

Review of

Dina Iordanova, David Martin-Jones, and Belén Vidal, eds. *Cinema at the Periphery*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 280 pp.

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Is a quiet revolution taking place at the intersection of film studies and postcolonial theory? Are we seeing a renewal of diasporic cinema and the production of innovative films in transnational contexts? Is the Hollywood hegemony slipping and the Eurocentric model redundant? After thirty years of ‘liberated’ international markets and unfettered ‘progress’ of globalization it is timely to take stock of the dialogues and debates being advanced in film studies and in the cinematic forum. A new collection of essays entitled *Cinema at the Periphery* seeks to explore some of these questions.

In his celebrated book *Imagined Communities* (1983) Benedict Anderson argued that nations and nationalisms were products of Enlightenment ideology and print-capitalism. On the assumption that we now exist in a culture dominated by global *image*-capitalism, cultural critics have begun to explore what it means to fashion a *transnational* cinema; and have dared to speculate on a periphery without a centre; to think through the implications of dialogue between peripheries; to explore the spaces between localities and the global forces that cut across the imagined community of the nation in complex and problematic ways. Important recent contributions have included Hamid Naficy’s *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001) and Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie’s *Cinema and Nation* (2000).

Conscious of the apparent domination of world film markets by Hollywood productions, we are apt to forget that the true *history* of cinema, since its inception, has involved participants from every part of the globe. The poetry of ordinary life and the spectacle of the exotic were there at the outset. Nor does the Hollywood film industry exist in glorious isolation from international markets. Dina Iordanova notes the *reliance* by Hollywood on its “foreign” (Iordanova, Jones & Vidal, p. 26) markets; it is not a monolithic and uncritical exporter of the American Way of Life. We must also be reminded of the independent growth of major film markets and production centres in India and Nigeria, for instance, which suggests that the notion of a single centre of power needs to be challenged. The headline gross revenues for the Hollywood blockbusters conceal diverse layers of creative engagement *within* and *between* nations. As Iordanova points out in her contribution to *Cinema at the Periphery*, 90 % of box-office revenues in India and 60 % in Japan are from films produced by the domestic market. Moreover, it is well-known that the Bollywood market also plays to a global diaspora and that it also breaks into the global mainstream. That said, the international market is still weighted toward and dominated by Hollywood’s 70 % share of productions; it is dismal from a diversity perspective that the international penetration of the American market may be as low as 7.5 %.

In these terms, the notion of a transnational cinema holding its own against the global brands suggests an element of aspiration and hope; and the existence of a specialist market, rather than a revolution in the balance of media power. Yet it does not seem unfair to speak of polycentric industries; with evidence of multiple accents and diversifying markets, between which there are flows of influence, support, and exchange. *Cinema at the Periphery* makes a case for undertaking a less Eurocentric approach, and one that accommodates more variety and critique than the global, Hollywood blockbuster model.

Realizing that interesting work is being neglected or marginalized in film studies, current work is increasingly informed by contested notions of the decentered subjectivities, the postcolonial, and - in more recent years - the transnational. The story of cinema has never been so multiple and so fragmented. The problem for contemporary film scholarship is how to negotiate complexity and accommodate local nuances in addition to the risky business of surveying the common features of a larger landscape and global perspective. Having moved on from poststructuralist posturing and Lacanian psychoanalysis, film and cultural studies have reached an interesting juncture at which economic and social realities are being researched alongside critical interpretation and reception. Transnational cinema scholarship also benefits from student friendly sourcebooks such as Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden's *Transnational Cinema, the Film Reader* (2005) and the journal, *Transnational Cinemas*.

In the past, scholarly works such as the *Oxford History of World Cinema: The Definitive History of Cinema Worldwide* (1996) have ambitiously addressed the need to survey and describe the field in a more encompassing fashion. The scope of world film studies incorporates a better understanding of who makes film; how they come to be made and who is watching them. But the notion of the 'comprehensive' or 'definitive' survey presents its own terminological and methodological problems which, under greater scrutiny, are opening up new areas for scholarship.

More auspicious still for film enthusiasts and scholars has been the wider availability of films for viewing on specialist cable and satellite channels, on fixed media such as DVD, or by means of online download – legal or otherwise. The opportunities for watching films have never been so open, diverse, and widespread. One's knowledge of what to watch is informed by the thousands of film festivals that take place every year. Improvements in technology and the diminishing cost of entry mean that previously excluded communities now have local film production opportunities within their reach. *Cinema at the Periphery* begins to approach some of these developments but stops short of running into the dimension of very low budget, community film making and participatory video. This is not primarily a book about the democratization of global communications technologies and the intertwined roles of social media in dissemination, dialogue, and critical debate.

But it would be a mistake to present a uniform picture of creative developments and technological progress without taking notice of past and on-going battles. One problem has been to find a terminology that embraces and addresses difference and inequality on multiple levels. Postcolonial, diasporic, and transnational are essential

terms that will be familiar to scholars working in the field. The editors of *Cinema at the Periphery* outline the key terms of the contemporary debate and offer a variety of analyses to address the issues faced by a range of film-makers and film-markets across the globe. Their interrogation of the theoretical underpinnings of their subject matter, at the outset, is very helpful. Looking exclusively through the unstated assumption of a white, male, European, middle-class frame is a problem that has beset many publications that sought to address the particularities of global cinema on its own terms. Taking their bearings from Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994), the authors hint at the unfinished project of a multicultural study that builds on the work of postcolonial studies and transnational cinema. Accordingly, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Cinema* (2003) is another key work for film critics working in this field.

Cinema at the Periphery “proposes a scholarly space where the multiple peripheral strands may speak for themselves without having to face the onerous burden of constantly explaining themselves in the context of a Eurocentric construct that inevitably puts them in the position of 'defensive apology' and 'shamefaced disavowal’” (p. 4). Further, taking their bearings from the work of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarti's project of “provincializing Europe,” the authors aim “to place the research in cultures entirely rooted within the periphery, thus sparing the need of the investigation to constantly engage with the center, and effectively bracketing the center out” (p. 4).

Cinema at the Periphery helpfully divides its essays into two sections: the first deals with industries and markets; the second with identities and histories. The editors are wise not to posit a causal relationship between modes and conditions of production and the emergent narratives. Rather, they express their sense that there is a “symbiotic feedback loop” between the two sections of the book (p. 6).

Several essays discuss the subnational cinema in relation to the dominant national production and the potentialities of international co-production such as that described in Mette Hjort's case study of collaborative film work in Denmark and Scotland. Other essays in the first section provide thoughtful insights into the specificities of local issues in globalized contexts. Chapters also discuss film production in Australia, New Zealand, Quebec and China.

In the second section of *Cinema at the Periphery*, dealing with Brazilian, Spanish, and Arab case studies, the familiar emphasis on the role of the protagonist shifts to a sense of places or locations that functions on many levels. But this is a mapping of place that is always slipping away; subject to interrogation and contestation in ways that will now be familiar for students of transnational film discourses: “Liminal, tangential, or even extreme borderlands function as the setting for narratives that signify isolation and marginality, presuppose a context of frontier and displacement, or remythologize peripheral histories” (p. 13). Where the spectre of identity appears, it seems to be constructed momentarily, or in parenthesis, or on the margins, or in the gaps of the globalized practices.

Cinema at the Periphery is successful in that there are common elements in the dialogue that the reader or viewer is able to construct across the chapters, as well as a proportionate sense to be gained of the uniqueness and specificity in the local contexts. Each of the contributors tends to frame their essay within the common parameters, or in conscious deviation from them, and that helps to hold an otherwise disparate collection together.

An unarticulated tension that runs through the collection is the risk that the peripheral dialogues fail to be as emancipatory as the claims suggest and that there is a collapse into minority roles and marginality as a mode of defeat rather than resistance. Taken as a whole, *Cinema at the Periphery* is a judicious and scholarly work, but at times I would have wished, on the one hand, for more trenchant speculation on the affirmative futures, and on the other, a more emphatic sense of the black holes of invisibility and neglect.

With the benefit of hindsight there are many lessons in the failure of the promised future to arrive. For instance, it is now more than thirty years since the UNESCO/Macbride Report, “Many Voices, One World” (1980), welcomed the “tremendous strides taken by science and technology” (p. xiii) in the field of communications. The authors noted the increasing *interdependence* of nations and speculated on the potential for communication technologies to have a positive impact:

“It is true that the patterns of domination and the conflicts of interest stemming from them cannot be made to disappear merely because the scope for communication has been broadened, but the increased possibilities of communicating can help to soften their impact by making every individual more alive to the problems and aspirations of others and every nation more conscious of the dangers lying in wait for the world community as a whole” (p. xiii).

The evidence for the demise of the nation, the weakening of nationalism, and the empowerment of the dispossessed, is weak on the ground.

The film product, which is the subject of study in *Cinema at the Periphery*, is, in certain respects, rather traditional and culturally mainstream. What ‘film’ is fails to be unravelled, described, deconstructed, or scoped in the introductions. Perhaps we needed to hear more about documentary rather than traditional mode of the award winning ninety-minute narrative fiction movie; more on radical experimentation and formal innovation; more on new approaches to collaboration along participatory lines; more on short films; more on amateur and prosumer production; and more on the demographics of social media and digital participation.

Iordanova attempts to provide a solid foundation for this collection by emphasizing the potential of new modes of distribution and production. The book is, no doubt, describing what is underway but it still has a long way to go. The emancipatory potential of the *emergent* is difficult to assess at this stage, but it would be unfair to ask for a book that remains to be written. *Cinema at the Periphery* is very good on its own terms, and provides a solid introduction to a body of influential film studies and to current debates in this field. Long live the peripheries!

References

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