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**György Kalmár**  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3440-038X>  
(University of Debrecen, Hungary)

# From Post-Communist to Post-Human Care

*A Comparative Study of The Death of Mr. Lazarescu and Eden*

## Abstract

On basis of a comparative close reading of two paradigmatic Eastern European films about precarious lives and acts of care, this article explores the relationship between three distinct but interrelated phenomena: (1) the early 21<sup>st</sup> century experience of increased precarity and vulnerability, (2) certain philosophical or theoretical trends (such as care ethics and critical posthumanism) that aim to conceptualize this new state of insecurity, and (3) new Eastern European cinematic trends that can be understood as responses to the first two phenomena. The article's starting hypothesis is that socially committed Eastern European art cinema responds to the social and cultural changes of the times, and therefore expresses a whole set of cultural assumptions about ethical behaviour, the human being's relation to others, or the possible values that may govern human decisions. By comparing a classic example of the Eastern European social problem film, *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* with the more recent *Eden*, the article highlights recent cinematic shifts in the representation of precarious lives. By putting these two films in the context of the Eastern European social problem film, the article explores the ways the 21<sup>st</sup> century experience of ecological crisis and the cinematic influence of transnational ecocinema may change existing Eastern European cinematic practices, inspiring new, eco-critically informed ethical approaches and definitions of precarity.

## Keywords

precarity, care ethics, post-communist, post-human, *The Death of Mr Lazarescu*, *Eden*

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The following article explores new developments in Eastern European art cinema that can be regarded as responses to such early 21-st century crisis-situations as climate change and environmental degradation. These films are also often shaped by those new theoretical discourses that aim to theorize the present experience of vulnerability, precarity, and

crisis.<sup>1)</sup> Based on the contextualized comparison of two specific films, *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Cristi Puiu, 2005) and *Eden* (Ágnes Kocsis, 2020), I will outline two different approaches to the cinematic representation of “precarious lives,”<sup>2)</sup> and show the ways the differences between the two films may be attributed to the influence of such trends as critical posthumanism, ecocriticism and the ethics of care. By contrasting two cinematic definitions of precarity, which may be associated with two historically specific ethical approaches that I will call post-communist and post-human care, the article also indicates possible ways Eastern European cinematic traditions may shift due to the above mentioned historical experiences.

In the English language precarity stands for the state of being precarious or uncertain, a state of persistent insecurity, vulnerability or danger. While the term scarcely occurs in late 20<sup>th</sup> century academic literature, in the crisis-ridden early 21<sup>st</sup> century it became a key term in a wide variety of fields, such as sociology, labour studies, environmental humanities, disability studies, gender studies, migration studies, and political economy, a crucial concept for theorizing life in an era of uncertainty. In this article, following Judith Butler, I define precarity as a socially and politically produced condition, which manifests in historically specific ways.<sup>3)</sup> When contrasting various cinematic definitions of precarity, I will indicate the processes through which the ontological precariousness of bodies is turned into socially and politically constituted forms of precarity in ways that are not only specific to geographical space and historical time, but are also shaped by the ways Eastern European cinemas react to these new historical, artistic and theoretical trends. Relying on a set of recent studies from sociology and political science, I argue that Eastern Europe, the former Eastern bloc, can be still recognized as a region with shared historical experiences, sociocultural characteristics and political trends, a “unique cultural space,”<sup>4)</sup> which also produces recognisably regional experiences and cultural representations of precarity.<sup>5)</sup> It is for these reasons that I rely on the East / West distinction, which, according to the above referenced studies, remains relevant in the post-communist period as well. While Eastern Europe cannot be comfortably placed in the Global North / Global South binary, in which its historical, social and political particularities become invisible, it does remain an “Other Europe,”<sup>6)</sup> distinguishable from the northwest European centre.

When exploring Eastern European cinematic representations of precarity and their shifting representational paradigms, one has to acknowledge the tendency of European art

1) The present research was supported by the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Debrecen, Hungary. Some of the ideas developed here were first formulated in different contexts in György Kalmár, “Post-Crisis Reckoning: Making Sense of Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Civilizational Ruptures,” *Acta Sapientia Philologica* 13, no. 1 (2021), 1–17 and György Kalmár, “*Eden* and Eastern European Ecocinema,” *Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, March 9, 2023, 1–23. I also owe thanks to my colleagues for their valuable comments at the NECS 2023: Care conference in Oslo, where this research was first presented.

2) Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

3) Ibid.; Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010); Gediminas Lesutis, *The Politics of Precarity: Spaces of Extractivism, Violence, and Suffering* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

4) Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East-Central European Film* (London and New York: The Wallflower Press, 2003), 5.

5) Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Allen Lane, 2019).

6) Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*.

cinema in general to present social problems and raise awareness about the struggles of ordinary people. This socially committed, emancipatory attitude has been among the key defining characteristics of art cinema throughout its history, from Eisenstein through Vittorio de Sica to the Dardenne brothers. This democratic and emancipatory potential of cinema is even more pronounced in the often oppressive, authoritarian political climate of Eastern European countries, both before and after the fall of communism, where film is one of those rare mediums in which social issues can be problematized and public debates can be initiated.

Even before ecocriticism, critical post-humanism or care ethics gained prominence and called attention to human and non-human precarity, Eastern European art films had the tendency to be attentive to vulnerability and precariousness. Many of the most influential Eastern European auteur films speak of a heightened sense of human vulnerability, which lies often at the very focus of these films. This sharp sense of socially and “politically mediated differential exposure to violence” and harm<sup>7)</sup> is traceable in such classics as *Ashes and Diamonds* (Andrzej Wajda, 1958), *The Shop on Main Street* (Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1965), *Andrei Rublev* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1966), *The Round-Up* (Miklós Jancsó, 1966) or *Closely Watched Trains* (Jiří Menzel, 1966), as well as in such recent multiple award-winning titles as *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007), *Delta* (Kornél Mundruczó, 2008) or *Cold War* (Paweł Pawlikowski, 2018). Though many of these films are repeatedly acclaimed for elevating that sense of human vulnerability and precariousness to a metaphysical level, to an ontological condition (as most notably in the films of Tarkovsky and Tarr), the films tend to define this condition through such a social backdrop that associates the sense of vulnerability with specifically Eastern European historical and sociocultural phenomena. These cinematic trends have contributed to depicting Eastern Europe in the European cultural imaginary as a place where human lives are cheaper, less protected, more vulnerable and afflicted. Though there may be plenty of sociological and medical studies that support such a “dark vision”<sup>8)</sup> of the region, in this article I focus mostly on the discursive aspect of these figurations of Eastern Europe, and regard them primarily as cinematic mythologies, in other words, cultural fabrications. The differences between these cinematic acts of self-fashioning, and the various representational strategies and cinematic imaginaries one encounters in these films call attention to the importance of art films and more specifically the social problem film in shaping the cultural imaginary of Eastern Europe.<sup>9)</sup>

Indeed, both *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* and *Eden* can be regarded as time-specific variations or timely appropriations of the so-called social problem film, also referred to as social-consciousness film or message film in film theory and criticism.<sup>10)</sup> It is an important cinematic trend in both art and genre cinema, which is often theorized as a separate, recognizable genre.<sup>11)</sup> Significantly for the present study, cinema attendance statistics suggest

7) Lesutis, *The Politics of Precarity*, 7.

8) Doru Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema: An Introduction* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 37.

9) Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*.

10) Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 105.

11) Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), viii; Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 105.

that the social problem film is one of the most popular film types or genres in both Romania and Hungary.<sup>12)</sup> Its most defining characteristic feature is “the dramatization of topical social issues”<sup>13)</sup> in a film narrative, that is, the combination of “social analysis and dramatic conflict within a coherent narrative structure.”<sup>14)</sup> Although these qualities overlap with some of the typical trends in global art cinema, and may also appear in many other genres, such as the biopic, the historical film or even science fiction, “social problem films are distinct from them in that they typically have settings roughly contemporaneous with their moment of release, and they usually employ a serious tone and realistic mode of representation in engaging with their subject matter.”<sup>15)</sup> Importantly for both films to be analysed in detail here, social problem films also tend to highlight and explore the problematic relationship of an individual (its protagonist) with specific social institutions.<sup>16)</sup> As Roffman and Purdy’s book or Neale’s article demonstrate, social problem films, because of their focus on the issues of their times, tend to change in sync with the societies at large, and are therefore ideal material for academic studies that wish to explore films in a social, cultural or political context.

In the comparative analysis below I will argue that *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* and *Eden* belong to two distinct periods in this history, and that the changes in their approach to human vulnerability, precarity and the social problems that create them are (at least partly) due to the influence of ecocriticism and ecocinema. This leads to the research question how the traditional portrayal of precarious lives in Eastern European social problem films aligns with the principles of these characteristically 21<sup>st</sup> century cinematic trends and theoretical perspectives. In the analyses below I will highlight the ways the cinematic reception of these critical trends necessarily includes acts of localization, appropriation and the readjustment of formal filmmaking strategies. The above mentioned discourses consciously and systematically challenge one’s fundamental assumptions about (post)industrial capitalism and its modus operandi, the human subject’s relation to its environment (or the Earth as such), as well as the meaning and targets of ethical behaviour.<sup>17)</sup> These conceptual shifts have significant implications for cinema, affecting social imaginaries, the stories told, the way precarity is depicted and understood, as well as the meaning of ethical behaviour.

Ecocinema is closely related to such trends: its emergence marks a new sense of (non-anthropological, ecological or biological) precarity. As opposed to Shpolberg and Brasis-

12) Andrea Virginás, *Film Genres in Hungarian and Romanian Cinema: History, Theory, and Reception* (London and New York: Lexington Books, 2021), 118.

13) Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Hollywood and Society, 1930–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 432.

14) Roffman and Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film*, viii.

15) Steven Doles, “Social Problem Films,” *Oxford Bibliographies*, March 30, 2015, 1.

16) Roffman and Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film*, viii; Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 105.

17) Masha Shpolberg and Lukas Brasiskis, eds., *Cinema and the Environment in Eastern Europe: From Communism to Capitalism* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2023); Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Maurice Hamington and Michael Flower, eds., *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Joseph Kupfer, *Feminist Ethics in Film: Reconfiguring Care through Cinema* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012).

kis's seminal volume,<sup>18)</sup> I do not regard ecocinema here as merely a critical approach or interpretive strategy. For practical reasons, similarly to MacDonald, Willoquet and others, I regard both specific thematic and formal characteristic features of the films necessary so as to be categorized as ecocinema. These include focusing on environmental themes, criticizing or undermining anthropocentrism and industrial modernity, raising awareness about environmental issues or damaging industrial practices, and experimenting with alternative film formats that may lead to a more ethical view of the biosphere.<sup>19)</sup>

According to this stricter or narrower definition of ecocinema, however, one finds relatively few examples from Eastern Europe.<sup>20)</sup> These are mostly documentaries or experimental films and videos, such as *Sirenomelia* (Emilija Škarnulytė, 2017), *Acid Forest* (Rugile Barzdziukaite, 2018), *Frozen May* (Péter Lichter, 2017), *Greetings from Free Forests* (Ian Soroka, 2018), *Freshwater* (Peter Riviera, 2021), or *Land of Warm Waters* (Igor Buharov and Ivan Buharov, 2022), with only a few potential feature film examples, such as Gregorz Królikiewicz's experimental feature *Trees* (Drzewa, 1995), György Pálfi's *Hukkle* (2002), Sonja Prosenč's *The Tree* (Drevo, 2014), or Angieszka Holland's *Spoor* (2017). The Hungarian director Ágnes Kocsis's 2020 film *Eden* is thus among the first examples of this trend in the Eastern European feature film scene. *Eden* is also important for the present study because it seems to consciously re-examine the traditional representational strategies and definitions of precarity of the Eastern European social problem film in the light of our 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of ecological crisis.

Therefore, in what follows, I will map out the transformative effects that the 21<sup>st</sup> century state of precarity as well as the ensuing new perspectives of ecocriticism and care ethics may have on Eastern European social problem films, with a particular focus on the ways precarious lives and acts of care are understood and represented. In my comparative study of *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* and *Eden*, I will highlight the most significant shifts in representational strategies. Both films tell stories about precarious lives and acts of care, but while *Lazarescu* suits the formula of the Eastern European social problem film, of which it is a formative example, and depicts what one could call post-communist precarity, *Eden* shows signs of a profound philosophical and cinematic transformation in its approach, and can be regarded as one of the first Eastern European cinematic representations of post-human precarity. Though the two films can naturally be placed in a chronological order, my intention is neither to create a teleological narrative of cinema's historical progress, nor to jump to generalizing conclusions about the effect of ecocinema on Eastern European film cultures at large, but rather to explore possible examples of the ways new challenges and influences of the new millennium may shape Eastern European cinematic accounts of precarious lives, thereby potentially changing several well-established and artistically successful regional cinematic conventions.

18) Shpolberg and Brasiskis, eds., *Cinema and the Environment in Eastern Europe*.

19) See: Willoquet, *Framing the World*, xi–xvii, 9–10; Scott MacDonald, "Toward an Eco-cinema," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11, no. 2 (2004), 111.

20) Meta Mazaj, "Coming to the Senses: Environmental Ethics and the Limits of Narrative in Contemporary Slovenian Cinema," in Shpolberg and Brasiskis, *Cinema and the Environment in Eastern Europe*, 219; Kris Van Heuckelom, "Cinema of the Forest People: From Environmental Consciousness Toward Ecocritical Perspectives in Polish (Post)communist Film," in Shpolberg and Brasiskis, *Cinema and the Environment in Eastern Europe*, 245.

## Changing definitions of the precarious Other

Now let me turn to *The Death of Lazarescu*, Cristi Puiu's 2005 film, which "put the Romanian New Wave on the international map"<sup>21)</sup> by winning the prestigious *Un Certain Regard* prize in Cannes, so as to lay out the basic characteristic features of its approach to precarity and care. First of all, true to the traditions of the European social problem film and realist filmmaking in general, one can notice a clear "commitment to revealing lived material and political experience,"<sup>22)</sup> for example in the way the film creates the authentic feel of a well-definable social situation with realist aesthetics, "inherent minimalism," "verbal naturalism," "long shots and slow-paced action."<sup>23)</sup> The fact that *Lazarescu* chooses its protagonists from the less privileged classes, so as to emphasise the social and psychological effects of post-communist destitution and disenchantment is equally typical of both the Romanian New Wave and the New Hungarian Cinema of the early 2000s. This tendency, as Doru Pop convincingly demonstrates, can be traced back to the filmmakers of Italian Neorealism, who thought that "the only 'real-reality' was that of the marginalized, of the lower parts of society."<sup>24)</sup> For these filmmakers, as well as for most members of the Romanian New Wave "ordinary people and their uneventful existence became the basis of what seemed to be a new understanding of human life (a 'revolutionary humanism' as Bazin has put it)."<sup>25)</sup> Mr. Lazarescu is no exception in this row of characters: he is a retired, widowed, alcoholic engineer, who lives alone in his shabby flat in a run-down apartment building somewhere in Bucharest after the fall of Ceausescu's state-socialist dictatorship. The bleakness and deprivation communicated by the mise-en-scene, by the old, cheap objects, mostly leftovers of the puritan mass-production of a fallen regime, all signify various sorts of deprivation, physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual, thus creating a somewhat self-exoticizing picture of the "other" Europe, which is as characteristic of Puiu's other films, such as *Stuff and Dough* (Marfa si banii, 2001), as the films of such other Eastern European multi-award-winning directors as the Romanian Cristian Mungiu or the Hungarian Kornél Mundruczó. *Lazarescu* relies on "wobbly camerawork, verisimilar mise-en-scene, the construction of mobile subject positions, and toned down uncommunicative narration"<sup>26)</sup> and avoids the use of extra-diegetic music, all serving the purpose of creating an immersive feeling of the protagonist's miserable conditions and to "to give the sense of life unfolding in real time."<sup>27)</sup> In this somewhat self-exoticizing and ironically self-deprecating approach to its protagonist, which the critics of Romanian New Wave have often described a "miserabilism,"<sup>28)</sup> Mr. Lazarescu is presented as an Eastern European post-communist everyman. "I drink like every man" he says once, when questioned by a paramedic about his alcohol consumption. In *Lazarescu*, this seems to be more than a peculiar inter-

21) Rahul Hamid, "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu (Cristi Puiu, 2005)," *Senses of Cinema*, September, 2017, accessed January 10, 2025, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/cteq/the-death-of-mr-lazarescu/>.

22) *Ibid.*, 1.

23) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 8.

24) *Ibid.*, 54.

25) *Ibid.*, 54.

26) László Strausz, *Hesitant Visions on the Romanian Screen* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 184.

27) Hamid, "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu," 2.

28) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 8.

est in the vicissitudes of a particular character. Rather, as Pop's detailed analyses demonstrate, it is a general artistic approach to society, its systemic problems and the suffering they cause, an approach or vision that permeates many of the films of the Romanian New Wave.<sup>29)</sup> In *Lazarescu*, most other characters are also built from well-established, self-critical, local stereotypes of the post-communist world, they tend to be weary, overworked, underpaid and generally irritated by the situations and people their work makes them encounter.

One evening Mr. Lazarescu starts experiencing health problems, dizziness and a severe headache, which, as we later learn, are signs of his advanced, undiagnosed cancer. The film shows his series of attempts to seek medical help, from neighbours, relatives and medical professionals. The post-communist healthcare system, however, is one of reluctant care, which produces precarity in a systematic way, as a matter of course.<sup>30)</sup> When the paramedics step into the smelly and shabby apartment of the old man in his worn clothes and smell of liqueur, they immediately put him into the category of the less deserving Other, someone inferior to a "proper," ideal human being, someone whose pleas for help are morally less pressing, an outsider to "the ideology of the worthy citizen."<sup>31)</sup> Throughout the narrative, Lazarescu encounters weary medical professionals, a series of bureaucratic obstacles, and a system that seems more concerned with paperwork than with saving lives. Along the way, Lazarescu is transported from one hospital to another, facing long waits and dismissive staff members, while his condition steadily worsens.

Thus, the film focuses on such social problems as health inequality, ageing, the institutional causes of human suffering, and it is set in social conditions where human life becomes precarious, chances of survival are slim, and gestures of genuine compassion are rare. This foregrounding of the historical, social and institutional causes of vulnerability aligns the film with Judith Butler's socio-political definition of precarity, according to which it is "a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death."<sup>32)</sup> The labyrinthian physical and bureaucratic spaces of the Romanian healthcare system, in which the increasingly confused and desperate Lazarescu wanders around express disorientation, the lack of agency and the systematic erosion of human dignity.<sup>33)</sup> Through its even, meticulous and deliberate pacing, the film further reinforces a sense of helplessness and inevitability. This overall gloominess is only balanced by occasional instances of black humour, some rare gestures of genuine care, and the abstract, religious layer of the film's meaning (also highlighted by its protagonist's Biblical name), which makes it an allegorical story of human precarity.

Importantly from the point of view of ethics, *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* is also a story of missed human contacts, unanswered ethical pleas, and failures of care. Though the

29) Ibid., 52–65.

30) Strausz, *Hesitant Visions*, 187.

31) Eva Feder Kittay, "Precarity, Precariousness and Disability," in *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*, eds. Maurice Hamington and Michael Flower (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 21.

32) Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

33) Strausz, *Hesitant Visions*, 186; György Kalmár, *Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema: Labyrinthian Men* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

film makes clear that our protagonist needs help, and that without caring others his chances of survival are thin, in the eyes of most other characters Lazarescu becomes abject: he smells bad, just like his apartment, he vomits, defecates, he is humiliated repeatedly and treated like abject matter. The film, following the traditions of the social problem film, emphasises the “socially determined”<sup>34)</sup> nature of these tragic misadventures. They seem to be integral parts of the strictly hierarchical post-communist medical systems in which rank, authority and status are everything,<sup>35)</sup> and ethical concerns are considered to be an unaffordable luxury. Lazarescu’s phone calls and appeals for help are exemplary ethical situations, where one is supposed to hear and respond to the call of the Other. Yet, the ambulance does not come for a terribly long time, he is seldom treated with respect, he is blamed for his condition, when he calls his relatives he gets lectured on drinking, his daughter is of no avail, as she has already moved to Canada, and the neighbours simply refuse to go with him to the hospital. Thus, *Lazarescu* depicts post-communist healthcare as a dysfunctional, disillusioned system of reluctant care, in which the alterity or otherness of the Other is routinely missed or used as a pretext for inefficient care. Though in interviews Puiu emphasised the influence of real-life stories and personal experiences that influenced his naturalist, almost documentary approach in the film,<sup>36)</sup> I would also like to highlight the influence of the well-definable cinematic mythology of the “other” Europe, which defines human precarity as produced by the social and economic backwardness of the region.

The network of similarities and differences between *Lazarescu* and *Eden* regarding the definition of the suffering Other are most revealing. *Eden* also tells the story of a person in need of others, it also focuses on a situation in which human care and ethical behaviour are associated with medical care, and it also makes the spectator contemplate the complex ethical implications of the human situations represented. However, *Eden* signifies a significant departure from the prevailing representational paradigm working in *Lazarescu*. Set in a near-future Budapest, the film narrates the story of Éva, a solitary woman grappling with a debilitating condition that renders her life precarious and her agency severely limited. Afflicted by multiple chemical sensitivity, Éva experiences allergic asphyxiation in response to the pollutants present in her environment. She lives in the confines of an airtight apartment, among furniture made of steel and glass, and she has to rely on specialized air purifiers to supply her with breathable air. Everyday items, including clothing, must be free of washing powder or fabric softener, and she can only venture outside her home covered by a protective spacesuit. The construction of her hermetically sealed home was made possible through the sponsorship of a clinic, which, in return, conducts experiments on her in an attempt to comprehend the nature of her illness.

Here one can already note a significant alteration of the dominant local cultural mythologies. While Éva’s anxiety and desperation bear semblance to those depicted in numerous Eastern European social problem films (including *Lazarescu*), here they are attributed to new kinds of causes, mostly to the degradation of the environment and the

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34) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 40.

35) *Ibid.*, 27.

36) *Ibid.*, 65.



pollution caused by modern civilization. The fact that *Eden* is set in the near future, and not in the time of its making, as it is conventional social problem films,<sup>37)</sup> already indicates that the root causes of the issues it problematizes are not located in the particularities of a specific time or place. Éva's suffocation is no longer a consequence of post-communist destitution or any local social issue, but rather a potent symbol of a possible future that may be shared by us all. The source of her suffering, conflicts, and dramatic tension transcends cultural, economic, and sociological factors, focusing instead on ecological ramifications. This is a major shift in the underlying local mythologies and cultural geography informing the film. In most Eastern European post-communist social problem films, as in *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu, 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007), *Land of Storms* (Ádám Császai, 2014) *The Class* (Ilmar Raag, 2007), *Beyond the Hills* (Cristian Mungiu, 2012) or *The Trap* (Srđan Golubovic, 2007), to name only a few, the protagonists' troubles are (at least partly) produced by social backwardness, deprivation and poverty, which are firmly established in the regional cultural mythologies as characteristic features of the "East,"<sup>38)</sup> effects of inadequate progress and insufficient modernization. As we have seen above, it is this self-deprecating cultural mythology and tradition of social criticism that shapes *Lazarescu's* "dark vision" of underfunded health services, the all-pervading "decrepitude of space,"<sup>39)</sup> the scenery of dilapidated hospitals and destructive social habits. By contrast, in *Eden* Éva's troubles are not caused by the backwardness of the local or regional, but, on the contrary, they are the side-effects of progress-oriented industrial modernity and corporate capitalism.

Together with these shifts in the cause of suffering and death, the social and physical aspects of character-building change too. Within the Eastern European film context, *Eden's* most notable departure from well-established local practices is its breaking with the established de-idealizing character-building practices. As Doru Pop's chapter on antiheroes in *Romanian New Wave Cinema*<sup>40)</sup> and my previous work on the formations of masculinity in post-communist Hungarian cinema<sup>41)</sup> may amply demonstrate, the portrayal of antiheroes that are consciously distanced from both the idealized protagonists of American genre cinema and the equally idealized communist hero types is as characteristic of the Romanian New Wave as of New Hungarian Cinema. Mr. Lazarescu thus belongs to a long list of characters with limited agency, neglected bodies, unassuming appearances, peculiar clothing choices, self-destructive habits, or behaviour patterns at odds with the norms of their societies. These characters have become ingrained within Eastern European art cinema, constituting recognizable and established elements of a distinct cinematic (and wider cultural) tradition that treats locals in an ironically self-deprecating manner, depicting them as irredeemably imperfect, but often darkly funny human beings.<sup>42)</sup> These

37) Doles, "Social Problem Films," 1.

38) Miklós Ságghy, "Irány a nyugat! — filmes utazások keletről nyugatra a magyar rendszerváltás után," in *Tér, hatalom és identitás viszonyai a magyar filmben*, eds. Zsolt Győri and György Kalmár (Debrecen: Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, 2015), 233–243.

39) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 37.

40) Ibid., 87–100.

41) Kalmár, *Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema*.

42) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 153.

practices, as the films of Béla Tarr most prominently exemplify, often convey existential anguish experienced in an indifferent or destructive social milieu, but they also raise unsettling questions about human existence in general. From a more specific cinematic perspective, these de-idealizing character-building practices may also be regarded as a dark mirror and implicit critique of the shallow fantasies of perfection fostered by genre cinema and the cultural mythologies it embodies. The above mentioned abject-like qualities of Mr. Lazarescu simultaneously ridicule the far-from-ideal Eastern European everyman, and reveal the falsity of the ideals that he cannot live up to. In other words, these traditional de-idealizing practices of Eastern European cinema effectively serve as poignant metaphors for the Eastern European condition on the one hand, and sarcastically satirize the pervasive Americanization of culture on the other.<sup>43)</sup>

It is most telling that *Eden* breaks with this well-established character-building technique: unlike Mr. Lazarescu, who is easily identifiable as a type, as Eastern European art-house cinema's definition of the local everyman, Éva is much closer to the physical, social and cultural ideals associated with the middle class of northwest Europe. Though she is in her early forties, beyond the preferred youth promoted by the beauty industry, Éva refrains from indulging in the typical vices of Lazarescu-like characters, such as drinking or smoking, and she possesses none of the unappealing bodily traits typically associated with de-idealized characters, such as being smelly, dishevelled, or overweight. This shift is all the more notable since the female protagonists of the director Ágnes Kocsis's previous films were shaped by the previous cinematic paradigm — see the public toilet cleaner Viola in *Fresh Air* (Friss levegő, 2006) or the compulsively overeating, obese nurse Piroska in *Adrienn Pál* (Pár Adrienn, 2010). Instead, Éva embodies qualities such as intelligence, wit, sensitivity, and empathy, and she can find solace in the classical music coming from her neighbour's home. In contrast to the lower class Lazarescu, who lacks discernible taste or intellectual and creative pursuits, Éva engages in crafting and sculpting, using the metallic materials available to her.

It is important to note that both films show characteristic features of ethics of care, as they rely on a social and relational concept of the human subject,<sup>44)</sup> and explore ethical problems less as abstract ideals, and more as practices of “informed responsive actions” of care.<sup>45)</sup> As opposed to the abstract individual of liberal humanism, both films depict protagonists as defined by particular social and historical situations, as parts of a network of various sentient beings, human and non-human life forms (Lazarescu has cats, Éva has turtles), and depict acts of care as “a response to the needs of particular persons in their determinate circumstances.”<sup>46)</sup> Furthermore, both films make it clear that human life is to be seen in a social context, loneliness is killing, and one can only survive if one is embedded in a set of caring relationships. However, *Lazarescu* suggests that due to the miserable

43) See: Gábor Gelencsér, *Az eredendő máshol: Magyar filmes szölamok* (Budapest: Gondolat, 2014), 302–307; Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 87–100; Anikó Imre, *Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 200; Kalmár, *Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema*, 79–84.

44) Hamington and Flowers, eds., *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*, 4–5; Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

45) Hamington and Flowers, eds., *Care Ethics in the Age of Precarity*, 5.

46) Kupfer, *Feminist Ethics in Film*, 1.

social conditions that produce post-communist precarity, such a caring community is difficult to find, which predestines poor Mr. Lazarescu to an undignified, untimely death. On the other hand, in *Eden*, alongside the above mentioned social, physical and personal changes, there is a discernible shift in cultural and social class dynamics. Éva is no longer depicted as a hopelessly destitute, uneducated societal outcast. While Mr. Lazarescu's choices are also seriously limited by his own understanding of his situation as well as his socio-economic status, Éva has a clear opinion about the cause of her problems, and actively seeks medical and legal help. Thus, this shift in character-building may signify not only a shift in cinematic traditions, but also a different ethical stance, a different intention and moral message. It suggests that in the face of the ecological crisis precarity, far from being a characteristic of underprivileged lower class Eastern European people, becomes a defining characteristic feature of life as such, regardless of wealth, age, geographical location, education or social class.

### Shifting spatial arrangements of subjectivity

The above explored shifts in the cinematic definitions of the vulnerable Other and the causes of suffering are matched with subtle changes in the arrangements of cinematic space in which the precarious subject is defined. Locations, spaces and the mise-en-scene play a crucial part in the cinematic language and visual grammar of both the Romanian New Wave and Hungarian New Cinema.<sup>47)</sup> As Pop argues,

Representing space as having significant narrative values, where spatial construction is in close connection with the disenfranchised nature of the human beings populating it, is a syntactic connection. It links the cinematographic aspects of the movie and the narrative levels, with a close attention to the negative effects of industrialism and the profound alienating nature of the relationships between humans. This is essential for the cinematic grammar of the young Romanian directors, and it is instrumental when it comes to interpreting the works of these New Wavers.<sup>48)</sup>

Pop's description is not only important for highlighting the way the relationship between space and the human being is made meaningful in this kind of cinema, but (as I will later indicate) also highlights points where this approach to social problems can be appropriated for the purposes of ecocinema.

Other studies have called attention to the ways the characters' spatial movements are used systematically by these filmmakers to express abstract and symbolic meanings, and highlighted the wider cultural implications of these movements.<sup>49)</sup> In case of the two films

47) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 42–73; Hajnal Király, *Film a határon* (Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület, 2022), 14–49; Hajnal Király, "Leave to Live? Placeless People in Contemporary Hungarian and Romanian Films of Return," *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 6, no. 2 (2015), 169–183.

48) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 37.

49) Király, "Leave to Live;" László Strausz, "Vissza a Múltba: Az Emlékezés Tematikája Fialat Magyar Rendezőknél," *Metropolis*, no. 3 (2011), 20–29; Strausz, *Hesitant Visions*; Sággy, "Irány a nyugat."

in focus, one must first highlight the prominent role of hospital environments, which are crucial for both *Lazarescu's* and *Eden's* visual style, mise-en-scene, and spatial symbolism. It also seems clear that the unsymmetrical power structures of these medical spaces play a key role in the representation of the ethical questions lying at the heart of the films' interest.<sup>50)</sup>

Isolation, loneliness, desperation and vulnerability are key qualities in both films, and both protagonists are seriously deprived of agency and are in need of the care of the Other. Arguably, these are features that can be as relevant for more conventional social problem films as for ecocinema. As Meta Mazaj's analysis of the Slovenian eco-film *The Tree* (Drovo; Sonja Prosenc, 2014) also demonstrates, *Eden* is not the only Eastern European eco-film that places its protagonist in a claustrophobic, "barren and depleted" space<sup>51)</sup> in a manner reminiscent of the spatial settings described by Pop above. However, the differences in the means of cinematic representation may indicate shifting theoretical and ethical perspectives. While *Lazarescu* relies on the casual, realistic camerawork of the Romanian New Wave, giving the spectator the feeling of sharing the same spaces as the characters, living and moving with them,<sup>52)</sup> in the clinical scenes of *Eden* we do not have hand-held cameras, but rather carefully designed, geometrical compositions that highlight the allegorical qualities of the image. While in *Lazarescu* our relation to the image is mostly sensuous, affective and immersive, in *Eden* almost every frame is a call for intellectual contemplation and philosophical analysis. Furthermore, in *Eden* we almost never see the doctors from Éva's point of view (as in *Lazarescu* and real-life medical situations). In the most typical spatial arrangement, she becomes a spectacle, an object of curiosity for both the film's spectator and the medical professionals within the narrative. The mise-en-scene in these scenes at the research clinic is filled with medical equipment displays and monitors, all showing her. She occupies the centre of the frame, sitting in the back in a glass cube, separated by window panes and targeted by multiple cameras, and thus appears mostly as a vulnerable, tormented specimen in a cruel laboratory experiment. This spatial and visual arrangement of characters invites the spectator to identify with the doctors, the subjects of the diegetic gaze, yet this identification (due to the doctors' clinical detachment and lack of empathic emotional response as they watch Éva's convulsions and near-suffocation) fills the spectator with unease.

Thus, although with different cinematic methods, both films alienate us from the medical gaze, and call attention to its ethical shortcomings. However, while this failure to respond to the suffering Other mainly stems from a socially and historically well-defined situation in *Lazarescu*, and thus works mostly as a critique of post-communist social conditions, the medical situations taking place in the bright, slightly futuristic clinic of *Eden* seem to have a different, wider scope of meaning. Éva's story, as well as her filmic representation in medical spaces can be interpreted as a general critique of the cold, detached, objectifying medical gaze of Western medicine, and, by implication, of Western science.

50) Eszter Ureczky, "When Cura Encounters Xenos: Women, Care and the (Un)kindness of Strangers in Three Films by the Dardenne Brothers," in *European Cinema at Times of Change*, eds. György Kalmár and Zsolt Györi (Debrecen: Debrecen University Press, 2021), 224–243; Király, *Film a határon*.

51) Mazaj, "Coming to the Senses," 230.

52) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 28, 32; Strausz, *Hesitant Visions*, 184.

Reminiscent of the influential critiques of Western medical science by Donna Haraway or Rosi Braidotti, the film implies that it is this objectifying, rational, goal-oriented and often profit-driven, care-less attitude that leads to the destruction of the biosphere, the prevalence of pollution and various allergic substances, as well as to the pronounced precariousness of human and animal life.<sup>53)</sup>

This leads to a significant shift in the relationship between humans and technology, a matter of key importance to many of the 21<sup>st</sup> century theoretical discourses shaping *Eden*. In the established cultural narrative of Eastern European art cinema, spaces characterized by advanced technology and other hallmarks of enlightened modernity are often linked with the “West,” understood simultaneously as geographical and cultural space. Within this somewhat self-exoticizing and self-colonizing trend in cultural geography, the East is typically depicted as less developed, less tolerant, and more backwards and run-down, a place from which most protagonists feel alienated.<sup>54)</sup> In *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, as in numerous other 21st-century Eastern European films, the backwards, intolerant or hostile qualities of the characters’ surroundings even lead to their deaths, as in *Beyond the Hills* (Mungiu, 2012), *Delta* (Mundruczó, 2008), or *Land of Storms* (Császai, 2014).<sup>55)</sup> However, some contemporary approaches, such as ecocriticism or critical posthumanism, appear to be at odds with this established cinematic mythology. *Eden*’s narrative could very well be set in the West, and the film neither necessarily define Budapest as “East” (in the cultural geographical sense), nor does it turn its location into a “storytelling devise with a grammatical function”<sup>56)</sup> as the Romanian New Wave in general and many examples of the New Hungarian Cinema of the 2000s do.

The general targeting of key aspects of industrial modernity and Western science in *Eden*, however, come at a high cost. The film eschews elements that could limit or localize its critical edge, and therefore departs from many of the above discussed conventional cinematic traits associated with Eastern European social problem films. *Eden*, in contrast to most examples of the Romanian New Wave and the New Hungarian Cinema of the 2000’s, does not rely on local idiosyncratic socio-cultural elements, does not create atmosphere on basis of sensuous qualities of such elements or locations, there is no naturalistic portrayal of the socio-cultural context specific to the Eastern European semi-periphery, no aesthetics of decay, the characters do not particularly resist idealization, and the general inclination to depict bleak lives lived in shabby settings with a touch of dark humour is almost completely missing. Consequently, *Eden* differs significantly from *Lazarescu* and Kocsis’s previous films, as it conspicuously positions itself as a transnational eco-film meant for the global audience of art cinema. Its narrative could take place in virtually any industrialized locale worldwide, and it could be about any middle-aged, middle-class woman facing a similar health challenge. Éva does not stand for the post-communist everywoman, rather, she is presented as a global metropolitan individual confronting the ecological crisis, someone in need of the Other’s care. This globalizing effect is, in part,

53) Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Ureczky, “When Cura Encounters Xenos.”

54) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 37.

55) Király, “Leave to Live.”

56) Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*, 37.

achieved through the film's deliberate purification of its mise-en-scene. While *Lazarescu* features numerous locally significant objects steeped in post-communist nostalgia, such as clothes, furniture or kitchen equipment, these culturally resonant items have been deliberately eliminated from Éva's sterile, metal-and-glass environment. The same holds true about the other spaces of the film: such meaningful pieces of local object-culture and relics of the past are missing from both the clinic and the home of the film's other protagonist, the well-paid clinical psychiatrist András, who tends to listen to classy jazz in his tasteful middle class house while sipping red wine from stylish wine glasses.

Not only spaces are meaningfully different in the two films, however, but the characters' movements within these as well. Again, we have a set of similarities, which highlight the differences: both main characters find themselves trapped in their life circumstances, and the central question driving their narratives revolves around the possibility of breaking free from these constraints in order to lead what could be considered "normal" or healthy lives. Claustrophobia is one of the main affective qualities of both films, as Lazarescu sinks deeper and deeper in the hell of post-communist healthcare with his ever worsening symptoms of a fatal disease, and Éva gets more and more desperate due to her physical and emotional isolation. As the above quoted longer passage from Doru Pop and the studies referenced at the beginning of this section demonstrate, this feeling of claustrophobia and these spatial configurations of entrapment, as well as the ensuing narrative driven by the desire for liberation, align with a longstanding tradition in Hungarian and Romanian cinemas, which often define human beings as trapped, limited and compromised, haunted by existential angst and a fair bit of insatiable and unfulfillable desire to be someone else somewhere else. (See, for example, Kocsis's two previous feature films, *Fresh Air* and *Adrienn Pál*, or Mungiu's *Occident*, 2002). *Eden* skilfully carries forward this aspect from the Eastern European social problem film, retaining the ethical questions that result from the encounter with such a trapped and suffering Other, while effectively replacing the traditional local (socio-cultural) adversities with global (ecological) ones.

However, concerning the spatial dynamics that emerge from this initial situation of entrapment and the desire to escape, *Eden* deviates from established paradigms. In Hungarian and Romanian social problem films, as for example in *Beyond the Hills*, *Fresh Air*, *Moscow Square* (Ferenc Török, 2001), *White Palms* (Szabolcs Hajdu, 2006), or *The Way I Spent the End of the World* (Catalin Mitulescu, 2006), the conventional pattern features failed escapes, circular and regressive journeys within disorienting and often hostile spaces, where protagonists ultimately abandon their initial goals and aspirations, and return to their point of origin or simply die.<sup>57)</sup> *Lazarescu* follows this pattern, as its protagonist can never escape the dire social and medical conditions of post-communist Romania, but remains "trapped alone in his socially determined tragedy,"<sup>58)</sup> thus it reaffirms the existential angst and all-pervasive sense of entrapment characteristic of the regional cultural mythologies. However, *Eden* seems to challenge this canonical pattern by introducing alternative spatial movements and narrative trajectories.

57) Strausz, "Vissza a Múltba," 23–24; Sággy, "Irány a nyugat;" Király, "Leave to Live."

58) Ibid., 40.

The most remarkable difference lies in the fact that Éva's journey is neither circular nor regressive or repetitive. It has a clear trajectory, not only on a psychological level but also in terms of physical and spatial progression. Throughout the film, Éva manages to liberate herself from the confines of her apartment and the clinical laboratory, either independently or with András's caring emotional and medical assistance. While Mr. Lazarescu is carried from one hospital to the other in the night without any real agency or chance to escape or heal, and we last see him in a small hospital room, lying unconscious, Éva ventures out into the streets while clad in her space suit, visits a pet shop, buys turtles, and even embarks on several strolls in the parks and forests surrounding Budapest with András. In the final scene of the film she even makes the daring decision to go on a picnic with András, despite the associated health risks. On a beautiful early summer day, she spreads a blanket on the grass and removes her protective attire so as to enjoy the fresh air in a delightful summer dress. Though after a brief period of joyful abandon Éva has an allergic attack and dies, the film does not represent this as an unambiguously dark ending. In contrast to the protagonists of the above listed films, she does not return to her former, constricting spaces, she is recognized as an Other worthy of love and care, and she regains agency by deliberately choosing to experience a picnic on a summer morning in a summer dress, even if this is her last experience in this life. As opposed to the bleak and confining hospital room where Lazarescu's ordeals (presumably) end, Éva's spatial journey culminates in this picturesque setting on Margaret Island, in natural surroundings, in the film's most colourful scene.

Thus, while *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* ends in a small room, with its protagonist lying unconscious on a hospital bed, being prepared for surgery, *Eden* takes us outside, into a wide open space of natural greenery. Moreover, *Eden* adds a meaningful shot that marks the differences between the two films' approaches: in the last shot of the film we witness Éva's passing from an aerial perspective, with the camera positioned a few meters above the blanket and the meadow. This non-human viewpoint simultaneously distances us from the personal drama and draws attention to the visual splendour of the scene. Gradually, the camera begins to ascend, as if Éva's soul were transcending the earthly realm, departing from the field, the island, the city, and soaring through the clouds until it encompasses the entire Earth in a single view. This visual movement corresponds to a shift in the auditory experience, where the diegetic sounds of the scene gradually diminish and make way for Lucio Dalla's song "Il Cielo."

In this final scene of *Eden*, the Earth's appearance as the last image and ultimate focal point associates Éva with the planet, and therefore extends the scope of traditional ethics by associating the ethical imperative to care for a suffering Other with that of caring for the planet. Furthermore, it creates a post-human perspective, which surpasses individual human existence, and embraces all life on Earth as one unified, living entity. It is noteworthy that the first photographic portrayals of Earth in this manner were produced by the astronauts of the Apollo program, who were the first humans to witness and photograph our planet from outer space, presenting it as a single, vibrant sphere amidst the vast expanse of the cosmos. The ethical implications of the final image of *Eden* are further highlighted by the fact that the astronauts also reported that such a perspective invariably evoked a profound sense of humanity's oneness and connectedness in them, along with a sense of responsibility toward all life on Earth.

Thus, the closing image of *Eden* defines the film's ultimate meaning within a post-human conceptual framework,<sup>59)</sup> in relation with the planetary sublime,<sup>60)</sup> where the ethical responsibility to care is extended to the whole of the planet. Within this perspective of extended post-human care, Éva's death is not necessarily understood as the tragic destiny of a solitary human being, but rather as a form of liberation from a pained and restricted human existence, a journey toward sublime transcendence.

The introduction of the planetary sublime in the film's conclusion gains further complexity and depth through the unexpected appearance of extra-diegetic music. Playing a somewhat flimsy, sentimental, melodramatic song during the end credits was also the way Puiu softened the tragic overtones of *Lazarescu*. Similarly, the Italian popular hit *Il Cielo* (Italian for "the sky") further alleviates the tragic tension of the final scene of *Eden* and validates Éva's interpretation of her liberation from her confining spacesuit (and her no less confining physical existence) as the happiest moment of her life. The song places her narrative within the wider context of the Earth (and the sky) as an integral whole, and interprets her death as ascent and escape. There is no circular journey,<sup>61)</sup> no return or retreat,<sup>62)</sup> no dual movement<sup>63)</sup> here, only human mortality subsumed by the planetary sublime, a sense of shared ethical responsibilities, and a touch of self-reflective irony (due to the overdone sentimentality of the old pop song), which saves the film from the danger of too much pathos and dogmatism by playfully complicating the epistemological status of the film's closing image.

### Conclusions: from the post-communist to the post-human

Thus, *Eden*'s resolution simultaneously underlines the heightened sense of precariousness in the age of environmental degradation, and redefines precarious life within the framework of the planetary sublime. Unlike *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, *Eden* does not simply tell another powerful story about human precarity and the importance of gestures of care, but also attempts to reconceptualise and reframe such narratives. The last shot of the film can be seen as a validation of the ecocritical perspective as the ultimate frame of reference through which to view life, human relationships, acts of care, or questions of ethical behaviour. While Mr. Dante Lazarescu's journey could be described as a descent into hell, central to *Eden*'s perspective is the concept of ascent, a rhetorical device usually avoided in Eastern European art cinema because of its moralizing implications, but frequently used in the environmental movement. Mark Minster defines the rhetoric of ascent as a storytelling technique where the main character transitions from a narrow-minded, environmentally destructive, materialistic, and morally inferior stance to a morally superior, eco-

59) Willoquet, *Framing the World*, 4.

60) Frank White, *The Overview Effect: Space Exploration and Human Evolution* (Reston: American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, 1998).

61) Király, "Leave to Live."

62) Kalmár, *Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema*, 146–149.

63) Strausz, "Vissza a Múltba."



logically conscious one.<sup>64)</sup> It is noteworthy that Minster traces the origins of this narrative pattern to the religious tradition of the conversion narrative,<sup>65)</sup> underscoring its significance for the ethical and moral principles of the environmental movement.

Minster's analysis and reinterpretation of the rhetorical figure of ascent can shed new light on the concluding scenes of *Eden*, while also highlighting those aspects of the trope's working that distance it from most Eastern European art films. Though Éva's ascent into the planetary sublime may constitute an agreeable ending for spectators concerned about the climate crisis, ecological destruction, or the devastating effects of corporate capitalism, in the context of Eastern European art films, such a resolution may seem like a new and potentially dangerous gambit. This is a tradition that favours aesthetic complexity over the reiteration of recognizable rhetorical and narrative patterns, that prefers ambiguity over simple messages, that seeks to depict and comprehend morally complex (and often compromised) characters, a tradition that (due to the region's painful historical experience of authoritarian regimes) is deeply sceptical about simple black and white moral(izing) messages and ideologically laden perspectives.<sup>66)</sup> As the above comparisons with *Lazarescu* have also indicated, *Eden* rewrites some of the typical character-building strategies, narrative patterns and aesthetic choices of Eastern European art cinema, including not only films such as *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, but also director Ágnes Kocsis's previous films. The subtle displacements that take place between such shifts between conventional social problem films and ecocinema are well-indicated by the way *Eden* retains some of the usual spatial definitions of its protagonist, such as isolation and alienation in bleak spaces, but (somewhat similarly to *The Tree*),<sup>67)</sup> redefined the source of this confining condition in ecocritical terms and constructed a narrative with different spatial trajectories.

Films made under the influence of the 21<sup>st</sup> century state of insecurity or precarity, similarly to *Eden* and other eco-films present a new cinematic approach that incorporates such conservative rhetorical and narrative elements as the ascent narrative to convey messages usually classified as progressive. On the one hand, as Minster's analysis of films like *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Everything's Cool* (2007) underscores, ecocinema often carries a moral stance. These films typically leave little room for doubt regarding what is considered environmentally responsible, pure, conscious, forward-thinking, and urgently necessary. They aim to persuade viewers of the moral high ground associated with eco-conscious attitudes or the moral unacceptability of environmentally harmful approaches without worrying too much about the historically compromised cultural materials they recycle. Often, they draw inspiration from conventional genres like moral allegories, spiritual awakening narratives, conversion stories, or the exemplum, appropriating these old patterns for advocating new messages.

64) Mark Minster, "The Rhetoric of Ascent in *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Everything's Cool*," in *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 25–42.

65) Minster, "The Rhetoric of Ascent," 28.

66) Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 44; Pop, *Romanian New Wave Cinema*.

67) See: Mazaj, "Coming to the Senses," 232.

However, as opposed to American examples like *Safe* (1995), *Eden* seems to be aware of the possible dangers associated with this paradigm shift, the awkward proximity of its pattern of ascent to Christian moral allegories or the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (literally: lifting up), not to mention the ways these goal-oriented patterns are regularly abused by shady political ideologies. Including the cheesy Italian pop-song *Il Cielo* in the film's resolution serves precisely this purpose of ironically undermining the self-assured moral pathos of these historically over-used (and politically compromised) generic patterns. Another similar safeguard is the fact that in *Eden* we never get a definitive answer to the question about the role of environmental and psychological factors in Éva's symptoms. It is worth noting that in *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* we also do not learn whether the protagonist's cancer was caused by his drinking habits, and arguably in that cinematic universe it is not even important. What matters is the heightened sense of precarity and lack of care in a specific social and historical context. In this sense, *Eden* does not completely break with the traditions of the Eastern European social problem film. Rather, it serves as a case study illustrating the complexities arising when different local and global cultural influences, philosophical and aesthetic trends meet under the pressure created by the sense of precarity. It also marks our time as that of profound change, when long-standing artistic, ethical, and cultural frameworks start shifting in unexpected but meaningful ways.

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## Filmography

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- Acid Forest* (Rügštus miškas; Rugile Barzdžiukaitė, 2018)
- Adrienn Pál* (Pál Adrienn; Ágnes Kocsis, 2010)
- An Inconvenient Truth* (An Inconvenient Truth; Davis Guggenheim, 2006)
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- Ashes and Diamonds* (Popiół i diament; Andrzej Wajda, 1958)
- Beyond the Hills* (Dupa dealuri; Cristian Mungiu, 2012)
- Cold War* (Zimna wojna; Paweł Pawlikowski, 2018)
- Closely Watched Trains* (Ostře sledované vlaky; Jiří Menzel, 1966)
- Delta* (Delta; Kornél Mundruczó, 2008)
- Eden* (Éden; Ágnes Kocsis, 2020)
- Everything's Cool* (Everything's Cool; Daniel B. Gold and Judith Helfand, 2007)
- Fresh Air* (Friss levegő; Ágnes Kocsis, 2006)
- Freshwater* (Freshwater; Peter Riviera, 2021)
- Frozen May* (Fagyott május; Péter Lichter, 2017)
- Greetings from Free Forests* (Pozdravy z volných lesů; Ian Soroka, 2018)
- Hukkle* (Hukkle; György Pálfi, 2002)
- Land of Storms* (Viharsarok; Ádám Császi, 2014)
- Land of Warm Waters* (A meleg vizek földje; Igor Buharov and Ivan Buharov, 2022)
- Moscow Square* (Moszkva tér; Ferenc Török, 2001)
- Occident* (Occident; Cristian Mungiu, 2002)
- Safe* (Safe; Todd Haynes, 1995)
- Sirenomelia* (Sirenomelia; Emiliya Škarnulytė, 2017)
- Spoor* (Pokot; Agnieszka Holland, 2017)
- Stuff and Dough* (Marfa si banii; Cristi Puiu, 2001)
- The Class* (Klass; Ilmar Raag, 2007)
- The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* (Moartea domnului Lăzărescu; Cristi Puiu, 2005)
- The Round-Up* (Szegénylegények; Miklós Jancsó, 1966)
- The Shop on Main Street* (Obchod na korze; Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos, 1965)
- The Trap* (Klopka; Srđan Golubovic, 2007)
- The Tree* (Drevo; Sonja Prosenc, 2014)

*The Way I Spent the End of the World* (Cum mi-am petrecut sfârșitul lumii; Cătălin Mitulescu, 2006)

*Trees* (Drzewa; Grzegorz Królikiewicz, 1995)

*White Palms* (Fehér tenyér; Szabolcs Hajdu, 2006)

## Biography

**György Kalmár** is reader at the Department of British Studies of the Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen (DE), Hungary. He graduated at DE in 1997, his majors were Hungarian and English. He worked as a post-graduate researcher and visiting scholar at the University of Oxford in Great Britain and at the University of Indiana in Bloomington, USA. He gained a PhD in philosophy (2003) and one in English (2007) at DE. His main teaching and research areas include literary and cultural theory, contemporary European cinema, gender studies, and British literature. He is the founding editor of the ZOOM book series, and the main organiser of the ZOOM film conferences. He is the author of over seventy articles and seven books, including *Formations of Masculinity in Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017) and *Post-Crisis European Cinema: White Men in Off-Modern Landscapes* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2020).