

Factory Existentialism: The Machinery Of Meaning

Wayne Mason

*Pour Soi, En Soi?
Dans l'usine
Il n'y a pas de soi*

The smell hits you before you even get out of your car. By the time you are walking into the old factory, it's already clinging to your clothes and hair. You can almost taste it. Your co-workers quip that it smells like money, but really, it's chemicals and machinery- so thick it settles in the back of your throat like defeat washing down the taste of swallowing your pride on a daily basis. You think about this as you march past aging machines and flickering lights like some forgotten post-Soviet dystopia.

This is how the shift begins. As a swing shift worker, it's never quite day or night, just some industrial purgatory between worlds. Everything becomes more disorientating- more dreamlike- maybe that is a good thing.

You make it to the lab and close the heavy doors behind you muffling out the sounds of the machines, people, and forklifts into a uniform roar. Inside this lab is alive to a similar degree, a cleaner microcosm of the factory at large... the hum of precision machines and water baths, whirl of vacuums sucking out the stench of industry. The sounds are as familiar as your own breath. Your lungs sucking air in and out intertwine with the rhythm of the lab. Sometimes you mistake the sounds of the machines for your own breathing. The machinery doesn't replace you, it absorbs you.

There is an odd comfort in the ceasing to exist. Repetition dulls sharp thoughts and mutes awareness. You run your samples, document numbers, enter data, repeat times infinity. On the good nights when the cheap coffee really hits, soundscapes form in the monotonous tones of the machines, you etch lines of poems in the margins of stained clipboards. Other nights, your brain comes to a halt just like the clock that seems to be running backwards.

In the break room, no one talks too much, it's a strange liminal space of people doom scrolling on their phones, drink coffee, or lay their heads on the table in sleep or meditation. Sometimes there is laughter, but its contrived and hollow, desperate even, and often short lived. The guys that are talking are usually going on about sports or something or other that I can't really care about. Other than one or two other kindred spirits, I don't really talk to much of anyone. It's safer that way.

It is on these breaks the intrusive thoughts grow. You half serious/ half joking think about quitting. You imagine yourself just walking out mid-shift, but then what? The system won't stop grinding because of one defiant cog... but there are still bills to be paid.

But you think that there has to be some meaning to all of this besides money. Not meaning in just the factory, because the factory is just a symptom of an entire system. Not that this place is entirely meaningless. It is a factory and it makes real product, some people way further up the ladder than me make real profit. The entire place is lousy with operating procedures, and MSDS's all with meaning. But what meaning for us? We are ghosts, and we are replaceable.

Ultimately, one day you realize that life in the factory is no different than life outside of the factory- it is entirely up to you to give it meaning. It is up to you take what you can from it, and not just a paycheck.

You find cracks in the concrete where flowers can grow, even in a place this ugly and maybe you just find out that this place is not without its own kind of magic. I've written tons of poems here about this place. I have an entire publishing career I owe to this place or places like it. Its influenced my sound art. It has influenced my philosophy. Maybe that is the meaning and the liberation, to carve out a small sacred place in the middle of industries endless grind- to give a soul to a soulless place.

Maybe you escape this place early, maybe you get to retire one day. But until then you keep clocking in and out. As tired and defeated as you feel, you do not let the machines win.

Author Bio:

Wayne Mason is an experimental writer, sound artist, and factory worker from central Florida whose work explores industrial landscapes, existentialism, and the interplay of text and noise. His words and sounds have been published widely in the small press and his new book, *The Death Factory* (LJMcD Communications) is out now.