
Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media

By Dina Iordanova

Written by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam
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“*Unthinking Eurocentrism* was a hugely influential book, and remains so twenty years later. It informed my approach to the study of film from early on, in conveying how film and media countersign ideology and the subtle workings of social consciousness. It taught me to approach film not solely as text, but first and foremost as context; to focus on film culture and mediated discourse. *Unthinking Eurocentrism*’s utter exuberance of referencing was particularly inspirational. Confidently flowing and cutting across cultures and discourses whilst revealing patterns of othering and orientalisation that work throughout the world, both outside and within Europe, it motivates and excites. This is how I want all writing on film to be: rich and intense. It is a book that shaped, and continues shaping, all my work.”

I provided this endorsement to Routledge in 2014. It appears on the back cover of the second edition of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, a book that was re-released with an additional extended commentary by the authors two decades after its initial appearance.

But it had all started much earlier. Even though published originally in 1994, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* first entered my life in the fall of 1996, at the University of Chicago campus. I had recently arrived from Austin, Texas, to take up a Rockefeller fellowship at the interdisciplinary Humanities Institute here, under the guidance of Arjun Appadurai. And I was just learning my way around Hyde Park when, on an autumn afternoon, I found myself marvelling at the remarkably stocked basement of the Seminary Co-op Bookshop, on Woodlawn just off 57th street.

There was a relatively slim film section, mainly of books on American and French cinema – a landscape that I had grown familiar with during my preceding three-year stint of teaching at UT-Austin. Nestled among those, however, was a book that was completely different. *Unthinking Eurocentrism* claimed that all cinematic traditions in the world mattered equally and ought to be known and respected. It was providing a sweeping discussion of cinematic texts, from across the world, in a

context where American and European classics figured alongside films from Latin America, Asia, and Africa but did not rank any higher. It was all blending in a perfect discourse, which elegantly cross-referenced media, public opinion, ideology, and education.

My few years of immigrant experience until then had left me with the impression that in the US context knowing American film was hugely respected whilst everything else was marginalised and overlooked. One type of culture was scrutinised and privileged at the expense of others. It was a situation that had made me feel uneasy and insecure about my own choices and interests. Now there was a framework, provided by *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, which operated on the premise of equal value of cultures and excitingly demonstrated how an approach that respected the multiplicity and diversity was consistently possible.

The way the book was done overstepped all entrenched national cinematic traditions. The discussion dropped borders to meander as it saw fit, bringing in references and examples from wherever it suited to build the argument. It was so liberating! It was one of the first truly transnational texts that I came across. By allowing itself to be playful and even whimsical with the examples, the text was able to foreground issues and concerns that otherwise could have remained unnoticed.

Somehow I immediately knew that I would adapt this method to the project I was starting at that time and that it would eventually become my first English language book, *Cinema of Flames* (2001). I would drop national borders and would use examples from whichever Balkan country suited me to build the argument, because I felt the line of reasoning I could develop this way was by far more important than sticking faithfully to a historiography of a country or a region. In a way, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* gave me a template for all my future work.

Later that year I read Ella Shohat's *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, published in 1989 by the University of Texas Press. It also left a great impression on me, mainly with its dynamic dissection of the complex agendas that rule the Israeli society. It opened my eyes to the dialectical relationship of representation and perception. Like *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, it was a book that dealt with a large number of films. Rather than scrutinising a single canonical text, it weaved filmic references together into one large discursive canvas. Most of all, however, I was impressed by the elegance with which Ella Shohat was writing herself into the text, acknowledging her specific background and personal point of view (rather than hiding behind some artificially constructed objectivity).

When I look back now, I realise that I have modelled a lot of my own

writing after things that I learned from *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, but also from *Israeli Cinema*.

Unthinking Eurocentrism empowered me to create a text that would embrace the abundant and varied cinematic material that was available to me without succumbing to the pressure to analyse singular texts. It emboldened me to favour a contextualising approach over close textual analysis, as this was how I could show the way multiple cinematic works contribute to a general discourse that shapes the narratives related to cultural configurations.

Israeli Cinema gave me a model on the basis of which I could write myself into the investigation and reveal my specific background and point of view, with its advantages and disadvantages. It was the book that taught me to always acknowledge my own position in regard to the material I would investigate. It allowed me to act on my belief that scholars should not pretend to be above and beyond things like class stratification and ideology.

In May 2014 I was invited to speak at a transnational cinema conference at the NUY campus in Abu Dhabi (UAE), organised by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam who had taken up professorships there. The event was to take stock of where we were now as well as mark the 20th anniversary since the publication of *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. Along with the other conference guests, I had become part of the family of people who were continuing the formidable work that the book had launched. The study of cinema as a transnational phenomenon had become an acknowledged and respected discipline. I could not have known any of this back then, when I first picked up the book at the Seminary bookshop.