

Attfield, S. (2020) *Class on Screen: The Global Working Class in Contemporary Cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Review by Tom Zaniello

It goes without saying that this would be an essential book for any film scholar, film teacher, or film buff in the Working-Class Studies Association. But another strength of Sarah Attfield's book is that almost anyone in the WCSA would also find this book extremely helpful. She discusses important films that all of us should be familiar with, but she also brings us many neglected gems and underappreciated films. Her focus on films from 2000 to 2020 also makes it a timely and revealing guide to how labor has been portrayed all over the world in the last twenty years.

Sarah Attfield knows that the scale of 'class on screen' is global, but she proceeds bravely and brilliantly through more than 140 films, some of them well-known, others reasonably familiar to most film-goers, but many more without the recognition they deserve. With a keen eye and a large reservoir of experience, she proceeds to take us on a guided tour of important categories of culture and their films. In addition to the 140 primary choices for discussion, she often comments on related films and other films in a director's career.

Her interdisciplinary approach, her 'focus on the lived experiences of working-class people,' and her detailed intersectionality paying close attention to the characters in the films as they 'face layers of oppression due to their class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and gender' are exemplary. Her working-class background growing up in council estate housing in London makes her a sensitive and caring commentator.

The book will therefore benefit not only those who make film studies their primary area of teaching and research, but it also provides those in other areas of working-class studies with a great introduction to the importance of films about class on a global scale. Her filmography lists 140 films that she discusses in some detail. Numerous others, not listed, are used for further elaboration of ideas raised by the primary group of 140. Both sets of films are important: the primary 140 which support her different chapter topics are obviously essential, but the secondary group, sometimes discussed in a few sentences or a paragraph or two, nonetheless offer additional important films often supplying an even greater cinematic context for the first group.

Five major topics are discussed in separate chapters; all of them are of great contemporary concern and all help form part of our necessary understanding of the state of labor films at this time.

The first group is *Work and Unemployment*, whose primary goal is to evaluate the representations of work in cinema 'in terms of their authenticity and nuance,' especially focusing on unemployment, including both urban and rural working classes. Five of the films discussed I would categorize as essential to understanding precarity in world labor: Ken Loach's take on London delivery drivers in *Sorry We Missed You*, Boots Riley's surreal American call center tale in *Sorry*

to *Bother You*, Ji-Young Boo's South Korean Big Box unionization drive in *Cart*, Ramin Bahrani's New York City push-cart worker in *Man Push Cart*, and Fan Lixin's 'internal' Chinese migrants in *Last Train Home*.

The second group is *Working Class Culture*, which dissects whether this culture 'binds communities together' or 'distracts ... people from their exploitation' or in what ways that culture is 'common around the world.' The subtopics are revealing: music and subculture, sport, and 'life on the streets and disaffected youth.' Such films as Jia Zhngke's *Unknown Pleasures*, Fernando Meirelles's *City of God*, and Stephen Chow's *Shaolin Soccer* about urban subcultures in China, Brazil, and Hong Kong, respectively, have had significant exposure in the USA and elsewhere. Attfield's placement of their significance in understanding a classic of cultural analysis, Dick Hebdidge's 1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, illuminates the importance of film's role in interpreting working class resistance and struggle within dominant capitalist culture.

Films of *Immigration and Diaspora* make up the third group that focuses on 'immigrants, members of diasporas, refugees and asylum seekers,' especially films by immigrants of the Global South and diasporic filmmakers from the Global North. While there have been other studies of immigrant films, this chapter adds an important 'Detour into Palestinian Cinema,' certainly one of the neglected areas in films studies that Attfield's book hastens to repair. One of the films, *Five Broken Cameras*, a co-production of Israeli and Palestinian filmmakers, has been available for some time, but should be even more widely seen.

The fourth major group, *Gender and Sexualities*, turns to a 'detailed look at the intersections between class, gender, and sexuality,' focusing mainly on 'the experiences of women ... in light of feminist theory' but with a concern that 'gains by white middle-class feminists in the west' have not always benefitted working women around the world. One director, Spain's famous Pedro Almodovar, receives detailed attention because of his 'transgressive' and 'taboo' portrayal of so many fascinating female characters. Important films by women, especially Rungano Nyoni's *I Am Not a Witch*, set in an African village, and Celine Sciamma's *Girlhood*, set in a Parisian public housing estate, also receive incisive commentary.

The final major section is *Race and Class in Australian Indigenous Film* which details the 'intersections of class with race, but with a specific focus on films made by Indigenous Australians' that 'challenge the colonizer's gaze and use film as a method of self-representation (through storytelling).' In addition to films of the Palestinian diaspora, this important film culture offers films that Attfield is especially keen to highlight. Many films that she discusses I didn't know about and now want to see as soon as possible. Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah*, for example, follows two young people who leave their 'remote Indigenous community' and face poverty and racism traveling to the town of Alice Springs. Although there is risk in depicting the addiction and 'personal trauma' of the Indigenous characters, Attfield argues that the director's cinematic portrayal is worth it.

One nice touch I found very helpful is Attfield uses chapter-end bibliographies. Not only are these convenient but they also immediately contextualize the important issues raised. Attfield's range throughout the book is obvious from these bibliographies but also from the text itself. She often develops points that too many of us have easily missed – for example, the use of Multicultural

London English (MLE), a working-class dialect that combines Cockney, Jamaican, African, and South Asian accents common among millennial London working-class youth. In brief, it is the ‘vernacular of council estates and of UK grime music and epitomizes the multi-ethnic nature of London working-class communities.’ She also points to films that use this dialect, making London symbolic of the global and communal working-class she is so keen—and able—to demonstrate in films from around the world.

Readers already familiar with some of the films she discusses will be gratified to discover more of the same; those plunging into this subject for the first time will be rewarded as well.

Reviewer Bio

Tom Zaniello directed the Honors Program and taught film studies at Northern Kentucky University; he has also been an adjunct professor at the University of Maryland and the National Labor College of the AFL-CIO. He is the author of three guidebooks to labor films: *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Expanded Guide to Films about Labor* (2003), *The Cinema of Globalization: A Guide to Films about the New Economic Order* (2007), and *The Cinema of the Precariat: The Exploited, Underemployed, and Temp Workers of the World* (2020).