Answers

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Abstract

The answers below touch on three different meanings of world cinema. First, world cinema is the acknowledgement of an existing cinema originated in the diversity of geographical and cultural contexts from all over the globe and expresses the rise of multiple local cinemas on a common international scene. Second, world cinema denotes to the films that proved to be recognizable as artistically valuable through these channels (festivals, critics, niche distributors) and conveys the idea that only certain types of films would be accepted on the international scene. And third, world cinema relates to a more specific type of films, that are not so many but gives a particular visibility to an immensely vast phenomenon with films that are either “without borders”, or mixing various origins and references. By keeping these in mind, the research on world cinema should be issue based, acknowledging the vast rainbow of various ways to make cinema, related with socio-economical and cultural contexts, political environment, inscription in various aspects of history of cinema aesthetics and other artistic and cultural means of expressions, local, regional and global. The films of world cinema are, or at least should be objects of research, objects of thinking, but also if not primarily objects of love.

Keywords

meanings of world cinema – contemporary cinema – borders

Editors' Note

In the initial call for invited articles, we contacted world cinema scholars and asked four questions. Since Jean-Michel Frodon opted to answer the questions (instead of addressing these in an article), we decided to keep his responses as such because these questions also illustrate the journal's areas of inquiry.

– What does the notion “world cinema” represent today? Has the notion of “world cinema” experienced a transformation over time?

Obviously, there can be various meanings for this wording. One of them would mean the acknowledgment of an existing cinema originated in the diversity of geographical and cultural contexts from all over the globe. “World cinema” in this sense would express the rise of multiple local cinemas on a common international scene, mostly translated through the programming of film festivals, and the multiplication of awards for films coming from areas that were previously rarely present, or considered as first rank contenders, in these arenas. This connects with the attention of film critics, film academics, niche distributors and DVD publishers that all together made visible the existence and the creativity of a huge amount of countries or areas that were hardly “on the map” during the previous eras – approximately until the end of the seventies. This could be bluntly summed up as the emergence of non-white cinemas, since the international scene has been dominated, culturally and economically, by films made between Moscow and Los Angeles during the 85 first years of cinema – with the notable exception of Japanese cinema, since the early 1950s, and to a narrower extent the Brazilian Cinema thanks to the Cinema Novo movement since the early 1960s. Occasionally, a lonely personality (Satyajit Ray from Bengal, India, Yılmaz Güney, Kurdish from Turkey) managed to surface, but with little effect on the visibility of the cinema from his country or region or culture. It is during the 1980s that the “rest of the world” conquered a large recognition, firstly through the presence of Chinese cinemas (Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong) and Iranian cinema, then other Asian cinemas (South Korea, Philippines, Thailand, Kazakhstan), French-speaking West African cinema, later Argentinian cinema, Turkish cinema, Latin American cinemas...

This phenomenon gave birth to the second meaning of “World Cinema”, which designates here the films that proved to be recognizable as artistically valuable through these channels (festivals, critics, niche distributors). It conveys the idea that only certain types of films would be accepted on the

international scene, with the implicit meaning that these films are losing their connection with the culture they come from, and the original audiences they were supposed to address (those of their own country, region, culture, language) to be accepted according to the canons of the so-called “international recognition”, canons that are widely considered as being dictated by the dominant (or at least formerly dominant) white Western world. “World Cinema” in this respect refers to a kind of “White Washing” of local products, and have been more than occasionally considered as disloyalty toward the original background of the filmmakers in order to gain benefits – symbolic and financial benefits – in the Western world. I would personally consider this issue with a much more balanced approach, some of those who were pointed according to this perception having actually provided a large visibility of their country and their culture afar from their traditional borders, but also I wish to ask where is written that it is mandatory for artists to primarily address their fellow citizens, or any given category of audience.

The third meaning of “World Cinema” relates to a more specific type of films, that are not so many but gives a particular visibility to an immensely vast phenomenon. It is the translation in the domain of films of what is known as globalization, not in the previous sense of accepting works from all over the world, but in the more specific meaning related with films that are either “without borders”, or mixing various origins and references – the processes and diversity of conditions in this sense have been deeply and clearly researched by Hamid Naficy under the designation of “accented cinema”, which in fact covers a wide range of situations beyond the traditional local, and more than often national affiliation of films in the recent period.

So clearly there have been evolutions of the meanings of “World Cinema” over time, but the various meanings do not come one after the other, they overlap, and to a certain extent confront each other.

- Do you think the adjective “world”, when applied to cinema, art, literature, theater, and music, carries a signification in itself? For instance, in relation to “world arts”, does the term “world” evoke something different than the “world” in “world literature”?

I do not think I am able to give an answer to such a vast question, beyond a banal: yes, to a certain extent (there are common points in the meaning of “world” related with various arts) but no if acknowledged from a different point of view (there are specificities in the meaning of “world” attached to each art form). So I pass.

- In recent decades, the world has been addressed through different notions such as international, global, multinational, and transnational. Have these notions brought about a different understanding of the world and its cinemas?

Yes, definitely. Each of the words refer to one meaning of “World Cinema” as I tried to point out in my first answer. And yes, these notions did bring a different understanding, or better said, different understandings of the world and its cinemas. Some of these understandings have to do with post-colonial and de-colonial approaches, some relate with much less conflictive dynamics, they reformulated the questions of self-representation and representation of the other, individually and collectively, they rephrased the discourses about what is common among human cultures and what is not, they modified the understanding of patterns, and of the Hollywood patterns to begin with, re-questioning the articulation of the global and of the American, they brought new lights on narrative and visual strategies, and the circulation of influences not only between one area and another but between means of expression, etc. No one can think about the history and the contemporary situation of cinema in terms that would not be largely defined by the various, even contradictory effects of globalization.

- Is it possible to imagine the world as a totality, an expanding web of peoples and cultures? Or should we start any discussion on the world by highlighting the power relations, differences, and separations (such as the global north and south, center and periphery, the West and the rest, and the first, second, third, and fourth worlds)?

I'd say none of these two options. I can't imagine anything even close to the global, continuous, smoothly connected network of proposals evacuating the immense amount of conflictualities of all kind cinema conveys, since it is deeply rooted in the real world. And I don't believe any of the categorizations you mention, though sometimes useful in some specific context, is enough to address the complexity of the contemporary cinema world, or, more exactly, the complexity of the cinema in today's world. This is why I am convinced that researching and thinking and writing about it should be issue-based, acknowledging the vast rainbow of various ways to make cinema, related with socio-economic and cultural contexts, political environment, inscription in various aspects of the history of cinema aesthetics and other artistic and cultural means of expressions, local, regional and global. We have suffered long enough of the imposition of general patterns denying the specificities of fields,

objects, projects, visions that are not an indistinct cloud of confusion where nothing significant can be understood beyond the smallest element level, but are calling for fragile, transformable, always questioned elaboration to build connections, understand lines of strength and meanings. “Word Cinema” is, for me, a strong incentive for keeping eyes, ears and mind open, and certainly not try to put this immense amount of “objects” in boxes with labels. These “objects” being films, of course, but not only: filmic strategies, people working in relation with cinema in various positions, ideas about cinema, festivals, memories, documents, negotiations, dreams, regulations. They are, or at least should be objects of research, objects of thinking, but also if not primarily objects of love.