

There was a factory, way back in the annals of industrial standard time.

What kind of factory was it?

It was a fencing foil factory, though not a single employee partook in the sport. Yes, there were minor skirmishes, which utilized the fruits of labour. But in general, there simply wasn't time.

The metallurgy was hard, too hard, and largely unfair, with little connection between the workers and the products of their actions, other than the meagre wage every month, often a month late, and sometimes—especially for the young people—never received at all.

This wasn't one of those factories where the workers wear hydraulic exoskeletons on the backs of their legs, which firm into a chair at the press of a button. It wasn't a factory in outer space, it wasn't online, or on a blog, or in a feed, and it wasn't a museum.

Rather, it was a factory caught between the old way of work and the new. It stood on the threshold of what is sometimes called the "Second Industrial Revolution," when children's working shifts were reduced from twelve hours to nine: presumably, for their recreation, though actually, to freshen them for the next shift. Alas, that freshness would not last long.

One room, a workshop that ran approximately thirty feet long, had an extractor fan mounted in the corner. This fan was like all of the other extractor fans in the factory.

The room, however, had rather unique qualities.

More specifically, the room held rather unique moments. It was a room of mirage and hard work, of mass faintings, *trompe l'oeil* and mutual belief—though at first, few understood this.

Yes, there was the occasional worker who claimed to see vague figures, moving along the walls. True, a visiting quality inspector (originally from Port Issac<sup>i</sup>) once turned ice cold, as he watched a thread being cut onto the tang of a spare blade. But there was a rational explanation for such phenomena: fatigue.

Indeed, what worker, inclining towards exhaustion, would not mistake the far wall for a forest, its mold in verdant bloom? What worker hasn't tripped face first into sleep, and while descending, grazed that anamorphic plane, where the ground becomes a skull, then a chasm?

So the arguments went, but still, the visions continued, sometimes shared by many at a time. The shadows of dueling fencers periodically appeared on the walls of the room, their every lunge and parry marking, however briefly, an obscure diagram. The workers would say little about its meaning.

Grindstones glistened like the Koh-i-Noor, anvils seeped *eau de cologne*. These marvels, which so impressed the crowds at The Great Exhibition, meant nothing to those who hadn't the time or the means to visit.

By far the most common vision came to be known as "the orchestra,"<sup>iii</sup> which was induced, some said, by the way steel "sings" in the forge, the pitch rising with the temperature. Several of its notes were believed to have magical properties: to resonate with specific things in the world, to make instruments of the world of things, to destroy things. Rumor has it that a foil removed from the forge, while singing one such note, would sing that note forever.

Needless to say, this wasn't a productive time for the factory. Eleven workers had already been sent home without pay. The supply of threats and punishments was beginning to run dry.

More children from the local orphanage were hired, yet they too fell into the phantasmagoric, unproductive chaos of this particular room.

The owner was flummoxed.

The factory closed for an evening. This rare occurrence could only mean one thing: an investigation of the recent, surplus-destroying phenomena. A scientist came to inspect the facilities, searching for “mundane” causes of the ostensible haunt. She scanned the pipes and radiators for noises, the electrical and structural faults for draughts. Could the hallucinations be caused by electromagnetic anomalies? Were vermin creating the shadowy effects?

There was no denying that this room had rather unique qualities. In little time, it creaked and groaned. Gradually, she began to shiver. But there was also something else.

Figures emerged.

They stayed in the periphery of her vision, moving, like a crowd, in an unscripted yet forceful manner—with velocity, but not speed. In their wake, only silence remained, which collected in eddies and rivulets, then rivers and lakes, eventually reaching the scale of a standing wave. It bore mute testimony to the apparitions, as they performed their *secessio plebis*.

“It would not be unreasonable to suggest,” the scientist later recalled, “that I was terrified.” But as the minutes elapsed, her curiosity grew. At last, courage in hand, she turned to greet the spectres, only to see them disappear. Where they stood a blade, clamped in a bench vice, vibrated frantically up and down.

A twinge of disappointment.

Still, vibrations were more familiar to the scientist than apparitions.

To achieve this effect, an object must receive energy that varies in intensity at a rate equal to its resonant frequency. This type of energy is usually referred to as “sound.”

Yet the room was more or less silent, save the occasional creaks and groans. The energy in question, the scientist deduced, must fall below the register of human hearing. And if that infrasonic frequency matched those of the body’s organs<sup>iii</sup>—if the workers were made to vibrate, like the foil, with increasing ecstasy and dread—then it would also explain the sensations experienced in this room.

The following day, the scientist shared her discovery.

No one filled the room with concrete, nor lined it with acoustical foam. Nor was the extractor fan, believed to be the source of the infrasonic enchantment, pulled down from its perch.

In this story, the room remained open. It continued to offer escapist pleasures: tricks of light and shadow, apparitions of all colours and sizes. Soon, the patterns were obvious.

The vibrations, for all their terroristic potential, would undo no machine, no robot, no financial instrument speeding capital through the airstreams. The hallucinations never revealed anything as efficient as *factory organ*. Had this been the case, every hum and vibration, each mirage of rising heat, all the wayward clicks, breaths, and shifts of the eye could rush through the pipes to the rooftop, sounding a composition without end. If every factory joined in song—stops open, pipes full—then we would no longer speak of alienation. The working conditions would be transparent.

Nonetheless, the fan persisted, sucking toxins into the ether, making the room an instrument. Its frequency, like all frequencies, could move through walls, into pores and orifices, and across the fictive bounds that keep us each in a role—that delineate our lot.

Whatever its symbolism, the resonator remains precisely this: indiscriminate, built for the many, not the one.

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<sup>i</sup> More recently, in Port Issac, Cornwall, members of the sea shanty group "The Fishermen's Friends," after receiving a record deal with Universal Music, left their jobs in marine industries to become full-time entertainers. Reports from Port Issac's community on the impact of the band: "Taking inspiration from 'The Fisherman's Friends,' the entire industry began a widespread switch from fishing to song"; "The work songs that had formerly ameliorated the toils of labour became the work itself." This transition of economies reflected larger trends towards "fishing for work" and, interestingly, "fishing for work songs," rather than fishing for fish.

<sup>ii</sup> One transcription of "the orchestra" goes as follows:

A well-known scientist once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits the sun, and how the sun, in turn, orbits the centre of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy.

At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate propped on the back of a giant tortoise."

The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, "What is the tortoise standing on?"

"You're very clever young man, very clever," said the old lady. "But it's turtles all the way down!"

She continued, "I've written an orchestra piece, you know."

The well-known scientist was taken aback, feeling vaguely like he had heard these responses before, but didn't remember anything about an orchestra.

"It's not the sort of orchestra you're used to," said the old lady. "The orchestra is always playing; we hear it inside and outside, from near and far."

She paused.

"There's no silence for the living. We have no earlids."

<sup>iii</sup> An eyeball vibrating at its resonant frequency of approximately 18Hz, for example, may experience a "smearing" of vision. This claim, issued in Technical Report 19770013810 of a well-known space agency, stops short of answering a key question: Could these smears be mistaken for extraterrestrial life, or are extraterrestrials the ones causing them?