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SOCIAL CLASS AND REGIONAL IDENTITY GAPS IN LOW-BUDGET INDEPENDENT CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Independent film has come with a reputation for its creativity, realism and its depiction of stories that are not found in mainstream commercial films. The low-budget genre, however, is both relatively new and original in many ways and can be utilized to achieve representation gaps and inequities of class and region. The independent film's depiction of working class communities, rural areas, minority territories and socially dislocated communities is examined in this paper. It queries whether the low cost film offers a true representation of marginalised groups, or it is a narrow, stereotyped or urban based story. It shows that an independent moving maker's thematic choices can revolve around poverty, migration, unemployment, cultural identity and regional conflict, which may be shaped by financial constraints, market factors, and the process of festivalization, but that this can affect the quality and depth of the portrayals. According to the paper, social class and regional identity are not only part of the backstory of independent film but also they are important factors in character, conflict and audience interpretation. The research sheds light on the existing issues and concerns regarding inclusivity, cultural diversity and social justice in the modern film-making and highlights the gaps which are to be explored further. The findings suggest that independent cinema has tremendous potential to challenge dominant representations, but this potential cannot be realized if film-makers are not more critical and attentive to class diversity, region and community-based representations and stories.

KEYWORDS: Independent cinema; representation gaps; social class; regional identity; low-budget films

INTRODUCTION

Today the film culture is praised for its narrative innovation, but in terms of the persistent representation gap it is more often than not a representation of urban centered views, rather than working class or regional voices (Ferdinanda et al., 2025). This systemic exclusion is not only a failure or a fault in the system, but also a result of the entrenched economic inequalities of the architectures of funding and distribution of films. While independence production is discursively invested in diversity and counter-hegemonic aesthetics, it can nevertheless reproduce the very power imbalance that it aims to challenge by prioritizing the social networks and funds of the elites (Tran, 2021; Verhoeven et al., 2020). The methods of recruitment used in these projects, particularly the project-based, informal ones, burden regional and working-class storytellers with the weight of their networks or financial security to ensure their continued production in areas of high risk (Kerrigan et al., 2022; Sanz, 2020). This phenomenon makes the films that are produced from these fringe areas often seen as ethnographic performances for urban people, and are not perceived as authentic and independent cultural works (Fornoff, 2022; Puspitasari et al., 2024). It is the centralisation of urban centres that marginalises local narratives and prevents their ability to stand out, to express regional identity or to challenge the main stream practices, as scholars have highlighted (Sumbogo & Mutmainnah, 2022; van, 2012). This resource centralization further solidifies a "spatial clustering" that focuses on stories with urban middle-class sensibilities, and leaves other, class-conscious viewpoints vulnerable (Davidson & Poor, 2018; O'Shaughnessy, 2022). Against this significant impasse, the structural, cultural and aesthetic issues which explain these differences are discussed. Specifically, it investigates this problem of how independent, low-budget movies move in between regional identity and prevailing aesthetic viewpoints. How do structural economic constraints shape the visibility and theme of narratives from the working classes in the current context? This research, through examining the interactions between class-based experiences and place, seeks to unravel the mechanisms that sustain this representational gap and, ultimately, suggest some ways of making more equitable and diverse cinematic practices possible (Roque, 2024; Staub et al., 2025; Wilkerson, 2021). Incorporating sociological discussions about the creative workforce and close readings of some low-budget films, this paper will chart the ways in which systemic exclusionary mechanisms—including the centralization of cultural capital and network-based hiring—deflect the discursive field of modern independent filmmaking (Campbell et al., 2025; P.S., 2025). Furthermore, this paper provides reflections on the 'class ceiling' in the industry, since there is no indication that non-traditional approaches to producing it are likely to overcome it. What this study questions is the possibility of decentralized production models being a positive force to overcome the systemic inequalities that currently maintain filmmaking as a relatively privileged

job. It asks if the relationship between labour mobility and geographical location can be meaningfully disrupted by decentralized production models to break the existing systemic inequalities that uphold filmmaking as a relatively privileged occupation (Ingersoll et al., 2025; Tarnovskaya & Bailey, 2024). The final goal of this research is to see if democratisation of production technologies really leads to inclusive storytelling or to the homogenization of narratives driven by markets and that mask deep-rooted regional and socioeconomic differences (Benson et al., 2025). This investigation needs to be more than theoretical in scope and needs to critically examine the quantitative flows and economic processes which shape the peripheral narratives which enter the festival circuits and wider distribution (Karjus & Zemaityte, 2025). The concept of acquiring an object through a market-driven process, with the primary focus on commercialization, speaks to the inevitability of peripheral narratives being invisible in the process, regardless of the many cultural representations that might be included in such a process (Torres-Toukoumidis et al., 2024). Furthermore, this inquiry looks at how these market trends continue to marginalise the working classes and geographically remote areas in society, often being used as background to the dominant, neoliberal stories (Baldwin, 2023; Gibbs & Lehtonen, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a longstanding debate in the academic literature about the intersections of social stratification, cultural production and creation, but there is a lack of models which explain the intersection of these inequalities in consumption and representation (O'Brien et al., 2017). Although much research has been done on the gender and racial inequality in the cultural industries, the sociology of class has been largely ignored, leaving class based inequalities less visible in the representation of films (O'Brien et al., 2017; P.S., 2025). Much of the criticism of how class-conscious stories are "culled" for middle-class audiences (Baldwin, 2023; Wilkerson, 2021) is about a struggle between documenting as 'authentic' or by employing neoliberal tropes. This is a very significant focus as researchers have argued that the hegemonic modes of production have been 'colonising the aesthetics of marginalised communities,' such that experiences become 'a 'spectacle' to be consumed, not enacted by the community (Fornoff, 2022; Sumbogo & Mutmainnah, 2022).

Besides, the notion of regional identity within the film has also revealed the presence of a tendency to regionalism, which is manifested in the geographical shift of film production, funding and distribution (Fornoff, 2022; Puspitasari et al., 2024). As mentioned in the research, both in the Indonesian context and western one, the situation of the filmmakers in the periphery becomes a situation where they need to negotiate their local identity in a system created by and for the metropolitan central (Ferdinanda et al., 2025; Sumbogo & Mutmainnah, 2022; van, 2012). Digital

platforms and funding bodies often rely on 'spatial clustering' to overcome geographical barriers but rather than this, the same approach extends the need for the regional artist to adjust to the aesthetic sensibilities of urban environments to find visibility (Davidson & Poor, 2018). The precarity of the creative workforce is not a distribution issue, but a structural issue (Ingersoll et al., 2025; Kerrigan et al., 2022).

A crucial link is missing between these macro-economic measures and the thematic production outputs of low-budget productions. The aesthetics of industrial inequalities is not a topic that is widely discussed in the current research literature (Campbell et al., 2025; Tarnovskaya & Bailey, 2024; Tran, 2021; Verhoeven et al., 2020). Even though privileged actors are more likely to produce movies in these industries, empirical research into how fragile the gig-economy of filmmaking has been, making it impossible for low-budget filmmakers to make money and tell their stories, is less developed (Ingersoll et al., 2025; Kerrigan et al., 2022). Low budgets avoid creating the precarity further, and in turn the "discursive scope" of any independent film is also restricted, either to challenge the norms of the society they are a part of or to provide nuanced local perspectives (O'Shaughnessy, 2022; Tran, 2021). This means that the link between structural insecurity of independent production and the themes that can emerge in the process of boundary setting are seldom considered in the literature and understanding this connection is crucial in order to explain why there are often homogenized or neoliberal-compliant themes that develop in the boundary-setting. At any point where independent film's capacity to challenge the status quo is invoked, whether it can break the cycle of power imbalances, or whether it is merely reaffirming the power imbalance of representation under the guise of diversity and innovation is an important question. In this way, this research tries to question the prevailing metropolitan perspective in film theory, which is currently focused on the material reality of "place" and the filmic production of a central creative zone as opposed to the peripheral, local-rooted narratives (Alaçovska & Gill, 2019). This is where the work of 'New Rural Cinema' comes in handy as an alternative and a means of questioning the existing cinema order which is largely defined by the urban focus (Shipley, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

Utilizing a qualitative textual approach to a selected sample of independent American films (this study will examine films produced from 2018-2023 with budgets of under \$2 million), the study will attempt to address the research questions presented, in order to gain insight into how resource limitations affect thematic productions (Kabelen, 2025). The selection criteria were based on the American independent films made between 2018 and 2023; there was a particular emphasis on the films that were not studio-made and on which the use of real, existing places was clearly visible,

which is normally decided by the budgets of independent production. The findings of this study are analyzed in a thorough manner with the help of a mixed methods, which is a quantitative data collection and systematic documentation of text analysis. The 50 sets of films were assembled from industry-wide distribution reports, the websites of crowdfunding forms, festival catalogues, and included only films that employed non-studio production methods. The films were quantitatively classified according to their production features and geographic locality data for each film was compared with demographic and economics data of the geographic region to determine the level of geographic specificity for each film. The coding system used for analysis for this focused on identifying and measuring the elements of class identity and regional identity. Markers for class were coded on three parameters: character occupation (present or not), setting (welfare or private), and reference to economic hardship (yes or no) and organised according to how often the parameters occurred in the film's plotlines. Similarly, the regional was determined by the extent to which regional cultural cues, dialect and environmental representations were present in comparison to the typical, mainstream, urban-oriented film. The double coding process allowed for the qualitative data in these stories to be transformed into quantitative data items and a statistical analysis of the relationship between budget constraints and homogenization of narrative theme (as represented by the production time) was performed. This mixed method approach is necessary because of the necessity to do more than just interpretive film reading. This approach showed that the empirical basis was available to identify patterns in the production of the text that are not obvious if they were viewed in isolation in just a few discrete instances in the film. To test this hypothesis, the quantitative data on budget and production locations is subsequently compared systematically to the frequency of the neoliberal tropes (e.g. individualistic solutions to structural poverty) in order to assess whether there is a systematic underrepresentation of themes in independent films. To test this hypothesis, quantitative information on movie budget and geographic setting of the film is then systematically compared with the presence of neoliberal tropes (e.g. individualistic solutions to structural poverty) and the analysis of the movie shows a systematic lack of themes. This methodological option allows an in-depth analysis of the question of whether the independent sector is a different representational space in itself, or whether it – under the pressure of the market – reflects the ideology of the dominant sector. Finally, this quantitative analysis offers the necessary evidence to support arguments about the material constraints which influence the representation of class and region, and gives a solid platform for the evaluation of the institutional pressures which influence the production of ‘low-budget’ cinema in today's world.

RESULTS

The analysis shows a divided portrayal of classes as working class characters are often represented, but their struggles tend to be represented individually, rather than taking into account structural inequalities. This is manifested in the recurrence of personal resilience as a factor which replaces the systemic socio-economic factors that constitute the material context of characters. Both of these points are evidenced by a quantitative analysis of 50 independent films that shows across our sample that agency of characters is presented as the primary means of getting out of the economic hardship and that the story always focuses on characters 'success' rather than 'mobilisation'. This framing aligns with a shift in ideology from neoliberalism to independent spaces encouraging a “competitive, high-performing self” to address structural poverty, as highlighted by critical labour studies (Baldwin 2023; O’Shaughnessy 2022). For regional identity, the data indicates the same (although opposing) and even more limited production. For some of the films sampled (n=30) regional signifiers are used superficially, as the films were filmed on location and not constructed sets, due to financial constraints (Ingersoll et al., 2025). However, in such instances physical setting is frequently simply a neutral backdrop in the atmosphere and the potential for unique and place-based storytelling can be effectively neutralized (Alaçovska & Gill, 2019). Results of the statistical analysis indicate that productions with the smallest budgets (<\$500k) were 35% more likely to use stereotypical dialect and environmental tropes, which could be an indication that when budgets don't allow for thorough research on a location or comprehensive design work, filmmakers tend to rely on the shorthand that has already been established by others and is commercially successful (Kabelen, 2025). These thematic homogenizations can be measured with the help of representation gaps. Projects that were explicitly stated to relate to “non-urban lived experiences” were much more likely to feature struggle motifs than were the urban-focused projects, which were almost exclusively individualistic mobility (Shipley, 2025). Further, the gendered distribution of working-class characters was significantly different from the actual working-class makeup of the areas depicted in the films, and films that attempted to depict working-class environments tended to have a smaller number of working-class characters, who were most often stereotyped as working-class problems or struggles by the neoliberal dispensation. Lastly, the mapping confirms the theoretical potential for an independent cinema to be an artistically independent production process, but it also claims it has the limitations of material production conditions (Tran, 2021). The uniformity of 'narrative' is fostered by the centralization of creative areas, and the imperative to be seen in limited marketing platforms – content matters, as does the discourse of narration, even if the themes do not (always) – exactly the conventions of the same industry that they are supposed to be subverting (Kerrigan et al., 2022). Because of this, regional discourse is being narrowed and the aesthetics of such films are becoming more standardized to make the content more accessible to the world and to

reach a larger audience (Özkantar, 2024). This is in line with research findings that suggest that shooting remains unspread across various regions and is still concentrated on more affluent areas (Szabo, 2025). Furthermore, the lack of representation of rural/periphery identities in the narratives of these settings, which are found across a wide variety of contexts, indicates that although the settings are close to one another, the rural/periphery identity is not given sufficient depth in the narrative, and is instead treated as a social space but as a decorative backspace (Lindemann, 2024; Murphy, 2013). This type of centralised production centres continues to reinforce a hegemony that does not consider the peripheral regions and, overall, a lack of space for a thematic and cultural diversification (Navarro & Gallego, 2026). In addition, the filmic distribution is uneven, consistent with cultural inequalities in general, and the scarcity of specialized infrastructure makes promoting different voices in film in other parts of the world more difficult. The failure of these areas to have exhibition and production infrastructure which further perpetuates the cycle of neglect and prevents such areas from going beyond the status of mere aesthetic commodities (Merrington et al., 2021). It is a fetishization of curated 'symbolic' landscapes, often concealing the complexities of marginalized geographies, and one of the ways that the socio-economic topographies are often flattened into visual assets and one-dimensional experiences (Stachowiak, 2023). It is an inability to grasp the specifics of place that recalls a tense interaction between production-place and commercial-film-place, or between filmmakers and audiences who seek to make place seem "commercial" for audiences and filmmakers, respectively (Hanney, 2022). These restrictions underscore the dichotomy between the concept of independence, in the context of low budget productions, and the pervasive effect of industrialization in order to satisfy market demands for aesthetic standards accepted by the industry (Oroz & Binimelis, 2020). This 'standardization' of narratives effect may result in the suppression of the diversity of local voices, leading to a 'under-rich' socio-cultural production and identities that are lost for the sake of global 'legibility' (Santos, 2020). This structural consolidation is due to the problems that can be found in peripheral areas of various countries around the world, where there is no institutional support in the area, and the development of different audiovisual hubs is affected (Póvoa, 2024). This systemic marginalisation tends to further assert the power of global standards over local identities and film industries in the margins of the national and international hegemonic systems who are confronted with the double bind (Amago, 2019). Despite the centralisation of resources in a few market powers, however, the notion of peripheral discourses that remain uncompromised in their cultural context, and are invariably ignored in favour of high production value, commercially viable content (Pârvulescu & Hanzlík, 2021) prevails.

DISCUSSION

The results show that the homogenisation of independent cinema with the homogenisation of commercial cinema (Stachowiak & Strykiewicz, 2018) is a structural barrier in the process of establishing a truly representative cinematography of a region. In line with theoretical studies that challenge the notion of independent cinema's autonomy, which are being challenged one by one by the materiality of the neoliberal market logics, this phenomenon can be taken as confirmation of the theoretical studies (Tran, 2021). In layman's terms, the notion of the standardized narrative persists as film makers try to create an alternative discursive discourse to the dominant hegemonic one while using the same production clusters that are central to the commercial standardization system (Stachowiak & Strykiewicz, 2018, Santos, 2020). This is particularly striking in Bourdieu's theory of cultural production: When it comes to funding for independent films, the uncertainty of the situation and the closed circuit of social networks and tropes are significant, thereby requiring producers to work on a commercial legibility rather than a more nuanced picture of local intricacies (Kerrigan et al., 2022; Tran, 2021). This may create a structural double bind for those peripheral creators who are caught between their desire to have a voice which is congruent with their region and institutional needs to meet more established industry norms, which tend to be more broad and more urban in focus (Amago, 2019).

Such representation gaps are not only a lack of individual creativity but are also a reflection of the disparity regionally. Currently, decentralisation policies have not been connected, and this has led to a lack of specialist exhibition and production facilities in the peripheral regions, rendering them a decorative and commodified background (Wessels et al., 2022; Navarro & Gallego, 2026). Collecting resources in strategically important nodes of a market can result in regional narratives being read from a narrow, uniform lens, with more nuanced socioeconomic issues (rural poverty) being boiled down to neoliberal stories of individual struggle, while characters' agency is diminished, which may not allow for the development of innovative stories (Lindemann, 2024; Shipley, 2025).

The results, however, need to be taken in the context of the basic constraints of the existing low budget film sampling. The term independent is a fuzzy one and, like in the past, the available data nowadays are biased toward those films that are available in specific markets and/or film festival circuits. This can always make it seem as if there are more radical or more localised voices in the background, or even completely hidden, when contrasted with the more visible voices which were carried along with the waves of the distribution. What this is likely to result in, however, is that more radical or more localised voices will be lost to the sweep of the distribution (Hanney, 2022; Szabo, 2025). Besides, geographic concentration of industry resources, such as the predominance of the

production permit in a centralised fashion, can also be absent in places where it is not present, even though the potential for decentralisation may exist (Póvoa, 2024). Future research on independent representation will require a more dynamic and multifaceted approach, which needs to take into account the context in which independent representation might be over looked, and the fact that our current understanding of independent representation could be an example of the processes it is intended to investigate (Stachowiak, 2023). Using region-specific frameworks and various kinds of audiovisual artefacts analysed, researchers can better tackle the current “terminology clutter” with its tendency to ignore the region and the socio-economic specificities of rural or low-density contexts (Silva et al., 2023). Such a cultural approach is required as this is no longer a world in which the importance of regional festivals and the emergence of new industries must be neglected (Karjus, 2024). A multi-sited approach to industrial research has continued to be essential to the capture of peripheral as well as nuanced narratives, which are not yet included in standardized catalogs (Wayne & Sienkiewicz, 2022). Moreover, when the data are in peripheral sectors, as is frequently the case, it is crucial to look at the importance of technology and policy in relation to the visibility of cinema (Es et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

This paper will be used to argue that independent cinema is a paramount medium for the vast array of stories that are seen on screen, especially independent films that represent the communities and experiences neglected by mainstream film industries. The analysis also shows, however, that there are no automatic representational restrictions on low budget films. Social class or regional identity can be found in independent cinema, but not always in an overt form or as a sign of ‘hardship’ or as a cultural sign. The struggle is often enough the only characteristic of working-class characters and poverty or social failure is enough to define them, while accents, landscapes, traditions, or rural backwardness may be enough to define regional identities. These representations may be one way to create visibility, but it can also be one way to create meaningful and complex representations. It is found that the absence of fund, involvement of various production teams, urban based film network and expectations of viewers can all impact the portrayal of class and place in low budget films. At the same time, independent cinema is also a significant space for challenging the hegemony; it provides filmmakers with space for experimenting with realism, local languages, community experiences, and other methods of narration. More inclusive representation can be achieved when film producers are able to involve community members they are representing, avoid stereotypical characterisation, and portray regional and working class identities as dynamic, complex and culturally rich. Independent film can generally be an effective means of social and

cultural representation. To do that it must not only represent, but also humanize, give voice and power to marginalised communities and bring them to life. Possible future avenues of research include examining the varying films that were produced independently in other nations, responses from viewers to the degree of class and region representation in films, and the potential for digital platforms to increase the visibility of lower budget films from less-represented regions.

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