https://doi.org/10.58193/ilu.1800

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Move on Down

Precarity in Contemporary Hungarian Cinema

Watch the audiovisual essay here:
https://youtu.be/KZKCSefolbI

Abstract
This video essay engages with the topic of precarity in feature films produced in Hungary around and after the regime change of 1989, which launched tectonic social transformations leading to widespread instability. The essay confronts precarity as downward intragenerational mobility from an economic and social perspective from the final years of state socialism until the present. As an audiovisual product, the video documents the author's efforts to move beyond the disembodied voice of academic texts and experiment with accent as a marker of social entanglement.

Keywords
precarity, Hungarian cinema, regime change, social instability

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Creator's Statement

This video is an offshoot of the research project on the social history of Hungarian cinema conducted at the Eötvös Loránd University between 2015 and 2020. Together with my colleagues, we coded *all* feature films produced in Hungary for a large number of variables, such as time period, location, protagonists, genre, etc. With the database at my disposal, I compiled a list of feature films made after 1985 in which the protagonist experiences social and/or economic downfall during the last years of the state socialist system and its immediate aftermath.

In the article based on the findings — "Move on Down. Precarity and Downward Mobility in Contemporary Hungarian Feature Films"[1] — I argue that the representation of precarity is a useful prism through which one can glimpse the cinematic reflections on social transformation from 1985 onward. Additionally, images of precarity also mirror the filmmakers' own dispositions towards social mobility, and intellectuals' fears about precarity and the loss of social status in general.[2] In the written text, I made sure to follow the established conventions of academic writing, using a detached and objective language. Guiding readers from the initial hypotheses through the evidence towards the conclusion, I made every attempt to remain as neutral as possible as a scholarly voice — in written form. There was no need to reveal the subjective position of the speaker: the research question made sense, the methodology was sound, the argument — hopefully — convincing!

The production of the video essay allowed me to leave behind the safe but often confining entrenchments of academic writing and offer viewers something personal that could not be expressed in written form. As Barbara Zecchi has suggested, the video essay itself represents an accented form of intellectual engagement when compared with tradi-

1) László Strausz, "Move on Down: Precarity and Downward Mobility in Contemporary Hungarian Feature Films," in *Precarity in European Films: Depictions and Discourses*, eds. Elisa Cuter, Guido Kirsten, and Hanna Prenzel (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 179–197.

2) At least two articles adopt a similar database methodology. In her article "Up the Slope: Women's Mobility Stories in Post-Transition Hungarian Cinema," Margitházi discusses upwards mobility in relation to female protagonists. Beja Margitházi, "Up the Slope: Women's Mobility Stories in Post-Transition Hungarian Cinema," *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies*, no. 18 (2020), 223–250. Also, Vajdovich's "Good Wives, or Emancipated, Working Women?" (2019) analyzes the representation of female roles in Hungarian feature films between 1931 and 1944. Vajdovich Györgyi, "Jó feleség vagy emancipált, dolgozó nő? Nőszerepek és női mobilitás az 1931–44 közötti magyar filmben [Good Wives, or Emancipated, Working Women? Female Roles and Female Mobility in Hungarian Films between 1931 and 1944]," *Metropolis* 23, no. 4 (2019), 8–29.

tional written scholarship: she considers video essays to be an "accented video way of feeling as thinking."[3] The topic of regime change-era precarity in Eastern Europe is, after all, not just another topic that I address objectively throughout my work. Rather, the period was a formative event that impacted my thinking ever since, and the video essay gave me the opportunity to reveal this involvement. Thus, when planning the voice-over for the video, one element I decided not to mask was an accented English. An English with a distinct Eastern European accent. An English that at times puts emphasis on the wrong syllable. My English, which reflects on how language itself can be a source of precarity for non-native speakers, in academia and elsewhere. My accent allowed me to slip into the skin of the films' protagonists and play with how this not-quite complete command of language, this off-centered referentiality may be used productively.

Exploring various perspectives on the role of voice-over in videographic work, Ian Garwood addresses the allegation that voice-over is, essentially, un-video-essay-istic writing. "If we can talk ourselves into this position," he proposes, then "we can talk ourselves out of it,"[4] and refers to Kevin B. Lee who suggests that we treat spoken words audiovisually. One such strategy, Lee argues, is when sounds redefine words.[5] For example, the difference between perfect British-English voice-over narration, and a distinctly accented voice-over transforms the meaning of narration itself. Here I follow Hamid Naficy's concept *and* practice of accented thinking as a form of critical displacement and affect.[6] And while it would probably be an exaggeration to state that the accent entirely redefines the meaning of the words from the written article, the physical qualities of the spoken words[7] surely open up new possibilities for interaction between image and sound.

My original plan with making this video essay was to produce a straightforward audiovisual adaptation of a published text. However, the process brought about unexpected revelations way beyond the upshots of this plan. My own disembodied academic voice from the written essay transformed in the voice-over into an embodied voice — one that is geopolitically circumscribed, one that has a history. As such, the adaptation motivated me further to add auditory markers of my personal involvement, participation, and entanglement in the topic of precarity as a whole. The work has allowed me to reflect on how the voice of an involved narrator can diminish the distance between the speaking subject and the object of inquiry. It is this distance that produces too often hierarchical, exoticizing descriptions of peripheral cultures and subjects. My video essay has allowed me to confront the argument by Alexander Kiossev[8] on the self-exoticizing Eastern European intellectual,

3) Barbara Zecchi, "An accented video way of thinking: Becoming videoessay," *Academic Quarter*, vol. 28 (2024), 28, accessed January 14, 2025, https://journals.aau.dk/index.php/ak/article/view/8852/7105.

4) Ian Garwood, "The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism," *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016), accessed January 14, 2025, https://necsus-ejms.org/the-place-of-voiceover-in-audiovisual-film-and-television-criticism/.

5) Kevin B. Lee, "Elements of the Essay Film," *Vimeo*, 2014, accessed January 14, 2025, https://vimeo.com/90150897.

6) Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

7) On top of the discussed quality of the accent, a more detailed analysis would also take into consideration pitch, tempo, timbre, volume etc.

8) Alexander Kiossev, "The self-colonizing metaphor," *Atlas of Transformation*, 2011, accessed January 14, 2025,

who through her own discursive practices situates herself as *inferior* in relation to the Western subject. My project has shown that the accented language does not necessarily have to stand in a comparative-hierarchical relation to non-accented-ness. Rather, it can express a set of experiences accessible only for the accented subject.

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Biography

László Strausz is an associate professor in Film Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest. His work focuses on contemporary East-Central European screen media, cultural memory, and the politics of style. Since the publication of his monograph *Hesitant Histories on the Romanian Screen* (Palgrave, 2017), he has been working with state-produced educational films made during the state socialist decades. He is the associate editor of the journal *Eastern European Screen Studies.*

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http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html.