GYÖRGY KALMÁR

REPRESENTATIONS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

IN 21ST CENTURY GLOBAL ART CINEMA

ZOOM 2021

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Preface

This book is the result of a workshop on trends in contemporary film culture at the University of Debrecen, Hungary, in the spring semester of the 2020/2021 academic year. Our topic, as the title of this volume indicates, was the representation of social inequality in 21st century global art cinema. This seminar-turned-into-a-workshop started out from the recognition that growing social inequality is one of the key socio-cultural issues of our times, which threatens to tear many of our societies apart, causing much human suffering, creating anti-establishment resentment, driving political polarisation, and seriously damaging the life chances of future generations. We recognised this issue as a global problem that socially conscious art cinema is ready to respond to around the world. We found that the way social inequality appeared in various geopolitical situations, and the ways it is represented on the screen offer a wonderful opportunity to study not only global art cinema, but also the interplay of global trends and local socio-cultural characteristics.

The participants were at various stages of their academic careers: two lecturers, a few PhD students and a seminar of MA students. Such workshops have been organized at the University of Debrecen for several years, mostly by the members of *E-Bloc: Research Group for the Study of Eastern European Cinemas* (established in 2012 by Zsolt Győri and myself), which organized much of film-related academic work in Debrecen, and grew into a well-recognised academic centre in Eastern European film studies. It was also this group of researchers that started the ZOOM film conferences and ZOOM book series in cooperation with the University of Debrecen Press (also in 2012). This is the eights volume of that book series.

Such conferences, workshops and seminars have been most helpful in our research work, which also led to the publication of various monographs by our members, such as Zsolt Győri's *Szerzők, filmek, kritikai-klinikai olvasatok* (ZOOM, 2014), Andrea Virginás's *Film Genres in Hungarian and Romanian Cinema* (Lexington books, 2021), or my own *Formations of Masculinity in Post-communist Hungarian Cinema* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017) and *Post-Crisis European Cinema* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2020). Thus, it was only natural in 2020, in a year beset by the Covid-pandemic, to bring people together for a joint publication project. This time, as a gesture of recognition and gratitude, I decided to extend the invitation to publish with us to our MA students as well. Our discussions, their ideas, opinions and written con-

tributions have been most helpful for many of us, staff members. Thus, in this year when many of us were in need of solidarity and helpful companionship, it seemed only natural to include the best of their articles. Throughout our seminar-turned-into-workshop, these students impressed me on a regular basis with their sensitivity towards issues of social inequality, their insights about specific films, as well as their readiness to dig into the socio-cultural background of films from various parts of the world. None of our authors come from the great economic and cultural centres of the world, and all of us have first-hand experiences about living on cultural half-peripheries, which often led to sensitivity and perceptiveness with regards to issues of social inequality, marginalization, or the precariousness of life for the less fortunate. It was a privilege and a source of great inspiration to see their openness to participate in the great reckoning and rethinking that, I believe, is our task and responsibility as 21st century intellectuals. I would like to dedicate this volume to them: to the generation of new intellectuals, who are already working through the problems of building more compassionate, just and sustainable societies.

Academic projects such as this are always results of a synergy of ideas, influences, conversations, friendships and publications. This is especially true about this edited volume, which was inspired by our shared work with several close colleagues of mine. I would like to acknowledge this local intellectual context and take account of some of the more recent works written in English, not only as a gesture of gratitude and appreciation, but also as a practical guide to the reader, who may wish to go on reading, exploring further and deeper.

One well-established trend in the study of social inequalities and their cultural representations focuses on issues of gender. My former supervisor, Nóra Séllei's work on gender inequality has been formative in Hungary. Her "Space, Body, and Subjectivity in Ágnes Kocsis's Film, *Fresh Air* (2006)" (in *The Routledge Companion to Modernity, Space and Gender,* 2018), and her "Bridget Jones and Hungarian Chick Lit" (in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, 2006) have proved especially significant. The work of Eszter Ureczky, a regular ZOOM conference participant, often connects issues of inequality, gender, disease and care in her analyses of film and fiction. Her "Crises of Care: Precarious Bodies in Western and Eastern European Clinical Film Dystopias" (in the journal *Contact Zones,* 2018) and "When Cura Encounters Xenos: Women, Care and the (Un)kindness of Strangers in Three Films by the Dardenne Brothers" (in our recent ZOOM volume *Europe and European Cinema at times of Change*, 2021) explore issues that are also at the heart of the present volume. A similarly close member of our research group is Imola Bülgözdi, whose "Alternate History and Escapism in Socialist Hungary in *Liza, the Fox Fairy*" (published in the above mentioned 2021 ZOOM volume) connects the exploration of cinema and gender with Eastern European and post-socialist studies. Fanni Feldmann's work on queer-themed films is equally relevant, her recently finished doctoral dissertation *Queering the Iron Curtain: Spaces of Otherness in British and Eastern European Cinema* (2021) and her "Minorities in Love: Intersections of Space, Sexuality and Ethnicity in *Vil-*

lage Romance and *Soldiers*" (in the edited volume *Postsocialist Mobilities*, 2021) indicate the ways a younger generation of researchers in Debrecen carry on and develop the topics, interests and conceptual frameworks established by their teachers and supervisors. My own work on Hungarian masculinities in *Formations of Masculinity in Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema* (2017) is also part of this trend.

The study of representations of contemporary ethnicity- or race-based inequalities is less prevalent in Hungary (and generally in Eastern Europe), but there are several key researchers and publications, mostly around the Romakép Műhely (RomaImage Workshop). From the recent English language publications of this much devoted group, Andrea Pócsik's "Screened Otherness: A Media Archaeology of the Romani's Criminalization" (in *Regimes of Invisibility in Contemporary Art, Theory and Culture,* 2017) and András Müller's "Gubera-Cinezine. Inforg films at the Romakép Workshop" (in the edited volume *The Freedom of Experimentation. Inforg Studio 2000-2010*, 2021) must be mentioned.

As some of the above publications indicate, the study of social inequalities often intersects with Eastern European studies, which several of our previous ZOOM volumes have tackled in one way or another. Zsolt Győri's work on housing estate films is a fine example of this trend. His most relevant publications in this field include "Concrete Utopias: Discourses of Domestic Space in Hungarian Cinema" (in *Cultural Studies Approaches in the Study of Eastern European Cinema*, 2016) and "Young Mothers, Concrete Cages: Representations of Maternity in Hungarian Housing Films from the 1970s and 1980s" (in *Georgaphies of Affect in Contemporary Literature and Visual Culture: Central Europe and the West*, 2021). My Romanian colleague, Constantin Parvulescu, has also been a close companion in organising research groups and projects about cinematic representations of social inequality. His "Narratives of Cruel: Cristian Mungiu's Cinematic Work and the Political Imaginary of East-Central Europe" (in *Res Historica*, 2020) and "Labour and Exploitation by Displacement in Recent European Film" are especially relevant for the present project. The edited volume in which his latter article was published, *Cinema of Crisis: Film and Contemporary Europe* (Edinburgh UP, 2020) contains two other related chapters by colleagues associated in some ways with our research group, these are "Frontlines: Migrants in Hungarian Documentaries in the 2010s" by Lóránt Stőhr and "The Double Form of Neoliberal Subjugation: Crisis on the Eastern European Screen" by Anna Bátori.

These scholars and papers have been part of the immediate intellectual context influencing the present volume and its authors. It is with great joy that I enlist their work here. It is also my duty to express my gratitude to the Department of British Studes of the University of Debrecen for its continuous support of our film studies centre and ZOOM books. My own research behind this project was also sponsored by the János Bolyai Research Grant of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the Programme of National Excellence of the Hungarian Ministry of Human Resources ÚNKP-20-5-DE-310.

György Kalmár

Introduction: Representations of Social Inequality in 21st Century Global Art Cinema

The following introduction explores the importance of the issue of social inequality in the early 21st century, its shifting causes and manifestations, as well as its changing paradigms of conceptualization and representation. Its key point of departure is the recognition that due to a set of recent social, financial and technological changes social inequality has become one of the key social issues of our time. When compared to historical examples, it becomes clear that social inequality in the 21st century is produced by partly new factors, appears in new social configurations and also calls for new (social, institutional, cinematic and academic) representations. The last section of this introduction defines a short list of the key concepts of our research project, the analytical and theoretical tools that we consider particularly useful in highlighting the results of our work. By defining them here, we also wish to create a shared frame of reference that supports our readers, and also establish a certain level of theoretical and conceptual coherence for this volume.

Social inequality in the 21st century

The early 21st century has made growing inequality emerge as possibly the most destructive social problem that the world faces (Goldstone and Turchin 2020; Standing 2010). According to the 2020 report of the charity organization Oxfam International, *Time to Care*, the richest one percent of humanity owns at least half the world's wealth, and their share is growing every year. In the last decade the number of billionaires around the world has doubled, and in this same period the top one percent has accumulated twice as much wealth as the ninety percent of the global population. This "inequality crisis" is not only manifesting between the developed and the developing world, but within individual societies as well, thus threatening to tear societies into two.

In the early 2020's it seems clear that in the developed world the welfare state, together with the great, utopian visions of the 1990's have been shattered, the global liberal order has been destabilized, and we have reached a "nihilist moment of disillusionment and anger" (Harari 2018, 17), where "liberalism is losing credibility" (Harari 2018, xii). As events around the world indicate almost on a daily basis, this

is a dramatic and dangerous situation that runs the risk of unleashing a "politics of inferno" (Standing vii). One is inclined to agree with Zigmunt Bauman that "the crisis facing the Western world is not temporary, but the sign of a profound change that involves the whole economic and social system and will have long-lasting effects" (Bauman and Bordoni 2014, vii). The way the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed global inequality, increased social polarization, widened already existing social divides, and fuelled political polarization is only the latest example of this process. Little wonder, then, that inequality has gained new significance in the social and human sciences, as well as in socially committed art forms. I can but agree with the authors of a recently edited volume on Eastern European mobility who claim that the pandemic induced immobility of bodies is likely to serve as fertile ground for new intellectual quests into the nature of connectivity and immobility (Győri and Király, x). Clearly, the same applies for the concerns of the present volume: inequality and precarity.

At the point of writing, in 2021, when the world is struggling to emerge from the Covid-19-pandemic and its far-reaching consequences, this fact of rising, socially disruptive inequality could not be more obvious. The pandemic has been worsening a massive equity gap between the west and the developing world: while some of the developed countries, which handled the second and/or third wave of the pandemic better and could run efficient vaccination programs are already opening up (Israel or the UK, for example), in many third world countries the virus is still raging, breaking all death toll records (India, Brazil). As in most cases of inequality, these disparities do not simply stem from wealth inequality, for example, from different nations' diverse means to purchase effective vaccines for their citizens. The disparities in the effects of the pandemic on different countries, no doubt, are also due to such other factors as differences in their medical institutions (number of doctors and hospital beds per person, the availability of medications, the preparedness of the medical staff), the overall health conditions of the population (often associated with affordable food, as well as diet and sports cultures), people's levels of general education (their understanding of health regulations, their trust in science), or such general socio-economic conditions as housing circumstances (which determines, for example, the possibility of social distancing). Thus, behind the fairly obvious health inequalities, one can perceive a complex, historically produced system of other types of inequalities, which, in turn, are likely to determine the possibilities of a post-pandemic recovery. Though economists have been theorising about all sorts of recovery curves (Z, V, U, W and even L-shaped ones), the most likely scenario seems to be the "K-shaped" outcome (first outlined by JP Morgan), meaning that some countries, industries and social groups will probably rise quickly from the series of crises caused by the pandemic, while others will continue their downwards courses. According to the World Economic Forum, it does seem likely that while more affluent, technologically advanced regions, businesses and social groups will rise rapidly from the crisis, poorer countries, as well as the small businesses, blue-collar workers, and

perhaps even the dwindling middle class of developed countries are more likely to be left behind. Thus, the Covid-crisis can be recognised as yet another gloomy episode in the series of 21st century crises, with the potential to create even more inequality by tearing the world as well as specific societies apart, to winners and losers, to the well-adapting ones and the ones left behind (Bauman and Bordoni 2014, 58).

When exploring 21st century social and cultural phenomena, as we do in this volume, it is crucial to recognise the importance of these dramatic crisis-situations: the first decades of the 21st century has been mostly characterised by a series of crises, which include the 9/11 terrorist attacks; the 2008 financial crash; the humanitarian crisis caused by the Arab spring; its knock-on effect, the 2015 European migration crisis; its resulting melting of the political centre in Europe; the crisis of liberal democracies and the rise of populist authoritarian leaders; the strengthening of autocratic policies under the guise of pandemic-related health emergencies; as well as the gradually emerging, more and more pronounced global climate crisis. It is important to recognise the pattern in these crisis-situations: the early 21st century is the time of accelerated (and often shock-like) social, economic, environmental and technological change, where the ability to adapt to the quickly arising new conditions and challenges decides whether a country, a group, a company or a person will be destroyed by the changes or benefit from them.

This 21st century precariousness of human societies and human life in general can be traced back to a cluster of 20th century processes. When exploring inequality in a global context, the most important factor to be accounted for is probably globalized neo-liberal capitalism, as well as its unfortunate side-effects, which have only "come to the surface with the 2008 financial shock" (Standing vii). In Standing's, now famous, summary,

> in the 1970s, a group of ideologically inspired economists captured the ears and minds of politicians. The central plank of their 'neo-liberal' model was that growth and development depended on market competitiveness; everything should be done to maximise competition and competitiveness, and to allow market principles to permeate all aspects of life.
>
> One theme was that countries should increase labour market flexibility, which came to mean an agenda for transferring risks and insecurity onto workers and their families. The result has been the creation of a global 'precariat', consisting of many millions around the world without an anchor of stability. They are becoming a new dangerous class. They are prone to listen to ugly voices… (Standing, 1)

Thus, in essence, while in the last decades of the 20th century billions of people were lifted out of poverty around the world, this happened through precarious jobs in an unsustainable global system. "The flexibility advocated by the brash neo-classical economists meant systematically making employees more insecure" (Stand-

ing 6). The leading economies in this neo-liberal turn were the US and Britain, but the model they followed proved inspiring and influential all over the world. In both the US and Britain this meant the undoing of the post-war social contract (between governments, business and ordinary employees): "since the 1970s, that (post-war) contract has unravelled, in favor of a contract between government and business that has underfunded public services but generously rewarded capital gains and corporate profits" (Goldstone and Turchin, 23). In places like the US, this led to wealth inequality and social polarization comparable only to nineteenth century examples (Goldstone and Turchin, 16). According to Standing, as a result of these global trends,

> we may guess that at present, in many countries, at least a quarter of the adult population is in the precariat. This is not just a matter of having insecure employment, or being in jobs of limited duration and with minimal labour protection, although all this is widespread. It is being in a status that offers no sense of career, no sense of secure occupational identity and few, if any, entitlements to the state and enterprise benefits. (Standing, 24)

Such present issues as the widening gap between the elites and the precariat (with a destabilized, downward sliding middle class of the developed word), the extreme concentration of wealth at the top, the decreasing trust in democracy and democratic institutions, declining social solidarity and increasing political polarization are all definitely largely due to these economic processes (Goldstone and Turchin, 4–6). "The outcome is a growing mass of people – potentially all of us outside the elite, anchored in their wealth and detachment from society – in situations that can only be described as alienated, anomic, anxious and prone to anger. The warning sign is political disengagement" (Standing 24). This is clearly a dangerous situation: as Goldstone and Turchin warn, and as several events of 2020 and 2021 have shown, unless we drastically reshape these economic models, we are to face turbulent times.

As this quick overview of recent social and economic trends may indicate, contemporary wealth inequality affects all sorts of social and cultural phenomena. Standing's view that "we need a new vocabulary" (7) that can address newly emerging social phenomena seems to be echoed from politics to academia, from finance to filmmaking. Indeed, it seems very much the case that the set of institutional frameworks, social policies, economic models, political ideologies, academic approaches and artistic representational strategies that we apply today are mostly the products of the pre-crisis boom years of the late 20th century, which are patently ill-suited to address the challenges and rapidly changing conditions of the early 21st century. The 2008 financial crash, the Brexit vote, the rise of nationalist populism, the social and humanitarian disaster that the events of the Arab spring led to, or a whole series of climate-related catastrophes worldwide can all be regarded as wake-up calls, reminders of the inadequacy of our approaches, the signs of an intellectual, epis-

temological and ideological crisis that needs to be addressed as quickly as possible (Bauman and Bordoni 2014; Harari 2020; Kalmár 2020).

Shifting social imaginaries

What seems most important for us here, exploring the cinematic responses to these global shifts, is the crisis of our most general and most pervasive ideological, intellectual and artistic approaches. The easiest to spot are probably the shifts in our political and ideological metanarratives. As Harari argues,

> at the close of the twentieth century it appeared that the great ideological battles between fascism, communism and liberalism resulted in the overwhelming victory of liberalism. Democratic politics, human rights and free-market capitalism seemed destined to conquer the entire world. But as usual, history took an unexpected turn, and after fascism and communism collapsed, now liberalism is in a jam. So where are we heading? This question is particularly poignant, because liberalism is losing credibility exactly when the twin revolutions in information technology and biotechnology confront us with the biggest challenges our species has ever encountered. (Harari 2018, xii)

Behind this fading confidence about the future of liberal democracies, or that of the global liberal order, one can also sense a more and more pronounced uncertainty about some foundational ideas of modernity, such as progress, rapid technological change, free will, or human communities' capacity for rational self-governance. According to Bauman, in the pre-crisis, confident phase of modernity "the future was seen like the rest of the products in that society of producers: something to be thought through, designed, and then seen through the process of its production" (Bauman 2000, 131). Arguably, due to the above mentioned crisis-situations, it is precisely our ability to plan and engineer our better and better futures that got seriously questioned:

> 'Progress' stands not for any quality of history, but for the self-confidence of the present. The deepest, perhaps the sole meaning of progress is made up of two closely interrelated beliefs – that 'time is on our side', and that we are the ones who 'make things happen'. The two beliefs live together and die together… (Bauman 2000, 132)

In the early 21st century much of humanity seem to have lost faith in these core principles of modernity's belief in progress, arguably one of the core ideas of its belief system (Bauman and Bordoni 2014, 71). Time is definitely not on our side any more,

in fact, with regards to both the pandemic and the climate crisis, we find ourselves constantly racing against time, desperately looking for new solutions, technologies and policies that could control the damage we have caused and save us from existential threat. The other key ideological component mentioned by Bauman is no less undermined: after the Covid-crisis probably there are not many of us (ordinary citizens, politicians or scientists) who would feel that we are the ones who make things happen, that we have fulfilled Francis Bacon's dream of taming Nature, mastering the world, and keep everything under control. People all around the world seem to be desperately looking for secure investments for their savings, safeguards against dramatic social, environmental and economic change, charismatic authoritarian leaders to give them the sense of safety, as well as for the kinds of education and jobs for their children that could save them from the downwards slope that their parents find themselves on.

This loss of belief in progress can be regarded as a clear symptom of the general crisis of modernity and modern social imaginaries. Indeed, many of us ask, "is history a march towards better living and more happiness?" (Bauman 2000, 132). Tellingly, some of the best-selling books in contemporary social science regularly revolve around such questions: What are the shortcomings of the project of modernity? What did we misunderstand about civilization or human nature? Are we sure that we live better lives than the foragers and hunter-gatherers before the agricultural revolution? How can we fix our malfunctioning social and economic systems? (See: Bauman 2000; Bregman 2019; Ryan 2019).

Hartmut Rosa voices similar concerns when questioning not only our ability to plan, engineer and control the future, but also the desirability of such a rationally calculated civilizational formation. "Modernity is culturally geared and, given how its institutions are designed, structurally driven toward making the world calculable, manageable, predictable, and controllable in every possible respect" (38). "A modern society … is one that can stabilize itself only dynamically, in other words one that requires constant economic growth, technological acceleration, and cultural innovation in order to maintain its institutional status quo" (9). According to Rosa, however, this civilizational logic of control misses some key aspects of human beings' relation to themselves and to the world, and thus leads to a world that is "utterly uncontrollable in all the relevant aspects" (ix). Thus, according to Rosa, the modern promise of endless progress has become self-defeating, and gradually turned into a threat: "growth, acceleration, and innovation no longer seem to assure us that life will always get better; they have come instead to be seen as an apocalyptic, claustrophobic menace" (9).

Thus, in summary, these above outlined changes of the last few decades have called attention to several social, economic and technological issues that humanity needs to address quickly in the 21st century, and undermined or de-legitimized many of our grand narratives, ideological belief systems, social theories and policies developed in the second half of the 20th century. They have also created new forms

of social stratification, reshaped the class structure in many regions of the world. These changes have undermined our established late 20th century conceptualizations of inequality (based on sex, gender, race, ethnicity), and thus call for their re-investigation and updating in the 21st century social context. As a result, they have also caused an ideological and epistemological crisis, a crisis of knowledge, which make it more difficult to tackle the global challenges of the 21st century. This situation calls for new theoretical frameworks, new concepts, approaches from economists, politicians, consumers, artists, filmmakers, academic researchers and policy makers, for a fundamental re-vision of our 20th century artistic, theoretical and conceptual frameworks. There is an urgent need to map the new social trends, the new artistic approaches, the shifting ideological coordinates, the new visions of social change and human communities in general. Though academic research tends to focus on well-defined, local phenomena, the above outlined crisis-situation also necessitates keeping the global perspective in sight. Such a global outlook may be academically legitimate because different regions have different modernities, in which the issues of inequality appear within very different social imaginaries.

New challenges of cinematic representation

The representation of social outcasts and misfits has a long cinematic history. Situations of great inequality have a dramatic potential, which has been used (and probably often abused) by films from Griffith's *Intolerance* to such contemporary international hits as *Moonlight, Joker,* or *Parasites*. This penchant for the underprivileged is especially relevant in so-called art or arthouse film, which is traditionally characterised by being socially engaged, being interested in the socially excluded and non-normative, mostly realist in its approach yet aesthetically innovative, relatively independent from the status quo and from direct political influence or financial interests, more interested in in-depth analysis than in spectacular action, more focused on inner drama than physical struggle, and tends to show dilemmas to think about rather than problems and conflicts to solve (Elsaesser 2005, 9). This type of cinema, which used to be defined for much of the 20th century as European art cinema, has grown into a global trend: indeed, as many films analysed in this volume exemplify, some of the most outstanding products of this trend come from such previously unknown centres of cinematic production as South-Korea or Iran. This type of cinema, which (following Galt and Schoonover) I will call global art cinema, seems to fulfil one of the fundamental fantasies of European humanism, the dream of art connecting people of various cultural and social backgrounds around the world. As Galt and Schoonover note, "if art cinema instantiates an optimism about the possibility of speaking across cultures, the early twenty-first century seems inclined to dash that optimism" (Galt and Schoonover 2010, 12), partly due to such positive effects of globalization as the growth of the international film festival

circuit, or the availability of streaming services and other internet-based technological solutions, which allow 21st century citizens to participate in global cinema culture. Indeed, global art cinema may prove a fertile ground for studies like ours here precisely because it can connect certain global issues (in this case that of social inequality) with the local and the culturally specific. This tradition of cinema allows for keeping in sight the global perspective, while registering the local variations, the culturally specific social imaginaries, and those locally defined configurations in which certain global issues appear.

Thus, global art cinema seems a perfect fit for the study of the representations of social inequality worldwide. It is clear that the above referenced 21st century crisis-situations did not change art cinema's basic approach to the underprivileged: as Galt points out, "art films continue to grant priority to the downtrodden, the underdog, and the abjected members of human communities. They take as a moral prerogative the representation of the underrepresented; these films embrace the socially excluded…" (Galt and Schoonover 2010, 15). Yet, the marriage of art cinema and the socially underprivileged is not without problems, operational paradoxes and new challenges:

> Where does this ethos of art cinematic openness go in the post-9/11 world of anxious globalization, economic recession, and environmental crisis, where cultural transits are something to fear and the doctrine of infinite expansion is finally reaching a breaking point in the economic and environmental spheres? Notions of increased global networking that not long ago sounded utopian now evoke terror, and international travel becomes increasingly policed by race, class, and corporeal and national demarcation. On this emerging world stage, ideas about cultural globality must surely respond, as will the material conditions of cinematic spectatorship. (Galt and Schoonover 2010, 12)

The issues Galt and Schoonover points out, the recent backlash against globalization, the limits to intercultural communication due to political extremism or security concerns, or the tribalization of cultural discourses can definitely be recognised as social, political and cultural processes that may undermine or reshape this pre-crisis cultural system of global art cinema. The reception of several films discussed in this volume, such as *Joker, Born 1984, I Daniel Blake, or Parasites,* involved heated, ideologically motivated debates. These controversies highlight some of the most defining issues of our post-crisis 21st century world, the damaging effects of increasingly tribalized political discourses, the toxicity of a highly polarized public sphere, and the danger that the daily battles of the culture wars may impose such interpretational frames on these films that undermine their traditional ethos.

One field where the crisis-situations of the 21st century have noticeably put strain on this cinematic trend is the disparity between the "subjects" and "objects" of this

film culture. While the "objects" of this kinds of cinematic representations have typically been disempowered people, underdogs, and the social problems they face, the "subjects" of this kind of cinema, that is, the kind of filmmakers and audiences that engage with it, are typically from well-educated, socially and financially more privileged groups. As almost all accounts of art cinema point out, this contradiction is no novelty at all, it has been one of art cinema's characteristic features for most of its history. In the 21st century, however, partly due to social polarization driven by inequality, this distance between the two distinct social classes have grown considerably, putting strains on tolerance, empathy and solidarity, arguably the fundamental prerequisites of this cinematic practice. The most memorable example of this newly threatened inter-class alliance is the "deplorable incident", when during the 2016 US presidential campaign the democratic nominee Hillary Clinton called Trump supporters "a basket of deplorables". This (media) event, among other things, called attention to the rifts between the political elites and ordinary citizens, and can be regarded as a symptom of a crisis of political representation. Furthermore, it has highlighted the limits to empathy and solidarity between those who present themselves as champions of the underprivileged, and those who feel outcast, betrayed and left behind by such "champions" and the institutions in which these "champions" thrive.

Arthouse cinema may very well be one of those institutions, the credibility and authenticity of which is questioned by the kinds of (desperate, disenfranchised and disempowered) people that it likes telling stories about. But the relationship is strained from the other side as well: the increasingly desperate, militant and violent members of the global precariat may pose challenges both to the empathy of the well-meaning, well-educated, well-situated filmmaker, and to the kinds of cinematic approaches, narrative patterns and character types that such filmmakers used to rely on. After all, the established cinematic approaches of global art cinema that 21st century filmmakers inherited were created and consolidated in the pre-crisis boom years, between the forging of the post-Second-World-War European consensus, the birth of Italian neorealism, and the first signs of 21st century crisis of the global liberal order (9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis). It would not be very surprising if the socio-cultural rearrangements of the new century de-legitimized some aspects of this well-codified cinematic approach, similarly to the way they undermined a whole lot of pre-crisis social and financial policies.

If one accepts Standing's proclamation that the precariat is the new dangerous class, a new social group that calls for new sociological approaches and new government policies, then it may not be very far-fetched to assume that the cinematic representation of this new global class-in-the-making may also call for new representational strategies. Standing himself highlights some of the representational traps that one should avoid when thinking about the precariat when he calls attention to its "dual identity as victim/hero" (2) or warning that "it is wrong to see the precariat in purely suffering terms" (vii). These representational considerations may have the potential to reshape the aesthetic, political and moral framework of art cinema, its

traditions that go back at least to Romanticism's influential conceptualisation of the poet, a socially marginalised, potentially outcast figure of exceptional sensitivity, through whom mainstream society may have a chance to recognise the (often uncomfortable) truth that it is usually blinded to due to its middle-class conformism. Does this kind of traditional representational pattern of the underprivileged work as much in *Joker, Bronson,* or *The Favourite,* as in *I, Daniel Blake, Caphaerneum* or *Born 1984?* Such examples as this may shed light on the kinds of connections between the changing social landscape and cinema's representational strategies we are exploring in this volume, or may serve as an example of the kinds of questions we are seeking to answer. Are art cinema's approaches changing? Are the newly emerging social phenomena provoking new representational strategies? Does the ideological crisis of 21st century modernity filter into our cinematic representations? Are there films that challenge our 20th century cinematic heritage, representational strategies? Are there new narrative patterns, stylistic approaches, character types? Are there new trends in the ideological and political coordinates of cinema? How are specific regional cinemas reacting to this situation? Are there regional social imaginaries that interpret social inequality in their own specific ways? Are there recognisable trends in Eastern European cinema, or in Asian or Middle-Eastern cinema, for example?

Furthermore, one must realize that the issue of social inequality often ties in with more general questions concerning human communities, "human nature", or such basic elements of our civilizational heritage as capitalism, individualism, the role of the state, globalization, rapid technological development. These issues relating to the wider cultural landscape lead to such further questions as: How do these visual representations engage with these more general issues and thus contribute to 21st century shifts in public thinking? How do these films reflect on the crisis of modernity? What elements of modernity's cultural heritage are questioned, undermined or rewritten by these films?

Key concepts

In the final section of this introduction let me briefly recap some of the key terms and concepts of our research, through which we attempt to answer the following questions.

The post-romantic individual

21st century global art cinema can be regarded as an heir to and continuation of 20th century European auteur cinema, and as such has inherited some of the cultural mythologies of the latter (Elsaesser 2015; Galt and Schoonover 2010, 4–9). In the context of the present volume the most import aspect of this cultural heritage con-

cerns the European cultural mythology of the individual artist. A high percentage of films discussed in this book feature solitary individual protagonists in conflict with a hostile, corrupt, morally inferior social environment. These protagonists may struggle for a dignified existence, for proper social recognition, or sometimes simply for physical survival, their fights are usually individual ones, and their nemesis is no super-villain but rather repressive social normativity, mindless conformism, or the "heartless" greed driving capitalism (so as to reiterate a term from *Two Days One Night*). The cultural roots of this kind of setting go back to early modernity's reconceptualization of the artist as a creative individual of originality and talent, to the reinvention of the individual in the 18th century novel (often in the context of early capitalism and rapid social change), and to 19th century Romanticism's preoccupation with the talented, sensitive individual artist, who becomes prophet-like, communicates knowledge that the mainstream society has (comfortably) forgotten, and thus takes over some of the spiritual functions of pre-modern societies. So as to denote the unique but recognisable configuration of these characteristic features, as a practical shorthand referring to this intricate cultural formation, we are going to apply the term "post-romantic individual". Knowledge of this figure's cultural history may be essential for one's understanding of why and how these films' disenfranchised and marginalized protagonists offer perspectives from which the shortcomings of mainstream society can be recognised, how the individual is associated with the universally human, or how these stories of struggle acquire the potential of moral allegory or religious fable.

The abject

When discussing the cinematic representations of people living on the fringes of our societies, the concept of the abject may prove to be exceptionally productive. The first conceptualization of the abject comes from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror,* where the term is mostly defined in the context of individual psychological phenomena, through a psychoanalytical conceptual framework. The starting point of Kristeva's discussion highlights the visceral, bodily aspect of the abject through such examples as food phobia, which call attention to human beings' (hardly conscious) practices of separating the clean from the unclean, and throwing out (or literally throwing up) the latter. Thus, in Kristeva's approach, the abject is something unclean that we need to distance from ourselves, put on the other side of a boundary so as to feel safe and clean. A key insight in this respect is that what counts as unclean is culturally determined: something that people in one socio-cultural situation may find acceptable or proper may appear disgusting in another. As Kristeva points out, "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982, 4). Thus, Kristeva's account calls atten-

tion to connections between psychic, social and cultural processes through which the clean and proper is separated from the unclean and abject. This process is recognised as formative on the level of both the individual subject and society. In this sense "proper" subjectivity may exist only as long as certain things are considered abject, and are jettisoned, cast out (turned away from with disgust, thrown up, flushed down the toilet, kept out of consciousness). Likewise, "proper" society can only exist as long as certain people, behaviours and practices are marginalised, separated, and cast out (thrown into the sea, locked up in institutions, kept separated in ghettos, slums or concentration camps). The crucial psychoanalytical insight in this respect is that the abject looks so threatening and evokes so much disgust because somehow it belongs to us, it is a part of *our*selves that must be disavowed so that we can exist as clean and proper subjects. According to this by now widely accepted psychological logic, the closer such a "thing" is to us, the more unnerving its existence is, and thus the more violent reactions of expulsion it evokes.

Kristeva's book proved to be ground-breaking probably because it did not only theorize a fundamental human experience (casting out the unclean), but also successfully connected these personal experiences with a rich array of cultural practices and artistic representations. One of the recurrent motifs of these examples in *Powers of Horror* is the dynamic relationship and dramatic struggle between the subject and the abject (that threatens its cleanliness), which is also a drama of meaning:

> …what is abject, the jettisoned object, is ... excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A superego has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. To each ego its object, to each superego its abject. (Kristeva 1982, 2)

This conceptualization of a dramatic struggle between the proper and the abject can no doubt be useful if one wishes to understand the processes of social marginalization, or the cultural representations of marginalized, outcast people. Our present ideas, practices and representations may incorporate unconscious psychological processes, and also tie in with age-old cultural practices through which the cultural processes of abjection have been handled. The most noteworthy of these rituals are those of purification. As Rina Arya notes, "the state of being abject is *dangerous* to the self and others, while the operation of abject-ing involves rituals of purity that bring about social stability" (Ayra 2014, 4).

Kristeva's ideas were picked up and further developed by such critics as Judith Butler, Barbara Creed, or most recently by Rina Ayra, unpacking even more of the social, cultural and cinematic relevance of the concept. Summarizing some of these studies, Ayra defines the abject and the process of abjection in the following way:

> the terms 'abject' and 'abjection' can be used in different but related senses to refer to an operation (to make abject) and a condition (abjection). In the first sense, 'abjection' refers to an impulse or operation to reject that which disturbs or threatens the stability of the self and is unassimilable. Secondly, it refers to the 'wretched condition' … of being in this state, when one has experienced the abject, or has been rendered abject. (Ayra 2014, 3)

Ayra's summary already calls attention to the multiple aspects of the abject. One can distinguish between the visceral, the social and the moral. The most significant aspect of these for our research about inequality is obviously the social:

> The fear of the other may be displaced on to individuals and groups in society who are on the fringes and are stigmatized because their differences are not understood. They are seen to represent a threat, a fact that legitimizes their exclusion from the social fabric. In their otherness they are regarded as abject, lowly and despicable and, to return to etymology, are 'cast away' (are outcasts). (Ayra 2014, 7)

While this social aspect of abjection is fairly well-documented and theorized in sociology and social psychology, much less has been written about the moral aspect of the abject, which may also be most illuminating for the study of representations of inequality. As Kristeva has also pointed out, our cultural history calls attention to the associations between the abject and the sacred (1982, 17). In the cultural mythologies of (so-called) western civilization moral ideals are often embodied in socially outcast people, most importantly saints and prophets. If one recalls the life story of Christ or that of numerous saints, the pattern becomes clear: we tend to associate moral superiority with outcast, marginalized, misunderstood figures. Almost all these people that we associate with moral purity and the sacred lived on the fringes of society, often in abject poverty and living on unclean diets (wearing dirty rugs, feeding on the locusts of the desert), and they were killed, tortured and sacrificed by normative societies around them on a regular basis.

Such examples call attention to several key features of our rituals and narratives of abjection. First, one may notice that the various aspects of abjection (the visceral, the social and the moral) tend to be associated: for example, Christ was outcast by Jewish society, he often lived in abject poverty, contacted with such abject people as lepers, embodied the highest moral standards, and died in a way that can be interpreted as a ritualistic act of purification (see Kristeva 1982, 113). The scope of this introduction does not allow for a recap of the cultural history of abjection, or even of Christianity's powerful mythology of sin, defilement, self-abjection and purification. At this point it is sufficient to call attention to these deep cultural roots, as well as to the associated narrative patterns, character types, and intricate psychological processes, which may very well shape our contemporary cultural representations.

The other, closely related insight one may come to grasp when regarding the above cultural examples is associated with the ambiguity of the abject. The abject as sacred, as the Latin expression *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* also implies, tends to be simultaneously terrifying and fascinating: "The abject is ambivalent; it is frightening because it has the propensity to shatter the unity of the self, yet we are also fascinated by it because it takes us to the heart of our being, defines our identity and makes us feel more alive" (Ayra 2014, 6). The theoretical and historical background discussed by Kristeva and others should be kept in mind whenever one comes across outcast, marginalised protagonists who evoke ambiguous feelings from the spectator (ranging from disgust to awe), who are simultaneously socially inferior and morally superior, and who can be associated with both the bodily unclean and the sacred.

Social imaginary

Charles Taylor's concept of social imaginary can be appropriated as a term that connects the social and the cinematic. Taylor, in his formative analysis of modernity, defines the concept in the following way:

> By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that undelie these expectations. (Taylor 2004, 23.)

There is something intrinsically visual about social imaginaries, and it is partly this visuality that makes the term refer to more than just a set of ideas, beliefs, a coherent world-view or merely a normative moral order. As Taylor himself argues, "people 'imagine' their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends" (Taylor 2004, 23). In other words, "the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society" (2). Following this logic, one could argue that a social imaginary may very well manifest or be represented cinematically: it can appear as a narrative that contextualizes (and thus makes sense of) ideas, as a story that defines the imaginable, as a production of a (cinematic) space in which the placement and action of human beings as well as their interaction with their inanimate surroundings define society, the world in general and the role of human beings in it. Cinematic narratives create and operate a moral order, depict principles of sociality, and experiment with viable and non-viable social imaginaries (Elsaesser 2019, 5).

In Taylor's conceptual framework, norms rely on ideal cases, which, in turn, rely on a usually implicit metaphysical order (24–25). Arguably, cinematic narratives tend to engage with precisely such issues: individual characters as ideal cases, the conflicts between characters and the norms of society around them, or cracks between social norms and the metaphysical order they are supposed to stem from. Also, 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.

The off-modern

Arthouse films of the early 21st century, mostly due to the crisis-events mentioned above, often evoke social imaginaries that undermine, question or rearrange modernity's grand, goal-oriented historical narratives about progress. These films often take us into situations where the promises of modernity are left unfulfilled, where children live under worse conditions than their parents, where whole segments of society are left behind and are uncared for, where history seems to have stopped or turned around. These films tend to reveal the malfunctioning of the modern secular state, and show an odd mixture of social practices from different historical periods, typically mixing pre-modern, modern and post-modern elements. In order to denote this confusion of grand historical narratives, the present crisis of modernity, and conspicuous lack of modernity's utopian fantasies of progress, I have appropriated Svetlana Boym's concept of the off-modern, which she originally developed in the context of architecture and art history:

> In the twenty-first century, modernity is our antiquity. We live with its ruins, which we incorporate into our present. Unlike the thinkers of the last *fin de siècle,* we neither mourn nor celebrate the end of history or the end of art. We have to chart a new road between unending development and nostalgia, find an alternative logic for the contradictions of contemporary culture. Instead of fast-changing prepositions – "post," "anti," "neo," "trans," and "sub" – that suggest an implacable movement forward, against, or beyond, I propose to go off: "off " as in "off the path," or way off, off – Broadway, off – brand, off the wall, and occasionally off – color. "Off – modern" is a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history, at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress. (Boym 2017, 3)

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 (Kalmár 2020, 6). Off-modern landscapes, cityscapes and social imaginaries abound in the films discussed in this volume. When expressed visually, in the mise-en-scene (as ruinous modern architecture, slums among skyscrapers, homes furnished with scavenged material from scrapyards) they establish a certain recognisable aesthetics with much dramatic and poetic power; when it comes to the clash of different systems of care (for example a conflict between the family and the institutions of the modern state) they have the potential to pose fundamental questions about human beings and society. When they serve as the setting for the adventures of the resourceful individual hero(ine), as in *Parasites,* in the image of teenagers chatting on their mobiles in a dysfunctional, shit-storm-ridden semi-basement, it may even have a comically self-reflexive effect. In most cases, these off-modern narratives and social imaginaries prove to be fruitful precisely because of the ways the crisis-triggered profound uncertainty that they evoke makes us re-examine some of our fundamental assumptions about society, history, human nature, ethical norms or economic systems.

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Zoltán Szabó

On Some Limits of Social Realism in *Two Days, One Night* (2014) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019)

The Dardenne brothers and Ken Loach: three filmmakers (two, supposing we count Jean-Pierre and Luca as one, or perhaps even more than three, provided we are Deleuzians) whose names and cinematic works consistently seem to call for the same set of descriptors in order to circumscribe their aesthetic strategies, affective dimensions or socio-political orientation. Indeed, they are the certified "socially committed" filmmakers of the present, and one cannot even hope to write (or read) about them without the necessary corollaries invariably attached to their films. We must be made sure at each and every turn that they are politically conscious directors who respond to the broader social changes of their own time with immense care and sensitivity, keeping alive the tradition of social realist cinema both in terms of their representation strategies and in their method of cinematic inquiry. As vague and ultimately insufficient as these terms and phrases are, at the very least they signal a certain view of the individual as a social being, of man as a social animal. That is to say, a consistent feature of their entire oeuvres is their broadly sociological content, which rests on an understanding of the individual as someone whose "life – even if it may not appear in the direct form of communal life carried out together with others – is therefore an expression and confirmation of social life" (Marx *The Economic,* 106; emphasis in original). Or, expressed even more succinctly in the well-known 8th thesis on Feuerbach, likewise by Marx: "Social life is essentially *practical*" ("Theses," 60). It is worth nothing right away that this view stands in direct contradistinction to the philosophy of historical fascism, which starkly rejects the view of society as a conscious relationship between persons and reduces it to an empty abstraction vis-á-vis the individual, "rul[ing] out the dependence of the whole on the conscious will and purpose of the individuals constituting it" (Polanyi 393). If the atomization of society and the individualization of the social ring are all too familiar even today, it is because this general tendency is only one of the ways in which the legacy of fascism (or the spectre of fascism, we may say) survives surprisingly intact in the ruling neoliberal-neoconservative ideological orthodoxy of the last forty years.[1] Suffice it to recall as a paradigmatic example of this Margaret Thatcher's (in) famous claim that "there's no such thing as a society."

[1] For a sustained analysis on the disconcerting contiguity between fascism and late capitalism, see: Micocci, Andrea and Flavio di Mario. *The Fascist Nature of Neoliberalism*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Although the Dardeness and Loach are by no means the only ones carrying the heritage of social realism in contemporary global art cinema, the number of accolades they have garnered and the large international following they have managed to amass in the festival circuit through decades of filmmaking leave no doubt as to whether they are the most widely recognized and celebrated filmmakers of their kind currently. The British director, born in 1936, has managed to rack up more awards than years of life, while the Belgian siblings are well on their way to achieve to same incredible feat. For both Loach and the Dardenne brothers, the aforementioned view with regards to the reciprocity between the individual and society (or, in other words, an awareness of the individual character of the social as well as the social character of the individual) manifests itself in an emphatic preoccupation with those who are euphemistically described as being on the margins of society: the underclass, the subaltern, the homeless-drifter, the unemployed, the migrant, etc. More precisely, these are the groups which are defined by their exclusion from the labour-capital continuum and, as such, have no access to either of the two legitimate claims to making a living in a capitalist society, rendering them largely invisible to the default petite-bourgeois gaze of dominant representational modes. However, it is precisely through their very exclusion, or by way of their peripheral existence, that their conditions of living can implicate and expose larger socio-economic structures which, though they extend beyond them, necessarily and inevitably produce such groups of people.[2] Having said that, this paper will tackle some of their more recent features which turn the camera-eye to the increasingly pauperized (or precarious) existence of the post-industrial working class itself, which emerged in the wake of the neoliberal restructuring of labour from the late 1970s onwards, as the malicious genie of capitalism granted the workers' wishes for more flexibility and personal freedom in the form of short-term contracts, temporary work and the casualiza-

The historical dynamic between socialism, fascism, and capitalism (especially the relationship between the last two) were much more clearly understood by the most perceptive observers in the interwar period than it is today. Benjamin, Polányi, Horkheimer, and even Attila József knew precisely what they were witnessing. The emergence of neofascist/postfascist tendencies after 1989, 2008, and, most starkly, after the 2015 migration crisis cannot be properly situated without taking into account the historical crisis of capitalism. The crucial difference now is that the socialist worker's movement, having never recovered from its defeat by the preventive counterrevolution of fascism, plays no part in this development now. The opening lines of Attila József's 1930 poem, "Farsangi Lakodalom" ("Fascism and Capitalism are betrothed / And this your only intimation"), and Horkheimer's oft-quoted admonition from his 1938 essay, "Jews in Europe" ("But whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism") should serve as timely reminders.

[2] Writing about the decline of the welfare state and housing estates in the British context in *Europe and European Cinema at Times of Change,* Zsolt Győri claims that state benefits and housing policies rather conserve than improve the situation of precarious groups, consequently "the precast housing estates (but also the "terraces") have become a synonym of deprivation, poverty and toxic community dynamics … Instead of trust and solidarity serving as chief affections and allegiances within the community, fear and desperation become chief motivations of people's life choices, seriously limiting their agency" (Győri 283).

tion of labour. Without the slightest pretence of providing an exhaustive analysis of either of the two films which will be discussed, I only wish to focus on certain cardinal points at which they considerably diverge, hoping to illuminate some profound points of difference which are at risk of being overlooked once we haphazardly subsume them under the homogenizing label of "social realism."

The Dardenne's *Two Days, One Nigh*t (*Deux Jours, Une Nuit,* 2014) and Loach's *Sorry We Missed You* (2019) are both centred around the post-Fordist proletariat, a class which otherwise lacks any significant symbolic or political representation. The former reveals its narrative thrust already at the very moment the film is set in motion in the form of a conspicuous phone call which, quite tellingly in itself, interrupts our heroine's brief midday nap; after all, rest and free play has always been, and continue to be, a privilege afforded only to a few (cf. Thorstein Veblen's "leisure class"). Sandra, who works at a solar-panel factory called Solwal in the French-speaking Wallonia region of Belgium, is in the process of returning to work after a medical leave, only to find out from one of her co-workers that her colleagues held a vote in her absence. As a choice proposed by the management, they had the chance to decide whether they would take a 1000-euro bonus at the expense of letting Sandra go of her job and possibly working longer shifts in the future, or keep things as they are by renouncing the financial bonus and allowing Sandra to come back to work. Crushed by the fact that 14 out of her 16 colleagues voted for the bonus, Sandra is nevertheless convinced by her husband and her co-worker, Juliette, to talk to the manager, who reluctantly ends up agreeing to hold a secret ballot the next Monday, leaving Sandra only the weekend to talk to each and every one of her co-workers who initially voted against her and try to change their minds until then.

Loach's film operates with a less loaded – though no less pointed – premise. *Sorry We Missed You* opens with Newcastle-resident Ricky who, after hopping from one manual job to the next, is now being interviewed for a driver position at a delivery company named Parcels Delivered First. Immediately, we are thrown into a charade of devious language-games designed to mystify and conceal the concrete state of affairs to be established by the employment contract. Ricky expresses a desire for self-employment (to be his "own boss) and his manager-to-be, Maloney, makes himself seem all too ready and capable of fulfilling this wish: "You don't get hired here. You come on board … You don't work for us. You work with us. You don't drive for us. You perform services … There's no wages but fees." Needless to say, the flowery language underpinning the gig economy only masks a shift of all responsibility and potential blame to the workers while denying all security and benefits from them – and that is exactly what we witness in Ricky's subsequent spiralling into debt due to various work-related misfortunes which, at the same time, bind him even more strongly to his delivery job, preventing him from leaving it even as he loses all the remaining grip over his own life and is forced to watch his family disintegrate because of it. As we very well know, the working class, after apparently lying dormant for decades, returned in the mid-2010s as a decisive factor within the political scene

in the form of an internally divided, highly ethnicized-racialized, reactionary voting base; that is to say, as the *white* working class, now almost unquestionably associated with the Trump presidency and the Brexit vote in the political imaginary, though subsequent studies paint a much less clear picture of the events. The current crisis of workfare or work-based societies can be traced back to the third industrial revolution (the microelectronic revolution) of the 1970s, the technological developments of which have left a large portion of the global labour force in a most precarious position, irrevocably redundant in the production of value.[3]

The central contradiction – notably analysed in Marx's famous "Fragment on Machines"[4] – resides in the continuous attempts to increase productivity, which, in turn, leads to a gradual replacement of living labour by technology, making human labour increasingly superfluous in the production of material wealth all the while retaining abstract labour (socially necessary labour time) as the measure of value and the basis on which the production of value rests. The neoliberal deregulation of the financial sector and the rise of fictive capital do not simply account for the collapse of 2008 but are, in themselves, already responses to a deeper crisis which they tried to compensate with speculation and debt. In other words, less and less people are forced to work more and more, since labour itself – regardless of how undignified, humiliating, or demeaning it may be – is becoming an increasingly fragile commodity. Thus began the race for the remaining jobs, leading to amplified tensions and frictions within the working class itself as its members engage in a ruthless competition to have the opportunity to at least be exploited; since the alternative, considering the systematic dismantling of the welfare state and the concerted attacks on the political power of labour throughout the 70s and the 80s, leads in a straight line from unemployment through starvation to a premature death. The steady increase of social inequality, the new forms of social apartheid, and the rise of post-fascist regimes cannot be accounted for without considering their roots in the capitalist crisis of valorisation, since they are all effects of and responses to this process and not the problem itself. Long gone are the naïve hopes that the robotization and automation of work would organically lead to higher standards of living with reduced labour time and increased free time for a growing number of people. Let us remember that even John Maynard Keynes, who can hardly be accused of communist sympathies, predicted that in a hundred years the economic problem of the struggle for subsist-

[3] These were the socio-economic changes that led some contemporary economists and social theorists to refer to this transformed, globalized, downwards-sliding "class in the making" as the global precariat (see: Standing 2011; Kalmár 2021). For reasons I will elaborate later, however, I will refer to this class as the post-industrial proletariat.

[4] This short extract from the *Grundrisse* manuscripts serves as the most important reference point for the post-68 reception of Marx in the Italian autonomist/postoperaist (Negri, Virno, Birardi, etc.) tradition as well as in the more recent works of the Neüe Marx-Lektüre and the Wertkritik school. Contemporary writings on the post-capitalist political imaginary (Fisher, Mason, Srnicek and Williams, "fully automated luxury communism," etc.) also take it at the very least as an implicit starting point for all further considerations.

ence would be solved and, with what little work would remain to be done shared as widely as possible, we would only have to work three-hour shifts or a fifteen-hour week at the most (326–329). What we perceive instead is that the tendential redundancy of work merely leads to an acute struggle for the remaining positions whose number decreases by the day, and this conflict not only subtends both films in question but lends them their narrative potency as well.

Ken Loach and the Dardenne brothers tend to approach the plight of the post-industrial proletarian from markedly different perspectives, which at once manage to complement each other as well as reveal their respective blind spots. On the one hand, Loach is widely known for being an unabashed sympathizer of the colloquial Old Left, that is, the trade unionist, socially and culturally homogenous, politically organized working class primarily made up of industrial labourers whose political activity – despite all claims to the contrary – remained, for the most part, strictly within the framework of liberal democracies by fighting for higher wages, reduced working hours, better working conditions, social provisions and benefits, etc. Though rumours about the disappearance of the proletariat have been greatly exaggerated, the working class conceived as such certainly no longer exists, a fact that imbues Loach's works with both a mournful nostalgia for what has irrevocably passed and a relentlessly bleak view of what is still yet to come. He is principally guided by a profound Rousseauian sensibility which is kind and forgiving to people (without shying away from revealing their flaws) but ruthless to institutions. He understands perfectly well that the root cause of anti-social behaviour (criminal activity, violence, mental illnesses, etc.) can be found in social ills primarily and not within the personal shortcomings of individuals themselves. Loach's characters, as a rule, are fundamentally good people driven to despair by hopeless circumstances. The Dardeness, on the other hand, having made their first foray into filmmaking by producing video documentaries about Belgian working class movements, can now be reasonably described as "former radicals disillusioned like many others by the failure of leftist politics since the 1980s and more concerned now with the paths of individual lives than with grand revolutionary narratives" (Mosley 22). As Loach himself, they have heard the death-knell of the proletariat and, in the ensuing silence, are ready to profess its painful demise. "The working class," says Jean-Pierre in an interview given to *Cinéaste,* "is no longer the working class. It is no longer structured as it was at the beginning of the last century" (West 132). This de-classed proletariat is precisely what Guy Standing refers to as the precariat, which he defines as consisting of people lacking many, if not all, of the seven forms of labour-related security: labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, representation security (22).

Then again, let us briefly consider the following description from Engels' work on the English working class in the mid-19th century: "But far more demoralizing than his poverty in its influence upon the English working man is the insecurity of his position, the necessity of living upon wages from hand to mouth, that in short

which makes a proletarian of him" (127; emphasis mine).[5] Does the way Standing circumscribe the sociological determination of the precariat not simply a repackaging of the original definition of the proletariat? Without a doubt, the sociological character of the proletariat has changed considerably throughout the last 40-50 years, but what defines it as a class (having nothing other than their labour time to sell on the market) remains the same, regardless of whether the class exists in-itself or for-itself, that is to say, regardless of whether it is aware of its own position in the objective conditions of production and organizes itself accordingly or not. At the risk of resorting to needless polemics, Standing's works on the precariat is not so much an insight into the shifting conditions of labour under the historical crisis of the abstract value-form as it is a symptom of a retrograde academic logic that necessitates a ceaseless invention of new terms for the same old things in order to receive grants. In other words, what Standing, Loach and the Dardeness all take to be the ideal-typical working class (the politically conscious, organized industrial labourer), in comparison to which they view the post-industrial proletariat/precariat either with lament or resignation, is itself a historically produced situation and a contingent formation of this class. For the most part, they accept uncritically, though sometimes begrudgingly, the legal-political framework of the capitalist system and remain planted firmly within it. The absence of a wider perspective and a broader historical grasp seem to mark an unsurpassable limitation to their works, swiftly extinguishing the nascent potential for a subversive-revolutionary ethics of social realism and turning it into – for lack of a better a better term – a form of socially sensitive capitalist realism[6]. Ultimately, Loach and the Dardeness accept the lack of alternatives for the most glaring injustices and the most monstrous inequalities just as much as the self-appointed apologists of this naturalized order do – though Loach's latest film, as I will argue, constitutes an exception. David Walsh, who is perhaps the most insightful Marxist film critic working today, offers one of the more scathing critiques of the Dardeness' cinema but makes it clear that "[t]he brothers' sincerity is not as issue here, their art and ideas are" (74).

Although the Belgian brothers are always quick to point out that a film is not a courtroom where judgements should be (or even can be) made, their films tend to slip all too easily into complacent moralization – and *Two Days, One Night* is no exception from this unfortunate tendency. Informed by their somewhat defeatist

[5] Just before this passage, Engels calls attention to the shifting class-dimension of suicide: "For suicide, formerly the enviable privilege of the upper classes, has become fashionable among the English workers, and number of the poor kill themselves to avoid the misery from which see no other means of escape" (127). Sandra's suicide attempt in *Two Days, One Night* is very clearly connected to the uncertainty of her economic situation but her mental health issues, though obviously amplified by her depicted struggles, pre-exist the narrative of the film. Whether there is a connection between the origin of her depression and her socio-economic situation is left unclear.

[6] Mark Fisher's term for "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2). Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books, 2009.

attitude referred to above, they continue to observe the working class with a detached artistic curiosity and a growing sense of pessimism in their works. In lieu of even a tentative promise of collective action or overall change, all that remains are scattered moments of spontaneous solidarity by Sandra's colleagues and a chance to reach individual salvation for herself at the end. Even if the qualitative change she undergoes throughout the course of the film is formed through a series of interpersonal encounters, constituted by a developing intersubjective dynamic between her and the co-workers she visits, it is utilized only as a pretext for her own personal journey towards that final moment of triumph and redemption. Ureczky, who reads the film primarily as Sandra's quest in learning to rely on and care for herself, is quite right to emphasize the slight ambiguity of the closing scene which "still leaves Sandra in a state of socio-economic uncertainty but also a newly found emotional and intellectual sense of stability" (240). My point, however, is that substituting some form of self-realization for meaningful socio-political transformation is perfectly complicit with the individualizing logic of neoliberalism; rather than providing potential lines of flight, it serves as its ideological support. At the very least, we should bear in mind Adorno's pointed critique in such cases: "[i]n the end, glorification of splendid underdogs is nothing other than glorification of the splendid system that makes them so" (28). Evidently, though, a chance for personal betterment seems to be all that remains now that even the social democratic liberation of labour as a political project has withdrawn beyond the horizon of possibilities, not to mention that the more radical liberation *from* labour – which has undergirded the revolutionary socialist (communist, anarchist) movement and its historico-philosophical project ever since the mid-18th century – as a political act has receded into obscurity once the well-known slogan of the last French and Italian revolutionaries of the 60s-70s faded from the graffitied walls into oblivion: "Never Work."

The revolutionary refusal of work flashes up only briefly in the two films, either in the form of a vague longing for a stress-free, pleasurable existence or as a desperate rejection of an inevitably dour future that is waiting ahead. Sandra, in of the few brief moments of respite amid the otherwise suffocating pace of *Two Days, One Night,* is sitting on a park bench with her husband who is trying to console her after a failed attempt to convince one of her colleagues to take her side in the upcoming vote. "If they take you back," he explains, "after a few weeks with Juliette and your friends, you'll work like before. Better even." Sandra then immediately raises her eyes to a bird singing on a nearby branch off-screen and, after listening to her husband go on for a few more seconds, finally responds: "I wish that was me." "Who?," her husband asks in confusion. "That bird singing…" It is no secret that the Bible serves as a key literary touchstone for the Dardeness partly as a result of their Catholic upbringing, and their moral parables often allude to biblical stories. A much more conspicuously inserted reference comes towards the climax of the film as Sandra pays her visit to the last of her co-workers she needs to see before the Monday ballot, a black immigrant who is serving a temporary contract with the company and, as we later find

out, will likely face a similar situation as Sandra is going through once his contract expires. When, in spite of his precarious position, he still chooses to support Sandra, he justifies his decision by evoking the well-known biblical injunction: "I have to help my neighbour." That said, the exchange about the singing bird quoted above – perhaps inadvertently – also calls into mind a biblical passage, one that serves as a paradigmatic example of the frequently forgotten subversive core of Christianity that regards work as a punishment for the original sin[7]: "Behold the fowls of the air, for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?" (Matthew 6:26). And yet this resigned, postlapsarian reverie remains just what it is, a fleeting daydream of emancipation. It is not only the politically organized working class that is lost but also the very language itself which allowed it to identify its concrete conditions and articulate at least a desire to abolish them altogether.

The same desire figures much more prominently in *Sorry We Missed You,* though there it is also crucially intertwined with the cardinal issue of free choice. Guy Debord strikes to the heart of matter when he notes that "the problem is not that people live more or less poorly, but that they live in a way that is always beyond their control" (qtd. in Jappe 159). This control, or lack thereof, is what is implicated in the recurring problematization of choice. Certainly, the issue also appears to an extent in *Two Days, One Night*. After all, how do several of Sandra's colleagues deflect their responsibility in the situation involving the decision between taking the bonus or keeping Sandra around? Well, it simply was not their choice – and, as Sandra rightly retorts at one point, it was not hers either. So then whose choice is it? Indubitably, it is first and foremost a choice not of their own making but one that is given to (or, rather, forced on) them by the factory's manager, M. Dumont. But is he to blame when he sees that same job could be carried out by fifteen people, rendering Sandra's labour-time superfluous by simply obeying the iron rule of productivity? The Dardennes avoid the easy solution of painting Dumont as the villain, though he remains as far from sympathetic as possible, especially after he gives Sandra the chance to go back to work while also pointing out that the immigrant who was ready to help her will be definitely let go in the future if she reclaims her position in the factory. Then there is also Jean-Marc, the factory foreman who appears as an ominous figure scheming in the background and manipulating Sandra's colleagues into voting against her, so that one might easily be led to the (wrong) conclusion that even if Sandra's co-workers cannot be blamed for choosing the one thousand Euros over her (since it becomes quite clear that they are all in a serious need of extra money), the management of the factory certainly can be. Where the Dardennes remain somewhat ambiguous and potentially misguiding, Loach takes a definite step in the right direction. When Ricky is trying to get a week off from work in order to

[7] The other, perhaps more familiar, example is from Genesis 3:19: "By the sweat of your brow, you shall eat bread."

sort out family problems at home, the manager of the courier company responds in a way that makes it clear that to see the problem primarily in terms of injustice or moral failures is already to miss the point entirely. "Everyone knows I am 'nasty bastard number one'," Maloney says after refusing to give Ricky even three days off, "[b]ut I am greatly misunderstood … Do you wanna know why I'm number one? 'Coz I keep this [the parcel scanner] happy … This decides who lives and who dies." Though the manager certainly occupies a somewhat more beneficent position than Ricky, he is likewise only a functionary of a production process which operates above and beyond anyone's control, outside the bounds of human volition or agency, subordinating everyone under the dominion of its abstract imperatives that demand growth, expansion, and development. As the sphere of circulation is governed only by what Marx calls the "automatic subject" of the valorisation of value, the resulting forms of personal domination are only the surface expressions of the self-referential mechanism of capital accumulation. Conceiving of capitalism primarily as a result of political strategy or as a political act in itself is certainly politically (and, of course, narratively/dramatically) useful in that it ensures that we can point to the activity of an individual, a group of people, or even an institution whose conduct is responsible for it. Maloney stresses that he is responsible to the shareholders of the company, but then who are the shareholders responsible to? They are subordinated only to the self-propelling movement and abstract imperatives of capital that demand ceaseless growth, expansion, and accumulation.

Returning now to the problem of free choice from this perspective, we may consider three separate instances in which the question of choice comes to the forefront in *Sorry We Missed You*. The first time it happens is right after Ricky is hired and, contemplating whether to buy a van for himself or rent one from the company, Maloney ensures him that "[l]ike everything around here, it's your choice." Moreover, towards the end of the film, after Ricky has been mugged and heavily beaten up during a stop he made in his delivery route, he desperately insists on going to work since he is now facing a potential loss of income as well as an increasing amount of work-related debt. His understandably concerned family is trying to stop him from doing so, to which he simply replies with resignation that "I have not got a choice." It might be tempting to see Maloney's assertion as a mere managerial half-truth and Ricky's words as an expression of the sobering realization that what hides behind the veil of self-employment and worker autonomy is a complete lack of freedom of choice. Is it possible, however, that somehow they are both right, or, what amounts to the same thing in the end, perhaps they are equally wrong? The usual conservative retort that you can always get a different job if you do not like the one you have is, of course, an absurdly reductive statement but one that nevertheless contains a grain of truth. Gáspár Miklós Tamás' assessment of this central conundrum of capitalist societies is worth quoting at length:

> The proletarian has to 'go' voluntarily, deliberately to the capitalist to offer her time to the latter, the contract formalising the sale is a voluntary act between equals. At the moment of this transaction – but not later – the proletarian is not the subordinate of the bourgeois(e) and she is not her superior … Entering production through the gate of the labour contract, solemnising the sale of her time, the proletarian immediately loses her status as a contracting party equal to – and as free as – the capitalist. *She will become a subordinate, but less so to a person or persons than to capital, this subordination, mediated through the 'general intellect', technology and science*. Blueprints, algorithms, software, instructions, regulations are not negotiated, but prescribed or ordered to increase 'efficiency', that is, productivity. ("Communism;" my emphasis)

In other words, the formal-legal frame of liberal democracies guarantees that employer and employee enter into a contract as legally free and equal parties and not by way of force, coercion, or personal domination. As opposed to the rigid classification of caste systems, class is a contingent social position legally open (albeit socially impounded) to anyone. The other side of the freedom of contract, however, amounts to the freedom to starve, suffer, and die. This is why it is crucial that Loach points to the parcel scanner, nicknamed as the "gun" by the drivers, as a tool of technological mediation which reveals the impersonal dynamics of capital.

The choice disposed to Sandra and her colleagues as well as to Ricky rhymes with the limitations circumscribed by the alienating "or" of the Lacanian forced choice, the paradigmatic example of which is: "Your money or your life!" "If I choose the money," explains Lacan, "I lose both. If I choose life, I have life without the money, namely, a life deprived of something … To cut a long story short, it concerns the production of the primary alienation, *that by which man enters into the way of slavery*" (212). Since the choice proposed here necessarily involves a lose-lose situation, the only response which leaves one's autonomy intact is the revolutionary-emancipatory insistence on refusing the parameters of this choice altogether. Now we may turn our attention to the third case where Loach problematizes this apparent free choice in *Sorry We Missed You*. Around the midway point of the film, Ricky, despite his better judgement, still espouses the pervasive myths of meritocracy and upward social mobility to his son, Seb. Upon finding several cans of spray paint in Seb's bag, Ricky and his wife confront him about the consequences skipping school could have on his future prospects: "Just give yourself some choices, mate," Ricky tells Seb while regurgitating all those illusory beliefs he still desperately clings to; his son could go to a good university if he studied harder, he could get a well-paying job later on, etc. Seb's response to this is one of complete rejection and refusal, which recalls Sandra's brief moments of wistful longing for liberation. Having seen his parents struggle to make an honest and decent living in spite of all their continuous efforts, he no longer retains the mirage of a capitalism that can work for the people. Seb knows very well

that even if he managed to go to a university later on, he would still most likely end up with tens of thousands of pounds in debt, working a meaningless and underpaid job on the weekdays and drinking his problems away on the weekends. When Ricky tells him that he is going to end up as a "skivvy," Seb bring up the question of free choice once again, this time in order to defy his father precisely by accepting his premises, leaving him speechless: "It's your choice to be a skivvy, isn't it? A skivvy doesn't come to you, you go to it." Faced with a limited choice forced upon him, Seb reacts by rejecting it outright. That is to say, he chooses not to choose, his choice is one of non-choice, because he is well aware that the moment this choice is offered, its limitations are such that no matter which alternative he decides to take, he already loses once he accepts the terms in which this choice is proposed.

It is only in moments such as those detailed above that the films provide a fleeting glimpse into the underlying reality of class as a structural feature of capitalism behind the epiphenomena of social inequality and moral injustices. As such, these instances may provide a basis not only for condemning the neoliberal order through revealing its inevitable consequences but also, more importantly, for critiquing capitalism *tout court* by disclosing its formal determination in the social division of labour and the abstract rule of the value-form. If *Two Days, One Night* can be said to relapse into a form of capitalist realism by withdrawing into the individual and offering a potential escape route in the form of self-fulfilment, then *Sorry We Missed You* takes a few tentative steps towards what could be reasonably described as communist realism precisely by implicating the totality of social relations that constitute the capitalist mode of production. I believe that this latter approach, also espoused by Lukács in his work on literary realism, should serve as the necessary starting point for any contemporary cinematic realism that is worthy of the name.

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Zsolt Győri

You Are What Your Borders Are: Hospitality and Fortress Europe in *Last Resort* and *The Citizen*

Introduction: Fortress Europe and the lost case of hospitality[1]

International migration is a prime example of the kind of polarising contemporary social phenomena that create dramatic "us versus them" situations, undermine universal solidarity, and separate people into opposing groups with walls and razor-wire fences between them. Migration reveals the sharp dividing lines cutting through 21st century humanity: the lines separating us from them, the settled from the migrant, the privileged from the poor, the protected from the vulnerable, the legal citizens from those without papers or rights (see Várnagy and Kalmár 2021 in the present volume). The physical and symbolic borders between the two groups, which are the key elements of visual representations, further strengthen the sense of painful inequality and injustice involved. When we look at such situations, we often discover an allegorical picture of our deeply divided 21st century humanity, with groups of radically different opportunities facing each other. No wonder that international migration, especially since the 2015 European migration crisis, has become a hot topic for all sorts of cultural discourses: politics, philosophy, journalism, social sciences (Berghahn and Sternberg 2010) and created "new challenges for European cinema too, a crisis of cinematic representation" (Kalmár 2020, 150).

In the past twenty years, migrant cinema has become a canonical art cinema genre, yet not an unambiguous one. Its popularity is without doubt linked to the European migrant crisis (since 2015), testing both EU immigration and immigrant policies, raising many questions about the design and effects of regulations regarding admissions and exclusion. One of the central topics is concerned with the role of states in deciding which refugees to welcome and whom to exclude, which is thus tied up with questions of discrimination and inequality. This is a debate running deep in European history, intimately linked to the emergence of the modern concept of states and is even reflected in the etymology of hospitality. The Latin root of hospitality is *hospes*, meaning *guest* or *host,* while hostility has a very similar root, *hostis,*

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meaning *stranger* or *enemy*. The former is associated with practices of membership, the latter with those of exclusion and so was for the ancient Greeks who used a rich vocabulary to signify foreigners of different status with *xenos* referring to guest, refugee, or guest-friend entitled to hospitality, *metoikos,* the foreigner resident of the city who possessed some rights of citizenship, and the *barbaros* used to denote the uncivilized, suspicious and threatening type of foreigner who was best kept outside the city walls.

The etymological forking that produces hospitality and hostility as alternative, yet often complementary attitudes towards foreigners is all the more important since, as Gideon Baker remarks, already in ancient Greece hospitality was "no longer the private concern of elites, the public gift of hospitality became a gift made by the city" (Baker 2011, 25). The common practices of the land, and later, the creation of policies regarding immigration limited the scope of hospitality as individual matter and increased state responsibilities of handling foreigners. If liberalism defined the role of the state in advancing equality and general welfare, in a post-liberal era, membership becomes more limited and, as William James Booth contends, "there are no doubt powerful forces arrayed in many polities that seek to keep the exclusionary barriers high and reinvigorate a stronger sense of the "we" who stand within those boundaries" (263). One of the transnational polities erecting exclusionary barriers is Europe itself, captured by the succinct expression Fortress Europe. It marks the failure of the cosmopolitan-utopian ideal according to which it is the humanity of one person and the other that constitutes "we".

The contours of Fortress Europe are the starkest when we think about how the establishment, implementation, evaluation and necessary revision of immigration policies turn into a political agenda; how the success or failure of these have come to determine government popularity, party preferences, and electoral participation. The way political elites handle refugees and asylum seekers is indicative of their moral and ideological composition and, as Alex Bach asserts, "tells us something essential about the nature of power itself." (2) This power, more precisely biopower, is nothing new in the Old Continent, where immigration policies is just a fresh addition to the diverse technologies of governing and administratively controlling inequalities. Bearing in mind dark historical lessons in anti-semitism and interethnic conflicts, it should come as no surprise that detention facilities and processing centres for refugees often call into mind images of concentration camps.

In case of the recent European migrant crisis, the impossibility to welcome everyone and the introduction of criteria of "fairness" to decide who can stay and who will be deported marked, for liberal minded people, the failure of the egalitarian foundation of humanity. Resulting from the endorsement of stronger criteria of membership than ever before and the foregrounding of a sense of Europeanness founded on shared history, customs, and way of thinking, the concept of Fortress Europe today serves as a battle ground between supporters of liberalism and those who seek to protect the national framework of polity and claim to defend the cultural particular-

ity of Europe. Fortress Europe certainly did not emerge in the wake of the European migrant crisis, since the protection of EU borders has for long been the topic in negotiations between national and transnational governments. However the debates have become more heated resembling a war rather than a sensible discussion, placing the concept of Fortress Europe on the battle ground between advocates of inclusive and asylum-providing practices (qualities of liberal statecraft) and proponents of the case-by-case approach to granting asylum, but also more social control and limited tolerance for cultural differences (qualities of post-liberal, or illiberal statecraft). Fortress Europe today is not just a symbol of immigration control but of sectarian politics, of a fully-fledged war between value systems and of opposing perceptions of justice/injustice, and equality/inequality.

Cinema against Fortress Europe

It is one area of the richly layered symbolism of Fortress Europe that interests me here. My concern is not the otherwise crucial area of the relationship between hospitality, hostility and the control mechanisms central to modern statecraft, but the manner in which immigration stimulates the crafting of social and individual identity. This issue in past years was richly reflected in European art cinema, in films that pitted the politics of hostility against the ethics of hospitality exercised by the ordinary citizen. Examples like *Last Resort* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2000), *Terraferma* (Emanuele Crialese, 2011), *Le Havre* (Aki Kaurismaki, 2011), *The Citizen* (Vranik Roland, 2016), *The Other Side of Hope* (Aki Kaurismaki, 2017) and *Styx* (2018) share a strong conviction that unlike governmental bodies, individuals and communities continue to embrace the liberal ideal of unconditional hospitality. With different films in mind, Isolina Ballesteros asserts that "tolerance has to be cultivated within the family's structure as a first step to achieving a broader communal and supranational acceptance of Otherness" (169–170). The individual and grassroot cultivation of tolerance is all the more symptomatic of the fissure within liberal values, since in many countries private intervention and aid offered to clandestine immigrants is regarded as illegal activities by authorities. Such criminalization is not only present but emphatic in the above films as they talk about personal acts of offering hospitality in spite of state sanctions. Based on these films, liberal values and the responsibility for universal human rights is best advocated through disobedient citizenship, that is, citizenship disobeying practices of hostility legitimated in the name of order, security and sovereignty.

In *Terraferma* a family from the small island of Liosa near Sicily earning a modest living as fishermen and taking their share of the local hospitality industry in the summer months encounter refugees from North Africa first at sea and later on the beach. Already at the early stages of the story, the family, as Ellay Taylor asserts, is shown to be "torn between the law of the sea, which compels fisherman to save

anyone in peril on the ocean, and the laws of the land, which forbid their rescue". Although hesitant at first, they soon decide to hide a pregnant Ethiopian woman and his young son despite potential retribution from the authorities and the male hero eventually helps them reach mainland Italy. Set in Helsinki, Finland, *The Others Side of Hope* features the unexpected friendship of Khaled, a refugee from war-torn Aleppo, Syria and Wikström, a laconic Finnish restaurant owner of likely Swedish origins who risks his good reputation and savings to find Khaled's sister and help the siblings reunite. During his endless interviews with efficient but highly impersonal immigration officers, Khaled learns how to act in the role of the refugee which Peter Bradshaw sums up as follows: "happiness, cheerfulness, laughter itself – these are commodities that must be carefully handled for an asylum-seeker. Too little and officialdom won't like you, too much and your plight will not seem sufficiently sad, damaging your "deserving poor" status." Khaled fails to impress the bureaucrats of Fortress Europe with his performance and is scheduled for deportation, yet he will be saved by ordinary citizens who do not judge immigrants based on their officially required performance (which, in addition, dehumanize them) but their personal, human character. The German *Styx* is a heartfelt moral thriller located on the endless waters of the Atlantic off the coast of Mauritania where the paths of a severely damaged refugee boat and a well-equipped sailing yacht navigated by a German woman accidentally cross. Rike, who as a paramedic practices caritas by profession, is torn by her drive to help and the repeated radio messages of authorities urging her to keep away from the humanitarian crisis unfolding in front of her eyes. Eventually, as Manohla Dargis asserts, the "story of radical, deeply privileged individualism gives way to a potent, messy and sometimes uncomfortable parable about what human beings owe one another," and disobeying official procedures, Rilke acts according to the common ethical sense. Despite a shared thematic concern what sets *Last Resort* and *The Citizen* apart from the above films is their respective romantic subplots between the foreigner and the host that allow for a more nuanced characterisation of protagonists and the inequalities they suffer at the hands of official immigration policies. The present paper offers a detailed analysis on how the respective films portray individual acts of responsibility and hospitality vis-à-vis official policies and practices of hostility towards immigrants. But before moving onto the analysis itself, I offer a brief overview of immigration into the represented countries.

Immigration controls and national specificities

While there have been considerable immigration to Western Europe and North America since the late 19th century, Hungary has rarely been the target country of mass immigration. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries some 1.3 million agrarian workers immigrated mainly to the US (Illés 220), later followed by people leaving the country for political reasons after the rise of right wing nationalism, the world

war and the 1956. Strangely, immigration to Hungary mainly included Hungarians who after the Trianon Peace Treaties became national minorities in neighbouring countries. Consequently, as Sándor Illés contends, in the 1920s "taking care of refugees, for the simple reason that these were Hungarians, differed from "traditional" forms of hospitality" (221), a trend that continued in the latter part of the century. New arrivals almost exclusively consisted of culturally and linguistically homogenous groups; they were considered Hungarians relocating to the geographically curtailed motherland. In those rare cases when foreign nationalities immigrated to Hungary, like Greek citizens after 1949 or East Germans in 1989, and refugees from former Yugoslavia after 1991, they either returned home after political normalization (as with the Greeks) or used Hungary as a transit country to reach Western European destinations (as in the two latter cases). In the postcommunist period, the 2001 Status Law and the so called Hungarian Card issued under this law granted certain benefits to Hungarians with a permanent residence in neighbouring countries. Changes made to the Hungarian Citizenship Law in 2011 made it easier for descendants of Hungarian citizens to apply for citizenship. Largely to these historical factors, until recently Hungary has seen an influx of culturally integrated immigrants from neighbouring countries, that is, people who understand national obligations, morality, and values distinctive of Hungarian identity, making it easier for governments to adopt unconditional hospitality and offer immigrants full membership.

Immigration to Britain in the past century was a very different issue. Following the demise of the Empire, there was a sharp rise in immigrants from Third World countries, as the 1948 British Nationality Act allowed Commonwealth citizens unrestricted rights of entry into Britain to remedy serious labour shortage. Despite being declared equal by law, non-white immigrants soon began to test the limits of hospitality and debates over the social threat they posed became the topic of daily political debates and strengthened the radical right. Consecutive legislation – the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968, the Immigration Act of 1971 and the British Nationality Act 1981 – put increasing controls on immigration and signalled a cross-party consensus over the need to create racial thresholds for both those who have settled and for those who were planning to settle in the country. As Roxanne Lynn Doty notes, "[i]deas of "one's own kind" and dangers associated with too much dilution by outsiders easily shaded into fears that the presence of "others" posed a threat to the British way of life, to the very identity of the British people" (Doty 47). In the mind of many, xenophobia became a natural fear of strangers, leading to the racial coding of British identity as not only acceptable but desirable. As a result of the above mentioned acts, increasingly illiberal and racial criteria were set up for entries into the country with the legal authorization for guest workers being the work permit (subject to constant revision and renewal). Not long after the white/non-white division challenged the equal treatment of asylum-seekers by immigration control, Eastern-European "others", labourers from the post-Soviet countries, were subjected to official xenophobia at borders for their presumed cultural and social threat to British identity.

Even such a brief overview reveals considerable differences in the two countries' historical experience with immigrants and explains dissimilarities in the cinematic representation of hospitability and hostility towards foreigners. Whereas both films criticize Fortress Europe, the name of all those legal, cultural, social and economic mechanisms that produce inequality, their approach is unique. *Last Resort* was made in the wake of the Asylum and Immigration Bill of 1999, a policy of forced dispersal, which, as Doty claims, "institutionalized a practice already being followed by many London boroughs of dispersing asylum-seekers to southern coastal towns and to the north. … Areas with unfilled housing were designated "reception zones"" (55). The result of these policies, Doty concludes, "has been increased racism and xenophobia in areas where asylum-seekers have been dispersed to" (55–56). It is against this hostile legal environment that Pawlikowski tells the story of visitor-host relationship. I will argue that the ordinary citizen's ability to exercise hospitality in *Last Resort* increases with her willingness to question official views on immigrants and the humanistic-cosmopolitan inclination to regard those inside and outside the gates of Fortress Europe as equals. *The Citizen*, made in the aftermath of the recent immigration crises, in the highly hostile political atmosphere of Hungary in the 2010s, concentrates on the administrative management of inequality and how local value systems and nationalal policy agendas may impose limits on unconditional hospitality.

Last Resort and *The Citizen*

The two films feature refugee protagonists at very different stages of the asylum seeking process. In terms of plot, *Last Resort* is about a Russian woman, Tanya, who arrives to Britain with her 10-year-old son Artiom, in hope of a marriage. Yet it is important to note that the sentimental heroine does not seek a marriage of convenience but has deep affection for a British man whom she recently met and fell in love with. However, Tanya's real background story is not simply that of an Eastern European woman waiting for the British fiancé, who in fact never turns up at the airport, but of her having been betrayed by the ruthlessness of post-Soviet predatory capitalism where illustrators of children's books are in low demand. Hers is a story of having been made redundant, jettisoned, and psychologically wasted by her country's social and economic conditions, a personal account of post-Soviet precarity. With her native country in a full blown crisis of social values and inequalities skyrocketing, she dreams of a home offering emotional and financial stability. Her strong determination to achieve these turns Tanya into a refugee seeking political asylum at Stansted from where they are transported to Margate (called Stonehaven in the film) famous for its theme park called Dreamland.

There is nothing haven-like in the Margate for the refugees, a place that used to be a popular seaside resort offering various ephemeral carnivalesque impulses, a place

of escape from the mundane everyday. The location presented in the film no longer benefits from working-class consumerism but is spatialised as the underbelly Britain of limited career opportunities and "becomes the symbol of postcommunism in Britain, a Britain that in no way adheres to the Cold War mindset of a prosperous and affluent country with a secured place in history" (Kristensen 50). The glorious past of this once burgeoning town with a developed hospitality industry, captured by Lindsay Anderson's free cinema documentary *O Dreamland* (1956), is only remembered by the sign "Dreamland welcomes you" which, according to Yosefa Loshitzky, is "a parody of the inscription at the base of the Statue of Liberty, the entry point to America and the mythic symbol of immigration" (751). Stonehaven is a place abundant in vacant housing, thus fits the guidelines fixed by the dispersal policy. Nevertheless it also resembles traditional representations of refugee camps: the area is marked off from the outside world by barbed wire fence, while patrol dogs and surveillance cameras track every move of the occupants. People worn out by endless waiting, little social interaction and occasional violence are mirrored by the post-apocalyptic imagery of abandoned beaches, littered streets, and run-down buildings. The resort which was once a place of hospitality paradoxically appears as the opposite, a space of hostility and exploitation. The film' male protagonist, the working-class ex-convict Alfie, makes more money by selling telephone cards and tobacco to refugees than operating a games arcade and working as a bingo caller. Others adopt more predatory strategies and recruit young refugee women for cyber pornography. The non-citizen status of a refugee woman makes them easily exploited by the illegal sex industry serving citizens of Fortress Hungry for some exotic foreign flesh.-

Alfie's romantic attraction to Tanya is that of a gallant knight eager to take the "damsel in distress" back to his fortress, and possibly marry her too. But would this be a marriage of equals? The point I wish to make is that Tanya appears as someone who is in desperate need of a patronizing strong male partner and would probably always be the vulnerable party, someone to be taken care of. Her girlish look accentuates her infantile nature. Thus there is a certain colonial fantasy surrounding the relationship of Tanya and Alfie, that of the masculine, rational metropole, or Fortress Europe for that matter, coming to the rescue of the illogical and chaotic female Other. Nevertheless, the man's unconditional hospitality leaves Tanya some space for self-reflection and transformation.

If there is a single image that captures Tanya's original, naïve mind-frame, it would be the wall-size poster of a tropical seaside sunset in the Stonehaven apartment they occupy (see: images 1, 2); a fantasy-vision of a dreamland which nevertheless has begun to peel off and so reveals itself as an illusion. It is the graphic externalization of her psychosocial state, an allegory of her primal fantasy of a normal family and a caring Western husband, a dream to escape reality. Later in the film the poster will be painted over and one of Tanya's original paintings hung up. The transformation of the wall is symptomatic of Archie's attempts to transform the run-down

highrise apartment into a home, yet the more Tanya' fantasy becomes a reality the less compelling it seems. The shot of her painting, framed by Archie, tipping to one side expresses this psychic disequilibrium. She feels undeserving for Archie's acts of unconditional hospitality as these were offered for a selfish person with deceptive fantasies. Realising that the answer to her crisis is not Archie, British citizenship or Western living standards but the willingness to confront a false self-image constructed through perpetual escape, she decides to return to Russia. To be worthy of unconditional hospitality offered by the host, she must first practice self-care and learn how not to repress but embrace and handle her traumas and identity crisis. In her words: "I have to go back and start my life" (see: images 3, 4).

The tolerance and understanding Archie shows towards Tanya's frailty and alterity questions the very logic underpinning the Fortress Europe attitude. Breaking many rules, he wrecks both the studio and the face of the cyber-porn producer and later helps Tanya and Artion escape from the camp on a boat. In their adventure they both become outcasts and share an identity that comes before national designations such as English or Russian, an identity unstable and without assurances yet not insular and indifferent towards the other. Although their romantic intimacy remains unrealized, their ways part, and every moment of their relationship is filled with ambiguity, this is an ambiguity that leaves insiders and outsiders equal.

If hospitality forces Tanya on the path of self-investigation that results in the termination of her quest for asylum, Wilson, the protagonist of Roland Vranik's *The Citizen,* learns about hospitality at the last stage of obtaining citizenship. Wilson is from Africa, from civil war torn Guinea-Bissau where he lost his family and has been living legally in Hungary for many years. He works as a security guard and is preparing to take a naturalization exam that he had already failed on many occasions. The dark-skinned protagonist wants to integrate and rise from the status of the resident alien into that of the legal citizen. He takes private lessons from a Hungarian lady of his age, when unexpectedly Shirin, a pregnant Iranian woman, knocks at his door looking for shelter. After a few seconds of hesitancy, he lets her into the flat, the spatial symbol of his determination to settle in the country. Wilson's decision to welcome an uninvited guest into the flat he himself only rents is allegorical of his legal status.[2] He makes his intermediary existence open for someone fully peripheralised, who is both outside the law and pursued by law enforcement. Wilson is Shirin's "last resort" in more than one sense of the word: he offers a safe house to the woman without legal documents and allows her to give birth to her baby there. He does not expect Shirin to live according to his rules as a homeowner probably would, yet does everything to create an intimate atmosphere that he protects fiercely. Later, as Mari and Wilson become romantically involved, the married woman moves into the flat but due to the lack of privacy different conflicts emerge between the three

[2] In ancient Greece, the metoikos was a resident alien who did not have citizen rights and who paid a tax for the right to live there.

of them. Mari reports Shirin and her baby to the immigration office who are put into detention scheduled for deportation. Despite her deep feelings for Mari, Wilson sends her away and decides to move to Austria after receiving formal notification about the result of the citizenship application. The film ends on an ambiguous note, since viewers never learn if he was rejected or granted citizenship (see: images 5, 6).

At the outset, Wilson regards the legal form of citizenship and identification with the cultural heritage of the host country as self-fulfilment. This is the proper path set forth by today's EU immigration policies that are increasingly shaped by the fear of losing control over borders, a fear overcome by setting down symbolic thresholds asylum seekers must pass. In Hungary, as elsewhere in the continent, the citizenship test is an important stage of the naturalization process, and aims to guarantee the success of the assimilation. The test is a symbolic document, a transcript of Hungarian cultural identity and heritage. It turns the protagonist into a student, more so since the test largely covers areas of history, political history, citizenship studies, literature, arts and music, the same topics secondary school students are tested on during the maturity exam at the end of their compulsory education in Hungary. The citizenship test seems to measure one's level of maturity, but one might ask, maturity in what? It standardizes maturity and in doing so introduces the category of "substandard identity", another means of endorsing inequality discursively. In the top left image the coat of arms of Hungary and the flag of the European Union serve both as a visual-compositional frame and a legal framework for the exam committee performing the task of selection. The adjacent frame shows Wilson being judged, shamed and rejected at the hands of Fortress Europe. Another point I want to raise concerns identity that can be measured and whose worth is determined by its translatability into a transcript of exclusivity. Defined as such, cultural Hungarianness is protected by several thresholds; it is a fortressed identity that might seem alien even to its beholder, since normal citizens' everyday experience hardly fits normative definitions. Whom it serves best is a type of state thriving on people's sense of insecurity, an illiberal state setting up boundaries to separate those who are "in" from those who are "out", and in doing so crafting its own image as a protector of the people.

Fortress Europe works in mysterious ways depriving the migrant identity of a sense of achievement. Wilson, for example, is awarded the employee of the year award, sending out the politically correct message that even a migrant can be honoured, that thresholds have disappeared and universal equality is around the corner. Making someone a model migrant, the mascot of tolerance is not hospitality but a strategy to show off superfluous solidarity. The spatial logic of this scene suggests that there is little free space to navigate, that without patrons he would not be able to achieve much. Turning Wilson into the poster boy at a self-congratulating ritual is an ironic commentary of dishonest colour-blindness. We see a very similar composition at the immigration office when he reacts aggressively after being called an "African" and has to be held down by Mari and the security guards. After having proven his maturity in different situations, he is still identified by the colour of his

skin. Here immigration policies fail their own logic and become unthinking, irrational and immature. And yet, for an outside observer it is the immigrant who is made to be seem violent, irrational, uncivilized and immature: the barbarian at the wall (see: images 7, 8).

The domain of governmentality defending people's rights to Fortress Europe and a legal immigrant defending the right of an illegal immigrant to hospitality is the basic conflict of Vranik's film. The former gives immense powers to authorities and allows them to act in a concerted manner, the latter results in a growth of personality and the gradual evaporation of the desire to find asylum and legal status at any cost. Wilson makes a double sacrifice: he terminates his journey of seeking citizenship in its very last stage and, at the same time, breaks off with Mari, who loves the man but, as Wilson realizes, loves the fortress even more and driven by a desire for privacy hands Shirin and her baby over to the immigration officers. Mari's actions are certainly explained by her emotional bonding to the man, but also the historical trajectories of immigration to Hungary and related notions of hospitality overviewed a few pages earlier. With reference to these, Mari might rightfully feel to offer unconditional hospitality to Wilson in her desire to integrate him in her life and make him one of us. She choses the acculturated, assimilable immigrant over the threatening alterity of Shirin. Yet Wilson's membership in the community is more instable than Mari would expect, he resembles what Booth calls the stranger citizen who "is nevertheless remote, because he remains a potential wanderer who can leave these bonds as we who are constituted by them (or think ourselves be) never could." (264) Wilson's remoteness is rendered visible only after he accepts the role of the host and understands that hospitality is a daily responsibility, an ordinary gesture of humanity. In an ambiguous manner, he *declines citizenship* in Fortress Europe and embarks on a nomadic journey, this time, possibly, as an illegal immigrant *at his most naturalized state*, that is, in the heightened state of feeling one with humanity.

Conclusion

While most migrant cinema depicts Fortress Europe through visual metaphors of the inside–outside binary, such as the spatial dichotomies of upbeat downtown and the run-down outskirt areas, men in uniform trying to handle hordes of people, or oftentimes as corpses that look like waste washed up on the shores of Europe, the films discussed here capture the migrant experience as constant forking and circular movement. An example of forking is how Wilson is torn between being a visitor and a host one at the same time. An image from *The Cititzen* showing a round pool at a holiday resort (see: image 9), where Mari and Wilson escape for a few days, captures well the circular movements immigrants are subjected to, to be that the back and forth movement of Tanya (Russia–Britain–Russia), the pointless wanderings of

characters in the premises of the detention camp, or Wilson's frequent visits to various offices and examination centres. In these cases the migrant experience is not defined by being a radical outsider caught behind barbed wire or as a starving refugee on a boat on the Mediterranean, but rather as being caught in this endless movement in the labyrinth lain across various levels of bureaucracy, looking for meaning that – as host we often forget – is itself fluid and ambiguous.

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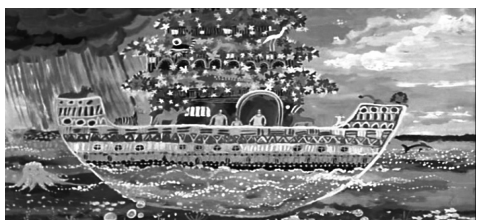
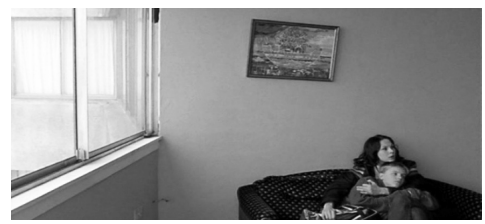
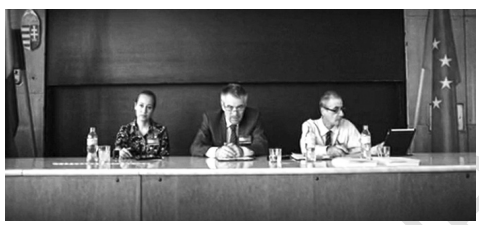
Images







Borbála László

Non-Human Precarity: Wasted Human-Canine Kinships in Two Contemporary Documentaries

> *"We are being wiped off the earth, not the face of the earth, the face we lost long ago, the arse of the earth, il culo. We are their mistake. … Mistakes don't surrender as enemies do. There's no such thing as a defeated mistake. Mistakes either exist or they don't, and if they do, they have to be covered over. We are their mistake"*
>
> (John Berger: King: A Street Story)

"Can we think of precarity "beyond" the human?" asked Judith Butler at a virtual roundtable in 2011 (171). Although in the past two decades animal studies has radically reshaped the humanities in that it exposed and, if not eradicated, at least replaced anthropocentrism with more-creature conscious perspectives, treating the human as the single subject of discussions on precarity and its representations is still naturalised. Non-human beings are ostensibly "incapable of experiencing precarity *as such,* as a subjective and not just objective condition of vulnerability" (Shukin 115). As long as animals and other non-human beings cannot give (human) voice to their experiences, one will never know for sure how they are subjectively affected by the accelerated economic, social, technological and environmental changes of the 21st century. Yet to not even contemplate the question entails that human precarity is a standalone phenomenon, unrelated to other creatures' shifting states of well-being and affliction. As Nicole Shukin puts it, "to allow "the human" to go unquestioned as the assumed subject of precarity is to enable a misrecognition of the life forms that are historically, materially, socially, economically, affectively and (bio)politically intricated with that subject" (116). And, even worse, to deny the intricate interrelationships between human and non-human states of vulnerability is to comply with those power mechanisms, those apathetic, hierarchizing, exclusory machinations of neoliberal capitalism that make lives precarious in the first place. Here I pick up on the issue raised by Butler and try to think of precarity "beyond the human" in order to challenge the anthropocentrism of the dominant precarity discourse. My opening argument is that the global spread of neoliberal capitalism and the crisis situations it culminates into make not only

human life precarious, but also condemn other, non-human forms of existence to the (metaphoric but also often physical) rubbish heap that such a system accumulates wherever it emerges.

Apart from precarity, a related key term that I will be using is that of Zygmunt Bauman's *wasted lives,* another notion that needs to be expanded to account for non-human states of being discarded by neoliberal capitalist systems around the world. For Bauman is distressingly definite in emphasising that "an inevitable outcome of modernization" is "the production of '*human* waste', or more correctly wasted *humans*" (*Wasted Lives* 5, emphasis added).[1] Nevertheless, in his essay written a few years back he also lists animals among those beings towards whom one has a moral responsibility to offer help. As he puts it, the children, the yet unborn, the poor and the indolent, the deprived and the dispossessed, and the animals, "devoid of language in which the demand could be phrased and of the skills to solicit rights by bargaining or coercion," are "the cases of moral responsibility reaching its peak" – here referring to Levinas' notion of *unconditional responsibility* – because in these cases "the demand is at its 'most unspoken'" – here drawing on Knud Løgstrup's term *unspoken demand* ("What Prospects" 20). What one can infer from this is that treating non-human animals on the same grounds as vulnerable human beings is a moral responsibility, at least in Bauman's terms where morality means unreservedly answering an unspoken demand. In other words, Bauman's conceptualisation of morality links back to the proposition that not listing non-humans beside humans in need of care implies callousness, a characteristic attitude which largely contributes to the devaluation of lives in neoliberal capitalist systems.[2]

[1] By *wasted lives* Bauman means "the 'excessive' and 'redundant', that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay" in the centre of modern life (production, business, finance, etc.). As he continues, the presence of jettisoned lives is "an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* (each order casts some parts of the extant population as 'out of place', 'unfit' or 'undesirable') and of *economic progress* (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of 'making a living' and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood)" (*Wasted Lives* 5, emphasis in the original).

[2] A common conception that Bauman, Levinas and Løgstrup also believe in is that our innate sense of morality, the urge to help the weak, is one of the unique qualities that makes us human. Nevertheless, devaluing and discarding the "unfit" is more likely to be a practice in human societies than in nature (Bauman, *Wasted Lives* 5. In fact, many animals are instinctually disposed to interspecies help and symbiosis rather than enmity and exclusion (see, for instance Nick Branson's article "Why do animals help each other?"). As the canine narrator of John Berger's *King: A Street Story* (1999) expresses, "[t]he hatred which the strong feel for the weak as soon as the weak get too close is particularly human; it doesn't happen with animals. With humans there is a distance which must be respected, and when it isn't, it is the strong, not the weak, who feel affronted, and from the affront comes hatred" (22). Here King talks about abjection, that is, how the modern human subject feels the carefully constructed and safely guarded walls of his identity threatened by what he could also become in a second due to the ever-changing conditions in our modern societies: out of place, out of time, weak, and thus unwanted (Julia Kristeva: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia UP, 1982.) Interestingly, therefore, Berger devalues the dominant anthropocentric concept of morality: he mercilessly rejects humans their inherent sense of moral responsibility and instead ascribes it to animals. As King says, "[w]here I'm not human at all is that I'm possessive about pain. I mean the pain of others … I take over the one who is suffering, and I growl if anybody approaches. It is something I learnt from my mother, and now it's stronger than me" (15).

The next, and most important, argument I am trying to make here is that considering non-humans as potential subjects of 21st century precarity allows one to trace whole networks of interconnected vulnerable lives. This approach to precarity obviously rests on the work of Donna Haraway, who pointed out during an interview that species do not come into being alone but co-constitute one another, the most accurate term to denote them being the *humanimal* rather than the reductive human or animal (00:00:03–00:01:25). Haraway's notion of co-constitution entails interrelatedness, meaning that humanimals are connected in their experiences of welfare as well as suffering even if not in the same manner or to the same degree. This explains my choice to apply a posthumanist, specifically interspecies approach to precariousness. Drawing on Butler's ideas, I argue 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" (173). Due to the global spread of neoliberal capitalism and its concomitant crises, I believe that 21st century precarity is something that extends to whole ecosystems where precarised human and nonhuman lives are interconnected. As Lauren Berlant put it at the 2011 roundtable discussion, the situation of precarity "is the situation of relationality itself, insofar as our dependencies are vulnerabilities" (171). Recognizing this, cinema also widens its focus in its representations of precarity, foregrounding not only human but also animal forms of vulnerable existence, and most importantly, how these are interrelated through shared experiences.

Maybe no other humanimal lives are connected more in this regard than that of the homeless and the urban street dog. In *Patas de kiltro* (*Street Dog Walking*, dir. Alina Astudillo and Guillermo Gonzalez, 2002), a documentary portraying the situation of strays in the cities of Chile, visual artist Antonio Becerro says that "[t]he dog is a victim of modern life, the same as the Mapuche Indian [the native people of Chile] and the homeless. We haven't given anything in favour of or support much our brothers and little brothers." The film also provokes the question whether we do more than just ignore our weak human and nonhuman brothers and, in fact, we produce precarious lives. According to a local veterinarian in one of the talking head interviews, people in the poorest, hilly neighbourhoods of Valparaíso, the second largest city in Chile, take care of the strays with the biggest zeal, therefore the mongrels reproduce in these areas in the largest numbers and then come funnelling down into the city, where their life comes to resemble those of the homeless, sleeping rough, scavenging for food, struggling to survive. In this sense, *Patas de Kiltro* showcases a specific example of how neoliberal capitalism creates poverty, which in turn produces mongrels. The film also uses visual means to reveal the links between the vulnerable states of humans and canines, alternating images of homeless people sleeping in the streets and strays slumbering in the middle of the city rush.

Furthermore, several interviewees in the film argue that since he has been displaced from nature and must survive in an environment not determined by him, the street dog can be regarded as the archetypal symbol of 21st century human precarity.

For instance, Mario Ibarra, painter argues that "on one side there is society abundant in food and economic power [and] the dog is the contraposition to this because [it] has to try to recreate life in another way, to be able to survive as best as he can." However, arguing that this makes the stray a perfect image of the dispossessed blurs the distinctions between subjective human and canine experiences, and, paradoxically, perpetuates the anthropocentric notion that human subjectivity stands above the nonhuman. It is important to note that dogs are affected by precariousness differently than their human counterparts; on the one hand, they mostly seem to be content to be roaming free and, in this sense, are beyond human practices of precarisation, on the other hand, they can be considered as the bigger (or maybe the real) victims of modernity, since, unlike the homeless, they are treated as organic trash when local authorities decide to reduce their numbers via periodic mass killings intended to increase order and cleanliness in the streets.[3] At such occasions, which the documentary records in upsetting detail, Bauman's term *wasted lives* comes full circle, regaining its literal meaning. In addition, these cleansing processes qualify as examples of the politics of precarity as defined by Isabell Lorey, showing that vulnerability is "unevenly distributed across species lines" (qtd. in Shukin 118).[4] The cruelty with which the dogs' bodies are dumped at the municipal landfills is part of the extreme disparities between human and canine experiences of 21st century precariousness.

Patas de Kiltro, however, also manages to highlight how vulnerability connects the homeless and the strays in a symbiotic relationship that helps mitigate their distinct yet shared precarious states. The people in the talking head interviews emphasise that these interspecies bonds are characterised by co-dependency, as the dogs seek out the homeless for food and care and they also depend on the animals for protection and warmth at night. Moreover, it is attested that these relationships are not only functional but are also based on mutual affection since both parties enjoy each other's company. Thus even though they are dispossessed and discarded by modernity in different ways, the experiences of precarity conjoin the portrayed human and canine outcasts, to use Shukin's words, "in a new kinship based on shared resilience, recovery and repair" (115).

In what follows I am going to analyse two, more recent documentaries: *Los Reyes* (2019), shot by Bettina Perut and Iván Osnovikoff in Santiago, the capital of Chile, and *Stray* (2020) filmed by Elizabeth Lo in Istanbul. *Los Reyes* records the everyday life of Football and Chola, the permanent canine inhabitants of Los Reyes skate park which is regularly visited by local youngsters who are reluctant to conform to the

[3] Exterminating street dogs and dumping their bodies on the rubbish heap at the outskirts of the city also reinforces the analogy of the stray being the product of our neoliberal capitalist systems where, as Bauman asserts, progress creates newer and newer objects which are then paradoxically discarded since, as now obsolete and unwanted, they hinder further progress (*Wasted Lives* 1–4.)

[4] In Lorey's conceptualisation, precarity "denotes the striation and distribution of precariousness in relations of inequality, the hierarchization of being-with that accompanies processes of *othering*" (12).

roles their families and the Chilean neoliberal society at large require of them. *Stray* follows three dogs, Zeytin, Nazar and Kartal whose lives similarly converge with those of human misfits, namely, a group of young Syrian refugees illegally squatting on a local construction site on the banks of Istanbul. Both films are thus markedly concerned with the resilient human-canine kinship briefly demonstrated above through *Patas de Kiltro,* thereby representing a growing tendency for a posthumanist approach in the representation of precarity in cinema. The analysis will touch upon three main aspects through which I believe the films project an interspecies perspective of precariousness, these being the focus, setting and pace. Yet before delving into the analysis itself, I shall briefly introduce the situation of street dogs in the two portrayed cities, as this is indispensable to understand those networks of interconnected humanimal lives that, in my reading, are the ultimate subject of precariousness in the selected pieces.

In Santiago, Chile and in Istanbul, Turkey stray dogs roam free. Chile has no specific animal protection laws that could prevent owners from abandoning their dogs therefore many end up on the streets as quiltros, a term used by the native Mapuche people since the 16th century to refer to Chilean mongrels. Since the country is free of rabies, there are no national dog population control laws: another reason that has led to an eighty percent surge in quiltros in the capital in the last decade, resulting in Santiago's present population of over a million stray dogs. Although Michelle Bachelet, former president, launched a national sterilisation plan in 2014, people have protested against government attempts to place more severe laws since then. And despite being exposed to the elements, suffering from diseases or dying from the winter cold, Santiago's strays enjoy a relatively high level of well-being due to the locals' kindness. People feel a sense of collective responsibility and sympathy for the dogs, which join commuters on their way to work, lie under café tables during lunch hours and sit in the park among playing children. In return for their company, citizens care for the animals by regularly feeding them and dressing them in sweaters and jackets, but they sometimes just go up to them for a pat, showing that they need the dogs as much as the dogs need them. In this sense, Santiago's strays belong to no one and everyone at the same time, living free but also in a harmonious, reciprocal relationship with the human (and other non-human) citizens and, as such, are deeply imbedded, organic elements in the city's social and cultural milieu as well as the urban eco-system.

The street animals of Istanbul are similarly part of both the city's tangible environment and its intangible cultural heritage. The history of local strays dates back to the Ottoman era, when dogs functioned as guards for neighbourhoods, helped eat the garbage and would alert people in case of fires, but according to Kimberly Hart, an anthropologist at SUNY Buffalo State College, "it wasn't just a functional relationship; it was seen as a good deed to feed and take care of them" (Hattam n.pag.). This special human-canine symbiosis has survived into the present, although with a two-century long interruption from the early 1800s to the 1990s, during which the

authorities tried to annihilate stray dogs in their attempts to Westernise the city by imposing order and stricter hygiene rules on the streets. This led to periodic mass killings in the last century,[5] arrested just recently by the 2004 animal protection law and the 2012 civilian protests against the amendments that would have allowed the removal of animals from city centres. Today it is illegal to euthanize or hold captive any stray animal, therefore Istanbul's population of 400,000–600,000 street dogs and cats can live in relative peace without being threatened by the authorities. In fact, under the terms of the 2004 animal protection law, it is the metropolitan municipality's responsibility to take care of stray animals, to put out food at hundreds of locations and provide spaying-neutering operations as well as other veterinary services. Still, as in Santiago, it is thanks to the people's respect and compassion that street dogs are not only surviving but thriving in Istanbul. As Elizabeth Lo, director of *Stray* recounts her experiences while filming in the city, "[p]eople really see a dignity in the dogs, they see them as fellow citizens, as belonging to their streets and communities" (Hattam n.pag.). Like their Chilean brothers, the strays of Istanbul wander free yet are inextricably bound up in the city's social, cultural and ecological system that the human habitants are also part of.

Both *Los Reyes* and *Stray* allegedly aim to give an intimate portray of the lives of street dogs in the respective cities. Perut and Osnovikoff initially wanted to make a film about the precarious young skaters of Santiago and since they raised funds for this project, they could not altogether abandon this thematic thread. Yet once they began filming, they felt the focus to be conventional and somehow empty, ignorant of the complexity of life in the portrayed urban space. Then one day, as Osnovikoff was skating in the park, he became enthralled by two dogs playing with a ball in one of the bowls. When Perut saw them too, it was decided that the film was going to be about the strays. The skaters were reduced visually to shadow figures, momentarily appearing faces and bodies, and vocally to fragmentary dialogues and voices blending with the noises of the city. As Perut said in an interview, "we couldn't take out the skaters, but we also didn't want to show them, because we think that the human being is not the center of the world" (Reed n.pag.). In other words, the filmmakers did not want to convey the idea that the human is the only being that can experience precariousness today.

Lo's filming process followed a posthumanist approach from its inception, informed by the director's personal conviction that dogs deserve more narrative time and space in cinema than they are normally granted. As Lo said in an interview, "[m]uch like Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, I knew I wanted *Stray* to be told entirely and truly from a dog's perspective – and not an anthropomorphic projection using animals as a vehicle as so many other films have done, but truly be about trying to use the me-

[5] The cruelest act amid these culling campaigns happened in 1910, when around 80,000 strays were banished to Sivriada, an island near enough to the city's coast for the people to hear the howls of the dogs slowly dying from hunger.

dium of film to represent a dog's life" (Barzey n.pag.). Accordingly, the line of ancient wisdoms on man and mutt interspersed throughout the documentary begins with an observation from Diogenes that "human beings live artificially and hypocritically and would do well to study the dog." The opening quote didactically emphasises that the film's subject is "a dog's life", shown from a dog's perspective. While the latter attempt is successful in both documentaries, I do not share the three filmmakers' opinion that their films focus entirely or exclusively on the lives of strays. Neither do I believe, however, that the films' main subject matter is the precarious lives of the portrayed people rendered analogous with the vulnerable existence of dogs on the streets, as most reviewers and critics suggest. Instead I contend that *Los Reyes* and *Stray* are both concerned with the parallel states and trajectories of human and canine vulnerability which are not fully comparable yet connected in the urban space.

The focus of the two documentaries therefore extends to whole networks of vulnerable humanimal lives, nevertheless these are presented from a specifically canine perspective. *Los Reyes* begins with the muffled roar of cars, which remains an acoustic backdrop against the teenagers' fragmentary conversations about family and love life issues, stoned gossip about their conflicts with the police, disses, cries of anxiety and economic despair, all of which blend in with the throbbing of water sprinklers, the chirping of birds, and the scraping metallic grinding of skateboards on the concrete. Our ears are sharpened to how dogs (presumably) perceive the world around them acoustically, but this rendition also amplifies how human and canine realities intersect in the shared space.

The filmmakers also tried to reproduce canine vision so that one only glimpses the skaters' shadows on the asphalt and some faces and limbs swooshing on as quickly as they appear. Yet the documentary is not comprised exclusively of point-of-view shots from the dogs' perspective; in fact, most of the scenes are shot from an objective camera angle from which one sees Football and Chola from an external viewpoint.[6] Also, allusions to canine olfaction are hardly detectable, thus the film does not project a comprehensive embodied perspective of the portrayed street dogs. Still, just as the sound design, the images aim to replace the hierarchical composition of subjective presences (usually favouring the human) on the screen with a lateral arrangement of different life-worlds and ways of perception. Consequently, we sometimes see the dogs actively interacting with the boys, being fed by or playing with them, but mostly they do what dogs do – waking, barking, chewing a ball, running around, humping, or just simply sleeping – next to the skaters (and other, non-human beings), immersed in their own universe. This is because the filmmakers chose, in their own words, "to put the dogs into a world that was *beside* them, a

[6] Moreover, the opening shots establish Football and Chola as humanised characters: Chola as the younger, nimbler, chasing passers-by while Football as a calm, elderly hobo with bleary eyes, a stoic expression on his face and an object perpetually clenched in his blunted jaws.

world with skaters, other animals, with another kind of existence, and more" (Reed n.pag., emphasis added).[7]

Elizabeth Lo's film also pays close attention to the parallel realities of man and mutt, yet from a more comprehensively embodied perspective of the latter. For not only do we hear, we also see, move and even detect scents like a dog. In contrast to the didactic opening quote from Diogenes, the first sounds – intermingling urban and natural noises – give a subtle introduction to the acoustically perceived world of Zeytin, one of the three strays followed by the documentary. Like in *Los Reyes*, the noise of the traffic blending with the sound of seagulls remains an aural murmur throughout the whole film, momentarily interrupted by shifting human conversation fragments, cries and calls. Lo said in an interview that "it being largely dialogue-free was important because the dogs aren't hanging onto every word" so that she sought to recreate through the medium of film "an older language – based on body gestures, sounds and calls – that goes beyond our human emphasis on the verbal" (Barzey n.pag.).[8]

In order to emphasise the visually perceived world of the canine protagonists, *Stray* consistently uses the point-of-view shot technique. In the opening sequence, the camera is closely following Zeytin's hind legs treading through public flowerbeds, then it switches to subjective perspective so that we are looking down at the purple bloom through the dog's eyes. At one point, Lo attached a GoPro camera to Zeytin's neck via a harness, thereby allowing viewers to move and see together with the dog as he is making his way through the rubbles of a construction site where he regularly meets with a group of young Syrian refugees – in these shots, their interactions are recorded in the most unabridged manner possible. But even when the film leaves the subjective point of view, it continues following the dogs at a very close range, which Lo managed to do with the help of an Easyrig,[9] an underslung camera and by crouching low throughout the filming process, as she says, "to mimic the height that dogs are seeing" (Mitchell n.pag.). Like the extreme close-ups in *Los Reyes,* the images taken at a dog's eye level in *Stray* thus reflect the portrayed strays' experiential reality, their parallel world with its sights invisible, sounds inaudible, scents undetectable to the human observer. Sometimes the camera switches to an external angle only to ensure that the viewer does not get too comfortable in the point-of-view shot of the dog wandering on the streets. For instance, after the above

[7] Shooting with a macro lens or leaning as close as possible, Petru and Osnovikoff also reveal the tiny creatures living beside (or sometimes on) the two dogs, the bugs, the mosquitos, the flies biting the edge of Football's ears to the point of drawing blood, bringing our attention to the interrelated lives of the skate park's microcosm in various different levels.

[8] *Stray*'s sound designer Ernst Karel developed the "aural language" described above in order to cinematically render the canine sense of hearing: "a world in which human dialogue becomes radically secondary to heightened frequencies" (Barzey n.pag.).

[9] Easyrig is a body harness system which spreads the weight of the camera onto the operator's body, thereby making shoulder mount, freehand and gimble-mount operation less arduous.

mentioned flowerbed scene, Zeytin is again shown from outside, seemingly staring at something in the city. The camera doggedly focuses on his features, not allowing the spectator to understand what he is looking at. Lo thus makes sure that the dog's perspective remains subjective throughout. In another scene one can detect the undetectable scents which help Zeytin perceive the world around him: the camera focuses on his snout as he is sniffing at the airborne messages around him. Juxtaposing the melodious chanting of the muezzin – which, for some viewers, is comprehensible – and a blurred scenery in the background with the implied, albeit incomprehensible, odours in the foreground, this scene not only centres canine perspective but it also emphasises how distinct human and canine worlds converge rather than merge in the city.

Since, like *Patas de Kiltro, Los Reyes* and *Stray* render human and canine experiences of street life analogous, most reviews and interviewers discussing the films suggest that the strays serve as symbols of human precarity, that their vulnerable states accentuate the marginalised situation of the portrayed human outcasts. As Leo Goldsmith argues, in *Los Reyes,* "the representation of animals functions … as a means of indexing those characteristics that humans have lost or failed to achieve: namely, their humanity" (n.pag.). In a similar vein, Barzey suggests that *Stray* "seems to draw a comparison between the position of stray dogs and the most ostracised in our society" (n.pag.). Indeed, one could easily compare the situation of the stray dogs and skaters in *Los Reyes,* since, in a sense, they are discarded by the same system, Chile's corrupt neoliberal economy. Although the country is seemingly prosperous, as the protests in October 2019 showed, it still suffers from the legacy of the Pinochet regime, the neoliberal reforms (elimination of subsidies, welfare reforms, privatisation of state-owned companies, the health sector, education and pensions) which have caused high levels of inequality in the first two decades of the 21st century (Albertus and Deming, 2019). For all we know, the young skaters could have easily been deprived of their access to education, employment and prospects in Chile's unbalanced distribution of power and capital, hence ending up with temporary jobs or as drug dealers in Santiago's streets, while Football and Chola, due to their being heavyweight mutts coming with a high cost of maintenance, could have easily been abandoned by their owners. Goldsmith similarly admits that it is tempting "to see in the figure of the stray – the de-domesticated animal – a kind of symbolic archetype of contemporary life. Chola and Football have a home (the park) and even individual homes (do-gooders construct doghouses for them), but are nevertheless homeless" (n.pag.).

Yet as I mentioned in connection with *Patas de Kiltro,* such interpretations deny the disparities between human and canine experiences of precariousness, supporting the anthropocentric notion that animals' experiences can serve at best as reflections of the human condition. As I tried to illustrate, *Los Reyes* and *Stray* do not fail to draw distinctions between human and canine states of vulnerability. On the one hand, shooting the film by centring a canine perspective allowed the filmmakers

to highlight that living in the park as quiltros is not entirely a negative state for the dogs; most of the time Football and Chola seem content to wander free. In contrast, what one can infer from the fragmentary conversations between the young skaters is that they are anxious and ashamed about living a "dog's life". One of the kids is outraged after he is called a lazy dog and kicked out by his grandmother from their apartment. The director of *Stray* observed the same perceptual difference between the young Syrian refugees and Zeytin and his friends: "I think there's a qualitative difference between people and animals living without homes, and I don't think a meaningful comparison can be made. The dogs seemed very content in Istanbul to be free to call any pavement their home, whereas for humans who were homeless, it was a hardship to endure" (Barzey n.pag.). In this sense, the street dogs apparently transcend human practices of precarisation.

On the other hand, the portrayed dogs can be perceived as the bigger victims among the two, since, as Bauman puts it, being devoid "of the skills to solicit rights by bargaining or coercion" ("What Prospects" 20), they are unable to escape the effects or change the course of modernisation. As to demonstrate such disparities between human and canine trajectories of precariousness, *Los Reyes*, for instance, recurrently juxtaposes the skaters' ignorance towards their relatively privileged status with the dogs' inescapable state of vulnerability. In several shots the camera focuses on such details as the dogs' rain-soaked fur or the flies on the nose of the weathered Football – details evoking a natural state of vulnerability shared by all living bodies, but which makes the subject's life precarious if they are subjected to endure it for long. As we learn later on, the kids have the opportunity to escape their precarious position, only, they do not want to. They are recorded complaining about treated as trash by their parents and the police, but they also admit that they prefer using and selling drugs and skating over studying or working. "I don't want to work" says one of them, "Let others do the work." Yet when the youngsters no longer find this way of life viable, they enter the social-economic system they have been so stubbornly resisting. We overhear another skater saying the following:

> I can see now that skating doesn't have much of a return. It makes you happy for a while but I need a stable job and that's it … If you don't contribute, you are just a drain, it gets old after a while. I'm too old for that. I graduated and I should be working. That's what I'm planning to do, bro. I'll join the fuckin' system.

The person speaking thus ultimately internalises those hierarchizing mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism that make his, his friends' and the dogs' lives precarious. And while the humans are seemingly able to leave the periphery (both metaphorically and physically), the dogs continue to stay there, exposed to the elements as well as the life-threatening prospects of human malevolence.[10] The possibility to choose

[10] Football, the older dog was for instance poisoned one year after Petru and Osnovokoff finished shooting.

to live in or leave the park, granted to the kids but not the dogs reveals how, in Lorey's words, "vulnerability gets unevenly distributed across species lines" (qtd. in Shukin 118).

Focusing on a canine perspective, *Los Reyes* and *Stray* therefore reveal that animals can also experience shifting states of affliction and insecurity in the 21st century, albeit in their own subjective ways and to a different degree than their human brothers. In short, the films reveal how humans and animals might be, in Shukin's words, "simultaneously if differently precarised" (115), thereby extending the anthropocentric subject of the filmic representations of precarity. Accordingly, they call upon a sense of moral responsibility that, as Bauman pointed out, embraces all weak and voiceless beings, whether they are human or nonhuman. They project a posthuman, or in Mari Ruti's terms, "universalist ethics of precarity" which "does not demand a similarity of experiences but merely that we are able to recognize points of contact between different experiences" (198).

In this light, the documentaries also show how, in their distinct vulnerable states, the dogs and the young men are mutually drawn to each other's company – this interdependent relationship is, ultimately, the main subject in both *Los Reyes* and *Stray*. For instance, when Football and Chola are (seemingly) suffering from loneliness, the effect of steady rainfalls on the skate park's social life, their whole being lights up as some younger kids arrive to the site with apparently no other reason than playing fetch with the dogs. Also, in the midst of all kinds of insecurities, the quiltros lodging in the skate park provide a sense of security, community and home for the misfits. As Goldsmith argues, despite their disparate experiences, the boys and mongrels build a subtle concordance: "the film makes their atomized daily fighting for subsistence, space, even pleasure in the increasingly segmented and stratified environment of the city into a shared struggle, the lot of the marginalized" (n.pag.). The same sense of communality persists in *Stray,* where the symbiotic relationship between the canine citizens and human outcasts predated the filmmakers' arrival into the shooting location (just like in the case of *Los Reyes*). In fact, it was Zeytin and Nazar, the two adult dogs, who led Lo to the young Syrian refugees. In this film too the dogs' presence in the boys' lives creates a sense of belonging in the specific urban space, something that grounds them against the drifts of non-belonging.[11]

Considering the above, the analysed films extend the subject of precarity to a specific human-canine kinship which is as worthy of notice and as precarious as their participants alone. Put differently, *Los Reyes* and *Stray* portray how "wasted" human-animal lives form a symbiotic relationship which is, as Shukin suggests, resilient to, nevertheless threatened by the continuous encroachment of global capitalism. For when the skaters realise that they need to have a stable job, the quiltros of Santiago face the threat of being left alone, deprived of the human company driven away by the forces of capitalism. In Istanbul, as the street dogs' living spaces, the old tradi-

[11] So much so that the boys feel a profound urge to take care of a dog that is only theirs, so one night they steal the puppy called Kartal from the guards' hut at the edge of the building site.

tional neighbourhoods (mahalle) are threatened by today's rapid urbanisation process, human citizens are similarly losing the company of their furry friends. Besides the traditional definition of precarity, which stresses how certain *human* groups and individuals are left out from the privileges of global capitalism, the two documentaries thus call attention to other kinds of precariousness, that of street animals and, most importantly, of those networks of life, those interspecies kinships which help both parties cope with their own distinct experiences of vulnerability in the portrayed environment. As these urban ecosystems are threatened to be gobbled up and the symbiotic relationships to be broken up by the ever-widening mouth of global capitalism, they must be treated as precarious in their own right.[12]

Since the experiences of precariousness bring the human and canine protagonists together in certain places within the cities, the second aspect through which *Los Reyes* and *Stray* convey a posthumanist view of precarity is the setting. In both cases, the filmmakers focus on those spaces where the human and canine lives regularly intersect, namely, the oldest skate park in Santiago and a construction site with abandoned, ruinous buildings waiting to be demolished on the banks of Istanbul. These spaces can be considered, in Svetlana Boym's terms, as *off-modern sites* of the otherwise modern cityscapes, not only physically situated on the periphery, but also as symbolic spaces showing the signs of the "socio-cultural dysfunction" that is characteristic of the "compromised, twisted, bizarre" 21st century form of modernity (Kalmár 2020, 7; see also Kalmár 2021, 24.). As Boym puts it, they are "the side-alleys of modern history at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress" (n.pag.), where the side-effects of order-building and of economic development become salient in the form of waste and rubble. These are the home ground where the wasted human and canine lives converge and thus form a kinship existing outside and resisting against the current of the hegemonic way of life.

Although slow pace is not new to the genre as such, I consider it as the third aspect through which *Los Reyes* and *Stray* project a novel interspecies approach to precarity. To capture the representative moments when the portrayed humanimal lives are conjoined in a kinship, the filmmakers needed to attune the pace of shooting to the rhythm of the dogs and to the frequency they meet with their human brothers. Put simply, they needed to work patiently. Lo recounts her experiences as follows:

> A lot of times, we would just be waiting and waiting and waiting for Zeytin to wake up – and sometimes she wouldn't wake up until 5pm. Her rhythms were her own. We just had to surrender our desires for whatever we might

[12] By extending the subject of precarity to nonhuman lives and interspecies relationships, the notion of precarity is itself subject to change: whereas traditionally, precariousness denotes being cast out of the neoliberal capitalist system, a posthumanist view of precarity shifts the meaning to being threatened to be absorbed by it.

> expect of a film's story and hand it over to her. Sometimes she would chase after sounds that we couldn't hear or smells that we couldn't smell. It was just a process of letting go and trying to immerse. (Godwin n.pag.)

As a result of tuning the filming process to the dogs' rhythm, the film itself has an oscillating pace, comprised of slow long shots in which seemingly nothing important happens alternating with quick shots usually characterised with sudden, jerky camera movements as Lo was trying to keep up with the dogs. Interestingly, while concentrating on giving an intimate portrait of dogs' lives, Lo as well as the Petru-Osnovikoff duo, thus inevitably immersed themselves and became part of the urban ecosystem which is the ultimate focus of their films.[13] As Osnovikoff put it, "[i]f we had relationship problems with the dogs, it would have been very difficult to get the shots, because when you use a macro, the movement amplifies when you're very close" (Reed n.pag.). The same is true for Lo; she could have never given such a close account of Zeytin and the others' lives had they been less tolerant or more submissive towards her. It is thus thanks partly to finding such charismatic figures as Zeytin, Football and Chola, partly to the filmmakers' willingness to immerse themselves into the urban microcosm and adopt to the pace of the multispecies life found there, that the audience gets a glimpse into how distinctly precarious human and canine lives converge in the shared city spaces.

To conclude, these films do not aim to convey the idea that human and nonhuman experiences and trajectories of precariousness are completely the same. However, they do extend the scope of representing precarity in cinema by showing that the lives of street dogs are also, albeit differently, precarised. Even more, treating non-humans as subjects of 21st century precarity allows the documentaries to map whole networks of interconnected humanimal lives which are threatened to be obliterated by the accelerating economic, social, technological and environmental changes of the 21st century. In this sense, *Los Reyes* and *Stray* propagate a much-needed posthumanist view of precarity, but not only in the sense that they treat animals as subjects of precarisation. They also expose the increasing vulnerability of those multispecies communities within which the human is but one embedded element. For although these kinships could be the basis for developing a "shared resilience, recovery and repair" against the destructive currents of the hegemonic way of life causing all kinds of crises around the world (Shukin 115), they are not valuable by the standards of our neoliberal capitalist systems and, as such, are being destroyed on a daily basis. Given the degree of their vulnerability, which the present paper aimed to highlight, it is concerning that the symbiotic relationships between vulnerable human and nonhuman beings are still on the periphery of our discourses and depictions of precarity.

[13] Due to occupying an embodied perspective, one could also claim that Lo's camera itself becomes a dog.

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Fruzsina Balázs

An Old Paradigm with New Relevance: The Depiction of the Marginalised Holocaust Survivor in Christian Petzold's *Phoenix* (2014)

Introduction

The Holocaust has a particular significance in the self-understanding of European societies, since it has become the very "foundational myth" of Europe, which, as it is highlighted in *Post-Crisis European Cinema,* generates a sense of unease and crude guilt up to these days (Kalmár 2020, 68). As a result of this process, the segregation and persecution of Jews still work as a reference point to all similar cases of social exclusion even today. In a somewhat similar manner, Holocaust films have created a key cinematic paradigm for the representation of socially marginalised or mistreated people. Therefore, representations of these past events (including Holocaust films) should not be merely regarded as portrayals of past occurrences: they can often be interpreted as commentaries of contemporary issues and questions as well.[1] In this light, it seems crucial to go back to post-Holocaust productions when discussing 21st century problems and conditions: the way contemporary cinema observes and relates to these past events and attitudes of rejection may reveal an intense critique of our very own time with its traumas, crises, and acts of marginalisation.

Jews have been the target of exclusion based on religious, racial, and political ideologies throughout history, and the Holocaust can be perceived as only the culmination of this tradition of hatred towards them. Cinematic productions depicting the

[1] Though I mainly explore the genre of the Holocaust film here, the relevance of this study is partly due to the fact that the marginalisation or persecution of ethnic minorities, such as that of European Jews, Muslims or the Roma people can in no way be regarded as a thing of the past. The way it has resurfaced again with the heightened social tensions of the 21st century did not escape the attention of contemporary European filmmakers either, as films like *This is England* (Shane Meadows, 2006) or *Just the Wind* (Benedek Fliegauf, 2012) show. For the European social context see: Katarina Kinnvall's "Fear, Insecurity and the (Re)Emergence of the Far Right in Europe" (in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Political Psychology*, 2014); for contemporary cinematic representations see *Nemek és Etnikumok terei a magyar filmben* (ZOOM 2018). György Kalmár's "*Árva* fekete fiúk" in the above mentioned volume focuses on the way hate crime "victims are endowed with a face" (192), thus exploring issues similar to the ones I analyse here.

Holocaust and its victims since the mid-20th century primarily focus on this aspect of Jewish marginalisation by making their viewers face the horrors of antisemitism and genocide. Nevertheless, there is a further, equally significant facet of pushing Jews into a peripheral position, which is also connected to the carnage, but which is way less visible in post-Holocaust films. This aspect is the social exclusion of Holocaust victims after World War II, as a result of the unimaginable trauma they have suffered, which alienates them from the normalities of ordinary social existence.

One of the most successful attempts to portray this new and less obvious barrier between the Jewish community and the rest of society is Christian Petzold's *Phoenix* (2014), a historical drama about a physically and mentally wounded woman, Nelly (Nina Hoss), coming home to Berlin from the Auschwitz concentration camp after the closure of the war to reunite with her former husband, Johnny (Ronald Zehrfeld). Petzold's film highlights the insurmountable gap between the victims of the Holocaust and those who have remained at home, – since the sufferers have come to possess a distinctive knowledge about the world that positions them outside the "dominant fiction of society" (Silverman 41) – which is manifested in the crisis of the protagonist's self, Johnny's fiction of Nelly's arrival, and the traumatic relationship between past and present. After a careful analysis of the aforementioned factors in *Phoenix,* it becomes apparent that the film can be interpreted not only as the illustration of Jewish survivors' multiple alienations within society due to their collective and individual traumas after World War II, but also as a cinematic piece holding a mirror to contemporary post-crisis societies and the inequities of social polarisation people face today.

The Tradition of Post-Holocaust Filmmaking

To be able to identify the novelties of *Phoenix* regarding the portrayal of Jewish marginalisation in post-World War II society, it is essential to examine the tradition of Holocaust filmmaking from 1945 up until the 2000s, which, as a result of the trauma culture it relies on, seems to address the issue in a more direct way. In *Post-Crisis European Cinema,* Kalmár points out – by using Aleida Assmann's concepts – that the Holocaust has become the "negative foundational myth" of Europe, since the European Union itself has been built upon a shared sense of guilt and regret, focusing on the worst parts of history, which leads to "the memory politics of 'remembering in order to never forget'" (Kalmár 2020, 68). This mentality is incontestably mirrored by post-Holocaust cinema, since it has "created an easily recognized iconography of persecution and genocide" (Reimer 17) over the last few decades.

In their *Historical Dictionary of Holocaust Cinema,* Robert C. Reimer and Carol J. Reimer take account of the various waves of post-Holocaust motion pictures. Accordingly, a distinction can be made between the immediate years after the war with their documentaries and Hollywood productions mostly conveying a moral

message; the second wave from the 1950s with pictures that are "set outside of the camps, alluding to the horrors through flashbacks, psychological scars of the protagonists, or trials of the perpetrators" (8); and the third wave beginning in the 1970s, the plot of which films mostly takes place in the concentration camps, where the action focuses on the maltreatment of the inmates (11). Moreover, as the book suggests, during the 1990s, the role of children became more central (12), while the 2000s brought about cinematic productions paying more attention to Hitler's persona and the Nazi leaders (17). As a matter of fact, it is rather visible from this periodisation of post-World War II film history that the primary theme of filmmakers in this field has been either the direct and/or indirect depiction of the events themselves, or the physical and psychological effects on the characters as victims of genocide. Therefore, by putting its protagonists into a social context that chiefly reflects upon their separation as quasi-mythologised trauma victims, Phoenix clearly moves away from the long-established modes of cinematic depiction, facilitating a stronger connection both with the sense of "afterwardsness" survivors of 21st century crises[2] experience and with the growing social inequality and marginalisation present-day citizens encounter.

The Crisis of the Self

First of all, one condition that makes the experience of the alienated subsister apparent in *Phoenix* is the crisis of the character's identity, which state of being is closely related to and manifested in the lack of recognition throughout the whole film. As it is formulated by Francis Fukuyama, "Individuals come to believe that they have a true or authentic identity hiding within themselves that is somehow at odds with the role they are assigned by their surrounding society" (Fukuyama 29). Indeed, this clash of the original self and the outer world becomes visible in Nelly's character: as a Holocaust survivor returning from a place of maltreatment, she does not want to associate herself with a society where she feels just as alien as in the camp, partly because of the effects of her traumatic experience, partly as a result of society's own inability (and unwillingness) to accept victims of trauma as its own and treat them accordingly. This confrontation of the two sides inevitably lead to an absence of recognition both within and towards Nelly inducing in her a deep crisis of the self, which phenomenon is absolutely pertinent in the case of 21st century victims of trauma and sufferers of social inequities based on race, gender, religion, age, or social status, too.

[2] During the 21st century, a series of crises has affected people's lives on a global level, leaving behind dead citizens and traumatised survivors. These include the terrorist attack of 11th September, 2001, a series of hate crimes against people of colour (e.g. the case of George Floyd), the serious effects of climate change, and the current COVID-19 pandemic afflicting citizens around world.

To begin with, one layer is Nelly's own inability to recognise herself after the destruction that has gone through in her body and mind, which is clear from the parallel the film draws between the woman's face and her self-accepted identity through established metaphors, the use of language, and its cinematography. A powerful example is the very first scene, which shows her passing the borders of Germany with a bandaged head, and makes the viewer know that her face has been distorted by a bullet back in the camp. Hence, an association of her outer wounds to the scars on her soul emerges right at the beginning. Also, this connection is further emphasised in the scenes concerning Nelly's plastic surgery. Although the doctor who is supposed to give her a reconstructive operation suggests that she should choose a new face which would facilitate her to have a fresh start, Nelly desperately wants her previous appearance back (00:05:20–00:06:05). What is more, when she is not satisfied with the end result and is confronted by her friend, Lene (Nina Kunzendorf), who claims that her face turned out to be "beautiful," Nelly's response ("That's not the point") and behaviour make it clear that what she wants to regain is not beauty but her past identity, which she equates with her lost face (00:14:25–00:15:23). Therefore, Nelly's harsh rejection of a new countenance is also a refusal of a novel identity, as she seems to mistake the way she looks for the person she is.

From the point of view of verbal expression, the protagonist's identity crisis becomes transparent through a dialogue between the two women in Lene's car, which raises the question whether Nelly's surgery is a "reconstruction" or a "re-creation" (00:14:55–00:15:23). According to the *Cambridge Dictionary,* reconstruction is "the process of building or creating something again that has been damaged or destroyed" while recreation is "the act of making something exist or happen again." When Lene first uses "reconstruction" to refer to her friend's operation, it upsets Nelly, for which the reason may be that it reminds her of the damage that is practically impossible to negate or fix entirely. Therefore, Lene corrects herself by applying "re-creation" instead, which suggests the possibility of the rebirth or coming to existence of something that is gone, and which can also be a reference to the film's title, *Phoenix,* foreshadowing the prospect of the resurrection of Nelly's soul in the end. In fact, the use of words in the film does imply that, as a result of her not being identified either by herself or by others, Nelly is actually closer to being dead than to being part of the living, which highlights the validity of Fukuyama's idea about the significance of society's acknowledgement. Accordingly, when talking to Lene at the beginning, Nelly utters the words "I don't exist anymore" (00:14:02–00:14:08) and later, she even talks about herself in the third person by saying "Johnny loved Nelly" (01:10:05–01:10:15), which act does not only indicate that she is no longer able to identify with the woman she was, but also hints at her seeing herself as a dead person, or one without a soul, which basically stands for the same phenomenon.

On the level of visual images and cinematography, one of the most vivid yet appealingly subtle illustrations of this liminal position between life and death that trauma victims occupy may be the scene when Nelly and Lene are talking about

their friends while looking at an old photo (00:15:25–00:15:45). As Lene describes that the people who have a cross above their head have died in the Holocaust, Nelly instinctively puts her finger on an unsuccessfully erasedcross above her own image (see fig. 1). This unuttered sign can reveal her status of not being completely dead but not really being alive either: a form of existence generally shared by victims of trauma and segregation, who seem to be outside the socially defined realm of normalcy, forced into a liminal and precarious state of being. The fact that this scene occurs right after Nelly's claiming that she no longer exists establishes a ground where the connection between the two scenes cannot be denied. Another example of Nelly's displacement and loss of integrity is the scene when she and Lene visit Nelly's old apartment, which has been bombed to its foundations during the war (00:12:57–00:14:02). The picture of Nelly trying to collect the pieces of her previous life from its ruins is already a powerful one (see fig. 2); it is, however, further intensified by the woman's noticing her own image in a broken looking-glass on the ground (see fig. 3). This moment of non-recognition can be interpreted as a distorted version ofthe Lacanian "mirror stage," which may be understood as an extended metaphor for the cinematic production of meaning as a whole. As it is expressed by Jacques Lacan, at a certain age, infants learn to recognise themselves in the mirror, forming the first impression of their self, as they learn to associate themselves with the image reflected by the object (Lacan 1–2).

This "mirror stage" seems to be repeated in *Phoenix*, however, instead of the moment of apperception, what Nelly experiences is a painful repudiation: the inability to accept what she sees as herself. Moreover, as opposed to the child who fascinatedly moves and makes gestures in front of the glass that helps the process of recognising the image as his/her own (Lacan 2), Nelly stands stiffly, staring at her reflection with vacant eyes, horrified, which also implies her deep-seated aversion to what the outside world wants her to accept as herself. Lacan also claims that the mirror stage is actually the point where the human subject becomes alienated from itself and enters its first bonds with the cultural regime of identity and signification (3). Therefore, Nelly seems to be unable to accept the image offered by the mirror, which may suggest her state of being already outside of what Silverman refers to as the "dominant fiction," that is, the culturally constructed ideology upon which our whole social existence is based (Silverman 8). In this context, the fact that the mirror Nelly is looking at is actually shattered can be a strong symbol of her not being part of that fiction anymore.

As a consequence, this image brings Petzold's drama another step closer to 21st century realities by implying the experience of trauma victims of both the Holocaust and of current crises, who are outsiders in their own community (or even in their own bodies), since they can no longer believe in its prevailing ideology or they are actually excluded by it. Nelly's silent suffering and failure to identify with her mirror image are actually symptoms that connect the victims of such still present issues as sexual harassment, domestic assault, rape, or the numerous forms of discrimi-

nation. Hence, Petzold's engaging with general themes – including the connection between body and soul as well as the lack of self-recognition – rather than focusing on specific events of the Holocaust makes it possible to read the film in the context of contemporary discourses, enabling today's viewers to reflect upon questions and concerns of their own time.

Alienated from the "Dominant Fiction"

The second level of the deficiency of recognition in *Phoenix* – from the side of the outside world towards the traumatised individual – is essentially both the cause and the result of the first one, that is, Nelly's inability to own herself. On the one hand, it is a cause, since the woman's status as a Holocaust survivor puts her out of the realm of the socially accepted normality of German society, which makes her feel rejected and alienated. On the other hand, unable to identify either with the new face she sees in the mirror or with the old one from the pictures, Nelly's last hope for "re-creating" herself is the feedback of her environment, namely, her husband, Johnny, who is the only remaining contact with the Nelly of her past. At this point, it is important to mention what Fukuyama states about the link between self-regard and external feedback: "It is not enough that I have a sense of my own worth if other people do not publicly acknowledge it or, worse yet, if they denigrate me or don't acknowledge my existence" (Fukuyama 18). Hence, even if the individual has an inner sense of self-worth, – of which Nelly has been proven to be in lack in the previous sections – they will always seek the recognition of others, which makes the case of Petzold's protagonist yet more serious.

Indeed, Johnny's treatment of Nelly and his romanticised fiction of her return from the concentration camp provide a great insight into how society can (or rather, cannot) relate to and cope with individuals and communities alienated from the "dominant fiction" by a particular crisis, which may also recall the lack of understanding and solidarity experienced in torn-apart societies of current times. First of all, Johnny's own error to recognise his previous wife from the moment they meet again up until the very last scene of the film is rather descriptive of what returnees had to face when trying to reintegrate into their old life after World War II. Although he sees a slight resemblance between the broken woman and the pretty bar singer he once married, Johnny is not able to accept that the wretched creature can really be his previous spouse, thus, he waits for the very last and undeniable proof to finally yield to the reality he does not want to see. Ironically, it is Johnny who highlights this tactic of avoiding returnees when he claims that people from concentration camps come home as distorted ruins and no-one looks at them or wants anything to do with them: they basically appear as a "problem" that no-one feels like dealing with (00:55:44–00:56:29). This mentality clearly shows how human communities tend to avoid their issues when there is no established protocol to reach for.

Johnny's comment may also induce an association between the situation of post-World War II Germany and contemporary societies divided along political and/or social lines. Indeed, people in the home country treating survivors as an issue they would rather avoid managing is a phenomenon which also seems to be manifested in the constantly widening gap between the social elite and the precariat or the political leaders and ordinary people today, since the lack of willingness to understand the "other" appears to be a key feature of the 21st century as well. The notion of abjection, discussed in more detail in the introduction part of this volume, may provide an accurate framework when analysing this relationship between the film and today's conditions (Kalmár 2021, 20–23.). Johnny's description of camp refugees suggesting that they make others uneasy and provoke disregard as well as repulse can be applied to all groups marginalised today by the ruling elite – that is, people who have the power to define what qualifies as abject. As Julia Kristeva puts it, the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order" (4), which characterisation clearly highlights the very core feature of these excluded groups: they somehow do not fit in the dominant fiction of their community, hence, they are forced to live as underprivileged outsiders. In this light, Petzold's cinematic representation of what returnees have gone through can also call attention to the struggles of such segregated groups of modern society as the precariat or other social and political minorities.

A further manifestation of the gap between the victims of the Holocaust and those who remained at home may be Johnny's project to rebuild the old Nelly (in order to lay his hands on her inheritance). Although the man does not seem to actually recognise Nelly, he realises the potential in her to play the role of his wife needed for the coveted economic gain. Hence, he indulges in creating a fiction about the wonderful return of his wife in which the woman, in desperate need of recognition from her husband, willingly assists. As a matter of fact, Johnny's venture can stand for the rather awkward and predictably unsuccessful undertaking of the friends, relatives, and partners of the survivors trying to reshape their loved ones to be like they were before. Accordingly, despite Nelly's criticism of the unrealistic nature of Johnny's plan, the man directs the very filmic debut of the "old Nelly" (see fig. 4) stepping out of the train in her red dress and Parisian shoes, with dyed hair and full makeup (00:55:35–00:56:29).

This complete disregard of reality in Petzold's character may indicate the escapism of the privileged still relevant in current societies who, unable to meaningfully relate to the tragedy of the less fortunate, try to create a more romantic scenario, in which they have a fixed and comfortable role to play. Therefore, as facing harsh realities is increasingly challenging in crisis situations, escapism and fantasy appear to be key elements in the operation of these disaffected and torn-apart societies, where the "other" is replaced with our own fantasy of the other. Actually, Nelly's dramatic return directed by Johnny may also imply the problematic nature of the attempt of global art cinema to embrace the precariat in their filmic portrayals of the underprivileged (see Kalmár 2021, 12–13.). Just like the man's attempt to narrate Nelly's

story, these 21st century depictions also indicate a crisis of representation rooted in the constantly deepening gap between the objects of these films, namely, the precariat, and the subjects, that is, the mostly privileged filmmakers.

Lost in Time and Invisible

As for evading haunting images, *Phoenix* rather consciously reflects upon the traumatic relation between past and present both in the experience of the returnees and in the conscience of the collective social mind – particularly in the special case of post-World War II Germany. Nelly's problematic relation to time has already been implicated in the analysis of her intermediate presence of being halfway dead already: she can neither go back to her lost self, – from which she is getting farther and farther with time – nor can she accept her present reality. Hence, she is stuck in a paralysed form of being, continuously pressed by time to move forward, but still not being able to do so. Nevertheless, the irrepressible force of temporal advance is meticulously demonstrated in the film by the reappearing element of Kurt Weill's "Speak Low," a song about the swift passing of time and love. Indeed, it provides a whole framework for the drama, as it is the very first as well as the very last piece the viewer can hear, highlighting not only the progress of time, but also Nelly's characteristic development.

During the opening pictures of Nelly and Lene arriving to the German border, the instrumental version of the song is audible as background music, creating a rather sinister and mysterious atmosphere. Furthermore, after Nelly has gone through the surgery, the sounds of "Speak Low," already with Ogden Nash's lyrics (Burlingame), are coming through a gramophone during their dinner. Unlike in the previous case, the piece now appears as diegetic music, part of the cinematic world, and it is even reflected upon by the characters, since Nelly wants to listen to it again, and Lene asks her to sing it when she recovers (00:18:45–00:20:48). Actually, Lene's wish is finally granted, as at the very end of *Phoenix*, during the last occurrence of this song, it is Nelly herself who sings it, finally regaining her enchanting voice. This visibly linear development manifested in the changing method through which the music is presented can be associated with Nelly's improvement in reconnecting with – to use Fukuyama's words – her "true inner self" (18). From the song only lurking in the background at the beginning, by the end, Nelly reaches the point where she uses her beautiful voice to sing it herself as a performance to her "friends," first, accompanied by Johnny on the piano, and then a capella, when the man finally realises who she is and freezes (01:30:45–01:34:30). This transition from being accompanied to singing alone can also point out Johnny's role in Nelly's journey: by playing along the man's fictional story of herself, Nelly has the chance to re-evaluate her identity and past, so that by the end, she is empowered enough to leave him behind as well as his fictitious image of who she is (or has to be).

With regard to the concept of the "true self," a further aspect of the final scene worth mentioning is its rather essentialist view on the notion of the self, which is also connected to the role of art as a link with our soul, an approach thriving in modernity. According to psychological essentialism, "various entities have a fundamental reality or true nature" (Christy 3), which implies that each human being has an essence or soul which is not affected by external forces, but stays intact throughout their lives. With the film's quite elevated closure of Nelly reclaiming her voice, the question arises: Is there an invisible core Nelly who stayed unaffected by all the horrors she has gone through? As a matter of fact, *Phoenix* does seem to suggest that there is an essence of Nelly that has always been there and which is still present, however, it appears to do so by implying that her soul remained unchanged not *despite* but *together with* all the misdeeds she suffered. Accordingly, this "true Nelly" can come to the surface again when the woman is ready to see beyond the fragments her identity has been shattered into by her trauma, and to recognise that the Nelly she sees in old pictures and the one looking back from the mirror are only versions of the same person who is in her up to this time. Significantly, the outlet for this awakening is her own art: she gives up pretending to be only a particular (past) version of herself and uses her voice as a musician to reconnect with and own her full identity, which includes everything that has happened to her since her departure. In fact, this practice of using the distinct forms of art as a way of owning and making visible the individual (and/or collective) identity is also applied by artists in the fight for social and political rights today, which, again, makes Nelly's venture quite a contemporary one.

Thus, being able to move on from her painfully petrified ghost-like existence, Nelly seems to realise the continuity of time and her own capability to advance along without having to lose who she is. Accordingly, the lines of the song appear as a speech act of letting the embodiment of the old days go, after which she literally walks out of the door to the sunlight (see fig. 5): "Time is so old and love so brief, / Love is pure gold and time a thief. / We're late, darling, we're late / The curtain descends / Everything ends / Too soon, too soon" (01:33:00–01:33:42). While the haunting, ghost-like Nelly is obviously lost in another time, the Nelly reborn in "Speak Low" at the end is very much live and present. Indeed, her assertive and powerful aura in the song acknowledging progression and change is being transferred into her own life, redounding to the woman's ability to accept and proceed, which is manifested in her gradually strengthening voice as well as her looking out of the door already while she is performing and then leaving the place without further ado when she finishes her song. In this light, it is relevant to claim that "Speak Low" is present like a ticking clock throughout the whole production, reminding both the viewer and the characters that time can and does progress for the victims of trauma as well, and moving on cannot (and should not) be avoided in order to reach the phase of healing at last.

Finally, besides focusing on the individual's struggle with time in trauma, the drama is also reflective of how the nostalgia for a bygone past and the burden of haunting images worked in the particular case of German society after the Holo-

caust, which can also illuminate the need for collective responsibility at the present moment. Bred Prager emphasises in his article "Hanna in Frankfurt?" that after World War II, "Jews were hardly in the position of receiving too many apologies for their suffering," on the contrary, "they were more likely to be walking wounds, made to apologize for not 'getting over it,' and prone to tactlessly reminding the Germans of what they have done" (Prager 54). This phenomenon is apparent in *Phoenix* as well, especially in the behaviour of Johnny, since he does not only represent the social background victims return to, – which correlation has been touched upon previously – but also the German conditions as a peculiar scenario.

As it is transparent from the plot, Johnny has been the one who turned in Nelly in order to save himself from deportation, what is more, he even divorced her after she was forced to leave the country. By abandoning his own wife, Johnny basically repeats the same crime the German government committed when it evicted its own citizens, depriving them from their rights and, eventually, their lives, too. Moreover, the sense of guilt and shame post-war Germany has faced is also mirrored by Johnny's refusal to recognise Nelly and own the consequences. Thus, similarly to his country, which was "in a state of denial, yearning for an imagined golden age before the horror" (Romney 32), Johnny also chooses to conveniently create a fictional world and disown the haunting reminder of his misdeeds, namely, Nelly. Not by chance, after reproducing and exposing this attitude of repudiation in *Phoenix*, Petzold decides to refuse and destroy it with the elevated final scene, where Nelly confronts her audience with the crude reality of what she has suffered, making it impossible for them not to pay attention. As a result, by being forced to hear the revived voice of the woman and by finally noticing her tattooed identification number (see fig. 6), denial and indifference become futile for the observer. Consequently, it feels safe to claim that in this cinematic production, Petzold attempts (and actually manages) to point out the social invisibility of crisis sufferers through the well-established precedent of the Holocaust, and to remind the viewers of the existence of the marginalised and their own liability to acknowledge them.

Conclusion

To conclude, the analysis of *Phoenix* has proven the relevance of post-Holocaust films in the discourse of contemporary affairs and concerns, as the Holocaust and its consequences can still work as a precedent to all acts of exclusion and social injustice up until today. Hence, moving beyond the mainstream themes and directing techniques of creating Holocaust motion pictures, Petzold's *Phoenix* not only portrays a rather complex picture of post-World War II Germany, but also succeeds in contributing to a more extended discourse of the continuous deepening of social polarisation and inequality 21st century nations face. Indeed, this aspect of the drama makes it a remarkable piece that holds a mirror to social shortcomings rooted

in the lack of shared accountability as well as manages to move beyond the time frame of its topic, commenting on current conditions and passing a moral message of social responsibility – an issue as relevant as ever even today.

Correspondingly, by examining Nelly's struggle for identity as a concentration camp survivor, the drama also poses the question of how members of an unrecognised, unrepresented, or traumatised group deal with alienation and the deficiency of recognition within their own community. Also, Johnny's escapism – both as a relative of a returnee and a representative of 1945 German society – resulting in the creation of a fictional alternative for what actually happened to his wife can denote the incapability and even unwillingness of the social elite to establish a meaningful and sensitive attitude towards the marginalised. Thus, the apparently insurmountable gulf between Johnny and Nelly can also stand for the multiplying differences dividing the social and political elite and the precariat today. Finally, the temporal dimensions of Nelly's encounter with trauma – including her intermediate position between past and present, life and death, and visibility and invisibility – have the potential to make the viewer realise the ghost-like presence of victims of violence, trauma, and exclusion in their own environment. Accordingly, *Phoenix* may encourage a more sensitive attitude towards the 21st century underdog, as it provides a certain distance necessary for the viewer to process and reflect in a quasi-objective manner.

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Images

Figure 1. A photograph of Nelly and her group of friends on which the crosses mean that the person is dead, while the circles signal the Nazis. Although it is hardly visible, there has been a cross above Nelly's head as well, which must have been erased when it turned out that she is actually alive.

Figure 2. Nelly and Lene at the ruins of Nelly's previous home.

Figure 3. Nelly suddenly noticing her reflection in a broken mirror among the debris on the ground.

Figure 4. Nelly at the train station, reuniting with her past friends and Johnny, acting out the latter's fiction of her arrival from the concentration camp.

Figure 5. Nelly walking out into the sunshine, leaving behind Johnny and her painful past.

Figure 6. The shot of Nelly's tattooed identification number from her time in Auschwitz, which becomes visible while she is singing accompanied by Johnny at the end of the film.

Rebeka Várnagy and György Kalmár

Lives in Transit: The Broken Stories of Social Outcasts in Christian Petzold's *Transit* (2018)

From Medieval danse macabres, through existential philosophy and art cinema, the transitory nature of human life has been one of the popular topics of arts and philosophy. We are all too familiar with the temporary boundaries of our transitory subjectivity, of being vulnerable, precarious subjects with limited life-spans. This temporal transitoriness, as the *sic transit gloria mundi* proverb also indicates, has often been associated with a moral, religious or philosophical call to keep in mind the transitory nature of everything worldly, and the precariousness characteristic of human life in general. In the 21st century, due to a whole range of social, geopolitical and environmental issues, these traditional concepts of transitoriness and vulnerability are often associated with (and sometimes overshadowed by) the concept of being physically in transit, on the road, not belonging to any place, being without papers, or being caught between states or countries (see: Győri 2021 in the present volume). According to the United Nations' 2020 *World Migration Report,* the number of people in transit, on the way between their countries of origin and the (desired, dreamed, wished-for) host country is close to 300 million at present. If one is to accept current predictions, this number is likely to rise dramatically as local climate crises become more common, and add to such push-factors as war and poverty. Abrahm Lustgarten estimates that due to shifting climate conditions, by 2070 two to three billion people will be forced to leave home and head towards more habitable areas (Lustgarten 2021). This phenomenon of climate-triggered migration has reached first world societies too. Now it is not only people from Syria, Libya, Guatemala or Afghanistan that are fleeing from war, poverty and terror. It is also people running from drought and wildfires in California, Australia or Southern Europe, billionaires moving to New Zealand, or Dutch people purchasing second homes in Eastern Europe as an insurance against rising sea levels. As the *New York Times Magazine* announced in mid-2021, the "Great Climate Migration" has already begun (Lustgarten 2021). Our settlement, comfort and life-styles seem increasingly dependent on rapidly changing social, environmental and geopolitical conditions. Therefore, willingly or not, more and more of us are in transit.

Christian Petzold's 2018 film titled *Transit* introduces the spectator to this rapidly growing group of vulnerable, underprivileged people, to the precarious lives of people in transit. The general, or even allegorical concept of transit is clearly highlighted

by the fact that the film retells a Second World War story of escaping from the Germans in a 21st century setting. The images of 21st century France and its refugees, illegals and all sorts of *sans papiers* distance the story from its original historical references, and elevate it into a more general exploration of the lives of people who left their homes, were lost on the way, and thus ended up being in transit forever. The film's protagonist is a young man named Georg, who tries to get state permission to leave for Mexico, in an attempt to avoid being caught and possibly killed by the German troops slowly taking over France. On the run, without family or friends, Georg appears to be lost in the world and largely invisible in French society. The fact that he is not the only character in this film who is forced to face the experience of being a social outcast could lead the narrative towards establishing new alliances, new forms of solidarity and belonging, towards growing new roots, and eventually finding a new identity. As the narrative progresses, however, it becomes evident that *Transit* is not heading towards this kind of narrative resolution (familiar from more optimistic films about international migration). In *Transit* none of the outsider characters manage to establish any compassionate or caring community over the course of the film, and thus everybody is left to one's own devices. This paper will argue that this failure to find a home, emotional anchorage, or a loving, empathetic community may be traced back to a narrative dysfunction: it is the result of the characters' inability to listen to one another's stories. It is this failure of listening and understanding, and the resulting lack of a shared narrative space that turns these characters' eternal homelessness into an existential condition, into an image of people after the collapse of meaningful human order.

An atmosphere of rejection, hopelessness and non-belonging permeates the entirety of *Transit:* viewers can sense that Georg is displaced and that he does not fit into the community that surrounds him. One of the most easily identifiable sources of this feeling of desertion and non-acceptance is the use of liminal spaces in the film. A liminal (or marginal) space is a physical location that functions as a boundary between permanent spaces – spaces filled with meaning. As Julia Thomas puts it in her article entitled "Understanding How Liminal Space Is Different from Other Spaces," liminal spaces are the "waiting areas between one point in time and space and the next" (5). Thomas then goes on to describe the feelings we tend to associate with and experience in liminal spaces as "the feeling of just being on the verge of something" (6). In "What Is Liminal Space?" John Staughton emphasises the same notion of suspension, the psychologically disruptive effects of spending time in these threshold-like spaces of waiting, without knowing exactly what comes next. Staughton's examples include streets, train stations, airport terminals and "places that one visits at unusual times" (5).

Based on these notions, one can easily identify the spaces used in *Transit* as liminal. The hotels, train stations, coffee houses, restaurants and temporary dwellings that Georg visits throughout the film all belong to the category of liminal spaces. In fact, no space that Georg visits is a permanent place: viewers can only see him in

marginal, liminal locations. The abundance of temporary, transitory spaces becomes significant if we take into consideration the usual functions and features of such locations. According to Hanan Parvez, author of "Liminal Space: Definition, Examples, and Psychology," "[w]e're not supposed to stay in these places for too long" (10) – that is to say, ideally, people pass through liminal spaces only in order to get to other, meaningful locations. This idea is further supported by Bjørn Thomassen, who, in his essay titled "Revisiting Liminality: The Danger of Empty Spaces", explores the concept of permanent liminality. Relying on Turner's 1978 work, Thomassen defines permanent liminality as "a situation in which the suspended character of social life evidently takes on a more permanent character" (28). Thomassen argues that the dangers of being permanently stuck in liminal spaces include "a constant search for self-overcoming (…) and an existential sense of alienation and loss of being-at-home" (30). In this passage, Thomassen draws his readers' attention to the close connection between liminal spaces and a loss of selfhood or self-identity – an idea that also appears in Parvez's article: "When you're in a liminal space, you're neither here nor there, neither this nor that" (2). Therefore, one can easily recognise the vast role that the great number of liminal spaces play in Georg's alienation from the rest of French society. Also emphasised by the film's title, the protagonist's constant journey and his always being in transit but never arriving at his destination lead to a loss of a firm sense of self and a more profound experience of being a social outcast unacknowledged by the people around him.

Another method that *Transit* uses to underscore the characters' precarious selfhood is the lack of names and other personal data about the narrative's social outcasts. The fact that at no point in the film do viewers get acquainted with the last names of nearly any of the characters (with, in some cases, even their first names remaining shrouded in mystery) illustrates how little the members of this outcast group know or even care to know one another. Seemingly irrelevant from the point of view of the plot, the missing names can be read as symbols of lost or obliterated identities. The link between naming and selfhood can be better understood with the help of Christoper Hughes's work titled *Kripke: Names, Necessity and Identity,* in the first section of which he describes multiple approaches to the issue of names and their referents. Several of these approaches suppose that names correspond to definite descriptions – that is to say that names refer to specific *identities*. According to one of these schools of thought, "for every … proper name there is a corresponding *necessarily* true identity" (4, Hughes's italics). As some philosophers whose works Hughes relies on believe, "a proper name is associated with a … cluster or family of … descriptions. A name is not … synonymous with any one of the descrptions in the family…; it refers to the (unique) satisfier of most, or of a weighted most, of those descriptions" (3). According to this approach, names serve two main functions: they link their referents to a specific body of meanings, and they define a particular, unique member of this group. Therefore, by remaining largely or entirely nameless throughout the narrative, the characters of *Transit* lose precisely these two

advantages: the experience of being connected to a certain group (community) and being granted a unique, individual identity.

Similarly to the use of liminal spaces, this approach to names associates the transitory lives represented in the film with the 21st century social context of migration. It reminds the spectator of the lives of those millions of migrants whose names are never pronounced properly in the host country, who are always called by their mispronounced first names in their low-paid jobs, or people who change their names to less exotic ones in order to fit in. The saddest stories (in both *Transit* and in the world today), are those of children, who arrive at ports or borders without parents, documents and proper names, or children whose names express the uprooted homelessness that often accompanies globalization, the children with such names as Batman, Usnavy or Facebook. Petzold's film makes the spectator wonder about their lives too: What kind of community and what sort of identity can they find? What chances do they have to break out of transit, to arrive somewhere that feels like home?

The fact that none of the characters appears to be interested in the other outsiders enough to enquire about their names is the first sign of their inability to listen to one another's stories, provide a platform for their fellow sufferers to relate their lives and experiences to a caring audience, and thus forge genuine human communities. This lack of interest is made even more evident when some of the characters attempt to approach Georg and gain some relief by telling him about their own struggles. Sitting in a crowded waiting room, Georg is addressed by a man who later turns out to be a professional music conductor. He begins to strike up a conversation with Georg, and he even tries to tell him a few details about his personal past. Georg, however, soon grows bored of the man's attempts to engage his attention, and abruptly leaves the conductor in the middle of his speech in order to find another seat where he can wait unbothered. This episode is soon followed by a strikingly similar scene: a woman sits down beside Georg, and she starts talking to him about her sister and brother-in-law, as well as the two dogs that she has been left in charge of. Obviously uninterested in the woman's narrative, Georg is relieved to hear his (cover) name called out by one of the clerks, and he abandons the woman immediately. This pattern is repeated multiple times throughout the film: whenever a character attempts to relate his or her story to Georg, the narrative is interrupted either by another character's unexpected arrival, or by Georg's evident boredom and lack of empathy. The only exception seems to be the protagonist's relationship with Driss, a young boy whom he meets in the streets and appears to deeply care for. However, even this seemingly more positive picture becomes tainted when Georg announces his upcoming departure to Driss. The fact that Georg is willing to leave Driss behind in order to move away from France, or that he never cares to learn Driss's last name question the depth of the bond between the two characters. In the course of the film's narrative this all-pervading apathy and inability to connect with other people leads to new and new betrayals and the state of continuous emotional destruction. When later Georg wishes to visit Driss and his mother, he is shocked to find an unknown family

in the flat. Driss and his mother took leave without caring to say farewell to Georg, in the same manner as Georg left all the people who attempted to tell him stories or form emotional ties with him. Thus, Georg's story with Driss and his mother, together with the emotional ties formed between them is left undeveloped, unsaid, unshared, in eternal transit.

This pattern of undeveloped bonds, missed encounters, unfinished stories and betrayed human connections does not only add to the film's slightly melancholic atmosphere, but also shapes its (regularly disrupted, unfinished) narrative patterns, and also fills the film with mystery. Why do the characters of the world of *Transit* act in such a strange way? Why aren't these desolate people happy to share stories and form friendships? Why does everyone end up caught in one's own bubble, repeating one's story endlessly? What does this existential situation of being in transit do to people? How does it dry them out of those qualities that we usually recognise as essential to normal social interaction? And what is the relevance of this pattern to the world outside the film?

One remarkable tendency in the film is that while this behaviour is unmistakably unfriendly and inconsiderate, it does not appear to affect the characters much: they seem to accept the others' lack of interest without any sign of distress. However, if one takes into account the timing and manner of the deaths of two of the characters, it becomes evident that their inability to have their stories heard causes them more suffering than they show. Both the conductor and the unnamed woman from the waiting room pass away immediately after their second encounter with Georg. Passing through a crowded room, Georg makes eye contact with the conductor, who appears to recognise him immediately. Despite the man's efforts to grab his attention, Georg turns his back on him, and walks out of the room. Shortly after Georg's explicit display of disinterest, viewers learn that the conductor has passed away: still standing in the same spot where Georg has left him, the man has a heart attack and dies instantly. The fact that the conductor's death immediately follows his second missed opportunity of talking to Georg and possibly relating his life story to him might appear to be a mere coincidence. However, taking into account the similarly symbolic death of the unnamed woman, one can sense that this timing is not purely accidental. After Georg dines with the woman whom he has met previously in the waiting room, she takes her own life by jumping off a bridge onto the street below. The fact that, during the meal that they share, she does not talk at all about her life or the stories that she has once tried to relate to Georg renders the circumstances of her death rather akin to those of the conductor's passing away. This pattern appears to underline the crucial importance of storytelling as a way of healing and coping with one's problems.

The connection between storytelling and healing is a well-documented psychological phenomenon. In *Healing Children's Grief: Surviving a Parent's Death from Cancer,* Grace Hyslop Christ specifically explores the type of grief that results from the passing away of a parent, yet her ideas are also applicable to the kind of grief

(the loss of an identity and a loving community) that is portrayed in *Transit*. In her book, Christ describes an experiment that she and her team have conducted. The experiment in question involved several children whose parents had recently passed away, and who were asked by Christ and her assistants to try various activities in an attempt to cope with their loss. According to Christ's account of the experiment, storytelling was one of the most successful ways of coping with the grief that these children experienced. As she puts it, "grieving (…) was evident in [the children's] memories of activities they and the parent had engaged in together" (123). This shows that, in order to process loss and grief, a recalling of what has been lost is required, which can be achieved through the activity of storytelling. Describing these storytelling sessions, Christ states that "[the children's] affect during these reminiscenes was usually pleasant," adding that "[s]ome children were freer to discuss their feelings about the parent in writing" (123). Thus, as Christ's findings illustrate, telling stories about one's losses is a powerful way of dealing with the negative emotions resulting from this loss.

David H. Albert's "New Beginnings," which is the first essay in a collection entitled *The Healing Heart: Communities*, corresponds to what Grace Hyslop Christ states about the crucial importance of storytelling in relation to grieving. According to Albert, "every story is a new beginning, a bringing forth of memory (…) by a narrative that stings the locus of love and loss and brings with it renewal" (3). This section illustrates one's need for stories in order to gain closure after a traumatic event and to be able to process the pain and move on.

Julia Sorensen arrives to similar conclusions in *Overcoming Loss: Activities and Stories to Help Transform Children's Grief and Loss*. Though this is a practical guide for adults in charge of small children who are going through the process of grieving following the loss of a loved one, the examples and situations are strikingly similar to those found in *Transit*. The volume contains tasks whose aim is to help children to better navigate their emotions and digest the lost they are experiencing. One of the tasks requires children to recall and tell as many stories about the loved one they have lost as they possibly can. According to Sorensen, these activities "focus on remembering, honoring, and transforming the closure, ending, or loss (…) [They] invite the child to join in their own journey to *express* the lost relationship" (54, italics added). This corresponds to the aforementioned works that emphasise the importance of storytelling when dealing with grief and loss. They all suggest that by sharing stories, the negative impact of grief can be reduced, and the experience can be turned into a more easily digestible one.

Albert's essay also calls attention to the role that storytelling and narrative-building play in the creation of a sense of selfhood and a firm self-identity. As he puts it, "[s]tories are the *re-collection* of parts of ourselves in the process of becoming who we are or truly meant to be" (4, Albert's italics). This lines up neatly with Dan Zahavi's ideas on the subject, discussed in his book titled *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective*. Relying on Ricoeur's notions, Zahavi claims that

"[t]o answer the question "Who am I?" is to tell the *story* of a life" (107, italics added), which he further emphasises by adding that "the self is the product of a narratively structured life" (107). Apart from this individual identity, stories can also help people to establish meaningful and empathetic communities. According to Albert, "the re-collection and re-membrance of [our stories] collectively is the multitudinous storehouse of culture and community" (4). According to the perspective created by Albert and the above quoted others, by not listening to one another's stories, Georg and his fellow outcasts lose both the opportunity to create an understanding community and the chance to establish a firm selfhood and a stable basis for coping with their losses and handling their grief. Therefore the film can also be read as a warning about the detrimental effects of "transit-like" social spaces. In the crisis-stricken 21st century, this warning about dysfunctional social spaces seems quite timely: we all know what it means to live in societies where understanding and solidarity are withdrawn, where social space becomes split, tribalized or atomized.

Thus, in *Transit* one may witness a world without shared, coherent stories. Behind this lack we have already spotted the painful absence of such "glues" of the human world as interest in the other or compassion. In this disintegrating world of *Transit*, however, there is an agency with the potential to pull strings together and create narrative closure: the film's narrator. Through most of the film, this unnamed third person narrator remains extra-diegetic. Near the end of the film, however, it is revealed that he is actually a bartender at the small restaurant that Georg frequents. At first sight, this might seem surprising, given that the bartender plays no significant role in the narrative, and no explanation is given as to why it is that he should be the one to tell Georg's story. However, this trope of the bartender-narrator may evoke a whole set of social, cultural and cinematic practices that are relevant to the film. The sight of a lonely man sitting in an empty bar, talking to the bartender, is surely a familiar one for many spectators of the film. Similarly, the cinematic trope of the embittered, disenfranchised and disillusioned loner, who shares his life with the bartender as there is no one else that he can share it with, is a well-established one, with memorable male protagonists from *Casablanca* to *Shining*. In these social and cinematic practices bars and pubs are defined as transitory spaces, transit-zones, as not-home. Here one makes temporary acquaintances, makes conversations and recount human stories that are often left behind without any certainty about a future follow-up or narrative closure. This makes *Transit*'s narrator especially well-suited for the job: he is a collector of fragmented stories, melancholy accounts of strangers in transit, confessions of people who have nobody to talk or confess to. A person, who listens not necessarily because he is personally interested, but because this is part of his job. His stories are stories of lost souls, unanchored vessels, people in transit between a lost home and the fantasy of a happy destination.

On a more theoretical level, we can also attribute a symbolic meaning to the fact that Georg's story is told by an outsider who does not play an active role in the narrative. The fact that Georg is not the narrator of his own story means that, instead of

a first person perspective, the narrative is related from a third person point of view. This detail becomes crucial in the light of Zahavi's take on the issue of first person narration. Zahavi states that one way to define human identity is to view it as an aspect of self-understanding. According to him, this sense of identity is "the fruit of an examined life" (108). This inevitably leads to the conclusion that, in order to gain this sense of selfhood, one needs to reflect upon his or her own life as a way of creating his or her experience of a stable self through these reflexive evaluations. This, as Zahavi also adds, "must include an approach from the first-person perspective" (108), as such self-examinations cannot be carried out by an outsider. Therefore, the third person narration performed by the bartender necessarily means that a part of Georg's self-identity is lost in the process of switching from a first person to a third person account of the events. This loss further highlights the symbolic aspects of the narrator's identity in the ways the film undermines Georg's sense of selfhood and belonging.

In spite of the negative effects that the narrator's identity has on Georg's sense of self, its more positive attributes ought not to go unmentioned, either. Out of the major characters of the film, Georg is the only person to decidedly survive the events of the narrative. While the conductor, the unnamed woman, Marie and Richard pass away before the film comes to an end, the fate of Driss and his mother is not elaborated on after their departure from the city. This means that Georg is the sole unquestioned survivor by the end of the film. Taking into account the different views on the key importance of storytelling discussed above, it is not surprising that the only person to remain alive should be at the same time the only character whose story has been heard by a fellow human being. The fact that the bartender is able to relate Georg's story proves that he has listened to the protagonist's account in its entirety – a luxury that none of the other characters experiences over the course of the film. The deaths of the other characters can be read as the symbolic deaths of their individual identities, resulting from their inability to express themselves by building narratives about their lives and relating these narratives to other people. Georg, however, remains alive, which emphasises the importance of storytelling as a coping mechanism, as a means of sustaining the sense of (some form of) identity, and as a necessary glue that connects one to the social-symbolic order.

Thus, in conclusion, one can read *Transit* as a cinematic exploration of dysfunctional societies produced by intolerance, forced migration, the lack of homeliness, existence in liminal spaces, transitory stories and a social space devoid of interest in others. Without doubt, the central topics discussed above are all key issues in our rapidly changing 21st century world: the issue of storytelling (the problem of creating shared stories with shared values where understanding and compassion can take place, against the backdrop of "alternative facts" and confirmation bias fuelled filter bubbles); the issue of being in transit (being displaced, without home, roots or belonging in a globalised world on the move); and the problem of liveable, healthy, home-like identities under such adverse conditions. Thus, when Georg's story is re-

counted in the setting of 21st century France, these problems transpire through the original Second World War narrative. By highlighting the similarities between these two volatile historical periods, and by painting a poetic image of the melancholy subject lost in transit, the film successfully explores some of the key social issues of our times.

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Symbols of Social Inequality in Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite*

In today's globalised world, certain political, economic and social tendencies – such as social inequality, or the rise of extremist political groups or lobbyists, just to mention a few – are not considered unique; yet, these issues emerge differently from country to country. One of the most significant social problems is the dangerously widening gulf between the rich and the so-called precariat (Standing 2011; Kalmár 2021). According to Max Roser: "Billions of people in the world are living in poverty. Adjusted for the purchasing power in each country, 85% of the world population live on less than $30 per day" (Our World in Data). It is not a new frustration, which governments have to cope with; it has always been present since society and civilisation were born. Throughout history, humanity has had to find a remedy for this complex and seemingly insoluble dilemma. Nowadays, however, the situation creates so much social tension that something has to be done. In 2019, at the time of making and releasing of Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite,* "the world's 2,153 billionaires had more wealth than 4.6 billion people" (Oxfam, 21). In the film, this phenomenon is set in the South Korean social context, giving its audience insight into the lives of the Kims and the Parks. The film introduces the Kim family, who clearly belong to the precariat, as the main exercisers of parasitical behaviour. However, at the same time, the film gradually also reveals how this attitude manifests in the well-off Park family as well.

The most important symbols in the film – such as the residences of the Kims and Parks, the smell, the scholar's stone and the invisible impenetrable threshold between the lives of two classes – can be all regarded as references to the phenomenon of social inequality. Representing the socially outcast and the poor is not a new tendency in the history of art cinema; yet, this film has the potential to give another twist and push to it. The director places the Kims into the centre of attention in order to make the viewer know them better than the affluent Parks. Consequently, one can observe the South Korean class difference from below, from the perspective of the characters in need. Speaking of a global crisis through a global cinematic language and system of symbols can connect very different people from very different places all over the world. Despite the country-specific social context, one can easily relate to the lives of the members of the Kim family and is able to realise soon that these people are not the only ones in the world suffering from the phenomenon of eco-

nomic inequality and immobility. Therefore, global art cinema can be regarded as a significant link between people who live under similar conditions worldwide.

Defining the Precariat

Before analysing the main symbols of *Parasite,* some words about the lower social class represented by the Kims are needed. In order to understand the concept of the precariat better, I rely on Guy Standing's definition: "There are two ways of defining what we mean by the precariat. One is to say it is a distinctive socio-economic group, so that by definition a person is in it or not in it" (Standing 2011, 7). In terms of labour and class, there are seven groups, including "the growing 'precariat', flanked by an army of unemployed and a detached group of socially ill misfits living off the dregs of society" as the fifth body in the hierarchy (Standing 2011, 8). In the 1970s and 80s, the neo-liberal model brought significant changes, causing an even sharper market competition and more flexibility in the labour market. Fading physical boundaries between countries in terms of the exchange of human resources led to a social backlash, resulting in instability and insecurity, especially in the field of livelihood. Thus, the precariat became an ever-increasing, global class phenomenon, without an anchor of stability, including those people who tend to listen to "ugly voices" (Standing 2011; Kalmár 2021). As I have mentioned before, these people have no work-based identity, they live month to month or in even worse cases, day to day with very few benefits given to them, sliding towards the lower end of the wage range and the social ladder.

Unfortunately, certain individuals, belonging to the conglomeration of the precariat can mean real danger – as the storming of the US Capitol in Washington in early 2021 revealed – if they do not get enough attention and understanding. They are the 'hidden' outcasts of society in the course of globalisation, left behind without a united voice or a voice on their own. These disenfranchised people can feel excluded, especially as a consequence of the growing antagonism between them and the elite – the intellectuals, the politicians etc. Governmental contracts with big businesses leave these people at the edge of the profit distribution system, neglecting them financially. In *Parasite,* Bong Joon-Ho focuses on this problem, namely, the dangerous side of the precariat, placing before the viewer a 'what if'-version. This though experiment is significantly different from the vision seen in Todd Philips's 2019 *Joker* (also discussed in the present volume) although both films involve cruelty and violence. In *Joker* Arthur becomes the symbol of a revolutionary movement, whereas the Kim family does nothing compelling that could shape the entire community or have a real social impact.

You Are Where You Live

In order to illustrate the class difference between the elite and the precariat, Bong Joon-Ho uses the two families' houses as the main visible sign of wealth. The Kim family lives in a semi-basement flat, where there is no privacy – not only inside their home but also from the outside world (in a scene, they can literally see a man, urinating in front of the window) – not to mention the lack of enough space for them; still, there is a paradox here as occupants of semi-basement flats are isolated human beings in terms of social conformity. At the level of symbols, semi-basements also carry significant meaning: the Kim family is half above and half beneath the ground, which reflects their social status and mental state. "They still want to believe that they're over ground, but carry this fear that they could fall completely below. It's that limbo state that reflects their economic status" (Sims 2019). The director also mentions that wealth inequality and the "state of polarisation" connected to it can be observed all over the world; he also highlights the fact that the gap between the elite and the precariat emerges as an even more relative one, which is not a unique phenomenon in rich countries (Sims 2019).

Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* is confined to the homes of the wealthy Park family and the poor Kim family, exploring the course of events after the Kims start to settle – one by one – in the well-off household. The spatial position of the dwelling places also serves as a symbol of social difference. For instance, the poorer family lives in a pool-like area of the city where their semi-basement apartment functions like an aquarium, making their home a liminal space and a display for others. Whereas the affluent Parks live on the top of a hill in a quiet, calm and still street, representing their stable economic and mental status. This separation also determines the wide gulf between the two families, which is further extended by the many stairs the director uses. The Kim son has to mount the hill in order to reach the soon-to-be employers' house; moreover, in the residence, he faces more stairs to climb up, and not only in the house but around it as well. Staircases are also highlighted when the Kims escape from the Park residence during a sudden storm, which completely floods the semi-basement apartment and also the lives of the poorer citizens. The members of the Kim family are silently running down, lower and lower on the stairs and streets, representing that they do not belong to the affluent environment, but the bottom of the class system. One can see the clean upper part of the city in greyish lights, while there is a sharp change when the family arrives at their 'proper' place: everything turns into an orange-like glow with dirt and trash around them. This is the very place they gain their voices back.

The film does not stop here, they have to run down more stairs in order to get back to their residence. The viewer also gets a close-up about one of the steps with the water running down on it, like the Kim family has to do the same. No wonder that Joon-Ho calls his narrative a 'staircase movie', a reference to the Bates house in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The director creates a haunted-house-like quality

throughout the movie via these stairs and the characters who are treating a normal or average person like a ghost, an invisible 'monster' of society. This element can be regarded as both a social commentary and also a generic feature, characterising the director's style itself: the monster-like, misunderstood lower-class people's interactions with those who do not or cannot understand them are widening the already existing gap, hence, it is even more impossible to breach. As the filmmaker puts it in the above quoted interview in *The Atlantic:*

> My films are always based on misunderstanding – the audience is the one who knows more, and the characters have a difficult time communicating with each other. I think sadness and comedy all come from that misunderstanding, so as an audience member, you feel bad – you want to step up and reconcile them. As a filmmaker, I always try to shoot with sympathy. We don't have any villains in *Parasite*, but in the end, with all these misunderstandings, they end up hurting each other. (Bong Joon-Ho)

Such semi-basements are existing homes not only in *Parasite* but in real life Seoul as well. They are named 'banjihas' – where very little or no sunshine gets through the windows – and thousands of people try to maintain their everyday lives in these residences while working hard for a better future (see: Image 1). People can get an insight into the occupants' lives and living conditions, leaving no privacy for them as Bong Joon-Ho represents it in the film, showing the viewer the street-life from the Kims' perspective – unintentionally glimpsing at a urinating man. "The banjihas are not just a quirk of Seoul architecture, but a product of history. These tiny spaces actually trace their roots back decades, to the conflict between North and South Korea" (Yoon 2020).

In 1968 North Korean commando soldiers attempted to assassinate the South Korean President, Park Chung-Hee. Though the incident was thwarted, the tension between the two nations remained tense. "Armed North Korean agents infiltrated South Korea, and there were a number of terrorist incidents" (Yoon 2020). In 1970, the South Korean building code was updated because the government feared the acceleration of events and tenseness. According to the new rules and regulations, all low-rise apartments that were built as new ones at that time had to involve basements in case of a national emergency. Due to the housing shortage in the capital in the 1980s, the leader apparatus of the country legalised these spaces to live in although before, renting out banjihas was illegal. In 2018, affordable housing, especially for the young and poorer people, was still a significant issue in South Korea – as it was revealed by the UN – even though the country could boast with the 11th largest economy in the world. So, these semi-basement apartments became the response and the solution of the problem on the one hand; on the other hand, dwellers could and can, as it is still an issue nowadays, hardly get rid of the social stigma related to banjihas.

In *Parasite*, not only the Kim residence carries compelling symbolic meaning but also the maze-like, isolated bunker under the Park house. This subterrain space enriches the film's symbolism by way of associating *Parasites* with with a rich cultural and cinematic tradition that associates existence in labyrithian spaces with sociocultural marginalization and "male subjects' exclusion from power" (Kalmár 2016, 119; see also Kalmár 2017). In a scene, one can see Chung-Sook, the mother of the Kim family, running after the former housekeeper, Moon-Gwang. The camera is following right after Chung-Sook, making the viewer participate in this 'chase'. The characters get deeper and deeper under the ground in the bunker, which symbolises the absolute hopeless economic and social state of Moon-Gwang and his husband, the once successful businessman, Geun-Sae. Reaching the bottom of the maze, one can realise that at this very moment, the lowest part of the social ladder is displayed in front of them. Moreover, the music also follows the genre shifts and the mood of the movie. In this scene, it turns into the horror-like, thrilling, haunting, and overshadowing element – working as a kind of pathetic fallacy – standing in sharp contrast with the previous scenes of the film, when it usually emphasises the playful aspect of the Kims' conspiracy.

The Poor's Smell: the Social Stigma

In *Parasite* and reality, semi-basements symbolise poverty, although people often choose these accommodations in order to save up money. Generally speaking, in the eyes of Korean society, the occupants of banjihas are defined by their homes. It is not just a means of evoking pity for the protagonists, but also a feature that characterises them. This symbolic nature of the semi-basement is clearly articulated by the smell: "That's not it. It's the basement smell. We need to leave this home to lose the smell" (*Parasite* 0:52:22-0:52:30). One can understand how this stigma works from the following quotation: "It's oppressive. It clings to you, seeping into your skin. It is omnipresent and sinister. Beyond being a mere symbol of social status, the smell threatens to expose one's identity and the dark secrets lurking beneath" (Lawless, 2020). Body odours represent the status of the Kim family, their poor and low position on the social ladder, hence, the very word 'poor' does not need to be directly uttered throughout the film. Another significant element related to smell is the scent of the fumigants used by the street cleaners, which means a cleansing process for the Kims (since it kills all the bugs and cockroaches), and at the same time, a barrier to social rise as a result of the stench. Bugs can also be analysed as symbols in the film, as the members of the poor family are treated as stinky things (definitely not as human beings) or a kind of germ.

The unpleasant scent of the poorer employees seeps into the Parks' home and their lives (See: Image 2), and destroys it ultimately. Meanwhile, the members of the Kim family have to realise that their new jobs, clothes and increased incomes are not

enough to step over the threshold of their social status. "By talking about different smells, the film puts the class issue under the microscope. Through smells, the film's tension and suspense mount, which eventually makes a multi-layered foundation for the upcoming tragedy", says Bong Joon-Ho in his interview given to *The Guardian* (Lawless, 2020). In *Parasite*, the smell that the Kims cannot get rid of erodes the basic respect people feel for one another, thereby reflecting their lives and positions in society, and showing the struggle they are going through. Publicly talking about body odours is taboo because people can see it as an insult or a kind of rudeness, something that is not considered an appropriate conversational topic of the perfect doorstep manner. Moreover, in the film, negative emotions, like anger, disgust, or discomfort are roused and memories are evoked by it, causing a sense of foreboding in the viewer; thus, people's smell becomes an emotional accelerator.

As body odour is a real-life experience, *Parasite* is a film based on a partly true story from the director's early 20s when he had to interact with a wealthy family in order to make ends meet as a student. He became the Math tutor of the son of an incredibly rich family; he was introduced by his girlfriend who was already coaching the boy in English. "They wanted another tutor for math, so she put me forward as a trustworthy friend, even though I was actually really bad at math" – remembering Joon-Ho, who was a Sociology major at that time (Datta 2020). Normally, well-off families do not use the means of advertising to look for help in domestic duties, the adequate person is introduced to them as one can see in the film as well. He also added, "…when you're working as a tutor or a housekeeper, you're in the most private spaces, and both sides are brought together in such intimacy" (Datta 2020) (see: Image 3). The young boy he was tutoring showed him every corner of the house and talked a lot about their family life, so probably, this was the cause why Joon-Ho was fired within a couple of months. "If I hadn't been fired, I might have been able to discover other things about that family. I was an innocent college student. I didn't have any bad intentions but that was the inspiration for this film" (Datta 2020).

The Historical Background and the Symbolic Meaning of the Scholar's Stone

Continuing with symbols, besides smell, the 'scholar stone' is another significant element in the film (see: Image 4). As Jason Hellerman argues, "*Parasite* is an incredibly deep social satire with expertly interwoven symbolism" (Hellerman 2020). In the film, Kim Ki-Woo has a close friend, a more successful one, representing the prosperous life the poor family want, who is planning to achieve more, so he steps further, giving a scholar's stone to the young man as a farewell gift. Robert D. Mowry, the leading expert of the famous Christie's (a British auction house founded in 1766) and Harvard Art Museum's Curator Emeritus describes such rocks as

> favoured stones that the Chinese literati displayed in the rarefied atmosphere of their studios. The Chinese scholar drew inspiration from the natural world; he did not go out into nature to paint or compose poetry. Rather, he worked within the seclusion of his studio and used these 'representations of mountains' as inspiration for his work (Mowry 2015).

The stone represented a microcosm of the universe and mostly, its form resembles mountains – mainly imaginary ones like "the isles of the immortals believed to rise in the eastern sea", however, various images of dragons, phoenixes, trees or even human bodies can be recalled by the viewer (Mowry 2015). Solitary places such as riverbeds and mountains were the areas where these rocks were found; the most prized ones originated from Lingbi situated in a northern province of China. "Because of their density, Lingbi stones are naturally resonant. The best Lingbi stones are deep black in colour; often only lightly textured, their surfaces appear moist and glossy" (Mowry 2015).

Scholar's rocks started to be significantly collected in the Tang dynasty (618-907), and later, in the Song dynasty (960-1279), they influenced Chinese literature as well. In *Parasite*, the stone symbolises the Kims' dreams and hopes that seemingly become fruitful. For Ki-Woo, the object holds something supernatural, a magic power, so he becomes obsessed with it, never letting it go. Thus, the viewer can have a suspicion on the Kims' fall when the rock slips out of the boy's hands into the basement where the former housekeeper's husband – a once successful businessman – is hiding (adding this married couple to the list of parasites, for he is fed by his wife on the Park's expense). In another scene, the semi-basement residence of the Kim family is flooded by a sudden storm and the stone is floating on the surface, representing the lost dreams and hopes – an overshadowing element of a tragic end. From this point, the course of events leads to downfall and with it, to the deadly chaos and clash between the two families: Geun-Se, the hiding husband, kills Ki-Jung (the daughter of the poor Kim family), then he is himself killed by Mr. Kim, who (triggered by Mr. Park's display of disgust for the smelly Kims) finally also murders the Park breadwinner.

After the 'attack' by the flood, the Kim family is sleeping in a gym with many other unknown citizens, the other victims of this unwanted accident. Nobody is seen on the screen but the father and the son, talking about plans and the future. This scene represents the intimate relationship between the two Kims, whilst the firm stone can be seen as the firm bond between the family members. During their conversation, while Ki-Wo is still hugging the scholar's stone, his father raises a question about it: "Why are you hugging that stone?" (*Parasite* 1:41:02) The son is looking down at the stone with tears in his eyes and says: "This? It keeps clinging to me" (*Parasite* 1:41:05-1:41:17). Via the close-up, one can interpret the son's gaze as hoping and believing in a better future because of the stone. The father thinks that there is something wrong with him – perhaps he is traumatised by the events – and recommends him to sleep. Yet, Ki-Wo insists on the supernatural power of the stone: "I'm serious. It keeps fol-

lowing me" (*Parasite* 1:41:25-1:41:30). At the end of the film, the Kim son is back in the semi-basement and makes up a plan after decoding his father's message. In the next scene, he takes the stone back to its natural habitat because it does not belong to anyone, its place is under the water, symbolising the place where the Kims belong to, to the semi-basement, the lower part of the social ladder.

Reality Versus Fantasy – the Invisible Thresholds of Life

Fantasy and escapism play a role as important in the lives of the Kims as the scholar's stone. One night after Ki-Taek's disappearance, the son recognises that one of the lamps in the Parks' house, which is occupied by other inhabitants now, is flashing in Morse code. He knows its meaning: his father is alive and now, living in the basement, in complete confinement, that is, his parasitical attitude continues, but this time, for his own life's sake. At this point, the film switches into a fantasy world. In his imagined life – but this time, without the precious stone, which can be regarded as the symbol of the Kim family's reality – Ki-Woo is able to get the house and free his parent. Yet, as the next scene reveals, reality is much harsher: Ki-woo is "back in his own basement, just as imprisoned as his father but by economic circumstances rather than legal ones" (Goldberg 2020). The viewer can already have a suspicion that he will never be successful in buying the residence because economic mobility between classes is impossible. It is important to note that the members of the poor Kim family are not lazy people. They put a lot of effort into the planning and accomplishing of their 'little game' to seep into the Parks' life one by one. They do not expect others to work instead of them (as their previous pizza box folding job shows), a characteristic which stands in sharp contrast with the Parks who are often represented as rich, spoiled and selfish parasites, strongly depending on the lower class.

Even if Ki-Taek were to be freed from the basement, another prison or capital punishment would wait for him as a consequence of murder; hence, one can say that the idea of wealth and happiness remains a fantasy, an imaginary life, which imprisons the Kim family; a desire they chase, but can never achieve. In this sense, the film describes a pessimistic perspective in terms of income inequality, implying that economic immobility is the new trend, the new standard with non-transgressive thresholds: who was born poor, dies poor, and who was born rich, dies rich, that is, economic mobility is just a fantasy. As Bong Joon-Ho puts it: "There are people who are fighting hard to change society. I like those people, and I'm always rooting for them, but making the audience feel something naked and raw is one of the greatest powers of cinema". "I'm not making a documentary or propaganda here. It's not about telling you how to change the world or how you should act because something is bad, but rather showing you the terrible, explosive weight of reality. That's what I believe is the beauty of cinema" (Jung 2020).

Reality also includes the invisible borderlines of other aspects of life, especially in terms of private life. The film suggests that if one transgresses these thresholds, the balance of normalcy and the class system with it turn upside down. Park Dong-Ik claims several times that private life must be respected: "…and she knew never to cross the line. I can't stand people who cross the line" (*Parasite* 0:47:18-0:47:22). Once, he is sitting in the backseat of the car, talking with the Kim father when Ki-Taek asks him: "Still, you love her, right?" (*Parasite* 0:48:00-0:48:02) Yet, the Park husband just laughs it off and says: "Of course. I love her. We'll call it love" (*Parasite* 0:48:02-0:48:16). This scene appears again nearly at the end of the film when both families are celebrating the Park son's birthday with a party and the two fathers are hiding behind the bushes in Native American costumes. Ki-Taek claims: "Well, you love her, after all" (*Parasite* 1:48:04-1:48:06). Still, no immediate answer comes, instead, after a pause, the employer states: "Mr Kim. You're getting paid extra. Think of this as part of your work, okay?" (*Parasite* 1:48:06-1:48:26) After the last but one sentence, there is silence between the two characters, building up tension in them and the viewer as well. This silence stands for the invisible threshold between the two classes, which can never be stepped over.

Privacy with its secrets, or with its skeletons in the cupboard, is another area that separates the worlds of the two families, maintaining the already momentous social inequality. This phenomenon leads both the characters and the viewers to inner struggles of continuous analysis and designation of these invisible lines. At the level of symbols, one can soon realise that similarly to social inequality, the private sphere also works for the benefit of the wealthy family, who seemingly has every right to intrude into the Kims' privacy. However, as the poorer family also invades the life of the Parks, in *Parasite* these symbols work in an ambiguous, twisted kind of way. For instance, the affluent couple has no idea about their employees hiding under the huge table in the middle of the living room. They are spending their night on the couch, watching their son in a tent set up outside the garden, so the Kim family does not stand any chance to escape from the house without recognition. Park Dong-Ik starts sexual intercourse with his wife as he believes they are alone in the room. Unfortunately, all members of the other household have to listen to the whole event, making the borderline of privacy completely vanished.

The Symbolic Use of Abjection

Not only the use of underground spaces – a symbol and a reference to social inequality – creates a sense of horror in the film but the appearance of a ghost as well, who is no other than the husband of the previously employed caretaker, living in the basement of the Park family. "The basement in the story comes with its own historical context. Earlier used as a bunker, alluding to South Korea's violent past, this basement that the Parks don't know about serves as an artificial tomb for Geun-sae"

(Almeida 2020). The ghost-like dweller stands for the phenomenon of social invisibility and isolation, in a world where the ruling forces can be identified as unreality, disenfranchisement and poverty. Besides the two already mentioned characteristics, abjection is also a significant feature in the film, a "psychic process in which we come to terms with what is culturally repressed within us" – according to Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (Almeida 2020; Kalmár 2021). One can feel disgusted by the shots showing the flooded semi-basement covered with feces, or in another scene Moon-Gwang (the housekeeper) throwing up into the toilet. However, the film does not stop here. At the birthday party of the Park son, the final murder scene is introduced by blood splashing across the neat tables and dishes (Image 5), and by Chung-Sook stabbing Geun-Sae with a barbeque skewer. The interaction of blood, food and flesh become the means of abjection and undermine the boundaries of the human-animal distinction. In this way, the 'ghost' husband can be considered the symbol of those abject people who keep haunting the affluent.

Conclusion

The above explored symbols, fantasies and a possible script of social upheaval make Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* an exciting, timely, and at the same time, scary experience. This is partly due to the director's excellent choice of various genres. The first half of the film includes comedic elements, giving way to a kind of dark thriller action cinema, but horror features cannot be missing from it either in order to accelerate the plot. In this way, Bong's narrative is a "black comedy thriller detailing Korean class tensions, … making Bong the first Korean director to win" the Palme d'Or (Worthy et al. 149). Horror tropes to the interactions between different classes, experiences and the characters facilitate the events and serve as a ground for everything that transpires. Generally speaking, in a horror movie, the upper-class household stands in the centre of threat, however, in this case, the director splits these features and introduces the Kim family first to the viewer to know them better than the affluent one. What is more, unlike other horrors, in *Parasite,* the poor family is represented as a group of people who have lots to lose – they can become unemployed just like the former housekeeper of the residence and their semi-basement flat is also at risk by unwanted 'attack'.

Regarding the film's representation of social issues, the main themes are social immobility, economic inequality, injustice, and the widening gulf between the precariat and the rich. All these issues can be observed in our globalised world; thus, they are not only Korean-specific frustrations but one can find them in most countries. The uniqueness of the film lies in the merge of the ingeniously used symbols and features of different genres, enriched by the director's real-life experience. The viewer gets to know what being a part of the precariat means and how their characteristics turn the life of a wealthy family upside down, leading to a fatal climax.

As in the real world, finding a remedy for social problems is not an easy task in the film. However, *Parasite* can serve as a timely reminder that humanity should fight against these issues in order to avoid such apocalyptical scenarios as the clash between two families in the film's denouement.

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Images

Figure 1. On the left: a scene from *Parasite;*
on the right: a real picture of a banjiha bathroom

Figure 2. The rain that can erase the unpleasant dust but not the smell.

Figure 3. "both sides are brought together in such intimacy"

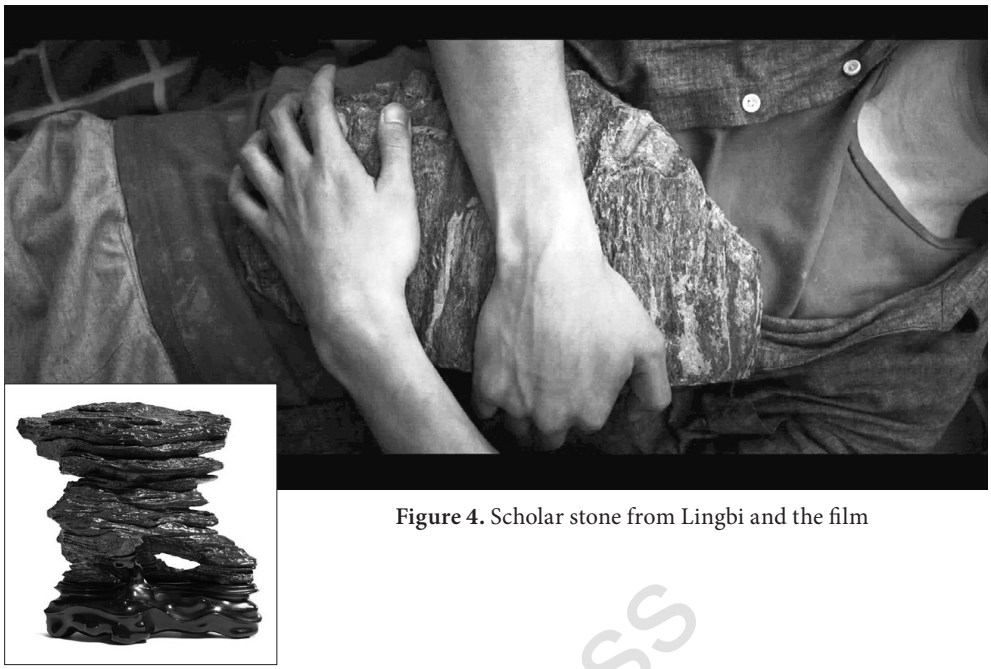

Figure 4. Scholar stone from Lingbi and the film

Figure 5. Blood splashing across the neat tables and dishes

Barbara Józsa

Disguised Monsters, Uncanny Secrets, and Unstable Structures: Increasing Fears of Class Conflict in *Parasite* (2019)

Introduction

Following a careful assessment, Erik Olin Wright provides a diagnosis and a moral critique of capitalism based on the extent to which the market meets the requirements of equality/fairness, democracy/freedom, and community/solidarity – the foundations of an ideal economic system. He concludes that "capitalism generates and perpetuates unjust forms of economic inequality; it narrows democracy and restricts the freedom of many while enormously enhancing the freedom of some; and it cultivates cultural ideals that endorse individual competitive success over collective welfare" (Wright 35). Complemented by the neo-liberal agenda, this economic setting is characterized by increased labour market flexibility – a feature that involves "transferring risks and insecurity onto workers and their families. The result has been the creation of a global 'precariat'" (Standing 1). Meanwhile the rich, realizing, but disregarding the possible consequences of inequality, continue with the exploitation of the precariat. However, tension is gradually rising between the two groups in the form of class struggles, defined by Marx and Engels as a conflict dating back to "the history of all hitherto existing society" where "oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes" (Marx and Engels 3). The possibility of such threatening struggle makes Guy Standing refer to the precariat as "the new dangerous class" and issue a warning denoting that, "unless the precariat is understood, its emergence could lead society towards a politics of inferno" (vii). He establishes this class-in-the-making as something potentially threatening and to be feared. Ever since the financial crash of 2008, the precariat has grown rapidly, but "the proportion may be highest in South Korea, where … more than half of all workers are in temporary 'non-regular' jobs" (Standing 15).

Set in Seoul, *Parasite* highlights the experiences of these marginalized people and simultaneously warns the public about the consequences of dismissing these urgent economic problems. Despite the fact that, according to Bong Joon Ho, the film "ex-

presses a sentiment specific to the Korean culture," responses to the film were pretty much the same all over the world. This highlighted the universality of the film's topic and, in an interview done by Alamo Drafthouse, the director attributed this phenomenon to the fact that, "[e]ssentially, we all live in the same country called Capitalism."

In this essay, I focus on how, by employing gothic devices such as deceptive surfaces and the uncanny return of the repressed, the film creates anxiety in the viewers and calls into being the fearful monsters of contemporary society. While the forces of production grow into a terrifying monster that no one can control anymore, there is a sense of increasing anxiety and insecurity connected to the gradually intensifying class struggle between the cockroach-like members of the precariat and the parasitic bourgeois vampire feeding off the labouring classes. I argue that the film excessively deals with the deceptive outer appearance of both humans and the Park house and, through this, it simultaneously highlights the instability of contemporary power relations as well as the inherent instability of the capitalist system. Eventually, such gothic devices are used to build up tension and to represent the biggest fear of all in the form of the gradually sharpening class conflict(s) which, by eventually crossing the demarcation line dividing the classes, concludes in an encounter with fatal consequences for both parties.

The precariat as a (political) monster

According to Guy Standing, since the Great Recession of 2008, governments have not only engaged in demonizing the victims of the global market economy more frequently, but they also have more refined ways of doing so. This kind of vilification is more easily achieved in "societies characterised by systemic economic insecurity and anxiety" as "insecurity makes it easier to play on fears, 'unknown unknowns'" (146). With "the globalisation and commodification of communications," the "images created and manipulated by visual and linguistic artists" establish "what should be the biggest fear of all" (146). He distinguishes four categories of such victims: migrants, welfare claimants, criminals, and the disabled.

To some extent, *Parasite* also engages in this kind of demonization in the sense that members of the precariat are frequently associated with monstrous qualities. When referring to the precariat, Standing also denotes the emerging class as "an incipient political monster" created by "the success of the 'neo-liberal' agenda" (1). This monster-like representation of the precariat appears quite early in *Parasite* through the family's association with cockroaches. As members of the precariat, this connection does not only reflect on their conditions of living, but also on their inferiority and their atomized size in the eyes of society and the state. In an interview with the Guardian, Bong Joon Ho also highlights the precarious existence of such people on the job market: "It's not as if they have shortcomings or they are lazy. It's just that

they can't get proper jobs" (qtd. in Rose) which is also referred to in the film during a conversation about how 500 college graduates applied for an open position as a security guard. It is precisely for this reason that the film encourages feelings of solidarity towards these 'monsters' as it acknowledges that many people are *made* monstrous by being subjected to the interrelating forces of the capitalist economy.

However, Standing warns us about seeing "the precariat in purely suffering terms" (vii) as, just like cockroaches, they are able to invade even the most safely guarded homes and "show that for all of our fortifications against dirt and disease, those efforts are ultimately futile" (Nuwer). In this sense, the precariat's presence can also become somewhat threatening and unpleasant as they are seen as parasitically thriving on other's existence and to continually "exploit the opportunities we create" (Lockwood qtd. in Nuwer) through their high adaptability. These political monsters were called into being and nurtured by the workings of capitalism and, just like Victor Frankenstein, the system also loathes and neglects its own creation.

In addition to this, the Kim's association with cockroaches also gives rise to allusions connected to Georg's Kafkaesque metamorphosis. Many critics have dealt with the effects such grotesque transformations have on the perception of identity: Matthew Powell argues that, through this device, it becomes possible to "explore the nature of otherness in the modern Western world," what is more, he sees the grotesque as an "expression of an ontological reality that indicates a precarious relationship between the self-and the world" (130). Additionally, "Karla Minar and A. Sutandio use Sartre's notion of shame and alienation to chiefly address the socially alienating effects and factors of Gregor's transformation" (qtd. in Dagamseh and Rawashdeh 170). This way, the family's association with cockroaches also indicates the way people can suddenly become members of the precariat by waking up one day like Georg did, even though this kind of transformation does not involve any bodily metamorphosis, but has more to do with a change in living conditions and external appearances. Leslie A. Sconduto examines the werewolf condition in Medieval romance and claims that such total transformations result in the person's separation and exclusion from all human society (315). In the film, this is especially apparent in the scenes where the Kims lose their home and, following the night spent in a public facility, show up to work in a slightly different condition than usual. Parallel scenes illustrate the way the two classes start their day and highlight the difference in the bedrooms from where they have to start their day and the difference in clothing choices available. Shortly after this, the camera cuts to Mr. Kim going shopping with Mrs. Park: the camera follows her with a tracking shot while Mr. Kim only gets to have a space in the background. Seemingly, Mrs. Park is so absorbed in her own world that she almost deliberately does not take notice of Mr. Kim and his appearance/condition. By not looking at him, she also does not acknowledge his existence and, for this reason, the scene not only presents a sharp divide between the two, but especially alienates and disregards Mr. Kim. However, later on in the closed space of the car, Mrs. Park is forced to take notice and acknowledge the existence of Mr. Kim

by his smell which cannot be kept in a safe distance from her as it does not respect any boundaries. Additionally, it also becomes a source of shame for Mr. Kim as being thus judged by his appearance makes him feel inferior. By only seeing as far as the surface is concerned, Mrs. Park does not think compassionately about the causes of Mr. Kim's smell and altered outer appearance and is seemingly not interested either.

Deceptive surfaces: Uncanny secrets hidden behind masks of appearance

As a consequence of these rapid changes, characters' identities become rather unstable and thus, deception and pretension become central elements in the film. The members of the Kim family can also use their aptness to sudden changes to their advantage as they transform themselves into someone else rapidly and with unexpected ease from one minute to another. According to Sconduto, such intentional disguise, as a misrepresentation of identity, "creates an illusion, an outward appearance that does not match the inner reality" while they also "create metaphors, parallels, oppositions, and ambiguities, all of which accentuate the illusory nature of appearances" (309–312). This leads to the unreliability of appearance which, in turn, generates feelings of instability and anxiety in the other characters and in the viewer.

Such illusions often serve the function to deceive others in order to conceal something from them and leave it unknown. In order to be employed by the Park family, the Kims have to hide their original selves and economic backgrounds and pretend to be someone else which only becomes possible through a process of total transformation. By intentionally disguising their identities, members of the family also "call attention to what is being hidden" (Sconduto 312). From the moment of entering the Park household, it is strongly assumed that everyone and everything hides something from the others and has a dark secret to be found out. During the English lesson, Kevin asks Da-hye to use the word 'pretence' at least twice in her composition; the Parks conceal the true reason of dismissing their employees; the enigmatic painting made by Da-song hides serious psychological trauma, while the nice family surface also turns out to be mere pretension, but the film does not provide spectators with enough information concerning their original secret. All in all, Driver Yoon's case illustrates the whole affair: when discussing his dark secret of potential perversion, Mrs. Park says that she did not know that he was this kind of guy which also entails that the driver was hiding something which now got revealed – his real nature. However, as the assumption that people are ultimately unknowable surfaces, speculations arise whether there is more hidden behind Yoon's mask. This process recalls the uncanny in the sense that these secrets have always been assumed to be there under the surface, but were never seen. At the same time, the person seems familiar (his appearance has not changed), but, in the light of what has been revealed, he is assigned new meaning and becomes increasingly unfamiliar.

Mr. Park's question, "Didn't you pay him well?" supposes that, by paying employees a good sum of money, employers expect them to maintain a clear cut divide between work and personal life – a state in which entering the workplace inevitably demands pretention which can result in a dissociative state "characterized by the presence of two or more distinct or split identities or personality states" (Bhandari). The film assumes that everyone and everything has a dark, hidden secret to be unveiled since everyone is pretending to be someone else and the real nature of people is waiting to be revealed in every case. This results in paranoid thoughts and lack of trust connected to members of the precariat especially because they infiltrate the homes of rich families without them knowing who exactly they let into their homes.

(Un)homely spaces in disguise: The house as the inherently unstable structure of capitalism

Pretention and instability are central elements of the film and haunt its text continuously not only interpersonally, but spatially as well. This appears multiple times throughout the film in numerous still shots which show people being present or moving about in the same space without the others knowing about it. An example of this can be seen in the scene showing Mr. and Mrs. Park conversing when a tracking shot suddenly reveals Ki-jung standing behind a wall eavesdropping, unnoticed (see fig. 5) illustrating that even the structure of the house is designed to keep secrets as there are numerous corners to hide behind or under which make the building appear increasingly unhomely and ultimately unknowable.

Through these unknowable, hidden corners the house exhibits features of the gothic and, in his examination of such spaces, Peter Romaneski claims that the gothic attacks "bodies of institutionalized power: governments, religious bodies, social hierarchies, … and more" in the form of presenting "places of power … as places of destruction instead of order, or of order masking ruin. … Human destruction is rooted in the foundations of the power centers meant to guard against that same destruction" (1). Similarly, the Park's house becomes a site of power: situated above the slums of Seoul and being spacious in terms of its arrangement, wealth and superiority gets associated with the building. Additionally, its premises are also heavily protected: on the outside, the house is more like a fortress with its seemingly impenetrable concrete walls which also signal an increased need for protection on the part of those possessing capital.

Simultaneously, the house, built and previously owned by Mr. Namgoong, can also be characterized as a space of ruin as new owners continuously invade and take over the previous owner's space. This way, the interior of the house is exposed to constant reconstruction through succeeding owners and their structural preferences resulting in the establishment a new kind of order in the house. In this sense, the house resembles the process of class struggles as well as the historical development

of production accompanied by the corresponding socio-political changes: "the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces. … They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder. Into their place stepped free competition, accompanied by a social and political constitution adapted to it, and by the economic and political sway of the bourgeois class" (Marx and Engels 8).

The house also conceals its original, deeper secret by maintaining a nice surface, but that which is hidden under its deceptive outer appearance is the terrifying truth of the capitalist system. As a locus of ruin, the basement hides the secret upon which the whole structure of power and luxury is built: just like parasites, the ruling class exists on exploiting and ruining the labouring classes. Wright further elaborates on this particular nature of economic inequality inherent in the capitalist system and describes it in the following manner: "At the very heart of capitalism is a sharp inequality between those who own capital and those who don't … Most participants in labor markets need a job much more than any employer needs their labor. … this power imbalance further intensifies, generating a very specific kind of inequality: exploitation. … the rich are rich, in part, because the poor are poor" (Wright 25). Alex Jung also addresses this contemporary, socially conscious aspect of the movie in his review when he calls the nice, elaborate surface of the house a "scam" and states that it "ultimately reveals something more insidious: that wealth is always built upon poverty and that the two are locked in a constant struggle." The problem of exploitation has been present for a period of time: published in 1867, Karl Marx takes to gothic metaphors in *Capital* to highlight the workings of the capitalist economy. He associates the bourgeoisie with the figure of the vampire who feeds on the lives of others and maintains its existence by sucking the life out of the labouring classes. The vampire's existence also depends on exploitation and destruction and, in this sense, the monster's desire for blood has been interpreted by Franco Moretti as "a metaphor for capital's desire for accumulation. The more he gets, the stronger he becomes, and the weaker the living on whom he feeds become … Like capital, Dracula is impelled towards a continuous growth, an unlimited expansion of his domain: accumulation is inherent in his nature" (Moretti qtd. in Neocleous 678). In popular literature, vampires have also been mainly coming from the upper-classes as feudal aristocrats, like Count Dracula. Based on these, Parasite builds up an association between the Parks and this figure of the vampire and thus presents the audience with another 'monster' of capitalism.

However, by inhabiting a structure built upon and held up by the oppressed labouring classes, this illusory structure of power becomes increasingly unstable which becomes especially prominent in moments that reveal the secret of the house. Just like the house, capitalism also has its in-built "self-destructive tendencies" that "undermine the viability of the capitalist state," and of which Wright writes in the following manner:

> "Financial sectors are prone to speculative "bubbles" in which people borrow money to invest in assets whose price is rising… . As more people borrow money to invest in the asset, this pushes the asset price even higher. Eventually, the bubble bursts and the price collapses, which means that many investors default on their loans, which in turn triggers a crisis of the banking sector. The result is periodic serious economic crises that destroy many firms, create great harm to large numbers of people, and increase social instability" (100–101)

In this sense, the structure's instability is inherent, built-in and, through the periodical visits from the man living in the basement, small-scale disruptions (as in meeting Da-song, see fig. 1) are created which would lead up to the concluding monstrous crisis in the end of the narrative.

This structural instability haunts the text of the film from the beginning and is also enacted by the constant changes in hierarchical levels of high and low presented by the frequent appearance of staircases (see fig. 2 and 3). This kind of instability is mainly experienced by members of the precariat as they are the ones who appear running up and down staircases the most and can be seen as a symbol of the precariat's employment insecurity which is also a reason they live without "an anchor of stability" (Standing 1). Early in the film, a tracking shot follows Ki-woo climbing the stairs leading up to the Park's house and, along with the viewer, he is blinded by the excessive sunlight for a moment which also signals his arrival into a new, foreign world (see fig. 2). Pausing for a moment, the audience is also given a chance to glimpse upon the spaciousness as well as the rich vegetation surrounding the house through a horizontal arc shot. After this, the other prominent staircase scene takes place later on in the film where, having successfully escaped from the Park house, the camera follows some members of the Kim family home throughout several still shots of them running down staircases in the pouring rain. Even though the Kims seemed to be profoundly settled in the house above, their fall happens within minutes which surprises the viewer. Meanwhile, the journey home seems to take forever and thus reinforces the huge vertical divide between the upper and lower classes as this is the moment the audience gets to know the actual distance Ki-woo had to travel to the Park house. The camera's focus on water also signals that members of the precariat live in the lowest part of the city since (sewage) water tends to accumulate only at the very bottom of a landscape, while water and moist are also symbols of poverty.

However, it is not just the precariat whose situation is unstable, but also the situation of the ruling class: the film, by presenting a space which gets increasingly unreliable and uncertain through revealing several hidden secrets, questions the length of time left for the ruling classes for maintaining their position in the midst of the ever widening divide and inequality without serious consequences.

A warning for the future: The inevitability of a brutally violent class-conflict

In *Parasite,* the sharpening of the class conflict seems inevitable as the intensification of violent tendencies is present not only between different classes, but between members of the same class as well. Being in positions where working is a condition of living, members of the precariat have to fight with one another for their own survival. Standing also refers to this neo-Darwinist nature of the neo-liberal state and states that, in this sense, the state "reveres competitiveness and celebrates unrestrained individual responsibility, with an antipathy to anything collective that might impede market forces… The market is the embodiment of the Darwinian metaphor, 'the survival of the fittest'" (Standing 132). Thus, the market is filled with considerable violence, gradually intensifying and, many times, resulting in deadly outcomes. In *Parasite,* the struggle between people belonging to the same economic background, the fragmentation of contemporary class structures, and the lack of class solidarity is given a significant emphasis during the scene where the struggle for the phone bearing the evidence of truth turns into a merciless fight for survival. As power relations are gradually shifting between the two groups, whoever ends on top becomes heartless enjoying the power allotted to them. During this scene, the precariat's association with cockroaches reaches its height as the slow-mo technique demands attention to the details and the nature of the fight. By showing people heaped on top of one another, this sequence immediately brings to mind the way cockroaches trample on each other driven by their instincts to survive, leaving little or no place for consideration for the others (see fig. 4).

The divide between the classes gets manifested/emphasized/is taken to an extreme: even before Da-song's birthday party, there is an observable distance between Mrs. Park and Mrs. Kim apparent in the way Mrs. Park withholding her gaze from Mrs. Kim, but is preoccupied with Jessica and with getting everything done in the best way possible. This divide is taken a step further with the appearance of the man from the basement as a consequence of which social order collapses. The focus of the frame gets fragmented in the sense that the camera simultaneously deals with the concerns of both classes by using rapid whip pan shots. This way, the lack of cooperation and solidarity is emphasized and becomes tragic as the camera technique also illustrates this division and does not unite the classes. This suggests that the divide has become so big that, even in times of crises, people cannot put aside their social and financial differences to help each other, while it also anticipates the seriousness of social problems.

As tension gradually builds up, the film reaches its climax in the inevitable outbreak of a violent class conflict which can be regarded as one the worst fears of contemporary society. E. Alex Jung in his review of *Parasite* highlights that the film "hits a nerve, tapping into the persistent feeling that we are on the brink of social

collapse" while the director claims that "[t]he true horror and fear of *Parasite* isn't just about how the present-day situation is bad but that it will only continue to get worse," (Jung). For the first time in the film, the camera establishes a connection between the upper and lower classes through the sewage system which is illustrated by a powerful parallel shot which shows Kuk Mungvang vomiting into the toilet in the basement of the Park house followed by a rapid cut to Ki-jung fighting the waste-flooded bathroom. In this sense, both classes are connected through the sewage system running underneath and, just like in the case of the capitalist system, its operation remains completely unnoticed up until it runs smoothly. However, as systems are prone to disruption and cannot remain stable forever, these problems can result in tragic outcomes with the lower classes suffering its consequences the most as they literally swim in the waste products of the upper classes. Here, the filth of the two worlds encounter, mingle and bring about the collapse of the divide between the classes and this encounter foreshadows the conflict at the end of the film. Julia Kristeva claims that "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982, 4; Kalmár 2021, 21.). Likewise, "proper" society can only exist as long as certain people, behaviours and practices are marginalised, separated, and cast out (thrown into the sea, locked up in institutions, kept separated in ghettos, slums or concentration camps). The crucial psychoanalytical insight in this respect is that the abject looks so threatening and evokes so much disgust because somehow it belongs to us, it is a part of *our*selves that must be disavowed so that we can exist as clean and proper subjects (Kalmár 2021, 21.). The same thing happens when the man comes out of the basement and the blood of the precariat gets spilled on the surface and threatens the cleanliness of the rich as it literally defiles their clothes, hands, and personal belongings.

To avoid the disruption of their identities, the rich seclude themselves in a world full of polished surfaces, sophisticated music, and grandiose celebrations that conceal the noise of the murderous acts committed in the basement which consequently remain unnoticed. Finally, the man from the basement reaches the sunlight, but still remains unnoticed by members of the upper class who are busy celebrating, absorbed in their own world of sunlight in which the man appears as a dark spot because of his dark apparel. For this reason, the man's appearance on the surface highlights the ignorance of the upper classes as he is the problem they avoid facing with: he is the ghost of the capitalist system that the upper classes are trying to disregard and his fury and brutal acts show the urgency of the need to deal with contemporary problems of society. Mr. Park's surprised question "You know me?" at getting face to face with the man also refers to the fact that he lives in a secluded world of polished surfaces and is not interested in paying attention to what lies under those deceptive surfaces as long as it does not threaten his life. This is why he is not familiar with the repressed returning in the form of the man. In addition to this, the camera work seems to suggest the same: as long as the man is kept out of reach everything remains

fine and order gets to be maintained. From his first appearance on screen, he does not share a frame with anyone except members of the precariat, however, as soon as he shows himself and gets to be within one frame with members of the upper classes, social order is disturbed and collapses immediately. In this respect, the man from the basement recalls and can be associated with the gothic notion of the ghost restlessly haunting the house (the capitalist system) due to an unfinished business he has to settle. He rises and comes back for revenge (against social-economical injustices) and raises awareness of the fact that ignoring the problem (the condition of the precariat, the products of the system) and its repression is simply not an option anymore.

Even though the crisis eases the accumulated tension, the end of the film gives rise to concerns as not even such bloodbath seem to resolve the class conflict: with serious losses on both sides, the state seeks to punish the perpetrators/criminals without any consideration for their motives, their lives and position in society and still disregarding the way these people are made monstrous by the state and the workings of the capitalist economy. This leads to Mr. Kim having to hide under the structure of the house, into the basement and thus, to become a ghost suggesting that the cycle continues and will probably be repeated again. The class conflict gets resolved for a while, but the problems are left unattended, which anticipates the outbreak of another such conflict in the future.

Conclusion

One of the biggest fears in contemporary societies can be related to the rapid rising of a new class-in-the-making: the precariat. Arising from the sharp inequalities generated and perpetuated by neo-liberal capitalist economies, members of the labouring classes face exploitation and unstable working conditions. The rapid transformation from being relatively well off into a state of complete vulnerability in the eyes of society can be seen as a weak point, but it can also be converted into a virtue. *Parasite* not only presents members of the precariat as victims of the system, but also illustrates their uncanny strength by way of associating them with cockroaches – a connotation which makes them appear as rather dangerous (political) monsters whose unstable identities provide ways of adaptation to new set of situations, thus strengthening them. A considerable amount of anxiety is produced by the deceitful outward appearance of both humans and inanimate objects in the film, while further tension is generated by the fluctuations in hierarchical levels – all of which enact the instability inherent in the structure of the capitalist system. The film can also be considered as a warning in itself as the ending represents one of the worst possible outcomes for the resolution of an upcoming, inevitably violent class struggle.

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Images

Figure 1. The uncanny secret of the basement. Still from *Parasite* (1:21:40).

Figure 2. An example of downward change in levels. Still from *Parasite* (1:32:36).

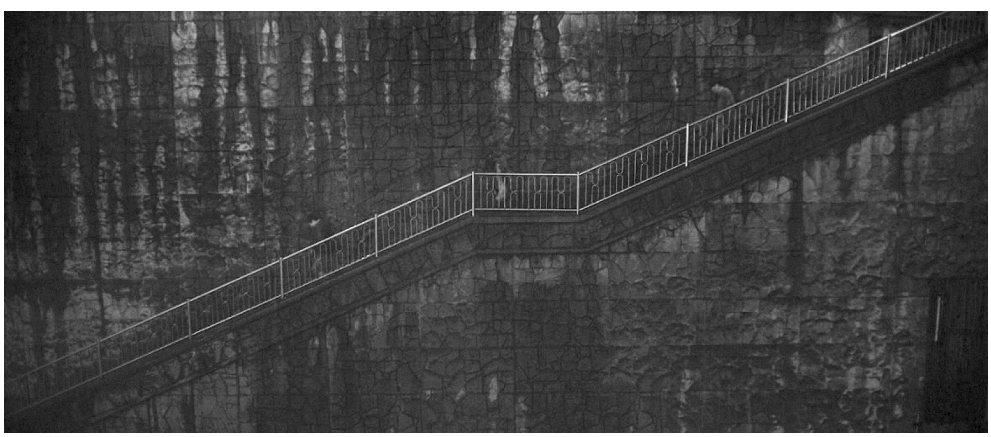

Figure 3. An example of upward change in levels. Still from *Parasite* (13:02).

Figure 4. Cockroach-like fight for the phone. Still from *Parasite* (1:14:44).

Figure 5. Concealed presence. Still from *Parasite* (0:34:46).

Aysel Aghayeva

The Meaning of Family in *Shoplifters*

There is a famous quote by Leo Tolstoy, which says 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'. Watching Hirokazu Koreeda's films one cannot help but wonder if the famous Japanese director and screen writer aims to prove or deny this claim. Koreeda has been concerned with one question for years and he has been addressing this issue in almost all of his films – "What is a family?" To many people family unconditional love, acceptance, trust and loyalty and caring for one another. Blood ties people stronger than anything, making it almost impossible to give up on your family. Yet, for Koreeda, this definition is more of a starting point for further explorations than an answer. His films explore questions that seem as unsettling as timely. Does blood mean family? Does being family gives people right to control the other and have power over them? What happens to the ancient institution of the family in the contemporary modern, urban setting? And what is the role of the family when, due to 21st century social disruptions or dysfunctions (Kalmár 2021), the modern state cannot fulfil its promises of care?

One of Koreeda's most popular films, released in 2018, is *Shoplifters,* which first premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and won the Palme D'or. This film left critics and viewers in awe, making them question the values and some of the truth they know of life. This film, just like the director's other works, addresses the question of the non-biological family, poverty, social status and the hardships that people have to face in the unjust society where work and money seem to be scarce.

Hirokazu Koreeda was inspired by reports on poverty and shoplifting around Japan. Koreeda admitted that he has been contemplating making this film for ten years and did not want it to only be from one perspective. This 'socially conscious film' needed to capture the family within society, how its members interact with the outside world and each other. The film is set in Tokyo, exploring the living environment and the desperate situation of a family, who can only rely on stealing to survive, even though all the adult members of the family are working. *Shoplifters* was strongly influenced by Recession in Japan as well as Koreeda's visit to the orphanage where he met a little girl reading *Smimmy* by Leo Lionni.

Japan's current economic and legal system has been established after the Second World War, in 1947, the year where not only the economy, but also fertility rates bloomed. "An economic boom associated with post-war reconstruction and the

Korean War followed, along with a brief surge in fertility paralleling the Western baby boom. A ten-year income, implemented in 1960, achieved its target in six years" (Aoki 104). Thus, the decades following the Second World War were considered the best in Japan's history and were economically beneficial. However, the boom which followed the post-war era soon gave way to decades of downfall.

The decline in Japan's economy began in 1989, when the Bank of Japan in fear of inflation raised the market prices and the interest rates from 2.5% to 6% by the summer of 1990. The period between the early 1990s and 2000s is known as "Japan's Lost Decade". There are numerous reasons why Japan still cannot recover from this downfall, like the change in population growth, increase in the number of the elderly, which stalls the labour market and brings major shifts into the social services, innovations and productions. While externally Japan's advantages have shifted to China in production of electronics and labour, internally the country has grown weaker with the traditional values and family expectations that are placed on the younger generation.

Japanese culture values and respects their elderly, which makes it hard for the government to take any kind of resources or pensions away from them, keeping them as valid members of society, even when they can no longer work. As such, one of the major factors in the continuity of the Lost Decades is the long levity and low fertility rates, as "the shifting age structure worked against badly needed economic adjustments, as resources continue to be directed towards aging members of the society" (Aoki 103). The Japanese traditional family mainly consists of the parents and children, where the eldest son is usually expected to take care of the entire family after a certain age and provide for the parents, just like his younger siblings. The children are expected to look after their parents and grandparents, which creates the ripples in the economy, which to this day are hard to fix.

Writing the script for the *Shoplifters* Koreeda based his research on the statistics and portrayed the uneasy family situation of a 'traditional' Japanese family in the volatile contemporary economic environment, which made life hard for each of them. Every member of the family worked or earned money in a way and yet it seemed to be barely enough to help them through the month, in which case they restored to stealing. Koreeda takes away the blood ties as it is not what keeps these people together, instead he links them using deep emotional bonds, as he searches for the answer to the same question – "What is a family?"

Yuri (Miyu Sasaki) is a fine example of the complexities interesting Koreeda. Her 'real family', her biological parents who are tied to her by blood abused and neglected her, they left her alone and unattended, not even reporting her missing to the police until their neighbours noticed the girl missing. Yuri was returned to her mother, because she was her biological daughter, but as viewers we do not feel any love between the mother and the little girl. If family means love and caring, the way Yuri's biological parents treat her make them the total opposite of a family, while the

Shibatas, who take the girl in and treat her like their own without any blood relation, feel like her true family.

The Shibatas are connected by many things, such as money, trust, past traumas, love and poverty, basically everything except blood. *Shoplifters* proves that family does not end in blood, neither does it begin there, and people do not need to be tied by biology or blood to love and care for one another. We do not need to give birth to become parents or to have the same parents to be siblings. It is this contrast between ties of blood and care that Nobuyo points out when she asks "what if we can choose our own parents?" The spectator of the film tends to agree with her that if given a true choice probably many people, like maybe Yuri, would not chose the biological parents.

In Japan family is defined as *Toda,* which is "(1) composed of husband/father, wife/mother, parents, children and close relatives, (2) founded on cooperation based on their emotional fusion, (3) characterized by the existence of natural, subordinate relationships amongst its members…" (Nonoyama 29). This structure of the Japanese family is defined as *ie*, which can be understood as "stem family" or 'nuclear family', consistent of at least one member of every generation or parents and their children, yet *ie* also "means the household is characterized as a corporate body of coresidents, each performing his/her role to maintain it" (Kumagai 138). At first glance all these qualities are present in Shibatas, the family around which *Shoplifters* is built, as they seem like an ordinary Japanese household who is holding the ideals of *ie*, with the oldest daughter/son living with their parent and children and any other close family member. As the viewers are exposed to this seemingly ordinary family, with their own faults and secrets, they don't question their true relations to one another until the last minutes where one after the other secrets are revealed and what seems to be the traditional 'Toda' falls to pieces.

The head of the household, father/husband is Osamu Shibata (Lily Franky) who works as a construction worker. In accordance with the rules of the *ie,* which were set during the feudal era in Japan, the eldest son has to bear the responsibility over the entire family and provide for them both money and protection. With the new additions made to the Civil Code in 1947, right after the war, the government tried to stop the *ie* system, which put incredible pressure on the eldest children and created a hierarchy within a family. While the ideal view of this new enactment was enticing it did little to change the persistent *ie* system which the traditional Japanese family still holds on to. That is however not to say that the traditional family did not change at all, so while the "Japanese family system may not truly be modern, but may contain elements of both traditional and modernity" (Kumagai 139) and the parents in many cases have separated their households and lifestyles, as well as their income as to not burden the children.

This 'modern' change is obvious in the Shibata family too, as each member of the family seem to be keeping and using their own income for themselves, not sharing

with the others, except little kids who are not yet of age to work. However, 'traditional' values are also present in *Shoplifters* as the entire 'family' live together (even their sister/aunt) with three generations all sharing the same living space. Moreover, Osamu seems to be considered as the head of the household. Even with everyone working, he is still expected to work and provide for them. This becomes more obvious at his accident: when he breaks his leg and is unable to work for a month, everyone grows worried and distressed. Their worry quiets down only when they learn that he will still receive the minimal wage that will be paid in his absence. Osamu is also the one who teaches Shota (Jyo Kairi) how to shoplift and has the 'talk' with him about 'boys' and 'girls', thus (albeit in twisted ways), he performs several traditional functions of a father.

As we learn later in the film, Shota is not Osamu and Nobuyo's real son, they kidnapped/took him out of a car parked in front of a casino, yet they raised him as their own and never treated him as an outsider. While Shota knows they are not blood related he never questioned their family ties, listens to his parents and sees Osamu as a father figure, even if he won't say 'dad'. And in a sense Shota not being able to call the man 'dad' could be considered the boy's own little rebellion against this messy family as he realizes that the stealing they are doing is not morally right. He questions their actions many times, always getting the same answer from Osamu, where he blames the economy, claims that they are justified and so on. The father figure of the family is not teaching his kid what is right and what is wrong, he is not protecting and shielding, instead the father is dragging the children, first Shota and then Yuri, into the life of crime and stealing. Osamu teaches the kids how to steal and tells them that it is ok to do so as long as 'no one goes bankrupt'. Yuri, too young to understand the difference, and perhaps too afraid to be left alone or abused again, follows Osamu and Nobuyo's tips, does not ask questions or doubts the new parents.

Shota on the other hand is already older and has seen more than Yuri, he is the one who starts to understand how wrong what they are doing is, how unhealthy their life has become and that what the parents are teaching them is not the right way of living. He starts seeing himself as Yuri's older brother and so realizes that he is responsible for her. As they steal together and are almost caught on few occasions, the boy begins to understand that this kind of life is not for kids, that what they are doing is against the law and can hurt them and the others. His worries and dilemma come to an end when he sees Yuri steal and decides to interfere, which leads to the narrative closure of the film: he gets caught stealing, suffers an accident while attempting to escape, the officials notice the strange family and their shady dealings, and the Shibatas are finally judged for all their dubious actions. It is worth noting that it is only at this point, after Shota's meaningful decision, that the Shibatas' secrets, true bonds and motivations are revealed to the spectator.

Koreeda explored the meaning of family, both modern and traditional as he shows that "the family as a group is also a living entity within which it is necessary to maintain a division of labour for a stable daily life. Division of labour evolves among

genders, generations, and ages" (Nonoyama 34). In *Shoplifters,* while Osamu and Shota are considered the 'older sons', they are not the only providers for the family, all the other members are also busy earning money and dealing with their own lives, each of them facing different dilemmas and trying to solve their issues. Each Shibata works or earns their own living, through whatever means they can, using their own cunning minds and abilities, without being questioned or judged by the others.

Aki (popstar Mayu Matsuoka) works in a sex booth, where while keeping her clothes on she is required to do erotic dances to please her patrons, some of whom can invite her to a VIP room. Despite having decent, wealthier parents, she chose living her grandmother and the Shibatas, with the agreement that she keeps what she earns. Aki, except for Yuri, is the only member of the rag-tag family who does have her own blood relatives and yet is refusing to live with them, the reasons of which are not explained. She seems happy living with Shibatas, even knowing what they do, liking the fact that they accept her, never pressure her into anything and just let her live her own life. Aki seems to have found her own happiness with these criminals, while escaping from her own blood relatives. Yet, she is also feeling anxious and lonely throughout the plot, seeking deeper connection and looking for love, questioning if she will ever find it.

For her the role models are Osamu and Nobuyo, as she wonders if she can find the same kind of partnership in someone they found in each other. The film does not explain directly why Aki left her family, yet the small hints suggest that for the twenty-something girl it is easier to live with this family she chose for herself, a family that does not judge or pressure her. In many Japanese families, especially after the Second World War, there was a shift in the mother-child dynamic. Fathers worked long hours and the mothers' compensated for their absence with the time spent on their children. This put more pressure also on the children, especially as "Japanese mothers today become frantically education-minded in their socialization practices and pay less attention to playing emotionally nurturing roles" (Kumagai 152).

Aki's reluctance to go back home and her distance from any topic that may involve someone wondering about her parents could be a clear indication that she felt pressured and constricted with her own blood relatives. Her being the older sister and the first child by the *ie* standards put a lot of pressure on the young girl, in a sense forcing her into a certain role which may have made her uncomfortable. If we consider the statistics shown by Kumagai in his paper "Families in Japan: Belief's and Realities", then one may presume that Aki, just like many other children of Japanese families may have been pressured into being perfect in everything she does, including her studies and her looks, and thus her main motivation was to escape that kind of toxic environment. When compared to such widespread cultural expectations and practices, life at the Shibatas seems liberating, free of the toxic, maximalist features of Japanese culture.

Aki, Osamu and Shota are not the only ones who deal with their own doubts and lives, while also trying to keep the small, messy family they created for themselves. One of the most interesting and mysterious characters in *Shoplifets'* exploration of human relationships is the grandmother (Kiki Kilin), who is the owner of the house and who lets all the Shibatas live with her, while supposedly receiving her later husband's pension. There are many mysteries about this woman, which get unveiled mostly after her death. It is only after she is buried that the Shibatas learn that her income was more than she implied, and that the old woman kept the extra money for herself. As it turn out, the grandmother was left by her late husband for a mistress, and now she uses his infidelity to play on her relative's bad conscience and extort money from them. She also played a part in convincing Aki to live with her, as a sort of a small revenge on the son her husband had with another woman.

It is clear that despite her lies and deceit, the grandmother genuinely cares for both Yuri and Aki, whom she practically took under her wing. During the dinner scene when Yuri first joins them, later while shopping, and last on the beach it becomes obvious that the grandmother honestly wants to protect and keep the family she has found. She is the elder, by the *ie* standards she should be considered as both care giver and cared for. While she could rightfully rely on her children for help and protection, and while the other members do treat her with respect and love, most of the times the film creates an impression that she is the one who is protecting them. In her own way she teaches Yuri how to be loved, slowly pulling her out of her shell and proving to her that not everyone will hurt her. She also gives Aki hope, freedom and chances to explore herself, to find who she is. When talking with Nobuyo about Yuri's future, she mentions the woman's past, seeking to find her real feelings about the kids she is raising as their own, even in such a weird and potentially unhealthy environment.

Koreeda makes the grandmother's intentions clear though her actions, rather than her words as he shows that this old woman, just like the rest is trying to keep their little family together. She does not care about their crimes or mistakes, she does not judge them, but instead she leads them to the right path and shows them that there is still to gain. In her own way she becomes a proof to all of them that even without any blood ties they can still be a true family, bound together by something stronger than blood – trust. While (perhaps wisely) she does not trust them with her money, she does trust them with her life and in exchange for giving her this little family she returns the favour by giving them a roof over their heads.

Throughout the film it feels that, apart from Yuri and Shota, everyone is aware that this game of family will not last forever. They are trying to enjoy every moment, waiting for the day to come when this is all over, yet not letting themselves be lost in the illusion. Koreeda treats these characters with sympathy and understanding, and even when the truth is revealed, it is presented in a way that makes them lovable and relatable.

The question Koreeda seems to be asking throughout the *Shoplifters* is reflected best in Yuri and her backstory, before she came to live with Shibatas. The little girl is found by Osamu and Shota on the way back from shoplifting from the supermarket, when they notice her sitting in the balcony out in the cold. It is only later, when Nobuyo and her husband try to take the girl back that hear the shouting and realize what kind of household she comes from. It is after this incident that they kidnap the child and let her live with them. The moral paradox they face is similar to the above discussed questions concerning the true bonds of family, whether is it based on blood or care. Similarly, here they have to decide whether they follow the laws and norms of a dysfunctional society, or decide to take care of the abandoned Yuri, even if that makes them criminals in the eyes of the law.

These paradoxes constitute the key psychological, social and moral questions that the film explores. It is obvious that the lifestyle that the Shibatas lead may be dangerous for a child. Being taught how to steal, lie and hide may not seem like an ideal education, yet emotionally this life is a lot safer for the little girl than living together with her abusive parents. Yuri lived with an emotionally unstable mother, who knew little about love or caring, which made her fear everything and shy away even from the softest of touches. Even the neighbours, who informed the police when she disappeared, who have heard the shouting and screams from inside the house never bothered to inform the police or authorities about child neglect and abuse, only getting 'worried' when they did not see Yuri. When Osamu and Shota pass by the freezing girl on the balcony, they are forced to face the same questions as the film's spectators. What is the duty of a citizen in a dysfunctional society that forgot how to care for others? How should one navigate the grey zone between what the law allows and what seems right? Koreeda does not directly answer these questions, his strategy is rather that of confronting the viewer with a set of emotionally charged, heavy moral choices that keep revolving in our minds long after the film is over.

At the end of the day, the Shibatas, with all their secrets open, their lives separated and in shambles, become the symbol of what a family should be like. Arguably their difference from the law and social norms only highlight their humanity and intrinsic values that the disintegrating, modern society around them so painfully lacks. This family of criminals, liars and deceivers proves to be the kind of self-made family that is able to make all the members happy, kept them together, give them a chance to work, build their own characters and find themselves in any way they can. Thus, in the laboratory of the Shibata household Koreeda manages to build the dynamic of an imperfect, crooked, yet deeply humane family.

Indeed, the film testifies that family means unconditional love, trust and caring, understanding and support at any moment, which does not always coincide with blood ties. By the end of this film of deceptive appearances, make-belief-relatives, shoplifters, illegal dwellers, kidnappers, and social service abusers, there is only one constant, there is only one point of reference for one's moral compass: the ability to care and love. That such basic, age-old and kitschy conclusions may seem acceptable

for the film's spectator reveals a lot about the depth of the crisis of our present (off-) modern societies. Indeed, it is in the context of the early 21st century crisis of the modern state that such alternative formations of care as the Shibata family gain their full social and artistic significance.

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Fatima El Aidi

The Representations of Social Inequality in 21st Century Moroccan Film

Since the very beginnings of the 21st century, Morocco has experienced numerous changes in terms of its economic and political systems, social development, education, technology, law, culture, and art. There are abundant factors behind these transformations, the most important of which is the succession of king Mohammed VI to the throne in 1999. The young king is known to be a modern, liberal art lover who came with ambitious intentions and plans to push the country forward and keep pace with the changes that take place everywhere in the world (Mansour, 2019). The era of king Mohammed VI is also characterized with more freedom of political speech and activity. Concerning the economy of Morocco, there is a noticeable progress in comparison with the previous century. Since the 2000s, the kingdom's GDP has practically doubled to hit all time records. Not only has this newfound wealth helped the country reduce its poverty rate by half, but it has also set Morocco on the road to become one of the leading developing countries in the region (Lahsini, 2017). As a result of these changes and the outcomes of technological development, globalization, modernization, and the effects of French colonialism (even after years from independence), Moroccan society has undergone an unprecedented transformation when it came to the lifestyles and mind-sets of the people. All of this led to a radical change in people's way of thinking, dressing, eating, talking and even dreaming.

The king has also given much more attention to women's position in society and gender issues, and responded to the demands of women's rights supporters despite Islamists' opposition. In 2004, Morocco adopted a new family code that puts women on equal footing with men in regard to marriage and children. It places the family under the joint responsibility of the husband and the wife instead of the husband only, and curbs the submission of women to the guardianship of a male member of the family. Despite being hailed as a great step forward for women's rights and as a model for the broader Muslim world, a significant group of Moroccan men disapproved of the new family code and some even said that it was against Islamic Jurisprudence. As far a women are concerned, the majority were overjoyed to finally have a law that protects them from all kinds of violence and discrimination. Nevertheless, a lot of people, especially from rural areas, were unaware of the new family code which means that effective implementation of those laws cannot be guaranteed all over Morocco (Hanafi, 2012, 518–523).

Although Morocco is widely known as the country of tolerance, co-existence, safety and hospitality, it was the victim of two suicidal operations that took place in Casablanca (2003) and Marrakech (2011). As a result of these horrifying terroristic attacks, the kingdom adopted an ambitious policy to combat extremism and spread a moderate, tolerant Islam. Furthermore, Morocco has been affected by the Arab Spring just like the rest of the world but in a different way from countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. On the 20th of February 2011, protests were held all over the country demanding radical political, economic and social reforms in order to eradicate corruption and improve the living conditions of Moroccan citizens. As a response to the people's demands, the constitution was rectified and political power became shared between the monarch and an elected bicameral parliament. In November 2011, the Islamic party of Justice and Development won the elections though it has been in the opposition since its establishment (Ottaway, 2011). The new constitution also reassures that men and women enjoy equal civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and freedoms. Plus, it encourages the participation of youths and women in political life (Hanafi, Hites, 2017).

Various changes and reforms have targeted the film industry in Morocco as well. The journey of Moroccan cinema started relatively late, particularly after the country gained its independence from France in 1956. Only then, the Moroccan cinematographic centre could take complete charge of producing newsreels, informational films, and documentaries that the state could utilize to form public opinion. By the end of the 1950s, Moroccan filmmakers were finally able to move into feature production with Mohamed Osfour's *The Damned Son*. Later, during the 1970s, sixteen films were produced, among them *Traces* by Hamid Bennani and *Oh the Days* by Ahmed Maanaoui. The former has until now been considered the first "truly Moroccan" film while the latter represented Morocco for the first time in Cannes film festival in 1978 (Carter, 2009).

Thanks to the state's support, especially with the current king, Morocco has moved from being a host country where several international films were shot (usually producing biased and misrepresentative representations) to becoming the third biggest producer of films in Africa and the second in the Arab world (Dardar, 2020). According to the Moroccan cinematographic centre, Morocco, today, produces from ten to fifteen feature films a year and organizes several film festivals, the largest and most famous one of which is the festival of Marrakech which draws attendees from around the globe. Briefly, Moroccan cinema has made remarkable progress in comparison with the previous century. The increase in the support funds, the return of some filmmakers from abroad, the rise of women filmmakers, the lessening of censorship and the initiatives hosted to support young aspiring filmmakers have resulted in the production of great films that have known international success and won different awards inside and outside the country (Carter, 2009).

When Moroccan filmmakers became more concerned with probing social realities and uncovering hidden taboos in a professional, artistic and life-like manner,

their films received recognition and were nominated and awarded at national and international film festivals such as Venice, Cannes, and Berlin. For example, Nabil Ayouch's incredible film about street children in Morocco, *Ali Zaoua,* was awarded the Bronze Horse for best film at the Stockholm Film Festival and other awards from Montreal and Alexandria Film Festivals. Moreover, films that challenge social oppression and tackle stories of rebellion and survival tend to be successful at festivals such as Faouzi Bensaïdi's *Volubilis* which won best film at Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia and other awards from Tangier in Morocco and El Gouna in Egypt. Additionally, films based on true stories such as Roschdy Zem's *Omar killed me* and Nabil Ayouch's *Horses of God* won different awards from Cannes and Bruxelles. The former is considered the only Moroccan film to be named as one of the nine shortlisted entries for the Oscars (ElKhayati, 2020.)

Furthermore, films that shed light on youth issues, social, psychological and emotional conflicts, gender inequality, class stratification, identity, tradition versus modernity, isolation, moral corruption, immigration and disappointment attract people's and critics' attention because they mirror the reality of contemporary Morocco. The best examples are *CasaNegra* by Nour-Eddine Lakhmari, *Marock* by Leila Marrakchi, *Death for Sale* by Faouzi Bensaïdi, *A Mile in My Shoe*s by Said Khallaf, *Stateless* by Narjiss Nejjar and *The Sleeping Child* by Yasmine Kassari. Unfortunately, no single movie could make it to the Oscars so far even as a nominee due to the high expenses of advertising and communication campaigns that no Moroccan producer can afford as stated by the director of the Moroccan Cinematographic Centre Sarim Fassi Fehri. The current president of "Fonds d'Aide pour le Cinéma," Rita El Khayat, added that the level and the artistic power of Moroccan films are very weak in comparison with giants of world cinema (in terms of story, screenplay, direction, montage, music, ect). However, the unprecedented selection of Nabil Ayouch's *Casablanca Beats* (2021) to compete for the Palms D'OR is a source of pride to the Moroccan film industry and a first step on a long road (Haskouri, 2021.)

Representations of Various Breaks in the Social Fabric and their Consequences

The various breaks and changes that came about in Moroccan society have had a great influence on the artistic content of cinema. For instance, the 2002 film *Casablanca Casablanca* mirrors the freedom of political expression as Farida Benlyazid tackles very insular socio-cultural and political events that took place in Morocco in the 1990s. She covers the social ills plaguing contemporary Morocco such as the disparity between class and economic strata, the tensions between modernity and traditionalism, the uneven politics of human rights, old totalitarian practices, social and administrative corruption, oppression, misuse of power, violence against women, poverty, unemployment and disappointment (Orlando, 2011). Other films that

capture political and social corruption are Hisham Lasri's *The End (*2011*), They are the Dogs* (2013) and *Starve your Dog* (2015). Lasri's bold and crude cinema criticizes the political and social injustices of contemporary Morocco and sheds light on serious, frightening incidents from the past such as the Arab spring and years of lead. The latter represents one of the darkest and most oppressive eras in the history of the country that will always be engraved in the memories of Moroccans. For this reason, Lasri decided to revive this era and connect it to the present situation to show how various forms of injustice are practiced over time (ELFaraoui, 2016). Hassan Benjellon's *The Dark Room* (2004), Saad Chraibi's *Jawhara: The Jail's Daughter* (2003) and others took advantage of the new, liberal era of king Mohammed VI to uncover the suffering of political prisoners and their families during the years of lead.

Moreover, the incredible shift in women's position in society thanks to the feminist movement, women's NGO's and reforms of the family code in 2004 have had a remarkable impact on cinema and TV. In 2008, Zakia Tahiri directed the comedy *Number One,* which takes to task the reticence of Moroccan men to embrace the new prescriptions of king Mohammed VI's Moudawana or family code. This is represented through Aziz, a rigid man, who is afraid of losing his privileges and position as a man due to the new laws. Seeing women doing men's jobs, hanging out in cafes, smoking, and wearing modern clothes has come as a shock to him like to most Moroccan men. Aziz imposes his manhood through the mistreatment of others including his wife and employees. However, he is eventually convinced that men and women are partners in life rather than rivals. As a result, he starts treating his wife better, helping with the housework, and sharing all his properties with her. Aziz's male neighbours start looking down on and accusing him of degrading all men with his deeds. In a word, Tahiri's movie is a comedy that calls for the eradication of machismo and misogyny in order to achieve equality and social stability (Orlando, 2011).

Another film about the rising issue of women's rights is Hassan Benjellon's *The Trial of a Woman* in 2001. It tells the story of women's oppression by their husbands through two characters with different backgrounds and lives. The first is a women's rights activist and wife of a stubborn man who disapproves of her work as it distracts her from her duty as a wife and mother. The second is a victim of verbal and physical violence by her ex-husband who finds herself obligated to work as a dancer to provide for her daughter. This type of work subjects her to social stigmatisation, blackmailing and sexual harassment. Benjellon utilizes the movie to criticize the hypocrisy of a judgemental, misogynistic society which tolerates violence, and calls women to support each other in their fight for freedom and gender equality.

Furthermore, the presence of women as scenarists, producers and filmmakers has been incredibly useful for the film industry and women. Female filmmakers have chosen cinema and TV to shed light on themes that are socially engaged, thought-provoking, and, with regard to male filmmakers, more readily cast women in take-charge roles. These women demonstrate an "écriture féminine" on the screen that visually depicts the voice of Moroccan women, a voice that is diverse and, at

the same time, unified in its expression of feminine being in contemporary times (Orlando, 2011, 124–125.)

Major concerns about the restriction of artistic freedom and creativity have been heightened since the 2011 election victory of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD.) As a reaction to that, representatives of the party assured that freedom of expression is a guaranteed right by the constitution. However, Moroccan filmmakers know very well that most of their audiences are conservative and supportive of what is called "clean art". Therefore, they have to work out which "red lines" they can or cannot cross. Moroccan filmmaker, Ahmed Bensouda, stated that there is a possibility to tackle controversial issues and taboos in a way that can attract a "family audience" without creating direct confrontation (Dale, 2015.)

Although Morocco has experienced an astounding advancement in its economy, which resulted in the creation of new job opportunities, the rise of the middle class, the improvement of the living standards and a combined decline in poverty and vulnerability since 2001 (The World Bank, 2017), subjective poverty and unemployment among youth remain at a high level, especially in rural areas. The World Bank issued a report which indicates that the Moroccan economy was pushed into a deep recession in 2020 due to the combination of the pandemic with an agricultural decline. Social corruption, nepotism, lack of equal opportunities, and the failure of the government to meet the population's demands have led to serious dilemmas such as the high rates of unemployment especially among youth and women, poverty, the widening gap between the elites and the precariat and the increase in illegal migration rates (Kasraoui, 2019.) As a consequence, social injustice has become a topic of debate in almost all Moroccan households, cafes, streets, newspapers, TV and cinema. In fact, Moroccan TV and Film do not only entertain but also attempt to mirror the society and shed light on the major issues that the country should deal with.

Representations of Social Inequalities in 21st Century Moroccan Film

Moroccan filmmakers' major focus on social and family issues stems from their dissatisfaction with Morocco's reality today. These socially committed filmmakers tend to use art as a tool to speak for the less fortunate or the precariat, and induce social change.

Ali Zaoua: Prince of the Streets (Nabil Ayouch, 2001)

In Nabil Ayouch's well-known film *Ali Zaoua,* inequality is manifested in the situation of street children in Morocco. Ayouch focuses particularly on the child Ali, who leaves his mother's house and starts living in the street after finding out that she is a prostitute. The four main characters (Ali, Omar, Kwita and Boubker) decide

to separate themselves from their gang, led by (Dib/wolf) in order to get rid of his authority over them. This rebellion against Dib leads to the murdering of Ali Zaoua whose friends swear to bury him properly as a prince. The filmmaker shows us in a heart-breaking, down to earth way what these children go through from hunger, coldness, dirtiness, mistreatment, violence, humiliation, danger and deprivation of all child rights. They either sell cigarettes and tissues or steal from people to get what to eat, sleep on the floor and cover themselves with a big black plastic, wear dirty rags, and smell like "the dead". At first, they had to give their daily incomes and stolen things to their gang leader, but Ali convinces them to leave to the city's port so that he can start working on his dream; the dream of becoming a sailor. Indeed, Ali meets a real sailor who promises to help and take him to "a faraway island." The island represents Ali's imaginary world where he's a clean, honest man with a beautiful wife and a normal happy life.

The other boy, "Kwita", likes a high school girl and wants to have a good job and big house so that he can marry her in the future. For Omar, he only looks for some love and care that he's always been deprived of, so he goes to Ali's mother who sometimes treats him well as an attempt to get her son back. The mistreatment of everybody around them has become normal. Everyone pushes them away and views them as street dogs not humans. Nobody asks himself/herself how these boys ended up like this and what can be done to help them? The police chase them whenever they're seen, the civilians treat them as criminals and the salesperson sells them glue though he knows why they use it. The only person who's nice to them is "Hamid", the sailor who believes in Ali's dream and tries to help him make it come true. After Ali's death, Hamid helps his friends bury him properly and makes a blue coffin with a black anchor and Ali's name on it.

These children attempt to escape their melancholic reality through glue sniffing, smoking, football playing, and dreaming. The miserable lives of Ali and his friends could not kill their dreams and hopes for a future that is better than their present though it seems almost impossible. Unfortunately, Ali does not live long enough to make that dream come true, so his friends decide to do that for him by giving him a proper burial on a boat while he's dressed like a sailor. This ending symbolises hope and the possibility of a better future for these children who do the impossible throughout the movie to make their friend's dream come true. Another issue that Nabil Ayouch sheds light on is prostitution and its effects on the prostitute's family and acquaintances. Ali's mother is single and makes money from prostitution. This subjects her and her son to all kinds of humiliation and slandering from adults and children. Ali couldn't stand the situation and preferred a bare, cold floor over a soft, warm bed. Even his death was the result of him refusing the other boys to speak inappropriately about his mother. The film implies that society does not only judge you based on your actions but also the actions of those around you.

The influence of Ayouch by Italian neorealism is evident in all of his works. His choice to hire real street and orphanage children gives more credibility and realism

to the film that has become one of the best Moroccan films ever. This wise choice is an attempt to draw the attention not only of ordinary people but also governments and decision-makers to do something about the unfairness that homeless children go through on a daily basis. Children who have no beautiful memories from the past, live an unjust, bitter present and are almost certain that they have no future. Children who sum up their sufferings in one sentence that is repeated throughout the movie, "Life … is miserable."

Casablanca Casablanca (Farida Benlyazid, 2002)

The second outstanding film that discusses social and economic injustices is Farida Benlyazid's *Casablanca Casablanca*. The film shows that the city of Casablanca is divided into two parts. The first one belongs to the upper-class who have the highest social status and wield the greatest political power. The second one is inhabited by the middle-class and the poor. The movie starts with the return of Amine, owner of an import/export company in Casablanca, with his wife and children from Canada to settle down in Morocco. Their return coincides with the government's launch of a tough campaign against smugglers and corrupt merchants. However, a lot of people like Amine are innocent victims of conspiracies. He is an honest, straightforward man who finds himself in a corrupt society where morals and ethics are no longer important to almost anybody. People who are trying to set him up and ruin his business ask him for a lot of money if he wants to be left in peace. However, his ethics and beliefs forbid him from submitting to their demands and going with the flow. So, to prove his innocence, Amine knows that he needs to either have powerful, influential acquaintances or give bribery. Consequently, Amine decides to stay loyal to his beliefs and goes back to Canada. Amin's friend, a journalist who has been imprisoned for fifteen years for political reasons, and wife disapprove of his decision and believe that corruption and injustice are universal issues that all countries suffer from. Thus, one should start from him/herself and attempt to make this country better and more prosperous for the future generations.

On the one hand, the ruling class or the super rich is represented by the owner of the bank (Yamani), his wife and son. Their luxurious houses, expensive cars, opulent parties and deluxe lifestyle aren't only the result of hard work but also corruption and manipulation at the expense of the precariat. Yamani's son is involved in the sexual violence and murder of a working-class girl, but his father gets him out of it with a single phone call that closes the investigation forever. The detective in charge of this case finds it hard to believe that there are some people who are always above the law and decides to resign. On the other hand, the proletariat is represented by the people who work at Yamani's house in tough conditions and for long hours. Even after they find evidence that proves the involvement of their boss's son in murder, they keep quiet fearing for their lives and livelihood. These people have a dual life as

they spend the entire day in a large, clean place where everything is available, and by the end of the day return to their cramped flats in dirty, over-crowded neighbourhoods. The same goes for Aicha and her six family members who live in a room on the roof of an old building. This is what makes Aicha attempt to immigrate to Italy to escape this horrible reality and improve her family's living standards. The huge number of people, especially youth, queueing in front of the embassy proves people's disappointment and dissatisfaction with the injustice that characterizes Morocco during the 21st century.

In a nutshell, Benlyazid presents to us different aspects of inequality through the lives of various characters who either practice this injustice on others or are subjected to it on a daily basis. However, she chooses the ending to be positive and promising. With Amine refusing to be a corrupt businessman like the others, his wife joining pro-poor charities and the detective rejecting Yamani's seducing bribe; she believes that good people will always exist no matter how corrupt the society is.

CasaNegra (Nour-Eddine Lakhmari, 2008)

CasaNegra or the black house is one of the most renowned Moroccan films ever. It deals with the issue of unemployment among youth and the dark side of Casablanca. Adil and Karim are jobless, uneducated childhood friends with big dreams that help them escape the bitter reality of Casablanca. On the one hand, Karim is the oldest son and breadwinner of the family. He tries to make a living through selling cigarettes, but the police keep chasing him. Karim's father spent his life working in a fish factory for five dollars a day. The long hours and terrible working conditions consumed his health till he became unable to move or do anything. After Karim's attempts to find a job with no diploma go awry, he decides to replace his father. However, when he sees the situation of the other employees and the payment, he loses his senses and attacks the owner. In the middle of all this, Karim finds refuge in two things: beer and his crush Nabila, even though he knows that he can never get a rich woman like her.

On the other hand, Adil plans to emigrate to Sweden in order to escape his stepfather's tyranny and violence against him and his mother. When Karim asks Adil why he wants to leave, Adil says: "it's the only way to get rid of the dirty, over-crowded streets of Casablanca; the cops that chase us everyday, the super rich who think they're better than the others; the only way to dispose of the fake beggars, drunkards, prostitutes, extremists, and most importantly my stepfather." One day, while prowling the streets of Casablanca aimlessly, Karim and Adil run into (Zrirek), a fraudster who offers them a lot of money in exchange for a small service. The way Zrirek practices his power over everybody around him and the use of an electric drill to terrify them proves that Casablanca has turned into a jungle where "the weak are meat that the strong do eat."

Another issue criticized in the film is violence against women. Adil's mother is subjected to different types of violence and humiliation by her alcoholic husband who takes her money by force and spends it on alcohol and drugs. A lot of Moroccan women suffer the same with their husbands or relatives, but they refuse to inform the police for many reasons. Some of them think that violence is a normal thing that all women suffer from in a way or another. Others know that they live in a society that tolerates the action more than the reaction. Thus, involving the cops will only get them into more trouble with families and surroundings. To conclude, Lakhmari's *CasaNegra* has stirred an unprecedented controversy because he could bring the real people and language of the streets of Casablanca to the big screen in a realistic, gloomy manner. Further, Lakhmari always makes the spectator see the world through the eyes of the main characters while they're prowling down the city. In this way, the spectator can see the realities and problems of Moroccan citizens with no filters. The inability of Adil and Karim to make their dreams come true and staying in CasaNegra reflects the failure of many young people to reach their goals in real life. Instead, they choose to accept their lives and create a "raison d'être" for themselves.

Urgent (Mohcine Besri, 2018)

Urgent is a 2018 film that uncovers the fragility and corruption of the public health sector in Morocco. The story revolves around a poor married couple who live in a small village with their six-year-old son, Ayoub, who suffers from a continuous painful headache. Consequently, the parents decide to take him to Casablanca's public hospital for diagnosis due to the lack of medical materials in the village. There, a young doctor asks them for a brain scan that costs a lot of money. Later, the results of the scan show a brain problem that requires an immediate operation. However, the hospital is over-crowded and there are no available beds for Ayoub. Another doctor, who takes advantage of people's pain and fear for their beloved ones, tries to convince them to take Ayoub to his private clinic. At this point, the painful journey of the child's parents and family starts in their attempt to save his life.

Mohcine Besri shoots the whole film in a public hospital to help the spectators have a close look at the situation of some public hospitals and the people who are there. He doesn't only point out the insufficient number of beds and medical materials, but also the nepotism and corruption of the people in charge and the doctors. Injustice here is represented through the suffering of Ayoub's parents who just stand by watching their child dying in front of them because they don't have enough money to take him to a private clinic and no acquaintances at the hospital. Consequently, Ayoub's uncle tries to ask for some money from a Swiss couple who intend to adopt his future child with his girlfriend. Hence, poverty and socio-cultural stigmatisation

impose on the couple to sell their child to someone who can give him/her a better life than the one he/she would have with them.

A Mile in My Shoes (Saeed Khallaf, 2016)

A Mile in My Shoes is a psychological thriller that tells the story of Saeed's miserable childhood and its influence on his present and future. Saeed's father dies when he is four years old and leaves him with his mother and sister in a tough, merciless world. The mother starts an exhausting job as a house cleaner to feed her kids, but finally decides to get married again for financial reasons. Unfortunately, she ends up with a heartless, drunk, sexual abuser who takes her money by force. The stepfather doesn't only practice physical and psychological violence on Saeed and his mother but also abuses the sister sexually. This dreadful childhood of poverty and mistreatment turns Saeed into a complicated, hateful character who winds up killing the source of his pain and agony, his stepfather. Consequently, he runs away and starts living in the streets. He spends many days begging people for some food and water, but nobody responds or cares. So, he decides to steal an apple. The green grocers catch the 16-year-old boy and beat him mercilessly as if he stole the whole market. Later, he meets a boy (Mustapha) who introduces him to a group of homeless children led by Namroud. Just like Dib in *Ali Zaoua,* Namroud sends the boys to steal money, food and other things which he keeps for himself. And if someone disobeys, the consequences are terrible. He also makes the boys kiss his hand on a daily basis and imposes on some to wear women's clothes and make-up so that he can sleep with them. When Saeed refuses to kiss Namroud's hand, he beats and urinates on him, and abuses him sexually.

Later, Saeed starts working for a tailor who turns out to be paedophilic. He tries to run from him but ends up being caught by the police and accused of stealing and attempted murder. He doesn't defend himself in court and prefers jail over the cold streets where he is always hungry and dirty. The injustice and pain that Saeed has encountered outside and inside the prison turned him into a troubled, rancorous child hidden in the body of a man. Feelings of hate and revenge controlled him at first, but later he decided to move on and look for a job. But what kind of job might be available for someone with no educational background and a criminal record? Theft remains the most reasonable answer to this question. Again, Saeed Khallaf points out a serious phenomenon that Morocco suffers from, which is homeless children and the consequences of their melancholic past on their present and future.

The message conveyed by Khallaf is that people aren't evil and destructive by nature. Thus, it's one's childhood and upbringing which define their faith and future. One is the product of their society. If society is cruel and corrupt, then we are going to be cruel and corrupt. He adds that no one can experience what Saeed has gone through in the film – from homelessness, hunger, dirt, coldness, humiliation, rape,

violence, oppression and loss of parents to wrongful conviction – and be expected to be normal. Thus, before judging and accusing anyone, we should walk "a Mile in their Shoes."

The Source (Radu Mihăileanu, 2011)

The Source is a Belgian-Italian-Moroccan-French production that was filmed in the Moroccan high Atlas mountains and captures the daily lives of rural women and men in Morocco. Most of the cast was Moroccan and the language spoken throughout the film is Moroccan Darija as well (Bordat, Kouzzi, Benmbarek, 2012.) Set in a remote, secluded village, the story focuses on women who go on a sex strike against having to fetch water from a distant, dangerous source while their men do nothing. Radu Mihăileanu gives the audience a close look at gender inequality and women's oppression since birth through the characters of Leila, Esmeralda, and others. Most girls of the village are illiterate due to financial and socio-cultural reasons. The majority of fathers prefer to keep their daughters at home to help with the house chores and be prepared to be good wives and mothers. Others refuse to send them to the city to continue their studies due to the expensive costs and fear for their honours. Plus, they believe that education opens girls' eyes and makes them realize their rights, which is against the welfare of the village. By the age of thirteen or fourteen, village girls are considered old enough to settle down and have a family of their own. Being in love or choosing their own husbands is out of the question as their fathers and male relatives are the ones responsible for that decision. They usually marry older men who already have wives and children.

These women do not only do the housework and take care of their children by themselves, but they are also occupied with animal husbandry, farming, fetching water and firewood and weaving. On the other hand, men of the village spend the entire day in cafes drinking tea and playing cards especially after the drought. The excessive tasks addressed to women especially the fetching of a huge amount of water from a distant well caused countless abortions to a lot of women. However, instead of being consoled, they are blamed and accused of infertility. As a result of all this, the women decide to go on a sex strike, which is the only weapon they have that makes them stronger than their men. Consequently, most of these women are subjected to verbal and physical violence as well as marital rape. The inability to accept change after decades of following tradition has made the men and some women of the village use religion and the holy book (Qur'an) to persuade these rebellious women that they are disobeying God and committing an unforgivable sin. Here, both religion and tradition are misinterpreted and misused to preserve the status quo and men's privileges.

The Source doesn't only discuss gender inequality, but it also tackles social and economic injustice. Despite the success of the government to save a lot of villages

from isolation, many others are still without electricity, running water, schools and hospitals. For this reason, women give birth at home and many lose their babies. The issue of unemployment among villagers is also covered in the movie especially after the drought. The way the women in the film decide to speak for their rights and never tolerate injustice, however, seems like an unrealistic, idealised, optimistic scenario. The sad reality is that fear, illiteracy and ignorance of the law make most women incapable of doing anything to change their situation or improve their living standards.

Behind Closed Doors (Mohammed Bensouda, 2013)

This is the first movie that tackles sexual harassment in the workplace and its consequences on the victims. The filmmaker shows us that sexual harassment can occur to all women, regardless of their social class, level of education and nature of job. This beautifully-made film covers the story of two women from different backgrounds, but they are both sexually harassed by their bosses. After the protagonist repels her boss, he tries to set her up in all ways to get her fired. Her various attempts to get rid of him and prove his misconduct go awry as he is in a position of economic and political power. As a consequence, the victim experiences a post-traumatic stress disorder after her boss's attempt to rape her and enters into a state of fear and depression. The film heavily condemns the lack of laws that protect women from sexual harassment and the demand of evidence to prove it especially that it mostly happens behind closed doors. Years later, Morocco adopted a law which criminalises sexual harassment in 2018, but social stigmatisation and lack of evidence still stands in the way of protecting and doing justice to sexually harassed victims.

Adam (Meryam Touzani, 2019)/ *Sofia* (Meryam Benmbarek, 2018)

Adam and *Sofia* revolve around the stories of two young single mothers in conservative Morocco. In the first film, Samia finds herself homeless and unemployed after leaving her parents' house due to her pregnancy out of wedlock. She plans to give the child up for adoption because she understands the consequences of keeping it with her, but her maternal instinct interferes and makes things harder than she thought. Absence of the father throughout the movie reflects the severe reality that puts the blame entirely on the girl and allows the man to get away. Sofia's story is a bit different as she is a victim of sexual assault by her father's business partner. Sofia refuses to accuse the man of anything fearing for her father's reputation and business. Instead, she risks her life and freedom knowing that having sex out of wedlock in Morocco is a crime that the law punishes for. Therefore, the film once again tackles sexual violence against women and its consequences on the victim's life and family.

Representations of the Super Rich and the Precariat

Marock (Leila Marrakchi, 2005)

In *Marock*, Leila Marrakchi depicts youth's quest for liberty and thirst for all that is forbidden through the teenage love between a Muslim girl (Ghita) and a Jewish boy (Youri) in the upscale neighbourhoods of Casablanca's richest enclaves. The film sheds light not only on sexual taboos but also the larger questions of religious tolerance, archaic class structures, and the economic disparity between the rich and poor in contemporary Moroccan society. Ghita, Youri and their friends live a luxurious, pleasant life that is free from all kinds of responsibility and trouble. They belong to wealthy families who speak in French, live in splendid houses, wield brand new cars, study in international schools, make extravagant parties and go on trips around the world. Most of the time, they are hanging out together, partying, drinking, smoking, engaging in casual sex and car racing. Their education and future careers are the last things they could think about as they are already guaranteed. Religious restrictions and social traditions mean nothing to them though most of them are Muslims, born and grew up in Morocco. Still, they drink and eat during Ramadan and never pray or practice any religious rituals. In fact, the only one who prays in Ghita's family is her brother after the horrible accident he had had which led to the death of a poor, young girl. But the father interfered and paid the girl's family enough money to close the case once and for all.

The Morocco that Marrakchi films in *Marock* is completely different from the one that everybody knows. If it were not for some scenes that show the big mosque of king Hassan II in Casablanca, one would think that it's been shot in the west. Briefly, one can say that the movie is a metaphor for a schizophrenic society that seeks to locate its contemporary identity somewhere between the vestiges of the past and the possibilities of the future (Orlando, 2011). It does also capture the economic inequality or the gap between social classes that is getting wider and scarier day after day.

Volubilis (Faouzi Bensaïdi, 2017)

Volubilis is one of the best Moroccan films that adopts a Marxist agenda and represents the constant struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The story revolves around a young married couple who are madly in love with each other and struggling to make a living. The husband (Abdelkader) is a security guard at the mall while his wife (Malika) works as a house maid. Their financial status forces them to live with the husband's parents and younger siblings in a small house where they don't have any kind of privacy. Conversely, the wife works for a rich woman who lives in a big house all by herself and possesses everything anyone would want, but she is abandoned by her husband and replaced by a younger woman. Malika

and her friend work very hard and are obligated to call her my lady and listen to her complaints when she is drunk, but when she is awake she keeps a distance from them because of the class distinction. Malika and her husband also dream of having a big house of their own, a garden, a lovely bedroom for their future kids, luxurious furniture and cars. However, life has another saying in this matter. Abdelkader gets involved in trouble with a woman of power who refuses to abide by the rules of the mall like the rest of the people. Being disciplined and fair, he stands in her way and kicks her out especially after she insults and slaps him. The woman's husband kidnaps Abdelkader, insults him back, beats him like an animal and records everything to his vengeful wife. Abdelkader loses his job as a consequence of that incident which turns his life upside down.

Volubilis does not only mirror the deepening crisis of class stratification, but also the humiliation and terror that people practice on those below them. There is a scene in the film where Malika and her husband talk about how fear controls today's society where a child fears his mother, the mother fears her husband, the husband fears his boss, the employee fears the employer and so on and so forth.

Horses of God (Nabil Ayouch, 2012)

Horses of God is a worldwide acclaimed masterpiece by renowned Moroccan filmmaker Nabil Ayouch about the terrorist attacks that took place in Casablanca in 2003. The plot follows the upbringing and daily lives of a group of poor, uneducated boys (Hamid, Tarek, Nabil and Fouad) from childhood into adulthood in Sidi Moumen, a sprawling shantytown on the outskirts of Casablanca. Despite the short distance that separates the two places from each other, it seems as if they are two different countries from different continents. The residents of Sidi Moumen live in tin-roofed shacks without electricity, running water or modern sewage disposal. The area sits atop a garbage dump where Hamid, Tarek and their friends run wild in packs and engage in fierce football matches that often explode into violence. Hamid and Tarek (an aspiring goalkeeper) are brothers who live with their father, a patient of Alzheimer, mother and brother. The mother used to provide for the family, but after being replaced by younger workers the situation got worse for them. Consequently, Hamid starts selling drugs while Tarek sells oranges. Years later, Hamid becomes one of the most feared men in the neighbourhood of Sidi Moumen who finds his way with anybody including the cops whom he must bribe to avoid being arrested. He imposes on his brother to stay on the safe side and never get involved with him so that if something went wrong, Tarek can take care of the rest of the family. After the arrest of Hamid for breaking the car's window of a cop, Tarek's life becomes dull and miserable. He discovers that Sidi Moumen is only a jungle where the powerful oppresses the weak, and with the absence of his brother, he finds himself incapable of getting a place in the market unless he pays for it. The feelings of loss, disap-

pointment, boredom, and inability to get his beloved woman (Ghizlane) have turned Tarek into a sad, angry man who seeks refuge in alcohol and weed (Holden, 2014).

Growing up in the slums with no father, a notorious mother, and being raped as a child made Nabil a troubled soul who struggles every day with his sexuality and tries to figure out who he really is. For Fouad, his story isn't less melancholic than that of his friends as he feels that the only hope of the family is his beautiful sister who might find a rich husband to help them rise from the ashes. While in prison, Hamid meets a group of Islamic extremists who brainwash him until he joins them. After his release, the relationship continues and Hamid persuades the rest of the gang to do the same. According to Nabil Ayouch, poverty, unemployment, violence, marginalisation, lack of parental guidance, hopelessness, disappointment and ignorance are serious issues that extremists take advantage of to recruit young people. Ayouch also stresses how concepts of manhood, brotherhood and religion can be manipulated to train young boys into committing acts of terrorism and becoming weapons of mass destruction.

Nabil Ayouch is a realist filmmaker known for his explicit depiction of reality and social taboos despite the fierce criticisms and accusations of moral corruption. After the suicidal bombings, he decided to return to Morocco, visit the neighbourhood of Sidi Moumen, and spend time with its residents to hear their stories and speak for them in his own way and style. He chose to film in a neighbourhood similar to Sidi Moumen, worked with non-professional actors from the area and used the language they speak in their daily lives to capture a haunting realist feeling (Mottram, 2021).

New Cinematic Trends and Social Change

Unfortunately, new and creative narrative models and approaches are almost absent in 21st century Moroccan cinema as the focus is mainly on social and family issues with the exception of these topics: immigration to Europe, immigration of Moroccan Jews to Israel in the 50s and the 60s and repression of leftists and human rights activists during the years of lead (Fassi Fehri, 2021). Additionally, the cinematic stylistic approaches still follow the same classical, monotonous and linear tendency of the previous century (EL Khayat, 2021). However, social and cultural change, the influence of western film industry, and the return of a group of filmmakers from abroad have carried with it a more challenging, daring, and rebellious cinema which created a division among audiences and critics. This division stems from the cultural values and religious instructions that are still deeply rooted in Moroccan society and people's mind-sets. As a result, some local filmmakers choose to adopt a non provocative approach and prefer to address issues without delving boldly into them or offending anyone. This approach tends to attract a family audience and avoid social controversy. For example, Mohammed Bensouda, filmmaker of *Behind Closed Doors,* believes that it is possible to focus on contentious issues without

creating direct confrontation. In interviews he also admits that he prefers to show modern realities but in such a way that can attract a family audience (Dale, 2015).

Other filmmakers such as Nabil Ayouch, Nour-Eddine Lakhmari, Narjiss Nejjar, Hisham Lasri and Leila Marrakchi embrace "bolder" approaches, uncover "forbidden" taboos, and capture social conditions in a realistic manner. Here, we are mostly talking about politics, sex and religion. It is true that the new constitution guarantees political freedom of expression and a lot of films have been made to criticize the government and revive a very frightening era in the history of Morocco known as "Years of Lead." However, touching on issues of sexual liberty and religion will never be tolerated by our conservative society. Since the release of Aziz Salamy's *Veiled love* in 2008, national debates have been stirred and a lot of people accused the movie of moral decay. It was the first movie to star a veiled girl having a sexual relationship and getting pregnant out of wedlock. Opponents stressed that it misrepresents Muslim women and Islam especially after showing the main characters naked and engaged in sexual intercourses as well as the conversations that take place between the female characters about their sex life. Aziz Salamy defended himself saying that he was only trying to mirror the schizophrenic life of Moroccan women who are torn between the restrictions of Islam and the liberty of modern life (Abd Ennabi, 2009.)

Ahmed Boulane's *Angels of the Satan* (2007) is another controversial movie that is based on the true story of fourteen guys who have been arrested and accused of worshiping Satan. This incident provoked the public opinion which attacked them for shaking the foundations of Islam. Ahmed Boulane's film was a reaction to those false accusations and could illustrate that these young people are hard-rock music lovers who have a different style, but they have nothing to do with Satanism. In 2015, Nabil Ayouch released his most controversial movie *Much Loved,* which narrates the story of four Moroccan prostitutes as they struggle against the dangers and stigma that comes from their profession. The film's "vulgar" dialogue, explicit and violent sexual scenes and sympathy for homosexuality sparked an unprecedented public outrage which made the Moroccan government have it banned. Minister of communication Mustapha El Khalfi said that the movie "undermines the moral values and dignity of Moroccan women, and is a flagrant attack on the Kingdom's image" (Alexander, 2015.) Furthermore, *Marock* is another controversial movie which tackles a forbidden love story between a girl from a rich Muslim family and a Jewish boy, and of course, there are issues since their families are not of the same religion. What is challenging about this film is that Marrakchi addressed unspoken issues in the Kingdom, such as sexual relationships and religious hypocrisy.

Lakhmari's *Casanegra* and *Zero* and Ayouch's *Horses of God* and *Ali Zaoua* have also created a national debate because of their explicit portrayal of social realities and indecent street talk. For Hisham Lasri, his film *The Sea is Behind* stirred controversy because it tells the story of a man, Tarik, who has a wife and children, but for his job, he dresses up as a woman and parades on the street belly dancing. Tarik represents the limit between manliness and homosexuality since he is a drag queen

in a Muslim country, and he is even arrested by the police who accuse him of being homosexual which is illegal in Morocco (Guermoudi, 2018.) Narjiss Nejjar's *Cry no more* angered some of the conservative audiences due to its focus on female prostitution in the rural area.

In addition to that, several films captured women's oppression and subordination as a way to change the public opinion and improve their position in both the private and public spheres. The stereotypical representations have also been challenged and eradicated to some extent. For example, films like *Douiba* (the little wolf), *Women's Market, Khnifist Rmad, Number One, The Sleeping Child, The Trial of a Woman* and many others give women central, non-traditional roles and encourage them to resist gender-based discrimination. In most of these films, women are independent, productive, smart, fearless and sometimes more influential than men. The 21st century has also been characterized by the rise of Amazing cinema especially after the critically acclaimed movie *Monsters* by Mohammed Faouzi won international awards (Mebtoul, 2020.)

On the one hand, the given small number of spectators in theatres (1.9 million, 2019) and the lack of artistic freedom suggest that cinema does not lead to fundamental social changes in Morocco in comparison with social media for example (Fassi Fehri, EL Khayat, 2021). On the other hand, there are few initiatives that came to light after the release of certain films such as Ali Zaoua Foundation, established by filmmaker Nabil Ayouch in 2009 in Casablanca with Moroccan writer Mahi Binebine. Its main objective is to work for social development and psycho-social rehabilitation of young Moroccans from disadvantaged backgrounds by facilitating their access to any form of artistic expression. This cultural centre provides training in the arts and crafts of the scene (music, dance, theatre, film and visual arts) and teaches several languages. It also has branches in Tangier, Fez, Agadir and Marrakech. Moreover, the countless films about women's issues, whether made by women or men, have partly led to a slight change in the mindsets of the people and the introduction of some new articles in the constitution. Finally, the concern of the government and civil society with the integration of rural communities and fighting marginalisation has also come from cinema to some extent.

Several filmmakers were under the spotlight after making films that break social taboos, such as Aziz Salamy's *Veiled love,* Marrakchi's *Marock*, Lakhmari's *Zero* and *Casanegra*, and Nejjar's *The Rif Lover* and *Cry No More,* as the majority of Moroccan spectators become very sensitive when it comes to love scenes, sex life and the female body in particular. However, no movie has created such public outrage as Nabil Ayouch's *Much Loved.* After the movie was banned by the government, the filmmaker has been summoned to court on charges of "pornography, indecency and inciting minors to debauchery" with his leading actress, Loubna Abidar. A Facebook page called for their execution and many death threats have been sent. Abidar was even subjected to physical violence, which made her flee to France. But not everyone in Morocco was against the film. Freedom of speech supporters such as Khadija

Rouissi, an opposition MP and deputy speaker of the parliament said, "Artistic works must be evaluated according to creative criteria and not through a moral prism." However, several of Ayouch's colleagues were reluctant to speak up in defence of the film, perhaps due to fears of a potential negative impact on their careers (Dale, 2015.)

Generally speaking, contemporary Moroccan films tend to be more professional than those of the previous decades. They are known to have tighter scripts, better cinematography and sometimes more professional performers. Regarding their narrative patterns and stylistic approaches, contemporary Moroccan films can be classified into three types. First, mainstream films which prioritize the story and are usually made to fulfil the viewer's expectations and make profits. The second type is known as experimental cinema, and it mainly focuses on the way the story is told through exploring non-narrative forms and experimenting with new techniques. Here, it is worth mentioning Hisham Lasri and his "mysterious" cinema which breaks all cinematic conventions in terms of camera angles, framing, focus, camera motion and so on. These films are usually elitist and elusive (ElFaraoui, 2019). The third type refers to films that try to make a balance between the two. Eminent filmmakers who follow this approach are Nabil Ayouch, Leila Marrakchi and Farida Benlyazid.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned films about the violation of women's rights imply that gender inequality is a serious issue that impedes the progress of Morocco and makes it way harder to achieve social justice. For this reason, almost every Moroccan film gives some space for the discussion and portrayal of women's position in the 21st century. For example, in Mustapha Darkaoui's *The lovers of Hajj Mokhtar Soldi* (2001), corruption is represented by Hajj (the pilgrim) Mokhtar who tries to win a seat in the parliament using his power and money. According to him, women are only bodies and objects of sex that he can get for any price. This reductionism and humiliation of women sums up how most men view the opposite sex in patriarchal societies. Another example is Nabil Ayouch's *Much Loved* (2015), which revolves around the lives of prostitutes in the city of Marrakech. Poverty and paucity of job opportunities impose on most of these women to do this job even if they despise it. Women's objectification, sexual and physical violence practiced by the clients and the police, paedophilia, political and social corruption are among the various topics tackled in this controversial film that provoked the Moroccan audiences and the ruling political party of Justice and Development.

In 2016, Mourad ElKhodi directed *Innocent Life,* a TV drama that breaks the socio-cultural taboo of early marriage in the rural areas of Morocco. Poverty, ignorance and sexual frustration are among the main reasons behind the prevalence of this serious phenomenon that violates child rights in all ways. Despite the strict

instructions of the new family code which raised the age of marriage to eighteen, girls of the village find themselves obligated to get married from the age of ten. And by the age of fourteen, most of them become mothers of two or three kids. The filmmaker condemns this reckless, ignorant practice which denies girls their right to make vital decisions about their sexual health and well-being and forces them out of education and into a life of poor prospects, with an increased risk of violence, abuse, ill health or early death.

Briefly, the commitment of Moroccan filmmakers to tackle a particular social issue indicates their strong urge to change or even eradicate it once and for all. However, cinema in Morocco is still and will continue to suffer financially and artistically if it does not find a way to attract its audiences and change its modus operandi as a whole.

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الرئيسية في المغرب منذ اعتلاء الملك محمد السادس العرش قبل عشرين عام. فرانس 24 بالعربية

2019 .المحطات

2020 .الخياطي، بوشعيب. الحضور المغربي في المهرجانات السينمائية الدولية. عين على السينما

2020 .دسوقي، صفوت. السينما المغربية ...تجارب مضيئة وتاريخ حافل بالجوائز. العين الإخبارية

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2014 .بوجيدة، فريد. السينما المغربية بين تأكيد الذات والحضور الاجتماعي

ZOOM

A kortárs filmtudomány kulcskérdései
8.

A Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó és a Debreceni Egyetem Brit Kultúra Tanszéke gondozásában induló filmelméleti és filmkritikai könyvsorozat célja a magyar és külföldi tudományosság legfrissebb csapásirányaihoz szorosan kapcsolódó filmes témájú kutatások megjelentetése. Egy olyan fórum létrehozására törekszünk, amelyben megférnek egymás mellett a hazai és egyetemes filmkultúrával foglalkozó kutatások, a történeti és elméleti orientáltságú szövegek, a fiatal tehetségek és a már nemzetközileg is elismert szerzők munkái. A könyvsorozat célja gazdagítani a nagy múltú hazai filmkutatás és a nemzetközi filmtudományi műhelyek közötti párbeszédet.

A sorozatban eddig megjelent:

1. Kalmár György: *Testek a vásznon (Test, film, szubjektivitás)* (2012)
2. Győri Zsolt és Kalmár György (szerk.): *Test és szubjektivitás a rendszerváltás utáni magyar filmben* (2013)
3. Győri Zsolt: *Szerzők, filmek, kritikai-klinikai olvasatok* (2014)
4. Győri Zsolt és Kalmár György (szerk.): *Tér, hatalom és identitás viszonyai a magyar filmben (2015)*
5. Győri Zsolt és Kalmár György (szerk.): *Nemek és etnikumok terei a magyar filmben* (2018)
6. Pólik József: *Körhinta a viharban – Filmesztétikai írások* (2019)
7. Zsolt Győri and György Kalmár (szerk.): *Europe and European Cinema at Times of Change* (2021)

ZOOM

The present collection of articles explores the cinematic representations of 21st century social inequality: its shifting causes and manifestations, as well as its changing paradigms of conceptualization and cinematic representation. Its key point of departure is the recognition that due to a set of recent social, financial and technological changes growing inequality has become one of the key social issues of our time. The articles collected here indicate that inequality in the 21st century is produced by partly new factors, appears in new social configurations and also calls for new kinds of (social, institutional, cinematic and academic) representations.

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