

Who's for 'world cinema'?

Michael Chanan*

1.

'World Cinema' is a highly ambiguous term which crept up on us on the model of 'world music'—which in turn originated as a marketing label, devised by a bunch of music producers and their friends in a pub in North London in 1987: a catch-all to be used on shelf dividers in the record stores, devised to try and exploit the proliferation of ethnic and 'other' musics at the edges of the market. In the array of labels dividing up the displays in the DVD stores, world cinema means firstly the stuff that isn't distributed by the majors (although they know there's a niche market for such films, so they sometimes set up specialist distributors and labels).

But actually, by this criterion, what world cinema consists in depends on where you are. In the UK, for example, it might mean foreign language films, but these are usually divided into European and non-European, and then there are separate sections for various niche genres. So if you were looking, say, for the Chilean film *Machuca* (Andrés Wood, 2004) in the UK, you'd probably find it under World Cinema. But not in Spain, where Latin America becomes invisible as a region because the Latin American films distributed there are Spanish coproductions and get lumped in with Spanish films.

In the chain stores and franchises, if it's there at all, 'world cinema' is an oddbin. In the field of film studies, it's an equally unstable term, but in a different way. First, it's much broader (evidence the range of the papers being presented here). It includes, for example, cinemas and films which never achieved conventional forms of international distribution, but also overlooked aspects of the mainstream, or unfamiliar angles on particular films or stars or directors. It is not so much a body of work, however, as a certain approach, which seeks to escape the bias of conventional scholarship against the marginal. It wishes to overcome the established model of centre and periphery in order to describe a multipolar and multicultural world of local and national cinemas, and to map their transnational articulations.

Perhaps the term has taken hold because it seems to inscribe the idea of a globalised world in a manner better suited to the new century. This would be an illusion, an historical slippage. The great historical break which divides us from the first century of cinema took place a few years before the official centenary of cinema in 1995. It was 1989-1991, when the Communist bloc collapsed and the Cold War came to an end—because it was this that first gave the world a new shape. Everything that has happened since, including 9/11 and the world crisis of finance capital in 2008, has happened in the context of the unearned triumphalism of neoliberalism (it is only now, with the popular

* For 'The Wild Things of World Cinema', Film Studies, King's College London, Graduate Student Work-in-Progress Conference, 13th May 2011

uprisings in the Arab countries, that history is once again shifting gear on such a massive scale) and cinema reflects this, transmutes it into articulations of the world as we imagine and experience it. But if you take this historical context into account, then certain paradoxes or conundrums appear.

Firstly, the present configuration of cinema in the world is also due to another revolution, or at least major transformation, an industrial and technical one, namely the introduction of digital video and its convergence with information technology, which by some kind of coincidence began around the same time and hasn't stopped since. Digital video has introduced new ways of shooting films, editing them, distributing and now exhibiting them which have unsettled the majors enormously as new players have entered a hugely extended market at all levels. What the relationship is between these two historical transformations, the political and the techno-cultural, remains as ever an open question, but it's certainly symbiotic and intricate. Adorno would call it an analogical affinity.

Secondly, in fact much has remained the same. The age of globalisation has not basically changed the international balance of power in the field of cultural production from its post-war configuration when the globe came to be divided into three worlds. The problem with attempting to reconceive the centre-periphery model is that it remains in operation. Just as before, the cinema majors, headquartered in Los Angeles, are hegemonic throughout the world, and a tacit arm of superpower imperialism. There is a long history to the way that Washington has been involved, both openly and in secret, in playing cultural politics, and the MPAA has long been one of the strongest lobbies on the Hill. This of course is not necessarily to impugn the individual film made within the system—far from it, for the system can often be quite flexible—but speaks to the economic (and sometimes political) methods employed to ensure that Hollywood retains the lion's share of cinema screen time around the globe, continues to serve the US economy as one of its largest foreign earners, and maintain the global hegemony of American culture. Even the second sector of US cinemas, the indies represented at Sundance, benefit from this system. It explains, for example, why Michael Moore is the most widely distributed cinema documentarist of our times, ironically exploiting the anti-Americanism of his international audience.

Michael Moore is obviously not a member of the class 'world cinema', but there are certain affinities—it is oppositional, agile, and to begin with, low budget. Above all, he comes from a de-centred space of social, political and artistic discourse. However individualistic, this is not the normal way that the US likes to project its image. The de-centred image that contests the norm that dominates the public sphere—this is also implicit in the idea of 'world cinema' almost whatever way you construe it: it betokens some degree of otherness or distance from the metropolitan centre, although this is not often spoken out loud for fear of being branded anti-American. To complicate things, the geography involved here isn't simply physical, and the centre isn't a single place—Hollywood—but a network of film studios around the world, typically located in or near world cities on different continents, like London or Hong Kong, which belong to the same (or rival) cartel. This is why a big successful blockbuster made in Australia or New Zealand, for example, is not an example of 'world cinema', but rather of the first cinema people think of when they think about the movies, which is 'Hollywood' and Hollywoodian,

the stars and the accolade of the Oscars. In short, it's impossible to think world cinema as a concept or a category without this divisive optic entering in, even if only as a looming shadow peaking in round the door.

This necessarily raises another bunch of questions, about the forms and degree of otherness and distance which different cinemas and films manifest. There is a long history to be considered here, most of which is hidden from metropolitan film studies, except for a few special cases. The New Latin American Cinema of the 60s and 70s was explicitly anti-Hollywood in both content and form, politics and aesthetics, but this would hardly be true of the otherness and original visual beauty of Japanese cinema. From time to time we're reminded of this otherness by new cinematic waves from countries previously beyond the horizon, like Iran or China, which stimulate great interest precisely because there is nothing like cinema to create new imaginary geographies of far-away and unknown places.

Third is a version of a problem widely debated in the literature on globalisation, that of the status of the national. There is always a great puzzle, when talking about cinema in national terms, over where the national lies and what it comprises, because cinema is perhaps the most international of artforms, and has been so since it began. The film trade itself was international before Hollywood came to dominate after WWI, and the Hollywood community itself came from all sorts of extractions, allowing them to think that the cinema they made is universal, whereas, from the point of view of the 'world cinema' approach, it is the national cinema of the USA. At all events, any film made anywhere has the potential to achieve a worldwide audience, and every film-maker measures themselves up not just against their domestic cinema but also international cinema, that is, cinema from anywhere else in the world. (Like the example we heard about today of the Turkish director Semih Kaplanoglu, whose influences, we learned, include both Tarkovsky and Satyajit Ray.)

Furthermore, just as globalisation promotes directors and actors from around the globe to international prominence, mainly through the film festival circuit, it also continues to think in terms of national cinemas, which remain national however globalised the world becomes. This is in part because they exist under national governments which help or hinder their operation each in its own way, but also because of the persistence in their language and manners of the imagined community of the national culture, which cinema constantly reconstructs, both reinforcing and transforming it. (Another example we heard about today: Spanish cinema after Franco.)

Those national cinemas may be large or small. The large ones tend to have solid histories, substantial infrastructures, large domestic audiences and modest budgets compared to Hollywood blockbusters. Many of the smaller industries, however, struggle to prosper from year to year, and their budgets are minuscule, yet in many such countries one or two of these films will go straight to the top of the domestic box office, above the Hollywood blockbusters. They reach us mostly through film festivals big and small: prestige dates like Cannes, Venice, and Berlin, where they get picked up by small independent distributors and sent round the art house circuit; and a growing number of smaller domestic and often specialist film festivals which appeal to local or national communities.

A notable feature of this system is that it requires various forms of aid and subsidy at one point or another in the supply chain, and national film industries flourish best

under regimes that have a certain kind of cultural pride (not always benign: the Brazilian military created Embrafilme to project a positive image abroad while some the films concerned were kept of the screens at home). In Latin America—the region I know best — no industry big or small can survive without some form of financial aid, through subsidy or tax breaks or the like. This becomes obvious from instances where national support was withdrawn and the industry collapsed, which happened in both Brazil and Argentina around the end of the 1980s. Subsequent governments were obliged to reintroduce assistance and immediately film production picked up. Part of this support system comes from the metropolitan countries, including the agencies of regional organisations like the EU, or foundations like the Hubert Bals Fund attached to the Rotterdam Film Festival, who support production, distribution and exhibition with modest sums. But even in Europe, the national regime is crucial, and most countries have them. The best example of a national form of support and assistance for its film industry is France, which is particularly zealous of the artform whose invention it takes as its own, and has developed a method of collecting and distributing funds for production, distribution and exhibition which has cross-party support and gives them a higher share of the domestic market—30% or more, I believe—than anywhere else in Europe. It is no coincidence that France has been in the forefront of the international call in world trade forums for the protection of cultural industries by means of what is called the cultural exception.

How this all works is not widely understood—in the past there were the merest handful of studies, like Bachlin in 1947 (*Histoire Economique du Cinéma*) or Guback in 1969 (*The International Film Industry*); there was a bunch of studies in the 70s on the political economy of the media in different countries, and recent work in the field is picking up, but without always focussing on cinema, leaving]the trade press as the primary source for mapping the way it operates. This wider purview is not surprising given the interpolation of cinema within a global entertainments industry which overarches us like a virtual octopus. For the most part, however, the whole topic remains pretty marginal to film studies as such. Meanwhile the groundrules have completely changed with digital video. This affects both ends of the scale, the Hollywood-type special effects blockbuster, and small local films from the countries of the South, like the ones on view at a festival like Cines del Sur in Granada. Neither of them look the same as twenty years ago.

In short, digital cinema has brought alterations in the mode of production that also produce differing screen aesthetics. This includes another overlooked—although now emerging—area within film studies, the soundtrack. Again there's a long and little known history, which includes the bifurcation in the 1960s between the post-produced soundtrack of studio practice, and the direct sound techniques adopted by new wave cinema in France and beyond. Here I remember a remark by the Colombian director Sergio Cabrera when we were discussing the soundtrack after I'd just seen one of his films. He was very proud of the fact that 95% of the sound mix used direct location sound. 'Think of it,' he said, 'in Hollywood it's the other way round.'

Yet the digital has also made the boundaries between these two modes of cinema fuzzy. A salutary tale, told me by another Latin American, the Argentine director Fernando Spiner, about his science fiction film *La sonámbula* (1998), a futuristic allegory about Argentina's disappeared, which made marvelous use of digital post-production effects and

was a modest success at the box office. A friend, he told me, had suggested that what he should have done was 'take it to Los Angeles, dub it into English and put subtitles on— then it would have gone to the top of the box office!'

But the Chilean film I mentioned earlier, *Machuca*, is another example. The first Chilean film to include the fictional reconstruction of the coup of 1973, it was digital postproduction which made it possible to represent the appearance of the streets of Santiago, with their revolutionary murals, at the time of Allende, accurately, convincingly at low cost.

2.

The issue of who controls distribution and the lines on which the world of cinema is divided came up at Cannes in 2004. According to the wisdom of Quentin Tarantino, president of the jury in that year,

'There are only three countries in the world now with sustainable film industries - America, India and Hong Kong. What do they have in common? These countries have stars whom the public want to see.' He said it was 'easy and popular and fun' to demonise Hollywood blockbusters. 'But a country cannot exist on auteur films alone - you need every type of film there is. Otherwise it's not an industry, it's a boutique.' (Charlotte Higgins, Tarantino takes on UK film industry, *Guardian*, 13 May, 2004)

I cringe every time I read this over. The arrogance, the assumption of superiority, the inability to think outside the commercial mindset. The newspaper report continues:

In return the British actor Tilda Swinton, a member of the Cannes jury, attacked Hollywood's domination of the UK film culture. 'Yes, a film culture cannot rely only on one brand,' she said. 'But no film culture can be based on only Hollywood imports. In Britain, multiplexes outnumber art cinemas 10 to one. It's difficult for audiences to find a different sort of cinema, and difficult for film-makers and critics to think of making a different sort of cinema.'

Another report, speaking of the year's larger US participation than the preceding few editions, made curious use of the term 'world cinema'. The suspicion, wrote Andrew Pulver,

that there has been a changing of the guard at Cannes is hardly borne out - the selection is still stuffed with regular festival attendees such as Walter Salles, Hirokazu Kore-Eda, Emir Kusturica and Abbas Kiarostami. But there is a sense that world cinema's taste is evolving: for example, the procession of Iranian, Chinese or Scandinavian film-makers seems to be grinding to a halt. Instead, Cannes is taking the opportunity to crown new princelings: Argentina's Lucrecia Martel, Thailand's Apichatpong Weerasethakul and even an Austrian, Hans Weingartner. (The Tarantino effect, *The Guardian*, 12 May, 2004)

What on earth, one might ask, is 'world cinema's taste', other than the predilections of the elite of the European film industry assembled in Cannes? In short, the same thing that Gilles Jacob, festival president, described as the kind of cinema they were looking for:

'popular auteur films, or, if you prefer, intelligent popular films' from everywhere. (http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2004/05/13/tem_ae13cannes.html)

Fair enough, but notice what this means. Auteur cinema is equivalent to what was known in the theory of the three cinemas as second cinema. This of course is the schema advanced by the Argentine film-makers Solanas & Getino in their manifesto *Hacia un tercer cine* (Towards a Third Cinema) at the end of the 1960s, in which first cinema was the industrial model of Hollywood, wherever it was adopted; second cinema corresponded to the European model, which privileged the director over the producer; while third cinema was oppositional, collective and militant, anti-imperialist and revolutionary. It was the furthest away you could get away ideologically from the centre. And still is, although its political articulation has shifted with the wider re-orientation in the popular movements to which it belongs, because across the world, another thing that digital video has meant, is an enormous growth in the production of a widening range of video genres intended for dissemination outside the market and aligned to popular political pressure groups and movements. A pertinent example is the movement known as *cine piquetero* in Argentina, which exploded into activity when the country was hit by a banking crisis at the end of 2001, about which Solanas himself wondered if it wasn't the return of third cinema. []

What I want to emphasise here is again that the geography of the three cinemas is not physical, despite the echo in the term of the theory of the three worlds (first enunciated by the Chinese in 1956 at the Bandung Conference, the founding conference of the Non-Aligned Movement). The space of the three cinemas, however, is virtual, and reflects a crucial fact about cinema almost from its inception—its transnationalism. Not only was the film trade international from the outset, but it rapidly discovered for itself a kind of language which was immediately intelligible everywhere, and at the same time, fully capable of local inflection. It's like Adorno's observation about music that it is indeed a universal language, but without being Esperanto. This is also why Solanas and Getino insisted that each of the three cinemas could appear in different parts of the world, including third cinema, of which they cited examples in the USA, Europe and Japan. Or to take the case of first cinema, we now not only have both Hollywood and Bollywood but also Nollywood, making Nigeria another of the largest film producing countries in the world - except that they're made and distributed on video cassette, even today (as I ascertained just a few days ago). In other words, Nigeria was rich and big enough to create a huge internal market for a new domestic entertainment genre, but has not advanced into the DVD era; I can't tell you why.

3

We're left with a lot more questions. Especially, for example, about flow. Even if the economic balance of power within international entertainments capital hasn't changed very much apart from corporations changing hands, the patterns of flow of the content it trades in have diversified considerably. It would seem that the cultural balance has shifted, not necessarily within the purview of the central and mainstream media, but below their radar, in the proliferation of small media which people now use across the globe—with effects that sometimes boil over into the mainstream media, especially when the political situation explodes and Twitter, Facebook and YouTube come into their own. World cinema is also active in this same parallel virtual world. At any rate, I can attest that more news

and clips of films from all sorts of places arrive in my inbox than I have time to look at properly.

In less anecdotal language, the question might be this. In the staggered double passage to postcolonialism and digital culture, what has happened to the old configuration of colonialism's imaginary geography? As barriers have begun to break down, how has the global imaginary been transformed? Something like that.

M.C., 14 May 2011