
Transnational Cinema: An Introduction

By Steven Rawle

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Reviewed by Sanghita Sen, University of St Andrews

Transnationalism is predicated on the idea of “flows of people and objects across borders, between and above nation” (p. xii). Steven Rawle’s book, *Transnational Cinema: An Introduction*, simultaneously extends and challenges understandings of transnationalism and transnational cinema at a critical juncture in the contemporary world, when far-right cultural nationalism and paranoia for the cultural Other is gaining strength, endangering the flows of people and cultures beyond parochial national boundaries. He demonstrates a close connection to the emerging tension between the outbreak of cultural nationalist predispositions on both sides of the Atlantic and the so-called permeability of national borders. The book also comments on the extent to which the medium of cinema is affected either by these socio-cultural developments or by consciously reproducing them. Furthermore, through the examination of the nomenclature of transnational cinema, the author highlights shifts in film studies over the years from dichotomous classification of cinema in terms of “us-vs.-them” to a potentially more inclusive approach to studying film cultures from across the world in the context of globalisation.

The author draws the attention of his readers to the need for a careful handling of the notion of transnational cinema. Taking the much-debated idea of world cinema as a point of reference, he argues that an incautious attention to the transnational cinema might lead to obfuscation of patterns of unevenly distributed power and ambivalences. In this context, it is therefore vital to describe, explain, and streamline the definition of transnational cinema, so that its distinctive elements and critical potential are paid due attention to. He further adds how the idea of transnational cinema supplements—and not replaces—the idea of national.

In the eight chapters of the book, Rawle discusses transnationalism in terms of conditions that arose as a result of neo-liberalism, globalisation, and foraminous borders, which pose both a challenge and opportunity for cinema’s global mobility. He then advocates the idea of cinema as a befitting medium to promote cross-border socio-cultural exchanges, situating it at the core of contemporary lives in a world under globalisation. Pointing to transnational exchanges and collaborations that were operative since the very beginning of cinema, he cites silent films as examples of early transnational cinema that travelled across national borders and were distributed worldwide. Although, with the invention of

talkies, cinema started becoming restricted to local cultures, with language serving somewhat as a barrier, globalisation enabled once again a unique opportunity of expansion not only vis-à-vis collaboration in filmmaking, but also in terms of content and format of films: utilising cultural elements from multiple sources for reaching out to a wider international audience. The emerging cultural hybridity in a number of films necessitates a transnational theory to adequately examine them. He demonstrates how the term is increasingly being used for cinema which “cannot be explained or analysed only in relation to a single national context” (2).

The author sets up the ensuing inquiries by providing a detailed overview of the characteristics, debates, constraints, and uncertainties in the discourse of the emerging field of transnational cinema. Most importantly, for me as a non-Western film researcher, the book problematises the idea of “world cinema” as a way of cultural otherization, continuing the work of Lucia Nagib, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Dina Iordanova, David Martin-Jones, and Belén Vidal, among several others. To counter this otherization of the cinemas of the periphery, the author argues for the transnational method of enquiry to create an egalitarian space for films from non-Western cultures within the mainstream discourse of film studies. Citing Iordanova’s research, he adds how the transnational lens also helps in understanding the hybrid mode of distribution as a model to replace the “traditional centre of world cinema” (11). By doing so, transnational cinema aims to subvert the hegemony of a unidirectional flow of world cinema on one hand and, on the other, utilise agility and multiple centres to deal with the imbalances in questions of power and inequality that shifts in the global economy dictate. Analysing films dealing with migration, diaspora, and cross-cultural/cross-border experiences, he collates the key concepts and theories of transnational cinema, illustrating how the production of films has traversed national boundaries to transform cinema as the product of a cross-border economy and of creative peoples in a globalised world.

Rawle’s anti-essentialist position in the book is refreshing. As opposed to a dichotomous “us-vs.-them,” he foregrounds localised and hybrid forms at the centre of his investigation. He devotes considerable space to this aspect in chapters on transnational articulations of genres, remakes, Third and postcolonial cinema, as well as exilic and diasporic cinema. By placing due emphasis on these, he decisively explicates how the Hollywood hegemony propelled the process of its subversion through these cinemas from the so-called periphery. Rawle brings in the reference to Third and postcolonial cinema to this discussion for its commitment to using films as a weapon for decolonisation and anti-imperialist politics. Additionally, he raises the issues of identity and inequality and highlights how globalisation plays a crucial role in fast-changing socio-economic

conditions under neoliberalism.

The one inadequacy that I found in this volume is also a common symptom shared by most books on transnational cinema and/or world cinema. Although he refers to John Hess and Patricia Zimmermann's essay "Transnational Documentaries: A Manifesto," he does not include documentary films in his own inquiry in the book.^[1] Documentary films have been crucial, particularly with reference to Third Cinema and postcolonial cinema; a discussion of this practice would have made the book a more comprehensive reference material in the area of transnational film studies.

Since the main aim of the book is to illustrate the most relevant concepts and theories of transnational cinema, Rawle paired these with carefully selected case studies for his argument. He situates transnational cinema, simultaneously, as a contemporary historical phenomenon and as a framework for engagement with the experience of transnationality. Each category of transnational cinema that he discusses in this very well-researched book provides a list of recommended viewing and study materials, which will be quite useful for someone trying to acquaint themselves with transnational cinema for the first time.

Notes

^[1] "Transnational Documentaries: A Manifesto", in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (London: Routledge, 2006), 97-108.