

Far from Flawless Socialist Cinema: Shifting Hungarian Judgments of North Korea's Ceaseless Cinematic Schematism*

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Throughout the Cold War era, the film partnership between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Hungarian People's Republic (HPR, 1949–1989) remained steadfast, manifesting through various avenues such as film exchanges and exhibitions. A multitude of prominent North Korean creations—ranging from early seminal works like *My Home Village* (1949) or *Partisan Boys* (1951), to the revered “Immortal Classics,” including *Sea of Blood* (1969) and *The Flower Girl* (1972), alongside family melodramas such as *The Fate of Geumbhui and Eunhui* (1974), traditional folktales like *The Tale of Chunhyang* (1959), and experimental endeavors, such as *An Emissary of No Return* (1984)—served as poignant reflections of the diverse cinematic epochs and altering policies within the DPRK. North Korea reciprocated by exhibiting Hungarian productions at specialized film events, with a noteworthy uptick in frequency during the 1980s, coinciding with the expansion in broadcasting of Eastern European works on North Korean television channels. Nevertheless, this does not imply that Hungarian film critics demonstrated unwavering solidarity in their engagement with North Korean counterparts. During the 1950s, film articles exuberantly celebrated North Korean cinema for its steadfast adherence to Soviet socialist realist paradigms. However, this narrative shifted profoundly with the advent of the Hungarian New Wave in the 1960s, as Hungarian film critics began to adopt a more critical stance, scrutinizing the formulaic narratives prevalent in North Korean cinema. These voices expressed discontent with the overt imposition of personality cults, the pervasive sense of ennui induced by the films, and an aesthetic saturated with repetitive tropes ad nauseam. This study investigates the changing reception and assessment of North Korean cinema by

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Hungarian socialist film critics, drawing upon archival documents and analytical pieces sourced from Hungarian film publications spanning the designated periods.

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Introduction

The filmic scenery of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has long been subject to misconceptions and substantial underrepresentation within universal film discourses. Despite prevailing perceptions of North Korean cinema as predominantly propagandistic in nature owing to its political affiliations, it warrants recognition as a meaningful contributor to the global cinematic canon.

This paper aims to enrich the nascent field of North Korean film studies by examining the reception of North Korean cinema within the socialist milieu of Hungary. Through an exploration of the altering perspectives of Hungarian film critics toward North Korean cinematic ventures, the study illuminates a path denoted by a transition from sympathetic endorsement to pronounced critique. Amid the cultural transformations brought by the Thaw period in Eastern Europe from the late 1950s through the 1960s, Hungarian film commentary gained a degree of objectivity unattainable within the DPRK, where stringent political constraints precluded candid critical assessment, confining such evaluations to the purview of the supreme leaders.

Departing from conventional linear narratives of DPRK film evolution or analyses centered on canonical opuses, the objective of the study is to contextualize North Korean cinema within an ideological and regional framework, elucidating its trajectory within a renowned post-socialist state in the Eastern European movie vista. The ideological lens involves analyzing North Korean cinema through the prism of its political, social, and cultural influences. This mode considers how socialist realism and Juche (subject thought) ideological doctrines have shaped the narratives, themes, forms, and artistic expressions of North Korean films, reflecting, reinforcing, or, at times, challenging the state's political doctrine. The regional paradigm situates North Korean cinema within the broader arena of spatial cinematic traditions. Specifically, it entails investigating how North Korean films relate to or diverge from the cinema of neighboring or politically and culturally similar regions, particularly Eastern European countries with their socialist film pathways. This framework facilitates a comparison and contrast between North Korean cinema and films