The Political Imperative of World Cinema

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Abstract

This paper argues for the political urgency of the project of World Cinema, and an understanding of World Cinema as a dynamic totality. Totality here is not a generic, macroscopic lens, but a system that accounts for the co-existence of all cinemas as well as the uneven power relationships that determine the relative visibility or invisibility of cinemas in the global system. This structural inequity, a condition that underlies the differentiated cinematic flows, is also a methodological ruse in that it can only point to unequal relationships in discourses that define the current conceptions of World Cinema. An awareness of totality, we argue, makes it possible to return to films themselves as nodal points from which to begin the mapping of World Cinema through its complex networks of financing, distribution, and its circuits of legitimation (film festivals, academic discourses) which shape world cinema as a body of knowledge.

Keywords

world cinema – transnational – political imperative

Upon completing the manuscript of *World Cinema: A Critical Introduction*, we noted the discord between the cosmopolitan spirit of world cinema and the parochial political forces shaping reality. The discord, we argued, highlights the

political imperative of the “turn to the world” in addressing this gap in global film culture, film studies, and other humanities-based disciplines. The rising popularity of the term and a rapid growth of the discipline of World Cinema points to a variety of forces that have made the world bigger, more diverse, and more interconnected, from new technologies and networks of distribution and exhibition to the proliferation of film festivals. Parallel with these developments is the growing importance of World Cinema as a term and as a discipline. It is ever present in festival programming, streaming services, popular press, as well as in the academic sphere, reflected by numerous publishing initiatives that include the launch of this journal, along with publications such as the *Tauris World Cinema Series* and the *Routledge Companion to World Cinema*.

Contrary to this growth, the world seems to be shrinking in front of our eyes. While the visions of cosmopolitanism at the heart of World Cinema are hardly rosy and carry an awareness of unequal power relations, histories of colonialism, and domination that have defined cross-border and cross-cultural relations, these visions seem drowned by locally articulated yet globally spread pronouncements of derision, fear, and exclusion of others. This discord gives the project of World Cinema a political urgency far beyond the academic sphere. If the idea of world cinema has to do with opening our worlds in encounters with others, it means giving up our isolationist tendencies, parochial views, and intolerance toward the others. Practices embedded in world cinema and other cross-border art forms are therefore not just a mere recognition that cinema is a global and transnational phenomenon; they are an act of defiance and resistance against such forces of authoritarianism, divisiveness, and isolationism.

This political imperative, we believe, can serve as a lens through which to address numerous issues and debates surrounding the study of world cinema. While everyone agrees on the ubiquity of the term, there is little consensus on the meaning and conceptual value of World Cinema.¹ Is it a useful term, or a slippery signifier, “a baggy monster concept,” signifying at once too much and too little?² Is it productive in realizing its aspiration of unsettling Eurocentric foundations of film studies, or does it merely rebrand existing institutionalized methods under the politically accurate banner of “the world”? Is it the most effective way of describing transnational modes of production, circulation, as well as reading/

1 Introduction to “Reflections on the World Cinema Turn.” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* (forthcoming).

2 Stam, Robert. (2019). *World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media: Towards a Transartistic Commons*. Routledge, p. 1.

viewing practices? Is it positive and inclusive, simply “the cinema of the world”³ without any center, or is it destined to re-inscribe power relations and “regressive forms of cultural universalism, neo-colonialism, and neo-orientalism”?⁴

Underneath all these questions, centered around a project whose task is both to de-center the Eurocentric model, and to find an effective way to account for the diversity of cinemas around the globe, lies weariness about the notion of totality. Totality for its own sake is rarely useful. It can be dangerous as a generic, macroscopic lens that subsumes everything that circulates in a contemporary global context, and is tainted with a suspicious odor of colonialism (“we are the world”). Aware of its trappings, we insist on the importance of totality in world cinema as a method of mapping that accounts for divergent perspectives, traditions and positions, but always through charting their interconnectedness and relationships. Building upon Franco Moretti’s world-system model, Kristin Ross’s relational model in world literature, and Dudley Andrew’s concept of “waves” of influence,⁵ we follow the premise that world cinema has to be understood as a dynamic system, where each component exists in a relationship with other elements, and where trans-border transactions take place in a world of differentiated conditions.

The study of any cinema is thus not a mere gesture of inclusion or filling a gap. It is to account for structural (in)equality to reveal gendered, racial, ethnic, economic and political nature of transnational processes in world cinema. It is to account for the profoundly uneven structures of financing, access, and representation that make certain cinema visible, others invisible, and determine major and minor cinematic flows. While a film from China or France may benefit from broader, more powerful forces of distribution and reception, a film from Kazakhstan, Nepal, or any country with smaller symbolic capital in the circuits of distribution or scholarship remains invisible despite its value as a cultural and stylistically unique text. To place such a film on the map of world cinema is to examine the forces that either prohibit or encourage the distribution and reception of the film in relation to others. If the concept of world cinema is accepted as an open territory where the issue of uneven visibility and power dynamic between its various components is put center stage, then it becomes possible to consider totality

3 Nagib, Lúcia. (2006). “Towards a Positive Definition of World Cinema.” In Stephanie Dennison & Song Hwee Lim (eds.), *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film*. NY: Wallflower, p. 31.

4 “Introduction to ‘Reflections on the World Cinema Turn.’” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*.

5 Moretti, Franco. (2000). “Conjectures on World Literature.” *New Left Review* 1, pp. 54–68; Ross, Kristin. (1993). “The World Literature and Cultural Studies.” *Critical Inquiry* 19(4), pp. 666–676; Andrew, Dudley. (2006). “An Atlas of World Cinema.” In Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim (eds.), *Remapping World Cinema*. NY: Wallflower Press, pp. 19–30.

not as an ever-broadening inclusion, but rather as an opportunity to carefully map and study the relationships between these elements. Such an understanding of totality is also a matter of *orientation*, of “knowing the territory differently,”⁶ seeing what a map looks like from a different vantage point, an awareness that every film and every interpretation embodies a specific geopolitical orientation. Our very understanding of world cinema, its interpretive frameworks and kinship grouping—whether they are national cinema, diasporic cinema, women’s cinema, or minor cinema—are implicated in the shaping of this territory. Insistence on the awareness of totality is thus a political imperative that poses the question of world cinema as a question deeply embedded in the politics of cross-cultural circulation and asymmetrical power relations underlying this circulation.

The unprecedented success of Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* (2019), which broke new ground in winning Academy Awards for Best International Feature, Best Director, and Best Film, can provide an instructive moment in this regard. The moment seemed as a radical threshold in world cinema, a long-awaited corrective to the Academy’s marginalization of international film, explicitly stated in their 1999 declaration that “the best of Hollywood is also the best of world cinema.” On display, we could say—finally!—was an industry affirmation of the vision of world cinema that scholars and cinephiles have been long advocating for: not one where Hollywood is seen as a single power center against which other cinemas must negotiate their place, but one that foregrounds its polycentrism, where various cinemas and cultures share the same space and form their own sphere of influence. We could also say that this development is reflective of the globalization of film culture and film market, and larger visibility of world cinema, which has transformed the Academy as well. *Parasite*, therefore, is merely walking the path carved by the success of films such as *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000, Ang Lee), and more recently *Roma* (2018, Alfonso Cuarón). All this is true, but may not grasp the phenomenon beyond the flattening tendencies of globalization that fog up the concept of “world cinema.”

Mapping the film in the larger network of forces, however, being attentive to the politics of visibility that determine its unique coordinates on the world cinema map will reveal a more nuanced dynamic that goes well beyond a surface gesture of inclusion. In this context, the success of *Parasite* has to be understood in the context of increased popularity of South Korean cinema, and Asian cinema more generally (think of successes such as Park Chan-wook’s *Oldboy* (2003) and *Handmaiden* (2016), Wong Kar-wai’s *The Grandmaster* (2013), Bong Joon-ho’s *The Host* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013) and

6 Andrew, Dudley. (2006). “An Atlas of World Cinema.” In Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim (eds.), *Remapping World Cinema*. NY: Wallflower Press, p. 19.

Okja (2017), Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (2018), among others), which has been on the rise since the 1990s, and has competed commercially with Hollywood in a way no other cinema has. It would involve a broader context of an intense exchange between Hollywood and Asian cinema since the 1980s, as well as a more specific and recent phenomenon of the Korean blockbuster, which has displaced Hollywood's exclusive claim on the concept of blockbuster. It would involve locating an orientation inscribed in the film itself: *Parasite* as a filmic text that cleverly blends art cinema with popular/genre cinema, and navigates the local/global dynamic in a way that maximizes its global appeal by positioning a locally specific text in a universal framework. The film may be firmly rooted in a specific place and time, but easily lends itself to a universal metaphor for the ailments of modern society; as Bong himself noted, the film is "about a country we all live in, called Capitalism." Within Bong's insistence in addressing the audience in Korean language at awards ceremonies, despite his perfectly functional English, lies a proud assertion of the film's local specificity, but also a disavowal of the fact that it is already "translated" into an idiom that aims for universal relevance. Its "foreignness" is palatable because it downplays this specific cultural context and uses a narrative and aesthetic approach that translates well into a broader trend of what Paul Julian Smith has called "prestige films"—films that signal border-crossing both in their production and distribution model, and in their universal mode of address.⁷

Establishing *Parasite*'s coordinates on the map of world cinema may also involve an examination of the changing and tighter relationship between the world of film funding bodies, international film festivals (which have traditionally served as the most important, alternative platform for the circulation and shaping of world cinema), and more mainstream platforms and networks, including streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime. As the programmers of the Berlinale's *Forum* note, if decades ago, festivals such as Berlinale were shaping new discoveries that expressed radical criticism of the status quo from the perspectives of countries on the periphery of the hegemonic West, today, "criticism immediately feeds back into the system so that capitalism works better. Minority positions rapidly become part of the mainstream." As a result, they note, world cinema has become a highly integrated part of an entire wider system where it is "hardly possible to make discoveries any more" and where everything is rapidly picked up by commercial

7 Smith, Paul Julian. (2012). "Transnational Cinemas: The Cases of Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil." In Lúcia Nagib & Rajinder Dudrah (eds), *Theorizing World Cinema*. NY: Routledge, pp. 203–236.

mechanisms.⁸ The stunning trajectory of *Parasite* points to precisely such an integration, a state of affairs where it may not be that unusual for the same film to win Palm d'Or at Cannes, Oscar for Best Picture, as well as garner commercial mainstream success on a global stage. While such integration may land a concentrated spotlight on certain films, it also pushes others, equally deserving ones, further into periphery. Our systemic model is a way to account for not just the *Parasites* of the world but those spots on the map designated as small due to the politics of recognition.

Finally, as we struggle to parse through the debates surrounding the terminology—"world," "transnational," "global," "transcultural"—it is important to take into consideration the limits of academic concepts beyond our own spheres. "Transnational" certainly carries significant currency, not as much as a descriptive label but as a methodology, as Higbee and Lim maintain, that is mindful of the specific and historically situated interplay of local and global forces extending beyond the mere transnational circumstances of production or circulation.⁹ For Robert Stam as well, the "elasticity" of "transnational" allows it to adapt to various sets of relationships, from "infra-national" to "pan-African" or "pan-Asian."¹⁰ But it also embodies a bias toward films or cinemas that have a transnational flavor (often excluding powerful and vibrant cinemas that don't have global circulation, such as Nollywood, Kollywood, or Yesilcam cinema in Turkey). It not only obscures a significant body of films that continue to be financed, distributed, and consumed on a local or regional level, but also fails to address the effects of globalization on the local strands of filmmaking within specific national cinemas.¹¹

It also has little relevance for films and filmmakers in parts of the world who are vying for visibility and recognition on the "world stage." They want to carve out their spot on the map of world cinema, and not be labeled under

8 Rebbhandl, Bert. (2019). "Looking for New Entry Points to the World." *Arsenal-Berlinale*. Conversation with Erika & Ulrich Gregor, Christoph Terhechte, Stefanie Schilte Strathaus, Birgit Kohler, and Cristina Nord on 50 years of International Forum of New Cinema.

9 Higbee, Will & Song Hwee Lim. (2010). "Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film." *Transnational Cinema* 1(1), pp. 7–21.

10 Stam, Robert. (2019). *World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media: Towards a Transartistic Commons*. Routledge.

11 Shahab Esfandiary describes, for example, how transnationalism in Iranian cinema has created a situation where the exemplars of national cinema on a global stage like Abbas Kiarostami have lost touch with local audiences that first made them famous, while their transnational status has given rise to "sacred defense cinema" that positions itself strongly against the homogenized culture of global capitalism. See Esfandiary, Shahab (2012), *Iranian Cinema and Globalization: National, Transnational, and Islamic Dimensions*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

an academic term that imposes another level of obscurity to their existence. It is true that the “World Cinema” moniker suffers from relentless appropriation in publicity and promotion. From airlines to film festivals, “world cinema” often serves as a blanket concept that ranges from banal universality to a rote desire to be different from the next commodity. And yet, it is necessary to place ourselves in the place of filmmakers and viewers for whom making and watching films is world-making activity, an attempt to express and grasp their own position on the larger stage, *to write themselves into world cinema*. Our insistence on a systemic notion of world cinema animates the political concern that scholars see in transnational cinema. We need to maintain the currency of terms such as “national,” “transnational,” “diasporic,” but they are not incompatible with or in competition with the “world.” Rather, as David Martin-Jones notes, they provide a different “rack focus,” each illuminating a different context with which to ground the geopolitics and analysis of films, but they are all operations performed “within the wider encompasser of world cinema.”¹² As is surely acknowledged by the name of this journal, world cinema is not about being consumed by the world’s endless horizons, but a political gesture that inflects the discourse of cinema with the desired plurality and complexity this world contains. We look at “world cinema” as a potent concept that continues to demand our intellectual energies and a sensitivity to the politics which animates it.

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