
Challenging the Hungarian Myth of the West: *Üvegtigris*/Glass Tiger and the Smokescreen of Neoliberal Capitalism.

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The year 1989 has long been perceived as Europe's *annus mirabilis*. The sudden collapse of communism reunited Eastern Europe with the West and cemented democracy and market capitalism as the region's political and economic future. Initially, at least, Hungary was touted as the star pupil of Eastern Europe's neoliberal transformation. Aided in no small part by János Kádár's market-oriented 'goulash communism', the Hungarian economy was in a more advanced state of development at the time of transition and, consequently, seen as a more attractive proposition for foreign investment. Western companies swiftly capitalised upon Hungary's newly opened market and Hungarian high streets were quickly awash with foreign franchises and products, fulfilling many citizens' long-held fantasy of consumer abundance.

In Hungary, the consumer item has a long history of mythical connotation. During the communist years, the ideological battle between East and West was, to a large extent, played out within the consumer realm. Many Hungarians had equated the superior quality of Western consumer goods with a better quality of life offered in the West more generally. Consumer items thus contributed significantly to the formation of a mythical, utopian image of the West and following the post-communist transition optimism was high for the prosperity, comfort and choice many associated with Western living.

This article seeks to engage with the political myths surrounding Hungary's return to the West; more precisely, how the locally-popular comedy, *Üvegtigris*/Glass Tiger (Iván Kapitány and Péter Rudolf, 2001) engages with the myths surrounding Hungary's democratic and capitalist assimilation. I argue that the film endeavours to confront both the ideological myths impressed from above and those romantically envisioned from below; that is to say, those disseminated by the global culture industries advocating market capitalism, and those deep-seated fantasies of life in the West cemented under communism. The film challenges the propagandist and ideologically laden myths of the West and engages with the expectations of the Hungarian citizens, expectations built upon a mythopoeic imaginary West as glimpsed from behind the iron curtain.

Glass Tiger was the feature length directorial debuts of Iván Kapitány and Péter Rudolf, who co-wrote the screenplay with Hilda Hársing and debutant screenwriter Gábor Óliver Buss. The film focuses upon café proprietor Lali (Rudolf) and his loyal band of hapless clientele. Through a series of tenuously linked vignettes, we witness the various happenings that occur in and around the Glass Tiger café, an American themed fast food restaurant situated, seemingly, in the middle of nowhere. Made on a modest budget of 150 million Forints - approximately €600,000[1] - *Glass Tiger* was released in Hungarian cinemas in October 2001. The film would go on to attract a national audience of 95,995 viewers by the end of the year,[2] and over 130,000 viewers by the end of its run.[3] Such was the success of *Glass Tiger* that a sequel was released in 2006, which itself would achieve a national audience of 304,021 viewers.[4] A third film in the series followed in 2010, attracting 469,984 viewers.[5] Such success has positioned the *Glass Tiger* series as one of Hungarian cinema's most popular film franchises.[6]

Aesthetically, one may liken *Glass Tiger* to the work of Emir Kusturica. While the film lacks the ethereal aura and magical realist elements that have come to define Kusturica's work, *Glass Tiger* does share a similar sense of the baroque. Indeed, *Glass Tiger* mirrors the unstructured narrative, cluttered and excessive mise-en-scène, and spectacularly exuberant characters of films such as *Dom za vešanje/Time of the Gypsies* (1988), *Podzemlje/Underground* (1995) and, perhaps most patently, *Crna mačka, beli mačor/Black Cat, White Cat* (1998). Akin to the films of Kusturica, *Glass Tiger* also embraces this sense of eclecticism and kitsch. This is no more evident than in the Glass Tiger café itself and its immediate surrounding, as will be demonstrated accordingly, and film's flamboyantly exaggerated characters. Regular Glass Tiger patron, Róka (Sándor Gáspár), for example, inexplicably wears a bizarre new outfit and sports an outrageous new haircut in every scene he appears in.

Yet, while *Glass Tiger* embraces a Kusturica-inspired sense of comedic excess, the film also offers subtle insight into Hungary's post-communist transition. Through central protagonist, Lali, a man unsatisfied with life, and who fantasises about material betterment, *Glass Tiger* provides a microcosmic snapshot of post-communist society. It is through Lali that the film engages with the Westernisation of Hungarian culture and the failure of neoliberal market capitalism to generate the levels of inclusive growth widely expected following the collapse of communism. Through Lali's desire to own a Chevrolet Impala, *Glass Tiger* examines the role of Western material culture in post-communist identity formations. However, given that Lali's desire ultimately remains unfulfilled, the film highlights a clash between post-communist expectations and realities. I argue that Lali's failed expectations speak to a wider sense of disillusionment that accompanied Hungary's return to the West as the

realities of life under capitalism failed to meet citizens' long-held hopes of prosperity and material comfort.

Additionally, this article argues that *Glass Tiger* highlights the continued legacy of communism, implying that despite the pervasiveness of Western cultural discourse, those deep-seated habits and tendencies ingrained by forty years of communism remain present. I argue that the legacy of communism is visible in the film's characters, who continue to hold onto 1980s attitudes, now obsolete and out of place in the contemporary post-communist setting, and through the Glass Tiger café itself, which I contend, functions as a metaphorical device through which the film comments on the façade of Hungary's return to the West. If one looks beyond the café's American frontage, the socialist footprint remains visible. Through the Glass Tiger café, the film addresses the façade of Westernisation, suggesting that while neoliberal reforms have led many commentators to deem Hungary's post-communist transformation a success, one must look beyond this semblance of successful Western assimilation to see the underlying realities of life in capitalist Hungary.

The Myth of the West

The myth of the West forms part of the communist legacy, born out of the coercive nature of communist rule, the shortage economy and the state's inability to fulfil its utopian promises. During the hard dictatorship of Mátyás Rákosi, Hungary's economic policy strictly adhered to the guiding principles of Stalinism, placing great emphasis on heavy industry.^[7] Light industry, conversely, was vastly underfunded resulting in frequent shortages of basic consumer goods. However, in the aftermath of the October Revolution of 1956, newly installed General Secretary, János Kádár sought to extinguish the threat of further insurgence and appease the alienated Hungarian populace through a policy of cautious reform. In exchange for citizens' acquiescence to communist ideology, the socialist government granted Hungarians greater individual liberties and grew more responsive to their material needs. Over the period of Kádár's governance Hungarians gained access to a comparatively well supplied and variable source of state produced consumer items.

Material culture provided an outlet for individual expression and subjectivity. However, the socialist consumer experience was laden with political ideology. Nationally produced consumer items were loaded with subtext, promoting the virtues of socialist ideology through notions of functionality and efficiency. Consequently, despite increased access to nationally produced consumer items, Hungarians instead attributed elevated cultural capital to their Western equivalents. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, access to Western consumer products was limited, obtainable only via the black market at hugely inflated prices. However,

after the Hungarian thaw, their availability steadily increased, with a richer and more varied array of Western products slowly finding their way to the Hungarian high streets.[\[8\]](#) Western consumer products became vehicles of political mythology, shaping what Alexei Yurchak describes as the Imaginary West. As Yurchak asserts, the Imaginary West emerged from

an array of discourses, statements, products, objects, visual images, musical expressions, and linguistic constructions that were linked to the West by theme or by virtue of their origin or reference, and that circulated widely in late socialism, gradually shap[ing] a coherent and shared object of imagination.[\[9\]](#)

Yurchak suggests that the concept of the Imaginary West was archetypal, disconnected from any real sense of place but infused with ideology. The Imaginary West proliferated, in part, because of the intermittent exposure to the West, which was largely limited to Western consumer products, and because of what John Borneman describes as “a recourse to fantasy” that arose from the absence of a fully functioning public sphere.[\[10\]](#) In communist Hungary, the mythical West was primarily conceptualised from the popular perception of Western consumer goods. As Hungarian anthropologist Krisztina Fehérváry maintains, these products “were understood as not just evidence of a better production system, but iconic of a more natural and humane political system, one valuing human dignity”.[\[11\]](#)

The diversity, workmanship and prestige of Western consumer products came to reflect the quality of life offered by the West more generally. Through their immeasurable novelty and variety, Western consumer goods were suggestive of an ideology that placed individual freedoms at the fore. Said products exposed the inferiority of the centralised economic system and imbued resentment towards the functionality of state manufactured consumer goods, and the ideology deeply instilled within their making. These resentments came to reflect the dissatisfaction with the communist system more broadly.

The emotional investment placed in Western consumer products was a collective response to the lived experience of communism. The cachet of Western commodities circulated as a statement of defiance towards communism’s imposed ideology, representing a desire for individual autonomy amidst the paternalism of the state and as a desire for freedom, symbolically manifest in the form of unrestricted consumer choice. Western consumer products also provided a link to the European community to which many Warsaw Pact citizens still believed they belonged.

Following the sudden and unforeseen implosion of communism, the fantasy of consumer abundance, which had fuelled the Imaginary West, became a reality, at least on the Hungarian high streets, which were soon saturated with Western products and franchises. As Henri Vogt states, inevitably following transition many citizens “interpreted freedom of consumption as an inalienable right connected to their newly acquired individual freedom”.[\[12\]](#) Citizens equated material culture with self-worth and status, and many assumed that Hungary’s return to the West would yield greater standards of living and by extension greater contentment and wellbeing.

While serving as an expression of freedom and an articulation of critique against communism’s now moribund ideologies, the Imaginary West also served as a neoliberal Trojan horse used to implant codes of behaviour espousing free market values. However, forty years of communist rule had left Hungarians in need of socialisation in the practices of globalised consumer culture. In order to instil the ideology of consumption, international advertising, marketing and public relations companies purchased majority stakes in Hungarian communications agencies in what Anikó Imre describes as a “colonization of the virtually virgin postcommunist media and information technology markets”.[\[13\]](#) Consequently, during the first decade of post-communism, advertising expenditure in Hungary rose exponentially, soaring from \$50 million in 1990 to \$1,894.70 million in 2000.[\[14\]](#) Western advertising placed emphasis on the authenticity of these newly available consumer items as Coca Cola’s slogan, “The Real One” (*Az Igazi*) suggests.[\[15\]](#) Such claims to authenticity served as attempts to legitimise neoliberal capitalism as both genuine and rightful.

Similarly, Hollywood studios acquired major shares in Hungarian film distributors ensuring that Hungarian cinema’s exhibited Hollywood movies.[\[16\]](#) New private television channels *RTL Klub* and *TV2* launched in 1997, and both public service and commercial broadcasters began importing increasing amounts of foreign television. Timothy Havens, Evelyn Bottando and Matthew S. Thatcher observe that between 2001 and 2004 US imports accounted for 57.3 per cent of all imported programming on Hungarian television with European imports reaching just under 25 per cent during the same period (130).[\[17\]](#) Over 92 per cent of these European Imports came from Western countries, principally from Germany (20.1%), UK (18.6%) Italy (17.3%) and France (16.8%).[\[18\]](#)

By 1991, 70 per cent of the Hungarian national daily newspapers were foreign owned and by 1996 so too were 65.8 per cent of women’s weekly magazines.[\[19\]](#) Hungarian versions of popular Western magazines and periodicals began increasingly filling kiosks and newsstands. The first American consumer magazine published in Hungarian being *Playboy*,

released in November 1989.[20] In reference to fashion and lifestyle magazine *Cosmopolitan*, first published in Hungary in 1997, Hungarian journalist Gusztav Kosztolanyi noted that “[i]n format, content and tenor, it was indistinguishable from its Western counterparts”.[21]

Western media thus became the primary means of disseminating neoliberal ideology and socialising citizens in the values of capitalism. By acquiring significant stakes in Hungarian media industries, foreign media conglomerates procured a platform through which to promote the virtues of the free market, transforming citizens into consumers through the communication of social codes espousing rampant consumerism. To satisfy these newly implanted material desires, new sites of consumption were established. From the mid-1990s, construction began on modern shopping complexes backed principally by American finance. The Duna Plaza, the nation’s first American-style shopping mall, opened its doors in 1996 establishing what urban theorist Judit Bodnár describes as “a novelty in the local culture of shopping”.[22]

The integration of Western-style economics fundamentally transformed the ways in which citizens lived and interacted with one another. The end of communist paternalism fostered an environment of individualism as citizens were now forced to fend for themselves. Consumer culture resulted in a shift towards self-interest and narcissism, and post-communist society became increasingly atomised, leading many citizens to decry the loss of community that had existed under the communists.

These conditions saw anti-Western sentiments rise in ascendancy. Support for the market economy declined as capitalism failed to generate the levels of inclusive growth many had dreamed of during the communist years. Indeed, to some, global brands such as Coca-Cola and McDonald’s became what social anthropologist Krista Harper describes “Hungarian folk villains” whose “logos symbolize the incursion of multinational corporations into public space, the media, and the public imagination”.[23] Many Hungarians subsequently began to associate the ubiquitous nature of consumer advertising with the Soviet Union’s equally ubiquitous five-pointed red star and, as such, a threat to Hungarian national autonomy.

Capitalism’s failure to live up to Hungarian expectations also created a deep sense of nostalgia for the communist past, with many citizens concluding that life had been better under the old regime. Indeed, a survey conducted by the *Pew Research Group* in 2009 revealed that 72 percent of respondents believed they were better off under communism, with only eight per cent claiming the opposite.[24] To a significant degree, nostalgia for the communist past spoke less about a collective desire to return to the past system, but instead spoke of a longing for

past longings, a desire to retrieve the fantasy of the West in which the West was seen as utopian.[25]

The Unfulfilled Promises of Neoliberal Capitalism.

How then does *Glass Tiger* engage with post-communist life and the myths of the Imaginary West? I argue that *Glass Tiger* provides implicit insight into contemporary attitudes towards material culture while exposing a discrepancy between the Westernisation of Hungarian culture and the standards of living many had assumed of Hungary's Western integration. Indeed, from the outset, the film emphasises the extent to which Hungarian culture has been westernised. The film opens on the fourth of July with two disc jockeys discussing the rock band, *Kiss*. We are then introduced to Lali, first seen taking photographs of himself stood next to an American war monument. Lali is an American fanatic; he has a miniature American flag tattooed on his arm, wears a Canadian baseball jersey, and regularly chews a toothpick in the insouciant manner of a Hollywood movie star. Such is his affection for America that has decorated the Glass Tiger café with the stars and stripes of the American flag.

The proceeding scenes introduce the viewer to Lali's various friends and customers, many of whom, like Lali, share a passion for the West. Csoki (Imre Csuja), for example, is a would-be Hell's Angel; he dresses in leather, rides a motorcycle with an American flag attached to its seat and carries a gun. However, rather than riding the traditional Harley Davidson, Csoki rides a Babetta, a Czechoslovakian-produced motorised bicycle. He is irresponsible and obstreperous, incessantly shouting, "Easy Rider, brother! Easy Rider!" ("ízi rájder öcsém"), referencing the Dennis Hopper film of 1969. He speaks of a desire to go to America, ride Route 66, see Hollywood, New York, Rodeo Drive and marry Pamela Anderson. Yet, in reality, he is unemployed and lives with his mother.

Later, we are introduced to Gaben (Gabór Reviczky), a car hustler (*autónepper*) who we first see wearing a Las Vegas baseball cap. He references J.R. Ewing from the American TV show *Dallas* and drives a succession of luxury American cars including a Lincoln and a Corvette. Gaben convinces Lali to trade his unfashionable UAZ-469 for a 1971 Chevrolet Impala; a vehicle that he believes will better represent Lali's personality.[26] The Impala is more than simply a vehicle; it is the commodified representation of Lali's desired persona. The Chevrolet, advertised as 'The heartbeat of America', is the United States' bestselling vehicle manufacturer and has become an icon of Americana. Such is the Chevrolet's status within American culture that over 700 songs have referenced the emblematic brand.[27] For Lali, the Impala embodies the American dream; representing social mobility, liberation and status. It

also confirms upon him a sense of belonging in the global, post-communist world.

Lali's wait for the Impala spans much of the film and he soon grows impatient, especially after seeing Gaben arrive at the café in a succession of luxury vehicles. The silver-tongued Gaben even attempts to deceive Lali by bringing him a Chevrolet Chavette instead of the Impala, claiming: "You told me to bring a Chevy. Here it is". Eventually the Impala arrives and Lali is finally able to attain the social esteem that the vehicle embodies. Unfortunately, before he is even able to fire up the Impala's engine, an articulated lorry reverses into the car, immediately crushing it.

Through the destruction of the Impala, the film provides a means of examining the realities of post-communism set against Hungarian expectations of the return to the West. The collapse of communism allowed Hungarians to envisage new forms of personal identity constructed from the vast array of newly available Western consumer products. Under communism, Western material culture had long been tied to notions of choice, individual freedom and expressions of self-identity, tenets held in high esteem by those living under a political system that placed collective identity over that of the individual. Indeed, for many citizens, post-communist material culture served as a pronouncement of self-expression, dignity and self-worth and an articulation of belonging, validating Hungary's reconnection to the West. The normalisation of Western consumerism in Hungary served as a declaration of the nation's claims to its rightful position in the first world. While the illegitimate communists had temporarily separated Hungary from the West, Hungarians continued to define themselves as Western given the nation's longstanding historical ties and varied contributions to Western civilisation. Consequently, following transition, many citizens perceived material culture and conspicuous consumption as normal and rightful by virtue of their Western connotations. This sense of rightfulness alludes to Krisztina Fehérváry's discourse on the normal in which she states:

'Normal' was commonly used to describe services, goods or constructions new to Hungary since 1989, things in keeping with socialist era expectations of life under a capitalist, free market system. New telephone systems, automatic teller machines, 24-hour convenience stores and courteous sales clerks were examples of a 'normal' world available to most of the population. These were amenities that Hungarians associated with a certain dignity accorded to bourgeois citizens of the 'first world'.[\[28\]](#)

Material culture in post-communist Hungary thus served as an expression of personal and collective identity, validating the post-communist citizen's

globalised subjectivities. Like Lali, for whom the Chevrolet Impala served as an affirmation of self-respect and status, many post-communist citizens employed Western consumer items as signifiers of social prestige and personal dignity.

However, while consumers gained access to a profusion of Western products and popular culture became awash with Western imagery, the unforeseen hardship of transition drastically impeded many citizen's access to these resources of cosmopolitan identity. Hungary had endured long-term recession since the 1980s and by the early 1990s, foreign debt stood at such an extreme level that strict austerity measures were necessary in order to balance Hungary's budget deficit and attract the foreign investment needed to modernise the economy.[\[29\]](#) Such measures came at the cost of the Hungarian citizens as unemployment figures rose and wages, pensions and social welfare all decreased. Thus, the privatisation that facilitated the influx of Western consumer products into the Hungarian marketplace also resulted in wide-scale financial privation that affected a large portion of the Hungarian population. Indeed, Hungarian-born sociologist Paul Hollander maintains that ten years after the post-communist transition, only ten percent of the population were as well off, thirty percent belonged to the middle strata and the remaining sixty percent lived precariously near the poverty line.[\[30\]](#) Compare these figures to similar statistics taken from America. In the year 2000, the poverty rate in the United States stood at 11.3 percent[\[31\]](#) whereas 48 percent of Americans classified themselves middle class and 15 percent as upper middle class.[\[32\]](#)

Thus, while consumer advertising engulfed the urban landscape and the latest consumer products filled shops and stores, these items continued to be elusive to those who simply could not afford them. As consumerism became the means through which Hungarians shaped new identities and demonstrated that they indeed belonged to the Western world, poverty created a sense of exclusion. Indeed, as Hungarian journalist, Gusztav Kosztolanyi states,

Hungarian society is becoming increasingly polarised between the haves and the have-nots. The losers are the old, the weak, the disabled and the homeless who are pushed even further into the margins due to their relatively small share of wealth... To be included, you must conform to expectations generated by the advertising agencies. The greatest sin of all is poverty.[\[33\]](#)

Kosztolanyi suggests that the freedoms Western consumer culture had represented during the communist era have since been bastardised by neoliberal agenda. The integration of fully-fledged market capitalism has ultimately produced more losers than winners, operating in the interests

of the global elite as opposed to those of the Hungarian people. Indeed, in his critique of neoliberalism, David Harvey suggests that

[t]he freedom of the market... proclaim[ed] as the high point of human aspiration turns out to be nothing more than the convenient means to spread corporate monopoly power and Coca Cola everywhere without constraint. With disproportionate influence over the media and the political process this class (with Rupert Murdoch and Fox News in the lead) has both the incentive and the power to persuade us that we are all better off under a neoliberal regime of freedoms.[\[34\]](#)

Indeed, *Glass Tiger* encapsulates the neoliberal monopolisation of desire through Lali's longing to own an American car. I argue, however, that the Chevrolet Impala ultimately functions as an embodiment of the myths of the West, an allegorical representation of many citizen's expectations of post-communism. As journalist Michael J. Jordan states, following the collapse of communism, "Hungarians were told, and many believed, they'd become like neighboring Austrians—a BMW in every driveway".[\[35\]](#) Communist-era utopian fantasies fuelled post-communist desires for affluence and prosperity, which were only intensified by the overabundance of Western products on the Hungarian high streets and the omnipresence of consumer advertising. The Impala symbolises such affluence. The prestigious and glamorous Impala, a symbol of Americana, embodies the assumptions that accompanied Hungary's return to the West, fantasies rooted in Hungary's communist past and sold by Western consumer advertising. The Impala's destruction, however, speaks to the realities of post-communism. Just as the car's destruction denies Lali access to the Impala and the social prestige it represents, the hardships of transition and the unanticipated privation of post-communism left many citizens unfulfilled and with feelings of ambivalence towards the new economic system.

The Glass Tiger Café and the Façade of Westernisation.

However, it is not only through the destruction of the Impala that *Glass Tiger* seeks to engage with the myths of the West and the realities of post-communist life. I argue that *Glass Tiger* explores such myths by emphasising the lingering legacy of communism. The film invites its audience to view neoliberal globalisation as a smokescreen masking the realities of transition with the omnipresence of Western cultural artefacts. Behind these superficial manifestations of Westernisation, one may observe the enduring footprint of communism. The notion of dressing the old in the trinkets of the new is explicit in Lali's place of work, the Glass Tiger café. The Glass Tiger displays in the stars and stripes of the American flag and sells fast food such as hot dogs and hamburgers. Nevertheless, despite its American frontage, the Glass Tiger

cannot disguise its communist heritage.

American fast-food restaurants were quick to establish a foothold in Hungary, a process that had begun prior to the fall of the Iron Curtain. McDonald's opened its first restaurant in Hungary in April 1988, the first of such restaurants to be opened within the Warsaw Pact states.[\[36\]](#) Other American fast food chains followed suit. The second Burger King in Eastern Europe opened in Budapest in 1991 and the region's first KFC and Pizza Hut opened in Budapest in 1992. Initially, at least, American-style fast food restaurants became sites of elevated cultural prestige. Such restaurants were widely perceived to be symbols of Hungary's Westernisation, and frequenting fast food restaurants exhibited a certain level of cosmopolitanism. Indeed, as anthropologist André P. Czeglédy suggests, the fast food industry was "considered by many Hungarians to be emblematic of the general success of the West as an idealized economic, political and social panacea".[\[37\]](#)

However, fast food establishments had been present in Hungary long before the late 1980s. The Kádár government sporadically permitted the development of fast food enterprises. Like the workhouse canteen, these establishments served to free the female sector of the workforce from the burdens of meal preparation and housework, in order to better utilise them in the workplace. Czeglédy describes a typical communist fast food establishment as follows:

These food stands are small-scale, often making use of the semi-permanent facilities cobbled together from a bewildering array of materials. They tend to be sparsely furnished and chaotically decorated. If there is a permanent premises, it is often grubby with use of one or two closely situated countertops on which they may consume their loosely packaged food.[\[38\]](#)

If we examine the Glass Tiger café in light of Czeglédy's description, comparisons are immediately visible. The Glass Tiger itself is a tow caravan with a filthy counter top, a separate free-standing counter set up a few feet away and a couple of white plastic outdoor dining tables with matching chairs. The inside of the café is equally disordered. The cramped interior is cluttered with the paraphernalia of business and the work surfaces covered with old beer cans and left-over food. Other fixtures are heavily stained with grease and other food-related spillages and the walls are covered with posters of featherweight boxer István "Ko-Ko" Kovács and various topless centrefolds. The signage above the counter is crudely painted and time and neglect have worn the lettering to spell "ÜVEGTI RIS". Moreover, the exterior sign, situated at the end of the road displaying the café's logo, consists of an assortment of makeshift neon lights. The cobbled together nature of the logo stands in stark

contrast to the clear and coherent nature of the banners and logos utilised by global, multinational companies. While the golden arches of the McDonald's logo are immediately recognisable, the Glass Tiger's logo is barely legible.

The café has the American flag painted on one corner of the caravan with the text, 'US NAVY 625' written on its frontage. This particular military reference signifies the USS Henry Clay (SSBN-625), a ballistic missile submarine.[\[39\]](#) Here, the film ironically likens the Glass Tiger to a form of watercraft notorious for not being seen, thus hinting at the café's lack of trade. The painted lettering also demonstrates the, at times, arbitrary use of Western references employed by companies seeking to latch onto the cultural capital of the West during the early years of post-communism.

Czeglédy contends that within the communist fast food industry "the division of labour is invariably a flexible or indistinct one that reflects the lack of hierarchical pretension and division of labour in the premises".[\[40\]](#) Indeed, working practices at the Glass Tiger are similarly unstructured, actual work is kept to a minimum and often it is not clear who is working and who is patronising. Lali is the proprietor of the Glass Tiger and runs the day-to-day business with the help of his half-witted assistant Sanyi (Lajos Ottó Horváth). However, due to the sporadic nature of business, work is flexible and Lali regularly stands in front of the counter rather than behind it, eating and drinking with his friends. Such is the blurring of labour divisions that in one scene Lali even tells friend Cingár (József Szarvas) to make something for himself.

Lali's approach to customer service is also deeply engrained in communist mannerisms. Katherine Verdery distinguishes the different emphasis placed on customer service by capitalist and communist enterprises, stating:

In our [capitalist] society, the problem is other sellers, and to outcompete them you have to befriend the buyer. Thus our clerks and shop owners smile and give the customer friendly service because they want business; customers can be grouchy, but it will only make the clerk try harder. In socialism, the locus of competition was elsewhere: your competitor was other buyers, other procurers; and to outcompete them you needed to befriend those higher up who supplied you. Thus in socialism it was not the clerk - the provider, or "seller" - who was friendly (they were usually grouchy) but the procurers, the customers, who sought to ingratiate themselves with smiles, bribes, or favours.[\[41\]](#)

Unquestionably, Lali more closely resembles the latter of Verdery's archetypes, his attitude defying 'the customer is always right' ethos that the Glass Tiger's Westernised exterior insinuates. Lali gives preferential

treatment to friends and family – we see, for example, that Lali has a tab system established for his regular patrons – but is disdainful to other customers. Lali swears at customers, threatens them and generally has little regard for service. Instead, he spends his working hours watching television, drinking with his friends and scratching scratch cards.

Perhaps the most notorious example of Lali’s attitude to customer service is in the scene where he takes a customer’s order for a hamburger. The customer approaches the counter and makes his order, startling Lali as he sleeps. Once roused and on his feet, Lali proceeds to prepare the man’s meal. However, the finicky customer constantly nit-picks, refusing the mushrooms because they are Chinese and claiming his hotdog has too much mustard on it, forcing Lali to prepare his food anew. Lali eventually loses his patience when the customer asks for still water and immediately changes his mind to sparkling. In his frustration, Lali, sarcastically asks “How many bubbles? I have one, five or ten bubbles...the one bubble is expensive as I have to get rid of the rest”. He then proceeds to give the man his hotdog with ketchup, as ordered, but drowns the food in the condiment. The customer asks for the complaint book to which Lali replies: “Go home and get your mother to cook for you, you little shit” and returns to his seated position by the fridge, indifferently chewing his toothpick. As this scene suggests, Lali’s approach to customers resembles that of the communist retailer who, as anthropologist Melissa L. Caldwell states, “wielded considerable power, deciding not only whether to serve a particular customer but also which items to sell and of what quantity”.[\[42\]](#)

Both the set-up and organisation of the Glass Tiger café and Lali’s working practices thus suggest a façade of Westernisation. While the Glass Tiger caravan’s exterior may be American in style, the functioning of the café remains inseparably tied to customs and practices developed under communism. The Glass Tiger café thus serves as an analogical device through which the film comments on the post-communist transition and Hungary’s return to the West. Despite the appearance of successful transition, as is evident in the neoliberal expansion and the Westernisation of the Hungarian high streets, the film encourages audiences to look beyond this veneer of successful integration to see the realities of transition that lie beyond it. Indeed, behind the smokescreen of Western integration one may see the difficulties Hungarians have faced in adapting to the, at times, alien conditions post-communism and the burden of disregarding and rejecting a way of life that for forty years had been perceived as fixed and certain.

Ultimately, while Western transitologists declared Hungary’s transition to be a success, chiefly because of Hungary’s compliant integration of neoliberal market practices, *Glass Tiger* challenges such assumptions by

focusing on issues perhaps more negligible to Western economists and transitologists, those being the effect of transition on the Hungarian people. The film ponders who really profited from the introduction of market capitalism, the Hungarian citizens or the multinational companies that capitalised on Hungary's virginal marketplace. Through the acquisitive Lali and his unfulfilled desire to own a luxury American vehicle, the film explores the role of consumerism culture in post-communist society and widespread disillusionment produced by capitalism's failure to generate growth across Hungarian society. Yet, it would be reductive to simply view the film as a response to Western cultural imperialism. One must instead look at neoliberal globalisation and consumer culture within a specific post-communist context. Rather than interpreting the post-communist Hungarian as a passive consumer, the issue is complicated by Hungary's communist heritage and the role materialism subsequently played in the formation of post-communist identities. Indeed, *Glass Tiger* engages with Hungary's own expectations of life in the West, expectations built upon a forty-year myth cemented under communism, a myth that invariably positioned the West as a utopia.

Glass Tiger also uses its rural setting to explore as a means of alluding to those left behind by transition. The film concentrates on a group of characters that continue to hold onto now obsolete sensibilities, sensibilities embedded within the political and social culture of the 1980s. Building on established stereotypes of rural backwardness, the film's rural setting becomes a device through which Rudolf and Kapitány suggest a disparity between the Hungarian populace and the new global world in which they now find themselves. This discrepancy is visualised in the very location of the Glass Tiger café. The caravan is situated on a rural lay-by, a site located on an undetermined stretch of road between destinations. Rudolf and Kapitány set the film in a non-place to use Marc Augé's term, a location that serves to highlight Hungary's continued state of cultural in-betweenness[43]. This sense of ongoing cultural transformation is further emphasised in the Glass Tiger café itself with its American frontage and communist-rooted working practices.

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[1] Gabor Kovács, personal communication via email, 21 February 2014.

[2] Enikő Löwensohn, *Filmévkönyv 2002: A Magyar Film 2001-ben* (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Filmarchívum, 2002) 226.

[3] Fabien Lemercier, "Glass Tiger 3 Aims for Box Office Heights," *Cineuropa*, December 17, 2010, accessed September 3, 2016, <http://cineuropa.org/nw.aspx?t=newsdetail&l=en&did=193524>.

[4] Enikő Löwensohn, *Filmévkönyv 2007: A Magyar Film 2006-ben* (Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Filmarchívum, 2007) 250.

[5] Lumiere: Data Base on Admissions of Films Released in Europe, "Film Information: Üvegtigris 3 (HU) [Original title]," accessed June 13, 2014, http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film_info/?id=35956

[6] Such has been the success of *Glass Tiger* and its sequels that a replica of the Glass Tiger caravan is now permanently situated in the village of Tinnye, Pest County - the location where the film was shot. The site is a popular tourist attraction where fans regularly take photographs of themselves in front of the famous café and even sign its walls. The replica is owned by the Glass Tiger Hotel and Restaurant (*Üvegtigris Panzió és Étterem*), the hotel where the cast and crew stayed during production. The hotel fully embraces the film's success, utilising the film's logo and promotional material for marketing purposes. The hotel's dining area is decorated with photographs of the cast and crew during their stay and they even sell *Glass Tiger* themed merchandise. The Glass Tiger Hotel and Restaurant is not alone in utilising the film for business ends. Indeed, a variety of Hungarian eateries, ranging from kiosk stands to cafés, restaurants, bars and pubs have all adopted the name, Üvegtigris. While certain establishments just share the name and do not necessarily have any connection to the *Glass Tiger* series, many actively embrace the films by incorporating the logo on signage, menus and advertising. These range from professional reproductions to handmade, painted signs and logos. Many also embrace the eclectic and ramshackle style of the Glass Tiger café, one that has its roots in the traditions of Hungarian fast food.

[7] Between 1949 and 1954, 92.1 percent of industrial investment was devoted to heavy industry (Nigel Swain, *Hungary: The Rise and Fall of Feasible Socialism* [London and New York: Verso, 1992], 79).

[8] The range and accessibility of these products noticeably increased following Hungary's ascension into the World Bank and IMF in 1982.

[9] Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 161.

[10] John Borneman, *After the Wall: East Meets West in the New Berlin* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 18.

[11] Krisztina Fehérváry, "Innocence Lost: Cinematic Representation of 1960s Consumption for 1990s Hungary," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 24, no. 2 (2006), 56.

[12] Henri Vogt, *Between Utopia and Disillusionment: A Narrative of the*

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[13] Anikó Imre, *Identity Games: Globalization and the Transformation of Media Cultures in the New Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2009), 3.

[14] Robin A. Coulter, Linda L. Price, Lawrence Feick, and Camelia Micu, "The Evolution of Consumer Knowledge and Sources of Information: Hungary in Transition," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 33, no. 4 (2005), 617.

[15] Jared Salter, "From Karl Marx to Trademarks," *Brand Channel*, 2006, accessed January 28, 2014, http://www.brandchannel.com/brand_speak.asp?bs_id=140.

[16] See John Cunningham, *Hungarian Cinema: From Coffee House to Multiplex* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 143-144.

[17] Timothy Havens, Evelyn Bottando, and Matthew S. Thatcher, "Intra-European Media Imperialism: Hungarian Program Imports and the Television Without Frontiers Directive" in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, eds. Anikó Imre, Timothy Havens and Katalin Lustyik (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 130.

[18] Havens et al., "Intra-European Media Imperialism," 132.

[19] Agnes Gulyas, "Tabloid Newspapers in Post-Communist Hungary," *Javnost - The Public* 5, no. 3 (1998), 69, 75.

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[24] PEW Global Attitudes Project, "Two Decades After the Wall's Fall: End of Communism Cheered but Now with More Reservations," (2009), accessed January 12, 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/pdf/267.pdf>.

[25] For further details on post-communist nostalgia see Fehérváry, "Innocence Lost", Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, "The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2004, 487-519) and Maya Nadkarni, "But it's Ours: Nostalgia and the Politics of Authenticity in Post-Socialist Hungary," *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, eds. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010, 190-214).

[26] The UAZ-469 is a Russian-manufactured utility vehicle originally used by the armed forces and paramilitary units in the Eastern Bloc.

[27] Tom Krisher, "Chevy Brand is Embedded in American Culture like no Other," *The Spokesman-Review*, 2011, accessed 1 March 2014, <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2011/nov/03/chevy-rolls-on/>.

[28] Krisztina Fehérváry, "American Kitchens, Luxury Bathrooms, and the Search for a 'Normal' Life in Postsocialist Hungary," *Ethnos* 67, no. 3 (2002), 374.

[29] Hungary's Gross Foreign Debt stood at \$20.6 billion, the largest debt of any of the former Comecon states, in 1989 (Anders Åslund, *Building Capitalism: The Transformation of the Former Soviet Bloc*. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001], 49).

[30] Paul Hollander. "Hungary Ten Years Later," *Society* 39, no. 6 (2002), 70.

[31] Joseph Dalaker, "Poverty in the United States: 2000," *U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2001), 1.

[32] Jeff Jones and Lydia Saad, "Gallup Poll Social Series: Economy and Personal Finance," *Gallup News Service* (2015), accessed June 20, 2017, http://www.gallup.com/file/poll/182933/Social_Class_150428%20.pdf.

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[34] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 38.

[35] Michael J. Jordan, "The Roots of Hate." *World Policy Journal* 27, no. 3 (2010).

[36] Now over 100 McDonald's exist throughout Hungary.

[37] André P. Czeglédy, "Manufacturing the New Consumerism: Fast-Food Restaurants in Postsocialist Hungary," in *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism*, eds. Ruth Mandel and Caroline Humphrey (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002), 159.

[38] Czeglédy, "Manufacturing the New Consumerism," 146.

[39] Gerarld A. Pollack, *USS Henry Clay SSBN-625 Home Page*, last modified 2016, accessed March 10, 2014, <http://boomer.user-services.com/Welcome.html>.

[40] Czeglédy, "Manufacturing the New Consumerism," 146.

[41] Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 22.

[42] Melissa L. Caldwell, *Food and Everyday Life in the Post-Socialist World* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009), 10.

[43] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

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Phil Mann recently completed his PhD at the University of St Andrews. His thesis, entitled 'Challenging Political Mythology: Representations of the Rural in Post-Communist Hungarian Cinema', explores the ways in which post-communist Hungarian filmmakers utilise the rural as site through which to challenge and critique the multifarious political mythologies that have risen in the ideological wake of communism. Phil's research interests lie in Hungarian cinema, in particular, the post-communist generation's continued preoccupation with issues of social and historical concern, and Phil has published articles on Béla Tarr's *A turinió ló/The Turin Horse*, György Pálfi's *Hukkle* and Bence Fliegauf's *Csak a szél/Just the Wind*.

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