

Possibility and Loss: The Sydney Steel Experience

Making Steel. Dir./Wri. Elizabeth Beaton. Prod. Elizabeth Beaton, Tamara Lynch, and Stephan Steinhouse. The Steel Project, Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton, and the National Film Board of Canada. 1992. 59 min.

Review by Peter Latta

Making Steel is an engaging video that discusses the remarkable and complex story of one of Canada's largest industrial plants. By using a combination of media and some very dramatic footage shot in the plant, the producers have created a unique video which will have value for many years.

This 1992 video co-production by the Beaton Institute Steel Project of the University College of Cape Breton and the National Film Board is one of the first efforts since the 1960s to document in film the steel plant in Sydney, Cape Breton. The Steel Project is a long-term project of the University Archives to preserve the records of the steel plant.

The video is actually three discrete, twenty-minute programs which, as stated in the introduction, "explore the Cape Breton experience from 1899, and illustrate aspects of steel making which were common to the industry across North America." The three sections cover the principal themes in the process of steel production—"Technology," "History," and "Culture of Work." The neat divisions between each section make this hour-long production quite useful for teachers.

Of the three parts I had most difficulty with the first section. "Technology" describes the process of steel-making in an integrated steel plant using raw materials, as opposed to the production of steel from scrap, and states that "more than 50% of all steel is produced in this way." This claim is not entirely accurate, particularly since the open-hearth process used in the Sydney plant and described at length in the film was, by 1967, when the plant was made a Crown Corporation, a well known technical anachronism in the world of steel-making. By the 1950s, the open-hearth process was being rapidly replaced by electric processes at steel mills across the world. While the shots of the old open hearth at Sydney add greatly to the interest of this video, it would be wrong to assume that the steel-making process described here is somehow indicative of steel-making in any contemporary sense. Indeed, it was this "museum piece" which stimulated the long awaited modernization of the plant. *Making Steel* appropriately leaves off the technical description of steel-making with the 1989-90 beginning

of the installation of a new electric “mini-mill”—a term that ranks among the greatest of misnomers. The lack of an historical technological context, however, does not help our understanding of steel-making either in Sydney or elsewhere.

Each stage of steel-making is outlined and is quite faultless in accuracy, but it is clearly written for the initiated. For viewers familiar with the metal industries, this will not be too objectionable, but I fear the rest will remain confused, and without any increased appreciation of industrial processes.

Several animated schematics of the processes do help the viewer make sense of what is, unarguably, a very large and confusing place. Much footage was also shot on site just for this video. It would seem, however, that there was apparently little direction given the camera operators, for the video consists largely of action shots of billowing smoke and flame, rolling steel rails, and other dramatic images, with little attempt to place the action in the specific physical context of the industrial technology. Some indistinct aerial views of the plant, for example, evidently intended to key the viewer to the site, simply do not explain where the work was done, or how the several physical processes worked in relation to one another.

The second section, “History,” recounts much of the current scholarship about Canadian steel-making communities and Maritime development and underdevelopment. The history of the steel plant is outlined by focusing on its economic, political, and labour components. Unfortunately, in the telling of the history by those who were not there, what was an exciting story becomes less so. I am puzzled why the producers did not include the voices of the workers, managers, and politicians who shaped this history. It cannot be for lack of oral history resources. There are many fine collections of recorded recollections of industrial workers, such as the memoirs of George MacEachern, one of Cape Breton’s leading labour activists. These first-person narratives of personal experience would have brought an immediacy and added authority to this part of the production.

There are obvious silences in *Making Steel*. Whereas, for example, the NFB production *Remember Africville* relies on oral history to give voice to those on both sides of the story, *Making Steel* includes little by or about politicians and plant managers and their role in steel-making. Similarly ignored is a large percentage of the mainly female staff who toiled in the offices. Women who replaced the men on the shop floor during war time are spoken of, but their sisters in the offices are overlooked. Of equal interest are the lives of those who stayed at home—the wives of the workers and managers. What might their experiences tell us about the broader effects of the steel plant in the community?

The final section, “Culture at Work,” is the strongest. Here, recollections by shop-floor workers reveal critical insights into the cultural organization of the work-place, and why there is both joy and heartbreak in industrial

work. These narratives of personal experience are valuable. While we do not see the speakers, their words overlay images of the plant. It is here that the participants in the steel story are allowed to be heard, and with an eloquence that comes of experience they give an heroic voice to a lifestyle few of us will ever know for ourselves.

There is clearly a sense of loss portrayed in this video. Lost opportunities, lost friendships, and a working way of life. In some ways, the record of the plant created by this video may be a record of that sense of possibility and loss.

Having watched *Making Steel*, I feel the technology of the plant and much of its history are yet to be recorded. Although there are ways that the steel plant story could be told more effectively, this video remains a solid introduction to the complexity of the Sydney experience, and what such an industry can mean to a community.

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