



UiT

THE ARCTIC
UNIVERSITY
OF NORWAY

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

Apartment Rising

The “New Workers Collective”

Thomas Buikema Fjærtøft

Master thesis in Visual Cultural Studies November 2013



Abstract

This research thesis is based on fieldwork conducted at a construction site in Oslo, Norway. By describing the complexity of nationalities, languages, trades, worker groups and companies in the field, I show the reality that faces the informants and how labor migration has transformed the workforce in the construction industry. At the construction site people would speak at least fourteen different languages and belong to nineteen different companies, with different people, languages and trades moving in and out. How do people relate to each other and create a common ground? I focus on how these social relations have changed by comparing them to Lysgaard's influential concept *the workers' collective*, in his work published for the first time in 1961. By contrasting my experiences with those of Lysgaard, I see how these transformations resemble the changes described by Bauman (2000), from a solid to a liquid modernity. One of the main points is that the construction site is a liminal place where workers are in-between buildings, countries and languages. The categories and relations are not stable and predictable, but rather fluid and in flux. In this environment people use humor and active engagement to create a diverse community together. This contemporary community is not the same as the workers collective described by Lysgaard. It does not spur collective action and deadlines, and the tender system make the community vulnerable. The new workers' collective is a resurrection in a different form - more fluid, fragmented, fragile and forceless. A part of this thesis is also the film "Apartment Rising" that shows, more than explains, contemporary reality facing workers and how they create common ground.

Acknowledgements

Doing research is never an individual endeavor. I have been lucky to have people supporting me and being patient throughout writing this thesis and while I was out on fieldwork. The most important people I would like to thank are my informants who have been patient and considerate towards me and my camera, always trying to answer my question. I have chosen to make you anonymous to respect your situations. I would also like to thank the general contractor that gave me access to their construction site without any strings attached.

I would also like to thank Bård Bjerkeli from Oslo Building Workers Union for showing me around Oslo's construction sites.

I have learned a lot from the VCS program, and I would like to thank my fellow students and my teachers there: Maria, Dasha, Sandro, Thomas, Kilian, Aliou, Orsi, Ralph and Konrad, thanks for fruitful discussions and feedback. Trond Waage and Gery Kildea, thanks for the help you gave me by pushing both my film and my thesis forward.

I am especially grateful to my advisor Peter I. Crawford for always supporting me.

I would also like to express thanks to patient friends and family members.

This thesis is dedicated to my brother the electrician Michael Buikema Fjærtøft.

Table of Contents:

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iii</i>
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. CONTEXTUALIZATION: THE CONSTRUCTION SITE	4
2.1 THE BUILDING.....	4
2.2 THE BARRACKS.....	5
2.3 THE WORKERS	5
2.3.1 <i>The Carpenters from the Baltics</i>	6
2.3.2 <i>The Plumbers from Norway</i>	7
2.3.4 <i>The Painters from all over the world</i>	8
2.3.5 <i>The Handyemen from the Caribbean and Africa</i>	9
2.3.6 <i>Other groups of workers</i>	9
2.4 THE SUPERIORS.....	10
3. METHODOLOGY	11
3.1 MY WAY INTO THE FIELD: ACCESS AND CHALLENGES	11
3.2 INTRODUCING THE CAMERA REQUIRED A CHANGE IN APPROACH	12
3.3 NEGOTIATING MY ROLE AS A RESEARCHER	13
3.4 CHOOSING HOW AND WHOM TO FILM	14
3.5 THE POWER OF THE CAMERA	15
3.6 THE EDITING PROCESS	19
4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS	23
4.1. THE WORKERS' COLLECTIVE.....	23
4.2. LIQUID MODERNITY.....	25
5. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS	28
5.1 THEMES	28
5.1.1 <i>Friendly relations and humor</i>	28
5.1.2 <i>The elevator and shared norms</i>	30
5.1.3 <i>Cigarettes and breaks</i>	31
5.1.4 <i>Superiors and subordinates</i>	34
5.1.6 <i>Deadlines and conflicts</i>	39
5.1.7 <i>A non-theme: The union</i>	40
5.2 THE WORKERS' COLLECTIVE: THEN AND NOW	41
5.2.1 <i>Trade union and traditional workers' perspectives</i>	42
5.2.2 <i>Status at the construction site regarding Lysgaard's three conditions for a workers' collective</i>	45
5.3 THE FLUID COLLECTIVE	50
5.3.1. <i>Bauman's concept of community</i>	50
5.3.2 <i>Fluid power</i>	52
5.2.3 <i>Liminality: Betwixt and between</i>	55
5.3.4 <i>The fragile collective</i>	57
6. CONCLUSION: FLUID, FRAGMENTED, FRAGILE AND FORCELESS	59
BIBLIOGRAPHY:	63

1. Introduction

“You should ask the hard questions, the ones about quality control and safety. Right now there is complete chaos and people are not talking to each other.” A foreman at Construction AS

This thesis is the result of fieldwork at a Norwegian construction site during the spring and summer of 2012. As a result of hard work trying to gain access to a construction site, I was introduced to a world dominated by a multitude of languages and nationalities, of dangerous materials and safety hazards, but also of humor, warmth and solidarity across nationalities and languages.

The motivation for my fieldwork at a construction site was that I wanted to investigate the consequences of the largest flow of migrants to Norway in the country’s history (Friberg 2011). In the public debate there is an ongoing discussion about the effects, especially regarding *“social dumping”*, where the concern is that wages and working conditions are being affected, due to the willingness of labor migrants to work for lower wages and under worse conditions than their Norwegian counterparts. In response to this, labor unions in Norway have tried to organize workers coming from other countries into Norwegian labor unions, as a way to counter this tendency.

Labor migration is not new when it comes to construction, as there have been workers moving between countries in search of work for a long time (Bull, Jensen, and Sverdrup 1985, 61-62). What is new is the scale and amount of workers who migrate, especially to Oslo, the capital of Norway. 183 000 labor migrants came to Norway from 1990 until 2012¹. The majority of these migrants started coming in 2004 as a result of Eastern European countries joining the EU. This meant that people from countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia had the right to seek employment in Norway and other European states. The effect of this is that 29 percent of all registered construction workers in Norway now have a different citizenship than Norwegian². The construction sites are increasingly multinational arenas where people from many different countries meet. I see this as a result of a larger societal trend regarding globalization processes and the opening of borders. What is the consequence of these rapid changes for workers and worksites?

¹ Statistics Norway: <http://www.ssb.no/befolkning/statistikker/innvgrunn> (Accessed 8.11.13)

² BNL-RAPPORT / NR. 7 2012 [ID-kortene i tall](#) (Accessed 29.10.13)

My initial research project involved collaboration with the Oslo Building Workers Union to see how they recruited members across different nationalities and languages. I chose this union because they actively tried to recruit migrant workers and respond to labor migration challenges by including people from different languages and nationalities and working together towards common goals. However, it proved to be difficult to access construction sites, especially with a camera together with trade union representatives. The result of this was that I changed approach and broadened the scope of my project. This led me instead to focus on the construction site as a workplace where various nationalities, languages and trades interacted. Thus, my fieldwork was two-fold. First, it involved going on rounds with the union representatives at different construction sites where I was unable to use my camera. The second and main part was participant observation at a construction site where I got access with the camera, but without the union. It is this location that is the subject of both my film and my thesis. At the construction site where I was allowed to film, my main focus was on how the workers were able work together and create a sense of community.

To understand the change labor migration has created in the culture and dynamics at the workspace I have chosen to draw on a classical sociological work *The Workers Collective* (Lysgaard and Kalleberg 2001) as a contrast to the reality facing the construction workers I encountered during my fieldwork. Lysgaard's main point was that workers during the 1950s would come together and form a collective that would protect them from their superiors' control and serve as a buffer between management's demand for efficiency and their own demands for safety and dignity. By looking at the workers' collective and comparing it to a contemporary construction site, I hope to shed light on interaction among the workers and on the power relations between the employers and the employees. During my fieldwork I quickly understood that there was a big difference between the factory described by Lysgaard and the modern construction site. Because of language barriers, temporary employment and labor migration, the groups mentioned by Lysgaard were more heterogeneous and complex than during the 1950s. This led me to my main question: What is the status of the workers' collective at a modern multinational construction site? Is the idea of the workers' collective at all useful in today's globalized workspace? And if not, how do people relate to each other and create a common ground?

I will juxtapose Lysgaard's theory with that of Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) newer work on liquid modernity, which describes forces that are changing our contemporary society. According to Bauman we are now living in a time of global capital characterized by rapid change, economic liberalization, individualization and mobility. Some of the consequences of this are insecurity and the lack of a sense of belonging. One of Bauman's points is that old concepts may no longer be valid, or may need to be redefined, in light of societal changes. He looks at how community has changed and needs to be redefined, and I want to see if the same is true for the workers' collective.

In this thesis, I will first (Chapter 2), contextualize the construction site and the workers there. In the next chapter (Chapter 3), I will discuss the methodological aspects of my fieldwork, including how I got access to the field and how the use of the camera gave access to some information while canceling out other types of information. In the third part (Chapter 4), I will introduce the theoretical frameworks I will use to interpret my material, that of Lysgaard on the workers' collective and Bauman on fluid modernity. Next (Chapter 5), I will sort my observations into themes and use the theoretical frameworks mentioned together with other anthropological and sociological theories to analyze my findings. Finally, (Chapter 6), I will sum up my findings and draw conclusions regarding what characterizes today's workers' community at a construction site in Norway.

2. Contextualization: The construction site

“The construction site is a dangerous place. There is a shaft that runs through the center of the building, all the twelve floors that you can fall through.... There is also the scaffolding. Make sure you watch out when you move on and off it. Sometimes there is a gap between the building and the scaffolding.”-Linda, responsible for logistics and safety at the construction site.

Construction is one of the most dangerous occupations in Europe³, and during the course of my fieldwork there where two fatal accidents at other construction sites in Oslo⁴.

My fieldwork was conducted at a construction site located in the eastern part of Oslo. The city with its approximately 620 000 inhabitants⁵ is one of the fastest growing cities in Europe⁶, mostly due to migration. The majority of labor migrants come from new member states of the EU, with a high concentration of workers from Poland and Lithuania. Most of these migrants work within construction (Vattø 2008, 7).

2.1 The building

The construction site was an apartment complex consisting of two twelve-story buildings. Each building was made up of either two or four apartments on each floor. When I first entered the construction site, the concrete framework of the building was finished and the workers were building the interior walls and finishing up the exterior façade. The workers would start on the first floor and work their way to the top. The carpenters were the first people to start on a floor, separating each floor into different rooms by putting up walls. Then the electricians and plumbers would connect the apartment to the rest of the building. The next people in were the painters, who would carry in big machines and plaster whole rooms before moving in with paintbrushes and rollers to paint each floor. After the room was painted, another set of carpenters would come in and lay the flooring in each building. Each of these teams had a deadline for when they should be finished on each floor. There was a high division of labor between the different workers, and especially if the carpenters were

³Eurostat: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Health_and_safety_at_work_statistics (Accessed 7.11.13)

⁴NRK: <http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/distrikt/ostlandssendingen/1.8110297> (Accessed 7.11.13)

⁵ If you include the metropolitan area the population reaches approximately 1.5 million inhabitants. SSB <http://www.ssb.no/befolkning/statistikker/folkemengde/aar/2013-03-13?fane=tabell#content> (Accessed 7.11.13)

delayed, it would affect the others. Each floor was then inspected once a week by the general contractor who would do inspection rounds on the site

2.2 The barracks

When the workers were not working in and on the building they would be in the barracks that were located close by. These were temporary offices and locker rooms that could be dismantled and moved to another construction site when the building was completed. The largest barrack contained the administrative staff on the top floor where they had their offices, reception and a meeting room. This was where the different workers would go if they needed to clarify something with one of the engineers or the project managers. These offices were a higher standard location in which work boots were not permitted. It was a clean atmosphere and workers would not go beyond the first reception area with the exception of a weekly progress meeting.

This was in contrast to the floor underneath. Here, the workers would meet and talk to each other. It consisted of a lunchroom and a locker room, which only the workers would use. This was their space, and was supplied with a few water heaters and refrigerators. The workers would eat in their work clothes. Migrant workers mostly used this lunchroom, and during lunch people would speak in Lithuanian, Russian, Polish, English and Kurdish. The next building consisted of a storage room on the first floor and a break room and lunchroom for the Norwegian workers on the second floor. Their lunchroom was smaller and only had one refrigerator.

2.3 The workers

There were on average 70 workers at the construction site, all employed by a total of 19 companies. Within these companies workers had 17 different nationalities and spoke at least fourteen different languages. Workers were employed according to their trade, but trade and nationality and language often overlapped, such as the carpenters who came from the Baltic States and the electricians who came from Norway. This made for a situation where communication between the workers often took place in their native language, and it limited to some extent the use of a shared language. The shared languages across nationalities at the site were not only English and Norwegian, but also Russian and Arabic.

As well as representing differences in language, the workers also varied when it came to the amount of time they spent at the construction site. This again affected how many people they knew at the construction site. The bathroom-installers were the group of people that were at

the construction site for the shortest period of time. They were two Polish workers who had lived in London before moving to Oslo. They relocated from construction site to construction site and would move prefabricated bathrooms, produced in Lithuania, into place. They would do this for a couple of days before moving on to the next building. In contrast, the engineers would stay at the construction site from when the first cement was poured until the new owners would take over the building. The workers I followed the most fell between these two categories.

I followed mainly five different groups during my fieldwork at the construction site. This was both because these were the people that I first came into contact with, and they were the ones who allowed me to film them and also were the most interested in taking part in the project. They were also quite different, so I could get insight into the diversity in and amongst the groups at the construction site. They spoke different languages, had different nationalities, represented different trades and subcontracting companies, and worked different shifts and time periods.

2.3.1 The Carpenters from the Baltics

The biggest group of workers at the construction site was the Lithuanian and Latvian carpenters. They were anywhere between ten to twelve workers, but this varied from day to day depending on how much work there was. In addition, they would travel back and forth to the Baltics to visit family and friends for two weeks every six weeks. This meant that it was quite unpredictable who was at the construction site and how long they had been there. They were all employed by the same company and worked these special shifts. To compensate for the two weeks off they would work longer hours than the others, from seven in the morning until six in the evening.

Their work was mostly *half-skilled* manual labor⁷. They put up plasterboard walls, fitted plaster panels on the exterior of the building and fitted insulation. When they started on a floor, it was just a bare concrete skeleton. They would then follow the blueprints and put up walls so that the different apartments and rooms would emerge. The carpenters' work was hard physical labor with strict deadlines for when a floor was supposed to be finished. If the carpenters had misunderstood the blueprints it would delay the workers who would follow. If

⁷ By using the term half-skilled I mean manual labor that demands a certain skill set but not formal qualifications. To be able to work at a construction in some trades such as electrical work it is demanded that you need a Norwegian "*fagbrev*" –trade certificate.

the carpenters made a mistake the electricians could not start working and the painters would not be able to begin painting. This happened a few times and created a lot of tension between the carpenters and the other workers.

Such misunderstandings often happened because of the varied language skills amongst the carpenters. They were workers from both Lithuania and Latvia that worked together. They did not understand each other's native language so they would use Russian to communicate. As English and Norwegian were the shared languages used by the other workers, the carpenters were quite isolated. Even though they spoke Russian, Lithuanian and Latvian to each other, a few knew some very basic English. This was essential in understanding and communicating with the other workers at the construction site.

One of my main informants, Marijus⁸, was one of the Lithuanian carpenters. He differed from the others by learning Norwegian and had moved permanently to Norway. The two other informants were Giedrius, who had been a labor migrant for six years, and Gregorijus, who was the oldest worker and one of the informal bosses, directing work and making sure that the others had the material they needed.

2.3.2 The Plumbers from Norway

The next biggest group was the plumbers who varied between five and seven people depending on how much work their company had at the construction site. Most of the plumbers were Norwegian citizens, and quite a few of them had backgrounds from other countries. Two spoke Turkish, one was from Syria and spoke Arabic, and one was German and knew both German and Norwegian. But even though the plumbers had backgrounds from many different countries they all spoke Norwegian together while working. This meant that they spoke the same language as the administrative staff and the engineers.

While I was at the construction site the plumbers worked on connecting the prefabricated bathrooms to the water and the sewage system, as well as installing all the other plumbing needed for a twelve-story building. The work demanded a high level of skill, as they had to adapt their work to blueprints that often were faulty. This created some disagreement with the Baltic carpenters, as they would follow the drawings down to the smallest detail.

⁸ All names in this paper are fictional in order to protect the identity of my informants.

A normal day at work for the plumbers would be from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon, except for Fridays when they quit work a bit earlier. My informants amongst the plumbers also represented their diversity: Patrick and Jonas were Norwegian; Furat was from Turkey, and Hans from Germany. Two of the plumbers I followed were apprentices on their way to get their certification and the rest were already certified⁹.

2.3.4 The Painters from all over the world

One of the most diverse groups was the painters. They did not fit into either the category of “Norwegian” or labor migrant group. Some came as refugees, others came seeking employment. They had different backgrounds and spoke a lot of different languages. Depending on how much work there was, they were from three to five people painting at the construction site. Salih, who was Kurdish and came to Norway 10 years ago, was the boss of the painters. Together with another Kurd, one Macedonian, a few Romanians and a Lithuanian, he was responsible for painting the interiors of the building.

This group did not have a fixed common language as the other groups. Instead, they would speak a combination of different languages depending on who was present. If Salih and the other Kurd were working together they would speak Kurdish. But if other painters were present such as the Macedonian Atanas, they would change language and speak a mix of Norwegian, Kurdish and Albanian. This would again change if one of the Romanian painters came and Salih would speak a few words in Romanian. This meant that the language was never stable and could change from situation to situation. Atanas, the Macedonian, would often not speak much at all.

With the help of big machines, but also smaller tools, the painters would first plaster all the walls and ceilings of each room after the carpenters, plumbers and electricians had done their part. Then they would paint the rooms with rolls and brushes. Their work at the construction site demanded both craftsmanship and knowledge. But at the same time there were no formal qualifications needed to work as a painter. Because of this, it was important to have a good reputation as a worker in order to continue to get painting assignments. The main challenge when painting, according to Salih, was to keep the quality of work stable because the apartments would be similar and the work would become fairly repetitive.

⁹ Vocational education in Norway is usually two years of schooling and two years as an apprentice before a final examination. When this test is passed one receives the craft certificate which documents ones trade and skill.

2.3.5 The Handymen from the Caribbean and Africa

The group that was the smallest and had the most unpredictable work schedule was the handymen. At the construction site there were two, Sam from Belize, and Daniel from Nigeria. They worked as unskilled laborers, picking up waste and supplying the other workers with materials. They were employed by a temp-agency and would be called in on short notice. As a consequence, they did not know how long they would be working nor on which days. They did not speak Norwegian and used English to communicate with each other and the other workers at the construction site.

2.3.6 Other groups of workers

There were other groups at the construction site that I did not follow as closely as the ones I discussed above. These groups were active at the construction site for different periods of time. All these groups were specialized in their field.

The four *German masons* worked on the exterior of the building plastering weather-resistant cement to the façade. They spoke German and did not know any Norwegian and only a little English.

Another group was the two *fire safety installers* from Sweden and Lithuania. They were responsible for installing safety measures in apartments. For the most part they poured fire resistant cement onto the floors and inside the electrical cabinets. As discussed earlier, the two *bathroom installers* came from Poland. They would move the prefabricated bathrooms into position at the construction site. They spoke English very well, which made them able to communicate with the other workers at the construction site. As mentioned, they were at the construction site for very short periods of time.

The most unpredictable category of workers was the *day-workers*. They came mostly from Eastern-European countries. They would be hired when one of the companies needed extra workers for some project. The ones I met worked with bricklaying. These workers would work from one week to the next. When they became redundant they would find work at another construction site or not work at all. They were employed by a lot of different temp-agencies.

2.4 The superiors

The last group that I followed was the administrative staff. They were seldom out on the construction site unless they were on their weekly inspection rounds. During these rounds they would inspect OSH (occupational safety and health), progress, and what “order” the construction site was in. Even though they were not present in the building on an everyday basis, they still made their presence known during their weekly rounds, and the Friday meetings where they would discuss how the different groups lived up to their deadlines. The administrative staff consisted of seven people: the project manager, four engineers, one logistics and safety manager, and one foreman (who was out at the construction site the most). They spoke both Norwegian and Swedish together since two were Swedish and rest were Norwegian. They were present at the construction site from the start of the building process until it was finalized and handed over to its new owners. If any of the other workers would have any problems, for example with blueprints or materials, they would visit the office and talk to one of the staff.

Here, I have given a description of the different groups that were at the construction site, to illustrate how complex and heterogeneous the workforce was. I believe it is important to have this groundwork in place before the next discussion about the methodology.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, I will go through some methodological aspects of my fieldwork, and I will discuss how these created the foundation for the knowledge and insights I gathered in the field, which again influenced my findings and interpretations. For the most part, I will reflect on the use of the camera as a research tool and my role as a researcher and filmmaker at the construction site. I do this to create validity to my findings by reflecting upon the circumstances of the knowledge I created together with my informants (Davies 2008). I will discuss my initial entrance into the field in this chapter, and look at how this shaped my findings and the methods defining my research. Even though film creates knowledge and gives insight it also has its limits. By focusing on me entering the field and the problematic aspects this created I want to show that using a camera while doing research can both be a hindrance and a helpful tool.

3.1 My Way into the Field: Access and Challenges

Before I entered the field, I had sent a letter to Oslo Building Workers Union to ask if they were interested in being a part of my project. I chose this union because of their diverse membership base and that they early on had chosen to recruit newly arrived migrant workers. They answered that they were very interested and would help me as best as they could by introducing me to the right people and giving me access to how they were working and their current projects.

Nevertheless, while entering the field some difficulties arose right away. In Norway every year during springtime there are negotiations between the trade unions and the employers' organizations about wages and working conditions. This year the negotiations almost evolved into a strike. The Union was preparing for the potential strike and they could no longer, due to the lack of time, help me gain access to the field.

During this time, I met with Bård, who was one of the ombudsmen for the Oslo Building Workers' Union. Bård is one of the main recruiters of the union. I hoped to follow him as one of my informants to observe how he recruited potential members and presented the union to different types of workers. But, because of the strike, Bård was no longer recruiting. Instead I followed him as he went from construction site to construction site, informing people about the potential strikes.

3.2 Introducing the camera required a change in approach

In the beginning, I did not emphasize the use of camera in my research, even though one of my main objectives was to film uninterruptedly and without too many limitations. In my experience the use of a camera demands a lot of trust between the person being filmed and the filmmaker. Therefore, I held back on the specifics of filming until I could meet my informants face to face and create the kind of trust needed.

As I started my fieldwork with the Oslo Building Workers' Union, I made it clear that I needed access to the construction sites with a camera. However, as I went on the rounds with Bård from the union, I realized that it would be hard to film at the sites together with him.

At one of the construction sites we visited, I was denied access with the camera when I asked if I could film the meeting between the union representative and the workers. At another site, the reply I got was that all filming had to go through the press office of the main company before he could grant me permission to film. This made the situation complicated, as Bård's visits were mostly unannounced, so it would complicate things if I needed to ask for permission before visiting the construction sites where I wanted to film. After sending emails to one of the major general contractors in Norway the response I got was that they were not interested in participating in my project due to earlier negative experiences with journalists and they did not want to go through the same experience again.

According to the French film theorist Andre Bazin the image carries a sense of ontological truth to it, in that it presents the audience with living, breathing people, captured by a mechanical device. The understanding that what is captured by film has happened during some period of time makes it a powerful medium when it comes to representing reality (Bazin and Gray 1960). Because of the camera's power to represent the world it created more skepticism towards me as a filmmaker than me as a researcher without the camera. The camera can be seen as a threat and as challenging status quo in its ability to disclose a believable truth. The presence of my camera was seen as a threat to the representation that the construction companies wanted to present about their construction sites and their relationship with trade unions. Filming the interactions between the Oslo Building Workers' Union and workers was perceived as controversial. The use of a camera in a highly politicized environment made it hard to gain access to the field.

During this period, it became clear to me that with this approach most of my planned fieldwork would be impossible to film. This situation, and my interest in using film as both a research

tool and as a way to convey knowledge, made me broaden the scope of my fieldwork. I chose to find another approach where I was freer to use the camera. This was because I wanted to use the full range of how the camera can contribute to doing research as it both heightens one's focus and makes observation move from a mere passive activity to an active and engaging one (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2008: 117). This requires being able to move around freely and interact with people.

I started looking for other possibilities for finding construction sites where I would be allowed to film. I chose here to distance myself from the union and instead try to gain access without union membership as the main focus of my research. As I sent out emails and contacted different general contractors, I got in touch with one of the largest general contractors in Norway, which I will call Construction AS. They were positive to the project about the construction site, and me looking into it as a place where different nationalities and cultures meet. My contact there put me in touch with the Holmstad construction site. This would be the place where I could conduct my fieldwork without too many reservations. Here, the power of cinema would rather be used to their advantage. It enabled them to present a construction site they were proud of.

3.3 Negotiating my role as a researcher

“So are we working good?” he asked and continued jokingly: “Is it good to work for Construction AS? I would like to work there.”

“No, I don't work for Construction AS. I am just here to make my film and do research,” I replied.

“Oh, you don't work for Construction AS? I thought you were checking how well we were working for Construction AS.”... “What are you making your film about?”

“I am making it about this construction site and all the different people who are working here.”

This was a situation where the carpenters from Lithuania thought I was a work inspector who was there to film them and inspect the efficiency of their work. I was dressed in safety equipment that I had borrowed from the general contractor. This included a hard hat and a reflective vest that carried the company's logo on it. To try to clear this up, I started not to store my equipment in the offices together with the engineers and administrative staff, but on the lower floor where the other workers had their locker room. With this I hoped to distance

myself from the bosses so my role would not be misunderstood. At first, quite a few thought I was working as an inspector, checking how well and efficient the workers worked. To explain what I was doing I chose to focus on me as a filmmaker and that I wanted to make a film and write a paper about the people working at the construction site. I did this to clarify that I was not an inspector but rather a researcher, and the footage would not be used to evaluate their work.

3.4 Choosing how and whom to film

I started filming right away at the construction site. The first days I only took shots of the building and general shots of people working, with little interaction between the people I was filming and me. I did this to make it clear what my role was at the construction site. The first days of filming I would take the industrial elevator to the top floor of the twelve-story building, shoot some establishing shots, and then work my way down the floors inside the building. I would talk to the people I met and explain my project to them and ask if I was allowed to film them. I understood early on who would be interested in being filmed and from whom I would need to gain more trust.

During these walks up and down the two buildings, I understood that it was easier for me to explain what I was doing with the camera present. Explaining that I was interested in making a film about the construction of this building and the people involved in it was easier, than talking about my thesis and explaining what it meant to be an anthropologist. So even though the camera creates skepticism, it is also tangible so people more easily understand your role.

I chose to focus on the building as a whole and the multitude of workers there. I did this because I early on felt that only focusing on a few workers would not take into consideration all the other workers at the construction site and how they interacted across their professions, nationalities and languages. Traditionally, observational ethnographic film tends to concentrate on one individual or a few individuals and create an as holistic account as possible about their worldview. Early on, I understood that what I was interested in was to look at the construction site as a social arena filled with many different worker experiences.

Anthropology has often focused on how people relate to specific places and spaces. According to Gupta and Ferguson anthropology has historically focused on “contained people, places and identities” (1992) i.e. cultures belonging to fixed societies and cultures that belong to specific places and locations. Instead, they argue, we should make room for and focus on hybridization and more fluid spaces. They use the term *borderlands* to describe

places where different groups and cultures meet, either living near borders or living a life where people continuously travel back and forth between them (1992:7). As I was doing fieldwork under such circumstances, I wanted to focus on how the construction site was such a borderland and how people with different identities came to work and communicate together. To do this, I chose not to focus on one single group or person, as I just mentioned, but rather focus on the construction site as a whole and study how these different groups interacted.

3.5 The power of the camera

During my first days at the construction site, I started to understand the complexity of the different groups, companies and nationalities that were present. One of the things that led me to the understanding of these complexities was how people would relate differently to the camera. The different groups would give me different forms of access, and allow me to film different parts of their workday. The workers would be conscious of the camera and potential viewers. They would often jokingly ask me to film one of their colleagues while they were having a break and ask me to show it to their superiors. One example of this can be seen in my film (Fjærtøft 2013, 24.00), when one of the painters, Salih, would comment on the other painters smoking.

-Look, cigarettes.

They don't come here to work, only to smoke.

Take a picture for my boss!

The painter who was the object of the joke, continued nevertheless and talked about how nice it was to take a cigarette with work clothes on, but it does show that they were conscious of the camera and who the potential viewers might be.

Holtedahl and Arntesen (2005) find that the relationship between the researcher and the recipient is important in the production of anthropological knowledge. They analyze the relationship between anthropologists and their informants in the field, and argue that it is important to also analyze the recipient of this knowledge. The recipient is the “third man” and can be a viewer of our filmic material or the reader of our texts. Holtedahl and Arntsen argue that the people in front of the camera are fully aware of the potential viewer of the material. Because of this, the informants change their behavior and how they want to be perceived according to whom they think the viewer is. This can also be seen in my material. The most

striking example of this is that most of the people I filmed paid a lot of attention to how their superiors would perceive them. This varied between the different groups of workers, however, in that some were not so concerned about this.

The question of when I was allowed to film and when I was not, varied between the different groups. Gregorijus was one of the older carpenters from Lithuania. He encouraged me to film him on the top of the roof while he and another carpenter from Lithuania were building a small wooden compartment. When I asked him what he was building, he replied he didn't know, but that he was following technical drawings. Looking at the drawings and how long it was taking, it was obvious that this demanded a higher level of technical skill to build than the other work they were doing. As I was filming him, I sensed a certain pride. After a part of the building process was completed, he took up a cigarette and started smoking. As he then noticed me continuing to film, he stomped out the cigarette and continued on working before his cigarette was finished.

I found it strange that he would just barely start smoking before putting the cigarette out, but after some time in the field, it became clear to me that the carpenters did not want to be filmed while smoking. When I was following the carpenters they would often tell me not to film situations, such as them having a cigarette break in the building or when they were waiting for the elevator.

Another example of what some workers felt uncomfortable about when being filmed, was showing mistakes. I was filming one day-worker from the Balkans who worked at the construction site for only a short period of time. He did not speak Norwegian fluently, but I was able to communicate with him in a mix of Norwegian and English. I found him on one of the floors in the building. He agreed to being filmed while he was working with laying bricks on one of the walls. As I followed him mixing cement I saw that he clearly became nervous and looked up towards the camera. He asked me to stop filming him for a moment, and wondered whether this material would be shown to the "*bosses*". I turned off the camera and asked him why he did not want this material to be shown. He answered that he had mixed the wrong cement, and that he would have to clean the bucket and remix new cement before he could start working again.

In these situations it became clear that the camera was considered a threat of some sort. The different groups of workers would relate to being filmed differently. There were situations

where it was accepted for me to film them, and then there were situations where they either modified their behavior or they would not let me film them at all.

This can be compared to the Norwegian workers who were more comfortable with me filming them and did not restrict me from filming them at all. They were more at ease in front of the camera and allowed me to film them in situations where the others would feel vulnerable. I was never told not to film, but instead was given quite free access to different situations; everything from a water leakage while testing pipes, to fixing pipe systems that someone had put up wrongly, to cigarette breaks. The plumbers were a lot more comfortable being filmed even though they would jokingly talk about making a fool of themselves in front of the camera. It was clear that they did reflect on how people would perceive them, making jokes about me having to fast-forward their work so it would look like they worked faster. In the beginning, they also were joking about how they would present themselves as lazy workers, but this changed after I got to know them better in the field. During this time they would also, like the painters, joke about me showing some of their material to their superiors, but did not ask me to avoid specific situations.

These differences in access given to me by my informants can be interpreted as showing how the different workers felt and experienced job security based on the dynamics of skills, language and sense of belonging. The ones that felt most secure in their work would give me the most access, while the ones who felt job insecurity did not wish to be filmed in specific situations. There might be different explanations for why the different workers reacted differently to being filmed. According to Friberg (2011), Polish workers actively use stereotypes of themselves as hard-working and “not asking questions” as a competitive advantage when it comes to working in the precarious labor market. Here the ideal is to work harder than all other workers to uphold this stereotype. As most of the workers were employed by temp-agencies and subcontractors it was important to use this stereotype as a way of securing future work in a precarious situation. Although there were few Polish workers at the construction site where I was working, I still recognized these mechanisms. The subcontractors and temporary hired workers used the strategy of upholding the image as hard working as a way of gaining more work. Being presented in situations, in which they did not have control and where they were not actively working, could damage this image and stop them from getting any more work. This combined with the aspect of differences in cultural backgrounds with relation to authority and respect for superiors, can explain why some were more negative towards being filmed in specific situations than others.

According to Goffman (1969) we present ourselves in specific ways to fit roles that are assigned to us by others. In this sense, people focus their energy on how others perceive them, and how well they fit other people's expectations of this role. When doing research with a camera this becomes clearer. The camera is a reminder to people that there exists an audience outside of the current situation. The more certain people are that they are filling their role, and the more power they have to define that role, the more secure they will feel. This is one plausible reason for why the workers who were uncertain whether their skills, work ethics, or language competency lived up to the expectations of the "bosses", were less interested in being filmed in situations where they could be looked upon as bad workers. The workers who did feel they met the expectations, had more power to define that role themselves and were more eager to participate in the filming process and give me access to parts of their workday such as cigarette breaks, joking around and social interaction, that was not strictly work-related.

Doing participant observation with a camera, as I did in my fieldwork, has its advantages and disadvantages. In one way, it heightens one's senses and makes one a more observant observer. Grimshaw and Ravetz discuss how ethnographic filmmaker Di Gioia used camera techniques that forces the filmmaker to be more in touch with their subjects and noticing "... gestures, looks, movement, shapes, silence and so on" (2008:117). Here filming makes one more attentive toward the world around oneself. This increased focus makes the filmmaker observe differently than a researcher without a camera would do.

At the same time it is clear that filming limits ones ability to participate. Holding a camera and walking around filming makes it difficult to engage on an equal level in the same activities as the people you are filming. The camera creates a certain atmosphere where the filmmaker is drawn to observation. However, it can also encourage interaction with the people one is filming if the filmmaker chooses to ask questions and tries to create a dialogue with the people being filmed. Traditionally, participant observation is used in such a way that a researcher goes into the field and engages in the lives of the people she is researching, and the more participation, the more validity she attains as a researcher, according to Davis (2008, 82). However, what should be more important when it comes to the question of validity, Davis argues, is the reflection around how and why these observations were made and the effect they have (2008:83). The camera can promote reflection, by making the interaction between the researcher and the people they work with visible in the final filmic product (Davis 2008:42). In my film, I chose not to try to hide my presence as a filmmaker-researcher,

but instead show that I was actively behind the camera and in dialogue with the people I was filming.

3.6 The editing process

- Film is about something whereas reality is not. (Vaughan 1999, 21)

As a student of observational filmmaking the ideal is to observe with the camera, following your subjects as they engage in everyday life, and filming situations that you encounter with no preconceived idea of the narrative you later create in the editing room. Shooting at the construction site I chose different people and different places: filming people's craftsmanship while they were working, talking about what their impressions of Norway were. I was not following a specific person, but rather trying to capture as much as possible from the different workers that were there. I thought of this as a natural way of combining social research and filmmaking.

When I came back from the field and started logging my tapes, I gradually understood that I might have a difficult time combining different situations into sequences and making a narrative film out of it. The material was scattered between people and different events. The only thing that became the common denominator of my work was the building itself.

The hard part about editing is trying to find what one's film is about. Finding a focus does not only mean having clear shots, but also something that drives one's film. Making the film has a beginning, a middle point and an end. As the Dai Vaughan (1999, 21) quote at the beginning of this chapter says: Film is about something. And in an editing room, while editing an observational film, the struggle becomes trying to find this.

As I was looking through my tapes, I did not feel that any of the people I had filmed would be a strong enough character to alone represent the construction site. I felt that what my film should do was to present different fragments of a construction site. As I tried to create different sequences and turn them into a film, I understood that my main obstacle was to find a narrative thread to create continuity and not confuse my viewers.

In searching for this, I got a lot of help from documentary filmmaker Gary Kildea. Under his guidance and supervision, I first chose to focus on my single sequences and wait with thinking about the overall storyline of my film. The point was not to make a story but rather

focus on contrasts: contrasts in themes, in sounds and in people. This was a dramatic difference compared to my first approach in how to edit my film.

During my editing I went through different selection processes. The first was focusing on quality. A lot of my shots did not have the quality that I desired. Either it was sound quality or a shaky, un-sharp image. This selection I did without much reflection. There might be content that I wanted because there were interesting things happening such as a good discussion or some interesting action, but it was quite easy to throw these parts out. Filmmaking is not just about capturing reality; it is also *aestheticizing* this reality. As a filmmaker you don't just want to capture what is happening, you want to do this in a way that enhances this reality's aesthetic appeal. The first selection was purely about selecting out of aesthetic and technical considerations.

In the next step, I filtered my material to create variety in what I was going to show. Here I found sequences and clips that contrasted each other in different ways. Some sequences, such as the glass window scene, I chose in order to show action and how tall and massive the building was. By action, I mean lived life where you see an action or activity from start to finish. Here the sequence starts out on the ground level, you see the window hoisted up multiple floors, before it is grabbed by the workers on top of the building and pushed into place. The glass looks fragile hanging by only one suction cup, and at the same time massive because of its size. This scene gives a feeling of the work that the workers at the construction site were doing.

To contrast this, I also had some scenes where the characters talked to the camera, such as the interview with Salih and the interview with the German, Hans, who both shared their thoughts about working and belonging. They focus on their lives as foreigners and how they experience Norway. Both of these interviews take place while they are working and are cross cut with scenes that show them working. Another type of scene that I focused on in my film was the more observational material. These were situations where people would talk and work with each other while I was passive and did not directly interact with the situation. This type of scene can be seen in my film when the plumbers Joackim and Mogely talk to each other about trying to borrow a chalk line.

After selecting the different types of scenes and sequences I placed them one after another into the timeline of the movie. However, to edit a film is as much about finding a rhythm and

a pace as it is about telling a story. Here the advice from Gary Kildea was important, to focus on contrasts once again. During the first cut of my film I reflected and thought a lot about which scenes should follow the other to make everything clear and coherent for the viewer. The end result was not being as compelling as I thought. It was slow and not as dynamic as I wished it to be. With the suggestion of Kildea, I instead chose to randomly select different clips and put them into my timeline and into the cut of my film. Instantly my film became more appealing and dynamic. Instead of trying to find a narrative in my material I focused on the different contrasting elements and how they interacted. When I followed someone into the basement, the next sequence would be on the roof. If I chose the interview that was inside, the next sequence would be outside. By looking at my material in this way, about different elements contrasting each other, I believe I made my film more unpredictable and in that way more appealing to the viewer.

By doing this I made a film about a building, as it was the only character that was present in almost the whole film. By focusing on both the workers in the basement and the workers on top of the roof, the difference in perspective was there. In doing this I chose a different type of film than traditional films at the Visual Cultural Studies program. Traditionally, VCS films often follow one character through different fields of life. But my film instead focused on how a lot of different characters and cultures are present under the same roof. This fits together well with my perspective as a researcher trying to document the multiplicity of different cultures and people present at the construction site.

“By isolating observations, it reveals commonalities and connections that may have gone unnoticed before. These may be the characteristics mannerism of a person, or how a particular cultural theme emerges repeatedly in different context” (MacDougall 2006, 4)

This type of film does have some drawbacks in that it does not give the viewer the possibility to intimately get to know some of the characters. Instead, my film shows a variety of different situations and action at the construction site loosely tied together by working on the same building. Still, I think the film more than my text shows how similar the workers were with regard to their lived lives. Across the different languages they were all joking about their bosses, they were all looking forward to having a break, they all took pride in the work they did. So even though this research project is about the differences in cultures I encountered at the construction site, the film shows how construction workers are similar across languages, borders and trades. This form of transcultural cinema is advocated by ethnographic filmmaker

David MacDougall (1998) who proposes that film can transcend cultural boundaries through showing what is shared and making cultural similarities as visible as cultural differences.

The strength of film is to show that we are in the end all common human beings. However, my film also sheds light on a new cultural diversity in Oslo and a part of Norway that is unknown to many Norwegians, but is the reality to a lot of Norway's new migrants.

4. Conceptual Frameworks

To help understand the complexity and changes that have happened within the construction industry I have chosen to juxtapose two theories. The first is Lysgaard's (2001) theory of the workers' collective, described in the book by the same name and which was first published in 1961. I use this as a starting point to understand interaction and how collective identity emerges at a workspace. The second theory is Bauman's (2000) idea of liquid modernity, which I use to shed light on forces that are changing our contemporary society. With this I will try to answer if it is at all fruitful to speak of a workers' collective at a multinational construction site in 2012.

4.1. The Workers' Collective

Lysgaard's *The Workers' Collective* (2001) is a classic in the field of sociology¹⁰. Published for the first time in 1961, he writes that the workers created this collective to protect themselves from increased production demands. His focus is on how this collective model would be produced and (re)produced within the context of the factory, though the theory was intended to apply to all types of work organizations. I wanted to see if the relationship between the workers and the management was as strong today at the construction site as it was when Lysgaard wrote his monograph in 1961. I also wanted to compare the sense of community and comradeship in the workers' collective as described by Lysgaard. This comparison addresses specifically today's situation at the construction site; generally, I want to see if the conditions for a workers' collective still are present in our society.

The monograph *The Workers' Collective* (2001) draws on a fieldwork, participant observation and interviews, done during the 1950s at a paper factory in the small town of Moss in Norway. It is proposed to be relevant, however, for all types of companies, indeed all organizations with superiors and subordinates, not just factories. His main finding was that workers created an informal buffer between what their superiors demanded from them and what they thought of as legitimate work. The managers, who through their link to the market saw a need for increased production, were met with a buffer amongst the workers in that they acted collectively to protect themselves against these systemic forces. The workers did not see the company they worked for as their own company. This was because they felt they did not

¹⁰ The workers collective is one of the most influential concepts in Nordic working life research. *The Workers' Collective* is listed as one of the 25 most influential Norwegian sociological works, according to the Norwegian Sociological Canon Project, led by Willy Pedersen (Sosiolognytt 2011). Of these 25, few deal directly with work organizations.

have any say in the running and day to day activities at the factory (Lysgaard and Kalleberg 2001, 107)

To analyze the differences he found at the factory between “*us*” the workers and “*them*” the superiors, he abstracts the social life at the factory into different *systems* (Lysgaard and Kalleberg 2001, 14).

- (1) The *technical-economic system*. This is the system around which the factory is organized. As a business, the factory is organized to maximize profits. The managers and the engineers at the factory are seen by the workers to represent this system. They demand that the workers work longer shifts and use newer equipment. The superiors’ main interest is not in the well-being of their workers. Following market mechanisms, where increased profits, or at least securing the company’s survival in the face of competition, are their main concern¹¹. According to the workers, the leaders are only interested in increasing production. And management’s attitude towards the workers is that they should work as much as possible during the time they are working at the factory (Lysgaard and Kalleberg 2001)

- (2) The *workers’ collective*. This is the system that negotiates the needs from the two other systems, the technical-economic system and the human system. In the technical-economic system, the individual workers are vulnerable to pressures from their superiors who are driven to maximize profits. On a one to one basis, the workers are at risk because they can lose their job, get health problems or work harder than they are able to do. In this situation, the collective arises to protect them. The workers need to follow certain rules or norms to be a part of the workers collective. It is important to not work too fast, to not talk too much with the management, to not aspire to climb in the organizational hierarchy by becoming a foreman for the other workers. It is important not to make individual gains when one is working. The consequences of breaking these rules are that the worker would be excluded from the workers social environment and be ostracized. The reason the workers’ collective exists is to protect the human system from the technical-economic one (Lysgaard and Kalleberg 2001).

¹¹ The paper factory went bankrupt in 2012, after 110 years of operation. <http://www.moss-avis.no/nyheter/slutt-for-peterson-paper-i-moss-1.7175629> (accessed 26.10.13)

(3) The *human system*. This is the system where people are complex and whole human beings. Lysgaard does not go into much detail about what he means by this, but it is the totality of a person, with the need for protection, understanding and human dignity. Humans have aspirations, but also limitations in relation to health, strength and knowledge. In this system, people are interested in realizing themselves as human beings in opposition to the simplifying mechanisms of technical-economic system. The workers are individuals under this type of system. (Lysgaard and Kalleberg 2001).

For there to be workers' collective at all, Lysgaard hypothesizes that three conditions or premises are necessary for a workers' collective to develop: *Common problems*, created by the technical-economic system; *identification*, establishment of an "us", based on similarity in status; and *interaction*, in particular "spontaneous interaction", that is not mandated by the work itself.

The stronger these conditions are present, according to Lysgaard, the stronger is the collective. In a later section, I will examine these in more detail and in light of the situation at the construction site.

4.2. Liquid Modernity

In our contemporary society, flexibility is one of the key words in our vocabulary, and change is happening at an ever-increasing pace. The major migration from the new countries of the EU started in 2004, but this change has had a dramatic influence both on Norway and other countries. In less than 10 years, quite radical changes have occurred. As an analytical concept *liquid modernity*, developed by Zygmunt Bauman, can be fruitful for understanding the changes in society that are taking place, and the complexities that face both the workers at the construction site and me as a researcher. It is easy to see that there is a difference between the society described by Lysgaard in the 1950s and the society facing the workers at the construction site in 2012. In trying to describe our time, Bauman believes we have gone from a "solid modernity" towards a more "liquid" one. Our time and society are characterized by:

"First of all, the passage from the "solid" to a "liquid" phase of modernity: that is, into a condition in which social forms (structures that limit individual choices, institutions that guard repetitions of routines, patterns of acceptable behavior) can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long, because they

decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set” (Bauman 2007, 1)

In the 1950s lifetime employment was the norm, there was one state broadcasting company in Norway, labor migration was less frequent, and marriages and local communities were more stable. Now, all our institutions – family, employment, media, politics – seem to be less “solid”, more diverse, more in flux than previously.

How our society is transforming itself at an ever-changing pace, and how this affects social relations, making them more fluid as well, is a core issue with Bauman.

“It is such patterns, codes and rules to which one could conform, which one could select as stable orientation points and by which one could subsequently let oneself be guided, that are nowadays in increasingly short supply” (Bauman 2000, 7)

Today is a different reality from that of the time of the 1950s. Then one’s sense of belonging and one’s role were quite clear. The obligations that were needed to be a good colleague, worker and human being, were well-defined and predictable, but in our times these categories are no longer stable, because of the liquefying forces of society, according to Bauman. Society is becoming more and more individualized, he writes:

“Ours is as a result an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual’s shoulders.”
(Bauman 2000, 8)

Individualization was some time ago considered a good thing, progress. The individual could break out of the bonds of tradition and confining norms. But individualization has at the same time had unforeseen consequences for our society, especially when it comes to community.

Other contributing forces to change in society, according to Bauman, are both the increased *liberalization* of the economy and the opening up of the world through rapid *globalization* processes. These processes are interrelated and make our world and our lives less predictable and more unsure. We now live in a world in which people have a:

“...combined experience of insecurity (of positions, entitlements and livelihood), of uncertainty (as to their continuation and future stability) and of unsafety (of one’s body, one’s self and their expression)” (Bauman 2000, 161)

The way we create our own life-strategies becomes increasingly hard, because the reference points that people use to create these strategies are ever-changing. Change happens so rapidly that our ability to plan our lives and predict the future deteriorates.

Challenges for the individual are at the micro-level. At the macro-level, the traditional power of the state is now losing to globalization. There has been a fragmentation of political power, where more power has become caught up in global-economic structures, without the political means to influence them. The power structures affecting our everyday life and workplace seem more and more remote, amorphous and inaccessible.

The question is, if Bauman's diagnosis is correct, how does this affect the prospects of the workers at the construction site, their security and their ability to create stable relations and a sense of community? Bauman writes that these profound changes call for "*a rethinking of old concepts*" (2000, 8), such as work and community.

"The practical question is whether their resurrection, albeit in a new shape or incarnation, is feasible; or – if it is not – how to arrange for their decent and effective burial. (Bauman 2000, 8)

For us, the question is, how to rethink the concept of the workers' collective? Or have times changed so much that it is no longer relevant?

5. Findings and Interpretations

To understand the social dynamics at the construction site, I will in this chapter discuss some of my empirical findings. These findings show how the different workers at the construction site interacted with each other and the conditions that shaped this interaction. I will first present a series of themes, and then draw on the two theoretical frameworks of Lysgaard (2001) and Bauman (2000) to interpret my findings in more depth. With this, I hope to shed light on the question of the relevance of the workers' collective today.

5.1 Themes

To organize my findings, I have sorted my observations into themes, based on recurrent topics and patterns in my material. I will discuss the following: friendly relations and humor, the elevator and shared norms, cigarettes and breaks, subordinates and superiors, language and identity, deadlines and conflicts, and finally, a “non-theme”, the union.

5.1.1 Friendly relations and humor

Workers at the construction site were generally very friendly and eager to reach out to others. When I was walking through the construction site it was easy to make contact with people and start conversations. Two of the things that contributed to this friendly atmosphere were “rituals” for making contact with new people, and the extensive use of humor.

Reaching out

When making contact with new people, one of the first questions asked is where people are from. People also asked me where I was from. This is more prominent than questions regarding what trade a person had in an introductory phase, perhaps because that would be a more controversial or status-marking question.

Early in my film (Fjærtøft 2013, 01.10), two people who do not know each other, meet inside the building while working, Furat the plumber from Turkey, and Daniel the handyman from Nigeria. To strike up conversation and get to know each other as common workers, they began talking. As we can see, the first type of conversation was about where each of them came from.

-You're from Ghana? asks Furat.

-No, I'm from Nigeria, answers Daniel.

-What about your partner? [referring to Daniel's co-worker who is not present in this scene]

-My partner is from the Caribbean. And you?

-I'm from Turkey.

-Turkey, that's nice.

This scene clearly demonstrates positive acknowledgement of the other person and where he is from. What also comes through in the film, is that even though they do not know each other, their body language shows that they are eager to make contact.

Humor

Relations were made amongst the construction workers by joking with each other. The same applied to me. To show the power of inclusion with regard to joking relations, there is one situation that did not make it into the film. This was when I was eating lunch with the painters at the construction site. As the painters were eating, the handymen came in and started eating at another table. As I wanted to ask the handymen some questions about their work schedule, I walked over to them. Salih also started talking to the handymen, but knew very little English. He would then instead try a joke to include all the people eating in the same room. *“So, here in one room we have one from Belize, one from Nigeria, one from Macedonia, two from Iraq, two from Romania and one from Macedonia”* before he added; *plus one potato!*”. The potato was referring to me. *Potet* has become a Norwegian slang term for referring to a white Norwegian. I interpreted this as a humorous way of including me in the group. Everyone chuckled, including me.

In my filmed material (Fjærtøft 2013, 18.00), one of these situations is seen when Daniel, the handyman from Nigeria, is waiting for the elevator and speaking to the camera. When the elevator arrives, two of the Latvian carpenters arrive and Daniel asks:

“They only speak Russian, do you speak Russian?”

-“No, I don't speak Russian”, I answer.

-“Okay, sorry for you”, Daniel laughs.

- “Do you speak Russian?” I ask.

-“*No. I do speak a little eastern European.*” He looks over to one of the Latvian carpenters and says, “*Like, davai davai.*”¹² The Latvian carpenter smiles replies,

-“*Davai, davai!*”

Danish anthropologist Charlotte Baarts (2006) writes about how humor is used at a construction site. During her fieldwork, she observed how workers would use humor to comment upon different types of behavior and negotiate their role as a good worker. She draws on the use of humor as a way of communicating within groups and as a way of including and excluding members. Baarts observed the use of humor as a way to comment upon accepted and ideal behavior amongst the workers. The same was true for the construction workers I followed.

There were many examples of humor which tie into the other themes as well, and will therefore be described and discussed in later sections. There is an exchange between a plumber and an engineer on all the “crap” that will be coming through the pipes (see Superiors and subordinates). There is also an example showing national stereotypes and how humor is used to uphold work ethics (see the Language and Identity section).

Humor and joking relations were an important part of everyday life. They were a way of upholding social relations and including coworkers.

5.1.2 The elevator and shared norms

Face-to-face interaction needs a physical space to take place, like the lunchrooms and the locker room. The only place where *all* the workers met was at the elevator. The elevator was an industrial elevator that was used for all types of transport up and down the building. A lot of time was spent using the elevator, both waiting for the elevator to show up, and riding the elevator together. Throughout the day the different groups took the elevator a lot of times to gather materials and move from one floor to another. During these trips up and down, people would meet other people of different trades, companies, backgrounds and nationalities, all working at the construction site.

As a main vein of infrastructure there were some strict rules to follow. One of the first days of my fieldwork I had forgotten to close the door of the elevator during one of my rounds. I was not aware of this, but noticed how people were staring at me in a special way. It was first

¹² Davai or давай is Russian and I would translate it in this context to “c’mon” or “lets go”.

when I talked to Salih for the second time during the day that I understood the reason for their reaction. Because I had not closed the door to the elevator, and had taken it to a floor that was empty because no one was working there, I had delayed a lot of work done by the carpenters. This was because when the door to the elevator was not shut correctly, the elevator would not run to any other floor. This made a huge impact on the carpenters because they were then not able to transport the insulation they needed to fit the walls of the building. The elevator started working again when one person used the stairs to get it going. This caused a great deal of commotion and people were talking about whom it could be. I was not aware that I had done this mistake before I was told by Salih. He told me to make sure I did not do this again because it slowed down work a lot. This was fortunately only one of the first days of my fieldwork, so I believe it only reinforced the idea that I was not accustomed to construction sites. However, this shows how important the elevator was and how strong the norms were to secure that it worked.

5.1.3 Cigarettes and breaks

Taking a cigarette break at places where the general contractor said it was not allowed, was one of the forms of shared “*resistance*” and acts of solidarity the construction workers used at the construction site.

Throughout the day the workers would take cigarettes breaks inside the apartment building or on the balconies, which was not allowed. The supervisors could not understand why the workers just couldn’t take the elevator down a couple of floors and smoke outside. The Baltic carpenters would during the day meet up and have a cigarette break on one of the balconies. This was the only time during the day when they would meet and talk without their company boss¹³ being present. During these conversations people would often plan their weekend or talk about what their plans were when going home. I early understood that this was something that they did not want the superiors at the construction site to see. The first time I was present during one of their breaks, they would all leave when I showed up. After a while, when I got to know the different workers and gained their trust, I was allowed to join them as long as I did not film. This was a place where they could meet and talk freely to each other. This was different than during their lunches when their close superior, the boss, usually ate with them. Not filming them also contributed to the relaxed atmosphere.

¹³ This boss was actually a Norwegian. His office was on the same floor as the non-Norwegian workers’ lunchroom and locker room. The carpenters from the Baltics also had a working “teamleader” (“bas” in Norwegian), a Lithuanian. In contrast, the plumbers from Norway, only had a “teamleader”.

In my analysis, the act of not wanting to be filmed during their cigarette breaks had to do with their role as a worker. For most of the Baltic carpenters it was important to be seen as hard working. When they did take a break, they did it by not being visible at the construction site and avoiding others seeing them. This can be seen in relation to the situation discussed earlier in this paper when one of the construction workers from Lithuania stomped out his cigarette because I was filming him. For him it was unacceptable to be filmed smoking while working.

Still, some of the workers did take cigarette breaks out in the open. While filming Daniel, one of the handymen (in a scene that did not make it into the movie because of poor quality), a discussion about cigarettes came up once again. I followed him while he was throwing away leftover plaster that had been used for the walls. As he finished he spotted Sam on the ground floor, talking to the plumbers having a break and chatting. Daniel told me to turn off the camera, but later changed his mind.

“Film this and show this to the bosses!” Daniel said.

One of the plumbers, Petter, laughed while looking at the camera and exclaimed:

–“Now he’s got evidence, now he is going to show it to the bosses”.

–“What? You are having a cigarette break?” exclaimed Daniel to Sam in particular.

–“Yeah, I am having a cigarette break” answered Sam.

–“But you don’t even smoke!”

After a little while Sam, who actually was not smoking, asked,

” So what kind of breaks do people that don’t smoke take?”

The question caused some confusion, but one of the plumbers answered. *“I am not sure, I think you can take a break of about five minutes per hour.”*

“Five minutes? What can you do in five minutes?” Daniel asked.

The plumber laughed, *“Not much, but then you can take ten [minutes]”.*

Here the plumbers felt more comfortable being filmed while smoking than the other workers. They felt they had the right to have a cigarette break while on the job. To them it was natural to have regular breaks. This meant that the different groups of workers related differently to

how they understood their rights as a worker. Both of these plumbers came from Norway. They had a stronger confidence when it came to taking breaks, even to inform their non-Norwegian workers about this in this scene. Here the camera gave me extra insight into the situation. The camera prompted the questions about the legitimacy of the breaks.

The cigarette at the construction site was a symbol of taking breaks and most of the construction workers smoked. Smoking was as a way of carving out personal space and time in an otherwise quite controlled and hectic environment. Here I see the workers' collective in action with coworkers covering and creating this space together against the will of their superiors. By smoking the workers would create a space in this system where they could enjoy talking about non-work related issues, which can be seen as a part of Lysgaard's *human system*. As one of the Kurdish painters told the camera, putting on his work clothes and taking a cigarette made him relax. And even though his boss Saih was joking that they only came to work to smoke, they continued smoking before starting to work. Discussions about smoking also created relations between the different workers.

Interestingly, this topic of cigarette breaks was an issue in Lysgaards (1985, 39) fieldwork as well, as shown by the following quotes:

“The foreman looks at us with skepticism if we stand talking together. “Well now, don’t you have anything to do?” said the department head to some who sat talking and smoking together....”

“It’s nice having a little conversation with your fellow workers. You have to be a little careful if the foreman is around, but if you are alone, it’s okay.”

“It’s freer today than it was. [Before] your fellow workers would come running and say that the boss is coming – stomp out your cigarettes! And you had to pretend to be working, when the boss came around.”

During the 1950s smoking in front of a superior at the factory was not something that would be accepted (Lysgaard and Kalleberg 2001, 116). At the construction site this was also true, but only for some of the workers. The plumbers at the construction site felt that they had the right to take a cigarette break and never showed any negativity towards being filmed while smoking. Rather they would joke about it, as discussed above.

5.1.4 Superiors and subordinates

One of the more distinct differences between the worker groups was the different strategies they used when it came to relating to their superiors. One important point made in *The Workers' Collective* was that there were certain rules when it came to talking to the superiors (Lysgaard and Kalleberg 2001). They found that the workers were not interested in being favored by the superiors and that they did not want to be evaluated or communicated to individually. This was because it could compromise the collective, and as one of the workers puts it *“the leaders want to create a difference –the best should earn the most. But the wages should be stipulated after the average, not after the best.* (Lysgaard and Kalleberg 2001, 108) my translation.

At the factory during the 1950s the workers would avoid talking to their superiors alone. Instead they would demand to talk to the bosses together, collectively. At the construction site this was different. The different worker groups would have different tactics when the superiors would come on their weekly inspection rounds. The plumbers would usually have a relaxed atmosphere around them when the superiors came. One scene in the movie (Fjærtøft 2013. 25.30) shows the plumber Petter working on installing a sewage pipe in-between two floors. He is met by one of the engineers who is walking past on one of their inspection rounds. He is working hard to push the pipe into place. The engineer initiates the conversation:

-Think about all the crap that's going to come down this pipe.

-Yes.

-And you're fixing that, unbelievable.

-Yes. I fix it. It's a shit job.

They continue by calculating the amount of waste that will run down the pipe using different metaphors that all have to do with human waste. They joke back and forth about how much waste the pipe can handle until the engineer ends the conversation. This can be seen as a clear contrast to Lysgaard's findings. The relationship is different and they are both fascinated by the craft and technology that is being used. Here both of the men are commenting on and reinforcing each other. I see here that the main point of this conversation was to confirm each other's skills, not to inspect if the other person was doing their job correctly.

This can be contrasted to the Baltic-carpenters. During these weekly inspection rounds most of the other workers were present, but the Baltic carpenters would disappear. Either they would leave to pick up materials or they would go to a different floor and start working there instead. This clearly confused the administrative staff. One time they got a hold of one of the carpenters and asked him where the others had gone. I knew he understood both some English and some Norwegian, but to the one engineer he said he did not understand. This confused the engineer. As the staff was walking through, they commented on some of the workers who came back that they needed to keep their helmets on even though they were inside. The message did not seem to come through as one of the carpenters shook his heads. (The carpenter who understood some English was present.) The staff then gave up and started to move on to the next floor.

Here there are clearly two different strategies when it comes to relating to superiors, and this says something about the different power relations at the construction site. The “Norwegian” plumbers were quite relaxed when it came to their relationship to their superiors. During the inspection rounds they were both joking with each other about work at the construction site, as described in the example above. This relationship can be seen in contrast to how the Baltic-carpenters experienced and reacted to the situation. Instead of interacting with their superiors, they would avoid them. Here being “invisible” or not speaking up (claiming not to understand) made it possible for the workers to avoid being singled out by the superiors as an individual. Instead they had to be treated as a group the same way as the workers in *the Workers’ Collective*.

The differences in strategy can be understood by the differences in how predictable their work situation was. Amongst the carpenters, who were more easily replaceable, there was a high degree of uncertainty when it came to steady work. Their language skills were not good, which contributed to insecurity and they did not have a protected profession like the plumbers and electricians. In such a multicultural work environment with varying levels of insecurity, the different workers were not able to create one powerful collective. Instead, the different groups of workers had to figure out their own strategies with regard to their superiors’ power over them.

5.1.5 Language and identity

One of the things that created the biggest differences between “us” and “them” was language. Language is necessary for communication and understanding. At the construction site,

language was clearly important in the creation of shared identities. The German masons at the construction site would almost only speak to each other and did not socialize much with the others. Group identity based on language could also go across categories such as trade or company. One of the fire safety installers spoke good English and came from Lithuania. He was able to talk to most of the people at the construction site, but almost only talked to the other Lithuanians that worked as carpenters.

Even though language was an important identity marker, the ability to speak different languages was not always conveyed to the others. This was particularly true amongst the plumbers, who had backgrounds from a lot of different countries and spoke many different languages in addition to Norwegian. However, this was not something that was communicated to those who only spoke Norwegian.

This preference for Norwegian and the downplaying of other languages is demonstrated when two plumbers with Turkish heritage, one of them the apprentice Furat, were working together. Suddenly Furat starts speaking Turkish to the other plumber. The other plumber understands what he is saying but instead of answering him says, “*What are you doing?*” in Norwegian and shakes his head while looking at the camera. Furat then continues to speak Turkish. The other plumber again shakes his head and continues working. Furat continued to speak to him in Turkish, but the other plumber would always answer him in Norwegian. This was something he asked me not to put in my film. As I understood it, he did not want to be seen in the film speaking any other language than Norwegian.

Another time I experienced this was with Mogly, one of the other plumbers. It was at seven in the morning and he was getting ready for work. As I approached him he was talking to Salih, the Kurdish painter, and spoke to him in Arabic. They were deeply engaged in a conversation. But as soon as I showed up, he switched over to Norwegian. He looked at me worriedly, and I sensed that he did not want to speak Arabic while I was present.

I asked what they were talking about. Mogly did not answer and was instead focused on how early it was, that he was tired, and that he wished they could all start an hour later¹⁴. Salih on the other hand told me proudly that he also knew Arabic and that they were discussing the

¹⁴ This was something that was often discussed at the construction site. It was a topic many workers could engage in and had the same opinion about. It can be seen as an example of the technical-economic system's incringement on the human system.

conflict in Syria and if the opposition had links to al-Qaeda or the CIA. This was the last time I heard Mogly speak any Arabic at the construction site.

In both these situations being a plumber meant that you would speak Norwegian as your “work language”. Belonging was important and was something that was communicated. Mogly did say his parents were from Syria, and Furat and the other plumber were both proud of being Turkish. However, using these languages to communicate was not something that was accepted. I see this as a way of maintaining the group identity amongst the plumbers. By using the same language everyone could understand each other, which meant that no one was excluded from discussions. This can also be seen with the German plumber, Hans, who spoke almost perfect Norwegian. By speaking Norwegian they all had one language to relate to and could build an identity as plumbers. They were creating some kind of structural form and stability in a highly fluid environment. Within this identity there was room for diversity, at least when it comes to acceptance of different national backgrounds and support for rivaling soccer teams. Fredrik Barth’s (1969), writing about ethnicity and ethnic groups, proposes that the main point of ethnic identity construction is creating a border where the differences between “us” and “them” are maintained. These borders can change over time and people can move across them. The cultural content within a group is secondary. Group identities are maintained by defining themselves in contrast to something else. For the plumbers it was clear that these were the other workers, who did not speak Norwegian.

This group identity strategy based on common language can be compared to the painters’ strategy. Their leader Salih, spoke five different languages to varying degrees at the construction site. In his work team there would often be workers who did not understand each other and did not speak the same language. Mostly he would work with Atanas who was Macedonian and spoke Albanian, and two Romanian workers. To communicate they would speak to each other in a combination of different languages. This *hybrid* language was a mix of Norwegian, Kurdish and Albanian. The language would depend on who was present working at the time and who the recipient of communication was. When one of his favorite coworkers, a Lithuanian, was working they would almost not speak together. Instead, they actively used body language to communicate what needed to be done. Even though they had a very limited vocabulary together they would use humor during their workday.

The way the painters created a common identity was different from the plumbers. They would embrace their status as foreigners and often use it to compare themselves to Norwegian

workers. One incident, that also is in the film, (Fjærtøft 2013, 12.54) shows Salih and the others plastering a wall in a hallway, and Salih asks Atanas to hurry.

“Look, he’s working really fast. That’s the way foreigners do it, “ says Salih.

He then starts working slow and meticulously besides Atanas. *“And look, this is how Norwegians do it.”*

He speeds up again, no longer impersonating Norwegians: *“Like this, one minute and then done!”*

By comparing the Norwegian workers with themselves he jokes about them and shows how good and efficient workers they are compared to the Norwegians¹⁵. Here joking relationships are important to create social-inclusiveness and solidarity within the group. The use of stereotypes in humor is discussed by Peter Gundelach (2000) when discussing jokes and national identities. According to Gundelach, people use jokes to divide the world into “us” and “them” and thus create and maintain group identities. Jokes are told both to present what characterizes the other group, i.e. laziness, inefficiency, but the duality of the joke also emphasizes values that the group telling the joke should possess, i.e. hard work and efficiency. By saying that Norwegian workers are slow and inefficient compared to “us” the foreign workers, Salih both comments on what makes them unique, and also what values his coworkers should strive for. Here the act of being different and speaking a different language is seen as something to be proud of. They see themselves as having superior values compared to the Norwegian workers.

Interestingly, the migrants and immigrants often made jokes about the Norwegians, but seldom the other way around. I see this as a manifestation of the different power relations at the construction site. The workers who were not from Norway had a lot of pressure to be thorough and efficient, in addition they also saw that the Norwegians had a lot greater work security through their formal education. To counter this inferiority they would tell jokes about the Norwegians. This is what Gundelach (2000) finds in his research. If power relations are symmetrical, the groups can tell jokes about each other. But if the relations are asymmetrical,

¹⁵ As discussed earlier in the methodology chapter, one of the competitive advantages of “non-Norwegian” workers is upholding their image as hard working, more so than “Norwegians” with permanent jobs (Friberg 2011)

it is the group with less power that tells jokes about the superior party, not the other way around.

Making such distinctions and competing in status as good workers, makes it difficult to create a collective identity across nationalities, companies and trades. By using these differentiated identities amongst themselves, they hold a less powerful position towards their superiors. Together with the fact that they are employed by many small companies, the unpredictable nature of who is at the construction site at what time, and the many languages - the ability to build one common collective identity is weakened.

5.1.6 Deadlines and conflicts

One of the main differences between Lysgaards' factory and the construction site was that the construction workers were employed by several different small companies. The electricians belonged to one company, the carpenters to another and the painters to a third company. There were a total of nineteen different companies at the construction site. Each of these companies was highly specialized in their field and had little to do with the work of the others. That is, unless one of the companies did not reach their deadline. This would halt production for the other companies, because they would have to change their plans and compensate in different ways. This was one of the main reasons for conflicts at the construction site. If someone made a mistake it would create problems for the rest of the production chain.

The Baltic carpenters often ended up in these conflicts. As they often had little language skills and a hard time communicating with the others at the construction site, they would have difficulties improvising if the plans were not right. In addition, they were the first people to work on a new floor in the building, so a lot of the others relied on them being finished before they could start.

The different companies get contracts by winning tenders. In the tender the company has to specify how many hours of work a specific job takes at a fixed price. If the job would take longer time and cost more money than estimated, the company loses money¹⁶. So if one company makes a mistake, it could hurt the other companies financially. Workers at the construction site carried with them this type of knowledge. Here the workers are closer to the technical-economic system of Lysgaard (2001) than during the 1950s. I interpret this as a

¹⁶ The plumbing company went bankrupt during the spring of 2013. The reason for this was that they had miscalculated their tenders.

result of smaller companies where the distance between the management and the workers is small.

The consequence of this was that the solidarity between the different companies and different groups varied depending on the groups involved and the situation. This was particularly the case regarding the carpenters and other groups at the construction site. During my fieldwork delays and mistakes by the carpenters caused a lot of conflicts. Once the painters had to repaint a whole floor because of mistakes the carpenters had done. Salih told me that even though this was not their fault they still had to repaint the room without extra pay. After this the atmosphere between the painters and the carpenters was quite sour and they would not speak to each other.

Another conflict was between the carpenters and the plumbers. The carpenters would often make mistakes when it came to placing the different walls. Once they built walls around one of the pre-fabricated bathrooms where there should have been a door. This meant that the carpenters would have to redo the whole bathroom and stall the progress of the others.

Here the different groups would accuse each other of different things. The carpenters would accuse the plumbers of being lazy and spoiled for not fixing the wall themselves, and the plumbers would accuse the carpenters of bad craftsmanship. Here the lack of a common language was one of the problems. The two groups of workers had little shared language and few ways of communicating directly to each other. They would often go straight to their superiors with problems related to deadlines.

The system of tenders was the root cause creating conflicts between workers from different companies. This structural situation makes it harder for the workers to create collective solutions to problems such as delays and mistakes. Moreover, by dividing the workers into smaller and different groups, the workers' didn't have the ability to mobilize as one group towards their superior.

5.1.7 A non-theme: The union

One of the striking things about the construction site was that the trade unions were not a topic that was discussed amongst the workers. This was my initial interest –the relationship between labor migrants and trade unions. However, as I have discussed in my methodology chapter, I was not able to film with the trade unions when they visited the different construction sites. Compared to the other construction sites I had visited with Bård, the union

representative, the construction site where I did my fieldwork did not have any pamphlets, brochures or stickers hanging up that informed about union membership.

Through my fieldwork I did not impose any research questions onto my informants, but rather would ask more general questions regarding work at the construction site, which would lead my informants and me on to various topics. We discussed a lot of different topics, but the subject of union membership would not arise. I did not want to pursue this topic if the workers at the construction site did not find it natural to talk about. My initial access problems with filming at construction sites showed that being involved with trade unions was controversial.

This represents a clear change compared to Lysgaard where the labor unions were actively a part of his research project. He explains that the unions were a very important part of his research project and says that without them he would not have had the trust needed to conduct his research (1985, 5). Even though the management at the factory was positive to the project they could not continue to do their research without the consent of the trade unions.

That none of the workers spoke about the unions and that the different trade unions were not present at the construction site, can be related to the changes that are taking place in the construction industry in Norway.

The section on the trade union and traditional workers' perspectives will deal more with this issue.

5.2 The workers' collective: Then and now

The relationship to the superiors was something that affected all the different groups of workers. There was a common skepticism towards the administrative staff and concern that they would gain insight into the work life of the employees. However, at the same time there was not a homogenous workers' collective at the construction site as Lysgaard described it. To describe these changes as seen by older Norwegian workers and the trade union, I will go back to my round of visits with Oslo Building Workers Union. These observations I could not have made at the construction site where I did my fieldwork, as older Norwegian workers were not present there.

After describing findings from these trade union visits, I will turn again to my fieldwork at the Holmstad construction site. I will discuss my findings in light of Lysgaard's three conditions

for the development and maintenance of a workers' collective: common problems, identification and interaction.

5.2.1 Trade union and traditional workers' perspectives

During our visits there was often a sense of sternness between the union representative Bård and the general contractor when it came to us visiting a construction site. Often there were questions about why Bård was visiting at this specific time, if there were any problems the general contractor needed to know about and usually questioning why Bård was there. My presence was never questioned after I had introduced myself as a master student. At one location we were not allowed to enter the construction site, because of the busy schedule they had, but other than this one situation we gained access to all the sites that we tried to visit (without the camera). As I started to understand, the relationship between the general contractor and the union representative was a fairly formal one, where the general contractor would question the union representative's legitimacy in visiting the site, and the union representative would question the general contractor's relationship with its workers and the grounds for limiting his access. Even though there was sternness between the union representative and the contractor this relationship was always professional.

The following is from one of the construction site visits with my informant, Bård. During these inspections I would usually observe and let him do the talking.

-Hi, my name is Bård and I come from Fellesforbundet.

-What can I help you with?

-I am just here to do a little "missioning" as usual.

-Have there been any problems?

-No, no, I am just here to talk.

After this we went together and talked to some of the employees. We walked up to the top floor and met two workers who were wearing the general contractor's logo. Bård asked about the strike and if they were ready.

-Yeah, we are ready. Hopefully this might change something but we haven't heard much from the union.

-Follow the news during the evening before and check the radio after you get up. If there is a strike then there will be a meeting 10 o'clock down town, Bård answered.

-Okay, same procedure as last time there was a strike?

-Yes, you will get the info if something happens.

- So what are we striking for this year?

- Higher minimum wages and the same wage and working conditions for temp workers and subcontracting workers [as for permanent employees].

Both of the men were fulltime employees of the general contractor and had worked in construction for a long time.

-This is important. We will be gone in 10 years' time if things don't change. There are no new people to take over. Now they hire people only temporarily and no new [permanent] people are coming in. But I don't think we will get it through without a strike.

At this construction site we also met one older formwork carpenter of about 60, who was working with a Somali colleague on a concrete construction.

-Hi, how are you today?

-We are fine, getting wet in the rain.

-So how are things working out? Is everything under control?

-You should look at these other guys here. None of them speak any Norwegian. There are only a few of us left. You should look in on them.

He points toward some workers that I later got to know were Polish.

-There is a lot less unity (samhold) now than before. Now you barely hear any Norwegian spoken at the sites. Mostly it is just Polish and other eastern European languages. It makes communication hard.

This was one of the tendencies that I noticed when I visited the different construction sites together with the union; the older workers had noticed a change and felt that there was less unity and a feeling of community.

Raymond Johansen, the General Secretary of the Norwegian Labor Party, himself originally a plumber, also observed this when he visited a construction site in 2011. This was reported in the newspaper *Bygningsarbeideren* (The Construction Worker) published by Oslo Building Workers' Union.

“It’s been a long time since I worked at a construction site myself, and what I saw was outrageous. Temp-agencies and a lot of foreign workers who don’t know Norwegian has made the community that I remember from construction sites disappear. It does not exist anymore. However, what does exist, is a lot of people that are paid little and people afraid to do anything about it.” (Raymond Johansen in Bals 2011) my translation.¹⁷

The trade unions are under a new form of pressure and are struggling to adapt to the changes brought on by labor migration. Oslo Building Workers Union is trying to keep their presence known at different construction sites. They expressed concerns like this:

*“the previous years experience from Germany, for example, shows us what happens when trade unions are weakened: Wages drop, accidents increase, and apprentices, professional pride and security disappear.”*¹⁸

The trade unions are afraid that globalization will create similar situations in Norway. The conversations with the traditional workers quoted above are from a different construction site than the one where I did my fieldwork. At this construction site there was a much stronger presence of a trade union and we were able to talk to a union representatives that were worried about the change that they observed around them at the construction site, where workers who spoke other languages than Norwegian were outnumbering them. These were the workers the trade unions were afraid would underbid each other in the tender system. In addition, some of the workers were afraid of their trade disappearing.

The question about trade unions was a non-topic at the Holmstad construction site, nor did I meet any union representatives there. In my analysis, this is in part because the traditional workers' fear of being replaced had by and large already materialized. There were no

¹⁷ “Det er lenge siden jeg har jobba på byggeplass selv, og det jeg så var opprørende. Utleiefirmaer og mange utenlandske ansatte som ikke kan norsk gjør at fellesskapet jeg husker fra byggeplassene har forsvunnet. Det eksisterer ikke lengre. Til gjengjeld finnes det mange lavtlønte, og folk som er redde for å gjøre noe med det”.

¹⁸ ”IKKE STÅ ALENE” Brochure from the Oslo Building Workers Union.
<http://www.bygningsarbeider.no/sites/bygningsarbeider.no/files/IKKE%20ST%C3%85%20ALEINE.pdf>
(accessed 1.10.13)

Norwegians among the carpenters, and among the painters, only two spoke some Norwegian. The Norwegian-speaking workers left at the construction site were in professions protected by Norwegian regulations. Being an electrician is a protected title in Norway and to work as one, one needs to either have a Norwegian trade certificate (fagbrev) or get one's education approved by a government agency¹⁹. The plumbers were also protected by Norwegian regulations. To start work as a plumber one needs to be employed by or apply to become a certified company. One of the rules for being certified is that the leader needs to have a Norwegian plumbing trade certificate and have qualified personnel²⁰. The other trades at the construction site were not protected in this way.

5. 2.2 Status at the construction site regarding Lysgaard's three conditions for a workers' collective

As mentioned in the section on the concept of the workers' collective, Lysgaard (1985, 2001) hypothesizes that three conditions or premises are necessary for a workers' collective to develop: *common problems*, *identification* and *interaction*. The stronger these conditions are present, the stronger is the collective, according to Lysgaard. I will now look at each of these in turn, also as a way of summing up some of my findings.

Common problems

The main common problem for the workers according to Lysgaard's model is protection from the technical-economic system, the need to have a buffer. Related to this is the fact that the workers share a condition of being subordinates. Lysgaard has himself said²¹ he could have made clearer what was meant by the technical-economic system, but productivity is a central issue. Using the construction site we can identify several common problems and possible challenges that this system creates: Stressful deadlines, dangerous work situations, incomplete or incorrect plan documents, inspections, pay systems and work schedules, problems with tools and facilities.

We can take the example of deadlines. All the worker groups were driven by deadlines. If there were problems, for example when the carpenters were delayed or made mistakes, which affected the others, there was little evidence of trying to find collective solutions to the problems. The various worker groups showed little solidarity with each other in such

¹⁹The government agency is NOKUT <http://www.nokut.no/no/student-og-arbeidssokere/yrker-som-ikke-krever-godkjenning/annen-utdanning/fag--og-svennebrev/> accessed November 1. 2012

²⁰ Personal communication with Ole Larmerud director of Norske Rørleggerbedrifters Landsforening

²¹ Introduction to the 4. edition (1985)

situations, and even complained to the superiors about the others and refused to talk to one another. At the construction site there is a complicating factor, compared to Lysgaard's factory, in that the technical-economic system is much more complex and fluid. In addition to the general contractor, each of the nineteen companies represents a technical-economic system. Because of the tender system, the workers' groups were naturally concerned about the survival of their own company, especially when conflicts arose. (For more detail, see section on "Deadlines and conflicts".)

Construction is one of the most dangerous industries in Europe; 25 percent of all fatal workspace accidents are in construction²². In Norway in 2011 there were 11 fatalities, the highest number of any industry²³. At the construction site it seems that the administrative staff as representatives for the technical-economic system, was more concerned about safety and dangerous work situations than many of the workers. In the very beginning I quoted one of the superiors as saying that one of the main issues I should look at is safety, for that was evidently a problem according to him. I also quote the person responsible for safety and logistics, who was the one who warned me of the dangers of the shaft and gaps in the scaffolding. The workers seem on the whole not to be so concerned, and some even refused to follow the safety rules, as seen in the example of the carpenters who ignored the engineer when he told them to wear their hard-hats also inside. Of course, it may be that the workers see the safety regulations as a burden from the technical-economic system, and not as a protection against the dangers in this system. One reason for this might be that the different workers while working for different companies experienced the administrative staff's focus on safety and safety gear as a hindrance for working efficiently, which again was necessary in order to meet the deadlines.

Another recurring common problem was incomplete or incorrect blueprints and technical drawings. Here also, there seemed to be no common initiatives to improve the drawings, although the consequences could be quite severe – mistakes, missed deadlines, stress for the workers and conflicts. When it comes to inspections, the different groups had different strategies, as I have described. Some made themselves invisible when the staff came on these

²²Eurostat, (accessed 7.11.13):

[http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php?title=File:Fatal_and_serious_accidents_at_work_by_economic_activity_EU-27_2009_\(1\)_\(%25_of_serious_and_fatal_accidents\).png&filetimestamp=20121030183014](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php?title=File:Fatal_and_serious_accidents_at_work_by_economic_activity_EU-27_2009_(1)_(%25_of_serious_and_fatal_accidents).png&filetimestamp=20121030183014)

²³The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, (accessed 7.11.13):

<http://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/artikkel.html?tid=227601>

rounds, while other groups had a much more relaxed relationship with the superiors. (For more details, see “Relationship to the superiors”.)

Regarding tools and facilities, the industrial elevator, which easily became a bottleneck, was one small example of an area where collective norms for its use had been developed. This I learned the hard way when I broke these norms.

In short, there were many common problems relating to the technical-economic system. Thus, this condition or premise for a workers’ collective is in place. Still, there seemed to be only varying degrees of collective solutions. Most solutions were on an individual-company-to-general-contractor-level, and not initiated by a collective endeavor either from the individual workers or their companies. Thus, the ability to deal with these problems was limited for the workers present at the construction site.

Identification

The workers’ collective can consist of many different types of people with different skills and functions, according to Lysgaard (1985, 2001), but there is a premise that they are similar in *status*. So the hypothesis is that “the more alike they are each other in external status, and the more different they are from representatives for the technical-economic system, the stronger is the chance of developing a workers’ collective” (1985, p 198, my translation). Lysgaard mentions in particular identity markers such as work clothing, and other symbols signifying status, e.g. where and with whom they eat lunch, as important in creating a common identity.

If there are other identity markers that are more salient, this can weaken identification within the same workers’ collective. Lysgaard mentions specifically the situation in the United States at that time, in contrast to a less diverse Norway in the 1950s. In the United States status differences regarding race, nationality and religion, were potentially more important, than differences in status at the workplace.

At the construction site there were many things supporting a distinction between workers and administrative staff. Nevertheless, at the same time, other important identity markers, which weakened collective identification as subordinates.

The identity markers Lysgaard emphasizes, work clothes and lunchrooms, were just as prominent at the construction site, as they were at the factory more than 60 years earlier. As

mentioned when describing the barracks, the administrative staff occupied their own space, including lunchroom. This area had a higher standard than the rooms for the workers. Work boots were not permitted in this clean atmosphere. This meant the workers could not go beyond the first reception area with the exception of a weekly progress meeting. The superiors could also be distinguished from the other workers as they wore the logo of the general contractor on the weekly inspection rounds.

In contrast to Lysgaard's factory, the workers at the construction site are divided. The Norwegian-speaking workers had their own combined break and lunchroom, while the non-Norwegian speakers had theirs. The Norwegian speakers did not have their own locker room, but did not use the others' locker room, either.

What we see here are three quite distinct groups, the administrative staff, the workers who could speak Norwegian (with diverse backgrounds), and the others. But the "others" could in other situations create different constellations based on language, nationality and work group/subcontractor as well as company/trade. And even the Norwegian-speaking group was not a clear-cut category, as exemplified by Norwegian-speaking Salih, who would eat with his multilingual team in the "foreigners" lunchroom.

To sum up, the identity markers at the construction site were all quite complex. There were clear divisions between the superiors and the subordinates, on the same identity markers that Lysgaard emphasizes. In addition, however, there were nationalities, languages and trades and work groups, which also overlapped, combined with the additional variable of how long one had worked at the site. In a "crisis", as illustrated by the conflicts created by the deadlines, a worker's main loyalty was to his own work group, that is, company or employer. This situation of diversity and flux makes the construction site very different from the stable, homogeneous Norwegian factory in the 1950s. It is actually in many ways more like the situation in the United States described by Lysgaard. However, this comparison is not entirely appropriate, at least in the sense that religion was not an important issue at the Norwegian construction site.²⁴

²⁴ Even though race and religion were not discussed at the construction site I cannot say that discrimination did not exist. But, when it came to the creation of different groups these went across religion and to an extent also race.

Interaction

The third condition for the development of a workers' collective according to Lysgaard's theory is interaction. Important here is face-to-face interaction. Lysgaard distinguishes between system-related and spontaneous interaction:

"System-related interaction is when two or more are put together to do a piece of work. When people seek out others to have a chat without any official reason, or when they have such a chat while they are doing work together, then we have an example of a case of spontaneously chosen interaction." (1985, 203. My translation.)

A workers' collective requires spontaneous interaction, not just work-related interaction. This in turn depends on things such as freedom to move around, which allows different work groups to meet, versus having to stay in one place working a machine, for example. Spontaneous interaction may be complicated additionally by noise that makes conversation impossible. Lysgaard mentions in particular the importance of "free spaces" such as lunchrooms and locker rooms for encouraging interaction. (Thus, they are both status markers promoting common identity and spaces promoting spontaneous interaction.)

Lysgaard emphasizes downtime at work – breaks, as well as walking and waiting time. Another variable is how tight superior control is. In a factory, as an example, there is an experience of more freedom on the night, evening and weekend shifts when the bosses are not around. Yet, another variable is how permanent or transient the interaction is. Specifically he emphasizes that a high degree of turnover reduces the possibility for a strong collective.

In my material there is a lot of spontaneous interaction, which I also have tried to capture in my film. There is joking around, conversations about trips home and weekend plans and chats to get to know new employees. There are "free spaces" in the form of lunchrooms and lockers just for workers. At the construction site, as at the factory, cigarette breaks were important in creating a non-work related free space for the workers. Waiting at the elevator and walking around to get materials also illustrates the downtime Lysgaard mentions. Still, how the different workers would relate to these downtimes and these "free-spaces" depended on how secure they felt in relation to steady employment. Some of the workers, such as the Baltic-carpenters and the handymen, were not comfortable being seen during these downtimes and breaks. Others, particularly the Norwegian plumbers, did not see any problematic aspect of being shown or filmed during downtimes or breaks.

However, the high level of mobility and different work schedules made it difficult to turn spontaneous interaction into lasting relations. One person who was frustrated with this was Salih, who during one of my interviews commented upon his experience on how un-interested his Norwegian co-workers had been in creating friendships outside construction sites and how short-term their perspective on co-worker relations was. His comment suggests that the lack of engagement may be a hinder for more stable relationships. The transiency of the workers, the short time frame for the relations at the work site, combined with the fluid nature of these relations, made stable, long-term relations difficult.

5.3 The fluid collective

Liberalization of the economy and the liquidizing forces of individualization and globalization, which are Bauman's (2000) main points, are clearly present at the construction site. It is therefore not surprising that the collective I observed during my fieldwork was highly fluid, in the sense of shifting constellations of people. Even though it was fluid, there was nevertheless a kind of community present at the construction site. This led me to the question: What are the characteristics of communities in our liquid modern times according to Bauman, and how can these shed light on the community that existed at the site?

5.3.1. Bauman's concept of community

Within Lysgaard's workers' collective there is a clearly defined "*us*" which is distinguished from "*them*", and this was the distinction between the workers and their superiors (2001, 93).²⁵ At the construction site these categories were not as clear. The notion of "*us*" used at the construction site varied from situation to situation depending on the different people that were present and how well they knew each other. "*Us*" was a fluid category.

As I have discussed, conflicts often arose between the different worker groups. This is because they are closer to the economic situation of their company, have difficulty understanding each other across languages and spend varying amounts of time at the construction site. This made it difficult to create a homogenous workers' collective as described by Lygaard (2001).

²⁵ Although Lysgaard also describes that who is included as "*us*" varies depending on the context. It could be a smaller group, such as "our shift", or a special function, such as running the paper machine. It could also be the whole factory, as when they went together on a donation to fight cancer (Lysgaard 1985, 28). Nevertheless, the main distinction remained clear-cut between "*us*, the workers" and "*them*, the management".

There may be a longing for a homogenous and stable community, but the only way for communities to exist in our fluid modern times, according to Bauman (2000), is by accepting plurality, and then actively and constantly seeking out relations and community with others.

Plurality

Instead of there being a fixed, homogenous and clear collective at the construction site there was a fluid collective where different workers would create relations based on ever-changing flux of identity markers. The workers would relate on the background of language, trade and nationality, but also on categories such as “being foreign” and diversity or plurality itself. The latter was particularly the case in the painters’ group. The strategies people used to create something in common, to create some unity, were in themselves fluid and diverse.

Bauman (2000, 177) writes that the only possible community today is “a kind of unity which assumes that civilized society is inherently pluralistic”. This is in contrast to antiquated patriotic and nationalist ideas where unity means homogeneity. Moreover, according to Bauman, plurality, rather than being some sort of weakness, is beneficial:

“Neither the patriotic nor the nationalist creed admits the possibility that people may belong together while staying attached to their differences, cherishing and cultivating them or that their togetherness, far from requiring similarity or promoting it as the value to be coveted and pursued, actually benefits from the variety of life-styles, ideals and knowledge while adding more strength and substance to what makes them what they are.” (2000, 177)

The different workers at the site did have different knowledge and ideas about constructing a building, and had they come together to discuss, this may have created synergies and new solutions. As it was, however, there was no arena for this to happen. There seem to be potential in their plurality that was not utilized.

Achieved, not acquired

Bauman’s second main point regarding community is that it requires constant effort. Unity can no longer be taken as given or something acquired, but rather, it has to be achieved. This is quite a different situation compared to Lysgaard’s workers’ collective, where your inclusion in this community was taken for granted if you were a worker. On the new community Bauman (2000, 178), writes;

“...the most promising kind of unity is one which is achieved and achieved daily anew, by confrontation, debate, negotiation and compromise between values, preferences and chosen ways of life and self-identification of many and different, but always self-determining, members of the polis.”

The workers at the construction site created this form of community, where they would focus on what they had shared, but also what made them different. In this sense they were able to “build together”, not only a concrete building, but also a community. People were reaching out, interested in contact and understanding. They were making an effort. The ways in which they created relations were quite creative, searching out common reference points in trying to meet other people, using joking and humor. Here the “common” and shared was not something given, but continually negotiated, where different identity markers were given weight depending on the situation.

This unity was not the given unity of Lysgaard’s workers’ collective, but an “emergent unity”, to use Bauman’s (2000, 178) term:

“... emergent unity is ... a joint achievement of the agents engaged in self-identification pursuits, a unity which is an outcome, not an a priori given condition, of shared life, a unity put together through negotiation and reconciliation, not the denial, stifling or smothering out of differences.

This, I wish to propose, is the sole variant of unity (the only formula of togetherness) which the conditions of liquid modernity render compatible, plausible and realistic.”

This “rethinking of old concepts” - community as pluralistic, emergent and achieved, and the workers’ collective as fragmented and fluid - can help in the interpretation and understanding of the situation facing the workers at the construction site.

5.3.2 Fluid power

Not only is the workers’ collective fluid, the power structure among the superiors and between superiors and subordinates can also be seen as fluid. “The superiors” is not one stable entity, but rather shifting. It is at times the administrative staff, at times the smaller companies (some of which only have a local “teamleader”, others a local “boss” as well). Those are the superiors present at the site. In addition, there are all the superiors and owners off-site and higher up in the hierarchy, both on side of the general contractor, and the various subcontractors. Beyond that, there are multinational companies and transnational institutions such as the EU, affecting the workers (and the contractors). This is a very different situation

than the paper factory, where the superiors were present at the site, the owners were citizens of the same small town and legislation was just national.

To understand part of this shift in power it might help to look at Jonathan Friedman's (2003) concept of vertical polarization, which he sees as a result of globalization, and which comes in addition to horizontal fragmentation. Vertical polarization implies an increased distance between elected political representatives and the people they are expected to represent. According to Friedman the representatives are more loyal to transnational organizations than their own populations when implementing policy. Power has shifted from the nation state to transnational organizations such as the EU. Friedman also writes of the cosmopolitan elite being distanced from local populations as another form of vertical polarization.

Lysgaard's (2001) analysis was conducted during a "solid" modernity with clear categories not only as to who was a colleague, but also who was a superior. When I conducted my research at the construction site this became less clear. Not knowing clearly who was in charge, and who had what responsibility, contributed to one of the main areas of tension at the construction site. There were multiple levels and lines of responsibility and power. The workers were responsible towards the administrative staff at the construction site, but they were also responsible towards their own company and the obligations they had through the tender system. Within this neo-liberal system, each of the companies was responsible for their own economic survival if they did not meet their deadlines. As a lot of the tenders had to do with competition on prices, subcontractors could easily come in the situation where they would out-bid a competitor by setting unrealistic deadlines. At the construction site the prospect of delaying other workers created tensions, but this tension was not directed towards the administrative staff, who had been responsible for the faulty drawings, but was instead directed towards other workers earlier in the production line. The workers were fragmented into rivaling groups. Not only that, this situation also puts more responsibility on the individual employee for the survival of the company they work for.²⁶

Bauman writes that the power structures affecting our everyday life and workplace are more and more remote and inaccessible, as mentioned in the section introducing the conceptual framework liquid modernity. In connection with this, there is a shift in how power is

²⁶ As previously quoted: "*Ours is as a result an individualized, privatized version of modernity, ...with the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders.*" (Bauman 2000, 8)

exercised, in that power and influence are no longer exerted by close supervision, involvement and control, but rather by disengagement, distancing themselves and inducing insecurity.

These days, domination does not rest primarily on engagement-and-commitment; on the capacity of rulers to watch closely the movements of the ruled and to coerce them into obedience. It has acquired a new, much less troublesome [for the people in power] and less costly –since requiring little servicing – foundation: the uncertainty of what move, if any, their ruler may make next (2001, 41)

The tender system and the precariousness of not knowing if you had work the next day, makes for an unpredictable and insecure situation. The ability to forecast and thus make plans for the future is greatly reduced. The superiors rely on their subordinates' constant lack of self-confidence, according to Bauman, and this is the new means of control, not tight supervision. Resistance and negotiation is harder through this constant *precariousness* and the fact that the powers that do influence and control peoples lives, are disengaged. They have become far less visible and harder to pinpoint than before (Bauman 2001). At the construction site this was also the case: who one's superior could be differed from situation to situation, and who the "higher-ups" were, was hard to identify. The bosses above the superiors at the site were a faceless part of a multinational company that had its main office in another country than Norway. The legislation that affected the construction workers was to a large degree enacted by transnational institutions (the EU). In addition, the economy was highly influenced by the global financial markets and crisis. What brought workers to Norway was probably unemployment in their home country and the possibilities of higher wages and better working conditions. In many ways, the power structures that affected the workers - and their local superiors - were unapproachable and thus hard to influence.

5.2.3 Liminality: Betwixt and between

The construction site was a continuously changing place. From one week to the next whole floors would be transformed from bare concrete to finished painted homes. Windows would replace holes and water would start to run. People would leave and new people would arrive. In this sense, the construction site was in an ever-changing condition. The construction workers themselves were betwixt and between different spaces and places, buildings, languages, countries and ways of life.

“Betwixt and between” is a phrase used to help explain the concept of liminality. Victor Turner’s term liminality is an in-between situation where standard categories do not apply and situations are unpredictable (Turner 1969). It is a term that was first used by Arnold van Gennep in describing the middle stage in rites of passage, *limen* or “threshold” in Latin, where participants are in-between the state they had before the ritual, but have not yet acquired their new status. Turner expanded on the term to describe the situation people are in when they are “in between” fixed states in life (1999). Being engaged is for example a liminal phase moving towards marriage. In these liminal phases people have left one category organizing their life and are waiting to enter another. In these in-between states old rules and norms lose their importance while new rules have not yet come into play.

One of the characteristics of a construction site is that there is a high degree of mobility of the workers there. Some workers would only be present for a few days working on a highly specialized task i.e. the bathroom installers, who grew up in Poland, but came from London to move the prefabricated bathrooms into place. They are certainly a type of *new nomads*, who travel from place to place and work for different projects. They were the only ones who would not say where they were from or where they belonged when I talked to them. Instead, they were more interested in where they were *going* and how they hoped to do well in Norway.

Others at the construction site had a different relationship to both the building and Norway. Most of the Baltic-carpenters emphasized how they were only in Norway temporarily, that they only *worked* in Norway and that they would go back to Lithuania when they were finished. One of my informants told me that he had been working temporarily in Norway for eight years. When I asked him what his plans for the future were he did not answer. Instead he told me, “*This is blood money, but we are here to work*”. I see this as a form of *constant liminality*, where he and workers like him are not able to see a future in either their home country Lithuania nor in Norway.

Almost all the carpenters lived together in one house that was owned by the company that employed them. In their spare time most of them would spend as little money as possible. A favorite pastime was fishing. The money they earned they would send back to their families in Lithuania. As they were working longer hours, did not speak Norwegian, and they all lived together, they seldom had contact with any of the others at the construction site. They were stuck in a phase of neither being at home or abroad. They did not see Norway as a new home where they could establish a future, perhaps because of the social relations that still bound them to either Lithuania or Latvia. However, they did not see themselves having a future in their home country either, as they did not see the possibility making a living there. In this sense they were in a constant temporary state in between the two different countries, traveling back every six weeks.

On the days when some of them would travel back home, there was always a light and humorous atmosphere around the construction site. However, when they came back to work two weeks later, the mood was different. This also affected my research. Right before the workers would leave they were quite interested in talking and participating, letting me film them, but Giedrius, for example, no longer wanted to take part in my project when he came back from Lithuania. He started talking about his family in Lithuania and how they might see him working and living the way he did, but did not want to elaborate on what he meant by this. Instead, he just continued working.

I see living in two countries, but not being able to create a future in any of them, as a form of constant liminality. They were not able to break out of what they themselves saw as a temporary way of life to create something more predictable and stable. Instead, this instability had become their way of life. Even though most of the workers were stuck in this liminal phase, one of the workers tried to adapt and create a future in Norway. Marijus was the one carpenter who decided to learn Norwegian. He had chosen to move to Norway and lived with his wife in a small apartment. When the other workers would go to Lithuania, he would stay with his wife in Oslo and learn Norwegian. Originally a plumber, his dream was to learn Norwegian sufficiently to formalize his education and get a permanent job at a Norwegian company. He was planning on building his own house in the southern part of Norway where he thought he could afford it. The only person Marijus spoke Norwegian to at the construction site was me. One of the reasons for this, I believe, was the latent conflicts between the carpenters and the plumbers.

Breaking out of this cycle of traveling back and forth and achieving upward labor mobility was not easy. This has also been written about by Friberg (2011). He discusses how Polish workers invoke the stereotype of a “hard-working Pole” who does what he is told, as a way of landing jobs and managing a precarious work situation. They themselves wanted more autonomy and wanted to be able to question the instructions they were given. The consequence of this compliant behavior when seeking permanent jobs, is that they are also labeled as lacking initiative and independent thinking. This made them unsuitable for permanent employment according to the employers, who wanted to fill these more responsible positions with employees having “Norwegian working culture”. According to Friberg this meant that the workers were caught in temporary jobs by actively using and upholding these stereotypes.

At the construction site there were other workers who were able to move past this liminal phase and make living a life in Norway permanent. Hans, the German carpenter, is one example. We meet him in my film talking about the differences between working in Norway compared to Germany. He spoke perfect Norwegian and had a Norwegian girlfriend. He said that Germany was his “homeland,” but he could never dream of moving back (Fjærtøft 2013, 14.00).

5.3.4 The fragile collective

There was a community at the site, which was held up by humor and friendly interactions. As discussed earlier, the workers at the construction site would greet and speak to each other, and jokes were told in an effort to include coworkers. People would reach out and create relations with others even across seemingly insurmountable language barriers, as exemplified by Daniel the Nigerian handyman, who spoke a few words in Russian and was joking with two of the Latvian carpenters.

The community was a patchwork of different cultures, languages and trades that was held together by working on one building. They had the same superiors when it came to the administration of this construction site and were supposed to abide by a common safety regime. Other building blocks for a shared identity were language, nationality and trade. However, these building blocks were not shared equally by all and shifted importance depending on who was present. People were nevertheless able to create ad-hoc relationships and a community, and they were able to build a physical concrete building. In my film, this is one of the central points, how people - despite their differences - relate to each other and are

able to construct something. The sense of community seems more present in the film than it is possible to describe in words.

David MacDougall writes about this tension or disparity between text and images. Perception is influenced by language and meaning, but it is at the same time through perception that meaning and interpretations might change. Images are closer to experience.

Meaning shapes perception, but in the end perception can reconfigure meaning, so that in the next stage, this may alter perception once again. (MacDougall 2006, 2)

In the film we see people being together, sharing the same space, doing manual labor, joking around, smoking, reaching out and talking to new people, showing pride in their work. They all had a trade that was essential in transforming a structure into housing. Each had skills that were needed and that the others relied on. By working together and changing the construction site into a building they shared a sense of working on the same project.

However, the sense of belonging and security varied among the different workers. The plumbers are an example of workers who were self-confident in their skills and the necessity of them being at the construction site. Other workers such as the day workers struggled to understand what they were supposed to do and if they had done it well enough to be able to continue working at the site. Or, even if they were secure in their skills, there was often an insecurity related to language.

The only place where all the construction workers would meet was in the elevator, the main vein of infrastructure at the construction site. This was in a sense a liminal place which never stood still and was always moving. People would meet, speak a few words and then move on. The precarious sense of belonging, the varying degrees of insecurity, the lack of meeting places for all, the high mobility of the workers, the tender system and the lack of a shared language, all this made the community fragile. Without warning conflicts could arise and divide the workers, whose main interest then became their own company and their own group.

It seems not to be the plurality and diversity in itself that made the community fragile. If work at the construction site had not been so dominated by deadlines and the fragmentation of responsibility in multiple contracts, there would have been fewer reasons for conflicts that divided the workers and threatened their community. Moreover, the tender system with multiple subcontractors seems to be the main explanation for why the workers were not able to act collectively and respond to their common problems. In this regard, the community at

the construction site is not only fragile, but also a forceless collective, unable to deal conjointly with the difficulties the workers at the workplace faced.

6. Conclusion: The new workers' collective - fluid, fragmented, fragile and forceless

My main interest in this thesis has been how people relate to each other and create common ground at a contemporary multinational construction site. More specifically, I wanted to explore the concept of the workers' collective as described by Lysgaard and whether it was relevant today. Lysgaard specifies three conditions for the creation of the workers' collective: *common problems*, *identification* and *interaction*, and these conditions were in part met at the construction site. There were in fact many similarities, but also major differences.

The workers did have *common problems*, such as working in a hectic environment and meeting strict deadlines as a result of their various companies' contracts with the general contractor. They were under the same administrative staff and often had problems with the blueprints that they were supposed to follow, which affected their ability to reach the deadlines. However, instead of spawning collective action and a set of norms, the different groups of workers would instead blame each other for the mistakes that created delays. Instead of trying to collectively solve the problems that affected all the workers, they ended up as rivals and would sometimes avoid speaking to each other if conflicts would arise. Another common issue was the superiors' inspection rounds, where different groups of workers would use different strategies. Safety was also an issue, yet the administrative staff seemed more concerned about this than the workers, possibly because safety measures could impede their efficiency in reaching deadlines.

When it comes to the second condition, *identification*, there was a clear difference in status between the workers and the superiors. The superiors would stay on their own floor in the building where the workers were not allowed to enter with their work boots on, and they did not eat lunch together with the workers. In addition, the superiors would wear the logo of the general contractor, which distinguished them from the other workers. However, the category of "superiors" was often not clear. There were multiple levels of superiors and lines of power. Another aspect is that "us", the workers, was for Lysgaard a homogenous category, compared to the construction site. Because of the diversity and the multiple subcontractors the question of who "us" was changed from situation to situation depending on the context and who was present. People would identify with each other in varying degrees depending on markers such as nationality, language and trade, in addition to their status vis-à-vis the superiors.

The last of Lysgaards' conditions is *spontaneous interaction*, which means that the workers could have arenas and "free spaces" to interact with each other and create room to socialize. At the construction site this was also the case. Workers would use their *downtime* and together create "free spaces" by smoking cigarettes and talking about their life outside of work. There were, however, many different languages at the construction site and a lot of the workers did not have a *shared language* to communicate with. Nevertheless, people would reach out and try and make contact with the little language they did share. Another aspect that made spontaneous interaction hard was the separation of the different groups into different lunchrooms. The Norwegian-speaking workers would eat in a separate room than the other workers.

It has been useful to compare my experiences at the construction site with the experiences of Lysgaard even though they are written more than 60 years apart. This is because it sheds light on power relations and interactions in a workplace. It provides a contrast which makes the rapid changes that are affecting the construction industry, and our society as a whole, more visible. Of course, there is still the question of whether Lysgaard's workers' collective is a category of the past and no longer useful in today's ever-changing society, or whether we can speak of a workers' collective also today

According to Bauman (2001) we now live in a time of liquid modernity, which is characterized by the melting and liquidizing of older categories and institutions organizing our lives (such as the workers' collective), and while we try to create new ones, these new categories melt once again. In our liquid modern times Bauman calls for a "...*rethinking of old concepts that used to frame its narratives* (2000, 8)" I believe that applying the *workers' collective* as a concept has given me insight to the internal dynamics at the construction site, and has also shown how working life has changed in the last 60 years. The workers' collective does, however, need to be redefined.

The construction site was a *borderland* (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) where people of different cultures and belonging to different groups would meet and interact. It was my intention to study such a borderland and not a fixed culture belonging to a specific place. The construction site proved in fact to be such a globalized space, with people from 19 different nationalities speaking more than fourteen different languages to each other. This environment is in stark contrast to the one described by Lysgaard. Turners (1969) term *liminality*, "betwixt and between", also describes conditions at the site well, both the ever-changing building itself,

and the flow of workers in and out. Some of the workers at the construction site would not belong to any country; instead, they would live in constant liminality between two countries. “Temporarily working in Norway” for some meant eight years with no end in sight. This is happening simultaneously as the power structures that affect people’s lives are becoming more remote and amorphous (Bauman 2000). At the construction site these power structures are represented by the superiors off-site and the forces that brought people to Norway, not the least of which is the higher unemployment in Europe.

The constellations of workers were fluid and fragmented. Nonetheless, there was a sense of community. The workers’ collective can be seen as resurrecting in a new shape, with new characteristics. According to Bauman, the only way for communities to exist in liquid modernity is through being founded on both *plurality* and being achieved through active *engagement*. The construction site was a patchwork of different languages, nationalities and trades. Through the engagement of the workers different groups were always reaching out and seeking contact with others, no matter how little language they shared. Differences and contrasts could be used to include others through joking and humor. This is more clearly experienced in the film, than can be described in a text. There was a community amongst the construction workers, all with a common goal, to construct a building, all participating with their skills in that endeavor. They were “defying Babel”, proving it possible to build a tower, despite a multitude of languages.

However, the community was also *fluid*, *fragmented*, *fragile* and *forceless*. These are the characteristics that can be used to define the new workers’ collective. The *fluidity* was characterized by there not being a fixed “us”, but rather this would shift depending on the situation and who was present, and if they could find common reference points to communicate. Even though people would reach out and build relations, the collective was *fragmented* especially through the neo-liberal economic tender system, and the differences between workers whose trade was protected and the other workers whose trade was not. The collective was also *fragile*. If there were any complications when it came to the deadlines any of the subcontractors had agreed to, each of the workers would focus their loyalties on their own company. This created rivalry between the different groups of workers when their company was in the risk of losing money, and could result in conflicts so serious that different worker groups would not talk to each other and no longer interact for periods of time.

One of the main differences between Lysgaard's workers' collective, and the fluid workers collective/community at the construction site, was that at the construction site they were powerless, *forceless*, in changing the conditions and were not able to create the buffer and collective action described by Lysgaard. Instead, it was dominated by a regime of *precariousness* where the different workers feared not being able to complete their contracts on time or not doing their job well enough to secure new employment.

Bibliography:

- Arntsen, Bjørn, and Lisbet. Høltedahl. 2005. "The Role of the Audience/Reader in Knowledge Production." *Visualizing Situatedness*:67 - 83.
- Baarts, Charlotte. 2006. "Druk, bajere og løgnehistorier– om humor og fællesskab på en byggeplads." *DANSK SOCIOLOGI* no. 17 (Nr. 1):68-83.
- Bals, Jonas. 2011. "Raymond Johansen: -Det jeg så var opprørende!" *Bygningsarbeideren*.
- Barth, Fredrik. 1969. *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of culture difference*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2001. *Community: seeking safety in an insecure world*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2007. *Liquid times: living in an age of uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bazin, André, and Hugh Gray. 1960. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." *Film Quarterly* no. 13 (4):4-9. doi: 10.2307/1210183.
- Bull, Edvard, Lill-Ann Jensen, and Jakob A. Kokkvoll Arne Sverdrup. 1985. *Arbeiderbevegelsens historie i Norge*. Oslo: Tiden.
- Davies, Charlotte Aull. 2008. *Reflexive ethnography: a guide to researching selves and others*. London: Routledge.
- Fjærtøft, Thomas. 2013. *Apartment Rising: Fragments from a Construction Site*.
- Friberg, Jon Horgen. 2011. "Culture at work: Polish migrants in the ethnic division of labour on Norwegian construction sites." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* no. 35 (11):1914-1933. doi: 10.1080/01419870.2011.605456.
- Friedman, Jonathan. 2003. *Globalization, the state, and violence*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1969. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Penguin.
- Gundelach, Peter. 2000. "Joking Relationships and National Identity in Scandinavia." *Acta Sociologica* no. 43 (2):113-122. doi: 10.2307/4201193.

- Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson. 1992. "Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." *Cultural Anthropology* no. 7 (1):6-23. doi: 10.2307/656518.
- Lysgaard, Sverre. 1985. *Arbeiderkollektivet: en studie i de underordnedes sosiologi*. Oslo: Universitetsforl.
- Lysgaard, Sverre, and Ragnvald Kalleberg. 2001. *Arbeiderkollektivet: en studie i de underordnedes sosiologi*. Oslo: Universitetsforl.
- MacDougall, David. 2006. *The corporeal image: film, ethnography, and the senses*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- MacDougall, David, and Lucien Castaing-Taylor. 1998. *Transcultural cinema*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Turner, V.W. 1999. "Midt imellom. Liminalfasen i overgangsriter." In *Rites de passage. Overgangsriter*, edited by I A. van Gennep, 131-145. Oslo: Pax.
- Turner, Victor W. 1969. *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Vattø, Trine Engh. 2008. *Arbeidsinnvandring fra de nye EU-landene: En analyse av arbeidsmobilitet og virkninger på det norske arbeidsmarkedet*, Økonomisk institutt, University of Oslo, Oslo.
- Vaughan, Dai. 1999. *For documentary: twelve essays*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.