Transnational Turn or Turn to World Cinema?

David Martin-Jones

Film and Television Studies, University of Glasgow, UK

E-mail: David.Martin-Jones@glasgow.ac.uk

David Martin-Jones is Professor of Film Studies, University of Glasgow, UK. His research engages with what it means to study a world of cinemas. He is the author/editor of eight books, including *Cinema Against Doublethink* (2018). He has published in numerous journals (including *Cinema Journal*, *Screen* and *Third Text*), co-edits the Bloomsbury monograph series *Thinking Cinema*, and serves on the editorial boards of *Film-Philosophy* and *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*.

This article considers whether the transnational turn is not, in fact, part of something much larger – a turn to world cinema ongoing since the 1980s. The reason why this may not be self-evident, the article speculates, is due to the prominence of the turn to history for how the field of Film Studies is typically understood to have been shaped since the 1980s. The obscuring of what may be a rather different emphasis takes place, in part at least, because of a historiographical emphasis in the Film Studies canon on Anglo-American scholarship exploring Western cinemas. At the very least, the turn to history, in certain respects, shares similarities with how research into world cinema is conducted. Thus, whether or not this is indeed the reason (as this article remains speculative), it is nevertheless the case – this article argues – that what may bring many scholars of transnational cinema together is a politically-engaged approach to film which is shared by much scholarship on world cinema. At the very least, then, discussion of the transnational turn should take into consideration the possibility that what is being realised may in fact be a turn to world cinema.

In this article I argue, in a speculative mode (hence my title is a question), that the future may cause us to realise that the transnational turn is, in fact, part of something much larger which is rarely discussed as such: the turn to world cinema. This is not to say that there is no transnational turn: there is. Rather, it is to focus our attention on the partisan nature of canon formation in disciplines like Film Studies. In actual fact, due to their partisan nature, all such turns can be considered to some extent illusory, depending on where you are looking at the field from. The different perspectives from which academic canons are written are, after all, political. As such, the veneration of a certain turn (e.g. the turn to history) can threaten to obscure the fact that what is going on in large parts of the field may also be an (unlabelled) turn (e.g., I argue here, the turn to world cinema). Indeed, I will suggest that there is, at the very least, an overlap between the turn to history and the turn to world cinema. This is, perhaps, suggestive of their both being – in some senses – related, if not, the same thing. This is not an argument I can flesh out in full in such a short piece – hence I am framing it as speculative, and to a degree as a provocation. Rather, this article builds upon several previous pieces in which my thinking about the transnational turn developed (as is suited to the reflective nature of this special issue, looking back on the last decade), which I will refer the reader back to in the course of the argument. Ultimately, this article indicates that a greater degree of interrogation of the nature of canon formation can be productive when considering what the transnational turn is, and why it is important.

The Transnational Party

Noting that canons, and how they are constructed, are partisan is a rather obvious point. We only have to consider the absence of creative women and people of minority cultures from so many canons (literary, cinematic, artistic, so on), to realise this fact. History is, it is well known, written by the "winners". Yet, if a turn indicates, precisely, a shift in what will be looked back upon at some point as the Film Studies scholarly canon, then, so too must a turn be partisan. With that in mind, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that there is no such thing as a transnational turn. Let us consider it just a partisan illusion created by some like-minded scholars – albeit not in a pre-meditated or conspiratorial way. Rather, like all such turns it was created by a movement that gathered enthusiasm and supporters as its light began to radiate across the discipline, indicating an exciting new way forwards that many felt they connected with. It may prove to be illusory, however, when history (for the sake of argument) sees it retroactively written out of the academic canon of Film Studies scholarship at some point in the future as only indicative of something larger. The opening supposition, then, is that we might consider the transnational turn an illusionary one, which we do not yet have enough perspective on to realise otherwise.

Such a supposition, of course, is only intended hypothetically. After all, there are many ways in which we can concretely indicate the emergence of the transnational turn (the existence of this journal being the most obvious), and the very real filmmaking conditions which encouraged academic interrogation in this direction (from the increasing globalization of

film finance, to the growth of the international festival circuit and its funding schemes, to the digital revolution, to the rise of online distribution, etc.). Not that the transnational turn in Film Studies entirely follows the growth of transnational filmmaking per se. Albeit there may be a large degree of that, as – for example – post-Cold War global markets have become more open to international co-productions. Even so, we should remember that the transnational turn also reconsiders previously accepted views of certain movies or genres – such as, for example, the European spaghetti western – that have previously been seen through a national or generic approach, as, in fact, historically transnational (Eleftheriotis 2001, 92-133). Nevertheless, what such a provocative supposition may well bring into greater focus is that the transnational turn actually indicates something of a shifting worldview in academic circles (or, Anglophone ones, specifically), as it is manifested in one discipline, Film Studies. That is, the move to variously 'unthink' Eurocentrism in an increasingly decolonial world (Shohat and Stam 1994; Frank 1998; Chakrabarty 2000; Iwabuchi 2002; Chen 2010; Mignolo and Escobar 2010).

How else are we to explain the fact that the recent special issue of *Frames Cinema Journal* (Fisher and Smith 2016), collecting together the views of ten eminent scholars to discuss transnational cinema finds very little consensus regarding the methodology most appropriate to the transnational turn? As Fisher and Smith summarise, the nearly 400 members of their Society for Cinema and Media Studies scholarly special interest group approach transnational cinema from a 'dizzying array of methodological perspectives', and this is before we consider the analytical dimensions which meet in transnational studies of film. Deborah Shaw's (2013) patient collation of the no fewer than fifteen different, if overlapping, uses of the term transnational currently in play in the field, only further strengthens the sense that there may be something larger at work which transnational approaches are only a certain (if integral, dynamic and vital) part of.

Let us entertain the possibility, then, that the transnational turn is, in reality, but a vibrant aspect of a much broader turn to world cinema (one rarely if ever mentioned as such, in spite of its ubiquity), and one which may even shed a new light on how we consider the turn to history. After all, the earliest of the texts explicitly to address transnational cinema were, in fact, works on world cinema – whether Sheldon Lu on Chinese cinemas (1997), Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim on Chinese diasporic/postcolonial cinemas (in and across France and the Maghreb respectively) (2010), or Mette Hjort (2010) examining coproductions involving a number of countries, with her focus on China/Hong Kong, France/Belgium/Tunisia, and Denmark/Scotland. Or rather, to be more accurate, they were works which considered connections across world cinema in its polycentric totality, exploring world cinema in the manner advocated by Lucia Nagib (2006) – who famously reclaimed a positive definition of the term to mean the heterogeneous entirety of the cinemas of the world (without a privileged centre, like Hollywood), rather than as a homogenizing label designating everything which is not made by Hollywood. This is itself an argument in the same vein as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's seminal *Unthinking*

Eurocentrism (1994) which previously sought to take us past the blockage of the Hollywood vs World Cinema dichotomy.

As the purpose of this piece is reflection, I will spend the remainder of the article unpacking my thinking. How I reached this conclusion regarding the emergence of the transnational turn within a broader turn to world cinema, and, as well, how the more recognised turn to history obscures our realisation of this.

Transnational Interrogation

In a contribution I was invited to write for *Teaching Transnational Cinema* (2016), I had the opportunity to reflect on a career-to-date of teaching courses considered by many to be of a world cinema nature, focusing especially on Asian and Latin American cinemas. These are of the 'world' relatively speaking, of course, in relation to the majority content of a typical UK Film Studies curriculum (which may, or at least has traditionally, offered a majority of classes centred on Hollywood and European cinemas). The key conclusion which I drew that has relevance for the argument I am making here, is that the study of any national cinema from amidst world cinema can often lead to considerations of the transnational, and again on to the world, in quick succession. To paraphrase the argument, whilst it might seem that transnational cinema studies explore connections between certain cinemas of the world, in fact this is just to study an aspect of a much broader concern: world cinema. Let me unpack this a little further.

What Japanese cinema shows in particular, both in the numerous student essays I have marked on contemporary auteurs feted on the international film festival circuit (e.g. Takeshi Kitano) and, again, on anime or J-Horror, is that even national cinemas with (historically) established film industries require what I dubbed a 'transnational gaze' when considering the – as one for instance – Japaneseness of their aesthetic and identity. This is because, I argued: *'when the context within which the text is located (produced and received) is now identified as being transnational as opposed to national, a hermeneutic question arises of how we are to understand the 'transnational gaze' that is required of us as viewers.'* (Martin-Jones 2016b, 108) Anime, for example, is perhaps the quintessential Japanese export product, yet it is a mode which, scholars of the form have noted, deliberately universalises the appearance of its characters (Napier 2006, 24). Why is a form which deliberately situates its stories in seemingly 'stateless' places, always considered so specifically Japanese in both its aesthetic and its identity, when it travels beyond Asia? Does this not indicate that, in fact, as much interrogation is needed of the assumptions which pertain to wherever in the world we are looking from, as there is of the films themselves?

This question is only that which has been asked of Japanese cinematic images since Roland Barthes (1970) and Noël Burch (1979), right though to contemporary scholars like Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) and Andrew Dorman (2016) in the Twenty-first Century. But whilst this perpetually resurfacing question indicates the complex historical relationship between

Japan and the West (in particular its history as a nation acting and reacting in the sphere of imperial powers like Britain and the USA) it also illuminates the privileged position of such powers which never feel they have to ask these same questions about themselves. Yet, obviously, the assumption of normativity to both Western cinema, and the Eurocentric gaze it so-often illuminates, is only that, *normative*, and does require this same level of scrutiny. It can only receive this level of interrogation, however, if placed on a level playing field, amidst a polycentric world of cinemas (after Nagib, as outlined above). Things transnational, it seems, are also things world historical, and as a result, geopolitical. At the very least, this example of Japanese cinema indicates the enmeshed nature of the study of cinema transnationally with the study of world cinema.

This realisation, in turn, sparked a memory of two previously published pieces. Firstly, an article (co-written with María Soledad Montañez) in which we argued that the geopolitics of the international film festival circuit, and in particular its funding competitions, led filmmakers in some small countries to either deliberately background, or erase, national-specificity from their films (2013). We dubbed this practice, 'auto-erasure', as distinct from the more well-known 'auto-ethnography' (Chow 1995; Eleftheriotis 2001; Martin-Jones 2009). The findings of this article have a similar impact on how we understand the situatedness of the transnational turn within the wider study of world cinema. For example, whilst a Uruguayan film, coproduced with an Argentine partner, like *Gigante/Giant* (2009) is indicative of the kinds of transnational coproductions helpfully outlined by Hjort, it equally indicates the global reach of the festival circuit and its influence across world cinema as a totality (Martin-Jones and Montañez 2013). Once again, via geopolitics, we return to the question of how to ground a hermeneutic, how to consider a text in context, which is so determining of how the film is interpreted. In the above discussion of *Gigante*, you will notice, three such contexts emerge in quick succession. *Gigante* is a Uruguayan film made by Control Z, a Uruguayan production company (national context). When viewed as such, it can seem concerned with issues of (national) relevance for Uruguayan audiences (e.g. what it means to live in Uruguay under contemporary global capitalism). Yet, when viewed in terms of its long standing coproduction partnership with Rizoma Films (Argentina), and the similarities in the corpus of films which the two companies have made, then the aesthetic seems to background specifically national concerns to enable the movie to play across borders within the Southern Cone of Latin America (e.g. speaking to broader issues common to contemporary life on both sides of the border separating the two nations, such as the precarious lives of services industries workers, daily encountering a supermarket full of international goods which they themselves cannot afford). However, when viewed from further afield once again, as a film destined for the international film festival circuit, we find a movie which auto-erases any trace of national or even region specificity, to appeal to the widest possible audience, globally (e.g. its concern with surveillance culture in urban life, under globalization, broadly conceived).

In each case, a different rack focus illuminates a different context within which to ground analysis of the film, and indeed, a different geopolitics. And with each such operation (pull back, refocus, pull back, refocus), we reach the limit and stop not at the transnational arrangement per se, but at the transnational aspect *within the wider encompasser of world cinema.* It is this which, by turns, prompted the memory of the second piece.

The second responded to an invitation to very briefly explain something of the state of the field of Film Studies in the UK for a broad, general audience. It was translated into Spanish, for publication in the Uruguayan film journal, *33 Cines* (Martin-Jones 2011b). In this work I decided to give my own (partial, partisan) take on the importance of the study of world cinema to the terrain, due in part to changing geopolitical circumstances: the end of the Cold War, the rise of the BRICS, and the altered film production landscape which this brought (e.g. from Global Hollywood and Global Bollywood to the emergence of Nollywood, and so on). I suggested that this be considered a turn in the field since the 1980s. Since then, having had time to consider this a little further, it is now possible to develop upon what was, in that piece, instinctive, by considering what we might conclude from the similarities between two seminal scholarly works on Indian film, and certain types of film historical work. *Thus, my argument in what follows is that there is a turn to world cinema, within which the transnational turn sits. This is currently being obscured by the importance given to the turn to history. This obscuring takes place, in part at least, because of a historiographical emphasis in the Film Studies canon on Anglo-American scholarship exploring Western cinemas.*

The Turn to History Overlaps the Turn to World Cinema

There is a prevailing consensus that Film Studies experienced a historical turn in the 1970s and 1980s, a key event for which was the 1978 conference of the International Federation of Film Archives in Brighton, UK (Elsaesser 1990, 1-10). Film history of this kind is distinct from, if related to, the history on film debate (Hughes Warrington 2011), with – broadly speaking – cinema history taking films, and their depictions of history, as the object of study, and new cinema history, film and its history as its object of study (Allen and Gomery 1985). The turn has since demonstrated both the limitations of theoretical approaches (the so-called High or Grand Theory of the 1970s, now replaced by a greater plurality of theoretical approaches), as well as the advantages of historical approaches. Yet what is rarely if ever mentioned is that the turn to film history is also imbricated with a broader turn to world cinema. How so?

From the various ways of exploring film history, one of these, which David Bordwell calls the 'aesthetic history of cinema' centers on 'forms, styles and genres', and is a category within which he includes Tom Gunning's influential work (Bordwell 2005). Yet the usefulness of the approach which Gunning takes in order to explore film history, for example the importance of studying text in context as though within a Foucauldian archaeological layer of history (which is evident in Gunning's famous *Wide Angle* article on the 'cinema of attractions'

(1986)), also emerged a year earlier in Rosie Thomas' article in *Screen* (1985) which advocated for a more serious approach to popular Indian (or Bollywood) cinema. Much as Gunning demonstrated that the aesthetic of early silent films in Europe and the USA was shaped by the manner of production and distribution (and thus these films should not be assessed as 'primitive' versions of our current cinemas, but as fit-for-purpose spectacles to be consumed as such in their contexts of reception), Thomas similarly argued that we pay close attention to popular Indian cinema's embeddedness, and to understand its aesthetic as not a poor copy of Hollywood, but, similarly, as entirely fit-for-purpose in relation to its context of production and exhibition. What both are critiquing, ultimately, is very similar – the assumed Eurocentric norm (classical Hollywood) against which 'other' cinemas (from other countries, other histories) are deemed lacking, and the resulting emphasis on narrative (over spectacle) which accordingly structures so many evaluations of such cinemas.

Although such a comparison in no way encompasses all of the turn to history, at the very least its sensitivity to context is also key to scholarship about world cinema. If the mid-1980s is so important for the discipline due to the emergence of the turn to history at that time, should we not also contextualise this turn more broadly to chart such similarities? Did this period also see, in fact, the emergence of the turn to world cinema? After all, we might play devil's advocate and ask why the historical turn did not occur before this moment, in the wake of, say, a work like Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy's *Indian Film* (1963)? Would such a question throw into perspective the turn to history's relationship to world cinema? This remarkable work of film history was written in spite of the absence of a national archive (at that time at least (viii)), and was first published in 1963, well in advance of the aforementioned historical turn (which coincided with the release of its second edition in 1980). The counter objection might be raised that there was a groundswell in terms of the study of film history with the 1980s, which is what – of course – indicates the historical turn. Nevertheless, something very similar can be said (albeit the burn was slower) of the study of world cinema.

Thus, we might conclude that the reason why it is not at all usual to consider the turn to film history in the way I am suggesting here (as entwined with the turn to world cinema), is because of the way in which the historiography of the turn to film history is typically written with a focus on Anglo-American scholarship which explores Western cinemas. Historically-informed scholarship on cinemas of the world is thus erroneously represented as a much more recent addition to this tradition. This is evident in, for example, James Chapman's *Film and History* (2013) which affords the turn to world cinema less than a page in its conclusion, acknowledging its importance, but emphasising its supposed newness with respect to this debate (126). Yet, as the above examples from Indian cinema indicate, there is nothing particularly new with respect to the historical emphasis of scholarship on world cinema. In respect of certain ways of doing film history, at least, it is not always clear what the distinction might be between the turn to film history and the turn to world cinema – which

encompasses which, which precedes which, and so on. At the very least, we have to acknowledge that the turn to history and the turn to world cinema are *overlapping*, and as such, we need to refocus much more on the geopolitical dimension of our studies, as well as the (supposedly politically more neutral) historical aspect.

With this in mind, then, where precisely does the transnational turn fit within such a broad historical-world cinematic turn? Is it not, in part at least, a recognition of the fact that (after Stam and Shohat via Nagib), we are beginning to better understand that, globally, 'all films are equal' (as William Brown has it (2018)), and that, as such we need to consider the integrated, transnational relations which function across a polycentric world of cinemas? The process of considering films transnationally is at times akin to Franco Moretti's idea of 'distant reading', which he develops in relation to world literature (2001; 2013) (which has itself already influenced several scholars in Film Studies – Dudley Andrew (2006; 2010); Iain Robert Smith (2017); John Caughie (2018); David Martin-Jones (2018)). This process, as it translates into the discipline, has been described as 'watching across borders' by Dina Iordanova (2010, 61) to indicate the importance of realising the wider geopolitics that become evident if we analyse films from around the world together beyond their respective national contexts. This has had, as Iordanova indicates, a positive impact on how we understand diasporic cinemas, for instance. Again, as in the Japanese and Uruguayan examples above, it is a question of how to ground a hermeneutics, whether we consider this ground transnational or global.

With distant reading in mind, then, we might reconsider whether the transnational turn commenced in the mid-late 1990s, and gained recognised momentum in the mid-2000s, as seems logical when viewed from our current position in the development of the canon (Shaw 2018, 290). Might we equally see, to continue in a speculative mode, looking back (perhaps with more clarity at a later date from now), a shifting pattern of distant viewing, informed by a different worldview each time? This could be charted by considering the differences between, say, David Bordwell's groundbreaking and influential first attempt to define art cinema as mode of film practice (1979) which problematically homogenizes European alongside Japanese films against an assumed Hollywood norm, and Shohat and Stam's more considered exploration of the visual imaginary of world cinema in *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994) the resonances of which are still evident in Nagib's polycentric approach noted above (2006) and, I would argue, across much scholarship of the transnational turn. If we were to take such a view, then the timing of this change would suggest that scholars of world cinema, and scholars involved in the transnational turn, are responding to historical events (like the end of the Cold War), which required a new worldview. After all, much of this academic writing, especially after Shohat and Stam, can be seen to be in some way a rebuttal to the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 1989) and 'clash of civilisations' (Huntington 1996) discourses of the post-Cold War world, an attempt to see the world differently via analysis of film.

Conclusion

Does the transnational turn exist? Yes, of course. Just as all other turns exist. Yet this is not just, not *solely*, the result of what doctoral candidates are taught: to tell the story of where a new work intervenes in the field by first setting out that field (itself, of necessity, a partisan view). Yet, I am not just saying, not *solely* arguing, that everything is relative amidst the various canonical land grabs we may participate in. Rather, the transnational turn's triumph in emerging, like that of all the other turns, lies precisely in its partiality, its politics: its ability to carve out its recognisable niche in the field which draws scholars to it so that it can expand this territory (just as Deborah Shaw and Armida de la Garza outlined in the opening editorial of *Transnational Cinemas*, as the perceived need they were reacting to when founding the journal (2010)).

This, then, is my view regarding what should be celebrated about the transnational turn: *in a context where the world cinema aspect of the historical turn is obscured (deliberately or otherwise) by the attention given to Anglophone debates which focus on Western cinemas, the transnational turn has foregrounded the often more political dimension of the turn to world cinema in a way which is exciting, and graspable, amidst such an otherwise madding whole.* The transnational turn may well be appealing to many scholars, after all, because it offers a way of make connections across and between the nations which constitute world cinema. It is this political dimension, I believe, which has drawn so many scholars who study world cinema to the transnational terrain, to help re-map Film Studies from the perspective of a different worldview in the post-Cold War, globalized world. As D. N. Rodowick argues, the turn to history can be considered, in part, an apolitical, if not depoliticizing movement within Film Studies – at least as it emerged relative to the political emphases motivating much theoretical work in Film Studies prior to this moment (2007, 94-96). What often unites scholars around the transnational turn, by contrast, may seem the opposite – a concern with politics, perhaps focusing on, say, border-crossing issues which mediate alterity, as in work on diasporic cinema. Here is a worldview considering interaction, if not integration, at the heart of the study of world cinema. This political pull factor, I would argue, also explains the dizzying array of methods which Fisher and Smith uncover – the polycentric nature of the transnational turn. Or, in fact, will we one day see it as the turn to world cinema?

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