From self-fulfilment to survival of the fittest: work in European cinema from the 1960s to the present, by Ewa Mazierska, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2015, 303 pp., £60 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78238-486-1

Ewa Mazierska’s latest book continues to build upon the author’s already exceptional contribution to academic knowledge in the fields of European and transnational cinemas. This latest work considers, through a suitably well-grounded sociocultural framework, what Mazierska identifies as the ‘paradox’ of individuals living in contemporary, high levels of unemployment facing, on the one hand, long working hours and yet on the other, the lowest level of security than ever before.

The book, From Self-Fulfilment to Survival of the Fittest: Work in European Cinema from the 1960s to the Present, begins with an exhaustive introduction in which the author rationalises her choices in searching for a cinematic representation of a golden age for work. This rigorous and carefully constructed volume explores both histories and theories of work in addition to its analysis of key cinematic case studies from across Europe. The first chapter underpins the theoretical framework through which the author undertakes her study and exploration which pertains to Marxist theories and films that in turn lend themselves to Marxist analysis. This book is organised in a clear and precise chronology with the first chapter which constitutes a rationalisation of current discourses on work and conceptual frameworks for the book, with the subsequent four chapters each exploring ‘the 1960s’, ‘the 1970s’, ‘the 1980s’ and ‘the 1990s, 2000s and beyond’ in turn. What is striking about the book is the author’s presentation of a very strong, thorough and accomplished critical and theoretical context for the sociocultural and historical lens through which each of the chosen films is analysed and scrutinised.

Chapter 2 sees the opportunistic and affluent 1960s probed and investigated. From the British New Wave’s Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (Karel Reisz, 1960), The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (Tony Richardson, 1962) and This Sporting Life (Lindsay Anderson, 1963) to Poland’s Złoto/Gold (Wojciech Has, 1962), Wolkower/Walkover (Jerzy Skolimowski, 1965) and Molo/The Pier (Wojciech Solarz, 1969). These films include Italian factories, Swinging London on screen and Nazi war camp cinema. A particularly adept approach comes in Mazierska’s focus on the importance attached to the cinema of the 1960s by the world of entertainment and mass media. The films here are considered as representative of a period which was good for work and for Europe.

The third chapter then explores a period – the 1970s – identified as being of greater fragmentation for both the cinema and for European society. Mazierska explores Western cinema and the attention granted, specifically, to working women, in the works of directors Marin Kermit, Jean Luc Godard and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. This is an accomplished section which, through an exploration of an increase in migration to the West, a shift towards consumption in the East, the division between high and low art being gradually eroded and a shift of attention from the privileged to the underprivileged worker in the cinema, considers a moving from the margins to the centre. The focus of the analysis here is on Eastern European films Wodzirej/Dance Leader Feliks Falk, 1977), Man of Marble/Człowiek z Marmuru (Andrzej Wajda, 1977) and Lindsay Anderson’s British production, O Lucky Man! (1973). Mazierska moves on to discuss the representation of overly powerful and decadent workers in Carry on at your Convenience (Gerald Thomas, 1971) and the Soviet Office Romance/Sluzhebnyy Roman (Eldar Ryazanov, 1977).

The author’s considerations of the 1980s begins with a rationalisation for this period as, what she terms ‘the time of disembedding’ (151), describing the decade as turbulent years which were punctuated with political struggle and, ‘the upward redistribution of wealth’ (151). Here, the chapter is largely devoted to the British cinema, again considering Lindsay Anderson and additionally Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, Mike Leigh and Stephen Frears. This chapter explores what the author has termed, ‘redundant industrial workers, the nouveux riches and young people’ (163).

Mazierska’s widest ranging chapter, ‘the 1990s, 2000s and beyond’, then goes on to consider the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and its impact further afield in the rest of Europe. Films that fall under the proficient lens of scrutiny here include, Edi (Piotr Trzaskalski, 2002), It’s a Free World (Ken Loach, 2007) The Full Monty (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) and Brassed Off (Mark Herman, 1996). Mazierska explores this period of work in film as characterised by a shift from Keynesian capitalism to neoliberalism which is rationalised through a representation of a condemnation of neoliberal conditions.

Mazierska’s conclusions, as meticulously explained and commanding as her theoretical underpinnings, lead one to the understanding that, as she puts forward, ‘we do not need more work and, especially, we do not need work that produces high profit, but less of it’ (261). Mazierska’s exploration of these distinct, yet comparably passionate and forthright periodic representations of work in the cinema is authoritative, extremely well rationalised and, indeed, definitive. Whilst this original work constitutes an exhaustive view of these cinematic representations of difficult and at times elaborate notions, the author does surmise that, ultimately, ‘the majority of filmmakers […] do not encourage viewers to change the capitalist status quo’ (263), for, as she posits, any attempt to produce change through any collective action inevitably ends in defeat.

This book is not only aimed at the specialist with foreknowledge of the field but is thorough, detailed, compelling and, indeed, accessible.

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