

# Master Hands

By Richard Marback and Jim Brown

“Master Hands,” directed by Jam Handy and filmed at the Flint, Michigan General Motors plant, follows the construction of an automobile from the casting of molten metal into an engine block to driving the finished product off the assembly line. Running time is 33 minutes. The purpose of “Master Hands,” as explained in a text-over shot at the beginning of the film, is to provide Americans an opportunity to “see at work the skilled craftsmen whose master hands command the great machinery of production.”



*A frame enlargement from the film illustrates the theme of its message. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

Visually, the film focuses on the hands of the auto workers and the machines they interact with as they are at work at their stations on the assembly line: repetitively stamping metal parts, attaching pieces of engines together, welding parts of the car frame to each other, and transferring various portions of the finished car to the next station. The repetition of the work is represented visually. Early in the film, at approximately 11:53, a worker turns a cam shaft over and back in rhythm with an overhead press moving up and down pounding the metal into its final shape. The camera alternately zooms in on the deft flip of the worker's wrist as he twists the long tongs with which he holds the end of the cam shaft, the steady pulse of his foot on the lever working the press, the volume of the press itself as it pounds the white hot metal into its final form. Later in the film, at 19:38, a more panoramic shot captures the landscape of the factory floor. Several rows of conveyors send car chassis past rows of auto workers who line both sides of the assembly line. When the conveyors stop, the auto workers move forward together, their movements synchronized with the machine, and as they step back the conveyor again propels the endless rows of chassis toward them and past them. The film conveys enormous manufacturing power both by juxtaposing close up shots of the worker's hands with the machines they manipulate and by zooming out to wider shots of the assembly line and the factory floor.

The film contains no narration. Instead, the visual choreography of the assembly line is accompanied by an original musical score, composed by Samuel Benavie and performed by the Detroit Philharmonic Orchestra. The music lends dramatic power to the repetitions and rhythms of the men and machines.

During the stamping of the cam shaft, for example, the up and down movement of the heavy machine is accompanied by the rhythm of a monotonous bass beat over which light strings contrast with flowing crescendos. The drama of the sound track builds as the end of the assembly line draws nearer. The bass recedes and horns begin to dominate, heralding forth the finished product. As the music plays in the closing shot of “Master Hands” the camera zooms in through the driver's side window of the finished car, focusing on the man's hands that turn the ignition, grab the steering wheel, and drive off as the camera zooms out to frame the car driving out of a driveway, onto a tree-lined road, and away toward the horizon.

“Master Hands” is significant for a number of reasons. It is a representative early work of Henry Jamison “Jam” Handy who pioneered corporate promotional films and whose Jam Handy Organization produced promotional and instructional films for the United States military during World War II, as well as a wide range of other promotional and instructional films well into the 1960s. It was also filmed just prior to the historic Flint sit-down strike through which auto workers won union recognition. The grievances of the auto workers who participated in the Flint sit-down strike are relevant to the other reason “Master Hands” is significant. As the scenes in the film suggest, work in the auto plants was not only repetitive—workers stood at the same station for an entire shift, performing the same task over and over—the work required the men to keep pace with the speed of the assembly line itself—a pace driven by the need to fill manufacturing quotas rather than the

care of a craftsman. The tension between craftsmanship and mass production is captured in the ancient Greek word *techne* from which we derive the English word “technology.” A *techne* is a craft, an art of making something that necessarily requires working deliberately and purposefully with materials. A “technology,” such as the assembly line, makes manufacturing more efficient by, in part, routinizing the deliberate and purposeful practices of the craftsman. Whether deliberately or not, “Master Hands” emphasizes the tensions between “craftsman” and “laborer” at a moment in the history of mass production when that tension was readily apparent.

The film’s treatment of repetition and gesture in the plant make it rich source material for examining the relationship between humans and technology both during the heyday of a manufacturing economy and in what is often referred to as today’s “information economy.” How is technology reshaping gesture? How do our tools change how the body works, and how do they reconfigure the body’s potentials and capacities?

These were the questions that we were interested in when we organized a “Mashup Roundtable” in 2011, the results of which were published in the open access journal “enculturation.” Richard (Marback) expressed interest in remixing the film, juxtaposing the footage with a range of materials, but he also did not want the video to be supported by an explanatory essay. Instead, he hoped that the mashup itself would stand on its own, a performance of his arguments regarding (among other things) how technology shapes and affects the body. Jim (Brown) suggested that Richard publish his mashup in “enculturation,” where Jim was serving as a managing editor, and the idea grew into a larger roundtable that invited people from across the field of rhetoric and writing to imagine how they might engage “Master Hands” by way of a video remix or mashup. What resulted were four mashups, each of which takes the questions raised by “Master Hands” in different directions. Richard’s mashup was put into conversation with projects by Bonnie Kyburz, Jeff Rice, Jody Shipka, and Anthony Stagliano, all of

whom were presented with four constraints. Mashup artists had to use footage from “Master Hands,” could not provide a companion text, and had to create a mashup that was no longer than ten minutes. We also invited five others to act as respondents. Those respondents are Will Burdette, Bump Halbritter, Billie Hara, Jentery Sayers, and Geof Sirc, and they spent a week discussing the mashups. At the end of the week, the conversation was closed and the comments remain as part of this [publication](#).

These mashups overlap and diverge in important ways, and the conversation by respondents unpacks some of the arguments made in the videos. Both the videos and the resulting discussion demonstrate that “Master Hands” is not only an interesting film to critique but is also a site for what rhetoricians call invention—the creation of new arguments out of existing materials and commonplaces. Beyond its fascinating material, the fact that “Master Hands” is in the public domain increases its value, since future artists and writers can continue to invent anew with Handy’s film.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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