Book Review: Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader
(Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden)

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Abstract - Transnational cinema: The film reader (Ezra & Rowden, 2006) is an anthology of papers on transnational cinema from the two earlier decades. It introduces the emerging debates of the transnational scene. It discusses transnational cinema as the most transportable art form as integration of digital technology has caused the rapid disappearance of permeable national media borders. Transnational cinema is characterized by awareness and diversity, and a speed capable of linking people across nations in minimum possible time. It affects the global economy and the cinematic literacy of its audiences and becomes the source of anxiety worldwide. Such themes draw on much discussed worldwide naturalization of Hollywood by taking the space of national cinemas in different countries. Transnational cinema: The film reader discusses the cultural repercussions of a global shift from multiple national cinemas to a diverse transnational cinema; the movement of Hollywood into the era of the multiplex; multicultural and diasporic interventions; and the ethics and aesthetics of Hollywood mis-en-scene.

Keywords - Transnational Cinema, National Cinema, Ethnic Cinema, Identitarian Films, Diaspora

This first ever anthology of transnational cinema series brings together the fourteen best essays from renowned media journals over the two earlier decades. It introduces scholars to the emerging debates of the transnational scene. It creates a specialized vocabulary that highlights the significance of cinema as the most transportable art form as digital technology and satellite transmission are leading to the rapid disappearance of permeable national media borders. Transnational cinema is characterized by awareness, diversity, hybridity, and a digital speed capable of linking people across nations. It affects the global economy as well as the cinematic literacy and consciousness of its audiences. In doing so, it becomes the source of national cultural anxieties worldwide. These themes persist throughout the anthology and draw on, what Andrew Higson (1989) calls, worldwide naturalization of Hollywood in his 1989 essay “The Concept of National Cinema,” and Stephen Crofts (1993) calls, U.S. cultural imperialism in his 1993 essay “Reconceptualizing National Cinema.” In four overlapping and developing sections, Transnational cinema: The film reader discusses the cultural repercussions of a global shift from multiple national cinemas to a diverse transnational cinema; the worldwide institutionalization of Hollywood cinema and its movement into the era of the multiplex (by beaming films to cinemas and homes via the satellite) (Davis, 2006); multicultural and diasporic interventions; and the ethics and aesthetics of Hollywood mis-en-scene.

Section one deals with the cultural repercussions of the global shift from national to transnational cinema and draws arguments of Higson (1989) and Crofts (1993). According to Higson (2006), national cinema is not the best way to achieve either national specificity or cultural diversity but leads to the homogenizing myths of national cinema (1989, p. 44). He adds that national cinemas aim at generating a stable set of meanings while positing the ideology of nationhood and national identity. They internally colonize, construct one body of unified values and images against another, and deny the possibility of hybridity (Higson, 1989, p. 37). On the other hand, transnational cinema thrives on hybridity and replaces monolithic national audiences by affecting their cinematic literacy, consciousness, and cultures. The anthology emphasizes that the audience displacement from national uniformity to transnational diversity confronts the processes of internal colonization within nation-states. This displacement is triggered like a ‘fission chain reaction’ that enhances preexisting national cultural anxieties of an originally lone source: Hollywood which has appealed to an extremely diverse public in America and abroad since its birth. What lies at the nucleus of this ‘fission chain’ is the ‘fusion’ of transnational knowledge facilitated by a myriad of low-end digital media travelers produced by minority, identity, and diasporic filmmakers as well as providers as sections one and three highlight. Their films are responding to a growing global demand which satisfies transnational consumers and institutions, but creates varying degrees of hostility toward national cinemas and Hollywood. National cinemas are pushing to survive the
competition of digital deterritorialization; Hollywood is moving rapidly into the era of multiplex high-end digital technology to tackle the threat to its global monopoly. The falling costs of digital filmmaking and increasing human resources have given birth to a culture of opportunity and access which is the main cause of deterritorialization, transnationalization and globalization.

Digital technology has introduced multicultural intervention into two processes, which are internal colonization of national cinemas and cultural imperialism of Hollywood. Sections one and three emphasize that the effect of transnational cinema is more than that of a pebble dropping on the surface of spring water; rather, many pebbles (films) fall in chorus in the larger ocean of the transnational which uniquely serves portions to all. As reflected in the essays of Stephen Crofts (1993) and Andrew Higson (1989), national cinemas flow from a single point within border restrictions of nation-states and claim to have unified monolithic audiences denying any currents of hybridity. The essays emphasize superficiality of the claim of the national cinemas of singular popular audiences lacking cinematic literacy and cultural hybridity as the effect of transnational cinema is far greater than that of a pebble dropping on the water surface. The transcultural knowledge and hybridity have consequent actions on audience body and mind and become part of a natural human composite. The anthology emphasizes that now, more than ever before, the transnational productions are traveling across borders to serve this human composite, enhance a cinematic literacy, and turn a film goer global citizen. This perpetual cinematic literacy of global citizens is a threat to the dominance of (inter)national establishment powers (producers/distributors/exhibitors) and Hollywood’s cultural imperialism.

Hollywood’s worldwide naturalization as an integral part of national cinema in film viewing countries started the process of displacement of national audiences to transnational ones. In section two, Robert E. Davis, Elana Shefrin, and John Hess and Patricia R. Zimmermann provide a comparative debate to Higson (1989) and Crofts’ (1993) argument to suggest that Hollywood has successfully exported, dominated, and naturalized itself as an integral part of fictional entertainment in most countries since 1919. Higson says Hollywood’s visual and aural tones are set in democracy, diversity and hybridity. These tones have facilitated its naturalization and popularity in foreign lands. It can hardly be conceived as “totally other” (1989, p. 39), whilst its alternative models maintain the stigmatic status of ‘Other’ in transnational markets. However, there are a variety of films to disrupt U.S. cultural imperialism and hegemony.

The anthology supports Crofts’ debate on emergence of alternative, radical and revolutionary Second and Third cinematic models like the avant-garde or auteur: Latin American, Asian, African, Fifth Generation Chinese, French Auteur, Italian Neo-realism, and “a cinema of political and aesthetic opposition”: China, Cuba, Senegal, Algeria, Africa (1993, p. 53). Sections two and three discuss Hong Kong, Korea and India’s lack of well-established transnational networks and market pitches of the kind of Hollywood. These sections draw on Croft’s argument on the limitation of the Second and Third cinemas to specialist exhibition circuits, art-houses, film festivals, minority slots or community television in export markets (1993, p. 58). The anthology offers an insight into the position of the culturally specific transnational cinemas: Indian, Beur, Hong Kong (including the Chinese/Japanese connections), and Latin American. David Murphy and Anne Marie Stock criticize First World financing of Third World films in a postcolonial era because the hybrids complicate the question of authenticity. Hamid Naficy critiques postcolonial transnational consciousness, home return narratives, and mobility of the diasporic, ethnic, identity, and exilic films. Jigna Desai (2006) offers a critique of complex relations between the Indian postcolonial nation and diasporic communities in the new low-budget English films produced by India’s cosmopolitan middle class which have a tremendous appeal for South Asian diasporic communities. Dresser discusses the politics of language, place, ethnicity, and the nationalist coding of China in popular Hong Kong films. The anthology emphasizes the spread of multicultural, ethnic, identity, and diasporic films which mirror resistance to internal colonization in nation-states and Hollywood’s cultural hegemony in transnational markets. As catalysts in the process of deterritorialization and transnationalization, these cinemas search for varying degrees of literate audiences who surpass the desire for mechanical consumption of national narratives and compete in the transnational markets.

The first, second, and third sections of the anthology reflect national anxieties of competition and unequal economic and cultural exchange because of, what Davis, Shefrin, and Hess and Zimmermann call, new windows of exploitation. These windows include theatres, cable channels, pay-per-view television, home video, Video on Demand (VOD) through cable or internet, and other alternative means of film distribution and presentation like festivals, art-houses, community television and satellite. Davis (2006) focuses on the movement of the internationally institutionalized Hollywood cinema into the era of the multiplex through the instantaneous worldwide release, or IWR “coming soon to everyone, everywhere” and a revision of the old slogan, “coming soon to a theater near you”. Characterized by multiculturalism, these windows offer national specificities and represent distinctively ethnic, diasporic, and identitarian communities worldwide. In doing so, they are constructing and restructuring cultures of decline of inward national knowledge in favor of transnational literacy.

Higson (1989) endorses a need to draw the parameters of national cinema at the site of consumption of films; it will help in recognizing popular transnational forms as a legitimate part of national cultural life, and to celebrate cultural diversity (2006, p. 18). The anthology enforces the popularity of transnational films, for example, American, Indian, and Hong Kong in most countries. In effect, it includes Pakistan wherein Indian, American and Hong Kong have naturalized in
the order mentioned. In recent years, Japanese, Iranian, Canadian, European (French, German and Spanish), and even American nations have also established their contacts with academia and art & entertainment industries in Pakistan in the form of film festivals in main cities. BBC World, CNBC, and Star satellite have offices in main cities. Media experts are expecting mergers between foreign and transnational Pakistani channels because of economic viability. This scenario reflects a pattern of growth that parallels internal resistance to an unequal cultural and economic exchange, and a developing concept of homelessness, bodiless, genderless, raceless, ethnicity-less ‘global dream capital’ migrating in cyber space inspired by universalists’ fantasy of global citizenship (Hess & Zimmermann, 2006, p. 99). Cinema as “visual currency” (Ezra & Rowden, 2006, p. 3) benefits American and European conglomerates and their local representatives in transnational markets and complicates the interest of national cinemas. Developed along these lines, Davis and Shefrin’s essays lack serious scholastic reading of transnational cinema and discuss success stories, marketing models, strategies, and mercantile economy of the conglomerates that most countries and companies cannot emulate. On the other hand, Hess and Zimmermann critique contemporary transnational culture that emanates from the “first-world” rather than the truly pluralized, diverse, and decentralized work that can put dents in the horizontal web. They emphasize a need for adversarial transnational documentaries emanating from diverse cultures to break Hollywood’s hegemony (Hess & Zimmermann, 2006, p. 102). In addition, they compare the border permeability of media travelers with the border politics of human travelers to offer a conflicting picture of the two economies. In author’s view, the border permeability is beneficial to transnational cinema, whereas countries need to ensure strict immigration control and non-permeability of borders for human travelers for their own safety and economic stability. This scenario jeopardizes the concept of global citizenship. There cannot be physically free-floating transnational citizens, but just cinematically literate transnational audiences. This concept offers either way a win-win situation that is economically unidirectional and benefits the white capitalist conglomerates. In this manner, the anthology reveals a paradox of cinematic literacy and global citizenship that critics need to explore.

Homi Bhabha and John Nelson’s critique of the ethics and noir aesthetics of Hollywood Mis-en-scène in section IV, “Tourist and terrorist” of the anthology reflects a paradox. This section discusses terrorist and tourist stereotypes to draw complex parallels between the identity of transnational media travelers and human travelers. These stereotypes are drawn along the lines of race, gender, ethnicity, and religion. The essays are written in the context of ideological conditions that constitute global culture following 9/11, in which there is “a rise of a global discourse of terrorism, socio-political interconnectedness and responsibility” (Ezra & Rowden, 2006, p. 167). The authors critique Hollywood stereotypes of, what Ezra & Rowden call, non-Western identity, a terrorist subject to eradication if a man of color (2006, p. 11), often “vaguely Arabic in look and sound,” (Nelson, 2006, p. 182), or Muslim. These essays emphasize the generalization of Hollywood racial stereotypes in ideologically complex guises in the Western world. The generalization shapes audiences’ “political cognition” and sense of terrorist ends and means and generates fears of “cinematic terrorists [who] have hated Western ways … and America’s hegemony as the world’s only remaining military, political and cultural superpower” (Nelson, 2006, pp. 182-84). This section complicates issues of cinematic literacy, nationalism, transnationalism, and U.S. cultural imperialism because of Hollywood stereotypes of non-Western and Muslim identities and construction of Western fears.

The fears have unveiled Afghanistan and Iraq wars and Western pressures on Syria and Iran in apprehension of their nuclear, hence, terrorist capabilities though the Muslim connection to the Oklahoma and 9/11 disasters has not been proved. This section explores issues of media stereotypes that turn “all U.S. citizens into potential victims and all ‘foreigners’ into potential victimizers” (Ezra & Rowden, 2006, p. 11). The stereotypical fears and destabilizing potentials of Hollywood are reflected in border controls as Ezra & Rowden (2006, p. 11) say, “Every tourist venturing into U.S. becomes a potential terrorist”. The anthology reveals Hollywood and U.S. bias and capitalism towards transnationalism, which, I can say, has even inspired India to rupture the stereotypes of Pakistani Muslim terrorists in films like “Mayn Hoon Na” in favor of a peace process. Hollywood’s responsibility is far greater towards the U.S. global dream for international peace. The anthology emphasizes Hollywood’s role towards transnationalism and what Bhabha (2006) calls, “the shared obligations and responsibilities of common, collaborative citizenship”. On the whole, the anthology reflects important debates and anxieties of national and transnational cinemas, cultural repercussions of the shift, and market complexities. Despite its flaws, the anthology is a useful attempt to coalesce transnational discourses for investigation within film studies as a wider range of national and transnational cinemas in styles, genres and cultural codes exist.

References


