
Choosing the Transnational

By Dina Iordanova

Dear Dina,

I hope we get a chance to lock horns (in friendly fashion!) at some point about this whole issue of transnational versus the study of national culture. While I am in sympathy with the intellectual ambition of transnational approaches and while the study of national cultures can seem, intellectually and methodologically, an insular ghetto, it is sometimes the case that the former approach suffers from insufficient attention to particularities and relies on outdated or superficial accounts of local or national conditions.

Dear Alan,

I think you are operating out of assumptions that need clarifying, as I absolutely do not feel we have any battles — neither actual nor putative. So hopefully when we meet some day it will not be necessary to lock horns, be it in a friendly or belligerent manner:)

This whole issue is about what you want to see and the respective selection of a vantage point. If you anchor yourself within one nation — which is a valid position — you see one type of things; if you anchor yourself supranationally, you see different things — that is all. My life has been such that I have felt more attracted to watching across borders and seeing those things that evolve above and beyond the nation. I have got many friends who have chosen to anchor themselves differently.

This literal rendering of an exchange with a colleague who has opted to fashion himself as a national cinema specialist took place on 11 December 2014. It alerted me to the fact that the transnational approach to film studies had now gained such currency that it was considered to be “mainstream film studies” and, as his e-mail went on, that it had become a trendy one, so much so that it led to frustration among those who, like him, came to feel that their national cinema work had come to be “consistently ignored, dismissed or patronised”. Who would think we would be at such a juncture so soon, whilst most of the writers in this journal still ponder how to enter the transnational teaching into what appears a citadel of time-honoured national cinema framework?

Besides providing for a good anecdote, this exchange made me realize that teaching transnational cinema, for me, is not so much about identifying and working with a specific body of films and conceptual frameworks for the analysis of these films, that it is not so much about

“introducing transnational cinema into the curriculum” as something distinct from what one would otherwise engage with, but it is about allowing oneself to make some simple choices and accepting oneself, as a teacher, as well as the students, as transnational subjects.

More often than not it is about choosing to recognize a stance that reflects one’s own experience of being transnational. Teachers who engage with the transnational have, in most cases, undergone some life experience that has opened them to the itinerant and sometimes mischievous back-and-forth that comes through realizing the potency of liminality. It is no wonder that most of the authors contributing to this collection belong to the growing ranks of “transplanted” and “hyphenated” people, each one in their own way, following a personal trajectory.

For me it was about validating my migratory path in scholarly behaviour. Adopting a transnational approach, at first without reflecting much on it and later on more consciously, enabled me to identify problems that were not particularly noticed, name them, and pursue them. What troubled me and touched me was all happening along with the fluctuation in social landscapes that were at the limits of the national; it was much better felt when one sees it from outside, in flux. I watched, from a distance, the emotionally draining disbanding of supranational political blocks in the aftermath of communism and the imploding dissolution of various doctrinally constructed multicultural “nations”. Cinema was one of the few contemporary art forms that was capable of showing the consequences of whatever was wrong with humankind, and of taking the concern to wider audiences, far beyond those immediately affected. The era that I feel I lived in was somehow not about the nation... All I was doing was choosing to follow my instinct.

Teaching transnationally, however, was also about recognizing the life trajectories and the generational positioning of the students. The people I see in the classroom today are increasingly resettled, mobile, conscious of migrations, and at ease with other cultures. They talk to friends from around the world on a daily basis, and learn how to be in a pluralistic environment, be it in the context of their games, or on Whatsapp and Viber, or on Facebook.

And then, it is about recognizing that teaching transnational cinema comes down to making several choices.

First, about making the choice to emancipate from the prescriptive national paradigm. It is a choice that involves overcoming fear and insecurity.

There is virtue in exploring national identities and studying film as it reflects a national discourse. But this is not the study of film, it is the study of national culture as seen through film, and to me this is a different discipline. Indeed, at many Universities film studies first sprang from (and still dwell in) the language departments that started introducing film in the curriculum as a device for the study of national traditions. In such places, the emergent transnationally slanted approach finds it tough to slot itself, as all those obstinate identities that do not fit and stay barred or marginalized are hard to integrate into the respected storyline. Still, many make the choice to emancipate from the national by changing the vantage point of the inquiry. There is no need to dispense of the nation; the emancipation may express itself in choosing to embrace and uphold a point of view where nations and borders exist yet function differently, not protectively to close off and keep one in, but loosely, to be broken through and superseded.

It is often a matter of self-esteem, of overcoming the simple fear of lacking proficiencies. One may have been trained in the national paradigm, one may have existing competences. One may not want to be challenged for not knowing full details about the unfamiliar cultures that one would venture into. Isn't the "teacher" one who is supposed to not be an *ignoramus*? Thus, many stay with the safe bet of the national model and bear with its discomforts. It comes down to challenging the politics of academia, of subverting ingrained fields and embracing interdisciplinarity. Of feeling the fear and doing it anyway.

Second, contemporary cinema's way of being is transnational - from how it is conceived to how it travels, from how it is made to how it is seen. We can choose to look at films in the complexity of this context. It means to suspend the close scrutiny of film as text for the sake of bringing in awareness of the multiple other dimensions of film culture. One can choose to position the film transnationally by embracing the diverse and complex knowledge of the environment — how film is produced, how it circulates, how it is received in different places. In that, exploring the setting of global film piracy or the festival circuit, and showing how a fluctuating context redefines the way in which cinema is received is as much a part of the transnational film studies agenda as it is the scrutiny of a specific "transnational" film.

Third, teaching transnationally is a matter of political commitment. It comes down to making the choice to watching across borders, to continuously seeing films not from only one tradition, but from elsewhere as well, and mainly films that, in some way, comment or undermine the established narratives. Teaching and learning to watch across borders means preparedness to imagine and allow multiple points of view. This is not about the material itself, it is about the viewing position one takes

from the outset.

For watching across borders to take place, it matters who are the teachers and how they hold themselves in the world politically. But it also matters who are the students and how open they can be to acknowledging the multi-dimensionality of human experience reflected in films. Watching across borders would mean, then, to opt to go beyond the confines of any fixed national identity and problematize it as a multi-faceted and ever-changing dynamic phenomenon. It would mean to leave behind entrenched tropes and evaluations and acknowledge that relativizing the premises can bring about new insights. It is often manifested in challenging and exposing oneself to alternative narratives of one's own nation past and current conflicts, be it as an aggressor or as a victim.

And, there is one last choice to be made: to celebrate the transnational.

Academic work is at its most vital when life experience informs its emphases and concerns. Our lives have been such that we have come to seeing things across borders. We have made our choices. And so, we can own up to the sorrow and yet choose to bring the joy of migration to the classroom – because it is the atmosphere and the tonality of the pitch that the students will take away, not so much the factual commentary. It is a matter of emotional learning.

When we come to share our experiences, we can choose to keep going on about feeling exiled, excluded and foreign, or we can choose to celebrate the cosmopolitan versus the parochial and take pride in our position of privileged outsiders. Whilst acknowledging the diversity of possible attitudes, the teacher can choose to be a happy trespasser over an abject alien.

Indeed, these were the choices and the approach to teaching we tried to engage with at the program I set up at the University of St Andrews about a decade ago. There was no existing portfolio of degrees that needed adjusting or breaking into; it was possible to do it from the vantage point of a *tabula rasa*. It was possible to structure the general curriculum around certain principles, and go the same way in the individual course design and in the choice of topics for individual sessions. It was reflected in the way we developed the library collection, and in the viewing recommendations we were making, in and out of class, day in and day out. And it worked for a while. But it did not last long. As we moved on, some reverted to the comfort zone of close up textual analysis; others snuggled up in the national template. Keeping up the transnational still requires hard work, to nourish and sustain.

Notes on Contributor

Dina Iordanova is a Professor of Global Cinema and Creative Culture at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. She has published extensively on matters of transnational cinema and maintains that one of the most important things in film studies is to “watch across borders”.