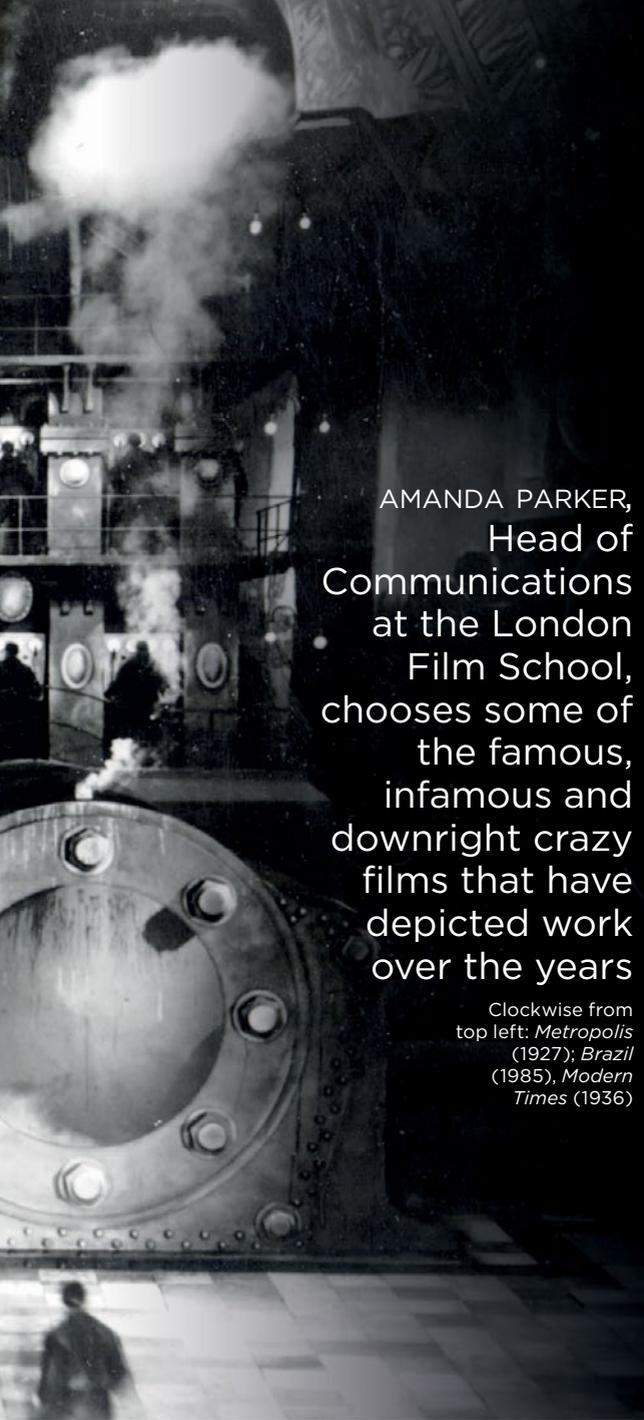


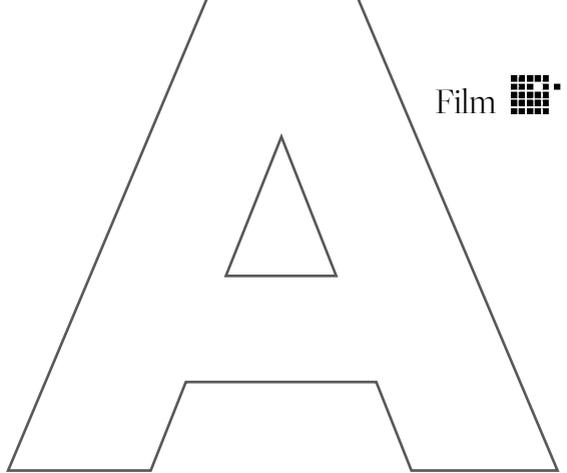
PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK/ALAMY

LIGHT PAY



AMANDA PARKER,
Head of
Communications
at the London
Film School,
chooses some of
the famous,
infamous and
downright crazy
films that have
depicted work
over the years

Clockwise from
top left: *Metropolis*
(1927); *Brazil*
(1985), *Modern
Times* (1936)



“All you need for a movie is a gun and a girl.”
Jean-Luc Godard’s quote summed up what is, for
so many of us, the appeal of films. But of course
there’s so much more to (cinematic) life than action
movies and rom-coms.

Given that we spend a third of our lives working,
it’s little wonder that the workplace itself gets big
screen treatment. Since the early days of cinema,
films have charted our relationship with work – and
there have been several stand-out classics that
have helped us seek reflection of our own lives in
the workplace – but somehow a better, shinier
version of us, and of the working experience.

Charlie Chaplin’s mass appeal lay in his Everyman
persona: there could be no performer better placed
to gently reassure society’s growing anxieties about
the world of work through comedy. And what →



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better vehicle could there possibly be than *Modern Times* (1936) to speak to a generation of film-goers, threatened by increasing automation in the workplace (Henry Ford having revolutionised the idea of factory work more than 20 years earlier), and the growing scarcity of jobs as the Great Depression deepened.

Modern Times works because it's one of the first comedic articulations of society's struggle to come to terms with increasing automation, reassuring viewers that the human spirit could – and would – overcome the uncertainties of increasing joblessness and poverty. It's a theme explored almost a decade earlier in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (Germany, 1927) in a world as far removed as possible from the gentle lampooning of Chaplin's factory. Lang's terrifying, highly stylised world of hyper-automation remains a landmark in film-making for its unique, and even today remarkable, cinematic vision of an automated dystopia. Reflecting the mass-appeal of the Futurism art movement through both set design and cinematography, it chimes with Chaplin's later comic treatment of man vs.

machine and warns us not to idolise the machine, while simultaneously promising that ultimately the human mind will be our saviour.

Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (UK, 1985) looks at the absurdity of the workplace when we become slaves to the rules to the point of ignoring the value of what we do.

Gilliam's surreal, Kafkaesque hero Sam Lowry (played by Jonathan Pryce) is all too aware of the purposelessness of his actions, and it's hard to find a film that better illustrates the ridiculousness, and mind-numbing power, of bureaucracy with award-winning design and effects, and Oscar nominations for the screenplay and artwork.

One sure-fire route to success in the workplace is to win over the boss, right? Released in 2006, *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel, UK) gave us an unparalleled insight into the cryptic and deliberately esoteric world of fashion, and allows film lovers worldwide to sympathise with the plight of Andy (played by Anne Hathaway) trying to please the boss that's impossible to please. The world of exploited interns, fashion and sociopathic leadership was stripped bare in this warts-and-all tale, which, appropriately enough, also went down as one of the most expensively costumed films in history.

The world of fashion from the perspective of the model won acclaim in India as one of the most successful films without a male lead. Madhu Bhandarkar's *Fashion* (2008, India) charts the darker side of fashion through →

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In *Modern Times*
Chaplin warns
us not to idolise
machines

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Top to bottom:
Working Girl (1988); *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006); *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013); *Office Space* (1999); *Rocket Singh* (2009)



Top to bottom:
His Girl Friday
 (1940); *The*
Network (1976);
9 to 5 (1980);
Made in
Dagenham
 (2010)



Meghna (played by Priyanka Chopra), following the gruelling and at times exploitative side of modelling success.

The purported links between sociopathy and leadership excellence are well-documented. *The Wolf of Wall Street* (US, 2013) is Martin Scorsese's paean to the heights of corporate success: it is also a stark warning of the dangers of that success. Between *The Devil Wears Prada* and *The Wolf of Wall Street* one thing is clear: the trope of the awful boss is gender-neutral. Mike Nichols' 1988 rom-com *Working Girl* (UK) made Melanie Griffith a household name and introduced us to the nightmare female boss, played to chilling effect by Sigourney Weaver.

New entrants to the workplace rarely find a focus in film: Shimit Amin's 2009 Bollywood feel-good movie *Rocket Singh* promises us that honesty, hard work and big dreams can win the day. He's the antidote to the slacker of *Office Space* (US, 1999), where a steadfast refusal to play the game in an office of white-collar IT torpor lands Peter Gibbons (Ron Livingston) on the management fast track. This film, like *Rocket Singh*, focuses on the mid-level worker, promising huge returns for the little guy who

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schemes big: perhaps because of this, both films have achieved cult status.

The role of women in the workplace (as seen on film) has reflected the legislative changes that have helped women become more visible in the workforce. The game-changer in portrayals of women in the workplace was the 1976 US blockbuster *Network*. Faye Dunaway plays the iconic, infamous female boss in Sidney

Lumet's prescient portrayal of a world of broadcast news where grabbing headlines carries more weight than truth.

A generation earlier, in Howard Hawks' 1940s classic *His Girl Friday*, Rosalind Russell is the ace reporter who's torn between her career and her desire to have children: women in the workplace is a novel idea, and serves as the film's driving narrative. Colin Higgins' 1980s classic *9 to 5* (US) sees secretaries club together in secrecy to exact revenge on a sexist boss; by 2010, women seeking equality are represented very differently on film. Nigel Cole's *Made in Dagenham* shows a strident, vocal female-led revolt against sexism through the pay gender gap. And, just as in Lone Scherfig's *Their Finest* (2017, UK), there's no longer any subterfuge required in seeking a rightful place and recognition in the world of work. ■

With contributions from London Film School tutors Brian Dunnigan, Femi Kolade and Gisli Snaer.

London Film School is the UK's oldest film school teaching postgraduate MA courses in Film Making, Screenwriting and International Film Business.