

## Representations of Social Inequality in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Global Art Cinema. Edited by György Kalmár.

Debrecen: Debrecen University Press, 2021. 145 pp.

Sumyat Swezin 

University of Debrecen, Egyetem tér 1 H-4032 Debrecen, Hungary; [sumyatswezin@upanglong.edu.mm](mailto:sumyatswezin@upanglong.edu.mm)

Over the last couple of years, the issue of social inequality has received tremendous attention in both academia and politics. It was also a key theme in varied social movements such as the American Occupy Wall Street, the French Yellow Jackets Demonstrations, and the Black Lives Matter movement (mostly in the US and Britain), and provoked heated debates on a variety of old and new media platforms. As the studies quoted by Kalmár in the volume's introduction prove, social inequality has grown drastically over the previous few decades, which is mostly due to the adverse side-effects of global neoliberal capitalism, such as the widening gaps in income, the lack of equality of opportunity, the demise of the welfare state, the slow decline of the middle class in the developed world, and the heightened vulnerability of the poor in such crisis situations as the recent pandemic (pp. 10–13). Growing social inequality may destabilize the political system, cause social and political polarization, hinder long-term economic growth, undermine individuals' sense of social justice, and slow down social mobility, precisely in a historical situation when the world is in desperate need of progressive change in order to avoid further crisis situations. Though numerous scholars and researchers have examined related social issues concerning twenty-first-century challenges that democracy and capitalism face from a variety of perspectives, the study of the ways social inequality is represented in contemporary cinema provides a new perspective and many novel insights about what twenty-first-century societies are going through. For those readers, both inside and outside academia, who wish to explore the recent changes in social theories, political ideologies, problematic trends in the contemporary world, and the ways these appear in art cinema, the volume *Representations of Social Inequality in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Global Art Cinema*, edited by György Kalmár, is an excellent place to start. The volume is the result of a film-studies workshop held in 2021 at the English

and American Studies department of the University of Debrecen, and it is the eighth volume in the ZOOM book series edited by György Kalmár and Zsolt Györi. It offers an informative overview of recent social and cinematic phenomena, as well as insightful discussions of several significant art films of the last two decades, such as *Parasites*, *Joker*, and *Shoplifters*. Even though this collection might play a small role in the larger landscape of social concerns that confront the world today, bringing this content together may give the concerned reader renewed optimism as well as useful food for thought in relation to the path ahead.

For those familiar with the ZOOM book series, the topic of the present volume will not come as a surprise. Several past ZOOM volumes focused on the cinematic representations of important social issues, such as *Europe and European Cinema at Times of Change* (2021), the series' previous bilingual volume, and publications in Hungarian such as *A tér, hatalom és identitás viszonyai a magyar filmben* (2015) [Relations of Space, Power and Identity in Hungarian Cinema] and *Nemek és etnikumok terei a magyar filmben* (2017) [Spaces of Gender and Ethnicity in Hungarian Cinema]. The contributors' previous work also displays a productive combination of social commitment and the methodology of cultural studies that one can witness here, as in Kalmár's "Apostate Bodies: Nimród Antal's *Kontroll* and Eastern European Identity Politics" in his latest monograph *Post-Crisis European Cinema*, and in Zsolt Györi's "Ruralising Masculinities and Masculinising the Rural in Márk Kostyál's *Coyote* and Bogdan Mirică's *Dogs*," a chapter in the edited volume *Postsocialist Mobilities*. What these publications signal is the development of a local film-studies center in Debrecen dedicated to publishing widely about problem areas that may be of interest to the wider, international cultural-studies scene.

The present volume offers an introduction by Kalmár and nine research articles written by fellow film researchers based in Debrecen, lecturers, doctoral students, as well as a few MA students. The introduction clarifies the central research questions as well as the key theoretical concepts informing the volume, such as *precarity*, the transformations of the *post-romantic individual*, the social outcast as *object*, Charles Taylor's *social imaginary*, and Stevlana Boym's *off-modern*. In the context of the volume, the most important aspect of cultural heritage concerns the European cultural mythology of the individual artist (pp. 19–20). Most of the films covered in this volume involve solitary individual protagonists who are outcasts; marginalized and socially inferior; engaged in a struggle for social achievement and recognition. Furthermore, the concept of social imaginary also proves useful for establishing connections between the cinematic and the social. As Kalmár argues, "Taylor's triangular motions between theory, social imaginary, and practices can also be explored on the basis of cinematic narratives: as many film analyses in this volume may exemplify, feature films are capable of introducing new

theories of sociality, show actions [...] and practices shaping and shaped by these, and therefore visualize new social imaginaries” (p. 24). In the introduction, Kalmár also proposes the use of Boym’s concept of the off-modern to signify the present state of post-crisis modernity: “Following Boym, by off-modern I do not wish to designate a new historical era, but rather the crisis of our previous, pre-crisis conceptualizations of history and our place in it” (p. 6). In his introduction, Kalmár convincingly argues that the crisis situations of the twenty-first century have resulted in significant shifts in our social imaginaries, in the cultural mythologies of arthouse cinema, and therefore created challenges for cinematic representation. Thus, the introduction lays out the social context, defines the goals of the volume and clarifies its conceptual base, thereby providing the reader with a road map for the upcoming chapters.

The first article, by Zoltán Szabó, offers a classical Marxist take on class as a structural feature of capitalism under the vile of socioeconomic imbalance. The paper compares the film *Two Days, One Night* (2014), directed by the Dardennes brothers, with Ken Loach’s *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) from the point of view of the politics of representation, with a special focus on the advantages and drawbacks of social realism. Next, Zsolt Győri’s “You Are What Your Borders are: Hospitality and Fortress Europe in *Last Resort* and *The Citizen*” explores the ways these two films represent asylum-seekers and immigration. Győri discusses Fortress Europe and immigration policies as “just a fresh addition to the diverse technologies of governing and administratively controlling inequalities” (p. 40). In the following article, drawing on the concept of Bauman’s *wasted lives*, Borbála László analyses non-human precarity as it appears in two contemporary documentaries about dogs, *Los Reyes* (2019) and *Stray* (2020). She argues that “we have to rethink the human in light of precarity, showing that there is no human without those networks of life within which human life is but one sort of life” (p. 53).

The theme of the Holocaust is still prevalent in twenty-first-century art cinema, still offering one of the fundamental templates for the representation of dispossessed and abused people. Fruzsina Balázs’s chapter reconstructs this cinematic tradition and its importance in the twenty-first century through her analysis of Petzold’s *Phoenix* (2014). Another film directed by Petzold, *Transit* (2018), discussed by Várnagy and Kalmár, draws attention to the links between the dispossessed of the past and those of the present, the existential crisis of the social outcasts of our current era, and raises several significant questions concerning ruptured human communities, the identity of people in crisis situations, and the possibilities of finding homes for people who are “physically in transit, on the road, not belonging to any place, being without papers, or being caught between states or countries” (p. 83).

In 2020, the film *Parasites* (2019) was a historical breakthrough as the first Korean Oscar-winning film and inspired numerous intellectuals and social critics to discuss its representation of the issue of social inequality. In this volume, there are two chapters that analyze the symbols expressive of social inequality and increasing class conflicts due to the polarizing socioeconomic tensions within Korean society. The main themes in *Parasites* are social immobility, economic inequality, injustice, and the widening gulf between the precariat and the rich—arguably all issues of global significance. In “Increasing Fears of Class Conflicts in Parasite,” Barbara Józsa focuses on the representation of the precariat as well as the fears and anxious fantasies that surround its rise in contemporary societies. Józsa calls attention to the way *Parasites* can be considered a warning, as the ending represents one of the worst possible outcomes for resolving an upcoming, inevitably violent class conflict. Aghayeva’s article, “The Meaning of Family in *Shoplifters*,” discusses the role of the family in the context of twenty-first century social disruptions and dysfunctions, as well as the clashes between the traditional Japanese family system and modern social norms. The volume concludes with a comprehensive overview of the representations of social inequality in twenty-first century Moroccan cinema. The violation of women’s rights, gender inequality, child exploitation, poverty, and political and social corruption are among the main topics of socially committed contemporary Moroccan films. Fatima El Aidi’s piece offers a useful introduction to Middle-Eastern cinema, its topics, issues and artistic practices, thereby adding an important tint to the colorful picture Kalmár’s edited volume paints.

All in all, *Representations of Social Inequality in 21<sup>st</sup> century Global Art Cinema* invites grave reflection on the chaotic growth of inequality and injustice in a world shaped by neoliberal capitalism, and calls for new approaches, new concepts, and dynamic intellectual change in cinema studies. Similarly to Kalmár’s previous monograph, *Post-Crisis European Cinema*, the present volume lays out some of the self-contradictions, malfunctions, and systemic errors in our late-twentieth-century social, economic and cinematic approaches, as well as some twenty-first-century attempts at their reconceptualization. The volume provides a broad understanding of the ideological shifts shaping the twenty-first-century’s societies, the deeper forces shaping the social clashes reflected in media, and offers an insight into the various means with which contemporary filmmakers engage with the unfolding social, cultural, and humanitarian crises. The book is both a result of and a contribution to the internationalization of Hungarian academic research: it is the result of a film-studies workshop carried out in English; it incorporates the work of international researchers based in Debrecen; and it has the potential to disseminate the research group’s results to international audiences. There is no doubt that this book will significantly aid scholars who want to broaden and deepen their knowledge of the intellectual

synergies between the social sciences and cinema studies. Hopefully, the institutions behind the publication will keep pace with Hungary’s quickly developing research groups—for example, with an open-access program for Debrecen University Press’s publications in English. For now, the volume can only be ordered from the website of Debrecen University Press.

© 2022 The Author(s).



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) (CC BY-NC 4.0).