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Heather J. Hicks

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Postindustrial Striptease: The Full Monty and the Feminization of Work

by HEATHER J. HICKS

IN 1985 IN HER NOW FAMOUS “Cyborg Manifesto” Donna Haraway characterized what she regards as a crisis in the nature of contemporary labor with the phrase “the feminization of work.” In terms that I believe warrant considerably more attention than they have received to date, Haraway attaches to work itself a set of descriptors historically associated with those judged to be biologically female:

Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. (166)

An astute theorist of gender and technology, Haraway matter-of-factly associates the feminine with the weak as part of a larger worldview that understands femininity as nothing more than a restraining facade into which much of the human population has historically been harnessed. In her suggestion that almost all workers are now feminized, she implies that current economic relations have extended the highly recognizable restrictions associated with a “feminine” existence well beyond those understood as biologically female.

Yet while Haraway seems to intend this phrase in the contained sense I have just described, much more needs to be said about her claims concerning the nature of contemporary work. What are the real stakes of claiming that “work”—a term once synonymous with masculine enterprise—has become feminized? Certainly, the heightened instability of our work lives that Haraway identifies is indisputable. It seems to me, however, that reconceiving of work as feminine produces political risks and possibilities that Haraway’s brief discussion does not permit her to explore.

For instance, while Haraway, by treating the feminine as anathema, herself discounts any benefits a “feminization” of work could produce in Western society, it is clear that in several respects this “feminization” has already been—and could be in the future—a positive development for workers. For some, including historian Julia Kirk Blackwelder, the phrase “femi-
nization of work” refers only to the physical entry of women into wage work. The contemporary women’s movement has been largely dedicated to opening the world of public, paid work to women. Thirty years after the Movement surged into existence, women’s entry into the work force, and, consequently, the public sphere, has given them economic and social independence that has provided much of the liberation from oppression that the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s dreamed of effecting.

Yet even if we move into the more abstract register that Haraway intends in her use of “feminization,” the encounter between the concepts of femininity and work hardly seems as calamitous as Haraway’s account of it would suggest. While conventionally “feminine” characteristics like cooperativeness and empathy are problematic when systematically associated with the biologically female, they can be, when distilled and imparted to the social relations of all workers, precisely the impulses that have strengthened the labor movement and will continue to do so. In his overview of depictions of American laborers since the mid-nineteenth century, David E.E. Sloane diagnoses a frequent resistance on the part of American authors and filmmakers to portray positively groups of workers as collective entities. “We still find satisfaction in sympathy for the individual,” he writes, “whether winner or loser; we recoil from any reform accounting for man in his largest and most complicated social combinations when projecting our image of human life and human responsibility” (66-67). Although Sloane does not acknowledge the role gender plays in the portrait of the “work ethic of the lone individual” (59) that so many of the texts he analyzes rehearse, the American convention of associating masculinity with autonomy figures crucially in these representations. On the other hand, as Paula Rabinowitz has demonstrated, invoking common associations between the feminine and mass identity became a means for radical women authors of the 1930s to celebrate collective modes of labor and resistance. For them, a “feminized” labor force could be a collectively empowered one.

As the implications of Haraway’s formulation continue to spiral outward, giving such minute attention to it might seem self-defeating. If understanding contemporary work as “feminized” is so complicated and potentially problematic, why dwell on her claim? The answer is that while Haraway offers her assessment of the regendering of work on the basis of very specific contemporary economic data, she is far from the first to resort to the metaphorics of gender to articulate the radical changes that the meanings of work have undergone in the last fifty years. On the contrary, Haraway has simply spelled out a way of understanding contemporary work that has been implicit in a host of representations of laborers since World War II. Again and again over the course of the last 50 years, authors and filmmakers have come to
express work relations in gendered terms that anticipate Haraway's. Perhaps the most recent and highly visible attempt to explore the volatile social interface between work and gender in the postindustrial economy has emerged not from the U.S. but from Great Britain. The 1997 comedy *The Full Monty*, directed by Peter Cattaneo, offers a complex depiction of the feminization of work that illustrates the degree to which this trend might in fact liberate laborers. On its most fundamental level, Cattaneo's film posits that new employment patterns within the service economy have radically subverted gender conventions, placing the “full monty”—the phallus—literally and figuratively up for grabs. The striptease around which the film revolves becomes a metaphor for all forms of service work available to the working classes, and by requiring that the men submit to the gaze of a female audience, such performance indeed seems the perfect instance of Haraway’s claim that, for workers, “[t]o be feminized means ... leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex.” Yet *The Full Monty* neither renders this feminization in purely negative terms, nor dismisses conventions of masculinity entirely from its picture of contemporary work. Instead, by intermittently depicting the striptease as a skilled form of dance, the comedy brings images of collectivity and skill together in an alternative, positive image of feminization.

*The Full Monty* depicts the struggle of six unemployed male steelworkers in Sheffield, England, to find work that they can be proud of in an economy where their skills are no longer marketable. In particular, the film follows the efforts of Gaz—a man whose protracted unemployment has left him too impoverished to pay child support—to find work that will prevent him from losing partial custody of his young son, Nate. Inspired by the success of a troupe of Chippendales dancers, whose female patrons fill the working men’s club, Gaz assembles the unlikely group to form an all-male revue. “Hot Metal” will, they decide, give their audience something Chippendales does not: for one night only, they will expose “the full monty,” selling women a view of their genitalia. The film culminates in their performance and ends with their phallic display.

Despite its many comic episodes, Cattaneo’s film has a serious agenda where the impact of postindustrialism is concerned. This is made apparent at the very outset of the film, when the audience is presented with a 25-year-old promotional film about Sheffield, “the beating heart of Britain’s industrial 1. While I regard *The Full Monty* as the most interesting filmic portrait of the feminization of contemporary work, a number of other films have also recently dramatized the upheavals in contemporary work patterns. In Great Britain, *Brassed Off* depicts the emotional effects of recent mine closures on male miners, while implicating women in their suffering by depicting them in management positions; in the U.S., the controversial film *Falling Down* depicts a “downsized,” white, middle-class male as the economic victim of both women and non-whites. For an extensive review of recent depictions of workers' struggles in both American and British films, see Stead.
north.” Touting a booming economy built on the steel industry, a vintage voice-over explains that “the city’s rolling mills, forges and workshops employ some ninety thousand men and state-of-the-art machinery to make the world’s finest steel.” The segment’s manically enthusiastic voice-over, a brassy 1970s musical score, and carefully compiled footage of Sheffield’s industry, commerce, and recreation, all illustrating the film’s theme, “Sheffield: City on the Move,” are immediately ironized by its present-day picture of Sheffield. “25 years later” reads a darkened screen before the contemporary action of the film begins, and as the opening episode of the film unfolds, we understand that Sheffield’s version of being “on the move” has not meant positive change for the men we see before us. As Gaz, his best friend Dave, and Nate creep through one of Sheffield’s now deserted mills, Dave presses home the message of this juxtaposition of “before” and “after” with the whispered lament, “Ten years we worked in here, and now look.” The scene that follows offers a series of deft visual metaphors. The formerly proud working men, now forced to steal and hawk rusty girders, are locked in the plant by an unwitting security guard. This image of entrapment by a failing industry and a failing way of life is followed by their hapless escape attempt. While young Nate nimbly crosses a beam to safety, Gaz and Dave stand on an abandoned car that is slowly sinking into the depths of a canal. Cast out of their work life, Gaz and Dave are both literally and figuratively going under.

While one might miss its centrality in this opening sequence, gender’s place at the heart of these personal and social crises quickly emerges as the film’s most pressing concern. The central staging area for questions about gender and work becomes the working men’s club, which the men first pass as they walk home from their escapade in the mill. Significantly, the club is teeming with women from the first moment it appears on the screen; the only “working men” in the club are the Chippendales dancers. Gaz instantly dismisses male strippers as “puffs”—gay men whom he regards as bereft of masculinity. Yet if the men in the working men’s club are in some sense feminized as Gaz suggests, more striking in this early scene is the female audience members’ performative masculinity. While Gaz looks on from a hiding place he has assumed in the men’s room, women from the Chippendales audience enter the room, and after a brief exchange, one of them walks to the wall, drops her pantyhose, and appears to urinate like a man. The women laugh uproariously and, without further explanation of her trick, they leave.

2. While *The Full Monty* does not foreground the role of technology in changes in the nature of contemporary work, its focus on the steel industry, one of the first industries to be heavily automated, suggests the relevance of cybernetic technology to its depiction of the feminization of work.
Within the context of the striptease performance at which this episode takes place, the woman’s odd display takes on particular significance. According to feminist readings of the female striptease, male pleasure in viewing a woman disrobe derives in part from his revelation/confirmation that she is indeed “castrated.” Meanwhile, the male viewer’s state of arousal affirms that he is in possession of the phallus that she lacks (Blessing 48). Given the symbolic revelation of sexual difference that is central to conventional striptease, the anonymous woman’s playful act becomes an obvious inversion of this order. Her act, apparently inspired by the spectacle of male stripping she has just seen, implies not simply that she has a penis, but that she is in possession of the phallus and hence has entered the male domain of empowerment.

The implications of this surreal moment are explored in the subsequent scene, when Gaz, Dave, and other unemployed men convened at the Job Centre mull over what Gaz has seen. While they do not resort to Freudian analysis, their interpretation of the event likewise treats it as a symbolic transfer of power. “I tell you,” Gaz warns, “when women start pissing like us, that’s it; we’re finished ... extincto.” When Dave asks how it could be physically possible for women to urinate standing up, another of the men matter-of-factly responds, “genetic mutations, isn’t it? They’re turning into us.” Indeed, while this response seems fantastic in an otherwise grounded portrait of gritty working-class life, the filmmakers ensure that this explanation feels faintly plausible to the audience. The woman’s feat seems so technically improbable, without any apparent prop to make it more feasible, that viewers themselves must reach for a more fantastic explanation to account for it. Even more forcefully communicated in this scene, however, is a sense that this single, small act connotes a sweeping transformation of gender relations. “In a few years, men won’t exist, except in zoos or something,” Gaz concludes. “I mean, we’re not needed anymore are we? Obsolete, dinosaurs, yesterday’s news.”

In my reading of The Full Monty, this brief, enigmatic scene is pivotal. It suggests that women in fact control “the full monty” in the world the film depicts. The remainder of the film then stages the question of whether the men, through their striptease, can—or in fact need to—get it back. Clearly, this is not exactly the sort of “feminization” that Haraway describes. Or, at least, part of what the film dramatizes appears to be an attendant “masculinization.” Indeed, the dramatic vision of women physically becoming men is echoed figuratively by several scenes in which Gaz’s ex-wife and Dave’s current wife appear to thrive in the domain of public work from which the men once derived their sense of masculinity. Gaz’s wife, in particular, is represented as a manager in a factory where those directly involved in produc-
tion are paid 2.50 an hour. Her repeated suggestions that Gaz take a job there establish her command over her workplace. Dave’s wife likewise appears to work happily as a clerk in a large store, while Dave balks at the conditions and salary that workers must endure there. The women thrive, it appears, in a work environment that men find inhospitable.

Yet what is so useful about reading *The Full Monty* as an instance of the ways the feminization of work may be represented is the multiple, simultaneous genders that are attached to its working characters. While the images of women functioning independently reflect the masculinization that Gaz diagnoses—a masculinization that he regards as concomitant with ex-working men’s own feminization—women’s place in this new world of work is less straightforward when seen in light of their relations with the men of the film. In their interpersonal bonds with the unemployed men of Sheffield, the women seem by turns to deny the men their sense of masculinity and to demand that they provide for them in terms that seem more conventionally gendered. Thus, both Gaz’s ex-wife and Dave’s wife urge their men to take service jobs that the men regard as demeaning. For instance, when Jeanie urges Dave to take work as a security guard, Gaz remarks, “Security? You’re worth more than that, Dave.” But more often the film portrays women as still demanding economic and social forms of support that spring from an older notion of gendered identity—a set of conventions that require the men to retain a role as provider and protector. Gaz’s wife demands child support although her place in the economy is more secure than Gaz’s. Lomper, a security guard so despondent about his tedious work that he attempts suicide, must care for and support his aging mother. Gerald, a downsized plant manager whom Gaz recruits for Hot Metal, is driven to lie to his wife about his unemployment because their respective identities as producer and consumer are fundamental to their marriage. *The Full Monty* illuminates Gerald’s humiliation and anguish in a scene in which his wife, oblivious to his unemployment, begs him to assent to an expensive ski trip. When he hedges, she pleads with him to be less cheap. After Gaz and Dave spitefully sabotage his only job interview, he articulates his wife’s role in his desperation to find lucrative work. “She’s still got credit cards, you know.... She’s out there now let loose on I Street with her fucking mastercard, spending.” Once again, women’s behavior in this largely realist view of quotidian British life becomes strangely amplified and cartoonish; Gerald’s description of his wife prowling the streets with credit card blazing has a monstrous quality. Her function as a drain on his financial resources forces him to try to recapture the managerial position he has long occupied, a masculine role that is now denied him by a lean economy hostile to workers whose seniority makes them expensive.
Finally, in more indirectly economic terms, Dave’s wife Jeanie seems to push him alternately toward and away from a conventionally masculine persona. Her repeated use of the phrase “Big Man” when she attempts to comfort Dave is emblematic of the ambiguity of gender roles in their strained marriage. On the one hand, Jeanie’s gentle use of this term when Dave experiences impotence can be understood as an attempt to affirm his sense of masculinity. On the other hand, “Big Man” is a term of endearment that draws attention to Dave’s most profound source of self-doubt: his weight. In this way, the double meaning of “Big Man” also emphasizes Dave’s particular vulnerability to the economic changes he is enduring. While being a big man could be a useful characteristic in industrial labor, it becomes a hindrance and an embarrassment in the world of service work he has now entered. In resorting to this phrase, the film seems to suggest, Jeanie simultaneously masculinizes and feminizes her husband. Such are the complexities of gender construction within the economy the film depicts.

Yet, ultimately, within the film’s ambivalent treatment of stripping, it is through Dave’s vulnerable sense of embodiment that *The Full Monty* plays out the most negative connotations of the feminization of work. Dave’s intense reluctance to participate in Gaz’s scheme suggests that although by stripping naked the men in some sense reclaim possession of the phallus, the very act of presenting themselves as bodies jeopardizes their claim to the abstract power attached to this icon. From the first scene in the film, Dave’s shyness and obvious embarrassment about his corpulent body mark him as a character who does not enjoy the relative freedom from embodiment associated with white males in Western society. While in some sense all of the men who form Hot Metal have bodies that mark them as outside the abstract category of white, middle-class male (they are old, or black, or gay, or, of course, working-class), it is Dave whose agonized relation to his own body signifies the feminized state of embodiment they all risk in their striptease.

Indeed, at the very outset of the film, the risks of having a body like Dave’s—a conspicuous body—are made clear. As Gaz and Dave walk through Sheffield after being forced to swim to safety from the sinking car on which they were stranded, Gaz remarks to Dave that he wouldn’t have gotten so wet if he had been willing to take off his shirt to make the swim. While on one level this fleeting remark inaugurates a series of moments in the film that establish how much self-loathing Dave must overcome to join Hot Metal on stage, it also establishes the connection between his condition of embodiment and that routinely projected on women. Just as Gaz teases Dave about his excessive modesty, two women approach them. Gaz instantly registers them as bodies, remarking, “What you reckon, Dave?” Dave casually rates them an eight or nine on a scale of ten, but then adds “can never tell till you see their
tits.” Dave’s refusal to take off his shirt, juxtaposed as it is with his sense that women’s identity can only be assessed by exposing their bodies, paradoxically links them. Unlike Gaz, who is willing to remove his shirt because his body does not signify, Dave senses that his body, by failing through its excesses to conform to their standard of white male neutrality, has the capacity to leave him subjugated and victimized.

Near the conclusion of the film, Dave spells out this equation between embodiment and the feminine to his peers in Hot Metal. As the men casually flip through magazines while tanning and toning for their impending performance, one of them remarks on a photo of an attractive woman. A second member of the troupe quickly dismisses her with the curt observation that “her tits are too big.” At this point Dave steps in with the comment, “I just pray that they’re more understanding about us.” He goes on to wonder aloud if the women watching their performance will perceive them as “too fat ... too old....” Lomper quickly retorts that because they are “blokes” the women won’t assess their bodies. He looks anew at the photo, and reassessing the woman in the terms he usually reserves for men, he says, “I’m sure she’s got a fine personality.” Dave, however, already intensely aware of the perils of embodiment, tells Lomper to “forget about personality.” In exposing their bodies, Dave implies, the men will become the social equivalent of women. In permitting—even inviting—women to judge them on the basis of their physical properties, they discard their claim to the masculine haven of “personality.”

This interpretation of the men’s new work as destructively “feminizing” seems to be reinforced by several scenes that stress the potentially demeaning effect of Gaz’s plan to make over his unemployed “mates” as strippers. In the first of these episodes, another laid-off steelworker whom Gaz has invited to audition for his incipient revue projects intense discomfort and humiliation as he struggles free of his shirt to reveal a powerful torso. Although the music continues, the man balks, then apologizes, unable to go on. When Gaz invites the man to linger at the auditions despite his failure, the man gruffly refuses, explaining that his children are in the car outside and that the audition is “no place for kids.” Placed as it is at the beginning of the scenes in which Gaz assembles Hot Metal, this brief scene definitively establishes the painful conflict stripping poses for men who have derived their deeply gendered notion of self by performing conventionally masculine forms of industrial labor.

Even more powerful, however, is a scene at the midpoint of the film when the filmmakers juxtapose scenes of the men of Hot Metal stripping during a dress rehearsal with scenes of Dave tediously patrolling the aisles of a store in his new job as security guard. In the jump cuts between the men’s awkward stripping (at which their test audience laughs) and Dave’s glazed expression of boredom, the stripping seems to emerge as a grotesque parody of the
humiliation Dave is quietly suffering. While the men clumsily expose their bodies before women’s waiting eyes, Dave figuratively sheds the trappings of masculinity that more skilled, remunerative industrial work afforded him. The filmmakers continue to play out this association of stripping with debasement when, at the conclusion of this complex episode, Gaz and Gerald are arrested for public indecency, and Gaz is barred from further contact with Nate, who was present at the dress rehearsal. By again invoking fatherhood as a locus of masculinity and actively inviting the audience to question whether Gaz should be exposing his son to his new career, the film once more suggests that stripping represents a degrading and unhealthy departure from conventional masculinity.

Yet while stripping epitomizes the sort of negative feminization of work that Haraway describes, *The Full Monty* also allows us to see the efforts of Hot Metal as a venture into the world of dance, and I would argue that dance in the film becomes a metaphor for the positive features that more flexibly gendered work identities afford us. In his famous account of the striptease, Roland Barthes identifies three “alibis” to which professional strippers resort in order subtly to deeroticize their performance, to give them “the icy indifference of skillful practitioners, haughtily taking refuge in the sureness of their technique” (87). Barthes complains that treating the striptease as art, work, or sport undermines the potential subversiveness of publicly exposing one’s body, and suggests that only amateur strippers, who have not yet mastered these alibis, or distancing techniques, offer performances “which unquestionably restore … to the spectacle its erotic power” (87). It seems troubling that for Barthes, who is speaking exclusively of female strippers, this perceived erotic power comes from viewing the amateur stripper “in a condition of weakness and timorousness” (88).

As I have already demonstrated, a number of episodes in *The Full Monty* depict the men as weakened and cowed by their inexpert attempts at disrobing—a phenomenon that the film treats as comical or sad, but never erotic. Yet the film also gradually constructs around the men’s stripping precisely the alibis that Barthes enumerates. The men of Hot Metal train for stripping by jogging and playing soccer, equating it with a sport, and the entire economic context that is established for Gaz’s decision to form the troupe establishes that their act of stripping is a form of work rather than some pure act of eroticism. I would argue, however, that the most important alibi in the film is art—the men’s increasing focus on the striptease as a skilled form of dance. It is this perspective that becomes crucial in Cattaneo's negotiation of the questions about gender and work that his film raises.

The film’s treatment of stripping as dance is clearly signaled by its only major instance of intertextuality. In an extended scene in the middle of the film Cattaneo asks us to understand *The Full Monty* as a rethinking of a well-
known 1983 American film, *Flashdance*. While a number of interesting comparisons could be drawn between the two films, here I'll concentrate on the ways Cattaneo's introduction of *Flashdance* establishes his own film's concern with dance as a skilled form of work. During this remarkable scene, the men of the just-formed dance group convene to watch the earlier dance film on video. As they view several brief scenes in which Alex, the female protagonist of *Flashdance*, works as a welder in Pittsburgh, Dave repeatedly insists that Alex's technique is flawed and that even he, though unschooled in welding, could weld "better than some woman." Yet once her famous gymnastic dance sequence begins, the men fall into admiring silence, punctuated only by Gerald's approving remark, "she can dance now, can't she." On one level, the gendered terms that Dave voices in the scene seem to reinforce the suggestion that the men are moving from a masculine into a feminine sphere, but more important to my reading of this scene is the ways it draws attention to skill. Alex's level of skill both as a welder and as a dancer become the central issue among the men who watch her. Indeed, in theory, since they intend to be erotic dancers, Gaz and his cohort should be viewing those early scenes in the film where Alex dances at a local strip club. Yet, instead, the men study the scene in which Alex auditions to enter ballet school.

This emphasis on the skill required to dance professionally is, in fact, a remarkably constant element of *The Full Monty*, although its function as a comedy would seem to militate against the men's training seriously for their performance. When Gaz and Dave first approach Gerald, who they have learned is a proficient ballroom dancer, Gerald rejects their request that he be their dance coach. "Dancers," Gerald states, "have coordination, skill, timing, fitness, and grace. Take a long hard look in the mirror." While Gaz's desperate insistence that the men must expose their entire bodies—the full monty—seems to imply that selling themselves only as bodies is their one hope of success, their rehearsals, training, and attention to detail reassert the place of skill in the work of dancing.

Such a shift to the discourse of skill could be interpreted as a reassertion of a purely masculinized notion of work. As Ava Baron has discussed, historically, the notion of skill has been systematically attached to the work done by men, and withheld from that done by women, regardless of the relative complexity of the tasks performed:

> Abilities that women acquire informally in the home or in such "women's jobs" as sewing and typing often are defined as unskilled and go unrewarded by promotion or wages. Further, skill labels gave male workers leverage both as men and as workers. The craftworker's belief that skill was linked to manhood influenced the form and content of class conflicts and relations between male and female workers. (14)

Given this longstanding link between skill and masculinity, the Hot Metal dancers' training seems to be an expression of resistance to the feminization
stripping implies. Yet, as Angela McRobbie has argued in her discussion of “Fame, Flashdance, and Fantasies of Achievement,” dance is unique as a contemporary arena of skill because of its particular availability to girls and women: “Its art lies,” she writes, “in its ability to create a fantasy of change, escape, or achievement for girls and young women who are surrounded by much more mundane and limiting leisure opportunities” (41). McRobbie goes on to read a number of recent representations of dance, including Flashdance, as depictions of dance as a form of skilled work that is accessible to young women.

Dance operates as a metaphor for an external reality which is unconstrained by the limits and expectations of gender identity and which successfully and painlessly transports its subjects from a passive to a more active psychic position. What is charted repeatedly in these stories is this transition from childhood dependency to adolescent independence which in turn is gained through achievement in dance or in the performing arts and therefore in the outside world. (45)

While stripping, then, becomes a metaphor for the negative aspects of the current feminization of work, dance’s capacity to liberate its participants from the “limits and expectations of gender identity” suggests it as a more positive metaphoric alternative within The Full Monty.

Indeed, not only is dance elevated as a skilled, multigendered activity in the film, but it is also depicted as a collective form of labor. While in virtually every scene in which the men practice disrobing they are shown separately on screen, sequences featuring their rehearsal of dance steps—including their final, highly synchronized performance—depict them working as a unit. The longstanding association of collectivity with the feminine here reminds us of how reconceptualizing work as a feminized activity might further empower workers.

By exploring so many of the meanings that might be attached to the notion of a “feminization” of contemporary work, The Full Monty suggests both the trouble and the promise that workers within postindustrial societies face as economic and technological trends profoundly subvert work’s conventional association with masculinity. Like Haraway, Cattaneo understands work to be undergoing practical and epistemological changes under the twin impact of cybernetic automation and women’s growing presence in the workplace. And, as in Haraway, the process of regendering “work” as feminine produces in the film a transformation not only of gender conventions, but also of how work and technology—two cornerstones of American life—signify. In the portrait of the “feminization” of postindustrial work that Cattaneo produces, we find the sorts of ambiguities that make Haraway’s claim so compelling. For some, the feminization of work marks a tragic endpoint to an American sensibility that celebrated work as the apex of masculinity and autonomy. For others, the feminization of work becomes a progressive paradigm that offers the means by which the nature and practices of work can be reimagined.
Finally, such a depiction of contemporary labor also reveals something about the interplay of contemporary significations of work and gender that Haraway’s brief formulation cannot. By suggesting that the highly flexible modes of postindustrial work open the way to gender redefinition, the film also foregrounds the fundamental performativity of our identities as workers. While our work lives seem the domain of our daily existence that is most overtly and rigidly policed by institutional forces, Cattaneo’s turn to gender in his depiction of work reasserts the ways that work is always a site of active definition and redefinition of our identities. While in its current hierarchical structure these modes of performativity are often hegemonic, understanding the postindustrial workplace as the site where social norms dictate that we should perform fluid selves illuminates its epistemological potential. In simpler terms, if late twentieth-century work has become the site where our very gender, once understood as the most essential element of our identities, may be so blatantly, publicly reconstituted, work must also be the site where other essential transformations of selfhod can be—must be—enacted.

Works Cited