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**WILL HIGBEE**

University of Exeter

**SONG HWEE LIM**

University of Exeter

# Concepts of transnational cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies

## ABSTRACT

*This article aims to map out the various concepts of transnational cinema that have appeared over the past ten to fifteen years, and its state of deployment, related issues and problematics. It argues for a critical form of transnationalism in film studies that might help us interpret more productively the interface between global and local, national and transnational. It also aims to move away from a Eurocentric approach towards the reading of such films. It will illustrate how the concept of transnational cinema has been at once useful and problematic, liberating and limiting, by focusing on two case studies – diasporic and postcolonial cinemas and Chinese and East Asian cinemas – that provide fertile ground for interrogating the concept of the transnational.*

## KEYWORDS

transnational cinema  
critical transnationalism  
diasporic cinema  
postcolonial  
francophone cinema  
Chinese cinema  
East Asian cinemas

1. See, for example, the work of sociologist Hannerz (1996), anthropologist Ong (1999), and Balibar (2004) on transnational citizenship; Gilroy (1993) and Hall (1990) on diasporic identity and postcoloniality; and Appadurai (1990) on the transnational flows of people and culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Within the discipline of film studies, the concept of transnational cinema is certainly now an established area of enquiry, at least judging by the launch of this journal and the increasing number of book titles that now bear its name: *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (Ezra and Rowden 2006a); *Transnational Cinema In a Global North: Nordic Cinema in Transition* (Nesting and Elkington 2005); *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Lu 1997a); *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (Durovicová and Newman 2009). Elsewhere, the term transnational makes its appearance in subtitles of books to indicate cross-border cinematic connections (Chan 2009; Hunt and Leung 2008a; Kaur and Sinha 2005; Morris, Li and Chan 2005). While it is clear from film history that transnational flows and connections in cinema are nothing new, this recent theoretical and paradigmatic shift raises the questions: why the concept of transnational cinema, and why now?

One immediate response is to view this shift towards the transnational as encouraged by a wider dissatisfaction expressed by scholars working across the humanities (in particular sociology, postcolonial theory and cultural studies) with the paradigm of the national as a means of understanding production, consumption and representation of cultural identity (both individual and collective) in an increasingly interconnected, multicultural and polycentric world.<sup>1</sup> However, there have also been a number of clear attempts to apply a conceptual framework of 'the transnational' to a variety of films, film-makers and film cultures. As early as 1993, Marsha Kinder commented on the need to 'read national cinema against the local/global interface' (Kinder 1993: 7). Four years later in the edited collection *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, Sheldon Lu identified 'an era of transnational postmodern cultural production' (Lu 1997b: 10–11), in which borderlines between nations have been blurred by new telecommunications technologies as a means of explaining the shifting debates away from national to transnational cinema. At the same time, Hamid Naficy was proposing the category of 'independent transnational cinema', which combines concepts of authorship (the interstitial or exilic film-makers from outside of the West working on the margins of the European and American film industries) with genre (a specific category of 'cine-writing', iconography and self-narrativization linked through themes of memory, desire, loss, longing and nostalgia) (Naficy 1996: 121). More recently, Andrew Higson (2000), Tim Bergfelder (2005) and Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (2006b) have interrogated the limitations of the national in favour of the transnational in film studies.

This article aims to map out these various concepts of transnational cinema that have appeared over the past ten to fifteen years, as well as its state of deployment, related issues and problematics. In deciding a title for this article we have in mind two seminal pieces on the concept of national cinema by Andrew Higson (2002) and Stephen Crofts (1998). Higson and Crofts both acknowledge the complex, contradictory and contestable nature of the national cinema label; they also offer instructive methodological approaches to the question of the national and, for our purpose here, the transnational. Higson, in particular, argues that the concept of national cinema is often used 'prescriptively rather than descriptively, citing what *ought* to be the national cinema, rather than describing the actual cinematic experience of popular audiences' (Higson 2002: 53; emphasis in original). While both the prescriptive and the descriptive can be discerned in writings on transnational cinema we want to adopt

a discursive approach in this article, since prescription is a form of discourse whose politics often obscure the history of its object; whereas description is another form of discourse whose history of its object often masks its politics. That is to say, whatever the approach, every narrative has a discursive history and gains currency in specific configurations of power/knowledge and at particular spatio-temporal junctures. The distinction between the prescriptive and the descriptive is thus an artificial one, at least from the perspective of the discursive. Studying a concept (in our case, transnational cinema) demands not just the tracing of its genealogy in descriptive terms or prescribing the terms of its usage depending on one's politics, but also the self-reflexive unveiling of the concept's discursive history, development and transformation.

Indeed, as Bergfelder points out, film studies has historically 'lag[ged] somewhat behind other academic disciplines' in accepting the influence of cultural hybridization and in using concepts such as 'global Disapora' and 'transnationalism' (Bergfelder 2005: 321), though this has been addressed by more recent scholarship (not least the inauguration of this journal). Broadly speaking, three main approaches have been applied in film studies to theorizing the question of the transnational. The first, exemplified by Higson (2000), focuses on a national/transnational binary, which sees the national model as 'limiting', while the transnational becomes a subtler means of understanding cinema's relationship to the cultural and economic formations that are rarely contained within national boundaries. Such an approach tends to focus on questions of production, distribution and exhibition (i.e., the movement of films and film-makers across national borders and the reception of films by local audiences outside of their indigenous sites of production). One of the drawbacks of this approach is its potential to obscure the question of imbalances of power (political, economic and ideological) in this transnational exchange, most notably by ignoring the issue of migration and diaspora and the politics of difference that emerge within such transnational flows. A second approach privileges an analysis of the transnational as a regional phenomenon by examining film cultures/national cinemas which invest in a shared cultural heritage and/or geo-political boundary; for example, Lu's work on transnational Chinese cinemas (1997b), Nestingen and Elkington's collection on transnational Nordic cinema (2005) and Tim Bergfelder, Sue Harris and Sarah Street's study of set design in European cinema of the 1930s (2007). We might even ask if the term 'transnational' is entirely necessary in the above cases. For example, could we instead speak respectively of a supra-national Chinese cinema, a regional cinema or a pan-European cinema? This returns us to the question of what exactly is the critical purchase of the term 'transnational'.

The final approach to transnational cinema relates to work on diasporic, exilic and postcolonial cinemas, which aims, through its analysis of the cinematic representation of cultural identity, to challenge the western (neocolonial) construct of nation and national culture and, by extension, national cinema as stable and Eurocentric in its ideological norms as well as its narrative and aesthetic formations (see, for example Naficy 2001, Marks 2000 and Enwezor 2007). Such studies are heavily influenced by theoretical paradigms emerging from cultural studies, postcolonial theory and globalization studies (e.g., Appadurai 1990 and Gilroy 1993). They focus almost exclusively on exilic, diasporic or postcolonial film-makers working within the West and are keenly aware of power relations between centre/margin, insider/outsider, as well as the continual negotiation between the global and local that often

2. At the 2009 Screen Studies Conference in Glasgow at a panel on transnational cinema, a particularly lively debate took place between speakers and the audience over whether or not the term 'transnational' had any critical purchase in film theory.

extends beyond the host/home binary in transnational or diasporic cinema. The films they study are also seen to be characterized by issues of migration, loss and displacement that lead to identities in flux, which, again, challenge the stable and fixed (hegemonic) concept of the national. One of the potential limitations of this third approach, however, is that diasporic or postcolonial 'transnational' cinema is consistently located on the margins of dominant film cultures or the peripheries of industrial practices, making it almost impossible to evaluate the impact such films might have on mainstream or popular cinema within either a national or transnational context.

In all three of these broad approaches outlined above, while the term 'transnational cinema' appears to be used and applied with increasing frequency as both a descriptive and conceptual marker, it also tends, for the most part, to be taken as a given – as shorthand for an international or supranational mode of film production whose impact and reach lies beyond the bounds of the national. The danger here is that the national simply becomes displaced or negated in such analysis, as if it ceases to exist, when in fact the national continues to exert the force of its presence even within transnational film-making practices. Moreover, the term 'transnational' is, on occasion, used simply to indicate international co-production or collaboration between technical and artistic personnel from across the world, without any real consideration of what the aesthetic, political or economic implications of such transnational collaboration might mean – employing a difference that, we might say, makes no difference at all. It is precisely this proliferation of the term 'transnational' as a potentially empty, floating signifier that has led some scholars to question whether we can profitably use, or indeed need, the term at all.<sup>2</sup>

Our intention with this article, then, is not simply to reject the term 'transnational' out of hand, nor to offer yet another conceptual neologism that might take its place; rather, it is to critically engage with this conceptual term to better understand how a form of what we will term a 'critical transnationalism' might help us interpret more productively the interface between global and local, national and transnational, as well as moving away from a binary approach to national/transnational and from a Eurocentric tendency of how such films might be read. It would, of course, be naïve to assume that the transnational model does not bring with it boundaries, hegemonies, ideologies, limitations and marginalizations of its own kind, or replicate those of the national model. Hence, it is imperative not to theorize transnational cinema only in the conceptual-abstract but also to examine its deployment in the concrete-specific so that the power dynamic in each case can be fully explored and exposed.

In what follows, we will illustrate how the concept of transnational cinema has been at once useful and problematic, liberating and limiting by focusing on two case studies that provide fertile ground for interrogating the concept of the transnational. The first case study will explore the place of diasporic and postcolonial cinemas within the framework of the transnational, with examples drawn largely from North African émigré and Maghrebi-French film-makers working in France. It will end by rethinking existing paradigms by Marks (2000) and Naficy (2001) that locate diasporic/transnational film-making only in the interstitial and marginal spaces of national cinemas, and will argue instead that diasporic cinema, while transgressing and transcending national boundaries, also has the potential of occupying or influencing the mainstream in national and transnational cinematic spaces. The second case study delineates the use of the term 'transnational' in the study of Chinese

cinemas before moving on to examine its application in the context of transnational East Asian cinemas. It takes the opposite direction from the first case study by questioning the celebratory tone that greets the mainstreaming of transnational East Asian cinemas in places such as Hollywood. Instead, it suggests that more attention should be paid to other modes of transnational film-making that may escape the popular radar. The conclusion will propose a critical transnationalism in film studies so that the concept of transnational cinema will continue to be useful in film studies.

## LOCATING DIASPORA AND THE POSTCOLONIAL IN TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA

While earlier theorizing on the transnational (most notably Higson 2000) has tended to focus on the movement of films and film-makers in relation to production, distribution and exhibition, more recent scholarship has explored the individual and collective narratives of migration, exile and displacement that are a central component of transnational cinemas (Ezra and Rowden 2006b, Higbee 2007). While they may well focus on an individual protagonist, the consequences of these uprootings and re-groundings are also frequently considered in the collective context of diaspora. Indeed, many of these transnational productions emerge from within a specifically diasporic configuration that, implicitly or explicitly, articulates the relationship between the host and home cultures, and is aware, at same time, of the interconnectedness between the local and the global within diasporic communities. Such a cinema can be defined as transnational in the sense that it brings into question how fixed ideas of a national film culture are constantly being transformed by the presence of protagonists (and indeed film-makers) who have a presence within the nation, even if they exist on its margins, but find their origins quite clearly beyond it. Naficy argues that this transnational exchange has given a voice to diasporic film-makers in the West while transforming the national by framing their difference or accent within the discursive of the national cinemas and traditional genres of their home and adopted lands (Naficy 1996: 120). Here we might point to the extensive use of popular comedy by Algerian émigré film-makers in France during the 1990s and 2000s to explore questions of migration, integration and multiculturalism; drawing on the traditions of satire and placing comedy in a concrete social context commonly found in Arab cinema, while simultaneously acknowledging comedy as the pre-eminent popular genre in France par excellence (Higbee 2007: 58). In this respect, transnational cinema has the potential to both reveal the diasporic experience and challenge the privileged site of the national as the space in which cultural identity and imagined communities are formed.

A variety of terms (some more politically engaged than others) have emerged since the 1980s, which attempt to describe the cultural production of diasporic film-makers, including: accented, postcolonial, interstitial, intercultural and multicultural. All of the above could potentially be subsumed by the term 'transnational', due to their association with modes of film production that transcend national borders and bring into question the fixity of national cultural discourses. This very fact points to one of the potential weaknesses of the conceptual term 'transnational cinema', especially when dealing with films that are intimately concerned with questions of difference and the place of minority cultures within the nation-state. That is to say, it risks celebrating the supranational flow or transnational exchange of peoples, images and cultures

at the expense of the specific cultural, historical or ideological context in which these exchanges take place. What is more, certain aspects of diasporic cinema may, in fact, be more concerned with national rather than transnational contexts. Though routinely cited as an example of transnational cinema, Beur cinema of the 1980s (films made by the French descendants of North African immigrants) was, in fact, far more concerned with articulating the rightful place of Maghrebi-French youth *within* the French nation than it was with exploring the transnational connections or intercultural exchange between France and the Maghreb produced by the North African diaspora in France. Indeed, in a film such as *Cheb/Cheb* (Bouchareb, 1991) the enforced 'return' of the Maghrebi-French protagonist to Algeria is presented as a journey of exile of a westernized youth to an alien country and culture. Interestingly, the position of Maghrebi-French film-makers on this topic has shifted somewhat in the 2000s with a burgeoning of return narratives such as *Ten'ja/Testament* (Legzouli, 2004), *Exils/Exiles* (Gatlif, 2004) and *Il était une fois dans l'oued/ Once Upon a Time in the Oued* (Bensalah, 2005), which offer a greater sense of intercultural dialogue between France and the Maghreb.

Bergfelder (2005) offers an indirect response to the above critique regarding the critical purchase and careless homogenizing of the transnational. Drawing heavily on the work of sociologist Ulf Hannerz (1996), Bergfelder argues that one advantage of the term 'transnational' is that it offers an alternative to the generalized and imprecise application of the term 'globalization'. Whereas globalization is routinely applied to any and every process or relationship (political, social, cultural or economic) that crosses a national boundary, the transnational (following Hannerz's definition) is more attuned to the scale, distribution and diversity of such exchanges and their impact at a local level as well as an understanding that they may have effects within and beyond the nation-state. In certain cases, the transnational may even bypass the mechanisms of the nation-state altogether (Hannerz, cited in Bergfelder 2005: 321). In this context we may think of the way that global cosmopolitan cities such as London, New York and Paris appear as centres of community and identification (not to mention important production hubs) for diasporic film-makers, against which the host/home binary is articulated. Thus, in films by Algerian émigré directors such as Merzak Allouache (*Salut cousin!/ Hey Cousin!*, 1997), Mahmoud Zemmouri (*100%Arabica/100% Arabic*, 1997) or Abdelkrim Bahloul (*Le Thé à la menthe/Mint Tea*, 1984) the local spaces and immigrant neighbourhoods of Paris acquire a greater significance for their diasporic protagonists than that of the nation-state (France).

Though Bergfelder chooses not to pursue this line of enquiry in his article, Hannerz's rationale for a preference for the 'transnational' over the 'global' or 'international' offers an apt description of how diasporic, postcolonial or intercultural cinema could be more productively analysed under the rubric of transnational cinema. What is required here is a critical understanding of the political imbalances as well as the unstable and shifting identifications between host/home, individual/community, global/local and, indeed, national/transnational, as well as the tensions these generate within diasporic films. The positions occupied by a Maghrebi-French youth and his aging Moroccan immigrant father as they journey across Europe from France to Mecca in *Le Grand voyage/ Grand Voyage* (Ferroukhi, 2004) are, therefore, markedly different, despite their supposedly shared Maghrebi/Muslim origins. The further they move away from old Europe, the more uncomfortable the westernized son becomes, while the father feels on increasingly familiar territory. A critical transnationalism must,



moreover, be attendant to the dynamics of the specific historical, cultural and ideological contexts involved in the production and reception of each particular film. This need to clearly articulate the politics of difference present within transnational cinema is acknowledged by Okwui Enwezor, who introduces the more qualified term 'postcolonial transnationalism' in his analysis of the UK-based Black Audio Film Collective's (BAFC) creative output in the 1980s and 1990s (Enwezor 2007: 117–20). The term thus allows for a description of the ways in which the BAFC's work offered a militant critique of the politics of race and policing of ethnic minorities employed by the Conservative government in Britain during the 1980s; simultaneously acknowledging, on the one hand, a shared legacy of empire amongst colonial migrants (and their postcolonial descendants) who arrived in western European cities during the post-war period and, on the other, entering into an intellectual, political and artistic dialogue with the wider Black African diaspora.

One further point of contention in the theorizing of the transnational in diasporic or postcolonial cinemas in the West concerns the relationship of such films and film-makers to the mainstream cinema of the host nation. Arguably the two most significant interventions in theorizing diasporic cinema in the West to date have come from Hamid Naficy (2001) and Laura Marks (2000). Their work clearly engages with the transnational through questions of border-crossing, transcultural exchange and the potential of diasporic/postcolonial film-makers working in the West to challenge Eurocentric constructions of national cultural identity. However, both appear reluctant to employ the term 'transnational', preferring to think of these films and film-makers as 'inter-' (intercultural or interstitial, respectively) rather than 'trans'. Similarly, when searching for a term to describe the shared aesthetics of these diasporic, exilic and postcolonial films, Naficy settles on 'accented cinema', jettisoning his earlier formulation of 'independent transnational genre' (Naficy 1996). Finally, in their respective studies, both Naficy (2001: 10) and Marks (2000: 18) locate diasporic and postcolonial cinemas firmly on the margins of national/transnational cinema production in both artistic and economic terms. This deliberate focus on experimental and interstitial film-making by Marks and Naficy, while reflecting the fact that ethnic minority and diasporic filmmaking continue to be marginalized within the West, cannot account for the recent mainstreaming of diasporic or postcolonial film-makers such as Garinder Chadha in Britain or Merzak Allouache, Rachid Bouchareb and Djamel Bensalah in France.

The example of Bouchareb's *Indigènes/Days of Glory* (2006) is particularly instructive here. The film was a French-Algerian-Moroccan-Belgian co-production, directed by a French film-maker of Algerian origin and starring Jamel Debbouze (a Maghrebi-French actor and currently one of France's biggest stars). It attracted over three million spectators in France and gained international distribution as well as an Oscar nomination. *Indigènes* focuses on the hidden history of North African colonial soldiers' contribution to the Allied liberation of Europe from the Nazis in World War II. And yet, while the film is obviously concerned with revisiting the colonial past to engage with France's postcolonial present, the term postcolonial alone cannot adequately reflect the (trans)national relationship of Bouchareb's historical epic to mainstream French national cinema (in the form of the heritage film) nor the film's transatlantic dialogue with the Hollywood war film. The film also drew attention to the continued injustices and exclusion suffered by war veterans from former French colonies and has been seen as instrumental in changing French legislation in this area. *Indigènes* is thus an example of a strand of transnational

diasporic or postcolonial film-making which has a clear impact not only on mainstream culture in France, but also on broader public opinion and even governmental policy – and can only be understood by applying a wider interpretation of diasporic, accented or intercultural cinema than the one offered by either Naficy or Marks. The narrow focus for diasporic film-making in their model is also of limited use for analysing other transnational film-making activities which have a broad appeal and firmly occupy the mainstream, such as in East Asian cinemas, which will be discussed in the next section.

## THEORIZING THE TRANSNATIONAL IN CHINESE AND EAST ASIAN CINEMAS

Given that ‘few places have a more complex relation to the national than the combination constituted by the People’s Republic [of China, or PRC], Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Chinese diaspora’ (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 14), it is unsurprising that scholarship on Chinese cinemas has been at the forefront of the theorizing the transnational: firstly, in recognizing the plurality of the concept of Chinese ‘national’ cinemas by using the plural rather than the singular form when referring to it (e.g., in Browne 1994: 1) and, secondly, in mobilizing the concept of the transnational (Lu 1997b) to encompass film-making activities that are located in several geographical regions and yet somehow share certain linguistic and cultural traits of ‘Chineseness’. In their introduction to a recent special issue on transnational cinema in the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, the guest editors Chris Berry and Laikwan Pang note that, with the benefit of hindsight, Lu’s 1997 edited volume, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, was ‘a watershed moment in the study of Chinese cinemas’ as both the terms ‘Chinese cinemas’ (in the plural) and ‘transnational Chinese cinemas’ were rarely used before Lu’s book but they now ‘name the field that we study and are used routinely’ (Berry and Pang 2008: 3).

The contention surrounding the definition of the Chinese ‘nation’ and the meaning of Chineseness determines that the concept of ‘transnational’ Chinese cinemas, while one step removed from the ‘national’, cannot be used simply as a description, nor will any prescriptive use go unchallenged. Despite Lu’s intention to decentre the sign of ‘China’ and ‘Chinese’ in relation to cinema, the subsumption of cinemas of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong under the umbrella of ‘transnational Chinese cinemas’ does not so much displace the national as reinstate it within a larger, pan-ethnic or supranational framework (Lim 2006: 5). Noting a similar danger in Lu’s contention that ‘the territorial nation-state and national cinema as sites of Chineseness are being eclipsed by a higher level of unity and coherence, namely a Chinese cultural order that is transnational’, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar propose an alternative in which the transnational is understood ‘not as a higher order, but as a larger arena connecting difference, so that a variety of regional, national, and local specificities impact upon each other in various types of relationships ranging from synergy to contest’ (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 5). It is difficult to see, however, how Berry and Farquhar’s alternative model might differ from Lu’s in critical practice, unless the problematization of the relation between the national/transnational is placed at the heart of all discussions of Chinese cinemas so that the shift from the national to the transnational, and, indeed, what it means to be ‘Chinese’, is not elided.

Outside of the geographical boundary that is commonly known as Greater China (PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong) and ‘cultural China’ (to also include Singapore),



the concept of transnational Chinese cinemas also refers to Chinese-language films made by diasporic film-makers located (mainly) in the West (for example, Ang Lee in the United States and Dai Sijie in France) and in countries where the Chinese population constitutes a substantial minority but is marginalized politically. In the latter case, transnational imaginary can be deployed as an alternative so that, say, a Chinese Malaysian film-maker may align his or her film-making with transnational Chinese cinemas rather than with the national cinema of Malaysia. This is the case for directors such as Tan Chui Mui and James Lee, whose Chinese-language films have more in common with those by Tsai Ming-liang and Wong Kar-wai than they do with Malay-language cinema (Raju 2008: 71–72). The issue of agency is clearly of importance here as the transnational can be mobilized to form other kinds of alliances (pan-ethnic in this instance) that highlight the oppression of a particular aspect of identity within the national. These kinds of transnational alliances can, of course, also be configured in relation to identity formations that disregard or challenge traditional constructs of the national (Lim 2006: 6), such as gender (women's and feminist cinema) and sexuality (queer cinema), or cinemas that bring into question a Eurocentric worldview (Third Cinema).

While scholarship on Chinese cinemas, especially of popular genres, continues to highlight their transnational connections (Chan 2009; Morris, Li and Chan 2005; Lo 2005), transnationalism is also fast becoming a default concept when discussing East Asian cinemas (Hunt and Leung 2008a) as more and more Japanese, Korean and Hong Kong films are turned into high profile Hollywood remakes. From action thrillers to horror films, East Asian cinemas have excited critics who marvel at their ability to beat Hollywood 'at its own game' (Cousins 2004: 20). Indeed, Hollywood has not only been remaking East Asian films (e.g., Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998) remade by Gore Verbinski as *The Ring* (2002)) but has also increasingly been inviting their directors to remake these films in and for Hollywood (Nakata directing the Hollywood remake of his *Ringu 2* (1999) as *The Ring Two* (2005)). Moreover, transnationalism has made possible transplantation not just of films but also of directors: for example John Woo, who, in the tradition of European émigré directors making similar journeys dating back to the early to mid-twentieth century, has enjoyed a second career making English-language films in Hollywood. (Woo's example is in stark contrast to the interstitial and intercultural film-makers discussed by Naficy and Marks as he clearly occupies a mainstream position within a film industry that is not his own – indeed, one that is globally dominant.) Even an established American auteur such as Martin Scorsese has much to thank 'the wonderful Asian cinema' for, as he did when accepting his first Oscar for best director in 2007 (referring to Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's *Infernal Affairs* trilogy (2002–2003) on which his own award-winning film, *The Departed* (2006), is based).<sup>3</sup>

In tracing the transnational trajectories of East Asian cinemas there is a tendency, especially among film critics, to adopt a celebratory tone as if these cinematic activities represent a counter-attack from the margins to the centre that benefits East Asian cinemas. Even if we accept the apparent benefits of this transnational exchange for East Asian cinemas in terms of market share and wider recognition of its film-makers, the reality of power inequality, however, demonstrates that the cooptation of East Asian film-making talents (from cast to crew) by the Hollywood system or Hollywood's outsourcing of labour-intensive processes (from anime to concept development) to East Asia benefits, in the main, Hollywood studios and cultural brokers in

3. To see the speech in full, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbbzaS8rcak> (accessed 14 December 2009).

4. For example, Roy Lee, a Korean-American who has been chiefly responsible for selling remake rights of East Asian films to Hollywood studios (thus dubbed the 'king of remakes'), apparently has no particular interest in Asian horror films beyond the profit margin (Xu 2008: 192, 195).
5. See Lim (2007) for a critique of the film *Memoirs of a Geisha*.

financial terms.<sup>4</sup> Besides, Hollywood's transnational imagination of East Asia, exemplified by films such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Bob Marshall, 2005) and *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003), often imposes an unthinking linguistic hegemony of English to maximize global profits while igniting geopolitical tensions by ignoring ethnic/racial difference (as in the case of casting Chinese actresses in the roles of Japanese geishas).<sup>5</sup>

In the introduction to their edited book, *East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film*, Leon Hunt and Leung Wing-fai note their special interest in the 'mutating *currencies* of transnationality – the remake, the arthouse film, the cult film/genre/auteur, the blockbuster' (Hunt and Wing-fai 2008b: 5; emphasis in original). The remake, the cult film/genre/auteur and the blockbuster have certainly, given their box-office success and popularity, gained considerable currency in scholarship on transnational East Asian cinemas while transnational flows in art house film-making tends to be neglected. However, it is often away from the popular that difficult questions about transnationality, such as those pertaining to (post)coloniality, albeit (or especially) within an East Asian context, have been raised – for example, in *Kôhî Jikô/Café Lumière* (2003), a Japanese-language film by the Taiwanese auteur Hou Hsiao-hsien.

*Café Lumière* is a transnational project initiated for the centenary of the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu in 2003 by Shochiku Studio. Hou's film not only echoes Ozu thematically by dealing with inter-generational familial relations but also weaves the complex (post)colonial relationship between Taiwan and Japan into its narrative. The latter strand of the film's narrative is achieved by designating the protagonist, Yôko (Yo Hitoto), as a writer researching on the composer Jiang Wenye (Koh Bunya in Japanese). Jiang (1910–1983) was raised in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation period (1895–1945) and travelled to Japan in the 1920s to study music. He moved again to China where he taught composition at the Beijing Normal University from 1938 and suffered during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) owing to his Taiwanese/Japanese background (Wu 2008: 175, 180n3). *Café Lumière* demonstrates that the triangulated relations among China, Taiwan and Japan from the last two centuries until today are as complex as Jiang Wenye's multiple identities and transnational career.

To update this postcolonial dynamic in the plot, Yôko is impregnated by her Taiwanese boyfriend and decides to raise her child on her own in Tokyo. The unborn child is clearly a symbol of reconciliation between Taiwan and Japan. However, Yôko's revelation of her pregnancy to her Japanese male friend, Hajime (Tadanobu Asano), who seems to have a romantic interest in her is, characteristically of Hou, blocked visually by a pillar when the two characters cross the street in their search of a café frequented by Jiang in the colonial days: thus Hajime's reaction is obscured just as the symbol of reconciliation in Taiwan-Japan relations is revealed. Hou's earlier films have been noted for their thematic and aesthetic affinities to Ozu, and the fact that Hou was commissioned to make a film on Ozu's centenary is an acknowledgement of such transnational auteurism on the part of the Japanese studio that used to produce Ozu's films. Hou, however, has used this opportunity not only to pay homage to a Japanese master but also to problematize the historical relation between Japan and Taiwan, albeit in a manner that resolutely refuses resolution and closure, privileging ambiguity and obstruction instead. In the penultimate shot of the film Yôko and Hajime stand on the platform in the background while a train passes from screen right to left in the foreground,

thus allowing only intermittent glimpses of the two characters through windows and between carriages. This cinema of obstruction stands in contrast to the celebratory tone and popular nature of most transnational film-making in and from East Asia, and from the way in which many scholars and critics simply look to the transnational as a means of tracing atypical collaborations and production histories of certain films within the discourse of the national. Thus transnational films such as *Café Lumière* quietly interrogate the possibilities of transcending the national in both film-making and everyday life.

## TOWARDS A CRITICAL TRANSNATIONALISM

As the two case studies above show, the shift from the national to the transnational within film studies is firmly established and still gaining momentum. Extending Lu's proposition that '[t]he study of *national* cinemas must then transform into *transnational* film studies' (Lu 1997b: 25; emphasis in original), Berry and Farquhar raise the question, 'What does it mean to think about "transnational film studies" as an academic field?' (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 13). There seems no more appropriate a time to address this question than on the occasion of the launch of a new academic journal called *Transnational Cinemas*, which returns us to our opening questions: why the concept of transnational cinema, and why now? Does the shift from the national to the transnational enable us to move away from a binary approach to national/transnational and from a Eurocentric tendency of how transnational films might be read in academic discourse?

For Berry and Farquhar, Chinese film studies in English and 'its frequent complicity with orientalism' have been 'trenchantly criticized' by scholars such as Yingjin Zhang and Rey Chow, the latter of whom points to the tendency of scholars dealing with western cultures to assume an universalism whereas the work of those dealing with non-western cultures is 'usually considered too narrow or specialized to warrant general interest' (Chow, cited in Berry and Farquhar 2006: 13–14). While Berry and Farquhar go on to cite the rapid increase in the 'international circulation of scholars studying Chinese cinema in various academic disciplines' as evidence for the emergence of transnational film studies as a field (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 14–15), this evidence alone does not fundamentally unsettle the assumption of universalism versus particularism within the discipline of film studies itself. That is to say, if transnational film studies can indeed be imagined as an academic field, now with its own dedicated journal to boot, it is, within the *reality* of institutional and disciplinary practices, at best a sub-field with an expanding geography and population, and, at worst, a ghetto whose particular interests would continue to struggle to be perceived – and accepted – as bearing a more general or even universal application and relevance (as the experience of many minority groups whose identities are based on difference in a multicultural society attests). Put differently, does the focus on a term such as the 'transnational' simply risk becoming a replacement for existing terms such as 'world cinema' as a means of merely describing non-anglophone films?

In this regard, transnational film studies parallels the trajectories and power dynamics of transnational cinema: while border-crossing is the *raison d'être* of both transnational cinema and its studies, borders continue to be heavily policed and entry often comes with a price tag which can sometimes be waived if in possession of the right papers. If transnational subjects can be grouped into 'those who "circulate capital" and those "whom capital

circulates” (Zizek, cited in Ezra and Rowden 2006b: 8), transnational cinematic flow is also, ‘contrary to the metaphor the word invokes’, not ‘a spontaneous force of nature, but shaped and produced by various social, economic and cultural forces’ (Berry and Pang 2008: 6). Transnational film studies, whether an academic field or sub-field, does not exist in a vacuum but must contend with these forces in order to carve out a space for itself. The launch of this journal is a welcome start, but transnational cinema still has some way to go before establishing itself more firmly as a critical concept and as an inclusive field of enquiry within the discipline of film studies.

We therefore argue that transnationalism in films and in the study of cinema cannot be taken as a given or for granted. The concept of ‘transnational cinema’ cannot be merely descriptive because all border-crossing activities are necessarily fraught with issues of power; neither can it be purely prescriptive as this often amounts to nothing more than wishful thinking. Rather, we propose a critical, discursive stance towards the question of the transnational in film studies so that we are alert to the challenges and potentialities that greet each transnational trajectory: whether it takes place within a film’s narrative and production process, across film industries, or indeed in academia. In the study of films, a critical transnationalism does not ghettoize transnational film-making in interstitial and marginal spaces but rather interrogates how these film-making activities negotiate with the national on all levels – from cultural policy to financial sources, from the multiculturalism of difference to how it reconfigures the nation’s image of itself. In examining all forms of cross-border film-making activities, it is also always attentive to questions of postcoloniality, politics and power, and how these may, in turn, uncover new forms of neocolonialist practices in the guise of popular genres or auteurist aesthetics. It scrutinizes the tensions and dialogic relationship between national and transnational, rather than simply negating one in favour of the other. Moreover, it refuses to see the flow or exchange within transnational cinema as taking place uniquely between national cinemas. Instead, it understands the potential for local, regional and diasporic film cultures to affect, subvert and transform national and transnational cinemas. It may also wish to pay attention to the largely neglected question of the audience and to examine the capacity of local, global and diasporic audiences to decode films as they circulate transnationally (not only in cinema theatres but also on DVD and online), constructing a variety of meanings ranging from adaptation and assimilation to more challenging or subversive readings of these transnational films. Finally, as a conceptual term it also needs to be engaged in a dialogue with scholarship in other disciplines that also have an investment in the transnational and the postcolonial (such as Gilroy 1993; Ong 1999).

A critical transnationalism should also extend to our own critical practice as film scholars who enjoy the privilege of being located within an anglophone academia: one that wields its hegemonic language of English while pronouncing on transnational films that are often polyphonic in their linguistic use and that contain characters whose plight is precisely a result of the lack of capital of all forms (economic, cultural, symbolic). Can transnational film studies be truly transnational if it only speaks in English and engages with English-language scholarship? What does it take to create ‘an environment of transnational scholarly exchange and discussion around an analytic project that we believe could and should be extended to include the cinemas of other nations, including Western nations’ (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 15)? It is only through embracing a more critical approach, such as the one outlined in this

article, that transnational film studies can emerge as a vital field for a transnational, trans-lingual dialogue on cinema.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Will Higbee is the author of *Mathieu Kassovitz* (Manchester University Press, 2007) and assistant editor of the journal *Studies in French Cinema*. He has published a number of articles on Maghrebi-French and North African émigré film-making and is currently working on a monograph for Edinburgh University Press entitled *Cinemas of the North African Diaspora in France*.

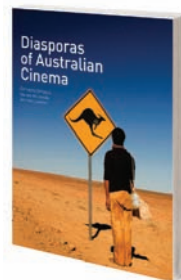
Song Hwee Lim is the author of *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas* (University of Hawaii Press, 2006), co-editor of *Remapping World Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film* (Wallflower Press, 2006), and founding editor of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*.

Contact: School of Arts, Literatures and Languages, University of Exeter, Queen's Building, The Queen's Drive, Exeter, EX4 4QH.

E-mail: [w.e.higbee@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:w.e.higbee@exeter.ac.uk)

E-mail: [s.h.lim@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:s.h.lim@exeter.ac.uk)

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Catherine Simpson and Renata Murawska are Lecturers in the Department of Media at Macquarie University in Sydney. Anthony Lambert is Lecturer in the Department of Critical and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University.

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