workers like in, say, Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust*. Today, these three films stand as pop-cultural remnants of an era when western societies were coming to terms with the downturn in industrial work and what this meant for the many people, families, cities, and communities who had relied on that work.

### **The Hope of Reindustrialization: *Gung Ho* (1986)**

Ron Howard’s comedy *Gung Ho* centers on the cultural encounter between a Japanese leadership at a newly-acquired factory and its American employees. In an effort to save jobs in his community, the American factory worker Hunt Stevenson (Michael Keaton) travels to Japan to get the Assan Motors Corporation to take over a recently closed factory in Pennsylvania. Having the Japanese investors take over the car factory on the condition that they can run it in accordance with Japanese managerial principles, Howard’s film sets up a cultural encounter that forms the narrative engine of the film. Deindustrialization, however, is the central social-historical context and theme of the film (Jensen 2020, 32).

Screen writer Edwin Blum conceived the film’s underlying premise after watching a story on *60 Minutes* about Nissan opening a plant in Smyrna, Tennessee (Canby 1986), but given the fact that American car manufacturers would not let Howard film *Gung Ho* in their assembly plants, the production team chose to shoot the film’s factory scenes in Buenos Aires (Gray 123-25).

The son of actors Rance and Jean Howard, director Ron Howard did not come from a working-class background similar to the milieu he portrays in *Gung Ho*. But the setting nonetheless seemed familiar to him given how he, in the words of biographer Beverly Gray, grew up in Burbank, ‘a blue-collar American town ... where the livelihood of many family friends was bound up with the shifting fortunes of Lockheed Aircraft’ (Gray 124).

Howard got his directorial debut in 1977 and earned a name for himself behind the camera with box office success in the early 1980s with *Night Shift* (1982), *Splash* (1984), and *Cocoon* (1985). So by the time Howard directed *Gung Ho* audience surveys had found that ‘his name in the credits bring audiences into theatres’ (Gray 123). The film did not turn out a success, earning a meager \$36 million dollars in U.S. box office and several critics were not impressed. Film critic Robert Ebert almost disdained the film, pointing to a lack of attention to detail and how it chose to feature fistfights instead of ‘dramatic development’ and *New York Times*’ Vincent Canby found the film’s ‘satire [to cut] like a wet sponge’ (Canby 1986; Gray 125).

The film shows the Assan Motors Corporation to get Hunt to convince his co-workers to adhere to the new Japanese rules, but when that doesn’t work Hunt strikes a deal with management, stipulating that if the workers are able to produce 15,000 cars in a single month the workers will get raises and management will hire more of the currently unemployed factory workers in the city. This plotline embraces a meritocratic fantasy in the sense that if the American workers just work hard enough they will get to keep their jobs and be able to provide for themselves and their families, i.e. a belief in a world order where a good work ethic is enough to keep industrial work in America. Given how the U.S. had lost 30 million jobs from plant closings in a single decade (Bluestone and Harrison 1982), it makes sense that a comedic take on this development would provide a sense of uplift or optimism for its viewers.

The deal that Hunt strikes with the company stipulates that anything less than 15,000 cars does not count. Hunt, however, lies about this aspect to his colleagues, which sets up him being exposed. Hunt, admitting to his lie, then delivers the central monologue of film in which he ponders the situation of Hadleyville, Pennsylvania and America more broadly:

The truth? You don’t want the truth. You know what you want to hear? You want to hear that Americans do things better than anybody else. They’re kicking our butts and that ain’t luck. That’s the truth. There’s your truth. Sure, the great old Ameri-can do-or-die spirit. Yeah, it’s alive. But they’ve got it! Well, I’ll tell you something. We’d better get it back. We better get it back damn fast. Instead, we’re strutting around telling ourselves how great we are, patting each other on the back. (*Gung Ho*)

*Gung Ho* articulates the perceived cultural effects of deindustrialization in a discourse of national identity. Framing deindustrialization in relation to Japanese competition and emphasizing how this affects American national identity and self-perception, Hunt stresses issues of attitude and mentality and takes issue with the lie his compatriots tell each other when they talk about ‘how great [they] are.’ Hunt’s framing of deindustrialization is a cultural one that completely elides socioeconomic causes. *Gung Ho*’s take on deindustrialization is certainly not about class conflict within the U.S., which, arguably, was the way that Michael Moore would portray the issue in his deindustrialization film *Roger & Me* three years later. Moore’s urban portrait of Flint, Michigan is narratively structured around Moore’s attempts to interview General Motors CEO Roger Smith in order to confront him about the social ramifications of GM’s downsizing in Flint in the 1980s. Moore’s way of portraying both Flint’s elite and some of its

most marginalized citizens emphasizes class conflict in a way that *Gung Ho* completely shies away from.

Linkon argues that the long-term effects of deindustrialization include depopulation, long-term unemployment, physical and mental issues, political resentment, a distrust of institutions, and societal uncertainties that become internalized (6). Those issues, however, are nowhere near what *Gung Ho* centers on. Ron Howard's take on deindustrialization zooms in on a perceived challenge to an American sense of self, articulated through Hunt's remark about 'the great old American do-or-die spirit' (Jensen 2020, 32-34).

The film ends with a struggle for the workers to construct the very last of the 15,000 cars, but the last ones are hardly finished in time for their deadline. Howard's way of ending this narrative seems forced. The Japanese executive acknowledges the workers' accomplishment and actually holds up his end of the bargain even though the workers did not deliver all of the cars on time. This unrealistic ending shows the workers to be completely at the mercy of the Japanese management. The power relations are fully in favor of management (Jensen 2020, 82). Literary scholar Peter Clare notes that:

the fact remains that the workers will have to keep up such an inordinate monthly production of cars from here on out (certainly putting in the same overtime and without management's help on the line), something it is clear they will not be able to do, even with their supposed reinvigorated work ethic. Moreover, although they now have wages equaling those they had under the union, they still lack a contract and collective voice. (69)

It is completely in line with *Gung Ho*'s participation in the comedy genre that the film ends on a high note. But this light-hearted conclusion to this narrative seems artificially tacked on. Management concedes to the workers in an unrealistic way. The workers have tacitly committed to performing at an almost superhuman level if they are to keep their jobs and that, too, seems to be no cause for celebration. And with the union being a thing of the past, the workers will no longer have a collected voice going forward. By focalizing its narrative through Hunt, *Gung Ho* seems sympathetic to his perspective, but, as Clare accurately argues, 'this messiah's gospel of work ethic is a ruse of sorts, pitched at the worker who will bear the brunt of this transitional state of the auto industry and global economy' (Clarke 2014, 71). *Gung Ho*'s perspective is Hunt's perspective; one that elides the socio-economic causes of deindustrialization and places the 'blame' on the workers themselves. It believes in reindustrialization but glosses over the economic and human costs this process would entail in terms of worsened working conditions and changed power relations in the industrial economy. Seven years later, the socialist filmmaker Erik Clausen offered his comedic take on deindustrialization, but he made no promise of reindustrialization.

### **The Frail Man of Deindustrialization: *De frigjorte* (1993)**

Directed by Erik Clausen, one of Denmark's most prolific social-realist filmmakers, *De frigjorte* explores a crisis of masculinity after its protagonist, machinist Viggo Hansen (also Erik Clausen), is laid off after working for 25 years at a local factory in Copenhagen. The film's opening scenes center on Viggo's concerns about the white envelopes (pink slips) that managers are handing out. Viggo and his co-workers, however, assure each other that 'They'll need

someone to tend to our machines.’<sup>2</sup> This use of the possessive pronoun ‘our’ reveals the degree to which these machinists identify with their place of work. This identification coupled with the film’s foregrounding of Viggo’s concerns about being fired suggest the grave ramifications deindustrialization will have for these workers. At the heart of Clausen’s film is an ambition to bring the experiences of industrial workers to the big screen.

The two strongest through-lines in Clausen’s oeuvre are arguably his political commitment and his employment of humor. ‘I am a socialist,’ Clausen said when *De frigjorte* was released before adding that ‘but I don’t want to brag about it!’ (Clausen in Grue 1993b). Clausen’s tongue-in-cheek way of discussing his political stance reveals an openness to aligning himself with a specific ideology as well as showing an irreverent take on political manifestations. Politics and comedy are closely intertwined in Clausen’s work.

Frequently invoking his working-class background when discussing his work, Clausen articulates an important part of his politics in his choice of who to focalize his narratives through. Clausen explained in a video for the union 3F’s Youtube channel that he has always sought to eschew an otherwise strong tendency to portray working-class as comic figures and that he instead ‘turned the working class into the main character’ (Clausen 2017), showing Clausen’s emphasis on class and class-consciousness.

*De frigjorte* performed well in Denmark, both critically and commercially. The Danish Film Critics Association awarded the film its annual ‘Bodil’ for best film and the Danish Film Academy gave Anne Marie Helger a ‘Robert’ in recognition of her performance as that year’s best supporting actress for her portrayal of Karen. In 1993, the Norwegian film award ‘the Amanda’ experimented with doing a Nordic award instead of ‘just’ focusing on Norwegian film. In that year, *De frigjorte* won for best screenplay (VG 1993). And in that same year, the coalition of Danish unions (The Confederation of Professionals in Denmark) gave Clausen an award, primarily for his work on *De frigjorte* (*Politiken* 1994). The film was the best-selling film in the second quarter of 1993 in Denmark (*Politiken* 1993) and the sixth-best grossing film in that year overall (Iversen 1994), trailing behind American blockbusters such as *Jurassic Park* and *Bodyguard*.

The end credits of *De frigjorte* tell us that the film would not have been made without financial support from the Danish General Workers’ Union, which traditionally organized unskilled workers. This union’s decision to help fund Clausen’s film was surely informed by a wish to give voice to many of its members’ experiences and frustrations in early-1990s Denmark that saw soaring unemployment rates. Indeed, the Danish daily *B.T.* noted (Hauch 1993) that the film’s focus on unemployment made it topical: ‘A highly current topic which almost 350,000 Danes plus families are feeling.’ This level of unemployment roughly corresponds to an employment rate of 12 percent of the total work force at that point in time.

When the management lays off Viggo and all of his coworkers at the start of the film, the workers are informed that they’re all ‘set free to do other work’, which is such a convoluted euphemism that one minor character, Iversen (Leif Sylvester), does not even realize that he has just been fired. Management is moving part of the production to Portugal. This line echoes the

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<sup>2</sup> I translated all of the Danish quotes into English myself.

film's Danish title *De frigjorte* which roughly translates to the 'The Freed Ones.'<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the factory workers do not feel free to do other work and the audience in the early 1990s would know just how bad unemployment was at that point in time. This talk of being 'set free' is a satirical attack on managerial discourse (why not just say they're all fired?), but it also poses the serious question of what these workers are going to do with all of their new 'freedom' and spare time? They had already found their vocation, but now they will have to find a new place in the world.

However, it is not just the experience of being fired and being out of work that causes Viggo concerns. At one point, Viggo is having lunch with his family in a communal courtyard and an elderly neighbor joins them. He enthusiastically tells Viggo and family of his work life experiences, but Viggo's thoughts, which are continuously communicated through voiceover narration, center around how this man probably will never find employment in his line of work again.

Though Viggo's line of thought explicitly is about his man's prospects, Viggo is rehashing these thoughts as a traumatic response to his nascent realization that his fate and prospects may well parallel that of this old man. And given the fact that the first time Viggo had talked to this man is down on a bench while his man is having a beer, Viggo is dreading the direction that he is headed in. Will he end up joining the lonesome alcoholics sitting on the benches? Viggo's work and sense of self are intimately interwoven.

Being laid off starts Viggo's crisis and he both becomes increasingly estranged from his wife Oda (Helle Ryslinge) and has an affair with a woman, Karen (Anne Marie Helger), whom he meets at a bar. This thematic point is also emphasized by the film's opening credits. As mentioned, the first scene introduces Viggo's fear of losing his job and it is after this scene that we see the opening credits which show pictures that seem to be from the 1950s-1960s. Not from work but from youth life and family life. These stills suggest a life story for Viggo that the film's narrative does not develop. The thematic point of this montage is that these old photographs are not just about work, but also about the working-class life and the experiences that that work made possible. The implication is that when that work is disappearing, this situation is not just a crisis for Viggo's work-life identity but a crisis of identity as a human being.

Political scientist Dale Hathaway once pondered (1993, 3) why the crisis brought about by deindustrialization in the 1970-1980s was not met with massive opposition like in earlier crises: 'The experience of the 1890s and the 1930s strongly suggests that those who are damaged by dramatic economic transformation normally attempt, in some form we might broadly call political, to protect themselves from further damage.' This fits well with *De frigjorte*, which does not portray any political elements in terms of activism or protest. The film is about the human consequences of this development, and is thus only implicitly a political response to deindustrialization in the sense that it gives voice and screen time to those affected by this development. Viggo's daughter, Lone (Gitte Rugaard), explicitly asks Viggo why people are not protesting the widespread joblessness, to which her father laments that 'People take it as a personal defeat. And no one wants to put their defeats on display.' Viggo's reply speaks to the reasons for why

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<sup>3</sup> The official title of *De frigjorte* is *Fish Out of Water*.



deindustrialization was not met with popular protest, but his allusion to an experience of ‘personal defeat’ bears witness to the heavy weight of individualization in this situation.

Sociologist Rasmus Willig argues (2013) that contemporary societies are shaped by what he calls ‘a U-turn in critique.’ Due to the increasing levels of individualization in contemporary societies, many people point the finger at themselves instead of taking issue with problems in society. If something is wrong in people’s lives, it is their own fault and not the product of, say, industrial production being relocated to a facility in Portugal, which is completely out of the hands of any single worker. *De frigjorte* presents this lack of public protests against massive lay-offs and deindustrialization as being symptomatic of an over-individualized society, which the film also emphasizes by having Viggo go through his crisis alone.

Viggo’s affair with Karen ends with her rejecting him and Viggo being beaten up by her new lover. Viggo is hospitalized at a psychiatric facility but ends up reconnecting with his family. This tragic-but-ultimately-uplifting storyline emphasizes the severe ramifications of deindustrialization on the men of the working class in the early 1990s. The ending of *Gung Ho* suggested a hope for reindustrialization, which maybe gave a glimmer of hope for a very challenged working class in the mid-1980s. *De frigjorte* offers no such hope. Historian Steven High (2021) notes that political resistance to deindustrialization has, at most, been able to postpone factory closings, but it has not been able to actually prevent it. In this perspective, *Gung Ho* seems to have been very optimistic about reindustrialization. I should add, however, that it absolutely is very understandable why somebody wanted to offer audiences a glimmer of optimism during the height of the deindustrialization crisis.

Instead of offering a promise of promise of deindustrialization, *De frigjorte* zooms in on a personal crisis that is brought about by deindustrialization. The film ultimately is about how working-class men (and women) can emotionally handle this societal transformation. Clausen’s film does not suggest that Viggo will find work in his field again but it does suggest that he is able to reconnect with his family. The positive ending is possible because Viggo ultimately did not squander everything he did have. He ends up in a situation where it is up to him to reconnect with his wife and his children. The film emphasizes that there is an emotional fallout in the wake of deindustrialization that each man must go through on his own. As a contrast to his focus on the individual, Peter Cattaneo’s deindustrialization film shows industrial unemployment to be handled by a group of workers.

### **From Blue Collar to No Collar at All: *The Full Monty* (1997)**

In *The Full Monty*, a group of unemployed steelworkers form a striptease group in order to earn some money in a deindustrialized Sheffield. Media scholars Estella Tincknell and Deborah Chambers argue (2002, 146) that the film addresses a 1990s ‘crisis in masculinity’ brought about ‘the decline of traditional male manual work’ as is seen in how the protagonist Gaz (Robert Carlyle) is not able to retain custody rights due to his inability to pay child support. Learning that the working-men’s club will host a Chippendales show and seeing his best friend’s wife, Jean (Lesley Sharpe), urinating while standing up in a men’s restroom, Gaz gloomily concludes that ‘A few years more, and men won’t exist ... We’re obsolete. Dinosaurs. Yesterday’s news.’ Media scholar Chantal D’Arcy notes that this opening represents ‘women’s complete appropriation of all the traditional attributes of masculinity’ (132). In a similar vein, Dave (Mark Addy) cannot perform sexually, Lomper (Steve Huison) is suicidal, and Gerald

(Tom Wilkinson) has not told his wife that he has been unemployed for six months. None of these men exists in the world in a way they like and embrace. They are all lacking something.

The film was a huge but surprising success. For a brief moment the film was the highest-grossing film in UK ever, and a 2017 audience survey in the UK showed that *The Full Monty* was the Brits' first runner up in as their all-time favorite British film, trailing only behind *The Italian Job* (1969) (O'Callaghan 2017). Despite a modest production budget of only 3.5 million dollars, the film ended up bringing in more than 250 million dollars (Kelley 2023). The film was nominated for four Academy Awards, winning for best music and losing to *Titanic* and *Good Will Hunting* for best picture, best director, and best non-adapted screenplay. 26 years after its release, the film is even being accompanied by a follow-up television series sequel, which has just been released. The film was a surprise success by all accounts.

The film opens with footage culled from a 1970s promotional film titled 'Sheffield – City on the Move' about the then-prosperous city of Sheffield that focuses on how the city's state is intimately tied to the steel industry: 'Thanks to steel,' the narrator tells us, 'Sheffield really is a city on the move.' This clip contextualizes the film's portrayal of 1990s Sheffield in the absence of industrial work. The ironic thing here is that the factory, though closed, still offers the men an illegal rehearsal space for this striptease performance. Their attempt to escape the confines of unemployment means going back to the source of their unemployment; the closed factory. This choice of setting is metaphorical for the film's portrayal of the transition from industrial production (in the secondary sector) to entertainment work (in the tertiary sector).

*The Full Monty*'s portrayal of how deindustrialization causes problems for men in society thus clearly parallels *De frigjorte*'s story about Viggo. Gaz cannot afford to take his son, Nathan (Wim Snape), to see a soccer match, indicating how his unemployment bars him from being the father he wants to be. However, when he, at the end of the film, does not want to go out on stage to perform with the others it is Nathan that urges Gaz to take the stage. Though he is experiencing a crisis he commits to his ambitions when he sees that that is what his son wants him to do. He may not be a steady provider like he and his friends once were, but he is still able to be a good man in the sense of being a good father. Indeed, Tincknell and Chambers (2002, 149) point out how *The Full Monty* shows 'fatherhood [to be] the place in which the value of masculinity is reasserted.'

Gaz's friend Dave has another problem. His self-image and sense of self is completely shattered to the point that he is unable to perform sexually with his wife Jean. However, when Dave admits that he and his friends have been rehearsing for their striptease show Jean consoles him. D'Arcy notes (2005, 130) that it is Jean's 'love [that] restores his confidence.' It is her devotion to Dave that makes him able to perform in the striptease show and, we might infer, makes him able to perform sexually later on. Gaz thus gets the final push he needs from his son and Dave gets his final push from his wife, which shows how the six men in the group not only rely on support from each other. They also depend on their families. This emphasis on the use of community is a quite the contrast to how *De frigjorte* shows Viggo to go through his crisis alone. The film's climax is the final strip show where the men go all the way, which demonstrates the film's positive resolution of its plot. Chantal D'Arcy, however, points out the ambiguity of this ending:

Hence, for all its upbeat ending – with wives, girlfriends and female acquaintances shrieking out their support and approval – *The Full Monty* offers no evidence of a solution to the

protagonists' unemployment and poverty. The only thing that the film's narrative does resolve is the problem of the male characters' loss of self-esteem. (132-133)

D'Arcy's point is that though the film probably leaves many viewers with smiles on their faces, the underlying problem of postindustrial unemployment is not solved. There is an existential crisis that is solved in each man in the group, but their economic woes do not come to an end with the few hundred pounds they each will make from this performance. In that way, the film's comedic closing disregards, for a moment, the dire outlook of deindustrialization in order to give viewers an uplifting take on a deindustrializing Great Britain.

### **Laughing all the Way to the Closed Factory**

Film scholars Frank Krutnik and Stephen Neale note that the fact that a film is funny is not enough to label it a comedy. They argue that a 'comedy is not just 'light' and 'amusing', it is marked also by a 'happy ending' and by its concern with the representation of 'everyday life' (11). *Gung Ho*, *De frigjorte*, and *The Full Monty* fit this description. They all (at least aim to) induce laughs, they all end on a high note, and they focus on the everyday lives of the industrial working class. In other words, their appeal (to laughs), their narrative structure, and their choice of principal characters run parallel to each other.

This is an interesting creative choice given how dire the prospects were for a great many people who suffered the costs of deindustrialization, e.g. long-term unemployment and uncertainty about life prospects. The overall depressive outlook Philipp Meyer presents his readers with in *American Rust* is quite the contrast to these films. Meyer's portrayal of a deindustrialized community in 21<sup>st</sup> century Pennsylvania emphasizes a social dissolution that is intimately connected to the disappearance of industrial work where the children of deindustrialization have 'neither their fathers' jobs nor their models of masculinity' to help them enter adulthood (Linkon 2018, 62). These comedies' take on deindustrialization is less grim.

*Gung Ho* suggests that reindustrialization might be possible in Pennsylvania. *De frigjorte* does not subscribe to this belief but it does offer a positive ending when Viggo learns that it is up to him to reconnect with his family. Deindustrialization is the new reality in Denmark in the 1990s but Viggo chooses to leave his 'inner grump' behind and join his family in working in the communal garden. He still has agency at an existential level. *The Full Monty* shows the men to succeed in making money in a single night, which is important for their personal development. The next day, however, they are just as unemployed as ever except for Gerald.

It is telling that deindustrialization is tackled through the form of comedy in several national contexts. It seems that the laughter in these films could be interpreted as either escapist or activist. Given how none of films are invitations for activist engagement it seems more likely to understand this call for laughter in the face of deindustrialization as an offer, for a moment, to get a comedic distance to the economic crisis that was all too familiar to some of the viewers of these films.

Perhaps it is telling that one of the only American television serials to really tackle deindustrialization, David Simon's *The Wire* (2002-2008), which 'testifies to the social costs of deindustrialization' (Linkon et al 241), has also been discussed as a rather bleak show (Dreier and Atlas 2009; Jensen 2017, 131-133). It does surely seem hard to find a silver lining in depicting deindustrialization but *Gung Ho*, *De frigjorte*, and *The Full Monty* all offer their viewers a sense of

uplift. The heavy consequences that deindustrialization brought about for many communities are probably too grim to make for enticing feature films, but filmmakers have nonetheless been able to give at least some voice to unemployed workers and their communities through the form of comedy.

Bruce Springsteen was gloomy about deindustrialization in his songs ‘Youngstown’ (Springsteen 1995), ‘My Hometown’, and ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ (Springsteen 1984). Meyer stressed the negative consequences of deindustrialization in *American Rust* and David Simon explored how deindustrialization was a central aspect of urban maladies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century American city in *The Wire*. And Michael Moore’s angry approach to G.M.’s factory closings is clear in *Roger & Me*. But where Moore’s humor is an activist one, the laughs induced by *The Full Monty*, *Gung Ho*, and *De frigjorte* instead offer ‘an escapist breather’ for people who had felt deindustrialization in their lives or in their families.

In other words, there are other approaches than the comedic one to depicting deindustrialization in popular culture, but it is nonetheless striking that some of the most prominent feature films from the era when deindustrialization was still acutely felt were comedies. Before deindustrialization entered its half-life in the 2000s, filmmakers sought to provide some silver lining in the darkness of the movie theater. Later works about the half-life of deindustrialization focus more on calling attention to the problematic, and perhaps less-known, long-term effects of deindustrialization, which seems to motivate the more serious/non-comedic approach to this social reality.

In a similar vein, it makes sense that Emmanuel Carrère’s *Between Two Worlds* (2021) about the contemporary gig economy is dire and serious. Its purpose is to raise awareness of the problematic aspects of this socio-economic development. This is a contrast to the public awareness about deindustrialization in the 1970-1990s which affected thousands of working-class families. In 1982, Bluestone and Harrison noted (1982, 4) that, at that point in time in the U.S., ‘every newscast seemed to contain a story about a plant shutting down, another thousand jobs disappearing from a community, or the frustrations of workers unable to find full-time jobs utilizing their skills and providing enough income to support their families’. In that situation, filmmakers didn’t need to raise awareness to deindustrialization. They would know that their audience was in the know about factory closings when they entered the movie theater.

*Gung Ho* suggested that reindustrialization was a possibility in the mid-1980s but downplayed the worsened working conditions that development would entail. *De frigjorte* offered no such hope, but was satisfied with giving a pop-cultural voice to those affected by deindustrialization in the early 1990s. It emphasized the social and existential repercussions of deindustrialization but also suggests that those affected by unemployment can get through their crises. *The Full Monty* aligned with this perspective, but, unlike *De frigjorte*’s focus on a single protagonist, stressed that male camaraderie and help from the men’s wives and children could help them through the existential and social costs of deindustrialization. This comedic approach brought the story of deindustrialization to the big screen and gave viewers an hour-and-a-half of escapist humor about a social reality, which many working-class viewers knew all too well when these films were released.

## Author Bio

**Mikkel Jensen** is Assistant Professor of American and Media Studies at the Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University in Denmark. His research focuses on how American media texts engage with contemporary historical tendencies such as deindustrialization, anti-urbanism, and populism. In 2022, he was awarded as Teacher of the Year in the Humanities at Aalborg University. His first monograph, *David Simon's American City*, is forthcoming with Manchester University Press.

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